

Volume 5, Number 1
Tishrei 5768

Olam Tikvahinu



A place to share Torah

Congregation Olam Tikvah
3800 Glenbrook Road
Fairfax, VA 22031

Olam Tikvateinu

Volume 5, Number 1

Tishrei 5768

Editors

Lisa Friedman, Cary Schwartzbach

Editorial Advisory Board

Rabbi David Kalender, Rabbi Joshua Ben-Gideon

Table of Contents

Olam Tikvateinu	4
Repairing Ourselves and the Earth: Reflections on Shabbat and Farming	5
<i>By Esther Mandelheim Elliott</i>	
Bal Tashchit: A Jewish Environmental Ethic	7
<i>By Candace Nachman</i>	
Origins of the Patriarchal Stories	11
<i>By Paul S. Forbes</i>	
Angels	16
<i>By Jerrold Markowitz</i>	
Judaism in a Word: Community	18
<i>By Susan Coren</i>	
The Shema: A Foundation for Contemplative Practice	22
<i>By Larissa Blechman</i>	

This edition is brought to you through the generosity of

Bill and Susan Kristol,

In honor of Bill's parents,

Irving and Gertrude Kristol.

It is also sponsored by the Rabbi's Discretionary Fund
and the Rabbi Itzhaq M. Klirs Memorial Adult Education Fund.

Please contact Rabbi Kalender to discuss making a contribution to ensure
the continued success of this publication.

Olam Tikvateinu

ה' חפץ למען צדקו יגדיל תורה ויגדיר

*For the sake of God's righteousness,
God desires that Torah grow and be glorified.—Isaiah 42:21*

Since *Olam Tikvateinu* began in September 2003, 20 members of the OT community have been inspired to develop and share their Torah. They have written a range of Jewish historical and philosophical inquiries, text interpretations and accounts of personal experience.

Celebrate Israel

In May 2008 we will publish a special edition, in honor of Israel's sixtieth birthday. We invite you to choose one of the prompts below, or simply to write about the importance of Israel in your life.

Submissions for Volume 5, Number 2

Please submit your article by Tuesday, April 1, 2008 for Volume 5, Number 2, to be published Iyar 5768. In a short essay of 300-600 words (1-2 pages), upper length limit 1500-2000 words (6-8 pages), comment on one of the passages below, or relate the importance of Israel in your life.

◆ **14 May 1948, Declaration of Establishment of State of Israel:**

THE STATE OF ISRAEL will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.

◆ **Above all**, this country is our own. Nobody has to get up in the morning and worry what his neighbors think of him. Being a Jew is no problem here. *Golda Meir*

◆ **Israel has created** a new image of the Jew in the world—the image of a working and an intellectual people, of a people that can fight with heroism. *David Ben-Gurion*

Please Join the Conversation

Please contact me or Rabbi Ben-Gideon about the idea you would like to develop and share.

For your reference, all published issues appear on our web site at www.olamtikvah.org.

Rabbi David Kalender

Repairing Ourselves and the Earth: Reflections on Shabbat and Farming

By

Esther Mandelheim Elliott

We need healthy, nourishing food for our families and community. But who wants to grow it? Taking up the challenge of farming organically in some ways parallels taking up the Torah as a Jew. We are blessed with the challenge of farming, the challenge of taking stewardship over a small piece of this earth to grow food for local families. The food nourishes our bodies as the Torah nourishes our spirits. Interestingly, as we return the Torah to the ark, we sing “Etz Hayim Hee”—describing the Torah as a lifeline to those who grasp it.

By Friday afternoon each week, we are blessed with Shabbat. Today, it is often hard to imagine how the observance of the laws of Shabbat can be an essential part of farming or any physical labor. But back when the Israelites were farmers in their own land, Shabbat was surely an essential part of their lives. The farmer abstains from work, not only for the sake of reenergizing the body and mind for the week ahead, but also for the sake of spiritual advancement. As Abraham Joshua Heschel explains in the first chapter of *The Sabbath*, “The Sabbath...is not for the purpose of recovering one’s lost strength and becoming fit for the forthcoming labor. The Sabbath is a day for the sake of life.”¹ The observance of Shabbat is not merely a means to make weekday labor more productive, but a means to intensify the life spirit, a way to fuel the fire of the soul. On Shabbat we are provided with the opportunity to recharge and also to reflect on what we do, how we live, why we farm.

Organic Farming as Tikkun Olam

My husband and I have been farming in Gainesville, Virginia, for four years. During that time, observing Shabbat has been an inspiring struggle. Our decision to take up farming here, on family land, was driven by the desire to grow healthy food. It felt natural to reclaim farm work as a noble profession that restores the soil and provides an entire community a connection to nature, plants, animals and organic matters. Yet the farm is a good distance away from any synagogue.

Additionally, the decision to rush, wrap up our farm chores and stop everything for Shabbat does not come naturally. On many a Friday, we struggle to light our candles before the sun sets behind the hills of the Bull Run Mountains. Yet with each passing week, the connection strengthens

between the holistic effect of fully observing Shabbat and our goal to contribute to the repair of the world through providing pure and fresh food to our community.

