

Vayeishev 2022

Mind Tricks

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:

ן אַשְׁמְעָנוּ; עַל-כַּן בָּאָה אַלֵינוּ, הַצָּרָה הַזֹּאַת – וַיֹּאמְרוּ אָישׁ אָל-אָחִיו, אָבָל אֲשֵׁמִים אֲנַחְנוּ עַל-אָחִינוּ, אֲשֶׁר רָאִינוּ צָרַת נַפְשׁוֹ בְּהָתְחַנְנוֹ אֵלֵינוּ, וְלֹא שְׁמָעְנוּ; עַל-כַּן בָּאָה אֵלֵינוּ, הַצָּרָה הַזֹּאַת 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 conversation to that effect. The story simply narrates what they did to him, with no record of Yosef's cries or pleas, and no mention of ignoring his suffering.

What conversation are they talking about?

R' Shlomo Freifeld suggests a frightening resolution.

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

And that's what the brothers realize years later in a miserable jail cell.

We can have no doubt that any observer of this traumatic episode would witness Yosef crying and begging them to stop their drastic and wicked course of action.

In their eyes, Yosef was trouble, and they had to get rid of him; it was settled in their minds. They were determined and decisive that he was a pretender to be removed; powerful emotions had dulled their sensitivity. Caught up in the heat of the moment, he hadn't made a sound in their eyes, and so the Torah records the story as the reality they experienced.

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

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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?

Hopes and Dreams

3 minute read | Straightforward

In the stories of Yakov's family and their descent to Egypt, Yosef features prominently. Yosef's brothers hated him, orchestrating his disappearance. Yet, he somehow rose to the rank of prime minister of Egypt, and in an ironic twist, wound up saving his family years later from a devastating famine in their homeland.

Our Sages herald Yosef as arguably the greatest of his generation, with certain qualities and traits exceeding even those of his lauded ancestors – צדיק יסוד עולם.

What was Yosef's distinctive quality; what made Yosef, Yosef?

The first Yosef story, the story of his youth, starts with him on top, his father's favorite, and ends with him quite literally at the bottom, in a pit and on the way to slavery. The second story, the story of his maturity and growth, begins with him in the depths of a prison dungeon, yet he climbs his way to the heights of Egyptian society. What changed was Yosef's perspective.

R' Isaac Bernstein sharply observes that the axis of Yosef's fortune turns based on where his focus is.

In his youth, his fall precipitated from his self-absorption about his dreams and ambitions; in his maturity, his climb blossomed from his deep empathy and sensitivity to others, listening to the troubled butler and baker, and eventually, an unsettled Pharaoh, to their dreams, hopes, and fears.

The Torah begins the second story by testifying that God was with Yosef from the bottom through the top of his successes:

ןיוֹסַף הוּרַד מִצְרִיְמָה וַיִּקְנֵהוּ פּוֹטִיפַר סְרִיס פַּרְעֹה שַׂר הַטַּבָּחִים אִישׁ מִצְרִי מִיַּד הַיִּשְׁמְעֵאלִים אֲשֶׁר הוֹרִדָהוּ שָׁמָה: וַיְהִי הְבֵית אֲדֹנִיו הַמְצְרִי: שַׁצְרִים Mhen Yosef was taken down to Egypt, a certain Egyptian, Potiphar, a courtier of Pharaoh and his chief steward, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him there. God was with Yosef, and he was a successful man, and he stayed in the house of his Egyptian master. (3:1,2)

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The Da'as Zkeinim observes that it's not too remarkable for someone desperate to believe in God - who else is going to help? But far too often, and with uncomfortable regularity, those self-same people forget God the moment they get their blessings, because all too often, wealth and success are the death of spirituality, snuffed out under a tidal wave of materialism.

But Yosef doesn't forget, because it's not about him anymore. The Torah classifies Yosef as a "successful" person – אָישׁ מַצְלִיהַ – the only instance the Torah describes someone this way; this title belongs uniquely to Yosef.

The Malbim notes that the word itself is the causative form of the word for success – מַצְלִיהַ – meaning Yosef was literally someone who caused the success of others. As the story makes abundantly clear, Yosef did in fact bring success to others; first, making Potiphar's household successful, and then running the prison successfully, and eventually, the entire government.

What if that were your definition of what success looks like? We ought to be mindful that it is the Torah's definition, after all. The egocentric definition of success as personal gain is victory, but it's not success. Success is improving other people's lives, nothing more, nothing less.

The progression of Yosef's story is in the common thread of his God-given charisma, looks, talents, and smarts. In the beginning, he thought it made him better than everybody else, but then he grew up, and understood that it merely gave him a greater ability to help others.

