

**Praising
The
One**

**Who
Frees
Captives**

Matir Asurim

**With
So Many
in Chains**



Quoted material
belongs to original authors.
The rest is CC-BY-NC
Virginia Avniel Spatz

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Creative Common license
to share and/or adapt
with ATTRIBUTION
for NON-COMMERCIAL
purposes only

PDF copy of slides
and plain text version
available on SongEveryDay.org

<https://songeveryday.org/one-who-frees/>

For context, quotations come
with a teacher's movement
within Judaism and a few other
identifiers
– cited teachers do not
necessarily represent
their movement.

Only images included
– cover illustration and two logos –
described at the end of this document.

Where Hebrew
is used, both
Hebrew characters
and transliteration are
provided,
along with translation.

This presentation is about the phrase, "Matir Asurim," and what its history suggests about Jewish Obligation and Judaism in general.

A VERY broad summary of Jewish obligation in Rabbinic tradition that we've inherited --

Jewish obligations are a gift from God; any obstacle to fulfilling those obligations is problematic. Some such obstacles, in Rabbinic perspective:

- certain cognitive and physical disabilities,
- having a womb,
- responsibility for children, and anything else constraining control over one's time

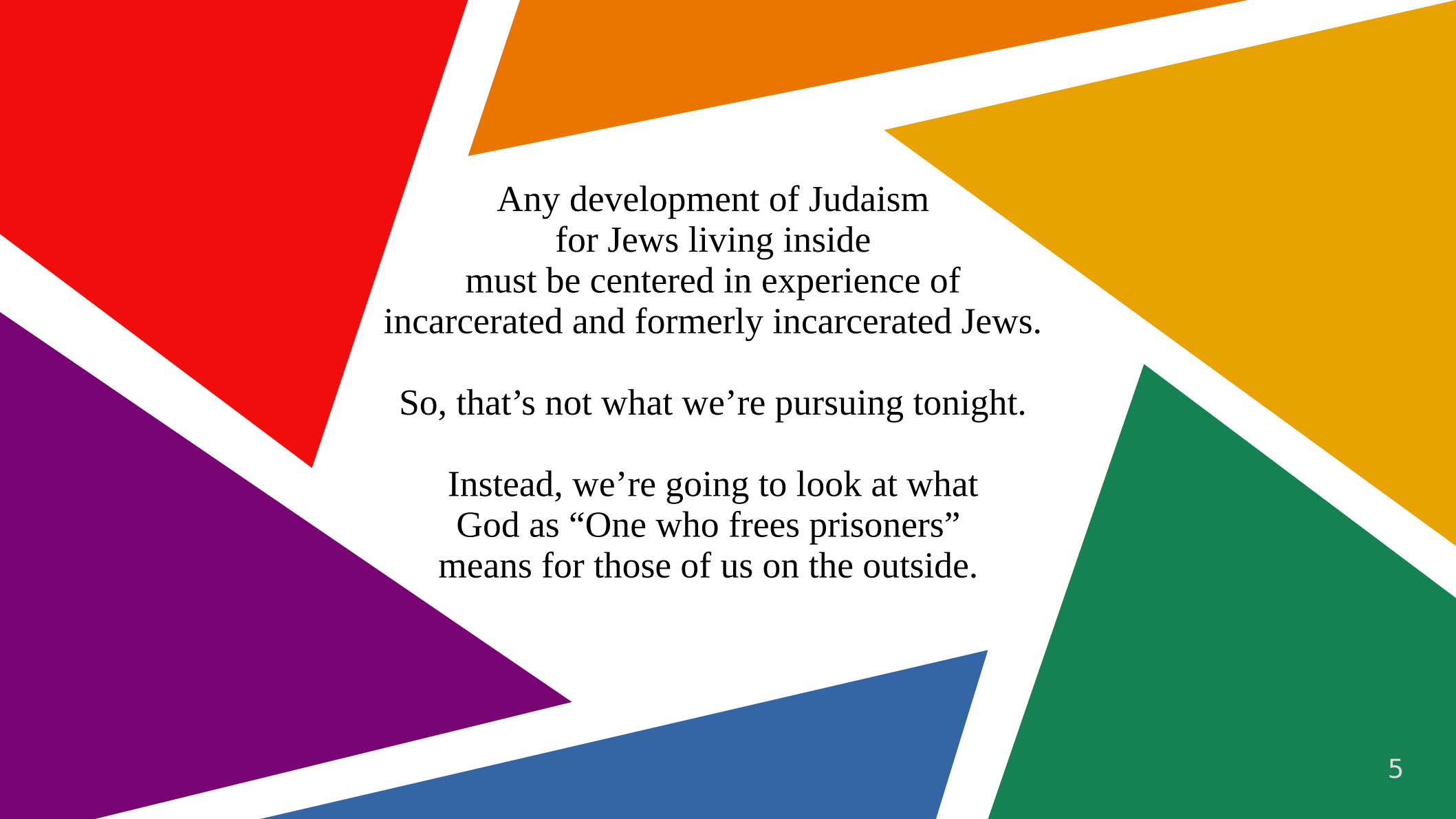
These resulted in exemptions to various obligations.

