

## Pinchas 2023

### Everybody is Somebody

3 minute read | Straightforward

Who are you? Where do you come from?

You are the sum of uniquely miraculous conjunctions of different DNAs, a complex recipe of hundreds of thousands of ancestors meeting in the distant past, resulting in you. It can be humbling, and it can be intimidating, although it's worth remembering the first time the Torah discusses pedigree, suggesting how much we ought to value it – פר בן בקר.

After assuaging God's wrath and ending the plague, the Torah hails Pinchas and his pedigree:

פִּינְחָס בֶּן אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן אַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֵן הַשֵּׁיב אֶת חֲמָתִי מֵעַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּקִנְיָאוֹ אֶת קִנְיָתִי בְּתוֹכְכֶם וְלֹא כִלִּיתִי אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּקִנְיָתִי – Pinchas, son of Elazar, son of Ahron HaKohen, has turned My anger away from the Children of Israel with his zealously avenging Me among them so that I did not destroy the children of Israel in My zeal. (25:11)

The Torah's usual naming convention is to name someone the son of their father – פִּינְחָס בֶּן אֶלְעָזָר. Rashi highlights how in this instance, the Torah traces Pinchas' ancestry to his grandfather, Ahron – פִּינְחָס בֶּן אַהֲרֹן – because people had mocked Pinchas as having mediocre pedigree, being a grandson of Yisro, a former pagan druid, so the Torah goes out of its way to identify Pinchas as having good pedigree; that God didn't see him as any less than.

What this seems to indicate is that past a threshold level, lineage and pedigree are things humans get caught up with; God doesn't actually care! Because in other words, you do not need to be somebody to make things happen, because a nobody in our eyes is still somebody to God.

Nowhere is this illustrated clearer than the opening of Yirmiyahu, where God appears to Yirmiyahu in his adolescence, and Yirmiyahu doesn't think he has what it takes to be the prophet God wants him to be, that he's just a kid and isn't one for public speaking:

וַאֲמַר אֶהְיֶה ה' הַנִּבֵּא לֹא-יִדְעֵתִי דָבָר כִּי-נֶעַר אָנֹכִי. וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֵלַי אֵל-תֹּאמַר נֶעַר אָנֹכִי כִּי עַל-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר אֲשַׁלְּחֶךָ תִּלְדָּה וְאֵת כָּל-אֲשֶׁר אֲצַוֶּךָ תִּדְבָּר – I said, “Alas, God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am just a kid!” And the Lord said to me, “Do not tell Me “I am just a kid!” Because wherever I send you, you will go, and whatever I command you, you will say!” (1:6-7)

R' Nosson Vachtvogel wonders how many potential greats have been lost to self-doubt. . There is no reason to suspect Yirmiyahu of self-effacing humility; he's not lying! He has honestly assessed and

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evaluated his abilities and concludes he doesn't have what it takes, yet God still dismisses these excuses – not because they are wrong, but because they ultimately don't matter. Although God doesn't talk to us the way he did to Yirmiyahu, we can have no doubt that God speaks to us through Yirmiyahu just the same – אל-תאמר נער אֲנִי –

R' Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin teaches that you ought to believe in yourself in the same way you believe in God. If you think God doesn't believe in you, you don't properly understand what believing in God entails. Your consciousness is rooted in your soul, a fragment of God – חלק אלוהים ממעל. God saw fit to send that part of Himself into the world in the shape of you, which is to say that God very literally believes in you, and we know that because you are here.

It's easier to believe in yourself if someone else does it first. And God believes in all of us!

God saw fit to share you with us; you're already somebody.

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## **The Heart of Worship**

3 minute read | Straightforward

Prayer is a central aspect of Judaism, if not all religious beliefs. It is an invocation or act that deliberately seeks out and interfaces with the divine.

Although prayer does appear obliquely or sporadically in the Torah, it is not the predominant mode of worship in the Torah or the ancient world the Torah appeared in, an era where animal sacrifice was a near cultural universal. Our sages went out of their way to teach that prayer doesn't just appear in the Torah; prayer stands in as a direct replacement or substitute for the lapsed sacrifices of long ago.

Our prayers are replete with requests to restore Jerusalem and rebuild the Beis HaMikdash. However, authorities are divided on whether the future we yearn for heralds a restoration or replacement of animal sacrifice. While that remains speculative until we find out, it is probably fair to say that it is hard for people in the modern world to wrap their heads around animal sacrifice.

