

Parashah Meditations

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MANY JEWS LEARN MEDITATION FROM NON-JEWISH texts or teachers, but yearn to integrate meditative insight with Jewish practice. Under the guidance of gifted rabbis and teachers, we have discovered that the weekly Torah portion can be approached in a contemplative way. Using this framework, we have found the weekly parashah to be a fruitful source of wisdom and inspiration for meditation practice and beyond.

We began to compose weekly meditations in 2010 to inspire our sitting group and havurah as well as ourselves. At that time, Richard was participating in the Institute for Jewish Spirituality's Jewish Mindfulness Teacher Training program, led by Rabbis Jeff Roth and Sheila Peltz Weinberg. During that program each of the thirty or so participants took turns preparing a page of meditation instruction or inspiration based on the weekly parashah. These "midrashim" were sent out each Sunday or Monday to set a *kavvanah*/intention and inspire sitting practice for the week. We decided to create a mini-drash on this model for our own sitting group and havurah in Washington, DC (Fabrangen), and to post them on the listserv before Shabbat.

Our intention was to look carefully and closely at a detail in the weekly Torah portion. We ask what lessons it can teach us about living wisely, peacefully, compassionately, and joyfully. We aim to uncover and express one pearl from the treasury that each week's parashah represents. The key for us was to find this pearl through meditative attention to the text, and to express it in a spare and simple form that would invite others to also enter into contemplative relationship with the text. We came to conceive of these comments as "haiku midrash." It is often a challenge to keep our comments to a few lines or even a paragraph or two, but the discipline of honing what we want to say to its essential essence has been helpful.

To find an idea for the midrash, we approach the text contemplatively. That means reading the words slowly and savoring them, paying attention to how they resonate within body, mind, and soul; noting what feelings they evoke and what questions they raise. We have evolved this process in the course of working with various teachers at a number of meditation retreats, particularly Rabbis Jeff Roth, Alan Lew (*z"l*), Shefa Gold, Sheila Peltz Weinberg, and teachers and writers Sylvia Boorstein and Norman Fisher. We recently became aware that there is a long Christian contemplative tradition called *lectio divina* that describes a similar process of interacting with and listening to sacred text.

Contemplative interaction with Torah differs from a primarily intellectual examination of text that most of us are familiar with from Torah discussions and traditional sermons. The contemplative approach includes carefully watching our own emotional, psychological, spiritual, and intellectual responses to both the white fire and the black fire — both what is left out of, and what is written into, the text. The white space in particular can be fertile ground for dreaming, imagining, and feeling. These responses become part of the dialogue with the text and form the basis for midrash. In this way, the text becomes alive and we are able to engage with it in a dynamic and inspiring way. We especially enjoy sharing ideas and drafts with each other, which has contributed to a deeper awareness and ability to find personal meaning and significance in the text.

We hope the sampling of meditation midrash that follows will do the same for you. But even more, we hope you will experiment with applying this contemplative approach to the text yourself. Try taking just one sentence — you can even pick it at random — and really mull it over, allowing it to resonate in your gut, in your head. Notice any discomfort, any yearning, any reaction that arises in you. Then listen for your own response, and for any answer that the text seems to want to give you in turn. End by formulating an intention for growth, a way that you can live out the inspiration from the text. We hope that you will find this approach a fruitful one in your own life.

Genesis/B'reishit

B'reishit

When God began to create heaven and earth, the earth being unformed and void... [Genesis 1:1]

Everything begins with nothingness and stillness. Each phase of creation culminates with the description, "And there was evening and there was morning." As we read in the V'ahavta, "...when you lie down and when you rise..." May our rising and awareness be filled with the energy that flows from spacious rest and contemplation.

Noah

And God said: "This is the sign of the covenant, which I am placing between Me and between you, and between every living soul that is with you, for everlasting generations. My rainbow I have placed in the cloud, and it shall be for a sign of a covenant between Myself and the earth." [Gen. 9:12-13]

Why does a rainbow, an ephemeral phenomenon, remind us of an everlasting covenant? Looking closely at the fleeting beauty of creation, we see that the passing away of phenomena is not the same as destruction. All experience and all creation arises and passes. Yet underneath the flux of experience we can sense something eternal, something constant, something that is the source of creation. We bless a rainbow because in blessing the fleeting, we become aware of its eternal source.

