



TOLMM WEEKLY NEWSLETTER for 4-13-24 TAZRIA

Ministry News

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

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

Donate



Tree of Life Messianic Ministries is a 501 C-3 non-profit. To donate go to etz-chayim.org and click on the PayPal or Venmo Link.

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

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

HOME GROUPS, CONGREGATIONS AND PEOPLE SEEKING FELLOWSHIP...

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

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

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

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

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

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

General News

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

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

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

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

WE HAVE 6 PRISON AFFILIATES THROUGHOUT THE UNITED STATES.

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



Rabbi Mordecai Silver tolmm@etz-chayim.org

MESSAGE FOR 4-13-24 TAZRIA-SHE BEARS SEED

She Bears Seed

Vayikra - Lev 12:1-13:59

2 Kings 4:42-5:19

Mattiyahu 8:1-4

Vayikra 12:6: And when the days of her cleansing are completed, for a son or for a daughter, she brings to the priest a lamb a year old, as a burnt offering...

The burnt offering in the Hebrew Olah or Chalil means 'whole burnt offering'. The derivation of the term Olah, as wholly 'ascending' unto God, indicates alike the mode of the sacrifice and its meaning. It symbolized the entire surrender unto God, whether of the individual or of the congregation, and His acceptance thereof. Hence, also, it could not be offered 'without shedding of blood.' Where other sacrifices were brought, it followed the sin- but preceded the peace offering. In fact, it meant general acceptance on the grounds of previous special acceptance.

The burnt offering was always to be a male animal.

In Psalm 51:19 we read the following:

Then You would delight in offerings of righteousness, In burnt offering and complete burnt offering....

Redemption is the same for male or female. A lamb for God. The Lamb of God.

Leviticus-Vayikra Chapter 13 deals with all kinds of skin diseases and what happens when these diseases get on the clothing. Why did a whole chapter of Scripture need to be devoted to disease?

Vayikra 13:46:

He is unclean-all the days he has the affection he is unclean. He is unclean, and he dwells alone, his dwelling place is outside the camp.

Do you see the connection here?

Exodus 25:8:

And they shall make Me a Set-apart Place, and I shall dwell in their midst.

Exodus 29:45:

And I shall dwell in the midst of the children of Yisrael and shall be their Elohim.

But then sin entered. And what is the result of sin?

Exodus 33:7:

And Mosheh took his tent and pitched it outside the camp, far from the camp, and called it the Tent of Meeting. And it came to be that everyone who sought Adonai went out to the Tent of Meeting which was outside the camp.

Romans 8:9:

But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of Elohim dwells in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Messiah, this one is not His.

Sin and God do not mix!

2 Corinthians 6:16:

And what union has the Dwelling Place of Elohim with idols? For you are a Dwelling Place of the living Elohim, as Elohim has said, "I shall dwell in them and walk among them, and I shall be their Elohim, and they shall be My people."

If we separate ourselves from sin and give our lives over to God, then we receive this promise:

Revelation 21:3: And I heard a loud voice from the heaven saying, "See, the Booth of Elohim is with men, and He shall dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and Elohim Himself shall be with them, and be their Elohim.

But if we try to mix the things of God with the things of man, we find ourselves in a similar position as to that that the servant of Elisha found himself:

2 Kings 5:20: But Gehazi, the servant of Elisha the man of Elohim, said to himself, "Look, my master has spared Na'aman this Aramean, while not receiving from his hands what he brought. But as Adonai lives, I shall run after him and take whatever from him."

The result was:

2 Kings 5:27: So, let the leprosy of Na'aman cling to you and your descendants forever." And he went out from him as leprous as snow.

Part of the metzora's (leper's) healing process was banishment from the Jewish camp. However, it is a delicate ordeal, one wrought with trauma, pain, and emotional distress. The Kohen (Priest), a man of peace, love, and compassion must be there for every part of the process. He must be there to guide the metzora through the tense incubation period as well as his discharge from the camp. Moreover, he is there again to ease him back into society.

Scripture teaches us that every tough decision need spiritual guidance. It can turn a cold-hearted punishment into a process of spiritual redemption. It can transform a tough, seemingly dispassionate decision into a beautiful experience. For when the Mashiach, Y'shua holds your hand, even if it is a stricken one, even if

he is leading you outside the camp, you are definitely not gone and certainly not forgotten.

