



TOLMM WEEKLY NEWSLETTER for 4-6-24 SHEMINI

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 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 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.

Elder 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 Home Group in Las Cruces. For more information email tolmm@etz-chayim.org.

Elder 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. 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 RABBI SILVER 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 6 PRISON AFFILIATES THROUGHOUT THE UNITED STATES.

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



Rabbi Mordecai Silver tolmm@etz-chayim.org

MESSAGE FOR 4-6-24 SHEMINI-EIGHTH

**Lev. 9:1-11:47
2 Sam. 6:1-7:17
Heb. 7:1-19**

Leviticus 9:1

It was on the eighth day, Moses summoned Aaron and his sons, and the elders of Israel.

The name of a Torah portion indicates its content. Thus, although this week's portion, Shemini (lit. "Eighth"), speaks of many different topics, all are somehow related to the central theme of eight.

Leviticus 9:22-23

Aaron raised his hands toward the people and blessed them; then he descended from having performed the sin offering, the burnt offering, and the peace offering. Moses and Aaron came to the Tent of Meeting, and they went out and they blessed the people--and the glory of Hashem appeared to the entire people!

2 Samuel 6:18

When David had finished bringing up the elevation offering and the peace offerings, he blessed the people with the Name of HaShem, Master of Legions

The "eighth" referred to in Shemini is the eighth day of the Sanctuary's consecration. In last week's portion we read about the first seven days of consecration, but they are not mentioned here.

The name of our portion is not "The Eighth Day" but rather "Eighth," for it alludes to a broader principle. The number eight is symbolic of a level higher than this world, denoting that which transcends creation. There are many things in the physical world that occur in "sevens"; the number seven belongs to the natural order. Spirituality, by contrast, is higher than the physical world and the number seven, and so is represented by the number eight.

The intent behind the creation of the world is that it becomes permeated with God's presence, a process that is accomplished when work to change ourselves, to put on the new things of God. The world was created for the purpose of combining the "eight" - spirituality - with the "seven" -the material world, which is another way of saying bringing Godliness into creation.

Shemini represents a higher level - the level that follows the seven days of preparation. For it was on the eighth day that the Ruach HaKodesh came down to rest on the Sanctuary - the successful fusion of spirituality (eight) with the material world (seven).

Leviticus 11:1; 44-46

Hashem spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying to them. 44: For I am HaShem your G-d--you are to sanctify yourselves and you shall become holy, for I am holy; and you shall not contaminate yourselves...45: For I am HaShem Who elevates you from the land of Egypt to be a G-d unto you; you shall be holy, for I am holy. 46: This is the law of the animal, the bird, every living creature that swarms in the water, and for every creature that teems on the ground...

The subject of kosher and non-kosher animals teaches us that every detail in the world relates to our service of God. Even the animals were created by God for the purpose of enabling us to refine the world and ourselves at

large. Accordingly, this topic is directly related to the number eight and the Torah portion of Shemini, for it expresses the concept of bringing Godliness into the physical world by following the Word of God-Y'shua.

2 Samuel 7:12-16

12: When your days are complete and you lie with your forefathers, I shall raise up after you your offspring who will issue from your loins, and I shall make his kingdom firm. 13: He shall build a Temple for My sake, and I shall make firm the throne of his kingdom forever. 14: I shall be a Father unto him and he shall be a son unto Me, so that when he sins I will chastise him with the rod of men and with afflictions of human beings. 15: But My kindness will not be removed from him as I removed it from Saul, whom I removed from before you. 16: Your dynasty and your kingdom will remain steadfast before you for all time; your throne will remain firm forever.

Hebrews 7:1; 4-7

1: This is Malki-Tzedek, king of Shalem, a cohen of G-d HaElyon, met Avraham on his way back from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him 4: Just think how great he was! Even the Patriarch Avraham gave him a tenth of the choicest spoils. 5: Now the descendants of L'vi who became cohanim have a commandment in the Torah to take a tenth of the income of the people, that is, from their own brothers, despite the fact that they too are descended from Avraham. 6: But Malki-Tzedek, even though he was not descended from L'vi, took a tenth from Avraham. Also, he blessed Avraham, the man who received G-d's promises; 7: and it is beyond all dispute that the one who blesses has higher status than the one who receives the blessing.

