

Chukas Balak 2023

Flags and Formations

1 minute read | Straightforward

Wherever the Jewish People camped and traveled in the wilderness, the tribes were always positioned in a particular formation, which the Torah goes into lengthy detail about several times.

But we're one people! Why are there tribes, and why was there any kind of formation; and more importantly, what are we supposed to make of the specific logistics millennia after the fact?

R' Norman Lamm notes that we read about the formations before Shavuot when we celebrate receiving the Torah. We might think that we're doing pretty great – we're in the camp of Torah after all!

The Torah gently reminds us that that's never been enough. The twelve tribes all had different characteristics, and each contributed in its own particular way. For example, Yehuda, the largest and strongest, tapped for leadership and monarchy, was the first in the formation and the first into battle.

We all have particular skills and functions useful at a particular time and place. It's not enough to be Torah-oriented in general – what is your individual place and purpose in particular? What do you stand for?

We need only remind ourselves of Bilam, a man whose belief in God's existence was as genuine and absolute as it gets and yet, remained an awful human.

Believing is step one only. The formations matter because we need a reminder that we can't hide in the crowd.

It's what we do that matters.

Thirst

4 minute read | Straightforward



Miriam was Moshe and Ahron's older sister and a great leader and prophetess of her own right. Michah describes her alongside Moshe and Ahron as delivering the Jews from exile in Egypt, and the Midrash says that Moshe led the men out of Egypt, but Miriam led the women.

When she died, the water stopped:

וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל כָּל-הָעֵדָה מִדְּבַר-צֹן, בַּחֹדֶשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן, וַיָּשֶׁב הָעָם, בְּקִדְשׁ; וַתָּמָת שָׁם מִרְיָם, וַתִּקָּבֵר שָׁם. וְלֹא-הָיָה מַיִם, לָעֵדָה; וַיִּקְהָלוּ, עַל-מִשְׁחָה וְעַל-אַהֲרֹן – The Jewish People arrived at the wilderness of Zin on the first new moon, and the people stayed at Kadesh. Miriam died there and was buried there. There was no water, and they gathered against Moshe and Ahron. (20:1,2)

Rashi cites a Gemara that notes the juxtaposition of Miriam's death with the lack of water, suggesting the association of Miriam's merit with water in the desert. So when she died, the water stopped.

You might wonder what the association of Miriam is with water in particular; the Gemara doesn't say why. But we might also be troubled by taking the association at face value; one of God's favorite people dies, so everyone has to go thirsty! If it was just a logistics problem, God could have told Moshe to speak to the rock to get the water going again; but that's not what happened! The water dried up, then the people went thirsty and got scared, and only then did God instruct Moshe how to produce water; which suggests that going thirsty is an essential element in this story.

Why did they have to go thirsty? What did they do wrong?

It's silly to conclude that God was lashing out at the people because Miriam died. But perhaps it was a response to something else, or rather, something that was notable in its absence.

The Torah simply records that she died, and the narrative proceeds, like nothing happened – and that's the problem – וַתָּמָת שָׁם מִרְיָם, וַתִּקָּבֵר שָׁם. וְלֹא-הָיָה מַיִם, לָעֵדָה –

Compare the response to her death to the response to her brother's deaths:

וַיִּרְאוּ, כָּל-הָעֵדָה, כִּי גָוַע, אַהֲרֹן; וַיִּבְכוּ אֶת-אַהֲרֹן שְׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם, כָּל בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל – The whole community knew that Ahron had breathed his last. The entire house of Israel wept over Ahron for thirty days. (20:29)

וַיִּבְכוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת-מֹשֶׁה בְּעֶרְבַת מוֹאָב שְׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם וַיִּתְּמוּ יְמֵי כָכִי אֲבָל מִשְׁחָה – And the Jewish People wept over Moshe in the plains of Moab for thirty days, and the mourning period for Moshe came to an end. (34:8)

Sure, Moshe and Ahron were the two most prominent leaders; but Miriam was no slouch! She was indisputably one of the most significant people in the entire story, and the Torah doesn't record that anyone cried or mourned!



