

***Volume 1, Number 2***  
***Nissan 5764***

# ***Olam Tikvateinu***

***A place to share Torah***



***Congregation Olam Tikvah***  
***3800 Glenbrook Road***  
***Fairfax, Virginia***

RABBI DAVID KALENDER  
הרב שמחה צבי בן שמואל ויוכבד

Nissan 5764

Dear Olam Tikvah Friend,

In the spring of 2003, Cary Schwartzbach and Lisa Friedman approached me with the idea of publishing an intellectual journal called *Olam Tikvateinu* (our Olam Tikvah, or Our World of Hope). The publication has been a great success, and I am so pleased that you now hold the second edition of that journal in your hand.

Conceived as a supplement to the existing experiences of Jewish study and reflection central to our community, the journal's statement of purpose is as follows:

Olam Tikvateinu, our Olam Tikvah, our world of hope, is a place for individuals of our congregation to share their Torah. It is to be a forum for original ideas and thoughts on Jewish themes—Tanakh (Hebrew Bible), Talmud, Jewish history, philosophy, ethics and actions/behavior.

Its motto is:

ה' חפץ למען צדקו יגדיל תורה ויאדיר

*For the sake of God's righteousness, God desires that Torah grow and be glorified.*

—Isaiah 42:21

Our current plan is to continue publishing twice yearly:

- ◆ **Tishrei** for subjects including High Holidays through Purim (include Elul, Chanukah, Tu B'Shevat).
- ◆ **Nissan** for subjects including Pesach through Av (include Yom Hashoah, Lag B'Omer, the Omer, Yom Ha'atzmaut, Yom Yerushalayim, Shavuot and Tisha B'Av).

My hope is that this journal will inspire you to develop your own ideas and will become a forum for sharing with all of us, perhaps even in response to something you have read here. Please contact me or Rabbi Ben-Gideon so we may begin working together toward your article.

**Please consider submitting your article by Sunday, August 1, 2004 for Volume 2, Number 1, to be published 1 Tishrei 5765.** Articles should be typed, double spaced, in MS Word and submitted by e-mail to Lisa Friedman, [Lisafriedman@cox.net](mailto:Lisafriedman@cox.net). Write "Olam Tikvateinu" in the subject line. The *upper* length limit is 1500-2000 words (6-8 pages).

Looking forward to enjoying your Torah,

*Rabbi David Kalendar*

# Olam Jikvateinu

## Editors

Cary Schwartzbach, Lisa Friedman

## Editorial Advisory Board

Rabbi David Kalender, Rabbi Joshua Ben-Gideon

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*This edition is brought to you through  
the generosity of Alice Marion, in memory of  
Irving Kowaloff, physician and Bible scholar,  
the Rabbi's Discretionary Fund and the Rabbi  
Itzhaq M. Klirs Memorial Adult Education Fund.  
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this publication's continued success.*

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# From the Editor's Desk

Dear Fellow Congregants,

In many ways, this second edition of *Olam Tikvateinu* makes us prouder than the inaugural one. Too often, journals begin with great fanfare, only to wither over time due to loss of interest. Our *ke'hila* (community), however, has much Torah to share with you. As our Sages taught, “Stronger than the need for the calf to suckle, is the desire for the heifer to nurse.”

In *Arbab, Mi Yode'ab*, Ilka Shore-Cooper investigates the meaning of the number four in the Seder and asks pointedly whether it is significant because of the symbols that add up to four, or because of the intrinsic importance of the number four itself? A similar predicament to that of the number of mitzvot—did someone count 613 of them, or did the Sages decide there were 613 and commentators later enumerate the specifics? For a great discussion of Passover numerology, see Ira Steingroot's *Keeping Passover*, (HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), Chapter 6.

Glenn Taubman's *Love and Fear* explores the dialectic of fear and love of God. Although we moderns are uncomfortable with the concept of fear of God—due, perhaps, to our glorification of autonomy—Glenn reminds us that the Rabbis also had their measure of disquiet. They sensed the inherent limitation of fear as an enduring motivation. Fear and love are tools of *b'tzelem Elohim* (*imitatio dei*, emulating the ways of God), much in the same manner that guides the parent-child relationship.

Exploring *Talmud Torah*, Rebecca Wand Ben-Gideon demonstrates for us how the sometimes confusing and contradictory world of Jewish learning can be used to create and craft vision and outlook. At the same time, she teaches us some skills for navigating that perplexing body of knowledge. Unlike other knowledge systems, Jewish study is interested more in the process than the answer; thus minority opinions are not merely recorded, they are regarded with honor. No catechism is our Talmud.

