



## Vayishlach 2023

### The Hand of My Brother

2 minute read | Straightforward

When Yakov impersonated Esau to take his blessing, his place at home was untenable, and he had to run away. After twenty years apart, their paths crossed once more, and Yakov was afraid of what Esau might do to him or his family, and he prayed for God's help:

הַצִּילֵנִי נָא מִיַּד אָחִי מִיַּד עֵשָׂו כִּי־גֵרָא אָנֹכִי אֹתוֹ פֶּן־יָבֹא וְהִכָּנִי אִם עַל־בָּנַיִם – Save me, please! From the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, I'm scared he might come and strike me down, mothers and children alike. (32:12)

R' Shmshon Raphael Hirsch notes that it was easier for Yakov to endure 20 years of injustice under a deceptive crook like Lavan than face Esau, the man Yakov had wronged, for just one moment.

The Beis Halevi highlights that Yakov was afraid of two aspects – the hand of his brother, and the hand of Esau – מִיַּד אָחִי מִיַּד עֵשָׂו. We know all too well about Esau's destructive capacity for violence – מִיַּד עֵשָׂו, but Yakov knows that Esau's warm embrace of brotherhood is no less of a threat – מִיַּד אָחִי.

For everyone who died in pogroms, Crusades, the Inquisition, or the Holocaust, there are so many memorials and prayers, so much history, so many resolutions of "Never Again." But, in the words of R' Noach Weinberg, there is a spiritual Holocaust taking place as we speak. How many souls do we lose to assimilation, to a friendly society that opens its arms to us and beckons to us so invitingly? What are we doing with our unprecedented freedom, information, and resources?

We may not live in a time of physical danger, but the spiritual danger is no less catastrophic, and for all the wonderful accomplishments of outreach organizations today, we still lose more than we save.

We like to think that if we were around then, we would have done all we could, and hopefully, that's even true. Today, the cries are a lot more subtle, but the opportunity is there just the same – מִיַּד אָחִי.

R' Chaim Shmulevitz would tell the Mir Yeshiva to cry for the assimilating Jews in Russia and the United States; that the students should not dare to ask for God's compassion when they could not move themselves to show compassion for others.

Pharaoh had three advisors concerning his slavery and genocide program – Bilam advocated for it and is a villain; Yisro was against it, was forced to flee, and is a hero; and Iyov stayed neutral and said



nothing and suffered immensely afterward. The Brisker Rav noted that Iyov's suffering was because he became an accomplice by remaining silent in the face of such cruelty.

As R' Noach Weinberg says, if a boy was drowning, you could ask his father for some rope to save him and be very sure he'd give you all the rope he had! We all encounter the unaffiliated from time to time – and if not, perhaps you should start there?

Yakov recognized the threat and asked for help.

If you recognize the threat, are you doing all you can?

## **Becoming Yourself**

3 minute read | Straightforward

Deception is one of the key recurring themes in Yakov's life story – as perpetrator and victim.

Yakov opportunistically bought Esau's birthright for a bowl of soup and masqueraded as Esau to get his blessing. This set a course of events in motion, where Yakov had to flee to his uncle Lavan, who then deceived Yakov by substituting Leah in Rachel's place, causing lifelong tension between them and their children; culminating in the brothers' abduction of Yosef and the subsequent cover-up of Yosef; which ultimately led the family and the Jewish People to the mire of Egypt.

Late in life, when he met Pharoh, Yakov recognized the constant struggle his life had been:

ויאמר יעקב, אל-פרעה, ימי שְׁנֵי מַגּוּרֵי, שְׁלֹשִׁים וּמֵאֵת שָׁנָה: מְעַט וְרַעִים, הָיוּ יָמֵי שְׁנֵי חַיֵּי, וְלֹא הִשְׁיִגּוּ אֶת-יָמֵי שְׁנֵי חַיֵּי אֲבֹתִי, בְּיָמֵי מַגּוּרֵיהֶם – Yakov said to Pharoh: "The days of the years of my journey are a hundred and thirty years; few and evil have been the days of the years of my life, they have not approached the days of the years of the life of my fathers in their days." (47:9)

Yakov recognized his difficulties, and we ought to as well. It is simplistic to dismissively hand wave and whitewash Yakov's role in the way his life unfolded. R' Shmshon Raphael Hirsch emphasizes that it is critical to proudly acknowledge the way the Torah characterizes our heroes' flaws so that we learn that although perfection is ever-elusive, excellence is not.

