

DEVOTIONS BY RABBI YECHIEL ECKSTEIN

# A MAN OF FAITH

REFLECTIONS ON GODLY LEADERSHIP  
FROM THE ANCIENT SHEPHERDS OF ISRAEL



International Fellowship  
of Christians and Jews®



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*But blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD,  
whose confidence is in him.  
They will be like a tree planted by the water  
that sends out its roots by the stream.  
It does not fear when heat comes;  
its leaves are always green.  
It has no worries in a year of drought  
and never fails to bear fruit.  
— Jeremiah 17:7–8*

# INTRODUCTION

## GROWING AS A MAN OF FAITH



IN HABAKKUK 2:4 WE READ, *“the righteous shall live by his faith”* (ESV). Faith is life-giving. It breathes hope into a climate of despair and sheds light in places of darkness. It fills our life with inspiration and meaning. It is the cornerstone of our belief and practice. Ultimately, faith is the foundation upon which everything else rests.

This is why the very first commandment on the two tablets that Moses brought down from Mt. Sinai reads: *“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery”* (Exodus 20:2). Our fundamental obligation is to have faith in a God who is involved in our lives — not a God who created the world and disappeared, but a God who brought the children of Israel out of Egypt when He heard their cries and who continues to answer our prayers today. A man of faith lives his life knowing that it’s not the external circumstances that will determine his course in life, but his relationship with God.

The prophet Jeremiah paints for us a beautiful picture of the man of faith in Jeremiah 17. First, he portrays those without faith *“... like a bush in the wastelands; they will not see prosperity when it comes. They will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives”* (vv.5–6). Without faith, there is no true prosperity; a person cannot thrive or develop to his greatest potential.

However, a man of faith *“... will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit”* (vv.7–8). Even in the most challenging situation, the man of faith will always bear fruit — something good will come

from any situation. A man of faith will thrive in a year of drought because he is connected directly to the source of life.

In this booklet, we will explore some of the Bible's greatest men of faith and their defining characteristic. In Micah 5:5, we read about "*seven shepherds*," and in the Jewish tradition, this refers to the seven paramount leaders of Israel: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, and David. Each of these shepherds personifies a particular virtue: Abraham, kindness; Isaac, strength; Jacob, truth; Joseph, righteousness; Moses, humility; Aaron, peace; and David, leadership.

We will study the defining character and virtues of each of these great leaders of the Jewish and Christian faiths through a reflective thought, prayer, and challenge for today's man of faith to grow closer in his walk with God. In addition, we will reflect on three more significant leaders in the *Torah* who faithfully shepherded the nation of Israel and their defining characteristic: Solomon, wisdom; Elijah, conviction; and Hezekiah, faithfulness.

There is much to learn from the lives of these leaders who formed the nation of Israel. But ultimately there is only one true shepherd. As King David wrote in Psalm 23:1, "*The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.*" On *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement, we repeat the following phrase no less than four times throughout the service: "We are your sheep, and You are our shepherd."

Let us strengthen our faith in our God and follow Him in obedience as sheep follow their shepherd. As we follow in the footsteps of these ten men of faith and learn from them, may God bless us, protect us, and guide us on our journey.

# ABRAHAM

## A MAN OF KINDNESS



*The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them [saying] “. . . Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way . . .”*

— Genesis 18:1–5

AS AUTHOR HENRY JAMES ONCE SAID, “THREE THINGS IN HUMAN LIFE are important: the first is to be kind; the second is to be kind; and the third is to be kind.”

Abraham would have agreed. The Jewish sages teach that Abraham was the original model for kindness. Three days after his circumcision, Abraham was sitting by his tent looking for visitors on whom he could bestow kindness. The third day after any operation is usually the most painful, and so God made the day unusually hot so that no one would bother Abraham. However, for Abraham, the pain of not being able to perform an act of kindness on any given day was greater than the pain of circumcision.

Most people think being kind means behaving nicely to those we encounter during our day. We may even give charity and volunteer once in a while. However, Abraham set the bar much higher. He *actively* sought out ways to be kind. He didn’t wait for an opportunity to come his way; Abraham looked for opportunities like they were

precious gold. For Abraham, a day without performing an act of kindness was a day not worth living.

