

# Weekly Words of Torah

## Parshat Va'era: **Let Our People Go!**

### Framing

This week's Torah portion is perhaps the quintessential jumping off point for talking about freeing the hostages still held captive in Gaza. As God metes out the first seven of the ten plagues, God instructs Moses to demand freedom for the Israelite slaves, over, and over, and over. "SHALACH ET AMI!!" is Moses' rallying cry as he introduces five of these seven plagues - providing the glaringly clear and just reasoning behind each upcoming onslaught.

### Access Points

- **Hamas is like Pharaoh:** While we often focus on the theologically difficult idea that God hardened Pharaoh's heart against freeing the slaves, in this parsha there is actually only one mention of God affecting Pharaoh's heart; in fact, there are eight mentions of Pharaoh being hard-hearted, stiff-hearted or having a toughened heart on his own, without God causing that to be. On the verse 7:14 ("God said to Moses: Pharaoh is כָּבֵד לֹב; he refuses to let the people go"), the 19th-century central European scholar Rabbi David Zvi Hoffman delineates three increasingly bad levels of apathetic, unsympathetic insensitivity to the needs of others, based on the three different root words used in the parsha: k.v.d, q.sh.e, and ch.z.k. Hoffman's psychologically astute comments not only describe Pharaoh; they seem to aptly fit the disposition of Hamas towards anyone but themselves.
- **The Gazan people, like the Egyptians of old, are desperately suffering:** Not only did Pharaoh's refusal to free the slaves from bondage keep the Israelites suffering terribly; his refusal plunged his own people into appalling and gruesome circumstances. During the plague of blood (7:14-25), the Egyptians had no water. During the plague of frogs (7:26-8:10), their homes were infested. During the plague of lice (8:12-15), they were ravaged by vile bugs. And so on. In the same way, the people of Gaza are also being devastated by their leaders. They have no food. They have no clean water. The very earth is infected by sewage, so disease and fungus are running rampant. But Hamas do not care - the Hamas heart is the worst kind of hard. During the Passover seder, we temper our freedom celebration and acknowledge the terrible suffering of the Egyptians by removing a drop of wine for each of the ten plagues. Perhaps, each Shabbat, as we light candles for the hostages, we might also remove drops of wine from our kiddush cups in acknowledgement of the Gazan people.
- **The mind games played by Hamas during the ceasefire and release of some hostages are reminiscent of those played by Pharaoh:** Over and over, Pharaoh refused to free the slaves; when a plague got too difficult to bear, he acknowledged God and announced he would let them go; however, after Moses prayed for the plague to end he changed his tune and "hardened his heart." One can imagine the frustrating, sickening, roller-coaster ride experienced by the slaves as he played these mind games, because we were also attacked by the same type of psychological warfare used by Hamas during the ceasefire. Will they release any captives today? Will they do it at the time they said they would, or make up some reason why they won't? Will they or won't they send out those hostages on the day's list? In 9:17, God says to Pharaoh: עוֹדָךְ מְסֻתּוֹלָל בְּעַמִּי לְבַלְתִּי שְׁלַחם - "You are still מְסֻתּוֹלָל my people by not setting them free." The commentaries explain the word מְסֻתּוֹלָל in ever stronger language: You are still showing yourself haughty against my people (Samuel David Luzzato); You are still treading on my people (Rashi); You are still thwarting my people (Rashbam). Samson Raphael Hirsch goes in a different direction, and understands the word מְסֻתּוֹלָל as: You have completely distanced yourselves from humanness. In other words, Pharaoh and Hamas, your choices and your behavior have turned you into animals. You are no longer human.

### Call to Action

This week, social media posts, calls to elected officials, and signs at rallies can zero in on these age-old but completely contemporary words: LET OUR PEOPLE GO. Moses said it five times in this week's Torah portion. Make sure to post, call, and protest five times as well.

### Closing Intention

At the beginning of the parsha (6:9), when Moses comes to the Israelite slaves and tries to assure them that God will indeed redeem them from bondage, they don't listen to him "בְּמִקְצָר רִיחַ וּבְמַעֲבָדָה קָטָה." This is translated in various ways, from the more metaphorical ("due to lack of patience"; "due to anguish of spirit"; "due to crushed spirit") to the more physical and concrete ("due to shortness of breath").

While the Israelite slaves of old had run out of breath, our beloved family members held hostage have nearly run out of time. Our voices must ring out loud and true this week - LET OUR PEOPLE GO. NOW.

# Weekly Words of Torah

## Parshat Bo: Publicize Your Solidarity

### Framing

This week's Torah portion, Parshat Bo, includes the last three plagues. With the final plague - Makat Bechorot (the Death of the Firstborn) - the Israelites are told to slaughter a sheep, and paint its blood on their doorposts as a sign of their Jewishness, so that their firstborns will not be killed along with the Egyptians. During the previous nine plagues, the Israelites were not asked to do anything to avoid harm, but in this case, they must take action. And the action they are told to take is not a simple one! They must slaughter a sheep, an animal that their enslavers, the Egyptians, worshipped as a god (see Maimonides, Moreh Nevuchim, Book 3, Chapter 46), and outwardly place its blood on the doorposts of their homes - a move that would be seen by the Egyptians as extremely antagonistic. But the Israelites took this action together, even when it was intimidating to do so, and publicized their solidarity with God and with Moshe. And perhaps that was what opened the gates to their ultimate freedom.