The Torah explicitly suggests that Yakov hurt Esau:

כַּשְׁמַע עֵשָׂו, אֶת-דְּבָרֵי אָבִיו, וַיִּצְעַק צְעָקָה, גְּדֹלָה וּמְרָה עַד-מְאֹד – When Esau heard his father's words, he cried with an extremely great and bitter cry (27:34)





R' Jonathan Sacks suggests that the material gifts to Esau were the literal return of the material blessing – קח-נָא אֶת-בְּרִכְתִּי; and bowing to Esau showed his deference to Esau's place; acknowledging the wrongdoing of their youth. Instead of trying to usurp Esau's position in the family and take his blessings; Esau could be Esau, and Yakov could be Yakov – וַיֹּאמֶר עֵשָׂו, יֵשׁ-לִי רֵב; אָחִי, יְהִי לְךָ אֲשֶׁר-לְךָ –

Once Yakov fights off the literal specter of trying to be like Esau, he earns the name and title of Yisrael, which has a connotation of straightness.

We each have our own blessings, and we mustn't seek our brother's blessing. His blessing is his, and yours is yours.

Be yourself; everyone else is already taken.

## **The Lonely Darkness**

5 minute read | Straightforward

One of the recurring motifs in the stories of our heroes is how often they stand alone, against all odds, and it starts from the very beginning of our Tradition.

During Yakov and his family's escape from Lavan, they had to navigate their way across a river. Some of the family's articles had remained on the wrong side during the crossing, so he sent his family ahead to make the most of the dwindling light while he stayed back to retrieve what he had left behind.

Alone as darkness fell, in one of the defining moments in Yakov's life, he was accosted by and fought with a mysterious figure, whom we identify as Esau's guardian angel:

וַיִּנְתָּר יַעֲקֹב, לְבַדּוֹ; וַיֹּאבֶק אִישׁ עִמּוֹ, עַד עֲלוֹת הַשָּׁחַר. וַיֵּרָא, כִּי לֹא יָכַל לוֹ, וַיִּגַע, בְּכַף-יָרְכוֹ; וַתִּקַּע כַּף-יָרֵךְ יַעֲקֹב, בְּהֶאָבְקוֹ עִמּוֹ. וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁלַחֲנִי, כִּי עֲלֶה הַשָּׁחַר; וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא אֲשַׁלְּחֶךָ, כִּי אִם-בְּרִכְתְּךָ. וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו, מַה-שָּׂמָךְ; וַיֹּאמֶר, יַעֲקֹב. וַיֹּאמֶר, יַעֲקֹב לֹא יֹאמַר עוֹד שָׂמָךְ-כִּי, אִם-יִשְׂרָאֵל: כִּי-שָׁרִיתָ עִם-אֱלֹהִים וְעִם-אֲנָשִׁים, וַתּוֹכַל. וַיִּשְׂאֵל יַעֲקֹב, וַיֹּאמֶר הַגִּידָה-נָא שְׂמֶךָ, וַיֹּאמֶר, לָמָּה זֶה תִּשְׂאֵל לְשָׁמִי; וַיַּבְרָךְ אֹתוֹ, שָׁם – Yakov was alone, and a man grappled with him until daybreak. When the stranger saw that he could not overcome him, he struck Yakov's hip and dislocated it as he grappled with him. He said, "Let me go, dawn is breaking!" – but Yakov said, "I will not let you go until you bless me." He said to him, "What is your name?" and he replied, "Yakov." He said, "No longer shall your name be Yakov, for your name is Yisrael, because you have mastery with God and men, and you have prevailed." Yakov asked, and said, "Now tell me your name" and he replied, "Why is it you ask my name?" and blessed him there. (32:25-30)



The imagery of this iconic battle is that it takes place in the darkness and lasts until dawn's early light. Darkness is a mythological archetype for concealment, chaos, danger, deception, disorder, fear, uncertainty, and the unknown.

