

A Little Text Study for Board Meetings

Vol. 3 – 2019-20 / 5780

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 third annual edition of this resource with our affiliates. Here you'll find 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 texts and commentaries, but also contemporary Jewish writing, and you'll find examples of many different kinds of texts here. Feel free to mix and match specific texts to specific months – this resource is for you to use in whatever way serves your community.

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 יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, 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 יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ לְעִסּוֹק 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.

September 2019

This month's study text comes from:



Rabbi Boris Dolin of **Congregation Dorshei Emet** in Montréal, Québec, Canada.

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said: There were no days as happy for the Jewish people as the fifteenth of Av and as Yom Kippur. The Gemara asks: Granted, Yom Kippur is a day of joy because it has the elements of pardon and forgiveness, moreover, it is the day on which the last pair of tablets were given.

-Talmud Tractate *Ta'anit* 30b

This text from the Talmud reminds us that even the most “serious” of Jewish holidays are rooted in joy. What does this mean for our Jewish community, and even more specifically for those who serve on a board or take on a leadership role in the community? Hopefully it allows us to put everything in perspective, and can be a reminder for why we should be doing this work in the first place.

Contrary to the popular imagination, the guilt that we might feel during the High Holidays is not as primary a Jewish emotion as joy, happiness and gratitude. Joy is what will keep people coming back through the doors of this synagogue to be part of the Jewish community more than a few times a year. It is what will compel people to do more Jewish learning and study, allow them to truly own a sense of spirituality and holiness and is what will help people to connect more with our tradition and with each other.

As we begin the year, may our work be one that brings us joy and inspires others to connect with all that we do as a community.



October 2019



This month's study text comes from:

Rabbi Megan Doherty of Oberlin College Hillel in Oberlin, OH, USA.

"He's a heel," my grandfather used to say, describing someone who was untrustworthy in business or in friendship. Perhaps as a result of my grandfather's teaching, I work very hard to be someone who is trusted by others, and I try equally hard to be honest with myself. My grandfather's saying reminds me of our ancestor Jacob, whose name in English translates to "heel". And Jacob, in our stories, is indeed a 'heel' – a protagonist almost incapable of telling the truth, whether to those closest to him or even (perhaps especially) to himself.

In addition to the famous story of Jacob's trickery in acquiring the blessing of the firstborn from his father Isaac (a blessing which should have gone to his brother Esau), Jacob lies to his brother Esau during and even after their famed reconciliation. He sends one messenger after another with gifts ahead of him to his brother, instructing each one to say in turn: "I am Jacob's servant, and Jacob himself is right behind me." Jacob does not arrive until the following day. After Jacob and Esau reunite and embrace, and Esau has met Jacob's family and invited them to journey with him, Jacob agrees, saying "I will go after you to Seir, and meet you there." He then promptly takes his wives and his children and goes in the opposite direction. The Bible has no record of him ever going to Seir. As much as Jacob may want to reconnect with his brother, he can't seem to break the pattern of misdirection and mistruth which was established in their youth.

According to a midrash, Jacob's self-delusions reach almost ridiculous heights. In Genesis Rabbah 79:10, we read that Jacob compared God and himself with these words: "You are the God of the upper worlds, and I am god of the lower worlds." Jacob is so convinced by his own version of reality that he takes for himself the responsibilities and identity of the Divine. When we lie to others, we open the door to lying to ourselves. Living with untruths can give us, like Jacob, an exaggerated sense of our own power and self-worth, or it can allow us to be convinced that we are smaller and less consequential than we actually are. If we lie to ourselves enough, we end up with a lack of trust in our core being, in our own instincts, judgments and choices.

By the end of his life, Jacob ultimately finds his way to truth, though it requires a whole generation's worth of travail and tragedy. We can learn from Jacob and choose a different path. We can face up to our fears with generosity and compassion, we can become active members of communities which nurture us by honestly reflecting both our missteps and our triumphs, and reserving space and time in our lives to check in with our innermost hearts – in this moment, am I doing the right thing for me? For my family? For the world?



