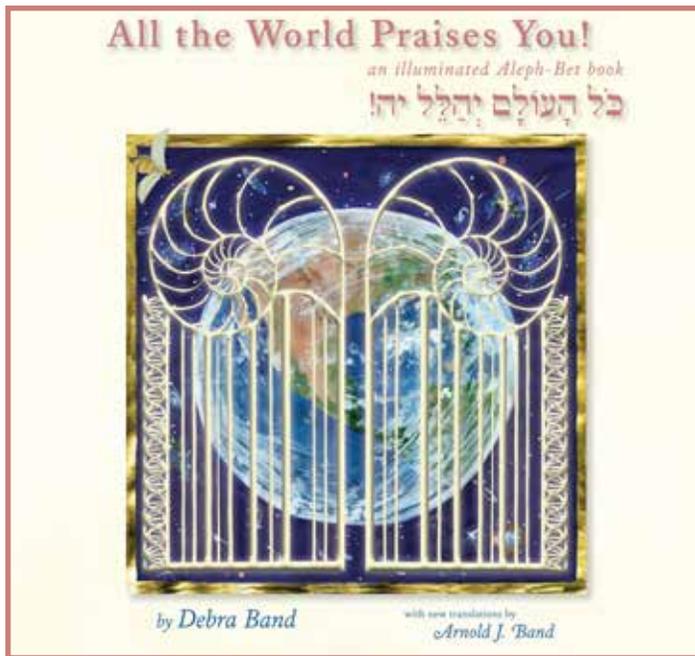


Diving Deeper!

Enrichment Materials Geared to Jewish Day-School High School Students and Adults



How to Use these Materials

Each verse and each painting presented in *All the World Praises You!* is rich with meaning in biblical interpretation, Jewish lore and spirituality, and implications for our modern environmental consciousness. The page-by-page notes below “unpack” the meanings of each page’s verse and painting with Jewish day-school high-school students and adults with some background in Jewish text tradition in mind, although I hope that others will be able to follow them also. 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 briefly stated 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 earliest extant manuscripts date from the tenth century. The work has remained popular among those interested in Jewish mysticism.

For more information about *Perek Shira*, there are several modern print and on-line publications, mostly

Diving Deeper: Educational Supplements for All the World Praises You!, copyright © Debra Band 2018. All rights reserved. See www.AllTheWorldPraisesYou.com for more information.

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 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.

There are many sources, popular and scholarly, for the history and development of the Hebrew alphabet and the Hebrew manuscript tradition. Wikipedia offers a broad general history of the [development of](#)

| 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 | 'ālf | 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 | maıym | water (waves)  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| N | nahāš | snake  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| O | 'āyin | eye  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| F, P | pēh | mouth/corner  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Q | qu (p-) | ? |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| R | raš | head  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| S, X | tann | composite bow  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| T | taw | cross-marker  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

Source: Institute of SemiticStudies.org

Copyright 1991 E. Isaac, Institute of Semitic Studies, Princeton NJ

[Mediterranean alphabets](#). Here is a chart showing the development and relationships of the Hebrew, some surrounding Mediterranean and Latin alphabets:

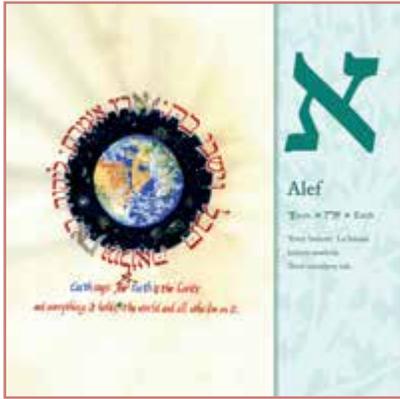
Below you will find a few scholarly titles of particular interest; the discussions of each of the letter paintings include more sources of particular interest in those contexts, and often refer to these works. The list of sources that I offer here is not at all exhaustive, but if you are interested in plunging deeply into many matters in this work, these works will get you started. Most are widely available. I also suggest that you check back while looking at particular letters' verses and paintings:

- Joseph Naveh, *Early History of the Alphabet*, Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1997. Also available in paperback (Varda Books) and e-book from www.ebookshuk.com. This is an important epigraphic and paleographic study of the development of the Hebrew alphabets in relationship to other early alphabets of the south-eastern Mediterranean region.
- There are many sources about the mystical significance of the Hebrew letters. One well known such work available in English is: Rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburgh, *The Alef-Beit: Jewish Thought Revealed through the Hebrew Letters*. New York, Jason Aronson, Inc. 1977.

Diving Deeper: Educational Supplements for All the World Praises You!, copyright © Debra Band 2018. All rights reserved. See www.AllTheWorldPraisesYou.com for more information.

- Marc Epstein, et al., *Skies of Parchment, Seas of Ink: Jewish Illuminated Manuscripts*. New York, Princeton University Press, 2015. A beautifully illustrated scholarly history of Jewish illuminated manuscripts.
- Colette Sirat, *Hebrew Manuscripts of the Middle Ages*. Ed., and trans. Nicholas de Lange. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002. A history of medieval European and Middle Eastern Hebrew manuscripts, with and without illumination.
- Christopher de Hamel, *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts: Twelve Journeys into the Medieval World*. New York, Penguin Press, 2017, offers an enchanting exploration of the western illuminated manuscript tradition, from which, along with the Hebrew manuscript tradition, this book is descended.
- Amos Hakham, *The Bible: Psalms with the Jerusalem Commentary*. Jerusalem, Mossad HaRav Kook, 2003. This set is a splendid resource for studying themes within this seminal literature. If you would like to learn more about traditional Jewish interpretations of each of the verses from the Psalms in *All the World Praises You!* (as well as your own studies of Psalms), Hakham's commentaries offer valuable explorations.
- A.J. Rosenberg, *Mikraoth Gedoloth: Psalms*, vols. 1-3. New York, The Judaica Press, 2001, presents the Hebrew and English texts of each book of the Hebrew Bible, along with the traditional canon of rabbinic commentaries on each verse, along with English summaries or extracts of the rabbinics. Other volumes besides these on the Psalms will be mentioned in the notes below.
- For modern academic bible scholarship on each book of the Hebrew Bible, focusing on linguistics, textual history and relationship to other cultures, see *The Anchor Bible: Psalms* (3 vols). Garden City, New York, Doubleday and Company. *The Anchor Bible: Psalms*, ed., and trans. Mitchell Dahood (1965) in particular, is referenced frequently in the commentary below.
- An Australian Jewish organization has made available [this essay on Jewish environmental ethics](#), that indeed begins by considering the *aleph* verse in *All the World Praises You!*
- Scholars in the Conservative Movement have written about Jewish environmental ethics in Elliot N. Dorff and Jonathan K. Crane, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Ethics and Morality*. Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2012. An abstract may be found [here](#).
- *The Jewish Study Bible: Jewish Publication Society TANAKH Translation* (ed., Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2004) offers marginal notes drawn from academic biblical studies accompanying the biblical text, covering the entire *Tanakh*.
- My own illuminated books with commentaries, *The Song of Songs: the Honeybee in the Garden*, Philadelphia, The Jewish Publication Society, 2005, (of interest for both paintings and commentary detailing the use of midrashic symbolism), *I Will Wake the Dawn: Illuminated Psalms*, Philadelphia, The Jewish Publication Society, 2007, and *Kabbalat Shabbat: the Grand Unification*, Potomac, MD, Honeybee in the Garden, 2016, all of which include my earlier visual interpretations of texts involved in this book.
- Abraham Joshua Heschel's discussion of spiritual "radical amazement," and "radical awe" at the created world offer profound insights into the Jewish attitude to the environment. See his *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976.

