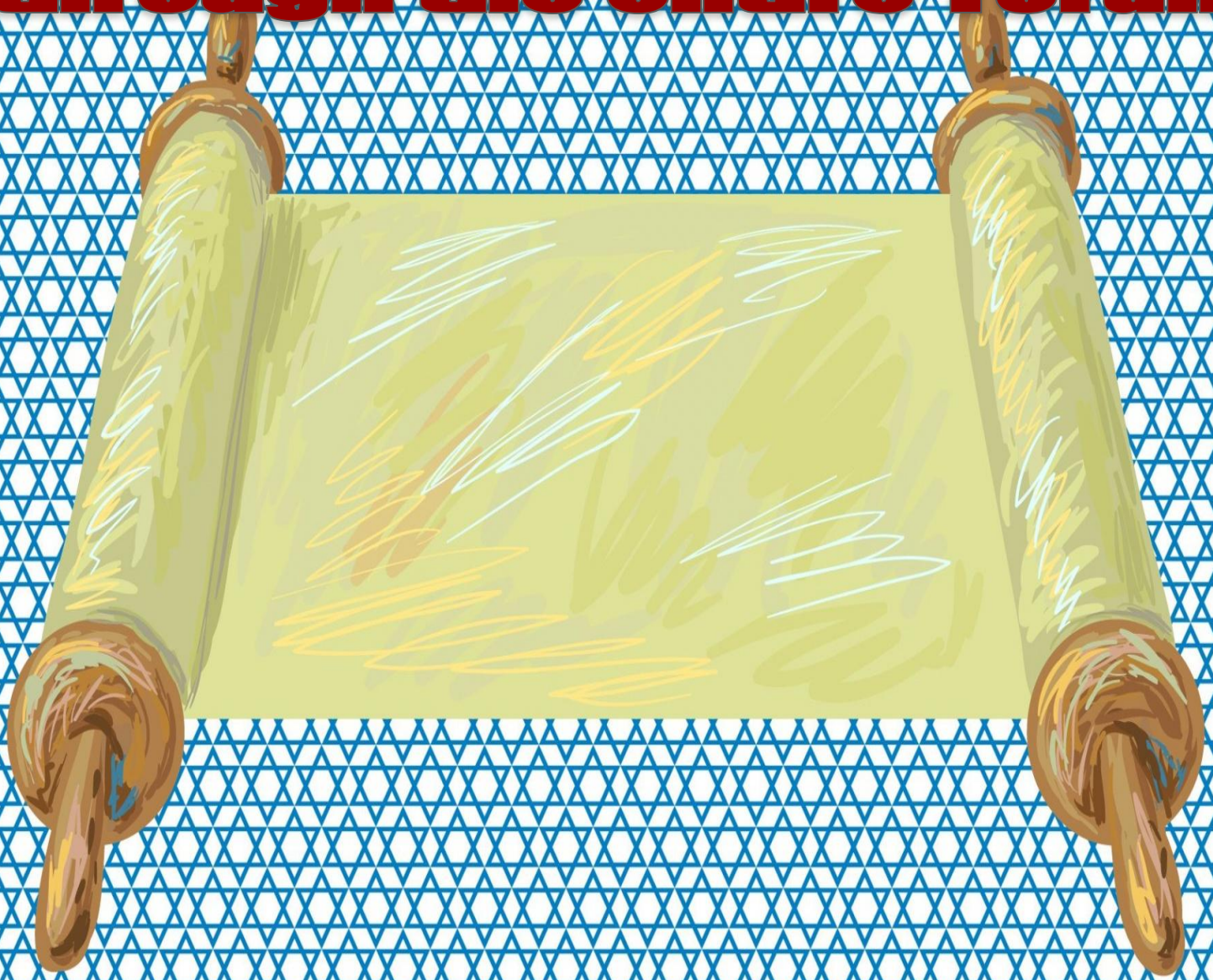
Project 180+7

A community sprint through the entire Torah



Ohr Kodesh Congregation

Rosh Hashana 5781

Introduction to Project 180+7
Josh Wilkenfeld, OKC Adult Education Chair

Tractate Berakhot captures a debate about how to approach Torah study when out of sync with the communal progression through the Torah. Some Rabbis suggest reading ahead; some were cramming on the eve of Yom Kippur.

But the Gemara largely rejects these approaches, providing the following response:

> אָמַר לֵיהּ הָהוּא סָבָא, תְּנִינָא: וּבִלְבַד שֶׁלֹּא יַקְדִּים וְשֶׁלֹּא יְאַחֵר.
>
> A certain [unnamed] elder told him, we learned: As long as one does not read the Torah portions earlier or later [than the congregation.] (Berakhot 8b).

The upshot being that even where separated from the community, our tradition encourages extra efforts to remain linked up. And, moreover, this bit of practical knowledge emerges not from one of the great sages of the Talmud, but from an anonymous elder: Someone who from experience rather than pedigree both appreciates the importance of this asynchronous synchronicity and has the confidence to state his point.

It's with this backdrop that Ohr Kodesh has worked to compile and offer the collection you are now reading. Though this season of social distance provides challenges to remaining in lockstep, the below project involves an ambitious attempt to link the community in Torah study in the leadup to *Rosh Hashanah* and *Simchat Torah*: A sprint through the ENTIRE Torah with novel viewpoints from community members.

And, just as our anonymous elder offered wisdom worthy of inclusion with the sages of the Talmud, so too does this collection proceed from the key recognition that, in our tradition, everyone can learn, and everyone can teach.

I am so grateful to the almost *sixty* members of the community who offered their time and insights to this project. This includes around TEN children who delightfully grabbed the opportunity to demonstrate their own equal-citizenship in the Jewish community. These insights offer us a chance to imagine ourselves grabbing five minutes of time with sixty of our dear community members and hearing about their views on Torah and Judaism --- an invaluable gift of closeness in this time of distancing.

I am also grateful to the distinguished and beloved leaders and friends of our community who have offered more elaborate Headnotes for four of the Five Books of Torah (the Shemot one was hacked together this morning).

Please print this out and enjoy it in the upcoming season. Whether you leaf through this over the intervening Holiday days, as you wind down in the evening, or even (heaven forbid!) during shul time, I hope you will, in reading through this, both remain connected on a deep and intellectual level to members of our community, and prepare for the Holiday season with an immersion in Torah.

Shanah tovah and best wishes for a wonderful year ahead,

Josh Wilkenfeld

Headnote to Sefer Bereishit / Book of Genesis
Rabbi Avi Strausberg
Director, Hadar National Learning Initiatives & Hadar DC

The Book of Genesis: This One Pleases Me

In the beginning, there was nothingness. Except that's not exactly true because there was something. There was chaos. There was wind, there was water, and there was darkness. And, then God took to creating the world. God separated light from darkness, day from night, water from dry land. And, a vision of a livable earth was called into existence. And, God was pleased with it. With each act of creation, with each move towards an ordered existence that could sustain life, God saw that it was good.

Except that this wasn't the first time that God took to creating the world. We learn in Genesis Rabba 3:7 that in God's effort to produce a viable world, a world fit for Torah, God created and destroyed many worlds. God created and destroyed, created and destroyed, each time saying, "This world does not please me," until finally on the foundation of the many worlds destroyed, God created our world.

In Ohr HaTzafun, Rabbi Natan Tzvi Finkel teaches that there is great wisdom in destruction. This runs contrary to our instincts. Our instinct teaches us that destruction is the end of something. We mourn the loss of the thing that came before; it is difficult for us to imagine a way forward out of the wreckage. Rabbi Finkel teaches us that rather than see destruction as simply ruins, we are forced to look for the wisdom contained within destruction. What lessons can we glean from the brokenness and how can this learning help us ensure that the next world is a better world?

In the Book of Genesis, we witness numerous falls for the fledgling nation. Soon after God deems the newly created world pleasing, God sees fit to once again nearly destroy it with the flood. The people come together, one people, one language, only to be dispersed and confused after the success (or was it failure) of the Tower of Babel. Famine after famine hit the people until ultimately they find themselves enslaved in Egypt. And yet, each time the Jewish people suffered a devastating blow, each time the world as they knew it was destroyed, a new world was created in its place. A world of promise and hope.

God creates worlds out of destruction and so too, we have the ability to create worlds out of destruction. In Genesis, we learn that human beings are created in the image of God. Rabbi Finkel writes, "this is what it means for the likeness of man to be created in the likeness of God." To be created in God's image means that we, like God, have the power to create, to destroy, and to rebuild out of destruction.

As we begin to reread the stories of the Book of Genesis, I encourage you to think about the possibility that every fall, each act of destruction, might contain the foundation upon which a new world will be created. And, that we, created in the image of God, might be the ones to bring that world into existence.

Genesis 1-3 / Noah Bassel

More has probably been written about these chapters than any other part of the bible. So we will just share something that continues to stand out in these texts that we continually tell our kids on Shabbat: Shabbat is to remind us of the creation of the world and our exodus from Egypt. So we remember every week that the story of creation is how God created every single human being in God's image, and that to honor that story, we need to act and live our lives in accordance with the belief that every single person is valuable and is made in the divine image. This is intertwined with the second part of Shabbat: remembering that we were slaves in Egypt, and that no other person should be oppressed because we remember our history of being slaves. We strive to infuse everything we do with these Shabbat Principles, and make them part of the big and small ways we celebrate Shabbat. And no matter how hectic of tiring life is, we know that part of our religion asks us to pause at least every seven days and immerse ourselves in a practice that helps us remember that every person is created in God's image.

