

"I Will Not Let You Go Unless You Bless Me": A Curriculum Guide in Wrestling with Morally and Theologically Troubling Texts in Torah

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¹ <https://arthistoryproject.com/artists/gustave-dore/jacob-wrestling-with-the-angel/>

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Rationale

וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁלַחֲנִי כִּי עֹלָה הַשָּׁחַר וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא אֶשְׁלַחְךָ כִּי אִם-בְּרֹכָתִי:
וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו מִה-שָּׂמָךְ וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב:
וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יַעֲקֹב יֵאמָר עוֹד שְׂמֶךְ כִּי אִם-יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי-שָׁרִיתָ עִם-אֱלֹהִים וְעִם-אֲנָשִׁים וַתִּוָּכַל:

Then he said, "Let me go, for dawn is breaking." But he answered, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."

Said the other, "What is your name?" He replied, "Jacob."

Said he, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but **Israel**, for you have **wrestled** with beings **divine** and human, and have prevailed." (Genesis 32:27-29)

In chapter 32 of Genesis, Jacob comes upon an *eesh* (איש) in the middle of the night. They wrestle until dawn and when this mysterious being tries to escape him, Jacob says "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." As a result, he receives blessing in the form of a new name—*Yisrael* (ישראל) or "one who wrestles with God." As the descendants of this tradition or *b'nei Yisrael* (בני ישראל), we are called upon to continue that struggle. Just as Jacob wrestled with an unknown being and demanded blessing out of his struggle to achieve his namesake, so too can we demand blessing from wrestling with our sacred texts that are morally and theologically troubling (see definition in key terms) to us. Learners of this course will have the opportunity to do a deep dive into texts from Torah that do just this.

Wrestling with these texts is one way of being in relationship with Torah and has the potential to teach us something about the text and our own worldviews. One way of thinking about this is that we are creating blessings for ourselves by wrestling with text that might be difficult to hold as sacred. However, using the interpretive process of Torah as a tool to understand the text is a way of making a blessing out of something that might not at first appear to be a blessing. Although we may not always agree with the text, there is something to be learned about the text itself and about ourselves as learners. Like Jacob, we will have to wrestle with something that challenges us to see the blessing contained within it. That blessing might not always be apparent from first glance but will require diving deeply into the text.

This curriculum guide is intended for use in a supplementary school setting for 10th-12th grade learners. At this stage of adolescence, the brain is seeking to push boundaries. Therefore, learners of this age need to be given space to be creators of their own ideas and they need to be able to push back against widely held ideas (Siegel, 2015). By giving them Torah as an interpretive process, they can better learn about themselves and the world around them. The depth of learning that is required of learners in this curriculum is also appropriate and compelling for this set of learners. They are not expected to glance at a text and be done with it, but rather they must fully engage with it and push back on it to deeply understand it. According to the 2016 *Generation Now* report, "teens appreciate Jewish knowledge and find it meaningful when it is relevant to their current life or they at least can envision utilizing that knowledge in the future" (Bryfman, p. 23). It is clear from these findings that if Torah can be discussed in ways that frame issues that matter to adolescent learners, then the text can come alive for them, and they will be more likely to have stake in the learning. Furthermore, given that many Jewish supplementary school settings cover Torah as content early on in their

programs (often in elementary school), this curriculum guide serves as a chance to deepen that understanding at an age that is developmentally better equipped to question some of the ideas in Torah and commentary. Because Torah is a fundamental text to Jewish tradition, it is also an entry point into having a deeper relationship to one's Jewish identity. At an age when these learners are "furnish[ing] the upstairs brain," (Siegel & Bryson, 2011, p. 39) and figuring who they are as independent beings, it is important to give them opportunities to question and push boundaries around their identity in safe and meaningful ways. According to the 2019 *GenZ Now* Report, one of the targeted outcomes of Jewish teen programming should include "develop[ing] the capacity (skills and language) that allows them to grapple with and express their spiritual journeys" (Bryfman, 2019, p. 4). Deep study of Torah that requires wrestling with difficult topics is one way that this outcome can be achieved.

Given the sensitive nature of some of the topics that are covered in this curriculum guide, it will be important for the teacher to work towards creating a safe space for learners to have civil discourse and it will require the teacher to be patient with learners as they wrestle with topics that are difficult for learners of any age. Lusk and Weinberg (1994) emphasize the importance of setting up classrooms properly to foster open conversation during difficult conversations. Adolescents need to feel like they can speak openly without ostracizing themselves from their peer group, as this is an important source of one's sense of self at this age. Furthermore, it will be important for the teacher to establish themselves as a "safe adult" (Siegel). During this stage of life, adolescents are usually differentiating themselves from their primary caregivers but still need adult influence, which makes the role of their teachers even more important. By giving learners the tools to have respectful discourse and room to push back on the text the teacher should be able to set up that necessary space for honest conversation amongst learners.

So much of adolescence is frustrating, but it also contains so much learning and growth. The same goes for the work of wrestling with Torah. Although it is difficult to always see the beauty or goodness of the wrestling, there is something to be gained from it, and through being reflective in our Torah learning, we can express that learning through blessing. Learners will learn not only about text, but also about themselves and hopefully be changed because of that learning. The Torah learning in this curriculum is certainly not exhaustive, but rather it is an entry point into the world of challenging and hoping to understand our tradition and ourselves. There are plenty of entry points out there, but after doing some research on the field, it became apparent why this curriculum might be necessary to create.

Environmental Scan

Having taught for multiple years at Leo Baeck Temple (LBT), I have started to gain understanding about the way that we teach our young learners about Torah. The scope and sequence at LBT currently include an Israel curriculum in 3rd grade and which is revisited in 8th grade, should students stay beyond their b'nei mitzvah. This is a model that could be helpful to replicate for Torah. Currently LBT religious school teaches Torah in 4th grade and I see an opportunity to have high school aged learners come back to a Torah curriculum to study it more deeply.

Speaking with Brett Lubarsky from the Jewish Teen Initiative was helpful to understand the field outside of the realm of congregational life. Our conversation taught me that there is a much heavier reliance on oneself or parents to look for learning opportunities for teenagers. Furthermore, in small synagogues with part-time youth group advisors, they are likely not scouring the internet for opportunities for teenagers, which means that most of the available opportunities are not necessarily being shared with teenagers. However, teen initiatives around the country are working to remove the barriers to participation and access, which makes curricula like this one even more important to create and promote.

Youth serving organizations that provide immersive experiences like NFTY or BBYO likely have a need to for more one-off programming that begins to develop a relationship between learners and Torah text. This tells me that it would be important to create a curriculum guide that can easily be broken down into smaller portions so that more groups could use it. I spoke with Michelle Shapiro Abraham, who is the Executive Director of Strategic Innovation and Program, Camps and Immersives at the Union for Reform Judaism. She emphasized the need to create intertwined learning that allows learners to move between text and life. Thinking about the world we live in today, she explained how powerful it is to embrace nuance, and text study is one way we can do that. An important question she brought up was asking about how we can value and trust a text that troubles us, which is one I attempt to address in this curriculum guide.

In looking to programs that currently exist, I found Hebrew College's Teen Beit Midrash focused on Talmud translation and study. This is a course that requires Hebrew and Aramaic skills that will not be required of this curriculum, but it speaks to the hunger of teenagers to challenge themselves and work towards understanding something ancient on their own terms. Although there are educators and clergy teaching text or teaching social emotional learning there is not necessarily a standard teen curriculum in the congregational world, which suggests a need for a curriculum that incorporates both social-emotional learning and Torah text study.

Micol Zimmerman Burkeman's curriculum guide on teaching Genesis to teens anew aims to do something similar with Torah stories as what I hope to do with my curriculum guide, however her guide focuses only on the book of Genesis and aims to revisit stories that have been understood at the basic fairy tale level. While I hope to do this with some stories, I also aim to include new stories that have not been presented to teens before and I aim to have learners work through stories and laws through the five books of Torah. Meanwhile Rabbi Adam Lutz's curriculum guide on midrash uses a PaRDeS-like model to look at biblical text alongside midrash and structures many of the classes in a similar way to be able to dive into this study format.

Overarching Enduring Understandings and Essential Questions

Enduring Understandings (Overarching)

1. Torah is an interpretive process in which the reader can discover its meaning for themselves.
2. Wrestling with text that is morally or theologically troubling to us is a way being in relationship with Torah.
3. Being able to analyze a text through generations of interpretive responses can empower us to have a deeper understanding of the text and our own worldviews.
4. Even when it is difficult to hold a text as sacred, it still has the potential to be a source of blessing.

Essential Questions (Overarching)

1. What is required of a person to be in relationship with text?
2. Can we consider texts holy if they are morally or theologically troubling within our belief system?
3. What can we learn about ourselves from analyzing text through multiple generations of interpretive responses?
4. How can wrestling with text be a blessing?

Letter to Teacher

Dear Teacher/Educator,

This curriculum guide was inspired by a combined passion for engaging teens and studying Torah. While writing this guide, I envisioned it being designed for a supplementary school setting for 10th-12th graders; however, its modular format can be pulled apart, as it is not necessary to have each preceding text to learn about later texts in the guide. This feature allows use for shorter learning opportunities where teens might be engaged such as weekend retreats or summer camp settings.

The 3-Tiered Approach

When I describe this curriculum as modular, I mean that you would repeat the same process with each text. You do not necessarily need to cover all the texts prior to teach the next. Units 2,3, and 4 have an introductory lesson to help learners start thinking about the big idea of that unit. Three lessons are dedicated to each piece of text to allow learners to:

1. Analyze the text solely in its biblical context.
2. Analyze the text through the lens of the generations of commentary.
3. Develop their own understanding of the text.

During this third step, students will finish engaging with the text by writing their own bracha (blessing) that either describes a bracha they have received from this text or a bracha they would want to give to a first-time reader of this text. This is a way of assessing their understanding of the work they have done over three lessons to wrestle with this text. These brachot (plural of bracha) will come back into the learning during the last unit of the curriculum when learners create zines for a text from the curriculum of their choice. The choice to have students write brachot was inspired by the story of Jacob fighting the *eesh* in Genesis 32 in which he wrestled with an unknown (the Hebrew word *eesh* translates to man, but the exact meaning in this context is unclear) and asking for a bracha before he finishes wrestling with the *eesh*. I believe that students can do a similar activity with text that troubles them by trying to write a bracha as a means of demonstrating their understanding.

Scope

Although my text choices do not equally represent all five books of Torah, there is representation across all five, as I see it as important to represent the many sides of the five books. Each unit will contain three text options per unit. You can select two of the texts per unit that you think will best engage or challenge your learners.

Although I have selected three texts for each unit that cover an array of important morally and theologically troubling issues, I have not covered all possible issues or pieces of Torah text. Because of that, I would encourage educators to include other texts from Torah that are not covered in this curriculum guide or that seem particularly salient to the group of learners using the 3-tiered approach I have laid out here (Biblical text, commentaries, and personal meaning/bracha). The texts I have chosen include a range from all five books of Torah. As a teacher, you should choose two of the three texts in each unit by gauging the interests of the students. You also should consider having each of the 5 books of the Torah represented

because we often focus heavily on popular narratives in Genesis and Exodus but forget that other books of Torah can pertain to our lives and are worth attempting to understand.

Sequence

The introductory unit of the curriculum guide serves to introduce Torah as a process and demonstrate how that can be done using PaRDeS (defined below). Torah study is not just about the outcome or final interpretation a person reaches, but rather there is a great deal of learning in the process of coming to understand the text, which can be done through the study method of PaRDeS (defined below). This unit is intended to be an opportunity to think about how the class will hold the difficult conversations to come. It will be important to set up class norms during this unit so that everyone is set up for success when sensitive topics with which everyone might not agree.

The units that contain deep dives of text (units 2, 3, and 4) are sectioned and titled this way because they allow the students to think about text in terms of the relationships found in them. Relationships between people, between people and God, and between people and Commandments are all facets that can be part of Jewish living. Learners will be given a chance to consider how each of these types of relationships can be considered holy. Once they have done the work of thinking about holiness in these relationships, they will sophisticate their understandings of these relationships by considering what does not sit well with them in the text.

When you decide how to order units 2, 3 and 4, I believe that it makes the most sense from a psychological lens to start with the human relationship unit, as this is something that will feel particularly salient in the lives of these learners as adolescents who often seek to identify themselves based on their peer relationships. However, you can make the pedagogical decision to flip units 3 and 4 (troubling relationships with Commandments and troubling relationships with God) if you believe this psychological sequencing is more appropriate for your learners.

Finally, the concluding unit serves to help the learners become empowered through their own understanding of the text. By the end of this course, the students should be empowered to create a zine that both demonstrates what they have learned from the text and empowers a reader outside of the class to seek their own understanding of the text. Each will include a blessing. A zine is a “a self-published, non-commercial print-work that is typically produced in small, limited batches. Zines are created and bound in many DIY ways” and they are often “motivated by self-expression and artistic passion.” While their content varies, they maybe be written, drawn, collaged or be some combination of all of these.² This is a creative way for students to express their understanding of text and incorporate a personal blessing at the conclusion.

It will be helpful for you to understand Torah study practices such as PaRDeS to help the learners through this curriculum. Familiarity with sefaria.org will also be important to teaching this class as it is a helpful online resource that makes Torah commentary readily accessible in English and provides multiple English translations to Torah text, which will be helpful for the final assessment of the course. While an expertise in Hebrew language is helpful for deep Torah study, it is not necessary for you to be able to use this curriculum guide and it is not required

² <https://www.binderymke.com/what-is-a-zine>

that the learners have that expertise either. However, it will be helpful to have familiarity with Hebrew terms that are used throughout this curriculum guide, although many are defined. The source sheets of text included throughout this curriculum guide include both the original Hebrew and an English translation and learners will largely focus on the English translation for ease of understanding. It is also important to note that every translation is an interpretation, which is why it will be helpful to provide alternate translations when possible. There will be opportunities to do this in the concluding unit when learners pick one text to deeply understand.

The commentaries I selected span history and parts of the world. I chose the commentaries that I did because they addressed the issue I was hoping to address in the lesson. Although plenty of others are suitable, they would have created too big of a topic to discuss in one class. Furthermore, I wanted to get a variety of voices on the issue at hand. This not only helps learners see just how much opinions differ throughout history, but it also invites them to be part of the conversation today. I wanted to make sure that I included voices from different genders and while I did not include a representative sample, I would encourage you to seek out more commentaries from people of different backgrounds to include in your lessons. Some resources that are worth looking into include *Torah Queeries*, *Ammud: Jews of Color Torah Academy*, and *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*.

I recommend providing folders to each student so that they have a place to store their text materials. This way, they can take notes on their materials to reference in later classes within a 3-part series for each text and so they will have easy access to resources during the concluding unit when they are deciding which text to use for their zine.

I hope that through this curriculum both you and the learners can have fun and embrace the struggle that is Torah study. I picked these texts because there is so much to unpack in all of them. They all have potential to be relevant to our lives. Although there may be frustration in struggling with text, there can also be a great deal of joy, and I encourage you to seek that joy with your learners.

On the next page, you will find a list of key terms that will be helpful in creating a sense of shared vocabulary amongst the participants in the classroom. Many of these definitions are ones that you will expand upon and wrestle with throughout the curriculum.

Key Terms for Understanding and Using this Guide

PaRDeS-This is a Jewish text study method and a Hebrew acronym that stands for P'shat, Remez, Drash, and Sod. Through this method a learner works through each of the steps reading a text to understand it more deeply. First a person looks to understand the simple meaning (p'shat), then they start to go deeper by asking what the text is hinting at (remez), then they begin to interpret what the text is asking of the reader (drash), and finally they can attempt to look for the secret meaning hidden in the text (sod).

Commentary-This is a broad term that encompasses all kinds of responses over the course of generations to Torah text. In this curriculum, when commentary is mentioned, it is discussing the ancient and medieval responses that have often been included in different Torah publications (i.e. Plaut, Eskenazi and Weiss, etc.), but it can also include modern responses to the text and the responses that your students come up with in response to the text. Often commentary is a reader's response to something confusing or troubling in the text.

Example: Rashi is one of the most famous commentators in our tradition. He was an 11th century French Rabbi who provided commentary on the Torah and most of the Talmud. Here is a classic example of something that Rashi provided commentary on in the Torah to answer a question he was having about the text.

Genesis 1:5

"God called the light Day and called the darkness Night. And there was evening and there was morning, a first day."

Rashi's Commentary on Genesis 1:5 THE FIRST DAY (literally, one day) — According to the regular mode of expression used in this chapter it should be written here "first day", just as it is written with regard to the other days "the second", "the third", "the fourth". Why, then, does it write *אחד* "one"? Because the Holy One, blessed be He, was then the Only One (Sole Being) in His Universe, since the angels were not created until the second day. Thus, it is explained in *Genesis Rabbah* (*Genesis Rabbah* 3:8).

Through this commentary Rashi is explaining something in the grammar of the text that seemed troubling. He then used a Midrashic (defined below) source called *Genesis Rabbah* to provide proof for his answer.

Midrash-Midrash is a classic storytelling tool that stems from the ancient rabbis. Using biblical text as evidence, the rabbis would tell stories to fill in what appeared to be missing pieces in the narrative. There are canonized books of Midrash from ancient rabbis, but this is not just an ancient practice. Rather this is a practice of storytelling that modern day readers can also take part in to bring deeper understanding to a biblical text. Some midrashim (plural) are so well-known that some people think they are from the Torah text itself! Here is an example of one of the most famous midrashim (plural of midrash) that helps explain how Abraham came to be the first person to believe in one God and reject idol worship:

Bereishit Rabbah 38:13

Terah (Abram's father) was a worshipper of idols. One time he had to travel to a place, and he left Abraham in charge of his store. When a man would come in to buy [idols], Abraham would ask: How old are you? They would reply: fifty or sixty. Abraham would then respond: Woe to him who is sixty years old and worships something made today - the customer would be embarrassed, and would leave. A woman entered carrying a dish full of flour. She said to him: this is for you, offer it before them. Abraham took a club in his hands and broke all of the idols, and placed the club in the hands of the biggest idol. When his father returned, he asked: who did all of this? Abraham replied: I can't hide it from you - a woman came carrying a dish of flour and told me to offer it before them. I did, and one of them said 'I will eat it first,' and another said 'I will eat it first.' The biggest one rose, took a club, and smashed the rest of them. Terah said: what, do you think you can trick me? They don't have cognition! Abraham said: Do your ears hear what your mouth is saying?

