

Alumot
Alumni Network



Livnot U'Lehibanot
TO BUILD & TO BE BUILT ☆ לבנות ולהבנות

ALUMOT

Handbook



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Livnot U'Lehibanot

To Build & To Be Built

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Welcome!

The handbook you are holding is designed to accompany you through Alumot experiences.

Alumot is a Livnot U'Lehibanot initiative designed to keep Jewish adults connected to Jewish values, community, and action. The name **Alumot**, meaning gathered wheat sheaves, symbolizes individuals coming together to form a strong, unbreakable community. It also plays on the word "alumni," reflecting its role as Livnot's post-program network.

This social venture harnesses the energy of Livnot, and other post-Israel experience alumni, through meaningful, locally led programs that foster personal growth, learning, and community engagement. Alumot creates opportunities to build lasting connections through our 3 core activities:

- **Shabbat dinners**
- **Guided nature hikes**
- **Community service projects.**

This handbook contains Chavrutas and other useful sources to add meaning to Community Service projects, Hikes, and other Alumot gatherings.

Livnot U'Lehibanot - To Build & To Be Built

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WHAT IS A CHAVRUTA?

A Chavruta is a traditional Jewish method of studying texts, where two or more people work together through dialogue and debate to deepen their understanding of a text. They are encouraged to challenge each other's perspectives and interpretations.

Chavruta comes from the word Chaver (=friend), it means "friendship" or "partnership".

"The Gemara cites other expositions that deal with Torah study. Rabbi Chama, son of Rabbi Chanina, said: What is the meaning of that which is written: "Iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend" (Proverbs 27, 17)? This verse comes to tell you that just as with these iron implements, one sharpens the other when they are rubbed against each other, so too, when Torah scholars study together, they sharpen one another in Halacha (=Jewish Law)."
(Ta'anit 7, 1)

POSITIVE SPEECH

Source 1: Sefer Yetzirah

"G-d fixed a creative power in the mouths of human beings which resembles His own power of speech. When a person speaks, his words create spiritual forces."

Source 2: Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai

"Every word a man utters rises upward, splitting the heavens to reach its destined place."

Source 3: Estee Acobas (She'arim College for Women)

When God created the world, He did so with speech. "God said, 'Let there be light!' and there was light." (Genesis, 1, 3). Man, who was created in God's image, creates realities in the same way that God does: Through the power of speech. Jewish tradition views words as holding power: Once something is said, the words bring about a change in the world. For instance, we often feel better after talking through a situation. Why is that so? In reality nothing has changed, yet the act of talking changes the speaker—softens him, comforts him. Speaking words has the power to change what he feels. This is also true in Jewish law: Merely "saying something" can change the reality. For instance, when a woman blesses the candles, her words sanctify and usher in the Sabbath; in effect, she alters her reality.

Source 4: Likkutei Etzot (Speech, 19, 3)

You must strive to sanctify the way you speak until your words are the words of the "Holy Tongue." Speak many words of Torah. Say many prayers and make many entreaties before G-d. Talk to Him; plead with Him. And at the same time be careful to avoid any falsehood and derogatory comments about other people. If you are careful about the way you speak it will help you to achieve personal sanctity and to guard the Holy Covenant. And the more you purify and sanctify yourself the more you will be able to perfect the way you speak.



Questions for Discussion

- Do you agree with the statement that words create spiritual forces? Why?
- Is prayer a concept you connect to? Do our words have power to change *actual* reality?
- Have you experienced a time when speaking positively changed you?

SENSITIVITY

Introduction

We expect others to be sensitive to *our* needs; but do we make an effort to discover the needs of others and be sensitive to them? This question highlights a character-trait that was considered to be one of the most revered goals in the Jewish tradition: to put others' needs before our own.

Source 1: The Book of Ruth (Chapter 2)

"Boaz said to his worker in charge of the wheat-reapers: "Who is that?" The worker answered: "She is a Moabite woman who came back with Naomi from Moab. She asked to let her glean and gather the dropped wheat among the sheaves behind the workers."

Boaz said to Ruth: "Listen...don't go to glean in another field. Don't go elsewhere but stay here...I have ordered the workers not to harm you. And when you are thirsty, go to the jars and drink"...She said: "Why are you so kind to me, when I am a foreigner?""

Source 2: The Talmud (Mishnah Baba Metzia 4)

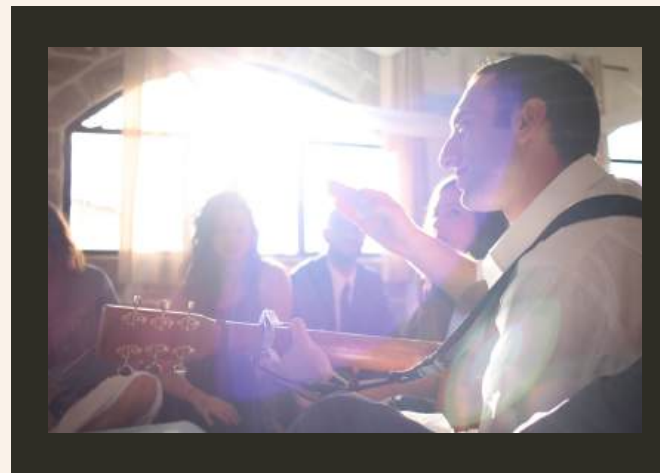
"One should not say (to the storekeeper), "How much does this item cost" if one does not mean to purchase it. If a person had once led a sinful life, one should not say to them, "Remember what you used to do." If a person was the grandchild of heathens, one should not say to them, "Remember how your ancestors behaved." As it is written: "You shall not aggrieve the stranger, and you should not oppress him." (Exodus 22, 20)

A sage taught before Rabbi Yitzchak: "Anyone who humiliates a person in public, is as if they have spilled his blood." Rabbi Yitzchak said, "Well spoken! For I have seen the redness drain from a person's face and he becomes pale."

Abayye said to Rav Dimi (in Babylonia): "What are they most careful about in Israel?" He said to him: "They make sure not to humiliate people in public."

Source 3: The Shulchan Aruch, by Rabbi Yosef Karo (based on Siman 145, 7)

If a given profession - which causes noise - was already in a neighborhood before it was residential, then the residents have foregone their right of protest regarding that profession. But they can still at any time complain because of the noise of customers entering their common territory (i.e., a courtyard). However, a mill (which causes the surrounding ground to vibrate when it revolves) and an oven (whose heat is damaging to a wall) must be distanced at least one foot from the wall of one's neighbor. In the case of an extremely large millstone, a greater distance must be left; to be assessed by a panel of experts and craftsmen.



Questions for Discussion

- Why is Ruth surprised by Boaz's words? Do we tend to treat 'foreigners' differently? Why?
- Which one of the Talmud's statements do you relate to most?
- What is the source of insensitivity?
- Aside from your parents, has someone ever put your needs before their own?

GRATITUDE

Introduction

The word "Yehudi" (=Jew) comes from the word Hodaya (=thankfulness). For many, this has been symbolic of one of the most important pillars of Jewish ethical living: Gratitude. The opposite value - thanklessness - is considered by some, to be the ultimate wrongdoing.

Source 1: The Torah (Genesis, Chapter 2-3)

Thanklessness

In Genesis, we're told that Adam was alone in the Garden of Eden. All animals had mates, except for Adam. Finally, G-d created Eve, and brought her to Adam. He seemed to be moved when he met her, speaking poetically: "...bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh."

Later, after eating of the forbidden fruit, G-d asks him why he disobeyed. Adam answered: "The woman, whom you gave me, she gave me of the tree and I did eat", thus hinting that G-d was responsible for his eating: "whom you gave me." That is true chutzpah!

Adam could have answered:

"The woman gave me of the tree and I did eat."

That is classic thanklessness.

G-d's punishment for thanklessness: exile from the Garden.

Some believe that the Jews were later exiled from Israel for similar thanklessness.

Source 2: The Torah (Exodus, Chapter 7)

Thankfulness

"And G-d told Moshe: "Tell Aharon to take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters, and it shall turn into blood.""

Rashi, the famous commentator, explains that Moshe himself could not smite the Nile, because he "owed" his life to the river, when it protected him as a baby hiding in a basket.

Questions for Discussion

- Without naming names, have you ever witnessed total thanklessness? Total thankfulness?
- In what ways can we express gratitude?
- In your life - in general - for what are you most thankful?
- What are you thankful for, at this very moment?
- Why would Moses feel the need to be thankful to an inanimate object such as the Nile?



INSPIRATION

True, you are righteous people
But that's not what I've meant for you to be
I wanted you to be
Like wild beasts howling in the forest
All night long

(Rabbi Nachman)



Questions for Discussion

- Rabbi Nachman speaks about people who live their lives asleep, do I identify with this? Is my heart awake? What can I do to live life with an awakened heart?
- Am I doing things in life that inspire me?
- Am I happy? What do I need to do to be happier?
- Think of one thing you want to improve? What's your first small step that will take you closer to your truest self?
- Right now: Imagine you're 99 years old lying in your bed, with maybe just a few more minutes of life in this world. You're looking back at your life. What are the things you want to make sure you lived, so you can look back with a sense of satisfaction and a peaceful heart?

