



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--July 2024/Tammuz 5784

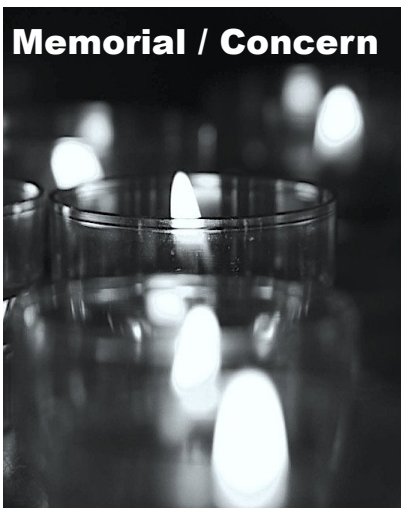
Divrei Matir Asurim is available in three formats: straight text for copying into emails; formatted text for copying/printing for postal mail; and on-line (with some internet links for those who can access them). This month, *Divrei MA* includes only a brief note on Meeting and Operations plus Torah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

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

The Core Organizing group meets next on July 7 (postponed from June 30). More news next month. Important note: Matir Asurim was notified that the organization will receive a grant from Rise Up: Nurturing the Soul of Jewish Justice.

Memorial and Prayer Concerns



Recent Losses to Execution:

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

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

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

Scheduled Executions:

July 16 (Texas): **Ruben Gutierrez**

July 18 (Alabama): **Keith Edmund Gavin**

August 7 (Texas): **Arthur Lee Burton**

August 8 (Utah): **Taberon Dave Honie**

Prayers for all in need of healing of body and spirit.

Image: lighted memorial candles (credit: Hadar Institute)

Share your prayer concerns, celebrations, and memorials for future editions.

TORAH EXPLORATIONS:

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

Balak and Pinchas: Broken at the Core

The Torah portions *Balak* (Num 22:2-25:9) and *Pinchas* (Num 25:10-30:1) are very closely linked due to a story that begins at the end of Balak, stops abruptly, and then continues in Pinchas.

Balak

Balak is a Moabite king who fears that the Yisraelites might attack, so he hires a prophet to curse them. The story of the prophet that he hires, Balaam, and Balaam's talking donkey takes up most of the portion. In short: Balaam takes the job, but the words God gives him to say are not curses; even though Balak threatens him, Balaam keeps saying nice things about Yisrael.

NOTE: Balaam (sometimes "Bilam" in English) is a non-Yisraelite prophet. The story makes clear that Balaam is in communication with God, known throughout the Torah as "YHVH" (or "Adonai") and "Elohim."

This positive, sometimes funny, story concludes with blessings, instead of curses. Some of Balaam's words even start morning prayers:

*"Mah tovu ohalekha Yaakov,
mishk'notekha Yisrael*

How lovely are your tents, O Jacob,
your dwellings, O Yisrael." -- Numbers 24:5

The king Balak and the prophet Balaam leave at the end of Chapter 24, and the tone of the reading changes. Things go immediately and violently wrong with the start of Chapter 25.

Yisraelite men become involved with Moabite women in "*liznot*." This word means sexual relationships that the bible calls sinful, sometimes translated as "harlotry." The Yisraelite men then start sacrificing to Moabite gods. "Thus Yisrael attached itself to Baal-peor, and YHVH's anger was kindled against Yisrael" (Num 25:3).

Moses orders the Yisraelites to kill all, including family, who were involved with Baal-peor." Then, a Yisraelite man and a Midianite (not Moabite) woman engage in sex acts in front of everyone. Pinchas, a priest and grandson of Aaron, kills the couple by running them through with a spear. This violence seems to somehow stop a plague, which had already killed 24,000 (Num 25:9).

The portion Balak ends here.

(cont. p.3)

TORAH EXPLORATIONS: Balak and Pinchas: Broken at the Core, cont.

(cont. from p.2) The portion stops abruptly with verse 9. Even in years when some weeks have two portions together, Balak and Pinchas remain separate.

The decision to stop the violent story at this point is at least 1000 years old. That's when the divisions into weekly Torah portions were set. For centuries, Jews have been discussing the meaning of this choice.

Meaningful Pause

Some teachers suggest that we stop reading because the violence of the story shocks us into silence. Some say stopping teaches us the value of pausing, reminding us to try to step away from violent situations before taking more action. Some say the abrupt stopping point marks violence as something to notice and not accept as "normal."

