

Pesach Second Days 2024

Appreciating Nature

3 minute read | Straightforward

The splitting of the Red Sea is one of the most important stories in the Torah and one of the most incredible miracles in Jewish belief.

Each element defies expectation; the magnitude of the miracle, where a vast ocean suspends and violates the entire natural order of the universe, not just to help the Jewish People escape, but eradicating the enemy force in one decisive moment, in just the nick of time and all at once out of nowhere.

Like so many of the plagues that struck Egypt, this miracle was also activated by Moshe raising his staff:

וְאַתָּה הָרָם אֶת־מִטְּףְךָ וְנָטַיָה אֶת־יָדְךָ עַל־הַיָּם וַיִּבְקְעֶהוּ וַיָּבֵאוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּתוֹךְ הַיָּם בַּיַּבְשָׁה... וַיִּט מֹשֶׁה אֶת־יָדוֹ עַל־הַיָּם וַיּוֹלֶךְ ה' אֶת־הַיָּם בָּרוּחַ וַיִּבְקְעֵהוּ וַיָּבֵאוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּתוֹךְ הַיָּם עַל־הַיָּבֵשׁ... – “And you lift up your rod and hold out your arm over the sea and split it, so that the Israelites may march into the sea on dry ground”... Then Moshe held out his arm over the sea and the Lord drove back the sea with a strong east wind all that night, and turned the sea into dry ground. The waters were split... (14:16,19)

Interestingly, the miracle was deactivated, and the natural order was restored with the same instruction and action:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה נָטַיָה אֶת־יָדְךָ עַל־הַיָּם וַיָּשָׁבוּ הַיָּם וַיָּשָׁבוּ הַמָּיִם עַל־מִצְרַיִם עַל־רֶכְבּוֹ וְעַל־פָּרָשָׁיו: וַיִּט מֹשֶׁה אֶת־יָדוֹ עַל־הַיָּם וַיָּשָׁב הַיָּם לִפְנֹת בְּקָר וַיָּשָׁבוּ הַיָּם וַיָּשָׁבוּ הַמָּיִם עַל־מִצְרַיִם עַל־רֶכְבּוֹ וְעַל־פָּרָשָׁיו: וַיִּט מֹשֶׁה אֶת־יָדוֹ עַל־הַיָּם וַיָּשָׁב הַיָּם לִפְנֹת בְּקָר וַיָּשָׁבוּ הַיָּם וַיָּשָׁבוּ הַמָּיִם עַל־מִצְרַיִם עַל־רֶכְבּוֹ וְעַל־פָּרָשָׁיו: וַיִּט מֹשֶׁה אֶת־יָדוֹ עַל־הַיָּם וַיָּשָׁב הַיָּם לִפְנֹת בְּקָר וַיָּשָׁבוּ הַיָּם וַיָּשָׁבוּ הַמָּיִם עַל־מִצְרַיִם עַל־רֶכְבּוֹ וְעַל־פָּרָשָׁיו: – Then the Lord said to Moshe, “Hold out your arm over the sea, that the waters may come back upon the Egyptians and upon their chariots and upon their riders.” Moshe held out his arm over the sea, and at daybreak the sea returned to its normal state, and the Egyptians fled at its approach. But the Lord hurled the Egyptians into the sea. (14:26,27)

To be clear, we are talking miracles here, so there are no rules, and we are deep in the uncharted realm of speculation.

But if you think about it, it makes sense that Moshe has to do something to activate the miracle to split the waters. After all, miracles don't just happen by themselves!

But then it doesn't necessarily follow that Moshe would have to do something to deactivate the miracle and restore the natural order. We quite reasonably might expect that the miracle is over the



very moment it has served its purpose; once the last straggler made it to dry land, the miracle is unnecessary and would resume its default natural state.

But the miracle doesn't end when it's over. God instructs Moshe to activate the return of the natural order as well. Why wouldn't the miracle end when it was over?

R' Shimshon Pinkus observes that this suggests an essential lesson that is a key to understanding the Torah; from God's vantage point, the natural and the supernatural are the same, in which case there is no default condition.

On this view, Moshe wasn't stopping a miracle; he was performing another miracle, the return of the natural order we take for granted.

R' Joseph B. Soloveitchik highlights how Jewish tradition has endorsed cosmic wonder at natural phenomena for centuries, with blessings over the waxing moon, first blossoms of spring, the configuration of the starry expanse, and the sweet smell of flowers, down to the food we eat, the healthy body, and something as simple as going to the bathroom.