Finally, Sarah Schultz's narrative reminds us of the ultimately indivisible nature of the collective Jewish soul. It also serves notice that our unity is an endeavor that we must each be willing to undertake. Perhaps this is the essential message of Passover, and why “in each generation one must see himself as if he himself were delivered from Egypt.” Redemption from the house of bondage came to us as a people of one mind (*ish echad b'lev echad*); the final redemption can only come to similarly disposed people.

Chag Kasher v'Sameach  
Cary Schwartzbach

# ***Arbah, Mi Yode'ah? Who Knows Four?***

By

Ilka Shore-Cooper

Growing up in a family of four children, the temptation was overwhelming during the Passover Seder to typecast each of my siblings as one of the other four sons—I was always the wise one, of course. While the four sons worked neatly for our family—at least in my mind—it did raise the question for me of why the number four is so common in the Haggadah. There are four cups of wine, four questions, four sons, and many more of the number four. Is there some significance to the number four, I wondered, so that the rituals grew up to fit the number? Was there four of something in the ritual to begin with, and more multiples of four were added over time? Or is there some aspect unique to the number four that might give it special resonance?

## **Four Cups of Wine**

The first instructions concerning wine in the Seder appear not in the Torah but in the Mishnah, the code of Jewish law edited around 220 CE. In the tractate on Pesach (*Pesachim* 10:1), which calls for four cups of wine at the Seder, “And they should not give him less than four cups of wine, even from the charity bin.” Everyone should have four cups of wine at the Seder, and the community should help those who don’t have enough so that they do have four cups of wine. As Dr. Ron Wolfson explains in his *Art of Jewish Living*, the four cups are clearly stated, but no explanation is given for why there are four cups.

After the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, Jews had not been able to gather together at their holy site in Jerusalem to offer sacrifices, among them the Passover sacrifice. Furthermore, the Jews had been living in a world ruled and heavily influenced by the culture of the Greeks and the Romans. This context is the background for the next quote about wine during the Seder, from the Babylonian Talmud (*Pesachim* 117b): “Our rabbis instituted four cups as symbols of freedom; let us perform a religious act with each.” Let’s look at what the “religious acts” might be before we examine what freedoms are symbolized.

A number of sources, including Baruch Bokser in *Origins of the Seder*, describe the similarity between the Seder and contemporary Greek *symposia* and Roman feasts. The *symposia* involved discussions during meals, and Roman feasts featured three kinds of wine-drinking—before the meal, with the main meal, and after it. These influences on the Seder seem clear, although it also seems clear that the rabbis strove to make Judaism separate and retain its uniqueness. So we drink four cups of wine, but with a religious act for each one.

The first cup is part of the sanctification of Kiddush—clearly a religious act. The second cup is drunk after telling the Passover story and before the main meal—no clear religious purpose there to me. The third cup comes after Birkat HaMazon, the grace after meals, and the fourth cup is after Hallel, or praise.

### **Four Freedoms**

But what is the explanation of the four freedoms mentioned in the Gemara? These are the four promises made in *Exodus* 6:6-9: “I shall take you out,” “I shall rescue you,” “I shall redeem you,” and “I shall take you to me for a people.” These four freedoms are variously explained as being freedom from hard labor, freedom from slavery, freedom from subjugation by Pharaoh, and complete freedom for Israel as its own nation. So the four freedoms come from the Torah, and four cups of wine follow them in the Talmud.

There are also four cups of wine in the dream the chief steward relates to Joseph while they are both in prison. After Joseph was sold into slavery and put into jail, he began his journey to freedom by interpreting the steward’s dream while in jail. The Israelites began their journey to the four freedoms while in slavery in Egypt. Perhaps that parallel explains the four cups? Unable to find anything more about why there are four cups of wine, I turned to another four, the four questions.

### **Four Questions**

As to why there are four questions, there are four Biblical verses explaining the telling of the Pesach story. These are *Exodus* 12:26-27, “when your children say to you”; *Exodus* 13:8, “And you shall tell your son on that day”; *Exodus* 13:14, “And it shall be when your son shall ask you at some future time”; and *Deuteronomy* 6:20-21, “If your child asks you tomorrow.” Why does the instruction to tell your

children appear four times? Dr. Wolfson explains that the rabbis thought that because there are four citations, the four ways of telling your children must be different. These four instructions to “tell your son [child]” served as the basis for the four children in the Maggid or “telling the story” section of the Haggadah.

Four cups of wine, four children, four questions, four Biblical verses from *Deuteronomy* in the Maggid, four freedoms—there are even more sets of four. In *The Art of Jewish Living*, Dr. Wolfson sees the entire Haggadah as a play in four acts. The central elements of Passover in Temple times were the Passover sacrifice, matzah, maror, and Hallel. The multiples of four are everywhere, but I still can’t find an underlying reason for the number four.

