



Vaeira 2024

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.

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 great or unique; they were quite the opposite. And that's the point we need to remember.

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 – מִתְחַלְלֵה עֹבְדֵי עֲבוֹדָה זָרָה הֵיוּ 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!

Even when Moshe, already well on his way to greatness, intervened to protect Yisro's daughters from bullies, onlookers mistook him for some random Egyptian!

The Midrash famously states that the enslaved Jews retained their names, clothing, and language. This is frequently – and mistakenly – framed as a point of pride when it seems the point is that apart from these narrow and limited practices, they were indistinguishable from Egyptians in every other conceivable way!

Moreover, the generation that left Egypt and stood at Sinai fought Moshe for the rest of their lives, begging to return 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 mighty and outstretched arm – it was a forceful intervention, an emergency rescue of a nation that had stumbled and was about fall off a cliff – **בְּיַד הַתְּזוּקָה וּבְזֶרַע נְטוּיָה** –

As R’ Shlomo Farhi explains, whenever God is characterized with strength, it indicates God is doing something undeserved. God does not require more power 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 – **וַנִּצְעַק אֱלֹהֵי** – **אֱלֹהֵי אֲבֹתֵינוּ, וַיִּשְׁמַע ה’ אֶת-קִלְנוּ**.

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 but 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; 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 – **אֲנֹכִי ה’ אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים**.

The Ropshitzer quipped that **תְּחִלָּה לְמִקְרָאֵי קֹדֶשׁ זָכַר לִיצִיאַת 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. As the Kozhnutzer Maggid reminds us, the Creator chooses us at our worst – **מִתְחִלָּה עוֹבְדֵי עֲבוּדָה זָרָה הָיוּ אֲבוֹתֵינוּ**.

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 must remind yourself that every single last human is worthy of God’s unconditional love.



Do You Know Who You Are?

4 minute read | Straightforward

In an era where our understanding of the universe is growing at an unprecedented pace, one area remains elusive.

In neuroscience and artificial intelligence, it has so far proven nearly impossible to explain why and how humans and other creatures have the subjective experience that we call consciousness. While some have historically suggested that this is equivalent to the concept of the soul, that's just another label rather than any kind of explanation.

The philosopher John Locke argued that consciousness is your continuous collective experience that forms your personal identity. This idea is useful because it is tangible and focuses more on psychology and our experiences than anything metaphysical. In other words, what makes you the same person over time is your ability to remember past experiences; or, to put it even simpler, your conscious identity of who you are is a function of where you've come from. This continuity of consciousness forms the essence of personal identity; the memories of your past funnel together to tie your present self to your past self.

For some time now, great thinkers have linked the concept of identity with memory and experience. Intuitively, then, the Baal Shem Tov intuitively teaches that exile means forgetting.

We find an infamous example in the Holocaust, where the signature of dehumanization was erasing people's names and replacing them with serial numbers. Similarly, it is something we can sadly recognize in cases of dementia, where the person before us has a heartbreaking disconnect from the person that once was.

Exile means forgetting; it's true of individuals, and it's also true of societies.

In a world where traditional narratives are often questioned, the loss of a common culture invites fragmentation and can often leave individuals with a sense of feeling adrift. Chaos soon follows when individuals or societies lose touch with the structures and stories that give their lives meaning and direction. In the context of immigrant families, the gradual fading of ancestral languages and traditions is predictable, and the third generation rarely speaks the language of their heritage. This phenomenon is not unique to any one culture; it's accurately describes Jewish Americans as much as Korean Americans.

The notion of narrative identity is at the heart of how the Torah frames the Jewish People's story in Egypt. In the depths of despair, they begin to lose their connection to the past. There is a notion that the Jewish People were saved at the very last moment from the point of no return, the cusp of total



assimilation – מ"ט שיערי טומאה. Our sages imagine a heavenly courtroom drama where the prosecutor questions the value of saving the Jewish People from the Egyptians – if they worship the same idols, so what's the difference?

Our sages teach how the Jewish People retained their language, clothing, and names. This teaching is sometimes characterized as praise that they didn't integrate into the dominant culture, and they retained a connection to their past throughout their exile. But in fact, this teaching highlights the opposite, how they adopted literally everything else. When Moshe himself went to Midian, the locals called the Egyptian! The Jewish People had forgotten and lost so much that they couldn't even listen to the man sent to save them.

But if exile means forgetting, then redemption means remembering; memory is intimately linked with redemption throughout the entire Exodus story, not just on a human level but at the Divine level as well.

