

Eikev 2022

Failure isn't Fatal

2 minute read | Straightforward

We often like to think that if we were to witness the biblical miracles, we'd feel confident that everything is going to work out and that you and your family are going to be safe.

Yet, confounding our expectations, no one who in those circumstances ever seems to feel that way. God could take them out of Egypt, split the sea, and smash their enemies; but Moses was for a little longer than they expected, and they panicked.

A mob cornered Ahron and demanded he come up with something to lead them:

וַיִּקְהַל הָעָם עַל־אַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו קוּם עֲשֵׂה־לָּנוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר יֵלְכוּ לְפָנֵינוּ כִּי־יָנֹחַ מֹשֶׁה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הֵעֲלָנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לֹא יָדַעְנוּ מָה־הָיָה לוֹ – The people gathered against Ahron and said to him, “Make us a god who will go before us, because Moshe, the man who brought us from the land of Egypt – we do not know what happened to him.” (32:1)

Ahron crafts an idol for them, a Golden Calf, a betrayal of catastrophic proportion.

Seeing that they had seen, this seems quite unforgivable. Moshe destroys the Ten Commandments, and the Jewish People suffer a plague.

It's easy to read this story and be struck by the rashness and poor thinking. Some of our enemies have even pointed to this story as a reason for God to void our covenant and open the door for another religion to supersede Judaism.

But they don't seem to have read the rest of the story.

R' Shmshon Raphael Hirsch notes that this is the very first time the Jewish People have been on the receiving end of God's severity. The paradigm up to this point is that God gets angry at you, it's over, you're done.

But in a highly irregular turn, instead of getting biblical, God talks to Moshe about how God is feeling:

וְעַתָּה הַנִּיחָה לִּי וְיִחַר־אַפִּי בָּהֶם וְאַכְלָם וְאֶעֱשֶׂה אוֹתָךְ לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל – “Now, let Me be, that My anger may blaze forth against them and that I may destroy them, and make you the great nation.” (32:10)



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God doesn't need to threaten anyone, God doesn't need to share how God is feeling. God can just do things; that's why God is God. God isn't acting godly here; God chooses to appear here as an aggrieved lover or partner.

A threat is a statement of intention given to another with the specific goal of provoking some desired response. As our litany of stories of our prophets show, God threatens so people respond. Recognizing the threat as a prompt, rather than a promise, Moshe successfully persuades God to forgive the people.

And the very next thing that follows the Golden Calf is God's instruction to build the Mishkan. As R' Hirsch explains, even before sinners apologize or repent, before any rituals or sacrifices, before fasting and prayer, God has initiated contact and paved a way forward for people who have let God down.

This is a new side of God; God in a covenantal relationship with the Jewish People. Despite the colossal failure to meet the standards expected of covenantal partners, God establishes plainly and unambiguously that this relationship can withstand missteps.

The Golden Calf was the worst thing the Jewish People could do, and yet we find God not only waiting but proactively inviting us back; even an event like the Golden Calf can not destroy the unconditional love between Creator and creation.

Whatever mistakes we've made, we can take heart that we can always make amends.

Broken Things

5 minute read | Straightforward

At Mount Sinai, Moshe ascended for forty days to receive the Torah. He didn't show up when the people expected, so they got nervous and clamored for a new religious focal point. In a moment of madness, they crafted a Golden Calf, and in a perplexing turn of events, identified it as the god that brought them out of Egypt.

As they celebrate their new object of attention and worship with a festival of dancing, song, and sacrifice, Moshe returns to our world with the original Ten Commandments, a mythical artifact with magical properties crafted by God's fingers. Moshe enters the camp only to witness these festivities and, utterly horrified, throws down the tablets, permanently shattering them.

With the first tablets broken, Moshe had to repeat the process in an attenuated form; the second tablets are almost second-rate in comparison. Whereas God had crafted the first ones, Moshe – a great human, but still a human – had to prepare the second. The first tablets contained a Torah that humans could never forget; the second ones contain a Torah we forget all the time.



The consequences of the Golden Calf were enormous; God threatened to destroy them all there and then, at least until Moshe intervened. Our sages suggest that the sin was so grave that every bit of human suffering pays down a sliver of the damage done by the Golden Calf.