Although modern science has demystified the world, the world is still magical. With a sense of wonder, you can look at the world as more miraculous than natural without saying there is a difference between the two and without disputing the scientific narrative. Every breath you take, every sunrise, a child's smile; these are the kind of things that are so commonplace that we overlook how special they are – ועל נסיד שְׁבַכְל יום עֲמָנוּ וְעַל גְּפִלְאוֹתֶיהָ וְטוֹבוֹתֶיהָ שְׁבַכְל יֵת עָרַב וְבִקְרַר וְצִהָרִים –

If you're still surprised the natural world didn't just kick back into gear when the Jewish People were done walking through the ocean, you might be taking a lot for granted in life.

This Cannot Be How It Ends

3 minute read | Straightforward

They thought it was over.

The Jewish People had finally left centuries of oppression behind them and had walked out of Egypt. But barely a few days out, the Egyptian army was in pursuit and had them cornered by the ocean shore, wading in the reeds, open sea in front of them, a cloud of dust from the vengeful Egyptian army on the horizon. They were trapped, and the people despaired.

Yet before God even talks to Moshe, Moshe already knows how to proceed:



אל-תִּירָאוּ—הִתְיַצְבוּ וּרְאוּ אֶת-יְשׁוּעַת ה', אֲשֶׁר-יַעֲשֶׂה לָכֶם הַיּוֹם – “Have no fear! Stand and wait, and you shall see God’s salvation today!” (14:13)

At this point, the Torah has not recorded an interaction between Moshe and the Creator; Moshe has not been briefed or prepared for what to do in this scenario. And yet he knows.

But how?

The easy answer is that when you’re in a tough spot, have some faith, and it’ll all work out! But apart from being a cop-out answer, it’s true except for when it doesn’t work out. Blind faith is probably not the answer; maybe it’s something else.

Right after the Jewish People are saved, they sing the Song of the Sea. The Torah also records how Miriam led a separate rendition of gratitude, and the Jewish women followed her. It’s curious because it indicates that the Song of the Sea was not enough, that Miriam’s activity was distinct and unique, over and above the Song of the Sea. It’s also curious because the Torah identifies her in a highly unusual way:

... וַתִּקַּח מִרְיָם הַנְּבִיאָה אֶחָזַת אֶהֱרֹן, אֶת-הַתֵּף—בְּיָדָהּ; וַתִּצְאֵן כָּל-הַנָּשִׁים אַחֲרֶיהָ, בְּתַפִּים וּבְמַחֲלֹת. וַתַּעַן לָהֶם, מִרְיָם – Miriam the prophetess, sister of Aharon, took an instrument in her hand, and led the women with instruments and dancing. And she sang to them... (15:21)

At this point in the story, we know that Miriam is a heroic leader in her own right who needs no introduction. The Torah highlights her prophecy and association with Aharon, even though she was also a sister to Moshe.

Sensitive to these nuances, Rashi suggests that the Torah alludes here to the prophecy Miriam received when she was only Aharon’s sister but not Moshe’s.

Pharaoh’s mystics had foreseen Moshe’s birth and launched a campaign of infanticide against Jewish boys in the preceding months. The Midrash records how Amram and Yocheved, the Jewish leaders of their time, had separated so as not to suffer such a terrible fate. Miriam then experienced the prophecy of Moshe’s impending birth. She persuaded her parents to get back together by saying that their action was worse than Pharaoh’s decree, as separation prevented the birth of girls as well.

When Yocheved fell pregnant, the Egyptian government kept tabs on her – but Moshe was born prematurely after a six-month pregnancy. When he was born, the Torah describes his appearance as brilliant – וַתֵּרָא אֹתוֹ כִּי-טוֹב הוּא – which the Midrash suggests is the same brilliance as the light of Creation – כִּי-טוֹב – and the entire house shone.

But despite such an encouraging sign, the moment came where she could hide him no longer – וְלֹא-יִכְלֶה עוֹד, הַצִּפְיָנוּ



Egyptians came for her to inspect the child she was due to give birth to. She knew she had to abandon the child prophesied by her daughter. Yocheved placed the boy into a basket and put him in the river. The Torah implies she could not bear to watch – and who could? What chances would one give a baby with no one to care for him, abandoned in a box in a river, in the heat, with an army on the hunt for him no less:

וַתֵּצֵא יוֹכֶדֶן בַּת־מִצְרַיִם בַּת־פַּרְעֹה, מֵהַ-יַּעֲשֶׂה לּוֹ – וַתִּתְּצֵב אֶחְתָּו, מֵרֶחֶק, לְדַעַה, מֵהַ-יַּעֲשֶׂה לּוֹ
him...(2:4)

The emphasis is on Miriam; Miriam stayed when Yocheved could not. She had not experienced a new prophecy and was only a child herself. Holding on to her prophecy, one thought guided her – this cannot be how it ends.

And she was right.

The daughter of the Jewish People's oppressors showed up, which would ordinarily be the worst thing that could happen. Still, in a stunning reversal, she displays compassion for the boy and takes him in, ultimate victory seized from the clutches of total defeat.