Mattiyahu 8:2-3: And see, a leper came, and bowed before Him, saying, "Master, if You desire, You are able to make me clean." And stretching out His hand Y'shua touched him, saying, "I desire it. Be cleansed!" And immediately his leprosy was cleansed.

What does this say to you?

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

We do not agree with the Jewish position on Yeshua, but Believers need to know the Jewish thinking on Yeshua and not buy into this thinking and forsake faith in our Messiah. For those who say they would never do this, we must beg to differ, because we have seen it over our lives as Jewish Believer's in Yeshua. We have been Believer's in Messiah Yeshua for decades. We have seen a lot and had many discussions with our fellow Jews and non-Jews who ultimately turned away from Yeshua because they steeped themselves in Jewish teachings. One does not come out of either traditional Judaism or Christianity and come into the Messianic walk, and then going back, or into, traditional Judaism. *There are many good things in Judaism but denying Yeshua as Messiah is not one of them.* Berachot (Blessings), Rabbi Mordecai Silver, Ph.D., and Rabbi Philip Hammond, Ph.D.

A TRADITIONAL JEWISH PARASHAH AND HAFTARAH COMMENTARY



Parashat Tazria: Summary

Leviticus 12:1-13:59

God instructs Moses about the purification rituals for mothers following childbirth; God then describes to Moses and Aaron the procedures for identifying and responding to those infected with leprosy.

The Lord spoke to Moses saying, “Speak to the Children of Israel regarding the rituals concerning childbirth of a boy. The mother shall be in the state of uncleanness for seven days. Upon the eighth day the flesh of a male baby’s foreskin is to be circumcised. For thirty-three days, the mother shall be in a state of purification and may not be in contact with any holy thing or area.

“If a girl is born, the mother remains unclean for two weeks, and for sixty-six days she will be in a state of purification. At the end of this time, she is to make offerings at the Tent of Appointed Meeting.”

God then spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying, “When a person has a swelling, rash, burn, scaly eruption discoloration, or any other kind of distortion of the skin, it shall be reported to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons. The priest shall examine the skin for the contagious disease of leprosy and pronounce the person clean or unclean.

“As for the person with leprosy, the person’s clothes shall be torn, his head shall be disheveled and he shall cover over his upper lip and shall call out, ‘Unclean, Unclean!’ The person shall be unclean as long as the disease is on him. Being unclean, he shall dwell apart. The leper’s dwelling shall be outside the camp.”

“The clothes touched by leprosy must also be examined by the priest and declared clean or unclean. The clothes which are capable of being made clean may be washed until they are fully clean, but that which is unclean must be burned in fire.”

Parashat Tazria Discussion Questions

- 1) Why is the mother in a state of purification after childbirth? Why is the amount of time for this state of purification longer for a mother who gave birth to a girl rather than a boy?
- 2) Why would God be so concerned about leprosy?
- 3) How do you think the people who had the disease of leprosy felt when they were banished to live outside the camp?
- 4) When you get sick, do you feel unclean? When you are sick, how do you feel towards God?

Haftarah for Tazria

2 Kings 4:42-5:19

In the Torah, Parashat Tazria describes the biblical affliction known as *tzaraat*, normally translated as leprosy. (Though the skin disease in the Bible is afflicted by God as a punishment for certain transgressions and differs from what is considered leprosy today.) In the haftarah for Tazria, the appearance of this same kind of leprosy leads to a life-changing experience for a general in the Aramean army.

As the haftarah begins, a man brings the prophet Elisha 20 loaves of bread. The prophet orders that the loaves be given to the people of the land, many of whom are suffering from poverty. Elisha's servant protests, insisting that it will not be enough for the crowd, but Elisha promises a miracle: "The Eternal has said that they will eat and have some left over" (4:43). His prediction comes true, and there is enough to feed everyone.

The narrative jumps to the story of Naaman, a revered commander in the Aramean army. He was highly valued as a warrior and thought to be favored by God. However, strangely, he also has leprosy, which implies that there was a limit to this favor.

One day, his wife's slave, who was originally from Israel, suggests that Naaman go to Samaria to be healed by a prophet there. Naaman asks permission from the Aramean king, who writes a letter to the king of Israel explaining that he is sending Naaman to be healed of his leprosy.

