



acted at that moment and they would remain even a little longer, their condition would have further deteriorated, and perhaps only a small remnant might have been rescued. That could plausibly have been one version of keeping to the promise – saving whoever was left.

But God didn't do that. God did not abandon them to their fates, and God would not let them die or fail. Instead, every single man, woman, and child walked out – even though they didn't deserve to. Because God didn't just keep His promise; He protected it – בְּרוּךְ שׁוֹמֵר הַבְּטָחָתוֹ.

The Sfas Emes notes that our ancestors were confident in their tradition that they would be mired in Egypt for four hundred years; so much so that they refused to believe that Moshe was there to save them, and quite reasonably so – after all, this redeemer was two centuries early...! And yet, before any explanation, logic, or wordplay about how or why, the simple fact was that it was time to go. Regardless of tradition, of what had been made explicitly clear by no less an authority than God's own word, the time was now, and the discussion evaporates. Because God protects His promise – בְּרוּךְ שׁוֹמֵר הַבְּטָחָתוֹ.

On the night we remember redemptions past, fueling our hope for redemptions to come, we ought to remind ourselves that God protects His promise, whatever it takes. We have a rich and vast eschatological literature about what will happen at the end times of Mashiach; will it be easy or painful? Peaceful or tragic? Gradual or sudden? Six thousand years or tomorrow?

The Sfas Emes reassures us that whatever we convince ourselves, we actually have no idea whatsoever. Perhaps once again, the qualitative strain of exile can stand in for a required quantity of years. Yet in the final analysis, it's entirely academic because even if our spiritual assets were entirely exhausted of ancestral credit and merit, we could always count on the Creator's bottomless wellspring of compassion; and the highly persuasive precedent for creative accounting when it comes to these things.

Because בְּרוּךְ שׁוֹמֵר הַבְּטָחָתוֹ – God protects His promise.

You are Worthy

3 minute read | Straightforward

The Exodus is an orienting event for the Jewish People, a founding moment in our history, with a daily duty to recall it. It's the first thing God has to say to humans at Sinai; God introduces Himself as the God who took us out of Egypt.

Remembering the Exodus is a perpetual mitzvah, and an astounding amount of our daily blessings, mitzvos, and prayers commemorate the Exodus – זָכַר לִיציאת מצרים. It is ubiquitous to the extent we could miss the point entirely.



What do we mean when we say that we remember that God took the Jews out of Egypt?

It is essential to understand first principles because they are the foundational concepts that govern the systems built upon them.

If we unpack the story, the Jews in Egypt didn't deserve to be saved because they were so good or so special; in fact, quite the opposite.

The Zohar imagines the angels arguing whether or not God should save the Jews, and the argument was that “this lot are just a bunch of idol-worshippers, and so are those!” The Haggadah admits as much – *מִתְחַלְלָה עוֹבְדֵי עֲבוֹדַת זָרָה הָיוּ אֲבוֹתֵינוּ* –

When Moshe told the Jews to set aside and take one sheep per family, the Midrash says that “set aside” meant setting aside their idols before taking the sheep for the mitzvah!

When even Moshe, already well on his way to greatness, saw Yisro's daughters getting bullied and got involved in the dispute to protect them, the onlookers mistook him for just another Egyptian!

The Midrash famously states that the enslaved Jews retained their names, clothing, and language. This is often framed as a point of pride, but the point would seem to be that apart from these narrow and limited practices, they were otherwise indistinguishable from Egyptians in every other conceivable way!

Moreover, the generation that left Egypt and stood at Sinai fought Moshe the rest of their lives, begging to go back to Egypt, and was ultimately doomed to wander and die in the wilderness.

The Zohar goes so far as to say that the Jews were on the 49th level of spiritual malaise, just one notch off rock bottom, the point of no return. Rav Kook notes that this adds a particular dimension to the imagery of God's strong outstretched arm – it was a forceful intervention, an emergency rescue of a nation that had stumbled and was about fall off a cliff – *בְּיַד תִּזְקָה וּבְזַרְעַ נְטוּיָה* –

As R' Shlomo Farhi explains, whenever God is characterized with strength, it indicates God doing something that is undeserved. God does not require more incremental strength to move a grape than a galaxy; but God can force compassion to overwhelm what justice requires – *גּוֹאֵל וְחֹזֵק אֶתָּה* –

That is to say that on a fundamental level, the Jews didn't deserve rescuing at all.

