



Shelach 2023

Building the Future

3 minute read | Straightforward

The Jewish People left Egypt and slowly made their way to the Promised Land. But the Promised Land had been settled already, and the Jewish People had to do some planning, so they sent scouts.

When the scouts got back from Canaan, they delivered a bleak report about the battles that lay ahead, and the Jewish People were devastated. They rued the day they ever left Egypt, that the arduous journey had been a colossal waste. If they were just going to die attempting to take the land, the thinking went, they'd be better off going back to Egypt with a new leader who was a little more realistic.

The aftermath of their poor response was that this lost generation would aimlessly wander the wilderness for nearly 40 years. Once these adults had all died, their children would have another go at conquering and establishing a new nation in the Land of Israel.

But something doesn't quite add up.

The wrongdoers in the story are the scouts, who conspire to paint the Land of Israel as an impossible goal when it's not. But while that's the catalyst for the story going off the rails, the Torah is explicit that God's punishment is not directed at the scouts but towards their audience:

– “In this wilderness shall your corpses drop, all of you who were recorded in the lists from the age of twenty years up, you who have complained towards Me.” (14:29)

The people believed the scout report, coming as they did from established and trusted leaders, that the task ahead was impossible. The scouts ought to have known better, but how should the people have reacted to their leaders saying they were doomed? Bad news is bad! When people hear bad news from reputable sources, it is quite normal – expected, even – to react negatively. That's why it's called bad news!

Even if we say they overreacted and took it too far, how does the punishment fit the crime?

There have been many empires, nations, and states. Many had come before this story, and many have come since.



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But the Jewish People are not just another member of that category; the Jewish People are in a class by themselves and unique in at least one respect.

The Jewish People in the Land of Israel, observing the Torah and living in the Divine Presence, are fundamentally and qualitatively different, with goals and values unlike any other. It is the culmination of a centuries-old hope and vision, with many careful and deliberate stops along the way. From Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, through Canaan, Egypt, and Sinai, the Torah call us to build something that no one had seen or done before.

Yet even after witnessing the events of Egypt, the Red Sea, Sinai, the clouds, the manna, and the water, cared for daily as much as anyone can be by the hand of God Himself; in the face of even the slightest adversity, their worst inclinations get the best of them, revealing that these people never really left Egypt at all. Here they are on the threshold of greatness, and they only want to turn around and go right back!

God is so let down to the extent that God considers killing them all, even the children, illustrating the severity of this misstep. Not believing in their great mission was a failure they could not recover from, and the result was a catastrophe.

Building a new model for a Torah society cannot happen by itself, or it would! Then and now, it requires pioneers with hope and vision.

If that's the attitude and perspective it takes to achieve the goal of establishing the Jewish People in the Land of Israel, how could these people ever hope to succeed?

They weren't ready, but maybe their children could be.

To accomplish something that no one has ever done before takes a certain character, perspective, and resiliency; anyone who's ever taken on something bold and ambitious knows it. If it were easy, someone else would have done it – but just because no one else has done it yet, that doesn't mean it can't be done.

A great vision can never come to fruition with half-hearted execution; you need to believe before you can achieve.

Who can do it? The people who want it badly enough.

Living with Newness



3 minute read | Straightforward

One of the key skills children learn is how to read a clock; what time is it?

Beyond answering the basic question with hours and minutes, there is something deeper behind the question; knowing the time means knowing what to do. The time of day and time of year, the seasons, and the calendar establish the boundaries and time frames upon which our world is built, with specific routines for morning, afternoon, evening, and night, summer, fall, winter, and spring.

Different cultures have established various numeral systems and calendars to measure time. Today, most of the world uses the Gregorian calendar, a fixed calendar determined by how long the earth takes to make one complete orbit around the sun.