### Access Points

- **Just like the Israelites needed to take public action, so too do we need to take public action in solidarity with those held in captivity in Gaza and with their families.** In all the previous plagues, God acted through Moses and/or Aaron. In this final plague, the Israelites are told that they too must take action. In essence, they need to serve as partners with God and their leaders in achieving the goals. Just like the Israelites, we too must be willing to take public action, to make our solidarity visible. (Perhaps we feel that our taking action won't actually do anything... that it is only people in positions of power who are going to effect change. But it is clear from our parsha that God and Moses weren't willing to finalize the ten plagues without the partnership of the "regular" people.)
- **The Israelites publicly slaughtered sheep, a dangerous act to take in Egypt.** We too might be afraid to show solidarity with the hostages, because it feels dangerous to do so. Friends on social media might disagree with your beliefs, and might not tell you that they disagree in caring and kind ways. However, like the Israelites, we have to consider doing it anyway as a sign of our solidarity. Because it is right. Because they need us to.
- **The Israelites put blood on their doorposts as a sign for both those outside their homes, and for themselves.** Verse 12:13 states that, "And the blood on the houses where you are staying shall be a sign for you: when I see the blood I will pass over you, so that no plague will destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt." The famous medieval French commentator, Rashi (Rav Shlomo Yitzchaki), comments on the first clause of that verse ("And the blood... shall be a sign for you") that in fact, the Israelites painted the blood on the *inside* of their doorposts, and not on the outside! He is playing off of the words, *for you* - pointing out that the sign was for themselves, rather than for God or the Egyptians. Sometimes the signs that we wear, or even those that we show the outside world, are actually *for us*. They are meant to help remind us, ourselves, of what we believe, and to strengthen our *own* morale, while also showing solidarity with others.

### Call to Action

This week, wear the number of days the hostages have been in captivity on your shirt. Wear it for yourself, and for those around you. Wear it even though you might be afraid, because we are all in this together. None of us are free until all of us are free.

### Closing Intention

At the beginning of the parsha (10:2), God tells Moses that part of the process of the ten plagues is for the Israelites to tell their children and grandchildren - their future generations - about what God did to save the Israelites, so that they never forget how God has taken care of them. Similarly, consider: showing your solidarity with the hostages and their families is something you will want to tell your grandchildren one day. Do not stand idly by at this moment.

# Weekly Words of Torah

## Parshat Beshalach: I Can't Smile Without You!

### Framing

What is the appropriate balance between embracing joy and feeling the pain of our fellow Jews in mortal danger? This is especially challenging as life continues after well over 100 days since Hamas declared war on Israel, massacring 1200+ people and kidnapping 240+ innocent men, women and children from their homes.

### Access Points

- **My creatures are drowning in the sea and you are singing before me?!** After 400 years of exile and slavery, the Israelites finally experience redemption as they cross the Red Sea and escape their oppressors once and for all. The angels sought to join the celebration. And yet according to Talmudic tradition ([Sanhedrin 39b](#)), God silenced them. “My creatures (the Egyptians) are drowning, how can you sing?” If it is objectionable to celebrate when the wicked die, how much more so must we participate in the suffering of the innocent hostages, ripped from their homes for no reason other than being Israeli.
- **“I am with you in your suffering” (Psalms 91:15):** By revealing Godself in a lowly, prickly bush rather than in a more impressive location like a tall tree, the Divine models this empathetic posture. God symbolically says, “If the Israelites are enslaved, I too am in a narrow prickly place” ([Midrash Tanhuma](#)). Similarly, when Noah and his family are on the ark, they abstain from intimate relations in identification with the destruction of the world around them ([Rashi Gen. 8:16](#)). These three precedents demonstrate the problematics of un-tempered joy as others are suffering.
- **The hostages' suffering is actually our own suffering:** As Jews, we do not ignore suffering wherever it is found, but when our fellow Jews are suffering this is even more the case. All Jews are both responsible for one another and share a common destiny. The Kuzari 3:19 explains it succinctly: “The relation of the individual to the community is like a limb to the rest of the body. Should the arm, if blood-letting is required, refuse its blood, the whole body would suffer, including the arm. It is the duty of the individual to suffer hardships, even death, for the well-being of the nation.” A part of each and every one of us is captive in Gaza right now.  
  
As at the Red Sea, recognizing the suffering of other innocent civilians is [not in conflict](#) with feeling deeply the pain of our fellow Jews (but see the larger context of our Talmudic passage [here](#)).
- **Yes, in the midst of shared pain, we also remember to give thanks.** Our daily prayer, the Amidah, contains 13 requests ascending in intensity. And yet immediately after we throw up our hands in desperate need of a new world order, we immediately turn to give thanks for the many blessings that are with us, morning, noon and night. In fact, by feeling fully the difficulties around us, we can sharpen the awareness of our blessings. Jack Gilbert captures this sentiment poignantly in his poem [“Brief for the Defense.”](#)

### Call to Action

Just as the Jewish tradition calls on us to leave a part of our home unfinished and to break a glass at a wedding to remember the destruction in Jerusalem and the world, set aside a moment every day to identify with the pain of the hostages. Wear a masking tape number, pray for the hostages, call the White House.

### Closing Intention

As the war drags on and the hostage crisis remains unresolved, it is easy to let life's routine eclipse the ongoing suffering around us. And yet, while the hostages remain captive, we too are held captive. Keeping the suffering of the hostages at the top of our priorities is not in conflict with recognizing other suffering. Nor is it in conflict with continuing to embrace our everyday blessings.

# Weekly Words of Torah

## Parshat Yitro: The Ten Commandments: Foundation for a Just Society

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### Framing

This parsha describes the lead-up to the giving of the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai. There are countless interpretations of those iconic 14 verses in chapter 20, and yet one way to frame the Ten Commandments is to think about them as laying the foundations for creating a just society.

