



Miketz 2022

How The Tables Turn

2 minute read | Straightforward

After a turbulent relationship with his siblings that culminated in his abduction and exile, Yosef climbed his way from the gutter to Egyptian aristocracy.

Years later, his brothers came to Egypt to avoid a famine back home, and Yosef entrapped them in a drawn-out ruse.

Instead of identifying himself, he role-played as a meticulous bureaucrat. Noticing that Binyamin was absent, he apprehended and jailed Shimon until they returned with Binyamin, and then had his personal effects planted on Binyamin to make him look like a thief.

The story is a classic, albeit protracted, and theatrical. Why did Yosef act so strangely?

R' Shmshon Raphael Hirsch perceptively notes that Yosef's goal must have always been to bring his family back together because if he'd wanted to forget his family, then when his brothers came to Egypt, he could have just let them be. They'd return to Israel none the wiser!

But to reunite the family, Yosef had several major obstacles to overcome. If he ever went home or wrote back to reforge the connection, it would not bring the family together; it would irreparably tear it apart. By exposing to Yakov the murderous cover-up and human trafficking perpetrated by his brothers, Yakov might regain a long lost son, but he'd undoubtedly lose the rest.

The only way to make it right would be for things to be different. The brothers would need to see that Yosef had changed, and Yosef would need to know that they had changed, and he has cause for concern.

Where was Binyamin? Had the same thing happened to Rachel's last son?

Judah, who had once instigated Yosef's abduction, would now take responsibility and endanger himself to protect Binyamin. Coupled with their admission of guilt and repentance – מה-נאמר לאדני – אכל אשמים אנהנו על-אחינו / ומה-נצטדק ומה-נדבר – they had accomplished something remarkable – our very first encounter with teshuva in Jewish history.

Seeing how Yehuda courageously took responsibility for his family and stood up to take the blame, Yosef knew that they were not the reckless and impulsive young men they had been all those years ago. Seeing that they had grown, he revealed himself to them.



Once, they had feared Yosef's ambition, believing he wanted them to serve him. Now Yosef had power over them; he could show that he didn't want to take anything from them; he wanted to help them!

With all the theatrics, the brothers could learn more about each other than they ever could have with words, and it was the one way to tease out the insights that could bring their family together once more.

R' Jonathan Sacks teaches that the stories of Bereishis are about families that could not learn to live together – it is one acrimonious falling out after another. But now there is a new paradigm – teshuva and forgiveness. Forgiveness brings Yakov's fragmented family back together and forms the foundation of the Jewish people.

It's Not About Who You Are; But What You Do

3 minute read | Straightforward

The Torah speaks in human language, and storytelling is one of humanity's most powerful tools.

Some parts of the Torah are communicated in the forms of laws, and others in stories. Integral messages can be passed through the ages, each generation filtering it through its wisest minds, gleaning new insights in each telling.

Some say that our tradition's stories are not about ordinary people like us; they are about perfect saints who were qualitatively different from us.

This is not a universally held position, and with good reason. If the stories are about holy people who are different from us, how can their stories be relevant guidance for our lives?

As R' Shlomo Farhi observes, while the Torah's terse stories obviously do not capture the character of these great people in three dimensions, we also cannot ignore the Torah's deliberate characterization and presentation of these stories, emphasizing and highlighting specific actions and people frame their particular way. We should sit up and notice, wondering what we are supposed to learn from the parts that don't quite align with our picture of greatness.

When famine struck Avraham's new home in Israel, he decided that his family would have better food security in Egypt's fertile land, and they left Israel. While this was an eminently reasonable decision to have made based on his assessment of the facts, the way it worked out was that he placed Sarah in a highly compromising situation that required divine intervention after Pharaoh took her.

The Ramban criticizes Avraham for leaving Israel and not counting on God's promises and that by abandoning Israel, he directly jeopardized those promises and endangered his family.



TorahRedux

The Maharitz Chajes notes that stories are often the Torah's medium for teaching us about morality because mature people understand that moral choices are often difficult and rarely black and white. While the law is made of words, those words have to be lived out, and only a story transmits the turmoil and weight of how those words and values interface with real life.

R' Jonathan Sacks suggests that the Torah's enduring hold is that our heroes are not gods or demigods; they are mortal men. God is God, and humans are human – and humans make mistakes.

R' Shmshon Raphael Hirsch notes that this kind of discussion is an essential feature of our rich heritage. Our ancestors are prototypes of what the ideal human acts like, but the Torah does not whitewash its heroes; excellent humans are still human.

Our role models cannot be idealized characters; they wouldn't be relevant if they weren't materially like us. What makes them great is precisely the fact that they weren't so different from us. They faced the same kinds of problems: how best to protect and provide for their families; and how to maintain their beliefs and practices while trying to do the right thing.

Avraham was not born holy and perfect, nor under extraordinary or supernatural circumstances. Avraham did not possess some innate characteristic that gave him a religious advantage. Avraham is first and foremost in our pantheon of great figures because, throughout his struggles, he maintained his integrity and persevered – sometimes rightly and sometimes wrongly. He is great because of the things he did, not because he was born that way.