A common thread people take from this story is the profound loss of what might have been; a more perfect world that never even got a chance to get started. Our sages teach that the letters began peeling off the surface and wafting back to the sky even before Moshe broke the tablets, which is how he understood that his people were no longer worthy.

The lessons of damage and loss are correct but miss something essential.

Moshe shattered the tablets, but what happened to the broken pieces?

When God told Moshe to craft the second set of tablets, God also tells Moshe what to do with them:

וְאָכַתְבַּב עַל־הַלְּחֹת אֶת־הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ עַל־הַלְּחֹת הַרְּאשֹׁנִים אֲשֶׁר שִׁבַּרְתָּ וְשָׂמְתָם בְּאֲרוֹן – “I will inscribe on the tablets the commandments that were on the first tablets that you smashed, and you shall deposit them in the Ark.” (10:2)

Our sages read the instruction to put “them” in the Ark as not only referring to Moshe’s second tablets, which are like the first tablets in content; but that the original shattered tablets were like the second tablets in what Moshe was supposed to do with them – וְשָׂמְתָם בְּאֲרוֹן / הַלְּחֹת הַרְּאשֹׁנִים אֲשֶׁר שִׁבַּרְתָּ.

The broken tablets are not buried, not forgotten, not hidden, and not lost. Instead, they are stored in the Ark, alongside the new, whole second tablets. As one writer beautifully put it, shattered remnants of the past still matter, persist in their importance, and deserve preservation and remembrance, just like something whole.

In this conception, the broken tablets are a striking symbol of brokenness and wholeness coexisting side by side at Judaism’s most sacred site. The comprehensive picture of the Golden Calf story and its aftermath should reorient our attitude to broken things and setbacks. It’s not a story about breaking things; it’s a story about what we do when we break things, and the epilogue is that you pick up the pieces and move forward.

In Japanese culture, there is an art form of restoring broken pottery by gluing the cracks and seams distinctively, often with gold lacquer; breakage and subsequent repair are part of the proud history of the object, rather than something to disguise.

Perhaps the first tablets represent an idealism that crashes into reality and shatters into pieces. While admittedly easy to say, perhaps their example shows that these hopes aren’t permanently lost to the ether. Rather than becoming cynical and jaded from traumatic experience and upheaval, discarding the vision of what could have been, you might be able to recover remnants that persist, integrating them with the real world you inhabit. It won’t look quite how you thought, but maybe some parts can



in certain ways. Sometimes we have to break or let go of what we hoped could be in order to make way for what is and can still become.

Moshe didn't break the tablets out of violent anger; his people and their world simply weren't ready for the first tablets. Letting go of them, however damaging and terrible, was a necessary part of the healing process, paving the way for his people to build a world on a foundation of broken ideals. There's nothing sad about that; that's just the way life is.

The Torah closes with a line of praise for Moshe, the faithful shepherd, endorsing his strength and valor – ולכל היד התזקה ולכל המורא הגדול אשר עשה משה לעיני כל-ישראל – אלוה / אשר שברת / יישר כהן ששברת –

On Simchas Torah, after we complete the Torah with that line, we immediately begin again, a new beginning built on breaking, breaking that is holy, breaking that God endorses, and breaking that stands before us and alongside the best we have to offer. From the ashes of this colossal failure, God teaches Moshe how his people can make amends and gives him the formula that features so prominently in our prayers on Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur. The healing from the rupture led to the Mishkan project, which all subsequent prayer, sacrifice, and worship center around. The remarkable quality of comebacks is not in spite of setbacks; it is because of them.

The Megaleh Amukos notes that the season of repentance and making amends is Ellul, an acronym for the Ark, the tablets, and the broken tablet they sit alongside – אלוה / ארון לוחת ושברי לוחת –

We all break things, and we experience brokenness in different ways over the course of our journey. When we lose someone, that loss leaves a void with their shape imprinted in our hearts, and we carry that brokenness forever. After pain and loss, life goes on, only differently than before; we now live with two sets of tablets.

We might call forgetting and moving on from what we break bouncing back, but that's not how people are; that's not how the world works. Everything leaves its mark; a scratch, a bruise, or sometimes a deep scar or void that never entirely goes away.

Perhaps we're not supposed to bounce back at all; maybe it's better to bounce forward.