They did not cry to pay their respects to this legendary heroine, so they would cry about something else. If they just had a new water source with no interruption, it would have endorsed the fact that they hadn't appreciated her contributions and had failed to honor her correctly; so God stopped providing water so that they'd make the connection between Miriam's contributions and their survival. The water didn't stop so that we would make the association between water and Miriam's merit; it stopped so that they would make the association.

Water is a biological necessity and prerequisite for life due to its extensive and unequalled capability to dissolve molecules, helping cells transport and utilize substances like oxygen and nutrients. It is designated as the "universal solvent," and it is this ability that makes water such an invaluable life-sustaining force. On a simple biological level, water is life.

One of water's most defining features is that its fluid properties allow it to adapt perfectly to its surroundings; water always assumes the form of its container.

Nothing is softer or more flexible than water, yet nothing can resist it.

Legend tells of R' Akiva noticing a steady trickle of water hitting a rock. It was only a droplet at a time, but it would not let up – drip after drip, but he realized that the water had carved a hole through the rock, pierced only by drops of water.

Miriam was born during one of the darkest chapters of Jewish history in Egypt. She was named Miriam, associated with the word מרה, bitter, for the bitterness of the Jewish condition.

When she was just a young girl, Pharaoh decreed that all male babies be thrown into the river. Husbands and wives separated to avoid having children who would not survive the edict, but Miriam boldly encouraged her parents to have faith and stay together. As a direct result, her brother, Moshe, the redeemer and lawgiver, was born. She then showed her own hope and faith at troubled waters, watching over the baby Moshe in the river, determined to watch over her brother in the darkest moment when their mother abandoned him at the river rather than face the pain of watching him be discovered and murdered – מר ים. She then became the famous midwife Puah, who soothed the infants when they were born; and led the women through the waters of the Red Sea to the other side, watching their tormentors drown in the waves – רם ים.

Like water, Miriam adapted to oppression, remaining steadfast in faith and hope, staunchly encouraging the people around her, guiding them through their dire straits, and then leading them on to better times.

Miriam led the women in song, separate from the men who responded to Moshe and Ahron, in a display of private class and dignity. R' Shlomo Farhi suggests that perhaps in some similar way, the Jewish People thought it would only be fit to mourn in private.



In our esoteric tradition, a core property of the archetypal feminine energy is to cultivate what is present – אתערותא דלתתא / מים נוקבין / נקבה. As the Piaseczna notes, it follows that the well, a self-generated, self-contained source of water, corresponded to Miriam, a woman who embodied the power of human initiative, with her internally-generated drive to act and inspire; when she died, the well died with her. And it follows that the Torah does not write that she died by Divine Kiss, even though our Sages teach that she did, because her approach was human-centric – אינו מצווה ועושה – rather than על פי ה.

The people realized in hindsight that the miraculous water God had provided them in impossible circumstances had been in Miriam’s merit; but perhaps it shouldn’t have been so surprising that Miriam was tightly associated with their water. When they were thirsting for hope and solace, she’d always been there to nourish them.

They should have mourned loudly and publicly for Miriam – she had been openly sustaining her people with life-sustaining energy and vitality all along.

The Lonely Darkness

5 minute read | Straightforward

One of the recurring motifs in the stories of our heroes is how often they stand alone, against all odds, and it starts from the very beginning of our Tradition.

During Yakov and his family’s escape from Lavan, they had to navigate their way across a river. Some of the family’s articles had remained on the wrong side during the crossing, so he sent his family ahead to make the most of the dwindling light while he stayed back to retrieve what he had left behind.

