

Tazria 2024

Come As You Are

3 minute read | Straightforward

We often think of holiness or sanctity as the hallowed privilege of a rare few, the people who have made it, the inner circle of those who are better and wiser than us. They are the ones who can pray for us, guide us, and bring healing. Sometimes that's true; other times, that view is propounded by self-righteous, holier-than-thou folks who self-serve by making us feel that way.

That being said, it is an objective and measurable fact that some people are further on their religious journey and are more advanced on the observance spectrum.

Make no mistake that everyone has the same obligation to meet the standard of perfect observance of the Torah – so, for example, the Torah unambiguously says to keep Shabbos with no exceptions.

Yet, in the external world where theory meets practice, achieving perfection is neither possible nor actual; that standard has only ever been theoretical. We ought to know better than to hold every human to the same standard.

The only uniform standard everyone is mandated to uphold is the half-shekel donation to the Mishkan, the tiniest sum of money, a de minimis threshold contribution. This contribution went towards the foundation sockets, which compare to our threshold foundation of faith and membership of the Jewish People.

But beyond that basic common and tiny denominator, everyone is radically different. Everyone is born in a particular environment, makes mistakes, and is only capable of so much or going so far. We know this intuitively – it is clear that, like all things in life, there must be a subjective element to religiosity by necessity, and there is.

In as much as sacrifices and the Beis HaMikdash are the domain of the privileged few, every single human may bring an offering. One form explicitly recognizes human subjectivity and meets us where we are, contingent on a person's means – קרבן עולה ויורד. While a wealthy person would bring expensive cattle, a working person would be expected to offer a pair of affordable birds, and a person in poverty would only have to provide some cheap flour:

וְאִם לֹא תִשָּׂיג יָדוֹ לְשֵׁתֵי תְרִים אֹךְ לְשֵׁנֵי בְנֵי־יוֹנָה וְהֵבִיא אֶת־קֶרְבָּנוֹ אֲשֶׁר תִּטָּא עֲשִׂירַת הָאָפֶה סֶלֶת – And if one's means do not suffice for two turtledoves or two pigeons, that person shall bring as an offering for that of which one is guilty a tenth of an ephah of choice flour... (5:11)



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Whatever the form, the result is a “pleasant scent,” which is how the Torah describes God receiving them warmly – רִיחַ נִיחֻחַ לֵהּ. This is quite obviously a metaphor; burning feathers smell disgusting. And yet unmistakably, the same reception reveals that whatever the form, they are substantively the same, whether bull, bird, or flour; all are warmly embraced, with no distinction between rich and poor – נֹאמַר – בַּעוֹף רִיחַ נִיחֻחַ וְנֹאמַר בַּבְּהֵמָה רִיחַ נִיחֻחַ, לֹאמַר לֶךְ אֶחָד הַמְרֻבָּה וְאֶחָד הַמְמַעֵיט וּבִלְבָד שִׁיכוּיִן לְבוֹ לַשְּׁמַיִם.

The Chafetz Chaim notes that the principle holds even while the sacrifices have lapsed. If you have the means to help others and do less than you could, you need to step up and meet your duty. To whom much is given, much is expected, and with great power comes great responsibility.

The legendary Reb Zusha of Hanipol would say that when he’d get to Heaven, he wouldn’t be afraid to answer why he wasn’t like Avraham, because he wasn’t Avraham, nor why he wasn’t like Moshe, because he wasn’t Moshe. But when they would ask why he wasn’t like Zusha, he’d have no answer for failing to live up to his unique potential.

As much as we all need to be better, you can only move forward from where you are. You are in the right place to do what you need to – הַמְּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עוֹמֵד עָלָיו אֲדַמְתִּי-קֹדֶשׁ הוּא –

This idea is at the heart of Korach’s folly, which leads only to ruin and misery. Everyone’s service is different and yet equally welcome.

