

Shemos 2024

Aim High

4 minute read | Straightforward

In so much of our lives, we occupy places and routines that are familiar and known. But every now and then, life leads us to the very edge and calls on us to step into the unknown and explore the new and uncharted territory of possibility. We can experience these transcendent moments as some of the moments we are most alive, where we extend ourselves and enlarge the boundaries of our reality.

In these pivotal moments, we often meet with what appear to be insurmountable obstacles – goals that lie out of reach, aspirations that loom large like distant stars. It is in these moments that we have the capability of discovering who we are. Do we retreat to the safe boundaries of the known, or do we stretch out toward the unknown? This leap of faith is not a blind jump into the abyss but a conscious choice to trust in our capabilities and the Divine hand that guides us.

The Torah describes one such moment. Pharaoh's daughter, the Egyptian princess Batya, had come to bathe in the shallows of the river Nile with her attendants. It was just another day in the life of a princess; bathing is part of most people's daily routine. We become so familiar with our routines that our brains can go into autopilot and cruise control; our bodies go through the motions with little conscious effort. But then, one day, unlike every time before, instead of the river, wind, and wildlife she was used to tuning out, she noticed something completely out of place, something unexpected that jolted her into action – a baby floating nearby:

וַתֵּרֶד בַּת־פַּרְעֹה לָרְחוץ עַל־הַיָּאֵר וַנַּעֲרֹתֶיהָ הִלְכֹת עַל־יַד הַיָּאֵר וַתֵּרָא אֶת־הַתַּבָּה בְּתוֹךְ הַסּוּף וַתִּשְׁלַח אֶת־אֶמְתָּהּ וַתִּקְחָהּ – The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe in the Nile, while her maidens walked along the Nile. She spotted the basket among the reeds and reached out to collect it. (2:5)

There is some ambiguity in the word the Torah uses to describe how she collected the child – וַתִּשְׁלַח אֶת־אֶמְתָּהּ. In the plain sense, it means she sent her handmaiden to fetch the basket. But it can also mean an arm's length or cubit. Observing that the story does not use the common word for arm – יָדָה – our sages take this to mean that Batya stretched out but could not quite reach, and at that moment, her reach miraculously extended just enough to save the child; she extended her arm, and her arm extended.

Think about it for a moment. She couldn't reach the child – her arms weren't long enough. But she reached out anyway.



The Kotzker Rebbe taught that this should be our orientation to anything that matters. When saving a life, you stop at nothing, exhaust every avenue, and chase every possibility, no matter how remote or improbable it seems.

This quality is the meaning behind Moshe's name – וַיִּהְיֶה-לָּהּ לְבֶן וַתִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ מֹשֶׁה וַתֹּאמֶר כִּי מִן-הַמַּיִם מְשִׁיתָהוּ – R' Chaim Shmulevitz highlights that despite Moshe having other names, he is known for the rest of his life by the name given to him by the Egyptian princess, named for the moment of boldness shown by his adopted mother.

In the interwar years, Jewish leaders were politically engaged in navigating East European Jewry through what they could not yet know was its final years. One of the most prominent voices was R' Meir Shapiro, a leading Rosh Yeshiva scholar, politician, and community organizer. At a major leadership meeting, he proposed bold plans to turn the tides of what was in the air, and his audience told him it was impossible. In response, he countered then by citing this teaching.

Our sages use this story to encourage us not to be daunted by the seemingly unattainable. This does not mean recklessly chasing after dreams but recognizing that whether physically, spiritually, or emotionally, our reach can extend far beyond what we understand our physical capabilities and natural boundaries to be.

In a contemporary embodiment of this wisdom, President Kennedy explained why the Space Race was important, why it mattered for humans to go to the moon, in doing so, captured the human spirit at its best: “We shall send to the moon 240,000 miles away, a giant rocket, more than 300 feet tall on an untried mission to an unknown celestial body, and then return it safely to Earth. But why the moon? Why choose this as our goal? And they may well ask, why climb the highest mountain? Why 35 years ago fly the Atlantic? We choose to go to the moon this decade and do the other things not because they are easy but because they are hard. Because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills because that challenge is one that we're willing to accept. One we are unwilling to postpone. And therefore, as we set sail, we ask God's blessing on the most hazardous, dangerous, and greatest adventure that man has ever gone.”

Apart from being able to plant a flag on the moon, which is pretty cool, the Space Race extended the boundaries of science in ways that demonstrably improved our lives, including significant advancements in water purification, waterproofing, disease research, agricultural techniques, fireproof insulation, wireless technologies, LED lighting, food preservation, and scratch-resistant eyeglass lenses.

