IMAGING TORAH

A COMPANION STUDY GUIDE
To the film

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GENESIS

בראשית



BERESHEIS

How does It all begin? In Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism, there is the concept of *Tsimtsum* where Hashem (the name indicating G-d) opened the "space" for the world's formations. Everything started as NO thing and it was all One and then Hashem created the universe. Here is a spiral suggesting the emergence of the original dualities that make up our physical existence.

As sung in the lyrics of the film:
"From nothingness to…



Should we be here? According to some sages, there was a heavenly argument as to whether humans should be created. The angels of Truth and Justice opposed humans for what damage they would do, but Love and Righteousness defended them for the good they can do. Some midrash (interpretations of biblical texts) say the first humans were connected twins male and female to be separated like philosopher Plato thought as well. Here in the Gan Eden – the Garden of Eden are the tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and the tree of Life and above these trees the creation of the second day - the firmaments combining waters and fire and air - above and below. May we deserve the confidence of those supportive angels.



When we read in this Torah parshah (meaning “portion”) the first aliyah (meaning “called up” and there are seven of these to each parshah) we have such a positive feeling of creation. And it was good. Remarkable. A miracle. But two aliyahs later comes the beginning of our decline as a species. We kill our brother, we are self-centered, jealous, and deceitful. Even with the remarkable abilities we have been given, we destroy, often heartlessly, the wonders before us. According to the Zohar (the foundational spiritual work of Judaism) Adam was both male and female. He was given a book of wisdom. His skin colors here are the colors of the four worlds we live in simultaneously according to Kabbalah – the world of making/action, the world oi formation like dream and angels, the world of creation like the essential organic elements, and the world of emanation/closeness to G--d. Adam's behavior was so dishonorable, that he/she is forced out of Gan Eden, and the book was taken away from them and we lost a guidance for deep interconnection with all that is, with the past and with the future. May we remove our blinders and selfishness and recognize the gifts of life and act as one with creation, and then maybe that book will be returned for our guidance to a deep relationship with all that is, with the past and with the future. Then maybe that book will be returned for our guidance.



(I had planned a less disturbing image but after the horror of October 7, 2023 this emerged)

The beginnings offer the possibilities of joy and pain as well. We lived in the Garden of Eden and were expelled for foolish desires, kept out by an angel with a fiery sword and what happens next is our children killing each other. Here Adam and Eve mourn over the slain Abel by his jealous brother Cain. The Midrash speaks of them not knowing what to do with this dead body and then they observed a bird burying its own dead and learned from this creature. The sages say that this is in fact a pure form of kindness - caring for the dead body - for it is a one-sided giving as you get nothing back for your kindness. Could not that be why we are here? Kindness.



NOACH

Why don't we listen to the truth? Are we so self-absorbed that we can't acknowledge what is in front of us? Here Noah according to the Zohar was warning his neighbors that their destructive and immoral behavior would bring down their existence. They paid no attention and continued their perverse activities of violence and sexual promiscuity. Even before Noah was told to construct an ark, he cautioned his community to change their actions. In that society was the angel/giant Nephilim who lusted after humans. Their world was soon to be destroyed for not listening and not shifting their self-centeredness. We too in our time are not listening to the warnings of global warming and our potential destruction. It was too late for that time, is it too late for us?



Can we lead an ethical life? That was the question for the generations at the time of the flood. There were seven Noahide laws at the time: not to deny or destroy the Oneness of G-d; not to curse G-d for what happens; not to murder; not to eat a limb of a still living animal; not to steal; not to indulge in sexual abuse; and to have honest judges to ensure justice. People then were so vile that they would steal everything, even a pea. Note also the first sentient beings into the ark were birds as they are closer to the heavens. May we too soar in our compassion and selflessness.



Noah and his wife Na'amah day and night cared for the animals on board the ark. They set an example for us to care for all sentient beings. In the foreground is the phoenix which when Noah approached, he was bleeding from his mouth from exhaustion. The bird spoke to Noah saying: "You are so busy, do not bother with me." And Noah replied: "May it be the will of Hashem that you never die." So, the phoenix is always reborn. The second of the three floors was where the animals were kept and in this drawing you see some present animals that are facing extinction - rhinos, gorillas, orangutans, Asian elephants and one of many birds. The kosher animals rather than two were brought in seven pairs like the sheep here who were never attacked on board for the year by their former predators like tigers. The blood on Noah's leg though was from a lion who had not been fed in time, and Noah limped from then on. (All the way on the left is a dinosaur which from those who didn't believe in evolution thought were also on the ark!) As to surviving botany from the flood, some say that Na'amah took care of seeds and plants. The third floor was the quarters of Noah's family, his three sons, their wives and children. The bottom floor was for refuse.



What do we value? The end of this parshah tells the story of the tower of Babel. Under a totalitarian ruler people constructed this giant structure to challenge even G-d, rising it into the clouds (a thanks to the painter Bruegel whose masterpiece I have adopted). The subservient people were so obsessed with this project, that according to midrash, they valued the bricks more than life, and if a brick fell over, they were aghast and despairing, but if a man fell over they didn't care. What are we valuing today?



LECH LECHAH

This is a well-known midrash about Abraham. His father Terah was a maker of idols. Abraham realized that there is only one Creator. He wanted to convince others of this truth. And convince his father. So, he destroyed all the idols in his father's shop and put an axe in the hands of one he left standing. His father accused Abraham of smashing the idols, but he said it was all done by that idol holding the axe. His father said that was ridiculous. "These are just creations of wood and stone." "Exactly!" said Abraham. Nimrod, who was a despotic ruler, also challenged Abraham's belief. He said that Abraham should worship fire, but Abraham said water (rain in this drawing) puts out fire, so Nimrod said worship rain, but Abraham said that comes from clouds, then worship clouds, said Nimrod. Abraham said the clouds are blown away by the wind and who controls the wind?



Who protects us? Abraham, the first advocate of monotheism was tested by G-d. And one of his tests was, when he was confronted by Nimrod, who had the skin of the snake from the Garden of Eden, and wielded authoritarian deceitful power demanded that Abraham worship idols and even worship fire and. Abraham refused, so Nimrod had him thrown into a fiery furnace, but a miracle happened to Abraham and he was not burned whereas Nimrod's servants who came near the fire were consumed by it. May we not have to have a miracle to depend on for our survival, but if we are faced with horrible tests, may G-d be on our side.



What is beauty? The Zohar says that when Abraham and Sarah came to Egypt only then did notice that she was beautiful. What had he seen before this? He had seen their internal spiritual beauty. This transcends physical beauty. But here in Egypt, a culture submerged in imagery from its architecture to its sculpture and graphics, the physical had dominance. And now in this space Abraham saw Sarah's physical beauty. And he was also then afraid that others here would too and then want to take her. The story then speaks of his hiding her in a box to keep her from the ravenous Egyptians, but they would later discover her and deliver her to the Pharaoh. What happens next is in Torah where pharaoh was attacked by diseases as the Shekhinah – the feminine aspect of The Creator - was protecting Abraham and Sarah.



How to make the right decision? Here Abraham is confronted with making one. His barren wife Sarah has given him her handmaiden Hagar to, in a way, prove his masculinity by siring a child. But when Hagar becomes pregnant, she mocks Sarah continuously, so Sarah tells Abram to send Hagar away. What to do? Hashem tells him to listen to Sarah. Why? Because she is recognized as a holier prophet than him and she would become the progenitress of the Hebrew people, not Hagar - people promised to be expansive as the sands and the stars. Let us too listen to our righteous women and act.



VAYERA

How do we treat strangers? in our time it seems we are becoming more and more suspicious of the "other." But Abrahan honored by all the major religions had his tent open on all sides and greeted every stranger as an equal even washing their feet. The Zohar speaks of two trees next to Abraham's tent that responded to the goodness of the stranger. If they were kind and open a tree would extend its branches to provide shade. In this case Abraham was visited by three angels – Michael in white, Gabriel in red and Raphael in green, But Abraham just saw them as travelers to be cared for. The other tree, when selfish bigoted people arrived, its branches became barren and extended up. We could use those sensitive trees around us now.



How do you confront G-d? Here Abraham who was the first Hebrew to "speak" to the one and only G-d was said to have G-d literally emblazoned on his own body - here the tetragrammaton – *yud heh vov heh* – the Hebrew letters - unpronounceable name of G-d - is in on his flesh and he is surrounded by the four simultaneous worlds (colors) and the Shekhinah feminine spirit is crowning him. He has learned that five cities are to be destroyed for their people's cruelty. Abraham bargains with G-d suggesting if there were righteous people in each city should G-d destroy them too? From 50 Abraham negotiates down to 10. And here too is Sarah his wife who had laughed at the promise of a next generation. Our sages say each of us is a city in ourselves as here Sarah is composed of a city. So saving one of us is saving many.



Can we challenge G-d's intentions? Here, Abraham was warned by angels, who he took for strangers in need of food and comfort, and who later said that they would destroy the city of Sodom whose inhabitants were cruel to outsiders enslaving them and physically and sexually. But Abraham challenged G-d saying if there were even as few as ten just people there, shouldn't Hashem spare them? We too should have the courage to confront injustice and stand for righteousness. It is our reason for being here.



One of the most important moments in Torah is the *Akedah* – the sacrifice of Isaac. Here on the three-day journey to what is Mount Moriah, Abraham sees a cloud and a fire rising from the ground to the sky. Isaac who was in his thirties (not the kid often represented in this story) carried wood for a sacrifice and he too saw the flame. The two others on this journey were Ishmael, Isaac's brother from the handmaiden Hagar, and Eliezer, who was head of Abraham's household. Next to the donkey, they are compared to that beast that did not have vision to see miracles. These two did not see the spiritual metaphysical calling on the mount. Abraham carries a sacrificial knife and the embers for a fire. Isaac carrying the wood understood and accepted that he was to be the sacrifice.



This is the *Akedah* – the binding of Isaac. Here Abraham, about to carry out the command of Hashem to sacrifice his son, has tied Isaac's hands and feet and put him on the logs and stones they had both set up for a sacrifice on Mt. Moriah. What is fascinating is that Isaac was not young, as usually assumed, but he was actually 40 years old when this occurred. Above Abraham to his left is the angel Satan holding Sarah in the sky. Satan had objected to the idea of creating man in the first place as he warned that this being would pursue evil. Knowing that Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his beloved son was a commitment beyond expectation, Satan tried to stop it a number of times, finally lifting up Sarah into the sky so she could see what was about to happen and scream out a "no." On the top right the archangel Michael is heading to stop Abraham and below him caught in the thicket is a ram that will later be used as a substitute sacrifice.



CHAYEI SARAH

It's said all life is seeing. But seeing what? When Abraham sought to find an appropriate place to bury his treasured wife Sarah, he found the cave Machpelah and offered to purchase it from the Hittites who were idolaters. When they looked into the cave, all they saw was stone. When Abraham looked, according to the Zohar, he saw an opening in the distance to Gan Eden (the Garden of Eden) and he saw Adam who was the male/female from whom all humanity evolved. May we too be blessed with spiritual sight to appreciate the miracles in front of us.



One of the midrash about this parshah tells of the angel Michael who took Abraham to the spiritual realm where he saw two gates. One much larger than the other. He asked about them, and Michael said the larger one was for souls who had not realized their potentials, and the other for those who had accomplished this journey. Abraham saw a soul that seemed to be headed toward the larger gate and he asked Michael if there were a way to help this soul. Hope there is, if this happens to any of us.



Miracles? At times kindness itself is a miracle! In this week's parshah Eliezer, Abraham's representative, is sent to find someone who could be a wife for Abraham's son Isaac. Eliezer goes to an area where there was less idle worship, and when he comes to a well, he sees a young woman Rivkah who generously approaches him to offer him water, and then, unasked, she brings water to all of his ten camels. Eliezer realizes that she is exceptional in her open generosity and midrash says that the water from the well actually rose up to fill her jar. In any direction water is a miracle on this planet.

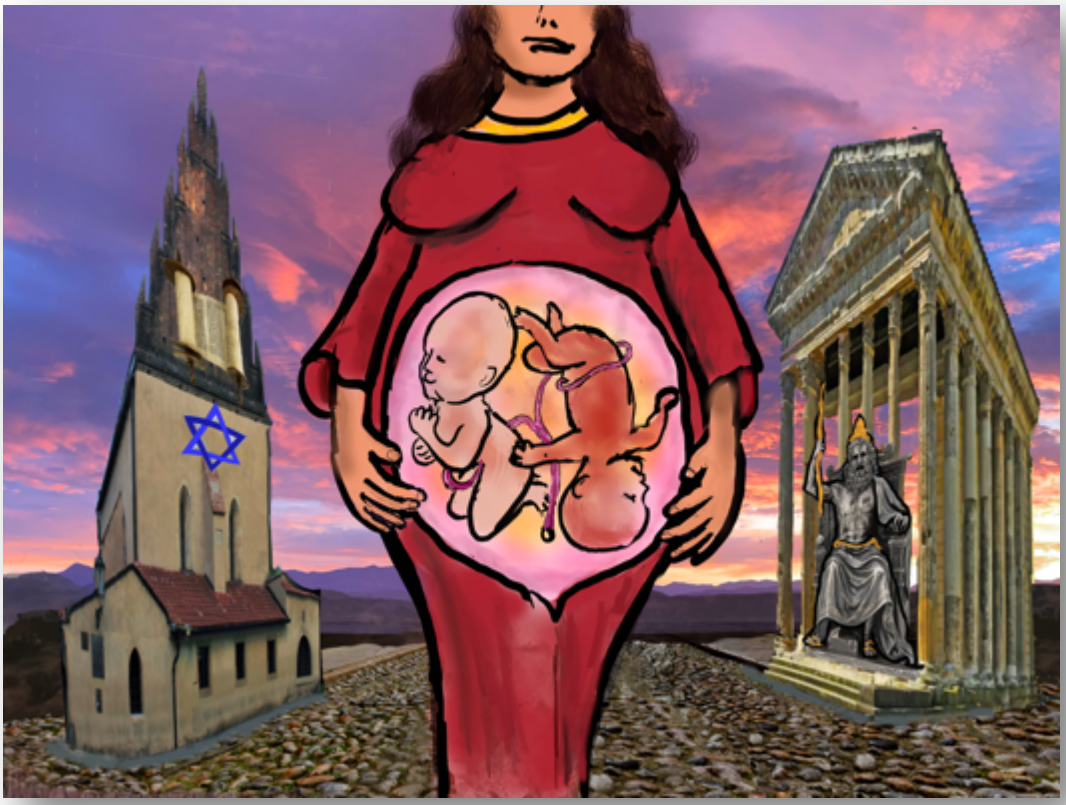


How to bring relatives in conflict together? Here Torah tells us that the opposing brothers Isaac and Ishmael came together to share burying their cherished father Abraham. A promise of the possibility of overcoming differences to recognize shared concerns. In the background are Hagar, Ishmael's mother, once shunned but had then been brought back, renamed Katura, to marry Abraham after Sarah died. Uniting families. But still a challenge as her children were told to keep a distance and some of them would later become enemies again of the Hebrew descendants of Abraham. We are still challenged to find ways to live together, even though we are all descendants of Abraham.



TOLDOT

Though this parshah concentrates on conflictual brothers, the Zohar also pays attention to Isaac here re-digging wells that had been destroyed by enemies of his father Abraham. Isaac doesn't get much attention. As his father Abraham is associated with bright light, Isaac is associated with the darker stormy perception, also necessary for survival, and were it not for Isaac we would not be here. He is the connection of the past with the future keeping the faith often represented by water. Water keeps us alive on the physical level and represents the flow of deep connections keeping us alive on spiritual levels. Torah is often compared to the flow of water. And in our history of triumphs and losses one well drawn here is associated with the fall of the first temple (Solomon's) and the second well has the reflection of the fall of the second temple (Herod's) but the third well is the promise of a future spiritual enlightened temple (and has the colors associated with the 10 sephirot that represent the emanations of existence). May we deserve this before we continue global warming and create droughts that destroy ourselves physically and spiritually.



This midrash is the well-known telling that when Rebecca (Rivka), Isaac's wife, was pregnant with twins, they struggled inside her. One was to be Esau and he was captivated by the gross and idolatry. The other was to be Jacob the forbearer of the Hebrew people. Inside her womb, when they passed various structures, Esau, who was reddish, would pull toward the false G-ds. And when passing a Jewish house of learning, Jacob would pull toward this space. May we too be pulled to spiritually evolving.