After the introduction to the setting of the enslavement in Egypt, the Torah describes how God is stirred by memory, specifically, memory of the ancestors – וַיִּזְכֹּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת־בְּרִיתוֹ אֶת־אַבְרָהָם אֶת־יִצְחָק וְאֶת־יַעֲקֹב –

When the Creator reveals Himself to Moshe, He introduces Himself as the God of his ancestors, establishing a continuity of Divine engagement with the Jewish people – אֲנִי אֱלֹהֵי אַבְיָהוּ אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם אֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק וְאֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב.

We must remember that God is timeless. God cannot remember or forget; these words are anthropomorphic metaphors, words we use the way we would talk about people. When we talk about remembering that someone was hurtful, it means the memory will prompt a different action or behavior; God remembers in the sense that God acts in response to something, in this case, the ancestors. The Chizkuni suggests that this self-introduction as the God of our ancestors is the source of our daily prayer – אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אַבּוֹתֵינוּ אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם אֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק וְאֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב.

It's how the Creator instructs Moshe to identify Him as well – הֲתֹאמַר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל ה' אֱלֹהֵי אַבְתֵיכֶם אֱלֹהֵי – אַבְרָהָם אֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק אֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב שְׁלַחְנִי אֵלֵיכֶם זֶה־שְׁמִי לְעֹלָם וְזֶה זְכָרִי לְדֹר דָּר.

Physical freedom was never enough; true liberation from slavery involved a reconnection with the Jewish People's historical and spiritual roots. To resuscitate the lost nation, to become the people they were meant to be, and to enter the promised land, they had to reforge their connection to the past. By recognizing the codewords of the past and the God of their ancestors, they would know that their time had finally come.

As R' Hanoch of Alexander teaches, a key part of God's command is to remember who you are and where you come from; remembering is the catalyst of redemption.



It's why the Book of Exodus, or more properly, the Book of Names, begins by listing the names of those who journeyed to Egypt, anchoring the narrative in personal identities.

It's why the Torah interrupts the story with an exposition of each family and the names of their descendants: the names of the sons of Levi, Gershon, Kohath, and Merari, the sons of Kohath, Amram, Yitzhar, Chevron, and Uzziel.

Life is short, and we barely live before we die. Our narratives do more than recount history; they embed us in a continuum of collective wisdom, teaching us that we are part of a story much larger than our individual selves, that we can be so much more than we are. That's why knowing your family and your people's culture and history is so important.

When we speak of our roots, it's not an empty metaphor. The human connection to family, culture, heritage, religion, and tradition is sacred. They anchor and ground us; they orient us to where we are. Whatever culture or background, our traditions literally and metaphorically support us; knowing our past is key to understanding our present and shaping our future.

Our traditions tell us that we can have the courage to stand up to the existential and metaphysics of life like heroes of old who could walk and talk with the Creator, who would argue and sometimes even win.

Know who you are and where you come from.

You descend from people who fight off angels and kill giants.

Choreographed Futility

4 minute read | Straightforward

At the beginning of the Exodus story, God tasks Moshe with his great mission. Moshe initially resists, saying the Jewish People will not listen to him.

Although our sages criticize him for this, he demonstrates that he is highly attuned to his environment because, sure enough, that's precisely what happens:

וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה בֶּן אֶלְבָּנִי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה מִקְצֶר רִיחַ וּמַעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה – But when Moshe told this to the Israelites, they would not listen to Moshe, their spirits crushed by cruel bondage. (6:9)



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Exactly as Moshe had predicted, they didn't listen, and this theatre only caused Moshe and his exhausted people unnecessary aggravation, disappointment, and frustration. It's hard to see this as anything other than choreographed futility – a colossal waste of time, energy, and effort on all counts from the outset.

This is consistent with a broader motif throughout the entire Torah, filled with so many aborted attempts, failed efforts, and wasted opportunities.

Generally speaking, it is usually worth giving something a go because you never know, but in this instance, everyone did know – they knew it wouldn't work!

Moshe knew they wouldn't listen. God knew they wouldn't listen. Yet God sent Moshe anyway. Why would God bother sending Moshe on an exercise in futility?

The Sfas Emes teaches that there is no such thing as futility when trying to help people. This chapter of the story illustrates that there's never one specific interaction that has an instantaneous magical breakthrough effect; the helper must persist. Words can take root even if they don't immediately blossom and yield fruit; the lack of immediate and apparent results doesn't mean the efforts are wasted.

The Netziv highlights how the Torah is replete with phases and stages that indicate gradual transformation; for example, there are five expressions of redemption, ten plagues, and each step of Dayeinu.

