

Shmini; Shabbos HaChodesh 2024

Excuses Aren't Kosher

2 minute read | Straightforward

The Torah specifies in clear terms what makes a mammal kosher. A kosher animal possesses a digestive property called chewing its cud, and the form of its hooves must be a fully cloven split. An animal that meets these two requirements is kosher; an animal that doesn't meet both is not kosher.

It's not complicated; it's not hard to understand.

But quite curiously, the Torah doesn't leave us with its simple formulation; it specifies several familiar animals that meet one requirement, but not both and states that they aren't kosher:

אֲךָ אֵת זֶה לֹא תֹאכְלוּ מִמֵּעֵלֵי הַגֵּרָה וּמִמִּפְרֵסֵי הַפְּרָסָה אֵת הַגִּמְלָה כִּי מֵעֵלָה גֵּרָה הוּא וּפְרָסָה אֵינֶנּוּ מִפְּרִיס טֵמֵא הוּא לָכֶם: וְאֵת הַשָּׁפָן כִּי מֵעֵלָה גֵּרָה הוּא וּפְרָסָה לֹא יִפְרִיס טֵמֵא הוּא לָכֶם: וְאֵת הַחֲזִיר כִּי מִפְּרִיס לֹא יִפְרִיס טֵמֵא הוּא לָכֶם: וְאֵת הָאֲרִנְבֹתָה כִּי מֵעֵלֹת גֵּרָה הוּא וּפְרָסָה לֹא הִפְרִיסָה טֵמֵאָה הוּא לָכֶם: וְאֵת הַיָּגֵר טֵמֵא הוּא לָכֶם – You may eat any animal with split hooves, that also chews its cud. Don't eat animals that chew the cud but don't have fully cloven hooves: The camel, since it chews the cud but doesn't have a split hoof is not kosher for you. The hyrax, since it chews the cud but doesn't have a split hoof is not kosher for you. The hare, since it chews the cud but doesn't have a split hoof is not kosher for you. The pig, since it has a split hoof but doesn't chew the cud is not kosher for you. (10:3-7)

The Torah says that the camel, hare, hyrax, and pig aren't kosher because they only meet one of the specifications, almost suggesting a difference between having one sign and having neither.

But these animals are on the non-kosher list because they don't meet both requirements; why is the Torah bothered by the fact they possess one element of the kosher laws?

The Kli Yakar suggests that having one sign may be worse than none; one sign can present a deceptive appearance, and only a more thorough inspection dispels the illusion.

We use excuses as justifications for a fault; an excuse's primary function is to diminish your responsibility by getting someone to excuse or forgive your wrongdoing. Where there's an excuse, it indicated a lesser commitment to the matter, and behind every excuse lies a real reason, whether it's decency, energy, interest, or time.

R' Shlomo Farhi teaches that most of us possess the clarity and self-awareness to know what we need to work on. We can hold ourselves back by clutching onto something, pointing to some achievement



or progress to excuse ourselves from doing more, and that good thing or two you've got going for you perversely wind up being something that's holding you back.

The Torah highlights the animals that have some things going for them, but not the whole package, drawing attention to them so that we aren't fooled, and perhaps so we don't fool each other or ourselves. You need to soberly define the boundaries of where you are in the physical and spiritual universe, being honest about your successes and failures.

Presenting as something you're not is not kosher, nor are your excuses.

Permissionless

3 minute read | Straightforward

The Mishkan was the focal point of spirituality and connection; its inauguration was a cause for celebration marked by a seven-day ceremony, but the celebration was marred by tragedy. Ahron's eldest sons, Nadav and Avihu, broke protocol and presented sacrificial offerings of their own, and they died instantly.

Their loss was devastating far beyond their immediate family; they were more than the beloved children of Ahron, who was the heart and soul of the Jewish People. Our sages suggest that they were perhaps even greater than Moshe and Aaron in some regards; they were primed to lead the next generation but never got their chance.

The Torah doesn't shy away from criticism; its silence about why they deserved to die is deafening, and our sages suggest possible explanations to fill the gap.

In one such teaching, Nadav and Avihu were liable because they would wonder when the old men would die; then, they could finally take Moshe and Ahron's place and lead the Jewish People.

R' Noach Weinberg teaches that their fatal flaw wasn't in speculating about the great men's deaths but in their waiting.

