

PARSHA DISCUSSIONS FOR OLDER CHILDREN

Text by the Lookstein Center



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Several years ago, as part of our commitment to the core Jewish values of chesed, tzedakah and tikkun olam, we decided to actively develop, curate and share meaningful content to help parents, educators and all those eager to meaningfully access and use Jewish wisdom and knowledge to engage those around them.

In 5783, the Lookstein Center for Jewish Education at Bar-Ilan University developed this special Parashat HaShavua content for students and educators. The goal was simple yet profound: to make the weekly parsha accessible, relevant, and inspiring for older children, helping them discover how the eternal wisdom of the Torah speaks directly to their lives.

Each week's material highlights a core theme from the parsha and connects it to the values we live by today. The texts are designed not only to be studied, but to spark meaningful and memorable conversation, reflection, and action. By engaging with these ideas, students can see themselves as part of a living tradition and recognize that Torah study and following the values of Torah is not only about learning what was, but about shaping what is and what will be.

We are deeply grateful to the Lookstein Center for creating this content, granting permission to share it with you as we did weekly throughout the year when it was first released and again now in this booklet and to the educators who bring it to life in classrooms and communities across the world. May the content presented here strengthen our commitment to Torah, deepen our appreciation for its relevance, honor those who dedicate time to study and discuss it, and inspire us all to live with greater meaning and purpose.

As always, we thank our wonderful graphic designer, Rena Ray, for her role and partnership in designing our content. We also warmly welcome your feedback, which you can share with us at info@areyvut.org.

Daniel Rothner
Founder & Director

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Parshat Bereshit



DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

The end of chapter 5 offers a vague description of a situation of men taking “choice” women. The commentaries struggle with explaining the event, but most explanations involve people in positions of power, whether physical, social, or financial, using that power to achieve their desires. Is it wrong for people who have influence to actually use it? For example, is there anything wrong with parents using their contacts to help secure a place for their children in the school of their choice, to get an interview with a particular firm, or to get an early appointment with a particular doctor? If a parent feels uncomfortable using their influence and does not use his/her influence, is their behavior ethically correct or are they being delinquent in their responsibility as a parent?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

When Shet (the third son of Adam & Eve) is born, his name is explained that he is the replacement for Hevel, whom Kayyin had killed. When a parent names a child after someone else (usually deceased, in the Ashkenazic tradition, or alive, in the Sefardic tradition) does it place an unfair burden on the child, or is it a gift of a legacy?

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Parshat Noach

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DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

Marital relations were forbidden during the Flood because they would have been inappropriate in a time when the world was drenched in sorrow. Is it necessary, or appropriate, for individuals to suspend their personal lives and aspirations when the broader community faces a serious crisis? Many people refused to have children during the Shoah while others insisted on doing so as an affirmation of life. What would you do?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

Noah decrees that his grandson, Canaan, is to be a servant to his brothers. Does that suggest that, for all eternity, Canaan's descendants are destined to slavery? Can such a "decree" be undone? Can it be that our fate is predetermined by the actions of our ancestors?

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Parshat Lech Lecha

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DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

Why did God demand Avram leave his family to pursue the Divine mission? Might Avram not have been more successful operating within a familiar culture – why did he need to leave and enter a new place in order to fulfill his destiny?

DISCUSSIONS QUESTION #2

Pharaoh pays Avram handsomely for Sarai, whom Pharaoh believed was Avram's sister. As a result, Avram's wealth increases substantially. Is it ethical to reap the benefits of an immoral act? Similar debates raged after the Shoah as to whether it was appropriate to accept reparations from Nazi Germany. Would doing so effectively put a price on human life?

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Parshat Vayera

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DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

After an uncomfortable incident with Avimelekh (a Philistine king), the king offers to establish a treaty with Abraham. Abraham gently rebukes Avimelekh but then signs the treaty. Is it appropriate to hold a grudge and not allow someone the opportunity to make amends? Is it appropriate to “forgive and forget” and ignore wrongs that were done previously? What are the disadvantages of each approach? Is one approach “more correct” than the other?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

Lot is advised to flee the city of Sodom in advance of its destruction. He tries to encourage his family members to join, but most don’t pay much attention to his warning. Should Lot have at least told his neighbors, or announced to the townspeople, that something terrible was about to happen, and give some the opportunity to save themselves? If you knew that a fire had just broken out, would you not warn your neighbors to get out of harm’s way? If you found out about an opportunity to make a large sum of money, would you tell others about it or keep it a secret?

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Parshat Chayei Sara

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DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

Eliezer asks God to send him a sign that the woman greeting him is indeed the appropriate mate for Isaac. Is it appropriate to ask God for signs? Can we expect God to respond to such requests? Do such requests turn God into our servant, rather than the reverse?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

Abraham has additional children with Keturah, but sends them away from Isaac. What happens to those descendants later in history? What kind of relationship do they develop with the descendants of Isaac? What impact may their being sent away have on them, or on Isaac? Is it possible that Isaac's desire to keep Esau close at hand is a reaction to his father's handling of his own brothers?