Another view: Pinchas kills the couple (named Cozbi and Zimri, we find out later), and that stops the plague. Cutting the story in two puts that violence in the past. This creates distance between the painful situation and the survival that follows. The Yisraelites did not ask Pinchas to spear Cozbi and Zimri, but they benefit because the plague stopped. They live, for better or worse, in a world created by violent acts in their past.

Similarly, people alive today did not choose whether and how wars were fought in our countries' distant pasts, but most of us benefit in some ways. We live, for better or worse, in a world created by those wars. More personally, none of us exists in a world which was not built by some level of past violence... and too many of us live with violence that is all too present.

The pause between Balak and Pinchas might be a sort of hopeful statement, an aspiration for the future: Maybe one day, we'll be able to put all violence in the past.

On the other hand, maybe damage cannot be avoided, once dangerous or unhealthy attachments

are formed. One commentary on Num 25:3 -- "Yisrael attached itself to Baal-peor" -- notes that getting away will be tricky and costly: "...it is impossible for a wooden nail to be wrenched from a door without loss of some wood..." (*The Book of Legends*, Bialik & Ravnitsky, 629:175).

Pinchas

The new portion opens with God praising Pinchas for killing Cozbi and Zimri. God explains the incident to Moses and tells him what to say about it. In some ways the opening of the portion Pinchas sounds like a press statement, offered after a pause to consult public relations experts, meant to "spin" the situation and calm people:

YHVH spoke to Moses saying:

"Pinchas, son of Eleazar son of Aaron the priest, has turned back My wrath from the Yisraelites by displaying among them his passion for Me, so that I did not wipe out the Yisraelite people in My passion. Therefore say:

'Here, I give him my covenant of *shalom** -- It shall be for him and his descendants after him a pact of priesthood for all time, because he took impassioned action for his God, thus making expiation for the Israelites.'

(Num 25:10-12)

* *Shalom* is sometimes translated here as "friendship." It usually means "peace" or "wholeness."

A small shift in language between the two portions -- Balak and Pinchas -- supports the possibility of a covenant of "wholeness." But arguments are also made for why the covenant might be called one of "peace."

From or With the People

In the previous portion, Pinchas arose "**from** the community" [*mi-tocham*] (Num 25:7). In this portion, God describe Pinchas as acting "**within** them" [*b'toch*] (25:11). This small **(cont. p.4)**

TORAH EXPLORATIONS: Balak and Pinchas: Broken at the Core, cont.

(cont. from p.3)

change highlights how Pinchas relates to the community and how God sees that relationship.

This small difference means that God sees the "whole" community, including BOTH Pinchas and those who angered God. By sticking with the community, instead of distancing himself, Pinchas changed God's attitude to the whole.

Regardless of what we think of Pinchas acting so violently, the point of this commentary is about sticking with the community, even in terrible times. The covenant of "*shalom*" here recognizes the importance of trying to keep the community whole and working for change from the inside.

This is a challenging teaching, even at the best of times. Staying within a community when things are going very wrong is not always easy -- or necessarily the best thing, for either the individual or for the community as a whole. But the focus on God seeing the WHOLE community prompts us to pause and consider: When is it appropriate to seek change from within? When is it better to separate and act from outside?

Armed or Not?

Another teaching comes from the idea of Pinchas going out "*mi-toch* [from within]" the assembly (25:11). One common reading is that, when he attacks the couple, Pinchas has to go out to get his weapon. The ancient rabbis could have used this as a warning that our assemblies should be protected by armed guards or that everyone should always be armed, just in case. Instead, Jewish teaching used this text to argue that weapons are not allowed in the study house (B. San 82a).

Other teachings about weapons relate to the strange appearance of "*shalom*" in the portion.

The Broken Vav

There are quite a few spots in the Torah where letters are written in unusual ways. Often they are larger or smaller than normal, as in an example

coming up. There are other oddities, including letters out of place or marked with dots. But there is only one broken letter: When Pinchas is given the covenant of *shalom* (Num 25:12), the **vav** in "*shalom*" is purposely cracked.