Va-Yeira

"Hineni - Here I am." [Gen. 22:1 – Abraham speaking to God]

"Hineni - Here I am." [Gen. 22:7 – Abraham speaking to Isaac]

"Hineni - Here I am." [Gen. 22:11 – Abraham speaking to the angel]

This is the highest practice: to say "Here I am" to every relationship, being fully present to what is larger than our selves, to what we care for and love, and to those who bring us connection.

Toldot

Yitzhak and his servants dug a well, quarrelled with the shepherds of Gerar, and named the well Esek/Bickering.

They dug another well, quarrelled over it, and named it Sitna/Animosity.

Then: *He moved on from there and dug another well, but they did not quarrel over it, so he called its name: Rehovot/Space. [Gen. 26: 22]*

Struggling to find something as necessary as water in the desert, we risk locking ourselves in a struggle that deepens from bickering to full-blown animosity. Moving away, physically and mentally, lessens the desperate attachment, allowing spaciousness to infuse the situation. In the new space, new ways of relating are discovered, finally creating space for peace to flow. (Inspired by a teaching of Rabbi Alan Lew, z”l)

Va-Yeitzei

And Jacob awakened from his sleep, and he said, “Indeed, the Lord is in this place, and I did not know.” [Gen. 28:16]

When we lose touch with the holy, wondrous, creative force manifesting in each place and each moment, we are like sleepwalkers in our own lives. Seeking to know helps us to wake up.

Va-Yishlach

Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until the break of the day. When he saw that he had not prevailed against him... [the man] said: “Let me go, for dawn is breaking.” And [Jacob] said: “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” And [the man] said unto him: “What is your name?” And he said: “Jacob.” And he said: “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob but Israel...” [Gen. 32:25-29].

The effort to reject and cast out our “enemies” of desire, anger, fear, anxiety, and lethargy only feeds and strengthens these qualities. Rather, becoming aware of and welcoming these forces with acceptance and compassion leads to healing and blessing. May we continue to struggle and grow as Jacob did in his moment of peril.

Mikeitz

“So now, let Pharaoh seek out an understanding and wise man and appoint him over the land of Egypt.” [Gen. 41:33]

Within the space of a few hours, Joseph emerges from two years in prison, shaves, puts on clean clothes, gives an insightful interpretation of dreams, and is elevated to viceroy of Egypt. What could he possibly have been doing while he was in prison to prepare himself to lead Egypt through the coming crisis? Exactly what he advised Pharaoh — he was seeking the understanding and wisdom that resided within him. Instead of despairing or fighting against the narrow space in which he found himself, he turned inward and cultivated discernment.

May we also learn to respond to tight and narrow times in our own lives by seeking understanding and wisdom.

Va-Yigash

So Joseph brought his father Jacob and stood him before Pharaoh, and Jacob blessed Pharaoh. [Gen. 47:7]

So Jacob blessed Pharaoh and left Pharaoh's presence. [Gen. 47:10]

In between these blessings, Pharaoh expresses his amazement at Jacob's age and Jacob responds that he is not nearly so old as his fathers, and that his years have been "few and miserable." The man who dreamed of angels ascending to heaven, who knew that "God was in this place," who wrested a blessing and a new name from an angel, and who has just been re-united with a beloved son — sums his life up as short and miserable. And yet from this glass-half-empty perspective, he summons not one, but two blessings for the half-god ruler in whose presence he stands. Does Jacob's ability to bless even a Pharaoh in some way come from his embrace of the common griefs and pains that are present in all our lives? Instead of being over-awed by Pharaoh's splendor, Jacob connects to Pharaoh's ordinary, flawed human nature through the shared human experience that life is short, fleeting, and full of sorrow. It is from this empathic, compassionate, and human connection that Jacob's blessing of Pharaoh arises.

May we also learn to hold our own mortality, shortcomings, and sorrows lightly and with compassion, so that they may empower us to connect with and bless all whom we meet.

Va-Yechi

All these were the twelve tribes of Israel, and this is what their father spoke to them and blessed them, each one according to his blessing he blessed them. [Gen. 49:28]

Reading Jacob's deathbed pronouncements to his sons can be troubling. We call these blessings, but many of the statements seem harsh, even belittling. In what way can we see these statements as blessings?

