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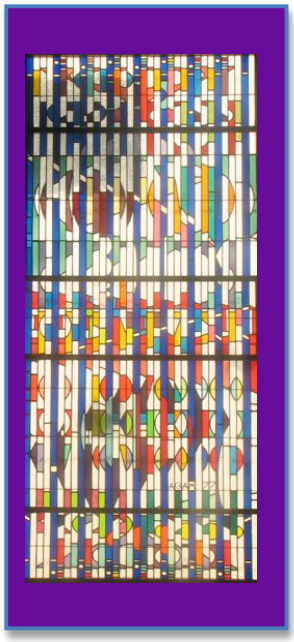

So Many Questions

Volume V Number 2

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Introduction to Volume V Number 2

Preparing for our seders children are rehearsing their four questions, the starting point of the evening. Questioning is one of the first elements of Jewish life we experience. The littlest child learns to question and becomes the focus of the entire family by questioning. As the seder progresses the account of the four sons challenges us to examine the nature of our questions – what is their source, what are their consequences?

This Spring issue of *To Learn and To Teach* reflects the seriousness with which our diverse congregants address questions. In his far-reaching and penetrating interview philosopher Arnold Davidson demonstrates how central the role of questioning is in his life and work, in Judaism and in philosophy. His wife, Diane Brentari, from her perspective as a linguist, asks what the story of Babel teaches about language and communication. We are blessed to have such scholars bring their insights to our community.

This Congregation is a place where important questions are addressed by people from within and without the academic world, learning together. So we include in this issue Nick Cheney's bar mitzvah talk, challenging himself to make sense of traditions that seem odd, to find his place in a system apparently remote from modern life. And we include SVARA student Jamie Weisbach's devar Torah, which raises one of the most heart-rending questions of all.

We celebrate the blessing of Jewish questioning, which connects generations and enriches the world, enlivens our seders and characterizes our Congregation.

Past and current editions of this publication are online at http://www.rodfei.org/To_Learn_and_To_Teach

The Questions Never End
An Interview with Arnold Davidson

by **Shirley Holbrook**

Arnold I. Davidson is the Robert O. Anderson Distinguished Service Professor in the Department of Philosophy, the Department of Comparative Literature, the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures, the Committee on the Conceptual and Historical Studies of Science, and the Divinity School at the University of Chicago. He has most recently been a visiting professor at the University Ca'Foscari of Venice and publishes in French and Italian as well as in English.

Among his many writings are works on Michel Foucault, Emmanuel Lévinas, Sigmund Freud, and jazz; and he has taught topics in the philosophy of Judaism and the philosophy of religion. He and his wife Diane Brentari have been at Rodfei Zedek for several years.

Davidson was primarily self-taught, beginning when a childhood injury confined him mostly to home and reading. After ten weeks at Georgetown University as a college freshman, his status was changed to graduate student, and he went on to complete a doctorate at Harvard University.

As for his Jewish background, Davidson grew up going to a Conservative synagogue and came into contact with the Tanach but did not study Talmud until later. When he began to look up Talmudic passages he "felt an almost magnetic attraction; becoming more and more interested and more and more convinced that the Talmud is a great, even essential, book." Here, too, he is self-taught, but consults Talmudic scholars, including his brother, a prominent Orthodox rabbi in Israel.

One of the things that has characterized his career is that he never knows what he's going to get interested in and thus can't really plan very well in advance. His description of his approach is "When it hits me, it hits me hard. So the only reaction I can have is to try to throw myself into it, knowing that, even throwing myself into it, I will never catch up to what I might have known had I started 25 years ago."

SH May we begin with what first drew you to philosophy.

AD Philosophy had a kind of liberating expansiveness. I could really think about anything I wanted to think about... philosophy of science, if I was interested in science, philosophy of art, if I was interested in literature and art, the philosophy of religion if I was interested in religion. I ended up doing my Ph.D. at Harvard University at a time during which it was one of the great philosophy departments in the world, and at the same time pursuing, in my so-called free time, an independent life I had developed which was connected to philosophy in Europe.

So that when I was nineteen I was invited to an international conference to give a talk – they didn't know that I was nineteen – I wrote my proposal on Georgetown University stationery – and I met the philosopher Michel Foucault, who I later became friends with and who had a great impact on me. There's often a division between, for example, French philosophy and Anglo-American philosophy – analytic philosophy versus continental philosophy... I've always found that kind of division odd. For me philosophy is not divided into geographical areas, nor even, for that matter, into mutually exclusive methods. What attracted me to both was that you could see things in one perspective that you couldn't see in the other perspective. I wanted to be put in a position where pressure was put on what I learned in the United States by my French interests and pressure was put on my French interests by what I learned in the United States.... people often had a very difficult time classifying me, and that always made me very happy. People would say, "We don't know what Davidson's interested in. There are just too many things; it's incoherent." And I would say, "Davidson doesn't know what he's interested in."

SH It seems as though you can study anything and everything in philosophy. What makes it philosophy as opposed to some other subject?

AD Philosophy is a discipline that shows many of its virtues in the questions that it asks. Eli Wiesel was asked why he decided to go to the Sorbonne to study philosophy. And he said, "I came to philosophy because of the questions." And there was a pause. "And I left philosophy because of the answers." And for me it's the kinds of questions that are asked that enliven philosophy, and make it valuable. And the fact that they can be asked with so many different kinds of texts and at so many levels is what allows them to express a certain kind of attitude, one that you don't find if you're reading a novel from a nonphilosophical point of view or if you're looking at a piece of art from a nonphilosophical point of view or if you're reading Exodus from a non-philosophical point of view.

