



## Re'eh 2022

### All Men are Created Equal

3 minute read | Straightforward

Centuries ago, the founding fathers of the United States of America made the radical and immortal proclamation that all men are created equal.

Today, this doctrine is called egalitarianism and is arguably a cornerstone of the modern world. This political theory prioritizes equality for all people, generally characterized by the idea that all humans are equal in fundamental worth or moral status and should have equal rights. While different sections along the political spectrum can reasonably disagree on the exact contours of equality and which policies further its ideals, it is clear that the inequalities of the ancient world are relics of history. Feudalism and entitled aristocracy are gone, as is a landed gentry with lords and serfs. Today, we understand that all men are created equal and that no one is better or worse than anyone else.

Quite compellingly, the Torah makes a case for a form of equality that not only predates many of the Renaissance ideals that gave rise to the modern world; but is quite arguably their source.

When the Torah talks about humans in the image of God, the Torah is unequivocal that the only hierarchy that exists is between you and God. There is no one else above or below you; every other human stands alongside you and under God.

What's more, is that whenever the Torah talks about interpersonal mitzvos and our duties to each other, the Torah utilizes recursive imagery in which all the laws are rooted:

כי-יהיה בך אביון מאחד אחיך / ולא תקפץ את-גדך, מאחידו, האביון / ורעה עינך באחידו האביון, ולא תמן לו / פתח תפתח את-גדך לאחידו / כי-ימכר לך אחיך העברי / לבלתי רום-לבבו מאחיו / ונתלה לא-יהיה-לו, בקרב אחיו / ושרת, בשם ה אלקיו-ככל-אחיו / כי-ימכר לך אחיך העברי / לבלתי רום-לבבו מאחיו / ונתלה לא-יהיה-לו, בקרב אחיו / ושרת, בשם ה אלקיו-ככל-אחיו / Don't withhold your hand from your brother, the poor man / Should your eye turn evil towards your poor brother, and you don't give him [what he needs] / Open your hands to your brother, and open them once more / Should your brother be sold as a slave / [Let a king] not be haughty over his brothers / [The kohen] shall not have an inheritance with his brothers [because of his extra benefits] / He will serve in God's name, as his brothers / A prophet will come from among your brothers / Conspiring witnesses shall suffer what they conspired upon their brother. (Multiple sources)

Whether we're talking about rich and poor, slaves or kings, prophets or priests, the Torah utilizes the imagery of brotherhood and fraternity consistently. When the Torah says something, it matters. When the Torah says the same recurring thing over and over, it matters a lot, and we should recognize it as such.



## TorahRedux

The Torah asks us not to define people by their status in a hierarchy as a lender or borrower, king or subject, master or slave. While socioeconomic status may accurately describe us, it is our common identity that defines us.

There is a radical concept here.

We must help each other, not because we are different, but because we are the same.

The theory of common identity anchoring us to each other is presented as one of the foundational reasons we observe the Torah:

וְזָכַרְתָּ, כִּי עֶבֶד הָיִיתָ בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם, וַיְפַדְדֶּךָ, ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ (15:15) – Remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and the Lord redeemed you

The fact that we were once oppressed is not merely a reason to find empathy with vulnerable folks; it goes further. It should serve as a constant reminder that we mustn't fall victim to arrogance and hubris by taking credit for our good fortune – וְאַמְרַת בְּלִבְבְּךָ כִּחֵי וְעַצְמְךָ יָדִי עָשָׂה לִי אֶת־הַחֵסֶל הַזֶּה.

Although egalitarianism informs many government policies today, we live in a modern professional world optimized for capital and commerce, not community. It has bestowed a litany of benefits and has resulted in arguably the finest era of human society to date. Still, while reasonable people can disagree on what optimal social policy looks like, we ought to remember that the Torah's conception of our duties to each other goes a lot further than equality and deep into the realm of brotherhood and fraternity, imposing a firm sense of duty to protect and respect each other.

The Torah speaks past our relative status and straightforwardly and unambiguously demands that you see the less fortunate as your responsibility. It has nothing to do with generosity and everything to do with our duties towards each other.

Because there, but for the grace of God, go I.

## You are Worthy

3 minute read | Straightforward

The Exodus is an orienting event for the Jewish People, a founding moment in our history, with a daily duty to recall it. It's the first thing God has to say to humans at Sinai; God introduces Himself as the God who took us out of Egypt.

Remembering the Exodus is a perpetual mitzvah, and an astounding amount of our daily blessings, mitzvos, and prayers commemorate the Exodus – זָכַר לִיציאת מצרים. It is ubiquitous to the extent we could miss the point entirely.