Gen 4-7 / Adam Small

The human race did not get off to an auspicious start. First, Cain kills his brother, Abel. As a punishment, God marks Cain and orders him to wander the Earth for the rest of his life. After several generations of apparent wickedness, God comes to regret creating humans. Only Noah finds favor in his eyes.

And yet, who knows how many years later, humans are still on this planet. We have created beautiful art, thrilling literature, and inspiring music. But we have also done horrible, wicked things (some of us more than others). I wonder if looking at our world today God still regrets creation, as he did before Noah redeemed humanity.

Gen 8-11 / Rachel Fleischer

The flood comes to an end when G-d remembers Noah and all the animals on the ark. Even so, no one can disembark until the water recedes and Noah can be sure that there is enough dry land. Noah releases birds—first a raven and then a dove—to search for dry land. The dove demonstrates that there is dry land by bringing back an olive leaf and then, seven days later, flying off and not returning. In response to an altar full of sacrifice from Noah, G-d resolved to never again "doom the earth because of man" even though, as G-d recognized, the nature of man tends toward evil from his youth. It is interesting that G-d does not recognize man to be evil at birth but rather, from youth, which implies that evil inclination can be taught, untaught, and redirected. This is the beginning of a regenerated world—the old world has been destroyed and the world will need to be repopulated (by Noah's children). The new world has new rules, like permission to eat animal flesh, but G-d makes clear that life is sacred. By creating a rainbow, G-d makes a covenant with Noah—but really with all living

creatures—to never again destroy the earth by flood. After this time, the whole world branched out from Noah's sons. In an effort to explain the behavior of some of Noah's descendants, the Torah segways into the Table of Nations by describing a time when Noah got drunk and naked. His sons saw his nakedness. Ham/Cannaan made fun of Noah, but Shem and Japheth covered him up. Noah curses Ham/Canaan (and his descendants), and blesses Shem and Japheth. Then, at 950 years old, Noah dies.

Gen 12-15 / Eytan Fisch

Avram -- not yet Avraham -- embarks on a journey that is, at once, tediously ordinary and revolutionary. Like every child of every generation, before and after, he physically and emotionally leaves the confines of his parents' home. It is the promise of nationhood and greatness that gives this mundane act the gloss of historical transformation. With his family in tow, Avram heads to a new land but, due to events, they ultimately travel on. It is in these early travels that Bereshit confronts Avram and Sarai with -- and seemingly foreshadows -- the very events, peoples, and places that will shape their progeny into the nation Avram is promised: the building of a *mizbeiach* (altar) at Beit-el; a famine that forces them to Egypt; plagues visited upon the Pharaoh of the day; and a return to Canaan. In their personal journey, Avram and Sarai walk the very physical, emotional, and spiritual path that their descendants will follow as they take the leap to nationhood.

Gen 16-18 / Art Spitzer

These chapters begin with the conception and birth of Ishmael, continue with the foretelling of the birth of Isaac, the command to circumcise, and the mass circumcision, and end with Abraham's bargaining over the destruction of Sodom. These are all familiar stories, but what struck me was that Ishmael (at age 13) was included in the circumcision, but Isaac was not— because he was not yet conceived. So Isaac would have been one of the first boys to be circumcised eight days after birth. And Ishmael is a member of the covenant, although he is said to be the ancestor of the Arab peoples. Interestingly (from what I read) Muslims also practice circumcision, although it is not a strict command, and is traced to the Prophet Muhammad, not to Ishmael.

Gen 19-22 / Elisha Friedman

Decisions, decisions. Genesis 19-22 presents a series of stories concerning difficult moral choices. Each story ups the emotional ante, challenging the reader to sit with the potentially devastating consequences of each decision: Lot chooses to protect two visiting angels while risking his family's safety; Lot's daughters hatch an unsavory plan in order to perpetuate the family line; Abraham deliberately misrepresents his relationship to and potentially endangers Sarah in order to protect himself from being killed; Abraham heeds Sarah's demand to cast out Hagar and the son she bore; and finally, God calls on Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac. These stories repeatedly pit emotion

against belief, and the individual against the community in scenarios where the stakes are high, inviting readers to reflect on the factors driving the decisions we make in our daily lives. These passages make for thought-provoking reading every Rosh Hashanah and especially this year, during the covid-19 pandemic, when the decisions made by each individual have potentially significant consequences for the well-being and safety of everyone in our community.

Gen 23-26 / Danny Alpert

In Chapter 23, as Abraham is seeking a place to bury Sarah, he goes to great lengths to ensure he has laid down permanent roots in the land. But immediately afterwards we are told that he abjectly refuses to allow his son Isaac to marry from among the locals, and instead insists that his wife be found from among his own family that he had left behind in Aram. This contrast in the story between chapters 23 and 24 is both striking and serves as a clear lesson in the value of playing the long game. While Abraham may personally feel the bond of his kin and his birthplace, he understands that staking a claim in the land is part of his responsibility to ensure the fulfillment of the promises God has made to him.

Gen 27-29 / Rebecca Rubin Damari

As a parent, it is hard not to read Genesis 27 as a parent and see it as unfair. Isaac has only one blessing to bestow on one son—it's a zero-sum game, which already seems unnecessarily limiting. Rebekah encourages, essentially orders Jacob to steal Esau's blessing from his father. Though I know the story takes place within a particular historical context as far as birth order, inheritance, and so forth, it's easy to read the chapter as a conflict between one parent's favoritism and another's, making for multi-dimensional family division. Genesis 28 treats the story differently, with Isaac (apparently intentionally) bestowing the blessing on Jacob and sending him to Laban maybe even as part of the blessing, rather than Rebekah's encouraging Jacob (in Chapter 27) to go to Laban to escape his jilted, murder-plotting brother.

Gen 30-33 / Michal Shinar

In this section, Jacob is given his new name of Israel, which roughly means to "God wrestlers." Some people say that this name is the heritage of the Jewish people: that we are people who wrestle with and grapple with God. But what struck me in this section is that Jacob's encounter with this mysterious man/angel is very brief and purely physical. However, it is Gen. Chap. 30 that we see some very real and raw wrestling with God from Rachel and Leah. Rachel wrestles with infertility and what it means for her life, Leah wrestles with her mixed lot of fertility but being a second-favorite to Jacob, and they name their kids names that have back stories of angst, joy, and complex emotions all at once. There is

no clear resolution to their troubles, but the complexity of their emotions about what God has given them are enshrined in the names of their offspring.

Gen 34-36 / Eric Goldscher

In Genesis Chapter 34, we learn of the massacre of Hamor, Shechem and their people at the hands of Simeon and Levi. In this one act, Simeon and Levi not only changed the future of the people of Israel but also acted against their father Jacob for the first time but certainly not the last time. In this instance, Simeon and Levi acted as brothers of their raped sister Dinah and not the sons of Jacob. The brother's anger was not only directed towards Hamor and Shechem but also their father Jacob for not doing anything to avenge his daughter's treatment. Their only immediate punishment for their actions is that Jacob forces them to bury their looted goods but this lack of punishment embodied them to take actions against their own brother later on.

Gen 37-39 / Deb Bilek

Joseph is gifted an ornamented tunic (or coat of many colors) by his father, Jacob, and has a series of powerful dreams, which he shares with his brothers. Joseph's brothers grew jealous of him, conspire to dispose of him, and ultimately sell him to a caravan of Ishmaelites, who then bring Joseph to Egypt. In the meantime, Joseph's brother, Judah, grows a family of his own in a very unconventional way - including initially fathering three sons, two of whom pre-decease him, and then, though unbeknownst to him until later, conceiving twins with his widowed daughter-in-law, Tamar. Back to Joseph: over time, he becomes trusted by many Egyptians, and is made a personal attendant to a high ranking courtier of Pharaoh. However, after a confusing and suspect encounter with the courtier's wife, Joseph is sent to prison. While in prison, the chief jailer grew to trust Joseph, and puts Joseph in charge of the other prisoners.

Each of these chapters outlines, in detail, a variety of interpersonal relationships - to name a few: father/son; brother/brother; father-in-law/daughter-in-law; mother/child; employer/employee; man/woman; jailer/prisoner; individual/Hashem. And while there is much to unpack in each of these, a theme that rises to the top is that our relationships with others are complicated. In this story, as in life today, our relationships are influenced by a myriad of different things, and these things change over time, which, consequently, cause our relationships to evolve as well. To me, one important element to any interpersonal relationship is the role of empathy, and I was hard pressed to find examples of empathy in these chapters. Many of the exchanges between these individuals seemed marked either by self-interest or reactionism, rather than a deep understanding of another person's lived experience.