Rabbi Nota Schiller suggests the number four is important in Passover because there are four matriarchs. He writes that our mothers pass on an innate sense of Jewishness, one of the last connections to Judaism we may feel, just as our celebration of Passover may be the last ritual tie when all other observance is gone. The importance of the four matriarchs would be a wonderful reason for the number four’s importance to Passover, but I don’t see a compelling connection.

By now the number four seems to be leading me in circles: there are four because four is important because there are four. What else are there four of that might lead to an answer? There are four seasons, and there are four directions. There are four ritual moments in life—birth, reaching the age of majority, marriage, and death. And there’s the Tetragrammaton—the four-letter name for God, yod hey vov hey, that cannot be pronounced.

### **More Thoughts About Four**

One and three are critical, mystical, almost magical numbers in several religions, including Judaism. As numbers, they’re unique, indivisible. Maybe four is used because it isn’t unique but is divisible; it has a balance to it that leads to a satisfying harmony, as when one ends music with a major chord. I haven’t found a definitive answer, and I suspect there isn’t one, but for me one of the purposes of the Seder has been fulfilled—asking questions about Passover. A happy and a kosher Passover.

## Acknowledgments

In alphabetical order, thanks to Benjamin Cooper for the title, to Rabbi Kalender for guided reading and suggestions general and specific as well as a conclusion, and to Lisa Friedman for discussions that led to some conclusions about the harmony of the number four.

## Index of Terms

**Gemara** (also called the Talmud): Several hundred years' worth of discussions and commentaries on the laws of the Mishnah, compiled in Palestine (*Talmud Yerushalmi*) around the year 400 CE and again in Babylon about 500 CE (*Talmud Bavli*). Being written later, the *Talmud Bavli* is more comprehensive.

**Mishnah**: The compilation of several hundred years' worth of discussion of the Torah that was the Oral Law, written down around 220 CE by Rabbi Judah HaNassi.

**Tetragrammaton**: The name of God that is not pronounced and which is written using the four consonants “yod hay vav hay.”

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**Ilka Shore-Cooper** and her family of Coopers have been OT members since 1988, with a five-year hiatus while living abroad. Other members of her family are higher profile, while Ilka is known for attending as many classes as possible and her possibly endless quest to be able to read, write and speak Hebrew some day.

# Love and Fear

By

Glenn Taubman

## Commanded To Love And To Fear

In various places in the Book of *Deuteronomy* we are *commanded* to love God and, alternatively, to fear Him. These two related concepts are also prominent throughout the Tanakh and the liturgy. Looking even casually at any Jewish text, you can't miss the two Hebrew words *ahav*, love and *yirah*, fear (sometimes also translated as “awe” or “reverence”). For example, Jews of every religious background and education know the *Sh'ma*, which is immediately followed by “And you shall *love* your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your resources” (*Deuteronomy* 6:5, emphasis mine).

But being commanded to “love” or “fear” God raises complex, age-old questions. Can someone be commanded to love or fear? Since love is usually thought of as an emotion—the kind that gets us giddy, raises our blood pressure, and excites us psychologically and physically—can it really be turned on and off like a light switch? Can fear? What does it really mean to “love” God? And precisely how are we supposed to do *ahavta*—to love God? Will a dozen red roses, a bottle of perfume and a box of candy suffice?

## The Sages Explore The Concept of Loving God

The Sages wrestled with the concept of loving God and found insights in the Torah. Maimonides says, with elegant simplicity, that one loves God by thinking about, studying and teaching Torah. He asserts that meditating on God's wonderful deeds and creations causes us to see in them His incomparable and infinite wisdom, and thereby come to love and praise Him, and be filled with a longing to know Him.

But even this beautiful statement raises red flags. No matter how much we love God, can we ever really “know” Him? After all, Moshe Rabbeinu asked several times to “know God's ways” and “know God in all of His glory” (*Exodus* 33: 13 & 18), but was told that “no man can see God [in all his glory] and live” (*Exodus* 33:20).

If no person can know God and live, what are we to do with all our love and desire?

Rashi adopts the approach that our actions show our love of God. He indicates that we must love God by performing all the mitzvot with care and dedication, even the seemingly minor and overlooked ones. He points to the Torah and says that if we observe *all* these commandments, God will fulfill his promise and return His love to us (Rashi on *Deuteronomy* 7:12). Indeed, the sacred texts make it clear that when we love God by observing all the commandments, we are on a two-way street, since God will reciprocate and return the love to us and all the Jewish people. Our liturgy is filled with verses such as this one from *Ashrei* (*Psalms* 145), “God protects all who love Him, but all the wicked He will destroy.”