Today's near cultural universal is that animal sacrifice is alien and weird, perhaps even disgusting and nasty. Most people don't want to watch an animal get slaughtered; any arcane mysticism is hard to imagine over the blood and gore.

That leaves prayer in a bit of a void; prayer is a stand-in or substitute for animal sacrifice, and yet an animal sacrifice is hard to relate to in almost every conceivable way, so far removed as it is from our primary experience. Moreover, the Torah has long sections devoted to the different categories and



kinds of sacrifice and their details and nuances; sacrifice is clearly the primary mode of worship in the Torah's conception, so prayer seems second-rate.

Either way, prayer is hard to understand. If prayer and sacrifice aren't connected, why bother with something the Torah doesn't validate as having much significance? And if prayer is connected to sacrifice, what element of sacrifice do we even relate to?

The Torah opens the section on sacrifices by outlining a scenario where someone wants to bring an offering:

‘אָדָם מִכֶּם בְּיִזְקָרִיב מִכֶּם קָרְבָן לַיהוָה – When one of you presents an offering for God... (1:2)

Although not readily obvious in translation, the Torah utilizes highly unusual language here. Rather than present the sensible scenario where one of you wants to bring an offering, it literally translates to when someone offers an offering of you, which is to say, literally of yourselves – אָדָם מִכֶּם בְּיִזְקָרִיב / אָדָם בְּיִזְקָרִיב מִכֶּם.

The Baal HaTanya notes that this reading suggests that at the earliest juncture, the Torah already indicates that as much it's going to talk about animal offerings, it's not about the animal at all; it's about the part of yourself you're willing to offer, and prayer would operate in much the same way – יִזְקָרִיב מִכֶּם.

R' Jonathan Sacks teaches that the conventional notion of sacrifice isn't really reflected in the Hebrew term – קָרְבָן. We think of sacrifice as giving something up when the Hebrew word actually means something more like drawing closer – קָרַב. You interact with the divine not with what you give up but by drawing close with what you have; in offering the material to God, you transform the material into the sacred.

God doesn't need our stuff and can't receive it in any tangible way; the Malbim teaches that all a person can ever offer is themselves, which mirrors precisely what the Torah calls for here – יִזְקָרִיב מִכֶּם. The Sfas Emes explains that the notion articulated here is that sacrifice and prayer are about aligning ourselves and resources to God's broader plan; prayer isn't secondary to sacrifice; it is the same.

While the form of seeking out the divine may have changed over time depending on the zeitgeist, the substance has remained constant. At the root of all mysticism is a desire to connect with the divine transcendence, and our sages have long identified the inner world of the heart as the battlefield of spirituality – עבודת שבלב. So we can read the Yom Kippur atonement ritual that seems odd to modern sensibilities, yet it maintains relevance to our prayers because the substance transcends the form of the performative aspect; that God forgives humans who want to make amends, goats and string or not.



אחד המרבה ואחד ואחד – It's not the form of how it appears so much as it's about the substance of how it is – הממעט ובלבד שיכוין לבו לשמים.

As Moshe said to his audience, our Creator is always close, quite different from other gods they might have heard of who can only be invoked with specific rituals – כי מי־גוי גדול אֲשֶׁר־לוֹ אֱלֹקִים קְרִבִים אֵלָיו פֶּה' אֱלֹקֵינוּ – כְּכֹל־קְרָאנוּ אֵלָיו.

The Izhbitzer suggests that our subconscious hearts and minds hope and pray all the time. When you whisper “Please, God,” hope for the best, or wish that things turn out okay, those unspoken but very real thoughts are prayers that bring tangible wisps of warmth into the world that affirm and sustain, from which things can and will eventually grow – קְרוֹב ה' לְכֹל קְרָאיו לְכֹל אֲשֶׁר? קְרָאָהוּ בְּאֵמַת –

As the Kotzker said, where can we find God? Wherever we let Him in.

Sacrifice, like prayer, was always about the inner world of the spirit, about opening your heart and yourself to the universe.

And prayer, like sacrifice, can't change God; but it can change you.

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## **Dirty Business**

4 minute read | Straightforward

“Thou shalt not kill.”

In almost all times and places, most societies consider murder to be an extremely serious crime. Although it's one of the Ten Commandments, it's probably one of those things that doesn't require revelation for us to be aware of it; it's intuitive and near-universal across almost all ages and civilizations.

