



Tazria 2022

Language Redux

3 minute read | Straightforward

Humans are the apex predator on Earth.

We share this planet with thousands and thousands of species, trillions of organisms, and none but humans carry a lasting multi-generational record of knowledge of any obvious consequence. And yet, a feral human being left alone in the woods from birth to death, kept separate and alive, wouldn't be 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 at 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)

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 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:

מכל הבהמה הטהורה, תקח-לך שבעה שבעה-איש ואשתו; ומן-הבהמה אשר לא טהרה הוא, שנים-איש ואשתו – 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 טהרה הוא. 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:

לא-תלך רכיל בעמיה, לא תעמד על-דם רעה: אני, ה – 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:

ולא תונו איש את-עמיתו, ונראת מאלתיך: פי אני, ה, אלהיכם – 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 – אני 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.



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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 there might even be an obligation to protect your neighbor by conveying the information – לא תַעֲמִיד עַל-דַּם רֵעֶךָ.

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.

Isolation Redux

3 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 – תוּעֵלָה; 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 מִמְּתָנְתּוֹ – 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 הָיִוֹת הָאָדָם לְבָדוּ.

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.



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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.

The Covenant of Perfection

2 minute read | Straightforward

Covenants feature prominently in the Torah and Judaism. A covenant is the highest form of contractual agreement, a binding promise of far-reaching importance in the relations between parties, with legal, religious, and social ramifications.

In addition to the agreement itself, covenants typically have a physical and public display of the sign or symbol to remember the promise, such as how the Torah deems rainbows to signify God's promise not to flood the world again.

Judaism can directly trace its roots to God's covenant with Avraham, the first Patriarch, and the initiation into the religion for Jewish males is called the Bris, literally, "covenant."

As the exclusive rite of passage for formal admission into Judaism, it's hard to overstate the central importance of Bris, so it's worth understanding the covenant it invokes.

When God engaged Avraham to enter the covenant, God mapped out a vision for humanity, blessing Avraham's descendants with greatness and the land of Israel. They just had to do one thing:



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וַיֵּרָא ה' אֶל-אַבְרָם, וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲנִי-אֱלֹהֵי-שָׁמַיִם—הִתְהַלֵּךְ לְפָנַי, וְהָיָה תָמִים
“I am The Omnipotent.... Walk before me, and be perfect ”. (17:1)

Like it's no big deal, the covenant requires us to be perfect. It doesn't take much trying before you quickly realize that perfection is impossible. While perfection is a worthy objective, it is an inherently unattainable one, and any who claim to have found it are deluding themselves.

How can God ask us to do the impossible?

The question betrays the kind of defeatist thinking we are all prone to at times. Perfectionism can be paralyzing – if we can't do it perfectly, then why try at all?

We should be very clear nothing and no one has ever been, currently is, nor will ever be perfect. Idealism can serve as a north star for direction, meaning, and purpose, but idealism alone is not an effective strategy for navigating day-to-day living, which necessitates some degree of flexibility and pragmatism.

We need to orient ourselves towards the process of perfecting, not the outcome of perfection, on the journey, not the destination. The Beis Halevi teaches that when we do our best, striving for better and more, we will find ourselves becoming more perfect over time – הִתְהַלֵּךְ לְפָנַי / וְהָיָה תָמִים –

The Gemara teaches that the name Hashem introduced Himself with, אֱלֹהֵי שָׁמַיִם, expresses the concept that the Creator withdrew from creating so that life had space to be and grow – שֹׁמֵר לְעוֹלָמוֹ דִּי –

The Kedushas Levi notes that God forms this space for us to have any input by necessity because that input is precisely what God desires from us.

Rabbi Akiva taught that in the same way we consider a loaf of bread an improvement from raw stalks of wheat, humans can and must improve the world around us.

The Malbim explains that our active participation is the essential theme of the covenant. Circumcision is not just an extrinsic sign on our bodies; Judaism's initiation for men symbolizes the action we are called upon to take to enhance our world, a living articulation of the covenant itself.

The symbolism of modifying our bodies as soon as we are born is a powerful visual metaphor we carry with us, teaching us that our everyday lives can elevate, refine, and improve the world around us.

You will never be perfect.

But the perfect is the enemy of the good.



Quote of the Week

We are all connected; To each other, biologically. To the earth, chemically. To the rest of the universe atomically.

– Neil deGrasse Tyson

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

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

Neli

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

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.