In waiting, they squandered all the time and opportunities they had along the way. In touch with the young people in a way the older generation could never be, they perceived a sense of deficiency or lack that they never took ownership of or stepped in to solve; they just sat back and waited for their turn. Their fundamental error was the mistaken belief that you are only responsible for fixing a problem once you have permission or authority.



The correct approach is to understand that responsibility begins the moment you become aware of the problem's existence. In other words, there is no hierarchy to responsibility; you don't need anyone's permission. Take ownership of the issues you perceive around you and confront them regardless of your position, resources, or abilities.

R' Noach Weinberg encourages us to live with and take to heart our sages' teaching that the world was created for us. Each of us is obligated to view the world as our personal responsibility, which requires no permission to step in and save; when something is your responsibility, the notion of waiting for permission is absurd.

As R' Shlomo Farhi teaches, the questioning self-doubt of who you are to step up is mistaken; instead, ask who you are not to share whatever gifts you have been entrusted with because your resources and abilities aren't yours to withhold from the world.

Our sages implore us not to wait for the perfect moment that might never come – *שָׁמָּא לֹא תִפְנֶה*.

Take responsibility for the world you see.

If you have something to share with the world, share it. If you can build, build. If you can lead, lead.

Everyone has something to share with others, and the bar for making a positive difference in people's lives is not high.

What's doubly sad about the incident with Nadav and Avihu is that the Torah's narratives don't even support their error. We know that Yisro initiated a judicial overhaul that Moshe adopted without debate because it was a good idea on its merits. In a later incident, Yehoshua was alarmed when Eldad and Medad prophesied in the camp, but Moshe was secure with their greatness and wished for more like them. He regularly complained about being exhausted and overwhelmed with his leadership position and needed more help. He was the most humble of all men; we have every indication that, in all likelihood, Nadav and Avihu's initiatives would have been welcomed and celebrated, but they kept to themselves and didn't share.

Knowledge must be shared. If we waited until we knew everything, no one teach. As our morning prayers affirm, part of learning is teaching – *לְלַמֵּד וּלְלַמֵּד*.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe famously built a distributed worldwide network of teachers empowered by the lesson that if all you knew was the letter Aleph, find all the people who don't yet know it and teach them.

If the universe has made you aware of something others have missed, that is permission enough to at least attempt to make a difference. People out there need your help; the clock is ticking.



R' Jonathan Sacks notes that this story is a caution that our power of initiative might be welcome in the world of action, but we must taper it in the world of spirituality. The world of spirituality is about subduing our ego in honor of God, not asserting it.

The Torah repeatedly affirms where laws come from – אָנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם. Rashi notes that this statement is an echo of Sinai – אָנֹכִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיךָ – suggesting a direct link from Sinai to the laws; if we accept God as sovereign, these are the laws of the kingdom, and Sinai is interwoven in the fabric of every mitzvah we uphold.

The Sfas Emes understands this as an affirmation of the nature of the Torah, that there is an invisible and intangible component beyond the obvious things we can directly apprehend. The social, inter-personal mitzvos build and develop a cohesive society whether performed intentionally as mitzvos or not; that's just how they work. Acts of charity will inherently bring brotherhood, goodwill, and positivity into the world, regardless of your awareness of a mitzvah called tzedaka.

The power of initiative works in the world of relationships because people are interactive – we can learn and understand how to get along better. But once we step out of the realm of feedback and interactivity, it is deeply presumptuous to continue asserting the power of initiative.

The Ohr HaChaim sharply observes that their initiative to do the right thing at the wrong time got them killed. This story unequivocally conveys the terrifying yet essential lesson that doing the right thing or having noble intentions is not enough; the context must necessarily inform our behavior.

No action exists in a vacuum. The right thing to do depends entirely on the context; circumstances, timing, and relevant values are necessary to determine the rightness of an action. If you're doing the right thing but the timing creates problems, it wasn't actually the right thing to do at that time. Doing the right thing without an awareness of context and timing very quickly becomes the wrong thing – וְזָרָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא צְנוּהָ.

This reflects a school of thought in philosophy called consequentialism, which teaches that the only way to determine whether something was morally correct or not is the consequences of that action. The Torah pays respect to these great men, but the outcome was that they died.

And our lives are like that in many ways.