As such, most humans are afraid of the dark to some degree; our sight is the sense we depend on the most, and we cannot see well in darkness, so a lack of light makes us feel vulnerable to danger.

In the darkness, we are surrounded by the unknown, with all sorts of potential threats hidden by the shadows just out of sight. But when dawn's light comes, the dangerous unknown is dispelled, the shadows disappear, and the darkness dissipates, to be replaced with the clarity and concrete safety of known order.

The Mesilas Yesharim says the trouble with darkness is not just that you won't see something dangerous, but that you can mistake something dangerous for something safe. You might not see the snake in the woods, and what if that big rock is actually a bear?

The Steipler teaches that the battleground of our struggles is in our minds. Whether fear or fantasy, our minds can paint vivid pictures that do not correspond to reality. Fear amplifies the negative, and fantasy amplifies the positive; but neither includes the consequences, opportunity costs, pathways, or tradeoffs that always accompany reality. When someone returns to their family after a long time away, they often think they'll all get along peacefully and happily now; or the newlywed couple might think they'll be in love forever – but we know how naive that is. Reality is much more challenging than the illusion of fantasy, but the difference is that it is real.

Driving at night, you can't see much further than your headlights – but you can make the whole trip that way; concealment and uncertainty are scary, but you will always have what it takes to make it through that particular darkness.

When Yakov asks the figure for his name, Yakov gets an evasive non-answer, “Why is it you ask for my name?”

R' Leib Chasman intuitively suggests that this is the nature of the formless enemy we fight. The Gemara teaches how at the end of days, Hashem will slaughter the Satan, and the righteous will cry because it was this enormous mountain they somehow overcame, and the wicked will cry because it was a tiny hair they couldn't even blow away. The very idea of the Satan is a shorthand for what we fight – a flicker of our reflection, a shadow, constantly in flux.

Although Yakov was permanently injured in his encounter, he still emerged as Yisrael, the master; we can expect to trip, stumble, and make mistakes along the way, and we might even get hurt. But it is the human condition to fight and struggle, but we can persist and win.



It's important to note that Yakov doesn't actually achieve total physical victory – he holds out for a stalemate while seriously injured. The victory – וַתִּוְכַל – is in staying in the fight and not giving up – וַיִּרָא, כִּי לֹא יָכַל לוֹ.

Our biggest tests, if not all of them, come when we are alone, but it is our characteristic ability to rise to the challenge that Bilam highlights in his reluctant blessing to the Jewish People – הָרַעַם לְבָדָד יִשְׁכַּן –

It's a point of pride, rooted in our identity from the very beginning, starting with Avraham, the first Hebrew, so-called because he is an outsider who stands alone against the dominant culture – / עברי / מעבר הנהר.

This theme repeats itself with Yosef, home alone with Potiphar's wife. About to give in to an almost irresistible temptation, he sees his father's face, reminding him that his family heritage is that he has what it takes to stand alone and not give up.

The Hebrew word for grappling is cognate to the word for dust because the fighter's feet stir up dust when fighting for leverage and grip – וַיִּאָבֵק / אבק. The Midrash suggests that the dust kicked up from this epic struggle rose all the way to the Heavenly Throne.

R' Tzvi Meir Silberberg highlights that the Midrash doesn't say that the victory went up to Heaven, but that the dust, the energy expended on the struggle, went up to Heaven. Our victories are personal, and although we don't always get to choose whether we win, we always control whether we go down without a fight; and putting up a fight is specifically what the Midrash honors. It's your choice to stand that will ultimately endure and carry the day, which perhaps Bilam also refers to – מִי מָנָה עֲפָר – יַעֲקֹב.

