

Shemini 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 a stressful couple of weeks, with the Exodus, Red Sea, Sinai, and Golden Calf debacle, 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 the celebration turned to tragedy:

וַיִּקְחוּ בְנֵי-אַהֲרֹן נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא אֵישׁ מִחֶמְתוֹ, וַיִּתְּנוּ בָהֶן אֵשׁ, וַיִּשִׂימוּ עָלֶיהָ, קִטְרֹת; וַיִּקְרִיבוּ לִפְנֵי ה', אֵשׁ זָרָה—אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה, אֹתָם. וַתִּצָּא אֵשׁ ה' וַתִּאֲכַל אוֹתָם; וַיָּמָתוּ, לִפְנֵי ה' וַתִּצָּא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי ה', וַתֹּאכַל אוֹתָם; וַיָּמָתוּ, לִפְנֵי ה' (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 אוֹתָם; וַיָּמָתוּ, לִפְנֵי ה'.

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.



In the laws that govern sexuality, among many others, the Torah affirms where the laws come from – אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם. Rashi notes that this statement is an echo of Sinai – אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם – 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 of circumstances, timing, and values to help establish the rightness of an action. If you're doing the right but where 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 זָרָה-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.

Excuses Aren't Kosher

2 minute read | Straightforward

The Torah specifies in clear terms what makes a mammal kosher. A kosher animal possesses a digestive property called chewing its cud, and the form of its hooves must be a fully cloven split. An animal that meets these two requirements is kosher; an animal that doesn't meet both is not kosher.

It's not complicated; it's not hard to understand.

But quite curiously, the Torah doesn't leave us with its simple formulation; it specifies several familiar animals that meet one requirement, but not both and states that they aren't kosher:

אֵת זֶה לֹא תֹאכְלוּ מִמֵּעֵלֵי הַגֵּרֵה וּמִמִּפְרָסֵי הַפְּרָסָה אֵת הַגִּמְלָה כִּי מֵעֵלָה גֵּרָה הוּא וּפְרָסָה אֵינֶנּוּ מִפְּרִיס טֹמֵא הוּא לָכֶם: וְאֵת הַשֶּׁפֶן כִּי מֵעֵלָה גֵּרָה הוּא וּפְרָסָה לֹא יִפְרִיס טֹמֵא הוּא לָכֶם: וְאֵת הַחֲזִיר כִּי מִפְּרִיס לֹא יִפְרִיס טֹמֵא הוּא לָכֶם: וְאֵת הָאֲרִנְבֹת כִּי מֵעֵלַת גֵּרָה הוּא וּפְרָסָה לֹא הֵאֲרִנְבֹתָהּ לָכֶם: וְאֵת הַיָּגֵר טֹמֵא הוּא לָכֶם: וְאֵת הַחֲזִיר טֹמֵא הוּא לָכֶם: וְאֵת הַחֲזִיר טֹמֵא הוּא לָכֶם: – You may eat any animal with split hooves, that also chews its cud. Don't eat animals that chew the cud but don't have fully cloven hooves: The camel, since it chews the cud but doesn't have a split hoof is not kosher for you. The hyrax, since it chews the cud but doesn't have a split hoof is not kosher for you. The hare, since it chews the cud but doesn't have a split hoof is not kosher for you. The pig, since it has a split hoof but doesn't chew the cud is not kosher for you. (10:3-7)

The Torah says that the camel, hare, hyrax, and pig aren't kosher because they only meet one of the specifications, almost suggesting a difference between having one sign and having neither.

But these animals are on the non-kosher list because they don't meet both requirements; why is the Torah bothered by the fact they possess one element of the kosher laws?

The Kli Yakar suggests that having one sign may be worse than none; one sign can present a deceptive appearance, and only a more thorough inspection dispels the illusion.

We use excuses as justifications for a fault; an excuse's primary function is to diminish your responsibility by getting someone to excuse or forgive your wrongdoing. Where there's an excuse, it



indicated a lesser commitment to the matter, and behind every excuse lies a real reason, whether it's decency, energy, interest, or time.

