

A tale of teacher-filled efforts:

A havurah-inspired retelling of bits of Eruvin 13b, 13a, 13b (in that order:
as explored in SVARA's "Dazzling Wisdom of Rabbi Meir" bet midrash, fall 2022)

with additional commentary and a few song quotations from back when

Said Teacher-Sibling Child-of-Graciousness: It was clear before the Force-that-Creates-with-Words that there was nothing like Havurah Insight in its generation, so why were general practices not fixed according to them? No one could not stand on the end of their insight, because they would expound on problems as assets, illuminating more facets, and on assets as problems, illuminating more facets. [1]

It was taught at the time that their name was not Havurah Insight but Teacher Breakthrough, so why were they named Havurah Insight? They illuminated for Wise Ones some possible paths. And their name was not Teacher Breakthrough but Teacher Comfort, and some say Teacher-Flowing-Fountain; so why were they named Teacher Breakthrough? They lit for Wise Ones suggestions of more ways ahead.

Minyan-Maker said: I was made-sharper-in-myself than my colleagues from experiencing Havurah Insight from behind. Imagine what I might have seen if I'd really faced them! Or vice versa:

"וְלֹא-יִכְנַף עוֹד מוֹרִיךְ, וְהָיוּ עֵינֶיךָ רְאוּת אֶת-מוֹרִיךְ."
"...you will see the eyes of your Teacher" (Isa 30:20)

Ancestor-Teacher said in the name of Establishing-Teacher: Havurah Insight had a student who would say about all matters problematic forty-eight aspects of problems and about all matters of assets forty-eight aspects of assets.

...His name, by the way, was Not-From-Here.

There were, in those days, meals to prepare and children to raise, homes and gardens to tend. There were folks with different ideas about decision-making and boundary-setting and varying needs and challenges and gifts.

"...So you think you can tell Heaven from Hell?
Blue skies from pain?" [2]

Meanwhile, systems around us failed so many.
There was a lot to do.

There were then many aspects we did not yet
speak with ease or even have words to express.

"I turned myself to face me, but I never got a
glimpse... ...Turn and face the strange." [3]

Jastrow links "made sharper" to Prov 27:17:

"בְּרֹזֶל בְּבִרְזֵל יִחַד וְאִישׁ יִחַד פְּנִיָּרָעָהוּ"

"As iron sharpens iron, so one sharpens the wit
[lit: "face"] of their friend." Verse 19 adds:

"כַּמַּיִם הַפְּנִיִּים לַפְּנִיִּים כֵּן לִבְהֵאָדָם לְאָדָם"

"As face answers to face in water, so does one's
heart to another." (JPS 1985 trans. adapted)

Rashi (via Sefaria) notes: "According to how
much a man knows that his friend loves him, so
he will show him his face." Sharing faces has
long been a work in progress.

"Your eyes, I say your eyes may look like his
Yeah but in your head, baby
I'm afraid you don't know where it is" [4]

Folks sometimes moved among communities,
bringing with them issues, from aliyot require-
ments to kashrut, settled in some places but
hotly debated elsewhere. It is told: In the
previous century, a Jerusalem learning group
once prepared to make a minyan by counting-

only-men upon request of participants who said their halakhah required this: It was then common to follow "strictest" practice in a disparate group, on the theory that this "worked for all." A visiting Fabrangen havurahnik objected, saying his practice, too, was strict, and his halakhah required him to decline to pray by counting-only-men [5]. This reportedly led to upheaval in the learning group [final decision lost: two prayer groups in the one learning community?] as well as at least one (male) witness later joining Fabrangen Havurah. [6]

It was taught back then that there was a long-enduring student in the Building-Place who addressed an iconic challenge with 150 aspects.

We cite teachers of old who addressed complex and controversial problems with innovative ideas. It is both a comfort and a challenge to know that earlier building stood on complicated compromise....