The Letter *Aleph*



The letter *aleph* is the first letter of the *aleph-bet*. Its shape is descended from an early pictogram 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 denotes 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; the prophet criticized Judeans' immoral behavior and hypocritical religious habits, and offered both sharp political advice for Judah's rulers and ecstatic evocations of divine rewards for Israel's devotion to God. Isaiah's wonderfully lyrical poetry continues to resound throughout western literature.

In this verse, Isaiah, who hated violence, and loved peace and life, tells us that everything on Earth came from God.

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, draws directly upon modern astronomy. This is a [photograph of the "Ultra-Deep Field"](#) of space made by NASA's Hubble Space Telescope in 2014. The [Hubble Space Telescope](#) includes a series of "detectors" that capture photons (light particles) emitted by different parts of the [electromagnetic spectrum](#), to enable astronomers to view the universe using different kinds of light (for instance, ultra-violet, heat, optical, radio-wave, x-ray, gamma-ray). 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. The theory of the Big Bang is thoroughly supported by astronomical observation and astrophysical analysis, and is now considered authoritative in the astrophysics community. Click [here](#) to see an amazing one-minute video that imagines the world from the Big Bang to our own modern civilization!

You will see this image of the Ultra-Deep Field again in this work (and all my other books)! I have adopted this image as a symbol of the all-suffusing presence of the Divine in the material world.

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 would you think about?
- Isaiah, of course, lived long before science began to show us the long and complicated process of the evolution of life on earth, however his message about the connection between ourselves, our planet and our God endures. 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. 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, and what God wants from us?
- Do you think that God’s promise gives us a special responsibility in the world?

For further exploration!

- A.J. Rosenberg. *The Book of Isaiah* 2 vols. New York, Judaica Press, 1982. Useful digest of traditional rabbinic commentaries of the biblical text.
- Joseph Blenkinsopp. *The Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries: Isaiah*, 2 vols. New Haven, Yale University Press, 2000. An importance resource in academic biblical studies.
- Amir D. Aczel. *The Mystery of the Aleph: Mathematics, the Kabbalah, and the Search for Infinity*. New York, Washington Square Press, 2000.
- Jeremy Brown. *New Heavens and a New Earth: the Jewish Reception of Copernican Thought*. New York and London, Oxford University Press, 2011. Whereas the difficult Catholic reception of modern astronomical thought is widely understood, Judaism also faced challenges in accepting astronomy that did not place Earth at the center of the cosmos. Brown offers a fascinating history of Judaism’s gradual and complex acceptance of modern astronomy.
- Recent archeological findings may shed some light on Isaiah’s life. [Click](#) to find out!
- 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 differs greatly from our modern, empirical, scientific understanding of the birth of the universe, the earth and life itself. 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 evolved through a complicated process on geologic time-scales. We do know, though, that Torah and modern science agree 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? In his 2014 book, *The Great Partnership: Science, Religion and the Search for Meaning*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks suggests that in fact science and Torah do not conflict. Whereas science provides the “how,” and “when,” Torah provides the *meaning* of creation. You can think about the *meaning* of our world as you read the rest of this book and these notes.

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 pronounced as I have written it, “*bet*.” In Jewish religious tradition, the letters are also numerals, and *bet* is the number 2.

Diving into the Verse

The editors of *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 psalm from which this verse is taken 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 of God’s unfathomable power in this psalm, along with power to control 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 God had promised to Jacob’s children after God brought them out of slavery in Egypt.

Diving into the Painting

In the painting I show the Hebrew and English words of the verse riding 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 can see 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, symbolize God’s all-suffusing presence in the world. The verse and painting tell us 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?

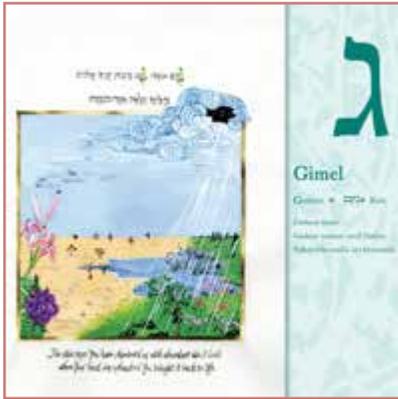
- Consider other biblical texts about God’s power to control the weather, in particular, storms? Consider Psalm 29, the second paragraph of the *Shema* (*Dvarim*/Deuteronomy 11: 13-21, and the Song of Deborah (*Shoftim*/Judges 4-5). Can you find other mentions of God’s power over weather in *Tanakh*?
- Now that we have modern science we have direct physical explanations for weather, including [thunderstorms](#) besides our religious understandings. As Jews, however, we understand that God set in motion, and continues to care for all the universe, with all the laws of nature. 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 an adult Jew and national citizen?
- Please see the *gimel* painting for more about attitudes toward rain and water.

Diving Deeper: Educational Supplements for All the World Praises You!, copyright © Debra Band 2018.
All rights reserved. See www.AllTheWorldPraisesYou.com for more information.

For further exploration!

- To explore the notion of the God of Storms from a primarily traditional rabbinic perspective, see the discussions of Psalms 29 and 135 in Amos Hakham, cited above.
- For academic bible scholarship on these psalms, see also the *Anchor Bible: Psalms*, vols. 1 and 3.
- Explore modern scholarly writings about Jewish environmental ethics, such as in the collection edited by Dorff mentioned above.

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

In an arid land, rain enables life. Today Israel satisfies its needs for water through technological solutions and conservation, but in the subsistence agricultural communities of ancient Israel, crops, herding and life itself were uncertain—utterly dependent upon rain in winter and dew in the summer and constantly vulnerable to drought. In this complex psalm, the poet refers to several biblical tales of water as some of the greatest miracles with which God protects and gives “strength

and might” to Israel. See Hakham, vol. 3, pp. 70-90 for his discussion of the psalm. Nowadays, we are also aware that just as 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 is a powerful indicator of divine favor throughout Jewish lore, mentioned 36 times throughout *Tanakh* and appearing also in traditional liturgy. Apart from the verse cited here, find and consider the following sampling:

- The second paragraph of the *Shema (Dvarim/Deuteronomy 11:13-21)* describes rain as a 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 at Wadi Kishon, ensuring Israel’s victory over the Canaanite general Sisera.
- I Kings 17-18, in which Elijah, having prophesied the failure of the rains while King Ahab sinned, sustains 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.”

You may wish to find a concordance of the *Tanakh* and review and discuss the different shades of meaning attached to rain. (a concordance is a book that indexes every word in a work of literature and lists every place where the given word appears. The leading concordances for *Tanakh* are by (a) Mandelkern, and (b) Brown, Driver and Briggs.)

Diving into the Painting

When the winter rains arrive in the [African veldt](#) the dry grasslands spring to life. Watering holes fill where the rains fall, and animals crowd around to drink and wash. Where the rain has saturated the dry ground the withered grass sprouts with new life and the bare trees send forth leaves and blossoms. Jutting into view we see not only the tiny honeybee sitting atop the dahlia, but also a stalk of pink lilies. You will find the lovely midrashic tale and symbolism of the lily in the commentary on the letter *tet* below. In a break above the clouds we glimpse the deep field of the sky glittering with innumerable stars (again adapted from the Hubble photograph in *Alef*), reminding us of God’s unseen but all-suffusing presence.

