

Living the Tension: Finding Beauty in a Complex World

*Reflections on Each Week's Parsha by Ben Lazarus
with a Foreword by Rabbi Doron Perez*

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Foreword by Rabbi Doron Perez

Ben Lazarus is one of the most inspiring people I have ever had the privilege of meeting in my life. He's also a close and dear friend who I deeply love and admire.

Ben and his wonderful wife, Gayle and equally wonderful children and family have had to deal with ordeals over the last almost 6 years that no one should have to go through. A loving husband, father, son and sibling at the height of his career, Ben was diagnosed in the aftermath of COVID-19 with a debilitating degenerative disease. After battling the illness for five years, he received the dreadful diagnosis of PSP, amongst the worst degenerative disease known to man. Now at the age of 50, Ben was forced to retire from his role as partner and expert in company mergers for a Big 4 Consulting Firm. From traveling the world for his company- 80 times in his career to cities across the United States and many other times across Europe, Ben has become wheelchair ridden. As the disease has deteriorated, the daily trials and tribulations that this poses to the person suffering from it as well as to their spouse and family around them, is of course enormous.

Such ordeals would be too much for most people to deal with any measure of hope, humour and positivity. But Ben is not most people. What did he do? Ben focused on what was in his control.

With his prodigious drive and will power, he revealed to himself and to us all a remarkable hidden talent – his amazing ability to articulate himself through the power of the written word. Most people in life don't get to write a book. But Ben is not most people.

What did Ben do? He has just completed his fourth book, this book, in the space of five months. We are looking forward hopefully to your next one soon!

Although Ben's books deal with very different subjects – one about Faith, one about dealing with the disease over the last six years, one about his travels around the world, and this latest one about the Parsha – the weekly Torah portion, I have noticed a profound and prevalent recurring theme.

Ben writes it clearly in the introduction to his third book, *Around the World in Kosher Ways*, about 40 fascinating stories across his decades of travel. While striving to strictly observe according all the Torah law in challenging situations in hotels, airports, and boardrooms. Ben writes as follows:

“...what I learned was that staying true to my faith – no matter what situation I got myself into – was truly beautiful and uplifting, while also very confusing and slightly absurd.”

It is that same remarkable tenacity of faith in the face of challenging situations, that Ben has employed in facing the recent challenge of dealing with PSP.

Quoting Ben once again in the introduction to his second book entitled, *Weathering the Storm: Living Fully with PSP*, he writes:

“Faith is woven through these pages, my Jewish faith. You don't have to share my beliefs to find value here. Whether you're religious, spiritual, or firmly atheist, I hope you'll recognize the universal truth: when the margins of life shrink, we discover what we're truly made of, and what, and who, truly matters.”

My dear friend Ben- you have taught us what you are truly made of when the margins around you have been shrinking. In places of

increasing constraints, you have revealed a true greatness of spirit. First and foremost, the decision to choose life – to live with intentionality and purpose. As you beautifully say in this in your words of the opening Parasha of Bereishit:

“Every day, I decide how to face my challenges. Do I find meaning in my limitations, or let them define me? Bereishit tells me that Hashem trusts me to choose.”

Secondly, you have shared it with the genuine commitment and conviction, creativity and imagination, and underpinned throughout with deep reservoirs of faith, courage, and fortitude. You have brought us into your world, so beautifully captured in the very title of this, your latest book – *Living the Tension: Finding Beauty in a Complex World*. You have brought us your world, and all of ours in some way, of this complex tension, yet revealed it to us with so much beauty.

Ben – in this book, you have taught us a critical lesson about the Torah. That our Torah is a Torah of life. Although, the weekly Torah portion is exactly the same every year and it doesn't change, our life experiences, most certainly do change all the time. The greatness of Torah is that it's eternal messages have relevance to the entire gamut of the human experience. But, the values of the Torah can only transform when we ourselves are open to life's experiences – committed to learn and to grow.

Ben, your harrowing experiences in recent times have been coupled with so much reflection and growth that you have revealed to us new depths and insights into the freshness and relevance of the Torah to all the vicissitudes of life.

You have not only revealed to us what the Torah is, you have shown us who you truly are.

To dearest Ben and to Gayle, my wife, Shelley's very special friend, to Rebecca and Amitay who I had the privilege of recently officiating at your wedding, to Shmuli and Aliza and to the whole extended Lazarus family – Shelley and I wish you everything you wish for yourselves.

May you be blessed with health and happiness, faith, friendship, and fortitude 120 ע.

Rabbi Doron Perez

Yad Binyamin, Israel

Introduction

I never planned to write this book. In fact, if someone had told me I would be publishing a book on Divrei Torah, I would have laughed out loud, completely shocked at the thought.

For most of my life, Torah learning was something I valued deeply, but it was not my profession; my career was in consulting, while Torah remained a constant presence.

A year ago, my life changed when I was diagnosed with Progressive Supranuclear Palsy (PSP), a terminal illness, forcing me to step away from my work and giving me something I had not had for many years: time to reflect, to learn, and to engage more deeply with life and with Torah.

I began writing a thought each week on the weekly Torah portion, which I shared on my blog on the Times of Israel. I did not set out to write a book, but simply to capture what I was thinking and experiencing, and over time those reflections became this.

This has not been an ordinary period; it has included illness, the reality of war in Israel, and moments of great personal joy, including my daughter's wedding, with pain and celebration, uncertainty and continuity existing side by side.

My outlook on life and Torah transformed due to this experience, offering crucial spiritual support precisely when required. The Torah does not present perfect people or simple stories; it shows human beings as they are – capable of greatness, yet full of struggle. Its heroes are not flawless: they make difficult choices, live with consequences, and grow through them.

It does not remove tension. It holds it, and within that tension reveals something unexpected: a deep and enduring beauty. This idea sits at the centre of this book, whose Divrei Torah were written week by week, in real time, not as final answers but as reflections on how Torah speaks into life as it is lived.

Because in the end, Torah is not only something we learn, but something we live.

It is beautiful in all of its complexity and honesty, and it is my hope that these reflections allow others to share in some of the insights that have sustained me.

It is that beauty I am so keen to share and given my condition there is a feeling I need to do it now, whilst I can, so I hope you find the book valuable. The process of writing it certainly has been.

Finally, I am mindful that anyone writing a book about the Torah holds particular views and draws on certain commentators rather than others. I apologise if your own perspective has not been represented in these pages – this book has been written *l'shem shamayim*.

Acknowledgements

I would like to begin by thanking Hashem for the strength and perspective to face this period.

To my wife, Gayle, for her constant support and strength.

To my children Aliza, Shmuli, Rebecca, my son-in-law Amitay, and my close family and friends, for the joy and meaning they bring to my life. I also want to call out especially my mother sister and parents in law for their incredible support.

I want to specifically thank Rabbi Doron Perez who, together with his beautiful family, who have been an inspiration to me., have become close neighbours and friends of ours and who gratefully accepted the challenge of writing a foreword for this book and, more importantly, married my daughter recently, a day I will never forget.

To friends and family – Ashley Sevitz, Marcel Berenblut, Nahi Simon and Debra Sobel who took the time to read, review, and help refine this work.

To those in the PSP community who have supported me online over the last year, in ways I can't express thanks enough. You may not fully understand it or appreciate this book but the strength to write it has come from you. I have included a Glossary to try to help people to come to terms with some of the key Hebrew phrases.

There are far too many people who have touched me in so many profound ways for me to begin to think about listing them here – please know that I am grateful.

And thanks to Sefaria and The Times of Israel, whose platforms made both the learning and sharing of these reflections possible.

Sefer Bereishit – The Courage to Live with Complexity

Studying Bereishit more than anything shows us how the first generations – many of who were true greats – whether they be Adam, Eve, Noah, The Forefathers and Mothers and their children lived with courage in the toughest of circumstances. They faced unbelievable challenges, made mistakes which they often were criticised for and yet they persevered and came through and built what was to become the bedrock of the Jewish people. It is truly inspiring – not in the superhero sense but, in the graft, and dedication form.

The Torah does not design role models as perfect but as characters that we see develop, grow and make mistakes as they journey through life. It makes the characters so much more relatable despite their clear greatness. I can't help thinking that if a human committee were trying to create a Bible by which we lived life, they would not take this approach. The humanity of the book makes it that much holier.

You will notice that I make mention of my health condition in the Dvar Torah on Bereishit, but rest assured it is a very small component of the overall book, but I felt it important to understand some of the context within which the book is written.

Bereishit: Hashem Intended Life to Be a Challenge

Why does the Torah start with struggle instead of serenity? You'd think it might begin with a peaceful paradise – lush gardens, people living in harmony, a divine lullaby of calm. But no. From the very first pages, we are thrown into chaos: Adam and Eve's misstep, Cain's jealousy, the first taste of desire, rivalry, and violence. It's not a soft opening – it's a bold statement.

Life is messy. And that's perhaps the point. Bereishit introduces us to a world where beauty and brokenness live side by side, and where free will is the defining feature of being human. Hashem didn't make life easy – He made it meaningful.

I'm 50 now, living with Progressive Supranuclear Palsy (PSP), a terminal illness that's changed everything. And yet, I find comfort in Bereishit's honesty. My life is a mix of joy and pain – simultaneously planning my daughter's wedding while grieving a friend's son. It's all there in the Parsha. My faith, sparked when I was 11, has never wavered. Bereishit doesn't feel like an ancient story – it feels like my story. It shows me a Hashem who doesn't promise to fix everything, but who walks with us through it all.

That faith started in a London Sunday School. I remember learning about 'Shema Koleinu' – a prayer where we speak to Hashem straight from the heart. My teacher said we could talk to Hashem directly, and that idea hit me like a bolt of lightning. I couldn't explain why it moved me so deeply, but from that moment, I knew Hashem was real. Recently, one of my children asked if I'd bet everything on that belief. I didn't hesitate. Yes, I would. Not because life is simple, but because Bereishit shows us a Hashem who wants us to wrestle with life, not run from it.

Rashi says Bereishit is about Hashem's sovereignty and Israel's claim to the land. That's powerful. But I also see something else: a Hashem who embraces complexity. When Eve saw that the tree was good for food (Genesis 3:6) and ate, she was using her free will. Imagine that Eve, created in the most perfect place on the planet, free from sin, free from bad, is suddenly placed under tremendous pressure to make a moral decision under difficult circumstances, one that tests her in a way we can all relate to albeit in different circumstances. .

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explains the Tree of Knowledge represents moral autonomy – the ability to choose between good and evil. And when Hashem warned Cain, “If you do well, will you not be accepted?” (Genesis 4:7), He was saying: the choice is yours. Cain chose jealousy and violence. Hashem didn't stop him. That's the deal – we get to choose, even when it hurts.

That hits home. Every day with my condition, I must choose hope or despair, joy or fear. Bereishit doesn't sugarcoat life. It reflects the world I live in – a place where light and darkness are always in tension. And I believe that's exactly how Hashem intended it.

My faith is grounded in three beliefs, all rooted in Bereishit.

First, I don't see a conflict between science and religion. If you believe in an all-powerful Hashem, it doesn't matter whether creation took six days or 15 billion years. The Torah's story and evolution's timeline can coexist. As Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt"l said, science explains how; religion explains why. Bereishit isn't a science textbook – it's a guide to meaning.

Second, I believe fundamentally in a universal Hashem. Hashem didn't initially build the world with a specific religion baked in. Bereishit starts with humanity, not Judaism. It tells us that goodness isn't limited to one faith. I love Judaism for its

universalism – Abraham found Hashem, but that doesn't mean everyone has to follow the same path. I proudly live my Jewish life, but I reject any belief system that excludes others. Judaism's gift to the world is ethical monotheism – values like justice and compassion that are open to all. That's the spirit of Bereishit.

Third, Bereishit shows us that free choice is everything. The stories of defiance and violence aren't just ancient drama – they're reminders that our choices matter and impact others. Every day, I decide how to face my challenges. Do I find meaning in my limitations, or let them define me? Bereishit tells me that Hashem trusts me to choose.

Bereishit doesn't promise perfection. It offers purpose. Hashem didn't want robots – He wanted real people who grow, love, and struggle. My illness has taught me to hold joy and pain together, to see both as part of the story. Bereishit reminds us that life's challenges aren't punishments – they're invitations. Invitations to live with intention, to find meaning, and to walk with a Hashem who made life hard so it could be holy.

For me, the Torah's first words are a call to embrace life's messiness with faith. Every moment – whether it's a celebration or a heartbreak – is a chance to connect with the One who gave us the gift of choice.

May we all find strength in Bereishit's truth: to choose wisely, to hold beauty and pain together, and to walk with the Hashem who made life a challenge – and made it worth living.

Noah's Leadership: Perfectly Imperfect

What if the Torah's only "perfect" hero was never meant to be flawless, but rather, perfectly suited to his moment?

Years ago, I attended a lecture at a top Business School where the speaker introduced a compelling idea: the concept of an "allowable weakness" in leadership. The premise was simple but profound: leaders who appear flawless often alienate others. People instinctively search for cracks. But when a leader is open about their limitations, ones that don't undermine their credibility, it builds trust. It makes them human.

Abraham Lincoln understood this. He spoke openly about his melancholy and used self-deprecating humour to disarm critics. His vulnerability didn't weaken him; it deepened his connection with others.

This lens helps us reframe Noah. His imperfections, far from diminishing his leadership, may define it. His quiet faithfulness, his integrity in isolation, made him the right leader for a world on the brink of collapse.

Noah is the only person in the Torah described as 'tamim', often translated as "perfect." Yet paradoxically, he's also one of the most criticised figures in the Torah. Why?

Perhaps because the Torah uses this word deliberately, not to declare Noah flawless, but to provoke a deeper question: What does "perfect" mean in leadership? Is it moral courage? Charisma? Strategic brilliance? Or is it something quieter, something contextual?

Consider the verse that introduces him:

אלה תולדות נח איש צדיק תמים היה בדרתיו אתה אלהים התהלך נח (Genesis 6:9): “These are the generations of Noah: Noah was a righteous man, tamim in his generations; Noah walked with Hashem.”

Just one verse earlier:

ונח מצא חן בעיני יהוה (6:8): “But Noah found favour in the eyes of the Lord.”

This juxtaposition creates both the impression of grace on one side, hard-won righteousness on the other. Why frame Noah this way?

Rashi famously presents two opposing views on the phrase בדורותיו (“in his generations”). One praises Noah, even in a corrupt generation, he was righteous. The other critiques him, compared to Abraham, he falls short, had he lived in Abraham’s time, Rashi writes, he would not have been significant.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt”l sharpens this view. In Covenant and Conversation, he notes Noah is silent. He doesn’t protest Hashem’s decree. He doesn’t plead for humanity. He builds the ark and saves his family, but not the world.

Abraham, by contrast, argues with Hashem over Sodom. He challenges divine justice. He leads through moral persuasion.

Noah’s leadership is quieter. But is it lesser?

Ramban defends Noah. He reads בדורותיו as a compliment, Noah was righteous despite his generation. Both the Ibn Ezra and Radak agree, Noah’s virtue shines brighter in contrast to the moral darkness around him.

This tension invites us into a broader conversation; leadership is not one-size-fits-all. It’s shaped by the needs of its time.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev adds a beautiful nuance. In Kedushat Levi, he distinguishes between two types of tzaddikim, those who challenge Hashem's decrees, and those whose humility leads them to accept them. Noah, he says, was so humble he didn't feel worthy to intercede. His temimut, his wholeness, was not passivity, but profound alignment with Hashem's will.

Yet this humility reveals a different strength, the courage to endure, not to argue.

Maybe tamim was never about perfection anyway? In Devarim (18:13), we're told: תמים תהיה. עם יהוה אלהיך. You shall be tamim with the Lord your Hashem. Here, tamim doesn't mean flawless. It means whole. Integrated. Spiritually aligned.

Noah's temimut wasn't about charisma or activism. It was about integrity in isolation. In a world collapsing, he walked with Hashem.

The question "is it lesser?" may itself be the wrong question. We tend to rank leaders against a single template. The Torah does not. It gives us archetypes – different greatness's for different generations.

Noah was quiet and dutiful, the preserver in apocalypse. Abraham was persuasive and outward facing, the challenger in moral crisis. Moses was introspective and mission-driven, the lawgiver in the wilderness. David was expressive and passionate, the unifier in conquest.

Each rose to meet the needs of their generation. Noah's introversion and precision were exactly what was needed to save humanity, but not necessarily the skills to 'argue' with Hashem as Moses for example did. His leadership wasn't about changing the world; it was about preserving it.

From my personal perspective, when I think about Noah's task, it's truly astonishing that he held onto his faith through it all, pulling through what must have seemed an impossible burden. This wasn't mere survival, it was a unique skill, a quiet mastery of steadfastness that turned isolation into sanctity.

If we demand perfection, we won't get it, we'll only be disappointed, settling for one polished type of leader who feels distant and scripted. We won't get true, human leadership. But if we allow for imperfection and authenticity, we might discover integrity, and the right leader for the right time.

Noah wasn't perfect. But he was real. He was righteous in his generation. And that's not a caveat, it's context. It's complexity. It's the beauty of leadership shaped by divine wisdom for its time. He walked with Hashem when no one else did. He built when others mocked. He endured when the world collapsed. And that, too, is greatness.

Lech Lecha – Abraham and Sarah – Perseverance and Resilience

When you stop and look at it, the story of Abraham and Sarah isn't one of constant miracles or divine ease. It's a story of persistence, with intermittent interactions with Hashem himself. Of moving forward despite setbacks. Of holding on when everything around them suggested letting go. And honestly, it's the strength I want to carry with me when I face my own challenges.

I often imagine them surrounded by Hashem's presence, walking with clarity and blessing. But that's not how the Torah tells it. They were tested repeatedly. They made difficult choices, and not all of them worked out smoothly. They faced famine, fear, and family tension. And still – they kept going. They didn't just survive; they built something lasting, something that still shapes our lives nearly 4,000 years later. That's not just inspiring – it's deeply humbling. They did it together.

Rabbi Sacks describes a powerful image from the Midrash: Abraham, still in Ur Kasdim, sees a palace on fire. He looks at the chaos and asks, "Is it possible the world has no Ruler?" Hashem answers, "I am the Ruler." But here's the key – Hashem doesn't put out the fire alone. He calls on Abraham to help. Starting something new – like ethical monotheism in a world full of idolatry wasn't a one-time event. It was a daily effort. A constant push against the moral confusion of the world. Abraham didn't just leave his home, he committed to the hard work of building something better, step by step.

This week's Parsha, Lech Lecha, spanning 24 years of their lives, shows just how demanding that journey was. At 75, Abraham hears the call: "Lech Lecha..." Go. Leave your land, your birthplace,

your father's house. Step into the unknown. Rashi says it's for his benefit, but let's be honest – it's a huge leap of faith. No clear destination. Just trust.

He goes. He builds altars. He starts the mission. Then famine strikes. So severe, Rashi says even the righteous couldn't stay. They flee to Egypt. Abraham must pretend Sarah is his sister to survive. They return, but things don't settle. Lot, once his closest companion, decides it is too hard and wants comfort and parts ways. Abraham is left alone again. He rebuilds. Another altar. Another step forward.

Still, no child. Ten years pass. Sarah, still barren, offers Hagar to her husband, which must have been heartbreaking. Ishmael is born, but peace is still elusive. The household becomes tense. Hagar runs away. An angel sends her back. The pain doesn't go away – it gets more complicated. The Midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 45:4) even says Hagar mocked Sarah, questioning her righteousness because she hadn't conceived. That must have hurt deeply. But Sarah didn't give up. She stayed in it. Her strength wasn't just in surviving – it was in continuing to believe.

Then comes war. Lot is captured. Abraham, not a soldier, gathers 318 men and rescues him. He refuses any reward from Sodom, saying: "Not a thread, not a shoelace." He chooses integrity over gain.

At 99, after 24 years of waiting, Hashem speaks again. Names change. The Parsha changes and the angels visit. Sarah will have a son. And finally, laughter breaks through. Yitzchak is born – the child they thought was impossible.

This isn't a story of perfection. It's a story of perseverance. Of resilience. Of showing up even when the path is unclear and the promise feels far away. As Rabbi Sacks says elsewhere, Hashem's

call to Abraham wasn't just to be different – it was to start something new. A faith that doesn't worship power or its symbols. Being a patriarch or matriarch wasn't about status or comfort. It was about staying the course. About strength – not the loud kind, but the kind that quietly rebuilds after every setback.

And from where I stand – facing my own challenges – their resilience resonates. I've had moments where I wanted to feel sorry for myself, where the road felt too hard. But Abraham and Sarah remind me: perseverance isn't neat. It's not always graceful. It's about choosing to keep going, even when it's hard to see the way forward. It's about holding onto a spark, even when the fire feels dim.

They kept walking when the world was uncertain. They believed when belief didn't come easy. And in doing so, they didn't just make it through – they built a legacy that still lives in us today.

That's not just history. That's what it means to live with faith. That's what it means to keep going.

Vayera – Sarah’s Laughter of Hope

We’ve all heard that laughter is the best medicine. But in this week’s Parsha, laughter is more than just medicine it defines our identity. It even becomes a name. The child of promise is called Yitzhak, meaning “he will laugh.” This name engraves laughter into Jewish memory. Why? Because laughter is the thread running through the pivotal story of Isaac’s birth and surprisingly it is one of the components of our perseverance and resilience. It is the laughter of hope.

The Torah uses the root צחק – laughter – seven times in this narrative. Abraham laughs when Hashem promises him a son at 100. Sarah laughs when she overhears the same promise at 90. Hashem asks, “Why did Sarah laugh?” And when Isaac is born, Sarah declares: “Hashem has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.”

But not all laughter is the same. Abraham’s laughter seems joyful, yet incredulous. But many ask what kind of laughter was that of Sarah’s? Cynicism? Despair? Or something else? Later, Yishmael, מצחק, introduces mocking laughter. In this story, laughter ranges from joy to scepticism, from hope to hostility.

The theme that binds it together is persistence and resilience in the face of the impossible. A 99-year-old man and a 90-year-old woman are told they will have a child. It sounds absurd. By any non-miraculous standard, it is. Yet, this impossibility becomes the foundation of Jewish history. Our covenant begins not with certainty, but with a laugh – a laugh that dares to imagine beyond despair. That laugh becomes a name, a legacy, and a lesson: Jewish survival itself is an act of persistence against all odds.

Rabbi Sacks highlights the theme of Isaac as embodying “miraculous persistence.” His name, Yitzhak, is prophetic. It signals the absurdity of Jewish existence: a people born from a barren couple, surviving exiles, persecutions, and near annihilation – yet still here. It’s the echo of Jewish history. Incredulous laughter becomes covenantal joy. Isaac’s life – re-digging wells, praying for children, and allowing his father to almost sacrifice him – embodies faith that defies logic. Every time we say “Yitzhak,” we affirm Judaism is built on the faith that life can defy logic, and that hope can outlast despair.

It is too simplistic to dismiss the laugh of Sarah as one of doubting Hashem. The Ramban points out that it wasn’t clear that she was informed by her husband of the previous conversation with Hashem (in Parshat Lech Lecha), for good reasons, and therefore when an Angel passing as a human promises Abraham a child perhaps, we mistakenly see it as a lack of faith. In fact, given her years of incredibly steadfast commitment to Hashem and the fact that Hashem talks to her, we should more than give her the benefit of the doubt and trust her faith.

Aviva Zornberg builds a picture for us. Imagine the scene behind the tent flap. Ninety-year-old Sarah overhears strangers telling Abraham: “In a year’s time, your wife Sarah will have a son.” She laughs. Is it bitter? Cynical? Or something else? Zornberg suggests it’s a rupture of imagination. For decades, she lived with barrenness and deferred promises. Suddenly, she hears words that defy reality. For a split second, she lets go of despair and glimpses an absurd, unpredictable future. Like many of us when we hear incredulous news for the good – we laugh. Her laughter isn’t mocking – it’s wild, contagious, born of what? It’s the laughter of relief, hope, of possibility, of a world that stretches beyond limits. That laughter conceives Yitzhak – in whom she enshrines laughter into the fabric of his name.

Viktor Frankl, himself a survivor of three concentration camps, wrote that humour was “another of the soul’s weapons in the fight for self-preservation.” Even in the darkest places, laughter gave prisoners escape and affirmed their humanity. Sarah’s laughter does the same: it cracks open despair and lets in light. It’s not certainty – it’s courage. It’s the ability to imagine a future radically different from the present.

As someone living with major challenges, like so many others, this theme speaks to me deeply. Odds sometimes feel overwhelming. And yet, like Sarah, I want to choose the laughter of hope – the laughter that says, there is hope and certainly meaning even where it can’t be seen. Hope exists when logic says otherwise. As Jews, this is our story. We laugh at despair – not because it isn’t real, but because we refuse to let it define us. We persist. We imagine. We hope. And yes -- even in the worst of times -- we laugh.

Sarah teaches us that faith begins not with certainty, but with a laugh – that laugh that dares to imagine beyond despair. And that laugh becomes a name: Yitzhak. Every time we say his name, we remember that the Jewish story begins with a burst of hope, with the courage to embrace the absurd and imagine a future beyond our limits. That laughter can change everything – it can give birth to Yitzhak, to joy, to a future we never thought possible.

Hayei Sara – Rebecca: Kindness with Determination

There is tremendous strength behind Rebecca's kindness, kindness that moves.

At the well, Eliezer asks for a sip of water. Rebecca doesn't just comply; she runs, twice, hauling water for ten camels under the desert sun. That's serious commitment beyond convenience. The Radak notes the Torah records her saying,

"Drink, my lord" to highlight Rebecca's good manners; even though she did not know the stranger's status, she addressed him as "my lord." This is kindness that sweats, kindness that doesn't discriminate.

The Test of Character

Eliezer's prayer at the well (Bereishit 24:14) sets the tone for the coming test:

"Let the maiden to whom I say, 'Please, give me a little water,' and who replies, 'Drink, and I will also water your camels' – let her be the one."

Why this test? Rav Hirsch explains: Eliezer hides his wealth and arrives dusty, gifts concealed, camels unloaded. He wants to strip away superficial motives – status, beauty, pedigree – and find a heart that gives freely. He even times it for evening, when daughters of the poor draw water themselves, not the rich ones with servants.

The Malbim notes that Eliezer deliberately sought someone from humble circumstances, accustomed to effort and simplicity. Why? Because the covenant's future depends on resilience and inner

strength – not on privilege. Rebecca’s response proves she is that woman: generous, practical, and unafraid of hard work, and as we will see, a strong complementary force to her to-be husband.

The Torah emphasises her speed: “וַתָּרֵץ” – she ran (24:18, 24:20). Twice. Ten trips for ten camels, each one a choice to keep giving. Before he even asks her name, Eliezer slips on the gold ring and bracelets (24:22). That’s how sure he is.

Kindness That Decides

Rebecca’s determination doesn’t stop at the well. When her family suggests a delay:

“Let the maiden remain with us for ten days” (Bereishit 24:55) – she answers without hesitation:

“אֵלֶיךָ” – “I will go” (24:58).

No ten-day wait, no wavering. Kindness here isn’t passive compliance; it’s active courage. She understands the urgency of the covenant and acts decisively, just as she ran for the camels.

Years later, when Isaac’s blessing hangs in the balance, Rebecca acts again. She risks misunderstanding, even anger, to ensure the covenant flows through Jacob. That’s not softness – it’s moral courage. Kindness with a backbone.

What Is Chesed?

Rabbi Sacks gives us language for what Rebecca embodies:

“Chesed is usually translated as kindness; but it also means love – not love as emotion or passion, but love expressed as deed. Chesed is love that is loyalty and loyalty that is love. It is born in the generosity of faithfulness, the love that means being ever-present for the other, in hard times as well as good... the poetry of everyday life written in the language of simple deeds.”

Rebecca's Chesed isn't sentimental – it's practical, loyal, and determined. It's the gift of love that begets love, the kind that builds trust and shapes destiny.

Why This Matters in Chayei Sarah

This, to me, is what Abraham was looking for – and why it is so pertinent to the Parsha that begins with the death of Sarah. The Midrash says:

“כל זמן ששרה קיימת היה נר דלוק מערב שבת לערב שבת... וכשבאת רבקה – חזרו.”
As long as Sarah was alive, her tent was blessed; when Rebecca came, those blessings returned.

In choosing a mate for Isaac, with all his challenges, Abraham potentially wanted someone who would complete him – someone like Sarah, whose fierce loyalty and moral courage had sustained him, but someone with a nature that would fit his son, who in several ways was so different to him.

A Deeper Look at Their Dynamic

Learning from the Netziv, Rabbi Sacks shows us Isaac's nature in sharp relief: he is the most withdrawn of the patriarchs. Rarely do we see him start action; his life often mirrors his father's. The Torah associates him with Pachad – fear (Gen. 31:42) – and Jewish mysticism links him to Gevurah, self-restraint. This is the man who once lay bound on an altar, reprieved only at the last moment. Whether from that trauma or the shadow of a dominant father, Isaac's emotions run deep and silent.

No wonder, then, that he loves Rebecca on one hand and Esau on the other. What they share is what he lacks: briskness, decisiveness, action. But here lies the difference: Rebecca channels those traits toward covenantal purpose, while Esau embodies

them without spiritual restraint. In this sense, Rebecca is not only Isaac's complement – she is the counterweight to his relationship with Esau, ensuring that strength serves destiny rather than impulse.

Kindness That Runs Extra

Rebecca teaches us that the right match, the right life, starts not with perfection, but with kindness – that overflow that dares to run toward the other. And that kindness becomes a name, a home, a hope: Rebecca.

In a world that often prizes convenience, Rebecca reminds us that real kindness costs effort. Whether it's checking in on a friend, volunteering, or simply listening without distraction – chesed today still means running that extra mile. This is so counterintuitive to a modern society that can see kindness for softness or even weakness – it is not as it is defined by Rebecca.

Every time we say her name, we remember how the Jewish story thrives on hearts that give without measure and who forge a people who would embody kindness and good deeds but with a strong resilience and call to action.

May we learn from Rebecca that true chesed is not weakness – it is strength, loyalty, and courage in action.

Toldot – 70 Faces of Torah: Wrestling with Toldot and Life

Jewish tradition teaches that the Torah has shiv'im panim – seventy faces. It is not a book of simple answers or one-dimensional truths. That is its beauty: always fresh, always authentic, inviting us into a world of layered meaning where multiple perspectives coexist.

To my fifteen-year-old self, who craved black-and-white answers, this would have seemed impossible. How can two different perspectives be true at once? Yet the Torah through its design insists that truth is multi-layered – and nowhere is this clearer than in Parshat Toldot.

Toldot: A Story of Tension

Toldot tells of Yitzchak and Rebecca, their children, and choices that shaped our destiny. Yitzchak goes into exile during famine, echoing Abraham's journey. Rebecca favours Jacob, Yitzchak favours Esav – a dynamic that leads to deception and heartbreak. Jacob secures the birthright and blessing through cunning, setting in motion the covenantal path to Sinai.

These acts are not simple moral tales. They are blessed by G-d, yet to us they seem messy and human. The Torah does not hide this tension. It shows that the road to holiness runs through human struggle. If humans were inventing a religion, they would never write such an honest account of their founders. It wouldn't pass the first draft.

Living the Duality

This duality mirrors our own lives. As someone living with a terminal illness and deep faith, I wrestle daily with the paradox

that what feels like a painful battle is, on a divine level, part of a purposeful plan. I hold both emotions – faith and fear, hope and grief – at once. We live in two worlds: the finite and the infinite.

Rabbi Sacks captured this beautifully in *The Great Partnership*:

“Science takes things apart to see how they work. Religion puts things together to see what they mean.”

Science explains; religion gives meaning. Likewise, the Torah does not force us to choose between angelic perfection and human frailty. It calls us to integrate both truths. Some choose to see these two distinct paths to understanding Torah – I choose to revel in the synthesis.

Commentators on Complexity

Rav Dessler, in *Michtav Me'Eliyahu*, insists that the Avot were so spiritually refined that what the Torah calls “sins” are infinitesimal lapses measured only against their towering greatness.

Ramban, however, does not shy away from critique. On Abraham’s descent to Egypt, he writes:

“Abraham our father unintentionally committed a great sin... His leaving the Land... on account of the famine, was also a sin he committed.”

Even the greatest can falter – and the Torah does not conceal this.

Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch offers a bridge. Commenting on *Toldot*, he notes that Chazal never hesitated to highlight weaknesses in our forefathers, making them more instructive for us. He critiques Yitzchak and Rebecca for failing to tailor their parenting to Jacob and Esav’s distinct personalities. For Hirsch, the Torah’s honesty is not a flaw but a feature: greatness lies in sanctifying real life, not escaping it.

The Beauty of Torah

The Torah does not sanitise its heroes nor strip them of transcendence. It teaches humility – we cannot fully grasp those who stood at the threshold of revelation. It teaches empathy – their struggles make them relatable. And it teaches aspiration – their greatness calls us upward, even as their flaws assure us that imperfection is not disqualifying.

The seventy faces of Torah invite us to hold both truths: the Avot and Imahot were extraordinary and deeply human. To reduce them to one dimension – angelic or flawed – is to impoverish the text. To embrace their complexity is to discover the beauty of a book like no other, where divine holiness and human reality meet – and where our own struggles can become the path to covenantal greatness.

Lighting Shabbat candles or saying a blessing are simple physical acts, yet we believe they carry spiritual weight in a world we cannot see. Two realities coexist: the tangible and the transcendent. So too with the Avot and Imahot. They were human, with fears and flaws, and yet they lived in Hashem's presence in a way we cannot imagine. To embrace both truths is not a contradiction – it is the essence of Torah. It is the essence of life. And perhaps, as I wrestle with my own journey, holding faith and fear together, I am learning that this tension is not something to resolve but something to live.

Vayetze – Laban – Unmasking the Enemy Within

On probably the most celebrated and observed evening in the Jewish calendar – at the Passover Seder – the Haggadah startles us with its opening indictment in its recounting of the story of the Exodus: “Arami oved avi” – “An Aramean sought to destroy my father.” This refers to Laban.

Why does our national memory place Laban, not Pharaoh, as the first and most insidious enemy of Am Yisrael? What did he do that was so terrible, so unforgettable, that we recall him each year with such intensity?

