



# The Social Justice Torah Commentary

## *Study and Discussion Guide*

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# Introduction

In the introduction to *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, Rabbi Barry H. Block writes, “The message [of the Torah] is clear: Israel serves God no less by pursuing social justice than through proper worship.” The collection demonstrates this message with a journey through the Torah, reading each *parashah* with an eye for social justice. This study guide is a companion to the book, with discussion questions on each chapter to inspire deeper conversation and exploration.

This guide can facilitate study and discussion in learning environments for adults, young adults, or teens. It can be used in weekly Torah study or in standalone classes. The questions range from comprehension—reminding readers of the content of the chapter—to evaluating the message of the chapter and applying it to our own lives. Just as *The Social Justice Torah Commentary* illustrates the myriad ways the Torah calls upon us to take direct action to create justice, so too does this guide challenge its readers to create justice in their own communities.

This guide offers two ways to use its content: chronologically, from Genesis through Deuteronomy, or thematically, grouping texts based on content (see the groupings on the following pages). You can use the complete guide with every *parashah*, or you could select your favorites for discussion. Some questions contain multiple parts. As facilitator, you can choose to ask these one by one to draw out deeper discussion. For questions where participants are asked whether they agree or disagree, encourage them to explain their reasoning.

Not every chapter within this book agrees with the others and neither will those who discuss these chapters. The goal of this guide is to foster discussion and sometimes disagreement for the sake of learning. Because of the possible sensitive nature within disagreement, it might be helpful to establish a classroom *b’rit* (covenant) for how to structure discussion.

## SUGGESTED B’RIT:

1. I will use “I statements” when expressing my opinions, with the understanding that others may not agree with my opinions.
2. I will disagree with opinions, not people.
3. I will engage in discussion with the goals of *Torah lishmah* (learning for the sake of learning) and *machloket l’shem shamayim* (disagreement for the sake of Heaven).

# Parashiyot by Theme

## Communal Responsibility

*P'kudei*: "Equity in Education: Let Every Student Shine"

*Vayikra*: "Harassment-Free Jewish Spaces: Our Leaders Must Answer to a Higher Standard"

*Sh'mini*: "Kashrut and Food Justice"

*Chukat*: "A Lesson in Trauma-Informed Care"

*Matot*: "Human Decency during Warfare"

*Va-et'chanan*: "You Shall Not Murder: Gun Violence Prevention"

*Ki Tavo*: "Jewish Supremacy: The Danger of Chosenness"

*Nitzavim*: "Voting Rights: A Constitutional Covenant"

*Haazinu*: "One Person, One Vote: A Biblical Precedent"

## Criminal Justice

*Mikeitz*: "Emerging to Govern: Reentry after Incarceration"

*Yitro*: "Systems of Justice: The Model and the Reality"

*T'tzaveh*: "Ending Wrongful Convictions: A Divine Imperative"

*Ki Tisa*: "May My Mercy Overcome My Anger: Ending America's System of Mass Incarceration"

*Acharei Mot*: "Mental Illness and Incarceration: Cutting People Off or Bringing Them Home?"\*

*Naso*: "The Death Penalty: From Jealous Rage to Dubious Deterrence"

*Mas'ei*: "The Cities of Refuge and Restorative Justice"

*V'zot Hab'rachah*: "Time to Say Goodbye: Reforming Cash Bail"\*

## Disability Justice

*Va-eira*: "Moses, Internalized Oppression, and Disability"

*Tzav*: "Sacred Work Requires Sacred Infrastructure: Including People with Disabilities"

*Acharei Mot*: "Mental Illness and Incarceration: Cutting People Off or Bringing Them Home?"\*

## Economic Justice

*T'rumah*: "The Heart-Incited Offering: Interdependence, Economic Redistribution, and Community Care"\*

*Vayak'heil*: "Tzedakah: Putting Your Money Where Your Values Are"\*

*K'doshim*: "What We Leave for the Poor"

*V'zot Hab'rachah*: "Time to Say Goodbye: Reforming Cash Bail"\*

## Environmental Justice

*Tol'dot*: "Digging Isaac's Third Well: Water and Systemic Racism"\*

*Vayeitzei*: "Waking Up to Climate Change"\*

*Emor*: "Does the Torah Require Vegetarianism?"

### Gender Justice

- B'reishit*: "Separate and Unequal: A Tale of Creation"  
*Chayei Sarah*: "Marriage Justice in Our Biblical Stories"  
*Vayishlach*: "Dismantling the Patriarchy from All Sides"

### Immigrant Justice

- Vayigash*: "Joseph's Journey from Forced Migration to Redemption: A Model for Immigration Justice"\*  
*Bo*: "The Exodus, Freedom, and Welcoming the Stranger"\*  
*B'shalach*: "Our Obligations to DREAMers and Ourselves"

