



## Vayikra and Zachor 2022

### Come As You Are

2 minute read | Straightforward

We often think of holiness or sanctity as the hallowed privilege of a rare few, the people who have made it, the inner circle of those who are better and wiser than us. They are the ones who can pray for us, guide us, and bring healing. Sometimes that's true; other times, that view is propounded by holier than thou folks who self-serve by making us feel that way.

That being said, it is an objective and measurable fact that some people are genuinely further on their religious journey and are more advanced on the observance spectrum.

Make no mistake that everyone has the same obligation to meet the standard of perfect observance of the entire Torah – so, for example, the Torah unambiguously says to keep Shabbos with no exceptions.

Yet, in reality, that standard has always been theoretical; it has never existed. In the external world where theory meets practice, it is neither possible nor true to achieve perfection. We know better than to hold every human to the same standard.

The only uniform standard everyone is mandated to uphold is the half-shekel donation to the Mishkan; the tiniest sum of money, a de minimis threshold contribution. This contribution went towards the foundation sockets, which are compared to our threshold foundation of faith and membership of the Jewish People.

But beyond that basic common and tiny denominator, everyone is radically different. Everyone is born in a particular environment, makes mistakes, and is only capable of so much or going so far. We know this intuitively – it is so obvious that like all things in life, there must be a subjective element to religiosity, by necessity, and there absolutely is.

In as much as sacrifices and the Beis HaMikdash are the domain of the privileged few, every single human may bring an offering. One form explicitly recognizes human subjectivity and meets us where we are, contingent on a person's means – קרבן עולה ויורד. While a wealthy person would bring expensive cattle; a working person would be expected to offer a pair of affordable birds, and a person in poverty would only have to provide some cheap flour:

וְאִם לֹא תִשָּׂיג יָדוֹ לְשֵׁמֵי תְרִים אוֹ לְשֵׁנֵי בְּנֵי-יוֹנָה וְהֵבִיא אֶת-קֶרְבְּנוֹ אֲשֶׁר חָטָא עֲשִׂירֵת הָאָפֶה סֶלֶת – And if one's means do not suffice for two turtledoves or two pigeons, that person shall bring as an offering for that of which one is guilty a tenth of an ephah of choice flour... (5:11)



Whatever the form, the end result is a “pleasant scent,” which is how the Torah says God receives them warmly – רִיחַ נִיחֵם לָהּ. This is quite obviously a metaphor; burning feathers smell disgusting. And yet unmistakably, the same reception reveals that whatever the form, they are substantively the same, whether bull, bird, or flour; all are warmly embraced, with no distinction between rich and poor.

The Chafetz Chaim notes that the principle holds true even while the sacrifices have lapsed. If you have the means to help others and do less than you could, you have not met your duty. To whom much is given, much is expected; and with great power comes great responsibility.

The legendary Reb Zusha of Hanipol would say that when he’d get to Heaven, he wouldn’t be afraid to answer why he wasn’t like Avraham, because he wasn’t Avraham; nor why he wasn’t like Moshe, because he wasn’t Moshe. But when they would ask why he wasn’t like Zusha, he’d have no answer for failing to live up to his own unique potential.

In as much as we all need to be better, you can only move forward from where you are. You are where you are supposed to be right now – הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עוֹמֵד עָלָיו אֲדַמְתִּי-קֹדֶשׁ הוּא.

In your present condition and natural state, you have a key stake in Judaism and a contribution to make that matters, even before the changes you must still undergo.

---

## The Heart of Worship

3 minute read | Intermediate

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 the primary mode of worship, 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 beginning of the sections of the sacrifices opens by setting out the scenario that someone wants to bring an offering:

‘אָדָם בִּיִּיִקְרִיב מִכֶּם קִרְבָּן לַיהוָה – When any of you presents an offering of to God... (1:2)

Although not readily obvious in translation, the Torah utilizes highly unusual grammar. 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, from yourselves – אָדָם מִכֶּם בִּיִּיִקְרִיב / אָדָם בִּיִּיִקְרִיב 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 you you're willing to offer – יִקְרִיב מִכֶּם – and it's clear that prayer would function in the same way.

R' Jonathan Sacks teaches that the conventional notion of sacrifice isn't really reflected in the Hebrew term – קִרְבָּן. We think of sacrifice as giving something up when the Hebrew word actually means something more like drawing closer. 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, the material transforms into the sacred.

