



Kedoshim 2024

Actionable Metrics

2 minute read | Straightforward

Honesty and trust are the basis of all healthy relationships. In the section of the Torah that charges the Jewish people to being holy, the Torah does not detail some ascetic, mystical ideal of inhibition. It talks about us. It talks about how we interact with each other:

לֹא תִשְׁנֵא אֶת אָחִיךָ בְּלִבְּךָ הוֹכֵחַ תּוֹכִיחַ אֶת עַמִּיתְךָ וְלֹא תִשָּׂא עָלָיו חֶטְא – Do not hate your brother in your heart. Reprove your neighbour again and again; but do not bear a sin on his account! (19:17)

In our respective circles, people respond differently to different things. Intentionally or not, people get upset. It's an unavoidable part of life. The Torah calls on us to act on it.

There is also no shortage of people to denounce from our circles. People whose politics or religiosity offend us. The Torah reminds us that these people too, are our brothers, and calls on us to act on this too. It is okay to call people out on public desecrations, and draw a line. But they are still out brothers.

Rav Hirsch notes that there is a dual aspect. לֹא תִשְׁנֵא אֶת אָחִיךָ – Do not hate your brother, and בְּלִבְּךָ, in your heart. The hatred is bad; but keeping it to yourself is worse. Forget the wrong, or don't keep it in. The way to let it out is הוֹכֵחַ תּוֹכִיחַ אֶת עַמִּיתְךָ. It is a personal duty to directly bring a little more self-awareness to others, in our own way.

The duty is qualified by integrity and moral awareness. It is important for deliver the message properly, but it is equally important to hear the message properly. This duty reverberates with the fraternal relationship we have with each other אָחִיךָ and עַמִּיתְךָ; to properly perform this mitzva, there can be no judgment or superiority. If they'll never listen, you should not say anything.

Crucially, the Torah says that וְלֹא תִשָּׂא עָלָיו חֶטְא – Do not bear a sin on his account. If we say nothing, it is our fault, not theirs! If someone hurts you, and doesn't understand or realise the extent of it, then the broken relationship is your own fault for not bringing it to their attention to fix.

Consider the gas tank indicator in your car. What if it didn't want to bother you with an accurate measurement of precisely how long you have until you stall? Such "kindness" would defeat it's very purpose. A measuring tool that isn't accurate is completely useless.



It's definitely frustrating that your car lets you know you need to make a twenty minute trip to then pump expensive fuel. But the kindness is not in the information. The kindness is in what you do with it.

Middos literally means measurements. And we are charged with being the measuring tools of each other's behaviour.

All of us would do well accept constructive criticism more freely from those who truly care. But it's important to sometimes offer it to friends too.

The integrity of your relationship can be measured by the amount of truth it can take.

[Taking God's Name in Vain](#)

3 minute read | Straightforward

One of the Ten Commandments is the commandment against taking God's name lightly:

לֹא תִשָּׂא אֶת־שְׁמִי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשׁוֹן כִּי לֹא יִנְקֶה ה' אֶת אֲשֶׁר־יִשָּׂא אֶת־שְׁמוֹ לְשׁוֹן – Do not take the name of the Lord your God in vain; for the Lord will not hold guiltless the one that takes His name in vain. (20:7)

This law encourages people to treat God's name with reverence and respect, affirming that abusing God's name shows a lack of humility and gratitude and is a way of disdaining the Creator's power and authority. Practically speaking, observant Jews today do not pronounce God's name as written and are careful in treating any document containing God's written name, using substitutes instead, like Creator, Hashem, Lord, or God.

But what does it mean to take God's name in vain?

Some people believe it to mean cursing. Others think it means casually swearing, like "I swear to God" or "God damn it." Refraining from coarse and foul language is a good idea and a worthy struggle, but that doesn't capture the essence of this law.

To be sure, swearing, in the old-fashioned sense, is partly covered. In any matter of doubt, a person would hold a religious article and swear in God's name; the willingness to take an oath in God's name with the implied invitation of punishment if the oath-taker was lying is taken to support the truth of the statement being sworn to.



But this is not the commandment against false oaths – that would be covered by the Tenth Commandment.

To do something in vain is to do something without success or result; Rashi narrowly suggests that this law is about a pointless invocation of God's name, like swearing that the sky is blue. Everyone knows that – that would be taking God's name in vain.