Assuming that these were accurate assessments of each son, and assuming that Jacob delivered the statements without blame, perhaps the value is in having someone see you accurately and clearly. Being seen completely by another person can be uncomfortable, but it is also intimate and, in some ways, freeing. It is a great gift when someone sees us and accepts us as we are.

May we be blessed to see clearly and accept our whole selves, just the way we are. And from that acceptance, may we grow.

Exodus/Sh'mot

Sh'mot

And God said to Moses, "Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh, I Will Be What I Will Be," and He said: "Thus shall you say to the Israelites: 'I Will Be' sent me to you." [Exodus 3:13-14]

How do we cultivate the awareness of our own enslavement? The aleph at the beginning of the word "ehyeh" teaches that silence can allow us to see the truth of what is. Awareness of the presence of the timeless and infinite within us can be the beginning of the journey toward liberation.

Va-Eira

Moses spoke thus to the Israelites, but they did not listen to Moses because of their shortness of breath and hard labor. [Ex. 6:9]

Exodus 6:9 is an intensely sad line: So much misery and suffering could have been avoided if the Israelites had heard Moses, really HEARD him, and been willing to walk out of slavery right then and there. If they had listened and heard with faith that divine strength would support their freedom journey, they would have been practically free right then. Instead Moses had to bargain and argue with Pharaoh, making it seem as though it was Pharaoh who had the power to grant freedom, when all along it was the Israelites who needed to listen and act in accord with the divine flow.

We can see this pattern in our own lives. Liberation is speaking directly to us, but we do not hear. We think the oppressor or oppressive situation must change first, when really it is we who must take the first step toward liberation. May we hear the voice of liberation calling to us and have the faith to make one small move to meet it.

Bo

God said to Moses, "Speak in the ears of the people: they shall ask, each man of his neighbor, each woman of her neighbor, objects of silver and objects of gold." [Ex. 11:2]

Now the Israelites had done according to Moses's words: they had asked of the Egyptians objects of silver and objects of gold and clothing...So did they strip Egypt." [Ex. 12:35-36]

God instructs the people to ask for objects of silver and gold. Moses goes farther and adds clothing to the request. The people go even farther. They take

everything of value. Some commentators explain that the silver and gold was payment for the Israelites' unpaid labor as slaves. Perhaps. However, they take not only justified recompense, but everything. They felt so wronged that they felt entitled to revenge. But revenge locks them more tightly into struggle. The Egyptians pursue them, maybe to get back some of the spoils. And even when the Israelites are finally free of Egypt, they are burdened by the spoils. The very first use they make of the gold is to build the golden calf, an idol.

May we see clearly the line between seeking justice and seeking revenge. May we see clearly the difference between our hunger to be valued, and our greed to be proven right.

Mishpatim

You shall not mistreat a stranger, nor shall you oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. [Ex. 22:20]

You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, since you were strangers in the land of Egypt. [Ex. 23:9]

Sometimes when we look carefully at our inner life, it seems there is a stranger inside. "Did I really say that? Am I really feeling that jealous/angry/hurt? Who is this that feels and acts so prideful/so dejected?" Instead of repressing these aspects of ourselves and pushing them away, the text instructs us to "know the feelings" — to empathize with the feelings that result when we are in a tight place and see no way forward. By practicing empathy and compassion for our full self, we can befriend the strange parts of ourselves and let go of the walls we have been building to keep them out. As we stop maintaining these walls that box us in to a narrow conception of "I," our own Mitzrayim/Egypt can fall away, setting us free.

May we welcome all parts of our selves home, and may we live peacefully and free among friends, both inside and out.

T'tzaveh

And on its bottom hem you shall make pomegranates of blue, purple, and crimson wool, on its bottom hem all around, and golden bells in their midst all around. [Ex. 28:33]

The very essence of pomegranate is its blazing, fiery, scarlet redness. It is deep red as a flower and as a ripe fruit. Breaking it open, its inner treasure of juicy seeds, nestled in the bitter white pulp of the enclosing membranes, sparkles with redness. There is no blue in a pomegranate, inside or out. Why, then, do

the instructions for the priest's garments specify including blue wool to make the pomegranates for the hem of the priestly garment? The obvious purpose of the bells and pomegranates is to awaken our attention and to lift us into heightened appreciation of *k'vod* and *tiferet*, of honor and beauty. But the blue of the pomegranate goes even farther. It stokes our sense of wonder and our imagination. It asks us to imagine a world even more beautiful than the one we inhabit with our usual senses.

