HUMAN RIGHTS THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

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Welcome to the René Cassin Parashot Project. We are proud to have brought together 54 leading Jewish thinkers, Rabbis and educators from across the UK to each write a ‘human rights thought for the week’, creatively connecting each portion of the Torah to a distinct human rights theme. This catalogue of short writings is accessible for all ages whilst being thought-provoking and covering a wide variety of subjects.

Our ambition is that this pack will be used as a tangible resource for Rabbis, Jewish educators, youth movements and schools, to engage and inspire the Jewish community at large on a range of human rights topics. Through greater education and discussion within the community, we seek to raise awareness of a number of issues which are explored in this pack - such as the extent of modern-day slavery, discrimination and the current global refugee crisis. We hope that this greater level of discourse will manifest itself in a more mobilised and engaged Jewish community, that is ready to stand up and tackle the demanding human rights problems of today.

We would like to extend our thanks to all those who have made this project possible. This includes all those who have taken the time and care to write these wonderful words, those who have proofread and those who have helped with the design.

We sincerely hope that this resource can be used as widely as possible, so please feel free to share it online and in person. If any of the readings spark questions or a desire to get involved in our work please do not hesitate to get in touch with us at info@renecassin.org

By studying both our religious texts and our history, it is clear that there is a profound and powerful relationship between Judaism and human rights that must be continued. It is through education, cooperation and activism that British Jewry can work to protect human rights and truly commit to the ideals of Tikkun Olam (healing the world).

*Mia Hasenson-Gross  
Director, René Cassin*
“AM I MY BROTHER’S KEEPER?”
A commentary on Parashat Bereshit
By Alexander Goldberg

Am I my brother’s keeper? This is a fundamental question that the Torah poses to us. It is a question that is left hanging throughout the entire Torah: Who is our brother or sister? How am I responsible to them? Why am I responsible? When do I need to respond? Parashat Bereshit provides us with the beginnings of an answer.

Rashi famously asks why the Torah starts at all with the Book of Genesis. His own view is that it should surely start at Exodus XII with the first Commandment given to Israel, the nation. Before we can explore this relationship between Israel and Hashem we need to understand the one between humanity and Hashem. In essence, we are taught that all of humanity comes from common ancestry created in the Divine Image:

“And G-d created humanity in His image, in the image of G-d He created humanity; male and female He created them.” Genesis 1:27

The sages understood that from this we learn that to destroy, hurt, starve or commit an injustice to another human being is a desecration of that image: a desecration of the Divine. The Mishnah says “Whoever destroys a soul, it is considered as if he destroyed an entire world. And whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world”. (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5; Yerushalmi Talmud 4:9).

We learn that each and every one of us is minted from the same mould and yet is different: and yet if two humans were the sole people left on this earth then they could create a world entire: hence to destroy a human is to destroy that world of possibility.

It is this concept that is carried down throughout the ages. During the Enlightenment, they were developed by Thomas Jefferson and the America’s Founding Fathers and beautifully restated in the US Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights...”

Today, there is a universal understanding of the equality and solidarity. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights expresses this as: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”

The Torah itself recognises that it is not enough to simply state the connectivity between humanity and G-d and between human and human. There remains a tension that is exposed with this early section of the Torah within the Cain and Abel story. Cain’s anger and jealously, his wish to overcome his brother with violence ends in tragedy. It is when Cain is challenged by his actions does he ask Hashem whether he is his brother’s keeper? It is a question that is posed to us individually and collectively in every generation. Do I utilise the enormous power that I have for good or simply use it to advance my own cause regardless of who it might hurt?

It was the same question posed to America’s Founding Fathers by the anti-slavery movement and by the suffragettes a hundred years ago. It is the question that we still ask ourselves today in terms of global inequality that results in hunger that claims 21,000 lives each day or treatable diseases that take the lives of millions each year.

In essence, G-d’s gift to us is the power of free will. We are ultimately judged by how we utilise the power of human agency: on how we keep our brother and our sister.

Alexander Goldberg is the Jewish Chaplain to the University of Surrey and a founding trustee of René Cassin
DIVERSITY AND ETHICS - PRINCIPLES OF A MODERN SOCIETY

A commentary on Parashat Noach
By Joe Boxer

This Torah Parasha features two appearances of divine intervention due to the acts of man, the flood and the story of the tower of Bavel. The story of the flood stems from the ethical failings of Mankind: “And the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that all the impulse of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord repented that He had made man upon the earth, and it grieved Him at His heart. And the Lord said, I will destroy man, whom I have created, from the face of the earth, both man, and beast, and creeping things, and the birds of the air, for I repent that I have made them” (Bereshit 6:5-7). As a result, G-d responds in two ways: first, through the destruction of humanity and second, through the construction of the Noahide Laws - a set of universal moral policies set to preserve the social order of the world.

The second narrative of this Parasha is somewhat more subtle. Mankind unites in Bavel to build a tower reaching up to the heavens. In response, G-d does not destroy mankind but merely disperses them, in both geography and language. Our sages argue over what the cause of this divine punishment was, and explanations range from Bavel launching a holy war upon G-d to a general mistreatment displayed at Bavel.

The Netziv picks up on a particular line in the narrative, “Now the whole world had one language and one speech” (Bereshit 11:1) and claims that the total unity displayed in this instance is a direct contravention of the biblical imperative from the creation story of, “be fruitful and multiple and fill the land.” The Netziv claims that by uniting under this “one speech,” the people were not dispersing and were not filling the world as G-d intended.

For the Netziv and other authors such as the Abarbanel, Bavel had developed into a totalitarian state, where diversity and difference were frowned upon. Bavel’s desperation to unite under a completely united society led to the fear of the outsider and the punishment of divergence. The contemporary author Rav Ezra Bick writes that “the Midrashim are clarifying for us the CONSEQUENCES (rather than the causes of) the unitary state. The psychological need for unity, the social pressure involved, the strength and power that result from this unity, all will result in the monolithically totalitarian state, which will result in both civil repression (as in the furnace of Avraham) and spiritual hubris (as in the idolatry reaching up to heaven with a sword).” As a result of this, G-d forced Humankind to be culturally and geographically diverse.

The two stories of the Parashat Noach are laying out expectations for a modern society. On the one hand, we have the cultural diversity desired by the Bavel story, for without diversity we have totalitarianism. We then have the ethical living and corrupt free desires of the flood story. The Noahide Laws include universal ethics such as do not murder and do not steal, as well as animal rights laws and the requirement to set up fair and just courts. Noah teaches us that we need to embrace a diverse society, yet we need to protect everyone who lives within those societies.

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1. Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin was a 19th Century European author. Most of his works came out from his time as the Rosh Yeshiva of Volozhin in Lithuania

Joe Boxer is the Mazkir of Bnei Akiva UK youth movement
THE WORLD’S FIRST REFUGEE

A commentary on Parashat Lech Lecha
By Mia Hasenson-Gross

In Parashat Lech Lecha Avraham receives a divine command to leave his home and country and uproot his family to the new and unknown land of Cana’an. In return Avraham is promised he will become the founding father of the Hebrew nation – a considerable reward for daring to make such a significant move:

‘And the Lord said to Abram, “Go forth from your land and from your birthplace and from your father’s house, to the land that I will show you. And I will make you into a great nation, and will bless you, and I will aggrandize your name and [you shall] be a blessing”’ (Bereshit 12:1-2)

When they finally arrive at the land of Cana’an they face a great famine that forces them to uproot again and make another journey to Egypt. And later on Avraham leaves Egypt again and travels back to Cana’an.

It is not easy to leave all that is familiar and safe and take a journey into the unknown, let alone three times. This is a story of a young family that is forced to travel, experiencing a journey of uncertainty yet they do it willingly, driven by the belief in G-d and guided by the promise of greatness.

For over 60 million refugees today who have fled their homes there is no promise of greatness, of ‘leading a nation’. But rather a simpler belief their journey will lead them to a life of safety. That is what has driven over a million Syrian refugees to make the dangerous journey in difficult weather conditions, and often at the mercy of human traffickers, to reach Europe where they seek refuge.

When in Spring of 2013, Faez al Sharaa understood that life in his hometown of Daraa, in southern Syria, was becoming too dangerous with daily fears of dying in the civil war, he and his wife packed their bags with clothing, photos from their wedding and a few keepsakes and left their home and their life behind.

Like Avraham and his family, Faez’s and many other families have left their homes, their culture and all that is familiar to embark on a journey to the unknown and to seek refuge in a new and safe place. And like Avraham who had to uproot his family again, many of the refugees reaching the shores of Europe are forced to continue to seek refuge when one, two or even three countries refuse to accept them.

Throughout our history, war, conflict and natural disasters have forced people to uproot their families and start a journey if not to the ‘promised land’ then at least to a ‘safe land’. Avraham’s journey teaches us that although we are now landlords, the inhabitants of the land, we should always remember that we too were once strangers seeking refuge, and of the obligation we have to treat the other, the way we would have liked to be treated.

One of the most repeated tenets in the Torah is the commandment: ‘When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the Land of Egypt. I am the Lord your G-d.” (Leviticus 19:33-34). This tenet is repeated in different versions 36 times in the Torah, and stresses the important principle for human society to provide safety and protection to the stranger, and is as relevant today as it was then.

Avraham’s journey teaches us that although we are now landlords, the inhabitants of the land, we should always remember that we too were once strangers seeking refuge.

Mia Hasenson-Gross is the Executive Director of René Cassin
THE STORY OF AN ARGUMENT
A commentary on Parashat Vayeira
By Joe Grabiner

As someone who has grown up in one of our community’s youth movements, RSY-Netzer, I have always been taught that our texts are filled with examples of strong leadership. In Parashat Vayeira we encounter such a moment of leadership, namely from our ancestor Abraham. However, it is not leadership in the conventional sense. It is not like that of Moses leading the people through the desert, or Joshua commanding his armies in triumph. Instead, it is the story of an argument.

The text tells us that there are two cities, Sodom and Gomorrah, and due to the wickedness that is going on within these cities G-d has decided to destroy them and everyone in them. Abraham makes a tremendous decision, and decides to question G-d. Of course not everyone in these cities is wicked, so Abraham says to G-d, ‘Will you sweep away the innocent along with the guilty?’ (Genesis 18:25). This is a remarkable moment of accountability in our Torah. Abraham challenges G-d saying, ‘how can you, the creator of all, destroy the innocent people of a city just because there are also wrongdoers amongst them?’ Abraham is a person of moral clarity in his society of passive wrongdoers. The obvious point for me here is that as Jews we are not in a relationship of submission with G-d. We are a people who, from our very earliest example question that power. Abraham does not question G-d only once but continues to do so in this passage, negotiating with G-d that ‘what about if there are 50 innocent people, would you destroy the cities then? What about if there were 45 innocent people, would you destroy the cities then? What about 10?’

We can only try to imagine what would have been going through Abraham’s mind at the time. Writing about something entirely different in his book ‘Can Human Rights Survive’, the legal scholar Conor Gearty, does a brilliant job of describing how Abraham must have been feeling: ‘how does it feel to know what truth is when you are everywhere surrounded by doubt? The feeling itself is undoubtedly marvelous to enjoy; it suffuses the body with a glow of certainty, impelling action where others can muster only cynical inactivity’.

However, Abraham is not the superhuman strong man. In his big moment of questioning G-d, he is tremendously humble, making sure to position himself at an appropriate level before the Almighty. He inhabits a mode of almost self-deprecation prefacing his argument with the words “here I am, speaking to my G-d, I am but ashes and dust - ואפר עפר ואנכי”. More than being humble, this is a tactical stroke of genius. Abraham is giving us a masterclass in advocating for those in immediate danger. One commentary on this passage, the Daat Zekenim, suggests that the reason Abraham uses this phrase is to hint that “by rights [Abraham] should have become earth, i.e. killed, in the war against the four kings, or he should have become ashes already when he submitted to the fires in Nimrod’s furnace. If he had been saved, it was only because G-d had displayed G-d’s mercy for him.” By reminding G-d of G-d’s own previous choice to show mercy to Abraham, Abraham is encouraging G-d to show mercy to the innocent folk of Sodom and Gomorrah.

We know that ultimately Abraham fails to convince G-d, and the cities are indeed destroyed. Yet the power in the story remains for me. Abraham shows us that in a moment of colossal terror- where two entire populations are at risk, we must encounter those in power with great urgency and with even greater clarity of thought, yet even more so than that, we must approach with a clear plan of how best to affect change.

Joe Grabiner is a movement worker at RSY-Netzer youth movement
REBECCA AND THE ORIGIN OF CHESED
A commentary on Parashat Chayei Sarah
By Dan Jacobs

In the Parasha of Chayei Sarah (the life of Sarah) we learn a fundamental and basic character trait that we should emulate from our biblical fore-parent.

Abraham sends his servant (hopefully receiving a living wage) Eliezer out to find his son Isaac a wife. In ancient times, the water well served as a social hub, much in the same way as a pub or coffee shop has done in modern Britain. Abraham gave Eliezer little in the way of criteria to decide on this match, other than they should be part of the family. Abraham trusted that Eliezer would use his wisdom and judgement to find the right wife for his son.

Says Eliezer: “So let it come to pass, that the maiden to whom I shall say: Let down your pitcher that I may drink; and she shall say: Drink, and I will give your camels drink also … and then I shall know that you have shown Chesed (kindness) unto my master” (Genesis 24, 14). It is clear from the context of the text that Eliezer saw Chesed as the key attribute Isaac should want in a wife.

The Mishna records Shimon HaTzadick who lived second century BCE as saying that the world stands on three things; Torah (law), Avodah (Service to G-d) and Chesed. This poses the question of what Chesed or kindness means that it should be so key to the workings of the world. In his work, Tomer Devorah, the Kabbalist Rabbi Moshe Cordevero (16th Century) talks about how human beings can emulate G-d’s Chesed (which is a key part of the Kabbalistic tree) by doing any of the following: loving G-d; providing for children; circumcision; visiting and healing the sick; giving charity to the poor; attending to the dead; delivering a bride to her wedding and making peace between people.

A strong thread going through R. Cordevero’s list is that each and every person starting with childhood has a right to be provided with basic necessities such as food, healthcare, love, a peaceful life through to their death. This is what Eliezer was looking for, a woman who can embody these attributes as one of the foremothers of civilisation so that she can imbue future generations with her Chesed.

Interestingly, Article 25 of the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948 states that “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services.” I see a large overlap in Article 25 with R. Cardevero’s formulation, in this way you can say that Rebecca (who according to tradition was a prophetess) was seen as embodying a fundamental principle of modern human rights.
THE INSPIRATION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS AND MORALITY

A commentary of Parashat Toledot
By Rabbi Ari Faust

Society today is guided by morals that protect the rights of the individual. What is the source of these values? Why are we motivated to shape a society that cares for the individual? What is our interest in treating others with dignity and respect?

Simply understood, we treat others the way we want to be treated ourselves. We respect others because we hope to be respected as well. There is nothing inherently altruistic about mankind, we are just egomaniacs trying to protect ourselves. Understood as such, society is a technical-functional establishment built to serve ‘me’. It is a great insurance policy set-up in order to protect ourselves and ensure our own personal comfort. Thus, morality is merely the advent of men and women who seek to be treated morally themselves.

This Nietzschean approach is celebrated by Avimelech king of Pelishtim in Parashat Toledot. We read that Yitzchak and his wife Rivka rest in Gerar, in the Pelishti Kingdom, where they announce that Rivka is Yitzchak’s sister (Bereishit 26:7). It is only after their stay in Gerar prolongs, Avimelech notices the couple behaving in intimate ways indicating they are more than just brother and sister (verse 8). The King chastises Yitzchak; but instead of claiming the moral upper-hand, the only nuance to his disapproval is that “one of the people might easily have laid with your wife, and you would have brought guiltiness upon us” (v. 10).

The question of wrong and right does not bother the Pelishti King. Avimelech is not concerned with the moral implication of sleeping with another man’s wife, he is only concerned about the potential consequences of this act.

This stance is consistent with the Pelishti King’s worldview: several years earlier (Bereishit 20), Abraham reported to the Pelishti King that his wife, Sarah, was but his sister. After the truth was revealed, the King was duly upset at Abraham for his duplicity. Abraham’s defence was simple and poignant, “Because I thought: Surely the awareness of G-d is not in this place” (v. 11).

In a place where morals are not absolute, they can be easily compromised and if morals are the advent of man, they can equally be overturned by man. Thus, in the twentieth century, Nazism was born out of the Pelishti-Nietzschean ‘weltanschauung’. In the absence of absolute values, the most hideous inhumanities can be justified through human logic because where the source of eternal values is killed, innocent people are also killed.

Judaism boasts a different view regarding the source of morals and human rights. The Torah is based on a principle that is as radical today as it was millennia ago: “In the image of G-d was [man] created” (Bereishit 1:27). Every single human being is essentially entitled to rights. By virtue of our very being – we are “in the image of G-d” – do we behave upright, and treat others as such. According to Judaism, we care for others, not because we want to be treated that way ourselves, but because they essentially deserve it. To behave immorally – to violate human rights or ethics – is inherently unbecoming of our most essential selves.

Western society has yet to fully appreciate the extent of the human dignity and personal rights espoused by the Torah. We yearn for the society that will celebrate the divine dignity of the individual, and that the moral rights boast the Godliness of mankind.

Morality is merely the advent of men and women who seek to be treated morally themselves... In a place where morals are not absolute, they can be easily compromised. Where morals are the advent of man, they can equally be overturned by man

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CHEAT, TRICK, DECEIVE
A commentary on Parashat Vayetze
By Dr. Sam Rodin

Parashat Va’Yetze begins as Jacob leaves his homeland for the first time when his mother, Rebecca insists that he must flee to his Uncle Laban in Mesopotamia as his brother Essav has vowed to kill him. Essav is enraged on discovering that Jacob has deceived Isaac to give him the blessing, which was rightfully Essav’s.

So begins Jacob’s twenty-year odyssey where he faces many trials and tribulations. It is a journey into exile, both physical and spiritual, during which Jacob himself and the other characters in this family saga deceive and are deceived in turn. It is also the story of Jacob’s encounter with G-d and his struggle to overcome his inauthentic self as the trickster and eventually to find his authentic self as Israel (Genesis 32:29). But Jacob has to endure many trials and betrayals in his twenty-year relationship with his double-dealing Uncle Laban. Jacob, the deceiver has truly met his match in his cunning uncle.

Because of this love for Rachel, and in accordance with tradition, Jacob agreed to work for his uncle as an indentured laborer for seven years only to be tricked and to discover that he has married Rachel’s old sister, Leah. The trickster who cheated his older brother out of the blessing that was his right, has now been cheated on his wedding night! He has to taste the bitter punishment of having to serve his duplicitous uncle for another seven years before he can marry his true love, Rachel and a further six years to acquire his own flocks and become a man of property.

After twenty years of servitude and humiliation, Jacob secretly takes his opportunity to flee his oppressive uncle with his clan and the wealth he had accumulated. Without telling Jacob, Rachel steals her father’s household idols – the G-ds who ensured the well-being of the family.

