

The *Parashah* and The Patient:
Bringing Sweet Torah into (Virtual) *Bikur Cholim*

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RENEWING BIKUR CHOLIM IN THE TIME OF COVID 19

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כֹּה דָאָגָה בְּלֵב-אִישׁ יִשְׁחָנָה

“Anxiety in the heart of a man weighs him down...” *Proverbs 12:25*

משלי יב) דאגה בלב איש ישחנה רבי אמי ורבי אסי

חד אמר: ישחנה מדעתו, וחד אמר: ישיחנה לאחרים

Rav Ammi and Rav Assi [explained it differently]:

One said: One should suppress it; the other said: One should talk about it with others.

Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 75a

Note: One connects the word *yashchena* (bows/weights him down) with the Hebrew *nassah*, “to remove”; the other with the Hebrew *suh*, “to speak.”

And note: The verse from Proverbs ends with: וְדָבָר טוֹב יִשְׂמְחֶנּוּ “but a good word/thing makes him glad.”

Study is holier even than prayer, for in prayer we speak to God, but in study we listen to God. We strive to understand what God wants from us. We try to make His will ours. For the holiest thing is God’s word. The Torah – God’s word to our ancestors – is our constitution as a nation, our covenant of liberty, the code by which we decipher the mystery and meaning of life.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z”l, former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom

“...For they are our life and the fullness of our days,
and on then we will meditate day and night...”

From Ahavat Olam in the evening prayer service

“She is a Tree of Life for those who grasp it...”

Mishlei/Proverbs 3:18, sung upon returning the Torah scroll to the Aron haKodesh

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi and the Sufferers of *Ra'atan*

From the Babylonian Talmud, Ketubot 77b

....What are his (the sufferer of *ra'atan*) symptoms? — His eyes tear, his nostrils run, spittle flows from his mouth and flies swarm about him. What is his cure? — Abaye said: Pila 1 ladanum,² the rind of a nut tree, the shavings of a dressed hide, melilot³ and the calyx⁴ of a red date-tree. These must be boiled together and carried into a house of marble,⁵ and if no marble house is available they may be carried into a house [the walls of which are of the thickness] of seven bricks and a half.⁶ Three hundred cups [of the mixture] must then be poured upon his head until his cranium is softened, and then his brain is cut open. Four leaves of myrtle must be brought and each foot⁷ [in turn] lifted up and one [leaf] placed [beneath it].⁸ It is then grasped with a pair of tweezers and burned; for otherwise it would return to him.

R. Johanan announced: Beware of the flies of one afflicted with *ra'atan*.

R. Zera never sat [with such a sufferer] in the same draught. R. Eleazar never entered his tent. R. Ammi and R. Assi never ate any of the eggs coming from the alley in which he lived.

R. Joshua b. Levi, however, attached himself to these [sufferers] and studied the Torah; for he said, “Let her be like a loving hind and a graceful doe”;⁹ if [the Torah] bestows grace upon those who study it, would it not also protect them?”

When he (R. Joshua ben Levi) was about to die, the Angel of Death was instructed, ‘Go and carry out his wish’. When he came and showed himself to him, the latter said, ‘Show me my place [in Paradise]’. — ‘Very well’, he replied. ‘Give me your knife’, the other (R. Joshua) demanded, ‘[since, otherwise], you may frighten me on the way’. He gave it to him. On arriving there he lifted him up and showed him [his place]. The latter jumped and dropped on the other side [of the wall].¹⁰ He seized him by the corner of his cloak; but the other exclaimed, ‘I swear that I will not go back’. Thereupon the Holy Blessed One said, ‘If he ever had an oath of his annulled¹¹ he must return;¹² but if not, he need not return’. ‘Return to me my knife’, he said to him; but the other would not return it to him. A bath kol¹³ went forth and said to him, ‘Return the thing to him, for it is required for the mortals’.¹⁴

Elijah¹⁵ heralded him proclaiming. ‘Make room for the son of Levi, make room for the son of Levi’. As he (R. Joshua) proceeded on his way he found R. Simeon b. Yohai sitting on thirteen stools¹⁶ of gold. ‘Are you’, R. Simeon asked him, ‘the son of Levi?’ — ‘Yes’, he replied. ‘Has a rainbow [R. Simeon asked] ever appeared in your lifetime?’ — ‘Yes’, he replied. ‘If that is so [R. Simeon said] you are not the son of Levi’.¹⁷ The fact, however, is that there was no such thing [in R. Joshua’s lifetime], but he thought, ‘I must take no credit for myself’...

NOTES:

1. A fragrant plant
2. A soft black or dark brown resinous exudation from the *Cistus* or rock rose.
3. Sweet-scented clover
4. The calyx of the date when it is in its early unripe condition
5. To shut out all draughts
6. The size of half a brick, with the size of a brick being three handbreadths.
7. Rashi explains that a special insect was used – so these are the feet of the insect.
8. Thus preventing the insect from burying its feet in the brain when lifted out.
9. He is quoting *Proverbs 5:19*, which was understood as referring to the Torah.
10. R. Joshua ben Levi “flipped the fence” into Paradise.
11. If he never had to ask a competent authority for absolution from an oath or a vow...
12. That is, the oath he just made can also be annulled.
13. A heavenly voice, that often comes to resolve controversies.
14. Lit., for “creatures.”
15. Elijah the prophet, himself, went up by a whirlwind into heaven (see *II Kings 2:11*)
16. Or some render this, “Sitting at thirteen tables of fine gold”
17. You cannot be the saintly man about whom Elijah made his proclamation. Background: The rainbow was a token of the *b'rit*, the covenant (see *Genesis 9:12*) that though the people deserved destruction, the waters shall no more cause a flood to destroy all flesh (*ibid.*, v. 15). By this logic, the rainbow should not appear in the lifetime of a saintly person, whose merit alone is sufficient to save the world from devastation.

