

## Vayikra

Leviticus 1:1–5:26

Traditional Haftarah Reading:  
Isaiah 43:21–44:23

### Come Back to Me

CANTOR SARAH GRABINER

THE BOOK OF LEVITICUS begins with a list of commanded sacrifices: the well-being, meal, guilt, sin, and restitution offerings. Our first *parashah* of the sacrificial rites clarifies their common purpose: to evoke “atonement” for our sins. The verb *l’chapeir* (to make expiation), familiar from the “Day of Atonement,” Yom Kippur, appears eleven times in the text of our *parashah*. As such, the haftarah focuses on a time when the Children of Israel failed to make restitution and Isaiah’s response of prophetic outrage.

Isaiah’s reproach emphasizes the benefits of the covenant between God and God’s people and the risks of not fulfilling our ancient sacrificial obligations. However, in the middle of the text of the haftarah reading, the tone shifts: Indeed, as humans, we err, but forgiveness is always possible. God speaks, uncommonly, in the first-person singular: *Anochi, anochi*—“I, I am the One who blots out your transgressions” (Isaiah 43:25), and later, “I have swept away your transgressions like a cloud, your sins like like a thick cloud; return to Me” (44:22). These verses are central to our Yom Kippur liturgy, recited at least four times throughout the day.

It can be difficult to connect with the God of Leviticus, the God of blood-and-guts sacrifices. Yet, we embrace the first-person singular relationship asserted in this haftarah, which reminds us of the possibility of *t’shuvah*, of “return and redemption.” In this way, we find assurance—not only on Yom Kippur but also throughout the year. God always awaits our resolve to change.

— FOR Study Use Only —  
Shabbat Torah Study 3/25/23

## The Path to Blessing

RABBI BILLY DRESKIN

*Vayikra* (Leviticus 1–5) presents the Torah’s recipe for building a relationship with God through a system of sacrificial offerings that provided ancient Israel with a very specific and navigable path. Combined with the observance of the ethical mitzvot delineated elsewhere in Torah, this is how one earns God’s blessing.

As our haftarah reading from the Book of Isaiah indicates, Israel opts for a different and disappointing path, worshiping arrogance and self-indulgence as they fashion iron and wood into idols (Isaiah 44:9–20). Isaiah is possibly lamenting the majority of Israelites who declined King Cyrus of Persia’s invitation to return from Babylonia to the Promised Land. He writes with remorse, “They kindle a fire and bake bread; and they make a god and bow down [to it]” (44:15).

I cannot help but see our own world reflected in these words. The ever-continuing need for a racial justice movement reminds us that despite all the sources of learning and guidance available to us, we cling to small-minded ideas of superiority and domination. We continue to endanger the lives of others with our high-risk behavior; we choose death over life, again and again resisting simple prescriptions for healthy living that can easily bring these threats to heel. Not Torah alone but so many of humanity’s sacred teachings offer us “a very specific and navigable path” to blessing—yet we stubbornly refuse.

God is hopeful, however, that Israel will rekindle the relationship. “Return to Me, for I have redeemed you” (Isaiah 44:22). May we be among those who stay the course, partnering with God and the ideals that God represents, to help rebuild a world of goodness and well-being for all.

### *Alternative Haftarah Reading:*

#### *From “Where Judaism Differs,” by Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver*

Judaism admonished men not to despair of the future, nor of their own strength, nor of mankind’s inexhaustible spiritual resources nor of God’s cooperation. Long and hard is the way, but there is a way, and there is a goal.

The moral life and human aspirations are the “sacraments” of Judaism. It recognizes no others. There are no beliefs which “save” men. There are no ceremonial or ritual acts the very performance of which bestows supernatural grace and saving power. There are visible symbols in Judaism, signs of the covenant, memorials of fidelity, but no sacraments. From earnest and faithful quest of the good life, in all ways, great or small, flow all divine grace and power.

