

# A Little Text Study for Board Meetings

Vol. 4 – 2021 / 5781-82

Monthly, single-page Jewish text handouts intended for short,  
10-minute Reconstructionist Torah study at the beginning of board meetings.

Curated by the Department for Thriving Communities

Reconstructing Judaism



**RECONSTRUCTING  
JUDAISM**

Deeply rooted. Boldly relevant.

## Introduction

We're pleased to share the 4th annual edition of this resource with you. Here are 12 different Jewish texts, one for each month of the year. Previously we sent this resource out in August, before the start of a new Jewish year. COVID-19 caused us to modify our usual planning processes this summer, so this year's edition will begin with the start of the secular new year in January 2021. These texts are Torah study opportunities for the beginning of meetings. For Reconstructionists, "Torah study" includes traditional texts and contemporary Jewish writings. Feel free to mix and match specific texts to specific months – this resource is for you to use as you like.

### Suggested use:

1. Print or email copies of the text of the month and set aside 10 minutes at the beginning of each board meeting for this purpose.
2. Have someone read the English language version of the text out loud.
3. Use a timer and stick to the allotted time.
4. Consider using discussion questions. Here are three possible ones:
  - a. How does this text speak to you personally?
  - b. How does this text speak to our community?
  - c. How does this text speak to our work and sacred purpose as a Board / Committee?

Some communities like to say the blessing for Torah study just before starting to read and discuss the text. The traditional version of that blessing appears below. Below that blessing is another one, developed by Rabbi Jeremy Schwartz, which many Reconstructionist congregations recite together at the beginning of board and committee meetings.

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <p><i>Barukh atah Adonai Eloheinu melekh ha'olam asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu la'asok b'divrei torah.</i></p> <p>How full of blessing you are, Eternal One, our God, majesty of the Universe, who has consecrated us with Your commands, and commanded us to occupy ourselves with words of Torah.</p>                | <p>בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ<br/>הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ<br/>בְּמִצְוֹתַיִךְ, וְצִוֵּנוּ לְעִסּוֹק<br/>בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה.</p> |
| <p><i>Barukh atah Adonai Eloheinu melekh ha'olam asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu la'asok betzorkhei tzibur.</i></p> <p>How full of blessing you are, Eternal One, our God, majesty of the Universe, who has consecrated us with Your commands, and commanded us to occupy ourselves with the needs of the community.</p> | <p>בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ<br/>הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ<br/>בְּמִצְוֹתַיִךְ, וְצִוֵּנוּ לְעִסּוֹק<br/>בְּצָרְכֵי צְבוּר.</p> |

We welcome your feedback or suggestions. Please contact Rabbi Maurice Harris, Associate Director for Thriving Communities at Reconstructing Judaism at [mharris@reconstructingjudaism.org](mailto:mharris@reconstructingjudaism.org).

January 2021



This month's study text comes from:

**Rabbi Joshua Lesser** of **Congregation Bet Haverim** in Atlanta, Georgia, USA. He is the co-editor of [Torah Querries: Weekly Commentaries on the Hebrew Bible](#) (2012 NYU Press).

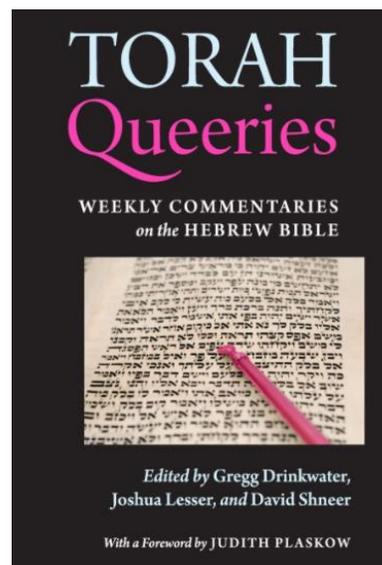
Mourn all the losses, little and big. It is how we are able to let go so that we may respond to the “now” of this pandemic. ... It doesn't quite feel right to look back yet at the lessons learned from this pandemic; we are not on solid ground. Instead, this moment calls us to be open to the flowing dissembling that is happening right now.