November 2019

This month's study text comes from:

Rabbi Lester Bronstein of Bet Am Shalom Synagogue
in White Plains, NY, USA.



When I meet with couples in the months before their wedding, I like to share this powerful between-the-eyes text with them. I urge them to think of this text as a challenge to their egos, and as an invitation to work together toward a goal that's greater than the "sum of the parts" of their relationship. I ask them to commit themselves to developing a working "MO" for having arguments, under the assumption that honest talked-through disagreements lead to strong marriages.

Al achat kama v'chama – "how much the more so" for congregational committees and boards!

Here it is, from *Pirkey Avot* in the *Mishnah*:



כָּל מַחְלוּקַת שֶׁהִיא לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, סוֹפָהּ לְהִתְקַיֵּם. וְשֵׁי אֵינָהּ לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, אֵין סוֹפָהּ לְהִתְקַיֵּם.

Any argument that is made for the sake of Heaven will in the end be sustained. Any argument that is not made for the sake of Heaven will in the end not be sustained.

אֵיזוֹ הִיא מַחְלוּקַת שֶׁהִיא לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, זֶה מַחְלוּקַת הַלֵּל וְשַׁמַּי. וְשֵׁי אֵינָהּ לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, זֶה מַחְלוּקַת קֶרַח וְכָל עֵדָתוֹ:

What is an example of an argument for the sake of Heaven? The [ongoing] debate between the followers of Hillel and the followers of Shammai. What is an example of an argument not made for the sake of Heaven? The argument of Korach and his followers. (Pirkey Avot 5: 17)

To which the Talmud responds, regarding Hillel's and Shammai's approach to each other's presentation: "Eilu v'eilu - Both these and these are the words of the living God."

May our committee/board/subcommittee/task force/working group continue to find ways to speak honestly to each other; to listen openly to one another; to "lift up" the argument of the person with whom we don't agree; to assume that our companions on this committee/board etc. are all arguing for the greater good and not for personal victory; and to embrace one another's striving toward "the words of the living God."

This month's study text comes from:

Rabbi Lauren Grabelle Herrmann of **SAJ – Judaism that Stands for All** in New York, NY, USA.

An Invitational Covenant

Exodus 19:16

וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי בַּהֲיִת הַבְּקָר וַיְהִי קֹלֹת וּבְרָקִים וְעָנָן כָּבֵד עַל־הָהָר וְקוֹל שֹׁפָר חֲזָק מְאֹד וַיַּחֲרֹד כָּל־הָעָם אֲשֶׁר בַּמַּחֲנֶה: וַיּוֹצֵא מֹשֶׁה אֶת־הָעָם לְקִרְיַת הָאֱלֹקִים מִן־הַמַּחֲנֶה וַיִּתְּצֻבוּ בְּתַחֲתֵית הָהָר: (16) On the third day, as morning dawned, there was thunder, and lightning, and a dense cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud blast of the horn; and all the people who were in the camp trembled. (17) Moses led the people out of the camp toward God, and they took their places at the foot of the mountain.

Deuteronomy 29:9-14

אַתֶּם נֹצְבִים הַיּוֹם כְּלָכֶם לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹקֵיכֶם רְאִשֵׁיכֶם שְׁבִטֵיכֶם זְקֵנֵיכֶם וְשֹׁטְרֵיכֶם כָּל אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל: טַפְּכֶם נְשֵׁיכֶם וְגֵרְךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבְּךָ מִחֹטֵב מִחֲנִיף מִחֹטֵב עֵצִיף עַד שְׂאֵב מִימִיד: לְעִבְרְךָ בְּבֵרִית ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ וּבְאֵלֹתָו אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ פָּרַת עִמָּךְ הַיּוֹם: לְמַעַן הִקִּים־אֶת־ךָ הַיּוֹם | לֹא לְעַם וְהוּא יְהִי־לְךָ לְאֱלֹקִים כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר־לְךָ וְכַאֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וּלְיַעֲקֹב: וְלֹא אֶתְכֶם לְבַדְכֶם אֲנֹכִי פָּרַת אֶת־הַבְּרִית הַזֹּאת וְאֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים הַזֹּאת: כִּי אֶת־אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁנֹו פֹה עִמָּנוּ עַמֵּד הַיּוֹם לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹקֵינוּ וְאֵת אֲשֶׁר אֵינְנוּ פֹה עִמָּנוּ הַיּוֹם:

(9) You stand this day, all of you, before YhVh your God—your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, all the men of Israel, (10) your children, your wives, the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to water drawer—(11) to enter into the covenant of YhVh your God, which YhVh your God is forming with you this day (12) in order that God may establish you this day as God's people and God shall be your God as the Holy One promised you and as the Ancient One swore to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. (13) I make this covenant, with its sanctions, not with you alone, (14) rather with those who are standing here with us this day before YhVh our God and with those who are not with us here this day.

Commentary & Questions:

Two times Moses gives the Torah to the people of Israel, once in Exodus after having just left Egypt and once in Deuteronomy, with the old and new generation together. ... [The first time] Moses gathers the people at the foot of the mountain. [The second time] Moses calls to the entire community – including Israelites, non-Israelites who dwell with them; men, women, and children; the living people and those yet to be born.

- Why might Moses change the way he includes the community in the second version of the covenant?
- What impact might the invitational nature of the second covenant have on the community?
- How might we, as spiritual communities, learn from Moses' behavior in Deuteronomy?
 - In what ways are we inviting people on the margins into the center of our communities?
 - How might we make our welcoming culture explicit and known, to reach those who might feel like they are outside?



January 2020

This month's study text comes from:

Rabbi Micah Becker-Klein of **Congregation Beth El** in Bennington, VT, USA.

The Book of Exodus, known in Hebrew as "*Shemot*" ("Names"), begins with the listing of names. A recounting of "who is who" as a new era opens. While *Genesis/Bereshit* begins the Jewish journey following one family, the Exodus narrative tells about a people emerging into being.



We learn of the following individuals whose names have their own meanings in the Hebrew:



Miriam (Fragrant Water), *Aaron* (Exalted), *Moshe* (Drawn from Water), *Yocheved* (God's Glory), *Tziporah* (Bird), *Gershom* (Stranger There), *Eliezer* (God is my Help), and *Yitro* (His Excellency). Each name conveys a message and some aspect of the personality of the character.

Most important to this theme is the "calling" of Moshe and his "name encounter" with the Divine. Moshe's life appears to us in the text of the Torah as a myth of the hero expounded. He encounters the Divine One "face to face," in a most unusual scene – the bush that was consumed in fire, but not burning. A Voice instructs

Moshe— "I am the one who was known to your ancestors as *El Shaddai*. I am YHVH, I am what I am." This name, YHVH, is not a noun or an adjective – it is a verb! A form of "to be." The name YHVH is a verb form that means something like "that which will be." The Divine One's essence is being-ness.

There are over 100 names for God in the Tanakh, and the Kabbalah teaches us that each word of Torah may be a form of the Divine name. We humans create names for ourselves with our actions every day. Through our work and through our interactions.

What do you know about your name? Why were you named as you were? What are some of the name practices in your family? May each of us create a name of blessing as we walk in this world.

To read more of this *d'var Torah*, visit <https://www.reconstructingjudaism.org/dvar-torah/these-are-names>.

February 2020



This month's study text comes from:

Rabbi Vivie Mayer of the **Reconstructionist Rabbinical College** in Wyncote, PA, USA.