And yet crucially, as R' Chaim Kanievsky notes, God responded to their cries all the same – *וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים* – *אֶלֶּקִי אֲבֹתֵינוּ, וַיִּשְׁמַע ה' אֶת־קוֹלֵנוּ*.

The Divrei Chaim notes that the very first Commandment is no command at all; God “introduces” himself as the God who took us out of Egypt – *אֲנֹכִי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים* – It's not a command – it is just a simple statement of fact. We might not deserve redemption, yet God redeems us all the same.

R' Tzadok haKohen writes that to remember Egypt is to remember God's first declarative sentence; our God rescues people from Egypt, whatever they have done and whoever they have become. Our God initiates the great Exodus before the Jewish People ever take a single step of their own to be better – אַנְכִי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים.

The Ropshitzer quipped that תְּחִלָּה לְמִקְרָאֵי קֹדֶשׁ זָכַר לִיְצִיאַת מִצְרַיִם – the first step towards holiness is remembering that the same Exodus that rescued people from the abyss once before could be just a moment away.

So when we remind ourselves about Egypt, it's not just that it happened once, but that, as the Lubavitcher Rebbe put it, God's redemption is not contingent on our worthiness.

Take this lesson to heart; it's one of the vanishingly few that the Torah specifically asks us to remember at all times – לְמַעַן תִּזְכֹּר אֶת-יְיָ צִאתְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם כָּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ.

And it's clear why.

You don't need to remember the simple historical events of the Exodus; you have to remind yourself that every single last human is worthy of God's unconditional love.

Pharaoh's Responsibility

3 minute read | Straightforward

One of the foundations of religion and morality is free will.

With good reason, Maimonides identifies free will as a foundational principle underpinning the entire Torah. If humans can't deliberately choose between right and wrong, there can be no reward or punishment. If we can't choose, our actions have no value as we don't control them; if you are bad, it's not your fault because being good is impossible.

The Exodus story poses a problem to this, however.

Throughout the story, God tells Moshe that He has hardened Pharaoh's heart, and so Pharaoh refuses to free the Jews. But if God had hardened his heart, Pharaoh's free will was hopelessly compromised; how was punishing Pharaoh deserved or fair?

Maimonides's exposition of free will explains that it is possible to do something so bad egregious that the path of making amends and repentance is foreclosed, and the person can no longer turn back to where they once were.



We understand this; there is an old folk saying that the axe forgets; but the tree remembers, meaning that the person who hurts another forgets but the person who gets hurt will not. Someone abusive can reform themselves, regret their actions, and resolve never to hurt another person again, and they should do all those things! But the point is, they can only hope to find a new path; they can never return to their old one, and that's what happened to Pharaoh.

Pharaoh's government enslaved, tortured, and murdered people, particularly children; justice itself required that he be prevented from making amends.

Pharaoh was so far down his path of madness and violence that he could not see or hear his people suffering, and his adviser's pleas fell on deaf ears:

הֲטָרָם תִּדַּע כִּי אֶבְדָּה מִצְרַיִם – “Do you not see that Egypt is already lost?” (10:7)

Contemporary psychology might call this a form of cognitive dissonance, the uncomfortable feeling you experience when two of your beliefs are in conflict. When confronted with challenging new information, people may seek to preserve their current understanding of the world by rejecting, explaining away, or avoiding the new information, or convincing themselves that no conflict really exists. We can lie to ourselves to justify bad decisions and hypocrisy.

Pharaoh was determined to hold onto his power over his Jewish subjects, but this was at odds with his duties to the Egyptian people who were suffering. These beliefs were incompatible, but Pharaoh would not address the systemic issue and let the Jewish People go; he would only ever ask Moshe to remove the symptoms of the plague at hand.

Where was Pharaoh's free will? Where is ours? Cognitive dissonance is ubiquitous.