### Access Points

■ **Responsibility for our fellow man:** Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch has an interesting way of framing the Ten Commandments in his biblical commentary to Exodus 20:13. He describes how the first five commandments reinforce one another to help ensure recognition of God's dominion over the world (commandments 1-4) throughout the generations (hence #5, honoring one's parents). The second group of the commandments (commandments 6-10) are an instantiation of the implications of that divine dominion. How do we treat our fellow man if we were to move through the world believing that all humanity is a creation of the Master of the Universe? As Hirsch writes, "God endows your fellow man with the same rights with which he endowed you. All of that which is his - his life, his marriage, his freedom, his happiness, his honor, his possessions - has been sanctified unto him by God." And so, Hirsch derives from the structure and content of the Ten Commandments that the primary reason that we can not murder, destroy a marriage through adultery, deprive someone of their freedom, deprive them of honor through false testimony, etc., is because these terrible acts would be a denial of God's will in the world. It would be a rejection of the recognition that it is God who sanctifies and presides over all humankind. If the Ten Commandments are at the heart of the Jewish tradition and our values, then surely the notion that no one has the right to deny another of God's creations their freedom is also at the heart of Judaism.

■ **Thou shall not steal:** This line, commonly known as the eighth commandment (Ex 20:13), is interpreted by Rashi as a prohibition against stealing souls/humans (whereas a verse in Lev 19:11, which also prohibits stealing, refers to theft of property). Rashi strengthens his case for why he interprets this prohibition as being about kidnapping, by explaining that this commandment follows the prohibitions against murder and adultery - which are punishable by death; so too, kidnapping is punishable by death, but stealing material property is not. The act of taking someone from their community and family and denying them their freedom - as has been done to the captives in Gaza - this act is seen as so treacherous by the Torah that it is one of only several commandments that warrants the death penalty. The prohibition against kidnapping is so core to our tradition that it is included as one of the Ten Commandments.

### Call to Action

Create a dramatic, creative, visually engaging image of the Ten Commandments, but swap out #8, "Thou shall not steal" for "Thou shall not kidnap." Share widely on social media.

### Closing Intention

Remember that the Ten Commandments are a foundational text in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Kidnapping a person and denying them their freedom is not merely a Jewish prohibition, but rather a rejection of a core foundational value of Western civilization.

# Weekly Words of Torah

## Parshat Mishpatim: Our Numbers Must Be Large!

### Framing

Parshat Mishpatim, known to scholars as the Covenant Code, could be described as the epilogue to the Exodus narrative, and a hugely important commentary on “bringing them home.” The story reaches its climax at the Red Sea, as the Israelites finally and unambiguously escape the Egyptian government. It achieves denouement at Sinai as God establishes what the relationship between Israel and the Divine will be in the future. Parshat Mishpatim asks the arguably more important question – what is the relationship between Israelites and themselves? What is the covenant of behavior we expect from each other? Phrased better – how am I expected to take care of my fellow Israelite?

### Access Points

■ **Does Eye for an Eye Really Work?** One of the most famous lines in civil jurisprudence history, עין תחת עין, an eye for an eye, is found in this week’s parsha (Exodus 21:24). On a peshat, or literal, level, the text literally means that whatever harm you cause to another person, from black eye to stab wound, is done similarly to you by the courts. This kind of punishment appeals to our most basic instincts of fairness, the kind that makes our inner kindergartner happy. But, to a more mature sense, it appears wildly unfair. Many incorrectly assume that this is why the rabbis of the Talmud, in Bava Qamma 83b, read these verses as referring to monetary compensation after pointing out how the “plain” meaning couldn’t possibly be fair. This is not a radical rabbinic deliberate misinterpretation of the text, rather reflective of the normative practice for thousands of years. The legal concept of *lex talionis*, also known also as retributive or reciprocal justice, isn’t original to the Hebrew Bible; rather it’s found all over the ancient Near East, from Mesopotamia to the Hittites, all pre-dating the Torah by hundreds of years. In most of the ones that we have found, the punishment is always monetary compensation dependent on the precise injury involved. This is because all wise traditions recognize that a literal eye for an eye does nothing but make aggrieved parties feel better, as opposed to compensation which can help cover the injured person’s newfound expenses. This takes the parties out of a cycle of violence and instead working towards prosperity together. Similarly, the cycle of violence between Israel and Gaza, the bombing, the killing, the striking, needs to come to an end. The continued strikes will only serve to inspire more extremism. It’s time to bring the fighting to an end, to support each other in the rebuilding efforts and reach peace and prosperity together.

■ **Three times a year, everyone must show up, because everyone is needed when we do important things. In other words, every voice counts and needs to be heard.** Every observant Jewish home knows the constant cycle of holidays every year. The planning of meals, the guests, the traveling, etc. The main elements of this never-ending circuit, Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot, are given the categorical title שלוש רגלים - the Three Pilgrimage Festivals - in this week’s parsha (Exodus 23:15-17):

אַתְּ חַג הַמִּצּוֹת תִּשְׁמֹר שִׁבְעַת יָמִים תֹּאכַל מִצּוֹת כֶּאֱשֶׁר צִוִּיתְךָ לְמוֹעֵד חֹדֶשׁ הָאָבִיב כִּי־בו יֵצְאתָ מִמִּצְרַיִם וְלֹא־יֵרָאוּ פְנֵי רִיקָם:  
וְחַג הַקֹּצִיר בְּכוֹרֵי מַעֲשֵׂיךָ אֲשֶׁר תִּזְרַע בְּשָׂדֶה וְחַג הָאֶסֶף בְּצֵאת הַשָּׁנָה בְּאֶסְפְּךָ אֶת־מַעֲשֵׂיךָ מִן־הַשָּׂדֶה:  
שְׁלֹשׁ פְּעָמִים בְּשָׁנָה יֵרָאָה כָּל־זָכוֹרְךָ אֶל־פְּנֵי הָאֲדֹן ה':

The holiday of barleybread you shall observe, for seven days eat barleybread as I have commanded you in the time of the month of the new grain, for that is when you left Egypt; and nobody is to show up empty handed.  
And the harvest festival, of the first fruits of your labor that you will sow in the field,  
and the gathering festival at the going-out of the year, in your gathering of your labor from the field.  
Three times a year, all your males should be seen before the presence of the lord God.

