

## **Shoftim 2023**

### **Self-Regulate**

< 1 minute read | Straightforward

As part of the functioning society the Torah seeks to create, the Torah requires us to have a judiciary to interpret the law, and an executive to apply it:

שִׁפְטִים וְשָׂרִים, תִּתֶּן-לָהֶם בְּכָל-שַׁעְרֶיךָ – You shall place judges and police within all your gates... (16:18)

As with many mitzvos, the Torah speaks to individuals here, and not the community. Does the Torah expect each of us to individually to create a roster of judges and a police force?

While the simple reading is about judges and police, it is not simply a law about the branches of government.

The Shelah instead reads it as Judaism's source for the principle of personal development and self-regulation. Building a great society starts with individuals. The mitzvah is literally given to you, in the second person possessive, because nobody else could possibly judge or police you in the way only you are uniquely able.

The Kotzker suggests that the mitzvah is literally to gatekeep the openings to our bodies, the sights, sounds, smells, and ideas we let in and out.

R' Shlomo Farhi notes that we pray every day for a return of the judges of old – הַשִּׁיבָה שׁוֹפְטֵינוּ כְּבָרָאשׁוּנָה – which on this reading, would mean a return to our youthful ideals.

R' Yisrael Salanter taught that our natural intuition is the only judge and policeman we ever need.

R' Jonathan Sacks explains that this is a microcosm of the Jewish People's mission. In our personal lives and in our communities, we have a duty to determine whether there is a gap between where we are and where we ought to be, then taking the necessary steps to bridge it.

Because if we're tuned in, we know what's wrong, and we know how to fix it too.



## Fit for a King

3 minute read | Straightforward

There's an interesting discussion about what the Torah's constitution might look like, and many famous scholars looked to the Torah as a source of political theory. One particular thread of that discussion is the role of a king. The Torah doesn't particularly advocate for monarchy, and imposes many constraints:

כִּי־תבא אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לָךְ וּירָשְׁתָּהּ וַיִּשְׁכַּתָּהּ בָּהּ וְאַמַּרְתָּ אֲשִׁימָה עָלַי מֶלֶךְ כְּכָל־הַגּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר סָבִיבְתַי: שׁוּם תַּשִּׁים עָלֶיךָ מֶלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בּוֹ מִקִּרְבֵּי תַּשִּׁים עָלֶיךָ מֶלֶךְ לֹא תוּכַל לָתֵת עָלֶיךָ אִישׁ נְכָרִי אֲשֶׁר לֹא־אֲחִיךָ הוּא: רַק לֹא־יִרְבֶּה־לוֹ סוּסִים וְלֹא־יָשִׁיב אֲתֵיכֶם מִצְרַיִמָה לְמַעַן הִרְבּוֹת סוּס וַיְהִי הָאָמַר לְכֶם לֹא תִסְפוּן לָשׁוּב בְּדָרֶךְ הַנֶּהָ עוֹד: וְלֹא יִרְבֶּה־לוֹ נָשִׁים וְלֹא יִסּוּר לְקַבּוֹ וְכֶסֶף וְזָהָב לֹא יִרְבֶּה־לוֹ מְאֹד: וְהָיָה כְּשִׁכַּתְוֹ עַל פֶּסֶס מִמְּלִכְתּוֹ וְכָתַב לוֹ אֶת־מִשְׁנֵה הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת עַל־סֵפֶר מִלְּפָנַי הַכְּתוּבִים הַלְוִיִּם: וְהָיְתָה עִמּוֹ וְקָרָא בּוֹ כָּל־יְמֵי חַיָּוֵהוּ לְמַעַן יִלְמַד לְיִרְאַה אֶת־יְהוָה אֱלֹהָיו לְשִׁמֹּר אֶת־כָּל־דְּבָרֵי הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת וְאֶת־הַחֻקִּים הָאֵלֶּה לַעֲשׂוֹתָם: – If, after you have entered the land that Hashem has assigned to you, taken possession of it and settled in it, you decide, “I want a king over me, like all the nations around me,” you shall be free to set a king over yourself, one chosen by Hashem. Be sure to select your king from your own people; you must not select a foreigner over you, one who is not your kin. Moreover, he shall not keep many horses... And he shall not have many wives, lest his heart go astray; nor shall he amass silver and gold to excess. When he is seated on his royal throne, he must write a copy of this Torah written for him on a scroll by the levitical priests. Thus he will not act haughtily toward his fellows or deviate from the Instruction to the right or to the left, to the end that he and his descendants may reign long in the midst of Israel. (18:14-20)

The Gemara notes that the king actually must write two Sifrei Torah; one that remains in the royal treasury, and another that he carries with him wherever he goes.