Who Was Laban?

Laban, whose name means “white,” was the brother of Rebecca, making him Jacob’s uncle and later his father-in-law. He lived in Haran, outside the Land of Israel, and is introduced in the Torah as the son of Bethuel and the father of Leah and Rachel. Laban is a complex figure: outwardly hospitable and family-oriented, yet repeatedly revealed as cunning, manipulative, and self-serving. His home becomes the setting for much of Jacob’s adult life, shaping the destiny of the nascent Jewish people.

The Torah sets the scene with deceptive warmth:

“And it came to pass, when Jacob saw Rachel... Laban ran to meet him, and embraced him, and kissed him, and brought him to his house.” (Genesis 29:10,13)

At first glance, Laban appears the welcoming uncle, eager to greet his kin. But as the story unfolds, his embrace is revealed as a prelude to exploitation.

“And Laban said to Jacob, ‘Because you are my kinsman, should

you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?" (Genesis 29:15)

Behind these words lies a pattern of manipulation and deceit that will define Jacob's years in Haran.

Laban's duplicity becomes even clearer as the narrative unfolds: "And it came to pass in the morning, behold, it was Leah! And he said to Laban, 'What is this you have done to me? Was it not for Rachel that I served you? Why have you deceived me?'" (Genesis 29:25)

Laban's response is as slippery as ever: "It is not done so in our place, to give the younger before the firstborn." (Genesis 29:26)

He cloaks his deceit in local custom, sidestepping responsibility while binding Jacob to further years of service.

Rashi, ever the close reader, makes the danger explicit:

"Because Laban sought to uproot everything; all the evil he did was only to destroy everything." (Rashi on Deuteronomy 26:5)

Laban's weapon is not the sword, but the contract; not the lash, but the lie. He cheats Jacob again and again – switching brides, changing wages, manipulating promises. Each act chips away at Jacob's sense of self, his trust, his hope. Laban's greatest crime is not what he does to Jacob's body, but what he tries to do to Jacob's soul. He is the master of slow erosion, the enemy who undermines from within, whose "kindness" is a mask for control.

Rav Hirsch exposes Laban's duplicity:

"He possessed nothing white except his name; his pious words were but a cloak for his greed." (Hirsch on Genesis 24:29–31)

Laban's hypocrisy is the archetype of the enemy who corrupts from within, who erodes identity not by force, but by seduction and slow compromise. He is the danger of assimilation, of losing ourselves not through oppression, but through the subtle, seductive pull of comfort and convenience. Laban's threat is existential: he seeks not to destroy the Jewish people physically, but to dissolve them spiritually, to make them forget who they are.

The Torah records Jacob's anguish and integrity after years of mistreatment:

"These twenty years have I been with you... you have changed my wages ten times; but Hashem suffered you not to hurt me."

(Genesis 31:41)

Jacob's resilience is remarkable – he emerges with his family, his faith, and his mission intact.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe reframes Laban's house as the crucible in which Jewish resilience is forged:

"Jacob's descent into Laban's house was a yeridah l'tzorech aliyah – a descent for the sake of ascent. (Likkutei Sichot, Vayetze)

In the darkness of Laban's duplicity, Jacob discovers resilience. He learns to hold fast to his values, to build a family and a future even when the ground shifts beneath him. Laban's treachery becomes the forge in which Jacob's faith is tempered. The Rebbe teaches that the challenge of Laban is not just historical, but perennial. Every generation faces its own Labans – forces that threaten to erode our identity, not with violence, but with the slow, subtle pressure to conform, to forget, to blend in.

Why do we remember Laban so vividly? Because his threat is perennial. Pharaohs come and go, but the Labans – the dangers that lurk in the familiar, the compromises that erode us quietly –

are always near. The Haggadah teaches us to be vigilant not only against the obvious enemies, but against the subtle ones; not only against those who attack our bodies, but those who sap our spirit.

Today, we are witnessing the unmasking of many “Labans” – those who, under the guise of friendship, tolerance, or even kinship, seek to undermine the Jewish people, our values, and our future. The Haggadah’s warning is more relevant than ever: the threats that come dressed in the language of peace, progress, or partnership can be the most dangerous, because they erode from within.

May we, like Jacob, emerge from every exile with our identity intact, our mission renewed, and our faith strengthened. May we have the courage to unmask the Labans in our world and in ourselves and transform every challenge into a new ascent.

May our vigilance and resilience bring us to a future of clarity, strength, and redemption.

Vayislach – Striving for Harmony: The Meaning of ‘Israel’

It is the middle of the night, and Jacob is standing alone on the banks of the Jabbok River. Rashi tells us he had returned for “small jars” – insignificant items he left behind – but what he encounters is anything but insignificant. A dramatic fight which ends with him being given the name Israel.

The Dark Night of the Soul

He is about to meet Esau, his estranged brother, who approaches with an army. Before facing the brother of flesh and blood, Jacob must confront a spiritual adversary. He wrestles with a mysterious angel until dawn. Wounded, limping, yet unbowed, Jacob demands a blessing. The angel responds not with a gift, but with a new identity:

“Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with Hashem and with men, and you have prevailed.”
(Genesis 32:29)

This name – Israel – is not a mere nickname. It becomes the root of our national identity, reshaping our spiritual DNA. But what does it truly mean?

The Netziv’s Insight

To understand this transformation, we turn to the brilliant commentary of the Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin) in Ha’amek Davar:

כי שרית עם אלקים ועם אנשים ותוכל... לפי הפשט י”ל כלפי שנקרא יעקב באחזו בעקב עשו ונתבאר לעיל שהוא בשני אופני. ‘בעת שיעקב בגדולה אוחז את עשו בעקבו שלא ילך ויתפשט גם הוא במלכותו. ובשעה שיעקב בשפלות מבקש להאחז בעקב עשו

ולא תחת יד אחרים הפראים ביותר. ואמר לו המלאך כי אינך צריך לזה השם... שהרי שרית עם אלקים שהוא שר שלו ותוכל. ובשעה שתהי' בשפלות ובגלות לא תהי' צריך כ"כ להאחז בעקב עשו כי שרית עם אנשים. היינו עם כל אנשים ומלכיות אפילו המה פראים בהליכתם ותוכל לכולם.

Translation:

“For you have striven with Hashem and with men, and you have prevailed... According to the plain meaning, this relates to the name Jacob, derived from his holding Esau’s heel, as explained earlier in two ways. When Jacob is in a state of greatness, he holds Esau’s heel so that he does not advance and seize kingship for himself as well. And when Jacob is in a state of lowliness, he seeks to cling to Esau’s heel rather than fall under the hands of the most savage [nations]. And the angel said to him: You no longer need this name... For you have striven with Hashem and you have prevailed. And when you are in lowliness and exile, you will not need to cling so much to Esau’s heel, for you have striven with men – meaning with all men and kingdoms, even those savage in their ways – and you have prevailed against them all.”

The Netziv raises a subtle question: Why does the angel list the greater challenge – Hashem – before the lesser challenge – men? And why does Jacob need a new name at all?

From Dependency to Independence

The answer lies in the meaning of Jacob – rooted in ekev, “heel.” Jacob’s identity reflects reactive dependency:

When strong, he restrains Esau’s advance.

When weak, he clings to Esau for protection from savagery.

In both cases, survival depends on others.

The angel declares: You have graduated. You no longer need to be a “Heel-Holder.”

Israel signals a radical shift:

We do not survive by clinging to superpowers or reacting to threats.

We endure because of inner strength.

“You strove with Hashem”: Our resilience flows from spiritual fortitude. When connected to our Divine mission, we shape reality rather than merely respond to it.

“You strove with men”: Even in exile, we need not beg for protection. We possess an innate, Hashem-given strength to stand upright.

To be Israel is to stand tall – not because we lean on others, but because we have an unbreakable spine.

The Paradox: Harmony Through Struggle

But how do we know we are aligned with our Divine mission? Here lies Jacob’s deeper essence. The Sages teach he embodies Emet – Truth – a synthesis of his forebears’ qualities: Abraham’s Chesed (Love) and Isaac’s Gevurah (Strength). This balance creates a relationship with Hashem that integrates kindness and discipline.

In Kabbalistic terms, Jacob corresponds to Tiferet – often translated as Beauty, but more profoundly understood as Harmony: the fusion of opposites into wholeness. Jacob united twelve diverse sons into one family – a multi-dimensional people who, even in exile, rallied around his legacy. It was never easy – like conducting an orchestra of clashing instruments into

symphony – but when guided by truth and harmony, the result is power beyond measure.

This is Hashem's vision for Israel: a people who strive relentlessly yet harmonise diversity into unity.

True Harmony Is Not the Absence of Conflict

Jacob's life proves this. He faced sibling rivalries, Laban's deceit, inter-family tensions, Joseph's disappearance, Dinah's tragedy, and violent reprisals. Yet through it all, he prevailed – not by avoidance, but by wrestling until dawn.

Harmony – Tiferet – is not peace without struggle; it is beauty born of engagement. Like an orchestra, harmony emerges from different, sometimes opposing notes blending together. In life, beauty arises when we embrace challenges, integrate our wrestling matches, and recognise that each voice adds to the whole.

Our world today mirrors Jacob's trials: disunity, broken relationships, fractures tempting us toward despair. But Jacob teaches a surer way – not simpler, but truer – through harmony and acceptance. Each of us brings a unique note; together, the result is worth every strain.

As Mark Twain famously asked regarding the endurance of the Jewish people:

“All other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?”

The secret, perhaps, is that we are Israel. We do not hide from history; we wrestle with it. We do not ignore the darkness; we struggle with it until the break of dawn.

Vayeshev and Chanukah – Hope Before Exile

At the time of Chanukah, I have several fond memories. My favourite was the time my son, daughter, and I were on a tour bus of New York, sitting on the top deck. We were in crawling traffic, and two lanes over was a parked Mitzvah Tank. On the roof were Chabadnik (Lubavitch) boys. My son, then a teenager, shouted across in Hebrew – “Chanukah Sameach!” In Hebrew, he had a chat with the boys, and when they realised he was Jewish, they threw across a lane of traffic a Chanukiah – a brilliant moment. On the flight back with El Al, someone lit a halachically designed electric Chanukiah, and we all sang Maoz Tzur.

It reminds me of a famous idea of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, which is related to this week’s Parsha and is one of my favourite ideas. The concept is that the cure is put in place before the affliction.

Before the exile of the Jewish People, the redemption – i.e. the line of the Moshiach – was born. How so?

In Parsha Vayeshev, we have the story of Joseph – his dreams, his journey to his brothers, their hatred of him because of his special status, their conspiracy to kill him, and then his departure for Egypt. Just at the point before we read about his story in Egypt – the point at which you can make a strong case that the exile of the Jews to Egypt began – we cut to a seemingly unrelated chapter which has nothing to do with the theme of the story.

It is a bizarre interruption. It tells the strange story of Yehudah – the brother who was, according to some commentators, punished or at least demoted for the actions of the brothers with Joseph. He loses his children for their sins, and on the road, he meets with and has relations with a prostitute, who turns out to be a heroine,

Tamar – his daughter-in-law – who has a prophecy that she needs to have a child with Yehudah. They have twins – another recurring theme in the Torah – and one of them is Peretz. We read later that Peretz is the forebear of King David and the future Moshiach.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe illuminates this pivot with exquisite precision:

“Yehudah’s siring of Peretz reflected how ‘the cure preceded the blow.’ Before the first power to subjugate the Jews [Pharaoh] was born, the [progenitor of the] ultimate redeemer [Peretz, Mashiach’s ancestor] was born.”

While the brothers schemed and Joseph descended, Hashem was quietly “creating the light of Mashiach,” introducing Peretz’s boundless spirit – the power to “break through” all barriers – ensuring that exile’s darkness would birth unbounded elevation.

There remain many questions about the story – why was the Moshiach sired in such an unconventional way – by way of Yehudah and Tamar in the form of her pretending to be a prostitute? Surely there would be more appropriate ways for such a line to be formed. But this is perhaps the point. As the Sforno says on the verse:

ויט אליה אל הדרך ויאמר הבה נא אבוא אליך כי לא ידע כי כלתו הוא ותאמר מה תתן לי
כי תבוא אלי

So he turned aside to her by the road and said, “Here, let me sleep with you” – for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. “What,” she asked, “will you pay for sleeping with me?”

The Sforno says: “Hashem has His own agenda; clearly, He hoped that Tamar bear one or two children sired by Yehudah, who in His eyes was more acceptable than his son Shelah [whose mother’s

antecedents we know little about]. Hashem wanted that the eventual Messiah should have had genetic material dating back to Tamar.”

We are not let into the mystery of why Hashem wanted it to happen this way, but perhaps, like Ruth the Moabite who also contributed to the line of David, her tenacity, persistence, and willingness to do what was required to fulfil Hashem’s words were important characteristics in the resilience of the line of kings that would lead, in the past and in the future, the Jewish People.

Therefore, at the exact point at which we could lose hope that we are descending into slavery and exile, Hashem gives birth to the redemption.

What does this mean for us? We all have major challenges in life – some seem more obvious and publicised than others – but there is a lesson here that although we can’t see it and we don’t understand it, the plan has been made by Hashem to end up in our interests and for the good.

This is not easy to accept – in Joseph’s story, he is seduced by his slave master’s wife, put in jail for years, and only then do his fortunes turn around. Yehudah was at his low ebb after losing his children, and he has a child by an apparent prostitute before his fortunes turn around. Bnei Yisrael must go through the pain of 210 years of slavery before being rebuilt as G-d’s people and crowned at Sinai. In the same way, I need to understand that whilst I don’t have the perspective to see what is happening to me as a positive – it is for some reason only something Hashem sees.

I pray we see the coming of the Mashiach soon, and I mean soon.

Miketz – Dinah’s Pain to Brothers’ Peace

Every Friday night, many Jewish parents place their hands on their children’s heads for one of the most tender moments of the week.

For daughters, the blessing is based on a high degree of logic: we invoke the Matriarchs – Sarah, Rivka, Rachel and Leah – whose many qualities built what was to become Bnei Yisrael, the Children of Israel, rather than simply a family. But for sons, we bypass the Patriarchs of Abraham, Yitzchak, and Jacob and instead recite:

יְשִׁימךְ אֱלֹהִים כְּאַפְרַיִם וּמְנַשֶּׁה

“May Hashem make you like Ephraim and Menashe.”

Why these two?

The well-known answer is that Ephraim and Menashe are the first brothers in the Torah to live without rivalry. Unlike Kayin and Hevel, or Jacob and Esav, or Joseph and his brothers, they represent pure sibling love. Their story is one of joy and peace.

Whilst this is true, there is perhaps another aspect we need to consider. To understand the miracle of their peace, we must look at the darkness from which they emerged. We must look at the story of Dinah and the tragic account of her brutal rape, described in Bereishit chapter 34, even if only judged by the reaction of two of her brothers.

The Silent Bridge: From Dinah to Asenath (Osnat)

On the surface, the stories of Ephraim and Menashe’s joy and Dinah’s trauma seem worlds apart, separated by generations and geography. But Jewish tradition suggests they may be inextricably linked through one woman: the boys’ mother, Asenath.

The Torah in our Parsha, Miketz (Bereishit 41:45, 50), introduces Asenath simply as the daughter of an Egyptian priest. However, a startling Midrashic teaching (Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer, ch. 38) identifies her as the daughter of Dinah, born from the tragic violation in Shechem and later adopted in Egypt. While not universally accepted, this Midrash offers profound insight into why the Torah names these two women so deliberately.

The text does not make this link explicit, perhaps deliberately. If it were stated plainly, we might treat the trauma as “resolved history.” By leaving it hidden, the Torah forces us to grapple with the abuse of Dinah did not have a happy ending, but it has to be recognised for what it was in all its pain.

The Midrash offers us a profound potential insight: The most peaceful brotherhood in the Torah is possibly linked to one of the most violent violations in the Torah.

Transforming the Legacy

This connection may add depth to how we view Joseph’s family. Joseph and Asenath are not just a political power couple; they are two survivors building a new reality.

Joseph was thrown into a pit by his brothers. Asenath possibly carried the lineage of Dinah’s terrible abuse. By all logic, their children should have inherited a legacy of resentment, victimhood, or strife.

Instead, they raise Ephraim and Menashe, boys who break the cycle.

When Jacob, their grandfather, blesses the boys at the end of his life, as has happened in similar cases, he brings about the possibility of sibling rivalry when he crosses his hands, placing the

right hand on the younger Ephraim. In any previous generation, this “switch” could have incited a war between brothers. But Ephraim and Menashe accept it. There is no jealousy. There is only harmony.

Rashi notes that this moment establishes the permanent formula for blessing our sons:

“בך יברך ישראל” – “By you shall Israel bless.”

Through Asenath, the brokenness of Dinah is not erased, but it is redeemed. The pain of the past is, to an extent, transformed into the peace of the future.

Our Moral Responsibility

This transforms the Friday night ritual from a mere wish for success into a charge of moral responsibility.

We live in a world that still has similarities to that of Dinah, a world rife with brokenness, violence, and exploitation. And let us be clear: these tragedies happen not only “out there,” beyond the Jewish community. They happen within. The family of Jacob was not immune, and neither are we. We must confront this reality with every ounce of strength we have and strive for better. When we bless boys, we cherish the story of Ephraim and Menashe. And when we look at the world, we must not forget the story of Dinah.

The Torah demands we face these truths, not sweep them under the rug. But the story of Ephraim and Menashe teaches us how to respond: by building homes that defy the chaos that can occur outside and inside our communities.

As Rav Soloveitchik taught in *Family Redeemed*, the family is the first unit of ethical commitment, the first brit (covenantal community). If we cannot create shalom bayit (peace in the home)

at our own tables, we cannot bring justice to our surroundings and more broadly.

A Call to Action

If you are fortunate enough this Shabbat to place your hands on your sons, grandsons, or any other boy whom you wish to bless and whisper the age-old words of blessing that Hashem make them like Ephraim and Menashe, recognise the weight of those words.

You are acknowledging the brokenness of the world (Dinah) while celebrating the potential for wholeness (Ephraim and Menashe). You are pledging to raise children who do not ignore the wounds of history, but who possess the strength to heal them. You are pledging to raise them in an environment in which what happened to Dinah cannot and should not happen.

This is the true blessing: to take what is shattered and, through love, make it whole.

Whether boy or girl, whether they are children, teenagers, or adults, the second part of the blessing surely remains relevant to all:

יברכך יהוה וישמרך

May Hashem bless you and protect you.

יאר יהוה פניו אליך ויהנך

May Hashem cause His countenance to shine upon you and Favour you.

ישא יהוה פניו אליך וישם לך שלום

May Hashem lift His face to you and grant you peace.

Vayigash – ‘Sheol’ to Life: Refusing Comfort, Defying Despair

What happens when reality tells you something you cannot bear to accept? The Torah gives us two striking examples – Jacob and Korach – both refusing to accept reality, but for different reasons and with different outcomes.

If you read the Torah carefully, you’ll notice something fascinating about these two encounters – they feature a dark word “Sheol,” often translated as “the grave,” that is only used in these two contexts in the entire Torah – three times with Jacob and twice with Korach.

The first is in the story of Jacob’s grief over Joseph. Jacob invokes Sheol three times to emphasise the pain he is in at the loss of his son and the situation with Benjamin: “Ki ered el beni avel Sheolah” – “I will go down to my son mourning, to Sheol” (Genesis 37:35). Again, in Genesis 42:38, fearing the loss of Benjamin: “V’horadtem et seivati b’ra’ah Sheolah” – “You will bring down my grey head in evil to Sheol.” And the third time, in this week’s Parsha Vayigash, when Judah pleads for Benjamin’s life: “V’haya ki yir’eh ki ein hana’ar... v’horad et seivat avdecha b’ra’ah Sheolah” (Genesis 44:31).

What does Sheol mean? The rabbis argue. Rashi alludes to Sheol as Gehinnom – a spiritual purgatory, suggesting Jacob feared eternal judgement. Ibn Ezra disagrees, saying it simply means the grave. Either way, Jacob was in a dark place. His words sound like despair. Yet, as Rabbi Sacks explains, his refusal to be comforted was not because he gave up hope, but because he refused to give up hope. The Midrash says, “One can be comforted for one who is dead, but not for one who is still living.” Jacob could not accept

consolation because deep down he believed Joseph was still alive. His grief lacked closure because his faith in the possibility of life endured. To mourn fully would have been, in his mind, a betrayal. His refusal to be comforted was an act of loyalty and hope. Jacob refused to accept reality – not out of denial, but out of faith.

The second context is in Parshat Korach, when the earth swallows Korach and his followers: “Vayerdu hem chayim Sheolah” – “They went down alive into Sheol.” Korach also refused to accept reality, but for the opposite reason. He could not accept that leadership was not his. He could not accept that Moses and Aharon were chosen by Hashem. His refusal was not rooted in hope but in ego. He clung to his ambition and pride, and that defiance led him to destruction.

Two figures, two refusals, two radically different outcomes. Jacob’s refusal kept hope alive and led to reunion and redemption. Korach’s refusal kept arrogance alive and led to rebellion and ruin.

And yet, in both stories, the Torah adds a surprising word formula almost as an antidote to “Sheol”: Chayim – “Alive.” Korach’s followers go down alive into Sheol. And Jacob’s redemption comes with the words: “Od Yosef Chai” – “Joseph is still alive.” Life flickers even in the abyss. For Jacob, that spark of life was the truth that his son lived. For Korach, it was the possibility of teshuvah – and indeed, the Sages teach his sons repented at the last moment. Sheol in the Torah is not a place of finality; it is a place where the future seems lost, yet life remains.

This is the Jewish story. Jeremiah later echoed Jacob’s cry: “Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted.” Why? Because to refuse comfort is to refuse to surrender hope. Jews have carried that refusal through centuries of exile, through Babylon, through the rivers of Babylon, through Tisha B’Av. Napoleon, hearing Jews

weep for Jerusalem after 1,700 years, said: "A people who can mourn so long will one day have it restored." And so it was.

Obviously, every situation demands a different response, and sometimes false hope is probably not the right practical idea so this needs to be treated carefully. However, even in my case where I am suffering from a terminal illness, I have hopes that the journey will be as pain free and as long as possible – it may not be the ultimate outcome I would want but it pays to refuse to give in.

Jacob did eventually see Joseph again. Rachel's children did return to the land. Jerusalem is once again our home. All the evidence may suggest otherwise, but Jews never believed the evidence because they had something stronger: an unbreakable hope.

So, if you feel the abyss calling, remember Jacob and Korach. Both refused to accept reality, but one did so to keep hope alive, and the other to keep ego alive. Our challenge is to choose the right kind of refusal – the kind that says, "I will not give up on life, on faith, on the possibility of redemption." Od Yosef Chai. There is still life. There is still hope.

Vayechi – Seeing Our Children as They Truly Are

This parshagives us the opportunity to learn lessons from Jacob's assessment of each of his children and his guiding each child based on their unique strengths and challenges, not the version we imagine.

At the opening of Parshat Vayechi, we read:

אתכם באחרית הימים אשר יקרא ויאמר האספו ואגידה לכם את אל בניו ויקרא יעקב

“And Jacob called his sons and said, ‘Come together that I may tell you what is to befall you in days to come.’” (Genesis 49:1)

Rashi explains that Jacob wished to reveal the end of Israel's exile, but the Shechinah (Divine Presence) departed from him. On the brink of Galut, Jacob hoped to offer clarity and hope, a sense of order and a plan. Yet, as the Sefat Emet teaches, even this was denied to him. Why? Because an essential part of exile is uncertainty. Redemption cannot come through clear prophecy alone; it must emerge from resilience, inner faith, and moral growth. Jacob's thwarted revelation becomes a profound lesson: strength is forged in not necessarily knowing that the outcome is foretold and foregone.

So, what does Jacob do instead? He gathers his family and does something remarkable: he blesses his twelve sons with words that reflect their individuality. These are not generic blessings or vague encouragements. Each son receives a message that names strengths, acknowledges weaknesses, and points to opportunities for the future.

To Reuben he says, “Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might... unstable as water” – praising his vitality yet warning against impulsiveness. To Simeon and Levi, “Instruments of violence are

their tools” – recognising their zeal but cautioning against anger. To Judah, “The sceptre shall not depart from Judah” – elevating his courage and humility as the foundation of leadership. Zebulun hears, “Zebulun shall dwell by the seashore” – a vision of commerce and opportunity. Issachar is told, “Issachar is a strong-boned donkey” – a symbol of scholarship and endurance. Dan is promised, “Dan shall judge his people” – justice and cunning in defence. Gad receives, “Raiders shall raid Gad, but he shall raid at their heels” – resilience in adversity. Asher is blessed, “Asher’s food shall be rich” – abundance and generosity. Naphtali is likened to “a hind let loose, who gives beautiful words” – grace and eloquence. Joseph is exalted, “A fruitful vine by a spring” – resilience and blessing despite hardship. And Benjamin is described, “Benjamin is a ravenous wolf” – boldness and strength tempered by justice.

Jacob does not pretend they are all the same. He does not impose one path. Instead, he gives each son a mirror, light and shadow, strength and challenge. These words are blessings with nuance, not harsh rebukes. They are guidance for growth and unity.

I do not think this is the way I would parent my own children, calling them all together and delivering a blunt assessment. But we are not talking about a regular family here. This was a family with a history of strife and conflict, brothers who had fought, sold Joseph, and endured years of tension. These twelve sons had been through so much and were the foundation of the Jewish people, about to go into exile and eventually lead the nation back to the land of Israel. They had already seen so much, and it was important, given who they were, that they heard this message jointly and together.

Despite the setting, there is an important lesson here: sometimes we need to be more honest with our children and those around us

about their potential, about what they can become, and how to guide them toward growth. Not to mould them into what we want, but to help them grow according to their own strengths and weaknesses as individuals. Jacob's words, though sharp at times, were aimed at keeping the family united and preventing strife as they faced the looming danger of exile and the distant hope of redemption. In moments of uncertainty, clarity about roles and values can preserve harmony and purpose.

This idea resonates with me personally, as I remember two of the most impactful meetings I had as a young consultant. Two partners spoke bluntly, but constructively, about my strengths and weaknesses. It was uncomfortable, yet deeply valuable. In one meeting I will never forget, the partner pointed out that I always had to have the last word in every conversation. My reply was "No, I do not," which only went to prove their point, something I finally understood. These experiences remind me that honest feedback, even when it stings, can help us grow and use our traits more wisely. Jacob's approach, though ancient, carries a modern truth: clarity and candour, when rooted in care, can strengthen families, teams, and communities.

Jacob's final words are not mere predictions; they are timeless guidance. Our traits are raw materials; exile and life's uncertainties demand we refine them. Growth comes not from forcing others into our mould, but from helping them become the best version of themselves. Like Jacob's individualised blessings based on knowledge of each of his children, our own lives call for honest self-reflection and the courage to let others flourish as individuals. In a world of ambiguity, this is our path to redemption.

Sefer Shemot – Awakening, Responsibility, The Birth of a Nation

Shemot traces the transformation from slavery to nationhood, highlighting courage, moral awakening, and collective responsibility. It explores leadership under pressure, the confrontation between power and justice, and the development of a people shaped by both suffering and revelation. A central idea that emerges is that redemption begins when people refuse to remain passive, when “the people wake up” and step into their role in shaping history. Faith here becomes not just belief, but action, expressed through law, structure, and national purpose, and through the courage to defy evil and build something new.

Fundamentally however, Hashem rescues his people, by His own hand, as was His promise and begins the storied history of the Jewish People and its relationship with the Torah.

Shemot – Batya – The Courage to Defy Evil

The opening chapters of Shemot present two contrasting narratives. Chapter 1 races through national catastrophe in six terse verses:

“A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph... He said to his people, ‘Behold, the people of the children of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them...’” (Shemot 1:8–10)

“They set taskmasters over them... They embittered their lives with hard labour... Pharaoh commanded all his people, saying: ‘Every son that is born you shall cast into the Nile.’” (1:11–22)

Six verses to legislate oppression, slavery, and genocide. Evil is swift, impersonal, systemic.

Then the Torah slows dramatically in the second chapter in stark contrast. In another six verses it narrows down and describes in quite significant detail an unexpected individual act of defiance:

“The daughter of Pharaoh went down to bathe by the Nile, and her maidens walked along the riverbank. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maidservant to fetch it. She opened it and saw the child, behold, a boy crying, and she had compassion on him and said: ‘This is one of the Hebrew children.’” (Shemot 2:5–6)

“Then his sister said to Pharaoh’s daughter: ‘Shall I go and call for you a nursing woman from the Hebrews?’ Pharaoh’s daughter said: ‘Go.’ So, the girl went and called the child’s mother. Pharaoh’s daughter said to her: ‘Take this child and nurse him for me, and I will give you your wages.’ ... The child grew, and she brought him to

Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. She named him Moses, saying: 'For I drew him from the water.'" (2:7-10)

Why this slow down and change of pace and deep dive on such an individual story? Nechama Leibowitz points out that the Torah quickly summarises the decrees of oppression in just a few verses, while it describes the rescue of Moses step by step in detail. This highlights that Israel's redemption comes not from grand, dramatic events, but from the quiet, courageous actions of ordinary individuals.

Evil can be enacted in sweeping strokes; goodness often emerges in intimate, deliberate moments. The Torah lingers here because Batya's choice is a turning point: one person defying an empire. We saw it with 9/11 and October 7 – evil can be performed on mass scale and quickly, the opposite is true with rebuilding and fighting evil.

And yet, for all this detail in the six verses around which there is naturally so much commentary of the various ways the interaction took place, including the intervention of miracles such as the lengthening of Batya's arm to reach Moses, so much remains opaque.

Who was she really? Why did she risk everything, her status, perhaps her life, to save a condemned Hebrew child? Did she sense that this crying infant would one day redeem a nation? The Torah does not tell us. It seems deliberate, as if to teach that the deepest moral decisions often defy explanation.

When later rescuers during the Holocaust were asked why they endangered themselves to save Jews, many could offer no grand ideology. They simply said, "It was the right thing to do." Batya's motivation appears similarly ineffable: a sudden surge of pity (וּתְחַמֵּל עָלָיו) that overrode fear, custom, and self-preservation.

And notice something remarkable: the survival of the Jewish people at this moment hinges on the courage of three women acting on a micro, tactical level, Yocheved and Miriam (identified by Chazal as Shifra and Puah), and Pharaoh's daughter. In the face of systemic hatred and overwhelming power, a few individuals, each in their own way, step up. Yocheved hides her child and devises a plan. Miriam watches and intervenes with boldness. Batya defies her father's decree and claims the child as her own.

Why them? Why so few? The Torah does not explain and perhaps cannot. Most people remain silent, paralysed by fear or swept along by the tide of conformity. These women are exceptions. As with the Holocaust, and as we see in our own day post-October 7, it is truly a rare and extraordinary person who risks comfort, safety, and even life to do what is right. The Torah wants us to see this: redemption begins not with armies or politics, but with individuals, often women, who act with courage when others do not.

And then comes the psychological depth: she names him herself, "Moses, for I drew him from the water" (מִן הַמַּיִם מִשִּׁיתָהוּ). Naming is an act of identity and responsibility. Batya does not remain a passive rescuer; she claims him. In a palace built on cruelty, she creates a pocket of compassion and says: This child is mine. That is moral courage at its most radical. Rabbi Sacks teaches that true morality transcends what we inherit from our birth or culture; it is defined by the choices we make to follow conscience.

Batya chose conscience over culture, humanity over hatred.

Tradition calls her Bitya, "daughter of Hashem." In the narrative, she is called "the daughter of Pharaoh" four times (verses 5, 7, 8, 9), emphasising her identity as the child of the oppressor. And then the Midrash shows us an incredible level of reward for her actions:

“Moses was not your son, yet you called him your son; you are not My daughter, yet I will call you My daughter.” (Vayikra Rabbah 1:3)

The Torah’s repetition heightens the irony and the transformation; she who was defined by Pharaoh becomes redefined by Hashem. The daughter of tyranny becomes the daughter of eternity. One source even lists her among those who entered Gan Eden alive. The child of the tyrant who sought to drown Israel’s future redeemer becomes the instrument of his survival. Hashem orchestrates redemption through the most unexpected vessels.

Batya’s story is not ancient history. It speaks urgently to our world today. Courage begins in small acts. Evil often feels overwhelming, but one person, one moment of compassion, can change history. Identity is chosen, not imposed. Batya rejected Pharaoh’s ideology and chose a moral identity. Post-October 7, when hatred resurfaces globally, we too must choose values over convenience, light over darkness. By saving Moses, Batya unknowingly partners in redemption. Our acts of kindness, supporting victims, standing against antisemitism, building bridges, align us with divine purpose. Silence is complicity. Batya teaches that moral clarity demands action, even when it costs.

As we read Parshat Shemot, this gives us hope. History has always shown that individual moral courage can fracture even the most entrenched systems of evil. Batya’s example is the precedent we need. May we be inspired by her quiet heroism. In a world that can still rush headlong into cruelty, may we too pause at the riverbank, extend our arm further than seems humanly possible, and declare, through action, that some decrees simply cannot stand.

Vaera – The plagues: Why 10? Why these?

What would a proportionate divine response to extraordinary cruelty look like? The Ten Plagues offer one answer: a graduated, relentless pressure on a tyrant who refused every opportunity to relent – each stage an escalation, each stage also an invitation to stop.

The 10 Plagues are among the most iconic miracles in the Torah – right alongside the splitting of the Red Sea. But two questions naturally arise: Why 10? And why these specific 10?

The honest answer to the specific “whys” is that it’s a puzzle. But to try to understand G-d’s method, let’s turn to G-d’s own words to Moses – His “mission statement” – found in four critical verses in this Parsha:

Exodus 7:2–5:

אתה תדבר את כל אשר אצוך ואהרן אחיך ידבר אל פרעה ושלח את בני ישראל מארצו
You shall repeat all that I command you, and your brother Aharon shall speak to Pharaoh to let the Israelites depart from his land.

ואני אקשה את לב פרעה והרביתי את אתתי ואת מופתי בארץ מצרים
But I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, that I may multiply My signs and marvels in the land of Egypt.

