



AHAVAT ACHIM
קָהָלָת אֶחָדִים
THE FAMILY SHUL

CANDLE LIGHTING 4:28 PM | 21 TEVET | JANUARY 10, 2026 | HAVDALA 5:33 PM



שבת פרשת שמות SHABBAT PARSHAT SHEMOT

Haftorah is Isaiah 27:6-28:13, then skipping to 29:22-23.

FRIDAY EVENING

MINCHA 4:30 PM

SHKIA 4:47 PM

TZAIT HAKOCHAVIM 5:27 PM

SHABBAT

HASHKAMA 7:45 AM

SHACHARIT - MAIN 9:00 AM

POST-HASHKAMA SHIUR ≈ 9:30 AM

LAST KRIAT SHEMA 9:42 AM

FUNDAMENTALS SHIUR ≈ 11:30 AM

GEDOLAH 12:28 PM

PRE-MINCHA SHIUR 3:40 PM

MINCHA 4:20 PM

SHKIA 4:48 PM

MAARIV 5:33 PM



SUNDAY
1/11

MONDAY
1/12

TUESDAY
1/13

WEDNESDAY
1/14

THURSDAY
1/15

FRIDAY
1/16

WEEKDAY MINYANIM AT AHAVAT ACHIM

SHACHARIT	8:00 AM	6:15 AM	6:25 AM	6:25 AM	6:15 AM	6:25 AM
2ND SHACHARIT MINYON - YISHTABACH AT 7:40 AM		7:25 AM				
MINCHA/MAARIV	4:37 PM	4:38 PM	4:39 PM	4:40 PM	4:41 PM	4:40 PM
ZMANIM						
Earliest Talit	6:21 AM	6:21 AM	6:21 AM	6:20 AM	6:20 AM	6:20 AM
Gedolah	12:28 PM	12:29 PM	12:29 PM	12:30 PM	12:30 PM	12:30 PM
Shkia	4:49 PM	4:50 PM	4:51 PM	4:52 PM	4:53 PM	
Tzait	5:29 PM	5:30 PM	5:31 PM	5:32 PM	5:33 PM	



Mazal tov to this year's Dinner Honoree, Dr. Melanie Kwestel, and this year's Young Leadership Awardees Sara & Natan Santacruz. Save the date, February 22, and look out for the invitations.



ANNUAL DINNER



Happy anniversary to **Sara & Larry Bernstein and Audrey & Jack Bickel.**

Don't wait, get your listings in for the February birthday and anniversary kiddush here: [February Birthday/Anniversaries](#).

WOMEN'S MONDAY NIGHT HALACHA SHIUR

This Monday night the Women's Halacha Shiur on topic of Borer will be at the home of Shelly Winchester at 8:15 PM.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Jan. 30 - Shabbat Shira Dinner. RSVP: [Shira](#)

Jan. 31 - Tu B'shvat Green kiddush with cholents made from sustainable ingredients and compostable cutlery. Sponsor/Volunteer here: [Green](#).

Feb. 1 - Adi Karni, IDF Combat Engineer.

Feb. 7 - Super Bowl Kiddush. Sponsor here: [Go Team!](#)

Feb. 14 - Scholar-In-Residence, Rabbi Shlomo Brody, from Ematali.

Feb. 14 - Birthday/Anniversary Kiddush.

Feb. 21 - 4th Annual Comedy Night with Mike Fine, Sat. night, Doors Open at 7:30 PM, show starts at 8:00 PM! Buy Tickets: [LAUGH A LOT!](#)

Feb. 22 - Journal Dinner.

Feb. 28 - Esther Chapter-by-Chapter Round-Robin Shiur. To sign up, click: [Esther](#).

Mar. 28 - Shir HaShirim Chapter-by-Chapter Round-Robin Shiur. To sign up, click here: [Song of Songs](#)

IN OUR FUTURE

Jan. 17 - Seudah Shlishit is sponsored by the Sonnenblick family on the yahrzeit of Marty's mother, הענטשא מאטלב בת זלמן, Helene Sonnenblick, and in honor of a siyum of Mesechet Zevachim.

