

# Hadar's Project Zug Shavuot Companion

5 CLASSES FOR YOUR TIKKUN LEIL SHAVUOT

תשפ"ה 5785



## **The Hadar Institute**

Hadar empowers Jews to create and sustain vibrant, practicing, egalitarian communities of Torah, Avodah, and Hesed. Hadar offers learning opportunities for people from all walks of Jewish life, including online courses, public lectures, week-long immersive experiences, and our online Torah and Tefillah library.

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This reader contains words of Torah, so please treat it with appropriate reverence.

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## **The Hadar Institute**

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To donate or sponsor future publications, please contact Jeffrey Stein at [stein@hadar.org](mailto:stein@hadar.org).

# WELCOME

## ◆ What is Project Zug?

Project Zug is Hadar's *havruta* learning platform. We provide self-guided courses and partner matching, empowering Jews of all backgrounds to engage in traditional Jewish text study and to connect with each other. Learn more at [www.projectzug.org](http://www.projectzug.org).

## ◆ P.S. We love to hear from you!

Please let us know how you end up using this companion and which classes you loved the most. And remember: if you want more, you can go ahead and register for a full-length course. If you already have a *havruta* (learning partner), you can sign up any day of the year, or if you would like to be matched with someone, register for our Summer 2025 Cycle by June 8, 2025!

Questions?  
Email R. Keilah Lebell, Director of Project Zug, at [lebell@hadar.org](mailto:lebell@hadar.org).

Shavuot celebrates the gift of Torah. After the festival of Pesah we count the Omer for seven weeks until we arrive at 6 Sivan. In doing so we relive two journeys. The first is the exodus from Egypt, making our way, miracle by miracle, to Mount Sinai. And the second is the seasonal journey from the spring harvest to the summer harvest. In Temple times, Shavuot was marked by bringing harvest gifts (*bikkurim*) to God, expressing gratitude for having settled in the Promised Land and being able to draw sustenance from it. Today we mark it by recalling when God gave us the Torah and immersing ourselves in it.

This dual meaning of Shavuot—as a celebration of harvest and a celebration of the giving of the Torah—expresses a direct connection between Torah and abundance. This connection encourages us to experience Torah as a bountiful harvest—evoking a sense of satiation, fulfillment, and overflowing gratitude. It teaches us that, through immersing in Torah, we are nourished.

This Shavuot, Hadar's Project Zug◆ serves up a “feast” of Torah—five handpicked classes to enrich your holiday. Each one comes from one of our full-length, self-guided courses, which were designed for paired learning (*havruta*). Study them with a friend or family member; bring them to synagogue to learn with a fellow congregant; convene a study group or facilitate a class at your Tikkun Leil Shavuot.

Just like a delicious treat, Torah is even better when you share it with someone. We hope you enjoy every morsel!

Wishing you a joyful Shavuot,  
Project Zug and the Hadar Institute Team◆

# COURSE DESCRIPTIONS

## **The Triumph of Life** | by Rabbi Yitz Greenberg | Page 6

From the ten-session course based on R. Greenberg's magnum opus, *The Triumph of Life: A Narrative Theology of Judaism* (2024), we bring you his unique and earnest take on the connection between creation and revelation.

## **Intro to the Jewish Bookshelf** | by Rabbi Avi Strausberg | Page 9

Dive into the world of the Zohar and Hasidut for a taste of some mystical interpretations of the revelation that occurred at Mount Sinai.

## **God of Our Mothers** | by Rabbi Miriam-Simma Walfish | Page 16

Our matriarchs each have something to teach us about how we might relate to God - perhaps in a way you never considered before. In this class, we consider the power of Rachel's tears to motivate God to care for Israel as a mother does for her child.

## **Unlocking the Prayerbook** | by Rabbi Elie Kaunfer | Page 22

Three times a day we recite the Shemonah Esrei, the standing prayer (Amidah) made up of 18 blessings spoken directly to God. In this class we look at the first blessing of the Amidah, alongside biblical intertexts, to gain new perspective on the phrase "great, mighty, and awesome."

## **Judaism is About Love** | by Rabbi Shai Held | Page 27

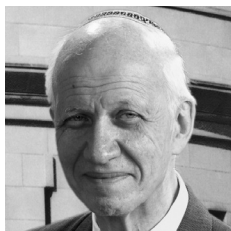
This past Spring, Project Zug published a ten-session course based on R. Held's groundbreaking work, *Judaism is About Love: Recovering the Heart of Jewish Life* (2024). This session explores how we can respond to tragedy and devastation with love.



Want to keep learning after Shavuot? Sign up to complete the course you started or try a different course during Project Zug's Summer Learning Cycle. You can register with your own *havruta* or tell us about yourself and we'll match you with someone new.

Visit [www.projectzug.org](http://www.projectzug.org) to register for our Summer Learning Cycle by the June 8<sup>th</sup>, 2025.

# BIOS



## RABBI YITZ GREENBERG

serves as the President of the J.J. Greenberg Institute for the Advancement of Jewish Life and as Senior Scholar in Residence at Hadar. R. Greenberg was ordained by Beth Joseph Rabbinical Seminary of Brooklyn, New York and has a doctorate in history from Harvard University.



## RABBI SHAI HELD

is President and Dean at Hadar. His most recent book, *Judaism is About Love*, was published in 2024. He is also the author of *The Heart of Torah* (2017) and *Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Call of Transcendence* (2013), and is the host of Hadar's newest podcast, *Answers WithHeld*.



## RABBI ELIE KAUNFER

is President and CEO at Hadar. He received *semikhah* from his longtime teacher, R. Daniel Landes, and is currently completing a book on the weekday Amidah. He received a doctorate in liturgy from the Jewish Theological Seminary, where he was also ordained, and is a graduate of Harvard College.



## RABBI KEILAH LEBELL

is Director of Project Zug and on a mission to transform lives through the profound power of one-on-one (*havruta*) learning. She holds rabbinic ordination from the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies. She, Sam and their three children, Meir, Della and Orly, live in Chattanooga, TN.



## RABBI AVI STRAUSBERG

is Senior Director of National Learning Initiatives at Hadar, and is based in Washington, D.C. She received her rabbinic ordination from Hebrew College in Boston, and was a Wexner Graduate Fellow.



## RABBI MIRIAM-SIMMA WALFISH

is faculty at Hadar and a Senior Coach for Pedagogy of Partnership. She holds a PhD in Rabbinics from Harvard University and has published several articles, including, "Upending the Curse of Eve: Reframing Maternal Breastfeeding in BT Ketubot" (2017).



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# The Triumph of Life

R. Yitz Greenberg

UNIT 2 God and Creation

SESSION 5 Revelation and *Tikkun Olam*

## ♦ Mishnah Avot

Pirkei Avot (“Ethics of the Fathers,” or perhaps “Foundational Sayings”) is a popular collection of moral and practical advice from ancient rabbis. Although it is often printed in its own right or in modern Siddurim (prayer books), originally it was a part of the Mishnah, probably used as advice for upcoming rabbis.

Last session, we looked at the creation narrative, which culminates in Shabbat. In this narrative, Shabbat is the microcosm of the perfect world, the day on which everything is in its right place, life has proliferated and is flourishing, and the dignities of human beings can be perfectly upheld. Every week, for one Shabbat day after six working days, it is possible to get a taste of this perfect world.

Shabbat in the Torah has two driving forces: creation (Exodus 20:8-11 [טז]) and redemption (Deuteronomy 5:12-15 [טז]). On the one hand, Shabbat is to remember the days of creation and rest; and on the other, Shabbat is meant to actualize the redemption from Egypt in our lives today. Revelation—the ethics, concepts, laws, and facets of God revealed to human beings—is the link between these two core concepts of Judaism. As R. Greenberg argues, it is through the revelation of creation found in the Torah that we can truly understand how to bring about redemption.

## CONNECTING CREATION AND REVELATION

In a cryptic line, R. Akiva thinks about the fact that we were not only created in God’s image, but we were also informed in the Torah that this was the case (see Session #2, where we first encountered his thought on being created in God’s image). Why? What was the purpose of God revealing this information to us?

### SOURCE #1 [טז]

#### משנה אבות ג:יד

הוא [= ר"ע] הֵיָה אֹמֵר,  
חָבִיב אָדָם שֶׁנִּבְרָא בְּצֶלֶם.  
חֶבֶד יִתְּרָה נִדְעָת לֹו  
שֶׁנִּבְרָא בְּצֶלֶם, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר  
(בראשית ט) "בִּי בְּצֶלֶם  
אֱלֹהִים עָשָׂה אֶת הָאָדָם."

#### Mishnah Avot ♦ 3:1

[R' Akiva] used to say: Beloved are humans that they were created in the image [of God]. It is an extra love that it was made known to them that they were created in the image [of God], as it is said, “For in the image of God, [God] made humans” (Genesis 9:6 [טז]).

- » In what way might it be loving for God to have created us in God’s image? In what way does telling us this fact indicate “extra love”?

## REVELATION OF CREATION LEADS TO REDEMPTION

R. Greenberg takes R. Akiva's ideas and extends them to their logical conclusions, folding redemption also into the discussion of creation and revelation.