The Ohr HaChaim suggests a broader and more profound meaning to this law. The verb of the mitzvah means to carry or to bear; the prohibition is on bearing God's name lightly, carrying it with you in deception. It means falsely invoking God to advance your own self-interest, being false with God or others in God's name, or, in other words, holding yourself out as more pious and righteous than you are.

On Rosh Hashana, we read the story of Chana. Chana was married to a righteous man named Elkanah, who had another wife, Penina. Penina had children, and Chana did not. When it was time to bring a sacrifice in the Sanctuary, the whole family went to Shilo and enjoyed the festivities. Penina teased Chana about where her children were, and Chana cried and refused to eat. When Elkanah saw her crying, he tried to comfort her, but Chana would not be comforted. She went to the courtyard, silently poured out her heart in prayer, and was soon blessed with a son, the legendary prophet Shmuel.

We read this story in part because it illustrates the power of prayer, but it also shows something else.

Penina's behavior is striking in its shocking cruelty. Her only saving grace is that she had the best intentions, which is that she wanted to push Chana to the point that she'd pray and be answered. And the story bears this out – Penina is indeed the catalyst.

The Kotzker highlights how her behavior was so monstrously evil that it could only have been for the highest and most sacred purpose, or, in other words, bearing God's name in vain.

R' Jonathan Sacks notes how much religious extremism and violence are committed in the name of God. As the Dudaei Reuven notes, all the most terrible crimes against humanity are carried out under the cloak of truth, justice, and uprightness.

If only it were as easy as substituting an “Oh my goodness” for an “Oh my God.”

Whenever a calamity happens, the proper thing to do is introspect and repent. But there will always be a clown who says it's because of this or that: talking in shul, hair coverings, knee coverings, the gays, or whatnot. Next time you notice, note how they deceptively invoke God's name to establish an in-group and out-group dynamic, virtue signal, and manipulate people to advance their agenda and control others – all with the best intentions.



Don't tell a grieving family it's part of God's plan. Do not say or do awful things to others and claim it's God's will or what God wants. That's using God's name in vain.

Taking God's name seriously demands that we audit and introspect ourselves for self-righteousness and any sense of self-serving holier-than-thou superiority. It is complex and requires us to live intentionally with decency, humility, and honesty toward others and ourselves.

Randomness Redux

8 minute read | Advanced

The Purim story unfolded over a protracted period, but we celebrate the holiday on the fourteenth of Adar. The holiday is unusual in the sense that, with most holidays, an event happens on a random date, and we celebrate the date to mark the anniversary of the event; the date is incidental to the event. That's not quite the case with Purim, whose story revolves around a specific date; the events are almost incidental to the date.

The antagonist, Haman, decided to mandate a legal genocide, a one-day purge against the Jewish People. He had it all figured out; he'd bribe the king, draft the law, and execute it with the king's seal. That's bad, he's bad; it's easy to understand. But in a puzzling turn of events, he wasn't sure about the effective date for his new law, so he cast a lottery to determine the right day and settled on the fourteenth of Adar – *עַל־כֵּן קָרְאוּ לַיָּמִים הָאֵלֶּה פּוּרִים עַל־שֵׁם הַפּוּר*.

Casting lots is distantly removed from our primary experience, but it is a core feature of the story.

Why did Haman cast a lottery?

Today, we understand that a lottery applies randomness to confound any notion of certainty or predictability. When a process can generate all outcomes with equal probability, we will perceive the resulting outcome of that uncertainty as fair. The Torah uses this randomizing methodology to select goats for sacrifice on Yom Kippur and to allocate the tribal lands of Israel.

Today, we would use a coin toss as a conventionally reasonable way to randomly determine two equal choices, heads or tails. It's intuitive, it's fair, it makes sense, and there's nothing to argue about – *בְּחִיק – יוּטֵל אֶת־הַגּוֹרֵל וְזֶה כָּל־מִשְׁפָּטוֹ / מִדְּנִינִים יִשְׁבִּית הַגּוֹרֵל וּבֵין עֲצוּמִים יִפְרִיד*.

Either goat can be the scapegoat; it doesn't matter at all. Which portion of land goes to which tribe doesn't matter. It could be any, which is the point; that's why it's fair. R' Aaron Lopiansky points out that the division of the Land of Israel marks the transition from divine intervention to human-driven



action. Although the outcome of the lottery isn't explicitly magical, the outcome will have a spiritual and religious significance, proving that randomness and probability are part of the divine toolkit as well.