Holiness-This is a term that you and your students will continue to uncover throughout the learning in this curriculum, but this can be framed by the idea of being separate from mundane activity and having spiritual significance. This is a state of being that can define relationships between beings and explains something that is bigger than the beings in the relationship itself.

Bracha (blessing)-There is an entire lesson dedicated to this term as there are many preconceived notions surrounding the word blessings, I will encourage you to use the Hebrew word bracha even though it is generally translated as blessing in English. A bracha can be described as at least one of several things including praise for God, a hope for someone else, a gift, and something found in "an object that is hidden [*samui*] from the eye," (BT Ta'anit 8b) there is something that is not fully understood at first glance. In Jewish tradition a classic bracha often starts with the words "Blessed are You Adonai, Ruler of the Universe who..." However, it is also possible to have a bracha directed at another person, one of the most common examples being the Priestly Benediction or the blessing over the children said by parents on Shabbat.

Troubling-This is a term that suggests there is potential for moral or theological discomfort. An idea that is troubling may range from confusing to painful, which will be important to recognize as learners and teachers move through this curriculum guide. Although it is difficult to tell someone that an idea is objectively troubling, this term will be used throughout the guide to indicate that an idea has the potential to feel a certain way and the curriculum guide aims to help learners by looking at texts from different perspectives, embracing what is troubling in those texts. This curriculum guide will invite learners to consider how someone *could* find the text troubling, even if they themselves do not.

Unit Enduring Understandings and Essential Questions

Unit 1: The Why and How of Tackling Trouble Text (Introductory Unit)

Unit 1 Enduring Understandings

1. Texts from Torah can be interpreted in a multitude of ways that can help us better understand the text and ourselves.
2. The process of wrestling with Torah is just as important if not more important than the answer one reaches studying it.
3. Wrestling with Torah often involves disagreeing with text and with people around us.
4. The process of wrestling with Torah, though potentially troubling or painful, can be an opportunity for creating blessing.

Unit 1 Essential Questions

1. What is required of a person to be in relationship with text?
2. How is Torah a process?
3. How can generations of interpretive responses to a text inform our understanding of it?

Unit 2: Troubling Relationships with People

Unit 2 Enduring Understandings

1. Humans and human relationships can be morally or theologically troubling and still contain holiness.
2. Although human relationships in the Torah do not always reflect moral exemplars, they can inform the way we approach and reflect upon our personal relationships.
3. In wrestling with Torah, we may wrestle and disagree with each other and while that may be uncomfortable, this too is an act of holiness.

Unit 2 Essential Questions

1. How can human relationships be holy?
2. Can we consider relationships or people holy if they are morally or theologically troubling within our belief system?
3. What can we learn about ourselves from analyzing human relationships through multiple generations of interpretive responses?
4. How can wrestling with troubling human relationships be a blessing?

Unit 3: Troubling Relationships with God

Unit 3 Enduring Understandings

1. We can hold God as holy even if God is morally or theologically troubling as portrayed in Torah by choosing to challenge Torah text and wrestle with it.
2. Wrestling with God and/or God's actions is a fundamental part of the Torah study process.
3. By wrestling with God and God's actions, we can better understand our own conception of God according to our developing personal theologies.

Unit 3 Essential Questions

1. How is God holy?
2. Can we consider God holy if God is morally or theologically troubling within our belief system?
3. What can we learn about our personal theologies from analyzing troubling relationships with God?
4. How can wrestling with God be a blessing?

Unit 4: Troubling Relationships with Commandment

Unit 4 Enduring Understandings

1. Our understanding of Commandments teaches us about our own moral or theological selves.
2. Commandments can be morally or theologically troubling and still contain holiness.
3. Understanding the reactions of interpreters from across generations to Commandments can be helpful to developing our own understanding of and approach to Commandments.

Unit 4 Essential Questions

1. How are Commandments holy?
2. Can we consider Commandments holy if they are morally or theologically troubling within our belief system?
3. What can we learn about ourselves from analyzing Commandments through multiple generations of interpretive responses?
4. How can wrestling with Commandments be a blessing?

Unit 5: Design A Zine for the Modern Teen

Unit 5 Enduring Understandings

1. Adding your voice to the generations of interpretive responses is an act of holiness.
2. Contributing your understanding of troubling text to the discourse can empower another person to better understand it.
3. Both words and images are powerful ways of portraying understanding of text and blessing.

Unit 5 Essential Questions

1. How can my understanding of a morally or theologically troubling text empower another reader?
2. What can I learn about myself from wrestling with morally or theologically troubling text?
3. How can my wrestling with troubling text be a blessing?

Unit 1: The Why and How of Tackling Trouble Text

(Introductory Unit)

Unit 1 Enduring Understandings

1. Texts from Torah contain multitudes of interpretive responses in them that can help us better understand the text and ourselves as readers.
2. The process of wrestling with Torah is just as important if not more important than the answer one reaches studying it.
3. Wrestling with Torah often involves disagreeing with text and with people around us
4. The process of wrestling with Torah, though potentially troubling or painful, can be an opportunity for creating blessing.

Unit 1 Essential Questions

1. What is required of a person to be in relationship with text?
2. How is Torah a process?
3. How can generations of interpretive responses to a text inform our understanding of it?

Lesson 1.1 Torah as Interpretive Process: Introduction to PaRDeS

Enduring Understandings

1. Texts from Torah can be interpreted in a multitude of ways that can help us better understand the text and ourselves.
2. The process of wrestling with Torah is just as important if not more important than the answer one reaches studying it.
3. Wrestling with Torah often involves disagreeing with text and with people around us.

Essential Questions

1. What is required of a person to be in relationship with text?
2. How is Torah a process?
3. How can generations of interpretive responses to a text inform our understanding of it?

Goals:

1. Present the steps of PaRDeS as a study method for analyzing text.
2. Give students a text to practice applying PaRDeS.
3. Encourage students to glean a moral out of text using PaRDeS.

Objectives (Participants will be able to...):

1. Articulate in their own words each of the steps of the PaRDeS study method.
2. Apply the steps of PaRDeS to study a secular text.
3. Make an argument about the message of the text that was gleaned from the PaRDeS process.

Potential Activity:

1. Pick a well-known children's story (i.e. Three Little Pigs or Little Red Riding Hood) and have students analyze the text using each of the steps of PaRDeS.

Lesson 1.2 Generations of Interpretive Responses: Introduction to Commentary

Enduring Understandings

1. Texts from Torah can be interpreted in a multitude of ways that can help us better understand the text and ourselves.
2. The process of wrestling with Torah is just as important if not more important than the answer one reaches studying it.
3. Wrestling with Torah often involves disagreeing with text and with people around us.

Essential Questions

1. How is Torah a process?
2. How can generations of interpretive responses to a text inform our understanding of it?

Goals:

1. Show the range of Torah commentaries that exist from throughout history.
2. Emphasize the importance of process in Torah study as a way of understanding text.
3. Encourage students to continue adding to generations of interpretive responses to text through their own commentary.

Objectives (Participants will be able to...):

1. Articulate in their own words the message of a piece of Torah commentary.
2. Articulate in their own words the significance of understanding how one arrived at an answer.
3. Produce a piece of commentary on a text.

Potential Activity:

1. Use a *simple* math problem to show that there are many ways to arrive at an answer. Tell students to come up with creative ways to show their work and arrive at the answer. Ask students to reflect on what they learned by showing their work creatively.
2. Using the story you used in the last lesson (like Three Little Pigs or Little Red Riding Hood), pull out one line from the story and have students add their own commentary to the verse/line. Start by putting the line on a giant post-it note and have students place smaller post-it notes around the paper to demonstrate how they can call exist together.

Lesson 1.3 Wrestling to be in Relationship with Torah And Each Other

Enduring Understandings:

1. Texts from Torah can be interpreted in a multitude of ways that can help us better understand the text and ourselves.
2. The process of wrestling with Torah is just as important if not more important than the answer one reaches studying it.
3. Wrestling with Torah often involves disagreeing with text and with people around us.

Essential Questions:

1. What is required of a person to be in relationship with text?
2. How is Torah a process?
3. How can generations of interpretive responses to a text inform our understanding of it?

Goals:

1. Present healthy conflict as a value of being in relationship with others.
2. Discuss how people can engage in healthy conflict.
3. Demonstrate how one can be in relationship with text through disagreement.

Objectives (Participants will be able to...):

1. Articulate in their own words the value of conflict in relationship
2. Develop a list of guidelines for how to engage in healthy conflict with one another
3. Apply the guidelines of engaging in healthy conflict to a conversation with a peer about a text

Potential Activity:

1. Pose the question: What would it be like if everyone in your life agreed with everything you said? Follow this up with questions like: How would it feel? How would it influence your sense of self? What would happen if suddenly someone walked up to you who then did not agree with you?

Lesson 1.4 Making Meaning and Blessing from an Ancient Book

Enduring Understandings:

1. The process of wrestling with Torah is just as important if not more important than the answer one reaches studying it.
2. The process of wrestling with Torah, though potentially troubling or painful, can be an opportunity for creating blessing.

Essential Questions:

1. What is required of a person to be in relationship with text?
2. How is Torah a process?
3. How can generations of interpretive responses to a text inform our understanding of it?

Goals:

1. Share the story from Genesis 32 of Jacob fighting the *eesh*.
2. Consider a working definition of blessing.
3. Create space for students to create alternative blessings.

Objectives (Participants will be able to...):

1. Apply the PaRDeS study method to the Jacob story in Genesis 32
2. Develop a working definition of a blessing
3. Write an alternative blessing as a response to Jacob's request in Genesis 32

Potential Activity:

1. In small groups, students will work together to write what they believe is a comprehensive definition of what a blessing can be
2. Hand out the following source sheet: <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/403289?editor=1>
Use the story found in this source sheet as a case study in understanding what blessing could be
Ask students to use this story to add to their working definition of what a blessing can be

Unit 2: Troubling Relationships with People

Unit 2 Enduring Understandings

1. Humans and human relationships can be morally or theologically troubling and still contain holiness.
2. Although human relationships in the Torah do not always reflect moral exemplars, they can inform the way we approach and reflect upon our personal relationships.
3. In wrestling with Torah, we may wrestle and disagree with each other and while that may be uncomfortable, this too is an act of holiness.

Unit 2 Essential Questions

1. How can human relationships be holy?
2. Can we consider relationships or people holy if they are morally or theologically troubling within our belief system?
3. What can we learn about ourselves from analyzing human relationships through multiple generations of interpretive responses?
4. How can wrestling with troubling human relationships be a blessing?

Lesson 2.1 How are Relationships with People Holy?

Enduring Understandings:

1. Humans and human relationships can be morally or theologically troubling and still contain holiness.
2. Although human relationships in the Torah do not always reflect moral exemplars, they can inform the way we approach and reflect upon our personal relationships.
3. In wrestling with Torah, we may wrestle and disagree with each other and while that may be uncomfortable, this too is an act of holiness.

Essential Questions:

1. How can human relationships be holy?
2. Can we consider relationships or people holy if they are morally or theologically troubling within our belief system?
3. What can we learn about ourselves from analyzing human relationships through multiple generations of interpretive responses?

Goals:

1. Demonstrate the range of definitions that can exist for holiness.
2. Consider the holiness of relationships between people.
3. Show that personal relationships have the capacity to contain holiness.

Objectives (Participants will be able to...):

1. Create a personal, working definition of holiness.
2. Articulate in their own words what makes a relationship between people holy.
3. Apply a definition of holiness to personal relationships.

Potential Activity:

1. Act out using only motions or words what an example of two people acting in a holy way would look like. Student can also use other art supplies to express this relationship (i.e. pencils, markers, clay, etc.)

Lesson 2.2 Troubling Relationships in the Biblical Text- Lot and his daughters (Genesis 19)

Enduring Understandings

1. Genesis 19 demonstrates that humans and human relationships can be morally or theologically troubling and still contain holiness.
2. Although human relationships in the Torah do not always reflect moral exemplars, they can inform the way we approach and reflect upon our personal relationships.

Essential Questions

1. How can human relationships be holy?
2. Can we consider relationships or people holy if they are morally or theologically troubling within our belief system?

Goals

1. Share the biblical story from Genesis 19.
2. Reflect on the actions and morality of the characters in this story
3. Consider the role of bodily autonomy in human relationships.

Objectives (Participants will be able to...)

1. Articulate a troubling facet to the story from Genesis 19.
2. Critique the actions of at least one character in this story.
3. Analyze the instances in Genesis 19 when bodily autonomy is called into question.

Sefaria.org Source Sheet: <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/404806?editor=1>

Lesson 2.3 Wrestling with Relationships in the Commentaries- Lot and his daughters

Enduring Understandings

1. Humans and human relationships can be morally or theologically troubling and still contain holiness.
2. Genesis 19 demonstrates that although human relationships in the Torah do not always reflect moral exemplars, they can inform the way we approach and reflect upon our personal relationships.
3. In wrestling with Torah, we may wrestle and disagree with each other and while that may be uncomfortable, this too is an act of holiness.

Essential Questions

1. How can human relationships be holy?
2. Can we consider relationships or people holy if they are morally or theologically troubling within our belief system?
3. What can we learn about ourselves from analyzing human relationships through multiple generations of interpretive responses?

Goals

1. Consider the role of consent in the story of Genesis 19.
2. Present generations of commentary on the story in Genesis 19.
3. Challenge students to use commentary to explain behavior in Genesis 19.

Objectives (Participants will be able to...):

1. Articulate in their own words how an ideal vision of bodily autonomy in human relationships could look.
2. Summarize one piece of commentary on the story in Genesis 19.
3. Explain the actions of a character from this story using at least one commentary.

Potential Commentary:

Radak on Genesis 19:5

(French Medieval Commentator 1160-1235 CE)

ויקראו...ונדעה אותם, who these people are, and how such people had dared to enter our town at night in spite of our reputation. The word נדעה is a euphemism for the intention to kill these people, just as it is in Judges 19:22 as reported by a party involved there in 20,5 Other commentators believe that the euphemism concerns the intention of sodomising these men.

Radak on Genesis 19:32

(French Medieval Commentator 1160-1235 CE)

ונשקה את אבינו יין, enough to make him drunk, so that he will not know what to do when we sleep with him. He certainly would not agree to sleep with his daughters while in full possession of his faculties. Anyone subscribing to the cultural mores of an Avraham would not knowingly engage in such a practice. This story is related in order to teach us that even people not subscribing to the moral standards of the Torah would not stoop to this kind of sexual licentiousness. The entire

story reveals the origin of the peoples of Ammon and Moav, two nations who will feature prominently in Jewish history from the time even before the Jews entered the Holy Land until the destruction of the first Temple. G'd prevented the Jewish people under Moses from attacking these nations seeing that their founder, Lot, had been a nephew of Avraham. Also, the Jewish people were not given any part of the lands occupied by these nations at the time when Moses and Joshua were involved in conquering the lands which became their home land.

The Torah: A Women's Commentary

(Edited by Rabbis Tamara Eskenazi and Andrea Weiss, contemporary)

On Genesis 19:33-34

“lay with her father. Oddly, incest laws in Leviticus and Deuteronomy do not explicitly prohibit sexual relations between a father and his daughter (see Leviticus 18:6-24). Technically speaking, the daughters broken no biblical law. Nonetheless, the daughters do seem to break a taboo (which explains why they first get their father drunk), yet the text does not condemn their actions.”

See Sefaria.org for other commentaries on Genesis 19

You can also reference *After Abel and Other Stories* by Michal Lemberger for a modern Midrash on the story from the perspective of Lot's wife.

Lesson 2.4 Making Meaning and Blessing for Ourselves-Lot and his daughters

Enduring Understandings

1. Humans and human relationships can be morally or theologically troubling and still contain holiness.
2. Genesis 19 demonstrates that although human relationships in the Torah do not always reflect moral exemplars, they can inform the way we approach and reflect upon our personal relationships.
3. In wrestling with Torah, we may wrestle and disagree with each other and while that may be uncomfortable, this too is an act of holiness.

Essential Questions

1. How can human relationships be holy?
2. Can we consider relationships or people holy if they are morally or theologically troubling within our belief system?
3. What can we learn about ourselves from analyzing human relationships through multiple generations of interpretive responses?
4. How can wrestling with troubling human relationships be a blessing?

Goals:

1. Present multiple commentaries on Genesis 19 as possible ideas for understanding the Torah text.
2. Provide space for learners to create a blessing out of their new understandings about the troubling text.
3. Challenge students to consider how interpretations from commentary inform their concept of bodily autonomy.

Objectives (Participants will be able to...):

1. Critique an idea in at least one commentary on the story of Genesis 19.
2. Create a blessing that demonstrates a newfound understanding of Genesis 19.
3. Explain how understandings of one of these commentaries informs their concept of bodily autonomy.

See next page for blessing worksheet

Write Your Own Bracha (Blessing)³

(to be used as a template for every post-text assessment)

1. What is something you learned about the **text** through the process of studying it?
2. What is something you found troubling in this text, if anything?
3. What is something you learned about **yourself** through the process of studying this text?
4. Having gone through this study process, what is something you would want to tell someone who is reading it for the first time?
5. What is a bracha you would write in response to studying this text? This could be a bracha you write for yourself, for God/the Divine, or for someone who is reading this text for the first time.

³ Unit 1, lesson Lesson 4 focuses on the idea of bracha. If you are choosing various lessons, I would recommend this lesson so that the idea of bracha can be properly scaffolded for the students.

Remember: a bracha is often translated to the word “blessing” in English. However the word blessing is often associated with something that is completely positive.

A bracha can be described as at least one of several things including praise, a hope for someone else, a gift, and something found in “an object that is hidden [*samui*] from the eye,” (BT Ta’anit 8b) there is something to uncover but that is not fully understood at the time of receipt.

In Jewish tradition a classic bracha often starts with the words “Blessed are You Adonai, Ruler of the Universe who...” However, there infinite variations of what a blessing could be. As we learned at the beginning of our course, Jacob asked the *eesh* to give him a bracha and in return the *eesh* asked for his name and said, “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but **Israel**, for you have **wrestled** with beings **divine** and human, and have prevailed” (*Genesis 32:27-29*).

Lesson 2.5 Troubling Relationships in the Biblical Text-Jacob the Deceiver (Genesis 25 and 27)

Enduring Understandings

1. Humans and human relationships can be morally or theologically troubling and still contain holiness.
2. Genesis 25 and 27 demonstrate that although human relationships in the Torah do not always reflect moral exemplars, they can inform the way we approach and reflect upon our personal relationships.
3. In wrestling with Torah, we may wrestle and disagree with each other and while that may be uncomfortable, this too is an act of holiness.

