



PARSHA DISCUSSIONS

I began Areyvut in September 2002 and I attended CAJE 29, a Jewish education conference at Hofstra University in the summer of 2004 which is where I was fortunate to have met Fred Claar, a passionate Jew committed to making high caliber Jewish education relevant to tweens and teens. Over the years, I have gained so much from knowing and learning from Fred and was deeply honored and blessed to have had him serve in the past on the Areyvut Board.

One of Fred's many initiatives and projects was focused on making the Parsha HaShavua, the weekly Torah portion, accessible to parents and educators. Over the years, Fred has accomplished this via a wide variety of efforts and projects including creating valuesandethics.org and publishing Values and Ethics: Torah Topics for Today. Through these and his many other efforts, Fred has literally impacted thousands and thousands of families.

A few years back (to be precise on June 10, 2021), I asked Fred for his permission for Areyvut to develop new content based on his model and approach. Fred replied immediately and said, "Delighted to work with you, in any way, with this project." Some things take a bit longer than we anticipate and unfortunately that was the case for this project.

Thankfully, in the summer of 2023, Kalya Goldberger, a veteran of Areyvut's initial Teen Board, committed to working on the project. The goal was to have Kayla develop the content throughout 5784, the 2023–2024 cycle, in real time each week. Kayla, based in Israel, developed content immediately in the aftermath of the atrocities of October 7th. Reading what she developed weekly was incredibly moving and powerful. The eternal wisdom of the Torah and Kayla's ability to connect it to what was transpiring in Israel and what global Jewry was dealing with was a gift, one that you are now still benefitting from.

I thank Fred Claar for inspiring me and so many others, Kalya Goldberger for developing the incredibly meaningful, powerful and timely content that you see here and Rena Ray for her design work and for being a genuine ongoing partner.

As I write this, Israel is still at war and there are still 50 hostages being held in Gaza. I passionately pray that as you see and use this, not only is this current war over and all the hostages have been returned to their families, but that Israel has genuine peace and the ability to live with its neighbors. May we all never forget all the sacrifices of our chayalim, the hostages, their families and all of Am Yisrael. May we really understand and believe fervently today and every day: Am Yisrael Chai.

Daniel Rothner
Founder & Director

PARSHAT BEREISHIT

This story of Adam and Chava is one of more well-known portions of the Torah. Adam and Chava were given the Garden of Eden to enjoy with the one exception of being forbidden to eat the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. However, after being convinced by the snake, Chava eats from the tree and persuades Adam to try it too. Consequently, they are kicked out of the Garden of Eden and punished for their actions.

This story has many lessons to teach us but the one we want to focus on is thinking about our environment and the way it influences us. The type of people that we surround ourselves with has major ramifications on the way we behave. Peer pressure, community standards and societal norms all have deep rooted effects on our lives that can lead to us making poor decisions. In this week's parsha, Adam and Chava succumbed to the pressures of the snake and that ultimately led to their downfall.

In the book Atomic Habits by James Clear, Clear spends much of the book discussing that a significant part of our habits and behaviors are due to external triggers. The way to break old habits or instill new ones is to alter our environment accordingly and either prevent or enforce the cues that lead to the habit. When relating back to the parsha, it is important to reflect on the people and environment we situate ourselves in and think about ways we can change our environment to be one that leads to personal growth.

It is also essential to realize our role in the greater environment and try to be a positive influence to those around us. Our presence can have much greater power than we may realize. Sometimes, all it takes is a smile to change the course of someone's day :)

DISCUSSION

Reflect on your environment and the people around you. Discuss what changes you can make to encourage personal growth and avoid the areas that are setting you back.

QUESTIONS

- What steps can you take to be a positive influence to those around you?
- What is an area in your life that you want to improve in? What changes can you make to help achieve your goal?

PARSHAT NOACH

In this week's parsha, the world is described as a lawless, chaotic mess. After trying to get the people to repent, God deems the people unsaveable and decides to destroy the world through a flood. Noach is the one righteous person in the land and God tells him to build an ark to save him, his family and the animals. Noach, his family and the animals enter the ark for 40 days and 40 nights while God destroys the world. At the end of that time, Noach is given a signal that the flood is over through a dove, he brings a sacrifice to God and God promises to never destroy the world again with rainbow symbolizing this covenant.

At first glance, this story is quite depressing. The people were so bad that the entire world had to be destroyed?! It leaves questions about the nature of humanity and the goodness of people. However, the ending of the story, with God's promise to Noach and future generations that He will never destroy the world again provides a slight glimmer of hope. This ending shows that God has granted all future generations the privilege of second chances and repentance.

In our lives, giving second chances can sometimes be difficult. Or maybe the second chance isn't so difficult but the third, fourth or fifth chance seems pointless. We can sometimes be pushed to the point of how many more chances we can give.

This story comes to teach us the balance. God promises to never destroy the world again but He also did destroy it the first time around. Similarly, in our lives we should try and practice forgiveness and awarding people chances. We should strive to grant forgiveness frequently because it allows both ourselves and the person being forgiven to develop and move forward.

We can also acknowledge that sometimes forgiveness takes time and there can feel like there is a point of no return. God's destruction of the world may seem like humanity reached that point but He provided a lifeline to the world through Noach, a small window of opportunity open for humanity to survive and repent.

DISCUSSION

Think about a time that it was difficult for you to forgive. Discuss if you ended up forgiving the person or not and if you noticed any changes in yourself or others after granting that forgiveness.

QUESTIONS

- What are ways you can try to be more forgiving in your life?
- How did you forgive the last person who upset you?
- How do you feel after you forgave someone?

PARSHAT LECH LECHA

This week's parsha is all about new beginnings and pushing yourself out of your comfort zone. Avraham is commanded to leave his home and go to the land that God will show him. God doesn't provide any description about what the land is to Avraham. God just commands Avraham to leave everything he knows for an unknown journey to an unknown land.

At first glance, Avraham's decision to leave everything behind seems almost impossible to relate to. He had no idea where he was going or what the journey would entail but he knew that his efforts would be rewarded in the end, as per God's promise.

In life, we come across these crossroads constantly in our own journeys. Sometimes we are thrown into situations that may be completely unknown to us and are then forced to navigate them. Other times, we set goals for ourselves and they can feel impossible to reach. Yet all of these moments contribute to our own personal "lech lecha," our own paths.

This week's parsha then teaches us an essential tool to navigating our own "lech lecha" stories. After God gives the commandment to Avraham to go to this new land, He promises Avraham that He will reward him. The parsha is teaching us the essentiality of foresight: looking towards the future benefits that a situation may bring. By focusing on the positive and trusting that the journey is part of our personal growth process, we can reframe our challenges towards a more positive outlet and utilize our experiences to better ourselves and others.

DISCUSSION

What is a character trait you are proud of? How have your life experiences contributed to its development?

QUESTIONS

- Think about a goal that you have been struggling to attain. What is one positive that you will gain from the steps needed to achieve it?
- Has forward thinking helped you achieve your goals?
- What is one way you can help encourage yourself through positive foresight?

PARSHAT VAYERA

Standing up for the protection of others is an important message that we are constantly taught throughout our lives. In school, we are reminded to stand up to bullying through announcements, lectures and posters. Billboards across the country frequently project the slogan, "If you see something, say something." We regularly acknowledge our need to protect those around us and prevent wrongdoing.

Avraham, serving as a prime role model to this lesson, does just that in this week's parsha. God tells Avraham that He is going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. In response, Avraham prays to God and asks for the cities to be saved on account of 50 righteous men. God responds that He would not destroy the city if there are 50 righteous men. Avraham then objects and continues to ask if there are 45, 40, 30, 20, 10 righteous men in the city. Each time, God responds saying He would not destroy the city if there were righteous men there. The Torah takes the time to include the entire conversation which further highlights the importance of protecting others.

We should try and internalize the messages of this week's parsha and take action when we feel that something is not right. Although this may seem like an easy task, it can be incredibly difficult. It is much easier for us to disregard others and say, "they don't need our help," or "there are other people to help them," and just walk away. In fact, this reasoning is labeled in psychology as the Bystander Effect. The Bystander Effect is when people tend to think that they are not required to take action, especially if there are others around. Knowing this, it is even more crucial that we recognize our personal responsibility to help and stand up for others around us.

DISCUSSION

Think about a goal you achieved that was challenging along the way. Discuss three ways you grew from that process.

QUESTIONS

- What are three steps you can take towards being more attuned to the needs of others?
- How can you remind yourself to step in and help when others are in need?
- How can you practice looking towards the positives in the future so that you can better endure the challenges of the journey?

PARSHAT CHAYEI SARAH

In this week's parsha, we are introduced to Rivka, the second of the matriarchs. Avraham instructs Eliezer to find a wife for Yitzchak. Eliezer travels to Midyan and stands by a well waiting for a woman to come and offer to bring him and his camels water. Immediately, Rivka comes and brings water to Eliezer and his camels. This act of kindness indicates to Eliezer that Rivka will be a good wife for Yitzchak. He then brings Rivka back with him to marry Yitzchak.

We can learn a lot from this snippet into Rivka's character the Torah is providing us. The way Rivka acts quickly and does not hesitate to help Eliezer is very impressive. Especially given how difficult the task was for Rivka (carrying water can be quite heavy!) but she quickly stepped in to do so without complaining or giving it a second thought.

Rivka's actions teach us an important lesson; when given the opportunity to help someone, it is essential to act quickly and without hesitation. Doing so ensures that we can maximize the opportunity and prevent the person that we are helping from feeling like a burden to us. When a person acts excited to do something kind for someone else, that energy radiates to both the person providing and receiving the help.

Another interesting aspect we can learn about kindness from this story is that kindness is something that is measurable through action. When we reflect on ourselves, it might be easy to think we are kind, generous people. However, when we are put to the test, how often do we actually act that way? Eliezer only knew that Rivka was kind because of the way she helped - not just because she said she was a kind person. So too, in our own lives, we should strive to align our actions with the ideals we try to attain.

DISCUSSION

Think about the last time you did something kind for someone else. How long ago was it? Discuss how you can make kindness a more prominent force in your life.

QUESTIONS

- What is a simple act of kindness that you can try to incorporate more into your life?
- How can you tell if someone is kind? Do you have any tests that you use to decide?

PARSHAT TOLDOT

Sometimes things are hard to understand in the moment. Without the bigger picture context, it is difficult to grasp why something may be happening. This week's parsha is a prime example of that. At the beginning of the parsha, God gives Rivka a prophecy saying that she has two nations in her womb, and the older son will serve the younger one. As the boys grow up, they turn out to be very different in nature. Yaakov tricks Esav into selling his birthright to him and then when it is time for Yitzchak to give Esav the birthright blessing, Rivka tells Yaakov to lie to his father and trick him into getting the blessing instead.

Now, this entire story of how Yaakov received the birthright is quite confusing. Why would Yaakov and Rivka need to lie in order for God's words to be fulfilled? Doesn't that set a rocky pretext for the formation of the Jewish people? Is the moral of the story supposed to be that it is acceptable to lie and cheat your way to success?

Although there are many answers to these questions, the one we present entails through looking at a few elements of the greater context. 1) Rivka had the knowledge that Yaakov was supposed to be the "chosen" son so she did what she needed to do to make it happen. 2) In the parshiot that follow, it seems as though Yaakov is punished for his deception. This can be seen by the way he gets tricked by Lavan and his own sons later on.

Knowing this information, a potential answer to these issues is that this situation may not have been optimally handled. There could have been other routes for both Rivka and Yaakov to approach the birthright and ensure that the prophecy was fulfilled.

