



Matir Asurim ["The One Who Frees Captives"] connects Jewish spiritual, cultural, and communal resources and people experiencing incarceration or re-entry.

Divrei Matir Asurim

Matir Asurim Words/Matters -- June 2024/Sivan 5784

Divrei Matir Asurim is available in three formats: straight text for copying into emails; formatted text for copying/printing for postal mail; and on-line (with some internet links for those who can access them). This month, *Divrei MA* includes two sections: 1) Meeting and Operations and 2) Torah Explorations. Feedback encouraged.

Inside readers, please send responses to news shared here, additional thoughts on MA operations, or Torah Explorations: through outside MA pen pal, if you have one; through USPS mail directly to: Matir Asurim, PO Box 18858. Philadelphia, PA 19119; or by emailing matirasurimnetwork@gmail.com.

MEETING AND OPERATIONS

Recent Meeting News

Matir Asurim held a Core Organizing meeting on May 12. Topics included a grant application plus working group reports and administrative planning.

Rise Up Initiative Grant Process:

Nurturing the Soul of Jewish Justice was founded in 2019. The fund "supports and strengthens work that integrates deep Jewish practice, centers the margins, and takes progressive action for social change."

MA was invited to apply for a grant this year. A small working group responded with the requested "Letter of Interest" and then met with Rise Up staff. All draft materials were shared with outside members as they were created.

Discussion looked ahead, with questions about how to manage if the grant was received:

- supervising anyone hired through the grant;
- making financial and progress reports;
- using resources to build the organization for the long-term.

The group agreed unanimously to go ahead with the grant process.

Administrative Issues:

Three planning items were assigned at the March meeting:

- a new system for handing off work from one member to another; postponed until June at the May meeting.
- outside members directory, with phone tree or group, and crisis response process; discussed in May, but no exact plan in place, and MA is still working on how to communicate with inside members.
- helping new outside members get involved; new plan approved at the June meeting:
 - 1) longer-term members will trade days for reading the general MA email, and responding to any queries;
 - 2) new email addresses will be set up for working groups, so new people can be directed to the right group -- penpal, resources, operations, etc. -- for their interest.

MEETING AND OPERATIONS cont.

Team, Working Group, Other News

Operations (Finance, Fundraising, and Communications): The umbrella organization (Social Good) managing MA funds asked for additional information about expenses sent to individuals. The working group is arranging for additional paperwork explaining process involved.

This working group is also preparing to send new (approved in January) "Guiding Concepts" to inside readers for approval -- either with the next Resource mailing or in a separate mailing.

Hubs: Seattle hub set up regional penpal work and will do an event in June.

Resources: This working group has experienced some delays in preparing planned "Judaism 101" materials. No mailing date yet.

Individual support: Reported food issues for Passover in two locations. Reported legal issues from several locations. MA is not currently equipped to respond to systemic issues but continues to monitor what we learn and consider how best to support inside members.

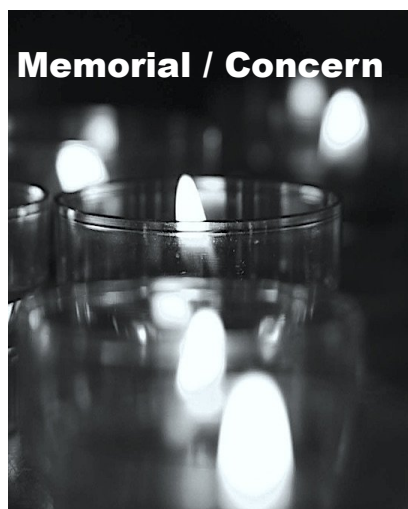
Member's Note: Jewish Left Conflict Support Network. One member shared that this group is concerned with non-carceral approaches to harm and could be a possible partner in MA's future work.

NEXT MEETING: June 30

Post-Meeting UPDATES:

Rise Up application was filed on May 19. Response is expected by June 14.

Email addresses for the working groups were established, posted on website, and are being shared as queries come in regarding these groups. Process for checking in on the "network" email is underway.