Who are we? Our choices? Or our heritage? Here Isaac and Rivkah have twins - Jacob and Esau, who was born red skinned and hairy. Two nations emerge from them, striving for different goals. One will follow the ethics of Torah and the other will pursue power at any expense. And they both will produce mighty leaders. From Jacob will come King Solomon who lived by the Torah and built the sacred temple and from Esau the dictator Hadrian who will destroy it. And later will come one of the greatest sages Yehuda Hanassi, the Prince, who wrote the Mishnah and from Esau the emperor Antoninus. And with these latter two is the promise of transcending the differences as they became colleagues, but it is said, not until the Messiah comes, will we again truly be close overcoming our differences.



When is a deception justified? That is the moral challenge of this consequential moment in Torah where Jacob, at the encouragement of his mother, fools his blind father Isaac to believing that he is his brother Esau in order to get his father's blessing. Esau himself was a constant liar and often heartless, where Jacob was deep in spirit and purpose, but it took wearing the disguise of the coat of Adam made by Hashem embedded with the animal kingdom and stolen by Esau, and having Jacob stick on hair on his hands to feel like Esau and even then it took two angels holding Jacob's arms encouraging him, to trick his father, for Jacob too knew the ethical paradox. When to tell a lie for the betterment of others.



VAYEITSEI

Setting boundaries - a vital concept in relationships whether between individuals or groups. And near the end of this week's parshah, the issue of boundaries comes up. Here Jacob lifts a large boulder (the issue of stones is a theme in Jacob's life - the Hebrew letters for stone are a combination of the words for father and children - uniting generations -and stones have been a sign for Jacob who placed them at his head before sleeping in the wild where they combined to be one stone and an access to the famed ladder where Jacob realized Hashem was in this place) - and now with this large boulder, Jacob creates a boundary between him and his unscrupulous father in law, the devious Laban, with the agreement that neither shall cross this boundary with an intention of doing evil. And behind Jacob are his sons who will add stones to support him and enlarge this mound.



Where are we? Really. Here Jacob, now on the run from his threatening brother, has come through Charan known as a place of wrath. He sets before him on top of rocks, connecting the depth with the heights, four sets of sacred stones suggesting the four directions. It is here where he will lie as the sun sets and it is here where he will have the ladder dream and when awake Jacob says “G-d was in this place and I; I didn’t know.” But now he knows. Hashem is everywhere in every direction and where we stand is in the middle of it all. This place is said to be where the Temple would be built. And those stones each became associated with the sons of Jacob who became Israel. The Zohar has various versions, and one suggests that the fallen angel Samuel wants continually to distract us from who and what and where we are by disguising itself, in this case as a harlot. May we not be deceived by short lived indulgences and rather have the will of Jacob to focus on what is true and what connects us to higher consciousness and contributive actions.



One midrash on this parshah has a surprising twist on the angels that ascended and descended on the ladder during Jacob's "dream." As the 12 rocks he placed under his head supposedly stones from the altar on which his father Isaac was almost sacrificed, these 12 suggest his 12 sons and the tribes to then emerge from them. These stones melted into one object that became a soft pillow for him to lie on. And the angels - the types mentioned in Torah and Haftorah - the cherubim with four heads, the seraphim with six wings and bright as fires, and the ophanim - all these angels (Hebrew translates actually as messengers - *melach*im) were actually descending and ascending on Jacob's body - like jumping up and down on him to "wake" him up to his spirituality and his purpose. The color yellow is associated with Jacob and the Kabbalah sephirah of *tiferet* - balance, harmony. The purple of some of the angels is associated with the world of their origin - *Yetzirah* - the world of formation and dreams.



How to make sense of dreams? Here we have the well-known story of Jacob, fleeing the wrath of his brother, and sleeping, they say, on the very mountain that will be where Hashem will give the Torah. Jacob has the dream of the ladder, which dream has been variously interpreted for millennia! Besides the angels ascending and descending, some say there are only four rungs to the ladder, each representing one of the worlds that we live in simultaneously: red for the world of making - our world of the senses, purple for the world of formation, sometimes thought as the place of dreams, blue for the world of creation possibly made of the minuscule essential elements both literally and spiritually that make up the universe, and yellow for emanation which is the undefinable connection to the higher power of creation itself. Also, it is said that four of the arrogant domineering leaders of historical societies fell from the ladder because of their selfishness and cruelty, which included the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks and the Romans, all whose imperial societies have disappeared.

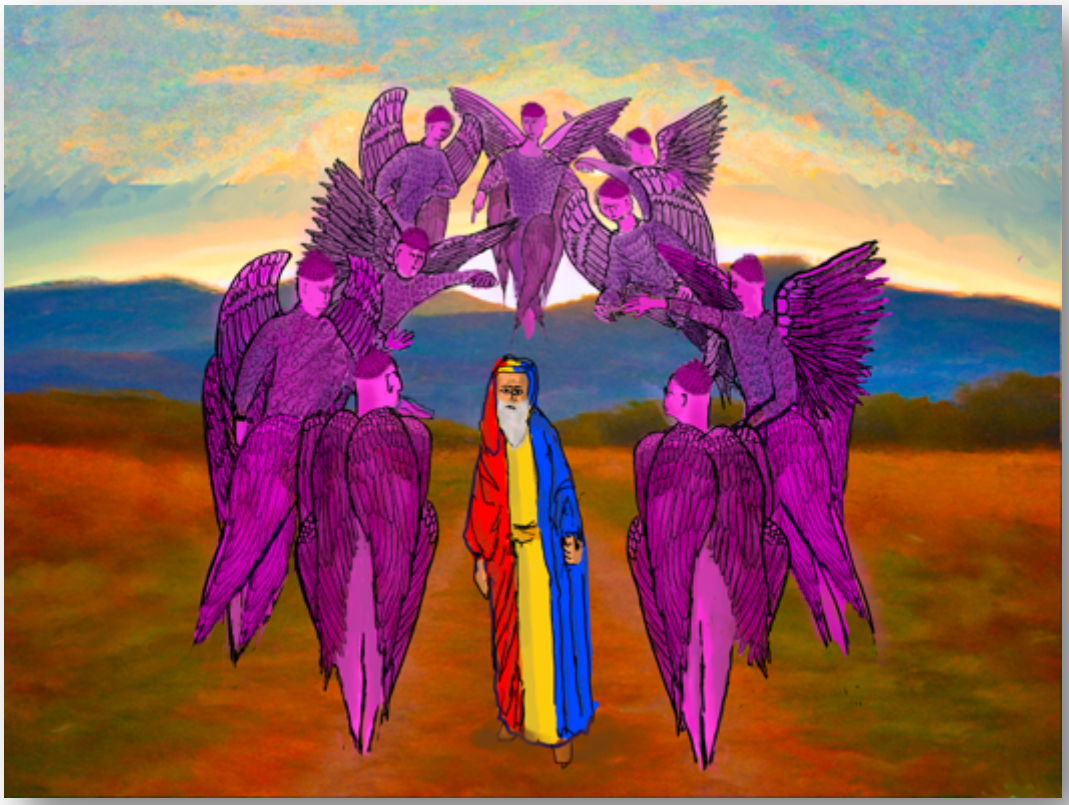


VAYISLACH

What is the value of possessions? In this parshah Jacob, wanting to protect his family, has put them on one side of a river, and now he is said to be “alone.” A permutation of that Hebrew word, is also the word for “jar.” There was a jar that Jacob left on the other side of the river, and he went to retrieve it. Why does this object have importance? Possessions are memories. If we have them we should care for them. But are they items for the future? In this case, this particular jar was to be the jar that Moses will use to anoint his brother Aaron to be high priest and his sons as well and will be used later to anoint the various kings of Israel, including David and Solomon and the prophets Elijah and Elisha. Did Jacob foresee the significance of this object? Are there objects that we have that will make a difference in someone else’s future? The dark angel above will soon wrestle with Jacob to determine his future.



Who was the being that Jacob wrestled through the night into the dawn? Some sages say it was Jacob's brother Esau's angel. Esau had gathered a group to wreak revenge on his brother. Others say it was a messenger (the translation of the Hebrew *malak*h which is the word used in Torah) from Hashem challenging the faith of Jacob. The dust from their battle rose up to the higher worlds. From dust we come and to dust we go and, in the process, we may transform from the material to the spiritual. Others say it was Jacob wrestling with his inner demon like we often do. When the *malakh* touched the ground sparks of fire rose up. When Jacob lifted it off the ground it lost its power. Sages say that the m*alakh* grabbed Jacob's penis to wound him, but this part of the story got "cleaned up" later to be his thigh. Jacob had separated his family and possessions like these small jars on the two sides of the Jabbok river to protect at least one of the groups. When we battle our opponents best to prepare for unexpected consequences.



Who protects us? The Zohar speaks about angels being around us to guide us. Jacob being our third and, in many ways, the more significant in our ancestors is shown here as described in the Zohar as a combination of his forefather patriarch Isaac (represented by red) and Abraham (represented by blue). The color associated with Jacob is yellow in Kabbalah is related to the sephirot *tiferet* which is centered in the Tree of Life associated with balance and harmony. As Jacob approached a confrontation with his angered brother who has a troop of 400, Jacob is said to have been surrounded by a company of angels to aid and encourage him. May we too earn the help of spiritual messengers on our journeys.



What to do when confronting a potential enemy? Preparation! In this week's parshah Jacob is about to encounter his brother Esau after two decades of separation and death threats from Esau. So, Jacob has a threefold plan - first prayer - acknowledging THAT which truly determines our present and future, asking that Hashem help him through difficulties; second, offering gifts (OK maybe not a wrapped Bundt cake) - Jacob did offer herds of his animals as a peace-making gesture; and third, as a last resort Jacob was ready to fight. Jacob had just left his duplicitous father-in-law Laban compared to a lion and was about to face Esau compared to a bear.



VAYEISHEV

One of the striking aspects of all of our Torah ancestors is their acknowledged failures in their characters. This makes them human and allows us to realize that even those we deeply admire have weaknesses, just like we do. So, we can strive to improve without reaching for perfection. They certainly weren't perfect and yet made great contributions. Here we find the young Joseph, favored by his father Jacob, accusing his brothers of foul behavior that wasn't true. Being the favorite of his father, he was given special gifts. We know one as a coat of many colors, but this is a gross mistranslation of the Hebrew that has other meanings like "long cloak with long sleeves." Some say it was embroidered and mostly white. Note that the very handsome boy was conscious of his good looks and painted his eyes. He had a big ego that almost cost him his life, and in his subsequent degradatyion and imprisonment, he learned humility and the source of all strength – Hashem.



Joseph's brother at first plot to kill him but Reuven the eldest suggests they throw him in a well surrounded by scorpions and snakes. As with some disasters they can lead to new possibilities. In this case the brothers decide to sell Joseph to Ishmaelites travelling on camels and this sale takes Joseph to Egypt where other turns of circumstances and Hashem's intentions lead him to become powerful person there. How many times have we felt in the depths wondering if there is a way out? What can come from this suffering? In Joseph case it becomes an avenue of growth. Will tough times be that for us?



Who is there to help us? In this parshah Joseph has been sold into slavery and is being beaten for crying for help. On the roadside his captors and he passed the grave of his mother Rachel and, shedding tears, he fell down by the small tombstone. Below ground he sensed the presence of Rachel who promises him salvation, and a storm rises up, frightening his captors who realize there is a power that is protecting Joseph. May we too gain help from our ancestors.



Joseph is bought Potiphar a high ranking official. Joseph proves himself to be an astute manger and Potiphar appoints him head of his household. Joseph was said to be very handsome, and Potiphar's wife wanted to have sex with him. In Torah the words and the accent on one of them suggests that Joseph may have been tempted and even turned on, but resisted when he looked into the woman's face and saw his father's face. That would put most of us off desire. Potiphar's wife grabbed ahold of Joseph's tunic and ripped it off him and later claimed that he had tried to rape her. He was sent to prison where he interpreted dreams and would, after years there, be brought before Pharaoh.



In prison he volunteered help to two other prisoners who were bothered by their dreams. He interpreted them with Hashem's guidance which he acknowledged. On the left is the chief baker accused for a stone found in Pharaoh's rolls, and now dreaming of carrying three baskets on his head attacked by birds. To this Joseph predicted a bad end for the baker that indeed occurred. On the right is the chief butler here for a fly found in Pharaoh's wine. He dreams of branches blooming into ripe grapes pouring into Pharaoh's cup which Joseph interpreted as fortuitous which indeed came true.

In front of Joseph on the floor are the symbols of the sephirot suggesting he was familiar with Kabbalah.



MIKETZ

How many steps must we take to confront power with truth? In Joseph's case, after two years in prison, he is suddenly released to come into Pharaoh's presence to interpret his dreams. There were seventy steps leading up to the throne, each one representing a different culture and language. Since few people knew more than two or three, they couldn't get close to the power person. But the night before the midrash says an angel educated Joseph in all the languages, like the downloading scenes in the movie The Matrix, and Joseph could now step right up to the Pharaoh, and the last language he spoke was Hebrew which Pharaoh did not himself know. So, Joseph's greeting of "shalom Aleichem" confused Pharaoh and he was intimidated by Joseph, fearing his confidence. Joseph explained that this was the original language. Joseph's knowledge impressed this megalomaniacal leader. May wisdom and truth triumph over ignorance and power-driven megalomaniacs.



The Zohar has much to say about dreams and how and who interprets them. When Pharaoh learned that there was a reliable interpreter, he had Joseph quickly released from jail to hear his understanding. Joseph (whose sephirot color is purple associated with Yesod - connections) here explains to Pharaoh that he is not the source of interpretation but that he is channeling what Hashem shares. And in Zohar the seven fat cows that predicted seven years of abundance were also representing the seven lower sephirot (aspects of Hashem that create our world, each with a color associated with it) that were flowing from the Holy One for the health of the land. Pharoah couldn't see this, but Joseph did. The cows coming from the water the Zohar relates to Joseph who is associated with the rivers and the flow of Hashem's gift of water to all of us coming rom the sky, here in the image flowing into the river.



Who are we meant to be with? In this parshah which is mostly devoted to Joseph dealing with his brothers, there is also a sentence mentioning his marriage to Asenath. Some say she was the daughter of Potiphar‘s wife who had tried to seduce Joseph. She had an astrological chart that predicted powerful people would emerge from her, but this was meant for her daughter. Others say she was Dinah the raped sister of Joseph’s brothers, who was later adapted by this Egyptian family. Now Joseph, having risen to Viceroy and described as incredibly handsome, would ride through the streets and women would come to the balconies, throwing their jewelry at him to get his attention, and one jewel that he caught had written the Hebrew letters for G-d, and he looked up to see whose that was, and that was how he and Asaneth connected - through G-d with archangel Michael helping to manipulating this encounter. May we too be guided by The One to ones we will love.



Who is innocent? The midrash tells this story about Joseph's brothers who had sold him into slavery and years later had come to Egypt to get food during the times of the famine that Joseph had predicted. That prediction freed Joseph from prison and raised him to be a viceroy to the Pharaoh, unbeknownst to his brothers. Joseph recognized them, but they didn't recognize him, and in their encounters, Joseph has his silver goblet secretly stuffed into the bag of the youngest brother Benjamin. When accused of theft by Joseph's representative (his son Manasseh) and when the object is found in Benjamin's sack, his brothers attack him, beating him on his shoulders. Joseph was testing them to see if they had developed a heart of forgiveness, which they didn't have when they threw Joseph in a pit. And here they still were too quick to bad judgement. Their maturity will happen, but not yet. We sometimes have to go through our own negativity to develop compassion.



VAYIGASH

Who are we? Maybe we are defined by how we relate to each other. Here was a confrontation between Joseph and his brother Judah. Joseph had been sold by his brothers and after many misfortunes including imprisonment, he was released to interpret pharaoh's dreams warning him of an impending environmental disaster. Joseph became Viceroy assigned to deal with the oncoming famine. When his brothers came down to Egypt for supplies, Joseph imprisoned the youngest brother Benjamin to see how his brothers would now react to a similar situation they had perpetrated on him. Judah demanded the release of Benjamin, not knowing that Joseph was his brother. Judah stomped the ground so firmly that Egyptian structures collapsed. As he was about to reach for his sword, Joseph warned him of his own more powerful strength. In the midrash Judah, with hairs bursting from his heart and a grinding a copper coin to increase his power, he is compared to a lion. Joseph is compared to a bull like ox.



