

Beshalach 2023

Appreciating Nature

3 minute read | Straightforward

The splitting of the Red Sea is one of the most important stories in the Torah and one of the most incredible miracles in Jewish belief.

Each element defies expectation; the magnitude of the miracle, where a vast ocean suspends and violates the entire natural order of the universe, not just to help the Jewish People escape, but eradicating the enemy force in one decisive moment, in just the nick of time and all at once out of nowhere.

Like so many of the plagues that struck Egypt, this miracle was also activated by Moshe raising his staff:

וַאֲמַתָּה הָרַם אֶת־מִטְּפוֹ וַנִּטָּה אֶת־יָדוֹ עַל־הַיָּם וַיִּקְעֵהוּ וַיִּבְאֹוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּתוֹךְ הַיָּם בַּיַּבָּשָׁה... וַיִּט מֹשֶׁה אֶת־יָדוֹ עַל־הַיָּם וַיּוֹלֶךְ ה' אֶת־הַיָּם בְּרוּחַ וַיִּפְּצֵהוּ וַיִּבְקְעוּ הַיָּם – “And you lift up your rod and hold out your arm over the sea and split it, so that the Israelites may march into the sea on dry ground”... Then Moshe held out his arm over the sea and the Lord drove back the sea with a strong east wind all that night, and turned the sea into dry ground. The waters were split... (14:16,19)

Interestingly, the miracle was deactivated, and the natural order was restored with the same instruction and action:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה נִטָּה אֶת־יָדוֹ עַל־הַיָּם וַיִּשְׁבּוּ הַיָּם וַיִּשְׁבּוּ הַיָּם עַל־מִצְרַיִם עַל־רֶכֶב וְעַל־פָּרָשָׁיו: וַיִּט מֹשֶׁה אֶת־יָדוֹ עַל־הַיָּם וַיִּשְׁבּוּ הַיָּם לַפְּנוֹת בַּקָּר – Then the Lord said to Moshe, “Hold out your arm over the sea, that the waters may come back upon the Egyptians and upon their chariots and upon their riders.” Moshe held out his arm over the sea, and at daybreak the sea returned to its normal state, and the Egyptians fled at its approach. But the Lord hurled the Egyptians into the sea. (14:26,27)

To be clear, we are talking miracles here, so there are no rules, and we are deep in the uncharted realm of speculation.

But if you think about it, it makes sense that Moshe has to do something to activate the miracle to split the waters. After all, miracles don't just happen by themselves!

But then it doesn't necessarily follow that Moshe would have to do something to deactivate the miracle and restore the natural order. We quite reasonably might expect that the miracle is over the very moment it has served its purpose; once the last straggler made it to dry land, the miracle is unnecessary and would resume its default natural state.



But the miracle doesn't end when it's over. God instructs Moshe to activate the return of the natural order as well. Why wouldn't the miracle end when it was over?

R' Shimshon Pinkus observes that this suggests an essential lesson that is a key to understanding the Torah; from God's vantage point, the natural and the supernatural are the same, in which case there is no default condition.

On this view, Moshe wasn't stopping a miracle; he was performing another miracle, the return of the natural order we take for granted.

R' Joseph B. Soloveitchik highlights how Jewish tradition has endorsed cosmic wonder at natural phenomena for centuries, with blessings over the waxing moon, first blossoms of spring, the configuration of the starry expanse, and the sweet smell of flowers, down to the food we eat, the healthy body, and something as simple as going to the bathroom.

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 – וְעַל נְסִיךְ שְׂבָכָה יוֹם עֲמָנוּ וְעַל נִפְלְאוֹתֶיהָ וְטוֹבוֹתֶיהָ שְׂבָכָה עֵת עָרַב וְבִקְרֹר וְצִהָרִים –

If you're still surprised the natural world didn't just kick back into gear when the Jewish People were done walking through the ocean, you might be taking a lot for granted in life.