Some traditional commentary reads the cracked vav as a broken spear. This teaches that "a spear has no place in peace" or that peace cannot be built on violence. Another suggestion is to read the word "*shalom*" itself as broken. This teaches that peace built by humans is always imperfect.

This broken letter also highlights how concerned Jewish tradition has been about this portion, and how leaders took steps to call our attention to what disturbed them.

How else can we read this unique broken letter?

The Tiny Yud

Another oddity in the portion, related to the troubling nature of the story, involves how the name Pinchas is written.

A little background on names in the Torah can help make sense of this oddity.

Changing a person's name, or its spelling, can be an important event in the Torah. When a person has a letter from God's 4-letter name, YHVH [*Yud-Hey-Vav-Hey*], added to their own, this is a sign of special relationship with the divine.

In Genesis, God changes the name of Abram to Abraham -- adding the letter **hey** (Gen 17:5). Then, God renames Sarai as Sarah, again adding the letter **hey** (Gen 17:15).

(cont. p.5)

TORAH EXPLORATIONS: Balak and Pinchas: Broken at the Core, cont.

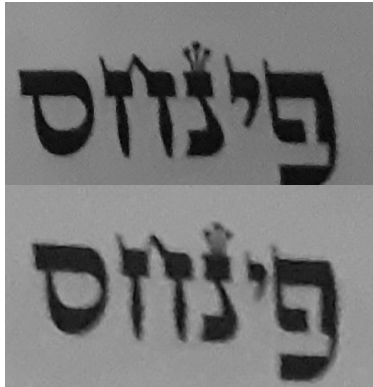
(cont. from p.4)

But changing Sarai to Sarah is not just adding a letter; adding the **hey** for Sarah also removes the **yud** from Sarai. This leads to an imaginative story linked to an earlier portion in Numbers.

In Breishit Rabbah, **yud** complains to God about being removed from the name of "Sarah the Righteous." As a form of reparations, God arranges for **yud** to join the name of another important leader in the Torah, Joshua (Yehoshua). His name is changed from Hoshea to **Yehoshua** with addition of a **yud** in Num 13:16.

Both **yud** and **hey** are understood as linking a person in the Torah to divinity.

Then, in Num 25:11, "Pinchas" is written with a tiny **yud**.



<< Most places in Torah, e.g., Num 25:7

[normal size י]

<< ONLY in Num 25:11

[tiny י]

According to some teachers, the smaller letter **yud** means that God removed some level of divinity from Pinchas. This might mean:

- 1) that Pinchas acted as he did because God's guidance was somehow withdrawn;
- 2) that God withdraws from Pinchas, because of, or in recognition of, his violent act;

We can also consider the tiny **yud** a reminder that there are many among us who feel diminished in some way because of how violence has impacted them and their loved ones. The smaller **yud**, the broken **vav**, and the way the portions Balak and Pinchas are split all point to ways in which

Jewish tradition both acknowledges brokenness at the core of the universe and refuses to accept this as an unchanging condition, without possibility of repair.

Not Necessarily Gone

“After the plague –”

At the beginning of Chapter 26, there is another odd visual presentation. The three words "After the plague" are followed by a unusual break and extra space. This is another example of how disturbed Jewish tradition has been with this Torah portion.

The census that follows is an unusual one. The people are told to count males of arms-bearing age. But the census of Chapter 26 lists women and men long dead as well. It also includes the rebellion of Dathan and Abiram and the strange fire of Nadav and Abihu. Verse 64, at the close of the count, specifically notes that “Among these was not one of those enrolled by Moses and Aaron” when they entered the desert. But the accounting seems to go out of its way to include people long gone, especially those whose stories are troubling.

Maybe this is a bad sign:

A) that the people still can't follow instructions, after 40 years; or

B) that, like many communities today, going forward is impeded by old baggage.

Or maybe this is a good sign, and this census signals that the people are figuring out how to name what shaped them and still move forward. The census here is another way this portion insists on reminding us that the past is not necessarily gone.

The Book of Numbers is coming to its close, and the Yisraelites in this portion must figure out how that past is going to influence their future. The same applies to us.

TORAH EXPLORATIONS: *Pinchas and the Scary Friend*

Many fictional detectives a “scary friend,” someone on the shady side of the street able to accomplish things the “good guy” cannot or will not. This is not too different from Pinchas in the Torah.