Remember that we are reading the Exodus story, the grandest redemption story in history to date, and this is how it starts. Moshe is frustrated, his people are hurting and spent, and he can't get them to entertain the dream or notion that things could change for the better. Not even the most legendary redemption story has an instant turning point or pivotal moment; it starts like this – boring and painfully slow. Nothing happens! On Seder night, we celebrate the great miracles, but maybe we should read these few lines as well and remember what change looks like, not only in our daily lived experience but as attested to in the Torah's own words.

The Chizkuni suggests that it's not that they wouldn't listen but that they couldn't; they were structurally and systemically too traumatized to have the mental or physical capacity to hold on to hope. And even so, God sends Moshe to them with words that are not lost to the ether. Even if they can't internalize the message, it is objectively important that they see Moshe trying to help them, that they hear the words, and accordingly, that we hear that interaction through the ages as well. There are times a person is so stuck that they don't want to be saved, and still, you can't abandon them.

Right after this unsuccessful effort to encourage his people, Moshe reports back to God, and God tells them straightforwardly that their mission is going ahead on schedule and as planned:



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וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה לְפָנָיו ה' לֵאמֹר הֲנִי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא־שָׁמְעוּ אֵלַי וְאִיךָ יִשְׁמְעוּנִי פְרַעְהַ וְאֲנִי עֶרְל שְׂפָתַיִם. וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־אַהֲרֹן וַיֹּצִיאוּם אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר הֲנִי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא־שָׁמְעוּ אֵלַי וְאִיךָ יִשְׁמְעוּנִי פְרַעְהַ וְאֲנִי עֶרְל שְׂפָתַיִם. וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־אַהֲרֹן וַיֹּצִיאוּם אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר הֲנִי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא־שָׁמְעוּ אֵלַי וְאִיךָ יִשְׁמְעוּנִי פְרַעְהַ וְאֲנִי עֶרְל שְׂפָתַיִם. – But Moshe appealed to God, saying, “The Israelites would not listen to me; how then should Pharaoh heed me, a man of impeded speech!” So God spoke to both Moshe and Ahron regarding the Israelites and Pharaoh king of Egypt, instructing them to deliver the Israelites from the land of Egypt. (6:12,13)

But what follows this powerful reaffirmation of the mission isn't a renewal or redoubling of efforts. The Torah interrupts this story mid-paragraph with a tangential breakdown of the heritage and lineage of the Jewish families in Egypt in exhaustive detail.

It's unclear what this breakdown is doing in this story, but perhaps it ties into the notion of efforts not going to waste.

The Ishbitzer teaches that in the instant we choose to pray, before uttering a word, God is poised to listen, which is to say, God responds before we have reached out. In the physical world, Moshe tried to encourage the Jewish People, but they couldn't hear him. But in the spiritual world, which is to say the world of the spirit, the Torah tells us who they were and where they came from, that they were descendants of Yisrael. Their identity could be a hook Moshe's words latched on to in their intangible subconscious.

Moshe's words weren't futile because they didn't exist in isolation; they pooled into a more extensive relationship full of interactions, and this was just one of many. They weren't futile because change happens gradually, incrementally, and slowly. They weren't futile because they still registered on a subconscious level. They weren't futile because they were the Children of Israel, and he was going to save them and stand with them at Sinai. They weren't futile because the people needed to see someone show them they were worth fighting for, and we must also recognize that.

We read about this ostensibly failed interaction, and it's blindingly obvious that although the words might not have landed perfectly, these efforts were anything but futile.

Nothing ever happens in a day. In the words of Steve Jobs, most overnight successes take a really long time.

God sent Moshe to talk to people when everyone knew it wouldn't change a thing, but this failed interaction goes on to form a part of a foundation that all future growth and progress can be built upon. It's not wasted breath; it's an investment in posterity.

Time and again, we expect ultimate salvation, a moment everything changes and turns around, and we get disappointed because the world doesn't work like that. God very deliberately sends Moshe on a mission he already knows he cannot possibly succeed at, highlighting to Moshe and us that apparent failure and setbacks are not futile. God sends Moshe because humble beginnings and failed efforts are independently valuable, regardless of the outcome.



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If you've clashed with someone in a relationship that matters to you, you know that you can't fix things with a good one-liner. No single idea or thought will make them suddenly understand; no light bulb will turn on that changes everything. Reality is far more modest than that; each kind word and positive interaction is a deposit into an account balance that barely seems to grow at the start. It's painfully slow, frustrating, and doesn't look like progress; sometimes, it even looks like a step backward.

If you're stuck in trouble and can't hear a kind word, hold on. If you're trying to help someone who won't hear or see it, keep it up.

It wasn't futile then; it's not futile now.

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.

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.