

## **Ki Sisa 2024**

### **Start Small**

3 minute read | Straightforward

The episode of The Golden Calf stands out as a particularly low moment in Jewish history.

Following such miraculous events as the Ten Plagues, the Exodus, and the parting of the Red Sea, among other supernatural phenomena, the Jewish People panicked because their leader was running late. They somehow concluded that an idol was the solution to their troubles.

In the aftermath, the Jewish People grappled with the consequences and sought to make amends. One form that took was the half-shekel tax, a mandatory contribution from every individual that went towards building the Mishkan. This act of collective responsibility and atonement symbolized the beginning of their journey back towards redemption.

R' Meilech Biderman highlights how, among other things, the very fact of a half shekel is itself a symbol that teaches a crucial lesson about human nature and the path of improvement that leads to lasting change.

A half isn't a whole, only a part. But it's a start, and that's what matters.

The half-shekel, being just a fraction of a whole, symbolizes that even partial efforts can be valuable starting points. It is a modest contribution that highlights the power of small beginnings; gradual, consistent progress is usually better than grand but fleeting efforts. Starting small is essential for meaningful change; baby steps are all it takes to overcome the daunting prospect of starting over and the fear of failure.

Small things count; they add up, stack, and compound quickly. You just have to get started.

Commitments and resolutions don't need to be hard to do; they just need to be something you keep. In that regard, it's actually better to start small. R' Yisrael Salanter recommends a strategic approach; rather than a complete overhaul in a given undertaking, surgically target the smallest element consistently. For example, instead of hoping to pray better in general, set a goal of praying one particular blessing more thoughtfully. Rather than resolve to never gossip again, set a goal of one specific hour a day that is gossip-free.



It is easy to dismiss the value of making slightly better choices and decisions on a daily basis; small things are, by definition, not impressive. They are boring and don't make headlines. But the thing about small commitments is that they work.

Keeping small commitments is what forms new behaviors, habits, patterns, and routines. The conventional wisdom is to set large goals and then take big leaps to accomplish the goal in as little time as possible, but enormous strides can often lead to burnout and disappointment. Instead, embracing gradual change and appreciating the compound effect of small commitments to minor improvement can be more sustainable and effective.

Small commitments work because they are easy to stick to; it's something worth being intentional about when change is on your mind.

R' Leib Chasman's students would ask him to recommend New Year's resolutions, and the sage would reply that they could decide for themselves but to make sure to pick something they could keep to. After thinking, they would share their choices with their teacher, and he would interrogate them. "Are you sure you can keep your resolution?" "I'm certain." "Great! I want you to cut it in half."

R' Chatzkel Levenstein intuitively suggests that a human can only be obligated to achieve what is possible within a calendar year, comparing personal growth to a loan paid off in installments. You don't pay the whole mortgage off in one month; that's not how mortgages work.

Maintaining basic, consistent efforts is often more fruitful than seeking dramatic transformations. Improving by just one percent is barely noticeable. In the beginning, there is hardly any difference between making a choice that is one percent better or one percent worse; it won't impact you much today. But as time goes on, these small improvements or declines compound, and you soon find a huge gap between people who make slightly better choices daily and those who don't. If you get one percent better each day, you'll end up thirty-seven times better after one year.

The journey back from the brink of one of the Torah's most significant crises began with a simple half-shekel.

It wasn't much, but it reminds us of the impact of small actions and choices that don't seem to make much of a difference at the time but add up and compound. The small things we stick with are what ultimately shape our long-term trajectory and path forward.

If you're thinking about making some changes, pick one and cut it into something small; just get started and see how far you go.