Even more seductive is looking ahead, predicting what the future of Judaism ... will look like. By the time I finished this piece, the landscape had already changed and by the time you read this, it will have changed again. I fight being in the unfolding moment because I hunger for resolution, for outcomes. ... Except, how much do we have to deny or hide from view to make the narrative work? From a spiritual perspective, our ability to be in the now is essential even when it is difficult...

I look towards the rabbis who survived Jerusalem's siege and ultimate destruction. Were they planful in their outcomes; did they know they would be inventing an entirely new Judaism? Or, were they doing their best to respond to the need at the moment by surrendering to their reality moving forward with their values?

My spiritual journey has taught me that resolution, along with traditional notions of success, is often illusory. Tibetan Buddhist Nun Pema Chodron writes, “As human beings, not only do we seek resolution, but we also feel that we deserve resolution. However... we suffer from resolution. We don't deserve resolution; we deserve something better... We deserve our birthright, which is the middle way, an open state of mind that can relax with paradox and ambiguity.”

Can we lead from this “middle way”? As the pandemic [began] unfolding [in spring 2020], we were reading about the Israelites' liberation from *Mitzrayim*, their future unknown. And while there was an irony in a time of our constraint to be reading about freedom, this idea of our birthright being an embracing of not knowing felt exactly right. Their fragility and imperfect strivings crossed with the possibilities of freedom encapsulated the same sense of tragic optimism of Chodron's paradox. Viktor Frankel expressed his ability to survive some of life's greatest trials by his ability to hold two opposing truths: life is inescapably bound up with pain and loss, and one can persevere with joy despite the severity of one's challenges. This is the middle way of our “now”.



February 2021

This month's study text comes from:

**Adva Chatter, Cyd Weissman & Hila Ratzabi** who work for Reconstructing Judaism and its award-winning online resource, [Ritualwell.org](https://www.ritualwell.org).

## Blessing for a Home Learning Space / ברכה למקום למידה ביתי

Let this space be filled with  
learning

Let imagination flow through these portals  
Let new ideas and possibilities emerge

Let this chair comfort you on your learning  
journey

Let this table steady and support you  
Let this lamp light your way to solving  
problems

Let this pen and paper reveal your insights  
Let this computer be the bridge to your friends,  
teachers and class

When learning is challenging—and it will be  
Let us be kind and compassionate  
Let us be patient and curious

When learning is engaging—and it will be  
Let us share and expand what we know  
Let us be satisfied and celebrate

Bless our home and bless this learning space

מי ייתן ומקום זה יהייה מלא בלמידה  
הדמיון והיצירה יעברו בו בשמחה  
בכל יום יהיו בו רעיונות ואפשרויות חדשות לחקירה

מי ייתן והכיסא הזה יספק משענת נוחה למסע  
השולחן ייתן מלוא יציבות ותמיכה  
זו המנורה תאיר את הדרך הנכונה  
אלו העטים והדפים יגלו עולם ומלואו  
וזו המחשב יהייה הגשר אל החברים, המורים והכיתה

כאשר הלמידה תהייה מאתגרת – והיא תהייה  
מי ייתן ונהייה אדיבים ונעימים  
מי ייתן ונהייה סבלניים וסקרנים

כאשר הלמידה תהייה מעניינת – והיא תהייה  
מי ייתן ונדע לשתף ולהרחיב את מה שאנו יודעים  
מיי ייתן ונדע לחגוג את הגילויים החדשים

ברך את ביתנו ומקום לימודינו להצלחה

For the original content, visit <https://www.ritualwell.org/ritual/blessing-home-learning-space>.

March 2021



This month's study text comes from:

**Carmen Amalia Corrales** of **Congregation Bnai Keshet** in Montclair, NJ, USA. She chairs Reconstructing Judaism's Jews of Color and Allies Advisory Board. The text here is excerpted and slightly adapted from a longer essay which can be found at <http://evolve.reconstructingjudaism.org/noticingjewsofcolor>.