From this we can appreciate that we may not always understand other people's actions. Sometimes, there is a greater context to what they are doing that we may not be aware of. Therefore, it is important to try and provide the benefit of the doubt. Additionally, we have to acknowledge that sometimes people make mistakes. Even our greatest role models and leaders don't always act in the way we expect them to. It is important to reframe those mistakes as part of being human and as an opportunity to learn and grow from.

DISCUSSION

Think about a time where someone made a mistake that really bothered you. Were you able to forgive them? Was there greater information that you found out after that made it easier for you to forgive them?

QUESTIONS

- How do you balance trying to give the benefit of the doubt and recognizing mistakes?
- Think about a time where you were quick to judge someone. Were you later surprised by a piece of greater context that you did not know?
- Do you think Yaakov's tricks were the correct way to approach the birthright in this story? Do you think it could have been handled differently? If so, how?

PARSHAT VAYETZEI

There are many things in our life that we dedicate time to. Whether it be school, work, family or friends, the way we choose to spend our time is the manifestation of our commitment towards those relationships. With all of the other tasks we have to regularly manage, it can sometimes be difficult to carve out the necessary time that shows our dedication to an important goal or relationship in our lives. This can lead to us falling behind in our progress towards achievement or slacking in our interpersonal relationships.

This week's parsha provides the opposite extreme. Yaakov runs away to Lavan's house in Charan to escape the wrath of Esav. In Charan, Yaakov meets Lavan's daughter Rachel and wants to marry her. Lavan tells Yaakov that he has to work for him for seven years and then he can marry Rachel. Yaakov agrees to it.

Although this isn't the end of the story, it is astounding that Yaakov agreed to work for seven years just to marry Rachel. It highlights his dedication towards his relationship with her.

However, after the seven years, Lavan tricks Yaakov and has him marry his older daughter Leah instead. When Yaakov realizes, Lavan tells him that he will let him marry Rachel also but he will have to work another seven years. Yaakov again agrees to it.

14 years! That's a long time to work just to marry Rachel. This story in the parsha teaches us that commitment and dedication are not easy. Sometimes it takes difficult labor and significant time to achieve a goal. However, when we are willing to remain committed to what we are doing and why we are doing it, we can achieve even the loftiest of goals and build and maintain beautiful relationships. When we prioritize our actions and time towards the goals and relationships that we have, we will ultimately feel more fulfilled because our time and efforts are being spent on areas that we truly care about.

DISCUSSION

Discuss a time where you stayed dedicated towards a goal and achieved it. What were some tips/tricks you used? How did it feel to be committed to that achievement?

QUESTIONS

- What does dedication mean to you?
- What are some areas in life that you are willing to dedicate yourself to?
- Do you think you spend enough time on those areas? If not, what can you do to increase your prioritization and dedication?

PARSHAT VAYISHLACH

Fights, disputes and disagreements are bound to happen in our relationships. Differences between us and others are inevitable. After all, no two people are the same. However, through these points of tension, it is essential for us to figure out how to reconcile. Even though this sometimes seems impossible, especially when we feel we have been so badly wronged that we do not think we can forgive, this week's parsha provides us hope that we can move past even the most messy of circumstances.

Yaakov is traveling with his family from Charan back to Eretz Yisrael. After being notified that they are about to run into Esav who is prepared for war (and last Yaakov saw, wants to kill him), Yaakov tries to devise a plan to protect his family. However, when Esav sees Yaakov, he embraces him. Instead of greeting him with hate for stealing his birthright years prior, Esav greets Yaakov with love and forgiveness.

We can take away from this moment that no matter how big the fight and how contentious the relationship has become, space can always be found for forgiveness. Even when it seems impossible and there is so much hatred between the parties, choosing to let go and recognizing that we are all only human can allow us to move forward.

DISCUSSION

Think about the last time someone upset you. How did you forgive them? Was it easy or difficult?

QUESTIONS

- What steps do you take when trying to forgive someone? How do you move on?
- What are ways that someone who has a difficult time forgiving can work towards forgiveness?
- Do you think everyone deserves forgiveness? Why or why not?

PARSHAT VAYEISHEV

How do we navigate our emotions of anger, hatred and jealousy? Oftentimes, these emotions can be overwhelming leaving us feeling like we are not in control. In this week's parsha we see a clear example of that. Yosef receives a special gift from his father, a multicolored garment and has dreams about his brothers serving him. When his brothers hear about all of this, they grow to hate him and start plotting to kill him. They ultimately decide to throw him into a pit, sell him into slavery and trick their father that Yosef died.

Although everything ends up working out for Yosef as we will learn more about in next week's parsha, it is clear that his brothers' actions were wrong. We can tell how powerful their emotions were that their feelings led them to try and kill their own brother. In our own lives, we may be confronted with similar feelings even if it is on a lighter scale. For example, if our sibling gets a better present or someone else gets recognition for our work, it can feel quite frustrating and upsetting. Especially if we begin to believe it is a pattern, these feelings of anger and jealousy can become quite overwhelming.

However, this story teaches us that we can have those feelings but we need to learn to channel them in a more productive way. After all, selling your brother into slavery is not the solution! We need to be appreciative for what we have and not focus on everything that we do not. By doing so, we will be able to subdue those negative feelings and be happier with ourselves and our lives.

DISCUSSION

Think about your relationship with your siblings. What is something that your sibling does that bothers you? How can you reframe that feeling into something more productive?

QUESTIONS

- What are three things you do to calm down when you're upset?
- How do you help your friends or family members navigate difficult emotions?
- What is the best way for others to support you when you are upset?

PARSHAT MIKETZ

This week's parsha exemplifies the phrase, "what goes around comes around." While in prison, Yosef offers interpretations to the dreams of two of his fellow inmates, Pharaoh's chief butler and Pharaoh's chief baker. Pharaoh's chief butler gets let out of prison and returns to work for Pharaoh.

After two years, Pharaoh has two dreams that none of his ministers can interpret. Pharaoh's chief butler remembers Yosef's ability to interpret dreams so Pharaoh calls him out of prison to interpret his dreams. Satisfied with his interpretations, Pharaoh names Yosef second-in-command, completely changing Yosef's status from prisoner to high ranking official.

This story teaches us the importance of being kind even when we are not asked to do so. Yosef took proactive measures to offer advice to Pharaoh's officers which led to him being saved a couple of years later. Instead of waiting to be asked to help, Yosef quickly stepped in to assist, highlighting his care for others.

In our lives, it is essential that we offer proactive kindness in every situation. As we can see from the story, kindness is contagious. The more we spread kindness, the better those around us and the world become.

We also learn that we never know how far a simple act of kindness can be taken. For you, it could be just offering some support to a friend going through a tough time. But for your friend, your actions might completely change their perspective on the matter and help them through it.

DISCUSSION

Share a story when you did something nice for someone else and that action came back to you later. What was that experience like.

QUESTIONS

- Has someone ever done a small kindness for you that changed your day?
- What are two small caring deeds that you can do this week to spread positivity and kind energy?
- Have you ever been influenced to do something nice for someone else because you saw a friend doing something similar?

PARSHAT VAYISGASH

Life is full of surprises. Whether for better or for worse, we cannot anticipate all of the twists and turns that life has to offer. In this week's parsha this point is made quite clearly. After Yosef's brothers came down to Egypt asking for food in last week's parsha, Yosef can no longer keep his identity a secret. He reveals himself to his brothers, leaving them speechless. How could it be that their brother is alive? How could it be that not only is he alive but he is the second-in-command in Egypt? After all, the last they saw of him he was being sold into slavery.

The brothers' response to this moment highlights the absolute shock that they must have been experiencing and is to be expected given the circumstances. However, Yosef's response is quite interesting. He tells the brothers not to worry and that really what happened to him was all part of Hashem's plan and not their fault. Yosef's statements make the story even more surprising! How could it be that after all these years Yosef has forgiven his brothers and does not even believe they are responsible for his experiences?

This story reflects a greater approach as to how we can navigate hardships and the uncertainties that come along with them. Yosef wanted to move on. He viewed the challenges he went through as part of a greater process that led him to where he was. Instead of viewing them as something that brought him down, he understood each piece of difficulty as a steppingstone bringing him to his successes.

This type of foresight is very difficult to have when we are actively having a difficult time. When we are going through challenges, it can seem impossible to attribute them to a greater meaning. However, after we have gone through it, it can be easier to reflect on and appreciate all that we have learned from the experience. No matter what change life brings about, it is helpful to recognize the benefits we are going to gain from the experience. After all, if God wants to train someone to be strong, He is not going to have them lifting feathers.

DISCUSSION

Think about something challenging that you endured. What did you learn from the experience?

QUESTIONS

- How do you handle surprises or unforeseen circumstances? What are a few steps that you can take to make it easier?
- Think of a friend who is going through a challenging time. What is one thing you can do to support them this week?

PARSHAT VAYECHI

In this week's parsha, Yaakov gives blessings to all of his sons and to Yosef's sons, Ephraim and Menashe. He gives each of them personalized brachot according to their strengths and weaknesses.

It's important that Yaakov does not expect his sons to follow the same life path - nor does he believe there to be one. He understands that people are different and have different strengths and capabilities. He does not expect all of his sons to be the same.

This point may seem obvious. However, it is interesting that Yaakov's sons, the founders of the Tribes of Israel, do not receive a uniform message. One might expect there to be a single way that Yaakov expects all of the Jewish people to be.

These blessings can then teach us a very important message. In our own communities, where we often establish standards or molds for everyone to fit, we are doing so at a fault. There are no two people that have the same capabilities. Every person has a unique space to fill and we should strive to appreciate the differences between us instead of constantly washing over them through our similarities. By doing so, we will be able to learn from each other and grow in our appreciation for others.

Through recognizing our unique strengths, we can determine how we can best use them for ourselves and for others. We will notice the specific areas that will allow us to maximize our potential and feel more fulfilled.

DISCUSSION

Think about three strengths and three weaknesses that you have. How do you think you can best use your strengths? Do other people in your life have a strength where you have a weakness (or vice versa)? How can you work together to help each other through your respective strengths/weaknesses?

QUESTIONS

- What are two things you can do this week to appreciate the differences of others around you?
- What are two ways you can use your strengths to help someone else out that is struggling in those areas?

PARSHAT SHEMOT

In this week's parsha we are introduced to Moshe for the first time. However, instead of the Torah telling us in simple language what type of person Moshe is, we are given stories that leave us having to determine his character.

The first story we are given is when Moshe comes across an Egyptian beating a Jew. Moshe intervenes and kills the Egyptian, saving the Jewish person's life. The next story we receive is when Moshe sees two Jews having a dispute. He again intervenes and tries to help settle the argument.

From these two stories, we can see that Moshe cares about justice and is willing to help others. Through his actions, we can learn and appreciate a lot more about him than if the Torah had just said he is a caring person.

Understanding this point, we can now appreciate the greater weight that our actions take on. Not only does our behavior affect the people involved, it also leaves an impression on others about our character. When people see or hear that you actually did something kind, it means a lot more to them than if you or someone else just said you are kind.

By recognizing our behaviors as a reflection of who we are, it adds a lot more weight to every action that we take. Hopefully, this will make us more mindful about what we are doing and ensure it aligns with the ideas of the person we want to be.

DISCUSSION

Share a story of a time where someone remembered a positive trait that you have based on your behavior.

QUESTIONS

- What do our behaviors say about us?
- Think about what we learn about Moshe's character through these stories. What character traits do you think others attribute to you based on your actions?
- How can you use these messages to be more mindful of your actions?