Some of the Motivations Behind Bringing Torah Into a Bikur Cholim Visit

Absolutely not in order of priority

1. Simon the Just...used to say, "Upon three things the world stands:
On Torah, on (Divine) Service, and on Deeds of Lovingkindness." (*Pirke Avot 1:2*)
2. For hope, reassurance, inspiration, guidance, comfort, calm, etc.
3. In a time of catapulting rapidly into a technological "Brave New World," we need to counter dehumanization and "robotization," and reinforce human interaction and pierce the isolation
4. For transcendence, perhaps distraction; also, an opportunity to be curious, joyful, playful, imaginative, entertaining, etc.
5. To "travel" together – perhaps to jointly visit unanswerable questions or foreign territory, or to help negotiate challenging transitions in illness, diagnosis, treatment, etc.
6. To clarify concerns, "package" worries, give words to feelings or ideas
7. To place a person's challenges/struggles in a Jewish frame or idiom
8. To offer a new/old dimension or a new/old perspective on a problem
9. To join in a Jewish spiritual experience, as distinguished from those generally offered by the doctor, social worker, physical therapist, administrator, etc.
10. To "re-plant" someone in the Jewish community and/or in the flow of the Jewish year.
11. To empower an otherwise disempowered Jew, strengthen his/her voice
12. To engage, respond to, and/or support family, friends, caregiving people, etc.

Some of the Unique Opportunities Presented by the Sharing of Torah in the Virtual Age

1. The Globalization extends the reach of/to Torah – a *choleh/cholah* can link to Torah study in Israel, Rio, London, etc. – and, in general, a "Torah Fellowship" could link ill people with distant visitors as *chavrutot*.
2. "Virtual Torah" echoes/reflects the very nature of Jewish learning – i.e., listening 'virtually' to voice from many very different 'rectangles' on the screen resembles our drawing on the layers of Jewish wisdom – Bible, Talmud, Midrash, Rashi, Maimonides, Medieval commentators, Sephardic and Ashkenazic teachings, Hasidic insights, etc., etc.
 - a. What has bonded us as a community is our portable Torah and a shared calendar.
 - b. We transcend the barriers of Cyberia just as we transcend time and physical presence.
3. We can untie the constraints put on Torah Study – e.g., a meaningful text can be shared/explored not just with the visatee but with family and friends, health care and mental health professionals, more (literally, "be on the same page").
4. The importance of Shared Vulnerability of the visitor/visatee – as two equal Zoom rectangles, both of them time-limited and ephemeral as well as Images of the Eternal and enduring. This relates to the Democratization potential of virtual platforms (for better and for worse).
5. Torah in Transitional Times – as an escort through stages of illness and dying, a hand-holding, or a bridge from the past/present to the future.
6. Intimacy can be enhanced deepened – the face masks are off (Though it is important to note that can be diluted at the same time – the communication can be flatter and, to say the obvious, less three-dimensional.)

7. Some/many people need a “punching bag” – a person, text, traditional practice, etc. to be the targets of their complaints or anger. It is possible to offer something that can serve as this sponge while also offering a worthwhile support.

Some Pretty-Obvious Cautions and Caveats re: Bringing Torah into a Bikur Cholim Visit

1. Make sure this is something the visitee feels open to, and comfortable with; often, if not always, one needs to ask in order to make sure.
2. Approach this as a joint, “horizontal” exploration more than a “vertical” teaching, with open-ended questions more than “closed” teachings. It probably should not be “so this is the question, and this is the answer.”
3. Ground the experience (or “experiment”) in the concerns and even the very words of the visitee
4. Avoid material that requires a great deal of back-story, explanation of vocabulary, understanding of history, etc. (On the other hand, people with a strong Jewish education might appreciate a multi-leveled opportunity!)
5. Especially if this might be your only visit, limit any source to a few lines or even a few words (e.g., a *pasuk* with a related adage from *Pirke Avot*)
6. As always, remain cognizant of people’s different experiences, identities, interests, and priorities, as far as you can ascertain these.
7. Be attentive and responsive to his/her/their zoning out.
8. Though it is generally true that there is no “perfect” text for any person, situation, or time, *our own* interest, curiosity, and commitment go a long way.
9. If at all possible, get the visitee a very readable hard-copy (perhaps enlarged font) and/or share the Zoom screen.
10. Make sure not only to respect but *help give words to* specific criticisms or ideas that the visitee offers in response to the text.