When we love God by performing the mitzvot He has taught us, we are also emulating “His ways” as best we can, and thus our deeds ripple out far beyond us, in ways we never know, like a stone that lands in a pond. As God clothed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (*Genesis* 3:7 & 21), we are taught to clothe a needy person—who may then survive a cold winter and later become a firefighter who saves others’ lives. As God visited Abraham after his circumcision (*Genesis* 18:1), we are taught to visit a sick person—who may then get stronger and rejoin his or her family as a breadwinner and loving caregiver. As God provided manna in the desert (*Exodus* 16:4), we are taught to donate time and funds to soup kitchens that feed hungry children—so that one of them may grow to become a heart surgeon, in turn saving countless lives. The unknown and unknowable ripples of our mitzvot enable us to know and show our love to God.

### **We Must Fear Him, Too**

But the Torah says we must do more than just love God. In *Parashat Eikev*, we are asked, “And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you?” And we are told, “Only to *fear* the Lord your God, to walk in His paths, to love Him, and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and soul” (*Deuteronomy* 10:12, emphasis mine). Similarly, the end of the Book of *Ecclesiastes* states: “The final word, when all has been considered: fear God and keep His

commandments, for that is man's whole duty" (*Ecclesiastes* 12:14). Thus we can identify an explicit requirement to fear God, too. The questions immediately arise again! "What is the fear of God?" "How do we show our fear of God?"

In the Psalms we sing on Rosh Chodesh and the major holidays as part of Hallel, we beautifully chant the verse *y'varech yiray Adonai*, God will bless those who fear him. How do we achieve *yirah*, the fear of God? The Sages teach that there are various levels of such fear, and various ways to demonstrate it.

### **Levels of Fear**

On the highest level, the way to fear God is always to view Him and all His creations with a sense of awe and reverence. Rashi and other sources teach:

Everything is within the power of God, with the exception of whether a person will have the fear of God. Only people can develop this spiritual quality themselves, and God cannot mandate it.

Rashi on *Deuteronomy* 10:12, *Bereshit* 33b

Because we are given the free will to control our own thoughts and actions, the highest spiritual level of fear requires us to train our minds always to approach God with awe and reverence. But reaching such a lofty level of spirituality seems difficult, if not impossible, for a normal person functioning in the day-to-day world. How can we deal with stress, traffic jams, illnesses and disappointments and still approach God with awe and reverence every moment of our lives?

The Sages and the Torah do provide a more concrete way to conceptualize the fear of God. In this view, the fear of God is more like the carrot-and-stick: one should fear God because he or she will be punished, in this life or the world to come, for transgressing the law. Such motivation, however compelling, is viewed as less worthy than the "higher" spiritual level of fear.

This "lower" type of fear is explained by the story of Rabbi Yohanan Ben Zakkai. When he fell ill, his disciples came to visit and, fearing that he was about to die, asked for a blessing. The Rabbi replied, "May it be God's will that your fear of Heaven be as great as your fear of your fellow man." The disciples looked puzzled

and said, “What kind of blessing is that?” The Rabbi continued, “When you are about to commit some kind of crime or transgression, you first look all around you and say ‘I hope there is no other person around to see me commit this crime.’ If only you had that same apprehension about God, and lived every moment of your life in fear that He was right there beside you, looking right over your shoulder and watching your every move. That is true fear of God, and I hope you attain it.” (Adapted from *Sefer Ha-Aggadah, The Book of Legends*, ed. Bialik & Ravnitzky, Schocken Books 1992, p. 212-13.)

### **Holy Fear, Or Awe**

Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, Dean of the University of Judaism’s Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, also separates the higher-level “holy” fear from the lower level “crime-and-punishment” form of fear. He cites the Zohar:

What the Zohar calls ‘holy fear’ is not the fear of retribution for having committed bad acts. It is the awe that emerges from the contemplation of God’s incomparability, greatness, and magnificence. *Yirah* is marvel, wonder and awe—the awe of greatness—as opposed to a mere fear of punishment. Such awe is different than our common fears.

Internet drash, February 2004

The Hasidic commentary *Mei ha-Shiloach* notes that when one fears a person, one cannot remain calm, because fear is the opposite of being calm. However, awe of heaven brings calm to the soul. The prime example is the midwives Shifrah and Puah (*Exodus* 1:17), who refused Pharaoh’s commands to kill Hebrew babies. We are taught that the midwives were calm because their awe of heaven removed from them any fear of a human such as Pharaoh. As the medieval compendium *Obrot Tzaddikim* reports, this higher-level “spiritual” fear of God is really the love of God. In this view, the love and the fear of God come full circle, and merge into one.

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin brings a modern view to the “fear of God.” He explains that the Torah requires us to fear God as a means of protecting society’s weakest members and promoting compassion towards them. He demonstrates this with two verses from the Torah.