Jan. 31 - Seudah Shlishit is sponsored by Amy & Stephen Agress to commemorate the Yahrzeit of Amy's stepfather, הירש בן מאיר.

Feb. 14 - Seudah Shlishit is sponsored by Amy & Stephen Agress to commemorate the Yahrzeit of Rabbi Hyman Agress, Stephen's father, הרב חיים בן הרב יהושע.

KIDDUSH & SEUDAH SHLISHIT

- Enjoy Scotch at Kiddush, please donate a bottle to the shul from time to time.
- To sponsor a Kiddush (prices start at \$318, plus a bottle of scotch) email dmgarfunkel@gmail.com.
- Want to know the menu for Kiddush? Email dmgarfunkel@gmail.com to be put on the WhatsApp group. To sponsor Seudah Shlishit for \$136 (or in the case of multiple sponsors, \$100 per sponsor), email dmgarfunkel@gmail.com.

SHIURIM



- PESHAT OF THE PARSHA, Tuesdays at 1:00 PM (<https://zoom.us/j/7291311899>, PW: 112233).
- TORAH FOR YOUR COMMUTE, via a Whatsapp group, with 3-minute daily Halacha insights. To join email Rabbi Shestack at rabbishestack@gmail.com.
- TORAH PODCAST FOR YOUR COMMUTE is available on Spotify or on other applications with an RSS code. Click here: [PODCASTS](#).
- POST-HASHKAMA SHIUR, alternates between examining the development of Halachot and analyzing Mishlei (Proverbs)
- FUNDAMENTALS OF JEWISH THOUGHT, after Kiddush.
- SHABBAT SHIUR, **Sanhedrin Ch. 8**, 40 minutes prior to mincha.
- TZURBA M'RABANAN w/ Zack Doberman, Wednesdays at 8:30 PM. In-person at the shul and via Zoom.
- MISHNA CHABURAH, w/ Jeff Safier, after 7:25 AM Shacharit minyon (≈10 minutes).
- HALACHA SHIUR FOR WOMEN, Monday nights, 8:15 PM - **Studying Borer**. [\[Eliana Kaplowitz's home on Jan. 26\]](#)
- SEDER ON THE SIDDUR, at Seudah Shlishit - **Korbonot Part VI (R. Donin - p. 199-200, R. Munk - pp. 61-73)**.

BOARD MEETINGS 8:15 PM

Jan. 27 - At shul w/Zoom option.

Feb. 24, Mar. 24, Apr. 28, May 26, & June 30

BIRTHDAY & ANNIVERSARY KIDDUSH

To add a birthday or anniversary to our February list (next Kiddush on Shabbat, February 14), click here: [SIMCHA](#). Listings/sponsorships are \$36 per family per month. RSVP for the February birthday/anniversary Kiddush by Sunday night, February 8.

18-25 Saddle River Road

Fair Lawn, NJ 07410

201.797.0502

<http://www.ahavatachim.org>

GITA COOPERWASSER ה"ע

YOUTH EVENTS

Feb. 7 - Parent-Child Learning.

Feb. 28 - Interactive Youth Purim program with dinner.

May 23 - Interactive Youth Shavuot program with dinner.

GITA COOPERWASSER ה"ע

SHABBAT YOUTH INFO



• SHABBAT YOUTH LEADERS:

3RD - 5TH: NICOLE

K - 2ND: ARIELLA & ABBY

3 YRS - PRE-K: ARNELLA & PERRI

- Youth group for in 2nd - 5th Graders starts at 9:00 AM (Drop Off) in the Youth Room on left on entering the social hall.
- Youth group for children 4 years old through 1st Grade starts at 9:00 AM (Drop Off) in the Youth Room on the right upon entering the social hall.
- Parent & Me, 9:00 AM in the Beit Midrash.
- Rabbi Meet & Greet, Friday night, kids can come over to the Rabbi after davening to receive a cup of grape juice and a ticket!
- Children earn tickets for coming to minyan (Friday night and/or Shabbat day), asking the rabbi questions or attending parent-child learning programs! Tickets can be redeemed for prizes.
- Children's corner at Seudah Shlishit, 1st to 5th graders will get 10 Torah questions in 10 minutes from Rabbi Shestack, with special snacks, tickets and more.