PARSHAT VAERA

In this week's parsha, we see two opposing sides stuck in their ways. On one side we see Moshe and Aharon, time and time again petitioning Pharaoh to let the Jewish people go. On the other, Pharaoh stubbornly rejecting their requests even though he knows what he is doing is wrong. In response to Pharaoh's refusals, God brings plagues. In this week's parsha, Egypt experiences seven plagues, all coming after multiple warnings and requests to free the Jewish people. After the seventh plague, it almost seems as if Pharaoh has a change of heart. He acknowledges that he is sinning against God and that he is in the wrong but then maintains his position of not freeing the Jewish people.

From an outsider's perspective, Moshe and Aharon's request and Pharaoh's refusal to fulfill it are equal displays of stubbornness. Both parties refuse to budge, waiting for the other to give in. However, there is an essential difference in their perspectives that can teach us an important lesson. Moshe and Aharon have assurance from God that what they are doing is just and necessary. They know that their mission is crucial and are acting from a place of determination and drive to fulfill it. Furthermore, their means of attaining their goal is through discussion and a hope that they can change Pharaoh's perspective.

However, Pharaoh's attitude is coming from a place of complete stubbornness. His refusal to free the Jewish people goes against what he knows to be logical. He knows that he is causing his people to suffer from the plagues by not letting the Jewish people go and he acknowledges that he is sinning by what he is doing. His stubbornness comes from a place of close-mindedness, negativity and an overall presumption that it is "his way or the highway" regardless of whether he is right.

From these two perspectives, we see that there is a critical distinction we should make for ourselves when working to achieve our goals. Working from a place of stubbornness and close-mindedness can lead us to make decisions that do not even align with the rest of our values. Stubbornness causes us to forgo the greater picture in exchange for the short-term satisfaction of getting our way.

On the other hand, determination approaches situations in a more positive, open-minded light. With determination, we are set on achieving our goal but go about it from a less rigid perspective and are constantly checking to ensure that our goal aligns with the greater hopes we have for ourselves. When we are determined, if inconsistencies appear along the way, we can adapt our mission to ensure it still aligns with our desired result. Unlike stubbornness, we are not "stuck in our ways" when we are determined, rather, we are focused and driven towards our achievements.

DISCUSSION

Share a time when your determination was a positive trait. Compare it to a time when being stubborn ended up affecting you negatively. Discuss the differences in those instances. What can you learn from it?

QUESTIONS

- Do you think it's important to be stubborn? Why or why not?
- What are two ways that the messages of this week's parsha can help you achieve your goals?
- Why do you think Pharaoh acknowledged that what he was doing was wrong but then didn't let the Jewish people go?

PARSHAT BO

In this week's parsha, we have the last three plagues, the first Passover and Pharaoh's eventual freeing of the Jewish people. To recap, the ten plagues were: water turning to blood, frogs, lice, wild animals, pestilence, boils, locust, darkness and the killing of all firstborn sons. We learn in the Talmud that each plague lasted for ten months. So, for ten months, Moshe asks Pharaoh to let the Jewish people go and Pharaoh says no. Until finally the last plague and Pharaoh frees them. The blaring question in this story is why? Once God decides to appoint Moshe and start the mission of freeing the Jewish people, why didn't it happen instantaneously? Why did the Jewish people need to suffer another 10 months, enslaved in Egypt while God used the plagues to force Pharaoh's hand to free the Jews on his own?

Although there is no way to truly know the answer, after all it is impossible to understand the logic of the way God operates, there are a few interesting points that we can learn from this idea but we will focus on the impact of words and actions on others. After years of slavery and oppression, seeing Moshe, Aharon and God stand up to Pharaoh and advocate on their behalf was essential for the Jewish people. The Jews needed to understand they're not lesser than and that they should not be subject to these conditions. Especially in face of rejection after rejection, seeing their commitment to the Jewish people time and time again is an essential shift in perceptions for their Jewish people to internalize. They now no longer see themselves as "lesser than" but rather worthy of freedom and appreciation.

In our own lives, especially with the influences of societal pressures and social media, it can sometimes feel impossible to live up to the standards and expectations of the world. Understanding our value is a crucial tool that we all need to overcome these challenges and appreciate our role in this world. One tangible way we can help those around us navigate these challenges is by showing our appreciation for them and pointing out the qualities that they have that make them special. By doing so, we can generate a world that is more focused on the positives and the elements that build our worth rather than being hypercritical and succumbing to the negative pressures we all face.

DISCUSSION

Discuss a time where someone advocated on your behalf and the impact it had on you.

QUESTIONS

- What was a compliment that you received that has since stuck with you?
- What steps can you take to build up the self-worth of yourself and those around you?

PARSHAT BESHALACH

In this week's Parsha, the Jewish people are finally saved from slavery. After finally getting to leave Egypt in last week's portion, the Jewish people are in the process of leaving when Pharaoh changes his mind and sends his soldiers to chase after the Jews and have them return. When the Jewish people reach the sea, it seems as though they are at a dead end and that they are about to be recaptured by the Egyptians. However, in an unbelievable miracle, God splits the sea and the Jewish people survive while the waves come crashing down on the Egyptians behind them.

After this moment, Miriam, Moses' sister, sings a song, named Shirat HaYam or Song of the Sea, which is an expression of tremendous joy and gratitude to God for being saved. Although the Jewish people had just experienced terrible hardships in slavery in Egypt for hundreds of years, they still took the time to appreciate their salvation. It is almost surprising that they say thank you in this moment. It would have been expected that after years of difficulty the Jewish people would grow to resent God and be angry for what they had gone through. Instead, they chose to see the light in the situation and appreciate that they were saved.

We can apply this message to our own lives. Even in moments where we are engulfed in darkness and everything around us seems unbearable, it is essential for us to reflect on the good and appreciate everything that we do have. Obviously, this is much easier said than done but the more we work on refocusing ourselves towards gratitude the better we will be able to overcome our challenges.

DISCUSSION

Think about a time when you were going through a challenge. Did you try reframing things with more positive, grateful outlook? Do you think it would have helped? Why or why not?

QUESTIONS

- Do you think it is important to be grateful?
- What are two ways you can be more grateful in your day to day life?

PARSHAT YITRO

When we need help, it can be very difficult to ask for it. Whether we are embarrassed or just believe we can get it done on our own, admitting to ourselves and others that we need assistance is hard. This week's parsha demonstrates just that. Yitro comes to see Moshe and notices how much work he is doing by himself for the Jewish people. Moshe sits by himself every day as a judge, dealing with people's disputes.

Realizing that Moshe cannot do it all on his own, Yitro suggests setting up judges to help and lighten Moshe's workload. The Torah is telling us here that even Moshe, the great leader of the Jewish people, cannot do it all on his own. Furthermore, it sometimes takes someone noticing our struggles and stepping in to help when it is too difficult for us to ask for it on our own.

We can learn two important lessons from this story. Firstly, it is important to be actively involved in helping others. We should try and be aware of our surroundings and seek out opportunities to help others. We constantly have opportunities to assist others, sometimes it just takes noticing a bit beneath the surface to make a significant change. Secondly, when someone is offering to help us, we should try and be receptive to it. Although our instinct may be to decline help, we should remind ourselves that everyone needs assistance sometimes. After all, even Moshe could not do it all on his own and needed guidance from Yitro to help his workload.

DISCUSSION

Think about a time someone offered to help you. How did you respond? Was it difficult for you to accept it?

QUESTIONS

- What are steps you can take to make accepting help easier?
- What are a couple of signs that you can look for to see if someone needs help but is not asking for it?
- How can you be proactive to see if someone needs assistance?

PARSHAT MISHPATIM

The title of this week's parsha is essentially a one-word summary. Mishpatim, or laws, is the essence of what we learn about in the parsha. Following last week's portion where we read the Ten Commandments, this is the first set of more detailed and specific laws that the Jewish people receive from God. Taking a step back, the timing of all these rules is quite interesting. The Jewish people just left Egypt where they lived in slavery and were subject to harsh rules and punishment. Now, with their newfound freedom, they are suddenly subject to a new set of rules. From the surface, this may seem counterintuitive and even frustrating for the Jewish people. Can you imagine going from being enslaved to finally thinking that you are free but then being forced to comply with a new set of standards?

However, there is a crucial distinction to be made between these systems. In Egypt, the inherent nature of the Jewish people's enslavement was immoral. Here, with the giving of the Ten Commandments in last week's portion and the follow-up rules we learn in this week's parsha, the laws serve as an intense contrast. The laws that God gives us are moral. They focus on developing a society that cares for one another and achieving a divine, just mission. We can see the importance of such rules in every aspect of our lives. Every society must have guiding rules to ensure that its members are kept safe and ideally can lead meaningful, purpose-filled lives.

This idea also connects to the idea of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks z"l regarding the difference between "freedom from" and "freedom to." Being freed from slavery gave the Jewish people physical freedom but until they had instruction and guidance towards a new, productive goal, they were still enslaved by their mindset. Once receiving the Torah which provides them this necessary guidance, they finally had the freedom to, the freedom to choose how to lead their lives, now with an elevated purpose.

DISCUSSION

Think about summer vacation from school. After weeks of studying for exams, you finally complete your assignments and get to enjoy your break. Now, it may be necessary to just unwind and take the time as a complete vacation, devoid of any responsibilities. However, imagine that this break is now endless. How do you think you would manage your time? Would you get bored or take on any new projects? How would you find meaning?

QUESTIONS

- Do you appreciate having structure or rules in your life? Why or why not?
- How do you manage following rules that you don't like?
- What are two ways you can elevate part of your daily routine to make them more meaningful?

PARSHAT TERUMAH

In this week's parsha, the Jewish people are instructed to bring different materials to help build the Mishkan, the Sanctuary for God. Following this, Moshe receives detailed instructions from God on how to build this Temple and the vessels that will go inside of it. When taking a deeper look, it is interesting that these two concepts are put together. The Mishkan requires both human work and creativity while the 'blueprints' are all divinely inspired.

This duality connects to a greater philosophical concept in Judaism which pertains to the balance between divine intervention and individual human effort. Coined Hashgacha v'Hishtadlut in Hebrew, these ideas have been debated among philosophers for hundreds of years and fill many Jewish books. Although the topic is too lengthy to fully discuss here, the instructions in this week's parsha highlight the two-sided nature of this balance in the world.

On the one hand, humans are required to take part in the creation of the holiest space on earth, the Mishkan. We are commanded to bring our own possessions, mere things and use them to serve God. Through human creativity these mere possessions get transformed into an elevated status of being worthy to be used to serve God.

However, it is not that simple. These simple items cannot attain that status without the holiness that God ascribes to them by providing the instructions for what to do with them. There is a certain 'fated' outcome for these items that connects back to the idea of divine providence, God's decision for what these items ought to be.

Although in our lives it may not be written out as clearly as it is in this week's parsha, understanding the balance between doing our part and having faith and trust that God has a plan for us is crucial. It reminds us that our effort is essential towards contributing to this world and that is empowering for our day-to-day lives. This remains true while also having the underlying understanding that God is present and there for us even if we don't always see it clearly.

DISCUSSION

Think about a challenge that you overcame. What effort did you have to put in to get over the challenge? How do you think God played a part in that challenge? Did the challenge help you grow?

QUESTIONS

- What are two items that you can use to motivate yourself to achieve your goals?
- How can you add more meaning to the mundane tasks that you have to complete each day?

PARSHAT TETZAVEH

In this week's parsha, God gives commandments to Aharon and his sons, the Kohanim (priests). These commandments include their obligation to maintain a constant flame inside the Mishkan, what clothing they are supposed to wear and how it should be made, and the process they must endure to anoint themselves and be initiated as priests.

