

A Little Text Study for Board Meetings

Vol. 2 – 2018-19 / 5779

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

Curated by the Department of Affiliate Support

Reconstructing Judaism



**RECONSTRUCTING
JUDAISM**

Deeply rooted. Boldly relevant.

Introduction

We're pleased to share the second annual edition of this resource with our affiliates. In this packet, we offer 12 different Jewish texts, one for each month of the coming year. They're intended for use as brief Torah study opportunities at the beginning of board or committee meetings. For Reconstructionists, "Torah study" includes not only traditional sacred texts and commentaries, but also contemporary Jewish poetry, fiction, and art, and you'll find examples of many different kinds of texts here.

The readings in this packet present an opportunity for lay leaders to be reminded of the pleasures of discussing Jewish texts together, and to create a link to other Reconstructionist communities' boards who will be using the same texts at the same time.

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. Invite comments or discussion for the remainder of the 10 minutes.
4. Use a timer and stick to the allotted time.

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 הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתֶיךָ, וְצִוָּנוּ לְעִסּוֹק 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 הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתֶיךָ, וְצִוָּנוּ לְעִסּוֹק בְּצָרְכֵי צְבוּר.</p>

We welcome your feedback or suggestions. Please contact Rabbi Maurice Harris, Associate Director of Affiliate Support at RRC / Jewish Reconstructionist Communities at mharris@reconstructingjudaism.org.

September 2018

This month's study text comes from:

Rabbi Adam Zeff of **Germantown Jewish Centre** in Philadelphia, PA, USA. (GJC is a Conservative synagogue and the home of Reconstructing Judaism's affiliate, **Minyan Dorshei Derekh**.)



An excerpt from Rabbi Zeff's Kol Nidre 5777/2016 sermon, "Silence"

The person whom the ancient rabbis take as their model of personal prayer never speaks a word. As we read in the haftarah on the first day of Rosh Hashanah:

"Now Hannah was praying in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice could not be heard." (1 Sam 1:13)

Hannah's prayer was so sincere that it came from the depths of her being, but it was silent, and the rabbis affirm that silence as the ideal kind of prayer. (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Berachot 31a)

This is surprising because the ancient rabbis are the originators of the prayers that we use today, the same prayers that fill the pages of the *makhzor* and make our services so very – you should excuse the expression – long.

As the rabbis of the Talmud would say, "*La kashya*" – "it's not a contradiction." The fixed words of prayers are necessary to guide our minds in the themes and pathways that can lead us to deep connection. But we know that no prayer, no praise, no words of thanks could ever truly capture all that we owe, all that we have, and all that we aspire to. We have to bring the inarticulate yearnings of our hearts to the table in order to truly connect to God. That's where Hannah excels – going beyond words to let the silent cry of her soul out into the universe.

October 2018

This month's study text comes from:

Rabbi Laurie Zimmerman of **Congregation Shaarei Shamayim** in Madison, WI, USA.



Midrash: Avot de Rabbi Natan 12:3

Two people had quarreled with one another. Aaron went and sat with one of them.

He said to him: "My son, look what your friend has done, his heart is distraught and he has torn his clothes out of sorrow regarding the quarrel, and he is saying: Woe is me, how will I raise up my head and look at my friend? I am embarrassed in his presence, because I am the one who wronged him."

And Aaron sits with him until he removes the jealousy from his heart.

And Aaron then goes and sits with the other party and says to him: "My son, see what your friend has done, his heart is distraught and he has torn his clothes and he is saying: Woe is me, how will I raise up my head and look at my friend? I am embarrassed in his presence, because I am the one who wronged him."

And Aaron sits with him until he removes the jealousy from his heart.

And when the two opponents who carried on the dispute met, they embraced and kissed one another.



Questions for discussion:

1. It is not uncommon for members of a community to quarrel with one other. Reflect on an instance at your congregation where two members were in conflict with one other. What role did you play in helping to resolve the conflict?
2. In what ways is this text helpful (or unhelpful) in resolving conflicts at a congregation? What challenges does it present?



This month's study text comes from:

David Cohen-Tzedek, Music Director at **Or Shalom Jewish Community**
in San Francisco, CA, USA.