Respite From the Constant

In his *Guide to Jewish Prayer*, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz writes that our sages have described the daily times of prayer as the ‘Shabbat’ within each day, a period of time for sacred matters “during which a person leaves the sphere of his regular activities and turns his mind away from the matters that surround him constantly.”² Our adherence to Shabbat rest gives us a chance to elevate our spirit and soul through reflection, meditation, prayer and uninterrupted time with family and friends. While we must attend to some basic, life-sustaining chores, we also keep in mind that this day of rest is unlike any weekday. As we honor the spirit of Shabbat, we receive a gift of precious time that restores our connection to the natural world and our commitment to *tikkun olam*, repairing the world, through our farm work.

Perhaps ‘constant’ best describes farm matters—vegetable plants constantly need water, another animal constantly cries out for a little more attention, an endless parade of challenges like deer in the garden, bugs, an early frost or excessive heat—it’s all constantly swirling. Shabbat becomes not a luxury, but a necessity for survival. While mental and physical burdens of work accumulate throughout the week, by Friday afternoon, they are already lifting. Without this lift, we would surely burn out. Shabbat repairs us and reminds us to recharge and reflect, so that we may continue growing, naturally.

Notes

¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951) 14.

² Adin Steinsaltz, *A Guide to Jewish Prayer* (New York: Schocken Books, 2000) 41.

Esther Mandelheim Elliott runs Stoney Lonesome Farm in Gainesville, VA, together with her husband, Pablo Elliott. Farm life presents her with an opportunity to rediscover the significance of Jewish observance through the natural cycles. The farm provides organically grown vegetables, herbs and flowers to its members in the Metropolitan DC area through a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program.

Bal Tashchit

A Jewish Environmental Ethic

By
Candace Nachman

Shoftim

Towards the end of Parashat Shoftim, in its discussion of the rules of waging battle, we are presented with one of the negative mitzvot contained in the Torah, the mitzvah of bal tashchit. Literally meaning, *do not destroy or waste*, bal tashchit has become the basis for a Jewish environmental ethic.

The commandment first comes to us in two verses contained in *Deuteronomy*, chapter 20.

When in your war against a city you have to besiege it a long time in order to capture it, you must not destroy its trees, wielding the ax against them. You may eat of them, but you must not cut them down. Are the trees of the field human to withdraw before you into the besieged city? Only trees that you know do not yield food may be destroyed; you may cut them down for constructing siegeworks against the city that is waging war on you, until it has been reduced.¹

It seems like an unreasonable burden on soldiers in the midst of battle to worry about which trees they may cut down to help them on to victory. What then is the reason behind protecting the fruit-bearing trees of the besieged city?

Sforno, a late-15th/early-16th-century rabbi in Italy, explains the sequence like this: An army should not senselessly destroy the trees of the besieged city, because this activity would mean that it is not sure of victory and eventually inhabiting the land. They should instead be certain of success and keep the fruit-bearing trees, so that they may have food to eat. Non-fruit-bearing trees that will serve the same military purpose should be used instead. Sforno is teaching that God has promised success in these military efforts, so the Jewish armies must not employ a “scorched earth” policy in lands it will eventually occupy. This approach is both practical and environmental.

But Sforno’s interpretation relates only to responsibility towards trees in wartime. Other rabbinic texts bring us to a more extensive environmental ethic, helping us understand the current interpretations of bal tashchit.

Do Not Destroy

In his late 12th-century work, the *Mishne Torah*, in *Hilchot Melachim*, Maimonides writes: “whoever breaks vessels, tears garments, or destroys a

building, or clogs a well, or does away with food in a destructive manner violates the negative mitzvah of bal tashchit.²² The early Sages of the Talmud reason that if the principle applies under the duress of wartime, then it should apply even more at other times. The Rabbis further expand the concept of bal tashchit to include not destroying anything of potential use, whether it was created by God or altered by humanity.

Maimonides goes even further. He adds more actions to the list of what constitutes bal tashchit and determines punishments for violators.

Maimonides reasons that

It is forbidden to cut down fruit-bearing trees outside a besieged city, nor may a water channel be deflected from them so that they wither. Whoever cuts down a fruit-bearing tree is flogged. This penalty is imposed not only for cutting it down during a siege; whenever a fruit-yielding tree is cut down with destructive intent, flogging is incurred. It may be cut down, however, if it causes damage to other trees or to a field belonging to another man or if its value for other purposes is greater. The Law forbids only wanton destruction... . Not only one who cuts down trees, but also one who smashes household goods, tears clothes, demolishes a building, stops up a spring, or destroys articles of food with destructive intent transgresses the command 'you must not destroy.'³

Here we learn that while in certain instances it is necessary to destroy a fruit-bearing tree, needless destruction is never acceptable.

