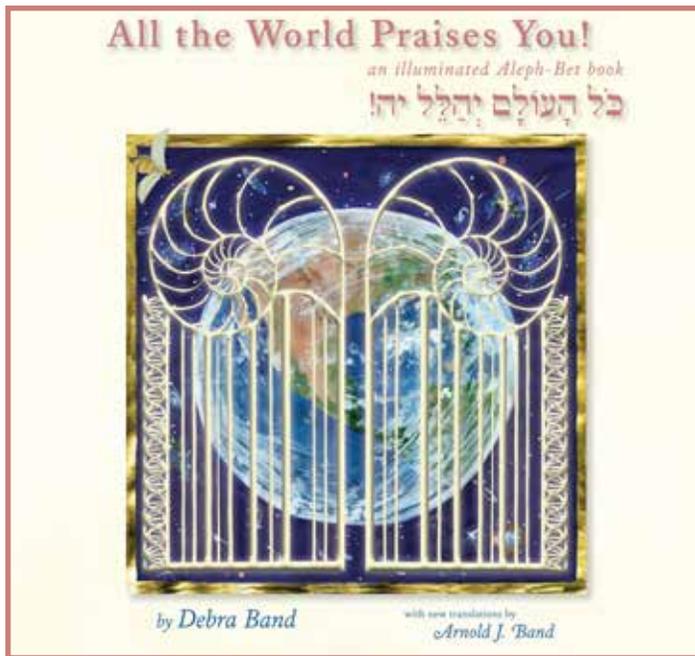


Diving Deeper!

Enrichment Materials Geared to Young People Reaching the Age of Bar and Bat Mitzvah



How to Use these Materials

Each verse and each painting presented in *All the World Praises You!* is full of ideas and lessons we learn from biblical interpretation, Jewish lore and spirituality, and our modern environmental consciousness. The page-by-page notes below “unpack” the meanings of each page’s verse and painting for you, as you reach Bar and Bat Mitzvah age and begin to think about your own place in the world. You will need a copy of *All the World Praises You!* at hand, however, to view the paintings and read the biblical passages.

Feel free to dip into these materials as you enjoy each page of the book! Each page’s commentary is free-standing. For each, you will find (a) basic information about the given letter of the Hebrew alphabet, (b) an introduction to interpreting the verse paired with the object representing that

letter, (c) my commentary explaining the symbolism of the painting, (d) questions leading you to consider the spiritual and environmental implications of the verse, object and its painting, and (e) suggestions for further exploration, including a wide variety of books, and links to websites on related environmental, historical, artistic and cultural resources, even “citizen-science” initiatives and creative writing suggestions. Please note that website addresses can change over time and I am not responsible for website content that has changed since these materials were compiled.

Teachers may wish to include elements of the materials below in curricula for schools and study-groups—and are welcome to do so! Please understand that each level of *Diving Deeper* covers a wide range of ages and Jewish educational levels. Please pick and choose among these rich resources to suit your own students’ needs and interests. *Enjoy!*

Debra Band

About Perek Shira

As I mentioned in the *What’s This* section of *All the World Praises You!*, *Perek Shira* is a compilation of verses praising God from across the Hebrew Bible, the *Tanakh*, the Talmud, and in later editions, the *Zohar*, all placed into the “mouths” of things from the natural world, creating the sense that all of nature sings praises of the Creator. Although we do not know exactly when this anonymous work was first compiled, the first manuscripts date from the tenth century. The work has remained popular among people interested in Jewish mysticism.

For more information about *Perek Shira*, there are several modern print and on-line publications, mostly prepared from the point of view of Jewish mysticism. The OpenSiddur Project provides material on *Perek Shira*, including the valuable [historical introduction](#) that Professor Malachi Beit-Arie, of the

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Hebrew University of Jerusalem prepared for a [facsimile reproduction](#) of an eighteenth century illuminated manuscript of this charming work; I enjoyed seeing this facsimile while it was being prepared by its publisher.

About the Alef-Bet

The Hebrew language has had two alphabets. The first alphabet was the ancient Hebrew script, or “paleo-Hebrew” that was used in Israel by at least the time of the Judges (13th century BCE, or, “Before the Common Era”). After Israel was conquered by the Babylonian Empire in 586 BCE and its leaders and scholars were deported to exile in Babylonia (modern Iraq) and Persia (as in the Book of Esther), we began to speak and write mostly in the language of Babylonia, called Aramaic. The Hebrew script we use now is our version of Aramaic script, and is often called “square Hebrew.” Both the ancient Hebrew and Aramaic scripts developed, together with the alphabets of many other languages of peoples who lived around the Mediterranean Sea, from the alphabet of the [Phoenician people](#) who lived mostly on the Mediterranean seacoast, around Israel. See this article about [Phoenician script](#). Here’s a chart showing ancient and modern Hebrew in comparison with other ancient Mediterranean alphabets. Can you recognize the names of the letters of other alphabets that originated in the lands surrounding the Mediterranean Sea?

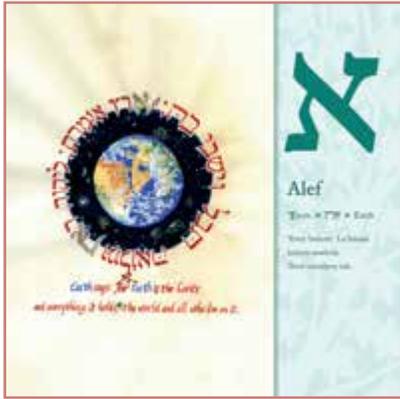
The Semitic Background of Our Alphabet										
LATIN (ENGLISH)	ORIGINAL NAME	GRAPHIC PICTURE	EARLIEST KNOWN FORMS	SOUTH SEM (SABAEAN)	MODERN ETHIOPIC	N. WEST SEMITIC (EARLY HEBREW)	PHOENICIAN	MID-EARLY GREEK	ARAMAIC (MODERN HEBREW)	ARABIC
A	'alf	ox-head 	 							
B	bēt	house 	 							
C, G	gaml	throw-stick 	 							
D	dāg	fish 	 							
E	hē	man calling 	 							
U, V, W	waw	mace 	 							
Z	zēn	?	 							
H	hēt	fence 	 							
I, J, Y	yad	hand w/closed fist 	 							
K	kapp	palm 	 							
L	lamd	ox-goad (whip) 	 							
M	maym	water (waves) 	 							
N	nahāš	snake 	 							
O	'ayin	eye 	 							
F, P	pēh	mouth/corner 	 							
Q	qu(p-)	?	 							
R	ra's	head 	 							
S, X	tann	composite bow 	 							
T	taw	cross-marker 	 							

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Source: Institute of SemiticStudies.org

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The Letter *Aleph*



The letter *aleph* is the first letter of the *aleph-bet*. Its shape is descended from an early pictogram (picture-writing) for an oxhead. In Jewish religious tradition, the letters are also numerals, and *aleph* is the number 1. *Aleph* has an additional significance in mathematics, where it symbolizes orders of infinity.

Diving into the Verse

This verse is from the book of the prophet Isaiah, who lived in the Kingdom of Judah during the second half of the 8th century BCE, around the period of the [attack on Judah by the Assyrian King Sennacherib](#). The book of Isaiah was written over the course of many

years and contains strong criticism of the Judeans' immoral behavior and hypocritical religious habits, sharp political advice for Judah's rulers... and beautiful poetry and visions of the joyful and blessed life of a righteous nation.

In this verse, Isaiah, who hated violence, and loved peace and life, tells us that everything on Earth came from God. Isaiah lived long before scientists began to understand the long and complicated process of the evolution of life on earth. Torah and Jewish mysticism, which studies the secret meanings of the Torah, tells us that God not only created the universe, but maintains it through time. In fact, it tells us that the entire universe is part of God. How can we, in our own era of both science and religion, understand this verse today?

Recent archeological findings may shed some light on Isaiah's life. [Click](#) to find out!

Diving into the Painting

I wrapped Isaiah's words around a painting of our Earth surrounded by the night sky. The Earth is turned to show Israel, where Isaiah lived and wrote so many centuries ago. The painting of the night sky, however, is based upon a very modern [photograph, made by NASA's Hubble Space Telescope in 2014](#). The [Hubble Space Telescope](#) carries a series of "detectors" that capture many different kinds of energy that help astronomers to view the universe in different ways. Presenting a view of the "extreme deep field" of space seen by many of these detectors, this photograph shows galaxies across the universe, from as long ago as a few 100 million years after the Big Bang, that is, *shortly after* the gigantic explosion from which all space, time, and matter in the entire universe developed, 13.7 billion years ago.

This starry sky painting is my version of a famous Hubble Space Telescope photograph of lights in the sky, including some that are close to our Earth, and some whose light, scientists can calculate, has been traveling toward our eyes and telescopes since shortly after the Big Bang, which happened about 13.7 billion years ago. Big Bang was a kind of gigantic explosion, that began space and time and all matter in the universe. [Click here](#) to see an amazing one-minute video that moves from imagining the Big Bang to showing our own modern civilization!

What do we learn about ourselves, our relationship with God, and with the natural world?

- If you were at the window of a space transport vehicle, gazing out at the Earth and the stars, what do you imagine you would think about?
- How do you think Isaiah wanted us to think about our relationship with all the rest of the world, outside of ourselves? About our relationship with God?
- Look at Braishit/Genesis 22:17. Abraham has just shown God that he loves and trusts God so much that he would sacrifice his precious son, Isaac, if God asked him to do so (the *Akedah*). Then, God tells him: “I will place My blessing upon you and make your children as many as the stars of heaven and the sands of the seashore...”
- What does that promise tell you about how God will care for all of Abraham’s children?
- Do you think that God’s promise gives us a special responsibility in the world?

For further exploration!

