



## **TOLMM WEEKLY NEWSLETTER for 11-11-23 CHAYEI SARAH**

### ***Ministry News***

***IF YOU HAVE A PRAYER REQUEST YOU WOULD LIKE PEOPLE ON THE LIST TO PRAY FOR YOU CAN SEND THEM TO US AT [TOLMM@ETZ-CHAYIM.ORG](mailto:TOLMM@ETZ-CHAYIM.ORG) OR BY TEXT MESSAGE TO 575 644-7706 AND I WILL SEND THEM BY EMAIL ONLY.***

Remember that you can support the work of Tree of Life Messianic Ministries with a donation made via PayPal or by check to PO Box 467, Organ, NM 88052. Your donation helps our continued outreach to inmates and the time it takes to put this Newsletter together.

**Donate**



**Tree of Life Messianic Ministries is a 501 C-3 non-profit. To donate go to [etz-chayim.org](http://etz-chayim.org) and click on the PayPal or Venmo Link.**

**Tree of Life Messianic Ministries primarily focuses on its Prison Ministry and helping form groups in the prisons. TOLMM also seeks to help Home Groups and offers a covering for Home Groups and the combined experience of leadership**

from Rabbi Philip Hammond and Rabbi Mordecai Silver. Group leaders can receive recognition as Elders under TOLMM, which will help in an advisory role. Your support is needed for the Prison Ministry due to continuing rising costs. We now have an Affiliate in Australia.

## ***HOME GROUPS, CONGREGATIONS AND PEOPLE SEEKING FELLOWSHIP..***

Shawn Warren lives in Arizona. If you know of someone who is looking for a group in that area, please let me know and I will send the information to Shawn. Elder Shawn Warren is an Elder affiliated with TOLMM and helps with one-on-one correspondence with inmates in our Prison Ministry Outreach. He also encourages people to contact us about affiliating with TOLMM through Home Groups and our help to group leaders.

Gabriel Martinez has a home group in El Paso. If interested let me know and I will send him the information. Gabriel is an Elder affiliated with TOLMM as is his Home Group, Ohr Ha'Brit Messianic Torah Assembly.

There is a new Home Group in Las Cruces. For more information email [tolmm@etz-chayim.org](mailto:tolmm@etz-chayim.org).

Michael and Gayle Michelucci are forming a new Home Group in Idaho.

Rabbi Phillip Hammond has a Zoom Bible Study and a Erev Shabbat and Shabbat Service on Zoom Friday evening and Saturday morning at 11:00am. Rabbi Hammond is in Australia and the time difference would be 5:00pm Friday Mountain Time. Rabbi Hammond is looking into starting a men's group focused in the United States. You can contact Rabbi Hammond at [Philip@etz-chayim.org](mailto:Philip@etz-chayim.org). Rabbi Hammond is now affiliated with Rabbi Mordecai Silver and his ministry, Tree of Life Messianic Ministries. Check out Rabbi Hammond at <https://www.etz-chayim.org/australia-affiliate/>.

We thank you for your support. Blessings in Messiah Yeshua, Rabbi Mordecai Silver, Ph. D., and Rabbi Philip Hammond, Ph.D. and our team

## ***General News***

TO SEARCH FOR MY BOOKS ON AMAZON ENTER “**BOOKS BY RAV MORDECAI SILVER**”. MINE ARE AVAILABLE IN PRINT FORMAT ONLY. I HAVE TWO NEW BOOKS ON AMAZON: RAV SHA’UL AND REFLECTIONS ON TORAH. TO SEE MORDECAI’S BOOKS, GO TO: [HTTPS://WWW.ETZ-CHAYIM.ORG/SHOP-OUR-STORE/PRINT-AND-KINDLE-BOOKS/](https://www.etz-chayim.org/shop-our-store/print-and-kindle-books/)

**RABBI MORDECAI HAS A NEW BOOK AVAILABLE. IT IS A SPANISH TRANSLATION OF THE TORAH IS VALID: THE COVENANT OF ISRAEL. IT’S AVAILABLE ON AMAZON.**

FOR RABBI HAMMOND’S BOOK, **HIS PERFECT GRACE**, GO TO AMAZON.COM AS WELL.