Let's try to understand this for a moment. Let's say someone told you that for every act of kindness, \$10,000 would be deposited into your bank account. Would you still be sitting in your chair? Probably not! You would immediately look for people to help. If no other opportunities were available, you'd get in your car and drive to the nearest store where you could help someone with their groceries or help an elderly person cross the street. Opportunities for kindness are everywhere, and you would do your best to perform them, right?

That's exactly how Abraham perceived kindness, except he wasn't getting a monetary reward. His reward was knowing that he helped someone, fulfilled God's will, and brought godliness into the world. That was worth more than gold to Abraham.

Studies have shown that a great way to feel happier is to make someone else happy. Try to raise the bar and actively look for ways to extend kindness to others as Abraham did. You'll be amazed by how much good you can do and how good you will feel.

### **PRAYER:**

*Establish peace, goodness, blessing, graciousness, kindness, and compassion, upon us and upon all of Your people. Bless us our Father, all of us as one, with the light of Your countenance, for with the light of Your countenance You gave us the Torah of life and a love of kindness.*

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This prayer is part of the *Amidah*, the silent meditation that is recited by observant Jews three times a day.

### **CHALLENGE:**

Think about a recent opportunity that you either missed or ignored to show kindness, to family, friends or strangers. What could you do to make up for that by showing kindness to them now? Like Abraham, be looking for opportunities to show a kindness proactively, not just reactively. Set a goal for yourself — 10 acts of kindness? 20? 100? Keep in mind that no act of kindness is too small.



# ISAAC

## A MAN OF STRENGTH



*Isaac trembled violently and said, “Who was it, then, that hunted game and brought it to me? I ate it just before you came and I blessed him—and indeed he will be blessed!”*

— Genesis 27:33

ISAAC HAD WANTED TO GIVE THE BIRTHRIGHT BLESSINGS TO THE ELDEST of his twin sons, Esau. But Rebekah knew better. During her pregnancy, she had been told prophetically that Esau would be unworthy of receiving the blessings, while Jacob would need them to fulfill his mission of spreading God’s Word. So Rebekah coached Jacob on how to trick his father into giving him the blessings. The plan succeeded, and then came the moment when Isaac realized that he was duped.

The real Esau returned from a day of hunting, ready to be blessed. Isaac asked, “Who are you?” Esau answered “It’s me, your son Esau!” And then it all comes together in one crushing moment. As the Bible tells us, “*Isaac trembled violently . . .*” The Jewish sages explain that Isaac didn’t tremble because he was angry. He trembled because he realized that he had been terribly mistaken. This was no ordinary shudder. This was the kind of shuddering that shakes a person to the core. Isaac’s whole outlook had been wrong, and only now did he fully understand God’s plan for his sons. All of Isaac’s hopes and dreams for Esau came crashing to the ground.

We can feel Isaac’s pain. The moment is sad and heart-wrenching, but at the same time, it is strengthening and inspiring. How many of us could walk away from a lifelong belief and humbly accept that

we were mistaken? And yet, Isaac does just that, and it is a testament to his strong character.

There is a story in the *Talmud* about a rabbi who spent his life's energies studying a word that appears hundreds of times in the Bible: *et*, loosely translated as "and" or "also." The rabbi theorized that every time the word was used, there was an additional law to be learned about the subject at hand. He spent his life extrapolating those hidden laws — until one day he was stumped.

He was forced to conclude that his theory was wrong, and he discarded what had been his entire life's work. When his students asked him how he could do such a thing, the rabbi answered: "Just as I was given reward for expounding, so I shall be given reward for refraining." The rabbi knew when to quit, and he wasn't too proud to admit when he was wrong.

We all know what it's like to find out that we have been mistaken. It is humbling and can shake our world. But there is something much worse than letting go of a long-held belief; it's continuing with the same faulty outlook and repeating the same mistakes over and over.

We can learn from the strength of Isaac on how to confront our mistakes and let them go. Only then can we change our course and move on with grace.