Most Jews of Color will arrive at synagogue after a different trajectory from that of other American Jews. Some Jews of Color come by choice, others form part of a Jewish diaspora that extends throughout the world, some have married a Jew or were adopted, and still others have one Jewish parent. Like all other Jews, Jews of Color want to participate in ceremonies that connect us to Jews over thousands of years, and to seek the comfort and companionship of community.

There is no single, essential Jewish experience, but Reconstructionists, as well as other Jews, coalesce through ritual around collective memories of our origins. With time, that collective memory may include the origins and history of Jews of Color. ... As we recognize the heterogeneity of Jewish experience and endurance, we can begin to imagine new philosophical approaches and *tikkun olam* imperatives.



The Jew of Color who arrives heartbroken and angry because of racial injustice, who weeps because members of her family have fallen sick during the pandemic, who fears being deported or who even lacks Internet access to connect to services has needs and memories that may be unlike those of most members of the community. Those memories may reflect the racial injustice and economic disparities that have afflicted the U.S. and belied its egalitarian tradition. To meet one another face-to-face is to experience the possibility of becoming identified with, and responsible for, one another. "All Jews are interconnected and responsible for one another," the Talmud teaches (BT Shevuot 39b). As we ethically assume each other's struggles as just, there is goodness and the potential for justice. ...

We are in the midst of the largest civil rights movement in American history. People of good will and of all backgrounds are working to effect positive change. In the peaceful protests, we see the presence of white allies, including many Jews. Even in Crown Heights, N.Y., where there have been historical tensions between Black communities and Jews, there have been ultra-Orthodox Jews marching in support of Black civil rights. Likewise, protests against the demonization of immigrants and the inhumane conditions under which many are being held have included the active participation of Jewish communities.

Among the false binaries that many people hold about Judaism is the idea that all Jews are white, and that only white Jews have experienced antisemitism or a history of persecution. In fact, Jews have

lived in places like the Caribbean, Latin America and Africa for hundreds of years, in many cases longer than they have been established in the United States. While some may assume that Jews have maintained a matrilineal line of descent throughout time, many Jews of Color grew up abroad in places where their access to synagogues or Jewish communities was curtailed; they may be children of mixed marriages or a racially mixed history. In Cuba, where I am from, most Jews are children of Jewish fathers, not mothers, because Jewish migration before World War II was predominantly male. Sephardic Jews have a history of forced conversion and of practicing Judaism in secret at home (a practice observed since the Spanish Inquisition). Many became estranged from the meaning of rituals their families kept observing and yet want to return to being Jews. An Ethiopian Jew, an Argentine secular Jew, a Black American Jew who finds great comfort in the Old Testament, and the Conversos: All of these people should be welcomed in our synagogues so that they can explore and fulfill their faith and wish for community.

April 2021



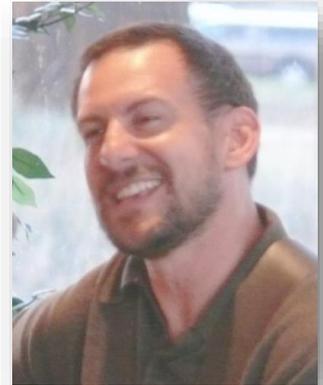
This month's study text comes from:

**Rabbi Jamie Arnold** of **Congregation Beth Evergreen** in Evergreen, CO, USA.

### **Four Children? Which One Am I?**

When my expectations rest as dove on olive branch or raven  
hovering on thermal winds, wonder swells from the deep breaking  
on the shores of my lips into syllables of wonder,  
What? How? Wow!

I am, a child of simplicity, being human, *ben Noach*,  
wholeheartedly **tam**, the simple one.



Then longing arises with 1000 questions, and I try to remember  
that while knowledge has answers, wisdom discerns which question to ask.  
Through disciplined attention to detail arises the power  
to harness the passion to know and be known into the service of a *tam*  
and I become a *ben Avraham*, **chacham**, the wise one.