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Parshat Toldot



DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

Following in his father's footsteps, Isaac tells Avimelekh that Rebecca is his sister. How important is it to be truthful? Are there circumstances in which it is justified to say things that are not true? How should someone feel about having to violate their own word? What dangers does such a practice, even if justified, carry for the person who is dishonest?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

God gives a message to Rebecca about her children, yet there is no indication that she shared that message with Isaac. How might the story have turned had God NOT delivered that message to her? How might the story have turned out had she shared that message with Isaac? How might the story be different had Jacob and Esau told Isaac about the sale of the birthright?

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Parshat Vayetzei

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DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

Jacob makes a deal with Laban regarding the white and the non-white sheep, after which he does some mysterious things with the mating of the sheep. While we don't know the precise nature of what he did, whether it was through some kind of shepherd's secret, magic, or selective breeding, Laban did not anticipate this and Jacob gains considerable wealth in a short period of time. When dealing with dishonest people, do we have an obligation to be straightforward or is it OK to engage in some form of deception to protect ourselves and "even the playing field?" Are there limits to the amount of deception that we can use or the extent of what we can gain from it? What kind of circumstances could justify that deception – potential financial loss or gain, political positioning, angling to get a job or landing a contract, personal safety, national security?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

Jacob arrives in Haran and tells Laban "all those things." It is possible that Jacob's honesty ended up lowering his status in Laban's eyes, which had all sorts of effects on their relationship. While honesty is obviously an important value, is it possible that too much honesty can be damaging? When is it appropriate to hold back critical information in certain relationships? How do we draw the line between what is appropriate to share and what is not?

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Parshat Vayishlach

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DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

Following the decimation of the city of Shechem by Simon and Levi, there is a debate between them and Jacob. Jacob, the statesman, was outraged by their actions while they, as idealistic activists, defended it. Similar debates have been held throughout history between young idealists and seasoned diplomats, sometimes resulting in important and successful social revolutions and other times resulting in disaster. How does one judge the “correctness” of a revolutionary movement?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

The Torah describes that Reuben slept with his father’s concubine, Bilhah. Jacob doesn’t react immediately, but years later, when giving blessings to his sons, Jacob cites this as a key reason that Reuben lost his prominent role as the leading son. Most children, at some point, will do things that anger, embarrass, or harm their parents. Is there a red line which, if crossed, makes it appropriate for a parent to disown a child? Should a parent support their child even s/he turns out to be an abuser, a thief, or worse? Where do we draw those red lines – ethically lines, ideologically, religiously? How do we manage relationships between parents and children while encouraging children to become independent adults who will make their own decisions?

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Parshat Vayeshev

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DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

Judah loses his status amongst his brothers as a result of multiple acts of deception and regains his position only after he learns to accept responsibility for his actions even though he could get away with another act of deception. What holds us back from taking responsibility for our actions? What do we gain from that and what do we lose? If we damage our own reputation, what do we have to do to rebuild it?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

In Parashat Vayeshev, Reuben tries to save Joseph by deceiving his brothers. What did Reuben think would happen when his brothers found out that he lied to them? Assuming that Reuben's motives were pure, why did he not make a principled stand against killing Joseph? What prevents us from standing up for things that we believe are right, and what happens to us when we fail to do so?

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Parshat Miketz

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DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

Joseph displays significant humility when meeting Pharaoh for the first time, insisting that he is incapable of interpreting anything and that only God has interpretations. Humility is a noble trait, but is it always appropriate? Is having low self-esteem the same as humility? What are the differences between them? Can you think of a situation where humility would not be appropriate? How do you decide when it is and when it is not appropriate?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

Jacob is mortally fearful of letting Benjamin go with his brothers to Egypt, even at the risk of losing Simeon, and both Reuben and Judah make dramatic offers to convince Jacob that it is the right thing to do. Elderly people are often fearful of losing their security and independence, even as their decision-making abilities may be compromised. Is it right or fair to try to convince them to accept decisions with which they are not comfortable? How do we know if, in trying to convince them, we are serving their best interest or ours? Can we ever truly know what's better for someone else, more than they know themselves?

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Parshat Vayigash



DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

Joseph reveals himself to his brothers and presents a grand plan to save the family. He repeatedly states that he bears no grudge against them for their actions. What he does not offer, however, is an apology for the ordeal that he put them through while being harsh, holding Simeon captive, and threatening to imprison Benjamin. Why is apology important? Can we move beyond the hurt when there is no apology? What kinds of responses to an apology could be beneficial in rebuilding a relationship?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

In Parashat Vayigash, Joseph supports his family while the Egyptians starve and sell everything they own for the food he provides them. Is it ethical to provide for people of privilege while others are left out? How do we balance our responsibilities to our loved ones with our general responsibilities to all of society? When there are limited resources, how do we decide who gets access to them?