### Intersectionality

- Vayigash*: "Joseph's Journey from Forced Migration to Redemption: A Model for Immigration Justice"\*  
*Sh'mot*: "Victims of Injustice: Saying Their Names"  
*Bo*: "The Exodus, Freedom, and Welcoming the Stranger"\*  
*B'chukotai*: "Fatness Is the Blessing, Not the Curse"  
*B'midbar*: "Counting Justly: Lifting Up Every Head"\*  
*B'haalot'cha*: "Shedding Light on Solidarity: A Candle Loses Nothing by Lighting Another Candle"  
*Pinchas*: "Covenant of Peace for All Who Enter Jewish Spaces"  
*D'varim*: "Like God Going before the Israelites: Placing Our Bodies between the Vulnerable and Violence"  
*Vayeilech*: "The Courage To Be Different"

### Israel

- Lech L'cha*: "Deserving of the Land"  
*B'har*: "The Land Is Mine"  
*Korach*: "Dissent for the Sake of Heaven: American Jews and Israel"

### Personal Responsibility

- Vayeira*: "The Abraham Bind: The *Akeidah* and Religious Freedom"  
*Vayeitzei*: "Waking Up to Climate Change"\*  
*Va-y'chi*: "Living in the Face of Death"  
*T'rumah*: "The Heart-Incited Offering: Interdependence, Economic Redistribution, and Community Care"\*  
*Vayak'heil*: "Tzedakah: Putting Your Money Where Your Values Are"\*  
*M'tzora*: "The Inequities Revealed by Plagues and Pandemics: Confront the Problems, Don't Blame the Victims"  
*B'haalot'cha*: "Scarcity, Abundance, and the Imagined Past"  
*Sh'lach L'cha*: "The Rights and Duties of Citizenship"

### Racial Justice

- Noach*: "Unconscious Racial Bias and the Curse of Japheth"  
*Tol'dot*: "Digging Isaac's Third Well: Water and Systemic Racism"\*  
*Vayeishev*: "The 'Original Sin' of Slavery"

*B'midbar*: "Counting Justly: Lifting Up Every Head"\*

*Balak*: "Balaam Is Watching: The Jewish Response to Black Lives Matter"

*Eikev*: "Atoning for Our Broken Covenants: Righting America's Racial Wrongs"

*R'eih*: "How Do Our Monuments Help or Hurt Our Memories of the Past?"

*Shof'tim*: "Lynching: Justice and the Idolatrous Tree"

### **Reproductive Justice**

*Mishpatim*: "Stricken from the Text: Sacred Stories of Reproductive Justice"

*Tazria*: "Facing Mortality in Childbirth"

*Ki Teitzei*: "Reproductive Justice and Levirate Marriage: May I Not Go Out Empty"

\**Parashiyot* which fall under more than one theme and are repeated

# Discussion Questions

## GENESIS

*B'reishit*: “Separate and Unequal: A Tale of Creation” by Rabbi Marla J. Feldman

1. How are the two creation narratives (Genesis 1 and Genesis 2) interpreted differently? What does each narrative imply about gender?
2. In what ways do our creation stories uphold the patriarchy? In what ways do they subvert the patriarchy?
3. How might we as Jews work to recreate the gender equality seen in Genesis 1? What are some possible stumbling blocks, and how might we overcome them?

*Noach*: “Unconscious Racial Bias and the Curse of Japheth”  
by Rabbi A. Brian Stoller

1. What is the “Curse of Ham”? How has it influenced racism throughout history?
2. What is the “Curse of Japheth”? How does the Curse of Japheth flip the traditional telling of the story of Noah’s nakedness (the “Curse of Ham”)?
3. What assumptions did Rabbi Stoller implicitly learn growing up as a wealthy white Southerner? What are some assumptions you implicitly learned in your communities? How might you work toward combatting those assumptions?

*Lech L'cha*: “Deserving of the Land” by Rabbi Jeremy Barras

1. According to this *parashah*, what makes the Land of Israel different from all other places?
2. What causes exile from the land? How is this relevant in contemporary times?
3. Do you think Rabbi Barras’s argument about attack and exile as a result of sin applies to modern-day Israelis and Palestinians?

*Vayeira*: “The Abraham Bind: The *Akeidah* and Religious Freedom”  
by Rabbi David Segal

1. How does the meaning of the term *yirat Elohim* (fear of God) differ in the *Akeidah* versus elsewhere in *Vayeira*? What is the significance of this difference?
2. How does Rabbi Segal interpret the message of the *Akeidah*? Do you agree?
3. Rabbi Segal teaches how the age of prophecy has ended. What might the end of prophecy mean about our own moral responsibility? How can we carry forth the prophetic message without becoming zealots or extremists?

*Chayei Sarah*: “Marriage Justice in Our Biblical Stories” by Rabbi Naamah Kelman

1. What does the story of Isaac and Rebekah teach us about Jewish marriage?
2. Many modern individuals assume that all women were subordinate in ancient times. In what ways was Rebekah not subordinate? What can we learn from her actions?
3. As Rabbi Kelman teaches, Rebekah subverts the traditional love story by being an agent of love rather than an object of love. What are modern day examples of radical love? How can we be agents of love?



