

Bereishis 2023

Never Enough

4 minute read | Straightforward

Most humans born in the past several thousand years have heard of Moshe; he is rightly one of the most recognized figures in human history.

Today, we might reasonably say that a strange burning bush is no basis for a system of government and that supreme executive power ought to derive from a mandate from the masses – although that's not the worldview of the Torah's story. But to the extent there's some truth to that, we might expect Moshe's glittering array of accomplishments would eventually win some popular support.

He stood up to Pharaoh and the Egyptian empire and won. He walked a generation of enslaved people into freedom, led them through a suddenly dry ocean, gathered them at Sinai, generating magic food and water along the barren desert waste, among other significant and unparalleled achievements.

And still, the people complained at every turn, resisting him every step of the way.

One particular time, the infamous Korach raised a formidable following and led an attempted coup and insurrection to supplant and usurp his cousin Moshe:

וַיִּקְהֻלוּ עַל־מֹשֶׁה וְעַל־אַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם רַב־לָכֶם כִּי כָל־הָעֵדָה בְּלָמָּה קִדְּשִׁים וּבַתְּוֹכֶם הוּא וּמִדּוּעַ תִּתְנַשְּׂאוּ עַל־קְהֵל ה' – They combined against Moshe and Aaron and said to them, “You have gone too far! All the community are holy, all of them! God is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above God’s congregation?” (16:3)

Korach directly paraphrases God’s directive at Sinai to be a nation of holy people – וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ־לִי מִמְּקַלְתָּם כֹּהֲנִים וְגוֹי קִדּוֹשׁ / כָּל־הָעֵדָה בְּלָמָּה קִדְּשִׁים.

This was a grave challenge and threat to Moshe; as one famous quote put it, when you come at the king, you best not miss. Moshe fully understood the severity of the threat and responded rhetorically:

הַמַּעֲט מִכֶּם כִּי־הִבְדִּיל אֱלֹקֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶתְכֶם מֵעַדְת יִשְׂרָאֵל לְהַקְרִיב אֶתְכֶם אֵלָיו לַעֲבֹד אֶת־עֲבֹדַת מִשְׁכַּן הוּא וְלַעֲמֹד לִפְנֵי הָעֵדָה לְשִׂרְתָּם: וַיִּקְרַב אֶתְּךָ וְאֶת־כָּל־אֶחָיו בְּנֵי־לֵוִי אֶתְךָ וְאֶת־כָּל־אֶחָיו בְּנֵי־לֵוִי אֶתְךָ וְאֶת־כָּל־אֶחָיו בְּנֵי־לֵוִי אֶתְךָ – “Is it not enough for you that the God of Israel has set you apart from the community of Israel and given you direct access, to perform the duties of God’s Tabernacle and to minister to the community and serve them? Now that God has advanced you and all your fellow Levites with you, do you seek the priesthood too?!” (16:9,10)



But Moshe’s rhetoric appears to fall quite flat. There is no challenge or rebuttal to what Korach has claimed, no counter, checkmate, or riposte. It is only a restatement!

So when Moshe accuses him of wanting to be part of the priesthood – וּבְקִשְׁתֶּם גַּם־כֹּהֲנִים – it’s hard to see how that would give Korach a moment’s pause. Korach would simply say yes, precisely!

Where is Moshe’s winning argument?

The Shem Mi’Shmuel explains that Moshe’s accusation towards Korach was about how self-serving his coup was. Moshe’s rhetoric pierces through Korach’s claim of shared holiness; because, true as it might be, Korach’s words are empty and self-serving. God wants people dedicated to God’s purposes; Korach was out for himself – for power and influence, personal gain, and honor – תְּהִיוּ־לִי / בְּקִשְׁתֶּם.

Moshe’s entire story prominently features the enormous personal cost and self-sacrifice required to lead and serve his people faithfully. Ahron’s entire story was about connecting people with the divine and closer to each other. Korach’s accusation of overstepping – רַב־לֶקֶם – rings hollow; Moshe’s accusation of Korach self-serving rings true – בְּקִשְׁתֶּם.