When the king of Israel receives the letter, he thinks it is merely provocation to incite war, and tears his clothes in a gesture of mourning. Soon, he is visited by Elisha, who asks why he's mourning. The king explains, and Elisha replies with confidence in his own healing powers: "Let this man (Naaman) come to me, and he will learn that there is a prophet in Israel!" (5:8)

When Naaman comes, however, Elisha's treatment is unexpected. The prophet tells Naaman to immerse himself seven times in the Jordan River. This angers Naaman, who expects that Elisha "would come out and stand here and call out in the name of the Eternal his God and wave his hand at the spot and cure the disease" (5:10). Naaman rants about how the Jordan is no better than the rivers back in Aramea, which apparently had failed to heal his leprosy.

Naaman's followers aren't as quick to dismiss Elisha. "Sir," they say, "had the prophet asked you to do something elaborate, surely you would have done it. Why not do it, then, when he only asks you to wash and be clean?" (5:13)

So Naaman consents to follow Elisha's advice. He goes down to the Jordan, strips, and dips—and his flesh becomes clear like the flesh of a small child. He and his entourage return to Elisha, where Naaman admits: "Now I know that the God of Israel is the only God in the whole world" (5:15). He offers a gift, which Elisha declines, saying that God is not interested in gifts.

Naaman declares faithfulness to the God of Israel, with one caveat: "When my master goes to the temple of [the god] Rimmon," Naaman says, "and he leans on my arm so that I must bow down...I hope God will forgive me this one thing" (5:18). In reply, Elisha tells him: "Go in peace" (5:19).



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

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

Who wants to please The Father?

- ▶ Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that entereth not by the door into the sheepfold, but climbeth up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber. ² But he that entereth in by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ To him the porter openeth; and the sheep hear his voice: and he calleth his own sheep by name, and leadeth them out. ⁴ And when he putteth forth his own sheep, he goeth before them, and the sheep follow him: for they know his voice. ⁵ And a stranger will they not follow, but will flee from him: for they know not the voice of strangers. ⁶ This parable spake Yeshua unto them: but they understood not what things they were which he spake unto them. ⁷ Then said Yeshua unto them again, Verily, verily, I say unto you, I am the door of the sheep...

Who wants to please The Father?

- ▶ ⁸ All that ever came before me are thieves and robbers: but the sheep did not hear them. ⁹ I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have *it* more abundantly. ¹¹ I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. ¹² But he that is an hireling, and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth: and the wolf catcheth them, and scattereth the sheep. ¹³ The hireling fleeth, because he is an hireling, and careth not for the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd, and know my *sheep*, and am known of mine...

Who wants to please The Father?

- ▶ **¹⁵ As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father: and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, *and* one shepherd. ¹⁷ Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again. ¹⁸ No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father.**

John 10:1-18

- ▶ Shepherds and sheep have a responsibility...
- ▶ The good news is [we need plenty of that] despite the interference of questionable shepherds, if we stay faithful to Yeshua through teshuvah - embrace His instruction YHVH will gather us from:

Who wants to please The Father?

- ▶ **³ And I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all countries whither I have driven them, and will bring them again to their folds; and they shall be fruitful and increase. ⁴ And I will set up shepherds over them which shall feed them: and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall they be lacking, saith YHVH.**

Jeremiah 23:3-4

- ▶ The Father Himself will gather His people from whence they have been scattered. He will appoint shepherds, not hirelings who will care for them. Shepherds who make sure the flock is eating from healthy pastures. Shepherds who stay true to the line of David, obeying the instructions of the Father. Shepherds who point the way to our true, and faithful Shepherd – Yeshua The Messiah... our One and only Saviour!...

▶ therefore, O ye shepherds, hear the word of the LORD; ¹⁰Thus saith the Lord GOD; Behold, I *am* against the shepherds; and I will require my flock at their hand, and cause them to cease from feeding the flock; neither shall the shepherds feed themselves any more; for I will deliver my flock from their mouth, that they may not be meat for them. ¹¹For thus saith the Lord GOD; Behold, I, *even* I, will both search my sheep, and seek them out. ¹²As a shepherd seeketh out his flock in the day that he is among his sheep *that are* scattered; so will I seek out my sheep, and will deliver them out of all places where they have been scattered in the cloudy and dark day. ¹³And I will bring them out from the people, and gather them from the countries, and will bring them to their own land, and feed them upon the mountains of Israel by the rivers, and in all the inhabited places of the country. Ezekiel 34:9-13

Who wants to please The Father?



