



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-- August 2024/Av 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).

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](mailto:matirasurimnetwork@gmail.com).

## MEETINGS AND OPERATIONS

### Core Organizers and Working Groups

The Core Organizing group met on July 7. Main topics of discussion focused on internal workings:

- Balancing the many, urgent needs of the work with the individual resources of current organizers;
- Balancing Matir Asurim work with other urgent concerns, including Israel/Palestine;
- Challenges of getting input from inside members;
- Paths for an organizer to shift work to others when their own capacity changes;
- Guidelines for facilitating meetings; and
- Possible communication methods with inside members during a crisis in the wider world.

Additional topics included managing files; arranging a grants working group to handle administration and budget for the 2024-25; and possible collaborations with Jewish and non-Jewish groups working on related issues.

**Next General Meeting: August 18.**

Beyond the meeting: The Grants Working Group continues to prepare budget and timelines for education and outreach and for building a network of advisors and funders. In addition, the working

group is considering experts to help with essential organizational functions.

Also in the works is a virtual information session for new outside members in September.

### Matir Asurim in the News

Matir Asurim was included in a recent Jewish Telegraph Agency (JTA) story: "2 incarcerated men wanted to convert to Judaism. This rabbi helped them do it." The article highlighted a podcast series, called "Tales of the Unbound," about the two men and the Jewish teachers working with them. Reporter Andrew Lapin also interviewed Rabbi Miriam Terlinchamp as well as others working with Jews inside. Several newspapers -- from *The American Israelite* of Cincinnati, OH, to the *Jerusalem Post* -- picked up JTA's July 18 story.

Here are a few paragraphs, from the JTA story:

Several groups — including the Aleph Institute, the Orthodox-aligned Jewish Prisoner Services International, and a newer progressive group called Matir Asurim — provide services and resources for incarcerated Jews. Some also serve inmates who self-identify as Jewish, even if they have never converted. But the groups do not tend to facilitate conversions behind bars.

(cont. p.2)

## MEETING AND OPERATIONS, Cont.

(Matir Asurim in the News , cont. from p.1)

[JTA story quotation continues]

There are several reasons. For one thing, a prison is a nearly impossible place to arrange the process required under traditional Jewish law. Jewish tradition also demands that converts choose Judaism freely, but incarcerated people are inherently not free and may not have pure motivations for converting. In addition, while incarcerated they would largely not be able to follow Jewish law once converted, a requirement held by some rabbis.

Matir Asurim, founded by Reconstructionist rabbinical students, is less bound by halachic stringencies. But it has not yet overseen any formal conversions, though its spokesperson said it is “in conversation with inside members about best pathways to support their desires for conversion while facing incarceration.” ... ..

As Terlinchamp took stock of the new Jews she brought into the world, she says she knew her

own rabbinical practice would be forever altered. In her new role away from congregational duties, she is seeking out other “unbound” Jews in situations for whom she sees her work with Kingsman and Phillips as a test case: queer Jews who feel unwelcome in organized spaces, perhaps, or rural Jews who live nowhere near a congregation and Jews with disabilities who can’t easily access physical Jewish spaces.

-- Andrew Lapin, "2 incarcerated men wanted to convert to Judaism. This rabbi helped them do it." JTA July 18, 2024.

Beyond the news article, the "Tales of the Unbound" series offers a great deal of useful material. Full transcripts of each episode are available, along with program notes. (Perhaps an outside penpal, a chaplain, or someone else with internet access can copy the material to share.)  
<https://www.judaismunbound.com/tales-podcast/>

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## Memorial and Prayer Concerns

Prayers for all in need of healing of body and spirit



Recent Loss to Execution:

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

Scheduled Executions:

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

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

Image: lighted memorial candles (credit: Hadar Institute)

