

Pekudei 2024

Sources and Uses

3 minute read | Straightforward

In a finite universe, resource allocation matters, and the headlines often reveal negligence. Trillions of taxpayer funds are spent on healthcare and defense in the public sector with no accountability for where they go. Corporate executives implement cost-cutting measures to increase margins; a few months later, a critical component fails, and a plane crashes. The lack of accountability is how you get lead in toys, carcinogens in baby food, and low-quality materials holding planes and buildings together; numbers tell a story.

In our daily lives, whenever someone wants an investment, one of the most important things investors should consider is the sources and uses, the story the numbers tell. How much money do they need, and where is it going? Will it make the business more profitable, or are you sponsoring the guy's next vacation? The same analysis applies to charitable giving: what ratio of the fundraising budget goes to the administration's salaries, travel, and dinners, and how much of your charity actually goes towards helping the cause?

When handling other people's money, there can be no room for moral hazard; as our sages acknowledge, money makes people act weird.

The Torah dedicates an entire section to a detailed account of how the donations to the building of the Mishkan were used, a public accounting for posterity.

The Torah's space is a precious commodity; what makes the cut and what doesn't is noteworthy. What are we supposed to make of this accounting, verifying that, by the way, Moshe didn't mess with the money, and just so you know, Bezalel didn't burgle some bars?

Firstly, our sages note that no matter how sacred the project or how pure the builder's intentions are, you are always guaranteed to have some clowns; there were actually people who suspected Moshe of skimming off the top and getting rich off the project!

Secondly, the essential principle isn't in the specific line items of how much of this or that there was; maybe that part doesn't matter today. However, the broader concept is dynamite; there must be transparency and accountability regarding public funds, even if the people involved have impeccable reputations. Leaders should eliminate the need for people to trust them, even if you're Moshe and even for the Mishkan.



As R' Jonathan Sacks highlights, the prophets regularly lambasted corrupt judges who had undermined their integrity and eroded the public trust in justice. A community and nation that suspects its leaders of corruption is dysfunctional. It is the mark of a society in good health when public leadership is seen as a form of service rather than a means to power, which is all too easily abused.

Our sages interpret a remark from Moshe as a way of acting in public life so as to be beyond reproach:

וְהָיִיתֶם נְקִיִּים מִה' וּמִיִּשְׂרָאֵל – And you shall be clear before the Lord and before Israel... (32:22)

As such, at least two people must be in charge of administering public finances; Moshe was the treasurer, and Itamar independently audited, which is how Moshe could verifiably claim at Korach's revolt never to have taken anything from anyone. When the Beis Hamikdash was operational, treasurers could only exchange treasury coins with a third party, not their own. They were not allowed to enter the treasury wearing tight clothes or anything with linings or pockets in which it might be possible to hide and steal.

Contemporary governance and leadership experts reinforce what the Torah stated plainly long ago: accountability is a prerequisite to leadership and is not just a matter of personal integrity but of a systemic design that distributes responsibility and ensures oversight. Leaders are tasked with doing right and being seen to do right, establishing a culture of integrity that underpins a healthy, functioning society.

While authorities differ on whether this is a legal requirement, there can be no question that the Torah's detailed accounting of the sources and uses of public contributions is a precedent that public trust in leadership is built on openness and accountability for the ethical stewardship of communal resources; it is healthy for leadership to be accountable to the community it serves.

It is the mark of good leadership to take proactive measures to eliminate the need for trust by replacing it with verifiable transparency, creating a culture of accountability and openness.

Accountability and integrity are everything; when you are transparent, you'll never need people to trust you.

Your Heart in the Right Place

3 minute read | Straightforward



In every field of human civilization, there are discoveries, technologies, and people that changed everything.

The printing press permanently slashed the cost of information, commoditizing and dramatically expanding the reach of human knowledge. Antibiotics and vaccination neutralized the dangers of the historically leading causes of human death. The internet has transformed how we communicate.

