



## Vayakhel; Pekudei; Shabbos Mevarchim 2023

### 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 used other numeral systems and calendars to measure time. Today, most of the world uses the Gregorian calendar, a fixed calendar determined by how long the earth takes to make one complete orbit around the sun.

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

הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לְכֶם רֵאשִׁית חֳדָשִׁים רְאשֹׁן הוּא לְכֶם לְחֹדֶשֶׁי 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 לְכֶם רֵאשִׁית חֳדָשִׁים רְאשֹׁן הוּא לְכֶם לְחֹדֶשֶׁי 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



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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 – היום / ועתה – which our sages take to mean as references to Teshuva, our capacity and power to change and repent – ה' אלקיך שאל מעמך כי – ואתה ישראל מה ה' אלקיך שאל מעמך כי – ואנחנו עם מרעיתו וצאן ידו היום אם בקליו תשמעו – אם-ליראה. Because in one day, everything can change – ואנחנו עם מרעיתו וצאן ידו היום אם בקליו תשמעו – אם-ליראה.

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.

## Your Heart in the Right Place

3 minute read | Straightforward

In every field of human civilization, there are discoveries, technologies, and people that changed everything.

The printing press permanently slashed the cost of information, commoditizing and dramatically expanding the reach of human knowledge. Antibiotics and vaccination neutralized the dangers of the historically leading causes of human death. The internet has transformed how we communicate.

Closer to home, Rashi opened up our literature to the masses. The Rambam organized and synthesized broad and divergent streams of lore and thought into cohesive and comprehensive works of law and philosophy. Aish HaTorah and Ohr Someach demonstrated the urgency of outreach to combat the attrition wrought by assimilation. Chabad put a Jewish embassy in every major city on the planet.



These are all remarkable feats, and they should speak to something deep within us; who hasn't once dreamed of making an impact and leaving the world better off for it? Even once we have matured past the stage of wanting to make the world in our image, we still have ambitions; and we eventually face the question of how we can hope to succeed at those ambitious goals.

It's a familiar question because it's universal.

How are you going to succeed at that?

This line of thinking is common and garbs itself in the language of realism. But this line of thinking is actually pessimism in disguise, and ironically, often grants people the certainty they need to excuse themselves from getting started.

Survivorship bias is real. While it's not strictly wrong to say that the number of people who are fortunate enough to successfully pull off massive accomplishments is small, what they all have in common is that they got started, which might be half the battle – לא עליך המלאכה לגמור, ולא אתה בן חורין – ליבטל ממנה. Rashi himself wrote dismissively of people who say it's impossible to finish Shas; the only way it's ever been done is a couple of pages per session.

But there is something else to it as well.

Our sages suggest that the designer in chief of the Mishkan, Bezalel, was exceptionally gifted and perhaps even supernaturally clairvoyant. But when the Torah describes the architects and artisans, the common craftsmen and contributors of the Mishkan construction project, it consistently refers to one unifying characteristic of the men and women who rose to the occasion:

וַיִּקְרָא מֹשֶׁה אֶל-בְּצַלְאֵל וְאֶל-אֹהֲלִיאֵב וְאֵל כָּל-אִישׁ חֲכָמִים לֵב אֲשֶׁר נָתַן ה' חֲכֵמָה בְּלִבּוֹ כֹּל אֲשֶׁר נִשְׂאוֹ לְבוֹ לְקַרְבָּה אֶל-הַמִּלְאכָה לַעֲשׂוֹת אֹתָהּ: – Moshe called Bezalel and Oholiav, and every skilled person whom Hashem had endowed with skill in his heart, everyone who had given their hearts to undertake the task and carry it out. (36:2)

The Ramban notes that the working population of that moment consisted of freed slaves, who only had experience in manual labor – they were not skilled in metallurgy or textiles! Yet the Torah consistently describes their technical skill as a feature of having a heart for the task in question – חֲכָמִים לֵב. The Chafetz Chaim suggests that in doing so, the Torah subtly recognizes the skill of these volunteers as a product not of experience, but of desire; their hearts were in the right place – נָתַן ה' אֹתָהּ. חֲכָמָה בְּלִבּוֹ כֹּל אֲשֶׁר נִשְׂאוֹ לְבוֹ לְקַרְבָּה אֶל-הַמִּלְאכָה לַעֲשׂוֹת אֹתָהּ.