I recently read about a survey conducted by the American Jewish Committee. Some of the responses alarmed me, particularly when participants were asked what shaped their Jewish identity. More people responded, "the Holocaust" than "holiday celebrations," twice as many who said "Jewish study." Furthermore, more people seemed to be concerned about anti-Semitism than about the issue of Jewish continuity.

Thursday, 27 Nissan-23 April, is Yom HaShoah, a day designated by the Israeli government for recollection of the Holocaust. Our tradition has always recalled tragedies throughout our history on Tisha B'Av - the Tisha B'Av prayer book includes selections on the expulsion from Spain, the

Crusades, and the pogroms, and now 'kinos' have been written about the Holocaust as well - but today Yom HaShoah is observed by more Jews than Tisha B'Av itself, or even joyous days like Sukkot or Shavuot!

This should lead us to wonder whether we have permitted ourselves to be overcome by bitterness and painful communal memories. Have we accepted the truth that G-d loves us and remains close to us, regardless of tragic events? A failure to do so has tremendous ramifications: it should not surprise us, if the Holocaust is the primary force shaping Jewish identity, that so many of our young people would as soon not be Jewish.

Please don't think that I'm dismissing the magnitude of the Holocaust. Having personally met many survivors, I have heard amazing stories of pain and heroism. Yet I just saw a beautiful quote: "Fighting evil is a very noble activity when it must be done. But it is not our mission in life. Our job is to bring in more light."

Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner writes in a letter that the Jewish people are described as both "Am S'ridei Charev," a nation of refugees of the sword, and also as "Am M'Dushnei Oneg," a nation brimming with pleasure. We cannot allow our identity to be overwhelmed by either of the two.

Rabbi Zvi Elimelech Hertzberg devoted himself to supporting and helping orphaned survivors after the war, many of whom still attend his old synagogue and remain close to the family. One of them became the Tokea, the "shofar-blower", in the synagogue when Rav Hertzberg learned that he had blown shofar while in Auschwitz. And today? The same survivor, now over 70, teaches a class in Talmud in the synagogue. God remains close to us. We cannot allow painful history, personal or communal, to overwhelm the tremendous positive nature of being believers, of growing as believers.

Hebrews 7:17

You are a cohen FOREVER, to be compared with Malki-Tzedek.

Psalm 110:4

HaShem has sworn and will not relent, "You shall be a priest forever, because you are a king of righteousness.

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 Shmini: Summary

Leviticus 9:1-11:47

After the dedication of the Tabernacle and the ordination of the priests, two of Aaron's sons bring a strange fire before God and are consumed by fire; God then instructs Moses and Aaron regarding which animals may be eaten.

The Lord had just commanded Moses to tell Aaron and his sons about the different offerings and specific rituals to be given in the Tent of Appointed Meeting. Aaron and his sons were required to remain at the entrance of the Tent of Appointed Meeting for seven days and nights.

On the eighth day, Moses summoned Aaron and his sons and the elders of Israel. Moses told Aaron to gather specific animal and grain offerings and bring them before the Lord.

They brought the offerings to the front of the Tent of Appointed Meeting. The entire community came forward and stood before the Lord. Moses said, "This is what the Lord has commanded that you do so that the glory of God will reveal itself to you." Then Moses said to Aaron, "As the Lord commands, come forward to the altar and sacrifice your sin offering and your burnt offering. Then sacrifice the people's offering for their atonement."

Aaron sacrificed the animals, then lifted his hands toward the people and blessed them. Then Aaron and Moses went inside the Tent of Appointed Meeting. When they came out again, they blessed the people, and the glory of God revealed itself to all the people. Fire went forth from before God and consumed the burnt offering and the fat parts on the altar. And all the people saw, and shouted for joy, and fell on their faces.

Now Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu each took his fire pan, put fire into it and placed incense upon it. Then they brought before God strange fire that God had not enjoined upon them. Then fire went forth from before God and consumed them and they died before God.

Moses said to Aaron, "This is what God said, 'I will be sanctified through those who are nearest Me, thus I will be honored before the entire peoples.'" Aaron was silent.

They carried Aaron's sons from the Sanctuary to outside the camp. Moses said to Aaron, "Don't show your mourning, lest God become angry with the entire community. But know well that your brethren, the entire House of Israel, shall bewail the burning that God has kindled. Do not leave this place in the Sanctuary, for God's anointing oil is upon you."

Then God spoke to Aaron, saying, "Drink no intoxicating wine when you or your sons enter the Tent of Appointed Meeting so that you may not die. This is a law for all time throughout your generations to distinguish between the sacred and the profane, the contaminated and the pure."