As R' David Fohrman explains, years later, Moshe knew what to tell the Jews at the shore of the Red Sea because this had happened before; it was the same story!

Jew cornered by Egyptian among the reeds, at the water's edge, all hope fading fast. Moshe had been in this situation before, so he understood to tell them to watch what happens. This cannot be how it ends!

Once they were safe, so many years after her prophecy, Moshe had finally saved their people. It is Miriam's celebration more than anyone else's because this is the ultimate fulfillment of her prophecy – the promised child has saved their people from Egypt for good.

You probably haven't experienced a prophecy of salvation. But all the same, in the heartbreaking moments that look like all is lost, you can invoke the power of Miriam and hold on just a little longer.

This cannot be how it ends.

The Water of Life



5 minute read | Straightforward

Symbolism plays an essential role in human culture. Through symbols, we find meaning in the physical world, which becomes transparent and reveals the transcendent. Certain symbols are cultural universals, primal archetypes intuitively understood that derive from the unconscious and require no explanation, like mother and child or light and darkness.

As the Torah draws to its close, Moshe says goodbye with a timeless ballad laced with beautiful metaphor and symbolism:

יַעֲרַף בְּמָטָר לְקַחֵי, תִּזְלַל כַּטַּל אֶמְרָתִי, כְּשִׁעִירִים עַל־דְּשָׁא, וְכַרְבִּיבִים עַל־עֵשֶׂב – May my discourse come down as rain; my speech distill as dew; like showers on young vegetation; like droplets on the grass. (32:2)

Many ancient cultures believed 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. Water symbolizes the universal reservoir of all possible existence, supports every creation, and even precedes their form. The Torah’s creation myth aligns with this archetype, with primordial water everywhere, from which everything subsequently emerges:

וְהָאָרֶץ הַיְתוּמָה תְּהוֹוָה וְבַהֲוֹי וְחַשְׁךָ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם – The earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep, and the spirit of God hovered over the waters... (1:4)

The Mikvah ritual bath is central to Judaism and draws heavily on this archetype, symbolizing rebirth and renewal. Moreover, with our knowledge of the water cycle, we have learned the literal truth of water as the solvent of life and regeneration; and in fact, the search for liquid water in the universe serves as a close proxy to the search for life beyond our planet.

But Moshe doesn’t say the Torah is like water; he compares the Torah to rain – יַעֲרַף בְּמָטָר לְקַחֵי. They do have a lot in common; both are life-giving, cleansing, regenerative, restorative, and like rain, the Torah came from the sky to affirm and sustain us. So sure, the Torah is like rain!

But Moshe doesn’t simply say that the Torah is like rain; he says it’s also like dew – יַעֲרַף בְּמָטָר לְקַחֵי, תִּזְלַל כַּטַּל אֶמְרָתִי.

But what is dew, if not just another form of rain and water?

To unlock the symbol and discover the meaning, we must establish the technical difference between rain and dew.

Dew occurs when you have a cold object in a warm environment. As the object’s exposed surface cools by radiating heat, atmospheric moisture condenses faster than it evaporates, resulting in the



formation of water droplets on the surface. In other words, a cold object in a warm environment can draw moisture out of the ambient surroundings.

There's a Torah that's like rain, that comes from the sky, and that hopefully, you've experienced at times, perhaps a flash of inspiration that came out of nowhere, the moments you feel alive. But that doesn't happen to everyone, and even when it does, it doesn't happen all the time. To borrow rain's imagery, this kind of inspiration is seasonal only. If you're counting on the rain to get by, what happens when the rain stops?

Perhaps precisely because of this problem, there's a Torah that we can experience that feels more like dew. A warm environment that doesn't come from the sky, that we can generate and cultivate ourselves, and which draws out the life-affirming properties from within and around us.

R' Simcha Bunim m'Peshischa notes that we can't expect our efforts and interactions with Torah to have an instant magical transformational effect like a rain shower; it's far more subtle, like dew. A morning's dew is not enough to nourish a plant, but with the regular appearance of morning dew, the days stack up, and despite no noticeable daily effect, the plant will grow.

As R' Shlomo Farhi points out, dew is gentle, not overwhelming. Plants can't survive forever on dew alone, but it can be enough to keep them going until the rains return. When you are running cold, a warm atmosphere will nurture and sustain you, but you should remember that it can't take you all the way; there will come the point that you need to proactively follow through with renewed drive and desire to grow once more.