Many years ago, the faculty of RRC articulated four objectives of Reconstructionist learning. I paraphrase them here:

- 1. To cultivate the understanding that Judaism is not a monolithic entity, but that it is an evolving civilization—a living, changing enterprise.*
- 2. To generate compassion and understanding for the Jews of the past by looking at Jewish ideas and practices from within their original historical-sociological context.*
- 3. To cultivate appreciation for the treasures and gems within Jewish civilization.*
- 4. To acquire a solid base of traditional knowledge so that we have a base from which to reconstruct.*

These four points teach us, respectively, about openness, non-judgment, appreciation and humility. We study the same sacred texts that the Jews before us studied, and we study their responses and reactions to those texts. And now, in turn, we add our thoughts, our BUTs and our MAYBES to the ever-expanding field of Jewish consciousness. Torah study constructs our world, and in this way, it is personal, collective, political and spiritual.



As we do this work, kindness and listening are invaluable. Kind listening to ourselves as we encounter ideas that soothe and ideas that rankle. Kind listening to the aching or hopeful hearts of our people through time as their voices participate in the ever-continuing conversation of Torah. Kind listening for the beauty often obscured behind the foreignness of distant cultures. It is the attitude of kindness and understanding that enables us to cultivate the perception of the expansiveness of the AND.

The sages embrace this AND with the famous teaching *of eilu v'eilu divrei elohim hayyim*: "These and these are the words of the living God." . . . In reaching for the One through the many, we find that the all-encompassing view is not a dissolving oneness as much as it is the viewing of a multi-faceted gem. Each face of the gem catches the light in its own distinct way.

To read more of this essay, visit <http://evolve.reconstructingjudaism.org/talmud-torah-practice>.

March 2020



CONGREGATION BETH-EL ZEDECK

This month's study text comes from:

Rabbi Dennis Sasso who leads **Congregation Beth-El Zedeck** in Indianapolis, IN, USA.

I am a Jew. Judaism is my family's legacy and my chosen spiritual path. I am a rabbi. Judaism's wisdom and values, customs and traditions, rhythms and cycles, inform who I am.

I do not regard Judaism a better religion than others. It is my path to being human. I regard religious claims of Divine election, chosenness or superiority to be harmful remnants of immature faith. God does not play favorites.



My teacher, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of the Reconstructionist movement, once challenged our class to consider what term was the most apt synonym for the concept of religion and of Judaism in particular.

After a vigorous discussion, Kaplan simply said, "religion is responsibility," and cited Hillel's dictum: "If I am not for myself—who is for me? But if I am for myself alone, what am I? If not now, when?" (*Pirkei Avot* 1:14)

Responsibility to one's self, to one's fellow human beings and to the imperative of action is the essence of religion, of the Jewish way.

Excerpted from Rabbi Sasso's essay, "Patriotism, Religions, and Culture." To see the entire essay, visit <http://evolve.reconstructingjudaism.org/patriotism>.

April 2020



This month's study text comes from:

Rabbi Ariana Katz, the founding rabbi of **Hinenu: The Baltimore Jewish Shtiebl**, an independent congregation.



When I have been in moments of grief and someone tells me, “You will learn so much from this,” I want to scream.

Grief is not a learning opportunity. Grief cannot be encapsulated into pithy facts learned about the universe, because grief dismantles the universe and asks us, while standing in the shambles, “What do you think you’ll do with this, punk?”

It is not a learning opportunity, though many of us can find relief by shifting into an observer role, looking at the undulating waves of loss and anxiety and anger and relief instead of swimming in those feelings.

...

Sitting at a table at a wedding this summer, and noticing one of my tablemates weep as the father of the bride gives a toast, knowing her own wedding was pending. Deeply seeing her hold that her own father was gone, that she was mourning his absence in this moment, and future moments.

Hearing classmates and teachers recite the mourner’s *kaddish* every day for a year as I do the same, and noticing how our voices grow bold, or shake, or grow routine, or quiet. Seeing the undulating power of a year of saying the same words for the same person. The only thing that changes is how we hold the grief.

Watching a dear friend put the Torah back into the ark on a Saturday morning, and being overcome knowing that this is how we lovingly dress bodies – we wrap them in holy garments, and place them in the ark. Knowing that she was preparing to do just the same for a family member. Knowing we create and recreate moments of our dying throughout life, to understand it somehow.

