



# CIRCLE PIT THE BIMAH

*by Jeremiah Satterfield*

**PunkTorah**

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**CIRCLE PIT THE BIMAH**  
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## Introduction

When I first got the idea for Circle Pit The Bimah (CPTB), I thought to myself, how great it would be to have an obscure blog where I can rant, rave, vent, and throw around my two cents at will and, who knows, maybe even draw an average of ten unique readers per post. That vision never came to light, but what I did feel is a whole lot better. Almost as an afterthought, I mentioned to Patrick Aleph of PunkTorah fame my intent to start a blog when the next Torah cycle was set to begin. Mr. Aleph, being whom he is, enthusiastically jumped on the idea and offered to make CPTB a feature on PunkTorah and that was that.

As the featured Parshot for 5772, I decided to take a less erratic approach and place some loose guidelines in hopes of challenging myself. Initially I was not born into an overly religious family, but that changed around the young age of one year old. Spending my early years in a very modern conservative right-leaning household, I spent my formidable years rebelling against those traditions and socio-religious beliefs. I only mention this because for me, not using Torah commentators and 'movemental' explanations for tradition is like showing up at a high noon showdown with empty holsters—and that's exactly what CPTB is all about.

Each of the following Parshot are the direct result of a process that meant staying a week ahead in reading, a first draft that read like a fragmented and delusional stream of conscience, and a final slightly polished and very short Dvar that does not directly quote the great sages of the past. As we cycled further into the year, each week became more and more challenging. Halakhah can be a very complicated and touchy subject, especially without the writings of more learned Sages.

On a personal note, I feel CPTB was a success. 5772 provided a spiritual challenge, which I was able to rise to and survive intact. I hope you enjoy what I believe is a unique take on Torah commentaries, because sometimes throwing caution to the wind is the only way to win a high noon showdown with empty holsters.

Jeremiah

## **Parsha Beresheit**

Salad Days, or why the Demo Tape is always better than the Album. (Gen. 1:1 — 6:8)

23 Tishrei 5772 — October 21, 2011

Well, here it is the beginning of it all: Parsha Beresheit. So much happens in this portion—in fact, each verse explodes with countless possibilities to delve deeper into its' unfathomable depths. We have the creation of our world and species, the birth of free choice, the start of each nation's genealogy, and most importantly, we are shown the ideal way to live without the Torah!

Sure, I'm a little crazy in the head, but, if you're still reading here is what I mean by that. For as long as I can remember, I have felt that every commandment in the Torah states the obvious. Think about it, there are some prohibitions most of us cannot even imagine breaking. For example: killing, eating another human being, dating your friend's mom; and yet on the other side of the coin, who has always honored their parents, who has told the truth 100% of the time, and who has honored every single Shabbat of their lives? When we falter, do we know we are doing the wrong things when we do them? You bet we do, and still we do them anyway, regardless of what the Torah says.

As I read this week's portion, what stands out the most to me are three core principles we all experience every day. The first principle is striving for the ideal: Adam is created, and THEN placed within Eden. Later on Adam must toil to provide for his family's basic needs. The second is stewardship: Adam and Eve's purpose in Eden is to keep the garden "dressed" and "kept." This means keeping the Earth and animals healthy and unburdened. Yes, Tikkun Olam is that old. Last but not least: loyalty, which plays the largest role in the early days of mankind. This last one is the heaviest and most complex, and (I'll keep it short) Adam and Eve stuck together after eating forbidden fruit. A generation later Cain's wife stayed loyal to him despite the blood on his hands, and to this day Hashem has never abandoned us despite how much we may take Him for granted.

Even now in modern times, we all to some degree strive and make our life and the lives of our loved ones better, whether it's working long hours, volunteering, or just being there for someone. That ideal of a balanced, perfect world or 'Eden' fuels our actions, and while no one is perfect and without fault, we stick together, we forgive, we heal, and we grow.

# Parsha Noah

The Remix (Gen 6:9—11:32)

26 Tishrei 5772 — October 24, 2011

Parsha Noah is known primarily for Noah, the Ark, and Hashem's promise to never, by His hand at least, to destroy the Earth. This Parsha also includes the creation of different languages and the abuse of Noah by the hand of his own son Ham. I think it's safe to say that everyone reading this is familiar with the story of Noah, so what was I able to take away from this reading that I overlooked before? Simple, it's "Parsha Beresheit the Remix."

Why a remix and not a cover? In a way, "Noah and Company" does everything backwards by mixing it up instead of redoing what has already been done. Adam and Eve start out literally rooted in paradise, cut off from the rest of world, just chilling with plants and animals. Noah and his family, like the First Family, spend a portion of their lives in a controlled, separate environment chock full of animals and seeds. What is so interesting about this is Eden is a fixed point physically and spiritually while the Ark is a sanctuary at the mercy of a turbulent sea. For me the lesson is this: there are times when you will be grounded in life and times when you feel uprooted and not in control, BUT, Hashem is in both of those places providing enough while you figure out what steps to take next.

As I read this week's portion, I initially saw a parallel between the fruit from the Tree of Good and Evil that provided knowledge—forbidden or not, it gave something to humanity. After the flood, fruit shows up again: this time in the guise of wine which, when drunk to excess, takes knowledge away. I think there is much we can learn by discussing this, but when I started to open that door, I kept thinking about Eden being a rooted shelter, and the Ark an uprooted shelter. I realized then why this idea kept creeping into my mind. I'm an easily satisfied guy. I'm happy when I'm not worrying. Like many, the current economic and social unrest is definitely making me a Noah and not an Adam. My Ark is knowing that no matter what happens I will always have a home, food, and family. My flood is in that I like only working one job and not two. I like not being dependent financially on others, I prefer being financially independent.

Remember, if you're battening down the hatches on your Ark, Hashem is there with you, and eventually the waters will recede. It's okay to be Noah, weathering the storm, knowing it's temporary and will end at any moment.

## **Parsha Lech-Lecha**

All is Fair in Love, War, and Faith (Gen 12:1—17:27)

3 Cheshvan 5772 — October 31, 2011

This week's Torah Portion is all about the misadventures of one of mankind's most important people. . . Father Abraham. I never truly understood Abraham, not even a little. He is the Patriarch of more than one major world religion. In fact, scholars use the term "Abrahamic Religions" in reference to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as well as he is a major prophet within the Baha'i faith. Not too shabby for a liar!

The book of Beresheit covers a lot of time and ground and that is something that is very easy to forget. At the start of this portion Abraham, and his wife Sarah, are young, married, childless, and still going by their birth names Abram and Sarai. We are led to believe that Sarai has an attractiveness no man could resist, not even the Pharaoh of Egypt, who at that time was the most powerful man in the world. A few things transpire (we'll get to that in a moment), a little more time passes, Abram rescues his nephew Lot and gets blessed by Melchizedek. Decades pass, Abram and Sarai are elderly and still childless, a few more things transpire, and Hashem changes Abram and Sarai's names and commands circumcision... phew so much to digest.

Here is why I just can't seem to understand Abraham. He is one of the most righteous men on the planet in his day. So why lie and negotiate your wife for your life and land? Here is a young man in a foreign land with a gorgeous and exotic young wife. He knows Pharaoh is the only person in a position to take her from him. So what does he do? He says "This is my sister," and then goes about his business, literally. I don't want this post to be apologetic or condemning. I am a different man and live in a different time. We know this deal really, REALLY bothers Sarai, and rightfully so, but I keep wondering just how angry does this make Hashem? Eventually Pharaoh learns the true nature of Abram and Sarai's relationship, and Hashem steps in inflicting Pharaoh with a plague.

The Torah never really goes into detail on how Abram and Sarai get over this episode in their relationship, but we do know they continue to live together and hopefully do that happily. During this time Abram matures a lot and leads the efforts to rescue his nephew Lot. In his last adventure, it ended with a plague inflicted on Pharaoh. This time it ends with Melchizedek blessing Abram.

Now for the final part of the Lech-Lecha trilogy. Abram and Sarai have entered their golden years childless, and it is no secret that having an heir is Abram's heart's desire. Obviously feeling bad for her husband, Sarai decides to do what she can to make having a son happen. So what does she do? She

arranges for her husband to step out of their tent and into Hagar's, and of course, the son Ishmael is conceived. Jealousy and tempers erupt as each compete for Abram's affection... and then Hashem steps in again. Hashem changes Abram and Sarai's name to Abraham and Sarah, tells Abraham his children will spawn nations, and then tells him to clean up himself, his son, and his male servants 'down there'. Oy vey, my head is spinning!

All of the above is why I could just never understand Abraham. There is no denying he meant well and loved Hashem and his family, but c'mon MAN!

What are your thoughts on Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, and Ishmael? Have you ever felt that Hashem has had to step in after your well-intended actions didn't really end up being so well-intended? Am I being too hard or not hard enough on Abraham?

## **Parsha Vayeira**

I and I Survived (Gen 18:1—22:24)

10 Cheshvan 5772 — November 7, 2011

I have a confession to make. I dreaded having to reflect and glean something meaningful for this Dvar that did not twist, bend, weave, or bob into the “I’m not religious, I’m spiritual” or “I’m a man of faith,” worlds of religious approach. Is there a catch phrase for “a thinking man’s” path to righteousness? If you read last week’s Dvar for Lech-Lecha I mention how Abraham always confused me and then gave a really long-winded synopsis of events. Vayeira follows in Lech-Lecha’s tradition by quickly moving from one event and set of circumstances to the next. As I read this portion, I tried all the tricks of the trade, like picking a secondary character and running with it, or taking the fan favorite approach and exploring the sexual politics that are prevalent in Beresheit. None of those were getting, it just seemed this week’s portion was yet another collection of stories chronicling the lives of some of our earliest Patriarchs and Matriarchs. Then it hit me: Abraham’s story is about unity and disunity.

In Vayeira the split takes place between Abraham’s first son Ishmael and his younger son, Isaac. Two brothers, two nations, two faiths, two names that start with the letter I, and it is precisely that ‘I’ (or you, me, etc.) against ‘I.’ We as created beings infused with the knowledge of good and evil are constantly at odds with ourselves and others to the nth degree. Call it religion, opinion, politics, or whatever – we like labels and we like taking sides. For example, this faith of ours has numerous denominations and right now Chassidic and unaffiliated liberal Judaism are popular, while everything in between seems to be struggling a little. It’s so very hard not to be dismissive of the other. Being accepting of the other side of the coin is scary – it’s like saying I might be wrong, and who would ever want to be wrong?

Sarah’s disappointment in her childlessness leads to unneeded pressures within her home. Ishmael is likened to a stubborn animal only because his father’s preferred wife is jealous of him while his mother is jealous of Sarah. He is a boy placed into a domestic war zone by others; of course, he is going to be difficult at times. Think about this: when Sarah makes Hagar and Ishmael leave their home, Abraham is saddened while Hashem provides for them in the wilderness. He even blesses Ishmael by allowing him to father a nation. On the other side of the line, we read that Isaac is the “son whom Abraham loves.” Talk about a tangled web woven.

Here is why this is so important today. Many of us try and foster this ideal of the individual who is diverse and complex, yet we often forget how to just live our lives with others. Dialogue and debate are crucial for a healthy

community, but there is a time for that and a time to sit down, break bread, and laugh with those around you. It is important to live life and that can only truly be done when you and those around you are healthy in mind, body, and spirit. If all you dwell on is which side of the aisle some of your views may rest, you will never foster a healthy life. Know what you believe and why, just be able to foster that sense of a 'little bit of Eden' while living your life day to day. Just as both brothers survived and prospered, so can we, as individuals and as a community.

## **Parsha Chayei Sarah**

Choices Made (Gen 23:1—25:18)

16 Cheshvan 5772 — November 13, 2011

OK, I'm going to keep this week's Dvar short and sweet. As Abraham and Sarah's time ends, the next generation starts with the marriage of Isaac and Rebecca. This week's portion begins with Sarah departing this world for the world to come and a distraught Abraham purchasing a plot of land to lay her body to rest. Abraham marries again and fathers additional sons. As Abraham prepares to depart this world, he leaves his estate to Isaac, and gives some of his wealth to the sons of his concubines so they can start their own lives independently of Isaac. Tucked between the deaths of his parents, Isaac marries Rebecca after Abraham charges his servant to return to his homeland in order to find a suitable wife for his son Isaac.