Alone as darkness fell, in one of the defining moments in Yakov’s life, he was accosted by and fought with a mysterious figure, whom we identify as Esau’s guardian angel:

וַיִּנְתֵּר יַעֲקֹב, לְבַדּוֹ; וַיֵּאבֶק אִישׁ עִמּוֹ, עַד עֲלוֹת הַשָּׁחַר. וַיֵּרָא, כִּי לֹא יָכֹל לוֹ, וַיִּגַע, בְּכַף-יָרְכוּ; וַתִּקַּע כַּף-יָרְךָ יַעֲקֹב, בְּהֶאָבְקוֹ עִמּוֹ. וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁלַחֲנִי, כִּי עֲלֶה הַשָּׁחַר; וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא אֲשַׁלְּחֶךָ, כִּי אִם-בְּרַכְתָּנִי. וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו, מַה-שָּׁמְךָ; וַיֹּאמֶר, יַעֲקֹב. וַיֹּאמֶר, יַעֲקֹב לֹא יֵאמָר עוֹד שְׁמֶךָ-כִּי, אִם-יִשְׂרָאֵל: כִּי-שָׁרִיתָ עִם-אֱלֹהִים וְעִם-אֲנָשִׁים, וַתֹּכֵל. וַיִּשְׂאֵל יַעֲקֹב, וַיֹּאמֶר הַגִּידָה-נָא שְׁמֶךָ, וַיֹּאמֶר, לָמָּה זֶה תִּשְׂאֵל לְשִׁמִּי; וַיִּבְרָךְ אֹתוֹ, שָׁם – Yakov was alone, and a man grappled with him until daybreak. When the stranger saw that he could not overcome him, he struck Yakov’s hip and dislocated it as he grappled with him. He said, “Let me go, dawn is breaking!” – but Yakov said, “I will not let you go until you bless me.” He said to him, “What is your name?” and he replied, “Yakov.” He said, “No longer shall your name be Yakov, for your name is Yisrael, because you have mastery with God and men, and you have prevailed.” Yakov



asked, and said, “Now tell me your name” and he replied, “Why is it you ask my name?” and blessed him there. (32:25-30)

The imagery of this iconic battle is that it takes place in the darkness and lasts until dawn’s early light. Darkness is a mythological archetype for concealment, chaos, danger, deception, disorder, fear, uncertainty, and the unknown.

As such, most humans are afraid of the dark to some degree; our sight is the sense we depend on the most, and we cannot see well in darkness, so a lack of light makes us feel vulnerable to danger.

In the darkness, we are surrounded by the unknown, with all sorts of potential threats hidden by the shadows just out of sight. But when dawn’s light comes, the dangerous unknown is dispelled, the shadows disappear, and the darkness dissipates, to be replaced with the clarity and concrete safety of known order.

The Mesilas Yesharim says the trouble with darkness is not just that you won’t see something dangerous, but that you can mistake something dangerous for something safe. You might not see the snake in the woods, and what if that big rock is actually a bear?

The Steipler teaches that the battleground of our struggles is in our minds. Whether fear or fantasy, our minds can paint vivid pictures that do not correspond to reality. Fear amplifies the negative, and fantasy amplifies the positive; but neither includes the consequences, opportunity costs, pathways, or tradeoffs that always accompany reality. When someone returns to their family after a long time away, they often think they’ll all get along peacefully and happily now; or the newlywed couple might think they’ll be in love forever – but we know how naive that is. Reality is much more challenging than the illusion of fantasy, but the difference is that it is real.

Driving at night, you can’t see much further than your headlights – but you can make the whole trip that way; concealment and uncertainty are scary, but you will always have what it takes to make it through that particular darkness.

When Yakov asks the figure for his name, Yakov gets an evasive non-answer, “Why is it you ask for my name?”

R’ Leib Chasman intuitively suggests that this is the nature of the formless enemy we fight. The Gemara teaches how at the end of days, Hashem will slaughter the Satan, and the righteous will cry because it was this enormous mountain they somehow overcame, and the wicked will cry because it was a tiny hair they couldn’t even blow away. The very idea of the Satan is a shorthand for what we fight – a flicker of our reflection, a shadow, constantly in flux.



