



## Shelach 2022

### Building the Future

3 minute read | Straightforward

When the spies got back from Canaan and delivered their bleak report, the Jewish People were devastated. They rued the day they ever left Egypt, that the arduous journey had been a colossal waste. If they were just going to die attempting to take the land, the thinking went, they'd be better off going back to Egypt with a new leader who was a little more realistic.

The aftermath of their poor response was that this lost generation would aimlessly wander the wilderness for nearly 40 years. Once these adults had all died, their children would have another go at conquering and establishing a new nation in the Land of Israel.

But something doesn't quite add up.

We ought to expect the conspiracy itself to be the crime, painting the Land of Israel as an impossible goal, but it's not. While it's the catalyst for the story going off the rails, the Torah is explicit that it was only the people's reaction to the news that dooms them:

“In this wilderness shall your corpses drop, all of you who were recorded in the lists from the age of twenty years up, you who have complained towards Me.” (14:29)

When people hear bad news, it is quite normal – expected, even – to react negatively. That's why it's called bad news!

The people believed the scout reports, coming as they did from established and trusted leaders, that the task ahead was impossible. Even if we say they overreacted and took it too far, how does the punishment fit the crime?

There are many nations and many states. Many had come before, and many have come since. But the situation in this story was unique, both before and since.

The Jewish People in the Land of Israel are not just one more on the list.

Correctly executed, it is fundamentally and qualitatively different, with goals and values unlike any other. It is the culmination of a centuries-old hope and vision, with many careful and deliberate stops along the way. From Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, through Canaan, Egypt, and Sinai, the Torah paves before us a winding path to build something new that no one has ever seen or done before.



Yet even after witnessing the events of Egypt, the Red Sea, Sinai, the clouds, the manna, and the water, cared for daily as much as anyone can be by the hand of God Himself; in the face of even the slightest adversity, their worst inclinations get the best of them, revealing that these people never really left Egypt at all. Here they are on the threshold of greatness, and they only want to turn around and go right back!

God is so let down, to the extent that God considers killing them all, even the children, illustrating the seriousness of this misstep. Not believing in their great mission was a failure they could not recover from, and the result was catastrophe.

Building a new model for a Torah society cannot happen by itself, or else it would; it requires pioneers with hope and vision. If that's the attitude and perspective required to achieve the lofty divine goal of establishing the Jewish People in the Land of Israel, how could these people ever hope to succeed?

They just weren't ready.

But maybe their children could be.

To accomplish something no one has ever done before takes a certain character, perspective, and resiliency; anyone who's ever taken on something bold and ambitious knows it. If it were easy, someone else would have done it – but just because no one else has done it yet, that doesn't mean it can't be done.

A great vision can never come to fruition with half-hearted execution; you need to believe to achieve.

Who can do it? The people who want it badly enough.

## Blue is the Color

3 minute read | Straightforward

After the fallout of the spies' poor report of what lay ahead, God instructed the Jewish People to observe the mitzvah of tzitzis, which we recite to this day as a part of the Shema:

וְהָיָה לָכֶם, לְצִיצִת, וּרְאִיתֶם אֹתוֹ וּזְכַרְתֶּם אֶת-כָּל-מִצְוֹת ה', וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם; וְלֹא-תִתּוּרוּ אַחֲרַי לְבַבְכֶם, וְאַחֲרַי עֵינֵיכֶם – You will wear these tzitzis. When you see them, you will be reminded of all God's commands; and you'll do them – and you won't stray after your hearts and eyes! (15:39)

R' Jonathan Sacks notes that the juxtaposition of tzitzis with the story of the spies implies some association by sequence. In fact, the stated purpose of tzitzis mirrors the failure of the spies, being misled by eyes that seek – וְיִתְּרוּ אֶת-אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן / וְלֹא-תִתּוּרוּ אַחֲרַי לְבַבְכֶם, וְאַחֲרַי עֵינֵיכֶם –



Our eyes and hearts are our emotion and instinct – the spies' error was that they succumbed to fear out of a desire for comfort and safety. They were correct that conquering Israel would be difficult and scary; they were wrong for thinking it was impossible and that the whole journey had been a fruitless mistake. After everything they'd seen, they still couldn't conquer their fear, and their fight or flight response was engaged.

As the Sfas Emes notes, it's only the interpretation of the spies' report that was flawed – they had correctly assessed the facts. But even if the land were inhabited by hordes of big, strong, tough, well-armed, and well-trained men, would God's assurances and promises have meant any less? Scouting ahead only altered things from their perspective; nothing changed for God. It was only ever for their benefit – שלח לך – but they were sadly led astray by what they'd seen and how it made them feel.

