

## **Matos Massei 2023**

### **The Steward of Your Future**

2 minute read | Straightforward

As the Jewish People approached the borders of Israel, Moshe knew he didn't have much time left in this world.

It was important to prime the next generation for what would lie ahead. He retold their entire history, as recorded in the book of Deuteronomy, a Greek word literally meaning the restatement.

One of the first things he talks to them about is one of the last things he did; just before they got to Israel, he designated sanctuary cities where perpetrators of accidental crimes could flee and find refuge from the strict letter of the law.

Sure, it's an important law, but why is it a part of his ethics speech at all?

We all have dreams and goals of what we want to achieve and who we want to be. And we procrastinate out of fear of failure or even fear of the reality of our own potential greatness. We doubt we can succeed, and the future seems uncertain. What if we fail? And after all, if we fail, then what's the point of starting?

This line of thinking handicaps us all the time.

In sharp contrast, Moshe had no doubts about his future – and not for the better. He knew with as much certainty as a human could ever hope to have that he would not set foot into the Land of Israel, and he had gone as far as he could, and his time had come.

And he still made plans for a future he knew he would not participate in, a future that only others would ever be able to practice and enjoy.

It's at the beginning of his ethics speech because it's one of the most important things a human has to know, and Moshe knew it, which is why it's at the beginning of his last public address, imploring the people to uphold good ethics to build a future that would last.

We may not have accomplished what we set out to do; we may not have gotten where we thought we ought to be by now. But if there is something available to you to do, just do it.



Don't do it to succeed, do it because it's the right thing to do, and do it even if it's only a step in the right direction.

The future is a commons that is best cared for in the present.

You are a steward of the future whether you like it or not, and whether you participate in it or not; you are carrying the yoke of the future here and now, today. Every single thing you do, every single day, compounds into the future that materializes – for better and for worse.

The future is sensitive. Deferring progress or responsibility compounds building an inactivity debt that requires a lot of future effort to undo before you can progress.

How many people can give their all to a project they won't benefit from? Taking care of the future without self-interest is hard, but that's the mindset Moshe showed us thousands of years ago for a future he would not be a part of.

A society grows great when old men plant trees whose shade they know they shall never sit in.

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## **Not All Those Who Wander Are Lost**

3 minute read | Straightforward

There are parts of the Torah that we all love, with fond memories of the wonder of learning them for the first time, like the Creation story, Avraham's first encounters with God, the Ten Plagues, and Sinai. Hopefully, it's not sacrilegious to observe that some parts are a little less riveting, like the Mishkan's design-build, the laws of sacrifices, and the 42 locations in the wilderness the Jewish People visited on their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land:

אֵלֶּה מִסְעֵי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר יָצְאוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לְצִבְאוֹתָם בְּיַד־מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן  
(33:1)

It's worth asking what the point of this is. The Torah is not a history journal; it exists to teach all people for all time. Here we are, 3000 years later, tediously reading about rest stops.

Why does it matter at all?

In a sense, it's the wrong question to ask, and it betrays the kind of thinking we are all guilty of.



## TorahRedux

We have this expectation and perception of linear progress, consciously or not, that our lives should be a straight road, leading directly and smoothly to our destination. What's more, we are relentlessly focussed on the outcome, where we are going. And then we get frustrated and feel sabotaged when invariably, it doesn't pan out that way!

But this is a stiff and unrealistic view of not only progress but life itself. Progress is incremental and organic, not linear or mechanical.

If you've ever driven long-distance, there are a few things you just know. You can't go straight as the crow flies, so you know you're going to have to follow the signs that guide your way carefully to get to the right place. You know you will probably miss an exit when you're not paying attention, and it'll cost you 15 minutes rerouting until you are back on track. You know you will need to stop for gas and bathroom breaks. You know there will be long stretches of open road where you can cruise, and there will be times you will get stuck in traffic. You know you will have to get off the highway at some point and take some small unmarked local streets. We know this.

We trivialize the journey, and we really mustn't. Sure, there are huge one-off watershed moments in our lives; but the moments in between matter as well – they're not just filler! While they might not be our final glorious destination, the small wins count and stack up.

The Sfas Emes notes how the Torah highlights each step we took to put Egypt behind us – **מִסְעֵי** **בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל** **אֲשֶׁר** **יָצְאוּ** **מֵאֶרֶץ** **מִצְרַיִם**. We might not get where we're going so quickly – but if Egypt is behind us, then that means we must still be moving forwards. As we get further away from our point of origin, we should keep it in the rearview mirror to orient us as a reference point to remind us that we're headed in the right direction. However long it takes to get where we're going, and however bumpy and curved the road is, it's important to remember why we got started in the first place.

The 42 stops along the way were not the optimal way to get from Egypt to Israel. It doesn't take 40 years to travel from Egypt to Israel. But it happened that way, and the Torah tells us this for 3000 years and posterity because that's the way life is, and we can disavow ourselves of the notion that progress or life should somehow be linear. The process is not a necessary evil – it is the fundamental prerequisite to getting anywhere, even if it's not where we expected, and it's worth paying attention to.