This Cannot Be How It Ends

3 minute read | Straightforward

They thought it was over.

The Jewish People had finally left centuries of oppression behind them and had walked out of Egypt. But barely a few days out, the Egyptian army was in pursuit and had them cornered by the ocean shore, wading in the reeds, open sea in front of them, a cloud of dust from the vengeful Egyptian army on the horizon. They were trapped, and the people despaired.

Yet before God even talks to Moshe, Moshe already knows how to proceed:

“Have no fear! Stand and wait, and you shall see God's salvation today!” (14:13) – אַל-תִּירָאוּ-הִתְנַצְּבוּ וְרֵאוּ אֶת-יְשׁוּעַת ה', אֲשֶׁר-יַעֲשֶׂה לָכֶם הַיּוֹם

At this point, the Torah has not recorded an interaction between Moshe and the Creator; Moshe has not been briefed or prepared for what to do in this scenario. And yet he knows.



But how?

The easy answer is that when you're in a tough spot, have some faith, and it'll all work out! But apart from being a cop-out answer, it's true except for when it doesn't work out. Blind faith is probably not the answer; maybe it's something else.

Right after the Jewish People are saved, they sing the Song of the Sea. The Torah also records how Miriam led a separate rendition of gratitude, and the Jewish women followed her. It's curious because it indicates that the Song of the Sea was not enough, that Miriam's activity was distinct and unique, over and above the Song of the Sea. It's also curious because the Torah identifies her in a highly unusual way:

... ומקח מרים הנביאה אֶחֻזת אֶהָרוֹן, אֶת-הַתֵּף-בְּיָדָהּ; וַתִּצְאֶן כָּל-הַנְּשִׂיִם אַחֲרֶיהָ, בְּתַפִּים וּבַמְּחֹלֹת. וַתַּעַן לָהֶם, מִרְיָם וְתַקַּח מִרְיָם הַנְּבִיאָה אֶחֻזת אֶהָרוֹן, אֶת-הַתֵּף-בְּיָדָהּ; וַתִּצְאֶן כָּל-הַנְּשִׂיִם אַחֲרֶיהָ, בְּתַפִּים וּבַמְּחֹלֹת. וַתַּעַן לָהֶם, מִרְיָם and dancing. And she sang to them... (15:21)

At this point in the story, we know that Miriam is a heroic leader in her own right who needs no introduction. The Torah highlights her prophecy and association with Aharon, even though she was also a sister to Moshe.

Sensitive to these nuances, Rashi suggests that the Torah alludes here to the prophecy Miriam received when she was only Aharon's sister but not Moshe's.

Pharaoh's mystics had foreseen Moshe's birth and launched a campaign of infanticide against Jewish boys in the preceding months. The Midrash records how Amram and Yocheved, the Jewish leaders of their time, had separated so as not to suffer such a terrible fate. Miriam then experienced the prophecy of Moshe's impending birth. She persuaded her parents to get back together by saying that their action was worse than Pharaoh's decree, as separation prevented the birth of girls as well.

When Yocheved fell pregnant, the Egyptian government kept tabs on her – but Moshe was born prematurely after a six-month pregnancy. When he was born, the Torah describes his appearance as brilliant – וַתֵּרָא אֹתוֹ כִּי-טוֹב הוּא – which the Midrash suggests is the same brilliance as the light of Creation – כִּי-טוֹב – and the entire house shone.

But despite such an encouraging sign, the moment came where she could hide him no longer – וְלֹא-יִקְלָה עוֹד, הַצְּפִינוּ. After three more months, which would have been a full-term pregnancy, the Egyptians came for her to inspect the child she was due to give birth to. She knew she had to abandon the child prophesied by her daughter. Yocheved placed the boy into a basket and put him in the river. The Torah implies she could not bear to watch – and who could? What chances would one give a baby with no one to care for him, abandoned in a box in a river, in the heat, with an army on the hunt for him no less:



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וַתִּמְצָב אֶחָתוֹ, מֵרָחֵק, לְדַעַה, מֵהַיְעָשָׂה לוֹ – Miriam stood and waited from afar, to know what would be of him...(2:4)

The emphasis is on Miriam; Miriam stayed when Yocheved could not. She had not experienced a new prophecy and was only a child herself. Holding on to her prophecy, one thought guided her – this cannot be how it ends.