## **PRAYER:**

*Blessed are You, LORD, our God, King of the universe, Who firms man's footsteps. Blessed are You, LORD, our God, King of the universe, Who girds Israel with strength. Blessed are You, LORD, our God, King of the universe, Who crowns Israel with splendor. Blessed are You, LORD, our God, King of the universe, Who gives strength to the weary.*

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These blessings are part of the Jewish daily morning prayer service.

## **CHALLENGE:**

Develop your inner strength muscles by exercising humility. Think about someone in your life with whom you are in strong disagreement at the moment. Even though you may be right, choose to walk away from an argument when it is clear that no good will come from it. But carefully consider the possibility that you may be wrong, and if so, be strong enough to admit it, correct it, and if necessary, apologize for it.

# JACOB

## A MAN OF TRUTH



*Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Harran.*

— Genesis 28:10

A STORY IS TOLD ABOUT A MAN WHO APPROACHED HIS RABBI AND ASKED, “I only have a half hour every day to dedicate to study. Should I study *Torah* or *mussar* (the Jewish equivalent of self-development)?” The rabbi answered, “Study *mussar*. Then you will realize that you have more than a half hour a day to study the *Torah*!”

Indeed, if we fully understood the importance of Bible study, we would find a way to make the time for meaningful study every day.

In Genesis 28:10, we are told that Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Harran, where he would seek out a wife in his uncle’s home. However, we had already learned that Jacob had left home in Genesis 28:5: “*Then Isaac sent Jacob on his way, and he went to Paddan Aram, to Laban . . .*” Why the repetition?

The Jewish sages explain that the first time Jacob left, he didn’t go straight to Laban’s home. Instead, he went to study at the academy of Shem and Eber, a seminary set up by Noah’s son and grandson for the study of monotheism and ethics. The sages teach that Jacob felt unprepared to face the tasks of going into exile, living in the home of the duplicitous Laban, and finding the right spouse.

In order to prepare himself spiritually for the challenges he would face, Jacob turned to studying God’s Word as it was known at the time through oral traditions. In fact, Jewish tradition says that Jacob studied for over a decade and then set out for Harran in earnest. In Genesis 28:10 when we read that Jacob left Beersheba, it is because

armed with God's truth, Jacob was at last ready to set out on his perilous journey.

The sages encourage us to learn from Jacob's example. God's Word is not just something nice to read once in a while. Bible study is not merely an academic pursuit. The *Torah* is our guidebook, a tool for coping with the struggles of daily life. In Psalm 19 we read that the Bible refreshes the soul and makes simple minds wise (v.7), that it gives joy to the heart and light to the eyes (v.8). Equipped with knowing the truth of God's Word, we are able to deal with the many challenges in our lives.

Try designating a significant amount of time to studying your Bible daily and you will be fully prepared for the demands of daily life. Arm yourself with God's Word; equip your soul with the truth of Scriptures. As it says, "*She [the Bible] is a tree of life to those who take hold of her; those who hold her fast will be blessed*" (Proverbs 3:18).

### **PRAYER:**

*May it be Your will to have mercy on me and to turn my heart to love and to be in awe of Your Name, and to diligently study Your holy Torah. Remove from before me any obstacles that prevent me from doing so and make it known to me all of the incentives to study it. For You hear prayer with compassion. Blessed are You, Eternal One, Who hears prayer.*

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Composed by Avrohom Yeshaya Karelitz, better known as the *Chazon Ish*, or "Man of Vision." The *Chazon Ish* was a 20th-century rabbi born in Belarus, who emigrated to Israel in 1933 as a pioneer before the state of Israel was officially recognized.

### **CHALLENGE:**

Spend the first 15 minutes of every day in God's Word. Find at least one nugget of truth or teaching that you want to remember through the day, and note it somewhere like a journal or a digital note or calendar item on your phone. Keep the teaching with you throughout your day and notice the impact God's Word has on your actions and the reactions throughout the day.