Furious Laban and his men pursue Jacob and his kin and overtake them. At Laban’s ironic accusation that Jacob is a thief, Jacob challenges Laban to search his encampment for his precious idols, only those were cleverly hidden by Rachel the whole time.

Through the lies, deceptions, thefts and inauthenticity of all of the characters in this soap opera and their undoing we are dramatically given a lesson in the fatal trap of neglecting fundamental human rights.

*an 1855 painting by Dante Gabriel Rossetti called the Vision of Rachel and Leah inspired by this passage

Dr. Sam Rodin is an autogenic therapist, life coach, writer and university lecturer and a René Cassin supporter
What would you not do for your loved ones? Chapter 34 describes one of the most shocking stories in the book of Genesis. Jacob’s daughter Dinah is abducted and violated by a local Chivite prince who then desperately wants to wed her. His father offers a lucrative deal to Jacob and his sons: their clans can intermarry, live together, and trade profitably. Jacob’s sons are indignant but they answer calmly, and with some deception. They agree to the deal on condition that all the Chivite men are circumcised. The Chivite Prince and his father take the offer back to their clan who all agree and are circumcised. While they are recovering, two of Jacob’s sons, Shimon and Levi, storm the Chivite city, kill all the weakened men, take back their sister, and plunder the entire place. Jacob is appalled and worried about retaliations. The story ends with Shimon and Levi’s defiant cry, “Should our sister be treated like a harlot?” (Genesis 34:31). At the end of the book, when Jacob is blessing his sons, he curses Shimon and Levi for their murderous violence (Genesis 49:5-7).

At first glance their actions seem inexcusable, but let us reflect on them in light of two clauses of Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948): “Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses. The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.” Dinah’s ‘full consent’ was clearly doubtful, and it could be argued that Shimon and Levi were simply exercising the right of ‘protection’, to which their family was entitled. After all, there was no nation state to which they could appeal, and they were part of their society’s leadership.

Nevertheless, the circumcision ruse and subsequent killing spree is wildly excessive and cannot be condoned. Interestingly though, I found a rabbinic Midrash (Sechel Tov) that suggests that the circumcision deal offered by Jacob’s sons was, in fact, genuine and that they really were open to becoming “a unified people” (Genesis 34:16). However, the Chivite Prince and his father revealed their lack of real commitment to this unification when they presented the offer to their own clan. They emphasised the potential trade opportunities, played down the circumcision condition, and then said, “Their livestock, their possessions, and all their animals – will they not be ours?” (Genesis 34:23). In their eyes this was not unification, it was a takeover. Shimon and Levi realised this and took matters into their own hands, but without the support of Jacob or his other sons.

Thus, as often happens in fraught political negotiations, there were numerous underlying interests and deceptions being played out in this not-so-straightforward biblical story. Marriage requires consent and the family unit must be protected, but at what cost? Our Torah does not idealise or idolise our ancestors. What it does do is teach us the complexities of human interactions through multi-layered narratives. Opposing views, values and interests lie beneath its surface, and studying them again and again sharpens our ability to think more deeply and honestly about our own dealings and relationships.

Learning Torah is an act of moral refinement. Rights are not simply declared. They must be analysed, weighed and compared.
Learning Torah is an nement. Rights are not simply ey must be analysed, weighed and

THE ESSENCE OF THE JEWISH SOUL
A commentary on Parashat Vayeshev
By Rabbi Oliver Joseph

If we do not allow our Jewish breath to utter words challenging those that seek to undermine the dignity of marginalised people, then what is holy in my Jewish soul?

I am a teenage leader on a summer camp with my youth movement Noam and we are playing some kind of large outdoor game. It is a dewy late evening and a beautiful dusk light still hangs on the horizon, we are standing on some kind of fenced off part of a field. I am on one side of a low fence and a few children are on the other – in hindsight, perhaps they should not have been there. On the other side of the fence is a drop of some ten feet. There is a lot of movement and excitement and as the game reaches its closing minutes, one of the participants starts to fall. Instinctively I reach out my hand and grab onto her. This memory was more than fifteen years ago and is only partially clear in my mind.

For the duration of camp this participant would continually remind me that I had saved her life. It may have been that she would have had a bad fall had she actually fallen but the exaggeration was still a little much. For some reason this story sticks in my head.

Parashat Vayeshev opens with the words “Now Jacob was settled in the land where his father had lived, the land of Canaan” (Genesis 37:1). Midrash Rabba wants to understand why the words, “mi’gorei aviv”, “the land where] his father had lived’, are included in the opening part of the Parasha in an unusual sequence. The Midrash jumps to an understanding of the word “mi’gorei” which simply translated means to live or dwell, changing it with minimal, subtle flicks of ink to the word “me’giorei” meaning to convert or to bring into Jewish life. The Midrash transports us from Jacob’s story to the story of Abraham and Sarah, traditionally understood to be the first Jews in the world – we are now thrown into a discussion of the essence of the Jewish soul.

The poetic contortion is accompanied by a short story presented in the name of Rabbi Yossi Ben Zimra: if you gathered all the nations of the world and attempted to breathe life into one single fly, you would not succeed and yet it says in the Bible, in Torah: “And the souls they had created in Haran” (Genesis 12:5). Abraham and Sarah bought people under the shelter of G-d’s wings to Judaism and in the eyes of the Midrash literally drew breath into their souls. Rabbi Yossi Ben Zimra compares the inability of all the nations collectively to breathe life into even the simplest of G-d’s creatures (the fly) in opposition to Abraham and Sarah who the Torah tells us brought life to the souls of new Jews.

The vision of the Midrash (a part of which may not jive with modern sensibilities) is that to live as a Jew is to grow a nefesh, a soul that is potent, potentially equal to the power to give life. If the Jewish soul and Jewish essence have even one-half of the power that is attributed to it then the next question is what is to be done with this power and energy?

The power to give life and the power to save is fundamental, and the Midrash draws our focus to the life-giving power of our religious life.

If such power is generated by the Judaism that we live, then a response to that power is to ask where such energy should be channelled? I offer one interpretation of this Midrash, that it is making a claim which is aspirational; Rabbi Yossi Ben Zimra and the holders of our Midrashic tradition are promoting a model of Judaism which is visionary and potent. What better way can we realise the greatest expanse of our communal vigour than to take a position on questions of human rights and the dignity of humanity on earth. If we do not allow our Jewish breath to utter words challenging those that seek to undermine the dignity of marginalised people, then what is holy in my Jewish soul?

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HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCATES WALK IN JOSEPH’S FOOTSTEPS
A commentary on Parashat Miketz
By Gabriel Webber

To the Egyptians, Joseph was three things: a technocrat; a beneficial foreigner; and an advocate for the role of dreaming in society.

He was a technocrat, because he was given his position of responsibility on merit. He was not part of a royal family. He did not go out campaigning and lobbying. Joseph became powerful and popular through good old-fashioned know-how: he had the foresight to predict the famine and the insight to know how to prepare for it. He was an expert who excelled at what he did, and he was appointed because his input contributed to good governance.

Moses was a beneficial foreigner who worked for the betterment of life in Egypt ‘even though’ he was not an Egyptian. Joseph had been forced from his home and ended up in Egypt against his will; but nevertheless, he had something to give, regardless of borders, and the Pharaoh was enlightened enough to work with him to the advantage of everyone.

But most importantly, Joseph was an advocate for the role of dreaming and aspirational thinking in society. He was the person who got the essentials out of Pharaoh’s dream and came up with a practical action plan for doing what needed to be done.

Without Joseph, what would the Pharaoh have made of his dream? Even if he had managed to work through it to the stage of realising the thin cows and fat cows were a metaphor for famine, would he have known when and how to start stockpiling food? Probably not. Famine was very remote from his experience, anyway, in those years of plenty. Had Joseph not mediated between dream and reality, the story would have ended very differently.

Human rights advocates today walk in his footsteps. They mediate between the aspirations of those who wrote human rights conventions – who dreamed dreams of a perfect world without violence, hate and discrimination – and the not-so-perfect reality.

When Monsieur René Cassin sat down in 1946 to begin drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it must have seemed fanciful indeed: humanity was still reeling from the Holocaust, and here was this international committee announcing that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”.

But, over the years, a cadre of courageous leaders has been slowly but steadily working to make that dream a reality. Like Joseph, they were not born into positions of leadership. Like Joseph, they were not elected. Like Joseph, they found a calling, something within themselves, which made them believers in the power of dreams, and successful creators of an at-least-slightly better tomorrow.

Whether lawyers, community organisers, campaigners or poets, these advocates are modern-day Josephs – and, like Joseph, they are often targeted, abused, imprisoned.

No one generation of advocates will complete the work of turning Monsieur René Cassin’s aspiration into a reality. Let us never forget what led to the dream that led to modern human rights.

**Whether lawyers, community organisers, campaigners or poets, these advocates are modern-day Josephs – and, like Joseph, they are often targeted, abused, imprisoned**

* picture of a UN radio commentator, Eleanor Roosevelt and René Cassin (Left-Right)

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THE TRUE VALUE OF FREEDOM AND RECONCILIATION

A commentary on Parashat Vayigash
By Rabbi Alexandra Wright

Parashat Vayigash brings the story of the estrangement of Joseph and his brothers to a moving climax. Second only to Pharaoh in Egypt, Joseph is responsible for managing the distribution of grain during the seven years of famine in the land. It is the famine that brings his brothers to Pharaoh’s court, to purchase food. Joseph, unrecognised by his brothers, although he knows them, insists that their youngest brother, Benjamin, accompany them on their next visit. Simeon is taken hostage until their return.

The brothers make their second visit with Benjamin and appear before Joseph. As they make their way home, Joseph’s goblet is found in Benjamin’s sack and Joseph announces his plan to keep Benjamin as a hostage and release the rest of the brothers to their father.

Judah approaches the man to plead with him: “By your leave, my lord,” says Judah, “please give your servant a hearing, and do not let your anger flare up at your servant – for you are like Pharaoh.”

This verse, and the emotional reconciliation of the brothers, always reminds me of the moment that Nelson Mandela was released from his twenty-seven year-long imprisonment on 11 February 1990; how during that long period of privation, he had preserved the mask of restraint, keeping his emotions under strict control: “I have been fairly successful in putting on a mask behind which I have pined for the family alone”.

Mandela survived against all odds into ripe old age; he implacably fought against apartheid in South Africa, hungered for freedom - not simply his own freedom, but for oppressed and oppressor to be liberated from prejudice and narrow-mindedness - and lived to see his dream of the dismantling of institutional apartheid fulfilled.

Many have written about the accrual of his moral capital, his dogged determination to see through the dream of reconciliation – this in spite of his political shortcomings. Others describe him as ‘a patriarchal personality conscious of his messianic stature,’ unable to share moral authority easily.

On the eve of the judgement that would determine his release from prison, and not knowing whether he would be set free or hanged, he wrote these words:

“During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.”

Mandela was undoubtedly a moral phenomenon, a symbol of the oppressed and all those deprived of freedom. But he was also a figurehead of freedom and equality, of the aspiration for reconciliation in a broken and deeply damaged society. He must have felt deeply angry at the injustices embedded in South African society, and no doubt there were times when he allowed his anger to “flare up”. But his stature – “for you are like Pharaoh” – as one who had suffered for so long, yet who remained unbending in his quest for that which was right and good – remains, long after his death, as a symbol of profound hope in broken societies.

As Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers, there is stupefaction and bewilderment, but then a tearful reconciliation. The injustices of the past are set aside and there is reassurance and generous hospitality as he offers to house his father, brothers and their families in the land of Goshen.

In this story, we glimpse the terrible suffering that famine can bring on whole populations, the possibilities when governments manage disasters effectively (even when it involves people having to buy back their own produce!), the fearfulness and terrible uncertainty of detention and the true value of freedom.

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WHAT’S JEWISH ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS?
A commentary on Parashat Vayechi
By Anthony Silko

Parashat Vayechi, in its most basic reading, tells the story of Jacob’s final years in Egypt, and how his son Joseph fulfills Jacob’s wish to be buried in the Holy Land. But there is so much more to discover, and much in this Parasha, which reflects the Jewish role – and the legacy of Jewish values - in the development of human rights.

There is a strong Jewish connection to human rights and social activism, which runs deep. Jewish thinkers, biblical ethics and the experiences of the Jewish people have been crucial to the development of human rights. Anne Frank beautifully articulated the Jewish commitment to tikkun olam – healing the world – when she wrote: “How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.”

But the Jewish connection to human rights goes back further than that, it goes right back to the ethics of the Torah. Indeed, it has often been said that the core tenets of Jewish belief, as set out in the Torah - which recognise the sanctity of the individual and the equality of everyone in the eyes of G-d - serve as the foundation for the Jewish commitment to human rights, a legacy we can all be proud of. Which leads me to where I found the most meaning in Parashat Vayechi: the importance of articulating a transformative vision, and leaving an ethical legacy to the next generation.

As Jacob prepares to die, he makes the time to deliver some vital final words to each of his sons and their offspring. Some of his sons are blessed – like Joseph, who is blessed with beauty and fertility. In blessing his son in this way, Jacob is imparting his dreams for the next generation to flourish.

However, some other sons are rebuked. Simeon and Levi are disavowed for their unmitigated violence in the slaughter of the citizens of Shechem. To be clear, this is not a rebuke which leaves any chance of redemption for the brothers. Jacob makes the ultimate decision to disassociate himself from his own sons – “let not my person be included in their council”. In doing so, Jacob draws a clear line between the values he wants to pass on, and the murderous violence of Simeon and Levi.

We can learn a lesson here about leadership. A true leader is a visionary, and one who successfully articulates that vision to pass it on. Jacob was a transformational leader, unwavering in his commitment to Jewish values, and determined to ensure they lived on as a legacy to future generations.

Perhaps we cannot all be famous leaders, but we can all be visionary, and if there is one thing we can all take from Parashat Vayechi it is this: Judaism compels us to be steadfast in our values. We must be just as determined as Jacob that these values - in particular the Jewish commitment to human rights - endure beyond our time.

In the interfaith and social action work I am leading at the Board of Deputies, I am determined to do some justice to this rich legacy of Jewish activism. By uniting with other communities to challenge hatred and catalyse positive change, the British Jewish community is signalling that it is a committed partner in the task of tikkun olam.

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It is an interesting fact about revolutions that they often start when things start to improve. In fact, when people are at their lowest, when they are at rock bottom either economically or physically it is very hard to revolt. Utter oppression leads to a loss of humanity. The ability to resist relies on a sense of self. If one’s sense of self is so eroded, if people are so degraded they feel worthless then they will not fight back.

The first act of rebellion is crucial. It takes someone to step outside the shared circumstances and say: no – we are worth more, we deserve more, this is wrong. The first act of revolutions is a voice. A voice that maybe starts as a cry of pain but is an expression of humanity. As a baby cries when it enters the world so a voice has the power to remind people of their shared humanity and their need to resist tyranny.

In Parashat Shemot, it is not Moses who starts the rebellion – although he, like many male leaders, gets all the credit. It is, in fact, two women. Two women, Shifra and Puah, whose names are largely forgotten. These two women were midwives – people who are there at the moment of birth, people who hear the cries of labouring women, and the cries of new-born babies.

Just as the French Revolution started with women rioting, the Occupy movement started with women protesting, so did the exodus from Egypt, this huge iconic rebellion against slavery, started with women.

Pharaoh asks Shifra and Puah, the two midwives, to kill all new-born baby boys, in effect to create genocide and destroy the Israelites. Without males the Israelites will not be able to reproduce and will all die out. We can assume that the girl babies born to slave women would be taken by Egyptian men. But these two women were rebellious. They defied Pharaoh. They did not do what he asked but, after delivering the babies, let the male babies live too. As if that was not daring enough, their bravery continues. Pharaoh summons the midwives and demands why they have not done as he commanded. He asks why they have let the boys live. Shifra and Puah may have been terrified but they speak out. And they speak out with wit and cheek and with chutzpah. They said, “Oh dear, these Hebrew women are so fertile they keep giving birth in the fields and we cannot get to them”. They turn Pharaoh’s fears against him. They say, in effect, you are right to be scared about the Israelite’s fertility, they are so fertile we cannot do what you want and kill the baby boys at birth.

They spoke up against Pharaoh’s great power. Two slave women. The lowest of the low, defied the greatest power in the land. They protected defenceless babies and they spoke out. They gave a voice to the voiceless. They listened to the cries of their people and they gave their people back their humanity. They started the revolution. Their actions meant that Moses was not killed as a baby and he went on to lead the Jewish people out of slavery and to freedom. Jews are constantly reminded that they should remember they were once slaves and they should deal justly with strangers and treat foreigners well. And all of this started with two women. Women’s voices are often ignored, dismissed or forgotten. Shifra and Puah might not be as famous as Moses but their actions, and voices, are every bit as important.
Parashat Va’ëira recounts the steps leading up to the ten plagues, and the first seven plagues. It is a Parasha full of drama and characters (boo the evil Pharaoh! Cheer as Aaron helps Moses overcome his stutter!). Apart from a brief recap of Moses’ and Aaron’s ancestry, it is a linear story moving through the plagues.

Parashat Va’ëira, usually read towards the end of January / early February, seems to have clear resonances with Holocaust Memorial Day (27 January). Since the time of Joseph, Hebrews had lived successfully in the Goshen neighbourhood. They maintained a distinct identity yet were part of the Egyptian cosmopolitan ‘melting pot’. But by the time of Parashat Va’ëirah, they had had rights taken away and had been living as slaves.

Reading it close to Holocaust Memorial Day, we recall the Nazi policies which, from 1933 onwards, systematically withdrew rights from Jewish Germans, moved them into defined areas, and forced them to be slave labourers in ghettos and concentration camps – adults and children, just as in Egypt in the period of Parashat Va’ëira. Ordinary Germans too often turned a blind eye, were inactive due to fear or apathy, or even actively benefitted.

Yet these resonances are illusory. In the Parasha, G-d is the main character; we know the plagues occur at His design. Each time Pharaoh ‘hardens his heart’ and rejects Moses’ petition, G-d sends another plague, through Moses and Aaron seemingly performing magic: a wand-like staff raised across the Nile causes frogs to swarm out; throwing soot into the air leads to painful boils.

In this one Parasha, almost every aspect of Egyptian life is affected. The land itself suffers: the Nile turns to blood; vegetation is destroyed by fierce hail. Homes invaded by frogs in every corner and cooking bowl. Bodies subject to lice and painful boils. Wild animals roam the land. Cattle succumb to disease.

But though the Parasha is full of activity, it is curiously silent about how Egyptians, and how Israelites, felt. Were Egyptians resentful (and terrified?) of their capricious, arrogant leader, bringing plagues upon his people? Or furious with the Israelites and their G-d, and standing four-square behind Pharaoh? Did the Israelites feel that Moses was only jeopardising their precarious lives of slavery still further? Or were they full of hope that freedom was around the corner?

The only glimmer of feeling is of Pharaoh’s. We hear, over and over, that G-d ‘hardened Pharaoh’s heart’ and Pharaoh ‘hardened his heart’. This could mean two different things – one with Pharaoh subject to G-d’s actions and with no free will, and one with Pharaoh taking action himself.

