

Movement at Sinai:

Preparing our bodies and minds to receive Torah

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Welcome!

This is a movement and text study experience for all ages and abilities! No equipment required, although you may want a pillow for the very end. It can be done alone, or in a small group, or with children; if standing is not comfortable for you, I've provided options to do each movement while seated.

I put this resource together as a way to bring some of the motion and drama of the Sinai story into the experience of studying Torah on Tikkun Leyl Shavuot. As part of our spiritual preparation, we can bring our bodies into the text, rather than sit bent over books for the whole night.

For each of these nine verses from the Shavuot morning Torah reading, there is a text study option and a movement. You can read and study all the texts or just some of them. With my children, I plan to read the verses and do the movements, skipping the centuries of commentary in between!

I hope this will be fun and that movement will bring meaning into your preparation for Shavuot.



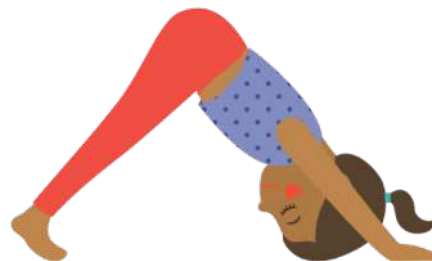
Tree

Ascent

Eagle

Downward

Presence



1. Mountain

Torah

Exodus 19: 2

Having journeyed from Rephidim, they entered the wilderness of Sinai and encamped in the wilderness. Israel encamped there in front of the mountain.

שמות י"ט:ב'

וַיֵּסְעוּ מִרְפִּידִים וַיָּבֹאוּ מִדְבַּר סִינַי
וַיַּחֲנֶה בְּמִדְבַּר וַיַּחֲנֶה שָׁם יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּגֵד
הָהָר:

Study

Mahazeh Avraham

"God measured all the mountains and did not find any worthy of having the Torah given upon it except Mount Sinai." (Leviticus Rabbah 13). Let us learn humility from Sinai, and let those who study Torah learn humility from it, for the Blessed Holy One bypassed all the other mountains and bestowed the Shekhinah on Mount Sinai, even though it is relatively low.

Movement

Mountain Pose

Stand with your feet slightly apart. Feel a connection with your whole foot on the ground. Your body weight should be over the center of your feet. Bring attention to your neck and spine; straighten them. Your arms hang from your shoulders. Take a deep breath. Let gravity hold you.

Seated: Sit with your feet resting on the floor or on a footrest, and do the same as above.

Discussion questions:

What does it mean to learn humility from studying Torah?

In what ways does studying Torah bring you to a place of humility?

2. Tree

Torah

Exodus 19: 1

On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone forth from the land of Egypt, on that very day, they entered the wilderness of Sinai.

שמות י"ט:א'

בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁלִישִׁי לַצֵּאת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל

מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בַּיּוֹם הַזֶּה בָּאוּ מִדְבַּר

סִינַי:

Study

Shir HaShirim Rabbah 2:3:2

Rabbi Azaryah also said: Just as it takes fifty days from the time the apple tree blossoms until its fruit is ready, so it was fifty days from the time Israel left Egypt until they received the Torah. And when did they receive it? "In the third month after the Israelites had gone forth." (Ex. 19:1).

שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים רַבֵּה ב'ג':ב'

רַבִּי עֲזַרְיָה אָמַר חוֹרִי, מֵהַתְּפוּחַ זֶה
מִשְׁעָה שֶׁמוֹצִיא נֹצֵר וְעַד שְׁגוֹמֵר פְּרוֹתָיו
חֲמִישִׁים יוֹם, כֹּה מִשְׁעָה שֶׁיֵּצֵאוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל
מִמִּצְרַיִם וְעַד שֶׁקִּבְּלוּ אֶת הַתּוֹרָה חֲמִישִׁים
יוֹם. וְאֵימָתִי קִבְּלוּ אוֹתָהּ (שְׁמוֹת יט, א):
בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁלִישִׁי לַצֵּאת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

Movement

Tree Pose: Stand with your feet together. With your left hand, lift your right foot to your left hip or thigh. Balance in your left leg. If you can, bring your hands together at your chest. Repeat with your left foot.

