



The Ten Plagues as Guidelines to Character Development and Spiritual Growth ***Yehudis Fishman***

Subject Area: Torah, Holidays, Spiritual Growth
Multi-unit lesson
Target age: adults

Objective: To view the plagues not just as a physical or historical events, but to make them relevant metaphors on an interactive and interpersonal level for Torah study and/or at the Pesach Seder.

Most Jewish people encounter the story of the ten plagues many times during a lifecycle, most often in family Seders, but also during annual or bar/bat mitzvah Torah study. Some modern historians and filmmakers have attempted to trace the scientific and factual basis of the Exodus in particular, and the plagues specifically. The traditional Jewish commentators highlight the ‘behind the scenes’ version of the details of what, when, and where, as well as the idea of karmic justice behind the plagues. However, it is in the more mystical and philosophical commentaries that we find the plagues representing universal and archetypal human failings. They are looked upon as fallen states from the higher potentials that human beings can achieve as reflections of conscious creations in the Divine Image.

My proposal is to develop a lesson plan that presents some of these latter teachings that broaden the scope of seeing these events in a literal way, to seeing them as symbols for personal growth, in contrast to decline. Generally speaking, Judaism considers the need for constant alertness and mindfulness to avoid falling into slavery by behaving in reactive or addictive modes of functioning. This is actually the deeper way of looking at the Exodus. In the actual words of the Haggadah, ‘In each generation, a person is obligated to see him/her self as if personally experiencing the release from Mitzrayim, literally meaning narrowness, or constraints.’

By examples and thought provoking questions, the above purpose can be experienced in adult education and/or Seder gatherings. This focus can enhance other Pesach perspectives by actively engaging participants in what otherwise might be just a passive reading of the text. The sources I will draw from are primarily: The Mei Hashiloach, the Ishbitzer Rebbe who compares the plagues to character degradation, Chabad sources which parallel the ten plagues to the ten sefirot, the Kabbalistic infra-structure



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of creation and all existence, as well as personality traits and the spiritual makeup of the individual. My original contribution to this schema is to further the link by referring to the psycho-spiritual system known as the Enneagram. Several modern Jewish thinkers have connected the Enneagram to the sefirot. My idea is to extend this connection to the plagues because the Enneagram deals very specifically with personality traits as they move from points of integration (i.e. liberation) to disintegration (i.e. slavery) and (hopefully) back to integration. A bibliography of some of these writings will follow the presentation.

I envision one class per plague. I will present conceptual and creative possibilities for each lesson, but the reader or teacher can feel free to embellish based on personal needs and ideas. I recommend reading or assigning some of the source material before the actual process experience, in particular the Enneagram sources, which may be less familiar to some Jewish people than even the sefirot. There are many opinions that the Exodus should be an ongoing and even daily process. My hope is that this project will contribute to that important directive.

The rabbis understand the correspondence between the plagues and the sefirot to go from 'below to above,' for example, the first plague will correspond to the sefirah of Malchut, usually translated as Royalty. In a book called, 'My Best Self-using the Enneagram to free the soul, - the authors relate the sefirot to the nine points of the Enneagram in the following way:

Outline of correspondence between plagues, Enneagram types and Sefirot:

<u>PLAGUE NAME</u>	<u>SEFIROH AND RELATED QUALITY</u>	<u>ENNEAGRAM NUMBER</u>
1-BLOOD	MALCHUT-CONFIDENCE	NINE
2-FROGS	YESOD-BONDING	EIGHT
3-LICE	HOD-SUBMISSION	SEVEN
4-WILD ANIMALS	NETZACH-AMBITION	SIX
5-DEATH OF TAME ANIMALS	TIFERET-COMPASSION	FIVE
6-BOILS	GEVURAH-REJECTION	FOUR
7-HAIL	CHESED-LOVE	THREE
8-LOCUSTS	BINAH-INTELLIGENCE	TWO
9-DARKNESS	CHOCHMAH-CONCEPTION	ONE



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10-DEATH OF FIRST BORN KETER-WILL-CORE ESSENCE INFINITY

SESSION 1: *Read- in class or out- as background, the book of Exodus from the beginning to chapter 7-verse fourteen. The first plague covers 7:14 to 7:25. Teacher can also bring whatever commentaries he/she feels are important and relevant, before or after allowing for class discussion about metaphoric associations to the following focused question:*