NOTE: Stay of execution (Texas), July 16, Ruben Gutierrez

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

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## TORAH EXPLORATIONS

### Torah/Haftarah Readings for Numbers/*Bamidbar* and Deuteronomy/*Devarim*

<i>Hebrew title</i> [English]. Chapters: verse	Haftarah	Civic date. Hebrew date
<b><i>Bamidbar</i></b> [In the Desert]. Num 1:1-4:20	Hosea 2:1-22	June 8. 2 Sivan
<b><i>Nasso</i></b> [Take a Census] Numbers 4:21 - 7:89	Judges 13:2-25	June 15. 9 Sivan
<b><i>Beha'alotkha</i></b> [When You Raise] 8:1-12:16	Zechariah 2:14-4:7	June 22. 16 Sivan
<b><i>Shelakh</i></b> ["Send"] 13:1-15:41	Joshua 2:2-24	June 29. 23 Sivan
<b><i>Korach</i></b> (name) 16:1-18:32	1 Sam 11:14-12-22	July 6. 30 Sivan
<b><i>Chukat</i></b> ["Law of"] 19:1-22:1	Judges 11:1-33	July 13. 7 Tammuz
<b><i>Balak</i></b> (name) 22:2-25:9	Micah 5:6-6:8	July 20. 14 Tammuz
<b><i>Pinchas</i></b> (name) 25:10 - 30:1	1 Kings 18:46-19:21	July 27. 21 Tammuz
<b><i>Matot</i></b> ["Tribes"] 30:2-32:42	Jeremiah 1:1-2:3	Aug 3. 28 Tammuz
<b><i>Masei</i></b> ["Travels"] 33:1-36:13	Jeremiah 2:4-28, 3:4	Aug 3. 28 Tammuz
<b><i>Devarim</i></b> [Words/Matters]. Deut 1:1 - 3:22	Isaiah 1:1-27	Aug 10. 6 Av
<b><i>Va-etchanan</i></b> ["I pleaded"]. Deut. 3:23-7:11	Isaiah 40:1- 26	Aug 17. 13 Av
<b><i>Eikev</i></b> [As a result]. Deut. 7:12-11:25	Isaiah 49:14 - 51:3	Aug 24. 20 Av
<b><i>Re'eh</i></b> ["see"]. Deut 11:26- 16:17	Isaiah 54:11 - 55:5	Aug 31. 27 Av
<b><i>Shoftim</i></b> [judges]. Deut 16:18 - 21:9	Isaiah 51:12- 52:12	Sep 7. 4 Elul
<b><i>Ki Teitzei</i></b> ["When You Go Out"]. Deut 21:10-25:19	Isaiah 54:1-10	Sep 14. 11 Elul
<b><i>Ki Tavo</i></b> ["When You Come"]. Deut 26:1-29:8	Isaiah 60:1-22	Sep 21. 18 Elul
<b><i>Nitzavim</i></b> [Standing]. Deut 29:9-30:20	Isaiah 61:10 - 63:9	Sep 28. 25 Elul
<b><i>Vayeilech</i></b> [He went]. Deut 31:1-30	Isaiah 55:6-56:8	Sep 28. 25 Elul
<b><i>Ha'azinu</i></b> [Listen]. Deut. 32:1-52	2 Sam 22:1- 52	Oct 5. 3 Tishrei 5785
<b><i>V'zot HaBerakhah</i></b> [This is the blessing]. Deut 33:1 - 34:12	Joshua 1:1-9 (or 1:1-18)	Oct 25. 23 Tishrei
<b><i>Eikhah</i></b> [Book of Lamentations]. Special reading for Tisha B'Av		Aug 12-13. 9 Av

Lamentations describes conditions and emotions of Jerusalem when the First Temple fell in 586 BCE. Scholars date the book to the 5th or 6th Century BCE. It is filled with images of God's rage and descriptions of human suffering and sadness. It is named for the opening word, *Eikhah* -- "How?!" or "Alas!" It ends with grief, mixed with hope and prayer:

Take us back, O ETERNAL One, to Yourself, And let us come back; Renew our days as of old!  
For truly, You have rejected us, Bitterly raged against us.

Take us back, O ETERNAL One, to Yourself, And let us come back; Renew our days as of old!

