

Preliminary Excerpts From

Access to God: 54 Ways You Can Get Closer (Without the Internet)



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Introduction

“Access Denied”

I learned a lot from various groups with whom I have worked – a tour in Israel, people with AIDS, High School kids, and Bar/Bat Mitzvah performers. The tour group of American Jews who genuinely were searching for their roots and their spiritual connections to their people, and to God, lacked some very basic information. Because they did not even know that it was lacking, they remained disconnected, spectators, observers, rather than participants. The suburban kids had the information, but lacked the way to process it, to make it useful for their spiritual journeys. The Bar/Bat Mitzvah kids showed they knew how to memorize, jump through hoops, and do anything necessary to get to the party. The people with AIDS had none of the form of Jewish worship, but certainly understood the content.

All of the groups logged onto the cosmic spiritual internet, looking for a connection to God, but the students, Bar/Bat Mitzvah kids, and the American Jews in Israel got “access denied” messages. It’s not that they actually communicated with God and were rejected. I am certain that God is staffing the website and ready to interface with anyone. They were simply missing the passwords to log onto the cosmic website.

Access to God has been denied to many people, not by God but by some of our human traditions. When we stood at the Western Wall, the people in my group really did not know how to gain access in a place where access is easiest. They didn’t know how to pray, how to connect with God, and that they had permission to do so readily. The kids in my High School program knew plenty, but their access to God was impeded by their mistaken impression that the words mattered and were in and of themselves the content. Kids who turn into adults who have been through the Bar/Bat Mitzvah mills (or who have missed out on this amazingly self-delusional approach) end up as adults who wonder whether there is anything at all to their Judaism.

Does God hear only Hebrew prayers? Is the only form of prayer which is legitimate that which is set down in our prayerbooks? Does God only communicate at synagogue services? Is the synagogue the only “phone booth to God”?

The purpose of this booklet is to help people struggling with their Cosmic Web Browser to find their connection with the spiritual, Jewish “website”. It’s not a compendium of Jewish practice, law or interpretation. It’s simply an attempt to look at the Torah portion each week to find some meaning for

today. If it inspires readers to read the Torah portion itself, or to look at other interpretations, or to think about the issues raised, it's a start. If this book helps some people look at their approach to Judaism and see that it can grow, or begin to look at what they need to continue to learn, it will have served its purpose. I hope readers will see this as a "jumping off point" encouraging them to jump into the ocean of Jewish knowledge, thought and tradition and start on their own scuba dive through the Torah portions.

Offering just one interpretation of a single word of Torah, or a single phrase is woefully inadequate. My prayer is that these Commentaries will be a starting point for everyone who reads it to join in the process of struggling with God and with the words of the Torah, coming up with their own volumes of interpretation, understanding and wisdom.

Each Torah portion is a portal to God, an access point, a way in. Once you start looking at the Torah portions, logging on to connect with God, the rest is easy. And you don't need the internet to get there!

God and Torah

What does God want us to do with Torah? Learn, study grow, interpret. The rabbis tell us "to turn it and turn it because everything is in it". They also say "Both this opinion and that opinion are the words of the living God". As long as we're engaged in the struggle to find meaning in Torah, God is going to back us up. Wherever we go in trying to find that meaning, and in bringing God's will to light. There's a wonderful story in the Talmud that I learned in my first year in rabbinical school (The first time around. I took 17 years from that first year to ordination).

Talmud, Baba Metzia 59b:

The story is told of a debate among the rabbis in which they could not come to a conclusion. What they were arguing about is relatively unimportant. But Rabbi Eliezer gave all the reasons and answers in the world to the rabbis to prove his point, yet the rabbis did not accept his opinion.

He said: If the law is as I say, let the carob tree outside prove it.
The tree got up and moved 100 feet (and some say 400 feet).

But the rabbis responded: We don't take proof from carob trees.

Rabbi Eliezer said: If the law is as I say, let the stream prove it.
The stream flowed backwards.

But the rabbis responded: We don't take proofs from the waters.

Rabbi Eliezer said: If the law is as I say, let the walls of this house of study prove it.
The walls of the house of study started to move to fall.

But Rabbi Joshua said to them: When wise men are debating, what do you have to do with it?
The walls did not fall in respect for Rabbi Joshua and did not stay upright in respect for Rabbi Eliezer. They leaned, and remain leaning.

Rabbi Eliezer said, If the law is as I say, let a voice from Heaven prove it.
There was a voice from heaven that said: What is your gripe with Rabbi Eliezer? The law is as he says in all places.

Rabbi Joshua got onto his feet and replied: The Torah is not in heaven!
What does that mean?

Rabbi Jeremiah said: The Torah was given to us at Mount Sinai, and we don't take proofs from heaven.

Rabbi Natan met up with Elijah the prophet and asked him: What did God do when God heard that?"

He replied: God smiled and said "My sons have defeated Me, My sons have defeated Me."

This story is based on Deuteronomy 30:12, which says: Surely this instruction ...is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens...neither is it beyond the sea...No, (Torah) is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart to observe it.

The Torah is not in the heavens. It's up to us to interpret, to understand and to use. It is up to us to uphold, to work with, to find the hidden meanings within. It's also up to us to understand that there are very few exact and "right answers". Those things which were right in a previous generation may not be right in this day and age. But the point of the story is that we are supposed to struggle with Torah, to work with Torah, and to make it our own.

God smiles when God "My sons have defeated Me." The smile lets us know that this is no defeat – it's precisely what God wants from us – to rely on our own abilities; to bring it into our own hearts – to take ownership and accountability for it; to trust our own judgment when it comes to interpreting the Will of God. By being responsible in our interpretation, honoring the traditions of our people at the same time as we continue to see our Judaism as dynamic, changing, evolving. God doesn't want us listening to voices from heaven but wants us to listen to the voices of our own hearts in direct engagement with the text, our traditions and our experiences.