And she was right.

The daughter of the Jewish People's oppressors showed up, which would ordinarily be the worst thing that could happen. Still, in a stunning reversal, she displays compassion for the boy and takes him in, ultimate victory seized from the clutches of total defeat.

As R' David Fohrman explains, years later, Moshe knew what to tell the Jews at the shore of the Red Sea because this had happened before; it was the same story!

Jew cornered by Egyptian among the reeds, at the water's edge, all hope fading fast. Moshe had been in this situation before, so he understood to tell them to watch what happens. This cannot be how it ends!

Once they were safe, so many years after her prophecy, Moshe had finally saved their people. It is Miriam's celebration more than anyone else's because this is the ultimate fulfillment of her prophecy – the promised child has saved their people from Egypt for good.

You probably haven't experienced a prophecy of salvation. But all the same, in the heartbreaking moments that look like all is lost, you can invoke the power of Miriam and hold on just a little longer.

This cannot be how it ends.

Amalek Redux

4 minute read | Straightforward

The Torah has lots of laws. Some are fun and easy to understand, like Shabbos, and some are fun and challenging to understand, like shaking the Lulav. A rare few are difficult to understand and might also leave us with a sense of moral unease.

One of them is the laws concerning Amalek.

On the back of the miraculous Exodus and escape at the Red Sea, the Jewish People were exhausted and weary when a band of raiders called Amalek attacked the stragglers in the group.

Seeing as the Jewish People are the protagonists and our ancestors, we understand that Amalek is the antagonist. But of all the adversaries of Jewish history, Amalek has a unique distinction, sitting in a class of its own. From the earliest Jewish writings, Amalek is the code word for everything that is wrong with the world ideologically.

The story of the Land of Israel is a story of conquest. In many stories, the inhabitants recognize the geopolitical risk and act accordingly, such as Balak, Sichon, and Og. But that's not how the Torah tells the story of Amalek, who attack not out of self-defense, but because they could, and with great dishonor, by targeting weak stragglers.

By most counts, there are no less than three separate duties incumbent on all Jews as it pertains to Amalek: to remember that Amalek attacked the Jewish People just as they left Egypt; not to forget what they did; and the big one, to eradicate the memory of Amalek from the world.

These laws are serious and are part of the rare category of mitzvos that apply to all people at all times under all circumstances.

But isn't it a little unsettling?

It sounds uncomfortably like a mitzvah to commit genocide, the moral argument against which is certainly compelling, especially for a nation who heard the commandment "do not kill" from God's voice at Sinai, even more so having suffered a genocide in living memory. Although some people have no trouble understanding it that way, you're in good company if you find difficulty in a commandment to kill Amalek today.

Long ago, the Gemara dismissed the notion of practicing the straightforward interpretation, pointing to a story in the Prophets where the Assyrian king Sennacherib forcibly displaced and resettled the entire Middle East, eliminating distinct bloodlines of racial descent.

While this elegantly eliminates the problem in a practical sense – there is no problem because the law can no longer apply – the moral issue remains open.

Over centuries, a substantial number of prominent halachic authorities have clarified that the status of Amalek is not racial; that although a tribe called Amalek attacked the Jewish People and formed the context for the law, the law is not and never was an instruction to commit genocide against those people. While the Gemara says that Amalek can never join the Jewish People, it also says that descendants of Amalek taught Torah in Israel, suggesting that their women, or children of women who married out, could lose their identity as Amalek. If Amalek isn't a race, there is no law to kill such a particular group, and there is no moral dilemma.