Essential Questions

1. How can human relationships be holy?
2. Can we consider relationships or people holy if they are morally or theologically troubling within our belief system?

Goals:

4. Share the biblical story from Genesis 25 and 27
5. Reflect on the actions and morality of the characters in this story
6. Consider the importance of morality in the people who are deemed leaders in our society

Objectives (Participants will be able to...):

1. Articulate a troubling facet to the story from Genesis 25 and 27.
2. Critique the actions of at least one character in this story.
3. Judge the actions of a leader from their own lives.

Potential Activity:

1. Come up with a list of admirable, yet controversial leaders who we may know (i.e. presidents, authors, scientists, artists, etc.) and ask the students to name what some of their controversial actions or values are. From there, ask them to pick one person to judge (though you can do this with more than one person over the course of the lesson) and decide if their admirable actions outweigh their controversial or morally troubling actions/beliefs.
2. Write down on note cards what predictions are for how people throughout history will attempt to justify the actions of characters (at least one) in this story.

Sefaria.org Source Sheet: <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/405006?editor=1>

Lesson 2.6 Wrestling with Relationships in the Commentaries-Jacob the Deceiver

Enduring Understandings

1. Humans and human relationships can be morally or theologically troubling and still contain holiness.
2. Genesis 25 and 27 demonstrate that although human relationships in the Torah do not always reflect moral exemplars, they can inform the way we approach and reflect upon our personal relationships.
3. In wrestling with Torah, we may wrestle and disagree with each other and while that may be uncomfortable, this too is an act of holiness.

Essential Questions

1. How can human relationships be holy?
2. Can we consider relationships or people holy if they are morally or theologically troubling within our belief system?
3. What can we learn about ourselves from analyzing human relationships through multiple generations of interpretive responses?

Goals

1. Consider excuses people make for immoral behavior by leaders.
2. Present generations of commentary on the story in Genesis 25 and 27.
3. Challenge students to use commentary to justify behavior in Genesis 25 and 27.

Objectives (Participants will be able to...):

1. Articulate in their own words one example of a leader whose morally controversial actions have been justified.
2. Summarize one piece of commentary on the story in Genesis 25 and 27.
3. Justify the actions of a character from this story using at least one commentary.

Potential Activity:

1. Have students write, act out, or draw the story of Genesis 25 and 27 from the perspective of one of the characters in this story. This portrayal should be informed by at least one piece of commentary.

Potential Commentary:

Chizkuni on Genesis 25:23

(French Medieval Rabbi, 1250-1310CE)

ורב יעבוד צעיר, “and the older will become subservient to the younger.” This is where the Torah decreed that Yaakov, though the younger, will eventually wind up as the senior one of the twins to be born. Rav Hunna (B’reshit Rabbah 63:6) is quoted as having said that it means if Yaakov merits it he will become the senior, if not, Esau will become senior to him. [Not found in the editions of B’reshit Rabbah at my disposal. Ed.] An alternate exegesis: the word רב does not mean: “the senior one,” but simply means “הרבה,” a great deal,” or “for a long time.” The word occurs when Esau first declined Yaakov’s gift by saying: יש לי רב, “I have lots.” (Genesis 33,9).

(See Sefaria.org or The Torah: A Women’s Commentary for more relevant commentaries)

Lesson 2.7 Making Meaning and Blessing for Ourselves-Jacob the Deceiver

Enduring Understandings

4. Humans and human relationships can be morally or theologically troubling and still contain holiness.
5. Genesis 25 and 27 demonstrate that although human relationships in the Torah do not always reflect moral exemplars, they can inform the way we approach and reflect upon our personal relationships.
6. In wrestling with Torah, we may wrestle and disagree with each other and while that may be uncomfortable, this too is an act of holiness.

Essential Questions

5. How can human relationships be holy?
6. Can we consider relationships or people holy if they are morally or theologically troubling within our belief system?
7. What can we learn about ourselves from analyzing human relationships through multiple generations of interpretive responses?
8. How can wrestling with troubling human relationships be a blessing?

Goals:

4. Present multiple commentaries on Genesis 25 and 27 as possible ideas for understanding the Torah text.
5. Provide space for learners to create a blessing out of their new understandings about the troubling text.
6. Challenge students to consider how interpretations from commentary inform their concept of an admirable leader.

Objectives (Participants will be able to...):

4. Critique an idea in at least one commentary on the story of Genesis 25 and 27.
5. Create a blessing that demonstrates a newfound understanding of Genesis 25 and 27.
6. Explain how understandings of one of these commentaries informs their concept of an admirable leader.

Potential Activity:

1. Hold a debate to determine who in the family that is depicted in Genesis 25 and 27 is the most admirable leader and why. Assign learners to each of the four main characters (Isaac, Rebekah, Esau, and Jacob). In their teams, they will have to make a case for why their character is the most admirable as a leader. You can even make it a competition by asking who of the following people is the most admirable and should be the leader/representative of the Jewish people.

Write Your Own Bracha (Blessing)⁴

(to be used as a template for every post-text assessment)

1. What is something you learned about the **text** through the process of studying it?
2. What is something you found troubling in this text, if anything?
3. What is something you learned about **yourself** through the process of studying this text?
4. Having gone through this study process, what is something you would want to tell someone who is reading it for the first time?
5. What is a bracha you would write in response to studying this text? This could be a bracha you write for yourself, for God/the Divine, or for someone who is reading this text for the first time.

⁴ Unit 1, lesson Lesson 4 focuses on the idea of bracha. If you are choosing various lessons, I would recommend this lesson so that the idea of bracha can be properly scaffolded for the students.

Remember: a bracha is often translated to the word “blessing” in English. However the word blessing is often associated with something that is completely positive.

A bracha can be described as at least one of several things including praise, a hope for someone else, a gift, and something found in “an object that is hidden [*samui*] from the eye,” (BT Ta’anit 8b) there is something to uncover but that is not fully understood at the time of receipt.

In Jewish tradition a classic bracha often starts with the words “Blessed are You Adonai, Ruler of the Universe who...” However, there infinite variations of what a blessing could be. As we learned at the beginning of our course, Jacob asked the *eesh* to give him a bracha and in return the *eesh* asked for his name and said, “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but **Israel**, for you have **wrestled** with beings **divine** and human, and have prevailed” (*Genesis 32:27-29*).

Lesson 2.8 Troubling Relationships in the Biblical Text-Sotah Ritual as Marriage Fixer **(Numbers 5:11-31)**

Enduring Understandings

1. Humans and human relationships can be morally or theologically troubling and still contain holiness.
2. The Sotah ritual in Numbers 5 demonstrates that although human relationships in the Torah do not always reflect moral exemplars, they can inform the way we approach and reflect upon our personal relationships.

Essential Questions

1. How can human relationships be holy?
2. Can we consider relationships or people holy if they are morally or theologically troubling within our belief system?

Goals

1. Demonstrate the importance of trust in human relationships.
2. Present the Sotah ritual as told by Numbers 5:11-31.
3. Challenge students to question what this ritual from Numbers 5 tells us about holy relationships between people.

Objectives (Participants will be able to...)

1. Articulate in their own words how trust plays a role in holy human relationships.
2. Explain in their own words what might be troubling in the Sotah ritual
3. Question what the Sotah ritual tells us about holiness in human relationships.

Potential Activity:

1. Have students rotate through a series of trust exercises including a blindfolded obstacle course with a partner (one partner guides and the other is blindfolded but must walk through the course), warm fuzzies (everyone writes an anonymous kind note to everyone else in the class, Taboo (card game), and Mafia (murder mystery game). At the end of these games, ask students to debrief and think about how each of these activities had something to do with the value of trust in relationships.

Sefaria.org Source Sheet: <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/405005?editor=1>

Lesson 2.9 Wrestling with Relationships in the Commentaries- Sotah Ritual as Marriage Fixer

Enduring Understandings

1. Humans and human relationships can be morally or theologically troubling and still contain holiness.
2. The Sotah ritual in Numbers 5 demonstrates that although human relationships in the Torah do not always reflect moral exemplars, they can inform the way we approach and reflect upon our personal relationships.
3. In wrestling with Torah, we may wrestle and disagree with each other and while that may be uncomfortable, this too is an act of holiness.

Essential Questions

1. How can human relationships be holy?
2. Can we consider relationships or people holy if they are morally or theologically troubling within our belief system?
3. What can we learn about ourselves from analyzing human relationships through multiple generations of interpretive responses?

Goals:

1. Consider how different people use trust in their relationships.
2. Present generations of commentary on the Sotah ritual in Numbers 5.
3. Challenge students to use commentary to understand the role of trust in relationships.

Objectives (Participants will be able to...):

1. Articulate in their own words what trust looks like to them in a relationship.
2. Summarize one piece of commentary on the Sotah ritual in Numbers 5.
3. Evaluate the use of the Sotah ritual using at least one commentary.

Potential Activity:

1. Do a gallery walk around the room, around which there are commentaries on the Sotah ritual. Have students walk around for a few minutes to get a taste of all of them and then have them select one to sit with either alone or with a partner. Have students use PaRDeS on their own or with a partner, using the commentary they chose, to better understand where trust is present or absent in the Sotah ritual. I recommend using the *Naso* chapter (starting on page 113) of *Beginning the Journey: Toward A Women's Commentary on Torah* (Edited by Rabbi Emily H Feigenson) for commentary sources.

Potential Commentary:

Sforno

(Italian Medieval Rabbi, 1470-1550 CE)

וְקָנָה אֶת אִשְׁתּוֹ, “he warned her and told her not to seclude herself with the man who was suspected as her lover.”

Lesson 2.10 Making Meaning and Blessing for Ourselves- Sotah Ritual as Marriage Fixer

Enduring Understandings

1. Humans and human relationships can be morally or theologically troubling and still contain holiness.
2. The Sotah ritual in Numbers 5 demonstrates that although human relationships in the Torah do not always reflect moral exemplars, they can inform the way we approach and reflect upon our personal relationships.
3. In wrestling with Torah, we may wrestle and disagree with each other and while that may be uncomfortable, this too is an act of holiness.

Essential Questions

1. How can human relationships be holy?
2. Can we consider relationships or people holy if they are morally or theologically troubling within our belief system?
3. What can we learn about ourselves from analyzing human relationships through multiple generations of interpretive responses?
4. How can wrestling with troubling human relationships be a blessing?

Goals:

1. Present multiple commentaries on the Sotah ritual as possible ideas for understanding the Torah text.
2. Provide space for learners to create a blessing out of their new understandings about the troubling text.
3. Challenge students to consider how interpretations from commentary inform their concept of trust in relationships.

Objectives (Participants will be able to...):

1. Critique an idea in at least one commentary on the Sotah ritual.
2. Create a blessing that demonstrates a newfound understanding of the Sotah ritual.
3. Explain how understandings of one of these commentaries informs their concept of trust in relationships.

Potential Activity:

1. Using the blessing worksheet that is used throughout the curriculum guide (and can be found below), have students write a blessing that demonstrates their understanding of the Sotah ritual and the role that trust plays in human relationships. Learners are welcome to write their blessing about any new understanding they have gathered about the Sotah ritual in Numbers 5, but the teacher should encourage them to consider the role of trust in human relationships, as this was the theme throughout the three lessons.

Unit 3: Troubling Relationships with God (6/10 Scripted)

Unit 3 Enduring Understandings

1. We can hold God as holy even if God is morally or theologically troubling in Torah by choosing to challenge Torah text and wrestle with it.
2. Wrestling with God and/or God's actions is a fundamental part of the Torah study process.
3. By wrestling with God and God's actions, we can better understand our own conception of God according to our respective personal theologies.

Unit 3 Essential Questions

1. How is God holy?
2. Can we consider God holy if God is morally or theologically troubling within our belief system?
3. What can we learn about our personal theologies from analyzing troubling relationships with God?
4. How can wrestling with God be a blessing?

Lesson 3.1 How is God Holy?

Enduring Understandings

1. We can hold God as holy even if God is morally or theologically troubling in Torah by choosing to challenge Torah text and wrestle with it.
2. Wrestling with God and/or God's actions is a fundamental part of the Torah study process.
3. By wrestling with God and God's actions, we can better understand our own conception of God according to our respective personal theologies.

Essential Questions

1. How is God holy?
2. Can we consider God holy if God is morally or theologically troubling within our belief system?
3. What can we learn about our personal theologies from analyzing troubling relationships with God?

Goals:

1. Consider what makes God holy.
2. Demonstrate the relationship between one's deeds and status of holiness.
3. Examine as a group what it means to be in relationship with God.

Objectives (Participants will be able to...)

1. Describe at least two qualities that make God holy.
2. Judge whether God's actions influence the extent to which they believe God is holy.
3. Articulate what a relationship with God could look like.

Potential Activity

1. Have students shape with clay, write, or draw out what they believe a relationship with God can look like and have them share that depiction with a partner. Then have students do a gallery walk, getting a chance to look at everyone's understanding of being in relationship with God. Tell students to stand next to one other than their own that resonates with them and explain why.

Lesson 3.2: Troubling God in the Biblical Text-Humans So Nice, God Made Them Twice

Enduring Understandings

1. We can hold God as holy even if God is morally or theologically troubling in the Creation story by choosing to challenge Torah text and wrestle with it.
2. Wrestling with God and/or God's actions is a fundamental part of the Torah study process.
3. By wrestling with God and God's actions, we can better understand our own conception of God according to our respective personal theologies.

Essential Questions

1. How is God holy?
2. Can we consider God holy if God is morally or theologically troubling within our belief system?
3. What can we learn about our personal theologies from analyzing troubling relationships with God?

Goals

1. Demonstrate that there can be truth and value in multiple iterations of a story.
2. Present the two stories of Creation of humans as portrayed Genesis 1 and 2.
3. Challenge students to question what these two stories tell us about God in the Torah.

Objectives (Participants will be able to...)

1. Recognize that multiple truths exist and can enhance a story/event.
2. Explain in their own words 3 differences between these two Creation stories.
3. Question what these two stories tell us about God in the Torah.

Materials

- Photos (found at bottom of lesson)
- Source Sheet (Sefaria print out) 1 per student
<https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/381459?lang=bi>
- Pens
- Highlighters
- Play dough
- Note cards (3x5) 1 per student

Scripted Schedule

00:00-00:10 Set induction: Place photos (sources at the end of this lesson plan) around the classroom and ask students to walk around and determine what they believe to be “true” about these artifacts. Give students a few minutes to walk around and find the different “truths” in these photos. Some students will be able to see multiple truths in each photo and some will only be able to see one. As a class, go through these photos and try to see all of the different iterations of truth in them and what stories they tell us.

00:10-00:15 Situate Ourselves in the text

Teacher explains: Genesis 1 is the very beginning of the Torah and details the beginning of God creating the world. There are going to be details about 7 days of Creation. On the sixth day of those seven days, humans are created. We are not looking at the entire story of Creation but rather we are looking at the **two** stories of how humans were created in the Torah. As you are reading through, I invite you to look for as many differences as you can between these two stories.

00:15-00:25 Reading on your Own

Hand out source sheets and highlighters/pens to students so that they can closely read the text and make notes if they need to mark differences in the two stories

<https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/381459?lang=bi>

00:25-00:30 Clarifying Questions

Teachers asks: Do you have any clarifying questions?

This does not mean not big questions about what the text means morally and theologically, but rather questions that can be answered simply and in a few words so that you can better understand the p'shat or surface level meaning of the text (a term they should understand from previous lesson on PaRDeS).

00:30-00:45 Reenact Creation

Break students into pairs. Have one student in each pair be in charge reenacting the Chapter 1 story and one student in charge of reenacting the Chapter 2 story. Provide paper, writing utensils, and play dough. Tell students that using their respective story, they can use drawing, play dough creation, or acting to demonstrate their understanding of how Creation of humans happened in the Torah. They will be given about 10 minutes to work on this creation before they share with their partner. Once they are both done putting their representation together, they should share it with their partner.

00:45-00:50 Argue for your story

While before each partner was simply sharing their representation, now they should each try to convince the other person why their version is the “true” version of how humans were created in the Torah. They should operate as though there can only be one true story.

