

A Little Text Study for Board Meetings

**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

RRC / Jewish Reconstructionist Communities



Jewish Reconstructionist Communities
In Association with the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College

Introduction

Many congregations have discovered the joys of taking 10 minutes at the beginning of each board meeting to do a little Jewish learning together. In this packet, we offer 12 different Jewish texts, one for each month of the coming year. Some of the readings are biblical, some rabbinic, and some literary and artistic. For Reconstructionists, “Torah study” includes not only traditional sacred texts and commentaries, but also contemporary Jewish poetry, fiction, and art.

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, וְצִוִּינוּ לְעִסוּק 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, וְצִוִּינוּ לְעִסוּק 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@rrc.edu.



September 2017

MILK (NITZAVIM-VAYELEKH)

By Rabbi Rachel Barenblat

God has never told me to write a poem
or spoken to me from within a cloud
or led me into the land, goat's milk
and date honey mingling in my mouth.
That crackly old-time connection is lost
and I don't know that it will return.

This time of year, everything's about return:
yellow school buses inscribing their poem
on curving roads, one sandal lost
and forlorn on the beach, wisps of cloud
racing across the sky. In our mouths
honey gilds apple wedges pale as milk.

When the baby cries, the mother's milk
descends. Both yearn to return
to connection. But what if his mouth
doesn't know how to suck, if her poem
has nowhere to flow? Don't let my pregnancy
cloud the issue: I'm talking about us, lost

and wailing for God in the night, lost
and fearful that the source of milk
has dried up and disappeared. The cloud
of unknowing offers no comfort. *Return
to Me* the shofar demands, a poem
without words to carry in our mouths.

Torah isn't over the sea, it's in our mouths
and our hearts -- so why do we feel so lost?
Have we forgotten Moshe's poem
and its endless reprises? We milk
our alienation for all it's worth; return
seems as implausible as walking on cloud.

But God is never just in the fire, the cloud:
God is as near as our heartbeats, our mouths
and our hands. Elul's waning moon says
"return to your source; all who wander are
not lost -- we'll leave the light on for you, milk
and cookies and a bedside poem..."

Even in the cloud, you're never lost.
Let your mouth taste the milk of repentance
and return, bearing your poem in your hands.

Rabbi Rachel Barenblat blogs as "The Velveteen Rabbi" (www.velveteenrabbi.blogspot.com).

She is the author of several books of poetry and contemporary prayers.



October 2017

Sukkot asks us to experience the impermanence of all material things. We leave our sturdy homes and take time to share meals or even sleep in a flimsy thatched hut, and we identify with our ancestors during their forty years of wandering in the wilderness. During Sukkot, we read the Book of Ecclesiastes (*Kohelet*), which presents itself as a series of King Solomon's observations about the nature and meaning of life. Some have called it an existentialist work.

- א** וְשָׁבַתִּי אֲנִי, וְאָרָאָה אֶת-כָּל-
הָעֲשָׁקִים, אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשִׂים, תַּחַת
הַשָּׁמַשׁ; וְהִנֵּה דִמְעַת הָעֲשָׁקִים, וְאִין
לָהֶם מְנַחֵם, וּמִיַּד עֲשָׁקֵיהֶם כֹּחַ,
וְאִין לָהֶם מְנַחֵם.
- 1** So I returned and considered all the
oppressions that are done under the sun;
and I witnessed the tears of the oppressed,
and they had no comforter; and on the side
of their oppressors there was power, but
they had no comforter.
- ב** וְשִׁבַּח אֲנִי אֶת-הַמֵּתִים, שְׁכָבָר
מֵתוֹ--מִן-הַחַיִּים, אֲשֶׁר הֵמָּה חַיִּים
עַדְנָה.
- 2** So I praised the dead that are already
dead more than the living that are yet
alive;
- ג** וְטוֹב, מִשְׁנֵיהֶם--אֶת אֲשֶׁר-עָדוֹן,
לֹא הָיָה: אֲשֶׁר לֹא-רָאָה אֶת-
הַמַּעֲשֵׂה הַרָע, אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשָׂה תַּחַת
הַשָּׁמַשׁ.
- 3** but better than them both is one that has
never existed, who has not seen the evil
work that is done under the sun.
- ד** וְרָאִיתִי אֲנִי אֶת-כָּל-עֵמָל, וְאֶת
כָּל-בְּשָׂרוֹן הַמַּעֲשֵׂה--כִּי הִיא קִנְאָת-
אִישׁ, מִרְעָהוּ; גַּם-זֶה הֶבֶל, וּרְעוּת
רוּחַ.
- 4** Again, I saw that for all toil and every
skillful work a person is envied by their
neighbor. This also is vanity and grasping
for the wind.
- ה** הַכֹּסֵּיל חִבְּק אֶת-יָדָיו, וְאָכַל אֶת-
בְּשָׂרוֹ.
- 5** The fool folds their hands together, and
eats their own flesh.
- ו** טוֹב, מְלֵא כֹף נְחֹת--מִמְּלֵא חֲפְנִים
עֵמָל, וּרְעוּת רוּחַ.
- 6** Better a handful with quietness
Than both hands full, together with toil
and grasping for the wind.