“Where two meet in Torah, the *Shekhinah* is present”
Hanina ben Tradyon in Mishnah Avot 3:2

“The *Shekhinah* awaits even one who is engaged in Torah”
Halafta ben Dosa of K’far Hananya in Mishnah Avot 3:6

“Whoever occupies him/herself with the Torah for its own sake,
his/her learning becomes an elixir of life to him/her...”
Rabbi Banna’ah in Babylonian Talmud, Ta’anit 7a

Mona 58, and her son Jonathan, 32, lost their husband/father to a sudden heart attack one year ago, and Mona was now facing a difficult stage in her breast cancer journey. They were also facing Jonathan's withdrawal, increased alcohol consumption and work absenteeism, as well as Mona's profound loneliness and other familial strains (e.g., finances) and challenges. Somewhat dubious, critical, or jaded about psychotherapy and psychotherapists, they met with a "para-chaplain" for spiritual counseling through a Jewish Healing program, which centered around the primary need for professional assessment of Jonathan's behavior, an individualized spiritual treatment program for each of them, personal and interpersonal support for both mother and son, striking a new balance in their relationship, and dealing with various practical and familial challenges. Prayers, parables, and guidance from traditional Jewish texts underscored these foci and cemented the structure of their "spiritual treatment plan," which centered around integrating responsibility to self, to others, and to God.

From Parashat Noah (Genesis 6:9 – 11:32) After the Deluge: Trauma and Recovery

(8:18-19: The emergence of Noah and family -- and every animal and bird – from the ark.)
 8:20 Then Noah built an altar to HaShem, and taking of every clean animal and of every clean bird, he offered burnt offerings on the altar.

NOAH'S GRATITUDE; RELIEF; TRIBUTE

- CLOSENESS AND DEDICATION TO THE MERCIFUL ASPECT OF HASHEM;
 "RECIPROCITY" (*Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer, 8th century Aggadic work*),
- INTEGRATION OF CONSTRUCTIVE AND DESTRUCTIVE

8:21 Hashem smelled the pleasing odor, and HaShem said to Godself: "Never again will I doom the earth because of human, since the devisings of human's mind are evil from youth, nor will I ever again destroy every living being, as I have (just) done.
 :22 "So long as the earth endures, Seedtime and Harvest, Cold and Heat, Summer and Winter, Day and Night, shall not cease."

AFFIRMATION OF SAFETY OF THE COLLECTIVE WHILE ACKNOWLEDGING THE FUNDAMENTAL, INNATE NATURE OF HUMAN BEINGS -- SELFISHNESS, ETC.

(*Ramban/Nahmanides, 1194-1270; Spain and Jerusalem; Abarbanel, 1437-1508, Lisbon and Venice*)

- BUT REASSURANCE THAT THE ETERNAL RHYTHMS OF LIFE ARE TO BE UNCEASING, THE OVERALL BALANCE AND CYCLE WILL BE RESTORED

9:1 God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them,
 "Be fertile and increase, and fill the earth.
 :2 The fear and the dread of you shall be upon all the beasts of the earth.....
 ...they are given into your hand.
 :3 Every creature that lives shall be yours to eat...I give you all these.
 :4 You must not, however, eat flesh with its life-blood in it.
 :5 But for your own life-blood I will require a reckoning: I will require it of every beast;
 of human, too....will I require a reckoning for human life,
 of every human for that of his fellow human!
 :6 Whoever sheds the blood of human, by human shall his blood be shed;
 For in God's image did God make human.
 7: Be fertile, then, and increase, abound on the earth and increase on it."

- REPETITION/RENEWAL OF BLESSING TO ADAM (*Genesis 1:28*) WHICH WAS ABROGATED BY THE BEHAVIOR OF THE GENERATION OF THE FLOOD (*Tanhuma Yashan, ca. 5th/6th cty CE; also Ibn Caspi, 1279-1340, French rabbi, philosopher, grammarian and biblical exegete*)
- BLESSING (v.1) BECOMES COMMANDMENT (v.7) (*Rashi, 1040-1105, France; pre-eminent Bible/Talmud commentator*)

- RESTORATION OF STATUS/POWER, *BUT* INTEGRATED WITH RESPONSIBILITY
- NECESSITY OF LIMIT-SETTING/LIMIT-RESPECTING, MINDFULNESS OF LIFE-BLOOD
- AS IMAGES OF GOD, HUMANS ARE TO REFLECT GOD'S ABSTENTION FROM TAKING LIFE
- VERSE 5 UNDERSTOOD AS FORBIDDING SUICIDE – see *Babylonian Talmud, Bava Kamma 91b* – HERE, IN THE AFTERMATH OF CATAclysmic TRAUMA!
- FOCUS ON HUMAN HESSED: NOAH'S RIGHTEOUSNESS PRIOR TO THE FLOOD, AND THE CARE OF THE ANIMALS DURING IT, LED TO THE PERMISSION TO EAT SOME MEAT (*Or HaHayyim, Hayyim Ibn Attar, 1696-1743, Moroccan Kabbalist and Talmudist*)

9:8 And God said to Noah and to his sons with him,
 "I now establish My *b'rit/covenant* with you and your offspring to come,
 10: and with every living thing that is with you...every living thing on earth.
 11. I will maintain My *b'rit/covenant* with you....
 ...never again shall there be a flood to destroy all the earth.

BEYOND BLESSING – AN ETERNAL COVENANT, AND A UNIVERSAL ONE
 WITH GOD COMMITTING TO MAINTAINING GOD'S PART

- NO MATTER HOW BLEAK THE FUTURE MAY SEEM, GOD WILL LEAD HUMANKIND TO ITS ULTIMATE GOAL (*Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, 1808-1888, Germany*)

:12 God further said, "This is the sign that I set for the *b'rit/covenant* between Me and you, and every living creature with you, for all ages to come.
 :13 I have set My bow in the clouds, and it shall serve as a sign of the *b'rit/covenant* between Me and the earth.... :16...I will see it and remember the everlasting *b'rit/covenant* between God and all living creatures, all flesh that is on earth.