Take heart in the image of Moshe on his hands and knees, lovingly gathering the precious fragments, collecting every shard, then gently placing each sacred sliver one by one in the Ark, a brilliant glimmer of hope that lingers for posterity.

The shattered remnants of the past belonged in the Ark, and we ought to remember that the Ark wasn't a mere prop; it featured prominently in the Jewish People's travels and wars. It went out in front of them, leading the way, which is to say that any step forward was paved by the broken tablets as much as the whole tablets.



We live in a world of the second tablets. Although the first ones couldn't exist in their wholeness, they could exist in their brokenness, and maybe we can pick up some of those pieces and find a place for them to help shape our world.

There is no paradox of broken and whole; they coexist in a reciprocal interaction. We must find a way to marry the broken with the whole, hopeful idealism with gritty reality.

Brokenness is not something to conceal or deny; it is an essential part of being human. The moments that break us are as significant to our growth as the moments that make us whole. We can find sanctity not only in whole tablets; but in shattered ones, as well.

If we honor that brokenness and carry it with us, it can become sacred, Holy of Holies. In the words of the Kotzker, there is nothing so whole as a broken heart.

The Water of Life

5 minute read | Straightforward

Symbolism plays an essential role in human culture. Through symbols, we find meaning in the physical world, which becomes transparent and reveals the transcendent. Certain symbols are cultural universals, primal archetypes intuitively understood that derive from the unconscious and require no explanation, like mother and child or light and darkness.

As the Torah draws to its close, Moshe says goodbye with a timeless ballad laced with beautiful metaphor and symbolism:

יַעֲרַף בְּמָטָר לִקְחֵי, תִזַּל כַּטַּל אִמְרֹתַי, כְּשִׁעִירִם עַל־דְּשָׁא, וְכַרְבִּיבִים עַל־עֵשֶׂב – May my discourse come down as rain; my speech distill as dew; like showers on young vegetation; like droplets on the grass. (32:2)

Many ancient cultures believed that water is the source of life, that rain and water are life-giving, and that water symbolizes cleansing, regeneration, renewal, fertility, birth, creation, and new life. Water symbolizes the universal reservoir of all possible existence, supports every creation, and even precedes their form. The Torah's creation myth aligns with this archetype, with primordial water everywhere, from which everything subsequently emerges:

וְהָאָרֶץ הִתְהַוָּה תוֹהוּ וָבִהוּ וְחַשְׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם – The earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep, and the spirit of God hovered over the waters... (1:4)

The Mikvah ritual bath is central to Judaism and draws heavily on this archetype, symbolizing rebirth and renewal. Moreover, with our knowledge of the water cycle, we have learned the literal truth of



water as the solvent of life and regeneration; and in fact, the search for liquid water in the universe serves as a close proxy to the search for life beyond our planet.

But Moshe doesn't say the Torah is like water; he compares the Torah to rain – יַעֲרַף בְּמָטָר לִקְחֵי. They do have a lot in common; both are life-giving, cleansing, regenerative, restorative, and like rain, the Torah came from the sky to affirm and sustain us. So sure, the Torah is like rain!

But Moshe doesn't simply say that the Torah is like rain; he says it's also like dew – יַעֲרַף בְּמָטָר לִקְחֵי, תִּנּוּל – כִּטְל אֶמְרָתִי.

But what is dew, if not just another form of rain and water?

To unlock the symbol and discover the meaning, we must establish the technical difference between rain and dew.

Dew occurs when you have a cold object in a warm environment. As the object's exposed surface cools by radiating heat, atmospheric moisture condenses faster than it evaporates, resulting in the formation of water droplets on the surface. In other words, a cold object in a warm environment can draw moisture out of the ambient surroundings.

There's a Torah that's like rain, that comes from the sky, and that hopefully, you've experienced at times, perhaps a flash of inspiration that came out of nowhere, the moments you feel alive. But that doesn't happen to everyone, and even when it does, it doesn't happen all the time. To borrow rain's imagery, this kind of inspiration is seasonal only. If you're counting on the rain to get by, what happens when the rain stops?

Perhaps precisely because of this problem, there's a Torah that we can experience that feels more like dew. A warm environment that doesn't come from the sky, that we can generate and cultivate ourselves, and which draws out the life-affirming properties from within and around us.