The Rambam explains that during a king's reign, he must write a Torah scroll for himself in addition to the scroll left to him in the treasury by his ancestors.

Even if the king inherits a treasury filled with beautiful Sifrei Torah from ancestors, the very act of writing the Torah scroll is a way of making the Torah, quite literally, one's own. The act of doing that writing becomes a powerful pedagogy through which the king comes to understand what his moral position must be.

In political theory, this is called the rule of law, that all persons, institutions, and entities are accountable to the same body of law. In real day to day life, laws matter only as far as they command the collective loyalty of those in power; it requires a governing class that cares about law and government and tradition, rather than personal power and gain. By making the king go through this exercise, the Torah hopes and envisions that a king will understand the gravity of his office.



The Torah’s perspective is that all men are just men – in the very beginning, the Torah says that humans are formed “in the image of God,” which R’ Jonathan Sacks teaches to mean as destroying a divine right to oppress others. It is political dynamite, from which we can learn about the sanctity of life, the dignity of individuals and human rights, the sovereignty of justice and the rule of law, free society, all because God bestows his image on everyone, not just kings and emperors. It follows that we would expect a Jewish conception of a king to look qualitatively different.

R’ Shlomo Farhi explains that the higher in stature and authority someone is, the closer scrutiny they can expect. Intuitively, a powerful person needs more humbling – not necessarily in a negative way, but more so that a successful leader is someone whose leadership exists to help his people.

Leadership is about being of service to others, not being served by others.

## Uncertain Futures

4 minute read | Straightforward

The Torah treats idolatry and pagan practices with extreme severity, condemning them repeatedly throughout the Tanach. In Moshe’s last address, he issues the same instruction to be weary of these foreign practices:

פי אתה בא אל-הארץ אשר-ה' אלהיך נתן לך לא-תלמד לעשות כתועבת הגוים ההם: לא-ימצא בך מעביר בנז-ובתו באש קסם קסמים מעונו ומנחש ומכשף: וחבר חקר ושאל אוב וידעני ודרש אלה-המתים: כ-יתועבת ה' כל-עשה אלה ובגלל התועבת האלה ה' אלהיך מוריש: When you enter the land that Hashem is giving you, you shall not learn to imitate the abominable practices of those nations. Let no one be found among you who sends his son or daughter to the fire, or who is an augur, a soothsayer, a diviner, a sorcerer, one who casts spells, or one who consults ghosts or familiar spirits, or one who inquires of the dead. For anyone who does such things is abhorrent to Hashem, and it is because of these abominable things that the Hashem is dispossessing them before you. You must be perfectly wholehearted with Hashem. (18:9-13)

While extremely difficult to reconcile with a modern understanding of how the world works, it would be obtuse to deny that a sizable portion of Jewish tradition incorporates magic and superstition as having some actual basis and realism – the book of Shmuel tells of an incident where years after the settlement of the Land of Israel, a Philistine army threatened the young state, and King Saul sought a witch out to consult with the ghostly spirit of the dead prophet Shmuel.



Be that as it may, there is a divergent rationalist school of thought more aligned with a modern understanding of the world, notably the Rambam, that does not treat these as genuine, but still equally forbidden.

Real or not, the Torah is explicit that seeking out future knowledge is taboo and, therefore, off-limits. Instead, we should embrace the future straightforwardly as it comes – תָּמִים תִּהְיֶה עִם הָאֱלֹהִים.

What’s so wrong about wanting to know the future?

R’ Yakov Hillel explains that someone seeking future knowledge yearns to eliminate doubt and uncertainty, which is antithetical to the human condition.

Humans hate uncertainty. It is stressful and makes us worry. Every day, we navigate over the shaky, uncertain, and constantly changing landscape of probabilities that lie before us.