In modern political science, we say the state has a monopoly on violence; that the state alone has the right to use or authorize physical force, and individuals do not have the right to commit violence. It is a hallmark of civil society when citizens do not commit wanton acts of violence against each other.

In our tradition, even though Jewish courts and governments historically possessed this power, they were judicious to the extreme in its application; a court that killed more than once in a lifetime was considered bloodthirsty.



And yet, on the other hand, the Torah presents us with the story of Pinchas, heralded as he is for the public assassination of a political leader! His act is jarring for at least two reasons. Firstly, the killing apparently makes him a hero; and secondly, it's an extrajudicial killing – only the state can commit acts of violence, and Pinchas was a civilian!

If Pinchas was just a civilian, and the Torah doesn't advocate violence, how is Pinchas a hero for being a killer?

It's an important question because the answer is revealing.

Pinchas is not a hero for being a killer; he's a hero for something else.

God never endorses the killing; God endorses Pinchas' passion – הַשִּׁיב אֶת־חַמְתִּי מֵעַל בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּמִנְאוֹ אֶת־קִנְאָתִי בְּתוֹכְכֶם. If that sounds like a distinction without a difference, it's not; our Tradition does not laud the killing. Our Sages say that although it may have been the right thing to do, we don't do that – הלכה ואין מורין כן.

The Chomas Esh reminds us that the Torah speaks to individuals, so you cannot justify your own inaction by pointing to others. The Ten Commandments are stated in the second person, to each of us personally – I am Hashem your God; Thou shall not kill. Pinchas did his duty to his God as he understood it, the masses be damned – תַּחַת אֲשֶׁר קָנָא לְאַלְהֵינוּ – that's why he's a hero, for his boldness and courage.

It's worthwhile to note that in the heat of the moment, Pinchas could not know what we know. He wasn't a prophet, and he could not know that the story would have a happy ending for him. Up to that point, as Rashi notes, Pinchas was a nobody in everyone's eye; he risked his life to stand up and strike. The vast majority of the camp had fallen prey to the nefarious women of Midian, and while some people held back and could remain on the outskirts of the calamity, Pinchas alone stepped into the fray, stood in the center against them, and challenged their ringleader.

Humans are heavily socialized creatures; we often hold ourselves to the standards of the people around us. One adage suggests that our character and mentality are the average of the five people we spend the most time with! We do what others do and don't do what others don't; we don't like to stand out from our peers, so we excuse our shortcomings by hiding in the crowd. After all, are you any better or worse than the next guy?

While it's undoubtedly the inflection point in the story, it bears considering what Pinchas thought would happen. He can't have expected to survive, and he stepped into the fray anyway.

That's why he's a hero, and it has nothing whatsoever to do with the killing.



He's a hero because he marches into the unthinkable against all odds. He doesn't ask or wait for anyone's permission. He remembers his identity and where he comes from – פִּינָחָס בֶּן-אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן-אֶהֱרֹן הַכֹּהֵן.

Through his bold act, he revealed that the bystanders and victims and ourselves had the power and capacity to do more all along. His daring act stands as an example that ought to make people who believe themselves helpless and powerless dig a little deeper. He doesn't preach or shout at the people caught up in trouble, nor at the people who are too scared to get involved – he just leads by example; acting bravely and decisively in the face of danger, fear, and uncertainty.

That's what God endorses, and it's this act of courage that sparks salvation. God could have stopped the plague at any point; God could have foiled the threat posed by the Midianite women wandering into the camp at multiple junctures along the way. But God deliberately doesn't step in to avert the catastrophe until one of the people bravely risks himself to do what needs to be done – הָשִׁיב אֶת-הַמָּתִי מֵעַל בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּקִנְיָאֻ אֶת-קִנְיָאֵתִי בְּתוֹכְכֶם.

The Midrash imagines a primordial internal discussion before God creates humanity, where Charity and Kindness advocate for God to proceed, as humans will be good and kind to each other. But Peace and Truth object because humans will fight and lie. The dispute is tied in deadlock, and God casts Truth from the sky, so Charity and Kindness carry the day, and God creates humanity.

The Kotzker observes that God had to throw Truth out, not Peace. It wasn't about giving Charity and Kindness a majority; because Truth can stand alone and doesn't require consensus or support. The Truth is the truth, and however many people stand against it, truth speaks for itself.