This book is just an attempt to fulfill that Will and Vision. The Torah is not in Heaven. It's right here. All we have to do is figure out what it means, for today, and then continue to figure it out again tomorrow.

May God give us all the strength to strive to find ways of bringing the teachings of Torah into our lives, and to constantly be engaged in Torah discussion. May we be blessed with insights and inspiration, with care and with courage, to find our convictions and to live up to them. May we, as a people, continue to grow intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally, beneath the wings of the *Shehina*, the Holy Presence of God.

How to Use this Booklet

I have a few suggestions for using this booklet.

Story Theology: In Chaplaincy School, we have a seminar called Story Theology. We tell a story to our colleagues. It can be any personal story of any kind. I used to like talking about my dogs at the beach. Then, everyone else gets to talk about what the story reminds them of in their own life. So the beach story is the jumping off point for other people to think about nature or loving animals, or whatever comes to their minds. The third step is to look for the theology of the story and the ways people relate to the story. How did the story remind you of God, or how do you connect the story with something more universal? What's out there beyond our own experiences in relating to one story that is told by one person and our reactions to it?

Each of the interpretation in this book is Story Theology. I'm telling you the story. You react to it, and think about what it reminds you of in your own experience of life. Then if you can discuss it with others, great! If not, just look for and acknowledge the places where God is present in your understanding of the story, or in your reactions to it. Where do you go in your head and your heart when you think about the Torah Commentary or what it reminds you of?

If you are reading this booklet alone:

You can read the introductions and then put this book down. Pick it up every week on Monday or Tuesday and read the section for the upcoming Torah portion. That way, you're thinking about the Torah portion and working on your own ideas that I hope will be stimulated by my commentary. Remember, I'm just commenting on a tiny piece of the Torah portion each week, a theme, or even just a word. After you see what I'm saying, please feel free to read the entire Torah portion. The chapters and verses for each Torah portion are listed at the very beginning of every commentary. Then, engage in discussion with me via email, or better yet, discuss the commentary with your family, friends, or coworkers.

With your family: Does anyone make time for Shabbat dinner? If you do, read the Torah Commentary at dinner and do Story Theology with it. How does everyone relate to the Reflection, and where is God in the interpretation of the Reflection and your personal ways of relating to it?

With a Support Group: Throw away the order of the Torah portions and look at this entire books as a

resource for the spiritual needs of the participants. If they are dealing with illness, look at the Reflections that deal with illness and recovery. If they are dealing with grief, look at the texts that have grief as their themes, and then do the same Story Theology process with them. I always prefer to start with where people are, and then whip out the perfect text for them. In my Bereavement Groups, that meant coming with printouts for all of the possible themes that usually come up in the group, and then have those resources right there for them. How Did Abraham deal with his loss? How did Moses deal with multiple loss? What does the liturgy of the High Holiday, with who will live and who will die really say? Feel free to read through the commentaries and see what you think will apply to your support groups.

In a *Bikkur Holim*/Caring Community setting: If you're visiting someone in the hospital or a nursing home, feel free to use this book as a resource for getting conversation going. You can use the Torah portion of the week or you can work with the themes. Either way, study the Torah Reflection and then do Story Theology with it – how you both relate to the Torah Commentary, and discuss the theology of the personal stories. You will never run out of stuff to say when you can get people to relate their experiences to the Torah!

Making Thanksgiving Spiritually Meaningful

We don't often think of Thanksgiving as a Jewish holiday - it's an American holiday which we, as Americans observe. Thanksgiving in America was started by Christian pilgrims, and infused by many Christian values. In the media, we are surrounded by images of people sitting down to their Thanksgiving dinner and "saying grace", celebrating the Christianity of Thanksgiving. There are always special program episodes on TV of all of our favorite shows, in which, for one episode a year, the people in the show actually express some human kindness. Homeless people are visited and fed, others in need are helped, and the heroes of our shows demonstrate that they can be "good people".

It seems that we have not developed our own specifically Jewish traditions for Thanksgiving. Yet, Thanksgiving is an interpretation of our holiday, Sukkot, the Fall festival designated to thank God for the bountiful harvest. As American Jews, we should revel in celebration of an American holiday, and not have any feelings of discomfort about it. Thanking God, after all, is a value we all share.

How can you make Thanksgiving Jewish?

1. Light candles at your table. There is no blessing for Thanksgiving candles, which means you get to make your own!!! Start out with the way we start all our blessings, *baruh attah adonai, elohaynu meleh ha'olam...* (Holy One of Blessing, Our God and Creative Power of the Universe, we thank You for)....and fill in the blank as you see fit. As you light your candles, invite others at your table to make their own blessings, using the same formula.

2. Have Challah and wine at your table, and say the blessings for them:

Wine: Use the blessing formula above plus: *Boray p'ri hagafen* (who brings forth fruit of the vine)

Challah: Use the blessing formula above plus: *Hamotzi lechem min ha'aretz* (who brings forth bread from the earth)

3. Thanksgiving is a great time to say *shehechyanu* (the blessing for thanking God for keeping us alive to enjoy this moment). Say it after the wine: Use the formula plus: *shehechyanu, v'kiymanu, v'higianu lazman hazeh* (who has kept us alive, sustained us, and enabled us to reach this moment).

4. Ask everyone invited to your dinner to bring something which symbolizes what they are thankful for. After the blessings, before dinner, have everyone talk about what they brought and its significance. Be sure everyone knows to bring something, and has a chance to talk, including children.

5. Make some time for remembering the people who are not with you, either because of distance, family obligations (or preferences) or death. Families change. The people sitting at your table all have other family members with whom they are not sitting (in-laws, cousins, parents and grandparents, children who are with former spouses, etc.) Talk about who else is not physically there. A moment of silence for people who have died, and are missed can be a great way of allowing people to remember. Have people talk about who they miss and special things about them from previous Thanksgivings. You can also light Yahrzeit candles for people who have died as a part of remembering.