CHECK OUT RABBI MORDECAI SILVER’S 3 YEARS OF VIDEO TEACHINGS ON THE TORAH PORTIONS AND FESTIVALS ON YOUTUBE.

WE HAVE 7 PRISON AFFILIATES THROUGHOUT THE UNITED STATES.

# **MESSIANIC TEACHING ON THE WEEKLY TORAH, HAFTARAH, AND APOSTOLIC SCRIPTURE PORTIONS...**



Rabbi Mordecai Silver [tolmm@etz-chayim.org](mailto:tolmm@etz-chayim.org)

## **MESSAGE FOR 11-11-23 CHAYEI SARAH**

**Chayei Sarah – Life of Sarah**  
**Genesis 23:1-25:18**  
**1 Kings 1:1-31**  
**Matthew 1:1-17**

### **The Legacy**

**Genesis 25:7-11**

***Now these are the days of the years of Abraham's life which he lived: a hundred years, seventy years, and five years. And Abraham expired and died at a good old age, mature and content, and he was gathered to his people. His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, facing Mamre. The field that Abraham had bought from the children of Heth, there Abraham was buried, and Sarah his wife. And it was after the death of Abraham that God blessed Isaac his son, and Isaac settled near Beer-lahai-roi.***

Means "Well of the Living One seeing me"

**Genesis 24:63**

***Isaac went out to supplicate in the field towards evening...***

Supplicate: To ask humbly or earnestly by praying.

**Genesis 24:51-52**

***Here, Rebecca is before you; take her and go, and let her be a wife to your master's son as the Lord has spoken. And it was, when Abraham's servant heard their words, he prostrated himself to the the ground unto the Lord.***

**1Kings 1:24**

***Nathan said, "my lord the king, have you said, "Adonijah will reign after me and he will sit on my throne"?***

**1Kings 28-30**

***Then King David answered and said, "Summon Bath-sheba to me." She came before the king and stood before the king. The king swore and said, "As the Lord lives, Who has redeemed my life from every trouble," "I swear that as I have sworn to you by the Lord, the God of Israel, saying, 'Solomon your son will reign after me and he will sit on my throne in my place,' so shall I fulfill it this very day."***

\*reference the similarities and differences how the heir was chosen and how man tried to interfere in God's plan.

**Matthew 3:8-9**

***If you have really turned from your sins to God, produce fruit that will prove it! And don't suppose you can comfort yourselves by saying, "Avraham is our father"! For I tell you that God can raise up for Avraham sons from these stones!***

**Matthew 3:13-17**

***Then Y'shua came from the Galil to the Yarden to be immersed by Yochanan. But Yochanan tried to stop him. "You are coming to me? I ought to be immersed by you!" However, Y'shua answered him, "Let it be this way now, because we should do everything righteousness requires." Then Yochanan let him. As soon as Y'shua had been immersed, he came up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, he saw the Spirit of God coming down upon him like a dove,***

***And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; I am well pleased with him."***

**Luke 2:29-32**

***Now, Adonai, according to your word, your servant is at peace as you let him go. For I have seen with my own eyes your Yeshu'ah, Which you prepared in the presence of all people –***

***A light that will bring revelation to the Goyim and glory to your people Israel."***

"Our Rabbis teach us that tzaddikim-righteous ones are described as being 'alive' even after they pass away. Let's try to understand what this means."

Chani raised her hand. "Teacher, I'm not sure if this is a good example, but I think I understand. You see, my mother's grandmother was a very special woman. My mother says she was a real tzadeikes-righteous person. I never met her; she died before I was born. But somehow, I feel like I know her.

"My mother always talks about her. She always says - 'Bubbe used to do this,' 'Bubbe used to say that' 'Bubbe would do it this way.' In our family, we do a lot of things the way Bubbe used to do them. It's as if everything about her is still with us today."