ולא ישמע אלכם פרעה ונתתי את ידי במצרים והוצאתי את צבאתי את עמי בני ישראל מארץ מצרים בשפטים גדלים

When Pharaoh does not heed you, I will lay My hand upon Egypt and deliver My ranks, My people the Israelites, from the land of Egypt with extraordinary chastisements.

מתוכם את בני ישראל והוצאתי את ידי על מצרים יהוה בנטתי כי אני וידעו מצרים
And the Egyptians shall know that I am Hashem, when I stretch
out My hand over Egypt and bring out the Israelites from their
midst.

Let's anatomise these verses, which lay out G-d's precise
objectives:

The Command: Moses and Aharon are to tell Pharaoh to let the
Israelites depart.

The Intervention: Hashem will harden Pharaoh's heart so that He
can multiply His signs and wonders.

The Punishment: Hashem will lay His hand on Egypt, delivering
extraordinary chastisements.

The Goal: The Egyptians shall know that He is Hashem.

Before dealing with the "Why" questions, we need to address a
difficult phrase – and an age-old question – right in the middle: "I
will harden Pharaoh's heart." This presents a major theological
problem. If Hashem hardens his heart, does Pharaoh truly have free
will?

This is a profound theological paradox. While we, living within the
confines of time, struggle to reconcile G-d's omniscience (all-
knowingness) together with human free choice, we must
understand that Pharaoh and the Egyptians maintained their
capacity for choice throughout. His stubborn refusal to yield, his
entrenched ego and reliance on slave labour, meant that a mere
request was never going to suffice. Hashem knew this.

I personally didn't understand this until observing a leader –
Ayatollah Khamenei, back in June, when it was clear the US was
going to bomb. He seemed utterly unwilling to back down despite

all logic and common sense. To me, I felt I understood this concept of a hardened heart. Pharaoh's heart was already hardened by his own hubris; G-d's "hardening" was perhaps a confirmation or an intensification of an existing condition, ensuring that the full lesson could be taught.

This brings us to the 10 plagues – why this precise, escalating method?

To understand why these 10 and their sequence, we turn to Rabbenu Bechaye, a great medieval commentator, who offers a beautiful, structural explanation. He suggests the plagues were a strategic campaign designed to dismantle the Egyptian worldview, moving systematically through the elements of nature that they worshiped:

"Blood and frogs are from the water... Lice and arov are from the dust (namely, earth)... And because [Pharaoh] hardened his heart and did not want to release them, [G-d] brought from the heavens plagues on their body... pestilence on the bodies of the animals and... boils on the bodies of the people. And from the air, He also brought hail and locusts upon the vegetation of the earth. And they still did not listen after this and so He brought upon them plagues from the air, namely darkness and the destruction of the breath of life from the firstborn." (Rabbeinu Bechaye Shemot 11:10)

This structural progression highlights Hashem's utter dominion over every aspect of existence:

Attack by Water: Blood and Frogs came from the Nile. The Nile was the heart blood of Egypt and their Hashem. Hashem struck their security first.

Attack by Land: Lice and Wild Beasts came from the dust and the earth.

Attack by Air (Biological): Pestilence and Boils struck the bodies of people and animals.

Attack by Air (Economic): Hail and Locusts destroyed the vegetation – the wealth the Egyptians prized so highly.

Total Warfare: Finally, Darkness – a removal of the senses, a “cyber-attack” on reality – followed by the Death of the Firstborn.

Hashem attacked by sea, by land, and by air. He systematically dismantled their false Hashems of the river, the earth, and the sun. Hashem chose a plan of ratcheting up pressure. This was a calculated, slow-moving campaign with built-in “opt-out clauses” along the way. According to the Mishnah in Eduyot (2:10) and the commentary of Rashi (Exodus 7:25), the plagues spanned a period of 12 months. For a full year, there were pauses. Before almost every plague, there was a warning. There was a chance for Pharaoh to say, “Enough.” The intensity of the response escalated only because the refusal persisted.

These actions were a direct consequence of 210 years of acute slavery. This was a regime that threw Jewish babies into the Nile, that crushed the spirits of a people with “back-breaking labour.” The cruelty of the Egyptians was, quite literally, beyond words.

The “extraordinary chastisements” mentioned in the verses were not arbitrary; they were a direct and proportionate divine response to extraordinary cruelty. The objectives were met. Hashem wanted the Egyptians to know Hashem through witnessing “signs and wonders.” And extraordinary chastisements. This multi-front campaign of “shock and awe” (of which there were 10 taking the “pairs” and different environments Hashem was targeting) surely dismantled their false deities and their sense of invincibility, while offering them an opportunity to step back from the brink at each stage.

We should view the 10 Plagues as a year-long process of justice ratcheting pressure on a tyrant who refused every opportunity to stop the suffering. The message was seared into history: There is one Hashem, and eventually, the cries of the oppressed are heard.

Bo – The People Wake Up

Until now, the foundational narratives of Bereishit and Exodus have centred on individuals – the patriarchs and matriarchs, Moses, Aharon, and Miriam. In Parshat Bo, everything changes. The focus shifts dramatically from personal journeys to the birth of a nation. Here, the Jewish people awaken to collective responsibility and courage, stepping out of the shadows of slavery into the light of destiny.

This transformation begins with the Plague of Darkness:

ויט משה את ידו על השמים ויהי חשך. אפלה בכל ארץ מצרים שלשת ימים

Moses held out his arm toward the sky, and thick darkness descended upon all the land of Egypt for three days.

איש את אחיו ולא קמו איש ממקמו שלשת ימים ולכל בני ישראל היה אור לא ראו במושבתם

People could not see one another, and for three days no one could move about; but all the Israelites enjoyed light in their dwellings.

For Egypt, darkness was paralysing. For Israel, light prevailed. Rashi uncovers two startling truths: the darkness concealed the quiet removal of those Israelites unwilling to leave Egypt, and it enabled the faithful to locate Egyptian treasures – a covert act of rebellion and economic warfare. Here, under the cloak of night, the nation begins to stir. It is still tentative, still fearful, still needing cover. Many shrink back, unable to make the leap, and are lost. Yet for those who act, this is the first flicker of national agency.

The awakening accelerates with the first mitzvah given to the entire people: Kiddush HaChodesh – sanctifying the new moon.

החדש הזה לכם ראש חדשים ראשון הוא לכם לחדשי השנה

This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you.

This is not a mere calendrical note. It is a revolution. Until now, time belonged to Egypt. Slaves have no hours, no days, no autonomy. Suddenly, Hashem declares: "This month is yours." Sforno captures the drama:

"חודש הזה לכם ראש חדשים" – From now on these months will be yours, to do with as you like. In contrast to the years when you were enslaved, when you had no control over your time at all.

Time – the ultimate instrument of oppression – is wrested from Pharaoh's grip and placed in Israel's hands. Freedom begins not with movement, but with mastery of time.

But sovereignty over time is only half the story. The people are commanded to take a lamb – a deity of Egypt – slaughter it, and smear its blood on their doorposts.

דברו אל כל עדת ישראל לאמר בעשר לחדש הזה ויקחו להם איש שה לבית אבת שה
לבית

Speak to the whole community of Israel and say that on the tenth of this month each family shall take for itself a lamb, a lamb to a household.

ושחטו אתו כל קהל עדת ישראל בין הערבים

And all the assembled congregation of the Israelites shall slaughter it at twilight.

ולקחו מן הדם ונתנו על שתי המזוזות ועלה משקוף על הבתים אשרי אכלו אתו בהם

They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they are to eat it.

This is audacity incarnate. Before the final plague, before Pharaoh yields, Israel must declare allegiance to Hashem in full view of Egypt. No more hiding in darkness. This is a public, dangerous, irreversible stand. It demands faith, courage, and a willingness to risk everything for identity.

Why this command? Why now? Because a nation cannot be born in secrecy. It must step into history with a defining act of defiance. Two pillars are laid: control of time and public declaration. By sanctifying the new moon, Israel claims the rhythm of its existence. The Hebrew calendar becomes the heartbeat of Jewish life – festivals, prayers, life cycles – all flowing from this moment. By sacrificing Egypt's Hashem and marking their homes, Israel proclaims: We are no longer yours. We belong to Hashem. This is not symbolic; it is existential.

This moment reverberates across Jewish history. After the Holocaust, when the Jewish people faced near annihilation, the rebirth of the State of Israel was another act of audacious courage – a collective decision to seize destiny, to stand and fight for sovereignty against overwhelming odds and as in days of old to set up a Jewish State with its own calendar. Then, as in Egypt, identity was forged in defiance.

The sad reality of the Exodus was that it seems many Jews struggled to adapt to the change but for the 2 million or so who exited Egypt these initial commands and acts of defiance were critical to form the birth of a nation that despite all of its challenges has withstood 3,000 years of having to continually show the same defiance against powerful enemies – Now is no different.

Our leaders are important, but it is the nation that is the one that Hashem gave the commands and instructions to – we must step up. We have seen it in the faces of the brave soldiers who have stood up against our enemies, and we continue as a people to also mark and maintain a calendar which sets us apart from others and forges our identity. May we take strength from this as we head through yet more troubled times.

Beshalach – Red Sea or Sea of Reeds – Does It Matter?

The longstanding debate about the meaning and location of Yam Suf is important and one that fascinated me when I was younger. How could we not know exactly where such a defining miracle took place, or at least how could there be so many schools of opinion? The Torah introduces Yam Suf early in the Exodus story:

וַיִּסַּב אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָעָם דֶּרֶךְ הַמִּדְבָּר יָם סוּף

“So, Hashem led the people around by way of the wilderness to the Red Sea (Yam Suf)...” (Exodus 13:18).

The debate is between the definition of Suf which means “reed” or “rush,” which Rashi points out, and which would imply a body of water that has reeds, over a traditional view that it was the Red Sea. It doesn’t come from Suf meaning red, but since as long ago as the Bible was translated to Greek (and obviously before). The Septuagint translates it as Erythra Thalassa (“Red Sea”). This is logical as it is the main sea in the way of Israel and Egypt.

Across generations, scholars have suggested possibilities ranging from the Gulf of Suez (Red Sea) to the northern Egyptian lakes (lake with reeds) and even the Gulf of Aqaba (the eastern split today of the Red Sea). Yet the more one pays attention to the Torah’s own presentation, the more one notices something striking: the Torah simply does not seem to want to tell us the precise location. It focuses on what happened, who experienced it, why it occurred, and how Hashem intervened, but not where.

This omission is not unique. We do not know where Mount Sinai is. The graves of Moses, Aharon, and Miriam remain hidden. The sites of Gan Eden, the Tower of Babel, and Noah’s Ark are not geo-located.

As an aside, this is in different contrast to when it comes to sites in Eretz Yisrael. The Torah is exceptionally specific. Chevron, Shechem, Be'er Sheva, Bet Lechem, Yerushalayim – the Torah not only names them but anchors stories, covenants, and mitzvot in these locations. Here, geography is not incidental; it is sacred. Why the difference?

From my lowly eyes, the desert and all within it were transitory, a place deliberately in the middle of nowhere where the nation could form. It was a way station and therefore its details didn't matter as it had no bearing on the life we were to live in Israel. Attachment to it and the creation of shrines in it was exactly what Hashem didn't want. After all, Sforno adds the Land is uniquely subject to Divine Providence, watched "from the beginning of the year to the end," making its physical contours spiritually charged.

If so, the Torah's silence about the location of Yam Suf is clearly not an oversight. It is a contrast. The Torah is detailed only when place is essential to covenant and destiny.

Faith

But there is another dimension, one that speaks to faith itself.

There are many schools of thought and one of them is to find proofs for Torah, and I fully respect this school, but I come from the side of someone who innately believes 100% in the Torah as the Truth and I also recognise that I will simply never understand all the answers.

If I accept that Hashem created the universe, formed worlds with a word, and shaped existence from nothing, then the exact location of the miracle is not important to me. A Creator of galaxies can certainly split a sea. If there was certainty, the bodies of the Egyptian soldiers, the body of Moses, the Ark, then logically it

would be so much easier to believe, but the truth is rarely seen as such by everyone. To the extent that, for example, less than five percent of Palestinians believed (in a poll conducted by a Ramallah NGO) that the 7th of October happened as an attack on civilians. People would always find room for doubt, and sadly we know that is the case.

If the site of Yam Suf were precisely known, people would rush to prove, disprove, measure, and analyse. We would risk turning a spiritual event into a scientific puzzle, or just as bad, into a shrine. But Judaism asks us to recognise Hashem in ways that preserve free will. As the Ramchal writes in Derech Hashem, reward is only possible in a world balanced between clarity and concealment. Rav Dessler's Nekudat HaBechira echoes this: free will operates only where truth is not overwhelming. If faith were as obvious as gravity, it would cease to be faith.

Rabbi YY Rubinstein, a student chaplain at Manchester when I was studying in nearby Leeds, once illustrated this vividly: if an angel stopped you from eating a cheeseburger each time you tried, you wouldn't be more righteous, you'd simply have no choice. He actually assumes that the first or second times you wouldn't believe it and would probably try another burger. In the same way, overwhelming archaeological proof would erode the freedom that gives spiritual life its value. The Torah's deliberate ambiguity safeguards the space in which belief can flourish.

There are those who say that the lack of a location proves it didn't happen, but this is a matter of faith. We know the Jews were in Egypt, we know they ended up in Israel in large numbers, and we know they emerged with the Bible, the most read book ever. It must have been miraculous. And the fundamental reality is that an alternative narrative has never emerged despite hundreds of thousands or millions having made the journey.

Ultimately, whether the crossing occurred at the Red Sea, a nearby lagoon, or another body of water altogether changes nothing essential for me. It seems to me the Torah wanted to guard against free will and shrines.

As the late Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks often reminded us, the Torah is not a history book. It is Hashem's instruction, a guide to living. That is why it is focused on the story of the Exodus and the laws and ethics of the people as well as detail on the Land we were promised (and the commitment Hashem demands from us). That demands trust in the face of ambiguity, because ambiguity is exactly what allows free will.

So, was it the Red Sea or the Sea of Reeds? I truly don't know, and neither did many of our greatest commentators. But perhaps that is precisely the point. The Torah invites us to look beyond the map and instead embrace the enduring truth of what Hashem did for us and what He continues to do.

Yitro – Mount Sinai: A Look Behind the Matrix

Our childhood impressions of biblical moments often linger like cherished illustrations. For many, Mount Sinai evokes two contrasting images: one bathed in soft light with flowers blooming, a pinnacle of spiritual romance for the Jewish people; the other a mountain suspended above the nation, creating a strange and powerful mix.

This event was unique, arguably the only time Hashem revealed Himself directly to an entire nation at once. How are we to picture this in our limited minds? No other religion claims such a mass revelation, perhaps a sign that such an event would be impossible to fabricate.

The Torah's account, especially the verses immediately following the Ten Commandments, along with insights from Rashi and the Netziv, reveals a complex and sobering reality, somewhat different from the childlike image we carry.

Having witnessed thunder, lightning, the piercing blast of the shofar, and the mountain engulfed in smoke, the people were overwhelmed. They recoiled and stood at a distance (Exodus 20:15).

In the first verses after the Ten Commandments, the narrative seems to shift abruptly. The people said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but let Hashem not speak to us, lest we die" (Exodus 20:16).

Moses reassured them: "Do not be afraid. Hashem has come only to test you, and so that the fear of Him may remain with you, that you not sin" (Exodus 20:17).

This was a people hardened by miracles: the ten plagues, the splitting of the Red Sea. Yet this encounter shattered them. It instilled not primarily love, but raw, visceral fear.

Rashi emphasises the immediate trauma: the awe-inspiring dread of Hashem's overwhelming presence burned itself into their consciousness to prevent sin. The Netziv, in Ha'amek Davar, offers a complementary layer: the people feared ongoing direct communication with Hashem. Their level of preparation sufficed for this singular moment, but they sensed that future unmediated encounters would be lethal. They needed Moses as a permanent intermediary.

Both interpretations converge on a shared truth: despite their spiritual elevation and firsthand experience of open miracles, the people were traumatised.

What does this teach us?

We must not delude ourselves: the world is a tough place full of violence and evil. This is a product of Hashem's design choice of free will.

Yet the world is padded in a way that enables free will. If we were face to face with Hashem's majesty, we simply could not survive.

Belief in Hashem implies a parallel spiritual reality: an awesome realm beyond the physical "matrix" we inhabit. This realm may be totally alien to us, something simply unimaginable.

Human frailties and instincts shield us from its full intensity. Direct exposure is overwhelming, even terrifying.

At Sinai, the entire nation was granted one glimpse behind the curtain. The experience was shattering yet purposeful. It etched into our collective memory that a transcendent power exists – one

we cannot fully comprehend or withstand in our current form. Our ancestors tasted it; the primal tremor echoes faintly three thousand years later.

I do not advocate fear as the primary path to Hashem; love and connection remain the ideal.

But love without awe risks reducing Hashem to a mere friend or companion. Sinai reminds us: Hashem is the Creator and Sustainer of existence, infinitely beyond our matrix. We needed, at least once, to feel that power in its raw form.

The revelation was not just a gift of law; it was a necessary encounter with the terrifying majesty of the Divine. Only then could love and obedience rest on a foundation of genuine reverence.

As if to round out the point, the Torah continues:

Hashem said to Moses: Thus, shall you say to the Israelites: You yourselves saw I spoke to you from the heavens (Exodus 20:19).

The Netziv adds something profound that may account for the “shock” treatment:

“I spoke with you. Not in the manner of human thinking, that it is not honourable for Me to speak directly with the masses of people, except with special individuals who are of elevated stature. But behold, I did speak with you directly to show that you do not need any intermediary. And the matter is understood similarly, the Holy One, Blessed be He, hears the prayer of Israel and all His providence over them with no intermediary. And this verse serves as an introduction to the warning that comes immediately afterward, as will be explained.”

The Israelites were accustomed to a society with many Hashems and idols that served the people, feeding and watering them. Now they had One Hashem who had just established a direct relationship with them. It was not about what Hashem could do for them, but what they needed to do to serve Hashem.

All the people needed to hear it and feel that this was different: a flip in the relationship. Up to this point, it had been Hashem rescuing them. Now, with the coming laws of Mishpatim, they were Hashem's servants, and they could never say they did not hear Him speak to them directly.

It was quite an event – one that still reverberates, reminding us that true service begins with hearing the voice that once shook the mountain.

Mishpatim and Slavery

Parashat Mishpatim introduces the core legal principles of the Torah. Yet instead of beginning with uplifting commandments like “Love your neighbour” or “Do not put a stumbling block before the blind,” the Torah starts with a subject that deeply challenges modern sensibilities: slavery and indebted servitude (To which references regarding a Hebrew ‘slave’ refer).

The opening verses are:

ואלה המשפטים אשר תשים לפניהם

These are the rules that you shall set before them.

כי תקנה עבד עברי שש שנים יעבד ובשבעת יצא לחפשי חנם

When you acquire a male Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years; in the seventh year he shall go free, without payment.

For those of us raised in a liberal Western framework, this is difficult. The Torah legislates slavery rather than prohibiting it. And beyond that, the Torah calls on us to see ourselves as avadim laHashem, servants of Hashem. These are two challenges that require thoughtful engagement.

Why the Torah legislates slavery rather than abolishes it

Hashem could have created human beings already perfect, already obedient, already free of moral struggle. But there would have been no growth, no learning, no free will. Instead, we are placed in a world where we develop ourselves, confront the moral failures of society, and slowly elevate the human condition.

At the time the Torah was given, slavery was universal. The Israelites themselves had just emerged from centuries of bondage. Poverty, debt, and servitude were woven into the economic fabric of the ancient world. Rather than abolish an entrenched system overnight, the Torah regulates it and humanises it, setting standards far ahead of those of surrounding cultures.

And the phenomenon has not disappeared. The Walk Free Global Slavery Index estimates that 50 million people today are in forced labour, forced marriage, debt bondage, and other slavery-like conditions. Many millions more live in situations barely distinguishable from servitude. Abraham Lincoln abolished slavery in the United States, but the long road to equality continued across generations.

In this sense, humanity is a work in progress, and the Torah reflects that reality. It offers a fixed divine blueprint together with a flexible interpretive system. The Written and Oral Torah were given together, allowing future generations to deepen, refine, and extend the law while remaining anchored to its principles.

As the Rambam writes:

“All the commandments that were given to Moses at Sinai were given together with their explanation. This is what is called Oral Law. Moses taught the entire Torah that Hashem gave him to the entire Jewish people. He taught them the Written Torah and then taught them its explanation, the Oral Torah.”

(Rambam, Introduction to Mishneh Torah)

The Talmud famously asserts this interpretive responsibility in the story of the heavenly voice:

“Rabbi Joshua stood on his feet and said: ‘It is not in heaven.’ What did he mean by this? Rabbi Jeremiah said: ‘The Torah was already given at Mount Sinai. We do not pay attention to a heavenly voice, for You already wrote in the Torah at Mount Sinai, “After the majority to incline” (Exodus 23:2).”

(Bava Metzia 59b)

With regards to slavery specifically, the late Chief Rabbi Sacks captures this moral trajectory with characteristic insight:

“In miracles, Hashem changes nature but never human nature. Were He to do so, the entire project of the Torah – the free worship of free human beings – would have been rendered null and void... Hashem wanted mankind to abolish slavery but by their own choice, and that takes time. Ancient economies were dependent on slavery... The challenge to which Torah legislation was an answer is: how can one create a social structure in which, of their own accord, people will eventually come to see slavery as wrong and freely choose to abandon it?”

(Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation*, Mishpatim: “The Slow End of Slavery”)

The Torah does not expect a perfect world. It expects a developing one, guided by laws that are firm yet adaptable, like the Japanese bullet train built with flexible tolerance to withstand earthquakes. We are meant to move society forward. I do not believe in slavery, and I believe the Torah expects us to work toward a world without it. We still have 50 million people to free.

We are servants of Hashem

The second challenge is philosophical rather than historical. In a culture that celebrates freedom from all external constraint, the

Torah teaches that true freedom comes from knowing Whom we serve. We are not, and were never meant to be, entirely autonomous. We are avadim laHashem.

For unto Me are the children of Israel servants; they are My servants whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your Hashem.”

(Leviticus 25:55)

Even in the context of human servitude, the Torah insists that our ultimate allegiance is not to any human master but to Hashem. The Exodus itself is framed not only as liberation from Pharaoh but as redirection of our identity: we were taken out of Egypt so that we could become Hashem’s servants, not servants of servants. This is a form of servitude that does not diminish freedom but creates it. To live without answering to anything higher than ourselves is not freedom, but rootlessness. To bind ourselves to the Creator is to anchor our lives in purpose, morality, and transcendence.

This is the real paradox at the heart of Mishpatim. The Torah discourages human slavery by regulating it out of existence over time, while at the same moment encouraging a different avdut – a willing submission to Hashem that elevates rather than degrades. Modern society often views any form of obligation as an infringement of personal liberty, yet the Torah teaches that freedom without direction becomes emptiness. The Oral Law allows the Torah’s principles to flex and adapt as human understanding grows, but the foundational truth remains: true freedom comes from choosing to align ourselves with the divine will.

Mishpatim presents many challenges to the modern reader, and slavery is only one of them. But part of understanding the Torah is recognising that it speaks to each generation at its own stage of

moral development. We often judge the ancient world by today's standards without acknowledging that our own world, too, is far from perfected. The Torah's laws set humanity on a path of continual refinement, guided by principles that are fixed yet applied through a system intentionally designed to evolve. Our responsibility is to continue that journey, to elevate society, and to draw closer to Hashem through choosing lives of meaning, service, and moral purpose.

Terumah – The Two Cherubim: The Spark in the Holy of Holies

When Hashem instructs Moses to build the Sanctuary in which His Shekhina (Divine Presence) will dwell, the Torah describes many components that are both functional and beautiful. Yet among all the materials, structures, and vessels, the two Cherubim atop the Ark of the Covenant stand out as utterly unique. Their presence feels different from the rest of the Mishkan, almost jarring, as if they belong to another emotional dimension entirely.

Understanding what they were and why they held such a central position is essential to grasping the deeper meaning of the Mishkan. In fact, it is possible to argue that they reveal the core of our relationship with Hashem: a bond based on deep emotion and love, standing in contrast to, and alongside, the daily rituals that often subsume us.

To set the scene, only five chapters before Parshat Terumah, Hashem commands:

“אלוהי כסף ואלוהי זהב לא תעשו לכם”

“With Me, therefore, you shall not make any Hashems of silver, nor shall you make for yourselves any Hashems of gold.”

Yet now, within this functional set of instructions for the Mishkan, Hashem commands the creation of two golden figures to sit atop the holiest object in existence. This contrast draws us in immediately. It seems almost at odds with the previous command, walking a fine line.

While much of the Mishkan is described in practical and architectural terms, the heart of the Sanctuary is portrayed in five lyrical verses:

“...Make two cherubim of gold... one at each end of the cover... with wings spread upward... facing one another... and from between the two cherubim I will speak with you...”

The Torah gives precise craftsmanship instructions, but the commentators offer strikingly different depictions of what these figures actually looked like. Rashi writes:

“כרובים – דמות פרצוף תינוק היה להם”

“They had the face of a child” (Sukkah 5b).

This understanding echoes into modern times, where even the dictionary defines a “cherub” as an innocent, chubby-faced figure. This image speaks to the loving yet hierarchical relationship between a parent and a child.

However, the Talmud offers a different, far more intimate perspective. Yoma 54a records that the Keruvim were “מעורים זה בזה,” intertwined like a loving male and female. Their presence in the Sanctuary is therefore both innocent and deeply intimate.

“ונועדתי לך שם... מבין שני הכרובים.”

“There I will meet with you... from between the two cherubim.”

This site becomes the focal point of Divine communication and later the place where the Kohen Gadol stands on Yom Kippur. Why would such evocative, almost romantic imagery be placed at the centre of holiness?

Rav Melamed in Pninei Halacha points us to an unexpected source for understanding this: the Mishna in Ta'anit (26b), which teaches that two of the most joyous days of the Jewish calendar were Tu B'Av and Yom Kippur. On those days, the maidens of Jerusalem would wear borrowed white garments "שלא לבייש את מי שאין לו" and dance in the vineyards, calling out to the young men: "בחור שאנא... עיניך וראה מה אתה בורר לך... שקר החן והבל היופי"

Rav Melamed asks the obvious question: How can matchmaking take place on Yom Kippur, the most solemn day of the year?

He answers that marriage is itself holy, for "השכינה שורה ביניהם" the Shekhina dwells between husband and wife who are faithful to one another. Their love reveals the unity of Hashem so profoundly that Hashem permits His Name to be erased to restore peace between them. The Arizal teaches that the command to "Love your neighbour as yourself" (ואהבת לרעך כמוך) is most fully fulfilled between spouses.

Rav Melamed continues:

"וכן מצינו שצורת הכרובים... היתה כצורת איש ואשה בעת קיום מצוות עונה."

"The form of the Keruvim mirrored a man and woman in intimate embrace."

Holiness does not shrink or suppress life. Rather, "הקדושה אינה" "מצמצמת את החיים אלא מעצימה אותם" "Holiness does not restrict life; it intensifies it."

When Israel fulfilled Hashem's will, the Keruvim faced each other. When Israel strayed, they turned away (Bava Batra 99a). Their posture was a living barometer of the relationship between Hashem and His people.

This teaches that the Keruvim represent not fear or distance, but passionate, loyal love. They stand at the core of the Mishkan because our relationship with Hashem is meant to contain both structure and emotion. Fear creates discipline and stability. Love generates depth, warmth, and longing.

The Rambam describes the highest form of serving Hashem as serving out of love:

“עושה האמת מפני שהוא אמת.”

A person does what is true because it is true.

He describes ideal love of Hashem as becoming “כחולת אהבה,” lovesick, as in Shir HaShirim: “כי חולת אהבה אני.” Rabbi Akiva taught, “All the writings are holy, but Shir HaShirim is the Holy of Holies.”

The Keruvim, therefore, are not ornamental. They are essential. They show that the holiest space in the world is defined by relationship, by closeness, by yearning, by fidelity. The Mishkan is full of structure and detail, beams, sockets, fabrics, but at its centre stand two figures representing the most vulnerable and most powerful force in human and spiritual life: love.

This is where Hashem meets Moses. This is where the Kohen Gadol enters on Yom Kippur. This is the reminder that Hashem desires not only obedience but connection, not only awe but affection.

Loving Hashem is demanding. It is unpredictable and emotionally risky. This is why the Torah cautions about “Hashems of gold” (אלוהי זהב). Passion misdirected becomes idolatrous, as we tragically saw with the Golden Calf. Fear feels safer. But without love, the relationship dries out. The Keruvim teach that neither fear nor structure alone can sustain holiness. A relationship with

Hashem, like a relationship with a spouse, needs commitment and discipline, but also heart, longing, and emotional presence.

Finally, the journey of the Keruvim mirrors the journey of Judaism itself. Prior to the Mishkan, we encounter the Keruvim only once in the entire Torah. They are seen in the third chapter of Bereishit, guarding the entrance to Gan Eden with a revolving flaming sword.

In Eden, they represent distance, exile, and the way back being barred. In the Mishkan, they lean toward one another in a golden embrace. From distance to closeness, from exile to intimacy, from fear to love.

As the Rambam said above, we should be lovesick in our relationship with Hashem. The Kruvim seem to be a clear sign that it sits centre together at one and in rhythm with the ritual side of Jewish Practice.

Tetzaveh and Zachor – War and the Urim and Thummim

As I write this week's Parshah on February 26, 2026, many of us in Israel are carrying the same unspoken weight: will a larger war engulf us in the coming days. We can look to this week's Parsha for some inspiration.

The uncertainty is palpable. U.S. carriers and jets shift positions, deadlines regarding Iran approach and recede, hospitals prepare quietly, and diplomats receive evacuation options. No one truly knows what tomorrow holds. Like many of you, I find myself scanning X and news sites for signals in the noise, while others step away entirely, aware that the so-called experts understand little more than we do.

We want reassurance that we will be safe. Those defending us seek clarity on the road ahead. Our greatest kings, prophets, and leaders once had a G-d-given instrument intended for moments exactly like this, a tool to seek guidance from Heaven in times of existential uncertainty, especially in matters of war. It was called the Urim and Thummim.

What was this enigmatic device? How did it function? And in its absence today, does it still offer wisdom for our current fog of doubt? I believe that it does, and that it offers a measure of quiet comfort as well.

The Ibn Ezra opens this week's parsha with a tantalising and poetic line:

לדעת אמת אם לבבך יאווה ראה כל גויה לנכבד בנוה ואורים ותומים וסודם אחוה בסתר
בסדר ואתה תצוה

“If your heart desires to know the truth, look at the body and consider the most glorious thing within it. I will secretly reveal the mystery of the Urim and Thummim in the portion ‘And Thou Shalt Command.’”

Rabbi Yehuda Leib Krinsky explains that the “most glorious thing” is the human soul. The Ibn Ezra binds the secret of this oracle, the instrument for national decision making, to the soul itself. He teaches that the essence of this device reflects the core spiritual command embedded in the name of this week’s parasha. Far from a mechanical or magical object, the Urim and Thummim demanded an inner readiness and purity of spirit.

The Torah gives only a brief description.

“Inside the breastpiece of decision you shall place the Urim and Thummim, so that they are over Aharon’s heart when he comes before G-d” (Exodus 28:30).

The Ramban paints a vivid picture. Unlike every other vessel in the Mishkan, the Urim and Thummim were not crafted or donated. They were placed directly into the breastplate and consisted of holy Names of Hashem hidden within its folds. When the Kohen Gadol inquired, for example “Who shall go up first against the Canaanites,” he focused on the Urim, which means “lights.” Letters on the stones of the tribes would illuminate. But glowing fragments alone were insufficient. They could point toward the phrase “Yehudah Yaaleh,” Judah shall go up, yet the letters might also permit incorrect combinations.

This is where the Thummim, meaning perfection or integrity, entered. Through their power the heart of the priest was refined and granted divine clarity. He could assemble the illuminated letters into coherent and true words. The Urim offered the data. The Thummim granted the insight to interpret it. We see King

David rely on this repeatedly during moments of danger with the Philistines.

This mysterious prophetic instrument is difficult to comprehend, and perhaps it is meant to remain so. It offered certain individuals, on a specific spiritual level, access to a prophetic realm that lies far beyond our experience. Most of the Torah focuses on practical living and collective memory, not on the mechanics of the spiritual world. To borrow from business language, its inner workings are beyond our pay grade.

Bringing this to our present moment and to the approach of Purim and Parashat Zachor, the Urim and Thummim were primarily tools for war.

The Netziv notes that the core purpose of the Choshen, the breastpiece, was national and military. He links the word Choshen to “Chash”, to hurry, because war demands swift judgement and clear decisions. There was no room for endless debate. The king and the people turned to the Urim and Thummim especially for matters of national survival. The Talmud limits its use to the king, the Sanhedrin, or essential communal needs such as the anointed priest for war. It was the ancient equivalent of a war room, joining human planning with the guidance of Heaven when Jewish lives were at stake.

This Shabbat we also read Parashat Zachor. “Remember what Amalek did to you.” We are reminded that there have always been enemies who seek our destruction without cause. Today we face such an enemy in the Iranian regime and its proxies.

The lesson of the Urim and Thummim aligns precisely with Zachor. Joshua fought Amalek below while Moses prayed above. Victory required both physical effort and spiritual elevation. We are not meant to rely only on miracles. The story of Purim reinforces this

as well. Its triumph came through human decisions, strategy, and courage, Hashem's hand hidden within natural events and our forebear's bravery.

The Torah leaves the mechanics of the Urim undefined, and no blueprint has survived. We live in an age of *hester panim*, the hidden face of G-d. The link between this week's parsha and Purim deepens this idea. Moses's name is absent from Tetzaveh and G-d's Name is absent from Megillat Esther. In both, the hiddenness itself becomes the message. In Purim's quiet miracles our ancestors prevailed not through visible signs from Heaven but through intelligence, loyalty, bravery, and faith.

We no longer have glowing stones or open revelations. What we have is ourselves and the responsibility to act in a concealed world.

Yet we are not without guidance. The Urim reminds us that spiritual strength must be joined with the ability to see beyond the surface. Israel's enduring resilience has always emerged from this combination: the soul that Hashem breathed into us together with the Yiddishe Kop, our ingenuity, our intelligence services, and our relentless determination. It is Torah joined with the IDF, spiritual awareness woven together with physical action.