Recent Loss to Execution: **Jamie Mills**, May 30 (Alabama)

Scheduled Executions:

June 11 (Missouri): **David R. Hosler**

June 26 (Texas): **Ramiro Gonzales**

June 27 (Oklahoma): **Richard Norman Rojem Jr.**

Share your prayer concerns, celebrations, and memorials for future editions. Contact info on page 1 (top of document)

Image: lighted memorial candles (credit: Hadar Institute)

TORAH EXPLORATIONS: *Leaving Leviticus*

The last portion of the Book of Leviticus is **Bechukotai** [In my laws] Lev 26:3 - 27:34. It was read on June 1 this year (2024). See the discussion on "All Israel Responsible One for Another," based on a verse in this portion. Page 7 below.

See also the discussion of "Jeremiah's Trees," from the haftarah** for *Bechukotai*: Jeremiah 16:19-17:14. Page 8 below.

Schedule of Torah/Haftarah Readings for Numbers/*Bamidbar*

<i>Hebrew title</i> [English]. Chapters: verse*	Haftarah**	Civic date. Hebrew date
Bamidbar [In the Desert]. Num 1:1-4:20	Hosea 2:1-22	June 8. 2 Sivan
Nasso [Take a Census] Numbers 4:21 - 7:89	Judges 13:2-25	June 15. 9 Sivan
Beha'alotkha [When You Raise] 8:1-12:16	Zechariah 2:14-4:7	June 22. 16 Sivan
Shelakh ["Send"] 13:1-15:41	Joshua 2:2-24	June 29. 23 Sivan
Korach (name) 16:1-18:32	1 Sam 11:14-12-22	July 6. 30 Sivan
Chukat ["Law of"] 19:1-22:1	Judges 11:1-33	July 13. 7 Tamuz
Balak (name) 22:2-25:9	Micah 5:6-6:8	July 20. 14 Tamuz
Pinchas (name) 25:10 - 30:1	1 Kings 18:46-19:21	July 27. 21 Tamuz
Matot ["Tribes"] 30:2-32:42	Jeremiah 1:1-2:3	Aug 3. 28 Tamuz
Masei ["Travels"] 33:1-36:13	Jeremiah 2:4-28, 3:4	Aug 3. 28 Tamuz

*Dates listed are for the Shabbat on which the portion is read. Where daily services are held, verses from the same portion are read on the Monday and Thursday before that Shabbat. These are listings for a full Torah reading each week, completing the Torah in one year. There is also a custom of splitting the Torah portion into three sections for the public reading; in the "triennial cycle," the entire Torah cycle is completed each year, but only one-third of each portion is read aloud in any given year: the first year, section one; the next year, second two; the third year, section three.

**The *haftarah* [plural: *haftarot*] is a reading from the Prophets linked to each week's Torah reading. This is a very old tradition, and verses vary a little across communities. These are Ashkenazi listings, based on completing the full Torah in one year, the most common practice in the US and Canada. Sephardic, Yemeni, and some other customs vary from the above. In addition, some communities use alternate readings to match the triennial [three-year] reading cycle, lifting up a theme from the section read that year. A few Jewish communities choose another reading entirely for philosophical reasons.

TORAH EXPLORATIONS: Guiding Concepts

When Matir Asurim was first formed, members created a list of Jewish ideas to explain the organization's work. This list was approved by inside and outside members at the time (2021).

The "Guiding Concepts" list was revised in early 2024 to combine overlapping ideas. The new list also clarifies the ideas with "Source Text," words from Torah, Talmud, or a later Jewish teaching. This revised version was approved early in 2024 by MA's Core Organizing Group; it is still under review by inside members and so still DRAFT.

Guiding Jewish Concepts (DRAFT, Revised 2024)**

B'tzelem Elokim [divine image]: All people are created in the image of the Divine. We all carry a spark of divine goodness as well as the capacity for creative action and transformation.

SOURCE TEXT:

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ, בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ: זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה, בָּרָא אֹתָם

“And God created humankind in the divine image. In the image of God did the Divine create them.” — Genesis 1:27.

Teshuva [repentance/return]: We believe in human resilience and transformation, in our ability to make amends after experiencing and/or perpetrating harm. We practice this relationally as conflict arises within our organizing, and also strive to create a world that uplifts restorative accountability processes rather than punishment.