The Midrash warns us that sin is like a passing visitor, then a houseguest who overstays their welcome, and before long, it's master of the house. R' Jonathan Sacks suggests that we can all too easily become prisoners to our own pride on a microcosmic level.

It's not so difficult to imagine becoming so entrenched in a worldview that you get tunnel vision and can't change course.

R' Yisrael Salanter says that the first time you do something wrong, it's a sin. When you repeat it again, it seems permitted. When you do it the third time, it can feel like a mitzvah!

R' Shimshon Pinkus suggests that this is the definition of the Rosh Hashana blessing to be the head, and not the tail – שְׁנֵהְיֶה לְרֹאשׁ וְלֹא לְזָנָב. It's a wish for an intentional year, with conscious and constant course corrections, because if today's actions are based on yesterday's decisions, you end up being your own tail!

As much as we celebrate the prospect of freedom, you must consciously choose it daily.



Choreographed Futility

4 minute read | Straightforward

Towards the beginning of the Exodus story, God gives Moshe his great mission.

Moshe initially resists and says that the Jewish People will not listen to him. Although our sages criticize him for this, he demonstrates that he is highly attuned to his environment because, sure enough, that's precisely what happens:

וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה בֶּן אֶלְבָּנִי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה מִקֶּצֶר רוּחַ וּמַעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה – But when Moshe told this to the Israelites, they would not listen to Moshe, their spirits crushed by cruel bondage. (6:9)

Exactly as Moshe had predicted, they didn't listen, and this theatre only caused Moshe and his exhausted people unnecessary aggravation, disappointment, and frustration. It's hard to see this as anything other than choreographed futility – a colossal waste of time, energy, and effort on all counts from the very outset.

This is consistent with a broader motif throughout the entire Torah, filled as it is with so many aborted attempts, failed efforts, and wasted opportunities.

Generally speaking, it is usually worth giving something a go, because you never know; but in this instance, everyone did know – they knew it wasn't going to work!

Moshe knew they wouldn't listen. God knew they wouldn't listen. Yet God sent Moshe anyway. Why would God bother sending Moshe on an exercise in futility?

The Sfas Emes teaches that there is no such thing as futility when trying to help people. This particular chapter of the story illustrates that it's never one specific interaction that has an instantaneous magical breakthrough effect; the helper must persist. Words can take root even if they don't immediately blossom and yield fruit; the lack of immediate and apparent results doesn't mean the efforts are wasted.

The Netziv highlights how the Torah is replete with phases and stages that indicate gradual transformation; for example, there are five expressions of redemption, ten plagues, and each phase of Dayeinu.

Let's remember that we are reading the Exodus story, the grandest redemption story in history to date, and this is how it starts. Moshe is frustrated, his people are hurting and spent, and he can't get them to entertain the dream or notion that things could change for the better. Not even the most legendary redemption story has an instant turning point or pivotal moment; it starts like this – boring



and painfully slow. Nothing happens! On Seder night, we celebrate the great miracles, but maybe we should read these few lines as well and remember what change actually looks like, not only in our daily lived experience but as attested to in the Torah's own words.

The Chizkuni suggests that it's not that they wouldn't listen, but that they couldn't; they were structurally and systemically too traumatized to have the mental or physical capacity to hold on to hope. And even so, God sends Moshe to them with words that are not lost to the ether. Even if they can't internalize the message, it is objectively important that they see Moshe trying to help them, that they hear the words; and accordingly, that we hear that interaction through the ages as well. There are times a person is so stuck that they don't want to be saved; and still, you can't abandon them.