One of the most powerful phrases in the Torah is when God saw the young Yishmael dying in the desert. The Midrash imagines the angels arguing against divine intervention to save Yishmael because of the atrocities his descendants would commit, but they lose the argument because God evaluates things differently. God answers the boy based on where he is and the facts and circumstances as they are here and now – בְּאֲשֶׁר הוּא שָׁם –

In your present condition and natural state, you have a key stake in Judaism and a contribution to make that matters, even before the changes you must still undergo.

You are where you’re supposed to be right now, and you are enough.

Isolation Redux

4 minute read | Straightforward

When a person is officially diagnosed with the skin condition the Torah calls tzaraas, the Torah imposes a mandatory seven-day quarantine; the person must leave town and live in solitary isolation. Anyone who lived through COVID has primary experience of isolation and quarantine. However

difficult and unpleasant, it has the valuable function of attempting to stop contagion and transmission, saving lives in the aggregate.

Yet our sages teach that this skin condition resulted from gossip and slander, which is to say that it wasn't a contagious or transmissible condition.

So why are quarantine and isolation appropriate?

Perhaps isolation is an appropriate measure for the wrongdoing of harmful speech.

Language distinguishes humans from animals and is the tool that has built and compounded human civilization. More than smarts or strength, it is arguably humanity's most powerful tool to control and influence the world around us.

Gossip has a positive social utility, exposing genuine threats among us, like abusers and molesters. That kind of gossip is not only permitted but arguably mandatory – תועלת; but most gossip doesn't meet that standard. Most gossip is destructive speech that puts others down, modifying bonds and cohesion in an imagined social hierarchy, subtly eroding people's relationships in the perceptions of others. By lowering somebody's reputation, you can feel superior in gaining status relative to the unknowing victim.

So gossip quietly but very literally tears apart the fabric of your community and social circle by planting divisive and harmful ideas and impressions, sabotaging trust and relationships.

If that is correct, then quarantine is highly appropriate – society needs protection, not from the disease, but from the person.

And perhaps there's something else to it as well.

Beyond helping society, perhaps it helps the gossiper as well. They have subverted their precious power of language for nefarious purposes, and isolation from others may help a person who gossips recalibrate how they communicate, reorienting them to their place in society when they rejoin.

Human beings are social creatures; our power of communication is what makes us human, so losing the power of communication is literally dehumanizing. Deprived of human interaction, stimulus, and activity, a person's mind must fill the void of boredom and sensory deprivation. Solitary isolation isn't a trivial thing; the prevailing view holds that, generally speaking, more than 15 days in isolation qualifies as torture; it's not hard to imagine why.

Moreover, this isn't the only time the Torah talks about isolation as a punishment; the Torah describes how the penultimate plague of darkness was experienced by its victims, primarily as a form of isolation:



לֹא־רָאוּ אִישׁ אֶת־אָחִיו וְלֹא־קָמוּ אִישׁ מִתַּחַת־יָדוֹ – People could not see one another, and for three days no one could get up from where he was... (10:23)

Presumably, Egyptian adults weren't like children who are scared of the dark; it's not just that it felt like blindness, it's that their worlds were isolated, completely cut off from each other – לֹא־רָאוּ אִישׁ אֶת־אָחִיו.

The Chiddushei HaRim highlights that this isolation was the worst punishment God could inflict on Egypt, short only of death itself – that people could not see each other. In a very real way, recognizing another human and moving ourselves to help them cuts to the very heart of what it means to be human, and we should take that notion seriously. Our sages go so far as to say that someone in isolation is effectively considered dead to the world.

Humans need each other; it's an existential design feature of being human – לֹא־טוֹב הֵיּוֹת הָאָדָם לְבֵדוֹ.

Our most fundamental nature, the root of our behavior, is generosity, empathy, courage, and kindness. Isolation exposes what it means to be human by stripping those things away.

Perhaps by being alone for seven days, a person who gossips can appreciate their ability to communicate in a new light, cultivating a new understanding of the value of community for when they return.

Human beings are social creatures; make sure you use your precious gift of communication to build, not break. But some breaking can be constructive; not all gossip is destructive; some forms of gossip are not only permitted, but required.