6. Do some random mitzvot (acts of lovingkindness). Collect and deliver food, household and personal supplies to people who need them. There are plenty of food drives at this time of year. Contribute food. Make a donation in honor of the people coming to your dinner (or alternatively, in honor of your hosts) to your congregation, the Jewish Federation, Jewish Family Service, or a local shelter. Invite a single person, or people whose families are distant, to be your special guests. If you are a guest this year for the first time, donate what you would have spent hosting a dinner for others in honor of those you would have invited, or in honor of your hosts.

Most of all, have a happy, meaningful and fulfilling Thanksgiving!

Terezin and *Tu B'shvat*: Parshat *B'shelah* Exodus 13:17 – 17:14

Tu B'shvat became a very difficult holiday for me the first time I visited Prague, in 1985. At that time Czechoslovakia was Communist, and Jews were still being persecuted. It was horrible to see the magnificent beauty of the perfectly preserved buildings everywhere in this city, and to see the cruelty, inhumanity and anti-Semitism of the regime. I went to Prague to see what had happened to our people during the Holocaust, to see the Museum of an Extinct Nation, the items that had been stolen from Czech and other Jewish communities. Instead, I was confronted by the reality of Jews still being persecuted. It was not a nice trip.

I won't recount for you all of the experiences of that trip in this Torah Reflection, just the *Tu B'shevat* part. Outside of Prague, in the beautiful Czech countryside, there was a fortress called Terezin. The Nazis took it over, and turned it into a concentration camp. It was the "model" concentration camp, where the Red Cross was invited to see how "humanely" our people were being treated. Across the street from the fortress was a town, and it was annexed as part of the camp. Herman Wouk describes it well in [The Winds of War](#). I recognized the village square that he described with gallows in it; there was now a huge 5-pointed red star of flowers in the square. You'd never know what it was like just 40 years before. A short walk from that square is a field, with small markers with Jewish stars on them, dominated by a huge *menorah*. And a crematorium.

In 1942 a sapling was smuggled into Terezin, and it was planted by the children in honor of *Tu B'Shevat*, the Jewish celebration of trees. At the end of the war, the tree was transplanted into the field next to the crematorium where the Nazis had dumped ashes. There now stands a beautiful maple tree, in that field, composed of the ashes of the children and their loved ones who were murdered in that place.

You can't see and touch that tree without being permanently changed by the experience. There were a lot of life-changing experiences for me on that and my subsequent trip to Prague six years later, after the Velvet Revolution. But every year, on *Tu B'shvat*, I share this story, and remember this particular tree, and the bravery and hope of the children who planted it and are reflected in its beauty. Each year on *Tu B'shvat*, I read [I Never Saw Another Butterfly](#), the collection of poetry and artwork by the children of Terezin.

Tu B'shvat reminds me of the Holocaust, and this week's Torah portion *B'shelah*, tells the story of a completely different experience for our people, when we crossed the Red Sea, and the final, complete and total defeat of Pharaoh's armies. We achieved liberation from Egyptian bondage by God's grace, by the will of God to make us into a people that relates to God through the words of the Torah and our traditions.

We remember this story not only because of the incredible miracle that happened, but also as a reminder that each of us comes through our own awe-full experiences. We remember the miracles especially when we come through our own Red Seas, and wonder whether we will personally reach the proverbial other shore. Many of us know what it's like – to be surrounded by enemies (either internal or external) and to be unable to see a way to avoid disaster. Many of us have faced challenges that were overwhelming, moments when we felt there was no way out. The Red Sea experience is a paradigm for our people – to see that God is a resource for us when we have nowhere else to turn.

My teacher, Rabbi Wayne Dosick writes in [Soul Judaism: Dancing with God into a New Era](#):

O God, there are times when I come to the Red Sea in my life. Old doubts and fears pursue me; I am confronted by new and difficult challenges; the vast unknown looms before me. Sometimes I am afraid; sometimes I lose faith in my own abilities and my own strengths; sometimes I even lose faith in You. But in Your goodness, You have given me the courage to face every obstacle and the capacity not merely to endure but to prevail.

Be with me, O God, as You were with Your children at the sea. Grant me a full measure of Your all-wise care and Your loving guidance so that I can emerge on the other side of my Red Seas healthy and whole, assured that a better world awaits. In love and gratitude, like my ancestors of Old, I sing songs of praise to Your great and holy name. HalleluYah.

We can pray for God to help us through our darkest moments, through the times when we almost feel that all hope is lost. We may find courage in remembering our history. We may even find God and hope in places where we couldn't imagine that Presence, even in fields of ashes. Confronting that tree, for me, changed my life forever (twice, when I consider my second visit there) and transformed for me (and now I hope you) the meaning of *Tu B'shvat*. Despite what the Nazis did to the children who planted the tree, WE are still here. We're still able to tell their story and to remember them. We can plant trees in their

memory, and affirm, once again, that we are the people who were rescued at the Red Sea and who turn to God to help us through our own worst of times.

May it be Your Will, Holy One of Blessing, that we remember Your Presence in our lives each and every day. May we find You there, to help us through our darkest hours, and may we draw the courage and strength we need to be able to go on, to flourish, to grow, to learn and to praise Your name.

You Are What You Eat: *Parshat Tzav* Leviticus 6:1 – 8:36 Passover

(Ok, so you figured it out. I'm not really commenting on the Torah portion, but on the holiday which usually happens around when we read this Torah portion.)

You find out that you are going to move to a far-away place in two weeks. Let's say you get this incredibly great job offer, the money is too good to refuse, but you have to move. You decide you are going. Then what do you do? You put your house on the market, or notify the landlord. You make arrangements to figure out where you are going to live. You call the movers and set up a date for the move. You figure out how you're going to get to the new place –whether you should ship your car or drive it to your new home. Then you start packing all your stuff, and if you're like me, you make lists of everything you need to get done, and forget where you put the lists.