As the example of Pinchas shows, it takes heroic courage and determination to go against the crowd, tremendous conviction, inner strength, and willpower. Unlike Pinchas, we're probably not going to get a shoutout or magical blessing from God for doing the right thing. But the right thing remains the right thing.

If there's something to do, don't wait for someone else to do it; do it now, and don't think twice. Stop thinking, start doing. Courage isn't the absence of fear; it's just doing it anyway.

It's better to walk alone than in a crowd going in the wrong direction.

## How to Eat an Elephant

6 minute read | Straightforward

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In our storied and hallowed tradition, some of our sages have suggested that the Torah contains a Golden Rule, a comprehensive and holistic meta-principle that unifies and underlies the entire framework of the Torah.

It's worthwhile to take those suggestions seriously to understand why one, as opposed to another, might be considered the most important thing, or at a minimum, a close candidate.

Some are pretty intuitive, like R' Akiva's timeless and universal "love thy neighbor"; or Hillel's ethic of reciprocity – what is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. Ben Azzai suggested that it was the notion that humans are created in the image of God, which teaches us the fundamental equality of all humans; Ben Zoma suggested it was Shema Yisrael – that there is One God. They're not hard to explain; they're not hard to understand.

But one suggestion is a little more ponderous – Shimon ben Pazi's suggestion:

– וְזֶה אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשֶׂה עַל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ כְּבָשִׂים בְּנֵי־שְׁנָה שְׁנַיִם לַיּוֹם תָּמִיד: אֶת־הַכֶּבֶשׂ הָאֶחָד תַּעֲשֶׂה בַבֶּקֶר וְאֶת הַכֶּבֶשׂ הַשֵּׁנִי תַעֲשֶׂה בֵּין הָעֶרְבָיִם:  
This is what you shall offer upon the altar: two year-old lambs; every day, regularly. You shall offer the one lamb in the morning and the other lamb in the evening. (29:38, 39)

Shimon ben Pazi taught that the Torah's Golden Rule is the daily ritual – the עֲבוּדָה – and more specifically, the instruction to bring the daily sacrifice at its designated times in the morning and evening – קָרְבַּן תָּמִיד.

Quite obviously, this stands in stark contrast to the other proposed candidates. It's perfectly plausible to suggest that treating other humans with kindness and respect might be the most essential thing the Torah has to tell us; it's perfectly plausible to suggest that pronouncing our belief in the existence of the One God might be the most important thing.

R' Shlomo Farhi notes that whichever candidate we decide upon, it would not be the Golden Rule of personal relations, nor would it be the Golden Rule of Judaism. If the Torah is the blueprint for existence, then it would be the Golden Rule of life and all things – הַסֵּתֶכֶל בְּאוֹרֵי־תֵא וּבְרֵא עֹלָמָא. It follows that identifying the Golden Rule and what it has to teach us is enormously consequential.

How could the specific and technical daily sacrificial service possibly be the most important thing the Torah has to tell us?

Perhaps it was selected as a candidate for the Golden Rule not to emphasize the importance of the sacrificial service or its technicalities; but rather to highlight another key value for us – the essential nature of consistency. It's not about the קָרְבַּן; it's about the תָּמִיד.

The defining feature of the daily sacrifice is quite arguably the regularity for which it is named – תמיד. It is the only mitzvah that happens every morning and every evening, rain or shine, hot or cold, weekday, Shabbos, or Chag; commitment with conviction.

R' Yehuda Amital suggests that the non-spectacular nature of the law is precisely what makes it remarkable. It does not commemorate some miraculous historical event nor deliver a moment of tangible spirituality. It is boring, plain, repetitive, and simple; twice per day, morning and night.

It is worth noting that the motif of regularity in the Torah appears almost exclusively in the context of the Mishkan; תמיד is intimately and tightly associated with עֲבוֹדָה. Aside from the regular daily sacrifices, the bread had to be on the table regularly – תמיד; there had to be a regularly lit candle on the Menorah – תמיד – and a regularly lit fire on the altar – תמיד. As the Mesilas Yescharim puts it, the only path to success for any serious undertaking is through disciplined, regular, and unwavering commitment.

If you've ever wanted to accomplish anything of note, you know that getting started can be challenging. All too often, we bite off more than we can chew. Maybe you sit down to think about everything you have to do, only to freeze up, intimidated and overwhelmed, no longer capable of taking that first step. We can get lost, frustrated, and impatient. We want instant results or lack the commitment necessary to follow through. We're unclear of the goal, or we run out of energy and time. We get sidetracked and distracted, bogged down, and get lost in the noise. We give up too soon or hang on too long. And so we fail. We don't finish. It flops. And nothing has changed.