### SOURCE #3

**R. Yitz Greenberg, *Triumph of Life***

There is a problem in the gap between this ideal and the real. People are swayed, as it were, brainwashed by culture and society, and may be persuaded that they have none of the above dignities. This was the universal condition in all human societies. Therefore, as the Torah's account in Genesis, telling people that they are images of God represents an act of love. At Sinai, God intervened in human history and revealed to humans that they were images of God just as, in the Exodus, the liberation of the slaves revealed to them that they were not Egyptian property. Rather, they were humans, loved and created by God to seek out a homeland and build a society that honored their dignity.

*Revelation and religion exist to communicate this truth to all people.* R. Akiva confirms that being an image of God—with its attendant dignities—means that one is in a constant state of being loved. R. Akiva then stresses that this love is raised to a further level. Given that human society does not act on this truth and treat all people as they deserve to be treated, God reveals to people that they are loved and made in the image of God. In R. Akiva's teaching, the creation of life and humanity stems from God's love. That act of revelation to humans of this status is a further act of divine love.

Just as divine love is the source of human dignity and the motivation for revelation and religion, so is it the driver of the second core Jewish narrative teaching, classically called redemption (*ge'ulah*). In consideration of modern Jewish theological discourse, I call it *tikkun olam* (the repair and perfection of the world). The logic is as follows. Any love that bestows infinite value on the other aspires to what is best for the other. The present state of the world—and the powers-that-be in it—do not do justice to the uniqueness of every human being, and often deny or crush it. Therefore, the Divine wants a perfected world for beloved humanity (and other forms of life) to live within. That is why Judaism carries the banner of messianism: a call—a promise—for a fundamental transformation of the world for the better.

The original Genesis creation story shows that God wants this world to be a paradise, for nothing less can do justice to the full dignities of a human being. The definition of the perfect world (comparable to Shabbat on the seventh day of creation) is a world full of life

and no death, with all needs provided for, with everything in its right place, with peace between all creatures and harmony in nature and society. That is the divine goal for creation. To attain this, Judaism champions a process of liberation and improvement for humanity, which culminates in the messianic age. In that future state, the repaired world will be a place in which the infinite value, equality, and uniqueness of every person is honored in every way, and is upheld in all the material conditions and spiritual interactions in daily life. Out of love, God promises that this final state will be reached. Out of love, God calls on humans to join in the process of world repair. This is why creation is inextricably linked to redemption in Judaism.

1. What role might you play in the process of redemption, or as R. Greenberg writes, *tikkun olam*?
2. Do you agree with R. Greenberg's definition of redemption?





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## Intro to the Jewish Bookshelf

Rabbi Avi Strasuberg

### UNIT 3 SESSION 7

Modern Perspectives on Revelation  
The Hasidic Masters

We dive into the world of the Zohar and hasidut for a taste of the mystical interpretations of the revelation that occurred at Mount Sinai. First, take a look at the moment of revelation immediately preceding the giving of the Ten Commandments.

#### SOURCE #1

שמות יט:טז-יט, כ:א-יח

<sup>19:16</sup> וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי בְהִיט הַבָּקָר  
וַיְהִי קֶלֶת וּבָרָקִים וַעֲנָן כָּבֵד עַל-הָהָר  
וְקוֹל שֹׁפָר חָזָק מְאֹד וַיִּחַרַד כָּל-הָעָם  
אֲשֶׁר בַּמַּחֲנֶה: <sup>17</sup> וַיּוֹצֵא מֹשֶׁה אֶת-הָעָם  
לִקְרַאת הָאֱלֹקִים מִן-הַמַּחֲנֶה וַיַּתְּצֻבוּ  
בְּתַחְתִּית הָהָר: <sup>18</sup> וַהֲרִי סִינַי עָשָׂן כְּלוֹ  
מִפְּנֵי אֲשֶׁר יָרַד עָלָיו יְקוֹק בָּאֵשׁ וַיַּעַל  
עָשָׂנוּ כְּעָשָׂן הַכֹּבֵשֶׁן וַיִּחַרַד כָּל-הָהָר  
מְאֹד: <sup>19</sup> וַיְהִי קוֹל הַשֹּׁפָר הוֹלֵךְ וְחֹזֵק  
מְאֹד מֹשֶׁה יִדְבֵּר וְהָאֱלֹקִים יַעֲנֶנּוּ  
בְּקוֹל:...

<sup>20:1</sup> וַיִּדְבֹּר אֱלֹקִים אֶת כָּל-הַדְּבָרִים  
הָאֵלֶּה לְאֹמֹר:

<sup>2</sup> אֲנִי יְקוֹק אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ  
מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עֲבָדִים: <sup>3</sup> לֹא-  
יִהְיֶה לְךָ אֱלֹקִים אֲחֵרִים עַל-פָּנָי:

<sup>4</sup> לֹא-תַעֲשֶׂה לְךָ פֶסֶל וְכָל-תְּמוּנָה אֲשֶׁר  
בַּשָּׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל וְאֲשֶׁר בָּאָרֶץ מִתַּחַת  
וְאֲשֶׁר בַּמַּיִם מִתַּחַת לָאָרֶץ: <sup>5</sup> לֹא-  
תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לָהֶם וְלֹא תַעֲבֹדֵם כִּי אֲנִי

Exodus 19:16-19, 20:1-18

<sup>19:16</sup> On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. <sup>17</sup> Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. <sup>18</sup> Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the Lord descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently. <sup>19</sup> As the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him...

<sup>20:1</sup> God spoke all these words, saying:

<sup>2</sup> I the Lord am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage: <sup>3</sup> You shall have no other gods besides Me.

<sup>4</sup> You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth. <sup>5</sup> You shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I the Lord

יִקְוֶה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֶל-קִנְיָן פֶּקֶד עֲוֹן אָבִת  
עַל-בָּנִים עַל-שְׁלִשִׁים וְעַל-רִבְעִים  
לְשָׁנָאִי: <sup>6</sup>וְנִעְשָׂה חֶסֶד לְאַלְפִים לְאַהֲבִי  
וּלְשֹׁמְרֵי מִצְוֹתַי:

<sup>7</sup>לֹא תִשָּׁא אֶת-שֵׁם-יְקֹוֹק אֱלֹהֶיךָ  
לְשׁוֹא כִּי לֹא יִנָּקֶה יְקֹוֹק אֶת אֲשֶׁר-  
יִשָּׂא אֶת-שְׁמוֹ לְשׁוֹא:

<sup>8</sup>זָכוֹר אֶת-יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקַדְּשׁוֹ: <sup>9</sup>שֵׁשֶׁת  
יָמִים תַּעֲבֹד וְעָשִׂיתָ כָּל-מְלֹאכֶתְךָ:  
<sup>10</sup>וַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שַׁבָּת לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ  
לֹא-תַעֲשֶׂה כָּל-מְלֹאכָה אֹתָהּ וּבִנְךָ  
וּבִתְךָ עַבְדְּךָ וַאֲמָתְךָ וּבְהֵמָתְךָ וְגֵרְךָ  
אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ: <sup>11</sup>כִּי שֵׁשֶׁת-יָמִים עָשָׂה  
יְקֹוֹק אֶת-הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת-הָאָרֶץ אֶת-  
הַיָּם וְאֶת-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר-בָּם וַיָּנַח בַּיּוֹם  
הַשְּׁבִיעִי עַל-כֵּן בֵּרַךְ יְקֹוֹק אֶת-יוֹם  
הַשַּׁבָּת וַיְקַדְּשֵׁהוּ:

<sup>12</sup>כָּבֵד אֶת-אָבִיךָ וְאֶת-אִמְךָ לְמַעַן  
יֵאָרְכוּ יָמֶיךָ עַל הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר-יְקֹוֹק  
אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לָךְ:

<sup>13</sup>לֹא תִרְצַח  
לֹא תִנָּאֵף  
לֹא תִגְנוֹב  
לֹא-תַעֲנֶה בְּרַעַךְ עַד שֹׁקֶר:

<sup>14</sup>לֹא תַחְמֹד בֵּית רֵעֶךָ לֹא-תַחְמֹד  
אִשְׁתִּי רֵעֶךָ וְעַבְדּוֹ וַאֲמָתוֹ וְשׁוֹרוֹ וַחֲמֹרוֹ  
וְכָל אֲשֶׁר לְרֵעֶךָ:

<sup>15</sup>וְכָל-הָעָם רָאִים אֶת-הַקּוֹלֹת וְאֶת-  
הַלַּפִּידִם וְאֶת קוֹל הַשֹּׁפָר וְאֶת-הַהָר  
עָשָׂן וַיֵּרָא הָעָם וַיָּנֻעוּ וַיַּעֲמֻדוּ מֵרָחֵק:  
<sup>16</sup>וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל-מֹשֶׁה דַּבֵּר-אַתָּה עִמָּנוּ

your God am an impassioned God, visiting the guilt of  
the parents upon the children, upon the third and upon  
the fourth generations of those who reject Me, <sup>6</sup>but  
showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those  
who love Me and keep My commandments.