These agricultural festivals are reshaped by the Torah into holidays in honor of God - times when Israel gathers together to honor our Lord. Note that here God is addressed as “ha-adon,” the master, in stark contrast to the competing local deity, Baal, whose name also translates to master. Three times a year we gather for the most holy of purposes, to show how serious we are about preserving our relationship with the one God, Hashem. **This idea of showing up in large groups to show seriousness is the basic premise behind protest and democracy. We can only be taken seriously when our numbers are large; we must all act if we want our leaders to hear our voices.** And even though “it is not on you to finish the work,” according to Rabbi Tarfon, in Pirkei Avot 2:16, he also tells us that “you are not free to abandon it.” We are not free to abandon the work of bringing home each and every hostage.

### Call to Action

This parsha spends a great deal of time detailing the obligations we have to each other in a society. Societies exist in order to share burdens across an entire population, and the Torah's society makes it clear that it does mean an entire population. Exodus 23:5 reads:

כִּי־תִרְאֶה חֲמֹר שֵׂנֵאָדָּךְ רֹבֵץ תַּחַת מְשָׁאוֹ וְחָדַלְתָּ מֵעֲזֹב לוֹ עֲזֹב תֵּעֲזֹב עִמּוֹ:

When you see the donkey of your enemy lying under its burden and would refrain from raising it, you must nevertheless help raise it.

One could read this as an injunction against animal cruelty, but the inclusion of the directive to help him unload the donkey implies that the burden was unintentional. We have a mitzvah to help those we don't like, even when it's inconvenient, even when we don't want to. All the more so, do we have this obligation for those who are our friends. In this difficult time for Klal Yisrael, take the time to see which of your friends have burdens, physical or emotional, which you can help unload..

### Closing Intention

The parsha ends with God promising the Land of Canaan to the Children of Israel. God promises that so long as we follow the rules, God will make sure our enemies cannot harm us. The best way we can protect ourselves is to continue to keep the covenant and take care of each other.

# Weekly Words of Torah

## Parshat Terumah: Building a Movement Together

### Framing

How do we build a movement to demand the release of hostages cruelly held in Gaza, and to envision how best to establish peace and security for all people in our precious homeland? This week's Torah portion, Terumah, asks the Jewish people to build a movement, in which individuals come forward to contribute their unique talents and materials to the construction of the Mishkan, a sanctuary and dwelling-place for God amongst the people. How can we learn from the Torah's vision of a tremendous national project to ensure that our own such project in this moment remains intimately connected to who we are and what we most aspire to as individuals and a nation, while still reserving a dwelling-place for the Divine presence at its heart?

### Access Points

- At the outset of our parsha, God tells Moses to instruct the Israelites to bring gifts to upbuild the Mishkan, saying "you shall accept gifts from every person whose heart impels him." Rabbi Sholom Noach Berezovsky Z"l, also known as the Netivot Shalom or the previous Slonimer Rebbe, imagines this process in moving psychological terms. He says that a heart impels an individual to deliver that which is hardest, most painful and troubling to God. He then declares that "we will build the Mishkan from all those hard parts of life that each member of the Jewish people individually delivers and raises up to God. **"How can we build a nationwide movement that reflects all our rawest, most intense emotions: our pain, our fear, our anger?"** How can we take these impossibly difficult parts of our lives and our world, and channel them to the constructive ends of divine justice?
- Compared to the Slonimer's psychological reading, the nineteenth-century Enlightenment commentator Samuel David Luzzatto, known as the Shadal, has a more political understanding of this verse. In Hebrew, the verse refers to the heart impelling a person to bring gifts, using the Shoshon ג.ד.ב. Later, it will refer to each giver again as ג.ד.ב. - giving of heart (Exodus 35:5). But a ג.ד.ב. is also a dignitary or government representative. The Shadal imagines that while it might have been expected for B'nei Israel to appoint representatives and functionaries to manage the construction of the Mishkan, the people decided to bypass this process, passionately employing their own hearts as dignitaries, and bringing all gifts to Moses directly, without liaison (Exodus 36:3). In building our political movement, we too need to make clear to our democratic representatives all around the world that we unreservedly demand the release of hostages, insisting that they not get in the way of our most intense and heartfelt pleas for our brothers and sisters in captivity. **We must employ direct political pressure, and speak without qualification.**
- The parsha ends with instructions concerning the pegs for the four posts of the tabernacle in order to establish it firmly in the ground. In his vision, the prophet Isaiah also describes the pegs of Israel's national tent, instructing the Israelites to "enlarge the site of your tent, extend the size of your dwelling, do not stint, lengthen the ropes, and drive the pegs firm!" (54:2). Following Isaiah's vision, we as a people must now erect the tent-pegs of this justice movement in such a way that we can both extend our tent while holding fast and firm. We must tell our story to everyone who will listen, demanding justice and freedom, yelling about the blood that is crying out from the ground, and insisting that saving a life is equivalent to saving a world. **We must invite people from all walks of life and all around the world into this movement without diluting our message and while staying true to who we are.**

### Call to Action

Be a part of this movement: talk to your neighbor, discuss with your friends, bring it up with co-workers, at family dinners, post on social media, make people productively uncomfortable. Know that you're part of a collective, a national/global constructive Mishkan project to restore God's presence in an otherwise very dark world..

