

Dvar Torah – Parashat Va’era – January 17, 2026

Building an Urban Eruv – Bridging Two Worlds

Dr. Jesse Hefter – Greater Boston Eruv Corporation

Gut Shabbos, everyone. Thanks to Rabbi Fogelman for inviting us to join with all of you for this Shabbos. Thanks also to the Rabbi and his Rebbetzin for hosting my wife, Brenda, and me at their home.

Jews are a people who literally live with the concept of bridges. We resolutely stand between past and future, exile and redemption, body and soul, weekday and Shabbos. And in this week’s Parashat Va’era, we encounter perhaps the most dramatic bridge-builder in our history: Moshe Rabbeinu.

At the beginning of the parasha, HaShem turns to Moshe and says:

וַיֹּאזְרֵא אֶל־אַבְרָהָם אֶל־יִצְחָק וְאֶל־יַעֲקֹב בְּקֹל שׁוֹנֵי וְשְׁמִי הָשֵׁם לֹא נִדְעָתִי לָהֶם:

“And I appeared to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov as Kel Shakai but (in my capacity) as HaShem, I was not known to them”. The pasuk is telling us that the connection between HaShem and our patriarchs was prophetically powerful with one huge difference: HaShem did not interact with them as the God of rachamim, as the God of the future. With Moshe, the bridge would be complete – HaShem would reach across as it were and interact with him and the people of Israel in a new, connected way – as a people.

The Torah continues:

וְהוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם מִתַּחַת סִבְלַת מִצְרַיִם וְהִצַּלְתִּי אֶתְכֶם מֵעַבְדֻתָם וְגִאֲלֹתִי אֶתְכֶם בְּזְרוּעַ נְטוּיָה וּבְשִׁפְטִים גְּדֹלִים: וְלָקַחְתִּי אֶתְכֶם לִי לְעָם וְהָיִיתִי לָכֶם לֵאלֹהִים

“And I will take you out... I will save you... I will redeem you... and I will take you as My people.”

HaShem is promising liberation—but the people can’t hear it. They’re crushed, beaten down, lost in “kotzer ruach”—shortness of breath, shortness of hope. And into that space steps Moshe.

He lives between two worlds. Moshe walks into Pharaoh’s halls yet sits among slaves. He carries HaShem’s voice yet feels Am Yisrael’s doubt. He knows the promise yet sees the suffering.

Moshe becomes a bridge—a conduit through which redemption can cross. The Makkot, the plagues themselves—ten steps, each larger than the last—show us that geulah is not a single event but a process, a series of crossings. HaShem is moving Bnei Yisrael *from one world to another*.

This tension—between the ideal and the real—is a central theme in the philosophy of one of my Jewish mentors, HaRav Joseph B. Soloveitchik, the Rav.

In his monumental work, *The Lonely Man of Faith*, published in a long essay in the journal Tradition in 1965, the Rav teaches that every person contains two selves:

The first is Adam I – The Majestic Human. Adam I is a builder, creator, and planner. Adam I is the one who shapes the world, constructs societies, and accomplishes.

Then there is Adam II – The Lonely Human. Adam II is vulnerable, seeking a relationship, meaning, covenant, and HaShem.

The Rav insists that both Adams are necessary. One without the other is incomplete. Adam I can build a city—but not a home. Adam II can feel deeply—but cannot build a community.

Geulah or Redemption occurs when the two Adams join forces, when spirituality meets structure, when yearning meets action.

That is our Moshe Rabbeinu. He is a majestic leader challenging powerful, political systems, and, at the same time, a lonely soul pleading before God, “I cannot speak,” “They will not believe me,” “Why have You troubled this people?”

Moshe bridges heaven and earth, halakhah and compassion, God’s promise and human effort.

Now let’s cross that bridge from ancient Mitzrayim to our suburban neighborhoods of today.

There is perhaps no mitzvah that encapsulates the Rav’s duality—and Moshe’s bridge role—more than building an Eruv.

How is an Eruv emblematic of Adam I? An Eruv requires mapping boundaries, reading blueprints and utility maps, surveying poles and slopes and other structures, mastering the laws of lechi (the vertical strip attachment added to a utility pole to form a doorpost), korah (the horizontal component of a doorway opening), reshut harabim (an area considered by Halacha to be a public way), reshut hayachid (an area considered by Halacha to be a private enclosure), negotiating with municipalities, utility companies, and condo/neighborhood associations, and driving and/or walking miles of streets in all kinds of weather to inventory, assess, and verify Eruv components.