The Laws of Kashrut

Then Moses told Aaron's remaining sons to make an offering to God. Afterwards, God spoke to Moses and to Aaron, telling them to state the following to the Israelite people:

These are the creatures that you may eat from among all the land animals: any animal that has true hooves, with clefts through the hoofs, and that chews the cud, you may eat. The following animals who either chew the cud or have true hooves, you shall not eat: the camel, the rabbit, the hare, and the pig. You shall not eat of their flesh nor touch their carcasses. They are unclean to you.

From the waters, seas and rivers, you may eat all creatures except what does not have fins and scales. They are an abomination to you. You shall not eat of their flesh.

And these you shall hold in abomination from among the fowl; they shall not be eaten: the eagle, the vulture, the kite, falcons and ravens of every variety, the ostrich, the sea gull, any variety of hawk and owls, the pelican, the stork, herons of every variety, the hoopoe and the bat.

All winged swarming things that go upon four legs are an abomination to you. Only those insects that have above their feet, jointed legs to leap with on the ground may you eat, such as locusts, crickets and grasshoppers of every variety. All other winged swarming things that have four legs shall be an abomination to you.

All animals that walk on paws, among those that walk on fours, are unclean for you. Also unclean are those living things that creep on the earth, such as the mole, the mouse, lizards, crocodiles, and chameleons. Whoever touches anything unclean, whether directly, by cloth or by container, they shall remain unclean until evening. Then they shall be clean.

And everything that creeps upon the earth, it is an abomination and shall not be eaten. Whatever goes upon the belly, upon four legs or many legs, all creeping things are an abomination.

You shall not make yourselves unclean by eating these things. For I the Lord am your God: you shall sanctify yourselves and be holy, for I am holy. For I, the Lord God, who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God, you shall be holy for I am holy.

Parashat Shmini Discussion Questions

- 1) Why does what we eat make a difference to God?
- 2) Do you ever think about what you are eating as unclean or clean? Why or why not?
- 3) How did you feel when God appears to kill two of Aaron's sons?
- 4) What does God mean by proclaiming, "You shall be holy for I am holy?" How is God holy? How are you holy?

Haftarah for Shmini Ezekiel 45:16-46:18

David brings the Holy Ark to Jerusalem, Samuel II 6:1-7:17

In this week's Torah portion, Nadav and Avihu bring "strange fire" to the Tabernacle as an offering. But as God never asked for this offering, they are punished with death. Similarly, in the Haftarah for Parashat Shmini we read about an event where someone tried to interfere with the Holy Ark, against God's will, and was duly punished.

As the haftarah begins, King David is gathering up his best men—30,000 of them. He is making preparations to move the Ark from the house of Abinadav, where David had been keeping it safe, to its proper resting place in Jerusalem.

The legions load the Ark onto a cart driven by Abinadav's sons, Uzah and Ahio. The 30,000 Israelites make a grand celebration as they escort the Ark, dancing and playing instruments. But the party passes

by a farm, and the oxen jostle the cart. Uzah reaches out to steady the Ark and—because of this, and despite his good intentions—he is instantly killed by God because he touched the Ark.

Somewhat understandably, this terrifies David. “How can I let the Ark of the Eternal come to me?” he asks (6:9), fearing that if the mere act of touching led to the death of Uzah, bringing it to David’s capital city might be a recipe for his own annihilation. So David leaves the Ark for three months at the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite.

After those three months, we are told that “the Eternal blessed him (Obed-Edom) and all his family” (6:12), so David decides to try bringing the Ark to Jerusalem a second time. David takes extra precautions this time. With his legion of Ark-lifters, he makes a sacrificial offering after every six steps.

A Chilly Welcome

When they reach the City of David, Mihal—one of David’s wives and the daughter of Saul, David’s predecessor as king and long-time rival—sees the parade of dancing Israelites, with King David dancing at the head. She emerges and sarcastically scolds David: “The King of Israel really honored himself today! He showed himself off before every slave-girl like an empty-headed lout!” (6:20)

David retorts that he is dancing in order to honor God—the same God who chose him, and not Saul, to be king. Meanwhile, Mihal was cursed with childlessness for her snide remarks.