**\*reference back to last verse in Luke and speak about tie it all together about the legacy.**

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**We include a Traditional Torah Commentary and my Messianic Commentary. The reason for this is so you can see a Messianic Perspective and a Traditional Jewish one. Remember to use discernment in approaching Traditional Jewish teachings as they do not recognize Yeshua as the Messiah. There are various ideas in traditional Jewish circles about the Messiah and even that there is no Messiah, the thinking in Reform Judaism. So, please be careful to balance the teachings.**

**We do not agree with the Jewish position on Yeshua, but Believers need to know the Jewish thinking on Yeshua and not buy into this thinking and forsake faith in our Messiah. For those who say they would never do this, we must beg to differ,**

because we have seen it over our lives as Jewish Believer's in Yeshua. We have been Believer's in Messiah Yeshua for decades. We have seen a lot and had many discussions with our fellow Jews and non-Jews who ultimately turned away from Yeshua because they steeped themselves in Jewish teachings. One does not come out of either traditional Judaism or Christianity and come into the Messianic walk, and then going back, or into, traditional Judaism. *There are many good things in Judaism but denying Yeshua as Messiah is not one of them.* Berachot (Blessings), Rabbi Mordecai Silver, Ph.D., and Rabbi Philip Hammond, Ph.D.

## **A TRADITIONAL JEWISH PARASHAH AND HAFTARAH COMMENTARY**



### **Parashat Chayei Sara:**

### **Summary Genesis/Berisheet 23:1-25:18**

***Following the death of Sara, Abraham purchases a burial plot and sends his servant to find a wife for Isaac.***

Sara dies at 127 years of age in Hebron in the land of Canaan. Abraham mourns her, then asks property owners there to grant him burial space so that he may bury his dead out of his sight. Knowing that Abraham is ennobled by God, they are willing to give Abraham the choicest land, but Abraham insists on paying for it. Only then does Abraham bury his wife in the cave of Machpelah in the land of Canaan.

Feeling old, Abraham decides to find a wife for his son Isaac. He says to his eldest servant, "Swear by God, the God of heaven and earth, that you will not take a wife from among the Canaanites, but that you shall go to my homeland and take a wife from among my kindred."

The servant says, "What if the woman will not want to follow me into this land? Shall I have your son go there?"

Abraham responds, "Take heed that you do not bring my son back there! God, Who took me from my father's house, will send an angel before you. If the woman should not want to go with you, then you will be free from this oath."

The servant swore to Abraham this oath and took 10 camels and some of his master's finest things and journeyed to the city of Nahor. He made the camels kneel down outside the city by the water well at the time of evening when the women come to draw water.

### **Feed My Camels!**

And the servant said, "Let it come to pass that the girl to whom I say, 'Please tilt your pitcher so that I may drink,' will respond with, 'Drink and I will give your camels water too.'"

The servant had hardly finished speaking when Rebecca, a descendant of Abraham's brother, came down to the well and filled her pitcher. Abraham's servant ran to meet her, saying, "Let me please sip a little water from your pitcher."

"Drink," she said. "Then I will draw water for your camels too."

As she did so, the servant kept on gazing upon her in wonderment, holding his peace to know whether God had caused his journey to prosper or not.

Only after the camels had finished drinking did the servant take a valuable ring of gold and two golden bracelets and ask, "Whose daughter are you and is there room in your father's house for us to stay overnight?"

"Yes, come stay," Rebecca said after she explained her lineage.

The servant bowed his head and prostrated himself before God, saying, "Blessed be God, the God of my master Abraham."

Rebecca then ran and told her mother what had happened by the well. Now, Rebecca had a brother, Laban, and Laban, seeing the gifts of gold on his sister, went to greet the man and invited him to come into the house.

The servant of Abraham came in and explained his mission. "I am a servant of Abraham. God has blessed my master exceedingly so that he has become great. He is rich with animals and money and servants. Sara, my master's wife, bore him a son, and to this son Abraham will give everything. He asked me to leave Canaan to find a wife from among his kinsman. Abraham told me that the God to Whom he is a servant will send an angel and help me find the proper wife for his son.

"So I came to the well and waited to see if a woman might give me water and offer my camels water too. Rebecca came immediately and graciously did so. I blessed God for sending Rebecca to me and my master. Now, tell me if you wish to deal in loving-kindness and truth with my master so that I may know what to do."



### **Permission From Father**

Laban and his father, Bethuel, said, “The matter has come forth from God. Take Rebecca and go as God has spoken.”

