

Moses in Santa Fe

By Nahum Ward-Lev

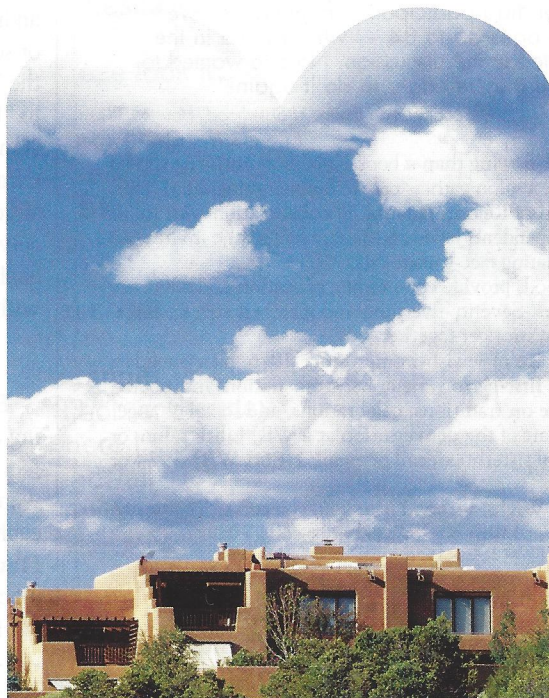
During the winter and spring of 2000, while living in a small town in the Galilee, I studied at a *beit midrash*, a learning community whose members seek to grow through serious study of Jewish texts.

Our *beit midrash* had leaders, but no teacher. The text was the teacher, and all points of view were welcomed. Our study went beyond academics to the soul work of exploring how we would live in the light of our learning. I was exhilarated by the vibrancy and the seriousness of our community. And, I must add, we ate well. Each Tuesday morning, my colleagues arrived with field-fresh vegetables, as well as delicious breads and thick strong coffee.

Returning to Santa Fe, I saw a real need for a *beit midrash* in our own community. Many adults hunger for serious exploration of Jewish texts. We Jews lack opportunities for sustained, meaningful conversation within a sacred community where we can learn and grow together.

I envisioned the *beit midrash* as part of the Adult Education program at the congregation I had served as rabbi. My successor expressed unqualified support for the project. And so, I e-mailed a detailed description of the *beit midrash* to everyone I thought might be interested, and followed up by telephone. Participation, I explained, would require a solid commitment to weekly attendance; together we would be sharing our thoughts, our hearts, and our souls.

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In September 2000, eighteen intrepid souls who made the commitment to study for three hours a week from September through May gathered for our first session. I chose to begin with the story of our people's journey from slavery to liberation, from alienation to covenant. We studied Exodus chapters 1–20 line by line, examining numerous rabbinical commentaries; we also drew images, role-played, and wrote *midrashim* as we accompanied the Israelites from Egypt to Mt. Sinai. One month out of Egypt, on the edge of the desert, we Israelites had run out of food. Ahead lay the wilderness, vast and uncharted. We were afraid; we murmured against Moses. "All I can think about is food," wrote one man. "The desert winds howl the emptiness I feel inside. I look out into the wilderness. The emptiness will swallow me up. I cannot go on." Others wrote about struggling to find the faith, the strength, to go on. We then reflected on our own lives, on moments when we—as par-

ents, employees, or patients—had felt out of control or called upon to take a risk. Our conversation had that slow and spacious quality that often comes when people enter into the sacred together.

In the past seven years, we have also studied Prophets, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, *Pirkei Avot*, and Genesis. Our circle of people has grown to twenty and includes many original participants plus an equal number of newer members. We are a diverse group in age, Jewish background, religious belief, and worldview. Yet, we bond as a community of learners, creating together a safe and sacred place to be deeply authentic with each other. In coming to know the Matriarchs and Patriarchs, for example, one man spoke of how "the full humanity

of Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, and Rachel gives me space to err and pick myself up—space to be a human being." "Our forebears were imperfect," wrote one woman, "and God loved them anyway!"

To set the tone for our study, we open each session chanting the traditional blessing *la-asok b'divrei Torah* (...who has commanded us to be immersed in words of Torah). Then we read the Hebrew text. Often we read several translations, noticing variations. Next we ask questions of the text, observing patterns and discontinuities.

There've been times when we've devoted an entire evening to understanding one word of Torah. One such evening, as we read the initial verses in Genesis 12, in which God calls Abram forth "to be a blessing," we pondered: what does the word *b'rachah* (blessing) mean in this context? After comparing several passages in which *b'rachah* is found, we noted that the three-letter root of *b'rachah*, *b-r-ch*, also appears in the Hebrew words for "knee" and

"pool." Together we wondered about the common threads connecting blessing, knee, and pool. A man said that "knee" might imply to kneel or bow out of reverence. A woman observed that one can become immersed in a pool. Working with these thoughts, others noticed that both bowing and immersion suggested an intimate relationship with something or someone greater. What, then, could the Torah mean when Abram is called to "be a blessing"? How did we understand the call to be a blessing in our own lives? In the midst of the conversation that night, I felt that we ourselves were being a blessing, bringing each other into intimate relationship with something greater.



Every year, the quality of the learning and the texture of our community feel different. One year, I thought we were not connecting to the text and to each other, so for the next three sessions I brought the Torah from the ark and placed it on a table in the center of our circle. People felt a definite shift in our

group in the presence of the Torah. Perhaps we were reminded of the sacred center that binds us together.



Four years ago, we initiated the practice of working with a *midah*, an ethical virtue, alongside our text study. We worked on *l'shon hara*, refraining from speaking gossip, as we studied texts and shared our experiences. Early on, one woman spoke about her inner conflict; she knew that *l'shon hara* could be hurtful, but she still spoke it. She wondered, if people refrained from *l'shon hara*, what would they talk about? A laugh of recognition rippled around the room.

Our *l'shon hara* study focused on practical questions: Where do we draw the line between *l'shon hara* and political conversation? How should a community talk about a person possibly in need of help? Learning from each other, we saw that too often we gossip in order to bond with other people. Together we realized the irony and folly of our practice: *L'shon hara* erects a barrier to true community because gossip does not require people to offer each other real vulnerability, intimacy,

or authenticity—the very qualities necessary for cultivating community with others.



Our community of learning has been greatly enhanced by the approximately equal presence of men and women in our circle. One man told us that he values our *beit midrash* in part “for the opportunity to sit with men I respect and admire. I have learned meaningful lessons about being a father from hearing how they relate to their children.”

Another man said that he struggles to understand his people's experience of God. God has little meaning for him, so he values hearing from others, men and women, who share his struggle.



At its core, our *beit midrash* is an opportunity for connection and authentic relationship in the context of studying sacred texts. As one learner said: “Torah is not simply the words of the text. Torah is how these words are understood and lived in community.” □