

Balak 2022

Flags and Formations

< 1 minute | Straightforward

Wherever the Jewish People camped and traveled in the wilderness, the tribes were always positioned in a particular formation, which the Torah goes into lengthy detail about several times.

But we're one people! Why are there tribes, and why was there any kind of formation; and more importantly, what are we supposed to make of the specific logistics millennia after the fact?

R' Norman Lamm notes that we read about the formations before Shavuot when we celebrate receiving the Torah. We might think that we're doing pretty great – we're in the camp of Torah after all!

The Torah gently reminds us that that's never been enough. The twelve tribes all had different characteristics, and each contributed in its own particular way. For example, Yehuda, the largest and strongest, tapped for leadership and monarchy, was the first in the formation and the first into battle.

We all have particular skills and functions useful at a particular time and place. It's not enough to be Torah-oriented in general – what is your individual place and purpose in particular? What do you stand for?

We need only remind ourselves of Bilam, a man whose belief in God's existence was as genuine and absolute as it gets and yet, remained an awful human.

Believing is step one only. The formations matter because we need a reminder that we can't hide in the crowd.

It's what we do that matters.

Facing the Darkness Alone

4 minute read | Straightforward

One of the recurring motifs in the stories of our heroes is how often they stand alone, against all odds, and it starts from the very beginning of our Tradition.



During Yakov and his family’s escape from Lavan’s house, they had to navigate their way across a river. Some of the family’s articles had remained on the wrong side during the crossing, so he sent his family ahead to make the most of the dwindling light while he stayed back to retrieve what he had left behind.

Alone as darkness fell, in one of the defining moments in Yakov’s life, he was accosted by and fought with a mysterious figure, whom we identify as Esau’s guardian angel:

וַיִּנָּתֵר יַעֲקֹב, לְבַדּוֹ; וַיֵּאָבֶק אִישׁ עִמּוֹ, עַד עֲלוֹת הַשָּׁחַר. וַיֵּרָא, כִּי לֹא יָכֹל לוֹ, וַיִּגַע, בְּכַף-יָרְכוּ; וַתִּקַּע כַּף-יָרֵךְ יַעֲקֹב, בְּהֶאָבֶקוֹ עִמּוֹ. וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁלַחֲנִי, כִּי עָלָה הַשָּׁחַר; וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא אֲשַׁלְּחֶךָ, כִּי אִם-בְּרִכְתְּנִי. וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו, מַה-שָּׂמָךְ; וַיֹּאמֶר, יַעֲקֹב. וַיֹּאמֶר, יַעֲקֹב לֹא יֹאמַר עוֹד שָׂמָךְ—כִּי, אִם-יִשְׂרָאֵל: כִּי-שָׁרִיתָ עִם-אֱלֹהִים וְעִם-אָנָּשִׁים, וַתּוֹכַל. וַיִּשְׂאֵל יַעֲקֹב, וַיֹּאמֶר הַגִּידָה-נָא שְׂמָךְ, וַיֹּאמֶר, לָמָּה זֶה תִּשְׂאֵל לְשִׁמִּי; וַיִּבְרָךְ אֹתוֹ, שָׁם – Yakov was alone, and a man grappled with him until daybreak. When the stranger saw that he could not overcome him, he struck Yakov’s hip and dislocated it as he grappled with him. He said, “Let me go, dawn is breaking!” – but Yakov said, “I will not let you go until you bless me.” He said to him, “What is your name?” and he replied, “Yakov.” He said, “No longer shall your name be Yakov, for your name is Yisrael, because you have mastery with God and men, and you have prevailed.” Yakov asked, and said, “Now tell me your name” and he replied, “Why is it you ask my name?” and blessed him there. (32:25-30)

The imagery of this iconic battle is that it takes place in the darkness and lasts until dawn’s early light. But darkness does not simply describe the battle environment; it describes the battle itself.

Darkness is a mythological archetype for concealment, danger, deception, disorder, fear, and the unknown.

As such, most humans are afraid of the dark to some degree; our sight is the sense we depend on the most, and we cannot see well in darkness, so a lack of light makes us feel vulnerable to danger.

In the darkness, we are surrounded by the great unknown, with all sorts of hidden threats lurking in the shadows in the corners of our eyes, looming just out of sight. But when the light of dawn comes, it dispels the dangerous unknown, the darkness dissipates, and the shadows disappear, replaced with the concrete safety of known order.

The Mesilas Yesharim says the trouble with darkness is not just that you won’t see something dangerous, but that you can mistake something dangerous for something safe. You might never see the snake in the woods, and what if that big rock is actually a bear?