The Torah conditions timely rain on the product of outward effort:

וְהָיָה אִם-שָׁמַעְתָּ אֶת-קוֹל אֱלֹהֵי מִצְרָיִם אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי מֵצִוְהָ אֶתְכֶם הַיּוֹם לְאַהֲבָהּ אֶת-ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וְלַעֲבֹדוֹ בְּכָל-לִבְבְּכֶם וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁכֶם. וְנָתַתִּי מִטְרֵ-אֲרָצְכֶם בְּעֵתוֹ
If then, you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day, loving the Lord your God and serving Him with all your heart and soul, I will grant the rain for your land in season...
(11:,13,14)

The Ishbitzer suggests that dew is a product of internal effort, a reflection of our hearts and minds. Subconsciously, our hearts and minds hope and pray, day and night, without stop. When you so much as hope for the best, or that things turn out okay, or even whisper "Please, God," those thoughts bring wisps of warm vitality into the world that affirm and sustain growth and life. Given the mythical potency of dew and its connection to humble yet persistent origins, our sages suggest that, of all things, dew contains the latent power to resurrect the dead at the End of Days.

There are times you'll have flashes of divine inspiration, but at some point, that's going to dry up. Reassuringly, as Moshe said so long ago, it doesn't just come from the sky; it can emerge slowly with determination and environmental support. Perhaps then, dew is the symbol of human-driven inspiration – אתערותא דלתתא.



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Half the year we pray for rain, but half the year we also pray for dew; remember that you are more like a plant than a robot. You have fallow and fruitful seasons, needing different things at different times; a light drizzle right now, a little more sun next week. It is a design feature, not a flaw, and is a far healthier approach to adopt than perpetual sameness.

This isn't cutesy wordplay; the metaphor is quite explicit. If Moshe's words are the water, then we are the grass and leaves, the tree of life itself, encouraged to endure and grow strong – כְּשֶׁעִירָם עָלֵי-דְשָׁא, וְכִרְבִּיבִים עָלֵי-עֵשֶׂב.

When you go into the woods, you see all kinds of trees. One is stunted, another is bent; you understand it was obstructed or didn't get enough light, and so it turned out that way. You don't get emotional about it, you allow it; that's just the way trees are. But humans are like that too – כִּי הָאָדָם עָץ – הַשְּׂדֵה. All too often, rather than accept ourselves and others, we are critical, whether self-conscious or judgmental, critical of a way of being other humans for the way they are. But humans are like trees; this one was obstructed like this, that one didn't get enough that, so they turned out that way.

Trees lose their leaves in the cold dark winters, but they do not despair, secure in the knowledge that spring will return before long and they will blossom once again. You might be in the thick of winter, but hold on; you too will blossom once again.

If you're waiting for inspiration or a sign, it might be a while, it might not come at all, or this might be it.

Cultivate an environment around yourself with structure, systems, and people that will foster, nurture, and support your growth. You will not rise to the level of your goals; you will fall to the level of your systems. It's simply unsustainable to have big goals with no supporting infrastructure.

Your goal should not be to beat the game but to stay in the game and continue playing so that you can in turn foster a gentle and nurturing environment that will warm others too.

Moshe's timeless blessing is hauntingly beautiful and refreshingly real. Moshe speaks through the ages and reminds us the Torah is not just water, the stuff of life. It is the water we need in good times and the dew that gets us through hard times.

The metaphor itself acknowledges and validates that there are times the rains just won't come. But in the moments where the Torah won't be our rain, it can be our dew.

Onward



5 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.

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-נִזְעָרָיו וַיִּקְמוּ וַיֵּלְכוּ יחדוֹ – Avraham returned to his stewards, and they got up and left together... (22:19)

וַיֵּצֵאוּ מִן-סוּר, וַיֵּצְאוּ אֶל-מִדְבַּר-שׁוּר; וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁלֹשֶׁת-יָמִים בַּמִּדְבָּר, וְלֹא-מָצְאוּ מַיִם – 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. פָּנוּ 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 – וַיִּקְמוּ וַיֵּלְכוּ / וַיֵּצֵאוּ מִן-סוּר / רַב-לָכֶם שָׁבַת, בְּהַר הַזֶּה פָּנוּ וּסְעוּ לָכֶם.

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.



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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 the Leshem teaches, the dual pulsation at the heart of all things is the descent down and the return back up. The breaking is the descent and the fixing is the ascent back to a higher point. This is not only a historic process but a perpetual moment-to-moment one, the elevation of all things, the vibration of life and existence itself.

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.

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 וַהֲבִיחֻם מִצְרַיִם נֹסַע אֲחֻרֵיהֶם 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 מִה־תִּצְעַק אֵלַי דְבַר אֶל־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּסְעוּ – 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 – וְהָמָּה בְּכִימִים, 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-שְׁנֵיהֶם-אֶת אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְאֶת-הָאִשָּׁה – אֶל-קַבְדָּתָהּ; וַתַּעֲצֹר, הַמַּגִּפָּה / הַשִּׁיב אֶת-חַמְתִּי מֵעַל בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל, בְּקִנְאוֹ אֶת-קַנְאָתִי.

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 אֲמָנוֹת אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם. 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.



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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.

I dedicate TorahRedux in loving memory of 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

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.