When the servant of Abraham heard their words, he bowed low before God and brought forth articles of gold and silver for Rebecca and delicious fruits for her family. He stayed with the family overnight. The next morning the family asked that Rebecca stay with them for a while, but Abraham’s servant said to them, “Do not delay me, since God has caused my journey to prosper.”

They then called for Rebecca and asked her if she would go with this man. “I will go,” she said. Then they sent Rebekah away with a blessing, “Become the mother of thousands of ten thousands and may your offspring seize the gate of your enemies.”

Now Isaac was meditating in the field when he saw camels coming. Rebecca took her veil and covered herself. The servant told Isaac all that had occurred. Then Isaac brought her into the tent of his mother, Sara. He married Rebecca and he loved her, and only then was Isaac comforted by the loss of his mother.

Abraham took another wife, Keturah. She bore him six sons, and those sons begot more sons, but all that Abraham had, he gave to Isaac.

To the new wife’s children, he gave them gifts and sent them away. Later, Abraham died satisfied at the age of 175. His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Makhpelah where his wife Sara was buried.

It came to pass that after Abraham died, God blessed his son Isaac. Isaac dwelt near the well of “The-Living-One-Who-Sees-Me.”

The descendants of Hagar, who bore Abraham’s son Ishmael, are listed. Ishmael had 12 princes, listed according to their tribes. Ishmael died at 137 years. His people lived near Egypt.

### **Parashat Chayei Sara Discussion Questions**

- 1. Why did Abraham want to bury Sara “out of his sight?” Why do traditional Jews still bury people in graveyards today rather than “within our sight?”**
- 2. The servant of Abraham comes up with a test at the well to find the wife for Isaac. Do you ever come up with tests for people to pass? Give an example. What do your tests reveal about yourself and about them?**
- 3. Why was it so important for Abraham to find a wife for Isaac from his kinsmen in his father’s land rather than from the land of Canaan? Is it still important to marry someone from the same tribe or religion? Why or why not?**

# Haftarah for Chayei Sara 1 Kings 1:1-31

*In David's weakest moment, his throne becomes vulnerable.*

In Parashat Lech-Lecha, God promises Abraham that he will be the father of a great nation. Abraham's hope for the future was embodied in his son Isaac, but in this week's portion, Chayei Sara, as the patriarch nears death, the prospects for a dynastic family seem dim. Isaac and his wife Rebecca have yet to even conceive a child.

Similarly, in Haftarah Chayei Sara, King David must deal with the future of his own dynasty. When the book of Kings I opens, David is ill, and the infirmity of old age is setting in: "Even though they covered him with bedclothes, he never felt warm" (Kings 1:1). His servants' idea for a cure? To find a young woman to "be his nurse [and] to lie close to him and keep him warm" (1:2). They search for a suitable candidate and find a Shunammite woman named Abishag.

Meanwhile, King David's son Adonijah makes a play for the throne, and declares himself king, backed by an army of 50 men. Adonijah was not the oldest of David's sons (Absalom was), but he was cunning. He carried out his coup with the aid of some of the priests—though, the text notes, not all of them—and offered sacrifices as a way to solidify his position. Adonijah invites three of his brothers to witness this ceremony — all except Solomon, who is kept ignorant of his ascension.

Nathan the prophet, who is listed among those who did not support Adonijah, came to Bathsheva, Solomon's mother, to warn her. "Let me give you advice that will save your life, and the life of your son Solomon," he says, instructing her to inform King David of his son's preemptive power play (1:13).

Bathsheva obeys. She approaches David while Abishag is attending to him and relates exactly what Nathan told her to say. Then she adds of her own accord: "Now, my lord king, the eyes of all Israel are upon you to tell them who shall sit on your throne when you are gone. If you do not," she concludes, "then as soon as you are lying with your ancestors, my son Solomon and I will be regarded as traitors" (1:20-21).

As soon as she finishes, Nathan comes to the king. "Could it be that the lord my king ordered this, without telling your servant who will sit on the throne after you?" he asks rhetorically (1:27).

David orders Bathsheva to return. In front of them both, he swears an oath that "Solomon would rule after me...I will carry it out this very day!" (1:30). To this, Bathsheva bows low and replies: "Let my lord king David live forever" (1:31).