Place Hashem's Name first, just as the Urim and Thummim rested over Aharon's heart, and that becomes our centre of balance. From this foundation, even as we face anxiety about the unknown, we can confront the frightening data of our world not with panic but with steadiness and direction.

Follow the heart and soul aligned with Hashem's instruction and we will endure. This is the essence of Purim. It teaches that victory is possible even in darkness, through courage, wise manoeuvring, and trust in the unseen.

Even when His Name is hidden, He walks beside us. May we find the strength to stand firm. May we be victorious. May clarity pierce the concealment, speedily and in our days.

The Urim and Thummim teach that neither action nor faith alone is sufficient. It is their union, body and soul, that will see us through whatever comes next.

Ki-Tisa – The Holy Stubbornness of a Wartime Bride

In Parashat Ki Tisa, the Torah presents one of its most psychologically nuanced portraits of the Jewish people through the repeated phrase “am k’sheh oref”, meaning “a stiff-necked people.” The term echoes across the Torah six times, appearing four times in this week’s Parsha and twice more in Devarim. Its repetition is intentional. It compels us to confront a trait that has always been both our enduring flaw and our unexpected strength.

The narrative unfolds in dramatic stages. Hashem first applies the label after the sin of the Golden Calf, offering a piercing judgement of refusal and rebellion. Twice more, Hashem declares that He cannot dwell among the people because their stubbornness would draw the force of divine justice too intensely. Yet in the Parsha’s redemptive turning point, Moses uses the exact same phrase not to condemn the people but to plead for them:

“If I have found favour in Your eyes, let the Lord go in our midst, because it is a stiff-necked people, and pardon our iniquity.”

Moses transforms the critique into an argument for closeness. His logic is audacious. Israel’s stubbornness is not a reason for Hashem to withdraw, but a reason He must remain.

Ramban illuminates this reversal. A people with such intense resolve, he explains, cannot be entrusted to intermediaries. An angel would lose patience, and a human leader would despair. Only Hashem possesses the limitless compassion required to guide, restrain, and forgive a people whose nature resists being guided. What begins as an accusation becomes the foundation for an intimate bond.

Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch expands this idea by teaching that the same inner force that fuels rebellion can also sustain unwavering faith. The Netziv adds that a “stiff neck” is morally neutral. It is a deep reservoir of inner strength. When directed away from Hashem, it leads to disaster. When aligned with Hashem, it becomes a loyalty no empire can break.

Rabbi Yitzchak Nissenbaum, writing from within the nightmare of the Warsaw Ghetto, captured this paradox with haunting clarity. He imagined Moses pleading before Hashem:

“What is now their greatest flaw will one day become their most heroic quality. Just as they are stubborn in disobedience, so one day they will be stubborn in loyalty. Nations will demand that they assimilate, but they will refuse. They will suffer humiliation, persecution, torture, and death, yet they will remain faithful. They will go to their deaths saying Ani ma’amin.”

His words, written before his own murder, proved tragically prophetic.

We often imagine this kind of heroism as belonging only to the past. Yet yesterday I witnessed a glimpse of this holy stubbornness with my own eyes.

Living in the region that Israel inhabits today, surrounded by hostile actors and relentless threats, we unfortunately have no choice but to be firm and unyielding. We must remain vigilant and steady. But Ki Tisa teaches that our stubbornness must be directed toward Hashem, not against Him, and that it must express itself through faith, continuity, and principled resilience.

And so, in the shadow of an escalating war, with sirens sounding, uncertainty everywhere, soldiers deployed, and daily life disrupted, my daughter stood before me wearing her wedding

dress for the first time. The atmosphere in the country is heavy. Security alerts interrupt the day. News updates arrive with a sense of dread. People whisper their worries about what tomorrow may bring. The reasonable choice might be to postpone the celebration, to wait for calmer days, to retreat until the storm subsides.

But she and her chatan refused to give in. They chose to build a Jewish home now, in this moment, in this land. It is an act of faith not despite the challenges but in defiance of them.

When I saw her radiant in that dress, I cried tears of joy. In that moment, the trait our Parsha struggles with became something luminous and pure. She embodied stubbornness in the noblest sense. She refused to succumb to despair, refused to let terror dictate the timing of her joy, and refused to allow fear to decide the course of her life. In their quiet resolve, the rebellion of the Golden Calf was answered by the sanctity of the chuppah. Her stance declared: We will build. We will dance. We will not break.

The Torah's repetition teaches that stubbornness is like nuclear energy. It is powerful and volatile. Left unrefined, it can destroy. Directed toward idolatry or complaint, it becomes our downfall. But when harnessed toward covenant, toward love of our people, and toward the refusal to let darkness extinguish Jewish life, it becomes our salvation.

My daughter's wedding – celebrated even as war shaped its contours, different in many ways from what we had once imagined, yet no less joyful for that – reflects the beautiful stubbornness of a people who refuse to let their enemies script their destiny.

May we merit to be an “am k'sheh oref” in the right way: unyielding in our commitment to one another, steadfast in our heritage, and resolute in choosing life.

Vayakel-Pekudei – Faith and Integrity Intertwined

Faith and integrity are not mutually exclusive but are deeply connected. The rituals we keep and the ethics we uphold form a single fabric of spiritual life. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the double parshiot of Vayakhel – Pekudei, often read together at the conclusion of Sefer Shemot.

The Mishkan's original purpose was to create a dwelling place for Hashem on earth, a visible manifestation of His Shechina among the people. Fifteen chapters earlier, the Torah states explicitly:

ועשו לי מקדש ושכנתי בתוכם

“And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them.”
(Exodus 25:8)

By the end of Sefer Shemot, this objective is fulfilled. Hashem's presence not only enters the Mishkan but remains there continuously – regardless of the people's spiritual state. The book concludes with this powerful description:

כי ענן יהוה על המשכן יומם ואש תהיה לילה בו לעיני כל בית ישראל בכל מסעיהם

“For over the Tabernacle a cloud of Hashem rested by day, while fire would appear in that cloud by night, in the view of all the house of Israel throughout their journeys.” (Exodus 40:38)

The Netziv comments on the words בכל מסעיהם in his work Ha'amek Davar (Shemot 40:38):

בכל מסעיהם... בין שהיה ברצון ה' בין שהיה בזעף... מכל מקום זה לא נשתנה עסק
הענן שהיה תמיד

“In all their travels, whether it was with Hashem’s favour or with His anger, such as after the incident of the spies, nevertheless, the matter of the cloud did not change – it was always present.”

This constancy teaches a profound truth: Hashem’s presence endures even in moments of disappointment or spiritual decline. Faith persists through difficulty.

To appreciate this, we must consider the structure of the final chapters of Sefer Shemot. From the journey into Egypt to the Exodus, from the giving of the Torah to the desert wanderings, and finally to the construction of the Mishkan, the book charts the path from slavery to spiritual identity. The Ramban, in his introduction to Shemot, notes that the exile is not fully over until the Divine Presence dwells among the people. Only then does physical wandering become spiritual homecoming.

Pekudei introduces one more essential component: the detailed accounting of all materials used in the Mishkan. As a CPA, I naturally appreciate this section – but its significance transcends professional interest.

The Torah portion begins:

אלה פקודי המשכן... אשר פקדעל פימשה

“These are the accounts of the tabernacle... as they were counted, according to the commandment of Moses...” (Exodus 38:21)

It then lists precise tallies of materials, such as:

כל הזהבתשע ועשרים ככר ושבע מאות ושלשים שקל...

“All the gold... came to 29 talents and 730 shekels...” (Exodus 38:24)

And similarly for the silver:

וכסף פקודי העדה... מאת ככר ואלף ושבע מאות וחמשה ושבעים שקל

“The silver of those of the community who were recorded came to 100 talents and 1,775 shekels...”

(Exodus 38:25)

After this careful accounting, the Torah concludes:

ככל אשר צוה יהוה את משה כן עשו בני ישראל

“Just as Hashem had commanded Moses, so the Israelites had done all the work.”

(Exodus 39:42)

And finally:

וירא משה את כל המלאכה... ויברך אתם משה

“Moses saw all the work... and Moses blessed them.”

(Exodus 39:43)

The Mishkan was the people’s central spiritual project – built with generous hearts, voluntary contributions, and enormous communal effort. Yet spiritual intention alone was not sufficient. The Torah insists that the funds be handled with transparency and accountability.

Rabbi Sacks (Covenant & Conversation, Pekudei, Integrity in Public Life) explains that Moses’ detailed reckoning – audited by independent Levites – prevents suspicion and establishes an enduring model of ethical leadership. Rambam echoes this idea when he rules that charity funds may only be entrusted to individuals of unquestionable integrity (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Matanot Aniyim 10:8).

Rabbi Sacks' summary captures the point succinctly:

A free society is built on moral foundations, and those must be unshakeable. Moses' example in giving a full accounting of the Mishkan funds set a vital precedent for all time.

This message applies to every sphere of life – business, community leadership, and any situation involving the resources of others. Ritual observance alone is insufficient; competence alone is insufficient. Faith and integrity must operate together. The Mishkan embodies this harmony.

Today, in place of the Mishkan we have prayer, and in place of its donations we have tzedaka. While the forms have changed, the requirement for integrity has not. Those entrusted with communal funds, those who manage other people's money, and those conducting business are obligated to act with honesty and transparency. It is not optional. It appears at the threshold of Hashem's presence filling the Mishkan – and remains one of the foundations for joy, peace, and enduring faith.

Sefer Vayikra – Intentionality, Holiness, and Inner Refinement

Vayikra turns inward, focusing on the spiritual architecture of holiness through korbanot, ritual, and ethical sensitivity. It emphasises intention over action alone, teaching that what lies beneath our behaviours, our motives, awareness, and sincerity, is what transforms the physical into the sacred. One of the defining ideas in this section is captured in the phrase “preserving and enhancing,” where even something as simple as salt becomes a model for how small, consistent acts can deepen meaning. Holiness is not found in grand gestures, but in the quiet discipline of bringing intention into the everyday.

Vayikra – Salt – Preserving and Enhancing

There is a great deal to unpack in the book of Vayikra, with its focus on sacrifices. It is not always an easy topic to relate to, and for many of us it can feel distant, even uncomfortable. Yet within that world of korbanot (sacrificial offerings) are ideas that feel strikingly close to our own lives.

One of those ideas is intention.

There is a well-known debate between the Rambam and the Ramban about the purpose of korbanot. The Rambam, in Moreh Nevuchim (III:32), understands them as rooted in human behaviour, a way of redirecting existing instincts toward Hashem. The Ramban, in his commentary to Vayikra 1:9, sees something far deeper, suggesting that a person should feel as though they themselves are being offered.

Yet however we understand korbanot, one thing is clear: without inner intent, they are empty. As Chazal teach.

“מצוות צריכות כוונה” (Berachot 13a), mitzvot require intention.

Without that inner engagement, what remains is action without transformation. A sacrifice without intention becomes, at best, a technical act; at worst, it reflects the warning of Mishlei:

“זבח רשעים תועבה” (Mishlei 21:27),

“The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination, how much more so when it is brought with evil intent.”

And if we are honest, the same can sometimes be said of prayer. Many of our prayers, certainly my own, fall short of what they

could be, and it is reasonable to assume that the same was true of sacrifices in their time.

Which brings us to something far simpler, a possible solution that applies in many areas: salt.

Salt is one of those things we barely notice because it is always there. At the Seder table it appears in the salt water, on Friday night in the bread blessing, and in kitchens everywhere it is universal. It is never the main ingredient, yet without it something is missing. Food feels flat. With it, flavour deepens and something ordinary becomes meaningful.

It is striking, then, that when the Torah introduces korbanot, it emphasises salt:

“על כל קרבנך תקריב מלח... ולא תשבית מלח ברית אלקיך” (Vayikra 2:13),

“On all your offerings, you shall offer salt... you shall not omit the salt of the covenant of your Hashem.”

It is not an enhancement. It is essential.

The Netziv, Haamek Davar (Vayikra 2:13), explains:

המלח בפ"ע רע לאכילה ומקולקל מאד וגם שורף כמה דברים ומאבדם ומ"מ הוא המקיים וממתיק את האוכל. וה"ה ככל הליכות הטבע שברא הקב"ה יסוד האור הוא החשך ויסוד כל טוב הוא הרע. ומאופל ומחושך מאיר עיני האדם. וקבע הקב"ה עולמו בזה האופן כדי שייגע ההשגחה העליונה לפי המעשים בטוב. שהרי אם היה הטוב בהחלט בלי רע וכן הרע בהחלט לא היה אפשר להיות ההשגחה לפי המעשים אלא לצדיק גמור או לרשע גמור ולא למי שראוי להרעה והטבה. משא"כ עתה מגיע השתלשלות הענינים משעה רעה לתכלית הטוב מצומצם לפי המעשים בהשגחתו יתברך כמה יאריכון ימי הרעה ואיך תהי הרבה או מעט עד שבא לידי תכלית הטוב הבא באחרית הימים של חשך. מש"ה ברא הקב"ה הליכות הטבע בזה האופן. ומלח בטבעו. אות הוא על זה הברית שברא עולמו באופן שישגיח על יצוריו בכלל ועל ישראל בפרט וא"כ מלח הוא ברית אלהיך. מש"ה אע"ג שבא להמתיק המאכל מכ"מ לא תשבית מעל

מנחתך כדי להתבונן על הברית של ההשגחה. ולהיפך הוא דבש תחלתו מתוק וערב
”וסופו רע ואחריתה תוגה ע”כ לא תבא בית ה' להקטרה

Salt, on its own, is harmful to eat, unpleasant, even destructive. Yet it preserves and enhances food. So too the world. The foundation of light is darkness, and the foundation of all good is that which appears bad. From darkness, a person’s eyes are opened. Hashem structured the world this way so that His providence can operate in response to human action. If reality were entirely good or entirely bad, there would be no process, only the completely righteous or completely wicked. Instead, events unfold from difficulty toward a precise good, shaped by our actions, until that good emerges from within the darkness itself. Salt is therefore a sign of this covenant, that Hashem oversees His world, in general and in particular, through this process. That is why it must not be absent from the offering. By contrast, honey begins sweet but does not endure.

This idea is echoed elsewhere. As Mishlei teaches:

”דבש מצאת אכל דרך פן תשבחנו והקאתו” (Mishlei 25:16),

“If you find honey, eat only what you need, lest you become full and vomit it.”

The Netziv is describing a world in which things are not defined by how they begin, but by what they become. Salt, on its own, is not pleasant, yet it gives depth and endurance. Honey begins with sweetness, but it does not offer the same lasting value.

Seen in that light, salt is the most unremarkable yet essential ingredient. It works quietly, but it allows something to endure.

We no longer bring sacrifices. Instead, we have tefillah, described by Chazal as

”זו תפילה איזו היא עבודה שבלב?” (Ta’anit 2a) – the service of the heart.

Yet prayer can easily become routine, words we say without fully engaging with them.

Speaking personally, this is something I have felt strongly over the years when preparing to serve as chazan on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Taking the time to understand the text and its context deepens my ability to connect. In a sense, that preparation is the salt added to the words. The same text, with that added layer, carries weight and meaning and changes the experience of tefillah.

So what is the salt of prayer?

Perhaps it is this. The effort to ensure the words do not simply pass through us, but stay with us, and at the same time to bring out their depth through how we say them, even if only in a single phrase.

Most of us cannot be expected, and I certainly include myself, to transform every word of prayer. But at the right moments, when we add that small measure of salt, the difference is real. A little more attention and a little more intention can turn passing words into something that endures.

Because in the end, the Torah is not asking for honey.

It is asking for salt.

And we all know how much a small pinch of salt makes a difference.

Tzav – Monks, Gentry, or neither? – The Kohanim and the Economics of Holiness

I have many friends who are Kohanim, and if you ask them, they will tell you that it is not a role that comes with many obvious benefits today, living in Israel or abroad, as compared to ancient times. They do not receive gifts of meat, grain, oil, or wine as their ancestors once did. There is no steady stream of Terumah arriving at their door, no portions from offerings waiting to be eaten. Instead, what they experience most tangibly are the obligations: the need to avoid contact with the dead, the additional restrictions at times of funerals, and the heightened awareness of their status in moments of loss.

And yet, alongside those limitations, there remain certain privileges and signs of honour and respect – the first aliyah to the Torah, the opportunity to bless the community with Birkat Kohanim, a quiet but enduring sense of distinction. Even today, Kohanim are often invited to lead Birkat Hamazon, and there remains a sensitivity not to place them in roles that would be considered undignified. It is a role that, in our time, is more symbolic and spiritual than economic – but not without form.

Which makes Parashat Tzav all the more striking.

Because when we read the parasha, we encounter a completely different reality – one in which the Kehunah is not only a spiritual role, but an economic one as well. The Torah speaks repeatedly, almost insistently, about what the Kohanim receive, as well as what they don't.

“That which is left thereof shall Aharon and his sons eat... I have given it unto them for their portion of My offerings made by fire; it is most holy” (Vayikra 6:9–11).

“The breast of waving and the thigh of heaving... have I given unto Aharon the priest and unto his sons as a due forever” (7:34).

“This is the anointing portion of Aharon and the anointing portion of his sons...” (7:35).

The language is unmistakable. These are not incidental details. The Torah frames them as gifts, as dues, as their portion. The Kohanim, uniquely among the tribes, have no land, no territorial inheritance, no independent economic base. Instead, their sustenance is woven directly into the avodah itself.

But to understand this fully, we have to step back and ask a deeper question: what exactly is the Kehunah meant to be?

Chazal speak of three crowns (Keterim) – Keter Torah, Keter Malchut, and Keter Kehunah. The crown of the priesthood is not earned but pre-selected. It is given to Aharon and his descendants as a role, a destiny, a lifelong calling. It is, in a sense, the most “given” of all the crowns – and perhaps that is precisely the point.

The Torah’s vision of the Kohen is also broader than the altar alone. The Kohanim are not only those who serve; they are also those who were meant to teach and those who heal. They instruct the people in matters of Torah, guiding them in distinguishing between the pure and the impure, the permitted and the forbidden. And they stand at the centre of one of the Torah’s most intimate human encounters – the diagnosis and restoration of the metzora, a process that is as much spiritual as it is physical.

They are, in this sense, both teachers and healers – figures who stand at the intersection of law, life, and human vulnerability.

It is also the crown that was arguably the most famously contested. In the rebellion of Korach, the claim is made: “Why do you raise yourselves above the congregation?” The Kehunah is perceived as privilege, as elevation, perhaps even as authority. But the Torah’s response – spread across Sefer Bamidbar and already embedded here in Vayikra – is to redefine what that crown actually means.

It is not a crown of ownership. It is a crown of dependence.

At one level, the system described in Tzav seems to provide the answer. As Maimonides explains, eating from the offerings is itself a mitzvah. The Kohanim receive portions from sin offerings, guilt offerings, meal offerings, and peace offerings. Alongside this, they benefit from the wider system of priestly gifts – terumah, first portions, and other contributions – that sustain not only the individual Kohen but his entire household. On the surface, it can look like a system of provision, even of security.

But that impression does not quite hold.

The Torah carefully ensures that what is given never becomes something that can be held. The Kohanim cannot accumulate wealth. What they receive must be eaten within strict boundaries – specific places, specific times. There is no land to develop, no business to expand, no capital to grow. Their sustenance is immediate, almost perishable. It feeds them, but it never settles them. It provides, but it does not secure.

The Ramban highlights another dimension: the portions are shared among the entire beit av of Kohanim serving at that time. This is not a system that rewards individual achievement or allows for hierarchy. It is deliberately distributed, ensuring that all who

are part of the service share in its benefits. Even those unable to serve fully partake in the portions. The system resists concentration and reinforces community.

So what kind of life does this create?

Are the Kohanim, as it might appear, a kind of religious elite – wearing the crown of Kehunah as a mark of status?

Or are they something closer to servants, sustained but constrained?

They are certainly not monks. The Torah does not ask them to withdraw from physical life or to embrace poverty. They marry, raise families, and eat well. They partake of what the Torah itself calls kodshei kodashim, the most sacred of foods. There is no ideal here of denial or asceticism.

But neither are they gentry. They do not own land, they do not control production, and they do not generate independent wealth. Their table may be full, but it is never self-sustaining. It depends, continuously and almost precariously, on the actions of others – on the farmer who separates terumah, on the individual who brings a korban, on the rhythm of the nation's spiritual life.

Perhaps the most accurate description is that the Torah creates something entirely different: a class that is sustained but never secured.

And yet, this dependence does not diminish them. If anything, it sharpens their role. Because they do not own, they must guide. Because they are sustained by the people, they must serve them – not only in ritual, but in teaching, in judgement, and in moments of personal fragility.

Rabbi Sacks suggests that the book of Vayikra, known as Torat Kohanim, reframes the entire idea of religious existence. The Kohanim are not separate from the people; they are sustained by them. And in turn, they sustain the people spiritually. It is a relationship of mutual dependence that prevents both isolation and dominance.

Seen in this light, the repeated phrase in Tzav – “I have given it” – takes on a deeper resonance. The Kohen does not earn his portion in the conventional sense, nor does he own it in any lasting way. It is given. And because it is given, it can never become fully his. It must be received with boundaries, with discipline, and with an awareness of its source.

The eating itself becomes part of the avodah.

We might have assumed that holiness resides in what is burned, in what ascends in fire on the mizbeach. But Tzav teaches that holiness continues beyond the altar. It extends into what is eaten, into what sustains life. The Kohen does not merely facilitate the offering; he completes it.

And perhaps this is the deeper answer to Korach.

The crown of Kehunah is not a crown of power, but a crown of proximity – a life lived close to the Divine, sustained by it, dependent on it. It is a crown that looks, from the outside, like privilege, but from the inside is a constant, quiet exposure: nothing one has is fully one’s own, and nothing one relies on is fully in one’s control.

History, of course, complicates this picture. There were times – particularly toward the end of the Second Temple – when the priesthood began to resemble an elite class, with power and wealth becoming concentrated. But that only highlights the

brilliance of the Torah's design. The system described in Tzav is not meant to produce aristocracy. It is meant to resist it.

So – monks or gentry?

The answer is neither.

The Kohanim inhabit a more delicate, even uneasy space, one that resists simple categorisation. They wear a crown – but it is a crown that binds as much as it elevates. They live neither lives of renunciation nor of privilege, but of dependence, dignity, and service.

Their table is full – but it is never entirely their own.

And perhaps that is the enduring message, even for our Kohanim today. The material benefits may have faded, but the posture remains: a figure to be honoured not for what he owns, but for what he represents – and a life shaped not only by what one is given, but by how one serves, teaches, and uplifts others with it.

Shemini – Know Your Place

For some of us there is a deeply uncomfortable lesson at the heart of Parsha Shemini, particularly for those of us who naturally look for logic and understanding in the way we live. It is not an easy message to absorb, but it goes to the core of how Judaism understands religious life.

Judaism is not a religion of pure spirituality, nor of pure physicality. It is a fusion of the two. It insists that holiness is not found only in moments of inspiration, but in the structure of everyday life, in a system of rules and boundaries that shape how we live.

Nowhere is this more clearly expressed than in the two sections that sit side by side in this week's Parsha: the story of Nadav and Avihu, and the laws of kashrut.

The Parsha opens at a moment of extraordinary spiritual intensity. The Mishkan has just been inaugurated, the Divine Presence has descended, and fire comes forth from Heaven. It is the moment one might imagine as the pinnacle of religious experience.

And then, suddenly, tragedy.

Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aharon, step forward and bring an offering of their own. The Torah describes it with a single, devastating phrase: they brought a "strange fire... which He had not commanded them."

It is striking what the Torah does not say. It does not suggest rebellion or ego. Many commentators, from Chazal through to later thinkers such as the Sefat Emet, emphasise that their intentions

were pure. They sought closeness, driven by a desire to partake in that moment of Divine presence.

And yet, that was precisely the problem. They acted without command.

In a space defined by Divine instruction, even a sincere, self-generated act becomes out of place. The Ramban explains that the Mishkan is a space of exact order, not improvisation, while the Abarbanel adds that it was not even their moment; the avodah belonged to Aharon. Their initiative, however noble, disrupted that structure.

It is a difficult idea to absorb. It means that it is possible to be inspired, sincere, even spiritually elevated, and still be wrong.

And then the Torah pivots.

From fire and intensity, we move into the laws of kashrut – lists of permitted and forbidden animals, details and distinctions governing one of the most basic human acts: eating. The transition feels abrupt, but it appears anything but accidental.

If Nadav and Avihu represent unbounded spiritual expression, kashrut represents discipline. If their act was driven by desire, kashrut is defined by obedience. And crucially, kashrut is a ‘chok’, a set of laws not fully explained and not dependent on our understanding.

The Torah frames it not in terms of logic, but of relationship: “For I am Hashem who brought you up from the land of Egypt... you shall be holy, for I am holy.” Holiness, in this sense, is not something we define, but something we respond to.

This is not abstract. It is lived.

I have spent a lifetime working in a non-Jewish environment, surrounded by different cultures and ways of thinking. And yet, throughout that time, I have tried to remain committed to kashrut despite the fact I cannot claim to grasp or feel the need to grasp the reasoning behind each detail.

But I have come to understand something else.

Kashrut creates a way of life. It brings awareness into the ordinary, introducing a pause, a discipline, and a recognition that even something as simple as eating sits within a larger framework. It also creates distinction – not separation in the sense of disconnection, but in the sense of identity. It reminds us that our actions are guided by something beyond immediate logic or convenience.

Over time, that discipline shapes more than behaviour; it shapes mindset. It anchors how we think and adds a layer of ethics and integrity – not because each law is understood, but because we live within a system greater than ourselves.

Across centuries and continents, Jews have held onto kashrut, each at their own level but with a shared sense that this matters. Perhaps it is precisely this kind of commitment, independent of full understanding, that has given Judaism its resilience. It creates not just belief, but behaviour, not just identity, but daily practice.

Seen in this light, the connection back to Nadav and Avihu becomes clearer. They acted from within themselves, from a place of inspiration, while kashrut asks us to live in response to command. One is self-generated spirituality; the other is commanded living.

And the Torah places them side by side to make a profound point: holiness is not created by us, but shaped by how we respond.

But it goes further than that.

Judaism asks us, at times, to think beyond what we think is right. It asks us to recognise that our logic, however sincere, is limited, and that our understanding is not complete. True Avodat Hashem sometimes means stepping beyond our own reasoning and being willing to be subservient to a Hashem who is all-wise, even when we do not understand the reasons.

At the same time, Judaism is not asking us to suppress who we are. There is real space within it for creativity, individuality, and expression. I see this clearly in my own children and in those around me, each finding their own voice within Torah life.

That creativity is not the problem. The challenge is balance.

Because alongside that individuality, there remains a core mandate: to follow the instructions of Hashem.

And perhaps this is where the message becomes most uncomfortable.

For some of us, this comes naturally. I think back to my 15-year-old self, quite comfortable following rules without needing to fully understand them. There is security in that structure.

But for others, particularly those who are more questioning or free-spirited, this can feel far more difficult. We want understanding and alignment; we want our actions to emerge from within.

And yet, this is exactly where Parshat Shemini challenges us. It asks us to accept that not everything in our religious life will align with our instincts, and that there will be moments where we act without full clarity – and where that discipline becomes part of the avodah.

Because if everything only aligned with what we already understand, we would still be serving ourselves.

Nadav and Avihu, in their greatness, followed that instinct. They sought closeness, and it was sincere and elevated – but it was not what was asked of them.

And so the Torah offers a recalibration. It shifts us from self-generated spirituality to commanded living, reminding us that sometimes closeness to Hashem is found not in what we start, but in what we accept.

For those of us who question and wrestle, this is not a rejection of that instinct, but a reframing of it. We are meant to think and engage, but also, at times, to act without complete understanding.

Parshat Shemini asks us to live within that tension.

Because in those moments, we are no longer simply expressing ourselves – we are responding.

And that is the deepest lesson of Shemini. We do not define how to come close to Hashem; we respond to how Hashem asks us to come close to Him.

Know your place – not as a limitation, but as a foundation.

Because in the end, holiness is not found in what we create, but in what we are willing to follow.

Tazria – A Language We Have Forgotten How to Read

This is one of the hardest parshiot for me to introduce.

Not because it lacks relevance, but because it feels so far removed from the way we understand the world. It speaks about tumah and taharah after childbirth and then moves into something even harder to grasp; marks that appear not only on a person, but on their clothing, and even on the walls of their home. And that is where the discomfort begins, because 'Tzara'at' something that affects houses, we can no longer pretend this is simply medical (defined by some as leprosy). Illnesses do not behave like this. The Torah is clearly speaking in a different language.

And Chazal are clear about what that language is.

The Gemara in Arachin 15b links tzara'at directly to lashon hara, to the misuse of speech. As Rabbi Yosei ben Zimra teaches, "Anyone who speaks malicious speech will be afflicted by leprous marks, as it is stated: 'Whoever defames his neighbour in secret, I will destroy him.'" Not only lies, but words that diminish, divide, or quietly reshape how we see one another.

The Torah itself reinforces this through Miriam. A prophetess, a leader, someone who spoke not from malice but from misunderstanding, and yet was struck with tzara'at. The message is unmistakable. This is not about illness. It is about responsibility. It is about the consequences of words.

Which means that this is not a parsha we can approach without a spiritual lens.

To try and understand that lens more clearly, I found myself turning to the Rambam. If there is a way to approach something as

elusive as this with clarity and structure, it is often through him. And significantly, at the end of his discussion of these laws, in Mishneh Torah Hilchot Tum'at Tzara'at 16:10, he steps back and offers not just detail, but explanation, almost a summary of what all of this is about.

He begins with a striking statement:

הצרעת... אינו ממנהגו של עולם, אלא אות ופלא היה בישראל

This is not the way of the world. It is a sign, a פלא, given to warn people about lashon hara.

And then he describes a progression that is as subtle as it is profound.

שהמספר בלשון הרע משתנות קירות ביתו

A person begins by speaking improperly, and the first place the impact is seen is not on the person, but on the walls of their home. If they recognise it and change, the process stops there. But if not, it moves closer, to the objects in the house, to the clothing they wear, and ultimately to the person themselves.

Not a punishment. A process. Not something that begins within, but something that closes in.

And that idea is both subtle and deeply familiar.

Because lashon hara does not begin as a conflict between people. It begins as a culture around them. It begins in the small, almost forgettable moments – a comment in the kitchen, a remark in the coffee room, a quiet aside that feels insignificant. But it is not insignificant, because words do not stay where they are spoken. They travel. They settle. They shape.

They shape how we see others, how we speak about others, and eventually how we relate to others. And once that shift takes place, the consequences are no longer small. Families begin to tear. Friendships begin to fracture. Communities begin to lose trust.

The Rambam himself describes this descent with remarkable clarity. It begins, he says, with idle talk – דברים של הבל. From there it moves to speaking negatively about others, and from there it can spiral further and further, until the boundaries that once held a person in place begin to erode entirely. It is not dramatic at first. It is gradual. And that is precisely what makes it so dangerous.

Chazal tell us where this leads. To sinat chinam, to a breakdown of unity so profound that it can bring about destruction – even to the point of the Beit HaMikdash itself being lost.

And yet, what is equally striking in the Rambam is that this process is not inevitable.

At each stage, it can be stopped.

If the person returns, the house is restored. If they change, the clothing is purified. Even at the final stage, the person themselves can return. This is not a system designed to exclude. It is a system designed to awaken. To make visible what is usually invisible.

And that is why the metzora is sent outside the camp. Not as rejection, but as reflection. Someone who has created distance must now experience distance, not to be pushed away, but to be given the space to understand what has been lost, and what can still be rebuilt.

Because there is another kind of speech.

The Rambam ends with it, almost quietly, but with enormous weight:

אז נדברו יראי ה' איש אל רעהו

Those who fear Hashem speak to one another, and Hashem listens.

The same capacity that fractures a world can also sustain it. The same words that create distance can create connection.

So perhaps this parsha is not describing a reality that no longer exists.

Perhaps it is describing one that exists just as strongly as ever, only without the visible signs.

And if that is true, then the message is not distant at all. It is immediate. To be careful with what we say. To notice where conversations are going. To stop things early, while they are still in the walls of the house, before they become something deeper and harder to repair.

Because lashon hara is not a side issue in Jewish life. It sits at the root of whether we can live together at all.

And perhaps tzara'at is not a disease we no longer understand.

Perhaps it is a language we have forgotten how to read – and a warning we can still choose to hear.

Metzora: The Body at the Torah's Centre

Metzora (and Tazria, which often accompanies it) may be the closest the Torah comes to holding two seemingly opposite worlds together in a single space. It is a concept I have found myself returning to often over the course of this year, not only in learning, but in life itself, the idea that the Torah does not resolve tension, but asks us to live within it. Perhaps nowhere is that more evident than here, where the most private and physical aspects of human life sit at the centre of our understanding of holiness.

On the one hand, as a fairly traditional, slightly prudish British boy, I find this to be perhaps the most private and uncomfortable section in the entire Torah. It speaks, without hesitation, about birth, the body, intimacy, and various physical conditions that we would normally avoid discussing in polite conversation, and it does not make for the easiest public reading.

And yet, at the same time, this is not marginal material. Quite the opposite. These parashiot sit almost exactly at the mathematical centre of the Torah, right in the heart of Sefer Vayikra, the book that defines our day-to-day relationship with Hashem through holiness, discipline, and avodah. In fact, if one measures the Torah by its verses, the midpoint falls within this Parsha, amid these laws. What is striking is what the Torah chooses to place at that centre. One might have expected a focus on the Temple service, the High Priest, or the sacrificial order. Instead, the Torah turns to the human body.

While Tazria speaks about birth and the covenant of circumcision on the eighth day, Metzora sets out the rhythms of marriage through the laws of taharat hamishpacha. It addresses physical expression and its boundaries. It builds on what I discussed in my

Dvar Torah on Tzav, particularly the idea that tzara'at, which Chazal understand as deeply connected to lashon hara, reflects the impact of how we speak about one another.

This juxtaposition is not incidental. The Torah is making a deliberate statement. It refuses to separate spirituality from physical existence. It does not locate holiness in some abstract or distant realm, but insists that kedusha is found precisely in how we live within the realities of the body and human relationships.