...Read Merle Feld's story [7] or other tales of early havurah attempts at "gender equity." Recall also: "Four Dead in Ohio" and "Find the Cost of Freedom" mourned Kent State (5/4/70), ignoring mayhem and death at Jackson State (5/15/70). Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young later continued -- "Though your brother's bound and gagged / And they've chained him to a chair / Won't you please come to Chicago / Just to sing" -- even as Gil Scott-Heron was already commenting:

"He wonders why I tell him America's revolution
Will not be the melting pot but the toilet bowl.

...And now you want me to help you overthrow what?" [8]

Later Activist said: I will prove, based on Torah and long-established reasoning, that it's kosher to protest war (and a presidential inauguration) on Shabbat: Are we not taught that we must never stand idly by the blood of a neighbor? And, if saving one life overrides Shabbat, would not saving thousands or more to do the same? Esther Ticktin, z"l, objected: Not so. *Pikuah nefesh* applies to binding wounds or tending gravely ill within physical reach, not marching at a distance of thousands of miles from a war zone -- [Stamma:] where would this end? -- Instead, let us acknowledge that this protest involves violations of Shabbat practice for many, but we do so now in recognition of the urgent call for peace.

R' Arthur Ocean Waskow wrote lovingly of both Esther and Max Ticktin (z"l). He quotes his first-hand memory of Esther's remarks: "What I feel moved to do is say to God: '*Ribbono shel olam*, You Who rule the world, we know that if we join this march we will be violating Shabbat. We need to do it. Sorry!'" [9]

"There are many here among us
who feel that life is but a joke
But, uh, you and I, we've been through that
and that is not our fate.
So let us stop talkin' falsely now
The hour's getting late" [10]

At first, Havurah Insight struggled with finding a spot to stand. More collective learning and practice led to additional innovation and challenges inside the tension between *gemara* and *svara*. [11]

So don't get me wrong / It's not that I knock it
It's just that I / am not in the market
For [someone] who wants to love only me
...All I'm sayin', I'm not ready
For any person, place or thing
To try and pull the reins / In on me [12]

Befuddlement and impatience with aspects of traditions before and around them persisted. Strong commitment to practical *tikkun olam* and egalitarianism was challenged by on-going relationship with cishet male-centered learning and ritual. Engagement with mysticism, meditation, and musical experiment was common but not universal. Process sometimes seemed endless; ad hoc practices developed a life of their own; communal memory was lost. Intentions and people aged. There was rage, healing, death and new birth. Community shape evolved and diversified, shifted and split. Wearied. Revived. Cast new light.

Dissipation, race relations.
Consolation, segregation.
Dispensation, isolation....

Tell me who of them will come to be?
How many of them are you and me?" [13]

Older lore recalls a long-standing dispute over practice between This House and That House, resolved, eventually, by divine Voice declaring: "These and these are Living Divine Words; in cases of practice dispute between these two Houses, act according to That House" [14].

A version of the divine Voice seems to echo in contemporary Jewish communal decision-making:

- "We've realized that it's simpler if we follow Movement on these matters,"
- "We rely on Expert for this kind of thing," and
- "This was considered years ago, with much angst, and we are never going through all that again."

More tales of divine Voice: R' Meir is directly linked in one; through R' Akiva, to a second. Neither tale ties up neatly in a happy ending, like "*ilu v'ilu*," however. Together the two stories hint at a reason R' Meir's colleagues couldn't stand on the end of his insight.

1) Elisha ben Abuya (*Akher*), R' Meir's teacher and friend, experiences a private *bat kol*. *Akher* tells Meir that he heard a divine Voice call out: "Return, wayward children (Jer 3:22), return to Me and I will return to you" (Mal 3:7), except for Elisha ben Abuya, who was aware of My might and rebelled against Me." [15]

2) The Oven of Akhnai incident involves a *bat kol* and results in R' Eliezer's excommunication. It is R' Akiva who volunteers to break the news, lest someone unsuitable do so and "he destroy the whole world" [16]. Through Akiva, then, R' Meir is connected to one teacher who was excommunicated, as well as to his teacher-friend, one who became apostate.