יבַּיִ-ה-ז-ה קָנֵנִי רָאשִׁית זָרְבָּו גָּדָם מִפְּעָלָיו מִאֵז: יְמַעַּלְמָן גַּפְכָּתִי מַרְאָשִׁי מַקְדְּמִי-אָרָץ: יְבָאִינְךָ תְּהִמָּהוֹן חֹלְלָתִי בְּאֵין מַעֲינָתִ נְכַבְּדִים-מִים: יְבָאָרֶם הַרְמִים הַטְּבָעוּ לִפְנֵי גְּבֻעֹת חֹלְלָתִי: יְעַדְלָא עַשָּׂה אָרֶץ וְחוֹזְקָתָה רֹאשָׁת עֲפָרוֹת פָּבָל: יְבָהֵכִינוּ שָׁמִים שָׁם אָנָי בְּחִזְקוֹן רֹגֶג עַל-פְּנֵי תְּהִוָּה: יְבָאָמָצָ שְׁחִקִּים מִמְעָל לְעַזּוֹז עִזּוֹת תְּהִוָּה: יְבָשָׁוָמוּ לִבְםָ חָלוּ וּמִים לֹא יְעַרְבֵּרְפִּיו קְחַזְקוֹן מַזְדִּי אָרָץ: לְאַהֲנָה אַצְלָוָ אָמָנוֹ וְאַהֲנָה שְׁשָׁעִים יוֹם יוֹם מַשְׁחַקָּת לִפְנֵי בְּכָלָעַת: יְמַשְׁחַקָּת בְּתַבְלָ אַרְצָו וְשֻׁעְשָׂעִי אַתְּבָנִי אָדָם: יְבָעָתָה בְּגַם שְׁמֻעוֹדָלִי וְאַשְׁרִי דָּרְכִּי יְשָׁמָרָה: יְשָׁמָעוּ מַוְסָּר וְחַלְמָנוֹ וְאַל-תְּפַרְעָוָה: יְבָאָשָׁרִי אָדָם שְׁמָעָלִי לְשַׁקֵּד עַל-קְלָתִמִּי יוֹם יוֹם לְשַׁמֵּר מִזּוֹת פְּתַחְיִ: לְכִי מַצְאִי (כְּתִיב מַאֲאִ) מַאֲאָחָם נִינְקָךְ רָצְוָן מִ-ה-ז-ה: יְהֹתָאִי חַמֵּס נְפַשְּׁוֹ פֶּלֶן מְשֻׁנָּאִי אַהֲבוּ מַוְתָּה: –

“. . . 22The Lord acquired me at beginning of His quest, the first of His creations of old. 23For eternity I have reigned, from the beginning, preceding the earth. 24When there were no depths I was formed; when there were no fountains abounding with water. 25Before mountains were set down, before the hills, I was born. 26He had not yet made the earth or the fields, or the first dust of the world. 27When He established the heavens I was there, when He fixed the horizon over the surface of the deep; 28when He fortified the clouds above, when He strengthened the wellsprings of the depths; 29when He gave the sea its boundary so that the waters would not transgress His command, when He established the foundations of the earth; 30I was like a nursing beside Him, I was [His] delight every day, rejoicing before Him at all times; 31playing in the habitable areas of His world, and being delighted with the sons of man. 32And now, my children, listen to me; fortunate are those who observe my ways. 33Hearken to instruction and become wise, and do not put it to naught. 34Fortunate is the man who listens to me, coming early to my door each day, waiting at the doorposts of my entrances. 35For he who finds me finds life, and he has gained favor from the Lord. 36But he who turns away from me deprives his soul; all who hate me love death.”¹

A. Remember that it is “wisdom” that is speaking, and she is now declares that she was the first of Hashem’s creations (or at least the first of his creations “of old”). In Pesachim 54a and at Nedarim 39b, we are told –

“Seven phenomena were created before the world was created, and they are: Torah, and repentance, and the Garden of Eden, and Gehenna, and the Throne of Glory, and the Temple, and the name of Messiah.