Seated: Bring your right foot on top of your left knee or calf. Lift from your waist and bring your hands together at your chest if you have your balance. Repeat with your left foot.

Discussion questions: What does the metaphor of an apple tree yielding fruit teach us about human readiness to receive Torah? What has been fruitful for you this year during the period of the Omer?

3. Ascent

Torah

Exodus 19: 3

And Moses went up to God.
The Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and declare to the children of Israel:

שמות י"ט:ג'

וּמֹשֶׁה עָלָה אֶל־הָאֱלֹקִים וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו
ה' מִן־הַהָר לֵאמֹר כֹּה תֹאמַר לְבֵית
יִעֲקֹב וְתִגִּיד לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Study

Devarim Rabbah 10:2

The Blessed Holy One made the heavens for heavenly beings and the earth for earthly beings, as it is written, "The heavens belong to the Lord, but the earth is given to humanity." (Ps. 115:16). Along came Moses and made the earth a place for heavenly beings and heaven a place for earthly beings, as it is written...."And Moses went up to God... The Lord came down upon Mount Sinai." (Exod. 19:3, 20).

Movement

Climbing!

It's time to get our heart rates going. Climb the stairs in your house!

Seated:

Step/ march in place.

דברים רבה י"ב'

דָּבָר אַחֵר, כֹּךְ בָּרָא הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא אֶת
הָעֲלִיּוֹנִים לְעֲלִיּוֹנִים, וְאֶת הַתַּחְתּוֹנִים
לְתַחְתּוֹנִים, שְׂכָךְ כְּתִיב (תהלים קטו, טז):
הַשָּׁמַיִם שְׁמַיִם לָהּ' וְהָאָרֶץ נָתַן לְבְנֵי אָדָם,
בָּא מֹשֶׁה וַעֲשֶׂה אֶת הַתַּחְתּוֹנִים לְעֲלִיּוֹנִים,
וְאֶת הָעֲלִיּוֹנִים לְתַחְתּוֹנִים, שְׂכָךְ כְּתִיב (שמות
יט, ג): וּמֹשֶׁה עָלָה אֶל הָאֱלֹקִים וגו' (שמות
יט, כ): וַיֵּרֶד ה' עַל הַר סִינַי.

Discussion: This midrash parallels Moses' role at Sinai with the Holy One's role in creating the world. What other parallels can we draw between Sinai and Creation?

4. Eagles

Torah

Exodus 19: 4

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Me.

שמות י"ט:ד'

אַתֶּם רְאִיתֶם אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי לְמִצְרַיִם
וְאֲשָׂא אֶתְכֶם עַל-כְּנָפֵי נְשָׁרִים וָאֵבָא
אֶתְכֶם אֵלַי:

Study

Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael, 19:4

"How I bore you on eagles' wings" -- what makes the eagle different from other birds? They all carry their young in their claws, fearing other birds that might fly down upon them from above, but the eagle fears only humans, who might shoot an arrow at it. It says, "It is better that it hit me and not my young." ... As it is written, "In the wilderness, where you say how the Lord your God carried you, as a man carries his child." (Deut. 1:31).

Movement

Eagle Pose

Stand with your feet together. Lift your arms over your head and bring your right arm down under your left, so your elbows and wrists are crossed in front of you. With palms together, try to bring your elbows down. If you can balance here, bend your legs, put your weight in your left leg, and lift and wrap your right leg over your left. Repeat on the other side, beginning by bringing your left arm under your right.

Seated: Follow the instructions for arms only.

Discussion: Is being borne on eagles' wings a comforting image of Divine power, or does it evoke a lack of human agency? Aside from parents protecting young children, in what ways do we use our strengths to shield the vulnerable from harm?

5. Downward

Torah

Exodus 19: 14

Moses came down from the mountain to the people and warned the people to stay pure, and they washed their clothes.

שמות י"ט:י"ד

וַיֵּרֶד מֹשֶׁה מִן־הָהָר אֶל־הָעָם וַיְקַדֵּשׁ
אֶת־הָעָם וַיִּכְבְּסוּ שְׂמֹלֵתָם:

Study

Rashi on Exodus 19:14:1

"Moses came down from the mountain to the people" —This tells us that Moses did not turn to his own affairs but went direct from the mountain to the people (Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 19:14).