May we be inspired to risk moving beyond the known, into the realm of the ineffable.

P'kudei

He [Moses] set up the courtyard all around the Mishkan and the altar, and he put up the screen at the entrance to the courtyard; and Moses completed the work. And the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the Mishkan. [Ex. 40:33-34]

We have been reading for weeks about the elaborate, careful and precise preparation of the *Mishkan*/Tabernacle. To what purpose? All of that skillful effort was directed to creating an empty space. Yet it was that emptiness that invited something more to dwell within.

May our care with our practice lead to an emptying, to the letting go of self concepts, so that we become attuned to, and allow our actions to be guided by, the holy presence within. (Inspired by Alison Laichter, Executive Director, Jewish Meditation Center of Brooklyn)

Leviticus/Va-Yikra

Tzav

“A continuous fire shall burn upon the altar; it shall not go out...” [Leviticus 6:1]

Fire is a process that brings together oxygen with fuel to release energy. Such a process goes on inside of us. Our cells are continually combining the oxygen that we breathe in with the food that we eat to generate the energy we need to stay alive. There is a never-ending cycle of creating and breaking molecular bonds to release the energy we live on. When we quietly tune in to inner sensation, we can sometimes sense a continual buzzing or humming that vibrates and pulses through the body. If this energy were visible to us as light (as it is in

some organisms such as the firefly or luminescent deep sea creatures) we would perceive each other as sparkling, flashing beings shedding light all around.

As we look deeply inside ourselves and others, may we understand and appreciate the unending, eternal, and sparkling essence that powers our aliveness.

Sh'mini

“And if any of these dead [creatures] falls upon anything, it will become unclean, whether it is any wooden vessel, garment, hide or sack, any vessel with which work is done; it shall be immersed in water, but will remain unclean until evening, and it will become clean. But any earthenware vessel, into whose interior any of them falls, whatever is inside it shall become unclean, and you shall break [the vessel] itself.” [Lev. 11:32-33]

In verse 32, the dead, unclean creature has fallen upon the outer surface of the object. But in verse 33, the contamination is in the interior of the vessel. When the outside is contaminated, a gentle act (just immersion — not even scrubbing and soap) and patience (just waiting until evening) are sufficient to create a change from unclean to clean. But when the inside becomes contaminated, then the radical act of breaking the container itself is needed. So too it is with us. When our skin or our garments (perhaps to be understood as our outer face or our social roles) are uncomfortably touched, we need simply to immerse ourselves in something calm — perhaps chanting a psalm or saying a self-affirmation or a blessing — and then be patient that the discomfort will pass. However, when our innermost self is touched by something not alive and not kosher, we must take action to shatter the very conception of self. The deadness — the “not change” — that has contaminated the self must be cleansed by a radical change, a breaking of our separate and limited self.

May we understand that change, both small and large, is continual. And may we discern those times when our best action is to be patient and wait for change to take place on its own, and when the most skillful response is to initiate change with an intentional breaking of our own patterns.

M'tzora

“But if he is poor and cannot afford [these sacrifices], he shall take one...” [Lev. 14: 21]

Faced with a need to change, there are times when we feel we don't have the energy or resources to even begin. Rather than stay stuck, this parashah

teaches us to take one beginning step toward change. When we take this one initial action, a new way forward will begin to unfold.

K'doshim

“You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy.” [Lev. 10:2]

What does it mean to be holy, not just to act in a holy way or to think holy thoughts — but to BE holy?

Rest in the awareness of your body doing its dance of aliveness — the breath coming in, the breath going out; the blood circulating; the mind thinking; the heart loving — and ask, what does it mean to BE?

Numbers/B'Midbar

B'Midbar

The Lord spoke to Moses in the Sinai Desert, in the Tent of Meeting on the first day of the second month, in the second year after the exodus from the land of Egypt... [Numbers 1:1]

To receive an insight, we must allow our minds and hearts to be clear, and lay ourselves open and bare like the wilderness at Sinai. However, even if we do the work of opening, inspiration is not guaranteed, for inspiration comes in its own specific time and place.

Sh'lach Lecha

And they spread an evil report of the land which they had spied out among the Israelites: “... And there we saw the Nephilim — the Anakites are part of the Nephilim — and we looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and so we must have looked to them.” [Num. 13:32-33]

When we see ourselves as grasshoppers, what if we allowed ourselves to see not with fear, but with exquisite attention? What if we were to carefully attend to the self that feels small and fragile? What insights would arise?