<sup>7</sup>You shall not swear falsely by the name of the Lord your  
God; for the Lord will not clear one who swears falsely  
by His name.

<sup>8</sup>Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy. <sup>9</sup>Six days  
you shall labor and do all your work, <sup>10</sup>but the seventh  
day is a sabbath of the Lord your God: you shall not  
do any work—you, your son or daughter, your male or  
female slave, or your cattle, or the stranger who is within  
your settlements. <sup>11</sup>For in six days the Lord made heaven  
and earth and sea, and all that is in them, and He rested  
on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the  
sabbath day and hallowed it.

<sup>12</sup>Honor your father and your mother, that you may long  
endure on the land that the Lord your God is assigning  
to you.

<sup>13</sup>You shall not murder.  
You shall not commit adultery.  
You shall not steal.  
You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

<sup>14</sup>You shall not covet your neighbor's house: you shall not  
covet your neighbor's wife, or his male or female slave, or  
his ox or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor's.

<sup>15</sup>All the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the  
blare of the horn and the mountain smoking; and when  
the people saw it, they fell back and stood at a distance.

<sup>16</sup>"You speak to us," they said to Moses, "and we will

וְנִשְׁמָעָה וְאַל-יִדְבֹּר עִמָּנוּ  
אֱלֹקִים פֶּן-נָמוּת: <sup>17</sup>וַיֹּאמֶר  
מֹשֶׁה אֶל-הָעָם אֶל-תִּירְאוּ  
כִּי לְבַעֲבוֹר נְסוּת אֶתְכֶם  
כָּא הָאֱלֹקִים וּבַעֲבוֹר תִּהְיֶה  
יְרֵאתוֹ עַל-פְּנֵיכֶם לְבִלְתִּי  
תִּחָטְאוּ: <sup>18</sup>וַיַּעֲמֵד הָעָם  
מִרְחָק וּמֹשֶׁה נָגַשׁ אֶל-  
הָעֶרְפֶּל אֲשֶׁר-שָׁם הָאֱלֹקִים:

obey; but let not God speak to us, lest we die.”<sup>17</sup> Moses answered the people, “Be not afraid; for God has come only in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may be ever with you, so that you do not go astray.”<sup>18</sup> So the people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick cloud where God was.

### Questions from R. Avi Strausberg

1. Based on this text, how would you describe revelation?
2. What do you think was revealed?
3. What do you imagine it would have been like to experience revelation?
4. Does the concept of revelation have meaning to you in your own life?

### THE ZOHAR

Now that you’ve read the text, we’ll turn to the **Zohar**, the foundational work for Jewish mystical thought, known as **Kabbalah**. Kabbalah is a set of mystical teachings that attempts to understand the mysterious essence of the Divine and the nature of the relationship between the one who is *Ein Sof* (without end) and God’s creation, humankind. The Zohar, written in Aramaic, first appeared in Spain in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and was published by Moses de Leon. Leon attributed the writings of the Zohar to R. Shimon bar Yohai, a rabbi of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, although historians believe that Leon himself authored the Zohar based on earlier teachings. The Zohar provides a book-by-book commentary and exploration of the Five Books of Moses while exploring topics like creation, the nature of souls, redemption, and the relationship between *Ein Sof* and humankind.

Let’s look at a couple of passages from the Zohar to get a sense for the nature of the work and its perspective on the revelation at Sinai.

In the text of Genesis 1, God speaks exactly ten times in that passage. This is picked up by rabbinic *midrash* and referred to by the Zohar on the next page.

# ◆ Ten Words

In Hebrew, the phrase that denotes the Ten Commandments translates literally to “Ten Words” or “Ten Utterances”. This is also the meaning of the Greek word “Decalogue”: “*deca*” = ten, “*logos*” = word.

## ◆ Zohar II:90b

What we call the Zohar is essentially three volumes (volume 1 on Genesis, volume 2 on Exodus, and volume 3 on Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). It also has various other sub-parts like “The Faithful Shepherd”, “Zohar Hadash” (New Zohar), and “Tikkunei Zohar” (Rectifications of the Zohar). Here we are learning a passage from volume 2 on page 90b; below only a few pages later, 93b-94a.

## SOURCE #2

זוהר חלק ב, דף צ, עמוד ב

דְּהָא אֲוִרִיּוּתָא שְׁמָא דְּקוּדְשָׁא  
בְּרִיךְ הוּא הָוֵי, מַה שְׁמָא  
דְּקוּדְשָׁא בְּרִיךְ הוּא אֲתִגְלִיף  
בְּעֶשֶׂר אֲמִירָן, אוֹף אֲוִרִיּוּתָא  
אֲתִגְלִיפָא בְּעֶשֶׂר אֲמִירָן.  
אֲלִין עֶשֶׂר אֲמִירָן אֵינֻן  
שְׁמָא דְּקוּדְשָׁא בְּרִיךְ הוּא.  
וְאֲוִרִיּוּתָא כְּלָא שְׁמָא חַד הָוֵי,  
שְׁמָא קַדִּישָׁא דְּקוּדְשָׁא בְּרִיךְ  
הוּא מְמַשׁ.

Zohar II:90b

For the Torah is the Name of the Holy One, blessed be He. As the Name of the Holy One is engraved in the Ten Words of Creation, so is the whole Torah engraved in the Ten Words, and these Ten Words are the Name of the Holy One, and the whole Torah is thus one Name, the Holy Name of God Himself.

## SOURCE #3

זוהר חלק ב, דפים צג,  
עמוד ב - צד, עמוד א

הָנִי עֶשֶׂר אֲמִירָן דְּאֲוִרִיּוּתָא, אֵינֻן  
כְּלָל דְּכָל פְּקוּדֵי אֲוִרִיּוּתָא, כְּלָלָא  
דְּעִילָא וְתַתָּא, כְּלָלָא דְּכָל עֶשֶׂר  
אֲמִירָן דְּבְרָאשִׁית. אֲלִין אֲתַחֲקִי  
עַל לִוְחֵי אֲבָנִין, וְכָל גִּנּוּזֵי דְּהוּ  
בְּהוּ, אֲתַחֲזֹן לְעֵינֵיהוֹן דְּכָלָא,  
לְמַנְדַּע וּלְאַסְתַּכְלָא בְּרִנָּא דְּתַרִּיג  
פְּקוּדֵין דְּאֲוִרִיּוּתָא דְּכָלִּילֵן בְּהוּ,  
כְּלָא אֲתַחֲזִי לְעֵינֵין, כְּלָא אִיהוּ  
בְּסִכְלָתֵנוּ, לְאַסְתַּכְלָא בְּלָפָא  
דִּישְׂרָאֵל כְּלָהוּ, וְכָלָא הֵנָּה נֶהֱיָר  
לְעֵינֵיהוּ. בְּהֵהוּא שְׁעָתָא, כָּל רוּזִין  
דְּאֲוִרִיּוּתָא, וְכָל רוּזִין עֲלָאִין וְתַתָּאִין,  
לֹא אַעֲדִי מִינֵיהוּ. בְּגִין דְּהוּ חֲמָאן  
עֵינָא בְּעֵינָא, זִיו יִקְרָא דְּמַרְיָהוֹן,  
מַה דְּלֹא הֵנָּה בְּהֵהוּא יוֹמָא, מִיּוֹמָא  
דְּאַתְבְּרִי עֲלָמָא, דְּקוּדְשָׁא בְּרִיךְ

Zohar II:93b-94a

The Ten Words contain the essence of all the commandments, the essence of all celestial and terrestrial mysteries, the essence of the Ten Words of Creation. They were engraved on tablets of stone, and all the hidden things were seen by the eyes and perceived by the minds of all Israel, everything being made clear to them. At that hour all the mysteries of the Torah, all the hidden things of heaven and earth, were unfolded before them and revealed to their eyes, for they saw eye to eye the splendor of the glory of their God. Never before, since the Holy One created the world,

הוא אתגלי ביקריה על טורא דסיני.  
 כיון דקבילו ישראל אורייתא על טורא  
 דסיני, כדן אתבסם עלמא, ואתקיימו  
 שמיא וארעא, ואשתמודע קודשא  
 בריך הוא עילא ותתא, ואסתלק  
 ביקריה על כלא.

had such a revelation of the Divine Glory taken place. Once Israel received the Torah on Mt. Sinai, the world was duly and completely established, and heaven and earth received a proper foundation.

### Questions from R. Avi Strausberg

1. How does the Zohar connect the revelation of the Torah to the first act of creation? What does it mean to connect these two things?
2. According to the Zohar, what was revealed when God revealed the Ten Words at Mount Sinai?
3. What is the image of revelation presented by the Zohar?

### HASIDUT

Let's now take a look at a teaching of the **Ba'al Shem Tov** on revelation. R. Yisrael ben Eliezer, an 18<sup>th</sup> century Jewish mystical rabbi born in Poland, is commonly referred to as the Ba'al Shem Tov (Master of the Good Name) or the "**BeShT**". The Ba'al Shem Tov is credited as being the founder of Hasidic Judaism, known for its mystical teachings that often touch on spiritual concepts such as God, the soul, and Torah.