Plans for the Temple

After the Ark is brought to Jerusalem, David bemoans the fact that it resides in a temporary dwelling, and not in a permanent Temple. David points out the irony to Nathan the prophet: “Look, now—I live in a cedar palace, while the Ark of the Eternal stays in a tent!” (7:2).

That night, Nathan receives a prophecy in which God praises David’s good faith but denies him permission to build the Temple. After David’s eventual death, God promises, David’s son will build the Temple and God will establish David and his line as royalty forever.



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

Rabbi Hammond can be contacted at – Philip@etz-chayim.org

Who wants to please The Father?

- ▶ Stop worrying about what the world thinks of you, worry about what YHVH thinks of you!
- ▶ Stop thinking about what the world can give you, think about what YHVH can give you!
- ▶ Stop building kingdoms that reflect the world, but rather build that which reflects YHVH!
- ▶ Stop thinking what about the loses, but think about the gains in YHVH!
- ▶ Stop putting ourselves 1st, instead put YHVH 1st and foremost!

Who wants to please The Father?

- ▶ And *when* the people complained, it displeased YHVH: and YHVH heard *it*; and his anger was kindled; and the fire of YHVH burnt among them, and consumed *them that were* in the uttermost parts of the camp. ² And the people cried unto Moses; and when Moses prayed unto YHVH, the fire was quenched. ³ And he called the name of the place Taberah: because the fire of YHVH burnt among them. ⁴ And the mixt multitude that *was* among them fell a lusting: and the children of Israel also wept again, and said, Who shall give us flesh to eat? ⁵ We remember the fish, which we did eat in Egypt freely; the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlick: ⁶ but now our soul *is* dried away: *there is* nothing at all, beside this manna, *before* our eyes. ⁷ And the manna *was* as coriander seed, and the colour thereof as the colour of bdellium. ⁸ And the people went about, and gathered *it*, and ground *it* in mills, or beat *it* in a mortar, and baked *it* in pans, and made cakes of it: and the taste of it was as the taste of fresh oil. ⁹ And when the dew fell upon the camp in the night, the manna fell upon it. ¹⁰ Then Moses heard the people weep throughout their families, every man in the door of his tent: and the anger of YHVH was kindled greatly; Moses also was displeased. Numbers 11:1-10

Who wants to please The Father?

- ▶ Read the bible with focus and intent – you will see pattern after pattern...
- ▶ One such pattern is YHVH bringing His people up and out of Egypt.
- ▶ Another sad pattern is the continued disobedience of Israel as a nation.
- ▶ Another encouraging pattern is even amongst all the disobedience and complaining is a remnant who remain loyal to YHVH.
- ▶ Great news – YHVH will remain faithful to the remnant... those who please Him through heart circumcision, even if they have been led astray by false shepherds.

Who wants to please The Father?

- ▶ **Woe be unto the pastors that destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! saith YHVH.** ²Therefore thus saith YHVH God of Israel against the pastors that feed my people; Ye have scattered my flock, and driven them away, and have not visited them: behold, I will visit upon you the evil of your doings, saith YHVH. ³And I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all countries whither I have driven them, and will bring them again to their folds; and they shall be fruitful and increase. ⁴And I will set up shepherds over them which shall feed them: and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall they be lacking, saith YHVH. ⁵Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth. ⁶In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely: and this is his name whereby he shall be called, YHVH our righteousness. Jeremiah 23:1-6

Who wants to please The Father?

- ▶ Intentionally or unintentionally many Pastors, Priests, Teachers, Leaders have led the Children of Israel astray.
- ▶ Having been brought up on a sheep farm, I know the importance of good animal husbandry – shepherding. Protecting the flock, in all areas of welfare.
- ▶ What a warning and statement: **Woe be unto the pastors that destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! saith YHVH.** This has been a problem down through the ages...
- ▶ **For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, specially they of the circumcision: ¹¹whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre's sake.** Titus 1:10-11

Who wants to please The Father?

- ▶ But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. ² And many shall follow their pernicious ways; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of. ³ And through covetousness shall they with feigned [fabricated, fictitious, artificial] words make merchandise of you: 2 Peter 2:1-3a
- ▶ Destroy and scatter... that is what false prophets, false teachers, do. Yet we must also realise that sheep will destroy and scatter themselves, even if a good shepherd is in charge.
- ▶ Yeshua is the perfect Shepherd but we see...

Who wants to please The Father?