Rabbi Hertz suggests that each time Pharaoh obstinately refuses to agree to Moses, he entrenches himself further, making it less likely he will be able to listen to G-d and change his position. Pharaoh’s own actions of refusal result in the curtailment of his own free will – he boxes himself in and is less able to choose to accede to Moses’ request.

Perhaps this is where the resonance is greatest. How many ordinary people in 1930s Europe ‘hardened their hearts’? Each incremental step of oppression ignored or tolerated, yet building to the unprecedented attempt to destroy the Jewish community in its entirety. Each time a civil or human right is withdrawn or denied to a group of people, those unaffected have choices. Yet choosing not to challenge – often for ‘good’ reasons - makes it so much easier not to challenge the next time. Until there comes a time when we don’t even notice or perhaps don’t care.

Underlying the drama of Parashat Va’ëira is the insistent repetition: Pharaoh hardened his heart. Perhaps this is the real warning of the plagues.
BREAKING THE YOKE OF SLAVERY
A commentary on Parashat Bo
By Rabbi Elli Tikvah Sarah

What does it feel like to be a slave? We do not need to research the testimonies of slaves, who toiled in the Americas in the 18th and 19th century to find answers to this question. According to the Global Slavery Index, 45.8m adults and children are enslaved across the world today.¹

While modern slavery encompasses human trafficking, sexual exploitation and forced labour, the fundamental definition of slavery remains unchanged across millennia: the absolute denial of personal liberty – usually, accompanied by cruel treatment. We read in the Book of Exodus: “The Egyptians made the Israelites serve with rigour. They made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and in brick, and in all manner of service in the field” (Sh’mot, Ex. 1:13-14)

The Exodus tale gives us a sense of what it feels like to be a slave. When the Pharaoh who had imposed slavery on the Israelites died: “The Israelites groaned from their bondage, and they cried out…” (Sh’mot, Ex. 2:23). Why? The Spanish medieval commentator, Nachmanides (1194-c.1270), explains that the Israelites were fearful that the new king would be even crueler than the previous one. Much later in the story, after Moses had reluctantly assumed the task of challenging Pharaoh, and went to the Israelites to tell them that G-d was planning to liberate them: “They did not listen to Moses because of shortness of spirit – mikotzer ru’ach – and hard bondage” (Va-eira, Exodus 6:9). The experience of slavery may crush the spirit as well as subjugate the body. Indeed, the Torah narrative makes it clear that the Israelites needed convincing that redemption was at hand.

After the first four plagues – blood, frogs, lice and flies – had wreaked havoc everywhere, when it came to the plague of cattle disease, ‘All the cattle of Egypt died; but not one died of the cattle of the Israelites” (Ex. 9:6). And so it was, for the remaining plagues of boils, hail, locusts, darkness and death of the firstborn: the Israelites were protected. The tale of those final three is related in this week’s Parashat Bo. However, the Israelites were not automatically saved from the final plague. In order to ensure that the Eternal would pass over their houses, each household had to slaughter a lamb, and smear the blood on the door-posts and the lintel: “And the blood shall be for you as a sign upon the houses where you are; so when I see the blood, I will pass over you (u’phasachti), and there should be no plague upon you to destroy you, when I smite the land of Egypt” (Ex. 12:13). In order to be saved, the Israelites had to mark out their houses for deliverance.

The Torah teaches us important lessons about the journey from slavery to freedom. Even those who are enslaved are not passive victims. They can, and perhaps they must, participate in their own liberation. The Torah relates that, finally, the Israelites left in haste – such haste that there was no time for their dough to rise; hence matzah, unleavened bread, is the bread of freedom (Ex. 12:39). We also learn that liberation was not confined to the Israelites: “And a mixed multitude – erev rav – went up also with them” (Ex. 12:38). When the opportunity arose, all the slaves made a dash for freedom.

And so, the Exodus narrative of slavery and liberation has universal meaning. Indeed, the laws of the ordinance of Pesach for future generations also apply to the geir – the sojourner: “One law shall be to the home-born and to the sojourner that sojourns among you” (Ex. 12: 49). The tale of the Exodus is a clarion call of liberation for all those who are enslaved.

¹ http://www.globalslaveryindex.org/

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"Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the Lord drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided, and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left" (Exodus 14: 21-22)

Parashat Beshalach imparts the extraordinary story of the children of Israel crossing the Sea of Reeds to escape the might of the Egyptian army, led by their Pharaoh, who was attempting to coerce them back into slavery. This historical example of a people successfully defying the ruling elite to determine their own future as free people is recalled annually around the Seder (Passover) table, as we remember that we Jews were “once slaves in a foreign land”.

The Jewish people have never forgotten this narrative, as we are required to picture ourselves, as being these very slaves, escaping across the sea, onto dry land and liberation.

At the sea Moses and the Jewish people understood their situation as never before - their years of suffering from their taskmasters, Pharaoh's deception in perusing them following this exodus, their apparent hopelessness surrounded by the wilderness, the sea and the hurtling dust of the oncoming chariots. Therefore, immediately they emerged on dry land and with the relief of seeing their tormenters destroyed they composed ‘The Song of the Sea’ (Shirat HaYam) .... “I shall sing to Hashem for he is highly exulted having hurled horse and rider into the sea.”

The prophetess Miriam, Moses’ sister, then took up the tambourine and danced together with all the women to express the ultimate spiritual expression of freedom and thanksgiving to Hashem, for their survival from tyranny. This poem, which is recited daily in the morning service, is therefore a constant reminder, that there is a G-d of the world who loves justice and truth and orchestrates His world accordingly.

It is this notion of what it means to have this belief and the values of protecting the vulnerable, the sick, the stranger in our midst and pursuant of social policies, which respects the rights of others. The concept of human rights obliges us to discuss such pressing questions as genocide, modern day slavery, human trafficking, race and religious hatred, the global environmental crisis, and the future of the Israeli – Palestinian conflict.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook wrote: “The love for people must be alive in the heart and soul, a love for all people and a love for all nations expressing itself in a desire for their spiritual and material advancement ... and to promote their happiness”.

The freedom we obtained, as described in Parashat Beshalach gave us the veracity to place social justice and activism as a central force within Jewish theology, ethics and education and which ultimately ensured the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations.

Beshalach

* Moses parting of the Red Sea

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Parashat Yitro is a fascinating window onto the politics of Torah. It tells of Moshe’s first attempt to establish the Israelite polity. It looks like he wants to erase all trace of Egyptian hierarchy through a theocratic-anarchy in which each person is judged directly by G-d, through Moshe as a prophetic window, with no human authorities in between. Yitro thinks that’s unrealistic: “Stand you between the people and G-d”, he says to Moshe (following Rashi’s interpretation of Shmot 18:19), “otherwise the whole thing will fall apart!” (ibid. 18:18). Yitro instructs Moshe to find judges “who fear G-d, people of truth, who hate corruption” and appoint them over the people (ibid. 18:21).

Establishing justice is no small part of what G-d wants from Israel. This is clear from the Torah’s many laws. And the only hint G-d gives as to why G-d chose Avraham was “that he will command his children...to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice” (Bereshit 18:19). Many interpreters believe that Israel’s essence as a “holy nation” involves this “righteousness and justice” (see for example Rashar Hirsch on Shmot 19:6). But if establishing justice is core to Israel’s religious mission, why did we learn it from a non-Jew? Is it not strange to learn a core meaning of Torah from ‘outside’?

I believe that this story conveys a message critical to understanding the mission of the People Israel in our generation. Let me explain. The Rabbis teach (Bavli Sanhedrin 56b) that G-d commanded all humanity to protect every person through just law. They call this commandment “Mitsvat Dinim”. Some sages teach (see Sforno’s introduction to the Bible for an eloquent example) that G-d’s purpose in choosing Avraham and establishing Yitro lays out the paradigm for this combination of Jewish particularism and humanism. Non-Jewish Yitro taught Moshe how to establish legal and political justice because while Israel’s religious path is unique, the just global order that it is her mission to help establish is universally human.

The paradigm of Yitro helps us understand that by struggling for Human Rights with all our hearts, souls and resources, we demonstrate faithfulness to our mission as the children of Avraham, “to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice”.

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HUMAN RIGHTS FOR ALL!
A commentary on Parashat Mishpatim
By Michael Goldin

Containing 53 mitzvot, Parashat Mishpatim is one of the most legal Parashot in the Torah. These commandments span the entire gamut of Jewish life from the requirement to observe the festivals through to the laws of tort and debt.

However, there is one commandment which the Parasha makes a point of repeating twice - the requirement not to oppress the stranger: “And you shall not mistreat a stranger, nor shall you oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall not oppress any widow or orphan” (Exodus 22:20-21) and “And you shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, since you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 23:9).

This law is not only emphasised in Parashat Mishpatim, in fact, a variation of this command is repeated a total of 36 times in the Torah.

To my mind, the fact that the requirement not to oppress is such a constant theme in the Torah, coupled with the fact that it is mentioned in a wide range of contexts, allows us to understand it as a ‘principle’ rather than a ‘rule’.

The distinction between these two concepts was explained by the legal philosopher Ronald Dworkin. He understood that rules tell us how to behave but principles tell us how to apply the rules, particularly in circumstances where it is unclear. For example, the Torah simply commands “thou shalt not kill”. It is unclear whether this is an absolute prohibition or whether there might be exceptions to the rule as one might expect.

The fact that we also have the principle of anti-oppression helps us to understand that killing may be permissible in certain circumstances where we are fighting oppression; for example, in self-defence or during a just war. Thus, the prohibition against oppression is a meta-rule which enables us to better understand how to put our body of laws into practice.

A close textual analysis of the verses quoted above leads the Mekhilta, a commentary on the Torah, to explain how this principle ought to apply in an everyday context. The Mekhilta says that when you encounter another person you should not refuse to engage with them simply because they are of another faith or do not keep the Torah’s laws as you do. The Talmud (Bava Matzia; 58b) applies this principle as well and says that “should a proselyte come to study Torah, do not say to him: the mouth that has consumed forbidden meats… has the audacity to study the Torah given from the mouth of G-d.”

The point being made here is clear. The duty we owe to respect others is not conditional on how ‘good’ or how ‘deserving’ they are. They are to be afforded dignity because of their inherent worth as human beings.

This is very pertinent to our modern discourse of human rights. There are those who would have us believe that human rights are only owed to those who ‘deserve’ them, that we should only respect the fundamental human dignity of those of whom we approve and that once someone has committed a crime they are no longer worthy of our society’s respect. The Torah, and Parashat Mishpatim in particular, tells us otherwise. It tells us that a core principle of our creed is to stand firm against oppression and that we must do so not only when we approve of the behaviour of the person being oppressed but simply because it is the right thing to do.

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A WORLD FIT FOR G-D’S AND HUMANITY’S PRESENCE

A commentary on Parashat Terumah
By Rabbi Mark Goldsmith

In the Torah it took thirty-four verses for G-d to create the entire universe. Just Chapter One of Genesis and three verses of Chapter Two. How long did it take the Israelites to build the rather simpler Mischan – the Desert Temple? More than 600 verses from Parashat Terumah, and the next four Parashot.

Why is this? It is because whilst it is not so difficult for G-d to build a home fit for humanity, it is extremely difficult for humanity to make a home fit for G-d.

Parashat Terumah begins with what is needed for any project of transformation that is worthwhile, willing hearts and a willing community. The word “terumah” means a willingly given contribution.

At the end of the five Parashot that begin with Parashat Terumah, in the final verses of the Book of Exodus, the Presence of G-d comes to dwell in the Mishcan that the Israelites have created over those 600 verses.

In our day, we must continue to build a world that is fit for the Presence of G-d. This was not a one-off action. The Mishcan was a metaphor for the world as a whole, as Martin Buber pointed out, the verbs which are used for the building of the Mishcan by humanity are the same as those used to describe G-d’s action in creating the world.

A world fit for the Presence of G-d is one where all human beings have the potential to thrive. This is not possible unless all live with the rights enshrined in the values presented in such documents as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. So many of these rights are only possible if those who live around you are willing to grant them to you.

Discrimination will still happen if people practice it. Fair trials will only be possible if they are demanded by people with the will for fairness to be offered to all. Freedom of movement can only happen if those into whose territories one might cross will grant access. We depend on each other’s willing hearts, just as G-d depended on ours for the Mishcan to be built.

Another human rights lesson that can be interpreted from Parashat Terumah is that of sustainability. Rights which last temporarily and do not have the capacity to be renewed in changed circumstances do not build a world fit for G-d’s presence. When the design for the Tabernacle is specified by G-d in the portion of Parashat Terumah, Acacia wood is given as the only wood for construction. Midrash Shemot Rabbah 35:2 tells us that “G-d set an example for all time, that when a man is about to build his house from a fruit-producing tree, he should be reminded: If, when the supreme King of kings commanded the Mishcan to be erected, His instructions were to use only such trees as are not fruit-bearing, though all things belong to Him, how much more should this be so in your case?” The Acacia tree, a common desert tree which can grow in the most inhospitable circumstances was the right tree for a sustainable project.

Even if it had been available, the most precious wood would not have been right. For human rights to apply to all it needs to be possible for violations to be challengeable in simple, straightforward and easily accessible ways, with lawyers and courts available to all without requiring great wealth or power, like the common desert growing Acacia tree is easy to obtain to harvest.

A world fit for human life is a world fit for G-d’s presence. This is a Terumah, a gift, that we can give to ourselves as well as to G-d.

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A LESSON IN COMMUNITY
A commentary on Parashat Tetzaveh
By Emma Dorman

Parashat Tetzaveh follows on from the previous Parasha where the Jewish people were instructed on the building of the Tabernacle. In Parashat Tetzaveh we move focus from the physical building to those who worked within it. Here we learn about the special ceremony for inaugurating the priests, Aaron and his sons, and the garments worn by the High Priest.

Among these garments are the ephod—an apron worn backwards which had gem-studded straps, the me’il—a blue robe hemmed with gold bells and pomegranates and the tzitz which was a golden headband engraved with the words “Holy to G-d”. These clothes, specific to the High Priest, were in addition to the regular outfit of the priests of tunic, turban, sash and trousers.

The High Priest also wore the choshen mishpat—the breastplate of judgement. The breastplate comprised four rows each containing three precious stones. This totals twelve gemstones, upon each gemstone was engraved the name of one of the twelve tribes of Israel. We are told that each gemstone had its own unique colour which corresponded to the colours of the tribes’ flag as well as the attributes of each tribe. For example, the tribe of Simeon was symbolized by a topaz.

The representation of each tribe in their own individual way on the garments of the high priest, who can be viewed as a conduit to G-d, is important. There is a lesson here on community but also the importance of diversity. All the tribes were represented on the breastplate, none were left out, unifying the entirety of the Jewish people and representing them as a community in the Tabernacle where G-d resided.

This explains the importance of community but how does it explain diversity which some would deem the opposite of unity? The names of the tribes could have all been engraved on one large stone or on multiple of the same stone, but they were not. Each tribe was asked to provide a stone which represented them as a tribe. In this way the individual traits of each tribe, what they contributed to the Jewish people as a whole, was represented. Here is our lesson in diversity. It is only when we accept what makes us different and come together in spite of our differences that we become a community.

This is not just a lesson for then but also for now. At Jami we are privileged to work with those with lived experience of mental health problems who use our support services alongside the educational and awareness work we do in the community. People turn to Jami as somewhere to receive support particularly when they feel that their situation is misunderstood. It can be difficult to understand those who have a different experience to us or have travelled on a different path of personal development but it is important to remember that we are all part of one community. Everyone has something unique to contribute. Just as the gemstones on the breastplate of the High Priest united us as a people it is also a reminder of the richness of a community symbolized by diversity.

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THE COMMITMENT TO HUMAN RIGHTS

A commentary on *Parashat Ki Tissa*

By Rabbi Daniel Smith

Judaism does not speak so much about human “rights” but speaks more about human “duties.” *Mitzvot* are the other side of the coin of human rights, because one person’s human rights are everyone else’s human responsibilities. Human rights are more than well-meaning wishes. They become actualized through our commitment, personally and financially.

*Parashat Ki Tissa* begins with a census counting all the men of Israel aged twenty and over. But the people are not counted directly. Instead, each person is commanded to make an offering of half a shekel. The rich may not give more, and the poor may not give less. Then the shekels are counted. The tradition is that we do not number people directly because every person is a unique individual. We know the evil of societies that tried to turn people into mere numbers.

Traditionally these verses are read on Shabbat *Shekalim*, which inaugurated the annual fund-raising drive for the temple and for religious institutions in Israel. In more recent times, these verses have been used to remind us to make donations to other Jewish institutions.

Giving to the community, supporting synagogues, schools and charities is a normative aspect of Jewish experience. The rabbis saw the act of giving as character building. They tried to create a society where people felt it natural to give and to care for others. Judaism commands that we pay taxes and give charity as part of our social duty, in order to enable all people to enjoy their human rights.

Ensuring the right to education means we must train teachers, build schools and support libraries. The right to justice means appointing judges, courts and police officers. The right to health-care means training nurses and doctors, and maintaining hospitals. It should be pointed out that the original *Ki Tissa* biblical census was probably for military purposes. Though Judaism sees war as a terrible last resort, Judaism is not a pacifist religion. Until the messianic age of peace arrives, the human right to freedom and security may mean maintaining a military defence capability.

The rabbis derived spiritual lessons based on this *Parasha*. Every Israelite was obliged to give a contribution of half a shekel. Unlike most biblical taxes, this poll-tax was the same for everyone. Other Biblical taxes were linked to how much a person could afford to give. For example, the tithe was ten percent of income, which obviously meant the rich gave more than the poor. The rich and the landowners had further extra taxes, such as leaving the corners of their fields for the poor and the stranger, and leaving the gleanings of their orchards, fields and vineyards for the poor, the widow, the orphan and the stranger. The very poor were exempt from paying most taxes. But in this half-shekel contribution everybody was asked to give the same equal amount, because every person had a part to play in maintaining a home for the Divine Presence and for the Jewish people. On a spiritual level everyone counts in the community.

Every person should realise that as individuals we only give partial service to the world. We need a community to make that service whole and full. It is our privilege and our duty to support others so that all can enjoy their human rights.

But why should it be a half shekel that everyone gives, and not a whole shekel? Perhaps it is to teach us that no one is whole and complete on their own. We need others so that we can become complete individuals, and we need good relationships with others to be fully ourselves.

Every person should realise that as individuals we only give partial service to the world. We need a community to make that service whole and full. It is our privilege and our duty to support others so that all can enjoy their human rights.

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COMMUNITY BUILDING
A commentary on Parashat Vayakhel
By Leonie Lewis

The key word in Parashat Vayakhel, is the word Vayakhel. Its causative form indicates that people were being assembled. In this instance, “Moses gathered or caused to assemble” the Children of Israel. And this opening verse of the Parasha alerts us to the nature of community in Judaism. The root of the verb Vayakhel is Kahal which means community.

A kehillah or kahal is a group of people assembled for a given purpose.