R' Shlomo Farhi teaches that most of us possess the clarity and self-awareness to know what we need to work on. We can hold ourselves back by clutching onto something, pointing to some achievement or progress to excuse ourselves from doing more, and that good thing or two you've got going for you perversely wind up being something that's holding you back.

The Torah highlights the animals that have some things going for them, but not the whole package, drawing attention to them so that we aren't fooled, and perhaps so we don't fool each other or ourselves. You need to soberly define the boundaries of where you are in the physical and spiritual universe, being honest about your successes and failures.

Presenting as something you're not is not kosher, nor are your excuses.

Refusing the Call

4 minute read | Straightforward

Before introducing us to Moshe, the Torah describes how Yakov's family grew numerous and how the Egyptian government felt threatened by such a sizable population of outsiders. Determined to curb this threat, they devised a means to subjugate the Jewish People, which they slowly dialed up until it became intolerable. Once the Torah has established the setting, the Torah tells us of Moshe's birth and upbringing before he has to flee.

Moshe encounters the mysterious burning bush on his travels, and God calls on him to save his people. Curiously, Moshe refuses this call:

וַעֲתָה הִנֵּה צַעֲקַת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בָּאָה אֵלַי וְגַם־רָאִיתִי אֶת־הַלֶּחֶץ אֲשֶׁר מִצְרַיִם לֹחֲצִים אֹתָם: וַעֲתָה לָכֵה וְאַשְׁלַחְךָ אֶל־פַּרְעֹה וְהוֹצֵא אֶת־עַמִּי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם: וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים מִי אֲנֹכִי כִּי אֵלֶךְ אֶל־פַּרְעֹה וְכִי אוֹצִיא אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם: ... וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־ה' בִּי אֲדֹנָי: "The cry of the Children of Israel has reached Me; I have seen how the Egyptians oppress them. Come! I will send you to Pharaoh, and you shall free My people, the Children of Israel, from Egypt." But Moshe said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Children of Israel from Egypt?"... Moshe said to God, "Please God, I have never been a man of words, either in times past or now that You have spoken to Your servant; I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." (3:9-11, 4:10)

This is the beginning of one of the most epic and important stories ever told. Moshe knows where he comes from and has seen his brethren suffering, and his birth and upbringing uniquely situated him to do something about it. No less than the Creator has called on him to greatness, and he refuses; not once, but twice!



How could Moshe possibly refuse the call?

It's essential to understand that refusing the call is not just a literary trope that humanizes the hero; because this story isn't ordinary literature. If Moshe could refuse the call, and his refusal is part of this timeless story, it reflects a fundamental property intrinsic to all humans we need to acknowledge and understand.

It wasn't that Moshe doubted that his people could or should be saved; it's that Moshe doubted himself. He had fears and insecurities – he didn't think he was worthy of such a great mission. He didn't think he had what it takes, and he was missing what he believed to be a key trait to be successful – he wasn't a man of words! How would he persuade anybody to follow him? How would he advocate for his people to the Egyptian government? This isn't faux humility – Moshe is articulating an accurate self-assessment; he is right! And yet, the answer seems to be that none of that matters at all, that he has to get on with it just the same.

When the Mishkan was finally ready for inauguration, Ahron refuses the call, feeling ashamed and unworthy, in part because of his complicity in the Golden Calf incident. In the view of our sages, Ahron's shame was exactly what validated him as the right person; his self-awareness of his shortcomings, and his view of the position deserving gravity and severity. Moshe couldn't say Ahron was wrong, and only encourages him to ignore those doubts – למה אָתָּה – לְמֹשֶׁה, אָמַר לוֹ מֹשֶׁה, בּוֹשׁ וְיָרָא לְגִשְׁתָּ, אָמַר לוֹ מֹשֶׁה, לְמָה אָתָּה – בּוֹשׁ? לְכָה נִבְחַרְתָּ.