The story of Batya reaching out to Moshe captures a universal truth about the human condition: we are sometimes called to stretch beyond our perceived limits. The act of reaching out becomes a powerful metaphor for the courage and tenacity inherent in each of us. The supernatural extension of Batya's hand is not a fantasy trope; it symbolizes the extraordinary outcomes that can only emerge



from our willingness to extend ourselves beyond what we believe is possible. It's a reminder that the potential for the miraculous lies within the mundane fabric of daily living.

Whether ancient or modern, these stories remind us of the ongoing relevance of these timeless lessons in our daily lives. In striving to make the world a better place, what seems impossible may only be so until we dare to stretch our hands. Aim high; shoot for the moon, as the famous saying goes.

Because even if you miss, you will land among the stars.

Refusing the Call

5 minute read | Straightforward

Before introducing us to Moshe, the Torah describes how Yakov's family grew numerous and how the Egyptian government felt threatened by such a sizable population of outsiders. Determined to curb this threat, they devised a means to enslave the Jewish People, which crept slowly until it was intolerable.

Once the Torah has established the setting, the Torah tells us of Moshe's birth and upbringing before he has to flee. Moshe encounters a mysterious burning bush on his travels, and God calls on him to save his people. Curiously, Moshe refuses this call:

וַעֲתָה הִנֵּה צַעֲקַת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בָּאָה אֵלַי וְגַם־רָאִיתִי אֶת־הַלֶּחֶץ אֲשֶׁר מִצְרַיִם לֹחֲצִים אֹתָם: וְעַתָּה לֵכָה וְאַשְׁלַחְךָ אֶל־פַּרְעֹה וְהוֹצֵא אֶת־עַמִּי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם: וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים מִי אֲנֹכִי כִּי אֵלֶךְ אֶל־פַּרְעֹה וְכִי אוֹצִיא אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם: ... וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־ה' בִּי: – “The cry of the Children of Israel has reached Me; I have seen how the Egyptians oppress them. Come! I will send you to Pharaoh, and you shall free My people, the Children of Israel, from Egypt.” But Moshe said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Children of Israel from Egypt?”... Moshe said to God, “Please God, I have never been a man of words, either in times past or now that You have spoken to Your servant; I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.” (3:9-11, 4:10)

This is one of the most important stories ever told. Moshe knows where he comes from and has seen his brethren suffering. His birth and upbringing uniquely situate him between both sides to do something about it. No less than the Creator has called on him to greatness, and he refuses, not once, but twice!

How could Moshe possibly refuse the call?



Refusing the call is a literary trope that humanizes the hero, but this story isn't ordinary literature. Moshe's refusal is part of this timeless story because it reflects a fundamental property intrinsic to all humans we must acknowledge and understand.

Moshe didn't doubt that his people could or should be saved; Moshe doubted himself. He had fears and insecurities; he was missing an essential trait to be successful! He wasn't a man of words; how would he persuade anybody to follow him? How would he convince the Egyptian government to let his people go? This isn't faux humility – Moshe articulates an accurate self-assessment; he is right! And yet, the Creator answers that it doesn't matter; he must do it anyway.

When the Mishkan was finally ready for inauguration, Ahron also refused the call, feeling ashamed and unworthy for his responsibility for the Golden Calf incident. Yet in the view of our sages, Ahron's shame was exactly what distinguished him as the right person; his self-awareness of his shortcomings and his view of the position as one that required gravity and severity. Moshe never says Ahron is wrong; he only encourages him to ignore those doubts and do it anyway – אָמַר לוֹ – שְׁהִי אַהֲרֹן בּוֹשׁ וַיֵּרָא לְגִשְׁתּוֹ, אָמַר לוֹ – שְׁהִי אַהֲרֹן בּוֹשׁ וַיֵּרָא לְגִשְׁתּוֹ, אָמַר לוֹ – שְׁהִי אַהֲרֹן בּוֹשׁ וַיֵּרָא לְגִשְׁתּוֹ. מִשֵּׁה, לָמָּה אַתָּה בּוֹשׁ? לָכֵן נִבְחַרְתָּ.