A good rule of thumb that should only fail rarely is that if there is a credible threat to communal safety and wellbeing, it is better to expose the threat than suppress it. Someone's potential status of innocence should never trump everyone else's certain and definite status of safety.

Suppressing public awareness of abusers only protects and serves the interests of abusers. Exposing them is worthy of pride, not shame; utilizing gossip correctly serves to effectively isolate abusers from the general population and protects vulnerable people in our communities.

When there are dangerous folks people need to be careful around, remember that you can serve the highest of purposes in spreading the word.

But in almost every other instance, there's a relationship tax; the friction that inevitably results when two humans interact. If you want people to be in your life, it's important to overlook minor frictions such as occasional misunderstandings, small disagreements, differences in preferences or habits, and unintentional mistakes. The law of the metzora mirrors human interaction; people who engage in



gossip and slander can often experience loneliness and isolation, the consequence of people keeping their distance in order to protect themselves from drama and conflict.

To have other people in your life, you have to be willing to endure and ignore a certain amount of friction.

Under Observation

4 minute read | Straightforward

The Torah describes a skin condition called tzaraas and many associated laws of diagnosis, quarantine, and rehabilitation. The Torah treats it as a spiritual affliction as opposed to having any apparent medical significance, and as such, it falls under the holiness and purity rubric of the kohen.

The Torah is deliberate and precise that the condition can only be diagnosed or treated by a kohen, the religious leaders of an era before rabbis. If the patient were a learned expert and the kohen an illiterate imbecile, the patient's status still turns on the kohen's word alone and nothing else.

If the kohen doesn't need to know what he's doing, why is the kohen a central figure at all?

Our sages understood that the condition called tzaraas was a symptom experienced by people who gossip and speak ill of others. In this light, it follows that the entire treatment process serves to rehabilitate the patient.

By requiring someone else to make the diagnosis, the Torah acknowledges that it's pretty easy to find faults in others and that it can be hard to see our own; being subjected to the judgment of another is precisely the experience you subject others to when you gossip about them.

It is easy to figure out what others are doing that feels annoying, disappointing, or hurtful. It tends to be harder to figure out what you are doing that is annoying, disappointing, or hurtful. But gossiping about what others are doing gets you nowhere, and the Torah's focus is on reorienting your interactions.

The Tur notes that when the kohen makes his determination, the Torah describes how the kohen quarantines the condition away for a week; not the person – וְהִסְגִּיר הַכֹּהֵן אֶת־הַנִּגַּע שְׁבַעַת יָמִים.

R' Yitzhak Yehuda Trunk highlights how the kohen must look at the condition first but then also looks at the whole person – וְרָאָה הַכֹּהֵן אֶת־הַנִּגַּע / וְרָאָהוּ הַכֹּהֵן – suggesting the need to see an issue for what it is



critically but to consider the totality of a person in context; their qualities and redemptive features as well.

One of the laws of diagnosis is that if the condition persists but does not spread, the kohen must declare the illness healed – וְלֹא-פִשָּׁה הַנִּגַּע בְּעוֹר וְטִהַר וְהִכְהִין – . When someone is in a stable medical condition, you might equally describe them as stable and therefore improving; or you might say that the lack of improvement is a sign of deterioration, that they're not going to get better. Neither is wrong, but in terms of our orientation to the world, this law indicates a clear bias towards positivity.

R' Zusha of Hanipol observes how severe the Torah is about gossip and slander; if a person has the propensity for gossip and slander within them, they don't belong around others – כָּל-יָמֵי אִשָּׁר הַנִּגַּע בּוֹ יִטְמָא – טְמֵא הוּא בְּדָד יֵשֵׁב מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה מוֹשְׁבֵי.

The Rema notes that this could well be someone with tzaraas on their entire body doesn't quarantine; their exterior physical condition matches their inner spiritual condition, and people will know to steer clear just by looking.