HOSPITALITY

Introduction

Ever since Abraham and Sarah welcomed strangers into their tent, hospitality has been a tradition in the Middle East, continued until this day by their ancestors. In the western world, it's less common (in North America, for example, how often have we had strangers as guests at our dinner table?). Hosting guests isn't just a solution for lonely homeowners and hungry vagabonds. It's a way to open up to new people, new ideas, new ways of thinking – for all involved.

Source 1: The Torah (Genesis, Chapter 18)

"Abraham was 99 years-old when he was circumcised...and he was sitting at the entrance of the tent as the day grew hot. Looking up, he saw three men...As soon as he saw them, he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them and, bowing to the ground, said: My lords, if it please you, do not walk right past me, your servant (but stay and be my guests). Let some water be brought; bathe your feet and recline under the tree. And let me fetch some bread that you may refresh yourselves; then you can go on..."

Source 2: Based on the Talmud (Gittin 55 B)

At the time of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, there was a man who had a friend named Kamtza and an adversary named Bar-Kamtza. He held a large banquet and told his servant to invite Kamtza and many Rabbis; the servant made a mistake and invited Bar-Kamtza. At the dinner, when he saw Bar-Kamtza, the host told him to leave. Bar-Kamtza begged the host not to embarrassingly evict him from the banquet and even offered to pay for the cost of his dinner. The host refused. Bar-Kamtza offered to pay for the entire banquet, but the host had his servants evict him by force. Afterwards, Bar-Kamtza sought revenge against the host and the entire city of Jerusalem

(Rabbis were present at the banquet, but did not protest the host's behavior). He told the Romans that the Jews were conspiring against them. What followed was the destruction of Jerusalem. Jerusalem was destroyed due to the inhospitality of that one host.



Questions for Discussion

- Have you been offered hospitality since you've been in Israel?
- Have you ever been hosted in the home of a total stranger? What did it feel like?
- Can hospitality be incorporated in North American society?
- In what ways can people be hospitable *without* inviting people into their homes?

LIGHT

Source 1: The choice of a candle (by Margaret Mead)

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

Source 2: Hasidic story (Choose life - Mandelbaum)

A skeptic approached a famous Rabbi with a plan to embarrass him. He hid a bird in his hand behind his back and then asked: "Rabbi," he said, "I have a bird in my hand. Tell me, is it dead or alive." If the Rabbi answered "dead", he would let it fly away. If the answer was "alive", he intended to snuff out its life and present the "wise" man with a dead bird. The Rabbi gave thought for a moment and answered: "My son, the choice of life or death is in your hands!"

Source 3: Maimonides' Mishneh Torah (Chapter 5, Halachot 1-2)

"Free will is granted to every human being. If one desires to turn toward the good way and be righteous, the ability to do so is in one's hands. If one desires to turn toward the evil way and be wicked, the ability to do so is likewise in one's hands."

Source 4: William Shakespeare (based on The Merchant of Venice, Act 5, Scene 1)

We need only to remember how much and how often - and in how many different ways - our individual act of understanding, of encouragement, of guidance, of personal concern can enlarge the life of someone else, even as enduring good was done for us. And we need only remember - there is no such thing as a small good act! We see this clearly - everywhere around us. How far that little candle throws its beams! So shines a good deed in a naughty world.

Source 5: Groucho Marx

"I, not events, have the power to make me happy or unhappy today. I can choose which it shall be. Yesterday is dead, tomorrow hasn't arrived yet. I have just one day, today, and I'm going to be happy in it."



Questions for Discussion

- Do you believe that the choice of life and death lies in YOUR hands?
- What does that mean to you?
- What's your light? How are you choosing to affect this world?

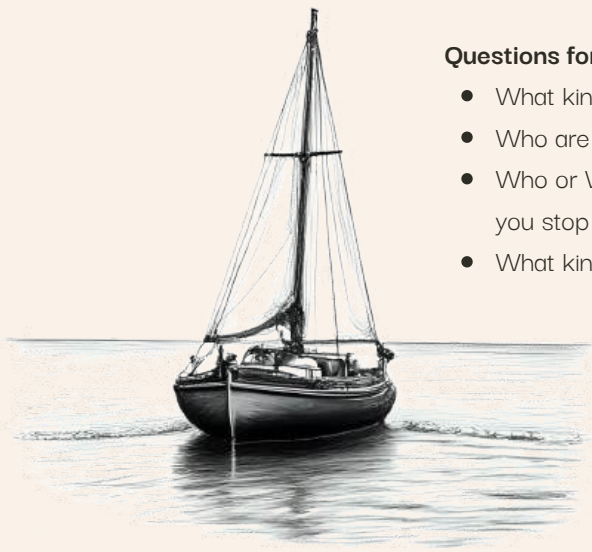
WE'RE ALL ON THE SAME BOAT

Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai taught a metaphor: Several people were sitting in a boat; one took a drill and began drilling a hole under his seat. His companions said to him, "What do you think you are doing?" "What does it concern you?" he replied, "I am only drilling under my own seat!" They answered, "When the water fills the boat, we will all drown together."

(Midrash Vayikra Raba 4)

Questions for Discussion

- What kind of a boat are you sailing in?
- Who are your sailing companions?
- Who or What is the drilling? How will you stop it?
- What kind of holes are you drilling?



UNITY

It is the custom of the world that one takes a bunch of reeds tied together; can one possibly break them all at once? But when one takes one by one, even an infant can break them. And so, you find that the People of Israel are not complete until they become "one bunch."
(Midrash Yalkut Shimoni)

Questions for Discussion

- Are the People of Israel, in your opinion, "one bunch"?
- If so, what defines that bunch?
- If not, what would help the Jewish People to become more unified?



THE YA'AKOV AND ESAV METAPHOR

Source 1: The Torah (Genesis 25)

"And Yitzchak was forty years old when he took Rivkah, . . . and Rivkah his wife conceived. And the children struggled together within her; and she said: 'If it be so, wherefore do I live?' And she went to inquire of the Lord. And the Lord said unto her: 'Two nations are in thy womb, and two peoples shall be separated from thy bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the big shall serve the younger'. And when her days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold, there were twins in her womb. And the first came forth ruddy, all over like a hairy mantle; and they called his name Esav. And after that came forth his brother, and his hand had hold on Esav's heel; and his name was called Ya'akov. . . . And the boys grew; and Esav was a cunning hunter, a man of the field; and Jacob was a Tam man (=Simple, honest, naïve), dwelling in tents. And Ya'akov sod pottage; and Esav came in from the field, and he was faint. And Esav said to Ya'akov: 'Let me please swallow some of this red, red; for I am faint.' Therefore, he was named Edom (=Red). And Ya'akov said: 'Sell me first thy birthright.' And Esav said: 'Behold, I am at the point to die; and what profit shall the birthright do to me?' And Ya'akov said: 'Swear to me first'; and he swore unto him; and he sold his birthright unto Ya'akov. And Ya'akov gave Esav bread and pottage of lentils; and he did eat and drink, and rose up, and went his way. So, Esav despised his birthright."

Source 2: The Torah (Genesis 40, 27)

While giving blessings to his children, Yitzchak's blessing to Esav contains a sentence: "and thou shalt serve thy brother".

Source 3: Zohar (Genesis 140 B)

Rabbi Shimon said: Liver and Heart are two leaders of the body, and that's what our passage in Torah means by saying "And the children struggled together within her". Rav Kahana said: The Liver is "first" and "ruddy" – first to swallow blood. Rabbi Elazar said: First for the blood, not first created. "The big will serve younger" – the Liver is bigger than the Heart and serves the Heart. Rabbi Ba from the name of Rabbi Akha said: "Ya'akov sod pottage" can be understood also as "Ya'akov thought thoughts" (Heb. "Vayazed nezid" meaning sod pottage has the same root as "zadu" or "zadon" meaning "thought" or "intention"). That means the heart thinks about Torah (Enlightenment) and acknowledgement of Creator (consciousness). And what's written next? "And Esav came in from the field, and he was faint", the Liver's always going out to hunt – to swallow ingredients out of food, and when it doesn't find – it is faint, and then the Liver says to the Heart: Instead of you being thoughtful with those things, Torah and stuff, You should think about food and drink to allow existence of your body, because without you being interested in food I cannot swallow ingredients from food and create blood and then pass it over to be sent to all the body. That's what is said in Torah "Let me please swallow some of this red, red".

And the Heart answers: "I'll do that but under one condition, you have to accept that I am the senior", that's what Torah says, "Sell me first thy birthright."

Rabbi Yosei said: "later in the passage it says that Ya'akov gave him bread and pottage of lentils. Why did he choose lentils? Lentils are round like an orbit around the world."

Questions for Discussion

- The Zohar seems to see the Ya'akov-Esav story as something happening constantly in every person. Besides nutrition and anatomy, what do the Heart and Liver represent in your life?
- Do you think it is possible to make peace between Ya'akov and Esav? How?
- What is the difference between peace and compromise? Give an example relative to the "Ya'akov and Esav" metaphor.
- Do you agree with the Torah and Zohar seeing the "Liver" as a servant of the "Heart"? Why?
- What do you live for? What goals are worthy of living for?
- While helping others, will you invest in their "Esav" more or in their "Ya'akov"? Why?
- Esav (in source 1) says, "and what profit shall the birthright do to me?" Please explain Esav's perception of the meaning of life according to his statement.
- Rabbi Yosei (in source 3) says that "lentils" were chosen by Ya'akov on purpose in order to give Esav a hidden message. What in your opinion was this message?
- The Zohar, while interpreting the Torah in this inner way, mentions that when the "liver" is not in relationship with the "Heart" it gets faint. Why? Give an example.
- Yitzchak blesses Esav to be a servant of Ya'akov. How can that be considered a blessing? What "Esav" in your life benefits out of serving "Ya'akov"?