Let's say it's two days before you have to leave. What are you doing? I remember that when I left New Jersey, on the second to last day, I closed my bank accounts, went to AAA for my Trip-tik, made hotel reservations in Flagstaff, AZ, since that was the only place on the journey that seemed like a goal. And I continued packing. I went to a discount store to get supplies for the road, like soft drinks and munchies (God forbid I should go without, or have to hunt for supplies along the way!)

By the time moving day came, the bags were packed and I was ready to go, humming, like Peter, Paul and Mary - leaving on a freeway!

So all this discussion is by way of trying to understand something that makes no sense, that all of us accepted as fact, but I started wondering about. If God told Moses on the first day of Nisan that he should expect that on the 14th of the month the people and he were going to get thrown out of Egypt, and Moses told the people, which the Torah says he did, why, then, is there this whole issue of not having the time to let the dough rise for bread?!? They had two weeks notice. There was plenty of time! In fact, the feast of unleavened bread is told to Moses well before there was any discussion of a rush to leave Egypt. God tells Moses to plan a feast of unleavened bread which is to last for 7 days and is to be a commemoration of the departure from Egypt, before the people even begin planning the Passover offering. Now, for those of you who are going to doubt this, look it up yourselves in Exodus, chapter 12. The Passover offering is in fact one holiday, the Feast of Unleavened Bread another, and the issue of the rush to get out of town doesn't appear until verse 34, while the command to have the holiday begins at verse 14.

We all have accepted this idea of a rush, when the rush may not have happened. My initial response was that maybe the people didn't believe it when Moses told them they were heading out of town in two weeks, but that can't be. If you recall, the Israelites borrowed (some might say stole) the gold and silver and riches of their Egyptian neighbors during the two weeks prior to the Exodus, so we know they knew they were leaving. You don't go around "borrowing" all this stuff, when you don't plan to return it, when you think you're not going anywhere. Can it be that we would prepare to leave town and our ancestors wouldn't? All those Jewish mothers unprepared for a trip? I can't believe that!

Why don't we know what's going on? The Torah says one thing in one place, and yet our *Haggadah* quotes the Torah someplace else, saying that there was a rush to get out of town. Which statement from the Torah are we to believe?

There's a symbolism to the unleavened bread, which is why we have this holiday. *Matzah* is the "bread of affliction" not the "bread of liberation". *Matzah* has not risen, is as low as you can get. It is the perfect symbol – in food- of what slavery is: humble, unassuming, impoverished, low. There is nothing in it to lead it to "rise up". Bread, on the other hand, is puffy. It's full of hot air. One could say it's full of itself. A slave can't eat such a symbol of uprising, of grandeur, of growth.

Passover falls half a year away from the High Holidays. It's a reminder of where we were back then, on Yom Kippur, when we confessed our sins and recognized how little worth we have. Passover and matzah remind us of the experience of slavery of our people, and the ways we enslave ourselves to all those things which make us just like bread - how we have puffed up our own souls, our own spirits, and filled ourselves with incredible amounts of hot air.

We are what we eat. If we are to know and really understand whence we come, we need to understand that we, in every generation, were slaves: we were *matzah* thousands of years ago, and in our tradition, just six months ago. And we have been bread – the bread of liberation from Egypt and the bread of our own puffy egos. *Matzah* reminds us to know who we really are, without all of the trappings and elevations, all the yeast we add to our own personalities.

There may or may not have been a rush to get out of town, but there certainly is reason for the Torah to give us two very good reasons for *matzah* - so that we'll look beyond the rush to see meanings in that which we eat. May it be Your will, Holy One, our God, and God of our ancestors that we continue to

struggle to do Your will, to understand that there are depths to the Torah which we have yet to explore, and to constantly find the blessings hidden by You within the text. May we strive to be much more like the unleavened bread, shedding the pomposity of self-righteousness, ever reminding ourselves that we are what we eat.

Passover Food

Have you started getting ready for Passover? I noticed this week that the market near where I live has started to display its Passover foods. Have you ever looked at the stuff on the market's shelves? I looked and found some incredible stuff: there were 6 different brands of matzah, all with different prices. What is the only recipe for Matzah? Flour and water. That's it. There are no other ingredients allowed. So maybe they cook it differently? Nope. No variations are allowed. From the moment the water hits the flour, the entire process - mixing, shaping and baking - can take no more than 18 minutes. So what's the difference? The name on the box and the price you pay.

What else is on the shelves? There are lots of gefilte fish jars and cans. Cake mixes. Mixes, actually, for just about everything you really don't need. Matzah Ball Soup Mixes abound on the shelves. Have you ever tasted this stuff? It actually could sit on your seder table instead of the salt water. What else is on the shelves? Other incredibly useless stuff, like matzah crackers. Why pay almost twice as much for someone else to break a board of matzah? They do make the edges nice and neat. Passover candy is plentiful, and there's every possible variety of Passover macaroons, Passover jellies like you can't believe. (Those of us with sweet teeth and no weight problem have it made. I'm jealous.)

So what's not there? Just about anything that's nutritious, or, for that matter, essential for Passover (except the matzah and derivatives, like matzah meal and farfel). The items on the seder plate don't come in boxes (ever wonder why there's no mix for haroset?). And the stuff in the boxes and jars aren't part of the seder. What do you make of this abundance of stuff we don't really need, and the lack of the stuff we do need?

It seems to me to be the classic conflict between form and content. The shelves are filled with the stuff that is form, with no content. Passover bagels are the best example I can think of for that. Why would someone want bagels on Passover? Can't live without them for one week? When it's about form, Passover bagels make sense. When you think about the content of the holiday, you know they are

completely contrary to what it's about. If there's a holiday in which it's supposed to be all about content, it's Passover. We don't get to eat anything without it serving as a reminder that we were slaves, and we are supposed to see ourselves as having personally left Egypt.

