Occasionally, usually when I should be studying, I find myself flipping through a book of lateral thinking puzzles. Lateral thinking puzzles present mysterious scenarios that require out of the box thinking in order to solve. Here are a few examples:

S: A man lay dead in a field next to a piece of string and a cloth. How did he die?
A: His kite had snagged across some power lines. It was raining. He had been electrocuted. The cloth and string were the remains of the kite.

S: A man lies dead next to a feather that caused his death. What happened?
A: The man was a circus sword-swallower. In the middle of his act someone tickled him with the feather, and he gagged.

The goal is to come up with the solution imagined by the author of the puzzle, but other solutions are permitted if they fit the details. When it comes to discovering *the* solutions imagined by the authors, I tend to be grateful that the answers are in the back of the book.....

Sometimes a passage in the torah can be a lateral thinking puzzle. An especially tricky one shows up in Deuteronomy 34:1-6 – part of the reading for Simchat Torah. These verses tell about Moses' death and are not often emphasized on such a joyous holiday, so many people aren't familiar with the puzzle. It goes like this:

Moses died alone on a mountain and was buried in a valley, but no man knows the location of his grave. How did he come to be buried?

I presented this puzzle to some nursing home residents at a shabbat service and asked who they thought buried Moses. Simultaneously, two residents replied by insisting that *God* must have buried Moses. I was shocked. Here I was, all prepared to offer some rather obscure and, I thought, fanciful theories I had gleaned from reading medieval commentaries on Genesis 34, and these nursing home residents were offering up God as grave digger as if this were the most natural and obvious thing in the world. Without having studied any medieval commentaries, somehow they were thinking like Rashi, a prominent commentator who lived in France in the 11th century. Rashi's first response, too, was to say, "the holy one blessed be he, in his glory" buried Moses.

Rashi was not one to present only a single interpretation, tending instead to catalog diverse ranges of interpretations. This is no exception – after his initial statement that God buried

Moses, Rashi went on to present a theory that Moses buried himself. I suggested this possibility to my nursing home residents. They were dubious. How could a person bury himself?! Rashi didn't explain – he offered the theory without providing any details of how it might work. However, such a scenario was presented at the beginning of the commentary of Ibn Ezra, a medieval Spanish commentator. Ibn Ezra suggested that Moses buried himself by entering a cave to die. When I shared this, the nursing home residents remained dubious, but we didn't have time to explore the matter further during the service.

After the service, I went to visit a resident named Ida. Ida was the real impetus behind my desire to study the commentaries on this text. I had been visiting her nearly every week for two years, and she brought up the story of Moses' death almost monthly. She always wanted to know what happened to him and wondered if perhaps he didn't actually die but was brought up to heaven while still alive.

At one point, I discovered a children's book with a folktale about the death of Moses – the book is called "*The Shadow of a Flying Bird*." In the folktale, when it is time for Moses to die, he does not want to give up his life. God sends different angels to fetch Moses' soul, but none of them feel it is appropriate for them to take the soul of such a great man. Eventually, God sends the evil Sammael to take Moses' soul. Unlike the angels, he is all too happy to comply; but he is unsuccessful and returns to heaven with injuries. Finally, God has no choice but to personally take Moses' soul. God tearfully does so by means of a kiss, evoking the myth of God breathing life into the first human.

The book is beautifully written with lovely pictures, and when I read it to Ida she was mesmerized by the story. She was also: outraged that God would send an evil spirit to take Moses' soul, upset at the notion of *God* taking someone's soul, and generally offended at God's requirement that Moses die in the first place. However, after much discussion, she decided that, if Moses *really* had to die, then having God come for his soul and take it by means of a kiss was maybe the most gentle and loving possible way for it to happen. But she still didn't think Moses should have to die.

Ida and I had spoken at length about Moses' death, but we hadn't spoken before about the mystery of his burial. I knew that the true test of any theory about the fate of Moses was to present it to Ida and wait for her response. The folks at the service were dubious about the idea of Moses burying himself, and I wanted to see what Ida would say. She didn't like it. Not one bit. She was also unappreciative of the theory offered by some commentators that Moses was buried by angels. Ida didn't believe in angels.

Ida was most moved by Rashi's comment that Moses' grave was prepared in that spot all the way back at the time of creation – a reference to a *mishnah* which claimed there were 10 things created at twilight on *erev shabbat* – one of which was the grave of Moses. I asked Ida how she imagined the scene, and I was intrigued to discover that she was blending Ibn Ezra's perspective with Rashi's. In Ida's imagination, Moses' grave would be a cave, and he would go to it on his own initiative, as Ibn Ezra interpreted, but she viewed the cave as having been prepared by God at the time of creation, as Rashi had suggested. And, like Rashi, Ida clung to the sense of God handling the burial. In her imagination, God would emerge from the cave to meet Moses as he approached, and ultimately Moses would not have to bury himself.

