

Yasher Koach, Sarah and Oliver. For reaching this milestone, for your beautiful Torah and Haftarah chanting, and for your words of wisdom. Both of you are such gifts to your families and to our community.

I'm going to come back to some of what you've taught us, but first I need to acknowledge that this extraordinary simcha is set against a backdrop of another excruciating week for our people. Yet again, we're confronted with the all too Jewish mixing of bitter and sweet, as we experience personal joys amidst collective pain.

Barely a week has passed since we learned of the tragic news that six of the Israeli hostages remaining in Gaza had been murdered by Hamas. Carmel, Eden, Alexander, Almog, and Ori, as well as Hersh Goldberg-Polin, whose parents' words have been especially resonant among their fellow American Jews during these months. Zichronam Livracha. May all of their memories be for a blessing.

This heartbreak is compounded when we consider just how close the negotiations came before then, for a ceasefire and hostage deal. Unlike many aspects of witnessing this war from the sidelines, this was no abstraction. The names of three of these six beautiful souls, including Hersh's, were discussed as part of a proposed deal in July. Which, it was reported, had been scuttled by Netanyahu's administration. Since the news broke this weekend, the Israeli government has only doubled down. This past Monday, Netanyahu reiterated that there would be no future deal without an assurance of the IDF's continued occupation of the Gazan border with Egypt. A move that his own Defense Minister dismissed as unnecessary for Israel's security. And which many Israeli and international observers believe is a decision he is making merely to salvage his own political and legal future. While still more hostages languish. And more Palestinian civilians remain in harm's way.

This crisis of leadership comes after eleven months – to the day, today – of near total failure of the current Israeli government to keep our people safe. Notwithstanding the fact that Hamas is most directly responsible for

violence against Israelis against these six, innocent hostages – and against so many others, and absolutely must be held accountable – so, too, must we hold the Netanyahu government responsible for this ongoing tragedy.

For nearly an entire year, we have grieved, and agitated, and protested, and spoken about the myriad emotions that have beset us. And now, ritually, we move into the time of the year when we can expect these feelings to get even louder.

We have just entered the month of Elul, the last month of the Jewish year, when we annually break open our souls before Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. We focus on accountability for the wrongs of this past year, holding ourselves responsible both individually and collectively. And as we begin that cycle this year, we're ever closer to a High Holiday sequence that, we know, maps onto the first anniversary of October 7th. The High Holiday season, beginning with Elul, is always laden with intensity, and this year it almost feels like too much to bear.

This week, I read a teaching that resonated with what I'm feeling uniquely this year, about this annual process from the Sfat Emet, a Hasidic master of the 19th century. The teaching focuses on the month of Elul itself, and speaks not only to the Torah portion, but also to the news cycle.

The rabbi points to a familiar phrase from psalms: hu asanu **v'lo** anachnu, which can be translated in two different ways based on two different spellings that each exist in our tradition for the word "v'lo." One is with the letters Lamed Aleph, meaning, "God made us, and we didn't make ourselves." The other is with Lamed Vav, meaning "God made us, and we belong to God." Related ideas, yet distinct from one another.

If you take all four of these letters together, Lamed Aleph and Lamed Vav, you get the letters that make up "Elul." The idea being that this month of introspection is some combination of *belonging* to God...and also remembering the force that created us. The Sfat Emet teaches that the

“more a person can set aside their own selfishness, the closer that person can draw to God.” Which is the goal for any of us this month.

And where he goes with it, finally, is to connect this teaching to the opening words of this week’s Torah portion: “you shall appoint judges and officers throughout your land,” who, according to him, should help us refocus our attention on God and away from more mundane needs and desires. Leaders who themselves are so committed to God and to humanity and the collective that they lead us toward setting aside our own needs in the service of something better.

The Sfat Emet insists that this is what a leader *should* be. And all the values for which we hold ourselves accountable during Elul should be magnified tenfold vis-a-vis our leaders. It is only fair to wonder if the current Israeli government could live up to the rebbe’s standards. Is Benjamin Netanyahu motivated by the service of God? Are he and his coalition focused on truth, justice, and the highest needs of the collective? Or are they driven more, perhaps, by self-preservation?

Questions like these, I sometimes feel, are better left to editorial pages than to divrei Torah during Shabbat. But the thing is...this week’s Torah portion, perhaps more than any other, hinges on a *similar* question: what makes a good leader?

And, here, Sarah, is where your d’var Torah comes in.

As you taught us, Parashat Shoftim focuses on leadership. Early on, the text addresses any king the people might choose to rule them. As you explained, “The Torah says that ‘[the king] shall not keep many horses or send people back to Egypt to add to his horses.’ Essentially,” you said, “this continues the idea that leaders should prioritize their community over their personal comfort.” The parsha continues to describe how a leader must not be guided by material gain. A king should not see himself as above the law. And a king should be respectful of God, who holds ultimate authority over humankind.

It all boils down to faith. A leader should be guided by God's words, and believe that through God's wisdom, they will prevail. Even if it's hard for them to see. For this reason, the parsha mandates that the king should keep a Torah text next to him when he's seated on the throne.

Faith is also at the core of the section of this parsha, which *you* addressed, Oliver.

You taught us of the law that when Israelites go to war, they must not cut down the fruit trees of their enemies. Following Rambam, who said that "you shall not destroy the trees for you are to trust in God to deliver them to your hand," *you* taught us to focus on the bigger picture rather than a short term desire. Addressing leadership during war, you reminded us of the Torah's imperative to trust in God's will, which will ultimately be in their favor, if they act ethically.

By contrast, destroying these trees would be a cynical act of people who couldn't believe that God would deliver them, to a place where they might benefit from the fruit those trees could yield.

In different ways, each of you emphasized that leaders – in peace and in war – should be governed by faith. Which is in such short supply right now.

This past week has cast into sharp relief just how little good faith there is among Israel's current leadership. And after months of trying to find some wisdom to share with you about this seemingly eternal conflict, all I can ask, as a rabbi, is that we return to faith. That we don't allow ourselves to believe it's all over. That we resist thinking that it's not worth our attempts to try and stop the corrupt leaders who continue to fail us. It is not too late to demand that Israel's officials behave the way they should. No matter how absurd it may seem to imagine having any leverage right now, we need to believe that we can do this. That we can pressure Israel's leaders to course correct. This Elul, and onwards.

In the words of the parsha: Al-tir'u. V'al tachapzu. V'al ta'artzu. Do not be afraid. Do not panic. Do not dread. Ki Adonai Eloheichem ha'holech imachem. For the Eternal your God is with you.

Shabbat Shalom.