One of the things that brings together a certain kind of Judaism with a certain kind of philosophy is questions. The questions never end; and the answers, even when you're convinced of them temporarily, lose their force at a certain point; and the questions come back again. And that perpetual questioning, which I find to be so important to the way I think about philosophy, is I think part of a certain tradition in Judaism as well.

SH It sounds as though, no matter what field a person is in, they should do some of this to understand their own field?

AD I think so. You can find people who are trained as scientists, who are trained as artists, who are trained as scholars in other academic areas who inevitably, even if quietly, ask philosophical questions. And I think that those kinds of philosophical questions, the traditional philosophical questions – What is "the good"?, just to pick a nonrandom example – are questions not only motivated by academic debates, but motivated by the kind of questions we all ask ourselves. It is of great importance to me that nonacademics ask those questions, worry about those questions, think about those questions. It's precisely those kinds of questions that show how philosophy permeates, not only other academic disciplines, but everyday life. And bringing the way in which philosophy permeates everyday life into explicit self-consciousness is for me one of the goals of philosophy—to show people both that they're already thinking philosophically even if they don't recognize it as such and to make that thought more explicit, more systematic, more acute.

Bringing the way in which philosophy permeates everyday life into explicit self-consciousness is for me one of the goals of philosophy.

Philosophy has become an academic discipline and tends to develop its own jargon, not easily accessible from the outside. What's interesting is that philosophy used to be written in a way that didn't exclusively take the form of systematic academic treatises. When one thinks of Plato's dialogues, the interaction between two people asking questions, provoking each other, trying to give answers, re-asking the questions, requires a certain kind of accessibility. Plato's dialogues can be very difficult, but they don't have a certain form of obscurity. There's a wonderful essay by Primo Levi called "Of Obscure Writing," in which he attacks obscure writing and says that it's often the case that when someone reads a text that's obscure, and that they don't understand, they think of themselves as being in some way incompetent. Rather, if someone finds your work obscure, you, as the writer, should feel shame.

SH I was thinking of the Talmud.

AD I pick up a Talmudic tractate and think to myself, "What is going on here?" Since just as I take it for granted that if I don't understand Plato, it's my problem – Plato was much more intelligent than I am – if I read a Talmudic tractate and don't understand what's going on, it's my problem. So I try to figure out a way to enter into the form of thought that one finds there and try to understand what's going on so that I can, myself, raise certain kinds of questions.

It seems to me a great loss that the Talmud, at least for many Jews, is a kind of text over there, on the side. Okay, the Hebrew Bible one has to deal with, but the Talmud – that's long. it's difficult, there are translation problems, and so on. And I think it's a real missed opportunity. The Talmud – just as Plato ought to be read by non-philosophers – ought to be read by people who are not specialists. And indeed the Talmud ought to be read by non-Jews. I think part of the problem with the Jewish tradition is that it eventually ceded the Talmud to specialists. When philosophy

is the province only of philosophers it loses something. When the Talmud is the province only of traditional Talmudic scholars, it loses something.

There's a great tradition of arguing whether, given the inexhaustibility of the Tanach and Talmud, one should even study philosophy. I think there's a good argument for saying "yes," even for a traditional Jew.

SH Does Maimonides belong in this subject?

AD Maimonides is, I think, an extraordinary example because it's hard to find many thinkers in the history of Judaism as well-versed in Talmud and halakhah as philosophy. And indeed there's a long history of trying to figure out what the relationship is between Maimonides' philosophical works, especially *The Guide*, and *The Mishna Torah*, which is a halakhic work. There are many Talmudic scholars, especially those who are trained traditionally, who just don't ask philosophical questions or are even sometimes told in yeshiva not to read *The Guide*; *The Mishna Torah* is all that you need. And there are many philosophers, even philosophers who are Jewish in a halakhic sense of being Jewish, who wouldn't know what to do with a Talmudic text if it was opened in front of them.

The tradition of Maimonides is carried on, I feel, by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, deeply implanted in a certain tradition of Judaism while at the same time wanting to bring to the reading of those traditional texts a philosophical perspective. That is why I'm so interested in his work. There's a kind of back-and-forth between the Talmudic perspective and the philosophical perspective. It makes you read Talmud differently, quite differently than a traditional Talmudic scholar does; but in my view it adds something.

I became more and more interested and more and more convinced that the Talmud is a uniquely important book, quite independently of what one's theological beliefs are, even independently of what one's practices are, and that it ought to be studied. There are sometimes things that don't seem philosophical, but they can be made into philosophical questions. I was recently thinking about the fact that for an Orthodox Jew the most frequent words uttered are "baruch atah Hashem." Every blessing, over a hundred a day, proclaim “blessed are you Hashem”. Are we really blessing God? Does God need our blessing? And if not, why do we say "baruch atah?" And there's a Talmudic discussion about this problem that is extremely interesting. In fact, there's more than one opinion about how to interpret "baruch atah."

The very raising of this question – are we really blessing God — inevitably leads to a set of philosophical considerations. The Talmud responds to it, from within its own resources, but the answer is also philosophical. For example, one traditional answer is that by "baruch atah" we're referring to God as the source of all blessings, “You who are the source of all blessings”, which is very different than if we think we're blessing God. Well, all of this now raises questions that are distinctive, questions of philosophical theology, about the nature of God, about the relationship between human beings and God — does God need our blessings?