I guess what was also missing from the grocery store shelves is the one best source of really great content: there wasn't one Haggadah to be found. And no books on Passover. The absolutely best book, by the way, which I have ever come across for preparing for Passover is called the Passover Survival Kit, by Rabbi Shimon Apisdorf, published by Leviathan Press (1-800-Leviathan). If you're leading a seder, going to one, or just curious, you can get it at a bookstore or order directly from the publisher.

This year, I hope we all will struggle to find the ways in which we can focus on the content, the meanings of the symbols in our homes and on our tables. I hope we will all participate in asking questions about all the aspects of the holiday, and maybe even find some of the answers. (Put on orange on your seder plate, and see where it leads.) And I hope we will all find our own meanings, even in the most mundane of issues, in the most normal of places.

Shavuot, The Festival of God's Love

Shavuot, more than any other holiday on our calendar, is the holiday that affirms God loves us. God's love is permanent, unshakable, unconditional. Because of God's love, God gives us Torah, the guide for our lives and the route to meaning and hope. The gift of Torah is contingent: God expects us to struggle with Torah, to find its deepest meanings. It's not given as an end in itself, but rather as the first step in a process that leads to our reciprocation.

We call Shavuot the Time of the Giving of our Torah, *z'man matan torataynu*, but that is not the same as receiving the Torah. God gave Torah once, but we receive and reciprocate in a continuous way. We also call Shavuot *hag habikkurim*, the festival of the first fruits, which are reserved as our gifts to God.

But God doesn't need gifts from us. The *bikkurim* are God's way of letting us connect to what is holy: giving and receiving at the same time. We receive Torah and we give back, physically with *bikkurim*, and spiritually through doing *mitzvot*. We translate *mitzvot* differently, from commandments to good deeds, depending upon whether we see the things we're supposed to do as our choices or as God's demands. The tradition of spending the entire eve of Shavuot in study is about getting started in the ongoing mitzvah of reciprocation of God's love.

When we do mitzvot, they are their own reward. The reward is in the doing, in the moment when we actually do what we know is right. Our prayerbook tells us that God has given us Torah and *mitzvot* because God loves us (*ahavat olam* in the evening service or *ahava rabbah* in the morning service). When we do the things God wants us to be doing, we get to experience God's love. God loves us no matter what; but doing *mitzvot* enables us to feel the love. Every time you perform a *mitzvah*, from saying a blessing to remembering the *Shabbat*, to learning a Jewish text, to giving money or time to helping other people, you are experiencing some of God's love. *Mitzvot* = God's love.

On Shavuot, we read a metaphor for this loving, dynamic relationship: the Book of Ruth. It's the story of the love of two people, symbolizing God's love for us. We are all Naomi in her deepest despair. Having lost all everything, Naomi can't find anything to hope for. She sees herself as bitter, empty. Ruth accompanies her in her despair, commits herself to being a part of Naomi's life, no matter what. Ruth says: "Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you dwell, I will dwell." Ruth is the symbol for God, standing with us, bringing us hope, strength and assurance even in our worst moments. Naomi provides

Ruth with an opportunity to give love and support, and Ruth provides for Naomi's needs, showing her that hope is the only antidote for despair. Both women give, and in so doing, both women receive.

May it be Your will, Holy One, God of our ancestors that we receive and give Torah, give and take spiritual nourishment, love and hope. May we continue to be blessed with the ability to experience Your love by doing *mitzvot*, learning to be humble in the presence of Your wisdom. May we find healing and wholeness in words of Torah, reminding us always of Your love.

Jewish Calendar 101: *Parshat Matot* Numbers 31:1 – 32:42

One of the most common questions we start asking around this time of year is: when are High Holy Days? Why is that a question? Why are they not the same date as every other year? Well, in actuality, they are on the same date every year, but on the Jewish, lunar, calendar. What is a lunar calendar? This week's Torah portion outlines the dates for the holidays of the Jewish year, but I suspect **Jewish Calendar 101** could help a lot of people understand our calendar better.

As we all know, the solar, secular calendar has 365 1/4 days per year. That's based on the number of days it takes for the earth to orbit the sun. *But when Judaism started keeping track of dates and time, everyone knew that the world was flat, and that the sun rose and set, but mainly as a decoration in the sky.* The sun's schedule was permanent and fixed. But the moon had phases, and you could count the days in each phase, and count from one new moon to the next. It's so much easier to count to 28 or 29 than to 365!

The big problem with the lunar cycle is that it usually takes 29 1/2 days, based on the time it takes for the moon to complete one full cycle of phases, from no moon, to crescent, quarter, half, full moon and back again. The full moon is on the 14th day of each lunar cycle, new moon always the first day of moonlight. But 12 of these cycles only adds up to 354 days. ($29.5 \times 12 = 354$)

The lunar year is 11 days shorter than the solar year! 11 days may not seem like much, but when you miss out on 11 days for a few years, a holiday which is intended for Spring would move back through Winter into Fall. Imagine Passover one year on April 1. The next year on March 19, then on March 8 and February 25 in subsequent years. Eventually, the Spring Holiday would be in the Fall.

To correct the difference between the calendars, we add a Leap Month (of 29 or 30 days) every 2 or 3 years, depending on the year. We call that extra leap month Adar II, since it always is inserted in the calendar between Adar, when Purim happens, and Nisan, when Passover happens. An extra day is also added to the calendar – changing 29-day months to 30-day months 6 times during the 19 years it takes for all this calculating to work out. Every 19 years there are 7 leap years, a total of 6,939 days in both calendars.

Confused? I'm not great at math either, but the important part to remember is that it does work out and whoever figured this out had a lot more time on his/her hands to cipher the details than we do! And

though they differ on the solar calendar, Rosh Hashanah is always on the first day of Tishre, which will always come out in the late summer (around early September).