Mostly though, I am afraid – of loss, rejection, dependence.  
It's safer to love from a distance, see self as the source (not a steward)  
of blessing and curse, playing judge, prophet saddled to an ass, *ben Bilaam*  
so quick to blame and beat one of his own, I slip into  
the wicked skin of **rasha'**, concealing collective divinity with toxic shame.

Then again, I know nothing. I truly don't know what, who, how or why to ask.

***Aini yodea' lish'ol.***

As *tam*, am I silenced by Mystery?

As *chacham*, have I lost sight of the question, so focused on answers.

Or perhaps I am silenced by grief, afraid to ask for help, companionship, love.

Here, waiting for you to sit beside me and say, "Here I am, my son, daughter, child. I don't know either."

May 2021



This month's study text comes from:

**Rabbi Jane Berman**, social worker, Board Certified Chaplain, and Pastoral Associate at **Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation** in Bethesda, MD, USA. The piece below first appeared in *RRA Connections*, the newsletter of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association, in February 2012.

Miracles: the whole concept makes me feel uncomfortable. I feel like I am not a true spiritual leader if I don't believe in them, but perhaps I have locked myself into an overly restrictive understanding of miracles. The idea that God is the instigator of miracles, and we Jews have to do our part, sounds beautiful, but the messiness of life creates too many theological problems for me. It brings me right back to that little girl who screamed — where were those miracles when my parents were ill? I return to the magical thinking of my seven-year-old self who believed that if only I had been a good girl my parents wouldn't have gotten sick. In a tantrum, I scream, "God, I did my part, where were you?"



In my work as a hospital chaplain, I am constantly asking Jewish patients if I can pray for them. I spend most of my time at the National Institutes of Health, where patients with difficult-to-treat illnesses and their families seek miracles. Even though I am skeptical that miracles really can happen, when I plead to God to help them I feel centered. When I ask patients and families what they would pray for, and express their hopes in my prayer asking God to heal them, even the atheists are touched. Tears flow and the prayer is no longer about the cure, but about their fears, and the tenderness of being deeply heard.

The prayer feels magical to me. As I close my eyes to begin the prayer, I often see a light surrounding the patient's head. Who knows what it is, but it provides me with a sense of mystery. When I recite, "May the God who healed Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah heal . . .," I feel touched by the struggles of our ancestors and I gain faith that this individual will somehow find a sense of peace. By putting the hopes of patients and their families into a prayer, I change something. Their worries come to transcend their specific time and space, which creates openings for new understandings of healing.

My colleague explains that prayer causes a shift in energy. When she said that we can't control where its positive affect will be directed, I felt a sense of relief. I felt like I could be the believer I so desperately wanted to be. The concept of miracles is too complicated for me. However, the idea that individuals can create positive, unexpected change through intentional thoughts and actions is real to me.

June 2021



This month's study text comes from:

**Dr. Koach Baruch Frazier**, a rabbinical student at the **Reconstructionist Rabbinical College**. It is a partial transcript of his talk, "Resilience through the Practice of Lament," online at <https://bit.ly/3hV8dl9>.

...so, back in June of 2016 right after the massacre at the Pulse nightclub, my friends and I – we were at that moment where we knew it was time to grieve 49 of our trans and queer siblings of color who were murdered simply for existing. And we were in mourning, so this group of friends called “Justice Beats,” a ragtag group of queer and trans people of color in St. Louis, decided to pick a public space on the queer side of town, and we would for 49 days drum, say their names, and we would mourn. Sometimes three or four people joined us and sometimes 20 joined us. ...but no matter how many people came, overwhelmingly people said: “I am grateful to have a space where I can show up authentically without having to hide my sorrow.”

They realized that their grief was welcome there, just like it is in the Hebrew Bible. Lament is found throughout the entire book, most famously in *Eicha*, in the Book of Lamentations, where the first line says: *How?! How is it that this lonely City sits here when it used to be filled with so many people?* Talking about the destruction of Jerusalem.