WHEN IS YOUR CONFIDENCE EXPRESS SENSITIVITY AND WHEN DOES IT EXPRESS DOMINATION? *Auxiliary point: Confidence is power. To the Egyptians, the Nile was the source of their power and security. If their power had become corrupt, how does turning water into blood address this? How do people use power in a destructive way, and how in a constructive way? The class can talk about how they feel when other people use power constructively or destructively, but more importantly, the focus should be on personal insight as to what situations seem to push ourselves into these patterns.*

For example, in school settings in particular, children who are leaders sometimes become bullies. What makes this happen? What is the difference between bullies and inspiring leaders?

MOST IMPORTANTLY, *what can be done to facilitate a shift from negative to positive expression of this core trait? Here is where Enneagram studies and paradigms are most helpful, but intuitive and honest gut sharing can also be productive. This is a primary objective for this course. PERSONAL AWARENESS AND INSIGHT CAN BE TRANSFORMATIVE!*

A key concept from the Enneagram is that when our behavior is coming from our personality rather than from our Essence, it is often fearful, reactive, addictive, and mindless. Therefore when we can pay attention to our responses, especially when they create stress and conflict, we can begin to realize we have other options. This was the problem of the stubbornness of Pharaoh and the Egyptian people's blind obedience to him. What is our inner Pharaoh? How can we enlighten that part of ourselves? One important way is to see how our stubbornness and blindness gets us into trouble and produces plague-like consequences.



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Here is my insight into shifting the problem related to this plague: From a Torah perspective: When an Israelite would drink, the blood would turn back into water. To me this suggests: From an enlightened perspective, one can shift an otherwise coagulated viewpoint to a more fluid viewpoint which is less fixated and more responsive to the needs of whatever particular situation one finds oneself in. Then there is more room for creative, rather than reactive responses. The Enneagram offers a similar line of reasoning. The confident person begins with an ability to preserve the peace and the status quo. But he/she grows by moving from a preservationist to a universalistic. In other words, it's not about my agenda or yours, but rather, how do we create a win-win situation for the greatest good.

SESSION 2- Read Exodus 7:26 to 8:11. What is the metaphor of the frogs about? Frogs proliferate, but they are also cold-blooded. The key question here is:

WHEN IS BONDING OR INTIMACY GENUINE AND WHEN IS IT FALSE? Again, the teacher or facilitator can be more active or more passive in the discussion, according to his or her inclination, or the preferences of the class. Here are some good questions about bonding from Rabbi Jacobson's workbook:

Do I try to bond without fostering a loving attitude? Am I too dependent on the one I bond with or vice versa? Do I withdraw when I am uncomfortable with my friend's troubles? And here is a question that is in sync with the spirituality of the Enneagram: 'Am I aware of the third partner-G-d- in bonding, and that this partner gives me the capacity to unite with another despite our distinctions?'

Here is a Torah insight to a possible release from false bonding: The Midrash says that all the frogs eventually died except the ones who 'chose' to jump into the hot ovens. The rabbis relate this to the trait of Mesirat Nefesh, reaching beyond one's comfort zone to help another. Similarly, in the Enneagram system, the growth process is in moving from being able to control another to being able to empathize and assist them. In the words of 'My Best Self,' to move from the Confronter to the Philanthropist.

SESSION 3- Read Exodus from 8:12 to 8:16. What is there about lice that are submissive? The Rabbis say that they were generated directly from the earth. In our



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prayers we have a line at the end of the Amidah, 'May my soul be like earth before all.' What does this image conjure up for you? (No pun intended) This was the first plague that the Egyptians were not able to replicate, even in a 'pretend' way.

Here is a statement by Rabbi Jacobson that clues us in to the difference between healthy and unhealthy submission. The root of the word Hod means both acknowledgement and thanksgiving. The first word a Jew wakes up with in the morning is Modeh, I give thanks. It is recognizing your qualities and strengths and acknowledging that they are not your own; they were given to you by G-d for a higher purpose than just satisfying your own needs. Thus scholars also translate Hod as empathy or humility.