PHYSICALITY & SPIRITUALITY

Rabbi Eliezer Ben Azariyah says: "If there is no flour, there is no Torah. And if there is no Torah, there is no flour."
(Mishnah, Ethics of Our Fathers 3, 17)

Questions for Discussion

- In YOUR opinion, what do these things (Flour and Torah) represent?
- What do you think the relationship between physicality and spirituality should be?
- How would you apply this concept in your life?
(Relationships, career, community etc...)



THE LAND OF ISRAEL

There is a discussion among Jewish thinkers, "Is the Land of Israel, Eretz Yisrael, inherently holy? - or is it only holy because of the holiness of the Jewish People?" In other words, the "Land of Israel" ,meaning, "the land of the Jewish People" would not be holy unless the Jewish People were in it.

Both answers have validity and are worth thinking about in greater depth. Mark Twain, on a visit to Israel in the 1800s, comments on how it's completely treeless and barren. It is incredible to see the remarkable development in agriculture, real estate, forestry, etc., that has taken place in such a short time since the Jewish People have returned to the Land. Clearly, a close relationship between the Jewish People and the Land has an effect on the Land. But there are also many aspects of the Land itself—the flora, fauna, and topography—that have deep levels of meaning and significance. For example, because we don't have a major source of fresh water to use for drinking and irrigation, we are completely dependent on G-d's providence to provide enough rain for us. The Land itself is incredibly varied, even the climate can change radically providing diversity of weather and employment for its people. The plants and animals are rich with meaning that will be further explored on the tiyulim (=hikes).

This Land, by Dan Almagor

"Ask anyone: 'This is your land, but tell me - what does she mean to you?' He won't be able to answer. Because this land is different to every single person...this land—to me—means joy mixed with tears. She's a silent prayer. She's a dream for generations. She's the yearning of roots that have sprouted branches...this land is heat waves and thorns and young girls' smiles. She's the murmuring of flocks...She's a crazy dream that suddenly came true. There are lands bigger than my land. There are more beautiful ones. But she - she is my land."



Questions for Discussion

- What are your impressions of the Land of Israel?
- What is unique about it? What does it teach you?
- What does Israel mean to you?

EVERY PERSON HAS THEIR “NEVO”

Source 1: The Summit (The Torah, Deuteronomy, 3, 23-25)

“I pleaded with G-d at that time, saying, ‘Let me, I pray, cross over and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan, that good hill country, and the Lebanon.’ But G-d was wrathful with me on your account and would not listen to me. G-d said to me, ‘Enough! Never speak to Me of this matter again! Go up to the summit of Pisgah and gaze about, to the west, the north, the south, and the east. Look at it well, for you shall not go across yonder Jordan.’”

Source 2: Opposite (Rachel, Israeli Poet, 1930)

The heart is attentive. The ear is listening: Has he arrived? Will he come?

In every yearning, there is a sadness of Nevo.

This opposite that, the two beaches of one riverbed.

The rock of decree: Distant forever.

The spreading-out of hands. The view of the opposite side.

There - no one has come.

Every person has their Nevo across a great land.



Source 3: Background Info

According to Jewish tradition as written in the Torah, Moses (who lived approximately 3500 years ago) led the Jewish People out of Egypt, through the desert for 40 years, and (almost) into the Land of Israel. Some say that Moses wasn't allowed into Israel because of a mistake he once made (G-d told him to get water out of the rock by talking to it, but Moses smote it with his staff). Others say he wasn't allowed into Israel, because since most of the Jews didn't make it through the desert, it wouldn't be appropriate for a leader to have more privileges than the common people. Mt. Nevo is identified as the highest mountain peak overlooking Jericho, on the Jordanian side of the Jordan River. Rachel the Poetess, also known as simply "Rachel," was born Rachel Bluwstein in Russia in 1890, and came at the age of 19 to Israel, where she lived for 4 years at an agricultural school for girls. When she was 29, she joined the first Kibbutz at Degania on the shores of the Kinneret, but after contracting tuberculosis, she had to leave for Tel Aviv, where she lived for the last five years of her life. It was at this time that she published most of her poetry. She died at the age of 40, and was buried on the shores of the Kinneret. Rachel's life has taken on mythic proportions for Israel's reading public and a volume of her collected verse remains one of the country's greatest bestsellers.

Questions for Discussion

- According to Rachel, what is the symbolism of Mt. Nevo?
- Do you agree with the poet that every person "has their Nevo?"
- What is your Nevo?
- The Rolling Stones sang: "You can't always get what you want." Easier sang than done. How do *you* cope with "lack?" Do you have any wisdom on how to deal with not-getting-what-you-want?
- What are the good aspects of "not-having-what-you-want?"

LECH LECHA

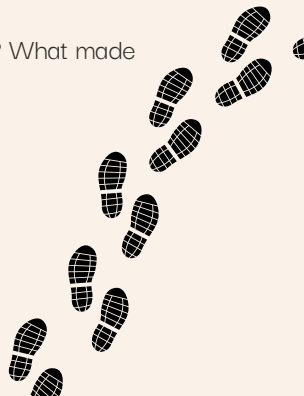
Hashem said to Abram, "Go forth from your country, from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you."

(Genesis 12, 1)

The phrase, "Lech-Lecha," can be translated as 'go', 'go for yourself' or/and 'go toward yourself'

Questions for Discussion

- What do you think is the meaning of the different places that Abram is requested to go from?
- Can/Should someone fully leave where they came from, their family, their homeland?
- "Lech Lecha": Rashi, One of the commentators on the Torah, explains that this means 'go for yourself - for your own good/pleasure'. In your opinion, What should be the connection between one's designation in life and pleasure?
- What would be the biggest thing that would prevent your own personal Lech-Lecha? Would it be opposition from outer influences? From inner influences?
- Did you ever do a "Lech-Lecha"? What helped you? What made it difficult?



PURPOSE

"...Thus was a single human created, to teach you that whoever destroys a single life, it is considered as though he has destroyed an entire world, and whoever preserves a single life, it is as though he has preserved an entire world... and to tell of the greatness of the creator, for man may cast many coins with one mold - they are all alike, while the creator, King of kings, casts every person in the mold of the first human, and not one resembles another - thus must every individual say, 'For me the world was created.'"

(Mishnah Sanhedrin 4, 5)

Questions for Discussion

- How can we use what has been said to understand the way we act and relate to the world?
- How does this relate to the way you approach life?



AMAZEMENT (WHOA!)

Wonder or radical amazement is the chief characteristic of the religious man's attitude toward history and nature. One attitude is alien to his spirit: taking things for granted, regarding events as a natural course of things.

To the prophets, wonder is a form of thinking. It is not the beginning of knowledge but an act that goes beyond knowledge; it does not come to an end when knowledge is acquired; it is an attitude that never ceases. As civilization advances, the sense of wonder declines. Such decline is an alarming symptom of our state of mind. Mankind will not perish for want of information; but only for want of appreciation. The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living. What we lack is not a will to believe but a will to wonder. In radical amazement, the Biblical man faces "the great things and unsearchable, the wondrous things without number" (Job 5, 9). He encounters them in space and in time, in nature and in history; not only in the uncommon but also in the common...

We are trained in maintaining our sense of wonder by uttering a prayer before the enjoyment of food. Each time we are about to drink a glass of water, we remind ourselves of the eternal mystery of creation...

Wishing to eat bread or fruit, to enjoy a pleasant fragrance or a cup of wine; on tasting fruit in season for the first time; on seeing a rainbow, or the ocean; on noticing trees when they blossom; on meeting a sage in Torah or in secular learning; on hearing good or bad tidings - we are taught to invoke His great name and our awareness of Him. Even on

performing a physiological function, we say "Blessed be You...who heals all flesh and does wonders." This is one of the goals of the Jewish way of living: to experience commonplace deeds as spiritual adventures, to feel the hidden love and wisdom in all things.

("G-d in Search of Man" by Abraham Joshua Heschel, 1955)

Questions for Discussion

- Do you agree with Heschel that "radical amazement" is so important? Maybe we should be focusing instead on being kind, helping the disadvantaged, promoting education, fighting for human rights, or bringing world peace? Do you think he has his priorities mixed up?
- Heschel believes that prayers said before enjoyment will enhance wonder. What is your opinion on this?
- Heschel finds a connection between wonder and food. Do you find a similar connection?
- What, in your opinion, is the one negative character trait that can prevent someone from being amazed?
- Describe a time in your life when you have been utterly and "radically" amazed.



JEWISH IDENTITY

Source 1: Golda Meir

When Golda Meir held the office of Prime Minister, she tried to encourage Henry Kissinger to make Israel a top priority. He sent her a letter:

"I would like to inform you that I am first an American citizen, second, Secretary of State, and third, a Jew." Golda responded, "In Israel, we read from right to left."

Source 2: Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach

A spiritual guru of the hippie counterculture of America's 60s and 70s, whose songs gain increasing popularity throughout the Jewish world every year, Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach shared an interesting insight into this topic.