All of this discussion about Jewish months and calendars is important, not because we're supposed to be math geniuses or to really worry about the details of each year. It's really an issue of learning how we measure time as Jews, and how the concept of holy time is involved. According to Abraham Joshua Heschel, perhaps the last century's greatest Jewish philosopher, in The Sabbath, "Judaism is a religion of time, aiming at the sanctification of time... the Bible senses the diversified character of time. There are no two hours alike. Every hour is unique and the only one given at the moment, exclusive and endlessly precious. Judaism teaches us to be attached to the holiness in time, to be attached to sacred events." We don't build the cathedrals of our neighbors - our cathedrals are in time - the holy events of the year, like Shabbat. As Jews, we know that Shabbat is holiness in time, that there is special time, separate time, which is totally different from all other time.

Heschel talks about Jewish ritual as being almost like an architectural form - in time. What we do as Jews is based not on things but on time, time of the day, time of the week, month, year. We mark days for remembrance. Remember the day we left Egypt, the day we stood at Mount Sinai, the Day of Judgment, the Day at the end of Days, when the Messiah will come. Shabbat is celebration of time rather than space. Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space. On Shabbat we become attuned to holiness in time. Once a week. Every week.

The Jewish calendar is a way of emphasizing part of what makes us unique as Jews, and what makes our observance of time holy. We only get to live each moment once, each day once, on a calendar which connects us with our ancient past, and emphasizes that each moment we live, we get to experience both as ordinary time and holy time. May it be Your will, Holy One, our God and God of our ancestors, that we continue to struggle to find true, current meanings of our ancient traditions, and that we learn to number our days and find within them the holiness of our time.

Months of the Jewish year:

Tishre - High Holidays, Sukkot, Simḥat Torah

Heshvan - no holidays

Kislev - Hannukah

Tevet - No major holidays

Shevat - Tu B'shvat: The New Year for Trees

Adar (I and sometimes II) Purim

Nisan - Passover, Yom Hashoah

Iyar - Israel Independence Day, L'ag B'Omer

Sivan - Shavuot

Tammuz - no major holidays

Av - Tisha B'av

Elul - no major holidays

Scary Liturgy: *Parshat Shoftim* Deuteronomy 16:18 – 21:9

Rabbi Amnon of Mainz, one of the greatest men of his generation, wrote a *piyyut*, a liturgical poem, with which we are familiar. The circumstances which led him to write this poem were unfortunately not all that unique for Jews of his time - he had been tortured in an effort to force him to convert. According to the legend, he either wrote *u'netanah tokef* on his deathbed or dictated it after his death in a dream to Rabbi Kolanymous.

I'm not sure what to make of the legend, and similarly, most Jews are really not sure of what to make of the *piyyut*. It is included in every Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur Service in almost every synagogue. The part most of us are most familiar with says that **On Rosh Hashannah it is inscribed, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed, who shall live and who shall die.** The *piyyut* then goes on to list some of the possible ways in which people might die -by fire, water, plague, starvation, etc. It's a specific, but not exclusive, list.

When I was a kid I puzzled over whether or not it was okay for God to write on Rosh Hashannah. After all, we were told it was forbidden to write on *yom tov*. Certainly, on Yom Kippur, I couldn't figure out why it was ok for God to seal anything. Once again we are forbidden to do such work on such a holy day. Beyond my own confusion, I learned much later that a lot of people find the poetry very disturbing. There's a book out there, somewhere in which our fates are written, closed, sealed. What's the point of having such a book, and, if it's written down during these ten days, how does what we do the rest of the time effect that fate? Isn't it rather cruel for there to be decisions made in September or October about the fates of people who will die next June? What if they are really good between now and then? Does God include in this book the deaths of babies who are born after the Holidays and die before next year's holidays? What kind of God would intentionally take people in the primes of their lives, making this kind of decision in advance?

Okay, it's all a metaphor, but, for most of us, we miss the entire point. We focus so much on the list of the ways in which people can die that we miss the words that follow the list, that make it all make more sense. Those 7 words are "*u'teshuvah, u'tefillah, u'tzedakah, ma'vaerin et roah hagezerah*". Repentance, prayer, and acts of lovingkindness can shift (or remove) the bitterness of the decree. Repentance, prayer, and acts of lovingkindness do not remove the decree, they remove the bitterness thereof, They can make the decree tolerable.

Repentance, prayer and acts of loving-kindness. Some of the most positive ways in which we can live our lives: recognizing what we have done wrong, correcting the mistakes, seeking forgiveness from those we have harmed; seeking God in our lives, relating to and relying upon God for the strength to improve our lives; and acts of loving-kindness, helping other people, making life better for others, not just for ourselves. So Rabbi Amnon's paragraph focusing on death is really focusing on surrender. People die in all kinds of ways over which we have no control. Some deaths are tragic or make absolutely no sense. Some seem downright cruel. They are all out of our control. Whether we live or die in the upcoming year, according to our poet, we really don't get to control. He provides a list of some of the core issues over which we have no choice but to recognize our powerlessness.

But we do get to control the ways in which we live. If we live our lives with a focus on *teshuvah*, *tefillah* and *tzedakah*, repentance, prayer, and acts of loving-kindness, we might come to feel very differently about the ultimate decree. It may not be so bitter after all. We may come to a place of *shalom*, of inner peace, through the focus not on that which we can't control, but rather on that with which we can. We can rail against God for not consulting us in these things or we enrich our lives living with God, taking control over how we live.

In other words, Rabbi Amnon's *piyyut* is reflected in the very familiar quotation based on a statement by Reinhold Niebuhr: **God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference**, The serenity prayer. We cannot change the ways we are going to die; we can change how we live in the meantime.