- You may want to read and discuss this information about the [Big Bang](#) with your teacher.
- If you haven’t already done so, you might enjoy reading the Creation story in the first chapter of *Braishit/Genesis*. You may see that the story in Torah is very different from the way we understand the way the world was made through modern science. In Torah the whole universe was created in six days. Through science we know that it took millions of years to make the world we have now...and that the world is still evolving. In Torah God created everything by commanding it should be. Through science we know that that everything from rocks to hummingbirds developed through a long and complicated process. We do know, though, from both Torah and modern science that the whole universe began at one moment. In Torah, God said “Let there be light,” to begin Creation. Our scientists now know that the Big Bang happened (13.7 billion years ago), beginning all space and all time and all matter. Why do you think the Bible story and modern science are different? How does the Bible story help us understand the *meaning* of our world? Talk about this hard and important question with your parents and your rabbis and Jewish-studies teachers. You can think about the *meaning* of our world as you read all the rest of this book.

The Letter *Bet*



The letter *bet* is the second letter of the *aleph-bet*, and different Jewish communities across the world pronounce it in two different ways. In Ashkenazic pronunciation, its sound is often *bais*, unless there is a *dagesh* (dot in the middle) that turns it into *bet*. In Sephardic, Middle Eastern and modern Israeli Hebrew the letter is always pronounced “*bet*.” Its shape comes from the shape of a house. In Jewish religious tradition, the letters are also numerals, and *bet* is the number 2.

Diving into the Verse

The people who put together *Perek Shira* remind us that God is so powerful that God controls the Earth’s climate—God makes water vapor rise from the earth to make clouds, makes the thunder and lightning that often happens during rainstorms, and makes the wind blow through the sky. The composer of the psalm containing this verse was probably one of the Levites who worked in the Temple in Jerusalem. In this psalm, the composer tells us that Israel’s God is more powerful than all the other gods of the countries around Israel, such as Egypt and all the Canaanite city-states. The idea that Israel’s God can control something as huge as the climate is one of several examples the Psalmist offers of God’s amazing superpowers, along with complete power over the heavens, earth and sea, the power to cause the Ten Plagues, and the power to conquer the Canaanite kings so that Israel could return to the land that God had promised to Jacob’s children after bringing us out of slavery in Egypt.

Diving into the Painting

In the painting I made the Hebrew and English words of the verse ride the winds of a [thunderstorm](#). Silver lightning sparks across the sky, and rain streaks down to the forests below. Above the clouds, though, all is calm. The sun glints through a break in the clouds, the sky is blue, and we catch a glimpse of the distant heavens above, based on the same [photograph made by NASA’s Hubble Space Telescope in 2014](#) that you saw in the *aleph* painting. This painting follows the verse in suggesting that only Israel’s God has the power to create a world with such dramatic weather, and this is the same God who brought our whole universe into being.

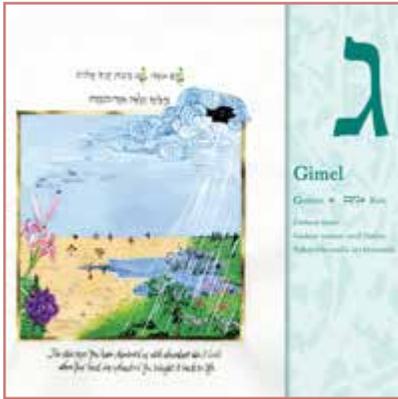
What do we learn about ourselves, our relationship with God, and with the natural world?

- Can you find other biblical texts about God’s power to control the weather, in particular, storms? Consider Psalm 29, the second paragraph of the *Shema* (Dvarim/Deuteronomy 11: 13-21, and the Song of Deborah (Shoftim/Judges 4-5). Can you find other mentions of God’s power over weather in *Tanakh*?
- Now that we have modern science we have direct physical explanations for weather, including [thunderstorms](#). As Jews, however, we understand that God set all the universe, with all the laws of nature, into motion, and we look to God to care for us. As part of God’s empowerment of Adam on the sixth day (see Braishit/Genesis 1:26-31) and the Covenant with God begun by Abraham, we understand that it is our responsibility to care for ourselves and all Creation as part of our devotion to God. Is there a common idea about our relationship to God and to nature embedded in these texts?
- How does this relationship between God, the weather and ourselves affect your sense of responsibility for your actions, as a Jew now reaching adulthood?

For further exploration!

- If you would like to explore the idea of the God of Storms from a traditional rabbinic perspective, see the discussions of Psalms 29 and 135 in Amos Hakham, *The Bible: Psalms with the Jerusalem Commentary*. Jerusalem, Mossad HaRav Kook, 2003.
- Explore how Jewish scholars describe Jewish environmental ethics, such as in the collection edited by Dorff mentioned above. See Elliot N. Dorff and Jonathan K. Crane, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Ethics and Morality*. Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2012.

The Letter *Gimel*



The letter *gimel* represents a hard “g” sound. The shape comes from the shape of a fish. In Jewish religious tradition, the letters are also numerals, and *gimel* is the number 3.

Diving into the Verse

Israel is mostly very dry, without large rivers, and so the rains, which fall during winter, are very important for farming and supporting all the people and animals in the land. Today, Israel has developed modern technologies to satisfy its needs for water. Long before our technologies, in the subsistence farming communities of ancient Israel, like the areas around Jerusalem where the psalm this verse comes from was written, everything necessary for life depended upon the

winter rains. If you read the whole psalm, you will find that the Psalmist, the poet, mentions several water miracles among the great acts with which God protects and gives “strength and might” to Israel. However, just like the forty days and forty nights of rain of Noah’s flood (*Braishit/Genesis* 6-8) could destroy life, today we hope to protect balanced rainfall—not too little, not too much.

Rain was so very important in biblical times—just as it still is today—that *Tanakh* associates rain with God’s blessings 36 times throughout *Tanakh* and we mention it also in our traditional daily, Shabbat and festival prayers. Apart from the verse cited here, find these:

- The second paragraph of the *Shema*, Deuteronomy 11:13-21, in rain figures prominently in Divine reward for Israel’s devotion, and punishment for sin.
- The Prayer for Rain recited during the *Mussaf* Amidah on Shemini Atzeret
- Judges 5:4; The Song of Deborah describes how God caused the clouds to drip water into the dry riverbed, *Wadi Kishon*, ensuring Israel’s victory over the ferocious Canaanite general, Sisera.
- I Kings 17-18, in which Elijah, having prophesied the failure of the rains while King Ahab sinned, protects the life of the widow and her son.
- Proverbs 25:14, “Like clouds, wind—but no rain—is one who boasts of gifts not given.”

Diving into the Painting

The arrival of the winter rains in the [African veldt](#) brings the dry grasslands to life, inspiring this painting. Where the rains fall, a watering hole floods, and animals crowd around to drink and wash. In the pale, dry land where the rain hasn’t yet fallen, the grass and trees are desiccated and bare; where the rain has saturated the ground, the once-dry grass sprouts with new life. Jutting into view we see not only the tiny honeybee sitting atop the dahlia, but also a stalk of pink lilies. See the commentary on the letter *tet* for the special Jewish symbolism of the pink lily. In a break above the clouds we glimpse the deep field of the sky lit with innumerable stars (again adapted from the Hubble photograph in *Aleph*), reminding us of God’s invisible presence, from which we and our whole world spring.

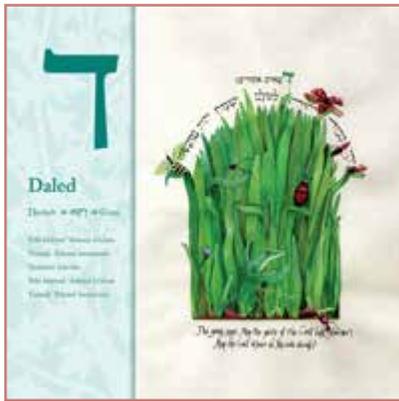
What do we learn about ourselves, our relationship with God, and with the natural world in this painting?

- Do you think of rain as a nuisance or as an essential part of life?
- Has the area you live in experienced a change in rain patterns? What does the rain in your area tell you about the health of the land and our climate?
- How can we humans meet our responsibility to care for the land, and make sure that we, and all living things around us, can thrive?

For further exploration:

- Carol Meyer. *Rediscovering Eve*. New York, Oxford, 2012. Meyer is an important archeologist, who has spent her whole career digging in Israel and studying both the archeology of ancient Israel and its relationship to Biblical text. In this book she explores not only the lives of women during Israel's pre-history and the biblical period, but the conditions of human life in general in ancient Israel. The archeological record tells us that rain was very important!
- See the article by Arthur Waskow on "Jewish Environmental Ethics" in Elliot N. Dorff and Jonathan K. Crane, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Ethics and Morality*. New York, Oxford University Press, 2012.
- To learn more about changes in rainfall due to climate change, see this [article](#) from the US Environmental Protection Administration (EPA). The US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration offers much information about the Earth's climate, including rainfall patterns; see this [webpage](#) and explore the resources to which it points. This 2016 [article](#) from the important scientific journal, *Nature*, describes observations and projections of extreme rainfall associated with climate change.

The Letter *Daled*



The letter *daled* is the fourth letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and represents a “d” sound. The shape developed from the shape of a fish. In Jewish religious tradition, the letters are also numerals, and *daled* is the numeral 4.

Diving into the Verse

The person who composed *Perek Shira*, matching up things from the natural world with verses from the *Tanakh*, Talmud and other books, chose this verse from one of the happiest descriptions of the order of Creation in all of *Tanakh*. Psalm 104 is a long poem praising the God who created a world of perfect natural order and balance, who “established the earth on its foundations, so that it shall never totter,” at

the largest scale, and still had the patience to take care of the smallest details, making “the grass grow for the cattle, and herbage for humankind’s labor that they may get food out of the earth.”