"When children are born, they need more than a little crib. Sadly enough, a lot of parents think they can buy them everything, but children don't need that; they need a place in the world, a place of light. There is a (teaching in the) holy Zohar (book of mysticism) which says that there are two questions in the world. There is 'mi' and 'ma,' what and who. The holy Zohar says, those who ask 'what' are destroying the world, and those who ask 'who' are rebuilding the world. You know why children are so angry at their parents? Parents start asking, 'what are you, are you a good student? Are you beautiful?' The child wants to cry out, 'Why do you care; ask me who I am.'

Source 3: Every Man Has a Name (by Zelda Schneurson Mishkovsky - an Israeli poet)

Every man has a name that was given to him by G-d and by his father and mother.

Every man has a name that was given to him by his stature and his way of smiling and by his clothing.

Every man has a name that was given to him by the mountains and by his walls.

Every man has a name that was given to him by his fate and by his friends.

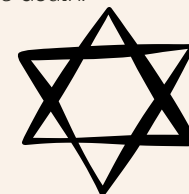
Every man has a name that was given to him by his sins and by his yearnings.

Every man has a name that was given to him by his haters and by his love.

Every man has a name that was given to him by his holidays and his work

Every man has a name that was given to him by the times of the year and his blindness.

Every man has a name that was given to him by the sea and by his death.



Questions for Discussion

- How do you identify yourself?
- Where does the term "Jewish" fit on our list of how we think about ourselves? Are we Jewish women/men or women/men that are Jewish? Are we Jewish Journalists (doctors, teachers, cooks, bus drivers, garbage men, etc.) or Journalists that are Jewish? How does our Jewish identity inform the way we do things?
- What does it say to us and others when we identify as a Jew? Does this evoke positive images or negative? Why?
- What is the essence of our Jewish identity? Is it the food we eat? Where we live? Is it our sense of social justice? A connection to Jewish learning? Our friendships? All of these? None of these? What would we like it to be?
- How do we guide our parents, selves, and children to look at the "who" instead of the "what"?
- What names are given to you? What name would you like to give yourself? Why?

MIRACLES

Judaism has an ambivalent approach to Miracles. On the one hand, Jewish thought maintains that all of nature, every small thing that makes up the universe in which we live, is really a miracle, a hidden miracle. On the other hand, we also recognize that when something happens that is outside that natural order, it is even more of a miracle, a revealed miracle. On the one hand, we are warned by our Sages not to rely on a miracle and told that it is somehow unfortunate that G-d needed to intervene and change the natural order of things. On the other hand, we are constantly reminding ourselves of the miracles that happened to the Jewish People. We recount the Passover story of coming out of Egypt and crossing the Red Sea on Passover and throughout the year in our prayers. Chanukah is, of course, very focused on recounting the miracle of the oil that lasted 8 days instead of 1. Jewish history is full of awesome stories of miracles that have happened to individuals and the nation. We have plenty of writings of times when Eliyahu HaNavi, Elijah the Prophet, appeared at the last moment to help great Jews out of all sorts of problems (and not just on Passover). But there are also many, many times when we felt we could have used a miracle, and there didn't seem to be one.

Judaism is trying to show us a view of the world in which we should be constantly in awe. Life is a miracle, every moment. And yet, some moments really are more miraculous. We have to live our lives with logic, dealing with the facts before us. The laws of nature are very real and difficult to overcome. And at the same time, we live our lives with faith, realizing that things can work out in ways we never would have expected.

"One of the reasons that the Rabbis established Channukah for eight days, despite the oil burning miraculously for only seven, was to teach the inseparable link between G-d's intervention when the Jews are saved through miracles and their being saved through apparently natural means. Winning a war, or oil that burns for one day, should be viewed as no less Divine control of the world than oil which burns miraculously for seven extra days. A daily challenge for the Jew is to see G-d's intervention and guidance in the daily events of nature, and to internalize the conviction that every occurrence in our lives, whether on a personal level or on a national level, is directed by G-d's control of the natural systems." –Rabbi Shaya Karlinsky, Rosh Yeshivah of Darche Noam and his son Binyamin (for his bar mitzvah).

Here's a story from the Talmud that shows this ambivalence:

There was once a man whose wife died and left behind a breast-fed baby. He didn't have money to give the baby to a professional wet-nurse, and a miracle was done for him whereby he developed breasts like a woman's breasts, and he breast-fed his baby.

Rav Yosef said, "Look how great this person is, that such a miracle has been done for him!"

Abaye responded, "The opposite is true. Look how inferior this person is, that the order of creation was changed for him."

Rav Yehuda said, "Look and see how difficult is the sustenance of a person, that the order of creation was changed for him."

Rav Nachman said, "You should know, that miracles happen and yet it is not a common thing that food will suddenly materialize. (Shabbat 53 B)

Miracles are "beyond," beyond what is the norm. Throughout Jewish thought, we see that the Jewish People's ability to access the miraculous comes from our ability to be "beyond." Rabbi Yehoshua Rubin, an educator, musician, counselor, and tour guide, says that if we want to experience kindness in the world, we must show kindness, and if we want to experience miracles, we must be a miracle.



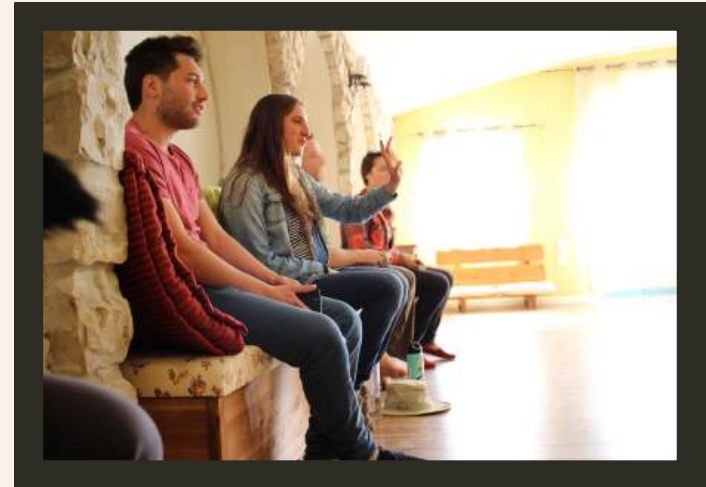
Questions for Discussion

- What miracles do you or have you seen in your life? Why do you think there is an ambivalence towards miracles in Jewish thought?
- How would you explain the reason for the difference of opinion between Rav Yosef and Abaye?
- Why does Rav Yehuda feel the need to add to what Rav Yosef and Abaye said? Is Rav Nachman adding anything new to Rav Yehuda?
- Would you want G-d to miraculously change your nature, or would you want G-d to give you the tools to cope with the situation you're in, given the nature that you have? Why?
- What does it mean to you to "go beyond" or to "be" a miracle?

ACTIONS

"Know that a person is influenced in accordance with his actions. One's heart and all of one's thought are always drawn after one's deeds in which one is occupied, whether they are good or bad...for after one's acts is the heart drawn."

(Sefer HaChinuch - Enumeration and commentary of the 613 commandments, Italy, 14th Century)



Questions for Discussion

- How is this view different from the usual perception of the purpose of actions?
- Where in your life can you apply this wisdom?
- What do you believe should come first - the intention, or the action? In which situations?

THE JEWISH PEOPLE

Source 1: (Mark Twain, On the Jews)

If the statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one percent of the human race. It suggests a nebulous dim puff of star dust lost in the blaze of the Milky Way. Properly, the Jew ought hardly to be heard of; but he is heard of. He is as prominent on the planet as any other people...His contributions to the world's list of great names in literature, science, art, music, finance, medicine...are also way out of proportion to the weakness of his numbers...All things are immortal, but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?

Background:

The first Jewish People were the famous couple of Avraham (Abraham) and Sarah. From this union, Yitzchak (Isaac) was born. Yitzchak married Rivka (Rebecca), and together had Ya'akov (Jacob). Ya'akov was the father of many children, most of whom became the heads of the 12 tribes of Israel (Dan, Naftali, Shimon, Zevulun, Asher, Yehuda, Binyamin, Issachar, Levi, Gad, Reuven, and Menashe)

Each of the twelve leaders and their tribes had his own unique path in life and way of connecting to G-d. Over 2,500 years ago, ten of the twelve tribes were exiled from the Land of Israel and have, for the most part, remained separate from the Jewish People ever since.

Researchers in the last century claim that the tribes were never really

lost to themselves, only to us. For all these years they have maintained Israelite traditions, and have been waiting to return to their home in the Land of Israel. Explorers have found substantial evidence that they are living and practicing their Israelite customs throughout Eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa. Although they don't know about holidays like Chanukah (which happened after they were exiled) and don't have knowledge of the Talmud and Rabbinic Judaism, they follow many Biblical traditions.

In recent years, we've had the incredible opportunity to see some of the lost tribes coming back home to Israel. The Ethiopians - who now make up a significant segment of Israeli society - are understood to be from the tribe of Dan, and immigrants have started to come from India who are recognized as being from the tribe of Menashe.

Most Jews in Western countries are presumed to be from the tribe of Yehuda. In fact, the name "Yehuda" is where we get the term "Yehudi" (=Jew).