Some of my favorite mystery writers give their main characters such an accomplice/friend. In particular, many of Walter Mosley's mysteries work this way: When in deep trouble, bookstore owner Paris Minton finds Fearless Jones, a man for whom backing down and compromise are foreign concepts. Detective Leonid McGill relies occasionally on a mysterious assassin named Hush. And Easy Rawlins has Mouse, his oldest and most dangerous friend.

One thing I love about Mosley is that his main characters seem aware of the cost of engaging with shadier elements. He never suggests that violence can be employed in such a way that it doesn't really touch the good guys. In fact, much of the Easy Rawlins series centers around Easy — who has decided that Mouse is, for better or

worse, a part of his life — trying to develop boundaries for himself and his family. Once Easy has foster children in the house, we hear Easy's son reciting an oft-repeated admonition: “Mouse is only for if the house is burning down and the fire department is on strike.”

But I'm especially fond of a Mosley character who needs no scary friend. In what I think is Mosley's most Jewish writing, the character Socrates Fortlaw is a seriously flawed man living in a seriously flawed world. He doesn't need an outside source to do his dirty work — he has committed and knows he's capable of a level of violence that is plenty scary. His challenge is to understand the past and, when faced with similar circumstances, make new choices.

Like whoever decided to include the broken *vav* in the Pinchas “*shalom*,” Socrates Fortlaw knows that the only peace we've ever known — so far — has involves somebody's spear. We can't pretend it belongs to someone else; we have to learn how to go forward knowing what we know.

A version of these remarks about Walter Mosley and the “scary friend” was part of a dvar Torah given at Temple Micah in Washington DC about ten years ago on Shabbat Pinchas. Afterward, a member of the congregation pointed out that the “scary friend” and “good guy” sometimes represent two aspects of the same person, much like everyone in Jewish tradition has both a *yetzer hara* [negative impulse] and a *yetzer hatov* [positive impulse], and we cannot survive without them both -- Virginia Avniel Spatz

Walter Mosley is a writer of mysteries, science fiction, plays, and other forms of fiction. He has also written There are three Socrates Fortlaw novels, and “Always Outnumbered, Always Outgunned” was made into a movie. There are 16 Easy Rawlins novels, and “Devil in a Blue Dress” was made into a movie. In addition, there are three Fearless Jones mysteries, and Six Leonid McGill mysteries. Mosley's work will most often show up on the “African American” shelf fiction, but he identifies as both Black and Jewish. Many themes in his work are Jewish.

In addition, his website notes: “Concerned by the lack of diversity in all levels of publishing, Mosley established The Publishing Certificate Program with the City University of New York to bring together book professionals and students hailing from a wide range of racial, ethnic and economic communities for courses, internships, and job opportunities.”

Final note, from V. Spatz: I have been a big fan of his work for many years and met the author twice. In my experience at book-related events, not all authors are very interesting in person, and some are not especially kind; Mosley is both.

TORAH EXPLORATIONS: Tammuz

The month of Tammuz begins this year on July 5-7. This is right after the major national holidays of Canada Day (July 1) and US Independence Day (July 4). These holidays are observed publicly with cheers for liberty and unity, history and promise. There are fireworks, parades, and picnics. Also: protests and public reflection from those in each country who object to the national policy and action. In contrast, the Jewish month of Tammuz is quiet. It is marked primarily by a fast day that launches a period of collective mourning.

Tzom Tammuz, the "Fast of Tammuz" on the 17th (July 23 this year), marks biblical and historical events: Biblically, 17 Tammuz marks the breaking of the first tablets of the Covenant. See the Golden Calf story, Exodus 32. Historical dates marked by the fast relate to the fall of the First Temple (586 BCE). The Fast of Tammuz also starts a period known as "the Three Weeks," leading toward Tisha B'av, the lowest point of the Jewish year.