We have natural pattern recognition abilities, which is why humans are prone to believe in magic and superstition. Doubt and uncertainty are fundamental and intrinsic to the human condition – we aren’t computer programs. Uncertainty is central to the Jewish conception of prophecy; counterintuitively, a prophet’s job is not to foretell an inevitable future – instead, their job is to warn people away from the path they are on. A prophet whose warning comes true has failed! The future is not set, which is also a central theme of the High Holy Days.

This is also the theme of Isaiah critique that is read before Tisha b’Av, where Isaiah calls his community to task, people who, instead of doing the work to alleviate poverty and suffering, and be good and kind to each other, would rather just slaughter a goat or two:

לְמָה-לִּי רַב-זִבְחֵיכֶם יֹאמֶר ה' שְׁבַעַתִּי עֲלוֹת אֵילִים וְחֶלֶב מְרִיאִים וְדָם פְּרִים וּכְבָשִׁים וְעֲתוּדִים לֹא חִפְצָתִי. כִּי תִבְאוּ לִרְאוֹת פָּנַי מִי-בִקְשׁוּ זֹאת מִיָּדְכֶם רֶמֶס הַצָּרִי. לֹא תוֹסִיפוּ הִבִּיא מִנְחַת-שָׂוֵא קִטְרֹת תוֹעֵבָה הִיא לִי חֹדֶשׁ וְשִׁבְתָּ קְרָא מִקְרָא לֹא-אוֹכֵל אֲנִי וְעֲצָרָה. הֲדַשִּׁיכֶם וּמוֹעֲדֵיכֶם שְׂנֵאָה נִפְשֵׁי הָיוּ עָלַי לְטָרַח נִלְאִיתִי נִשְׂאָ. וּבִפְרֹשְׁכֶם פִּפְיֶכֶם אֲעָלִים עֵינַי מִכֶּם גַּם כִּי-תִרְבוּ תִפְלֵה אֵינֶנִּי שִׁמְעֵ יְדֵיכֶם דְּמַיִם מְלֹאוּ. רַחֲצוּ הַיָּדַי וְהַיָּדַי וְהַיָּדַי – “What makes you think I want all your sacrifices?”, says Hashem. “I am stuffed with burnt offerings and ram sacrifices and cattle fats. I don’t need the blood of bulls, lambs and goats. When you come to worship me, who asked you to parade through my courts with all your ceremony? Stop bringing me your meaningless gifts; the incense of your offerings disgusts me!

“Your celebrations of Rosh Chodesh and Shabbos and your fast days, are all sinful and false. I want no more of your pious meetings! I hate your new moon celebrations and your annual festivals. They are a burden to me. I cannot stand them! When you raise your hands in prayer, I will not look. Though you might offer many prayers, I will not listen, because your hands are covered with the blood of innocents!

“Wash yourselves and become clean! Get your sins out of my sight. Give up your evil ways; learn to do good. Seek justice! Help the oppressed and vulnerable! Defend the cause of orphans! Fight for the rights of widows!” – (1:10-17)



It is normal to be scared of the future, but that fear can paralyze us from doing the work we need to do. By holding on to what we need from the future, we use shortcuts to hack the outcome.

Instead, the Torah advises us to be wholesome, to embrace the struggle the uncertainty and fear of the future straightforwardly as it comes – תָּמִים תִּהְיֶה עִם ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ.

Maybe there are religious hacks. But R' Yitzchak Berkowitz notes that people who are wholesome and straightforward understand that shortcuts are no substitute for the real deal.

The human enterprise is trial and error, courage, and risk. R' Shlomo Farhi explains that shortcuts are pitfalls – the bad and wrong ways to do things. We need to prepare for the future properly you can't hack your way into being a decent human – you can't ask for forgiveness before making amends; you can't lose weight sorting out your diet; you can't retire without saving.

When we are afraid of the future, there is something we want to avoid. Instead of avoiding the pain, confront it, put in the work, and take decisive action.

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## **An Eye for An Eye Redux**

5 minute read | Straightforward

One of the most bizarre and incomprehensible laws of the entire Torah was also one of the ancient world's most important laws – the law of retaliation; also called lex talionis:

עֵינַי תַּחַת עֵינָיו שֵׁן תַּחַת שֵׁן יָד תַּחַת יָד רֶגֶל תַּחַת רֶגֶל: – An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a hand for a hand, a foot for a foot. (21:24)

The law of retaliation isn't the Torah's innovation; it appears in other Ancient Near Eastern law codes that predate the text of the Torah, such as the Code of Hammurabi. All the same, it appears three times in the Torah, and its words are barbaric and cruel to modern eyes, easily dismissed as unworthy of humane civilization.