Though Hasidic thought often makes use of Kabbalah, it leaves behind the esoteric nature of Kabbalah that restricted the learning of the Zohar to an elite few. Rather, Hasidut is known for its ability to transmit the mystical interpretations of Torah to wider audience through stories, teachings, and daily practices. The Ba'al Shem Tov didn't leave behind a book of his teachings so we must rely on his students' accountings of his words. Let's look now at a teaching of the Ba'al Shem Tov's on revelation brought by R. Adin Steinsaltz, a great 20<sup>th</sup> century rabbi and scholar.

### SOURCE #4

"מסופר על חסיד שאמר: 'למדנו תורה עם הבעל שם טוב, עם ברכים ורעמים וקולות השופרות כי, כפי שהוא סיפר לנו, קבלת התורה בהר סיני מעולם לא פסקה, היא מצב תמידי בדיוק כפי שהבריאה היא מצב מתמשך'."

There is the story told of the Hasid who said: "We have studied Torah with the Ba'al Shem Tov, with thunder and lightning and the sound of trumpets, because, as he told us, the receiving of the Torah on Mount Sinai has never ceased; it is a permanent stance—just as the Creation itself is unceasing."

#### ◆ Torah Scrolls

The blessing recited before and after each section of the Torah reading during the service.

לפיכך הברכה הנאמרת בעת קריאה בתורה "ברוך...נותן התורה" היא בלשון הווה – "נותן" ולא בלשון עבר "נתן".

Similarly, the blessing which is recited on the occasion of reading from the Torah Scrolls, "…who gives us the Torah," is in the present tense, "gives", not the past, "gave".

המושג הזה התפתח מהגישה שלפיה התורה שרויה תמיד בעיצומו של תהליך עיצוב והתפתחות.

This idea has developed from the attitude that the Torah itself is always forming and expanding; it is a constant growth.

ההתרחשות בהר סיני הוא התגלות מתמשכת החוזרת על עצמה בכל פעם שאדם לומד תורה. גם אם אדם אינו מודע לעמידתו בפני ההר המקודש, אלוהים עדיין אומר את עשרת הדיברות. גם אם הוא אינו שומע, העמידה עצמה, מתוך יראה ופחד, מספיקה כדי ליצור את החיבור הנכון עם התורה.

The event at Mount Sinai is an ongoing revelation which repeats itself whenever one studies Torah. One may not be aware of standing before the Holy Mountain, but God is still uttering the Ten Commandments. Even if one does not hear them, the standing itself, in awe and terror, is enough to establish the correct relationship to Torah.

#### Questions from R. Avi Strausberg

1. How does the Baal Shem Tov describe revelation at Sinai and how does he connect the process of revelation to the process of creation?
2. What do you think about the Baal Shem Tov's understanding of revelation? How does this align with your own understanding of revelation?

Let's turn to the writings of R. Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter who is more commonly known by the title of his main work the Sefat Emet. The **Sefat Emet**, born in Poland, was a 19<sup>th</sup> century great Hasidic rabbi whose commentary on the weekly Torah portions makes up his eponymous work.

## SOURCE #5

### שפת אמת, שמות עמ' צא

בפסוק 'וכל העם רואים את הקולות' (שמות כ:יח). פירוש משכתוב 'אנכי ה' אלקיך'. שראו בני ישראל כל אחד את שורש חיותו וראו עין בעין חלק נשמת ה' ממעל שיש לכל אחד. ולא היו צריכין להאמין את הדיברות. רק ראו את הקולות שכך הוא כאשר ה' דובר.

### Sefat Emet, Exodus p. 91

"All the people saw the voices" [lit. "the thunder"] (Exodus 20:18). The voice was that which said, "I am the Lord your God" (in the singular). Each one of Israel saw the root of his or her own life-force with their very eyes and each one saw the part of the Divine Soul above that lives within. They had no need to believe the commandments, because they saw the voices. That's the way it is when God speaks.

## Questions from R. Avi Strausberg

1. How does the Sefat Emet describe revelation?
2. The Sefat Emet writes that each one of us has a part of the Divine Soul that lives within each of us. How does this align with your understanding of the Divine?
3. What does it mean for each person to see the root of his or her own life-force?
4. What does the Sefat Emet mean when he says, "That's the way it is when God speaks"? What do you think it's like when God speaks?

## Take a Step Back

1. How do these different presentations of revelation align with your own understanding of revelation? Do any of these change how you think about it?
2. How would you describe the types of commentary on revelation that we've explored here in this session? What characterizes them? What type of language is used?




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# God of Our Mothers: What Our Matriarchs Teach Us About Connecting to God

Rabbi Miriam-Simma Walfish

## SESSION 2 Rachel's Tears: Activating God's Maternal Compassion

The Haftarah for the second day of Rosh Hashanah from the book of Jeremiah (31:1-19 ) allows us a window into the maternal side of God. It features our biblical foremother, Rachel, weeping for us, her children who have been sent, by God, into exile. Before going on to prophesy comfort for the exiles (where Ephraim stands in for the people at large), Jeremiah gives voice to Rachel's despair as she laments our exilic state. The verses about Ephraim also appear in the Musaf Amidah on Rosh Hashanah.

### **Havruta Instructions:**

1. Greet your partner. Take a moment to catch up socially with your *havruta*.
2. Reflect and share with your *havruta*: How would you describe the way you wish for God to relate to you and the people you care about—as Source, Creator, Sovereign, Presence, Redeemer, Teacher, Father, Mother? Does it change?
3. Have one partner read the text aloud while the other partner follows along, switching roles periodically.
4. Take turns sharing which parts of the text call your attention. What do you resonate with in the text? What's confusing?
5. When you are done with all the sources, take a step back and reflect on how your learning might affect your experience of prayer on Rosh Hashanah.



♦ **Jeremiah 31:15-20**

Jeremiah prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Babylonians (in 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE). He was later captured and died in captivity.

## I. RACHEL WEEPS FOR HER CHILDREN

We will look first at the verses from Jeremiah in context and then explore a *midrash* where Jeremiah's words are dramatized.

### SOURCE #1

ירמיה לא-טו-כ

Jeremiah 31:15-20 ♦

(translation based on NJPS)

<sup>15</sup>כֹּה אָמַר ה' קוֹל בְּרָמָה נִשְׁמָע  
נְהִי בְּכִי תִמְרוּרִים רָחֵל מִבְּכָה  
עַל-בָּנֶיהָ מֵאַנָּה לְהַנְחִים עַל-  
בָּנֶיהָ כִּי אֵינָנּוּ:

<sup>15</sup>Thus said God: A cry is heard in Ramah—wailing, bitter weeping—Rachel weeping for her children. She refuses to be comforted for her children, who are gone.

<sup>16</sup>כֹּה אָמַר ה' מִנְעִי קוֹלְךָ מִבְּכִי  
וְעֵינֶיךָ מִדְּמָעָה כִּי יֵשׁ שָׂכָר  
לִפְעֻלָּתְךָ נְאֻם-ה' וְשָׁבוּ מֵאֶרֶץ  
אֹיֵב: <sup>17</sup>וְיִישׁ-תִּקְוָה לְאַחֲרִיתְךָ  
נְאֻם-ה' וְשָׁבוּ בָנִים לְגְבוּלָם:

<sup>16</sup>Thus said God: Restrain your voice from weeping, your eyes from shedding tears; for there is a reward for your labor—declares God: They shall return from the enemy's land. <sup>17</sup>And there is hope for your future—declares God: Your children shall return to their country.

<sup>18</sup>שָׁמוֹעַ שָׁמַעְתִּי אֶפְרַיִם  
מִתְנוּדָד יִסְרַתְנִי וְאֶנְסָר כְּעֶגְלָה  
לֹא לָמֵד הִשְׁבֵּנִי וְאֶשׁוּבָה כִּי  
אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵי: <sup>19</sup>כִּי-אַחֲרֵי  
שׁוּבִי נִחַמְתִּי וְאַחֲרֵי הִנָּדַעַי  
סָפַקְתִּי עַל-יָרֵךְ בִּשְׁתִּי וְגַם-  
נִכְלַמְתִּי כִּי נִשְׁאַתִּי חֲרַפְתִּי  
נִעֲוִירִי: <sup>20</sup>הֲבֵן יִקִּיר לִי אֶפְרַיִם  
אִם יֶלֶד שֶׁעָשָׂים כִּי-מִדֵּי  
דְּבָרִי בּוֹ זָכָר אֲזַכְּרֶנּוּ עוֹד עַל-  
כֵּן הָמוּ מַעֲי לֹא רַחֵם אֶרְחַמֶּנּוּ  
נְאֻם-ה':

<sup>18</sup>Indeed, I heard Ephraim pleading, "You disciplined me, and I took the discipline; I was like a calf untrained. Bring me back, let me come back, for you are the Lord my God. <sup>19</sup>For after I had turned away I repented; and after I was discovered, I struck my thigh; I was ashamed, and I was dismayed because I bore the disgrace of my youth." <sup>20</sup>Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he the child I delight in? As often as I speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore I am deeply moved for him; I will surely have mercy on him, declares God.