Moses assembled the people at this time in order for them to become a community of purpose and industry. He wanted them to build the portable sanctuary and for them to be driven by this common purpose which would shape them into a community.

Community building can thus be positive and constructive but can also cause rebel rousing and be negative and sometimes sadly destructive.

In classical Hebrew there are three different words for community: edah, tzibbur and kehillah; and they signify different kinds of association. A kehillah is different from the other two kinds of community. Its members are different from one another.

When and if members of a kehillah are to be brought together for a collective undertaking—one that involves making a distinctive contribution, then we feel and see the beauty of a kehillah, a community driven by constructive purpose.

The people who constitute an edah also have a strong sense of collective identity (ed is a witness in modern Hebrew). They have witnessed the same things. They are bent on the same purpose. The Jewish people become an edah—a community of shared faith—only on receiving the first command.

“By contrast, the word tzibbur - comes from the root tz-b-r, meaning “to heap” or “pile up.” To understand the concept of tzibbur, think of a group of people praying at the Kotel. They may not know each other. They may never meet again. But for the moment, they happen to be ten people in the same place at the same time, and thus constitute a quorum for prayer. A tzibbur is a community in the minimalist sense, a mere aggregate, formed by numbers rather than any sense of identity” (Rabbi Sacks).

A kehillah gathers together the distinct and separate contributions of many individuals, so that each can say, “I helped to make this.”

There is therefore a necessary balance here between two concepts which exist in an inevitable tension: our sense of the independent value of each individual and the vital importance to our lives of meaningful community. “Each person is to bring the gift of her or his own ability and willingness, and all must be woven into a coherent whole. A building is not well-built without careful plans, and a community does not thrive without individuals willing to bring their gifts as they are needed – and not just when the individual feels like it.

Every individual has something to offer and contribute to community and wider society. Those who offer their time for the well-being of society are to be commended but in turn recognise that their volunteering input is reciprocal and that the collective community is the beneficiary.

The teaching of the word Vayakhel, is in the detail that the people here are not primarily individuals, but individuals who have become a meaningful collective. Kehillah refers primarily to what it means to gather for the purpose of creating sacred space, and, through that act, to create a sense of Place” (Rabbi Sacks).

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THE NOTION OF COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

A commentary on Parashat Pekudei
By Sammy Lee

Parashat Pekudei is the last in a series of five parashot describing the building of the Mishkan (Tabernacle) and spends a lot of time acting as a manual for how the Jews should go about building the Tabernacle. Fundamentally, we can understand the Tabernacle to be a paradigm for all of the world. The ‘manual’ which lays out how to build the Tabernacle, can be specifically adapted as a ‘manual’ for how to build a strong Jewish community.

The Parasha goes into explicit detail of how the Mishkan should be built. The very fact that the Torah gives such detailed instructions on the materials, design and construction of the communal structure, affirms that every minute detail played a vital role in contributing to its construction. The Tabernacle was built by everyone. The Torah mentions the men and the women, with special emphasis on the skill and artistry of the women; the Sages add that the children also took part. Even if one was physically unable to do the work required to build the Mishkan, every person played a crucial part in its construction, whether it be through donating materials, or providing the necessary support for its construction. It was very much a communal effort and without all the other hundreds of thousands of people also taking part, the Sanctuary could not have been completed. The Parasha, too, even while recognising the leadership of the Mishkan’s chief architect, Bezalel, emphatically attributes the project to the entire community: ‘The Israelites did so[…]just as G-d had commanded Moses, so they did’.

The Tabernacle was a place where Jews could come together to pray as a ‘Klal’ (a cohesive group), and not just as ‘Pratim’ (a conglomeration of individuals). Judaism understands that the presence of others enhances prayer and the spiritual experience; it was for this reason that the Tabernacle was constructed.

This concept of community, modelled by the Tabernacle, defines the core of what Jewish communities to the Diaspora should look like today. The notion of collective responsibility applies not only in the building of the Tabernacle thousands of years ago, but in all our collective endeavours today as the Jewish people, as we work to build a holy global community centered around an ethical core.

We may not be able to do the intense physical labour required to build community centres in developing countries, but we are able to contribute funds/support to those who can, just as some were unable to offer their physical labour to build the Mishkan, so instead donated materials/provided support. We also may not be able to provide medical/psychological care to refugees, but as a community we can commit to keeping such crises at the forefront of our thoughts and actions. If we can come together as a ‘Klal’, as the Jews did in the Mishkan, we will have more voices to speak for those who cannot, and can create a more powerful impact than a single individual could do alone. We must all feel responsible for each other and the only way this is possible is if we all feel part of a unified community.

The Tabernacle was not only the spiritual and civil centre of the people, but also the physical centre of the community for the Israelites. However, today there is no Tabernacle (I wouldn’t even know where to find acacia wood and tanned ram skin!). So where is our spiritual centre today? Some would argue that it is their Synagogue; but for many others this is not the case. The truth is, every Jew has their own Tabernacle, their own haven where they feel most connected to their Judaism and the Jewish people. The beauty of the modern world is that we have many different Judaisms, and thus many different physical and spiritual centres for Jews all around the world. Whether it be a Synagogue, a Youth Movement, a School, a Charity etc.; community is always at the forefront of Judaism.
There is no way around it. Deep in the midst of Leviticus, Parashat Vayikra is challenging territory for anyone looking for easily transferable moral and ethical lessons for today’s world.

Parashat Vayikra is an intricate and technical description of the laws for Temple sacrifices. We learn of sacrificial offerings of meal and animals – how to do them and what they should consist of – and their use for the expiation of various kinds of guilt and sin. Notwithstanding the yearning for the rebuilding of the Temple that permeates some contemporary Judaisms, Vayikra takes us back to a world that seems alien to today’s Jews. Indeed, some Judaisms today try to avoid fully engaging with this world, through limiting references to Temple sacrifices in the liturgy and through passing quickly over Parashot such as this.

An alternative strategy might be to drill down into the core purpose of Temple sacrifice to try and find an ethical/moral bedrock beneath. After all, sin and guilt are hardly consigned to the past and while post-Temple Judaism deals with these intrinsically human failings differently, it still has to deal with them. Still, even such an approach – which tries to find eternal, transcendental meaning in Torah by focusing on the ‘values’ it promotes – would find it hard to see the relevance for social justice and human rights in Vayikra.

What I would suggest instead is that Vayikra, and the Temple sacrifices it details, offers much more than a source of moral/ethical lessons under a veneer of pre-modern cultic ritual. In fact it is precisely those seemingly alien rituals that offer an anthropological kind of truth that can inspire thinking about how the work of social justice can be pursued.

The Temple offered a collective experience, even when (as much of Vayikra details) it offered a space for the individual expiation of sin and guilt. It offered a spatial focus for the Jewish people, a place where holy work was done, an intense concentration of spiritual and moral work. There is something valuable here.

The unmediated relationship between individuals and the divine that forms the backbone of post-Temple Jewish theology and practice, is stark and even lonely. Of course, collective rituals still take place, in the home and in the synagogue, but we have lost much of the intense drama that the Temple offered, as well as the sheer power of the mass focus on a single space.

Yet the work of improving the world and making it a more just place can benefit from precisely the kind of powerful collective ritual focus that the Temple represented. Of course, this isn’t completely absent from the world. Protest marches, despite being of sometimes dubious practical efficacy, remain popular precisely because they channel the power of the mass. The Nuremberg trials, and to an extent more recent human rights court cases, offer rituals that are no less intricate than the Temples in their pursuit of the apportioning of guilt and atonement of sin.

The question is, what specifically Jewish ways might there be for creating modern rituals than channel the power of the collective in the work of social action? The Temple may provide some inspiration here, not in its offerings of animals and meal, but in its unashamed drama, in the power of the fear and humility that it embodied.

Vayikra therefore provides a forceful challenge to the common assumption that ritual and law ‘gets in the way’ of the human need to deal with the brokenness of humanity. It is in the scrupulous detailing of how ritual is performed that we are offered a path towards remaking the world.

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LEADERSHIP AND POPULISM

A commentary on Parashat Tzav
By Hannah Weisfeld

Parashat Tzav spells out in detail the rituals and rules around sacrifice and the way in which different types of sacrifice must be dealt with. On first glance it makes for rather mundane and extremely gory reading! Yet, it offers us some interesting insights into the concept of leadership and what it means to represent the people.

Early on in the Parasha we are told of the 'aish tamid' - the perpetual fire that must be kept burning on the altar by the priests. All through the night the burnt offering is left on the altar and in the morning the priests take the ashes outside of the camp to remove them, and replace the wood on the altar to ensure it never goes out. The obligations on the priests are significant. Day-in-day out they must tend to the everlasting flame, the offerings that are upon the altar, with strict rules about exactly who can eat of the offering, how it can be eaten and how much can be eaten. The priests are expected to offer sacrifices on behalf of them. Taking on the guilt and sins of the people is no mean feat, it is quite a time consuming and serious labour. The responsibility of leadership dictates how the priests must live their lives. Constantly on display and at the service of the people.

In the context of biblical times, the priesthood wasn't something you chose, you were born into it, making in some respects that obligation much tougher. Yet if that is the level of obligation placed on the unelected leadership, it sets the bar extremely high for those that choose to enter into a leadership position and represent the people. The priests have little choice about whose offerings they can and cannot offer: they perform a service on behalf of the people for the people and G-d. They are given strict instructions about what they are entitled to benefit from whilst performing their duties i.e. which parts of the sacrifices they are entitled to eat. Their personal ambitions and egos are largely irrelevant in the process of performing their priestly duties.

What if all elected leaders were to apply these same rules to their leadership: day in day out to be constantly reminded of their calling to serve the people for a higher purpose than their own personal ambitions? To represent the wide range of opinions and views that exist, regardless of their personal beliefs, and to do so without a display of ego and not for their own personal gain, but for the benefit of all?

Perhaps the tumultuous events of the past year would have panned out differently? The decision to enter into an EU referendum, partly driven by personality politics and the desire to protect or enhance personal positions of leadership may never have come into fruition. The attempts by the American president to prove his popularity above and beyond all other previous presidents, and the desire to belittle media outlets questioning his leadership capabilities, would simply not have featured on the radar. The approach of Western leaders to the common good – whether that be the treatment of minorities within our own societies, or the need to protect the most vulnerable beyond our borders would be valued much greater than the desire to play to popular politics.

Of course, the demands of priestly leadership of the biblical era in comparison to western elected politicians of the 21st century are significantly different, and yet the comparison gives us some insight into the type of leadership we should be striving for and seeking to support in our troubled world.

Hannah Weisfeld is the Director of Yachad
A commentary on Parashat Shemini
By Rabbi David Mason

The Exodus, the ending of the Jewish slave presence in Egypt is clearly an inspiration to affirming human rights down to the present day.

I would like to suggest that hidden away at the end of this Parsha, is something quite fundamental about how we understand mitzvot (commandments). The second part of the Parsha contains a long list of various animals that we are permitted to eat, as well as those that are forbidden. At the conclusion, we are told that ‘For I am the Lord your G-d and you shall sanctify yourselves and be holy, for I am holy…’ (Vayikra 11:44). The next verse, in continuing to extol the importance of holiness, then brings in the theme of the Exodus from Egypt. It continues, ‘For I the LORD am He who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your G-d: you shall be holy, for I am holy’ (verse 45).

It is the framing of the Exodus from Egypt here at the end of the laws of Kashrut that interests me. The Exodus, the ending of the Jewish slave presence in Egypt is clearly an inspiration to affirming human rights down to the present day. Campaigns to end slavery still continue and the desire to prevent or end oppression and persecution is an important part of human rights legislation internationally.

According to Isaiah Berlin, in his ‘Four Essays on Liberty’ (1969) there are two basic concepts of liberty, ‘negative liberty’ and ‘positive liberty’. Berlin explains that ‘negative liberty’ exists when one is prevented from achieving a specific goal. He states that ‘If I am prevented by others from doing what I could otherwise do, I am to that degree unfree; and if this area is contracted by other men beyond a certain minimum, I can be described as being coerced or, it may be, enslaved.’ (122). On the other hand, regarding ‘positive liberty’ Berlin writes that ‘I wish my life and decisions to depend on myself, not on external forces of whatever kind. I wish to be the instrument of my own, not other men’s’ acts of will. I wish to be a subject, not an object. I wish to be somebody, not nobody…and not acted upon by external nature or by other men as if I were a thing, or an animal or a slave incapable of playing a human role’ (131). This dual definition may be comparable to Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik’s dual definition of the ‘covenant of fate’ and ‘covenant of destiny’. In the former, we are subject to fate and the possibility of suffering. It is that suffering and oppression from which we require the ‘negative liberty’ of Berlin. A ‘covenant of destiny’ involves acting on history and the world in a more positive and active manner.

And so in our Parsha, the ability to understand Jewish law, the difference between kosher and non-kosher species of animal, at first is consequent from the freedom from slavery that resulted from the Exodus from Egypt. But the process of Hashem, becoming our G-d, evident in the phrase ‘to be a G-d unto you’ may well involve both individual and national will. The learning and understanding of law and commandment, was a process through which we would positively choose a relationship with G-d, thus replacing the ‘negative liberty’ of the Exodus experience with the ‘positive liberty’ of building a national relationship with G-d.
A RIGHT TO HEALTHCARE?
A commentary on Parashat Tazria
By Rabbi Danny Rich

Parashat Tazria (Leviticus 12:1-13:59) has two main parts: a description of the required ritual for a woman following childbirth and a procedure for the diagnosis and treatment of a variety of skin diseases.

In the ancient Israelite world bodily functions and illness were a cultic matter, overseen by the priesthood, a hereditary male caste associated with the tribe of Levi. Bodily emissions -including blood and semen- appear to have been the source of some fear and resulted in ritual (but not hygienic) uncleanliness which frequently led to temporary separation or exclusion from cultic arenas, if not the community as a whole.

The opening verses of Parashat Tazria indicate that a mother who bears a son is ritually impure for an initial seven days and is excluded for a further period; if she has a daughter the time period is doubled, presumably on the logical basis that it is assumed that the daughter herself will bear a child in the future.

It is possible out of this bizarre ritual to begin to appreciate the sense of reverence for, and appreciation of, the wondrous nature of birth. Nevertheless, in a world where childbirth continues to be a moment of great physical danger in many societies and leads to discrimination in, for example, employment, in the case of so called developed nations with modern and safe healthcare systems, the verses describing the ancient rituals surrounding childbirth may serve as a timely reminder. Access to maternity services should be a given in our modern world and the birth of a child should be a moment of celebration for individual families and communities and should reinforce our commitment that these children will be raised in a society of which all can be proud and in which all can thrive.

What is true of the newborn child should be equally applied to men and women who suffer mental and physical illness. The remainder of Parashat Tazria prescribes the role of the priest in the diagnosing and ritual purifying of sufferers of skin complaints, known in Biblical Hebrew as tzarat. Although often translated as ‘leprosy,’ tzarat appears to designate a variety of skin ailments. The procedure involved identification, treatment and, in some cases, isolation and most dramatically a requirement for the sufferer to declare ‘Impure, impure!’

This declaration requirement which may remind us of the leper’s bell might initially cause us to recoil but the Babylonian Talmud Moed Katan 5a remarks that the purpose of such a declaration serves not only as a warning to others but should elicit compassion and prayer on behalf of the sufferer. Perhaps ahead of its time the Talmud was alluding to the rights and responsibilities aspects of health. The modern citizen is entitled to expect the community to offer sympathy and the very best of healthcare treatment but as a responsible member of the same society one should endeavour to recognise when one is ill, to reduce (where possible) the illness’s damage to oneself and others, and to acknowledge that even the most advanced healthcare system provision demands a sense of responsibility from its users.

Interestingly despite the role of the priesthood Parashat Tazria makes no suggestion that illness arises from moral failure, reaffirming the modern concept that both mental and physical illness strikes its sufferers at random and a decent society places great importance on accurate diagnosis, appropriate treatment and rehabilitation where possible.

Read Parashat Tazria, enjoy good health and play your part in ensuring the maintenance of a caring society in which healthcare remains the right of all regardless of individual circumstance.

Rabbi Danny Rich is the Senior Rabbi for Liberal Judaism and a member of René Cassin’s Advisory Council
BREAKING UP THE PLAGUE OF ETHICAL INPUNITY UPON ALL OUR HOUSES

A commentary on Parashat Metzora
By David Brown

Read plainly this Parasha highlights the primitive ritualistic context of our treasured text. The details of animal offerings and blood based cleansing for leprosy present anthropological intrigue or instinctive disgust.

For me, Judaism is not exclusively ritual or religious practice, nor is it solely offering values that address issues such as refugees, war, or wasteful destruction of our planet’s ability to sustain life. Combining practice and principle, Judaism can imbue those it touches with a profound spiritual and material purpose – not forced dogma or narrow expectations – but a vast, varied and vibrant framework for a life of meaning and connection with others.

So what does a Parasha grossly detailing the biblical cleansing process for an affliction we today treat medically offer our scientific and developed society?

Financial hardship shouldn’t exclude you from social healing

“And if he be poor, and his means suffice not, then he shall take one he-lamb for a guilt-offering to be waved, to make atonement for him … or two young pigeons, such as his means suffice for; and the one shall be a sin-offering, and the other a burnt-offering.”

This contrasts with a more expansive list for the usual process. However primitive we may view this society, they had the awareness to allow for alternatives for those with fewer means.

It takes some serious and collective scrubbing to remove a spiritual stain

“And he shall sprinkle upon him that is to be cleansed from the leprosy seven times … shall wash his clothes, and shave off all his hair, and bathe himself in water … he may come into the camp, but shall dwell outside his tent seven days … on the seventh day, that he shall shave all his hair off his head and his beard and his eyebrows, even all his hair he shall shave off; and he shall wash his clothes, and he shall bathe his flesh in water … the priest that cleanseth him shall set the man that is to be cleansed, and those things, before the LORD, at the door of the tent of meeting.”

The text continues with animal offerings, burnt offerings, sets of seven cleansing right and left ears with blood and what I imagine most modern readers would find bizarre.

Setting aside our distance from this context, accepting this was a society that viewed this particular affliction as physically unclean and requiring spiritual atonement, it presents a model for personal and social healing. This biblical society tackled its social ills with a staged process, deployed significant resources, and required individual responsibility and collective intervention.

Many of our social ills are far more complex than a particular physical affliction, yet how many of our responses acknowledge all the elements involved in thoroughly responding to them? Much current political discourse is squeamish about the steps, time and resources necessary. Moreover, as pragmatism is trumped by populists on the left and right, the need for personal agency and societal action is ignored by those peddling simplistic solutions to our most complex challenges.

Ethical disgust is infectious

“behold, if the plague be spread in the house, it is a malignant leprosy in the house … he shall break down the house, the stones of it, and the timber thereof … and he shall carry them forth out of the city into an unclean place. Moreover he that goeth into the house … shall be unclean”

Every person and every physical object that came into contact with this impurity was infected. Instead of this particular impurity, consider the many Jewish values on providing for the stranger, the widow, or the orphan, as well as those connected to the environment or ethical consumption, as being necessary for a pure life. The same contagious spreading of impurity could be present by the contravening of those values in the food we eat, the clothes we wear and the air we breathe.