All of this talk about a prayer we read during the High Holidays is not just digression, but at the core of this week's Torah portion, *shoftim*, much of which focuses on the issues of justice and judgment. This Shabbat we begin the month of Elul, the month preceding the High Holidays, a month traditionally set aside for thinking about getting ready for the High Holidays. It says in our Torah portion "*tamim tehiyeh im adonai elohecha*" You will be simple (wholehearted) with adonai your God." In other words, you will trust in God, surrendering unto God that which is God's domain. God is commanding us to take responsibility for that which we can control, to fulfill our obligations, to do that which is right and just. The Torah portion then goes on to forbid sorcery, which is an effort to control those things over which we have no domain.

According to Abraham Joshua Heschel, "Judaism is a religion of time, aiming at the sanctification of time... the Bible senses the diversified character of time. There are no two hours alike. Every hour is unique and the only one given at the moment, exclusive and endlessly precious. Judaism teaches us to be attached to the holiness in time, to be attached to sacred events." (The Sabbath) Most of what we do is based not on things but on time, time of the day, time of the week, month, year. We mark days for remembrance.

Our Torah portion speaks about cities of refuge for people who have committed manslaughter, for them to go to for safe-keeping until the death of the High Priest, who, if he were doing his job right, would have prayed well enough to prevent the disasters of accidental deaths. The month of Elul is a refuge in time, for all of us, who have done terrible things, some purposefully, some unintentionally. Elul is when we look inside to see how we are using our time, which we get to control. Elul is the beginning of our process of transition between what was and what will be. We begin to get ready for the Holidays by looking at our lives over the past year, and start considering for the year to come. How do we want it to be? In what ways do we have to change in order for the desires of our hearts to happen? What needs to be done to undo the things we did that were wrong? How can we prevent them from happening next year?

The rabbis teach us that we should live each day of our lives as though it were our last day, because, we never can know. Live each **day** fully, one day at a time, live **time** fully, for each moment could be our last.

As we enter Elul, our city of refuge in time, may we all be blessed beneath the wings of *shehina*, God's Holy Presence, with the strength and courage to face our failures, to own our weaknesses, and may we find the help, security, and compassion we all seek. May we recognize the things over which we have no control, and surrender them to God, have the strength and courage to work on the things that we can control, and may we find the wisdom to understand fully the difference between them. May we be blessed with that which is truly precious and therefore most holy - time.

Time Movers: *Parshat Nitzavim* Deuteronomy 29:9 – 30:20

"You stand this day, all of you before the Holy One your God..." *Nitzavim* has such a dramatic beginning, and leads so well into not just the historic narrative of the text but also into the High Holidays, when once again we all stand together before God. It is a statement of anticipation and of anxiety. We are all standing on a precipice - all looking into what we hope is the promised land of our future, trying to figure out the ways in which our pasts will lead us into our futures. The covenant which was established with Children Israel, as they stood there in the presence of God, was designed precisely so we would feel this angst when we read these words at this time of the year - we are about to stand before our God. Are we ready?

According to Abraham Joshua Heschel, "Judaism is a religion of time, aiming at the sanctification of time... the Bible senses the diversified character of time. There are no two hours alike. Every hour is unique and the only one given at the moment, exclusive and endlessly precious. Judaism teaches us to be attached to the holiness in time, to be attached to sacred events." (The Sabbath) Most of what we do as Jews is based not on things but on time, time of the day, time of the week, month, year. We mark days for remembrance. Look at the *mahzor* or a *siddur* and you'll find the word "yom" (day) more often than you might originally think. "*hayom harat olam*", today is the birthday of the world, and also the day when we stand before our God.

I like to tell this story a lot. Maybe you've heard it. I was on the subway once when I saw a man who looked totally exhausted sitting across from me. I watched him struggle to stay awake, watched him as he anxiously peered out the window at a stop to see if he had missed his. It took me a while, but I figured out why he was so tired. His shirt had the name of his company on it: "Time Movers". No wonder he was exhausted! He had spent his day moving time!

Time movers. I wonder what they do, and how they do it. Think about it: if you could move time, how would you do it? Would you move time in a way that is different from the way we currently experience it? Would you make time move faster or slower? (After all, doesn't time fly when you're having fun?) Would you move your time to a different age altogether, like the 17th century or the 25th century?

I wanted to wake the Time Mover, to ask him how he does what he does, and to seek his advice on how I could learn his technique. Unfortunately, such things just are not done in New York. With the exception of the Time Movers, the rest of us live in time which can't be moved. Life has really just two tenses: past

and future. We are in the constant flow between the two, every moment is either about to happen or has slipped by. We experience time each moment as it comes, each day as we live it, each week, etc.

Rosh Hashannah takes the concept of holiness in time one step further. It marks the passage of a complete Jewish year. Rosh Hashannah begs the question: If you can't move time, what have you done with the time since last Rosh Hashannah? What have you done with the hundreds of thousands of minutes, the nearly 8,500 hours, the 350 odd days, the fifty or so weeks since last Rosh Hashannah? Have you lived these times to your fullest? Rosh Hashannah asks us to begin a process of examining how we lived our time, and how will we use our own time in the future.

Rosh Hashannah is the Jewish time to reflect on how we have used our time as a nation, as a people, as human beings. Think back and list all of the things which have happened this year in human history. And what has happened this year in your own life? What really made you proud? Where did you find your *nachas* - your sources of joy? What were the challenges you faced? How did you do with those challenges? What remains undone, unexamined, unapproached? Who was sick, who is sick, who has recovered? What were your major life-changes of this year, and what became more comfortable for you in its ongoing reliability? Think of two moments in the last year which made your heart sing, and two moments that made your soul ache.

Rosh Hashannah is the moment of transition between what was and what will be. We begin today to look at our lives over the past year, and start considering for the year to come. How do we want it to be? In what ways do we have to change in order for the desires of our hearts to happen? What needs to be done to undo the things we have done that were wrong? How can we prevent them from happening next year? During the next days we will be in limbo between how we lived our lives in 5764, and how we will live our lives in 5765. We have ten days to think about it. *We have ten days not to move time but to change how we move through time.*

The rabbis teach us that we should live each day of our lives as though it were our last day, because, in reality, we never can know. Live each **day** fully, one day at a time, live **time** fully, for each moment could be our last.