Source 2: Historian Rabbi Berel Wein

Yehuda is the brother who set the tone for Jewish life as it is known today. Yehuda is known for physical and spiritual strength, leadership, tenacity, and viability. Amazingly, there are many stories in the Tanach about Yehuda and his descendants that seem to be uncomplimentary such as the escapades of Yehuda with Tamar, and the story of David who stole away a married woman, Batsheva. And yet it is almost invariably true that from these unlikely seemingly illicit marriages the future of Jewish People is guaranteed. Even in our time, there are

unlikely people and events that G-d uses for historic purposes that we would not choose those for the 'proper' turning points of Jewish history. Yehuda was not a perfect person, but a great historic lesson: Yehuda rises from every one of his problems. King Shlomo (Solomon), says that a righteous person falls 7 times, but gets up. That's Yehuda. That's the Jewish People. What's greatest about the Jewish People is not just scholarship and philanthropy, but just the fact that we're here. Any incident would have crushed a lesser person, but not so Yehuda. The difference between the righteous and evil, is that the evil doesn't rise up again. The evil person says, 'As long as I'm down I might as well enjoy it. What's the use?'

The righteous person rises back up, and is not a prisoner of habits and weaknesses.

Other civilizations in history don't lose and survive. Rome falls. That's the end of Rome. It's over. Not so with the Jewish People.

Questions for Discussion

- What characteristics seem to you to be Jewish?
- What traits do you have or values transmitted in your family that seem to be Jewish?
- What commonalities do you see among different Jews you've met? What differences do you see among different Jewish populations?
- Why do you think the Jewish People have been scattered around the world for all these years?

NEGATIVE QUALITIES?

"Rabbi Elazar Ha-kappar said: envy, lust and [the desire for] honor remove a person from the world."

(Ethics of Our Fathers - Pirkei Avot 4, 21)

Questions for Discussion

- Define envy, lust, and honor. What does each one mean to you?
- What do they mean by saying that these three things remove a person from the world (we are not talking about physical death)?
- Aren't these qualities beneficial, after all, weren't we created with them?



GOOD & EVIL

Question: Are People Basically Good or Evil?

Bad

Source 1: The Torah (Genesis 6, 5)

"G-d saw how great was human wickedness on earth—how every plan devised by the human mind was nothing but evil all the time."

Comment: (Dennis Prager, 2002)

I believe that we are born with tendencies toward both good and evil. Yes, babies are born innocent, but not good. Why is this issue so important? If you believe people are born good, you will not stress character development when you raise children. You will not teach them that the primary struggle they have to wage to make a better world is against their own nature. I attended Jewish religious schools until the age of 18, and I learned that – opposed to my secular friends, who were taught that the greatest human struggle is against society – the greatest struggle was with *me*, and my natural inclinations to laziness, insatiable appetites, and self-centeredness. Also, if you believe that people are basically good, G-d and religion are morally unnecessary, even harmful. Why would basically good people need a G-d or religion to provide moral standards?

Good

Source 2: (Ecclesiastes 7, 29)

"...G-d made men plain, but they have engaged in too much (crooked) reasoning."

Comment: (Rav Kook, Musar Avicha 1)

All obligations of the heart and merit of humans and bringing one's soul to pureness, and all the good personality characteristics – are found in nature. Personality characteristics that are connected to Godly actions, and are not according to their original nature – this comes only from physicality.

Rabbi Kook believed that a human sense of morality, which is the manifestation of G-d in the individual, is the world's driving force. Inside every human shell are concealed sparks of holiness and Divine light. The shell feeds off the energy of this spark, and Jewish souls carry within themselves the attraction to good.

(Professor Pinchas Polonsky: Rabbi Kook and the Modernization of Judaism, 2006)

Judaism does not view humans as being inherent sinners who need to be saved. Humans have free will to be righteous.

(The Jewish Globe, 2009)

Questions for Discussion

- What is your opinion on this subject? Are people naturally good or naturally bad (or naturally both or neither)? Give an example from your own life to back up your answer.
- What do you think your true essence is?
- Is there any part of your identity that you are hiding from? That you are afraid to recognize and tap into?
- What do you think happens to a person who lives in secrecy?
- Is there any part of your Jewish identity that you are hiding from? That you are afraid to recognize and tap into?
- What is holding you back from letting down this boundary?

ART & JUDAISM

Source 1: Rav Kook ("Olat Re'iyah", Volume 2, 3-4)

"...As long as there is one drawing hidden in the depth of the soul which is missing and was not realized, there is still an obligation on the artist to express it...(this is under the limitation that...) only those treasures, which when opened, perfume the air of reality and are good to be opened..."

Comment: In this way, Rav Kook explains the connection between the Hebrew words for artist ("oman") and faith ("emunah"): An artist's work in *reality* is faithful to the image held *virtually* in the artist's mind.

Source 2: Professor Mel Alexenberg ("Jewish Consciousness and Art of the Digital Age", 2004)

The worldview of ancient Greece revived in Renaissance Europe dominated Western art until the rise of modernism at the beginning of the 20th century.

Here, art was defined as "mimesis," the imitation of nature. The Hellenistic worldview is reflected in European languages: "art" in English and French, "arte" in Spanish, "Kunst" in German and Dutch, "iskustvo" in Russian, etc. These words are all related to artificial, artifact, imitation, and phony. In contrast, the Hebrew word for artist is spelled with the same letters (AMN) as the word "amen" which means "truth." Its feminine form is "emunah", faith, and as a verb "l'amen" means to nurture and educate. These two definitions of art are not only different from one another; they present opposite viewpoints.

This Jewish path begins with movement, a journey away from the safely familiar towards freedom to experience new ways of seeing. The biblical story of the Jewish People begins: "G-d said to Abram: Lech-Lecha

(=Go for yourself) from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father's house to the land that I will show you." This passage can also be read as: "Walk with your authentic self - away from all the familiar and comfortable places that limit vision - to a place where you can freely see." Here, the dynamic Hebraic mindset is established, as new ways of seeing emerge from the integration of our journey through geographical space with our inner quest for spiritual significance. Movement through the psychological realms of intention, thought, and emotion - coupled with action in the physical realm - leads to fresh visions.

Comment: Professor Alexander explains that in the Jewish tradition, the artist needs not imitate nature, but rather be true to him/herself. We're encouraged to be free, to shed the familiar and comfortable, and go on a journey (both physical, intellectual, emotional, and psychological) - which will result in "fresh visions."

Source 3: Midrash Tanchuma (Tazria)

Once the wicked Roman ruler Tinius Rufus asked Rabbi Akiva: "Whose deeds are more perfect, G-d's or humans'?" Rabbi Akiva answered: "The deeds of humans."

He responded: "Can humans make heaven and earth?" Rabbi Akiva answered: "Don't pick an example that is beyond a human's ability to create; take an example that relates more directly to humans."

Rabbi Akiva brought him some stalks of wheat and some flour and noted that they are products of G-d's doing, whereas flour is the product of humans. Rabbi Akiva asked: "Is not the flour more perfect than the stalks of wheat?"

Comment: Opposite to what we might expect, the great Rabbi Akiva explained to Tinius Rufus (the Roman ruler who had him publicly executed) that human creations are "more perfect" than G-d's creations.

Questions for Discussion

- Rav Kook feels that an artist is obligated to create "drawings" that are hidden in the depths of his/her soul. Why would a religious leader like Rav Kook deal with art? Do you think his suggestion is a positive one?
- Professor Alexenberg suggests that we go on a "journey." He thinks true freedom is the freedom to leave "the familiar and the comfortable" and leads to fresh visions. Do you agree with him? In your life, what has led you to "fresh visions," to new ways of looking at the world?
- In this strange argument between the Roman and the Rabbi, with whom do you agree? Back up your opinion with your own examples of "more perfect creations."
- Are you an artist? Have you ever created art? With which art form do you have the most intense connection? Would you define your connection as "spiritual?" Give an example of a time when you've been incredibly moved by art.

REPAIRING THE WORLD

"How does a war begin? A war begins when, on some far-away island, parents yell at their children. Their echo begins the war. How does peace begin? Peace begins when, on some far-away island, parents wake up in the morning and say good morning to their children with love. Their echo begins the peace."

(Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach on Rabbi Nachman of Breslov)



Questions for Discussion

- What does this mean to you personally?
- What kind of echoes do you make?
- What kind of echoes do you want to make?

DON'T CHANGE, CHANGE

He gave me the Ten Commandments not in hunger, nor in anger, not in fire and not in clouds, but in tenderness and love, and he added hugs and good words and he added "please" and he sang "Remember" and "Observe" in one tune, and begged and quietly cried between one commandment and another, Don't Take the Name of G-d in Vain, Don't Take, in Vain, please, don't judge falsely against your neighbor..

And he hugged me tightly and whispered into my ear Don't Steal, Don't Commit Adultery, Don't Murder, and he put the open palms of his hands on my head during the Yom Kippur blessing.

Honor, Love, So that you might live many days on the face of the earth.

And my father's voice was white as the hair on his head.

Afterwards, he turned his face towards me for the last time like on the day he died in my arms and he said:

I want to add two more to the Ten Commandments:

The Eleventh Commandment: Don't Change.

And the Twelfth Commandment: Change, Change.

Thus did my father speak and turned from me and went away and disappeared in his strange distances.