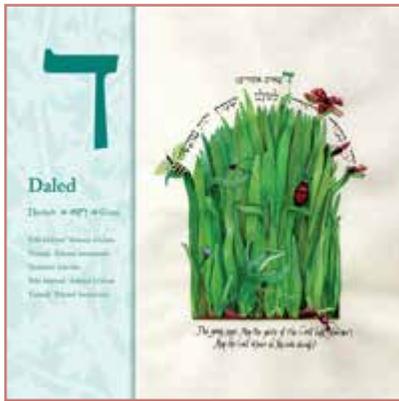
What do we learn about ourselves, our relationship with God, and with the natural world in this painting?

- Do you regard 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 the way we humans meet our obligation (and self-interest) to care for the land?

For further exploration:

- Carol Meyer. *Rediscovering Eve*. New York, Oxford, 2012. Meyer is a renowned archeologist. Her book probes the archeological record, ethnography and biblical and other contemporary literary sources to explore not only the lives of women during Israel's pre-history and the biblical period, but the material culture and conditions for humanity in general in ancient Israel. The study sheds light on the preciousness of water in the arid biblical lands.
- Review 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. In Jewish religious tradition, the letters are also numerals, and *daled* is the numeral 4.

Diving into the Verse

The compiler of *Perek Shira* chose this ecstatic praise of God from one of the grandest, most optimistic views of Creation in all of *Tanakh*. Psalm 104 presents a 35-verse song of gratitude to the God who created a world of perfect natural order and balance, who, at the cosmic level “established the earth on its foundations, so that it shall never totter,” yet, at the human level scale, made “the grass grow for the cattle, and herbage for man’s labor that he may get food out of the earth.”

Amos Hakham suggests that “the central idea of the psalm [is the contemplation of] the splendid order of creation [that] brings a person to revere, fear, love, and surrender himself to the Creator.” Many phrases within Psalm 104 resound through other late biblical works, such as Proverbs. You will find other references to Psalm 104 throughout this work.

The fact that the original compiler of *Perek Shira* matched this grand verse from Psalm 104 with something as lowly as grass raises a thought-provoking tension. Biblical texts often treat grass as a great blessing, while others, such as Psalm 37, regard it as insignificant and impermanent: “Do not be troubled by evil men; do not be incensed by wrongdoers; for they soon wither like grass, like verdure fade away.” This contrast between great and small, between transient and everlasting, suggests that even the smallest, least-substantial among us can perceive and praise the God that enables and suffuses all Creation.

Diving into the Painting

A moment from my childhood! This painting grew from my childhood memories of countless happy spring and summertime moments whiled away propped on my 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 remained spellbound by the infinite variety of life sheltered in a seemingly insignificant clump of grass, just as was the original compiler 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 lives!

With our eyes planted at ground level, we scrutinize a dense clump of grass. A worm, ants and a gangly [daddy-long-legs](#) crawl out from between the blades, a tiny lizard clambers up onto a strong blade, while ladybugs and my eponymous honeybee prepare to alight into the warm summer air. A small bud of the dahlia representing my granddaughter’s presence appears at left.

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

- How do you relate your own life to the miniscule phenomena of the natural world? What kind of objects capture your own attention and imagination?
- What other tiny things play essential roles in our environment? How has humanity's evolving ability to see their role in the greater world changed through history?
- Do you have favorite works of art—literary, visual or musical—that express wonder at the variety of life in nature? Do you relate these ideas to your sense of connection to 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), in particular, the analysis of the psalm by Arnold J. Band.
- See the text and discussion of Psalm 104, in *Hakham*, vol. 3, pp. 35-53.
- 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.

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

The psalm from which this verse comes is a famous listing of God’s wondrous qualities, and constitutes most of the *Ashrei* prayer has a prominent place in traditional Jewish liturgy, recited twice within the traditional *Shacharit* (Morning) prayer service, and during the *Mincha* (Afternoon) prayer service. The italicized words in the phrase “the

majestic glory of your splendor” are three terms that rise in a crescendo of ecstatic awe and love of God’s strength and beauty, emphasizing divine royalty and power.

Diving into the Painting

To me, few things express divine splendor as grandly as the gigantic natural light show of the Northern Lights, the [Aurora Borealis](#). This brilliant play of color shimmering in the dark night sky is caused by the beating of the sun’s magnetic fields on the upper levels of Earth’s atmosphere. The aurora seems to symbolize perfectly the Jewish mystical idea of the *shefa*, the divine energy that flows from the highest, remotest core of the Divine to suffuse our physical world.

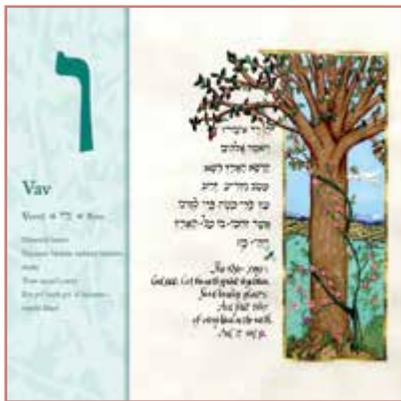
What do we learn about ourselves, our relationship with God, and with the natural world in this painting?

What other images from the natural world (including the human life-cycle) display God’s splendor in our world for you? What special nuances of God’s providential care for our world do your images reflect?

For further exploration:

- See the discussion of Psalm 145 in Hakham, vol. 3, p. 452ff. for the psalm’s religious interpretations, as well as the discussion of Psalm 145 in Dahood, the *Anchor Bible: Psalms*, vol. 3, p. 334ff. for academic biblical analysis, including comparison to Ugaritic texts.
- To explore the mystical concept of the *shefa*, see the lyrical overview of Kabbalah offered in Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz’s *The Thirteen Petalled Rose: A Discourse on the Essence of Jewish Existence and Belief*. New York: Basic Books, 2006. This brief work offers a concise and poetic view of Jewish mysticism for the generally educated layperson.

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

How better to celebrate the beauty and variety of Earth’s plant-life than to have the rose recount God’s words creating vegetation! In *The Jewish Study Bible*, bible scholars Adele Berlin and Marc Brettler suggest that this passage implies that “Humankind, animals and birds all seem originally meant to be neither vegetarians nor carnivores, but

frugivores, eating the seeds of plants and trees. (*Jewish Study Bible*, p. 15). To Rashi, the seminal 11th century rabbinic commentator on all Tanakh, this passage indicated that the Earth would be “filled and covered with a garment of different grasses.”

Diving into the Painting

The fertile 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 bearing an olive twig reminiscent of the dove that brought Noah proof of life’s rebirth on land in the wake of the Flood. Each of these plants symbolizes a special Jewish value significance in Jewish lore.