Enter the mitzvah of tzitzis, reminding us that there is more than meets the eye. Don't fall for how things appear! While it's an essential lesson for us to learn, it was especially egregious for them to miss. God had come good for them in Egypt, at the Red Sea, and then gave them food, shelter, and water through an arid and empty desert; God had more than earned their trust. But they couldn't trust in God, couldn't live with the uncertainty of what lay ahead. Yet when God conceded to their request, they couldn't handle it, and they panicked. But the Jewish People would have been better off not sending spies to scout ahead at all!

A key part of the mitzvah of tzitzis requirement is to have a blue-violet string – תְּכֵלֶת. R' Shamshon Raphael Hirsch notes that the visible portion of the electromagnetic spectrum ends with blue-violet. There are infrared, ultraviolet, and lots more additional magnitudes of light that radiate unseen beyond what our eyes can discern on either end of the spectrum. It's also blue like the sky, the limit of earth's visible atmosphere, yet we know that space sprawls out far beyond our most powerful and sensitive imaging tools. Perhaps then, part of the mitzvah of tzitzis is to remind us of the essential human boundaries of our perception, that there is an invisible, imperceptible, but very real unseen sphere of existence beyond what we see and feel.

It's worth highlighting that the blue thread surrounds the white threads and not the other way around. If tzitzis corresponds to all of Torah – לְמַעַן תִּזְכְּרוּ, וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֶת-כָּל-מִצְוֹתַי – then it corresponds to all of life within the finite bounds of human capability and limitations. There is no separate track for spirituality to exclude the physical; the Torah utilizes the earthly and physical drives. It's a man's duty to unite and elevate all available forces and things and incorporate them under the Torah's umbrella, and tzitzis is the mini-uniform for the job.

And given blue's deep symbolism and appearance on a Jew's uniform, it should be no surprise that it is the standard color of the Beis HaMikdash and Kohen Gadol's uniforms.

Tzitzis follows the story with the spies to remind us daily and for eternity that the spies could not have been more wrong. It's not what you look at that matters, but what you see and how you see.



There's always more than meets the eye.

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## **Onward**

4 minute read | Straightforward

The Torah's stories have captured the awe of audiences for three millennia, and rightly so.

The Torahs tell us of explosive moments, like the crossing at the Red Sea, where the defenseless Jewish People desperately fled their oppressors, with the most advanced and formidable army in the world in hot pursuit. In a defining moment, Moshe holds out his staff, and God parts the waters, and the Jewish People walk through the dry ocean floor. The Egyptian army attempts to follow, but once Moshe's people have crossed safely, the sea suddenly reverts back to normal, and the Egyptians are drowned.

The Torah tells us of the theophany at Sinai, where the people gathered at a mountain enveloped in cloud and smoke, quaking, with fire and lightning flashing overhead, amid the sound of booming thunder and shofar blasts; and then the Jewish People hear the voice of God through the uproar.

These are some of the defining stories of our history and exhibit the dizzying heights of the supernatural. They showcase what is fundamentally magical about the Torah.

But despite the power of these moments to captivate us, the Torah doesn't indulge us by dwelling on them even a little. Just like that, with the stroke of a pen, the Red Sea is old news, Sinai is history, and it's time to move onward:

וַיֵּצֵא מֹשֶׁה אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל מִיַּם-סוּף, וַיֵּצֵאוּ אֶל-מִדְבַּר-שׁוּר; וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁלֹשֶׁת-יָמִים בַּמִּדְבָּר, וְלֹא-מָצְאוּ מַיִם  
Moshe and the Children of Israel set out from the Red Sea. They went on into the wilderness of Shur; they traveled three days in the wilderness and found no water. (15:22)

רַב-לְכֶם שָׁבַת, בְּהַר הַזֶּה. פְּנוּ וּסְעוּ לְכֶם – You have stayed long enough at this mountain. (1:6)

We have these distinctly unique stories of the Divine manifested in our universe, and then the Torah just moves briskly onward – וַיֵּצֵא מֹשֶׁה אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל מִיַּם-סוּף / רַב-לְכֶם שָׁבַת, בְּהַר הַזֶּה. פְּנוּ וּסְעוּ לְכֶם.

The starkness of the Torah's almost dismissive continuity is jarring, and there is a vital lesson here. It suggests that even after the greatest of heights, the most momentous achievements, and the most incredible successes, the Torah simply notes that once you get there, you can't stay long, and before you know it, it's time to continue the journey and move onward.

Onward is an interesting word – positive and proactive, meaning going further rather than coming to an end or halt; moving in a forward direction. As the Izhbitzer explains, part of growth is moving on  
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and walking away from the place you once stood. We can't stay because the moment is gone – it's gone in time, irretrievably behind us, and it's our responsibility to realize that distance in mental and physical space too.