Putting our values into practice requires taking apart the foundations of much of how we live, and in contrast to moving our impurity from within to some other place, in our interconnected world where much that is impure requires a global effort, we not only have to breakdown our unclean habits and habitats, but build in their place a society where all can live, survive and hopefully thrive.
AGUNOT, GOATS AND DIVORCE
A commentary on Parashat Acharei Mot
By Shelley Marsh

The London Beth Din have taken brave steps by publically naming men who withhold divorces from their wives. To clarify, under Orthodox Jewish law (halacha) only men can grant a divorce (known as a Get). A husband and wife can lead completely separate lives but unless the husband agrees to give the get, his wife remains tied to him, an agunah (literally ‘chained’) woman, unable to marry someone else under Jewish law. This is not a medieval story, this situation remains in the 21st century and it is an international issue. For me, this is an issue that resonates deeply. While many perceive it is only relevant to Orthodoxy and to the marriages in Israel, I perceive agunot are at the heart of a human rights issue. This is a subjugation of women, and is an issue that is still not solved.

This Parasha, Acharei Mot, translates as ‘after death’. It connects to Yom Kippur. One focus is about how one should atone for one’s transgressions. The sins of the community go with the goat, into the wilderness, never to be seen again. The term scapegoat is often sourced to this Biblical reference;

“and Aaron shall cast lots upon the two goats, one lot for the Lord and the other lot for Azazel. And Aaron shall present the goat on which the lot fell for the Lord, and offer it as a sin offering; but the goat on which the lot fell for Azazel shall be presented alive before the Lord to make atonement over it, that it may be sent away into the wilderness to Azazel.”
Vayikra 16:8-10

Our community has struggled to find an acceptable Halachic solution for agunot. Women in our communities remain in a metaphorical wilderness, cast aside without status and importantly, without any control over their own destinies. With no choice but to remain married to men who refuse to release them from failed marriages, agunot have no opportunities to begin new relationships, they cannot re-marry and go on to have children.

Many engaged couples are now exploring the idea of a pre-nuptial agreement to try and prevent agunot. This isn’t a straightforward process, but it highlights again the need to address this issue. The issue is ultimately one of control. And it is one of forgiveness. When a relationship is over, it is best just to walk away, to leave the other person intact, not in in a subordinate position.

At the end of a marriage, both husband and wife may spend time in their own wilderness. Perhaps lost, saddened by the end of a relationship that they would have had high expectations would have lasted a lifetime.

Divorce brings those expectations to an end. Some people might grieve the end of a marriage and express it as feeling like a bereavement. In Acharei Mot, ‘after death’ the challenge is that we need to go into the wilderness and take time for some self-reflection. A marriage fails. There is life after that bereavement. There is time to come out of a period in the wilderness and to forgive oneself and one’s ex-spouse for the failed marriage.

Acharei Mot holds a profound message about power, relationships, freedom, reflective thinking and human rights. The London Beth Din has indeed acted bravely. It is time for our community to acknowledge the need to find an on-going solution to the Halachic issue of agunot. Divorce is an ending of a relationship. Life continues.

It is time for our community to acknowledge the need to find an on-going solution to the Halachic issue of agunot.

Shelley Marsh is an educator and founder and director of Reshet UK
RELIGION, MODERNITY AND MORALITY
A commentary on Parashat Kedoshim
By Michael Wegier

Our Parasha contains Chapter 19 which is a fascinating collection of commandments covering a range of religious, ethical, commercial, agricultural and sexual matters. Not by chance do modern biblical commentators refer to this part of the book of Leviticus (Chapters 17-26) as the Holiness Code but this term was not used by traditional religious commentators.

The laws address many issues with which contemporary liberals can easily agree. “You shall not defraud your fellow. You shall not commit robbery. The wages of a labourer shall not remain with you until morning. You shall not insult the deaf or place a stumbling block before the blind.” (Verses 11-14) Other verses continue setting out a moral framework for interpersonal relations.

So far so good. But Parashat Kedoshim does not argue for a moral code independent of G-d or the commandment to sacrifice. Indeed, the 2nd verse reads “You shall be holy for I, the Lord your G-d, am holy.” And in verse 5, “When you sacrifice an offering of well-being to the Lord, sacrifice it so that it may be accepted on your behalf.”

There are also intriguing laws about the mixing of species. Cattle should not mate with different kinds and clothes should not be made from different materials. Harlotry is bad for the people.

The Chapter goes on to forbid the consumption of blood and to avoid divination, speaking with spirits and even the cutting of one's hair in a certain way. And it ends with more moral laws and a reminder that G-d freed the people from Egypt.

Modernity has shown us that the ethical life does not require religious faith and practice. Almost all secular and atheist people live decent lives without a need for G-d. And of course that is also true of religious people. But there are also, clearly, people who claim faith in G-d while behaving unethically if not far worse. Yet that is a straw man with which to beat religion. The genius of our Parasha and much of Leviticus is that it presents an archetype of how a profoundly religious life and a moral one can be one and the same. The Torah does not see the distinction between the secular and religious that is so natural for most of us.

Kedoshim teaches that the ethical life will be lived by the community of Israel within a framework of ritual and faith in the Lord. I am indebted to Professor Arnold Eisen of Jewish Theological Seminar for articulating this point. It is ritual and community that give the people of Israel a particularist identity with which to live out universal values. And it is the boundaries that are set by our moral, culinary, sexual, legal and economic behaviour, that together with both explicable and sometimes inexplicable laws, make the Jewish people distinct.

The genius of our Parasha and much of Leviticus is that it presents an archetype of how a profoundly religious life and a moral one can be one and the same.
This week’s Parasha concludes with a focus on blasphemy, a term which denotes the use of G-d’s name in disrespect. In this piece, we learn that a Jewish man was sentenced to death by Moses after committing blasphemy.

While the Torah states that “whoever curses his G-d shall bear his sin” (Leviticus 24:15), should blasphemy still be a punishable offence?

This account raises important questions surrounding the curtailment of freedom of expression and freedom of the press. Although it can cause great offence and upset, the act of blasphemy is still an act of speech which does not in itself constitute an infringement of individual rights. Therefore, placing limits on what people can or cannot say by legislating against blasphemy is a direct curtailment of freedom of expression. Indeed, the European Court of human rights states that restrictions on freedom of expression are only justifiable if “necessary in a democratic society”. Such restrictions are thus defensible if speech is seen to incite hatred. As using G-d’s name in disrespect does not in itself necessarily incite hatred, the criminalisation of blasphemy cannot be legitimately justified.

Directly linked to freedom of expression is freedom of the press, which has intrinsic value and is itself a human right. As the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states “everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression”, which includes the freedom to “impair information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers”. Freedom of the press is also protected in Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, enshrined in British law through the 1998 Human Rights Act. Therefore, protections of freedom of the press trump protections against any offence which may be caused by blasphemy.

It is well understood that freedom of the press is a fundamental prerequisite for a flourishing democracy. Legislation which prohibits blasphemy is largely consigned to totalitarian or autocratic states, often existing alongside other detrimental controls. Allowing citizens a public voice ensures an arena in which views and criticism can be shared and discussed, increasing democratic participation. The press also plays an important part in ensuring transparency of the state, ensuring that the government of the day is held accountable for its actions. Indeed, the dismantling of human rights institutions and mechanisms by the state often starts with attacks and limits on the press. This is true of Nazi Germany in the 1930s, where the curtailment of the press was one of the first steps in the eradication of individual and community rights.

Furthermore, contrary to the view that there exists a tension between freedom of expression and freedom of religion, freedom of expression enables individuals and communities to exercise freedom of religion by allowing them to publicly express and talk about their religion. This protects religious minorities from persecution, ensuring the state cannot hold a monopoly on the practice of religion.

In democratic societies where there exists a plethora of religions and opinions, blasphemy laws are extremely problematic. While we must all be respectful of one another's religious beliefs and ensure everyone can peacefully practise their religious views without hatred or discrimination, what constitutes blasphemy is often subjective and is thus extremely difficult to police. Freedom of expression allows different religions to flourish and freedom of the press ensures the state is held accountable, which is fundamental in a democratic society. However, while freedom of expression and freedom of the press are enshrined in human rights law, there still exists barriers to such freedoms and we must continue to ensure that these rights are adequately protected.

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The cavernous space soars high above your head as you come through the oversized front doors of the factory. Tall brick walls are whitewashed and topped by an enormous lattice of steel beams and crossbars which extends across the huge ceiling, holding up the corrugated metal roof. Having been minus 30 C for most of the winter, the snow is starting to thaw, leaving puddles of slush and mud outside and the thermometer has hit a balmy zero degrees. But this is a stark industrial space, a previously abandoned factory with no heating and single pane glazing and although the worst of the weather is held at bay, a five minutes standing inside your toes start to feel the chill and you certainly do not consider removing a layer.

Vardan greets us with an illuminating smile and a strong handshake. He is thrilled to show us his small enterprise, talking animatedly about the metal parts his team of six workers manufacture, as spirals of metal offcuts fall lazily from the machines and lie glinting on the floor around us. A huddle of industrial activity, tucked away at the far end of the factory floor, dwarfed by the scale of the building.

But this is not the story of a typical small business owner. This is Krivoy Rog, a tough industrial town in Eastern Ukraine and Vardan is an Internally Displaced Person - essentially a refugee in his own country. He grew up in the thriving city of Donetsk and had plans to open his own metal manufacturing business. But he was forced to flee his hometown when the fighting between Ukrainian and pro-Russian forces threatened his family’s safety. He is one of the thousands of Jews caught up in the violence.

Parashat Behar introduces the idea of Shemitta and the Jubilee year, opportunities for us to put our faith in G-d and for G-d to provide. But it also touches on the topic of destitution and the responsibility we have as a community to assist people who, for whatever reason, find that they are unable to support themselves. “If your brother becomes destitute and his hand falters beside you, you shall support him… so that he can live with you.” (Vayikra, Leviticus 25:35) This goes beyond the obligation to provide for the poor and infirm. This is a warning that when it seems like someone is struggling and a crash is inevitable, step in and help out, before they hit rock bottom.

Vardan found himself in Krivoy Rog, with few possessions and no way of earning money to support his family. Unemployment in this town is high and jobs are very low paid. Facing destitution and with his hand having faltered, World Jewish Relief stepped in to support him. Vardan had been working in the metal industry in his home town of Donetsk and he was enthusiastic about pursuing this. Through our Livelihood Development Programme we provided Vardan with business training, including HR management, as well as legal support and we helped him access grants to purchase specialist equipment.

He set up his own metalwork business which has gone from strength to strength. His new premises mean he can start expanding his business and not only is he able to support himself and his family, but he is extremely proud to be able to employ a small workforce: he has created new jobs for other Internally Displaced People who have had to leave their homes in Donetsk and is able to offer them secure employment, in turn supporting his ‘brother’ whose hand had faltered. They are now all able to be guaranteed a certain standard of living and provide for their family.

And this notion of supporting those who are destitute, giving them a way to support themselves and achieve a standard of living by which they can adequately support their family, is also enshrined in human rights law.
The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 25) states that everyone has the right to a standard of living that ensures the health and well-being of themselves and their family - including the ability to provide adequate food, clothing, housing and medical care.

People throughout Ukraine are struggling to attain this standard of living. They may be unable to heat their homes in the depth of winter, or cannot afford to buy the medication they need for a sick parent. They have been forced to flee their homes and have lost their savings and pensions in the process. By giving them the opportunity to get a job, set up their own business and earn a living, World Jewish Relief’s Livelihood Development Programme enables them to regain their human rights and fulfils Maimonides’ highest level of charity “to support a fellow Jew by endowing them with a gift or loan…or finding employment for them, in order to strengthen their hand until they need no longer be dependent upon others.” (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Charity, 10:7-14)

At the door to the factory, Vardan proudly displays a photograph of the huge space in its heyday with row upon row of machines and workers filling the factory floor. He smiles broadly as he says he hopes to replicate that picture in the coming years. “Even in the most difficult times, you shouldn’t give up”, he says.
Parashat Bechukotai translates to ‘in my statutes.’ It comes at the end of the book of Leviticus which up until this point has focused on the concept of what is and what is not holy. The main focus of this Parashat consists of G-d promising blessings for the Jewish people if they obey his laws and commandments, followed by a list of dreadful curses and calamities that will ensue if they do not:

“I will lay your cities in ruin and make your sanctuaries desolate…I will make the land desolate, so that your enemies who settle in it will be appalled by it.” (Leviticus 26:3, verse 31)

This Parasha is all about rules, following them or not following them. Rules are important. In the UK, the ‘Rule of Law’ is one of the fundamental doctrines of the UK’s uncodified constitution. The key ideas that the ‘Rule of Law’ espouse are that no one is above the law and that we are all equal before the law. This, wrote A.V Dicey, the famed 19th Century constitutionist, ensures a ‘government of law’ and not a ‘government of men.’ (Introduction to the study of the law of the constitution. A. V. Dicey, (1915))

This is not to say that the law occasionally cannot be ‘an ass’. The laws set in Parliament are set by humans and interpreted by humans who are liable to the same prejudices and foibles as we all are. Law can be and has been used to oppress. It has been used by the powerful to ensure that the voiceless remain voiceless. Legality does not always equate to morality and vice versa.

Yet, laws are important, even when we need to challenge them. Laws and rules act as a guideline for acceptable behaviour, and when working at their best, ensure a level of equality within society. We can challenge unjust laws without challenging the very concept of the Rule of Law. Law and morality are in a constant state of conversation and tension.

René Cassin, as the Jewish voice of human rights, upholds the importance of the Rule of Law. Yet, will speak out when rules are unfair or when they prevent individuals from accessing justice altogether. This is why we campaign for an end to the indefinite detention of migrants in the UK or for better protection of survivors of human trafficking. Current legislation does not ensure fairness for all and we should speak out when this is the case.

The danger of not keeping our legal system in check with an evolving concept of morality may not be as gruesome or divinely inspired as spelt out in Parashat Bechukotai but will certainly cause human suffering nonetheless. Making sure that our legal system is infused with, challenged by and in conversation with human rights norms is part of the ‘Eternal Vigilance’ required to uphold a fair society.

Law and morality are in a constant state of conversation and tension

Sam Grant is the Campaigns Manager of René Cassin
OVERWHELMING NUMBERS AND WHAT TO DO WITH THEM
A commentary on Parashat Bamidbar
By Dr Edie Friedman

The reading of Bamidbar marks the start of what is known in English as ‘the Book of Numbers’. It does not disappoint. In it we read about 4 camps, 12 tribes, 273 surplus firstborn, 22,300 Levites, 603,550 Israelites and so on. These numbers can seem overwhelming, but what can we learn from them?

The Parasha starts by saying that G-d decreed that the Israelites should be counted – what would be called conducting a census. They were counted when they left Egypt and were counted again after many had died following the worshipping of the golden calf. They were then counted a third time as the people entered the longest and most demanding stage of their journey. We know that biblical texts can be read in a manner which strengthens our own individual beliefs. Is this Parasha about a mere mechanical process or as the commentator Rashi suggests, a manifestation of G-d’s love for his people, in that every individual counts?

The place of numbers in this Parasha can make the text seem obscure, dense and bewildering. Some commentators have suggested that in spite of this, the text can be read as a reminder of the mixed blessing of using numbers in helping us understand difficult issues in the world. On the one hand, numbers serve an important function in simply providing us with basic information, yet on the other hand, numbers can also overwhelm us, making us feel powerless and useless in the face of huge and grave problems. Numbers can also serve to dehumanise the very people with whom we want people to identify. How many times have we heard people comment that it is easier to empathise with one individual than with a group?

The Israelites are, in Parashat Bamidbar, for all intents and purposes, refugees. They escaped from persecution in Egypt and are travelling – for more than 40 years – through the wilderness to the Promised Land.

So what are we to make of this portion in relation to our understanding of and interest in refugees today? Numbers or statistics documenting the ‘refugee crisis’ make for very grim reading indeed. In 2016 alone,

- 4.8 million refugees were displaced from Syria
- 4271 refugees drowned in the Mediterranean
- 10,000 out of 90,000 child refugees who reached Europe, disappeared
- Out of the 20,000 Syrian refugees due to arrive in the UK by 2020, only 2,700 had actually arrived
- The Government promised to take in an unspecified number of vulnerable refugee children.

These statistics are important for us in that they not only serve as a reminder of the magnitude of today’s refugee crisis, but also as a reminder that each statistic represents a human life.

One of the challenges we face in encouraging people not to be overcome by compassion fatigue, is to hold two contradictory thoughts together at the same time; the scale of the problem may be enormous but we must not lose sight of the fact that in the midst of all these numbers they are human beings. The act of helping one individual must never be underestimated. As it says in the Talmud (Sanhedrin 37a), “when you save one life it is as if you saved the entire world”.

But action to help the individual should go hand in hand with action to deal with the underlying causes of the problem- a difficult task, but one we cannot ignore.

Dr Edie Friedman is the Executive Director of JCORE
VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN
A commentary on Parashat Naso
By Rabbi Benji Stanley

Parashat Naso, Numbers 4:21-7-89, includes the ritual or ordeal of the Sotah. A woman suspected of having gone astray into adultery is, according to 5:11-31, to be brought by her husband to the priest who makes her drink a potion, the “waters of bitterness”, which, if she is guilty, we are told, will cause her belly to distend and her thigh to sag and cause her to “become a curse among her people” (5:27). If a woman has not committed adultery and yet “a spirit of jealousy” (5:14) comes upon her husband such that he suspects her anyway, she may be forced to undergo the ritual, but it will, we are told, clear her name: “she shall be acquitted and retain seed” (5:28). Whatever the outcome of the case, no Israelite woman is safe from this ritualised act of male jealousy.

How do we respond to such a passage in our Torah? We can revert to apologetics, hopeful defences of the text to make it alright. Some suggest that the “waters of bitterness” would have never worked, causing any physical harm, and so the ritual would have always acquitted the woman, safely purging the community of male jealousy whenever it arose. I do not know if this is the case. The Rabbis of the Mishnah explore the ritual of the Sotah in its own devoted tractate and they do not approach the text with apologetics, rather they seem to expand and relish in its violence. Michael Satlow in his article “Texts of Terror” points out how Mishnah Sotah adds to the Torah’s aggressive threateningness in three ways. It insists that the ritual be public: “anyone who wants to see comes and sees (Mishnah Sotah 1:4). It adds details of violent humiliation: “The priest grabs her garments— if they rip, they rip; if they tear open, they tear open” (Sotah 1:5). Thirdly, it presents the details of the ritual as part of a moral universe in which the punishment fits the crime: the ritual will afflict her thigh and belly because “she began the transgression with the thigh and afterwards with the belly” (Sotah 1:7). Satlow explains that, while the Sotah ritual was not done in Rabbinic times, the Mishnah itself can be seen as an attempt to threaten women, or entrench threatening attitudes towards women, through words, in order to effect controlling submission.