Demonstrating empathy can be difficult, because it requires us to overcome and reach beyond our own self-interest or reactionsim. That's why I think of empathy as a practice in and of itself. And perhaps

this is the lesson that I wish to offer: the characters in these stories are flawed - as we all are - in part because of their lack of empathy for one another. We can learn from this. For instance, rather than seeking revenge on our siblings when they make us mad, perhaps we might aim to better understand where they are coming from before we conspire against them. Or, instead of punishing someone based on suspicion, perhaps we can ask questions to better understand the entire story.

Gen 40-43 / Hannah and Stella Feldman (age 13)

When Joseph was imprisoned and interpreted the dreams of the baker and cupbearer, he trusted that in time the cupbearer would remember Joseph. This came true when Pharaoh had a disturbing dream and needed an interpreter and the cupbearer recommended Joseph. Pharaoh then trusted that Joseph correctly interpreted his dream, that there would be 7 years of plenty and 7 years of famine, and appointed Joseph second in command of all of Egypt. Pharaoh did not wait to see if the 8th year after the dream brought famine to the land, he immediately gave Joseph the job and had him do everything he could to prepare and lessen the impact of the upcoming famine. His trust in Joseph paid off and Egypt prospered even through the years of famine.

Gen 44-47 / Perry Smith

Joseph reveals himself to his brothers, and brings Jacob and his family to live in Egypt. Reading this chapter, I always find it easy to imagine Moshe himself narrating this story. As an Egyptian prince who became the leader of Israelites, the story of an Israelite who became the leader of Egyptians must have resonated with him. In the description of Joseph's emotion at the moment of revelation we have a rare insight into how Moses himself might have felt as a pariah to the Egyptian family who raised him, and what he had given up to become the leader of the Israelites.

Genesis 48-50 / Liz Cohen

Jacob seems calm in the face of his impending death. Instead of reflecting on his life, he focuses on the future, and his legacy. When he says to bless Menashe and Ephraim, because "in them may my name be recalled", we can see the message that our longest-lasting impact is how we are remembered by future generations. At the end of Chapter 50, when Joseph also wants to be buried in the land of Canaan, we could read this as the fulfillment of Jacob's wish. Joseph is following in his father's footsteps,

maintaining a tradition. It is tradition and history, combined with faith, that has sustained the Jewish people until today.

Max Cohen (age 9):

I think Jacob didn't want his sons to experience the same feud he had with Esau. So he wanted to give each of his sons an identity, and some advice, so they wouldn't fight each other. Also. A lot of people in this world are not first-born, but they are still great. You need a chance to be yourself. Even though I am first-born, I don't think it matters what the birth order is. It only matters what sort of person you choose to be.

Headnote to Sefer Shemot / Book of Exodus
Josh Wilkenfeld
Just a guy

In this year's review of the Book of Exodus, I think there is value in reading Exodus as providing a dramatic answer to the challenges raised in the Book of Genesis. This approach, in turn, gives rise to a conversation about some of the central challenges in building caring relationships with each other and with G-D.

Genesis begins with the telling of the three great pre-historical events in the life of humankind, each corresponding to a particular human tendency towards trouble. First, the expulsion from Eden results from *defiance*: G-D gives instruction, and humankind rebels. Second, the Flood results from *cruelty*: People acted terribly towards other people, prompting G-D to destroy all life. Third, the Dispersion from Bavel results from *haughtiness*. The people of Bavel note to each other "Come, let us build us a city, and a tower, with its top in heaven, and let us make us a name; lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." The Babel story thus alludes to a self-centredness -- up to the notion that the symbol of human accomplishment would rival G-D by peaking in the Heavens.

These three stories share a key similarity in that all involve some diminution in humankind as a whole. The Expulsion from Eden renders humans mortal, the Flood first destroys most humans and thereafter removes human agency to cause such destruction again (*see* Gen 8:21), and the Dispersion shatters the unity of humankind.

Our Book of Exodus, then, can be read as providing a pilot antidote to all these ills. How to solve haughtiness? Force a people to live as strangers and slaves in a land not their own for 400 years and thereafter extract them from slavery through signs and miracles, so that, once they achieve salvation, they will appreciate the tenuous position of all humans in society. How to solve defiance? Reveal G-D to the people on a mountain smouldering with fire and accompanied by the sounds of the Shofar, and make clear that those who follow G-D's rules will thrive and those who reject G-D's rules will receive punishment. How to solve cruelty? Offer a detailed code of rules from that same G-D that expressly demands kindness and forges the people into a mutually responsible group.

And this solution works decently well -- the Jews follow Moses and G-D into a barren wilderness -- i.e., they eschew defiance. And although *Tanakh* generally does not shy away from offering stories of awful interpersonal deeds between Israelites, the time in the desert is relatively free of such episodes. Meaning, our ancestors in the desert actually seem to have been (mostly) nice to each other. Moreover, whereas the Expulsion/Flood/Dispersion events reduce human agency, the system of Torah presaged and then unfurled in Exodus restores that agency: The Jewish people are offered a path to control their individual and national fortunes.

But the program had a flaw as well. Although 400 years in captivity stripped the Jews of haughtiness towards G-D, it bred the unfortunate side effect of overdependence. So much so that, in Exodus 32, a *slight* absence from Moses post-Sinai -- just a short stretch after direct revelation from G-D -- has the Jews in a full panic mode and ready to build a Golden Calf.

So much of the Book of Exodus, then, sets up the tension of life as a free people: How to preserve sufficient memory of our dependence on G-D that we prioritize the needs of the stranger and the unfortunate without believing ourselves so subject to divine forces as to be unable to act. I enjoyed reading the Book of Exodus with this tension in mind, and as a challenge for how we today can maintain that same balance between dependence-with-agency and independence-with-kindness.

Exodus 1-3 / Rachel Gildiner

Fear and faith intertwine themselves in these chapters. Jacob and his sons and their tribes go to Egypt where Joseph already is. Yet shortly after their arrival, the entire generation ends there in this new and foreign land. A new king comes to power in Egypt and is threatened by the number and strength of the Israelites. Because of his fear, he ultimately enslaves them and tells the midwives Shifra and Pua to kill all sons as they're born. They disobey his orders, out of their fear of their own God. Moses is born and placed in a basket in the nile to spare his life. He grows up as an Egyptian and sees the atrocities of slavery. He kills an Egyptian soldier in an act of defense of one of his Israelite brethren, then he flees out of fear. Moses marries Tzipporah and has a son of his own. Moses sees the burning bush, was afraid to look at it, doubted his own leadership, trusted God's promise, and is now the one chosen to lead the Jews out of Egypt.

Ex 4-7 / Havi Goldscher

Much like Moses, each of us is learning each day the incredible skills and assets by our sides all the time. Moses understood, by instruction that his rod, by his side, could become a serpent and while scared originally by its power, the Lord instructed him to utilize all that he had strength to control. In 2020, as parents, we are forced to look inward to support our families and our children. Parents now need to use everything in their arsenal to teach, support and guide their children and their parent's voices are the primary source of strength. As parents, we cannot hide behind our insecurities but instead let this unique period of time push us all to believe in ourselves more deeply.

Ex 8-11 / David Weisel

In these chapters, God delivers the second through ninth plagues to the Egyptians, starting with frogs and going up to darkness. For five of these plagues, Pharaoh announces that he will let the Israelites go. But then God removes the plagues and Pharaoh reverses his decision to let the people go. With the frogs, for example, Pharaoh "saw that there was relief" and "hardens his heart" as a result. This speaks to an aspect of the human condition to which many of us can relate. Often, when we are faced with personal or professional adversity, we say to ourselves that we need to make a change. We say that we need to change our parenting styles or look for a more fulfilling job. But then we "see that there is relief" -- things get better at home or work -- and we forget about our intentions to change. The Torah's message here is that momentary relief is just that: fleeting and inconstant. The problems will still be there in the morning. To truly make changes in our lives, we need to keep our hearts not hard, but open to beneficial change.

Ex 12-15 / Rachel Bergstein

G-d has already sent nine plagues and still Pharoah won't let B'nai Yisrael leave Egypt. What to do? The narrative arc pauses at this critical juncture for some important instructions from G-d. Each Israelite family should slaughter a lamb, put the blood on the doorposts, and eat it roasted with bitter herbs, a practice that should, according to G-d, be repeated every year as the korban Pesach. And, if the lamb is too big for one family, they should share it with their neighbors so that it is completely consumed or else burned by morning. Every year from then on, B'nai Yisrael should eat matzot for seven days as a festival to G-d. And now, back to our scheduled programming of the drama of the night when G-d kills each Egyptian first born...

I have always been struck by the connection between ritual and history. When asked why Jews eat matzah on Pesach, most would answer that because the Israelites didn't have time for their bread to rise as they were fleeing from the Egyptians, we eat unleavened bread. That is in the text, but only AFTER G-d has already instructed Moshe to establish a ritual holiday where Jews eat matzah. Is this a tension or an enhancement? Do we observe ritual because it is a commandment from G-d or because it reminds us of a historical narrative? Which events from our Jewish past do we mark with ritual and which do we mark with history? There is a reason that the Pesach seder is the most observed ceremony by American Jews, more than Hannukah and more than high holiday services. The connection of ritual and narrative is a powerful force that reinforces and enhances one's understanding, appreciation, and performance of religion.