But perhaps there’s more to Moshe’s retort.

Our sages associate Korach with another famous villain – Haman.

Both were fabulously wealthy; our sages say they were two of the richest men in the world.

Both were highly influential; Haman was second only to the king, and Korach was in the highest tier as well. While Moshe and Ahron had the most visible roles, Korach and the whole family of Levi had critical and desirable roles in the new Jewish religion – הַבְּדִיל אֱלֹקֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶתְכֶם מֵעַד תִּשְׂרָאֵל לְהַקְרִיב אֶתְכֶם אֵלָיו – לְעַבֵּד אֶת־עַבְדֹת מִשְׁכַּן הַיְלָל וְלַעֲמֹד לִפְנֵי הַעֲדָה לְשָׂרְתָם.

But with all Haman’s influence, prestige, power, and wealth, it wasn’t worthwhile to him without one thing:

– וְכִלְיוֹהַ אֵינְנו שׁוֹהֵ לִי בְּכָל־עֵת אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי רֹאֶה אֶת־מֵרְדֵּכַי הַיְהוּדִי יוֹשֵׁב בְּשַׁעַר הַמְּלָךְ: “Yet all this means nothing to me every time I see that Jew Mordechai sitting in the palace gate!”

Perhaps the rhetoric in Moshe’s reply to Korach is similar – הֲמַעֲט מִכֶּם – is everything Korach already has so trivial? Are all the duties, honors, and privileges of the Mishkan still not enough?

Korach craves the one thing out of reach, the priesthood, without which everything counts for naught. Haman desires the one thing out of reach, Mordechai’s submission, without which everything counts for naught. Not only do they take their blessings for granted, they outright trivialize, discount, and devalue everything they have – הֲמַעֲט מִכֶּם.



TorahRedux

What's more, our sages note that the Torah refers to Haman in the story of Adam and Eve, hinted in God's language to Adam asking if they ate from the Tree of Knowledge, which can be read as an oblique allusion to Haman – *הָמָן / הַמִּזְהָרִים אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתִי לְבַלְתִּי אֶכְלֶם-מִמֶּנּוּ אֶכְלֶתָּ*.

Dayan Chanoch Ehrentreu observes that Adam and Eve's mistake is the same color. God creates the entire universe for them; all of Creation is at their disposal in the palm of their hand. But they crave the one thing out of reach, one tree they can't eat from, without which everything falls stale and flat.

It's the same mistake as Korach and Haman, a consistent and recurring mistake humans make from the beginning.

While there is plenty of room for healthy ambition and aspirations for tomorrow, you must still value and appreciate where you stand today; otherwise, what's it all worth? While you can say you appreciate your blessings, your actions may indicate otherwise.

Gratitude and its inverse form, taking things for granted, are recursive throughout the Torah, consistently one of its core themes and a leading indicator of prosperity or disaster. Korach, Haman, and Adam and Eve all suffered severe punishment for taking their blessings for granted – they lost everything, and everything quickly turned to nothing.

They say you don't know what you've got until it's gone, but sometimes you do know what you have; you just never think you'll lose it while you chase the next thing.

Appreciate what you have, and who loves and cares for you. Don't take the people or things in your life for granted, not just because nothing lasts forever – but because, as Moshe said, is it not enough?

Regulations Redux

4 minute read | Intermediate

Speed limits, traffic lights, parking meters, building codes, dress codes... it's easy to see rules as restrictive forces in our lives, reducing individual freedom and personal choice.

The Torah is brimming with laws and rules, so it's a critique one can aim at Judaism with some merit and one that has long been raised by seekers.

There are so many rules, and they stack up fast! Eat now, fast then, do this, don't do that, and it goes on.



Why can't we just do what we want?

The opening story of Creation about the dawn of humanity centers around the imposition of a rule – don't eat from this tree, and humanity's unwillingness to follow the rule – they did it anyway.