Over the ages, these exemptions influenced Jewish views on exempted categories of people...and vice versa Exempted people were granted fewer rights, as well as responsibilities, as Jews – based, at times, on “different spiritual planes” reasoning.

This obligation-based thinking has also influenced views of non-Jews, and, at different points in history, views of people classified as “slaves.”

In recent decades, Jews in some exempted categories – e.g., non-male Jews, disabled Jews, trans Jews – have been changing Jewish thought and practice for themselves and for the larger Jewish world.

Incarcerated Jews have little control over their time and possessions -- They don't have access to candles and flame to welcome Shabbat or freedom to refrain from work or join others in worship, e.g. Some expectations are shifting, so that Jewish observance inside isn't perceived as “defective.” But there's much more to be done.



Any development of Judaism
for Jews living inside
must be centered in experience of
incarcerated and formerly incarcerated Jews.

So, that's not what we're pursuing tonight.

Instead, we're going to look at what
God as "One who frees prisoners"
means for those of us on the outside.

The phrase “*matir asurim*”* is found
in Psalm 146 and incorporated into
several places in the liturgy

עֲשֵׂה מִשְׁפָּט לְעֲשׂוּקִים
נֵתֵן לֶחֶם לָרָעִבִים
יְהוָה מַתִּיר אֲסוּרִים:*

Who makes justice for the wronged,
gives bread to the hungry
YHVH [*matir asurim*]*

Matir Asurim

מַתִּיר אֲסוּרִים

Asurim – אֲסוּרִים

from verb אָסַר – *alef-samech-reish*:

to tie, bind, imprison

masc. plural noun = “prisoners”

Also:

obligate by oath or vow;

so: not permitted (for other purposes)

Matir Asurim

מַתִּיר אֲסוּרִים

Matir – מַתִּיר

from verb נָתַר – *nun-tav-reish*:
to be free, loose

causative form : **to unfasten, unbind**
participle (“noun-ifier”) = “the freer” or
“The one who loosens, unbinds, unties”

Also, Biblically:
leap, spring, start

Later Hebrew:
to make permitted,
to release as object of
prior vow or obligation

Back to
Psalm 146:
"Matir
Asurim" in
slightly
larger
context.

Psalm 146:5-8

Psalm 146's
ten verses
praise God
as Creator
and caretaker

5) Happy are they whose help is Jacob's God,
whose hope is in the ETERNAL, their God

6) Maker of heaven and earth,
the sea and all that's in it
who keeps faith forever

7) Who makes justice for the wronged, gives bread to the hungry
YHVH frees prisoners [*matir asurim*]*

8) YHVH restores sight to the blind [*pokeach ivrim*]*
YHVH makes straight the bent [*zokeif kefufim*]*
YHVH loves the righteous

*These three phrases are found in Babylonian Talmud's list of blessings
for recitation when arising and preparing for the day (Berakhot 60b).

a little
more context -
details not important

The Babylonian Talmud (*Berakohot* 60b) includes

- ten blessings relating to actions or states of being that divide sleep from becoming aware and preparing for the day – including the three using phrases from Ps. 146
- blessings for using the toilet and washing hands
- blessing for “return” of the soul
- blessing for engaging the mind – i.e, Torah study
- blessing for washing one’s face