There is a third approach to the ordeal of Sotah. When we encounter a difficult Torah text we may avoid either apologising or embracing it, but rather, we can preach or teach against it. Our Parasha may force us to confront a contemporary world in which “according to the best available statistics, one out of every three women worldwide has experienced either physical and/or sexual violence”.1 Parashat Naso and the discourse of human rights could push us to be more keenly aware of, and able to stand up against, violence and all discrimination against women, systemic and incidental.

A woman has “the right to life” (Article 2 of the Human Rights Act), the “right not to be subject to torture or inhuman or degrading treatment” (Article 3 of the Human Rights Act) or the threat of it, the “right not to be discriminated against” (Article 14 of the Human Rights Act). There is a principle that comes up, in, of all places, in Tractate Sotah of the Babylonian Talmud: “The beginning and end of Torah is the act of loving kindness”. The ordeal of the Sotah should teach us to build a fairer, kinder society.

1. http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/vaw/the-issue

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Our Parasha may force us to confront a contemporary world in which “according to the best available statistics, one out of every three women worldwide has experienced either physical and/or sexual violence”
WITH CRISIS COMES HUNGER
A commentary on Parashat Behaalotecha
By Laura Marks OBE

According to the World Economic Forum, at the end of 2015 there were 65.3 million forcibly displaced people on Earth. They included 21.3 million refugees, 40.8 million internally displaced and 3.2 million asylum seekers with nearly half of them coming from Somalia, Syria and Afghanistan.

Over 80% of refugees are hosted by developing nations, the least able to support them. The number of child refugees is growing with, globally, nearly one in 200 children a refugee. Hunger in refugee camps is well documented as supplies are unreliable and inadequate and stories of child labour, often in unsafe and unregulated jobs circulate.

The Israelites were, of course, refugees too. Fleeing from slavery in Egypt they wandered through the desert for 40 years in conditions that must have been unbearable. We are told their main food source was manna, and water would have been scarce even though Miriam, Moses's sister, is credited by Rashi, writing in the 11th Century, with providing a miraculous source of water to the thirsty travellers.

In this Parasha, the Israelites are found complaining about the food to Moses. They demand meat, food like they had known in Egypt, and Moses turns to G-d for advice and support. Whilst it is at this time that Moses was advised to set up what we might now call an advisory board and the first attempt at power sharing is seen (possibly in history?) actually it was divine intervention which dealt with the food revolt, not the leaders at all.

The situation resonates with the hunger of desperate people today; refugees fleeing the terrors of civil war in Syria, people facing drought in East Africa, oppression in Darfur and even the thousands of families in Britain who have turned to hundreds of food-banks, in one of the richest countries in the world, for basic food. The Trussel Trust, one of the UK’s largest food banks reported giving nearly 1.2 million, three-day emergency food parcels away in 2016-17. With crisis comes hunger.

G-d, we are told, intervened for the Israelites and sent a wind which blew huge numbers of quails from the sea, enough to feed the hungry Israelites with a massive feast of meat, on which they 'gorged' themselves. Ironically, and inexplicably, all those who ate the quail with 'gluttony' were struck down with plague. Was the meat infected or was this a punishment for excess and self indulgence?

Maybe the plague reminds us, rather brutally, that food comes at a cost. Food supplies are limited and we need to treat our environment with respect, a message which resonates in the modern climate of global warming, environmental damage, mass farming methods and of course, widespread hunger, as much as it did for the Israelites who paid a seemingly harsh price for complaining and overeating. Hunger and oppression go hand in hand. The Israelites fled oppression but it took generations before they were able to be both free and secure in their ability to feed themselves.

So the messages for today are clear. Our responsibility to people seeking refuge goes well beyond safety from war and violence. We need to face up to the interacting pressures of welcoming strangers to our land, feeding people who cannot feed themselves, and caring for our environment. This is a long-term commitment and will take time and perseverance and the engagement of every one of us.

The winds today bring wobbly boatloads of people in from the sea, not mountains of food. However, in both cases, the arrivals challenge us to consider our individual and collective responsibilities both to one another and to the world which we all share.

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In his 2007 book “The Year of Living Biblically”, AJ Jacobs humorously describes his attempt to follow every single rule in the Bible as literally as possible for an entire year. It is on Day 64 that he attempts to tackle, what he calls, “the second item on my list of Most Perplexing Laws: Capital Punishment.” After his attempt at stoning an adulterer—which involved throwing pebbles at an elderly man—Jacobs concludes: “Even though mine was a Stoning Lite, barely fulfilling the letter of the law, I can’t deny: It felt good to chuck a rock at this nasty old man. It felt primal. It felt like I was getting vengeance on him. […] I also knew that this was a morally stunted way to feel. Stoning is about as indefensible as you can get. It comes back to the old question: How can the Bible be so wise in some places and so barbaric in others?”

In Parashat Sh’lach L’cha, we read the following story (Numbers 15:32-36, adapted from the New JPS translation): “Once, when the Israelites were in the wilderness, they came upon a man gathering wood on the Sabbath day. Those who found him as he was gathering wood brought him before Moses, Aaron, and the whole community. He was placed in custody, for it had not been specified what should be done to him. Then the Eternal One said to Moses, “The man shall be put to death: the whole community shall pelt him with stones outside the camp.” So the whole community took him outside the camp and stoned him to death - as the Eternal One had commanded Moses.”

So with all the wonderful moral lessons we can learn from the gift of Shabbat also comes a teaching of cruel punishment for breaking the rules. Of course, many readers will be familiar with the quote from Mishnah Makkot 1:10: “A Sanhedrin that puts a man to death once in seven years is called destructive. Rabbi Eliezer ben Azariah says: even once in seventy years.”

Rabbi Louis Jacobs rightly acknowledges that all this material comes from a time when the right to impose the death penalty had been taken away from the Jewish courts by the Roman authorities. Yet whatever the initial reason, Judaism effectively abolished capital punishment in rabbinic times.

The passage from the Mishnah was even referred to in the Knesset debate concerning the retention of the death penalty in the State of Israel, and it was eventually decided to abolish capital punishment entirely except for treason committed in time of war.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights begins with the recognition of the inherent dignity of all members of the human family and affirms in Article 3 that “Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.” According to Amnesty International, over two-thirds of the countries in the world – 139 – have now abolished the death penalty in law or practice. However, despite repeated calls by the UN and human rights charities to abolish the death penalty completely, the USA and other otherwise enlightened nations continue this ethically unacceptable legal practice.

The evolving Jewish attitude toward capital punishment can serve as a powerful example for those countries who continue to execute human beings in the name of the law. So when we read the story about the stoning of the man who collected wood on Shabbat, let us not be distracted by a literal reading of the text but instead reflect upon the work that we must still undertake to ensure that “the right to life” will be granted to all wherever they may live.
Korach, the cousin of Moses and Aaron, famously rebelled against their leadership. Along with 250 men, he challenged Moses saying:

"Rav Lachem – you have taken on too much for yourselves, because all the community, ALL of them, are holy, and G-d is amongst them. So why do you raise yourself above the community of G-d?"

He has a point. Moses and Aaron have indeed taken on a lot for themselves; between them they hold the political, legal, military and the religious leadership. So while the men who joined the complaint of Korach are described as “princes of the community, the elect of the assembly, men of renown”, it is clear that they do not have anything like the power that they would like.

Moses seems to understand that their complaint has legitimacy. He falls on his face – and while no conversation with G-d is explicitly recorded, given his response in the following verse it seems that he must have been asking G-d how he should answer.

The problem is real. For Korach has spoken the truth – the whole community are holy – everyone is of equal value, and each has an equal right. So why are Moses and Aaron, the unelected leadership, over them?

At first sight it is hard to disagree with Korach and his men. All the people are holy, everyone has equal rights, and yet the leadership and the power is concentrated within one small group. Something is clearly wrong. And yet G-d is not on the side of the rebels. Indeed, the rebels will ultimately be swallowed alive when the earth opens and closes over them. The punishment of this descent is in direct contrast to their aspiration to rise to the very top of the society. It alludes to the selfish motivation of the challengers – they are not asserting the equal rights of everyone in the community even if at first it appears that they are doing so, but they are using the language of equality to stage a coup only in order to achieve the leadership for themselves. The punishment will fit the crime – descent rather than ascent, separation rather than community.

The clues are there if you look. The very first sentence begins with a verb that has no object – “And Korach took.”

Korach is someone who takes for himself. He is not interested in the holiness nor the rights of the rest of the people except insofar as espousing them can help his own case. His is not a desire to do anything except achieve power. For Korach equal holiness does not lead to equality in the society, it is simply a pawn in an argument that will lead to him increasing his own power.

We can take a number of lessons from Korach. One is that speaking the language of equality is powerful, but the motivation behind the language matters. Sometimes the work we do for others is actually mainly helping ourselves, making ourselves feel useful or even superior because of the time and energy we put into this cause. Many an idea to improve the lot of others has become mired in the internal politics and jostling for place in the organisation.

Another is how we challenge established structures and speak truth to power. Words create and words destroy. We have to be continually mindful of just how we are challenging, and not to slide into a different place. How we challenge really matters.

And thirdly we must be aware of the privilege and entitlement with which we live. It is no accident that Korach and his men were leaders in the community,
Sometimes the work we do for others is actually mainly helping ourselves, making ourselves feel useful or even superior because of the time and energy we put into this cause.

‘men of renown’ – they were the privileged and entitled who wanted more, who did not even notice how much they already had.

Korach spoke the truth but he did not care about it. He defended the holiness/rights of the whole community but only in order to take power for himself. And while Moses understood the truth of his words, he also came to understand the danger of his motivation, and the travesty of using those words in order not to fulfil them for others but to take power for himself.

We are living in a world where the Korachs are in the ascendant. The political rhetoric is all about destroying the elites and fighting for the little people, the ordinary people who have been left behind while the gap between rich and poor has grown exponentially. And yet rhetoric is all it is, as we see a new leadership consolidate its power, mouthing about taking back control for the masses while doing exactly the opposite. The story of Korach reminds us to look behind the language, to ascertain the motivation, to check the privilege and to notice the reality. As ever with bible, human nature does not change and we can see ourselves in the stories of our forbears.

*Painting of Korach and his 250 rebels by Sandro Botticelli entitled The Punishment of Rebels

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RUNNING AWAY FROM SNAKES
A commentary on Parashat Chukkat
By Rabbi Robyn Ashworth-Steen

Along with around 12 million others, you may have seen the terrifying scene of an iguana being chased by a swarm of snakes in David Attenborough’s Planet Earth. Apologies now to those who suffer from ophidiophobia (a fear of snakes). In this petrifying clip we see a young iguana miraculously escape from this pit of snakes. At first the iguana stands stock still in an attempt to mislead the snakes whose vision is poor and who only react to movement. But the scene soon intensifies with the reptile being forced to run over rocks as more and more snakes appear from crevasses in the rocks. From a seemingly peaceful landscape it is, almost immediately, flooded with snakes from every direction.

In Parashat Chukkat we are introduced to a very similar scene when, in response to the Israelites’ moans about the hardship of the wilderness, G-d sends fiery serpents amongst the people. Unfortunately, the Israelites do not escape from harm, as our iguana did, but rather suffer from fatal snake bites. This pit of snakes attacks and is victorious. With the help of the Planet Earth clip we can imagine the horror of this scene. We hear the Israelites’ desperate plea to Moses to ask Adonai to remove the serpents. We can only imagine how heartfelt Moses’ prayer would have been that day. The next part of this narrative is very surprising. After instructions from Adonai, Moses builds a brass serpent upon a pole. When a snake bite victim looked into the eyes of the serpent they were healed and lived to tell the tale.

What was this serpent built? Why was this serpent built? What was its significance? I think Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel may be able to help us. In his book, ‘Between G-d and Man: An Interpretation of Judaism’ Heschel also employs the use of the image of people (rather than iguanas) being chased by snakes. The image is, again, horrifying. He says that ‘for each snake the desperate men slew, ten more seemed to lash out in its place’. Heschel then, crucially, states that ‘our world seems not unlike a pit of snakes’. He continues by saying that we had descended into the pit of snakes generations ago and that ‘the snakes have sent their venom into the bloodstream of humanity, gradually paralyzing us, numbing nerve after nerve, dulling our minds, darkening our vision’. This image is far more terrifying than that presented by Planet Earth. Here we are, human beings in our families, communities and relationships slowly being surrounded by snakes, multiplying at a rate of knots. The snakes of poverty, inequality, racism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, hate and malnutrition have already surrounded us. They are upon us and one of the most worrying things is that we tend only notice them when we get bitten – when we are directly affected.

In our sacred narrative we see that the bitten person is only healed once they look in the eyes of the snake. That is, once they see what is before them and look into the eyes of prostitution, modern slavery and trafficking. If we close our eyes to what is going on around us we will be surrounded and attacked and society as we know it will descend into the apocalyptic vision which Heschel paints. We cannot simply try and plaster over the cracks in our society for the snakes will still come. But instead we must address the root problems. I’ll end with the words of one of the people being chased by the snakes in Heschel’s story:
‘If we remain here, we shall be dead before the snakes. I am searching for a way of escape from the pit for all of us.’

Our duty is to follow the Iguana’s example and run for our lives – run to find ways to escape from the toxic ills of our environment. We must look the snake in the eye. It is what G-d commands and expects of us.
A commentary on Parashat Balak
By Gideon Leibowitz

The compelling, and somewhat mystifying, tale of Balaam and his donkey in Parashat Balak, is one of the more striking portions within the Torah, revealing a powerful insight into how Jewish people tackle issues in the wider world.

The story goes that Balak, the Moabite King, summoned the prophet Balaam to curse the Israelites who had just defeated the Amorites in battle. Although reluctant to carry out this task, Balaam agreed, but while on the journey, his donkey came to a complete standstill. Angry at its refusal to move, Balaam beat his donkey until G-d "opened the donkey's mouth". Channelling the voice of G-d, the donkey told Balaam not to curse the Israelites but instead to bless them. And so it goes that when Balaam reached the people of Israel he delivered the pivotal and everlasting blessing on the Israelites - "Mah Tovu Ohalecha Yaa'akov (How good are your tents, O Jacob)".

This Parasha is the only portion of the Torah in which there is a talking animal, something that has occupied Rabbis and scholars for generations. However, of the many potential readings of this Parashat, for me, the most pertinent is not the fantastical nature of the donkey, nor the beauty of the blessing Balaam bestows upon the Israelites, but the fact that in a time of crisis, G-d granted the donkey one of the most powerful gifts possible: the ability to talk.

Without the capacity to speak, the donkey starts off as a subservient and seemingly insignificant presence - particularly in comparison with the authoritative characters of a King and a prophet. However, the donkey's unexpected voice decisively flips the power dynamic between itself and Balaam and the profound impact of speech, even in the face of the brutality of Balaam's beating, enables the donkey to persuade the prophet to bless the Israelites instead of cursing them.

The power of speech has always been a central feature of the Torah. In the morning liturgy of P'Sukei D'zimrah, we say "Blessed is the One who spoke and the world came to be...", implying that G-d "spoke" the Universe into existence. Similarly, the oral tradition of songs, sermons and stories in Judaism has always been an essential part of our culture and shared history.

And this emphasis placed on the power of speech is a timely reminder of the Jewish community's actions within the wider world. Unlike the donkey at the beginning of the Parasha, we are fortunate enough to have the ability to speak up and speak out, both as individuals and as a community.

Today, human rights abuses exist in all corners of the world. In Syria, 11 million people have been displaced by years of civil war, in Chechnya the LGBT community face persecution and violence, and there are more people in slavery today than at any point in human history.

As a community, we can always do more. Silence and passivity cannot be an option when we have the choice of whether to speak out or not. Silence often shows indifference and as the great Elie Wiesel said, "Indifference elicits no response. Indifference is not a response. Indifference is not a beginning; it is an end."

There are many people around the world who do not have the power to speak out for themselves. Therefore, just like Balaam's donkey, who used his voice in such a meaningful way, when we have the privilege of being able to speak, for those of us who do have a voice, it is our duty that we make ourselves heard.

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In the Parasha for this week, we have examples of what are, to my mind, the best and the worst of humanity. At the beginning of the Parasha is the conclusion of a story about relations with the Midianites involving idolatry and intermarriage. There, Pinchas, the grandson of Aaron, is rewarded by G-d for murdering an Israelite notable, Zimri and the Midianite woman, Cozbi, whom he had possibly – we cannot be sure from the text – taken as his wife. Pinchas's action had apparently checked a plague, but we should sit very uncomfortably anytime we read of vigilante action being taken against someone, and then the vigilante being rewarded. If such an act were committed today, it would rightly cause outrage and disgust, and the perpetrator would, we hope, be punished. It is a story wherein the woman is painted as the major actor in the scandal – G-d is depicted in Chapter 25 v.18 as calling it “the affair of Cozbi”, with the man seemingly less to blame than her.

Centuries later, in rabbinic attempts to explain this story, an elaborate plot is suggested in which the Israelite men are seduced by young Midianite women. The evidence to support this plot is paper-thin, but it enables the rabbis of the early centuries in the common era to justify what we should nowadays find unacceptable. Civilised society ought never reward a Pinchas for such a vigilante act of self-righteous indignation and fatal aggression. In our era, although it might sometimes be cumbersome and get things wrong, we have to uphold the rule of law and reinforce this respect for the law in our children.

At all times, people who value pluralism, equality, fairness, and the rule of law in a civilised society must be vigilant in support of these principles. This is, as history repeatedly has shown, especially important in times of economic, social or political turmoil, when people seek others on whom to vent their frustrations. Women, foreign workers, asylum seekers, Jews, Muslims, other minorities – all can be vulnerable and blamed in such times.

That is why the story of the daughters of Zelophechad that appears in Numbers 27 is one that we can celebrate and, I hope, use to empower ourselves. The five women – Machlah, Noah, Choglah, Malkah and Tirtsah – who are always named whenever they appear, present their case to Moses and everyone, using the legal systems of their time. G-d is portrayed clearly and unequivocally as asserting that their case is right, and the law of the Torah takes a major step towards fair treatment of the women. We can all be successors to these five women if we choose. We can all work cooperatively to peacefully improve the law and safeguard the rights of those who could be marginalised.

In contrast with satisfying the desire for instant redress or revenge, it takes patience, persistence and clarity of purpose to keep on pursuing just and peaceful change.

If Parashat Pinchas teaches us one thing though, it is that the distance between a vigilante and being vigilant is only as much as a finger stroke. Which will you be this week?

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BETWEEN RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

A commentary on Parashat Matot
By Robin Moss

The beginning of Parashat Matot (“Tribes”) distinguishes between two different concepts, in Hebrew a neder and a shevua. If you open a standard English translation of the text, you will usually see the former translated as a “vow” and the latter as an “oath”. In English they are essentially synonyms, but in Hebrew, they refer to different things.

Rav Joseph Soloveitchik offers us the following way to understand the distinction. A shevua creates an obligation upon a person to do (or not do) something – for instance, if I said “No chocolate for me please. I’m on a diet”, the focus is on me. A neder changes the status of an object – for instance, in the diet example above, the chocolate has now become a forbidden item.