This may seem like a transitional portion but an underlining concept is present; and that concept is choices. Reflecting over the previous portions in this year's cycle the choices made form a linking chain. The interesting thing is most of these decisions are made by our matriarchs, giving them a feminine flavor over a masculine one. The idea of masculine and feminine means a lot more than the outline on the public restroom door you use – they represent everything from language rules to the approach someone takes during real life situations. In the Torah, we see where the feminine approach is more cerebral while the masculine is more physical. Think about it: Eve chooses to partake of the fruit and Adam follows suit. Sarah chooses to build a life and family with Abraham, while he acts out of fear to preserve his own well-being; and ultimately it is Rebecca's choice to leave her home only to (believe it or not) fall in love with Isaac. What does Isaac do? He takes her into his tent and weds her.

I could go on and on categorizing events in Torah as masculine or feminine, but it's more beneficial for each of us to reflect and do that ourselves. Which pieces of our collective history do you view as masculine and which do you view as feminine?

# **Parsha Goldot**

The Age of Quarrel (Gen 25:19—28:9)

25 Cheshvan 5772 — November 22, 2011

what makes the Torah's lessons relevant for people living yesterday, today, tomorrow, for both male and female, people of all ages, and for everyone scattered across this globe we call Earth. When I decided to try my hand at 'Dvar-ing' (is that even a word?), I tried to forget everything that I know about our collective spiritual ancestors. I didn't want to infuse each week's reading with some socio-political agenda or pen a modern day discussion citing great Jewish minds past and present like Rambam and Elie Wiesel. Who knows, maybe the next cycle I will focus my Dvrei through that looking glass. As I sat down to once again read the story of Jacob and Esau's relationship with each other and their parents, all I could think about were the concepts of 'mind over matter' and 'might makes right'.

This portion is about twin brothers who, when viewed as one person, create a deep, complicated, driven individual. The quarrel between the two is really the conflict we all deal with on a daily basis within ourselves. Jacob leaves his mother's womb clinging to his brother's heel. This tells us that in Rebecca's womb, as each body split and grew into Esau and Jacob, there was a struggle. Esau being the physically stronger was able fight his way out first, Jacob while physically weaker was mentally determined to never give up, signified by his clinging to his brother's heel upon exit.

As they grew older Esau was manly, hairy, loud, an outdoorsman, or, the extrovert. Jacob was delicate, smooth skinned, quiet, an indoors man, or, the introvert. The extrovert, in the here and now, is always dominant, while the introvert is able to visualize a goal, and piece by piece, work towards it, only to dominate upon the complete fruition of his plans. When Esau ate Jacob's soup, he was dominating because he had the soup and was no longer hungry. Jacob on the other hand knew what he ultimately wanted and, while giving up his meal, was able to take a step towards his ultimate goal by making a trade for Esau's birthright. Later on Isaac tricks his father into giving him what would have been Esau's blessing, and Esau – Jacob's blessing, enraging Esau. Esau's rage is not at his mother for conspiring against him with Jacob, or at his father for going along with the charade, but at his other half, Jacob and by default himself.

How often does each of us allow our thoughts and actions to clash within us? How often do you let insecurities stop you from simply just getting better? Better at physical pursuits and better intellectually? There are many times when I am my worst enemy when I quarrel within myself for not being the strongest, the most outgoing, the wittiest. What is your quarrel? How have you

*reconciled your extrovert and introvert sides?*

# Parsha Vayetze

The First Step (Gen 28:10—32:3)

2 Kislev 5772 — November 28, 2011

When I was still a child, it just blew my mind every time I heard the story of Moses descending from Sinai with the Ten Commandments. Back then I pictured the ancient world as a disorganized violent place where incredible muscle bound hulks traipsed about dragging damsels in distress by their hair and killing at will. Nothing could be further from the truth. The same societal ills that plagued our forefathers plague us today. Growing up in the United States it is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that since the Emancipation Proclamation, slavery is no more, or since the Wolf of Berlin placed the barrel of his luger to his head and pulled the trigger, genocide is a cruel joke from the past. Vayetze addresses this naivety.

Almost half way through Beresheit, this week's portion reads almost the same as the previous portions, just with different names. Jacob is deceived in a similar way in which he deceived his father Isaac. Rachel becomes increasingly jealous at Leah and Bilhah for conceiving Jacob's children. Laban covets Jacob's wealth, and Hashem intervenes, once again, this time with dreams.

What sets Vayetze apart is Jacob's ladder dream with celestial beings climbing up and down. At first, I am a little puzzled that a ladder and not a tree appears in his dream. Trees are so important to Jews of all walks, a tree represent life, knowledge, and mysticism, plus like a ladder you can climb up and down. So why be given a ladder and not a tree? Trees climbing is for fun, but ladders are climbed for work. When you climb a ladder, you look up or down and then move on a rung consciously in your desired direction. Climbing a tree you scurry, reach, jump, swing, and smile your way around and down. Hashem placed a ladder in Jacob's dream to show him, and us, that just living life in a way where you "just go with the flow," while easy, is not what is expected from us. Hashem forgets nothing and through his covenants, He is being patient and working really hard with humanity to get us back to a Eden-esque or Messianic state of being. The Ten Commandments are being written one by one on the tablets in Sinai. They just will not be finished until many years later after Moses climbs the mountain like a ladder a second time.

Today we may have better technology, more comfortable lives, and more transparency in society, but at our core, our dilemmas are no different than those faced by Jacob. The ancient world is no more, or less savage than the one today. Not just in war zones or developing countries but everywhere, even in the only super power left in the world. I remember once when I was kid, I decided to climb a pine tree. For over an hour I battled with bark in my eye, limbs scraping open my skin, sap dripping all over me. It was a slow and

painful process but I kept reaching and striving for that next rung of branches. When I made it to the top, sure, I was happy, but I knew I would have to start the same painful process to descend. I may have gone home with my eyes red and swollen, with blood oozing out of my hands and arms, and my clothes and hair matted with sap, but I learned a lesson that is still with me to this day. The easy way is to just stay where you're at, flowing with the good and bad at the same time. Taking the first step in either direction is hard work, in fact so hard that each additional step after the first is just another first step.

I challenge all of you to strive for that first step up, counter complacency and the wicked who are taking steps down. Tikkun Olam can only start inside of you.

What first steps have you worked hard to take? Do you ever stop for a break?

## **Parsha Vayishlach**

Think for the best or you will go down just like the rest! (Gen 32:4—36:43)

9 Kislev 5772 — December 5, 2011

A couple weeks ago, Toldot was approached under the assumption that since Esau and Jacob are twins they are in essence one very deep, complicated, driven individual split between two bodies. This separation of one divine spark creates an immovable object contrasted by the unstoppable force. Vayishlach is what happens when the inevitable ramming of the horns occurs.

In this week's portion Jacob returns to his homeland worried, and reasonably so, dividing his estate into two camps in hopes that when he meets his twin brother Esau, any revenge meted out will only be felt by one side. Jacob isolates himself during the night to prepare himself for his meeting with Esau. During the night Jacob is confronted by a stranger. He spends the rest of the evening wrestling with this stranger. Some believe this stranger to be Esau; others believe him to be an angel, or a manifestation of Hashem, or even Jacob himself. Whomever Jacob wrestled with is not important. What is important is how this plays into the reunification of a Divine spark, which is what happens the next morning.

Esau who was the extroverted half of the two was always physically strong. Esau never had to look past the present moment to satisfy his needs. Jacob, representing the introverted side, was intelligent enough to know that he needed time to plan and strategize in order to move towards his ultimate goal. The years he spent away working and building a large family with his wives and maidservants afforded him the time to become physically and strategically strong enough to confront Esau.

As the sun slowly rose and the dawn crept up ushering in the ultimate day of reckoning, one hurdle remained for Jacob... he must conquer the introvert. Jacob physically overcomes the stranger only to be permanently handicapped, yet reborn as Israel.

Israel, not Jacob, limps back to his camp waiting to confront the rest of his Divine spark resting within Esau. Israel, not Jacob, bows to his twin brother seven times. Esau is overcome with what he sees and embraces his brother Israel who is no longer his enemy Jacob. What a great end to a heart breaking conflict.

Vayishlach really spoke to me this week, more than I can ever remember it doing in the past. Shortly after starting Circle Pit the Bimah, I was forced to come to a head with myself. I was at a point where I felt overwhelmed – in other words, I felt like the Greek character Atlas on a bad day. One night I had a dream where I'm in a suit walking through a city which always acts as

the backdrop for most of my dreams. I'm looking past the high rise sky line into mountains covered by jungle, and I think to myself, I need to walk over there for Shul since today is Friday and the sun is about to set. So I walk and walk and walk, never really getting any closer to my goal. Finally, I get frustrated and give up, rationalizing that there will always be another Shabbat, why worry about it. I then walk down a flight of steps into a basement, resulting in my waking up.

The entire next day, I am not my usual self, more than anything I am mad at my subconscious for giving in so easily the night before. I decided to work from home, didn't shave or bathe, really didn't do anything except clash with myself. That night I had another dream. A huge floating albino snake slithered up to me. The serpent was approximately 10-12 feet long and its red eyes just stared at me while its body swayed back and forth behind it. As much as snakes creep me out, I just stood there and stared back. Then it happened... WHAM!!! The serpent strikes face first into my chest. My body sways like wheat during a breezy summer's day, but my feet remain rooted to the earth. Defeated, the serpent flies off and in my dream reasoning I understand why it lost. During the entire confrontation, its mouth was closed so it could not whisper to me and break my resolve. The next morning I reevaluated a lot of the things that were bearing down on me. Those things I could change, I did. Those I could influence to a degree, I did. Those I couldn't do anything about, I just stopped obsessing over and I have felt great ever since.

The things I was wrestling with, while trivial compared to what Jacob had to overcome, still forced me to reconcile Jeremiah with Jeremiah. What is your biggest obstacle? How did you find peace within yourself?

# Parsha Vayeshev

Meanwhile. . . (Gen 37:1—40:23)

17 Kislev 5772 — December 13, 2011

Every week I follow a certain process as I approach each Torah portion. On Monday morning when that week's Dvar is available to anyone who wants to invest two or three minutes of their life reading my thoughts on a small slice of Torah, I am preparing the following week's portion scribbling down a sentence or two for each chapter. I then set those notes aside, go back to living my life while my subconscious and Torah court each other resulting in a marriage of insight that I capture the following day in words. Well, that didn't really work so well this week. Of course, I did my part. While you were reading Vayishlach last Monday morning, I was reading Vayeshev just as my process demands, but here I am on a Sunday, a full seven days later still drawing a blank. What to do? Skipping a Dvar is just not an option; it is not fair to you or me.

Vayeshev is the story of Joseph, his coat, his many brothers, his relationship with Mr. and Mrs. Potiphar, and his interactions with the chief Baker and Butler of Pharaoh's court. If that is not enough for you, an interlude involving Judah, his daughter-in-law and the conception and birth of their twin sons Zerah and Perez takes place.

Maybe I approached this week's portion with a cocky naivety. Can you blame me? Vayeshev's brim is overflowing with people who can just as easily play the hero as well as the villain. All four chapters are full of jealousy, deceit, envy, and self-centeredness only to be garnished with modesty, self-realization, spiritual growth, and overcoming the hurdles of life, and yet I have nothing insightful to share. In fact I had, for lack of a better term, an Anti-Vayeshev week. I had a great week. I work from home the majority of the time so when it snowed I was happy to camp out indoors and admire the winter wonderland from my windows and balcony. A couple days after being snowed in, the temperature dropped to single digits during the day and sub-zero temperatures over night, again no worries my home is warm and I didn't have to venture out. Towards the end of the week, I went to a surprise party for my best friend, and I received a lot of recognition from my boss for going above and beyond this past year for the company I consult for. I lead a rough life.

As one week ends and the next begins I am look forward to gleaning spiritual nutrition from the various commentaries I listen to and read. This process is one that will help me grow in a way where any arrogance sprouting within me will be plucked like a weed in a garden before causing ill intent in others. It will help me so that I will not let jealousy drive my actions, and where I will have the foresight to avoid acts which will later result in being outed as a hypocrite.