The Torah asks us to track time using the moon as a frame of reference; when people spot the new moon, they would report it to the highest court, which declares the beginning of a new month – Rosh Chodesh. It's not Rosh Chodesh because there's a new moon, but because the Jewish leaders say so. It's the very first commandment in the Torah, given to the Jewish People still enslaved in Egypt:

הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֶם רֵאשִׁית חֳדָשִׁים רְאשֹׁן הוּא לָכֶם לְחֹדְשֵׁי הַשָּׁנָה – This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you. (12:1)

There are lots of mitzvos, so one of them has to come first. But why is establishing the lunar calendar through Rosh Chodesh the first mitzvah as opposed to any other?

The story of the birth of the Jewish People begins at a time of stuckness, with the Jewish People systematically subjugated and oppressed, powerless objects with no choice or control over their circumstances.

Although slavery is illegal in most of the world, it persists. Moreover, slavery isn't just a legal status; it's a state of mind, body, and soul. If you have ever felt helpless or stuck, you have experienced an element of slavery.

When we internalize that forces of change exist and that we have the power to harness and steer them, the possibilities are limitless. This moment can be different to the moments that have come before; this newness is the beginning of all newness – הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֶם רֵאשִׁית חֳדָשִׁים רְאשֹׁן הוּא לָכֶם לְחֹדְשֵׁי הַשָּׁנָה.

The Shem miShmuel explains that the power of the Exodus story is that its story of freedom on a national level offers us the opportunity to become free of the tendencies and troubles that hound us on a personal level. With the power to change, hard times don't need to be so scary anymore, and the world isn't threatening; it can be full of exciting possibilities. It follows that the first mitzvah is the one that empowers us to change by giving us a symbol of change.

The sense of futility, powerlessness and stuckness that come from being burnt out or overwhelmed is poison. But as much as stuckness can come from attachment to the past, R' Nachman of Breslev teaches us to avoid dwelling too much on the future and focus on the present day and present moment.

The Torah often speaks to us in terms of here and now – הַיּוֹם / הַיּוֹם – which our sages take to mean as references to Teshuva, our capacity and power to change and repent – ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ שֶׁאֵל מֵעַמּוֹד כִּי יִנָּחֵם. Because in one day, everything can change – אִם-לִיְרֵאָה וְאִם-לְהַיְתָר עִם מִרְעִיתוֹ וְצִאָן יְדוֹ הַיּוֹם אִם-בְּקִלּוֹ תִּשְׁמְעוּ –

The world tracks time using the sun; the Sfas Emes notes that the nations of world history rise and fall like the sun, lasting only when things are bright. The Jewish People track time using the moon, persisting in darkness, and even generating light among total blackness.

The very first mitzvah is the lunar calendar, the only calendar with a visual cue for changing times; and a powerful symbol of change, a natural metaphorical image of a spiritual reality. It's not just an instruction to count the time but a commandment to rule over time and even natural phenomena. It's a mitzvah to live by and with the power of change and renewal.

Every day, every week, and in truth, every moment, is brand new, brimming with freshness, vitality, and renewal.

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

The Hebrew root word for “thing” and “word” is identical – דָּבָר / דְּבָר. 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 שִׁבְעָה-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



הוא טהרה הוא. 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:

לא תלך רכיל בעמך, לא תעמד על-דם רעה: אני, 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:

ולא תונו איש את-עמיתו, ונראת מאלקיך: כי אני ה, אלקיכם – 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 – שהכל נהיה בדברו – so must we – אני ה. The Lubavitcher Rebbe taught that as much as God creates with words, so do humans.

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 – ויאמר ה' סלחתי כדברך –

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 – לא תעמד על-דם רעה.

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.

Onward

5 minute read | Straightforward

The Torah's stories have captured the awe of audiences for three millennia, and rightly so.

The Torahs tell us of astonishing moments like The Binding of Isaac, the ultimate test of human commitment with the future in the balance, where Avraham lifts a knife to his son's neck only for an angel to interrupt him, salvation averting tragedy through transparently divine intervention at the very last.

The Torah tells us of the harrowing crossing at the Red Sea, where the defenseless Jewish People desperately fled their oppressors, with the most advanced and formidable army in the world in hot pursuit. In a defining moment that upends the entire natural order of our universe, Moshe holds out his staff, and God parts the waters for the Jewish People to walk across the dry ocean floor. The Egyptian army attempts to follow, but once Moshe's people have crossed safely, the sea suddenly reverts to its normal state, and the Egyptians are drowned.