Some people argue that it is human nature to use the Earth's resources in any manner we see fit. God gave humans dominion over the rest of His creations, so we should be allowed to use the land and its resources in any manner we choose. However, *Genesis* 2:15 states, "The Lord God took the man and placed him in the Garden of Eden, to till it and *tend* it" (italics mine). We are the guardians of His creation: there is no mention of our placement on this Earth to destroy what God created. The mitzvah of bal tashchit reinforces this point and connects the creation—the beginning of our obligations to the land—with our continuing commitment to God.

Do Not Be Destructive

Many people reason that if they work and care for something they should be able to treat it however they want. How can we change an attitude that has for centuries pervaded the human mindset? Maimonides tells us that people should be trained not to be destructive. He gives the example of burial: the deceased's garments should be given to the poor and not buried in the grave, to be eaten by worms and moths. Anyone who buries the dead in an expensive garment violates the negative mitzvah of bal taschit.⁴ This text, also from the *Mishne Torah*, moves us towards the

more general ethical principle underlying bal tashchit—that it trains a person not to be destructive.

Whose Earth Is It, Anyway?

It is common today for people to take the position that if waste or destruction does not affect them directly and personally, they do not need to worry about it. It is this way of thinking that the Torah and rabbinic interpretations are trying to stop. As Jews, we have a responsibility to those who come after us to teach them the ways of the Torah and all 613 mitzvot. If all the natural resources are destroyed before future generations are born, then how can they observe the mitzvah of bal tashchit?

This leads me to a passage in the *Sefer Ha-Hinuch*, a 13th-century text that explicates in detail the 613 mitzvot. It elaborates on the notion of ethical training first mentioned by Maimonides and even sheds light on why as Jews we should take the mitzvah of bal tashchit seriously:

The purpose of this mitzvah is to teach us to love that which is good and worthwhile and to cling to it, so that good becomes a part of us and we avoid all that is evil and destructive. This is the way of the righteous and those who improve society, who love peace and rejoice in the good in people and bring them close to Torah: that nothing, not even a grain of mustard, should be lost to the world, that they should regret any loss or destruction that they see, and if possible they will prevent any destruction that they can. Not so are the wicked, who are like demons, who rejoice in destruction of the world, and they are destroying themselves.⁵

Our first instinct should not be to destroy, but rather to make use of something with the least amount of damage.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, the leading Orthodox rabbi of 19th-century Germany, dramatically conceptualized the commandment of bal tashchit:

Be a mensh! Only if you use the things around you for wise human purposes, sanctified by the word of My teaching, only then are you a mensh and have the right over them which I have given you as a human. However, if you destroy, if you ruin, at that moment you are not a human but an animal and have no right to the things around you. I lent them to you for wise use only; never forget that I lent them to you. As soon as you use them unwisely, be it the greatest or the smallest, you commit treachery against My world, you commit murder and robbery against My property, you sin against Me!⁶

Rabbi Hirsch goes on to say that those who destroy or waste are idolaters, and the idols that are served by destructive actions are anger, pride and, above all, ego.

As we learned in *Genesis*, we are merely tenants, here to protect God's property. Rabbi Hirsch sees in bal tashchit one of the most basic Jewish principles—acknowledging the sovereignty of God and the limitations of our own will and ego. If we do so, we will hopefully be able to restore our harmony not only with the world around us, but also with the Divine Will, which we place above our own.

Broadening the Meaning of Bal Tashchit

As is common with any mitzvah in the Torah, the Rabbis have taken a specific instance and broadened it to relate to more aspects of our everyday lives. I would like to continue this expansion of interpretation for bal tashchit. I believe we should go a step farther than learning not to be destructive and wasteful. When we find that those actions have occurred, I believe we need to work to reverse them.

In our everyday actions, we need to reduce our impact on the Earth. To help fulfill the mitzvah of bal tashchit, we should recycle newspapers, bottles and other household products. We should buy products made from recycled or biodegradable materials wherever and whenever possible. We should only buy as much as we need. Another Talmudic ruling on bal tashchit prohibits the wasting of fuel.⁷ Therefore, for shorter trips, we should walk or use public transportation rather than driving.

Each of us needs to do whatever we can. In the words of Dr. Seuss, “Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not!”⁸

Notes

¹ *Deuteronomy* 20:19-20, in David L. Lieber, ed. *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary* (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 2001).

² Rambam, *Hilchot Melachim* 6:10

³ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Kings and Wars 6:8, 10

⁴ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Mourning 14:24

⁵ *Sefer Ha-Hinuch*, Mitzvah #529

⁶ Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Horeb* #56

⁷ Talmud Shabbat 67b

⁸ Dr. Seuss, *The Lorax*

Candace Nachman has been a member of OT since birth. She holds an MA in Marine Affairs and Policy. She is active in promoting sound environmental practices within the local DC Jewish community.