There are tears of Joy and tears of grief. In the Zohar when Joseph reveals himself to his brothers and then embraces his younger brother Benjamin, it says in Torah text that he kissed his neck and cried. Were these the tears of joy brought on from reconnecting to a loved one? Or were they more than that? The Zohar says that he also saw on Benjamin's neck the sad future of the disappearance of the tribes and the destruction of the Holy Temples and inevitable diaspora of the Jewish people. The greatest of visionary dreamers foretold history and cried for the oppressions Jews would suffer in the past and even now. The journey is not smooth but through grace and our actions we survive.



How to deal with sadness and shock? Music soothes the soul. For 22 years Jacob mourned what he believed was the death of his son Joseph whose tunic was given to Jacob covered in blood to confirm Joseph's death. But it was not true. And when his other sons learned this, they were concerned as to how to present this to their father without making him ill. It was decided that the daughter of his son Asher, Serah , would play the harp in Jacob's tent and, in her song, sing the words "Joseph is alive." Outside the tent other sons wait to see how Jacob takes the news. May good news be shared with us so kindly.



Are there still miracles? During the times of our Torah ancestors there definitely were. Here elder Jacob has come to reunite with Joseph, once he thought dead but now Viceroy to Pharaoh, whom now Jacob meets. The miracle here is the entrance to the throne room had a very low top lintel so all who came in had to bow low. But not Jacob. The lintel rose up cracking and let Jacob enter standing, as it did in the past for Abraham when he met Pharaoh. To the right the giant Og points out this miracle which he knew had happened to Abraham. May we appreciate the miracles, for we are surrounded by them.



VAYECHI

Familial tensions. We all have them. They had them. Particularly the sons of Jacob. The brothers. And we all know the story of how, jealous of the favorite, Joseph (a parent should avoid favoritism as the consequences are problematic!), his brothers were willing to kill him, but on the recommendation of Judah (in blue) they agreed to sell Joseph. Reuben (in red) had hoped to stop this but was too late. The brothers first threw Joseph into a pit. And from that pit, with all kinds of unexpected twists in his journey, Joseph rose to become the Viceroy in Egypt. One midrash tells that after all the brothers attended their father Jacob's funeral, on the return they came upon that very pit they had thrown Joseph into, and Joseph stopped and prayed by this hole. The brothers were fearful that Joseph might now take revenge on them. But Joseph's prayer was a thanksgiving for the journey, even the horrors, dangers, and pain, as this led to his empowerment, where he could save many others from famine, including his family. So, here he was giving thanks to the pit that began it all. Can we be grateful for the bad events in our lives?



How do we bless the next generations? This parshah has the famous blessing that the ill Jacob gives to his grandchildren. Unexpectedly, he put the more powerful hand, his right hand, on the youngest brother Ephraim. But his wishes still were for both Ephraim and older Manasseh including that they be like the fish in the sea: that they and their descendants be abundant and like fish whose eyes are always open, so we are able to see the truth and keep moving! May we be able to bless the next generations as we have been blessed.



After blessing his sons, death enveloped Jacob gently and instead of this being the Angel of Death it was the Shekhinah which is the feminine aspect of Hashem extending into the world of time and space. The easiest transition through death is said to be having the Shekhinah kiss you as happened to Jacob, and it is compared to removing a hair from a glass of milk.

In Kabbalistic thought, as we die, the higher sephirot energy centers rise from the body – the *guf* – reuniting with the higher soul called the *neshomah*. These colored discs represent the upper six sephirot leaving Jacob's body in this graceful exit

EXODUS
שמות



SHEMOT

Who will save the children? That is the challenge in this week's parshah. Pharaoh, scared of losing his power, has demanded the death of all male Hebrew children. His soldiers search for them, but when near the children, the earth covers them up, protecting them.

Note that the midrash says the Jewish women would have healthy sextuplets at that time, and that rocks would seep out honey to feed the hidden children. Hashem performed wonders then. May that happen now and may we too do what we can to help children.



This is a well-known midrash about the young Moses being a threat in the future to Pharaoh. So, to test this danger, they set before Moses objects. There are varying opinions on what these were - a gold rock, or an onyx which also varies in color. The one thing agreed on was there was a fiery red coal. If his hand went toward the rich stone, he would be a danger, and Pharaoh would have him killed. Next to Pharaoh was his daughter who had rescued Moses. On the other side were Pharaoh's advisors Balaam and Jethro. As Moses moved his hand, the other attendee was a disguised archangel Gabriel who influenced Moses to move toward the coal, but unexpectedly, not only did Moses' hand head for it, relieving Pharaoh of his fear, Moses suddenly picked it up and put it in his mouth and from then on, he stuttered. His brother Aaron would do the speaking for him.

s



The Zohar speaks of Moses as a caring shepherd who would seek out and carry a lost lamb, but on this afternoon, he was moved to take the flock into a desert area and above him there appeared birds near a cave and in this cave was what we all know as the burning bush, but the Zohar emphasizes that at first there was an angel that called to him within this miracle. Moses left the flock and approached the cave. The Zohar also speaks of birds falling to the ground. It doesn't explain this phenomenon but in a way, it is a commentary on the freedom that these creatures have to soar, but before the Holy One, all abilities dissolve in awe of the Oneness.



How to deal with a miracle? What would you do? Moses at first hid his eyes. Then he questioned why this was happening to him. And then he asked who is doing this? The reply was "*eh-yeh*" sometimes translated as both present and future - "I will be" and "I am." Other miracles occurred to convince him like his staff becoming a snake, his hand being leprous and that disappearing, all motivated by G-d's thorn bush that wouldn't burn. May we too be blessed with the fire that doesn't consume but enlightens.



VA’ERA

The Zohar speaks to the exceptional connections the patriarchs had with Hashem and on the levels of the higher worlds their beings were open to receiving spiritual guidance. And Moses being the most evolved of all the patriarchs with eyes closed radiating cosmic energy was able to experience what the Zohar describes as the three colors of something eye-like with the black mirror pupil an access to joining with the Holy One and the image was surrounded by the symbols in the waking world of fire to the north, water to the south, wind to the east and the earth to the west.



What does it take to get the message? This parshah begins with the wonders that Hashem sent to the autocrat Pharaoh that he should let the Hebrews free. The midrash talks about that first plague of blood and that it wasn't just in the Nile but it seeped from the walls and pillars of Pharaoh's palace. It even oozed from a fruit when squeezed, So would Pharoah listen? He didn't. How much do we have to be reminded of what is right before we do it.



There is a midrash about the second plague: that it began with only one frog. A very big one! But just one. The Egyptians attacked it and with each hit burst out the multitudes of frogs that then smothered the country. One commentary is this is what happens when you get angered and go on an attack which only escalates the situation. Here's another interpretation: all the plagues were alarm calls for the Egyptians and their leadership to abandon slavery, their ignorance and superstitions, and awaken to the wonder of Hashem. The plagues were all supernatural occurrences. So, the appearance of one gigantic frog might be such a wake-up call, but they didn't see or listen, they just attacked to preserve their own blind corruption. They couldn't perceive the miracle in front of them - a wonder and a warning.



What does it take to believe in wonders? Here was the seventh plague. The one that finally got Pharoah to realize that this was beyond the power of him and his necromancers to create - the fire in hail that crushed trees and animals. A mix that science can't accept - opposites together. Moses was to raise his hand and the sky then burst in storm and lightning of the inexplicable. There are times when we need the power of the unexpected and unknown to squash the authoritarians.



BO

What does it take for us to see the truth? Here in this parshah, the second to last plague confronts this issue. The plague was darkness where Pharaoh and the Egyptians literally couldn't see what was in front of them. But the midrash reports that they could see the Hebrews who, even when enslaved, were able to celebrate their being together and were not faced with the darkness. May our eyes open to the gifts of presence and community and Hashem's protection.



Who is there to watch over us? The midrash on the last plague speaks of when the Hebrews marked their doorposts and lintel with blood, and their ancestors emerged to protect and guide them. Abraham and Sarah are above the lentil - the color associated with them is blue and the spiritual essence (sefirah) is "*chased*" - kindness. Isaac is to the left and his color is red and the sefirah is "*gevura*" - discipline. And on the right is Jacob whose color is yellow and whose sefirah is "*tiferet*"- harmony. It is also said that the Egyptian dogs did not bark as they were in awe of this grave consequential night. May we too have the protection of our ancestors.



As Hashem is unmanifest, unknowable, immutable, Hashem, of course, has no physical attributes; but others including our sages sometimes use phrases like the hand of Hashem. And in the last plague, Hashem participated directly in protecting us from the angel of death. The color purple is associated with the *Olam Yetzirah* – the second world of the four we live in simultaneously, which is connected with a more metaphysical dream consciousness world. Here the family has prepared the protection of their home with the hyssop used to spread the sacrificial blood of the animal placed on the doorposts of their home to have this angel of death pass them by.



This midrash adds another miracle to the final plagues in this parshah. On the night of the last destructive plague, not only were the Hebrews protected by Hashem's hand from the minister of death, they were also transported on clouds to celebrate the first Pesach in the Holy Land, for there was the only place the proper sacrifices could be made. After they had eaten, they were returned via clouds to Egypt to then on the ground begin their exodus. May we too be helped and transported to meet the challenges of true freedom



BESHALACH

The Zohar in this parshah tells of the Hebrew people heading toward freedom but coming to the raging waters of the *Yam Suph* – the Red Sea. They are guarded by the pillar of smoke in the day and fire in the night and in each of these is one of the patriarchs. On the right is Abraham associated with *chesed* – kindness; and on the left is Isaac associated with *gevura* – discipline. Combining these aspects creates a balance in being. Hovering above them all is that manifestation of Hashem in the protective feminine dwelling form of the Shechinah. And above all of them are the fifty gates of the sephiaht *Bina,* understanding. In the desert the Israelites will develop fifty aspects of their spiritual character, making them ready to connect to Hashem.



How do we confront fear? Here the Hebrews finally leaving 210 years of slavery have arrived at the churning *Yam Suf* - Red Sea - and now what? In the desert here comes the infuriated Pharaoh with his chariots bound to recapture the Hebrews. Moses prays to Hashem for guidance and one of the protective clouds following the Hebrews is blocking the Egyptian charge in darkness, but will that stop them? Then Nachshon, one of the leaders of the tribe of Judah, decides to leap into the waters heading forward up to his neck, willing to risk everything for freedom. What follows is the parting of this sea and the escape of the Hebrews. May we too have the courage to step forward.



The Hebrews crossed the *Yam Suf* – the Red Sea – but what is depicted here is that there were twelve passageways through the chambers of the water – for each of the twelve tribes. And as they walked through, they could see each other as if looking through glass walls and the water walls also had fruits and food suspended so they could eat as they walked. Miriam Moses' sister sang a song of praise for the miracles of Hashem.

Moses lifts his staff the center of which contained the energies from a deeper realm of being – *Yetzirah* – the world of formation.



Who and how do we thank for the miracles in our lives? In this parshah the Hebrews thank Hashem in song for saving their lives from the pursuing Egyptians who drown in the *Yam Suf* - their bodies thrown on the shore to prove their demise. And the angel Gabriel shows a child buried in a brick as an example of the cruelty of this authoritarian hateful regime that murdered children and actually put them in the bricks. These horrors committed by the Egyptian and their leaders was deserving their destruction. In the song the Hebrews praise the "hands" of Hashem that guided them and protected the young and eliminated the enemy. May we too be protected in this time from evil rulers and threats to humanity.



The Torah speaks of two pillars, one of smoke and one of fire, that led the children of Israel to the promised land. One midrash speaks of there actually being seven pillars. One that was in front of the people, four that were in each of the cardinal points, one that was above them that protected them from too much heat and other inclement weather, and one that was at their feet which also protected them in this case from snakes and scorpions. Wouldn't it be a gift if we too are surrounded with protection and guidance.



YITRO

This is the most significant parshah of the Torah for here was the revelation – the delivery of the Torah to the Hebrew people. Mountains argued that they be the place to receive this honor. Mount Tabor, Hermon, and Carmel stood up, but Hashem chose a small mountain – Sinai – as a symbol of humility. Moses was intimidated feeling unready to represent the people, but in a midrash it speaks of his being picked up by a cloud taking him toward Sinai. But powerful angels objected to humans being given this deep truth. Who is humankind to deserve this? These angels are described as enormous. One like Hadraniel spewed forth fire scaring Moses to tears. But Hashem intervened and said that humans would receive the gift of truth and Torah, and how they deal with this would then be their choice.



Have you ever seen sound? Here at the base of Mount Sinai, the Hebrews experienced an amazing blending of sight and sound - synesthesia. They saw the sound blasting from an eternal shofar. Sound as form and color. All the senses merging into the Oneness. May we be given such sight.



All the tribes gathered at Mt. Sinai for what surely was the most significant moment in their history where they all at the same time experienced a spiritual revelation. All the letters and words of the *matan* Torah – the giving of the Torah - and the ten declarations or ten commandments happened simultaneously as a synesthetic event they heard what they saw and saw what they heard. Even the unborn children in their mothers were aware of this miracle. All were double crowned for their commitment to the truth of the Oneness of the Creator. As Moses stepped onto the mountain to receive the revelation, the mountain itself was ablaze with fire and smoke and it rose up and would soon hover over all the people gathered there. The fires are known as spiritual fire and here they have formed the structure of two triangles with one heading up and the other down and together they combine to be the "*mogen david*" – the star of David. At the base of the mountain are altars for each of the 12 tribes and one in the center that represents the four worlds Kabbalah speaks about. As the sky was lit up with lightning and thunder and hail, thousands of angels seen here in purple on the arcs of blue as they shouted the praises of Hashem. The letters in the thick cloud are the first words of the first commandment "*yud heh vov heh*"" – the unpronounceable name of Hashem Above are ram horns in whose center is a series of concentric circles which is another representation of the sephirot.



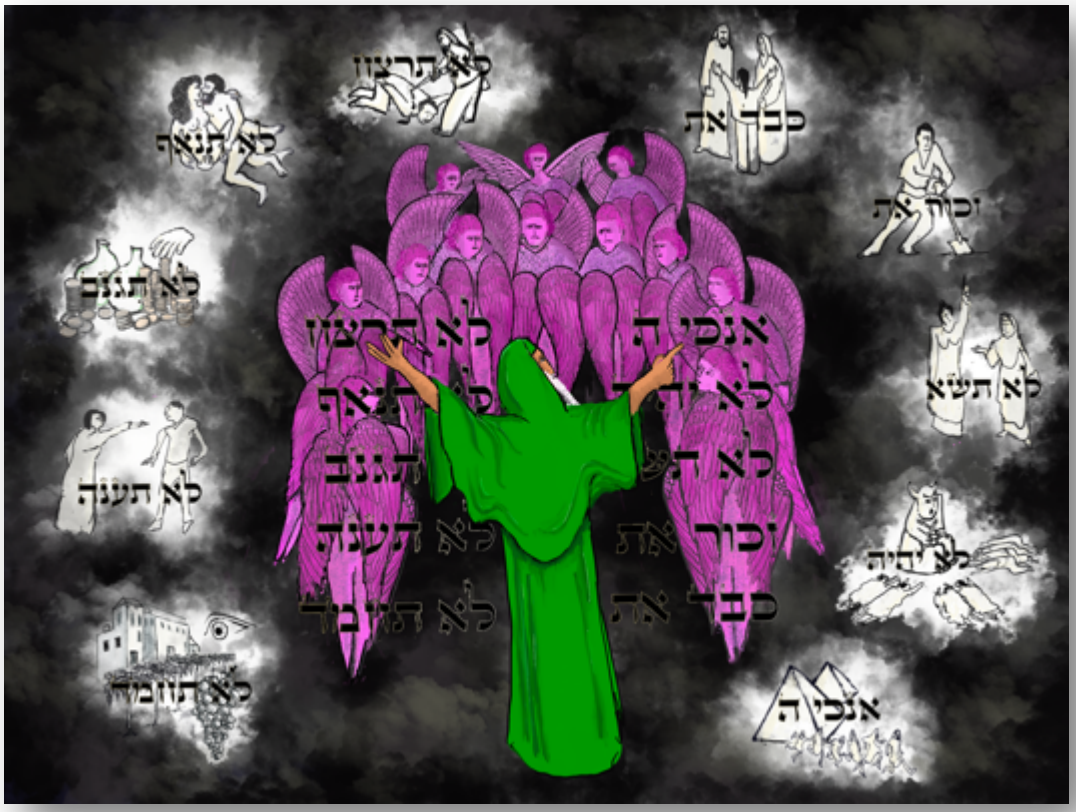
Moses went to the top of Sinai and the mountain split lifting above the mass of gathered Hebrews below who were surrounding Sinai. In a state of synesthesia revelation, they saw and heard simultaneously, amidst the fiery mountain, the words of Hashem, accompanied by the blast of a shofar and lighting and the blackening clouds, as these engulfed Moses for his personal conversation with Hashem. What is heard is *ani*" I am -"*yud heh vov heh*"" – the unpronounceable name of Hashem indicating endless mercy and wisdom – " *Elohim"* - the word associated with G-d as the supreme power.