The rose symbolizes humility and beauty, and even the complexity of God, in Jewish tradition. Midrash on the beginning of *Shemot/Exodus* describes the miraculous Burning Bush as a rosebush—a lowly thorn-bush with fragrant flowers, thorns and five-leaflet leaves—yet God could speak to Moses from even that humble source. Drawing upon the Jewish mystical tradition, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz entitled his small and elegant book summarizing Kabbalah, *The Thirteen-Petalled Rose*, alluding to the many aspects of the soul that spiral out from the core of the Divine. In the Song of Songs, the rose is both a symbol of beauty, and of Israel’s love of God. The apricot is most likely the fruit tree originally intended in the beloved verse “Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest, so is my beloved among the youths,” in Song 1:3. See my commentary on Song 2:1-3 in my Song of Songs book, listed above, for discussions of the midrashic symbolism of both the rose and the 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 (see the commentary on the Frontispiece in my Song of Songs, p. 3). We explored the symbolism of grass in the *daled* painting above. Vineyards, and anything to do with grapes are rich with associations and symbolism throughout *Tanakh*. The grapes used to make wine, and the vineyards that grow them almost always allude to joy and sanctification (The latter part of the Noah story, Esther and Qohelet, where wine and vineyards lead to foolish excess are among the relatively few exceptions), and of course offer a means of blessing God in Sabbath and festival Kiddush. *Tanakh*, the Talmud and Jewish legend contain countless praises of trees, as comparisons to humankind, in particular to the righteous person, and to 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.

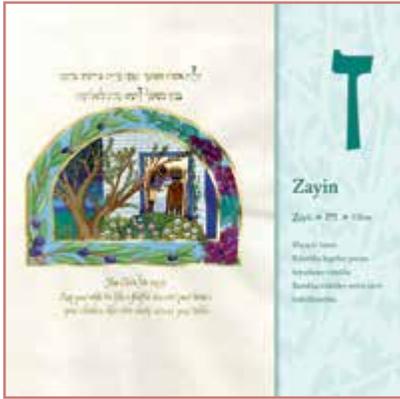
What do we learn about ourselves, our relationship with God, and with the natural world in this painting?

- Consider Berlin and Brettler’s suggestion 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 garden (whether in a farm or urban plot, a suburban garden, or in pots on an apartment balcony)? What spiritual thoughts does this passage provoke as you work with your own plantings?
- As you travel and see different kinds of plant environments what kind of connection do you feel between the plant life, yourself, and the Divine?

For further exploration:

- For an in-depth study of plants of the Land of Israel and their biblical associations see Hareuveni, Nogah, trans. Helen Frenkley. *Tree and Shrub in Our Biblical Heritage*. Kiryat Ono, Israel, Neot Kedumim, 1984.
- Ellen Davis. *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible*. Cambridge University Press, New York, 2009. This work by a prominent Episcopalian theologian and scholar of the Hebrew Bible profoundly affected my understanding of the inextricable bond between care of the environment, responsible agriculture and biblical spirituality that is embedded in *Tanakh*.
- Biologist Neil Shubin offers a fascinating, and even poetic view of the deep physical and biological connections among all life and all matter in *The Universe Within: Discovering the Common History of Rocks, Planets, and People*. New York: Pantheon, 2013.

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 serene happiness that will be enjoyed 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 particular blessing, comparing the wife, who bears the children, to a fruitful grape vine, and the children themselves to the shoots of olive trees around the family table.

A note on the translation of the phrase “*shtiley zetim*” is necessary here! This phrase is usually translated as “olive saplings,” or olive plants, perhaps because most of the English translators of the Bible, living in cool northern climates (such as the British translators of the highly influential King James Bible) were unfamiliar with these wonderful trees. Olive trees send out myriad sprouts from their roots, so that a central parent tree may be surrounded by a whole thicket of leafy sprouts. I first became familiar with this habit from my own olive tree in my garden in San Diego, and enjoy seeing it in olive groves across the Mediterranean region.

Jewish tradition specially protects fruit trees such as the olive; the Talmud compares a fruit tree to a person, and [destroying fruit trees](#) is expressly forbidden in Jewish law.

Diving into the Painting

The painting likens the flourishing 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 have 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 figure among the “[Seven Species](#)” of staple crops grown in the land of Israel, as described in *Dvarim/Deuteronomy* 8:8. Olives, farmed for millennia across the Mediterranean basin provided the oil necessary for anointing priests, lighting the golden menorah in the Temple, and many other sacred tasks. Winemakers of course press grapes for the juice that makes the wine with which Jewish tradition welcomes and sanctifies nearly all sacred moments, and which accompanies our happiest celebrations. The starry sky alludes to God’s promise to make Abraham’s children as innumerable 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?

- As a parent, what natural-world metaphor would you choose to describe your gratitude to God for your family?
- As young person, what natural-world metaphor would you choose to describe your gratitude to God for your parents and siblings?

For further exploration:

- See the discussion of Psalm 128 in Amos Hakham, *The Bible: Psalms with the Jerusalem Commentary*. Vol. 3. 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 ecstatic 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.” By placing this verse “into the mouth” of the beetle, often inconspicuous and ignored, I contrast its fragility and tininess with the power and vastness of the Creator 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—and each has its own niche in Earth’s ecology, whether pollinating plants (the bee and the butterfly), tilling the soil (the earthworm), assisting in decomposition (the roaches and some moths), or helping us by devouring other insects that we consider pests (the ladybug).

This painting raised happy memories of the “insect hospital” that my brother, sister and I maintained in our backyard throughout our childhood summers. However the hapless insects fared, our (misguided, if well-intentioned) hobby nurtured a lifelong fascination with their world and habits.

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

Can you think of an encounter with insects—perhaps a butterfly or ladybug landing on your finger—that gave you an opportunity to examine it closely? How do you relate it to the totality of nature?

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.
- See the illuminations and commentary on Psalm 104 in my *I Will Wake the Dawn: Illuminated Psalms*, Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 2007.

The Letter *Tet*



The letter *tet* represents the “t” sound. In Jewish religious tradition, the letters are also numbers, and *tet* is the numeral 9.

Diving into the Verse

This lovely verse appears in the final chapter of the book of the prophet Hosea, whose name means “He [God] saves,” and who lived in northern Israel during the 8th century B.C.E., prior to the [Assyrian invasion](#). Comparing Israel’s unfaithfulness to God to his own wife’s unfaithfulness to him (she was a prostitute), Hosea criticized the idol worship prevalent in the Northern Kingdom of Israel and promised that 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 favor, using the present imagery of dew, of lilies, spreading olive trees, and bountiful harvests.

Water almost always symbolizes divine blessing in biblical texts, but why would Hosea mention dew, so small a water-source, rather than rushing streams or rivers to express God’s promise that Israel will live in peace and security in its land? Northern Israel has few significant 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 signals divine favor. In Hosea’s prophecy, God promises to be gentle with Israel as the cool dew drops, to help the returning nation flourish like the blooming lily, and 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 summertime dew.

Diving into the Painting

Hosea mentions the lily in the verse, but the lily shown here also alludes to another key element of Jewish spirituality. 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 tell of how one fine day the king (God) traveling through his lands, happened upon an old orchard (the human world) just outside his palace (Heaven). This orchard had once been a paradise, planted with pomegranates, grapes, roses and figs. Its caretakers, though, had sorely neglected it, allowing the fine plantings to wither and become overgrown with thorns. Suddenly, just as the king was about to order the orchard razed, he noticed a single stalk of fragrant rose-colored lilies (the Ten Commandments) 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; only for the sake of the guiding values of the commandments does God allow the corrupt world to survive. The painting uses the 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.