-- Lamentations 5:21-22

## TORAH EXPLORATIONS

### *Listing the Stages: Closing the Book of Numbers*

"Travels [*Masei*]" (Num 33:1–36:13) closes the Book of Numbers. It lists 42 wilderness journey stages, beginning at Ramses, on the way out of *Mitzrayim*, biblical Egypt (33:3). It closes 40 years later, on the steppes of Moab, as the People prepare to cross over the Jordan River (33:50).

The list includes a few story or place notes:

- "and they made a three-days' journey..." (33:8);
- "There were twelve springs in Elim and seventy palm trees, so they encamped there" (33:9),
- "...at Rephidim; it was there that the people had no water to drink" (33:14)
- "Aaron was a hundred and twenty-three years old when he died on Mount Hor" (33:39).
- "Etham, which is on the edge of the wilderness" (33:6)
- "the wilderness of Zin, that is Kadesh" (33:36).

But most of the list follows a simple pattern: "They set out from \_\_\_ and they encamped at \_\_\_."

#### **What Kind of List Is This?**

At other points in the Book of Numbers, there are many speeches about what the People did wrong. In Deuteronomy, Moses scolds the People plenty. But here, this list seems non-judgmental.

It says, for example, that there wasn't water at Rephidim, but it doesn't -- as in other verses -- accuse the People of rebellion because they complained. Maybe, as with many tales among people who have known one another a long time, everyone already knows what went wrong at each stage...and who blames whom for what. Or maybe, for a change, this isn't about blame or failure.

One commentary treats the list as a record of God's worries, telling a story to explain:

Imagine a ruler had a child who was sick. They journeyed to a distant place for a cure. On their way back, the parent began listing the stages of the journey: Here we slept, here we were

chilled, here you had a headache. Likewise, the Holy One said to Moses: List for Me all the places where Israel caused Me anxiety. Hence: "These are the stages."

A variation on this story stresses the loving care of the parent, rather than the worries:

On the return trip the ruler reminded the child of all the places they stopped on their journey toward treatment, as a reminder of the king's loving care and their relationship.

Another teaching says that the 42-stage journey is, in itself, one name of God. (*Magen Avraham*, a 17th Century Polish commentary.)

All three commentaries point to how important the list seems is for God in the bible. Once the People cross the Jordan, things will be very different. And the wilderness period, for all its troubles, is treated like a honeymoon between God and the People (see Jeremiah 2:2). Listing the stages also helps the younger generation, who were not there at Rephidim or Etham or Kadesh, to know their story.

#### **What Kind of List Do We Need?**

For months now, Torah readings have followed the long story that began in Genesis, when Joseph and his brothers moved into *Mitzrayim*, and then through the Exodus into the wilderness.

Do parts of this year's Torah trip stand out?

Did you gain new insights or new questions?

Do you feel that you've gone through stages in your Jewish studies this year?

Are there stages in your personal journey through a difficult year that you'd like to mark and remember? Are there stages worth noting simply because you survived? Are there stages that brought you an insight or a question you want to remember as the journey continues?

The closing of the Book of Numbers is a good moment to pause, consider, and maybe list.

## TORAH EXPLORATIONS: Av



### For Times Such as These: Av

Av, in the peak of summer, opens with destruction and consolation. The Three Weeks of counting that began on the seventeenth of Tammuz ends at Tisha B'Av's doorstep...



We begin with Tisha B'Av, compressing time and space. Our tradition stitches together moments, separated by millennia in history, by teaching that they all happened in the same day: Tisha B'Av commemorates destruction of the First and Second Temples and more. The day offers a container for all of this sorrow to mingle, where we can allow our hearts to break open.

On Tisha B'Av, generations are compressed as well. Ancestors walk through the door and join us...their pain and suffering mingling with ours.

With Tisha B'Av, the holiday cycle marks violence done to our people. At the same time, the annual Torah cycle brings us through the close of *Bamidbar* and beginning of *Devarim*, where we read of violence that our people are doing and planning to do to others in conquering Canaan. This is folded into the layers of grief through which we time travel....

With layers of intensity, Av demands reflection on how we act under pressure. What family patterns, core beliefs, or traumatic impacts are operating to inform our actions, and how might we implement our higher values even in times of great stress and intensity? When the heat is turned up, how do communities and movements react? How do we respond to devastation, how do we create space to mourn and give despair our full attention? And then, how do we refuse to linger in sorrow?