There are times when God does ask for something for Himself. One of the most intriguing passages for me in the Talmud is in Berachot 7a, where it says that God prays. What does that mean, that God prays? And moreover, it explains the content of God's prayer, what God prays for. I think that this is a source of profound philosophical investigation about both the nature of God and how we're to think of prayer. Since God prays, clearly prayer can't be only supplication, what is he asking for – better, to whom is he asking? Perhaps prayer involves something else as well. God's prayer has to do with God's own self-transformation. Since a lot of Judaism is based on the precept of the imitation of God, maybe our prayer is also a form of self-transformation.

I've given seminars with graduate students who have come from a yeshiva background, who have spent five, six years studying Talmud. And I never think I'm going to know more than they do. I didn't study at a yeshiva for a decade. But I try to get them to ask questions that they wouldn't have asked in yeshiva. And that's where philosophy and Talmud come together. When I teach a passage from Talmud, I try to look at everything I can that's been written about it so that I will know what the traditional understanding looks like. And then I try to find the places where questions aren't asked and can be asked from a philosophical perspective.

Not asking a question is difficult because the tradition is so committed to asking questions.

You asked earlier whether my idea of philosophy has changed over time. There's one aspect that I wanted to mention that actually has to do with my interest in halakhic Judaism. A couple of decades ago I got interested in the work of the French historian of philosophy Pierre Hadot, one of the greatest scholars of ancient philosophy of our time, but also known for a more general claim, that in the ancient world philosophy was not just a theoretical discipline, but also a way of life. One could be classified as a philosopher even if one didn't write anything. If one lived as a Stoic, one could be classified as a Stoic philosopher. Eventually, the philosophical significance of how one lived became much more marginal; and as philosophy started to develop as an academic discipline and as it came to be thought of as conceptual argumentation, this idea of philosophy as a way of life receded into the background.

I had the idea, not knowing exactly what I was going to do, to teach a graduate course in which I looked at this notion of a way of life in three very different contexts: Pierre Hadot's commentary on the Stoic philosopher Epictetus's *Manual*, in which the idea of philosophy as a way of life is so central; Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik's *Halakhic Man*, in which, again, a certain way of living – the source not being Stoic philosophy but the halakhah – is crucial to what it means to be a Jew; and then the third example, the writings and biographies of St. Francis of Assisi, who's much better known for his way of life than for his theological writings, which are very, very few. As I was working on these topics I realized that the halakhic dimension of Judaism, which of course is enormously intellectually complex, could also be thought of as a way of re-articulating the idea of religion as a way of life, not just as a set of beliefs. The relationship between beliefs and

practices is extremely complicated in the history of Judaism, but I wanted to think about Judaism as a set of practices, and the way of life con-veyed by these practices, and the obvious place to look is halakhic argu-ments and debates.

Of course, that inevitably raises the question about the relationship between Orthodox Judaism and other denominations of Judaism – for me, an ongoing question. Many of the philosophers I'm most recently interested in are in the mainstream of modern Orthodoxy. I'm a member of a Con-servative synagogue; I'm not an Orthodox, fully halakhically observant Jew; so what does that mean? I find enormous value in

certain Orthodox philosophers, quite independently of whether I put into practice the details that are being discussed. I am committed to looking at two different kinds of sources. At one point in my life it would have been enough just to give the philosophical arguments — for example, the ethical and political arguments — and sometimes that is enough. But I also want there to be a more internal argument. I believe, for instance, that there are Talmudic arguments that can be used against certain forms of gender inequality that are present in some of the practices of traditional Judaism. One of the main things I'm interested in doing is articulating the problem, giving the philosophical argument, giving the halakhic argument, and then making them confront one another.

I love the fact that the two rabbis I've known at Rodfei Zedek, having been a member for a very short time, Larry Edwards and David Minkus, are committed to the intellectual virtues and the ethical virtues, as well as to what I might call the existential virtues — the way one lives one's everyday existence — of Judaism. And they don't dismiss one dimension for the other dimensions. They make the different virtues into an issue. There are moments in which Rabbi Minkus will give out a set of questions; I love listening to what people have to say in response. Whether I agree or disagree, the fact that they're provoked to engage and say something is for me an enormous value. I remember a discussion about the *akeida* when a teenage woman was called on. "Well," she said, roughly speaking, "It's a good thing Abraham didn't kill Isaac because Judaism would have been over." An absolutely profound philosophical remark, which, whether one agrees or disagrees with it, allows one to begin to ask a whole series of questions.

It seems to me that it's crucial to the Jewish tradition that people want to say things like that, they want to ask questions, they care about this in a way which is encouraged, that critique, protest, questioning, perplexity, uncertainty, self-examination — intellectual, ethical, and existential virtues — are built into the texts of our tradition. And all of this is not just a question for scholars. I'm not denying the significant role of scholarship; I value scholarship and I don't want it to be denigrated. But I want the questions to stay alive, and they stay alive when, let's call them, ordinary people, not only scholars, feel compelled to ask them. When they do that, they are apprentice philosophers, at least for me. That's the soul of philosophy. Philosophy may begin in wonder, but it certainly continues in questioning. Judaism may begin in faith, but it certainly continues in questioning.