It might seem like a narrow, technical separation, but it is important and also might help us thinking about rights and responsibilities.

In his classic work of political philosophy Anarchy, State, and Utopia (1974), Robert Nozick (who, incidentally, was Jewish) lays out a theory of rights as what he calls “moral side-constraints”. By this, he means that the crucial feature of a right is that it imposes an obligation on all other people (and, by extension, institutions such as governments) not to violate that right. In other words, when we say “Person A has a right to life”, what we really mean is “every other person has an obligation not to kill Person A” (and of course, by reciprocity, Person A has an obligation not to kill every other person).

Nozick therefore frames rights, usually thought of as the “property” of each human by dint of being human, instead as placing moral responsibilities onto the rest of humanity. I don’t so much carry around a basket of goodies as a set of invisible shields. In the language of Matot, rights are neder, not shevua. They act on everyone else, not on me. They impose responsibilities, rather than granting privileges.

Now to be sure, there are many in the philosophical world who have challenged Nozick’s understanding of rights. For one thing, in his conception, it is unclear how there can be different categories of rights, for instance the “qualified”, “limited” and “absolute” classifications within the UK Human Rights Act (1998). For another, if rights are moral side-constraints, what happens when rights come into conflict? (In fairness, Nozick and neo-Nozickeans have more or less convincing answers for these and other challenges).

The neder/shevua distinction illuminates something else profound about human rights. A shevua version of rights, as being my property, places the onus on me to claim/assert my rights. If rights are neder, really it is everyone else who should be feeling a duty towards me. It totally changes the focus of human rights education and advocacy. It is the difference between asking people to listen to the small, downtrodden voice of the victim of a human rights abuse as opposed to feel the obligation we have to them. Reactive versus proactive. About them versus about (all of) us. Rights as “protecting the little guy” versus rights as binding us together in mutual ties of societal obligation.

I recognise that sometimes, rights as shevua might be the only option. Many people just do not feel some forms of moral obligation to others, and it has to be legally asserted/forced upon them. But I wonder what the whole discourse around rights might be if we started first and foremost as talking about them as neder, as responsibilities on all of us, to everyone else. An inspiration, aspirational model for our society, and a valuable Jewish insight into universal human rights.
The Torah was not given to angels, but to human beings, and human beings sometimes make mistakes, sometimes the worst mistakes you can imagine.

So what do you do if you kill someone by mistake? When their family swears to take bloody revenge upon you? When it looks like they will take justice into their own hands?

For this reason the Torah instructs us about the six Cities of Refuge:

“You shall provide yourselves with places to serve you as cities of refuge to which a manslayer who has killed a person unintentionally may flee. The cities shall serve you as a refuge from the avenger, so that the manslayer may not die unless he has stood trial before the assembly.” (Numbers 35)

The law recognises that people do not always act logically but that powerful emotions, like fear, anger and hate, can override our intellect and cause us to lash out to those who hurt us, even if they had no intention to do so. Accidental killers need to be protected, so that true justice can be done.

The rabbis of the Talmud emphasised the importance of these Cities of Refuge, stressing both their accessibility and their use:

“It is taught: Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov says that the word Refuge was inscribed at the crossroads so that the manslayer might notice and turn in that direction.” (Babylonian Talmud, Makkot 10a-b)

“Rabbi Yossi ben Yehudah says, that to begin with, every slayer, be it in error or with intent, was first sent forward to the cities of refuge. The Court then sent for him from there.” (Ibid. 10b)

It is not enough to merely have Cities of Refuge, to have paths to safety and security for those who need them, but those paths must be clear and well signposted. In your moment of need, when the vengeful are following you, you need every sign to point the way. And it isn’t enough to protect just the innocent - because how can you tell who is innocent until you’ve had a trial? Until they have stood before the court of law, all killers deserve the same chance at sanctuary, the same opportunity for justice.

A number of years ago, I watched Louis Theroux’s documentary, ‘Miami Mega Jail’, and saw the state of the Pre-Trial Detention Centre. The inmates of the PTDC have not yet stood trial, and are technically innocent, yet the culture of violence and abuse that the documentary revealed was truly shocking. A 2014 study revealed that worldwide three million people were being held in pre-trial detention and other forms of remand. Unable to get on with their lives, these people should be innocent until proven guilty, yet many may spend a long time treated as guilty before coming to court.

In this way the Cities of Refuge were aiming to be better, to be places that manslayers could actually live, albeit with reduced freedom of movement. Based on Deuteronomy 4:2, the rabbis of the Talmud deduce that the manslayer needs to be provided with the basic needs of civilisation - a town with a market, with easy access to water, and even, if the manslayer is a scholar, access to his teacher (Makkot 10a).

It is a sad reality that it takes a while for courts to bring everyone to trial, and a necessity that those awaiting trial cannot flee beyond the reach of justice, but Parashat Masei, and the rabbis of the Talmud, come to teach us that killers never cease to be human.

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HEARING OUT HIGH AND LOW ALIKE
A commentary on Parashat Devarim
By Matt Plen

We usually assume that compassion for the poor and vulnerable is the bedrock of a commitment to social justice and human rights. It is certainly the assumption behind the graphic, heart-rending adverts published by poverty, homelessness and refugee charities. This idea also has powerful philosophical roots. The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas writes that the basis of ethics is our intuitive response to the suffering face of the Other. In other words, morality is based not on principles or ideology, but on an instinctive impulse to act for an individual who we perceive to need our help.

How does this idea play out in Parashat Devarim? A significant section concerns G-d’s instructions to the Israelites regarding the peoples whose land they had to cross on the way to Canaan:

*Charge the people as follows: You will be passing through the territory of your kinsmen, the descendants of Esau, who live in Seir. They will be afraid of you, be very careful. Do not provoke them! For I will not give you of their land so much as a foot can tread on; I have given the hill country of Seir as a possession to Esau. What food you eat you shall obtain from them for money; even the water you drink you shall procure from them for money.*

*(chapter 2, verses 4-6).*

The obvious question this passage raises is: if the descendants of Esau are afraid, why do the Israelites need to be careful? Rashi, the medieval commentator, offers the following explanation, linking two consecutive phrases: “They will be afraid of you, be very careful” – how should they be careful? “Do not provoke them”. Nechama Leibowitz, a 20th century Torah scholar, expands on Rashi’s comment, explaining that the new generation, born into freedom after the Exodus from Egypt, were ‘full of their own strength and vigour [and] had to learn to practise self-control and curb their own aggressiveness aroused by the very fear displayed by their weaker neighbour’. In order to act on the imperative to protect the vulnerable, they first had to learn to see their neighbours – in Levinas’ terms, the face of the Other.

Subsequently the narrative takes an unexpected turn. After enjoining the Israelites to practice restraint in relation to the sons of Esau, the Moabites and the Ammonites, G-d gives a different command regarding the Amorite kingdom of Sihon:

*Up! Set out across the wadi Arnon! See, I give into your power Sihon the Amorite, King of Heshbon, and his land. Begin the occupation: engage him in battle. This day I begin to put the dread and fear of you upon the peoples everywhere under heaven, so that they shall tremble and quake because of you whenever they hear you mentioned (verses 24-25).*

If the Israelites had to be restrained from provoking the previous people they encountered, we might expect them to leap at this opportunity to attack Sihon. Yet we read that Moses ignored G-d’s instruction:

*Then I sent messengers from the wilderness of Kedemoth to King Sihon of Heshbon with an offer of peace, as follows: “Let me pass through your country. I will keep strictly to the highway, turning off neither to the right nor to the left. What food I eat you will supply for money, and what water I drink you will furnish for money; just let me pass through….”* *(verses 26-28).*

How can this change in attitude be explained? It seems that Moses had internalised the principle underlying G-d’s previous instructions. The fact that King Sihon was an assertive, military leader (see verses 30-32), very different from the frightened people that the Israelites had hitherto encountered, seems not to have influenced Moses. The principle of non-aggression had become detached from the specific identity of one’s potential adversary.
This idea of prioritising abstract principle over personality is articulated explicitly earlier in the Parasha, when Moses recalls his establishment of a judicial system for the people as they emerged from Egyptian slavery:

*I charged your magistrates at that time as follows, “Hear out your fellow men, and decide justly between any man and a fellow Israelite or a stranger. You shall not be partial in judgment: hear out low and high alike. Fear no man, for judgment is G-d’s. And any matter that is too difficult for you, you shall bring to me and I will hear it”* (chapter 1, verses 16-17).

Equal treatment before the law for Israelites and strangers is an easy principle to grasp. But ‘hearing out high and low alike’ or, as stated elsewhere in the Torah ‘You shall neither side with the mighty to do wrong … nor shall you show deference to a poor man in his dispute’ (Exodus 23:2-3) is more problematic.

If justice is about responding to the needy and vulnerable, then surely we should favour the poor over the rich! The Torah slaps this idea down with this unambiguous statement that the law must be blind.

In a fascinating essay¹, German Jewish political theorist Hannah Arendt makes a startling argument that compassion for the poor is a dangerous principle on which to base justice. She claims the difference between the American revolution, whose resulting republic has survived for over 200 years, and its French counterpart, which descended almost immediately into anarchy and violence, was that the French revolutionaries were consumed with the urgent question of solving the problem of poverty. Their passion and their identification with the poor against the rich resulted in dogmatism, violence and ultimately the collapse of the revolution. The American Founding Fathers, on the other hand, were preoccupied not with poverty but with freedom from tyranny. Accordingly, they set about creating institutions in which all men (slaves and women aside) could enjoy equal treatment and would be able to engage in deliberative politics.

Arendt believes that ignoring human particularity and suffering was, paradoxically, a vital ingredient in the struggle for freedom and justice. In today’s turbulent political climate, can we say the same thing?

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* Hannah Arendt

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THE RIGHT TO REST
A commentary on Parashat Va’Etchanan
By Rabbi Dr Deborah Kahn-Harris

Parashat Va’Etchanan is a rich source for looking at human rights. Spanning Deuteronomy 3: 23 – 7:11, the whole of this Parasha is voiced by Moses, as he recounts the story of the Israelites in the desert following the Exodus from Egypt. In looking at human rights, we might examine the value of the cities of refuge (Dt 4:41-43) or the legal status of covenantal relationship or, as Moses is explicitly denied entry into the land of Israel by G-d as a punishment (Dt 3:23-28), what the suitability of particular punishments for particular crimes. But the real centrepiece of this parasha is the recounting of the ten commandments in Dt 5: 6-18, which simply cannot be ignored in a discussion of human rights.

In particular, I would like to focus on one of the key differences between the ten commandments as listed here in Deuteronomy and the list as it first appears in Exodus. Famously as we know from the Lecha Dodi prayer we sing on Friday evenings, the biblical text presents us with a problem in the fourth commandment. In Ex 20: 8 we are enjoined to zachor, remember, the Shabbat day to keep it holy; whereas Parashat Va’Etchanan in Dt 5:12 we are commanded to shamor, guard the Shabbat day to keep it holy. Moreover, the rationale is different in these two texts. In Exodus we remember the Shabbat because G-d rested on the 7th day of creation; in other words, we remember Shabbat in an act of imitatio Dei (imitation of G-d). In Deuteronomy, we guard Shabbat because we were once slaves in Egypt and G-d freed us; therefore, G-d commands us to observe Shabbat. Essentially, we guard Shabbat as a day of rest, because as slaves we had no rest. Through this commandment G-d teaches us the human need for rest.

In fact, both the Deuteronomy and Exodus renditions of this commandment make explicit the fundamental need for, perhaps even right to, rest. Both texts tell us not only do we need to rest, but also our extended family (sons and daughters, spouses and partners), people who work for us (in the language of the Hebrew Bible our servants of both genders), strangers who reside among us, and even beasts of burden. Any living creature that works requires regular rest periods. We are all equal in this matter.

Living as we do in a modern, late capitalist society where job insecurity is rife particularly among the poorest members of society with the ensuing pressure to be available for any sort of work whenever it might appear and a culture of 7-day week, 24-hour day shopping is increasingly the norm for all of us, the Bible’s message that rest from all forms of work is an essential right for everyone could not be a timelier human rights message. It is a message we must remember and guard if we are to continue to work for a society in which we all can thrive.

Rabbi Dr Deborah Kahn-Harris is the Principal of Leo Baeck College
A PARADOX OF HUMAN RIGHTS
A commentary on Parashat Eikev
By Sam Alston

In our reading of the Torah, we are currently in the middle of Moses’ grand speech to the people before he dies - reminding them of where they have come from, what has been achieved, and passing on some final wisdom.

One of the bits of wisdom found in Parashat Eikev covers an important part of Moses’ speech to the people from the mountain and includes the commandment in Birkat Hamazon, the blessing after meals, that ‘When you have eaten and are satisfied, then praise the Eternal One’, a mitzvah Jews around the world practice daily.

For many of our Christian fellows, this may seem odd. Christians say grace before meals - when they are at their most hungry and are most likely to appreciate the thought of the food and desire it the most.

Why do we do it the other way around?

Throughout Parashat Eikev, Moses reminds us that once we have entered the land we should praise G-d for our victory and remember to follow G-d’s commandments - that even after we have got what we want and are satisfied we should continue to listen to G-d and follow mitzvot.

The reasoning for this emphasis becomes clearer once we consider it in the context of human rights. Human rights each build on each other to preserve what we need to be free. If you are hungry then, for example, this limits your ability to exercise your right to vote. You may not have the time to study the candidates’ positions, the concentration to participate in the process, and it probably is not top of your priority list. Similarly, if you have no right to freedom of assembly, you may struggle to organise to protect your right to privacy.

The point when we are most capable of guaranteeing our human rights is the point when we are in full possession of our human rights. It is also the point where we are most able to join with others and fight for them to enjoy the same rights as us. However, paradoxically this is the point when we are most likely to feel comfortable and stop valuing our human rights. It is the time when we feel that the government is on our side and thus we do not mind it extending its power into our lives – just as after we have eaten we are likely to be least thankful for another bite of food.

Looked at this way, it is not only our moral and religious obligation to continue to thank G-d and pursue justice once we have been satisfied but it is also the best way to ensure that we still have our human rights and enough to eat.

So next time you fulfill the commandment of Birkat Hamazon, think also about how you can pray with your feet and work for human rights for all.

The point when we are most capable of guaranteeing our human rights is the point when we are in full possession of our human rights

Sam Alston was a movement worker for LlY-Netzer, the youth movement of Liberal Judaism

* Rabbi Heschel marching alongside Martin Luther King Jr at the Selma march in 1965 quoted as saying “When I marched in Selma, my legs were praying”
SEEING WITH OUR HEARTS
A commentary on Parashat Re‘eh
By Rabbi Janet Darley

This Parasha begins with the word “see”. “See, this day I set before your blessing and curse” (Deuteronomy 11:26).

Seeing, or not seeing, figures in a number of passages in Torah. Abraham, almost completely ignored, the ram so bent was he on sacrificing Isaac, though sacrificing children was a prohibited act. Balaam’s donkey sees what its owner can not seem to see—G-d’s messenger with a large sword. There are also examples of misseeing—of seeing not reality, but fear. The majority of the spies sent to examine the land reported it to be inhabited by giants. What should we be seeing, so we might receive the blessing and not the curse?

Parashat Re‘eh continues (verse 7) telling us “do not harden your heart” and “open your hand.” In good classic pedagogical form, the Torah gives us the lesson and a corresponding action to reinforce the lesson. This methodology, which takes law and expands it to a relevancy that the law alone may not have, either for the ancient Israelites or for us today, makes the lesson easier to grasp.

When we hear the term “hardened heart” it immediately echoes the story of Passover and the action of G-d “harden” Pharaoh’s heart. But “heart hardening” is not reserved just for Pharaoh. The world is filled with hardened hearts. Almost daily, we are confronted with stories in the evening news, newspaper articles, or even direct mail that remind us of the pain that exists in the world. We hear and read these stories continually, and yet most of us go on with our lives able to successfully compartmentalize the “news” from that which genuinely affects us. In a world filled with so much tragedy, we have become used to shutting off the ambient noise of pain and suffering. We become blind to the truth of what is happening. We don’t “see.” Every one of us is guilty of this at one time or another. Our constant challenge is to find ways to contribute to healing the world’s ills in ways that are meaningful, realistic, and appropriate.

There are two ways of seeing—one is with our eyes. We should look carefully at what is around us. But sometimes our eyes deceive us. Sometimes we need to shut our eyes and see with our hearts, with our souls, to really understand.

I am shocked and horrified at the rhetoric surrounding the desperate people fleeing war torn lands, fleeing upheaval, fleeing the death and destruction all around them. Words and headlines that paint them as swarms, as marauders, ignoring the reality that they, like us, are made in the image of G-d.

In 2016, there were 38,516 applications for asylum in the UK, Italy had over 100,000, France about twice as many as the UK. Only around 40% of UK asylum applications are accepted. We do have resettlement schemes, but just over 7,000 Syrians have been settled here through resettlement schemes in the past two years. Only 250 children came in under the Dubs amendment with another 1000 brought in to reunite with their families here.

These trips are perilous. In 2016, 5000 drowned in the Mediterranean. By April 2017, 1000 had drowned. For those who come overland, the journey is also dangerous

Why might someone want to come to Britain? They may have family members or friends here. Often they speak English, so they logically think that ultimately they will be able to rebuild their lives and use their skills here.

We of all people have to find a way to see the truth. We must see and then choose--blessing or curse. Which we get depends on the society we choose to create.

Rabbi Janet Darley came to the UK from Utah in 1989. She was a senior lecturer in economics at Kingston University before retiring to study for the rabbinate. She served South London Liberal Synagogue from 2008 until the summer of 2016. She is a Citizens UK Leader and serves on its council and executive.
JUSTICE DOES NOT COME CHEAP
A commentary on Parashat Shoftim
By Micah Smith

Justice does not come cheap. Employing judges, paying for law enforcement, maintaining the infrastructure needed to administer justice…it’s no wonder the judiciary are frequently called on to find cost savings. But when too much is cut, what is lost? Justice and the rule of law are essential for human rights. As the preamble to the UN Declaration on Human Rights puts it:

“it is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law”.

Likewise, Article 6 of the European Convention on Human Rights recognizes the right to a fair trial as a fundamental human right. We are fortunate to be able to go to fair-minded and independent judges who will apply the law properly. It’s what restrains the state and others from acting in arbitrary ways that would undermine our human rights. That’s why the rule of law, making everyone subject to the law, including the most powerful – matters so much.

Parashat Shoftim, meaning “judges”, recognizes this. It requires that even the king be subject to “all the rules of the Torah”. While the King stands above the people, he cannot stand above the law. In fact, the King is instructed to carry a copy of the law wherever he goes and to study it every day; the king is a servant and a student of the law, not its master.

Parashat Shoftim contains the Torah’s most famous line about justice: “Justice, justice shall you pursue”. Justice is thus painted as something elusive; something to be pursued and worked for and never simply had and taken for granted. The word “justice” is also repeated. Rabbi Bunim of Peshischa suggests that this is because in the pursuit of justice, both the means and the ends must be just. It is not enough for justice to be administered; the way it is administered must also be just.

