

A Readers' Guide to *Chapters of The Heart*

Compiled by

Sue Levi Elwell, Carol N. Friedman, Tamara Jaffe-Notier and Nancy Fuchs Kreimer

Dear Reader,

Chapters of the Heart is an excellent catalyst for discussion and exploration for individuals, for one in dialogue with another, and for groups. Our readers have suggested choosing one chapter at a time to open deep discussion. You might also read two chapters from the same section of the book, considering how writers' perspectives illuminate, challenge, or expand our appreciation of each unique contribution. Many chapters provide a welcome catalyst for intergenerational and interfaith discussions.

Please write to us and let us know how we can make this Guide work for you.

Sue, Carol, Tamara & Nancy

Chapter 1: A Life With Things

Vanessa L. Ochs

1. Although Vanessa and her husband Peter both come from Jewish families, their union was an "intermarriage" of sorts, involving differences of class and culture. When have you found yourself in close family relationships that spanned differences of religion, race, culture or class? What have been some of the issues that emerged?
2. This chapter is about acquiring things, and also about acquiring new family members and being welcomed into their world and value systems. And it is about giving away both things and one's own, fixed, ideas about relationships, ritual, and more. How does Vanessa's perspective change through the course of this chapter, about things, about ritual, and about family connections? Does your perspective change?
3. How do you understand Vanessa's stepping forth to officiate at her mother-in-law's funeral, and her initial confusion about the function of the collapsible razor blade given to her by the funeral director? How does it become a sacred object for her, one that she will not throw out?
4. What are objects that have become sacred for you? Are these objects of protection, of memory, of inherent value? Do any of them "open up broken hearts"?

Chapter 2 On Raising a Son: One Mother's Search for Wisdom

Hara E. Person

1. Hara writes that learning that she was pregnant with a boy brought “tears of astonishment and admittedly also fear. I knew nothing about boys and felt completely unprepared to mother one.” She continues, telling us about her own “strongly matriarchal family.” How did you react when you read these words?
2. Hara notes that the problem of having “authentic voices” silenced affects women and men. What does this mean? When has your voice, or the voice of someone close to you, been silenced?
3. In this chapter, Hara's son becomes her teacher. How has the presence of someone in your life, either a child or another loved one, “enlarged” the world around you as your “eyes began to notice what would have been earlier simply edited out of view?”
4. The final sentence of this essay is the author's prayer for her son. What might your prayer be for a child in your life?

Chapter 3: Between Sisters

Ellen M. Umansky

1. “Between Sisters” challenges each reader to think about her or his own relationships with siblings, both real and imagined, and to consider how those relationships change as we go through life. How did Ellen's narrative open questions or challenges for you?
2. The Torah, and other sacred texts, include a range of stories about siblings, as rivals, as collaborators, as individuals who reconcile after long estrangement, and those who are never able to bridge the distances between them. Which stories speak to you at this time in your relationship with your siblings, or those who have become like siblings to you?
3. Ellen's father, “the strong charismatic patriarch of our family,” compared his two daughters to one another. Discuss how parents or elder family members enhance or limit childrens' sense of their potential and their abilities.
4. Ellen uses the biblical story of Rachel and Leah to illuminate her relationship with her own sister. And, citing the scholar Lori Hope Lefkowitz, she reminds us that there is often a “story behind the story” in the Torah. Does “reading between the lines, filling in the blanks, and when necessary inventing new stories” serve you as a way to read sacred texts, particularly when you try to connect those texts with your own experience?

Chapter 4: The Face Under the Huppah: Relating to My Closest Stranger

Nancy Fuchs Kreimer

1. Nancy shares two pieces of advice that she learned in couples' therapy: "You can either be right or be in a relationship," and "Different minds!" What is sparked in you as you consider this advice?
2. How do you respond to the idea of bearing "the burden of the other?" How might this present a spiritual opportunity for you?
3. What might it mean for you to look at other human beings as if each of them reflects one of God's faces?
4. Nancy describes her argument with her husband about driving directions as "an old play," and shares "some of the satisfying endings," including "getting out of the car at a rest stop and seeing it all against an immense sky." Is this a "satisfying ending" for you? Why or why not?