Right after this unsuccessful effort to encourage his people, Moshe reports back to God, and a nonchalant God tells them straightforwardly that their mission is going ahead on schedule and as planned:

וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה לְפָנָיו ה' לֵאמֹר הֲנִי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא־שָׁמְעוּ אֵלַי וְאִיךָ יִשְׁמְעוּנִי פְרַעֲהַ וְאֲנִי עֶרְלָה שִׁפְתָּיִם. וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־אַהֲרֹן וַיֹּצִיאוּם אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶל־פְּרַעֲהַ מִלֶּךְ מִצְרַיִם לְהוֹצִיא אֶת־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם – But Moshe appealed to God, saying, “The Israelites would not listen to me; how then should Pharaoh heed me, a man of impeded speech!” So God spoke to both Moshe and Ahron regarding the Israelites and Pharaoh king of Egypt, instructing them to deliver the Israelites from the land of Egypt. (6:12,13)

But what follows this powerful reaffirmation of the mission isn't a renewal or redoubling of efforts. The Torah interrupts this story mid-paragraph with a tangential breakdown of the heritage and lineage of the Jewish families in Egypt in exhaustive detail.

It's unclear what this breakdown is doing in this story, but perhaps it ties into the notion of efforts not going to waste.

The Ishbitzer teaches that in the instant we choose to pray, before uttering a word, God is poised to listen, which is to say, God responds before we have reached out. In the physical world, Moshe tried to encourage the Jewish People, but they couldn't hear him. But in the spiritual world, which is to say the world of the spirit, the Torah tells us who they were and where they came from, that they were descendants of Yisrael. Perhaps their identity could be a hook Moshe's words latched on to in their intangible subconscious.

Moshe's words weren't futile because they don't exist in isolation; they pooled into a more extensive relationship full of interactions, and this was just one of many. They weren't futile because change happens gradually, incrementally, and slowly. They weren't futile because they still register on a subconscious level. They weren't futile because they were the Children of Israel, and he was going to save them and stand with them at Sinai. They weren't futile because the people needed to see someone show them that they were worth fighting for, and we need to recognize that as well.



We read about this ostensibly failed interaction, and it's blindingly obvious that although the words might not have landed perfectly, these efforts were anything but futile.

Nothing ever happens in a day. In the words of Steve Jobs, most overnight successes take a really long time.

God sent Moshe to talk to people when everyone knew it wouldn't change a thing, but this failed interaction goes on to form a part of a foundation that all future growth and progress can be built upon. It's not wasted breath; it's an investment in posterity.

Time and again, we expect ultimate salvation, a moment everything changes and turns around, and we get disappointed because the world doesn't work like that. God very deliberately sends Moshe on a mission he already knows he cannot possibly succeed at, highlighting to Moshe and to us that apparent failure and setbacks are not futile. God sends Moshe because humble beginnings and failed efforts are independently valuable, regardless of the outcome.

If you've clashed with someone in a relationship that matters to you, you know that you can't fix things with a good one-liner. No single idea or thought will make them suddenly understand, no light bulb will turn on that changes everything. Reality is far more modest than that; each kind word and positive interaction is a deposit into an account balance that barely seems to grow at the start. It's painfully slow, frustrating, and it doesn't look like progress; sometimes it even looks like a step backwards.

If you're stuck in trouble and can't hear a kind word, hold on. If you're trying to help someone who won't hear or see it, keep it up.

It wasn't futile then, it's not futile now.

Trading Taskmasters

4 minute read | Advanced

On Seder night, we celebrate the Jewish People's birth as a nation and liberation from slavery. The entire night explores the imperative value of freedom and teaches us that freedom is a mode of thinking under all circumstances; it is not handed to us, it is ours to claim only if we make that choice.

But are we really so free?

Quite arguably, did we not simply trade up for a better taskmaster, swapping service to Pharaoh for service to God?



The notion of swapping masters ignores a crucial distinction between negative liberty, the freedom from, and positive liberty, the freedom to. Negative liberty means freedom from restrictions placed on you by other people; positive liberty means freedom to control and direct your own life, to consciously make your own choices, create your own path and purpose, and shape your own identity in life.

Someone with negative liberty can do as they please, like an infinite vacation. The trouble with negative liberty is that it doesn't exist for long; we are invariably enslaved to someone or something, even if just our conscious habits and subconscious instincts. They may have a good time at first but will eventually become enslaved to some form of addiction, desire, or laziness. That's not being free; that's called being lost.

Discipline and freedom only seem to sit on opposite ends of the spectrum; they are tightly connected in fact. If you want freedom, the only way to get there is through discipline.