Governments don't assign effective dates to legislation randomly. Usually, the effective date of a law is whenever it becomes relevant – it would be relevant to ban a terror group overnight; it would only be appropriate change the tax code years in advance so that everyone has adequate notice.

Unlike the tax code, genocide doesn't have a relevant date. Genocide this week is the same as genocide next summer. There isn't a fairness question that requires randomness to resolve; any given date is already equally random and fair. Haman didn't need a lottery for fair selection or random scheduling.

But that's not the only way the ancients used lotteries.

Ancient civilizations would also cast lots as cleromancy, a form of divination where they would attribute Divine Providence to the outcome – השגחה פרטית. By removing human choice and influence over what course of action to take – so the thinking went – destiny and fate could reveal themselves. The Torah uses this form of lottery to expose a looter, Achan, who illegally claimed spoils in the Book of Joshua; to reveal that Jonathan had violated Saul's command to fast; and by Jonah's Gentile shipmates to identify that the terrible storm was his fault.

Cleromancy, the second form of lottery, has nothing to do with fairness or randomness. It's about ascribing not just certainty but divine significance to an outcome, treating it as the Divine Will, and proceeding accordingly. Achan was the guilty looter and no one else; Jonathan had broken the vow, and not someone else; Jonah, and not some other sailor or passenger, was responsible for the storm. These individuals faced real consequences in the physical world due to the perception of their divinely ordained guilt through cleromancy.

The Torah explicitly forbids utilizing this second form of lottery multiple times in the strongest terms – לא תנחשו ולא תעונו / לא ימצא בך מעביר בנו-יבתו באש קסם קסמים מעונו ומנחש ומכשף... פיי-תועבת ה' כל-עשה אלה ובגלל – התועבת האלה ה' אלקיך מוריש אותם מפניך... תמים תהיה עם ה' אלקיך.

Whether magic is real and that's how it works doesn't matter; what matters is that people ascribe divine significance to cleromancy and act accordingly – that's the kind of superstition the Torah takes significant issue with.

Far more sinister, this is the kind of lottery Haman cast; cleromancy, seeking divine approval for his genocide. As Rashi notes, Haman wasn't simply consulting his sorcery for which moment to start; but which moment he might succeed. The Purim holiday is named for Haman's lottery of cleromancy and divination, his attempt to predict a divinely sanctioned moment for his plot, and arguably, his attempt to abdicate any choice or responsibility in the matter.



The entire story revolves around the comical reversal of Haman's attempt at divination to reduce his uncertainty; God's actual Will guides all outcomes and confounds Haman at every turn. The monstrous and powerful Haman is quickly diminished from the dizzying heights of palace society, helplessly humiliated into a weak and wretched joke on the way down to a shameful death, to be publicly derided and laughed at for all time by the children of history.

The Purim story contains a powerful and timeless moral, that God is concealed in the story but revealed in the outcomes. God alone controls the power of outcomes; the small, improbable outcomes that stack to shape the history and reality we know are one of God's most decisive and signature capabilities – קונה הכל. We can only hope to recognize God's Hand retroactively in hindsight at best and never prospectively, as Haman attempted.

God operates invisibly in the background, orchestrating everything with the power of outcomes; Haman didn't stand a chance, and we know from history that the bad guys never have a chance either – אֵלֹהִים שֶׁבְּכֹל דּוֹר וָדוֹר עוֹמְדִים עָלֵינוּ לְכַלּוֹתָנוּ, וְהַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא מְצִילֵנוּ מִיָּדָם.

We live in a world of possibilities, a probabilistic world, not a magical one. Probability distributions accurately describe our universe and predict the expected outcomes of all possible values; it is the language God speaks to us every day. We can predict how likely something is to happen, but we can only make that prediction in the abstract because God alone has the power of outcomes – הכל בידי שמים.

When Mordechai encourages Esther to go to the king and make her case to save her people, Esther declines initially because she is afraid – and she should be! She is worried because she correctly understands that going to the king uninvited is a gross breach of palace protocol and puts her life in danger.

Mordechai can't tell her that she's wrong or even that she will be fine. He can't say that because he can't possibly know that – or he would say so! Esther is correct about the risk and uncertainty of this proposed course of action, and all Mordechai can say is that someone has to step up, and it might as well be her, but if she won't, someone else will; which is to say that she can choose to do her part, but must leave the rest to God's power of outcomes.