And that's, from my perspective, one of the great attitudes that conjoins philosophy and Judaism. Don't make Judaism too easy, because if you make it too easy you've missed something. It seems to me a great virtue of the Jewish tradition that it's really opposed to making everything easy. I used to make a joke in some of my seminars that the hardest thing for a Jew was to know when *not* to ask a question. When do you stop asking questions? Not to ask a question is often a vice. Had Abraham not argued with God about Sodom and Gomorrah, something about the Jewish tradition would have been lost that is very central. But then, shortly thereafter, Abraham doesn't argue with God about Isaac; indeed he says almost nothing. What's different about those two scenes that makes it a virtue to question and protest in one case and not in the other? Not asking a question is difficult because the tradition is so committed to asking questions.

That raises for me another series of philosophical issues about when one should accept something without needing a satisfying intellectual explanation, and if that's ever the case. This is one of the moments at which certain forms of philosophy and certain forms of religion can come into conflict with one another. So what is going on here, that motivates a certain way of life? And that connects with the idea of philosophy as a way of life that was so crucial to my rethinking some of these questions when I encountered the work of Pierre Hadot.

Shirley Holbrook, a founding editor of To Learn and To Teach, retired after teaching mathematics at the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools. She and her husband Richard have served on the Board and children Daniel and Nina grew up at Rodfei Zedek. Shirley is a past president of the Congregation.

The Two Sides of Language (Noach)

***by* Diane Brentari**

The talk printed here represents another installment of This American Shabbat. Created by Rabbi David Minkus in his first year at Rodfei Zedek, the concept grew from the NPR program, This American Life. Diane Brentari studied with Lorenzo Davis and Steven Loevy. The three spoke during services on Nov. 5, 2016.

The Tower of Babel is one of the few places in the Torah where the idea of language takes center stage, which interests me a great deal as a professor of linguistics. In fact, I would suggest that, just as many major themes in the Tanakh are introduced in Bereishit, the notion of language in the story of the Jewish people may be given its shape as a major biblical theme, at least in part, in parasha Noach. My remarks first of all focus on the origin and use of the two Hebrew roots for *language* in this Torah portion: לשן (lashon), which literally means "t*ongue*" and שפה (sefah), which literally means "*lips*". The use of these two roots is not haphazard, but rather offers us a way to better understand a difference between our communicative practices with God and those we use with other people. Both לשן and שפה appear for the first time here in parasha Noach. לשן is used for i) our communication with God, which starts out being taken for granted, but which becomes increasingly formalized throughout the Torah when God talks to us; coupled with ii) the idea of communication with no mis-understanding. In contrast, שפה aligns with i) the practices of everyday communication among human beings, coupled with ii) confusion and misunderstanding. לשן is the divine and שפה is human.

לשן as the root for language is used in the first part of today's parasha prior to the Tower of Babel. לשן appears in: i) Genesis 10 (5-29) in the description of Noah's three sons and their offspring (three times, once for each son): "*by their clans within their nations, each with its own language ...*" So in Chapter 10, even as the sons establish their clans we can under-stand that, under the interpretation here, these different languages did not cause confusions or misunderstandings but rather may simply be different dialects of a common language.

But on a deeper level, לשן could represent the almost crystalline way that God has communicated with his people since Bereishit. I would suggest that לשן means that before the Tower of Babel God's manner of communicating with us was taken for granted to be unproblematic, with mutual

understanding between interlocutors. For example, when talking with Noah, God communicates his wishes and Noah simply understands. The assumption of unequivocal command didn't work so well if it ended with God wiping the earth clean of us. During the events starting at the end of Bereishit and through Noach, however, we get the sense that God is starting to re-think His mode of communicating with us, and create more formality, more distance between Him and us. From here onwards, there is a shift from easy, natural, transparent communication from God to a more codified and official way of doing so.

The use of שפה starts in Genesis 11 only during and after the Tower of Babel section of the parasha (four separate uses). We find in Genesis 11:1 "*Now the whole world had one language";* in Genesis 11:6 *The LORD said, "If as one people speaking the same language* this is how they have begun to act…" ; in Genesis 11:7 "*Come, let us go down and confuse their language so that they will not understand each other's speech"*; and finally in Genesis 11:9 "*That is why it was called Babel because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world."*

By introducing שפה we now have a different term to use when referring to language, and a split in meaning from לשן, and I would suggest that שפה refers to that non-ideal relationship between two people as speaker and hearer, where confusion and misunderstanding is fairly common. שפה is used in our parasha when language was diversified to the point of confusion among peoples.

The two roots לשן and שפה are used fairly rarely in the Torah to mean language, but despite the seemingly disparate ways in which לשן and שפה are used, one thing linguistics teaches us is to look at the word in its discursive context. These two roots are more frequently in the other two books of the Tanakh — in Nevi'im (Prophets) and Ketuvim (Writings). To take just one example, לשן and שפה are contrasted in the same way as I am suggesting here (clarity vs. confusion) in Isaiah, where לשן is used for the "breath of God" (Isaiah 11:15) and *"gathering all of the nations and tongues"* (Isaiah 66:11), while שפה is used, once again, to talk about confusion created by language, "*unintelligible speech"* (Isaiah 28:11), and "*garbled tongue*" (Isaiah 33:19). I would extend the meaning of שפה to the language used in everyday life—giving directions, asking advice, telling a story or joke, etc.—that is, all of the ways that language is used in the domain of the human.