*Tol'dot*: “Digging Isaac’s Third Well: Water and Systemic Racism”

by Rabbi David Spinrad

1. How does access to water correlate with wealth and race? How does this *parashah* connect to the modern day water crisis?
2. According to Nachmanides, what is the deeper meaning of the three wells? Why is the third well especially significant?
3. Nachmanides’s messianic dream is a Third Temple without conflict or hatred, and Rabbi Spinrad’s messianic dream is a world with equitable access to water. What is your messianic dream? How can we work toward realizing that dream?

*Vayeitzei*: “Waking Up to Climate Change” by Rabbi Julie Saxe-Taller

1. How does Rabbi Saxe-Taller connect Jacob’s realization after his dream to the ongoing climate crisis?
2. What is the paradox outlined by Aviva Zornberg? Why is this paradox important? What are some other paradoxes within Jewish tradition?
3. How might sleep reconnect us with God and nature? What are our own paradoxes relating to sleep and rest? How might we overcome our paradoxes?

*Vayishlach*: “Dismantling the Patriarchy from All Sides” by Evan Traylor

1. What are some examples of patriarchal behaviors and attitudes that Traylor highlights from *Parashat Vayishlach*? What are some examples of subversion of patriarchy in the *parashah* that Traylor highlights?
2. How does Traylor illustrate that it is not enough to go through personal transformation alone? How might each of us be involved in societal change?
3. Although it isn’t enough by itself, personal transformation can be a powerful catalyst to motivate someone to work toward societal change. Have you had a personal transformation that motivated you? What was it? How do you maintain the motivation to continue to work toward positive change?

*Vayeishev*: “The ‘Original Sin’ of Slavery” by Rabbi Esther L. Lederman

1. How does Rabbi Lederman compare the Joseph story with United States history?
2. Do you agree with Rabbi Lederman’s evaluation of our “original sin,” either in the Joseph story or with regard to slavery in the United States?
3. Rabbi Lederman contends that we are “still living with slavery’s legacy while many white citizens of this country believe it to be an issue of our past and not our present.” She suggests reparations as a possible path forward for a better future. What actions can we take to repair the current inequities in our society resulting from slavery?

*Mikeitz*: “Emerging to Govern: Reentry after Incarceration”

by Rabbi Reuben Zellman

1. What does the story of the cupbearer and Joseph teach us about incarcerated and formerly incarcerated persons? How might these stories go against assumptions we make about incarcerated and formerly incarcerated persons?
2. How does Joseph’s story provide us a model for reentry after incarceration? What would a similar model look like in our current society?

3. Rabbi Zellman teaches that God was with Joseph while he was in prison. How might acknowledging God's presence with prisoners today help us imagine a more just criminal system? How can we take action to build our vision of a just criminal system?

*Vayigash*: "Joseph's Journey from Forced Migration to Redemption: A Model for Immigration Justice" by Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum and Rabbi Mike Moskowitz

1. How do Rabbi Kleinbaum and Rabbi Moskowitz connect Joseph's story with the plight of LGBTQ+ individuals and asylum seekers?
2. Why did Joseph give Benjamin more than his other brothers? What implications does this "extra portion" have in today's society?
3. Joseph warns his brothers not to fight when they go to bring back their father Jacob. Why do you think Joseph says this? How might we apply Joseph's warning to our community?

*Va-y'chi*: "Living in the Face of Death" by Rabbi Susan Talve

1. *Va-y'chi* contains the last chapters of Genesis before Exodus begins. How does this *parashah* serve as a transition from Genesis to Exodus?
2. There is a midrash that Jacob doubts his sons' integrity, and they respond with the *Sh'ma*. How is the unity of God connected to integrity and the willingness "to sacrifice for the common good"?
3. Rabbi Talve's vision of unity and harmony is equal access to healthcare and education. What is your vision of unity and harmony, and why? How can that vision become a reality?

## EXODUS

*Sh'mot*: "Victims of Injustice: Saying Their Names" by Rabbi Mari Chernow

1. What are the different names of the second book of Torah in English and Hebrew? What meanings do the different names convey?
2. What is Halbertal's process of verminization? When else in history have you seen verminization happen?
3. Do you agree with Rabbi Chernow's argument that it is important to say the names of victims of injustice? If so, how could we implement this practice? If not, what can we do instead to lift up victims of injustice and combat verminization?

*Va-eira*: "Moses, Internalized Oppression, and Disability"

by Rabbi Lauren Tuchman

1. What is internalized oppression? How does it show up in the Exodus story?
2. How does God respond to Moses's internalized oppression? How do you feel about God's response?
3. Rabbi Tuchman suggests we all analyze our feelings about disability, either our own disabilities or others'. What feelings might you have internalized about ability/disability? How might we work to dismantle those feelings?



*Bo*: “The Exodus, Freedom, and Welcoming the Stranger” by Rabbi Sandra Lawson

1. What is the ending of the phrase “Let My people go”? How do the extra three words change the meaning? Why do you think we often leave those words out?
2. Rabbi Lawson teaches that the Torah includes laws to protect the oppressed and marginalized, specifically slaves and strangers, who were some of the most vulnerable communities in ancient times. What are the vulnerable communities in our modern society, and how might we protect them?
3. Rabbi Lawson highlights the Hebrew phrase *eirev rav* (mixed multitude) from this week’s *parashah*. What does this concept of a mixed multitude mean to you? How might we honor this concept in our communities today?