#### ◆ Eikhah Rabbah

An early midrashic collection on the book of Lamentations, from about 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century Eretz Yisrael. While much of its narrative is set in the First Temple period with characters from that period, these stories probably reflect responses to the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans, not the First by the Babylonians.

#### ◆ Wedding

The word in Hebrew is *huppah*, which today refers to a ceremonial canopy. But in Rabbinic texts, it refers to the first home of the newlyweds, or else the wedding itself.

### Questions from R. Miriam-Simma Walfish:

1. How do you understand God's response to Rachel's tears in verses 16-17? Do you find God's response comforting?
2. According to this passage, what moves God to return the people to the land? (There are multiple possible answers to this question).
3. How do verses 18-20 describe the relationship between God and the Jewish people? What about this image do you find resonant? What do you find challenging?

Whereas the verses from Jeremiah apparently see "Ephraim" who matures and repents as responsible for God's change of heart, this next text, an extended *midrash* from the opening section of Eikhah Rabbah, ◇ shifts the focus to Rachel's role.

Here, God calls on the patriarchs to cry and plead for mercy for the Jews caught in the destruction of the Temple. But none of them are able to succeed—that is, until Rachel steps in.

Again take turns reading sections of the text aloud and sharing what you notice with your *havruta*. Then discuss the questions below.

### SOURCE #2 □

#### איכה רבה פתיחתא כד

אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא  
לירמיה, אני דומה היום  
לאדם שהיה לו בן יחיד  
ועשה לו חפה ומת בתוך  
חפתו, ואין לך כאב לא  
עלי ולא על בני, לך וקרוא  
לאברהם ליצחק וליעקב  
ומשה מקברייהם, שהם יודעים  
לבכות....

#### Eikhah Rabbah Introduction 24

The Holy Blessed One said to Jeremiah, "I am today like a man who had an only son and made a wedding ◇ for him, but he died during his wedding ceremony—you have no greater pain than Mine and that of My son. Go call to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses from their graves, because they know how to cry...

בְּאוֹתָהּ שָׁעָה קִפְצָה רָחֵל אֲמָנוּ לִפְנֵי  
הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא וְאָמְרָה רְבוּנוּ  
שֶׁל עוֹלָם, גְּלוּי לִפְנֵיךְ שִׁיעָקֵב עֲבָדְךָ  
אֶהְבֵּנִי אֶהְבָּה יִתְרָה וְעָבַד בְּשָׂבִילִי  
לְאִבָּא שְׁבַע שָׁנִים, וּבְשָׁהֲשָׁלִימוֹ אוֹתָן  
שְׁבַע שָׁנִים וְהִגִּיעַ זְמַן נִשְׁוֹאִי לְבַעֲלִי,  
יַעֲזֹ אָבִי לְהַחֲלִיפָנִי לְבַעֲלִי בְּשָׂבִיל  
אֲחוֹתִי, וְהִקְשָׁה עָלַי הַדָּבָר עַד  
מְאֹד כִּי נִוְדָּעָה לִי הָעֲצָה, וְהוֹדַעְתִּי  
לְבַעֲלִי וּמִסְרָתִי לוֹ סִמֶּן שִׂפִּיר בִּינִי  
וּבֵין אֲחוֹתִי כְּדֵי שְׁלֹא יוּכַל אָבִי  
לְהַחֲלִיפָנִי,

וּלְאַחַר כֵּן נִחַמְתִּי בְּעֲצָמִי וְסָבַלְתִּי  
אֶת תַּאֲוֹתַי וְרַחֲמֵתִי עַל אֲחוֹתִי שְׁלֹא  
תֵצֵא לְחִרְפָּה, וְלִעֲרֹב חֲלָפּוֹ אֲחוֹתִי  
לְבַעֲלִי בְּשָׂבִילִי, וּמִסְרָתִי לְאֲחוֹתִי כָּל  
הַסִּמָּנִים שֶׁמִּסְרָתִי לְבַעֲלִי, כְּדֵי שִׁיְהִי  
סְבוּר שֶׁהִיא רָחֵל.

וְלֹא עוֹד אֶלָּא שֶׁנִּכְנַסְתִּי תַּחַת הַמֶּשֶׁה  
שֶׁהָיָה שׁוֹכֵב עִם אֲחוֹתִי וְהָיָה מְדַבֵּר  
עִמָּה וְהִיא שׁוֹתֶקֶת וְאֲנִי מְשִׁיבֶתָּהּ עַל  
כָּל דָּבָר וְדָבָר, כְּדֵי שְׁלֹא יִכִּיר לְקוֹל  
אֲחוֹתִי

וְגִמַּלְתִּי חֶסֶד עִמָּה, וְלֹא קִנְאָתִי  
בָּהּ וְלֹא הוֹצֵאתִיהָ לְחִרְפָּה. וְכֵּן  
אֲנִי שֹׂאֲנִי בְּשֵׁר וְדָם עֶפֶר וְאֶפֶר לֹא  
קִנְאָתִי לְצָרָה שְׁלִי וְלֹא הוֹצֵאתִיהָ  
לְבוֹשָׁה וּלְחִרְפָּה, וְאַתָּה מֶלֶךְ חַי  
וְקַיָּם, רַחֲמֵן, מִפְּנֵי מַה קִּנְאָתָהּ  
לְעִבּוּדֶת כּוֹכָבִים שֶׁאֵין בָּהּ מִמֶּשֶׁה,  
וְהִגְלִיתָ בְּנֵי וְנִהְרְגוּ בַּחֶרֶב וְעָשׂוּ

At that moment, Our Mother Rachel leaped before the Holy Blessed One and said: “Master of the Universe, it is revealed before you that your servant Jacob loved me the most and served my father seven years for me, and when those seven years came to a close, and the time of my marriage to my husband arrived, my father planned to exchange me for my husband with my sister (Leah). This was extremely difficult for me when this plan became known to me, and I notified my husband and transmitted to him a sign by which he would be able to distinguish between me and my sister, so that my father could not be able to exchange me.

“But later, I regretted my decision and endured my desire, and I had mercy on my sister, that she should not go out to disgrace. That night, they exchanged my sister with me for my husband, and I transmitted to my sister all the signs that I had transmitted to my husband, so that he would think that she was Rachel.

“Not only that, but I entered under the bed where he was lying with my sister and when he would speak with her, she would be silent—but I would respond to him accordingly so that he would not recognize my sister’s voice.

“I was gracious with her, and I was not jealous of her, and I did not bring her out to disgrace. Just as I, flesh and blood, dust and earth, was not jealous of my rival, and I did not bring her out to embarrassment and disgrace—You, Who are an everlasting, merciful King, why should You be jealous of idols which have no substance? Yet You exiled my children, and they are killed by the sword, and their enemies have done with

אֵינִי בָם כְּרָצוֹנָם.      them as they will!”

מִיד נִתְגַּלְגַּל רַחֲמֵי שֶׁל הַקָּדוֹשׁ      Immediately the mercy of the Holy Blessed One  
בְּרוּךְ הוּא וְאָמַר, בְּשִׁבְלֶךָ רָחֵל אֲנִי      prevailed, and [God] said: “For you, Rachel, I return  
מְחִזִּיר אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמָקוֹמָם.      Israel to their place.”

### Questions from R. Miriam-Simma Walfish:

1. What about Rachel’s experience as sister, wife, and mother might make her perspective unique?
2. Why do you think Rachel’s story and question move God? What does this tell us about God?
3. What kind of relationship is Rachel asking for God to have with the Jewish people?

## II. GOD’S MATERNAL LOVE FOR ISRAEL

In the previous source we saw that Rachel’s maternal tears and relational stance move God in a way that no one else can. A possible way of interpreting why this is the case, is that Rachel is relating to God as one mother to another. In fact, Mara Benjamin paints a picture of maternal love and describes the ways in which God’s love for us has maternal qualities:

### SOURCE #3

**Mara Benjamin, *The Obligated Self: Maternal Subjectivity and Jewish Thought*, pp. 27, 32.**

In Jewish theology and practice, love is active and behavioral: God loves a particular people, Israel, with special intensity, and the covenant God makes with Israel mediates this love and obligates both parties... Juxtaposing embodied, maternal experiences of love and biblical expressions of divine love... illuminates both the human and the divine. God’s “firstborn,” Israel, occasions intense disappointment, rage, pride, vulnerability, and anguish, just as children provoke in their human mothers... Both sides of the covenantal relationship between God and Israel, as envisioned in scripture and rabbinic tradition, reveal aspects of maternal love, and maternal experiences, in turn, give material reality to the nature of divine love...

Maternal love, like divine love, is “erotic” insofar as it is responsive to particular children’s specific needs and unique selfhood... The love that is nurtured in caring for one’s child is altered and attuned that specific self, to a unique body and temperament... God’s love for his people is maternal love amplified: dynamic, volatile, and keenly attentive.