First, he too cites the story of Shifrah and Puah, who risked their lives and disobeyed Pharaoh's royal decree. The Torah says "The midwives, *fearing* God, did not do as Pharaoh told them, and did not kill the babies" (*Exodus* 1:17, italics mine). Their fear of God led them to protect the weakest among us.

Second, in *Parashat Kedoshim*, the Torah says, "You shall not curse the deaf, or place a stumbling block in front of the blind, but you shall *fear* your God" (*Leviticus* 19:14, italics mine). Of course, if we cursed a deaf person, he would never know it. And if we placed a boulder in front of a blind man, he would never be able to identify us as the perpetrator of that cowardly act. So what is there to stop us from harming the weakest among us—like babies and the disabled—except for the fear of God?

Rabbi Telushkin also points out that one of the greatest 20th-century lessons is that we should *most* fear those people who do *not* fear God. He notes that Hitler, Stalin, and many of history's most bloodthirsty leaders shared a contempt for the notion that there exists a God of fear, a God who punishes evil. This is not only a modern phenomenon, since the Torah records that Amalek "did not fear God" when he struck those at the back of the line, the weakest and weariest (*Deuteronomy* 25:18). In this light, there is something ironic and paradoxical that our Jewish faith revolves around a "God of fear," whose primary demand is *love*: that we should "love our neighbors as ourselves" ("*ve'avanta l'reyacha kamocho*"—*Leviticus* 19:18), and that we should likewise love our God with all our resources (*Deuteronomy* 6:5).

### **If At Some Point Fear Merges With Love, Are Love And Fear Equal Concepts?**

Some final thoughts emerge about the love and fear of God. As we strive to fulfill the mitzvot, are love and fear equal concepts? In other words, do we earn more "brownie points" if we perform a mitzvah because we love God, or because we fear God and are afraid of the consequences? Do the concepts merge, so that one cannot love God without having a healthy dose of fear and awe, and vice versa? Is there a spectrum of love and fear of God?

In general, the Sages say that love is a better motivator than fear. According to Rashi:

One who is motivated by fear will soon go his own way when the tasks become too difficult, whereas one who serves God out of love is ready to make sacrifices for the object of his affection.

Rashi on *Deuteronomy* 6:5

Rashi finds it more honorable to serve God out of love than out of fear. A similar refrain comes from Sifrei: “One who serves a master out of fear will always seek ways of escaping his obligations. But for one who serves out of love, obedience is a source of joy.” Apparently these great rabbis believed in the axiom, “love conquers all.”

In sum, the Tanakh and the liturgy compel us all to wrestle with what it means to love and fear our God. Do our actions show our love or our fear? Do we allow our love and fear to merge into one all-encompassing force that propels us on our path to God?

Perhaps the love and fear of God resemble the way in which a younger child views his or her parents. They are the benevolent providers of all our physical and emotional needs, so we love, honor and respect them. We also recognize, however, that they are all-powerful and controlling, and we fear their wrath when we err. Our love and fear of parents come full circle. Could our approaches to God be similar?

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**Glenn Taubman** has been a contented member of Congregation Olam Tikvah since 1985, and a proud member of B'nai Yisrael since 1956.

# ***Talmud Torah: Creating Vision***

By

Rebecca Wand Ben-Gideon

Today, theoretically, we should be full of hope. It's Shabbat, and more than that, it's Shabbat Shirah, when we reenact the *Song of the Sea*, the song the Israelites sang when they realized they were still alive and free. Today is also Tu B'Shevat, the fifteenth of the month of Shevat. Traditionally on Tu B'Shevat, we look at the sludge on the street and try to imagine that it is gone. We imagine spring is on the way, and that instead of looking cold and gray, the world will soon be green and blooming.

Actually, we're not just supposed to feel hopeful today. Judaism is hopeful in general: three times a day we pray, expressing our faith that things can and will be better.

Yet despite all this hopeful energy, I often feel overwhelmed by any number of realities that threaten to crush all the hope out of me. A couple of weeks ago, for example, the *New York Times Magazine* ran an article about the enslavement of children and young women, who are held captive as prostitutes—not only abroad, but right here in New York. I found myself skimming the article: I couldn't take it all in. I felt not only outraged and disgusted but also, more disturbingly, hopeless and powerless as well.

## **Looking For People With Vision**

In an election year like this one, we look for leaders who we hope *can* do something about these big problems—leaders with vision, who are able to transcend hopelessness and imagine solutions. Vision, however, is an elusive quality. Miriam and Devorah had it, in the form of prophecy, but prophesy is not a common gift.

**Rebecca Wand Ben-Gideon** has graciously allowed *Olam Tikvateinu* to publish the text of her Senior Sermon at the Jewish Theological Seminary, delivered on Saturday, February 7, 2004, on which we celebrated Tu B'Shevat and Shabbat Shirah and read Parashat Beshalach.