As Ramban explains in his commentary to the laws of tzara'at, these are not natural illnesses but “a sign and a wonder in Israel,” a way in which spiritual imbalance becomes visible through physical expression.

In a different but complementary register, Rabbi Sacks made a broader point in a 2014 address on happiness that speaks directly to this idea. Judaism, he argued, does not see happiness or holiness as detached from the physical world, but rooted within it:

“Happiness, in biblical Judaism, is to be found in the here-and-now... in this embodied life... The Hebrew Bible... steers clear of those tendencies that see a sharp separation between body and soul... The intricate structure of Jewish law... should be seen as the sanctification of pleasure.”

Holiness, in this view, is not elsewhere. It is here.

And yet, if we are honest, we do not fully understand these laws. We can study them, analyse them, and explore the many commentaries that seek to explain them. We can identify moral themes and symbolic meanings. But at a deeper level, the Torah does not offer a complete explanation, and perhaps that is intentional.

This is not a system we fully comprehend; it is a system we live.

Maimonides makes this point explicitly when he describes tzara'at as a "sign and a warning" designed to distance a person from harmful speech. The mechanism is not fully explained, but the direction is clear. The Torah is less concerned with providing theoretical clarity than with shaping lived behaviour.

This insight helps explain something much broader about Jewish history. When we consider these parashiot alongside the wider framework of Torah, we see how laws governing speech, particularly the prohibitions of lashon hara, and laws governing intimacy, family life, and cycles of separation and connection, have had a profound and lasting impact. They establish boundaries, create discipline, and, perhaps most importantly, create space within relationships for renewal and dignity.

These are not abstract ideas. They are amongst the most significant questions our teenagers and young married couples are thinking about, the areas of life that shape identity, relationships, and the future of the family. It is perhaps no coincidence that they are placed at the centre of the Torah, rather than hidden away.

Across generations, these structures have contributed to something remarkable: the continuity and resilience of the Jewish people. This is not because we have fully understood these laws, but because we have lived them, often with commitment even in the absence of complete comprehension. We may not fully understand these laws, but three thousand years of Jewish continuity stand as powerful evidence that they work.

At the centre of the Torah, where we might expect the most elevated or abstract expression of divine service, the Torah instead focuses on the most human aspects of life. It does so in a way that

can feel uncomfortable and difficult, and that ultimately resists full intellectual explanation.

And yet it is precisely in that space, between what we experience and what we cannot entirely explain, that Jewish life has endured.

The centre of the Torah is not found only in the sanctuary, but in the home, in relationships, in the body, and in the discipline with which we choose to live. We may not fully understand these laws, but three thousand years of Jewish life stand as quiet, enduring evidence of what they have built.

Acharei Mot – Yom Kippur: The Drama We Forgot

There is something quietly unsettling about Yom Kippur.

Not only the fasting, or the white clothing, or even the sheer length of the day, but the sense that we are participating in something we no longer fully experience. We follow the words, we know the structure, and yet somewhere beneath it all lingers the awareness that this day once carried a weight, a drama, an immediacy that we have not entirely lost – but no longer fully feel. It is not absent; it is just out of reach, like something remembered but not relived.

Parshat Acharei Mot takes us directly into that world. It does not describe an idea of atonement in abstract terms; it places us inside it, almost uncomfortably so. At the centre of the Torah, we are brought into the inner core of Yom Kippur – into something that was once lived rather than recited, experienced rather than studied.

“כי ביום הזה יכפר עליכם לטהר אתכם”

“For on this day He shall atone for you, to purify you” (Vayikra 16:30)

This was not a promise deferred to some distant future. It was something happening, now, in real time, with an entire people standing inside it.

There were no machzorim, no quiet pages to guide the experience or soften its edges. The people did not read the Avodah – they stood within it. They gathered in Jerusalem not simply to observe, but to feel, together, the unfolding of something upon which everything depended. The day was not structured around text; the text was embedded within the day.

At the centre stood the Kohen Gadol, entering a space no one else could enter, at a moment no one else could choose. The Torah frames this with a warning that carries both boundary and tension:

“ואל יבא בכל עת אל הקדש”

“He shall not come at all times into the Holy” (Vayikra 16:2)

Crossing that boundary was not symbolic. It was dangerous, necessary, and filled with consequence. He carried with him not only incense and offerings, but the fragile hope of a people – that failure was not final, that distance could be closed, that return was possible even after everything that had gone wrong.

The Torah then turns our attention outward, to one of its most striking and unsettling images – two goats, indistinguishable in appearance, yet sent in utterly different directions. The randomness of the lottery only sharpens the tension:

“ונתן אהרן על שני השעירים גורלות”

“Aharon shall place lots upon the two goats” (Vayikra 16:8)

One moves inward, toward closeness, toward the sacred centre. The other is sent away, carrying with it everything that cannot remain:

“ונשא השעיר עליו את כל עונותם אל ארץ גזרה”

“The goat shall bear upon it all their iniquities to a land cut off” (Vayikra 16:22)

This was not an idea of letting go, not a metaphor to be reflected upon quietly. It was something watched. Step by step, distance growing, until what weighed on them was no longer within reach. You could see it leaving.

Inside the Mikdash, another kind of intensity unfolded, one that was less visible but no less powerful. The Kohen Gadol confessed – first for himself, then for the priests, then for the entire people – widening the circle each time. And when the Divine Name was spoken, the response was not passive or internal. The nation fell to the ground, not out of routine, but because something overwhelming had just passed through the air. This was a moment that demanded a physical response.

And then everything narrowed into a single, fragile question: would he come out?

There must have been a silence at that point – not the quiet of prayer, but the silence that tightens in the chest. A collective holding of breath that no one chose but everyone shared. Because until that moment, nothing was resolved. Everything – forgiveness, acceptance, the possibility of beginning again – depended on what would happen next.

And then he appeared.

Alive. Whole. Accepted.

The release was not gentle, and it was not individual. It came as a wave – relief, joy, something unspoken breaking open all at once. Not because a ritual had been completed, but because something real had happened, and they had lived through it together. The day had carried them somewhere, and now it let them go.

Today, we sit with words. We read the Avodah. We follow its order carefully, faithfully, respectfully. And yet, if we are honest, we are tracing the outline of a drama we no longer see, trying to access an experience that once required no effort to feel.

And still, Chazal make a remarkable claim – that in telling the story, we are not merely remembering it. We are entering it. The stage has shifted, but it has not disappeared. What once unfolded in the Temple now unfolds within us.

But something in us still longs – not only for meaning, but for immediacy. For the sense that something is at stake, that something is happening now, not just being recalled. Perhaps that longing is not a weakness, but a guide. Perhaps it is pointing us back to what the day was always meant to awaken.

Because maybe the Avodah was never only about the Kohen Gadol entering the Holy of Holies. Maybe it was also about the part of ourselves that we hesitate to enter – the place we avoid, the truths we push away, the distance we learn to live with. And Yom Kippur, at its deepest level, asks whether we are willing, even briefly, to step inside.

If we slow down, even for a few moments during the Avodah – if we allow ourselves to imagine, to stand בתוך העם, בתוך הרגע – then the distance begins to close. The words begin to carry weight again. The sequence becomes a journey. The day becomes something lived rather than observed.

“לפני ה' תטהרו”

“Before Hashem, you shall be purified” (Vayikra 16:30)

Kedoshim – Business ethics is not a different Torah

Kedoshim can feel, at first encounter, like an assault on the senses. Mitzvah follows mitzvah, domain after domain – home, field, speech, justice, relationships – arriving not as a single idea but as a torrent. And within that torrent sits the verse I once tried, in my own small way, to carry into my business life:

לא תעשק את רעך ולא תגזל לא תלין פעולת שכיר אתך עד בקר

You shall not commit robbery. You shall not defraud your fellow
The wages of a labourer shall not remain with you until morning.

It is tempting to point to a verse like this and say: here is the source of business ethics in Torah. But the truth is more demanding than that.

Business ethics in Torah does not emerge from one place. It is not a single commandment that can be framed and placed on a wall. It is constructed from the totality of Torah life – from the same system that governs the family, the individual, and the community. The marketplace is not a separate moral arena. It is simply another setting in which the Torah expects us to live out its vision.

As Rav Hirsch writes on this Parsha:

“The concept of holiness which the Torah here demands is not to be sought in extraordinary or ascetic practices. Rather, it is to be realised in the ordinary conditions of everyday life. In all spheres of human activity – whether in personal conduct, in social relationships, or in business dealings – man is to sanctify himself by subordinating all his actions to the will of Hashem.”

And he sharpens it even further:

“The Torah does not set up a separate domain of ‘religious life’ alongside ordinary life. The whole of life is to become ‘religious life.’”

There are not two Torahs – one for the beit midrash and one for the marketplace. There is one Torah, and it cuts across each part of life equally. Business is not an exception to that system. It is one of its clearest tests.

And so the Torah builds its ethical vision not in one place, but across many, including for example: honest weights – “מאזני צדק”; fair pricing – “אל תונו”; not placing a stumbling block – “עו לפני”; and the overarching call – “ועשית הישר והטוב.” Each one a fragment. Together, a discipline of integrity that applies no less in the office than in the home.

Which brings us back to Rabbi Akiva’s famous teaching:

ואהבת לרעך כמוך – זה כלל גדול בתורה

If this is a great principle of the Torah, then it is also, perhaps, the greatest principle of business ethics. Not as a slogan, but as a demand – to see the person across from you not as an opportunity, but as a neighbour.

And the Torah is precise:

כמוך – as yourself

Not less than you. Not more than you. As you.

A person who does not value themselves cannot sustain this balance. A person who overvalues themselves will distort it. But a person grounded enough to respect themselves can extend that same dignity outward – into fairness, into restraint, into integrity.

And when that happens, business ceases to be a neutral activity. It becomes an arena of קידוש השם – where Torah is not only studied but seen.

Perhaps that is the deeper message of Kedoshim. Not that holiness is found in escaping the world, but that it is created by refusing to divide it. One Torah. One standard. Lived everywhere.

Emor – The Moral Mean

The Torah does not ask us to choose between human need and moral sensitivity. It asks us to hold them together. That is the challenge – and what we might call the moral mean.

Nowhere is this more surprising than in Sefer Vayikra. In a book so saturated with blood, offerings, and the detailed mechanics of sacrifice, we might reasonably expect a relentless focus on ritual precision and obedience. It is, after all, a world of korbanot, of life taken and offered in the service of Hashem. And yet, almost quietly, another voice emerges from within that system. It is not a rejection of sacrifice, nor a retreat from that reality, but a discipline within it – a demand for restraint, for sensitivity, for balance.

ושור או שה אתו ואת בנו לא תשחטו ביום אחד

An ox or a sheep – you shall not slaughter it and its young on the same day. (Vayikra 22:28)

At first glance, this appears to be a narrow, almost technical restriction. But as so often in the Torah, what looks limited in scope opens into a far wider moral vision. The Rambam, in Moreh Nevuchim (III:48), explains that this prohibition is rooted in a recognition of suffering – the distress caused when a young animal is slaughtered in the presence of its mother. He writes:

“It is also prohibited to kill an animal with its young on the same day (Vayikra 22:28), in order that people should be restrained and prevented from killing the two together in such a manner that the young is slain in the sight of the mother; for the pain of animals under such circumstances is great. There is no difference in this case between the pain of man and the pain of other living beings, since the love and tenderness of the mother for her young ones is

not produced by reasoning, but by imagination, and this faculty exists not only in man but in most living beings. This law applies only to ox and sheep, because these are the animals permitted to us for food, and in these cases the mother recognises her young.”

This is a demanding claim. The Torah does not deny human need, nor does it prohibit the use of animals. It builds an entire system of avodah around them. But it simultaneously refuses to ignore the reality of suffering. It insists that even within a framework that permits taking life, there must be boundaries that reflect an awareness of that life.

To appreciate this fully, we need to situate the mitzvah within its original context. The world in which the Torah was given is not our world. It was an agrarian society in which animals are the currency of existence – sources of food, labour, wealth, and survival. To bring a korban was not symbolic; it was a real and costly act, one that expressed dependence, gratitude, and accountability before Hashem.

The world in which the Torah was given, though over time it has been replaced by a system of prayer, was – so I believe and pray – a vehicle by which we have the potential for reaching out to Hashem.

And yet, even within that world, the Torah introduces a limit that cannot be explained by utility alone. You may slaughter; you may bring offerings; but you may not do so without regard for the experience of the animal. This is neither an ethic of total permissiveness nor one of absolute prohibition. It is the disciplined integration of both: the recognition of human need alongside an insistence on moral restraint. That is the perhaps something that could be called the ‘moral mean.’

This principle is not confined to a single verse. The Torah returns to it repeatedly, expanding it into a broader framework of responsibility. It commands:

“If you see your enemy’s donkey lying under its burden... you shall surely help with him.” (Shemot 23:5)

and:

“You shall not see your brother’s donkey or his ox fallen on the road and hide yourself from them; you shall surely help him lift them up again.” (Devarim 22:4)

These are not merely interpersonal laws. They are obligations to relieve the suffering of an animal – even when it belongs to your enemy, even when it would be easier to turn away. From here emerges the halachic principle of “tza’ar ba’alei Chayim”, the prohibition against causing unnecessary suffering to living creatures.

What is striking is not only the presence of compassion, but the context in which it appears. The Torah is not introducing compassion into a compassionate world. It is articulating compassion within a world that did not yet take it for granted. In doing so, it is not simply expressing a value; it is forming one.

Rabbi Sacks captures this when he writes that Judaism regards animals as sentient beings, capable of distress, and that while they may not possess rights in the human sense, we nonetheless bear duties toward them. The Torah is not constructing a theory of animal rights; it is shaping human character. It asks not only what we are permitted to do, but who we become when we do it.

This becomes clearer when we place this mitzvah alongside others that define the moral architecture of Torah life: the command to

love one's neighbour, the repeated injunction to love the stranger, and the prohibition against placing a stumbling block before the blind. These are not isolated ideals, but expressions of a consistent vision – a Judaism that resists extremes and instead operates within a calibrated space between them. It recognises power but disciplines it; it permits use, but forbids abuse; it acknowledges reality, but refuses to be defined by it.

In this light, even the well-known debate between the Rambam and the Ramban regarding the nature of korbanot takes on a different tone. Whether sacrifices are understood as a concession to human nature or as an ideal form of divine service, the Torah's concern here is not only why they exist, but how they are carried out. The presence of this mitzvah – and the wider framework of tza'ar ba'alei chayim – makes clear that even within a system that allows, and even commands, the taking of animal life, there remains an unwavering demand for moral awareness.

This is reinforced by the placement of the law itself. It appears just before the closing verses of the Parasha, which speak of Kiddush Hashem – of not profaning Hashem's name and of sanctifying it amid the people. The juxtaposition suggests that sanctifying Hashem's name is not limited to grand or public acts, but is equally present in the quiet, often unseen decisions that reflect who we are. Even in the act of slaughtering an animal, even in a moment that might seem purely functional, the possibility of Kiddush Hashem – or its opposite – remains.

What emerges is a deeply integrated vision. Amidst the intensity of Vayikra, the Torah embeds compassion at the centre of ritual life – not as an alternative to it, but as a condition of it. It does not abolish the use of animals, nor does it retreat into an idealised ethic that ignores human reality. Instead, it charts a path that is at once realistic and aspirational.

Judaism does not ask us to live at the extremes. It asks us to live in the moral mean – to act within the world as it is, while shaping it through the choices we make. Holiness is found not only in what we do, but in how we do it, in the space between permission and restraint, between power and compassion.

And it is precisely there, in that demanding and deliberate balance, that a life of Torah becomes not only a life of obedience, but a life of moral greatness.

Behar – Bechukotai: When We Stop Listening

The Tochacha is among the most difficult passages in the Torah – not only because of its severity, but because of its clarity. It does not describe a sudden collapse, but a slow unravelling: a society that drifts, step by step, away from its centre. It is tempting to read it as history, as something that happened to others, in another time. It is harder – and more honest – to read it as possibility. Not a prediction, but a warning.

The Torah introduces this unravelling with quiet precision:

“ואם לא תשמעו לי, ולא תעשו את כל המצות האלה”

“But if you will not listen to Me, and you will not perform all these commandments...” (Vayikra 26:14)

At first glance, the verse appears repetitive. If we are told “you will not perform,” what is added by “you will not listen”?

The Sforno addresses this directly:

ואם לא תשמעו לי ולא תעשו: אחר שאמר 'ולא תעשו את כל המצות' מבואר שלא ישמעו פקודת ה'. ועל כרחך שמה שכתוב 'אם לא תשמע' הוא לשמוע אל החכמים... מקבלי ומורישי תורה שבעל פה

Having already stated that they will not perform the commandments, it is clear they are not fulfilling Hashem's command. Therefore, “if you will not listen to Me” must refer to listening to the sages – the transmitters of the Oral Torah.

And with that, the Torah reveals something deeply unsettling. The beginning of decline is not the abandonment of mitzvot. It is the weakening of listening.

Not disbelief – but distance. Not rejection – but a loosening of the bond between the people and those who carry Torah forward. One may still know, still believe, and yet not truly hear. And from that subtle gap, the Sforno traces a progression – less listening leads to less doing, less doing to less respect, until even that which is self-evident begins to erode, and the covenant itself is placed at risk.

Earlier in the Parsha, the Netziv teaches that “אם בחוקותי תלכו” is not a call for passive compliance, but for - עמילות for effort, engagement, a life of active involvement in Torah. Covenant, in this sense, is not something we inherit and preserve by default. It is something we take part in, sustain, and at times struggle to uphold. We are not merely protected by it; we are responsible for it.

And at the heart of the Tochacha lies a quiet but devastating idea: keri, the choice to live as though events are happenstance, as though strength is self-generated and history carries no message. A covenantal people cannot afford that illusion. Strength, success, and even sovereignty – these are blessings of immense magnitude. But they carry within them a subtle danger: that we see ourselves as sufficient unto ourselves, and in doing so, we begin to forget.

We are not living the Tochacha. That is not a claim one can or should make lightly. And yet, it would be equally mistaken to assume that we are beyond its reach. Because the Tochacha is not only about outcomes; it is about direction. It asks not only what has happened, but where we are heading.

And here the Sforno’s insight becomes uncomfortable. If the beginning of decline is a failure to listen – to truly hear – then we must ask whether there are signs of this among us. Not rejection of Torah, חס ושלום, but something quieter: a weakening of trust, a growing distance, a hesitation. Even within the religious world,

there are moments in which the voice of Torah is no longer heard with the same clarity, the same confidence, the same closeness.

It would be easy to place that responsibility entirely on those who listen less. But the Torah does not allow for such simplicity. Relationships do not fracture in one direction. Trust is not sustained by authority alone; it is sustained by presence, by integrity, by a visible alignment between word and deed.

And that demands something of those who stand in the name of Torah.

Not only learning – but example. Not only authority – but accountability. Not only guidance – but participation in the shared life and burden of the people.

Where Torah leadership is perceived – rightly or wrongly – as distant from the responsibilities of the כלל, as disengaged from the moral and civic weight of national life, or as touched, even at the margins, by self-interest, inconsistency, or a failure of Kiddush Hashem, the cost is not abstract. It is paid in trust.

And when trust is weakened, “ואם לא תשמעו לי” begins not as rebellion, but as quiet distance.

Because the honour of Torah depends not only on those who learn it, but on those who embody it.

And yet, even here, the Torah turns the demand back upon us. The Netziv, in a striking reading, explains that even a Jew living under constraint, even one sold into the hands of others, remains fully obligated: “את שבתותי תשמרו.” Responsibility does not disappear when conditions are imperfect, when leadership is lacking, or when the moment is complex. Covenant is not contingent on ideal circumstances. It is the core of identity itself.

I write these words at a moment that holds both strength and vulnerability. A missile has struck a residential area in Arad. We are strong, thank Hashem – capable, resilient, able to respond. But moments like these are not only tests of our strength; they are invitations to awareness. They ask whether we see only the surface, or whether we are willing to reflect more deeply – on who we are, and who we are becoming.

The Tochecha is not telling us we have arrived there. It is warning us how one arrives – slowly, almost imperceptibly, through the erosion of unity, of responsibility, of the ability to listen, each to the other and together to the Torah.

And it does not speak in one direction alone. It speaks to a people who must resist the quiet drift into distance, who must choose to remain engaged, to listen even when it is difficult, to hold on to a shared sense of purpose even amidst disagreement. But it speaks no less to those who stand in the name of Torah – that their leadership must be lived in a way that can be heard: with integrity, with humility, with a visible Kiddush Hashem, and with a genuine participation in the life and burden of the people.

Because a covenant is not sustained from one side. It is shaped in the space between – strengthened when there is trust, and weakened, often quietly, when that trust begins to fray.

We are not there. But we are close enough to recognise how a people gets there, and close enough to choose otherwise – to strengthen our unity, to deepen our moral seriousness, and to rebuild, with care and honesty, the trust that allows a people not only to believe, but to listen.

Before it is too late.

Sefer Bamidbar – Resilience and the Challenge of Community

Bamidbar unfolds in the wilderness, a space of uncertainty, conflict, and growth. It examines the fragility and strength of a developing nation, grappling with leadership struggles, truth, dissent, and the complexity of collective identity. A recurring theme is how “truth can be weaponised,” and how easily a community can lose its way when confidence, humility, and clarity are shaken. It is sobering to observe that in what was in many ways a profoundly holy experience – lived under the direct canopy of Hashem’s protection – the people nonetheless committed some of their most grievous sins: the spies’ report, the sin of Midian, the rebellion of Korach.

Yet it is precisely in this environment that resilience is formed, as a people learn to navigate disagreement, challenge, and responsibility while holding onto their mission.

Bamidbar – Because They Were Dear to Him

There is something deeply intentional about the transition from the searing intensity of the tochacha at the end of Sefer Vayikra to the opening scene of Sefer Bamidbar. One closes with warning, consequence, and collective responsibility. The other opens, almost quietly, with a count – but not only a count. It opens with the formation of a people.

Not simply a census, but the organisation of a collective army.

A nation arranged with care: each tribe in its place, each group beneath its banner, each individual situated within a larger whole. It is a vision whose relevance has been felt with particular force in recent times – the recognition that strength lies not merely in numbers, but in structure, in coordination, in the coming together of many different roles into a single, unified body. Our men and women in our Defence have and continue to rise up and show strength in exactly these facets.

And yet, even here, the Torah resists abstraction. It refuses to begin with the system. It begins with the person.

Rashi, in his opening words, gives us the key:

“שאו את ראש” -

Because they were dear to Him, He counts them enow and then.

Not because He needs the numbers, but because He cherishes the people.

The Torah's language is precise, almost tender:

“שאו את ראש... במספר שמות... לגלגלתם” – to lift the head, to count by name, to see each individual.

After the tochacha, where the nation is addressed as a whole and where failure and consequence are collective, Bamidbar begins by restoring something essential: the irreducible dignity of the individual. The nation is not an idea. It is built, painstakingly, person by person.

The Mishneh Torah gives this idea its halachic clarity:

“וכל המקים נפש אחת מישראל כאלו קים כל העולם כולו.”

Each individual is not merely counted. Each is an entire world.

But Bamidbar does not linger there. Almost immediately, it turns to structure – tribes, flags, encampments, responsibilities. The individual is not left alone. He or she is placed, located, woven into something larger.

It is here that the Netziv, in Haamek Davar, opens a deeper way of reading the Parsha. He notices that the Torah does not speak in a single voice when it counts. It uses two expressions: “שאו את ראש” and “תפקדו אתם.” This is not repetition. It is intention.

שאו את ראש וגו'... ובסמוך כתיב עוד הפעם תפקדו אותם לצבאותם... הרי שני דברים”
המה.”

“Lift the head... and immediately afterward it says again, ‘you shall count them according to their hosts’... these are two distinct matters.”

There is a counting that tells you how many. But there is also a counting that tells you something far more human – where a person stands, who they stand with, and how they are connected to others.

ונצטוו כאן לשאת את הראשים כמה יש תחתיו... עד שיצטרפו כל ראשי המשפחות”
...ואנשיהם לנשיא השבט

“They were commanded to ‘lift the heads’ – to determine how many are under each leader... until all the heads of families and their people come together under the prince of the tribe...”

The Torah is not only counting a people. It is quietly building a structure of belonging.

And then the Netziv widens the lens even further, beyond the desert and into the human condition itself:

“כל אדם יש לו צבא עלי ארץ.”

“Every person has a ‘tzava’ – a sphere of service – upon the earth.”

For some, that sphere is close to home, expressed in family, in work, in the quiet responsibilities of daily life. For others, like the Levites, it is expressed in sacred service. But the census in Bamidbar is focused on a particular kind of calling:

“אבל משונה הוא צבא איש מלחמה...”

“But the army of a warrior is different...”

“שאינו יכול... אלא בצרוף חברים הרבה.”

“He cannot fulfil his role except together with many others.”

Even the strongest individual cannot stand alone – not in battle, and not in building something that endures.

And so the Torah counts those who are ready:

“...שלא נמנו אלא אנשים שהיו יוצאי צבא...”

“Only those who were ‘going out to the army’ were counted...”

Not because others do not matter, but because here the Torah is defining responsibility. It is identifying those prepared to step beyond themselves, to act with others, to carry the weight of something larger.

To be counted, then, is not only to be loved. It is to be called.

Rabbi Sacks captured this with characteristic clarity: a census in the Torah is never about numbers for their own sake. It is about significance. Each person counts because each person matters – and because each person has a contribution that no one else can make.

And slowly, almost imperceptibly, a picture emerges. A nation that is not a crowd but a composition. A people formed not by uniformity but by alignment. Tribes, flags, families, roles – each distinct, each necessary, each part of a larger whole.

The structure does not erase the individual. It depends on the individual.

And this brings us back, quietly but unmistakably, to the tochacha.

If Vayikra speaks in the language of the many – the רבים who can fail together – Bamidbar responds in the language of the individual, the יחיד who must choose to stand up. A society does not collapse in abstraction. It collapses through the accumulated failures of individuals. And it is not rebuilt in abstraction either.

It is rebuilt the same way it was counted.

One person stepping forward. One role accepted. One responsibility carried.

Until those individuals, each different, each necessary, begin to align with one another. And when they do, something changes. The many no longer feel like many. They begin to move as one.

A people. A mission. A single, living body.

Because they were dear to Him, He counted them.

And in counting them, He did something more demanding than love alone. He reminded them that each one is seen, each one matters – and that each one is needed.

Naso: Trust, Jealousy, and the Courage to Protect Relationship

It feels fitting that as I come to the end of this series of Divrei Torah, having begun in Beha'alotecha and worked my way back to Naso, I find myself guided once again by the teachings of the late Rabbi Sacks, whose ideas have been a source of inspiration in recent years.

He turns to one of the most difficult and uncomfortable passages in the Torah, the case of the sotah.

At first glance, it is deeply troubling. A woman, suspected by her husband of adultery, without witnesses and without the framework of a conventional legal process, finds herself at the centre of a deeply charged emotional storm of jealousy, suspicion, anger, and the potential for misuse of power.

And yet, Chazal frame the situation with nuance. There is no evidentiary basis for judgement. No crime has been proven. The relationship itself has fractured under the weight of doubt. At this point, there are two paths, separation, or an attempt, however extraordinary, to restore trust.

If she chooses the latter, the Torah describes a ritual unlike any other.

Water is prepared. But not just water. Into it is dissolved the Name of Hashem, written and then erased. The act we are taught from childhood to avoid at all costs, the erasure of the Divine Name, becomes here not only permitted, but commanded.

And why?

Because, as the Sages teach, Hashem is willing to forgo His own honour to restore peace between husband and wife.

That idea should give us pause.

The Torah is not merely addressing a suspected act. It is addressing a breakdown of trust at the most intimate level of human existence. And in response, Hashem Himself enters that space, not to judge, but to heal, not to assert His transcendence, but to enable reconciliation.

Even more striking is that this practice was ultimately suspended. When trust in society deteriorated, when relationships themselves could no longer sustain the integrity the ritual required, the sotah process ceased. Its disappearance is itself a commentary. Without a foundation of trust, even Divine intervention cannot repair what has been broken.

What emerges is not just a law, but a warning.

Jealousy, when unchecked and unexamined, can corrode the fabric of a relationship. The Torah does not validate it. It contains it, surrounds it with safeguards, and ultimately reveals its destructive potential.

At the same time, it elevates the relationship between husband and wife to the highest level of significance.

So significant, in fact, that it takes us back to the beginning of the Torah.

Before there was a nation, before there was law, before there was covenant, there was Adam and Eve, a relationship, a partnership, the foundational unit through which life, meaning, and continuity emerge.

From the Avot and Imahot onwards, the Torah repeatedly returns to this theme, that the strength of the future rests not only on grand visions or public achievements, but on the integrity, trust, and respect within the most private of bonds.

If Hashem is willing, as it were, to erase His own Name to preserve that bond, what does that ask of us?

To guard against creating situations that breed suspicion. To act in ways that build, rather than erode, trust. To recognise that relationships are not sustained by assumption, but by responsibility.

And on both sides, to understand the weight of that responsibility. The ritual's apparent asymmetry – that it addressed the husband's suspicion rather than the wife's – is a legitimate question the commentators grapple with, and the Talmud's decision to suspend it when men's own fidelity could no longer be assumed is itself a form of answer: the Torah's ideal was never unilateral accountability, but mutual.

Because the Torah's message is not only about what happens when trust breaks down, but about how much must be invested to ensure that it does not.

As I complete this cycle of Divrei Torah, I feel a deep sense of gratitude.

Above all, to my wife, for the trust she has placed in me over the years, and for the relationship we have been privileged to build together. It is not something assumed, but something worked on, protected, and nurtured.

If there is one message I would want to pass to the next generation, it is this.

Take this relationship seriously.

Do not take trust for granted, and do not place it at risk. Guard it carefully. Build it deliberately. Be ever mindful of the quiet but powerful danger of jealousy, how easily it can take root, and how much it can destroy if left unchecked.

The Torah's message is as relevant now as it has ever been, that the strength of our future rests not only in what we build publicly, but in the integrity of the relationships we sustain privately.

May we be worthy of that responsibility.

Behaalotecha – Aharon not the Ayatollah

As we enter an uncertain Shabbat with our safe room ready and stocked, many of us will turn to this week's Parsha. There is a crucial lesson for us, and for the Iranian regime, in this week's Torah portion, Behaalotecha. It comes right at the beginning in the form of the way Aharon – a man of peace – complies with Hashem's will.

For years, Iran has provoked and stirred conflict, funding terrorism and supporting the training of groups like Hamas and Hezbollah, which have caused significant havoc. Alongside Qatar, Iran has been a chief financier of these groups, enabling their destructive actions.

Until recently, Iran preferred to operate indirectly, letting others carry out their agenda. However, the regime remains unpopular domestically, especially as it expends Iran's natural resources on pursuits many view as unjust.

At its core, the regime is driven by religious fundamentalism. They profess absolute faith in an extreme interpretation of Islam, invoking Hashem's name to justify actions that, from my perspective, spread hatred and desecrate the divine. They bend religious teachings to support their fanatical views, amplifying the perception that religion fuels war, hardship, and pain. In Jewish terms, they are a Chilul Hashem – a desecration of Hashem's name.

I believe in a just Hashem, one whose agenda we serve, not the other way around. A Hashem who calls us to respect the dignity of all people and beliefs and to do good in the world. The Iranian regime's actions do a disservice to this vision, giving religion a bad name.

In this week's Parsha, we find just such a counterexample in Aharon HaKohen. Known for his love of peace and unity, Aharon lights the Menorah at the opening of the Sedra, as described in Numbers 8:3 (Sefaria):

את משה פני המנורה העלה נרתיה כאשר צוה יהוה אל מול ויעש כן אהרן
Aharon did so; he mounted the lamps at the front of the
lampstand, as the Lord had commanded Moses.

Rashi explains:

And Aharon did so – This is stated to praise Aharon, that he did not deviate from Hashem's command (Sifrei Bamidbar 60).

Aharon faithfully followed Hashem's will, earning praise for his devotion. Similarly, Hillel teaches in Pirkei Avot 1:12:

“Be of the disciples of Aharon, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving all people and bringing them closer to Torah.”

Two lessons emerge:

Our role model is Aharon – loving and pursuing peace.

Religious leaders are charged with carrying out Hashem's will, not manipulating texts to fit fundamentalist agendas. I believe they have the relationship the wrong way round.

I believe the vast majority of Muslims also desire peace, though they are too often led by those who gain power through divisive, populist messages. I pray for a quiet Shabbat and that Israel's actions have weakened this insidious regime. I also hope extremists within our own communities reflect on these lessons.

Let Aharon's voice of peace prevail. May we see a world free from those who stoke, fund, and carry out terror, and who desecrate Hashem's name in the process.

Shelach: Truth Weaponised Then, As Today

Big, bold lies are blunt instruments. They're usually easy to spot, easy to dismiss.

Who knows where we will be when this is published, but Iran's regime has just announced that they have shot down 28 Israeli jets in the last 24 hours. That, I think, is a big, bold lie – one most people can see through.

But subtle mistruths? Those are far more dangerous. They slip under the radar, they sound reasonable, they feel familiar. And because of that, they shape our beliefs, our fears, and our decisions – often without us even realising it. They allow us to believe what we want to believe.

This week's Torah portion, Shelach, is a masterclass in the power of subtle distortion and its gravity and consequences. The sin of the ten spies wasn't a brazen fabrication. They didn't invent a fantasy. They shaded the truth, exaggerated the danger, and played into the people's deepest insecurities.

"We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we."

"The land devours its inhabitants."

"We were like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and so we were in theirs"

These weren't fabrications. They were fears, dressed up as facts. And for that, the punishment was immense: forty years of wandering in the desert.

Why so harsh? Because the punishment fit the crime. The spies wanted to stay in the desert, under Hashem's direct protection, rather than face the uncertainty of the Promised Land. So that's exactly what they got – just not in the way they imagined. They remained in the desert, and they got what they asked for, but it became their downfall.

Rabbi Sacks offers a powerful insight here:

“The spies were not afraid of failure. They were afraid of success.”
– Rabbi Sacks, from his article called: Two Kinds of Fear.