## **Parsha Miketz**

No Frum (Gen 41:1—44:17)

23 Kislev 5772 — December 19, 2011 by punktorah

Miketz is the portion where Joseph finally gets his happy ending. Joseph's divine blessing of dream interpretation is remembered within Pharaoh's court. This leads to his release from prison with the promotion from foreign prisoner to revered Egyptian Statesman. As an added treat, Joseph reconciles with his brothers. This week's portion screams "abuse survivor," "over comer," and "liberation." The only problem is I am not a victim of abuse and therefore being a survivor is lost on me. What Miketz means to me is completion and balance in all aspects of a person's being. This week Joseph exemplifies this.

When Adam and Eve ate of the fruit one of the seeds they swallowed was that of privilege and conceit. We all have this seed embedded within in us from birth, but like all seeds for the weed to sprout and grow it must be tended to by a dutiful gardener tending flowers. The remnant of Jacob left in Israel watered, pruned, and nurtured this seed within Joseph causing the weed's root to sink through his heart piercing his soul. When a weed is that embedded, plucking it is no easy feat. The only remedy to remove the unwanted affliction is to completely remove the root.

The only hope for Joseph is an extreme one, sold out of jealousy into slavery by his brothers. He worked his way into as good of a situation as any slave can. Due to lust, he is cast into prison only to once again make a positive impression with his fellow inmates. The sin of forgetfulness rears its head leaving Joseph abandoned behind bars for a couple more years. Finally, Joseph's crop of privilege and conceit has withered and been plucked from his soul, mind, and body. He is redeemed and ready for his place as a lynchpin in the Patriarchal succession within Judaism.

Only by the grace of Hashem is Joseph pulled from prison after interpreting Pharaoh's dreams predicting 7 bountiful years followed by 7 lean years. He shaves his beard... OH NO!!! marries a nice Egyptian girl...WHA WHA WHAT! and starts a very successful and important career as a freed man.

After what seems to be a long agonizing journey Joseph is complete. He has the spiritual integrity, the physical confidence, and the mental wisdom to provide for everyone in the region. Joseph knows what's coming in just a few short years and yet he is mature enough to start a happy family in the present while working to provide for their needs in the near future. When the 7 lean years arrive and people start to go hungry. Because of Joseph Egypt becomes the humanitarian capital of the ancient world. The balance Joseph has achieved within himself has allowed him to enjoy the present, while preparing for the future, but what about his past?

No truly complete person can live only in the present with a nod to a prosperous future without coming to terms with lessons learned from their past. Joseph is no exception. When his brothers come to Egypt to purchase food he recognizes them immediately and manages the situation in a way where he will not neglect his duties but will still be reunited with his beloved elderly father. Joseph at this point in his life knows what happened in his past is not all his fault or his fathers or even his brothers. He knows they all played a part in the evil that transpired. This realization alone allows for him to finally be reunited with his family.

The concept of "Patron Saints" is foreign to Judaism, however if it was part of our tradition I feel Joseph would play a much more prominent role in some circles. I feel a bond with him, which I haven't felt until this week. Like Joseph I do not live in Israel, in fact I am happy living in the southwest region of the United States. Like Joseph, I have a Hebrew name and a "Gentile" name. Like Joseph, I have been in serious relationships with non-Jews and while in them never compromised my beliefs (don't worry Kosher Gals I am currently on the market wink wink!). Most importantly, like Joseph I like to think of myself as someone striving for balance in all aspect of my life.

How have you reconciled your past, present, and future? Where do you struggle when it comes to balancing the mind, body, and spirit? Does being orthodox help solve these problems? Reflect and grow and share.

# Parsha Vayigash

Brother of Mercy (Gen 44:18—47:27)

1 Tevet 5772 — December 27, 2011

Seriously, is there anyone out there who does not like a nice happy ending? The previous portions dealing with Joseph are burdened with some really heavy events, for someone with so many highs and lows in their life it is kind of nice that his story ends relatively quiet and understated. Vayigash is the portion where Joseph breaks into tears revealing himself to his brothers, he is reunited with his beloved and in a way estranged father, and he relocates his entire family to Egypt so they will be closer to him.

Joseph up until this point is the quintessential conservative archetype, he worked hard building himself up in wealth and power while maintaining an uncompromising stance in blind faith and “got over” being a slave and prisoner. The Joseph of Vayigash is the polar opposite of this approach, he provides land for his reconciled family to live on using his status as a statesman, he also negotiates with the populace securing all the land and resources in Egypt for Pharaoh and his government creating a socialized large government, and it works with great success.

What really stood out to me this week is what transpires at the end of the Parsha, where Joseph barter back the land of Egypt from the locals for Pharaoh. As much as I might try to block out the Hebrews future in Egypt in the coming week's portions, I just cannot do it. People are not born racist. Racism is taught. Yet, in a way, you can't teach racism, because when you think about it, being racist is an impossible state of being for humans. What is not racism is being an “economist.” Living my entire life in the United States, stereotypically Jews and East Asians are viewed as smart and crafty but not industrious, anyone with black or brown skin is often portrayed as lazy and dim witted and of course not industrious. The industrious people of American society are the white Christians all of whom have built and maintain the only world super power. This is all ridiculous non-sense but we can see a parallel with our modern society and ancient Egypt. The Torah never mentions Joseph hiding the fact he was a foreign ex-slave who served hard time in prison, because he was able to provide for everyone he was accepted and loved, as was his tribe by proxy. As the generations passed, the Egyptians forgot about how Joseph showed mercy and treated all like a brother and his kinsmen became the others of society and thus a liability.

## Parsha Vayechi

Bought the single for the A-side but ended up loving the B-side more. (Gen 47:28—50:26)

7 Tevet 5772 — January 2, 2012

Vayechi is the final Parsha of Beresheit and the Parsha where two very charismatic Patriarchs cross the threshold of the world to come. Growing up when this part of the Torah cycled through, Joseph was nothing more to me than a kid with a coat who ends up in Egypt, nothing more nothing less. When I decided to start Circle Pit the Bimah, I wanted to try and approach each portion like it is the first time and not the thirty-third. I have really worked hard to try and forget, for lack of a better term, what I have learned from others in the past. This means no commentator quotes, no socio-political agenda, and no current news or popular culture references. So far this approach has really worked and for the first time in my life I see Joseph for who he was not for what he wore or where he lived.

As in life, dualism places an integral role within Judaism, and at no other time is the clash between religious observance and secular life more evident than as it is with Joseph. Joseph is the Patriarch who represents a secular life accompanied by belief. In fact, our holiday of Hanukkah, which is observed during Joseph's Torah portions, is a holiday founded around that clashing of the religious and secular worlds. Very fitting. Why is all of this important? Vayechi continues this tradition, Israel blesses Joseph's sons out of order defying the normal process. Joseph returns Israel's body to the land of his forefathers for a religious burial, and Joseph stays in Egypt and when he dies is interred under Egyptian customs.

Even today, it seems most of the time the secular minded of us are attacking the fundamental foundations of the more religious Jew's life by trying to impose a different set of day-to-day values than what they are used to. Depending on where you live, the orthodox do the same to us, and unfortunately this will never change. Sometimes a marriage will occur between both worlds, other times it may seem we are more cruel to each other than our enemies are to us. We will never be without the other. Eden is the only place within creation where there are only two mitzvot: the first is just live and the other is do not eat the fruits of this one tree. If we were all Rabbinic Torah masters what need would we have for the Torah and Jewish fellowship? The same is true if we are all righteous secular Jews.

The world we live in demands a Torah and that will never change. What we can change is how we approach the other side. The reasoning which might sway me probably will not work on my polar opposite and it is arrogant to think the same is true when the situation is reversed. I will always need a Rabbi because I am not a Rabbi, just as a Rabbi will always need a student so

that he can be a Rabbi.

Where do you think a person should draw a line, if any, between religious and secular pursuits? Have you ever felt singled out for attack by the other side of the same family?

# Parsha Shemot

Gift from a foreign G-d (Ex. 1:1—6:1)

15 Tevet 5772 - January 10, 2012

Shemot is another Torah portion where a lot happens in the span of just a few chapters and verses. It is one of the darkest times for the ancient Hebrews. A new Pharaoh is in power, unlike his predecessor he does not have a Joseph to befriend and rely on. He is a Pharaoh who is unabashedly loyal to Egypt and Egyptians. Times were a lot different from now and so was the economy, and for the perceived other lower menial jobs channeled through slavery is the preferred form of domination.

The Hebrew Bamidbar are vastly multiplying, and since dominance is about resource management, "fear of the other" burns brighter and hotter in the hearts and minds of the Egyptians. Enter baby Moses, nothing special about him and the other newly born Hebrew boys except his mother has that rare perfect balance between fear and cunning. Knowing it is only a matter of time before Moses's short life is made even shorter she places him in a basket and sets him afloat in the same river Pharaoh's Daughter likes to bathe and relax in; and the stage is set the Hebrew G~d gives the royal family a beautiful baby boy via the sacred Nile River.

Nursed by his own Hebrew mother, loved and courted throughout his adoptive Grandfather's kingdom, Moses truly is the gift from the Hebrew G~d. In fact Moses is Egyptian for "because I drew him out of the water" and he keeps this name for the rest of his life. Like all of us Moses has a weakness, a character flaw, unlike the Patriarch's flaws he is easily moved to a violent anger. After killing an Egyptian to protect Hebrew slaves, he flees to the wilderness, finds a wife, and is content to settle down and live a quiet full life. Hashem allows this time to run its course before confronting Moses with a charge to return the Hebrews to the Promised Land. Hashem adjusts the spark within Moses allowing him to approach the Egyptians in a way their magicians will understand and respect if not fear.

Returning to the grand halls of his youth this quiet soft spoken man mutters "Pharaoh, let my people go," and Pharaoh says "no." Immediately following this discourse Pharaoh strengthens his people's dominance over our people, what was hard before is now unbearable. The age of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs is unabashedly over and Hashem ushers in the Age of the Prophets with Moses and Aaron.

What symbolism does Moses in a Basket floating in another faiths holy land mean to you? Why do you think Hashem gives Moses the ability to perform miracles in a way the Egyptian magicians will be in awe of?

# Parsha Va'eira

Career Suicidal Gestures (Shemot 6:2—9:35)

23 Tevet 5772 — January 18, 2012

“And I appeared” or by its proper Hebrew name Va'eira is probably best known to everyone as the Torah portion where Pharaoh's heart softens and then hardens while Hashem afflicts the Egyptian populace with plague after plague after plague. Moses and Aaron continue their presence in Pharaoh's court demanding the end of slavery for the Hebrews, and Hashem in a very indirect way appears and then disappears with the hardening and softening of Pharaoh's heart. Makes for a great moral lesson tackling ones intent and the motivation for actions emanating from the heart, but Pharaoh is not the only example for this so is Moses.

Va'eira begins with Moses doubting his ability and not really wanting a leadership position, and from what the Torah tells us the Hebrews agreed with Moses. This personality trait of Moses I can relate to in a complete and whole way, because like Moses I have made the same suicidal gestures with my career. On multiple occasions and to different levels of leadership I have made it clear that taking the step into management is not my goal and in so many words something I never plan on pursuing. This is not career suicide but it can be read as a suicidal gesture. In reality, the incredibly small increase in pay is just not worth the stress of having to be available around the clock while “parenting” grown adults most of whom are many years older than me, and worse of all terminating the income of someone with children. I like to think this is Moses's outlook as well besides it is not like there are no other candidates for the position, there is Aaron who becomes the head of the Hebrews 40 years after liberation and we learn later on of other Hebrews who really wanted the job as well.

Moses is smart enough, educated enough, and a “believer” enough to know the Hebrews will be set free... eventually. He knows it will be a long hard road to lead, move, and settle to a new land, a people who have a collective body disfigured of deep scars from generations of slavery. Moses's life is different from those he is charged to lead. He understands more and leads for the greater good not the lesser few. Growing up in the west in a pursuit of wealth driven society it is nice to see that Moses's lesson on “humbleness over power” is what makes him the most influential leader to Jews and one of the most influential leaders to all other people.

What does Moses's reluctance say about Jews today? Are we as human beings scattered across a globe living comfortably under different types of government at odds with the type of character and leadership Hashem would like? Or are we so far removed from the Shemot that model is no longer relevant?

## **Parsha Bo**

This is the Meaning of Life (Ex. 10:1—13:16)

29 Tevet 5772 — January 24, 2012

Ahhh... Parsha Bo, finally the plagues burdening the Egyptians come to an end and Hashem gives us Jews the holiday Passover. No matter how hard I might try, I will never know where to begin to make sense of the final plague which subsequently leaves the first born male in every Egyptian household without life, and yet Bo is an integral portion in trying to understand Hashem and just how we are created in His image.