There's a plausible reading here where God is cruel and tantalizing, teasing His creatures by pointing at the beautiful tree they are forbidden to enjoy; the language of prohibition and denial is right there, and it identifies God as the maker and enforcer of a system with arbitrary rules that humans are destined to fail.

But the story that follows about Noah and the Flood is a story about what happens in a world with no rules – total anarchy and chaos, and ultimately, the collapse of civilization. When everyone pillages and plunders, you have barbaric savages. Noah and the Flood, we see a world without rules, which leads to chaos and the collapse of civilization.

No serious person believes that radical anarchy would be sustainable, a total free for all where Darwinist principles of survival of the fittest govern the day. Doing anything you want isn't a utopian dream; it's a dystopian nightmare. Every human society at all times in all places has understood that humans need rules and norms; ancient and primitive societies had rules and norms we might object to, but they had rules and norms just the same. The existence of rules and norms is a foundation of human society – no one gets to do whatever they want.

Rules form boundaries that enable and facilitate safe human relations by asserting how to interact, preventing infringement on others or abuse or depletion of a thing. Rules are a basic civic requirement.

Beyond the philosophical, this extends to the essential nature of reality; our universe is a universe of rules, built and run according to rules, the laws of physics that govern energy and matter.

The religious aspect of doing whatever we want is based on the notion that observant Jews are missing out. Sure, there are many things observant Jews can't do or enjoy – bacon, cheeseburgers, lobster, and pepperoni are allegedly some of the big ones.

Yet the Midrash teaches that it is wrong to believe that the Creator denies or prohibits us from the joys of life in any way. Rather, the Torah asks us just to regulate our instincts and stop them from running wild in order to maintain balance in our lives, from greed, hunger, and revenge, to tribal loyalty and sexuality.

Humans break when overindulged – people everywhere abuse and hurt, cheat and steal, get obese and sick, and tirelessly waste years of life on sexual pursuits. These negative impacts aren't the product of liberty; they're different forms of addiction and brokenness.



TorahRedux

Like all cultures and societies, the Torah has lots of rules. And like all cultures and societies, some make more sense than others.

But like all rules and laws, they keep us safe and stop us from getting out of control. They help regulate our enjoyment of life; they enable everything else.

The laws of sexuality regulate that family relationships are inappropriate if combined with sexuality.

The laws of Shabbos are endless; you learn something new every time you learn the laws of Shabbos. But the existence of Shabbos changes and elevates how we experience time – it's not Saturday, a day off work, it's Shabbos! Moreover, Shabbos has kept generations of families and Jewish communities eating, singing, and praying together for life.

The Torah permits a carnivorous diet, which could reasonably be construed as unethical; it asks us to limit our diet to animals with certain features that must be slaughtered humanely. If the Creator is the gatekeeper of Creation, it's not obvious that we should be able to eat living creatures at all! But otherwise, the Torah allows us to enjoy the vast majority of human cuisine prepared in accordance with our culture.

What's more, when taken together, the rules of kosher keep the Jewish People distinct and separate from the world. They elevate the most basic instinct to consume into a religious act, saturated with meaning and purpose. As the Chasam Sofer notes, the kosher laws open with what Jews can eat, the permission, not the prohibition.

As the Meshech Chochma notes, the Creation story isn't about a negative restriction on a tree; it's about a positive command to eat literally everything else in Creation and fill the world with people, broad and permissive, perhaps even indulgent and hedonistic, with one caveat.

The Creator sanctifies human desire with the very first command – the directive to eat and procreate suggests that even our most basic instincts serve God's purposes. Although there's a caveat, even several, the Torah's claim is that God is the gatekeeper of that permission; that's what "Creator" means. If we accept the premise of a Creator, why would we feel entitled to the entire universe?

Beyond the aspect of a legal obligation, the fact that Jews observe a rule or practice makes it a cultural norm, unspoken but socially agreed on, and therefore sanctified by the collective consciousness of all Jewish People.