- Eccl 4:1-6, translation adapted from OJPS and NKJV



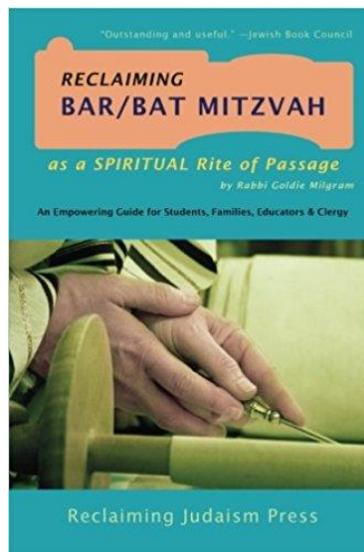
November 2017

Characteristics of a Memorable D'var Torah*

- Rabbi Goldie Milgram

- Helps those present to connect some aspect(s) of the Torah portion to their own lives
- Touches on something in your life that is likely to have happened in the lives of others in the room
- Offers emotional honesty; is very real
- Takes an ancient event and interprets it in the light of current affairs
- Directly addresses those present to involve and empower them – using “I,” “you,” and “we” language and ideas
- Highlights ethical principles and action opportunities that most of those present can realistically implement
- Brings an aspect of Jewish practice to life, a mitzvah, a blessing, a holiday ritual, a sacred phrase, and so on
- Uses guidance from commentaries of the sages
- Adds new perspectives from our own time
- Reflects the human capacity for constructive change
- Offers hope, insight, and inspiration for living

* adapted from the original on p. 131 of *Reclaiming Bar/Bat Mitzvah as a Spiritual Rite of Passage: An Empowering Guide for Students, Families, Educators & Clergy* (www.reclaimingjudaism.org)



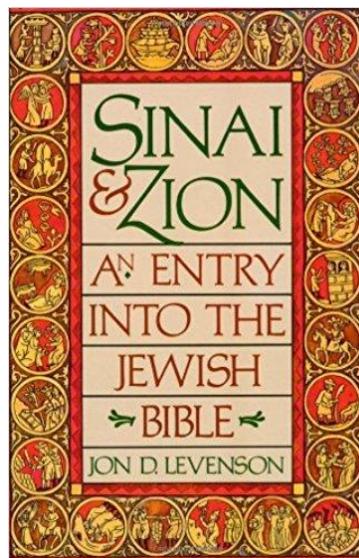
December 2017

From *Sinai and Zion*, by Jon D. Levenson:

In the encounter of Moses and the burning bush, two of God's emblems – tree and fire – clash, and neither overpowers the other.

The two will appear again in tandem in the [menorah], the Tabernacle candelabrum which is actually a stylized tree, complete with "branches," "almond shaped cups," "calyxes," and "petals" (Exodus 25:31-39).

This arborescent lampstand appears not only in the Tabernacle which served as Israel's central sanctuary in the period of wandering in the wilderness, but also in the Temple that was to be built by Solomon . . . The Temple at Jerusalem was lit by the fires of the burning tree.



January 2018

Proverbs 1:20-33

In the book of Proverbs, we meet a figure known as “Wisdom,” and She is presented as a woman seeking to educate, warn, and help all who will listen to her.