Like the Torah portion, the haftarah is concerned with succession, both on a personal level and on a national one. By seizing power and attempting to take over the kingdom for his own purposes, Adonijah showed himself to be an unfit candidate to be king. Like Isaac, Solomon

received his father's birthright despite not being the oldest son. And, just like Isaac, Solomon inherited a destiny that was only beginning to take shape. Before David took his post, Israel had only had one other king. The duties of a king and the path of a young nation, still without a Temple, were still being determined.



## ***From the Desk of Rabbi Philip Hammond. Ph.D.***

Rabbi Hammond can be contacted at – [Philip@etz-chayim.org](mailto:Philip@etz-chayim.org)

### **LIFE IS WHAT IT IS??**

#### **LOOKING FOR GOOD NEWS STORIES!**

It can be a little depressing when you are addressing the more negative aspects of life rather than the more positive aspects of life. I thought to myself, “self” why not look for a good news story and write about that? Then in thinking about this I realised what is a good news story for one is the opposite for another and vice versa. This fact came home to roost in Australia this week.

There was one story out of many that divided the community. Some embraced this as a great news story and others saw it as a sad abominable story. A four-year-old child, I repeat a four year old child has who apparently identifies as transgender has actually begun the process of transition before even beginning school. It has been revealed that hundreds, yes hundreds of children are being referred to hospitals in NSW for gender dysphoria. Some of these children are reported to be as young as 3 years. It is also reported that the Education Department is totally supporting the transition of the 4-year-old and it is all attached to this program called “Safe Schools”. It is also reported that a major hospital in Melbourne has 250 children being assisted by what is called the gender dysphoria unit. Ten years ago, this same unit had only one. For the social

engineering left this has been a great news story, and the levels of excitement and support for this are very high. For those of us with a biblical world view it is another reminder how far our societies are moving away from the instructions of our Creator. How anyone can even begin to believe this is a great advancement for our communities is mindboggling.

A four-year-old child cannot make an informed decision on such a life-changing issue. Surely this borders on “child abuse”. The push for homosexual lifestyles to be accepted by all members of our communities has no boundaries. If you disagree with this agenda, you are unfairly labelled as homophobic. The propaganda machine of the homosexual lobby is in full swing, and they appear to have an attitude of “whatever it takes”. Whilst not all homosexuals have such an aggressive attitude, those that are pushing the agenda are very militant. The invasion into our education system is now at a level that could be seen as unstoppable. What is really frustrating for those who are against this onslaught is that the playing field is full of unjust weights and measures. The issue of freedom of speech in Australia has been fought around the homosexual issue and Islam. Speak against these and you can quickly find yourself in trouble with the authorities, whereas if you held the same views against Christianity or Judaism or conservative values you would be supported by these same authorities. The shift in attitudes and lifestyle foundations over the past 50 years has been enormous. On many issues there has been a 180deg turnaround. Not all these changes have been bad or negative, but any change that goes against the instructions of HaShem will bring with it darkness and sickness. The harm that is caused by drugs and alcohol alone is out of control. The hurt and pain caused by “casual relationships” is not addressed because these relationships are encouraged by many in positions of education and power. Most of the TV shows, films and social media outlets encourage these “casual relationships”. Almost every film and TV “show” has a homosexual character or characters in the story line, often with a political agenda attached. If you believed the propaganda, you would be forgiven to think any family or group without a “resident” homosexual was completely out of the ordinary.

Respect for self, and others, is disappearing at a rapid rate in our communities. Life is losing its value and when life has no value the vilest of acts are committed without conscience. We are at a time in history when the general populace is practicing what is right in their own eyes. There are no foundations, boundaries, or Godly values at the forefront of our lifestyle

choices. Unfortunately for most this is now a “good news” story instead of a “bad news” story. Make no mistake, we are reaping what we are now sowing and there is every chance it will become much worse before it becomes better. Only HaShem can bring about the changes required and until He decides enough is enough, we are left to our own deficient devices encouraging 4-year-old children to change genders.

May HaShem indeed have mercy on us all!