The Torah has lots of rules and laws. But those laws come from the Creator of Genesis; the God who creates life, loves life, commands life to thrive, and wants that life to love and enjoy.

We do this thing, we don't do that thing. No one gets to do whatever they want, that's not how the world works. We live in societies built on the rule of law, in a rule-based universe.



Rules aren't so terrible.

The Pelagian Heresy

4 minute read | Straightforward

A substantial chunk of humans who have ever lived are familiar with the Adam and Eve story, about the emergence of humans and human consciousness out of primordial space and time.

The nature of the kind of story it is lends itself to a plethora of explanations and interpretations; the motifs and concepts evoked by its imagery are incredibly powerful and convey deep meaning.

Consider just one line of interpretation. After Adam ate the fruit, the original sin – what changed?

It is hard to overstate how enormously consequential both the question and answer are.

In Christianity, the dominant Augustine school teaches that man's original sin fundamentally corrupted the state of humanity from a state of innocent obedience to God to a state of guilty disobedience, the fall of man. Humans are bad and sinful, and humans need God's grace to be redeemed. Humans are born in a state of sin, and there is a straight line from this interpretation to the belief that God sent Jesus to die to atone for humanity's sinful condition.

To Judaism, the Augustine theory is untenable and poses insurmountable theological problems, and so it is critically essential to reject it entirely and understand what our point of departure is.

If a human is fundamentally sinful or evil by nature, then not only is sin inevitable, but the idea of religion or morality is a cruel joke. It turns God into a grotesque caricature – how could a just and fair God punish us for sinning if doing right is simply beyond our power? If humans can't choose to be good, there's no free will and no reward or punishment. If we can't choose, our actions have no value as we don't control them. If you are fundamentally bad, then it's not your fault because being good is impossible. Interestingly, a Christian theologian named Pelagius noted these objections and was excommunicated as an arch-heretic for well over a thousand years.

The proper Jewish perspective is that humans are untainted by original sin and freely choose between good and evil. The idea of free choice underpins all the laws and stories of the entire Torah. Arguably, it underpins the whole idea of creation – as much as the almighty God could want anything from an as puny thing as a human, what could we even do for God if we can't choose?



More fundamentally, the idea that humans are bad and sinful in a perpetual state of evil that is somehow separate from God or God's master plan is a form of dualism. Dualism is the belief in two opposed powers, which borders on idolatry, contrasted with monotheism, the belief in one singular power.

As R' Jonathan Sacks teaches, dualistic thinking is immature and dangerous because it means all bad things are caused by something God hates, or the enemy of God, or Satan. In ourselves, it causes terrible and unwarranted guilt and shame, and in societies, it causes fractious rifts among people, who see each other as the enemy and the other.

R' Shimon Bar Yochai suggested that since God wanted to give the Torah to humans, God might have created humans with two mouths; one for words of Torah and holiness and one for talking and eating. The implied premise of the question is that perhaps dualism is the correct view, and we ought to protect good from being tainted by evil. Yet we know we only have one mouth for all the good and bad, because dualism is the wrong way to look at the world; that's just not how things work.

We're not supposed to be angels – God isn't short of them and doesn't need our help making more. We might not be much, but we're precisely what we're supposed to be. Maybe we have an aspect or inclination to do the wrong thing sometimes or perhaps often – *יִצָר לֵב הָאָדָם רַע מִנְעֻרָיו*. But it's not that we are essentially and intrinsically bad; it's still just an inclination – a *יִצָר*.

This is arguably the point of the flood story, which begins and ends with God lamenting how bad people can be. It's not that humans stopped being bad; it's that God recognizes that human badness is inseparable from the other things God wants from us. We can learn to resist and even overcome this inclination, which is the entire point of creation, Judaism, and the Torah.

One of the most influential ideas in Judaism, mentioned in the book of Job and popularized by the Baal Shem Tov, is the idea that our souls are a small fragment of godliness, and God as well in some sense – *חֵלֶק אֱלֹהִים מִמֶּעַל*. This motif is formidable – not only is God a piece of us, but equally, we are a piece of God.