The Malbim suggests that all a person ever has to offer is themselves and their all, which is precisely what the Torah calls for – יִקְרִיב מִכֶּם. The Sfas Emes explains that the notion articulated here is that prayer and sacrifice are about aligning ourselves and resources to God's broader plan – prayer isn't secondary to sacrifice; it is the same.

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

As Moshe said to his audience, our Creator is different to gods they might have heard of who are only invoked with specific rituals – כִּי מִיִּיִגִּי גְדוֹל אֲשֶׁר־לֹא אֱלֹהִים קִרְבִּים אֵלָיו כֹּה אֱלֹהֵינוּ בְּכָל־קִרְבָּנֵנוּ 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, that things can and will eventually grow from – קרוב ה' לכל קראיו לכל אשר יקראהו בְּאֵמֶת.

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.

---

## The Eternal Flame

3 minute read | Straightforward

The ancients understood that water is the source of life, that rain and water are life-giving, and that water symbolizes cleansing, regeneration, renewal, fertility, birth, creation, and new life.

Rain is a powerful symbol in the covenantal relationship between God and the Jewish people; unlike Egypt, where the water comes up from the Nile and beneath feet, Israel is a land where people must look up to the heavens for rain.

Given rain's prominent role in an agricultural economy, it follows that rain features in our daily prayers; but there was one time of year when the rain had a unique prayer.

The Kohen Gadol would enter the inner sanctum of the Beis HaMikdash once a year on Yom Kippur and perform the ritual service and say one single prayer – the only prayer ever said at Judaism's holiest site – about rain.

But where we might expect the foremost religious leader and representative of an entire generation to request the right amount of rain at the appropriate time and place, we find that instead, the prayer simply asks God to ignore the prayers of travelers who don't want to get wet on their way.

Given the central importance of rain, why is that the most important thing to say?

There is an interesting directive in the laws of sacrifices about a fire that had to burn in all weather conditions, even in the rain:

אֵשׁ תָּמִיד תִּוְקַד עַל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ לֹא תִכָּה – Burn an eternal flame on the altar, it can never burn out... (6:6)

On its face, this is a simple instruction to the attending Kohanim on duty to regularly stoke and fuel the flame.



## TorahRedux

There was nothing magical about it; it could not and did not burn on its own. It required a complex and dedicated logistical operation with constant maintenance and monitoring with round-the-clock shifts year-round, rain or shine, snow or wind.

Pirkei Avos suggests that their efforts were met with divine assistance; when it rained, the rain would not quench the fire, which is to say that our sages specifically understood the divine assistance to take the form of rain that wouldn't put the fire out, as opposed to no rain at all over the fire. The Kohanim would still have to work the fire in adverse weather conditions; God would make sure their efforts were successful.

This strongly implies that no rain here, there, or anywhere is not a viable solution.

Do not deny the crucial role consistency, perseverance, and perspiration play in your life. Like the eternal flame, the miracle only happens after you've exhausted your efforts.

As R' Chaim Volozhin teaches, while we can't choose our circumstances, we can control our direction and velocity.

This eternal flame, fueled as it was by raw human willpower, was the source of fires in all the year-round services, from the Menorah to the incense, the crescendo of the Yom Kippur service when the Kohen Gadol said his prayer for the rain. The eternal flame wasn't just something that lies in the external world; it comes from within.

R' Shmshon Raphael Hirsch suggests that this illustrates that the heat and warmth of the special moments of life are only fuelled by the grit and consistency of our daily grind. It wasn't an eternal flame so much as a perpetual flame – אש תמיד.

R' Joseph B. Soloveitchik suggests that it is a human's duty to broaden the scope and strengthen the intensity of their efforts – השתדלות – because the aggregate of all outcomes is contingent on our efforts.

Our sages understood the true miracle of the eternal flame; determined willpower and enduring efforts blessed with success. The Yom Kippur prayer affirms our worldview; we reject the immaturity of the fair-weather traveler, who does not accept that it will rain. We live in a world where there is rain, a world where it must rain, and people are going to have to be a little wet and uncomfortable.

For the blessing to have a place to land, you need to do all you possibly can; ask not for a lighter burden, but broader shoulders.

But all you can do is your best; you can only hope for the rest.