So here is a way to reflect on these two different Hebrew roots in thinking about communication in the Torah: לשן captures the perfect, transparent, communication between God and us that we all aspire to, but which gets worked out in a more conscious and formal way starting in Noach. שפה characterizes our communication with each other, which is prone to misunderstanding and inherently imperfect.

Most interpretations of the diversification of language see it as a punishment, but as a linguist I find it really hard to see it that way. The diversification of language is one of the most beautiful means of cultural expression that we have. Every language is fascinating, each in its own way, most people have access to a native language from birth, and languages are entirely free as the air—rich and poor alike have equal access to a native language,

except in exceptional circumstances. So an alternative to a punishment interpretation would be this: We become closer to God by overcoming sin, and by analogy we become closer to our neighbor by overcoming misunderstanding. There is a view mentioned in several interpretations of the Talmud, and emphasized by Maimonides, that sin can be understood as an opportunity for improvement. Tractate Berakhot 34b of the Talmud ascribes a higher level of goodness to the penitent than to the righteous person; there is more merit in overcoming a sin than in never having sinned. Making mistakes gives us the opportunity to repair them. Perhaps this relationship can be analogized to the confusion produced at the Tower of Babel, as also being an opportunity for interpersonal clarification and eventual understanding. So sin is to personal improvement as confusion is to understanding. The confusion is reparable, just as our behavior is reparable, and by investing in the work of overcoming sin or misunder-standing, the result becomes more worthy in the eyes of God.

How do the implications of The Tower of Babel affect us each and every day? It is just a fact that when we talk, we also communicate information about who we are as individuals, perhaps as much as about the content of the message itself. Even if my interlocutor and I are talking about the same topic, my accent or word choices, among other things, identify where I come from, my gender, my age, and my social status. So even the small differences in the way we talk can also be a source of division, misunderstanding, or misjudgment unless we work hard to make it otherwise. I study the sign languages of the Deaf Communities of the world, and on occasion I've been with Deaf people when they make first impressions on typical speakers, let's say of English. Speakers can respond negatively to a person whose voice is a little off, or who has a speech impediment, or even someone who doesn't speak at all, but uses a sign language. It takes effort to suspend judgments about how creative or intelligent a person is, leave aside the person's tone of voice, their cadence, their manner of speaking, and truly listen to what is being said—across spoken and signed languages, or even across dialects, And perhaps this is one of the ways to welcome the foreigner.

I recently heard the WECRZ podcasts and the first one had contributions by three prominent members of Rodfei Zedek, including Ed Hamburg. He expressed the view that one of the reasons we are doing so well as a synagogue is because we see the need to embrace and respect the diversity among us. He applauded the efforts that we are making to dispel confusions among ourselves as we move towards the future. I see this, too, as a positive consequence of putting the lesson of the Tower of Babel into action, and I am grateful to be part of these efforts and this wonderful community here at Rodfei. Mutual understanding is possible...

Diane Brentari is the Mary K. Werkman Professor of Linguistics and Director of the Center for Gesture, Sign & Language at the University of Chicago. After earning her Ph.D. from the University she has analyzed sign language grammars from around the world, as well as new and emerging sign languages. She and her husband Arnold Davidson have been members of Rodfei Zedek for several years.

How Can We Make Sense of Unfairness? (Ekev)

***by* Jamie Weisbach**

"Ekev" means consequence, and this parasha is all about the consequences of observing mitzvot. In the beginning of this parasha, Moses delivers a stirring promise of the great rewards that will come from following the mitzvot, and the great suffering that will result from failing to follow them. Moses makes it sound very simple: mitzvot equal reward, and transgression equals punishment.

But I think we all know that that's not really how the world works. All it takes is a simple glance around to see people who suffer after doing mitzvot, and people who live good lives despite many transgressions. To me, this parasha is profoundly troubling because it seems to promise something that is almost offensively untrue in light of the unjust suffering we see in the world.

The good news is we're not the first ones to notice this, and Moses's statements in this parasha are not Judaism's last word on the subject. In two places (Kiddushin 39b and Chullin 142a), the Talmud tells the story of how Elisha ben Abuyah, a great Rabbi, became a heretic. Here's what happened. One day, Elisha saw a man instruct his son to retrieve some nestling chicks from a tree. The boy obeyed his father, climbed the three, and then dutifully shooed away the mother bird before retrieving the chicks, thus performing two mitzvot simultaneously, kibud av v'eim, and shilach hakein, the two mitzot for which the Torah promises a long life. But on the way down, he fell out of the tree and died. How could a child die while doing the two mitzvot which were rewarded with long life? The question was too much for Elisha ben Abuyah, and he turned away from Torah and mitzvot in disgust.

I think most of us have moments like this, where we see the world the way Elisha ben Abuya saw it, and want to turn away from Torah entirely. A lot of the Rabbinic commentary on this parasha attempts to address these moments though, so I'm going to talk us through a few of them and see if they can shed any light on how we should respond to this.

I can't promise that at the end of this any of you will feel that the issue has been satisfactorily resolved – I certainly don't think it has been. But I think that these rabbinic responses offer a starting point for thinking seriously about the unfairness of the world without following the path of Elisha ben Abuya.