- כ** חֲכָמוֹת, בְּחוּץ תְּרַנֶּה ; בְּרַחֲבוֹת, תִּתֵּן קוֹלָהּ. **20** Out in the open, Wisdom calls aloud, She raises her voice in the public square;
- כא** בְּרֹאשׁ הַמִּיּוֹת, תִּקְרָא : בְּפֶתַח שַׁעֲרִים בְּעִיר--אֲמַרְיָהּ תֹאמַר. **21** Above the commotion She cries out; at the city gate She makes her speech.
- כב** עַד-מָתִי, פְּתִים-- תִּנְאֻהֲבוּ-פְתִי : וְלֹצִים--לְצוֹן, חֲמָדוֹ לָהֶם ; וְכֹסִילִים, יִשְׁנְאוּ-דַעַת. **22** “How long will you who are simple love your simple ways? How long will mockers delight in mockery and fools hate knowledge?
- כג** תִּשׁוּבוּ, לְתוֹכְחָתִי : הִנֵּה אֲבִיעָה לָּכֶם רוּחִי ; אֲוִדִיעָה דְּבָרֵי אֲתָכֶם. **23** Repent [make *teshuvah*] at my rebuke. Then I will pour out my spirit to you. I’ll make my teachings known to you.
- כד** יַעַן קָרָאתִי, וּתְמָאֲנוּ ; נְטִיתִי יָדִי, וְאִין מִקְשִׁיב. **24** But since you refuse to listen when I call, and no one pays attention when I stretch out my hand;
- כה** וּתְפָרְעוּ כָל-עֲצָתִי ; וְתוֹכְחָתִי, לֹא אֲבִיתֶם. **25** since you disregard all my advice and don’t accept my rebuke,
- כו** גַּם-אֲנִי, בְּאִידְכֶם אֲשַׁחֵק ; אֲלַעַג, בְּבֹא פְחָדְכֶם. **26** I, in turn, will laugh when disaster strikes you;
- כז** בְּבֹא כְשֹׁאָה (כְּשׁוֹאָה), פְּחָדְכֶם-- וְאִידְכֶם, כְּסוּפָה יֵאָתֶה ; בְּבֹא עֲלֵיכֶם, צָרָה וְצוּקָה. **27** When your dread comes like a terrible storm [a “*shoah*”], and your calamity comes on like a whirlwind; when trouble and distress overwhelm you.
- כח** אָז יִקְרָאֲנֵנִי, וְלֹא אֲעֲנֶה ; יִשְׁחַרְרֵנִי, וְלֹא יִמְצָאֲנֵנִי. **28** Then they will call me, but I will not answer; they will seek me earnestly, but they will not find me.
- כט** כִּי-שִׁנְאוּ דַעַת ; וַיִּרְאֵת ה', לֹא בָחַרוּ. **29** Because they hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the Eternal One;
- ל** לֹא-אָבּוּ לְעֲצָתִי ; נֶאֱצוּ, כָּל-תוֹכְחָתִי. **30** Since they wouldn’t accept my advice, and they spurned my rebuke,
- לא** וַיֹּאכְלוּ, מִפְּרֵי דֶרֶכָם ; וַיִּמְמַעְצְתֵיהֶם יִשְׁבְּעוּ. **31** they’ll eat the fruit of their ways and their schemes.
- לב** כִּי מְשׁוּבֹת פְּתִים תִּהְרָגֶם ; וְשִׁלּוֹת כְּסִילִים תִּאֲבָדֶם. **32** For the waywardness of the simple will kill them, and the complacency of fools will destroy them.
- לג** וְשָׁמַע לִי, יִשְׁכֹּן-בְּטָח ; וְשָׁאֲנוּ, מִפַּחַד רָעָה. **33** But whoever listens to me will dwell securely, and will be quiet without fear of evil.”

- Translation adapted from multiple sources.



February 2018

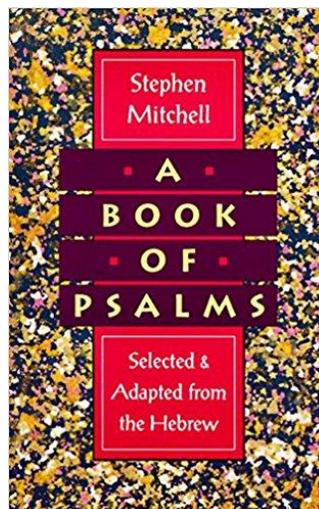
“Psalm 102”

By Stephen Mitchell

You rebuild the desolate city;
you bring the exiles back home.
You grant the poor your abundance;
you guide the nations toward peace.
You hear the cry of the destitute
and the sobbing of the oppressed.
You soothe the pain of the captive;
you set the prisoner free.

Come to me too in your mercy
and set my soul at peace.

- from *A Book of Psalms: Selected & Adapted from the Hebrew*



March 2018

From Rabbi Laura Geller's essay, "Reactions to a Woman Rabbi"

As long as the rabbi is a man, a Jew can project the image of the rabbi onto God. But when Jews encounter a rabbi who is a woman, it forces them to think about God as more than male or female. It provokes them to raise questions that most Jews don't like to confront: What or who is God? What do I believe about God? That primary religious question leads to others. How can we speak about God? What are the appropriate words, images and symbols to describe our relationship to God? Does the English rendering of Hebrew prayers convey the complexity of God? How can we change language, images, and symbols so they can convey this complexity?