...AND NOT ONLY THAT: HEAVENLY SIGN OF THE *B'RIT* BETWEEN GOD AND ALL EARTH, ALL CREATURES ON V. 13: THE *B'RAKHAH* SAID WHEN SEEING A RAINBOW – "Who remembers the Covenant, is trustworthy in His Covenant, and fulfills His Word" – *ברוך זוכר הברית ונאמן בבריתו וקיים במאמרו* (*Orach Chayyim, of Jacob ben Asher, ca. 1269-1343, Cologne and Toledo*)

- TRUST AFTER TRAUMA (AND VALUE OF SYMBOLS IN RECOVERY JOURNEY?)

BUT, ALAS --

20: Noah, the tiller of the soil, was the first to plant a vineyard.
 21: He drank of the wine and became drunk, and he uncovered himself within his tent.
 22: Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father's nakedness and told his two brothers outside.
 23: But Shem and Yafet took a cloth, placed it against their backs and, walking backward, they covered their father's nakedness; their faces turned away, so that they did not see their father's nakedness.
 24: When Noah woke up from his wine and learned what his youngest son had done to him,
 25: he said, "Cursed be Canaan; the lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers."
 26: And he said, "Blessed be HaShem, the God of Shem; let Canaan be a slave to them.
 27: May God enlarge Yafet, let him dwell in the tents of Shem; let Canaan be a slave to them."

THE LINGERING IMPACT OF THE TRAUMA (?) LEADS TO A NEED:

- FOR NUMBING; FOR NOT-THINKING/NOT-FEELING CONSCIOUSLY
- FOR ACTING OUT (HAM) AS WELL AS ACTING RIGHT (SHEM AND YAFET)
- FOR CURSING OFFSPRING JUST BLESSED BY GOD!

AND AN END TO THE "ROSE-COLORED GLASSES" – FROM THE DEMOCRACY OF ALL BEING GOD'S IMAGES TO THE HUMAN BEINGS' ACTUAL INEQUALITY IN DEED

* V. 22 & 23 – HOW CRISIS BRINGS OUT THE TRUE NATURE OF PEOPLE;

* IN RESPONSE TO TRAUMA – INDIVIDUAL STRENGTHS/RESOURCES, AS WELL AS SHORTCOMINGS/CHALLENGES, EMERGE

Ira S., 37, an attorney, was the only child of parents now in their 70's, survivors of the Holocaust who had also lived through heart disease and breast cancer. Recently, in a tragic accident on a rare vacation, Ira's mother was injured so severely that she was now near death. Distraught, despairing, and furious, Ira called his JFS for help, and the sensitive, resourceful intake worker picked up that his concerns/needs were religious/spiritual in nature and connected him with a Bikur Cholim volunteer, who often included brief nuggets from the weekly Torah portion, as well as psalms, stories, and prayer. Six Zoom meetings and many phone calls saw Ira through his mother's last weeks of life in the ICU and his initial months of bereavement, when he was connected to a JFS therapist for ongoing treatment and support

From Parashat Bo (Exodus 10:1-13:16)

In 12:21-28, Moshe relays to the Israelites the divinely given instructions and supplements them with some clarifications. (*Exodus 12:22*.)

**22. Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood that is in the basin,
and apply some of the blood that is in the basin to the lintel and to the two doorposts....**

22. "Take a bunch of hyssop..."

The reason that the Israelites were commanded only for the Passover of Egypt alone to take a bunch of hyssop, and not for the ensuing Passovers of the generations, is that Israel in Egypt were naked of all good, meritorious qualities, and they had nothing of these of their own. They knew only degradation and submission to Pharaoh and Egypt. Therefore they were commanded: This one quality that is in your possession – submission – lift it up for *K'dushah*/Sacred Purpose. The hyssop, according to our Sages, suggests lowliness and submission, and this is the language of "Take..." as taking often refers to raising up and lifting up, that is, be submissive to the Will of HaShem. But for the Passover of the generations, after Israel were purified and joined with the receiving of the Torah and Mitzvot and good deeds, then there is no need for the bunch of hyssop.

Rabbi Abraham Bornstein, 1839-1910, of Sochatchov, Poland was a leading posek (Jewish legal decisor) in late 19th century Europe and founder and first Rebbe of the Sochatchover Hasidic dynasty. He is known as the Avnei Nezer ("Stones of the Crown") after the title of his posthumously-published set of Torah responsa.

**22. "Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood that is in the basin,
and apply some of the blood that is in the basin to the lintel and to the two doorposts."**

The Midrash says that even though they are lowly...if they join into a 'bundle,' their very lowliness will bring them help from the Holy.

The Exodus from Egypt was only the beginning, the time when they came out from under Pharaoh's hand. Afterwards they had to enter the category of God's servants in order to receive the Torah. This is hinted at in the blood-smearing on the lintel and doorposts: so they know this is only the beginning.

Of this, Scripture says: "Open for me, my sister, my love" (*Song of Songs 5:2*). The rabbis said: "You make an opening as wide as a needle's eye and I'll open it for you like the entrance-way to a palace." This took place at the Exodus from Egypt, just like the opening of a doorway. God defended that little point, as it says: "God will protect the opening" (*Exodus 12:23*).