Chapter 5: Loving Our Mothers

Vivian Mayer

1. Vivie opens her chapter with a story about restraining herself as her son struggled for a teacher's attention. What emotions did this telling evoke in you?
2. The Jewish idea of praying through the "the merit of the ancestors" reminds us that where we come from, including our most immediate ancestors—parents and grandparents—contributes to how we access the spiritual in our lives. Who are your closest "*avot* and *imahot*" (mothers and fathers). How do they figure in your understanding of prayer?
3. As a practicing traditional Jew, Vivie encounters the Mothers—Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah—on a daily basis in her prayers. For Vivie, these *Imahot*/ Mothers, are complex figures, meaning different things to her at different stages in her life. How has your relationship with your religious models changed over time?
4. In the end, Vivie's essay turns out to be not only about loving the flawed biblical matriarchs but also about loving herself. How does the practice of invoking these ancestors in prayer help her know the reality of God's love?

Chapter 6: Portals to Sacred Family Life

Julie Greenberg

1. Families are the crucible of our first experiences of living with others. How is your own family (either the one you grew up in or one you created) like and unlike the family Julie describes? What reflections did her essay provoke in you about your own family?
2. What are some of the ways Julie has found to stay mindful through the daily challenges of family life? Do any of them remind you of your own behaviors or practices?
3. Julie and her parenting partner, D, have different reactions to Joey's belt buckle. What does the buckle represent to each of them, and to Joey himself? Did this conversation resonate with your experience? What was your response to this exchange and its conclusion?
4. Julie writes, "On the journey of love, things that might not seem to have much significance can be major stumbling blocks unless they are approached as portals to greater understanding. These things become momentary 'sancta,' items that point beyond themselves to a bigger world." What 'sancta' have you discovered in your "journey of love"?

Chapter 7: "Sing, O Barren One": Ambushed by a Hysterectomy at Age Twenty-Six

Ellen Frankel

1. Ellen's chapter addresses the universal hope of many women throughout history and across differences of culture: to become biological mothers. When Ellen discovers that she will never bear a child, she draws on her inner strength, and writes, "I was determined to keep toughing it out. Even now." What do you "tough out," "even now"?
2. The Hebrew word *akara* is a contronym that means both "essence" and "absence." How does this word, often translated as "barrenness" invite us to consider the paradox of life itself?
3. The circle of Ellen's family was deeply touched by her hysterectomy. How have individuals in your intimate circle responded to loss or challenge in ways that have provided support to those suffering or grieving?
4. Ellen writes, "There's one emotion associated with these events that I've never really talk about, and I wonder whether it eats away at me unconsciously even now. That emotion is shame." Ellen writes about her journey through her shame. What were your responses to her journey, and her conclusions?

Chapter 8: *El Na Refa Na La: Please, God, Heal My Daughter!*

Amy Eilberg

1. Amy shares her story of her response to her daughter's struggle with anorexia. How can the need for privacy, or our desire to protect a loved one, isolate us when we most need to be embraced by others or by our community?
2. Amy finds solace in prayer, friends, and community, "the cultivation of trust and patience, an acceptance of brokenness, and a commitment to rigorous truth-telling." What has worked for you when you have "walked through a dark time"?
3. Amy suggests that life is often defined by uncertainty, brokenness, and suffering. Discuss an experience that has allowed you to glimpse and understand "the necessary interweaving of joy and sorrow in every human life."
4. Amy's reflections on prayer challenge each reader to open to this universal practice that needs to be reclaimed again and again. How do the prayers of others comfort you when you find yourself unable to pray? When have your prayers sounded like "cries" and felt like "a silent ache in [your] chest"? When have sacred words served as "an anchor for [your] tortured mind and heart"?