In the Purim story, Mordechai asks Esther to go to the king to save her people and Esther refuses the call, not wanting to risk her life; she has correctly assessed the facts and is indeed in danger. But as Mordechai says, that doesn't matter; if Esther remains paralysed by her fears, she will lose the opportunity to step up. The call to action is open before her; and she must do it anyway – כִּי אִם-הִחָרַשׁ – תַּחֲרִישִׁי בְּעַת הַזֹּאת רוּחַ וְהִצְלָה יַעֲמֹד לְיְהוּדִים מִמְּקוֹם אַחֵר וְאַתָּה וּבֵית-אָבִיךָ תֵּאבְדוּ וּמִי יוֹדֵעַ אִם-לָעַת כְּזֹאת הִגַּעְתָּ לְמַלְכוּת.

The book of Jeremiah opens with a similar vignette. Jeremiah reports that God appeared to him in his youth, and called upon him to be the prophet for his generation; like his forebears, Jeremiah protests that he is just a kid and is not a speaker. In what we can now recognize as a consistent fashion, God dismisses these excuses; not because they are wrong, but because they don't matter – he's got to do it anyway – וַיְהִי דְבַר-ה' אֵלַי לֵאמֹר: בְּטָרִם אֲצַוְךָ בְּכַטָּן וְיַדְעִתִּיךָ וּבְטָרִם תִּצָּא מִרְחֹם הַקִּדְשִׁיתִיךָ נְבִיא לְגוֹיִם נִתְּתִיךָ: וְאָמַר אֲהֵה אֲדַנִּי הַ הַנְּהָ – לֹא-יַדְעִתִּי דְבַר כִּי-נֶעַר אָנֹכִי: וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֵלַי אֶל-תֹּאמַר נֶעַר אָנֹכִי כִּי עַל-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר אֲשַׁלְּחֶךָ תִּלְוֶה וְאַתָּה כָּל-אֲשֶׁר אֲצַוְךָ תִּדְבֵר.

The Torah is deliberate in how it presents stories; there are lessons in what it leaves in and leaves out. Of all the small interactions that don't make the final cut, we should note that refusing the call is an interaction the Torah consistently deems necessary in multiple unrelated stories; our greatest heroes don't just jump at the chance to do what is clearly the right thing.

Who is perfect enough to fix the problems in your community? Who is perfect enough to lead the people you love to greatness? The Torah seems to endorse and validate this sentiment, insisting that it has got to be you despite your flaws – אֶל-תֹּאמַר נֶעַר אָנֹכִי. Ironically, the people who are deluded and narcissistic enough to think they are perfect would be the worst candidate; the Torah holds Korach up as the counterexample.



If you have adequately honed your sensitivities, you recognize you have a lot of work to do, and so many people need your help. You might even hear a call to action reverberating deep within. But you doubt yourself, and you refuse the call. You're scared – and you should be! There is plenty to fear, and the stakes couldn't be higher. The undertaking the Torah calls us to is enormous, too enormous to accomplish on our own; yet it calls on us just the same – לא עזיבך המלאכה לגמור, ולא אתה בן חורין לבטל ממנה –

There is moral fiber in quieting the voice of self-doubt and stepping up to answer the call anyway – אין אני לי, מי לי. וכשאני לעצמי, מה אני.

The Torah calls on humans, keenly aware of our fears, flaws, imperfection, and insecurities. We mustn't engage those self-same fears, flaws, imperfections, and insecurities as excuses to neglect our duty. The Torah repeatedly tells us they don't matter; do it anyway!

Moshe, Ahron, Jeremiah, and Esther all expressed a form of impostor syndrome, the feeling that whatever job you're in, you're not qualified for it and that people will figure out any minute that you're a poser with no clue what you're doing. Your self-awareness serves you well by accurately identifying gaps in your skillset but does you a disservice by stopping you from trying. You have to silence the doubt in yourself when it gets to the point of holding you back from doing transformational things simply because you're not quite ready to face the reality of your own potential greatness.

Our pantheon of heroes is replete with imperfect individuals who had good reasons to refuse the call. Each excuse was entirely accurate; we ought to draw immense comfort and power from how universal self-doubt and uncertainty are. The Torah's consistent thematic response to our greats, and through them to us, echoing and reverberating for all eternity, is simply that there's work to do, and someone has to do it.

So why shouldn't it be you?

The Unburning Bush

5 minute read | Straightforward

One of the most enduring and iconic scenes in the Torah is the incident of the burning bush.

Not only is it momentous for the obviously supernatural, but it is also the turning point in the Exodus story. Having described the cruel extent of the Jewish People's enslavement and suffering, the burning bush is the moment the Creator reaches out to Moshe to intervene, setting events into motion that permanently shape human civilization for the remainder of human history to this day.