### Closing Intention

The Midrash Tanchuma on our parsha imagines God making a radical statement. God says to the angels, "See how much I love all the earthly beings who live below? I even descend and dwell behind a curtain of goats' hair for their sake. As it is said [in our parsha concerning the construction of the Mishkan]: You shall make curtains of goats' hair (Exodus. 26:7). If, out of an intense love of humanity and the Jewish people, the Divine chose to be present in an undignified and gross situation, involving goat's hair, we should also imagine God being present with the hostages in Gaza, wherever they are and in whatever undignified and dark situations they are enduring. It is a small comfort for us know that God is present there, even amidst the horrors they have almost certainly experienced. We both pray and demand for their immediate release, as the necessary first step of a long path to their - and our - healing.

# Weekly Words of Torah

## Parshat Tetzaveh: Wearing Our Hearts on Our Sleeves

### Framing

In this Torah portion of Tetzaveh, God gives Moses instructions about the special uniforms to be worn by the priestly class serving in the Mishkan (Tabernacle), as well as the pieces of the uniform worn exclusively by the kohen gadol (the high priest - currently Moses' brother Aaron). An explanation is given for each of the components of the high priest's distinctive clothing, spelling out the spiritual role each garment plays. Amazingly, several of those components are being echoed today, in the current unacceptable situation, as our people toil to get the message out to the world in person, in print, and on social media: more than 100 of our loved ones are still held captive in Gaza. Help us bring them home now.

### Access Points

- **The Ephod.** The first of Aaron's vestments to be described in our parsha is the "ephod" - a sort of long robe, tied behind his back, sleeveless but with shoulder-pieces, and a belt, which is also attached to the shoulder-pieces. Two precious stones, one on each shoulder-piece, are engraved with the names of the tribes of Israel: six on each shoulder, almost as if Aaron is symbolically carrying all of Israel on his shoulders. "Attach the two stones to the shoulder-pieces of the ephod, as stones for remembrance of the Israelite people, whose names Aaron shall carry upon his two shoulder-pieces for remembrance before the Lord" (Exodus 28:12). The Malbim (Rabbi Meir Leibush Weiser, 19th-century central European commentator) says, whether presciently or wishfully, that these two stones, on either side of the high priest's neck, "point to the unity of the Jewish people. And even though they are divided [because their tribal names are engraved on two separate stones], and some lean to the right and some lean to the left [you can't make this stuff up!!], even so they are all united on the shoulder-pieces of the one ephod that ties them together." And so it must be. Whether we lean to the left or to the right, politically, religiously, or socially, we must take to heart the lesson of the ephod's avnei shoham, which are inextricably linked - and band together to keep our message clear and unified: Bring them home.
- **The Choshen Mishpat:** Over the ephod, Aaron then wears a breastplate, called the "choshen mishpat." The breastplate is made up of four rows of three stones, each a different type: one carnelian, one chrysolite, one emerald, one turquoise, one sapphire, one amethyst, etc. "The stones shall correspond in number to the names of the children of Israel: 12, corresponding to their names" (Exodus 28:21). The rows of stones - all unique and special in their own right - mirror the rows and rows of pictures of the hostages, each of whom has their own family, their own story, their own life. Just like the tribes of Israel, each individual hostage has their own name, and we must continue to say those names and display their photos. [In an agonizingly poignant twist, the soldiers in Paratroopers Brigade, Battalion 890, while serving in Gaza, [took upon themselves to each wear a photo of one hostage on the front of their ceramic vest](#), to remind themselves and each other what and who they were there for. Those vests are called "ephodim."]
- **Over His Heart:** We are told that "Aaron shall carry the names of the sons of Israel on the choshen mishpat over his heart, when he enters the sanctuary, for remembrance before the Lord at all times" (Exodus 28:29). The Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, 19th-century Lithuanian scholar) comments that any time the term remembrance (זכרון) is used, it means remembrance for salvation. In other words, the names of the Jewish People on the choshen are put there so God remembers them and saves them. Redeems them. Brings them home safe. And it should not surprise us that Aaron carries those names over his heart - just as Rachel Goldberg carries the number of days the hostages have been stolen from us over her heart. It is the heart that cries out for salvation and rescue.

### Call to Action

This week, when you think about what you wear, consider a bracelet, a piece of tape with a name or a number, a t-shirt, or even a picture (like those Paratroopers), that reminds you and others - and of course, reminds God as well - that we cannot rest until our children, our parents, our sisters and brothers all come home. Take a photo of your holy vestments and post it on social media. You never know whose heart will be jarred into action because of it.

### Closing Intention

We sometimes hear that it is the clothes that make the man. In Parshat Tetzaveh, we learn that clothes can indeed have real meaning and significance and intention. May we use our garments, like the high priest of old, to make our hopes and prayers and demands known to all.



# Weekly Words of Torah

## Parshat Ki Tissa: Prayer Counts!

### Framing

Parshat Ki Tissa falls in between the parshiyot that include the commandment to build God's house in the desert, the *mishkan*, and those that depict the actual building of the *mishkan*. The central narrative of Ki Tissa includes the Israelites' creation of the Golden Calf, Moshe's smashing of the Divinely written tablets, and God's forgiveness of the people.

### Access Points

■ **The way to be counted is through contribution.** In our parsha, the Torah instructs Moshe to take a census of the Israelite people. However, instead of counting people one person at a time, Moshe is told to count the people through a set financial contribution of ½ shekel per male aged 20 and up. This money-oriented counting serves as a census for how many men are of military age. But it also has an added value, as God commands each of the people being counted to offer a standard donation that will serve the whole community through contributing toward the *mishkan*. Rashi teaches that the money will serve as an atonement because the money could be used to purchase animals for sacrifices. (Rashi on Exodus 30:16). In this case, being counted means giving of oneself, in two important ways.