If You Want

By Hezy Leskly (translation by David Cohen-Tzedek)

If you want spaghetti bolognaise,
you'll get all of the spaghetti bolognaise in the world.
If you want all of the spaghetti bolognaise in the world,
you'll get maybe an envelope with a note:

"The bolognaise delivery was lost en-route
from Marseille to Haifa;
perhaps drowned in the sea
perhaps abducted by reckless Uzbeks
perhaps mistakenly exploded."

If you want love,
you'll get maybe an empty envelope,
no address,
nothing.

After the weeping and the sleep you'll understand
that it is possible
to use the empty envelope,
to put something in it:
perhaps a shard of glass
perhaps a ring that got bent
perhaps a lock of hair. Something.

If you ask for an empty envelope,
you'll get love,
all the love in the world.

אם תרצו ספגטי בולונז,
תקבלו את כל הספגטי בולונז שבעולם.
אם תרצו את כל הספגטי בולונז שבעולם,
תקבלו בקושי מעטפה עם פתק:
"משלוח הבולונז אבד בדרך
ממרסי לחיפה;
אולי טבע בים
אולי נחטף בידי אוזבקים משולחי רסן
אולי התפוצץ בטעות."

אם תרצו אהבה,
תקבלו בקושי מעטפה ריקה, בלי כתובת,
בלי כלום.
אחרי הבכי והשינה תבינו
שאפשר
להשתמש במעטפה הריקה,
לשים בה משהו:
אולי שבר זכוכית
אולי טבעת שהתעקמה
אולי קווצת שיער. משהו.

אם תבקשו מעטפה ריקה,
תקבלו אהבה,
את כל האהבה שבעולם.

The original Hebrew poem appears in Leskly's book Dear Perverts, 1990-92.

December 2018

This month's study text comes from:

Rabbi Lina Zerbarini of Kehillath Shalom Synagogue in Cold Spring Harbor, NY, USA.

Invoking Blessing on the Dogs

For more than 2000 years, our tradition has understood the importance of dogs as loyal companions and caretakers.

1. One ancient text suggests that the "mark" of Cain (which isn't defined in the Torah) was actually a **dog** that God gave to Cain to keep him company in his solitude. (*Bereshit Rabbah* 22:12)
2. A rabbi in the Jerusalem Talmud tells the story of a **dog** who observed a serpent poisoning the curdled milk of its master. The dog barked frantically, but to no avail, as its master failed to heed its warnings and set out to partake of the milk. The desperate dog hastened to consume the food itself, thereby dying an agonizing death while saving the lives of its master and his fellow shepherds. The grateful shepherds buried the faithful dog with funerary honors and erected a monument to its memory.



The Hebrew word for dog, *kelev*, is made up of the three letters that could also be read *ka-lev*, "like the heart." Many of us have found deep love, caring, compassion, and companionship from our dogs and know that our hearts are bound up with theirs.

Caleb, whose name in Hebrew is *kelev*, is one of the most brave, loyal figures in the Torah. And he is rewarded by God.

Perhaps it is not a coincidence that DOG is GOD spelled backwards.

Today we offer gratitude for the blessings our dogs have brought to us. We strive to end their suffering.

And we offer a blessing to our loving and loyal companions:

Yesimkha E-lohim ke-kalev ha-ne-eman.

May God make you like Caleb, the loyal one.

And may you, too, be rewarded. May you live lives filled with belly-rubs, games of fetch and tag, cookies, and love. And let us all say: Amen.

- excerpted from a ceremony created by Rabbi Zerbarini

January 2019

This month's study text comes from:

Rabbi Jeremy Schwartz of Temple B'nai Israel in Willimantic, CT, USA.



Or Haḥayim (Ḥayim ibn Attar, 1696-1743, Morocco, Italy, Israel)

ואולי כי לזה רמז באומרו (ויקרא יט יח) ואהבת לרעך כמוך, פירוש לצד שהוא כמותך, כי בשלומו ייטיב לך, ובאמצעותו אתה משלים שלימותך, ואם כן אינו אחר אלא אתה עצמך וכאחד מחלקיך

“Love your neighbor as yourself (Leviticus 19:18),” meaning in as much as they are “as you.” For their wellbeing is good for you, and through them, you make your wholeness whole. And in that case, they are not “other” but you, yourself, and like one part of you.