(Yehuda Amichai - Israeli Poet)

More Info:

Yehuda Amichai (1924 - 2000) was an Israeli poet. Amichai is considered by many to be the greatest modern Israeli poet, and was one of the first to write in colloquial Hebrew. Amichai was awarded the 1957 Shlonsky Prize, the 1969 Brenner Prize, 1976 Bialik Prize, and 1982 Israeli Prize. He also won international poetry prizes, and was nominated several times for the Nobel Prize in Literature.

His writings - as a secular poet - are characterized by gentle irony, and the pain of damaged love. It was a love for people, for the Torah and Eretz Yisrael, and, most of all, it was a love for the city of Jerusalem.

In the Torah, there are two separate versions of the Ten Commandments. The first version says: "Observe the Shabbat." The second version says: "Remember the Shabbat." According to tradition, G-d - when verbally giving the Ten Commandments to the Jewish People at Mt. Sinai - said both words simultaneously in one utterance.

Questions for Discussion

- When the poet's father wanted to say his last words to his son, he decided to give him a contradictory double message: Don't change. And yet change. How do you reconcile the two?
- Do you find any relevance in this message that relates to the continuity of the Jewish People? How is "not changing and changing" important to a nation's continued existence?
- Do you agree with this "don't change/change" idea on a national basis? On a personal basis?



THE FOURFOLD SONG

There is one who sings the song of his soul, and in his soul, he finds everything, full spiritual satiation.

There is one that sings the song of the people, leaving the circle of his personal soul, which he doesn't find wide enough, he aspires to the brave heights, and he clings with gentle love with the entirety of the People of Israel, and with her he sings her songs, is troubled by her troubles, is brightened by her hopes, thinks lofty and pure thoughts on her past and her future, and contemplates with love and wisdom her inner spiritual content.

And there is one who yet widens his soul until it spreads out above the border of Israel, to sing the song of humanity. His spirit goes forth and widens into the greatness of humanity and its image, he aspires to general human consciousness and awaits its fulfillment, and from this source of life he draws forth his thoughts, aspirations, and dreams.

And there is one who is yet above this in breadth, until he becomes one with the entire universe, with all its creations, with all its worlds, and with them all he sings.

And there is one who rises above, with all these songs together in one cluster, and all give forth their voice, all together sing their tunes, and each gives each other life; a voice of joy, happiness, merriment and glee, a voice of pleasure and a voice of holiness.

The song of the soul, the song of the people, the song of humanity, the song of the world, all blend together at all times...

Israel is the Song of G-d – Shir El, a simple song, a double song, a triple song, a fourfold song - the Song of Songs...

(by Rabbi Kook)



Questions for Discussion

- Although Rav Kook's poem could be looked at as simply a description, a snapshot of the Jewish People, is he also perhaps making a statement? What values or principles do you find hidden in the words of "The Fourfold Song?"
- Rav Kook describes four kinds of people "who sing." Can you possibly think of any, other than the ones he mentions?
- Have you ever met all four kinds of "singers?" Give some examples.
- Are you a "singer?" Do you fit into Rav Kook's poem? If so, where? If not, why?

INDIVIDUAL & COMMUNITY

Source 1: (Ethics of Our Fathers - Pirkei Avot 1, 14)

"Hillel said:

If I'm not for myself, who will be for me?

And if I'm only for myself, who am I?

And if not now, when?"

Source 2: (Ethics of Our Fathers - Pirkei Avot 2, 5)

"Hillel said:

Do not separate yourself from the community; do not believe in yourself until the day you die; do not judge your fellow until you have reached his place..."

Source 3: (The Rabbi of Kotzk)

"In one's pockets should always be two pieces of paper. On one should be written "I am only dust and ashes." On the other should be written "The world was created just for me"."

Questions for Discussion

- With which of Hillel's three lines in source 1 do you identify the most? Why?
- In source 2, What is Hillel trying to teach us? How are his 3 statements connected?
- With which of the Rabbi's two lines in source 3 do you identify the least? Why?
- When in your life have you felt the tension between "individual and community"?
- Do you believe it's important to balance the two? Do you think it's possible?
- What "pieces of paper" do you keep in *your* pockets?



HONORING PARENTS

Source 1: The Ten Commandments (Exodus, 20, 12)

"Honor your father and your mother, that you may long endure on the land that Hashem your G-d is assigning to you."

Source 2: Maimonides (Hilchot Mamrim, 6, 3)

The Torah obligates us to both honor and fear our parents.

What is the difference between fear and honor?

Fear signifies that the child must neither stand nor sit in his father's place; he must not contradict his father nor decide for or against him.

He will not call him by his personal name – neither during his life or afterwards. . .

What does honor signify?

The child must provide his father and mother with food, drink, and clothing, paid for by the parents. If the father has no money and the son has, he is compelled to maintain his father and mother as much as he can. He must escort his parents in and out, he should rise before them.

Source 3: Shulchan Aruch (Yore Deah, Siman 240)

"What is honor? Feeding them and giving them drinks, clothing and covering them, escorting them in and out. And he must give it to them with a smiling face, because even if he feeds them delicacies every day but does this with an angry face, he is punished on account of this."

Source 4: The Talmud (Kiddushin 31 A)

"Rav Yehuda said in the name of Shmuel, Rabbi Eliezer was asked:

"How far does the honor of parents extend?"

He said to them: "Go and see what a certain heathen, Dama ben Netina, did in Ashkelon. The Rabbis sought jewels for the ephod (the ephod was a richly embroidered garments worn by the high priest during sacred rituals), at a profit of 600,000 Dinar, Rabbi Kahana taught: at a profit of 800,000 Dinar, but as the key was lying under his father's pillow, he did not trouble him.

When Rav Dimi came, he said: He [Dama ben Netina] was once wearing a gold embroidered silken cloak and sitting among Roman nobles, when his mother came, tore it off him, struck him on the head, spat in his face, yet he did not shame her."

Questions for Discussion

- What do you think is the common denominator of the 'honor' laws? Of the 'fear' laws?
- What do you think was the motivating idea for creating these specific laws?
- What message do you think the stories in source 4 are trying to convey?
- If someone saved your life – is there any way that you could repay him/her? – is this to say that giving life is the same as saving a life?
- How can one be expected to grow yet maintain an honor and fear relationship with one's parents? What is the difference between this kind of relationship, and one based on friendship – i.e., parents as friends? Can you find a place for love in the ideal expressed above and how or how not?

HOLINESS

In Judaism, holiness is often found in elevating the ordinary. For example, Shabbat is holy. It is a day that is elevated above the other days of the week. Every aspect of our lives has the potential to be infused with holiness.

Source 1: The Talmud (Brachot 62 A)

Rav Cahane went up and laid down under the bed of Rav (his Rabbi). He heard him (Rav) talk, laugh, and have intimate relations (with his wife). Rav Cahane said to himself, "Is the mouth of my teacher like one who has never before tasted food?!"

Rav heard him (talk to himself under the bed) and said, "Cahane!! Are you here?!! Get out! This is not proper behavior!!"

Rav Cahane replied, "This too is Torah, which I need to learn."

Source 2: Rabbi Aryeh Ben David (former Director of Education at Livnot)

"Being spiritual means being in touch with something that is inside of you."

Source 3:

In Judaism, self-improvement is not only valued for its own sake, but also as part of the path to holiness. There are many stories of great Jewish men and women who emphasize the importance of character development as a way of better connecting to G-d.

Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, also known as "The Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto" eloquently explains how this works.

"Enormous revelation of spirit are possible by transforming a simple disappointment, a minor setback, a heartfelt sigh. The soul is like a flowing source of water that has become blocked. We work to dig and find little openings and cracks. Every small access point can release a huge flow...deep feeling flowing like a bath, washing away unworthy attachments...And in one moment, you can see, in an unshakable flash that you are standing in your place in the great chain of creation, among a huge camp of angels and holy beings. You yourself are one of them."



Questions for Discussion

- What do you think of the story in source 1? Was Rav right or was Rav Cahane right? Or both?
- What does the statement in source 2 mean to you? What does holiness or spirituality mean to you?
- What is the Rebbe saying in source 3? Have you ever experienced this? Do you know people who are so refined that they really do seem to be "holy"?

LASHON HARA

NEGATIVE VERBAL ENERGY

There is a basic tenet of Judaism that says, "Guard Your Tongue". If at all possible, we are encouraged to use speech that emits positive energy and fosters unity, and not the opposite. Speech that emits negative-energy (in Hebrew: "Lashon Harah") is something that can destroy a person's self-confidence, entire relationships, communities, and even empires.

Opening Story

Once there was a man who had said terrible things about someone. Realizing that he has done something awful, he goes to his Rabbi and asks, "Rabbi, what can I do?" The Rabbi thinks a bit and tells the man to bring him a feather pillow. The man brings the pillow, and the Rabbi tells him to go outside, rip the pillow open, and shake out the feathers. The man does that. As he shakes out the feathers, the wind catches them, and they start flying everywhere. The man comes back to the Rabbi and says, "I did as you said. Now what?" The Rabbi says, "Now go back outside and pick up all the feathers." The man looks startled and says, "How can I? The wind took them! I don't even know where they are now!" The Rabbi says, "Exactly. Just like your words. Once they're out, it's impossible to get them back."