Some of the questions related to Hod are: Does my humility expand me or constrain me? In the name of humility do I sometimes remain silent and neutral, when I should speak up? Does my humility cause others to take advantage of me? Do I take too much pride in my humility?

Part of the idea behind Hod as related to thanksgiving, is focusing on what makes you happy. This is a positive trait when it is connected to the here and now and also expresses gratitude to the Source of all being. But when it fosters discontentment with the present and is primarily directed toward self-gratification, then it can become dysfunctional. The fact that the Egyptian magicians were unable to replicate the lice may be related to their small physical size or their connection to the humble characteristics of earth. This might have produced a chink in their self-centeredness and their insensitivity to their mistreatment of their slaves.

A positive aspect of the insubstantiality of each individual louse metaphorically may mean that its negativity can more easily be shifted. The liberating factor from the Enneagram perspective is to move from being a dreamer who says, 'I'll be happy when....' to an illuminator, one who is humble enough to make a space for others and to encourage them to find joy in their present situation.

SESSION 4- Read Exodus from 8:16 to 8:28 *what is unusual about wild animals coming into human space? Under what conditions can this happen? When animals came together in the flood story, how were they different? There is a Talmudic*



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teaching that if the Torah would not have been given, we could learn different character traits from animals- modesty from a cat, diligence from an ant, etc however, the rabbis

Add that without the Torah, we would be likely to use these traits indiscriminately and inappropriately.

Since animals are territorial, when species are functioning synergistically, that implies there is a uniting consciousness operating. So when animals came together in the ark, the mystics say this was because of Noah, and of course, G-d, bringing them together. A modern example might be diverse animals fleeing together from an impending natural catastrophe.

The territoriality that wild animals tend to exhibit is metaphorically related to dominance, persistence or endurance, and ambition. Since so much of our culture is competitive, the questions here are likely to be more obvious than with the other types. Some examples are: In order to get my way, do I allow others to get hurt? Do I believe that the ends justify the means? The Pharaoh model is clear here too: Does my endurance come out of deep conviction or out of defensiveness? Am I tenacious out of stubbornness and an unwillingness to acknowledge errors? Does my determination compromise my compassion for others?

What is a possible way out for destructive ambition? The point of liberation, suggests the Enneagram, is to reach out to point nine, which as we have seen is an ability to make peace between different perspectives. In 'My Best Self', the authors call this- moving from being a guardian (of one's own turf) to being a stabilizer of a larger system. This might be similar to many species of animals realizing that they need the rest of the pack for survival. Or, as in the plagues or Noah's ark, there is an overriding factor that unites them; a common enemy in Egypt's case and a common friend and protector, as in Noah's case.

SESSION 5- Read Exodus from 9:1 to 9:7 this is the plague where the domestic animals died. This is related to number five on the Enneagram. This type is the intellectual, the bystander or observer. The Sefirotic quality is Tiferet, compassion or harmony. The common troublesome area here is being too much of a bystander. It's like the typical Hamlet like stereotype of someone who is always saying or thinking,



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'but on the other hand'...and therefore is frequently numbed into inaction. Some questions here are: Am I compassionate only when it suits me or is convenient? Do I realize that sometimes being truly compassionate requires withholding compassion? Am I sometimes helping others at the expense of helping myself? Do I express compassion in relationship or merely out of habit or pity? One ironic question might be: Do I equivocate or hesitate about expressing compassion?

From a Torah perspective, an important axiom is that very often our strengths can be our weaknesses, and vice versa. This is one reason why character traits are called attributes, which literally means 'measurements,' because they must constantly be adjusted and evaluated according to the appropriateness of the situation. Thus the underlying cognitive correlative of compassion, which is an ability to see things from another's point of view, can also be a problem when over-analysis delays or prevents needed action.

The plague here relates to the domestic animals which are generally easygoing and compliant- i.e. sensitive to the wishes of their masters. An interesting side point is that in Judaism, one of the reasons for the specific signs of a kosher animal is that split hooves represent a lack of stubbornness and chewing cud represents thoughtfulness and reflection. This relates to the non-assertive aspect of this contemplative Enneagram type, type five.

