



Achrei Mos 2022

Right Thing; Wrong Time

4 minute read | Straightforward

Few people want to do the wrong thing. Most people want to do the right thing, and often, it pays off. Sometimes, even when we know the right thing to do, we're afraid to follow through.

But once in a while, doing the right thing backfires spectacularly.

After an action-packed couple of weeks, with the Exodus, Red Sea, Sinai, and Golden Calf debacle all in quick succession, the Mishkan was finally ready, and the people could settle down.

The new spiritual infrastructure embodied by the Mishkan was an exciting cause for celebration; the people hadn't had a way to thank their Creator for keeping them through Egypt and ultimately saving them – arguably the thought process behind the excitement for the Golden Calf. The Creator had established a medium through which their worship was welcome; the celebration was genuine, and Ahron's family felt it too. And so, after they had followed Moshe's commanded rituals, Ahron's eldest sons, Nadav and Avihu, wanted to make a token offering of their own, expressing their gratitude and respect on this momentous occasion. The Midrash talks about their joy at seeing a Heavenly fire descend and that they wanted to join God's act of life and love with their own.

But joy turned to ashes, and celebration turned to tragedy:

ויקחו בני-אֶהֱרֹן נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא אִישׁ מִחֶמְתוֹ, וַיִּתְּנוּ בָהֶן אֵשׁ, וַיִּשִׂימוּ עָלֶיהָ, קִטְרֹת; וַיִּקְרִיבוּ לִפְנֵי ה', אֵשׁ זָרָה—אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה, אֹתָם. וַתִּצָּא אֵשׁ ה' וַיִּקְחוּ אֶת נָדָב וְאֶת אַבְיָהוּ בְנֵי אֶהֱרֹן מִן הָאֵשׁ. וַתִּצָּא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי ה' וַתֹּאכַל אוֹתָם; וַיָּמָתוּ, לִפְנֵי ה' אֹתָם; וַיָּמָתוּ, לִפְנֵי ה' אֹתָם; וַיָּמָתוּ, לִפְנֵי ה' אֹתָם. (10:1,2)

The Torah has no trouble describing people doing something bad or wrong; it conspicuously avoids suggesting that Nadav and Avihu did anything explicitly wrong. Our sages suggest different things that might associate them with wrongdoing, but we are left with the impression that this wasn't wrong so much as it was inappropriate or misguided. Their image is still very much that they were great men who died a beautiful death before God; failed heroes, and not wayward sinners – וַתִּצָּא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי ה' וַתֹּאכַל—אֹתָם; וַיָּמָתוּ, לִפְנֵי ה' אֹתָם; וַיָּמָתוּ, לִפְנֵי ה' אֹתָם.

R' Jonathan Sacks notes that this story is a caution that our power of initiative might be welcome in the world of action, but we must taper it in the world of spirituality. The world of spirituality is about subduing our ego in honor of God, not asserting it.



The Torah repeatedly affirms where laws come from – אָנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם. Rashi notes that this statement is an echo of Sinai – אָנֹכִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיךָ – suggesting a direct link from Sinai to the laws; if we accept God as sovereign, these are the laws of the kingdom, and Sinai is interwoven in the fabric of every mitzvah we uphold.

The Sfas Emes understands this as an affirmation of the nature of the Torah, that there is an invisible and intangible component beyond the obvious things we can directly apprehend. The social, inter-personal mitzvos build and develop a cohesive society whether performed intentionally as mitzvos or not; that's just how they work. Giving charity brings brotherhood, goodwill, and positivity into the world, regardless of your awareness of a mitzvah called tzedaka. The power of initiative works in the world of relationships because people are interactive – we can learn and understand how to get along better.

But once we step out of the realm of feedback and interactivity, it is deeply presumptuous to continue asserting the power of initiative.