Focusing on the commandment of the eternal flame, the concept of having a consistent light in the Mishkan serves as a much grander symbol. The eternality of God's existence is represented in the flame and acts as a reminder to both the priests and the greater Jewish people. In the commandment, the Kohanim are instructed to maintain the flame from morning until evening.

As the Lubavitcher Rebbe explains, this idea is somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, there is an element of consistency and continuity that is expected in the flame. It sheds an 'eternal' light. On the other hand, the from 'morning until night' highlights the inherent nature of the way light changes. In different environments, the strength of the light presents differently, even if the flame is constantly there.

When applying this to our everyday lives, the Rebbe says that this is part of our mission. We are supposed to bring the Divine, inherently perfect and eternal, to the world that is subject to radical change and imperfection. We bring this energy, this illumination, to every condition of the world as a constant model for striving towards the perfect.

The flame reminds us of striving towards our goals and our higher mission of trying to make the world a better, more perfect place.

DISCUSSION

Think about the balance of consistency and change in your life. Discuss how that balance affects you.

QUESTIONS

- What are two areas you can work on to make the world a better place?
- What are parts of your life that you think it is important to be consistent?
- What are areas of your life that you think it is important to be open to change?

PARSHAT KI TISA

In this week's parsha, we read about the infamous sin of the Golden Calf. While Moshe spends 40 days and 40 nights on top of Mount Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments and the Torah from God, the Jewish people, waiting at the bottom of the mountain, begin to panic that there is no sign of his return. They turn to Aharon, Moshe's brother, and ask him to make them a God because they do not know what happened to Moshe. Aharon creates the Golden Calf with the people's help and the people worship the calf.

This infuriates God who says He will destroy the people, leaving Moshe begging for the Jewish people's survival. Moshe uses the 13 traits attributed to God to try and appease him. These traits focus on God being slow to anger, merciful, kind, truthful and forgiving. They have been adopted throughout Jewish prayer as a foundational element of asking God for forgiveness.

In our efforts to bring the Divine into this world, these traits provide much of the necessary means to do so. We are supposed to emulate God and strive to bring His will into this world. By acknowledging God's attributes when we are reflecting and asking for forgiveness, we are given a guide as to how to best move forward and correct our ways. This reflection process is crucial to have and is the first step towards forgiveness whether it be in terms of God or in our relationships with others.

DISCUSSION

Think about the last time you made a mistake. How did you know that what you did was wrong? What guidance did you use to recover and move forward from that mistake?

QUESTIONS

- How often do you try to reflect on your behavior?
- What are three ways you can incorporate self-reflection into your life?
- Do you think self-reflection is important? Why or why not?

PARSHAT VAYAKEL

In this week's parsha, the Jewish people begin building the Temple, as per God's command. Everyone is encouraged to bring items that will beautify the space. Those with special talents in relevant areas like carpentry or embroidery are also given the opportunity to use their skill sets to contribute. Through a combination of individual efforts and the collective mission of constructing the Temple, the Temple is built.

This relationship between the individual and the collective highlights the tension in the human experience. As individuals, we strive to be unique and are constantly trying to find ways to stand out. At the same time, we also seek out social belongingness and community. In this week's parsha, we're given a guide as to how to navigate these seemingly juxtaposing ideals. On the one hand, we have a collective mission that binds us together and drives a sense of unity. On the other, each individual is empowered to utilize their unique capabilities. Both of these aspects of the human experience thrive simultaneously under the framework God provides for building the Temple.

From this, we are given a greater lesson as to how to balance these elements in our own life. Sometimes it may seem daunting to find your own space within a greater community that has specific expectations and standards that must be followed. The pressure can even feel stifling for some because of the seeming rigidity. However, the parsha here is coming to teach us that each individual has the opportunity to use their own self-expression and talents to contribute. These differences are a point to highlight rather than restrict. By taking time to appreciate each other's differences the result on the communal and national level is all the more so beautiful.

DISCUSSION

Think about a time you were working on a group project. How did everyone as an individual contribute? Were group members able to use their unique skill sets to contribute to the greater whole? How did that affect the outcome of the project?

QUESTIONS

- What are some of your unique qualities?
- How do you think you can use your attributes to enhance your greater community?
- What are steps you can take to appreciate other people's differences?

PARSHAT PEKUDEI

In this week's parsha, the Jewish people begin building the Temple, as per God's command. Everyone is encouraged to bring items that will beautify the space. Those with special talents in relevant areas like carpentry or embroidery are also given the opportunity to use their skill sets to contribute. Through a combination of individual efforts and the collective mission of constructing the Temple, the Temple is built.

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DISCUSSION

Think about a time you were working on a group project. How did everyone as an individual contribute? Were group members able to use their unique skill sets to contribute to the greater whole? How did that affect the outcome of the project?

QUESTIONS

- What are some of your unique qualities?
- How do you think you can use your attributes to enhance your greater community?
- What are steps you can take to appreciate other people's differences?

PARSHAT VAYIKRA

In this week's parsha, the Mishkan is now complete and the people are introduced to how they are supposed to serve God in the Temple. They are instructed with the specificities of the different types of Korbanot, sacrifices, and are told when and for what reason each offering should be brought in order to serve God properly. For example, a Korban Chatat, or sin offering, is brought when someone transgresses inadvertently.

From this, we can learn an important idea about the significance of creating structure in our service to God. It might seem strange that if we are supposed to be striving for a relationship with God through our service in the Temple then shouldn't we choose how we want to build and maintain that relationship? Shouldn't we be able to connect in ways that come more naturally to us? In thinking about these questions, we can gain important insight into the best practices for both our relationship with God and the rest of the relationships in our lives.

The structure we are provided through Korbanot teaches us that when we are in a relationship, we have to learn how to best communicate with the other person in ways that they can connect to you. For example, the concept of the five love languages teaches us that certain people are more receptive to certain expressions of love than others.

Here too with Korbanot, Hashem is asking us to connect with Him through His channel. Although this may seem simple, this can be incredibly difficult for some. After all, offering animals on an altar is not easy to imagine as fostering a connection to God. However, by forgoing our personal methods of connection towards the greater service of God, we are able to act more selflessly and appreciate the opportunity that we are being given to connect.

DISCUSSION

Think about a time where you were having a difficult time connecting to someone in your life. How did you reframe your relationship? What strategies did you use to overcome this challenge?

QUESTIONS

- How do you relate to having structure in your life? Do you like it? Why or why not?
- Do you have certain expectations that you have to follow in your relationships? How do you navigate them?

PARSHAT TZAV

This week's parsha is all about the Kohanim, the priests, and their initiation into service in the Mishkan. They are given the commandment to constantly maintain the fire burning on the altar. The Kohanim are also told which Korbanot they are to eat from and go through a seven day initiation-into-service process led by Moshe.

Although the parsha only focuses on the Kohanim making it seemingly unrelatable to the average Jewish person, we can take away a larger universal message from the commandments the Kohanim receive. Looking specifically at the mitzvah to constantly maintain the flame on the altar, we can learn a profound message both from the imagery of the commandment and the fulfillment of it.

When thinking about the mitzvah itself, the commandment to maintain an eternal flame in God's Temple is not on the individual. Rather, it is a collective obligation to ensure that the fire is constantly burning. Looking at the symbolism of the commandment, the fire itself is supposed to represent our connection to God and His Presence in the Temple.

Knowing these aspects of the mitzvah, we can learn some key points on how to build our relationship with God and people in our lives. Firstly, our relationship as a people with God functions as a collective. It is about coming together and organizing ourselves so that the flame never dies out. Secondly, we have to put in effort to maintain this flame. Without human initiative, the flame would extinguish.

Therefore, we can understand that an essential component to both our relationship with God and any relationship we have in our lives is about effort and maintenance. One of the most important pieces of any relationship is how we show we care through the effort we put in. Taking these messages into account, we should take this week as an opportunity to work on our relationships and put in just a little bit of extra effort. Whether it is reaching out to someone we haven't spoken to in a while or taking steps to seek out God in our lives, our relationships can only grow through the effort we exert.

DISCUSSION

Think about the 'maintenance' that goes into your relationships. Do you think it helps your relationships? Why or why not?

QUESTIONS

- What are two things other people do that help develop your relationship with them?
- What are two ways that you can work on the relationships in your life?
- What extra effort do you put into your relationships when life gets busy or when you are going through challenges?

PARSHAT SHEMINI

In this week's parsha, we are given many of the laws of Kashrut or Kosher. At the end of this long list of restrictions of what is allowed and not allowed to be eaten, God tells the people that they should not make themselves impure by eating these things and that they have to be holy because He is Holy. In general, when learning about Kosher, we refer to these commandments as a 'chok' or a law that does not have an overt reason. God doesn't provide any specific reasoning as to why certain foods are permissible while others aren't. God just provides the guidelines and says we must follow it in order to be 'holy'.

The word holy in itself is quite ambiguous. It is difficult to understand what it means when God asks us to be holy because He Himself is holy. Afterall, what does the word 'holy' even mean? However, from this instruction to follow Kashrut because in an effort to be holy, we can gain insight into how the physical and spiritual realms intertwine in our lives. God requires us to be mindful about the way we choose to sustain ourselves everyday. Eating, the most basic physical requirement our bodies demand of us each day, is given the opportunity to be elevated into something much more powerful. We are required to add an element of spirituality and awareness each time we eat through observing the laws of Kashrut.

Nowadays, we can see this trend throughout the world. The practice of mindful eating has become quite popular. Mindful eating encourages people to notice what they are consuming and how it affects them. From Kashrut, we can see a similar lesson through God's instructions. However, it's not just about noticing the physical changes foods bring to our body, it also connects us to a spiritual awareness of our consumption. Paying attention to what we consume on a spiritual level allows us to be more cognizant of our physicality and think about how we can elevate it to a spiritual and more meaningful purpose.

Furthermore, on a deeper level, thinking critically about our consumption in terms of how we choose to spend our time and resources and being thankful for what we do have will allow us to develop more meaning in our lives. Whether it is noticing the amount of time we spend on social media or saying an extra thank you to the bus driver in the morning, taking time to add meaning to our mundane, everyday experiences can help us achieve this deeper search for spirituality we learn from Kashrut.

DISCUSSION

What does the word 'holy' mean to you? Do you think it relates to your everyday life? If so, how?

QUESTIONS

- What are two steps you can take to be more mindful throughout your day?
- What are two routines you do every day? How can you make them more meaningful to you?
- Do you think it is important to look for more spiritual meaning in your life? Why or why not?

PARSHAT TAZRIAH

In this week's parsha, we are first introduced to tzara'at, a spiritual infection that appears physically as discoloration on skin, clothing or as we will see in next week's parsha, on houses. According to Chazal, the sages, tzarat of the body is contracted because of lashon hara, literally translated as evil speech.

When thinking about the connection between tzarat and lashon hara it is not so obvious why they would be related. Especially when examining this relationship within the context of Jewish law, it makes their congruence all the more puzzling. In Jewish law, there is a concept of midah k'neged midah or an action for an action. Most famously represented later on in the book of Vayikra with the phrase an "eye for an eye", the concept states that the transgressor receives the transgression done back to them as punishment. Essentially, the punishment is supposed to match the crime. However, here it doesn't make sense. How does a skin disease reflect speaking badly about someone else?