Akher and R' Eliezer were both, in part through divine Voice incidents, hardened in positions dividing them from colleagues. So maybe – just maybe – R' Meir's seemingly endless supply of facets is a response to A) witnessing, at first- and second-hand, brilliant teachers undone by rigid attachment to singular positions, and B) watching the effect on the community.

----- A Blessing for Recitation by Descendants of Rabbi Meir -----

Blessed are You, Who Joined Words and the Universe Came to Be,
where Your Torah penetrates the lives of human beings in many, varied, connected and individual ways,
forming linkages with lived experience, through openings upon openings
and through learning, depths within depths.

It is revealed and known before the Seat of Your Weight
that blocking even one opening or blurring a single boundary
threatens our collective relationship to Torah-Life,
endangering some of us in immediate ways and others over time.

We have long known that "none of us is free if one of us is chained,"
and that "If we don't say it's wrong, then that says it's right,"
but we feel a need to hurry, we become distracted, and we weary.
We tremble in tension
between what must be done and what we do not know
between leaving ourselves time to heed more perspectives and failing to act on time.

No one of us alone, nor any single generation, can balance all the retrieval and sealing required
for us to survive as individuals and thrive as community, even for even a short time.

Blessed are You, Healer of Substance, who makes possible the wonder of continued struggle. [17]

NOTES:

- 1) based on Eruvin 13b, beginning with "*Amar R' Abba bar Haninna...*"
- 2) "Wish You Were Here," Waters/Gilmour (Pink Floyd), 1975. Pink Floyd was founded 1965.
- 3) "Changes," David Bowie, 1972. David Bowie (1947-2016) had many musical faces and changes.
- 4) "Somebody to Love," Darby Slick (b-i-l of Grace; Jefferson Airplane), 1967. Jefferson Airplane (later: Starship) began in 1965; Grace Slick (b. 1939) was in and out of the band, beginning in 1966.
- 5) "A Modest Beginning." Esther Ticktin (b. 1925, Vienna, Austria; d. 2017 DC, USA). *The Jewish Woman: An Anthology. Response: A Contemporary Jewish Review*. Number 18. Jewish Student Press Service. Summer 1973. Full essay, posted at songeveryday.org in 2014 with permission of the author. Esther's condensed *halakhot*:
 - (1) Do not--on halachic, religious grounds--participate in a minyan which separates women behind a mehitza.
 - (2) Do not--on halachic, religious grounds--accept an aliyah where women are not called up to the Torah (and explain your reasons).
 - (3) If you have to participate in an all male religious event, and enjoy it or are uplifted by it, do not speak to a woman about it (nor to a man either).
 - (4) Do not enter a circle of male dancers which excludes women, whether for Simhat Torah, a wedding or any other religious or secular occasion, for you were a stranger in the land of Egypt.
- 6) Fabrangen Havurah (DC, started 1971) is one of the oldest havurot in the US (Havurat Shalom, near Boston, started 1968); helped create Nat'l Havurah Committee; launched cross-community, egalitarian Jewish Study Center, modeled after Franz Rosenzweig's Lehrhaus.

Fabrangeners cited here: A. Waskow, active early member, highlighted the havurah in *God Wrestling*; the Ticktins were key members, active from 1972 until their deaths.
- 7) Merle Feld (b. 1947). *A Spiritual Life: Exploring the Heart and Jewish Tradition*. State University of New York Press, revised edition, 2007.
- 8) "Four Dead in Ohio" (N. Young) and "Find the Cost of Freedom" (S. Stills) were both released in mid-1970, performed by Crosby, Stills, Nash, & Young (est. 1968 as CSN; Y came and went.)