R' Yisrael Salanter sharply notes how the punishment of isolation fits the crime. The sin isn't just telling stories about others; it's specifically about finding fault in others, a sin of misappropriating a skill you're supposed to use on yourself. The Torah describes the skin healing from its nucleus but quite literally talks about inverting the eye – הִפְךָ הַנִּגַּע אֶת עֵינָיו – . By placing the laws of Tzaraas next to the laws of kosher, the Torah suggests that what comes out of our mouths is just as important as what goes in. If the condition and isolation are a result of judgmental eyes, then he has healed when his eyes are fixed firmly inward.

The Rambam says that when disaster strikes, it is forbidden to treat tragedy as a chance act of nature or randomness and that all things come from God and should be catalysts for teshuvah. Our response to suffering should be humility and introspection; don't look elsewhere and blame it on those you don't like.

The Brisker Rov taught his students that the prophet Yonah fled from God, preferring to suffer rather than betray his people, but that when God sent a storm after him, he took ownership of the predicament around him – בְּשֵׁלִי הַסַּעַר הַגָּדוֹל הַזֶּה – . In taking responsibility, you claim the power and ability to respond.

R' Asher of Stolin suggests that the Torah's approach to our personal shortcomings is to be upfront and forthcoming with them – נִגַּע צָרַעַת כִּי תִהְיֶה בְּאֲדָם וְהוּבָא אֶל-הַכֹּהֵן – . A problem shared is a problem halved; when people know you have an issue, they are in a position to help you in the way you need it. With self-compassion, you can be gentle and forgiving with yourself enough to display your mistakes and vulnerabilities and can be open with trusted people about the fact that you are flawed, like everyone else. The error of gossip is hiding your faults by exposing other people's rather than doing anything. Share your flaws with trusted teachers and friends; own them before they own you.



At every step, the Torah reminds us repeatedly that we don't see things as they are; we see them as we are. Take ownership rather than point a finger.

Humans are highly subjective creatures, and we need to be mindful of how we use our ability to analyze critically. You need to take responsibility for your faults, not point fingers and place the blame elsewhere. Acknowledging imperfections opens the door to doing something about them. Success isn't hiding your cracks or revealing others; it's in honestly confronting yourself and bringing attention to the cracks within.

When everything is someone else's fault, you will suffer a lot. When you realize everything springs from within, you will discover peace and joy.

Regulations Redux

4 minute read | Intermediate

Speed limits, traffic lights, parking meters, building codes, dress codes... it's easy to see rules as restrictive forces in our lives, reducing individual freedom and personal choice.

The Torah is brimming with laws and rules, so it's a critique one can aim at Judaism with some merit and one that has long been raised by seekers.

There are so many rules, and they stack up fast! Eat now, fast then, do this, don't do that, and it goes on.

Why can't we just do what we want?

The opening story of Creation about the dawn of humanity centers around the imposition of a rule – don't eat from this tree, and humanity's unwillingness to follow the rule – they did it anyway.

There's a plausible reading here where God is cruel and tantalizing, teasing His creatures by pointing at the beautiful tree they are forbidden to enjoy; the language of prohibition and denial is right there, and it identifies God as the maker and enforcer of a system with arbitrary rules that humans are destined to fail.

But the story that follows about Noah and the Flood is a story about what happens in a world with no rules – total anarchy and chaos, and ultimately, the collapse of civilization. When everyone pillages and plunders, you have barbaric savages. Noah and the Flood, we see a world without rules, which leads to chaos and the collapse of civilization.



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No serious person believes that radical anarchy would be sustainable, a total free for all where Darwinist principles of survival of the fittest govern the day. Doing anything you want isn't a utopian dream; it's a dystopian nightmare. Every human society at all times in all places has understood that humans need rules and norms; ancient and primitive societies had rules and norms we might object to, but they had rules and norms just the same. The existence of rules and norms is a foundation of human society – no one gets to do whatever they want.

Rules form boundaries that enable and facilitate safe human relations by asserting how to interact, preventing infringement on others or abuse or depletion of a thing. Rules are a basic civic requirement.

Beyond the philosophical, this extends to the essential nature of reality; our universe is a universe of rules, built and run according to rules, the laws of physics that govern energy and matter.