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Parshat Vayechi

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DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

Jacob blesses his grandchildren, insisting that they “belong to him.” How much should grandparents be involved in raising their grandchildren? What level of interference in parental decisions is acceptable or not? If grandparents are footing the bill for their grandchildren’s education, should that give more of a say in how they are raised? How do we balance the need for grandparents to be involved, as an integral part of the children’s history and tradition, and the need to avoid meddling in the decisions made by the parents?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

Jacob insists, both from Joseph and his other sons, that they return him to his ancestral plot in the Machpelah Cave for burial. There is a general norm, as well as a halakhic directive, to honor the wishes of a dying person. Are there limitations to that? What if their wishes violate local laws or our ethical and/or religious values?

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Parshat Shemot

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DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

After Moses's first encounter with Pharaoh, the condition of the Jews gets worse. They complain to Moshe, who in turn complains to God. God responds that now Moses will see that Pharaoh will indeed free the people. Moses, as the middleman between God and the people, is put into an uncomfortable position and needs to rely on the authority of someone else, in this case, God, to take responsibility for the outcome of his actions. When is it appropriate to rely on reassurances from the authorities that our actions are OK, and when must we take personal responsibility for them? For example, at what point can, or must, a soldier refuse to obey the authority of a commanding officer because the soldier deems it immoral? What would happen to armies, or any organized system, is every individual decided for themselves what was appropriate or inappropriate?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

God is patient with Moses as Moses repeatedly looks for excuses to avoid taking on the mission. Taking on responsibility for the community is praiseworthy – at what point does someone have the right to say “NO, thank you” and bow out? Is it justified to pressure someone to take on a responsibility they don't want to assume? How do we balance the needs of the individual and the needs of the community?

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Parshat Vaera

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DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

The plagues apparently affected all Egyptians. (We know, for example, that the plague of the firstborn affected every Egyptian household without exception.) Is it possible that there were no good Egyptians? There has been much discussion over the past few years about a book called "Hitler's Willing Executioners," in which the author claims that hatred of Jews was so deeply embedded in German culture that it was easy for the masses of Germans to join in the Nazi campaign of extermination. In the last two years, there has been an alarming resurgence of European antisemitism. Can a culture of hate be undone?

DISCUSSIONS FOR OLDER CHILDREN

Many of the plagues sound like they are punishment for Pharaoh's, and Egypt's, mistreatment of the Jewish people. What sort of punishment is appropriate for someone who is a mass murderer? What about if it is someone who has denied the masses their civil rights, or embezzled members of his community to the tune of billions of dollars?

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Parshat Bo



DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

With the Exodus, Jews were given their own calendar, which operates on a different system from that of other nations. Whereas all other nations have either solar or lunar calendars, the Jewish calendar is comprised of lunar months and solar years with a complex system of adjustments. What are the advantages of such a system? What does having a separate calendrical system do to the interaction between Jews and other nations? Is that a good or a bad thing?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

In ancient cultures, the first-born was considered naturally superior to all his siblings and given the rule of the household. The Torah instructs that the first-borns, even of the animals, are holy and must be dedicated to God. Is the Torah trying to continue the ancient practices or disrupt them? Should there be a natural heir in every family, or is some other system of distribution more equitable? Does Judaism believe that certain individuals, by virtue of their birth, are considered superior?

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Parshat Beshalach



DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

With the parting of the Red Sea, there is an outburst of song. Immediately afterward, the Israelites arrive at Elim, where they find an oasis with abundant water and date trees. Yet at Elim, there is no song, expression of wonderment, or even a sense of thanks. What is it that sparks people to acknowledge only the extraordinary gifts bestowed upon us but not the ordinary? Is it possible to train oneself to become appreciative of the small things which are done for us regularly?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

After the battle with Amalek, God vows an eternal battle against Amalek. People often hold grudges against those who have wronged them. For how long is that appropriate? After World War II, many Jews refused to buy German products. Now, more than 75 years later, many Jews are living in Germany. Should we let time, and history, heal all wounds, or are there some things that are different? How do we decide what things fall into those we can put behind us and those things which need to be seared into our permanent memories?

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Parshat Yitro

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DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

When the Israelites arrived at Mount Sinai, God offered them an upgrade to their relationship with Him – they would have to perform the mitzvot (commandments) and adhere to the covenant, and in return, their status will be changed and they will become God's special nation. Everyone likes to feel special, but what motivates that desire? Does highlighting the uniqueness of the individual run the risk of creating self-centered narcissists who believe that they are better than everyone else? Are there circumstances when we should stand on our need to feel special?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

A close reading of the Torah reveals that Moses is at the bottom of the mountain when the Ten Commandments are proclaimed, but some of the commentaries suggest re-ordering the text so that Moses is at the top. How do we want to view our leaders and heroes? Do we want them to be superhuman and untouchable, above our experience, or are we more comfortable with flawed characters who share our struggles and look like us? Why do some people want superheroes and others want regular people who rise above? What happens when we discover that our superhero is not so super or that the person who we thought was just like us turns out to be different?