The Torah speaks in whole truths to give a three-dimensional view of the people we look up to. The Torah is for and about humans; because it's ok to be human.

Some people suggest that focusing on our hero's misdeeds is disrespectful, but perhaps they have it backward. Their humanity does not undermine our respect for them; it is the very basis of our respect and veneration!

The Torah is replete with stories about how great people also make mistakes.

Adam eats the fruit; Noah doesn't save a single person; Avraham compromises Sarah; Yitzchak favors Esau; Yakov tricks his father; Yosef is vain, and his brothers engage in human trafficking. The generation that comes out of Egypt is doomed to die in the wilderness. Moshe doesn't get to the Promised Land. The Promised Land doesn't result in the Final Redemption. Failure is a core theme of almost every story in the Torah!

But crucially, here we are 3000 years later, learning those stories, still trying. Perfection is ever-elusive, and there is no finish line. The Torah's stories guide our way through the ages because they matter to us. They teach us that humans can fail, but if perfection is out of reach, greatness is not.

If all our greats are humans; then all humans possess the capacity to be great. That's why their stories matter to us.



Greatness isn't who you are; it's what you do that defines you.

The Miracle of Resolve

3 minute read | Straightforward

Although modern science has demystified the world, the world is still magical.

With a sense of wonder, you can look at the world as more miraculous than natural without saying there is a difference between the two and without disputing the scientific narrative.

Every breath you take, every sunrise, a child's smile; these are the kind of things that are so commonplace that we overlook how special they are and take entirely for granted – וְעַל נְסִיחַ שְׂבָכָל יוֹם עִמָּנוּ – וְעַל נִפְלְאוֹתֵיהֶּ וְטוֹבוֹתֵיהֶּ שְׂבָכָל עֵת עֲרַב וְבֹקֶר וְצַהֲרַיִם.

If we can see the miraculous in nature, then the natural and supernatural are the same.

There is another kind of miracle though, things that are incredibly unlikely, and we naturally perceive these categories of miracles differently.

When we talk about an underdog winning against the odds or a remarkable comeback story, people also talk about miracles of the hidden kind. The history of the State of Israel, or someone recovering from a severe illness, can be spoken about in such terms.

The Chanukah story includes similar elements; the hidden miracle of an underdog defeating a formidable and vastly more powerful enemy – מְסַרְתָּ גְבוּרִים בְּיַד הַלְּשִׁים וְרַבִּים בְּיַד מְעֻטִים – While unlikely, it was not impossible; it was not openly miraculous or explicitly magical in the way freezing and splitting an ocean is.

The brave victors diligently searched for kosher oil to light the Menorah once more; the enemy had deliberately contaminated and sabotaged all the stores. But in a fortunate turn we could also perceive as miraculous, they discovered one last jar of oil, enough to last one day and night. This, too, was unlikely but not impossible.

They chose to use the entire jar for the first lighting and rededication, and their efforts were met with an open miracle; oil that should have burned for one day lasted eight days and nights, by which time they had been able to prepare more kosher oil. We live in a finite and limited universe where one day's worth of anything does not last for eight; that's how numbers and words work. One day's worth of oil lasting for eight isn't simply unlikely; it's not physically possible.

Making a day's worth of oil last eight days is an incredible display of the Creator's power, unbelievable unless we acknowledge the magic of it.



Our sages explain intuitively that miracles are never redundant; the natural order is deliberate. The purpose of a miraculous military victory is obvious, perhaps even necessary, with the Torah and the future of the Jewish People in grave danger – *בְּשָׁעַמְדָּה מְלָכוֹת יָוֵן הִרְשָׁעָה עַל-עַמָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל לְהַשְׁפִּיחַם תּוֹרְתָהּ וּלְהַעֲבִירָם מִחֻקֵּי רִצּוֹנָהּ.*

What was the point of making the oil last longer?

The Sfas Emes explains that in terms of lighting the Menorah, it didn't matter at all. They could have found a hundred jars of oil, or perhaps even zero – circumstances would have permitted the temporary use of any oil.

R' Shlomo Twersky highlights the capacity of these heroes to hope and search for a jar of oil in the first place when malicious forces had done everything they could to snuff out any chance or possibility of success.

From the perspective of these brave heroes who stood up for the Jewish People, the miracle meant everything. A military victory might be a wink from Heaven that they were correct, as might be political and religious freedom, but the Chanukah miracle left no room for doubt that there is a power in the universe that gives spiritual victories sacred purpose and meaning. It was a smile from Heaven at their efforts; a thumbs up that their hopes and dreams were well placed and mattered.

We are awed by God's power to shape the universe, but miracles aren't the only thing that shapes the universe. The power of human desire can also shape the universe and awe the Creator to the point of upending the natural order; magic born of wanting, the miracle of human resolve.