If a young man wants to buy flowers for his wife, he should probably remember the red rose bouquet she chose for their wedding because they are her favorite. If he buys her a beautiful arrangement of white tulips for her birthday, we understand that he probably hasn't done the right thing. While he meant well and has done something genuinely and objectively nice, the context determines that red roses would have been the way to go.



Many variables go into something working out well, but what that means, then, is that the right person at the wrong time, or the right deal at the wrong time, or the right job at the wrong time, are actually all the wrong thing, and we would do well to let go of them and make our peace. More than a simple misfire, bad context or timing reveals a fundamental incompatibility and misalignment.

There is no shortage of positive outlets for your enthusiasm and initiative, no shortage of good causes to contribute to and volunteer for.

But when it comes to using your initiative, it is imperative to be in tune with the context of your physical and spiritual environment because, as the famous proverb goes, the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

Living with Newness

4 minute read | Straightforward

One of the foundational skills children learn early on is how to read a clock.

What time is it?

It's not simply a question of hours and minutes; there is something deeper to the question. If you know what time it is, you also know what to do. It's morning, wake up and eat breakfast before school or work. It's nighttime, time to wind down and go to sleep. The time of day, the time of year, the seasons, and the calendar all establish the boundaries and time frames upon which our world is built, with specific routines for morning, afternoon, evening, and night, summer, fall, winter, and spring.

Different cultures have established various 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 רֵאשׁ חֳדָשִׁים רִאשׁוֹן הוּא לְכֶם לְחֹדְשֵׁי הַשָּׁנָה – This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you. (12:1)



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There are lots of mitzvot, 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 today. What's more, slavery isn't just an abstract legal status or even just a phenomenon that still occurs in some dark corner of the world; it's also a state of mind, body, and soul that can happen to anyone. Thankfully, we don't have much primary lived with the experience criminal aspect of actual human trafficking; but if you've ever felt helpless, powerless, 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 – *החדש הנה לכם ראש חדשים ראשון הוא לכם לחדשי השנה*.

The Shem miShmuel explains that the power of the Exodus story is that its story of freedom on a national level offers us the opportunity to become free of the tendencies and troubles that hound us on a personal level. The sense of futility, powerlessness, and stuckness that come from being burnt out or overwhelmed is poison. 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.

One preeminent historian has observed that the worst thing about history is that people try to correct the past. People try to save the past, which is impossible; you cannot go back to the past and save the people there or prevent past injuries. We only have the present circumstances and perhaps a hopeful look to the future.

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. As R' Hanoch Heinoch of Alexander teaches, we can attach ourselves to vitality by being present – *ואתם – הדיבקים ה' אלתיכם תימים בלכם היום*.

The Torah often speaks to us in terms of here and now – *ועתה / היום*. Our sages take these references to Teshuva, our capacity and power to change and repent – *כי אם-ליראה* – *ה' אלתיך שאל מעמך*. Because in one day, everything can change – *היום אם-בקלו תשמעו*. As R' Baruch of Mezhibozh teaches, forget the past; right now, be a Jew – *ועתה ישראל!* The Chafetz Chaim takes this to be a reference to introspection – *ה' אלתיך שאל מעמך* – what does this moment require?

It follows that our sages wisely guide us to seize every moment; if not now, when? As the Chiddushei Harim observes, every “now” has a different duty, calling for some new, renewed, or entirely other



choice or deed. As R' Ahron of Karlin points out, each moment has its resolution; each moment of existence is incomparably unique, never existing before in the history of Creation, and never to be repeated before becoming irretrievably lost forever.

As the Vilna Gaon points out, Moshe speaks in the present tense to offer us all the power to choose – רָאָה אֲנֹכִי גֵתָן לְפָנֶיכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּרָכָה וּקְלָלָה. Rashi quotes a Midrash that every day, we should perceive our experience of Judaism as brand new – הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה ה' אֱלֹהֵיךָ מְצֹנֵךְ –

Even once a person has resolved to change, they can still be anchored by the weight of their wrongdoing. The Shinover Rav suggests that although the past can't be undone, it can be creatively reinterpreted, in the way Yosef reframes a troubled past with his brothers to relieve them of their guilt – וַעֲתָה אֵל־תֵּעָצְבוּ וְאֵל־יִחַר בְּעֵינֵיכֶם כִּי־מִכְרַתֶּם אֹתִי הַנְּהָה כִּי לְמַחְנֶה שָׁלַחֵנִי אֱלֹהִים לְפָנֶיכֶם – What happened then wasn't so great, but that brought us to where we are, here and now, and you can only move forward from where you are!