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Parshat Mishpatim

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DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

The Torah warns us not to be unkind to the stranger, for we were once strangers ourselves in Egypt. Is there an obligation to be nice to the stranger, or just not to be unkind? Is it possible to draw a line distinguishing between being nice and avoiding being unkind? How far must we take this obligation? Does this apply to every individual, or to the community as a whole? How well does your community accept people who are different?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

One of the curious laws about slavery is that the slave can choose to remain with his master rather than going free in the seventh year, but there is a special ritual that must be performed. Laws are often legislated to protect people. Does a person have the right to reject that protection, or should society insist that they be protected? If someone is in an abusive relationship, and although miserable, claims that they want to remain in that relationship, should their friends (or the authorities) encourage/insist that they get out for their own protection?

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Parshat Terumah

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DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

Many of the vessels created for use in the Mishkan (Tabernacle) were made of pure gold or a gold coating over wood. Despite their beauty, they were seen only by a select group of Kohanim (priests) during the service. Are the most important qualities of a person those which are seen on the outside or those which are hidden? What use is there in values which are hidden?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

The initial-stated function of the mishkan (tabernacle) was for God to dwell amongst the people. That is a noble desire, but possibly terrifying as well. God sees all and knows all; having that palpable presence in our neighborhood can be overwhelming. Would we prefer living in a society with greater individual freedoms, in which the authorities are kept at a distance, but which affords little protection, or one in which “Big Brother” sees all and knows all, providing a high level of protection, but limiting our freedoms and individuality?

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Parshat Tezaveh



DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

On the one hand, the Kohen Gadol is to be totally dedicated to God, sanctified to God, and on the other, he was to wear a number of garments whose function was for him to carry a symbol representing the people before God. Is the job of public officials – Rabbis, politicians, judges, etc. – to protect and preserve the ancient traditions, the things which are considered sacred in their culture, or to serve the needs of the people?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

Aaron and his sons, the kohanim (priests) were distinguished by special clothes. Many people wear uniforms in their jobs. While a uniform offers a mark of distinction, it also sets the individual apart. Do uniforms separate between different levels of society? Do people wearing special clothes feel superior to those who are not wearing them? Is it possible to bridge the gaps within society without removing the special place each individual has?

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Parshat Ki Tisa



DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

One of the key arguments that Moses uses to save the Israelites was that destroying them would create a desecration of God's name. Apparently, as a result of Moses's argument, God relents. What other kinds of behaviors create a desecration of God's name? Does that only apply to those things which are public?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

God instructs that two people lead the efforts to construct the mishkan (Tabernacle) – Betzalel, from a noble family of Judah, and Oholiav, from an unknown family of Dan. These two come from dramatically different backgrounds: Judah is the tribe of royalty who marches first in the wilderness and Dan is from one of the maidservants who brings up the rear in the procession. Is it always important to have more than one person in a leadership position? While diversity helps more people to feel involved, what do we lose in pursuing it? What do/should we sacrifice for diversity?

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Parshat Vayakhel

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DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

There is incredible precision in designing and building the mishkan (Tabernacle). Like a very complex Leg construction, if the pieces are off by just a fraction of an inch (or millimeter) things won't fit properly or the entire project won't be stable. Precision gives us a sense of beauty, almost of a quest for perfection. What is the price we pay for pursuing that precision? Is it always worth it? Is it possible to achieve that same kind of precision and perfection in our human interactions?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

Moses calls for donations to help construct the mishkan (tabernacle) and the response is so overwhelming that he needs to ask for people to stop bringing. What brings people to such a level of zeal that they rise way beyond the level of expectation? When is that level of zeal a good thing and when does it become dangerous? How can we tell the difference?

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Parshat Pekudei

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DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

The Torah goes to great lengths to account for every item donated for the construction of the mishkan (Tabernacle). Should we demand more or less accounting from public institutions than from private ones? Which is worse, an individual who cheats another in a business deal or someone who collects a welfare check without qualifying for assistance?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

The most significant phrase in this entire parasha is – “kaasher tzvia et Moshe” – they did as God had commanded Moses. That phrase appears at the end of nearly every paragraph and emphasizes the extent to which the Israelites followed God’s commandments to a tee. At the same time, Betzalel, the architect of the mishkan (Tabernacle), was given special wisdom – apparently to make a variety of decisions regarding the design and implementation of the construction. When is it good to simply follow orders and when is it more appropriate to be creative – or even to defy orders?