Grief is not a learning opportunity, but it is a cruel teacher. In the span of a lifetime we will create life, and recreate moments of dying – through dressing the Torah and putting it in the ark, through sickness and healing, through anxiety. In the span of a lifetime we will mourn death, we will feel the shock of absence and not be able to go on. We will swim in those waves. We won’t drown. Maybe what we learn from all this is how to swim.

Excerpted from Rabbi Katz’s blog. To read more, visit www.arianakatz.com.

May 2020

This month's study text comes from:

Rabbi Sarah Newmark of Gig Harbor, WA, USA.

אַרְמֵי אָבִי וַיֵּרַד מִצְרַיִם וַיִּגְר שָׁם בְּמַתִּי מֵעַט וַיְהִי-שָׁם לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל עַצוּם וְרַב :

“My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down to Egypt and lived there with a few others; there he became a great nation, powerful and numerous.” - *Deuteronomy 26:5*

This famous line from the Book of Deuteronomy is also chanted each year at our Passover Seders. It is emblematic of the Jewish metaphorical journey, a journey which begins each year at Simchat Torah with the retelling of the story of Creation, which moves us through Redemption and which culminates with the Revelation of God's law at Mt. Sinai.

Our journey is often one of exile, sometimes self-imposed, as is Abraham's journey when he is told by God, “*Lech L'cha...go forth to a land you do not know,*” and, as found in both our sacred texts and in our history as a people, it is too often an exile imposed by others.

Exile seems to be in our very DNA as a people. Our roots are interrupted, and we must learn how to re-establish them in new and sometimes hostile soil.

Exiles are always painful, and our texts are full of longing for our land and sorrow at our losses. But it was not all bad. When the Jews were exiled from their land in 586 BCE by the Babylonians, in time, they flourished. They set up great schools of Jewish learning in Babylonia, in Pumbedita and Sura. It was in Babylonia that the Torah was completed and codified into the form we still have today.

We survived this traumatic exile and returned to our land in 537 BCE led by our king, Zerubavel, which means “Seed of Babylon,” not exactly on anyone's top ten Jewish Baby Names list these days! And then we survived more trauma, particularly when the 2nd Temple was destroyed by the Romans in the year 70 CE, and the rabbis had to re-invent Judaism or let it die.

Given that stark choice, they re-invented it, turning animal sacrifice into prayer services and rebuilding the Temple figuratively by adding layer upon layer of interpretive text to our ever-standing foundation, Torah.

We, too, are resilient, and we are not afraid to re-invent ourselves when our path is either no longer serving us well or has become blocked. Our roots may no longer grow in the same soil of our ancestors, but it turns out that we are good at being transplanted elsewhere. My father was a wandering Aramean, which taught us to root ourselves in our tradition, not just in soil. Our tradition journeys with us wherever we may travel.

For more, visit Rabbi Sarah's website <https://www.rabbisarahnewmark.com/>.



June 2020

This month's study text comes from:

Rabbi Sheila Peltz Weinberg of Philadelphia, PA, USA.

My understanding of spirituality is, as the Kotzker Rebbe¹ defined Hasidism, *arbeit auf zich*, “work on oneself.”

It is the work of growing awareness.

Its purpose is to reveal the unseen and hidden fears, desires, obstacles and barriers to living lives of gratitude, generosity and service.

Since we live in relationship with others in all dimensions of time and space, our human development is nurtured by others and nurtures them.

We aim to establish conditions in our families, synagogues, communities and nations to foster awareness, wise choices and loving relationships in the service of our sacred values: peace, justice and love.

We know these values because we are in relationship with something greater than our fragmented selves, greater than our limitations. We call that greatness “God.”