R' Chaim Brisker explains that Amalek is not a particular group of humans; it is a conceptual category. It's an attitude and ideology that transcends any specific race or individual and persists forever, an archetype of evil that we must fundamentally stand against and be on alert for. Writers



through the ages have labeled enemies or opposition as Amalek, which, although often lazy, correctly categorizes and formalizes this eternal struggle.

The perpetrators of the original crime are all dead, and modern society does not believe in the heritability of guilt. But the offense isn't simply that they physically attacked the Jewish People; as Rashi explains, it's that they cooled us off along the way while we were weary – אֲשֶׁר קָרָה בְּדֶרֶךְ וַיִּזְנֶב בָּהּ – פְּלִיְהֵנְחָשׁ לִים אֲחֵרִיךְ וְאַתָּה עֲנִיךְ וַיִּגַע.

As the Netziv points out, it would be self-defeating and tautological to have an eternal command to destroy something's memory; the Torah makes that impossible simply by mentioning it.

The Kedushas Levi goes further and suggests that Amalek's legacy lies in the heart of every person.

We might stop to wonder if the ideology of Amalek is all around us in the social Darwinist culture we have built ourselves, which is, at its core, a simple application of survival of the fittest behavior.

Sure, the malignant form of Amalek looks like a Haman or a Hitler. But the benign form is all around us, in ourselves and others. It's not any particular humans we need to overcome, but their attitude and ideology. The fight against Amalek does not end even though the nation is long gone; its legacy remains, and it's the legacy that poses a threat.

A Chassidic aphorism observes that Amalek is numerically equivalent to doubt – עמלק / ספק.

In our day-to-day lives, that looks like when you consider doing something bold or different, and someone, perhaps even yourself, pokes holes or second-guesses the new initiative. “I want to try this new idea, but maybe I shouldn't? What if it's the wrong choice? Maybe I don't deserve it?” Or perhaps, “Why start or support that project—aren't there far more important ones?”

The attack in Rephidim only happens opportunistically when people are caught off guard – רפידים / רפיון ידים.

Anthropologists and psychologists have long observed the phenomenon of crab mentality in some groups. The metaphor derives from a pattern of behavior noted in crabs when trapped in a bucket – any individual crab could easily escape, but the others will undermine its efforts, ensuring the group's collective demise. In some groups, members will attempt to reduce the self-confidence of any member who achieves success beyond the others, whether out of envy, resentment, spite, or competitive feeling, to halt their progress. The wrong circles have powerful inertia that draws members towards conformity and mediocrity in a self-fulfilling negative feedback loop.

Letting feelings of self-doubt and personal incompetence persist is called impostor syndrome. You can baselessly hold back from doing things that could transform your life because you're not ready to face the reality of your own potential greatness.

As the Mishna in Pirkei Avos says, eliminate doubt – הַסְתַּלֵּק מִן הַסֵּפֶק.



If it sounds pithy or trite, just know that that's quite literally Amalek's great crime – trying to hold the Jewish People back just as they were beginning to break through, discouraging them just as they were getting started and finding their feet – אֲשֶׁר קָרָה בְּדָרָה וַיִּזְנוּב בָּהּ כַּל־הַנְּחָשׁ לְשׂוֹלֵי אֶתְרֵיהּ וְאַתָּה עֲיַר וַיִּגַע.

It's not apologetics or mental gymnastics; it neatly fits the words and is something we recognize all around us.

Haters rarely hate you; far more often, they hate themselves because you're showing them a reflection of what they wish they could be, and they don't like feeling inadequate.

Shine bright and soar, and forget about the people who tried to hold you back.

Onward

4 minute read | Straightforward

The Torah's stories have captured the awe of audiences for three millennia, and rightly so.

The Torahs tell us of astonishing moments like The Binding of Isaac, the ultimate test of human commitment with the future in the balance, where Avraham lifts a knife to his son's neck only for an angel to interrupt him, salvation averting tragedy through transparently divine intervention at the very last.