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Parshat Vayikra

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DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

This parasha is all about korbanot, sacrificial offerings to God. The word korban is often translated as “sacrifice,” which means something very different from the word korban itself which implies something to bring us closer to God. Do you think that God wants us to give things up in order to get closer to Him? Do you think that for us to feel closer to God we need to give something up?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

There are special offerings we are obligated to bring when we sin even without being aware that our actions were forbidden. Why should we be accountable for things that we do not know or are not aware of? How about in interpersonal relationships – should we feel guilty about hurting someone unintentionally? Should we feel slighted when someone says something innocent that happens to hurt us?

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Parshat Tzav

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DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

Much of this parasha describes the same things that are already mentioned in the previous one, with the main difference being that Vayikra focuses on the sacrifices from the perspective of the people while Tzav presents the perspective of what the kohanim need to know. The question of the need to know is an important one in matters of security but raises important issues in other areas of life. Should the internal ethics governing the medical community be shared with the masses? What should parents hide from their children or their aging parents? What kind of culture do we create when some people in the same organization know more than others?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

The Torah provides an incredibly detailed description of how Moses dresses Aaron and prepares him for his role. It feels a little like a slow-motion scene of dressing a bride before her wedding. What is it about details that make such a difference in our experience? How does it make you feel when you know that someone invested a lot of thought in the small things? How do we know when we are focusing too much on the small things and not enough on the big things?

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Parshat Shemini

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DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

While the Torah does not advocate vegetarianism, the laws of kashrut suggest a preference for non-predatory animals, that is, animals that prey on others are forbidden to eat. What responsibility do humans have for the animal kingdom? If humans are supposed to avoid eating predators, why is it appropriate for humans themselves to be predators? Does Judaism condone hunting for sport?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

Given his position as Kohen Gadol (High Priest), Aaron was denied the opportunity to manifest the mourning for his sons, and the Rabbis commend him for his silent strength through the ordeal. How much of their private lives are public figures expected to sacrifice for the benefit of their constituents? Is the public standing of a leader enhanced or diminished in displaying human emotion or weakness?

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Parshat Tazria



DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

The Torah is famous for its democratization of knowledge. All knowledge is available to anyone who seeks it. Good translations make all classical Jewish texts available to all. Tazria describes the intricate details of diagnosing tzar'aat, even though it is likely that few people ever really understood those details. Is it sometimes better to know less, or is it always better to have all of the information ever produced accessible at our fingertips? Is some information too dangerous, either for our physical or our spiritual well-being, to be accessible to all? For example, the Talmud tells the story of four great Torah scholars who entered the "pardes" of Jewish learning, only one of whom emerged unscathed.

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

Tzara'at is a spiritual disease that has physical manifestations. One of the interesting features of tzara'at is that even with clear signs of tzara'at, the person (or the house) is not considered "infected" until he or she is declared impure by the kohen, so much so that the kohen tells the afflicted person to clear the house before he pronounces the decision of pure/impure lest the person's property is declared impure when the declaration is made. Imagine someone who has violated the norms of their society – a child molester, someone who seduced someone else's spouse, someone who put friend's money in bad investments to make himself lots of money – so much so that they need to be shunned, banned, excommunicated, or jailed. How are we to treat the people surrounding them – their parents, spouses, children, siblings? Can we, should we, separate between them and those in their close orbit, or does that minimize the power of the social exclusion?

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Parshat Metzora

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When a house was afflicted with tzara'at, it had to go through various stages of purification, including removing the affected stones to dismantling the entire house. According to one midrash, God afflicted some of the houses in the Land of Israel with tzara'at so that the Israelites would dismantle them they would discover a treasure hidden there by the previous residents. What seemed like a terrible punishment turned out to be a gift from God. Have you ever had a bad thing happen to you that you later realize turned out to be an amazing opportunity? How do we turn every negative consequence – both for ourselves and for others – into an opportunity for meaningful growth?

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Parshat Acharei Mot

Areyvut

DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

The Torah details a series of forbidden sexual or marital relationships. Some of those are currently accepted as alternatives in contemporary society. How do we navigate the tension between the Torah's instructions forbidding certain things and a contemporary culture which protects the right to do those very things? Are there limits to the kinds of things we tolerate and protect and those which we declare to be completely unacceptable? If yes, what criteria do we use to draw those limits?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

The Torah hints that there are things that are more forbidden in the Promised Land than in other places and that the consequences for violating them in the Promised Land are more serious than the consequences for violating them in other places. What makes a place sacred? Why is it that there are behaviors (like walking around in a bathing suit or speaking loudly) which are considered acceptable in certain places and not in others? How do we deal with situations in which different people have varying understandings about what it means for a place to be sacred (like a Holocaust museum, a concert theater, the president's house, or a synagogue) and what kinds of behaviors are acceptable in each?

PARSHA DISCUSSIONS FOR OLDER CHILDREN

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Parshat Kedoshim

***Areyvut

The Torah often emphasizes that we need to be nice to strangers because we were strangers in Egypt. If we recall correctly, our experience in Egypt was not exactly one of great hospitality and warm feelings. Are we supposed to turn a blind eye to the bad in order to find some redeeming quality in everything? What are the downsides of turning a blind eye to the evil that others do? What kind of people do we become if we remember only the bad in others? What do we become if we remember only the good in others?