It is pure Adam I—the halakhic engineer, the Jewish civil planner.

But the *telos* of the Eruv is Adam II. Families with young children who want to walk to shul can do so as a group. A parent can push a stroller. Community members can be seen bringing food to a neighbor in need. And, in a way, the Eruv helps to form a community that feels whole rather than isolated.

An Eruv has the incredible capacity to connect souls as much as sidewalks.

It takes halakhic boundaries and turns them into a sense of human belonging.

As the Rav says, Halakhah doesn't *constrain* life—it creates space for spiritual life to flourish.

The Eruv is the Rav's vision drawn onto the map. It is the Halakhah translated into geography, it is a community traced across telephone poles, fences, and natural boundaries, and a “redemption” woven out of hay baling twine and plastic half-round conduit

It is Moshe's role again: Take a Divine idea and make it real.

Building an Eruv rarely happens all at once. It occurs in stages. Just like the process of our people's redemption in this week's Parasha: **“I will take you out... I will save you... I will redeem you... I will take you as My people”**.

The process unfolds in steps:

1. Form a committee—because no Jewish miracle lacks one.
2. Map the territory.
3. Drive and, where necessary, walk the proposed perimeter—frequently more than once.
4. Meet with local officials who have never heard the word “Eruv”—or pronounce it “air-roof.”
5. Negotiate access.
6. Budget the project.
7. Install lechis on poles or overhead twines where no cables exist and poles or equivalent where no poles exist. Sometimes, we create – we place something where nothing currently exists.
8. Check, recheck, and certify.
9. Execute a Kinyan Kesef – we bridge between our Eruv group and the municipality

10. Execute a Eruv Chatzayros – we bridge between all members of our Eruv area by sharing a portion of Shabbos food with the entire tzibbur

And only then—quietly, —a city transforms.

Nothing looks different to the average pedestrian or driver in the neighborhood, but the experience of Shabbat changes:

- parents stroll freely
- families with young children can stop to chat
- people feel rooted, connected, unburdened

That is geulah—not with thunder and lightning, but with thin plastic tubing, baling twine, and paperwork.

It is a redemption earned together, woven through the partnership between heaven and earth.

So, what is the takeaway – what do Moshe living in the 13th century BCE and the Rav in the 21st century teach us?

Perhaps the lesson is this: we often imagine redemption as something God does *to us*. Va'era teaches it's something God does *with us*. Moshe doesn't free Israel alone. God doesn't free Israel alone. It's a partnership.

- Moshe bridges God's word with human reality.
- The Rav teaches we must bridge the builder and the seeker within ourselves.
- The Eruv teaches that redemption is practical, maybe a little messy, and profoundly holy.

We are covenant partners—not spectators.

And let me end personally.

I have had the privilege to design and build the Greater Boston Eruv between the years of 1984 and 1993, and later expanded that Eruv around Boston University, and then into South Brookline, West Roxbury, and West Newton, followed by an Eruv in Newport, RI, and one in Malden, another in Swampscott, and another in Palmer at Camp Ramah. I've learned that every segment of an Eruv holds a story.

I've stood under telephone poles, Halakhic tape measure in hand, certifying that the lechi is within halakhic tolerance. I have stood on the edges of brooks and ponds and measured the angle of the slope to potentially serve as a mechitzah. I have walked the perimeters of cemeteries and parklands, ensuring that the areas we were planning to enclose were Halachically permitted.

And then I've stood in shul on Shabbat, watching a family literally roll into shul together, or carry a tallis bag or a siddur or sefer in or out of shul, and thought:

“This is why we do it.”

And now, as I look forward to continuing the project to build an Eruv here in Natick/Framingham that we started about 1 year ago, I feel I am extending that bridge:

- linking communities to Torah,
- connecting Halakhah to daily life,

This is because every Eruv is a tiny reenactment of Va'era: bringing God's promise into human reality, one pole or fence or twine at a time.

Moshe teaches us to live in between worlds. The Rav teaches us to unite our inner worlds. The Eruv teaches us to build the bridges that make that unity visible.

May we all merit to be bridge builders— between each other, between people and HaShem, between ideal and real, between holiness and the world we walk every day.

Gut Shabbos