The Mishkan volunteers could succeed at something unprecedented with no relevant experience because God granted the requisite skill to the people whose hearts were in the right place and whose hearts were invested in the project. R' Noach Weinberg similarly encourages us to invest heart into our undertakings and trust that God sends us the fortune and wisdom required to succeed – יגעתי ולא מצאתי אל תאמן. If we want the right things for the right reasons, why wouldn't we throw ourselves in the deep end and hope for the best?



The Malbim suggests that all we truly can give is our all, and it's true enough of most things. Who can accomplish the impossible? The people who want it badly enough – רחמנא ליבא בעי. Our Sages taught that you could have anything you want if you want it badly enough – אין דבר עומד בפני הרצון – If you want it badly enough, you'll find a way; and if you don't, you'll find an excuse – בדרך שאדם רוצה לילך מוליכין – אותו.

We all have big goals, and if we expect to influence the quality of our lives, we must be proactive. But what are the chances you get what you want if you don't go after it? And crucially, what are the chances you get it if you go about it half-heartedly?

If you want to succeed, your heart has to be in the right place, and you have to go all-in.

## Attitude Redux

4 minute read | Straightforward

During the Jewish People's time in the desert, God gave various commands.

We expect God to give commands; it comes with the territory, that's what God does, and it makes sense. They'd just left Egypt and stood at Sinai; there was a new religion with new procedures and protocols to implement. And after all, there's no way to know what God wants unless God says so!

What God says, we expect the audience to do, which the Torah dutifully records – וַיַּעַשׂ כֵּן.

But what we might not expect is that the Torah reports with meticulous regularity, every time, not just that people obey, but that people carry out their task as per God's command – וַיַּעַשׂ כֵּן כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה'. The Torah uses this phrase tens, if not hundreds, of times!

If you think about it, it's almost entirely redundant, apart from the repetitiveness. It's not obvious what doing something per God's command adds because, in nearly every example, there is no other conceivable way to do it.

When God says to light the Menora, there is only one way to light a Menora. When God says to take a census of how many people there are, the only way to fulfill the command is to count people. When God says to bring a Korban Pesach, or how to do the Yom Kippur service, or any of the Mishkan-related workflows, or to go to war with Midian, or to execute somebody, there isn't any other way to do any of those things! And yet each time, the Torah doesn't say people followed their instructions; it says that the people followed their instructions faithfully as per God's command – וַיַּעַשׂ כֵּן כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה'.

When people follow instructions, why does the Torah add that they followed the instructions per God's command?

Perhaps the Torah isn't telling us that they did it; it's telling us how they did it.

R' Shlomo Farhi explains that even when there truly is only one way to do something, there is still a right and wrong way. When the Torah adds that people followed instructions faithfully – כְּאִשֶּׁר צִוָּה ה' – it's not saying that they did just like they were told; it means that people follow instructions just like when they were told, capturing the snapshot of sentiment or feeling of a particular moment.

When you do anything, even if there's no other way, you can still do it with energy, focus, and joy, or not – a right way and a wrong way, even when there's only one way.

Our sages were sensitive to this subtle but universal nuance.

Rashi quotes the Sifri that Ahron lit the Menora every day, precisely the way Moshe told him for the rest of his life, and never changed or deviated in any way – כְּאִשֶּׁר צִוָּה ה'; the Sifri suggests that our everyday approach to Torah should similarly be with freshness and excitement – וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר – אֲנֹכִי מְצַוֶּה הַיּוֹם עַל־לְבָבְךָ.

R' Simcha Bunim of Peshischa notes that as much as the comment is about Ahron not changing how he performed his duties, it's equally a comment about how his duties didn't change him. Some people let privilege and honor get to their heads – but not Ahron.

The Sfas Emes notes that lighting the Menora wasn't a particularly prestigious ceremony in that any Kohen could kindle the lights. Still, Ahron took it seriously enough that he insisted on doing it himself every day for the rest of his life – he did it like the moment he received the command.

The Ishbitza notes that the highest praise for Ahron is that he retained that initial desire, that things never got stale or boring for him. He kept challenging himself to find something new and exciting, so he lit the Menora his last time with the same enthusiasm as the first.