More commonly, vision is a characteristic, an ability one can cultivate.

In our parashah, Paro (Pharaoh) is the archetypal foolish leader who can't seem to get it right. The parashah begins with Paro's decision to finally let the people go, *vayehi b'shallah paro et ha'am* (*Exodus* 13:17). He has had enough of the plagues and at long last decides to send the people away. But then he changes his mind and sends the army after the Israelites, with disastrous consequences. Why can't Paro make up his mind, we wonder? How might it have been different for him? How can it be different for us?

### **Torah Study Develops Vision**

In *Pirkei Avot*, R. Meir teaches: *Kol haosek b'torah l'ishma zocheb l'davarim barbeh*. Whoever engages in Torah study for its own sake will merit many things. He enumerates what some of these benefits might be: for example, Torah learning makes a person a joy to God and to humanity. Overall, he believes that a major benefit of Torah study is that it builds character. It instills in its practitioners certain characteristics—sharp judgment, patience, and modesty. People benefit from a scholar's counsel and skill, understanding and strength—all good leadership qualities. I would add an item to R. Meir's list of benefits, or extrapolate from it: Talmud Torah (Torah study) helps create people with vision, people who are able to see the world as a redeemable place (*Pirkei Avot* 6:1).

### **The Process of Talmud Torah**

It's important to note that by Torah study, I mean the study of not only the five books of Moses, but also the rest of the Bible, Mishnah, Gemara, Midrash—Torah in the broader sense. Talmud Torah cultivates vision not only through the content of what a person studies, but also through the unique nature of our texts themselves. When Jews study, we do more than take in information about a particular topic. Our minds are shaped by the form of our texts, by their refusal to paint the world only in black and white, to present a static picture of things.

Our texts are put together in a unique way: they are built around multiple opinions on any given issue. The Talmud takes the form of a dialogue or debate that crosses generations. Volumes are filled with

contradictory interpretations of a single story, with disagreements about how we should live. By studying these materials and learning to think rabbinically, our minds are trained to see not just one side of a question—and often, not just two sides of a question—but many perspectives. We are trained to see possibility, to imagine the counterargument, to construct alternative universes.

How does this process work? We can see an example by looking more closely at Paro's change of heart. *Vayehafech levav paro v'avadav el ha'am va'yomru ma zot asinu ki shilachnu et yisrael me'avdenu?* We read, Pharaoh and his servants had a change of heart towards the people and said, 'What have we done, releasing Israel from our service?' (*Exodus* 14:5) What happened? Why does Paro change his mind?

### **Why Paro Changes His Mind**

The easy answer is that God changed it for him. God tells Moshe, *v'chizakti et lev Paro*—I will harden Paro's heart. But while the Biblical text seems pretty clear, the Midrash isn't satisfied with this answer. It provides a second, perhaps conflicting interpretation. The Midrash explains that Paro's regret is, in fact, a result of his lack of vision, his inability to see possibility.

The Midrash suggests that we can better understand Paro by thinking about the owner of a field full of stones. The owner can't do anything with it, so he sells it. The new owner surveys the field, decides to remove the stones and discovers water, *mayim chayyim*. He turns the field into an agricultural paradise—he plants spices and pomegranates. It's beautiful. He has to hire a security guard, because everyone who passes by stops to look. One day, the original owner walks by, and he can't believe it! 'Oy! How could I have sold this field?' he exclaims. Similarly, R. Levi teaches us, the people of Israel were changed after they crossed the sea and became as beautiful as an orchard of pomegranates. When Paro saw the people so transformed, he said to himself, 'What have I done?' (*Exodus Rabbah* 20)

R. Levi portrays Paro as unable to see possibilities. He is unable to imagine the field cleared of rocks, or the Israelites' potential to bloom in freedom. The result of his lack of vision is regret. Even with all his power, Paro is trapped in a world he is unable to change.

With this story in mind, I can think about Paro's regret in a new way. While I appreciate the explanation found in the Biblical text,

that God changed Paro's mind, I also begin to wonder: could there be another way to understand Paro's actions? The Midrash turns what seems to be a clear Biblical text into something messier; it turns the story upside down and enables us to mine its riches by looking at the world through a different lens.

### **Imagination and Rigor**

The rabbis weren't afraid to get creative, to envision things that, to put it mildly, seem fantastic. In the Talmud, R. Yosi HaGlili explains that when the Jews emerged from the sea, *everyone* participated in the song—children on their mothers' laps, babies nursing at the breast. When they saw God's presence, the *Shechinah*, they looked up and sang, *Zeh eli v'anvehu*, 'this is my God and I will praise Him!' As if this weren't enough, R. Meir goes a step further and insists that even fetuses in the womb sang the *Song at the Sea*.