Even though they went out from Egypt with great victory, God wanted Israel to be in their own eyes like that bundle of hyssop, to know that they were just as the open doorway, hoping to truly come inside. Then it is written: "The king has brought me into his chambers" (*Song of Songs 1:4*), referring to the Giving of the Torah.

Sefat Emet (Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger, 1846-1905), from The Language of Truth: The Torah Commentary of the Sefat Emet, Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger, translated and interpreted by Rabbi Dr. Arthur Green (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998) pp. 96-97

Steve, 29, was diagnosed with a serious cancer and had undergone both surgery and chemotherapy, with limited success. Otherwise healthy, his doctor had just asked him if he wanted to consider a new, still-experimental treatment that “might be of help, hopefully even curative...but also might be worse than the disease in its impact on certain organs...” Unsure of how to proceed, he asked the Bikur Cholim visitor for her opinion, specifically, for what the Jewish tradition might say to him. She reconnected the following day with a selection of potentially relevant, very brief teachings from the Torah and Rabbinic tradition, some suggested by her rabbi and others that “felt right” to her. The two-page collection supported Steve intellectually, interpersonally, spiritually, and emotionally, and both informed and strengthened him in his decision-making process. He also shared the sources with his doctor.

From Parashat Tazri’a-Metsora’

(Leviticus 12:1 – 15:3)

Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

“And on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.” (*Leviticus 12:3*) The mitzva of circumcision in the portion of Tazria appears in the midst of the discussion of the impure and pure periods immediately following childbirth. Furthermore, our Sages specifically derive from this ordinance that the ritual of circumcision overrides Shabbat: “On the eighth day, [the child’s] foreskin shall be circumcised – ‘even if it occurs on Shabbat” [*Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat 132a*]. Why express this crucial significance of circumcision – its precedence even over Shabbat – within the context of ritual impurity? What is the connection?

Targum Yonatan Ben Uziel links the two issues by interpreting: “And on the eighth day, when [Biblically] she is permitted [to have sexual relations with her husband], on that [day] is [the baby] to be circumcised.” He is thereby citing the view of our Sages, who understand that the circumcision must be on the eighth day following the birth “so that everyone not be happy while the parents will be sad” if they cannot properly express their affection toward one another [*Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Niddah 31b*].

I would like to suggest an additional connection. When a woman is in a state of ritual impurity, she and her husband are forbidden from engaging in sexual relations until she immerses in a mikveh (ritual bath). Obviously this restriction demands a great deal of self-control and inner discipline. The major symbol that graphically expresses the importance of mastering one’s physical instincts is the command of circumcision: even the sexual organ itself, the physical manifestation of the male potency and the unbridled id, must be tempered and sanctified by the stamp of the Divine.

A well-known midrash takes this even one step further: Turnus Rufus the Wicked once asked Rabbi Akiva: “Whose works are better, the works of God or the works of human beings?” He answered him, “The works of human beings...” [Turnus Rufus] said to him, “Why do you circumcise?” [Rabbi Akiva] said, “I knew you were asking about that, and therefore I anticipated [the question] and told you that the works of human beings are better.”

Turnus Rufus said to him: “But if God wants men to be circumcised, why does He not see to it that male babies are born already circumcised?” Rabbi Akiva said to him, “It is because the Holy One Blessed be He only gave the commandments to Israel so that we may be purified through them.” [*Midrash Tanhuma, Tazria, 5*]

I see in the words of the midrash as well as the context of the commandment a profound message: the human being is part of the physical creation of the world, a world that is subject to scientific rules of

health and illness, life and death. The most obvious and tragic expression of our physicality is that, in line with all creatures of the universe, we humans as well are doomed to be born, disintegrate and die. And therefore the most radical example of ritual impurity is a human corpse, *avi avot hatuma*.

However, an animal carcass, a dead reptile, and the blood of the menstrual cycle (fall-out of the failed potential of fertilization) likewise cause ritual impurity. A woman in childbirth has a very close brush with death – both in terms of her own mortality as well as during the painful anguished period preceding the moment when she hears the cry of a healthy, living baby.

God's gift to the human being created in the Divine image, however, is that in addition to physicality there is also spirituality, in addition to death there is also life eternal, in addition to ritual impurity (*tuma*) there is also ritual purity (*tahara*). Hence, the very human life that emerges from the mother's womb brings in its wake not only the brush with death, *tuma*, but also the hope of new life, *tahara* – and while the *tuma* is for seven days, the *tahara* is for thirty-three! The human being has the power to overcome his physical impediments and imperfections, to ennoble and sanctify his animal drives and instincts, to perfect human nature and redeem an imperfect world.

This is the message that Rabbi Akiva attempted to convey to Turnus Rufus the Wicked. Yes, the world created by the Almighty is beautiful and magnificent, but it is also imperfect and incomplete. God has given the task of completion and redemption to the human being, who has the ability and capacity to circumcise himself, to sublimate his "sub-gartelian" (beneath the gartel, or belt) drives, to sanctify society and to complete the cosmos. Indeed, the works of the human being are greater! And the command of circumcision belongs within the context of impurity and purity.

And this is also the meaning behind the principle that circumcision overrides Shabbat: the Sabbath testifies to God's creation of the world – impressive and inspiring, but deliberately imperfect. Circumcision testifies to the human being's challenge to redeem himself and perfect the world. Indeed, circumcision overrides Shabbat.