■ **When the Israelites were at risk of destruction from God's anger, Moshe pleaded and petitioned God. We must emulate Moshe.** After their sin of creating the Golden Calf, God expressed a willingness to start a new nation from Moshe, and destroy the people (Exodus 32:10), and Moshe steadfastly argued on the people's behalf. Moshe employed several tactics, including evoking our forefathers as he argued that even a people that has gravely sinned deserves to be forgiven. Moshe empathizes with the people to the extent that he says that if God does not forgive the people, then he should be erased from God's book (Exodus 33:32). The 13th-century French commentator Hizkuni suggests that Moshe is referring to the heavenly "Book of Life" where all those who are destined to live have their names recorded. Moshe understands his fate as inherently sealed with the Israelites whose lives are on the line.

■ **Use historical, petitional language.** The most familiar passage in the parsha are the 13 attributes of mercy which first appear in Exodus 34:6-7. In addition to this week, we read the passage with the attributes of God's mercy during *Tahanun*, on the fast days in our calendar, and most famously during Selichot and on Yom Kippur. The famous piyut calls on God to remember us mercifully now as God did when he taught Moshe how to attain forgiveness for the Israelites sins. God, you have taught us to say these 13 attributes. Remember us today through this covenant of the 13 attributes just as you taught them to Your humble servant (Moshe).

### Call to Action

Pick one thing to do for the hostages and post it publicly. Commit to a daily act of prayer on behalf of the hostages, either through your own words or through our traditional language.

### Closing Intention

The parsha reminds us that every person matters, and that through the power of one person's prayers, a whole community can be saved. Don't underestimate the possibility of your individual actions to comfort, to raise awareness, or even, evoke Divine mercy.

# Weekly Words of Torah

## Parshat VaYakhel: From Words to Action

### Framing

In this Torah portion, Moshe gathers the Children of Israel and iterates God's instruction to them: Rest on the sabbath, do not kindle flame on the holy day, and bring forth all that is needed to construct the Mishkan (Tabernacle). Unlike Parshat Terumah, however, which details the specifications of the holy vessels, VaYakhel records their construction: implementing the Divine plan through tangible action.

### Access Points

- **What Kind of Gathering Is "VaYakhel"?** This parsha begins with Moses assembling the Children of Israel, stating that he will now introduce what God commands. Rashi points out that the grammatical form of ויקהל is causative, because "one does not assemble people" with hands: i.e., by force. Rather, they bring people together through their speech. We cannot force others to demonstrate solidarity and empathy with the plight of our hostages. Rather, we must usher people in with our words—invite people to share in the struggle to immediately return our family members, friends, brothers, sisters, fathers, mothers, sons and daughters home.
- **Public Donation Is Willing Donation:** *"Take from yourselves an offering for the Lord; every generous-hearted person shall bring it"* (Exodus 35:5). The Mishkan's very material existence was brought about by the willing – those who could offer from themselves to further the collective mission. So too, it takes our widespread will to mobilize and effect change in our societies and halls of power.
- **Leadership - Bezalel and Oholiab:** *"And He put into [Bezalel's] heart [the ability] to teach, both him and Oholiab...He imbued them with wisdom of the heart.....every-wise hearted man into whom God had imbued wisdom and insight to know how to do, shall do all the work of the service of the Holy, according to all that the Lord has commanded"* (Exodus 35:34 - 36:1). An effective leader is not only great in knowledge, but offers an expansive emotional capacity: the ability to guide others with discernment, judgment, and a profound, sincere empathy. Any community, people, and movement needs collective buy-in. Yet, no amount of popular support will ever substitute for the essential duty of brave leadership. We must demand that our political and societal leaders fulfill the responsibilities that their solemn duties confer and that this grave moment demands.

### Call to Action

Do not compel or guilt, but invite others to join in this movement's actions of their own volition. Explain to them why the struggle to return our family is theirs too. Our success will require a combination of our popular determination and brave leadership to see these loved ones home. Act for the former and demand the latter. Let it be known to our leaders that their abandonment is not an option.

### Closing Intention

Five months on from the horrors of October 7, a creeping sense of normalcy becomes ever more appealing. Approaching 150 days in captivity for 100+ loved ones reminds us that we cannot accept any complacency. Any successful movement is like a symphony. Like the craftsmen under Bezalel's Oholiab tutelage—we, the people, have our role to play, and our leaders must rise to theirs.

# Weekly Words of Torah

## Parshat Pekudei: A True Accounting Needs Specificity!

### Framing

Parshat Pekudei may appear at first to be rather opaque and technical. It describes in great detail the assembly of the Mishkan (Tabernacle), with a long discourse about the priestly attire. Yet there is a profound human dimension as well, if we stop to appreciate the rationale for sharing all of these details. The parsha deals with finite financial amounts, but we ought to consider how we can apply some of its approach to reckoning with the infinitely large hole that the hostages' absence in our lives has left for all of Am Yisrael.

### Access Points

■ Our parsha derives its name from the opening words of Exodus 38:24: *eileh f'qudei hamishkan* – these are the accounts of the Mishkan. The focus, then, of our portion, is every single financial transaction, with all of its details, that went into the crafting of the Mishkan. These accounts take up the bulk of the parsha, as we learn the provenance, value, and specifications of each constituent component of the Mishkan. But what's particularly odd is that the same root *p-q-d* is used just a couple of words later in the same verse in a seeming redundancy, telling us that these were the accounts *asher puqqad al-pi Moshe* – that were accounted (or perhaps calculated) by Moses. Moshe Rabbeinu himself spent all this time accounting for every part of the Mishkan; clearly it was valued quite highly and deserved such an intricate calculation. But our present dilemma is even more complex, as we are confronted with a situation, a loss, that is literally incalculable. Our parsha paints a clear picture of how challenging it was to figure out the exact worth of the Mishkan, but what are we to do when it is simply impossible to calculate the inestimable loss from our lives of over a hundred hostages? Our tradition teaches unambiguously that one life is worth a whole world (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5) - an infinitesimally large amount. Given what we know about accounting for the Mishkan, *gal vahomer*, all the more so, must we hold front of mind and reckon with a tragedy that is truly unaccountable.