Diving into the Painting

If I had to choose a favorite painting in this book, this painting might be it! This painting grew from my childhood memories of many happy spring and summertime moments happily propped on elbows in my family’s garden, probing the grass for tiny flowers and insects. If I was *really* lucky that afternoon, I might catch sight of a tiny startled lizard. Over the years I have always been amazed by the infinite variety of life sheltered in a little clump of grass, just as was the composer of *Perek Shira*. How better to express the grand sweep of this verse from one of my favorite psalms, than to relate it to these tiny life forms!

We look closely into a dense clump of grass. A worm, ants and a gangly [daddy-long-legs](#) crawl out from between the blades, a tiny lizard clammers up onto a strong blade, while ladybugs and my eponymous honeybee prepare to alight into the warm summer air. The small purple dahlia bud represents my granddaughter, just like the honeybee represents me (*Devorah*, the Hebrew word for honeybee, is the source of the English name Debra or Deborah).

What do we learn about ourselves, our relationship with God, and with the natural world in this painting?

- If you have a garden or park near your home, do you ever lie on the ground like I did (and still do!) and poke through the grass to see what you can find? Head outside to a nearby patch of grass, watch carefully and list or draw all the plants and animals (living or dead) that you see there. Think about how they affect one another.
- Think of a few other tiny things that play important roles in our environment. How has our ability to understand their role in the greater world changed through history?
- How are the small things and the huge things in the world related? Can you think of examples? For instance, a tall apple tree grows from a tiny seed that was pollinated by a honeybee carrying tiny grains of pollen from one apple blossom to another. What would happen if all these related small and large things did not exist in the right time at the right place?
- How do you relate your own life to the tiny things in the natural world? To the really gigantic things? What kind of objects capture your own attention and imagination?
- How does the variety of small and large life in our world make you think about God?

For further exploration:

- See the illuminations and discussion of Psalm 104 in my *I Will Wake the Dawn: Illuminated Psalms* (Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 2007).
- You may enjoy these [two articles](#) about the importance of grass.

The Letter *He*



The letter *he* (pronounced *hay*) makes, an “h” sound at the beginning or middle of a word and is almost always silent at the end of a word. In Jewish religious tradition, the letters are also numerals, and *he* is the numeral 5. The letter evolved from a pictogram for a man calling out.

Diving into the Verse

This verse is part of Psalm 145, which makes up most of the famous prayer known as the *Ashrei*, which is recited twice during the *Shacharit* (Morning) prayer service, and during the *Mincha* (Afternoon) prayer service. Psalm 145 is a long, alphabetic list of qualities of God, understanding God to be the all-powerful ruler of the universe. This

particular verse uses the words “majestic,” “glory” and “splendor” to build excited admiration and love of God’s strength and power.

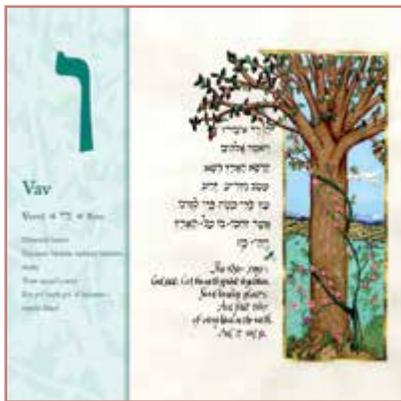
Diving into the Painting

What could be more amazing and royal looking than brilliant colored lights shimmering across the wide night sky? To me, few things express divine splendor as wonderfully as the gigantic natural light show of the Northern Lights, the [Aurora Borealis](http://www.aurora-service.eu/aurora-school/aurora-borealis/). The way the sun’s magnetic energy makes curtains of colored lights on the upper levels of Earth’s atmosphere seems to perfectly symbolize God’s power and presence in our world. See <http://www.aurora-service.eu/aurora-school/aurora-borealis/> for another explanation of the Northern Lights, the Aurora Borealis, and the Southern Lights, the Aurora Australis.

What do we learn about ourselves, our relationship with God, and with the natural world in this painting?

What kind of pictures come to your mind when you think about God’s power and splendor in the universe?

The Letter *Vav*



The letter *vav* generally carries a “v” sound, but if it appears with a *dagesh* (a dot) to its left, the sound becomes “oo,” as in “noodle.” If the *dagesh* is on top, the sound is “oh.” In Jewish religious tradition, the letters are also numerals, and *vav* is the number 5. The letter evolved from a pictogram for a mace.

Diving into the Verse

Can you think of a happier “voice” to celebrate God’s creation of the beauty and variety of Earth’s plant-life than the rose with all its brilliance and fragrance? This verse is God’s command, on the fifth day of creation, that caused the creation of all plant-life. Two important modern scholars of *Tanakh* have suggested that the emphasis on seed-

bearing plants in God’s order implies that all animals, including humans were meant to eat the fruit and seeds of plants, instead of the plants themselves. Rashi, the twelfth century rabbi who wrote the most important of all traditional commentaries on *Tanakh*, believed that God meant that the Earth would be “filled and covered with a garment of different grasses.” In the *daled* painting above, we considered the importance of grass to all animals.

Diving into the Painting

In the painting, the fruitful land wears a cloak of many colors and kinds of plant life. In the foreground grasses, a stalk of pink lilies, mushrooms—and the dahlia—spring up around the spreading roots of an apricot tree, as the rose climbs skyward toward the tree’s leafy canopy. Grasslands stretch back to hills covered in grapevines, and a white dove flies into the scene carrying an olive twig, reminding us of the dove that brought Noah proof of that life had taken fresh hold on the earth after the Flood. Most of these plants have symbolic meanings in Jewish tradition.

In Jewish tradition, the rose symbolizes humility and beauty. In explaining *Shemot* (Exodus), the early rabbis wrote that the miraculous Burning Bush was a rosebush—a lowly thorn-bush with fragrant flowers, thorns and five-leaflet leaves. But God could speak to Moses from even that unimportant looking plant! In the Song of Songs, *Tanakh*’s book of love poetry, the rose represents beauty as well as Israel’s love of God. The apricot tree growing here reminds us of the much-loved verse in the Song of Songs, “Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest, so is my beloved among the youths,” (Song of Songs 1:3); in biblical times the fruit usually translated now as “apple” was almost certainly really an apricot. In midrash, a lone stalk of pink lilies in a neglected orchard alludes to the value of the Ten Commandments in the corrupt human world.

Grapes and vineyards symbolize many ideas throughout *Tanakh*. The grapes are used to make wine, like the wine we use to bless God in Shabbat and festiva kiddush, and the vineyards that grow them also almost always symbolize joy and sanctification (The end of the Noah story and Ahasuerus’s week-long drunken party in Esther where wine and vineyards lead to bad behavior are exceptions). Jewish tradition also loves trees! *Tanakh*, the Talmud and Jewish legend contain countless praises of trees, comparing them to humankind, in particular to the righteous person and to the Torah. For instance, think of the passage in the Torah service, comparing the Torah to “a tree of life.” A favorite passage of mine in the small Mishnaic ethical tractate *Pirkei Avot* (*Ethics of the Fathers*) compares the person “whose wisdom[words, here) exceeds his deeds” to a tree with a huge, leafy canopy but shallow roots, so that it

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can be toppled by any high wind, while the person whose “deeds exceed his wisdom” is like a tree that has few branches, but wide and deep roots, anchored so that it can survive any trouble. the Torah; consider, as a start, the passage in the Torah service, comparing the Torah to “a tree of life.” A favorite passage of mine in the small Mishnaic ethical tractate *Pirkei Avot* (*Ethics of the Fathers*) compares the person “whose wisdom exceeds his deeds” to a tree with a huge, leafy canopy but shallow roots, so that it can be toppled by any high wind, while the person whose “deeds exceed his wisdom” resembles a tree of few branches, but wide and deep roots, anchored so that it can survive any adversity.

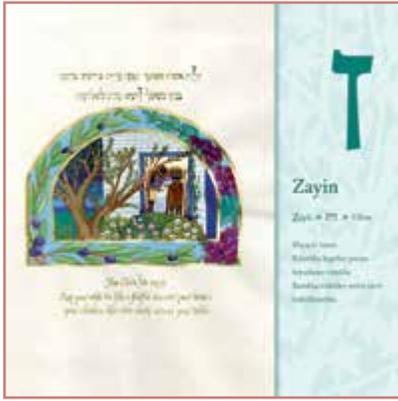
What do we learn about ourselves, our relationship with God, and with the natural world in this painting?

- Consider the suggestion above that early Israel may have understood that all animal life was meant to eat only fruit and seeds. What does this suggest about early Israel’s attitudes toward living on the land?
- Do you like to garden (whether in a farm or urban plot, a suburban garden, or in pots on an apartment balcony)? Does gardening ever help you feel connected to God? If so, how?
- As you travel, whether in large urban parks or across vast landscapes in different parts of the globe, do you feel between the variety of plant life in different places, yourself, and God?

For further exploration:

- If you are interested in learning more about the plants of the Land of Israel and how they are mentioned in *Tanakh*, see Nogah Hareuveni, trans. Helen Frenkley. *Tree and Shrub in Our Biblical Heritage*. Kiryat Ono, Israel, Neot Kedumim, 1984.

The Letter Zayin



The letter *zayin* represents a “z” sound. In Jewish religious tradition, the letters are also numerals, and *zayin* is the numeral 7.

Diving into the Verse

The verse is from Psalm 128, a short poem about the happiness that will be found by the righteous person who follows God’s commandments. The Psalmist tells us that righteous people will be able to enjoy the fruits of their labors, be happy and have a good life. The Psalmist singles out children as a special blessing, comparing the wife, who bears the children, to a fruitful grape vine, and the children themselves to olive sprouts around the family table. Many sprouts

shoot up from the roots of olive trees, so that a parent tree may be surrounded by a thicket of these leafy sprouts!

As fruit trees, olive trees have a special, since the Talmud compares a fruit tree to a person, and [destroying fruit trees](#) is forbidden in Jewish law.