Chapter 9: *Facing Pain, Facing My Fears*

Ruth H. Sohn

1. Ruth begins her chapter by sharing her nearly paralyzing fear as her young husband faced radical surgery, his second in eight months. With the help of her spiritual mentor, she invited her fear into her meditation practice. She writes, "I felt my heart expanding, opening to the flow of the waters of pain and compassion, of healing and love." When have you had such an experience? How has this "expansion" made a difference in your life? Have you been able to hold onto this sense of openness?
2. In meditation, Ruth encountered a pool that refreshed all who approached it. She shares a text from the Zohar that references the river that flows from Eden (Genesis 2:10). How do you understand these images of life-sustaining water as sources of spiritual nourishment?
3. Ruth compares her fear to that of Jacob as he anticipated meeting his estranged brother Esau after many years. The thirteenth century commentator, Hizkuni, suggests that a divine messenger intervened to enable Jacob to face himself, and his complex relationship with his brother. What was your response to this "reading" of the biblical text? When has an outside "force" helped you face yourself or your fears?

4. Ruth, like other contributors to this volume, finds solace and support in prayer. Are there particular prayers, either from fixed liturgy or other sources that bring you comfort or calm?

Chapter 10: My Mother as a Ruined City: Insights from the Book of Lamentations

Rachel Adler

1. Rachel teaches that Lamentations records not only the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE, but also the destruction of its “nomos,” an entire universe of meaning for the inhabitants of that culture. She then writes, “My mother’s nomos is destroyed by dementia.” Have you witnessed or known the destruction of a nomos? What nomos gives your life meaning?
2. Rachel studies and reads to make sense of her mother’s dementia, and shares with us the insights of Elaine Scarry, “who writes about physical pain and its effects on the universe of the sufferer.” Scarry also writes about the power of moving through the experience of loss and recovery with another: “to be present when the person in pain rediscovers speech is almost to be present at the birth or rebirth of language.” How is it a privilege to accompany another through loss and recovery, or to be accompanied through trauma?
3. Rachel writes, “Lament was considered a women’s genre, and it was an art ...Why women? ...They were experts in destruction and loss.” Do you think that this is true in the twenty-first century?

Rachel writes, “We try to recover Mother the way she was when she was well ...” How have you attempted, successfully or not, to recover memories of loved ones when they were vibrant and well?

Chapter 11 Wrestling with God and Evil

Judith Plaskow

1. Judith writes that when her mother died “a cruel and lingering death” at age 58, “quite to my surprise, I found I was angry not at God but at the colossal irrelevance of the Reform funeral service. I simply did not want to hear about God the Lord and King, justice and judgment. I wanted to be told that people are born and die, that God gives and takes away, that the moon waxes and wanes, that tides move in and out, that nothing really dies, that everything is taken up in our memories and in the ecology of the planet.” Do you resonate with Judith’s anger? How do you relate to the theology she longs to hear expressed?

2. Judith writes, "God is the creative energy that underlies, animates, and sustains all existence, the Ground of Being, the source of all that is, the power of life, death, and the regeneration in the universe." How have you witnessed this in your life? Do you believe that God is "responsible for evil along with good," or "has the power and responsibility to intervene in creation?"
3. Judith writes, "Initially unperceived by me, the edifice of my prior beliefs was giving way—not with a mighty crash but quietly, hardly noticeably, before the power of an alternative understanding." How have your beliefs changed over time? How does understanding contribute to our spiritual growth?
4. What is your response to Judith's suggestion that we humans, not an omnipotent God, are responsible for making justice in this world? How do you understand her challenge "to be the justice required for creation to flourish?"

Chapter 12: In the Right Time: Reflections on an Abortion

Sue Levi Elwell

1. Why do you think Sue's story remained untold for so long and why does she decide to tell her story now? Are there parts of your life that were untold stories? For how long? If you did tell them eventually, what made you decide to do so? If they remain untold, why is that the case? What do you think might be gained and lost by telling them?
2. The experience Sue depicts in this chapter played a role—in her view—in her calling to become a rabbi. Can you trace the work you do today to particular events in your life? Would you say you have a vocation (literally, a calling)?
3. What does "living in a time of favor" mean to you? How might you work towards living in such a time?
4. Following the rich tradition of narrative midrash, Sue wrote Tirzah's story to fill in a lacuna in Jewish tradition. Do you have a sense of a midrash that needs to be added to the tradition—a gap that needs filling? Would you be open to trying your hand at writing a midrash?