*B’shalach*: “Our Obligations to DREAMers and Ourselves” by Cantor Seth Warner

1. What are some ways that the “Song at the Sea” is unique?
2. What are some difficulties listed in loving the stranger? Can you think of some additional difficulties?
3. Cantor Warner connects our imperative to love the stranger with supporting DREAMers. What are other ways you can think of that we as Jews can love the stranger? How might remembering that we were strangers once help us to love the stranger?

*Yitro*: “Systems of Justice: The Model and the Reality” by Rabbi Rachel Greengrass

1. What does *Yitro* teach us about necessary requirements of a system of justice?
2. Rabbi Greengrass highlights how people of color are disproportionately affected by the US justice system. She asks, “Can justice really be achieved when such bias is shown in who is ‘brought to justice’ in the first place?” How would you answer her question?
3. What does it mean to judge with a fear of God? What does it mean to judge while acknowledging the full humanity of the person? Why is each of these important? How could these goals be implemented into our current justice system?

*Mishpatim*: “Stricken from the Text: Sacred Stories of Reproductive Justice”

by Rabbi Joshua R. S. Fixler and Rabbi Emily Langowitz

1. How does *Mishpatim* distinguish fetuses from people? How has the *parashah* been used to influence halachic rulings on abortion?
2. How is a restriction on access to abortion a limitation of religious freedom? Do you agree? If so, how can we protect this religious freedom?
3. The Torah, Mishnah, and Gemara all place the life of a pregnant person above the potential life of a fetus. How can we elevate the voices of the people who are primarily affected by this issue? How can we help end the stigma around abortion or miscarriage in our community?

*T’rumah*: “The Heart-Incited Offering: Interdependence, Economic Redistribution, and Community Care” by Rabbi Mackenzie Zev Reynolds

1. This week’s *parashah* is named after the offering every Israelite is invited to bring to help build the *Mishkan*. What might the root of the word *t’rumah* teach us about this offering?

2. How is the *t'rumah* in this *parashah* different from elsewhere in the Torah? Why do you think this difference is significant?
3. Rabbi Reynolds argues that the best way to replicate a heart-incited offering in today's society is by accounting for our communities' needs. How might we give our own heart-incited offerings? What practical steps would be required?

*T'tzaveh*: "Ending Wrongful Convictions: A Divine Imperative"

by Kristine Henriksen Garroway, PhD

1. Dr. Garroway teaches how each of the priests' garments represented atonement for a different kind of sin. What did the *choshen mishpat* (High Priest's breastplate) atone for? What does the need for this particular atonement teach us about Israelite society?
2. With the destruction of the Temple came the end of priestly sacrifices and communal atonement. How did the Rabbis compensate for losing the *choshen mishpat*? Do you agree with their decision?
3. Dr. Garroway argues that without a *choshen mishpat* to atone for false convictions, it is better to let a guilty person go free than to accidentally convict an innocent person. Do you agree? Is it possible to eliminate false convictions without sometimes letting guilty people go free? How can we address this issue in our society today?

*Ki Tisa*: "May My Mercy Overcome My Anger: Ending America's System of Mass Incarceration" by Rabbi Deana Sussman Berezin, MAJE

1. What are the three lessons Rabbi Berezin suggests the story of the Golden Calf can teach us about our system of mass incarceration?
2. Rabbi Berezin suggests addressing crime with mercy and *t'shuvah* instead of retribution. What might *t'shuvah* look like in a legal sense? Are there limitations of this approach?
3. What aspects of our current system go against our principles of mercy and *t'shuvah*, and what purposes do they serve? What are potential alternatives? How can we become advocates for mercy and *t'shuvah* within our own legal justice system?

*Vayak'heil*: "Tzedakah: Putting Your Money Where Your Values Are"

by Rabbi Marina Yergin

1. *Tzedakah* is often translated as "charity." How does the Hebrew word *tzedakah* go beyond charity? Does this additional meaning change your understanding of this Jewish value?
2. Rabbi Yergin emphasizes that it is not enough to just give *tzedakah*, but one must do so with intention: to give with one's heart and with the recipient in mind. What do you think it means to give with intention? What are some examples of giving with intention and not giving with intention?
3. The *tzedakah* we see in *Vayak'heil* is not monetary, and it includes the whole community. What are some ways you can give without donating money? How might you include your community in this act of giving?

*P'kudei*: “Equity in Education: Let Every Student Shine” by Rabbi Craig Lewis

1. What is the significance of having twelve gemstones on the High Priest’s breastplate? Why do you think the stones were all different?
2. The different stones not only have different economic values, but also different ways to care for them. How does Rabbi Lewis connect the different stones of the breastplate to our public education system?
3. How are our students like the stones on the High Priest’s breastplate? How can we care for our students with equity instead of equality? What might be some examples of “different stones” within our communities that require “different care”?