Success would mean leaving the spiritual cocoon of the wilderness – where they lived on manna, drank from a miraculous well, and dwelled in the presence of the Shechinah – and entering a world of responsibility, struggle, and uncertainty. So, they bent the story to fit the narrative they wanted to hear. They masked their fear of change in a tale of giants and danger. And the people believed them – because it was easier to believe than to confront the truth.

Rabbi Immanuel Bernstein adds another layer to this. He notes that the spies misinterpreted what they saw in the land. According to the Midrash, Hashem caused many Canaanites to die during the spies' visit so the locals would be too distracted to notice them. But the spies saw the funerals and concluded, falsely, that “the land devours its inhabitants.”

“They interpreted it negatively... Yet if the correct interpretation was so obvious, what led them to draw the opposite conclusions? The answer is that, for various reasons, the spies did not want the people to enter the land.” Rabbi Immanuel Bernstein

This wasn't a lie – it was a distortion, shaped by fear and agenda. And that's what made it so dangerous.

This story feels eerily familiar today, as I write this.

We live in a world saturated with subtle mistruths. Social media is a master of this art – bending facts, framing narratives, feeding us what we want to hear rather than what we need to know. The onslaught of misinformation about Israel is rarely made up of outright lies. It's the half-truths, the selective reporting, the emotionally charged framing that does the damage.

The Iranian regime, too, has long sold itself a story of greatness, of invincibility. But when you start believing your own propaganda, you lose touch with reality – and that's a dangerous place to be.

In business, I've seen this too. One CEO once told me, "I'm right about 80% of the time and you're right maybe 20% of the time – but that's 20% more than anyone else is willing to say out loud. That 20% is golden to me." He said he too often hears a narrative being told with an agenda, which is why he appreciated my advice – even when it challenged his assumptions. That honesty, even when uncomfortable, was precious to him.

Telling someone a truth they don't want to hear is hard. Admitting a truth to yourself is even harder. But that's exactly what Shelach demands of us. It asks us to confront the stories we tell ourselves, to question the narratives that feel good but may not be true.

The Torah doesn't punish the people for the Golden Calf with 40 years of wandering. But for this? For a distorted report about the Land of Israel? That's the moment that changes everything.

Because it wasn't a lie. It was something far more dangerous.

And perhaps the most enduring lesson is this: truth is not just about content – it's about delivery. The spies didn't just say the wrong thing; they said it in a way that sowed fear, not faith. Their

words were laced with anxiety, their tone with defeat. And that made all the difference.

In our world – whether in leadership, business, or personal relationships – how we say something often matters as much as what we say. Body language, tone, timing, even the intention behind our words – these shape how truth is received. Honesty isn't just a statement. It's a posture. A presence. A complete concept.

The spies failed not only because they distorted the truth, but because they delivered it in a way that undermined trust and courage. Let us learn from their mistake – not just to speak truth, but to embody it.

In our times, where even the most basic facts are adapted to fit a narrative, we must understand the impact of this distortion. A recent statistic showed that over 90% of people in the West Bank and Gaza believe that no civilians were attacked on October 7th. That's not just misinformation – it's a reshaping of reality with devastating consequences.

As with the war, we see this dynamic in our own national debates – whether on the draft, judicial reform, or other deeply divisive issues. If we are ever to solve these challenges, we must take heed of the message of this Parsha and learn to develop an authentic, truthful, and respectful language – one that seeks to objectively find a solution that is best for Israel and the Jewish People according to Hashem's wishes, not just to spin our narrative. It is going to be so hard – and the Torah acknowledges that difficulty by making such an example of it in this Parsha.

As we raise our children, speak to our spouses, and strive to work ethically, we must remain attuned to the power of narrative, the

weight of our words, and the responsibility that comes with them.
The impact – and the consequences – can be profound.

Let's choose to speak truth with courage – and with care.

Korach: Lessons in Debate from Moses and Hillel

A fourth rebellion in a year – but this one was different. Moses fell on his face in response, and the famous commentator Rashi says: “but now at the rebellion of Korach, his hands sank down (he felt himself powerless).” How many times does he have to stick his neck out and defend this stubborn Jewish people?

This episode comes on the heels of the sin of the spies. Yet it is this episode – The debate between Korach and Moshe – that the Mishnah in Pirkei Avot (Ethics of our Fathers) singles out as the prime example of what a dispute should not look like – while the debates between Hillel and Shammai are held up as the ideal.

We are a people with many things to debate – some of them on hold since October 7, 2023, but some still simmering beneath (and at times above) the surface. What can we learn from Korach, Moses, Hillel, and Shammai that might help us debate constructively?

Korach and Moses: Choosing the Right Battles

The Torah introduces Korach’s rebellion with a subtle but telling phrase:

“וַיִּקַּח קֹרַח” – “And Korach took...” (Bamidbar 16:1)

Rashi, quoting the Midrash, explains that Korach “separated himself” – he took himself aside from the community. This wasn’t a movement for unity or for Hashem’s will. It was a campaign for control.

Korach’s challenge wasn’t rooted in principle – it was rooted in ego. According to Rashi, his rebellion was sparked by jealousy over

the appointment of Elitzafan ben Uziel. He masked his ambition in the language of equality: "For the entire community is holy." Yet his rhetoric, though appealing, was a pretext for personal gain.

When Moses hears Korach's words, the Torah tells us:

וישמע משה ויפל על פניו

And Moses heard, and he fell on his face." (Bamidbar 16:4)

This time, Moses doesn't argue. He doesn't plead. He doesn't even respond with words. Rashi explains that this was the fourth rebellion – and Moses felt powerless. He had already stood up for the people after the Golden Calf, the complaints about food and water, and the sin of the spies. But now, something had shifted.

This wasn't about fear or survival. It was about pride, provocation, and power. Korach's rebellion was driven by ego, not the nation's needs. And Moses understood that not every argument is worth engaging. Sometimes, silence is the wisest response.

We, of course, learn that Korach played his cards badly – but more than that, this was an argument that was completely unnecessary. It was not what was needed after the trauma and punishment of the spies. It should not have happened. Moses left it to Hashem to resolve – and it ended badly for Korach and his supporters.

Hillel and Shammai: The Argument for the Sake of Heaven

The Mishnah in Pirkei Avot (5:17) draws a sharp contrast:

כל מחלוקת שהיא לשם שמים סופה להתקים, ושאינה לשם שמים אין סופה להתקים
איזו היא מחלוקת שהיא לשם שמים? וזו מחלוקת הלל ושמאי. ושאינה לשם שמים? וזו
מחלוקת קרח וכל עדתו.

Every dispute that is for the sake of Heaven will in the end endure; but one that is not for the sake of Heaven will not endure. Which is a dispute for the sake of Heaven? The dispute between Hillel and Shammai. And which is one that is not for the sake of Heaven? The dispute of Korach and all his congregation.

Why are Hillel and Shammai the model?

The Gemara in Eruvin 13b explains that the halacha follows Beit Hillel because they were modest and patient. They taught both their own views and those of Beit Shammai – and they taught Shammai's view first.

This wasn't just a method of learning. It was a model for living. Hillel's greatness wasn't only in his intellect – it was in his ability to listen, to honour the other, and to make space for disagreement without descending into division.

That's the disagreement that endures. That's the debate we need.

Empathy and Light

The late Chief Rabbi Lord Sacks zt"l once wrote:

I don't need you to agree with me. I need you to care about me.

That's the essence of machloket l'shem shamayim. Not agreement, but care. Not uniformity, but empathy – and a shared desire to reach the best answer for what Hashem would want of us.

To this, Rav Kook adds a vision of light.

The righteous do not complain about darkness. They increase light.

We're not here to win arguments. We're here to build a future. That means listening more than speaking. It means spending less time assigning blame and more time seeking understanding.

Rav Kook's genius was his ability to see light where others saw darkness. He saw the beauty in the pioneers, even when others dismissed them. He believed that every Jew has a contribution to make.

We must increase the light – by showcasing the beauty of Torah, by protecting our nation's security, and by building an open, diverse civil society rooted in Jewish values.

No one owns the full truth. All Jews have a voice. We must find ways to bring everyone into the tent of tradition – even if it means compromise and complexity.

Our Moment of Choice

Like Korach's time, we face division today. And some of the issues before us can't wait. The question of the draft, for example, is not just a policy matter – it's a question of national identity, of shared responsibility, of what it means to be part of Am Yisrael. It is also a real issue of concern for a community who have closely guarded their values and community for centuries in a pursuit of Holiness and the honour of Torah. I have my strong views as a religious Zionist and father of a soldier, but I also need to listen and learn. We need empathetic dialogue to find solutions that honour all perspectives. I am not saying decisions aren't at some point needed but we should reach there through the Hillel way. Hillel and Shammai had some pretty huge debates so we won't be the first.

For the conversations that must happen now, we need to follow the example of Hillel. We must listen, empathise, and present opposing views fairly. We need to look for the light, and spend less time in the darkness of what's already happened. The past is behind us. The future is still ours to shape.

At the same time, we must also learn from Korach. Not every issue needs to be addressed all at once. For example, some policy debates might wait until communal trust is rebuilt. And all of them need the approach of Hillel – humility, patience, and a genuine desire to build rather than break.

Conclusion: The Right Way to Disagree

King David said it best:

הנה מה טוב ומה נעים שבת אחים גם יחד

How good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell together in unity.
(Tehillim 133:1)

Let's pick our battles carefully. Let's fight them with dignity. Let's disagree like family – because we are family. We have a chance to strengthen our nation and turn pain into purpose.

It won't be easy. But it's possible. And it's worth it.

Chukat: The Power of the Sibling Bond

This week we see the ending of one of the most powerful relationships in the Torah – that of Miriam, Aharon and Moses. A counterweight to stories of sibling rivalry, it offers a unique perspective on the power of siblings working together and a role model for us.

Sibling Rivalry in the Torah

When we think of siblings in the Torah, conflict often comes to mind. From the outset of Bereishit, we see strained sibling relationships:

Cain and Abel, whose rivalry ends in tragedy with Abel's murder.

Yitzchak and Yishmael, separated by their parents' fears.

Jacob and Esav, divided by favouritism and deception.

Joseph and his brothers, whose jealousy nearly leads to fratricide.

The Torah does not shy away from the complexity of sibling dynamics. Yet, it also offers a powerful counter-narrative – a vision of siblinghood at its best. In this week's Parsha, Chukat, we find a compelling example: the relationship between Moses, Aharon, and Miriam, a sibling bond that shaped the destiny of the Jewish people.

The Unique Nature of Sibling Relationships

Sibling relationships are unique. They are not chosen, yet they often shape us most profoundly, typically being our first and longest-lasting bonds, from early childhood to old age. Siblings are our first mirrors, reflecting our strengths and weaknesses,

challenging our identity, and teaching us about fairness, loyalty, and love. Psychological research confirms that sibling bonds play a critical role in emotional development, empathy, and social skills.

Birth order also influences how we relate to the world (though this is a simplification):

Oldest siblings often take on leadership and responsibility.

Youngest siblings may be more creative or independent.

Middle children often become peacemakers.

Only children may develop strong autonomy.

Yet, as life progresses, sibling relationships can be overshadowed by friendships, careers, or marriages, strained by distance or diverging paths. Their potential for depth and resilience, however, remains unmatched.

A Modern Blind Spot

In contemporary life, the sibling bond is often underappreciated. At funerals I've attended, the focus is understandably on children and grandchildren. But the sibling – who may have known the deceased longer than anyone else – often stands quietly to the side, feeling lonely in their grief. This is a poignant loss. Siblings share our earliest memories, witness our growth, and walk with us through life's major chapters. Their love is enduring, their presence deserving of recognition.

This Week's Parsha: A Model of Sibling Unity

Parshat Chukat (Bamidbar 19:1–22:1) marks a pivotal moment in the Torah, including the deaths of Miriam and Aharon, which deeply affect Moses and the Jewish people. The sibling relationship

of Miriam, Aharon, and Moses stands as a model of sacred siblinghood:

Miriam, the visionary and protector, challenged her parents to save Moses, led the women in song at the Sea of Reeds, and, through her merit, provided water for the nation.

“And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aharon, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and dances. And Miriam called to them: Sing to the Lord, for He is highly exalted; the horse and its rider He has thrown into the sea.”

ותקה מרים הנביאה אחות אהרן את התף בידה ותצאן כל הנשים אחריה בתפים
”ובמחלות. ותען להם מרים שירו לה' כי גאה גאה סוס ורכבו רמה בים
(Shemot 15:20-21)

Aharon, the peacemaker, stood beside Moses with humility and loyalty despite being older, fostering unity among the people.

“Be of the disciples of Aharon, loving peace and pursuing peace.”

“הוי מתלמידיו של אהרן, אוהב שלום ורודף שלום” (Pirkei Avot 1:12)

Moses, the reluctant but faithful leader, carried the burden of leadership with humility, relying on his siblings' support.

“Now the man Moses was humble, more so than any man on the face of the earth.”

“והאיש משה ענו מאד מכל האדם אשר על פני האדמה” (Bamidbar 12:3)

How They Worked Together

The Midrash captures their shared greatness:

“Moses, Aharon, and Miriam are the three branches of the vine from which the people of Israel blossomed.” (Bereishit Rabbah 98:2)

What could have been a power struggle became a partnership. They didn’t compete – they complemented. Miriam protected Moses in infancy and sustained the nation with water. Aharon served as Moses’s voice and emotional support. Moses led with humility, leaning on his siblings’ strengths. Even when Miriam and Aharon spoke critically of Moses (Bamidbar 12), it was out of concern, not malice. Moses’s response was compassionate:

“Please Hashem, heal her now.”

“א-ל נא רפא נא לה” (Bamidbar 12:13)

Why It Mattered

Their unity was not just personal but national. Together, they led the Jewish people out of Egypt, sustained them through 40 years in the desert, and prepared the next generation for leadership. In Chukat, the deaths of Miriam and Aharon mark a turning point.

When Miriam died, the well that sustained the nation in her merit dried up (Bamidbar 20:1–2). Rabbi Sacks suggests that Moses’s grief over Miriam’s death may have contributed to his emotional state when he struck the rock (Bamidbar 20:10–11), an act of frustration that led to his exclusion from the Promised Land. This interpretation highlights how deeply the sibling bond affected even Moses’s leadership. When Aharon died soon after, the nation mourned:

“And all the house of Israel wept for him for thirty days.”

“ויבכו אתו שלשים יום כל בית ישראל” (Bamidbar 20:29)

Moses was left to lead alone, but the legacy of their shared leadership endured.

Lessons for Us

Each sibling had their own family – Moses with Zipporah, Aharon with Elisheva, and, according to some traditions, Miriam with Caleb (Sifrei Bamidbar 78) – yet their bond remained strong. They worked together with humility, respect, and shared vision, achieving something extraordinary.

“How good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell together in unity.”

“הנה מה טוב ומה נעים שבת אחים גם יחד” (Tehillim 133:1)

The story of Miriam, Aharon, and Moses teaches us that siblinghood is sacred. It can be challenging, even strained, but it holds immense potential for love, trust, and shared purpose. Let us honour our siblings in life – call a sibling this Shabbat to share a memory or express gratitude. When siblings unite, they don’t just survive, they can create something truly incredible.

Balak – Danger of Spiritual Complacency

The best are not perfect – I don't want to imply that this Dvar Torah is in any way influenced by Wimbledon but Roger Federer, one of the greatest tennis players of all time, said:

“Even when I was ranked No. 1 in the world, I only won 54% of the points I played. You don't have to be perfect to be great.”

That number stunned me. Federer – arguably the GOAT (Greatest of All Time) – won just over half his points, yet dominated tennis for years. His greatness came from consistency, resilience, and recovering from the 46% he didn't win.

Parshat Balak delivers a parallel lesson. It's about a generation on the brink of greatness, undermined by temptation. It's about leaders who falter and one man – Pinchas – who rises in the moment. And it's about the danger of spiritual complacency, thinking we've “arrived” when growth is never complete.

A Personal Reflection: Embracing Imperfection

As a young, zealous teenager with a black-and-white worldview, I saw everything simply: right or wrong. Wrongdoing meant guilt and judgement – for myself and others. I viewed biblical generations as perfect, built of stronger stuff. But this assumption was not correct in every way. We all face temptation and sin – even the greatest, even Moses. This doesn't justify sin, but it's a reality we must confront and overcome. The greatest danger is ignoring our flaws instead of addressing them. Parshat Balak offers a vivid case study in human vulnerability.

The Sin at Shittim: A Fall from Greatness

How could a generation raised on manna and miracles, standing at the edge of their destiny, fall so far, so fast? The Children of Israel, on the border of the Land of Israel, were a new generation seemingly ready to inherit the promise. They had just been praised for their modesty by Bilaam, a prophet sent to curse them. Yet, they fell into sins of immorality and idolatry.

This sin, like the previous generation's, unfolded "before the eyes of Moses" (Bamidbar 25:6). Moses, overwhelmed, forgot the halacha (Rashi) and fell silent. Unlike the Korach episode, where he left resolution to Hashem, here Pinchas's bold act stopped the plague and restored divine favour. The Torah is unflinchingly honest about human nature and the power of temptation.

Bilaam's Blessing: Seeing Our Potential

Sometimes we don't realise our own potential and interestingly we see it this week. The Torah shifts perspective, showing the Israelites through Bilaam's eyes – a non-Jewish prophet hired to curse them. Instead, he blesses them:

"How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel" (Bamidbar 24:5).

Rashi and Rav Hirsch explain that Bilaam praised the Israelites' modesty and moral order. The Ramban (Bamidbar 24:5) adds that this blessing reflected their spiritual unity, a divine protection against external curses. But ironically, this praise became their downfall. Unable to curse them directly, Bilaam advised Balak to send women to seduce them (Sanhedrin 106a), exploiting their internal vulnerabilities. And it worked at least to a large extent until the incredible and somewhat radical intervention of Pinchas. Had they had the chance to internalise Bilaam's view of their spiritual potential, they might have resisted temptation. Similarly, we often fail to see our own potential for greatness.

The Danger of Settling: A Biblical Pattern

The sin at Shittim begins with a subtle phrase:
“And Israel settled in Shittim...” (Bamidbar 25:1).

Chazal teach that “Vayeishev” (settled) signals spiritual vulnerability, when comfort and passivity open the door to temptation. Sanhedrin 106a states:

“Every place where it says ‘Vayeishev,’ it brings pain.”

Consider these examples:

Bereishit 37:1 – “Jacob settled...”

The conflict with Joseph and his brothers erupts.

Bereishit 37:25 – “They sat down to eat...”

After throwing Joseph into the pit, the brothers eat, indifferent to his cries.

Shemot 32:6 – “The people sat down to eat and drink...”
Before the Golden Calf, festivity leads to a catastrophic fall.

Bamidbar 25:1 – “Israel settled in Shittim...”

On the cusp of entering the Land, the people relax – and fall into sin.

In each case, “settling” reflects a false sense of arrival, when we stop striving and assume the work is done. Spiritually, there’s no standing still – you’re either growing or slipping. As Rav Hirsch writes:

“The moment we believe we have arrived is the moment we begin to fall.”

Pinchas: The Courage to Act

Against this backdrop of complacency, Pinchas is described with one powerful verb: he rose.

“He rose from among the congregation and took a spear...”
(Bamidbar 25:7).

Where Moses hesitates, Pinchas stands. Where the people settle, he acts. Bamidbar Rabbah (20:25) explains that Pinchas acted out of zeal for Hashem’s covenant, driven by a deep sense of responsibility to protect the nation’s sanctity. His zeal breaks the paralysis and restores the covenant, showing that spiritual vigilance requires courage and decisive action.

Conclusion: Keep Rising

Parshat Balak teaches that the greatest threat is complacency within. We all stand on the border of our own “promised lands” – moments of growth or achievement. The Torah warns: don’t settle too soon. Keep rising. Act like Pinchas when the moment demands it. As Rav Dessler explains in *Strive for Truth*, our free will lies at the point of our personal struggles. For Bnei Yisrael, it was the lure of immorality and idol worship. For us, modern temptations – money, power, status, or comfort – are just as corrosive.

Even the greatest fall short. As Roger Federer said:
“You don’t have to be perfect to be great.”

The closer we are to greatness, the more vigilant we must be. To stay true to our values, reflect daily on one area where you can strive harder. And when faced with a moment of moral challenge, pause and ask: “What would Pinchas do?” Don’t settle. Rise.

Pinchas: Leadership, Legacy, and Letting Go

After weeks of dramatic episodes – Pinchas’s zeal, Bilaam’s curses, Balak’s schemes, and the plague at Peor – this week’s Parsha offers a profound shift. Amid all that turbulence, the Torah slows to record something quiet and deeply personal: a conversation between Moses and Hashem about who will lead the people when Moses is gone. It is a moment of extraordinary grace, revealing timeless principles of leadership and legacy. As I reflect on my own challenges – and on what it means to prepare others to carry forward what we have built – this exchange speaks to me with particular force.

Moses has just been reminded of his impending departure from this world and inability to enter the Land of Israel. After forty years of unparalleled leadership, sacrifice, and struggle, this could understandably be a moment of protest or despair.

Yet, instead, we witness an extraordinary conversation marked by trust, humility, and shared purpose, rooted in Moses’s profound love for his people and his intimate relationship with Hashem.

The Leader Moses Was, Reflected in the Leader He Seeks

Moses turns to Hashem with a request: “Let the Lord, Hashem of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the community...” (Bamidbar 27:16). This is not a request born of personal ambition, but from a deep-seated concern for the continuity of his people.

Moses then articulates the qualities of the leader he believes the people need: “One who will go out before them and come in before them, who will lead them out and bring them in, so that the Lord’s people will not be like sheep without a shepherd.” (Bamidbar 27:17).

This is not a political appeal. It's a deeply pastoral one. Moses doesn't seek a warrior-king or a fiery prophet. He asks for a shepherd – someone who will walk with the people, guide them, protect them, and nurture them. As Rashi notes, Moses's own sons were not chosen, emphasising that this is not about hereditary succession but about character and fitness for the role. This request reflects Moses's own selfless leadership, a leader who consistently prioritised the people's needs above his own, in his final moments. It's a profound act of kiddush Hashem, sanctifying Hashem's name through his actions.

The Timing: Letting Go and Legacy Building

The timing of this transition is particularly striking. Moses has just received the news of his fate. Yet, without delay, he turns to Hashem – not to plead for himself, but to ensure the people will have the guidance they require.

What is even more profound is that Hashem does not start this transition. He waits for Moses to bring it up. After forty years of leading the people, Moses is given the dignity and trust to decide when the time is right to begin the handover. This demonstrates a profound respect for Moses's judgement and underscores that true leadership involves empowering others.

This teaches us two fundamental principles:

Firstly, true closeness with Hashem is not about control but about trust. Hashem trusts Moses to know when the people are ready, and Moses trusts Hashem to guide the selection of the right successor.

Secondly, Moses's greatness lies not only in his leadership but also in his ability to step aside with grace, ensuring the mission endures beyond his lifetime.

Hashem's Response: Yehoshua – Humility and Vision

Hashem responds by naming Yehoshua, “a man in whom there is spirit” (Bamidbar 27:18). The Seforno explains this as someone with the capacity to connect with each person individually, demonstrating empathy and understanding. Ibn Ezra adds that “ruach” (spirit) implies divine inspiration and wisdom. It’s not simply intelligence or charisma, but a connection to a higher purpose.

As Rabbi Sacks notes, Yehoshua’s leadership stemmed from his humility: “Joshua had no pretensions... He was simply a faithful servant of Hashem and of Moses. That is what made him a leader” (Covenant & Conversation).

Hashem further instructs Moses to “invest Yehoshua with some of your majesty, so that all the congregation of the Israelites will listen to him” (Bamidbar 27:20). Rashi elucidates that this demonstrates the people’s continued respect for Moses and that his public endorsement would pave the way for a smooth transition. The Ohr HaChaim explains that Moses was instructed to physically place his hands on Yehoshua, symbolising the transfer of not just authority, but also his blessing and spiritual strength.

Moses does exactly that, standing by Yehoshua, laying his hands upon him, and giving him honour in the presence of the people. This is more than just a transfer of power; it’s a transfer of trust, dignity, and legacy, ensuring the sacred mission continues seamlessly.

A Legacy for All Generations

This Parsha is not simply about succession; it’s about the relationship with Hashem that shapes a life, and the leadership that flows from it. In considering the life of Moses, we are

reminded that his legacy is not merely judged by moments of greatness or lapses, but by the profound love he embodied for a nation and the depth of his relationship with Hashem. The Torah tells us”

“Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses – whom Hashem singled out, face to face”

(Devarim 34:10), a testament to their intimate connection – all rooted in Moses’s leadership and love for his people. In today’s world, where leadership is often associated with power and control, the example of Moses and Yehoshua offers a powerful alternative.

Moses’s final act is not to hold on, but to hand over. Not to seek honour, but to ensure continuity. And Hashem responds not with distance, but with closeness. Together, they model a leadership transition rooted in trust, humility, and shared purpose – a model applicable not only to national leaders but to parents, teachers, and community members in every generation. By stepping aside with grace, Moses ensured that his legacy would not be one of personal glory, but one of enduring impact.

Moses’s life exemplifies a perspective that values the overarching narrative rather than isolated incidents. His journey, culminating in his passing, was set against the backdrop of decades of guidance, growth, and challenge – an ongoing process that formed the foundation for the future of the Jewish people. His death was not merely an ending but a transition – a pivotal moment that paved the way for others to carry the torch.

As Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, beautifully said in his teachings, “The descent is part of the ascent.” Difficult moments, setbacks, or moments of personal failure are

integral to growth and elevation – they are not the end but part of a larger, divine plan for ascent.

Reflecting on our own lives – whether like me at fifty, having to face down a terminal illness, or navigating other challenges – we find inspiration in Moses’s example and in the Rebbe’s words. Despite the difficulties, the fight goes on.

Every encounter, every challenge, is an opportunity for meaning. Just as Moses handed over leadership with dignity and love, so too can we embrace our moments of difficulty as part of our spiritual ascent. Our setbacks do not define us – they are part of the journey that leads to growth, purpose, and hope.

The Parsha fittingly concludes with the verse that reflects calm, order, and obedience: **ויאמר משה אל-בני ישראל, ככל אשר-צוה יהוה את-משה** – “And Moses said to the Children of Israel: according to all that the Lord had commanded Moses” (Bamidbar 27:23).

This serves as a reminder that true leadership is ultimately about serving a higher purpose and passing enduring values to future generations. This is a timeless blueprint for navigating transitions and building lasting legacies.

Matot-Masei: Wrestling With Tough Questions

The Torah in this week's double portion contains some of the concepts many of us find challenging. As Rabbi Sacks taught, "The Torah's greatness is that it trusts us with the hard questions, inviting us to wrestle with its laws to refine our moral vision and grow as ethical beings."

Let's wrestle!

As a parent, and as a person of faith, I sometimes wish religion were clean and uncomplicated – black and white, always palatable to the modern world we live in. But it isn't. And life isn't either. Hashem doesn't ask us to live in simplicity – He asks us to live in truth. He challenges us, because challenge is the foundation of growth. Free will is the basis of this world: for every impulse to do good, there is a voice pulling us the other way. We therefore have to learn to fight these impulses and that at some level requires us to grapple with tough stuff.

It is of course easier to write about uplifting values and moral teaching that slot into today's environment perfectly, but when the Torah presents us with laws – on war, vows, gender roles, and justice – that we find hard to understand in our modern context, we must not look away. We must wrestle with them. That's what it means to be in covenant with Hashem.

The Torah doesn't pretend life is simple. It gives us a framework to navigate complexity. In a world of volatility, it is a constant – a moral anchor that helps us hold steady when everything else shifts.

In this context we also have to consider that society's view of what is acceptable is constantly changing as I illustrate below, against which we have a strong anchor.

An Example of Shifting Ground: Sheffield, 1997

An example of the shifting of the ground in a matter of years is something I experienced personally. I remember my first day of work in Sheffield, England, in 1997. A new, female, colleague asked, "Is it okay to wear a trouser suit to work?" The answer – "It's at the discretion of each partner" – seemed normal then. Today, the need to ask such a question would seem absurd and the answer completely inappropriate.

That moment has stayed with me. It reminds me that what we call "modern values" are constantly shifting. What's progressive today may be regressive tomorrow. So when we say the Torah is outdated, we must ask: compared to which moment in time?

The Torah doesn't chase trends. It offers something deeper – a moral anchor. Its laws, even the difficult ones, challenge us to think beyond the moment and ask what justice, dignity, and accountability truly mean.

Justice and Intent: The Cities of Refuge

There are so many concepts in this week's Parsha I had to focus on one.

One of the most morally sophisticated ideas in the Parsha is the institution of the *Arei Miklat* – Cities of Refuge. Someone who kills unintentionally must flee immediately without haste to one of these cities and remain there until the death of the High Priest (Numbers 35:9–34). Why exile someone who didn't mean to kill?

Because the Torah recognises that intent matters, but so does impact. Even accidental death demands accountability. The Torah's legal system distinguishes between premeditated murder and manslaughter – long before modern legal systems developed categories like first-degree murder, second-degree murder, and negligent homicide.

Today, society has moved beyond the concept of Cities of Refuge to a system of incarceration. But while the structures have changed, I don't think many would argue that we've significantly advanced in the quality of the solution. Prisons often fail to rehabilitate, and justice systems around the world struggle with fairness, overcrowding, and recidivism.

The Torah, by contrast, presents a blueprint that balances justice with compassion. The City of Refuge is not a prison. It's a space for reflection, for spiritual growth, and for the community to grapple with the value of life and the cost of its loss. It's a model that holds people accountable while still preserving their dignity and potential for change. It is a principle from which to draw practical solutions fit for today.

A Law That Rarely Happened – But Still Matters

Interestingly like seems to be the case with the Cities of Refuge, the Torah devotes significant space to laws that may have rarely, if ever, been applied. The rebellious son. Capital punishment for Shabbat violation and other offenses also. The Mishnah (Makkot 1:10) famously says that a Sanhedrin that executed once in seven (and some opinions say seventy) years was considered destructive.

We were never a society that practised mass punishments – so these examples are an absolute exception – So why include these laws at all?

Because the Torah is not just a legal code – it’s a moral blueprint. These laws teach us what society should value: life, intent, accountability, and compassion. Even if rarely enacted, they shape our ethical imagination.

Context Matters: War, Women, and Moral Complexity

This Parsha doesn’t shy away from complexity in other areas as well. It addresses a wide range of morally and halachically challenging topics – from the laws of warfare to the role of women in shaping halacha.

One of the most difficult passages is the command to attack Midian. It raises profound ethical questions, especially regarding the treatment of non-combatants. But the Torah presents this as a specific response to a specific threat at a specific time. These are not open-ended permissions for violence, but reflections of a morally complex moment in our national history. They are recorded not to be repeated, but to be wrestled with. That we have it enables us to have a discussion about what is required at a moment when Hashem is not personally involved (as is the case with the Firstborn of Egypt) and from that has sprung moral codes which are followed to this day, in direct opposition to these rules.

We also encounter one of the Torah’s most inspiring legal transformations as related to women’s right: the story of the daughters of Tzelofchad. These five women stood before Moses and demanded justice. Hashem affirmed their claim, and the law changed. This wasn’t just a legal ruling – it was a moment of halachic evolution, driven by moral clarity and courage. It reminds us that so much about Judaism and its development doesn’t just tolerate questions – it grows through them.

Conclusion: Wrestling Is Faith

We live in a world where values shift rapidly. What's considered ethical or enlightened today may be questioned tomorrow. But the Torah offers something deeper: a framework for moral clarity that transcends time.

Parshat Matot-Masei reminds us that the Torah's relevance isn't in how easy it is to read – but in how deeply it challenges us to think, to feel, and to live with integrity.

The Torah doesn't ask us to retreat from the world. It asks us to engage with it. To challenge injustice. To elevate the human spirit. To wrestle with hard truths – and emerge stronger.

Sefer Devarim – Reflection, Choice, and Living with Purpose

Devarim is a book of reflection and renewal, urging a new generation to internalise lessons of the past and take ownership of their future. It focuses on choice, between life and death, meaning and apathy, and calls for conscious, values-driven living. One of the clearest refrains is the Torah's call to "choose life," not only as a command, but as a mindset, a daily decision to engage, to be grateful, and to act with purpose. This section reframes faith as something lived, where memory shapes identity and responsibility shapes the future.

Standing separate from the other four books, it is Moses's opportunity to prepare a people for life outside the protected world of Hashem's canopy, and Moses's leadership, where no one else can take responsibility but ourselves.

As many of the Parshiot are said in the month of Elul and around the High Holy Days, I have chosen to take a specific look at some of the connections and insights that relate to the Parsha and the High Holidays.

Devarim – Tisha B’Av (and Devarim): Time to Stop and Think

Tisha B’Av, the 9th of Av, is the Jewish calendar’s saddest day, marked by the destruction of both Temples, exile, and centuries of loss. We fast, chant Kinnot, and sit in mourning to confront our collective pain. Yet, Tisha B’Av is not merely grief – it calls us to renew our love for Hashem, His covenant, and one another, with the hope of transforming this day into joy (Rambam, Hilchot Ta’anit 5:19).

As a teenager, I found Tisha B’Av overwhelming. Lost in its rituals – fasting, mournful Kinnot about the First Temple’s fall and the Second Temple’s destruction by sinat chinam (baseless hatred) – I struggled to see its relevance. I didn’t understand the Kinnot – they felt ancient, poetic, and distant. I couldn’t study Torah and instead was handed pages of sorrow I couldn’t connect to.

Over time, I realised Tisha B’Av urges us to rise above the minutiae and focus on our covenant with Hashem and our unity as a people.

Rabbi Sacks encapsulated this:

“The beauty of Judaism is that it did not become traumatised by tragedy. Despite their suffering, Jews did not let themselves become defined by it. They mourned on Tisha B’Av and the other specified fasts but did not allow the rest of their days to be darkened by grief. They set limits to sadness.”

By distilling our pain into one day, we mine its lessons to strengthen our bonds with Hashem and each other.