## Sacred Fire

3 minute read | Straightforward

The Torah reports God's instruction to Moshe to conduct a census of the Jewish People by counting adult males. The conventional methodology of counting is inappropriate for this task, and God orders Moshe to instead use a proxy for counting heads – a half-shekel fixed financial contribution per person. Count the donations, and that's how many people there are – one step removed:

כי תשא אֶת־רֹאשׁ בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לִפְקֻדֵיהֶם וְנָתַנּוּ אִישׁ כֶּפֶר נַפְשׁוֹ לֵה' בַּפְּקֹד אֹתָם וְלֹא־יְהִיָּה בָהֶם נֶגֶף בַּפְּקֹד אֹתָם: – זֶה יִתְּנוּ כָל־הָעֵבֶר עַל־הַפְּקֻדִים מִחֲצִית הַשֶּׁקֶל בַּשֶּׁקֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ עֶשְׂרִים גֵּרָה הַשֶּׁקֶל מִחֲצִית הַשֶּׁקֶל תְּרוּמָה לַה' – “When you take a census of the Israelite men according to their military enrollment, each shall pay the Lord a ransom for himself on being enrolled, that no plague may come upon them through their being enrolled. This is what everyone who is entered in the records shall give: a half-shekel...” (30:12,13)

In almost every instance the Creator speaks, the Torah doesn't lead us to understand that this speech has any physical element, perhaps not even an audible sound. But in the instruction to count the Jewish People, the Torah uses language that is tangibly concrete and physical – זֶה יִתְּנוּ – “This shall they give.”

Sensitive to this nuance, our sages suggest that the Creator pulled a fiery coin in the form of a half-shekel from beneath the Divine Throne and showed it to Moshe – “This.”

We might understand the premise of a vision that helps Moshe practically understand the physical properties of such a coin. But the coin described isn't a metal coin; it is a fiery coin.

Why was the coin made of fire?

Interactions with the Creator commonly feature fire as a standard building block of prophetic vision. Fire is immaterial, visible energy – not to mention dangerous and scary. The effortless control of fire is a powerful symbol of the Creator's total control over the elements and matter.

But our sages' words teach far more than predictable cliché.

Tosfos point out that Moshe had seen money before and understood what a coin was; where he was struggling was the notion that something as mundane and terrestrial as money could affect the soul. The Kotzker suggests that the Creator pulls a fiery coin out from beneath the Divine Throne in response, not because there is power in currency, but in its fire – the fire and spirit that animate the giving is what have the redemptive effect on the soul. “This.”



## TorahRedux

The Noam Elimelech teaches that the point isn't that the specific coin the Creator summoned was made of fire; but that all coin is fire.

Fire is technology, and its use depends on the user and the context. Fire can symbolize creativity, transformation, and destruction; it can mean heat and warmth or burning ruin. Money is also a form of technology, a medium of exchange that facilitate transactions and the exchange of goods and services. Like fire, each exchange is transformative and can be creative or destructive.

It's not wrong to have money. It's not wrong to want money. But it's dangerous to love money, embracing the fire – that's how you burn the house down. It's essential to strike a balance; money is just a tool. It is not just a means to improve your own life but the lives of many others; love the goodness you can do with it.

Our sages teach that righteous people value their money more than their own bodies. R' Meir Shapiro suggests that is because righteous people know how much they can do with it; how many poor families they can feed, and how many communal institutions they can support.

If all coin is like the fiery half-shekel everyone gave, we ought to remember that it symbolized the equality of all community members and was the symbol of their obligations to support the community and its institutions. Your giving must be broad and generous, animated with a spirit that sets your soul on fire.

Our sages teach us that the Creator pulled the coin from beneath the Divine Throne.

Remember that's where it comes from – and be careful not to burn yourself.

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## **Count Me In**

4 minute read | Straightforward

A fair amount of times, the Torah reports that the Jewish People conducted a census, breaking down how many men were in each tribe, and then adds up the subtotals for a total count. It occupies a lot of space in the Torah.

The Ramban explains that taking a census is a basic government function to organize logistics, safety, and military planning.

While that is accurate, the Torah's lessons are timeless and eternal. Of what value to us is the level of detail in the raw statistical data from each census?



The Ramban explains that the information itself is more relevant to daily government, which is probably why it only covered military-age men. But the lesson isn't in the data; it's in the method of counting.

The way they counted was that every individual would have to appear before Moshe and Ahron, and God. The requirement to appear before the entire generation's leadership tells us that those people were not just numbers; they were valuable individuals.

There is a constant interplay between individualism and collectivism. Individualism stresses individual identity and goals; collectivism focuses on group identity and goals, what is best for the collective group. The notion of collectivism and unity – אֶחָדוּת – is all too often propounded to squash individuality, and we mustn't tolerate that. You are not just a cog in a machine, with another human being at the ready to take your place. You are not the property of the state or any group or person.