Judaism is monotheistic period. This means everything, or lack thereof, emanates from one source, Hashem. Whether it is righteousness, wickedness, or something in between the root, the seed, the source is the same and never wavering. We as human beings are created in Hashem's image and this does not mean He looks like us externally but that we encapsulate pure dualism just like Him. Every act, belief, and feeling we have is only present because its opposite is not acted upon. Sure, we exist, but we emanate good and evil based on our will just like our creator.

Passover is the perfect lesson to explain the compulsions of good versus evil we all have seeded inside of us. In fact, this week's portion is the blossomed fruit matured from the seed sprouting out of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The Hebrews marking their doorposts is a conscious choice to do good when faced with doing evil. This choice to mark themselves apart saves their sons and leads directly towards breaking the yoke of bondage. The Egyptians refusal to do the right thing results in the evil inclination running rampant in their hearts and minds leading to death, sorrow, anger, and the lust for vengeance. Such a heavy portion.

Bo is the perfect moral lesson to carry as a reminder while navigating all of life's temptations. Sometimes we are the ancient Hebrew yearning to cast off the burden of evil inclinations and sometimes we are the ancient Egyptian willfully afflicting those around us. Bo is more than just the first Passover it is the morality of where we as human beings created in the divine image of Hashem exist. Actions have consequences and only you the individual can choose which path to take.

## Parsha Yitro

G-dfree Youth: The Time I Broke Up With Hashem (Ex. 18:1—20:23)

15 Shevat 5772 — February 8, 2012

In Parsha Yitro three very important things take place. First, Moses's father-in-law Jethro (Yitro in Hebrew) advises Moses to set up a multi-leveled representative government made up of judges. Second Hashem descends over Sinai while the ancient Hebrews are encamped at the mountain's base; and finally Moses is given what I call the Big Ten or more commonly referred to as the Ten Commandments. Pretty straightforward and clear-cut right? Wrong. This week's portion has done nothing but cause misery in my life! I have never been thought of as a liar, I try not to take Hashem's name in vain, and heck I have never stepped out on any girl I date. Yet this portion is the reason that an angry thirteen year old kid in West Virginia banged his fists against his head and told Hashem the two of them were finished.

Ten set in stone easy-to-follow rules are not the reason I was frustrated and gave up. It was the fact that something so straightforward is so muddied by people. Each commandment is nothing more than a branch sprouting out of the simplistic Essence of Judaism (aka the Golden Rule). The rest of the Tanakh, Mishnah, Midrash, etc. are arguments for either an open left handed caress or a clinched crushing right handed fist. ARRRRGGHGHG!!!!

The good news is I have always been a thinking man, meaning my distaste for my parents overzealous approach towards religion was the fuel that made me strike out on my own but it was not enough to keep me away. Of course, I was antagonistic towards anyone observant until I could no longer justify my atheism and now my approach to Judaism is very secular and very modern but I am a Jew nonetheless and not an angry atheist or a member of another faith's flock.

The thirty-three year old me understands what the thirteen year old could not and that is Halachah is meaningless unless it naturally flows through your life like a fresh water spring. Commentaries and parshot are great and I love them, but they are there to feed you, to strengthen you, and to make you grow – not to hinder your spark.

Shortly after turning twenty-two I apologized to Hashem for walking out on Him and since then I try and keep it simple but I do work hard at emanating the big ten internally and externally. For example, #6, sure, I don't kill people, heck I don't even eat or wear animals, but it is also a charge against self-destructive behaviors. Hashem wants us to live, and you can't do that when your killing yourself mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and physically. Now when I study commentaries I always try and look at things from the author's point of view. In order to truly find balance and grow as a Jew it is so

important to fully understand opposing ideals and to completely embrace those you agree with.

Don't just do something because it is tradition do it because you need to in order to be the best Jew you can be. Shalom.

## **Parsha Mishpatim**

Occupying My Tea Pot (Ex. 21:1—24:18)

21 Shevat 5772 — February 14, 2012

One can easily argue that last week's portion Yitro, more than any other, represents the Torah as a whole, and one can easily argue that this week's portion Mishpatim represents the Talmud. Mishpatim to me marks a departure from the format the Torah has been unrolling itself as, gone is the moral ambiguity of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs and present are divine laws. Last week Moses established a government body consisting of judges and this week he takes his nation founding to the next logical step by codifying laws on parchment and thus finding a way to unilaterally make the Torah relevant to every person then and now.

This week Moses gives his first dictation regarding law for just about everything. For the hardline right we have an out for murder, slavery, assault, and male immodesty and for me and my lame liberal brothers and sisters big government checks and balances regulating the treatment of widows, no interest loans, false witness, bribes, and respect for foreigners. Moses would be so unelectable today.

So does this mean, "do what you want" just makes a good argument for it "after the fact?" Probably, but I want to be a better Jeremiah today than I was yesterday and the only real way to do that is to strip yourself down to a point where you are moving forward in the direction of righteousness and not constantly resetting yourself always looking for that "oh so sacred" of a path. I am in a place now where the afore mentioned woes are non-issues in my daily life. True I have never murdered anyone in cold blood but I have definitely thrown my fair share of hook punches, the point is I am at a place in my life where fighting really is not a reality for me. I am way beyond that. The challenges for me lay with the later. I live in society, I interact with people in society, and I am part of society. When one suffers, we all suffer.

Mishpatim is the Talmud portion of Torah because it opens the discussion for fairness, and what is righteousness? It codifies what is, and is not, permissible within Jewish society. What this week's portion is not, are stagnant rules to take advantage of, to further a special interest group's agenda. Maybe you feel more comfortable eating steak in a tri-cornered hat while shooting shifty-eyed glances at widows with funny sounding last names. Maybe you're a vegan potluck type of person who can't quite figure out why the government is so hesitant to provide more basic needs for those it rules over.

Allowing those of different dispositions to gravitate towards one common root is the genius of Judaism. If Hashem wanted the Jewish people to be stagnant and set in a certain way he would have ended the Torah with Yitro but He

didn't in fact there is a lot more to come. Don't be stagnant and set in your ways meditate on where you are at right now and challenge yourself to press forward along the path of righteousness.

Where do you see yourself now? Where would you like to be tomorrow or a year from now?

# Parsha Terumah

Just Another Parsha? (Ex. 25:1—27:14)

29 Shevat 5772 — February 22, 2012

From the outside looking in, Terumah is a nice, short, yet technical portion one can read rather fast because, for the most part, none of us are trying to build a Tabernacle out in the mesa (mesa is “New Mexican Español” slang for desert and Español is Spanish for Spanish). Yet in this week’s Torah Portion an indirect message of community over personal wealth starts the building process via donations from the ancient Hebrews. Up until this point the Hebrews only responsibility to Hashem is a belief solely in Him. This simple belief has led to freedom, food, and military victories. In Terumah Hashem asks for those Hebrews who are able to donate to do so by providing a place for Him to dwell making it a two sided relationship.

Relationships go both ways it is unfair to all involved when only one side gives and the other only receives. Often there are times we forget that Hashem created the human race for companionship and not as subjects for an experiment in rule. Hashem asking the ancient Hebrews for supplies for His earthly dwelling is just the beginning it is also an indirect plea for the overall health of the community.

The lesson of Terumah is so far reaching and inclusive in our day to day lives its impossible to find a place were it stops. Its like outer space its endless. This is because human beings are pack animals. We are at our healthiest when we are in a functioning environment with other fulfilled and happy human beings. Think about it who do we fear the most? We fear the recluse, the loner, the outsider while we gravitate towards people who make us laugh and who we feel comfort from being around. By building the Tabernacle Hashem and the ancient Hebrews took the next step in a relationship designed to make humanity and world the best it possibly can be.

For the sake of time and my sanity I’m going to leave this portion as is. Seriously though I could probably write a book exploring the merging of spiritual and physical in community from the home all the way to society on a global scale. Terumah is important because it forces us to view ourselves as individuals in a whole. If the tribes are united then they will never be divided.

P.S. If anyone in the greater Albuquerque area (or anyone willing to move out here) wants to build a Tabernacle out in the Mesa I say lets do it!

# Parsha Tetzaveh

More Than Fashion (Ex. 27:20—30:10)

6 Adar 5772 — February 29, 2012

I have to admit I put writing this week's thoughts on Torah off, well that's not entirely true I followed my weekly process I just didn't want to sit down and type up a few paragraphs on it; but I made a commitment to you, myself, and most importantly Hashem. So lets do this.

In Tetzaveh Hashem via Moses codifies instructions to consecrate everything priestly. This includes oil for the Tabernacle, priestly garments, ordination of the priesthood, the alter, and incense burning. In today's age, the Temple has been reduced to a wall supporting the earthly foundation of a Mosque. We no longer have a family of priests we have Rabbis and any Jew can be a Rabbi after the proper training. Looking at this week's portion within the framework of the early 21st century, we can apply these laws to how we as Jews view and present ourselves within the world surrounding us.

Anyone who knows me well will tell you that in so many words I talk and act as if I spent 3 years and 8 months in a federal penitentiary. The truth is I spent that time living and working at a desk job in Charlotte, North Carolina and the culture shock of the mid-south was something I never became accustomed to. During the past week while I reflected on Tetzaveh, I was reminded of a co-worker in Charlotte who was adamant that I was not Jewish because I did not look like a Jew. I have absolutely no clue what a Southern Baptist thinks a Jew looks like and honestly I didn't ask since we worked in an office building and that conversation would not have ended politely to say the least. Then I started to think about my misspent youth and how sometimes I would be followed through stores based on my "look," but we are not even through Shemot and I have talked about myself way too much. The inspiration for these reflections is how important our presentation is to our self-image, our community, and to the non-Jewish community at large.

I really wanted to forget about Tetzaveh because challenging myself and asking how do I want my presentation to be, is a very heavy task. At this point in Torah, Aaron and his sons are finally at a point where dressing in priestly garments is a natural and comfortable expression of themselves and the greater Hebrew community is ready to except them as is. Before this point dressing as a priest would have resulted in a small flicker of awkwardness emanating from the priestly caste, and even a small flicker would have blinded those within the Hebrew camps, doing more harm than good. Like Aaron I want to exude a complete and confident Jewish aura instead of an awkward or uneasy aura. The first thing I want Non-Jews whom I interact with to think when they hear the word Jew is something positive. I do not want that

response to be something like “Oh, you mean you’re like that stiff, awkward guy Jeremiah.”

This week examine yourself. How do you find comfort in outward Jewish expression? Are there times when an outward expression makes you feel uncomfortable? In the past how did you overcome that discomfort?

# Parsha Vayikra

Crucial Barbecue (Lev. 1:1—5:26)

29 Adar 5772 — March 23, 2012

This week we embark upon Vayikra, book three of the Torah. In a lot of ways, Vayikra is what one should expect from a middle book and Vayikra starts things off without any surprise twists. This week's portion is five chapters devoted to the how, when, why, and where of the sacrificial offerings.

Animal sacrifices today are just not practical. This is not because sacrificing an animal is frowned upon (let's face it, most people's diets include killed animals and sacrificing them is not that weird) it is because we display our prosperity in other ways. The ritual and reasons for sacrificial offerings are laid out in Vayikra to strengthen the relationship between Hashem and mankind. Animals, or no animals, it makes perfect sense that Hashem created everything, and by default, everything is His, regardless of what we may think.

In modern times, each of us has our own way of showing just how sorry and remorseful we are. My process is a heartfelt apology, acknowledging my scum bagginess, followed by a gift of some sort. On the other hand, a close friend of mind likes to show remorse with a nice dinner and drinks at a classy restaurant. Both are far cries from sacrificing the choicest of cows, but the intent is the same. Making amends is something we have to initiate first in our hearts, and then through our actions. This is exactly what Vayikra is about.

Wait there's more! Sacrificial offerings also add closure. Done with sincerity showing your remorse to those you have hurt helps all involved, both sides are then able to close and lock a door that opens into a painful part of life. Closure is a crucial tool in spiritual growth. Dwelling on past mistakes will only strangle you like a vine.

What are your sacrificial offerings?