In the Purim story, Esther also refuses the call, not wanting to risk her life. Mordechai gives her a similar response – she has correctly assessed the facts and is indeed in danger. But that doesn't matter; the call to action stands open, and someone has got to respond. If Esther focuses on her fears and flaws, then she will lose the opportunity to step up, and someone else will – כִּי אִם־הִתְחַרַּשׁ תִּחְרִישִׁי בְּעַת־הַזֹּאת רִוּחַ וְהִצְלָה יַעֲמֹד לְיְהוּדִים מִמְּקוֹם אֲחֵר וְאֵת וּבֵית־אֲבִיךָ תִּאֲבְדִי וּמִי יוֹדֵעַ אִם־לֵעַתְּ כְּזֹאת הִגַּעְתָּ לְמַלְכוּת־הַזֹּאת.

The book of Jeremiah opens with a similar vignette. Jeremiah reports that God appeared to him and called upon him to be that generation's prophet. Like Moshe, Jeremiah protests that he is just a kid and is not a speaker, and in what we can now recognize as a consistent fashion, God dismisses these excuses – not because they are wrong; but because they ultimately don't matter – וַיְהִי דְבַר־ה' אֵלַי לֵאמֹר: – בְּטָרְם אֲצַרְךָ בְּבֶטֶן יְדִעְתִּיךָ וּבְטָרְם תֵּצֵא מִרְחֹם הַקִּדְשִׁתִּיךָ נְבִיא לְגוֹיִם נִתְּתִיךָ: וְאָמַר אֲהֵה אֲדַבְּרֵי הַהִנֵּה לֹא־יִדְעֵתִי דְבַר כִּי־נָעַר אָנֹכִי: וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֵלַי אֲלֵ־תֹאמַר נָעַר אָנֹכִי כִּי עַל־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר אֶשְׁלַחְךָ תִּלְוֶה וְאֵת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר אֲצַוְךָ תִּדְבַר.

Who is perfect enough to fix the problems you see around your community? Who is perfect enough to lead the people you love to greatness? Ironically, the person deluded and narcissistic enough to think he is perfect enough is the worst candidate. The Torah seems to be saying that it has got to be you – אֲלֵ־תֹאמַר נָעַר אָנֹכִי.

If we have adequately honed our sensitivities, we recognize we have a lot of work to do and that so many people need help. We might even hear a call to action in our lives vibrating deep within us, but it's not enough. We doubt ourselves, and we refuse the call. We're scared – and we should be! There is



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plenty to be scared of, and the stakes couldn't be higher. The undertaking the Torah calls us to is enormous, too enormous to accomplish on our own; yet it calls on us just the same – לא עליך המלאכה – לגמר, ולא אתה בן חורין לבטל ממנה.

The moral fiber is in quieting that voice of self-doubt that makes us refuse the call and stepping up to answer – אם אין אני לי, מי לי. וכשאני לעצמי, מה אני –

The Torah calls on humans, keenly aware of our fears, flaws, imperfection, and insecurities. We mustn't engage those self-same fears, flaws, imperfections, and insecurities as excuses to shirk our duty. The Torah repeatedly tells us they just don't matter; there's work to do!

Moshe, Esther, and Jeremiah all expressed a form of impostor syndrome, the feeling that whatever job you're in, you're not qualified for it and that people are going to figure out any minute that you're a poser with no clue what you're doing. Your self-awareness serves you well by accurately identifying gaps in your skillset, but does you a disservice by stopping you from trying. You have to silence the doubt in yourself when it gets to the point of holding you back from doing transformational things simply because you're not quite ready to face the reality of your own potential greatness.

Our pantheon of heroes is replete with imperfect individuals who had good reasons to refuse the call. Each reason was entirely accurate; we ought to draw immense comfort and power from how universal self-doubt is. The Torah's consistent thematic response to our greats, and through them to us, echoing and reverberating for all eternity, is simply that there's work to do, and someone has to do it.

So why shouldn't it be you?

Thought of the Week

The worst thing someone can do, is not to even attempt the thing they wish for. The second worst is to attempt it, half-heartedly. A lot of people protect themselves from hard falls by taking themselves out of the game entirely...when they had the ability to win big all along.

— Dr. Julie Gurner, @drgurner

Quote of the Week

Growth is painful. Change is painful. But nothing is as painful as staying stuck somewhere you don't belong.



– Mandy Hale

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.