# JOSEPH

## A MAN OF RIGHTEOUSNESS



*The sea looked and fled, the Jordan turned back;*

— Psalm 114:3

PSALM 114 IS PART OF A GROUP OF SIX PSALMS THAT WERE ORIGINALLY sung after the Israelites crossed the Red Sea. It is a psalm of praise, rejoicing in the amazing events that followed their Exodus from Egypt. It describes the sea as “fleeing,” the Jordan “retreating,” and mountains “leaping like rams.” The sea fled when it parted, allowing the Israelites to safely escape their Egyptian enemies. The waters of the Jordan retreated when they separated, offering secure passage for the Israelites through to the Promised Land. The mountains shook when God descended upon Mt. Sinai to give Moses the Ten Commandments.

Psalm 114 recounts the many miracles that brought about the birth of the nation of Israel. But one miracle, in particular, deserves a closer look. The psalmist reveals that when the Israelites approached the Red Sea, it “*looked and fled*.” What did the sea look at that made it part?

Jewish tradition teaches that the sea fled upon seeing the bones of Joseph, the son of Jacob, who had requested that the Israelites take his remains with them when they left Egypt. Something about the bones of Joseph caused the sea to react. But what? For the answer, we turn to Joseph’s greatest moment.

Joseph’s greatest achievement was not becoming the viceroy of Egypt. It wasn’t even his willingness to forgive and help his brothers, despite their betrayal. Joseph’s greatest moment came when he refused the advances of his master’s wife.

As you may recall, after being sold into slavery in Egypt, Joseph found himself working in the home of Potiphar, a member of the Pharaoh's personal staff. Potiphar's wife took a liking to him and tried daily to ensnare Joseph in sin, but Joseph was able to refuse her offers. The Bible recounts his struggle: *"How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her"* (Genesis 39:9-10). Joseph fought against his natural desires, and he won. Joseph continually chose righteousness over temptation.

Such self-mastery is an achievement like no other. The Jewish sages teach that when the sea saw the remains of Joseph, it said, "If Joseph can go against his nature, I can go against my nature, too," and it parted.

Friends, are you looking for miracles? We don't need to wait for a sea to divide or mountains to leap! For miracles, we need to look no further than ourselves. Every day is a chance to bring the miraculous into the world. Are we drawn to gossip? Hold our tongues. Do we worry incessantly? Trust in God. Find the areas in which you come up short — and go beyond them. Choose righteousness — that is a true miracle!

### **PRAYER:**

*May it be Your will, LORD, that you attach us to Your commandments. Do not bring us into the power of error, nor into the power of transgression and sin, nor into the power of challenge. Let not the Evil Inclination dominate us. Distance us from an evil person and an evil companion. Attach us to the Good Inclination and to good deeds and compel our Evil Inclination to be subservient to You.*

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This prayer is taken from the Jewish daily morning service.

### **CHALLENGE:**

Identify one of your own character traits or tendencies that you'd like to change. First, take a week to notice every time that you fail in this area and record it in a journal. Next, spend a week noticing when you are *about* to fail and record that in your journal. Finally, with your newly trained awareness, notice when you are about to fail and ask God to help you keep from doing so. Celebrate every victory!

# MOSES

## A MAN OF HUMILITY



*“Command the Israelites to bring you clear oil of pressed olives for the light so that the lamps may be kept burning. In the tent of meeting, outside the curtain that shields the ark of the covenant law, Aaron and his sons are to keep the lamps burning before the LORD from evening till morning. This is to be a lasting ordinance among the Israelites for the generations to come.” — Exodus 27:20–21*

OUR SCRIPTURE VERSE BEGINS, *“Command the Israelites to bring you clear oil . . .”* God was giving the command, but who was He talking to? In context, the answer is obvious: God was talking to Moses. However, the fact that Moses was not mentioned by name raises a flag. From the time of Moses’ birth until the end of the Five Books of Moses, Moses’ name is mentioned in every single *Torah* parshah — the traditional Jewish readings from Genesis to Deuteronomy that is followed every year — except for this one. Why?

The Jewish sages explain that this particular *Torah* portion deals with Aaron’s appointment as the High Priest and the duties of his descendants. This was Aaron’s moment. The sages explain that Moses, in his great humility, understood that this was Aaron’s portion. He gladly stepped aside so that Aaron could shine.