-- Katz & Rosenberg, p.257-8

...In a cultural and economic system that values some people's feelings over other people's lives, how is it possible, publicly, to grieve?

There is not one answer, but Tisha B'Av is an invitation to explore. Overwhelming harm and violence are devastating life on the planet, and it is not possible merely to think and talk our way to a new world. As people living into more wakefulness than capitalism and white supremacy want for us, it is possible and necessary to answer our full range of human emotions as part of our full humanities. We grieve so that we may live.

Shabbat Nachamu, the Shabbat of Consolation, is the Shabbat immediately following Tisha B'Av. It takes its name from the haftarah for the week, from the Book of Isaiah, where it is written: "*Nachamu ami*" ("Be comforted, my people"). This begins the seven weeks of consolation leading up to Rosh Hashanah.

-- Katz & Rosenberg, p.274

There is plenty of theological and cultural wrestling left to do....It is impossible to know what Tisha B'Av will look like in the future, or if the next generation of liberation-seeking Jews will discard it as no longer resonant. However, Jews will always find new ways to tell their stories and make new meanings. -- Katz & Rosenberg, p.271

***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

**Excerpts, with adaptations, used with permission**

## TORAH EXPLORATIONS: Av, Cont.

### "HOW?!" a Roadmap for Transformation

"How" is the sort of word that is used a lot without getting much attention. But this small, often overlooked word is important to a time of transformation in the Jewish calendar. The word creates a kind of roadmap for heading into, and climbing out of, Tisha B'Av, the lowest point of the Jewish calendar.

"How [*Eikhah*]" is the first word, and the Hebrew title, of the Book of Lamentations, read on Tisha B'av. It is also a key word in the Torah and prophetic readings for "Shabbat Chazon," the sabbath of vision, right before. Together, the "how" readings cover a lot of emotional territory.

In English, "how" can be used to express different ideas:

**Frustration:** "How are we supposed to do this?!"

**Disbelief:** "How could this happen?"

**Despair:** "How awful!"

**Questioning:** "How does this work?"

The Hebrew word "*eikhah*" has similar uses in the Bible, generally, and in readings for this season:

"*Eikhah/How* can I, alone, bear the trouble of you!...

...the burden, and the bickering!" -- Deuteronomy 1:12,\* Torah reading for Shabbat Chazon

**Frustration:** Moses re-telling complaints about the People's behavior in the wilderness

"*Eikhah/How* has the faithful city become perverse?... She was full of justice,

righteousness lived in her. But now murderers -- " -- Isaiah 1:21,\* prophetic reading for Shabbat Chazon

**Disbelief:** God criticizing the People in Isaiah's prophecy, set in 8th Century BCE

"*Eikhah/How* lonely sits the city!..."

Once great with people! She was great among nations, now alone and vulnerable.

Once a powerhouse, now just one of the ruled." -- Lamentations/*Eikhah* 1:1,\* reading for Tisha B'Av

**Despair:** mourning destruction of the First Temple and exile, 6th Century BCE

"How did we get here?" and "How do we go on?"

-- centuries of Jewish teaching about destruction and tragedy

**Questioning:** Jews trying to find meaning and move forward through disaster

\*Bible translations adapted from Jewish Publication Society 1985

These "Hows" outline a difficult journey, built into the Jewish calendar. Following this annual journey can remind us that building community is hard work that can easily get off track.

### How did we get here?

The Book of Deuteronomy opens with Moses and the People at the end of a forty-year journey. They stand on the river's edge, imagining life on the other side. When they first escaped into the wilderness, a "promised land" seemed just around the corner. Decades later, the People have been through a lot. Moses is listing their mistakes and his disappointments, crying:

"How can I manage this burden!" (Deut 1:12)

(cont. p.7)

## **TORAH EXPLORATIONS: Av, Cont.**

**(cont. from p.6)**

This is a community in trouble and out of balance. Maybe not all that different from our own?