February 2019

This month's study text comes from:

Rabbi Yael Ridberg of **Dor Hadash** in San Diego, CA, USA

Commentary on Parashat Terumah (Exodus 25:1 - 27:19)



In the opening verses of *Parashat Terumah*, the Torah imagines that God declared to Moses to instruct the people: *Asu li mikdash, v'shachanti b'tocham* – Make me a sanctuary, that I might dwell among the people (Exod. 25:8). The text tells us that all those with a willing heart (*nediv libo*), were to bring gifts to build the sanctuary, but the structure was not really where God would dwell. God would dwell in the effort of the people in the ways they came together to create something of beauty, of sanctity, and of presence.



In a touching *midrash*, the rabbis teach that the Tabernacle was built in response to a human need to build something for God. Yet, the Sanctuary was not a gift **to** God, but the opportunity to build it, was considered a gift **from** God in recognition and celebration of the people's growth, following the exodus from Egypt and the receiving of the law. It remains an important lesson that the Torah emphasizes that the *mishkan* (the sanctuary) was built through the generous outpouring of the Israelites' hearts and hands (Exod 35:20-29).

The building of the *Mishkan* – the temporary, travelling sanctuary – was an effort to strengthen the immanence of the divine presence, and bring God into the hearts of humanity.

This reading was excerpted from a Huffington Post article which can be found at:

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/parashat-terumah-build-the-world-with-a-willing-heart_us_58b77638e4b0ddf654246372

March 2019

This month's study text comes from:

Rabbi Nathan Martin of Congregation Beth Israel in Media, PA, USA



The Talmud asks: During the day, when one does not recite the same *kiddush* as at night, what blessing does one recite?

Rav Yehuda said: Before the meal, one brings a cup of wine and simply recites the usual blessing over wine: *Blessed are You, Adonai our God, who creates the fruit of the vine.*

The Talmud relates that Rav Ashi happened to come to the city of Meḥoza. The Sages of Meḥoza said to him on Shabbat day: Will the Master recite for us the great *kiddush*? And they immediately brought him a cup of wine. Rav Ashi was unsure what they meant by the term great *kiddush* and wondered if the residents of Meḥoza included other matters in their *kiddush*. He thought: What is this great *kiddush* to which they refer?

He said to himself: Since with regard to all the blessings that require a cup of wine, one first recites the blessing: *Blessed are You, Adonai our God, who creates the fruit of the vine*, I will start with that blessing.

He then said aloud: *Blessed are You, Adonai our God, who creates the fruit of the vine*, and stretched out the words to see if they were expecting an additional blessing.

He saw a particular elder bending over his cup and drinking, and he realized that this was the end of the great *kiddush*.

He read the following verse about himself: “The wise man, his eyes are in his head” (Ecclesiastes 2:14), since he was alert enough to discern the expectations of the local residents.

—Babylonian Talmud, Pesachim 106a

Rabbi Nathan notes that he first learned about this text from Rabbi Kelilah Miller.

April 2019

This month's study text comes from:

Rabbi Toba Spitzer of **Congregation Dorshei Tzedek** in Newton, MA, USA.



Two Texts from Martin Buber

From *I and Thou*

The true community does not arise through people having feelings for one another (though indeed not without it), but through, first, their taking their stand in living mutual relation with a living Center, and, second, their being in living mutual relation with one another. The second has its source in the first, but is not given when the first alone is given. Living mutual relation includes feelings, but does not originate with them. The community is built up out of living mutual relation, but the builder is the living effective Center.

From *Paths in Utopia*:

The real essence of community is to be found in the fact—manifest or otherwise—that it has a center. The real beginning of a community is when its members have a common relation to the center overriding all other relations: the circle is described by the radii, not by the point along its circumference. And the originality of the center cannot be discerned unless it is discerned as being transpicuous [transparent] to the light of something divine. All this is true; but the more earthly, the more creaturely, the more attached the center is, the truer and more transpicuous it will be.

May 2019

This month's study texts come from two different Reconstructionist rabbis:

Rabbi Hannah Nathans of Klal Israel in Delft, The Netherlands

Rabbi Hava Lynn Pell of Camp Hill, PA, USA

לא עליך המלאכה לגמור ולא אתה בן חורין ליבטל ממנה

It is not up to you to finish the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.

– **Rabbi Tarfon, *Mishnah Avot 2:16***



אם אין אני לי מי לי? וכשאני לעצמי מה אני? ואם לא עכשיו אימתי?