The Jerusalem Talmud (*Berakohot* 9:1) includes blessings meant for the start of day that focus on identity, rather than action:

- NOT making me a *goy* [non-Jew]
- NOT making me a *bor*, [empty cistern; uncultivated person]
- NOT making me an *isha* [woman]

for
another
time

These 3 blessings,
and various
alternatives,
launch a WHOLE
DIFFERENT DISCUSSION

Prayerbooks for hundreds of years have included

10 blessings for WAKING ACTIONS
+ 3 blessings of IDENTITY =
= 13 morning blessings...a good symbolic Jewish number.

But then there's another blessing, for washing one's face:

“...removes sleep from my eyes
and slumber from my eyelids.”

– > 14 total.

(Kind of like “the 18 [*Shemonah Esrei*]” blessings of the Amidah,
have actually been 19 for centuries.)

CAUTION:
The Talmud
makes many
assumptions
about norms
for bodies,
shelter,
etc.

...more
on this
later...

Instructions for Morning Blessings

from B. Talmud *Berakhot* [blessings] 60b

When you hear the rooster, say:

"Blessed are You, YHVH, sovereign of the universe,
who has given me discernment to know day from night"

When you open your eyes, say:

"Blessed....who restores sight to the blind [*pokeach ivrim*]."

When you sit up and stretch, say: "Blessed...frees captives [*matir asurim*]"

When you dress, say: "Blessed...clothes the naked [*malbish arumim*]"

When you stand up, say:

"Blessed...straightens the bent [*zokeif kefufim*]"



Talmud and later discussion raise questions about who is obligated to recite each blessing, from a purely logistical, physical perspective:

- If someone slept in their clothes, do they recite “clothes the naked”?
- If a person is blind, do they recite “restores sight...” upon awakening?
- If a person cannot sit up or move their limbs, do they recite “frees the captives”?

Why does any of this matter? Why bless at all?
OTOH, why be so fussy about who is obligated, when?

Two key teachings are involved:

- 1) that using **anything** without thanking God is a form of theft; and
- 2) unnecessary blessing is taking God's name in vain.

The sweet spot joins action – like noticing daytime or putting on a belt – to blessing, thus allowing a Jew to enjoy/use what is otherwise not ours. Acknowledging that it all belongs to God also carries an ethical call, reminding us of societal needs and divine expectations:

Out of a commonplace event, [blessing] makes an occasion for a personal experience of God's love, attaches to that experience social import, and provides expression for that experience in worship.

– *Worship and Ethics: A Study in Rabbinic Judaism*, 1963. p.66
Rabbi Max Kadushin (1895-1980, Russia/US, Conservative)

This experience of the divine amid the ordinary is what Kadushin called “Normal Mysticism.”

Another of many commentaries on links between blessing and ethics...

Prayerbook commentary based on teachings of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik notes that using biblical terms for the morning blessings results in “less than precise wording.” On the other hand, these terms resonate with a prophetic authority and they

...have moral and ethical implications. God heals the blind, frees the prisoners, lifts up the oppressed. Each utterance of praise is filled with an ethical motif, a moral principle that must also be realized by man himself. When we pronounce these *berakhot*...we acknowledge God’s all-inclusive morality and announce publicly our commitment to imitate [God’s] ways.

– *Koren Mesorat HaRav Siddur*
Soloveitchik (1903-1993; Germany/US, Modern Orthodox)
often called “the Rav” – thus siddur title

Some influential teachings, on physical obligation

Maimonides (12th Century Egypt) says that obligation to recite a blessing arises from conditions set out in the first half of each teaching:
heard the rooster, moved one's limbs, etc:

It is the custom of the people in the majority of our cities to recite these blessings one after another in the synagogue, whether or not they are obligated in them.

This is a mistake and it is not proper to follow this practice. One should not recite a blessing unless obligated to do so.

– Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*: Prayer 7:9

A later ruling says that anyone not meeting one of the conditions – e.g., one who did not hear the sound of the rooster -- and so not obligated to bless according to Maimonides, should recite the blessing but not call on God, formally, using “the Name.”