The Book of Isaiah opens a long time later, on the other side of the river. But the vision of a "promised land" now seems like a nightmare. Isaiah tells the People they are focused on the wrong things and have become a burden, even to God:

“Your rituals are a burden to me...Your hands are full of blood.” (Isaiah 1:14-15).

The prophet's harsh words point to a whole nation troubled, out of balance, and wondering: How could dreams of justice and righteousness go so deeply wrong?

In Lamentations, the Temple is in ruins, and the People face exile. Vision of a "promised land" seems in the past. Tisha B'Av mourns loss of dreams and hopes, as well as lives and homes.

This won't be the only time in history that Jews ask: “How?! How did our visions turn into this painful mess?!”

We have always struggled to share burdens in our communities. We've always fallen short of our visions. That is one message of the "How" readings. But it's not the only message.

### **How do we go on?**

The "How" readings also tell us that we are expected to do better, as individuals and society:

Learn to do good.  
Devote yourselves to justice;  
Aid the wronged.  
Uphold the rights of the orphan;  
Defend the cause of the widow. -- Isaiah 1:17

Where did our ideas of community fail in the past? What visions must we mourn? Shabbat Chazon prompts us to envision something truly new, and imagine steps toward needed change. Tisha B'Av reminds us to expect failure and to mourn our losses. But the calendar nudges us forward.

There are seven weeks from Tisha B'Av to the new year. The "How" readings give us our homework, well in advance. We have work to do. And that work starts with "Learn."

**HOW?!  
HOW?  
HOW!**      **איכה**

Image: Hebrew word *Eikhah* in Hebrew characters, plus English “How?! How? How!”

## **TORAH EXPLORATIONS: Av, Cont.**

### THE PLURALITY OF MOURNING by Rabbi Lauren Tuchman

I've been thinking a lot lately about the profound wisdom of our Jewish calendrical cycle. We are not a linear people—our years are cyclical and, as we move through the cycle, our tradition asks us to embody the specific mood or energy of each moment, year after year, even as we ourselves are in a constant state of flux. For many years, I did not feel a connection to the *churban*, the destruction of the Temples. I did always believe deeply in collective mourning, but on some level it felt hollow. That is, until this year. [This piece originally appeared in 2022.]

There is so much to grieve right now, and as the losses of our world continue to pile up. Many of us feel weighed down by past and present grieving, it feels like our holy tradition is calling out to us, crying alongside us. In the Talmud (B. Taanit 29b-30b), there is an extended discussion about how to prepare for and observe Tisha B'Av. Numerous rabbinic opinions are recorded pertaining to many aspects of the day itself and the days which precede and follow, traditionally referred to as the "nine days."

The text asks: Should we begin mourning for the full nine days prior to Tisha B'Av, or mourn for merely a week before? If Tisha B'Av falls on a Sunday, is there even a week of mourning before, or does Shabbat nullify the mourning practices? When can a person do their laundry? What if they only have one garment and Tisha B'Av falls on Friday—can they wash their garment for the honor of Shabbat? And what about Torah study—is Torah study prohibited on Shabbat? Are you allowed to learn Torah? Maybe you can only learn the sections you're familiar with. How should we commemorate this time?

I am profoundly moved by the way in which the rabbis engage in this back- and-forth. After the

*churban*, the rabbis understood that we were living in a radically altered world and they wanted desperately for our traditions to survive. We are heirs to their ingenuity. The rabbis were working out for themselves and future generations just how we would commemorate Tisha B'Av specifically and honor the destruction of the Temple more broadly. Writing just hundreds of years after that trauma, there was no consensus.

To me, this lack of consensus points to the very human reality that the way we grieve and mourn is radically individual. Some of us need those safe containers to hold the pain. Our tradition masterfully created a staged process for mourning the deaths of dear ones for that reason. We move from *shiva* (seven days immediately following burial) to *shloshim* (the thirty days of mourning) to observing the *yahrzeit* annually—because we know that even as time progresses, we need a ritualized way to return to the loss and re-emerge into the world again and again, year after year.

Just as our rabbis were not of one mind about how to commemorate the loss of the Temples in Jerusalem, I know many of us are wrestling with a plurality of thoughts and feelings about grieving at this time. Society often teaches us to bottle up emotion and stay as far from death and pain as possible. Where's the space for the rawness, the realness, the honesty, and the complexity as we hold our loss?