Source 1: The Torah (Numbers, Chapter 12)

"When they were in Chatzerot, Miriam...spoke against (her brother) Moses because of the...woman that he had married...As the cloud withdrew from the tent, suddenly Miriam was stricken with leprosy (an illness that requires leaving the living area of the community and being in isolation for a period of time)."

Source 2: The Talmud

Lashon Harah is like killing three people because it destroys the reputation of the victim, damages the perceptions of the listener, and diminishes the standing of the speaker.

Source 3: Chafetz Chaim

Lashon Harah can create division and separation. And unity – in the Jewish tradition – is of ultimate importance...Lashon Harah can not only destroy a person, but can also endanger families, and entire communities. Words of violence can lead to physical violence, and that can affect empires...and even the cosmos...Exceptions: a person is required to reveal information to protect a person from immediate, serious harm. However, this can only be done as a "last resort" – with first-hand knowledge only, without exaggeration, only to a relevant authority, etc.

Source 4: The Zohar (Parshat Metzora 52 B)

About Lashon Harah it is written (in the Book of Psalms): "And their tongue is a sharp sword" – that it kills and damages like a sharp sword. Because of this it is written: "Fear for yourselves for the sword" – meaning: be fearful of speaking Lashon Hara, which is called "the sword".

Questions for Discussion

- Why do you think Miriam was stricken with leprosy after speaking Lashon Harah? Do you believe this was a just outcome?
- Do you agree that one shouldn't say negative things about others, even if they are true? Why or why not? Is the existing secular law morally enough?
- Have you ever been a victim of Lashon Harah? If so, would you compare it to a sword? What other imagery would you use to describe it?
- What is hardest for you when trying to control your words?
- Have you ever been a victim of Lashon Harah?
- In your opinion, when *should* negative speech be spoken?

TIKKUN OLAM

Introduction

One famous Jewish tradition: we're put on this earth to make a change, to fix a somewhat broken world. This is called Tikkun Olam (=“Repairing the World”). Many believe that each person was created in order to make some important (even if it's seemingly insignificant) change in this world. What's your task?

Source 1: (Kings II, Chapter 2, 19-22)

The men of Jericho said to Elisha: “Look, the town is a pleasant place to live in, as my lord can see; but the water is bad and the land causes bereavement.” He responded, “Bring me a new dish and put salt in it.” They brought it to him. he went to the spring and threw salt into it. And he said, “Thus said G-d: I heal this water; no longer shall death and bereavement come from it!” The water has remained wholesome to this day, in accordance with the words spoken by Elisha.

Source 2: The Jewish Way (by Rabbi Irving Greenberg)

The world was and is meant to be a paradise. But only when there is peace, with abundant resources and an untrammled right to live, will the world be structured to sustain the infinite value of the human being. This is the heart of Judaism, the dream. Jewish existence without the dream is almost inconceivable. Jews have repeatedly given everything, including their very lives, to keep it alive. And when catastrophe shattered the vision, Jews spent their lives renewing it.



Questions for Discussion

- Do you think it's really possible for one person to repair the world?
- Have you ever witnessed someone trying? Give an example.
- If you do want to take part in Tikkun Olam in your lifetime, what are some of the “changes” that you would like to make?

DESTRUCTION & REBUILDING

The Story of the Turkey Prince

A prince once became mad and thought that he was a turkey. He felt compelled to sit naked under the table, pecking at bones and pieces of bread, like a turkey. All the royal physicians gave up hope of curing him of this madness. The king grieved tremendously. A sage arrived and said, "I will undertake to cure him." The sage undressed and sat naked under the table, next to the prince, picking crumbs and bones. "Who are you?" asked the prince. "What are you doing here?" "And you?" replied the sage. "What are you doing here?" "I am a turkey," said the prince. "I'm also a turkey," answered the sage. They sat together like this for some time, until they became good friends. One day, the sage signaled the king's servants to throw him shirts. He said to the prince, "What makes you think that a turkey can't wear a shirt? You can wear a shirt and still be a turkey." With that, the two of them put on shirts. After a while, the sage again signaled, and they threw him pants. As before, he asked, "What makes you think that you can't be a turkey if you wear pants?" The sage continued in this manner until they were both completely dressed. Then he signaled for regular food from the table. The sage then asked the prince, "What makes you think that you will stop being a turkey if you eat good food? You can eat whatever you want and still be a turkey!" They both ate the food. Finally, the sage said,

"What makes you think a turkey must sit under the table? Even a turkey can sit at the table." The sage continued in this manner until the prince was completely cured.

(Rabbi Nachman of Breslov)

Questions for Discussion

- How do you understand this story?
- Do you find this story to be potentially helpful in learning about how to heal individuals?
- Do you find any parallels between this story and the destruction and rebuilding of the Jewish People?
- Can it be helpful in learning about the destruction and rebuilding of other peoples, too?



THE CAROB TREE

One day Choni was walking along the road, and he saw an old man planting a carob tree. Choni asked him: "How long will it take for your carob tree to bear fruit?" The man told him, "Seventy years." Choni said to him, "Will you live another 70 years?" The man answered, "I found the world growing with carob trees and I want to leave the world growing with carob trees. Just like my ancestors planted for me, I will plant for my grandchildren as well."

(Talmud Bavli, Ta'anit, 23, 4)

Questions for Discussion

- What are the Carob trees that you have found in your world that you are reaping the fruits of and are thankful for?
- What are the carob trees that you would like to leave after you?
- When and how would you begin, if you haven't already?



INNER LIGHT

In many cultures, there is a "flood story." The Sumerians had Gilgamesh, the Greeks had the Odyssey. The Babylonians, the Mayans, the Chinese, the Hindus, the Egyptians, and Native Americans also have epic flood stories in their culture. In the Jewish tradition, it is Noah and the Ark.

Source 1: Noah is instructed how to build the ark - The Torah (Genesis, 6, 16) "Make a Tzohar for daylight in the ark, and terminate it within a cubit of the top. Put the entrance to the ark in its side..."

Source 2: Rashi (a medieval French Jewish commentator on the Torah) Make a Tzohar for the ark. What is a Tzohar? The word "Tzohar" means either "window" or "precious stone."

Source 3: Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (Likutei Moharan 1, 9) Rabbi Nachman explained Rashi's double-translation as follows: "The difference between a window and a radiant stone is this: a window has no light of its own, and light enters through it. When there is no light outside, the window can't bring light inside. But a radiant stone (in this case, he means a radiant, shiny stone) lights up on its own, regardless of the light outside. Similarly, there are people who resemble a window - and cannot light up on their own; and there are people who are like a radiant stone - and light up from within."

Questions for Discussion

- How would you classify yourself... are you a window or a radiant stone?
- Is it possible to create light from within without being dependent on exterior lights? Is it possible to be a 'radiant stone'? How have you done so in your life?
- What are the benefits of being affected by the light around us (of being a 'window')?

TZEDAKA

Introduction:

Tzedaka comes from the Hebrew word Tzedek (=justice), and is commonly translated as "charity". Tzedaka differs from the common term "charity", as it is not an act of philanthropy, it is an ethical obligation. An important part of spiritual life is doing what is right and just, and Tzedaka is part of that. It is a way to empower poor people to support themselves, helping them in developing their talents and skills.

Source 1: The Torah (Deuteronomy 15, 7-8)

"If, however, there is a needy person among you, one of your kin in any of your settlements in the land that your G-d Hashem is giving you, do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kin. Rather, you must open your hand and lend whatever is sufficient to meet the need"

Source 2: Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (commentary on the Torah, Leviticus)

The Jewish spirit of Tzedaka is the spirit of seeing in every one of life's blessings - material, physical, emotional and spiritual - the responsibility to use the power it gives us to help build up the happiness of those who do not feel complete in whatever area of life and who are still hungering for contentment and joy.

Questions for Discussion

- With what have you been blessed (material, physical, emotional, and spiritual)?
- What kind of "life's blessing" do you feel you can share?
- In Hebrew charity is called Tzedaka, which means justice. How, in your opinion, can the fulfillment of the above statement bring justice?

In the Mishneh Torah, Maimonides classifies eight degrees of charity. what do you think of the levels of charity? Do you agree with the order?

- Giving a gift, a loan, or partnership that enables the recipient to become self-sufficient
- Giving anonymously to an unknown recipient (donor and recipient do not know each other)
- Giving anonymously to a known recipient (donor knows recipient, but recipient doesn't know donor)
- Giving publicly to an unknown recipient (recipient knows donor, but donor doesn't know recipient)
- Giving before being asked
- Giving adequately after being asked
- Giving less than adequate but cheerfully
- Giving begrudgingly

CHARACTER

There are four types of character in human beings:

One that says: "mine is mine, and yours is yours": this is a commonplace type, and some say this is a Sodom-type of character.

[One that says:] "mine is yours and yours is mine": is an unlearned person ("am ha'aretz").

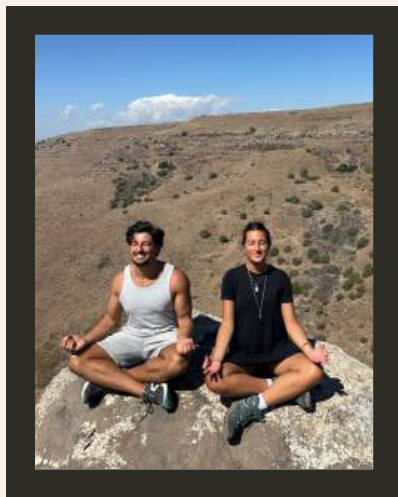
[One that says:] "mine is yours and yours is yours" is a pious person.