The religious aspect of doing whatever we want is based on the notion that observant Jews are missing out. Sure, there are many things observant Jews can't do or enjoy – bacon, cheeseburgers, lobster, and pepperoni are allegedly some of the big ones.

Yet the Midrash teaches that it is wrong to believe that the Creator denies or prohibits us from the joys of life in any way. Rather, the Torah asks us just to regulate our instincts and stop them from running wild in order to maintain balance in our lives, from greed, hunger, and revenge, to tribal loyalty and sexuality.

Humans break when overindulged – people everywhere abuse and hurt, cheat and steal, get obese and sick, and tirelessly waste years of life on sexual pursuits. These negative impacts aren't the product of liberty; they're different forms of addiction and brokenness.

Like all cultures and societies, the Torah has lots of rules. And like all cultures and societies, some make more sense than others.

But like all rules and laws, they keep us safe and stop us from getting out of control. They help regulate our enjoyment of life; they enable everything else.

The laws of sexuality regulate that family relationships are inappropriate if combined with sexuality.

The laws of Shabbos are endless; you learn something new every time you learn the laws of Shabbos. But the existence of Shabbos changes and elevates how we experience time – it's not Saturday, a day off work, it's Shabbos! Moreover, Shabbos has kept generations of families and Jewish communities eating, singing, and praying together for life.

The Torah permits a carnivorous diet, which could reasonably be construed as unethical; it asks us to limit our diet to animals with certain features that must be slaughtered humanely. If the Creator is the



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gatekeeper of Creation, it's not obvious that we should be able to eat living creatures at all! But otherwise, the Torah allows us to enjoy the vast majority of human cuisine prepared in accordance with our culture.

What's more, when taken together, the rules of kosher keep the Jewish People distinct and separate from the world. They elevate the most basic instinct to consume into a religious act, saturated with meaning and purpose. As the Chasam Sofer notes, the kosher laws open with what Jews can eat, the permission, not the prohibition.

As the Meshech Chochma notes, the Creation story isn't about a negative restriction on a tree; it's about a positive command to eat literally everything else in Creation and fill the world with people, broad and permissive, perhaps even indulgent and hedonistic, with one caveat.

The Creator sanctifies human desire with the very first command – the directive to eat and procreate suggests that even our most basic instincts serve God's purposes. Although there's a caveat, even several, the Torah's claim is that God is the gatekeeper of that permission; that's what "Creator" means. If we accept the premise of a Creator, why would we feel entitled to the entire universe?

Beyond the aspect of a legal obligation, the fact that Jews observe a rule or practice makes it a cultural norm, unspoken but socially agreed on, and therefore sanctified by the collective consciousness of all Jewish People.

The Torah has lots of rules and laws. But those laws come from the Creator of Genesis; the God who creates life, loves life, commands life to thrive, and wants that life to love and enjoy.

We do this thing, we don't do that thing. No one gets to do whatever they want, that's not how the world works. We live in societies built on the rule of law, in a rule-based universe.

Rules aren't so terrible.

Language Redux

4 minute read | Straightforward

Humans are the apex predator on Earth.

We share this planet with thousands of species and trillions of organisms, and none but humans carry a lasting multi-generational record of knowledge of any obvious consequence. And yet, a feral human



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being left alone in the woods from birth to death kept separate and alive, would be not much more than an ape; our knowledge isn't because humans are smart.

It's because we speak – מְדַבֵּר.

We communicate and cooperate with others through language, giving us a formidable advantage in forming groups, sharing information, and pooling workloads and specializations. Language is the mechanism by which the aggregated knowledge of human culture is transmitted, actualizing our intelligence and self-awareness, transcending separate biological organisms, and becoming one informational organism. With language, we have formed societies and built civilizations; developed science and medicine, literature and philosophy.

With language, knowledge does not fade; we can learn from the experiences of others. Without learning everything from scratch, we can use an existing knowledge base built by others to learn new things and make incrementally progressive discoveries. As one writer put it, a reader lives a thousand lives before he dies; the man who never reads lives only once.