Origins of the Patriarchal Stories

By

Paul S. Forbes

Were Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph real people or just the stuff of legend? The three great religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, all regard themselves as “Abrahamic,” basing the legitimacy of their heritage on the legacy of one ancient family. Unfortunately, we have no independent evidence of the existence of these ancient individuals, nor are we ever likely to. In the last few years, an ancient stone inscription was unearthed with the name of King David, and more recently the foundations of his Jerusalem palace have been discovered. The names of other Israelite and Judahite kings have been revealed on the conquest inscriptions of the kings of the great neighboring civilizations. But the comings and goings of Bedouin tribal chieftains such as Abraham and his family would not have been deemed worthy to be recorded in royal inscriptions.

In the absence of any archaeological evidence, must we conclude that the Patriarchs did not exist? Not necessarily. If we know where to look, there are some faint echoes from the past that may suggest that at least some of the patriarchal stories were based on the lives of real people.

In order to proceed with our investigation we need to approach both the Biblical text and the archaeological evidence objectively, seeking convergences where they exist between the text and the scholarly evidence. We need to begin by understanding how the books of the Torah came to be written.

Origins of the Patriarchal Stories

Most of the population of Biblical Israel, including royalty, was illiterate. There were no books, and diplomatic correspondence and tax records were written on small lumps of clay by an elite educated class called scribes. Very little else was written down. Only the scribes could read the clay tablets. But although there were no books, each family, clan and tribe undoubtedly had a rich oral tradition, sometimes reaching back thousands of years. For example, in present-day Iran, there are village storytellers who retell the 2,300 year-old saga of Alexander the Great’s defeat of the Persian Emperor Darius word for word, holding audiences entranced for many hours. The *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* were probably passed down this way. Surely this skill would have been cultivated among the ancient Israelite Bedouins as well.

Becoming One Kingdom

Scholars who have closely analyzed the Biblical texts generally agree that the Patriarchal stories were written down long after the events they describe. In *The Patriarchal Age*, McCarter and Hendel posit that both the impetus for collecting and recording these stories and their compilation into a more or less consistent narrative took place as part of the effort of the early kings of Israel to consolidate the many tribes and groups into a United Kingdom. By taking the individual traditions of the different groups and weaving them into the story of one family, the kings hoped to demonstrate the parallel of the tribes uniting to become one Kingdom.

Abraham

Creating eponymous ancestors was common practice in ancient times. An eponymous ancestor is a real or legendary figure whose name is given to a city, people or nation. For example, Pennsylvania was named for William Penn. He was a real person. Here's an amusing example of a legendary eponymous ancestor: when the Seleucid Greek Kings ruled over Jerusalem during the pre-Maccabean period, they had to have an ancestor for that city. So they fabricated the story that the city was founded by a Greek named Hierosylamos!

Unlike the other Patriarchs, Abraham's name appears in the Bible only as a personal name, never as a geographic, tribal or local designation. Therefore it is quite possible, if not probable, that he was a tribal hero before he became a figure of legend and reverence. It is obvious, however, that the story of Abraham became mythologized. Just one example: *Genesis* 11:22-26 tells us that Abraham's father was Terah, his grandfather was Nahor and his great-grandfather was Serug. All three names appear in Assyrian texts from the first half of the first millennium BCE as the names of towns in the region of Haran, where Abraham lived after leaving the city of Ur. In other words, Abraham's forefathers were eponymous ancestors of these towns.

The earliest non-Biblical reference to what may be the Biblical Abraham is on the victory inscription of the Egyptian Pharaoh Shishak 1 (who was the Biblical Sheshonk). The Bible tells us that about the year 925 BCE, during the reign of King Rehoboam (*Kings* 14:25-26; *Chronicles* 12:2-12), Sheshonk invaded and devastated Israel. The Pharaoh's victory inscription boasts that he overcame a place in the Negev called *pa' boa-q-r-'a 'i-bi-ra-ma*, which experts have translated as "The Fortress of Abram." We can't say conclusively that this is the Abram of the Bible, but it does suggest that the Abram/Abraham tradition was alive and well in 10th-century BCE Israel. It also confirms the many Biblical stories tying Abraham to the southern

territories of what would become the Kingdom of Judah. Other stories have Abraham founding cultic sites in Manasseh-Ephraim in the north as well. Thus, when the Patriarchal saga is woven together c. 1000 BCE, Abraham comes to be seen as the ancestor presaging the uniting of both the northern and southern tribes into a new Kingdom of Israel under David.

Isaac

In the Bible, Isaac the son of Abraham is also identified with the Northern Negev and particularly with the Well of Beersheva. Archaeological excavations have revealed a similar well at that location dated to about the time of the Israelite settlement.

In the ancient Near East, people were generally given names containing a theophoric (the name of a deity). It is unlikely that a name “Smiley” (Isaac) would have been given. Scholars think that “Isaac” is probably a shortened form of “Isaac-El,” which probably means, “May El smile upon us” or “May El look favorably on us.” In ancient times that name could have been the designation of a person, a group or a place.

In those days, El was the name of the Canaanite high god as well as one of the names of the god of Israel. The El tradition probably originated in the north. The other name for the Israelite god, Yahweh, is thought to have originated in the south. On Mt. Sinai, which is located in the south, God tells Moses that he had previously been known as *El-Elohe-Yisrael*, or “El, God of Israel,” but that he now would be known as *YHWH* (Yahweh).