R' Shlomo Farhi suggests that this was the symbolic significance of Yosef's stripy cloak Yakov had given home; that Yakov saw in Yosef the ability to bring together people of different stripes and backgrounds.

Our sages herald Yosef as the greatest of his generation. He stood strong and tall in the face of nightmares his brothers could never begin to imagine, and he did it with his distinctive style and flair.

In shackles and from the pits, he never forgot that God was with him and calibrated his sensitivity to others' problems and was determined to help them, despite being down on luck more than any of them.

Your fortune will change when you stop looking out for yourself.



Parallel Lines

3 minute read | Straightforward

Most of the second half of the book of Genesis is about Yakov's children, with a strong focus on Yosef. Yet, right in the middle of the Yosef narrative, the Torah interrupts with a cryptic parallel side story about Yehuda, commonly glossed over, and perhaps a little awkward.

Yehuda had a son who displeased God and died. Presuming some form of levirate marriage, wherein marriage outside the family clan was forbidden, Yehuda's second son married Tamar, but would not uphold his duty to have a child with her, and he died as well. Afraid that Tamar was somehow responsible for the death of his sons, Yehuda withheld his third son from her, leaving her in limbo as the first chained woman – an aguna. She then disguised herself as a harlot to seduce Yehuda and became pregnant.

When word spread that Tamar was pregnant, the obvious conclusion was that she had violated her duty to the family clan, and so she had to be executed. At the last minute, she revealed her ruse, and Yehuda admitted fault.

What is this story doing in the middle of the Yosef stories?

R' Jonathan Sacks observes that this story mirrors the Yosef story, and illustrates that Yosef and Yehuda had a parallel and corresponding rise and fall.

Both stories involve deception through clothing – Yosef with his blood-stained tunic, and Yehuda with Tamar's seductive disguise.

The Torah begins this narrative with Yehuda isolated:

וְיָהֵי בָּעֵת הַהָּוֹא וַיָּרָד יְהוּדָה מֵאֵת אֶחָיו וַיֵּט עַד־אִישׁ עֲדָלָמִי וּשְׁמוֹ חִירָה. וַיַּרְא־שָׁם יְהוּדָה בַּת־אִישׁ כְּנַעֲנִי וּשְׁמוֹ שׁוּעַ וַיָּקֶחָה וַיָּבא אֵלֶיה And afterward, Yehuda descended from his brothers and camped near an Adullamite whose name was Hirah. There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua, and he married her and lived with her. (38:1, 2)

Yehuda's descent was both literal and figurative – וַיָּרָד יְהוּדָה מַאַת אָחָיו. The Midrash teaches that the remaining brothers held Yehuda responsible for their father's misery; he separated himself and did what no one else in the family had done – he married a Canaanite.

The turning point in this story is powerful, where Tamar reveals that she had fulfilled her duty to the clan when they would not uphold their duty to her:

הָוּא מוּצַאת וְהִיא שֶׁלְחָה אֶל־חָמִיהָ לֵאמֹר לְאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר־אֵלֶה לּוֹ אָנֹכִי הָרָה וַתּּאמֶר הַכָּר־נָא לְמִי הַחֹתֶמֶת וְהַפְּתִילִים וְהַמַּשֶּׁה הָאֵלֶה. וַיַּבֵּר יְהוּזָה - As she was being brought out, she sent this message to her father-in-law, "I am with child by the man to whom these belong." And she added, TorahRedux | Ancient Words, Timeless Wisdom Subscriptions and feedback: Neli@TorahRedux.com

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"Examine these: whose seal and cord and staff are these?" Judah recognized them and said, "She is more in the right than I since I did not give her to my son Shelah." And he was not intimate with her again. (38:25,26)

As surely as Yosef and Yehuda hit rock bottom, they could both rise once more.

Admitting his wrongdoing, Yehuda unlocked the ability to make amends, and the man who had once proposed murdering his brother Yosef could transform into a man who would stand up for his brother Binyamin when he was in danger.

It is worth highlighting the enormous gamble Tamar took to avoid embarrassing Judah. Chazal hyperbolically liken humiliation to murder. R' Jonathan Sacks quips that we cover bread at the Shabbos table so that we don't embarrass the bread when we make kiddush first; if only we were so careful with people!

R' Jonathan Sacks notes that these stories contain the first instances of teshuva – repentance and forgiveness – the power to heal what would otherwise lead to permanent relationship fractures.

Yakov's family found their way back when they learned to admit their mistakes to themselves and each other.

So can we.

