



Ki Sisa 2023

Sacred Fire

3 minute read | Straightforward

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

כִּי תִשָּׂא אֶת־רֹאשׁ בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לִפְקֻדֵיהֶם וְנִתְּנוּ אִישׁ כֶּפֶר נַפְשׁוֹ לַה' בַּפְּקֻד אֹתָם וְלֹא־יְהִיָּה בָהֶם נֶגֶף בַּפְּקֻד אֹתָם: זֶה יִתְּנוּ כָל־הָעָבֵר – “When you take a census of the Israelite men according to their military enrollment, each shall pay the Lord a ransom for himself on being enrolled, that no plague may come upon them through their being enrolled. This is what everyone who is entered in the records shall give: a half-shekel...” (30:12,13)

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

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

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

Why was the coin made of fire?

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

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

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



TorahRedux

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

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

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

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

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

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

Onward

4 minute read | Straightforward

The Torah's stories have captured the awe of audiences for three millennia, and rightly so.

The Torahs tell us of astonishing moments like The Binding of Isaac, the ultimate test of human commitment with the future in the balance, where Avraham lifts a knife to his son's neck only for an angel to interrupt him, salvation averting tragedy through transparently divine intervention at the very last.

The Torah tells us of the harrowing crossing at the Red Sea, where the defenseless Jewish People desperately fled their oppressors, with the most advanced and formidable army in the world in hot pursuit. In a defining moment that upends the entire natural order of our universe, Moshe holds out his staff, and God parts the waters for the Jewish People to walk across the dry ocean floor. The Egyptian army attempts to follow, but once Moshe's people have crossed safely, the sea suddenly reverts to its normal state, and the Egyptians are drowned.



TorahRedux

The Torah tells us of the theophany at Sinai, where the people gathered at a mountain enveloped in cloud and smoke, quaking, with fire and lightning flashing overhead, amid the sound of booming thunder and shofar blasts; and then the Jewish People hear the voice of God through the uproar.

These are some of the defining stories of our history and exhibit the dizzying heights of the supernatural. They showcase what is fundamentally magical about the Torah.

But despite the power of these moments to captivate us, the Torah doesn't indulge us by dwelling on them even a little. Just like that, with the stroke of a pen, the Binding of Isaac is behind us, the Red Sea is old news, Sinai is history, and it's time to move onward:

וַיָּשָׁב אַבְרָהָם אֶל-נְעָרָיו וַיִּקְמוּ וַיֵּלְכוּ יַחְדָּו – Avraham returned to his stewards, and they got up and left together... (22:19)

וַיֵּצֵא מֹשֶׁה אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל מִיַּם-סוּף, וַיֵּצְאוּ אֶל-מִדְבַּר-שׁוּר; וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁלֹשַׁת-יָמִים בַּמִּדְבָּר, וְלֹא-מָצְאוּ מַיִם בַּיַּדְּשׁוּר – Moshe and the Children of Israel set out from the Red Sea. They went on into the wilderness of Shur; they traveled three days in the wilderness and found no water. (15:22)

רַב-לָכֶם שָׁבַת, בְּהַר הַזֶּה. פָּנּוּ וּסְעוּ לָכֶם – You have stayed long enough at this mountain. (1:6)

We have these distinctly unique stories of the Divine manifested in our universe, and then the Torah just moves briskly onward – רַב-לָכֶם שָׁבַת, בְּהַר הַזֶּה פָּנּוּ וּסְעוּ לָכֶם / וַיֵּצֵא מֹשֶׁה אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל מִיַּם-סוּף / וַיִּקְמוּ וַיֵּלְכוּ.

The Torah does not dwell in the magical moments, and the starkness of the almost dismissive continuity is jarring, and there is a vital lesson here. It suggests that even after the greatest of heights, the most noteworthy achievements, and the most incredible successes, the Torah simply notes that you can't stay long once you get there. Before you know it, it's time to continue the journey and move onward.

Onward is an interesting word – positive and proactive, meaning going further rather than coming to an end or halt; moving in a forward direction. As the Izhbitzer explains, part of growth is moving on and walking away from where you once stood. We can't stay because the moment is gone – it's gone in time, irretrievably behind us, and it's our responsibility to realize that distance in mental and physical space too.

It's also true to life; the world will not dwell in your magical moments. Whether you ace the test, get the girl, close the deal, buy the house, sell the business, have the baby, or whatever the outstanding achievement is, it's still Tuesday, you're still you, you still have deadlines, you still have to get into better shape, your siblings still get on your nerves, and your credit card bill is still due. And so, by necessity, there comes a time to move onward.

In dull moments, we may find ourselves thirsty with nothing to drink. But this, too, as the Izhbitzer teaches, is part of the growth process. Eventually, those bitter waters can transform into a sweet oasis, and what appeared to be downtime is integrated into the journey forward.

Even the Golden Calf story has redeeming elements; apart from the critical teaching that using iconography to worship the One God is still idolatry, it decisively demonstrates God's predisposition for forgiveness and paves the way to the Mishkan and all the resultant forms of interacting with the Divine.

Do not fool yourself into thinking that what got you to where you are will fuel you to further heights; that energy does not simply overflow into everything else. Success is not final, and failure is not fatal; the proper response to both is the same – onward.

This lesson is challenging enough, but the Izhbitzer takes us further and forewarns us that what follows the heights of success is rarely smooth and straightforward lulls and plateaus of accumulation and consolidation to catch our breath; we can often expect an inverse experience in short order. All too often, great heights are followed by sharp declines and drawdowns, troughs and valleys; Avraham gets home to find his wife has died; the miraculous rescue at the Red Sea is directly followed by the people's complaints about the local water being too bitter, and the people worship a Golden Calf at the foot of Mount Sinai itself.