So Isaac, like his father Abraham, is a figure representing the southern lands. Placing them at the head of the Patriarchal hierarchy suggests that these stories were canonized when David’s southern Kingdom of Judah was in the ascendancy.

Jacob

Although Jacob, like Isaac, originates in Beersheva, he later settles near Shechem in the northern hill country and builds cult centers at Shechem and Bethel. According to the Biblical story, he changes his name to Israel after wrestling there with an angel. At this point, Jacob becomes the personification of the people of Israel. It is noteworthy that he spends his early years in the south and his adulthood in the north, making him a symbol of the union of these separate but related groups. Scholars believe that name “Israel,” which was the name of the united tribes, was applied to Jacob at a late point in the development of the Patriarchal tradition.

The name “Jacob-El” means “May El Protect” and is found as a name of both people and places in ancient times. It was a common name during the Hyksos Period (c. 1675-1550 BCE) when Egypt was ruled by invading

Semitic people from Palestine. The second Hyksos Pharaoh was in fact named Jacob-El. A scarab (a seal in the form of a beetle) found in a tomb at Shiqmona, Israel, dated to c. 18th century BCE, bore the name of a local ruler named Jacob-El. The Egyptian annals also mention the conquest of a location called Jacob-El. It is quite possible that the Palestinian Jacob-El could have been an ancestor of the Hyksos king of the same name. It is also possible that this ancient Canaanite hero gave rise to the Biblical story of Jacob, which has its own Egyptian connections.

Joseph

Like his traditional father and grandfather, Joseph is also a partial name, missing the “-El” suffix. Joseph-El means “May El Increase,” probably meaning increase crops, livestock, children, etc. It is equally possible that this name originated as an earlier hero, or as the eponym of a tribe or district. In all likelihood, according to scholars, the term, “The House of Joseph” was probably coined after the union of the northern and southern tribes, as the northern counterpart to “The House of Judah.” Joseph is described as being the father of Manasseh and Ephraim, who are the eponymous ancestors of the northern tribes. In this case, it is plausible that Joseph was actually a personal name of a past tribal hero.

An early tale may have eulogized a tribal patriarch who went to Egypt as a slave and became a powerful official. This would have been quite possible during the Hyksos period. Even in later periods, we know of “Asiatics” who became high officials at the Egyptian court. One, named Irsu, even seized power during a famine at the end of the XIX Dynasty, contemporaneous with the formation of the Israelite union.

The best-known tale about Joseph is possibly derived from an older Egyptian story, “The Tale of Two Brothers.” Like the Joseph story, a trusted official (in this case a brother) is the unwelcome target of the sexual advances of the Lady of the House. When she is refused, she falsely accuses the loyal servant, and dire consequences follow.

Clearly, we are unable to shed a great deal of light on the actual individuals behind the Patriarchal stories. We do know, however, that the Patriarchal tradition emerged at the end of the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age 1 (1200-1000 BCE). We now can understand the important role these stories played in unifying the disparate clans, tribes and families into what ultimately became our common heritage.

Sources:

The Encyclopedia Judaica, CD ROM Edition, 1997.

Dever, William G. *Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From?* Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003.

Finkelstein, Israel and Neil Asher Silberman. *The Bible Unearthed.* New York: The Free Press, Division of Simon and Schuster, 2001.

McCarter, Jr., P. Kyle. *The Patriarchal Age: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.* Rev.

Ronald S. Hendel. *Ancient Israel.* Ed. Herschel Shanks. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1999.

Simpson, William Kelly, ed. *The Literature of Ancient Egypt.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1973.

A student of comparative religion and Biblical archaeology for over 60 years, Paul S. Forbes has taught Biblical archaeology courses at Olam Tikvah, the Foundation for Jewish Studies and the JCC. His writings have appeared in the *Biblical Archaeology Review*, and he has made possible the acquisition of a rare, fourth-century BCE archive of Aramaic documents by the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

Angels

By

Jerrold Markowitz

How many miracles might be happening around us but we, in our haste, never stop to notice them?

Etz Hayim, Exodus 3:2 commentary

Traditional Judaism assumes the existence of angels, defined as both incorporeal (nonhuman) beings and people performing divine actions. Although an angel is an attendant or messenger (*mal'akh*) of God's divine essence and difficult to completely understand, these "divine beings"¹ carry out God's will.² Therefore, an angel is "a physical manifestation of God's will and concern, appearing on earth to perform a specific task."³

Sometimes angels' tasks require them to move quickly. Wings are attributed to incorporeal angels because the motion of flying represents this "most perfect and most sublime movement."⁴ For example, due to the urgency, an angel intervened from heaven to stop Abraham from slaying his son, Isaac. This angel also reflects God's protection and guidance. When an angel's task is completed, it vanishes.⁵

In the Book of *Zechariah*,⁶ an "interpreting angel" accompanies Zechariah to guide him and explain what is going on in the world, rather than the angel taking part in God's actions. Throughout the Book, this interpreter is referred to as "the angel that spoke with me."⁷ How much of a human life or journey is "divinely guided"⁸ by an angel?