Diving into the Painting

The painting compares the healthy family to the fruiting olive tree, surrounded by its shoots. Through the window we glimpse children clustered around the family dinner table, while outside the mature parent tree stretches its branches toward the home, as though to protect it. A grape vine twines up the side of the window, while stars spangle the clear night sky.

The painting includes several natural phenomena that carry particular symbolic meaning in *Tanakh*. The olives and grapes painted in the border refer not only to the words of the psalm, but also suggest the sanctity of the flourishing family—perhaps part of the Psalmist’s intended meaning. Both fruits are included among the [“Seven Species”](#) of crops Israel, as described in *Dvarim/Deuteronomy* 8:8. Olives, which people have farmed for thousands of years in the lands surrounding the Mediterranean Sea (insert photo of Moroccan groves and press), provided the oil necessary for anointing priests, lighting the golden menorah in the Temple, and many other sacred tasks. Grapes, of course, are pressed for the juice that makes the wine with which Jewish tradition welcomes and sanctifies nearly all holy times like Shabbat and holidays, and which accompanies our happiest celebrations. The Psalmist tells us that the person who follows God’s law (the Torah) will enjoy all these blessings. The starry sky reminds us of God’s promise to make Abraham’s children as impossible to count as the stars of the night sky (*Braishit/Genesis* 22:17)

What do we learn about ourselves, our relationship with God, and with the natural world in this painting?

- What thing in the natural world would you choose to describe your gratitude to God for your family?
- As young adult reaching the age of responsibility for your own actions and choices, what do you consider to be the great blessings of a life well-lived? What metaphors from the natural world could symbolize these blessings?

For further exploration:

If you would like to explore Psalm 128 further, please see Amos Hakham, *The Bible: Psalms with the Jerusalem Commentary*. Jerusalem, Mossad HaRav Kook, 2003, p. 328.

The Letter *Het*



The letter *het* makes a guttural “kh” sound made at the back of the throat. The shape was suggested by a fence. In Jewish religious tradition, the letters are also numerals, and *het* is the numeral 8.

Diving into the Verse

This verse is part of Psalm 104, which offers 35 joyful verses praising the beautiful order and symmetry of the world God created. Bible scholar Amos Hakham suggests that the Hebrew, “*Ma rabu*” means both “great in number,” and “great in wonder.” We often hardly even notice beetles, except to brush them off our clothes if they fly onto us! But by placing this verse “into the mouth” of the beetle, I contrast the fragility and tininess of the beetle with the limitless size and power of

God and Creation.

Diving into the Painting

[Beetles](#) and other insects of many colors, sizes and shapes teem around soil at the roots of a tree. Each has its niche in Earth’s ecology, whether pollinating plants (the bee and the butterfly), tilling the soil so plants can grow (earthworm, properly speaking, these are annelids), helping decompose dead animals and plants so their chemicals can again enrich the soil (the roaches and some moths), or devouring other insect pests (the ladybug).

I especially enjoyed making this painting, since it reminded me of the “insect hospital” that my brother, sister and I made in our backyard throughout our early childhood summers. Whether the poor insects survived our “care” or not, we built a lifelong fascination with their world.

What do we learn about ourselves, our relationship with God, and with the natural world in this painting?

Can you think of an experience with insects—maybe some time when a butterfly or ladybug landed on your finger—that gave you an opportunity to examine it closely? What could you learn about its role in the natural world from watching that insect?

For further exploration:

- See the discussion of Psalm 104 in Amos Hakham, *The Bible: Psalms with the Jerusalem Commentary*. Jerusalem, Mossad HaRav Kook, 2003, p. 44.
- Psalm 104 offers a biblical view about how all the natural world and the human world live together in harmony. See my illuminations and commentary on the whole psalm in my *I Will Wake the Dawn: Illuminated Psalms*, Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 2007.
- [INaturalist](#) is a citizen-science program that has projects in which you can be involved in protecting many parts of our environment, including insects.
- [Backyardbarkbeetles](#) is a citizen-science program that invites you to become involved in protecting our forests, by protecting beetles.
- Catch ladybugs or firelies, put them into a jar with small airholes and watch them carefully for a little while (please do let them go quickly)! Look at all the detail on their tiny bodies! Draw a picture and write about your observations. What does looking at them up close make you feel about how God takes care of our world?

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The Letter *Tet*



The letter *Tet* represents a “t” sound. In Jewish religious tradition, the letters are also numbers, and *tet* is the number 9. The shape of the letter is adapted from a fence.

Diving into the Verse

This beautiful verse appears in the final chapter of the book of the prophet Hosea, whose name means “He saves” [meaning God saves]. Hosea lived in northern Israel during the 8th century B.C.E., just before the [Assyrian invasion](#) that destroyed the northern Kingdom of Israel, and when worship of the Canaanite gods was common among Israelites. Comparing the people’s unfaithfulness to God to his own wife’s unfaithfulness to him (she was a prostitute), Hosea criticized

the idol worship popular in the Northern Kingdom of Israel, at the same time promising that God would forgive and redeem the people from sin. In this chapter Hosea prophesies that if Israel abandons idol-worship God will accept them back and grant them security and happiness. His prophecy includes imagery of dew, of lilies, spreading olive trees, and plentiful harvests.

Water almost always symbolizes divine blessing in biblical texts, but why would Hosea mention dew, such a tiny water-source, rather than rushing streams or rivers to express God’s promise that Israel will live in peace and security in its land? The answer lies in Israel’s natural environment. Northern Israel has few large rivers that flow during the summer growing season. Instead, the dew that beads on leaves and stems during the cool nights nourishes the crops and that Hosea understood as a sign that God was pleased with Israel’s behavior. In Hosea’s prophecy, God promises to be as gentle with Israel as the cool dew drops, to help the returning nation flourish like the blooming lily, to enable it to sink strong, deep roots into its precious land. Even today, Jewish tradition continues to value dew; the traditional Musaf service for the first day of Passover includes a special prayer for dew during the summertime.

Diving into the Painting

Hosea mentions the lily in the verse, but a famous midrash about a lily shows us another subtle meaning involved in this verse. Midrash (found in Song of Songs Rabbah II:2-3, and Leviticus Rabbah XXIII:3) describes the role of the Ten Commandments in the corrupt human world. The rabbis spun the following tale. One day as the king (God) traveled through his lands, he happened upon an old orchard (the human world) just outside his palace (Heaven). This orchard had once been like paradise, planted with pomegranates, grapes, roses and figs. Its caretakers, however, had neglected it, allowing the fine plantings to wither and become overgrown with thorns. Suddenly, just as the king was about to order the orchard cut to the ground, he noticed a single stalk of fragrant rose-colored lilies rising from the weeds. Catching sight and scent of the flowers, he commanded, “For the sake of the lily, let the orchard be saved!” The rabbis compared the role of the Ten Commandments in the world to that of the lily in the ruined orchard. God allows the troubled world to survive only because the commandments tell us how to live. The painting uses the natural-world dew and lily as metaphors to suggest that the silver dew-drops, representing divine favor, and the lily symbolizing the value of divine law, will help Israel thrive.

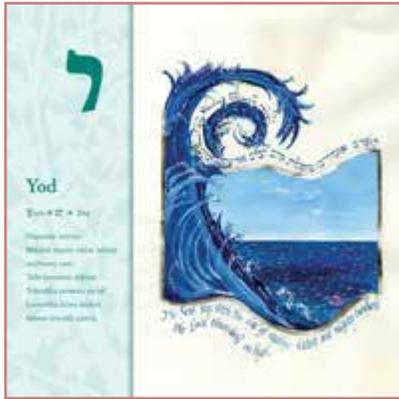
What do we learn about ourselves, our relationship with God, and with the natural world in this painting?

Imagine that you are walking barefoot in the dewy grass early on a clear summer morning. Think about how the dew that dampens your feet refreshes the soil, and how this connects us to nature and to God.

For further exploration:

- Read the The Prayer for Dew, found in many *siddurim* (Jewish prayer books)
- Write an essay or poem about how walking barefoot in the dewy grass connects us to all the world, and to God.

The Letter *Yod*



The letter *yod* represents a “y” sound (and just like the “y,” makes an “ee” sound the same sound at the end of a word). In Jewish religious tradition, the letters are also numerals, and *yod* is the numeral 10. We should observe here that after the numeral *yod*, the letters represent groups of 10, or groups of 100. All other numbers are represented by combinations of letters/numerals.

Diving into the Verse

Who of us does *not* feel small and insignificant while standing on the beach, watching the power and enormity of the ocean? Just like many of us, the Psalmist sensed God’s power in the roar and rush of the ocean’s waves. He expressed that feeling in this verse from Psalm

93. In fact, this short psalm focuses specifically on how ocean displays God’s great power. The psalm brings to mind the waters that filled all the universe before God separated them into the heavens and the oceans in the biblical story of the second day of Creation. Only God, the poet continues, is more powerful than the roar of the ocean. The most important of all rabbinic commentators on *Tanakh* and Talmud, Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitschaki), who lived in 11th century France, associated this verse with God’s protection of Israel, reminding us of the “strong hand and outstretched arm” with which God brought us out of Egypt: “I know that more than the voices of many waters, which roar over us, You are mighty, O Lord, and Your hand is powerful over them.”

Diving into the Painting

In the painting the verses follow the contour of the rocking waves, as the ocean—its enormousness filling the eye—transforms from calm lapping to a sweeping breaker. The honeybee is safe from its waves and the small dahlia, transformed to a child’s beach-ball, rolls in the surf.

My small painting of the ocean emphasizes the change from calm to violent waves. The nineteenth-century British painter, [J.M. William Turner](#) painted many wonderfully atmospheric scenes of both calm and violent seas; click here to see his painting, [The Bell Rock Lighthouse](#).

What do we learn about ourselves, our relationship with God, and with the natural world in this painting?