The first response I'm going to talk about is from Rabbi Ovadia ben Jacob Sforno, a 15th century Italian Rabbi who wrote an important commentary on the Torah. He offers the following explanation for why so many people seem to get no reward for the mitzvot they do. *We should do mitzvot purely out of love for God, and without giving any thought whatsoever to the reward that will come. Only by doing mitzvot with this mindset will we ever come to be worthy of the reward.* He quotes Antigonous Ish Socho from Pirkei Avot 1.3, and says that *we should be like servants who serve the master not on condition that they receive reward.* If you do mitzvot purely out of desire for reward, you will not merit the reward.

I'm not satisfied with this answer. While striving to be motivated by love might be a worthy goal, as an explanation for the world's unfairness, I find this deeply troubling. The implication, which Sforno doesn't spell out, is that if someone does not receive any reward for their good deeds, it is because they didn't really deserve it because they didn't do it with sufficiently pure motives – they must have done it with reward in mind and not out of pure love for G-d and mitzvot. It blames the victim for their own suffering. I don't think the world is unfair because people do mitzvot with the wrong kavana – and I don't want to tell people who suffer unfairly that they simply didn't deserve to be rewarded.

Midrash Tanhuma, a fifth century collection of midrashim on the Torah, offers a different solution. It tells the following parable: *A king acquires a plot of land and wishes to grow an orchard, so he hires a group of workers to cultivate and tend it. However, he refrains from telling them what the reward will be for each specific task, lest they see which tasks get the best pay and do only those, leaving the garden miktzata bateila umiktzata kayama – partially incomplete and partially complete.*

Similarly, the Tanchuma goes on to explain, God has left us with the task of building the world through mitzvot, but has not revealed to us the rewards for each task we undertake, lest we flock to the big, high-reward mitzvot and leave the smaller ones incomplete, thus making a world that is miktzata bateila umiktzata kayama.

There are two Rabbis who offer options for how this works – one, Rabbi Abba bar Kahana says that G-d has simply confounded reward and punishment in this world – to avoid incentivizing only the big mitzvot, there is simply no reward or punishment system operating in this world.

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai offers a different idea – there is a punishment and reward system, but it's out of scale, so huge mitzvot can get tiny rewards, and tiny mitzvot can get huge rewards. Likewise, with punishments, so that at the end of the day there's no obvious correlation between a mitzvah and its reward. As proof of this, he cites the same two mitzvot that so troubled Elisha ben Abuyya earlier, honoring your parents, and shooing away the mother bird. In the Torah, the rewards promised for them are exactly the same, despite the fact that, as Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai says, one of them is a great mitzvah among the great mitzvot, and one is a small mitzvah among the small mitzvot. Nevertheless, the same reward is promised. This teaches us not to specifically expect long life for each of them, but that it is possible for the same reward to come for huge and small mitzvot – that the

punishment and reward system is out of scale.

I'll leave you to decide which of these you like better – or if you think there's really a difference at all. In both cases, God is concerned with making sure that the world is not left lopsided, and incomplete due to our natural desire to seek reward.

I think there are two big takeaways from this approach. The first is that things actually are unfair on an individual level – many people do mitzvot that go unrewarded, and it's not their fault, or due to any secret failings in their intentions. It's actually unfair. But the second takeaway is that the world needs to be this way in order to avoid an even worse outcome – a world only partially complete, and partially incomplete, left lopsided as we flock to seek the biggest rewards. What is unfair on a micro-level, each individual, is actually necessary on a macro-level, the world as a whole. By leaving the rewards for each mitzvah concealed, God hopes that we will strive to do everything we can, and take every mitzvah seriously, as one of the necessary steps in building up the world, no matter how small it seems.

Midrash Tanchuma exhorts us not to sit and weigh mitzvot, seeking only those that seem to offer us the biggest rewards and neglecting the rest. Rather, we should be like David, who at the end of his life, uttered the following prayer: "Ribono shel Olam —Master of the Universe— I am not afraid due to the big Mitzvot of the Torah, because I know that they are important. So why am I afraid? I'm afraid because of the small mitzvot, that I transgressed one of them, whether a positive commandment or a negative commandment, because it seemed small." At the end of his life, David is afraid that despite everything, he still neglected the mitzvot that seemed small in his eyes, and left his part of the world *miktzata bateila umiktzata kayama*.

Rashi translates the first words of this parashah *"v'haya eikev tishma'un"* as "if you will hear the heel", and explains that this is telling us that if we hear and follow the commandments that we usually tread with our heels – only then will G-d's covenant with us be maintained.

I hope this provides the beginning of a way to respond to the unfairness of the world in better ways than Elisha ben Abuyya. I hope it also puts us on guard against the feeling that because we are good on all the big mitzvot, we have no need to worry about the smaller things. As the Tanchuma teaches us, even small things can leave the world incomplete, if we neglect them. And I hope it helps us look at the world around us with an eye to doing the things that are being left undone, and which, in their absence, leave the world *miktzata bateila* – partially incomplete.

Jamie Weisbach joined Rodfei Zedek at age ten when his family moved to Hyde Park. He is the son of David Weisbach and Joan Neal and brother of Ilana. He studied at the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem in the summer of 2015, and graduated from Bowdoin College in 2016 with a major in English and Theater and a minor in Religion. He is currently a full-time student at SVARA here in Chicago, and has been accepted as a fellow at Hadar in New York for the 2017-2018 academic year.