Do not worship any other gods
Do not make any idols
Do not misuse God's name
Keep the sabbath holy

Honour your father & mother
Do not murder
Do not commit adultery
Do not steal
Do not lie
Do not covet

- ▶ Who wants to please The Father? All children of Israel should... as
- ▶ We serve a wonderful God, as there is no God like the God of Israel and no nation like the nation of Israel.

Jewish Practices



The Jews of Italy

Jews have been present on the Italian peninsula from the time of Judah Maccabee.

The Jewish presence on the Italian peninsula dates back to ancient Roman times. The Jews of Italy's capital city claim to be the oldest continuous Jewish community in Europe.

Italy only became a unified country in the latter part of the 19th century, before which it was a patchwork of regions invaded, occupied, and ruled at different times by different powers. The history of Italy's Jews reflects this, alternating between periods of prosperity and persecution depending on the ruler.

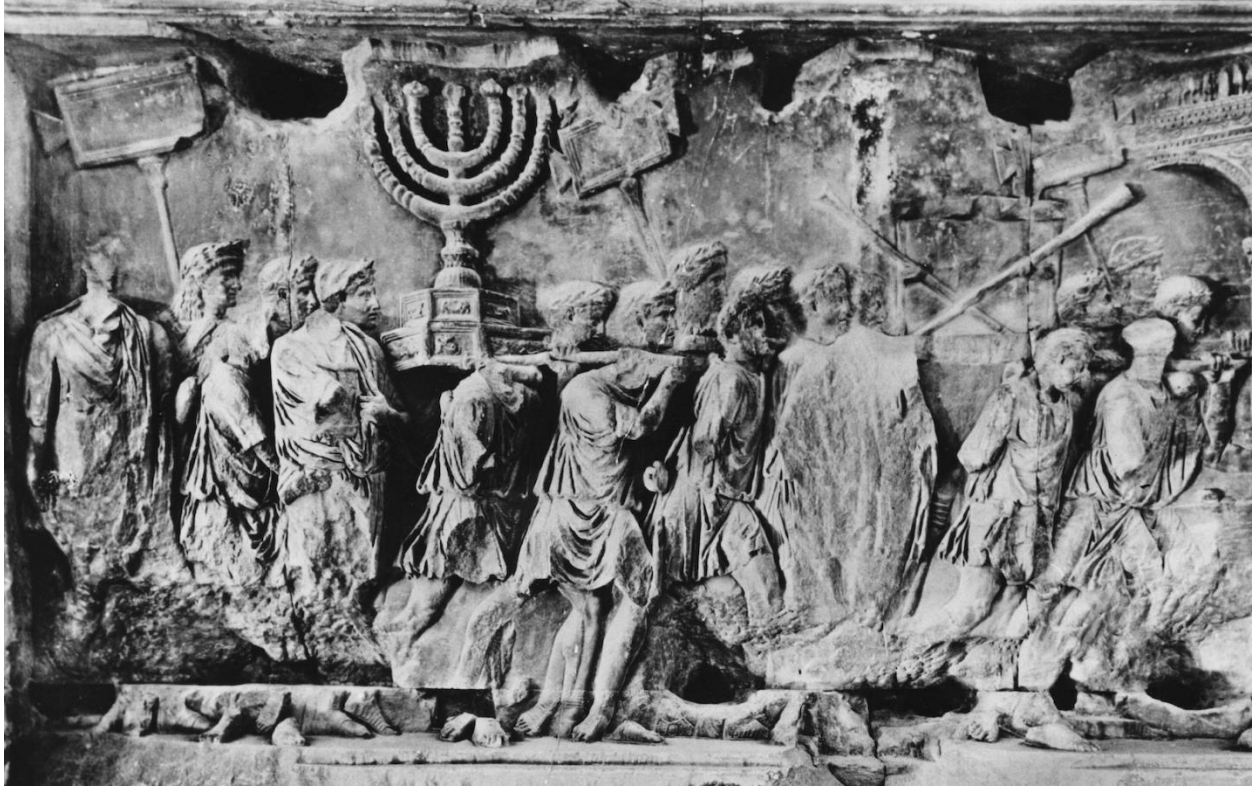
"No other place in the western Diaspora can indeed boast a Jewish presence that has been so ancient, widespread and constant," the scholars Anna Foa and Giancarlo Lacerenza wrote in their book on the first 1,000 years of Jewish history in Italy.