- Think of times that you have stood on a beach at water’s edge, or even imagined doing so. How do you feel about the power of the waves, and endlessness of the deep oceans that encircle our globe?
- As you think about the ocean, knowing both its power *and* fragility in the wake of global climate change, in what ways can you relate your own life to both its health and its power? Does the ocean evoke thoughts of timelessness? Of great power? Of vulnerability despite timelessness and power?
- As you reach the age of responsibility for your actions as a Jew, knowing that human actions can affect even the vast oceans, what can you do in *your* life to help protect them?

For further exploration:

- Explore the paintings of Turner online and in many art museums. You can see part of the world's greatest collection of Turner's paintings online at the [Tate](#) Gallery.
- If you would like to learn more about Psalm 93, read Amos Hakham, *The Bible: Psalms with the Jerusalem Commentary*. Jerusalem, Mossad HaRav Kook, 2003, Vol. 2, p. 380.
- Read Proverbs 8, in which Divine Wisdom describes how She, whom God created before even the seas, was God's "confidant" during all of Creation. What does this mean to you?
- Rachel Carson's 1951 book, *The Sea Around Us*, offers a still-essential appreciation of the ocean's power, beauty, and vulnerability, and humanity's relationship with it.

The Letter *Kaf*



The letter *kaf* is the third letter of the Hebrew alphabet. When *kaf* has a *dagesh* (a dot) in its center, it represents a hard “k” sound; without the *dagesh* it represents a guttural “kh” sound. In Jewish religious tradition, the letters are also numerals, and *kaf* is the number 20. Its earliest form, which showed a line projecting from the center of the cup-shaped letter, was thought to resemble the palm of a hand.

Diving into the Verse

This verse is part of Psalm 147, in which the Psalmist reminds us that God made every beautiful and powerful element in nature, and controls all.

Tanakh mentions stars many times, in many contexts. Among the best known is this verse *Braishit/* Genesis 15:4, when God tells Abraham “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them...So shall your offspring be.” In *Shoftim/Judges* 5:20, the woman-chieftain, Deborah, sings a triumphant poem following her victory over a powerful Canaanite general. In *Shirat Devorah*, or “Deborah’s Song,” she exclaims that “the stars fought from heaven, from their courses they fought against Sisera,” making me wonder whether she had seen a meteor shower around the time of the battle, and believed it an omen, a sign, of divine favor (see the section on Deborah, in my *Arise! Arise! Deborah, Ruth and Hannah* (2012), not only for my paintings, but for more discussion of this fascinating possibility).

Diving into the Painting

You could find the [constellations](#) shown in this painting in the night sky over Washington, D.C. at the moment that Dalia was born! The rainbow border represents [the spectrum of visible light](#) that we see emitted by the chemical elements glowing from stars.

Although stars may seem distant from the environment of our own planet, in fact, all the chemicals that make up our Earth, including our own bodies, were all produced in the stars that we see in the night sky, and all the stars that came before them ever since the Big Bang 13.7 billion years ago. The Earth is composed of material that spun out of our own star, the Sun, which is the source of our own light and energy (think of solar power), for the heat that causes our weather—hot or cold, wet or dry—and that warms us on a sunny day. Life could not exist on Earth without our star.

Stars are a favorite subject in my family because my late first husband, Dalia’s dad’s father, was an astrophysicist, a scientist who studied stars and the physics that makes them glow. He thought that studying the stars was the most fascinating subject in the entire world!

What do we learn about ourselves, our relationship with God, and with the natural world in this painting?

*Think about, perhaps write a poem or story about how you feel when you look up at the night sky. A personal story! During a trip around Morocco a few months before the publication of *All the World Praises You!* my husband, Michael, and I spent a night in a wildly luxurious camp at the edge of the Sahara Desert. After dinner we spent ages gazing up at the completely dark, clear desert sky, the Milky Way a thick blanket of diamonds above us. Michael and I each pulled out our cell-phones and opened up our star-map apps to identify the stars shining above us—which amazed our guide, who didn't know about these apps. Despite all the high tech, all the amazing luxury amidst the Sahara's dunes, all the sophistication of our advanced educations, what struck each of us in our little group was simple wonder at the profound beauty of the heavens, amazement at God's glittering Creation spread overhead. This moment, and other moments looking at the Milky Way inspire my paintings of the night sky.*

For further exploration:

- Explore other mentions of stars in *Tanakh* and try to understand why stars matter in that context.
- For many fascinating views of stars and other astronomical objects, accompanied by short explanations by astronomers and astrophysicists, you may enjoy [Astronomy Picture of the Day](#), NASA's most popular website. There's a new picture every day!

The Letter *Lamed*



The letter *lamed* represents an “l” sound. The shape came from that of an ox-goad. In Jewish religious tradition, the letters are also numerals, and *lamed* is the number 30.

Diving into the Verse

The writer of this special Psalm for Shabbat, tells us how it is good to praise God all day long. He urges us to give thanks for God’s lovingkindness, God’s *hesed*, as the day begins. He reminds us to thank God for God’s faithful God’s care of us during the dark night. The contrast of dawn and night in this verse is an example of the psalmist’s use of “thought-rhymes,” that are a special characteristic of biblical poetry. The great biblical commentator Rashi, believed that the dawn really means the coming of *Moshiach*, the Messiah, and believed that

the “night” means the pain of the whole Jewish people not being able to live in and around our beloved Jerusalem.

Diving into the Painting

In the painting I use a calm night-time landscape of a river flowing between lush green forested banks under a star-lit sky to express the Psalmist’s serene trust in God’s care. As in the *kaf* painting, the night-sky reflects stars, and here the moon, in their phases, the night Dalia was born, against the backdrop of the deep sky observed in the famous Hubble Space Telescope photograph you may remember from the *aleph* painting here. This sky, though, shows us the whole nighttime from sunset (at right) to dawn (at left), just as the Psalmist tells us that we can trust in God’s care from night to dawn.

What do we learn about ourselves, our relationship with God, and with the natural world in this painting?

- What time of day do you most often find yourself thinking about your relationship with God? What is it about that particular time of day that makes you think about this?
- The psalmist chose the opposites, nighttime and morning, to make a word-picture about his trust in God. What other “opposites” would you choose to make the same kind of word-picture?
- As you look toward adulthood, what parts of your life do you especially trust in God to help you live well?

For further exploration:

- Psalm 92, the Psalm for Shabbat, is an important and fascinating psalm to explore. See the following sources to learn more:
- Amos Hakham, *The Bible: Psalms with the Jerusalem Commentary*, vol. 2, p. 371-378.
- There are many ways of thinking about this psalm! I have done two different visual interpretations of Psalm 92 in its entirety, in my books, *I Will Wake the Dawn: Illuminated Psalms*, pp. 100-101, and *Kabbalat Shabbat: the Grand Unification*, pp. 46-47. The paintings are very different! See whether you can understand the different ideas in the poem that I stressed in each of the paintings (hint: there are explanations of each painting in the books!).

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The Letter Mem



The letter *mem* represents a “m” sound. The shape came from water waves. In Jewish religious tradition, the letters are also numerals, and *mem* is the number 40.

Divining into the Verse

The prophet Isaiah ben Amoz, lived in the Kingdom of Judah during the last half of the 8th century BCE, and the [Book of Isaiah](#) is considered not only an important Jewish prophetic book, but one of the masterpieces of world literature. Rabbis and bible scholars consider that the prophet himself wrote the first 39 chapters (including this verse) during the late 8th century BCE, while other authors, whose names have been lost, wrote two later sections a couple of hundred years later, after the Babylonian conquest and destruction of the First

Temple in Jerusalem in 587 BCE. The first part of Isaiah contains his prophecies about the threat posed by the rising Assyrian empire (today’s northern Iraq and southern Turkey), that resulted in the destruction of the Kingdom of Israel, prophecies concerning the Kingdom of Israel and the Kingdom of Judah, and with prophecies of the rebirth of all Israel. This verse in this painting offers a glowing view of God’s redemption of Israel. Isaiah compares a refreshed and newly strong and lively Israel to a blooming desert. You might like to see the [gigantic frieze depicting the Assyrian king, Sennecherib watching the battle for the northern Israeli town of Lachish](#), from the ruins of his palace in Nineveh, now in the British Museum. Our verse, from the beginning of Chapter 35, describes God’s redemption of Israel, comparing a vigorous, newly reborn Israel to a blooming desert contrasts with the previous chapter’s comparison of Israel’s attackers to dead and toxic wastelands fit only for jackals and hyenas.

Divining into the Painting

When Dalia’s dad and uncle were small, during the middle days of Passover each year, our family backpacked our matzah and did a day hike through the [California desert](#) east of our home in San Diego to see the cactus blooming at the end of the winter rains. The cactus flowers turned the dry gray and gold hills every shade of red and orange and yellow and the long-branched ocotillos lit up the landscape like scarlet fireworks.

What do we learn about ourselves, our relationship with God, and with the natural world in this painting?

- Can you describe a period in your life when you or someone you love, faced, and finally recovered from terrible challenge? How did you (or they) think or feel about God during this crisis?
- Consider, maybe write about, how the natural world can symbolize human life.
- How do you feel when you see neglected land, or a neglected neighborhood, restored to health and beauty? How do you think God might be involved, directly or indirectly, in the area’s healing? Consider writing a poem about your feelings when you see such an area restored to health.

For further exploration:

Explore the desert environment! Start by reading [this article about the Earth’s deserts](#) and how human activity threatens their delicate ecology.

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The Letter *Nun*



The letter *nun* represents an “n” sound. In Jewish religious tradition, the letters are also numerals, and *nun* is the number 50. Its shape grew from the shape of a snake.