Although Yakov was permanently injured in his encounter, he still emerged as Yisrael, the master; we can expect to trip, stumble, and make mistakes along the way, and we might even get hurt. But it is the human condition to fight and struggle, but we can persist and win.

It's important to note that Yakov doesn't actually achieve total physical victory – he holds out for a stalemate while seriously injured. The victory – וְתוֹכֵל – is in staying in the fight and not giving up – וַיִּרָא, כִּי לֹא יָכַל לוֹ.

Our biggest tests, if not all of them, come when we are alone, but it is our characteristic ability to rise to the challenge that Bilam highlights in his reluctant blessing to the Jewish People – הָיוּ-עָם לְבָרֵךְ יִשְׁכֹּן.

It's a point of pride, rooted in our identity from the very beginning, starting with Avraham, the first Hebrew, so-called because he is an outsider who stands alone against the dominant culture – / עֲבָרִי / מֵעֵבֶר הַנְּהַר.

This theme repeats itself with Yosef, home alone with Potiphar's wife. About to give in to an almost irresistible temptation, he sees his father's face, reminding him that his family heritage is that he has what it takes to stand alone and not give up.

The Hebrew word for grappling is cognate to the word for dust because the fighter's feet stir up dust when fighting for leverage and grip – וַיִּצְבֹּק / אֶבֶק. The Midrash suggests that the dust kicked up from this epic struggle rose all the way to the Heavenly Throne.

R' Tzvi Meir Silberberg highlights that the Midrash doesn't say that the victory went up to Heaven, but that the dust, the energy expended on the struggle, went up to Heaven. Our victories are personal, and although we don't always get to choose whether we win, we always control whether we go down without a fight; and putting up a fight is specifically what the Midrash honors. It's your choice to stand that will ultimately endure and carry the day, which perhaps Bilam also refers to – מִי מָנָה עֶפְרָי – יִצְקֹב.

The opening blessing of the morning blessings is for giving the rooster the understanding to distinguish between day and night – הַגּוֹמֵחַן לְשִׁכּוּי בֵּינָה לְהַבְחִין בֵּין יוֹם וּבֵין לַיְלָה. But doesn't every animal with eyes know the difference? R' Meilech Biderman teaches that the rooster is highlighted because it crows just before dawn while it's still dark. In Perek Shira, a song that attributes different verses to different creatures and cosmic entities, the rooster sings how it hopes and yearns for God's salvation – לִישׁוּעָתְךָ קִיּוּתִי הֵ – the rooster understands already before dawn that the darkness is coming to an end and that the sun will rise once more.

In all the stories of our heroes, no one came to save them; how you face the realization that to some extent, you stand alone is arguably a defining moment of adulthood and maturity – אֲשָׁא עֵינַי אֶל הַהָרִים – מֵאַיִן יָבֵא עֲזָרִי. That's not simply to say that no one is coming to save you; it's more profound than that.



It's that the only person who will ultimately save you is yourself; that the helping hand you're looking for is at the end of your own two arms, and that your fate is your own responsibility.

It might take everything to stand alone, but you are enough. You already have what it takes – it's in your blood.

When Something is Off

6 minute read | Straightforward

As the Jewish People approached the Land of Israel, bordering nation-states were alarmed. A chieftain of Moav, Balak, had become familiar with the Jewish People's encounters and victories over the tribes and states who had crossed them and correctly anticipated imminent conflict and geopolitical upheaval in his neck of the woods.

Seeking divine aid, he sent elders to engage Bilam, a mystic and shaman whose magical abilities the Torah treats as an actual genuine threat – unlike say, Pharaoh's wizards.

Bilam accepted the job, setting out to curse the Jewish People and bring their unstoppable march to a halt. He saddled his donkey and departed with the dignitaries, but God, the source of his abilities, would not endorse his mission. God arranges many obstructions along the way by sending an angel – an especially intimidating one.