People who wish to express their opposition to forgiveness, concession, and compensation, insisting on retaliation of the most brutal and painful kind, will quote “An eye for an eye” as justification, conjuring a vision of hacked limbs and gouged eyes.

This law is alien and incomprehensible to us because we lack the necessary context; we fail to recognize its contemporary importance to early human civilization.

The human desire for revenge isn't petty and shallow. It stems from a basic instinct for fairness and self-defense that all creatures possess; and also from a deeply human place of respect and self-image. When a person is slighted, they self-righteously need to retaliate to restore balance. It makes sense.

The trouble is, balance is delicate and near impossible to restore, so far more often, people would escalate violence, and so early human societies endured endless cycles of vengeance and violence. In this ancient lawless world, revenge was a severe destabilizing force.

This is the context we are missing. In such a world, societies developed and imposed the law of retaliation as a cap and curb violence by prohibiting vigilante justice and disproportionate vengeance. An eye for an eye – that, and crucially, no more. It stops the cycle of escalation, and tempers, if not neuters, the human desire for retribution. Crucially, it stops feuds from being personal matters, subordinating revenge to law and justice by inserting the law between men, a key political theory called the state monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force.

R' Jonathan Sacks observes that the same rationale underlies the Torah's requirement to establish sanctuary cities. The Torah inserts laws between the avenger and the killer, and a court must give the order. Revenge is not personal, and it is sanctioned by society.

This was familiar to the Torah's original audience. We ought to reacquaint ourselves with this understanding – the law is not barbaric and primitive at all; it's essential to building a society.

Even more importantly, our Sages taught that these words are not literal, and instead, the remedy for all bodily injury is monetary compensation. The Torah forecloses compensation for murder – לא תקחו כופר לנפש רוצח. The fact the Torah chooses not to for bodily injuries necessarily means compensation is allowed. And since people are of different ages, different genders, and in different trades, with discrete strengths and weaknesses; mirroring the injury isn't a substitute at all, so paying compensation is the exclusive remedy, in a sharp application of the rule of law – there shall be only one law, equitable to all – משפט אחד יהיה לכם.

Before dismissing this as extremely warped apologetics, the overwhelming academic consensus is that no society practiced the law as it is written. Today, we readily understand that if we suffer bodily injury, we sue the perpetrators' insurance company, and the ancient world understood that tradeoff too.

How much money would the victim accept to forgo the satisfaction of seeing the assailant suffer the same injury? How much money would the assailant be willing to pay to keep his own eye? There is most certainly a price each would accept, and all that's left is to negotiate the settlement figure, which is where the court can step in. Even where the law is not literally carried out, the theoretical threat provides a valuable and perhaps even necessary perspective for justice in society.

It's vital to understand this as a microcosm for understanding the whole work of the Torah. There is a much broader point here about how we need to understand the context of the Torah to get it right, and we need the Oral Tradition to get it right as well. The text is contingent, to an extent, on the body of law that interprets and implements it.

Without one or the other, we are getting a two-dimensional look at the very best, or just plain wrong at worst. If we were pure Torah literalists, we would blind and maim each other and truly believe we are doing perfect like-for-like justice! After all, what more closely approximates the cost of losing an eye than taking an eye?! Doesn't it perfectly capture balance, precision, and proportionality elegantly? It holds before us the tantalizing possibility of getting divinely sanctioned justice exactly right!

But we'd be dead wrong. Taking an eye for an eye doesn't fix anything; it just breaks more things.

The original purpose of the law of retaliation was to limit or even eliminate revenge by revising the underlying concept of justice. Justice was no longer obtained by personal revenge but by proportionate punishment of the offender in the form of compensation enforced by the state. While not comprehensive, perhaps this overview can help us look at something that seemed so alien, just a bit more knowingly.

There's a valuable lesson here.

The literal reading of *lex talionis* is a vindictive punishment that seeks pure cold justice to mirror the victim's pain and perhaps serve as a deterrent.