Ex 16-18 / Marcela Kogan

In Exodus Chapter 18, God provides manna for the starving Israelites and instructs Moses to tell his people that they “gather of it each according to his eating capacity,” and “let no one leave over any of it until morning.” Those who took too much found their leftovers crawling with worms the next day. Limiting how much manna the Israelites could gather was another test that God puts the Israelites through to see if they would obey his commands. But by limiting the food gathering intake, God is also teaching the Israelites how to be considerate of others and how to temper their greed— interpersonal skills they would need to exercise as they formed a nation. The consequences to their transgression was clear and so was the life lesson: If you take more than your share, you’ll never enjoy your leftovers.

God wanted the Israelites to trust that God has their backs, to realize that the days of bondage, starvation and depravity are over so they don’t have to horde their food or keep leftovers. God wanted to change the mindset of the Israelites, get them thinking positively about their future, they could eat without being afraid food will run out, that their luck will change. Once they trusted God, they could

move on and learn skills necessary to become free thinking, productive human beings. Every time they disobeyed God there were consequences. Just like a parent trying to teach a child to be a responsible adult. But the Israelis could not change their habits overnight. The people needed to trust god to grow and learn. So God had to punish their misdeeds by making the food inedible. The next time, Israelites would not need to horde the food because they will have learned that God would keep his promise to provide. There is a reason why God wants people to trust him. It's not just trust him because he is God, it is not a vain trust, like a King who makes decrees because he can, with no backing for it. God wants people to trust him so he can teach them to grow. they could not trust a God they barely knew, despite the miracles he showed. They could not turn off the instinct to hot. So they kept distrusting, the distrust kept them from moving forward. So God had to teach them to trust him in small ways.

Ex 19-22 / Michael Cohen

These three chapters are one of the most important and debatable in the entire Torah as they include the giving of the ten commandments, the concept of the covenant, and the law of retaliation (eye for an eye, etc.). While we all know the ten commandments, it is the way in which G-d chooses to give them to his chosen people that resonated with me at this time. G-d says he will come in a thick cloud with thunder, lightning, and a shofar that starts softly and gets louder so that the Israelites trust Moses (and future messengers) forever. It emphasizes that even a message so important as the ten commandments requires attention to how it is delivered. In our lives, with our families, fellow colleagues, and congregants, it is the tone and the delivery that often matters just as much as the message itself.

Ex 23-25 / Aron Krasnopoler

These chapters call to mind the words of the prophet Micah (6:8), "It was told to you, man, what is good and what the Lord demands of you – only doing justice and loving kindness and walking humbly with your God." Chapter 23 calls on us to do justice by not spreading false rumors or giving false testimony, protecting the rights of the minority and treating everyone fairly. It continues with calls to act with kindness towards our enemies (supporting their loaded donkey), workers and animals (Shabbat) and the land itself (Shmita). Chapters 24 and 25 remind of us of the covenant between God and the Jewish people and their humility and awe for God's power. In Chapter 24, Moses recounts the covenant to the people and they respond, "All the Lord has spoken we will do and we will heed", accepting the covenant without argument. Moses then seals the deal by throwing blood from the sacrifices on the people. The event culminates with Moses, Aaron and his sons and seventy elders of Israel going up Mt. Sinai and seeing the God of Israel, or at least the ground beneath God's feet as blue sapphires. In Chapter 25, the people are asked to make donations to build the Tabernacle. It is like a nobleman paying tribute to his liege lord after swearing his allegiance. The Jewish people are humble

before God in their commitment to the covenant and building the Tabernacle after their experience at Mt. Sinai. We, who cannot have that experience, have the greater challenge to look within to remember our humility and awe for God. We can remember to act with justice and kindness in all things.

Ex 26-29 / Becky Anhang Price

Exodus Chapters 26 through 29 provide extensive instructions regarding the measurements and materials for constructing the Mishkan. The details conjure the modern-day experience of planning a major household renovation: extraordinary planning and attention to detail are needed to achieve the ultimate goal of a space that is both utilitarian (a house) and welcoming (a home in which connections are formed and fostered). In the midst of the description, we learn that the children of Israel are to be commanded to take pure, pressed olive oil to light a "ner tamid." This light is to burn from evening until morning (performing the day-to-day utilitarian function of illuminating the darkness) and be lit eternally by all future generations (performing the transcendent function of connecting the Children of Israel to their covenant with God).

Ex 30-33 / Avi Rubin

Perakim 31-33 begin with God commanding that the Israelites be counted and taxed in order to pay for the construction of the mishkan. He then instructs Moses at length on the proper parameters of the mishkan, the type of incense that shall be offered, etc. The importance of Shabbat is then also explained. In the midst of all of this, the Israelites become impatient with Moses and construct a golden calf. After convincing God not to punish his wayward people, Moses returns to camp, flies into a rage, destroys the calf, and sends forth sword-bearing Levites to punish the offending population. They kill 3,000 fellow Israelites. Afterward, God admonishes the Israelites for being a "stiff-necked people."

Ex 34-37 / Hannah Olson

When Moshe returned from his second trip up the mountain, he asked the Israelites to consider bringing gifts for the purposes of building the tabernacle. "Everyone whose heart is so moved," he says... and then the gifts come pouring in in such abundance that he has to ask them to stop! Imagine what it would be like for our congregational hearts to be so moved that we were asked to STOP giving of our time, treasure, and talent. What measure of movement would it take for you to make a sizeable

gift? And how could you move someone else to give of themselves? Our shul can't arrange for a new Sinai-style miracle, but maybe you could be a new miracle for our shul.

Ex 38-40 / Michelle Robin Silberstein

Exodus 38-40 describes, at great length and precise detail, how the Mishkan Torah was built and eventually inhabited by The Divine Presence in the Holy of Holies. All of Am Yisrael came together to fundraise and build the Tabernacle, construct garments for the Cohanim, assemble and disassemble the structure for transport, etc. - each member of the community made some kind of contribution, and thus each component of construction is accounted for here. The near-obsessive report is an early example of operating public works with full transparency in order to foster confidence in leadership and encourage participation in any and every way possible. These guidelines and blueprints have directed synagogue construction, communal worship, and organizational behavior for millenia; they model the concept of "sweat equity" and reinforce the act of togetherness found at the intersection of serving God through service to each other. When the people were working in harmony towards this greater goal, Hashem would rest in the Tent of Meeting; the Shalom of the People in the outer rings of the camp would radiate inward and reflect back to them from the peace brought down from upon high.

Headnote to Sefer Vayikra / Leviticus
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The Torah comprises five books. Sefer Vayikra—the Book of Leviticus—stands at its center, as if God wants to make clear to us that this is what's it's all about.

So, what is it all about? Well, Sefer Vayikra easily divides into two halves, each seemingly with its own message and set of concerns. Biblical scholars generally describe this as two sources, "P" (Leviticus 1–16) and "H" (Leviticus 17–26); those of us committed to the divine authorship of the Torah will have to understand this division not as two distinct historical sources, but rather as two manifestations of God's imagination. Either way, though, the sense that there are two messages in the book seems inescapable.

The first half of the book is what many people think of as "Leviticus"—cultic rules of purity sacrifice and purity (thus the scholarly title "P," for "priestly"). It picks up where Exodus left off. From chapter 25 until its end, Exodus largely details the instructions for and construction of the Tabernacle. Sefer Vayikra therefore tells us what to do in this Tabernacle we've now built. Leviticus 1–10 outlines the various kinds of sacrifices in precise detail, while chapters 11–16 go on to describe the rules of purity—essential knowledge, since those offering the sacrifices must be ritually pure.

The second half, in stark contrast, is obsessed with holiness (thus the scholarly label "H"). The Hebrew root k-d-sh, generally rendered "holy," pervades these chapters. Sacrifices make no appearance here, and though we do find references to purity and impurity in H, it clearly means something different from the temporary, ritual impurity of chapters 11–16 (for more on the different meanings of impurity in Leviticus, see Jonathan Klawans, Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism). Here we are told to "be holy," and H is chock full of laws that we easily perceive as "ethical" (e.g. leave the corners of your fields unharvested, for the poor; don't be tardy in paying your workers; etc.).

What are these two halves doing in the same book? The contrast between them looks stark, as evidenced by how much easier it is to find someone to give a devar Torah on, say, the parashah of Kedoshim rather than, for example, Tzav.

I have long thought that the key to book is Leviticus 16. If Sefer Vayikra is the center of the Torah, then chapter 16 is the beating heart of Sefer Vayikra, the fulcrum at which the book turns from P to H. Leviticus 16 lays out the ritual of cleaning the Tabernacle of its impurity, with the high priest bringing two goats—one sent out into the wilderness and the other sacrificed to God. The chapter then tells us that this ritual is to be performed only once per year—on the 10th of Tishrei, that is, on Yom Kippur.