### Questions from R. Miriam-Simma Walfish:

1. Share with your *havruta* what you notice about Benjamin's description of God's maternal love. What do you make of the comparison she draws between God's relationship with Israel and a mother with her infant and child? What resonates with you? What surprises you?
2. Now reread the verses from Jeremiah through Benjamin's eyes. What new insight does Benjamin's description of divine maternal love shed on these verses? On Rachel's successful plea to God in the *midrash*?

### III. RAHAMIM AND WOMB

Building on Benjamin, we see that a keyword in Rachel's narrative and God's response is רַחֲמִים (*rahamim*) (see, e.g., Jeremiah 31:20, above). It has the following meanings, both in Hebrew and other, related languages:

1. Mercy
2. Compassion
3. Love
4. Womb

In fact, the classic biblical lexicon Brown-Driver-Briggs  suggests that its primary meaning was “womb,” and the others are dependent on that, describing the feeling of brotherhood of people who once shared a womb. *Rahamim* has been translated by some as “wombliness,” often reflecting motherly attributes.

### Questions from R. Miriam-Simma Walfish:

1. Reflecting on the rich word *rahamim*, how is God's love like maternal love? How is maternal love like God's love?

#### Take a Step Back

1. What have you learned from Rachel about a maternal way of relating to God?
2. How has examining the maternal compassion of God in these sources affected how you conceive of God's presence in the world and in your own life?
3. How does the image of God as mother affect how you wish to approach your relationship with God this Rosh Hashanah?

#### Appreciate:

Share with your *havruta* something they helped you see in one of the texts you studied today and thank them for what they brought to your learning.



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# Unlocking the Prayerbook: Finding New Meaning in Our Prayers

Rabbi Elie Kaunfer

UNIT 1 The Case of the First Blessing of the Amidah

SESSION 2 How Can We Ever Describe God?

Remind yourself of the content of the blessing. In this session, we turn to line 3: “The great, mighty, and awesome God.”

## SOURCE #1

אבות	First paragraph of the Amidah
1. בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ,	1. Blessed are You, YHVH, Our God and God of our ancestors
2. אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם, אֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק, וְאֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב	2. The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob
3. הָאֵל-הַגָּדוֹל הַגִּבּוֹר וְהַנּוֹרָא,	3. The great, mighty, and awesome God
4. אֵל-עָלִיוֹן,	4. God Most High
5. גּוֹמֵל חֲסָדִים טוֹבִים,	5. Who performs acts of loving-kindness
6. וְקוֹנֵה הַכֹּל,	6. And Creator of All
7. וְזוֹכֵר חֲסָדֵי אֲבוֹת,	7. And remembers the loving-kindness of our ancestors
8. וּמְבִיא גּוֹאֵל לְבָנָי בְּנֵיהֶם לְמַעַן שְׁמוֹ בְּאַהֲבָה:	8. And brings a redeemer to their children's children for His name's sake, with love.
9. מִלֵּךְ עוֹזֵר וּמוֹשִׁיעַ וּמִגֵּן:	9. Helping, saving, and shielding king!
10. בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', מִגֵּן אַבְרָהָם:	10. Blessed are You, God, shield of Abraham.

#### ◆ Megillah 25a

This section of the Talmud is mostly about the proper way to read Torah in synagogue. In this context, the topic arises in the Mishnah of people saying or doing problematic things during the reading or while leading the prayers. This is then expanded on in the Talmud. R. Hanina is an important sage in the Land of Israel during the late 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE.

#### ◆ led the Amidah

Literally: “He descended.” This is a standard term used in the Talmud to refer to someone leading the core prayers in synagogue, in its fuller form: “to descend before the ark.” Perhaps it reflects synagogue architecture, that the leader would go in front of the ark on a lower level than the rest of the congregation.

#### ◆ Men of the Great Assembly

The Great Assembly is a mysterious institution from the time of Nehemiah and later (5<sup>th</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BCE) who are responsible—in the rabbinic imagination—for fixing the liturgy. More on them below!

Before we look at any sources, think about this line and discuss with your havruta:

1. What associations does it conjure up for you?
2. What kind of God is “great, mighty and awesome?”
3. What acts might be associated with those adjectives?

### “HAVE YOU FINISHED PRAISING YOUR MASTER!”

We’ll get to the biblical intertext next, but first a story about someone who innovated on this formulation in the blessing, adding additional adjectives to describe God, and a rabbi’s reaction.

#### SOURCE #2

תלמוד בבלי מגילה דף כה  
עמוד א

ההוא דנחית קמיה דרבי  
חנינא, אמר: האל הגדול  
הגבור והנורא האדיר והחזק  
והאמץ.

אמר ליה: סיימתינהו לשבחיה  
דמרך? השתא הני תלתא,  
אי לא דכתבינהו משה  
באורייתא ואתו כנסת הגדולה  
ותקנינהו, אנן לא אמרינן להו,  
ואת אמרת כולי האי?!

משל לאדם שהיו לו אלף  
אלפי אלפים דינרי זהב, והיו  
מקלסין אותו (באלף) דינרי  
כסף. לא גנאי הוא לו?

Babylonian Talmud  
Megillah 25a

There was once someone who led the Amidah before R. Hanina. He said: “The great, mighty, awesome, powerful, strong, courageous God.”

[R. Hanina] said to him: Have you finished praising your Master? These three [adjectives]—were it not that they were written by Moses in the Torah and affixed by the Men of the Great Assembly, we would not even say them! But you say all of these?!

It may be compared to a human who had thousands upon thousands of gold coins, and people praised him for his silver coins. Isn’t that a degradation of him?

◇ Deuteronomy

10:17-19

Deuteronomy, the fifth and final book of the Torah, is Moses' speech to the Israelites at the end of his life.

## Questions from Rabbi Ellie Kaunfer

1. What might have motivated the prayer leader to make these additions?
2. Why was R. Hanina upset about the additions to the prayer?
3. How do these approaches compare to your initial reactions to the phrase in the blessing?

## WHAT DO THESE ADJECTIVES MEAN?

The biblical intertext offers a different understanding of the phrase “great, mighty, and awesome.”

### SOURCE #3 ס

דברים פרק יז-יט

Deuteronomy 10:17-19◇

<sup>17</sup>כִּי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הוּא אֱלֹהֵי  
הָאֱלֹהִים וְאֵדֹנֵי הָאֲדָנִים הָאֵל-  
הַגָּדֹל הַגִּבּוֹר וְהַנּוֹרָא אֲשֶׁר  
לֹא יִשָּׂא פָנִים וְלֹא יִקַּח שֹׁחַד:  
<sup>18</sup>עֹשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט יְתוֹם וְאַלְמָנָה  
וְאֹהֵב גֵּר לִתְתּוֹ לוֹ לֶחֶם  
וְשִׂמְלָה: <sup>19</sup>וְאָהַבְתֶּם אֶת הַגֵּר  
כִּי גֵרִים הֵייתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:

<sup>17</sup>For YHVH your God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords, **the great, mighty, and awesome God** who shows no favor and takes no bribe; <sup>18</sup>who does justice for the orphan and widow, and loves the stranger, providing him with food and clothing—  
<sup>19</sup>you too must love the stranger, for you were strangers in the Land of Egypt.

## Questions from R. Ellie Kaunfer

1. According to this text, in what ways is God “great, mighty, and awesome?”
2. What would it mean to pray to a God who protects widows, orphans, and strangers as opposed to a creator or miracle-worker God? Is this a way you think about it? Which seems more meaningful for you in your prayer?
3. What is the implication of God’s actions here on our own behavior vis a vis the downtrodden?



♦ **Jerusalem Talmud Berakhot 7:3, 11c**

The Jerusalem Talmud is really a misnomer since it comes from 4<sup>th</sup> century Galilee, but this is its most common name. It is the earlier of the two Talmuds, the one from the Land of Israel as opposed to the Babylonian Talmud. This section, Berakhot (“Blessings”), is about prayer.

♦ **His house**  
Referring to the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians, which the prophet Jeremiah witnessed. God watched the Temple be destroyed but did nothing to stop it: God’s restraint demonstrates God’s might.

♦ **only the Temple is awesome**  
and the Temple is no more.

## WHAT HAPPENS WHEN GOD IS NOT “GREAT, MIGHTY, AND AWESOME?”

While the full phrase appears in Deuteronomy, there are versions of it in various different books of the Bible. Sometimes it says “great and mighty,” other times “great and awesome.” There is one other place where the full phrase appears, in one of the last books of the Bible, Nehemiah, associated with the Men of the Great Assembly mentioned above. This source weaves together all versions of this phrase into a historical narrative and answers the question: What happens when God is *not* seen as protecting the weak? How can God be “great, mighty, and awesome” by Deuteronomy’s definition in a world of suffering?