And as the Lubavitcher Rebbe put it, people are not dollars. You are not fungible. You are not replaceable.

R' Jonathan Sacks highlights the Torah's choice of words for the count – שָׂאוּ אֶת־רֵאשׁוֹ פְּלִיעֵדוֹת / כִּי תִשָּׂא אֶת־רֵאשׁוֹ בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל – literally, “lift the heads.” There are many ways to say “count” in Hebrew; this isn't one of the naturally obvious ones. Again, the Torah seems to be saying that even among the crowd, lift your head up high and proud. To this day, Jews do not count people directly, but instead, count heads.

There is a beautiful and uncommon blessing we say upon seeing a crowd of multitudes – חַכְמֵי הַרְזִים – the knower of secrets, which the Gemara explains as acknowledging God's greatness in knowing each of us in our individual hearts, despite our different faces and minds. This is a subtle but vital point – God is great not because of the glory and sheer size of the crowd, but because God can see each of us as distinct within the sea of all too forgettable faces; God can see the individual within the collective.

It is a blessing in praise of the God who creates diversity in our world, rejoicing in our different minds, opinions, and thoughts. It is a blessing over Jewish pluralism. It is one thing to tolerate our differences; it is quite another to acknowledge them as a blessing. It is one thing to love Jews because we are all Jewish, that is, the same; it is quite another to love Jews because they are different from ourselves.

We cannot tolerate factionalism, where one subgroup splinters from the main group, but we cannot afford to exclude individuals. The Torah makes incredible demands of us, and we mostly fall well short, some a little more, some a little less. We must hold ourselves to the highest standards, but we can never look down at our fellow.



To argue the other side, while we must celebrate individuality, we must not condone individualism. Our duty is to find a balance between being individuals while remaining part of the group. We need to maintain a tension between the need for individual freedom and the demands of others.

The whole idea of loving others is that they are not just like you; if you had to love people like you, that would just be loving yourself and would demand nothing of you. We must reinforce the notion of tolerance of heterogeneity, people not just like us. Diversity is natural; homogeneity is artificial.

God creates all of us as separate individuals, born with a particular makeup and tendencies that mark us as a distinct and unique piece of fate. It is who you are to the core, but some people never become who they truly are; they conform to the tastes of others and end up wearing a mask that hides their true nature. R' Shlomo Farhi teaches that being the same as others is a sacrilege that profanes and squanders who we are put in this world to be.

Loving another is not that I care about someone in my circle who is just like me, and perhaps I have a duty to expand my conception of who is in the circle. That would be loving yourself and would demand nothing of you. Loving another means that someone else's problems bother me so deeply that I simply have to do something about it, and I will be lacking if I do not. The idea of loving another does not include circles – it has nothing to do with people's similarities.

Evolutionary theory teaches that cooperation is as important for survival as competition. You're irreplaceable and unique – but remember that we need you! The strength of the team is each individual. The strength of each individual is the team.

The idea that every Jew is worthy enough to be presented before God and the generation's leadership, that every Jew must lift their head high, is timeless and eternal. Moreover, it teaches a broader lesson that is portable to all and covers women, children, and the elderly as well. The Jewish People are something massively monumental, yet we each have our own significant role to play. We must celebrate each other's unique contributions while striving to do more ourselves.

This illuminates an interesting comment by Rashi, that the point of the census was to discern how many people had survived the plague that followed the Golden Calf debacle. The plague killed a small fraction of the total population figure given in the Torah, so it's strange to talk in terms of "survivors" when only a few succumbed. But if we consider each individual as a core component of the Jewish People, then the Jewish People as a whole really are damaged by the loss of any single person, and the remainder truly are "survivors."

The Baal Shem Tov taught that if the Jewish People are a Sefer Torah, then every Jew is a letter.

The Torah counts everyone. Because everyone counts.