רש"י על שמות י"ט:י"ד:א'

מן ההר אל העם. מְלִמֵּד שְׁלֹא הָיָה
מֹשֶׁה פּוֹנֶה לְעַסְקָיו, אֲלֹא מִן הָהָר –
אֶל הָעָם (מכילתא):

Movement

Downward Dog

Come to the floor on your hands and knees, shoulder width apart. Exhale and straighten your arms and legs, so you are an upside-down letter V. Push upward from your palms through your shoulders and back.

Seated: Extend your legs forward, toes pointing up. Extend your arms up and out.

Discussion: The ancient rabbis thought it significant that Moses came down to be with the people for the giving of the Torah. What steps can a leader take to stay with the people and maintain a position of leadership?

6. Thunder!

Torah

Exodus 19: 16

On the third day, as morning dawned, there was thunder, and lightning, and a dense cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud blast of the horn; and all the people who were in the camp trembled.

שמות י"ט:ט"ז

וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי בִּהְיוֹת הַבֹּקֶר וַיְהִי קוֹלֵת וּבְרָקִים וְעָנָן כָּבֵד עַל-הָהָר וְקוֹל שֹׁפַר תְּחִזֵּק מְאֹד וַיִּתְחַד כָּל-הָעָם אֲשֶׁר בַּמַּחֲנֶה:

Study

Mekhilta d'Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai 19:16

Lest we think [the Torah] was given in silence, scripture says, "There was thunder and lightning"--great claps of sound, great flashes of light, sounds of all kinds, light of all kinds.

מכילתא דרבי שמעון בר יוחאי

י"ט:ט"ז

יכול ניתנה בשתיקה ת"ל ויהי קולות וברקים קולות וקולי קולות: ברקים וברקי ברקים קולות משונין זה מזה וברקים משונין זה מזה

Movement

Thunder!

Sinai was not a quiet experience -- it's time to make some noise! From a seated position, either in a chair or on the ground, stomp your feet/legs on the ground to make a thunder and lightning storm!

Discussion: This is one of several verses emphasizing the people's awe and fear at Sinai. In what ways can we imagine that fear not as weakness, but as integral to our encounter with the Divine?

7. Falling back

Torah

Exodus 20:15

All the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the blare of the horn and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they fell back and stood at a distance.

שמות כ':ט"ו

וְכָל-הָעָם רֹאִים אֶת-הַקּוֹלֹת וְאֶת-
הַלְפִידִם וְאֶת קוֹל הַשֹּׁפָר וְאֶת-הָהָר
עֹשֵׁן וַיֵּרָא הָעָם וַיָּנֻעוּ וַיַּעֲמֻדוּ מֵרָחֵק:

Study

Rashi on Exodus 20:15:5

"They fell back and stood at a distance" — they recoiled twelve miles to the rear, the whole length of their camp, and the ministering angels came and helped to restore them to their place, as it is said, (Psalms 68:13) "The angels of the God of Hosts made them move on, move on" (Shabbat 88b).

רש"י על שמות כ':ט"ו:ה'

(ה) ויעמדו מרחק. היו נרתעין לאחוריהם
שנים עשר מיל, כארך מחניהם, ומלאכי
השירה באין ומסיעין אותן להחזירם,
שנאמר (תהילים ס"ח) מלאכי צבאות
ידדון ידדון (שבת פ"ח):

Movement

Ten Commandments Laps!

It's taught that the people moved miles backward and forward in response to each commandment. Pick two spots in the room. Run or walk ten laps, one for each commandment!

Seated: This verse is also taught as one of the bases for swaying during prayer. Sway back and forth, imagining that our prayer practices today echo the Israelites standing in awe at Sinai.

Discussion: What forces in your life make you retreat from things you need to face, and what or who are the forces who bring you back to your place?