## **Parsha Tzav**

Seriously Dude! Another Way Too Short Dvar or Have I Told You Lately That I Love You?  
(Lev. 6:1—8:36)

3 Nisan 5772 — March 26, 2012

*Parsha Tzav is the continuation of the Torah's listing of which offerings require this or that, and how those offerings were ceremoniously carried out. Oh, and once the list of offerings is complete, Moses clothes Aaron and anoints him, and his sons, as Judaic Priests.*

*Tzav does not teach us anything new. What it does do is reiterate important lessons. Making amends, and how we present our outward selves are lessons already touched upon within Torah. So why the repeat and why not combine Vayikra and Tzav into one portion? The answer is simple, only people study Torah, and it's no secret that everyone likes to be reminded of things. This week as you meditate on and study Tzav look through your spiritual spyglass as you would in search of positive reinforcement. It's like being told by someone special that they love you over and over again.*

*What verbal and non-verbal reinforcement helps you to be a better Jew?*

# **Parsha Shemini**

Daniel Balint or Living A Double Life (Lev. 9:1—11:47)

12 Nisan 5772 — April 4, 2012

Vayikra can be a very daunting book, especially when you limit your Dvar to a very loose free-association style discussion. Previously I mentioned for this Torah cycle that I wanted to challenge myself by not relying on more scholarly Jewish commentaries for my weekly Dvar. Vayikra, however, is definitely a book where commentaries can become crucial. For me, this week's portion of Shemini is an exception. The life-blood flowing from the beating heart of these chapters is separating the sacred from the profane.

Something I have always naturally been good at is Separation. I have never lived a secret life; I am just very good at compartmentalizing. As a child, I had my religious friends and my secular friends; outside of birthday parties, the two never mixed. Fast forward to my late teens and early twenties and I was viewed as two completely different people. This was due primarily to working full time as a ravenous, wild-eyed prep cook with after-hours partying requirements. This was contrasted by my life as a hardcore kid running with a pack of healthy-eating and clean-living punks. I have never lived a lie – I just didn't spin hardcore records or eat steaks at work, and drinking in back alleys before all-ages shows was never my thing. Two lives, but one person with exceptional time management skills. That doesn't change the fact that co-workers thought I was joking about vegetarianism, and some punks seemed surprised to occasionally witness me drinking out of a brown paper bag. This is exactly what Shemini is all about.

In chapter nine of Vayikra a sin offering is followed by a burnt offering, which is then followed by a peace offering. The sequence of these offerings is not a coincidence: they symbolize the separation of wickedness, atonement, and forgiveness. If we are unable to differentiate right from wrong — and why we are right or wrong — then we will be forced to remain in the proverbial wilderness. The wilderness is emotional instability, mental anguish, and physical pain. Only by identifying our faults and actively working to correct them will we be able to leave those burdens behind and move on to something so much greater.

To illustrate the criticality of this concept is the tragic story of Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu. These brothers presented a "strange" fire which Hashem deemed profane and, as punishment, they were consumed by sacred fire erupting from the Holy of Holies. The lesson here is Nadab and Abihu were unable to completely separate their former secular lives from their current sacred lives as Priests. If they had been able to separate, who knows, they may have played a much more important and positive role within Judaism.

Shemini concludes with a list of Kosher versus Non-Kosher animals. What is so important about this concept of Kosher is not the permission to kill and eat certain animals, but demonstrating how important things you consume are both figuratively and literally. The easiest way to remember which animals are Kosher is to look at their diets and determine if they are scavengers, eating what has been left by others as waste. The lesson here is not to fill yourself with wasteful things because it will only hold you down.

Shemini teaches us how not to live in the wilderness but we have to choose to make that break and enter into a promised life.

**Parsha Tazria-Metzora**

19 Nisan 5772 — April 11, 2012

This week's Torah portion is a double portion this week will follow the split 7-inch record format where each chapter gets its own track. So here you have it folks Circle Pit The Bimah Split EP Vol. 1.

**Parsha Tazri**

(Lev. 12:1—13:59)

## 1. Of Babies and Women.

This week's double shot of Torah begins with what a girl has to do in order to be deemed ritually clean after giving birth and then quickly moves on to discuss, once again, the rite of circumcision. When all is said and done I think us guys made out like bandits. I can't remember my circumcision but my mom definitely remembers carrying and giving birth to me.

## 2. Desert Zombies From You Know Where.

Towards the end of the twentieth century I was a lowly high school senior trying to learn a little Española. One day in class I turn in my seat towards my friend who was sitting on the other side of the room, and in a very matter of fact way I pointed out that because he was not circumcised, he was unclean. Not only did that statement earn me a one way ticket to the Vice Principal's office (I was also assigned a personal escort), but she was a cute girl named Tara! After sitting in the teacher's lounge for a couple periods, the Vice Principal came out and read the teacher's note describing my concerns for my gentile friend's Biblical status of uncleanness. He looked at me and I just looked back like I truly did not know making that proclamation was not appropriate for a Spanish class in a public high school. He totally bought my defense, apologized for keeping me for two full periods and sent me on my way. The "I don't know any better" excuse does not work in the world of Judaism because we have all the "do's" and "do not's" laid out for us in Torah and Tazri is a perfect example of this.

**Parsha Metzora**

(Lev. 14:1—15:33)

## 1. Calling Doctor Aaron

If that skin crawling feeling is your thing, then Metzora is the portion for you... literally. In Metzora Aaron and the priests are given an additional task. This

task, by today's standards, is akin to a Dermatologist. It was the duty of the priests to examine skin conditions and then declare the afflicted clean or unclean. The unclean verdict resulted in the sufferer exiling themselves for one full week and on the seventh day a follow-up exam would take place and a new judgment would be given. As someone whose skin is extremely allergic to poison ivy, exiling yourself actually eases some of the discomfort. Go figure.

## 2. Dirty Words

Metzora finishes with a discussion about certain states of sexual dirtiness. For women the seven days concluding their monthly menstrual cycle are deemed unclean and women are told to refrain from sex and to withdraw from society until a new cycle begins. Since men do not have periods, our uncleanliness can happen at any time, we are told to clean ourselves of any spilled seed. Some may say this is a good example of sexism in the Torah and I can see where that point of view comes from. On the other hand I am not a big fan of blood, but I am a big fan of taking showers. I don't know, what do you all think?

**Acharei Mot and Kedoshim**

10 Iyyar 5772 — May 2, 2012

**Parsha Acharei Mot**

(Lev. 16:1—18:30)

## 1. You Say Yom Kip-PER, I Say Yom Kip-POOR

I really like the sixteenth chapter of Vayikra and in a way I wish Acharei Mot was, you know, “my portion” (I was born in November, no such luck). In this chapter, lots are cast to decide which animals are sacrificed and which animals are let loose into the wild for atonement. Oh, and before I forget, this is the Yom Kippur part of the Torah. In a previous Dvar I mention how I became a zealous atheist at the age of thirteen, which lasted until the ripe old age of twenty-two. I only bring this up again because Yom Kippur was the first mitzvah I kept after returning to the rank and file of our tribe and, despite my views on animal sacrifice, Acharei Mot remains very important to me.

## 2. Blood Free Youth.

In my notes for this section of Acharei Mot I have scribbled “quote Vayikra chapter seventeen verse fourteen and be done with it.” It’s a great verse – look it up, read it, and meditate on it, but this part is all about keeping Kosher, a blood free palate and more importantly, promotes compassion. How can we as Jews and as a “Priestly People” promote the dignity and respect so inherent within our faith when we insist on picking and choosing what needs Tikken Olam? Remember it’s “repair the world,” not ‘repair the markets’ or an inflated sense of self-worth. What we put inside of ourselves, whether it’s something physical like food, or an ideological concept, will in turn emanate from us through our thoughts and actions.

## 3. No Harm, No Foul.

Controversy! It goes without saying that incest is not okay, but is consensual male homosexuality really a sin, and what about female homosexuality? Look... some real talk... I think the Torah’s wording regarding to homosexuality is presented in a way which allows for same sex relationships. Relationships of all types are complicated, and narrowing everything down to a few lines here and there cannot encapsulate every aspect of every relationship. I wish I had more to offer on this subject. On one hand, I’m proud that I am not homophobic, on the other hand, as a heterosexual male, it’s something that I don’t think about that often.

**Parsha Kedoshim**

(Lev. 19:1—20:27)

## 1. Representative Eric: be a CANtor not a CAN'Tor.

In this country that I live in, it is an election year. This means in November I will vote for candidates who feel the way I do about issues that are important to me, instead of candidates whose views I disagree with. Why is this important? Glad you asked! Kedoshim is two chapters, and in the first chapter (most important, in my opinion), Hashem provides commandments to protect the earth, those less fortunate, and indirectly opposes classism. Sure, there is some stuff in there about getting tattoos, beard shaving, and ghost whispering, but the fact remains the same: Hashem wants us to occupy the world with justice, compassion, and equality.

## 2. Manifest Zion.

No two people are alike. Hashem knows this because that's how He created us. Kedoshim concludes with some warnings and corporeal punishment commandments making this now complete portion appealing to both sides of the aisle. As an American living in the southwest, it's a little hard to think that the Navajo and Pueblo nations who first inhabited New Mexico were wicked, and that's why this area is now part of the United States of America. [Fun fact: Albuquerque is the city I call home, and the first two Mayors were Jewish. In fact, Jews and New Mexico have a long and fruitful relationship going back to the mid-1800s.] While I might have problems reconciling this concept, others seem to truly understand it and are glad to be part of a nation who has helped "de-wickedify" (new word?) tyrannical regimes hoarding prosperity from others.

## **Parshat Emor**

Rhymes with Restitution (Lev. 21:1—24:23)

18 Iyyar 5772 — May 10, 2012

Emor is an explosive portion. Within these four chapters of commandments and prohibitions for or against, everything from grooming, honor killing, and mixed marriages, to who to eat with, and what to do with a rabble rousing blasphemer are laid out. True, Emor's target audience is the priestly cast and their families, but the role of public opinion is modeled here and yet this week's portion ends with restitution being paid in a suitable way by societal standards. Does this mean that being Torah observant today prohibits daughter burning and blasphemer stoning? The answer to that is an unequivocal YES!

In this modern age we do not live in a tribal nomadic society drawn from ethno-religious lines. Jews can be found living just about everywhere in the world and our racial features are literally across the board. While we are all Jews, our Jewish stories vary widely, but this was not the case thousands of years ago. For example, if I were to be in an accident caused by another which resulted in the loss of an eye, I do not want that person's eye – I would rather have my medical bills and any special needs taken care of financially. Because of the place and time, an ancient Hebrew in the same situation was not in a position where monetary retribution for pain and medical treatment could easily happen.

Retribution is about making wrongs right – not feeding a craving for vengeance.

While reading this week's portion I am reminded of something that happened to a close friend of mine (we will call him "H"). In our hometown, there was a punk-infused heavy metal band associated with a large Fundamentalist-Christian Church. The metal fans in the area really weren't into their style of metal and the local punks weren't into their style of hardcore. This meant their fan base was comprised only of fellow congregants. H got invited to a birthday party where this band was booked to play. Now H was not a Christian, nor was he extremely religious. He was a mild-mannered tattoo artist who found solace chanting the Maha Mantra at the local Hare Krishna farm. He showed up at this kid's house and the place was full of people from this church, from small kids all the way to middle-aged adults. As he told me this story, he pointed out how uncomfortable he felt from being visually judged because of his heavily tattooed appearance.

As the band played the chorus to one of their songs, the word restitution was screamed in regards to J.C.'s crucifixion. This caused something inside H's head to snap and he reacted. As the chorus neared a second time, H ran toward the

makeshift stage, parting the sea of people in half, and reaching out he grabbed the mic, placed his mouth over it, and as clear as the moon on a cloudless summer night, he yelled PROSTITUTION! Needless to say if looks could kill – they would have.

As an open-minded Jew, I found H's proclamation hilarious and, while not blasphemous towards Judaism, it is towards Christianity. Despite being in an enclave of the "saved," no one had a right to stone or burn H. In our society, we can afford dissenters because we are not nomadic, our resources are stable, and because of education it is harder for a rabble rouser to seriously challenge the moral and religious belief system that makes and keeps us Jewish.

In what other ways has the passing of time changed society's views on restitution?