■ From the currency conversions/weights to the entire priestly wardrobe to the specifications of the physical construction of the Mishkan, it is evident that we have a parsha that is concerned with the details. Witness how Exodus 39:33 narrates a seemingly simple event: *vayyaviyu et hamishkan el Moshe* – then they brought the Mishkan to Moses. We already know from our preceding chapters what the Mishkan consisted of and even looked like, but it turns out that this clause is actually just the header for the highly detailed list that follows! We read another eight and a half verses that go out of their way to enumerate every physical component that we mean when we say “the Mishkan.” It is insufficient for a reader to conceptualize the Mishkan in the abstract; rather we are instructed to understand what it looks, sounds, and feels like at a deeper level. Similarly, we must refuse to let the 130 remaining hostages exist only in theory, as an abstract tragedy. We ought to characterize our loss in more concrete terms and make a point to get to know the remaining hostages more intimately. What do they like? How do they spend their time? We can push ourselves to uncover some of these biographical details and ensure that our immense loss is neither abstract nor a mere number. Let us mimic the parsha in not only referencing “the hostages” in passing, but rather leaving no detail up to imagination in crafting a vivid picture of what each of these sacred souls brings to the world.

■ Our parsha goes into elaborate detail about not only the worth of various items in the Mishkan, but also the aesthetic details. Most of Chapter 39 is devoted to depicting for our mind's eye a clear visual of the priestly attire. And Exodus 39:10-14 even paints a precise picture of every single stone on each row of the priestly breastplate. There is clearly a great significance ascribed to the visual effect of how kohanim were dressed. Our rather artistically attuned portion hints at *hiddur mitzvah*, the notion that Jewish spaces and objects should look beautiful. We can draw a couple of takeaways. First, it has been moving to hear hostage families speak about the innumerable ways that their loved ones, now in captivity, beautified their lives. It is worth sharing these with our communities and understanding that people are just as likely, if not more, to bring beauty into our midst as are objects. Next, in the spirit of recognizing the value of art, consider engaging this week with the vast array of artistic projects that have emerged in connection with the hostages. There have been poems aplenty, and Kikar Chatufim (Hostages Square) in Tel Aviv has become a significant multimedia exhibit of hostage-connected art. Use our parsha's concern for the aesthetic and artistic to highlight these artistic remembrances of what we've lost.

### Call to Action

Learn more about and appreciate art connected to the hostages and their families on the [Hostages and Missing Families Forum website](#). In the political realm, as an increasing number of American elected officials and institutions make statements calling for a ceasefire, insist that any such demand for a cessation of hostilities must include a call for a negotiated hostage release. Draw explicitly on our above framework of each individual hostage alone holding legitimately inestimable value.

### Closing Intention

The parallel concerns for matters both abstract and concrete is a key feature of our parsha. Our appreciation for the idea of the Mishkan is enhanced by the parsha's concretization of all of its parts and its clear, exact spelling out of all the Mishkan consisted of. Similarly, our understanding of the priesthood is strengthened by the depth of visual detail offered in describing the priestly look. Let us then speak not only philosophically, but also in tangible terms about our hostages. We must go beyond the numbers, ages, and names to acquaint ourselves with a high degree of specificity with the details of those whose return we so desperately yearn and fight for.

# Weekly Words of Torah

## Parshat Vayikra / Shabbat Zachor: Our Leaders Must Lead for the Sake of the People, Not for the Sake of Their Own Egos

### Framing

This year, we read Parshat Zachor - the extra section chanted for Maftir on the Shabbat before Purim - alongside Parshat Vayikra. The Zachor text, three verses that come from the tail end of [Deuteronomy chapter 25](#), recounts God's emphatic exhortation to the Jewish People to

*"Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt—how, undeterred by fear of God, he surprised you on the march, when you were famished and weary, and cut down all the stragglers in your rear. Therefore, when God grants you safety from all your enemies around you, in the land that God is giving you as a hereditary portion, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!"*

The special Haftarah read for Parshat Zachor tells the story of Saul, first king of Israel, and the decision to fire him from that job, when he did not completely destroy the Amalekite nation when he had the chance (and when he was commanded to!).

### Access Points

■ **Is humility a high Jewish value?** In any Torah scroll you will look at, the letter aleph in the first word of Parshat Vayikra is written in miniature, like this: וַיִּקְרָא. Some commentators (including the 13th-century German/Spanish sage, the Tur) explain that the small aleph is a nod to Moses, who, as we are told, was [incredibly humble](#). Since, the Tur points out, God only appeared to the prophet Balaam by chance, the way the Torah records that appearance ([Numbers 23:4](#)) is: וַיִּקְרָא (having to do with the word בִּקְרָה, or chance). Moses did not want to make himself seem better than Balaam, so he also wanted to record God's appearance to him in this particular instance as וַיִּקְרָא, rather than וַיִּקְרָא (which comes from the root א.ק.ר, meaning to call, indicating a strongly intentional appearance). God did not accede to Moses's request, as their prophetic meetings were never by chance, but did meet Moses part way by allowing Moses to write this word in the Torah with a smaller aleph than usual.

■ **So is arrogance condemned in Judaism?** The Amalekites, who, in our tradition, were reembodyed in Haman and his family in the Purim story, and can arguably be said to have reappeared today in the form of Hamas, are our people's complete and utter enemy, as they represent complete and utter evil in the world. In the Zachor text, we are told that the Amalekites intentionally chose to attack a totally vulnerable people - the Israelites - as they exited their world of slavery. Even more, we are told that the Amalekites did so because they were "undeterred by fear of God." The Amalekites were so arrogant that knowing Israel's connection to God didn't stop them from brutally attacking an unprepared, ragtag group of people. Their overblown sense of self is anathema to Judaism and the Jewish people.