Moses is known as the most humble man of all (Numbers 12:3), and his example teaches us that true humility is having enough self-esteem that you don’t always need to be the one in the spotlight. True humility is being able to peacefully and joyfully move aside so that others can have their moment. This is also the hallmark of any

great leader. A good leader can lead others. However, a great leader also empowers others so that they can forge a path of their own.

When Moses stepped aside for Aaron, it was a beautiful counterbalance for the time that Aaron made way for Moses. Back in Exodus 4, when Moses encountered God at the burning bush, he put forth all sorts of arguments for why he should not be the one to redeem Israel. Finally, Moses pleaded with God, *“Please send someone else”* (v.13), and the sages explain that Moses was arguing that Aaron should be chosen, not him. Aaron, as the older brother, deserved the privilege and honor of being the leader of Israel, not Moses. But God responded, *“What about your brother, Aaron . . . He is already on his way to meet you, and he will be glad to see you”* (v.14). God reassured Moses that Aaron knew that Moses had been chosen and that he was sincerely happy for Moses. Aaron didn’t need to be in the spotlight — he was only too glad to see his brother excel.

We can all learn from Moses and Aaron by looking for ways to help others to reach their potential. How might we take a step back to let someone else advance? For a parent, it may mean giving a child a chance to do a grownup job. At work, it may mean giving an employee a shot at doing something new and extraordinary. Be joyful and glad for others when they have their moment — and be ready to step aside to let others shine.

### **PRAYER:**

*My God, guard my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking deceitfully. To those who curse me, let my soul be silent; and let my soul be like dust to everyone.*

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This prayer is recited at the conclusion of the *Amidah*, the silent meditation, a long prayer that is recited at every Jewish service.

### **CHALLENGE:**

Find a way to decisively step aside and play a supportive role for others — whether at work, at home, or in your church community. Identify a person you can mentor or someone who deserves to be given an opportunity. Focus your energy on helping others reach their full potential, allowing them to shine!



# AARON

## A MAN OF PEACE



*“When anyone has a swelling or a rash or a shiny spot on their skin that may be a defiling skin disease, they must be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons who is a priest.” — Leviticus 13:2*

IN LEVITICUS 13:2 WE LEARN THAT ANYONE WHO SUSPECTED THAT HE OR she might have a “defiling skin disease,” in Hebrew *tzara’at*, had to go before Aaron, the high priest, or one of his descendants. Now, the last time I thought that something was amiss physically, I went to a doctor. Why are the children of Israel commanded to go to a priest, specifically Aaron, or one of his sons, when experiencing a physical ailment?

The Jewish sages teach that *tzara’at* wasn’t a physical disease like others. It was primarily a *spiritual* disease that had *physical* symptoms, which is why a spiritual healer was needed more than an expert in medicine. The main cause that brought about this spiritual/physical affliction was the sin of speaking badly about others. Whether a person engaged in gossip or slandered others with lies, the result was a *tzara’at*, or defiling skin disease.

The rabbis teach that a common excuse among those who gossip is “but it’s true.” We rationalize our actions by explaining that if something is true, then it’s OK to say it. We hide behind the notion that “others need to know the truth,” which may be appropriate in some cases, but isn’t usually the case when it comes to telling others about how unfairly Susan treated you yesterday or what you overheard Bill say about Gary at the coffee machine. So while we

may think that we are doing others a favor by sharing the truth with them, in fact, we are doing a disservice by creating wedges between people and severing the bonds of humanity.

This is why the gossip was sent to Aaron. According to Jewish tradition, Aaron was the champion of peace — even at the cost of truth. What does this mean exactly? This is how Aaron would operate: As soon as he heard that two people had been quarrelling, he would go to each person and claim that the other was remorseful. He would exaggerate how badly each one felt and he would relay the good things said by one party about the other. This created the space for each side to meet and reconcile. Yes, Aaron compromised the truth, but for the sake of peace.

This, according to Judaism, is not only permissible, but advisable. Hillel the Elder used to say: “Be a student of Aaron: love peace and pursue peace.”

So if Aaron was able to sacrifice truth for peace, how much more should we stay away from compromising peace for the sake of “truth” that could lead to division and quarrels? Let’s use our words to bring people together. Let us build bridges and help rectify old rifts. At the very least, let us be careful not to use our words to tear people apart. Love peace and pursue it!