There is a part of the soul, whatever it may be, that is fundamentally pure and incorruptible – *אֵלֶּהִי, בְּנִשְׁמָה שְׂנֵיתָהּ בִּי טְהוֹרָה הִיא*.

Adam sinned, sin exists, and we make mistakes. But it's not that we are bad because of dualism; it's because of the duality of all things. What changed wasn't that Adam became bad, but in eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, he became more knowledgeable and aware of good and evil, of guilt and consequences.

There is a little bit of something in everything. In the good, there is some bad, and in the bad, there is some good. There is fullness in the emptiness, sadness in the happiness. They are complementary parts of a reciprocal interaction that are present in all things, including ourselves.



We take the good with the bad.

Language Redux

4 minute read | Straightforward

Humans are the apex predator on Earth.

We share this planet with thousands of species and trillions of organisms, and none but humans carry a lasting multi-generational record of knowledge of any obvious consequence. And yet, a feral human being left alone in the woods from birth to death kept separate and alive, would be not much more than an ape; our knowledge isn't because humans are smart.

It's because we speak – מְדַבֵּר.

We communicate and cooperate with others through language, giving us a formidable advantage in forming groups, sharing information, and pooling workloads and specializations. Language is the mechanism by which the aggregated knowledge of human culture is transmitted, actualizing our intelligence and self-awareness, transcending separate biological organisms, and becoming one informational organism. With language, we have formed societies and built civilizations; developed science and medicine, literature and philosophy.

With language, knowledge does not fade; we can learn from the experiences of others. Without learning everything from scratch, we can use an existing knowledge base built by others to learn new things and make incrementally progressive discoveries. As one writer put it, a reader lives a thousand lives before he dies; the man who never reads lives only once.

Language doesn't just affect how we relate to each other; it affects how we relate to ourselves. We make important decisions based on thoughts and feelings influenced by words on a page or conversations with others. It has been said that with one glance at a book, you can hear the voice of another person – perhaps someone gone for millennia – speaking across the ages clearly and directly in your mind.

Considering the formidable power of communication, it follows that the Torah holds it in the highest esteem; because language is magical. Indeed, the fabric of Creation is woven with words:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים, יְהִי אוֹר; וַיְהִי-אוֹר (1:3) – God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.



The Hebrew root word for “thing” and “word” is identical – דָּבַר / דְּבַר. R’ Moshe Shapiro notes that for God – and people of integrity! – there is no distinction; giving your word creates a new reality, and a word becomes a thing. R’ Shlomo Farhi points out the obvious destruction that ensues from saying one thing but meaning and doing something else entirely.

R’ Jonathan Sacks notes that humans use language to create things as well. The notion of a contract or agreement is a performative utterance – things that people say to create something that wasn’t there before; a relationship of mutual commitment between people, created through speech. Whether it’s God giving us the Torah or a husband marrying his wife, relationships are fundamental to Judaism. We can only build relationships and civilizations with each other when we can make commitments through language.

Recognizing the influential hold language has over us, the Torah emphasizes an abundance of caution and heavily regulates how we use language: the laws of gossip and the metzora; and the incident where Miriam and Ahron challenged Moshe; among others. Even the Torah’s choice of words about the animals that boarded the Ark is careful and measured:

מִכָּל הַבְּהֵמָה הַטְּהוֹרָה, תִּקַּח-לָךְ שִׁבְעָה וְשִׁבְעָה-אִישׁ וְאִשְׁתּוֹ; וּמִן-הַבְּהֵמָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא טְהוֹרָה הוּא, שְׁנַיִם-אִישׁ וְאִשְׁתּוֹ – Of every clean creature, take seven and seven, each with their mate; and of the creatures that are not clean two, each with their mate. (7:2)

The Gemara notes that instead of using the more accurate and concise expression of “impure,” the Torah utilizes extra ink and space to articulate itself more positively – “that are not clean” – אֲשֶׁר לֹא טְהוֹרָה הוּא. While possibly hyperbolic, the Lubavitcher Rebbe would refer to death as “the opposite of life”; and hospital infirmaries as “places of healing.”