It's true to life as well; the world will not dwell in your magical moments. Whether you ace the test, get the girl, close the deal, buy the house, sell the business, have the baby, or whatever the great achievement is; it's still Tuesday, you're still you, you still have deadlines, you still have to get into better shape, your siblings still get on your nerves, and your credit card bill is still due. And so, by necessity, there comes a time to move onward.

This lesson is challenging enough, but the Ishbitzer takes us further and forewarns us that what follows the heights of success is rarely smooth and straightforward lulls and plateaus of accumulation and consolidation to catch our breath; the miraculous rescue at the Red Sea is mundanely followed by the people's complaints about the local water being too bitter.

In the boring and dull moments, we may well find ourselves thirsty with nothing to drink. But this, too, as the Izhibitzer teaches, is part of the process of growth. Eventually, those bitter waters can transform into a sweet oasis, and what appeared to be downtime is integrated into the journey forward.

And actually, all too often, great heights are followed by sharp declines and drawdowns, troughs and valleys; the Golden Calf debacle doesn't just happen after the extraordinary events at Sinai – it literally happens while they're camped at the foot of the hallowed mountain!

But even the Golden Calf story has redeeming elements; apart from the important teaching that using iconography to worship the One God is still idolatry, it decisively highlights God's propensity for forgiveness and paves the way to the Mishkan and all the resultant forms of interacting with the Divine.

Do not fool yourself into thinking that what got you here will fuel you on to further heights; that energy does not simply overflow into everything else. Success is not final, and failure is not fatal; the proper response to both is the same – onward.

Quite arguably, a failure to move on was the mistake at the heart of the debacle of the scouting mission to Israel – the spies just wanted to stay put in the safety of God's embrace in the desert. They weren't wrong; the road ahead was fraught with danger! But that's not how the world works; stagnation is not God's design for us or the universe – life changes, moves, and evolves.

The Torah is a guide to life – תורת חיים – and one of the defining features of living things is motility – they move independently. We shouldn't be so shocked by the ebbs and flows of life itself, moving and changing, with concomitant ups and downs. When living things don't move, they quickly atrophy, stagnate, wither, and before long, they die. Living things must move and push to grow healthy and



## TorahRedux

strong. You can fall down and run out of breath plenty of times along the way, but that's part of it, so long as you, eventually, get back up and keep moving onward.

As R' Shlomo Farhi explains, if you look at stock market performance over a century, the zoomed-out time frame looks like a smooth and steady incline; and yet, when you zoom in to years, months, weeks, days, and hours, the amount of choppiness and volatility increases. On an extended time frame, each individual part matters less. The bouncing highs and lows blend into a smooth line that only goes one way – onwards and upwards.

The past is not gone or forgotten; it forms the basis and foundations of today.

Although we can't dwell in the moments of achievement, perhaps there is a part we can carry in our hearts and minds.

And as we go, it comes with us, ever onward.

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## Attitude Redux

5 minute read | Straightforward

During the Jewish People's time in the desert, God gave a variety of commands.

We expect God to give commands, it comes with the territory, that's what God does, it makes sense. They'd only just left Egypt and stood at Sinai; there was a new religion with new procedures and protocols to implement. And after all, there's no way to know what God wants unless God says so!

What God says, we expect the audience to do, which the Torah dutifully records – וַיַּעַשׂ כִּן.

But what we might not expect is that the Torah reports with meticulous regularity, each and every time, not just that people obey, but that people carry out their task as per God's command – וַיַּעַשׂ כִּן. The Torah uses this phrase tens, if not hundreds of times!

If you think about it, apart from the repetitiveness, it's almost entirely redundant. It's not at all obvious what doing something per God's command adds, because, in almost every example, there is literally no other conceivable way to do the thing.

When God says to light the Menora, there is only one way to light a Menora. When God says to take a census of how many people there are, the only way to fulfill the command is to count people. When God says to bring a Korban Pesach, or how to do the Yom Kippur service, or any of the Mishkan-related workflows, or to go to war with Midian, or to execute somebody, there isn't any other way to do any of those things! And yet each time, the Torah doesn't say people followed their





instructions; it says that the people followed their instructions faithfully as per God's command – וַיַּעַשׂוּ כְּכָל אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה'.

Each time people follow instructions, why does the Torah add that they followed the instructions per God's command?

Perhaps the Torah isn't telling us that they did it; it's telling us how they did it.

R' Shlomo Farhi explains that even when there truly is only one way to do something, there is still a right and wrong way. When the Torah adds that people followed instructions faithfully – כְּכָל אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' – it's not saying that they did just like they were told; it means that people follow instructions just like when they were told, capturing the snapshot of sentiment or feeling of a particular moment.

When you do anything, even if there's no other way, you can still do it with energy, focus, and joy; or not – a right way and a wrong way, even when there's only one way.

Our sages were sensitive to this subtle but universal nuance.