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## Do Not Despair of the Future

RABBI DANA EVAN KAPLAN, PhD

In this Torah portion, God sets forth the laws of animal sacrifice, explaining that different sacrifices serve different functions. God teaches Moses about the different types of offerings, what they should consist of, and under what circumstances they should be offered. These teachings are an elaborate description of biblical ritual. Ritual is a sequence of religious actions that are performed in a prescribed manner for a particular theological purpose. From the establishment of the First Temple (and possibly even earlier) to the destruction of the Second Temple more than a thousand years later, the major public Jewish rituals were performed primarily in the Jerusalem Temple.

Once the Second Temple was destroyed, the Sages developed new forms of ritual designed to replace the sacrifices that had been offered in the Temple. While the Sages who were alive at the time were shocked and horrified by the destruction of the Temple, they did not waste valuable energy on endless ruminations on the terrible tragedy that had befallen them.

As Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver reminds us, they did not despair of the future. There might be a long, arduous struggle ahead, but humankind has the spiritual resources, with the help of God, to accomplish almost anything. Central to Rabbi Silver's argument is the fact that in Judaism, the sacrifices were not essential for salvation. They were important public rituals that helped all to respond to the events of human existence in religiously meaningful ways, but they were not essential for the nullification of moral or ethical failings or for the restoration of spiritual purity. While the destruction of the Second Temple was a terrible tragedy, the Sages were able to take what Silver calls "visible symbols" from preexistent Jewish sources and practices as well as to create new "memorials of fidelity" in order to help all people develop an approach to faithfully pursue a life filled with divine grace.

Judaism places a heavy emphasis on living a good life, a life devoted to public welfare as well as personal happiness. As Reform Jews in twenty-first-century America, we understand that living a moral and ethical life are the only religious sacraments that we have. We agree with Rabbi Silver that beliefs do not bestow divine saving power upon humans. Judaism is urging us to take advantage of our short lives to do something good in concrete terms for our fellow human beings and for the world.

## B'har

Leviticus 25:1–26:2

Traditional Haftarah Reading:  
Jeremiah 32:6–27

### Buying Land While Facing Destruction

RABBI STEPHEN WEISMAN

The traditional haftarah reading for *Parashat B'har* has two parts:

1. God tells Jeremiah that his cousin Chanam-el will visit him and request that Jeremiah redeem his family's land in Anatot—and Chanam-el does arrive at the prophet's house. Jeremiah, recognizing God's will, redeems the land while imprisoned in Jerusalem for prophesying the impending downfall of Jerusalem. He gives the deed to his aide, Baruch, along with instruction to preserve it safely in an earthen jar.
2. Jeremiah offers a prayer, praising God's role in creation and Jewish history, marveling over God's faith with future generations, symbolized by God's request that he purchase his cousin's land.

This reading follows the Torah's laws regarding the Sabbatical and Jubilee years. In particular, it invokes the laws protecting land holdings in Leviticus 25:25–28 and our servitude to God in 25:55. The haftarah reading adds depth and significance to the Torah portion, which was becoming less accessible to a more and more urban Jewish community.

The haftarah's message is clear: just as God saved our faithful ancestors from Egyptian slavery by purchasing our lives from the Egyptians and providing a path to our freedom in our own land, so, in Jeremiah's time, and even while warning of the impending destruction, God promises to eventually give that land back to us—when we have earned it through our work on ourselves and when we will have brought justice to the world.

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## Proclaim Liberty Throughout All the Land Unto All the Inhabitants Thereof

RABBI STEPHEN WEISMAN

My choice for an alternative haftarah reading for *Parashat B'har* is inspired by thirty years of work with *b'nei mitzvah*. Summarizing *B'har* is challenging enough for twelve-year-olds. So much of its content has no connection to their lives. Asking them to pick what they want to read and teach about invariably leads them to select the opening verses, so they can focus on the words of Leviticus 25:10, inscribed on the Liberty Bell: "Proclaim Liberty Throughout All the Land Unto All the Inhabitants Thereof."