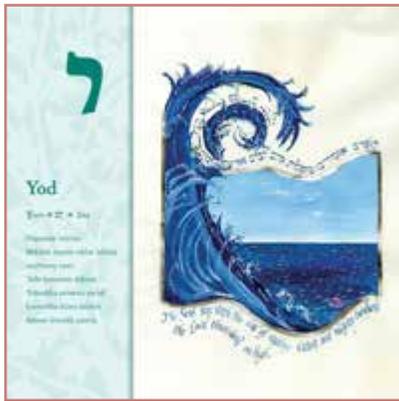
What do we learn about ourselves, our relationship with God, and with the natural world in this painting?

Imagine walking barefoot in the dewy grass early on a clear summer morning and consider the refreshment that this simple daily water source brings to the soil, and the ways that it connects us to God.

For further exploration:

- The Book of Hosea, which presents a dramatic and emotional evaluation of Northern Israel's spiritual state prior to the Assyrian invasion and conquest, employing extensive agricultural imagery. Chapter 14, as above, includes God's plea, voiced by the prophet, that Israel return to the "paths of the Lord."
- The Prayer for Dew, found in Orthodox and Conservative *siddurim* (Jewish prayer books)

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). The shape developed from the shape of a hand. 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 is *not* overcome by 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 the feeling in this

verse from Psalm 93. In fact, this short psalm focuses specifically on how ocean displays God’s great power, harking back to the primordial waters prior to the separation of the waters on the second day of Creation. Amos Hakham suggests that “This verse goes back to tell what happened before ‘the world was established so that it cannot be moved,’ (verse 1). The mighty floodwaters lifted up their voice, and rose up with a great tumult to inundate the entire world...” Only God, the psalm 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, invoking 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

The verses follow the contours of the rocking waves, as the ocean—its breadth filling the eye—transforms from calm lapping to a sweeping breaker. Yet the honeybee is safe from its waves, while the small dahlia, transforms to a child’s beach-ball.

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 atmospheric paintings of the sea, evoking both its calm and its violent energy; 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. How do you think about the power of the waves, and endlessness of the deep oceans that encircle our globe?
- Contemplating the ocean, knowing both its power and fragility in the wake of human impact, in what ways can you relate your own life to both its health and power? Does the ocean evoke thoughts of timelessness? Of great power? Of vulnerability despite timelessness and power?

For further exploration:

- Explore the paintings of Turner. Many museums across the world exhibit his work, but the [Tate Gallery](#) in London has the most extensive collection.
- Read Amos Hakham, *The Bible: Psalms with the Jerusalem Commentary*. Jerusalem, Mossad HaRav Kook, 2003, Vol. 2, p. 380 for an analysis of Psalm 93.
- See the commentary on this psalm in *Mikraoth Gedoloth: Psalms*, vol. 3, p. 362-3
- 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 created every beautiful and powerful element in nature, and controls all....and is the only being able to count the stars. Amos Hakham points out that God counts the number of the stars and

is aware of their number, just as a military general counts and knows the number of his/her troops. In addition, he points out that the Psalm implies that God counts *all* the stars, and gives them each a name, unlike us humans, who can only count and name the stars we can *see* (or, I might add, identify using our growing technologies).

Tanakh includes many mentions of stars, in many contexts. Among the best known is *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 an epic poem following her victory over a powerful Canaanite general. In *Shirat Devorah*, or “Deborah’s Song,” she cries out that “The stars fought from heaven, From their courses they fought against Sisera,” raising the tantalizing possibility that she perceived a meteor shower, visible around the time of the battle, as a portent of divine favor. To explore this idea, please see the section on Deborah, in my *Arise! Arise! Deborah, Ruth and Hannah* (2012), for a discussion of this poem and analysis of this verse, as well as my painting of this verse.

Diving into the Painting

The constellations shown in the painting were visible in the night sky over Washington, D.C. at the moment that Dalia was born. The rainbow border surrounding the painting represents the full spectrum of visible light emitted by stars.

I included this verse, which is not found in *Perek Shira*, as a tribute to Dalia’s grandfather, my beloved late first husband, David, a NASA astrophysicist. Although stars may seem distant and distinct from the environment of our own planet, in fact, all the chemicals that make up our Earth, including our own bodies, were produced in the stars that we see now and in all the stars that came before them during the course of the 13.7 billion years since the Big Bang. The Earth is composed of material that spun out of our own star, the Sun. We still rely on our star for our 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.

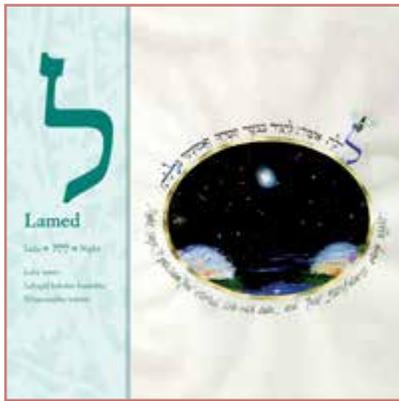
What do we learn about ourselves, our relationship with God, and with the natural world in this painting?

A personal story: during a trip around Morocco a few months prior to the publication of *All the World Praises You!* my husband and I camped out in a wildly luxurious bivouac at the edge of the Sahara Desert, close to the Algerian border. After dinner we spent ages gazing up at the 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—dazzling our guide, who'd never encountered these—but despite all the high tech, all the hilariously unexpected 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. *Think about, perhaps write about your own reaction to seeing the night sky.*

For further exploration:

- 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.
- The Catholic Church's long resistance to modern astronomy proposed by [Galileo](#), using the sun-centered astronomical model proposed by [Copernicus](#), and which conflicted with biblical text is well-known, however, many Jewish scholars had similar difficulty accepting the modern system. See Brown, Jeremy. *New Heavens and A New Earth: The Jewish Reception of Copernican Thought*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

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

This verse from the designated Psalm for Shabbat, celebrates how it is good to praise God all day long—giving thanks for God’s lovingkindness, God’s *hesed*, as the day begins, and for the faithfulness of God’s care of us during the dark of night. The psalmist’s use of parallels, such as day and night here, “thought-rhymes,” is one of the hallmarks of biblical poetry. Rashi understood the mention of the dawn as an illusion to the coming of *Moshiach*, the Messiah, and understood the night as the painful exile from Jerusalem.

Diving into the Painting

A brilliant sky over a serene night-time landscape of a forested river expresses 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 presented in the *aleph* painting here. The sky here, though, encompasses 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 contemplating your relationship with God? What is it about that time of day that prompts, or enables these thoughts?

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.
- A.J. Rosenberg, *Mikraoth Gedoloth: Psalms*, vol. 3, p. 359-362.
- I have done two very different visual interpretations of the entire Psalm 92, in my books, *I Will Wake the Dawn: Illuminated Psalms*, pp. 100-101 (focused on the concept of sacred space within the psalm), and *Kabbalat Shabbat: the Grand Unification*, pp. 46-47 (focused on its inclusion in the mystically-inspired Kabbalat Shabbat service).

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.

Diving into the Verse

The prophet Isaiah ben Amoz lived in the Kingdom of Judah during the last half of the 8th century BCE. The [Book of Isaiah](#) figures among the great works of world literature, quite apart from its importance as a biblical book. Rabbinic and academic bible scholars consider that the prophet himself wrote the initial 39 chapters (including this verse) during the late 8th century BCE, while others, whose names have been lost, wrote two latter sections in the aftermath of the Babylonian conquest and destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem.