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What do we mean when we say that we remember that God took the Jews out of Egypt?

It is essential to understand first principles because they are the foundational concepts that govern the systems built upon them.

If we unpack the story, the Jews in Egypt didn't deserve to be saved because they were so good or so special; in fact, quite the opposite.

The Zohar imagines the angels arguing whether or not God should save the Jews, and the argument was that “this lot are just a bunch of idol-worshippers, and so are those!” The Haggadah admits as much – *מִתְחַלְלָה עוֹבְדֵי עֲבוֹדָה זָרָה הָיוּ אֲבוֹתֵינוּ* –

When Moshe told the Jews to set aside and take one sheep per family, the Midrash says that “set aside” meant setting aside their idols before taking the sheep for the mitzvah!

When even Moshe, already well on his way to greatness, saw Yisro's daughters getting bullied and got involved in the dispute to protect them, the onlookers mistook him for just another Egyptian!

The Midrash famously states that the enslaved Jews retained their names, clothing, and language. This is often framed as a point of pride, but the point would seem to be that apart from these narrow and limited practices, they were otherwise indistinguishable from Egyptians in every other conceivable way!

Moreover, the generation that left Egypt and stood at Sinai fought Moshe the rest of their lives, begging to go back to Egypt, and was ultimately doomed to wander and die in the wilderness.

The Zohar goes so far as to say that the Jews were on the 49th level of spiritual malaise, just one notch off rock bottom, the point of no return. Rav Kook notes that this adds a particular dimension to the imagery of God's strong outstretched arm – it was a forceful intervention, an emergency rescue of a nation that had stumbled and was about fall off a cliff – *בְּיַד תִּזְקָה וּבְזַרְעַ נְטוּיָה* –

As R' Shlomo Farhi explains, whenever God is characterized with strength, it indicates God doing something that is undeserved. God does not require more incremental strength to move a grape than a galaxy; but God can force compassion to overwhelm what justice requires – *גּוֹאֵל וְחֹזֵק אֶתָּה* –

That is to say that on a fundamental level, the Jews didn't deserve rescuing at all.

And yet crucially, as R' Chaim Kanievsky notes, God responded to their cries all the same – *וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים* – *אֶלְקֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ, וַיִּשְׁמַע ה' אֶת-קוֹלֵנוּ*.

The Divrei Chaim notes that the very first Commandment is no command at all; God “introduces” himself as the God who took us out of Egypt – *אֲנֹכִי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים* – It's not a command – it is just a simple statement of fact. We might not deserve redemption, yet God redeems us all the same.



R' Tzadok haKohen writes that to remember Egypt is to remember God's first declarative sentence; our God rescues people from Egypt, whatever they have done and whoever they have become. Our God initiates the great Exodus before the Jewish People ever take a single step of their own to be better – אַנְכִי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים.

The Ropshitzer quipped that תְּחִלָּה לְמִקְרָאֵי קֹדֶשׁ זָכַר לִיְצִיאַת מִצְרַיִם – the first step towards holiness is remembering that the same Exodus that rescued people from the abyss once before could be just a moment away.

So when we remind ourselves about Egypt, it's not just that it happened once, but that, as the Lubavitcher Rebbe put it, God's redemption is not contingent on our worthiness.

Take this lesson to heart; it's one of the vanishingly few that the Torah specifically asks us to remember at all times – לְמַעַן תִּזְכֹּר אֶת-יוֹם צֵאתְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם כָּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ.

And it's clear why.

You don't need to remember the simple historical events of the Exodus; you have to remind yourself that every single last human is worthy of God's unconditional love.

## **Sensitivity to All Creatures**

3 minute read | Straightforward

From the dawn of humanity, people have utilized animals for all kinds of purposes, from farming and hunting to clothing, food, labor, transport, and domestication as pets. Inasmuch as the Torah permits these uses, the Torah categorically prohibits human mistreatment of animals, with a comprehensive list of laws designed to minimize animal suffering resulting from human interaction.

As it relates to food, from field to table, there is a vast corpus of rules that governs everything we put into our mouths and everything we don't; and one of the defining features of observant Judaism is the laws of kosher, in particular, the rules concerning how we obtain edible meat.

R' Avraham Yitzchak Kook suggests that, among other reasons, the Torah's laws of kosher meat consistently demonstrate an underlying principle that humans ought to respect the life and well-being of all non-human creatures.

Consider that kosher slaughter, the most obviously exploitative use of animal life, is heavily regulated; the Torah requires the blade to be razor-sharp for a smooth cut and must be concealed from the animal throughout, among many other laws that prevent unnecessary animal distress. The Midrash rhetorically asks what possible difference it could make to God whether an animal dies by a cut in the



front of its neck or the back; it concludes that it doesn't make a difference to God so much as it makes a difference to the human, since a front cut is more humane, and refines the humans who observe this law.