Closer to home, Rashi opened up our literature to the masses. The Rambam organized and synthesized broad and divergent streams of lore and thought into cohesive and comprehensive works of law and philosophy. Aish HaTorah and Ohr Someach demonstrated the urgency of outreach to combat the attrition wrought by assimilation. Chabad put a Jewish embassy in every major city on the planet.

These are all remarkable feats, and they should speak to something deep within us; who hasn't once dreamed of making an impact and leaving the world better off for it? Even once we have matured past the stage of wanting to make the world in our image, we still have ambitions; and we eventually face the question of how we can hope to succeed at those ambitious goals.

It's a familiar question because it's universal.

How are you going to succeed at that?

This line of thinking is common and garbs itself in the language of realism. But this line of thinking is actually pessimism in disguise, and ironically, often grants people the certainty they need to excuse themselves from getting started.

Survivorship bias is real. While it's not strictly wrong to say that the number of people who are fortunate enough to successfully pull off massive accomplishments is small, what they all have in common is that they got started, which might be half the battle – לא עליך המלאכה לגמור, ולא אתה בן הורין – ליבטל ממנה. Rashi himself wrote dismissively of people who say it's impossible to finish Shas; the only way it's ever been done is a couple of pages per session.

But there is something else to it as well.

Our sages suggest that the designer in chief of the Mishkan, Bezalel, was exceptionally gifted and perhaps even supernaturally clairvoyant. But when the Torah describes the architects and artisans, the common craftsmen and contributors of the Mishkan construction project, it consistently refers to one unifying characteristic of the men and women who rose to the occasion:

וַיִּקְרָא מֹשֶׁה אֶל-בְּצַלְאֵל וְאֶל-אֹהֲלִיאֵב וְאֵל כָּל-אִישׁ חֲכָם-לֵב אֲשֶׁר נָתַן ה' חֵכְמָה בְּלִבּוֹ כֹּל אֲשֶׁר נִשְׂאוֹ לְבוֹ לְקַרְבָּהּ אֶל-הַמִּלְאכָה לַעֲשׂוֹת אֹתָהּ: – Moshe called Bezalel and Oholiav, and every skilled person whom Hashem had endowed with skill in his heart, everyone who had given their hearts to undertake the task and carry it out. (36:2)



The Ramban notes that the working population of that moment consisted of freed slaves, who only had experience in manual labor – they were not skilled in metallurgy or textiles! Yet the Torah consistently describes their technical skill as a feature of having a heart for the task in question – הַכֶּבֶד־לֵב. The Chafetz Chaim suggests that in doing so, the Torah subtly recognizes the skill of these volunteers as a product not of experience, but of desire; their hearts were in the right place – ה' נָתַן ה' – הַכְמָה בְּלִבּוֹ כֹּל אֲשֶׁר נִשְׂאוּ לִבּוֹ לְקַרְבָּה אֶל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ לַעֲשׂוֹת אֹתָהּ.

The Mishkan volunteers could succeed at something unprecedented with no relevant experience because God granted the requisite skill to the people whose hearts were in the right place and whose hearts were invested in the project. R' Noach Weinberg similarly encourages us to invest heart into our undertakings and trust that God sends us the fortune and wisdom required to succeed – יַגְעִתִּי וְלֹא יַצְלִיחַ אִלֵּינוּ. If we want the right things for the right reasons, why wouldn't we throw ourselves in the deep end and hope for the best?

The Malbim suggests that all we truly can give is our all, and it's true enough of most things. Who can accomplish the impossible? The people who want it badly enough – רָחֲמָנָא לִיבָא בְעֵי. Our Sages taught that you could have anything you want if you want it badly enough – אֵין דְּבַר עוֹמֵד בְּפָנֵי הַרְצוֹן – If you want it badly enough, you'll find a way; and if you don't, you'll find an excuse – בְּדֶרֶךְ שְׂאֵדָם רוֹצֵה לִילֵךְ מוֹלִיכִין – אֹתוֹ.