Chapter 13: My Life as a Talking Horse: Hybridity and Gender Equity as Jewish Values

Wendy Zierler

1. Wendy opens her chapter by stating, "My life straddles two Jewish worlds," and she then explores how those words both collide and come together in a uniquely

dynamic tension. How many worlds does your life “straddle”? How does this chapter help you to see your “worlds,” with new understandings of how your worlds challenge, clash, and complement one another?

2. Wendy shares a childhood memory of a guilty pleasure of “breaking shabbes” by running to the corner store to buy candy and then tip-toeing into her bedroom to eat it. How did your childhood self rebel against—or make a place for yourself in your family’s world? What “guilty pleasures” do you remember, and how do you think they inform the worlds in which you choose to live now?
3. The talking horse longs for freedom, but as Wendy writes, “freedom doesn’t end up taking the tidy Enlightenment form that he or we might have expected.” Several of the essays in this volume refer to the story and the symbols of Passover seder, our annual commemoration of freedom. The freedom that Jews celebrate is a hard won *collective* freedom, a freedom that demands remembering, each year, that too many human beings still spend their lives enslaved to others. How do you understand your own free choices to be a part of, or apart from, one or more communities?
4. Wendy writes eloquently about the hybrid nature of the postmodern world. To what extent do many religious traditions thrive by encouraging, accepting, and nurturing identity and participation that are “part one thing, part another?”

Chapter 14: My Interfaith Friendships: Blessings and Challenges

Blu Greenberg

1. Discuss a time when you faced the challenge of moving beyond what is known and comfortable, particularly in terms of religious traditions, to sharing dialogue with others and building interfaith friendships. How have interfaith experiences, or lack of exposure to others, affected your own religious identity?
2. When Blu and her husband host Msgr. John Oestreicher at their home, Blu has “an immature fantasy” that the priest will remember the Jewish faith of his youth when he “hears the ancient words and traditional melody.” What has been your experience with individuals who were born or brought up in your faith and chose another religious path?
3. In what ways is the Israeli-Palestinian dialogue Blu describes related to the Jewish-Christian dialogue she explores? How do these encounters present unique challenges?
4. Do you agree with Blu that Jews have a responsibility to initiate and sustain interfaith exchange? Do Christians? Do Muslims? Why? Why not?

Chapter 15: The Remembrance of These Things: War, Occupation, Parsley, Bitter Herb

Margaret Holub

1. Margaret experiences tension between her passionate concern for social justice and her commitment to Jewish prayer and holiday observance. She suggests both theological and liturgical responses as acknowledgement of these tensions. What are your responses to her suggestions?
2. Margaret cites Maimonides' four steps of *teshuvah*, repentance: the articulation of one's wrongdoing in detail both to the one wronged and to God; the expression of remorse; restoration in every material way possible; and turning away when another opportunity to commit the same sin arises. She says that "she takes (these steps) as a road map for atonement ...in her small private world." Which of these steps do you find most challenging?
3. What are some ways we might free ourselves from "the sticky web of voraciousness and exploitation"? Why is this process so difficult to achieve and maintain?
4. At the conclusion of her chapter, Margaret challenges us to "be honest about who we are on the seder table: parsley or saltwater, bitter herb or sweet mortar." Who are you *this year*?

Chapter 16 Shattering and Rebirth: My Midlife Gap Year

Dayle A. Friedman

1. Dayle introduces the Lurianic model of the cosmic shattering of God's supernal light. How have you—or someone close to you—been able to "locate and liberate the sparks of light hidden with the shards that surround us"? What strategies have proven most successful for you?
2. Dayle writes about "*yeridah l'zorech Aliyah*," a descent for the sake of ascent. How do you understand this?
3. Responding to loss of beloveds and a cherished career goal, Dayle "cleans up her own act," and "invites family, friends and colleagues to reflect on my strengths and weaknesses in an unvarnished '360 review.' This is not easy!" What does Dayle learn?
4. Dayle looks at her own learning style and patterns. What kind of a learner are you? How do you want to grow at this time in your life?