The Zohar speaks to this most important parshah of the giving of the Ten Utterances – the Ten Commandments. It's said that the first items created were the Hebrew letters. Once the earth and heavens were made, the "hands" of Hashem would engrave two sapphire tablets from two drops of dew and the letters of the soon to be words flew to the tablets, the one on the right with white letters on black fire and the other black letters carried by white fire. The tablets themselves contain the illuminated sephirot as well.



The midrash comments that Hashem told Moses on the top of Mount Sinai that he should go down and tell the people how to prepare for the giving of the Torah and specifically to speak to the women before the men and to address them gently. But with the men, they had to be taught in a stern manner. Why the women first? The sages offer various reasons including that the women, thus distinguished, would take on the education of children with greater effort, and that the Hebrews were redeemed from Egypt because of the merit of righteous women.



The angels did not want the Torah to be given to humans and complained about the presence of a mortal amongst them. Moses was told by Hashem to respond and he argued that each of the ten commandments were declared for us, not for angels, as they don't covet, or give false testimony, or steal, or commit adultery, or kill, and they have no parents to honor, nor do they work needing a Shabbos, nor do they take the name of Hashem in vain, or worship other G-ds, nor were they there when the Hebrews were in slavery and then freed by Hashem. Moses queried: how then do these ten statements apply to you angels? The angels acknowledged the truth of Moses's words. Yes, humans are often unappreciative of the gift of life and behave poorly toward others, and the ethics of Torah therefore is a guide to overcome these negative behaviors.



MISHPATIM

When do we say “yes” and mean it? Here at Mount Sinai where the revelation of G-d’s Oneness touched all who were there, they said “we will do and we will listen” and sages comment that above them were Hashem’s “feet” on a sapphire brick path surrounded by dark and light clouds reflecting the journey of the Hebrew people, and below they were double crowned, celebrating their commitment to good deeds and expanding understanding. May we deserve the crowns for how we live.



This parshah is filled with instructions on how to live fairly with other human beings. Some of these laws are archaic and specific to those times, but many are useful for our times. One that stands out in Exodus 23:5 is that if your enemy's donkey collapses from too much weight, it is your responsibility to help. Help your enemy? The midrash even speaks of helping him pile up his animal as well if you see they are having difficulties. What is this about? It is about being human and recognizing we share life and problems and if we help where we can, maybe the enemy may become a friend. A story of when this was done tells of the enemy being surprised and grateful, and then asked his opponent to join him for a shared drink. It is also about caring for other sentient beings like the struggling animal. We live in a time where almost 30% of the living species are threatened to extinction. We are responsible for caring for them too.



TERUMAH

This week's parshah is about the construction of the Mishkan - a physical reflection of the order and purpose of the holy structure of our lives. It is filled with symbols like the menorah made from one nugget of gold that formed first in four burning colors which then became the seven-armed golden menorah reminding us that we are made from One. Its arms extend upwards with meanings for each of its parts. It is said to represent the human mind grounded in the visible and reaching for the heavens and once lit, bringing back to us wisdom and love. Each of the 22 upsides down goblets has emblazoned on it the Hebrew letters and aims downward to have blessings flow toward us, and each of the seven arms speak to the seven Torah sections (according to some sages rather than five} and these arms are associated with the physical and spiritual characteristics of the sephirot - reaching upwards. Each associated with a planet and constellation, and all aimed to connect with Hashem.



What do symbols mean? Here in this parshah one of the stranger structures is described - a table for showbread that miraculously stayed warm through the week and was eaten by the Kohanim – the priests - who would find sustenance from a small crump like the small manna that fed the Hebrews for years in the desert. So may our homes even while eating be places to speak Torah and be protected by Hashem's angels and provide us with sustenance as those showbread loaves formed into "faces" reminding us of those who came before to generate our survival.



The Hebrews are instructed to build the Mishkan - a holy place in the middle of their community where the spiritual meets the physical. There are various objects mentioned in this parshah Terumah that are in the Mishkan including the covering that is to be on top of the ark that contains the tablets of the ten utterances (commandment). This material and the colors mentioned in a midrash are connected to an animal forty five feet large with six vibrant hues on its shaggy coat. Sometimes called a *tachash* it had one horn and came to Moses, here in green, to offer up its skin for the covering.

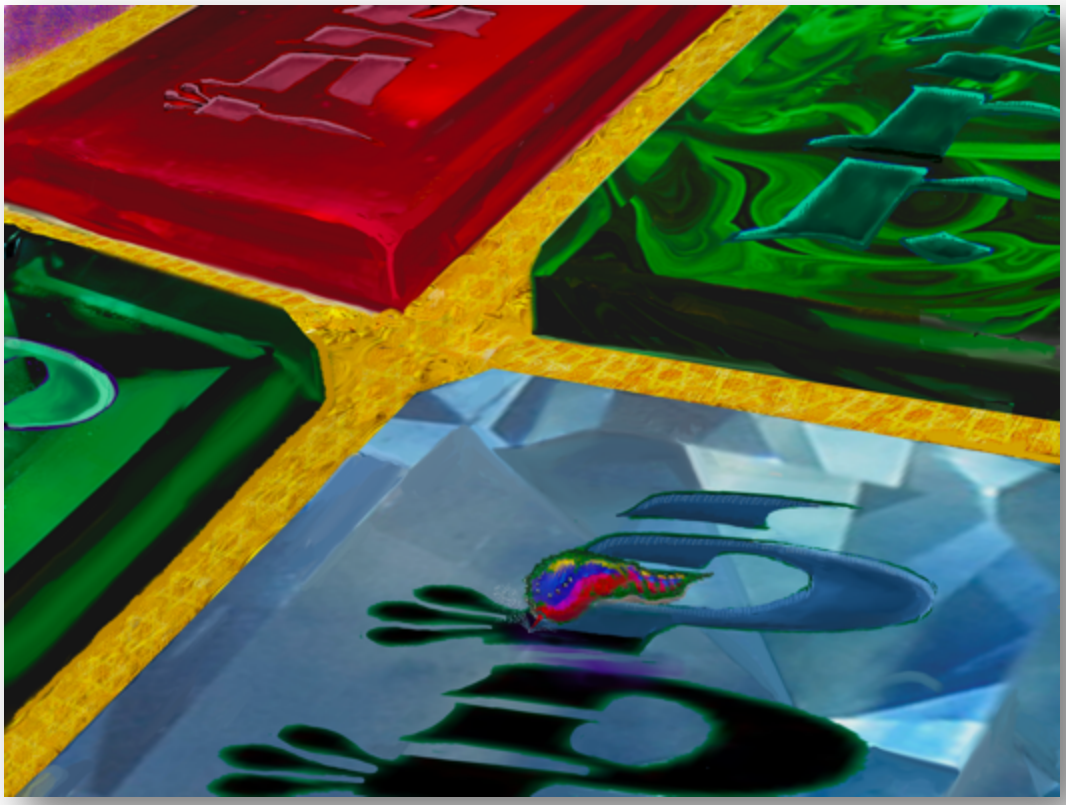


This parshah Terumah talks about all the implements in the Mishkan. One is the table made of acacia wood and covered with gold that is to be the offering of bread. The Zohar speaks of this table having a supernal version and that from both of these comes the food for all and that this table should have bread constantly on it and from that will flow the blessing and food to all the other tables of the world. May we also continue providing for others. As one guru from another tradition puts it – we are here to feed others.



TETZAVEH

How do we become one with the ONE? A challenge for us all even if we are the manifestation of that oneness. And the Mishkan in the desert was to be the dwelling place of THE Creator where we could get closer. But close still has separation in it. Therefore, the sages explain that the last item to be made in the most sacred part of this structure was the golden incense altar and it was from this that the High Priest Aaron would light fragrances and it was through olfactory perception, often thought to be the closest to feeling, that its smoke would unite people and with the Shekhinah, that "feminine" aspect of the One. May we too find ways of remembering who we are and where we come from.



This parshah continues the iteration of the details of the Mishkan in the desert, here describing the garments that the *kohen gadol* - the high priest - was to wear. And what covered his heart was a breastplate called this *choshen* and on it were 12 precious stones and on each were the letters from the names of the 12 tribes and the patriarchs and this was a mystical kind of computer where the letters would light up as responses to deep questions. But in inscribing the letters the instruction was not to cut or damage these jewels which even today would be a challenge. The midrash story is that a rare kind of tiny wormish insect-like creature called the *shamir* was used to engrave these jewels which it could do without damaging them. We call this fantasy and magic, but Shakespeare reminds us that “there are more things in heaven and on earth, that are dreamt of in your philosophy."



KI TISSA

What do we believe? Who do we believe? The Hebrews had experienced the most profound revelation in history. Then Moses had ascended the mountain saying he would return in 40 days. Now the angels had objected to humans receiving wisdom and Torah saying that they didn't deserve it and one of them, sometimes called Satan, sought to convince G-d of human failings and to do so he formed an image of Moses in a coffin floating above the Hebrews and as they pointed to him. they believed that Moses was gone, and they believed this, and it led to their seeking an image to worship now that their prophet had not returned. They had missed the accurate timing. Will we?



The Zohar responds to the making of the idol of the golden calf that it was forced on Aaron (here in orange the color associated with him in Kabbalah). Idol worshipping people who went along with the Hebrews who left Egypt despite experiencing the revelation at Mount Sinai, they did not accept Hashem's wonders and Oneness. In the midday sun they readily ripped their jewelry off their ears to contribute gold that was pushed onto Aaron by their leaders who were two powerful evil wizards related to Balaam and Laban wearing an ox and donkey on their clothes. Had Aaron let the gold drop to the ground it would have been swallowed up, but instead, he placed in in a bag and then threw that into the fire from which would emerge the golden statue of a calf. He wanted to calm the rebels but went too far giving into to their nefarious demands.



What do we worship? Who do we trust? Here the people who had escaped slavery after two hundred years and have just had a spiritual revelation at Mount Sinai, now 40 days later, thinking their leader Moses has disappeared on the mountain, some demand of his brother Aaron that he create an image for them to pray to. Frightened that they might fall into further violent chaos, he obliges and a golden calf with 12 others smaller calves for each tribe, emerges from flames and some - the non-Hebrew men who went out from Egypt with the Hebrews - dance ecstatically round these statues. Aaron looks embarrassed. When can we abandon fears and trust in the eternal?



Do we get a second chance? We often could use one, particularly now. Here the Hebrews had made a golden statue to worship instead of Hashem. This now is take 2 - Moses has again ascended Sinai and come down with another sapphire tablet where the words were carved through both sides with the letter "*samech*" literally having its circle center suspended, reminding us of the infinite which has no limits. The Hebrews presented themselves naked before Moses whose face radiated colors as he now was emanating the deepest truths. May we too get a second chance to appreciate the wonder of creation.



Moses has asked to see the face of Hashem who has told him that to see Hashem is to die. Hashem then tells Moses to place himself in the cleft of the rocks and Hashem's symbolic hand will pass behind him with all the power of nature. It is told that what appeared before Moses was a geometric like figure that is similar to the knotting of tefillin which is worn to remind one of G-d's gifts.

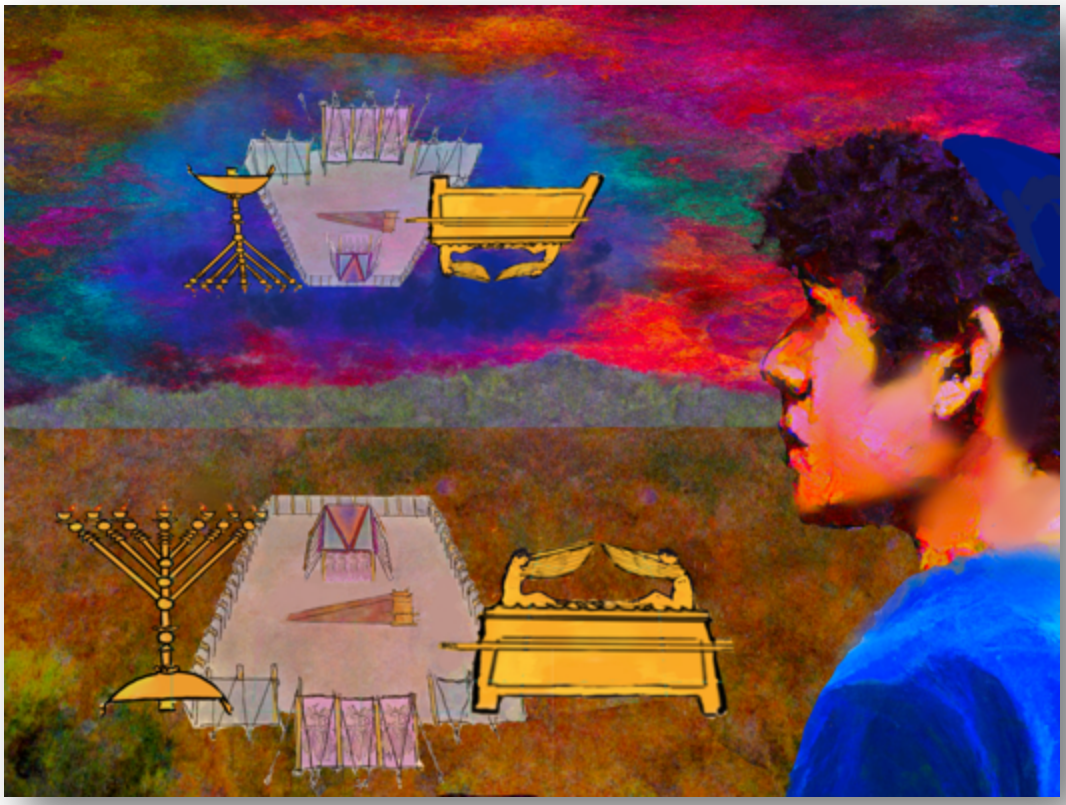


VAYAKHEL

Who are the most generous? In this case, when gold and silver and copper were requested to construct the implements in the Mishkan, it was the women who came forward first. It is said they didn't participate in the chaos of the golden calf and therefore, unlike the men who were embarrassed, the women readily stepped up. But there was a question of their offering their copper mirror as this at first appeared narcissistic, but when reminded that the women committed to being attractive so their men in slavery were still inclined to mate with them.



Torah is a time of miracles. Moses was shown on Mt. Sinai the objects that would be in the Mishkan, but the creation of these was given to a 13-year-old Bezazel (whose name translates as “in the shadow of G-d”) was able to make the structures using the Hebrew letters which some sages say preceded all manifestations. First came letters. Then what they combine into words that become our realities. The first item Bezalel made was the ark which would contain the tablets and Torah. The top of this were the two cherubim. And here too a miracle – when we were conflicted and confused the two were separated, but when we were united and faithful, they embraced each other.



In this parshah the young Bezazel having been chosen to make the objects in the Mishkan including the lamp and the ark and the layout of the tabernacle according to the Zohar he sees the images he will make - a reflection of supernal images that appeared out of a blue in the heaven's sky.



To live in a time of miracles. With all the materials to construct the Mishkan, it was at first too difficult for people to build it, so the midrash says that Moses himself was able to make it take form, magically lifting the planks and setting them in place. The Shekhinah - associated with the feminine aspect of Hashem - hovers over the tabernacle protecting it. Would that the Shekhinah return to protect and help us create a better world, a place for Hashem..



PEKUDEI

What makes us welcome? Preparation? Moses spent seven days preparing the Mishkan, the dwelling place on earth for Hashem, building it and taking it down and rebuilding it till on the eighth day it was ready to be entered, but it then became filled with the clouds of the Shekhinah - the nurturing aspect of Hashem - and we are told both that at first the clouds seemed to prevent him entering and then he was allowed in - the clouds of the Shekhinah now encouraged him to enter, surrounding him with clouds like a tallit – a prayer shawl - welcoming him. May we prepare ourselves as well so that we can be welcomed.