- ▶ Many therefore of his disciples, when they had heard *this*, said, This is an hard saying; who can hear it? ⁶¹ When Yeshua knew in himself that his disciples murmured at it, he said unto them, Doth this offend you? ⁶² *What* and if ye shall see the Son of man ascend up where he was before? ⁶³ It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, *they* are spirit, and *they* are life. ⁶⁴ But there are some of you that believe not. For Yeshua knew from the beginning who they were that believed not, and who should betray him. ⁶⁵ And he said, Therefore said I unto you, that no man can come unto me, except it were given unto him of my Father. ⁶⁶ From that *time* many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him. John 6:60-66
- ▶ Not every lost sheep can be blamed onto bad shepherds. In fact most of the blame is due to decisions people make by themselves.
- ▶ Yeshua had some strong words about doing things our own way...

Jewish Practices



The Story of “Oy Vey”

Half Hebrew, half Aramaic, this classic lament is all Jewish.

Oy vey! — also: Oy vavoy! Oy vey iz mir! Oy gevalt! Or quite simply: Oy! — is an iconic Jewish expression that conveys the weariness of a people overly familiar with hardship and oppression, as well as the resilience of a people that finds hope and sometimes even humor in catastrophe. It’s both heavy and light. It’s tragic and funny. It’s so much better with a thick Yiddish accent. But where did it come from?

The word “oy” (אוי) goes back thousands of years, all the way to the Hebrew Bible. In that classical biblical mode, there is nothing funny about it — “oy” is simply an expression of anguish, and may well be etymologically related to that English word “woe.” Of all the biblical authors, the prophet Jeremiah uses it the most, a total of eight times. (Not for nothing has his name become synonymous with lament — giving us the English word “jeremiad.”)

A few examples will give a sense of the way this word was originally used. In the Bible, “oy” can be wielded as a curse or at least a poetic barb thrown at one’s enemies. For example:

Oy to you, O Moab!

You are undone, O people of Chemosh!

Numbers 21:29

Today we think of “oy” as a Jewish exclamation, but in the Bible it is used by all peoples. Another sworn Israelite enemy, the Philistines, have this to say when they realize that the Ark of the Covenant is back on the battlefield, protecting the armies of Israel:

Oy to us! Nothing like this has ever happened before.

1 Samuel 4:7

As with many onomatopoeic words, oy has variations — including in the Bible itself. Consider this line from Proverbs:

Who cries “oy!” and who “avoy!”?

Proverbs 23:29

Here, “oy” and “avoy” sound similar and clearly mean the same thing. Other variations of “oy” appear in Aramaic, a language closely related to Hebrew that was the lingua franca of Jews for many centuries in antiquity (and is also the language of the Talmud). So, for instance, the Talmud’s Aramaic version of “oy” is the word “vay” (וי) — which may well give us the “vey” in “oy vey.” As we saw from Proverbs, doubling the expression of woe was common even in biblical times.

Although “oy” seems to have been a nearly universal expression of lament, today the expression “oy vey” comes to us in English through Yiddish, where it feels very much a part of the Jewish character of that language. It is perhaps for this reason that Merriam Webster’s dictionary traces “vey” not to the Aramaic “vay” as suggested above, but to the Middle High German *wē* — which also means “woe.”

Yiddish also gives us all the resonant variations of this lament, most notably *oy vey iz mir* (“woe to me!”) and *oy gevalt* (“woe! violence!”). This last variant might seem the most disturbing, but it is usually the one used in the most comical way, employed to ruefully bemoan surprise disasters, such as: “He wore that? Oy gevalt!”

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “oy vey” entered English usage in the 19th century, when the word was more commonly spelled “oi” before the more contemporary “oy” took over in the 20th century. In English, it exists alongside similar expressions of different origin — including a Scottish “oy” that means “grandchild” and an “oy” that is a variant of “hoy” and “ahoy,” words used to call someone’s attention.

According to an analysis run through Google Books, the word “oy” has been in steady decline in English since the 1980s. Nonetheless, “oy” and “oy vey” continue to be some of the most resonant and recognizable Jewish expressions. This was on literal display with Deborah Kass’s devilishly simple bright yellow aluminum sculpture of the word. One side reads “OY” in capital letters, and the reverse side reads “YO,” the Spanish word for “I” and also an English slang term that not only mirrors the original word but is nearly opposite in tone. Kass has explained that she loves the way these two letters, read in either direction, resonate in so many languages. Funnily enough, the English slang “yo” is pretty close to that older English “ahoy” that was also sometimes shortened to “oy.”