The Torah cautions us of the power of language repeatedly in more general settings:

לֹא-תִלְךָ רֵכִיל בְּעַמִּיךָ, לֹא תַעֲמֹד עַל-דַּם רֵעֶךָ: אֲנִי, ה' – Do not allow a gossip to mingle among the people; do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor: I am Hashem. (19:16)

The Torah instructs us broadly not to hurt, humiliate, deceive, or cause another person any emotional distress:

וְלֹא תוֹנוּ אִישׁ אֶת-עֲמִיתוֹ, וְיִרְאַתָּ מֵאֱלֹהֶיךָ: כִּי אֲנִי ה', אֱלֹהֵיכֶם – Do not wrong one another; instead, you should fear your God; for I am Hashem. (25:27)

Interestingly, both these laws end with “I am Hashem” – evoking the concept of emulating what God does; which suggests that just as God constructively uses language to create – שֶׁהַכֹּל נִהְיָ בְּדַבָּרוֹ – so must we – אֲנִי ה'. The Lubavitcher Rebbe taught that as much as God creates with words, so do humans.



TorahRedux

The Gemara teaches that verbal abuse is arguably worse than theft; you can never take back your words, but at least a thief can return the money!

The idea that language influences and impacts the world around us is the foundation of the laws of vows, which are significant enough that we open the Yom Kippur services at Kol Nidrei by addressing them.

Our sages praise people whose words God concurs with, one of which is the language of repentance. Words have the power to activate a force that predates Creation; Moshe intercedes on behalf of the Jewish People for the calamitous Golden Calf, and God forgives them specifically because Moshe asked – וַיֹּאמֶר ה' סְלִחָתִי כִּדְבָרְךָ –

Of course, one major caveat to harmful speech is intent. If sharing negative information has a constructive and beneficial purpose that may prevent harm or injustice, there is no prohibition, and there might even be an obligation to protect your neighbor by conveying the information – לֹא תִעֲמֹד – עַל-דַּם רֵעֶךָ.

As R' Jonathan Sacks powerfully said, no soul was ever saved by hate; no truth was ever proved by violence; no redemption was ever brought by holy war.

Rather than hurt and humiliate, let's use our language to educate, help and heal; because words and ideas have the power to change the world.

They're the only thing that ever has.

Science and Torah

5 minute read | Straightforward

The Creation story is one of the most powerful and influential stories in human history.

But is it true?

Traditional people may initially be inclined to condemn such questions as heresy, but that approach alienates inquisitive youngsters and is also problematic. As the Rambam points out, if we take the Creation story at face value, we would mistakenly understand that humans are literally created in God's image, which means we look like God and that God has some shape or form. But even though we don't believe God has an actual image, the story is still true!



The language we use to talk about truth is complex and nuanced; it is not a mature expectation to read the words and expect a step-by-step guide to how the Creator shaped the entire universe.

One of the universal rules of interpretation is that the Torah speaks how humans speak – דיברה תורה – כלשון בני אדם.

If the Torah speaks in human language for humans to understand, there is literally no point whatsoever for the Torah to include information people would not understand. The Torah's primary audience was a band of barely literate former slaves in the desert 3000 years ago; imagine explaining General Relativity and the age of the Universe to them! Dinosaur bones were only discovered in 1677 and were believed to belong to giants and dragons at first. Not only would such information have made no sense to our ancestors, but these ideas would not have been useful as they don't relate to the world as the place of action the Torah asks us to live and move in.

R' Shamshon Raphael Hirsch teaches that the Torah is not a textbook of magic or metaphysics. It isn't even primarily concerned with history! The Torah is not a how-to manual of how God created the universe; it's a book of instructions – the literal translation of Torah – guiding us on how to ethically build and shape a cohesive human society in general and Jewish society in particular.