The Gemara provides sources for each of these phenomena. **Torah** was created before the world was created, as it is written: ‘**The Lord made me as the beginning of His way**, the first of His works of old’ (Proverbs 8:22), which, based on the subsequent verses, is referring to the Torah.”²

As previously mentioned, in traditional Jewish thought wisdom and Torah are often seen as synonymous, albeit that does not always come across as peshat. Perhaps the source for this understanding (in addition to the Gemara above) is Devarim 4:6, which reads: “And you shall keep and perform [the statutes and ordinances of Hashem], for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the eyes of the peoples, who will hear all these statutes and say, ‘Only this great nation is a wise and understanding people’.”

To that end, recall that wisdom and understanding have twice been personified and mentioned together (“Say to wisdom, ‘You are my sister,’ and you shall call understanding a kinswoman.”³ and “Surely wisdom will call out [and] understanding will raise her voice.”⁴). As mentioned when we discussed Mishlei 7:4, wisdom and understanding may in fact be a singular female personification (and not two separate personifications) as the following verse (Mishlei 7:5) referred to only a singular personification.

B. Note that various commentators (e.g., Sforno & Abarbanel) understand that the first word of the Torah, בראשית הזמן ("In the beginning of time"), means ("In the beginning"), when Wisdom declares herself to be the "first" of Hashem's work, taken literally that would presuppose some concept of time existed at

¹ Mishlei Chapter 8.

² Translation from the Koren Talmud.

³ Mishlei 7:4.

⁴ Mishlei 8:1.

wisdom's creation. Bereshit Rabbah 1:4, elucidating ברא שית by interpreting it as being a contraction of two words, ברא שית (created six), states that six things were created before the world. “**The Torah and [God’s] heavenly Throne of Glory** were actually created prior to the world. **From where** is it known that the Torah preceded the creation of the world? **For it is stated, ‘Hashem made me as the beginning of his way’** (Proverbs 8:22). **From where** is it known that [God’s] heavenly Throne of Glory preceded the creation of the world? For it is written, **Your throne is established from the past, etc. . . . The forefathers, the people of Israel, the Holy Temple, and the name of Messiah entered the thought of God to be created** prior to the creation of the world.”⁵ Presumptively, Bereshit Rabbah, which left repentance, Gan Eden, and Gehenna, and swapped in (if you will) the Avot and Bnai Yisrael, did so in part due to a different theological emphasis. Bereshit Rabbah 1:4 goes on to say “**R’ Ahava bar R’ Zirah said: ‘repentance also entered into the thoughts of God prior to creation, for it is stated’ . . .**” and “**R’ Abba bar Kahana said: ‘The Torah preceded the Throne of Glory’ for it is stated, ‘Hashem made me as the beginning of his way.’** (Mishlei 8:22).”⁶

- Three questions to ponder: (1) Which came first, the creation of time or the Torah?, (2) If time was created first, when in relationship to the creation of Torah/Throne of Glory did Hashem have the “thought” to create the Avot, Israel, the Holy Temple, and the name of Messiah, and (3) Is Hashem having the “thought to create” equivalent to creation itself?

C. Rashi to Mishlei 8:30 says that wisdom being a delight to Hashem every day⁷ means that wisdom/Torah preceded creation by 2,000 years.⁸