---

## **It's All For You**



2 minute read | Straightforward

In the aftermath of the Golden Calf, God tells the Jewish People to build a Mishkan. Once it is built and operationally ready, God calls Moshe to tell him the laws of sacrifices:

וַיִּקְרָא, אֶל-מֹשֶׁה; וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֵלָיו, מֵאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד לֵאמֹר (1:1)

Calling to somebody is a deliberate expression of consideration and care; it is the highest honor to be so directly recognized by the Creator. Quite unusually, the word וַיִּקְרָא appears in the Torah scroll with a small א. Rashi, citing a Midrash, takes this to mean that while writing the words, Moshe was uncomfortable writing about God seeking him out directly, and wrote the final letter in a small font, evoking a comparison to the prophecy of Bilam, whose prophecy has a sense of erratic encounters rather than deliberate meetings – וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶל בִּלְעָם.

This teaching serves to illustrate Moshe’s humility, but it raises a major issue.

One of the foundations of Judaism is that Moshe Rabbeinu had prophecy unlike any other; it is Moshe’s Torah that we hold in such high esteem. By comparing himself to Bilam, or anyone, doesn’t Moshe actually undermine the entire Torah?

Our sages teach that Bilam didn’t have prophecy because of his qualities; but to preempt a prospective claim that if the nations of the world had a prophet like Moshe, they might have acted differently. Accordingly, it follows that Bilam was a prophet for the people’s sake, not his own merits; the abilities and achievements were incidental to the man.

R’ Shlomo Farhi explains that this is the common thread Moshe could draw between himself and Bilam. In the aftermath of the Golden Calf, God told Moshe to raise his people’s spirits, and as Rashi explains, he does so by saying that God only talks to him because of the people – צֵא וְאָמַר לָהֶם דְּבָרַי – כְּבוֹשִׁים. בְּשִׁבְלֵכֶם הוּא מְדַבֵּר עִמִּי.

In the distinctive words of R’ Simcha Bunim of Peshischa, a man standing at the top of a mountain can’t be proud of how tall he is. As high as he may stand in the physical world, the mountain lends him his height over others, nothing else. In much the same way, Moshe achieved greatness yet remained humble. His great accomplishments were not attributable to his own effort; the people had given him his power.

However great you or them might be, we are all here to serve.

---

## Amalek Redux





4 minute read | Straightforward

The Torah has lots of laws. Some are fun and easy to understand, like Shabbos, and some are fun and difficult to understand, like shaking the Lulav. A rare few are not only difficult to understand but leave us with a sense of moral unease as well.

One of them is the laws concerning Amalek.

On the back of the miraculous Exodus and escape at the Red Sea, the Jewish People were exhausted and weary when a band of raiders called Amalek attacked the stragglers in the group.

By most counts, there are no less than three separate duties incumbent on all Jews as it pertains to Amalek: to remember that Amalek attacked the Jewish People just as they left Egypt; not to forget what they did; and the big one, to eradicate the memory of Amalek from the world.

These laws are serious and are part of the rare category of mitzvos that apply to all people at all times under all circumstances.

But isn't it a little unsettling?

It sounds uncomfortably like a mitzvah to commit genocide, the moral argument against which is certainly compelling, especially for a nation who heard the commandment "do not kill" from God's own voice at Sinai; even more so having suffered a genocide in living memory. Although some people have no trouble understanding it that way, you're in good company if you find difficulty in a commandment to kill Amalek today.

Long ago, the Gemara dismissed the notion of practicing the straightforward interpretation, pointing to a story in the Prophets where the Assyrian king Sennacherib forcibly displaced and resettled the entire Middle East, eliminating distinct bloodlines of racial descent.

While this elegantly eliminates the problem in a practical sense – there is no problem because the law can no longer apply – the moral issue remains open.

Over centuries, a substantial number of prominent halachic authorities have clarified that the status of Amalek is not racial; that although a tribe called Amalek attacked the Jewish People and formed the context for the law, the law is not and never was an instruction to commit genocide against those people. While the Gemara says that Amalek can never join the Jewish People, it also says that descendants of Amalek taught Torah in Israel, suggesting that their women, or children of women who married out, could lose their identity as Amalek. If Amalek isn't a race, then there is no law to kill such a particular of people, and there is no moral dilemma.

But if Amalek isn't a particular group of people, what are all the laws concerning Amalek about?



R' Chaim Brisker explains that Amalek is not a particular group of humans; it is a conceptual category. It's an attitude and ideology that transcends any specific race or individual and persists forever, an archetype of evil that we must fundamentally stand against and be on alert for. Through the ages, writers have always labeled enemies or opposition as Amalek, formalizing this eternal struggle.