## LEVITICUS

*Vayikra*: “Harassment-Free Jewish Spaces: Our Leaders Must Answer to a Higher Standard” by Rabbi Mary L. Zamore

1. How are the laws of sacrificial offerings an example of “radical transparency”?
2. What is the connection between the Hebrew words for community and witness? In what ways do you see these two concepts as connected to each other?
3. Rabbi Zamore offers a Jewish perspective of accountability that focuses on *t’shuvah* (repentance and repair). How can we hold leaders accountable for harassment while encouraging repair through *t’shuvah*? What should the community do when the leader cannot or will not perform *t’shuvah*?

*Tzav*: “Sacred Work Requires Sacred Infrastructure: Including People with Disabilities” by Rabbi Ruti Regan

1. How does Rabbi Regan compare the obligation of sacrifices to the creation/maintenance of accessible spaces?
2. What are some ways our communities can do *t’shuvah* (repentance) for the wrongs we have committed against people with disabilities?
3. Rabbi Regan lists several ways in which small details can make a big difference. What are some of the examples listed? What are some examples you can think of within your community? How might we be more attuned to these details to avoid humiliation and offense?

*Sh’mini*: “Kashrut and Food Justice” by Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz

1. How can kashrut be seen as an ethical guide? What examples does Rabbi Yanklowitz provide?
2. How do you understand Rav Soloveitchik’s concepts of the morality of majesty and the morality of humility? According to Rabbi Yanklowitz, how are they in concert with each other and not in competition?
3. Rabbi Yanklowitz tells the story of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter not giving kosher certification despite adherence to kosher laws, because the organization was unethical. In what ways might our foods be *treif* (not kosher) due to ethical concerns? How might we make our community more kosher by increasing our ethical standards?

*Tazria*: “Facing Mortality in Childbirth” by Maharat Rori Picker Neiss

1. *Tazria* begins with laws of childbirth, including a period of impurity and a requirement for a sin offering. What is the alternative reading that Maharat Picker Neiss offers?
2. What are the implications of the Talmudic teaching that a fetus is considered “as its parent’s thigh”? How does this teaching reimagine the offering given after birth?
3. While childbirth bears the risk of the lives of birthing parents, as well as the lives of their children, childbirth is especially dangerous for people of color. More than just discrimination in medical settings, this risk is compounded by structural inequality in society. What are some of the structural inequalities that add to this risk? How can we work together to minimize this risk for all peoples?

*M’tzora*: “The Inequities Revealed by Plagues and Pandemics: Confront the Problems, Don’t Blame the Victims” by Rabbi Asher Gottesfeld Knight

1. What is *tzaraat*? Who is afflicted, and how is it cured?
2. What are the examples Rabbi Knight lists as a “blame the victim” analysis of *tzaraat*? How has this same tendency to blame the victim affected people with COVID? How might we reshape this narrative when we encounter it?
3. What are the personal and communal responsibilities to prevent and respond to *tzaraat*? How can we apply those responsibilities to our world today and to our modern plagues?

*Acharei Mot*: “Mental Illness and Incarceration: Cutting People Off or Bringing Them Home?” by Rabbi Joel Mosbacher

1. What does *kareit* mean? Why is the goat sent out to Azazel? What are the goals of the practices of *kareit* and the scapegoat?
2. In what ways do we as a community improperly practice the concept of *kareit*? In what ways do we treat others like scapegoats?
3. What are Rabbi Mosbacher’s suggestions for how we can prevent treating mentally ill people as scapegoats? Who else do we scapegoat and/or excommunicate? How can we work toward ensuring no one is undeservingly cut off from our community? How can we bring back those who have been sent away?

*K’doshim*: “What We Leave for the Poor” by Rabbi Barry H. Block

1. What is the mitzvah of *peah*? How is it given and received? How does it differ from other forms of *tzedakah*?
2. What are the differences between the negative mitzvah of *bal tashchit* and the positive mitzvah of *tzedakah*? Why is the former not considered charity?
3. What are some examples Rabbi Block provides as modern-day versions of *peah*? What are some additional examples you can think of? How can we as a community do our part in the mitzvah of *peah*?

*Emor*: “Does the Torah Require Vegetarianism?” by Ruhama Weiss, PhD

1. What four main examples of Torah laws that provide protections for animals does Dr. Weiss offer? What do you think of these laws?

2. Why do you think the Torah uses language of “mothers” and “children” when referring to sheep, oxen, goats, and even birds?
3. Dr. Weiss suggests that the story of Rabbi Y’hudah HaNasi and the animals is meant to teach us to have compassion for other living things. How can we show compassion to animals in today’s world? Are we personally compelled to reduce meat consumption, become vegetarian, or become vegan?

*B’har*: “The Land Is Mine” by Rabbi Jill Jacobs

1. The Torah says we were *gerim* (strangers) in Egypt, but it also says we were *gerim* (sojourners) in Israel. How is our status as *gerim* connected to the verse in Torah where God says “the land is mine”?
2. Bloodshed is the “foremost sin that can result in expulsion from the land.” Rabbi Jacobs, along with Rabbi Moshe Avigdor Amiel, interprets “bloodshed” to mean murder, in which Rabbi Jacobs includes death caused by war. Do you agree death in war should be considered murder?
3. Rabbi Jacobs connects the two biblical beliefs that bloodshed defiles the land and that the land is God’s with a critique of the Occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Do you agree with this connection?