The Steipler teaches that the battleground of our struggles is in our minds. Whether fear or fantasy, our minds can paint vivid pictures that do not correspond to reality. Fear amplifies the negative, and fantasy amplifies the positive; but neither includes the consequences, opportunity costs, pathways, or tradeoffs that always accompany reality. When someone returns to their family after a long time away, they often think they’ll all get along peacefully and happily now; or the newlywed couple might think



they'll be in love forever – but we know how naive that is. Reality is much more challenging than the illusion of fantasy, but the difference is that it is real.

When Yakov asks the figure for his name, Yakov gets an evasive non-answer, “Why is it you ask for my name?”

R' Leib Chasman intuitively suggests that this is the nature of the formless enemy we fight. The Gemara teaches how at the end of days, Hashem will slaughter the Satan, and the righteous will cry because it was this enormous mountain they somehow overcame, and the wicked will cry because it was a tiny hair they couldn't even blow away. The very idea of the Satan is a shorthand for what we fight – a flicker of our reflection, a shadow, constantly in flux.

Although Yakov was permanently injured in his encounter, he still emerged as Yisrael, the master; we can expect to trip, stumble, and make mistakes along the way, and we might even get hurt. But it is the human condition to fight and struggle, but we can persist and win.

It's important to note that Yakov doesn't actually achieve total physical victory – he holds out for a stalemate while seriously injured. The victory – וַתִּגְבַּל – is in staying in the fight and not giving up – וַיִּרְא, כִּי לֹא יָכַל לֵו.

Our biggest tests, if not all of them, come when we are alone, but it is our characteristic ability to rise to the challenge that Bilam highlights in his reluctant blessing to the Jewish People – הָיוּ-עִם לְבָרֵךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל.

It's a point of pride, rooted in our identity from the very beginning, starting with Avraham, the first Hebrew, so-called because he is an outsider who stands alone against the dominant culture – / עֵבֶרִי מֵעֵבֶר הַנְּהָר

This theme repeats itself with Yosef, home alone with Potiphar's wife. About to give in to an almost irresistible temptation, he sees his father's face, reminding him that his family heritage is that he has what it takes to stand alone and not give up.

The Hebrew word for grappling is cognate to the word for dust because the fighter's feet stir up dust when fighting for leverage and grip – וַיִּצְבֹּק / אֶבֶק. The Midrash suggests that the dust kicked up from this epic struggle rose all the way to the Heavenly Throne.

R' Tzvi Meir Silberberg highlights that the Midrash doesn't say that the victory went up to Heaven, but that the dust, the energy expended on the struggle, went up to Heaven. Our victories are personal, and although we don't always get to choose whether we win, we always control whether we go down without a fight; and putting up a fight is specifically what the Midrash honors. It's your choice to stand that will ultimately endure and carry the day.

In all the stories of our heroes, no one came to save them; one of the defining moments of adulthood is arguably how you face the realization that to some extent, you stand alone. That's not simply to say that no one is coming to save you; it's more profound than that. It's that the only person who will



ultimately save you is yourself; that the helping hand you're looking for is at the end of your own two arms, and that your fate is your own responsibility.

It might take everything to stand alone, but you are enough. You already have what it takes – it's in your blood.

When Something is Off

6 minute read | Straightforward

As the Jewish People approached the Land of Israel, bordering nation-states became concerned. Familiar with the Jewish People's encounters and victories over the tribes and states who had crossed them, Balak, chieftain of Moav, correctly anticipated imminent conflict and geopolitical upheaval.

Seeking divine aid, he sent elders to Bilam, a renowned mystic and shaman, whose abilities as a holy man were established and respected. Bilam accepted the invitation and set out with them to curse the Jewish People to hinder their so far unstoppable march.

Bilam saddled his donkey and departed with the dignitaries, but God would not endorse his mission and sent an angel to obstruct him. The donkey saw an angel standing in the way holding a drawn sword, so the donkey turned off the road into a field, and Bilam beat the donkey to turn her back onto the road. The angel reappeared in a narrow walled lane, and seeing the angel, the donkey cowered against the sidewall, crushing Bilam's leg, so he beat her again. The angel then repositioned itself in a narrow spot that allowed no room for maneuver, and the donkey lay down, so Bilam beat the donkey one last time.

After the third beating, God gave the donkey the power to speak, and she complained to Bilam that she had always been a loyal steed and did not deserve these beatings. God then gives Bilam the ability to see the angel, and Bilam bows to the ground; the angel then berates Bilam for beating the donkey, noting that she saved Bilam's life. Bilam admits his error and the story proceeds.