The prophet proclaims prophecies about the threat posed by the aggressive [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 prophecies of the rebirth of all Israel. You might like to see the [gigantic frieze depicting the Assyrian king, Sennacherib 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.

Diving into the Painting

I drew upon happy family memories to depict the rebirth of the land in this painting. During the intermediary 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 after the winter rains. Reborn, the once sere gray and ochre hills blossomed in every shade of red and orange and yellow, and the long-branched ocotillos lit 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 terrible challenge in your life that you faced and ultimately recovered from? How did you relate to God during this crisis?
- Consider, perhaps write about your reaction to, or hopes for, seeing damaged and failing land, or a failing neighborhood, restored to health and vigor. Do you regard your hopes for the land’s, or the neighborhood’s, recovery as part of your personal conversation with God?
- Consider, perhaps write about, how one of your own perceptions of the natural world can be a metaphor for human life.

For further exploration:

See the introductory essay on Isaiah in *The Jewish Study Bible*, cited above.

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

With this verse God commands Moses, standing at the foot of Mount Sinai, to remind Israel of how He rescued his Chosen People at the Red Sea. Jewish tradition has always held the miracles at the Red Sea, rescuing the fleeing Israelite slaves from the chariots, arrows and swords of the Egyptian cavalry, as the essential proof of God’s protection of Israel. In fact, in his philosophical work, the *Kuzari*, the twelfth century Spanish-Jewish poet and philosopher, Judah Halevi, described every Jew’s *direct* folk-memory of the crossing of the Red

Sea, passed from parent to child, as 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 power or aggression, but of God’s protection of Israel.

The early (Talmudic period, by the 5th century CE) rabbinic commentary on Exodus, the *Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael*, explains the metaphorical comparison of the eagle to 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

The red [Golden Eagle](#) found in the Mediterranean basin (rather than the Bald Eagle that symbolizes the US) soars over the Sahara, 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, 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?

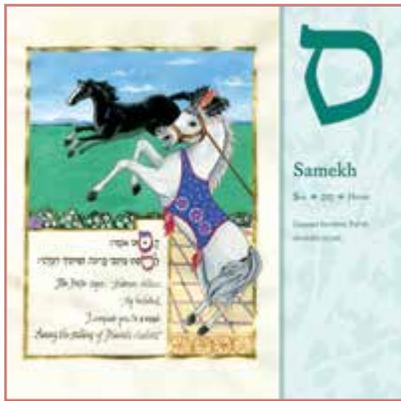
- As you consider times in your life when you have felt protected from serious harm, have you imagined God *symbolized* (not worshipped) in the guise of an animal, or some other tangible object?
- Decades following the Holocaust, in the midst of climate change across the globe, the notion of unerring divine protection of Israel, or *all* life on earth, can be difficult for many to accept. How do you think about this question, perhaps resolve it, for yourself?

Diving Deeper: Educational Supplements for All the World Praises You!, copyright © Debra Band 2018.
All rights reserved. See www.AllTheWorldPraisesYou.com for more information.

For further exploration:

- The biblical story of the Crossing of the Red Sea, *Shemot/Exodus* 14-15.
- Judah Halevi, *The Kuzari*, various editions.
- 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

In this verse from the Song of Songs the young man praises his lover’s beauty. How is a comparison to a horse a compliment to a young woman? How, one might well ask, can a verse from the *Song of Songs* about horses and [Pharaoh’s chariots](#) possibly be considered a praise of God? The answer to this question lies in both archeology and the midrashic tradition.

Ancient Israel knew horses only as weapons of war. Israelites used donkeys for transport and pulling carts; swift horses, capable of carrying soldiers and pulling heavy chariots, were fearsome weapons that they only encountered in enemy armies, for instance, the Deborah story (Judges 4-5), which comes to us from 13th century BCE Israel, describes the Canaanite general’s, Sisera’s, use of horses and iron chariots as evidence of his startling power and fearsomeness. Horses were introduced to Israelite armies by King Solomon (970-931 BCE), who imported them, together with chariots, from Egypt (Kings I: 10-26); biblical text associates their acquisition with King Solomon’s vast wealth and power. Crucially, we also know from modern Egyptology that the Pharaohs’ chariots were drawn exclusively by stallions. So, what happens when you let a pretty mare loose in a paddock full of chariot stallions? Pandemonium! In the light of the archeology, we must understand this verse as the man saying something like, “Honey, you’re driving my guy-friends and me crazy!”

While on the surface the Song of Songs appears to be passionate, erotic love poetry—using many metaphors from the natural world— these 117 verses traditionally attributed to King Solomon have a far more complex place in Jewish tradition than as love poetry alone. As I have written at length in my *Song of Songs: the Honeybee in the Garden*, this anthology of poems has a double life. The Song of Songs must first be appreciated as intensely beautiful love poetry expressing the emotions between a young man and a young woman (by extension, any two lovers). By the time of the Mishnah (second century CE), if not earlier, it had already come to be considered to be the expression of love between God and God’s Chosen People, Israel. A vast body of midrash has grown over the centuries based on this allegory, and consequently the Song became a fundamental source in Jewish mysticism. Thus, in light of both the archeological understanding—the uncontrollable passion between stallion and mare, man and woman—and the midrashic allegory on the Song of Songs, which elevates this physical passion to the spiritual level, we understand this particular verse as a declaration of the fervent love between Israel and God.

Diving into the Painting

The painting presents an elegant black mare running freely across a pasture. A strong white stallion, caparisoned in the manner of ancient Egyptian chariot horses, rears up in an attempt to free himself to run to the mare...maybe nearly upsetting his chariot at the same time!

Diving Deeper: Educational Supplements for All the World Praises You!, copyright © Debra Band 2018.
All rights reserved. See www.AllTheWorldPraisesYou.com for more information.

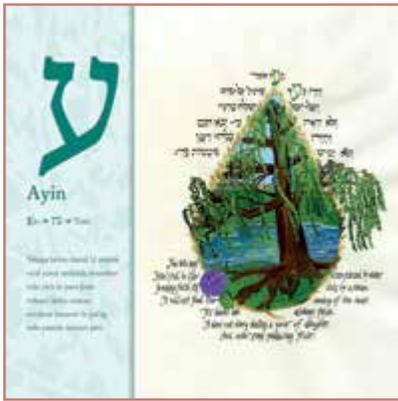
What do we learn about ourselves, our relationship with God, and with the natural world in this painting?

- In your life, what is the thing that you feel the greatest, most lasting, love or passion for?
- What thing in the natural world do you associate with a deep passion for God? A season, a plant, an animal, a natural occurrence? How do you associate these?

For further exploration:

- See the discussion of the meaning of this verse, in particular the import of archeology, in Marvin Pope, *The Anchor Bible: Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1977), p. 338 ff.
- 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.
- For an important analysis of the role of the Song of Songs in Jewish mysticism, see Arthur Green, "The Song of Songs in Early Jewish Mysticism." *Orim: A Jewish Journal at Yale* 2, no. 2 (Spring 1987): 49-63.