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 is a mitzvah to live by and with the power of change and renewal. It is a mitzvah to live presently with this moment and make it count.

Every day, every week, and in truth, every moment, is brand new, brimming with freshness, vitality, and renewal.

Refusing the Call

5 minute read | Straightforward

Before introducing us to Moshe, the Torah describes how Yakov's family grew numerous and how the Egyptian government felt threatened by such a sizable population of outsiders. Determined to curb this threat, they devised a means to enslave the Jewish People, which crept slowly until it was intolerable.



Once the Torah has established the setting, the Torah tells us of Moshe's birth and upbringing before he has to flee. Moshe encounters a mysterious burning bush on his travels, and God calls on him to save his people. Curiously, Moshe refuses this call:

וַעֲתָה הִנֵּה צַעֲקַת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בָּאָה אֵלַי וְגַם־רָאִיתִי אֶת־הַלַּחֲזִץ אֲשֶׁר מִצְרַיִם לֹחֲצִים אֹתָם: וַעֲתָה לָכֵה וְאַשְׁלַחְךָ אֶל־פַּרְעֹה וְהוֹצֵא אֶת־עַמִּי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם: וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הָאֱלֹקִים מִי אֲנֹכִי כִּי אֵלֶךְ אֶל־פַּרְעֹה וְכִי אוֹצִיא אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם: ... וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־ה' בִּי: "The cry of the Children of Israel has reached Me; I have seen how the Egyptians oppress them. Come! I will send you to Pharaoh, and you shall free My people, the Children of Israel, from Egypt." But Moshe said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Children of Israel from Egypt?"... Moshe said to God, "Please God, I have never been a man of words, either in times past or now that You have spoken to Your servant; I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." (3:9-11, 4:10)

This is one of the most important stories ever told. Moshe knows where he comes from and has seen his brethren suffering. His birth and upbringing uniquely situate him between both sides to do something about it. No less than the Creator has called on him to greatness, and he refuses, not once, but twice!

How could Moshe possibly refuse the call?

Refusing the call is a literary trope that humanizes the hero, but this story isn't ordinary literature. Moshe's refusal is part of this timeless story because it reflects a fundamental property intrinsic to all humans we must acknowledge and understand.

Moshe didn't doubt that his people could or should be saved; Moshe doubted himself. He had fears and insecurities; he was missing an essential trait to be successful! He wasn't a man of words; how would he persuade anybody to follow him? How would he convince the Egyptian government to let his people go? This isn't faux humility – Moshe articulates an accurate self-assessment; he is right! And yet, the Creator answers that it doesn't matter; he must do it anyway.

When the Mishkan was finally ready for inauguration, Ahron also refused the call, feeling ashamed and unworthy for his responsibility for the Golden Calf incident. Yet in the view of our sages, Ahron's shame was exactly what distinguished him as the right person; his self-awareness of his shortcomings and his view of the position as one that required gravity and severity. Moshe never says Ahron is wrong; he only encourages him to ignore those doubts and do it anyway – אָמַר לוֹ – שְׁהִיָּה אַהֲרֹן בּוֹשׁ וְיֵרָא לְגִשְׁתָּ, אָמַר לוֹ – מֹשֶׁה, לָמָּה אַתָּה בּוֹשׁ? לָכֵן נִבְחַרְתָּ.

In the Purim story, Mordechai asks Esther to go the king to save her people and Esther refuses the call, not wanting to risk her life; she has correctly assessed the facts and is indeed in danger. But as Mordechai says, that doesn't matter; if Esther remains paralysed by her fears, she will lose the opportunity to step up. The call to action is open before her; and she must do it anyway – כִּי אִם־הִחַרְשׁ – תַּחֲרִישִׁי בְּעַת הַזֹּאת רִחוּ וְהִצְלָה יַעֲמוּד לַיהוּדִים מִמְּקוֹם אַחֵר וְאַתָּה וּבֵית־אָבִיךָ תֵּאבְדוּ וּמִי יוֹדֵעַ אִם־לַעֲת כְּזֹאת הַגְּעַת לַמְּלָכוֹת.