A Day to Reflect and Renew

This theme of internal discord is not new. In fact, the Torah itself foreshadows it in Parshat Devarim, read just before Tisha B'Av. Moses laments:

איכה אשא לבדי טרחכם ומשאכם וריבכם

“How can I bear your troubles, your burdens, and your strife all by myself?” (Devarim 1:12)

The word Eichah here echoes the opening of the Book of Lamentations, linking the Torah's narrative to the sorrow of Tisha B'Av.

Rashi explains that these terms – ריבכם, משאכם, טרחכם – are not just logistical burdens, but emotional ones: complaints, contentiousness, and suspicion. He describes a people who are quick to argue, to assume the worst, and to speak with cynicism. This is not just about what we say, but how we say it. The tone, the attitude, the constant friction – these are as corrosive as the content of our words. In fact, they may be more dangerous. Our internal politics, often Machiavellian in nature, can mirror the behaviours that led to our national tragedies.

Moses's cry is not just administrative – it's a lament over a community fractured by mistrust and negativity. This verse reminds us that the seeds of destruction often lie not in external threats, but in the way we speak to and about one another.

The Path of Covenant and Love

When we take a step back from the minutiae and detail, we consistently return to the principles that lie behind our faith and that are at the root of our diversion from it – our relationship with Hashem, His requirements of us, and our relationship with our fellow man or woman. Looking back at the most basic requests

from Hashem helps us understand where this sadness emanates from.

For this, we don't need anything sophisticated – we can look at the most important prayer we have – first the Shema – and second the greatest principle of the Torah, according to the Rabbi who witnessed the pain of the destruction of the Second Temple.

Love Hashem and Honour His Covenant

ואהבת את ה' אלהיך בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך ובכל מאודך

“You shall love the Lord your Hashem with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.” (Devarim 6:5)

This love, written at the beginning of the Shema prayer, as the Rambam describes (Hilchot Teshuva 10:3), is an all-consuming devotion, shaping every thought and deed. As the sentence says – all our heart, soul and might – all our resources.

Do we do this? Truly? Many of us (and I am speaking of myself) try to live according to Hashem's way, but do we truly seed our love into the relationship – especially as we grow older and focus on other relationships, and other false Hashems such as money, lust, and power?

As with other relationships, time breeds familiarity and it can lead us to take our eye off the key point of all.

The Shema goes on to say in the 2nd paragraph

“If you listen to My commandments... I will provide rain... But if your heart turns away... the heavens will close.” (Devarim 11:13–17)

Love demands action. The covenant requires performing mitzvot with intention, even when their full meaning eludes us. Hashem sets it out clearly – there is a quid pro quo, or as others would say, no free lunch. For the awesome benefit of the covenant we hold dear with Hashem, we have responsibilities.

These responsibilities are to Hashem and to our fellow men and women. Both.

Love One Another

ואהבת לרעך כמוך

“Love your neighbour as yourself.” (Vayikra 19:18)

Rabbi Akiva, who saw the Temple’s ruins, called this the Torah’s core. He saw perhaps more than anyone the way baseless hatred tears us apart – he saw it with the destruction of the Temple and the death of his students. Perhaps this is why he saw this verse as arguably the greatest principle of the Torah.

Perhaps also, the Torah’s use of לבבך above – with its doubled letter – hints at a doubled heart. Rashi teaches that this alludes to our internal struggle: the good and bad inclinations (yetzer hatov and yetzer hara), emphasising that we must love Hashem with all parts of ourselves including overcoming our negative influences. But maybe, as a friend of mine thought, it could also be said that the heart beats not only for Hashem, but for others. That we love Hashem not in isolation, but through our interconnectedness, our shared struggles, and our collective heart.

There are many commandments – 613 – and thousands of pages of detail, but the injunction not to learn Torah on Tisha B’Av brings us back to focus on the tremendous sadness of the day and the hope that we can be better in the future (and, to be honest, in the

immediate present, where we are so at danger internally – not to mention externally).

Rabbi Akiva's Hope: Love as Redemption

In the Talmud (Makkot 24b), Rabbi Akiva visited the Temple's ruins. A fox emerged from the Holy of Holies; his colleagues wept, but Akiva laughed. If the prophecy of destruction (Micah 3:12) was fulfilled, he said, so too will redemption (Zechariah 8:4–5). What is that prophecy?

It is not a prophesy of power and loud celebration...

“There shall yet be elderly men and women in the squares of Jerusalem... and the squares of the city shall be crowded with boys and girls playing.”

This vision – elders at peace, children in joy – embodies love: a community bound by compassion and faith. Akiva's “Love your neighbour as yourself” is the covenant in action, where every Jew is cherished.

Tisha B'Av Today: A Call to Return

Tisha B'Av gathers our pain into one plea from Eicha 5:21:

השיבנו ה' אליך ונשובה חדש ימינו כקדם

“Take us back, O LORD, to Yourself, and let us come back; renew our days as of old.”

This cry demands action: to love Hashem with devotion, honour His covenant through mitzvot, and love each other as Akiva envisioned. By rising above the weeds of division and routine, we can prevent further tragedy and hasten the day when Tisha B'Av becomes a festival of joy.

It may sound hugely simplistic, but sometimes we need to create space to see the big picture. And it doesn't matter what type or shape of Jew you are – I believe we could all learn a message or two on Tisha B'Av.

V'etchanan – Faith: The Secret That Twain Sought to Know

Mark Twain once wrote:

“If the statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one quarter of one percent of the human race. It suggests a nebulous puff of star dust lost in the blaze of the Milky Way. Properly, the Jew ought hardly to be heard of, but he is heard of, has always been heard of. He is as prominent on the planet as any other people, and his importance is extravagantly out of proportion to the smallness of his bulk. The Jew saw them all, survived them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert but aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jews; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?”

It's a powerful question. What is the secret of our endurance? How have we, a people so small in number, managed to outlast empires, ideologies, and civilisations? I believe this week's Parsha, V'etchanan, offers profound insight into the structure and strength of our faith, rooted in the Torah.

Three Elements of Faith in V'etchanan

In V'etchanan, we encounter three foundational elements of Jewish belief and identity that help us answer the question posed by Mark Twain.

The Shema and the First Commandment

The Shema – “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our Hashem, the Lord is One” (Devarim 6:4) / שמע ישראל ה' אלוהינו ה' אחד – reaffirms our belief

in one Hashem, the Hashem who brought us out of Egypt. This is not merely theology; it's a declaration of loyalty, relationship, and memory. It's a call to love Hashem "with all your heart, soul, and might," binding us to Him across generations.

The Covenant

Hashem chose us to be His people – not because we are in any way superior, but because we were entrusted with a mission: to be His representatives in the world. The Ten Commandments, repeated in this Parsha (Devarim 5:6–21), are not just laws; they are the terms of that covenant.

Our Commitment to His Laws

At Sinai, we didn't merely receive rules – we entered a relationship. We said, Na'aseh v'nishma – "We will do and we will hear." That commitment, I believe, is the secret to our immortality. This commitment is contained within a framework set out in two places in this week's Parsha, a set of guardrails, the beauty of which I set out below. These are the guardrails of "Don't add/subtract" and "Don't go right/left".

The Structure and Beauty of Torah

What makes the Torah the key to our endurance?

It's not a single book of rules. Hashem didn't hand us a finished legal code like the Shulchan Aruch or Mishnah Berurah. Instead, He gave us a written framework – the Five Books of Moses – and an Oral Law, transmitted to Moses and passed down through generations, designed to evolve and respond to the changing realities of Jewish life.

This is the genius of the Torah. It's not static – it's structured yet dynamic. It has an anchor, but it also has sails.

Look at us today: Jews live across every continent, speak dozens of languages, and span a wide spectrum of religious expression. Yet, from Jerusalem to Honolulu, we share core experiences – Shabbat candles, the haunting melody of Kol Nidrei, the Seder plate – united by a system designed to endure. Hashem created a Torah that could withstand time, embrace diversity, and remain holy.

Human Imperfection and Enduring Commitment

Let's be honest: none of us succeeds in keeping all the mitzvot all the time – even Moses was a step away from perfection. I certainly don't pretend to be anywhere close. We fall short – sometimes in mitzvot between man and man, sometimes in those between man and Hashem. Some laws we understand and cherish; others we follow out of trust, even when they don't make sense to us, and yes some we struggle with because we are all 'works in progress'.

But here's the miracle: we're still here. We're still connected. We're still trying.

If the generation that left Egypt could attend Seders in Jerusalem, Manchester, or Nairobi, they'd see differences – different foods, languages, customs. But they'd also see something deeply familiar. They'd see that we remember them. That we're still telling their story. That we're still part of the same story.

Challenges and the Two-Dimensional Framework

This system isn't easy. As society changes, as technology accelerates, as values shift, we face real challenges. But Hashem anticipated that. In V'etchanan, He gave us a two-dimensional framework to keep us grounded over the long run.

The Two Guardrails

Don't Add or Subtract

“You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor shall you diminish from it” (Devarim 4:2) / לא תוספו על הדבר אשר אנכי מצוה אתכם / ולא תגרעו ממנו.

This is about preserving the core framework. The Torah and its transmission are sacrosanct. We don't rewrite the anchor. For example, we don't eliminate the prohibition on writing on Shabbat or create new mitzvot to suit modern trends.

Don't Turn Right or Left

“You shall not turn aside to the right or to the left” (Devarim 5:32) / ושמרתם לעשות כאשר צוה ה' אלוהיכם אתכם לא תסורו ימין ושמאל /

This is about faithfulness to tradition. Within the adaptive framework, we follow authentic paths. Our sages – like Rabbi Akiva or later poskim – guide us, permitting innovations like the establishment of an eruv to allow carrying on Shabbat, or in some cases strictures to protect the laws like Muktzah and Second Day Yom Tov outside Israel.

Interpreting the Guardrails

The first guardrail says: Don't tamper with the foundation. Even if we struggle to keep every law, we accept that Hashem's framework is right. This is like a pilot accepting the rules of aviation as universally set.

The second says: Stay on the authentic path. Within the Torah's flexibility, we don't veer into interpretations that betray its essence. Our rabbis apply ancient principles – like pikuach nefesh – to classical halachic dilemmas, such as communal enactments or financial ethics, keeping us aligned with Torah. This is like navigating a ship through a channel – there's room to adjust, but the boundaries keep us safe.

These boundaries have protected Judaism throughout the ages. We see them today in many historical and current examples: those who kept Shabbat in 1930s New York despite the risk of losing their jobs, those who fight in the IDF to protect their land despite the risk of death, and those who manage to keep kosher when travelling to far-flung places in the world when it would be so much easier not to.

Each of us has our challenges in this area, each is at their own level often based on their background and environment, and none of us is perfect, but the will to continue trying to perform tough mitzvot which don't necessarily fit with the times or our schedule is one of the reasons we are still here.

Conclusion: A Personal Reflection

As someone who, especially in my younger years, preferred a world of black-and-white rules, I used to wish Hashem had given us a clear, fixed code. Something simple. Something static.

But now, I see the wisdom in what He gave us. The Torah is not a rulebook – it's a living guide. It challenges us, stretches us, and sometimes frustrates us. But it also unites us, elevates us, and keeps us alive.

Yes, it gives rise to different expressions of faith – some stricter, some more lenient, some mystical, some pragmatic. And yes, change can feel slow. But the Torah's brilliance lies in its ability to hold us together while allowing us to grow.

So, what does this mean for us today? How do we balance our commitment to Torah with the challenges of modern life? Whether it's keeping Shabbat in a changing world or wrestling with ethical questions, the Torah guides us if we hold fast to its framework. The Torah – in its written and oral forms – is a miraculous, resilient,

and beautiful guide for all generations. Whether we keep a little or a lot, whether we struggle or soar, we should be deeply grateful for it.

It is, in response to Mark Twain's question, the secret to our immortality: a Torah that is not merely studied but lived, not merely preserved but renewed, in every generation and in every life.

Ekev – Profound Gratitude – Parashat Ekev

Let's be honest: sometimes it takes losing something to truly appreciate what we had. For many of us, gratitude only kicks in when the Wi-Fi drops... or worse, the phone drops (!), and we brace ourselves for the worst only to flip it over and realise it's not broken. That moment of relief? That's modern-day gratitude. On a more serious note, when health, mobility, or time slip away, the fragility of these things becomes starkly clear.

With significant health challenges, I can honestly say I feel enormous gratitude for the blessings I have and continue to receive. It's a perspective shift forced upon me one I'm not sure I would have arrived at on my own.

This week's parasha, Eikev, gives us the mitzvah of Birkat Hamazon/Grace After Meals, from which we can learn so much:

ואכלת ושבעת וברכת את ה' אלהיך על הארץ הטובה אשר נתן לך

“When you have eaten your fill, give thanks to the LORD your Hashem for the good land which He has given you.” (Devarim 8:10)

It seems like a simple three-step formula: Eat, be satisfied, bless Hashem. But the Torah immediately warns us of a danger a pattern we see throughout our history:

פן תאכל ושבעת ובתים טובים תבנה וישבת

ובקרך וצאנך ירבין וכסף וזהב ירבה לך וכל אשר לך ירבה

ורם לבבך ושכחת את ה' אלהיך

“When you have eaten and are satisfied, and have built fine houses and lived in them, and when your herds and flocks multiply, and

your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud, and you will forget the LORD your Hashem..." (Devarim 8:12-14)

Notice that the "give thanks to Hashem" is replaced by thinking of our fine houses, assets, and money. Abundance, comfort even success can breed complacency, and the blessings for which we should be grateful can become the cause of our forgetfulness.

Rabbi Sacks wrote:

"Part of the essence of gratitude is that it recognises that we are not the sole authors of what is good in our lives... Thankfulness has an inner connection with humility. It recognises that what we are and what we have is due to others, and above all to Hashem."
– Covenant & Conversation on Parashat Eikev

As the Talmud states:

"Wine belongs to the master. Thanks goes to the waiter."
– Bava Kama 92b

I am speaking for myself when I say that I have too often been too quick to thank or self-congratulate myself and ignore the Master. I believe in Hashem. I love Hashem. I fear Hashem. But I'm also a control freak and, at times, a perfectionist – traits that served me well in my career, but also made me think I was more in control than I ever was. That focus easily morphed into a sense of self-importance.

Facing my own mortality has stripped away the noise of success, responsibility, and self-reliance. The things that once seemed important have faded, replaced by a profound appreciation for the gifts I've been given.

I'm grateful for all the wonderful things Hashem placed and continues to place in my orbit my wife, my kids, my family, my friends, my colleagues, the skills Hashem gave me, and all the "chance" moments and opportunities that Hashem placed in my orbit... and yes, the challenges too.

I'm not a "regret" person. But I recognise that the blessings I've had weren't because of me. They were gifts from Hashem. I've been saying Birkat Hamazon/Grace After Meals since I was 11, but too often and by that, I mean 99% of the time it was rushed, mumbled, autopilot. Now, I am going to try to slow down, to mean the words, to truly acknowledge the source of the blessing. The times I fail are a reminder of how easily I revert to self-absorption.

Grace after meals is just one facet it's just a component of my general lack of gratitude for so much good and the opportunity to overcome adversity. I have a lot of work to do, but at least the path is much clearer now. It's a daily struggle, a conscious choice to fight my own ego and recognise the source of it all.

I can't speak for other people's challenges and certainly don't know why bad things happen to good people it is way above my pay grade or "security clearance." And yes, there are many terrible things happening around us. I simply am not qualified to explain. But for just me I don't see my challenges as a punishment. I still have so many wonderful things in this world.

And I am truly grateful.

May we all learn to bless Hashem in times of abundance, not just at moments of crisis. May I, and anyone who happens to feel similar to me, strive to see beyond the surface, to acknowledge the source of all blessings, and to cultivate a spirit of gratitude even when our own self-centredness gets in the way.

Re'eh – Dethroning the Inner Idol: Re'eh and Rosh Hashanah

As we approach Rosh Hashanah and the Days of Awe, I turn to Parshat Re'eh to reflect on themes that will shape the Mussaf service, which I hope to lead this year if my health permits. Each Parshah offers a lens, not just into the Torah's narrative, but into the spiritual work we are called to do as we prepare to stand before Hashem, during the High Holy Days and every day.

Before leading the congregation, the chazzan recites Hineni (הנני), a humble plea that begins: "Here I am, poor in deeds, trembling and afraid in awe of the One who is enthroned on the praises of Israel" (הנני העני ממעש, ברעש ונפחד מפחד יושב תהלות ישראל). The chazzan acknowledges, though unworthy, the weight of standing as a representative before Hashem. This prayer sets the tone for divine service, calling us to shed pride and align with a higher purpose, a perfect prelude to the themes of Parshat Re'eh.

This week's Parsha, Re'eh (ראה), opens with a stark choice:

"See, I place before you today a blessing and a curse..." (Devarim 11:26, ראה אנכי נתן לפניכם היום ברכה וקללה)

It launches into a section about obedience to the Torah, promising blessings for adherence and curses for disobedience. The language is urgent, a warning as we approach days where, spiritually, we walk a delicate line. Hashem presents challenges, personal, communal, and national, that test our commitment.

Beneath this call to clarity lies a deeper warning, one that speaks not only to ancient Israel but to our modern selves: the first item we are told to avoid is idolatry.

“Beware... lest you be drawn after them [false Hashems] and inquire about their practices...” (Devarim 12:30, השמר לך פן-תנקש, אחריהם... ופן-תדרש לאלהיהם)

Idolatry might seem distant. On a trip to India, I was once offered a literal idol by kind-hearted people, but such encounters are rare. Yet idolatry has not vanished, it has transformed. The Lubavitcher Rebbe teaches that the most dangerous idol is internal: the ego.

“Let no strange Hashem be within you” (Tehillim 81:10, לא-יהיה בך, אל זר), interpreted by Chazal as the yetzer hara (יצר הרע), the inner force that resists surrender to Hashem.

The Rebbe explains that when our desires, fears, or pride override divine truth, we serve ourselves, not Hashem. This inner idol, the self that insists on being the centre, must be dethroned. He writes:

“The greatest obstacle to divine service is not external distraction, but internal resistance, the voice that says, ‘I am the centre.’”

“To make a dwelling place for Hashem in this world, one must become transparent, not absent, but aligned.”

As someone who has long wrestled with control, I find this teaching humbling. What about striving to reach our full potential? Yet Hineni reminds us: “I am poor in deeds, trembling and afraid, though I am not worthy” (הנני העני ממעש, נרעש ונפחד, אף על פי שאיני). True potential lies not in self-aggrandisement but in aligning with Hashem’s will.

Rabbi Sacks echoes this in his essay Challenging the Idols of the Secular Age:

“Every age has its idols... and ours is the worship of the self.”

In a culture that celebrates autonomy, we risk losing sight of a higher truth. Rabbi Sacks reminds us that humility is not weakness but accountability to Hashem. He reflects on the shofar's message:

"The shofar is Hashem's way of saying what He said to Adam: 'Where are you?'" (איכה, Bereishit 3:9)

It is a call to awaken, to return, to rediscover our true selves beneath layers of ego.

The Mussaf of Rosh Hashanah, which I hope to lead, is structured around three themes:

Malchuyot (מלכויות) – Declaring Hashem's Kingship: "Remember us for life, O King who desires life, and inscribe us in the Book of Life, for Your sake, living Hashem" (זכרנו לחיים, מלך חפץ בחיים, וכתבנו בספר) (החיים, למענך אלהים חיים).

Zichronot (זכרונות) – Trusting in Divine Memory: "You remember all deeds from the beginning of time and take note of all creatures of old" (אתה זוכר כל-מעשה עולם, ופוקד כל-יצורי קדם).

Shofarot (שופרות) – Hearing the Call of the Soul: "A great shofar will be sounded, and a still small voice will be heard" (ושופר גדול יתקע, וקול דממה דקה ישמע).

These prayers are existential. Malchuyot demands we dethrone ourselves to crown Hashem. Zichronot asks to be seen as we truly are. Shofarot bypasses the ego, speaking directly to the soul.

Viktor Frankl reminds us that meaning comes from using our gifts to contribute. In times of transition, like retirement, we ask: What now? How do I give? Yet, as Hineni teaches, we are not the centre, acknowledging our unworthiness before Hashem. The Rebbe emphasises that true service requires transparency, alignment with Hashem's will, not personal ambition. Our purpose may be

modest: leading a prayer, listening, writing, showing up. All of it matters.

To make a dwelling place for Hashem, we don't need to be grand, we need to be real, echoing the humility of Hineni: "Here I am, poor in deeds, though I am not worthy" (הגני העני ממעש, אף על פי שאיני ראוי).

This reminds me of a chessboard, where each piece, whether a king, a pawn, or a knight, has a unique role, moving according to the player's strategy. A pawn may seem insignificant, yet its careful advance can shift the game's outcome; a knight's bold leap serves the broader plan. Similarly, we each contribute, not for personal glory, but to fulfil Hashem's purpose, guided by the divine strategy of the Torah.

Parshat Re'eh is an invitation to see clearly, to choose blessing over curse, to dismantle the false Hashems within. "You are our Hashem" (אתה הוא אלהינו).

Shoftim – One simple verse packs a punch

As we approach Rosh Hashanah and read Parashat Shoftim, one verse in Deuteronomy 18:13 speaks directly to the heart of the High Holy Days:

תמים תהיה עם יהוה אלהיך

“You shall be wholehearted with your Hashem.”

This simple yet profound command calls us to live with complete trust and devotion to Hashem. Rashi explains:

“Walk before Him whole-heartedly, put your hope in Him and do not attempt to investigate the future, but whatever comes upon you, accept it whole-heartedly, and then you shall be with Him” (Sifrei Devarim 173:3).

Ramban adds that we should focus our hearts solely on Hashem, trusting that He alone shapes our lives, and avoid seeking answers in practices like astrology.

This message resonates deeply with the prayers of Rosh Hashanah, particularly the Unetaneh Tokef, which confronts us with life’s uncertainty:

כמה יעברון וכמה יבראון, מי יחיה ומי ימות, מי בקצו ומי לא בקצו

“How many shall pass away and how many shall be born; who shall live and who shall die; who shall live out their allotted time and who shall not.

These words remind us we cannot control the future, only our faith in Hashem’s plan. For me, this verse has taken on new meaning this year as I navigate my health challenge, that has taught me to

surrender to Hashem's will. Being "wholehearted" means letting go of the need to know what lies ahead and embracing each moment with trust and hope.

The High Holy Days provide three deliberate paths to cultivate this wholehearted faith: Teshuva, Tefillah, and Tzedakah. These are not random acts but practical, transformative practices that reorient our lives toward Hashem.

Through Teshuva (repentance), we actively reflect, confront our shortcomings, and return to our truest selves, aligning our actions with Hashem's will.

Through Tefillah (prayer), we open our hearts to Hashem, fostering a deeper connection that strengthens our trust in Him.

Through Tzedakah (charity), we embody Hashem's compassion, transforming our relationships with others and the world.

These practices drive real change, reshaping our character and drawing us closer to being tamim – wholehearted. As we stand before Hashem this Rosh Hashanah, may we embrace Teshuva, Tefillah, and Tzedakah to live with complete devotion, trusting in His plan and walking His path with love.

Ki Teitzei: Beauty is in the Discomfort

This gritty Parsha that I once found hard to hear, exposes the true power of our living, breathing Torah and helps us prepare for the real nature of the coming Yamim Noraim.

Growing up as a liberal kid in a non-Jewish private school in London, the first aliyah of Parashat Ki Teitzei, from rishon to sheni, was always the hardest for me. The laws felt alien, even jarring. I felt immense discomfort.

A captive woman taken in war. An unloved wife whose son must be honoured. A rebellious child condemned to death. These were laws that seemed to speak to a world I believed existed “out there” and not the civilised one I believed in, and at times had to defend. Not in my community, not in my values, not in the world I wanted to inhabit. These laws provoked feelings of injustice. How could a society condone taking a captive woman? How could a child ever deserve to be condemned to death?

And yet, I heard them up to four times each week, Shabbat afternoon, Monday, Thursday, and again on Shabbat morning. They ate at me. Where is the holiness in these situations?

Now, at 50, I’ve come to see that the Torah doesn’t shy away from the rough edges of life. It doesn’t pretend that every situation has a perfect solution. It speaks to war, to dysfunction, to moral failure, and to irredeemable evil. It speaks to the real world, not just the ideal one. That is its beauty.

This theme doesn’t end with the rebellious son. It continues throughout many of the 74 commandments in Ki Teitzei. Consider, for example, laws dealing with complex family situations, such as

those where conflicting rights and responsibilities create seemingly impossible choices.

On the surface, some of these laws can appear to perpetuate injustice, creating difficult situations and trapping individuals in limbo. Yet, they also reflect a deep concern for the sanctity of relationships and a cautious approach to intervening in deeply personal matters. They speak to the complexity of human relationships, and the difficult choices societies must make when faced with imperfect information.

We read of a criminal whose body must be buried the same day, because even in death, dignity matters. We read of the obligation to return lost property, even to someone we dislike. We read of the prohibition against exploiting the vulnerable, workers, widows, orphans, strangers. We read of the command to remember Amalek, a nation defined by its hatred and cruelty.

These laws are not endorsements. They are containments, ways to limit harm in situations that are already broken. They are Torah's way of saying: Even here, there must be boundaries. Even here, there is a path to dignity.

And this is where the timeless beauty of Torah truly shines. Rambam (Maimonides) teaches us that the Written Law is never meant to stand alone. It is wrapped in the Oral Law, which travels with it through time, offering interpretation, nuance, and moral clarity. In Hilchot Mamrim, Rambam codifies the laws of the rebellious son with such strict conditions that the Talmud concludes:

"There never was a case of a rebellious son, and there never will be. It was written only to teach."

(Sanhedrin 71a, echoed in Mishneh Torah, Mamrim 7:11)

Some might argue that even with these strict conditions, the existence of such a law is problematic. Does it normalise violence against children? Does it reflect a patriarchal worldview? These are valid concerns, and they highlight the ongoing need for critical engagement with Torah. However, the Oral Law, by effectively nullifying the law in practice, suggests a deeper understanding: the law serves as a symbolic warning against extreme rebellion and a reminder of the importance of parental responsibility.

This duality, Written and Oral Law, is what keeps Torah relevant across generations. Written before any other religion codified its laws, it remains more sophisticated, more humane, and more attuned to the complexities of human nature.

Rabbi Sacks frames Ki Teitzei as a Parsha of social responsibility, how we treat the vulnerable, the outsider, the broken, writing:

“Among [its laws] are moral and legal obligations towards neighbours and fellow citizens, sexual misdemeanours, moral behaviour in relation to financial matters, and other rules of social responsibility.”

(Covenant & Conversation: Ki Teitzei)

Rashi, ever the realist, links the captive woman, the hated wife, and the rebellious son as a moral progression. On Deuteronomy 21:11, he writes:

“The Torah spoke here only in response to the evil inclination. For if the Holy One, blessed be He, would not permit her, he would marry her in a forbidden manner. But if he does marry her, he will ultimately come to hate her, as it says afterward: ‘If a man has two wives...,’ and he will eventually father from her a wayward and rebellious son. Therefore, these passages are juxtaposed.”

(Rashi on Deuteronomy 21:11)

Ki Teitzei becomes a Parsha not just of laws, but of moral resilience. It teaches us that justice is not always clean, but it must always be pursued. That compassion must extend even to the undeserving. That memory, like the command to remember Amalek, is not just about pain, but about vigilance and moral clarity.

This is Torah for the battlefield. Torah for the broken home. Torah for the courtroom. Torah for the world we live in, not just the one we dream of. This is something important for us as we sit here a few weeks from Rosh Hashana.

As we approach – The Day of Judgement, we stand before Hashem not only with our ideals, but with our contradictions, our brokenness, and our unresolved struggles. The Torah portion of Ki Teitzei reminds us that holiness is not found only in perfection, but in how we navigate the messiness of life. Just as the Torah addresses the uncomfortable, the unjust, and the morally complex, so too do our prayers on Rosh Hashanah ask Hashem to see us in our entirety, not just for who we are, but for who we are trying to become.

When we say “Zochreinu l’chayim”, “Remember us for life”, we are not asking to be remembered as flawless. We are asking to be remembered as people who, like the Torah itself, wrestle with the real world, who seek dignity even in discomfort, and who strive to bring compassion into complexity. That is the beauty of both Ki Teitzei and the Yamim Noraim: they call us to moral courage, not moral simplicity.

Ki-Tavo – Making our relationship with Hashem ‘Real’

As I write this, I’m acutely aware of my own shortcomings, and I would describe myself as a self-confessed hypocrite. Although I believe in Hashem, am committed to His words, and try to live accordingly, over the past few years I’ve often found myself lost in the routine of life. The result has been a relationship with Hashem that feels less than “real.”

Prayers have become more superficial, constantly competing with the vibrations of WhatsApp messages and a million other distractions. On a deeper level, I’ve been quick to take personal credit for my successes and even quicker to blame Hashem when things go wrong.

But we are in the month of Elul, a time of reflection and preparation for the High Holy Days. I, like many of us, am struggling to break free from this mindset and to see the world through a more spiritual lens, even if just a little.

In this context, we can look at one of the verses in this week’s Parsha:

“You have affirmed this day that the ETERNAL is your Hashem – in whose ways you will walk, whose laws and commandments and rules you will observe, and whom you will obey.” (Deuteronomy 26:16)

The phrase that jumps out is “This day – היום הזה.” When is this day?

In Chassidic thought and in the writings of commentators like Nechama Leibowitz, “This day” means now, every day. In her Studies in Devarim, Leibowitz explains that the commandments

must feel fresh, as if newly given each day, urging us to approach them with renewed devotion.

We need to renew our relationship with Hashem constantly. We must not let it grow stale. As the verse says, we need to invest our heart and soul into it, our entire heart and soul.

In this context, the Rambam (Maimonides) offers an inspiring parallel. In his book *Hilchot Teshuva* (Laws of Repentance), he asks: “How do we come to love Hashem?” He gives an analogy:

“What is the proper love of Hashem? It is like the love of a person who is lovesick, whose mind is never free from the object of his love. He thinks of her constantly, whether sitting, standing, eating, or drinking. Even more so should the love of Hashem be in the hearts of those who love Him.”

This is not just poetic, it’s aspirational. The Rambam is describing total emotional and spiritual immersion, where Hashem is not a distant concept but a living presence in our thoughts, our choices, and our hearts.

I’m not sure I have the tools to recommend how to achieve this state. I’m clearly not there. But one thing I’ve noticed since retiring and stepping back from the day-to-day obsession with work is that this world does not revolve around me. As controlling as I’ve tried to be, Hashem is so evidently pulling the strings.

To become lovesick for Hashem and to renew ourselves spiritually, we need to make space for it. My self-absorption over such a long time has been a major block to this. As I turn toward Rosh Hashanah, I need to step back and recognise that I am not the King. The King is Hashem, and He actively wants us to build a relationship of love and awe with Him.

It's a process. And at certain points in life, such as now, for me, newly retired and reflecting on my own frailty and health, it resonates more deeply than at others. But I suspect most of us could benefit from making more space for this.

Nitzavim: Choose Life

As we stand on the threshold of Rosh Hashanah, the Torah presents us with one of its most stirring and personal challenges. In Parashat Nitzavim, after a series of verses describing blessings and curses, closeness and distance, reward and punishment, we are given a choice:

“I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life, so that you and your offspring may live.” (Devarim 30:19)

This is not merely a poetic flourish. It is a profound theological and existential statement: we are free to choose, and our choices shape our lives, our communities, and our future.

The verses leading up to this moment emphasise that the Torah is not distant or inaccessible:

“It is not in the heavens... nor across the sea... but close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it.” (Devarim 30:12–14)

Rashi explains this with a parable: a father shows his child the best portion of land and says, “Choose this!”, a loving nudge toward the right path. Sforno adds that choosing life is not about reward, but about recognising what is truly life, a life of loving Hashem, grounded in awareness of His goodness and greatness.

The Challenge of Real Life

As the Israelites prepared to leave the divine shelter of the desert and enter the real world, with its sweat, tears, and moral tests, Hashem made it clear: this will not be easy. But it will be meaningful.

Judaism is not a religion of comfort. It is a religion of purpose. The covenant is not a guarantee of ease, but a promise of significance. We are not promised a smooth path. We are promised a purposeful one.

This is especially relevant today. As we look around at a world filled with uncertainty, suffering, and complexity, whether personal, national, or global, we are reminded that the Torah does not shy away from these realities. It meets them head-on and calls us to respond with courage, clarity, and commitment.

Rav Kook – Creation as Constant Becoming

Rav Kook, the great mystic and visionary, offers a breathtaking interpretation of spiritual life and human growth. He writes:

“An epiphany enables you to sense creation not as something completed, but as constantly becoming, evolving, ascending. This transports you from a place where there is nothing new to a place where there is nothing old, where everything renews itself, where heaven and earth rejoice as at the moment of creation.”

This is a radical optimism. Even in suffering, even in confusion, we are part of a divine process of growth. Choosing life means choosing to take part in that process, to see ourselves not as victims of fate, but as partners in creation.

It’s a message that resonates deeply as we prepare for the Days of Awe. Teshuvah – return – is not just about fixing what’s wrong. It’s about becoming who we are, and recognising that the world itself is in a state of becoming, not brokenness.

Viktor Frankl – Meaning as the Ultimate Choice

Viktor Frankl, Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist, echoed this Torah truth in secular language. In *Man's Search for Meaning*, he wrote:

“Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms, to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.”

Frankl's insight is deeply aligned with the Torah's call to choose life. Even when external control is stripped away, the power to choose meaning, dignity, and moral direction remains. This is the essence of human freedom, and the essence of the covenant between Hashem and the Jewish people.

Choosing Life in Our Time

As we face Rosh Hashanah, each of us stands at a crossroads. The world presents us with both blessing and suffering, often in unequal measure. We carry personal burdens, national pain, and global uncertainty. And yet, the Torah calls us not to despair, but to choose life.

Not just life in the biological sense, but life filled with purpose, faith, and connection. A life in which we strive to love Hashem, to recognise His goodness, and to live with moral courage.

Rav Kook reminds us that the world is not broken, it is becoming. Frankl reminds us that even in darkness, we can choose light. And the Torah reminds us that the path is not in heaven or across the sea, it is within us, in our mouths and in our hearts.