The Torah tells us of the harrowing crossing at the Red Sea, where the defenseless Jewish People desperately fled their oppressors, with the most advanced and formidable army in the world in hot pursuit. In a defining moment that upends the entire natural order of our universe, Moshe holds out his staff, and God parts the waters for the Jewish People to walk across the dry ocean floor. The Egyptian army attempts to follow, but once Moshe's people have crossed safely, the sea suddenly reverts to its normal state, and the Egyptians are drowned.

The Torah tells us of the theophany at Sinai, where the people gathered at a mountain enveloped in cloud and smoke, quaking, with fire and lightning flashing overhead, amid the sound of booming thunder and shofar blasts; and then the Jewish People hear the voice of God through the uproar.

These are some of the defining stories of our history and exhibit the dizzying heights of the supernatural. They showcase what is fundamentally magical about the Torah.

But despite the power of these moments to captivate us, the Torah doesn't indulge us by dwelling on them even a little. Just like that, with the stroke of a pen, the Binding of Isaac is behind us, the Red Sea is old news, Sinai is history, and it's time to move onward:



וַיָּשָׁב אַבְרָהָם אֶל-נְעָרָיו וַיִּקְמוּ וַיֵּלְכוּ יַחְדָּו – Avraham returned to his stewards, and they got up and left together... (22:19)

וַיֵּצְאוּ מִן-יַם-סוּף, וַיֵּלְכוּ אֶל-מִדְבַּר-שׁוּר; וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁלֹשַׁת-יָמִים בַּמִּדְבָּר, וְלֹא-מָצְאוּ מַיִם – Moshe and the Children of Israel set out from the Red Sea. They went on into the wilderness of Shur; they traveled three days in the wilderness and found no water. (15:22)

רַב-לָכֶם שָׁבַת, בְּהַר הַזֶּה. פָּנוּ וּסְעוּ לָכֶם – You have stayed long enough at this mountain. (1:6)

We have these distinctly unique stories of the Divine manifested in our universe, and then the Torah just moves briskly onward – וַיֵּצְאוּ מִן-יַם-סוּף / רַב-לָכֶם שָׁבַת, בְּהַר הַזֶּה פָּנוּ וּסְעוּ לָכֶם / וַיֵּצְאוּ מִן-יַם-סוּף.

The Torah does not dwell in the magical moments, and the starkness of the almost dismissive continuity is jarring, and there is a vital lesson here. It suggests that even after the greatest of heights, the most noteworthy achievements, and the most incredible successes, the Torah simply notes that you can't stay long once you get there. Before you know it, it's time to continue the journey and move onward.

Onward is an interesting word – positive and proactive, meaning going further rather than coming to an end or halt; moving in a forward direction. As the Izhbitzer explains, part of growth is moving on and walking away from where you once stood. We can't stay because the moment is gone – it's gone in time, irretrievably behind us, and it's our responsibility to realize that distance in mental and physical space too.

It's also true to life; the world will not dwell in your magical moments. Whether you ace the test, get the girl, close the deal, buy the house, sell the business, have the baby, or whatever the outstanding achievement is, it's still Tuesday, you're still you, you still have deadlines, you still have to get into better shape, your siblings still get on your nerves, and your credit card bill is still due. And so, by necessity, there comes a time to move onward.

In dull moments, we may find ourselves thirsty with nothing to drink. But this, too, as the Izhbitzer teaches, is part of the growth process. Eventually, those bitter waters can transform into a sweet oasis, and what appeared to be downtime is integrated into the journey forward.

Even the Golden Calf story has redeeming elements; apart from the critical teaching that using iconography to worship the One God is still idolatry, it decisively demonstrates God's predisposition for forgiveness and paves the way to the Mishkan and all the resultant forms of interacting with the Divine.

Do not fool yourself into thinking that what got you to where you are will fuel you to further heights; that energy does not simply overflow into everything else. Success is not final, and failure is not fatal; the proper response to both is the same – onward.