Diving into the Verse

Moses and Israel are standing at the foot of Mount Sinai, just before God calls Moses up to receive the Torah. God uses these words to command Moses to remind Israel of how He rescued his Chosen People at the Red Sea. Throughout our history we have believed that God’s miraculous splitting of the Red Sea, rescuing the fleeing Israelite slaves from the chariots, arrows and swords of the Egyptian cavalry, is our greatest proof of God’s protection of Israel. The twelfth century Spanish-Jewish poet and philosopher, Judah Halevi, wrote that all

Jewish parents pass the memory of the crossing of the Red Sea to their children, and that this chain of memory is our personal proof of our special relationship with God. The eagle—whose boldness and power has led empires across human history to adopt it as their emblem—has become a Jewish symbol, not of human power or aggression, but of God’s protection of Israel.

An early rabbinic explanation of *Shemot*/Exodus, the *Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael*, explains how the eagle symbolizes divine protection of Israel:

‘How I bore you on eagle’s wings and brought you to Me.’ How is the eagle distinguished from all other birds? All other birds carry their young between their feet, being afraid of other birds flying higher above them. The eagle, however, is afraid only of men who might shoot at him. He therefore prefers that the arrow lodge in him rather than in his children...As it is said, ‘And in the wilderness, where you have seen how the Lord your God bore you, as a man bears his child’ (Deut. 1:21)

Diving into the Painting

In the painting you see the huge, strong [eagle](#) soaring over Egypt, the Sinai and the Red Sea. Below the tiny figures of the Israelites hurry toward the sea. In the foreground, next to the dahlia, a stalk of rose-colored lilies symbolize, just as in the *Tet* painting, the value of the Ten Commandments that Israel would soon receive.

What do we learn about ourselves, our relationship with God, and with the natural world in this painting?

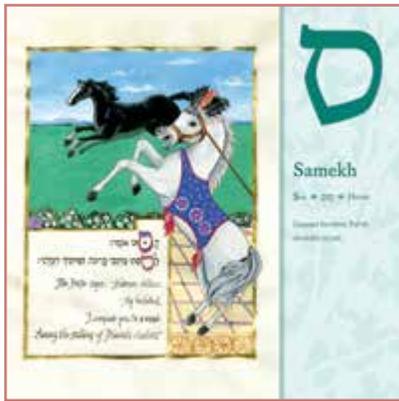
- As you consider times in your life when you have felt protected from serious harm, have you imagined God *symbolized* (not worshipped) in the guise of an animal, or some other object?
- You may have learned about the Holocaust, and every day you probably hear news about global climate change, and so the idea that God *always* protects Israel, or *all* life on earth, may sometimes be hard to accept. As you grow into adulthood, and become responsible for your life as a Jew, how do you think about the idea that God will always solve our problems and take care of us Jews and all the world? What’s our responsibility in our covenant with God?

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For further exploration:

- The biblical story of the Crossing of the Red Sea, *Shemot*/Exodus 14-15.
- Jacob Z. Lauterbach, trans., *The Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael*, (Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 1933), is a fascinating early collection of midrash to dip into. This particular midrash is found in vol. 2, p. 202-3.

The Letter *Samekh*



The letter *samekh* represents an “s” sound. In Jewish religious tradition, the letters are also numerals, and *samekh* is the number 60. The shape derives from the shape of a bow.

Diving into the Verse

How, you might wonder, can a verse from the Tanakh’s book of love poetry, *Song of Songs*, that talks about horses and Pharaoh’s chariots possibly be a praise of God? The answer to this question lies in the symbolism of these horses! We can understand this symbolism by looking into the archeology and history of ancient Egypt and Israel, and also understanding the way the ancient rabbis tried to help us understand our relationship with God. One of the rabbis’ tools was

midrash, the two-thousand year old literary tradition of explaining the between-the-lines meanings in *Tanakh* by thinking up, or passing on legends that express the biblical ideas. We have already looked at much midrash here; for instance, the lily story in the *tet* painting (also mentioned just above) is a midrash.

How and why were horses important in ancient Israel? In biblical times Israel knew horses only as weapons of war...usually used by foreign armies. Instead of horses, Israelites used donkeys for riding and pulling carts. Strong and fast horses, able to carry soldiers and pull heavy chariots, were fearsome weapons that they only encountered in enemy armies. Read, for instance, the Deborah story (Judges 4-5), which comes to us from 13th century BCE Israel. The writer of that story described the Canaanite general’s use of horses and iron chariots as evidence of his advanced technology and terrible power. Horses were introduced to Israelite armies by King Solomon (970-931 BCE), who imported them, together with chariots, from Egypt (Kings I: 10-26). Horses remained so rare and special throughout the biblical period that *Tanakh* associates them with King Solomon’s amazing wealth and power.

The writer of our verse compares the young woman to a mare. Why is a mare important (and beautiful)? We also know from recent studies of ancient Egypt that the [Pharaohs’ chariots](#) were drawn *only* by stallions, never mares. So, what happens when you let a pretty mare loose in a paddock full of feisty chariot stallions? Pandemonium! The male and female horses will do anything to be together! In the light of the archeology, we must understand this verse as the man saying something like, “Honey, I want to be with you *so much!*—you drive my guy-friends and me crazy!”

While on the surface the Song of Songs appears to be wonderful love poetry—using many metaphors from the natural world— these 117 verses traditionally attributed to King Solomon mean much more in Jewish tradition than just beautiful love poetry. Yes, it’s love poetry, but the Song of Songs has another life in Jewish tradition! Since at least the time of the early rabbis (first and second centuries) if not earlier, much midrash has compared the love between God and Israel to the love between the young woman and man. Now we can understand how the wild love the young man declares in this verse can be seen as a praise of God!

Diving into the Painting

The painting presents an elegant black mare running freely across a pasture. A strong white stallion, saddled like ancient Egyptian chariot horses (copied from ancient Egyptian painting), rears up in an attempt to run to the mare.

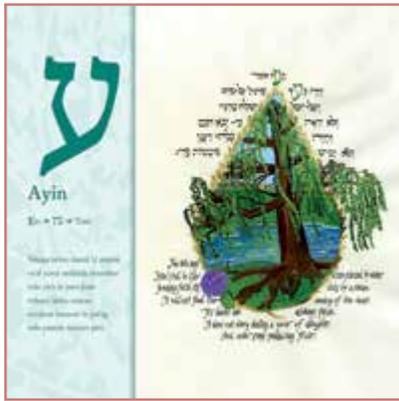
What do we learn about ourselves, our relationship with God, and with the natural world in this painting?

- As you reach young adulthood and begin to take interest in young men or women around you, do you feel that this love is a natural part of life? Is it difficult to control your feelings? How do you express these feelings in a way that fits comfortably into your family's and friends' ways of life? Do you see a reflection of your relationship with God in this relationship?
- What thing in the natural world do you associate with a deep passion for God? A season, a plant, an animal, a natural occurrence? What kind of love of God do they symbolize?

For further exploration:

- You might enjoy the illumination of this verse in my *Song of Songs: the Honeybee in the Garden*, Illumination 4. See the Introduction for an explanation of the midrashic allegories on this biblical love poetry.

The Letter *Ayin*



In modern times, in most Jewish communities, the letter *ayin* has no sound other than the vowels shown with it (or implied by the grammatical form of the word in which it appears), or it may be a glottal stop. In ancient times, and in some eastern Jewish traditions, *ayin* has a guttural sound. In Jewish religious tradition, the letters are also numerals, and *ayin* is the number 70. Its shape developed from the shape of an eye.

Diving into the Verse

Jewish tradition honors the tree as a symbol of Torah, of men and women, of the entire People of Israel, and this verse is one of my personal favorites in all *Tanakh*. You may know another famous verse about trees—the one we sing in synagogue as the Torah is

replaced into the Ark: “It is a tree of life to those who grasp it, and all who hold on to it are happy.” (Proverbs 3:18); click to listen to a [traditional chant](#), and to a [chorale version](#). Although many of the prophets warn against worshipping trees as gods, as did the nearby Canaanites, trees usually represent God’s blessings for Israel. Jewish law even forbids cutting down fruit trees! Trees are also compared to human emotions. One midrash about Hannah in the first chapter of the Book of Samuel, compares this depressed woman, who can’t have children to a withered, leafless olive tree, while her husband’s second wife, Peninah, who enjoys her many children, is compared to a leafy, fruiting olive tree—the relative fruitfulness of each tree symbolizes each woman’s pain or happiness relating to child-bearing.

This verse is from the book of the prophet [Jeremiah](#), who lived in Israel during the 6th century BCE and supported the religious reforms of the Judean king, Josiah. Josiah struggled to restore worship of our one God to Judah after the corruption of earlier kings, who allowed idolatry. Jeremiah also witnessed both the destruction of the [Assyrian empire](#), which had earlier destroyed the northern Kingdom of Israel, and the destruction of the Judean Kingdom in 586 BCE, resulting in the [Babylonian Exile](#). Earlier and later in this chapter Jeremiah has scolded the Judeans who persist in idol-worship despite King Josiah’s efforts at restoring worship of Israel’s God. In this lyrical verse, however, he compares people who are faithful to God to a tree planted by water—fresh, secure and happy.

Diving into the Painting

Even in the middle of a bustling city, a tree planted beside a stream flowing through a park can flourish. While designing this painting, and thinking about the tree’s balance of strong roots and full canopy, I remembered a favorite passage in *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers) (III:22), which in turn, is based on our verse from Jeremiah:

“He whose wisdom [words] exceed his deeds, to what is he like? To a tree whose branches are few, but whose roots are few; and the wind comes and plucks it up and overturns it upon its face; as it is said, ‘And he shall be like a lonely juniper tree in the desert, and shall not see when good comes; but shall inhabit the parched places in the wilderness, a salt land and not inhabited.’ But he whose deeds exceed his wisdom, to a tree whose branches are few, but whose roots are many, so that even if all the winds in the world come and blow upon it, it cannot be stirred from its place; as it is said, ‘And he shall be as a tree planted by the waters; and that spreadeth out its roots by the river, and shall not perceive when heat cometh, but his leaf shall be green; and shall not be troubled in the year of drought, neither cease from yielding fruit.’”