It's not apologetics or mental gymnastics; it fits the words very neatly. The perpetrators of the original crime are all dead, but the offense isn't simply that they attacked the Jewish People; as Rashi explains, it's that they cooled us off along the way while we were weary – אָשֶׁר קָרָה בְּדַרְוֵה וַיִּזְנֹב בָּהּ כָּל־הַנְּחֻשָׁלִים אֶתְרִיָּה – וְאַתָּה צַנֵּף וַיִּגַע.

As the Netziv points out, it would be self-defeating to have an eternal command to destroy something's memory; the Torah makes that literally impossible simply by mentioning it.

The Kedushas Levi goes further and suggests that the legacy of Amalek lies in the heart of every person.

So sure, the malignant form of Amalek looks like a Haman or a Hitler. But the benign form is all around us, in ourselves and in others. It's not any particular humans we need to overcome, but rather, their attitude and ideology. Case in point, the fight against Amalek does not end even though the nation is long gone; its legacy remains, and it's the legacy that poses a threat.

An old Chassidim aphorism observes that Amalek is numerically equivalent to doubt – עמלק / ספק – and the attack in Rephidim only happens opportunistically since people's were caught off guard – רַפְיוֹן יָדַיִם / רַפְיוֹן יָדַיִם.

In our day-to-day lives, that looks like when you consider doing something bold or different, and someone, perhaps even yourself, pokes holes or second-guesses the new initiative. “I want to try this new idea, but maybe I shouldn't? What if it's the wrong choice? Maybe I don't deserve it?” Or perhaps, “Why start or support that project—aren't there far more important ones?”

Anthropologists and psychologists have long observed the phenomenon of crab mentality in some groups. The metaphor derives from a pattern of behavior noted in crabs when they are trapped in a bucket – any individual crab could easily escape, but the others will undermine its efforts, ensuring the group's collective demise. In some groups, members will attempt to reduce the self-confidence of any member who achieves success beyond the others, whether out of envy, resentment, spite, or competitive feeling, to halt their progress. The wrong circles have powerful inertia that draws members towards conformity and mediocrity in a self-fulfilling negative feedback loop.

As Churchill said, if you have enemies, that means you've stood up for something at some time in your life. To be sure, if you only have enemies, you have a different problem! But if you have no enemies, you also have a problem, likely that you try to please everybody rather than standing for your own ideas and values. Make sure you know which side of the line you're on!





Letting feelings of self-doubt and personal incompetence persist is called impostor syndrome. You can baselessly hold back from doing things that could transform your life because you're not ready to face the reality of your own potential greatness.

If it sounds pithy or trite, just know that that's quite literally Amalek's great crime – trying to hold the Jewish People back just as they were beginning to break through, discouraging them just as they were getting started and finding their feet – אֲשֶׁר קָרָה בְּדַרְוֹ וַיִּזְנוּב בָּהּ כַּל־הַנְּחָשׁ שְׁלִים אֶת־רִיחַ וְאֶת־הָעֵינָן וַיִּגְעַע.

As the Mishna in Pirkei Avos says, you must eliminate all doubt – הַסְּתַלַּק מִן הַסְּפִקָה.

Remember that someone who was Amalek can lose their status; when they discard their harmful ideology, they're not the enemy anymore, and the law no longer applies to them.

Haters rarely hate you; far more often, they hate themselves because you're showing them a reflection of what they wish they could be, and they don't like feeling inadequate.

Shine bright and soar, and forget about the people who tried to hold you back.

---

## Quote of the Week

Fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten.

— Neil Gaiman

---

## Thought of the Week

There is a story people say about R' Chaim Soloveichik, one of the greatest and most innovative scholars in several generations, whose impact is palpable to anyone who has learned in a yeshiva at even a moderate level.

He heavily influenced the entire yeshiva world that followed him, and he is held in very rare company. His name is invoked with reverence; at the juncture his insights become relevant, the entire topic is about to reveal itself.

Less well known, it is said that his house was open to all, so open, to the extent that it became a public thoroughfare where notices and advertisements were posted.



## TorahRedux

When people share that part, the audience is supposed to be surprised to hear that the legendary scholar was also exceptionally kind and generous.

But I wonder if it perhaps reveals that we're not doing a good job of transmitting our actual values - that the practice of kindness and generosity sits right alongside Torah study.

In his own words:

*“A rabbi that doesn't close his Gemara to do tzedaka and chesed – even when the Gemara is open in front of him, it's as if it's closed. However the converse is also true – a rabbi that does close his Gemara to do tzedaka and chesed, even when it's closed, it's as if it's open!”*

---

*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).*

Neli

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

**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.