The donkey saw this angel standing in the way holding a flaming sword, so the donkey veered off the road into a field, until Bilam beat the donkey to turn her back onto the road. The angel soon reappeared in a narrow walled lane, and the donkey cowered against the sidewall, crushing Bilam's leg, so he beat her again. The angel then repositioned itself in a narrow spot that allowed no room for maneuver, and the donkey lay down, so Bilam beat the donkey one last time.

After the third beating, God gave the donkey the power to speak, and she complained to Bilam that she had always been a loyal steed and did not deserve these beatings. God then gives Bilam the ability to see the angel, and Bilam bows to the ground; the angel then berates Bilam for beating the donkey, noting that she saved Bilam's life. Bilam admits his error and the story proceeds.

While our modern sensibilities suggest that it's wrong to beat animals, the story seems to assume that some part of animal training plausibly includes negative reinforcement, so that wouldn't be why the donkey and angel are so angry at Bilam. Instead, the sense we get as readers is that the beating is wrong because it's not fair! It's not disobedient; it's scared of the scary thing – the donkey is innocent.



Yet Bilam is missing the crucial piece of information that unlocks the story – that there is an invisible threat ahead, and only his donkey is aware of the imminent danger! Without this missing piece, it would seem exactly how Bilam thought it seemed to him; his donkey was misbehaving and not following directions, so he did what animal trainers do – he hit the donkey, consistent with what he understood was happening. His trained animal was behaving erratically for no apparent reason, wandering off and walking into walls.

Bilam hitting the animal was a rational conclusion to draw if he didn't have the key to understanding what was really going on, undermining his wrongdoing. What was so wrong about his actions that both the angel and talking donkey told him off?

The Kedushas Levi suggests that this exact line of thinking was Bilam's mistake, and it's something we do all the time.

If you've ever noticed that something is a little off, you typically feel a sense of unease, as the sense of wrongness slowly but undeniably creeps up on you. Bilam should have noticed that something strange was happening and taken a moment's pause to contemplate, but he missed the cue; something incredibly unusual happened, not once, not twice, but three times, and he totally missed it.

Instead of noticing and contemplating, he got angry and beat his donkey, powering right on with his plan, blaming rather than understanding. That's not the way a purported man of God ought to behave.

A person professing to live their lives according to their understanding of God's mission and the right thing to do ought to keep their eyes wide open. But Bilam couldn't see past his ego; he sought the fortune and power this prestigious mission would bring, and nothing was going to put him off course.

There's a classic joke about a flood, and the waters reach the top of the priest's home. The priest climbs to the roof, and a neighbor with a boat comes by and says, "Hop on, I'll take you to safety." The priest replied, "No, no, the Lord will save me." Then the water reaches his waist when a helicopter comes by and drops a ladder. The priest shouts up, "No, no, the Lord will save me." Finally, the water goes over his head, and he paddles to the surface. A disaster relief boat comes by and offers to bring the priest to safety. Once again, he declined, "No, no, the Lord will save me." The priest paddles until he is exhausted, and he drowns and dies. He reaches the gates of Heaven, puzzled, and asks God, "Lord, why didn't you save me?" only for God to smile, "My guy, I sent you two boats and a helicopter!"

The signal isn't only when God opens Bilam's eyes to see the angel. As the Shelah notes, the donkey's initial misbehavior was already an interaction with the divine; the flaming angel and magic sword don't reveal any additional information. By that point, he'd already missed it three times and had only been spared from disaster at the very last moment in a stroke of fortune, mercy, and providence.



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Even if he could excuse the first time the donkey misbehaved as a one-off, the second and third time in quick succession were moments he ought to have realized something was off, and he might have reconsidered whether he was doing the right thing. But instead of acknowledging the obstacles in his way with humility and understanding and adjusting accordingly, he responded with anger, ego, and pride, lashing out in rage at his poor donkey.