From this, we can learn an important lesson. We can begin to grasp the severity of harm caused by speaking poorly about someone else. By damaging someone's reputation or causing others to think differently about that individual through our words, we are creating an invisible blemish on them. A blemish that is real and hurtful even though it cannot be seen. It causes the person to be judged superficially by others and leads to people taking information out of context regarding the individual. Furthermore, such evil speech can cause social isolation, directly paralleling the isolation a person with tzarat must endure to become pure again.

Using the physical manifestation of a blemish through tzarat, God is teaching us the impact our words have on others. We should regard our words as powerful tools, potentially having the ability to inflict great harm on those around us. Through using the physical symbol of tzarat, God is highlighting the importance of being careful with what we say and being sensitive to those around us. By implementing this visualization that tzarat provides us about the effects of our words, we can strive to be more conscious about what we say and work towards a kinder world.

DISCUSSION

Do you think tzarat is an effective tool for managing unkind speech? Why or why not?

QUESTIONS

- What are two ways you can work towards being more careful with your words?
- What are two physical signs you can use to help control yourself from speaking badly about others?

PARSHAT METZORA

In this week's parsha, we are given very specific instructions about the purification process for a person with tzarat, a spiritual skin disease. The Torah goes into great detail about the steps that need to be taken to become pure. The lengthy process involves the priest checking that the disease is gone and then once it is gone taking seemingly random materials to perform the cleansing ritual. Finally, after this ritual is performed, the individual is allowed to rejoin the camp.

Connecting back to last week's discussion about tzarat, the sages teach us that tzarat is contracted because of speaking badly about others. Now, in this week's parsha, we are provided the pathway to teshuva, returning, and forgiveness. The concept that God both punishes us while simultaneously providing us a method to forgiveness is astounding. This balance is a foundational belief in Judaism. There is always an opportunity to redeem oneself.

Knowing this, we can better understand our relationship with God and others. When God provides us the steps to improve ourselves and then grants us forgiveness, we learn that self-improvement takes work but can be reached. Similarly, when we need to ask for forgiveness from someone in our lives, we should apply these messages. Saying 'I'm sorry' needs to be adjoined with a commitment and improvement of our actions.

DISCUSSION

Think about the last time you upset someone. How did you resolve things with that person? What additional effort, more than just saying you were sorry, did you have to put in to be forgiven?

QUESTIONS

- Do you think it is helpful to have a ritual in place that guides us as to how to be forgiven? Why or why not?
 - What can we learn about the importance of putting effort into relationships from this week's parsha?
- Do you think proving yourself through action helps to deepen your connection to others?

PARSHAT ACHAREI MOT

This week's parsha provides the Jewish people the commandments surrounding Yom Kippur. Literally translated as the 'Day of Atonement,' Yom Kippur is the holiest day of the year. It is the day where people atone for their sins before God and have their transgressions wiped clean. God provides specific instructions as to the workings of the day. The Kohanim, priests, have specific roles to play, most importantly the Kohen Gadol, the great priest. As part of the service, the Kohen Gadol takes a goat, designates it as the representative of the Jewish people's sins and sends it off into the wilderness. Simultaneously, the nation is instructed to observe the day by treating it like a Sabbath and by not engaging in self-serving, physical matters like eating.

All of this put together paints a very interesting picture as to what atonement looks like in Judaism. There is an interesting balance being portrayed between the nation and the individual when it comes to being forgiven. It requires both introspection of every individual by taking out all physical matters and national recognition of collective faults as a people. It is not enough for a person to be apologetic for their own actions. Being part of the Jewish people means recognizing your place in the collective and noticing the impacts for better or for worse.

For example, if someone steals from another person but later realizes what they did was wrong, returns the item, and apologizes, they may be forgiven on an individual level. However, that episode fails to recognize the greater impact those actions may have had. What if someone had seen or heard about this individual's actions? What if this behavior encouraged a larger cultural acceptance of stealing and even led others to steal? By understanding that our actions contribute to a much larger national image, we can focus on the need to be more careful with our behaviors.

Furthermore, we can also appreciate the unseen benefits of our positive behaviors. A kindness like holding the door open for someone may not seem all that powerful. However, placing that encounter in the national context, maybe that action contributed to the growth of a kinder, more empathetic culture for our people.

DISCUSSION

How do you think about yourself in terms of being part of a greater collective? Do you relate to this idea? Why or why not?

QUESTIONS

- Have you ever experienced a time where something you did had much larger effects than you were expecting?
- What are two takeaways that you can learn from this idea next time you do something wrong?

PARSHAT KEDOSHIM

This week's parsha begins with the commandment, "You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy." The parsha continues with a wide variety of commandments which gives insight into the Jewish law system. Dividing the laws of the parsha into three categories, commandments between God and man, laws about behavior between people, and laws that are not given a reason, we can understand the Jewish law system on a much deeper level. Regarding the commandments between us and God, the parsha details the process of sanctification, not committing idolatry, and keeping Sabbath, among others. The laws about behavior between people are being honest in business, equal applicability of the law, not stealing, giving charity to those less fortunate, respecting parents and elders, and loving your neighbor as yourself. We also are given the law of not mixing two types of fabric which is an example of a law that is not given a reason.

Thinking about all of these laws together under the greater context of what it means for us to be holy to God, we can understand important elements about our relationship with God and the nature of the commandments He has given us. Going back to the first category of commandments, laws between us and God are seemingly quite obvious for the foundation of a religion. It makes sense that God would have expectations entering into a relationship with the Jewish people, just like we have expectations for every relationship that we have. For example, the same way we expect loyalty from others in our lives, so too God expects that from us by not committing idolatry.

The second category of laws regards our behavior to each other. This category is also easier to understand why God would command us to follow them. They are a set of expectations for proper moral behavior in this world. God wants us to establish a society that is moral, just and can serve as a light unto the nations.

The third category is a bit more difficult to understand. Why would God give us a seemingly arbitrary law? What is the purpose of concealing the reason to the commandment? One possible reason for this has to do with the element of trust. In every relationship in our lives, trust is an essential component. We trust that our parents know what is good for us. We trust that our friends will help us in a time of need. We trust that our teachers are relaying constructive information to help us grow.

Here too, God is teaching us that this trust is a crucial component of our relationship with Him. We are required to relinquish our control of knowing why we are doing something to serve something that is much greater than ourselves. Taking ourselves out of the self-focused why we are doing something, we are able to dive further into the decision to trust in God and our relationships as a whole. This will help to foster greater connection and think more deeply about the things in life we are expected to do for ourselves and others even if we do not understand the reason.

DISCUSSION

How do you relate to the idea of blind trust? Do you think blind trust is a good thing? Why or why not?

QUESTIONS

- How do you generally respond when someone asks you to do something without giving a reason?
- How does trust affect your relationships?

PARSHAT EMOR

In this week's parsha, we are commanded with many laws regarding specific prohibitions for the priests, the holidays of Passover, Sukkot, Yom Kippur and told about various laws about not killing, the repercussions for causing damage to others and being blasphemous. We are also given instructions about the omer, a sacrifice that is made up of the first products of the new harvest that is brought on the second day of Passover. Then, the people are instructed to count 7 weeks until the 50th day where the priest is to bring another sacrifice.

Although nowadays we do not offer these sacrifices, we can take away a larger idea from this commandment. The omer sacrifice is an offering consisting of the grains reaped during the new harvest. Taking a step back, the difficulty of this commandment must have been immense. After working for months to grow crops and finally obtaining the results, needing to take a portion of it and offer it to God as a sacrifice must have been quite challenging. Imagine working towards a goal for months and finally achieving it but then needing to give a portion of the results away.

From this, we can appreciate the lesson that God is trying to teach us. We are expected to show a level of gratitude for what we have been able to achieve. We cannot claim the production of this grain as simply a result of our individual actions. We must recognize that God is responsible for our success and subsequently thank Him for it. Furthermore, at the end of the fifty days, we are told to leave the leftover grain for the poor to come and collect. Similarly, with this commandment, we are yet again required to appreciate what we have been given and share our wealth with those that are less fortunate.

Having these two commandments, one at the beginning of the harvest and the other at the end, ensures that we maintain a sense of gratitude for what we have been given. At the beginning of the harvest, the excitement of finally starting to see your success may cause someone to be overly proud of their accomplishments and become self-absorbed. Similarly, at the end of the harvest, when the individual finishes collecting their wealth, it becomes much easier to disregard others and only focus on oneself. Therefore, both the commandment to bring the first of your produce as a sacrifice to God and the requirement to leave the leftovers of the fields for the poor to take serve as important checks for self-reflection and appreciation. They provide an opportunity for the individual to recognize where their wealth comes from and how blessed they are to have wealth. These checks are crucial measures to maintain gratitude and awareness of others within society.

DISCUSSION

Think about a time when you worked really hard to achieve a goal. How would you have reacted if you had to give a portion of it up? Do you think it would have been hard to do? Why or why not?

QUESTIONS

- What are two ways you can implement 'checks' in your life to remind you to be more grateful?
- What are two reminders can you set to think about those less fortunate next time you make a purchase?
- Do you think setting up these checks are helpful? Why or why not?

PARSHAT BEHAR

What does a Jewish economy look like in the Land of Israel? In this week's parsha, we gain incredible insight into the complex economic system that the Torah instructs us to set up when we enter the land. We are given the commandments of Shemita and Yovel, two periods of agricultural and financial rest and reset for Jewish society. Shemita happens every seven years and prohibits any work on the land and annuls all debts. It essentially serves as a financial system reset and gives a period of respite for the ground. Yovel happens every fifty years and is a much larger upheaval of the economy. All purchased property must go back to the original owners and agricultural work on the ground is not allowed to be done.

The parsha also teaches us that we are not allowed to take interest from one another. Also, the parsha says that these laws of not working the land are supposed to teach us to trust in God and that He will provide for us by following these respite periods. Also, the given reason why we cannot own land in perpetuity is because it belongs to God and therefore, we are not allowed to permanently change its ownership from the original allotments of land that He has prescribed to each tribe of the Jewish people.

Looking at all these laws together, we can gain insight into the complexity of the Jewish economic system. Its structure is quite different from the modern-day conceptions of economy. It has both elements of the capitalist and the free market the majority of the time. However, every seventh year, the requirement to pause and equalize society has more socialist and communist notes. Rabbi Sacks highlights this point by pointing out the two values of these systems: freedom and equality. However, these systems must choose between one or the other, they cannot have both. The beauty of the Torah is that it creates space for both values to be held. Freedom and equality both exist even though economically they cannot exist at the same time.

Thinking more broadly, the Torah comes to teach us how to navigate contrasting but essential values through the example of the Jewish economy. However, this message can be applied to many areas of our lives. Using creative solutions, we can learn to hold space for various values in our lives that may at first seem at odds with each other.

DISCUSSION

Think about a time where you had conflicting values guiding you through a situation. How did you handle it? Did you have to sacrifice one value for the other? Were you able to figure out a solution that worked with both values?

QUESTIONS

- What does it mean that God owns the land and therefore we cannot sell it in perpetuity?
How does that connect to the value of equality?
- Do you think that the values of freedom and equality are in tension with each other? Why or why not?

PARSHAT BECHUKOTAI

In this week's parsha, God maps out His system for reward and punishment on the national level. He explains that if the Jewish people follow in His ways, then they will prosper and have peace in the Land of Israel. However, if the Jewish people do not follow in His ways, then they will face drought, disease, war and exile.

This idea of national reward and punishment can be quite challenging. After all, collective punishment feels unfair. Why should I as an individual be punished for something that I may not have done but others around me have?

However, by approaching this question from a different angle, we can learn an important lesson about the value of unity and togetherness as a people. God chooses to both reward and punish us on a national level because He expects a higher level of responsibility for every individual to have for each other. He demands of us to recognize that our actions have implications for the entire nation, not just ourselves. Our behaviors are powerful enough to make us responsible both when the nation chooses the right and the wrong path.