The opening blessing of the morning blessings is for giving the rooster the understanding to distinguish between day and night – הַגּוֹתֵן לְשִׁכּוֹי בִּינָה לְהַבְחִין בֵּין יוֹם וּבֵין לַיְלָה – But doesn't every animal with eyes know the difference? R' Meilech Biderman teaches that the rooster is highlighted because it crows just before dawn while it's still dark. In Perek Shira, a song that attributes different verses to different creatures and cosmic entities, the rooster sings how it hopes and yearns for God's salvation – לִישׁוּעַתְךָ קִיּוּתִי הֵ – the rooster understands already before dawn that the darkness is coming to an end and that the sun will rise once more.

In all the stories of our heroes, no one came to save them; how you face the realization that to some extent, you stand alone is arguably a defining moment of adulthood and maturity – אֲשָׁא עֵינַי אֶל הַהָרִים – מֵאִין יבֹא עֲזָרִי. That's not simply to say that no one is coming to save you; it's more profound than that. It's that the only person who will ultimately save you is yourself; that the helping hand you're looking for is at the end of your own two arms, and that your fate is your own responsibility.

It might take everything to stand alone, but you are enough. You already have what it takes – it's in your blood.



## **Fear Redux; Faith Redux**

6 minute read | Straightforward

In the context of religion, faith is a natural consequence of professing to believe in God. If there's a Creator, there must be some plan, and so the thinking goes, we should have faith in it.

Faith means the notion of confidence or trust in a person, thing, or concept; in this case, the Creator – אמונה / בטחון.

But how we talk about faith doesn't always make sense.

People get afraid and worried about everyday life, like whether they can afford to pay their bills or if their loved one will recover from sickness. The root of every human fear is the notion that we are fundamentally powerless against the forces of the universe.

There can sometimes be a toxic Emunah culture that stifles, suffocates, and squashes real people with real feelings. That sounds like when people say things like don't worry, God has a plan, or it's for the best, trust God, and have faith that everything will work out. As the famous song goes, the main thing is to have no fear at all – והעיקר לא לפחד כלל –

Whether spoken or unspoken or even in your own thoughts, there is an invalidation or judgment here; to the extent you feel doubts or fears, you really have to work on your faith because if you had faith in God, you wouldn't feel afraid – because faith and fear are incompatible and mutually exclusive.

But is that so true?

Firstly, there is a basic problem with the notion that fear is intrinsically wrong. Although many fears are learned, the threshold capacity to fear is part of human nature, a subconscious instinct, which, like desire, does not lend itself to moral judgment; it's simply the basic reality of our lived experience.

Fear is our response to a stimulus occurring in the present or in anticipation or expectation of a future threat perceived as a risk. The fear response arises from the perception of danger leading to a confrontation with or escape from or avoiding the threat, also known as the fight-or-flight response, which in extreme cases of horror and terror can be a freeze response or paralysis.

Fear is visceral and instinctual, hard coded into our DNA, predates human consciousness, and results from an external stimulus, not a character flaw. The survival instinct originates in the most primal parts of the brain – נפש בהמית –



This is a complete defense of feeling our fears.

Moreover, fear is one of the tools the Torah uses to obtain compliance from its readers – וְתָרָה אֶרְיָהּ בְּכֶם – וְעָצַר אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְלֹא־יִהְיֶה מָטָר וְהִאֲדָמָה לֹא תִתֵּן אֶת־יְבוּלָהּ וְאֲבָדְתֶם מִהֲרָה מֵעַל הָאָרֶץ הַטֹּבָה אֲשֶׁר ה' נָתַן לָכֶם.

Fear is arguably why many people practice religion; Pascal’s wager argues that a rational person should live as though God exists because if God does not exist, a person only loses a little luxury or pleasure. In contrast, if God exists, a person stands to receive infinite pain or gain in Heaven and Hell.

But far more powerfully, the greats experienced fear too, as the Torah and our prophets testify, which should demolish any misguided self-righteous attempts at invalidating fear.