Chapter 16, you might notice based on the chapter divisions I described above, is the last of P. However, it is in fact an exquisite mix of the interests of these two streams of God's message in Sefer Vayikra, of the "priestly" and the "holy." Scholars have pointed out that much of the chapter ignores specificity about date and seems instead to describe a regular priestly cleaning process; only in its final verses does the limitation to Yom Kippur appear. More important, in those same verses where we find the once-a-year requirement, we also learn that it is insufficient simply to perform the ritual of the two goats and provide the other animal offerings; as well, we must "afflict [our] souls," which later interpreters understood as tied to a process of introspection and teshuvah.

Chapter 16, read holistically, then, teaches us that the rituals of P and the holiness of H are inextricable from each other. There cannot be ritual cleansing without psychological work, and there cannot be personal transformation without precisely legislated and performed rituals. This may not be the purpose of the Torah—that, surely, is to bring about a redeemed world—but it is the absolutely necessary precursor to doing that work. Without the ability to clean house and begin again, we would surely give up in our work of redemption. Sefer Vayikra gives us the tools to carry on in the face of our inevitable trips and stumbles. That's why it's the heart of the Torah.

Lev 1-4 / Trudy Jacobson

All four of these chapters reference the concept of offerings, but what differentiates them are whether they are sin or well-being, precious or accessible (meat vs. grain). The offerings also move from those which are individual sin offerings which assume that one must admit that something we did requires expiation whether out of acknowledgement of guilt or something that may sincerely have been unintentional. What strikes me throughout the readings which are quite repetitive in their detailed references to how the various offerings are to be carried out is the theme I had never appreciated before reflecting the comparison of a burnt offering designated by the word "Olah" which showcases that the flames and smoke ascended to heaven and fits into the common understanding of Aliyah – "to go up" allowing us to take a biblical practice into a common vernacular but in current terms without the need to burn a physical manifestation for our purification. This is essential since regardless of the type of offering the offering is still only an appreciation of inappropriate behavior, the change to be made is still the learning that comes after the sacrifice is accepted

Lev 5-7 / Josh Sandler

Sacrifices come in many forms, and while specific to certain actions/sins, there are cases where flexibility is permissible. A person who is required to make an offering/sacrifice cannot do it alone. They must utilize the kohanim, who in turn must be ready by not letting the fire go out.

Lev 8-11 / Gary Simms

"Moses brought out the second ram, the ram of ordination... Moses took some of the blood and put it on the ridge of Aaron's right ear, and on the thumb of the right hand, and on the big toe of his right foot." Lev 8:22-23. A symbolic interpretation of these acts is that the blood on Aaron's ear was to remind him (and us) that we must listen to the pain of others. The blood on the thumb reminds us that we may need to raise a hand to protect others. The blood on Aaron's toe reminds of the need to walk into the arena of conflict in order to make peace. The symbolism of blood also segues to Passover, and in many years, the reading coincides with *Shabbat HaGadol* ("The Great Shabbat") immediately preceding the holiday.

Blood is a leitmotif of the Passover story (the plague turning the Nile to blood; the blood of the first born; the blood on Israelite doorposts to ward off the Destroyer; the blood of Pharaoh's army being destroyed at the Red Sea).

At the Seder table, some question its historical accuracy. Rabbi Burton Visotzky (*JTS Distance Learning Project 4/30/05*) reminds us that there is an important difference between "historic facts" and "truth." As he notes, *"The story of the Exodus, whether historically factual or not, is a story of the*

beginnings of peoplehood that should be embraced with both arms and hugged to one's soul. It is a story that tells of enslavement, redemption and a covenant with God. It continues to offer a model for our own religious imaginations... and a spiritually awesome experience around the Seder table."

Lev 12-14 / Dianne Levine

When I read these chapters of the Torah I see two entirely separate issues and instructive themes.

Chapter 12 talks of the recovery period from "tuma" or impurity for a woman who has just given birth. This disparity between the length of the Tuma on the birth of a male child (33 days) and that on the birth of a female child (66 days) usually evokes feminist outrage. I see this in a totally different way that might very well ignite male chauvinistic fury.

The mother of a female child has just completed the monumental task of creating this unbelievable creature who has capacities unlike a male human. Yes, the mother needs a much longer recovery period because her daughter will be like that female in the Garden of Eden who changed the future of mankind by having the courage to eat from the Tree of Knowledge (no, she wasn't really seduced by the snake). Eve saw the future and so she tried something new. She was responsible for making man into the kind of creative being that I believe God always intended him to be. Producing a boy child may very well be like Abraham who heard some voice that told him to take his son and slaughter him as a sacrifice despite the prohibition against murder that he surely knew (the seven laws of Noah). Abraham eagerly responded "yes right away" without further inquiry. (Blasphemy???? I honestly believe that Eve and Adam did right while Abraham sinned.)

Chapters 13 and 14 talk of the job of the priest in determining the nature of skin diseases and of household invasive conditions. Is it any wonder that Jews went into science and medicine in a BIG way? Here we see how Israelite law sets the stage for science ruling our treatment of disease. The priest is the doctor and the scientist who diagnoses a medical problem and/or a structural problem. NO-- the problem is not brought on by witches or evil spells. While the priest does not quite see the germ theory of disease, he sure comes close as he prescribes sanitation and isolation. He must definitely see the importance of isolation until the condition has passed. The fear of contagion underlies the priests' orders to remain outside the camp and and or destroy the belongings of the infected individual. This is modern medicine and science at its beginning.

Lev 15-18 / Darci Lewis

If the Torah were a sitcom, Leviticus 15 and 18 would be episodes pulled from streaming for offensive content, so let's just focus on Leviticus 16. This chapter is familiar from the Yom Kippur Avodah service, telling about the high priest's offering. As fascinating as the scapegoat is, the line that stood out to me was verse 17: "And there shall be no one in the tent of meeting when he goes in to make atonement in the holy place, until he comes out, having made atonement for himself, his household,

and all the assembly of Israel." As hard and as important as the work of improving our community is, we must first take time to be alone and to improve ourselves.

Lev. 19-21 / Ellen Elow-Mintz

These chapters begin with the statement, "You must be holy, for I, your God, am holy." This is immediately followed by the requirement first, to honor one's mother and father (in that order) and to keep Shabbat. B'nei Yisrael is receiving many laws in throughout this section of Leviticus. By reiterating these commandments, God is defining what essential positive behaviors are expected at all times. As we look to 5781, it is as vital to have goals we may be able to attain on a regular basis as it is to then tell us all the things we cannot/must not do. In this time when many people are lacking the basics, we are reminded to leave gleanings for the poor and hungry. We are instructed not to hold grudges, and to ease the way for those who have physical or other challenges. These commandments (and many more) are incumbent upon all of us. While there are detailed additions for the priests in following chapter, it is the people that receive the first and more comprehensive instructions. Chapters 19 and 20 on their own could provide a year's worth of study.

Lev. 22-24 / Susanna Shapiro

These verses are so rich – they talk about purification v. contamination; the holy days/festival days; and basic sense of justice and consequences of actions (the famous "eye for an eye").

In terms of contamination - the fact that many things (touching a corpse, eating from a torn animal, associating with someone who is contaminated) can contaminate a Jew is not that surprising. Even though a number of examples are mentioned – including but not limited to the 3 mentioned above – we can easily infer that there are many things that can shift us from a state of purity to a state of contamination. Lev. 22 reminds us to be conscious of those things, to be vigilant, and to not take purity for granted because it can be easily lost.

Then comes the more unique and interesting part of this chapter: the state of impurity or "contamination" is easily reversible. Unlike an indelible mark or some irreparable act, the state of purity can be almost immediately reclaimed by "immersion in the water".

This is a uplifting and perpetual reminder that we (humans) can contaminate ourselves, and G-d can always purify us (through our symbolic act of faith - immersion in water) is a statement of hope that redemption for most things is in our hands. Just like t'shuvah – return/repentance/turning - which is perpetually available to us, so is purification.

The parshah goes on to review of the major holy days and festivals – from Pesach to Sukkot; Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur. These elaborate rituals, moments to pause in space and time to demonstrate our faith in Hashem, help us see how important it is not just to survive and be in the "rat race" but to live with intentionality and to keep our mind focused on divine service throughout the year.

The famous teaching on the "gleanings" is also part of these chapters. As we harvest we think beyond ourselves and our families to remember the less fortunate and act in a way that provides tzedakah and restores justice.

There is also a discussion of an irreversible sin – to blaspheme Hashem. The exact nature of what this means is not elaborated. But for blaspheming Hashem, the punishment is stoning. I believe this means that forgetting the source of life and the spiritual Reality of our world, beyond which all else is an illusion, is fatal and irreversible. What is the point of a life without recognizing G-d, the endlessly miraculous and perfect source of all life and meaning? Immediately after the stoning section, comes the famous "eye for an eye" section. Why are the sections together? It could be because when we hurt each other, we are also hurting G-d. Harming each other not irredeemable as is forgetting or "blaspheming" G-d, but we are still harming G-d through our fellow man or woman. We are in G-d's image so any harm to each other or even to a living creature cannot go unpunished. So, we give "an eye for an eye."

These verses of this parashah from Vayikra helps us remember justice, intentionality, and how to put everything in perspective where G-d alone is at the center. The rituals of purity, the festivals and the laws are all ways we can remind ourselves of this center, this deep and ever-renewing purpose of existence. Everything is redeemable unless we forget or lose our center. If we lose this we don't have anything – it's like we are metaphorically stoned ... just an empty shell with all the life beaten from us.