And then in the Psalms, from Psalm 130 it says: *Out of the depths I cry to you, O God. Hear my cry, attend your ears to my pleas for mercy!*

These verses sounded just like the people that I was marching on the streets with, but after you have experienced tragedy after tragedy after tragedy, it becomes difficult to stop and mourn. But you see, lament – it has a formula as I've learned it. And formulas can be useful in times of crisis and uncertainty. This is the gift of our ancestors giving us the spiritual technology to help us stay on this road of resilience and healing. And so, I'd love to share this formula with you tonight.

The first element of this formula of lament is **address**. *Dear universe, the Source of all Life, Whoever is out there – Whatever is out there!* The second is **expressing your distress**. *Why in the world are my siblings, my trans women of color, continuing to be killed? Why?* The third: this is where you stop and you remember that there was a point in time before now, [before this] destruction or death or [tragedy] – and it was in front of you, and **somehow, someway you made it through**. And now it's behind you, and you're still here. Part of lament is remembering: you're still here, that you can make it through. The fourth element is the **plea**. *This is what's going to make it so I can start healing! This is what I need to repair the harm that was done to me! This is what I need!* The fifth element is **gratitude**. Maybe it's gratitude knowing that one day you'll be on the other side of this one. Maybe it's gratitude knowing that you used to be on the front end of something and now you're on the back end. It may be gratitude for ... giving yourself the gift of being in your grief and allowing your body and your soul and your mind to experience [it] so you can get on the other side of it, no matter where you are in that process...

## July 2021

This month's study text comes from:

**Ellen Dannin**, who has been a member of **Ann Arbor Reconstructionist Congregation**, **Congregation Dor Hadash** in San Diego, and **Congregation T'chayah** in Detroit. This text is excerpted from a longer piece that can be found at <https://www.reconstructingjudaism.org/dvar-torah/filling-earth-gods-presence>

Exodus 22:25-26 says that if you have taken your neighbor's garment in pledge for a loan, you must return it to him before the sun sets. It says that the compassionate God will hear the cry of your cold, needy neighbor, but not you. The Torah portion that contains these verses, *Mishpatim*, is full of injunctions which concern society's care for its *strangers*. The Torah orders us *love the stranger* or *not oppress the stranger* thirty-six times. But in verses 25-26 the issue is closer at hand. It regards the treatment of our neighbors, the people we live with and see every day.



Even more blatant than blinding ourselves to the way we treat our neighbors is the fact that it is likely that we ourselves will [become] or leave widows and orphans, and that misfortune could easily reduce us to having no more than the clothes on our backs. We know this on the one hand, and yet on the other hand, we cannot seem to open our eyes and open our hands. We know that misfortunes happen, and that if they do, [then] we will need kind treatment from a loving community. But then we compartmentalize, hardening our hearts and creating a world in which God's mercy will not exist when we need it.

If we cannot be kind under these circumstances, then what hope is there that we can create any space for God's presence to fill the world? ... Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel tells us: *Day after day we ask desperately—are we alone in this silent universe—of which we feel a part and in which we also feel like strangers?*

... There is no miracle that will change the sad state of our world. This is work that God alone cannot do. We must make space for God to enter and actively invite God in. Each small space where we create an opening is one where redemption can exist.

*Ashrei*, which means "happy", tells us that God's hand can be open. Just as God's hand can be open, we can and must open our own hands.

August 2021



This month's study text comes from:

**Rabbi Alex Weissman** of **Congregation Agudas Achim** in Attleboro, MA, USA. This text is excerpted from an essay Rabbi Weissman contributed to the Reconstructing Judaism's Evolve project, where groundbreaking conversations and essays on many topics can be found. The entire essay is online at <http://evolve.reconstructingjudaism.org/god-is-the-space-between-us>.



Each of us as individuals cannot exist without a vast array of networks. Every morning, our liturgy gives us a blessing to say, describing God as *she'asah li kol tzorkhi*, which is usually translated as something like "who has met all of my needs." But in fact, God has not met all of our needs. If only that were true! Rather, it must mean that God has *made* all of our needs. Our needs are God-given. Our needs are Divine. Our needs are what make us human.