Ida's ongoing concern with the death of Moses, and her insistence on God's involvement in Moses' death and burial, revealed that this was not just some logic puzzle for her but was deeply personal. The parallels between Moses' situation and her own certainly did not escape me... Moses was not being allowed to enter the promised land, and so was left to die alone on a mountaintop, because anger, irritation and lack of patience took control of his actions and led him to disobey God. Ida too was profoundly isolated – she held herself aloof from other residents at the nursing home, and her son and his family chose to have virtually no contact with her – probably because of her sometimes volatile temper and frequently critical comments.

Although she probably wouldn't admit it, I think Ida saw herself in the story of Moses and identified with his plight. When Ida would share about feeling hurt that her son hadn't called in several months, or about an interpersonal conflict, she would follow up with an almost defiant insistence that at least she had her God with her. She couldn't bear the thought of Moses dying alone, couldn't abide by Ibn Ezra's perspective that Moses buried himself, because it would be

akin to saying that she might be alone, might even die alone, and she couldn't endure her own suffering if she believed that.

The puzzle of Moses' burial, with all its varied answers, is symbolic of the puzzle of death, suffering, and broken relationships. I wonder if there is any image more profoundly symbolic of isolation, futility, and despair than the image of Moses having to bury himself. Ibn Ezra's picture is grim – when it was his time to die, Moses entered the cave that would become his tomb like a dying animal might crawl under a porch. A bleaker perspective appears in the commentary of Sforno, a medieval Italian commentator. According to Sforno, after Moses' death on the mountain, his own *spirit* buried his body in the valley – apparently Moses was alone, without assistance, divine or human, in this life *and* in the afterlife.

I can understand the midrashic impulse to imagine that God attended to Moses' burial using heavenly shrouds and coffin. Who wants to die alone? Who wants to suffer alone? Who wants to think they might be paying for their mistakes at the time of death? Rashi's commentary, of a cave prepared for Moses at the time of creation, brings a sense of wholeness, of completion. The end is linked to the beginning – death is connected to creation, Deuteronomy is connected back to Genesis. Ida can know that however bleak a situation seems, and in spite of broken relationships, God cares for people's needs and has intended to all along.

So what's the answer to death, suffering, and broken relationships? Where is God, and what role does God play? Perhaps the answer is in line with Rashi and Ida and the nursing home residents at the service – God is there, God works up a sweat and gets dirty hands digging graves, God even plans *far* ahead to care for human needs. Or maybe Sforno and Ibn Ezra are right. Maybe God *doesn't* actively participate that way. But this doesn't have to mean isolation and disconnection from God. Maybe Moses wasn't slinking into a cave like a dog going to die under a porch. Maybe it was a good death – after saying his goodbyes, offering his blessings, passing on his wisdom and acknowledging some of his errors, he prepared himself a tomb in a cave and walked into it with dignity, ready to leave this world and unite with the divine. And perhaps the image of a spirit burying its own body can be empowering instead of depressing. How many of us ascribe that kind of strength to our spirits? How many of us truly imagine that

our spirits can have that kind of tangible impact in the world?

Or maybe they are *all* wrong. The answers don't have to be limited by the imaginations of medieval commentators. We can think out of the box. The text says no *man* knows the location of his grave. Maybe a *chevra kaddisha*, a holy burial society, composed of women took it upon themselves to care for his body and didn't disclose its location. Maybe community gathers round to assist us through difficult times, even when the signs of help are hidden. Maybe sometimes, even when it would seem we have done all we could to drive others away, people continue to care for us anyway. There are infinite possibilities.

The torah offers us a mysterious scenario; and life brings mysteries of its own: painful experiences, loss, and challenging relationships. As with lateral thinking puzzles, more than one answer is possible. Unlike lateral thinking puzzles, we can't flip to the back of a book for the best answer. But we *can* look for clues: in the writings of past Jewish commentators like Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Sforno, and in the prayer book. The clues we glean from these and other sources, divine and human, can help us in our search for the answers that will sustain us. These answers are sometimes less obvious than they seem (*or than we would like*), and they demand of us the same creativity that we would apply to interpreting a biblical text or a puzzle in a book.

What do we want our answers to be? And how can we embody those answers for each other?