We all have big goals, and if we expect to influence the quality of our lives, we must be proactive. But what are the chances you get what you want if you don't go after it? And crucially, what are the chances you get it if you go about it half-heartedly?

If you want to succeed, your heart has to be in the right place, and you have to go all-in.

The Family Trees

3 minute read | Straightforward

The Torah opens with Creation and describes the emergence of life and all things in just a single chapter. It spends the best part of two entire books detailing the Mishkan, with meticulous and exhaustive details of the planning, production, and assembly of the portable sanctuary that served as the physical and spiritual center of Judaism until the construction of a permanent Beis HaMikdash.

The Torah's primary construction materials list contained vast amounts of gold, silver, copper, and precious gems. If you had to say the one main thing the Mishkan was made of, you might say gold, used throughout the project, from finishes to furnishings.

But it's not.

The Mishkan had no foundation and no roof, just curtains and drapes. The only solid structure came from its walls, which were made of wood:

וַעֲשִׂיתָ אֶת־הַקְּרָשִׁים לְמִשְׁכַּן עֲצֵי שֵׁטִים עֹמְדִים – You shall make the planks for the Tabernacle of acacia wood, upright. (26:15)

The people contributed precious metals and gems they'd brought from Egypt. But they were in the desert; where were they getting wood from?

Rashi highlights that the Torah typically refers to everyday items and general contributions in other instances uses but in the case of wood, uses the definite article – the planks – indicating a specific contribution – הַקְּרָשִׁים / הַקְּרָשִׁים. Rashi notes that this wood had been designated generations before; our sages teach that before our ancestor Yakov went to Egypt, he visited his grandfather Avraham's home, took some trees from there, and took them to Egypt with him, making his children swear at his deathbed to take the trees with them when they left to build a sanctuary with.

R' Yaakov Kamenetsky notes that Yakov didn't just plant trees; he planted actualized hope in a physical and visual form accessible in the external world of tangible things. Enslaved in Egypt, his descendants would look at and tend to their grandfather's trees, a promise and symbol that the hands that built pyramids and monuments for their masters would one day make sacred things and places for themselves; work that broke and destroyed could transform into work that built and united.

Yaakov knew his children would raise their eyes and cry in misery. They'd see trees that connected them to the roots of their history and would allow them a glimpse of his hopeful vision of a better, brighter future.

But hope for the future isn't necessarily specific to trees; Yakov could have left them anything.

He chose to leave trees because trees symbolize life and vitality, seasonality, and natural energy, representing the cycle of life and death. Like trees, generations of death in Egypt would burst to life once more.

Our great ancestors had a tangible vision for what these trees could become and took concrete action to imbue them with meaning so that this vision would unfold in reality. Yaakov was a visionary, but his dreams manifested in the world of action.

This is the wood they used, and it's ubiquitous – the Mishkan is made of this wood, the Ark is made of this wood, the table is made of this wood, and the large and small altars are made of this wood, too. The wood may be overlaid with metal, but it's all made of this wood.



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More pointedly, wood is organic and simple, unlike gems and precious metals. R' Zalman Sorotzkin points out in a way that's hard to overstate that wood is the invisible support structure of no less than the entire project. You might see gold everywhere, but gold is just the decorative overlay; that's not where the support comes from. Support comes from the durability and enduring sturdiness of the wood – עֲצֵי שֵׁטִים עֹמְדִים. The gold is useless without the underlying strength of the wood that holds it up.

Sparkle and glamor catch the eye, but remember, it's superficial only.

The boards must be assembled upright, not upside down, in the direction of the tree's original growth, with the lower part of the board corresponding to the lower part of the tree. Even though the board is symmetrical, this law extends to every mitzvah that uses plants, such as Lulav and Esrog. R' Joseph Soloveitchik notes that this instruction is a universal law; the way to grow something is with its feet planted on the ground with its head, heart, and spine aligned straight up a straight line, physically, spiritually, and emotionally aligned. You can't put something together upside-down and expect it to work right; things must be upright to grow correctly.

