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
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.

Barukh atah Adonai Eloheinu melekh ha’olam asher kid’shanu b’mitzvotav v’tzivanu la’asok b’divrei torah.

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.

Barukh atah Adonai Eloheinu melekh ha’olam asher kid’shanu b’mitzvotav v’tzivanu la’asok betzorkhei tzibur.

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.

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.
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.velveteenrabbilblogs.com).

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

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.

2 So I praised the dead that are already dead more than the living that are yet alive;

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.

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.

5 The fool folds their hands together, and eats their own flesh.

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
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)
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.
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.

20 Out in the open, Wisdom calls aloud, She raises her voice in the public square;

21 Above the commotion She cries out; at the city gate She makes her speech.

22 “How long will you who are simple love your simple ways? How long will mockers delight in mockery and fools hate knowledge?

23 Repent [make teshuvah] at my rebuke. Then I will pour out my spirit to you. I’ll make my teachings known to you.

24 But since you refuse to listen when I call, and no one pays attention when I stretch out my hand;

25 since you disregard all my advice and don’t accept my rebuke,

26 I, in turn, will laugh when disaster strikes you;

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.

28 Then they will call me, but I will not answer; they will seek me earnestly, but they will not find me.

29 Because they hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the Eternal One;

30 Since they wouldn’t accept my advice, and they spurned my rebuke,

31 they’ll eat the fruit of their ways and their schemes.

32 For the waywardness of the simple will kill them, and the complacency of fools will destroy them.

33 But whoever listens to me will dwell securely, and will be quiet without fear of evil.”

- Translation adapted from multiple sources.
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.
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.
...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)
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 Ester 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.
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*
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 Shamai 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”). “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