Excerpted from Rabbi Weinberg's essay, “Mindfulness: Telling the Truth, Redeeming Through Love.” To see the entire essay, visit <http://evolve.reconstructingjudaism.org/mindfulness>. Rabbi Weinberg is also the creator and co-leader of the Jewish Mindfulness Teacher Training Program. For more, visit her website, <https://www.sheilapeltzweinberg.com/>.



¹ The Kotzker Rebbe (1787–1859), a.k.a. Rabbi Menachem Mendel Morgensztern of Kotzk, was a Polish Hasidic master.

July 2020



This month's study text comes from:

Rabbi Jacob Staub of the **Reconstructionist Rabbinical College** in Wyncote, PA, USA.

The following is excerpted from a live talk that Rabbi Staub gave at Kehillat Israel in Pacific Palisades, CA. The audio recording and transcript are available at <https://www.reconstructingjudaism.org/spoken-audio/what-makes-reconstructionist-congregation-different>.

Jewish civilization evolves, has always evolved. Continues to change and adapt to new circumstances. Chicken was once pareve, now it's meat. Fish was once pareve, it's still pareve. And there are circumstances that make that happen. The Bar Mitzvah ceremony develops in the 15th Century when confirmation of Catholic children moves from eight or nine to 14. Before that, the Jewish initiation ritual happened at age six or seven. Coincidentally, the surrounding culture, the Christian society, the Catholic society, had confirmation at that age. So we are influenced by our surrounding culture. You would think that, you know, God commanded a Bar Mitzvah party at Mount Sinai but it's not true.

Jeremiah or Isaiah or Ezekiel's view of God is not like Rabbi Akiva's and neither would be recognizable to the philosopher Saadia Gaon or Maimonides and neither would theirs be recognizable to Kabbalists in the Middle Ages. Our beliefs evolve as we are influenced by surrounding culture.

One more example: lighting the candles on Friday night with the [Hebrew] blessing text *asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav*, that says we are commanded to light the candles of Shabbat, is an innovation from the 10th Century, which was really an anti-Karaite polemic, because the Karaites didn't light lights on Shabbat. And the Rabbanites, the rabbinic Jews said, "Ha, that's from Sinai. God commanded it." And so, one of our most central rituals, comes about out as a result of an intra-Jewish competition and conflict. And that doesn't make it any less powerful. If you light candles on Friday night and you identify with your parents and grandparents and great grandparents and you bring in the light of Shabbat and your soul, that's fine but that particular practice is only a thousand years old.



[laughter]

And the point is, therefore, we have an obligation to continue to evolve, to continue to reconstruct. It is a mandate. It is almost a divine commandment, that we can't stay still. We can't remain in place because everything changes and we must continue to evolve, to survive, to flourish...

August 2020

This month's study text comes from:

Rabbi Bob Gluck, who is a pianist, composer, writer, rabbi, and a Professor at the University at Albany.

Why do we pray?

...[P]rayer serves several purposes.

Through structured Jewish language, it is a means of personal and collective expression, including thanks, joy, sadness and distress.

Prayer is a vehicle by which we can cultivate discipline and reflection, awe, humility and a sense of connection with each other and beyond ourselves.

It is a means to engage with, and to cultivate and transmit, our historical traditions as these are articulated in our inherited liturgical texts.

Prayer is also a symbolic reenactment, in word and gesture, of Jewish root metaphors, symbols, terms, and history. For example, the *Kiddush* refers to Shabbat as a symbol of the liberation from Egyptian bondage and of the creation of the world. Together, these form an interlocking, yet complex set of functions.

The Language of Prayer

Prayer texts do not utilize language in the same way as normal discourse. Liturgy uses words in a symbolic and highly formalized manner. The goal isn't to communicate information, but to tap emotions, and bring to life deeply resonant images. This is one reason why some people find the traditional liturgy comforting and a helpful ground for personal reflection.



- Excerpted from Rabbi Gluck's essay, *Some Reflections on Reconstructionist Prayer*, in *The Reconstructionist*, Spring 2002: Volume 66, Number 2. For more information about Rabbi Gluck, see <http://www.electricsongs.com>.