It is interesting to consider this question and whether we can recognize non-Biblical angel experiences. For example, two unrelated parents, Theresa and Ed, who never met, received "messages" prior to their unrelated deaths at ages 79 and 94.⁹ Days before Theresa died, she was fluctuating between coherent and incoherent states of mind. Yet a few times she told the hospice nurse and her daughters that she needed to find her pocketbook, because she was going on a trip, and she also wanted her deceased mother to light a candle for her. Ed, who was consistently coherent in the hospital, told one of his sons on what became his last Shabbat that he had a dream the previous night and knew this was the end.

In a different experience, one cold January evening, a young woman who had picked up her son from a local day care center was carrying him toward the L'Enfant Plaza Metro. As she began crossing the street, her wristwatch suddenly dropped. An unknown young man wearing a knit cap ran out from somewhere, scooped up the watch, ran after the woman, returned her watch and ran away.¹⁰

Another non-Biblical story may have also included an angel. It began at a Sunday singles dinner in a private home. The event host, also single, was speaking with a woman who got there late while everyone else was engaged in conversation. In the parking lot after the dinner, the host said to one of the male attendees: “That woman is too old for me, but she’d be right for you.” The man and woman eventually met, dated and married. Years later, while reminiscing, they noted that it seemed curious they never saw the host again, as if he had appeared once and then vanished.¹¹

According to Maimonides and Rabbi Marshall Meyer,¹² anyone performing a mitzvah is an angel, even if it’s only a brief or spontaneously generated action, such as saving a baby from a burning building or bringing people together to facilitate a friendship. “A person has to have a reason for living, and the best reason is another person.”¹³

Maybe our deeds [mitzvot] and our actions are the angels. Maybe there are no angels other than our deeds. Maybe our deeds trying to ascend to a higher level are the angels climbing upward from the earth. We are struggling to make something of our lives. Our deeds do not come down from heaven.¹⁴

Notes

¹ *Genesis* 3:5 and commentary, in David L. Lieber, ed. *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary* (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 2001).

² *Encyclopaedia Judaica CD-ROM Edition*.

³ *Genesis* 18:2 commentary, *Etz Hayim*.

⁴ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1956) 66.

⁵ *Genesis* 18:2 and 22:11 commentaries, *Etz Hayim*.

⁶ The Rev. Dr. A. Cohen, *The Twelve Prophets* (London: The Soncino Press, 1977).

⁷ Such as verses in *Zechariah* 1:9, 2:2, 2:7, 4:1, 5:5, in Cohen.

⁸ *Exodus* 23:20 commentary, *Etz Hayim*.

⁹ Thanks to Randee Markowitz for her input.

¹⁰ “Good News,” by Jerrold Markowitz, *Washington Jewish Week*, March 9, 1995.

¹¹ Names withheld upon request.

¹² “The Dream of Life” in Jane Isay, ed. *You are My Witness: The Living Words of Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2004).

¹³ Chaim Potok, *The Gift of Asher Lev* (New York: Fawcett Books, 1990) 152-153.

¹⁴ Isay, 93.

As a longtime member of Olam Tikvah, Jerrold Markowitz is a regular participant in Shabbat and festival services. As a Ritual Committee member, Jerry writes a monthly column for the *Contemporary*.

Judaism in a Word—Community

By
Susan Coren

I was asked to consider the one Jewish value that is so central, so important to Judaism, that without it Judaism cannot be understood, appreciated or even exist. A follow-up question was whether that one thing helped me get through this past year of difficult medical issues for my family. What immediately came to mind is my firm belief that the foundation for all our ethical, humanitarian, theological and ritual values—and probably the single most important factor that helped me through this past year—is the concept of Community.

Community Involvement Underlies Everything Jewish

Everywhere we turn in Judaism, we find evidence of the value we place on our interactions with those in our community. From our daily practices to our holidays, from our laws to our traditions, from the way we celebrate simchas to the way we handle sorrows, not a moment of our Jewish lives goes by without community involvement.

On a daily basis, we are reminded of the importance of our community as we gather to form a minyan to say our prayers. In order to recite the *Barchu*, *Kedushah* or *Kaddish*, or to read from the Torah, we must have at least ten Jewish adults present. Each day, our religion shows us that we are needed by one another and that our presence counts.

Our holidays are not just about performing the set of rituals prescribed for that particular holiday. We concern ourselves with making sure our family and friends have a place to come for Break Fast; we gather in each other's Suktahs; we share latkes and Seders. Being with other members of our community enhances our holiday experience and brings an added measure of spirituality or ruach to our observance.