The Ohr HaChaim sharply observes that their initiative to do the right thing at the wrong time got them killed. This story unequivocally conveys the terrifying yet essential lesson that doing the right thing or having noble intentions is not enough; the context must necessarily inform our behavior.

No action exists in a vacuum. The right thing to do depends entirely on the context; the circumstances, timing, and values are necessary to determine the rightness of an action. If you're doing the right but the timing creates problems, it wasn't actually the right thing to do at that time. Doing the right thing without an awareness of context and timing very quickly becomes the wrong thing – אִשׁ וְרֵה אֲשֶׁר לֹא צָוָה.

This reflects a school of thought in philosophy called consequentialism, which teaches that the only way to determine whether something was morally correct or not is the consequences of that action. The Torah pays respect to these great men, but the outcome was that they died.

And our lives are like that in many ways.

If a young man wants to buy his spouse flowers, he should probably remember that she chose a red rose bouquet for their wedding because they are her favorite. If he buys her a beautiful arrangement of white tulips for her birthday, we understand that he probably hasn't done the right thing. While he meant well and has done something genuinely and objectively nice, the context determines that red roses would have been the way to go.

Many variables go into something working out well, but what that means, then, is that the right person at the wrong time, or the right deal at the wrong time, or the right job at the wrong time, are actually all the wrong thing, and we would do well to let go of them and make our peace. More than a simple misfire, bad context or timing reveals a fundamental incompatibility and misalignment.



There is no shortage of positive outlets for your enthusiasm and initiative, no shortage of good causes to contribute to and volunteer for.

But when it comes to using your initiative, it is imperative to be in tune with your physical and spiritual environment because, as the famous proverb correctly puts it, the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

Sensitivity to All Creatures

3 minute read | Straightforward

From the dawn of humanity, people have utilized animals for all kinds of purposes, from farming and hunting to clothing, food, labor, transport, and domestication as pets. Inasmuch as the Torah permits these uses, the Torah categorically prohibits human mistreatment of animals, with a comprehensive list of laws designed to minimize animal suffering resulting from human interaction.

As it relates to food, from field to table, there is a vast corpus of rules that governs everything we put into our mouths and everything we don't; and one of the defining features of observant Judaism is the laws of kosher, in particular, the rules concerning how we obtain edible meat.

What is the point of the laws of kosher?

R' Avraham Yitzchak suggests that, among other reasons, the laws of kosher meat consistently demonstrate an underlying principle that the Torah requires humans to respect the life and well-being of all non-human creatures.

Consider that kosher slaughter, the most obviously exploitative use of animal life, is heavily regulated; the Torah requires the blade to be razor-sharp and concealed from the animal, among many other laws that prevent animal distress. The Midrash rhetorically asks what difference it makes to God whether an animal dies from a cut in the front or the back of its neck, and concludes that the law doesn't make a difference to God so much as it makes a difference to humans; being particular to cut the front is kinder and so refines the humans who observe the law.

The laws of kosher aren't just about how we treat the animal until it dies, but afterward as well. There is a little known law to conceal the blood that is spilled, almost a mini-burial ceremony:

וַיִּשְׂפֹךְ, אֶת-דָּמוֹ, וְכִסָּהוּ, בְּעָפָר – Pour out the blood, and cover it with dust. (17:13)

In the Torah's conception, blood is the vehicle for the essence and soul of identity, personality, and vitality; and therefore warrants sensitive handling and treatment:

אֶךָ-בָּשָׂר, בִּנְפִשׁוֹ דָמוֹ לֹא תֹאכְלוּ – Eat only the meat; do not consume the blood... (9:4)



A soul is not a distinct thing; it is the thing that makes the creature what it is, not a parasite on a host body. When we talk about the blood draining from someone's face, or the lifeblood of an organization, we're using the same kind of imagery as blood as the seat of life, which may help us understand why blood is a central element of all the sacrificial rituals:

כִּי נַפְשׁ הַבֶּשֶׂר, בַּדָּם הוּא, וְאֲנִי נָתַתִּיו לָכֶם עַל-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ, לְכַפֵּר עַל-נַפְשׁוֹתֵיכֶם: כִּי-הַדָּם הוּא, בְּנַפְשׁ יְכַפֵּר טוֹב ה' לְכָל יִרְחָמֵיו – For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that atones because of the life. (17:11)

The Torah unambiguously permits humans to consume a carnivorous diet; but as Nechama Leibowitz points out, the Torah only reluctantly allows humans to eat meat after the Flood story. As much as humans are the apex predator on Earth, God's compassion goes far beyond humans – טוֹב ה' לְכָל יִרְחָמֵיו – על כָּל מַעֲשָׂיו.

The distinction between right and wrong, good and evil, purity and defilement, the sacred and the profane, is essential in Judaism. Beyond Judaism, navigating regulations is part of living and working in a civilized society. The laws of kosher elevate the simple act of eating into a reminder and religious ritual to exercise self-control over our most basic, primal instincts, even the ones to hunt and gather food to eat.

While animals do not possess sentience to understand the notion that life is a sacred thing, humans are not like other animals, and the Torah gives us laws to remind us that there is a difference. R' Shlomo Farhi teaches that the Torah's boundaries should instill sensitivity and reverence for life. Our abilities, choices, rights, strength, and power are not trump cards; just because you can, doesn't mean you should.

You don't need to become a vegan, you can still enjoy your steak and ribs. But you should recognize the Torah's concern for the treatment of all living creatures, not just humans; because the two are linked. Someone who is cruel to animals will be cruel to people.

Our host cultures have woken up to animal cruelty in recent decades. The trend is largely positive, but we have a proud tradition that is millennia older; the Torah instituted the first systematic legislation prohibiting animal cruelty and mandating their humane treatment long ago.

Judaism is in constant dialogue with its surroundings and we may have to get more familiar with our environment to navigate it properly. On the one end, the Torah's laws don't explicitly regulate factory farming, but it's a product of modern business practices that poses many animal welfare issues, and the relevant parties should be open to how to do better. On the other end, the tradition of kosher slaughter is in jeopardy in an increasing number of jurisdictions, labeled as archaic and cruel; there are some important organizations working tirelessly to protect our tradition and they deserve your support.



The Torah has regulated human interaction with animals for thousands of years; the laws of kosher teach us compassion and sensitivity to other creatures.

We should be proud of our heritage.

The Heart of Worship

3 minute read | Straightforward

Prayer is a central aspect of Judaism, if not all religious beliefs. It is an invocation or act that deliberately seeks out and interfaces with the divine.

Although prayer does appear obliquely or sporadically in the Torah, it is not the predominant mode of worship in the Torah or the ancient world the Torah appeared in, an era where animal sacrifice was a near cultural universal. Our sages went out of their way to teach that prayer doesn't just appear in the Torah; prayer stands in as a direct replacement or substitute for the lapsed sacrifices of long ago.

Our prayers are replete with requests to restore Jerusalem and rebuild the Beis HaMikdash. However, authorities are divided on whether the future we yearn for heralds a restoration or replacement of animal sacrifice. While that remains speculative until we find out, it is probably fair to say that it is hard for people in the modern world to wrap their heads around animal sacrifice.

Today's near cultural universal is that animal sacrifice is alien and weird, perhaps even disgusting and nasty. Most people don't want to watch an animal get slaughtered; any arcane mysticism is hard to imagine over the blood and gore.

That leaves prayer in a bit of a void; prayer is a stand-in or substitute for animal sacrifice, and yet an animal sacrifice is hard to relate to in almost every conceivable way, so far removed as it is from our primary experience. Moreover, the Torah has long sections devoted to the different categories and kinds of sacrifice and their details and nuances; sacrifice is the primary mode of worship, so prayer seems second-rate.