SOURCE TEXT:

Text by Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav, a beloved Eastern European rabbi in the late 18th century:

אם אתה מאמין, שְׂיִכּוּלִין לְקַלְקֵל, תִּאֲמִין שְׂיִכּוּלִין לְתַקֵּן

“If you believe that you can damage, believe that you can repair.”

— *Likutei Moharan* [collected teachings] Part 2:112

Refua Shleima [Complete Healing]: We work towards collective healing and wholeness, striving to restore balanced relationships within the broader interconnected web of creation and to heal the traumatic effects of white supremacy, colonization, and other systems of oppression that affect our minds and bodies.

SOURCE TEXT:

Amidah Prayer, the oldest composed liturgy in Jewish tradition:

רַפְּאוּנוּ יְהוָה וְנִרְפָּא הוֹשִׁיעֵנו וְנִגְשָׁעָה

R'fa'einu, Adonai, v'neirafei

Heal us, Adonai, and we shall be healed...

TORAH EXPLORATIONS: Guiding Concepts, cont.

Panim el panim [face-to-face]/Approaching: Seeking “face-to-face” interactions, despite difference, distance and bars; approaching one another as equals and striving to work in genuine relationship.

SOURCE TEXT:

כַּמַּיִם הַפְּנִיִּים לַפְּנִיִּים כֵּן לִב־הָאָדָם לְאָדָם

“As face answers to face in water, So does one person’s heart to another.” — Proverbs 27:19

וַיִּגַּשׁ אֶלְיוֹ יְהוּדָה...

“Then Judah approached him... — Genesis 44:18.

Learning from every person: Learning from every person requires honoring the contributions and voices of people who have been systemically silenced, including through incarceration. In our conversations, we strive to hold awareness around differences in identity and power dynamics.

SOURCE TEXT:

Jewish legal text from ~200 CE, Pirkei Avot (Ethics of Our Ancestors), 4:1:

בֶּן זֹמָא אָמַר, אֵינְהוּ חָכָם, הַלּוֹמֵד מִכָּל אָדָם, שְׂנַאֲמַר (תהלים קיט) מִכָּל מְלַמְדֵי הַשְּׂכַלְתִּי כִּי עָדוּתִיד שְׂיָחָה לִּי

“Ben Zoma said: Who is wise? One who learns from every person, as it is said: ‘From all who taught me have I gained understanding’ (Psalms 119:99).”

Kol Yisrael Aravim Zeh Bazeh [All Jews Are Responsible, One to the Other]/**Communal**

Responsibility: “All Yisrael is responsible, one for the other.” Jews have many universalist obligations, but we also have a special duty to other Jews.

SOURCE TEXT:

שְׂכֵל יִשְׂרָאֵל עֲרֵבִים זֶה בָּזֶה

“All Yisrael is responsible, one for the other.” — B. Talmud Shevuot 39a.

INSIDE READERS: A print mailing should have reached you through the Post Office, sharing the new list and asking for your comments; if you do not receive that mailing and have comments to share, please let us know.

Ways to reach Matir Asurim:

through outside MA pen pal, if you have one;

through USPS mail directly to: Matir Asurim, PO Box 18858. Philadelphia, PA 19119;

or by emailing matirasurimnetwork@gmail.com

The following "Learn More" section is adapted from the Matir Asurim website and was originally prepared by Rena Branson and Virginia Spatz.

TORAH EXPLORATIONS: Guiding Concepts -- Learn more

LEARN MORE: Jewish Sources and Discussion for Guiding Concepts

***B'tzelem Elokim* [divine image]**

“And God created humankind in the divine image. In the image of God did the Divine create them.” — Genesis 1:27

It was for this reason that man was first created as one person (Gen 1:27), to teach you that anyone who destroys a life is considered by Scripture to have destroyed [בְּרַחֵם, alef-bet-dalet] an entire world; and anyone who saves a life is as if he saved an entire world. Again, for the sake of peace among humankind, that one should not say to another, “My father was greater than your father” — Sanhedrin 4:5

The bible text, and the ancient rabbinic discussion around it, are the basis for Jewish understanding of human rights. These teachings obligate Jews to treat every human being as worthy of care that recognizes the spark of divinity in all of us.