The Mishkan was built out of Yakov's hopes and dreams for his children, the promise they inherited about the places they'd go and who they could be. Those children passed on that dream to their children, who would build the Mishkan, but also to us, the children who would remember it.

Every breath of our lives fulfills countless generations' hopes and prayers. They aren't burdens; they can be building blocks of lasting meaning if we use them right.

The dreams and promises we inherit are priceless treasures.

Attitude Redux

4 minute read | Straightforward

God gave various commands during the Jewish People's time in the desert.

We expect God to give commands; it comes with the territory, that's what God does, and it makes sense. They'd just left Egypt and stood at Sinai; there was a new religion with new procedures and protocols to implement. And after all, there's no way to know what God wants unless God says so!

What God says, we expect the audience to do, which the Torah dutifully records – וַיַּעַשׂ כֵּן.



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But what we might not expect is that the Torah reports with meticulous regularity, every time, not just that people obey, but that people carry out their task as per God's command – וַיַּעַשׂ כִּן כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' – The Torah uses this phrase tens, if not hundreds, of times!

If you think about it, it's almost entirely redundant, apart from the repetitiveness. It's not obvious what doing something per God's command adds because, in nearly every example, there is no other conceivable way to do it.

When God says to light the Menora, there is only one way to light a Menora. When God says to take a census of how many people there are, the only way to fulfill the command is to count people. When God says to bring a Korban Pesach, or how to do the Yom Kippur service, or any of the Mishkan-related workflows, or to go to war with Midian, or to execute somebody, there isn't any other way to do any of those things! And yet each time, the Torah doesn't say people followed their instructions; it says that the people followed their instructions faithfully as per God's command – וַיַּעַשׂ ה' כִּן כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה'.

When people follow instructions, why does the Torah add that they followed the instructions per God's command?

Perhaps the Torah isn't telling us that they did it; it's telling us how they did it.

R' Shlomo Farhi explains that even when there truly is only one way to do something, there is still a right and wrong way. When the Torah adds that people followed instructions faithfully – כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' – it's not saying that they did just like they were told; it means that people follow instructions just like when they were told, capturing the snapshot of sentiment or feeling of a particular moment.

When you do anything, even if there's no other way, you can still do it with energy, focus, and joy, or not – a right way and a wrong way, even when there's only one way.

Our sages were sensitive to this subtle but universal nuance.

Rashi quotes the Sifri that Ahron lit the Menora every day, precisely the way Moshe told him for the rest of his life, and never changed or deviated in any way – כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה'; the Sifri suggests that our everyday approach to Torah should similarly be with freshness and excitement – וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר – אֲנִי מִצְוָה הַיּוֹם עַל-לְבָבְךָ.

R' Simcha Bunim of Peshischa notes that as much as the comment is about Ahron not changing how he performed his duties, it's equally a comment about how his duties didn't change him. Some people let privilege and honor get to their heads – but not Ahron.



The Sfas Emes notes that lighting the Menora wasn't a prestigious ceremony in that any Kohen could kindle the lights. Still, Ahron took it seriously enough that he insisted on doing it himself every day for the rest of his life – he did it like the moment he received the command.

The Izhbitzer notes that the highest praise for Ahron is that he retained that initial desire, that things never got stale or boring for him. He kept challenging himself to find something new and exciting, so he lit the Menora his last time with the same enthusiasm as the first.

The Shem miShmuel notes that the word for training, which means practice repetitions, is cognate to the word for inauguration, the first time you do something – חנוכה / חינוך. This suggests that training is not simply a repeat of past performance but the repetition of newness, with each repetition inviting an opportunity to introduce a fresh aspect or dimension.

Attitude and mentality are everything; the mental and emotional components heavily influence the substance of any interaction. Prayer and sacrifice require proper intent to have any substance; there is a vast difference between giving someone a hand because you care and giving someone a hand out of pity.