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This lesson is challenging enough, but the Izhbitzer takes us further and forewarns us that what follows the heights of success is rarely smooth and straightforward lulls and plateaus of accumulation and consolidation to catch our breath; we can often expect an inverse experience in short order. All too often, great heights are followed by sharp declines and drawdowns, troughs and valleys; Avraham gets home to find his wife has died; the miraculous rescue at the Red Sea is directly followed by the people's complaints about the local water being too bitter, and the people worship a Golden Calf at the foot of Mount Sinai itself.

Quite arguably, a failure to move on was the mistake at the heart of the debacle of the scouting mission to Israel – the spies just wanted to stay put in the safety of God's embrace in the desert. They weren't wrong; the road ahead was fraught with danger! But that's not how the world works; stagnation is not God's design for us or the universe – life must change, move, and evolve. Staying put and stagnating is what's unnatural.

The Torah is a guide to life – תורת חיים – and one of the defining features of living things is motility – they move independently. We shouldn't be so shocked by the ebbs and flows of life, moving and changing, with attendant ups and downs. When living things don't move, they quickly atrophy, stagnate, wither, and die before long. Living things must move and push to grow healthy and strong. You can fall and run out of breath plenty of times along the way, but that's part of it, so long as you eventually get back up and keep moving onward.

As R' Shlomo Farhi explains, if you look at stock market performance over a century, the zoomed-out time frame looks like a smooth and steady incline; and yet, when you zoom in to years, months, weeks, days, and hours, the amount of choppiness and volatility increases. On an extended time frame, each part matters less. The bouncing highs and lows blend into a smooth line that only goes one way – onwards and upwards.

The past is not gone or forgotten; it forms the basis and foundations of today.

Although we can't dwell in the moments of achievement, there is a part we can carry in our hearts and minds.

And as we go, it comes with us, ever onward.

Prayer Redux



7 minute read | Straightforward

Prayer is one of Judaism’s essential and fundamental practices.

Through prayer, we commune with the Creator, affirming our connection, dependency, and gratitude to the Source of all life.

The theory of prayer – the metaphysics of how prayer works and what it does – is complex and, in all likelihood, fundamentally unknowable. It’s not obvious how you’d test whether or not prayer works because the universe is, self-evidently, a much bigger place than your personal wish list.

What we do know is that at all times and all places throughout our history, the Jewish People have always turned to God in prayer for health, success, and salvation. It is almost universally understood that prayer plays a prominent role in the efforts and energy we must expend to get the outcomes we want – as well as the ones we don’t.

The crescendo of the Exodus came with the decisive miracle at the Red Sea. The ocean parted, giving the desperate Jewish People safe passage while simultaneously obliterating their great tormentors in one fell swoop. The Splitting of the Red Sea is one of the most captivating and magical moments in the entire Torah, and prayer plays a prominent role in the build-up:

וּפְרָעָה הַקָּרִיב וַיִּשְׂאוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־עֵינֵיהֶם וַהֲגִהוּ מִצְרַיִם בֹּסַע אֶתְרֵיהֶם וַיִּירָאוּ מְאֹד וַיִּצְעֲקוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־ה' – As Pharaoh drew near, the Jewish People caught sight of the Egyptians advancing upon them. Greatly frightened, the Jewish People cried out to the Lord. (14:10)

But surprisingly, and quite unlike how we might expect, this prayer is not well received:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה מַה־תִּצְעַק אֵלַי דְּבַר אֶל־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּסְעוּ לִי – Then the Lord said to Moshe, “Why are you crying out to Me!? Tell the Jewish People to get going!!” (14:15)

With righteous outrage, we might wonder why God gets annoyed that the people cry out. The Jewish People have made it to the beaches with their children and everything they own. They have no boats and cannot swim to safety; just over the horizon, there is a hostile force in hot pursuit. By any reasonable standards, they are out of time and out of options. They are desperate, so they cry out to God for help; we cannot doubt that their fears and tears were genuine.