Chapter 17: Letting Go and Drawing Close

Laura Geller

1. When Laura decided to wean her son, and looked for a Jewish text to guide her, she “rediscovered a verse that was very familiar because we read it every Rosh HaShana ...I had read these texts for many years ...but I never paid attention until the story connected to me.” What was your response to Laura’s “discovery”? Have you ever “discovered” a text that was waiting for you to read it with *your* eyes and *your* questions?
2. Laura’s teacher Sylvia Boorstein, who is the teacher of several contributors to this book, teaches that “the only correct answer to the question, ‘How are you?’ is ‘I couldn’t be better,’” because if we *could* be better, we *would* be better. Is this advice that you find helpful? In what situations would you share it with someone seeking your wisdom?
3. “The important part of ...looking back is to be able to forgive myself (and those I love) for not being perfect, to be able to see myself clearly and accept who I am with gratitude.” How can you “look back” with Geller’s compassionate gaze?
4. What are you letting go of as you draw close?

Chapter 18: Leaving Egypt Again: Aging With Awareness

Sheila Peltz Weinberg

1. Whatever our age, we are all in the process of growing older. Sheila's chapter connects the themes and symbols of the Passover seder to the experience of aging, and invites us to join her. What would your aging be like if you "saw it as a time of liberation, of deepening awareness, of strengthening (the) soul and (your) connection to the sacred unity that underlies all life"?
2. What "mind states" or "hindrances" create "contracted and limited" energy in your perspective, sometimes preventing awareness (da'at)? What "obscures joy and connection and reduces (your) ability to enjoy life?"
3. Discuss how "critical doubt" can sometimes work as a force of "resistance or reluctance" in our lives? Conversely, how can "critical doubt" sometimes guide us to deeper questioning?
4. Sheila joins authors Vanessa and Margaret in challenging readers to think about living with less, and facing our FOMO factor (Fear of Missing Out). Sheila asks us to consider the maror, the bitter herb we eat as part of our seder ritual, as a reminder the energy that balances lust and desire.

Chapter 19: A Heart So Broken It Melts Like Water

Barbara Eve Breitman

1. Barbara (Bobbi) shares with us the teaching of Rabbi Mendel of Kotzk (the Kotzker rebbe): "nothing is more whole than a broken heart." How does that paradox ring true to you?
2. When have you "resist[ed] the inevitable losses and traumas that life brings, denying the truth of impermanence"? Did this stance "increase suffering" in your life? How did you or others find ways to reinstate balance and an increased sense of well-being in your life?
3. Bobbi helps the reader navigate her heart-breaking story by guiding us back and then forward in time, illustrating *teshuvah*, the "process of turning and returning ...". Can you think of an event in your life where your understanding of the power and impact and meaning of that event has been aided, changed, or deepened by returning to the event over time?
4. Bobbi writes this essay seventeen years after the events she described. Were you surprised by her concluding updates? How does the update change your reaction to her story?
- 5.

Chapter 20: With the Song of Songs in Our Hearts

Tamara Cohn Eskenazi

1. Tamara's first published article proposed that the Song of Songs is a response to the Book of Job. Can you imagine what some of her arguments might have been? From what you can tell, do you think the idea is convincing?
2. Each of Tamara's three marriages were unique, coming at different stages in her life. Yet, in each case, she found connections between her own experience and the lovers' story in the Song of Songs. What seems to you to have been the connecting link between the author's three different twentieth century love affairs and the poetry of the Song?
3. What images or metaphors from the love poetry of the Song quoted by Tamara speak most powerfully to you?
4. Why do you think the editors chose to conclude *Chapters of the Heart* with Tamara's essay?