The words in this closing poem of Joel, especially Joel 4:10 ("Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears"), are an inversion of the more familiar, idyllic, and well-known teachings of Isaiah 2:4 and Micah 4:3. Yet they are neither bellicose nor hateful. They promise God's continuing love and support even in exile.

One may envision America's founders reading these verses from the Book of Joel in the early days of the Revolutionary War, seeking encouragement. In connection with the words they chose for the Liberty Bell, Joel's verses are a strong support for social justice initiatives.

### *Alternative Haftarah Reading: "The Horrors of Slavery," by Ernestine Rose*

It is utterly impossible for us, as finite beings, with the utmost stretch of the imagination, to conceive the depth and immensity of the horrors of slavery. I would that, instead of speaking and listening to-day, we could all sit down in perfect silence, and each and every one of us ask ourselves what is it to be a slave? . . .

We have the evil among us; we see it daily and hourly before us; we have become accustomed to it: we talk about it; but do we comprehend it—do we realize it—do we feel it?

What is it to be a slave?

Not to be your own, bodily, mentally, or morally—  
that is to be a slave.

Ay, even if slaveholders treated their slaves with the utmost kindness and charity; if I were told they kept them sitting on a sofa all day and fed them with the best  
of the land,

it is none the less slavery;

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for what does slavery mean?

To work hard, to fare ill, to suffer hardship, that is not slavery;  
for many of us white men and women have to work hard, have to fare ill,  
have to suffer hardship, and yet we are not slaves.

Slavery is not to belong to yourself—to be robbed of yourself.

There is nothing that I so much abhor as that single thing—to be robbed  
of one's self. . . .

The same mother earth has created us all; the same life pervades all;  
the same spirit ought to animate all.

Slavery deprives us of ourselves.

The slave has no power to say, "I will go here, or I will go yonder."

The slave cannot say, "My wife, my husband, or my child."

He does not belong to himself, and of course cannot claim anything whatever  
as his own.

This is the great abomination of slavery, that it deprives a man of the common  
rights of humanity stamped upon him by his Maker.

## Ensuring *D'ror*

CANTOR RHODA J. HARRISON, PhD

"Proclaim Liberty Throughout All the Land Unto All the Inhabitants Thereof"  
(Leviticus 25:10)—this is the Levitical verse that found its way onto America's  
Liberty Bell, a national symbol of independence. In the context of *Parashat B'har*,  
the verse introduces the instructions for the Jubilee year's release of one's material  
purchases, including land, loans, and people.

The choice of the word *d'ror*, translated on our national bell as "liberty," is of  
interest. Most often when referring to "freedom" (such as the setting free of a  
slave or servant), the Bible uses the word *chofesh*, a term that in Modern Hebrew  
retains the notion of freedom. When school lets out, *chofesh*, "vacation," begins.

So, why *d'ror*? Why not *chofesh*? The eleventh-century French commentator  
Rashi views *d'ror* as specifically the freedom from living under someone else's  
rule, an understandable interpretation given the reality of Jewish life in medi-  
eval France. Thirteenth-century grammarian Rabbi Avraham Bedersi argues  
that *chofesh* implies solely a reduction of servitude, whereas *d'ror* represents its  
total abolition. Later scholars add that while *chofesh* marks the absence of labor  
for a limited period of time, *d'ror* implies that a person has become his or her own  
master.

Ernestine Rose, an outspoken nineteenth-century feminist and abolitionist,  
abhorred the notion of slavery. Her writings, like this prophetic selection, fur-

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ther the biblical notion of *d'ror*. She understood that the proclamation of liberty throughout the land must apply eternally and universally to everyone, no matter the color of their skin or their gender.

Especially in today's world, where the shackles of slavery are not necessarily visible, Rose's words inspire us to fulfill the ideals of the Jubilee year by ensuring *d'ror* throughout the land to all its inhabitants.