Our needs are what create connections. Without them, we would live cut off from others, without relationship. We would be independent in the deepest and most violent sense of the word. We would be alone.

We need each other in the most fundamental of ways. We need the planet. We need our water. We need our air. We need our food.

Even God has needs, and God needs us. When Moshe (Moses) encounters the burning bush, he hears his name twice, "Moshe, Moshe!" An ancient rabbinic teaching on these two words compares God to someone overloaded by an excessively heavy burden who cries out all in one breath, "Somebody, somebody! Come quickly and take this load off me!" That is, faced with the enslavement and suffering of the Israelites in Egypt, God was overwhelmed. God was burdened. God had needs. God needed Moshe.

This is not the omnipotent God that many of us learn about as children. This is a God of vulnerability—a God of interconnectedness, a God of interdependence.

## September 2021

This month's study text comes from:

**Rabbi Rena Blumenthal**, who served for many years as Jewish Chaplain at **Vassar College** in Poughkeepsie, NY, USA. Now a freelance rabbi living in New Paltz, NY, she is also the author of the novel, [\*The Book of Israela\*](#) (2018 Resource Publications). This piece first appeared in *RRA Connection*, the newsletter of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association.



We are the people of the Book and we are created in God's image; it stands to reason that our God must also have a Book. And what, then, would God's Book be like? Needless to say, it would be a paragon of perfection, no sentence obscure, no word out of place, no letter missing or superfluous. It would require no study, no commentary, no debate. It would pulsate in harmony with the heartbeat of creation.

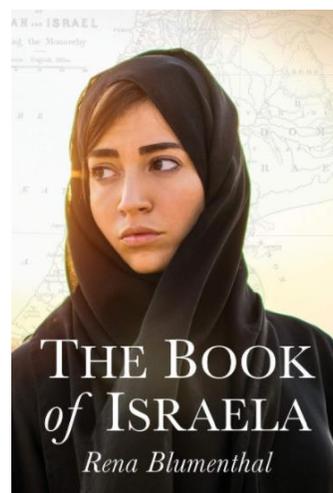
Our Book, on the other hand, is an ungainly mess. It is full of errors and confusion, narratives of horror, contradictions, obscurity, lacunae. What would you expect? We are only human. Yet we cling tenaciously to our Book, debate its oddities, savor its imperfections, study and revere its every letter, dot and tittle. We lovingly inscribe God's name into every

word until the whole Book shimmers with meaning, transforming itself into living Torah.

And it's good that we do, for every human life is just like our Book, an ungainly mess, full of random encounters, unexpected dead ends, irrevocable mistakes, comically and tragically perverse twists and turns — contradictions, obscurity, lacunae. Yet we cling tenaciously to the story of our lives, searching for purpose and connection, longing to discern and then do what is right, striving to weave coherent narratives out of the frayed fibers of experience.

And then, once a year, if we so dare, we stop clinging to the narratives of our Book and of our lives. We let go of the tenacious effort that so defines us and stand revealed before God, our sins confessed, our souls laid bare, our bodies hungry and unadorned. With the chutzpah of aspiring angels, we pray to be inscribed, even sealed, into God's Book, so that our lives, ever so briefly, may become a living Torah, may shimmer with meaning and pulsate with the heartbeat of creation.

*G'mar hatimah tovah* — this Yom Kippur, may a small piece of our souls be, if ever so briefly, inscribed, even sealed, *b'sefer ha'hayim* — into God's Book of Life.