If that sounds familiar, that's because you're human, and we need to remember the Golden Rule; it's not about the flourishes and sprints of inspiration and hard work. The great principle of our lives is consistency; small disciplines and routines repeated daily that empower us and lead to great and hard-won achievements gained slowly over time.

As Rashi notes, it seems impossible to finish Shas or Shulchan Aruch, but it's fairly easy to learn a page or two per day. It's insane to go from the couch to running a marathon, but it's quite doable to train for a 5K. It's too costly to pay off a house in one shot, but it's pretty realistic to pay your mortgage every month. It's tough to lose weight, but it's manageable when you stick to your daily diet and exercise. It's grueling to decide whether to spend the rest of your life with someone, but it's more straightforward to figure out if you're having a good time with them. It's challenging to cram everything for a test in just one sitting, but it's not too difficult to do the assigned reading and homework every week.

From health and finance to spirituality and relationships, any kind of serious progress must be incremental by necessity. It requires showing up and putting in the work, doing what needs to be done wherever you find yourself, whether you're in the mood or not.



Consistency requires perseverance through plateaus and setbacks and a lifelong commitment to establishing positive habits and routines that become almost second nature. All of your life's goals will require consistent effort to push toward them. If you do not consistently focus on achieving them and do not put in the work, you will likely fall back into old habits or lose motivation and interest. If you are persistent, you can get them. But if you are consistent, you will keep them.

It's not what we do once in a while that shapes our lives – it's what we do consistently.

Consistency is about time investment – a little bit of time, repeated over an extended period of time.

That being said, it's important to separate consistency from stagnation – it's not enough to mindlessly repeat one action over and over; we aren't machines. Far too often, we aren't successful because while we sustain our efforts, we fail to scale those efforts over time; we don't take responsibility for our progress. But it's just so obvious; if you never ratchet up your efforts incrementally, of course you will only ever find yourself right where you are!

Instead, you must adapt your actions as you grow and learn, gaining feedback from each action adjusting accordingly to help you stay on track and make progress towards your goal. Incremental improvements compound, leading to exponential gains if you stay on track. Each step forward fuses and stacks, gradually building greater momentum, which is typically the difference between success and failure in any field and the key to high levels of achievement.

Leonardo da Vinci quipped that a diamond is a lump of coal that just stuck to its job. If you think of any titan of business, entertainment, religion, or sport, they never got there on the back of a heroic one-off performance. They are legends because of their consistent, sustained efforts over the long-term – they heeded the Golden Rule. It's a mistake to compare yourself to someone successful and chalk up the difference to a difference in ability, intelligence, talent, or even hard work when, in all likelihood, the difference is consistency. You can get there too.

If it sounds like work, that's because it is – the definition of the term the Mishkan rituals fall under is quite literally “work” or “service” – עֲבוּדָה. It's an investment on our part; it's the contribution and service we can offer. In a certain sense, maybe it's all we truly can offer – all we have to offer is our all, that deepest part of ourselves, committing to what's important and putting the time in on a regular basis; and what we do is who we become. Consistency, continuity, and dedication is the עֲבוּדָה; and it's our עֲבוּדָה – the Golden Rule of all things.

We all have big dreams, and we should – they're part of what makes life beautiful and worth living. The Torah provides clear guidance on how to get there; the goal may be gargantuan, but you can still only ever take it one day and one step at a time. Getting anywhere serious requires building small habits and rituals that you partake in every day that keep you focused on your highest goals and priorities. Goals can change, but they can change us too; you might be pleasantly surprised who you have become when you're ten years in.



As the old saying goes, there has only ever been one way to eat an elephant: one bite at a time.

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## Prayer Redux

7 minute read | Advanced

Prayer is one of Judaism’s essential and fundamental practices.

Through prayer, we commune with the Creator, affirming our connection, dependency, and gratitude to the Source of all life.

The theurgy of prayer – the metaphysics of how prayer works and what it does – is complex and, in all likelihood, fundamentally unknowable. It’s not obvious how you’d test whether or not prayer works because the universe is, self-evidently, a much bigger place than your personal wish list.