- from the anthology, *On Being a Jewish Feminist*, edited by Susannah Heschel.



Rabbi Laura Geller @rabbigeller · Apr 13

At interfaith ritual - standing w/ @bend_thearc & @clueLA at ICE to protest deportation of non-violent immigrants.

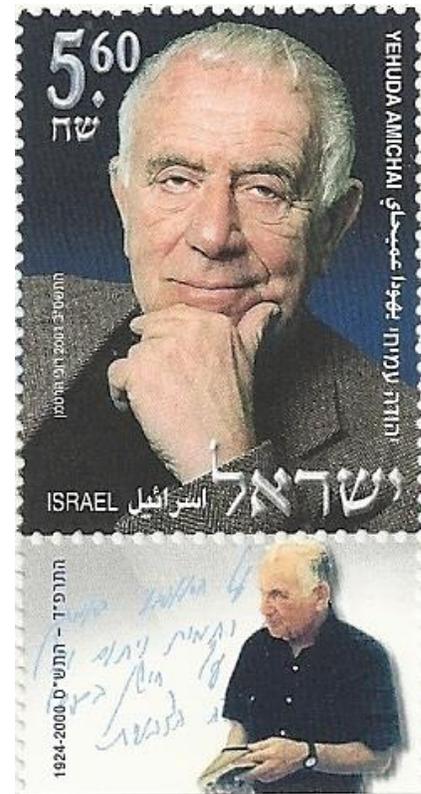


April 2018

Searching for God's Face

Israeli poet, *Yehudah Amichai*, transl. Rabbi Steve Sager

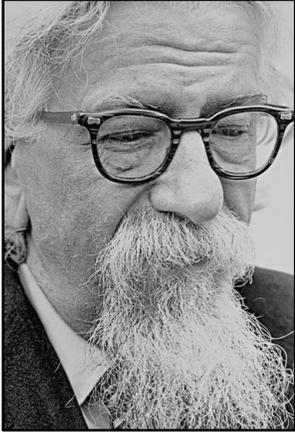
Moses, our teacher, only once saw the face of God
and forgot. He did not want to see the wilderness
not even the promised land, but only the face of God.
He struck the rock in the fury of his longings
he went up and down Mt. Sinai, he shattered the two
tablets of the covenant and made a golden calf, he searched
in fire and cloud. But he remembered only
the strong hand of God and his outstretched arm
not his face and he was like someone who wants
to remember the face of a loved one but cannot.
He made himself a police sketch from the face
of God and from the burning bush and from the face
of Pharaoh's daughter who leaned over him when he was an infant
in the basket,
and he distributed the picture to all the tribes of Israel
and throughout the wilderness. But no one had seen
and no one recognized. And only at the end of his life,
on Mt. Nebo did he see and die
with a kiss from God's face.



משה רבינו ראה רק פעם אחת את פני האלהים
ושכח. הוא לא רצה לראות את המדבר
ואפילו לא את הארץ המבטחת, אלא רק את פני האלהים.
הוא הכה בסלע בזעם געגועיו
הוא עלה להר סיני וירד, הוא שבר את שני
לוחות הברית ועשה עגל זהב, הוא חפש
באש ובעשן, אבל הוא זכר רק את
יד האלהים החזקה ואת זרועו הנטויה
ולא את פניו והיה כמו אדם שרוצה
לזכר את פני מי שאהב ולא יוכל.
הוא עשה לעצמו קלסטרון מפני
האלהים ופני הסנה הבוער ופני
בת פרעה שנרכנה מעליו כשהיה תינוק בתבה,
והפיץ את התמונה בכל שבטי ישראל
ובכל המדבר, אבל איש לא ראה
ואיש לא הכיר. ורק בסוף חייו,
על הר נבו ראה ומת
בנשיקת פני האלהים.

May 2018

From *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* by Abraham Joshua Heschel



...faith is not the clinging to a shrine but the endless pilgrimage of the heart. Audacious longing, burning songs, daring thoughts, an impulse overwhelming the heart, usurping the mind – these are all a drive towards serving the One who rings our hearts like a bell. *(Adapted)*