Here Aaron who was the first Kohen Gadol – high priest - wore the Urim Thummim – the first AI computer? When asked a question, letters on the jewels would light up as G-d's answers. Here when asked the question as to who would lead the people confronting the Canaanites it answered Judah according to the lit-up letters - that he would take on this responsibility. This object no longer exists for us to get responses from Hashem to our pressing questions. Now we look deep inside for this illumination, or if fortunate enough, have sages with wisdom to advise us.

LEVITICUS

ויקרא



VAYIKRA

This parshah starts the next book of the Torah. In it are many, for our times, obscure instruction regarding sacrifices. To get applicable guidance from these chapters takes some juggling. One theme may be humility. Another may be connection - connection to the past and all living creatures. As to humility, it is said the Moses the supreme leader of the Hebrews was the humblest of beings. Called upon by Hashem (G-d) repeatedly he defers saying he isn't worthy and he means it. Here Hashem called on him to take the responsibility of creating the Mishkan, the tabernacle, the meeting place for the community and Hashem's home on earth. Moses again refused saying his brother who was to be the Kohen Gadol, the head priest, should do this. But Hashem insisted. Moses' face turned red but given this task and honor it also radiated fire like energy. Humble but active. And to connections, there are three chief animals used for sacrifice and every animal sacrificed stands as a substitute for us. We are spared the punishments for wrong doings by sacrificed creatures. Each animal is a remembrance of our ancestors - Abraham who would run to slaughter an ox to feed his visitors - Isaac where a ram was substituted for his being sacrificed - Jacob told by his mother Rebecca brought goats to his father. May we be humble and active and appreciate the sacrifices of all who got us here.



This week's parshah speaks about the sacrifices made at the Mishkan. Today these seem like ancient primitive endeavors. But the Zohar points out that though there were those who could offer the more valued ox or goat, it was the poorest - like this woman here - who, making their offering with doves for peace and forgiveness, were more recognized for their efforts. May we appreciate that it is not wealth but honesty and heart and soul that make a difference.



This first parshah of this new book of Vayikra begins with the varieties of sacrifices - *korbanos* - which is translated as "growing near." These animal sacrifices are challenging for us today. Yes, the animals represent us, die for us, but which of these sacrifices talk to us today? One sacrifice is called the peace offering, where all participate share the sacrificed food as equals, from the priest to the family and friends. May we find ways to be together. And another part of the process is salting all the sacrifices. The lower firmament, created on day two, wanted to participate in praise and appreciation of Hashem, and it being collected into the sea as a source of life, asked to be part of all the sacrifices, hence the salt.



What do sacrifices from the past mean today? In ancient times, there was an equation between humans and the animal that was sacrificed - as the animal was standing in for human. So, here the ox bursts through this human as an acknowledgment of the negative things we do like abuse and theft and destruction of the environment, and for all of this we ask for forgiveness - through sacrifice - a symbol, an action. Another element on the left of this picture here is that the offerings of the poor, which sometimes we're just flour and dough, as compared to an expensive animal, these offerings of the poor were equal, if not preferential, to the offerings of the rich.



TZAV

Moses was given the responsibility to construct and prepare the Mishkan in the middle of the desert. He was to anoint his brother Aaron and his four sons to become the leading Kohanim - priests. Part of the process was to immerse them in a mikveh – a gathering of water - submerging them completely with not a hair protruding above the water symbolizing that one should emerge oneself completely in the wisdom of Hashem.



How do we connect with G-d? This parshah speaks to keeping the fire going, where the priests would add logs to the altar for sacrifices continuously, and in the Mishkan (tabernacle in the desert) the miracle of a fire from above would light the wood, meeting the fire we stoke from below. This is a metaphor for the passion for our good deeds meeting the gift of life from G-d. It is said that the surface of the copper altar symbolizes our heart (here written in Hebrew letters.). May our hearts ablaze with the wonder of the spark within us from the infinite goodness which created us.



How to honor the high and the low. In this parshah which centers on the how to honor the high and the low. In this parshah which centers on the *korbanos* - the sacrifices - there is the contemporary challenge of relevance. In this image appear two stimulating concepts: one is that the wood used to burn the sacrifices does not include that from the grape or olive trees as both of these provide gifts to us for transformation and anointing. And another concept is that mornings began with a priest specially selected to take ashes from the sacrifices on a silver plate out to where ashes were placed. This too was an honor, acknowledging another form of transformation – cleaning up!



SHEMINI

How do we celebrate? This week's parshah has the very troubling story of the two sons of Aaron who entered the Holy of Holies, and their souls were pulled out from them in a fire stream from Hashem. Sages have discussed the causes for this and among them is that the two were drinking before they came in. The Zohar comments on drinking saying wine does make one joyful but also sad, particularly afterwards, so when approaching a spiritual experience, we are encouraged to do so in silence, and recognize the "wine" of Torah that can give one joy.



This story always jumps out when reading Torah. Here the sons of Aaron - Nadab and Abihu - wanted to get as close to Hashem as possible. There is much commentary on what happened to them. We know their bodies died on approaching the Holy of Holies where the ark is kept, and which officially can only be approached once by the Kohen Gadol – the high priest - on Yom Kippur. When they entered impetuously, but well intentioned, a fire swept down through the cherubim on top of the ark and fire filaments went toward each and divided entering their nostrils and pulling out their souls. We have to prepare ourselves properly for entering challenging circumstances. Their desire overran their preparation. They wanted something they weren't ready for. That is represented by the incense fires they brought in, which were not correctly made. The midrash speaks of an angel who pushed them out of the Holy of Holies so their relatives could bury them, otherwise they would have rotted where no one could enter. Here was an angel's concern for their failed attempt. We all make mistakes.

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How do we deal with anger? Here Moses was confronting his brother Aaron and his two remaining sons. The other two had died in their effort to get too close to G-d when they weren't ready (there souls are in the upper right), and Aaron and his other sons did not participate in a particular ceremony of one of the sacrifices, and Moses is disturbed that they had not, and he accuses them of failing their obligations, but it turns out that because they were in the mourning they did not have to do this particular ceremony and Moses realizing this, had to calm his anger. May we too learn to calm our anger particularly when it is misplaced.



How to bless others? Here Aaron has been made the Kohen Gadol and as the Mishkan has been assembled he is called on to give what we know as the priestly blessing – “May the Lord bless and keep you. May the Lord's face shine upon you and be gracious to you. May the Lord lift up its face and grant you peace.” Midrash says that the priest's hands should be at the same level as his mouth and tongue so that truth will emanate from him not as a superior but as an equal qualified to lead. Yet still questioning himself, Aaron was uncertain that he should light the sacrifice, and from the sky came down Hashem's fire. Two of Aaron's living sons witnessed this and wished to make the leap to higher consciousness. Were they ready? Are we?



TAZRIA

How do we get our souls? Commentators on this parshah remark that once the sperm and egg join, an angel brings down a soul, but often that soul doesn't want to leave the bliss of its connection to G-d to then go through the challenges of being a human, and yet it is the human that can reach transcendent states. We are also reminded that we were the last beings created and that should truly make us conscious that we are a later expression of Hasshem and therefore be humble.



Where do we come from? The Zohar speaks of seeds. Those that grow from the deep and rise to blossom and those that we plant that later will give birth. Depending on when we make love – the day or night – the Zohar suggests this will lead to whether the child will be male or female.



This parshah initially speaks to birth. The midrash speaks to the newborn having all the wisdom and knowledge of Torah and more, but as the child emerges an angel touches it above its lips – the philtrum – and with this new cleft, all this understanding is concealed and even forgotten. We have to relearn what we already deeply know. This is our journey in life. The parshah also references the leprosy-like skin disease called *tsada'ats*. One of the reasons for contracting the disease is l*ashon hara* – "evil tongue*"* - gossip. The man in the rain has his mouth and other source of bad talk bound. The rain though is Hashem's free gift providing for our survival.



How to tell when someone is unethical or immoral? In the time in the desert, when someone acted this way, their very skin, clothing, and even walls of their spaces, would discolor. There are ten causes for these markings – *tsara'at* - that the rabbis mention - from bottom right going up and around - worshiping idols, sexual immoralities, murder, mocking the Jewish people, stealing, disregarding Torah precepts, conceit, *lashon hara* evil speech about others, the evil eye, and swearing falsely. With the negative lying from political schemers today, maybe *tzara'at* evidence should return!



METZORA

What are the consequences for evil speech? The Zohar speaks of those who speak with a vicious tongue attacking others. Their behavior will revert back on themselves. A form of leprosy will attest to their cruelty. In the past their homes would reveal their sinister activities and have to be destroyed and out of this would emerge combating spirits from above and below and once they destroy each other, then a purifying process can be applied to clear the defilement.



The three parshot that includes this one all talk of the crime of *lashon hara* – evil tongue. We all have been living in times of gossip and slander. For our sages this was equal to murder, and we have seen how so many young and old have been destroyed by words. One of the great Jewish sages, the Chofetz Chaim, who was a Kagan, continuously spoke about the danger of bad talk – it effects three – the one who is attacked, the one who hears, and the one who speaks it. May we be aware of the effect of what we say and speak from truth and care.



How do we deal with liars, people who spread false words and accuse others unjustly? It's called *lashan hara* - evil speech - and it is regarded as one of the worst actions any of us can do. It hurts the falsely attacked, the one who listens and even the one who makes the unfounded statements. It's like listening to poisonous snakes. In the past such behavior would engender markings on your clothing and your house walls and your body. No more. So, what to do? The sages speak of our being given holes in our ears where we can put our fingers to avoid hearing and being influenced by such disgusting speech. May we be reminded to shut off listening to evil ones.



ACHAREI-MOT

How to prepare for responsible leadership? Here Aarron - the Kohen Gadol - the head priest - must immerse himself in waters to clear away his negativity putting aside objects like gold – symbols of physical distractions. May we too find ways to wash away our negativities.



How do we make choices? Are we prepared? These are themes in this parshah. There were two identical goats, one was to be a holy sacrifice and the other taken to the desert to be thrown to a symbolic negative image called Azazel. How to decide? Often, we can't make clear distinctions. We need help. And on Yom Kippur the high priest, donned only in white linen, was confronted with stepping into the holiest space and often doubted himself - was he ready to light the incense, represent others, and step into the unknown? And on this day, he uttered the essence of the tetragrammaton (the unpronounceable name of G-d) while other priests shed tears and fell on their faces blessing The Creator, hoping that we will all have guidance in making our challenging decisions and stepping up and into the mystery of life.



Who is to take on the challenging work for us? Actually, all of us participate, as did the entire congregation in the desert, when once a year one of two goats would be selected by lot by the Kohen Gadol - the high priest - and all would contribute to the purchase of this creature, and the priest would place his hands on it to carry the transgressions of all of us. Then a person would be selected to take it to a cliff where it would be sacrificed, so that we too could be rid of our iniquities. And here the Zohar spins off into describing that man being recognized by having one blue eye bigger than the other with hair on this eyelid. Why? Not explained, but such a being took on the responsibility for all of us. Maybe by seeing more?



Guilt and shame. We all suffer from them at times. How do we release ourselves from these negative feelings? We can make amends with those we have hurt. And symbolically as a community we can acknowledge our responsibilities. The ritual in this week's parshah speaks of two goats who represent us. One is chosen to be taken away from the community and bound in a red thread round its horns. It will be sacrificed to something called Azazel - a mythic name for the collector of negativity. May we purge ourselves of both wrong-doings and the debilitating emotions that limit our potentials. It was said when our community committed to correcting harmful behavior as the goat toppled over the cliff that red thread turned white indicating that we too can change to positive behaviors.



KEDOSHIM

This parshah contains many mitzvot and most significant of all is the instruction you shall love the stranger as yourself. As the sages have commented, this is not an easy assignment. When the master Hillel was challenged to share the essence of Judaism while the questioner stood on one foot, Hillel rephrased this to a more tenable practice instructing: “That which is hateful to you, do not unto another." And then he added: "That is the entire Torah, the rest is its interpretation. Go study." Commentators mention how this line about loving strangers reflects many of the other mitzvot including (upper right going down and around) - be honest in your dealmaking, take care of others' property, help others, be respectful and encouraging, speaking positively of others, and celebrate in other's happiness.



The Zohar speaks of this parshah as a special blessing and that to study Torah particularly around midnight offers an opening so that our consciousness expands - here indicated by the colors of the four worlds that Kabbalah tells us that we live in simultaneously. And to make love at this time too is a blessing. And it also speaks of one of the instructions from the parshah to be honoring our parents



How to live a good life and how to avoid a bad one? That's what this parshah speaks to. It is filled with many *mitzvot* (commandments) and deals with one of the worst which is that of gossip - telling tales - essentially lying and how it's like a sharp arrow out of the mouth that cannot be taken back and can do a lot of damage. The good life is embracing Hashem - G-d - and Torah and the loving the other as oneself. Here the other is an elder to be respected and to their left side is the reminder to be fair in commercial dealings (the scale) and to be generous - leaving the falling food for the poor, as we head for a land of milk and honey, rather than the volcanic eruptions of worshiping false gods.



A major theme of this parshah is conduct and ethics reflecting the idea that we should be holy as Hashem is holy and we have been given the gift of creativity which is what Hashem does. Create. There are instructions about the growth and productivity and care of trees, and the story is told of the conqueror emperor Hadrian passing through Israel to start at war when he encountered an old man planting a fig tree. The ruler challenged him saying, “Why do what you are doing for you will surely die before this tree ever produces.” The man replied, “If I am not here to tastes from this sapling, my children will.” What we do today affects the future. Consider this in how we presently are treating the planet.



EMOR

How to educate the next generations? In this week's parshah the very first words suggest teaching with gentleness. Moses instructs Aaron and his children, and the parshah talks about behaviors of the priests and the way to celebrate our holidays including counting the omer for 49 days (the days between the release from slavery and the giving of the Torah) which we do after Pesach. Sages comment on different types of personalities - from the aggressive bull to the tame sheep to the weak goat. Which are we and do we educate with kindness?



BEHAR

Who are the righteous? This parshah speaks to the *shmita,* in the past celebrated every seventh year. A time where we are not to plant or reap, but to let the land alone, and trust that Hashem will provide. Seven becomes a theme in Jewish history. Here are the seven generations of *tzadikim* – righteous being - who courageously raised the people to deeper spiritual connections. Starting with Abraham (blue) and his kindness opening his tent to all, to Isaac (red) who provided the people with wells, to Jacob (yellow) who fathered the tribes, to Levi with music officiating in spiritual rituals, to one of his son's Kehot who took care of the ark, to Amram the father of Moses who lead the Israelites while in Egypt, to finally Moses himself whose righteousness was so high that he brought down the Torah (here with the letter *zayin* which is also the number 7). May we still benefit from all their gifts.



Who is responsible? Much of this parshah is devoted to issues of caring for the other and the Zohar speaks of our duty to feed the hungry and release the slaves. The image here is being bound to Hashem by a heavenly yoke (emblazoned with the letters of the Tetragrammaton and the radiating colors of the sephirot that motivates us to purposeful action - t*zedakah* - often translated as charity - actually meaning righteous justice - to care for others.



How do we treat those subservient to us? Sages comment on this parshah saying that should you, a wealthy person, have a servant, and there is only one blanket and pillow, you are to let the worker have them before you. Do we treat those who work for us with this same respect?



BEHUKATAI

How to appreciate the blessings we are given? Shabbos is one way. This parshah is famed for its painful reproofs for abandoning the teachings and ethics and connection to Hashem who created us and everything. But the parshah begins with stating the blessings we receive for our gratitude and faith. It speaks of the rain - a gift that asks for no reciprocal behavior. It is free. Water itself is essential for our very survival, and from it the parshah mentions all the growth and fruitful abundance that can emerge from the earth. A sign of love. May we continually thank The Creator for these ongoing blessings.



What is our future? This is one of the challenging parshahs. It begins with blessings particularly if we honor the ethics of Torah. We will benefit from helpful rain and become tall as we connect with Hashem's cosmos from the first to the last letter of existence. But if we discard these laws, like punishment from a roaring lion, our ground will be hard like copper and the sky will become iron, and our homes will be destroyed, the temple burned, and we will be driven from our homeland and dispersed through all parts of the world. And that happened.