R' Simcha Bunim m'Peshischa notes that we can't expect our efforts and interactions with Torah to have an instant magical transformational effect like a rain shower; it's far more subtle, like dew. A morning's dew is not enough to nourish a plant, but with the regular appearance of morning dew, the days stack up, and despite no noticeable daily effect, the plant will grow.

As R' Shlomo Farhi points out, dew is gentle, not overwhelming. Plants can't survive forever on dew alone, but it can be enough to keep them going until the rains return. When you are running cold, a warm atmosphere will nurture and sustain you, but you should remember that it can't take you all the way; there will come the point that you need to proactively follow through with renewed drive and desire to grow once more.

The Torah conditions timely rain on the product of outward effort:



וְהָיָה אִם־שָׁמַעַתְּ אֶת־שְׁמֵעִי אֶל־מִצְוֹתַי אֲשֶׁר אֶנְכִי מְצַוֶּה אֶתְכֶם הַיּוֹם לְאַהֲבָה אֶת־ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וּלְעִבְדוֹ בְּכָל־לִבְבְּכֶם וּבְכָל־נַפְשְׁכֶם. וְנָתַתִּי מְטֶר־אֲרֻצְכֶם בְּעֵתוֹ – If then, you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day, loving the Lord your God and serving Him with all your heart and soul, I will grant the rain for your land in season... (11:,13,14)

The Ishbitzer suggests that dew is a product of internal effort, a reflection of our hearts and minds. Subconsciously, our hearts and minds hope and pray, day and night, without stop. When you so much as hope for the best, or that things turn out okay, or even whisper “Please, God,” those thoughts bring wisps of warm vitality into the world that affirm and sustain growth and life. Given the mythical potency of dew and its connection to humble yet persistent origins, our sages suggest that, of all things, dew contains the latent power to resurrect the dead at the End of Days.

There are times you’ll have flashes of divine inspiration, but at some point, that’s going to dry up. Reassuringly, as Moshe said so long ago, it doesn’t just come from the sky; it can emerge slowly with determination and environmental support. Perhaps then, dew is the symbol of human-driven inspiration – אַתְּעֲרוֹתָא דְלִתְתָא.

Half the year we pray for rain, but half the year we also pray for dew; remember that you are more like a plant than a robot. You have fallow and fruitful seasons, needing different things at different times; a light drizzle right now, a little more sun next week. It is a design feature, not a flaw, and is a far healthier approach to adopt than perpetual sameness.

This isn’t cutesy wordplay; the metaphor is quite explicit. If Moshe’s words are the water, then we are the grass and leaves, the tree of life itself, encouraged to endure and grow strong – כְּשִׁעִירָם עָלֵי־דְשָׁא, וְכַרְבִּיבִים עָלֵי־עֵשֶׂב.

When you go into the woods, you see all kinds of trees. One is stunted, another is bent; you understand it was obstructed or didn’t get enough light, and so it turned out that way. You don’t get emotional about it, you allow it; that’s just the way trees are. But humans are like that too – כִּי הָאָדָם עֵץ – הַשְׂדֵה. All too often, rather than accept ourselves and others, we are critical, whether self-conscious or judgmental, critical of a way of being other humans for the way they are. But humans are like trees; this one was obstructed like this, that one didn’t get enough that, so they turned out that way.

Trees lose their leaves in the cold dark winters, but they do not despair, secure in the knowledge that spring will return before long and they will blossom once again. You might be in the thick of winter, but hold on; you too will blossom once again.

If you’re waiting for inspiration or a sign, it might be a while, it might not come at all, or this might be it.

Cultivate an environment around yourself with structure, systems, and people that will foster, nurture, and support your growth. You will not rise to the level of your goals; you will fall to the level of your systems. It’s simply unsustainable to have big goals with no supporting infrastructure.



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Your goal should not be to beat the game but to stay in the game and continue playing so that you can in turn foster a gentle and nurturing environment that will warm others too.

Moshe's timeless blessing is hauntingly beautiful and refreshingly real. Moshe speaks through the ages and reminds us the Torah is not just water, the stuff of life. It is the water we need in good times and the dew that gets us through hard times.

The metaphor itself acknowledges and validates that there are times the rains just won't come. But in the moments where the Torah won't be our rain, it can be our dew.