**Parsha Behar**

(Lev. 21:1—26:2)

## 1. Dominion, There Comes A Time. . .

*Behar* discusses how Hashem wants the land of His creation to be cultivated and managed. The first part in this week's double portion establishes rules for farming and land "ownership." Just beneath the surface a deeper current is flowing and that is the inevitable time when we must recognize our role and place in this world. The classless and environmental sustainability commandments for land management are given to a nomadic people before entering Zion as a lesson in self-realization. We all must come to terms with where we as individuals are as people and as part of a people. We can only grow closer to being a more complete Jew and selflessly performing *Tikkun Olam* by accepting that there is a time when we must recognize the role we play in our families, our communities, and within Hashem's creation. There may be times in our lives when we flourish financially and other times when we struggle to survive at the most bare subsistence level. We are created beings living in a created world that has existed for a very long time. Hashem may have granted us the privilege of Dominion but we remain created in a way where we cannot live without each part of creation playing its unique role. The time for that realization and awakening is now.

**Parsha Bechukotai**

(Lev. 26:3—27:34)

## 1. Heads or Tails

*Bechukotai* is a dire warning from Hashem. If you are anything like me, you have noticed that *Vayikra* is like watching a coin flipping its way up and then down before reaching its final resting place in your hand. No more is this true than in the final chapters of Torah's third book. The beginning chapter of this week's second portion deals with cause and effect. Hashem stresses the importance of living a righteous and loving life. The reward, if you do so, is prosperity and happiness, but if you do not, the floodgates of despair will open. In just one chapter the key to what everyone wants (good health, a safe home, a clean environment, and family) is given juxtaposed against the punishments for not keeping the commandments (famine, disease, violent death, and

cannibalism). Torah law in Vayikra is something many detractors use to argue against organized religion and that's easy to do, when you only look at every other chapter or, in other words, just one side of the coin.

## 2. Taxation Without Representation

Vayikra ends in a way that seems almost anti climatic. Bechukotai ends with of all things tax code related. Almost as a 'reminding nod' towards commandment keeping and what will befall the Jewish people for not heeding Hashem's ideal for a perfect Jewish life, Torah's third book ends with 'who must provide what' for each offering.

## **Parsha Bamidbar**

Collect `Em All (Num. 1:1—4:20)

2 Sivan 5772 — May 23, 2012

Bamidbar is the portion where Torah's fourth book begins. Also known as Numbers, this book is all about counting, and counting, and—you guessed it, more counting! Where Genesis appeals to those of us almost religiously awed by the great collection of triumphs and tragedies of our collective Patriarchs and Matriarchs, Shemot speaks to the patriotic of the tribe with the founding of the first Jewish state, and Vayikra provides an argumentative source for the politically minded. For those who love genealogy and a complete and thorough documentation of the past, Bamidbar will speak to you.

It is easy to forget the history and circumstances which led the ancient Hebrews to forty years in the desert. Passover is such an important holiday that it is easy for the modern mind to delegate the memory of slavery to the observance and rituals of the Seder. Parsha Bamidbar is the first portion in a book specifically designed to make a people who were once illegitimate in the eyes of others legitimate.

This week's reading gives a legal age limit of twenty years, lists each tribe's Prince, begins a census which officially re-establishes recorded Jewish genealogy, divides Jewish land between tribes, demands a tax of five shekels for any tribe with more men than the Levites, and...phew...tells the Levites and the sons of Kohath the proper way to move the Tabernacle. For a new nation comprised of ex-slaves, this is the moral and psychological encouragement they need.

On the surface, being counted, told where to live, and taxed for "being fruitful and multiplying" seems bizarre and unnecessary, but look at it from their perspective. These were not first generation slaves, they were not second or third generation slaves—these were people whose families had been slaves for hundreds of years. You don't just rebound from that overnight. Their former masters were counted, taxed and granted land by Pharaoh. This meant that being counted, paying a tax and having their land redistributed (in their eyes) made them free and equal. For the first time in their lives, the ancient Hebrews were not lowly, were not expendable, and were not a diminishing investment. *They were free and equal human beings.*

Viewing those different from ourselves as equals is important, but treating those same people as proper individuals is righteous.

## **Parsha Naso**

Curbing My Enthusiasm (Num. 4:21—7:89)

10 Sivan 5772—May 31, 2012

Back in the 80s when I was a kid, it was called being a 'worrier.' I am a 'worrier.' Then in the 90's, worrying became 'crazy.' Not mentally ill crazy, just 'crazy.' I am a 'crazy.' Now it's jokingly referred to as 'someone who needs to curb their enthusiasm.' I am an 'enthusiast.' Naso is a portion many people find confusing. It is arguably sexist, and what's the deal with the ritual of bitter water... seriously, what's the deal with that? All head scratching aside, this week's portion is one where I can literally visualize myself walking around participating in it. Not sure what that says about this guy, but I just can't picture myself as a slave in Egypt or as an eyewitness at the parting of the Red Sea.

My DNA is programmed with a neurosis that manifests itself in the weirdest and often times the most ridiculous ways. These occasional... let's call them 'episodes'... is why I can relate to Naso. I can see myself standing before Aaron or another priest making unfounded and irrational accusations towards my better half. I'm not a jealous man most of the time but I have made an accusation once or twice and while my so-called 'evidence' was laughable at best, I still felt the need to accuse.

The only real way to prove infidelity is to witness the act, a confession by those accused, or a pregnancy that results in a kid who doesn't look like you. So what exactly was the bitter water the defendant was forced to drink? A truth serum? Doubtful. Was it a poison that forced sterility? Maybe. Was it a ritual that required Hashem to step in and reveal the truth? Hopefully. Despite the mystery, this is a very real lesson about having faith. Faith in those I love, faith in knowing there is not a clandestine conspiracy out to persecute and hold me back, and most importantly, faith in my ability to recognize and correct my own faults.

Good news is, as I get older, I have fewer 'episodes.' It's been a solid 10 years since I've stormed out of work, only to show up the next morning like nothing happened, and with the exception of one night last February, I have not gotten into an asinine argument with a cabbie in a few years. Work and cab drivers have always been touchy areas for me.

As for the February episode, the cabbie came back, found me marching along the side of the road and took me home. I apologized. I tipped well. Hopefully there were no hard feelings. I also hold no ill will toward the fairer sex I accused of... I'm not even really sure what all I was alleging, I was just accusing. We both were able to put that episode behind us and I remain on fairly good terms with her.

Naso is not just about looking guilty. It's also about looking for guilt when it is not there. Have faith that not everything you perceive has a sinister agenda. Have you had a Naso moment only to later regret your actions?

# Parsha Behaalotecha

Untitled (Num. 8:1—12:16)

15 Sivan 5772 — June 5, 2012

I am going to cheat this week. I am cheating because, like the ancient Hebrews in Behaalotecha, I am literally living in a desert. But unlike those whose story unfolds in this portion, it has only taken three years and seven months in the desert for this Jew to settle down in a permanent home, or as I like to think of it, in my own small piece of Zion. What resonates with me the most in this portion are the delicate intricacies involved when falling into a routine versus falling out of synch with that routine.

I am not picking sides because I am cheating this week. Like so many of us, I love when things go smoothly. I love when one's word is kept, and I love when things start to change and lead toward a place I perceive to have greener grass (or I suppose browner sand in my case). Behaalotecha is about this dynamic, it is a deep nuanced portion. It is about following through on your word, the importance of following a routine that works, and how what you may think is best for you right now is not the best for you ever!

I cheated on this week's Dvar because I used to have a routine that worked for me and I no longer do. I said I was going to buy a home this summer. I did, and now I am disorganized and aching for the daily motion of familiarity. The good news is I made the right choice and it is just a matter of time before I have a modified routine fusing the old and new together in harmony. I am going to unpack some things and try to figure out what size mezuzah I need in lieu of a welcome mat. Shalom.

Have you found yourself in a place of upheaval and resentment like the Hebrews described in Behaalotecha? Has breaking away from what you are used to benefited or hindered you? How has Hashem and His Torah played a part in all of that? You know what to do... so do it!

## **Parsha Schlach**

It's a Little Something Called Chutzpah, Babe! (Num.13:1—15:41)

24 Sivan 5772 — June 14, 2012

Twelve spies, one representative from each Tribe, are sent into the Promised Land to size up the real estate and its inhabitants in hopes of ending the ancient Hebrew's desert Diaspora. The spies return with tales of a land flowing with milk and honey. Providing proof for this claim, they reveal to the people grapes so large, two men must carry them. All but two of the spies lament of giants inhabiting the land and how a Hebrew presence there is impossible. The dissenting two, Aaron and Caleb, come down with a big case of the Chutzpah.

What is Chutzpah and how do we know Aaron and Caleb had it in Schlach? The answer to that is in two parts. First, Chutzpah is Yiddish for audacity (sometimes good, sometimes bad), and second, Aaron and Caleb had the audacity to say to Moses "We can do this!" Despite what their pleas may have seemed outwardly in their hearts, Aaron and Caleb never really become angry nor do they truly berate their fellow spies and cite the first hand proof of Hashem's awesome power they have all witnessed. Instead, they have the audacity of faith in their place within the Promised Land to openly dissent and proclaim a sure victory for the ancient Hebrews.

Hashem on the other hand does not display Chutzpah. His frustration with the ancient Hebrews' fear and lack of faith in Him leads to chastisement. His anger results in the ancient Hebrews being forced to live a nomadic desert life for forty years. This means their children will know the peace and tranquility of being a settled people but those liberated from the yoke of slavery will never know that sense of security. Honestly, I feel that is a fair punishment.

Good Chutzpah is the audacity to have faith and confidence in yourself and your community without the seasoning of arrogance. It is the contentment with what you have and the clear vision to see what is needed to improve your life and your community's health without the stench of any 'ism.' It is using the tool of remembrance as a reference for faith while navigating life's path.

A Dvar for Schlach is only one word... Chutzpah.

# Parsha Korach

Revolution Summer (Num.16:1—18:32)

28 Sivan 5772 — June 18, 2012

For all intents and purposes Korach is the face for any ancient Hebrew who took issue at some point with Moses's style of leadership. Moses did not spend his formidable years like most Hebrews, nor did he live an average Egyptian life. Moses was not one for public discourse and, if you read between the lines, he may have had a hard time relating to those he was chosen to lead. Representative Democracy is not Hashem's revolution – His revolution is universal justice.

As a modern American, I've only lived under the yoke of "crazy" liberals and "a\*\*hole" conservatives who only agree on time-limited leadership roles. Competitive leadership is a machine running nonstop, and with a presidential election in the United States a few months away, that machine is running full force. This got me thinking: who exactly were Moses and Korach? I know who Torah says they were, *but what kind of men do I perceive them to be?*

My grim reality is this: I do not know who either of those men truly were. Not because of a lack of scripture, but because I have never had a good frame of reference for a single leader government or for an attempted coup. Korach had a sizable following – to dismiss him as a trouble maker would be naïve. Moses, on the other hand, understood what Hashem wanted from humanity and maybe he could have been better in conveying that to the people. Unfortunately, that did not happen, giving rise to Korach and his backers. The crisis I face is, knowing no matter what, I can wait out an administration, which is something foreign in the ancient world.

Parsha Korach's lesson is simple: believe in the platform, the overall message, not in a cult of personality. Hashem chose Moses to lead, not Korach, because when you sell yourself to the people you are admitting your willingness to compromise to appease the majority, and that is not always bad, but in this case the big C is not an option on the table. In other words, know what you believe and why. Do not let yourself become distracted over a candidate or a single issue. Life is complex and there is no quick fix.

## **Parsha Chukat**

An Anthology Of What Is Wrong With Me (Num.19:1—22:1)

6 Tammuz 5772 — June 26, 2012

If Chukat is about faith in Hashem's covenant to provide a home and good health to those who choose to follow him, why has this week's Torah portion done nothing but distract me during my meditation since early childhood? Why does it feed my naturally ingrown neurosis and "Jewish" flavored guilt? If I knew the answer to that, then I would be a fully realized Jew and unfortunately for me, I am light years away from being a fully realized anything.

For me, personally, there is just way too much going on in Chukat that I can link directly to my life. First, Miriam dies in Zin, meaning she never sets foot in the promised land. When I was young, I used to have this recurring dream that I was at my Aunt and Uncle's house, and their last name is Zinn. In these dreams I am in their basement typing a code into a door lock which opens into a lavish tower adorned with a golden spiraling staircase, plush red velvet walls, with men in tuxedos and women in ball gowns blissfully strolling about seemingly without any real purpose. Once I step onto the golden staircase, I am unable to walk so I crawl, cling, and climb halfway up to the tower's steps when I come across a dead end hallway with a television set tuned to static. The static scrambles my brain and that's as far as I make it.