Furthermore, we can understand the weight of influence our actions are able to have on those around us. Our behaviors, whether positive or negative, influence others along those trajectories. Understanding these points, we can learn to be more careful with our actions and appreciate the great impact they can have on both us and everyone else around us.

DISCUSSION

Have you ever experienced a time where you were punished or rewarded collectively? How did you respond to that situation? Did it seem fair or unfair to you? Did it change your perspective on responsibility?

QUESTIONS

- What are two ways you can make yourself more aware of the impact of your actions?
- How do you try to help those around you when you think they are making a mistake?
- What are two ways you try to learn from someone else's good behavior to improve yourself?

PARSHAT BAMIDBAR

In this week's parsha, following God's commandment, Moshe takes a census of the Jewish people. The whole parsha focuses on who is being counted and then the count itself, listing the number of men in every tribe except for Levi over the age of twenty. Now, the classic question to ask on this is what is the significance of the count? Doesn't God already know how many Jewish people there are? Why does this count matter to Him?

Rashi, a commentator on the parsha, famously responds saying that the point of the census here is to show the Jewish people how much God loves us and that is why He chooses to count us often. This answer depicts the beauty of God's love for His people and provides an opportunity for connection and appreciation of our relationship with Him.

Similarly, Rabbi Sacks' approach to the count offers another insight about what this counting of the people can teach us about our relationship with God. Looking at the phrase used for counting in the parsha, "se'u et rosh," literally, "lift the head," we can learn about the importance of the individual within the communal. As Rabbi Sacks notes, generally a census is used to describe a population as a collective while simultaneously dismissing the value of the individual in the process. For example, if the number of people in an army was 600,000, the value of this figure is placed on the collective strength of the army. The count overlooks those who make up the army.

Therefore, the use of the phrase "se'ut rosh" teaches us that God is emphasizing the individual through the count. He is choosing to "lift the head" of each individual and highlight their essentiality within the nation. So too, in our own lives, we should recognize the power we each hold to appreciate the individuals around us and try to 'lift their heads' through our appreciation.

DISCUSSION

Think about the last time you were a part of a big group. Did you struggle with getting lost in the crowd? What brought you back to your sense of individuality?

QUESTIONS

- What measures do you take to highlight your individuality among a group?
- Do you think maintaining a sense of individuality is important?
- What can you do to show your appreciation for the individuals that make up an important group or organization to you?

PARSHAT NASO

This week's parsha, Naso, is one of the longest portions in the Torah, encompassing a diverse range of topics. Among them is the beautiful and enduring tradition of the Priestly Blessing. Imagine the sight: Kohanim, descendants of Aaron, raising their hands in a specific formation and transmitting blessings from God to the Jewish people.

The Priestly Blessing expresses God's unwavering desire for peace, security and prosperity for us. The Kohanim act as a conduit, conveying God's love and promises. Interestingly, these powerful words are incorporated into our daily prayers, recited consistently.

But why repeat these blessings every day? What deeper meaning does this practice hold?

The daily recitation serves as a powerful reminder of God's love for us. By consistently hearing God's blessings, we internalize the message that we are valued and cherished. It's a daily dose of reassurance, a confirmation of our special connection with the Divine.

The Priestly Blessing teaches us more than just the content of the message. It highlights the importance of communication itself. Just as God establishes the need for constant communication to nurture our relationship with Him, so too are we called upon to cultivate open communication in all aspects of our lives.

The message is clear: expressing love and appreciation, even if seemingly repetitive, strengthens bonds. By making an effort to consistently communicate with God through prayer, and with those around us through open expression, we foster deeper and more meaningful connections.

In essence, the Priestly Blessing is not just a collection of words, but a powerful teaching on the importance of constant communication in our relationship with God and with each other.

DISCUSSION

Do you think that repetition and communication in your relationships is important? Why or why not?

QUESTIONS

- How can we improve communication in our own lives, both personal and communal?
- How can we ensure our words are blessings, uplifting those around us?
- In a world of instant messaging and social media, how can we strive for clear and meaningful communication?

PARSHAT BEHA'ALOTCHA

In this week's parsha, we are given a window into the pressures of being a leader and the loneliness one might feel in that position. The Jewish people are in the desert and are receiving 'manna', a form of sustenance that God provides them daily. However, they start to complain to Moshe that they want fresh food and meat. In response, God gets angry with the Jewish people and Moshe turns to God in frustration. Moshe asks God why he is forced to carry this burden of leading the Jewish people on his own. In response, God instructs Moshe to gather a council of 70 elders in order to assist him with his responsibilities.

From this, we can learn a profound message about both leadership and about managing stressful situations. Generally, when thinking about leadership, we tend to idolize the individuals in power without appreciating the more personal impact these positions may take on their lives. Their guidance and power is essential to guiding their group to the necessary goal. However, we can easily overlook the toll that this work may take on their lives. By seeing the loneliness that Moshe goes through leading the Jewish people, we can better appreciate the sacrifices and decisions he made for bettering the future of the entire nation.

Furthermore, we also gain insight into the necessity of knowing how to ask for help. The humility that Moshe demonstrates in this moment by turning to God and saying I cannot handle this challenge on my own is an incredible instance of self-reflection. He accepts the fact that he needs help to navigate the pressures he is under and acts on it by asking God for it. Seeing that even Moshe, the greatest leader of the Jewish people, can also benefit from the use of extra assistance empowers us to be cognizant of our own limits. By increasing our own recognition of what the maximum we can handle is, we can learn to navigate our stresses through asking for help from others around us.

DISCUSSION

Think about a time you were in a leadership position. Did you feel lonely? How did you navigate the balance between being in the group and leading the group?

QUESTIONS

- What are two steps that you can take to try and balance a stressor in your life?
- Is asking for help difficult for you? Why or why not?

PARSHAT SHELACH

Everyone faces challenges. The question is how we navigate them. This week's parsha gives us insight into how to face the uncertainty that challenges may bring. Hashem instructs Moshe to send people to go and scout out the Land of Israel. Moshe sends a group of 12 men with specific instructions of what to look for during their journey. When the spies return, they tell the people that the land will be too difficult to conquer and incite fear among the nation. Bravely, Caleb, one of the men who was sent, takes a stand against the rest of the spies and argues that they will be able to capture the land. However, the rest of the group continues to say it will be impossible.

Consequently, the Jewish people are overcome with fear and start crying out that they should have just been left to die in Egypt. This infuriates God and the people are punished with that generation not being able to enter the Land of Israel.

Thinking about the greater messages this story can teach us, we can gain a better understanding as to how we should approach challenges and what it means to stand up for what we believe in. Looking at the two responses to the spies' time in the Land of Israel, we can see a clear difference between their approaches. All of the spies reported back the difficulties the Jewish people were going to have to face when they entered Israel. However, the key difference between them was whether they believed that they could overcome these challenges. Taking the real but optimistic perspective allowed Caleb to see the challenges for what they were but then give a hopeful message to the people about how they will be able to deal with them. Unlike the rest of the spies Caleb was able to look for the good and recognize the incredible opportunity for the Jewish people to rise to the occasion.

Even more so, Caleb standing up for what he believes in to an entire nation teaches us the tremendous courage that is sometimes necessary to do the right thing. In our own lives, following the correct path can be challenging. Looking towards Caleb for inspiration, we can be empowered to take action where we see it necessary and rise to the occasion even when it may seem difficult.

DISCUSSION

Think about a time when you had to stand up for something you believed in. How did you handle the challenge? What was your strategy?

QUESTIONS

- How can you cultivate an optimistic outlook while still being realistic about the obstacles you face?
- What are two steps you can take to motivate others around you to do the right thing?

PARSHAT KORACH

This week's parsha details the story of the rebellion of Korach, a Levite, who challenges Moses and Aaron's leadership. Korach, along with others, argues that everyone is holy and should be able to serve God as a Kohen, priest. On the surface, this seems like a worthwhile pursuit – shouldn't everyone have the opportunity to connect with God as a priest?

But God's response is swift and severe. God's anger is clear, demonstrating that Korach's rebellion was far more than a simple request for equality.

The key lies in understanding the difference between genuine service to God and the sin of Korach. While the desire to connect with the Divine is commendable, the Torah teaches us a critical lesson about humility.

True devotion comes from fulfilling the role designated for you, not from trying to achieve power or a specific title. The meticulously chosen roles within the priestly service ensure the sanctity and order of these holy rituals. Korach's rebellion, fueled by pride, threatened this delicate balance. His challenge wasn't solely about access, but about seeking power that was not assigned to him.

Service to God takes many forms and is unique for every individual. Simultaneously, there are specific guidelines to what our service looks like. These two ideals work together through harnessing humility and our individual characteristics within the prescribed framework that God has given us.

Learning from Korach's actions, we should strive to serve God with sincerity and dedication, fulfilling the roles life has placed before us. Doing so will help us achieve a closer, more meaningful relationship with God and will strengthen our own appreciation of the roles we have been set to play in our own lives.

DISCUSSION

Is there ever a place for challenging leadership? If so, how can we ensure our challenges are motivated by humility and not pride?

QUESTIONS

- How can we differentiate between a genuine desire for improvement and a prideful attempt to seize power?
- How can we work to encourage discussion and disagreement while still maintaining order and respect?

PARSHAT CHUKAT

In this week's parsha, the Jewish people once again complain about food and water, expressing a desire to return to Egypt. God instructs Moshe and Aharon to provide water from a rock for the people. In a moment of frustration, Moshe says to the people, "Listen now, you rebels," before striking the rock twice, causing water to flow out. Subsequently, God tells Moshe and Aharon that because they failed to glorify Him in this moment, they will not be permitted to lead the Jewish people into Israel or even enter the land themselves.

This consequence must have been devastating for Moshe. After all, he had dedicated his entire life to leading the Jewish people, and now, for what seems like a small mistake, he is barred from completing the journey with them. From this, we gain incredible insight into Moshe's character and learn valuable lessons on how we should strive to conduct ourselves.

Moshe's unwavering determination to continue leading the Jewish people, despite knowing he wouldn't complete the journey with them, highlights his deep commitment to God and the Jewish people. Throughout all the challenges the people put him through, he honors his commitment and perseveres. This point is underscored by the fact that at the end of the parsha, the people complain again about food and water, clearly not having learned their lesson. Imagine how difficult it must have been for Moshe to see the same mistakes repeated, knowing he wouldn't see the journey through, yet still choosing to lead the nation with determination.

Another important lesson we can learn from this story is about anger and how we choose to channel it. As the leader of the Jewish people, Moshe was held to the highest standard, especially regarding his behavior. When he addressed the nation improperly, God's punishment may seem severe to us. However, this highlights the importance of careful conduct and respectful language, even in moments of frustration or anger. It is critical that we strive to act respectfully towards everyone, even in times where our emotions might tell us otherwise.

DISCUSSION

Think about a time in your life where you were frustrated at someone. How did you channel those feelings? Do you think you handled the situation well? How could you have handled the situation better?

QUESTIONS

- How do you set goals in your life? What do you do when a roadblock comes up that makes them difficult to achieve?
- Do you think you make the same mistake over and over again? Why do you think that is? What can you do to work on it?

PARSHAT BALAK

In this week's parsha, we have the famous story of Balak and Bilaam. The Torah pauses for a moment from focusing solely on the Jewish people and instead provides a story about Balak, the king of Moab. After seeing the way the Jewish people have been defeating the other nations in battle, Balak decides he needs to turn to other measures for help. He sends messengers to Bilaam and asks for him to curse the Jewish people. Bilaam says no twice and then finally says he will go with them but will only say the words that God approves of.