A Torah scroll is quite clearly a religious article, yet it has no inherent sanctity from perfect script or spelling. A Torah scroll is kosher and sacred exclusively when written with the express intent of imbuing the words and scroll with sanctity, which is to say that its utility and value as a holy object are solely determined by the mentality of the scribe.

The Mishkan had plenty of unique artifacts like the Menora, but it had some pretty ordinary implements that everyone owns; a shirt, a hat, a cup, and a spoon. What designated these as sacred and distinct is the intention with which they were crafted.

This is a universal truth in all walks of life, from Judaism to art to cooking. A great cook will say their secret ingredient is love; a great artist or sage will say their secret technique is heart and soul.

In the words of Martin Luther King Jr., if a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as a Michelangelo painted, Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, 'Here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well.'

Mastery is typically dull. Finishing your fiftieth marathon is less notable than your first.

It's normal.

The more we experience something, our enthusiasm, and attention typically wane. Predictability and comfort put an end to fresh euphoria; when we know what to expect, our excitement wears off, and



boredom sets in. That's why we need to keep things fresh if we're focused on a long-term project or goal; cruise control is a killer.

It's often seen with young athletes or scholars who lose their way – they think they've made it and stop putting in the work that would take them to the elite tier. The seasoned pros always comment on how essential it is for youngsters to maintain their concentration and focus on staying on track, being fully present in each moment, and devoting their full and undivided attention, so things don't get boring.

In all walks of life, the highest form of mastery is valuing each repetition and finding its novelty and excitement.

It's not redundant for the Torah to say each time that people did the right thing in the right way for the right reason. It is ubiquitous because it reflects a truism of life, a constant reminder that is universally true.

The way you do things matters.

The Clothes Make the Man

5 minute read | Straightforward

From all over the world, Jews would come to the Mishkan and Beis HaMikdash for spiritual healing and engagement with the divine transcendence. Offering services far beyond the regular public programming and sacrifices, the Kohanim, the priests on duty, would attend to people's personal spiritual needs, helping them bring sacrificial offerings to find atonement or thanksgiving, whatever their circumstances.

The Torah describes a plain and simple uniform that all on-duty Kohanim would wear: linen shorts with a matching long-robed shirt, a belt, and a turban.

The uniform was modest and minimal, but like all dress codes, uniforms pose a challenge. How we dress is a form of self-expression; doesn't imposing a uniform dress code stifle individuality and human freedom?

Clothing is a basic form of self-expression, and self-expression is vital to emotional growth and well-being. We use freedom of expression, including clothing choice, to cultivate the ability to make choices about how we express ourselves, an integral part of learning a broader responsibility for our choices and healthy personal development. If you've ever seen a child put up a big fight about getting



dressed, you've seen just how important it is, emotionally speaking, to be able to control your outward appearance as part of being in control of your identity. There should be no question that you can tell something about a person by how they dress. While imprecise, it's directionally accurate.

Yet, be that as it may, the nature of a public-facing service job is that you must somewhat check yourself at the door. There's plenty of time for self-expression, but it might not be the right moment to express yourself fully when a client or patient requires your advice and compassion.

Humans have certain behaviors hardcoded into our biological makeup – we make snap judgments from very thin slices of information, including conclusions from how someone dresses. These are powerful drives, and we'd be lying to ourselves if we thought we could suppress subconscious instincts; they are subconscious. So while there are plenty of highly successful or learned people who avoid formal wear on principle and achieve incredible heights wearing gym clothes and flip flops, the fact remains that when you're trying to impress, regardless of your merits, everyone knows you're better off in a suit than pajamas.

How someone dresses is, of course, not a reliable or proper way to judge a person at all, but the fact remains that appearances matter. Sitting in the emergency room with a troubling health concern, you might get thrown off a little if the doctor walks in with ripped jeans and spiky chains over a tank top. In scrubs or a clown costume, he's still the same doctor; the scrubs also help you.