00:50-00:55 Bring the stories together

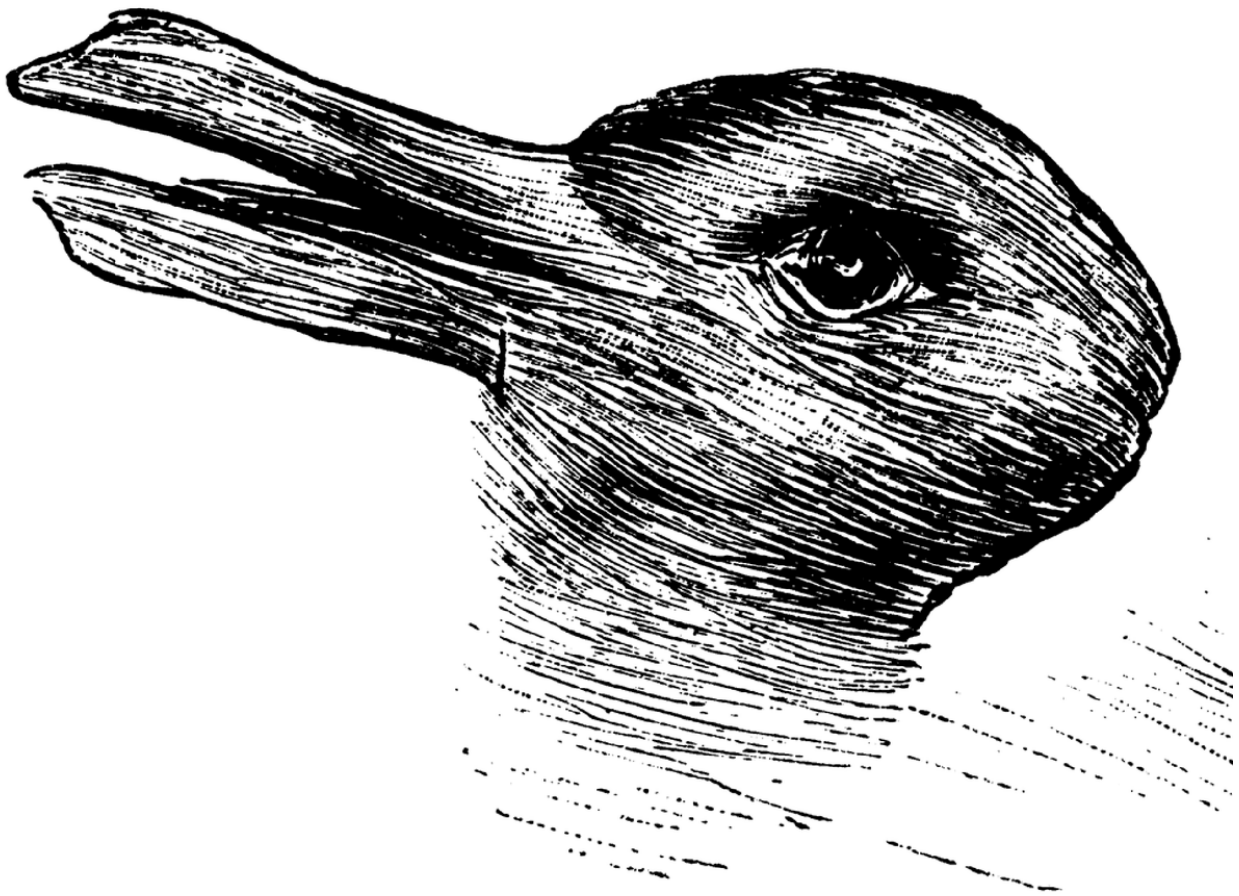
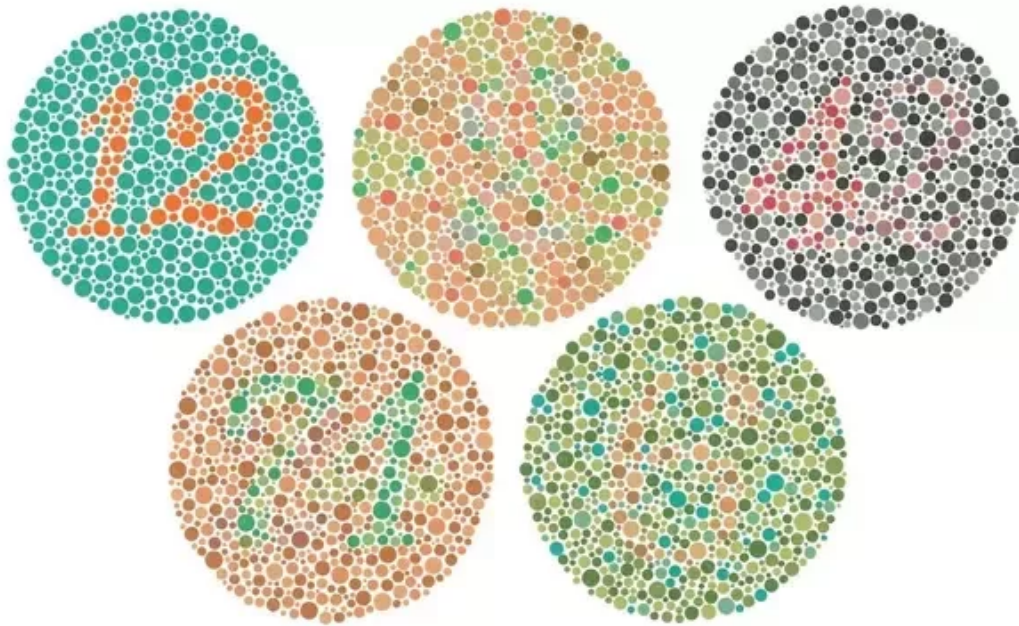
Teacher explains: Now that they have tried to convince the other person that there can only be one true version of the story, they are now going to have to work together to understand why God may have created humans in both ways. After all, that is what the Torah says so maybe there is some truth to how it is written. Still in pairs, have them think about how both stories can work together to make sense in Torah.

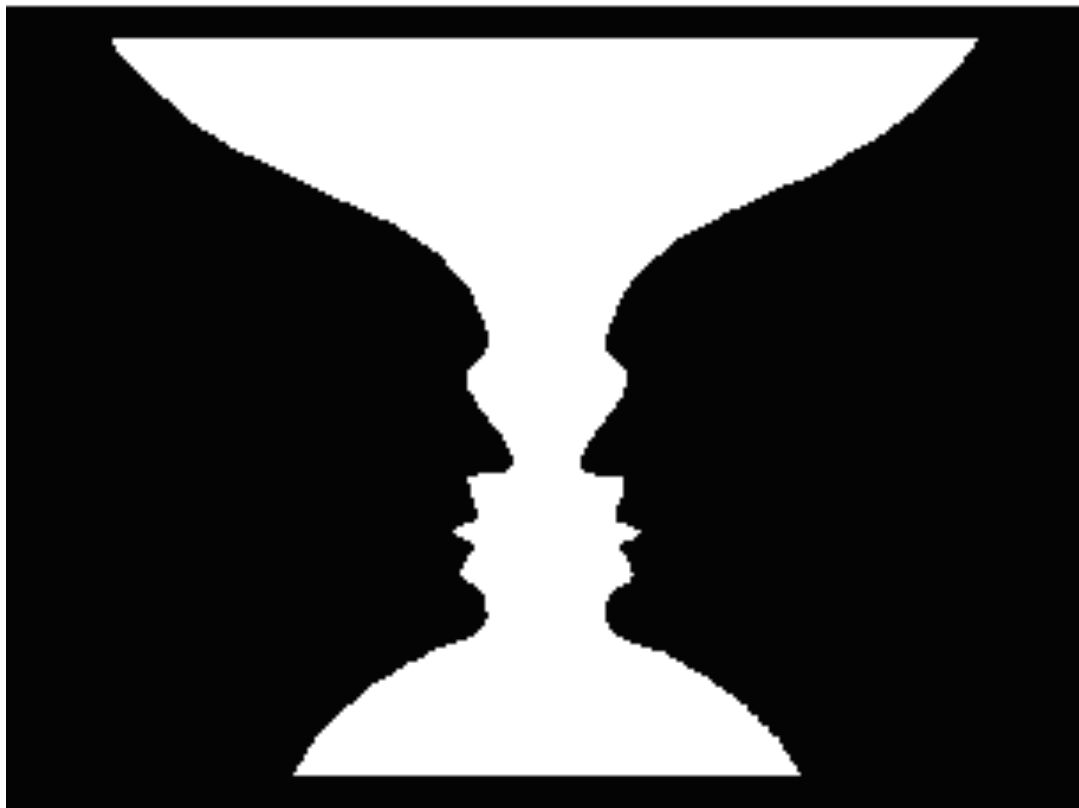
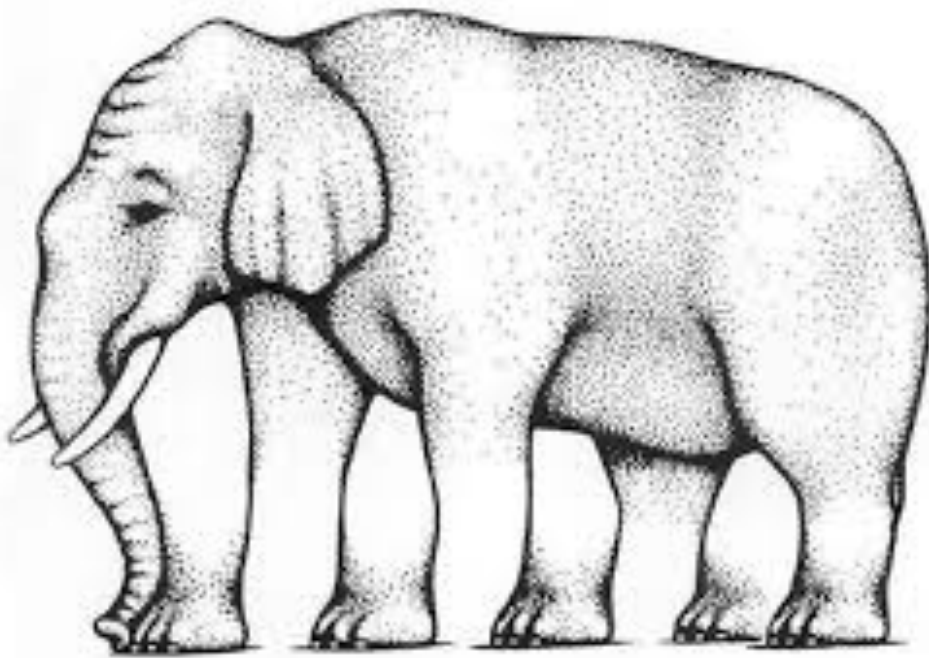
0:55-1:00 Closure: Predictions for next time

Teachers asks: How do you think people throughout history will try to explain how having both stories in the Torah makes sense or are both truth?

Hand out note cards on which students will write their predictions to look back at during the next class.

Appendix for Lesson 3.2





Lesson 3.3 Wrestling with God in the Commentaries- Humans So Nice, God Made Them Twice

Enduring Understandings

1. We can hold God as holy even if God is morally or theologically troubling in the Creation story by choosing to challenge Torah text and wrestle with it.
2. Wrestling with God and/or God's actions is a fundamental part of the Torah study process.
3. By wrestling with God and God's actions, we can better understand our own conception of God according to our respective personal theologies.

Essential Questions

1. How is God holy?
2. Can we consider God holy if God is morally or theologically troubling within our belief system?
3. What can we learn about our personal theologies from analyzing troubling relationships with God?

Goals

1. Present ideas about debated authorship of the Torah.
2. Introduce multiple interpretations of the two Creation stories that have come out of generations of commentary.
3. Present the idea that the truths we believe in come with underlying assumptions that are worth investigating.

Objectives (Participants will be able to...)

1. Explain at least two ideas of how people think about the writing of Torah.
2. Summarize one piece of commentary on the Creation stories.
3. Articulate how one of their assumptions about the Creation text informs their understanding of the text.

Materials

- Giant post-its
- Sharpie
- print outs of commentaries/commentators
- print out of photo (in appendix)
- pencils/pens
- note cards from last class (with student predictions)

Scripted Schedule

00:00-00:15 Set Induction:



(See blown up photo below)

Share the above photo with students and ask them to write a quick story inspired by what is happening in this picture. It can be about anything that is inspired by this photo but should tell some sort of narrative outline.

Give students 2-3 minutes to write out their story outlines independently.

Once they have had a chance to write down their stories, ask students to share quick 20-30 second overviews of the story they thought this picture was telling. Get at least 3-4 examples.

Once the teacher has gone around the room and listened to a few different stories, they go back and ask students what an initial assumption was they made to help them write this story. Potential answers: I assumed that the child just landed in his jet pack, I assumed that the child is about to take off in his jet pack, I assumed that the child is lost in this big field, etc.

Ask some probing questions to follow up these assumptions:

1. Why did you make this assumption?
2. What did you observe and interpret that made you think ____?
3. Why do you think you saw it in this way?

Teacher explains: The stories you came up with are all rooted in specific observations you made about the image and that you interpreted to mean something different. All your stories have some truth in them even if they might contradict each other. Today we are going to think about how our assumptions about a text or image influence how we interpret it. We'll talk about commentaries on the passage we read during our last class about the two Creation stories. These commentaries will help us think about how we can understand Torah that might not make sense from first glance.

00:15-00:25 How do you think the Torah was written?

Teacher asks: What are at least four different ways that Torah may have been written down?

Potential answers: God wrote the Torah, God had Moses write Torah, a bunch of people wrote Torah, God made Torah appear, etc.)

⁵ <https://www.istockphoto.com/photo/young-business-boy-wearing-jetpack-in-england-gm490772160-75388663>

Write each answer on a giant post-it and put them up around the room so that students can pick different parts of the room to stand in once they are done coming up with potential answers. If students are having trouble coming up with ideas, you can share some of the potential answers.

Ask students to go to the corner or section of the room that has the post-it with which they most align. Once they pick a corner, have them discuss with a partner why it is they chose this corner for 2-3 minutes. Once they have shared with a partner, ask for a few answers in the big group.

00:25-00:35 Gallery walk with Commentaries

Teacher says: We just spent some time thinking about how Torah was written. Our understanding of how Torah was written tells us something about how we are going to explain troubling issues in the Torah's stories. We are going to do a gallery walk with several different commentaries on this story about the Creation of humans. Last week you made some predictions about how people might try to make sense of the fact that humans are created twice in the Torah. See if any of your ideas are in these commentaries. Maybe there will also be some ideas that are new to you. Each commentary will come with an explanation about where some of the commentator's assumptions might come from. Try to make your way around the room so that you can start to learn about all four of these commentaries. But you will end up focusing on one that is interesting to you.

See appendix for the commentaries to print out and post around the room. There should be several copies of each commentary so that more than one student can take one.

00:35-00:45 Dive deeply into one commentary

Tell students to pick one commentary that they will think about deeply. They can take the sheet with them back to their seat to take notes.

Once students feel like they have a grasp of the piece of commentary they should consider the following prompt:

If this commentary were to represent the truth, what else might you have to believe about Torah for this commentary to make sense?

00:45-00:50 Share out

Have several students share out some of their responses to the above prompt to the big group by having them share a summary of what the commentary aims to tell us and what assumptions might be part of it.

00:50-1:00 Note Card Reflection

Bring out the notecards from last session that have their predictions for how they think people throughout the generations might make sense of these two Creation stories. Give each student their respective note card and have them reflect on how they think they may have arrived at this prediction.

Teacher asks: What factors went into your prediction about how commentators throughout history might try to understand this text? How are you thinking about the biblical story differently after this class?

Here are follow up questions if they struggle to come up with answers about factors that went into their prediction?

1. To what extent do you think the time we live in influences how you interpreted this text?
2. To what extent do you think your identities influenced how you interpreted this text?
3. What was an observation you made about the text that helped you make an interpretation?

Teacher says closing words: We only looked at a handful of commentaries that have existed over the course of history, but they help us start to think about different ways that people have understood this text in Torah. We also started to think about how our personal assumptions affect how we look at a text or image. Next week we'll wrap up our study of this text and come to our own personal conclusions about what we can learn from this story and how

Appendix for Lesson 3.3

**Rabbi Dr. Rachel Adler (pg. 30-31 of *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*)
(Contemporary American Reform Rabbi, known for feminist scholarship)**

“Genesis 1 is an account of the Creation, whereas Genesis 2-3 is an account of the creation of patriarchy—a remarkably truthful account. The world brought about by Genesis 2-3 is one in which desire is no longer joyful but oppressive. Even before the disobedience, relations between man and woman and world are commodified and function based. Adam is created to till the soil. Woman is created to help *Adam*. However lush, the garden is a workplace. Created things are good, not intrinsically as in Genesis 1, but because they are resources. The Garden is described as prime real estate, rich in water and in trees, and adjacent to lands rich in gold and gemstones. Everything is viewed extractively. The forbidden fruit is presented as the epitome of desire in terms not of intrinsic value but of what it is food for: “good to eat,” “alluring to the eyes,” “desirable for insight” (3:6).

Woman’s desire for man ensures her subjugation and her anguish (3:16). Man’s desire is not even mentioned. He is exhausted by the effort to pull from the ground what can be consumed before descending into the ground and being consumed by it. Adam and Eve are alienated from each other, from the earth, from their labors, from the rest of creation.

The world of patriarchy cries out for mending. A mending world would commit itself to equality and power-sharing, to working cooperatively in order to fill needs and solve problems. At one again with the rest of Creation, perhaps we would even learn not to resent our mortality so bitterly. Reunited also with the rest of creation, men and women could learn again to be “loving friends”—as the traditional rabbinic wedding blessing portrays them.

Background on Rabbi Dr. Rachel Adler⁶

The writings of Rachel Adler on Jewish law and ritual have catapulted her into the center of modern Jewish religious discourse. She first gained fame in the 1970s as an Orthodox woman who championed traditional Jewish laws of family purity. Adler later renounced her earlier writings and became a fierce critic of Jewish religious patriarchy. Leaving the Orthodox world, Adler earned a doctorate in Religion and was ordained a Reform rabbi. An outstanding feminist theologian and scholar of Jewish law, Adler has garnered international attention from Jewish and non-Jewish scholars, women and men alike, through her novel feminist approach to *halakhah*. Her scholarly productivity continues unabated and she remains a major figure on the Jewish religious scene.

⁶ <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/adler-rachel>

**Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (excerpts from pages 9-21 of *The Lonely Man of Faith*)
(Orthodox American Rabbi who lived from 1903-1993, Modern)**

"We all know that the Bible offers two accounts of the creation of man...The answer lies not in an alleged dual tradition but in dual man, not in an imaginary contradiction between two versions but in a real contradiction in the nature of man. The two accounts deal with two Adams, two men, two fathers of mankind. Two types, two representatives of humanity, and it is no wonder that they are not identical. Let us just read these two accounts.

In Genesis 1 we read, "So God created man in His [God's] own image, in the image of God created He [God] him, male and female created He [God] them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the fowl of the heaven, and over the beasts, and all over the earth."

In Genesis 2, the account differs substantially from the one we just read: "And the eternal God formed the man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and man became a living soul. And the eternal God planted a garden eastward in Eden.... And the eternal God took the man and placed him in the Garden of Eden to serve it and to keep it."

Let us portray these two men. Adam the first and Adam the second, in typological categories....

Adam the first who was fashioned in the image of God was blessed with great drive for creative activity and immeasurable resources for the realization of this goal, the most outstanding of which is the intelligence, the human mind, capable of confronting the outside world and inquiring into its complex workings...Adam the first is interested in just a single aspect of reality and asks one questions only—"How does the cosmos function?"

Pg. 21

"Adam the Second is, like Adam the first, also intrigued by the cosmos. Intellectual curiosity drives them both to confront courageously the *mysterium magnum* of being. However, while the cosmos provokes Adam the first to quest for power and control, thus making him ask the functional "how" question, Adam the second responds to the call of the cosmos by engaging in a different kind of cognitive gesture...Instead his inquiry is of a metaphysical nature and a threefold one. He wants to know: "Why is it?" "What is it?" "Who is it?"

Background on Rabbi Soloveitchik

"He unfailingly captured the adoration of his students. He was known as the "Rav", he became the greatest leader of Modern Orthodoxy in the twentieth century, often espousing relatively very liberal positions on educational, political, and social issues within the Orthodox world. His ordination of over 2000 Orthodox rabbis at Yeshiva University, during forty years at the helm, attests to his power and efficacy as well as his consistency and determination."⁷

⁷ <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/joseph-soloveitchik>

Chizkuni on Genesis 2:7

(French Medieval Rabbi of the 13th century)

. וייצר ה' אלוקים את האדם . "G-d shaped the human being;" seeing that the Torah wished to write that G-d placed man inside the garden, it repeated part of the process by which man was created, [showing that G-d was active in his creation beyond the initial stages. Ed.] The words: ויטע, "He planted," and ויצמח, "He made grow," were written to lead up to the story of the tree of knowledge, and the commandment forbidding man to eat from that tree.