The Torah tells us of the theophany at Sinai, where the people gathered at a mountain enveloped in cloud and smoke, quaking, with fire and lightning flashing overhead, amid the sound of booming thunder and shofar blasts; and then the Jewish People hear the voice of God through the uproar.

These are some of the defining stories of our history and exhibit the dizzying heights of the supernatural. They showcase what is fundamentally magical about the Torah.

But despite the power of these moments to captivate us, the Torah doesn't indulge us by dwelling on them even a little. Just like that, with the stroke of a pen, the Binding of Isaac is behind us, the Red Sea is old news, Sinai is history, and it's time to move onward:

וַיָּשָׁב אַבְרָהָם אֶל-נְעָרָיו וַיִּקְמוּ וַיֵּלְכוּ יַחְדָּו – Avraham returned to his stewards, and they got up and left together... (22:19)

וַיֵּצֵאוּ מִן-הַיָּם הַהוּא אֶל-מִדְבַּר-שׁוּר; וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁלֹשֶׁת-יָמִים בַּמִּדְבָּר, וְלֹא-מָצְאוּ מַיִם – Moshe and the Children of Israel set out from the Red Sea. They went on into the wilderness of Shur; they traveled three days in the wilderness and found no water. (15:22)

רַב-לָכֶם שָׁבַת, בְּהַר הַזֶּה. פְּנוּ וּסְעוּ לְכֶם – You have stayed long enough at this mountain. (1:6)



We have these distinctly unique stories of the Divine manifested in our universe, and then the Torah just moves briskly onward – וַיִּקְמוּ וַיֵּלְכוּ / וַיֵּסַע מֹשֶׁה אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל מִיַּם-סוּף / רַב-לָכֶם שָׁבֹת, בְּהָר הַזֶּה פָּנוּ וַיֵּסְעוּ לָכֶם –

The Torah does not dwell in the magical moments, and the starkness of the almost dismissive continuity is jarring, and there is a vital lesson here. It suggests that even after the greatest of heights, the most noteworthy achievements, and the most incredible successes, the Torah simply notes that you can't stay long once you get there. Before you know it, it's time to continue the journey and move onward.

Onward is an interesting word – positive and proactive, meaning going further rather than coming to an end or halt; moving in a forward direction. As the Izhbitzer explains, part of growth is moving on and walking away from where you once stood. We can't stay because the moment is gone – it's gone in time, irretrievably behind us, and it's our responsibility to realize that distance in mental and physical space too.

It's also true to life; the world will not dwell in your magical moments. Whether you ace the test, get the girl, close the deal, buy the house, sell the business, have the baby, or whatever the outstanding achievement is, it's still Tuesday, you're still you, you still have deadlines, you still have to get into better shape, your siblings still get on your nerves, and your credit card bill is still due. And so, by necessity, there comes a time to move onward.

In dull moments, we may find ourselves thirsty with nothing to drink. But this, too, as the Izhbitzer teaches, is part of the growth process. Eventually, those bitter waters can transform into a sweet oasis, and what appeared to be downtime is integrated into the journey forward.

Even the Golden Calf story has redeeming elements; apart from the critical teaching that using iconography to worship the One God is still idolatry, it decisively demonstrates God's predisposition for forgiveness and paves the way to the Mishkan and all the resultant forms of interacting with the Divine.

Do not fool yourself into thinking that what got you to where you are will fuel you to further heights; that energy does not simply overflow into everything else. Success is not final, and failure is not fatal; the proper response to both is the same – onward.

This lesson is challenging enough, but the Izhbitzer takes us further and forewarns us that what follows the heights of success is rarely smooth and straightforward lulls and plateaus of accumulation and consolidation to catch our breath; we can often expect an inverse experience in short order. All too often, great heights are followed by sharp declines and drawdowns, troughs and valleys; Avraham gets home to find his wife has died; the miraculous rescue at the Red Sea is directly followed by the people's complaints about the local water being too bitter, and the people worship a Golden Calf at the foot of Mount Sinai itself.