### SOURCE #4

תלמוד ירושלמי ברכות ז:ג, דף יא טור ג	Jerusalem Talmud Berakhot 7:3, 11c
רבי סימון בשם ר' יהושע בן לוי: למה נקרו אנשי כנסת הגדולה? שהחזירו הגדולה ליושנה.	R. Simon [said] in the name of R. Yehoshua ben Levi: Why were they called the Men of the Great Assembly? Because they returned greatness to its earlier place:
אמר רבי פינחס, משה התקין מטבעה של תפילה 'הא-ל הגדול הגיבור והנורא'.	R. Pinhas said: Moses established the form of the Amidah: “The great, mighty, and awesome God.”
ירמיה אמר 'הא-ל הגדול הגיבור' (ירמיה לב:יח) ולא אמר הנורא	Jeremiah (32:18) said: “The great and mighty God,” but did not say “awesome.”
למה אמר הגיבור? לזה נאה לקרות גיבור שהוא רואה חורבן ביתו ושותק.	Why did he say “mighty”? One who can watch the destruction of His house and be quiet is fittingly called mighty.
ולמה לא אמר נורא?	And why didn't he say “awesome”?
אלא שאי' נורא אלא בית המקדש שנאמר 'נורא אלקים ממקדשך' (תהלים סח:לו).	Because only the Temple is awesome, as it says: “Awesome is God from his Sanctuary” (Psalm 68:36).

♦ **captured and imprisoned**

The prophet Daniel lived in exile in Babylon along with many of his compatriots. For God to let God's people be captured shows the absence of God's might.

♦ **fiery furnace**

Three of Daniel's fellow Jews were sentenced to die in a fiery furnace by the king of Babylon. Daniel secretly joined them there and God miraculously saved all four of them. See Daniel chapter 3.

♦ **“The great, mighty, awesome God”**

In the verses, it is a group of Levites who give this speech/prayer before the assembled people of Israel, after the rebuilding of the Temple and the return of the exiles from Babylon. Rabbinically, this is the period when the Great Assembly held sway, and so these Levites are assumed to speak on behalf of—or perhaps themselves are part of—the Great Assembly.

דניאל אמר 'הא-ל הגדול והנורא'  
(דניאל ט:ד) ולא אמר הגבור. בניו  
מסורין בקולרין היכן היא גבורתו?

ולמה אמר הנורא? לזה נאה  
לקרות נורא בנוראות שעשה לנו  
בכבשן האש.

וכיון שעמדו אנשי כנסת הגדולה  
החזירו הגדולה ליושנה 'הא-ל'  
הגדול הגיבור והנורא' (נחמיה  
ט:לב).

Daniel (9:4 [ד]) said “The great awesome God” but did not say “mighty.” His sons have been captured and imprisoned, ♦ so where is His might?

Why did he say “awesome”? For the awesome things He did for us in the fiery furnace, ♦ He is fittingly called awesome.

When the Men of the Great Assembly arose, they returned greatness to its earlier place: “The great, mighty, awesome God” ♦ (Nehemiah 9:32 [ד]).

**Questions from R. Ellie Kaunfer**

1. According to this text, the prophet's life experience changed their understanding of God. Moses saw both God's awe and might; Jeremiah experienced the “might” but not the “awe”; Daniel experienced the “awe” but not the “might.” The Great Assembly once again seem to experience all three.

Try and get it into each character's heads. How did they understand and experience the “might” and “awe” of God? What sort of “might” or “awe” were they looking for?

2. The key lesson seems to be that your experience of the world can change your prayer life and your understanding of God. Although the words of our prayerbook are the same every time (unlike the words of the prophets), your experience of the prayer is not—because of the different circumstances of your life, because of your growth, you can experience the same words differently

Is this true for you? Have you had any transformative moments that led you to experience God or prayer in a particular way? Have you understood or experienced prayers in variant ways over time?

3. After seeing all these sources, what you think “might,” “awe,” and “greatness” mean to you when it comes to God?



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# Judaism is About Love

Rabbi Shai Held

UNIT 3 *Hesed: Bringing God's Love to Other People*

SESSION 8 Love in the Ruins: Responding to Devastation

## ♦ the Mishnah

The earliest collection of Jewish legal traditions from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century Galilee.

The world is far from whole. Countless human beings suffer, and our planet strains under the weight of human consumption. In the third chapter of *Judaism is About Love*, R. Shai Held explores our obligation to confront these harsh realities—not with passive acceptance but with sacred indignation. When society fails us, when life is unbearably painful, when injustice and brutality prevail, and when God's love seems absent, we are called to expect and fight for a more just, more whole existence—for ourselves, our loved ones, and for all humanity.

But indignation is only one response to loss and suffering. Our sacred texts and practices teach us to grieve **and** to protest **and** to rebuild (p. 251). But the ultimate salve, says R. Held, is love, and even in times of unfathomable devastation, we must actively choose love.

The sources that follow explore Rabbinic responses to destruction, loss, and suffering, and the choices we must make in the wake of tragedy.

## I. RESPONDING WITH LOVE

In describing Tisha B'Av (the fast day on 9<sup>th</sup> Av), the Mishnah♦ lists all the tragedies and destructions that happened on that day in ancient times, including the destruction of both Temples. The Mishnah responds especially to the destruction of the Second Temple. As R. Held puts it, “the visible symbol of God's love for Israel... the center of the world had been... razed to the ground... The world as they had known it no longer made sense” (p. 248).

### SOURCE #1

משנה תענית ד:ו

Mishnah Ta'anit 4:6

חמשה דברים ארעו את  
אבותינו... בתשעה באב.

There were five events that happened to our  
ancestors... on Tisha B'Av.

נגזר על אבותינו שלא יכנסו

It was decreed about our ancestors that they

◆ **Israel**

See Numbers 14.23.



◆ **first**

In 586 BCE by the Babylonians.

◆ **second**

In 70 CE by the Romans.

◆ **Betar**

The last battle in the disastrous Bar Kokhba Revolt.

◆ **silenced**

Or “plowed over.” Either way, this probably refers to the establishment of a Roman city on the ruins of Jerusalem after the Bar Kokhba Revolt.

לְאֶרֶץ, וְחָרַב הַבַּיִת בְּרֵאשׁוֹנָה  
וּבְשֵׁנִיהָ, וְנִלְכְּדָה בֵּיתָר,  
וְנִחְרְשָׁה הָעִיר.

should not enter the land of Israel; ◇ the Temple was destroyed—the first ◇ and the second ◇ time; Betar ◇ was captured; and the city [of Jerusalem] was silenced. ◇

**Discuss with your *havruta*:**

1. What do you think it says about the Mishnah’s approach that commemoration of tragedies are concentrated on particular days and not, e.g., spread throughout the Jewish calendar? What kind of an approach to tragedy does this situation encourage those who practice it?
2. Why do you think fasting on Tisha b’Av might be an appropriate way to mark these tragedies?
3. Why is actively remembering and mourning these events so important?

But Tisha B’Av, the saddest day in the Jewish calendar, is followed up in the Mishnah almost immediately with a description of a day known as Tu B’Av, only six days later (on the 15<sup>th</sup> of Av). This, it turns out, is one of the most joyous days of the Jewish calendar!

**SOURCE #2** ס

**משנה תענית ד:ח**

אָמַר רַבִּין שְׁמַעוֹן בֶּן  
גַּמְלִיאֵל, לֹא הָיוּ יָמִים  
טוֹבִים לְיִשְׂרָאֵל כְּחַמְשָׁה  
עָשָׂר בָּאָב וּכְיוֹם הַכְּפוּרִים,  
שֶׁבָּהֶן בָּנוּת יְרוּשָׁלַיִם  
יוֹצְאוֹת בְּכָלִי לְבֵן שְׂאוּלִין,  
שֶׁלֹּא לְבִישׁ אֶת מִי שְׂאִין לוֹ.

וּבָנוּת יְרוּשָׁלַיִם יוֹצְאוֹת  
וְחֹלוֹת בְּכַרְמִים.

וּמָה הָיוּ אוֹמְרוֹת, בְּחוּר,  
שָׂא נָא עֵינֶיךָ וּרְאֵה, מָה  
אַתָּה בּוֹרֵר לָךְ. אֵל תִּתֵּן

**Mishnah Ta’anit 4:8**

Said Rabban Shimon ben Gamaliel: There were no days of joy for Israel like Tu B’Av and Yom Kippur. For on those days, the daughters of Jerusalem would go out in white garments—borrowed, in order not to shame any one who had none.

And the daughters of Jerusalem would come out and dance in the vineyards.

And what would they say? “Young man, lift up your eyes and see what you choose for yourself. Do not set your eyes on beauty but set your eyes on the family.

עֵינֶיךָ בְּנוֹי, תֵּן עֵינֶיךָ בְּמִשְׁפָּחָה.  
שָׁקֵר הַחֵן וְהַבֶּל הַיָּפִי, אִשָּׁה יִרְאַת  
ה' הִיא תִתְהַלֵּל (משלי לא)

‘Grace is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman that fears the Lord, she shall be praised’ (Proverbs 31:30 [כ]).”

About this juxtaposition, R. Held says:

***Judaism is About Love, p. 251***

Now, let’s think about this for a moment. The Temple has been destroyed, and we are in mourning; the traditional seven days of mourning (*shiva*) have not yet been completed—and suddenly we are thrust into one of the most joyous days of the year. What is going on here?