Background on Chizkuni

Chizkuni (Rabbi Hezekiah Ben Manoah) was from Middle-Age France (c.1220 - c.1260 CE) And wrote a commentary that is "a compilation of insights culled from the Midrashim...including Rashi, Rashbam and Ibn Ezra [three medieval commentators]. However, Chizkuni does not name any of his sources (other than Rashi), in order to encourage objective study, as he felt that one should focus on the message rather than the messenger."⁸

⁸ <https://www.sefaria.org/Chizkuni>



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Lesson 3.4 Making Meaning and Blessing for Ourselves- Humans So Nice, God Made Them **Twice**

Enduring Understandings

1. We can hold God as holy even if God is morally or theologically troubling in the Creation story by choosing to challenge Torah text and wrestle with it.
2. Wrestling with God and/or God's actions is a fundamental part of the Torah study process.
3. By wrestling with God and God's actions, we can better understand our own conception of God according to our respective personal theologies.

Essential Questions

1. How is God holy?
2. Can we consider God holy if God is morally or theologically troubling within our belief system?
3. What can we learn about our personal theologies from analyzing troubling relationships with God?
4. How can wrestling with God be a blessing?

Goals

1. Present multiple commentaries on the Creation story as possible ideas for understanding the Torah text.
2. Provide space for learners to create a blessing out of their new understandings about the troubling text.
3. Challenge students to consider how interpretations from commentary inform their concept of God in Torah.

Objectives (Participants will be able to...)

4. Critique an idea in at least one commentary on the story of Creation.
5. Create a blessing that demonstrates a newfound understanding of the story of Creation.
6. Explain how understanding one of these commentaries informs their concept of God in Torah.

Materials

- commentaries from week before (in folders)
- worksheet (1 per student)
- pens/pencils

Schedule

00:00-00:10 Set Induction

Consider the following prompt and debate it: Pineapple belongs on pizza

Teacher asks students to seriously consider:

1. What would need to be true for a person to believe this? What assumptions would they need to make?
2. What could make this untrue?

3. How can this be true for some and not others?

00:10-00:00:15 Review Commentaries

Give students a few minutes to re-familiarize themselves with the commentaries from last week. They should focus on the one that they did a deep dive on last week. Tell students that they will be critiquing some of these commentaries and so they should think about the arguments behind them as they re-familiarize themselves.

00:15-00:25 Critique Commentaries

Using the same prompts as they did for debating pineapple on pizza, they should consider the following questions about a piece of commentary that was studied.

1. What could make this untrue?
2. How can this be true for some and not others?

00:25-00:40 PaRDeS

Either with a partner or on their own, each learner should use materials to consider the following question:

Teacher asks: Given everything we have learned in the past few lessons on this text, is God still holy? If so, how is God holy? Use the PaRDeS study method (discussed in Lesson 1.1) and consider commentaries we studied to think about this question.

Reserve 2-3 minutes to having students share summaries of their discussions.

00:40-00:50 Write Blessings

Provide each learner with a worksheet to fill out (found at the bottom of this lesson) that will guide them in answering questions that will lead up to them writing a blessing about the learning they have done over the course of the past three lessons. Allow students time to read through the questions on the worksheet and to look through the biblical text and commentaries. The teacher should walk around to see if any learners are struggling to answer any of the questions, as they should work through all of them, not just write the blessing immediately and be done.

00:50-1:00 Share blessings

Give students a chance to close the class by sharing their blessings with everyone whether it be a blessing they have gleaned from their learning, a blessing for someone who has not studied it yet and may try to approach it, or a blessing for the class for the learning they have done together. Once everyone has shared, allow students to reflect on the variety of blessings that have been offered. If there are no immediate reflections, the teacher can ask:

1. What is something you gained from another person's blessing today?
2. If there is a blessing that you feel you need to take with you from the group, what is it and why?

Write Your Own Bracha (Blessing)⁹

(to be used as a template for every post-text assessment)

6. What is something you learned about the **text** through the process of studying it?
7. What is something you found troubling in this text, if anything?
8. What is something you learned about **yourself** through the process of studying this text?
9. Having gone through this study process, what is something you would want to tell someone who is reading it for the first time?
10. What is a bracha you would write in response to studying this text? This could be a bracha you write for yourself, for God/the Divine, or for someone who is reading this text for the first time.

⁹ Unit 1, lesson Lesson 4 focuses on the idea of bracha. If you are choosing various lessons, I would recommend this lesson so that the idea of bracha can be properly scaffolded for the students.

Remember: a bracha is often translated to the word “blessing” in English. However the word blessing is often associated with something that is completely positive.

A bracha can be described as at least one of several things including praise, a hope for someone else, a gift, and something found in “an object that is hidden [*samui*] from the eye,” (BT Ta’anit 8b) there is something to uncover but that is not fully understood at the time of receipt.

In Jewish tradition a classic bracha often starts with the words “Blessed are You Adonai, Ruler of the Universe who...” However, there infinite variations of what a blessing could be. As we learned at the beginning of our course, Jacob asked the *eesh* to give him a bracha and in return the *eesh* asked for his name and said, “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but **Israel**, for you have **wrestled** with beings **divine** and human, and have prevailed” (*Genesis 32:27-29*).

Lesson 3.5 Troubling God in the Biblical Text-The Binding of Isaac (Genesis 22)

Enduring Understandings

1. We can hold God as holy even if God is morally or theologically troubling in the Akeida by choosing to challenge Torah text and wrestle with it.
2. Wrestling with God and/or God's actions is a fundamental part of the Torah study process.
3. By wrestling with God and God's actions, we can better understand our own conception of God according to our respective personal theologies.

Essential Questions

1. How is God holy?
2. Can we consider God holy if God is morally or theologically troubling within our belief system?
3. What can we learn about our personal theologies from analyzing troubling relationships with God?

Goals

1. Present the story of the Akeida (Binding of Isaac).
2. Provide space to consider many perspectives on the events of the Akeida.
3. Consider what the Akeida story tells us about God in the Torah.

Objectives (Participants will be able to...)

1. Explain the perspective of at least one character in the Akeida.
2. Explain in their own words what is troubling about what is taking place in the Akeida.
3. Question how someone could justify the morality or theology of the events in the Akeida.

Materials

- 1 source sheet per student (<https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/399994?lang=bi>)
- pens/pencils
- highlighters
- gavel (optional)
- notecards (1 per student)

Schedule

00:00-00:10 Would you rather...

Ask students: Would you rather give up air conditioning and heating for the rest of your life or give up the Internet for the rest of your life?

Ask students to come up with their own silly or wild would you rather questions. Take 3-4 student suggestions to discuss.

00:10-00:15 Introduction to the Binding of Isaac (also often known as the Akeida or Akeidat Yitzhak)

Teacher says: Although Abraham was not exactly given two would you rather options explicitly in the story we're going to study today, it did require him to think about some pretty intense extremes. Do I follow orders from God that I disagree with or do I disobey and risk failing God's test? Today we're going to read from the story of the Binding of Isaac, which is sometimes called the Akeida or Akeidat Yitzhak in Hebrew.

Pass out source sheets to students. (<https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/399994?lang=bi>)

Teacher explains: To situate ourselves in the biblical text (the Torah), we should understand what happens before and after this story. Just before this story, Abraham and Sarah had finally given birth to a son in their old age. They had a lot of trouble conceiving, but when they were almost 100 years old, their son Isaac was born. Before then, Abraham had another son named Ishmael with his maidservant, Hagar.

It would be helpful to create a timeline on a whiteboard to show what happened when.

1. Abraham and Sarah have trouble having a child
2. Abraham has a child named Ishmael with Hagar (his maidservant)
3. God wants to destroy the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, but Abraham argues with God to try to save the righteous people in it
4. Sarah gives birth to a son named Isaac
5. Sarah kicks Hagar and Ishmael out of their home
6. **Akeida**
7. Sarah dies

00:15-00:25 Reading on your own

Hand out source sheets and highlighters/pens to students along with source sheets (1 per student) so that they can read independently and identify what might be morally or theologically troubling here. By the end of the reading period, they should have some sort of response about what might be morally or theologically troubling in relation to God's role in this story.

Source Sheet link: <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/399994?lang=bi>

00:25-00:30 Clarifying Questions

Ask students if they have any clarifying questions (not big questions about what the text means morally and theologically, but rather questions that can be answered simply and in a few words so that you can better understand the p'shat or surface level meaning of the text (a term they should understand from previous lesson on PaRDeS).

00:30-00:50 Hold a trial

Someone is going to be put on trial for what has happened in the Binding of Isaac. Given what we have just learned about in the story, decide as a class who should be on trial and what their charge is.

The teacher should ask students to come up with the specific charge for this trial. To determine how this court case will run we need to identify the characters at play.

Depending on size of the class, use as many or as few characters on the list as possible:

*means this character needs to be present

-Abraham*

-Isaac*

-Sarah*

-2 servants

-G-d*

-Ram

-Judge

-lawyers defending Abraham*

-lawyers defending Isaac*

Give students about 5 minutes to learn their part so that they know what they might think about their perspective when being asked questions in the trial. Lawyers should work together during these 5 minutes to think of questions to ask different characters.

Trial (about 10 minutes) Start the trial proceedings in which the defendant is formally charged, Abraham, Isaac, Sarah, and G-d at least are called up to the stand to be interviewed by both lawyers. If there are enough students and there is enough time, other witnesses can be called up. In the meantime, they can assist the lawyers in coming up with questions to ask.

Meanwhile the judge should be writing down (or perhaps have help here) the different answers of each witness.

In the last 2 minutes of the trial, we will have closing statements from each side's lawyers that will sum up their arguments in about 4 sentences (no more than 1 minute each).

00:50-00:55 What do you think?

While the judge or judges are deliberating, ask each student to consider what they think according to their own opinion who should win the trial. Then the judge or judges can come back in and share their opinion, which will determine the outcome of the trial.

0:55-1:00 Closure: Predictions for next time

Ask students to each make predictions, which they will write down on note cards that we will look at next time and share out to the class about how they think people throughout history will find ways to reconcile how difficult this text morally and/or theologically. In other words,

how do you think people throughout history will try to justify what God and/or Abraham did in this story?

Lesson 3.6 Wrestling with God in the Commentaries-The Binding of Isaac (Akeida)

Enduring Understandings

1. We can hold God as holy even if God is morally or theologically troubling in the Akeida by choosing to challenge Torah text and wrestle with it.
2. Wrestling with God and/or God's actions is a fundamental part of the Torah study process.
3. By wrestling with God and God's actions, we can better understand our own conception of God according to our respective personal theologies.

Essential Questions

1. How is God holy?
2. Can we consider God holy if God is morally or theologically troubling within our belief system?
3. What can we learn about our personal theologies from analyzing troubling relationships with God?

Goals

1. Encourage struggling and arguing with the existing interpretations of the Akeida.
2. Introduce multiple interpretations of the Akeida that have come out of generations of commentary.
3. Present the idea that the way we approach morality decisions and theology inform how we will approach and understand the Akeida.

Objectives (Participants will be able to...)

1. Explain how they approach a morally difficult decision.
2. Summarize one piece of commentary on the Akeida.
3. Articulate how one of their approaches to morality/theology informs their understanding of the text.

Materials

- Commentary print outs
- pens/pencils

Scripted Schedule

00:00-00:10 Set Induction

Teacher asks:

1. How do you react when faced with morally troubling/difficult decisions?
2. What does your thought process look like?
3. When was a time in your life or in someone else's life that you witnessed when you or they were powerless to someone else's rules/laws/instructions?

Ask students these questions. If they need time to think about it, give them pens and paper to write for a minute or two.

00:10-00:15 Review the Story

Teacher explains: We are going to continue thinking about the Akeida this week, but this time through the lens of different commentators throughout history. Before we jump in, let's all review the story we'll be thinking about.

Ask students to re-read their copies of the Akeida story from the week before. Ideally they will have their copy from the last class, as they may have taken notes or highlighted parts of the story.

Remind them of the following timeline from last class by writing it on the board:

1. Abraham and Sarah have trouble having a child
2. Abraham has a child named Ishmael with Hagar (his maidservant)
3. God wants to destroy the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, but Abraham argues with God to try to save the righteous people in it
4. Sarah gives birth to a son named Isaac
5. Sarah kicks Hagar and Ishmael out of their home
6. **Akeida**
7. Sarah dies

00:15-00:25 Discuss

Teacher asks: What would have to be true for this request from God (to sacrifice one's son) to be morally or theologically sound to you? Is it possible?

Follow up question: What do you think the moral of the story is supposed to be? To what extent can you agree with that message?

00:25-00:35 Gallery walk with Commentaries

Teacher says: We just spent some time thinking morally/theologically troubling decisions. We are going to do a gallery walk (*just like we did for the Creation stories*¹⁰) with several different commentaries on this story about the Akeida. Last week you made some predictions about how people might try to make sense of what happened during the Binding of Isaac (the Akeida). See if any of your ideas are in these commentaries. Maybe there will also be some ideas that are new to you. Each person's commentary will come with an explanation about where some of the commentator's assumptions might come from. Try to make your way around the room so that you can start to learn about all four of these commentaries. But you will end up focusing on one that is interesting to you.

See the end of this lesson for the commentaries to print out and post around the room. There should be several copies of each commentary so that more than one student can take one.

00:35-00:45 Dive deeply into one commentary

¹⁰ Only include if this is being used as the full curriculum guide, not a one-off series

Tell students to pick one commentary that they will think about deeply. They can take the sheet with them back to their seat to take notes. Although it is not necessary to make sure that every commentary is covered, try to get some variety amongst the class so that they can hear a range of ideas.

Once students feel like they have a grasp of the piece of commentary they should consider the following prompt:

According to this commentary, what is the moral of the story? To what extent can you get on board with it and why?

00:45-00:50 Share out

Have several students share out some of their responses to the above prompt to the big group by having them share a summary of what the commentary aims to tell us and what assumptions might be part of it.

00:50-1:00 Note Card Reflection

Bring out the notecards from last session that have their predictions for how they think people throughout the generations might make sense of the Akeida. Give each student their respective note card and have them reflect on how they think they may have arrived at this prediction.

Rabbi David Hartman (from his article “The Akeida: A Window Into God’s Humanity and Our Own”¹¹

(Orthodox American-Israeli rabbi who lived from 1931-2013, Modern)

“In attempting to understand the God of the Akeida [Binding of Isaac], and what the Akeida might mean for us today, **I have found it helpful to look at God as a parent...**

God made the covenant with Abraham. But after He did so, He got nervous, He suddenly felt scared. He has given over enormous power to human beings, and He felt His ego being threatened...

When God says, “Take your son,” Abraham understands that the God who is speaking – the God of the Akeida – is a God who experiences His own authority as under siege...

Who is this God that must pray to human beings for help in overcoming His impulses? Who is the God that needs to ask human beings to remind Him of compassion? The Midrash illuminates for us the reality of a God who is struggling to reconcile the opposing forces within Him. It is my view that the Akeida is a moment of God’s struggle within Himself. God tests Abraham because of God’s own internal difficulty balancing justice with compassion, fear with love.

How can we talk about God experiencing an internal struggle? The great contemporary biblical scholar Yohanan Muffs argues that it is only in human terms that we can most authentically grasp the nature of the divine. I share Muffs’ view that God’s humanity, so to speak, is essential to a true understanding of Him. Yet it is not only twentieth century thinkers such as Muffs and Abraham Joshua Heschel and I who have portrayed God in starkly mortal terms. Drawing on the tradition of the Bible and the Midrash, the rabbis of the rabbinic period routinely discussed God as having an interior emotional life. While this approach did not fit in with medieval philosophy, which maintains that God cannot take on any human form, that any change or emotion in God is a sign of imperfection, the great figures of the rabbinic period were not frightened to speak of God in the language of human psychology.

It is this tradition that empowers me to think of God in terms of psychodynamic maturation: to cite His shift from being a figure of complete and total authority to a figure who works in concert with human beings. It is the deep rabbinical tradition of ascribing human qualities to God that enables me to see a God who decides to become accountable to human beings.

And it is this precedent of anthropomorphism [humanizing] in the rabbinic canon that informs my view of the God of the Akeida as a parent struggling with his identity. It is the rich tradition of rabbinic anthropomorphism that enables us to see the God of the Akeida as grappling with the competing values within Him. He loves Abraham, and He has planned great things for him, but God is beset by his own internal dilemmas, by his own conflicting emotions. This is the God of the Midrash, the God who says to Moses, Hold me back, Moses, I’m losing myself.

If this is a bold way of discussing the divine, it is no bolder than the way the Bible itself discusses God. Rather than diminish God in our eyes, looking at God in human terms enables us to understand Him on a deeper level. The God who experiences emotion, who experiences internal struggle, is a God who can enter into a relationship of mutual accountability with human beings. The God who experiences His own psychodynamic reality is the God of covenantal spirituality.”

¹¹ <https://www.hartman.org.il/the-akeida-a-window-into-gods-humanity-and-our-own-2/>

Elie Wiesel's words as told by Rabbi Pini Dunner¹²

(Elie Wiesel was a Holocaust survivor, author, political activist and Nobel Laureate)

(Rabbi Pini Dunner is a contemporary Orthodox Rabbi in Los Angeles, CA)

“The late Elie Wiesel offered a brilliant if somewhat jarring insight into this episode – an insight only a Holocaust survivor could conjure up and get away with.

The Akeida may have started out as God testing Abraham, he suggests, but Abraham quickly turned the tables and turned it into a test of his own – a test on God.

By fully and enthusiastically complying with God's command to sacrifice his son, it was as if Abraham was saying: “I defy You, Lord. I shall submit to Your will – but let us see whether You shall go to the end, whether You shall remain passive and remain silent when the life of my son — who is also Your son — is at stake.”

Wiesel goes on to offer a compelling scenario. In the final analysis, there were three victories for Abraham as a direct result of the Akeida. The first was that Abraham forced God to change His mind, as it were, and spare Isaac. The second was that Abraham forced God to involve Himself in the Akeida endgame, by rejecting the agency of the angel messenger. And the third was that Abraham compelled God to allow this story to be invoked whenever his descendants erred before Him, as a reminder of what happened, and to ensure His mercy.

On Rosh Hashana we acknowledge God's control over every aspect of our lives and we declare ourselves to be totally in His hands. By doing so, we deliberately emulate Abraham's calculated blind faith at the Akeida, reminding God that He doesn't really want us to suffer, just as he didn't want Isaac to die.