Now you might think, this is very nice, very imaginative. We, too, can learn to be imaginative in our thinking from reading such teachings. That's true, but if we reduced the value of studying these stories to only being imaginative, we would miss a major feature of Talmud Torah, that is key in developing vision—rigor. The Gemara follows up on R. Meir's statement and requests specifics. Tell me, the Gemara demands, why would the fetuses sing? They can't see God's presence or the miracles going on around them. R. Tanhum takes this question seriously and answers: women's wombs became like glass, enabling unborn fetuses to witness the miracles of the sea and prompting them to praise God, *Zeh eli v'anveyhu*.

This combination of fearless imagination and rigor is also found in our legal texts. The Talmud is exacting about practical issues, such as the laws of prayer. But it is just as rigorous about areas of law that were impractical, even in Talmudic times, such as the laws of Temple ritual. It might seem odd to expend energy studying rituals no one performs. But a major goal of the rabbis is to train students to be rigorous, whatever the topic. This point goes beyond the content and produces students who can explain multiple opinions on a single question. Even as they assert the correctness of only one side, they can argue the other. It's a little like a math teacher who insists that students show all the steps they took to get

their answer—the process and method are as important to the teacher as the end product.

In any given discussion, the Talmud sometimes does and sometimes doesn't come to a conclusion about who is right. But it always constructs for us a debate and dialogue that lays out all opinions, even those that are rejected. This methodology can be confusing for students: one can be so convinced that Shmuel is right that it is hard to understand Rav's perspective. But that is exactly what we are asked to do—turn the world upside down and look at things another way.

This training has been invaluable to me, even as I struggle sometimes with the texts themselves. As I try to understand a section of Tanakh or Talmud that deals with women's bodies in a way I find troubling...As I try to find a way to reconcile my commitment to halachah with legal structures, such as marriage law, that foster inequality for women...As I wonder, should I wear a kippah...These questions are not separate from my study of Torah, but a part of it. My struggles arise from Talmud Torah, from my training as a crazy-question asker. This same process of Talmud Torah also gives me faith that we might envision together a multitude of possible answers.

### **Imagining Our Future and Building It Together**

I don't need to go as far as the Talmud or Midrash to reap the vision-cultivating effects of Torah study. A look at the text of our parashah also suggests that we should be community of people who can imagine a different future and build it together. The Israelites are initially unable to even *imagine* going free. They suffer from *kotzer-ruach*, a shortness of spirit, because of their enslavement. They need a dramatic demonstration that things can be different. So God takes them out of slavery via an alternative path, through the sea—the wet becomes dry, the waters are walls of glass, the seemingly impossible has become possible.

Today, on Tu B'Shevat, we celebrate our people's ability to transform desert into a fertile land. The chalutzim worked the land to make way for their utopian visions for the future. Unlike Pharaoh, they were able to see a field of stones and imagine *mayim chayyim* beneath.

So, too, may we be inspired by their example and cultivate our own sense of vision through Talmud Torah. We are obligated to ask questions and suggest things that may seem crazy. It may turn out that our ideas are implausible, but on the other hand, who knows?

Talmud Torah helps us build our vision, our ability to see the world as redeemable. The rabbis took the Biblical story of *Yetziat Mitzrayim*, a story that by itself is as fantastic and full of meaning as exists, and they built upon it layer after layer of question, answer, imagination—wombs of glass, singing infants. The Israelites were taken out of Egypt to receive Torah—and this story, which we tell year after year and which the rabbis embellished so lavishly, encourages us, when *we* read biblically, to see a people redeemed. When we read the parashah rabbinically, we may come to see the whole world as redeemable. Our challenge and privilege is to engage in Torah study and be transformed by it, so each of us may be able to look at a field of stones and imagine what can be.

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**Rebecca Wand Ben-Gideon** is a fifth-year rabbinical student at the Jewish Theological Seminary. She is also pursuing a Master's degree in Talmud and Rabbinics.

# ***Kol Yisrael Arevim Zeh Bazeh: We Are All Responsible For One Another***

By  
Sarah Schultz

Who is wise? One who learns from every person...

Who is wealthy? One who is happy with one's lot...

Who is honored? One who honors others.

*Pirkei Avot 4:1*—Ben Zoma, (90-130 C.E.)

## **A Quote That Defines Judaism**

I have placed the above quote on my e-mail signature line, so that every time I send an e-mail, the quote shows up on the screen below my message. I am not exactly sure when I first saw the quote in *Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers)* but it has spoken to me for a long time.