This parshah is split between the blessings and the curses. Blessings for following the ethics of Torah and curses for abandoning it. The metaphor is of Torah versus the sword. Living a life of peace and kindness or besieged by a life of violence and cruelty. One midrash speaks of the meeting of the conqueror Alexander the Great and the High Priest Simon the Just before the walls of Jerusalem. Instead of killing this spiritual Hebrew, Alexander having seen the priest in a dream now bowed before him, honoring him and the Hebrew people as a vanguard of truth and compassion. Were today's would-be emperors to humble themselves before the empathetic wise, how our world would change.



Zohar here offers a release from what is one of the most troubling parshahs. In it - often read fast and softly to reduce its power - are harsh warnings of the consequences of abandoning Torah and ethical behavior. These are described in excruciating details, but says the Zohar, at night when the damaging demons emerge, if we focus on the gifts of Hashem and our positive intentions and we are still, then these demons can be dissolved. Their presence may be to push us toward good deeds and in doing so they are transformed.



As said this is one of the toughest parshahs and often when read in synagogues is read very quickly. Here is a series of divine blessings shown on the right of prosperity and abundance and peace in the country and the cities; and on the left the divine reproofs for departing from devotion to Torah causing drought, hunger, disease and suffering here portrayed with this group in the uniforms of holocaust victims abandoned under the bleeding branches. Each side of the tree of life has ten limbs reflecting the ten sephirot of the Kabbalah. Ten as evolutionary and ten as warnings.

NUMBERS
במדבר



BAMIDBAR

As we begin this next book of the Torah the question gets asked: Why did Hashem give the Torah in the wilderness. There certainly seem more impressive sites to choose. What about the Red Sea? But when Hashem approached, it fled, for at its edge were deified with idols. How about the mountains? But they too skipped away like rams, feeling unworthy as on top of them were idolatrous statues. But the desert did not retreat. No shame or guilt. It suggests openness, freedom, humility, unencumbered by possessions, expansive.



Why the desert? The words "in the desert" start the book of Bamidar - called numbers - but literally it means in the desert or wilderness. It is here without any human material density - in emptiness - that G-d speaks to Moses. Unencumbered by distractions, he hears Hashem. The next words in the parshah are - in the Mishkan -and it is in the Holy of Holies between the wings of the cherubs on the ark, that Hashem communicates. Another private space. May we too find spaces to listen to Truth.



Who are we? This parshah lists the 12 tribes and each of the flags and the Zohar comments that our essence is the combination of the aspects represented by four faces - the lion for strength, endurance and caring reflecting the facet of the Sephirot *chesed* olored blue; the ox for discipline, judgement called *gevura* and colored red; and the eagle for transcendence and harmony and compassion called *tiferet* colored yellow; and *malchut* translated as kingship: and the human face, here for responsibility, authenticity, We are a unity - combination powers..

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Is the time of miracles over? A continuous question as we journey through Torah and our lives. This week's parshah lists all the tribes and their functions. They are our ancestors carrying the Torah and its wisdom forward. And those who actually carried the sacred *aron* - ark - were of the Levi tribe and it is said that when the people moved and these Levites specifically, the covered ark itself carried them, led by a cloud by day with the Hebrew letter *heh* amidst it, suggesting Hashem's protection. May we too be carried by the gift of our forebearers.



NASO

This parshah contains the famed priestly blessing – delivered by the Kohanim with their fingers parted (here the hands have the divisions and colors of the four worlds spoken of in Kabbalah) – so that the transference of blessing is through them. The midrash tells of a traveler lost in the desert, out of water. And suddenly he sees a thriving fruit tree and a spring next to it. He is saved. But how to thank for this blessing that which already is blessed. The tree and water are already perfect. And then the traveler wishes that the tree and the water will provide for others. What can he wish for them? They provide for us. May we all be blessed and protected, as is said in the *birkas kohanim* – the priestly blessing.



How can we change? In this parshah, it speaks of the Nazarite who makes a vow to improve himself, to reach greater height, represented by eagles, and he recognizes that drinking turns him first into a weak lamb, then an angry lion, and then a foolish monkey, and finally just a pig wallowing. So, he commits to stopping this behavior, stopping drinking, physically represented by growing his hair and nails and not cutting them for a certain period of time. It's a commitment on an individual level. And the parshah then follows with the priestly blessing - a commitment for all of us - symbolized her by the hands behind the eagles.



What are the priestly blessings? The Zohar speaks of the priests, when raising their hands for these famed blessings that are in this parshah Naso, should raise the right hand above the left. The Sephirot of Kabbalah cosmology tells us the right is the side of mercy. The Zohar also speaks that the priest should have the feminine in their existence, which can be a wife. The hands here have the colors, according to the sage Ari, of the four simultaneous worlds we live in shown in the palms, and all the 10 sephirot in the separated fingers. Through their midst pass the letters of the tetragrammaton of Hashem to bless us with - first – sustenance. “May the Lord bless you and keep you.” The second - the smiles of kindness of others gained by the kindness we extend to them. “May the Lord lift up his countenance upon you.” And the third – peace. “May the Lord grant us peace.” Without it, there are no blessings.



Where can Hashem talk to us? In the last lines of this parshah. It is said that Moses, the humblest of beings, would enter before the holy ark and the messages would come from between the two cherubim. Here the *aleph* - the silent letter - is the message. A reminder that we are the interconnected emanations of the One created in love. May we hear these messages everywhere we go and may we be blessings to all.



BEHA'ALOCHTA

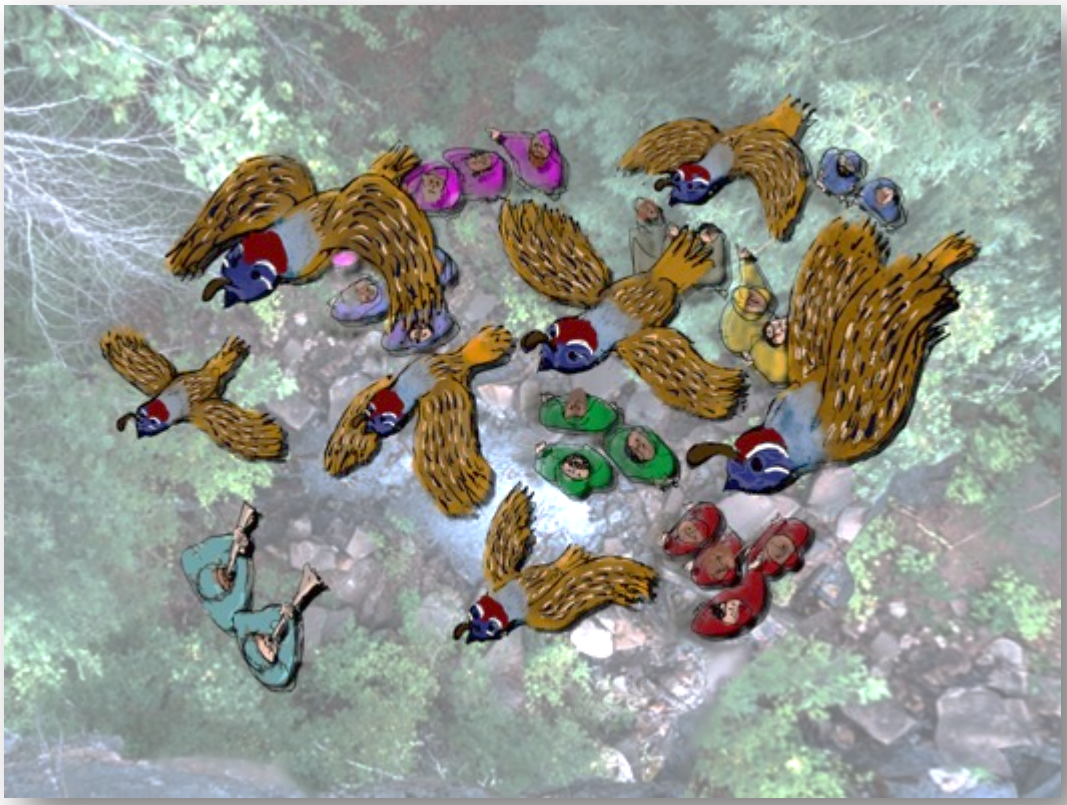
The lighting of the Menorah lamp in the mishkan was Aaron's responsibility, with the flowered goblets and flames turned inwards toward the center – a metaphor for the harmony we seek, and the Zohar speaks of this kindling as a metaphor like the bridegroom coming out of the bedroom. The Zohar often uses sensual imagery of intimacy as the connection for us to Torah, the tree of life.



Who blesses whom? In this parshah the Levites have their bodies completely shaved and are anointed by Moses and waved by Aaron to purify and prepare them for service in the Mishkan. And during this procedure as the oil is poured over them the people place their hands on these Levites blessing them and taking in their blessings.



Appreciation. Gratitude. Warning. Wonder. Themes in this week's parshah. The Hebrews were provided food each morning on the journey toward Israel. Called manna, it dropped like dew from the sky. It seems to have looked like coriander, but if you appreciated the miracle, it tasted like whatever you wanted; but if you were not grateful and desired something else, not only was the taste unpleasant, but your body reacted poorly with a burning in the throat and a swelling in the body. And as to warning, Moses was provided two silver trumpets that were used to awaken the people to at times serious dangers like droughts. We could use these now since so many are deaf to the realities of global warming causing serious worldwide droughts. And the wonder: the ark sometimes went ahead of the people and sparks shot out from it clearing the path of dangers.



In this parshah, Moses is overwhelmed by the ungratefulness of the tribes as they complain that, though Hashem has provide them with manna, they miss the meat of Egypt; and Hashem in response blows a wind that sends qualls to the complainers who will stuff themselves with the meat. Another wonder providing them more than they need. When will we know we have enough - “tov?” – the Hebrew word for enough and sometimes meaning simply “good.” Also, Hashem tells Moses to gather the elders so they too can prophesize and help him with leadership. You can’t lead alone. And two trumpets are made to gather the tribes together.



SHELACH

Who do you trust? Here Moses addresses the leaders of the tribes who are about to spy on Canaan where the Hebrews are heading. These were the heads of the families but in the end even with the help of Moses's staff for protection they came back with false reports exaggerating the threats. Caleb in blue and Joshua in brown would tell the truth but were not believed by the gullible masses, and Levi on the right did not participate at all. We must be wary of so-called leaders and put our deepest trust in G-d.



The danger of believing lies. A problem then and a problem now. The midrash speaks of the spies who came to discover the nature of Canaan and then lied about what they saw to scare the people from advancing into what was to be their homeland. One of their lies was that there were giants, and one was a woman. The spies were hiding in what they thought and said was a cave but turned out, according to them, to be a giant pomegranate that then she picked up and threw aside. Why are we willing to tolerate what is clearly a deception to empower the undeserving?



What are the consequences of lies? The Zohar answers this in response to the lies told by the scouts - the spies - sent to discover the nature of the agriculture and the peoples who lived on Canaan. They came back with giant fruits - grapes, pomegranate and fig - and claimed the people there were hostile giants. They lied for various reasons - but two of the 12 - Joshua and Caleb - who according to the Zohar did carry a giant grape cluster (Rashi says they carried nothing - but who knows - we weren't there - or maybe we were but forgot) and these 2 said what the other 10 said was not true, but the people believed the others and were greatly afraid to enter into the Holy Land. The consequences of the lie - the two Temples in the future would be destroyed - here Solomon's on the left and Herod's in 70 AD on the right. Long range consequences of deceit. Beware in our times as well how lies today will affect the future.



How will liars be punished? Who will bring forgiveness to us? These are themes of this week's reading. The spies sent to check out the land, came back with false reports of dangerous giants and plagues to frighten the Hebrews which happened, except to the women who listened to Joshua and Caleb who told the truth. The punishment for the spies was their lying tongues extended out to their navels and worms climbed up and into their mouths and they perished. Wonder if this could happen to the outstanding liars of our time! And as to forgiveness, here is Moses asking Hashem to forgive us who have abandoned the truth and grace of our Creator. Would he too be here to help us. Maybe his spirit is doing that now.



KORACH

Who should lead? The rich? That's what Korach thought in this parshah as he was the wealthiest person among the Hebrews having been a treasurer for Pharaoh. He was furious that he was not being chosen to be the leader and was figuring lies to tell about Moses to undermine the people's trust in him and others who were following the spiritual path, often disregarding material possessions. We must be wary of those who have a lot and claim they are better than others who give a lot.



Where does anger come from? Expectations disappointed? Hurt feelings? In commenting on this week's parshah, the Zohar speaks about the anger of Korach who was a relative of Moses and Aaron and believed he should have equal status to them. Moses attempts to pacify him, reminding him of the responsibilities he already has, but Korach remains angry. And the Zohar says that this is like having a vicious snake around your head striking out at everything. The wisdom of our fore-bearers reminds us to be slow to anger and quick to let it go.



This week's story is about a power-driven self-absorbed megalomaniac. In his effort to overthrow the just leadership and undermine the society he gains followers, but their arrogance ends up in their own destruction by fire from the bottom and being sucked into the earth. Sometimes the punishments of the past would be very appropriate for some of the evil people in our present for those selfish egotists to be also sucked into the earth and disappear. There is also in the story women in this case a wife and daughter who saved one of the converts to this madman and kept him from sliding into the pit as well. May we all be saved by the power of just women.

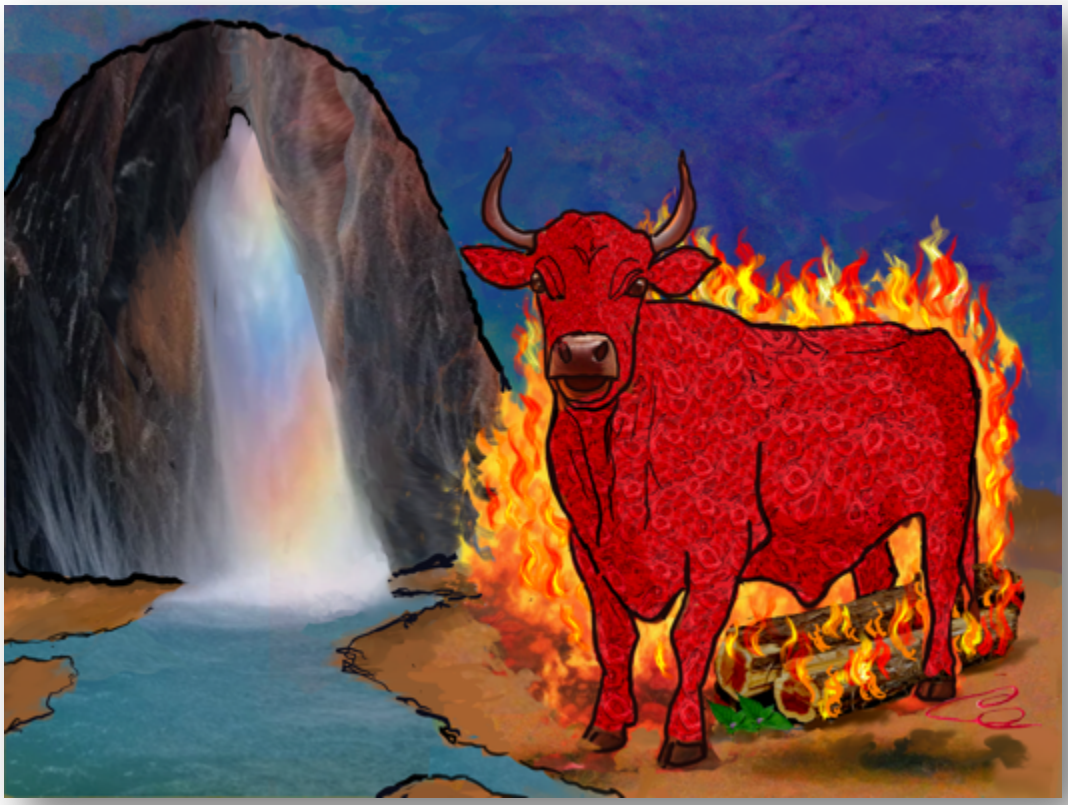


CHUKAT

Can what hurts also help? The people were again complaining disheartened by the long journey and many no longer trusting in Moses or G-d as their guide. These were then attacked by venomous snakes and scorpions and wild dogs. They realized their slander and asked for mercy and G-d had Moses mount a copper snake on a pole and when they looked at it, they were cured. It reminded them of their folly and G-d's mercy. Like them, as they look up - toward heaven - may we too be reinspired and healed.



