

Rabbi Shai Held recently published ***“Judaism is About Love: Recovering the Heart of Jewish Life.”*** He attended Ramaz High School and studied at Yeshivat HaMivtar in Efrat Israel. He is a graduate of Harvard University (A.B., PhD) and received his rabbinic ordination at the Jewish Theological Seminary. In 2006 he co-founded Mechon Hadar: an Institute for Prayer, Personal Growth and Jewish Study. For further information, see Hadar.org.

Rabbi Shai Held Quotes

1. “From the perspective of Jewish ethics, there are few (if any) graver crimes than violating the dignity of another human being. “In hurting another person, I am not just running afoul of the will of God—though I am also surely doing that. At some level, I am also assaulting God, who, Jewish theology insists, is profoundly invested in the dignity of God’s creatures.” Conversely, as R. Abraham Paley (20th century) teaches, “being careful with and attentive to the honor of your fellow is the acceptance of the yoke of the kingdom of heaven.”

— Shai Held, **The Heart of Torah, Volume 2: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion: Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy**

2. “R. Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089–1167) takes this to a daunting extreme: One who witnesses oppression and says nothing, he insists, will meet the same fate as the oppressor himself (shorter commentary to Exod. 22:20–22). According to Jewish ethics, then, “in a society where some are oppressed, all are implicated. There are no innocent bystanders.”

— Shai Held, **The Heart of Torah, Volume 1: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion: Genesis and Exodus**

3. “Judaism’s view is that we are called to be world builders; God believes in our ability to renew ourselves, and to make real and deep contributions to realizing a more just, decent, and compassionate world.”

— Shai Held, **The Heart of Torah, Volume 1: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion: Genesis and Exodus**

4. “We are charged never to go along to get along; in the face of injustice, we are challenged by God to speak up.”

— Shai Held, **The Heart of Torah, Volume 1: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion: Genesis and Exodus**

5. “God wants Abraham to train his descendants to do what is just and right, but Abraham cannot teach what he himself has not yet learned. Abraham needs to learn how to stand up for justice and how to plead for mercy, so God places him in a situation in which he can do just that. Subtly the text communicates a powerful lesson, one that is learned all too slowly, if at all, by those of us blessed with children: We cannot teach our children values that we ourselves do not embody. If Abraham is to father a people who will stand up for what is good and just, he will first have to do so himself.”
— Shai Held, The Heart of Torah, Volume 1: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion: Genesis and Exodus
6. “In the Torah’s values, upholding the worth and dignity of human lives takes precedence over attending to God.”
— Shai Held, The Heart of Torah, Volume 1: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion: Genesis and Exodus
7. “Awareness of the divine,” Heschel writes, ultimately “bristles with an unbearable concern that deprives us of complacency and peace of mind, forcing us to care for ends which we do not wish to care for, for ends which have no appeal to our personal interest.” We resist this ineffable call “with all our might, pride and self-reliance,” but it is an “enforced concern . . . a pressure that weighs upon us,” and it “plants a question, a behest, in front of us, which our heart echoes like a bell, overpowering as if it were the only sound in endless stillness and we the only ones to answer it.” The voice of God, Heschel tells us, demands “concern for the un-regarded.”
— Shai Held, Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Call of Transcendence
8. “If you want to love God, love those whom God loves. Love the fatherless, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger.”
— Shai Held, The Heart of Torah, Volume 1: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion: Genesis and Exodus
9. “God asks us to honor our fellow human beings just as we honor God, and to welcome them just as we would welcome God. We serve God in the very act of serving the neighbor who stands before us.”
— Shai Held, The Heart of Torah, Volume 1: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion: Genesis and Exodus

10. “The God of Israel is against injustice in all its forms, and not just injustice against this people or that (no matter how beloved). Put somewhat differently: what both Moses and Frederick Douglass intuitively understood is that for all the profound importance of ethnic solidarity, a wider human solidarity is also fundamental. One cannot lead this particular people without a concern for justice for all people(s).”
— Shai Held, The Heart of Torah, Volume 1: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion: Genesis and Exodus
11. “God’s love may extend even to people we (perhaps legitimately) cannot stand.”
— Shai Held, The Heart of Torah, Volume 2: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion: Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy
12. “As Ibn Ezra forcefully avers, “the main purpose of the all the commandments is to straighten the heart”
— Shai Held, The Heart of Torah, Volume 1: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion: Genesis and Exodus
13. “The trajectory of Exodus is unmistakable. When the book begins, the people are enslaved to a merciless despot who refuses to grant them even a moment’s respite (Exod. 5:5); when it ends they are serving the God of creation and covenant, who mandates and regularizes periods of rest (35:2). The mitzvah of Shabbat thus helps move the people from “perverted work, designed by Pharaoh to destroy God’s people . . . [to] divinely mandated work, designed to bring together God and God’s people, in the closest proximity possible in this life.” God rejects servility: whereas “Pharaoh places the Israelites under a backbreaking and soul-crushing yoke . . . God invites them to stand tall.”
— Shai Held, The Heart of Torah, Volume 1: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion: Genesis and Exodus
14. “To be part of the Jewish tradition is to “argue for justice and plead for mercy.”
— Shai Held, The Heart of Torah, Volume 1: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion: Genesis and Exodus

15. “R. Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–72) writes about prayer applies to life as a whole as well: “God is in exile; the world is corrupt. The universe itself is not at home. To pray means to bring God back into the world, to establish His kingship for a second at least. To pray means to expand His presence.... To worship, therefore, means to make God immanent, to make Him present. His being immanent in the world depends upon us.”

— Shai Held, The Heart of Torah, Volume 1: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion: Genesis and Exodus

16. “But since my actions are not in accordance with my true goal, I am not accomplishing my life’s mission, and I am still not worthy. Things have changed; I am now needed. And yet I go on living as if nothing had changed and I were not needed. What we confess on Yom Kippur, says R. Kook, is not our lack of worth, but precisely the opposite: we take responsibility for the fact that we insist on living as if we were worthless, and as if the hour did not need us.”

— Shai Held, Judaism Is About Love: Recovering the Heart of Jewish Life

17. “When all is said and done, religion is, in large part, about softening our hearts and learning to care, about cultivating generosity and an eagerness to share one’s bounty.”

— Shai Held, The Heart of Torah, Volume 1: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion: Genesis and Exodus

18. “The Torah wants us to know that Moses is not just offended by injustices perpetrated against his own people. Moses also defends foreigners and strangers, and “his passion for justice makes no distinctions between nations.”

— Shai Held, The Heart of Torah, Volume 1: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion: Genesis and Exodus

Questions for discussion:

- What Jewish values are reflected in each quote?
- Which Jewish values do you hold as your highest value(s)?