## What We Do With Broken Things

5 minute read | Intermediate

At Mount Sinai, Moshe ascended for forty days to receive the Torah. He didn't show up when the people expected, so they got nervous and clamored for a new religious focal point. In a moment of madness, they crafted a Golden Calf, and in a perplexing turn of events, identified it as the god that brought them out of Egypt.

As they celebrate their new object of attention and worship with a festival of dancing, song, and sacrifice, Moshe returns to our world with the original Ten Commandments, a mythical artifact with magical properties crafted by God's fingers. Moshe enters the camp only to witness these festivities and, utterly horrified, throws down the tablets, permanently shattering them.

With the first tablets broken, Moshe had to repeat the process in an attenuated form; the second tablets are almost second-rate in comparison. Whereas God had crafted the first ones, Moshe – a great human, but still a human – had to prepare the second. The first tablets contained a Torah that humans could never forget; the second ones contain a Torah we forget all the time.

The consequences of the Golden Calf were enormous; God threatened to destroy them all there and then, at least until Moshe intervened. Our sages suggest that the sin was so grave that every bit of human suffering pays down a sliver of the damage done by the Golden Calf.

A common thread people take from this story is the profound loss of what might have been; a more perfect world that never even got a chance to get started. Our sages teach that the letters began peeling off the surface and wafting back to the sky even before Moshe broke the tablets, which is how he understood that his people were no longer worthy.

The lessons of damage and loss are correct but miss something essential.

Moshe shattered the tablets, but what happened to the broken pieces?

When God told Moshe to craft the second set of tablets, God also tells Moshe what to do with them:

וְאָכַתָּב עַל־הַלְּחֹת אֶת־הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ עַל־הַלְּחֹת הָרִאשׁוֹנִים אֲשֶׁר שִׁבַּרְתָּ וְשָׂמְתָם בְּאֲרוֹן  
the tablets the commandments that were on the first tablets that you smashed, and you shall deposit them in the Ark.” (10:2)

Our sages read the instruction to put “them” in the Ark as not only referring to Moshe's second tablets, which are like the first tablets in content; but that the original shattered tablets were like the



הַלַּחַת הָרְאשֹׁנִים אֲשֶׁר שִׁבְרָתָ / וְשִׁמְתָם – second tablets in what Moshe was supposed to do with them – בְּאֶרֶץ.

The broken tablets are not buried, not forgotten, not hidden, and not lost. Instead, they are stored in the Ark, alongside the new, whole second tablets. As one writer beautifully put it, shattered remnants of the past still matter, persist in their importance, and deserve preservation and remembrance, just like something whole.

In this conception, the broken tablets are a striking symbol of brokenness and wholeness coexisting side by side at Judaism's most sacred site. The comprehensive picture of the Golden Calf story and its aftermath should reorient our attitude to broken things and setbacks. It's not a story about breaking things; it's a story about what we do when we break things, and the epilogue is that you pick up the pieces and move forward.

In Japanese culture, there is an art form of restoring broken pottery by gluing the cracks and seams distinctively, often with gold lacquer; breakage and subsequent repair are part of the proud history of the object, rather than something to disguise.

Perhaps the first tablets represent an idealism that crashes into reality and shatters into pieces. While admittedly easy to say, perhaps their example shows that these hopes aren't permanently lost to the ether. Rather than becoming cynical and jaded from traumatic experience and upheaval, discarding the vision of what could have been, you might be able to recover remnants that persist, integrating them with the real world you inhabit. It won't look quite how you thought, but maybe some parts can in certain ways. Sometimes we have to break or let go of what we hoped could be in order to make way for what is and can still become.

Moshe didn't break the tablets out of violent anger; his people and their world simply weren't ready for the first tablets. Letting go of them, however damaging and terrible, was a necessary part of the healing process, paving the way for his people to build a world on a foundation of broken ideals. There's nothing sad about that; that's just the way life is.