The nature of our universe is that life doesn't go according to plan; no plan survives contact with the enemy, as one proverb put it. So when we hit speed bumps and obstacles, we ought to be strategic in responding; some obstacles need to be climbed, and some obstacles require a full detour and rerouting.

To be clear, an obstacle doesn't mean you stop. An obstacle means you are required to recalibrate around, over, or through.

They are signs, and we should respond to them with the serious consideration they deserve and consider which way they point, where we are in the physical and spiritual universe, where we are going, and how we'd best get there.

R' Elchanan Wasserman powerfully suggests that knowing what God wants, even without explicit instruction, is sufficient information to impose a duty to act on that knowledge. Bilam was punished for following Balak's entourage because he could already recognize from the outset that God did not want him to curse the Jewish people, regardless of any formal instruction.

Bilam's mistake wasn't that he hit the donkey; that is somewhat excusable. Bilam's mistake was that he had all the tools necessary to recognize the obstacles that pointed him away from his ill-fated mission. Instead, he ignored the cues, responding with anger and ego three times, without one moment of introspection and self-reflection. If the unusual and extraordinary make no impression and fail to spark a moment of reflection and reorientation, we are ignoring the signs; you probably shouldn't count on a flaming angel wielding a magic sword showing up with the helpful feedback you need.

But to put it another way, if it takes a flaming angel with a magic sword to let you know you're on the wrong track, you haven't been paying attention, and you probably should have realized it quite some time ago already.

R' Yitzchok Berkovits suggests that this story highlights Bilam's central flaw – his character. Bilam had abilities equal to or greater than even Moshe, but he wasn't a teacher or leader. With all the unique knowledge and power he possessed, he was just a wizard for hire, a simple mercenary in the venal pursuit of money, power, and prestige.

Our Sages suggest that Bilam had the ability to identify the most opportune moment to curse people. So while God neutralized this specific scheme against the Jewish People, we are left with a story about



who Bilam was, a man who, with all his abilities and wisdom, used them to carve a profession out of knowing when to curse people most effectively – assuming the pay was good enough, of course.

The Mishna in Avos contrasts upright students from the school of Avraham with students from the crooked school of Bilam. It's not that the school of Bilam isn't learned or wise; Bilam is never characterized as ignorant or stupid! But perhaps the Mishna suggests that our wisdom is reflective of our character. We don't see the world as it is, but rather as we are.

If we focus our gifts and wisdom on pursuing fame, money, and power, we channel the evil eye of Bilam. But if we utilize our gifts to show compassion and generosity, kindly and selflessly giving to and serving others, then we are students from the school of Avraham, who prayed for Sodom, even though its people were the antithesis of all he stood for.

The story of Bilam stands as an example for all time of the folly of skill without character, of being plugged in but not tuned in. We need to understand who we are and where we are, striving to become caring, good, kind, and honest human beings; or else our gifts are useless, or worse, dangerous.

Next time you encounter obstacles, check your ego and open your eyes.

You might need to course-correct, and you might not; but if you're attentive and responsive to your particular path, you probably already know if you're on the right track or not.

The Bittersweet Symphony

7 minute read | Straightforward

We've spent the best part of a year reading the Torah's greatest story, about how Yakov's family grew until they were duped into working on public infrastructure that slowly slipped into full-blown slavery; and about how God remembered His promises to their ancestors, and He sends Moshe to save them. We have followed this journey through all the adventures and detours, through the highs and lows, and we're approaching the end.

But it doesn't quite go how we might expect.

Spoiler alert: Moshe dies.

Actually, his brother dies too, and so does his sister, and come to think of it, so does every single soul that walked out of Egypt.



We've probably read it too many times to notice, but the protagonists do not get a happy ending for all their troubles. It almost feels like the opposite, like they utterly failed. Moshe just can't get this stubborn bunch over the finish line, and none of them ever get to the Promised Land; they all die in the wilderness.