May the wisdom of our rabbis and our calendar provide us with some solace and grounding in whatever we are grieving. May the fluidity of the rabbis' honest back-and-forth about how to commemorate this time help us consider how we mark our own time of trial and calamity.

-- from 5782 Tisha B'Av mailing, adapted slightly

*Rabbi Lauren Tuchman is a speaker, spiritual leader, educator, and consultant to Jewish communities on disability and inclusion. Ordained by The Jewish Theological Seminary in 2018, she is, as far as she is aware, the first blind woman in the world to enter the rabbinate.*



***TORAH EXPLORATIONS: Av, Cont.***

A PRAYER FOR BREAKING by Sarit Cantor

Speaker of Justice, Freer of the Bound, You of Many Names:  
Help us to learn what it means to crumble  
witness us amidst the rubble  
let our pain and our sorrow  
be transmuted into soil  
grow into medicines that nourish the hearts & bodies & dreams of those to come.

May we find you in our speechlessness, in our wailing;  
may we find you in our ripped clothes and raw skin;  
in our deepest ruin, may we have the strength to remember  
that breaking waves do not compromise the ocean  
that this ruin is a practice of communion.

May we remember that our relationship with you  
lives in the parts of us  
that push the cracks open;  
that this breaking is holy;  
that this ending is co-creation, is composition, is sovereignty,  
it is the power to emerge on the other side.

-- from 5783 Tisha B'Av Mailer --



"Fragmented" by WilHei / Pixabay    Image: Glass shattered in a way the creates a web of cracks

## TORAH EXPLORATIONS: Av, Cont.

adapted from "**Comfort & Regret: a Meditation on Tisha B'Av**"

by Rabbi Becky Silverstein (originally appeared in 5782 Tisha B'Av mailing)

The Talmud teaches (B. Berakhot 32b): From the time the Temple was destroyed, the gates of prayers have been locked, but the gates of tears have remained open. All year long we have access to Gd through the spiritual technology of crying—through our tears, our raw emotion.



Tisha b'Av begins a cycle of seven haftarot, prophetic readings, on consolation. As we move from mourning to the possibility and celebration of a new year, we are guided by a cycle of repair and return. After we do the spiritual work of Tisha B'Av—to open and give voice to grief of devastation—we do the spiritual work of opening ourselves to comfort and consolation. This prepares us to stand with our communities before Gd on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

The Shabbat after Tisha b'Av is known as Shabbat Nachamu, the Shabbat of comfort and consolation. During that Shabbat, the haftarah opens with this line and continues with a prophecy that triumphs Gd's return to Jerusalem.

נַחֲמוּ נַחֲמוּ אֶת־עַמִּי, יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ

*Nachamu, Nachamu ami -- yomar eloheichem*

Comfort, comfort, my people, said your Gd -- Isaiah 40:1

At first, I read this line and its context as centering the experience of Gd's people, that we are the ones who need to be consoled. After all, Gd, through Isaiah, is speaking to the exiled Jews. But, there is a disconnect between this reading and the Hebrew grammar.

- The verb; *nachamu* / comfort, is in the plural imperative (“y’all comfort!”)
- The noun, *ami* / my people, is in the singular.

Perhaps the people are present as witnesses to the consolation of another.

Pesikta Rabbati, a midrash crafted between 600-900 BC, teaches:

“Comfort, comfort, my people (Isaiah 40:1),” say R’ Berakhiah the Kohane, should be read, “Comfort Me, comfort Me, O my People.”

In the way of the world, if a man owns a vineyard and robbers come and cut it down, who is to be comforted, the vineyard or the owner of the vineyard?

And so, too, if a man owns a house and robbers come and burn it down, who is to be comforted, the house or the owner of the house?

You are My vineyard. But Nebuchadnezzar came and, having destroyed it, exiled you and burned My Temple; it is I that need to be comforted.

This midrash frames Isaiah 40:1 as Gd's request for comfort. Instead of others comforting Gd's people, the midrash reads this verse as a commandment for us to comfort Gd.