Inflection Points

3 minute read | Straightforward

One of the most tragic figures in the Torah is Reuven. His haunting story is replete with squandered potential and the road not traveled. When he wanted to bring his mother flowers, he might have waited until Leah was alone. After Rachel's death, he might have spoken directly to his father instead of moving the beds.

One of his defining missed opportunities is when the brothers resolved to dispose of Joseph, and Reuven convinced them to change their scheme:

וַיִּשְׁמַע רְאוּבֵן, וַיַּצְלָהוּ מִיָּדָם; וַיֹאמֶר, לֹא נַכֶּנּוּ נָכָּשׁ. וַיֹאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם רְאוּבֵן, אַל-תִּשְׁכָּוּ-דָם-הַשְׁלִיכוּ אֹתוֹ אָל-הַבּוֹר הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר בַּמִדְבָּר, וְיָד שַל-תִּשְׁכָּוּ-דָם-הַשְׁלִיכוּ אֹתוֹ מִיָּדָם; וַיֹּאמֶר, לֹא נַכְּנוּ גָכָשׁ. וַיֹאמֶר, לֹא נַכְּנוּ אָלָאָרִיו שַל-תִּשְׁלְחוּ-בוֹ: לְמַעַן, הַצִּיל אֹתוֹ מִיָּדָם, לַהֲשִׁיבוֹ, אָל-אָרִיו clutches. He said, "Let us not take his life." And Reuven went on, "Shed no blood! Cast him into that pit out in the wilderness, but do not touch him yourselves"—intending to save him from them and restore him to his father. (37:21, 22)

Yet his good intentions never materialize: TorahRedux | Ancient Words, Timeless Wisdom

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על-הַבּוֹר, וְהָנֵה אֵין-יוֹסֵף בַּבּוֹר; וַיָּקָרַע, אֶת-בְּגָדָיו. וַיָּשֶׁב אֶל-אֶהָיו, וַיֹּאמַר: הַיֶּלֶד אֵינְנוּ, וַאֲנִי אָנָה אֲנִי-בָא Reuven returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he rent his clothes. Returning to his brothers, he said, "The boy is gone! Where do I go now?" (37:29, 30)

R' Shamshon Raphael Hirsch wonders whether his previous failures might have crippled him, or that he felt threatened by Joseph; what is certain is that by deferring action to avoid the tension of confrontation, the moment fizzled out and disappeared.

The Midrash laments the missed opportunity, saying that if Reuven had known that the Torah would record for posterity that "when Reuven heard, he tried to save him from their clutches", he would have carried Joseph back to his father on his shoulders; and the Midrash concludes with the lesson that we should do everything wholeheartedly.

But if you think about it, that's the wrong message. If Reuven would act because of his audience, he wouldn't be saving Joseph because he cared at all! Isn't the Midrash honing in on the wrong point?

R' Elya Meir Bloch observes that since the Torah spans centuries and generations, it has time skips. The stories and sagas that make the cut resonate not just in the protagonist's lives, but in the lives of their readers for all time.

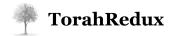
R' Shlomo Farhi teaches that we can never know which moments in our lives are the inflection points. The Midrash is not about insincerity; it's about indecisiveness. If we knew which moments would be the ones that mattered, we'd be fully present and engaged to give our all.

If Reuven had only known, says the Midrash. If he'd known that the future was watching that moment, he might have found the conviction to follow through. But Reuven could not know. He had not read the story. None of us can read the story of our life – we can only live it.

As R' Jonathan Sacks notes, it is impossible not to recognize in Reuven a person of the highest ethical sensibilities. His heart is in the right place and he only means the best. But though he had a conscience, he lacked courage and conviction. He knew what was right, but dwelling on his mistakes had robbed him of the resolve to act boldly and decisively; and in this particular moment, more was lost than Joseph. So too was Reuven's chance to become the hero he could and should have been.

The feeling of regret is the pain of what could have been. To minimize regret, engage in every moment wholeheartedly and fully present.

The future is watching.



Living with Differences

3 minute read | Straightforward

The formative stories in the book of Genesis are powerful and moving.

They tell us where we come from, what our heroes and role models looked like, and how they got there. We recognize the individual protagonists' greatness when we read these stories, but the stories also include plenty of failings.

In the stories of Yakov's children, there is constant tension, a sibling rivalry. Yet Yakov's children are the first of the Jewish People; the first generation to be entirely worthy of inheriting the covenant of Avraham collectively – אנסער שבטי י-ה.