Hukkat

And the Lord spoke to Moses: “You and your brother Aaron take the rod and assemble the community, and before their eyes speak to the rock to produce its water.” [Num. 20:7-8]

Just as God told Moses to speak to the rock, we too can listen and speak gently to the hard and difficult places within ourselves. If we can do so, *mayim hayim* [living waters] can flow, and quench our thirst for insight and peace.

Pinchas

Torah: The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: "Pinchas the son of Eleazar the son of Aaron the kohen has turned My anger away from the children of Israel by zealously avenging Me among them, so that I did not destroy the Israelite people because of My zeal. Therefore, say, 'I hereby give him My covenant of peace. It shall be for him and for his descendants after him an eternal covenant of kehunah/priesthood, because he was zealous for his God and atoned for the children of Israel.'" [Num. 25:10-13]

Haftorah: The Lord said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a still small voice. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" [I Kings 19:11-13]

Why is the story of Pinchas split between two different Torah portions? Last week we read that Pinchas killed two people engaged in idolatry. The parashah ends. We pick up again this week to learn that Pinchas' zealous action is rewarded with an eternal covenant of peace and the priesthood. What was Pinchas doing in that time between killing and receiving the covenant of peace?

Midrash tells us that Pinchas and Elijah were the same person. Therefore, the haftorah gives us a clue as to what Pinchas/Elijah was doing in the interlude. He was trying to move from anger to peace. To do so, he had to turn inward and listen intently. Did he hear the sound of silence, the continuously gentle vibration of the energy of the universe? From carefully and patiently listening to the calm stillness within, Pinchas was transformed.

The break in the story itself teaches us something more about the place of righteous anger. It shows us that angry action, while sometimes needed, brings the story to a halt. Anger begets only an ending. In contrast, peace is a beginning. Peace creates a power that flows continuously from generation to generation.

May we be granted the discernment to take strong action when absolutely necessary, and the wisdom to then let go of anger and listen intently to find and connect to the source of peace.

Deuteronomy/D'varim

R'eih

"...then you must bring everything that I command you to the site where the Lord your God will choose to establish His name." [Deuteronomy 12:11]

Where is God's dwelling place? Sitting quietly focusing on breath, we can become aware that the holy of holies is within us.

Shoftim

"Justice, justice, shall you pursue, that you may thrive..." [Deut. 16:20]

The repetition of the word "justice" can have many meanings, among them that justice in the world is nurtured and enhanced by justice within. Taking and allowing time to hear and reflect on our inner voices can improve the quality of our decision-making and interaction with the world.

Ki Teitzei

"...you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!" [Deut. 25:19]

A paradox: how to remember to forget? To blot out the memory of those things that pursue us, drain life from us, and undermine our peace, we must "remember" or remind ourselves to return our attention, again and again, to that which gives us life. This is the "effortless effort" we can use to gently train our minds by focusing on breath or God. As the mind quiets, it expands and in the expansiveness, troubling, even horrific, memories can be seen from a new perspective.

Ki Tavo

After the people have crossed the Jordan, before receiving the great blessings and curses, Moses and the priests spoke to all Israel:

"Keep silence and hear, Israel. Today you have become the people of the Lord your God." [Deut. 27:9]

Why does the Torah say "keep silence and hear?" Because in silence, hearing and understanding take root.

Nitzavim

"But the word is very close to you. It is in your mouth and in your heart so that you may fulfill it." [Deut. 30:14]

Why does the Torah say "mouth" before "heart?" Shouldn't we look in our heart for the truth before we speak? Sometimes those truths that are closest

to us are the hardest to discern. The Hasidic practice of *hitbodedut* — of speaking our innermost thoughts to God — can reveal the truth hidden in our hearts. The key to this practice is to speak continuously for 10 to 15 minutes without stopping, imagining that you are speaking directly to God. Even if you say things like, “Are you listening? I don’t really believe in you. Who are you? Do you even hear me? If you do, do you care about me? This is silly. But I want you to be there. And if you were there, and you were listening, I would want to tell you...” Keeping this stream of talk going for a full 10 to 15 minutes, despite feelings of doubt or discomfort, is a very powerful practice. In our own experience, and in watching many others use this practice, we have seen it lead to significant spiritual growth.



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