The paradox of Abraham's compliance with God's instruction to sacrifice Isaac, is that by leaving his son's fate in God's hands, he was challenging God to come to the rescue. As it turns out, it was precisely this blind faith that turned him from being a helpless victim into the hero of faith who was assured of God's help even in the darkest moment.”

¹² <https://rabbidunner.com/who-was-being-tested-at-the-akeida/>

Rav Yosef Albo (in Sefer Haikkarim)
(Spanish Medieval Rabbi of the 16th century)

“Should you ask, since the Almighty knew whether Abraham would withstand his trial or not, what was the reason for imposing on him these sufferings? The answer is that the reward for potential good is not the same as that for actual good deeds. “Let not him that girdeth on his armour boast himself as he that putteth it off (1 Kings 20, 11), he who has not performed deeds of valour, who is prepared for battle cannot be compared to the one who has actually fought and performed these deeds and already “putteth off” his armour. For this reason the Holy One blessed be He often inflicts suffering on the righteous in order to habituate it to them so that their outward actions conform to their inner character. The deed will intensify love of God since every action leaves its own indelible mark on the performer. This practice in good actions is terms *nisayon* [Hebrew for “experience” or “test”]”

Dr. Nehama Leibowitz

(1905-1997 Latvian-Israeli Modern Biblical Scholar)

“Abraham felt no inner compulsion to do what he did. No Divine command existed obliging him. Every moment of those three days he could have excused himself and withdrawn saying: “But surely thou hast already told me that “in Isaac shall seed be called to thee.” And he did not. It was this which distinguished him from all martyrs of Jewish history, since they acted in response to a bounden duty to give their lives, rather than transgress the will of God. Abraham performed his sacrifice because, as [Rav Yosef] Albo points out, “no other aim existed in his heart but to do the will of God”

But there was still opportunity for Satan to accuse and obstruct after the sacrifice just as before. Surely, he could argue that the same self-sacrifice and devotion displayed by Abraham in sacrificing his son was shared by the heathen idolaters in giving their sons in human sacrifice to Molech [pagan God of the region/time] Why was Abraham’s act different? It could admittedly be answered that what the idolaters performed out of primitive fear to placate their gods, Abraham did out of love, without any expectation of reward.

Midrash Tanchuma, Vayera 18:1

(Medieval Midrash from 500-800 CE from Rabbi Tanchuma in Babylon/Italy/Israel)¹³

And it came to pass after these words that God did prove Abraham (Gen. 22:1). What words were spoken? Ishmael had said to Isaac: I am superior to you, for I underwent circumcision at the age of thirteen, and underwent the pain (that accompanied it), while you were merely eight days old at the time of your circumcision and could feel no pain. Why, even if your father had wished to slaughter you, you would not have known the difference. If you had been thirteen years old, you could not have tolerated the anguish that accompanies circumcision. Isaac retorted: That is not so! Even if the Holy One, blessed be He, should command my father: "Slaughter thy son Isaac," I would not resist. Immediately thereafter Scripture states: *And it came to pass after these things that God did prove [nisa] Abraham.*

¹³ https://www.sefaria.org/Midrash_Tanchuma

Chizkuni on Genesis 22:1
(French Medieval Rabbi of the 13th Century)

Another interpretation, one which places the emphasis on the words נסה את אברהם, “He tested Avraham.” Avraham was not tested in order for G-d to convince Himself of his willingness to offer up his beloved son, seeing that such matters are known to Him, Who is omniscient; he was tested by the attribute of Justice which had dared question the degree of loyalty he could summon when so tested. Passing this test successfully would convince the people around him of the absolute obedience to any command G-d would issue to him. There was no way the nations of the world could challenge his faith thereafter.

Ibn Ezra on Genesis 22:1
(Spanish Medieval Rabbi of the 12th century)

THAT GOD DID PROVE ABRAHAM... Saadiah Gaon says that *did prove* means that God tested Abraham in order to demonstrate his piety to mankind; furthermore, he interprets *for now I know that thou art a God-fearing man* (v. 12) to mean that now I have made known to all that thou art a God-fearing man. But didn't Saadiah know that even Abraham's young men were not present when he bound Isaac and placed him on the altar?⁶ Cf. verse 5. *In other words, no one was there to witness his act.* Others say that *and offer him there for a burnt offering* is to be interpreted as: bring him up to the mountain; this will be considered as if you brought him up as a burnt offering.⁷ *The word translated as offer him { ve-ha'alehu) literally means bring him up.* However, Abraham did not understand his prophetic vision⁸ *He thought that God actually wanted him to offer his son as a burnt offering.* and hurried to sacrifice Isaac. God then told him, "I did not ask you to slay Isaac."

Still others say that God told Abraham: act as if you were bringing him up as a burnt offering. We find a similar occurrence in connection with the prophet Jeremiah, who was commanded to *Go unto the house of the Rechabites...and give them wine to drink* (Jer. 35:2).⁹ *The Rechabites were foresworn by Rechab from drinking wine (Jer., Chap. 35). When God told Jeremiah, and give them wine to drink he did not intend that Jeremiah actually make them drink. Similarly God's intention was not that Abraham actually sacrifice Isaac. He wanted Abraham to make all the preparations necessary for the sacrifice, i.e., to bind Isaac, lay him on the altar, etc. He was to do everything as if he were offering him as a sacrifice.* Now these geonim offered the above interpretations because they held that it is not possible that God would issue a command and then take it back.¹⁰ *God is unchangeable; hence his mind, too, is unchangeable. Therefore they offered the latter two interpretations.* However, they overlooked the fact that God took the firstborn to serve Him and after a year replaced them with the Levites.¹¹ *The first-born were at first sanctified to God to minister before him (Ex. 13:2). However, the next year the Levites took their place. Cf. Num. 3:40-44.* In reality all questions are removed by Scripture's first stating that *God did prove Abraham.*¹² *God did not change His mind. He never intended for Abraham to sacrifice Isaac.* The reason God tested Abraham was in order to reward him.

3.7 Making Meaning and Blessing for Ourselves-The Binding of Isaac

Enduring Understandings

1. We can hold God as holy even if God is morally or theologically troubling in the Akeida by choosing to challenge Torah text and wrestle with it.
2. Wrestling with God and/or God's actions is a fundamental part of the Torah study process.
3. By wrestling with God and God's actions, we can better understand our own conception of God according to our respective personal theologies.

Essential Questions

1. How is God holy?
2. Can we consider God holy if God is morally or theologically troubling within our belief system?
3. What can we learn about our personal theologies from analyzing troubling relationships with God?
4. How can wrestling with God be a blessing?

Goals

1. Present multiple commentaries on the Akeida as possible ideas for understanding the Torah text.
2. Provide space for learners to create a blessing out of their new understandings about the troubling text.
3. Challenge students to consider how interpretations from commentary inform their concept of God in Torah.

Objectives (Participants will be able to...)

1. Critique an idea in at least one commentary on the Akeida.
2. Create a blessing that demonstrates a newfound understanding of Akeida.
3. Explain, with the help of their understanding of the commentaries, how God can be seen as holy in the Akeida.

Materials

- commentaries from week before (in folders)
- worksheet (1 per student)
- pens/pencils
- blessing worksheet (1 per student)

Schedule

00:00-00:10 Set Induction: What would you do?

Ask students: If you had to put yourself in the shoes of Abraham, God, Isaac, or Sarah (let the students choose), what would you do in the scenario of the Akeida?

00:10-00:00:15 Review Commentaries

Give students a few minutes to re-familiarize themselves with the commentaries from last week. They should focus on the one that they did a deep dive on last week. Tell students that they will be critiquing some of these commentaries and so they should think about the arguments behind them as they re-familiarize themselves.

00:15-00:25 Critique Commentaries

Students should consider the following questions about a piece of commentary that was studied:

3. What could make this untrue?
4. How can this be true for some and not others?

00:25-00:40 PaRDeS

Either with a partner or on their own, each learner should use materials to consider the following question:

Teacher asks: Given everything we have learned in the past few lessons on this text, is God still holy? If so, how is God holy? Use the PaRDeS study method (discussed in Lesson 1.1) and consider commentaries we studied to think about this question.

Reserve 2-3 minutes to have students share summaries of their discussions.

00:40-00:50 Write Blessings

Provide each learner with a worksheet to fill out (found at the bottom of this lesson) that will guide them in answering questions that will lead up to them writing a blessing about the learning they have done over the course of the past three lessons. Allow students time to read through the questions on the worksheet and to look through the biblical text and commentaries.

The teacher should walk around to see if any learners are struggling to answer any of the questions, as they should work through all of them. Note: they should not just write the blessing immediately and be done.

00:50-1:00 Share blessings

Give students a chance to close the class by sharing their blessings with everyone whether it be a blessing they have gleaned from their learning, a blessing for someone who has not studied it yet and may try to approach it, or a blessing for the class for the learning they have done together. Once everyone has shared, allow students to reflect on the variety of blessings that have been offered. If there are no immediate reflections, the teacher can ask:

4. What is something you gained from another person's blessing today?
5. If there is a blessing that you feel you need to take with you from the group, what is it and why?

Write Your Own Bracha (Blessing)¹⁴

(to be used as a template for every post-text assessment)

1. What is something you learned about the **text** through the process of studying it?
2. What is something you found troubling in this text, if anything?
3. What is something you learned about **yourself** through the process of studying this text?
4. Having gone through this study process, what is something you would want to tell someone who is reading it for the first time?
5. What is a bracha you would write in response to studying this text? This could be a bracha you write for yourself, for God/the Divine, or for someone who is reading this text for the first time.

¹⁴ Unit 1, lesson Lesson 4 (Lesson 1.4) focuses on the idea of bracha. If you are choosing various lessons, I would recommend this lesson so that the idea of bracha can be properly scaffolded for the students.

Remember: a bracha is often translated to the word “blessing” in English. However the word blessing is often associated with something that is completely positive.

A bracha can be described as at least one of several things including praise, a hope for someone else, a gift, and something found in “an object that is hidden [*samui*] from the eye,” (BT Ta’anit 8b) there is something to uncover but that is not fully understood at the time of receipt.

In Jewish tradition a classic bracha often starts with the words “Blessed are You Adonai, Ruler of the Universe who...” However, there infinite variations of what a blessing could be. As we learned at the beginning of our course, Jacob asked the *eesh* to give him a bracha and in return the *eesh* asked for his name and said, “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but **Israel**, for you have **wrestled** with beings **divine** and human, and have prevailed” (*Genesis 32:27-29*).

Lesson 3.8 Troubling God in the Biblical Text-Chosenness and Intermarriage (Deuteronomy 7:1-11)

Enduring Understandings

1. We can hold God as holy even if God is morally or theologically troubling in Deuteronomy 7:1-11 by choosing to challenge Torah text and wrestle with it.
2. Wrestling with God and/or God's actions is a fundamental part of the Torah study process.
3. By wrestling with God and God's actions, we can better understand our own conception of God according to our respective personal theologies.

Essential Questions

1. How is God holy?
2. Can we consider God holy if God is morally or theologically troubling within our belief system?
3. What can we learn about our personal theologies from analyzing troubling relationships with God?

Goals

1. Present the story of Deuteronomy 7:1-11.
2. Challenge students to consider troubling facets of this story.
3. Consider what Deuteronomy 7:1-11 tells us about God in the Torah.

Objectives (Participants will be able to...)

1. Articulate in their own words what one of the messages of Deuteronomy 7:1-11 could be.
2. Explain in their own words what might be troubling in Deuteronomy 7:1-11.
3. Assess how someone could justify the morality or theology of the events in Deuteronomy 7:1-11.

Sefaria Source Sheet: <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/405008?editor=1>

Lesson 3.9 Wrestling with God in the Commentaries-Chosenness and Intermarriage

Enduring Understandings

1. We can hold God as holy even if God is morally or theologically troubling in Deuteronomy 7:1-11 by choosing to challenge Torah text and wrestle with it.
2. Wrestling with God and/or God's actions is a fundamental part of the Torah study process.
3. By wrestling with God and God's actions, we can better understand our own conception of God according to our respective personal theologies.

Essential Questions

1. How is God holy?
2. Can we consider God holy if God is morally or theologically troubling within our belief system?
3. What can we learn about our personal theologies from analyzing troubling relationships with God?

Goals

1. Encourage struggling and arguing with the existing interpretations of the Deuteronomy 7:1-11.
2. Introduce multiple interpretations of the Deuteronomy 7:1-11 that have come out of generations of commentary.
3. Present the idea that the way we approach morality decisions and theology inform how we will approach and understand Deuteronomy 7:1-11.

Objectives (Participants will be able to...)

1. Summarize one piece of commentary on Deuteronomy 7:1-11.
2. Create a working definition of "chosenness."
3. Articulate how their understanding of "chosenness" affects how they understand the text.

Potential Commentaries:

Ibn Ezra

On Deuteronomy 7:6

(Spanish Medieval Commentator, 1089-1167CE)

HIS OWN TREASURE. I have already explained the meaning of the word *segullah* (treasure). It means a desirable thing to which nothing comparable is to be found anywhere. *Segullat* (treasure)¹¹ *Literally, treasure of. in and treasure such as kings...have as their own* (Eccles. 2:8) is similar.

Sforno

On Deuteronomy 7:6

(Italian Medieval Commentator, 1470-1550CE)

אתה, כי עם קדוש אתה, and it is not appropriate for you to desecrate your sanctity through women committed to alien deities, who will bear you children that are already genetically corrupted. It is this that the prophet Maleachi 2,11 had in mind when he spoke of חלל יהודה קדש ה' אשר אהב ובעל בת נכר, "for Yehudah profaned what is holy to the Lord, what He desires, by sleeping with daughters of alien gods."

Lesson 3.10 Making Meaning and Blessing for Ourselves-Chosenness and Intermarriage

Enduring Understandings

1. We can hold God as holy even if God is morally or theologically troubling in the Deuteronomy 7:1-11 by choosing to challenge Torah text and wrestle with it.
2. Wrestling with God and/or God's actions is a fundamental part of the Torah study process.
3. By wrestling with God and God's actions, we can better understand our own conception of God according to our respective personal theologies.

Essential Questions

1. How is God holy?
2. Can we consider God holy if God is morally or theologically troubling within our belief system?
3. What can we learn about our personal theologies from analyzing troubling relationships with God?
4. How can wrestling with God be a blessing?

Goals

1. Present multiple commentaries on the Deuteronomy 7:1-11 as possible ideas for understanding the Torah text.
2. Provide space for learners to create a blessing out of their new understandings about the troubling text.
3. Challenge students to consider how interpretations from commentary inform their concept of God in Torah.

Objectives (Participants will be able to...)

1. Critique an idea in at least one commentary on the Deuteronomy 7:1-11.
2. Create a blessing that demonstrates a newfound understanding of Deuteronomy 7:1-11.
3. Explain, with the help of their understanding of the commentaries, how God can be seen as holy in Deuteronomy 7:1-11.

Write Your Own Bracha (Blessing)¹⁵

1. What is something you learned about the **text** through the process of studying it?
2. What is something you found troubling in this text, if anything?
3. What is something you learned about **yourself** through the process of studying this text?
4. Having gone through this study process, what is something you would want to tell someone who is reading it for the first time?
5. What is a bracha you would write in response to studying this text? This could be a bracha you write for yourself, for God/the Divine, or for someone who is reading this text for the first time.

¹⁵ Unit 1, lesson Lesson 4 (Lesson 1.4) focuses on the idea of bracha. If you are choosing various lessons, I would recommend this lesson so that the idea of bracha can be properly scaffolded for the students.

Remember: a bracha is often translated to the word “blessing” in English. However the word blessing is often associated with something that is completely positive.

A bracha can be described as at least one of several things including praise, a hope for someone else, a gift, and something found in “an object that is hidden [*samui*] from the eye,” (BT Ta’anit 8b) there is something to uncover but that is not fully understood at the time of receipt.

In Jewish tradition a classic bracha often starts with the words “Blessed are You Adonai, Ruler of the Universe who...” However, there infinite variations of what a blessing could be. As we learned at the beginning of our course, Jacob asked the *eesh* to give him a bracha and in return the *eesh* asked for his name and said, “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but **Israel**, for you have **wrestled** with beings **divine** and human, and have prevailed” (*Genesis 32:27-29*).

Unit 4: Troubling Relationships with Commandments

Unit 4 Enduring Understandings

1. Our understanding of Commandments teaches us about our own moral or theological selves.
2. Commandments can be morally or theologically troubling and still contain holiness.
3. Understanding the reactions of interpreters from across generations to Commandments can be helpful to developing our own understanding of and approach to Commandments.

Unit 4 Essential Questions

1. How are Commandments holy?
2. Can we consider Commandments holy if they are morally or theologically troubling within our belief system?
3. What can we learn about ourselves from analyzing Commandments through multiple generations of interpretive responses?
4. How can wrestling with Commandments be a blessing?

Lesson 4.1 How are Commandments Holy?

Enduring Understandings

1. Our understanding of Commandments teaches us about our own moral or theological selves.
2. Commandments can be morally or theologically troubling and still contain holiness.
3. Understanding the reactions of interpreters from across generations to Commandments can be helpful to developing our own understanding of and approach to Commandments.

Essential Questions

1. How are Commandments holy?
2. Can we consider Commandments holy if they are morally or theologically troubling within our belief system?
3. What can we learn about ourselves from analyzing Commandments through multiple generations of interpretive responses?

Goals:

1. Consider what makes Commandments holy.
2. Compare and contrast commandments to secular laws.
3. Examine as a group what it means to be in relationship with Commandments.

Objectives (Participants will be able to...)

1. Describe at least two qualities that make Commandments holy.
2. Compare and contrast at least one secular law to at least one Commandment on related issues.
3. Articulate what a relationship with Commandments could look like.

Potential Activities:

1. Compare and contrast the 10 Commandments to American laws (i.e. Constitution and/or Bill of Rights), trying to decide what makes them distinctly “Jewish” or “American,” respectively.

Lesson 4.2 Troubling Commandments in the Biblical Text-The Rebellious Child (Deuteronomy 21:18-21)

Enduring Understandings

1. Our understanding of Commandments teaches us about our own moral or theological selves.
2. Deuteronomy 21:18-21 demonstrates that Commandments can be morally or theologically troubling and still contain holiness.
3. Understanding the reactions of interpreters from across generations to Commandments can be helpful to developing our own understanding of and approach to Commandments.

Essential Questions

1. How are Commandments holy?
2. Can we consider Commandments holy if they are morally or theologically troubling within our belief system?
3. What can we learn about ourselves from analyzing Commandments through multiple generations of interpretive responses?