Lev 25-27 / Gilda Zimmet

In Leviticus Chapters 25-27 the term redemption is repeated throughout and in particular it is something that happens in the Jubilee year, the 50th year. In a time where income inequality is rampant in our modern society, these Chapters make me wonder if there is a place for redemption in our current society, that has at its ethos a streak of individualism. Just as G-d provides for the return of land (which was the means by which a person or family could support themselves and perhaps thrive) to persons who have lost land for various reasons, I wonder if we should live in a society that allows for some "return" at certain intervals not as a give away or a form of welfare but as way to make a more just and widely productive society. If a person falls into deep debt might it not make more sense to alleviate the debt even if that requires someone on the other end of the spectrum to give up some of his or her wealth? I think the concept of a Jubilee year should be used by communities to ask themselves - have things become so unequal and distorted to the point of dysfunction and can a form of redemption be

conceived of that reduces inequality in way that is not punitive to those who are more fortunate and which is uplifting to those who are less fortunate?

Headnote to *Sefer BaMidbar* / The Book of Numbers
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During this summer governed by COVID-19, many of us are not traveling for lengthy periods from our homes. In previous years, those journeys required us to answer several essential questions: Who is directing our trip? Where will we spend the most time? How do we provide for our meals and lodging? What reading material will we take with us? What obstacles do we anticipate? How will we handle the inevitable "surprises" along the way?

The fourth book of the Torah, B'midbar Sinai or Numbers answers those and other questions as it recounts the travels of the People of Israel from the Sinai Wilderness to the Jordan River, the border of the land of Canaan, over a forty year span. God is their guide, remaining loyal to the covenant with the Israelites even though they frequently provoke God's anger. Despite those provocations, God supplies their basic material needs. Moreover, God's presence moves with the people. Initially God's presence is found in the cloud by day and in the fire at night. As they travel and their relationship with God develops, the people experience God in the mobile Sanctuary/Tabernacle. The Ark in the Tabernacle is the tangible witness to God's presence. It is from the Ark that God addresses Moses.

The journey of the Israelites over forty years includes forty stations or stops that can be divided into three stages; the wilderness of Sinai (Numbers 1:1-10:10), where they make elaborate plans for their journey; the area of Kadesh (10:11-20:13), where they spend the vast majority of their forty years; and from Kadesh to the steppes of Moab (20:14-36:13), where they prepare to conquer the land and settle it. While some of the passages within this book duplicate the narrative accounts in Exodus, it is only in Numbers that God punishes Israel. As Professor Jacob Milgrom explains "all the incidents of Numbers take place after Israel has left Sinai—where it swore allegiance to the covenant and was warned of the divine sanctions for its infringement" (J. Milgrom, The JPS Torah Commentary, Numbers, p. xvi). These infringements include murmurings about food and water, challenges to the leadership of Moses and Aaron and outright insurrection.

Numbers contains many literary genres including narrative, poetry, prophecy, prayer, satire, forms of law, the itinerary and of course the various census from which the English name of the book derives. It is also important to note that law and narrative alternate regularly within the book, with the narrative centering mostly on the march through the wilderness and the legal portions connected to the three main stations of the march: Sinai, Kadesh and the steppes of Moab (ibid. xv).

As we retrace the journey of our ancestors in the wilderness, we encounter, as they did, serious obstacles. Some of those obstacles come from within the people (Korach, Datan and Aviram, the tribes of Gad and Reuben, as well as frequent complaints about "the service on the journey") and

others result from the challenges of foreign nations (principally Moab and Midian). How Moses leads the people through these obstacles adds to the drama of the book and complexity to Israel's developing relationship with God.

I will conclude this note with a few words about the major religious struggle within Numbers. Israel departed Egypt but remembered Egyptian pagan practices. In the wilderness, Israel confronts various forms of paganism including the Baal fertility cult and the intercession of diviners. Interestingly it is the non-Israelite prophet Balaam who captures Israel's unique relationship with God when he declares: "Lo, there is no augury in Jacob, No divining in Israel; Jacob is told at once, Yea Israel, what God has planned" (Numbers 23:23).

As you read the commentary nuggets prepared by our members, imagine yourselves to be among the travelers with Israel on this journey of two generations from slavery to the brink of sovereignty in the land of Israel.

Numbers 1-4 / Bea Gurwitz

The first chapter of Bemidbar (Numbers) starts off with God commanding Moses to conduct a census of the Israelites "on the first day of the second month, in the second year following the exodus from the land of Egypt." Why then? Why not do a head count right after the exodus? The subsequent psukim offer some clues. The census tallies only the men in each tribe and specifically men over 20 who have the ability to bear arms. Once counted, the Torah assigns each explains where they should march as the Israelites progress through the desert (the "division Reuben" which numbered 151,450, for example, was instructed to march second). The parsha also offers instructions for how they should camp. In the middle of the divisions came the Leviim, instructed to care for the Mishkan as they walk and when they camp--"each in position, by their standards." Together, these details suggest that the census has a very specific purpose--to create a well-organized army of Israelites to protect the Mishkan--a new asset of the Jewish people. The connection between the census and the need to protect the Mishkan would be clearer if the census came right after the completion of the Mishkan in Shemot. Alas, the full book of Vayikra comes in between the end of Shemot and the beginning of Bemidmar. So what gives? Rashi helps us here, noting that the Mishkan was built at the beginning of Nissan (Exodus 40:2) and it was just the next month that Moses counted them. Boom!

Num 5-8/ Gidon van Emden

Almost whiplash-inducing in the range of topics it covers, this section encompasses disparate matters, from the Sota, the procedure surrounding a wife suspected of infidelity, through the ascetic Nazir, the priestly blessing, and instructions regarding Temple worship. These texts speak to us from seemingly different places: the blessing is still used on a weekly, even daily basis, and remains meaningful in its expression of God's graces, which we wish upon our people and our children. The Sota and the instructions for Temple worship, on the other hand, remind us that much of the Tora, while fraught with meaning, is set in a time and culture we don't recognize as our own. And yet, it is our own - it is a part of our Tora, and thus it is in and of its time, even as it is also timeless and enduring. It is our task every year anew to find even in those passages that are difficult for us to read, God's countenance and grace, which are exactly what we wish for in the priestly blessing. May we indeed be blessed accordingly, able to discern contemporary and personal meaning not only where it is obvious, but also where it is hard to see.

Num 9-11 / Siona Listokin

A series of short vignettes about Pesach Shainee, the cloud and trumpet sounds that dictated desert travel, a leadership roll call, congregational complaints about the food, and finally a story about two out-of-line prophesiers (Eldad and Medad). The upshot of these unconnected paragraphs is that Moshe has a lot to do: He is a spiritual leader shaping the technicalities of worship, a quartermaster

general and conduit of a lopsided bureaucracy of the tribes/elders/GOD. Moshe's leadership style in these roles varies, and he is at times subservient to his boss or threatening to quit. My favorite moment comes when Moshe is faced with a minor rebellion by two elders, as Joshua counsels Moshe that he should push back ("Forbid Them!"). Moshe casually waves Joshua off. Sometimes the best leadership response is to let things go because there are bigger fish to fry. Five sentences later God smites the people with a very great plague for some reason.

Num 12-15 / Seth Yoskowitz

The Importance of What We Say and How We Say It
This section starts with Aaron and Miriam speaking against Moses about Moses' wife. While what was said by the pair may perhaps have been "truthful" in a certain sense, Miriam severely and Aaron as well were punished by God for their words. As an immediate contrast, within the same few verses, Moses is described as the most humble man on Earth and true to form cries out the humblest of prayers on behalf of his sister "O God, pray heal her!" Clearly even in the most familiar of interpersonal relationships – brothers and sisters – care and thought regarding speech and its delivery count heavy. But what about beyond the walls of one family? What of speech when much larger groups are involved, perhaps even a whole nation? Later in this section is the story of the 12 spies scouting the land of Israel. All 12 spies speak a certain "truth" – that Israel is a great land and its inhabitants possess certain strengths and advantages. Ten of the spies speak that "truth" offering a perspective of fear and defeat. Only Joshua and Caleb speak that "truth" offering a perspective of faith and success in coming to the land of Israel. Again, care and thought regarding speech and its delivery count significantly as Joshua and Caleb are rewarded with something Moses, Aaron and Miriam don't even get to do which is to step foot into Israel. And as if to tie a bow or knot around the importance of taking care with speech..., this section of the Torah ends with the third paragraph from the Shema about tzitzit (fringes of the tallit). Tzitzit are a visual reminder to "remember" and "do" the mitzvot (commandments). Many times, our immediate instinct is to say things that may be a "truth" but perhaps from a negative perspective like Aaron, Miriam and 10 of the spies did. Tzitzit may have been intended as the visual, physical cue that reminds us of our Jewish values, helping our speech come out as a force for good in the world.