Rashi quotes the Sifri that Ahron lit the Menora every day, precisely the way Moshe told him for the rest of his life, and never changed or deviated in any way – כְּכָל אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה'; the Sifri suggests that our everyday approach to Torah should similarly be with freshness and excitement – וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר – אֲנֹכִי מְצַוֶּה הַיּוֹם עַל-לְבָבְךָ.

R' Simcha Bunim of Peshischa notes that as much as the comment is about Ahron not changing how he performed his duties, it's equally a comment about how his duties didn't change him. Some people let privilege and honor get to their heads – but not Ahron.

The Sfas Emes notes that lighting the Menora wasn't a particularly prestigious ceremony in that any Kohen could kindle the lights. Still, Ahron took it seriously enough that he insisted on doing it himself every day for the rest of his life – every day, he did it like the moment he received the command.

The Ishbitza notes that the highest praise for Ahron is that he retained that initial desire, that things never got stale or boring for him. He kept challenging himself to find something new and exciting, so he lit the Menora his last time with the same enthusiasm as the first.

The Shem mi'Shmuel notes that the word for training, which means practice repetitions, is cognate to the word for inauguration, the first time you do something – הַיְנוּךְ / הַנוּכָה. This suggests that training is not simply a repeat of past performance but the repetition of newness, with each repetition inviting an opportunity to introduce a fresh aspect or dimension.

Attitude and mentality are everything; the mental and emotional components heavily influence the substance of any interaction. Prayer and sacrifice require proper intent to have any substance to them; there is a vast difference between giving someone a hand because you care and giving someone a hand out of pity.



A Torah scroll is quite clearly and obviously a religious article, and yet it has no inherent sanctity from its perfect script and spelling. A Torah scroll is kosher and sacred exclusively if they were written with the express intent of imbuing the words and scroll with sanctity; which is to say that its utility and value as a holy object are solely determined by the mentality of the scribe.

The Mishkan had plenty of unique artifacts like the Menora, but it had some pretty ordinary implements that everyone owns; a shirt, a hat, a cup, and a spoon. What designated these as sacred and distinct is the intention with which they were crafted.

This is a universal truth in all walks of life, from Judaism to art to cooking. A great cook will say their secret ingredient is love; a great artist or sage will say their secret technique is heart and soul.

In the words of Martin Luther King Jr., if a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as a Michelangelo painted, Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, 'Here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well.'

Mastery is typically boring. Finishing your fiftieth marathon is probably less special than your first.

It's normal.

The more we experience something, the more our enthusiasm and attention typically wane. Predictability and comfort put an end to fresh euphoria; when we know what to expect, our excitement wears off, and boredom sets in. That's why we need to keep things fresh if we're focused on a long-term project or goal; cruise control is a killer.

It's something often seen with young athletes or scholars who lose their way – they think they've made it and stop putting in the work that would take them to the elite tier. The seasoned pros always comment on how essential it is for youngsters to maintain their concentration and focus to stay on track; to be fully present in each moment and devote their full and undivided attention so things don't get boring.

In all walks of life, the highest form of mastery is in valuing each repetition and finding the novelty and excitement in it.

It's not redundant for the Torah to say each time that people did the right thing in the right way for the right reason. It is ubiquitous because it reflects a truism of life, a constant reminder that is universally true.

The way you do things matters.





## Quote of the Week

"Picking the right direction to go in is way more important than how hard you work."

– Naval Ravikant

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## Thought the Week

“A lot of solid company leadership traits require maturity (that has nothing to do with age).

Having hard conversations the right way. Truly listening. Not having to be right.

There are a lot of people, who just never grow up... but there is little worse than an immature leader.

Most businesses lose talent due to poor leadership and the inability to execute maturely and responsibly.

For too many, being a “boss” is more important than being a “leader” so they’re comfortable not seeing further than their own wants or needs in a situation.

The focus on self over the business is a very clear marker of an immature leader.”

– Dr. Julie Gurner, @DrGurner

This is also true in families.

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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. And if you saw, heard, read, or watched anything that spoke to you, please send it my way - [Neli@TorahRedux.com](mailto:Neli@TorahRedux.com).*

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



## TorahRedux

Neli

*PS - TorahRedux is my pride and joy, the product of thousands of hours of learning, research, writing, editing, and formatting. I have a niche business that allows me to spend substantial time on TorahRedux, and I welcome your assistance in furthering my goal to keep publishing quality content that matters. I help NY home care companies implement compliant Wage Parity plans that enhance recruitment and retention; whether or not that was comprehensible, if you know anyone in the New York home care field, please introduce me!*

*PPS - I want to use my reach to help more people in more ways; this is me shooting my shot at another one. Several of my home health clients are hiring at all levels from entry-level to management. Please send me a resume and a one-line explanation of what kind of role would be the best fit and I'll make some introductions.*

**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.