While the Torah's terse stories obviously cannot capture who these great people truly were in three dimensions, we shouldn't ignore that the Torah deliberately frames the stories a particular way, characterizing and highlighting specific actions and people. We should sit up and notice, wondering what we are supposed to learn from the parts that won't quite fit with our picture of greatness.

Each generation of our ancestral prototypes added something – Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yakov. What are we supposed to make of the apparent disputes and strife between Yosef and his brothers?

R' Yitzchak Berkovits suggests that one lesson is how perilously close people came to killing one of their own in Yosef, how their inability to tolerate Yosef nearly ruined them, with a straight line from their disagreements to centuries of enslavement in Egypt.

While we can't get to some ultimate historical truth of the matter, the Torah's characterization is unequivocal. As much as we believe that there is a right and wrong approach to life and that we must fight for what we believe in, we must still love and tolerate people we disagree with. If, in our pursuit of truth and justice, we end up dividing the family, hating and alienating others, we have gotten lost along the way.

The Sfas Emes suggests that Yosef's criticisms stemmed from the fact that he had different, which is to say, higher standards than his brothers. Being the closest to his father, he was the best placed to claim authority from his father's teachings; and being so highly attuned, he was sensitive to his brother's nuanced missteps, so while Yosef's brothers could not dispute his greatness, they determined that his standards were destructive.

It's not so hard to see why. Although they were the heirs of Avraham's covenant, it was intolerable to have someone so demanding and oversensitive policing them day and night. In their estimation, it was untenable for a viable Jewish future.

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The brothers would eventually see that Yosef wasn't a threat, that he had been on the right track all along, just not the right one for them. But they would only realize too late, after the family had already suffered greatly from the fallout, and would be mired in Egypt for centuries as a result.

R' Yitzchak Berkovits suggests that the lesson for us is to learn to live with high standards in the place where theory and practice meet.

Daily, we see the razor-sharp edge of absolute truth clashing with the realpolitik of practical rather than moral or ideological considerations. It's impossible to measure and quantify values or where to draw the line; it's deeply personal and subjective to specific circumstances, continually hinging on so many practicalities.

Yosef and Yehuda never clash about what's true, or what matters. They agree entirely about the value of Avraham's legacy, but they could not agree on what that might look like. One of the story's lessons is the error of confusing theory with practice; with no difference in values, we can and should tolerate differences in practice.

Two of the most fundamental principles of the Torah and life are loving your neighbor and the image of God, both of which speak to the dignity of others – אהבת לרעך כמוך / צלם אלוקים. Reserving love and compassion for people who are just like you is not the Torah's greatest principle – that would demand literally nothing of us. We must tolerate the existence of those who are not just like us, which is incredibly hard.

Like Yosef, we mustn't be afraid of high standards. But if we aren't quite ready to live that way, we should at the very least tolerate others who do have high standards. Society has to tolerate the person who wants things to be better just as equally it has to tolerate the person who can't quite live up to that just yet.

Because true to life, you can't teach a person anything once you've chased them away.

<u>Avoiding I Told You So</u>

4 minute read | Straightforward

The book of Genesis concludes with Yosef's story.

It's worth noting that roughly a quarter of the book revolves around Yosef as the central character, making him its most prominent protagonist by a distance.

As an adolescent, Yosef was his own worst enemy, sharing vivid dreams with brothers already jealous of his special relationship with their father. Determining that this arrogant dreamer was unworthy of

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their great ancestral legacy and posed a threat to its future, the brothers disposed of him, selling him into ignominious slavery.

But he could not be stopped. Undeterred, he climbed his way out the depths of slavery and false imprisonment without faltering until he reached the height of Egyptian aristocracy.

The story reaches its climax with Yosef positioned as the fully naturalized Egyptian ruler of all, Tzafnas Paneach. In a stunning reversal, his brothers unwittingly made their way to him:

וַיָּבֹאוּ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאַל לְשְׁבּר בְּתוֹדְ הַבָּאִים כִּי־הָיָה הָרָעָב בְּאָרָץ בְּגָעָן וְיוֹסֵף הוּא הַשֵּׁלִיט עַל־הָאָרָץ הוּא הַפַּשְׁבִיר לְכָל־עַם הָאָרָץ וַיָּבֹאו אָחֵי יוֹסַף וּיִשְׁבָר אַלָהם מַאַין בָּאתָם וַיֹאמָרוּ מַאָרָץ בְּנַעַן ווּיִשְׁתְּחוּדלוֹ אַפַּיִם אָרְצָה. ווַיַרא יוֹסַף אֶת־אָחָיו וַיִּבָרם וַיִּתְנַבָר אָלָהם ווִדַבּר אָבָיהם קָשׁוֹת וויֹאמֶר אַלָהָם מַאין בָּאתָם וויֹאמָרוּ מַאֶרָץ בְּנַעַן ה The sons of Israel were among those who came to procure rations, for the famine extended to the land of Canaan. Now Yosef ruled the land; it was he who dispensed rations to all the people of the land. Yosef's brothers came and bowed low to him, with their faces to the ground. When Yosef saw his brothers, he recognized them; but he acted like a stranger toward them and spoke harshly to them. He asked them, "Where do you come from?" And they said, "From the land of Canaan, to procure food." For though Yosef recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him. (42:5-8)