D. Verse 33 offers man the possibility of becoming “wise”. The book of Iyov similarly addresses man’s ability to access wisdom and understand creation, but does it clarify parameters and limitations or establish a contradiction. Iyov 28:12-13 provides “But where can wisdom be found; [and] where is the source of understanding? No man grasps its value; it cannot be found in the land of the living.” After going on in this manner, rejecting mankind’s ability to find wisdom and understanding through a search, the chapter concludes, at Iyov 28:28, with “[God] said to man, ‘Behold, the fear of the Lord is wisdom; and to shun evil is understanding.’” Later, at Iyov 38:1 & 4, Hashem famously rejects man’s ability to understand how the universe operates and why: “Then the Lord answered Job from the tempest . . . ‘Where were you when I laid the earth’s creations?’ . . .” And recall Shlomo’s conclusion from Kohelet: “All this I probed with wisdom; I thought I could become wise, but it was far from me.”⁹ Perhaps the explanation of the discrepancy between Mishlei here (man can become wise) and Iyov/Kohelet can be found by revisiting our earlier discussion on how Mishlei declared wisdom (Torah) to be a “a tree of life for those who grasp it. . .”¹⁰, even though Torah told us that the punishment for eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil was death, and now seeing that Mishlei is dealing with wisdom that is coupled with Torah and righteousness, while Iyov and Kohelet are dealing with wisdom for its own sake (*i.e.*, more akin to eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil).

- Pirkei Avot 3:9 – “Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa said: ‘Anyone whose fear of sin precedes his wisdom, his wisdom is enduring, but anyone whose wisdom precedes his fear of sin, his wisdom is not enduring.’ . . .”
- In the next shiur we will seek to compare Iyov’s statement that “the fear of the Lord is wisdom” to Mishlei’s view that they are not synonymous, but that instead the fear of the Lord is a prerequisite to obtaining wisdom.

⁵ Translation from the Artscroll Bereishis Rabbah.

⁶ Id.

⁷ Rashi sees “טְהִרָּתְךָ” as meaning exactly two days.

⁸ Presumably Rashi bases this on Tehillim 90:4, “a thousand years in Your eyes are like a bygone yesterday”.

⁹ Kohelet 7:23.

¹⁰ Mishlei 3:18.

JANUARY

Simcha Kiddush Honorees

Birthdays

Josh Agress
Shifra Caruso
Eli Greenbaum
Noah Greenbaum
Yair Haddad-Cohen
Hayden Goldberg
Neshama Nudelman
Maya Santacruz

Nate Schwitzer
Rabbi Ely Shestack
Jacob Shtaynberger
Maayan Sufian
Nicole Sufian
Ben Wechsler
Beth Wechsler
Dena Winchester

Steven Winchester

Anniversaries

Sara and Larry Bernstein
Audrey and Jack Bickel



AHAVAT ACHIM
קהילת אהבת אחים
THE FAMILY SHUL



Board Game Night

FOR
ADULTS!



WITH PIZZA & BEER

**SATURDAY
JANUARY 24**

8:00 PM

\$10 per person

RSVP by 1/20

RSVP at:

<https://tinyurl.com/GameNightAA>

events@ahavatachim.org

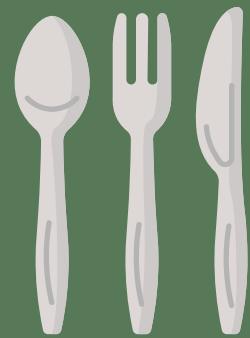
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Grow & Behold and
recovered ingredients
via Misfits Market



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utensils to be composted
and picked up by
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AHAVAT ACHIM
קהילת אהבת אחים
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THE FAMILY SHUL



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SAVE THE DATE

AHAVAT ACHIM ANNUAL DINNER

SUNDAY FEBRUARY 22ND, 2026

HONORING



MELANIE KWESTEL
DINNER HONOREE



SARA & NATAN SANTACRUZ
YOUNG LEADERSHIP AWARD

Ahavat Achim Presents...

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Night!



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8:00 PM/Doors Open at 7:30

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the comedy of

MIKE FINE



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Non-Members: \$25

After Feb 10

Members: \$10
Non-Members: \$30

At the door:

Members: \$10
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Covenant & Conversation

SHEMOT • שמות

FROM THE TEACHINGS AND WRITINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ז"ל

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

With thanks to the Schimmel Family for their generous sponsorship of Covenant & Conversation, dedicated in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel.