What we do know is that at all times and all places throughout our history, the Jewish People have always turned to God in prayer for health, success, and salvation. It is almost universally understood that prayer plays a prominent role in the efforts and energy we must expend to get the outcomes we want – as well as the ones we don’t.

The crescendo of the Exodus came with the decisive miracle at the Red Sea. The ocean parted, giving the desperate Jewish People safe passage while simultaneously obliterating their great tormentors in one fell swoop. The Splitting of the Red Sea is one of the most captivating and magical moments in the entire Torah, and prayer plays a prominent role in the build-up:

וּפְרָעָה הַקָּרִיב וַיִּשְׂאוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־עֵינֵיהֶם וַהֲגִהוּ מִצְרַיִם נֹסֵעַ אַחֲרֵיהֶם וַיִּירָאוּ מְאֹד וַיִּצְעֲקוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־ה' – As Pharaoh drew near, the Jewish People caught sight of the Egyptians advancing upon them. Greatly frightened, the Jewish People cried out to the Lord. (14:10)

But surprisingly, and quite unlike how we might expect, this prayer is not well received:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה מַה־תִּצְעַק אֵלַי דְּבַר אֶל־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל וְיִסְעוּ אֵלַי – Then the Lord said to Moshe, “Why are you crying out to Me!? Tell the Jewish People to get going!!” (14:15)

With righteous outrage, we might wonder why God gets annoyed that the people cry out. The Jewish People have made it to the beaches with their children and everything they own. They have no boats and cannot swim to safety; just over the horizon, there is a hostile force in hot pursuit. By any reasonable standards, they are out of time and out of options. They are desperate, so they cry out to God for help; we cannot doubt that their fears and tears were genuine.



Moreover, our sages imagine Heavenly gateways for prayers, suggesting that prayers are accepted or denied based on circumstances, quality, and timing. The Neila prayer on Yom Kippur extensively utilizes this imagery to evoke a sense of urgency – quickly squeeze in your final prayers because the gates are closing! The Gemara concludes that regardless, the gate of tears is always open, presumably, because tears are heartfelt and sincere, and the pain that generates tearful prayers loads them with a potency that Heaven cannot refuse.

If crying to God for help is what you are supposed to do, why did God get annoyed at their prayer?

The imagery of gates in Heaven is compelling, but it appears to have a fatal flaw. The metaphor doesn't work for a gate of tears because a gate that never closes is no gate at all!

The Kotzker Rebbe sharply teaches that the gate of tears is still a gate because not all tears are equal; some tears are indeed turned away. The gate is shut to crocodile tears – superficial sorrow that is insincere, like when people attempt to use grief to excuse inaction.

In the story of Pinchas, Balak, and Bilam successfully schemed to compromise the Jewish People by sending the young women of Midian into the Jewish camp to seduce the men; most young men found the temptation impossible to resist, sparking a devastating plague.

But the Midianite women were not successful at drawing in everyone; some of them were strong enough to resist, and, unsure what to do, they went to the holiest man, their leader Moshe, at the most sacred spot they knew, the Mishkan, to cry and pray – וַהֲמָהּ בָּכִים, פָּתַח אֱהֵל מוֹעֵד.

These people of moral fiber cried and prayed for help, but that didn't save the day.

R' Moshe Sherer highlights how the Torah explicitly credits Pinchas's assassination of the provocateurs for stopping the plague, and not anyone's prayers – וַיִּדְקֹר אֶת-שְׁנֵינֵיהֶם-אֶת אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְאֶת-הָאִשָּׁה / הָשִׁיב אֶת-חַמְתִּי מֵעַל בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל, בְּקִנְאוֹ אֶת-קְנֹאֲתַי אֶל-קְבֻרָתָהּ; וַתַּעֲצֹר, הַמַּגֵּפָה.

When something is wrong, and we respond only with thoughts and prayers, they are crocodile tears, lip service, pearl-clutching, and window dressing. The pain and tears may be honest, but prayers don't help if your approach to problem-solving is fundamentally broken.

As much as there may be stories of people praying for magical solutions that materialize out of thin air with no human input, the Torah dismisses the notion of thoughts and prayers as a substitute for action.

At the Red Sea, God urges Moshe to have his people quickly get a move on. The Midrash expands this discussion; God rebuked Moshe that it was an inappropriate moment for lengthy prayers – there was danger close, and it was time for decisive action.