Moreover, our sages imagine Heavenly gateways for prayers, suggesting that prayers are accepted or denied based on circumstances, quality, and timing. The Neila prayer on Yom Kippur extensively utilizes this imagery to evoke a sense of urgency – quickly squeeze in your final prayers because the gates are closing! The Gemara concludes that regardless, the gate of tears is always open, presumably, because tears are heartfelt and sincere, and the pain that generates tearful prayers loads them with a potency that Heaven cannot refuse.

If crying to God for help is what you are supposed to do, why did God get annoyed at their prayer?



The imagery of gates in Heaven is compelling, but it appears to have a fatal flaw. The metaphor doesn't work for a gate of tears because a gate that never closes is no gate at all!

The Kotzker Rebbe sharply teaches that the gate of tears is still a gate because not all tears are equal; some tears are indeed turned away. The gate is shut to crocodile tears – superficial sorrow that is insincere, like when people attempt to use grief to excuse inaction.

In the story of Pinchas, Balak, and Bilam successfully schemed to compromise the Jewish People by sending the young women of Midian into the Jewish camp to seduce the men; most young men found the temptation impossible to resist, sparking a devastating plague.

But the Midianite women were not successful at drawing in everyone; some of them were strong enough to resist, and, unsure what to do, they went to the holiest man, their leader Moshe, at the most sacred spot they knew, the Mishkan, to cry and pray – וְהָיָה בְּכִימָם, פָּתַח אֱהֹל מוֹעֵד.

These people of moral fiber cried and prayed for help, but that didn't save the day.

R' Moshe Sherer highlights how the Torah explicitly credits Pinchas's assassination of the provocateurs for stopping the plague, and not anyone's prayers – וַיִּדְקַר אֶת-שְׁנֵיהֶם-אֶת אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְאֶת-הָאִשָּׁה / אֶל-קִבְרֹתָהּ; וַתַּעֲצֹר, הַמַּגֵּפָה / הַשִּׁיב אֶת-תְּמִתִּי מֵעַל בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל, בְּקִנְאוֹ אֶת-קִנְאָתִי.

When something is wrong, and we respond only with thoughts and prayers, they are crocodile tears, lip service, pearl-clutching, and window dressing. The pain and tears may be honest, but prayers don't help if your approach to problem-solving is fundamentally broken.

As much as there may be stories of people praying for magical solutions that materialize out of thin air with no human input, the Torah dismisses the notion of thoughts and prayers as a substitute for action.

At the Red Sea, God urges Moshe to have his people quickly get a move on. The Midrash expands this discussion; God rebuked Moshe that it was an inappropriate moment for lengthy prayers – there was danger close, and it was time for decisive action.

Rashi suggests that God was annoyed at the people's prayer at the sea because they seized their ancestral craft – תַּפְשׂוּ אֲמִנוֹת אֲבוֹתֵם – The Maharal explains that prayer isn't craftsmanship, like carpentry or plumbing. Prayer is supposed to be heartfelt and soulful! But they cried out to God as the last resort of their ancestors, a weak effort that betrayed deep fear and insecurity and the cynical despair of helplessness that all was lost. It was an inferior, or at least suboptimal, immature prayer that betrayed a lack of belief, both in God and in themselves, that there was nothing they could do!

Only they were wrong to think there was nothing else they could do, and we'd be equally wrong for thinking prayer could ever work in a vacuum.



As R' Shlomo Farhi explains, they should have believed enough in their prayer to stop praying and get moving, but they were frozen and paralyzed.

In sharp contrast, our ancestor Yakov prepared to reunite with Esau years after wronging him and meticulously prepared for their meeting. He prepared for peace by sending waves of lavish gifts to Esau; prepared for battle and victory, arming his young family and training them; prepared for defeat and death, dividing his family in two in the hope that the second camp might escape without Esau ever knowing they existed; and then finally, he prays that God is with him and that his family survives.