Everyone suffers from one of two pains; the pain of discipline or the pain of regret. The difference is discipline weighs ounces while regret weighs tons. Counterintuitively, life gets harder when you try to make it easy. Exercising is hard, but never moving makes life harder. Uncomfortable conversations are hard, but avoiding every conflict is harder. Mastering your craft is hard, but having no skills is harder. Easy has a cost.

Freedom worthy of admiration and respect requires positive liberty, taking responsibility for yourself by committing to an idea or purpose, such as a diet and exercise regime for fitness and good health. However difficult or forced, making these choices is actually the highest expression of freedom, and in the long run, you can only benefit.

The Midrash similarly suggests that not only can freedom be found in the service to God, but it is also the only way to ever be truly free. When the Torah says that God carved the Ten Commandments, the Midrash suggests we alternatively read it as liberation through the Ten Commandments – תְּרוּת עַל־הַלָּחָת / תְּרוּת עַל־הַלָּחָת. We earn freedom through the Torah's framework by assuming responsibility for our lives and destiny. It's an externally imposed responsibility, like Pharaoh, but the comparison stops there. The outcome of the Torah's responsibility is the gift of positive liberty, freeing us from slavery to our worst inclinations; resulting in humans that are more humane, kinder, and more compassionate.

The God that rescued the Jewish People from Egypt was the same God that had sent them there in the first place. It's not contrived salvation or engineered heroics because God is not gratuitously cruel. It wasn't Egypt that held the Jews; it was God holding the Jews in Egypt as foretold to Avraham, in response to Avraham's question how God could promise a destiny to his descendants if, at some point, they would inevitably deviate from Avraham's example. The Maharal explains God's answer to mean that the Egypt experience would permanently bind his descendants to the Creator regardless of their mistakes.



R' Shlomo Farhi teaches that God doesn't just save us from things that hurt us; however bitter the lesson might be to learn, the things that hurt us can also function as instruments of saving us from something, providing pathways to positive liberty. The Jewish People left Egypt with the hard-won experience God had promised Avraham, and with that experience accumulated, the ordeal was complete – בְּרַכְשׁ גְּדוּל –.

Yet the unspoken inverse of that notion is that if they'd had the experience all along, the ordeal would have been redundant and would never have happened. It was only because they had lost their way, forgetting who they were and where they had come from, that they suffered through centuries of slavery as a result. If they had stooped to pagan idolatry like anyone else, it only follows that they were vulnerable; the inescapable conclusion is that Pharaoh could have only ever have enslaved them so they could rediscover what they had lost! The hand that hurts is the same hand that serves to save – שְׁבִכְל דּוֹר וְדוֹר עוֹמְדִים עָלֵינוּ לְכַלּוֹתֵנוּ, וְהַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא מְצִילֵנוּ מִיָּדָם. However disturbing this lesson is, it is simultaneously deeply comforting, suggesting that all our pain has deep meaning and significance.

We never swapped service to Pharaoh for service to God; because we aren't slaves to God at all. God offers us positive liberty, the freedom to take control of our lives and realize our fundamental purpose in the universe. Accepting the responsibility of service to God may look forced, but we know we are the ultimate beneficiaries of our efforts because we can utilize our freedom to thrive, tapping into our highest and best selves and making our lives matter. God offers humans positive liberty, and through it, cosmic significance.

Our bodies feel pain in response to an injury; your nerves send millions of signals to your brain that something is wrong, hopefully prompting a reaction. Pain has a clearly defined purpose; the only incorrect response is to ignore it.

We shouldn't ignore the pain in our national or personal life, but we possess the freedom and spirit to elevate and transform that pain into meaning and purpose. There is cosmic significance to our hurt. It matters.

The God who heals is the same God who hurts; hurt is a pathway to healing, and compassion can overcome severity – שְׂמַאל דְּחֵה וְיָמִין מְקַרְבֵּת –.

We're never glad for the hurt, but we are free to make it count.

Quote of the Week

"If it costs you your peace, it is too expensive."

– Paulo Coelho



Thought of the Week

"Wisdom tells me I am nothing, love tells me I am everything. Between the two, my life flows."

– Nisargadatta Maharaj

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 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 **7 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.