Gratitude Redux

8 minute read | Straightforward

Emotional states are everything.

While all animals experience emotions, they are predominantly simple; human capacity for complex thought uniquely impacts the context and depth of how we perceive and experience our emotions. Some emotions, like guilt, can come from our understanding of our role in events in the external world.

One of the highest human emotions is gratitude, which affirms that there are good things in the world, gifts and benefits that we have received. Research has shown that gratitude is one of the most powerful predictors of wellbeing, over and above most known factors, including health and wealth. Gratitude is tightly linked to feeling happy, empathetic, energetic, forgiving, hopeful, optimistic, and spiritual while feeling less depressed, envious, and neurotic.

The Mesilas Yesharim teaches that God's entire purpose in Creation was to have a counterpart to share the gift of God's goodness with – humans, created as we are in God's image and likeness.

It follows that recognizing goodness activates and draws out what's best in us; gratitude and recognition arguably form the undercurrent of the vast majority of mitzvos, and it might not be a stretch to say perhaps all of Judaism.

The Midrash imagines God walking Adam through Eden. After reveling in how beautiful and wonderful each tree is, God would say that each marvelous one had been designed for human enjoyment. Inasmuch as we can say that God could want anything, God wants humans to enjoy His gifts and recognize and appreciate those blessings.

The first words God says to the Jewish People articulate that God wants to be recognized – אֲנֹכִי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ – and not just for higher-order activities such as Creation, but for a specific and



personal intervention in their lives, that God had rescued them from slavery. The next thing God has to say is that God cannot tolerate idolatry, where humans would misattribute God's work to other, lesser powers. Idolatry betrays and demeans the good that God has done, and ranks among the most egregious sins towards God; idolatry entirely undermines God's purpose for Creation, that God's goodness to be appreciated and loved – וְאֶהְרֹת אֵת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל לִבְבְּךָ וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל מְאֹדְךָ

In the agrarian world of the Torah, there used to be an annual national thanksgiving ritual – the mitzvah of Bikkurim. Farmers would tie a string to the first fruits that sprouted. Then, after the harvest, the Mishna describes how the entire country would sing and dance together at a massive street festival in Jerusalem to accompany the farmers dedicating those first fruits at the Beis HaMikdash to express their gratitude for the harvest – and almost everyone was a farmer.

On arrival, the farmers would present their baskets to the attending Kohen and recite some affirmations, including a brief recital of Jewish history. They'd recount how Yakov fled from Lavan, that his family descended to Egypt, and that God rescued the Jewish People and gave them the Land of Israel – אֲרָמִי אֲבִד אָבִי / וַיֵּרֶד מִצְרָיִם / וַיִּסְוֶן־לָנוּ אֶת הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת – The prayer closes with an instruction to the farmer to rejoice – וְשִׂמְחָתָּ בְּכָל הַטּוֹב אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לָךְ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ וּלְבֵיתְךָ אִתָּהּ וְהִלּוִי וְהִגַּד אֲשֶׁר בָּרַךְךָ –

It's hard to overstate how central our sages saw the mitzvah of Bikkurim. The Sifri suggests that the merit of Bikkurim is what entitles the people to the Land of Israel; the Midrash Tanchuma says that the merit of Bikkurim fuels the world's prayers; and the Midrash teaches that the mitzvah of Bikkurim perpetuates nothing less than the entire universe.

But there's one part that doesn't quite fit.

The farmer would work his field manually; weeding, plowing; sowing; pruning; watering, and guarding it. It redeems no less than an entire year's work when the harvest comes, and ensures food security for the next year!

The farmer has worried for a year, living with anxiety and uncertainty. After the harvest, those troubles are gone; he can sleep easy now, and it might be the one time a year he can undoubtedly pray from a place of love and security, not fear and worry. So it's a strange thing for the Torah to instruct the farmer to rejoice – וְשִׂמְחָתָּ בְּכָל הַטּוֹב אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לָךְ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ וּלְבֵיתְךָ –

If this is the happiest anyone will realistically be, why does the Torah need to command joy?