The tradition implicitly makes a stunning claim. In the wake of destruction and devastation, we should respond with... more love. Grief and lament have their place, but they cannot, must not, be given the final word. When everything seems lost, the Mishnah subtly reminds us, set about reaffirming life and rediscovering love.

**Discuss with your *havruta*:**

1. This *mishnah* highlights Tu B’Av as a day of great joy—a day of coupling off! What details do you notice in the Mishnah and what do you wonder about?
2. Notice that the young women would wear borrowed clothing. This was so that those who couldn’t afford a nice white garment would not be embarrassed. What’s significant about this detail?
3. Does this directive—to seek out love, even and especially in the midst of great loss—make sense as a paradigm to follow?
4. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel also says that this practice was done also on Yom Kippur. What do you think is so joyous about Yom Kippur?

◆ **Yalkut Shimoni**

A 13<sup>th</sup> century collection of *midrashim* from Germany covering the whole Tanakh.

◆ **Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai**

A foundational figure of rabbinic Judaism in the transition from the Second Temple to the Rabbinic periods. R. Yehoshua was one of his students. You can learn more about him in the Project Zug course by R. Tali Adler, *Talmudic Personalities*.

## II. RESPONDING WITH KINDNESS

When it comes to the particular destruction and loss of the spiritual center of Judaism—the Holy Temple in Jerusalem—another surprising response emerges.

### SOURCE #3

ילקוט שמעוני על נ"ך תקכב

כי חסד חפצתי ולא זבח.  
אמר הקב"ה חביב עלי חסד  
שאתם גומלים זה לזה יותר  
מכל הזבח שזבח שלמה לפני  
אלף עולות יעלה שלמה  
וכה"א זאת התורה לעולה  
למנחה, זאת התורה לא  
עולה ולא מנחה.

פעם אחת היה רבן יוחנן בן  
זכאי מהלך בירושלים והיה  
רבי ייחושע מהלך אחריו  
ראה בית המקדש שהוא  
חרב אמר אוי לנו על הבית  
שחרב מקום שמתכפרין בו  
עונותינו,

א"ל בני אל ירע לך שיש לנו  
כפרה אחרת שהיא כמותה  
ואי זה זה גמילות חסדים,  
לכך נאמר כי חסד חפצתי  
ולא זבח, ואומר אמרתי עולם  
חסד יבנה:

**Yalkut Shimoni** ◆ on Nakh #522

“For I desire kindness, and not sacrifice” (Hosea 6:6 [ס]). The Holy Blessed One said, “The acts of kindness you do to each other are more beloved to Me than all the sacrifices that King Solomon sacrificed before Me.” A thousand burnt offerings offered Solomon, but it is written, “This is the Torah *la*-burnt offering *la*-grain offering” (Leviticus 7:37 [ס])—this is the Torah, not (*lo*) a burnt offering and not a grain offering.

Once, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai ◆ was walking in Jerusalem and R. Yehoshua was walking after him. He saw the Temple destroyed. He said, “Woe to us that this house is destroyed, the place where they atone for the sins of Israel!”

[Rabban Yohanan] said to him, “My son, do not let this trouble you. We have an atonement that is like it—and which is it? Acts of kindness. That’s why it is said, ‘For I desire kindness, and not sacrifice’ and it says, ‘I said: the world will be built on kindness’ (Psalm 89:3 [ס]).”

### *Judaism is About Love*, pp. 250

In some sense, sacrifice and acts of lovingkindness are structurally parallel: both are about giving something to God. Since, in the absence of the Temple, we can't give something to God directly, we give something to God indirectly, by giving it to God's creations.

#### **Discuss with your *havruta*:**

1. How can kindness be understood as an act of atonement?
2. How can kindness be understood as an act of sacrifice?

### **III. RESPONDING WITH PROTEST**

As we mentioned at the beginning of this session, in the face of tragic loss, we are not meant to meekly accept it but to hold sacred indignation and even cry out in protest to God. But even beyond that, R. Held argues that anger and protest can in fact be a reflection of our love for others and the world.

A story from King David's life illustrates how God shows love for David by condemning his actions. In 2 Samuel, the prophet Nathan tells David a parable to rebuke him for killing Uriah and taking Uriah's wife Batsheva for himself.

#### **SOURCE #3** ס

##### **שמואל ב יב:א-ז**

וַיִּשְׁלַח ה' אֶת נָתָן אֶל דָּוִד וַיֵּבֹא אֵלָיו  
וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ שְׁנֵי אַנְשִׁים הָיוּ בְּעִיר אַחַת  
אֶחָד עָשִׂיר וְאֶחָד רֹאשׁ: <sup>2</sup>לְעָשִׂיר הָיָה  
צֹאן וּבָקָר הַרְבֵּה מְאֹד: <sup>3</sup>וְלָרֶשׁ אֵין  
כָּל כִּי אִם כְּבִשָּׂה אַחַת קִטְנָה אֲשֶׁר  
קָנָה וַיְחַיֶּה וַתִּגְדֵּל עִמּוֹ וְעַם בְּנָיו יֹחֲדוּ  
מִפֶּתוֹ תֹּאכַל וּמִכֶּסֶׁת תִּשְׁתֶּה וּבְחִיקוֹ  
תִּשָּׁכַב וַתְּהִי לוֹ כְּבֵת: <sup>4</sup>וַיֵּבֹא הַלֵּךְ  
לְאִישׁ הָעָשִׂיר וַיִּחְמַל לְקַחַת מִצֹּאֲנוֹ  
וּמִבָּקָרוֹ לַעֲשׂוֹת לְאִתָּם הֶבֶא לוֹ וַיִּקַּח  
אֶת כְּבִשַּׁת הָאִישׁ הָרֹאשׁ וַיַּעֲשֶׂה  
לְאִישׁ הֶבֶא אֵלָיו:

##### **2 Samuel 12:1-7**

<sup>1</sup>God sent Nathan to David. He came to him and said, "There were two men in the same city, one rich and one poor. <sup>2</sup>The rich man had very large flocks and herds, <sup>3</sup>but the poor man had only one little ewe lamb that he had bought. He tended it and it grew up together with him and his children: it used to share his morsel of bread, drink from his cup, and nestle in his bosom; it was like a daughter to him. <sup>4</sup>One day, a traveler came to the rich man, but he was loath to take anything from his own flocks or herds to prepare a meal for the guest who had come to him; so he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him."

♦ **victimizer**

See Antti Kauppinen, "Valuing Anger," in Myisha Cherry and Owen Flanagan (eds.), *The Moral Psychology of Anger* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), p. 37.

<p>וַיִּחַר אֶף דָּוִד בְּאִישׁ מְאֹד וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל נָתָן חִי ה' בִּי בֶן מִוֶּתֶת הָאִישׁ הָעֹשֶׂה זֹאת: <sup>6</sup>וְנָתַת הַכֶּבֶשֶׂה יְשָׁלֵם אַרְבַּעַתַּיִם עֶקֶב אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה אֶת הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה וְעַל אֲשֶׁר לֹא חָמַל:</p> <p><sup>7</sup>וַיֹּאמֶר נָתָן אֶל דָּוִד אֵתָּה הָאִישׁ</p>	<p><sup>5</sup>David flew into a rage against the man, and said to Nathan, "I swear to God, the man who did this deserves to die! <sup>6</sup>He shall pay for the lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and showed no pity."</p> <p><sup>7</sup>And Nathan said to David, "That man is you!"</p>
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**Discuss with your *havruta*:**

1. Before discussing what it comes to teach, how do you understand the parable Nathan tells David? Who is the rich man? The poor man? The lamb? (Note that scholars continue to debate these complicated questions, and there is unlikely to be one true answer!)
2. How does Nathan know that this story will anger David?
3. David himself was brought up as a shepherd. What is the significance of this fact in the parable?
4. What is the main point of Nathan's story, and why do you think God addresses David in this way?

***Judaism is About Love*, pp. 72, 73-74**

When we respect other people, when we take them seriously, we believe they ought to be accountable for their actions. ... Sometimes we get angry at people precisely because we respect them; our anger is in fact a manifestation of our respect.

But it's not just respect for the culprit that requires us to get angry; it's first and foremost respect for the victim. "When we value someone as a person, we see him or her as **commanding** respect." This means not only that we are obligated to treat the person with respect, but that we expect others to do so as well. Truly valuing people in this way "entails resentment or indignation when they are abused." In other words, respect for the victim requires us to become angry at the victimizer. ♦ ...



A life animated by faith and love requires us to respond to the sufferings of the oppressed but also to work to bring an end to their oppression. (Compassion is sometimes unavoidably political.) This means that while love can and must express itself as kindness, and compassion, and generosity, there are also times when it can and must manifest itself in indignation and protest.

### **Take a Step Back**

1. How do you think the rabbinic responses to loss and devastation—mourning, sacred indignation, kindness, and love—might shape the ways we confront tragedy in our own lives and communities?
2. Why do you think acts of kindness are so central to the rabbinic vision of rebuilding after loss, especially in the absence of the Temple?
3. How can sacred indignation and protest be expressions of love for others, the world, and even God?
4. What might result from choosing love in the wake of profound suffering?