Goals

1. Present the story of Deuteronomy 21:18-21.
2. Challenge students to consider troubling facets of this story.
3. Consider what Deuteronomy 21:18-21 tells us about the holiness of Commandments.

Objectives (Participants will be able to...)

1. Articulate in their own words what one of the messages of Deuteronomy 21:18-21 could be.
2. Explain in their own words what might be troubling in Deuteronomy 21:18-21.
3. Assess how someone could justify the morality or theology of the events in Deuteronomy 21:18-21.

Sefaria.org Source Sheet: <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/405431?editor=1>

Lesson 4.3 Wrestling with Commandments in the Commentaries-The Rebellious Child

Enduring Understandings

1. Our understanding of Commandments teaches us about our own moral or theological selves.
2. Deuteronomy 21:18-21 demonstrates that Commandments can be morally or theologically troubling and still contain holiness.
3. Understanding the reactions of interpreters from across generations to Commandments can be helpful to developing our own understanding of and approach to Commandments.

Essential Questions

1. How are Commandments holy?
2. Can we consider Commandments holy if they are morally or theologically troubling within our belief system?
3. What can we learn about ourselves from analyzing Commandments through multiple generations of interpretive responses?

Goals

1. Encourage struggling and arguing with the existing interpretations of the Deuteronomy 21:18-21.
2. Introduce multiple interpretations of the Deuteronomy 21:18-21 that have come out of generations of commentary.
3. Present the idea that the way we approach morality decisions and theology inform how we will approach and understand Deuteronomy 21:18-21.

Objectives (Participants will be able to...):

1. Summarize one piece of commentary on Deuteronomy 21:18-21.
2. Justify the law in Deuteronomy 21:18-21 using at least one commentary.
3. Articulate how their personal relationship to Commandment affects how they understand the text.

Potential Commentaries:

Mishna Sanhedrin 8:4

(Postbiblical Oral Law, ~200CE)

If his father wishes to have him punished but his mother does not wish that, or if his father does not wish to have him punished but his mother wishes that, he does not become a stubborn and rebellious son, unless they both wish that he be punished. Rabbi Yehuda says: If his mother was not suited for his father, the two being an inappropriate match, as the Gemara will explain, he does not become a stubborn and rebellious son. If one of the parents was without hands, or lame, or mute, or blind, or deaf, their son does not become a stubborn and rebellious son, as it is stated: "Then shall his father and his mother lay hold of him, and bring

him out to the elders of his city and to the gate of his place. And they shall say to the elders of his city: This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious; he will not obey our voices; he is a glutton and a drunkard” (Deuteronomy 21:19–20). The Sages derive: “Then shall his father and his mother lay hold of him,” but not people without hands, who cannot do this. “And bring him out,” but not lame people, who cannot walk. “And they shall say,” but not mutes. “This son of ours,” but not blind people, who cannot point to their son and say “this.” “He will not obey our voices,” but not deaf people, who cannot hear whether or not he declined to obey them. After he is brought before the elders of the city, he is admonished before three people and then they flog him for having stolen. If he sins again, he is judged by a court of twenty-three judges, but he is not stoned unless the first three judges before whom he had been flogged are present there, as it is stated: “This son of ours,” this is the son who was already flogged before you. If the rebellious son ran away before he was sentenced, and afterward, before he was caught, his lower beard grew around, he is exempt from the death penalty. Once his lower beard grows around his genitals, he can no longer be judged as a stubborn and rebellious son. But if he ran away only after he was sentenced, and afterward, by the time he was caught, his lower beard had already grown around, he is liable to receive the death penalty. Once he is sentenced to death his sentence remains in force.

Mishna Sanhedrin 8:5

A stubborn and rebellious son is sentenced to death not because of the severity of the transgression that he already committed but on account of his ultimate end, because a boy of his nature will grow up to lead an immoral life, and it is better that he should die while he is still innocent, before causing excessive harm, and not die after he becomes guilty. This is because the death of the wicked is beneficial to them, because they can no longer sin, and it is also beneficial to the world, which is now rid of those who do it harm. Conversely, the death of the righteous is detrimental to them, as they can no longer engage in the performance of mitzvot, and it is also detrimental to the world, as the righteous are now absent from it.

For Contemporary commentary see: <https://opentemple.org/the-curse-and-opportunity-of-the-rebellious-child-ki-teitzei/>

Lesson 4.4 Making Meaning and Blessing for Ourselves-The Rebellious Child

Enduring Understandings

1. Our understanding of Commandments teaches us about our own moral or theological selves.
2. Deuteronomy 21:18-21 demonstrates that Commandments can be morally or theologically troubling and still contain holiness.
3. Understanding the reactions of interpreters from across generations to Commandments can be helpful to developing our own understanding of and approach to Commandments.

Essential Questions

1. How are Commandments holy?
2. Can we consider Commandments holy if they are morally or theologically troubling within our belief system?
3. What can we learn about ourselves from analyzing Commandments through multiple generations of interpretive responses?
4. How can wrestling with Commandments be a blessing?

Goals

1. Present multiple commentaries on the Deuteronomy 21:18-21 as possible ideas for understanding the Torah text.
2. Provide space for learners to create a blessing out of their new understandings about the troubling text.
3. Challenge students to consider how interpretations from commentary inform their concept of the holiness of Commandments.

Objectives (Participants will be able to...)

1. Critique an idea in at least one commentary on the Deuteronomy 21:18-21.
2. Create a blessing that demonstrates a newfound understanding of Deuteronomy 21:18-21.
3. Explain, with the help of their understanding of the commentaries, whether Commandments can be seen as holy in Deuteronomy 21:18-21.

Write Your Own Bracha (Blessing)¹⁶

1. What is something you learned about the **text** through the process of studying it?
2. What is something you found troubling in this text, if anything?
3. What is something you learned about **yourself** through the process of studying this text?
4. Having gone through this study process, what is something you would want to tell someone who is reading it for the first time?
5. What is a bracha you would write in response to studying this text? This could be a bracha you write for yourself, for God/the Divine, or for someone who is reading this text for the first time.

¹⁶ Unit 1, lesson Lesson 4 (Lesson 1.4) focuses on the idea of bracha. If you are choosing various lessons, I would recommend this lesson so that the idea of bracha can be properly scaffolded for the students.

Remember: a bracha is often translated to the word “blessing” in English. However the word blessing is often associated with something that is completely positive.

A bracha can be described as at least one of several things including praise, a hope for someone else, a gift, and something found in “an object that is hidden [*samui*] from the eye,” (BT Ta’anit 8b) there is something to uncover but that is not fully understood at the time of receipt.

In Jewish tradition a classic bracha often starts with the words “Blessed are You Adonai, Ruler of the Universe who...” However, there infinite variations of what a blessing could be. As we learned at the beginning of our course, Jacob asked the *eesh* to give him a bracha and in return the *eesh* asked for his name and said, “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but **Israel**, for you have **wrestled** with beings **divine** and human, and have prevailed” (*Genesis 32:27-29*).

Lesson 4.5 Troubling Commandments in the Biblical Text- Ban on Homosexuality (Leviticus 18:22)

Enduring Understandings

1. Our understanding of Commandments teaches us about our own moral or theological selves.
2. Leviticus 18:22 demonstrates that Commandments can be morally or theologically troubling and still contain holiness.
3. Understanding the reactions of interpreters from across generations to Commandments can be helpful to developing our own understanding of and approach to Commandments.

Essential Questions

1. How are Commandments holy?
2. Can we consider Commandments holy if they are morally or theologically troubling within our belief system?
3. What can we learn about ourselves from analyzing Commandments through multiple generations of interpretive responses?

Goals

1. Present the story of Leviticus 18:22.
2. Challenge students to consider troubling facets of this story.
3. Consider what Leviticus 18:22 tells us about the holiness of Commandments.

Objectives (Participants will be able to...)

1. Articulate in their own words what one of the messages of Leviticus 18:22 could be.
2. Explain in their own words what might be troubling in Leviticus 18:22.
3. Assess how someone could justify the morality or theology of the events in Leviticus 18:22.

Sefaria.org Source Sheet: <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/405441?editor=1>

Lesson 4.6 Wrestling with Commandments in the Commentaries- Ban on Homosexuality

Enduring Understandings

1. Our understanding of Commandments teaches us about our own moral or theological selves.
2. Leviticus 18:22 demonstrates that Commandments can be morally or theologically troubling and still contain holiness.
3. Understanding the reactions of interpreters from across generations to Commandments can be helpful to developing our own understanding of and approach to Commandments.

Essential Questions

1. How are Commandments holy?
2. Can we consider Commandments holy if they are morally or theologically troubling within our belief system?
3. What can we learn about ourselves from analyzing Commandments through multiple generations of interpretive responses?

Goals

1. Encourage struggling and arguing with the existing interpretations of the Leviticus 18:22.
2. Introduce multiple interpretations of the Leviticus 18:22 that have come out of generations of commentary.
3. Present the idea that the way we approach morality decisions and theology inform how we will approach and understand Leviticus 18:22.

Objectives (Participants will be able to...):

1. Summarize one piece of commentary on Leviticus 18:22.
2. Justify the law in Leviticus 18:22 using at least one commentary.
3. Articulate how their personal relationship to Commandment affects how they understand the text.

Potential Commentaries:

Ramban (aka Nachmanides)

(Spanish Medieval Commentator, 1194-1270)

On Leviticus 18:22

“Now the reason for the prohibitions against lying carnally with a male,³⁷⁷Verse 22. or an animal,³⁷⁸Verse 23. is well-known, as it is an abominable act and is not for the preservation of the human species, because [the copulation] of [male and male or of] man and animal will not beget offspring. And Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra commented:³⁷⁷Verse 22. “Since we find [Lot’s daughter using] the expression, *Behold, ‘shachavti’* (I lay) yesternight with my father,³⁷⁹Genesis 19:34. [and she did not say, *nishkavti*, in the passive, or “Behold, *shachav imi avi*, — my father lay with me,” this shows that the term *shachav*, although in the active form, refers to the

person who commits that act as well as the passive partner who permits herself or himself to be thus abused]; thus it follows that the verse, *And with a male 'lo thishkav' (thou shalt not lie)*,³⁷⁷ Verse 22. constitutes a prohibition both against the one who actively commits pederasty, and against the one who permits himself to be thus abused.” [Thus far are the words of Ibn Ezra.] But if it be as Ibn Ezra said, why is the woman not included in the verse, *And thou shalt not lie with any beast*,³⁷⁸ Verse 23. [and it is clear that she is not so included from the fact that Scripture had to continue, *Neither shall any woman stand before a beast, to lie down thereto*],³⁷⁸ Verse 23. for women are included in all admonitions of the Torah? Rather, the use of the expression, *Behold, 'shachavti' (I lay) yesternight with my father*³⁷⁹ Genesis 19:34. is due to the fact that it was Lot's daughters who, through lying with him, [were instrumental in that affair] in order to beget seed of him. As is known, the seed comes either from the movement of the whole body, just as foam is formed in the mouths of galloping horses, or it is brought forth in the veins nearby [the sexual organ], where it gathers by the continuing motion thereof until it is emitted. Were they then not to have lain with Lot, his seed would not have come forth, for in his drunkenness he was like a silent stone.”

The Torah: A Women's Commentary (page 692)

(Edited by Rabbis Tamara Eskenazi and Andrea Weiss, contemporary)

On Leviticus 18:22

“In the early 21st century, this is one of the most misinterpreted, abused, and decontextualized verses in the Torah. This verse, ripped from its place in the system of Levitical [from the Book of Leviticus] laws, is often mobilized to justify discriminatory legislation and behavior against homosexuals and their families. While the act of anal intercourse would present a problem to the person who organized his life according to the Levitical laws, it has no place in the judicial systems not governed by the total system of Leviticus—and does not cohere with contemporary sexual notions of mutual consent and sexual preference.

In Leviticus, the priestly writers want to prevent the mixture of different types of fluid, as well as uphold distinctions. In terms of blending fluids, anal intercourse is problematic for the same reason as is intercourse with a menstruating woman: semen, an agent of life, potentially mixes with feces, a substance that symbolized decay and death. This is similar to the mixture of semen and menstrual blood that indicates the absence of conception. In addition, the priestly writers want to avoid the blending of gender categories, as evident in their choice of language. They do not command “do not lie with a male,” but rather “do not lie with a male as one lies with a woman.” The problem arises when someone treats a male body like a female one. Indeed, such distinctions between the male and the female body define women as those who are penetrated during sexual intercourse and dominated during social intercourse. While treating a man in this manner is odious behavior, it is construed as the natural way to engage women.”

Lesson 4.7 Making Meaning and Blessing for Ourselves- Ban on Homosexuality

Enduring Understandings

1. Our understanding of Commandments teaches us about our own moral or theological selves.
2. Leviticus 18:22 demonstrates that Commandments can be morally or theologically troubling and still contain holiness.
3. Understanding the reactions of interpreters from across generations to Commandments can be helpful to developing our own understanding of and approach to Commandments.

Essential Questions

1. How are Commandments holy?
2. Can we consider Commandments holy if they are morally or theologically troubling within our belief system?
3. What can we learn about ourselves from analyzing Commandments through multiple generations of interpretive responses?

Goals

1. Present multiple commentaries on the Leviticus 18:22 as possible ideas for understanding the Torah text.
2. Provide space for learners to create a blessing out of their new understandings about the troubling text.
3. Challenge students to consider how interpretations from commentary inform their concept of the holiness of Commandments.

Objectives (Participants will be able to...)

1. Critique an idea in at least one commentary on the Leviticus 18:22.
2. Create a blessing that demonstrates a newfound understanding of Leviticus 18:22.
3. Explain, with the help of their understanding of the commentaries, whether Commandments can be seen as holy in Leviticus 18:22.

Write Your Own Bracha (Blessing)¹⁷

1. What is something you learned about the **text** through the process of studying it?
2. What is something you found troubling in this text, if anything?
3. What is something you learned about **yourself** through the process of studying this text?
4. Having gone through this study process, what is something you would want to tell someone who is reading it for the first time?
5. What is a bracha you would write in response to studying this text? This could be a bracha you write for yourself, for God/the Divine, or for someone who is reading this text for the first time.

¹⁷ Unit 1, lesson Lesson 4 (Lesson 1.4) focuses on the idea of bracha. If you are choosing various lessons, I would recommend this lesson so that the idea of bracha can be properly scaffolded for the students.

Remember: a bracha is often translated to the word “blessing” in English. However the word blessing is often associated with something that is completely positive.

A bracha can be described as at least one of several things including praise, a hope for someone else, a gift, and something found in “an object that is hidden [*samui*] from the eye,” (BT Ta’anit 8b) there is something to uncover but that is not fully understood at the time of receipt.

In Jewish tradition a classic bracha often starts with the words “Blessed are You Adonai, Ruler of the Universe who...” However, there infinite variations of what a blessing could be. As we learned at the beginning of our course, Jacob asked the *eesh* to give him a bracha and in return the *eesh* asked for his name and said, “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but **Israel**, for you have **wrestled** with beings **divine** and human, and have prevailed” (*Genesis 32:27-29*).

Lesson 4.8 Troubling Commandments in the Biblical Text-Terminating Pregnancy (Exodus 21:22-25)

Enduring Understandings

1. Our understanding of Commandments teaches us about our own moral or theological selves.
2. Exodus 21:22-25 demonstrates that Commandments can be morally or theologically troubling and still contain holiness.
3. Understanding the reactions of interpreters from across generations to Commandments can be helpful to developing our own understanding of and approach to Commandments.

Essential Questions

1. How are Commandments holy?
2. Can we consider Commandments holy if they are morally or theologically troubling within our belief system?
3. What can we learn about ourselves from analyzing Commandments through multiple generations of interpretive responses?

Goals

1. Present the story of Exodus 21:22-25.
2. Challenge students to consider troubling facets of this story.
3. Challenge students to consider the law from Exodus 21:22-25 in terms of modern day abortion discourse.
4. Consider what Exodus 21:22-25 tells us about the holiness of Commandments.

Objectives (Participants will be able to...)

1. Articulate in their own words what one of the messages of Exodus 21:22-25 could be.
2. Explain in their own words what might be troubling in Exodus 21:22-25.
3. Explain in their own words how reading Exodus 21:22-25 could influence a person's position on accessing abortion.
4. Assess how someone could justify the morality or theology of the events in Exodus 21:22-25.

Sefaria.org Source Sheet: <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/405450?editor=1>

Potential Activity:

1. Use the law in Exodus 21:22-25 as a source for a discussion about the way access to abortion is discussed in contemporary times. Have students consider whether, given this text, there is an argument in favor or against having access to abortion (regardless of what they personally believe). This is an opportunity to see how their predictions about the text might translate into modern day discussion points.

Lesson 4.9 Wrestling with Commandments in the Commentaries- Terminating Pregnancy

Enduring Understandings

1. Our understanding of Commandments teaches us about our own moral or theological selves.
2. Exodus 21:22-25 demonstrates that Commandments can be morally or theologically troubling and still contain holiness.
3. Understanding the reactions of interpreters from across generations to Commandments can be helpful to developing our own understanding of and approach to Commandments.

Essential Questions

1. How are Commandments holy?
2. Can we consider Commandments holy if they are morally or theologically troubling within our belief system?
3. What can we learn about ourselves from analyzing Commandments through multiple generations of interpretive responses?

Goals

1. Encourage struggling and arguing with the existing interpretations of the Exodus 21:22-25.
2. Introduce multiple interpretations of the Exodus 21:22-25 that have come out of generations of commentary (including a specifically Christian interpretation).
3. Present the idea that the way we approach morality decisions and theology inform how we will approach and understand Exodus 21:22-25.

Objectives (Participants will be able to...):

1. Summarize one piece of commentary on Exodus 21:22-25.
2. Justify the law in Exodus 21:22-25 using at least one commentary.
3. Explain at least one theological or moral difference between the Christian commentary and Jewish commentaries.
4. Articulate how their personal relationship to Commandment affects how they understand the text.

Potential Commentaries:

Yevamot 69b:10

(From Babylonian Talmud, ~500CE)

And if she is pregnant, until forty days from conception the fetus is merely water. It is not yet considered a living being, and therefore it does not disqualify its mother from partaking of *teruma*.

Gittin 23b:9

(From Babylonian Talmud, ~500CE)

What is the reasoning of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi for this ruling? He holds: A fetus is considered as its mother's thigh, i.e., a part of its mother's body, and it is as though the master transferred ownership of one of her limbs to her. Since the maidservant is pregnant, the child is considered to be a part of her, and it is as though he emancipated a portion of her body.