Num 16-18 / Marla Satinsky

We spend years now trying to investigate and find out our genealogy; our ancestors and their stories. In the time of the exodus, the leaders "gathered together the entire assembly" to establish their genealogy. Everyone in those times knew who they were and where they came from. They knew the stories of their ancestors. My brother has spent years trying to piece together a family tree of just one side of our family. He is now starting to look for the other side of our family. What makes us so interested in trying

to find our past? From the time of the exodus until now is one long dotted line. No one really knows all the stories of our past.

Num 19-21 / Dani Kazhdan

In Numbers 21, the Jews complain that God has brought them to a desert, and they have been stuck with the "miserable food"--presumably the mana. In response, God punishes the Jews by releasing snakes that bite the Jews. This story is in many ways parallel to Numbers 11, where the Jews complain about the Mana. But there is a notable difference. There, God creates a major miracle, sending magical poisonous birds: the Jews who bite into the birds die. Here, God simply releases snakes that, true to their nature, bite the Jews. (The Torah describes God's release of the snakes with "VaYishalach," which, as Rashi in Genesis 8:8 explains, refers to letting things run their course.) I see God's move towards a more natural-law-bound role as consistent with the shift from the God of daily miracles who took the Jews out of Egypt to the more subtle God of our day-to-day life.

Num 22-24 / Sarah Hyams

These three chapters interrupt the previous narrative with the memorable story of Balak, Balaam, a talking ass and prophecies. I was struck by moments in the opening verses which both echo and are in tension with places in the text outside of these chapters. First, from Shemot where a new pharoah sees the population of Israelites as a threat, Joseph's earlier heroic role notwithstanding. Balak, king of Moab, employs vivid new metaphors to describe the same threat (22: 3, 4, 5, and 6). But what about God's covenant with Abraham? Those uncountable stars sound promising, but are in tension with political realities the Israelites encounter. As the narrative of wandering towards the promised land picks up again in later chapters, drastic punishments imposed by God on the Israelites diminish the population significantly, and another census is also just ahead. Are the survivors traumatized? Are they aware of this covenant? Another echo, briefly noted: the only previous mention of Moab before Numbers 22 is in Bereshit 19, where the son born to Lot and his older daughter (whose knowingly incestuous act is motivated by an assumption that earth needed to be repopulated) is named Moab, identified as the progenitor of the Moabites. The far end of this thread is found in Megillat Ruth. Naomi goes to Moab to escape famine. Her Moabite widowed daughter-in-law, Ruth, marries Boaz legally, they return to Naomi's home and from their son Perez, we are told, will come Davidic. Another interesting set of contrasts.

Num 25-29 / Noah Phillips

These chapters are, in the colloquial sense, “biblical” as can be. The Baal-Peor heresy and Israelite fornication with Midianite women begets a plague, and only a brutal murder by Aaron’s grandson Phineas stops the infection. G-d exults, granting Phineas’ progeny the priesthood and ordering the

Israelites to destroy Midian. Out of this death and destruction, however, come good things. The Israelites are granted their portions of the Promised Land, Zelophehad's daughters succeed in establishing that women (without brothers) can inherit, G-d orders Moses to appoint Joshua as leader, and we get the sacrifices and festivals - that is, Judaism itself. Like our world, the world of Numbers 25-29 is not pretty, or easy on the Jews; but that's how we get where we need to go.

Num 30-34 / Rachel Braun (Excerpted from Rachel's *Tour of Torah* blog)

Chapter 33: 1–49 list[s] the journeying of the Israelites. . . . The text enumerates 42 stops, more place names than are enumerated elsewhere in the Torah. . . . A [] literary device here is the repeating of the name of the departure point when listing each journey. . . . The Midrash Tanchuma reads God's love into this repetition. Each aspect of the journeying – the departure as well as the arrival – likens our story to that of a king (ie, God) and the king's son intimately reliving a shared path, retracing their steps and actions. Some modern commentators focus on the idea of honoring the journey, in that leaving a place is a momentous part of a life course, and must be acknowledged with repetition.

Num 35-36 / Rob Zucker

The Israelites should create cities for the Levites and among them are cities of refuge. The Torah details a number of situations in which a person is killed and it should be considered murder, and provides for a family member of the person killed to avenge the killing as justice. But it also explains the circumstances of an accidental killing that may not be avenged if the killer flees to a city of refuge and remains there. It would seem that this selection shows how there cannot or should not be an endless cycle of revenge when a person is killed - and recognizes that intent matter when it comes to the circumstances of a person's death.

Chapter 36 includes a critical development on laws that generally concern themselves with men and favor men - provision for the transfer of property to daughters of a father with no sons. Referred to as the daughters of Zelophehad (three times before we learn their own names - Malhah, Tirzah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Noah) they are allowed to keep the property of their father within his tribe rather than be disinherited because they are women.

It seems to me that learning and remembering the names of these women themselves (not just as the daughters of their father) is a fitting way to honor them

Headnote to Sefer Devarim / Book of Deuteronomy
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Deuteronomy, the Greek-English word for Devarim, gets its name from the rabbinic description of the text, Mishne Torah or second telling. From this title one may understand the sefer as more of a recounting of previous stories than a unique text in its own right. However, the text is much more about building a future than retelling stories from the past. Yes, Moses does walk down memory lane recounting tales from the wilderness, the incident of the spies, and we even get a do-over of the Ten Commandments. At the same
time, 70 of the 100 new laws contained in the book are not found in the earlier texts. As we will see, more than anything, the emotional tone set by Moses signifies why this book is different from all the other books.

Moses first introduces himself to us as "not a man of words" in Exodus (4:10) and unfit for the task of leading the Israelites out of Egypt. Here, as we enter into Devarim, three books later, that has changed. Moses is no longer "slow of speech and tongue"; he is now defined by his conversations with God and the people. The opening pasuk of the sefer states, "These are the words that Moses addressed to all Israel on the other side of the Jordan." In this opening sentence, we see a switch from the anonymous passive voice of "and it came to pass" to Moses owning the content of his words. The midrash teaches (Deut R. 1:1) "The change is not due to improved rhetorical skills but to his enthusiastic commitment to his message." His enthusiasm is meant to ignite a sense of ownership and responsibility in the Israelites.

The Israelites are preparing for their greatest transition since the Exodus, moving from the intensity of the wilderness experience and into the Land of Israel. They will no longer be camped together but dwelling in their own portion of the land and will need to take ownership over their spiritual and communal lives.
Deuteronomy gives us the framework for this type of engaged and sustained Jewish community. First, it emphasizes the importance of God and monotheism which is the foundation that connects us all together. Second, we receive the structures that have become our contemporary Jewish rituals and practices, such as the Shema, Birkat Hamazon, Kiddush, and mezuzah all of which remind us of our obligations, shared heritage, and gratitude for being a free people. Finally, we receive several laws grounded in creating a just and righteous society including the establishment of courts and governing bodies so that we are always guided by our values. God, ritual, and justice are what will build and maintain our dedication to Judaism.

Moses knows that we are moving from the “start-up” phase into an establishment and enables a sense of commitment and ownership through his words and actions. Our inheritance, given in the Torah, is the sacred responsibility to hold our values close and continue building an enthusiastic commitment to living Jewishly.

Deuteronomy 1-3 / Jacob Lewis

We tend to think of Moses as a religious leader, and Deuteronomy as a collection of his (troubling) theological and ethical teachings. These three chapters, however, remind us that he was also a leader on the regional geopolitical stage. Think of these chapters as an early example of a well-worn genre--the (ghostwritten) memoir of an aging political figure, with the requisite crowing over (troubling) accomplishments and shifting blame for failures. The successful reorg of the judicial system, the awesome victory over Bashan, choosing and training my successor? Totally me. That incident with the spies? I got some bad advice. Moses was great, but also flawed--just like us. Hopefully we, like Moses, can pass some wisdom on to future generations in spite of (or even because of) our flaws.

Deuteronomy 4 / Hersh Lewis (age 10)

Basically, the Israelites are about to cross the Jordan, and Moses is reminding them yet again: you must not create graven images, else you will die. If you follow the commandments, people will think you are smart, and you will prosper. You should teach these commandments to your children and your children's children, because God is a merciful God, and with a strong hand he brought you out of Egypt. On Mount Sinai, you saw no image, but only heard a voice telling you these commandments.

Even though it's Moses's own fault that he will not reach the Land (he sinned and hit the rock so it would seem as if it was his will that water came out of, and not the will of God), now he's blaming it on the Israelites (and it's not the first time, either). Pasuk 21 says, "And the Lord was angry with me because of you, and He swore that I would not cross the Jordan and that I would not come into the good land the Lord, your God, is giving you as an inheritance." I think that's unfair, and he might as well admit that it's his fault. The larger message here that Moshe is saying is that if you do not follow these rules, you will likely die because you have sinned, like me. I think that death is a harsh punishment, but the harsher the sin you do, the harsher punishment should be--although it also says that God is merciful, so hopefully God won't kill us for doing one of the simpler sins.