"I have loved the Torah of R' Chaim Schimmel ever since I first encountered it. It strives to be not just about truth on the surface but also its connection to a deeper truth beneath. Together with Anna, his remarkable wife of 60 years, they built a life dedicated to love of family, community, and Torah. An extraordinary couple who have moved me beyond measure by the example of their lives." — Rabbi Sacks

This year's series of essays were originally written and recorded by Rabbi Sacks zt"l in 5773 (2012–2013). These timeless messages are accompanied by a new [Family Edition](#) created to inspire intergenerational learning on the Parsha.

Leadership and the People

The sedra of Shemot, in a series of finely etched vignettes, paints a portrait of the life of Moses, culminating in the moment at which God appears to him in the bush that burns without being consumed. It is a key text of the Torah view of leadership, and every detail is significant. I want here to focus on just one passage in the long dialogue in which God summons Moses to undertake the mission of leading the Israelites to freedom – a challenge which, no less than four times, Moses declines. I am unworthy, he says. I am not a man of words. Send someone else. It is the second refusal, however, which attracted special attention from the Sages and led them to formulate one of their most radical interpretations. The Torah states:

Moses replied: "But they will not believe me. They will not listen to me. They will say, 'God did not appear to you.'"

Shemot 4:1

The Sages, ultra-sensitive to nuances in the text, evidently noticed three strange features of this response. The first is that God had already told Moses, "They will listen to you" (Ex. 3:18). Moses' reply seems to contradict God's prior assurance. To be sure, the commentators offered various harmonising interpretations. Ibn Ezra suggests that God had told Moses that the elders would listen to him, whereas Moses expressed doubts about the mass of the people. Ramban says that Moses did not doubt that they would believe initially, but he thought that they would lose faith as soon as they saw that Pharaoh would not let them go. There are other explanations, but the fact remains that Moses was not satisfied by God's assurance. His own experience of the fickleness of the people (one of them, years earlier, had already said, "Who made you ruler and judge over

us?”) made him doubt that they would be easy to lead.

The second anomaly is in the signs that God gave Moses to authenticate his mission. The first (the staff that turns into a snake) and third (the water that turned into blood) reappear later in the story. They are signs that Moses and Aaron perform not only for the Israelites but also for the Egyptians. The second, however, does not reappear. God tells Moses to put his hand in his cloak. When he takes it out, he sees that it has become “leprous as snow”. What is the significance of this particular sign? The Sages recalled that later, Miriam was punished with leprosy for speaking negatively about Moses (Bamidbar 12:10). In general they understood leprosy as a punishment for *lashon hara*, derogatory speech. Had Moses, perhaps, been guilty of the same sin?

The third detail is that, whereas Moses’ other refusals focused on his own sense of inadequacy, here he speaks not about himself but about the people. They will not believe him. Putting these three points together, the Sages arrived at the following comment:

Resh Lakish said: He who entertains a suspicion against the innocent will be bodily afflicted, as it is written, *Moses replied: But they will not believe me.* However, it was known to the Holy One blessed be He, that Israel would believe. He said to Moses: *They are believers, the children of believers, but you will*

ultimately disbelieve. They are believers, as it is written, and the people believed (Ex. 4:31). The children of believers [as it is written], and he [Abraham] believed in the Lord. But you will ultimately disbelieve, as it is said, [And the Lord said to Moses] *Because you did not believe in Me* (Num. 20:12). How do we know that he was afflicted? Because it is written, *And the Lord said to him, ‘Put your hand inside your cloak’* (Ex. 4:6).

Shabbat 97a

This is an extraordinary passage. Moses, it now becomes clear, was entitled to have doubts about his own worthiness for the task. What he was not entitled to do was to have doubts about the people. In fact, his doubts were amply justified. The people were fractious. Moses calls them a “stiff-necked people”. Time and again during the wilderness years they complained, sinned, and wanted to return to Egypt. Moses was not wrong in his estimate of their character. Yet God reprimanded him; indeed punished him by making his hand leprous. A fundamental principle of Jewish leadership is intimated here for the first time: a leader does not need faith in himself, but he must have faith in the people he is to lead.