We put Egypt behind us one step at a time. We get to the Promised Land one step at a time. Any step away from Egypt is a substantial achievement – even if it's not a step in the physical direction of the Promised Land, it truly is a step towards the Promised Land.

The journey is anything but direct, and there are lots of meandering stops along the way. It might seem boring and unnecessary – I left Egypt, and I'm going to Israel! But that's the kind of thinking we have to short circuit. It's not a distraction – it's our life.

Life isn't what happens when you get there; life is every step along the way.



## 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 – מדבר.

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

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

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

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

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

The Hebrew root word for “thing” and “word” is identical – 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:

מכל הבהמה הטהורה, תקח-לך שבעה שבעה-איש ואשתו; ומן-הבהמה אשר לא טהרה הוא, שנים-איש ואשתו – 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” – אשר לא 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 מאלקי: 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 – וַיֹּאמֶר ה' סְלַח־לִּי כִּדְבָרְךָ –

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

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

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

They're the only thing that ever has.

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## **Sharing the Load**

5 minute read | Straightforward

The Torah's story traces the origin of the Jewish People, from the dawn of humanity, through our first ancestors and their families, to their eventual subjugation in Egypt. These stories revolve around the struggle to realize God's promise for their children to live peacefully and securely in their homeland.

The homeland is a core driver of the Torah's entire story, it's where the story has been heading from the beginning. With the people stuck in Egypt, God rescues them by sending Moshe to overthrow the world's most powerful civilization and empire with the aid of transparently magical and supernatural forces, which sustain the Jewish People through years of wandering through a barren wasteland, until they finally make it to the border of the Promised Land. This is the culmination of the Torah's story, and there is going to be a profound transition.

They'll have to fend for themselves to a much larger extent, and Moshe won't be able to join. They won't be wanderers anymore; they will be colonists and settlers. It's been a long ride, but they have finally made it.

The trouble is, no sooner than they're even in sight of the place when a good twenty percent of the people decide that after all that, they don't really want the Promised Land after all.

Clans from Reuven, Gad, and Menashe take a fancy to the wrong side of the border, which is just too perfect for all their sheep and cattle. So they ask Moshe if they can settle there and relinquish any claim to the Land of Israel, a request that seems as breathtaking in its audacity as its stupidity.

They turn their back on the literal Promised Land God had promised them and their ancestors. They turn their back on the fulfillment of their ancestors' hopes and dreams, the promise that was an essential part of their heritage and identity. They even turn their back on respectable values – the Midrash observes that they asked to build stables for their cattle before mentioning settlements for their children, suggesting that they cherished their money more than human life.

What's more, to refuse the Promised Land is not just to choose a different physical path but, by definition, a very different spiritual path as well; they arguably turn their back on God in a certain sense. Years later, the book of Joshua records a story where they have to prove that they still believe in the God of Israel – because that was in question to a certain extent.

Not to mention, entering the Land of Israel is a sensitive topic for Moshe. It's the thing he is most desperate for, something he prayed countless times for trying to persuade God, and the one instance God refused Moshe and his prayers. These people have his dream within reach, and they don't even want it!

It's hard to overstate what a betrayal this was, and Moshe treats it as such. Perhaps the only reason it doesn't end with the devastation and death that so many similar biblical stories have is that this group didn't act impetuously; they sought guidance and permission from Moshe. But that doesn't make the ask any less disturbing. And perhaps in a sense, asking permission is worse, because at least in the other instances, they were hungry or impassioned!

This interaction is one of Moshe's last – he's not going to the Promised Land; he knows this is the end of the line for him, and this will be one of his final lessons. It's unquestionably one of his most timeless and essential.

Moshe doesn't take them to task for turning their back on the Promised Land, God, their heritage, their ancestors, or for overrating wealth. He could have set them straight on any or all of those counts, but he doesn't.

He takes them to task for turning their back on their brothers:



וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה לְבְנֵי־גַד וְלְבְנֵי רְאוּבֵן הֲאֵחִיכֶם יָבֹאוּ לְמִלְחָמָה וְאַתֶּם תֵּשְׁבוּ פֹה – Moses replied to the Gadites and the Reubenites, “Shall your brothers go to war while you remain here?!” (32:6)

In this interaction, Moshe emphasizes the foundational concepts of brotherhood, collective identity, loyalty, and sharing the burden of responsibility.

From the beginning, Moshe’s core defining characteristic is loyalty to his people. He sees someone getting beaten and risks his life to intervene and protect an otherwise total stranger. He sees his people suffering for too long and boldly accuses God of gratuitous cruelty towards his brothers – לָמָּה לָמָּה הָרַעַתָּה לְעַם הַזֶּה לָמָּה זֶה שְׁלַחְתָּנִי וְעַתָּה אִם־תִּשָּׂא הַטָּאתָם וְאִם־אֵין – When they lose their way at the Golden Calf, God threatens their destruction, and Moshe sticks up for them, responding with his own threat – מִחַנֵּי נָא מִסְפָּרָךְ.