The Chanuka Amida prayer doesn't talk about God making oil last a long time; it celebrates the daring few who stood up to restore their religion to greatness – *כָּאוּ כְּנִיָּה לְדַבֵּיר בֵּיתָהּ וּפָנּוּ אֶת-הַיְכָלָהּ וְטָהְרוּ אֶת-מִקְדָּשְׁךָ – וְהִדְלִיקוּ נְרוֹת בְּחִצְרוֹת קִדְשֶׁךָ.*

We might take courage from their example that no matter the odds, there is always one last untainted source of light from which everything else can flow and grow; the lone jar, or what in Yiddish is called the *pintele Yid*. It means the dot of a Jew, the fundamental essence of Jewish identity, and is perhaps related to the concept of the incorruptible soul – *חֶלֶק אֱלוֹק מִמַּעַל*. This story and this imagery articulate clearly and plainly that there always remains some residual spark that cannot be lost or extinguished; it can only ever lie dormant, waiting patiently for as long as it takes to be rediscovered, to reignite and burst into flame once again.

The magic of Chanuka isn't only in God's power to shape the universe by making one day of oil last for eight. The magic of Chanuka is the example of our ancestors utilizing the power of human desire to shape the universe, the miracle of human resolve, something we all possess.

We light Chanukah candles to remember how powerful that truly is.



Your Mind's Eye

2 minute read | Straightforward

Waiting out famine in Canaan, Yakov sent his sons to Egypt to obtain provisions, but they were arrested and imprisoned by their long-lost and unrecognizable brother Yosef.

Held in prison, they speculated how they'd wound up in such a precarious situation:

– וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל-אָחִיו, אֲבָל אֲשָׁמִים אָנַחְנוּ עַל-אָחִינוּ, אֲשֶׁר רָאִינוּ צָרַת נַפְשׁוֹ בְּהִתְחַנְּנוֹ אֵלֵינוּ, וְלֹא שָׁמְעָנוּ; עַל-כֵּן בָּאָה אֵלֵינוּ, הַצָּרָה הַזֹּאת –
The brothers lamented to each other, “We are guilty! For what we did to our brother... We saw his suffering! He pleaded with us, and we ignored him. We have brought this on ourselves!” (42:21)

But when we review the entire episode as it unfolded, there is no record of any such conversation to that effect. The story simply narrates what they did to him, with no record of Yosef's cries or pleas, no mention of his suffering.

What were they remembering?

R' Shlomo Freifeld suggests a frightening answer.

Sight is not an exclusively visual faculty. Our eyes govern the physical aspect of perception, but there is also a mental and emotional component; the way you process optical inputs. A deficiency in the physical element will result in blindness, but lacking the mental component results in functional blindness, if only in figuratively.

That's what the brothers realized years later in a miserable jail cell.

We don't need the Torah to tell us that if we were standing there observing this traumatic episode unfolding, we would have seen Yosef crying and begging them to stop their madness.

Instead, the Torah speaks to us with deafening silence. In their eyes, Yosef was trouble, an upstart pretender, a threat to be removed. It was settled in their minds, they had to be decisive.

But in other words, powerful emotions had clouded their senses. Caught up in the heat of the moment, any sound he made fell on deaf ears; the Torah records events as they experienced, with his silence.

Only in hindsight, sitting in jail years later, could they take stock of the terrible ordeal as it truly unfolded; they had been blind to the cries of their brother.

Every day, we ask God to open our eyes – פוקה עורים – which takes on new meaning in light of this teaching; it's a prayer for clarity and perception, and it's hard to overstate how important that is.



Your eyes aren't enough when it's your mind that's blind.

Is there something you might be blinding yourself to right now?

Quote of the Week

"If you have earned your self-respect, respect by others is a luxury; if you haven't, respect by others is a necessity."

– Nassim Nicholas Taleb

Thought of the Week

"When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves."

– Viktor Frankl

I present TorahRedux l'ilui nishmas my late grandfather, HaGaon HaRav Yehuda Leib Gertner ben HaRav HaChassid Menachem Mendel.

I hope you enjoyed this week's thoughts. If you have questions or comments, or just want to say hello, it's a point of pride for me to hear from you, and I'll always respond. And if you saw, heard, read, or watched anything that spoke to you, please send it my way - Neli@TorahRedux.com.

If you liked this week's edition of TorahRedux, why not share it with friends and family who would appreciate it?

Neli

PS - TorahRedux is my pride and joy, the product of thousands of hours of learning, research, writing, editing, and formatting. I have a niche business that allows me to spend substantial time on TorahRedux, and I welcome your assistance in furthering my goal to keep publishing quality content that matters. I help NY home care companies implement compliant Wage Parity plans that enhance recruitment and retention; whether or not that was comprehensible, if you know anyone in the New York home care field, please introduce me!



TorahRedux

PPS - Several of my home health clients are hiring at all levels from entry-level to management. Please send me a resume and a one-line explanation of what kind of role would be the best fit and I'll make some introductions.

Redux: *adjective* – resurgence; refers to being brought back, restored, or revived; something familiar presented in a new way. Not to see what no one else has seen, but to say what nobody has yet said about something which everybody sees.