At this point in the story, Moshe has fled Egypt as a fugitive and has built a new identity and life as a shepherd in Midian. One day in the wilderness, he chases a stray lamb and has an encounter with the arcane:

ומִשֶׁה הָיָה רֹעֵה אֶת־צֹאן יִתְרוֹ חֹתְנוֹ כִּהְיוּ מִדְיָן וַיִּנְהַג אֶת־הַצֹּאן אַחַר הַמִּדְבָּר וַיָּבֹא אֶל־הַר הָאֱלֹקִים חֹרֵב: וַיֵּרָא מִלֹּאֲהָ ה' אֵלָיו בְּלִבְת־אֵשׁ מִתּוֹךְ הַסִּנֵּה וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה הַסִּנֵּה בֹעֵר בָּאֵשׁ וְהַסִּנֵּה אֵינּוּ אֹכֵל: ... וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־תִּקְרַב הֵלֶם שְׁלִי־נִעְלִיךָ מֵעַל רִגְלֶיךָ כִּי הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עוֹמֵד עָלָיו אֲדַמְת־קֹדֶשׁ הוּא: ... וַיֹּאמֶר ה' רְאֵה רָאִיתִי אֶת־עֲנִי עָמִי אֲשֶׁר בְּמִצְרַיִם וְאֶת־צַעֲקוֹתָם שָׁמַעְתִּי מִפְּנֵי נִגְשָׁיו כִּי יִדְעֹתִי אֶת־מִכְאֲבָיו... וְעַתָּה הִנֵּה צַעֲקוֹת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בָּאָה אֵלָי וְגַם־רָאִיתִי אֶת־הַלַּחֵץ אֲשֶׁר מִצְרַיִם לֹחֲצִים אֹתָם: ... וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹקִים אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אֲהַיָּה אֲשֶׁר אֲהַיָּה וַיֹּאמֶר כֹּה תֹאמַר: נִצַּעְתָּ בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בָּאָה אֵלָי וְגַם־רָאִיתִי אֶת־הַלַּחֵץ אֲשֶׁר מִצְרַיִם לֹחֲצִים אֹתָם: – Now Moshe, tending the flock of his father-in-law Yisro, the priest of Midian, drove the flock into the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a blazing fire out of a bush. He saw the bush in flames, yet the bush was not consumed... And He said, “Do not come closer. Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground...” And the Lord continued, “I have seen the plight of My people in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I am mindful of their suffering... Now the cry of the Israelites has reached Me; moreover, I have seen how the Egyptians oppress them... And God said to Moshe, “I will be what I will be.” He continued, “Tell the Israelites, “I Will Be,” sent me to you.” (3:1,2,5,7,9,14)

Apart from the local significance of this story, this interaction is one of the Torah’s vanishingly rare instances of a theophany, a physical manifestation of the divine in a tangible, observable way, which is always accompanied by an upending of the natural order – the appearance of physics-bending supernatural properties.

In our experience, fire requires fuel to combust; that’s what generates flames. There is no such thing as burning without fuel because fire and burning are inseparable; they are the same thing.

A bush that doesn’t burn is cryptic, and yet the symbol is deliberate; God doesn’t act gratuitously or because it sounds cool.

Why does God choose the form of a burning bush to communicate with Moshe?

God’s self-introduction is essential and, in a way, tells us a lot about what God wants us to know. God self-identifies as אֲהַיָּה אֲשֶׁר אֲהַיָּה, a complex form of the infinitive “to be.” It might mean “I am what I am,” or perhaps “I will be what I will be.”

The Midrash expounds on this conversation and says that when God seeks to be seen as compassionate, God is called Hashem. When God desires justice, God is called God. What that means, then, is that God is fluid and free-spirited, always in a state of being and becoming, transcending any single definition. We can not understand God as God is; we can only understand what God does. This is perhaps symbolized by the fire that was not sustained by the bush; God’s existence doesn’t depend on anything or anyone external, is fully self-sustaining, and is the source of all energy in the universe.



The burning bush is also a metaphor that contains the imagery and symbolism of Moshe's place in everything to come. Moshe was in the desert, and God appeared before Moshe noticed; God was already there. God is there, and engages Moshe specifically because he notices the bush – וַיֵּרָא ה' כִּי סָר – לְרֵאוֹת וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו. What Moshe sees isn't a burning bush but an unburning bush, a fire that doesn't seem to consume the bush – מִדּוֹעַ לֹא יִבְעַר הַסִּנֵּה.