Even once convinced to accept her fate and role, Esther asks Mordechai to have the Jewish People fast and pray for her success. She wasn't sure it would work, and she didn't think she would make it through; she was terrified, and Mordechai couldn't correct or reassure her.

We are probably overly familiar with the story, too numb for Esther's last words to Mordechai to chill our blood the way they deserve – “and if I die, I die.”

Whereas Haman abdicates choice and responsibility to his magical lottery, Esther bravely and deliberately chooses to advocate for her people and courageously resolves to stand before the king, not because she knows she will succeed, but because it is the right thing to do.

Where Haman is a coward who consults a lottery out of fear of failure, Esther puts her best foot forward and takes a chance; the outcome of her last stand no longer matters to her because she has accepted that God alone has the power of outcomes. If she dies, she dies, and salvation must come from somewhere else. Her willingness to give her life to this cause is a moral victory that places her in our pantheon of greats as a heroine worthy of the highest honors.

God alone can see all ends, and God alone can determine ultimate destiny and fate; all we have to decide is what to do with the time and opportunities we are given. Esther is only responsible for her choice to make her stand; she is not responsible for the outcome, which is random, which is to say, in God's hands alone. This does not remove the significance of her choice; it redeems it. Mordechai and Esther's determination to do all they could while depending on and hoping for God's power of outcomes is a complete and total inversion of Haman's attempt to control or force the outcome; their immortal hope stands before us forever – ותקוותם לכל דור ודור.

The Purim story is filled with chance and coincidental events and encounters, like Mordechai foiling an assassination attempt, leading to outcomes of such significance that it is plain to readers that God orchestrated them. God's Hand is not directly perceptible to Mordechai and Esther; but we can see it in lucky events that weave the story together.

Appearances are deceptive, and what you see is not always what you get – our inputs do not always lead to the outcomes we expect or predict, for better and for worse; maybe that's why we dress up in silly costumes and disguises, hiding behind masks. We can get drunk and be vulnerable; we're safe in God's hands.

Chance and probability are the undercurrents of the entire story; they're what the holiday is named for. Purim is the holiday that can never die, and even the somber day of Yom Kippur is but a reflection of Purim. Perhaps everything is like Purim – it looks random, but it's not.

While there is doubt that is a function of concealment – הסתר – the notion of uncertainty itself is a fundamental feature of existence and reality, and it has to be that way. We live within the constraints of a dimension called time – we can only ever exist in the present moment, with no access to the past or future. We can recall the past and forecast and prepare for the future, but that's the best we can do; because uncertainty itself is an iron law of reality and all existence that won't change even in the utopian age of Mashiach.

Haman is descended from Amalek; who not only grapple with doubt and uncertainty but are numerically equivalent, which is to say inextricably linked – עמלק / ספק. But instead of their mistake of reaching into the future in an attempt to dispel uncertainty, we can transform their doubt. The doubt doesn't transform into something else, but like Esther, who learned to act within uncertainty, we can find joy amidst the uncertainties of life as well; satisfaction is the same word as uncertainty if we only look at it differently – ספק / סיפוק.



TorahRedux

We believe in God, and God runs the show. But even though Haman can't hurt us, it sure seems like he can; when it looks like people are in danger, we have no choice but to act accordingly. When you face mortal danger, that's scary, and you have to respond. When Haman's plan went public, they correctly recognized it as an imminent catastrophe! No one in the story thought that they just needed to strengthen their faith, that they just needed to trust God to do His thing and sort it all out, and that everything was going to be okay.

Although you don't control the outcome, you must act as if you can do something, like what you do matters, because that's the only thing within your power to do.

If that sounds like our life is theatrics, maybe that's kind of how it is! Our Sages suggest that the Jews were never even in danger; God put on a show for them like they'd put on a show in participating in the feast at the story's outset – לא עשו אלא לפנים אף הקב"ה לא עשה עמהן אלא לפנים.

In the reality we inhabit, playing along with the theatre is all we can do. If you have a test tomorrow, you'd better study and make sure you know the material well. Sure, God runs the world, but the probability distributions conclusively demonstrate that people who know the material usually pass; people who don't study typically fail. You might pass or fail, and the test might never ultimately matter in the fullness of your life as it unfolds.

But you won't ever know that sitting in the room, staring at the paper, scratching your head, searching for the answer.

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.