*B’chukotai*: “Fatness Is the Blessing, Not the Curse” by Rabbi Rachel Grant Meyer

1. *Parashat B’chukotai* begins with a promise of either blessings or curses as determined by someone’s behavior. Rabbi Grant Meyer finds this dichotomy to be problematic. What do you think of this dichotomy?
2. How does the midrash on this portion complicate the view of the “curses” it contains? What is the difference between *k’lalah* and *tocheichah*?
3. This chapter introduces the idea of a blessing within a curse or one person’s curse being a blessing for another. Rabbi Grant Meyer gives fatness and fatphobia as examples. What do you think of these examples? What are some others?

## NUMBERS

*B’midbar*: “Counting Justly: Lifting Up Every Head” by Ilana Kaufman

1. *B’midbar* begins with a census of the Israelites. What makes the biblical census similar to and/or different from the counting of Ilana Kaufman’s childhood?
2. What is the purpose of saying a blessing before counting? How is counting similar to or different from other actions we say a blessing before? Why is saying a blessing afterward not sufficient?
3. Kaufman highlights how Jews of Color were undercounted for so long because they were not explicitly considered in the questions asked. Why do you think that was? What other demographics of Jews might be underrepresented in our counts? How can we make sure to count our community more intentionally and accurately?

*Naso*: “The Death Penalty: From Jealous Rage to Dubious Deterrence” by Rabbi Ronald Stern

1. What was the *sotah* ritual for, and how was it performed? What are your initial thoughts about the *sotah* ritual?

2. Rabbi Stern offers two potential alternative readings of the *sotah* ritual: to decrease femicide and to critique the use of magic. What are the rationales for these alternative readings? Do you agree or disagree?
3. How does Rabbi Stern connect the *sotah* ritual with the death penalty? What are Rabbi Stern's arguments against the death penalty? Do you agree or disagree? If you agree, what actions can be taken to end the practice of capital punishment?

*B'haalot'cha*: "Shedding Light on Solidarity: A Candle Loses Nothing by Lighting Another Candle" by Imani Romney-Rosa Chapman and Rabbi Ellen Lippmann

1. What is the significance of Pesach Sheini? What are its limitations? How would you feel about participating in a Pesach Sheini celebration?
2. The authors list nine steps to solidarity (allying with marginalized members of a group to which you don't belong): awareness, listening, recognition, letting go of shame, feeling, learning, persisting, finding common interest, and amplification. Which step resonated the most with you? Which steps come more easily to you, and which steps are more challenging?
3. What are some ways we could use the nine steps offered to practice solidarity in our own community? How can we do the work to "light another candle"?

*B'haalot'cha*: "Scarcity, Abundance, and the Imagined Past" by Rabbi Rachel Kahn-Troster

1. How does a scarcity mentality show up in this *parashah*? How does God respond to the Israelites' complaints of scarcity?
2. What are some ways we see scarcity mentalities in American politics and culture? How are they impacted by racism and xenophobia?
3. What are some benefits of an abundance mentality over a scarcity mentality? What practices might we adopt to replace our own scarcity mentality with one of abundance? How can we combat scarcity mentalities in our communities?

*Sh'lach L'cha*: "The Rights and Duties of Citizenship" by Rabbi Seth M. Limmer

1. Who is a *ger*, and who is an *eizrach*? What does *Sh'lach L'cha* teach us about these two groups?
2. What are the four freedoms outlined by President Franklin D. Roosevelt? How do they relate to individual liberty and societal responsibility? How does Rabbi Limmer connect "freedom to" and "freedom from" to the Israelites' transition from *avadim* in Egypt to *avadim* of God?
3. If the benefits of societal responsibility are not considered, some may feel that it's less like a freedom and more like a restriction. What are some examples that illustrate this paradoxical connection between freedom and responsibility? What can we do to balance our personal liberties with our societal responsibilities to improve society for all?

*Korach*: "Dissent for the Sake of Heaven: American Jews and Israel" by Rabbi Ethan Bair

1. What is the difference between saying "All the congregation is holy" and "All the congregation are holy"? How does Korach seemingly misunderstand the declaration of holiness?



2. What kind of dissent is accepted in Judaism, and what kind of dissent is discouraged? What are some examples of acceptable and unacceptable dissent?
3. Rabbi Bair offers that disagreement over Israel's Occupation of the West Bank is an example of dissent that is either seen as acceptable or unacceptable depending on one's own beliefs. Have you experienced this issue in your community? What are other examples of issues that can be seen as either acceptable or unacceptable depending on the individual person? What are some ways we can bridge the gap between what is "acceptable" and "unacceptable" to have empathy and compassion for others during disagreements?