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Parshat Emor

Areyvut

DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

Kohanim (priests) live with an extra set of restrictions, specifically regarding their encounter with death and who they may marry. This sets them apart from the rest of the people. Should we expect a higher standard of practice from our leaders? Does being a role model generate greater responsibility, or is that unfair? Do higher expectations make our leaders more or less accessible, more or less available as role models?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

Every culture has holidays. Those are special days for celebration and rejoicing. When the Torah speaks of holidays, it inserts into each of them some obligations – both obligations to God and obligations to other humans. What message does the presence of these obligations send? How do obligations transform us as people?

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Parshat Behar

Areyvut

DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

The Torah establishes standard “valuation” for people, depending on gender and age. When everyone is treated the same does that increase or decrease our individual sense of value? Does that increase or decrease our motivation to contribute to society and move forward? What are the benefits and drawbacks of competition?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

There is a distinction between real estate deals in cities and those in farm countries. If someone sells a house in a city they have one year to “redeem” it back, and if they do not then the sale is permanent. By contrast, in farm country, they have until the Yovel (Jubilee) year to redeem it, and if they are unsuccessful then it reverts back to the original owner automatically. In what ways are the connections between the people and the land different for farm people and city people? How does living in a city affect us differently?

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Parshat Bechukotai

★ ★ ★
Areyvut

A significant part of this parasha focuses on Divine punishments for Israel's wrongdoing. Do punishments have a positive side? How can we distinguish between a constructive punishment and a destructive one? Is there a difference between punishment on the scale of a family and those imposed by a broader society?

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Parshat Bamidbar

***Areyvut

DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

The organization of the camp of the Israelites places the mishkan (Tabernacle) at the center, highlighting its role as the thing which binds the people together. What stands at the center of your life? Your family life? What are the values which define the essence of your community?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

The tribe of Levi was marked for special status. It also happened to be the tribe of both Moses and Aaron. How far must we go to avoid the appearance of nepotism? Should we disqualify the best candidates because they have a special relationship with someone making the decisions? Which is more important – getting the best person for the job or maintaining the respect for the integrity of the system?

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Parshat Naso



DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

The heads of the tribes brought two different offerings to celebrate the inauguration of the Tabernacle – one was a group offering, the other individual. Which is a more profound experience, being a soloist or being part of an orchestra working together? When it is important to be part of a group and when is it more important to be an individual? How do we establish a balance in our lives between working as part of the community and taking care of our own needs?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

In his search for spiritual elevation, the nazir effectively distances himself from much of public life. His hair grows uncut, he cannot participate in many celebrations (involving wine or alcohol), and he must protect himself from impurity. How do we balance our need for personal space, growth, individuality, and spiritual searching with our responsibility to be part of a community? As parents, or children, how do we balance the responsibilities we have to ourselves, our families, and our communities? Which of those takes precedence and how do we decide?

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Parshat Behaalotcha

Areyvut

DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

Moses invites his father-in-law, Yitro, to join the Israelites on their journey to the promised land. Yitro declines, feeling like he is an outsider. What kinds of things do we say or do, perhaps even without being aware, which people who are slightly different from us or with different backgrounds than us feel uncomfortable or unwanted? How consciously do we need to be of other people's sensitivities to avoid offending them?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

A small group of people was excluded from the Pesach (Passover) offering in the second year because of their impurity. When they complained to Moses, who then turned to God, they were given a second opportunity to do it a month later. When is it OK to make exceptions to the rule? What happens when every request for an exception is granted? What about our people who are disadvantaged in some way – should we always be looking for ways to accommodate them? What about firefighters or soldiers without legs, or blind surgeons? What are the limits of those exceptions?

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Parshat Shelach



DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

The scouts report what they saw along with their interpretation of it. Should leaders always tell the truth, or are there times when it is better if the public is kept in the dark?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

All of Israel is punished for their reaction to the report of the scouts, but God metes out special punishment to the scouts who brought back a bad report. Do leaders have responsibilities and accountability greater than their followers? Should followers be held accountable for listening to their leaders?

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Parshat Korach

Areivut

DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

Moses responds to the challenge of Dathan and Abiram with some cynical remarks, and Dathan and Abiram refuse to even show up to a meeting with him. What happens when verbal debates don't focus on the substance of the issues but on the style of delivery or the sharpness of the put-down? Political muscle-flexing is the way things get done, but too much power control leads to abuse. How do we know when to use the means at hand to get done what we think is right and when we are crossing the line? Is using the power that we have appropriate in other kinds of relationships? At what point does it become an abusive relationship?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

The Israelites are instructed to provide for the basic needs of the Levites since the Levites are landless. Is it good for public servants to be dependent on those whom they serve? Does that create a set of checks and balances on the public servants or does it make them too vulnerable to do their jobs properly? Is it best to have a leadership that is independently wealthy and doesn't need the financial support of the public?