As R' Noach Weinberg highlights, Yakov prepares for peace, victory, and death, which is to say that he did no less than everything possible to prepare for all eventualities before prayer, even though God had already promised to be with him and that his children would inherit the land and his legacy.

Maybe that's what our efforts have to look like to give our prayers a hook to latch on to – even when God promises.

God didn't want their prayers at the Red Sea because it wasn't time to pray; it was time to act! But they couldn't because they had given up and were consumed with fear. Perhaps that lends enduring power to the legacy of Nachshon ben Aminadav, whom the Midrash heralds for clambering into the water when he could not yet know what would happen because just maybe there was one last thing to try before giving up, finding room for a ray of hope amid the clouds of despair – a hope that drove action.

R' Shlomo Farhi suggests that the biggest challenge to our faith and belief is time, that we give up prematurely.

By wading into the water, Nachshon showed people who thought they had reached the outer limit of what they could do and revealed that the boundary was just a little further than they'd thought. They'd stopped at the shore, but he boldly and bravely stepped into the impossible and waded up to his neck without waiting for instructions, leading by example in the face of uncertainty, the quality of his tribe, Yehuda. And when he did that, he sparked salvation, upending the natural order, and the ocean split for all.

Perhaps that underpins God's irritation at why they cry out – they are parked on the beach, crying, but what exactly do they expect God to do with that?! We can almost hear God begging for something to work with – tell them to get up and get going!

To be sure, we should not judge our ancestors too harshly for being afraid. The fight, flight, or freeze response is hardcoded into our DNA and predates human consciousness; people tend to freeze when their families are about to get massacred.



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But God speaks through them to us, and we should ask ourselves if our own prayers are corrupted by fear or despair and yet still wonder why our prayers go unanswered. We must audit our lives, soul-searching about whether we truly mean our prayers. Does the way you spend your life align with what you claim to want? Does what you pay attention to and devote time to reflect that? We should wonder if God might give us a similarly terrifying answer about what we're asking God to work with.

If you're crying crocodile tears, you shouldn't be surprised that your prayers don't seem to be working; you may need to confront the reality that your prayers are wildly mediocre.

You won't get the dream job you don't apply to. You won't get healthy if you don't diet and exercise. You won't pass the test if you don't study the material. You won't get rich if you don't invest. Your relationship won't be meaningful if you don't give your partner attention. That's the way the world works; if you expect your prayer to change that fundamental reality, you will likely continue to be disappointed.

You need to animate your life with action and hope, like our ancestor Yakov, like our hero Pinchas, and invoke the incredible bravery of Nachshon. God desperately wants to shower us with blessings, but we need to build the vessels that contain those blessings, or they have no place to land.

The future is concealed and uncertain; what lies ahead is shrouded in the darkness of the unknowable. But we can illuminate it with bold and decisive actions that brighten each step along the way. And with each step, certainly pray to meet with good fortune and success.

If there's something you've been praying on for a while, stop being a soldier and think like a general – strategize for a moment. Every person who wants something different from their performance than what they're getting is doing something to perpetuate poor outcomes. Bluntly consider what you could be doing better to make it happen, and do those things.

Miracles happen, but they start with your effort and dedication toward your dreams. Thoughts and prayers are not a substitute for action.

You must believe in a positive outcome enough to invest real effort into making it a reality.

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?



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Neli

***PS** - TorahRedux is my pride and joy, the product of thousands of hours of learning, research, writing, editing, and formatting. I have been blessed to operate a niche business that allows me to dedicate a substantial amount of time to TorahRedux, and I welcome your assistance in furthering my goal to keep publishing high-quality Parsha content that makes a difference. I want to talk to home care companies, so if you know anybody in the home care industry, please introduce me!*

***PPS** - It took me years to start making a parnassa; if anyone you know is looking for a job, please put them in touch with me. With a helping hand from Above, I have successfully helped **8 people** find jobs so far!*

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.