Along the way, Bilaam, riding his donkey, has an encounter with an angel and God speaks to Bilaam through the donkey, rebuking Bilaam for going with Balak. In the end, much to Balak's dismay, Bilaam ends up blessing the Jewish people. As part of his blessing he says, "All those who bless you are blessed and all those that curse you are cursed."

From this line of Bilaam's blessing, we can internalize an important lesson. Our language can have a much larger impact than we might think. Choosing our words to reflect what our motivations and goals are in life carefully is crucial.

Even more so, using our language to be positive and encourage kindness in others will in turn come back to ourselves. However, as the line of the blessing continues, we see that using harsh, damaging language will only lead to damage unto ourselves. Being conscious of how we speak and recognizing the potential impacts our words can have will lead to a more sensitive, positive world for both ourselves and others. Taking this message into account, we can strive to focus on building people up through our language and see the impact it has on our lives.

DISCUSSION

Think about a time someone else's words had either a positive or negative impact on you. How did it influence your actions or feelings?

QUESTIONS

- What are two steps you can take to try and speak more positively?
- How do you think your words affect others around you?
- Do you think speaking more positively is important? Why or why not?

PARSHAT PINCHAS

This week's Dvar Torah is dedicated to the Refuah Sheleimah of Binyamin Bear ben Chana, an IDF Lone Soldier from Canada who was injured this week on the Lebanon border. May our learning, conversation and dialogue be in his merit and lead to a speedy and full recovery.

In this week's parsha, God tells Moshe the rules of inheritance. God says that the portions allotted to each family will be passed down by father to son. After this announcement, the five daughters of Zelophehad come to Moshe with a claim about their inheritance. They explain that they have no brothers and their father passed away. They appeal to Moshe and ask what will be of their inheritance since there are no sons to pass on their father's land to. Moshe turns to God about their claim and God explains that their request is just. He tells Moshe that the daughters are entitled to their late father's portion of land.

We can learn a lot from this encounter about what true leadership is and what it means to be a trailblazer. Looking at the daughters of Zelophehad, their courage to approach Moshe with such a request was monumental for this time. Up until this point, women had not been considered for inheritance. Their request helped ensure financial security for themselves and generations of women to come. Additionally, the way they approached Moshe with respect highlights the importance of both advocating for what you believe in while still maintaining mutual understanding and respect for others.

Looking at the situation from Moshe's perspective, we can also learn the proper way for leaders to navigate challenges. Moshe was posed with a question where he didn't know the answer. Instead of trying to figure it out on his own or brush it off with a simple answer, he took the question seriously and turned to God for guidance. Moshe's behavior serves as a model for how we should strive to act in our own relationships. Taking our friends' or family's concerns seriously, putting ourselves in their shoes and trying to understand their perspective is crucial to our own growth in being more empathetic, kind people.

DISCUSSION

What is an issue you feel passionately about? How do you think you can implement the values of kindness and respect when approaching the topic?

QUESTIONS

- What are two things you can do this week to be more empathetic to others?
- What are two acts of kindness that you can do to show your appreciation and care for others in your life?
- What reminder can you set for yourself to be more present when someone is talking about a problem they are facing?

PARSHAT MATOT-MASEI

This week is a double parsha, meaning we read both Parshat Matot and Parshat Masei. Parashat Matot covers the aftermath of the war with Midian, detailing the spoils of war and the laws regarding the treatment of prisoners. It also addresses the issue of vows and oaths, emphasizing the importance of upholding one's promises.

Parashat Masei provides an outline of the journeys the Israelites endured as they traveled from Egypt to the Promised Land. It lists their encampments and the major events that occurred during their travels. It also contains laws concerning the division of the land among the tribes, including provisions for cities of refuge for unintentional killers. Finally, it discusses the boundaries of the land and the establishment of cities for the Levites.

In examining Parshiot Matot and Masei, one central theme that emerges is the significance of promises and commitments. In Parashat Matot, we see a detailed discussion about the vows and oaths made by individuals, emphasizing their importance and the consequences of failing to fulfill them. This is not just a legal concern but an insight into the ethical principle of what it means to make and maintain a promise. The Torah's treatment of vows highlights the immense value of promises in human relationships and our relationship with God.

The value of promises in these parshiot can be linked to the broader narrative of the Israelites' journey through the wilderness. Each encampment discussed in Parashat Masei represents the promises God is fulfilling for the Jewish people. These journeys are not merely physical but deeply symbolic of the broader promise between God and the Jewish people.

They highlight the amount of love and commitment that God has shown through His word and actions to the Jewish people. In our own lives, the value of promises follows a similar suit. Our commitments are more than just pure legal obligations. They serve as concrete evidence of our values and priorities. By following through on our commitments, we are able to truly show ourselves and others what is important to us through creating a deep sense of trust, integrity and responsibility.

Thinking about these lessons, we are reminded that promises are not mere words but actions that shape our character and relationships, both between each other and with God. Upholding our promises, whether big or small, is essential to building a just and trustworthy society.

DISCUSSION

When was the last time you kept a promise even though it was really difficult for you? Explain why it was difficult for you to keep it and what helped you to push through and maintain your commitment in the end.

QUESTIONS

- Do you think keeping your promises is important? Why or why not?
- When was the last time someone broke a promise to you? How did it affect your relationship?

PARSHAT DEVARIM

In this week's parsha, Moshe begins his final speech to the Jewish people before they enter the Land of Israel. His parting words recount his time leading the Jewish people and provide guidance to what lies ahead in the next stages of their journey.

In studying Torah, there is a concept that God never wastes even a single letter that is written in the Torah. Each letter is regarded as significant, having been placed with the utmost intention by God. If that is the case, then why would the Torah rehash in detail the stories we have just read about in previous chapters? Why wouldn't the Torah choose to save words by just saying Moshe reviewed their history and assume that the readers had the foreknowledge of the previous chapters?

Through Moshe going into great detail about his time leading the Jewish people, the Torah is coming to teach us a much deeper lesson about the importance and power of reflection. Taking the time to reflect about our past experiences allows us to gain new insights into ourselves. We can better learn from our behaviors and reassess the trajectory we have set ourselves on. Even more so, we can apply the lessons of the past to the present and future. Doing so will allow us to constantly improve and grow as both individuals and as a nation.

Building on the theme of reflection, another key lesson we can draw from the parsha is the value of accountability. By recounting the events of the past, Moshe is not only reflecting but also holding the people accountable for their actions and decisions. He reminds them of their missteps, such as the incident of the spies and the rebellion, but he also highlights the moments of faith and serving God. This balance between acknowledging both the positive and negative aspects of their journey is crucial for personal and communal growth.

DISCUSSION

Do you think reflecting on your past is important? Why or why not?

QUESTIONS

- What are two ways you can work on taking more accountability for your actions?
- How do you balance looking back while also moving forward?
- What are two lessons you can learn from reflecting about your past that would be helpful for your future?

PARSHAT VA'ETCHANAN

In this week's parsha, we continue the preparations for the Jewish people to enter the Land of Israel. Moshe repeats the Ten Commandments and then gives over the Shema prayer to the Jewish people. Shema serves as part of the core construction of Jewish prayer. The one-line declaration before the subsequent three paragraphs is tremendously powerful. The words are a statement expressing our commitment to God and His oneness. Every time we say Shema, we are recommitting to our relationship with God through saying that He is our God and that He is One.

Ve'Ahavta, the first paragraph of the Shema is also found in this week's parsha. Ve'Ahavta, translated as 'you shall love' provides the roadmap for what our relationship with God is supposed to look like. It gives the commandments of loving God with all of your heart, soul and possessions, to teach your children and to say the prayer when you wake up, go to sleep and when you are on your way. Ve'Ahavta also commands us to put the prayer in Tefillin and inside the Mezuzot that go on our doorposts.

Thinking about Shema and Ve'Ahavta as the roadmap given by God that describes how we fulfill our end of our relationship with Him, we can gain insights into both how we can deepen our connection to Him and with the people in our lives. Modern day psychology teaches us that there are five love languages people use to connect to one another: quality time, acts of service, words of affirmation, physical touch and gift giving. However, looking at Shema, we see that we can learn these exact forms of connection here too, highlighting the Torah's wisdom predating modern psychology by thousands of years.

Starting with quality time, God commands us to recite Shema when we wake up and when we go to sleep, setting the priorities of our day to focus on God and ensuring that we are giving Him the necessary time out of our busy schedules. Building off this, the entire prayer of Shema are words of affirmation: we are expressing our devotion to serving God. Acts of service are described throughout Shema and the Torah about actions we can take as part of our service to God. More specifically, in Shema, that is putting up Mezuzot, teaching our children, and wearing Tefillin. The mitzvot of Mezuzot and Tefillin also fall under the category of physical touch. Although it is impossible to touch God, they serve as physical forms of connection that we can use to deepen our relationship with Him. Finally, looking at giving gifts, we are told to love God with all of our possessions. This vague commandment provides opportunity to use our belongings to serve God.

Seeing the five love languages through Shema teaches us that there are many different avenues to connect to God. God provides us these opportunities to appeal to the various ways we can work to deepen our relationship with Him. Furthermore, this also provides a model for other interpersonal relationships we have in our lives. Using these different pathways, we can strive to develop closer connections to both the people in our lives and with God.

DISCUSSION

Think about the five love languages. What ways do you feel you connect to the best? How can you use this model to reapproach the relationships you have?

QUESTIONS

- What is a meaningful form of connection for you in a relationship?
- What does having a relationship with God look like for you?

PARSHAT EIKEV

When everything is going well in our lives, it can be difficult to attribute our successes to others who may have helped us along the way. We tend to focus on our own efforts and how amazing we are, rather than noticing the external factors that contributed to our achievements. This tendency to attribute our successes to ourselves while blaming failures on others is known in psychology today as self-serving bias. It reflects a natural human tendency to protect our self-esteem by taking personal credit when things go right and deflecting blame when things go wrong.

However, this is not a new concept. In the parsha, we see a similar point being conveyed to the Jewish people. As they prepare to enter the Land of Israel, God warns them about the dangers of prosperity and success. Moshe cautions the people not to become arrogant once they have settled in the land, built fine houses, and amassed wealth. In their comfort and abundance, they must be warned not to forget that it was God who provided for them, bringing them out of Egypt and sustaining them through the wilderness. The Torah reminds us that even when we work hard and experience success, we must maintain a sense of humility and gratitude. Success is not solely the result of our own efforts but is also due to divine assistance, the support of others, and the many circumstances that align to make success possible.

This warning highlights the spiritual and ethical dangers of self-serving bias. When people become comfortable and prosperous, they are more likely to overlook their moral and communal responsibilities. The Torah speaks about the risks of becoming selfish, neglecting the needs of the less fortunate, and forgetting the source of their blessings. The call to avoid arrogance and selfishness is not just about maintaining faith in God but also about ensuring that society remains just, compassionate, and mindful of those who are in need.

Through understanding this timeless message, we realize the importance of cultivating gratitude not just towards God but towards all the people and factors that have contributed to our success. Whether it's parents, mentors, friends or colleagues, acknowledging the role others have played in our achievements allows us to develop a deeper sense of appreciation. In doing so, our successes are enriched because they are accompanied by humility, gratitude and an awareness of the broader context in which our accomplishments occur.

DISCUSSION

Talk about how your successes were a combination of both personal efforts and assistance from others.