The laws of kosher aren't just about how we treat the animal until it dies, but afterward as well. There is a little known law to conceal the blood that is spilled, almost a mini-burial ceremony:

וְשָׁפַךְ אֶת-דָּמוֹ, וְכִסָּהוּ בְּעָפָר – Pour out the blood, and cover it with dust. (17:13)

In the Torah's conception, blood is the vehicle for the essence and soul of identity, personality, and vitality, warranting sensitive handling and treatment; it follows that it is disrespectful and inappropriate to consume blood:

אֶךָ-בְּשָׂר, בְּנֶפֶשׁוֹ דָּמוֹ לֹא תֹאכְלוּ – Eat only the meat; do not consume the blood... (9:4)

When we talk about the blood draining from someone's face, or the lifeblood of an organization, we're using the same kind of imagery as the Torah, where blood is the seat and symbol of life and vitality, which may help us understand why blood is a central element of all the sacrificial rituals:

כִּי נֶפֶשׁ הַבְּשָׂר, בַּדָּם הִוא, וְאֲנִי נָתַתִּיו לָכֶם עַל-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ, לְכַפֵּר עַל-נַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם: כִּי-הַדָּם הִוא, בְּנֶפֶשׁ וְכִפֹּר בַּדָּם הַיְהוֹדֵהוּ – For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that atones because of the life. (17:11)

The Torah unambiguously permits humans to consume a carnivorous diet, but as Nechama Leibowitz points out, the Torah only reluctantly allows humans to eat meat after the Flood story. As much as humans are the apex predator on Earth, God's compassion goes far beyond humans – וְהִאֲרַץ נָתַן לְבְנֵי-אָדָם / טוב ה' לכל ורחמי על כל מעשיו.

The distinction between right and wrong, good and evil, purity and defilement, the sacred and the profane, is essential in Judaism. Beyond Judaism, navigating regulations is part of living and working in a civilized society. The laws of kosher elevate the simple act of eating into a reminder and religious ritual to exercise self-control over our most basic, primal instincts, even the ones to hunt and gather food.

While animals do not possess sentience to understand the notion that life is a sacred thing, humans are not like other animals, and the Torah gives us laws to remind us that there is a difference. R' Shlomo Farhi teaches that the Torah's boundaries should instill sensitivity and reverence for life. Our abilities, choices, rights, strength, and power are not trump cards; just because you can, doesn't mean you should.

You don't need to become a vegan; you can still enjoy your steak and ribs. But you should recognize the Torah's concern for all creatures and not just humans, because the two are linked; someone who is cruel to animals will be cruel to people.



## TorahRedux

In a largely positive trend, our host cultures have woken up to animal cruelty in recent decades, but we have a proud tradition that is millennia older; the Torah instituted the first systematic legislation prohibiting animal cruelty and mandating humane treatment long ago.

Judaism is in constant dialogue with its surroundings, and we may have to get more familiar with our environment to navigate it properly. On the one end, the Torah's laws don't explicitly regulate intensive factory farming, but it's a product of modern business practices that raises many animal welfare issues, and the relevant parties should be receptive to calibrating how they can do better. On the other end, the tradition of kosher slaughter is in jeopardy in an increasing number of jurisdictions, labeled as backward and cruel; there are some important organizations working tirelessly to protect our tradition that deserve your support.

The Torah has regulated human interaction with animals for thousands of years; the laws of kosher teach us compassion and sensitivity to other creatures.

We should be proud of our heritage.

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

*I hope you enjoyed this week's thoughts. If you have questions or comments, or just want to say hello, it's a point of pride for me to hear from you, and I'll always respond. And if you saw, heard, read, or watched anything that spoke to you, please send it my way - [Neli@TorahRedux.com](mailto:Neli@TorahRedux.com).*

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

Neli

*PS - TorahRedux is my pride and joy, the product of thousands of hours of learning, research, writing, editing, and formatting. I have a niche business that allows me to spend substantial time on TorahRedux, and I welcome your assistance in furthering my goal to keep publishing quality content that matters. I help NY home care companies implement compliant Wage Parity plans that enhance recruitment and retention; whether or not that was comprehensible, if you know anyone in the New York home care field, please introduce me!*

*PPS - Several of my home health clients are hiring at all levels from entry-level to management. Please send me a resume and a one-line explanation of what kind of role would be the best fit and I'll make some introductions.*



## TorahRedux

**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.