How Do I Find My Place? (Va-Yetzei)

***by* Nick Cheney**

This parasha focuses on the family of Jacob, his marriages to Rachel and Leah, and the birth of his children. In the parasha Jacob meets his uncle Laban and his daughters and falls in love with the younger daughter, Rachel. When Jacob asks Laban for permission to marry Rachel, Laban agrees but with one catch: Jacob must work for Laban for seven years. Jacob agrees to this pseudo-contract. At the end of his seven years of labor, Jacob is ready for the wedding and he marries Rachel.

Or so he thinks. Jacob never saw who was under the veil during the wedding and only in the morning does he realize that he has married Leah, Laban's older older daughter. Of course Jacob still wants to marry Rachel and he agrees to work for another seven years in order to win her. However before Jacob starts his next seven years he asks Laban why he was tricked and Laban replies: "it is not the custom in our place, to marry off the younger before the elder."

It is this moment that I want to focus on. This quote is talking about traditions and custom. To me and probably to most of you that would seem to be a strange reason to offer; it seems like such an odd and even backwards way of doing things, compared to what we would do today. Tradition is often a tricky thing to handle, especially for somebody like me, a secular Jew. Customs and traditions may seem odd from the outside, particularly when one doesn't participate in them on a regular basis. They may seem alien, out of step, confusing. But while religion doesn't play a great role in my daily life, I do want to be reminded of who I am. Participating in Jewish ritual, though it is difficult for me, reminds me that I am Jewish and evokes something deep inside me.

Whether or not Laban is being straightforward in the reason that he offers to Jacob here, the response reveals much about their relationship.The rift that we see here between Jacob and Laban is one between people who are members of the same family but who are deeply suspicious of each other, and their relationship continues to be an uneasy one throughout the chapter.

I will admit that my relationship with traditional Judaism is sometimes difficult in a similar way. I have struggled to figure out what it means for me to try to integrate traditions and customs, that may at first seem very far removed from modern life, into my identity. How do I make sense of these things that seem so odd and different - how can I find my place in a system where

sometime, the answer can only be "because that's the way we do things?"

For me, the process of learning what I have had to learn for my bar mitzvah has not been an easy one; I have struggled with the work and its meaning. But in the end, I am happy to have been able to participate and take my place as a Jew in the community. It gives me a sense of fulfillment to know that I have done my duty as a Jewish person and helping to keep these traditions from dying. Because in the end, it is this collection of traditions and customs, sometimes more obviously meaningful, but sometimes strange, that is what brings us together as a community - and what keeps us together.

Nick Cheney has lived in Hyde Park since he was born. His father is a professor at the University of Chicago; his mother teaches English at Ida Crown Jewish Academy. He is currently in eight grade at the University of Chicago Lab School and is an avid reader and fencer. He has one younger brother, Louis, who is ten. Nick was thrilled to be able to have his bar mitzvah at Rodfei Zedek as he feels very close to this community.

Pumpkinflowers

Stephanie Friedman reviews Matti Friedman's account of war in Lebanon

The army was still very much the old army with old ideas about war, but the war for which Avi as bound was different and augured others to come. The world that day at the desert base was, in other words, the past. For the men selected along with Avi, and for many others, what marks the line between the past and the present, between youth and everything that has happened since, is the hill in Lebanon that we called the Pumpkin.

In *Pumpkinflowers*, Matti Friedman (no relation) tells the story of an undistinguished army outpost in a war with no name that yet comes to define his understanding of himself, his generation, his country, the Middle East, and war itself. Told in four parts, the first section relates the story of a soldier named Avi, the second of two of the Four Mothers whose activism helped bring about Israel's withdrawal from the Security Zone in Lebanon where the Pumpkin was located, the third details Friedman's own time at the Pumpkin, and the fourth follows the author back into Lebanon years later, using his dual citizenship to pose as a Canadian tourist. By intertwining national and individual narratives, the book balances the claims of the general and the particular, and the force of fact and of feeling, in order to trace the history of a time whose contours are not yet completely defined, and whose reverberations have not yet finished sounding.

By immersing himself first in another soldier's story before he embarks on exploring his own, Friedman provides a larger context for his story, that takes his book beyond the expected boundaries of memoir. *Pumpkinflowers* begins with a prologue based in the writer's point of view, but quickly shifts to focusing on another soldier entirely. Friedman's approach muddles the reader's assumptions about which "soldier's story" is being told here, and demonstrates no one individual story can stand in as a synecdoche for the country or the region's story. At the same time, he is trying to sort out some kind of narrative that makes sense of his experience, and that of the men like him:

I would rather suggest the title of a comprehensive history of these years of the Lebanon "security zone" in the 1990s, for those interested in background, and continue Avi's story uninterrupted; unfortunately, no such history has been written...Many thousands of men of Avi's generation, my generation, people whose awareness of the world blinked on around

the interval between Appetite for Destruction and Nevermind, share the sense of owing an important part of our personalities to a time and place of no concern to anyone else, and to a war that never officially happened.

In an effort to record "events" that "were important when they were going on, and left intense personal memories," but "barely any collective memory at all," Friedman moves between intensely personal accounts of individual soldiers (either the recollections of the living or the letters of the dead), and a larger historical context involving public opinion, government (in)action, and sociocultural trends. *Pumpkinflowers* is compelling for the way it weaves these public and private strands together, without simplifying complexities or rushing to easy conclusions. The history of this period is still being written, Friedman insists, and his own book partakes of that unfolding process by embracing ambiguities and open-endedness.