Who will lead? And does it take a miracle to have the right caring gifted leaders? This is the issue in this week's torah parshah. Hashem communicated directly with Moses and guided him to lead the Hebrew people and appointed his truly kindhearted brother Aaron to be the spiritual head of the tribes. But megalomaniacal self-centered amoral villains claimed that they should take power. (Do times change?) After these corrupt liars were swallowed into the earth, Moses still had to prove that Aaron should have this spiritual role, and to do so, he had each tribe place a staff in the Mishkan. and Aaron's overnight grew flowers and almonds, and his inscribed name was transformed into the tetragrammaton on the staff. I only we had such miracles today to assure that good, honest, compassionate, wise leaders represent us.



A question here is how can we purify ourselves, ways to cleanse ourselves of negativity? The Torah responds with a bizarre and purposely incomprehensible methodology in this week's parshah - the red heifer. This was a cow that would be sacrificed and its ashes ground with clear water to be consumed to accomplish a purification. How would that work? Sages have been discussing it for millennia. The Zohar says that cow was the color of red roses and comments that cedar wood and hyssop and a red thread were part of the fire. Cedar is a giant tree to remind us not to be arrogant, hyssop has small leaves to remind us to be humble, and the red thread is there to acknowledge our misguided behaviors. Another "wonder" of cleansing was Miriam's rock from which pure water flowed in streams to each of the tribes. Neither the rock nor the heifer exists now, so we have a lot of work to do on our own to clean up our acts.



What is the gift of the feminine? In this parshah it is water - an essential source of life. We don't survive without it. And here it was provided for the tribes by the prophetess Miriam, sister of Moses. Being still a time of wonders, a round rock would follow her with the tribes as they moved through the wilderness, and when they settled in various places, this rock would sink into the earth and out of it would flow 12 separate streams for each of the 12 tribes. And in times when there were conflicts between the tribes, the water wouldn't emerge, but the children, in their untainted innocence, would come and sing to the rock for it to again provide the living healing waters, and the desert itself would bloom around it. May we create peace in our times to deserve the gifts of nature.



The challenge for even the greatest leaders is to transcend their egos and emotional reactions. What is truly amazing about Jewish history is it admits the frailties of its greatest of prophets. Here Moses was facing scoffers and complainers. Once his beloved sister Miriam had died, the rock associated with her that miraculously and continuously poured for healthy water to all the tribes, now stopped. A vocal group of doubters blamed Moses. Hashem said to Moses to speak to the rock. But he also knew that his brother Aaron the peacemaker was soon to die and here he was overwhelmed by grief and insults, so he struck the rock which at first bled and then suddenly poured down a torrent or water literally drowning the group of complainers. But because he himself had doubted Hashem's instruction to just talk to the rock, he was denied to personally enter the Holy Land. We must be open to what life offers us even though it often is not our plan.



BALAK

Why do some intelligent leaders and advisors take the wrong path? Here the Zohar speaks to the well-known story of the powerful mystic Balaam, who was paid gold and bought off to condemn the Hebrews, and neither he nor his assistants now see the angel blocking his path, which only his own donkey sees, and it even miraculously speaks to Balaam warning him of the vision in front of him. But Balaam is distracted by the grape vines and then more intently his focus goes to the two heads in the dark mountain whom the Holy One condemned and buried there up to their necks. These were two angels Aza and Azazel who complained that humans should not have been created as they were bound to sin and destruction. And now they get Balaam's attention and will encourage his foolishness.



How many times do we have to be told the truth before we get it? In this week's parshah, the corrupt prophet Balaam - who is credited for inventing gambling and fostering abusive prostitution - has taken money to curse the Hebrews but is stopped on the way three times by an angel warning him to face the truth that the Hebrew people are to be blessed. He doesn't see or listen to what is in front of him. His donkey does and bows down and even magically speaks to him, but his greed and megalomania drive him on to what will be his demise. May we able to recognize messages blocking us from choosing iniquity, and other messages helping us toward goodness.



Heed the warnings. Pay attention. In this parshah the corrupt immoral King Balak wants to destroy the Hebrew immigrants. He calls on Balaam, a prophet and magician, to verbally condemn the tribes in their tents below, which he wants to do but he cannot as Hashem only lets him speak words of praise alluding among other things to these people as a flowing brook of truth surrounded by abundant trees of life. Balak himself was also a black magician and had devices like a metallic bird who once inserted in its beak with a gold needle would then do his malicious biddings. But in this case the bird returned with its tail feathers in flames and ashes as a sign that evil will not overwhelm this people. It's said Balak's face turned green in anger and envy. Those who want to destroy often can't face the truth.



PINCHAS

What's the right thing to do? Here priest Pinchas confronts a corrupt leader Zimri openly committing immoral acts which bring on a plague. Others just stand by and watch. So how to stop this? Pinchas considers his heritage - on one side is his grandfather Aaron and priest father Eleazar who preach and practice peacemaking; on the other side his grandfather Yitro an idol worshiper who would overfeed his calves in order to fatten them up and cruelly butcher them. Here Pinchas sees the spear of Moses and makes his decision. He will destroy the wicked even if it means using violence. Are we willing to do that when we confront evil?



Who are we? What comprises our soul? The Zohar addresses this, commenting on the disturbing story of Pinchas the grandson of the just deceased High Priest Aaron. Pinchas is enraged by the outrageous behavior of one of the princes of the tribe of Simeon who contemptuously disparaging the new faith has intercourse publicly with a Midianite woman before the Mishkan and his tent after both of them have defecated in front of a statue of Baal whose worship included such actions. Such abandoning of the teachings has led to a plague with many deaths. Pinchas skewers these two without spilling blood (another miracle) which blood would have led to tribal revenge, but even so, at first the Simeonites come to attack Pinchas. At this moment the Zohar says, in stress, Pinchas' soul lifted out of his body and the souls of Nadab and Abihu (his uncles who had died in an earlier story for, though unprepared, they had wanted to be too close to G-d) – these souls came to merge with the soul of Pinchas to give him strength, and that they did, and the Simeonites retreated. Pinchas was then ready to be honored to become the next High Priest. May we in our passions for righteousness be assisted by the spirits of our ancestors.



What to do for equal rights? These five women stood up for themselves and confronted power. They were the daughters of Zelophehad who himself had stood out in a somewhat perplexing gesture to emphasize keeping Shabbos by carrying wood on Shabbos, which was forbidden, and he suffered the consequences of doing this publicly to set an example for others not to do what he did. But here his daughters set an example of what to do - they wanted an equal share of the distribution of land at a time when only males got it and they went to Moseswith their request, and he himself unclear what to do, asked the ultimate power - G-d - who said - yes - equal rights for women.



Moses has just transferred his leadership power to his most trusted student and ally Joshua. Now in midrash on this parshah he is told to ascend a mountain to look down on the land he personally will never enter and to bless it with spiritual wisdom. Such wisdom is compared to the fruit of a fig tree in that you don't get it immediately, rather like with these fruits, some wisdom develops slower than others as a reminder that our spiritual paths take time for our growth, but like the fig, all of it is of use. Continue the journey and taste the new fruits on the way, some will be sweet and juicy.



When to do the right thing? The Midianites were committed to the destruction of the Jewish people and culture. Moses knew they had to be confronted, but he also knew that once they were defeated, he too would die. So, the question was should the battle be postponed, and many of the soldiers, knowing that this fight would lead to Moses' passing, asked him to delay because they didn't want to lose their leader. But he insisted that they take responsibility and, confront the enemy now, even though it meant his own mortal end. The Midianite rulers including Balaam attempted to fly away but were killed for their corruption.



MATOT

What is the feminine gift? Here the Zohar speaks of wise hearted women combining Justice (the color of red) and Mercy (the color of white). So here are some of these women – may they bless us with both. (The colors they wear are from the different tribes – like blue for Judah, red for Rueben, green for Simeon, orange for Asher, blackish for Issacher and whitish for Zebulon and turquoise for Gad.) May we continually be blessed by the wisdom of women.s



MASEI

How to reconstruct the Holy Temple? The Zohar advices that even in these troublesome days, we should make our table an altar like the altars in the Temple. Approach each meal in appreciation – washing our hands, purifying ourselves physically and spiritually. May we bless the abundance of food, the energy it gives us, to do good deeds and restore the values represented in the Temple.



How do we protect those in trouble? This parshah deals with providing a city of refuge for those who have inadvertently caused the death of someone so that they would be protected from who, in vengeance, would want to kill them. And it was said that these cities should have easy access so that the roads should be made wide, and if there are rivers, bridges should be created, so that those in need can get to a place of protection easily. The Hebrew word on the sigh is “refuge” and this word in modern Hebrew stands for a safe room. Seems this is something we need right now to provide easy refuge for those in trouble.



What is the relationship between student and teacher? In this parshah there is presentation of the cities of refuge where people who have accidentally killed somebody could go to in order to escape revenge. If they had a teacher, their rabbi too was to go to this city and the two of them continue their studies. Here they study this very parshah that lists the 42 encampments of the 40 years in the wilderness. This is quite a commitment to one's students.

DEUTERONOMY
דברים



DEVARIM

The sun was made to stand still on the day of the battle with the giants Og and Sichon. The Hebrews having crossed the river Arnon defeated the Emorites with a surprise attack, but the battle raged till it was almost Shabbos and this is when Joshua asked for time to stop. Og tried to use a giant stone to hurl at the Hebrews but Hashem turned it into a yoke that trapped him.



Can we stay in revelation? Commentators on this parshah which has Moses chastising the people for not trusting in G-d also remind us, as the Lubavitcher Rebbe said, that we must move on even if we want to remain in a consecrated space, as our purpose is to share what we learn. Here the tribes leave Mount Sinai beginning their journey of thousands of years with promises that they will be as the stars. Can we, given that past gift of enlightenment, now find our path to contributes light to others?



What is our future? This week's parshah begins Moses' rebukes at the rebellious actions of the Hebrew people. But the first words suggest positive possibilities and the sages list seven of them: supporters of Torah like the sun; teachers like the moon reflecting truth; judges showing no favoritism like the sky; scholars numerous like the stars; political leaders like lightening striking for fairness; givers of charity like roses; and caretakers of sanctuaries like the menorah. May we all find our path toward goodness.



VA'ETCHANAN

Who will be the next generations to advance the faith? The Zohar comments on the line in this week's parshah's where G-d addresses Moses saying : Speak no more" and though the rest of the book is in fact Moses' words, the Zohar emphasizes that this is about taking the teaching and passing them on so others speak the truth. Here with the Shekhinah is embracing Moses sometimes associated with the sun and he is blessing his disciple Joshua who is associated with the moon. The future will have both sources of light rather than reflections and we too can be like the generations shown here with the leaders of the 12 tribes and the 70 Sanhendrin all radiating the cosmic energies out to all levels of existence with the symbol of the pillar of fire that once led the Hebrews and now the sephirot energies illuminating our way. May we be guided and become guides.

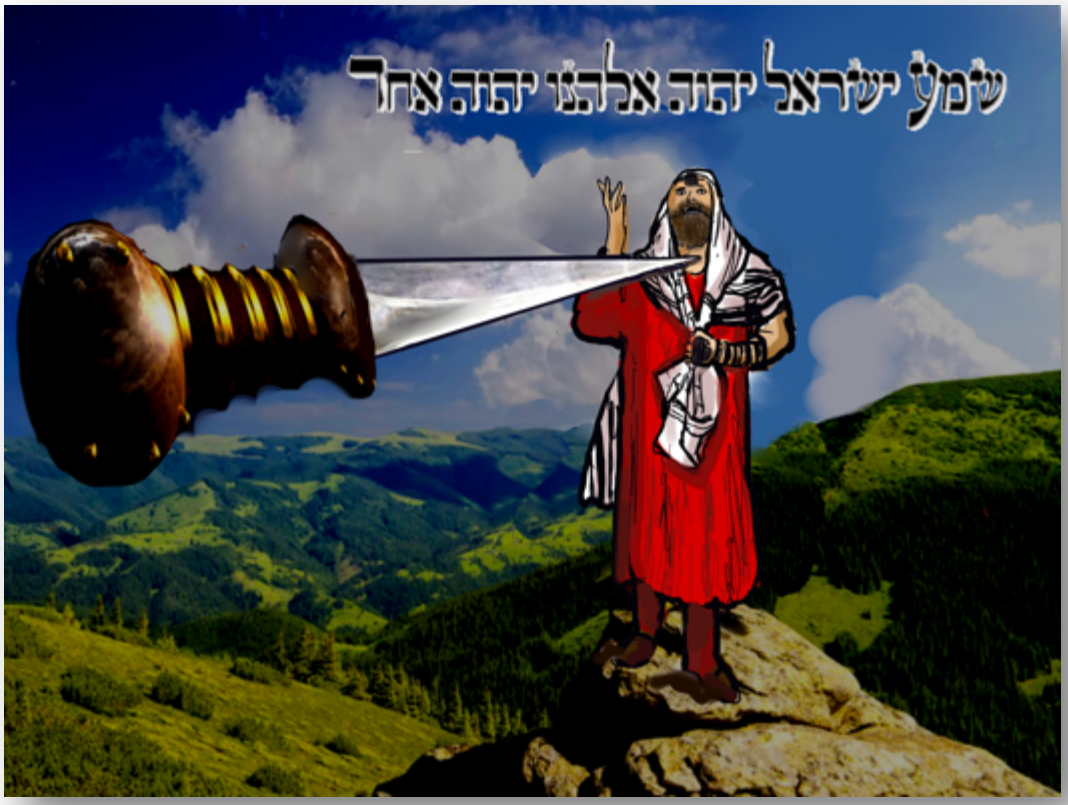


Can we hear G-D? In this parshah the Ten Commandments are repeated but here Moses reminds the people how they could hear directly from Hashem and they do hear the first two utterances - that there is One G-d here indicated by the letter *aleph* which is also the number one, and the second being not to worship idols in any form - but the people were so frightened by Mount Sinai being covered in flames, that they asked Moses to be their intermediary to tell them the next eight. How do we hear the truth?



EIKEV

Who do we see before us? This is a question for all of us. In this parshah Moses speaks of G-d's forgiveness for wandering away from truth and reminds all to be in awe of G-d. One way is to always "see" G-d in front of us, as is said of Moses that he always had Hashem in front of him. Now G-d has no form, but this drawing, suggests from the letters, an indication of Hashem's presence - the *aleph* of One - and the tetragrammaton *yud hey vov hey* – the unpronounceable name of Hashem. The colors reflect the four worlds of Kabbalah's cosmology that we all live in simultaneously. May we too keep G-d before us as our guide.



(VA'ETCHANAN)

When faced with overwhelming challenges, the sages say it is like a sword aimed at our neck. Even then they say we should not abandon prayer. Can we do it? This parshah has the essential prayer of Judaism - the "Shema." It proclaims that everything is really One. This means the good and the bad are woven together for our growth. Can we transcend the negative realizing the lessons?



EIKEV

Can we rate good deeds? In this parshah it speaks of the heel - “eikev” - the lowest part of the body, its end - and yet reminds us that every kind gesture even a small one is significant and generates a blessing on the giver - referred to as a protective angel - that follows the action and the actor. True satisfaction comes from the completion of a good deed no matter how small. And in this parshah one mitzvah is to love the stranger. for we were strangers. May we follow in these footsteps.



What will protect us? The Zohar addresses this in commentary on the six words of the Shema prayer and its subsequent paragraphs that are in this parshah. These words are placed in mezuzahs attached to our doors and while we are in bed - maybe studying the wisdom of our ancestors which is recommended to be done even late at night - the protective hand of Hashem covers us and the power of the prayer inside the mezuzah distracts evil forces and in fear they flee. May we find such help beyond the mystical hope, knowing that we truly are in the hand of G-d; and may we be blessed, as we bless the Creator for giving us life.



RE’EHs

How can we make a contribution? This is one of the themes of the parshah this week and it speaks of charity. But what to give? As often observed by our sages, charity when offered to the needy is best when it offers them ways to provide for themselves. And that is teaching as a form of giving. And when giving, give with joy. So, here education is being given to allow one to care for oneself and others. And we are also in this seemingly coincidental time encouraged to celebrate with joy for our being here.



What shall we choose for our path? The Zohar deals with this question which is essential to Judaism and this parshah - which is about the freedom to choose how we will live, what we believe, how we will behave and react. It is not predetermined. We are encouraged to choose between two paths, actually in this parshah, two mountains - one barren and lifeless like the path of the sword and violence, and one green and fertile like the Torah which is a path of compassion, fortitude, kindness, wisdom and peace. And the Zohar adds that Hashem's "eyes" - here with the letters of the tetragrammaton - *yud hey vov hey* -are always open watching our choices.