With our new understanding, compensation is not punitive at all – it's restitutive and helps correct bad behavior. You broke something or caused someone else pain, and now you need to fix it – and you don't have to maim yourself to make it right!

R' Shlomo Farhi notes that our sages taught a form of stand your ground doctrine; when someone is coming to kill you, you can use deadly force and kill them first. But even that is tempered with a caveat that if you have the ability to neutralize them without killing them, you aren't permitted to use deadly force. De facto, it's fully conceivable that in the heat of the moment, there is a split-second decision and you can't afford to be precise, but de jure, the point stands that even when force is authorized, there is no free pass. Our sages require scholars to stand up for themselves in the way a snake does; snakes have no sense of taste or smell, and a scholar's self-defense must be free of petty vindictiveness – תלמיד חכם שאינו נוקם ונוטר כנהש, אינו תלמיד חכם.

There is nothing outdated about the law of retaliation. It's as timely as ever because we all break things. We hurt others, and sometimes we hurt ourselves too. Our Sages urge us to remember that one broken thing is bad, and two broken things are worse. We can't fix what is broken by adding more pain and hope to heal.



Taking it further, there is a wider lesson here as well.

In seeking justice for ourselves, we needn't go overboard by crushing our enemies and hearing the lamentations of their women. We can and should protect ourselves and our assets, but we needn't punish our adversaries mercilessly such that they never cross us again. In a negotiation, don't squash the other side just because you can. It's about making it right, not winning. Channeling the law of retaliation, don't escalate. Think in terms of restitution, not retribution.

Do all you must, sure, but don't do all you could.

## Randomness Redux

8 minute read | Advanced

The Purim story unfolded over a protracted period, but we celebrate the holiday on the fourteenth of Adar. The holiday is unusual in the sense that, with most holidays, an event happens on a random date, and we celebrate the date to mark the anniversary of the event; the date is incidental to the event. That's not quite the case with Purim, whose story revolves around a specific date; the events are almost incidental to the date.

The antagonist, Haman, decided to mandate a legal genocide, a one-day purge against the Jewish People. He had it all figured out; he'd bribe the king, draft the law, and execute it with the king's seal. That's bad, he's bad; it's easy to understand. But in a puzzling turn of events, he wasn't sure about the effective date for his new law, so he cast a lottery to determine the right day and settled on the fourteenth of Adar – על־כֵּן קָרָאוּ לַיָּמִים הָאֵלֶּה פּוּרִים עַל־שֵׁם הַפּוּר.

Casting lots is distantly removed from our primary experience, but it is a core feature of the story.

Why did Haman cast a lottery?

Today, we understand that a lottery applies randomness to confound any notion of certainty or predictability. When a process can generate all outcomes with equal probability, we will perceive the resulting outcome of that uncertainty as fair. The Torah uses this randomizing methodology to select goats for sacrifice on Yom Kippur and to allocate the tribal lands of Israel.

Today, we would use a coin toss as a conventionally reasonable way to randomly determine two equal choices, heads or tails. It's intuitive, it's fair, it makes sense, and there's nothing to argue about – בְּחֵיק – יוּטֵל אֶת־הַגּוּרָל וְמָה' פְּלִי־מִשְׁפָּטוֹ / מְדַנְּגִים יִשְׁבִּית הַגּוּרָל וּבֵין עֲצוּמִים יִפְרִיד.





Either goat can be the scapegoat; it doesn't matter at all. Which portion of land goes to which tribe doesn't matter. It could be any, which is the point; that's why it's fair. R' Aaron Lopiansky points out that the division of the Land of Israel marks the transition from divine intervention to human-driven action. Although the outcome of the lottery isn't explicitly magical, the outcome will have a spiritual and religious significance, proving that randomness and probability are part of the divine toolkit as well.

Governments don't assign effective dates to legislation randomly. Usually, the effective date of a law is whenever it becomes relevant – it would be relevant to ban a terror group overnight; it would only be appropriate change the tax code years in advance so that everyone has adequate notice.

Unlike the tax code, genocide doesn't have a relevant date. Genocide this week is the same as genocide next summer. There isn't a fairness question that requires randomness to resolve; any given date is already equally random and fair. Haman didn't need a lottery for fair selection or random scheduling.

But that's not the only way the ancients used lotteries.