Either way, prayer is hard to understand. If prayer and sacrifice aren't connected, why bother with something the Torah doesn't validate as having much significance? And if prayer is connected to sacrifice, what element of sacrifice do we even relate to?

The Torah opens the section of sacrifices by outlining a scenario where someone wants to bring an offering:

אָדָם בְּיִקְרִיב מִזֶּם קֶרְבָּן לַיהוָה – When one of you presents an offering for God... (1:2)



Although not readily obvious in translation, the Torah utilizes highly unusual grammar. Rather than present the sensible scenario where one of you wants to bring an offering, it literally translates to when someone offers an offering of you, as in, of yourselves – אָדָם מִמֶּךָ פִּי־יִקְרִיב / אָדָם פִּי־יִקְרִיב מִמֶּךָ. The Baal HaTanya notes that this reading suggests that at the earliest juncture, the Torah already indicates that as much it's going to talk about animal offerings, it's not about the animal at all; it's about the part of yourself you're willing to offer – יִקְרִיב מִמֶּךָ – and prayer would operate in the same way.

R' Jonathan Sacks teaches that the conventional notion of sacrifice isn't really reflected in the Hebrew term – קָרְבָן. We think of sacrifice as giving something up when the Hebrew word actually means something more like drawing closer – קָרַב. You interact with the divine not with what you give up but by drawing close with what you have; in offering the material to God, you transform the material into the sacred.

The Malbim suggests that all a person ever has to offer is themselves and their all, which is precisely what the Torah calls for – יִקְרִיב מִמֶּךָ. The Sfas Emes explains that the notion articulated here is that prayer and sacrifice are about aligning ourselves and resources to God's broader plan; prayer isn't secondary to sacrifice; it is the same.

While the form of seeking out the divine may have changed over time depending on the zeitgeist, the substance has remained constant. At the root of all mysticism is a desire to connect with the divine transcendence, and our sages have long identified the inner world of the heart as the battlefield of spirituality – עבודת שבלב. So we can read the Yom Kippur atonement ritual that seems odd to modern sensibilities, yet it maintains relevance to our prayers because the substance transcends the form of the performative aspect; that God forgives humans who want to make amends, goats and string or not.

It's not about how it looks so much as it's about how it is – לומר לך – נאמר בעוף ריח ניחוח ונאמר בבהמה ריח ניחוח, לומר לך – אחד המרבה ואחד הממעט ובלבד שיכוין לבו לשמים.

As Moshe said to his audience, our Creator is always close, quite different to other gods they might have heard of who are only invoked with specific rituals – כִּי מִי־גִוִי גָדוֹל אֲשֶׁר־לוֹ אֱלֹקִים קְרֹבִים אֵלָיו כֹּה אֱלֹקֵינוּ – בְּכָל־קְרָאֵנוּ אֵלָיו

The Izhbitzer suggests that our subconscious hearts and minds hope and pray all the time. When you whisper “Please, God,” hope for the best, or wish that things turn out okay, those unspoken but very real thoughts are prayers that bring tangible wisps of warmth into the world that affirm and sustain, that things can and will eventually grow from – קָרוֹב ה' לְכָל קְרָאָיו לְכָל אֲשֶׁר יִקְרָאָהוּ בְּאֶמֶת.

As the Kotzker said, where can we find God? Wherever we let Him in.

Sacrifice, like prayer, was always about the inner world of the spirit, about opening your heart and yourself to the universe. And prayer, like sacrifice, can't change God; but it can change you.



Thought of the Week

According to our Tzaddikim, wholeness is not something that arrives from outside of us, it is something that emerges from within us.

No longer viewing ourselves as deficient through eyes of lack, we can now view ourselves as latently whole through eyes of enoughness.

– R' Joey Rosenfeld, @jorosenfeld

Quote of the Week

Being ethical is more profitable long term, assuming an iterated game.

– Naval Ravikant, @naval

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.