The point of liberation is to move toward type eight, which as we have said, is about taking charge. There is a time for deliberation and a time for action. When an introvert type takes on responsibility for a project or for a group, he/she can bring a larger perspective of thoughtfulness and compassion than a purely active type might bring. The liberation of this type is referred to in My Best Self as the movement from observer to explorer, because the action that comes from deliberation and thinking out of the box, can often find new and creative solutions that others did not see.

SESSION 6- *Read Exodus from 9:8 to 9:12 the sixth plague was boils. The only plague whose activation was jointly performed by Moses, Aaron, and G-d. This is most interesting because on the Enneagram, type four is the most individualistic of all. The related sefirah is Gevurah, often translated as strength, but also meaning restraint, or setting boundaries. Its negative expression is in being condescending, or judgmental,*



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often under the guise of necessary criticism. Some of the questions here would be; when I judge and criticize another, is it in any way tinged with my own contempt and irritation? Is it reasonably restrained or excessive? Is my discipline both compassionate and consistent? Does my discipline weaken or strengthen me and others?

Later in the Torah, boils are related to the skin eruptions that the rabbis say came primarily from speaking bad or belittling another. The treatment was quarantine, not so much as a medical precaution but because that attitude and badmouthing can unfortunately be highly contagious. Also the mystics point out that it causes divisiveness both conceptually and practically, and so the consequence of the tail bearer is to be isolated for a period of time. Thus self-discipline and self-scrutiny is the antidote for being too strict with others. To look at oneself in the mirror, boils and all, with both compassion and truth, is a key to the appropriate expression of this type. As the famous saying goes about the Hassidic master, Reb Zusia, 'When I get to heaven I won't worry that they shall ask me, 'why weren't you like Abraham or Moses. But I will worry that they will ask, 'why weren't you like Reb Zusia?'

On the Enneagram, the point of liberation for this type is number one, who is a perfectionist. Thus the balancing factor is to focus on one's own striving for excellence, than to be overly demanding of others. So too the authors of My Best Self say that ideally, this type moves from being an individualist to a builder. Like a conscientious conductor of an orchestra, he/she develops the ability to see and bring out the uniqueness of each player.

SESSION 7- *Read Exodus from 9:13 to 9:35 This is the plague of hail and relates to the sefirah of chesed, benevolence, which from a Torah perspective is related to making a positive impact and contribution to those around. In the Enneagram the corresponding trait is success and achievement. Some relevant questions are: Is my loving-kindness conditional on receiving certain favors? Is my loving-kindness exploitive or unconditionally generous? Or, to use a model from this plague, do I bombard others with my accomplishments even when the recipients are unwilling or even harmed thereby?*



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One interesting feature about this plague is that the hailstones or balls of ice, had fire inside. The rabbis say that the angel Michael controls water, and Gavriel controls fire. Usually, they do not work together, but for this plague they did. This could hint at the following: The liberation point for type three is to strive to express point six, the rugged individualist who doesn't need constant validation from others for self-worth. The model for fire and ice working together, as in this plague, might also point to not needed to compete for an exclusive place in the sun, but to be loyal to a group or higher cause, as type six usually is. Then the person can grow, as is phrased in My Best Self, from a (self-centered) succeeded to a motivator (of others).

SESSION 8- *Read Exodus from 10:1 to 10:20. The last three plagues go beyond the emotional realm to the cognitive and volitional realms. It's interesting that they are even listed in a separate portion than the first seven, and they all in some way relate to the power of vision. Regarding the eighth plague of locusts, the Torah says that 'they covered the face of the earth,' and in this sense, brought darkness even before the official plague of darkness.*

The corresponding sefirah is Binah, translated as understanding. It is more precisely an analytical ability that is called 'the mother of children' in the sense that it gives birth to the emotional qualities mentioned above. In the Enneagram the parallel trait is known as the helper, the one who feels a need to be of service to those in need. In its disintegrating form, it tends to contain a hidden agenda of unfulfilled and largely unrecognized longings. This shadow side tends to have a consuming nature, symbolically like that of the locusts that strip the land bare of its productivity.