Reproduced from *Likutei Divrei Torah: Gleanings of Divrei Torah on Parashat Hashavuah*
for Shabbat Parashat Tazria-Metzora

Carla, 64, an extremely gifted painter, photographer, and High School art teacher, found herself diagnosed with a recurrence of her cancer. Fighting for health in every way possible, as a single woman in a big city, she found herself quite lonely and for the first time in her life, curious about spirituality and what the Jewish tradition might offer her in navigating the ups and mostly downs of her journey. She had many meetings with a Bikur Cholim volunteer over the months, which typically began with a continuation of a question that she had posed in the previous visit, and in the course of looking at a brief commentary on that week's portion, she came up with new and very interesting questions. Though she did not feel comfortable joining in congregational prayer nor in a support group, she produced art in response to the texts and died at home with her family around her, and a file of the sources nearby.

From Parashat Balak (Numbers 22:2-25:9):

In his second oracle (*Numbers 23: 18-23*), Balaam, the prophet hired by the Moabite King Balak to curse Israel, instead waxes on about their strength, courage, dependable protection by God, and success:

- 18...Up, Balak, attend; Give ear unto me, son of Tzippor!
19. *El/God* is not man to be capricious, or mortal to change His mind.
Would He speak and not act, promise and not fulfill?
20. My message was to bless: When He blesses, I cannot reverse it.
21. No harm is in sight for Jacob, no woe in view for Israel.
Adonai their God is with them, their King's acclaim in their midst.
22. *El/God* who freed them from Egypt is for them like the horns of the wild ox.
- 23. Lo, there is no *nahash*/augury in Jacob,; no *kessem*/divining in Israel:
Ka'eit/At once, Jacob is told,
Israel, *ma pa'al El*/what God has planned (has done? is doing? will do?)**
24. Lo, a people that rises *k'lavi*/like a lion, leaps up (is raised up) like the *ari*/king of beasts,
Rests not until it has feasted on prey and drunk the blood of the slain.

Mah Pa'al El? What has God planned/done/is doing/will do?

"Ya'akov" are those of more limited knowledge – they are the ones who say, "*ka-eit*," that the conditions of the time and the crisis of the period are the causes. But "Yisrael," who are on a higher level, they will say, "*mah pa'al – El*," all that which has happened and is happening in the world – all of it is the work/activity of HaShem.

Rabbi Israel Taub of Modzitz (1849-1920) first Rebbe of the Modzitz dynasty, known for his creative output of more than 200 melodies. His book of Hassidic commentary on Genesis, Exodus, and Leviticus is called Divrei Yisrael.

In the days of Czar Alexander III, when harsh decrees were enacted against the Jews of Russia, Baron Guenzburg arranged for an appointment of leading rabbis with the Minister of the Interior. The Minister invited to this appointment, as well, a leading oppressor of the Jews, (Konstantin) Pobedonostsev, who poured out his wrath on the people of Israel. Among his words he said: "I understand the benefit that exists in all living creatures, from the silent to the spoken, but it has eluded my understanding to see what benefit there is in the people of Israel. Are they not as a raging leprosy to the folk; why did God create this people?" The words of this foe accomplished more than those of the pleadings of the great ones of our people, and all the decrees were left in place, in their power. When the rabbis departed, gravely disappointed, they saw a smile on the face of Rabbi Isaac Elhanan, the Rabbi of Kovno, who had taken part in the meeting. Asked to explain, he said: "I've always found the following verse difficult:

'Ka'eit/At once, Jacob is told = Israel, *ma pa'al El*/what God has planned (has done? is doing?)'
Now it is clear to me: '*Ka'eit*,' when the time comes that they will say to the people of Israel, '*ma pa'al El*/why did God create this people?' then the era of (*next verse, 23:24*) '*hen am k'lavi yakum*/lo, a people that rises like a lion,' will commence -- the beginning of the Redemption. Y. Yeffet

Heather, 38, chose Judaism at age 34 and married a non-observant Jewish man two years ago (at age 37.) While undergoing fertility treatments, some unrelated, genetic medical problems were discovered, and the treatment for these complicated, even jeopardized, her journey to pregnancy, besides requiring a series of hospital procedures. Her husband recently lost his job due to economic shifts. With the cost of living in New York City and the costs of the fertility treatments, the couple considered moving to another apartment, but they could not find anything within their means. And just as all this was transpiring, her 73 y/o mother, living in Heather's childhood home in Ohio, had deteriorated in her health and had to be moved to a long-term residence. Heather had become a familiar face in her synagogue since her conversion studies began, and the rabbi asked a Chessed Committee member to visit her. Amira, who had met Heather in synagogue, arranged a Zoom with Heather, who had a strong, uncomplicated belief in God's goodness, and had asked Amira to bring something related to the weekly parashah.