### **PRAYER:**

*May the LORD bless you and safeguard you. May the LORD illuminate His countenance for you and be gracious to you. May the LORD lift His countenance to you and establish peace for you.*

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This is the priestly blessing from Numbers 6:24–26. It is still recited in synagogues across the world by *kohanim*, those who can trace their ancestry back to Aaron.

### **CHALLENGE:**

How can you be a peacemaker this week, this day? What can you do to bring two quarrelling parties together in peace? Take it upon yourself to avoid and reject being the cause of strife — even the tiniest bit. Even if the other person is nasty and wrong, be a “student of Aaron” and choose peace.

# DAVID

## A MAN OF LEADERSHIP



*"I have sinned against the LORD."* — 2 Samuel 12:13

WHAT DEFINES GREATNESS? WHEN WE THINK OF GREAT INDIVIDUALS, WE think of those who have accomplished many things in their lifetimes and succeeded in reaching their goals. Greatness is mastery and flawlessness. According to our Scriptures, however, greatness is defined by failure.

Failure?

That's right. The words that transformed King David into one of the greatest men and leaders of all time are the words *"I have sinned against the LORD."* In other words, "I seriously messed up." This was the response given to the prophet Nathan who had come to confront the king and tell him he had sinned when he took a beautiful woman named Bathsheba to be his wife. Bathsheba was married at the time, and while King David did not personally kill her husband Uriah, he did have Bathsheba's husband sent to the front lines of battle where he was sure to be killed, and that's exactly what happened. After Uriah died, King David took Bathsheba as his own wife.

King David's greatest and defining moment is the minute that he realized that he had failed and the confession he voiced a split second later. Jewish tradition teaches that it was his ability to admit his mistake that made King David worthy of everlasting kingship and one of Israel's greatest leaders.

Everyone makes mistakes, but our missteps are not what define us. It is our response to our lowest moments that transform us into better or lesser beings. If we own up to our mistakes and take responsibility

for them, we can learn from them. Ironically, our failures can end up being our greatest catalysts for positive growth.

Take Thomas Edison, for example. It is said that he failed 1,000 times before he successfully invented the life-changing light bulb. When asked how he felt about failing 1,000 times, Edison replied, “I didn’t fail 1,000 times. The light bulb was an invention that had 1,001 steps.” Greatness is born out of failure. More specifically, mistakes provide us with the opportunity to become great. The choice is ours.

How would your relationships be different if every time you wronged someone you owned up to it? Three little words — “I was wrong” — are the best gift that you can give to anyone. And as we learn from King David, it may just be the greatest gift that we can give to ourselves.

### **PRAYER:**

*Cleanse us from all our sins and clothe us again with a garment of holiness, as it is written: “See I have removed your iniquity from upon you, dress yourself in festive attire” (Zachariah 3:4). Like the prayer of King David of blessed memory: “Restore to me the joy of Your salvation and with a generous spirit, support me” (Psalm 51:14). “Create a new heart for us, O God, and renew for us a steadfast spirit” (Psalm 51:12).*

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This prayer is taken from a text traditionally recited on the eve of *Yom Kippur*, The Day of Atonement.

### **CHALLENGE:**

Achieve greatness by taking responsibility for your mistakes. Consider your actions in recent days and weeks, looking for a mistake or wrong you committed that you never acknowledged or reconciled. Go back to those you wounded to admit “I was wrong,” or “I made a mistake,” or “I’m sorry,” whatever may be appropriate. It goes without saying that this is critical in relationships with friends and spouses, but it’s also important to say these words to others we may lead, be they employees or children. Sometimes, it’s the best way to lead and teach by example.

# SOLOMON

## A MAN OF WISDOM



*“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher.  
“Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.”  
What do people gain from all their labors at which  
they toil under the sun? — Ecclesiastes 1:2–3*

THERE IS A COMMON REFRAIN THROUGHOUT THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES. The book begins and ends with the author declaring that *“everything is meaningless.”* But can that really be true? Is King Solomon — considered the wisest man to ever live — saying that life is a meaningless accident? Can it be that he believes there is no point to our limited time on this planet?

