There was once a Jew who lived and worked in Shushan HaBirah, the capital city of the vast and sprawling Persian Empire. This Jew had intimate access to the king of Persia and was an object of the king's favor. Eventually, this Jew realized that the needs of the Jewish community itself needed redress and a request was made of the king.

The Biblical character I am referring to is none other than...Nechemiah, who was a trusted bureaucrat in the court of Shushan. Nechemiah lived, perhaps a generation or two after the events described in Megilat Esther and he was someone who may have begun his career as an intern for Mordechai. Nechemiah was informed that the small Jewish community in Yerushalayim was struggling, and, echoing the language of Megilat Esther, he asked permission from the king to travel there himself to supervise the rebuilding of Yerushalayim and its wall.

Today, the 16th of Adar is the anniversary of the rebuilding of Yerushalayim’s walls in the time of Nechemiah. I’ve shared before how the two stories in Tanakh that take place in Shushan, each involving a Jewish request of the king, each echoing the language of the other, represent two strategies for Jewish survival. The megillah ends with Jews who have requested the freedom to defend their own lives in the neighborhoods and cities where they lived who then devote themselves to mutual support and solidarity through tzedakah and mishloach manot.

Nechemiah made his request to take leave of Shushan and the diaspora to make sure that Yerushalayim had defensible walls. His strategy for Jewish survival is rooted in a flourishing community in Eretz Yisrael that has the capacity to protect itself through its own efforts, defending its own walls, albeit as part of a vast multi-ethnic empire.

Once upon a time, these were two different paths. The story of our era of Jewish history is the story of paths converging and disparate strategies coming together.

On November 9th, 1938, after years of negotiations, the director of the Joint Distribution Committee, the JDC, one of the largest and most important Jewish tzedakot and relief agencies in the United States turned down a request to merge with the United Palestine Appeal, the largest and most important American organization supporting aliyah and Jewish life in Eretz Yisrael. The two organizations had different mandates. The JDC supported Jews in danger and struggling in poverty in the lands where they lived. The United Palestine Appeal raised money to get Jews out of the lands where they lived to settle them in Eretz Yisrael.

On the very next day, November 10th 1938, violent antisemitic riots broke out across Germany and it became obvious that protecting Jews in danger around the world, and creating a Jewish homeland in Eretz Yisrael were not different mandates at all, but two sides of the same mandate. Paths converged and the United Jewish Appeal, the predecessor of today’s Federation system was created within a month.

Some of you heard the Israeli journalist David Horowitz speak at our neighborhood AIPAC event last November about his grandfather, an Orthodox rabbi, who was buried in the same cemetery as the great 19th century scholar, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch. Except, they weren’t truly buried in the same cemetery. Rabbi
Samson Raphael Hirsch was a founding member of the “austritt” or separatist Orthodox community. He believed that only observant Orthodox Jews could be in leadership roles at any Jewish organization and he lobbied the government to give Orthodox Jews the right to form their own government-authorized, autonomous, Orthodox Jewish communities with their own schools, nursing homes, synagogues, and...cemeteries.

The majority of Orthodox Jews, even in Frankfurt where Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch lived, chose to remain part of the general Jewish community. They were told by the greatest halakhic scholars of the time that it was permissible for Orthodox Jews to remain members of the general Jewish community provided that Orthodox Jews had autonomy to run their own synagogues and ensure their kashrut and other religious needs. David Horowitz’s grandfather was a member of the general Jewish community and was buried in its cemetery. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch was buried in an exclusive Orthodox cemetery just a few feet away; the two cemeteries were separated by a wall.

During the Second World War, an allied bomb fell on that wall, knocking down that divider between the final resting places of those two German rabbis. The war, in a metaphoric way, and in a literal way, broke down the barrier that had divided these two paths that Orthodoxy had taken in the modern world. Paths converge and, at least within Modern Orthodoxy, it is obvious that Orthodox Jews must ensure our own religious needs, and be participants in broader Jewish life.

This winter, we devoted an evening at the shul to studying the halakhic thought of Rabbi Eliezer Melamed. Rav Melamed, no stranger to controversy, is one of the founders of Har Berakhah, an Israeli settlement in the heart of the Shomron and, controversy notwithstanding, one of the most influential authors of practical halakhah among the Religious Zionist community in Israel. His books are now being translated, one by one, into English and those books are, hopefully, expanding his influence in the United States. Most English books of Halakhah are extremely strict, keeping all of the lenient positions in Hebrew-language footnotes as if you only deserve to know the more lenient positions on how to make tea on Shabbat if you can read about it in rabbinic Hebrew.

Rav Melamed’s Israeli context permeates his writing. His leniency is a product of feeling responsibility for a broad spectrum of Jews trying to perform mitzvot. And in more ways too, his Israeli context is obvious. Rav Melamed discusses the question of whether or not a burglar alarm can be left to operate on Shabbat. I’ve been asked about ways to use a timer to disarm and arm a burglar alarm on Shabbat. I’ve been asked about LED lights indicating an open door even on a system disarmed for Shabbat. But Rav Melamed worries about a situation where a timer arms a burglar alarm for several hours at night when the household is asleep. In Israel, the police who would be called to respond to the alarm are Jewish. One is obligated to violate Shabbat to save human life but one is usually forbidden to violate Shabbat to save mere property. How can it be justified to call the police to protect property alone? The laws of Shabbat are different in a Jewish state with Jewish police who are on duty on Shabbat.

This is an example too of paths converging. Over a century after Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch built a wall in the Jewish cemetery of Frankfurt, scholars in Israel are helping us to understand that halakhah can be formulated in such a way that it recognizes the unity of the entire Jewish people and our mutual responsibility for one another.

Our parashah too is about roads converging. Parashat Vayikra and Parashat Tzav describe many of the same korbanot. But whereas Vayikra describes them from the perspective of the owner bringing an animal or mincha offering to the Temple, Tzav describes them from the perspective of the kohen who plays an intimate role in
everything that happens in the Temple. And the one bringing a korban and the kohen helping to offer that korban have different perspectives. They get to eat different parts of different korbanot and we can see their diverging interests in the order that the korbanot are listed.

But both perspectives need to be in the Torah because the system requires kohanim to serve and requires civilian Jews to bring korbanot.

There was a time when a primary task of Jewish leadership meant figuring out which path to follow and whose needs to prioritize and whose needs to marginalize. The task of our era of Jewish history is, yes, to pick a path, and to make difficult decisions that upset some people, and to prioritize some needs and marginalize others. But, we are to do so in a way that brings as many people as possible to the decision making table. And we are to make decisions while seeing ourselves as being responsible, not only to meet our own needs, not only to meet the needs of our family, not only to meet the needs of those with the same religious outlook and form of practice or political worldview as us, but also feeling responsible for all of Klal Yisrael. This is a time for paths to converge.