Matir Asurim strives to put this into practice within carceral systems in the U.S. and Canada. We work, often in small ways within challenging systems, for the dignity, respect, compassion, and joy due to incarcerated individuals, returning citizens, and their loved ones. A vision of the spark of divinity in all humans informs all our work, within the organization and beyond.

Language notes:

The root word translated as “destroy” [בְּרַחֵם, alef-bet-dalet] here can also mean “to be pressed” or “in despair.”

- Causing one individual to “be pressed” or “in despair” has a ripple effect on that person’s entire world, including many other individuals;
- Helping one individual avoid being pressed or in despair affects an entire world, too.

“*Ha-m’abeid nefesh achat mi’yisrael*” means, literally: “anyone who destroys a soul from Yisrael.” Jewish teachers have argued for centuries

about whether this teaching applies only to the preservation of Jewish souls.

Surrounding text in Sanhedrin does not use this clause, “mi-yisrael.” however.

In addition, the ancient discussion is about Cain and Abel. Neither brother is “from Yisrael,” and “*ha-adam*,” the earthling (or “Adam”), of Genesis 1:27, is likewise not a Jew.

Panim el panim [face-to-face]

“Then Judah approached him [*vayigash eilav yehudah*]” (Gen 44:18):

Background: Judah faces a powerful leader in Pharaoh’s court who has a member of the family in custody, accused of a serious crime. At this point, Judah and his brothers do not yet know that the leader they face is their long-lost brother, Joseph.

This raises a question: The men are already in the same space. So why does the text tell us Judah *vayigash*, “drew near” or “came in contact”?

One answer: The last letters of these three words — *vayigaSH eilaV yehudaH*, *shin-vav-heh* — spell “*shaveh*, הֵוֵה [equal].” Judah’s step forward changes the dynamic and allows the brothers to speak directly, as equals. (from 14th Century German scholar, known as Ba’al HaTurim)

Another answer: “As face answers to face in water, So does one person’s heart to another (Proverbs 27:19). Judah steps forward trying to create a face-to-face encounter, inspiring compassion. This was a struggle for Judah, to step across apparent cultural differences and the gap in their positions. The result, ultimately, was reconciliation between the brothers. (based on Or Hachayim, 18th Century teacher from Morocco)

Maimonides says that *nagash*, “to approach,” can be about a change in physical closeness and/or about coming to an understanding.

TORAH EXPLORATIONS: Guiding Concepts -- Learn more, cont.

Refua Shleima [Complete Healing]

Amidah Prayer, the oldest composed liturgy in Jewish tradition:

R'fa'einu, Adonai, v'neirafei
Heal us, Adonai, and we shall be healed

hoshi'einu v'nivashei'ah
save us and we shall be saved

ki t'hilateinu atah
for You are our praise.

v'ha'alei r'fu'ah sh'leimah
bring complete healing

l'khol macoteinu
for all of our ailments

ki eil melekh
because God, Ruler,

rofei ne'eman v'rachaman atah
a faithful and compassionate healer are you.

Mi Sheberach Prayer, another healing prayer:

Hakadosh barukh hu May the Holy Blessed One
yimalei rachamim alav
be filled with mercy for [insert person you are
praying for]

l'hachalimo ul'rapo'to
to restore them to health and to cure them

ul'hachaziko ul'hachayoto
and to strengthen them and to invigorate them.

v'yish'lach lo m'heirah
And may God send promptly

r'fu'ah sh'leimah min hashamaiyim
complete healing from the heavens...

r'fu'at hanefesh ur'fu'at haguf
healing of the soul and healing of the body

v'no'mar amein,
and let us say Amen.

Kol Yisrael Zeh b'Zeh [All Israel Responsible One for Another]

a parting note from the Book of Leviticus [Vayikra]

Ideas of responsibility are discussed a lot in Jewish tradition. Being responsible to other humans, to animals, to the planet, to the divine image within us all -- these are all important Jewish obligations. But Jewish tradition also considers special responsibilities Jews have to one another:

- in ritual matters -- like building and operating a *mikvah* [pool for ritual immersion], for example -- assuming non-Jews would not know anything about these matters or be interested;
- in ethical matters -- some Jews feel strongly responsible to try to prevent other Jews from behaving in ways that give Jews "a bad name" or put the community at risk in other ways.