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to accept women as rabbis, Rabbi Priesand and the women following her forged a path for female rabbis, cantors, and leaders in all the branches of Judaism. In remembering and celebrating this historic change, it is also important to recognize every woman who has not been afforded the opportunity to be ordained a rabbi, despite her efforts and longing. We especially think of Ray Frank (Litman), Martha Neumark (Montor), Irma Levy Lindheim, Dr. Dora Askowith, Helen Levinthal (Lyons), and Paula Herskovitz Ackerman, among the many who wanted to become rabbis but could not.

In celebrating Rabbi Priesand, we lift up every woman who has overcome limitations, contributing to the ever-widening acceptance of women as rabbis, cantors, scholars, Jewish professionals, thought leaders, and lay leaders. This haftarah reading links the verse from the biblical Book of Esther to Rabbi Priesand's own words. As Rabbi Priesand recounts, she just wanted to be a rabbi. Her aspiration was organic and ordinary, but her persistence met the right moment in history, making her ordination and rabbinate extraordinary.

May we all work to dismantle the societal structures that continue to disadvantage women in our communities.

## International Women's Day

MARCH 8

*From "Brown v. Board of Education in International Context,"  
by Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg*

On a personal note, *Brown* and its forerunners, along with the movement for international human rights that came later, powerfully influenced the women's rights litigation in which I was engaged in the 1970s. Thurgood Marshall and his co-workers sought to educate the Court, step by step, about the pernicious effects of race discrimination. Similarly, advocates for gender equality sought to inform the Court, through a series of cases, about the injustice of laws ordering or reinforcing separate spheres of human activity for men and women. The ACLU's Women's Rights Project, which I helped to launch and direct, was among the organizations inspired by the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund's example.

*Brown* figured four years ago in a courageous decision by Israel's Chief Justice, Aharon Barak. The Israel Land Administration had denied the asserted right of Arabs to build their homes on land in Israel open to the general public for home construction. The Administration defended the denial on the ground that it would allocate land to establish an exclusively Arab communal settlement. Citing *Brown*, the Israeli Supreme Court ruled that such allegedly separate-but-equal treatment constituted unlawful discrimination on the basis of national origin. . . .

To sum up, *Brown v. Board of Education* is a landmark case in the history of the civil rights movement. It represents the repression of the reality. It propels the human digni-

In this excerpt, she describes the breaking 1954 on the basis of race. In the 1970s was persuaded the Supreme Court to overrule *Plessy vs. Ferguson*. Likewise, uncorrupted. Ginsburg was interested in her remarks, she a passion that drove her.

The daughter as a Jew and as a woman. The discrimination of Jews—appointed by the law. At the time she did not know, a feminist.

In her approach to values, and teaching were the words of the prophet (Isaiah 16:20). Building on her work, Ginsburg, a pro-





To sum up, *Brown* both reflected and propelled the development of human rights protection internationally. It was decided with the horrors of the Holocaust in full view, and with the repression of Communist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe a current reality. It propelled an evolution yet unfinished toward respect, in law and in practice, for the human dignity of all the world's people.

## A Prophet in Her Own Time

SUSAN FRIEDBERG KALSON

In this excerpt from a speech Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg gave in the mid-2000s, she describes the concentric circles that continue to ripple out from the groundbreaking 1954 US Supreme Court ruling that “separate but equal” treatment on the basis of race is inherently unequal. Part of Ginsburg’s genius as a lawyer in the 1970s was to apply the same principles used by the civil rights movement to persuade the Supreme Court that laws discriminating on the basis of gender were likewise unconstitutional. A student of international legal commentary, Ginsburg was interested and engaged in the world beyond the United States. In these remarks, she advocates for equity among all peoples and nations with the same passion that drove her American jurisprudence.

The daughter of Jewish immigrants, the discrimination Ginsburg experienced as a Jew and as a pioneering female lawyer drove her determination to fight discrimination of all kinds. In 1993, she became the second woman—and sixth Jew—appointed to the Supreme Court, where she redoubled the battle for equality under the law even after her views became the minority, dissenting opinion. By the time she died, Erev Rosh HaShanah 5781 (2020), she was hailed as a superhero, a feminist icon, and a prophet.