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Parshat Chukat



DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

As the Israelites pass by the southern border of the Promised Land they are attacked by the king of Arad who takes some people captive. The Israelites vow vengeance and take it soon afterward. The Torah earlier warned against vengeance, and the Rabbis spare few words in describing the damage that vengeance does to us. Are there certain types of vengeance that are OK but others that aren't? What does vengeance, even if justified, do to us as people?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

In a famous ironic twist, while the person for whom the Red Heifer is prepared is purified by it, everyone involved in its preparation becomes impure (albeit to a lesser extent). It could be argued that everyone who helps others needs to sacrifice some of themselves for the benefit of those they are helping. This is true for friends, parents, teachers, medical professionals, and more. How do we know when the sacrifice is too much? At what point are the givers allowed to say that they need time or energy for themselves? Do we resent the givers who pull back to take care of themselves?

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Parshat Balak

Areyvut

DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

Bilaam clearly tells Balak, many times, that he cannot curse the Israelites as God will not permit it. Despite those repeated proclamations, it later becomes clear that Bilaam is involved in a different plot to undermine the Israelites. What kinds of motivations drive us to do things which we know are clearly wrong? How do we feel after we've done them?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

After having seen the Israelites destroy the powerful nations of the Emorites and the Bashan, Balak sends for the sorcerer Bilaam to curse the Israelites. Success can sometimes backfire, as it builds envy or fear in others. Should we let that stop us? Is it possible to be too successful? Can we mitigate the fear that others have of our success?

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Parshat Pinchas

Areyvut

DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

God tells Moses that it is time to die, but Moses refuses to step down until God appoints a successor. What quality of a person is expressed when they insist on finding someone who can continue the job that they started? What quality is expressed when they insist that there is no one who can fill their shoes?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

The daughters of Zelophehad appealed to Moses that their father's name not be erased from the land because he has no sons. Every human who passes through life has a desire that something of them remain after they are gone – their name, children, an idea, or something that they did. Beyond the desire to immortalize ourselves, is there a meaningful value in publicizing the good acts and generosity of individuals? Which is more important – making a difference in people's lives or being known for making a difference in people's lives?

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Parshat Matot

***Areyvut

After the conquest of the eastern bank of the Jordan, two tribes request to stay behind and receive their portion of the land in the recently captured area. Moses is enraged and challenges them: "Shall your brothers go to war while you settle here?!" There are many times when we are part of a group and, along with the other members of the group, have made a commitment. Take, for example, a school sports team, a kibbutz, or a band. The departure of one or two members of the group places extra hardship on the other members. Do we have a right to pull out of communal commitments? Do we owe other people when we commit to something together?

After the battle with Midian, Moses instructs the soldiers to split the spoils of war with the rest of the Israelites. When a team scores an important victory, how much credit should be given to the support team – the coaches, the trainers, the people doing sales and advertising, the secretaries, etc.? How about when a community or school experiences growth – should credit be given to the rabbi, the board, the teachers, the students, the parents, and the custodian? Should the gains be shared equally, and if not, how do we figure out what formula would make it fair for everyone?

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Parshat Maasei



The Israelites are instructed to chase the Canaanites out of the land lest they become problematic later. This means that even though the Canaanites may not pose an immediate threat, to prevent a threat from emerging they must be banished from the land immediately. The concept of preventive measures is familiar to us in many different kinds of situations (buying insurance, preventive medical care, pre-emptive military campaigns, etc.). How do we make sure that we are not going too far?

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Parshat Devarim



DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

On their march toward their promised land, the Israelites are instructed not to start wars with Edom (descendants of Esau, our cousins), Ammon, and Moab (also cousins, descendants of Lot), because God had given them their lands the same way that he would give us ours. Everyone likes to feel special, and it's probably important that everyone understand that they are special. How does it make us feel when we discover that other people are special in ways that we thought we were unique? How can we maintain our own feeling of uniqueness without feeling threatened by other people's specialness?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

In Sefer Devarim, Moses retells a number of stories that we are familiar with from earlier in the Torah. A close reading of those stories reveals that he changes them somewhat, and those changes are likely intentional, with important educational messages. Is it OK to reshape past events in order to convey important core ideas, or is the truth of the past more important? If it is OK to make changes, are there limits to how much we can change? What are the risks involved? (This is a burning question in questioning the truth of the historical foundations of modern countries, Holocaust education, and much more!)

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Parshat Vaetchanan

Areyvut

DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

Sefer Devarim contains some of the most strident arguments against intermarriage, especially with the seven Canaanite nations. Today that could be labeled as ethnocentric, anti-democratic, discriminatory, or even racist. How do we navigate the tension between the desire for continuity of a tradition with contemporary Western values?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

One of the core mitzvot emphasized in Sefer Devarim is the command to teach our children. Where is the line between education and indoctrination? To what extent should openness and exploration be part of the educational process, especially if the process is designed to generate commitment and continuity?