8. B'nei Israel

Torah

Exodus 20:19

The Lord said to Moses: Thus shall you say to the Israelites: You have seen that I spoke to you from the very heavens:

שמות כ':י"ט

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה כֹּה תֹאמַר אֶל־
בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אַתֶּם רְאִיתֶם כִּי מִן־
הַשָּׁמַיִם דִּבַּרְתִּי עִמָּכֶם:

Study

Rabbeinu Bahya, Shemot 20:19:1

Seeing that all the Israelites had witnessed with their own eyes all the miracles God had performed beginning with the ten plagues in Egypt and now culminating in the giving of the Torah, God repeated both at the beginning (19:4) of the Decalogue and at its end the words: "you have seen."

רבנו בחיי, שמות כ':י"ט א'

אתם ראיתם כי מן השמים דברתי
עמכם. מפני שכל ישראל עדים במה
שראו בעיניהם האותות והמופתים
הגדולים תחלה עשר מכות של מצרים
עד סוף מתן תורה לכך הזכיר הקב"ה
להם אתם ראיתם בין בתחלה בין

Movement

Child's Pose (B'nei Israel):

Kneel on the floor with your toes together and your knees hip-width apart. On an exhale, bring your torso to your knees, face down, extending your arms forward. Create space through your spine and all the way to your fingertips.

Seated: Hold a pillow on your lap if you wish. On an exhale, fold your torso forward so it rests on the pillow. Extend your arms toward the floor. Create space in your spine & all the way to your fingertips.

Discussion: The people's direct witnessing of miracles is key; even aural experiences were "seen." Through which senses do you encounter God?

9. Presence

Torah

Exodus 20:21

Make for Me an altar of earth and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your sacrifices of well-being, your sheep and your oxen. In every place where I cause My name to be mentioned I will come to you and bless you.

שמות כ':כ"א

מִזְבֵּחַ אֲדָמָה תַעֲשֶׂה לִּי וְזָבַחַת עָלָיו
אֶת־עֹלֹתֶיךָ וְאֶת־שְׁלָמֶיךָ אֶת־צֹאֲנֶךָ
וְאֶת־בְּקָרְךָ: בְּכָל־הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אֶזְכֹּר
אֶת־שְׁמִי אֲבֹא אֵלֶיךָ וּבִרְכֹתֶיךָ:

Study

Rashi on Exodus 20:21:5

"In every place where I cause My name to be mentioned"--This means: where I will give you permission to mention My Proper Name, there "I will come to you and bless you"— I will make My Shechina rest upon thee.

רש"י על שמות כ':כ"א:ה'

בכל המקום אשר אזכיר את שמי.
אשר אתן לך רשות להזכיר שם
המפורש שלי, שם אבוא אליך
וברכתיך – אשרה שכינתי עליך.

Movement

Easy Pose:

Sit on a pillow or on the floor, with your legs crossed in front of you. Bring your hands to rest on your knees, palms facing down. Focus on the alignment of your spine. Close your eyes. Hold in your mind the teaching that the Shechina is resting upon you. Take ten deep breaths.

Seated: Follow the same instructions without crossing your legs.

Discussion: Our homes have become places for public (remote) study and prayer. Have you changed your home to create sacred space? Has opening to public prayer/study changed how you experience your home?

Concluding thoughts on mountains and trees, yearning and yielding...

**bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress:
Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994)**

There are times when personal experience keeps us from reaching the mountain top and so we let it go because the weight of it is too heavy. And sometimes the mountain top is difficult to reach with all our resources, factual and confessional, so we are just there, collectively grasping, feeling the limitations of knowledge, longing together, yearning for a way to reach that highest point. Even this yearning is a way to know.

Marge Piercy, "For she is a tree of life" (1999)

I see her opening into flushed white blossoms the bees crawl into. I see her branches dipping under the weight of the yield, the crimson, the yellow and russet globes, apples fallen beneath the deer crunch. Yellow jackets in the cobalt afternoon buzz drunken from cracked fruit oozing juice.

Discussion: bell hooks brings us back to the opening discussion of humility, whereas Marge Piercy describes the apple tree, fruitful in Sivan. How do you experience both your soul's yearning, the limits of your encounter with Torah, and the bounty that this season and holiday bring?

Thank you for joining me... Hag Sameah!