QUESTIONS

- What are things that you are proud of?
- Did other people help you along the way? How so?
- What are ways that you can work on appreciating people that help you on a daily basis?

PARSHAT RE'EH

Oftentimes when we are very happy, it can be difficult to recognize that there are others that may not be as fortunate. It may even feel like a “buzzkill” to start thinking about the difficulties that others may be facing while we are trying to experience our own happiness. So, instead of thinking about the challenges that others have on their plates, we tend to block them out.

However, in this week’s Parsha, we are given an alternative approach. Bnei Yisrael are commanded to come and rejoice three times a year, Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot, at the “Place that God will Choose.” The Torah puts specific emphasis that everyone should come to celebrate: families, servants, Levites, converts, orphans and widows. People from all walks of life are commanded to take a break from their daily lives and come together to celebrate.

Instead of focusing inwardly when we are celebrating, we have the opportunity to include all those around us, especially those who may be going through a more difficult time. By doing so, we can foster a stronger and more inclusive community that works to support everyone in both the most joyous and difficult of times.

DISCUSSION

Think about a time when you felt left out. Did someone make an extra effort to include you?
If so, how did that affect you?

QUESTIONS

- What are your favorite aspects of your community?
- Why is making sure everyone feels included important?
- How can you try to make a more inclusive environment in your school, synagogue or community?

PARSHAT SHOFTIM

Judicial systems are one of the essential pillars to modern society. Justice is an essential tool that keeps law, order and civilization intact. Without laws and enforcement of those laws, societies as we know them today would not exist and there would be complete chaos. Given that, it makes sense that in this week's parsha, as part of their preparations for entering the Land of Israel, Bnei Yisrael are commanded to establish judges and officers at all of their city gates. The establishment of such a system is crucial for the functioning of the new society they are building in the land.

This commandment is not all Judaism has to say on the judicial system. The Torah and the Rabbinic texts delve into the system and how it is to function to an extremely in-depth level, as any just legal system should. Interestingly, one of these Rabbinic texts, Pirkei Avot, adds an angle that is not often appreciated when talking about judging. Pirkei Avot explains that we should judge others favorably and give the benefit of the doubt.

This concept of judging others favorably in conjunction with the commandment to establish a judicial system provides a key insight into the overlap between the principles of Justice and Mercy. These two ideas are discussed in many contexts in Judaism and are important for us to internalize in our lives.

We often perceive the world in terms of fairness; "It's not fair that she got two cookies and I only got one." However, when it comes to judgment, and especially judging others, it is imperative that we try to give people the benefit of the doubt and judge them favorably. It is impossible to have the full context of anyone's actions: at the end of the day we are not mind readers. Instead, we should make an effort to internalize the fact that we do not have the full picture and take it into consideration whenever we judge others.

DISCUSSION

Think about the phrase: "treat others the way you want to be treated" and instead substitute "judge others the way you want to be judged." What does that mean to you?

QUESTIONS

- What are ways you can practice judging others favorably?
- How can you add positive aspects to your perspective when judging others?
- How can you balance the attributes of mercy and justice in your life?

PARSHAT KI TEITZEI

In this week's parsha, Moshe presents the Jewish people with a series of laws that pertain to interpersonal relationships and ethical conduct. A profound example of this is the commandment known as 'Shiluach HaKan', which instructs us to send away the mother bird before taking her eggs. This commandment, while seemingly simple, reveals a deeper principle of empathy and moral responsibility.

At first glance, 'Shiluach HaKan' might appear to be a mere ritualistic law concerning animal welfare. However, its true significance lies in its broader ethical implications. The commandment mandates that even though we are permitted to take the eggs, we must first consider the distress it causes the mother bird. By sending her away, we acknowledge her suffering and act to mitigate it, thus demonstrating a heightened level of sensitivity and compassion.

This requirement to be aware of and alleviate the suffering of others, even when we have the right to act otherwise, reflects a fundamental value in our ethical system. It teaches us to extend our sensitivity beyond our own immediate experiences and actively consider the impact of our actions on those around us.

In our daily lives, this principle encourages us to handle difficult situations with care and compassion. Whether it involves navigating interpersonal conflicts, making challenging decisions or addressing the needs of others, we should strive to approach each scenario with thoughtfulness and empathy. Moreover, it prompts us to recognize and address the needs and feelings of others, even in situations where their distress may not be immediately apparent to us.

This extra sensitivity is not just about avoiding harm; it's about fostering an environment where compassion and understanding are integral to our interactions. By actively seeking to alleviate the discomfort of others and being mindful of their experiences, we contribute to a more humane and empathetic society.

DISCUSSION

Reflect on a time when someone showed sensitivity to your feelings or needs in a way that was unexpected. How did this impact your perception of their actions and your relationship with them?

QUESTIONS

- What are two reminders you can set for yourself to be more sensitive to the needs of others?
- How do you navigate the balance between having to do something difficult and wanting to be compassionate?

PARSHAT KI TAVO

In this week's parsha, the Jewish people are preparing to enter the Land of Israel, marking a pivotal transition in their journey. As part of this preparation, God instructs them to approach two mountains: Gerizim and Ebal. Here, they receive the profound promise of blessings for following His commandments and the warning of curses for straying from His ways. This powerful experience serves as a crucial guide as they enter this new chapter as a nation.

Unlike their previous experiences in the desert, where they witnessed overt miracles, the Jewish people are about to face a reality where divine presence will be less apparent. To help them navigate this shift, God establishes a system of blessings and curses, providing a framework for understanding His connection to His people. This system serves as a constant reminder of their responsibilities and the importance of their actions.

Through this lens, we can extract vital lessons for our own lives. We are reminded of our responsibility to actively seek God's presence in the world. While we may not experience miracles in the same dramatic fashion as we did throughout the books of Bamidbar and Shemot, we are called to recognize the subtle ways God operates through a system of rewards and consequences. Even when His presence feels distant, we are assured that our actions are noted and carry significance.

Furthermore, the blessings and curses teach us about the nature of divine justice. God's system operates fairly, even when we struggle to comprehend it. Each action has consequences—positive or negative—and this calls for a deep sense of accountability. We must be mindful of our behaviors, understanding that our choices shape our spiritual reality and our relationship with the divine.

This understanding also encourages us to reflect on how we can align our daily actions with our values and beliefs. By consciously choosing to act in ways that promote goodness, compassion and integrity, we can achieve the blessings promised to us. Conversely, we must also be aware of the potential pitfalls of our actions, learning from our mistakes and striving for personal growth.

DISCUSSION

How do you interpret the concept of blessings and curses in your own life? Have you had specific instances where you felt the impact of your actions? What were they?

QUESTIONS

- In what ways do you actively seek to recognize God's presence in your daily life?
- What are two strategies you use to reflect on your behavior?

PARSHIOT NITZAVIM-VAYELECH

This week, we explore both Nitzavim and Vayelech. Continuing the theme of the book of Devarim, Moshe shares guidance from God as the Jewish people prepare to enter the Land of Israel. Notably, Moshe relays that the people will stray from God's path and face exile, reflecting the complexities of human nature. Yet, He assures them that their children will ultimately return to God and the land.

From this, we learn a vital lesson about teshuva, or repentance. God promises a constant pathway for return, fully aware that people will sin, yet He remains committed to this promise. By striving to emulate God, we gain a deeper appreciation for offering second chances, fostering an environment where growth is possible. Acknowledging our imperfections, God continues to forgive and show unconditional love for His nation, reinforcing the idea that love and compassion are essential even in times of failure.

Similarly, in our lives, we must recognize that people may not always meet our expectations and they might hurt us. It's crucial to provide opportunities for them to rebuild trust and mend relationships. This embodies the essence of teshuva: allowing others to return to their true goodness and demonstrate their ability to rectify wrongdoings. By embracing this perspective, we cultivate stronger connections and contribute to a more forgiving and understanding community. Ultimately, the journey of teshuva encourages us to believe in the possibility of redemption—not just for ourselves, but for others as well.

DISCUSSION

What does the concept of teshuva mean to you personally? How do you interpret the idea of "returning" to goodness in your own life?

QUESTIONS

- Do you think it is important to give people second chances? Why?
- What are two steps you can take to be more forgiving?
- Do you have any grudges? What would it take to help you move on from them?

PARSHAT HA'AZINU

This week's parsha marks the end of Moshe's journey and the transition to a new stage for the Jewish people. Moshe's leadership defined much of their experience as they transformed from slaves in Egypt to a free people serving God on their way to Israel. As they finally approach the Promised Land, God informs Moshe that he will die and cannot enter Israel with the rest of the people.

Reflecting on this moment, it must have been extremely difficult for Moshe. After all, he dedicated his life to guiding the Jewish people toward redemption in the land. Yet, we see a remarkable level of acceptance on his part regarding his inability to complete the journey. He passes the mantle of leadership to Yehoshua and climbs to the top of a mountain to view Israel from a distance, where he ultimately passes away. The imagery of this moment is striking: although he cannot enter, he is granted a vision of all his goals and dreams ahead of him.

From Moshe's strength, we can learn to appreciate that not everything goes according to plan. He devoted his life to bringing the Jewish people into Israel, and yet, at the pivotal moment, he was unable to do so. However, when we reflect on his journey leading the Jewish people, we see that the entire endeavor was essential, even if the ultimate goal was not achieved. In our own lives, we should strive to focus on our end results while also appreciating the journey that leads us there. By making an effort to embrace each step along the way, we can maximize our experiences and grow in unexpected ways.

DISCUSSION

Reflect on the idea that the journey is as important as the destination. Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?

QUESTIONS

- What qualities do you think are essential to leadership?
- How do you react when things don't go according to plan? What do you do to manage?
- How can you work on reframing setbacks in a more positive light?

PARSHAT V'ZOT HABERACHA

In this week's parsha, V'Zot HaBeracha, we encounter the poignant conclusion of the Torah as Moshe blesses each tribe of Israel before his passing. This moment is filled with profound emotion, as Moshe reflects on the journey the Israelites have undertaken and the future that lies ahead for them in the Promised Land. His blessings serve not only as a farewell but also as a reminder of the unique qualities and strengths of each tribe.

One of the central themes of this parsha is the importance of legacy. Moshe, who dedicated his life to leading the Jewish people, takes this opportunity to impart wisdom and guidance, ensuring that his influence will continue even after his death. His blessings highlight the distinct roles each tribe will play in building the nation, emphasizing the value of diversity and the strengths that come from each individual's contribution.

As we consider Moshe's final words, we are prompted to reflect on our own legacies. What do we want to be remembered for? How do we wish to influence those around us? Just as Moshe celebrated the unique characteristics of each tribe, we too should recognize and honor the individuality within our communities. Each person brings a unique perspective and set of talents that contribute to the collective strength of the whole.

Additionally, this parsha teaches us about the power of words. Moshe's blessings are not mere formalities; they are infused with intention and purpose. Words have the ability to uplift, inspire, and shape destinies. In our interactions, we should strive to use our words thoughtfully, offering encouragement and recognition to those around us. A simple word of praise or support can leave a lasting impact on someone's life.

In a world where it can be easy to focus on differences, V'Zot HaBeracha reminds us of the importance of unity amidst diversity. Just as Moshe highlights the strengths of each tribe, we should look for the strengths in others and work together to create a harmonious community.

DISCUSSION

Reflect on the concept of legacy and the impact of your words. How can you contribute positively to those around you?

QUESTIONS

- What qualities do you value in yourself and in others? How can these contribute to your community?
- How do you ensure that your words have a positive impact on those around you?
- What kind of legacy do you wish to leave behind, and what steps can you take now to work toward that vision?