In her approach to life and the law, Ginsburg was shaped by her Jewish identity, values, and teachings. Emblazoned on the walls of her Supreme Court chambers were the words “*Tzedek, tzedek, tirdof*—Justice, justice you shall pursue” (Deuteronomy 16:20). On International Women’s Day, may we take up her fight anew, building on her legacy to empower our call for justice, remembering Ruth Bader Ginsburg, a prophet in her own time—and for ours.

## Equal Pay Day

LAST WEEK OF MARCH/FIRST WEEK OF APRIL

*From "The Women of Reform Judaism Resolution on Pay Equity," 2015*

Given the profound injustice of unequal pay, Women of Reform Judaism reaffirms its commitment to achieving pay equity and calls upon its sisterhoods to:

1. Urge the swift adoption of legislation that would provide women who face sex-based wage discrimination with a straightforward, accessible path for recourse, including but not limited to:
  - a. Barring retaliation against workers who disclose their wages, so that workers can more easily determine whether they face wage discrimination, and
  - b. Ensuring the right to maintain a class action lawsuit, providing women with the same remedies in court for pay discrimination as those subjected to discrimination based on race or national origin.
2. Work with synagogue leadership to enact just compensation policies for clergy and staff at all levels, or, where they already exist, to ensure that these policies properly guide the compensation, interviewing, hiring, firing and promoting of clergy and staff.
3. Implement sisterhood or congregational programs to empower women with tools to address pay inequity they may face in their professional lives outside the synagogue.
4. Take a leadership role to advocate for pay equity in their Jewish community and in their broader local community by forging partnerships with Jewish, other faith, and secular organizations in those communities.

### You Shall Not Defraud Your Fellow

*RABBI LIZ P. G. HIRSCH*

Not unlike our Jewish holidays, Equal Pay Day is not fixed to one calendar date of the year. It moves according to the specific calculations of the wage gap each year. Black Equal Pay Day, Latina Equal Pay Day, and Native Equal Pay Day are consistently later in the year, emphasizing the wider wage gap due to greater pay discrimination faced by women of color in the United States.

As the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism notes, "Equal Pay Day is not a holiday to celebrate, but rather a day we use to bring attention to the ongoing injustice of pay discrimination in the United States . . . mark[ing] how far into the new year women must work to receive in wages what their male counterparts earned in the previous calendar year." The haftarah reading for Equal Pay Day is an excerpt from the Women of Reform Judaism's 2015 "Resolution on Pay Equity."

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Our values, principles, and resolutions are the roots of the Reform Movement. With our text, we affirm our sacred commitment to gender equality and economic justice.

There is much work to be done. According to an analysis by the National Partnership for Women and Families, as of March 2020, “women in the United States are paid 82 cents for every dollar paid to men.” The resolution first calls upon us to take a legislative strategy, supporting current bills and policies that work to reduce the gender wage gap. We can look to the work of our Religious Action Center for the most current legislation in need of our advocacy. Significantly, the resolution also requires us to hold up a mirror and examine the policies and practices of our own institutions to ensure we are modeling pay equity in every way. To that end, seventeen organizations have joined together to form the Reform Pay Equity Initiative, which is developing best practices for addressing the gender wage gap.

As we learn in the Holiness Code, the heart of our Torah, “You shall not defraud your fellow. You shall not commit robbery. The wages of a laborer shall not remain with you until morning” (Leviticus 19:13). May we work toward a day when all people are paid equally and justly.

## Transgender Day of Visibility

MARCH 31

*“Invisibility in Academe,” by Adrienne Rich*

Invisibility is a dangerous and painful condition. . . . When those who have power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you . . . when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing. Yet you know you exist and others like you, that this is a game with mirrors. It takes some strength of soul—and not just individual strength, but collective understanding—to resist this void, this non-being, into which you are thrust, and to stand up, demanding to be seen and heard. And to make yourself visible, to claim that your experience is just as real and normative as any other . . . can mean making yourself vulnerable. But at least you are not doing the oppressor’s work, building your own closet.

