

“Just What the Doctor Ordered”

Sermon in Tribute to Lewis Krain, Outgoing President of Temple B’nai Israel

Shabbat Naso 5786

May 29, 2026

Rabbi Barry H. Block

This week’s Torah portion, **נשא**, is boring! Well, at least it is at first glance, and possibly second. Right, Eden? Try not to doze while I give you the basics: The Israelites are in the wilderness. Moses and Aaron have been commanded to take a census—but at first, they are told not to count their own tribe, the Levites. There’s a reason: The purpose of this census is to count those eligible to go to battle as the people enter the Promised Land, whereas the Levites have a different task. Some of them, Aaron and his descendants, are **כהנים**, priests, charged with offering sacrifices in the **משכן**, the portable sanctuary that travels with the people throughout their desert wanderings. Carrying the **משכן** and everything that goes with it from place to place is a major undertaking, especially dismantling it each time the people move and reassembling it when they encamp. Those duties are assigned to the non-priestly Levites, who are divided into clans, depending on the son of Levi from whom they’re descended. Counting the Levites, then, is the purpose of a second census, so Moses and Aaron will know how many people are available for each duty. Descendants of Gershon deal with all things made of fabric. Eden is now the world’s expert on the descendants of Merari, who are in charge of hardware. Eden will provide the details, and the color commentary, tomorrow.

Moses and Aaron are grandsons of Kehat, another son of Levi. At the end of last week’s portion, we are told that their clan is responsible for the shipping and handling, if you will, of the most sacred objects in the **משכן**. However, the **כהנים**, the priests, do all the dismantling and reassembling, covering each of the holiest objects in cloth before turning them over to their cousins to schlep them. Descendants of Kehat who are not **כהנים** are not permitted to touch those themselves or go into the **משכן** to get them. The last words of the portion are: “Don’t let them go inside the **משכן** to witness its dismantling, lest they die.”ⁱ

And now, let me translate this situation for Lewis. For the priests’ cousins, even High Priest Aaron’s first cousins, the **משכן** is kryptonite.

There’s a problem, though. Moses, whom God repeatedly calls to enter the **משכן** is not a **כהן**, a priest. Moses not only survives these encounters with the Divine in the Holy of Holies; he’s also not punished or chastised in any way. The ability to enter the **משכן** despite not being a **כהן** is Moses’s superpower!

That power, though, is hardly Moses's only superlative quality. Above all, Moses is an unparalleled leader. He is humble, and he is tireless.

Talmudic sages refer to Moses as משה רבנו, "our rabbi, Moses." That wasn't especially humble of them. Their point was to situate themselves as Moses's rightful heirs, entrusted to teach Torah and regulate its observance. Moses is never called a rabbi in the Torah; nobody is. Much more clearly, Moses is the leader of בני ישראל—that is, B'nai Israel.

Throughout the last eighteen months, our own B'nai Israel has been blessed with an extraordinary leader. Lewis Krain would not compare himself to Moses, or at least not until I brought in the superpower characteristics. Sorry to say, Lewis, but I'm not aware that you possess any superhuman superhero powers. Still, I will compare Lewis's leadership to Moses's tonight, and I have brought the receipts.

Despite all appearances, Moses is humble. In the words of Torah: "Now Moses himself was very humble, more so than any other human being on earth."ⁱⁱ No, Moses is not a shrinking violet, except that, when God initially calls upon him to lead the Children of Israel from slavery to freedom, Moses protests that he is unworthy—incapable, even, given that he claims to suffer from a speech impediment.

Shrinking from responsibility, though, is not what makes a person humble. In the Massar tradition, humility requires taking responsibility, even a leading role, without self-aggrandizement or arrogance. The mantra for humility that many of us have learned from Alan Morinis is, "No more than my space, no less than my space." A person with a leadership role who does not exercise the power vested in them has abandoned their responsibility, neglecting to fill their space, and that's a failure of humility.ⁱⁱⁱ

Time and again, Moses, who did not seek leadership, nevertheless exercises it, unifying the fractious Israelites before confronting Pharaoh, repeatedly cajoling them to observe the Torah, and by being a consistent presence.

As many of you know, Lewis became president suddenly and unexpectedly, during a Zoom meeting on a Friday afternoon in December 2024. He had agreed to be president, of course, but not at that time, but rather at our 2026 annual congregational meeting, a few weeks from now. The Temple's governing documents dictated that Lewis take the reins early and quickly, and circumstances demanded that he hold them firmly. Lewis did that, accepting the myriad challenges facing our congregational community at that time and restoring calm.

Lewis did not have to confront anybody like Pharaoh, but his first challenge was to bring healing to a fractured congregation. Lewis handled that with humility. He did not insist that everything he had done was perfect. He listened to critiques and suggestions. He corrected errors and misperceptions. He sat down with several members who had expressed their unhappiness to him. He sought even more such encounters.

As time went on, Lewis often found himself dealing with matters outside his area of expertise—"details" like air conditioning and heating, roof leaks and repairs, and finances. No, Lewis was not managing any of those issues, but he understood his role as leader. He kept up with what was happening, was empathetic toward those beset by frustrating challenges, and expressed appreciation for hard work. When a decision had to be made, Lewis understood that the congregation's constitution and bylaws designate him as the chief executive officer, and he exercised that authority judiciously.

I am also not Pharaoh, but there are times when I am too quick to make a decision and act or become overwrought. Lewis has this amazing ability to calm me. I'm a better rabbi when I'm calm, which has made Lewis an outstanding leader of our congregation.

Above all, Lewis has been here. At every Board meeting, Executive Committee meeting, and countless committee meetings in between, of course, but just as importantly at virtually every Friday night service, Oneg Shabbat—for which he's typically early, which is noteworthy—kiddush luncheons, special programs, and the like. Lewis has consistently made himself visible and accessible to Temple members and staff.

Toward the end of this week's portion, Moses teaches Aaron the priestly benediction, which he and his sons are enjoined to recite, to link God's presence with the Children of Israel. Notably, Moses isn't the one who bestows the blessing; Aaron is. Again, Moses understands what his role is and is not, and he humbly assigns these words to Aaron as God instructs.

In a moment, Jana and I will offer Torah's words of blessing to Lewis at the Ark. First, though, I will personalize them to Lewis and to this moment of his Temple presidency coming to an end—and, by a quirk of his schedule and mine, the last Friday night of his presidency when he and I will share the *bimah*.

May God bless you with satisfaction in your devoted service, guarding you from regrets.

May God shine light on the gifts you have showered on Congregation B'nai Israel, and may you experience the fruit of those labors among Temple members, friends, and guests.

May God smile on you, Sylvia, Mira, Milo, Doris, and all of your loved ones, granting you the blessing of peace.

כֵּן יְהִי רָצוֹן. May that be God's will.

Amen.

ⁱ Numbers 4:15-20.

ⁱⁱ Numbers 12:3.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ideas learned from Alan Morinis.