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Quite arguably, a failure to move on was the mistake at the heart of the debacle of the scouting mission to Israel – the spies just wanted to stay put in the safety of God’s embrace in the desert. They weren’t wrong; the road ahead was fraught with danger! But that’s not how the world works; stagnation is not God’s design for us or the universe – life must change, move, and evolve. Staying put and stagnating is what’s unnatural.

The Torah is a guide to life – תורת חיים – and one of the defining features of living things is motility – they move independently. We shouldn’t be so shocked by the ebbs and flows of life, moving and changing, with attendant ups and downs. When living things don’t move, they quickly atrophy, stagnate, wither, and die before long. Living things must move and push to grow healthy and strong. You can fall and run out of breath plenty of times along the way, but that’s part of it, so long as you eventually get back up and keep moving onward.

As the Leshem teaches, the dual pulsation at the heart of all things is the descent down and the return back up. The breaking is the descent and the fixing is the ascent back to a higher point. This is not only a historic process but a perpetual moment-to-moment one, the elevation of all things, the vibration of life and existence itself.

As R’ Shlomo Farhi explains, if you look at stock market performance over a century, the zoomed-out time frame looks like a smooth and steady incline; and yet, when you zoom in to years, months, weeks, days, and hours, the amount of choppiness and volatility increases. On an extended time frame, each part matters less. The bouncing highs and lows blend into a smooth line that only goes one way – onwards and upwards.

The past is not gone or forgotten; it forms the basis and foundations of today.

Although we can’t dwell in the moments of achievement, there is a part we can carry in our hearts and minds.

And as we go, it comes with us, ever onward.

Fear Redux; Faith Redux

6 minute read | Straightforward

In the context of religion, faith is a natural consequence of professing to believe in God. If there’s a Creator, there must be some plan, and so the thinking goes, we should have faith in it.

Faith means the notion of confidence or trust in a person, thing, or concept; in this case, the Creator –
אמונה / בטחון.

But how we talk about faith doesn't always make sense.

People get afraid and worried about everyday life, like whether they can afford to pay their bills or if their loved one will recover from sickness. The root of every human fear is the notion that we are fundamentally powerless against the forces of the universe.

There can sometimes be a toxic Emunah culture that stifles, suffocates, and squashes real people with real feelings. That sounds like when people say things like don't worry, God has a plan, or it's for the best, trust God, and have faith that everything will work out. As the famous song goes, the main thing is to have no fear at all – והעיקר לא לפחד כלל –

Whether spoken or unspoken or even in your own thoughts, there is an invalidation or judgment here; to the extent you feel doubts or fears, you really have to work on your faith because if you had faith in God, you wouldn't feel afraid – because faith and fear are incompatible and mutually exclusive.

But is that so true?

Firstly, there is a basic problem with the notion that fear is intrinsically wrong. Although many fears are learned, the threshold capacity to fear is part of human nature, a subconscious instinct, which, like desire, does not lend itself to moral judgment; it's simply the basic reality of our lived experience.

Fear is our response to a stimulus occurring in the present or in anticipation or expectation of a future threat perceived as a risk. The fear response arises from the perception of danger leading to a confrontation with or escape from or avoiding the threat, also known as the fight-or-flight response, which in extreme cases of horror and terror can be a freeze response or paralysis.

Fear is visceral and instinctual, hard coded into our DNA, predates human consciousness, and results from an external stimulus, not a character flaw. The survival instinct originates in the most primal parts of the brain – נפש בהמית –

This is a complete defense of feeling our fears.

Moreover, fear is one of the tools the Torah uses to obtain compliance from its readers – וְתָרָה אֶרְיָהּ בְּכֶם –
וְעָצַר אֶת־הַשְּׁמַיִם וְלֹא־יִהְיֶה מָטָר וְהִאֲדָמָה לֹא תִתֵּן אֶת־יְבוּלָהּ וְאֲבֹדְתֶם מִהָרָה מֵעַל הָאָרֶץ הַטְּבֵה אֲשֶׁר ה' נָתַן לָכֶם.