Deut 5-8 / Gary Libbin

Deutoronomy chapters 5-8 form a veritable quote book for essential Judaism - the 10 commandments, the Sh'ma, and the verses that form the core of the Passover haggadah and birkat hamazon, the blessings after a meal. More than any one verse, however, this section serves as a pivot for how the Israelites, and we, relate to the events that came before in the Torah. Moses begins his recitation of the 10 commandments by telling those gathered that they were all present at the giving of the covenant 40 years earlier - despite the fact that they been wandering in the desert for the last 40 years in order for the generation of those who left Egypt to die off before entering the land of Israel. Similarly, the verse that

we quote each year on Pesach - because of that which G-d did for me when I left Egypt, comes from this section. The way that we have connected, in every generation, to the words and ideas of the Torah is by treating these events not as history, but as a communal and personal memory. We were freed from Egypt, we were the recipients of the Torah at Sinai, and we will eventually enter the Promised Land.

Deut 9 / Ezra Libbin (age 10)

Even though the Israelites were bad to G-d, they are being rewarded with the land of Israel. G-d is going to destroy the people who are there because they are rude, mean, horrible people. The Israelites weren't much better, but only somewhat. They are getting the land because it was promised to our ancestors, but the Israelites must prove that they are worthy of the land in the future. Overall, Moses reminds them that although they haven't shown it yet, they need to trust in G-d and follow his commandments.

Deut 10-12 / Sarah Horowitz

Deuteronomy Chapter 10 begins with God telling Moses to create a second set of tablets to replace the first set that he "smashed," and with God's reconciliation with the nation of Israel for their transgressions I think this shows us that even God allows us to rectify mistakes we've made, so similarly we should be kind to ourselves with the mistakes we have made, and be forgiving of the mistakes others in our lives have made. Chapter 11 begins with describing some of God's miracles, including guiding our nation out of Egypt, and God's blessing and cursing the Jewish nation. We should remember that since God has led us out of difficult times in the past, he will so to lead us out of the current difficult time we are going through in the present day. Chapter 12 begins with God giving the Jewish people specific laws to observe only when physically located in Israel. This reminds us that our behavior may need to change depending on the place we are physically located, and also that there is a time and place for each of God's commandments - we can't be expected to do everything all at once - we need to be mindful of where we are and what we have the capacity to fulfill given our physical location.

Deut 13-15 / Nina and Eldad (age 7) Glasner

After reading about the kosher laws, I think that the person in China who first got the virus was probably not Jewish. He got the virus from a bat's blood. The germs he got in his nose created Covid19. He couldn't be Jewish because he was buying bats to eat, but bats are not kosher.

If you didn't know, flamingos are kosher because they're not a hunting bird. Once there was a Roman emperor who served a dish of flamingo tongues. In that time a lot of flamingos were killed for their tongues because the Romans thought it was tasty. Today Jewish people don't think it's tasty and they won't encourage other people to eat flamingos. If too many people would eat them they would become extinct. "People would rather see flamingos alive than on their plate."

Deut 16-18 / Glenn Farber

Chapter 16 begins with a run through the shalosh regalim, in the order of the Biblical calendar: Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot. In the descriptions of Shavuot and Sukkot, the chapter commands us all to rejoice and be happy – our families, servants, strangers among us – and "You shall have nothing but happiness!". Although the section on Pesach explicitly states a reason to be appreciative ("because the Eternal freed you from Mitzrayim"), it doesn't command happiness. The Shavuot and Sukkot sections, conversely, don't state a reason – although the festival is linked to the harvests. Today, in the US, we don't connect Shavuot and Sukkot to agricultural success. It's easier for us today to rejoice and be happy because of salvation from enslavement (Pesach), destruction (Purim), and religious oppression (Chanukah) than because of bountiful harvests. Yet it is the latter which the Torah commands. Can we be happy on command? Can we rejoice without a deeply felt reason?

Deut 19-21 / Tamara Halle

These chapters address several acts of injustice between people. For example, in Chapter 19, we have the commandment (first stated in Numbers Chapter 35) to establish three cities of refuge for those who are inadvertent manslayers, as well as the commandments not to bear false witness or move a marker noting land boundaries. Of all the laws mentioned in Deuteronomy Chapters 19-21, the one that stands out to me the most is the one in Chapter 21 about how to behave regarding a woman who has been taken captive during a military conquest. In Chapter 20, it states that women captured in battle are "booty" and can be "consumed" by the Israelite victors (Chapter 20:14). But in Chapter 21:10-14, it's clear that the Torah aims to provide some protections and human rights to captive women. A captive woman is to shave her head and cut her nails, and keen for her parents for 30 days before the captor can make her his wife/concubine. (Robert Alter notes that these acts are likely rituals to mark a transition rather than to make the woman less attractive to the man, as several medieval commentators have suggested.) If, after consummating the marriage, the man no longer wants her, he can send her away but he cannot profit from selling her, since he has "abused her" (Chapter 21:14). So, although sexual exploitation is condoned by the Torah, there are limits to this exploitation. Compared to contemporaneous cultures, these laws could be seen as an advancement - but they still fall very short of human rights protections that we would condone today.

Deut 22-24 / Daniel & Jack Grunberger (age 10)

Deuteronomy 22 includes two stories that on the surface deal with two very different mitzvot: "hashavat aveydah," or returning a lost item to its owner, and "tsa'ar ba'aleh hayyim," the prohibition against animal suffering. The first story describes a person's obligation to return a lost item to its owner, whether the person is known to you or not. The second one deals with a fallen animal that you find on the road. You are not allowed to ignore it. Instead, you must help its owner get it to its feet.

What links these two different mitzvot? The link is that in both instances you are not permitted to ignore doing what needs to be done. As Jack explained, "you must do the right thing, take action, and

not be passive. The two stories are together to teach us that doing the right thing extends to all of God's creatures."

Deut 25-27 / Rise Ain

Devarim 26 is the Cliff Notes version of the story of Jewish peoplehood and our role in the world. It's all there. We are reminded of our history starting with our ancestors whom God has chosen because of their inherent potential to instill correct values. Our potential as individuals and as God's treasured people is critical to the story told in our orienting event, the Exodus from Egypt. Key concepts emerge: vulnerability, respect, empathy, relationship, involvement, and modeling. As slaves, we were vulnerable but with God's involvement we were able to achieve freedom. We could not do it alone. Through God's involvement, we had a role model for correct behavior. Our experience as slaves enabled us to have empathy for others. We played an active role in achieving our freedom because God knew we could; God knew our potential, He respected us. But God does not leave anything to chance when God tells us to be mindful of the needs of the orphan, the widow, and stranger. We are to take care of the most vulnerable and recognize each person's potential because God did that for us. We can be active partners in creating a world where we can behave as God does, respecting the potential in each of us. And, if we don't, well, that's not in the Cliff Notes version!

Deut 28-30 / Shana Zucker

God offers an abundance of blessings for observing all commandments, but also threatens the Israelites with exponentially more curses if they astray. Why is the carrot and stick approach needed to create desired behaviors? Isn't the carrot enough? Or why do we even need external reinforcements? Perhaps tactical, extrinsic measures are helpful reminders when we adrift from a path that is leading us to our best selves. But external influences are only effective as temporary acts since basic human behavior craves something much deeper. We crave what makes us feel good and we know we feel good when we are learning and growing, when we have the freedom to make choices, and when we have a sense of belonging. These elements cannot endure with external influences, rewards or punishments, which brings into question why were there so many more curses than blessings? One reason for the imbalance may allow us to think about curses as more powerful tactics than blessings. A curse stings when executed and hopefully serves as a reminder to avoid something similar in the future. What is even more profound, though, is that a curse allows opportunities to demonstrate even greater strength by reflecting inward or finding resilience in a path forward.

Fred Ansell / Deut 31-32

Three times this chapter contains the admonition, "Be strong and of good courage." This is reminiscent of nearly identical words at the end of Psalm 27, which we often read in connection with the Mourner's Kaddish. And this is no coincidence. Life is uncertain and we do not know what will

happen, including sometimes the sudden and unexpected deaths of people close to us. Although difficult, the best way to accept the changed reality and adjust to it constructively is to be strong and take courage. In living life in general, people can claim an abstract commitment to acting morally, but unless one has the strength and courage to live according to those principles, even when it is hard, those claims represent mere self-deception.

Adina Alpert / Deut 33-34

As Moshe is taken to his final resting place which (after all of these years!) is not the land of Israel, but in fact a mountain overlooking this forbidden place, he takes a moment to actually speak his own words to the Jewish people. This is one of the only times Moshe has not spoken from Hashem's mouth or to Hashem, rather he speaks his own words to Bnai Yisrael. Moshe has nothing left to lose in his relationship with either Hashem or Bnai Yisrael, but even in what could be his most bitter or angry moment, he spends his final moments talking about family – where did our family come from (Seir, Paran, Egypt, the desert), who is in the family (Reuben, Levi, Yehuda, Joseph, etc) and rather than remind them of their foibles and weaknesses, he leaves them with his final hopes, dreams, and reminders of what they can aspire when he's gone (faith, offspring, protecting each other, generosity, justice and bravery). Moshe further includes the real head of the family, Hashem. His final words remind Bnai Yisrael ***and*** Hashem of His better angels: He is a guide, a helper, our strength, and our protector. In his final moments of sadness, anger and loneliness, Moshe teaches us to give our energy to togetherness, aspirations and hope for a better tomorrow.