Quite arguably, a failure to move on was the mistake at the heart of the debacle of the scouting mission to Israel – the spies just wanted to stay put in the safety of God's embrace in the desert. They weren't wrong; the road ahead was fraught with danger! But that's not how the world works; stagnation is not God's design for us or the universe – life must change, move, and evolve. Staying put and stagnating is what's unnatural.

The Torah is a guide to life – תורת חיים – and one of the defining features of living things is motility – they move independently. We shouldn't be so shocked by the ebbs and flows of life, moving and changing, with attendant ups and downs. When living things don't move, they quickly atrophy, stagnate, wither, and die before long. Living things must move and push to grow healthy and strong. You can fall and run out of breath plenty of times along the way, but that's part of it, so long as you eventually get back up and keep moving onward.

As R' Shlomo Farhi explains, if you look at stock market performance over a century, the zoomed-out time frame looks like a smooth and steady incline; and yet, when you zoom in to years, months, weeks, days, and hours, the amount of choppiness and volatility increases. On an extended time frame, each part matters less. The bouncing highs and lows blend into a smooth line that only goes one way – onwards and upwards.

The past is not gone or forgotten; it forms the basis and foundations of today.

Although we can't dwell in the moments of achievement, there is a part we can carry in our hearts and minds.

And as we go, it comes with us, ever onward.



Count Me In

4 minute read | Straightforward

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There is a beautiful and uncommon blessing we say upon seeing a crowd of multitudes – הַכֶּם הַרְזִים – the knower of secrets, which the Gemara explains as acknowledging God's greatness in knowing each of us in our individual hearts, despite our different faces and minds. This is a subtle but vital point –



God is great not because of the glory and sheer size of the crowd, but because God can see each of us as distinct within the sea of all too forgettable faces; God can see the individual within the collective.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

The Torah counts everyone. Because everyone counts.

What We Do With Broken Things

5 minute read | Straightforward

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

וְאָכַתְבַּ עַל־הַלְּחֹת אֶת־הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ עַל־הַלְּחֹת הָרִאשׁוֹנִים אֲשֶׁר שָׁבַרְתָּ וְשָׂמְתָם בְּאָרוֹן – “I will inscribe on the tablets the commandments that were on the first tablets that you smashed, and you shall deposit them in the Ark.” (10:2)

Our sages read the instruction to put “them” in the Ark as not only referring to Moshe’s second tablets, which are like the first tablets in content; but that the original shattered tablets were like the second tablets in what Moshe was supposed to do with them – וְשָׂמְתָם בְּאָרוֹן / אֲשֶׁר שָׁבַרְתָּ / הַלְּחֹת הָרִאשׁוֹנִים.

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

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

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

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

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

The Torah closes with a line of praise for Moshe, the faithful shepherd, endorsing his strength and valor – וּלְכֹל הַיָּד הַחֲזָקָה וּלְכֹל הַמּוֹרָא הַגָּדוֹל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה מִשָּׁה לְעֵינֵי כָל־יִשְׂרָאֵל – Our sages take this as a reference to



some of the things Moshe intuited on his own, which God only endorsed after the fact, one of which is breaking the tablets – אָשַׁר שִׁבְרָתָהּ / יִישַׁר כְּהִדָּה שִׁשְׁבְּרָתָהּ.

On Simchas Torah, after we complete the Torah with that line, we immediately begin again, a new beginning built on breaking, breaking that is holy, breaking that God endorses, and breaking that stands before us and alongside the best we have to offer. From the ashes of this colossal failure, God teaches Moshe how his people can make amends and gives him the formula that features so prominently in our prayers on Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur. The healing from the rupture led to the Mishkan project, which all subsequent prayer, sacrifice, and worship center around. The remarkable quality of comebacks is not in spite of setbacks; it is because of them.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

It's Not Over Til It's Over

5 minute read | Straightforward

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

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

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵּדַרְדֹּר כִּי שָׁחַת עַמֶּךָ אֲשֶׁר הִעֲלִיתָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם: סָרוּ מִהֵרָ מִן-הַדֶּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתָם עֲשׂוּ לָהֶם עֵגֹל מִסֶּכֶה וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ-לוֹ וַיִּזְבְּחוּ-לוֹ וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלֶּה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלֵנוּךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם: וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה רְאִיתָ אֶת-הָעָם הַזֶּה וְהִנֵּה עָם-קֹשֶׁה-עֲרִיר הוּא: וְעַתָּה הִנֵּה אֲנִי נֹשֵׁב לְפָנֶיךָ לְגוֹי גְדוֹל – Hashem spoke to Moshe, “Hurry down, for your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt, have acted basely. They have been so quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them. They have made themselves a molten calf and bowed low to it and sacrificed to it, saying: “This is your god, Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!” Hashem further said to Moshe, “I see that this is a stiffnecked people. Now, let Me be, that My anger may blaze forth against them and that I may destroy them, and make of you a great nation.” (32:7-10)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

After winning his argument with God, Moshe asked for greater understanding, but God cryptically answered that we could only see God in hindsight. This suggests that Moshe's bold and hopeful intuition was correct; we shouldn't just accept things because that's the way it is. God's response is



encouraging, not discouraging – our honed intuition is the absolute zenith of human apprehension. Don't take it lying down as Noach did, and if you don't win, then like Avraham, you'll know you did all you possibly could. We cannot know what God will do, and we cannot see God in real-time, only in hindsight. This concept underlies the entire notion of Teshuva – our fate is not predetermined, and we can directly influence it; use your judgment, and don't justify things that don't feel right as destiny and fate.

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

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

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

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

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

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.

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

Neli

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***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!*

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.