Our Customs Reflect Community Awareness

Judaism teaches us the importance of caring not only for those we know in our communities, but also for those we might not yet know—or might never know. For example, on Passover we recite, “Let all who are hungry come and eat.” Additionally, we read in the Torah that as we gather grain from the field at the Shavuot harvest season, we “shall not reap all the way to the edges” of the field, “or gather the gleanings” for those should be left for “the poor and the stranger” (*Leviticus 22*). By placing this requirement in a listing of festivals, the Torah reminds us of the importance of connecting mitzvot with our celebrations. Sharing our blessings with our community has always been a central part of Judaism.¹

Insights from *Exodus*

In the book of *Exodus*, we receive the Ten Commandments, and rules are laid out for us in Parashat Mishpatim. In the commentary in the *Eitz Hayim*, we read that “Judaism is based not only on the major pronouncements of the Decalogue, but on the hundreds of minor ways in which we are called on to sanctify our relationships with other people. . . . Our standards for how we treat others must be based not on social-utilitarian concerns, the desire for an orderly society, but on the recognition of the image of God in every person and the presence of God in every relationship.”² At the heart of our Jewish law is the idea that our civil and moral code is so completely meshed with our religious law that we cannot behave as Jews without acting as responsible members of our community. Hence, as we welcome our young people into Jewish adulthood, our tradition of b’nai mitzvah projects encourages them to support others in the community. Similarly, we hold canned food drives to help support those in our community without enough to eat while we fast and repent on Yom Kippur, and we give tzedakah for various social action and community service projects. And the list goes on.

The book of *Exodus* provides another insight about community. It begins with a list of names. It’s not the only place in the Torah to list names. Every time in the past that we read a parashah with such a list, I have tended to glance over it, not paying too much attention to each and every name, and skipping to the part just after the list. In writing this article, though, I consulted one of my favorite books, *The Bedside Torah*, by Rabbi Artson³, about this section. In his commentary, Rabbi Artson explains that the lists in the Torah represent an assertion of human worth. He states, “We may not care about every name listed there, but the author of the Torah does, and wants us to learn to care as well. Those names teach us that more people are involved in our lives than we choose to acknowledge, that we are more deeply embedded in our society than we will ever know.”

The OT Community Confirms My Belief

This past year, quite a long list of people helped my family in many ways. I will not subject you to a Torah-like catalog here, but I do want to tell everyone on that list that each and every one of you means a great deal to me, and that I could not have gotten through this past year without you. I have been involved at Olam Tikvah for a number of years, and I have always felt very connected to this community, but it is nearly impossible to put into words the feeling that comes from having so many

people both literally and figuratively at my side. There were many hospitalizations, tests, and emotional roller coaster rides as we made our way through a process that has led to the diagnosis of a genetic connective tissue disorder for not only my husband, but also our sons. Our lives have been forever changed, and through it all, you have been there for us in countless ways.

My community has held me up through a difficult year, and you continue to do so. Thank you for teaching me not to skip over those lists of names in the Torah. Shanah Tovah.

Notes

¹ See also <http://www.jtsa.edu/PreBuilt/ParashahArchives/5764f/emor.shtml> for Rabbi Matt Berkowitz's discussion of the Parashah, further illustrating the relationship between mitzvot and celebration.

² David L. Lieber, ed. *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary* (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 2001) 456.

³ Bradley Shavit Artson, *The Bedside Torah: Wisdom, Dreams & Visions* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2001) 93.

Susan Coren and her family have been members of Olam Tikvah since 1999. As co-President of Sisterhood, she has particularly enjoyed giving the d'var Torah on Sisterhood Shabbat.

The Shema: A Foundation for Contemplative Practice

By

Larissa Blechman

The core of Jewish worship, the *Shema*, is a declaration of faith and a call to witness daily the Oneness of God. The first prayer children learn and the last recited before death, it offers accompaniment to every Jew through each moment of life. While most of us already understand the significance of the *Shema*, I'd like to introduce a contemplative approach, with the *Shema* as its foundation, which will expand the experience of all prayer and establish a starting point for meditative practice.

Meditative Practice: A Spiritual Approach

Meditative practice can involve using a single letter, a word, a verse, a niggun (wordless melody) or the breath as a focus for both contemplation and experience. It offers us an increase in awareness of self, a sense of unity and comfort, and a connection to God that may be missing in our over-filled lives. For people for whom the meaning and relevance of text and liturgy feel elusive, meditative practice offers a spiritual way to bring the essence and meaning of Jewish texts and teaching into their lives.

Spirituality often appears in the mainstream media. We've all heard of Madonna's Kabbalah studies and of ecstatic retreats that offer people spiritual fervor, yet don't provide much substance for daily life. But spirituality can mean more than that. When people decide they are interested in "spirituality," they are seeking connection, usually to what they experience as Divinity. Spiritual practice develops when a need or desire is identified, an intention is set, and a routine of actions is implemented. At the heart of true spirituality is practice and discipline.

One approach to establishing spiritual connection is to meditate. Meditation is simply concentrated focus of the mind. We call the repeated act of sitting in meditation a practice because it is something that we must continually repeat: there is no perfection, only the repeated practice.