From Parashat Ekev (Deuteronomy 7:12 – 11:25)

Remember the long way that HaShem your God led you these past forty years in the wilderness
L'ma'an 'anotkha l'nosotkha/in order that He might test you by hardships
 to learn what is/was in your hearts, whether you would keep His commandments or not.
Deuteronomy 8:2

The meaning of this is: The 'inui/ affliction was so that they can evaluate/determine if they are whole with HaShem, the word 'l'nosotkha' (to test you) suggesting 'rising, exaltation, lifting up', as in *Isaiah 62:10: "Harimu nes al ha-amim/Lift up a standard/banner for the people,"* which is discussed in the holy Zohar. These two understandings are one – because through the *nisayon*/trial, if they withstand it, they will be with *Elyon* (the Highest One) beyond the nations of the earth, and this principle/reality applies to every generation and to every person. When the Holy Blessed One wants to elevate an individual to a certain rung, He first tests him, as our Sages taught in the *Midrash Bemidbar/Numbers Rabbah (15:12)* – "The Holy Blessed One does not promote a person to greatness until He has tested him first." And through the test a person is indeed lifted up in his station a great deal, as is taught in (*Babylonian Talmud*) *Bava Batra 10b* about one scholar who heard (in a trance) that "no creatures can attain to the place in heaven of the martyrs of Lydda." And this is true not only of those who give their lives but also applies to all forms of pain and suffering that a person endures for the sake of Heaven, his place is promoted in the World-to-Come. This is also addressed in (*Babylonian Talmud*) *Berachot 5a*: "The Holy Blessed One gave Israel three precious gifts, and all of them were given only through suffering: the Torah, the Land of Israel, and the World-to-Come." And we are similarly taught in the *Midrash Sh'mot/Exodus Rabbah (31:3)* "Happy is the one who endures a *nisayon*/test/trial, since there is no person whom the Holy Blessed One does not try." And you ought to understand further that those days when a person serves the Holy Blessed One when He does *not* shower very many blessings on him, these days are engraved for him as eternal testimony above, to be recalled for his good, and are considered as if the person, as it were, did *Hessed* with/for the Holy Blessed One. And this is spelled out fully in *Jeremiah (2:2)* – "So says HaShem: 'I recall in your favor the *Hessed* of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed after Me in the desert, in a land that was not sown.'"

Hafetz Hayyim -- *Rabbi Israel Meir HaKohen (1838-1933), talmudic scholar, ethical writer and saintly figure, deeply concerned with Jewish personal, interpersonal, and communal issues, one of the founders of the Aguda movement, strongly supportive of settling Eretz Yisrael.*

“to test you, to know what is/was in your heart...”

The Ramban (*Nahmanides, 1194-1270, Spain*), in his commentary on the Torah, said that this is about the Manna. And we can understand it according to our Sage’s Midrash, that the Manna did not descend in the same manner for all; for the *Tzaddikim*, it involved no exertion, falling at their doorstep, and for the *R’shaim* it entailed labor and exertion (to gather). This implies that if a person was inconsistent/hypocritical (*lo haya tokho k’varo* = “his inside was not as his outside”), the Manna would reveal his inside nature through the place of its fall. And so, this is the meaning of “to know what is in your heart.”

Rabbi Israel Joshua Trunk of Kutno (1820-1893), Polish rabbi and one of the early supporters of Hibbat Zion; close to Hasidism, esp. to the Rebbe of Ger, Isaac Meir

Re: Trial(s): Seven More Jewish Quotes

A farmer puts the yoke on his strong cow, not on his weak cow.

Eleazar ben P’dat in Midrash Genesis Rabbah 32:3

As a potter does not test defective vessels, which would break with one blow, so the Holy Blessed One tests only the righteous.

Yonatan ben Eleazar, Midrash Genesis Rabbah 32:3

The better the flax, the more it is beaten, and the more it improves and glistens.

Yossi ben Hanina, Midrash Genesis Rabbah 32:3

Rejoice in your trials here; they save you hereafter.

Talmud, Derekh Eretz 7:23

“Happy is the one who endures a *nisayon*, since there is no person whom the Holy Blessed One does not try.”

Midrash Sh’mot/Exodus Rabbah 31:3

No limit to trials, but the wise learns thereby.

Solomon Ibn Gabirol, Mivhar haP’ninim, Spain, ca. 1050, # 223.

Trials challenge, persecution strengthens, and isolation exalts, provided they do not break one.

Stefan Zweig (1881-1942), Austria; World of Yesterday, 1943, p. 343

If one should give me a dish of sand, and tell me there were particles of iron in it, I might look for them with my clumsy fingers, and be unable to detect them; but let me take a magnet, and sweep through it, and it would draw to itself the most invisible particles. The unthankful heart, like my finger in the sand, discovers no mercies, but let the thankful heart sweep through the day, and as the magnet finds the iron, so it will find some heavenly blessings.

Henry Ward Beecher, in Thoughts Gathered from the Extemporaneous Discourses of Henry Ward Beecher, ed. Edna Dean Proctor (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2003) p. 116

Some Possible Transitions

Not in order of priority, usefulness,

“Last time, you mentioned (or, perhaps, “we touched on”) XYZ, and it made me think of this text/teaching/commentary....”

“I wonder what you make of this source....”

“I thought that this might have a bearing on your question about....”

“This week, the Torah portion deals with X, Y, and Z. On one confusing/unclear/difficult word/phrase/idea/commandment, there’s a very interesting commentary....”

“This approach to XYZ seemed like it could be helpful....”

“It might seem like a stretch, but I think that this law/expression/story/commentary relates to your question about XYZ....”

“I think that this text shows how Jews/people in another time and place in history, managed some similar issues/challenges...”

...perhaps followed by:

“...Would you like to explore it together for a few minutes?”

“...Are you up to looking at a short text today?”