This is an exceptionally important idea. The political philosopher Michael Walzer has written insightfully about social criticism, in particular about two stances the critic may take vis-à-vis those he criticises. On the one hand there is the

critic as outsider. At some stage, beginning in ancient Greece:

Detachment was added to defiance in the self-portrait of the hero. The impulse was Platonic; later on it was Stoic and Christian. Now the critical enterprise was said to require that one leave the city, imagined for the sake of the departure as a darkened cave, find one's way, alone, outside, to the illumination of Truth, and only then return to examine and reprove the inhabitants. The critic-who-returns doesn't engage the people as kin; he looks at them with a new objectivity; they are strangers to his new-found Truth.

This is the critic as detached intellectual. The prophets of Israel were quite different. Their message, writes Johannes Lindblom, was "characterized by the principle of solidarity". "They are rooted, for all their anger, in their own societies," writes Walzer. Like the Shunamite woman (Kings 2 4:13), their home is "among their own people". They speak, not from outside, but from within. That is what gives their words power. They identify with those to whom they speak. They share their history, their fate, their calling, their covenant. Hence the peculiar pathos of the prophetic calling. They are the voice of God to the people, but they are also the voice of the people to God. That, according to the Sages, was what God was teaching Moses: What matters is not whether they believe in you, but whether you believe in them. Unless you

believe in them, you cannot lead in the way a prophet must lead. You must identify with them and have faith in them, seeing not only their surface faults but also their underlying virtues. Otherwise, you will be no better than a detached intellectual – and that is the beginning of the end. If you do not believe in the people, eventually you will not even believe in God. You will think yourself superior to them, and that is a corruption of the soul.

The classic text on this theme is Maimonides' *Epistle on Martyrdom*. Written in 1165, when Maimonides was thirty years old, it was occasioned by a tragic period in medieval Jewish history when an extremist Muslim sect, the Almohads, forced many Jews to convert to Islam under threat of death. One of the forced converts (they were called *anusim*; later they became known as *marranos*) asked a rabbi whether he might gain merit by practising as many of the Torah's commands as he could in secret. The rabbi sent back a dismissive reply. Now that he had forsaken his faith, he wrote, he would achieve nothing by living secretly as a Jew. Any Jewish act he performed would not be a merit but an additional sin.

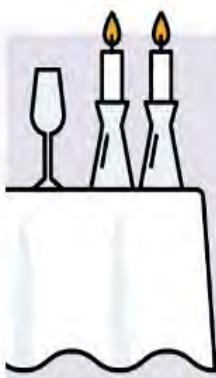
Maimonides' *Epistle* is a work of surpassing spiritual beauty. He utterly rejects the rabbi's reply. Those who keep Judaism in secret are to be praised, not blamed. He quotes a whole series of rabbinic passages in which God rebukes prophets who criticised the people of

Israel, including the one above about Moses. He then writes:

If this is the sort of punishment meted out to the pillars of the universe – Moses, Elijah, Isaiah, and the ministering angels – because they briefly criticised the Jewish congregation, can one have an idea of the fate of the least among the worthless [i.e. the rabbi who criticised the forced converts] who let his tongue loose against Jewish communities of Sages and their disciples, priests and Levites, and called them sinners, evildoers, gentiles, disqualified to testify, and heretics who deny the Lord God of Israel?

The *Epistle* is a definitive expression of the prophetic task: to speak out of love for one's people; to defend them, see the good in them, and raise them to higher achievements through praise, not condemnation.

Who is a leader? To this, the Jewish answer is, one who identifies with his or her people, mindful of their faults, to be sure, but convinced also of their potential greatness and their preciousness in the sight of God. “Those people of whom you have doubts,” said God to Moses, “are believers, the children of believers. They are My people, and they are your people. Just as you believe in Me, so you must believe in them.”



Around the Shabbat Table

1. Why might believing in people be harder than believing in an idea or a mission?
2. How should a leader strike a balance between believing in their people while simultaneously seeing their flaws?
3. How does faith in others change the way we speak about them?

● These questions come from this week's **Family Edition** to Rabbi Sacks' Covenant & Conversation. For an interactive, multi-generational study, check out the full edition at rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation-family-edition/shemot/-leadership-and-the-people/