Italian Jews in Antiquity

Jews probably lived in Rome by the third century BCE. In 161 BCE, only a few years after defeating the Seleucid King Antiochus, Judah Maccabee sent a diplomatic mission from Judea to Rome headed by Jason ben Eleazar and Eupolemos ben Johanan. According to the historian Cecil Roth, the fact that the names of the two Jewish ambassadors are known bears a special significance.

"These are the first Jews to be in Italy, or to visit Europe, who are known to us by name," Roth wrote in *The History of the Jews in Italy*. They are "the spiritual ancestors of Western Jewry as a whole."

Ancient Rome's Jewish population was swollen by slaves and prisoners brought back after the sack of Jerusalem in the year 70 CE. The Arch of Titus in the Roman Forum bears a famous carving showing Roman forces in a triumphal procession bearing the menorah and other loot from the destroyed Temple. The arch was such a powerful symbol that Roman Jews refused to walk through it for centuries. They finally did so only in 1948, joyously parading beneath it to celebrate the birth of Israel.



The Arch of Titus in Rome. (Getty Images)

From late antiquity to the early Middle Ages, most Jews lived in well-established communities in southern Italy and Sicily. Jewish catacombs and other archaeological evidence demonstrate a sizable Jewish population at Venosa, an important ancient crossroads between Naples and Bari from the fourth to the ninth century.

The 12th-century Spanish Jewish traveler Benjamin of Tudela visited Italy on his journeys in the 1160s and 1170s. His trips took him to several Jewish communities in southern Italy, but he mentioned only two major Jewish communities north of Rome: Pisa and Lucca.

Middle Ages and the Renaissance

Jewish communities flourished in central and northern Italy in later centuries, bolstered by Sephardic Jews fleeing Iberia after the expulsions in the late 15th century and by small groups of Ashkenazi Jews from central Europe. Great ports such as Venice, Ancona and Livorno became crossroads of Jews from many lands and backgrounds. In some cities, Jews of different traditions built separate synagogues.

But in the decades after the expulsion of Jews from Iberia, Spanish rulers also banished all Jews from Sicily and south of Rome. Jews consequently moved north, to Venice, Ancona, Florence, Bologna and Padova. Both secular and religious authorities began instituting further restrictive measures. In 1516, civic rulers in Venice forced Jews to live in a closed district on the site of an old foundry. The word “ghetto” is believed to come from “geto,” the Venetian dialect for foundry.

In 1555, Pope Paul IV instituted the ghetto in Rome and other cities in the papal states. Branding the Jews killers of Christ, the decree condemned Jews to live in segregated areas, barred them from owning property or having more than one synagogue per community, forced them to trade only in secondhand

clothing and required them to wear a distinguishing yellow hat or other mark. In 1569, Pope Pius V went further. He expelled Jews from almost everywhere in the papal lands, allowing them to live only in the ghettos in Rome and Ancona. Many Jews fled northward. Within little more than a century, closed Jewish ghettos were in place in most towns and cities in Italy that were home to Jews. New ghettos continued to be established until the end of the 18th century.

Despite this, Jewish religious and cultural life flourished during the ghetto period. Venice became a major European center of Hebrew publishing, for example, and behind anonymous outer walls, highly decorated synagogue sanctuaries were built.

Emancipation and the Holocaust

The emancipation of the Jews and the abolition of the ghettos didn't take place until the 19th century. Napoleonic rule in north-central Italy eased restrictions on Jews for a brief period at the turn of the century, but this was followed by a renewed crackdown after Napoleon's fall in 1815. With the Italian peninsula still under a variety of regional rulers, Jews became involved in the general struggle for unification, taking an active part in the Risorgimento, or Italian liberation movement, between 1848 and 1870.

The defeat of papal forces and confinement of the pope to Vatican City in 1870 brought down the gates of the last closed ghetto, in Rome. With emancipation, Italian Jews eagerly adopted an Italian identity and quickly integrated into mainstream society.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, they built grand new cathedral-style synagogues that proclaimed their pride and freedom, and they entered all professions and walks of life. There were already Jews in parliament in 1871; Italy had a Jewish prime minister, Luigi Luzzatti, in 1910; and between 1907 and 1913, Rome had a Jewish mayor, Ernesto Nathan.