October 2021



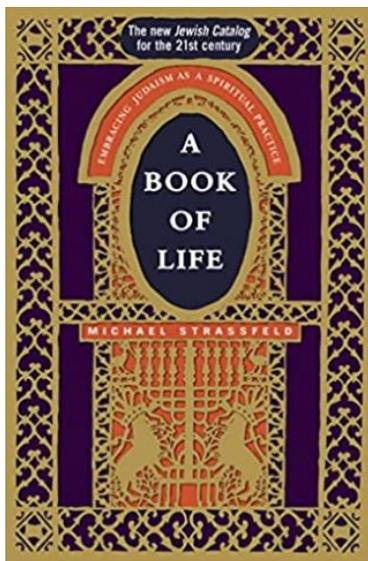
This month's study text comes from:

**Rabbi Michael Strassfeld**, Rabbi Emeritus of **SAJ – Judaism That Stands For All** in Manhattan, NY, USA. Rabbi Strassfeld is the author, editor or co-editor of numerous books, including three versions of *The Jewish Catalog*, *A Shabbat Haggadah: Ritual and Study Texts for the Home*; *The Jewish Holidays*, a guide to the holidays used in many Jewish households, and [\*A Book of Life: Embracing Judaism as a Spiritual Practice\*](#).

Now a plague of darkness has fallen, as it is written: "People could not see one another, and for three days no one could get up from where he was." (Ex.10:23). Darkness is the penultimate plague, coming right before the death of the first born. Is darkness really worse than the plagues that preceded it, like killing all the animals and destroying all the crops? Yes, because this plague doesn't mean that there was a blackout. **The plague was that people didn't see each other.** By the time of the ninth plague, people stopped helping their less fortunate neighbors and didn't join together to mitigate the situation. The plague of darkness was every person for themselves. It was the end of any sense of society.



The plague of darkness is the ninth plague because it is the last warning to a society that has become hardhearted and doesn't see its fellow citizens. It comes right before the final plague — the death of the first born, a plague that struck down "every first born from the first born of Pharaoh who sits on the throne to the first born of the slave girl who is behind the millstones." (Ex. 11:15).



Ultimately, what the coronavirus has reminded us is that we are all connected. What happens on the other side of the world affects us here. What happens to those who have been ground down by the millstones of prejudice and inequality makes all of us vulnerable, even the first born of Pharaoh.

"People could not see one another, and for three days no one could get up from where he was." The question is who will stand up in this darkness and bring light to whoever wherever they dwell.

Excerpted from: <https://www.reconstructingjudaism.org/dvar-torah/plague-darkness>

This month's study text comes from:

**Rabbi Rachel Gartner**, Director of Jewish Life at **Georgetown University** in Washington, DC, USA. This text is excerpted from a d'var torah that appeared on American Jewish World Service's website. The original content can be found at <https://ajws.org/dvar-tzedek/shoftim-5775/>.

The opening verses of Parashat Shoftim are among the most profound articulations of Judaism's call to justice. Shoftim famously teaches: *Tzedek, tzedek tirdof*: Justice, justice you shall pursue.

A powerful and essential Jewish teaching, these verses have been expounded upon by many commentators. Perhaps my favorite is that of Rabbi Simkha Bunim of Pczsha, who taught that the double language ("justice, justice") means we must pursue justice justly. That is, it isn't only the goal of justice that's important; the methods we use to pursue justice must also be just themselves.

But what exactly does that mean?

Our parasha addresses this, teaching:

"Do not pervert justice; you shall not show favoritism, and you shall not take a bribe..."

"Listen to the claims of your brethren, so that you might judge fairly."

"Do not show favoritism, hear the small and the big alike... *ki mishpat l'elohim hu* for [ultimately] judgment is God's."

Pursuing justice justly then involves listening, spurning favoritism, and, I would add, being guided by the principle, *ki mishpat l'elohim*, or that judgment is from God.

### Listening

Notably, in the opening chapter of Devarim, the very first word Moshe says to his judicial appointees is *Shmatem*, or "Listen!" Listen so that you might judge fairly. Indeed, underlying the vast body of Jewish case-law is a profound commitment to case-specific, detail-oriented and nuanced listening. We listen carefully to the facts of the case, the particular situations of the individuals involved, and the broader context in which the dispute takes place. Deep, empathetic listening is essential to Judaism's definition of a just pursuit of justice because it promotes more fair and appropriate judgments.

### Judgment is from God

These words remind us that justice is not a human invention, rather its source is in God. Truly, this is the foundation upon which the Torah's entire notion of justice stands.