Rabbi Ariana Katz and Rabbi Jessica Rosenberg write:

Tammuz is a spacious month, with very little on the Jewish calendar. This collective breath is particularly notable for where it falls squarely between two intense holiday arcs: sandwiched between the packed Exodus journey of Nisan, Iyar, and Sivan and the slow and steady ramp-up to the High Holidays that will begin in earnest in Av. With intention, Tammuz can be a month to notice this hinge of the year, and to make space for more subtle changes, within us and around us. In Tammuz, we are encouraged to notice our gardens growing, all around us all the time." -- *For Times Such as These*, p.254

They also write about the bigger calendar journey that begins with the Fast of Tammuz, on the 17th of the month:

It is a powerful gateway into the Three Weeks, which culminates with the Ninth of Av, marking the complete destruction of the Temple. Some of us have never had access to cultural practices that feel spiritually supportive, and some of us are just beginning the journey of discovering what a relationship with our spiritual selves and the holiness of the world feels like. Some of us have no interest in exploring anything in the realm of spiritual practice. Across a range of relationships to tradition, we can ask: When we allow ourselves to mourn...accessing the holy, how much deeper can we feel the heartbreak of the wreckage of our sacred sites" -- *For Times Such as These*, p.253

The authors suggest using the Fast of Tammuz to reflect on communal losses in the past year. For readers on the outside this might include bookstore that closed or organizations that collapsed. For inside readers, what are some similar losses: access to a particular common space and the people who gathered there? links to useful programs or sets of resources? Pausing to acknowledge losses can sometimes help in moving forward.

For Times Such as These: A Radical's Guide to the Jewish Year. Rabbi Ariana Katz and Rabbi Jessica Rosenberg. Wayne State University Press, 2024.

TORAH EXPLORATIONS: Av

Season of Transformation

From Tisha B'Av Resources 5783 (2023)

Tisha B'av (the 9th of Av) begins the season of transformation and *teshuva* that lasts until the completion of the High Holidays. On the 9th of Av, Jews commemorate the devastation brought about by the destruction of the Temple. We add meaning to this day by commemorating other historical calamities that befell the Jewish people throughout time. It is a day of grief, of sadness, and of remembering. Traditionally, people observe this holiday by reading the Book of Lamentations (called "Eicha" in Hebrew) and by abstaining from eating, drinking, washing, wearing leather, and other pleasurable experiences.

Key concepts associated with this holy day:

- First Temple (Solomon's Temple, Beit HaMikdash HaRishon) — the first central place for worship for ancient Israelites, built by King Solomon in the early 900s BCE, and destroyed by the Neo-Babylonian Empire in 586 BCE. Jews made pilgrimages to the Temple to offer sacrifices on the altar.
- Second Temple (Beit HaMikdash HaSheni) — the second central place of worship for ancient Israelites, built in Jerusalem in the late 500s BCE and destroyed by the Roman Empire in 70 CE
- Lamentations (Eicha) — a poetic text written in response to the destruction of the First Temple and exile of the Jewish people. Traditionally, Eicha is read both in the evening of Tisha B'Av. Some communities have the custom of sitting on the floor while Eicha is read in order to express grief. Eicha is not a history book about the destruction of the Temple. It is a work of literary and theological art that discusses difficult questions surrounding suffering and faith

Possible ways to observe

- Choose one activity that is part of your normal routine and abstain from it for 25 hours to mark the day as different
- Journal about a loss that you have experienced, including how it made you feel and where you have found or might find comfort. How can you honor that loss while also moving forward in life?

May this season of grief reach you with resilience and openness.

With blessings for tzedek, rachamim, v'shalom,
justice, compassion and peace,

Laynie, Sarit, and all of us at Matir Asurim: Jewish Care Network for Incarcerated People

TORAH EXPLORATIONS: Av, Cont.

Resilience and Lament -- Dr. Koach Baruch Frazier

TRANSCRIPT OF “CULTIVATING RESILIENCE THROUGH THE PRACTICE OF LAMENT”

From 5782 (2022) Tisha B'Av Resources. At that time, Dr. Koach Baruch Frazier was a rabbinical student. He graduated and was ordained by the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in May 2024.

Shalom aleikhem. My name is Koach Frazier, and I live at the intersection of hate and oppression here in America. I am Black. I am trans. I am Jewish. And I am absolutely determined to thrive. I am an activist, a musician, a healer, a spiritual leader and for almost 15 years, I helped people engage more fully in their lives through the power of better hearing, as an audiologist. I've marched on the streets with my drum alongside fellow freedom fighters on the streets of Ferguson. I sat down in the Capitol with fellow Jews, in solidarity with Dreamers. I have trained Jews and non-Jew about the intersection of anti-Blackness and antisemitism.