The Shem mi'Shmuel notes that the word for training, which means practice repetitions, is cognate to the word for inauguration, the first time you do something – חִינוּךְ / חֲנוּכָה. This suggests that training is not simply a repeat of past performance but the repetition of newness, with each repetition inviting an opportunity to introduce a fresh aspect or dimension.

Attitude and mentality are everything; the mental and emotional components heavily influence the substance of any interaction. Prayer and sacrifice require proper intent to have any substance; there is a vast difference between giving someone a hand because you care and giving someone a hand out of pity.

A Torah scroll is quite clearly a religious article, yet it has no inherent sanctity from perfect script or spelling. A Torah scroll is kosher and sacred exclusively when written with the express intent of



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imbuing the words and scroll with sanctity, which is to say that its utility and value as a holy object are solely determined by the mentality of the scribe.

The Mishkan had plenty of unique artifacts like the Menora, but it had some pretty ordinary implements that everyone owns; a shirt, a hat, a cup, and a spoon. What designated these as sacred and distinct is the intention with which they were crafted.

This is a universal truth in all walks of life, from Judaism to art to cooking. A great cook will say their secret ingredient is love; a great artist or sage will say their secret technique is heart and soul.

In the words of Martin Luther King Jr., if a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as a Michelangelo painted, Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, 'Here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well.'

Mastery is typically boring. Finishing your fiftieth marathon is less notable than your first.

It's normal.

The more we experience something, our enthusiasm and attention typically wane. Predictability and comfort put an end to fresh euphoria; when we know what to expect, our excitement wears off, and boredom sets in. That's why we need to keep things fresh if we're focused on a long-term project or goal; cruise control is a killer.

It's often seen with young athletes or scholars who lose their way – they think they've made it and stop putting in the work that would take them to the elite tier. The seasoned pros always comment on how essential it is for youngsters to maintain their concentration and focus on staying on track, being fully present in each moment, and devoting their full and undivided attention, so things don't get boring.

In all walks of life, the highest form of mastery is valuing each repetition and finding the novelty and excitement in it.

It's not redundant for the Torah to say each time that people did the right thing in the right way for the right reason. It is ubiquitous because it reflects a truism of life, a constant reminder that is universally true.

The way you do things matters.

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## **Taboo**

5 minute read | Straightforward

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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:

וּנְחֹשֶׁת הַתְּנוּפָה שְׁבָעִים כֶּכֶר וְאַלְפִים וָאַרְבַּע־מֵאוֹת שֶׁקֶל. וַיַּעַשׂ בָּהּ אֶת־אֲדָנֵי פֶתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וְאֵת מִזְבַּח הַנְּחֹשֶׁת וְאֶת־מִכְבַּר הַנְּחֹשֶׁת אֲשֶׁר־לוֹ  
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 there is a bronze vessel we know of 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 כְּנֹו הַנְּחֹשֶׁת בְּמִרְאֵת הַצְּבָאוֹת 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 speaking. 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 – תאווה. 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 simply perceiving these actions as mere gratuitous and mundane acts of the flesh, God recognized their heroic valor 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 say, the Jewish People were saved from Egypt in the merit of righteous women.

R' Shmshon 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 extremely 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, along with 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 Chava were created naked and felt no shame until later in the story when they ate from the Tree of Knowledge. There was nothing intrinsically bad about their bodies, and so no shame associated with it; 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 the notion 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 important role to play in the universe's destiny. Nechama Leibowitz teaches that the same impulses which can lead us to destruction can equally lead us to sanctity – to building our families and perpetuating the future. Our sages recognized the need to serve God with our better and worse inclinations – בְּכַל-לִבְבָם – 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 an essential 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 are transient, that there is more to life than preoccupation with your image. But vain doesn't mean they are bad; beauty is a gift, and modesty should not be properly understood as a denial 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 – קבל, כי אלו תביבין עלי מן הכל –

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 highlight that intimacy and everything associated with it can be sacred and what God considers among the dearest.

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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. I have been blessed to operate a business that allows me to dedicate a substantial amount of time to TorahRedux, and I welcome your assistance in furthering my goal to keep publishing high-quality Parsha content that makes a difference. I broker healthcare businesses for sale; I kindly ask for your blessings and prayers, and introductions to anyone who might want to buy or sell a healthcare business!

**PPS** - It took me years to start making a parnassa; if anyone you know is looking for a job, please put them in touch with me. With a helping hand from Above, I have successfully helped **8 people** find jobs so far!



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**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.