Fear is arguably why many people practice religion; Pascal's wager argues that a rational person should live as though God exists because if God does not exist, a person only loses a little luxury or pleasure. In contrast, if God exists, a person stands to receive infinite pain or gain in Heaven and Hell.



But far more powerfully, the greats experienced fear too, as the Torah and our prophets testify, which should demolish any misguided self-righteous attempts at invalidating fear.

Fear is not a negative emotion; it is not something we should avoid associating with our great ancestors. Fear is a human emotion, and our great ancestors were humans who felt fear and responded to those fears in ways we can learn from.

When God promises Avraham a grand future, Avraham wonders what God is talking about because, as a childless older man, he naturally experiences doubt, fear, and insecurity about the future – מה-תתן-לי / בְּמָה אֲדַע כִּי אֵירָשָׁנָה. As beings bound by time, our existence is limited from one moment to the next; everyone worries about the future.

When Yakov and his family finally escape Lavan’s clutches, they are intercepted on the run by Esau with 400 warriors, and Yakov is afraid – וַיִּירָא יַעֲקֹב מְאֹד. He has good reason to be afraid – he can send gifts, give weapons to children, and send half the family a day ahead, but he understands the imminent reality that his family might get massacred – הַצִּילְנִי נָא מִיַּד אָחִי מִיַּד עֲשׂוּ כִּי־יִרְא אֲנֹכִי אֹתוֹ פֶּן־יָבֹא וְהַכִּנִּי – אִם עַל־בָּנָיִם.

When Yosef frames his brothers as part of his ruse to see if they regret his abduction and trafficking, they express fear when they begin to realize that they are entangled with a powerful person who poses a serious threat to them – וַיֵּצֵא לָבֵם וַיְהַרְדּוּ אִישׁ אֶל־אָחִיו.

When the young Moshe steps beyond the palace life of his childhood into the world of his people’s suffering, he steps in to save someone from an oppressive Egyptian officer, killing the Egyptian. Realizing that he has crossed the point of no return and stands alone against the might of the Egyptian empire, Moshe feels afraid – וַיִּירָא מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּאמֶר אֶכֶן נֹדַע הַדְּבָר.

When Mordechai sends word to Esther about the new legislation authorizing the genocide of the Jewish People, he tells Esther to intervene and go to the king. But Esther doesn’t go immediately; she responds that going to the king without summons is a death sentence. She is afraid to risk her life, and Mordechai must persuade her to overcome those fears to save the Jewish People.

Let there be no doubt that we are talking about giants here, the greatest of greats, heroes of heroes. And they felt fears we can easily recognize as familiar.

It is cruel, not to mention incredibly self-destructive, to idealize a lack of fear.

As one great writer had a child ask his father, can a man still be brave if he’s afraid? Says the father with piercing clarity; it is the only time a man can be brave.

Toxic masculinity is a cultural pressure that says men shouldn’t cry or get scared; our Torah says they do.



As Fred Rogers taught, anything human is mentionable, and the mentionable can become more manageable. When we can talk about our feelings, they can become less overwhelming, less upsetting, and less scary.

A core part of the Jewish mission is the pursuit of wholeness – שלימות / תמימות. It is an act of psychological violence to kill off the emotional aspects of another, or in the case of yourself, self-mutilation. When you cut away the parts of the self capable of feeling a wide range of emotional responses, people wind up disconnected from themselves and the people around them. You get broken people not emotionally in tune with themselves or their surroundings. By definition, wholeness must be compatible with the full spectrum of human emotion; one of the most important tasks of our era is to reconnect with and reunite the severed parts.

The life of our greatest heroes was an emotional life that was visited by fear and doubt. The difference between the best of us and the rest of us is what they did about it. The Torah's stories reassure us that we're not alone and that our feelings are natural and normal.

Fear and faith are compatible, and they exist along the same spectrum. Faith is not blind or mindless; the Torah testifies Avraham's faith in the middle of his doubt and insecurity – וְהָאֱמֹן בֵּה' וַיִּחְשְׁבֶהָ לוֹ צְדָקָה.