Setting the Stage for Practice

It is important to prepare, to set the stage for practice. My experience has been that establishing a regular daily practice time creates the space necessary for contemplation and prayer. It "cements" the kavannah, the intention, to develop the practice. It is nice to have a single, beautiful experience, but the greatest benefit is found in daily repetition of prayer or of meditation.

You will probably want to begin by doing this practice separately, before incorporating it into your regular davening, in order to establish your understanding of the meditative approach. Find a quiet, comfortable space, probably in your home, where you will be undisturbed. Have a siddur with you. Have a talit with you if you wear one when you daven. Set a timer for a workable amount of time. I suggest 15 minutes for beginners. Let the people in your life know that you are committing this time to your practice. This is important work that helps to calm and center us individually, as well as aligning us more fully with God. Honor this time, and teach those in your life to do so as well.

Focusing on the *Shema*

We now set a kavannah that is hidden in plain sight in the first words of the *Shema*: “Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad.” In a siddur with a Hebrew version of the *Shema*, look carefully at the first line in Hebrew. Even if you don’t read Hebrew, you will be able to discern differences in the letters themselves. In the first word, shema, notice that the last letter, ayin, is larger and in bold print. Now move to the last word of the verse, echad, and notice that the last letter, dalet, is also enlarged and darker. Just as it is in Torah, it is represented here. Combining these two letters, ayin and dalet, produces the word “eyd,” which means “witness.” A traditional way to understand this is that we are always to witness the Oneness and Unity of our God, and particularly as we recite this verse. A contemplative approach defines “witnessing” as “being present with” or “being able to see, hear or know by personal presence and perception.” We continue to know and affirm the Oneness of our personal and communal God.

We then expand our focus into becoming witnesses to and observers of our own experience. We contemplate. We meditate in the Oneness. We gather in all the seemingly disparate parts of ourselves and bring them into Oneness with the supreme Oneness, and spend time there. Traditionally, we gather the tzitzit on the talit prior to the recitation of the *Shema*. A lovely way to set the kavannah is that as you gather in your tzitzit, you are gathering in the all of the parts of yourself that get scattered during everyday life, the parts of you to which you may not always feel connected. If you are not wearing a talit, perhaps you will want to spread your arms and then bring them in to the center of your body, symbolically gathering yourself in. Now gather all of yourself—body, mind, and soul—and return to the quiet space you set aside for yourself.

Observing and Participating

Our practice is to become an observer and a participant. Sit comfortably and quietly, eyes closed, and observe where you are at this moment.

Notice what comes to your attention. There is no right or wrong; simply observe what is present for you now. Accept bodily sensations or rising thoughts, whatever comes into your awareness. After a few minutes, begin to focus on the flow of your breath. Notice the cool touch of the breath entering the nostrils, and then its warm touch as it leaves the body. After a few minutes, begin to consciously relax your body as you exhale. Breathe out tension and fatigue. Breathe in a sense of well-being. Continue to breathe, allowing your breath to gradually deepen. Allow time for this; it probably will not happen instantly. Calm, deep, smooth breath changes the physiology of the body, bringing relaxation to the nervous system and mind. A relaxed body and mind open more fully to prayer and experience. Enjoy this calm breath. Continue to follow the flow, watching each breath as it flows out and then in.

“Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad. Listen, Israel, Adonai is God, Adonai is One.” Observe, Israel. Be aware as you recite these words that all of you is one. Your oneness meeting the Oneness of God. Return again to watching the flow of the breath. Inevitably your mind will wander, and as this happens and you become aware of it, gently come back to observing the breath. Concentrate the focus of your mind on the flow of breath. Each time the mind wanders is an opportunity to return ourselves to our intention. We watch, we become distracted, we return, over and over again, through the course of each practice session and through the course of our lives. Sit here comfortably for as long as you like. When you are ready, open your eyes and move calmly back into your day.

Deepening Our Jewish Experience

This approach embodies traditional Jewish practice, which is to always be aware of God and of each and every one of our actions. We take our instruction from the *Shema* to develop our skills of observation and awareness. We watch and build up our tools of discernment and develop fresh, open eyes that reveal a new level of meaning and understanding of what is true in our lives. Jewish rituals that may feel outdated or less than fulfilling can be viewed through these new eyes, with the realization that it all *does* matter and is relevant to each of us, every single day. As we gain familiarity with ourselves through meditation, we can begin to see our own actions more clearly. We notice the impact and importance of how we conduct ourselves and of what we do in any moment, which is truly the essence of Judaism.

Larissa Blechman is an OT member and a practicing Jew. She teaches yoga and meditation grounded in a Jewish contemplative approach in the DC area and at Shabbaton and retreats. She is pursuing an MA in Jewish Studies/Education and ordination as a Rabbinic Pastor.

Olam Tikvatienu

Congregation Olam Tikvah
3800 Glenbrook Road
Fairfax, Virginia 22031-3199

Non-Profit
Organization
U.S. Postage Paid
Permit #72
Merrifield, VA 22116

לשנה טובה