Why does Gd need comforting? What can that open for us—people created in Gd's image?

## TORAH EXPLORATIONS: Av, Cont.

(cont. from p.10)

When the Temple was destroyed, Gd lost Gd's house, the central locus of Gd's presence in the world. While Gd's presence fills the whole world, it was in the Temple where Gd was connected to us, Gd's partners in creation.

נחם

*nun-chet-mem*

**Comfort, Regret**

There is another option. The root, *nun-chet-mem*, translated here and above as “comfort,” can, in another grammatical structure mean “to be sorry,” “to regret,” and to reconsider.”

We probably don't need the dictionary to tell us that to be in a state of wanting comfort can be the opposite of feeling sorry or regretful.

Perhaps Gd regrets some part of Gd's role in the destruction of the Temple and the exile: Maybe Gd regrets creating humanity at all, or regrets allowing conditions that led to the destruction. The regret might also be an expression of Gd's longing to reconnect with Gd's people.

In his sermon, "I Do Regret," Rabbi Aaron Alexander taught:

Regret. It's difficult. It's also divine. And it's definitely essential for any kind of authentic repentance—of any potential change in course, any return home, wherever it is.

The cycle of destruction, consolation, and opening to new possibilities is neither linear nor reserved for this specific moment in the Jewish calendar. Yet, this moment calls our attention to it and provides us the opportunity to practice opening to grief, naming regret, seeking comfort, and engaging in *teshuvah*, sacred repair. Our individual comfort need not be a source of shame, but can instead be, like all things, a place to connect with the spark of divinity/humanity within us and a foundation for seeing new possibilities.

**practice opening to grief,  
naming regret,  
seeking comfort,  
and engaging in *teshuvah*,  
sacred repair.**

*Rabbi Becky Silverstein is a Schusterman Fellow and co-initiator of the Trans Halakha Project. He is a faculty member of Svara: The Traditionally Radical Yeshiva and currently serves on the boards of the Jewish Studio Project and The Shalom Center. Becky believes in the power of community, Torah, and silliness in transforming the world.*



**NOTE:**

### **B. Berakhot 32b**

Rabbi Elazar also said: Since the day the Temple was destroyed the gates of prayer were locked, as it is said: “Though I plead and call out, He shuts out my prayer” (Lamentations 3:8). Even though the gates of prayer were locked, the gates of tears were not locked, as it is stated: “Hear my prayer, Lord, and give ear to my pleading, keep not silence at my tears” (Psalms 39:13).

## Torah Exploration: Shalom and Rage

Last month's Divrei Matir Asurim included a note about the "broken" *shalom* in Numbers 25:12. The *vav* in the word "*shalom*" is purposely cracked at this point in the Torah scroll. Some related, ancient teachings: -- "a spear has no place in peace," or peace cannot be built on violence; -- any peace built by humans is always imperfect.



Here is a contemporary teaching from Rabbi Yael Levy, of *A Way In: Jewish Mindfulness*. Rabbi Yael writes that tradition is calling us "into a *brit shalom*, a covenant of peace."

Search for love, the tradition calls. Look under the rage that you feel as you witness arrogance, greed and shameful acts of power. Look beneath the anger you experience as you see all that is being trampled and destroyed and reach for what you value and love. Feel the love that manifests as rage.

Touch the love that becomes anger. A *brit shalom* doesn't call us to deny rage. It says, experience rage, acknowledge its presence. Let rage fill you with energy and strength. And then, pivot from rage and act from and for love.

Pursue peace with love. Pursue healing and justice out of love for creation and all beings. Act from and for love.

Shalom/Wholeness/Peace does not mean perfection. It does not mean everyone will agree and see things the same way.

Shalom/Wholeness/Peace demands we acknowledge our differences, acknowledge the pain and contention, the brokenness of life. And do our best to seek common ground and pour love into the brokenness again and again.

This is a mighty task and sometimes we will be able to do it and sometimes not. Let us be gentle with ourselves and each other. Let us remember that each time we open the channels of love, healing flows into the world. Our words and actions make a difference.



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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.