18 Possible Dimensions of Being Chronically Ill with X....

Rabbi Simkha Y. Weintraub, LCSW, JBFCS, October © 2013

**Shared in individual and group spiritual support at the New York Jewish Healing Center*

**Not all apply equally, or at all, to every illness, condition, stage, or individual*

**Not in any special order of prominence, profundity, priority or, problem!*

**Very 'interflowing' and not discreet*

1...Compromised Trust in Tomorrow

Dark clouds of potential deterioration or complications of X

Medications no longer effective or available or harmonious; treatments contraindicated

2...Constantly Unfolding X – not stagnant, predictable

Hypervigilance and Despair

Living with the Unstable Narrative

3...Solipsism – Me, Me, Me

4...Unceasing Choices and Questions

Having to become a Researcher -- or a research project

5...The Need for a Team

--but unequal members/participants (the passive, the aggressive, the passive-aggressive!)

Varying disciplines (or none at all) – languages, perspectives, cultures

Consider the interplay of family members, social workers, phlebotomists, super-specialists, home health and personal aides, receptionists, nurses, PAs, insurance guys, clergy, government agency folks, pharmacists, physical therapists....

6...Identity Compromise

The overriding or obscuring of *Who one once was, or is*

The need/use but scourge/prison of labels

7...Psychospiritualsocial Isolation or Alienation

From family, friends, community, society, cosmos, *Ribbono shel Olam...*

...and yet, sudden, sometimes prolonged and profound dependence

8...The Comparative Self: Who you are, relative to other people with X

9...The Dance with Other Imposing Tsuris: financial issues, family problems, natural catastrophes...

10...Integrating X into Work/Occupational/Professional lives (and Volunteer lives)

Teaching co-workers about *your X*

Reality-testing and information adjusting/updating

HR policies and procedures (from another era?)

The boss's personal history with illness

The squeeze, or sometimes soaring ascendance, of volunteer, avocational, hobby pursuits

11...Limit-Setting and Boundary Maintenance, esp. with close ones; Whose illness is X, anyway?

12...Alternating Sense of **Boredom, Trappedness, Narrow Bridge, Despair, Locked Door, End of the Road, Diverted Journey....**

13....**Forgiving your Genes...**

14...The hovering or hiding **Terror of the Next Big** Illness or condition
Hypervigilance...psychosomatizing...or denial/neglect of symptoms

15....**Intimacy laid bare** –personal dimensions now open to consideration if not scrutiny by many uninvited parties

16...Being the **King or Queen of X** – Knowing it all or the Burden of Expertise

17. Being the Target for the “**Tyranny of Sympathy**” and for “**Putting Whipped Cream on Worms**”

18. Being **Avoided like the Plague** – or just enduring folks’ fear, horror, disgust, obsession, rejection -- often, alone (physically, emotionally, spiritually.....)

**Eighteen Commandments for the Jewish Community
As They Seek to Be More Responsive to People Living with Chronic Illness***

1. Listen. Try to hear what I'm saying, and play it back to check that you've heard correctly. Your being an ear is probably more helpful than your being a mouth. Your silent presence can be a gift.
2. Ask me about what I need; don't make assumptions.
3. Do not sugarcoat, or as one person said, "don't pour whipped cream on worms." This really is what it is. I have a "new normal," and I'd appreciate your being honest and realistic about it.
4. Do not label. I am more than my disease or diagnosis, even if its influence is extensive. I am *me*, a person with a name and a history and a life, and a complicated personality like everybody else.
5. Be a supportive presence. This sometimes involves doing absolutely nothing but joining me where I am. Other times I may need some specific assistance. Caring community is all-important, and you are part of that for me.
6. Empower me to do for myself and for others, as possible. Even when I may seem incapacitated, I may need/want to be as active, independent, and giving as I can. Don't let the "tyranny of sympathy" treat me as helpless and reinforce excessive dependence.
7. Bring humor to our encounters; it's an important way that Jews/people survive.
8. Validate what you hear me saying; show you've heard and understand as best as you can.
9. Allow me to grieve my losses. There may be a long and growing list of these, and only I know what still requires grieving. Don't stop my tears; my soul is speaking.
10. Allow me my anger, allow it to be expressed....along with fear, disgust, awkwardness, and other 'difficult' emotions/feelings. This is part of the path to peace.
11. Expand your radar to take in the fullness of my life, the range of my resources and my challenges, of my wholeness.
12. Before visiting me, consider what your expectations and concerns are. After visiting me, get to know your own reactions and 'aftertastes.' Do this for your own health and so that unpleasant residues won't prevent you from future visiting!
13. For some of us, God's Presence/the *Shekhinah*, is very much in the room and efforts should be made to be aware of that and not to obscure it (for example, by looming too large over the one who is suffering.) Others may not share this spiritual-religious reference point, but still value the teachings of care, love, dignity, etc. that underlie it, from their own place, in their own way.
14. Be aware, and willing to discuss, words, stories, or ideas in the prayer book or the Torah that are alienating. Help me in my struggle with these.

15. Help me find teachings – wise sayings, images, parables, etc. – that are instructive, comforting, inspiring, etc.
16. Maintain your curiosity about what my illness means to me – explore that with me on the days that I can do so. But don't tell me what it means to me, or try to change my mind.
17. Help my family with what they/we need – shopping, transportation, childcare, referrals, whatever.
18. Don't hesitate to cry; your tears can be a gift.

*Rabbi Simkha Y. Weintraub, LCSW, for the JBFCS New York Jewish Healing Center, with incredible input from participants at the “*Bikur Cholim Over the Long Haul*” workshop at the 19th Annual JBFCS Rabbi Isaac N. Trainin Bikur Cholim Conference, November 12, 2006 and eternal thanks to Ellen Schecter (author of *Fierce Joy*)