ברוך שֶׁעָשָׂנִי אִשָּׁה

ברוך שֶׁעָשָׂנִי אִשָּׁה –
שָׂאֲנִי אֲדָמָה וְאָדָם,
וְצָלַע רִכְבָּה;
ברוך שֶׁעָשִׂיתָנִי
עגולים עגולים –
כְּגִלְגָּלֵי מִזְלוֹת
וּכְעִגּוּלֵי פְרוֹת –
שֶׁנָּתַתָּ לִּי בְּשָׂר חַי
פּוֹרֵחַ,
וְעָשִׂיתָנִי כְּצִמְחַת הַשָּׂדֶה –
נוֹשָׂא פְרִי;
שֶׁקָרְעֵי עֲנָנֶיךָ,
מְחַלְקִים כְּמִשֵּׁי
עַל פְּנֵי וִירְכֵי;
וְאֲנִי גְדוּלָה
וּמְבַקֶּשֶׁת לִהְיוֹת יְלָדָה,
בוֹכִיָּה מְצַעֵר,
וְצוֹחֶקֶת, וְשֹׂרָה בְּקוֹל,
דַּק מִן הַדַּק –
כְּצִרְצֵר זְעִיר
בְּמִקְהֶלֶת כְּרוּבִיךָ
הַנְּעֻלָּה –
קֹטְנָה שֶׁבְּקִטְנוֹת –
אֲנִי מְשַׁחֶקֶת
לְרַגְלֶיךָ –
בוֹרְאִי!

WOMAN'S SONG

Blessed is he who made me a woman –
that I am earth and Adam,
a tender rib;
Blessed is he who made me
circles upon circles –
like the orbits of planets
and spheres of fruit –
who gave me living flesh
that blossoms,
and made me like a plant of the field –
that bears fruit;
so your cloud tatters,
slide like silk
over my face and thighs;
and I am grown
and want to be a girl,
weeping from sorrow,
and laughing, and singing aloud,
thinner than thin –
like the smallest cricket
in the sublime chorus
of your cherubs –
smallest of the small –
I play
at your feet –
my Creator!

1969

© Translation: 2002, Institute for the Translation of Hebrew Literature
From: *Thistles: Selected Poems of Esther Raab*. Translated by Harold Schimmel
Publisher: Ibis, Jerusalem, 2002, 965-90124-8-9

- by Ester Raab (1894-1981), Israel's first native-born woman to gain renown as a Hebrew language poet.

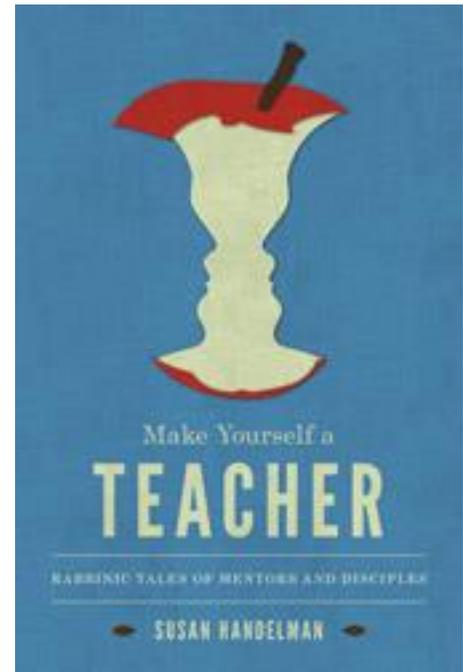


July 2018

Let the honor of your fellows be as dear to you as your own and do not be easily angered. Warm yourself by the fire of the Sages, but beware of their glowing embers lest you be burnt – for their bite is the bite of a fox, their sting is the sting of a scorpion, their hiss is the hiss of the serpent, and all their words are like fiery coals.

- Mishnah Avot 2:10

Translation by Susan Handelman, from her book, *Make Yourself a Teacher: Rabbinic Tales of Mentors and Disciples*



August 2018

2. Tosefta Sotah 7:7 (2nd century C.E.)

Make yourself a heart of many rooms and bring into it the words of the House of Shammai and the words of the House of Hillel, the words of those who declare unclean and the words of those who declare clean.

3. Rabbi David Hartman (z"l). "A Heart of Many Rooms." pages 21-23

...In other words, become a person in whom different opinions can reside together in the very depths of your soul. Become a religious person who can live with ambiguity, who can feel religious conviction and passion without the need for simplicity and absolute certainty.

...This then is the distinctive legacy of the talmudic interpretive tradition: an understanding of the revelation in which God loves you when you discover ambiguity in God's word. God loves you for finding forty-nine ways to make this pure and forty-nine ways to make it impure. Revelation is not always "pure and simple" but may be rough and complex.

...The religious personality this system tries to produce is able to interpret situations in multiple ways and to offer cogent arguments for opposite positions and points of view. This orientation reflects a particular kind of religious humility. What has often been portrayed as legalism...is a superficial misrepresentation of the deep joy in study and fascination with the rich complexity of the Torah.

- excerpted from a study sheet developed by Rabbi Aaron Finkelstein