If it was a step-by-step guide, it's not very good. The Creation story is about 34 verses long, whereas the Mishkan and its related laws and services occupy nearly a quarter of the Torah in exhaustive detail. R' Jonathan Sacks concludes that while the Torah is somewhat interested in the home God makes for us, it is much more interested in the home man makes for God.

The Torah is God's handiwork. But godly as it may be, it must be read, understood, and practiced by imperfect humans. It's not a deficiency in the medium, the Torah – it's a deficiency in us, the audience.

There is a way that humans read stories in this genre, which unlocks the truth of the Creation story; a genre is a category of things characterized by similarities in form, style, or subject matter. The Torah's Creation story is part of a creation myth genre, something common to all cultures across all human history.

Creation myths are symbolic stories that enormously influence our lives and societies. The word "myth" itself doesn't primarily mean false or fanciful; in the society in which it is told, a myth is regarded as conveying profound truths – not just literally but historically, metaphorically, and symbolically.

Creation myths are potent and formidable because the ideas they contain express in narrative form what we experience as our basic reality – where we come from, how we find ourselves where we are, and crucially, where we are going.



You may even have your own personal creation myth about your life and the direction your story has taken.

To ask if a myth is true in a factual or literal sense is to miss the point entirely and is the wrong perspective to approach it on any level. That's not the function of a creation myth.

Taking the entire Torah literally and at face value only, we'd think God looks like a human and walks in gardens, and we'd all be blind from taking an eye for an eye.

We should not doubt for a moment that the Creator shaped the universe and gave it order; we should not doubt that the image of God is a profoundly consequential idea that requires us to recognize the godliness in ourselves and each other to the extent that one sage, Ben Azzai, identified it as the essential principle of the Torah.

The Torah was given in the ancient world, where the prevailing universe of ideas held that the ancient world's gods were part of nature and fought each other. For example, a typical contemporary creation myth in Akkadian culture held that there are different tiers of gods. The working-class gods were tired of serving the upper-class gods, so they created humans from the dirt to be the new underclass, and the working-class gods could rest. In this cosmic order, the gods are indifferent to humans at best, and humans don't matter. Humans exist to be enslaved and serve the gods. Critically, this corresponded to the earthly social hierarchy, where people exist to serve the priestly class and king, who serve the gods best.

This entire hierarchy is utterly obliterated by the Torah when the One singular God, free and independent, creates humans out of love and, in God's image, creates them free. This imagery completely delegitimizes the language of oppression and enslavement and reimagines humans as supremely valuable and completely free. The Torah takes the imagery of humans as formed from dirt and inverts and sanctifies it when God infuses the dirt with a soulful breath of life – וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפָּיו נְשֵׁמַת חַיִּים –

The Mishnah learns from the imagery of the emergence of humanity by creating one individual that each life is its own universe, so taking a life is like destroying a universe; saving a life is saving a universe. Individuals matter, created as they are in God's image.

The development of the scientific method created an inflection point in the trajectory of human knowledge, transforming our understanding of the world around us.

Ideas like evolution and the Big Bang aren't a threat.

If you're reading the Torah looking for empirical facts, or parsing the text for hints or rebuttals to an old or young universe, to evolution or dinosaurs, to arcane magic or General Relativity, or 9/11 predictions or the future, you are going to come away disappointed because you are reading the Torah



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wrong. That is not the Torah's purpose in any way; how it all works is a separate and parallel track to what it all means.

And is it even possible for humans to understand how the Creator did it? Moshe and Job communicated to God and came away with learned ignorance, the understanding that there is an outer boundary to human knowledge and that humans can't understand much.

As R' Jonathan Sacks explains, science speaks of causes, but only religion can speak about purpose; science can take things apart to see how they work, but only religion can put things together to see what they mean.

If science is about the world as it is, and religion is about the world that ought to be, then religious people need science because we cannot apply God's will to the world if we do not understand the world. Torah is art, not science.

The Creation of the universe is more complicated than the brief treatment the Torah tells us, but the ideas it contains are explosive, and their truth and importance are absolute.

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.