Never one for dream analysis and twenty odd years later I can still remember having that never-changing dream over and over again as a kid. Maybe the promised land is at the top of the tower. Maybe the static is my inability to fully commit to something I have never seen. Maybe my lameness is my struggle with doubt, and my Aunt and Uncle's house? I don't know, I always thought their house was creepy.

Second is yet another episode of the ancient Hebrews speaking out against Hashem. His response this time is creative to say the least. The ancient Hebrews are plagued by an onslaught of venomous snakes. Hashem tells Moses to construct what is basically a snake totem for those bitten to gaze upon for healing. Let's forget about my distaste for snakes, and focus on why this makes me think about my mother... with a fair share of guilt. For the most part, I was a good kid, but like all neighborhood kids, I took part in my fair share of wickedness. Every time I indulged my evil inclination, without fail I would get sick immediately afterwards. Didn't matter if my ailment was poison ivy or the flu, every time I found myself in trouble, I became afflicted with something and without missing a step my mother would point out to me that I was sick because I did something wrong. If that's not guilt perfected, then what is?

Now for my angry rock story. Playing on a construction site with some of the

neighborhood kids and meaning no harm, out of nowhere comes a heavy thud and a dust cloud engulfs the back of my twelve year old neck. A late arrival to the festivities thought he'd inject himself into all the fun by throwing a clump of dirt at me. Like Moses, I get a little more than 'just angry.' I lashed out, but instead of using a clump of dirt, I literally cast the 'first stone.' Boy oh boy, did I get in a heap of trouble for showing up to a dirt fight with a rock! The short version: it is the only time in my life I hit a target dead on with a projectile. Luckily he wasn't seriously hurt, and I was immediately overcome with remorse the second the rock left my young hand.

This time each year I am reminded of a vivid recurring nonsensical dream from my childhood, and even though my neighbor was not seriously hurt (and he forgave me) I still feel guilty for striking out with a rock over twenty-one years ago. If I think I'm starting to get sick or forget about it, I worry and overanalyze every thought and action of the past few days. On a positive note I am curious to see what future moments of my life I will permanently link to the Red Heifer, Aaron's passing, and the military victories contained in Chukat.

## Parsha Balak

Not Just A Jew Thing (Num.22:2—25:9)

15 Tammuz 5772 — July 5, 2012

Worried that the Hebrew tribes are an unstoppable military force, Moab's king Balak commissions the non-Jewish prophet Balaam to curse the Hebrews before they can turn their attention to Moab. Balaam then sets out on his donkey to do what he does best and that is curse the enemies of Moab. While on his way to rain down curses, Balaam's donkey, seeing an Angel of the L~rd, refuses to continue. Incensed, Balaam begins to beat his ride when Hashem opens the mouth of the donkey, who pleads to know why Balaam is blind towards the angel. Parsha Balak is such an important portion, not only because it's a crowd pleaser (like you never giggle when the "A" word is dropped in Shul) but because it reiterates that Hashem is not just a "Jew" thing: He is a "for everybody" thing.

Sometimes it's easy to see the world as an "Us versus Them" place, while the reality is much more uniform. We are all, in some way, *both* the "Us" and the "Them." Hashem created us all, but because of the juices from the Fruit of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in our DNA, we can choose to stray. Balaam teaches us this message today and we can focus on the path ahead or allow ourselves to be diverted. Hashem is not only for the Jewish people, He is for all humanity and all nations.

Parsha Balak is such a great Torah portion: it is straightforward, simple to understand, interesting, and there is no hidden message. Hashem is the one true G~d and humanity, like it or not, are one people.

## **Parsha Pinchas**

The Spear, A Dead Man, And The Sisters (Num.25:10—30:1)

22 Tammuz 5772 — July 12, 2012

It's easy to read Pinchas and think that with a just argument, Hashem is open to reevaluate some Halacha, and I agree with that. It is also easy to look toward Pinchas for legitimizing righteous rage, and again, I would agree with that. When I re-read Pinchas a few days ago, I realized that this week's portion is also about how often Hashem, Torah, Judaism, and religion, as a whole, are misrepresented.

Part of the human condition is conscience acts carried out in hopes of receiving a positive return. Pinchas and the five daughters of Zelophehad (Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah) are perfect examples of this trait. The circumstances surrounding Pinchas and the five sisters are very different but they both are the direct result of others misrepresenting what Jews and Judaism is.

Our portion begins with its namesake: Pinchas (or Phinehas). Pinchas is rewarded by Hashem with a pact resulting in friendship and a special place within the priesthood. What did he do to deserve such special attention? He speared two people. Throwing a spear through the torso of another human being is out of the question in this day and age, but in context, it's easy to see why Pinchas found favor in the eyes of Hashem. The two he killed were misrepresenting Torah and the society the ancient Hebrews had constructed for themselves under the guidance of Hashem and Moses. There seems to be some question as to the nature of the damned's display of defiance but they were openly misrepresenting what the ancient Hebrews believed and stood for and by default what we as modern Jews project as our belief system. Pinchas and his spear corrected what had the potential to be a devastating misconception of how Jews worship if not remedied immediately.

Traditionally, up to this point, inheritance had passed from father to sons, not father to daughters. When Zelophehad died, he left five capable yet unmarried daughters and no sons. The five sisters, clearly distraught, approach Moses and petition for what they felt was rightfully theirs. Hashem agrees and the mourning sisters were granted as an inheritance the land that was allocated to their father. What is interesting is, while the daughters are stating their case, they point out how their family stood by Hashem's commandments and with Moses during Korach's attempted coup. Clearly a top-down father to son line of inheritance is a gross misrepresentation of how different sexes are viewed within Judaism. By correcting this misrepresentation of Hashem's justice, the five sisters were not only given what was rightfully theirs, but they are immortalized in Torah.

Well...there you have it: my new insight into Parsha Pinchas and how two very different circumstances corrected outside views of Judaism.

**Parsha Matot**

(Num. 30:2—32:42)

## 1. The Oath That Keeps Me Free

*Parsha Matot begins with a discussion on everything to do with oaths. Each of us has at some point taken an oath and kept it, but we have all deliberately, and/or accidentally, broken well-intentioned promises. Oaths, when made, form an emotional bond with the taker, and any witnesses admitting later that you broke something so important can really take a mental toll. Torah often gets a bad rap from detractors with claims of sexism, racism, and calls to violence, but what is often overlooked is the dialogue that constantly takes place between people. If you make an oath, do everything you can to keep it. If you break it, acknowledge your shortcoming and apologize. If you are someone receiving the apology, accept it and focus on the future, not on what didn't happen...*

## 2. Kill Them All And Let Moses Sort Them Out

*Acting on Hashem's direction, Moses forms a twelve thousand strong army composed of one thousand men from each tribe and orders them to 'shock and awe' the Midianites. Led by Pinchas (or Phinehas, remember him?), the army of Hashem descends on the Midianites and slays their five kings and the prophet Balaam; and then Moses gets mad... again. The returning army shows up with all the remaining Midianite women and children. This infuriates Moses who orders the immediate execution of every Midianite boy and woman who was not a virgin. Why was Moses so angry? Why spare the virgin girls? Good questions: maybe he was afraid of a Midianite rebellion of biblical proportions taking place later on in the Promised Land. While living with Pharaoh's daughter, Moses was instilled with Hebrew morals and beliefs by his biological mother-turned-nanny, and we all know how that turned out for the Egyptians.*

## 3. Promised Land Zionists Meet Spiritual Zionism

*Matot ends on an interesting note. The Reubanites and Gadites find the land east of the Jordan River perfect for their families and cattle. A tailored Zion, if you will. Moses is concerned but for once is not angry. Moses presents Reuban and Gad with a plan of action. As long as Reuban and Gad remain soldiers until the Promised Land is settled, their families and cattle can stay east of the Jordan. If they refuse to fight as soldiers, they will fall out of favor with Hashem and the rest of Israel. Many Jews live within Israel but even more live*

outside of the country. What makes us Jews is not where we live but what we believe, and wherever there are Jews, how can that place *not* be a small piece of Zion?

## **Parsha Masei**

(Num. 33:1—36:13)

### 1. Stations Of The Star

Parsha Masei starts out easy, and what I mean by that is no moral conundrums. Masei lists the route and encampments the ancient Hebrews found themselves in after leaving Egypt, a great reminder of where those who came before rested their heads thousands of years ago.

### 2. This Land Is My Land, That Land Is Your Land

Hashem informs Moses that He wants the ancient Hebrews to dispose of the inhabitants of Canaan. He also gives a command to destroy every idol and place of worship within the Promised Land. Hashem then dictates the physical boundaries of Israel and where each tribe is expected to settle and thrive in. Call it a divine gift or a handout: Hashem's idea of housing is designed to never leave anyone without a stable home.

### 3. City To City

Torah is a divinely coded set of laws. A key piece to any lawful society is a system designed to decide on a course of restitution and rehabilitation for those who break the law. Once settled within the Promised Land, the ancient Hebrews were told they must provide towns and pastures for the Levites to live in. Cities of Refuge must also be constructed for those found guilty of manslaughter to live in without fear of reprisals. Those found guilty of manslaughter were to live in these separate cities until the death of the High Priest. Imagine if today you were sentenced to prison but told your release was dependent on the life and death of the sentencing judge.

### 4. Family Fortune

Masei is all about land. We have a synopsis of the route taken out of Egypt, the borders of the Promised Land, and who gets to live where, but one loophole remains. Remember Zelophehad's five single daughters and their land? Zelophehad's kinsmen sure do. Fearing a loss of land from the tribe of Manasseh, they appeal to Moses, who decides it is only fair to keep things equal between the various tribe's land holdings. Moses rules that the sisters can keep their inheritance but may only marry within their tribe, so no land is lost.

# Parsha Devarim

Instrumental (Deut 1:1—3:22)

5 Av 5772 — July 24, 2012

Devarim (or Deuteronomy) is the first portion of the final book in the Torah. Just under forty years have passed since Moses implored Pharaoh to let his people go and during that time miracles were witnessed, battles were fought and won, the Torah was birthed on Sinai, and (excluding Moses) everyone old enough to remember slavery in Egypt is, well, dead. It should not come as a surprise that this week's Parsha consists of Moses recounting the history of a forty year old nation to the next generation of Jews.

Moses knows his time is almost up, and Devarim, the parsha, and the book exemplify this. Moses knows the importance of history and law and Hashem allows him another opportunity to dictate Halakah. Want a short version or just the gist of the core of Judaism? Read Devarim from start to finish.

I have a confession to make. I have struggled with this week's Torah portion, not because I was too busy with life or because of a moral conundrum, but because I am suffering from a bad case of writer's block. I had hoped to grind out five to six paragraphs for a Dvar by last Friday and here I am on the following Tuesday right on schedule and still scratching my proverbial head. Devarim should have been an "easy" one for me because of the diplomatic approach taken by Moses and the rest of the tribe as they traveled through other kingdoms peacefully. I am not motivated by fear but by logic and diplomacy, and there is a very real lesson here on respecting others and having a dialogue with your neighbors.

Open, honest, and fair dialogue requires equal participation from all parties, and maybe that is why I am afflicted with writer's block. Whatever the reason, Moses's talk in Devarim shows how much he and the ancient Hebrews have matured over the past forty years. A new generation of Jews are about to settle in the Promised Land and with that are hopes of peace and prosperity.

## **Parsha Va'etchanan**

The Ups And The Downs (Deut 3:23—7:11)

13 Av 5772 — August 1, 2012

The upside to this week's Torah portion is Moses' continued sermon reiterating the commandments Hashem has revealed to the Jewish people. Va'etchanan reminds us to never add or subtract from the Torah, never bow to other gods, the Big Ten are repeated, and the importance of marrying other Jews is stressed. Devarim is a book whose biggest contribution, in my opinion, is presenting all of the commandments given throughout the Torah in one book. For the ancient Hebrews this is Moses' way of reminding a largely illiterate people (generally assumed) of Hashem's divine commandments. For the current day Jew, Devarim makes everything easy and convenient to find. Talk about a timeless win-win situation.