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What do we learn about ourselves, our relationship with God, and with the natural world in this painting?

- What kind of tree would you compare yourself to, as you grow into an adult? Would you be a full-grown tree or a young sapling? Write about the kind of tree you'd like to resemble as an adult, perhaps make a drawing or painting of it.
- I live in the Washington, DC area, which is famous for its flowering cherry trees, originally brought here in 1912 as a [friendship gift to the American people from the people of Japan](#). Every year I love to watch my own cherry trees cycling from winter bareness to vivid spring blossom, summer leaves, autumn's colorful dying leaves, back to winter, and often compare their changes to our human life-cycle. Do you have favorite trees that you watch developing throughout the year? What do you think about as you watch their annual changes?
- If you were a tree how would you imagine God and humankind?
- Trees are so important to our environment! We know that they help clean the air, hold the soil stable, give us fruit, and provide homes for many insects, birds and small mammals. As you approach responsibility for your own actions as a Jew, what kind of responsibility do you have for trees around you?

For further exploration:

- *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers), found in many traditional Jewish prayer books, and in many other editions.
- *Neot Kedumim*, the Biblical Landscape Reserve in Israel, published a splendid book about the vegetation of the Land of Israel. The section for each plant includes the passages from *Tanakh*, Midrash and Talmud in which they are mentioned. See Nogah Hareuveni, *Tree and Shrub in Our Biblical Heritage*, (Kiryat Ono, Israel, 1984).
- H.N. Bialik and Y.H. Ravnitsky, trans., W.G. Braude, *The Book of Legends: Sefer Ha-Aggadah: Legends from the Talmud and Midrash*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1992) is a famous collection of these materials, and a fascinating book to dip into. For many years this book has been one of my favorite bar/bat mitzvah gifts! A section of trees and grasses (p. 771-773) presents a number of short legends, and trees figure in a great many of the other tales in the book.
- You might enjoy seeing my illuminations of the Hannah story in my *Arise! Arise! Deborah, Ruth and Hannah* (2012).
- Check out the citizen-science program, [Budburst](#), which offers kids the chance to work with real scientists to understand and protect our plants, trees...our whole environment!

The Letter Pay



When the letter *pay* appears with a *dagesh* (dot) in its center it makes a “p” sound and is called *pay*. Without the *dagesh* it makes an “f” sound, and is called *fay*. In Jewish religious tradition, the letters are also numerals, and *pay* is the number 80. The shape of the *pay* comes from the shape of our mouths.

Diving into the Verse

This verse is part of Psalm 92, the special Psalm for Shabbat, and helps us understand God’s unimaginable breadth and power, God’s infinite wisdom. The scholar, Amos Hakham, teaches us how the composer of this psalm links God’s great deeds and great thoughts to the environment: “The psalmist describes God’s thoughts as ‘deep’ and

His works as ‘great’ as an insight that deep thoughts lead to great deeds, just as the deep roots of a tree produce great, high branches.”

As human activities destroy much of the wild grassland and forest of Africa and Asia, and hunters kill these wonderful animals for their ivory tusks, it is important to appreciate the elephants’ rights to live their own lives in their environment.

Diving into the Painting

Of all animals in the natural world, the [elephant](#) is one of the largest and most [intelligent](#). In this playful painting, I imagine an enormous African elephant trumpeting the words of the psalm toward the heavens, describing God’s *even more* enormous power and wisdom. Elephants often host small birds who perch on their ears or back. Here my small cockatiel, Peaches, rests on the elephant’s ear as he holds a dahlia in his beak.

As human activities destroy much of the wild grassland and forest of Africa and Asia, and hunters kill these wonderful animals for their ivory tusks, it is important to appreciate the elephants’ rights to live their own lives in their environment.

What do we learn about ourselves, our relationship with God, and with the natural world in this painting?

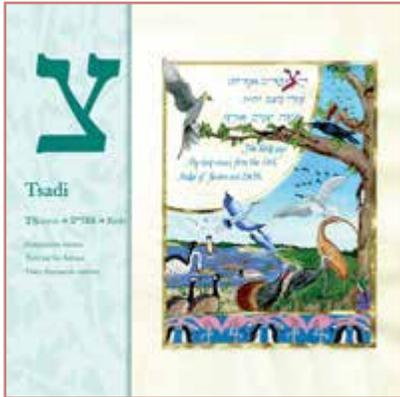
- Psalm 8 tells us that God made us “a little less than divine, adorned...with glory and majesty.” These gifts give us a special responsibility toward the rest of the world. As you think about your coming life as an adult, what kind of changes in your lifestyle would help achieve a more secure balance of human and natural world? Consider also your relationship with the God that created our universe. What kind of balance of actions do you think God expects from us, whom, as the Psalmist said, have such remarkable powers?
- Can you imagine a Bar/Bat Mitzvah project to help protect threatened animals?

For further exploration:

- Psalm 92. For a general discussion of this special Psalm for Shabbat, see Amos Hakham, *The Bible: Psalms*, vol. 2, p. 371.
- Learn about habitat destruction. See for instance, this article from the [World Wildlife Fund](#). While North America may seem far away from Africa and Asia, we can do a lot in our own environment to minimize habitat destruction. See this [article about responsible gardening](#) to protect native insect species.

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The Letter *Tsadi*



The letter *tsadi* represents a “ts” sound. In Jewish religious tradition, the letters are also numerals, and *tsadi* is the number 90.

Diving into the Verse

The verse before our verse asks, “I lift my eyes to the hills. From where will my help come?” The psalmist then answers his question with our verse—it is not the mountains, but the *Maker* of the mountains who will protect us, the poet realizes. This psalm suggests many stories where God protected people in different ways. The Bible scholar, Amos Hakham suggests that we can understand this psalm as a kind of blessing from parents or teachers to their children or students, a promise that God will take protect all of us from harm.

Birds in all their beauty and amazing variety fly freely across land, sea and sky, feeding and nesting in every kind of environment, from Antarctic ice to rain forest blossoms. Their songs and shrieks seem to sing with joy at their freedom, yet birds’ fragile lives need protection. All birds depend upon the delicate balance of the environment in God’s world—and upon us, who are responsible for protecting the environment that we all share.

Diving into the Painting

Woodland and water birds from across the world dive into the water, alight into the sky, and scabble in the grass. A tiny hummingbird sips from the dahlia, a woodpecker drills into the tree-trunk and a noisy raven squawks rudely at a nesting robin. Every kind of bird has adapted its lifestyle to its habitat... although my cockatiel, Peaches, should never be outside perching on that branch (at 22 year old, and as a member of an Australian species, he is much better adapted to life in my studio)! Flamingos and penguins, each adapted to very different landscapes than our woodland scene, twine their necks, or kiss in the imitation of Egyptian paintings!

What do we learn about ourselves, our relationship with God, and with the natural world in this painting?

- Part of the magic that birds hold for us is their natural connection of heaven and earth. How would it feel to you to soar into the heavens like, for instance the high-flying swift?
- Pretend that you are a bird migrating from North American to South America. As you look down at the [rainforests surrounding the Amazon River](#) far below you, how would you feel about the beauty of the rainforests you can see? And about the damage being done to much of the rainforest?
- As you reach the age of responsibility for your live as a Jew, how can you take part in the “repair of the world,” *tikkun olam*, by participating in activities to protect birds, whether at home or across our planet?

For further exploration:

- For more information on Psalm 121, and the way it describes divine protection, read the psalm and see the commentary in *Amos Hakham, The Bible: Psalms*, Vol. 3, p. 294 ff.
- See Uzi Paz and Yossi Eshbol, *Birds in the Land of the Bible*, (Jerusalem: Palphot, 2004) for photography and facts about birds found in the Land of Israel and surrounding regions.
- Explore the “citizen science” program, [eBird](#), run by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.
- [iNaturalist](#) is another citizen science program that has projects in which you can be involved in protecting many parts of our environment.
- Explore the [National Audubon Society](#), which has worked to protect birds and their habitats for decades.

The Letter Qof



The letter *qof* represents a “k” or “q” sound. In Jewish religious tradition, the letters are also numerals, and *qof* is the number 100.

Diving into the Verse

In this beloved verse, God promises Noah and his sons that God will never again destroy the earth and all living on it with a flood. God shows them the brilliant rainbow as a sign of this *covenant*.

We all know that God showed Noah and his family the rainbow as God’s promise never again to destroy the world. But we don’t always keep track of the fact that the word *covenant* means the promise is a “two-way street.” The rainbow is like God’s hand-shake on an agreement. Even in the Flood Story, long before God’s covenant with Abraham, the rainbow covenant involves commitments by God and *all* humanity. God has blessed Noah and his children, telling them to re-populate the world, and straightaway gives them six more rules for moral conduct that apply to all humankind. These moral laws that God gives to Noah, for all humankind to come, known as the “Seven Noahide Laws,” require that humanity must:

- (1) have children and fill the earth.
- (2) understand that all other animal life on earth will fear humankind; all animals are “given into your hand.”
- (3) humankind may eat all animals and all plants as food (the laws of kashrut come much later, and are particular to the children of Israel (Jacob).
- (4) never eat a living animal, “with its life-blood in it.”
- (5) no animal of any kind may commit suicide.
- (6) no human may kill another human since God made humankind in God’s own image.
- (7) As in (1), have children and fill the earth.

God only shows Noah and his family the rainbow after giving them these laws that all humanity will be required to follow. The promise never to destroy the world *depends upon* all humanity living according to these ground-rules.