Can we see clearly the path we should choose? "See" is the first word in this parshah which speaks to choosing blessings or curses. The curses come from foolish worship of idols whose roots are to be torn out on the unproductive ground. The blessings are productivity and the joyful appreciation of the wonders of Hashem and nature and the miracles around us, which for the Hebrews then included a splitting of the Jordan like the Red Sea so the Hebrew people could cross into the Holy Land. May our eyes be open to see the way for blessings.



SHOFTIM

How to be a judge? Can you be knowledgeable, honest, unprejudiced, fair? The midrash on this parshah, that begins with appointments and behavior of judges, says a judge should imagine that a sword is hanging above him and that what is below him is Gehinnom (the clearing realm of the afterlife that sometimes is visioned as cleansing fire, here coming from human garbage). If he intends to judge truthfully, then he is saved from both.



Can someone predict the future? According to this week's parshah, we are told to reject sorcerers enumerated in 8 phrases that Rashi the famed rabbi and scholar defines as: putting children through fire, using a rod as a divining tool, a magician, an omen interpreter (bread from his mouth and a deer crossing his path and dropping sticks to “read”), a charmer of animals, one whose armpit speaks and claims to raise the dead, a Yido wizard with a bone that indicates the future, and a necromancer who consults with skulls and the dead. We are, though, to listen to legitimate prophets who often speak of our future with the guidance of the Shekhinah, the feminine essence (dwelling) of Hashem, who here is depicted behind this woman.



Who judges and how is judgement fair? The Zohar comments on this parshah's mandates regarding the rule of law. It is said that there must be two or three accusers before anyone can be brought to trial, and one of them must be willing to be the punishers (the one with the rock) and the Zohar also speaks that each gate of a city should have a fair judge at its entrance allowing justice for those who enter their cities and that above each judge, here represented, as the Zohar says, are 24 holy judges. So, when the Torah repeats "justice. Justice" shall you seek, it is on many levels.



KI TEITSEI

This parshah filled with many instructions for proper behavior starts with how soldiers are to relate to captured women. Recognizing the lust that often accompanies the violence of war, the Torah demands high ethical conduct once these women are part of the conquest. Knowing the potential soldiers' desires, the enemies sometimes would send their daughters into the front of the battlefield hoping to distract the Hebrews soldiers. It had some effects but not quite what was expected. They may have wanted these women, but that didn't stop them from battle. For what is the purpose of war? Owning what the others have?



Who shall be a soldier? The Zohar repeats the exception that when someone has just been married, or built a new home, or is tending a new vineyard - that person is not to be drafted. They are to rejoice for a year. Twelve months and in this time, there can be spiritual expansion as well. The couple is to be free at home, free from toiling in worldly matters. Free from going into an army to war. There shall be joy from below and above. Everything pertains to the mystery of the possibilities of growth in a year.



Who is responsible? This parshah, filled with many mitzvot, speaks to building a fence on your roof. The sages say that the falling person will fall, ordained by heaven, fated, nevertheless, you should not be the one who causes this. And you are told not to take anything from the nest until you have separated the mother bird. Some sages reflect on this to remind us of being compassionate and not destroy other species. May we recognize our responsibilities to all sentient creatures.



KI TAVO

How do we know our mistakes? This parshah is famed for its listing of harsh things that can befall us for abandoning truth. The parshah begins though, with the instruction to bring the first fruits we raise to the temple, showing our gratitude. The Zohar here speaks to checking our shadow which mystically contains our misdoings and misjudgments and will reveal our spiritual flaws, and yet we still can head to the light - to the source of all - to the Creator - to appreciating the wonder of each day.



How does truth, wisdom and faith get spread? In this parshah there is reference to Moses, near the Jordan, which he would never get to cross to enter the Holy Land, being told by Hashem to construct 12 large stone pillars. These were to be covered in white lime like plaster and contain the Torah written in different languages. Part of our Jewish traditions has been to share our rich culture and heritage and spiritual depth in whatever language that will communicate to others. The question is now is, as then, will they read it and realize this guidance for an expansive life.



Who do we thank for the gifts in our lives? In this parshah it speaks of the *bikkurim* - bringing the first fruits - seven species - figs, dates, wheat, barely, pomegranate, olives, and grapes to the temple as offerings and honorings to Hashem that is the source of all our blessings. Accompanying the baskets with birds was also a custom. They connect the air and sky with the land that together brings forth what feeds us. May we express our thanks for the life that surrounds and supports us.

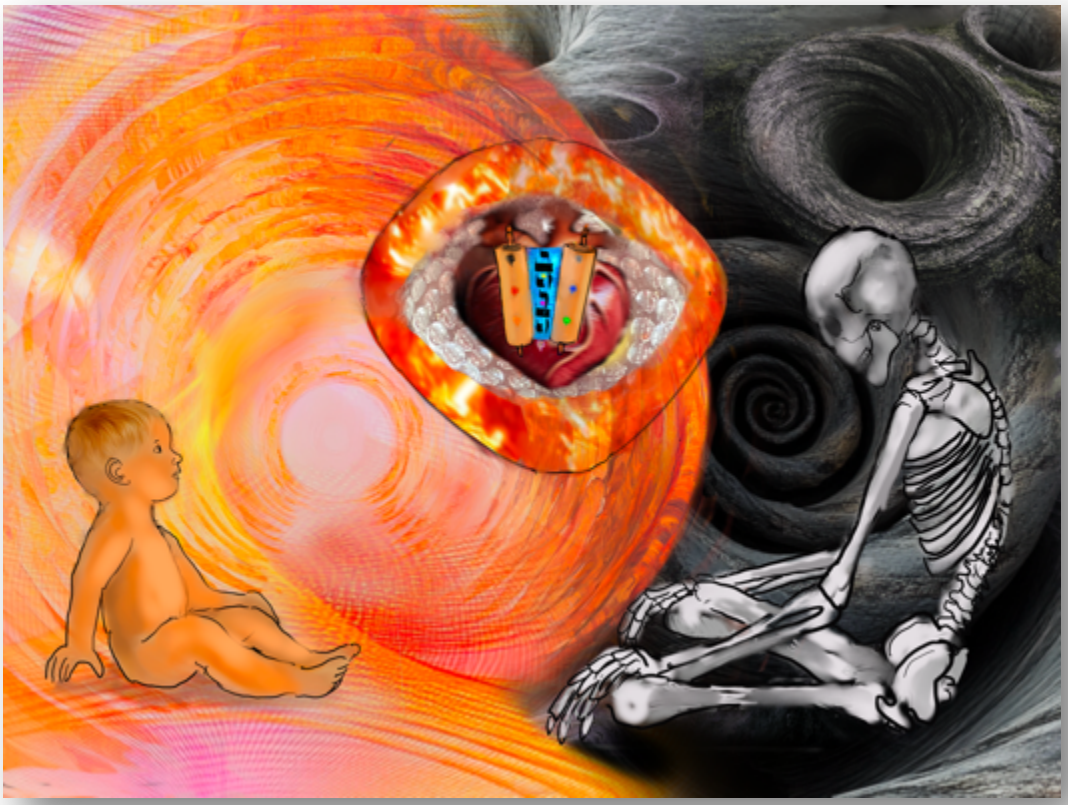


NITZAVIM

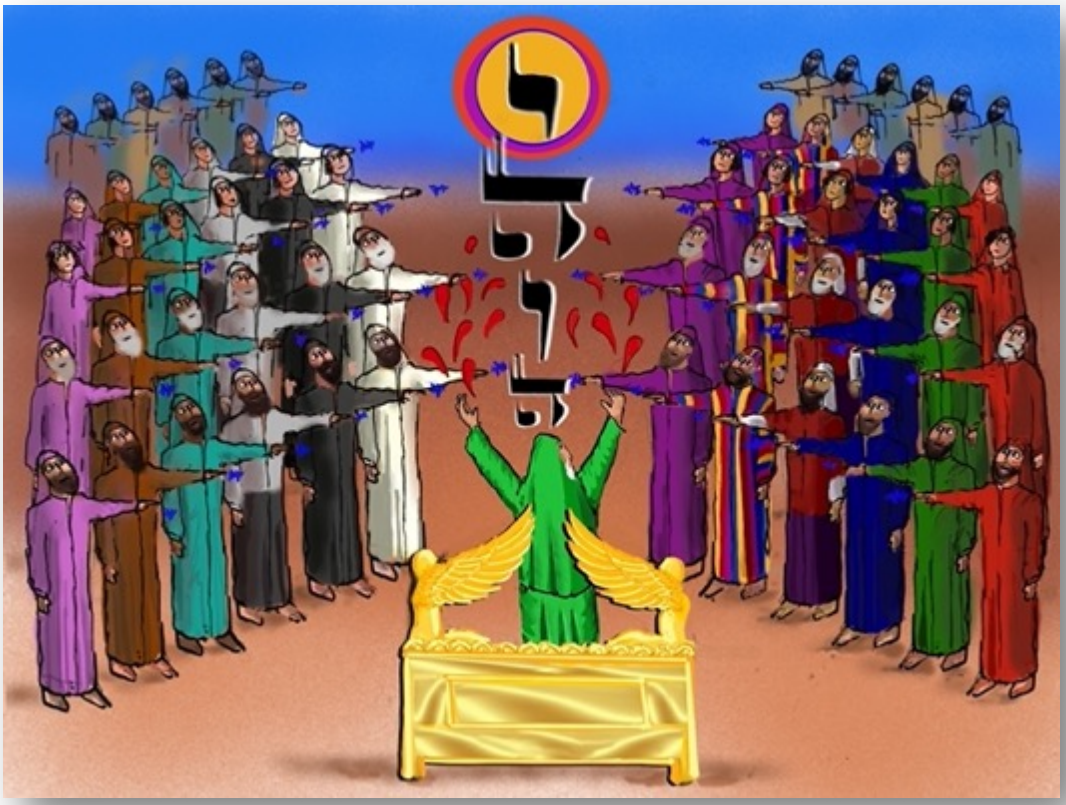
Who are we? The Zohar speaks to this parshah that talks about Moses addressing all the people standing before him, and the commentary is that it isn't just all the people that were there at the time, but all the people from every time, from our time, and it mentions Moses' prayer reflecting the 10 utterances of creation and sephirot on each finger - the 10 energy sources - as above we connect to The Creator whose unpronounceable name hovers above us.



For all the truth and commandments given to the Jews, it is not in heaven to say "who can ascend to the heaven for us and take it for us, so that we can listen and perform it? Nor is it across the sea. . . rather the matter is very near to you – in your mouth and in your heart." In the center of this image is the "*aleph*" – the first unpronounceable letter of the Hebrew alphabet and around it the three primary letters indicting Hashem – the *yud, hey* and *vov*. The colors on the strips of the lips here are from the four worlds we live in simultaneously as spoken of in Kabbalah.



Do we have a choice? This is a central theme in this week's parshah. Moses speaks to Hashem's offer: choose you life or death, blessings or curses. The sages speak to the first choice being like the child open to all possibilities versus the skeleton spiraling into the grey darkness of ignorance and fear. And where do we find inspiration and connection? It is in our heart and in our mouth. Here is where the truth of our wisdom - Torah - resides.



Where do we stand? This parshah begins with Moses gathering tribal leaders, elders. women and children and others before Hashem - our G-d - and the ark. He throws blood – the essence of physical life - forward - a gesture of purifying. Sages speak to why the group is talked about here; and they say why we are together is for us to be responsible for each other on our journeys - hence here the blue sparks - the color of kindness - extended to each other. May we stand up for each other.



VAYELECH

What happens when we pass on our wisdom to the next generation? Here the Zohar speaks about this parshah where Moses is passing on leadership to Joshua. Above Moses are the vibrancies of what's called Zer Anpin, which is the 7 upper cosmic sephirot energies, and more importantly, Moses is equated to the sun. Joshua represents *malchut*, the lower sephira, and the moon. Now the moon will be larger than the sun as Moses dies, yet Joshua's moon will still reflect Moses' guidance and wisdom, just as the moon reflects the sun. Moses lived when the Hebrews were blessed with manna - food from heaven; but now the Hebrews will have to make their own food, which is the next evolution and responsibility starting with Joshua and through the subsequence Hebrews in diaspora. And all of this flows from the Zohar's image of a supernal river giving sustenance and blessings both spiritual and physical.



How does the truth get spread? Good question for our times. In this parshah on his last day of his physical existence, Moses wrote 13 copies of the torah - 12 to be distributed to each of the tribes here in the presence of the community so each equally can study and practice the wisdom, and the 13th to be put inside the golden ark. The sages speak of this impossible task of writing these in one day being guided by Hashem. May the wisdom of these letters and words inspire us to do good, to be kind and to receive grace.



HAAZINU

On this last day of Moses' life, he sings this parshah. Singing! Judaism has been a religion of sound. Hebrew prayers are chanted. The midrash speaks of the ten prophetic songs which this parshah is the fourth. The first is Adam singing the gift of Shabbos. The second is Moses singing of the miraculous deliverance to freedom from the autocratic megalomaniac pharaoh. Third Moses' sister Miriam singing for Harhsem's providing the water of the well travelling with them. Fourth Moses again sings this very parshah. Fifth Joshua sang for Hashem's miracles to help defeat the enemies. Sixth the prophetess Devora sang for deliverance from the people committed to the Hebrew's destruction. Seventh Chana who gave birth to the prophet Samuel thanking Hashem in song. Eighth King David who thanks Hashem. Ninth King Solomon singing the Shir Hashrim (Song of Songs). And the tenth is a song of the future where the Jewish people as a group will sing the end of exile. The image here reflects Moses likening the Torah to rain which we depend on for survival. Without it, despite storms, we could not exist. And in the center of the image is what Moses said when we fulfill the ethics of our heritage it will be like red wine flowing from a single grape filling an entire cup.



What will our last words be? Here in this parshah Moses' last words are a song - a song of warning and a song of promise. Among the metaphors are Hashem as our rock, and like a protective hovering eagle over its young calming them, so too does G-d. We are compared to the lowly grape vine that climbs upwards and produces the gift of grapes, and that Hashem is continually giving us gifts like the dew itself that allows for growth. May we be grateful for all we are given.



What would we do on our dying day? Here the Zohar comments on this song-poem that Moses wrote on his last day. It is filled with imagery that the Zohar expands on like us being under the protection of a parent eagle, and that we are to call out to others to return to the truth and that the words are like the lily with both white and red colors of the spiritual sephirot representing both judgement and kindness, and an apple with similar colors signifying our spiritual truths and also the Zohar mentions our connections to everything symbolized here by the planets.



VZOT HABERACHAH

On his death, Hashem told Moses to close his eyes and place his hand on his chest and angels would descend to minister to him. Michael the angel of Mercy prepared his couch showing that Moses' leadership, even though he had rebuked the people, had always been about mercy. Expanding on this the angel Gavriel, angel of Justice, spread a linen cloth for Moses' head as linen represents mercy. And the angel Zagzagael known as the holiest of angels covered Moses' feet symbolizing his actions – where he walked and moved – all had been holy. Moses had dedicated his life to selfless contribution and earned a transcendent transition. May we too find ways to step outside ourselves and help others and earn our transitions.



How do you end and how do you begin? Though this is the last parshah of Torah it is also the beginning. Here Moses on his last day blesses the tribes who are the future of Israel. And we know that the last letter and the first letter of Torah spell the word "heart" which is the essence of Torah that the sages say is composed of the elements of fire, water and the desert wilderness land where it was given. May we continue to advance these teachings into our futures wherever we are.



How does everything end? How did everything begin? Interesting that in my search there were nowhere in Zohar writings that were specifically commenting on this last parshah. Maybe because it really isn't the end, as on Simchas Torah, where the Torah is begun again, you read the last words of the Torah and the first word at the same time. Our Torah was, as the Zohar says, written with black fire on white fire. The last word of Torah ends in the letter '*lamed*' and the first word starts with the letter '*bet*.' And those letters *'lamed bet*' do form the word for ***heart***. May we continually expand our hearts.



In the last parshah, Moses blesses each of the tribes. In the center of this image is the emerging spiral of the sephirot with each of the 10 centers and its colors coming out to the 22 violet hands- for the 22 Hebrew letters - each hand is in the priestly blessing. Star formations of the "*etz chaim*" – the Trees of Life – are seen in between each of the tribal leaders whose hands are in symbolic gestures – mudras - from other religious traditions. All being united in the One.



And so we begin again
the journey of Torah