Ancient civilizations would also cast lots as cleromancy, a form of divination where they would attribute Divine Providence to the outcome – השגחה פרטית. By removing human choice and influence over what course of action to take – so the thinking went – destiny and fate could reveal themselves. The Torah uses this form of lottery to expose a looter, Achan, who illegally claimed spoils in the Book of Joshua; to reveal that Jonathan had violated Saul's command to fast; and by Jonah's Gentile shipmates to identify that the terrible storm was his fault.

Cleromancy, the second form of lottery, has nothing to do with fairness or randomness. It's about ascribing not just certainty but divine significance to an outcome, treating it as the Divine Will, and proceeding accordingly. Achan was the guilty looter and no one else; Jonathan had broken the vow, and not someone else; Jonah, and not some other sailor or passenger, was responsible for the storm. These individuals faced real consequences in the physical world due to the perception of their divinely ordained guilt through cleromancy.

The Torah explicitly forbids utilizing this second form of lottery multiple times in the strongest terms – לא תנחשו ולא תעונו / לא ימצא בך מעביר בגורבתו באש קסם קסמים מעונו ומנחש ומכשף... פִּי־תוֹעֵבֶת ה' כִּלְעֹשֶׂה אֵלֶּה וּבְגִלְלָהּ – הַתוֹעֵבֶת הָאֵלֶּה ה' אֵלֶּקֶיךָ מוֹרִישׁ אוֹתָם מִפְּנֵיךָ... תָּמִים תִּהְיֶה עִם ה' אֵלֶּקֶיךָ.

Whether magic is real and that's how it works doesn't matter; what matters is that people ascribe divine significance to cleromancy and act accordingly – that's the kind of superstition the Torah takes significant issue with.

Far more sinister, this is the kind of lottery Haman cast; cleromancy, seeking divine approval for his genocide. As Rashi notes, Haman wasn't simply consulting his sorcery for which moment to start; but which moment he might succeed. The Purim holiday is named for Haman's lottery of cleromancy and



divination, his attempt to predict a divinely sanctioned moment for his plot, and arguably, his attempt to abdicate any choice or responsibility in the matter.

The entire story revolves around the comical reversal of Haman's attempt at divination to reduce his uncertainty; God's actual Will guides all outcomes and confounds Haman at every turn. The monstrous and powerful Haman is quickly diminished from the dizzying heights of palace society, helplessly humiliated into a weak and wretched joke on the way down to a shameful death, to be publicly derided and laughed at for all time by the children of history.

The Purim story contains a powerful and timeless moral, that God is concealed in the story but revealed in the outcomes. God alone controls the power of outcomes; the small, improbable outcomes that stack to shape the history and reality we know are one of God's most decisive and signature capabilities – קונה הכל. We can only hope to recognize God's Hand retroactively in hindsight at best and never prospectively, as Haman attempted.

God operates invisibly in the background, orchestrating everything with the power of outcomes; Haman didn't stand a chance, and we know from history that the bad guys never have a chance either – אֵלֹהִים שֶׁבְּכֹל דּוֹר וָדוֹר עוֹמְדִים עָלֵינוּ לְכַלּוֹתֵנוּ, וְהַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא מְצִילֵנוּ מִיָּדָם.

We live in a world of possibilities, a probabilistic world, not a magical one. Probability distributions accurately describe our universe and predict the expected outcomes of all possible values; it is the language God speaks to us every day. We can predict how likely something is to happen, but we can only make that prediction in the abstract because God alone has the power of outcomes – הכל בידי שמים.

When Mordechai encourages Esther to go to the king and make her case to save her people, Esther declines initially because she is afraid – and she should be! She is worried because she correctly understands that going to the king uninvited is a gross breach of palace protocol and puts her life in danger.

Mordechai can't tell her that she's wrong or even that she will be fine. He can't say that because he can't possibly know that – or he would say so! Esther is correct about the risk and uncertainty of this proposed course of action, and all Mordechai can say is that someone has to step up, and it might as well be her, but if she won't, someone else will; which is to say that she can choose to do her part, but must leave the rest to God's power of outcomes.

Even once convinced to accept her fate and role, Esther asks Mordechai to have the Jewish People fast and pray for her success. She wasn't sure it would work, and she didn't think she would make it through; she was terrified, and Mordechai couldn't correct or reassure her.