The Torah closes with a line of praise for Moshe, the faithful shepherd, endorsing his strength and valor – וְלִכֹּל הַיָּד הַחֲזָקָה וְלִכֹּל הַמּוֹרָא הַגָּדוֹל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה מֹשֶׁה לְעֵינֵי כָל־יִשְׂרָאֵל – Our sages take this as a reference to some of the things Moshe intuited on his own, which God only endorsed after the fact, one of which is breaking the tablets – אֲשֶׁר שִׁבְרָתָ / יִישַׁר כַּחֲךָ שִׁשְׁבְּרָתָ –

On Simchas Torah, after we complete the Torah with that line, we immediately begin again, a new beginning built on breaking, breaking that is holy, breaking that God endorses, and breaking that stands before us and alongside the best we have to offer. From the ashes of this colossal failure, God teaches Moshe how his people can make amends and gives him the formula that features so prominently in our prayers on Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur. The healing from the rupture led to





the Mishkan project, which all subsequent prayer, sacrifice, and worship center around. The remarkable quality of comebacks is not in spite of setbacks; it is because of them.

The Megaleh Amukos notes that the season of repentance and making amends is Ellul, an acronym for the Ark, the tablets, and the broken tablet they sit alongside – ארון לוחת ושברי לוחת / אלול. More to the point, the second tablets are delivered on Yom Kippur itself.

We all break things, and we experience brokenness in different ways over the course of our journey. When we lose someone, that loss leaves a void with their shape imprinted in our hearts, and we carry that brokenness forever. After pain and loss, life goes on, only differently than before; we now live with two sets of tablets.

We might call forgetting and moving on from what we break bouncing back, but that's not how people are; that's not how the world works. Everything leaves its mark; a scratch, a bruise, or sometimes a deep scar or void that never entirely goes away.

Perhaps we're not supposed to bounce back at all; maybe it's better to bounce forward.

Take heart in the image of Moshe on his hands and knees, lovingly gathering the precious fragments, collecting every shard, then gently placing each sacred sliver one by one in the Ark, a brilliant glimmer of hope that lingers for posterity.

The shattered remnants of the past belonged in the Ark, and we ought to remember that the Ark wasn't a mere prop; it featured prominently in the Jewish People's travels and wars. It went out in front of them, leading the way, which is to say that any step forward was paved by the broken tablets as much as the whole tablets.

We live in a world of the second tablets. Although the first ones couldn't exist in their wholeness, they could exist in their brokenness, and maybe we can pick up some of those pieces and find a place for them to help shape our world.

There is no paradox of broken and whole; they coexist in a reciprocal interaction. We must find a way to marry the broken with the whole, hopeful idealism with gritty reality.

Brokenness is not something to conceal or deny; it is an essential part of being human. The moments that break us are as significant to our growth as the moments that make us whole. We can find sanctity not only in whole tablets; but in shattered ones, as well.

If we honor that brokenness and carry it with us, it can become sacred, Holy of Holies. In the words of the Kotzker, there is nothing so whole as a broken heart.



## It's Not Over Til It's Over

5 minute read | Intermediate

With the climactic events at Sinai, the Jewish People heard God's word and received the Torah's laws, along with detailed instructions on how to build a Mishkan. Moshe remained at the summit of the mountain for another forty days, so the people got nervous waiting for him and built themselves a Golden Calf, a debacle that requires its own treatment.

Whatever Moshe and God were in the middle of, they stopped for God to inform Moshe what his people had done. Sending Moshe off the mountain, God declared that He would destroy the Jewish People and start over from Moshe:

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר כִּי שָׁחַת עַמְּךָ אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלִיתָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם: סָרוּ מֵהָר מִן־הַדֶּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתָם עָשׂוּ לָהֶם עֵגֹל מִסָּכָה וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ לָהּ וַיִּזְבְּחוּ לָהּ וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלֶּהָ אֱלֹהֵיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלִינוּךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם: וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה רְאִיתִי – אֶת־הָעָם הַזֶּה וְהִנֵּה עָם־קָשֶׁה־עֲרֹף הוּא: וְעַתָּה הַנִּיחָה לִּי וַיַּחֲרֹאֲפִי בָהֶם וְאָכַלְם וְאַעֲשֶׂה אוֹתָךְ לְגוֹי גָדוֹל – Hashem spoke to Moshe, “Hurry down, for your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt, have acted basely. They have been so quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them. They have made themselves a molten calf and bowed low to it and sacrificed to it, saying: “This is your god, Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!” Hashem further said to Moshe, “I see that this is a stiffnecked people. Now, let Me be, that My anger may blaze forth against them and that I may destroy them, and make of you a great nation.” (32:7-10)