### The small and big alike; do not show favoritism

A Divine creation, justice at once belongs to no human being at all, and to every human being equally.



Whether one is *katan*, small, or *gadol*, large, all people deserve, as their God-given right, equal access to due process regardless of their position, power or paycheck. Favoritism clearly leads to the inequitable distribution of justice—some get it, others don't. The Torah simply cannot countenance this.

This very same principle appears in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

"...[R]ecognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world,"

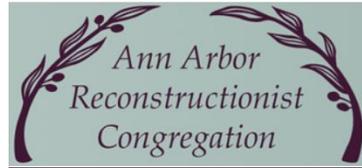
"All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law."

Call it a Divine gift or an inalienable right, the Torah and the Declaration of Human Rights are aligned in the insistence that justice exists in a way and a place beyond human invention and in some ways beyond our purview. Since people didn't create it, we don't own it. And it certainly isn't ours to distribute however we like.

So, like Moshe, who throughout the book of Devarim painstakingly sets up a system that aims at equitable transmission of God's justice, so should we do everything in our power to ensure that justice is, indeed, delivered equitably.

And we have a long way to go.

December 2021



**KESHER  
ISRAEL**  
CONGREGATION  
Creating Jewish  
Community Together

This month's study text comes from:

**Rabbi Shelley Goldman of Keshet Israel Congregation**, an independent community in West Chester, PA, USA. This text is an excerpt from a [guest d'var torah that she gave](#) at **Ann Arbor Reconstructionist Congregation** in Ann Arbor, MI, USA.



[At the beginning of the famous story of Joseph in the Book of Genesis], Joseph, his father's favorite, is sent to "see about" his brothers. We understand the complicated family dynamics at play when a younger sibling tags along with his older brothers. We can imagine how tricky it must have been to have Joseph, the son of his father's favorite wife, hanging around with the sons of the other wives, Bilhah and Zilpah. It is not a stretch for us to think about what might happen when the favorite son shows up in the special coat that his father gave him (when no one else got any presents) telling tales about his dreams. Dreams that proclaim Joseph a future king, with his brothers and parents bowing low to him, first as sheaves of wheat and then as the sun, moon, and eleven stars. We know that this is not a story that ends well. Or does it? Right now I'd like to focus on four words in Hebrew in our story.

As Joseph approaches, his brothers say to one another, "Here comes that dreamer! Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; and we can say, 'A savage beast devoured him.' We shall see what becomes of his dreams!" But when Reuben, the oldest, heard it, he tried to save him from them. He said, "Let us not take his life," we can put him in that pit instead. Then Judah piped up and suggested that they sell him to the traders in the approaching caravan.

The words that I'd like to focus on are "We shall see what comes of his dreams," eight words in English or *Nireh Mah Yeheyu Chalomotav*, four words in Hebrew. These four words exemplify the beauty of Torah study. Words can mean one thing in their Biblical context, or as my Biblical Hebrew teacher Michael Carasik says, "their natural habitat," and they can mean quite another thing once the commentator has finished her work. This tradition, of reading words wholly out of context and with your own purpose in mind, was begun by the rabbis of the Rabbinic Period, some 2000 years ago. The sages of the Talmud, completed [about] the year 500, made this style of commentary into high art.

It is in this tradition of taking words of the Bible and flipping their meaning, that some years ago my teacher, Rabbi Shefa Gold, presented the graduating rabbis of that particular year with a chant, "We shall see what comes of his/her dreams." In presenting this chant to a group of students who were moments away from becoming rabbis, and fulfilling a dream that was accompanied by years of study, the meaning of the words was flipped from the sarcastic sputter of a jealous brother to a loving send-off by a grateful community. When Joseph's brothers' say, "We shall see what comes of his dreams," while he is lying, without his coat, at the bottom of a pit, the answer that they expect is, "Nothing. Nothing will become of his dreams." When Rabbi Shefa Gold sings *Nireh Mah Yeheyu Chalomotey'ha*, "We shall see what comes of her dreams," she is saying, "I can't wait to see what you do next!"