The Zohar suggests that God's message through the unusual properties of the burning bush is that fire will not consume the bush, and the fires of exile will not destroy Jewish people. With God's protection, they would not be consumed. As the thornbush is the least of the plants, the Jewish People have historically occupied a low position in Egypt, and the burning fire is a symbol of oppression. The bush burning yet not being consumed symbolized that the oppressed people would be hurt but not destroyed by their enemies and that their hostility would be ultimately unsuccessful and fruitless.

R' Shlomo Farhi suggests that this contains a crucial insight into what qualified Moshe, above all others, to be the lawgiver and redeemer of the Jewish People, trusted over all others. In times of difficulty, positive and upbeat people will attempt to focus and redirect their attention towards positivity; look on the bright side; it could be worse, it's part of God's plan – heads in the sand, ignoring and pretending away the pain of whatever is taking place. Pessimistic people can be fully consumed by how terrible and unfortunate it is, how bad things are, and how bad it hurts; the essence of who they are gives way entirely to the ordeal.

Neither is wrong, but this story teaches a third way. Moshe sees past the bush that is on fire; he sees a fire that does not consume, which, as applied to the circumstances of his people, suggests an attitude of recognizing that the devastating pain of his people falls short of total ruin. Moshe can hold the notion of their suffering in mind without a diminished understanding of the nature of what they were: in immense pain and suffering, totally on fire, and yet still fundamentally whole, that things were hard, but everything was going to be okay.

Moshe would not look away from a Jew getting beaten by a taskmaster, and he would not look away from Jews fighting each other. He didn't ignore their hurt, nor did he magnify it. He didn't say they'd be okay or to get over it. He didn't passively witness any of those things; he actively engaged with them.

This encounter also reveals where God can be found. God is to be found in the wilderness, in the void, and in the middle of nowhere – בְּמִדְבָּר; in the middle of destruction, in the burning pain of exile – בְּעֵר; and also nature and the low places – מִתּוֹךְ הַסִּנֵּה. In other words, this symbol deconstructs any preconceived notions about God's inaccessibility.

God tells Moshe to remove his shoes because the place he stands is holy soil; the Chafetz Chaim teaches that this statement stands for all people at all times that God can be found within every and any moment. A person who lives with the awareness that the place you stand is also the place God is found lives with the secret of creation – that the Divine is here with us here and now.



The burning bush symbolizes the Divine Presence before redemption; the Midrash teaches that God feels our pain and is a partner in our troubles. The burning bush is an image of God's presence and protection in the face of danger and oppression and reveals where we can find God – in hard times and places.

Truth Redux

5 minute read | Straightforward

The universe is a competitive place, and every creature is in an existential struggle to survive. As Darwin showed, the fittest to survive adapt best to their circumstances, using all tools at their disposal.

Everyone is trying to get by, so what wouldn't you do to pass the test, get the job, win the relationship? People always exaggerate and lie on resumes, interviews, dates, and sales pitches. It's a strategic tool for gaining an advantage, no different from how a predator utilizes camouflage to catch its prey. In the context of individual survival and success, so the thinking goes, all is fair.

The only trouble is that it's dishonest. While some people navigate the world that way anyway, most people are uncomfortable lying.

But consider a more commonplace scenario, the most trivial interaction we encounter daily. How are you doing today? I'm fine, thank you.

It's not always so true, is it? You might be tired, stressed, and worried. You are feeling hurt or sad about that thing. You're not always okay, but you say you are and soldier on.

Our sages identify the quality of truth as the signature of the Creator, a profound suggestion that truth is not just a moral or ethical principle but a fundamental building block of the universe woven into the fabric of reality.

The Torah lists many laws and prohibitions; our sages saw value in establishing protective fences around the kind of things that tend to lead to boundary violations. There is one glaring exception – dishonesty. The Torah prohibits deception under a multitude of circumstances but, uncharacteristically, also sees fit to expand the boundary and instructs us to distance from dishonesty generally – מִדְּבַר שֶׁקֶר תִּרְחֶק. If you know some of the Torah's stories, this makes sense.

Throughout the Torah, dishonesty appears as a consistent signature of its antagonists. The snake is the archetypal trickster whose deception assimilates Creation back into the formless chaos. Ephron

does business with Avraham as a crook. Esau presents himself to his father with false piety. Lavan swindles Yakov, not to mention his own daughters, out of years of peace and happiness. Joseph's brothers cover up his abduction by faking his death. Pharaoh's slavery started by cheating the Jewish People with phony work quotas; he flip-flops about letting them go. Korach masks his self-serving ambition to foment a populist revolution. Bilam denies his goals to God and himself in pursuit of power and wealth. Among many issues with the infamous scout report about the Land of Israel, the scouts were biased and dishonest in their presentation of their experience.