Early Jewish Conceptions of God

Early Jewish literature was not concerned with proving God's existence or categorically defining God's nature.

Early Jewish literature was not concerned with proving God's existence or categorically defining God's nature.

In the Hebrew Bible, God plays many roles and has many personalities. God is a judge, lawgiver, liberator, creator, father, king, and shepherd. Oftentimes, God's attributes seem contradictory. God is said to be, "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love" (Exodus 34:6), but God is also a vengeful warrior. Unlike the conception of God as perfect, all-knowing, and all-powerful developed by the medieval philosophers, the God of the Bible is conflicted. As Jack Miles puts it in *God: A Biography*: "After each of His major actions, He discovers that He has not done quite what He thought He was doing or has done something He never intended to do."

The God of the Bible has real personality. God is depicted in nonphilosophical, human terms. God experiences anger and patience, jealousy and love. God is even described using physical imagery. God delivered the Israelite slaves from the Egyptians with, "a mighty hand and an outstretched arm" (Deuteronomy 26:8). In addition, the God of the Bible is accessible to humankind. God speaks through prophets and performs miracles for all to see. God's dialogue with humankind is not a one-way relationship. God listens to the complaints of humans, even when they concern God Himself. Abraham, disturbed that God wants to destroy Sodom, challenges God to reconsider, "Will You sweep away the innocent along with the guilty?...Shall not the Judge of the earth deal justly?" (Genesis 18:23,25)

Two attributes of the biblical God—God's creative capacity and God's oneness—stand out in both their centrality and their novelty. The Bible begins with the creation story, in which God orders a chaotic, cosmic mess into an orderly world in six days. The Bible does not discuss where God came from. This makes it unique in ancient Near Eastern literature, whose stories about the world's creation begin with the birth of the gods. God's role as a creator is especially significant because it is in the context of creation that humans are described as being "in the image of God." Monotheism is, arguably, the fundamental teaching and contribution of the Hebrew Bible. "Hear O Israel, the Lord is your God, the

Lord is one" (Deuteronomy 6:4), for Jews perhaps the best-known verse in the Torah, is recited in the *Shema* prayer, a central element of Jewish liturgy.

God as portrayed in rabbinic literature (the Talmud and midrash) is very similar to the God of the Bible. The Rabbis do not try to define God, and they continue to describe God in multiple, human terms. However, some differences do emerge. In rabbinic literature, God is a bit more removed from humankind. God no longer communicates with humans through prophets and is no longer considered an active religious legislator (the rabbinic sages occupy this role). In a famous talmudic dispute, a group of rabbis' rule in favor of a majority opinion that directly contradicts a heavenly voice. The passage concludes that, "the Torah is not in heaven." God, it seems, is not the final arbiter of religious law.

The conception of God in the *heikhalot* literature (a genre of mystical literature contemporaneous with the classical texts of rabbinic literature) is also worth noting. The mystics who wrote and studied *heikhalot* literature tried to achieve visions of the divine throne similar to the one described in the first chapter of the biblical book of Ezekiel. The representation of the physicality of God is striking in this form of mysticism. In the *Shiur Komah*, the most radically anthropomorphic mystical text, God's physical proportions are described in detail. For example, God is said to have a neck 130.8 million miles in length and fingers each 150.3 million miles long.

Philo of Alexandria (20 BCE-50 CE), a contemporary of the early *tannaim* (the authors of early midrashic works and of the Mishnah) was the first Jewish philosopher. He deviated from the norms of early Jewish discourse about God, integrating Greek thought with Jewish tradition and explaining God in an abstract philosophical way, quite similar to the methods eventually employed by the medieval Jewish philosophers.

עִבְרִי - Hebrew

Word (s) of the Week

Bottle / בִּקְבוּק

Pronounced: BAWK-book

Bakbuk is onomatopoeic: it sounds like liquid pouring out of a bottle.



A Taste of Jewish Humor

A Heart to Heart

Sidney was thinking about how good his wife had been to him, and how fortunate he was to have her. He asked God, "Lord, why did You make her so kind hearted?"

God responded, "So you could love her, my son."

"Why did You make her so attractive?"

"So you could love her, my son."

"Why did You make her such a good cook?"

"So you could love her, my son."

Sidney thought about this. Then he asked, "I don't mean to sound ungrateful or anything but...why did You make her so unintelligent?"

"So she could love you, my son."

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