In Leviticus 26, God promises great reward if the people obey the commandments as outlined and warns of terrible punishments if they fail to do so. This chapter is in the final Torah portion of the book, just completed in the Jewish calendar. The portion is full of curses and other difficult text. But it is also the source of this important teaching.

One of the punishment verses says: "And they shall stumble one upon another" (Leviticus 26:37). The Talmud takes this to mean that Jews can cause one another to stumble by failing to assist one another in honoring the commandments. Therefore, we are "all responsible one for the other" (Shevuot 39a). If we have the opportunity to prevent a member of the community from doing wrong, and do not intervene, we are responsible for the wrong.

TORAH EXPLORATIONS: *Jeremiah's Trees*

A famous passage in the Book of Jeremiah speaks of two plants:

- a “bush in the desert that doesn’t sense the coming of good” and
- a “tree planted by waters...that does not sense the coming of heat.”

These images are offered to illustrate a curse for “the individual who trusts in mortals” and a blessing “for the individual who trusts in God” (Jer 17:6,8). And the images seem pretty unchangeable:

The bush in the desert

The one who turns away from God seems in a terrible, lonely spot, like a “bush in the desert”:

He shall be like a bush in the desert,
Which does not sense the coming of good:
It is set in the scorched places of the wilderness,
In a barren land without inhabitant. -- Jer 17:6



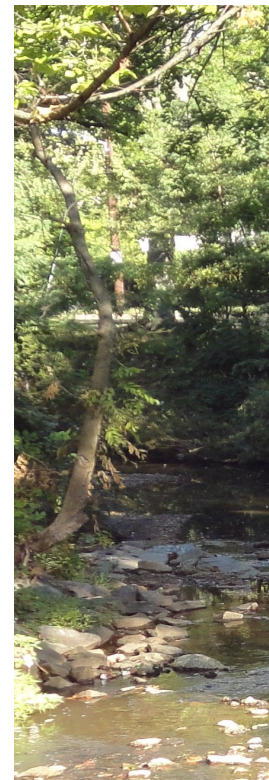
Image description: scrub bush, alone in the sand.
credit: Benmansour Zakaria via Pixabay.com

The tree by the waters

The one who trusts God seems to be set for the long-term:

He shall be like a tree
planted by waters,
Sending forth
its roots by a stream:
It does not sense
the coming of heat,
Its leaves are ever fresh;
It has no care
in a year of drought,
It does not cease
to yield fruit. -- Jer 17:8

Image description: Tree,
with many vibrant leaves,
near, flowing rocky creek.
credit: V. Spatz, taken in
Deanwood neighborhood of
Washington, DC (2017-ish)



Jeremiah’s separate bush and tree images might suggest that everyone is stuck with their own situation, reaping rewards for choosing God or left to overcome our own desolation for choosing wrongly.

But are we really meant to enjoy or struggle all alone?

Like a lot of the Book of Jeremiah, the ideas in this passage flip between extreme threats and promises. The People are warned to give up on “lies, no-gods, and things that are futile and worthless” (Jer 16:19) -- or else. They're also told there are many resources for people who seek divine guidance, from the “Fount of living waters [*m’kor mayim chayyim*]” (17:13).

Maybe Jeremiah believed that individuals can somehow turn, on our own, from “futile things” to trusting God. And that, with divine assistance, we can then move -- as individuals -- from curse to blessing. Or maybe Jeremiah didn't see individuals as separate from community. In either case, later Jewish tradition leans heavily toward communal experience, collective prayer, and joint responsibility.... See also note above on how the last Torah portion in Leviticus is used to teach that Jews are responsible for each other....

TORAH EXPLORATIONS: Jeremiah's Trees, cont.

The *haftarah* passage (Jer 16:19-17:14) concludes with a prayer:

"Heal me, Eternal One, and I will be healed;
save me, and I will be saved. For You are my glory" -- Jer. 17:14

This prayer suggests the possibility of change.

The passage doesn't spell out exactly how change is supposed to happen, just the prayer: "Heal me."

But it's important to note that this *haftarah* is scheduled to be read every year right before the festival of Shavuot.

- Shavuot celebrates the giving of Torah.
- Torah is linked to water in Jewish tradition.
- That Fount of Living Waters is part of the healing work.