For every upside, there is undoubtedly a downside, and Va'etchanan has a downside of biblical proportions (pun intended). This week's portion translates as "and I pleaded." Moses and the ancient Hebrews are encamped along the Jordan ready to cross and claim the Promised Land as their own but Moses will never set foot on the other side of the Jordan. As punishment for striking a rock twice for water in anger, Hashem forbids Moses entry and Moses does, what any of us would do in that situation: he pleaded. Here is a guy who did not choose to be born as a slave, he did not choose to grow up in Pharaoh's court, he pleaded not to be a Jewish leader, yet he had all of those things placed on him. Now he is forbidden to experience the one thing he worked so hard and so long for.

Israel is the formal name given to the Jewish people and has a widely accepted meaning of "struggle with G~d." In this portion we once again are shown a man struggling with our creator and G~d. Moses is a man who has seen his biological mother die, his brother and sister die. He lost contact with his adopted family decades ago. He had a quiet life in the wilderness taken from him, and he was practically forced into leading a people he is unable to relate to while constantly facing frustration and war. Now with his mortality in question, Moses struggles for a feeling of completion. Who wouldn't be heart broken in Moses' sandals? In a way, showing Moses the Promised Land is like Hashem striking Moses once in anger and refusing to allow him to enter is like striking him a second time but instead of a gush of water only pleas pour forth.

Moses is not the only one my heart breaks for, because how can those entering into the Promised Land fully appreciate what is about to happen? They know the nomadic life but have no concept of slavery, in fact those who did have that understanding through memory are already dead. Life can be harsh but

*times and people change.*

## Parsha Eikev

Cut-Fil-A: The Heart Wants What The Heart Wants (Deut 7:12—11:25)

21 Av 5772 — August 9, 2012

Moses continues his sermon in Parsha Eikev reminding us all on the importance of honoring our covenant with Hashem. To emphasize this he promises blessings, warns of curses, and tells us to circumcise our hearts.

The human heart is an extremely fragile yet efficient organ, so how can anyone survive cutting a piece off? This is not a command for a physically invasive procedure but a spiritual and personal act. One of the major pro-circumcision arguments for men is that it leaves that area cleaner and thus less susceptible to disease. Real talk—as a dude I don't want to smell or get sick down there, just saying. Circumcision of the heart follows the same principle: in this case, cleanliness and health means a just and orderly society made up of people who are not stiff-necked and hard to get along with.

Eikev could not have come at a better time this year. If you live in the United States, you know exactly what I'm talking about. Last week a portion of the majority felt the need to protest what they claim is a suppression of their freedom of speech and religious belief regarding sexuality. I won't go too deep into why I think everything played out as it did, but I will say that as someone of a different faith, their protest really turned me off to their religion. On one hand, like them I fall into the majority of people's sexual orientation, but as a Jew, I do not fall into the religious majority. Simply put, I'm a Jewish dude who has never 'made out' with another dude.

While protestors took too long lines and congested traffic, I'm sure they felt like righteous warriors vindicating their lord and savior, but all of that is self-serving and off-putting. All this time and effort placed on drawing a dividing line in the sand forcing an "Us versus Them" situation really leaves a bad taste in the "Them's" mouth. No one will ever know how many potential converts were lost or how many of the flock became disillusioned. More than who reignited their fire I would have to say. [NB: "Just added more fuel to their fire, I would say."?]

We as Jews face the same problem. This past year, stories of the Ultra-Orthodox protesting modernity and spitting on secular women have sprinkled themselves throughout the media. As hard as it is to deal with those views and actions internally, the damage to Judaism externally is so much worse. Circumcising your heart is just that: cutting away the stench of filth that will make others think less of the people you represent.

Moses tells us in Eikev to circumcise our hearts because the uncircumcised individual will forever stand on the shores of the Jordan yearning for the

Promised Land just out of reach, but the circumcised heart of a people will receive Hashem's promises of peace and happiness.

## **Parsha Re'eh**

Out Of Step With The World (Deut 11:26—16:17)

25 Av 5772 — August 13, 2012

Parsha Re'eh stresses the importance of never turning away from Hashem by turning towards another god or one who has never lived. We are also reminded which animals are kosher. Laws regarding farming and having servants are covered, and we are once again told to observe Sukkot, Pesach, and Shavuot. We Jews are assured, if we continue to do these things, and if our children continue to do these things, then only blessings will be reaped. Not a bad deal, if you ask me.

While Re'eh may seem repetitive, it is important to note that the ancient Hebrews turned away from Hashem at the foot of Sinai, and when your food source is daily manna and quail, it's really easy to keep a palate kosher. Same with holidays, when everyone around you is celebrating the same thing the same way, it is easy not to slip up in observance. However the times, well the times they are changing, and the ancient Hebrews are poised to cross the Jordan and settle in the Promised Land. Sometimes having a sense of security can make one lackadaisical and easily lured into other traditions.

As I write this, I am packing for a long overdue trip back to the East Coast. While there, I'll bounce back and forth between my parents' house and my friend Justin's place. This is why Re'eh is important. While Justin and yours truly share the same vegetarian diet, he starts his day chanting the Hare Krishna Maha Mantra. I'm fine with that, but just because I'm a guest in his home does not mean I will stop being Jewish and join him in chanting. On the other hand, there will not be any honoring of Hindu Deities at my folks' house, but there will be steaks. I'm fine with that as well, but don't expect me to put my vegetarian ethics on the shelf for a week.

Maybe those are bad examples, but for this week, this is what Re'eh means to me. Just as the ancient Hebrews were expected to be Jewish after settling down, we are expected to be Jewish regardless of where we are at physically in the world.

## **Parsha Shoftim**

We The People of Hashem (Deut 16:18—21:9)

5 Elul 5772 — August 23, 2012

After reading Shoftim I was poking around on Wikipedia and something really caught my eye. Normally, for the sake of ranting, I have stayed away from other commenters during this Torah cycle, but the author of Wikipedia's Shoftim entry compared this week's portion with a constitution and that comparison fits perfectly.

This week Moses provides the basic structure for a sane society. Rules for judges, the kingship, Levites, prophets, witnesses, war, unaccounted corpses, and cities of refuge are laid out, not just for the ruling classes, but also for all rungs on the social ladder. Often it is easy to look back at the time when the Torah was still relatively new and think, wow, such a barbarous time! People and society sure have changed.

Societies the world over have changed and most lawful nations in some way follow many of Shoftim's declarations. In the West, our legal system is structured in a way to provide an equal and balanced pull against one interest having an unfair advantage over the other. The system itself is not necessarily broken, but some people do try and use it for their own advancement.

Keeping with Circle Pit The Bimah's tradition of short and to the point Divrei, I will not go into a deep analysis of Shoftim and modern society. Laws and a constitutional declaration of structured justice are not only righteous, but a must for all people regardless of location and time. Some complain about the "rules" of Judaism, but without a system in place that protects all and allows for debate things would not be very good. Therefore, we as individuals must truly understand why there are checks balancing each other, and then work towards a more meaningful life and society. Justice. Justice... indeed!

## **Parsha Ki Teitzei**

Living in Balance (Deut 21:10—25:19)

14 Elul, 5772 — September 1, 2012

If you like doing the right thing, Ki Teitzei is for you. In fact, this week's portion contains something like 70 different Mitzvot laid out across five chapters. Ki Teitzei reminds us of the importance of environmental conservation, living compassionately with animals, and leaving excess for the poor.

Living in balance with our environment is extremely important because Hashem emanates this creation to sustain our lives. Without food and water, our body would shrink and wither, and without oxygen, our lungs could not enrich our blood as our heart pumps life to our most basic cells. If we as individuals continue to abuse the air, land, and water around us, we can only expect a life of sickness and despair.

Ki Teitzei is a reminder: it reminds us that there is more involved in taking care of this world than just keeping water clean and the soil toxin-free. Compassion to animals is stressed in this week's portion because animals play a critical and complex role in this world. They provide companionship, they can aid in farming, and they contribute to the biodiversity that makes this wonderful world tick. If we are unable to show compassion to other living, breathing, and feeling species, how can we ever show compassion to other humans or even to ourselves? The answer is simple: we can't.

Environmental exploitation and cruelty towards animals are not the only things Ki Teitzei prohibits. Not providing a level of subsistence living for our poor is prohibited. We all worry about health care, housing, etc. – but everyone regardless of age, race, gender, and tax bracket are entitled to know that they are responsible for bettering their life and their family's life without the fear of living cold, hungry, stigmatized, and more diseased than their neighbor.

We as Jews and as human beings are not just responsible for “getting ours” – we are responsible for living a conscientious life that does not lessen the quality of life for our neighbors.

## Parsha Ki Tavo

Plaster Caster (Deut 26:1—29:8)

19 Elul 5772 — September 6, 2012

In this week's Torah portion of Ki Tavo, the twelve tribes are divided in half and placed upon two mountains facing each other. In the valley between the tribes, the Levites yell out blessings and curses attached to our covenant with Hashem. I am unable to fathom how exciting it was to yell AMEN! after each proclamation. Imagine the excitement felt after a lifetime spent fighting and wandering to finally stand opposite the shore of stability and a new and better way of life.

The ancient Hebrews are commanded to raise pillars inscribed with the Torah and cast them in plaster once they settle in the Promised Land. This may seem odd but in actuality, this act makes a lot more sense than, say, sending a multi-colored sheet up a pole. Flags are great when you're working in government, fighting on the battlefield, and letting your neighbors know, "Hey, I am originally from a distant soil." Flags do not define a society and its people, declarations and laws do. I guess I find flag wavers funny, but it would probably be just as bad if the Stars and Stripes were really a nylon copy of the Constitution of the United States. Think about it: when what you believe is represented in words and not shapes and colors, being a misguided jingoist is really hard.

Today's Jews do not present themselves as a written Torah cast in plaster, but many of us do adorn ourselves with symbols used to represent the words inscribed within the Torah. Regardless, if your plaster pillar is jewelry, Tzitzit, Kipot, a head scarf, a black suit, or even permanent ink resting within your skin, you are by default saying "I am this, and this is what, and who, my people are." So be nice about things – we all have emotions and we all have bad days. However, if you are outwardly representing your faith, remember that you are representing yourself, your family, me, that person over there, Hashem, and countless other sparks who have yet to descend into the Lower Garden. I know it's hard to accept judgment, especially when passing it is so easy and almost instinctual, but every time you connect with another person, you are erecting those pillars and you are shouting AMEN!

**Parsha Nitzavim**

(Deu. 23:9—30:20)

## 1. Cousin Moishe.

Parsha Nitzavim begins with Moses addressing all within the ancient Hebrew camps. This included men, women, children, and the hewers of wood and drawers of water. Much research has gone into defining just who exactly the hewers and drawers were and why they are mentioned specifically. In the grand scheme of things, it's just easier to think of them as cousins, or family just not of our specific household. Even today, the Jewish people have cousins. Some are close, like Noahides and Samaritans (they are good people and yes, they actually exist). Others are a little more removed; I'm looking in your direction right now, Christians, Muslims, Baha'is. And yes, we even have the 'eye roll cousins' – I have moved my gaze in your direction, Messianics; but when all is said and done, the G~d of Abraham is to whom we all pray. Oh yeah, Moses also reminds us that if we stray from our Covenant, we will be blotted out by Hashem personally.

## 2. Thunder Buddies, Thick and Thin.

There is more to Nitzavim than harsh words and people blotting—well kind of. Moses continues his sermon reminding all of us that as long as we are loyal to Hashem, we have nothing to worry about because anyone who fosters hatred and malice towards us, Hashem will deal with. This means as long as we follow Torah and are humane to those also inhabiting this world, we never have to worry about being disliked or singled out by others for whatever reason. No wonder I have so many great friends.

**Parsha Vayelech**

(Deut. 31:1—31:30)

## 1. MTV Make 120 Minutes a Weekly Show or Get Off The Air!

Parsha Vayelech is composed of only one chapter made up of thirty verses and yet despite being a quick read, so many things seem to take place in rapid succession. Moses essentially retires and while doing so names Joshua his successor. He then writes down the Torah and presents the written word to the Levites. Hashem makes His presence known and speaks directly with Moses and

Joshua warning them of the inevitable spiritual adultery the Hebrews will engage in once settled within the Promised Land. Moses then does something unique: he writes a song and instead of singing it, he speaks the lyrics into the ears of the priests. This may seem odd at first, but the song is in effect an outburst of pure genius. Remember, Moses just wrote down the Torah and he is about to die, meaning no more spoken word before the tribes, and those about to enter the Promised Land are the nomadic children of illiterate slaves. Regardless of the time and place you live or your social status, everyone remembers the lyrics to a good song.