Like Italians in general, Jews backed both liberal and conservative political movements. Thousands of Jews even joined Benito Mussolini's Fascist party. In 1943, after Allied troops moved through southern Italy, Nazi Germany occupied northern Italy and began deporting Jews to their deaths. More than 8,000 Jews, around a quarter of the Jewish population, were deported and killed.

Italy's Jews today

Today, Italy's affiliated Jews number fewer than 30,000 out of a total population of 60 million. Around three quarters live in Rome and Milan with the rest in a handful of other towns and cities, almost all in northern Italy. But despite their small numbers, they make up a multifaceted, complex community, whose richness and diversity — combining Ashkenazic, Sephardic, native Italian and other Jewish traditions — bear witness to a complicated history dating back to antiquity.

In 1986, Pope John Paul II visited Rome's Great Synagogue, the first visit by a pope to a Jewish house of worship.

Many Jews in Italy today are immigrants (or the children of immigrants) who came to Italy in the past few decades, including thousands of Libyan Jews who fled after bloody anti-Jewish riots in 1967. Three main types of religious rites are celebrated: Sephardic, Ashkenazic and Italian — the latter a local rite that evolved from the Jewish community that lived in Italy before the destruction of the Temple.

The vast majority of Italy's Jews are nominally Orthodox. Most, however, are not strictly observant. Even observant Jews are typically highly acculturated, with a strong Italian as well as Jewish identity. Jews are active in all fields, from the arts to business to politics, and despite their small numbers hold prominent positions.

All officially established Italian Jewish communities are Orthodox and operate under the umbrella of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities (UCEI), which is their official collective representative to the state. Particularly in the larger communities, there is a well-organized infrastructure of schools, clubs, associations, and other services, including a rabbinical college.

Reform and Conservative Jewish streams are not officially recognized by the UCEI, although several small liberal Jewish communities have developed in Rome, Milan, and Florence. They function outside of UCEI but affiliate with international progressive Jewish organizations. Chabad also operates outside the UCEI umbrella, with an active presence in Rome, Milan, Venice, and Bologna.

In 1986, Pope John Paul II visited Rome's towering Great Synagogue, the first ever visit by a pope to a Jewish house of worship. John Paul made bettering relations between Catholics and Jews a cornerstone of his papacy, and his visit to the synagogue marked a watershed moment in the process — and was particularly significant for the Jews of Rome, who had suffered for centuries under oppressive papal rulers. His successors, Popes Benedict and Francis also visited the synagogue and reaffirmed their commitment to Jewish-Catholic dialogue.



The Earth as a Source of Wonder

The Jewish practice of blessing natural phenomena awakens us to the fact that the earth is a wonder, a witness, and a spiritual mystery.

In Exodus, as Moses observes the burning bush, a voice tells him to take off his shoes because *hamakom asher ata omed, admat kodesh hi* — the place on which you are standing, holy ground.

This raises the question: Are we to treat the earth on which we stand as holy? And if so, how?

The first chapters of Genesis treat the natural world as God's creation. The earth becomes a partner with the divine in forming the plants, the animals, and ultimately humans as well. The Torah clearly understands and honors the earth as the raw material for life.

In other parts of the Bible, the earth is a witness to the divine. Consider [Psalm 148](#), where the sun, moon, stars, waters, winds, fruit trees, animals, and birds all praise God, along with the peoples of the earth. While Maimonides comments that we shouldn't therefore think the elements are conscious, that's not at all clear from the psalm, which uses the same word — *hallelu* ("praise") — for what humans do and what animals, plants, and elements do. In [Psalm 98](#), rivers clap hands and mountains sing.

The earth is also treated as a covenantal partner with God. In [Genesis 9:13](#), God makes a covenant with the earth not to destroy it again by flood. In [Leviticus 25](#), God decrees that the land must have a sabbatical year in order to rest, and that if the people violate this commandment they will be sent into exile. Throughout the Bible, the earth has its own relationship with God, its own spiritual personality, and its own inalienable rights.

Humans too are expected to be in relationship to the natural world. Shabbat, that most fundamental of Jewish practices, is established as a *zecher l'ma'aseh vereishit* ("a reminder of the work of creation"). The festivals of Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot also bind us to the earth and its seasons by honoring the cycles of planting and harvest.

