

Dear Family & Friends,

24 hours ago, I was not sure that I would have the opportunity to deliver this drasha to you. I also thought I had a few more days to complete it, so here is hoping it makes as much sense to you as it does to me. The reason we are standing here this morning is because of the thoughtfulness and kindness of Annette, Mandi, Yael & Samuel. Without the four of you Ebony's Batmitzvah here at shul could not have been possible today. Brett, Ebony, Ciara and I will never forget your generosity and your hard work in getting us over the line, and seeing our dream for Ebony, which was to be able to learn and then read her Parashah from the Torah become a reality.

Mandi, you were the President of the shul when I joined Shira almost 4 years ago and then when Ebony began her Bat mitzvah journey in February last year doing the Bnei Mitzvah Program. Annette, you have actually known Ebony since she was a new-born baby when we were neighbours in Pental and Bella Vista Roads so it is fitting that you are now here as the President of Shira at her Bat mitzvah 12 years later. Yael, it has been a pleasure getting to know you and your gorgeous family over the past 9 months and I know that Ebony joins me in thanking you for teaching her how to layn. She loved every minute of her Sunday lessons with you and looked forward to them with great anticipation each week. We are thrilled that you could be here with us this morning despite all the challenges.

Although we have not been a regular shul going family in the past, Ebony and I have been attending regularly in the lead up to her Batmitzvah and have loved the time that the Saturday mornings have given us. It has been time away from our mobile phones, and other weekend demands where we have had time to sit quietly together, hold hands and just be in the moment. I am grateful to all 3 of you for creating an egalitarian environment at Shira where women feel included in all religious aspects of the shul. Thank you for making us feel so welcome in your Kehilla.

To our beautiful treasure Ebony, mine and Dad's hearts are bursting with pride not only at the way that you have conducted yourself this morning in shul or the way that you devoted yourself to learning your parasha but with the way that you have handled the disappointments of the past week. You have a grace and poise beyond your 12 years and Dad and I couldn't feel more blessed to have you as our daughter. You are the sunshine of our lives, a huge character, a strong individual but also the ultimate team player.

That is why this week's double Parasha of Vayakhel-Pekudei is a particularly fitting one for you to have learned. These 2 parashot make up the closing chapters of the book of Exodus, which concludes with the Jewish people putting into action the earlier instructions of God to build the Mishkan or Tabernacle. Moses describes all the materials needed to build the Mishkan and a list of all its parts. The clothes of the Kohen Ha Gadol (High Priest), which were made exactly to Hashem's

specifications and were full of beautiful colours, including the Choshen or breastplate which Ebony read to us about in her Aliyah.

The word Vayakhel means “assembly” and “community” while the word Pekudei means “itemization” and “individuality.” So, these 2 parashot, which follow each other in the Torah and in certain years such as this are joined together to form a single reading, express the paradox of these 2 components of human nature. As humans we all have a need and desire to bond together in a communal identity as well as a desire for an individual identity distinct and unique from our fellow humans.

The question for all of us is, how can we reconcile the contrasting values of community and individuality, is it possible to be an individual and part of a group or community at the same time?

We see in this Parsha that Moses gathers the people of Israel together to inform them of God’s desire for a Mishkan or Tabernacle to be built. This is the first time that Moses addresses the whole of the JP since his dramatic return from Sinai. First, Moses reminds the JP of the commandment to keep the Sabbath. Then he reminds them of God’s commandment to donate materials for the construction of the Mishkan. We read that both men and women donated, everyone participated in its construction, it didn’t matter if they were rich or poor or which tribe they were from. Everyone gave according to their ability and each participated. We read that there were too many donations and for the first and probably only time in fundraising history, the JP are told to stop bringing additional contributions.

From this we learn that there is power in numbers. When we join with others, we can accomplish tasks that we cannot do alone. Ebony, you will remember how our family joined with other families to make sandwiches for Eat Up. We literally made hundreds of sandwiches to be distributed to hungry school children all over Victoria. This is something that we could never have achieved on our own at home. There is power in a collaborative effort. We often discover our greatest potential by being part of a group. Rabbi Mordechai Yosef Leiner the Izbitzer Rebbe wrote that “with the building of the Mishkan, all the hearts of Israel were united. At first, everyone did his or her job on the Mishkan and felt good about what they had done. However, it was only when they saw how all the different parts of the Mishkan fit together so perfectly that they saw it was as if it had all been made by one hand.”

Judaism also attaches immense significance to the individual. Every life is like a universe. Each one of us, though we are all made in God’s image is different, therefore unique and irreplaceable. Judaism values the individual but does not endorse individualism. The Lubavitcher Rebbe explained that the parsha shows us that we can unite the contrasting values of community and individuality and build a community that encourages rather than suppresses the individuality of its members; and to cultivate an individuality that contributes to rather than conflicts with the communal whole.

Ebony, you read to us so beautifully today in your Aliyah about the creation of the Choshen or Breastplate that was worn by the Kohen Hagadol when serving in the Mishkan. You read about the 12 settings in the Choshen that were “vayimaloo” or filled up by the precious stones known as the “avnei miyloolim” or filling Stones. The 12 precious stones corresponded to the 12 Tribes of Israel and served as a medium through which God provided direction to the Jewish people. Ebony read to us that the breastplate or Choshen consisted of a rectangular piece of fabric folded over to create a square. The fabric was made from five materials: zahav (gold); wool dyed techelet (blue), argaman (purple) and shani (scarlet), as well as linen. The 12 precious stones were embedded into the breastplate, upon which were inscribed the names of the 12 tribes of Israel. The gems were arranged in four rows and 3 columns. When the Jews travelled through the desert from Egypt on their way to Eretz Israel, the flag transported by each tribe was identical to the colour of its stone. The stones therefore reflect each tribes unique character and highlights how each individual is distinct and can reach the heights of his or her unique potential. While every Jew follows the same commandments, we each do so with our own unique personality. No 2 tribes were exactly the same, just as no two people perform one mitzvah with the same intention or feeling.

Ebony, today you are wearing a replica of the Choshen as a gift from Dad and I around your neck to remind you that you are like a precious stone in the choshen, a unique individual who has so many skills and talents. However, it also to remind you that you are part of a Tribe, part of Team Jewish People. Judaism is not a spectator sport, most of our institutions run on the power, strength and commitment of volunteers. Shira Hadasha is a perfect example of this in action. The fact that the Torah contains two Parashot, one called Vayakhel and the other called Pekudei, means that our need for being part of a community and our striving for individual distinction are both important and desirable aspects of being human. Ebony, the Torah here is reminding you and all of us especially during this challenging time that we are going through, a time that most of us have never experienced before that we cannot do it all alone and that we are not meant to do it all alone.

And it is on this note that I thank you our family and friends for joining us in shul today and on such short notice. At no stage this week have we felt alone. We have felt the POWER of Community in every sense of the word. We invite you all to join us at our home to eat, drink and continue celebrating this extraordinary day with us.