*Chukat*: "A Lesson in Trauma-Informed Care" by Rabbi Shoshanah Conover

1. How do the traditional commentators respond to Moses hitting the rock? How does Rabbi Conover respond?
2. How do you understand what it means to have a trauma-informed response? What might a trauma-informed response look like in this example, and how could it have changed the situation?
3. How might we incorporate trauma-informed responses in our own lives, with our community, with our loved ones, with ourselves? What steps can we take to increase the likelihood that we will respond to situations with the acknowledgment of how trauma might affect people's actions and behaviors?

*Balak*: "Balaam Is Watching: The Jewish Response to Black Lives Matter" by Rabbi Ken Chasen

1. What is the biblical story of Balaam that is found in this week's *parashah*? How does Rabbi Chasen relate the story of Balaam to contemporary life?
2. Rabbi Chasen provides examples of strong bonds between the Black and Jewish communities in the early Civil Rights era. Why did these bonds weaken? How does Rabbi Chasen suggest we rebuild them?
3. Rabbi Chasen uses "Defund the Police" as example of an issue that has challenged racial alliances. What is your view of this policy goal? Have your own encounters with law enforcement shaped this view?

*Pinchas*: "Covenant of Peace for All Who Enter Jewish Spaces" by Chris Harrison

1. Harrison begins this chapter with the idea that Jews have often thought of themselves as an "ever-dying people." What do you think of this expression? Are the Jews an "ever-dying people"?
2. Why was Pinchas given a *b'rit shalom*, a covenant of peace? Why is this potentially problematic? How do the rabbis add complexity to the *b'rit shalom*, and what can their addition teach us?
3. What is Harrison's alternate image of earning a covenant of peace? What is exciting and what is challenging about his vision? How can we actively work toward a covenant of peace, either Harrison's or your own?

*Matot*: "Human Decency during Warfare" by Rabbi Samuel M. Stahl

1. What is the *milchemet mitzvah* (obligatory war) in *Parashat Matot*? Rabbi Stahl suggests this obligatory war goes against our Jewish aspiration for shalom. Do you agree?

2. Rabbi Stahl offers examples of the Torah's mixed views and restrictions on war. What do you think about the Torah's position on war? What about later Jewish texts' positions on war?
3. What is *tohar haneshek*? Is there anything you would add or take away from the examples Rabbi Stahl provides? Is a code of arms like *tohar haneshek* the best way to prevent war crimes and human rights violations, or is there a better way?

*Mas'ei*: "The Cities of Refuge and Restorative Justice" by Rabbi Denise L. Eger

1. What is the purpose of an *ir miklat*, a sheltering city? How was it used in biblical times?
2. What is restorative justice, and how is it different from punitive justice? How could the *ir miklat* serve as a center for restorative justice?
3. Rabbi Eger gives an example of restorative justice within our own judicial system which honors the hurt of the *go-eil hadam* (blood avenger) while offering the offender the chance for *t'shuvah* (atonement/repentance). How do you feel about this model of restorative justice? What might it look like if our whole criminal justice system was based on restorative justice? Are there limits to this model?

## DEUTERONOMY

*D'varim*: "Like God Going before the Israelites: Placing Our Bodies between the Vulnerable and Violence" by Rabbi Josh Whinston

1. How is God described in *Parashat D'varim*? According to Rashi, how can humans emulate this aspect of God?
2. Instead of thinking of ourselves as parents protecting a child, Rabbi Whinston suggests we see ourselves as people with societal power to put ourselves between vulnerable people and violence. What are some examples of how we could use our power in this way?
3. A main difference between God as protector and humans as protectors is the risk factor. How does risk affect our ability or willingness to show up to fight for justice? How do we manage or assess risk? When is the risk worth it and when is it not?

*Va-et'chanan*: "You Shall Not Murder: Gun Violence Prevention" by Rabbi Andrea C. London

1. What is the difference between *lo tirtzach* (do not murder) and *lo taharog* (do not kill)? What are some examples Rabbi London gives? Can you think of other examples?
2. Rabbi London addresses *lo tirtzach* as it applies to those most vulnerable to violence and death. She notes that the Torah instructs us to care for the widow and the orphan because they are the most disadvantaged by society, and therefore the most vulnerable. Who would be the metaphorical widows and the orphans in our world today?
3. Rabbi London suggests two approaches to fighting the issue of gun violence in America: regulating guns and addressing the underlying issues of poverty, addiction, and racism. What do you think of these approaches? Are there other approaches to add? What actions can we take to fight against gun violence?

*Eikev*: “Atoning for Our Broken Covenants: Righting America’s Racial Wrongs” by Rabbi Judith Schindler

1. This Torah portion provides an injunction from God to remember that we do not “win” our own wealth, but that it is given to us by God in return for obeying God’s commandments (Deuteronomy 8:14, 17–18). How does Rabbi Schindler interpret this verse? What do you think of her interpretation?
2. Rabbi Schindler compares the first tablets of the Ten Commandments with the Declaration of Independence and the original Constitution of the United States. How are they similar? How are they different?
3. Rabbi Schindler writes that the second tablet of the Ten Commandments gives an opportunity for atonement, which includes, (1) confession and truth telling, (2) reparations and restitution, and (3) transformative change. What are Rabbi Schindler’s suggestions on how the United States can atone? Do you agree with them? What would you add or take away? What actions can we take to encourage the United States to make proper atonement?