While our modern sensibilities suggest that it's wrong to beat animals, the story seems to assume that some part of animal training plausibly includes negative reinforcement, so that wouldn't be why the donkey and angel are so angry at Bilam. Instead, the sense we get as readers is that the beating is wrong because the donkey is innocent. It's not disobedient; it's scared of this strange and intimidating thing.

Yet Bilam is missing the crucial piece of information that unlocks the story and proves he was wrong to strike the donkey - that there is an invisible but deadly threat ahead, and his donkey is frightened of this imminent danger! Without this missing piece, it would seem exactly how Bilam thought it looked; his donkey was misbehaving and not following directions, so he did what animal trainers do - he hit



the donkey, entirely consistent with what he understood was happening. His trained animal started behaving erratically for no apparent reason, wandering off and walking into walls; Bilam reacted perfectly rationally!

Seeing as he did not have the key to understanding what was really going on, what did he do that was so wrong that both the angel and talking donkey told him off?

The Kedushas Levi suggests that this exact line of thinking was Bilam's mistake.

If you've ever noticed that something is a little off, you typically feel a sense of unease, as the sense of wrongness slowly but undeniably creeps up on you. Bilam should have noticed that something strange was happening and taken a moment's pause to contemplate, but he missed the cue; something incredibly unusual happened, not once, not twice, but three times, and he totally missed it.

Instead of noticing and contemplating, he got angry and beat his donkey, powering right on with his plan, blaming rather than understanding. That's not the way a purported man of God ought to behave.

A person professing to live their lives according to their understanding of God's mission and the right thing to do ought to check their ego and keep their eyes wide open. But Bilam couldn't see past his ego; he sought the fortune and power this prestigious mission would bring, and nothing was going to put him off course.

There's a classic joke about a flood, and the waters reach the top of the priest's home. The priest climbs to the roof, and a neighbor with a boat comes by and says, "Hop on, I'll take you to safety." The priest replied, "No, no, the Lord will save me." Then the water reaches his waist when a helicopter comes by and drops a ladder. The priest shouts up, "No, no, the Lord will save me." Finally, the water goes over his head, and he paddles to the surface. A disaster relief boat comes by and offers to bring the priest to safety. Once again, he declined, "No, no, the Lord will save me." The priest paddles until he is exhausted, and he drowns and dies. He reaches the gates of Heaven, puzzled, and asks God, "Lord, why didn't you save me?" only for God to reply, "My guy, I sent you two boats and a helicopter!"

The signal isn't only when God opens Bilam's eyes to see the angel. As the Shelah notes, the donkey's initial misbehavior was already an interaction with the divine; the flaming angel and magic sword don't reveal any additional information. By that point, he'd already missed it three times and had only been spared from disaster at the very last moment in a stroke of fortune, mercy, and providence. Even if he could excuse the first time the donkey misbehaved as a one-off, the second and third time in quick succession were moments he ought to have realized something was off, and he might have reconsidered whether he was doing the right thing. But instead of acknowledging the obstacles in his way with humility and understanding and adjusting accordingly, he responded with anger, ego, and pride, lashing out in rage at his poor donkey.

The nature of our universe is that life doesn't go according to plan; no plan survives contact with the enemy, as one proverb put it. So when we hit speed bumps and obstacles, we ought to be strategic in responding; some obstacles need to be climbed, and some obstacles require a full detour and rerouting.

To be clear, obstacles do not evidence that the direction or path is wrong; they are sadly silent on that. But there are signs, and we should respond to them with the serious consideration they deserve and consider which way they point, where we are in the physical and spiritual universe, where we are going, and how we'd best get there.

Bilam's mistake wasn't that he hit the donkey; that is somewhat excusable. Bilam's mistake was that he had all the tools necessary to recognize the obstacles that pointed him away from his ill-fated mission. Instead, he ignored the cues, responding with anger and ego three times, without one moment of introspection and self-reflection. If the unusual and extraordinary make no impression and fail to spark a moment of reflection and reorientation, we are ignoring the signs; you probably shouldn't count on a flaming angel wielding a magic sword showing up with the helpful feedback you need.

Or to put it another way, if it takes a flaming angel with a magic sword to let you know you're on the wrong track, you haven't been paying attention, and you probably should have realized quite some time ago.

R' Elchanan Wasserman powerfully suggests that knowing what God wants, even without explicit instruction, is sufficient information to impose a duty to act on that knowledge. Bilam was punished for following Balak's entourage because he could already recognize from the outset that God did not want him to curse the Jewish people, regardless of any formal instruction.