We know that "scorched places in the wilderness," without anyone around, are harsh spots in which to pursue healing. Meanwhile, we know that some people in Jeremiah's vision have access to water and fruit. But Jeremiah's language hints at how change might begin:

The bush in the desert

The bush is *shakhan* -- forced to settle
chareirim...m'leichah -- scorched and salty places
after *yasur* -- departing from, turning aside -- from
God.

The bush ends up *bamidbar* -- in the wilderness
-- which can also mean "in the words."

The tree by the waters

The tree is *shatul* -- planted or transplanted
al mayim v'al-yuval -- near water and streams
after *yivtach* -- trusting, lying down in front of --
God.

The tree sends out *sharashav* -- its roots -- the
same term used for plants and words.

The bush seems an accidental location arrived at when someone loses the way. Maybe lost in a mess of words without any sense of purpose or meaning.

The tree, on the other hand, is carefully placed in a spot where it can thrive. It has the opportunity to send out roots and find what is needed.

The festival of Shavuot brings us all together -- in spirit, if not in physical gathering -- in the giving of Torah. If we share the bits of Torah that we have, we can contribute to something larger. Learn. Make connections. Building together toward a better world.

As a whole, this *haftarah* suggests that there is abundance, and there is great need. Too many among us are forced to settle in scorched and salty places, where survival is a struggle and words are not enough. Those of us with fewer barriers to places where our roots can find fresh water have to do better at making sure that we ALL (re-)connect with the Fount of living waters.

TORAH EXPLORATIONS: What is Torah?

by Laynie Soloman and Sarit Cantor. From the 2022 (5782) Shavuot Holiday Mailer

In Hebrew, all words have three-letter roots. The word Torah comes from the Hebrew root yod (י), reish (ר), yod (י). When we put those letters into combinations with different sounds (vowels), the root takes on a new meaning, but still preserves some aspect of its core. You can think of these different vowels as outfits, helping the root come to life in a new place or context.

The following is a selection of dictionary entries that show the root yod, reish, yod and Torah's various verbal outfits. The italicized words are definitions. You don't need to know anything about Hebrew or roots beyond this to explore!

תּוֹרָה / TORAH noun f. 1) *teaching, law; in general- the Jewish law, Religion.*
2) *definition, designation; character, nature.*

יָרָה , יָרִי / YOD RESH HAY, verb. 1) *to permeate, penetrate; to shoot forth.* 2) *to throw, shoot.*

הוֹרָה / HORAH Causative form (i.e., "to cause to ____") 1) *to permeate.*
2) *to point, aim, shoot, cast.* 3) *to point out, to direct, teach, instruct, to decide.*

Based on these definitions, how would you define Torah?

If we consider these definitions of Torah: to permeate, to point, to shoot forth, the essence of how we understand Torah can be so much more expansive than the scrolls we read from each week. If Torah is that which permeates, it is like our breath, our words, the air that surrounds us and holds us through each moment. If Torah is that which shoots forth, directs us, it is a compass, it is movement connected to internal knowing.



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Divrei Matir Asurim is a publication to promote religious education and solidarity.

If not otherwise noted, content is provided by V. Spatz, an outside member of Matir Asurim.

Who We Are

We are a collection of Chaplains, Rabbis, Cantors, Kohanot/Hebrew Priestesses, advocates, activists, volunteers, loved ones of incarcerated people, and people with direct experience of incarceration. We are an all volunteer group who began meeting in 2021. We live and work across Turtle Island, in territories, cities, and rural settings of the US and Canada.

Vision

We are striving toward a world free from oppression, where aspects of social identity like race, class, and gender no longer limit our safety, opportunities, and agency to live into the fullness of our sacred potential.

We are striving toward a world where individuals are mutually accountable to one another and where wrongdoing is addressed through reparative and transformative justice, guaranteeing the human dignity of all parties.

We are striving toward a world where all people are provided with the conditions for healing trauma and for *teshuvah* (repentance/restoration), surrounded by resources, guidance, and social support networks.

We are striving toward a world where nobody is isolated and everyone has opportunities to connect to something larger than ourselves—whether to community, culture, or spirituality. Within that world, we envision a Judaism that is radically welcoming and accessible to all seekers.