But there is another phrase that repeats itself throughout Solomon’s writings. That term is *“under the sun.”* When Solomon talked about life under the sun, he was referring to the material, physical aspect of life. And in that respect, yes — everything is meaningless! Everything physical is temporary and empty. Solomon’s father, King David, wrote, *“Man is like a breath; his days are like a fleeting shadow”* (Psalm 144:4).

But that’s life *under* the sun. There is also life *beyond* the sun, and that is something else altogether different. Life beyond the sun describes the spiritual part of life. The point that Solomon in all his wisdom was trying to drive home is that ultimately, that’s the only part of life that really matters. Only the spirit lasts forever.

The Walton family is one of the wealthiest families in the world today. Sam Walton, the family’s patriarch, was the founder of Wal-Mart. Sam was more successful than anyone could have ever imagined, and so his final words before he left this world are very

instructive. When Sam looked back on a lifetime of unprecedented material success, he had just three words to say. His last words: “I blew it!”

By the world’s standards, Sam Walton had been one of the most successful individuals in the world. But by his own admission, he had failed. Like King Solomon, he wondered, *“What do people gain from all their labors at which they toil under the sun?”* Sam had worked hard and made billions. But what good does that money do for him now?

The legacy of Sam Walton is that material success does not make a life worth living. If our goal is strictly material, we are missing the whole point of life!

So what is the goal of life? Solomon sums it up for us: “. . . here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind” (Ecclesiastes 12:13). The only achievements that last forever are spiritual. We are here to become better people and to help make the world a better place. The goal of life has nothing to do with what we have, but everything to do with who we are.

As Solomon wisely taught, life under the sun becomes meaningful only when we go beyond it.

### **PRAYER:**

*You graciously endow man with wisdom and teach insight to a frail mortal. Endow us graciously from Yourself with wisdom, insight, and discernment. Blessed are You, God, gracious Giver of wisdom.*

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This prayer is part of the *Amidah*, the silent meditation, recited by observant Jews three times a day.

### **CHALLENGE:**

How might you be blowing it today, like Sam Walton? Consider what ways you may be putting temporary, materialistic pursuits — “under the sun” — ahead of what is truly meaningful in life — “beyond the sun.” Ask God to show you your own heart, and listen for an answer. Then look for ways to apply Solomon’s wisdom and alter your priorities today and this week to make more room for what matters most.

# ELIJAH

## A MAN OF CONVICTION



*“Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD. The god who answers by fire—he is God.” Then all the people said, “What you say is good.” — 1 Kings 18:24*

ONE OF THE MOST DRAMATIC EPISODES IN THE *Torah* OCCURS DURING the time of Elijah the prophet when the rulers of Israel were the wicked King Ahab and his equally evil wife, Queen Jezebel. Not only did they worship idols and encouraged idolatry throughout the land of Israel, they also had murdered hundreds of God’s true prophets. Their influence was powerful, and most of Israel had fallen into idolatry.

Elijah decided that enough was enough, so he invited Ahab’s prophets to partake in a showdown between the idol Baal and the God of Israel. The plan was for the prophets of Baal and Elijah to each prepare an offering on Mt. Carmel and then call upon their god to light the fire and consume the offering. Whichever god answered would determine the true god of Israel.

Needless to say, the prophets of Baal did not succeed. They sang, danced, screamed, and even cut themselves, but nothing happened. Elijah drenched his offering in water and then called out to the one true God. In a flash, a fire came down from heaven, consuming the offering, the water, and everything around it! The people immediately proclaimed: *“The LORD — He is God!”* (1 Kings 18:39).

Most of the time, when we read this passage, the focus is on the people’s faith. We reflect on the amazing display of God’s sovereignty

and marvel at the clarity and faith that the people must have experienced witnessing this miracle. However, let's focus on a different angle of the story —the faith and conviction of Elijah. Think about the faith Elijah must have had to set up this contest and trust God to come through for him with such miracles!