Rabbi Jacob Emden

(German Orthodox rabbi, writing c. 1750)

"The questioner asks about an adulterous married woman [who is pregnant, and this] is a good question. It appears to me [appropriate] to permit her [to abort]...And even in the case of a legitimate fetus there is reason to be lenient if there is a great need, as long as the fetus has not begun to emerge; even if the mother's life is not in jeopardy, but only so as to save her from woe associated with it that would cause her great pain..."

John Calvin

(Christian Pastor/Theologian, 1509-1564)

"This passage at first sight is ambiguous, for if the word death [*ie harm*, ason] only applies to the pregnant woman, it would not have been a capital crime to put an end to the fetus, which would be a great absurdity; for the fetus, though enclosed in the womb of its mother, is already a human being."

Lesson 4.10 Making Meaning and Blessing for Ourselves-Terminating Pregnancy

Enduring Understandings

1. Our understanding of Commandments teaches us about our own moral or theological selves.
2. Exodus 21:22-25 demonstrates that Commandments can be morally or theologically troubling and still contain holiness.
3. Understanding the reactions of interpreters from across generations to Commandments can be helpful to developing our own understanding of and approach to Commandments.

Essential Questions

1. How are Commandments holy?
2. Can we consider Commandments holy if they are morally or theologically troubling within our belief system?
3. What can we learn about ourselves from analyzing Commandments through multiple generations of interpretive responses?

Goals

1. Present multiple commentaries on the Exodus 21:22-25 as possible ideas for understanding the Torah text.
2. Provide space for learners to create a blessing out of their new understandings about the troubling text.
3. Challenge students to consider how interpretations from commentary inform their concept of the holiness of Commandments.

Objectives (Participants will be able to...)

1. Critique an idea in at least one commentary on the Exodus 21:22-25.
2. Create a blessing that demonstrates a newfound understanding of Exodus 21:22-25.
3. Explain, with the help of their understanding of the commentaries, whether Commandments can be seen as holy in Exodus 21:22-25.

Write Your Own Bracha (Blessing)¹⁸
(to be used as a template for every post-text assessment)

6. What is something you learned about the **text** through the process of studying it?

7. What is something you found troubling in this text, if anything?

8. What is something you learned about **yourself** through the process of studying this text?

9. Having gone through this study process, what is something you would want to tell someone who is reading it for the first time?

10. What is a bracha you would write in response to studying this text? This could be a bracha you write for yourself, for God/the Divine, or for someone who is reading this text for the first time.

¹⁸ Unit 1, lesson Lesson 4 (Lesson 1.4) focuses on the idea of bracha. If you are choosing various lessons, I would recommend this lesson so that the idea of bracha can be properly scaffolded for the students.

Remember: a bracha is often translated to the word “blessing” in English. However the word blessing is often associated with something that is completely positive.

A bracha can be described as at least one of several things including praise, a hope for someone else, a gift, and something found in “an object that is hidden [*samui*] from the eye,” (BT Ta’anit 8b) there is something to uncover but that is not fully understood at the time of receipt.

In Jewish tradition a classic bracha often starts with the words “Blessed are You Adonai, Ruler of the Universe who...” However, there infinite variations of what a blessing could be. As we learned at the beginning of our course, Jacob asked the *eesh* to give him a bracha and in return the *eesh* asked for his name and said, “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but **Israel**, for you have **wrestled** with beings **divine** and human, and have prevailed” (*Genesis 32:27-29*).

Unit 5: Design a Zine for the Modern Teen

Unit 5 Enduring Understandings

1. Adding your voice to the generations of interpretive responses is an act of holiness.
2. Contributing your understanding of troubling text to the discourse can empower another person to better understand it.
3. Both words and images are powerful ways of portraying understanding of text and blessing.

Unit 5 Essential Questions

1. How can my understanding of a morally or theologically troubling text empower another reader?
2. What can I learn about myself from wrestling with morally or theologically troubling text?
3. How can my wrestling with troubling text be a blessing?

Lesson 5.1 Introduction to the Zine

Enduring Understandings

1. Adding your voice to the generations of interpretive responses is an act of holiness.
2. Contributing your understanding of troubling text to the discourse can empower another person to better understand it.
3. Both words and images are powerful ways of portraying understanding of text and blessing.

Essential Questions

1. How can my understanding of a morally or theologically troubling text empower another reader?
2. What can I learn about myself from wrestling with morally or theologically troubling text?
3. How can my wrestling with troubling text be a blessing?

Goals:

1. Present zines as a concept for conveying ideas and creating understanding
2. Offer students opportunity to consider texts from throughout the curriculum

Objectives (Participants will be able to...):

1. Summarize in their own words what they learned from a zine they read.
2. Describe at least 3 qualities that make for an understandable zine.
3. Develop a plan to create a zine based on a text from this curriculum.

Potential Activity:

1. Create a gallery of zines on many different topics (not related to Torah/Judaism). Allow students to walk around and find one that they like. They can read through the zine after reading it, they will have the chance to share what they learned from it with the class.
2. Having read through some zines and learned deeply from one, students should try to compile a list of qualities that make for a good zine.
3. Remind students of all of the texts from this curriculum that they covered (as they likely only covered 2/3 texts from every unit) by writing them on the board or depicting the stories/commandments in pictures. Have them also return to their folders, where they should keep all of their materials throughout the course and take time to decide the text for which they would like to create a zine.

Lesson 5.2 Crafting a Torah Zine for the Modern Teen

Enduring Understandings

1. Adding your voice to the generations of interpretive responses is an act of holiness.
2. Contributing your understanding of troubling text to the discourse can empower another person to better understand it.
3. Both words and images are powerful ways of portraying understanding of text and blessing.

Essential Questions

1. How can my understanding of a morally or theologically troubling text empower another reader?
2. What can I learn about myself from wrestling with morally or theologically troubling text?
3. How can my wrestling with troubling text be a blessing?

Goals:

1. Provide space and resources for students to gather relevant information and material to create a zine
2. Revisit the idea that blessing can come out of wrestling

Objectives (Participants will be able to...):

1. Create a zine that demonstrates their understanding of a troubling Torah text from this curriculum.
2. Create a blessing within that zine that demonstrates the wrestling they have done with the chosen text.

Potential Activity:

1. Provide students with paper, magazines, markers, pencils, scissors, glue, and other potentially relevant art supplies to create a zine based on a text from the curriculum of their choosing. This creation process should take up most of the lesson. They should use the criteria laid out for the final authentic assessment at the end of this unit. The teacher should also provide other English translations (i.e. Robert Alter, Stone, Plaut, etc.) as well as access to sefaria.org for more commentary.

Lesson 5.3 Presenting Your Torah Zine for the Modern Teen

Enduring Understandings

1. Adding your voice to the generations of interpretive responses is an act of holiness.
2. Contributing your understanding of troubling text to the discourse can empower another person to better understand it.
3. Both words and images are powerful ways of portraying understanding of text and blessing.

Essential Questions

1. How can my understanding of a morally or theologically troubling text empower another reader?
2. What can I learn about myself from wrestling with morally or theologically troubling text?
3. How can my wrestling with troubling text be a blessing?

Goals:

1. Provide students with opportunity to present their zines to the class
2. Reflect on the wrestling students have done throughout the year with text

Objectives (Participants will be able to...):

1. Summarize their understanding of a troubling text from this curriculum
2. Explain how wrestling with text has influenced their understanding of Torah
3. Articulate an understanding they have gained from reading another learner's zine

Potential Activity:

1. Lay out all the student's zines so that they can do a final gallery walk with their own creations. Have students walk around readings others' zines and eventually pick one to sit with (that is not their own). Once they have had time to read through another person's zine, they should share one idea they learned from the zine and one thing they learned about the author of the zine through reading it.

Authentic Assessment Criteria

To assess understanding of the texts and interpretive processes at the end of each text deep dive, learners will be asked to write a blessing for themselves or someone who is approaching the text for the first time. This assessment will require the learners to each reflect on the process of learning they have gone through and empathize with a learner who was in the same place they were just a few class sessions earlier.

In Unit 5 of this curriculum guide, learners will create a Torah zine for the modern teen. A zine is a small booklet that is generally hand-written and self-published work of original or compiled texts and images. This zine will focus on one text the course has covered that particularly spoke to or challenged each learner. Upon picking a text, each learner will select a teen from their life (sibling, friend, cousin, teen student from a lower grade) who will serve as the audience of this zine. This project will be their opportunity to share the multiple sides of this text to someone who has not taken the course. The zine will help them work through wrestling with the text using different translations of the Hebrew, biblical context of the text, commentary from across generations, their own interpretation of the text, the thought process of how they arrived at that interpretation, and a message to empower the teen reader to make their own meaning of the text. The learners can draw from the inspiration of the brachot they wrote earlier on in the course to help them with the zine they create. They can either make their own zine or they can work with a partner.

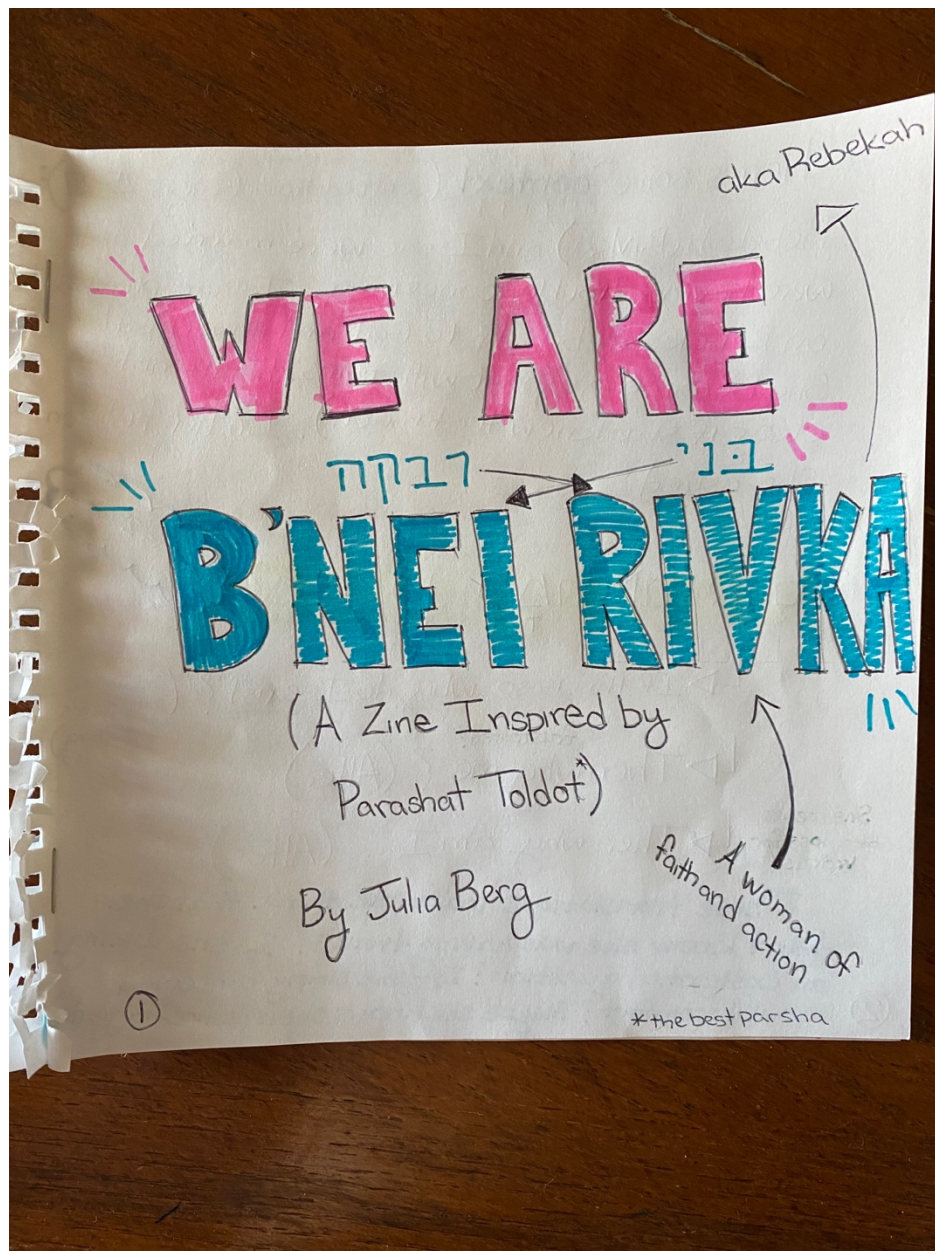
Students will be given resources to help them create this zine including access to multiple translations of the passages they are studying (i.e. the JPS, Robert Alter, and Koren translations of Genesis 1-2)

Y/N	Criteria	Approximate length ¹⁹
	The zine includes at least 3 pieces of different translation of the text ²⁰ (a translation can be one word or a whole verse that highlights how the English translation influences your understanding of the text)	1 page
	The zine clearly and concisely explains the significance between those variations	1-2 pages
	The zine gives context for the biblical text (location in the text and any significant information about the biblical context)	0.5-1 page
	Includes at least 3 commentaries (1 ancient/medieval, 1 modern/contemporary, 1 of the student's choosing)	2-3 pages
	Explains significance of or student's reaction to the commentary	Integrated into the 2-3 pages
	Explains the student's personal interpretation of the text	1-2 pages
	Justifies/explains the process of how the student arrived at this interpretation	integrated into the above 1-2 pages
	Articulates a message of blessing that empowers the reader of the zine for approaching this text	0.5-1 page
	Includes design elements other than writing (drawing, photos, diagrams) to create a memorable aesthetic for the reader of the zine	Integrated throughout

¹⁹ These are suggestions, not requirements to help learners get a sense of how much they should be putting into each section of the zine if that is helpful to them. Also, keep in mind that a “page” is a handwritten page, often with some sort of image or graphic component that is not just blocks of text.

²⁰ The students are not required to work in the Hebrew and instead should focus on the different translations in English for ease of understanding.

Example "We Are B'nei Rivka" Zine



Here's some ^{~ { } { } { } { }}context (sourced from Genesis 25-27)
 Rebekah (Rivka) and Isaac were married and
 were having trouble conceiving. Isaac pleaded
 on Rebekah's behalf to God and it worked!
 She became pregnant with twins (but it's not
 clear if she knew that much). In her frustration
 she asked:

וְלָמָּה זֶה אֲנִי??

Genesis 25:22

↳ If this is so, why do I exist? (The Torah: A Women's Commentary)

↳ Then why me? ^{frustrated?} (Alter)

She seems
at a loss for
words

↳ Then why am I... (Alter)

These translations make me think that she
 didn't know she was having twins. Is she asking
 an existential question? Is she simply concerned
 about discomfort? Maybe she knows she is destined for greatness

②

Here are some takes from commentators

RASHI: If this hurts this much, why did I pray for it so much??

RAMBAN: "If it shall be so with me, why am I in the world? Would that I did not exist, that I should die or never have come into existence"

THE KLI YAKAR: She thought there was only one child, who wanted to go into the doors of both Torah and idolatry. And therefore, she thought, have mercy, maybe there are two gods! And so she asked, "If so, why am I not acting like all other idolators? What do I gain [by my faith] if there are, have mercy, really two gods?!"

③ And THAT'S why she ...

אלה - אלה
↓
(God)

לך לך
↓

לך לך
(she went)

1. to inquire
2. to seek
3. to question

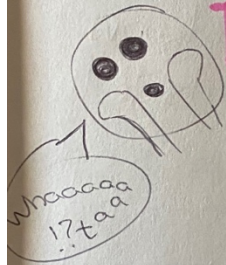
That takes
Somechutzpah!

And God responded! God gives her a cryptic prophecy about having two opposing nations in her womb. It's not super clear, but it sounds like the older one will serve the younger one. Weird... (especially given the culture she lived in)

④ She doesn't say anything to Isaac (as far as we know), but when Jacob and Esau are born, she favors Jacob (the younger one)

Although the Torah does not specify why she does this, one can interpret it as such.

So first she questions her faith and then she strengthens it with her actions!



But WAIT... there's more

Let's hop on over to Genesis 27
(beep boop scroll...)

LOADING...

⑤

Here we are at Genesis 27 **TA DA!**

*More of
the story:*

Some time has passed and Isaac thinks he is near the end of his life, so he wants to bestow his blessing on Esau, his eldest and favorite son. He tells Esau to go make him a meal he really likes...

BUT little did he know Rebekah was eavesdropping outside the tent the whole time. She devises a plan to trick Isaac so that Jacob can receive the blessing instead. Jacob is worried his father will figure him out and **CURSE** him. But Rebekah responds "Your curse be upon me, my son,"

IBN EZRA : (in the name of Saadia Gaon)

on Genesis 27:13

this means "it is upon me to remove the curse"

⑥ Talk about accountability! Look at her go!

The Torah: A Women's Commentary

"Her readiness to take responsibility can be seen as her understanding that what she is doing is not deception for personal gain, but the fulfillment of God's plan as revealed to her during her pregnancy.

RETWEET

I'm with you
@TheTorah:AwomensComm

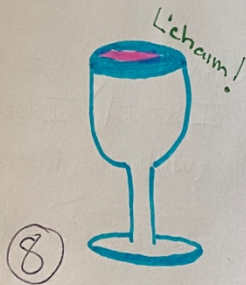
My take: One could argue that the means here is deceptive and cruel, but I'd like to see Rebekah's actions as brave and responsible. She took her faith in this cryptic prophecy and used her own form of power to do what she believed was right. This was her way of living a life of integrity.

So often the Jewish people are referred to as Bnei Yisrael (the children of Israel). Israel is the name Jacob gets after wrestling with a mysterious e'c (eesh or in English "man").

to be continued

BUT none of this would have been possible without the dedication and hard work of Rebekah. She is brave, sneaky, clever, faithful, resourceful and she is a woman of integrity. She may not be perfect, but no one is. I think that she passes on so many of her important qualities to Jacob, which gives him the strength to go on to be the patriarch to define the Jewish people.

Without her wisdom and courage, we would not be the people we are today. So let's raise a glass to Rivka / Rebekah. And let's be more like her while we're at it.



We ARE B'nei Rivka

A BRACHA

for the learning I've done with
this text

May we all strive to be more like Rebekah by believing deeply in our values and acting upon them. May we be brave enough to stand up for what is right and to ask hard questions. May we have the curiosity to seek answers in our lives and, in doing so, hopefully leave behind powerful legacies like our matriarch, the great do-er. After all, we are B'nei Rivka.

⑨

That's All Folks.

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