# ***Insights into Judaism***



## **Creationism and Evolution in Jewish Thought**

### ***Can one believe in both?***

The scientific theory of evolution seems to contradict the biblical account of Creation. While the Bible claims that God created the world in six days, culminating with the creation of humanity, the theory of evolution asserts that humanity evolved over billions of years. How do Jews approach this contradiction? Like any seeming contradiction between science and Jewish tradition, there are several options.

#### **Is It a Contradiction?**

Some Jews, including many of the ultra-Orthodox, reject evolutionary theory. They see the Bible as embodying eternal truths. Thus, some of the ultra-Orthodox are unwilling to reinterpret it in order to reconcile it with a scientific theory that, in their view, may be disproved in another hundred years. Some even go so far as to ban Jewish books on evolution.

For example, in 2005, a few prominent ultra-Orthodox rabbis banned Natan Slifkin's books on science and the Torah, which seem to support evolutionary theory (Slifkin himself is also Orthodox). Those who ban Slifkin's books see his arguments as challenging Jewish religious authority and undermining Jewish faith.

Other Jews reject the biblical account of creation because it contradicts evolutionary theory. They see the Bible as an ancient human document that cannot provide a helpful description of the world's beginnings for a person living in the twentieth century. They look to modern science to explain the origin of the world and reject religious explanations.

For example, Steven Pinker, a prominent evolutionary psychologist and Jewish atheist, rejects religious explanations of the origins of the world. He argues that the theory of natural selection best explains the origins of complex life, and no God could possibly have created a world that has so many faults in its design.

## Variety of Approaches, Even Among the Orthodox

Many Jews, however, reject the either/or approach and strive to integrate the biblical account with the findings of modern science. Some Orthodox Jewish scientists read evolutionary theory into the Bible, arguing that the Bible and modern scientific theory describe the same process using different language. Most famously, Gerald Schroeder, an Israeli physicist, uses Einstein's theory of relativity to explain how God's six 24-hour days of creation are equivalent to fifteen billion years of scientific evolution.

Other Jewish thinkers, such as Mordecai Kaplan and Yeshayahu Leibowitz, reconcile the biblical account of creation with evolutionary theory by rejecting literal understandings of the Bible in favor of metaphorical or allegorical readings. They argue that the Bible is not meant to provide an accurate scientific description of the origins of the world. Rather, it is a spiritual account of why the world came into being and what our role is in it. These thinkers follow a long tradition of Jewish commentators who view the Bible non-literally, from rabbis of the talmudic era to Maimonides.

Some kabbalists embrace aspects of evolutionary theory as a corroboration of kabbalistic understandings of the origins of the world and its development. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Israel, saw evolutionary theory as support for the kabbalistic ideas of the unity of life and the progressive unfolding of natural history.

## A New Layout of the Universe

Recent scientific developments have provided new opportunities for reconciling the biblical account of creation with scientific cosmogony. Most notably, the Big Bang theory, which has gained widespread acceptance in the scientific community today, asserts that the universe began at a particular point in time. This theory can support the biblical account of intentional creation at a particular time by God.

The hotly contested debate regarding teaching evolution vs. intelligent design in American schools has increased discussion of evolution within the American Jewish community. Some American Jews reject the term "intelligent design," seeing it as part of an attempt to bring Christianity into the public schools. Yet many Jews, even those who argue against the proponents of intelligent design, still strive to see the hand of God in the origins of the world. In the wake of these debates, Jews today continue to struggle to reconcile the traditional Jewish belief in creation with the scientific theory of evolution.





## Gifts of the Wilderness

*Why is the desert so central to the Jewish spiritual journey?*

*Author Unknown*

Several weeks ago, I experienced the delights and the challenges of being on retreat in the high desert of New Mexico. Each morning, the sun flooded my cozy straw-bale house. Afternoon winds whipped the fields of tall grass into undulating waves, scattering the few wispy clouds, and dusting every surface with a fine orange film of pine pollen. By night, a river of glittering stars flowed across the darkened sky.