Other ancient religious traditions include flood stories. The ancient religious tradition of Babylonia (modern Iraq) told another famous [flood story](#). The Babylonian myth of Gilgamesh, that dates from at least 1700 BCE, includes the dramatic story of Gilgamesh, the King of the city-state Uruk. When Gilgamesh’s best friend, Enkidu, died, Gilgamesh struggled to understand why humans had to die. Gilgamesh made a dangerous journey to speak with a hidden wise man, Utnapishtim, who told him of a flood that destroyed all humankind, another ark to save couples of every living species, other birds that announce the re-growth of life. As a reward for surviving the flood, and for his sacrifice to the gods, the Babylonian gods grant Utnapishtim and his wife eternal life. Unlike the Torah’s flood story, the Babylonian myth does not give moral laws for all humankind, and only Utnapishtim is granted eternal life. As similar as these two flood stories are on the surface, the Israelite tale is different from the Babylonian by ending in moral laws to benefit the lives of all humanity.

Diving into the Painting

The painting presents a calm scene of a rainbow appearing through the dissipating clouds, over a peaceful river. The scene reflects a favorite walk along the C&O Canal outside of Washington, D.C.

What do we learn about ourselves, our relationship with God, and with the natural world in this painting?

- If you were to compose seven laws to regulate relations between all humanity, and between humanity and the animal world, what would they be?
- What would you choose as a symbol of God's protection of the world from destruction?

For further exploration:

- Read the entire Noah story, from beginning with the flood to its end. In the *Jewish Study Bible*, see the discussion of the Noahide Laws on page 25. Think about what we learn about human nature and the role of law.
- Are you interested in mythology? To explore the exciting Gilgamesh myth, see the wonderfully clear edition, Stephen Mitchell, *Gilgamesh: A New English Version*. (New York: Simon & Shuster, Inc., 2004). The flood story is in Book XI, p. 180, but you may enjoy the entire myth.

The Letter *Resh*



The letter *resh* represents an “r” sound. In Jewish religious tradition, the letters are also numerals, and *resh* is the number 200. The shape developed from the shape of the head.

Diving into the Verse

In Psalm 104, the Psalmist celebrates God’s creation of the entire Earth and all that lives within it, in the heavens, on the earth, in the rivers and in the oceans. This lovely poem describes a world of perfect order and balance, a world where all creatures live in harmony according to the roles assigned them by God. In this verse the Psalmist points, as though with a finger, to the grandeur of the seas, its swarming life ranging from the smallest crawling creatures to the great

fish and whales. The poet employs the word *remes*, “creeping things,” alluding to the insects, reptiles and fish created on the Fifth Day in the biblical story.

Diving into the Painting

In the painting I offer you a view of a [coral reef](#) teeming with sea-life great and small. The large [blue triggerfish](#), native to the Red Sea dominates the scene. Gigantic blue clams and tiny waving coral polyps, rough branching corals and schools of fish—many of which were photographed by my son while diving near [Eilat](#), on [Australia’s Great Barrier](#) and the [Belize Barrier Reef](#)—flourish and teem in these ocean eco-systems. As far as they are from our cities and suburbs, despite the severe damage they have already suffered due to global climate change, coral reefs are nonetheless [essential to the Earth’s entire environment](#), protecting and creating land, providing food directly to humans and to fish at the base of the global food chain.

What do we learn about ourselves, our relationship with God, and with the natural world in this painting?

Have you ever dived or snorkeled in a coral reef, wondered at the swarms of oddly shaped creatures passing near your elbow, felt nearly giddy with delight at the brilliantly colored fish glinting in the sun-dappled waters? Have you walked around a public aquarium’s coral reef exhibit, amazed at the elegance of the jellies and silvered schools of sardines, the intelligence of octopi? What thoughts swim through your mind?

For further exploration:

- Visit one of the great aquariums, such as the Scripps Aquarium in La Jolla, California, or the National Aquarium in Baltimore, or the Coral World Underwater Observatory in Eilat, Israel. The Eilat Underwater Observatory takes visitors down to the sea floor among the actual coral reefs! Enjoy this [documentary film](#) about coral reefs.
- As a young person beginning to think about independent life, as a Jew assuming responsibility for your own actions, what can you do to help preserve our beautiful endangered coral reefs? Read this [article](#), do your own research about dangers we humans pose to coral reefs, speak with your teachers, to understand more about our responsibility. Write an article about the kinds of things (directly or indirectly) young people can do to help slow the destruction of the Earth’s coral reefs.

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The Letter *Shin*



Depending upon whether a dot appears at top right or top left of the letter, the letter *shin* has two names and represents two sounds. If the dot appears at top right, the *shin* makes the “sh” sound. If the dot appears at top left, the *sin* makes the “s” sound. In Jewish religious tradition, the letters are also numerals, and *shin* is the number 300. Like *samekh*, shape developed from the shape of a bow.

Diving into the Verse

The Milky Way is our own galaxy, the community of stars that our solar system is part of. How powerful God must be to have spread out the heavens like a sparkling robe! In this long and wonderful poem about the beautiful order of all creation, this psalm’s composer begins by celebrating the beauty of the stars of the night sky and his complete amazement at how powerful God must be to have made all of this. If you have ever spent a night under the cloudless desert sky, far from city lights, you may have felt the same amazement at the beauty of the night sky, and the power of its Creator. Many Jewish poets across the ages have written about how the night sky makes them think about God’s greatness and power. If you look back at the section on the *kaf* painting above, you will also remember that in *Braishit/Genesis*, God promised Abraham that his children would be as impossible to count as the stars of the night sky...we can imagine that Abraham was looking up at the Milky Way in the perfectly dark desert sky.

Diving into the Painting

The painting presents a view of the [Milky Way](#) far overhead on a dark night. You may notice that the Hebrew and English texts of the verse, moving from right to left, are written in the colors of the rainbow! The rainbow shows us the colors of the [electromagnetic spectrum](#), all the kinds of energy and light that exists in the Milky Way, and the whole entire universe.

What do we learn about ourselves, our relationship with God, and with the natural world in this painting?

When you look up at the dark night sky, and try to find the rest of our galaxy, the Milky Way (keep in mind that most of the “stars” we see in the sky are actually *other* galaxies!), think about how enormous God must be to have created us, our planet, our galaxy (the Milky Way), and all the other galaxies in the universe! Consider writing a poem about your feelings.

For further exploration:

- Explore photography of the Milky Way: a good place to start is NASA’s website, [Astronomy Picture of the Day](#), that posts a new photo relating to space sciences every day. You can [search](#) the APOD archive for images on particular subjects, such as the Milky Way.
- Listen to the Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach’s moving musical setting of the first words of our verse, [“Borchi Nafshi”](#).
- Rabbi Shefa Gold has recorded several chants of [“Borchi Nafshi.”](#) You may wish to search for other recordings...or compose your own.

The Letter *Tav*



The letter *tav* has two different pronunciations depending upon whether the speaker uses Ashkenazic or Sephardic Hebrew. In modern Hebrew “Sephardic” pronunciation the letter *Tav* always represents a “t” sound. However, in Ashkenazi Hebrew pronunciation, when *tav* has a *dagesh* (dot) in the center, it makes a “t.” Without a *dagesh*, it is pronounced “s,” and is called “*sav*.” When it appears at the end of a word, *tav* is often transliterated as “th.” In Jewish religious tradition, the letters are also numerals, and *tav* is the numeral for 400. The shape of the *tav* developed from the shape of a land cross-marker.

Diving into the Verse

Braishit/Genesis tells us how happy God felt as God finished his beautiful Creation. God says that Creation is not just “*tov*,” “good,” like God says about the other days, but “*tov me’od*,” “very good,” indicating how especially happy God is at the *completion* of Creation. Here, cells, the smallest kind of life, that make up every plant and animal, join the writer of *Braishit*/Genesis in praising God’s amazing Creation.

Diving into the Painting

When we look at a lovely dahlia with our eyes we see soft petals and vivid colors. In the edges of the painting you see what those petals look like in a microscope—many tiny round brightly pigmented cells. Move to the center of the painting, our view zooms out and you see all the microscopic cells joined together to make the whole flower. You can see a honeybee flying to the center of the blossom—and at bottom right a microscopic view of the cells of the honeybee’s eye that work together (hairs and all!) to enable the bee to find that flower whose nectar she will help turn into honey.

What do we learn about ourselves, our relationship with God, and with the natural world in this painting?

When you hold something beautiful, such as a flower, in your hand and study it closely—or simply let your mind wander around it, how do you relate it to the greater natural world? What (if any) message do you think God expresses to us in the structure and detail of that flower?

For further exploration:

- To explore the honeybee's eye and her remarkable adaptation to her life probing flowers, see artist [Rose-Lynn Fisher's electron microscopy of honeybees](#).
- Explore [the dahlia's life-cycle through this website](#). Plant a flower seed in some soil at the edge of a clear cup (so you can see the roots), and watch it grow from close-up!
- Read the story of Creation in the first chapter of *Braishit/Genesis*. How is the biblical story different from our 21st century scientific understanding of the way the world was created? Think about the kinds of *meaning* in the biblical story that are important to us today as modern people living in the world of science and technology.
- Explore amazing ancient and medieval Jewish midrash and legends about Creation! These legends even include unusual monster stories that are very surprising to our modern minds! You may enjoy reading some of these legends that have grown around the biblical account of Creation in the famous work of scholar Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, Vol. 1 *From the Creation to Jacob*. First published in 1906, there are many printed editions of this work. The work is available also [online](#). Use your knowledge of Torah to try to figure out what the people who first told those legends were trying to explain!

Final Paintings: *Find the Hidden Letters Puzzle*



Diving into the Verse

This verse from Psalm 104 sums up everything we have explored in *All the World Praises You!* As we celebrate Creation, we praise our eternal God and pray that God will always protect us, and all our generations in the wondrous environment of Creation...and we hope that we will each play our part in taking care of our precious world.

Diving into the Paintings

The two paintings show daytime and nighttime woodland scenes. Every letter of the Hebrew alphabet is hidden in the paintings....at least once! See if you can find them all!

[Click here for the key](#)