But we don't require the Torah to reveal that dishonesty is bad; it's easy to explain, and there are so many reasons!

You have more to gain from keeping your home than stealing your neighbor's; not stealing is a social contract that mutually benefits all. Everyone hates getting cheated or deceived, so lying or stealing is at least hypocritical and violates Hillel's Golden Rule of all things – don't do to others what you wouldn't want them doing to you.

As a matter of principle and outside of the consideration of benefits or consequences, lying is wrong because it hurts the person being manipulated and violates and ignores their autonomy; that person cannot and would not otherwise consent to be lied to or interacted with under false pretenses. If you could have achieved your goal without the lie, you would not have had to lie. Humans are created in the Divine image; violating the autonomy and dignity of another also compromises your own.

What's more, the societal implications of dishonesty are far-reaching. Our society is based on a foundation of mutual trust and honesty, and the only way to obtain any benefits from deception is in a world of trust and honesty; dishonest people hide in the camouflage of the much larger crowd of honest people – שְׁפֹת־אֱמֶת תִּבְנוּן לְעַד וְעַד־אֲרֹגְיָעָה לְשׁוֹן שְׁקָר – If we understand ethics to be universal standards of conduct, deception is self-evidently unethical because it would devalue and erode the foundation of mutual trust and honesty to the point that no one would trust anybody, and there would be no further benefits to dishonesty.

Truth is a cornerstone of civilization and the reality of our primary experience. Honesty builds trust, so people can rely on each other's words and actions, cooperating and collaborating, prerequisites for a society to function effectively. Without honesty, trust breaks down, leading to suspicion, conflict, and a lack of cooperation. Rules and laws depend on honesty to maintain stability and order; justice can only exist with truth and accountability. Relationships require honesty to establish understanding, respect, and mutual support. Business and commerce can only happen in an environment of honesty. Simply put, people can only lie in a world of truth, the world we know – אֱמֶת וּמִשְׁפָּט שְׁלוֹם שְׁפָטוּ בְּשִׁעְרֵיכֶם.

Beyond human culture, the consistency inherent to scientific principles and the laws of physics of the universe itself is an expression of truth, the signature of the Creator that makes the universe go – אֱמֶת אֱמֶת. Unsurprisingly, the Torah places such a strong emphasis on honesty.



No dishonest scales at work, don't deceive your business counterparts, don't testify falsely, keep your word, and a litany of others, with a general rule to avoid dishonesty. Truth is the world we know, the Divine signature. Healthy people are truthful people; we don't want to lie.

Are those everyday white lies a violation of Divine truth?

In context, everyone readily understands it's probably polite fiction, a form of basic social lubricant. Communication is about more than words; it's a convention of how humans interact. Conventions are subjectively followed when there is a general expectation that others will also follow them. Social grease is not dishonest when it's what people expect; deception is only deceptive when the intent is deception. When you respond that you're okay, you're not lying, even though it's not true. No one is looking for, nor expecting, a truthful report on your life; it's a social handshake, nothing more.

Our sages even went as far as permitting outright falsehood under certain circumstances for the sake of peace. Does the dress make her look fat? You will hopefully understand that her question is not intended literally; the wise here recognize an unspoken invitation for reassurance. It's not dishonest to give the reassuring response you're being implicitly asked for. Telling her she's beautiful, or saying you're okay, isn't lying. It's not even polite compliance with the request; it is fully aligned with truth and perpetuates life and all Creation.

As the school of Hillel taught, don't tell the bride she's ugly! Use your common sense, be normal – תִּהְיֶה אִתָּךְ שֶׁל אָדָם מְעוֹרְבֵת עִם הַבְּרִיּוֹת.

In our daily lives, we are constantly navigating the complex landscape of truth and deception. We tell white lies to maintain social cohesion, and some of us encounter more harmful forms of dishonesty.

Cultivate a habit of honesty in your life; be mindful of the words you speak and the actions you take. Strive for authenticity in your relationships and integrity in your efforts. Even small acts of honesty contribute towards a culture of trust and respect.

Truth is more than just a moral principle – it's a fundamental aspect of existence, the divine signature. In a world that can often seem full of deception and dishonesty, be a bearer of truth, showcasing the divine signature in all aspects of your life.

Because truth is not just about what we say to others – it's also about being true to yourself.

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



TorahRedux

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.