Healthy and well-adjusted humans require a sense of satisfaction and self-worth that comes from hard work and self-sufficiency – בְּזַעַת אִפְיֶךָ תֹאכַל לֶחֶם. Our sages call unearned benefits the bread of shame – לֶחֶם שֶׁל בּוֹשָׁה – When a child begins to individuate from the parent and insists on doing it "all by myself," we recognize the child undergoing a healthy phase of human development. Eternal childishness and helplessness is a sickness, not a blessing. And after all, self-reliance is the American Dream!



But we can take doing it “all by yourself” too far – **וְאָמַרְתָּ בְּלִבְבְּךָ כִּחְיִי וְעָצָם יָדַי עָשָׂה לִי אֶת־הַחֵיִל הַזֶּה**.

So perhaps the challenge for the farmer – and us – isn’t only in celebrating the blessings – **וְשִׂמְחָתָּ בְּכָל** **הַטּוֹב**; it’s that even after taking a bare piece of land and making it fruit all by himself, he has to admit that he didn’t truly do it alone – **אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לָךְ ה’ אֱלֹהֶיךָ וּלְבִיתְךָ** –

Gratitude has a fundamental connection and interaction with humility. It grounds us and orients us by recognizing that what we are and what we have is due to others, and above all, to God, and so the error of self-sufficiency isn’t just that it’s morally wrong – it’s factually wrong!

As R’ Yitzchak Hutner notes, **מוֹדָה** doesn’t just mean thanksgiving; it also means to confess. When we thank another, we concede that we needed the assistance of another, admitting our frail weakness and showing our vulnerability. We acknowledge that another has shared gifts with us, big and small, to help us achieve the goodness in our lives. Genuine gratitude strengthens relationships by helping us recognize and appreciate how we’ve been affirmed and supported by others. But our ego can inhibit us if we don’t get it in check, telling us we did it alone.

Gratitude affirms that self-sufficiency is an illusion, perhaps God’s greatest gift of all. John Rawls sharply observed that a person cannot claim credit for being born with greater natural endowments, such as athleticism or intelligence, as it is purely the result of a natural lottery. As the Rambam explains, our lives are a gift within a gift; by definition, our starting points cannot be earned, so gratitude should be our first and overwhelming response to everything. Sure, we may deserve the fruits of what we do with our gifts, but the starting point of having any of those things to start with is the more significant gift by far.

By thanking God loudly and in public, we firmly reject the worldview of self-sufficiency or that we did it ourselves – **כִּחְיִי וְעָצָם יָדַי עָשָׂה לִי אֶת־הַחֵיִל הַזֶּה** – and perhaps the ritual also helps recalibrate our expectations.

It is natural to be pleased with where you are but to want more still. Healthily expressed, we call it ambition, and unhealthily, we call it greed – **יֵשׁ לוֹ מִנֵּה רוּצָה מֵאֲתֵיִם**. You’re glad you got something, even though it wasn’t quite what you wanted.

But nothing undermines gratitude as much as expectations. There is an inverse relationship between expectations and gratitude; the more expectations you have, the less appreciation you will have, and it’s obvious why. If you get what you expected, you will not be particularly grateful for getting it.

Expectations are insidious because although we can superficially express gratitude, what looks like gratitude might actually be entitlement cloaked in religiosity and self-righteousness. It’s a blind spot because you think you’re thankful even though you didn’t get what you wanted! But that’s not joy; it’s the definition of resentment.



Getting gratitude right brings out what's best in humans, encouraging us not just to appreciate life's gifts but to repay them or pay them forward. But beyond gratitude's incredible blessings, getting gratitude wrong is catastrophic and is one of the catalysts for all the Torah's curses and prophecies of doom:

פלא תחת אשר לא־עבדת את ה' אלקיך בשמחה ובטוב לבב מֵרַב פֶּלַח ... Since you did not serve God with joy and good spirit when you had it all... (28:47)

It's a sentiment the Jewish People expressed uncomfortably often in the wilderness, complaining about lack of food and water, about the dangers they faced from the Egyptians as they were leaving, about the inhabitants of the land they were about to enter, and about the manna and the lack of meat and vegetables.