Some relevant questions could be: Do I care for others at the sacrifice of my own well-being? Am I like the stereotypical 'Jewish mother,' who says, 'Go, what do I care. so I'll sit in the dark.' Am I bitter and resentful over the lack of appreciation for what I do for them? Again, like the Jewish mother joke.. 'I gave you a present of two shirts...why didn't you wear the other one? one?'

The way out of the disintegration of this type is to turn to type four for assistance. Type four is very in touch with his/her feelings and emotions. If type two can do this in an authentic way, he/she will not need to project onto others his/ser unmet needs and then will not feel martyred and 'plundered' as a result of having given so much. As the



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authors of My Best Self put it, that person will have moved from being a helper to a partner. Then he or she will find true fulfillment in being a 'midwife' by 'birthing' the other's potential into manifestation.

SESSION 9- *Read Exodus from 10:21 to 10:29 This is the literal plague of darkness, which paradoxically corresponds to the sefirah of chochma, the flash of wisdom, or enlightenment. To help illuminate this quality, here is a quote from the Enneagram Institute's article on Personality, Essence, and Spirituality:*

'Wisdom manifests as brilliant intelligence, an ability to see exactly what is needed in the moment, and to act accordingly. This intelligence is not based on any set of principles, guidelines, or rules, but rather arises spontaneously whenever it is needed. It gives us the ability to respond to situations effectively, with an economy of energy—neither too much nor too little. Further, when we are manifesting this quality, we are able to communicate our insights clearly and authoritatively. We are patient, steady, capable, AND RADIANT.'

I would just like to add to this description of an ideal father archetype (In Kabbalah, Chochma is called Father) the humility that comes with knowing that one is cognitively in the dark about a great deal of information, and therefore needs to rely on inner intuition, one's higher self, a supreme being, etc. to access wisdom at its deepest source. Thus Chochma can be broken down into two Hebrew words, 'Koach Mah,' the power of 'Whatness.' Which is a positive way of being comfortable with 'sitting in the dark.' As expressed during the plague of darkness, for the Egyptians, the darkness was so thick that they could neither stand nor sit, but 'for the Israelites, there was light in their dwelling places.' In other words, from a position of arrogance and self-worship, life will become dark and fearful, but from a place of trust and reliance on a higher Power, life will be illuminating.

So some of the questions here could be: Am I truly certain that 'my way' of seeing or doing things is the only way, or even the best way? Can I find enlightenment even within my personal limitations? Can I even see and admit my limitations, at least to myself? In the Enneagram, the point of liberation here is type seven. When type one is joined with type seven, there will be more trust in a dynamic process rather than a rigid, soulless application of abstract rules. There will also be an ability to savor the



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moment, rather than always being dissatisfied because the implied standards of perfection have not been accomplished. Thus, in the words of My Best Self, the type one personality can move from a vision of being an Achiever to becoming a Pathfinder-continually breaking new grounds of expanded possibilities.

SESSION 10- *Read Exodus from chapter 11 to 12:36. This is the final plague, the death of the firstborn. Superficially, it may seem heartless that the Jews were celebrating their first Seder while this plague was happening. Therefore it would be helpful to consider this plague from a deeper perspective. Some rabbis feel that this plague occurred just because G-d's Presence was being revealed on earth. In a way, it was a climax of all the other plagues, not just because it caused the most destruction, but because each previous plague was due to an increasing manifestation of G-d's power and Presence. Does this mean our image of G-d is fearful and destructive? G-d forbid! But, psycho-spiritually, if on hand we are stiff-necked like Pharaoh, and on the other hand, undisciplined and profligate like the Egyptians, we will, to say the least, not be able to receive a higher presence with grace.*

The trait of Keter, the tenth or first Sefirah, is 'off the radar screen' of the Enneagram, but may be considered the zero point of infinity from which all the other types emerge. It has no deterioration aspect because there can be no fall or misalignment from Keter. At the level of Keter, there is no independent will that is separate from the divine, because the ego does not exist there. One hint of this is that the Hebrew letters of the word Keter adds up to 620, the number of letters in the Ten Commandments, and the amount of Biblical commandments together with the seven rabbinical commandments of Biblical status.