I have never fully understood Ben Zoma. A wise man, he could have been a respected Rabbi: he had all the schooling to be ordained, yet he never received ordination. A rabbi once told me that one who sees Ben Zoma in a dream is seeing wisdom. As a great sage, Ben Zoma challenges us as Jews to “do the right thing” in a world that does not always reward us for doing so. He calls upon us to be good Jews and act according to Jewish law, and he suggests that our deeds will not be in vain, but will bring an unparalleled, internal reward. At the end of the day, as Jews, our behavior is all we have: there's no heaven or hell in our afterlife, only what we create for ourselves here on earth.

In Ben Zoma's quote I find “reciprocity,” defined as a relation of mutual action or influence. I like the way Ben Zoma defines the words “wise,” “wealthy” and “honored” and the way they are all dependent upon our own actions. In Judaism, faith alone is not enough: you also must act appropriately. In a nutshell, this quote defines Judaism for me. During these times of division within the Jewish community on the subjects of conversion, i.e., who is “Jewish enough,” both by birth and observance level, the “fence” in Israel and the status of the Palestinians, we need to keep in mind more than ever that despite our differences, we are here to learn from and to “honor” each other.

## **A First Trip to Israel**

Recently while in Israel, I had the chance to experience Ben Zoma's quote "in action." I learned from an unexpected source the importance of Jewish unity, and that we really are all responsible for one another. Someone whom I could have easily viewed as "other" rather than as a Jew, like me—linked by the three tenets of Judaism, Torah, Avodah (work) and Chesed (acts of kindness)—taught me the importance of looking past the labels we all too often give each other. I hope I have become wiser for the experience. Here is my story.

I traveled to Israel for the first time with the Florence Melton Adult Mini School MORASHA (teachers') program, in the summer of 2003. The minute I saw Eretz Yisrael from the airplane window, I felt bonded with the land and thought of the generations of Jews who had yearned for our true homeland and yet been unable to travel there. I felt so blessed that tears rolled easily down my face.

Going to Israel had not been an easy decision, however: while my spirit yearned to be there, I had concerns. The week before I left, many innocent people died in a major bombing on Ben Yehuda Street. While I knew I would not be taking a bus, I was still fearful.

My husband and I had decided that due to the random nature of the violence coming out of the intifada, I would carry a cell phone with me while in Israel. It made us feel comfortable knowing that we could instantly be in touch with each other. My second day in Israel, I was waiting for his call while the rest of the group toured the tunnels leading under the Western Wall Kotel precinct. Due to the eight-hour time difference, we sometimes missed each other's calls, and it was difficult for us to catch up again that day.

## **Meeting an Israeli Mother**

I was speaking with our tour educator regarding my phone dilemma when a Haredi (fundamentalist-Orthodox) woman approached me with an infant in her arms. She looked exhausted. She asked me to watch her daughter while she went to the bathroom. So far on this trip, I had not had much opportunity to talk with Israelis. Outside of my tour educator, the Haredi woman was the first Israeli I had the chance to speak with in depth. I had been told that there were big differences between our two cultures, that I might be

surprised by Israelis' brusque natures. You can imagine my surprise when she asked me, a complete stranger, to watch her most prized "possession," her daughter. I honestly would have been less surprised had a local diamond merchant asked me to hold a bag of gems for him while he used the facilities!

I said yes, thinking to myself that this could only happen in Israel, where despite years of violence in the streets and feeling under siege, people still trust each other enough to leave their doors unlocked and ask another Jew to watch their child. It was a testament to the indomitable nature of the Israeli people. The woman got me a chair, and there baby Sarah and I sat. Sarah slept, while I cried with joy over having such a beautiful baby in my arms. I could not help but think of my beautiful daughter waiting for me back home.

When she got back, the mother said she had just returned from the emergency room, where her infant had been treated for burns from a hot stove. She said she felt like a terrible mother for having "allowed" this to happen to her daughter. Trying to comfort her, I said that sometimes accidents happen and we do not know why.

I thanked her for allowing me to do the mitzvah of ahavat Yisrael (love of the Jewish people) or kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh, all Jews are responsible for one another, through taking care of her daughter. I had learned of the mitzvah previously, but I had never had the opportunity to perform it until that day. I also told her how different things are where I live in the U.S., where we don't trust strangers enough to leave our children with them, even for a moment. She said she understood and had heard about life in the States.

### **Jews Look Out For Each Other**

Then she said something so beautiful I will carry it with me the rest of my life. She said: "But you are a Jew and I am a Jew and we look out for each other." The fact that she, a Haredi Jew, could say that to me, a Liberal Jew, gives me some hope that the rifts in Judaism may be healed someday,

While I remained in Israel for another ten days and had many emotionally charged experiences, none rivaled my meeting with the woman at the wall, and I don't think anything ever will.

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**Sarah Schultz**, a new OT member, is very involved in the Northern Virginia Jewish community. She hopes to make aliyah to Israel someday.

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

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