– Joseph Karo, *Shulchan Arukh: Orach Chayim* 46
16th Century, Safed; Sephardic with Ashkenazi commentary included

Contrary teachings on obligation

Ashkenazi teachers from 9th Century CE Babylon* said that the custom was:

...for everyone to recite all *Birkot HaShachar* in order, whether or not one derives pleasure from them, because they were instituted based on the general pleasures of the world.

Furthermore, the fact that others derive pleasure from something can be indirectly useful for someone who does not directly derive pleasure from it.

Likewise, the opinion of the Ari HaKadosh** is that every Jew must recite all of the *Birkot HaShachar* in their order to thank Hashem for all the general good that [God] showers on the world.

– from *Peninei Halakhah* (“Pearls of Jewish Law”), contemporary Israel
Citing *Kol Bo*, a 13-14th Century collection of unknown, Ashkenazi authorship

* Rav Natrunai Gaon and Rav Amram Gaon

** ”Ari” = Rabbi Isaac Luria, 16th Century, Safed

For centuries, individual and congregational practice has been influenced by this “general pleasures” idea, as well as “obligation.”

Later developments, rethinking obligation

Our society places tremendous value on the normatively abled body. Even as we might be grateful for the physical abilities we possess, we can encourage our students to think critically about the messages these *brakhot* send about the non-normatively abled body, and to think about alternative ways of thinking about them.

An example of a radical rethinking of a *brakhah* that I have seen is *matir asurim*—who frees the captives. For many people with disabilities who use adaptive equipment in their daily lives, that adaptive equipment levels the playing field.

— Rabbi Lauren Tuchman, contemporary US, Conservative
[blind from infancy and first blind woman ordained a rabbi]

**Later developments,
rethinking kavanah/intention**

“matir asurim”

You break me out of old patterns that don’t serve me anymore.

“zokeif kefufim”

You love my wounded, bent, shameful parts.

You lift them to the light,

forming new growth and opportunities for compassion.

– *Birkot HaShachar* (morning blessings): Paraliturgical reflections by
Rabbi Shoshana Meira Friedman, 2020 (The Open Siddur)

<https://tinyurl.com/ParaLiturgy>

Friedman (US, contemporary) was ordained at non-denominational
Hebrew College and identifies as late-diagnosed Autistic

Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi (Poland/US, 1924- 2014, Renewal)
sometimes used “frees us from compulsions” as
interpretation of *“matir asurim”*

What might the physical and obligation-based arguments suggest about the “*matir asurim*” blessing for people outside?

Does an individual with loved ones incarcerated, trapped at borders or by other circumstance, experience God as “*matir asurim*”?

As an aspirational prayer? Through experiencing freeing of others?

In the spirit of freedom being “indirectly useful for someone who does not directly derive pleasure from it”? Perhaps saying “amen” when others recite this blessing?

Given widespread incarceration, and its impact on all of us,
is God’s attribute as “*matir asurim*” a “general good”
that we, as a society, experience?

For the sake of argument: If society is NOT experiencing God's "*matir asurim*" attribute as a "general good" ...

Do we **(1)** bless God as "*matir asurim*" as a reminder of our ethical obligations, focusing on how we've fallen short in making this divine attribute manifest in the world?

To take just one commentary on the subject:

As important as prison reform is, we must also look upstream.

Let us fulfill the obligation of *matir asurim*, "freeing the captives," by keeping people from becoming captives in the first place by addressing issues of poverty, lack of affordable housing, lack of quality education, access to health care, and other ills our society faces.

– Rabbi Mark Goldfarb, reformjudaism.org, 2011

(US Contemporary, Reform)

Returning again to Psalm 146:

The psalm calls “happy [*ashrei*]” those who have the help of “Jacob’s God,” adding among God’s attributes:

7) Who makes justice for the wronged, עֲשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט, לְעֹשׂוּקִים--
gives bread to the hungry נָתַן לֶחֶם, לְרָעִיבִים;
YHVH frees prisoners יְהוָה, מַתִּיר אֲסוּרִים

Oseh mishpat la'ashukim
Notein lechem la'revim
YHVH, matir asurim

Perhaps, we can keep the entire verse in mind when blessing God as “*Matir Asurim*” upon awakening.