Nobody could be more qualified than Moshe to talk about loyalty; and no lesser than God testifies to Moshe’s fidelity, not just to his employer but to his people as well – עֲבָדֵי מֹשֶׁה בְּכָל־בֵּיתִי נֹאמְרֵי הוּא – In sharp contrast, the villainous Bilam is mocked as a faithless man loyal to nobody but the highest bidder – בַּלְעָם / בַּלֵּא עַם.

Our sages teach that all of Israel is interconnected – כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל עֲרֻבִים זֶה בְּזֶה – suggesting not just connected or linked things, but something gestalt, a new entity, wholly integrated into itself. Our sages liken the Jewish People to a boat – if there is a hole in the hull, we recognize the entire vessel, not just the hull, is in danger and requires your immediate attention and repair.

This story is explicitly political; Moshe expressly rejects the individualistic mentality of self-interested autonomy and liberty. It is wrong to enjoy yours before helping your brothers get theirs; your duty and responsibility are to help them get theirs too, and when we organize our societies, people with a libertarian skew ought to remember Moshe’s words.

The premise of Moshe’s rhetoric is that it is selfish to take without giving back, that it is a self-evident dishonor and disgrace to abandon your brothers to their fates without facing the challenge alongside them. Regardless of your personal beliefs, this orientation is why Chabad volunteers and kiruv professionals set up Jewish infrastructure across the planet and why Israeli citizens commonly take a firm stance on the central importance of national military service.

It is important to note that collective responsibility has an outer boundary; the notion of collective responsibility in guilt is fundamentally problematic and a critical ingredient in genocidal and totalitarian thinking – the Church used such reasoning to justify centuries of antisemitic oppression. The only proper basis for blame and fault is an individual’s moral responsibility, but collective responsibility can still be a helpful concept regarding proactive direction. We didn’t destroy the Temple; that’s not our fault. But we’re collectively responsible for why it hasn’t been rebuilt yet, and we can channel our energies to do better.





Moshe's emphasis on the responsibility between brothers is the culmination of another central theme of the Torah; the Genesis stories open with Cain asking the existential, haunting, and unanswered question – “Am I my brother's keeper?”. Genesis tells the stories of generations of families that could not learn to keep each other until Yehuda breaks the cycle and risks everything to stand up and be a keeper for his brother Binyamin.

Moshe's rhetoric in this story is another firm indication that, yes, you are your brother's keeper; and if you missed that, you haven't been paying attention. It's one of the most important interactions you can have; remembering your brother might be one of the simplest rules in life, but it is certainly one of the hardest for us to practice.

The distorted spirituality and wayward values reflected in the choice to refuse the Promised Land were problematic but somewhat tolerable for Moshe. But disloyalty to their brothers, any loosening of the connection and identity with the greater Jewish People, was a bridge too far.

You might not want to be so observant, or you might not want to sign up for the Israeli army; those might be reasonable personal choices – אַל תִּדוֹן אֶת חֲבֵרְךָ עַד שֶׁתִּגִּיעַ לְמִקוּמוֹ. But you can't choose to avoid your contribution to the Jewish People's well-being.

Make no mistake, there is a war out there. Our brothers and sisters are on the front lines battling the forces of assimilation, abuse, apathy, ignorance, illness, intermarriage, and poverty. You probably know your capabilities, and you may or may not have the skills and experience to be a front-line activist, advocate, coordinator, educator, or fundraiser. But honestly consider what you have to offer the Jewish People on any of those fronts, small or large, and remember what one of Moshe's last teachings asks us.

Shall your brothers go to war while you remain over here?

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

5 minute read | Straightforward

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

There's a valuable lesson here.

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

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

R' Shlomo Farhi notes that our sages taught a form of stand your ground doctrine; when someone is coming to kill you, you can use deadly force and kill them first. But even that is tempered with a caveat that if you have the ability to neutralize them without killing them, you aren't permitted to use



deadly force. De facto, it's fully conceivable that in the heat of the moment, there is a split-second decision and you can't afford to be precise, but de jure, the point stands that even when force is authorized, there is no free pass. Our sages require scholars to stand up for themselves in the way a snake does; snakes have no sense of taste or smell, and a scholar's self-defense must be free of petty vindictiveness – תלמיד חכם שאינו נוקם ונוטר כנחש, אינו תלמיד חכם.

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

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

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

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

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## **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



## TorahRedux

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 רֵאשֶׁון 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 רֵאשֶׁון 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 / הַיּוֹמָה – which our sages take to mean as references to Teshuva, our capacity and power to change and repent – ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ שֶׁאֵל מְעַמְּדֶךָ כִּי יִבְרָא אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵהָאָדָם הַיּוֹם אֵם-בְּקִלּוֹ תִשְׁמְעוּ – אֵם-לְיָרְאָה. Because in one day, everything can change –

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.

## Thought of the Week

If you're feeling some stress today, over a job or business that is well-compensated and provides a nice life....remember pressure is a privilege. There are people who would love to be in your seat & you have a great baseline to rework if you want to. Start there.

— Dr Julie Gurner, @DrGurner, [Ultra Successful](#)

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

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

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

Neli

**PS** - TorahRedux is my pride and joy, the product of thousands of hours of learning, research, writing, editing, and formatting. My business, Hendon Advisors, allows me to dedicate time to 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.