Ambiguity inheres in the historical period Friedman tries to unpack: as he argues, it marks the debut of a new type of warfare which defines a New Middle East other than the peaceful one people imagined was dawning at the time. The Pumpkin Incident, "the first time anybody in Israel had heard the outpost's name," illustrates the new era in which Avi and the author find themselves, one in which appearances matter as much if not more than actual events. One day in October 1994, a series of mishaps and injuries while under attack left the western side of the outpost unguarded as four Hezbollah fighters approached. The remarkable thing that happened next was not so much the attack itself -- the four fighters take advantage of the confusion to plant a flag on the outpost and retreat unscathed -- but the fact that the fighters' triumph was filmed and "broadcast across the Middle East and picked up by Israel's television stations."
Hezbollah understood that the images of an attack could be more important than the attack itself -- this seems obvious now but wasn't at the time. It was the very beginning of videotaped violence and the media war, which is a war not for territory but for "consciousness."

This "attack staged for the camera" played on the "[f]ear that we are no longer sufficiently tough [that] is one of the key chemicals in [Israel's] communal brain," and the Pumpkin Incident soon became "a sign of decay in the army and a frailty among Israel's youth" rather than "a small failure, the kind of thing that happens to garrisons whose senses are deadened by routine" (p. 34). If shifting outside perceptions about what happens at the Pumpkin matter more than internal realities, then it's hard to see how the men who serve there will ever manage to frame their personal experiences within a larger narrative, and thereby find some meaning in what they endure.

This desire to forge a larger narrative leads Friedman to tell a story which is not just his own, trying to provide a human subtext for a historical context. His intial subject, Avi, is not a model soldier. He is a misfit but not a total outcast, trying to define himself in the ways that young men -- young artists -- often do, writing out his emerging consciousness in florid third-person accounts, letters to an understanding female friend back home, and a retelling of the Akedah inspired by his father's insistence that Avi return to the front when he is home on leave. This emerging artist's conscious-

ness is what draws Friedman to tell Avi's story -- that, and the fact that his time at the Pumpkin is bookended by the Flag Incident, which causes his unit to be called up to the outpost earlier than originally planned, and another event that influenced national opinion about the soldiers in the security zone, the Helicopter Incident, in which Avi Ofner was one of 73 soldiers who died when two helicopters crashed en route to Lebanon on February 4, 1997 (shortly before Avi's tour of duty in the army was set to end). These deaths helped give momentum to the Four Mothers movement, and turn public sentiment toward withdrawal from Lebanon.

After the physical withdrawal came the mental withdrawal: with the former outposts now beyond a hostile border, demolished with explosives by the men who used to guard them before they were abandoned, Israelis who hadn't served in the security zone could put it out of their minds, and evade the uncomfortable "conclusion that it had all been an error." As Friedman puts it:

...it is easier to forget drawn-out affairs like ours than brief incidents of high drama, like a war lasting six days, just as a heart attach would stand out in the memory more than a decade of chronic pain, though the chronic pain might be more important in shaping who you are.

Friedman cannot so easily put his time at the Pumpkin behind him, however, and so he plots to realize the daydream that he and his fellow soldiers so often engaged in, that they would return to Lebanon as tourists, wandering among the cedars of the forest and eating at the riverside cafe in the village without fear. To do this, Friedman uses the Canadian citizenship that has not been his primary one since his family made *aliyah* in his early adolescence, traveling from Canada to Lebanon through London in the fall of 2002.

By returning to Lebanon as a tourist but behind the mask of his Canadian citizenship, Friedman haunts the landscape that haunts him, a ghost of his former soldier self that cannot be seen as such by anyone around him, although he constantly feels the risk of being exposed as the enemy he is. Friedman glimpses ghosts even as he raises his own family in the Galilee, the part of Israel he was supposedly defending during his time in Lebanon, and sees ripples still eddying in events that are shaping and reshaping his own country as well as the rest of the Middle East. "The Pumpkin is gone, but nothing is over," Friedman concludes when he reflects on his return to the partially ruined outpost; when he climbs the embankment to the trench, he cannot help feeling once again the anticipation of Readiness with Dawn (as the morning routine of soldiers at the outpost was poetically called), but he also recognizes that there is "nothing to be ready for. History had left this spot and moved on." Yet what history had moved on to was a "new era in which conflict surges, shifts, or fades but doesn't end, in which the most you can hope for is not peace, or the arrival of a better age, but only to remain safe as long as possible." Friedman remains haunted because the Pumpkin birthed for him, and so many others, a world of inconclusiveness, and returning to the place only underscores the fact, rather than bringing him some sense of resolution.

In the "soldier's story" that is *Pumpkinflowers*, neither Avi nor the author symbolize the Israel or the Middle East. The Pumpkin does, for everyone who was touched by its existence and the events that happened there, whether they were a soldier, a soldier's mother, a nearby villager or Hezbollah fighter, or anyone who had an opinion about the Pumpkin Incident or the Helicopter Incident, but also for everyone who has forgotten or never even knew that there was such a place at all. The Pumpkin's significance lies in its insignificance, as a hilltop that provides a vantage point, but of a view whose meaning is yet ambiguous.

Stephanie Friedman holds an MFA in writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts and an MA in English from the University of Chicago. She teaches writing and serves as Associate Director of Summer Session Programs in the Graham School at the University of Chicago. Stephanie and her family belong to Rodfei Zedek, where Stephanie chairs the Adult Education Committee.