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Parshat Ekev

Areyvut

DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

Are rewards and punishments meted out on an individual basis or on a communal-national one? Which of those seems more ethical? Which of those seems more beneficial? Why should individuals suffer because of the sins of the masses? Why should individuals benefit from the rewards of the masses?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

The Torah describes the material benefits of obeying God's instructions together with the negative consequences of ignoring them. Given the clarity of that presentation, why is it hard for people to do the right thing?

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Parshat Re'eh



DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

We are commanded to follow the direction of a prophet but forbidden from listening to false prophets, even when they produce miracles to prove their position. The difference between a false prophet and a true one is that the words of the genuine prophet come true while the predictions of the false one do not. This presents us with a problem – the only way to know if someone is a true prophet or a false one is to wait and see if their predictions come true, but by then it is too late! How can we decide who to listen to when they first give us their message? The same could be said for any religious leader. They represent many different opinions – how do we know which ones to follow?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

We are used to non-centralized religion. Each community has a synagogue, a Rabbi, a school that is attuned to its needs. The ideal set out in the Torah is one in which worship is centralized in a single place. What do we gain by having a centralized place of worship? What do we lose? Is there a way to maximize the best of both approaches?

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Parshat Shoftim



DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

We are commanded to pursue justice. Does justice mean that everyone gets the same treatment? Is it reasonable to expect the same behavior from a fifteen-year-old and a fifty-year-old? Is justice served when a wealthy businessperson who shoplifts a candy bar is treated the same as a hungry homeless person who shoplifts the same candy bar? Think about two people who drove through a red light – one was driving his wife to the hospital while she is in labor and the other didn't want to miss the opening scene of a movie. How do we decide what is just?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

The Torah mandates the death penalty for a number of different kinds of crimes, especially those which threaten to undermine the very fabric of society. Rabbinic interpretation and legislation limited the death penalty so much that it is nearly impossible to ever carry out. Can you imagine a case in which there should be a death penalty? For what kinds of crimes would it apply? Are there alternatives? What is its purpose? What is the purpose of any form of punishment?

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Parshat Ki Tetze

Areyvut

DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

There is a mitzvah to return a lost object. Do we have the right to expect that our lost things will be returned or is the Torah asking us to do what is “nice” – above and beyond the norm?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

There are many mitzvot in the Torah that suggest that people with an excess of wealth should express care for and share with those who lack that wealth. If I earn money because of my hard work, skill, or even good fortune, why should I share it with others who don't have the same talents as me? Is this just about feeling sorry for those who don't have or are there other underlying values?

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Parshat Ki Tavo

Areyvut

DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

When bringing the first fruits to the Temple, we are instructed to retell our history dating back to even before we were slaves in Egypt. While our past is important for understanding who we are, we need to create our identities and move forward, living in the present and striving for the future. For some people, the past is a huge burden, even when that past is a glorious one. Just think of members of royal families who needed to break away from the traditions which constrained them. How can we embrace our past without it strangling us?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

Moses instructs Israel that upon crossing the Jordan they set up stone monuments to commemorate the crossing. Do family heirlooms have meaning without the stories attached to them? How much of our lives should be rooted in the past as opposed to creating new experiences in the present or preparing for the future?

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Parshat Nitzavim

Areyvut

DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

Moses orchestrates a major ceremony to recommit to the covenant with God, emphasizing that the covenant applies equally to all – from the most respected to the poorest people and from the most educated elders to the most ignorant of children. Who should be making decisions for society – the elite few who have knowledge and expertise or the uneducated masses? How do we include everyone in the process while ensuring that the best decisions are made?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

God punishes us when we stray from the correct path and we are expected to return to God. Who should make the first move? When two people, or two groups, are in a relationship that frays, who should make the first move to break the impasse? What if the relationship is not between equals, but one in which one side clearly wields more power than the other?

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Parshat Vayelech

Areyvut

The scroll that Moses instructs to be written is to serve as a reminder to the people when eventually they are plagued by God's punishment. When someone says, "I told you so," it gives some sense of satisfaction to the one who says it. Does it have value beyond that feeling of satisfaction? What might be a more productive way of dealing with a situation in which one side warned the other of a consequence which eventually came true?

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Parshat Haazinu



The song of Ha'azinu, like much of poetry, is written in a way that allows for multiple interpretations. In what ways can leaving an ambiguous legacy be more powerful than one which is absolute?

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Parshat V'zot HaBracha Areyvut

Moses's burial place has left a mystery, and some have explained that God was concerned that his tomb is turned into a place of veneration and worship, as happened to many other righteous people. What is the value of connecting to great ancestors? What is the danger in connecting to great ancestors?