Moshe warns us how his people lacked gratitude in difficult times and warns them of making the same mistake in good times:

הִשָּׁמֵר לְךָ פֶּן־תִּשְׁכַּח אֶת־ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְבַלְתִּי שְׁמֹר מִצְוֹתָיו וּמִשְׁפָּטָיו וְחֻקֹּתָיו אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְצַוֶּה הַיּוֹם: פֶּן־תֹּאכַל וְשָׂבַעְתָּ וּבָתִּים טִבִּים תִּבְנֶה וְיִשְׁבַּת: וּבָקָרְךָ וּצְאֵנֶךָ יִרְבּוּ וְכֶסֶף וְזָהָב יִרְבּוּ לְךָ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר־לְךָ יִרְבֶּה: וְרַם לְבָבְךָ וְשָׁכַחְתָּ אֶת־ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ הַמּוֹצִיאֶךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית יְעֻדִים: – Take care lest you forget Hashem your God and fail to keep His commandments, His rules, and His laws, which I enjoin upon you today. When you have eaten your fill, and have built fine houses to live in, and your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold have increased, and everything you own has prospered, beware lest your heart grow haughty and you forget Hashem your God—who freed you from the land of Egypt, the house of bondage. (8:11-14)

So perhaps the short history of how the farmers got their land recalibrates our thinking. Our enemies might have slaughtered us; but God has given us our lives and security – אֶרְמִי אֶבֶד אָבִי. We might have been spared death, but we could have been enslaved or subjugated to any number of enemies; yet God has given us our labor – וַיֵּרֶד מִצְרַיִמָּה. And on top of safety and freedom, we have material abundance – וַיִּתְּנוּ־לָנוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת. With that kind of context, it would be ridiculous to think we somehow had it coming or that we did it by ourselves!

We don't practice Bikkurim today, and we're missing out on a vital aspect of Judaism. But we've probably all seen the contemporary analog, though – many businesses frame and hang their first dollar of revenue. It's sentimental, but it's a powerful symbol, and just like Bikkurim, it is a ritual that captures the moment you are overwhelmed with gratitude and joy. By dedicating our first sign of success, the first fruit, the first dollar, we protect ourselves from the hubris that we had it coming or the narcissism that we did it ourselves.

The Hebrew term for practicing gratitude literally means “recognizing the good” – הַכֵּרַת הַטּוֹב; gratitude is recognizing the good that is already yours. The things you lack are still present, and in expressing gratitude, no one is saying you need to ignore what's missing. But there is no limit to what we don't have, and if that is where we focus, then our lives are inevitably filled with endless dissatisfaction.



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As R' Shmshon Raphael Hirsch explains, almost all the mitzvos of the Land of Israel reflect this sentiment in one way or another. By heavily regulating our use of the land, with Shemitta, Yovel, the Omer, Sukka, and the tithes, the Torah guides us that there is only one Landlord, and we are all here to serve – הכל נתון בערבון, ומצודה פרוסה על כל החיים –

The Jewish people are named after Yehuda, a form of the Hebrew word for “thank you” – תודה. We're not just the people of the book; we could more accurately be called the grateful people, the people of thank you.

As R' Jonathan Sacks teaches, our blessings and prayers are a daily gratitude ritual; from the first words we say in the morning – מודה אני – to everything about life itself: for the human body, the physical world, the earth to stand on, the eyes we see with, and the air we breathe.

The Eliyahu Rabbah notes that the prayer leader repeats the Amidah aloud, and the congregation answers Amen, for all except the Thanksgiving blessing – מודים אנחנו לך. You can delegate plenty to others, but not saying thank you.

While most of us aren't farmers in the Land of Israel, each of us has a long list of blessings to be thankful for, and although we're sorely missing a national thanksgiving ritual; we can learn its lesson that there is no such thing as self-made.

If there are any good things or accomplishments in our lives, we didn't get them by ourselves; we all got plenty of help.

You need to recognize how blessed and fortunate you are, with no void of resentment for the things you don't yet have; to be wholeheartedly and wholesomely thankful, decisively abandoning your expectations and entitlement, truly rejoicing with what you have – איזהו עשיר? השמח בחלקו –

Let gratitude, joy, and happiness spill over beyond the confines of the religious sphere and into the rest of your life – it will deepen and enrich you. Thank God, and perhaps your spouse a little more; your parents, children, colleagues, clients, and community.

We can't make it alone, and we're not supposed to. We need each other; it's a key design feature of being human – לא טוב היות האדם לבדו –

As the legendary physicist and science educator Carl Sagan once said, to bake an apple pie from scratch, you must first create the entire universe.

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



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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!

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.