Moshe didn't want the job, arguing that they wouldn't listen. He was spot on and spent the rest of his days fighting their worst inclinations. But he still only ever wanted to save them! After agreeing to take on the mission, he felt like God was taking too long to save his troubled and weary brethren, and in a quite shocking turn, confronts God and tells Him off – לָמָּה הִרְעַתָּה לְעַם הַזֶּה!

Maybe the people tried their best, and their best simply wasn't good enough. But even if we could accept that they were traumatized and, perhaps on some level, never truly left Egypt behind them, you need a heart of stone not to think that perhaps Moshe might have deserved a little better after all that – עֲבַדִּי מֹשֶׁה בְּכֹל בֵּיתִי נְאֻמָּן הוּא –

Right at the end of his life, he asks God to allow him to enter the Land of Israel, quite possibly the only instance of a personal indulgence Moshe ever asks for, and God declines his request.

Of all people, doesn't Moshe, God's most faithful shepherd, supremely trusted above all others, deserve a happy ending?

And before you dismiss the question as childish – because, after all, life isn't a fairy tale – perhaps the question is better phrased as a personal question on the journey our souls are on; how do we reconcile ourselves to the fact that not even the greatest of us gets a happy ending?

R' Shlomo Farhi teaches that we need to remind ourselves that perfection is elusive and perpetually out of reach; failure to achieve perfection is not failure, so perhaps we need to reconfigure our expectations. Even if the Jewish People would never shake their demons and were doomed from the start, that's not a failure; even if Moshe couldn't finish the job the way he'd have liked, he didn't fail.

There's no happy ending, but perhaps the expectation of a happy ending is our own baggage that we bring along and project as the outcome we'd prefer to see. We are making the error of imposing our expectations on the story, and the story confounds our expectations plain as day; that's just not how it works.

There is a separate physical and spiritual reality, and it's the world of spirit that matters most, where we find the battlefield of human achievement and sanctification. God did not want Moshe to lead the Jewish People from Egypt to Israel for reasons that are not only ultimately inscrutable; but, perhaps in a certain sense, don't matter to us at all. God does not ask us to cure cancer and secure world peace; those reach their conclusions in the physical world, and that is not given to us to control. Instead, God asks us to exercise our values and wisdom in the spiritual realm, where we can choose to act as best as we can under the circumstances – a moral victory.



God's hand is not directly perceptible to us; it's only apparent in hindsight as things unfold. It has to be that way, so God can influence the world without compromising the freedom of His creations. God's intervention does not remove the significance of our choices, but in many ways, it can redeem those choices. Or, to put it in another way, we are only responsible for our choices and not for the outcome of those choices; we are responsible for the means, while the ends are solely in God's hands.

And so, by necessity, we need to bifurcate moral victory from physical victory.

Physical victory is fantasy, and we all know it; when you get the job, pass the test, get married, buy the house, have the baby, and win the deal, there is never a glorious moment of victory. Life will go on just the same as yesterday and the day before, and you will still be you – and it's just as true if those things aren't going quite the way you'd like!

Moshe didn't struggle with this; he didn't have a savior complex. He did all he humanly could for his people, and no more, and he knew he had not let God or his people down. He did not live with our question about deserving a happier ending; he let go of the outcome he might have wanted – once it wasn't on the cards, getting there no longer mattered to him. He never thinks for even one moment that he deserves better, even if at certain points he gets overwhelmed. He was not bitter and died entirely at peace, with no qualms or regrets – מיתת נשיקה.

He demonstrated the stoic quality of outcome independence, faith played straight, fully accepting that this is how it has to be right now, and not shying away from it in any way. He was wholly in touch with the now, figuring out how to move forward with no questions about how he got there or why.

That's not just a story; it's a fact of life, the human condition, and because Moshe knew it, he could leave this world happy and fulfilled.