Language doesn't just affect how we relate to each other; it affects how we relate to ourselves. We make important decisions based on thoughts and feelings influenced by words on a page or conversations with others. It has been said that with one glance at a book, you can hear the voice of another person – perhaps someone gone for millennia – speaking across the ages clearly and directly in your mind.

Considering the formidable power of communication, it follows that the Torah holds it in the highest esteem; because language is magical. Indeed, the fabric of Creation is woven with words:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים, יְהִי אֹר; וַיְהִי-אֹר – God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. (1:3)

The Hebrew root word for “thing” and “word” is identical – דָּבָר / דְּבַר. R' Moshe Shapiro notes that for God – and people of integrity! – there is no distinction; giving your word creates a new reality, and a word becomes a thing. R' Shlomo Farhi points out the obvious destruction that ensues from saying one thing but meaning and doing something else entirely.

R' Jonathan Sacks notes that humans use language to create things as well. The notion of a contract or agreement is a performative utterance – things that people say to create something that wasn't there before; a relationship of mutual commitment between people, created through speech. Whether it's God giving us the Torah or a husband marrying his wife, relationships are fundamental to Judaism. We can only build relationships and civilizations with each other when we can make commitments through language.

Recognizing the influential hold language has over us, the Torah emphasizes an abundance of caution and heavily regulates how we use language: the laws of gossip and the metzora; and the incident



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where Miriam and Ahron challenged Moshe; among others. Even the Torah's choice of words about the animals that boarded the Ark is careful and measured:

Of every clean creature, take seven and seven, each with their mate; and of the creatures that are not clean two, each with their mate. (7:2)

The Gemara notes that instead of using the more accurate and concise expression of “impure,” the Torah utilizes extra ink and space to articulate itself more positively – “that are not clean” – אשר לא. While possibly hyperbolic, the Lubavitcher Rebbe would refer to death as “the opposite of life”; and hospital infirmaries as “places of healing.”

The Torah cautions us of the power of language repeatedly in more general settings:

Do not allow a gossip to mingle among the people; do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor: I am Hashem. (19:16)

The Torah instructs us broadly not to hurt, humiliate, deceive, or cause another person any emotional distress:

Do not wrong one another; instead, you should fear your God; for I am Hashem. (25:27)

Interestingly, both these laws end with “I am Hashem” – evoking the concept of emulating what God does; which suggests that just as God constructively uses language to create – so must we – אגני ה. The Lubavitcher Rebbe taught that as much as God creates with words, so do humans.

The Gemara teaches that verbal abuse is arguably worse than theft; you can never take back your words, but at least a thief can return the money!

The idea that language influences and impacts the world around us is the foundation of the laws of vows, which are significant enough that we open the Yom Kippur services at Kol Nidrei by addressing them.

Our sages praise people whose words God concurs with, one of which is the language of repentance. Words have the power to activate a force that predates Creation; Moshe intercedes on behalf of the Jewish People for the calamitous Golden Calf, and God forgives them specifically because Moshe asked – ויאמר ה' סלחתי כדברך –

Of course, one major caveat to harmful speech is intent. If sharing negative information has a constructive and beneficial purpose that may prevent harm or injustice, there is no prohibition, and



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there might even be an obligation to protect your neighbor by conveying the information – לא תעמוד על-דם רעך.

As R' Jonathan Sacks powerfully said, no soul was ever saved by hate; no truth was ever proved by violence; no redemption was ever brought by holy war.

Rather than hurt and humiliate, let's use our language to educate, help and heal; because words and ideas have the power to change the world.

They're the only thing that ever has.

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

PS - *Friends, for some time now, I've been incredibly blessed with business ventures that have allowed me to pour my heart into TorahRedux. Life happens, and I am now in active search of new opportunities and collaborations to invest myself into. If you're working on something cool, I'd love to hear from you. No pressure or expectations - just the possibility of building something valuable together. You can reach me at neli@hendon.io.*

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.