As the Torah draws to the conclusion of its great story, Moshe hands over the reins to Yehoshua, and encourages him in front of the Jewish People, to be brave and strong in the face of fear; God tells Yehoshua the exact same thing – חֲזָקוּ וְאַמְצוּ אֶל־תִּירְאוּ וְאֶל־תַּעֲרָצוּ מִפְּנֵיהֶם כִּי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הוּא הַהֹלֵךְ עִמָּךְ לֹא יִרְפֶּךָ וְלֹא יַעֲזֹבֶךָ' – / לֹא תִירָא וְלֹא תַחַת / וַיִּצְוֵ אֶת־יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן־נוּן וַיֹּאמֶר חֲזָק וְאַמְצָן כִּי אִתָּהּ תָּבִיא אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי לָהֶם וְאַנְכִי אֶהְיֶה עִמָּךְ.

As the Abarbanel teaches, there is no contradiction between fear and faith. Faith in God cannot make a person immune to the powerful natural emotional instinct of fear. Faith means that despite those fears, you act with your highest faculties, guided by Torah, reason, and knowledge, not by fear.

What makes our greats great is that while they sometimes felt afraid, they didn't stay afraid. They didn't live in fear or act from a place of fear. In the high-stress moments, they felt it, but it is never mentioned again; they choose to act with confidence, faith, security, and trust that there is a divine plan, the difference between feeling afraid and being afraid.

We see this played out in the aftermath of the scout report of the Land of Israel; the Jewish People are consumed with fear and terror that they will be massacred, that their women and children will be captured, and they want to flee back to Egypt. Too afraid to listen, Yehosua and Caleb's reassurances fall on deaf ears – וְאַתֶּם אֶל־תִּירְאוּ אֶת־עַם הָאָרֶץ כִּי לֹחֲמֵנוּ הֵם סָר צִלָּם מִצְעֵלֵיהֶם ה' אֲתֵנּוּ אֶל־תִּירְאֵם –

Controlling your emotions doesn't mean avoiding or denying complex or difficult emotions. It means doing things with your emotions as the passenger, not the driver. When a moment of anger, fear, or sadness comes, feel it, recognize it, and understand it, but don't lose it.



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Avraham was right to be anxious about the future; Yakov was right to be scared his family would be massacred in the morning; Moshe was right that one man can't resist an empire alone; Esther was right that going to the king without an invitation was a death sentence.

In more recent memory, the Jewish world of today is built on foundations laid by Holocaust survivors. These people experienced unthinkable horrors beyond even the greatest subject matter experts. It has been said of the generation that survived the terror of the Holocaust that it was perhaps the greatest act of faith by the Jewish People to trust God and have Jewish children once more.

When you're afraid, it means you take a threat seriously. It's pointless to try to stop feeling nervous. Instead, like our heroes, recognize it for what it is, a call to harness all your faculties on the task at hand. Like pain, worry when you don't feel it.

Judaism and the Torah are situated in the world of action. We bear the timeless and consistent legacy of people who faced their fears and acted with boldness and hope, who felt scared in their darkness yet persisted until the light.

Our great ancestors took action, hoping things would work out, but not with any knowledge or certainty. As our sages point out, they often fear their sins and shortcomings. Their extraordinary acts of faith look like people who feel afraid but do their best to bring about a better outcome, which is well within our reach.

Courage is not the absence of fear but the triumph over it.

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

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

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

Neli

PS - *TorahRedux is my pride and joy, the product of thousands of hours of learning, research, writing, editing, and formatting. I have been blessed to operate a business that allows me to dedicate a substantial amount of time to TorahRedux, and I welcome your assistance in furthering my goal to keep publishing high-quality Parsha content that makes a difference. I broker healthcare*



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businesses for sale; I kindly ask for your blessings and prayers, and introductions to anyone who might want to buy or sell a healthcare business!

Redux: *adjective* – resurgence; refers to being brought back, restored, or revived; something familiar presented in a new way. Not to see what no one else has seen, but to say what nobody has yet said about something which everybody sees.