## We Must Reshape Our World

ARIEL TOVLEV

Transgender Day of Visibility is not just a day of awareness. We have long been written out of history, as if we do not exist, as if we have never existed. And yet



despite this invisibility, we have come to understand ourselves anyway. Transgender Day of Visibility is our collective call: we exist, we have always existed, and we will continue to exist.

But we cannot call out alone. We must come together in community to amplify our message, to declare to the world, “We are human beings! Our experiences are valid! Consider us not only in death and tragedy, but in life and joy! Celebrate with us in our life-affirming joy of gender euphoria!”

It is terrifying to be told you do not exist and to respond defiantly that you do. But in the midst of this vulnerability, there is strength and community. To every trans person who has felt invisible: you are valid, we see you, and you are not alone. To everyone, of every gender: we must reshape our world for it to include all of us. May we build a world that rejoices in everyone as they are, and may there be no need for closets anymore.

## Baseball Opening Day

*From “Kenneth Holtzman,” Jewish Virtual Library*

Kenneth Dale Holtzman is a former Jewish professional baseball player. He is still the winningest Jewish pitcher in [Major League Baseball] history. Holtzman (born November 3, 1945) was born in St. Louis. As a child, Holtzman would alternate eating Friday nights at the kosher homes of both sets of grandparents, who all immigrated to the United States from Russia. . . .

Holtzman signed with the Chicago Cubs . . . and made his major league debut at age 19 on September 4, 1965. . . . Holtzman was being called “another Sandy Koufax” as soon as he arrived in the big leagues. . . . The two greatest Jewish pitchers in history faced each other for the one and only time in their careers on September 25, 1966, the day after both had attended synagogue services for Yom Kippur. Holtzman was finishing his first full season in the majors while Koufax was winding down his final season. Holtzman [threw] a no-hitter for eight innings and [won] 2-1. . . .

When the second game of the 1973 American League Championship Series game against Baltimore fell on Yom Kippur, Holtzman—scheduled to pitch—did not play. That morning, a limousine took him to the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation, where he was escorted to the synagogue’s front row and was seated next to Jerry Hoffberger, owner of the [Baltimore] Orioles.

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## When Our Secular and Jewish Lives Come into Conflict: When Ken Holtzman Was Scheduled to Pitch on Yom Kippur

RABBI STEPHEN WEISMAN

Athletes, especially those at the higher levels of their sports, dedicate a great amount of their time to learning, training, and polishing their craft, often at the expense of being able to get involved in other things. In this, their experience is not very different from that of many young American Jews in the year of training leading to their celebration of becoming *b'nei mitzvah*. Preparation and training require sacrifice.

For most of us, most of the time, the secular and the Jewish elements of our lives complement each other, allowing our full involvement in both with little conflict. Sometimes, however, some of us find these elements working against each other, pulling us in two directions at once. At times like these, it is reassuring to know that we are not alone and to see how famous Jewish Americans have handled such conflicts. While the story of Sandy Koufax not pitching the first game of the 1965 World Series is much better known, Ken Holtzman experienced a similar conflict. Holtzman shared memories of that day with *Haaretz* in an article entitled “This Day in Jewish History, 1945: American Baseball Legend Who Struck Out in Israel Is Born”:

“I said to myself,” recalled Holtzman, “Oh my God, the owner of the opposing team. We’re both missing today’s game, and I have to pitch against his team in Oakland when I get home.” Fortunately, Hoffberger turned out to be “the nicest guy in the world,” and following services, he invited Holtzman back to his home. . . . Rested from his extra day off, Holtzman led his team to a 2–1 victory over the Orioles, and the A’s went on to win the pennant and the World Series.

Not all of life’s challenges work out so well, especially when two parts of our core being are thrown into conflict. Holtzman’s decision—in this case, to put his Jewish identity and values ahead even of his support for his team in a playoff game, because he had faith in their ability to win without him—was handsomely rewarded.

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