This Rosh Hashannah, may we all be blessed beneath the wings of *shehina*, God's Holy presence, with the strength and courage to face our failures, to own our weaknesses, and may we find the help, the

security, the compassion we all seek. May we look at our time, forgive ourselves and commit to the changes that we must make to move peacefully through time, rather than to move time. May we be blessed with that which is truly precious and therefore most holy - time.

Sukkot

In many ways, the messages of Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur are about closing one door and opening another. Starting fresh, starting new in a new year of possibilities and hope. Though it's hard to observe all of the Jewish holidays in such a close sequence, there's a good reason that *Sukkot* comes so soon after Yom Kippur. It's to give us all an opportunity to put our thoughts, our hopes, our dreams into action. To get over the confessions of our failures and to celebrate the things which we can do to move on - to do right, to create from scratch. The *sukkah* is a symbol of starting fresh in our journey with God. (A Hebrew lesson: a *sukkah* is a booth that we build, covering the roof with branches. The Holiday, *Sukkot*, is when we dwell in these booths, mainly for meals. The word "*sukkot*" is the plural for "*sukkah*").

Most of us try to live in places that are safe and secure, places where we can feel at home. We build *sukkot* to remind us of the fragility of our homes and our lives, the temporary nature of everything we have. Yom Kippur reminds us that we should feel guilty for all the rotten things we do with what we have; *Sukkot* is the opposite. It's a holiday of appreciation of what we have, even as life is so precarious. We build walls that are not really walls, a roof open to moon and stars, knowing that our *sukkah* could be blown down by a stiff wind, as a reminder of the real source of shelter for us – the holy Presence of God. The *sukkah* is a promise of the moon and stars in our lives, the spirit of the Holy One dwelling among us.

Sukkot reminds us that we were all wanderers in the desert and that we longed for a "permanent" home. Just like our people, a *sukkah* is constantly threatened, constantly in jeopardy. But we, and the *sukkah*, are still here. We do this incredibly silly thing of making a *sukkah* to remind us that we're still here as a people. Individually, we also do it to remind ourselves that we have managed to get through whatever challenges could have blown us away as well.

There has been a lot of talk about the evil which has been done to us, to our people, to our nation, to our economy, on and since September 11, 2001. We had buildings which were strong and mighty towers, but they too, like so much of what we think is permanent, have been "blown away". These can be frightening times for us as Americans, since now we have worry about all the possibilities of other ways in which evil can be done to us. But there has always been evil in the world, and always will be.

We create a *sukkah* out of thin air. One minute it's just some raw material – wood, fruit. Assembled, it's a holy reminder place. The *sukkah* calls us to pay attention not just to the evil, but to the presence of God in

our shakiest of times and places. The *sukkah* reminds us that no matter what we build, no matter how strong or how tall or how well reinforced, the healing and the hope come not from the building, but from what we put into it.

We build *sukkot*, not bunkers. We are guaranteed insecurity, not security. We are assured by the shakiness of our *sukkot* that despite whatever else happens, we know we can find God and a place for God in our lives. Coming right after Yom Kippur, when we reminded ourselves of how insignificant we are, *Sukkot* is a reminder that we can rebuild our lives, and our dreams, in the light of God.

May it be Your will, Holy One, that we remember that nothing is more permanent or more unshakable than Your Presence with us. May we learn to seek Your Presence when we feel that the most shelter we have is a flimsy booth. May we see how our lives are filled with blessings as numerous as the stars we see when we sit in a *sukkah*, and may our world be illumined by a new light which comes from You.

The End of the Torah, Start Again: V'zot Ha-braha, Deuteronomy 33:1-34:12

This is the last Torah portion in the annual series. It is usually read on *Simhat Torah*, when we celebrate the completion of the Torah-reading cycle. In my congregation, it has been a tradition to literally roll out the entire Torah scroll, so that we see it all at once. We usually have people stand around the room and unroll the Torah one person to the next, so everyone is holding it up in the circle. And then the kids and remaining adults and I take a tour. We see the places where each of the books ends, the Song at The Red Sea, the Ten Commandments, and Shema. We find the names of our patriarchs and matriarchs, and the names of Korah, Balaam, and remind ourselves of other great Torah stories.

Look at the last words of Torah: “Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses – Whom The Holy One singled out, face to face, for the various signs and portents that God sent him to display in the land of Egypt...and for all the great might and awesome power that Moses displayed before all of Israel.” It’s a beautiful reminder that Moses was really special, if we needed one. But even our leaders deserve to be recognized for their dedication and commitment, for their very leadership.

The last word of Torah is “*yisrael*” Israel. Nice ending: it took us the entire Torah to be this people, one people, who struggles with God (the literal meaning of Israel). The last word is the goal, to be Israel. If you look at the last letter of the Torah, *lamed*, it is a vertical line, almost seeming to hold all of the letters back, keeping them in place.

On *Simhat Torah*, we end the process of reading the Torah and start over again. We take the *lamed* at the end and put it next to the *bet* at the beginning (*b'raysheet*). This juxtaposition yields a Hebrew word, *lev*, meaning heart. The heart of Israel is in this process, in reading Torah again and again, struggling each time to find its meanings, noting that the words may not have changed since the last time we read it, but **we** have. How we understand it each time will change as we do. The heart of the Jewish people, and our own hearts come together on *Simhat Torah*, as we celebrate the end of the Torah reading cycle, and the start of the the Torah reading cycle. In other words, it doesn't really end at all, as we don't stop learning, growing and experiencing each time we come back to look at it again, for the first time.

hazak hazak v'nithazek Let us be strong, strong and strengthen each other!
(traditionally said when you finish studying)