Fear is not a negative emotion; it is not something we should avoid associating with our great ancestors. Fear is a human emotion, and our great ancestors were humans who felt fear and responded to those fears in ways we can learn from.

When God promises Avraham a grand future, Avraham wonders what God is talking about because, as a childless older man, he naturally experiences doubt, fear, and insecurity about the future – מִהֲתִתְּנוּ־לִי / בְּמָה אֲדַע כִּי אֵירָשָׁנָה. As beings bound by time, our existence is limited from one moment to the next; everyone worries about the future.

When Yakov and his family finally escape Lavan’s clutches, they are intercepted on the run by Esau with 400 warriors, and Yakov is afraid – וַיִּירָא יַעֲקֹב מְאֹד. He has good reason to be afraid – he can send gifts, give weapons to children, and send half the family a day ahead, but he understands the imminent reality that his family might get massacred – הֲצִילֵנִי נָא מִיַּד אָחִי מִיַּד עֵשָׂו כִּי־יִירָא אָנֹכִי אֹתוֹ פֶּן־יָבֹא וְהַכִּינִי – אִם עַל־בָּנָיִם.

When Yosef frames his brothers as part of his ruse to see if they regret his abduction and trafficking, they express fear when they begin to realize that they are entangled with a powerful person who poses a serious threat to them – וַיֵּצֵא לָבֶם וַיִּתְּרֵדוּ אִישׁ אֶל־אָחִיו –

When the young Moshe steps beyond the palace life of his childhood into the world of his people’s suffering, he steps in to save someone from an oppressive Egyptian officer, killing the Egyptian. Realizing that he has crossed the point of no return and stands alone against the might of the Egyptian empire, Moshe feels afraid – וַיִּירָא מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר אֲכֹן נֹדַע הַדָּבָר –

When Mordechai sends word to Esther about the new legislation authorizing the genocide of the Jewish People, he tells Esther to intervene and go to the king. But Esther doesn’t go immediately; she responds that going to the king without summons is a death sentence. She is afraid to risk her life, and Mordechai must persuade her to overcome those fears to save the Jewish People.





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Let there be no doubt that we are talking about giants here, the greatest of greats, heroes of heroes. And they felt fears we can easily recognize as familiar.

It is cruel, not to mention incredibly self-destructive, to idealize a lack of fear.

As one great writer had a child ask his father, can a man still be brave if he's afraid? Says the father with piercing clarity; it is the only time a man can be brave.

Toxic masculinity is a cultural pressure that says men shouldn't cry or get scared; our Torah says they do.

As Fred Rogers taught, anything human is mentionable, and the mentionable can become more manageable. When we can talk about our feelings, they can become less overwhelming, less upsetting, and less scary.

A core part of the Jewish mission is the pursuit of wholeness – שלימות / תמימות. It is an act of psychological violence to kill off the emotional aspects of another, or in the case of yourself, self-mutilation. When you cut away the parts of the self capable of feeling a wide range of emotional responses, people wind up disconnected from themselves and the people around them. You get broken people not emotionally in tune with themselves or their surroundings. By definition, wholeness must be compatible with the full spectrum of human emotion; one of the most important tasks of our era is to reconnect with and reunite the severed parts.

The life of our greatest heroes was an emotional life that was visited by fear and doubt. The difference between the best of us and the rest of us is what they did about it. The Torah's stories reassure us that we're not alone and that our feelings are natural and normal.

Fear and faith are compatible, and they exist along the same spectrum. Faith is not blind or mindless; the Torah testifies Avraham's faith in the middle of his doubt and insecurity – וְהֵאֱמַן בְּה' וַיִּחְשְׁבֶהָ לוֹ צְדָקָה.