For all its raw beauty and breathtaking vistas, the high desert is a harsh environment. I was warned to be on the lookout for rattlesnakes, scorpions, and black widow spiders, not to mention the legions of bloodthirsty mosquitoes that appeared at sunset. My gut rumbled and my head ached with the sudden shift from my sea level home to an altitude of 7,300 feet. In the extreme dryness my skin itched, my lips cracked and my nose, irritated by the pollen, ran constantly. To compound my physical discomforts, distresses I'd been repressing for months bubbled up as searing neck and shoulder pain, obsessive thoughts, and troubling dreams. I drank a lot of water and breathed deeply, praying that in time my body would adapt, and my mind would clear.

Being in the desert especially attuned me to the weekly Torah readings from the Book of Numbers, whose Hebrew name, *Bamidbar*, means "In the Wilderness." This Shabbat's double portion, Matot-Masei, comprises its final chapters. The entire book — and much of the Torah, in fact — unfolds in an arid desert wilderness not unlike the scrublands of northern New Mexico. For 40 years, after narrowly escaping Pharaoh's pursuing army at the Sea of Reeds, the Israelites roamed this unforgiving land, crisscrossing its hills and ravines, beset by challenges, struggling to find ways to live together and obey the dictates of a demanding, often wrathful, cloud-thundering, flame-throwing God.

Masei opens with a list of 42 spots in the wilderness where the Israelites camped along the way — 42 phases of their epic trek from slavery toward the ever-elusive promised land. Trouble and discord have plagued them every step of the way. Torah scholar Avivah Zornberg describes this wilderness as a space of “bewilderment,” “a quicksand ready to consume human bodies” where “cries and whispers and rages and laments fill the air.” Other voices in the tradition romanticize the people’s extended desert sojourn, nostalgically recalling the spiritual intimacy of those times when God’s voice would pour through Moses and the Torah, like a marriage contract, bound them and all of nature to divinity.

Why is the midbar so central to the Israelites’ mythic journey? What is it about wilderness that both fascinates and repels, excites, and terrifies? For me, midbar represents not simply a tract of wild land, but a state of mind. Unbounded, undomesticated, these trackless “deserts of the heart” are those times in my life when I don’t know which way to turn or what’s coming next, when I’ve lost my internal compass and feel at once overwhelmed, unmoored, and wrenchingly vulnerable. And yet the shattering realities of the midbar can also confer a breathtaking sense of freedom, inducing me to wriggle out of old identities like a snake shedding its skin.

A radical teaching attributed to the famous second-century mystic Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai answers the question of why God brings the people the long way around on their way out of Egypt like this: “Only to those who eat manna is it given to really study the Torah.” (Mekhilta Beshalach 1:34) Manna, the food of faith that drops from the sky to feed the Israelites during their desert wanderings, symbolizes their dependence on an invisible power for sustenance. This midrash suggests that only those who face the rigors and incalculable risks of the midbar, trusting they will be provided for, are able to receive the deeper layers of meaning buried in Torah.

During my recent retreat, my mind and body eventually settled. As I leaned into the land, offering up to it my fears, self-judgments and perceived limitations, I began to hear whispers of wise inner guidance and to feel enveloped in a protective, sheltering presence — something akin to what sages and mystics through the ages have referred to as *shekhinah*, a sense of immanent divinity woven into everything. The Hebrew word for wilderness, midbar, shares a root with the verb *l’daber*, to speak. The desert spoke to me, fed me, renewed me and softened my heart. I received its teaching as a gift, with humility and gratitude.

Returning home to the city, I faced a challenge similar to what I imagine the ancient Israelites must have faced at the end of Bamidbar as they prepared to leave behind 40 ragged and majestic years of wilderness strife and holy intimacy: How shall I weave the open spaces, the silence and the words, the struggles, triumphs and raw emotion of that desert time into the daily routines of work, home and relationships? How can I keep the whispers and visions, the gifts from the wilderness, alive in my soul?

Holding these questions, I find myself listening for the silences, the unbidden voices, and even the doubts and creative confusions that stir just beneath the surface.

**עֵבְרִי - Hebrew**

**Word (s) of the Week**

Garden / גַּן

Pronounced: GAHN

*Gan Eden* is the Hebrew term for "Garden of Eden," but *gan* can also mean "kindergarten."



**A Taste of Jewish Humor**

**A Deal with the Rabbi**

Issy and Howard were brothers disliked by the entire community. They ran a crooked business, they lied, and they cheated the poor. But they were also very, very wealthy.