Horrified at the prospect of his people's imminent doom, Moshe argued with God:

וְעַתָּה אִם־תִּשָּׂא חַטָּאתָם וְאִם־אֵין מַחְנִי נָא מִסִּפְרֶךָ אֲשֶׁר כָּתַבְתָּ – “Now, if You will forgive their sin, then well and good; but if not, erase me from the Book You have written!” (32:32)

God concedes the discussion, and Moshe successfully averts a catastrophe. The story continues with the aftermath of the Golden Calf incident and a slow return to normality. But although we know how the story ends and that Moshe was ultimately successful, we shouldn't downplay or gloss over what Moshe did.

Moshe argued with God; God let him win. Each element alone is remarkable. Both elements combined are explosive.

Moshe was intimately familiar with the Almighty, playing an instrumental role in supporting God's raining destruction on Egypt and devastating its military forces, utterly tearing the fabric of nature in the process. Knowing the Creator better than anyone who has ever lived and hearing God commit to destroying the Jewish People, Moshe stood his ground. He picked a fight with God Himself, threatening to resign and walk away from it all if God followed through.

Yet, there was no way for Moshe to think his actions had any serious prospect of success in real-time. The heroism and self-sacrifice it must have taken at that moment ought to send chills down our spine. Where does someone get the boldness to play religious Russian roulette against God Himself? Or put differently, how could Moshe possibly know that this gambit wouldn't backfire spectacularly?

The question is far better than the answer because there is no indication that Moshe had any knowledge of that effect. He simply refused to accept the finality of a national death sentence and took a chance in the hope that God would let him win.

There is a deeply pertinent lesson here. Far too often, well-meaning people end up excusing or justifying other people's suffering as "meant to be," resigning those unfortunate souls to destiny and fate. Yet Moshe literally heard God Himself impose a death sentence, and he still challenged it. The unequivocal moral of Moshe's standoff against God is that we must not accept what is "meant to be" because if that information even exists, humans can not access it. As we so clearly see, even if you heard the words uttered directly from God, you still wouldn't actually know what God truly intended to do.

The Gemara teaches that even if a sword rests upon someone's neck, they should not stop praying and should still hold on to the hope that their prayers will be answered.

None of this is to say that God wasn't serious. However, a characteristic we learn from God in this story and others, including Avraham concerning Sodom, is that God may pose something unconscionable to us as a prompt we are challenged to take issue with. R' Shlomo Farhi highlights how our heroes and role models never suspended their internal moral compasses, even when it brought them to the point of directly questioning God. Avraham took his opportunity, and God welcomed a discussion. Moshe took the opportunity here, and God not only welcomed the discussion but went on to explain how the Jewish People could make amends long into the future. When we fail to take the prompt, it results in needless suffering and misery, which Noach is the classic archetype of.

R' Jonathan Sacks explains that it is beyond human comprehension to understand suffering in the world; because if we could understand it, then we would accept it. There is no satisfactory answer to injustice, but asking the question might make us do something about it. If there's any nobility in accepting suffering with grace, there is only cruelty in accepting the suffering of others.

After winning his argument with God, Moshe asked for greater understanding, but God cryptically answered that we could only see God in hindsight. This suggests that Moshe's bold and hopeful intuition was correct; we shouldn't just accept things because that's the way it is. God's response is encouraging, not discouraging – our honed intuition is the absolute zenith of human apprehension. Don't take it lying down as Noach did, and if you don't win, then like Avraham, you'll know you did all you possibly could. We cannot know what God will do, and we cannot see God in real-time, only in hindsight. This concept underlies the entire notion of Teshuva – our fate is not predetermined, and



## TorahRedux

we can directly influence it; use your judgment, and don't justify things that don't feel right as destiny and fate.

The Leshem teaches that Moshe's exchange teaches that understanding God is simply beyond human grasp; it is not a symptom of some failure, but rather a constitutive element of being human. As so many of our prophets make clear, God is not like us; not just different, but fundamentally unlike, utterly inscrutable and incomprehensible, not just in part, but entirely at all – כי לא מחשבתי מחשבותיכם.