In Judaism, there are two words that roughly express the idea of faith: *emunah* and *bitachon*. There is a profound difference between the two: *emunah* is believing in God and that He runs the world; *bitachon* is acting in accordance with that belief and conviction. For example, a butcher who believes that his earnings all come from God has *emunah*. However, if he panics when a competitor opens up down the street, then he is lacking *bitachon*. *Bitachon* means living out the belief that God will come through for us every time. That's describes Elijah's faith.

Let us challenge ourselves to live our faith like Elijah — not just in abstract ideas, but in concrete actions, feelings, and emotions. Let's take our faith to a higher level and know unshakably that God is in control and that we have nothing to fear.

## **PRAYER:**

*"LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again."*

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This is the actual prayer that Elijah prayed just before he presented his offering to God on Mt. Carmel. It can be found in 1 Kings 18:36–37.

## **CHALLENGE:**

Think of a time when you have had an opportunity to talk with someone about your belief in God's truth, but were reluctant or nervous to do so. How did you feel following that interaction? What did you wish you could have said? Look for ways to say and do something that demonstrates an active faith in God this week. Honor God by applying what you believe, even if it may make you uncomfortable. Replace fear and the need to please others with conviction of faith and a desire to please God.



# HEZEKIAH

## A MAN OF HOPE



*Wait for the LORD;  
be strong and take heart  
and wait for the LORD. — Psalm 27:14*

HOPE IS A WORD THAT WE TOSS AROUND A LOT, BUT I'M NOT SURE THAT we always fully understand its meaning. It's not until we've *lived* hope — until we have been in a dark situation where we needed to find the light of hope in order to continue — that we can really know what the word means. Moreover, there are different levels of hope. There's the basic hope of having faith that things will be all right. And there's another level of hope when things haven't turned out the way we had hoped they would, and we are challenged to be bold enough to hope again.

Imagine that someone is suffering from an illness. At a certain point, they have hope that their health will improve, but then they receive a bad medical report. Is it possible to hope again? Is it possible to believe that God will deliver them from their troubles or give them the ability to withstand them?

Or maybe someone is facing difficulties with their marriage. That person hopes things will get better, until their spouse delivers some very unwelcome sentiments. The words are hurtful and discouraging. How is it possible for that person to have the strength to hope again?

This secondary, more challenging hope is what Psalm 27 is describing in the last line, "*Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD.*" In Hebrew, the word defined as "wait" is *kavei*, which literally means "hope." In the Jewish tradition, this verse reads,

“Hope to the LORD, strengthen your heart, and hope to the LORD.” Why does King David write “hope to the LORD” twice? Because there is the first time that we hope and then the second time. After the first hope, we must strengthen our heart so that we can hope again.

In Isaiah 38, we learn that King Hezekiah had become very ill. We can imagine that Hezekiah, a righteous king of Israel, certainly hoped and prayed throughout his illness that God would heal him. Then the prophet Isaiah visited him and delivered a most devastating message: *“This is what the LORD says: Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover”* (Isaiah 38:1). Hezekiah’s hopes were shattered!

Yet, the Jewish sages teach that Hezekiah replied to Isaiah, “I have a tradition from my grandfather David — even if a sharp sword rests on your neck, one should not refrain from praying for mercy.” Hezekiah continued to pray, and he was healed!

Friends, we should never give up hope, even when our first hopes have been dashed. Hope again and again. We must strengthen our hearts and dare to believe — our God will deliver us according to His timing and good plan.

### **PRAYER:**

*Please, God, save now! Please, God, bring success now! Please, God, answer us on the day we call. God of the spirits, save now! Tester of hearts, bring success now! O Powerful Redeemer, answer us on the day we call. Eternal King, save now! Illustrious and mighty one, bring success now. Supporter of the fallen, answer us on the day we call.*

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This prayer is excerpted from the service celebrating the *Torah* on the eighth day of *Sukkot*, the Feast of Tabernacles.

### **CHALLENGE:**

For every problem, there is a prayer. Compose your own prayers for each of your life challenges, and pray from the depths of your heart. Perhaps you might share your prayer with others. Invite them to join you in asking for God to give you hope as you wait on Him to show you His sovereign will and divine answers.

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