It's hard to overstate the importance of this moment, quite arguably the moment the entire book of Genesis turns on.

In every story up to this point, siblings could not get past their differences, and families would fracture and splinter off in separate ways. But this time, something different happens, and it's because Yosef did something different.

We can be confident that Yosef remembered his childhood dream that his siblings would one day bow before him; sharing this vision was the very thing that had torn him from his family and landed him in his current position!

Then this moment happens – they bow and humbly beg for his benevolence and assistance. Despite their best efforts, his dream has come true, and this moment utterly vindicates him. The upstart dreamer had, in fact, been a full-fledged prophet all along!

We can't begin to imagine all the years of pain and hurt, the difficulties and torment he experienced, first at home, then through abduction and slavery, then prison and later in politics, in utter isolation.

But this moment conclusively proves that however childish or immature he had been, they were completely and utterly wrong.

If he were to reveal his true identity now – the moment his brothers are on the floor beneath him, entirely at his mercy – can we begin to imagine the sense of power and vindication those words might be laden with? How tantalizingly sweet would those words taste rolling off our tongue?

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Yet, presented with the ultimate I-told-you-so opportunity, Yosef turned away from that path and towards the road to reconciliation, paving the way for the family to let go of past differences successfully.

The Kedushas Levi highlights how gracious and magnanimous it was for Yosef to avoid rubbing in this complete and total vindication. He recognized exactly who they were, remembered precisely what they had done, and only troubled himself to make sure that in their lowest moment, they would not recognize him – אָלָיהֶם וַיְדַבֵּר אָלֵיהֶם וַיְדַבֵּר אָהָם קָשׁוֹת.

Yosef refused to kick them when they were down, and would ultimately offer a positive spin on the entire story, that God had ordained the whole thing to position him to save them from their predicament – שָׁמַנִי אֱלהִים לְאָדוֹן לְכָל־מִצְרָיִם / לֹא־אַתֶּם שְׁלַחְתָּם אֹתִי הֵנָּה כִּי הָאֱלהִים / כִּי לְמִחְיָה שְׁלַחָנִי אֵלהִים לָאָדוֹן לָכָל־מִצְרָיִם / לֹא־אַתֶּם שִׁלַחְתָּם אֹתִי הֵנָּה כִּי

All grown-up now, Yosef is able to understand that his dreams were not about him; he was able to recognize that he was a tool. There was no glory to be had in his power, wealth, and success, or even his prophetic ability, except to the extent he could use it to help others and heal the rift in his family he had contributed to. No one had understood his childhood visions; they weren't going to bow because he was better than them but because he was going to save them all. From this point on through the end of the story, he repeatedly makes sure to feed and care for his brothers and their families.

In this moment, this hero of heroes acted from his heart instead of his pain. He truly was better than the brothers who had once tried to break him; rather than make them bitter too, he healed them all.

Most families are at odds a little too often, that is, assuming they're even on speaking terms! Inevitably, there are quite a few I-told-you-so moments. It's a rehash of the cycle of most of the book of Genesis, a tale as old as time, and perhaps even the natural course of life. But just because it's natural, that doesn't mean it has to be that way. It's not inevitable.

We should remember that our greats weren't robotic machines. They hurt each other deeply and caused their family immense and undeserved pain. Yet when things came back around, although they had not forgotten, they faced those moments with compassion and humility, invoking the power to defuse decades of hurt.

The legacy of these stories is that humans have the ability to choose to avert cycles of hurt, the power to fill that void with healing. Be the person you needed when you were hurting, not the person who hurt you.

Break the cycle.

Quote of the Week

TorahRedux | Ancient Words, Timeless Wisdom



TorahRedux

"Praying is talking to the Universe. Meditation is listening to it."

– Paulo Coelho

Thought of the Week

"Karma is just you, repeating your patterns, virtues, and flaws until you finally get what you deserve."

– Naval Ravikant

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 - <u>Neli@TorahRedux.com</u>.

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.