The book of Jeremiah opens with a similar vignette. Jeremiah reports that God appeared to him in his youth, and called upon him to be the prophet for his generation; like his forebears, Jeremiah protests that he is just a kid and is not a speaker. In what we can now recognize as a consistent fashion, God dismisses these excuses; not because they are wrong, but because they don't matter – he's got to do it anyway – וַיְהִי דְבַר־ה' אֵלַי לֵאמֹר: בְּטָרְם אֲצַרְךָ בְּכַטָּן יִדְעַתִּיךָ וּבְטָרְם תִּצָּא מִרְחֹם הַקְּדוּשָׁתִיךָ נְבִיא לְגוֹיִם נִתְתִּיךָ: וְאָמַר אָהֵה אֲדַנִּי הַ הַנְּהָ – anyway – לֹא־יִדְעַתִּי דְבַר כִּי־נִעַר אָנֹכִי: וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֵלַי אֶל־תֹּאמַר נִעַר אָנֹכִי כִּי עַל־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר אֲשַׁלְחֶךָ תִּלְוֶה וְאֵת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר אֲצַוֶּה תִּדְבַר.

The Torah is deliberate in how it presents stories; there are lessons in what it leaves in and leaves out. Of all the small interactions that don't make the final cut, we should note that refusing the call is an interaction the Torah consistently deems necessary in multiple unrelated stories; our greatest heroes don't just jump at the chance to do what is clearly the right thing.

Who is perfect enough to fix the problems in your community? Who is perfect enough to lead the people you love to greatness? The Torah seems to endorse and validate this sentiment, insisting that it has got to be you despite your flaws – אֶל־תֹּאמַר נִעַר אָנֹכִי – Ironically, the people who are deluded and narcissistic enough to think they are perfect would be the worst candidate; the Torah holds Korach up as the counterexample.

If you have adequately honed your sensitivities, you recognize you have a lot of work to do, and so many people need your help. You might even hear a call to action reverberating deep within. But you doubt yourself, and you refuse the call. You're scared – and you should be! There is plenty to fear, and the stakes couldn't be higher. The undertaking the Torah calls us to is enormous, too enormous to accomplish on our own; yet it calls on us just the same – לֹא עָלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה לְגִמְרָה, וְלֹא אַתָּה בְּן חוּרִין לְבַטֵּל מִמֶּנָּה –

There is moral fiber in quieting the voice of self-doubt and stepping up to answer the call anyway – אַם אֵין אָנִי לִי, מִי לִי. וּכְשֶׁאָנִי לְעַצְמִי, מָה אָנִי.

The Torah calls on humans, keenly aware of our fears, flaws, imperfection, and insecurities. We mustn't engage those self-same fears, flaws, imperfections, and insecurities as excuses to neglect our duty. The Torah repeatedly tells us they don't matter; do it anyway!

Moshe, Ahron, Jeremiah, and Esther all expressed a form of impostor syndrome, the feeling that whatever job you're in, you're not qualified for it and that people will figure out any minute that you're a poser with no clue what you're doing. Your self-awareness serves you well by accurately identifying gaps in your skillset but does you a disservice by stopping you from trying. You have to silence the doubt in yourself when it gets to the point of holding you back from doing transformational things simply because you're not quite ready to face the reality of your own potential greatness.

Our pantheon of heroes is replete with imperfect individuals who had good reasons to refuse the call. Each excuse was entirely accurate; we ought to draw immense comfort and power from how universal self-doubt and uncertainty are. The Torah's consistent thematic response to our greats, and through



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them to us, echoing and reverberating for all eternity, is simply that there's work to do, and someone has to do it.

So why shouldn't it be you?

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

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

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

Neli

PS - *TorahRedux is my pride and joy, the product of thousands of hours of learning, research, writing, editing, and formatting. My business, Hendon Advisors, allows me to dedicate time to TorahRedux, and I welcome your assistance in furthering my goal to keep publishing high-quality Parsha content that makes a difference. I source and broker the purchase and sale of healthcare businesses; I kindly ask for your blessings and prayers. If you are a buyer of healthcare businesses or can make introductions to healthcare operators who might buy or sell, just reply to this email to get in touch.*

Redux: *adjective* – resurgence; refers to being brought back, restored, or revived; something familiar presented in a new way. Not to see what no one else has seen, but to say what nobody has yet said about something which everybody sees.