Or do we (2) take another approach to our collective experience?

(2) another approach

Perhaps we should consider acknowledging that our communities are so substantially affected by mass incarceration, by philosophical views underlying it, and by so many other experiences of on-going captivity, that our prayer language should reflect this collective experience.

We have the precedent set when Jeremiah and Daniel adjusted prayer language used by Moses, and then the Great Assembly changed it again for the first blessing of the Amidah:

...הַאֵל הַגָּדוֹל הַגִּבּוֹר וְהַנּוֹרָא...

“...*Ha-el ha-gadol, ha-gibor, v’hanorah...*”

“...The great, mighty and awesome God...”

“They knew God insists on truth, and would not ascribe false things to God...” >>>

Moses said
“the Great
Mighty, and
Awesome
God”
(Deut.
10:17).

Daniel
said “the
Great and
Awesome God,”
(Dan. 9:4).

Jeremiah
said:
“the Great,
Mighty God,”
(Jer. 32:18).

Yoma 69B – Adaptation of Soncino translation using Voi/Void/Voix/Voidself pronouns for the Divine, following brin solomon’s *Siddur Davar Hadash*.

Moses had come and said: The great God, the mighty, and the awesome” (Deut 10:17).

Then Jeremiah came and said: Aliens are destroying God’s Temple. Where are, then, God’s awesome deeds? Hence he omitted “awesome” (Jer 32:18).

Daniel came and said: Aliens are enslaving God’s children. Where are God’s mighty deeds? Hence he omitted the word ‘mighty’ (Dan 9:4).

But the Men of the Great Assembly put all three terms into the Amidah, saying:

On the contrary! Therein lie God’s mighty deeds that Voi suppress Voix wrath, that Voi extends long-suffering to the wicked.

Therein lie Voix awesome powers: For but for the fear of Void, how could one [single] nation persist among the [many] nations!

But how could [the earlier] teachers – Jeremiah and Daniel – abolish something established by Moses? R. Eleazar said: Since they knew that the Holy One, blessed be Voi, insists on truth, they would not ascribe false things to Void.

– Babylonian Talmud Yoma 69b

In addition to the morning blessings, we find the expression “*matir asurim*” in the second blessing of the Amidah.

Not long after calling God “the great, mighty, and awesome,” in the first blessing, the Amidah’s second blessing emphasizes God’s power, with a focus on life and death and including:

| | | |
|--------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------------|
| אתה גבור לעולם אָדְנִי.. | You are forever mighty... | <i>Atah gibor l’olam adonai</i> |
| סוּמֵךְ נוֹפְלִים | You support the fallen, | <i>Someich nof’lim,</i> |
| וְרוֹפֵא חוֹלִים | and heal the sick, | <i>v’ro-fei cholim,</i> |
| וּמַתִּיר אֲסוּרִים... | and free captives... | <i>u’matir asurim...</i> |

– Amidah, “*Gevurot* [power]” blessing

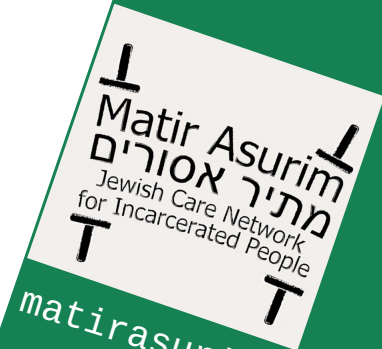
General questions about divine power and the efficacy of prayer are way beyond this presentation. But Shavuot is a good opportunity to reflect: “***Matir asurim***” is found again, here, in another of Judaism’s oldest prayers. How did our ancestors understand this aspect of divinity? What did they want us to manifest? How do their ideas call to us? And how do we answer that call???

Virginia Avniel Spatz
vspatz.net
Songeveryday.org
Rereading4Liberation.com
MatirMachot.blog

Lots of Jewish and justice
books at **SpatzReads bookshop**.
Any Bookshop purchase, after
entering through this portal,
supports the author.

<https://bookshop.org/shop/SpatzReads>

Patreon page
STILL
pending....



matirasurim.org/