The Jewish mystics added to this perception of the wonder of the earth by understanding the earth and the elements as infused with divine presence. In the Zohar, the Shechinah (the divine presence manifesting within the physical world) is described as earth, sea, fire and an apple orchard. The Baal Shem Tov, the founder of the Hasidic movement, chose to pray outside in nature because of the presence of this sacred energy there. And the Hasidic master Nachman of Breslov wrote: "A person should go out to the fields to pray. All the grasses will join you. They will enter your prayers and give you strength to sing praises to God."

For many of us, these texts and ideas are relatable. We've seen sunsets, oceans, high peaks, hummingbirds, and been moved to awe. Contact with nature makes us feel that we are standing in the presence of something greater than ourselves and maybe also that we are part of something larger, a web of divine becoming. Contemporary eco-theologians are exploring this intuitive connection between human beings and what David Abram calls the "more-than-human world."

Whatever our theology about the natural world, there is a very simple Jewish way of acknowledging the wonder that the natural world awakens in us, and that is the practice of blessing natural phenomena. This practice enhances our perception that the earth is a wonder, a witness, and a spiritual mystery.

In certain blessings, we bless the natural world as we consume it, as when we bless the food we eat. With other kinds, we simply meditate on the beauty or awe-inspiring quality of the natural world. These include blessings for natural phenomena of great beauty or magnitude — roses, mountains, thunder, lightning, and earthquakes.

Both types of blessings make us conscious of our gratitude for all that we have and are. And they remind us that we are not separate from nature. We consume it and appreciate it at the same time as we are it.

Consider the blessing over rain.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם הַטוֹב וְהַמְטִיב

Baruch ata adonai eloheinu melech ha'olam hatov vehameitiv.

Blessed are You, YHWH our God, ruler of the cosmos, who is good and does good.

Maimonides says a beautiful thing while discussing the blessing for rain: “When is the blessing for rain said? From the time when the water swells upon the ground and the continuing rain causes bubbles to form on the surface of the water, and these join together.”

In other words, to know when to say this blessing, one has to observe the natural world very carefully. One cannot say blessings without establishing an intimacy with nature.

Or consider the blessing recited over the sea:

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם שֶׁעָשָׂה אֶת הַיָּם הַגָּדוֹל

Baruch ata Adonai eloheinu melech ha'olam she'asa et hayam hagadol.

Blessed are You, YHWH our God, ruler of the cosmos, who has made the great sea.

That the sea has its own blessing is deeply moving. God’s first relationship in Genesis is with the sea. [Genesis 1:2](#): “The earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep [*tehom* in Hebrew] and a wind from God sweeping over the water.” As Kabbalah scholar Nathaniel Berman notes, the sea embodies the forces of chaos but also the forces of creativity. The contemporary Bible interpreter Avivah Zornberg understands *tehom* as the “murmuring deep”—the ocean of sound that precedes creation. Whenever we see the sea and recite the blessing, we recall this moment of meeting between God and the great sea, and the vast powers that are the root of the creation we know.

The practice of blessings, so basic to Jewish life, reminds us of the beauty of the natural world. It opens our hearts to the oneness of creation, a oneness Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook described

as “one lofty collective soul ... divided into many separated parts.” This sense of unity inspires us and makes us less lonely as human beings, and more conscious of our gratitude and wonder.

Blessing practice also reminds us that we need the natural world for our very being. Thus, the practice of blessing brings us back to the covenant with the earth: We must care for the planet so that it goes on caring for us. And as we do so, we can find elevation and inspiration in our ongoing awe at the complex beauty of existence.

As the prophet Habbakuk says: *Ki timalei ha'aretz ladaat et kevod Adonai, kamayim leyam mechasim.* The earth will be full of knowing God's presence as the waters that cover the sea.

עֲבָרִי - Hebrew

Word (s) of the Week

Ritual Washing of the Deceased / טְהָרָה

Pronounced: tah-hah-RAH

Coming from the word for purity, the ritual of *taharah* is the traditional way of cleansing a body and preparing it for burial according to Jewish law.



A Taste of Jewish Humor

A Helping Hand

Friday afternoon, 5-year-old Moishie Sherman came in while his parents were setting the table for Shabbos Dinner. Quite surprisingly, Moishie asked if he could help. His mother said, "No, but I appreciate your asking."

Little Moishie responded, "Well, I appreciate you saying no."

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*Philip Hammond
Phone: 0416087400 or
61 + 416087400
Philip@etz-chayim.org*