[One that says:] "mine is mine, and yours is mine" is a wicked person.

(Ethics of Our Fathers - Pirkei Avot 5, 10)

Questions for Discussion

- How would you define commonplace, unlearned, pious and wicked?
- Why do you think our sages have chosen this formula to define these types of people?



A MIRROR

Source 1: The Talmud (Yevamot Tractate 63)

In Genesis 18 it says "And G-d said: It's not good for a Human to be alone, I'll make for him a helper "Kenegdo"" (=in front of him. Can also mean against him). Rabbi Elazar explained: if he earns it – helper, if he doesn't – against him.

Source 2: (Toldot Ya'akov Yosef on Torah, Pikudei)

Our sages said in Pirkei Avot: Who is the wise? The one who learns from everyone. Ba'al Shem Tov explained: When a person pays attention to something evil in a fellow person – that's a sign that he has a sort of the same evil inside himself. It's like when you look at your reflection in a mirror and see dirt on your face - you should know that the dirt is on your face, not on the mirror.

Questions for Discussion

- In source 1, the passage in Torah speaks about creating a couple, separating a Human to Male and Female. Do you think Rabbi Elazar's explanation can be taken to other spheres of life besides couple relationships?
- In your opinion, what does it mean "earns it"?
- Do you agree with the Ba'al Shem Tov's statement in source 2? Why?
- Please find a way to interpret the passage in a way that you will agree with the "Mirror" way of thinking.
- Please find a way to interpret the passage in another way so you will disagree with it.
- How, in your opinion, can our society benefit from practicing the "Mirror" way of thinking?



LOVE

Source 1: The Torah (Leviticus 19, 18)

"...Love your fellow as yourself..."

Source 2: The Torah (Leviticus 19, 17)

"Do not hate your brother in your heart"

Source 3: The Torah (Deuteronomy 16, 14)

"Be happy and joyous on your festival day"

Questions for Discussion

- Why do you think that Judaism demands of us to love, to be happy, and not to hate? Aren't these emotions?
- Can we control our emotions entirely? How can we change them?



A non-Jew once came before Shamai and said to him, "Convert me on the condition that you teach me all the Torah, all of it, while I stand on one foot.

He (Shamai) repulsed him with the building measure he had in his hand.

He (the non-Jew) came before Hillel, who converted him.

He (Hillel) said to him:

Don't do unto others what you would not like to be done unto you - this is all the Torah, all of it - the rest is commentary, go and learn!

(Talmud Shabbat 31 A)

Questions for Discussion

- Why do you think Shamai responded the way he did?
- How can Hillel say that his one statement is the entire Torah?
- What does Hillel mean by his statement?

LIFE



Two people were walking together
(in the middle of the desert)

and in one's hand was a flask of water.

If both drink, both die of thirst, but if only one drinks, then
only that person who drinks survives.

Ben P'torah taught: Better both drink and both die, than only
one drink and see his friend die.

Rabbi Akiva taught the passage: "...and your brother shall live
with you (Leviticus 25, 36). "Your life comes before your
friend's life."

(Talmud Baba Metziah 62 A)

Questions for Discussion

- What would you do in this situation?
- What is the reasoning behind each of these two views?
- Of what importance is it that the water is in the possession of one of the two?

ETHICS

"Ben Zoma says:

Who is wise? One who learns from every person...

Who is strong? One who controls himself...

Who is rich? One who is happy with his portion...

Who is honored? One who honors others..."

(Ethics of Our Fathers - Pirkei Avot 4, 1)

Questions for Discussion

- How do you define wise, strong, rich, and honored?
- What is Ben Zoma trying to teach us?
- How does this differ from the world at large?



RELATIONSHIPS

Source 1: Midrash (Bereshit Raba, 68)

A Roman matron once asked Rabbi Yossi bar Halafta, "How many days did it take G-d to create the world?"

He said to her, "Six days."

She said to him, "What has your G-d been doing since the completion of the Creation of the world?"

Rabbi Yossi replied, "He has been busy pairing couples."

She was astonished. "Is that His trade?! Even I can do that job. As many man-servants and maid-servants as I have, I can pair up as couples."

"Perhaps it is a simple matter in your eyes," answered Rabbi Yossi, "but for

G-d, it is as difficult as the splitting of the sea."

She promptly placed one thousand man-servants opposite one thousand maid-servants and declared, "He will marry her, she will marry him," and so forth.

The next morning, two thousand servants came marching to her door, beaten and bruised. One had lost an eye; one had a broken leg, bandaged and bleeding, all complaining, "I do not want her!!! I do not want him!!!"

She immediately sent for Rabbi Yossi, and conceded, "Rabbi, everything that you said was true and wise."

To which he replied, "If it were easy in your eyes, know that it is as difficult for G-d as the splitting of the sea."

Source 2: Talmud (Sota 17 A)

R' Akiva expounded: 'Man & Woman - if they merit - the Holy Presence dwells in their midst, if they do not merit - then a fire consumes them.'

Questions for Discussion

- The "splitting of the sea" is considered to be the greatest miracle in Jewish history, an act that contradicted the laws of nature. Why do you think that the Rabbis considered a couple's staying together as an 'act that contradicts the laws of nature?'
- For couples that do succeed in staying together for long periods of time (30-50 years), what do you think is their secret?
- What do you think it means to have a "Holy Presence" in a relationship?
- If there is no "Holy Presence", why do you think there is a danger of the relationship being consumed by "fire"?



TEFILAT HADERECH

THE TRAVELER'S PRAYER

When embarking on a journey, recite:

Yehi Ratzon Milefanecha
 Adonai Eloheinu V'lohei Avoteinu
 Shetolichenu L'shalom
 V'tatzidenu L'shalom
 V'tadrichenu L'shalom
 (When flying add: V'tatisenu L'shalom
 V'tagi'enu Limchoz Cheftzenu
 Lechayim Lesimcha U'lshalom
 (If returning on the same day, one adds:
 V'tachzirenu L'shalom)
 V'tatzileinu Mikaf Kol Oyev V'orev
 V'listim V'chayot Ra'ot Baderech
 U'mikol Minei Fur'ani'yot
 Hamitragshot U'va'ot La'olam
 V'tishlach Bracha V'hatzlacha
 B'chol Ma'aseh Yadeinu V'titnenu
 Lechen U'lechesed U'lerachamim
 B'enecha U'v'enei Kol Ro'enu
 V'tigmelenu Chasadim Tovim
 V'tishma Kol Tachanunenu
 Ki El Shome'a
 Tefila V'tachanun Ata:

Baruch Ata Adonai,
 Shome'a Tefila.

יהי רצון מלפניך
 אֲדֹנָי אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ
 שְׁתּוֹלִיכֵנוּ לְשָׁלוֹם
 וְתַצִּידֵנוּ לְשָׁלוֹם
 וְתַדְרִיכֵנוּ לְשָׁלוֹם
 (בטיסה הוסיף: וְתַטִּיסֵנוּ לְשָׁלוֹם)
 וְתַגִּיעֵנוּ לְמַחֲזוֹ חֶפְצֵנוּ
 לְחַיִּים לְשִׂמְחָה וְלְשָׁלוֹם
 (אם חוזר באותו היום אומר:
 וְתַחַזְרֵנוּ לְשָׁלוֹם)
 וְתַצִּילֵנוּ מִכָּפַי כּוֹל אוֹיֵב וְאוֹרֵב
 וְלִסְטִים וְחַיּוֹת רָעוֹת בְּדַרְכְךָ
 וּמִכָּל מִינֵי פְרַעַנְיּוֹת
 הַמְתַּרְגְּשׁוֹת וּבָאוֹת לְעוֹלָם
 וְתִשְׁלַח בְּרָכָה וְהַצְלָחָה
 בְּכָל מַעֲשֵׂה יָדֵינוּ וְתִתְּנֵנוּ
 לֶחֶן וְלִחְסֵד וְלִרְחָמִים
 בְּעֵינֶיךָ וּבְעֵינֵי כָּל רֵאִינוּ
 וְתִגְמַלְנוּ חֲסֵדִים טוֹבִים
 וְתִשְׁמַע קוֹל תַּחֲנוּנֵנוּ
 כִּי אֵל שֹׁמֵעַ
 תְּפִלָּה וְתַחֲנוּן אַתָּה:



ברוך אתה אֲדֹנָי,
 שׁוֹמֵעַ תְּפִלָּה.

May it be Your will, Hashem, our G-d and the G-d of our ancestors, that You lead us toward peace, guide our footsteps toward peace, and make us reach our desired destination for life, gladness, and peace. (If one intends to return immediately, one adds: and return us in peace). May You rescue us from the hand of every foe and ambush, from robbers and wild beasts on the trip, and from all manner of punishments that assemble to come to earth. May You send blessing in our handiwork, and grant us grace, kindness, and mercy in Your eyes and in the eyes of all who see us. May You hear the sound of our humble request because You are G-d Who hears prayer requests. Blessed are You, Hashem, Who hears prayer.

Alumot
Alumni Network



Livnot U'Lehibanot

TO BUILD & TO BE BUILT ✦ לבנות ולהבנות

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