Despite the apparent lack of any obvious physical victory, Moshe's entire life was a living symposium on moral victory. He wanted to save them from suffering in Egypt, and he did. He wanted to give them a future, and he did. He gave all he had for as long as he had breath in him to secure a future for all of us.

It is not within human capacity to see all ends and decide our fates. Moshe gets to the threshold of the Promised Land, a dream centuries in the making, but never quite gets there; it leaves us no room for pride or self-righteousness, the way many happy endings do, but there is also no trace of failure or regret.

It's not a sad ending; it's bittersweet and true to life as we know it.

The conclusion of the Torah's greatest story is much more powerful than a patronizing and simple happy ending. It seems to emphasize that this is what even the greatest human successes and victories can look like, reinforcing a belief that ought to guide us through hard times; that, ultimately, no



matter how bad things get, there is no darkness greater than the light, and there is always hope, and the future will shine bright.

Moshe deserves all honor because he led his people out of the fires of Egypt and spent every last reserve of body and will, which was sufficient to bring them to a destined point and no further. Moshe could not lead their journey to completion the way he set out to, but that's not what defines his greatness or success, and it does not make his life or story any less complete. It was his choice to give himself entirely to the cause that granted him his victory, his moral victory, and it's that choice that makes him worthy of the highest honors, with the unique title of Rabbeinu, Our Teacher, whose name we remember for eternity.

As R' Eytan Feiner sharply notes, who better than Moshe Rabbeinu to demonstrate this lesson? Moshe, the avatar of perfect loyalty and service, did all he could, and although he didn't get everything he wanted, what he got was enough for him.

As our Sages remind us, we must ground ourselves. The ends are not given to us, and we don't always get to finish what we set out to do, but that mustn't stop us – לא עָלִידָה הַמְּלָאכָה לְגִמְרָה, וְלֹא אֶתְּהָ בֶן חוֹרֵין לְבָטֹל – מִמְּנָה. Sometimes you'll get to save the day, and sometimes you'll only get to pass the baton on to the next generation. Other times, you'll collapse in sight of the finish line, and your work will remain unfinished; but the outcome does not determine the victory.

The Torah does not end with the patronizing and sickly sweetness of a great physical victory, with Moshe leading his people to a happily ever after. But if there's no happily ever after, there is still an ever after. His victory is bittersweet, but it lingers on in us sitting here three thousand years later learning about him and his battles; his moral victory stands forever.

The Torah doesn't end how we expect and instead ends with a transition; they're about to cross the border, and a new generation with new leaders will write new books for the challenges of a new era. Each story is incomplete, theirs and ours. But that does not detract from the achievements of Moshe and the Jewish People, and it does not dishonor the faith and trust our ancestors had in God.

This bittersweet ending reasserts the theme of moral victories being more important than physical victories by showing us what is within our power and what is not. Whatever the circumstances, and against all forms of adversity, it is within us to be great; to be brave, gentle, hopeful, kind, and strong, like our heroes Avraham, Yitzchak, Yakov, Yosef, Moshe, Ahron, and Miriam. We shouldn't expect a happily ever after ending because that's just not how it works.

Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yakov knew it, Moshe, Ahron, and Miriam knew it, and they lived in peace with it. Yet we struggle with it all the time, even though we are the living embodiment of things not going quite the way we'd expect, and even though it screams out of every single page of Jewish history.



So, perhaps rather than ask why the Torah doesn't give Moshe and the Jewish People the happy ending we expect, we ought to invert the question.

With all we know, why do we still hold on so tightly to our expectations of how things ought to be?

Quote of the Week

When you can't find meaning you distract yourself with pleasure.

Thought of the Week

The hardest loss to deal with is the loss of someone who's still alive.

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

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

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

Neli

PS - TorahRedux is my pride and joy, the product of thousands of hours of learning, research, writing, editing, and formatting. I have been blessed to operate a 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 broker healthcare businesses for sale; I kindly ask for your blessings and prayers, and introductions to anyone who might want to buy or sell a healthcare business!

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.