*R’eh*: “How Do Our Monuments Help or Hurt Our Memories of the Past?” by Rabbi Ariel Naveh

1. What does the Torah say we are to do about idolatrous statues? What constitutes an idolatrous statue and what does not?
2. What is the difference between remembering and honoring? How does this difference affect how we treat statues and other memorial sites? When are memorial sites necessary and appropriate? When are they offensive and idolatrous?
3. How are Confederate statues similar to idolatrous statues? Do you believe they should be removed and/or destroyed? What other actions can we take to fight against what we believe to be idolatry in our society?

*Shof’tim*: “Lynching: Justice and the Idolatrous Tree” by Rabbi Thomas M. Alpert

1. What are the traditional explanations of why *tzedeq* is repeated twice in *tzedeq tzedeq tirdof* (justice, justice you shall pursue)? What does the repetition mean to you?
2. How can we pursue not only justice, but the appearance of justice? How can we avoid injustice and the appearance of injustice?
3. Rabbi Alpert describes his visit to the National Memorial for Peace and Justice. How did that memorial make him feel? How is lynching continuing today? What steps might we take to uproot this injustice?

*Ki Teitzei*: “Reproductive Justice and Levirate Marriage: May I Not Go Out Empty” by Rabbi Liz P. G. Hirsch

1. What is levirate marriage? What are the benefits of a levirate marriage, and who receives them?
2. Reproductive justice is not only about the right not to have children, but also the right to have children. How does levirate marriage connect with this aspect of reproductive justice?
3. Rabbi Hirsch remarks how people of color, poor people, and/or disabled people are the most likely to face barriers to their ability to have kids. How can we fight for reproductive justice to help ensure all people have the right to raise a family?

*Ki Tavo*: “Jewish Supremacy: The Danger of Chosenness” by Rabbi Noa Sattath

1. What is the meaning of the Hebrew word *s’gulah*? What are the different ways it is interpreted?
2. How did Rabbi Meir Kahane use the concept of *s’gulah* to promote racism and hatred? How do his teachings go against Jewish principles?
3. Rabbi Sattath teaches that Sforno interprets chosenness as the imperative to instruct all of humankind to worship God together, which Rabbi Sattath interprets as “the duty and commitment to uphold justice for all.” How do you interpret chosenness, and how would you act out that belief in chosenness?

*Nitzavim*: “Voting Rights: A Constitutional Covenant” by Rabbi Erica Seager Asch

1. How does the Torah expound on what it means by “everyone”? Why is this significant?
2. How does Rabbi Asch compare the covenant God makes with the people to the Constitution of the United States? What similarities or differences do you see between the two?
3. Rabbi Asch teaches that the Torah specifically mentions marginalized groups because they are the most likely to be left out. Likewise, many social justice groups today focus on marginalized groups that are more likely to be excluded. What are some groups of people who are more likely to have their civil liberties denied? How can we as a community fight for the right to vote for all people?

*Vayeilech*: “The Courage To Be Different” by Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin

1. Why is Joshua said to be suited to be Moses’s successor? Do you agree or disagree?
2. Rabbi Salkin argues that what makes Joshua a good leader is the defining trait of Judaism at large: being a radical minority. In what ways are Jews part of a radical minority? What would change if/when Jews are no longer the minority?
3. Bari Weiss said that we “were not put on earth to be anti-antisemites. We were put on Earth to be Jews.” What does it mean to be a Jew, to be a “lamp-lighter”? How can we fight against antisemitism without neglecting other peoples who also need help and without letting antisemitism determine our identity?

*Haazinu*: “One Person, One Vote: A Biblical Precedent” by Rabbi Noam Katz

1. How does the story of Babel relate to God setting divisions and borders for different groups of people? What is Sforno’s interpretation of this passage?
2. What is partisan gerrymandering? According to Rabbi Katz, how does partisan gerrymandering go against Moses’s final warning to the people?
3. What do you think about God setting geographic divisions among the peoples? Are God’s geographic divisions something we as Reform Jews should honor? If so, how might we protect different peoples’ right to have autonomy and self-governance in their own fixed spaces? If not, how might non-geographic divisions of people (e.g., religious communities, racial communities, LGBTQ+, etc.) be honored and given autonomy?

*V'zot Hab'rachah*: "Time to Say Goodbye: Reforming Cash Bail"

by Rabbi Joshua Stanton

1. According to Rabbi Stanton, in what ways was Moses's punishment from God different from how our current justice system operates?
2. What are the two blessings the name of this Torah portion could be referring to? Do you agree that these are blessings that should be given to people who have been accused of a crime but not yet convicted?
3. Rabbi Stanton uses Moses's punishment as an argument against the United States' system of cash bail. Do you agree with his position? What can we do to advocate for a more just and equitable system for those accused but not convicted, and thus still innocent under the law?

CLOSING DISCUSSION

1. Has this book changed how you view the Torah and its relationship with social justice?
2. What chapters/themes stood out to you and why?
3. How can we stay connected and organized to live out these social justice teachings?