Finally, to understand Moshe's boldness, we must recognize that the position he took was brimming with hope. Hope locates itself in the premise that we don't know what will happen and that there is room for us to act in the spaciousness of uncertainty. Hope is an embrace of the unknown and the unknowable, an alternative to the certainty of both optimists and pessimists, who both excuse themselves from acting. Hope depends on a degree of uncertainty; otherwise, it would be prediction, expectation, or even knowledge. Moshe had hope because even though he heard God say the words, he still wasn't sure that was the end. Think about that for a second; God can tell you something will happen, and you still couldn't be sure that it will! And from this story, we know that God endorses this view.

As Kierkegaard said, life must be lived forwards, but can only be understood backwards.

When events are still unfolding, there is simply no way for humans to determine what God's plan is, so there is equally no need to act like anything is God's plan for as long as you can still do something about it; the stories of our heroes and legendary figures should empower us to boldly act with the hope they once had.

Because it's not over until it's over.

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## **Taboo**

5 minute read | Advanced

The materials procurement process is one of the painstakingly detailed aspects of the Mishkan's planning and development. Aside from the sections about fundraising, the Torah includes a public ledger accounting for all sources and uses, recording where every last donation ended.

While not precisely gripping, there is a discrepancy in how the Torah accounts for how they utilized the donations of bronze:

וְנִחַשְׁתָּ הַתְּנוּפָה שִׁבְעִים כֶּכֶר וְאַלְפִים וָאַרְבַּע־מֵאוֹת שֶׁקֶל. וַיַּעַשׂ בָּהּ אֶת־אֲדָנֵי פֶתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וְאֵת מִזְבַּח הַנְּחֹשֶׁת וְאֵת־מִכְבַּר הַנְּחֹשֶׁת אֲשֶׁר־לוֹ וְאֵת כָּל־כְּלֵי הַמִּזְבֵּחַ. וְאֶת־אֲדָנֵי הַחֹצֵר סָבִיב וְאֶת־אֲדָנֵי שַׁעַר הַחֹצֵר וְאֵת הַדּוֹנָת הַבְּרֹזֶת שָׁמָּה – The donated bronze came to 70 talents and 2,400 shekels. From it, he made the sockets for the entrance of the Tent of Meeting; the bronze altar and its bronze grating and all the utensils of the altar; the sockets of the enclosure and the sockets of the gate of the enclosure; and all the pegs of the Mishkan and all the pegs of the enclosure. (38:29-31)

The Abarbanel notes that we know of a bronze vessel that doesn't feature on this list, the washbasin. It is categorized separately from the general bronze accounting because this bronze didn't come from the main bronze operating account; it came from a wholly separate source from the rest of the general fund:

וַיַּעַשׂ אֶת הַכִּיּוֹר נְחֹשֶׁת וְאֵת כְּנֹס הַנְּחֹשֶׁת בְּמִרְאֵת הַצַּבָּאוֹת אֲשֶׁר צָבְאוּ פֶתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד – He made the washbasin and its stand of bronze, from the mirrors of the women who amassed at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. (38:8)

Rashi quotes a fascinating Midrash that when the women of Israel wanted to donate their makeup mirrors to the Mishkan fund, Moshe considered rejecting these mirrors since they are, on their face, tools of immodesty. Notionally correct, humans use cosmetics to enhance their appearance aesthetically. While not the same, physical attractiveness is tightly correlated with sexual attractiveness, so cosmetics and makeup, superficially at least, serve the purposes of desire and lust, which are more aligned with the evil inclination – תאוה. But despite this, God interceded and instructed Moshe to readily accept these mirrors, declaring them the dearest of all contributions.

The subtext of this unusual vignette is that when the enslaved men in Egypt were exhausted and spent from backbreaking forced labor, they no longer wanted to be with their wives, the thought being that with no more children, their misery would come to an end. To counter this, the women would bring their husbands food and drink and use these personal makeup mirrors to seduce them with great success, directly resuscitating the imperiled future of the Jewish People. Rather than perceiving these actions as mere gratuitous and mundane acts of the flesh, God recognized their heroic courage and bravery in the Jewish People's hour of great need.