We are probably overly familiar with the story, too numb for Esther's last words to Mordechai to chill our blood the way they deserve – “and if I die, I die.”

Whereas Haman abdicates choice and responsibility to his magical lottery, Esther bravely and deliberately chooses to advocate for her people and courageously resolves to stand before the king, not because she knows she will succeed, but because it is the right thing to do.

Where Haman is a coward who consults a lottery out of fear of failure, Esther puts her best foot forward and takes a chance; the outcome of her last stand no longer matters to her because she has accepted that God alone has the power of outcomes. If she dies, she dies, and salvation must come from somewhere else. Her willingness to give her life to this cause is a moral victory that places her in our pantheon of greats as a heroine worthy of the highest honors.

God alone can see all ends, and God alone can determine ultimate destiny and fate; all we have to decide is what to do with the time and opportunities we are given. Esther is only responsible for her choice to make her stand; she is not responsible for the outcome, which is random, which is to say, in God's hands alone. This does not remove the significance of her choice; it redeems it. Mordechai and Esther's determination to do all they could while depending on and hoping for God's power of outcomes is a complete and total inversion of Haman's attempt to control or force the outcome; their immortal hope stands before us forever – ותקוותם לכל דור ודור.

The Purim story is filled with chance and coincidental events and encounters, like Mordechai foiling an assassination attempt, leading to outcomes of such significance that it is plain to readers that God orchestrated them. God's Hand is not directly perceptible to Mordechai and Esther; but we can see it in lucky events that weave the story together.

Appearances are deceptive, and what you see is not always what you get – our inputs do not always lead to the outcomes we expect or predict, for better and for worse; maybe that's why we dress up in silly costumes and disguises, hiding behind masks. We can get drunk and be vulnerable; we're safe in God's hands.

Chance and probability are the undercurrents of the entire story; they're what the holiday is named for. Purim is the holiday that can never die, and even the somber day of Yom Kippur is but a reflection of Purim. Perhaps everything is like Purim – it looks random, but it's not.

While there is doubt that is a function of concealment – הסתר – the notion of uncertainty itself is a fundamental feature of existence and reality, and it has to be that way. We live within the constraints of a dimension called time – we can only ever exist in the present moment, with no access to the past or future. We can recall the past and forecast and prepare for the future, but that's the best we can do; because uncertainty itself is an iron law of reality and all existence that won't change even in the utopian age of Mashiach.

Haman is descended from Amalek; who not only grapple with doubt and uncertainty but are numerically equivalent, which is to say inextricably linked – עמלק / ספק. But instead of their mistake of reaching into the future in an attempt to dispel uncertainty, we can transform their doubt. The doubt



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doesn't transform into something else, but like Esther, who learned to act within uncertainty, we can find joy amidst the uncertainties of life as well; satisfaction is the same word as uncertainty if we only look at it differently – סיפוק / ספק.

We believe in God, and God runs the show. But even though Haman can't hurt us, it sure seems like he can; when it looks like people are in danger, we have no choice but to act accordingly. When you face mortal danger, that's scary, and you have to respond. When Haman's plan went public, they correctly recognized it as an imminent catastrophe! No one in the story thought that they just needed to strengthen their faith, that they just needed to trust God to do His thing and sort it all out, and that everything was going to be okay.

Although you don't control the outcome, you must act as if you can do something, like what you do matters, because that's the only thing within your power to do.

If that sounds like our life is theatrics, maybe that's kind of how it is! Our Sages suggest that the Jews were never even in danger; God put on a show for them like they'd put on a show in participating in the feast at the story's outset – לא עשו אלא לפנים אף הקב"ה לא עשה עמהן אלא לפנים.

In the reality we inhabit, playing along with the theatre is all we can do. If you have a test tomorrow, you'd better study and make sure you know the material well. Sure, God runs the world, but the probability distributions conclusively demonstrate that people who know the material usually pass; people who don't study typically fail. You might pass or fail, and the test might never ultimately matter in the fullness of your life as it unfolds.

But you won't ever know that sitting in the room, staring at the paper, scratching your head, searching for the answer.

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*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](mailto: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. My business, Hendon Advisors, allows me to dedicate time to

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Subscriptions and feedback: [Neli@TorahRedux.com](mailto:Neli@TorahRedux.com)



## **TorahRedux**

*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.