"Chicago" (G. Nash) was released in 1971, first by Nash and then by CSNY. Bobby Seale (b. 1936) tells his own story of violent treatment, during what was later called the "Chicago 7" trial, in *Seize the Time* (1970); many other sources describe the protests, "police riot," trial, and separate but related history of the Black Panthers.

"Comment #1" is on the 1970 "Small Talk at 125th and Lenox" album by Gil Scott-Heron (1949-2011). The same album included "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" -- progenitor, intentional or not, of SVARA's "The revolution will not be translated."
- 9) Arthur Waskow (b.1933). "[Remembering Esther Ticktin](#): A Jewish Feminist Who Inspired Learners For Decades" includes first-hand notes on the Shabbat-protest and above-cited *halakhot*.

NOTES Continued

10) "All Along the Watchtower," Jimi Hendrix (1942-1970), 1968. A cover that overtook the original; even Dylan (who wrote, performed, and released this in late 1967) soon imitated Hendrix's version.

11) Eruvin 13b, beginning with "*Mei-ikar l'kamei d'R' Akiva...*"

12) "Different Drum," Michael Nesmith, 1964.

First recorded by Greenbriars, 1966, with John Herald (1939-2005) on vocals. Nesmith (1942-2021) used bits in an episode of "The Monkees" (1966) and later recorded the full song on his eponymous 1972 album. Meanwhile, the Stone Poneys' 1967 "Evergreen Volume 2" album version was very popular; that track used guest musicians and arrangement behind Linda Ronstadt, while extant recordings of Stone Poneys performing live at that time sound quite different.... ironically, a bit like performers all marching to different drums.

13) "Pastime Paradise," Stevie Wonder (b. 1950), 1976. Among great covers: Patti Smith, 2007.

14) back to Eruvin 13b beginning with "*Amar R' Abba amar Shmuel...*"

15) Kohelet Rabbah 7:8. *Akher* reports that he was riding a horse behind the Temple on a Yom Kippur which fell on Shabbat at the time of the *bat kol*.

16) Baba Metzia 59a/b beginning with "*Tanan hatam chatchu...*"

A paraphrase: Lone Teacher's idea of practice differed from others in the community, and he brought every logical argument in the world to his colleagues in support of his view, then resorted to supernatural evidence, concluding with a call for Divine Comment. An Emanation of The Voice emerged, asking why Lone Teacher was being challenged, given that practice always accorded with his opinion, if offered. Academy Leader dismissed this intervention, declaring: "It is not in heaven."

In an interlude -- an epilogue involving a teacher from later still -- the Holy One of Blessing is described as smiling and telling the prophet Elijah: "My children have prevailed over Me."

The story's continuation is less often shared: Items Lone Teacher had previously ruled fit to use are gathered and destroyed, and he is formally separated from the community. A colleague exercises great care in relating this news, but Lone Teacher's response is so angry and bitter that his tears destroy crops, even souring bread in kneading bowls, and all upon which he gazes burns up. Lone Teacher's partner, Peace Parent, tries to keep him from pouring out the full strength of his injury in entreaty; when this fails, Peace Parent's brother dies.

The end of R' Eliezer's life is recorded in San 68a, a heartbreaking story, in which R' Akiva is again central. This part of the tale is even less commonly related that the immediate aftermath of the Oven of Akhnai...when we tend to laugh along with the Holy One, even if unsure about what was won and how.

17) Virginia Avniel Spatz, 2022. Based on *Asher Yatsar* in many siddurim, Eruvin 13a/b with Rashi's comments, and "Dazzling Wisdom of Rabbi Meir" discussion about *Stamma* and "*yisatem*" in the *asher yatsar* blessing. See also R' Elliot Kukla's "[Asher Yatsar \(The One Who Forms\)](#)" on [Open Siddur](#)

18) Content organized by Virginia Avniel Spatz (songeveryday.org), December 2022/Kislev 5783. Unless otherwise noted, material written by V. Spatz.