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 trees as a symbol of Torah, of men and women, of the entire People of Israel. Consider the beloved description of the wisdom of the Torah that 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 the prophets warned against worshipping trees as gods, as was the practice in ancient Canaanite religions, trees frequently indicate God’s blessings for Israel, and indeed Jewish law forbids the destruction of fruit trees. Trees are also used as metaphors for the human condition. The first century Hellenistic-Jewish author, Pseudo-Philo, retelling the first chapter of the Book of Samuel, compares the childless and depressed Hannah to a withered, leafless olive tree, while her husband’s second wife, Peninah, who enjoys her many children, is compared to a full, fruiting olive tree—the relative fruitfulness of each tree symbolizes each woman’s pain or satisfaction.

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 attempted, with difficulty, to restore monotheism and Temple worship from the corruption of earlier kings, who supported 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 rebuked 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 those faithful to God that they will be as fresh, safe and happy as a tree planted beside water, another symbol of Torah.

Diving into the Painting

Even in the midst of a bustling city, a tree planted in a park beside a flowing can flourish. The balance of strong roots and canopy of this tree are suggested by a passage in the small Mishnaic ethical tract, *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 spreads 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.’”

Diving Deeper: Educational Supplements for All the World Praises You!, copyright © Debra Band 2018.
All rights reserved. See www.AllTheWorldPraisesYou.com for more information.

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

- Describe your feelings at seeing healthy and weakened trees; consider each simply as plants and as symbols of spiritual condition. What kind of trees would you consider? What environment do you imagine them in?
- I live in the Washington, DC area, and watch my own cherry trees cycling from winter bareness to vivid spring blossom, summer leaves, autumn's colorful dying leaves, finally back to winter's stark bare branches. Their cycle frequently brings the human life-cycle to mind. Do you have beloved trees that you watch developing throughout the year? What do you think about as you see them through their annual cycle?
- If you were a tree how would you imagine God and humankind?

For further exploration:

- Book of Jeremiah
- 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*, by, (Kiryat Ono, Israel, 1984).
- *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers), found in many traditional Jewish prayer books, and in many other editions.
- 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 delightful book to dip into. 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).
- A number of citizen-science programs run by major scientific research laboratories and organizations offer you a chance to participate in scientific research relating to trees...and our whole environment. See [Leafsnap](#), [INaturalist](#), [Backyardbarkbeetles](#), [Budburst](#), and of course, the [National Audubon Society](#). Look for others!

The Letter *Pay*



The letter *pay* has two sounds. When the letter 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

The prophet Isaiah ben Amoz lived in the Kingdom of Judah during This verse is part of Psalm 92, the special Psalm for Shabbat, and stresses God’s unimaginable breadth and power, God’s infinite wisdom.

Amos Hakham notes how the psalmist 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.”

Diving into the Painting

I drew upon happy family memories to depict the rebirth of the land in this painting. During the Of all animals in the natural world, the [elephant](#) epitomizes both enormity and [intelligence](#). In the playful painting, I imagine a huge African elephant trumpeting these words toward the heavens, describing God’s even more enormous power and wisdom. Elephants often host small birds as they perch on their ears or back, and here, my small cockatiel, Peaches, rests on the elephant’s ear, holding a dahlia in his beak.

As human activities reduce the wild grasslands and forests of Africa and Asia, and hunters kill them for their ivory tusks, we appreciate elephants’ intelligence, rich lives and importance in their environment.

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

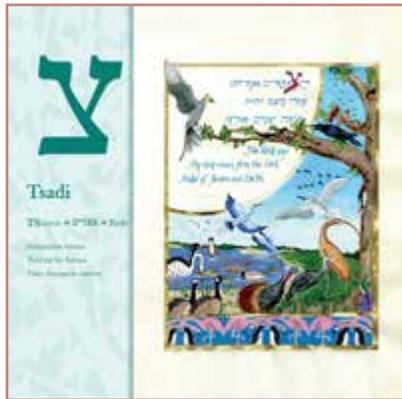
- As you consider endangered and threatened animals such the elephant, what responsibility do you feel to supporting their security in their own environments? What can you do? Give a financial contribution? Purchase environmentally sound products? Attempt to influence responsible environmental protection legislation and public policy? Anything else?
- Consider the changes in our lifestyle that would support a more secure balance of human interests and the protection of natural habitats. Consider also your relationship with the God that created our universe. What kind of balance of interests do you think God expects from us, made, as Psalm 8 tells us, “a little less than divine, adorned...with glory and majesty,” and given mastery over animal and plant realms, as God told Adam?

For further exploration:

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

Diving Deeper: Educational Supplements for All the World Praises You!, copyright © Debra Band 2018. All rights reserved. See www.AllTheWorldPraisesYou.com for more information.

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

This verse is prefaced by the even more beloved line, “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. Amos Hakham suggests that one interpretation of this psalm, drawing upon allusions to incidences of divine protection from across *Tanakh*, “is a blessing given by a father to his child, or a teacher to his pupil. It begins in the first person to

indicate that what applies to his child or his pupil applies to the speaker himself, and that whoever helps the child or the pupil in reality also helps his father or his teacher.”

Perek Shira associates this verse with one particular bird, the swift, but it might well be uttered by nearly any bird. Birds in all their beauty and astounding variety fly freely across land, sea and sky, feeding and nesting in every imaginable environment, from Antarctic ice to rain forest blossoms. Their songs and shrieks seem to sing of the joy of their free lives, 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 a viable environment.

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 bird has adapted its lifestyle to its habitat...although my cockatiel, Peaches, should never have be outside perching on that branch—he is much better adapted to life in my studio)! Flamingos and penguins, each adapted to very different landscapes than our woodland scene, embrace necks and kiss in this whimsical imitation of (much more grave)Egyptian tomb painting.

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

- Part of the magic of birds 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?
- How can you take part in the “repair of the world,” *tikkun olam*, by participating in protecting birds, whether at home or across our planet?

-

For further exploration:

- See the commentary on Psalm 121 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 exquisite 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.
- 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 family 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 often tend to read this verse in isolation, understanding the rainbow simply as a sign of a divine promise never to destroy the world. The verse, however, introduces the word “covenant,” implying that the rainbow is God’s seal on a *two-way* agreement. Even at this early moment in the Bible—before the Abraham story, long before the Revelation at Sinai—the rainbow covenant involves commitments by both God and, not only Jacob’s children, but *all* humanity. God has blessed Noah and his sons, telling them to “be fertile and increase, and fill the earth,” and straightaway gives them six more rules for moral conduct that apply to all humankind, altogether the “Seven Noahide Laws”: (1) Be fertile and increase, and fill the earth. (2) All other animal life on earth will fear humankind; all animals are “given into your hand. (3) All animals and all plants are given to humankind as food. (4) No living animal, “with its life-blood in it” may be eaten. (5) No suicide, applicable to any species. (6) No human may kill another human since God made humankind in God’s own image. (7) Be fertile and increase, and fill the earth.

The commentary on this passage in the *Jewish Study Bible* adds that the Talmud interprets this passage, teaching that these seven commandments amount to the following moral guidance for human life and community: (1) To establish courts of justice (2) To refrain from blaspheming the God of Israel, as well as from (3) To refrain from idolatry (4) To refrain from sexual perversion (5) To refrain from bloodshed (6) To refrain from robbery (7) To refrain from eating meat cut from a living animal.

Only after commanding the Noahide Laws does God show Noah the rainbow, implying that the promise never to destroy the world depends upon all humanity living according to the basic moral creed.