As the Torah draws to the conclusion of its great story, Moshe hands over the reins to Yehoshua, and encourages him in front of the Jewish People, to be brave and strong in the face of fear; God tells Yehoshua the exact same thing – חִזְקוּ וְאִמְצוּ אֶל־תִּירְאוֹ וְאֶל־תַּעֲרָצוּ מִפְּנֵיהֶם כִּי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הוּא הַהִלֵּךְ עִמָּךְ לֹא יִרְפָּךְ וְלֹא יַעֲזֹבֶךָ – / לֹא תִירָא וְלֹא תַחַת / וַיִּצְוֵ אֶת־יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן־נוּן וַיֹּאמֶר חִזְקוּ וְאִמְצוּ כִּי אִתְּהָ תָבִיא אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי לָהֶם וְאָנֹכִי אֵהְיֶה עִמָּךְ.

As the Abarbanel teaches, there is no contradiction between fear and faith. Faith in God cannot make a person immune to the powerful natural emotional instinct of fear. Faith means that despite those fears, you act with your highest faculties, guided by Torah, reason, and knowledge, not by fear.

What makes our greats great is that while they sometimes felt afraid, they didn't stay afraid. They didn't live in fear or act from a place of fear. In the high-stress moments, they felt it, but it is never



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mentioned again; they choose to act with confidence, faith, security, and trust that there is a divine plan, the difference between feeling afraid and being afraid.

We see this played out in the aftermath of the scout report of the Land of Israel; the Jewish People are consumed with fear and terror that they will be massacred, that their women and children will be captured, and they want to flee back to Egypt. Too afraid to listen, Yehosua and Caleb's reassurances fall on deaf ears – וַאֲתָם אֶל־תִּירָאוּ אֶת־עַם הָאָרֶץ כִּי לִחְמָנוּ הֵם סָר צֶלֶם מִעֲלֵיהֶם ה' אֶתְּנוּ אֶל־תִּירָאָם.

Controlling your emotions doesn't mean avoiding or denying complex or difficult emotions. It means doing things with your emotions as the passenger, not the driver. When a moment of anger, fear, or sadness comes, feel it, recognize it, and understand it, but don't lose it.

Avraham was right to be anxious about the future; Yakov was right to be scared his family would be massacred in the morning; Moshe was right that one man can't resist an empire alone; Esther was right that going to the king without an invitation was a death sentence.

In more recent memory, the Jewish world of today is built on foundations laid by Holocaust survivors. These people experienced unthinkable horrors beyond even the greatest subject matter experts. It has been said of the generation that survived the terror of the Holocaust that it was perhaps the greatest act of faith by the Jewish People to trust God and have Jewish children once more.

When you're afraid, it means you take a threat seriously. It's pointless to try to stop feeling nervous. Instead, like our heroes, recognize it for what it is, a call to harness all your faculties on the task at hand. Like pain, worry when you don't feel it.

Judaism and the Torah are situated in the world of action. We bear the timeless and consistent legacy of people who faced their fears and acted with boldness and hope, who felt scared in their darkness yet persisted until the light.

Our great ancestors took action, hoping things would work out, but not with any knowledge or certainty. As our sages point out, they often fear their sins and shortcomings. Their extraordinary acts of faith look like people who feel afraid but do their best to bring about a better outcome, which is well within our reach.

Courage is not the absence of fear but the triumph over it.

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## Prayer Redux

7 minute read | Advanced

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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 אֲחֲרֵיהֶם וַיִּירָאוּ מְאֹד וַיִּצְעֲקוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־יְהוָה – 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 מַה־תִּצְעַק אֵלַי דְבַר אֶל־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל וְיֵסְעוּ אֵלַי – 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 בְּכִיִּים, 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 – וַיִּדְקַר אֶת-שְׁנֵיהֶם-אֶת אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְאֶת-הָאִשָּׁה – אֶל-קַבְרֹתָהּ; וַתַּעֲצֹר, הַמַּגֵּפָה / הַשִּׁיב אֶת-חַמְתִּי מֵעַל בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל, בְּקִנְאוֹ אֶת-קַנְאֹתַי.

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 אֲמָנוּת 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.



## TorahRedux

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.

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.

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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.*



## TorahRedux

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

Neli

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

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