If I am not for myself, who is for me? When I am for myself, what am I? If not now, when?

– **Hillel, *Mishnah Avot 1:14***



Questions for discussion:

1. How do these teachings effect the work you do in stopping racism, sexism, sexual harassment, genderism, and other forms of systemic injustice?
2. What life situations come to mind when you think of either or both of these texts?

June 2019

This month's study text comes from:

Rabbi Sharon Stiefel of Mayim Rabim Reconstructionist Congregation in Minneapolis, MN, USA



Exodus 32: 15-16, 19

Thereupon Moses turned and went down from the mountain bearing the two tablets of the Covenant, tablets inscribed on both their surfaces: they were inscribed on the one side and on the other. The tablets were God's work, and the writing was God's writing, incised upon the tablets. . . . As soon as Moses came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, he became enraged; and he hurled the tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain.



The Broken Tablets

“The broken tablets were also carried in an ark. In so far as they represented everything shattered, everything lost, they were the law of broken things, the leaf torn from the stem in a storm, a cheek touched in fondness once but now the name forgotten. How they must have rumbled, clattered on the way even carried so carefully through the waste land, how they must have rattled around until the pieces broke into pieces, the edges softened crumbling, dust collected at the bottom of the ark ghosts of old letters, old laws. In so far as a law broken is still remembered these laws were obeyed. And in so far as memory preserves the pattern of broken things these bits of stone were preserved through many journeys and ruined days even, they say, into the promised land.”

—Rodger Kamenetz, *The Prairie Schooner Anthology of Contemporary Jewish American Writing*

Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 8b

Even the elder who has forgotten their learning must be treated tenderly, for were not the broken tablets placed in the Ark of the Covenant side by side with the whole ones?

Questions for discussion:

1. How does the metaphor of the broken tablets being carried in the ark resonate for you?
2. How are both the whole and the broken considered sacred in Judaism?
3. How do we allow the whole and the broken within our communities to share space?

July 2019

This month's study text comes from:

Rabbi Jane Rachel Litman of Center for LGBTQ and Gender Studies in Religion in Berkeley, CA, USA.

[I]t happened that a certain non-Jewish person came before Shammai and said to him, "I will convert to Judaism, on condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot." Shammai chased him away with the builder's tool that was in his hand. He came before Hillel and said to him, "Convert me." Hillel said to him, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor: that is the whole Torah; the rest is commentary; go and learn it."



שוב מעשה בנכרי אחד שבא לפני שמאי, אמר לו: גיירני על מנת שתלמדני כל התורה כולה כשאני עומד על רגל אחת. דחפו באמת הבנין שבידו. בא לפני הלל, גייריה. אמר לו: דעלך סני לחברך לא תעביד – זו היא כל התורה כולה, ואידך – הוא פירושה, זיל גמור.

— **Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a**

Question for discussion:

How does Jewish spiritual practice assume a foundation of empathy?

August 2019

This month's study text comes from:

Rabbi Shefa Gold, Co-Director of the **Center for Devotional Energy & Ecstatic Practice (C-DEEP)** in Jemez Springs, NM, USA



Teshuvah, a word usually translated as Repentance or Return, also means Response, and in that meaning I find instruction guiding me towards a certain stance in relation to my life. When the “great shofar is sounded”...”the still small voice” emerges as my response. The art of response requires Listening which necessitates the ongoing cultivation of a patient, calm receptive presence. I don't mean listening as a passive bystander. The kind of listening I'm talking about is when you allow yourself to be addressed directly; it means “taking it personally”.

When I walk outside and look up at the sky, I can open myself to receive its blue as a gift or as a letter that is addressed to me. Its beauty calls forth a response.... gratefulness, praise, wonder. Something in me rises to meet that presence which calls to me through the purity of Blue.

And when I encounter suffering in the world, I can let its mystery address me, calling forth compassion from my own depths. Response is an art-form that requires opening, listening and knowing oneself and one's reactions. Responsibility is the freedom to respond wisely, rather than be enslaved by patterns of reaction.

- excerpted from “Facing the Music: A High Holy Day Meditation” by Rabbi Shefa Gold, online at http://www.rabbishefagold.com/rh5761_2/.

For more on Rabbi Gold's work, see www.RabbiShefaGold.com.