R' Yitzchok Berkovits suggests that this story highlights Bilam's central flaw - his character. Bilam had abilities equal to or greater than even Moshe, but he wasn't a teacher or leader. With all the unique knowledge and power he possessed, he was just a wizard for hire, a simple mercenary in the venal pursuit of money, power, and prestige.

Our Sages suggest that Bilam had the ability to identify the most opportune moment to curse people. So while God neutralized this specific scheme against the Jewish People, we are left with a story about who Bilam was, a man who, with all his abilities and wisdom, used them to carve a profession out of knowing when to curse people most effectively - assuming the pay was good enough, of course.

The Mishna in Avos contrasts students from the school of Avraham with students from the school of Bilam. It's not that the school of Bilam isn't learned or wise; Bilam is never characterized as ignorant or stupid! But perhaps the Mishna suggests that our wisdom is reflective of our character - that we don't see the world as it is, but rather as we are.



If we focus our gifts and wisdom on pursuing fame, money, and power, we channel the evil eye of Bilam. But if we utilize our gifts to show compassion and generosity, kindly and selflessly giving to and serving others, then we are students from the school of Avraham, who prayed for Sodom, even though its people were the antithesis of all he stood for.

The story of Bilam stands as an example for all time of the folly of skill without character, of being plugged in but not tuned in. We need to understand who we are and where we are, striving to become caring, good, kind, and honest human beings; or else our gifts are useless, or worse, dangerous.

Next time you encounter obstacles, check your ego and open your eyes.

You might need to course-correct, and you might not; but if you're attentive and responsive to your particular path, you probably already know if you're on the right track or not.

Dirty Business

4 minute read | Straightforward

“Thou shalt not kill.”

In almost all times and places, most societies consider murder to be an extremely serious crime. Although it's one of the Ten Commandments, it's probably one of those things that doesn't require revelation for us to be aware of it; it's intuitive and near-universal across almost all ages and civilizations.

In modern political science, we say the state has a monopoly on violence; that the state alone has the right to use or authorize physical force, and individuals do not have the right to commit violence. It is a hallmark of civil society when citizens do not commit wanton acts of violence against each other.

In our tradition, even though Jewish courts and governments historically possessed this power, they were judicious to the extreme in its application; a court that killed more than once in a lifetime was considered bloodthirsty.

And yet, on the other hand, the Torah presents us with the story of Pinchas, heralded as he is for the public assassination of a political leader! His act is jarring for at least two reasons. Firstly, the killing apparently makes him a hero; and secondly, it's an extrajudicial killing – only the state can commit acts of violence, and Pinchas was a civilian!

If Pinchas was just a civilian, and the Torah doesn't advocate violence, how is Pinchas a hero for being a killer?

It's an important question because the answer is revealing.



Pinchas is not a hero for being a killer; he's a hero for something else.

God never endorses the killing; God endorses Pinchas' passion – הַשִּׁיב אֶת־חַמְתִּי מֵעַל בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּקַנְאוֹ וְאֶת־קַנְאוֹתֵי בְּתוּכֶם. If that sounds like a distinction without a difference, it's not; our Tradition does not laud the killing. Our Sages say that although it may have been the right thing to do, we don't do that – הַלְכָה וְאִין מוֹרִין כֵּן.

The Chomas Esh reminds us that the Torah speaks to individuals, so you cannot justify your own inaction by pointing to others. The Ten Commandments are stated in the second person, to each of us personally – I am Hashem your God; Thou shall not kill. Pinchas did his duty to his God as he understood it, the masses be damned – תַּחַת אֲשֶׁר קָנָא לְאַלְהֵינוּ – that's why he's a hero, for his boldness and courage.

It's worthwhile to note that in the heat of the moment, Pinchas could not know what we know. He wasn't a prophet, and he could not know that the story would have a happy ending for him. Up to that point, as Rashi notes, Pinchas was a nobody in everyone's eye; he risked his life to stand up and strike. The vast majority of the camp had fallen prey to the nefarious women of Midian, and while some people held back and could remain on the outskirts of the calamity, Pinchas alone stepped into the fray, stood in the center against them, and challenged their ringleader.

Humans are heavily socialized creatures; we often hold ourselves to the standards of the people around us. One adage suggests that our character and mentality are the average of the five people we spend the most time with! We do what others do and don't do what others don't; we don't like to stand out from our peers, so we excuse our shortcomings by hiding in the crowd. After all, are you any better or worse than the next guy?

While it's undoubtedly the inflection point in the story, it bears considering what Pinchas thought would happen. He can't have expected to survive, and he stepped into the fray anyway.