When Issy died, Howard went to Rabbi Bloom and said, "I will donate one million dollars to the synagogue if at the funeral you say that my brother Issy was a mensch."

The Rabbi thought long and hard but eventually agreed.

When it came time for the funeral, the Rabbi recounted Issy's wrong doings during his eulogy at length. He then closed with the sentence "But, compared to his brother, he was a *mensch!*"



## ***This is not your Bubbie's Chicken Soup Recipes shared by Cooks and Bakers***

### **Like Babka? You'll Love This Recipe for Chocolate Kokosh Cake**

***Goopy, endless layers of chocolate pastry topped with streusel.***

If babka is the hip Jewish treat du jour, then kokosh cake is its slightly homelier cousin of yesteryear. But don't let that description turn you off, because what kokosh cake lacks in razzle-dazzle, it makes up for in the most important of ways: rich, goopy, seemingly endless layers of chocolate.

Named after the Hungarian word for cocoa, kakaó, a kokosh cake is flatter and longer than a babka and made with a yeast dough that's barely left to rise. The dough is rolled thin, spread with a chocolate filling, and then rolled up.

According to Jewish food historian Gil Marks, kokosh cake, like Polish babka, wasn't originally made with chocolate; both chocolate and cocoa were expensive ingredients in shtetl times. Instead, kokosh cake evolved from a simpler version made with poppy seeds, known as makosh (the Hungarian word for poppy seeds is màk), before becoming the primarily chocolate pastry we know it as today.

Modern versions of kokosh are often topped with streusel, an addition I'll personally never say no to. My kokosh cake also contains two secret ingredients: egg whites in the filling, which ensure its goopy interior, and a touch of espresso powder, which heightens the flavor of the chocolate.

Babka, there's a hot new cake in town — and it's coming for your crown.



## Ingredients

### For the dough:

- 1 packet active dry yeast
- ¼ cup warm water
- 4 Tbsp sugar, divided
- 3 eggs + 1 egg, whisked, for egg wash
- 16 Tbsp (2 sticks) unsalted butter, room temperature
- 1 tsp vanilla extract
- 1 tsp orange extract (optional)
- ½ tsp salt
- 4½ cups all-purpose flour

### For the filling:

- ½ cup salted butter, room temperature
- 1 cup cocoa powder
- 2¼ cups sugar
- ½ tsp sea salt
- 3 egg whites
- ½ cup corn syrup

### For the streusel:

- ¼ cup all-purpose flour
- ¼ cup granulated sugar

¼ stick butter, room-temperature

½ tsp sea salt

## Directions

1. Combine 2 Tbsp sugar, yeast, and warm water in the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with the paddle attachment. Set the mix aside for 10 minutes to proof, or until it turns bubbly.
2. Add the 3 eggs, oil, and the remaining 2 Tbsp sugar to the bowl. Mix until fully combined.
3. Switch to the dough hook, add the rest of the dough ingredients and knead on medium speed for 10 minutes, until a smooth, cohesive dough forms and begins to pull away from the sides of the mixer.
4. Shape the dough into a ball and set it to rise in an oiled bowl, covered, for no more than 30 minutes. You can add a light dusting of flour to the dough for easier handling.
5. Preheat the oven to 350°F.
6. Line a 13×9-inch baking pan with parchment paper and clip down the sides.
7. Split the ball of dough into two equal sized balls. Roll one ball at a time into large, thin rectangles. (Roughly ¼ inch thick)
8. Combine all ingredients for the filling until smooth.
9. Using an offset spatula, spread filling over half the entire rectangle. Avoid adding filling to the edges of the dough and save any extra filling for later. Slowly roll the dough on the short side of the rectangle until you have a log. Repeat for the second ball of dough.
10. Place both logs side by side into the 13×9 baking pan. Brush both logs of dough with egg wash. If you'd like a gooey, more chocolatey cake, you can fill in the gaps around the logs with the extra chocolate filling.
11. Combine the ingredients for the streusel with your hands until the mixture resembles large, sandy crumbs. Sprinkle it over the egg-washed cake.
12. Bake for 50-60 minutes until the dough is golden brown. Allow it to cool before slicing.

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