As we walk before Hashem in the coming weeks, may we choose life, not just for ourselves, but for our families, our communities, and our people. May we choose unity, meaning, and the celebration of life.

And let us offer a heartfelt prayer for our soldiers and captives, that they may be protected, strengthened, and returned to us safely and in peace.

Vayelech – Having the Courage to Face our Fears

With immense gratitude for a gift from my mother on Rosh Hashana, I had the opportunity to read the Vayelech section in the new Rabbi Sacks Chumash.

It contains a beautiful and profound idea about leadership, which I'd like to share, adding one personal reflection.

Rabbi Sacks takes the two almost identical blessings given by Moses and Hashem and examines, with Rashi's assistance, the difference.

Moses famously says:

חֲזָק וְאִמָּץ כִּי אַתָּה תְּבֹאֵאתָ אֶת הָעָם הַזֶּה אֶל הָאָרֶץ

Be strong and resolute, for it is you who shall go with this people into the land

Hashem then says:

חֲזָק וְאִמָּץ כִּי אַתָּה תְּבִיא אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל הָאָרֶץ

Be strong and resolute, for you shall bring the Israelites into the land

Rashi sees the clear and slight difference which in Hebrew is even smaller – one letter – a Yud versus a Vav:

Moses, by the statement “You shall go with the people” (as one of them) said in effect to Joshua: The elders of the generation will be with you: everything has to be done according to their opinion and their advice.

The Holy One, blessed be He, however, said to Joshua, (v. 23) “Be strong and resolute: for you shall bring (תביא) the Israelites into the land that I promised them on oath, and I will be with you.”

everything depends on you alone: if necessary take a stick and beat them over the head: there can be but one leader for a generation, and not two leaders for a generation.

Rabbi Sacks says that Moses is advocating leadership by consultation and consensus, whilst Hashem tells Joshua to lead firmly from the front and be decisive and strong.

He concludes that the message is not one of confusion or difference but that he is being taught that it is a balance of both that is needed

“Leadership is not simple. You must listen, and you must lead. You must strive for consensus, but ultimately, if there is none, you must take the risk of deciding.”

I have had the privilege as a retired long-time Consulting Partner, to work with some of the most interesting and skilled CEOs and business leaders, and I can attest to the importance of this balance.

As I use the skills I learned from my years of working with leaders to fight my own personal battles, I look at both Moses and Hashem choose the expression – חזק ואמץ – Be strong and resolute as a sign of how I should set an example and drive my own behaviour.

The Gemara in Berakhot 32b says:

Our Rabbis have taught: Four things require strength: Torah, good deeds, prayer and the way of the world [i.e. proper behaviour]. From where is it derived that Torah and good deeds [require effort]? As it is said, “Only be strong and courageous to observe to

do according to all the law” (Josh. 1:7) – “be strong” in Torah, and “courageous” in good deeds.

“Be strong” in Torah – to me, is to trust in Hashem and have faith in Him and stay resolutely committed to His path rather than charting my own course. Now is the time to follow the path He has outlined – one of trying to do His will and seeking to communicate to others the true majesty, beauty and joy of living life according to His Torah – in my view in three dimensions:

The relationship between Hashem and us

The relationship between His land and us

And perhaps most important to me at this time in the situation the Jewish people and world face, the relationship between us and our fellow humans (Jews and non-Jews alike)

Regarding the instruction to “Be courageous,” it is perhaps fitting immediately after Rosh Hashana. Despite not being a Breslav follower, but knowing that thousands are in Uman at the grave of Rabbi Nachman of Breslav – I am taking a teaching I saw on Sefaria quotes by Heather Renetsky (who I don’t know but to whom I am grateful), citing Rabbi Marc Margolius:

The Hasidic master Rabbi Nachman of Breslov is known for his famous teaching:

“Kol ha’olam kulo gesher tzar me’od, vеха’ikar lo lehitpached klal.”
“The whole world is a narrow bridge, and the main thing is not to frighten yourself at all.”

But Nachman’s actual recorded teaching is far subtler and closer to our experience. Rather than use the Hebrew word lefached (“to be afraid”), he uses the reflexive form, l’hitpached (“to cause oneself to be afraid”). For Nachman, courage is not about denying or

repressing fear. Rather, the fundamental principle of courage is choosing not to frighten ourselves beyond the fear we already experience. Fear is unavoidable, perhaps even required. Courage involves moving forward despite our fear, and not exacerbating our anxieties.

I am scared. Of course I am. As the Chazzan today in shul at Mussaf, I led the community in the words:

מי יחיה. ומי ימות. מי בקצו. ומי לא בקצו

Who will live and who will die; who will come to his timely end, and who to an untimely end.

I face this reality, like us all, but with a real sense of clarity.

It frightens me. But I reflect on Rav Nachman's words, we must move forward despite our fears and face the challenges ahead.

I have learned as my situation has declined physically that at each step, the fear has been greater than the reality. I am still able, albeit in different ways, to have an impact, celebrate life with my family, especially as my oldest daughter has got engaged to a lovely man, and we have a wedding to, please Hashem, look forward to and to keep me motivated.

The fear is real, but I will try to be courageous and strong.

This is the common message Hashem and Moses give Joshua: stay true to the central backbone of the Torah as the reference with which you lead and live, and face down your fears and be a leader who is courageous.

As Rav Sacks says, use the balance of skills – decisiveness and consensus – which is much in the same way as we should lead life: balancing self-determination and initiative with teamwork and being part of a family unit.

On this Shabbat Shuva, I personally seek to come closer to Hashem, strengthen my commitment to Him, and prepare myself for the journey ahead. I hope our society is able to face our fears with courage and be strong in our moral commitment to the precious values Hashem gave the Jewish People and the world through His Torah.

Haazinu – Manchester, York, and the Song of Haazinu

Dedicated to the memory of those murdered in the Manchester terror attack that took place on this Yom Kippur (2025), their loved ones, the injured seeking healing, and a community I hold dear.

This Yom Kippur, as an ex-pat Brit in Israel, I was using the Koren Rabbi Sacks Machzor during Kol Nidre and was surprised to read that the Selichot prayer known as “Salachti” was authored by Rabbi Yom Tov of York, a French-born scholar who lived in York, England until the tragic massacre of 1190. To my knowledge, it is the only High Holiday prayer authored by an English rabbi. The prayer is beautiful, and tragic, when you learn what happened to its author. One of the verses that gave me pause was:

קולי שמע וראה דמעה עיני, ריב ריבי, שאה ניבי, והשיבני, סלחת

“Hear my voice and see the tears in my eyes, defend my cause, regard my words [of prayer], and answer me, ‘I have forgiven you.’”

Rabbi Yom Tov led his community through one of the darkest moments in Anglo-Jewish history. In March 1190, around 150 Jews took refuge in Clifford’s Tower in York Castle, fleeing a violent mob incited by debt-ridden nobles and Crusader fervour. With no hope of escape, Rabbi Yom Tov urged the community to choose taking their own lives over forced conversion. Many followed his lead. The survivors who surrendered were massacred the next morning.

A century later, in 1290, England expelled its entire Jewish population. These events left a scar in our memory, but they must also serve as a warning.

Strangely, with hindsight, this Yom Kippur my daughter and I discussed 'Salachti' and York's tragedy. During my university days in Leeds, I served as Yorkshire Region Head of the Union of Jewish Students and visited York, a city whose Jewish legacy is overshadowed by this trauma. We contrasted it with thriving UK cities with modern Jewish populations, including London, my hometown, and Manchester, my wife's, and where my daughter's grandparents live.

But as Yom Kippur ended and we checked our phones, we were shocked and devastated to learn of a terror attack in Manchester. The grief was immediate, and the connection also came. Two cities, centuries apart but only 75 miles away, now bound by tragedy.

Parshat Haazinu, Moses' farewell song, offers a framework for dealing with this terrible pain. Unlike the Torah's usual prose, Haazinu is a song, designed, as Rabbi Sacks wrote, to lodge itself in the heart, ensuring the covenant endures even in exile and suffering.

Two verses stand out to me:

The Torah uniquely uses the name HaTzur, "the Rock," for Hashem, a symbol of divine justice and moral clarity:

הצור תמים פעלו, כי כל-דרכיו משפט; אל אמונה ואין עול, צדיק וישר הוא

"The Rock! His deeds are perfect, all His ways are just; a faithful Hashem, never false, true and upright indeed."

Deuteronomy 32:4

And Moses reminds the people of the need to remember the past:

זכור ימות עולם, בינו שנות דור ודור; שאל אביך ויגדך, זקניך ויאמרו לך

“Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations; ask your father, and he will tell you, your elders, and they will inform you.”

Deuteronomy 32:7

‘Salachti’, written in the shadow of death, echoes Haazinu’s purpose: transforming pain into enduring memory and faith. Rabbi Yom Tov’s words ensure York’s martyrs are remembered, just as Haazinu preserves our covenant through exile. We pray that unlike Moses, Rabbi Yom Tov, and the victims of yesterday, we will see better times. Haazinu reminds us: memory and faith sustain us.

It is more than remembering, however. We need to be strong, like a Rock, and have faith in Hashem and the society He set out, and on which, through its Judeo-Christian tradition, Britain was built. That means seeking justice for what happened yesterday, but more importantly, it means working with our friends and allies to ensure that countries like Britain do not continue down a dangerous path, not just for Jews, but for society as a whole. “The Rock” reminds us that justice is not passive. It must be pursued.

As Rabbi Sacks wrote:

“It is not too much to say that Jews kept hope alive, and hope kept the Jewish people alive.”

But hope is not the same as optimism. Hope is active. It demands effort, partnership, and responsibility. It means standing up, speaking out, and working together, so that what followed York is never repeated.

Vezot Haberakha – Resilience: Benjamin’s Enigma and Simchat Torah

How the story of the quiet youngest son became a tale of resilience – revealed on Simchat Torah, October 7th, 2023.

Benjamin is a mystery to me (and also the name on my passport). The Biblical character is the youngest son of Jacob, born in sorrow. Rachel, his mother, names him Ben-Oni (“son of my sorrow”) as she dies, but Jacob renames him Binyamin (“son of the right hand”) (Genesis 35:18). He’s cherished, seemingly delicate, and fiercely protected by his brothers Joseph and Yehuda, and especially by Jacob, who at first refuses to let him travel to Egypt (Genesis 42:38). When Joseph sees him, he weeps (Genesis 43:30). Benjamin is quiet, the underdog. Yet Jacob blesses him with almost shocking intensity:

“Benjamin is a ravenous wolf; in the morning he devours the prey, and in the evening he divides the spoil.”

בְּנִימִין זֶאֵב יִטְרֹף בִּבְקֹר יֹאכֵל עַד וּבֶעֱרֵב יַחֲלֹק שָׁלָל (Genesis 49:27)

This doesn’t sound fragile, it’s fierce, even violent. Rashi connects this to King Saul, Benjamin’s descendant, and his military strength (Rashi on Genesis 49:27, Mikraot Gedolot). Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch sees it as divine power used to protect the community (The Pentateuch, Genesis 49:27). Rabbi Mendel Kaplan interprets the wolf as a spiritual guardian, defending the divine spark within us (Chabad.org, Parshat V’Zot HaBerachah).

But on Simchat Torah, we read a different blessing from Moses, reverting to the beloved side of Benjamin:

“The beloved of the Lord shall dwell in safety by Him; He covers him all the day, and He rests between his shoulders.”

יָדִיד ה' יִשְׁכֵּן לְבַטֵּחַ עָלָיו חֲפָץ עָלָיו כְּלָהִיּוֹם וּבֵין כְּתָפָיו שָׁכֵן (Deuteronomy 33:12)

This refers to the Temple and Jerusalem, partly located in Benjamin's territory, shared with Yehuda, making Benjamin a guardian of divine closeness. He is both fierce and beloved, a warrior and a sanctuary. This duality is, at least to me, the heart of resilience, a balance of strength and tenderness that defines our Jewish DNA.

The Resilience of the Tribes: Benjamin, Levi, and Yehuda

Benjamin is one of three tribes, alongside Yehuda and Levi, that endured, their resilience rooted in this duality. The ten other tribes, Reuven, Shimon, Dan, Naftali, Gad, Asher, Yissachar, Zevulun, and Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, were lost after the Assyrian exile around 722 BCE (2 Kings 17:6): “And he carried Israel away into Assyria.”

Levi mirrors Benjamin's duality. He and Shimon avenged Dinah's violation with brutal force (Genesis 34:25-26). Jacob later criticises their violence:

“Simeon and Levi... their weapons are tools of lawlessness.”

כְּלֵי חַמָּס מִכְרַתֵּיהֶם שִׁמְעוֹן וְלֵוִי... (Genesis 49:5-7)

But Moses blesses Levi for developing the capability to channel that passion into sacred service:

“Bless, O Lord, his substance... They shall teach Jacob Your ordinances, and Israel Your law.”

בָּרַךְ ה' חֵילוֹ... יוֹרוּ מִשְׁפָּטֶיךָ לִיעֲקֹב וְתוֹרָתְךָ לְיִשְׂרָאֵל (Deuteronomy 33:10-11)

The Levites transformed their zeal into devotion. As priests and teachers, they brought people together. Rabbi Hirsch sees this as strength made holy, used for the good of the community (The Pentateuch, Deuteronomy 33:10). Their toughness and love fostered unity, ensuring their legacy as ancestors of Kohanim and Leviim.

Yehuda's duality blends fierce leadership and deep love. Jacob calls him:

"A lion's cub... The scepter shall not depart from Judah."

גור אריה יהודה... לאיסור שבט מיהודה (Genesis 49:9-10)

This strength leads to King David's dynasty. But Yehuda's heart shines when he pleads to save Benjamin, offering himself as a slave in his place (Genesis 44:18-34). Moses blesses him:

"Hear, O Lord, the voice of Judah, and bring him to his people."

שמע ה' קול יהודה ואלעמו תביאנו (Deuteronomy 33:7)

Yehuda's courage and compassion unite the tribes, making him the leader and ancestor of most Jews today.

Two years ago, on Simchat Torah, October 7, 2023, our joy was shattered by devastating attacks in Israel. On that day and up to the time of writing, we've had to draw on these traits. Like Benjamin's wolf, we defended with fierceness. Like Levi's priests, we held tight to Torah with zeal. Like Yehuda's lion, we led with toughness and rebuilt with love.

As we finish the Torah and begin again, the blessings of Benjamin, Levi, and Yehuda, our enduring tribes, call us to live with fierceness and devotion, resilience and love. These three tribes survived because of their balance. Benjamin, the quiet one, my

namesake, may not be as famous as Levi's priests or Yehuda's kings, but he reminds us that every Jew carries this legacy.

On Simchat Torah, we honour those who fought and those who prayed. We dance with the Torah, even in sorrow. And we carry forward as wolves, priests, and lions, ensuring the Jewish soul endures.

Conclusion: Strength in Peace

Our enemies should know that while our tears and pain are real, and while we love life and want peace, it shouldn't ever be taken for weakness. We are strong and resilient; we just prefer peace and life. I hope it comes soon.

This book began with a question I never expected to be asking – how to live with meaning when life has been suddenly, irreversibly shortened – and it ends here, at the close of the Torah cycle, with the same answer the Torah has always given: we begin again. Ve'zot haberakha. And this is the blessing. Not a promise that life will be easy, but the assurance that it is worth living, that the Torah we carry is not a burden but a gift, and that the act of dancing with it, even in sorrow, is itself an act of faith. May these reflections be of some small use to those who read them. And may we all be written for a year of health, wholeness, and peace.

Glossary

Introduction

This glossary is designed to make the ideas and language of this book accessible to all readers, regardless of background or prior familiarity with Hebrew or classical Jewish texts.

Throughout the book, Hebrew terms, Torah concepts, and references to traditional commentators are used as part of the natural language of Jewish learning. These words often carry layers of meaning that are not easily captured by a single English translation. The aim here is not to provide exhaustive definitions, but to offer clear and approachable explanations that allow the reader to follow the discussion without losing the depth behind the terms.

Where possible, the explanations reflect how these ideas are used within the context of this book: not as abstract concepts, but as part of a lived experience of Torah, faith, and personal reflection.

1. Key Commentators and Thinkers

Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki)

An 11th-century French commentator whose work is foundational to Torah study. Rashi combines straightforward explanation of the text with insights drawn from Midrash, making complex ideas accessible.

Ramban (Nachmanides)

A 13th-century Spanish sage who integrates philosophy, mysticism, and close textual reading. Ramban often highlights the moral and spiritual complexity within the Torah.

Ibn Ezra (Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra)

A medieval commentator known for his focus on grammar, language, and contextual meaning. His approach is analytical and grounded in the plain sense of the text.

Radak (Rabbi David Kimhi)

A biblical commentator who emphasises clarity of language and the structure of Hebrew roots, helping to illuminate the meaning of verses.

Malbim (Rabbi Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Michel)

A 19th-century commentator who explores subtle differences in language and phrasing, often showing that no word in the Torah is redundant.

Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin)

Head of the Volozhin Yeshiva in the 19th century. His commentary focuses on the plain meaning of the text while drawing out deeper conceptual insights.

Sforno (Rabbi Ovadia Sforno)

An Italian commentator who emphasises ethical purpose and human responsibility within the Torah narrative.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch

A 19th-century German thinker who presents the Torah as a guide to ethical and meaningful living in the modern world.

Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks (Rabbi Sacks) zt"l

A contemporary Jewish thinker whose writings connect Torah ideas with modern ethical, social, and philosophical challenges. His influence appears throughout this book.

2. Core Torah Concepts

Torah

The Five Books of Moses, and more broadly the entire body of Jewish teaching and tradition. It is both a text and a framework for living.

Parsha

The weekly portion of the Torah read and studied throughout the Jewish world.

Mitzvah

Literally a commandment, often used to mean a good deed. In practice, it refers to actions through which Jewish values are expressed and lived.

Chesed

Loving-kindness expressed through action. It is not only a feeling, but a commitment to show up for others, especially when it requires effort.

Gevurah

Strength, discipline, and restraint. It reflects the ability to set boundaries and act with control and responsibility.

Tiferet

Often translated as “beauty,” but more accurately understood as harmony – the balance between opposing forces such as kindness and strength.

Emet

Truth in the deepest sense: integrity, reliability, and alignment with moral and spiritual reality.

Yetzer Hara

The human inclination toward selfish or destructive behaviour. It is part of free will and the moral struggle of being human.

Yetzer Hatov

The inclination toward goodness and moral action, balancing the Yetzer Hara.

Teshuvah

Often translated as repentance, but more accurately meaning “return”—a process of reflection, growth, and realignment with one’s values.

3. Biblical and Theological Terms**Avot**

The Patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the founding figures of the Jewish people.

Imahot

The Matriarchs: Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah, who helped shape the spiritual and moral foundations of the Jewish nation.

Shechinah

The Divine Presence, referring to how Hashem is experienced within the world and in human life.

Brit

Covenant – a binding relationship between Hashem and the Jewish people, rooted in responsibility and purpose.

Galut

Exile, both in the physical sense of displacement and the spiritual sense of distance or disconnection.

Geulah

Redemption – restoration and renewal, whether personal, national, or spiritual.

Mashiach

The future redeemer who will usher in an era of peace, justice, and spiritual clarity.

Kedushah

Holiness – living with awareness, purpose, and a sense of the sacred within everyday life.

Midrash

A body of rabbinic literature that expands on the Torah text, often filling in gaps, exploring motivations, and drawing out deeper moral or philosophical lessons.

4. Books of the Torah**Bereishit (Genesis)**

The first book of the Torah, dealing with creation, early humanity, and the lives of the patriarchs and matriarchs.

Shemot (Exodus)

Describes the slavery in Egypt, the Exodus, and the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai.

Vayikra (Leviticus)

Focuses on holiness, sacrifice, and the spiritual discipline required to build a meaningful society.

Bamidbar (Numbers)

Narrates the journey of the Israelites through the wilderness and the challenges of developing as a nation.

Devarim (Deuteronomy)

A series of speeches by Moses reflecting on the past and preparing the people for life in the Land of Israel.

5. Jewish Life and Practice

Shabbat

The weekly day of rest, from Friday evening to Saturday night, dedicated to reflection, family, and spiritual connection.

Halacha

Jewish law – the framework that guides daily life, practice, and ethical behaviour.

Tefillah

Prayer, both structured and personal, as a way of communicating with Hashem.

Tzedakah

Often translated as charity, but more accurately understood as justice and responsibility toward others.

Shalom Bayit

Peace in the home – creating harmony and mutual respect within family life.

Kiddush Hashem

Sanctifying Hashem's name through ethical conduct and the way one lives in the world.

Chillul Hashem

The opposite of Kiddush Hashem – actions that bring dishonour to Hashem or undermine Jewish values.

6. Additional Terms Used in This Book**Divrei Torah**

Literally “words of Torah.” Short Torah reflections or teachings, typically connected to the weekly portion. The plural of Dvar Torah.

Sefer

Literally “book.” Used to refer to each of the five books of the Torah (e.g. Sefer Bereishit, Sefer Shemot).

Korban / Korbanot

A sacrifice or offering brought to the Temple. The word derives from the root meaning “to draw close”—korbanot were understood as a means of drawing nearer to Hashem, not merely a ritual exchange.

Avodah

Literally “service” or “work.” Refers both to the Temple service performed by the Kohen Gadol (especially on Yom Kippur) and, more broadly, to the inner spiritual work of prayer and self-refinement.

Kohen / Kohanim

A priest; a member of the priestly tribe descended from Aharon. The Kohanim were responsible for the Temple service. The Kohen Gadol (High Priest) performed the special Yom Kippur service described in Parshat Acharei Mot.

Sinat Chinam

Baseless hatred – the causeless animosity between Jews which, according to the Talmud (Yoma 9b), was the spiritual cause of the destruction of the Second Temple. Its opposite, ahavat chinam (unconditional love), is held up as the antidote.

Machloket

Dispute or disagreement. The Mishnah in Pirkei Avot distinguishes between machloket l’shem shamayim (debate for the sake of Heaven, as between Hillel and Shammai) and dispute driven by ego or self-interest (as with Korach).

Tochacha

Rebuke or admonition. The Torah contains two extended passages of tochacha (in Vayikra 26 and Devarim 28) describing the consequences of the Jewish people turning away from Hashem. They are among the most sobering passages in the Torah.

Tza'ar Ba'alei Chayim

The prohibition against causing unnecessary suffering to living creatures. This principle, derived from several Torah laws, reflects the Torah's insistence that moral sensitivity extends beyond human relationships to all sentient life.

Tamim

Often translated as "perfect" or "wholehearted." In the Torah's usage, it more accurately means integrated, spiritually whole, and aligned with Hashem's will – not morally flawless, but genuine and undivided in one's commitment.

Tzaddik / Tzaddikim

A righteous person. The term carries a range of meanings – from someone who is legally in the right, to a person of deep moral integrity, to, in Chassidic tradition, a spiritual leader of exceptional holiness.

Am Yisrael

The People of Israel – the Jewish people as a collective, bound by covenant, history, and shared responsibility.

Avdut

Servitude or service. The Torah uses this word in two distinct senses: the degrading servitude of slavery (avdut Mitzrayim, the slavery in Egypt), and the elevated, chosen service of Hashem (avdim laHashem), which the Torah presents not as diminishment but as the source of true freedom and purpose.

PSP (Progressive Supranuclear Palsy)

A rare and progressive neurological condition affecting movement, balance, and speech. The author was diagnosed with PSP a year before writing this book. It is referenced at several points in the text as the personal context from which these reflections emerged.

Thematic Index

This index organises the themes and topics explored throughout the book by category, with references to the relevant Parsha reflections. Each entry is followed by the chapter title(s) where it is discussed.

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FAITH AND SPIRITUALITY

- **Choosing life** → *Nitzavim: Choose Life*
- **Emunah (faith)** → *V'etchanan – Faith: The Secret That Twain Sought to Know; Bereishit: Hashem Intended Life to Be a Challenge; Lech Lecha – Abraham and Sarah: Perseverance and Resilience*

- **Free will and moral autonomy** → *Bereishit: Hashem Intended Life to Be a Challenge; Nitzavim: Choose Life*
- **Gratitude** → *Ekev – Profound Gratitude; Ki-Tavo – Making our relationship with Hashem 'Real'*
- **Holiness in daily life** → *Kedoshim – Business ethics is not a different Torah; Shemini – Know Your Place*
- **Laughter and hope** → *Vayera – Sarah's Laughter of Hope*
- **Prayer and relationship with Hashem** → *Ki-Tavo – Making our relationship with Hashem 'Real'; Re'eh – Dethroning the Inner Idol: Re'eh and Rosh Hashanah*
- **Science and religion** → *Bereishit: Hashem Intended Life to Be a Challenge*
- **Teshuva (repentance)** → *Devarim – Tisha B'Av and Devarim: Time to Stop and Think; Ki-Tavo – Making our relationship with Hashem 'Real'*
- **Trust in Hashem (Bitachon)** → *Shoftim – One simple verse packs a punch*
- **Universal Hashem** → *Bereishit: Hashem Intended Life to Be a Challenge*
- **Wholeness (Tamim)** → *Shoftim – One simple verse packs a punch; Noah's Leadership: Perfectly Imperfect*

FESTIVALS AND SACRED TIMES

- **Chanukah** → *Chanukah and Vayeshev: Hope Before Exile*
- **Days of Awe (Yamim Noraim)** → *Re'eh – Dethroning the Inner Idol; Ki Teitzei: Beauty is in the Discomfort; Shoftim – One simple verse packs a punch*
- **High Holidays (Rosh Hashanah)** → *Re'eh – Dethroning the Inner Idol: Re'eh and Rosh Hashanah; Shoftim – One simple verse packs a punch; Nitzavim: Choose Life*
- **Passover / Haggadah** → *Vayetze – Laban: Unmasking the Enemy Within*
- **Simchat Torah** → *Vezot Habera'kha – Resilience: Benjamin's Enigma and Simchat Torah*

- **Tisha B'Av** → *Devarim – Tisha B'Av and Devarim: Time to Stop and Think*
- **Yom Kippur** → *Acharei Mot – Yom Kippur: The Drama We Forgot; Haazinu – Manchester, York, and the Song of Haazinu*

HASHEM AND DIVINE ATTRIBUTES

- **Creation** → *Bereishit: Hashem Intended Life to Be a Challenge*
- **Divine justice** → *Vaera – The Plagues: Why 10? Why These?*
- **Divine Presence (Shechina)** → *Terumah – The Two Cherubim: The Spark in the Holy of Holies; Vayechi – Seeing Our Children as They Truly Are*
- **Mass revelation at Sinai** → *Yitro – Mount Sinai: A Look Behind the Matrix*
- **Sovereignty of Hashem** → *Bereishit: Hashem Intended Life to Be a Challenge*

HISTORY AND MEMORY

- **Amalek / Zachor** → *Tetzaveh and Zachor – War and the Urim and Thummim*
- **Exodus from Egypt** → *Bo – The People Wake Up; Beshalach – Red Sea or Sea of Reeds; Vaera – The Plagues: Why 10? Why These?*
- **October 7th, 2023** → *Vezot HaberaKha – Resilience: Benjamin's Enigma and Simchat Torah*
- **Red Sea (Yam Suf)** → *Beshalach – Red Sea or Sea of Reeds: Does It Matter?*
- **Temple / Mishkan** → *Terumah – The Two Cherubim; Vayakel-Pekudei – Faith and Integrity Intertwined; Acharei Mot – Yom Kippur: The Drama We Forgot*

- **Ten Plagues** → *Vaera – The Plagues: Why 10? Why These?*
- **Tisha B'Av / Temple destruction** → *Devarim – Tisha B'Av and Devarim: Time to Stop and Think*
- **York massacre (1190)** → *Haazinu – Manchester, York, and the Song of Haazinu*

IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY

- **Am Yisrael / Jewish nationhood** → *Bo – The People Wake Up; Bamidbar – Because They Were Dear to Him*
- **Jewish survival and continuity** → *V'etchanan – Faith: The Secret That Twain Sought to Know*
- **Name 'Israel' / Jewish identity** → *Vayislach – Striving for Harmony: The Meaning of 'Israel'*
- **Sinat chinam (baseless hatred)** → *Devarim – Tisha B'Av and Devarim: Time to Stop and Think*
- **Unity and community** → *Bamidbar – Because They Were Dear to Him; Vayislach – Striving for Harmony: The Meaning of 'Israel'*

LEADERSHIP AND SOCIETY

- **Allowable weakness in leadership** → *Noah's Leadership: Perfectly Imperfect*
- **Courage to face fears** → *Vayelech – Having the Courage to Face our Fears*
- **Leadership styles** → *Noah's Leadership: Perfectly Imperfect; Behaalotecha – Aharon not the Ayatollah*
- **Leadership succession** → *Pinchas: Leadership, Legacy, and Letting Go; Vayelech – Having the Courage to Face our Fears*
- **Legacy** → *Pinchas: Leadership, Legacy, and Letting Go*
- **Letting go** → *Pinchas: Leadership, Legacy, and Letting Go*

- **Moses as leader** → *Korach: Lessons in Debate from Moses and Hillel; Pinchas: Leadership, Legacy, and Letting Go; Vayelech – Having the Courage to Face our Fears*
- **Rebellion and dispute** → *Korach: Lessons in Debate from Moses and Hillel*

PERSONAL GROWTH AND CHARACTER

- **Authenticity / avoiding perfectionism** → *Noah's Leadership: Perfectly Imperfect*
- **Complexity and beauty** → *Bereishit: Hashem Intended Life to Be a Challenge; Toldot – 70 Faces of Torah; Metzora: The Body at the Torah's Centre*
- **Defying despair** → *Vayigash – 'Sheol' to Life: Refusing Comfort, Defying Despair*
- **Humility** → *Noah's Leadership: Perfectly Imperfect; Tzav – The Kohanim and the Economics of Holiness*
- **Humour as resilience** → *Vayera – Sarah's Laughter of Hope*
- **Perseverance** → *Lech Lecha – Abraham and Sarah: Perseverance and Resilience; Vayera – Sarah's Laughter of Hope; Vezot Habera'kha – Resilience: Benjamin's Enigma and Simchat Torah*
- **Resilience** → *Lech Lecha – Abraham and Sarah: Perseverance and Resilience; Vezot Habera'kha – Resilience: Benjamin's Enigma and Simchat Torah; Bamidbar – Because They Were Dear to Him*
- **Self-examination** → *Ki-Tavo – Making our relationship with Hashem 'Real'; Ekev – Profound Gratitude*
- **Spiritual complacency, danger of** → *Balak – Danger of Spiritual Complacency*
- **Stiff-necked people (am k'sheh oref)** → *Ki-Tisa – The Holy Stubbornness of a Wartime Bride*

- **Wrestling with difficulty** → *Vayislach – Striving for Harmony; Matot-Masei: Wrestling With Tough Questions*

RELATIONSHIPS AND FAMILY

- **Brothers / fraternal reconciliation** → *Vayigash – 'Sheol' to Life: Refusing Comfort, Defying Despair; Miketz: Dinah's Pain to Brothers' Peace; Chukat: The Power of the Sibling Bond*
- **Jealousy and trust in marriage** → *Naso: Trust, Jealousy, and the Courage to Protect Relationship*
- **Parent – child relationships** → *Vayechi – Seeing Our Children as They Truly Are; Miketz: Dinah's Pain to Brothers' Peace*
- **Sibling bonds** → *Chukat: The Power of the Sibling Bond; Vayislach – Striving for Harmony*
- **Sibling rivalry** → *Toldot – 70 Faces of Torah: Wrestling with Toldot and Life*
- **Women of the Torah** → *Hayei Sara – Rebecca: Kindness with Determination; Vayera – Sarah's Laughter of Hope; Shemot – Batya: The Courage to Defy Evil*

RITUAL, LAW AND HALAKHA

- **Cherubim (Keruvim)** → *Terumah – The Two Cherubim: The Spark in the Holy of Holies*
- **Dietary laws / Kashrut** → *Shemini – Know Your Place*
- **Kohanim (priestly role)** → *Tzav – The Kohanim and the Economics of Holiness*
- **Korbanot (sacrifices)** → *Vayikra – Salt: Preserving and Enhancing; Tzav – The Kohanim and the Economics of Holiness; Emor – The Moral Mean*

- **Mishkan / Tabernacle** → *Terumah – The Two Cherubim; Vayakel-Pekudei – Faith and Integrity Intertwined*
- **Salt** → *Vayikra – Salt: Preserving and Enhancing*
- **Slavery / indentured servitude** → *Mishpatim and Slavery*
- **Tumah and Taharah (purity and impurity)** → *Tazria – A Language We Have Forgotten How to Read; Metzora: The Body at the Torah's Centre*
- **Tzara'at** → *Tazria – A Language We Have Forgotten How to Read; Metzora: The Body at the Torah's Centre*
- **Urim and Thummim** → *Tetzaveh and Zachor – War and the Urim and Thummim*
- **Yom Kippur service (Temple era)** → *Acharei Mot – Yom Kippur: The Drama We Forgot*

TORAH STUDY AND INTERPRETATION

- **70 Faces of Torah (Shiv'im Panim)** → *Toldot – 70 Faces of Torah: Wrestling with Toldot and Life*
- **Covenant and Conversation (Rabbi Sacks)** → *Noah's Leadership: Perfectly Imperfect; Naso: Trust, Jealousy, and the Courage to Protect Relationship*
- **Rambam (Maimonides)** → *Vayikra – Salt: Preserving and Enhancing; Devarim – Tisha B'Av and Devarim*
- **Ramban (Nachmanides)** → *Vayikra – Salt: Preserving and Enhancing; Vayera – Sarah's Laughter of Hope*
- **Rashi** → *Bereishit: Hashem Intended Life to Be a Challenge; Noah's Leadership: Perfectly Imperfect*
- **Rabbi Jonathan Sacks** → *Noah's Leadership: Perfectly Imperfect; Lech Lecha – Abraham and Sarah; Vayera – Sarah's Laughter of Hope; Naso; Vayelech; Matot-Masei*
- **Science and religion** → *Bereishit: Hashem Intended Life to Be a Challenge*
- **Sefaria** → *Acknowledgements*

- **Torah interpretation** → *Toldot – 70 Faces of Torah;*
Beshalach – Red Sea or Sea of Reeds: Does It Matter?