Shoftim offers clues for how to achieve this. In a commandment that prioritizes access to justice over efficiency savings, the people are called to appoint Judges for “all cities”, not just the largest ones. Then, in a commandment that prioritizes a representative judiciary over an efficient one, where a city has different tribes, each tribe is commanded to appoint its own judges. The cities are also commanded to appoint “judges”, not just one judge. This implies that at least two judges would hear each case, perhaps because, as written in Pirkei Avot, “no one can judge alone but the One”.

In all cases, judges had to be capable of giving “righteous judgments”. Judges were selected on the basis of merit alone and not prestige or connections. Parashat Shoftim requires individuals who will “not pervert justice… show favoritism… [or] take a bribe”. Human rights demand that not only do we support the justice system but that the justice system itself and its officials take pains to be above corruption.

Applying Parashat Shoftim’s principles to modern times entails a justice system that is likely to be costly, but also effective. Justice has to be accessible and delivered close to the people (“in all cities”). The judiciary must be diverse and representative (“for your tribes”). There must be enough judges to deal with the caseload and deliberate over their judgments (because more than one judge hears a case). And all judges need the expertise and integrity to consider their cases appropriately. A robust justice system is expensive, but our rights depend on it, and ultimately it enriches us all.

Justice is thus painted as something elusive; something to be pursued and worked for and never simply had and taken for granteded

Micah Smith is a former René Cassin Fellow, a playwright and a lawyer
WHO ARE THE WIDOW, ORPHAN AND STRANGER?
A commentary on Parashat Ki Teitzei
By Georgina Bye

Parashat Ki Teitzei at first seems like a pretty negative Parasha and I would wager that it is on the whole. It is one with lots of rules and regulations about what to do during war, when and how you should stone people, when to exile them from the community and who should be sentenced to death. To some extent it is basically an episode of Game of Thrones, but without the dragons.

However, we need to push past the brutality of this Parasha and take a closer look. The Parasha is not just talking about adultery, war and punishment, it goes on to talk about how you should plant your crops and build a fence around your roof so nobody falls off, how to allocate inheritance and the imperative to return lost property. How do these pieces sit side by side? Really this Parasha is about how you treat one another and despite this human to human element it’s not an easy Parasha to read, many of the rulings are challenging to our modern worldviews, the treatment of agunot (chained women who have been refused a divorce by their husbands), the general oppression of women as captives through marriage, and the social exclusion of wayward children and much more.

Yet, there is a glimmer of hope in this Parasha, although you have to wait until almost the end of the portion to find it. In Chapter 24 we turn our sights towards the poor workers, the strangers who are in our land, widows and orphans. After so much talk of how we can mistreat people we get to a point which says hang on a minute, you don’t take advantage of those that have nothing.

This section is talking about how we must treat the most vulnerable, we must pay their wages on time. We must not take a widow’s cloak for payment. Essentially we could derive that we are talking about those in extreme poverty, those outside of our own community, that have nobody to care for them. Perhaps a modern reading, is the refugee, the person struck by natural disaster or living in the shadow of an oppressive regime. The reasoning we are given here is that we should “remember that you were slaves in Egypt.” This phrase is repeated at least six times in the Torah through various iterations and again throughout the Passover Haggadah so it must be fairly important and worth reminding us of.

The other part of this obligation to the vulnerable is that of leaving some of the produce of the fields for the poor. This Parasha says you should not pick all of the olives off the tree and if you drop some sheafs of harvest in your field you must leave them there and not pick them up.

In truth I feel this is one of the most important messages that we occasionally need reminding of, maybe that is why it is repeated. Yes, this Parasha is a challenging one to read but it also contains one of our strongest imperatives to treat those less fortunate than ourselves with kindness and to not make their situation worse. Where we can lift them up so as not to be sinful ourselves.

I am very privileged to work for organisations that dedicate their time and resources to helping those in extreme poverty, those affected by natural disasters and revitalising Jewish communities around the world. They do so with this Jewish imperative in mind, driving their organisations and their personal work to support those that most need it.

Georgina Bye is the UK Manager for Olam and JDC Entwine
THERE BUT FOR THE GRACE OF G-D, GO WE…
A commentary on Parashat Ki Tavo
By Rabbi Sybil A. Sheridan

‘When you enter into the land…’ Moses urges the people in this Parasha, they must take of the first fruits of the harvest, bring them to the Tabernacle and give them to the High Priest saying the words made famous through the Passover Haggadah:

“A fugitive Aramean was my father…”

In a formula that describes the going down to Egypt, the slavery and the rescue from Egypt by the Eternal…

“Who brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and with an outstretched arm and with great awesomeness and with sign and with wonders.”

Though we read this passage at Passover, the context here, the giving of the first fruits associates it with the Festival of Shavuot, - although it could also refer to Sukkot and Pesach - the other harvest festivals. We read it just two weeks before the start of the Yamim Noraim – Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The phrase, therefore, and the memory it conjures of Jewish History – of the going down and the coming up out of Egypt is key to every major holy day of the year. The message is clear. Though we may be entering a new stage of settlement, this is not ‘blood and soil’ ideology. The people of Israel have come and gone from the land in the past… they are immigrants, tolerated in the land only because of the grace of G-d.

We are always moving - not only physically from place to place, but also materially from blessings to curses, from prosperity to poverty and back again, and spiritually - wavering between goodness and its opposite. We Jews today are very fortunate for while we still tend to move around, it is largely through choice, not compulsion and, unlike our ancestors, we live comfortably in two worlds, that of our Jewishness, and that of the general culture around.

But others, as we are all too well aware, keep moving, not through their own volition but because of war or famine, prejudice or persecution. The constant reminder is in our texts, our liturgy and our tradition of our origins as slaves. Our rescue from Egypt, through some miracle, chance or circumstance – certainly not through any merit of our own – should make us aware of the chance and circumstance that brings other nationalities to our door. We know, when we look into the face of a stranger, that ‘there but for the grace of G-d, go we …’

The first fruits brought to the priest were to be shared between the Levite and the stranger, the orphan and the widow - those who are impoverished and who cannot work the land for themselves. From the very first moment when we thank G-d for our newfound safety in a land of our own, our obligation to help others newly come to the land must be realized.

Later in the Parashat we read of the many blessings the land will bring – and we read of the many curses that will come to us if we fail to observe G-d’s mitzvot. The blessings and curses are to be delivered to the people in a particular ritualistic manner. Once they have crossed the Jordan, the leaders of six tribes will climb mount Ebal, the mountain of blessings and the leaders of the six other tribes will climb mount Gerizim, the mountain of curses. As the people pass through the valley below, the blessings and the curses are shouted out, so the people receive the message while they are moving…on the march to their final destination.

Rabbi Sybil A. Sheridan is a writer and British Reform Rabbi
I do not enjoy traditional Jewish dancing. I struggle to follow the actions and join a circle. At Summer Camp I would DJ to avoid having to do it. Recently I have been pushing myself out of my comfort zone.

Picture the scene - I am at a wedding. I am wearing brogues, trousers, button up shirt and a bow tie. I walk up to a circle to dance and get physically pushed out of it. I explain that I am not a man and dancing in the women's circle was the most appropriate place for me and get pushed out the circle again. I am turned away. Physical and emotional rejection from a space.

My understanding of Parashat Nitzavim is that Moses talks to the Israelites and, to paraphrase, “if you agree to the covenant with G-d you will be taken care of. If you do not - you will be punished and everyone will know it. But if you then return – and really mean it - you will be more prosperous than those who originally agreed the covenant.”

The initial interpretation I took was that sometimes your relationship with G-d is not healthy. I do not believe you should be threatened and punished for taking your own path in life. I do not believe you should feel pressured to return to something you have turned your back on. However, the more I read this section, the more I read the implications this can have on gender policing.

Gender policing is when people (whether actual police or more commonly – the public, friends, family or anyone else) enforce gender expectations based on what they assume ‘normal’ gender presentation or behaviour to be. For example, when you dismiss a man for liking ‘feminine’ colours or when a woman who is more masculine looking goes into a women’s toilet and gets asked to leave.

The text says if you covertly disobey G-d, G-d will be the one to punish you. But if you overtly disobey G-d, it’s up to ‘us and our children’ to police this behaviour. The policing of LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Queer) people by communities is common. Why reward those who align with your expectations and punish those who do not? I am not saying all Queer people want to align with expectations or be welcomed. But those who do – do you expect them to assimilate to what your expectation of being a human is?

People who agree to the covenant (or not) include Jewish LGBTQ people. Often communities reject them for being different to them, not for disobeying. The idea that you should be punished for walking your own path in life goes against other Jewish principles – such as treating others as you would want to be treated. The idea that our communities should judge these decisions – when we can never know what someone is thinking – seems dangerous. Where can queers stand, if no matter where they stand – punishment is inevitable?

The way I express gender is not “conventional” and the gender I have is not always binary - either woman or man. The text asks communities to police people for overtly disobeying G-d but how can we and, when we really reflect - why should we? I was going into a space I was already nervous to be in. I was aware gendered dancing was going to take place. I made a judgement call on what space was most appropriate and “safest” to be in. LGBTQ people do this all the time: participating with love in their hearts and anxiety pumping around their bodies. And yet - rejection.

Perhaps if spaces were more inclusive, understanding and open people may not want to ‘turn away’ and could find space in a community. How can spaces be made to be more inclusive, more safe – when we can have such strongly held assumptions about who people are and what our spaces need to be. Would you reject people from your community because you see them as “other”?

Dalia Fleming is the Director of Keshet UK

LGBTQ people do this all the time: participating with love in their hearts and anxiety pumping around their bodies. And yet - rejection
BE STRONG, BE OF GOOD COURAGE
A commentary on Parashat Vayeilech
By Maureen Kendler

Two ideas in Parashat Vayeilech seem to be interlinked in a strange way. Twice, G-d warns that in the future He will “hide His face.” Three times, Moses tells Joshua to “be strong, be of good courage, do not fear, or not be frightened by them.” G-d saying “I will hide my face” is one of the most mysterious and terrifying pronouncements He ever makes. What is humanity’s response supposed to be? Surely the answer is also there in the Parasha, to “be strong, be of good courage....”

Despite the fact that G-d will “hide His face”, our path forward is not to be afraid. It does not mean that we do nothing, give up, absolve the self of responsibility. It must be a call to humanity to respond with bravery.

G-d’s face may have been hidden in Warsaw in 1939, but Janusz Korczak’s face was not. Korczak headed up an orphanage in Warsaw like no other. Born in 1878 into a well-off Warsaw Jewish family, he played with poor children while young and his passion for helping disadvantaged youth continued into adulthood. He studied medicine and also had a promising career in literature.

In 1912, Korczak established a Jewish orphanage, in a building which he designed himself to advance his progressive educational theories. He envisioned a world in which children structured their own world. For example, in his manifesto, ‘The Rights of The Child’ he spoke against corporal punishment at a time when such treatment was considered a parental entitlement or even a duty. Later in ‘The Child’s Right to Respect’ he wrote:

In what extraordinary circumstances would one dare to push, hit or tug an adult? And yet it is considered so routine and harmless to give a child a tap or stinging smack or to grab it by the arm. The feeling of powerlessness creates respect for power. Not only adults but anyone who is older and stronger can cruelly demonstrate their displeasure, back up their words with force, demand obedience and abuse the child without being punished. We set an example that fosters contempt for the weak. This is bad parenting and sets a bad precedent.

Korczak was a well-known and highly respected figure in Warsaw and after his orphanage was moved inside the ghetto in 1940, he received many offers to be smuggled out. But he refused to abandon the orphans. On August 5, 1942, Korczak joined nearly 200 children and orphanage staff members who were rounded up for deportation to Treblinka.

It was said the sight of Dr Janusz Korczak leading the orphans to their fate dressed in their best clothes with combed hair and calm dignity made the very pavements of Warsaw weep. I would like the ending of Korczak’s story to be very different, but there is no happy fairy-tale last- minute escape. He and his orphans all went to their deaths in Treblinka, together with other orphanage staff members who could have, like Korczak, gone free.

Surely if ever there was a period in which G-d was hidden, this was it. It is impossible to understand what it means for G-d to “hide His face” - but we know what it means for man to show his face.

Moses tells Joshua to “be strong be of good courage, do not fear, or not be frightened by them.” Despite all the obstacles, there is a way of being, a way of behaving, and morality that can be pursued. Not everyone can do this, not everyone can be expected “to be strong, be of good courage, not to fear.”

There are many faces of Korczak left for us to admire. In his pre-war life there is the doctor, writer, the healer, the listener. In the war years he becomes the rescuer, the fighter, always on the side of the child, driven by a selfless responsibility to protect. And ultimately, he is the martyr.

We cannot imitate this. But we can aspir to his ideals, we can revere the memory of someone who in the time of G-d’s “hidden” face showed his face unflinchingly to us.

There are so many stories from Poland in the war that crush us with their despair, so many tragic tales that erode our hope, our sense of humanity itself. But we must also never forget the stories from that time that sustain us. There were other Korczaks, whose bravery provided the moral compass and pointed the way. We must endlessly examine the stories of those who were “strong brave and of good courage” and perhaps even the act of retelling of such bravery with a refusal to succumb to fear will help us uncover G-d’s “hidden” face.

Despite all the obstacles, there is a way of being, a way of behaving, and morality that can be pursued

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TORAH AND HUMAN RIGHTS
A commentary on Parashat Haazinu
By Rabbi Dr. Norman Solomon

Among famous last words the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32 must hold pride of place: “Give ear, O heavens, let me speak; Let the earth hear the words I utter! May my discourse come down as the rain, My speech distil as the dew, Like showers on young growth, Like droplets on the grass …”

Beautiful. But if you thought Moses was about to say something nice, you would be disappointed. After giving due glory to G-d, all whose ways are just, “True and upright is He”, he addresses the people: “Children unworthy of him—That crooked, perverse generation—their baseness has played Him false.” As for the ungrateful mob, despite all His kindness to them, “Jeshurun grew fat and kicked—you grew fat and gross and coarse—He forsook the G-d who made him … Vexed Him with abominations”—and thoroughly deserve all the terrors and troubles He has brought on them. But no comfort either to their enemies, on whom He will exercise due vengeance.

The Song is short on telling us exactly what G-d’s shameful people have done wrong, to deserve “the sword without … and the terror within” (v. 25), beyond biting accusations of serving false G-ds. It looks as if it is more about G-d’s rights than about human rights. But this is to overlook the earlier part of the book, in which what G-d wants is set out in great detail. G-d wants justice among people (“Justice, justice shalt thou pursue”— 16:20); He abhors corruption (“you shall not take bribes, for bribes blind the eyes of the discerning and upset the plea of the just”); in an anticipation of Magna Carta, even the king is subject to the law (17:18-20); you must look after “the stranger, the fatherless and the widow” (16:11); you must act in integrity, shunning wizards, communication with the dead, and like practices (18:9-14). In brief, in failing to respect human rights you are “serving other G-ds”, and thoroughly deserve all the dreadful things that have come upon you.

Let us not deceive ourselves. In calling for respect of human rights Deuteronomy also calls for what we would regard as extreme religious intolerance (no mercy on idolators), intolerance of sexual deviance (put adulterers and homosexuals to death), and the extermination of the local Canaanite population. This is at the opposite pole from what anyone nowadays would regard as compatible with a doctrine of universal human rights.

So we cannot simply turn to Deuteronomy to find support in ancient Jewish tradition for universal human rights as currently understood; it is an ancient document, reflecting world views of more than two thousand (traditionally, more than three thousand) years ago, and only against that background can we begin to learn from it.

What we have to do is to engage critically with the text, to see where it is heading, and to reject those aspects which belong to an earlier stage of civilization. And where it is heading is perfectly clear. Its whole aim is to create an ideal society, that is, one based on justice combined with concern for the needy. Critical engagement means that we nurture this ideal, but in the new, global context which our current world, through knowledge, communication and technology, has made possible.
THE INVISIBILITY OF MODERN SLAVERY

A commentary on Parashat V’Zot Haberachah

By Elliot Steinberg

“This is the blessing with which Moses, the man of G-d, blessed the children of Israel before his death” Dvarim 33:1

The first line of this week’s Parashat V’Zot Haberachah, the last in the yearly cycle of Torah readings, speaks of the entirety of the following Chapter as one blessing to the entire nation. Yet the Chapter systematically offers numerous different blessings, one for each tribe. For the tribe of Reuven, Moses blesses life (and presumably fruitfulness) given the tribe's few numbers. For Joseph, he blesses “his land with the bounty of the dew from heaven…with the bounteous yield of the sun and the bounteous crop of the moon…the bounty of the earth and its fullness”. He blesses Zevulun's journeys, and Isaackar's tents. He blesses Gad with strength and ferocity and Asher with security. Each tribe is blessed with something unique, and yet each blessing is designed to strengthen the whole. These blessings are in essence the foundation for the children of Israel to be able to live freely once they cross into their own land, and they are all necessary for this to be achievable.

In order to live freely and properly in their own land, the Children of Israel need food security (Joseph's blessing), safe places to live (Isaackar's blessing), self-confidence and strength (Dan and Gad's blessing) as well as the others listed in the Parasha. Indeed, Dvarim 33 ends that with these blessings “Israel dwells in safety, untroubled is Jacob's abode”. These securities are vital to our freedom and without them, it is easy to be manipulated, entrapped and enslaved. Too often we take the blessings listed by Moses for granted, and are not aware when they are not enjoyed by others.

Modern slavery is one of the most pressing issues of our time, largely because of its invisibility. For most people, slavery is a relic of the past and ended with the abolition of the slave trade. The act of enslaving someone is illegal in almost all modern states, and yet that does not mean that people are not enslaved. Similarly, in Torah most people would see the moment of leaving Egypt to be the moment of gaining freedom, and yet what we are shown here is that there need to be securities in place for true freedom to be possible.

All it takes is a small change in circumstances to become vulnerable to enslavement. For Sophie, a British woman who was trafficked to Italy to work on the streets, she put her trust in someone that she should not have, and was too afraid to leave for threats made to her family. For Hai, a Vietnamese boy trafficked to Britain to grow marijuana, the lack of opportunity to earn money in Vietnam caused him to look for work elsewhere, something that traffickers prey upon.

Modern slavery is purposefully difficult to spot and operates through vast, highly-organised networks. And yet we are able to fight it in two key ways. The first is to be aware of what goes on in our communities. Look out for things that don't feel right or may suggest trafficking or slavery and notify the police or enforcement agencies. The second is to put pressure on companies, manufacturers and governments to ensure that the securities that people need to feel free are universally available, because at its root slavery will always be possible where there are people vulnerable to be enslaved.

That the blessings offered to all of the tribes are considered as one blessing in the first verse shows their interconnectedness, and the responsibility of everyone to share their own blessings for the benefit of the whole and look out for the needs of others.

As we finish this Parasha, we immediately loop back to the beginning of the Torah so as not to leave space in the cycle. It connects our responsibility for society and to one another with the beginning of creation, and our ability to live as free people to the way in which we relate to the world around us.

Elliot Steinberg is the former programmes manager at the CCJ (Council for Christian and Jews)