Rashi suggests that God was annoyed at the people's prayer at the sea because they seized their ancestral craft – תִּפְשׂוּ אֶמְנוּת אֲבוֹתֵם. The Maharal explains that prayer isn't craftsmanship, like carpentry or plumbing. Prayer is supposed to be heartfelt and soulful! But they cried out to God as the last resort of their ancestors, a weak effort that betrayed deep fear and insecurity and the cynical despair of helplessness that all was lost. It was an inferior, or at least suboptimal, immature prayer that betrayed a lack of belief, both in God and in themselves, that there was nothing they could do!

Only they were wrong to think there was nothing else they could do, and we'd be equally wrong for thinking prayer could ever work in a vacuum.

As R' Shlomo Farhi explains, they should have believed enough in their prayer to stop praying and get moving, but they were frozen and paralyzed.

In sharp contrast, our ancestor Yakov prepared to reunite with Esau years after wronging him and meticulously prepared for their meeting. He prepared for peace by sending waves of lavish gifts to Esau; prepared for battle and victory, arming his young family and training them; prepared for defeat and death, dividing his family in two in the hope that the second camp might escape without Esau ever knowing they existed; and then finally, he prays that God is with him and that his family survives.

As R' Noach Weinberg highlights, Yakov prepares for peace, victory, and death, which is to say that he did no less than everything possible to prepare for all eventualities before prayer, even though God had already promised to be with him and that his children would inherit the land and his legacy.

Maybe that's what our efforts have to look like to give our prayers a hook to latch on to – even when God promises.

God didn't want their prayers at the Red Sea because it wasn't time to pray; it was time to act! But they couldn't because they had given up and were consumed with fear. Perhaps that lends enduring power to the legacy of Nachshon ben Aminadav, whom the Midrash heralds for clambering into the water when he could not yet know what would happen because just maybe there was one last thing to try before giving up, finding room for a ray of hope amid the clouds of despair – a hope that drove action.

R' Shlomo Farhi suggests that the biggest challenge to our faith and belief is time, that we give up prematurely.

By wading into the water, Nachshon showed people who thought they had reached the outer limit of what they could do and revealed that the boundary was just a little further than they'd thought. They'd stopped at the shore, but he boldly and bravely stepped into the impossible and waded up to his neck without waiting for instructions, leading by example in the face of uncertainty, the quality of his tribe,



Yehuda. And when he did that, he sparked salvation, upending the natural order, and the ocean split for all.

Perhaps that underpins God's irritation at why they cry out – they are parked on the beach, crying, but what exactly do they expect God to do with that?! We can almost hear God begging for something to work with – tell them to get up and get going!

To be sure, we should not judge our ancestors too harshly for being afraid. The fight, flight, or freeze response is hardcoded into our DNA and predates human consciousness; people tend to freeze when their families are about to get massacred.

But God speaks through them to us, and we should ask ourselves if our own prayers are corrupted by fear or despair and yet still wonder why our prayers go unanswered. We must audit our lives, soul-searching about whether we truly mean our prayers. Does the way you spend your life align with what you claim to want? Does what you pay attention to and devote time to reflect that? We should wonder if God might give us a similarly terrifying answer about what we're asking God to work with.

If you're crying crocodile tears, you shouldn't be surprised that your prayers don't seem to be working; you may need to confront the reality that your prayers are wildly mediocre.

You won't get the dream job you don't apply to. You won't get healthy if you don't diet and exercise. You won't pass the test if you don't study the material. You won't get rich if you don't invest. Your relationship won't be meaningful if you don't give your partner attention. That's the way the world works; if you expect your prayer to change that fundamental reality, you will likely continue to be disappointed.

You need to animate your life with action and hope, like our ancestor Yakov, like our hero Pinchas, and invoke the incredible bravery of Nachshon. God desperately wants to shower us with blessings, but we need to build the vessels that contain those blessings, or they have no place to land.

The future is concealed and uncertain; what lies ahead is shrouded in the darkness of the unknowable. But we can illuminate it with bold and decisive actions that brighten each step along the way. And with each step, certainly pray to meet with good fortune and success.

If there's something you've been praying on for a while, stop being a soldier and think like a general – strategize for a moment. Every person who wants something different from their performance than what they're getting is doing something to perpetuate poor outcomes. Bluntly consider what you could be doing better to make it happen, and do those things.

Miracles happen, but they start with your effort and dedication toward your dreams. Thoughts and prayers are not a substitute for action.



You must believe in a positive outcome enough to invest real effort into making it a reality.

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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!*

**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.