When you're at the hospital, and you see someone in scrubs in the hallway, you instantly know an incredible amount of relevant and valuable information about that person – they work at the hospital, they know their way around the building, they know a lot about health and the human body, they can direct you where you're trying to go. But most importantly, you know they're there to help you; the hospital dress code utilizes nonverbal communication to foster a sense of comfort and gravity that allows patients and their families to feel comfortable and at ease, all before a single word needs to be said.

And it's no different for spiritual health and well-being.

The Torah mandates a simple dress code for on-duty Kohanim, consisting of a plain and simple uniform, spirit scrubs if you like, out of concern for the weary and troubled souls who came from far and near.

Dress codes are effective. Dress codes work. While it's not an absolute and immutable law, it is a pretty good rule of thumb, a heuristic that primes us to act a certain way. And to be sure, what we're discussing is the textbook definition of superficial – but that's human nature and psychology; we have a strong bias and inclination towards the superficial. The way you present yourself matters.

Dress codes level the playing field by peeling away distractions and removing barriers to people getting what they need. Uniforms aren't intimidating the way fancy clothes are; uniforms aren't



off-putting the way old, raggedy clothes are. Everyone on duty appears equal, at least in an outward sense. Uniforms also create a psychological bond, building a group identity that motivates individuals to do more; you see this in the military, police, school, and work. It can help engender feelings of support: you see others working with you and recognize that they aren't just doing it as individuals for personal reasons. When you are servicing the public, it is not about you because you are expressly not representing yourself. Tellingly, the uniforms were procured with public funds and owned by the Beis HaMikdash endowment.

There is nothing inherent about dress codes or uniforms that makes you better at what you do for wearing those clothes, but the fact you're wearing them signals, at least to some people, that you're willing to put them first. And even if you don't think that's true, it is still a reason somebody else might think it is true, and that's reason enough.

Like other uniforms, the Kohanim's uniform conveys information and fosters comfort and security, setting the tone for meaningful and high-signal interactions with spiritual seekers. But like a doctor in scrubs, the dress code is only skin deep.

It's important to stress that appearance isn't everything – far from it. No two doctors or people are the same, even though they may wear the same uniform. They each have different personalities and sensitivities, and assuming a basic threshold of competency; they distinguish themselves with their bedside manner – what they're like to interact with. Our Amida also has a uniform structure, morning, noon, and night, Sunday through Friday, yet no two prayers are alike – the feeling we invest in each word is different each time. R' Shlomo Farhi highlights that even as similar as the Kohanim's uniform was, each set of clothing still had to be tapered to the contours of the wearer's body, with no loose fabric. No two people are alike, and even two conversations with the same person aren't interchangeable; uniformity doesn't mean homogeneity, and common form is not common substance.

Shakespeare wrote that the clothes make the man, but if that's a little wide of the mark, it's probably correct to say that the clothes set the tone. In your own house, yard, or office, do whatever and be whoever you like. Who's to say otherwise? But in other-facing, client-facing, or public-facing positions, you should be mindful of how you look to people who don't know to give you the benefit of the doubt. Plenty of major companies have relaxed dress codes for non-client-facing positions, but you can be sure that the client-facing positions are suited and booted!

The value articulated by a dress code or uniform policy is that while they may not help everyone, they provide substantial benefits to portions of the population disadvantaged in specific contexts.

So perhaps dress codes don't compromise individuality or self-expression; maybe they curb the outermost and superficial part of ourselves, and that's the part we can afford to sacrifice for other people's comfort in public service.



TorahRedux

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.

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. My business, Hendon Advisors, allows me to dedicate time to TorahRedux, and I welcome your assistance in furthering my goal to keep publishing high-quality Parsha content that makes a difference. I source and broker the purchase and sale of healthcare businesses; I kindly ask for your blessings and prayers. If you are a buyer of healthcare businesses or can make introductions to healthcare operators who might buy or sell, just reply to this email to get in touch.*

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.