Let's recall the stated point of Pharaoh's enslavement of the Jewish People was for population control; their fertility was a threat, so Egypt pursued oppressive policies to suppress it. But it didn't work, and this teaching credits the brave Jewish women for that. It also suggests that even the most accomplished leader could fail to recognize their true value, but as our sages ultimately conclude, the Jewish People were saved from Egypt on the merit of righteous women.

R' Shamshon Raphael Hirsch highlights the profound significance of how even something as mundane as a mirror, a symbol that draws attention to the human body as an object of sensual desire, can be co-opted and integrated into Divine service.

The symbolism goes deep; the washbasin functions to consecrate hands and feet, which means we can elevate and refine our simple flesh and blood bodies. There is no separate track for holy things – we create holiness through our actions and footsteps. The mirrors we might have thought of as a source of impurity are sacred and become the washbasin, the source of purity.

The separate accounting of the women’s bronze mirrors contains an essential and illuminating insight into the role of intimacy. It’s taboo to discuss, tainted as it so often is with guilt and shame, and yet one of its tools became not only a central feature in the Mishkan but quite plausibly the dearest donation of the lot!

It is imperative to separate what’s kosher from what’s not, right from wrong. The laws of איסורי ביאה and עריות are incredibly severe and have catastrophic consequences highlighted by, among others, Hoshea and Yirmiyahu. They matter! But we must remember that the very first commandment from God to humans is to be fruitful and multiply. The Sefer Hachinuch observes that the mitzvah’s essential nature is that God desires a world populated with life. This is intuitive because we are designed to precisely that specification, like every other living thing. It’s a defining feature of being a living thing!

Judaism is highly focused on the purity of our sexuality. Adam and Eve were created naked and felt no shame until they ate from the Tree of Knowledge later in the story. There was nothing intrinsically wrong about their bodies, so there was no guilt or shame associated with them; they were living expressions of holiness even in their natural state. Only once they gained a deeper perception and understanding of consciousness could they comprehend that sexuality could be immoral and their nakedness could be shameful and embarrassing.

We often childishly characterize Satan as this evil other at odds with God’s purposes, but this could not be more wrong. Satan is a trusted member in good standing of God’s forces and has a decisive and vital role to play in the universe’s destiny. Nechama Leibowitz teaches that the same impulses that lead to destruction can equally lead to sanctity – building our families and perpetuating the future. Our sages recognized the need to serve God with our better and worse inclinations – בְּכָל-לִבְבָךְ – literally, “hearts,” in the plural.

While we may categorize desire as originating in the baser or evil inclination, we must recognize its necessity as an essential precursor to life, to the extent that the Midrash labels that evil inclination as “very good.” Like eating or drinking, it is a fundamental biological driving force that is integrated and synonymous with being alive. When controlled and channeled in the appropriate context, it can be sacred.

R’ Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz teaches that Judaism does not exist to quell or quash the forces of human nature; the constraints of the Torah’s laws leave room for those forces to be beneficial and constructive. As the famous song goes, beauty and grace are vain but vain only in the sense that they



## TorahRedux

are transient, that there is more to life than preoccupation with your image. But vain doesn't mean bad; beauty is a gift, and modesty should not be a denial or rejection of it.

We may even think that beauty, desire, and sexuality are good in our homes but still inappropriate in the Mishkan, a place where we strive to be above any distraction and focus on God, where physical impulses should remain outside. And yet, speaking directly to this notion, Rashi and our sages straightforwardly and unambiguously point out that God does not see it that way. If we still think it's inappropriate, we need to recalibrate – קַבֵּל, כִּי אֱלֹהֵי חֻבִּיבִיּוֹן עָלֵי מִן הַכֹּל.

Human desire can be elevated into the sanctified life force of Judaism, showcased by the persistence of the Jewish women who saved the Jewish people.

The separate treatment of the women's makeup mirrors highlights that intimacy and everything associated with it can be sacred and what God considers among the dearest thing we have.

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

*I hope you enjoyed this week's thoughts. If you have questions or comments, or just want to say hello, it's a point of pride for me to hear from you, and I'll always respond.*

*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.