Here are some thoughts about Keter that resonate with Enneagram ideas from the book, 'The Sefirot.'

'Where is the place of G-d's glory?' The Jewish spiritual tradition teaches that the Hebrew word for 'where' refers to Keter. The constant search for self-improvement, the constant pushing for goodness, raises us from distance and degradation to a point where we are able to gain access to the light and clarity of Divine glory.'

'There are two avenues of relating to G-dly consciousness. One: for every specific area in one's life, there is a corresponding specific consciousness. And two: there is a



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general overarching consciousness that can envelope the entirety of one's life. The second consciousness is related to Keter.'

'Many people believe that they are in essence not holy. This is a false modesty that originates in the palaces of illusion. It is a self-limiting thought that makes it difficult to surpass circumstances and come close to G-d.'

'In this worldly terms, when one comes close to the border of one's preconceptions and courageously steps into a new way of life, one is filled with a fear that is mixed with excitement. This is the unknown. By acknowledging that one does not know, one truly grows.'

It is my fervent hope that the ideas presented in this project can help individuals and communities to continue to grow in their connection to their deepest selves, to each other, and to G-d.



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SOURCES AND RESOURCES:

- **TEN WAYS TO DESTROY YOUR LIFE AT CHABAD.ORG** by Yosef Y. Jacobson
This 7 page essay formed the basis of my proposal. It describes how each of the ten plagues with their corresponding sefirot and translation and the destructive aspect of each. Here is the 'summary statement' which expresses my premise for these lessons. "When we fail to confront our own demons, our perverted attributes can return to us too, in the form of psychological plagues."
- **PERSONALITY, ESSENCE, AND SPIRITUALITY at ENNEAGRAMINSTITUTE.COM** An elaborate 16 page article.
- **CLEAR IMPACT.COM** a consulting site based in Boulder (Joel Rothaizer CEO) with several good articles on the Enneagram. Another good summary which compares to my objectives here: *"The nine Enneagram points are nine perceptual filters, nine different ways of looking at the world. While we may have aspects of several types, we each have only one core type...On the high/healthy side, they reflect nine different gifts each of us has the potential to bring to our personal and professional lives. On the neurotic side, they reflect nine patterns of trying to find happiness where lasting happiness does not exist, nine prescriptions for frustration and suffering. Our interest is in using the Enneagram to assist people in discovering deeper levels of joy, harmony, inner peace, and relaxed productivity."*
- **UNDERSTANDING THE TEN PLAGUES**, from Internet magazine, 1994, found on heritage.org.il/innernet/archives
- **MY BEST SELF-USING THE ENNEAGRAM TO FREE THE SOUL** by Kathleen Hurley and Theodore Dobson, Harper Collins, 1993.
- **AWARENESS** by Miriam Adahan, Feldheim, 1994 *This is the best and most elaborate book I have found that combines both Enneagram and Torah principles in a way that is both conceptual and practical. It's a book I would use if teaching a class on the subject.*
- **THE ENNEAGRAM AND KABBALAH-READING YOUR SOUL-1998** and **CAST IN G-D'S IMAGE**, 2001 both by Rabbi Howard A. Addison and published by Jewish Lights. *Nice elaboration and integration of the Sefirotic Tree with the Enneagram*
- **SPIRITUAL GUIDE TO THE COUNTING OF THE OMER**, by Rabbi Simon Jacobson-1996 *The well-known author of Toward a Meaningful life, provides a pamphlet-workbook for examining our interactions based on the seven sefirot that underlie the seven weeks between Passover and Shavuot. My proposal*



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could be seen as a similar workshop with the addition of Enneagram perspectives.

- *THE SEFIROT- TEN EMANATIONS OF DIVINE POWER by Y. David Shulman 1996 published by Aronson. This is both a profound and readable description of each of the Ten Sefirot, Breslov perspective.*

ADDITIONAL POSSIBILITY: A few years ago a very funny Seder comedy produced by a traditional Jew came out called, 'WHEN DO WE EAT?' Having seen the movie several times, it occurred to me that each of the nine main characters reflect one of the nine Enneagram types. The finale of this class could include a showing and discussion of this movie, as an illustration and review of what came up in the class.