And now, I'm in rabbinical school. And I can tell you that one of the things I've learned as an audiologist, and particularly, as a musician, is that listening is so important—and not just hearing what people are saying, but listening, really listening. And it's made me listen better. Listen for those soft voices yearning to be heard all around me, listening to the truth, even when it hurts. And listening to the pain and sorrow of my own soul.

Because, you see, living here in America, with antisemitism and anti-Blackness and transphobia, I wake up every day with the news that someone with one or more of my identities, one of my siblings, is dead. And just as I've leaned into the grief, there's word that another sibling has been killed. It seems as if there is no time to mourn. But a beautiful part of our tradition is that when we mourn, we stop time. We don't go to work. We don't go to school. We sit on the floor. We tear our clothes. And our community comes and gathers so that we have space and time to grieve. We cannot have business as usual when tragedy strikes, because how can the healing process begin if we have never stopped to acknowledge that healing is actually necessary?

So back in June of 2016, right after the massacre at the Pulse nightclub, my friends and I—we were at that moment when we knew it was time to grieve. Forty-nine of our trans and queer siblings of color were murdered, simply for existing, and we were in mourning. So, this group of friends called Justice Beats, a rag-tag group of queer and trans people of color in St. Louis, decided to pick a public space on the queer side of town, and we would, for 49 days, drum, say their names, and we would mourn. Sometimes, three or four people joined us, and sometimes 20 joined us. There was even a sister gathering here in New York City organized by my friend Shoshana. But no matter how many people came, overwhelmingly, people said: “I am grateful to have a space where I can show up authentically without having to hide my sorrow.” They realized that their grief was welcome there.

Just like it is in the Hebrew Bible. Lament is found throughout the entire book. Most famously, in Eikha, in the book of Lamentations, where the first line says: “How, how is it that this lonely city sits here, when it used to be filled with so many people?” Talking about the destruction of Jerusalem. And then in the Psalms, from Psalms 130, it says: “Out of the depths, I cry to you, O God! Hear my cry! Attend your ears to my pleas for mercy.” These verses sounded just like the people that I was marching on the streets with. But after you have experienced tragedy after tragedy after tragedy, it becomes difficult to stop and mourn. But you see, lament, it has a formula, as I have learned it. And formulas can be useful in times of crisis and uncertainty. This is the gift of our ancestors, giving us the spiritual technology to help us stay on this road of resilience and healing. And so I'd love to share this formula with you tonight.

(cont. p.10)

Resilience and Lament -- Dr. Koach Baruch Frazier -- cont. from p.9

The first element of this formula of lament is address: Dear Universe, the Source of all Life, Whoever is out there, Whatever is out there!

The second is expressing your distress. Why in the world are my siblings, my trans women of color, continuing to be killed? Why?

The third: This is where you stop, and you remember that there was a point in time before now, where there was destruction or death, or there was tragedy and it was in front of you. And somehow, some way, you made it through, and now it's behind you and you're still here. Part of lament is remembering you're still here—that you can make it through.

The fourth element is the plea. This is what's going to make it so I can start healing. This is what I need to repair the harm that was done to me. This is what I need.

The fifth element is gratitude. Maybe it's gratitude knowing that one day, you'll be on the other side of this one, too. Maybe it's gratitude knowing that you used to be on the front end of something and now you're on the back end. It may be gratitude

for allowing yourself, giving yourself the gift of being in your grief, and allowing your body and your soul and your mind to experience it, so you can get on the other side of it.

So, no matter where you are in that process and no matter where you are today, I want to invite you to take a moment and think about that thing that gives you grief, think about that thing that makes you lament. I'm going to give you a few seconds to think it, to think about it. I'll invite you to take a deep breath with me. And just like in St. Louis, on the streets on the queer side of town, I'm going to invite you all, together, to shout out your truth to the universe. So get that thing. I'm going to count to three, and let's see if we can give the universe our truth. One ... two ... three. Shout it out!

Sometimes, we're the people shouting out our grief in our mourning, and sometimes, we're the folks who gather on the street corner and hold space for the other ones' grief.

I hope, my prayer, is that you feel the universe, feel your community, and most importantly, you feel yourself, with you, through your grief and your sorrow. And one day, when you're on the other side of it, you'll know this healing and resilience that comes through lament.



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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.