The Torah is not the only ancient religious tradition, nor even the only Middle Eastern religious text that passes on a [flood story](#). The Babylonian epic, Gilgamesh, that dates from at least 1700 BCE, includes the dramatic story of Gilgamesh, the King of the city-state Uruk. Struggling to come to terms with the meaning of human life following the death of his friend, Enkidu, Gilgamesh undertakes a perilous journey to speak with the reclusive wise man, Utnapishtim, who tells him of another humankind-destroying flood, another ark to preserve samples of every living species, other birds that announce the regeneration of life. As a reward for surviving the flood, and for his sacrifice to the gods, the Babylonian gods grant (only) Utnapishtim and his wife eternal life. The Gilgamesh story provides no moral laws, and death remains inescapable for all the rest of humankind. As similar as these two flood stories are, the Israelite tale is distinguished from the Babylonian by culminating in moral laws given to 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?

- How do you think the rabbis of the Talmud understood the relationship between humankind and the animal world? It will be helpful to review the earlier chapters of *Braishit*/Genesis to consider this question.
- Consider the Seven Noahide Laws, both the literal biblical account and the Talmudic interpretation. 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 natural-world symbol of God's protection of the world from destruction?

For further exploration:

- Read the entire Noah story. In the *Jewish Study Bible*, see the discussion of the Noahide Laws on page 25.
- See E.A. Speiser, *The Anchor Bible: Genesis*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1964, p. 147 ff., for an academic biblical studies analysis of the Flood story.
- To explore the Gilgamesh myth see the wonderfully accessible and exciting edition, Stephen Mitchell, *Gilgamesh: A New English Version*. (New York: Simon & Shuster, Inc., 2004). The flood story is found in Book XI, p. 180, but I urge you to 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. He presents a view of perfect order and balance, a world where all creatures live in harmony according to the roles assigned them by God, in God’s providential kindness. 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.

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. Giant blue clams and tiny waving coral polyps, rough branching corals and schools of fish—many of which were photographed by my son, Gabriel, while diving near [Eilat](#), Israel, on [Australia’s Great Barrier](#) and the [Belize Barrier Reef](#)—flourish and teem in these ocean eco-systems. As remote as they are from our cities and suburbs, suffering from global climate change as they already are, coral reefs are [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:

- See the discussion of Psalm 104 in Amos Hakham, *The Bible: Psalms*, vol. 3, p. 46.
- 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!

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

How powerful God must be to have spread out the heavens like a sparkling robe! The Psalmist begins his long paean of praise of God’s providential power evident in the beautiful order of creation with the beloved (and oft set-to-music) phrase, “*Borakhi nafshi ’et Adonai,*” by celebrating the beauty of the stars of the night sky. If you have ever spent a night under the cloudless desert sky, far from city lights, you may have felt the same “radical amazement,” in Abraham Joshua Heschel’s term, at the beauty of the night sky, and the power of its Creator as many Jewish poets have expressed. Let us sample two of these poems.

Writing before Copernicus and Galileo established that the Earth rotated around the Sun, Moses ibn Ezra, one of the greatest stars of the 11th-12th century Andalusian Jewish firmament, addressed God:

My thoughts awaken me to see You;
They show me in my heart’s eye Your deeds,”
They teach me to tell Your wonders,”
‘When I behold Your heavens,”
The work Your fingers made.”

Around its course the disk of heaven walks,
A potter’s wheel enwhirling the world;
It has no lips, and yet it tells Your glory
To earth, unmoved within its orbit.
Suspended in the void,
By cords of Your love stayed.

Thither the sun yearns, and there burns,
And of his light some to the moon lends.
While heaven’s sphere is spread out like a tent,
With stars blooming on it, a garden,
Proclaiming how profound
The plans that You have laid.

Solomon ibn Gabirol, a Sephardic philosopher and poet who lived a generation or so before Moses ibn Ezra, suggested that the stars of the vast night sky reflected God’s wisdom. In his lyrical philosophical work in verse, *The Royal Crown*, ibn Gabirol wrote that

Diving Deeper: Educational Supplements for All the World Praises You!, copyright © Debra Band 2018.
All rights reserved. See www.AllTheWorldPraisesYou.com for more information.

It [divine wisdom] drives the stars of the sky in its might
into their westerly motion;
each day at dusk
it bows in the west
to its king and his rule of the kingdom.

All the creatures of the world are in it
like a mustard seed in the sea—
such is its measure,
its greatness in truth is nothing
to the greatness of its king and creator.

Its proportion and vast dimension
beside him are Nothing and Void.

(Found in Peter Cole, ed. and trans., *Selected Poems of Solomon ibn Gabirol*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 165)

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](#), the full range of light that exists in the Milky Way, and the entire universe.

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

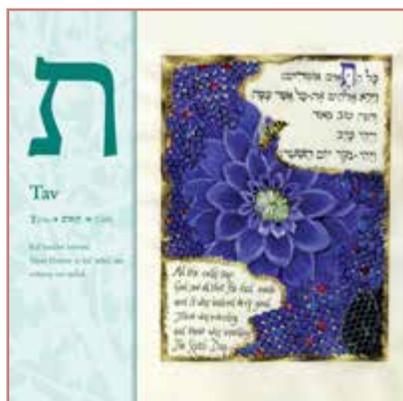
How do you perceive your place, our environment's place, our Earth's place in our galaxy? Think about both time and space in our relationship to God. As you consider the size of our galaxy, and understand that it is only one of an untold number of galaxies in the universe that have come and gone over the 13.7 billion years since the Big Bang, what thoughts about God and God's relationship to us come to mind? Consider expressing your thoughts in a poem, as have Ibn Ezra and Ibn Gabirol in the examples above.

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.
- Read Abraham Joshua Heschel's work, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, referenced in the general reading list at the beginning of this website, to explore his ideas of "radical amazement" at the universe, and "radical awe" of God.
- Explore the Jewish poets of medieval Andalusia, beginning with the books cited here, along with Professor Scheindlin's twin work to the *Gazelle*, entitled *Wine, Women and Death*, (Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 1986).
- Listen to the Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach's moving musical setting of the first words of our verse, "[Borakhi nafshi](#)"
- Rabbi Shefa Gold has recorded several chants of "[Borakhi nafshi](#)" You may wish to search for other recordings...or compose your own.

Diving Deeper: Educational Supplements for All the World Praises You!, copyright © Debra Band 2018.
All rights reserved. See www.AllTheWorldPraisesYou.com for more information.

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) is 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

The author of this passage from *Braishit*/Genesis describes the completion of Creation on the close of the sixth day, describing how God was pleased with the richness of all Creation. God declares Creation not simply “*tov*,” “good,” as with the work of the other days, but “*tov me’od*,” “very good,” indicating that special pleasure at the *completion* of Creation. Here, cells, the most unit of life common to every living thing in the natural world, join the biblical writer in praising the fullness of Creation. Our *aleph-bet* celebration of our God and the natural world is complete!

Diving into the Painting

When we look at a lovely dahlia with our eyes we see soft petals and vivid colors. In the painting we take a closer look: I show you a microscopic view of the cells that compose those petals, all joining together to make the many-petalled flower. Similarly, 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 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.](#)
- Explore the fascinating Jewish legends that have grown around the biblical account of Creation through 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 editions of this work. The work is available also [online](#).

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 Painting

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](#)