■ **But is uber-humility a Jewish value?** In the Haftarah, when King Saul decides to sidestep God's command to utterly destroy all of the Amalekite nation by keeping alive the Amalekite king Agag, Samuel the prophet delivers the devastating news that this has caused God to regret making Saul king, and will tear the kingship away from him for someone better suited for the job. In his sharing this with Saul, Samuel boils down the reasons for Saul's failure to one main point: Saul was too humble. "You may look small to yourself, but you are the head of the tribes of Israel," says Samuel. We can imagine the subtext here: Had Saul believed in himself and his ability to rule, instead of manifesting his inferiority complex in his leadership, he would have remained king. But his extremely low self-esteem left no room for him to stay in power.

### Call to Action

When we consider who we choose as our leaders - especially when we think about making sure that bringing home our hostages is taken into account in every decision that is made by our leaders - we must look closely at where those leaders stand on the humility-arrogance spectrum. Are they overly arrogant, like our archenemies, the Amalekites (and Hamas)? Then they must not be allowed to be in power. Are they overly humble, like Saul, and not able to govern properly because they are focused on the unhelpful narrative they have going in a loop in their head? Then they must not be allowed to stay in power. We need leaders like Moses, who know their import and yet don't flaunt it. Those who work for the sake of the people only, and not for the sake of their own ego. Consider this in the coming times, when we are called to choose who we think should lead us. And as you continue to write to your elected officials, and as you continue to post on social media to demand the hostages be brought home now, make this point: it is we the people who choose the leadership of our countries, and we will make our choices. We have the power.

### Closing Intention

For some, Purim this year will be very different than in years past. Celebrating our people's victory over the evil Haman feels questionable when we are facing a similar evil right now. Explore how you might want to change your Purim practices to reflect our 5784 circumstances.

Written by Aviva Lauer, Chief Education and Educational Training Officer, Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies, and Gottesman Family Director of the Pardes Center for Jewish Educators.

# Weekly Words of Torah

## Parshat Tzav / Shabbat Parah: If the Parah Adumah Can Have a Happy Ending, So Can Our People

### Framing

This year, alongside Parshat Tzav, we read Parshat Parah - the extra section chanted for Maftir on a Shabbat after Purim, during the second half of the month of Adar. The additional portion, which comes from Numbers chapter 19, describes the ritual of the Red Heifer, in which a wholly red-colored female cow is burnt and its ashes are made into a mixture that is used as a purification remedy for those who have become ritually impure by coming into contact with human corpses. Post-October 7, this one sentence description alone can put us into a negative space, with its trigger words of burning, death, and corpses. But what if the deep meaning of Parshat Parah is actually a happy one, meant to help us heal, rather than push us spiraling downwards?

### Access Points

■ **The original story of the Red Heifer is a very sad one.** Indeed, when we read Bamidbar chapter 19 in situ, as the first part of Parshat Chukat, we must understand that this purification ritual described in just 22 verses actually represents 38 long years of the Israelites' lives in the desert. Right before this chapter, we find ourselves reading about the Israelites' second year in the desert, at which time we learn of the awful sin of the spies, wherein the Israelites make a huge fuss about not wanting to enter into the Land of Israel because they are afraid. The result of this sin is a devastating consequence: anyone over the age of 20 will not enter into the land, and indeed, the entire nation will wait as long as it takes for that generation to die out before they will cross over into the Promised Land. So they wait, and wait, and wait, for 38 years, while people die, and die, and die. The literary representation of that entire time is this one chapter about the Parah Adumah as the antidote, so to speak, to the constant ritual impurity of death. (After this chapter, we re-enter the story of the Israelites in the desert in their 40th year.) When you think about it for just a moment, the constant refrain of death manifested by the Red Heifer rite can feel downright crushing.

■ **However, the story of the Red Heifer as part of the four special Shabbatot of the month of Adar is not sad at all.** The reason the rabbis instituted the custom of reading this section of text during the second half of the month of Adar, after Purim has come and gone, is because in order to be ready to make the traditional pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem for Pesach, Jews needed to be ritually pure. In other words, this is the time of year, both in ancient times and today, when people need to be reminded to get themselves in ritual order, whatever that consists of for each person. And as such, it is (simply and deeply) a call to get ourselves ready for the exciting and meaningful upcoming festival of Passover!

■ If we look at the Red Heifer text that is scary and triggering in one context, but affirmative and life-giving in another, can we also get ourselves to a place where we believe, with all our hearts, that with all of us taking action, we can turn the story of the 134 hostages still in Gaza upside down as well? That in just a short time, the entire enterprise of this website can become moot, and we can move on to healing our beloved returnees, our people, and our world, and preparing ourselves ritually, physically, emotionally, and spiritually for a reenactment of the Exodus from Egypt that will mean so much more this year than ever before?

### Call to Action

This week, go broad: urge Netflix to stream the documentary *Supernova: The Music Festival Massacre*, so that **the entire television-watching world** can get the message about Hersh and the other 133 hostages still imprisoned in the hell of Hamas captivity.

[Click here. It will bring up some option boxes in which you can request movies for Netflix to air.](#)

Simply copy this:

**Supernova. The Music Festival Massacre**

and paste it into the box.

The whole world has to know, and this is one way to make that happen.

### Closing Intention

*Yetziat Mitzrayim* was too miraculous to be believed before it happened. But it did happen. Now is the time for our people to make our own miracle. If every single one of us speaks up - if every single one of us puts our strength toward bringing the hostages home - we can make the unbelievable happen today.

Written by Aviva Lauer, Chief Education and Educational Training Officer, Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies, and Gottesman Family Director of the Pardes Center for Jewish Educators.