That's why he's a hero, and it has nothing whatsoever to do with the killing.

He's a hero because he marches into the unthinkable against all odds. He doesn't ask or wait for anyone's permission. He remembers his identity and where he comes from – פִּינְחָס בֶּן־אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן־אֶהֱרֹן הַכֹּהֵן.

Through his bold act, he revealed that the bystanders and victims and ourselves had the power and capacity to do more all along. His daring act stands as an example that ought to make people who believe themselves helpless and powerless dig a little deeper. He doesn't preach or shout at the people caught up in trouble, nor at the people who are too scared to get involved – he just leads by example; acting bravely and decisively in the face of danger, fear, and uncertainty.

That's what God endorses, and it's this act of courage that sparks salvation. God could have stopped the plague at any point; God could have foiled the threat posed by the Midianite women wandering into the camp at multiple junctures along the way. But God deliberately doesn't step in to avert the



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הַשִּׁיב אֶת־הַמִּצְוֹתַי – catastrophe until one of the people bravely risks himself to do what needs to be done –
מֵעַל בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּקִנְאוֹ אֶת־קִנְאָתִי בְּתוֹכְכֶם.

The Midrash imagines a primordial internal discussion before God creates humanity, where Charity and Kindness advocate for God to proceed, as humans will be good and kind to each other. But Peace and Truth object because humans will fight and lie. The dispute is tied in deadlock, and God casts Truth from the sky, so Charity and Kindness carry the day, and God creates humanity.

The Kotzker observes that God had to throw Truth out, not Peace. It wasn't about giving Charity and Kindness a majority; because Truth can stand alone and doesn't require consensus or support. The Truth is the truth, and however many people stand against it, truth speaks for itself.

As the example of Pinchas shows, it takes heroic courage and determination to go against the crowd, tremendous conviction, inner strength, and willpower. Unlike Pinchas, we're probably not going to get a shoutout or magical blessing from God for doing the right thing. But the right thing remains the right thing.

If there's something to do, don't wait for someone else to do it; do it now, and don't think twice. Stop thinking, start doing. Courage isn't the absence of fear; it's just doing it anyway.

It's better to walk alone than in a crowd going in the wrong direction.

Prayer Redux

7 minute read | Straightforward

One of Judaism's essential and fundamental practices is prayer.

Through prayer, we commune with the Creator, affirming our connection, dependency, and gratitude to the Source of all life.

The theurgy of prayer – the metaphysics of how prayer works and what it does – is complex, and in all likelihood, fundamentally unknowable. It's not obvious at all how you'd test whether or not prayer works, because the universe is self-evidently a much bigger place than your personal wish list.

What we do know is that at all times and all places throughout our history, the Jewish People have always turned to God in prayer for health, success, and salvation. It is almost universally understood that prayer plays a prominent role in the efforts and energy we must expend to get the outcomes we want – as well as the ones we don't.

The crescendo of the Exodus came with the decisive miracle at the Red Sea. The ocean parted, giving the desperate Jewish People safe passage, while simultaneously obliterating their great tormentors in
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one fell swoop. The Splitting of the Red Sea is one of the most captivating and magical moments in the entire Torah, and prayer plays a prominent role in the build-up:

וּפְרָעָה הַקָּרִיב וַיִּשְׂאוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־עֵינֵיהֶם וַהֲגִהוּ מִצְרַיִם נֹסַע אֲחֻרֵיהֶם וַיִּירָאוּ מְאֹד וַיִּצְעֲקוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־ה' – As Pharaoh drew near, the Jewish People caught sight of the Egyptians advancing upon them. Greatly frightened, the Jewish People cried out to the Lord. (14:10)

But surprisingly, and quite unlike how we might expect, this prayer is not well received:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה מִה־תִּצְעַק אֵלַי דְּבַר אֶל־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּסְעוּ – Then the Lord said to Moshe, “Why are you crying out to Me!? Tell the Jewish People to get going!!” (14:15)

With righteous outrage, we might wonder why God gets annoyed that the people cry out. The Jewish People have made it to the beaches with their children and luggage. They have no boats and cannot swim.

Just over the horizon, there is a hostile force in hot pursuit; by any reasonable standards, they are out of time and out of options. They are desperate, so obviously, they cry out to God for help. Isn't that what you are supposed to do? Isn't that what we've always done?

What's more is that the Gemara imagines Heavenly gateways for prayers, suggesting that prayers are accepted or denied based on factors like circumstances, quality, and timing. The Neila prayer on Yom Kippur extensively utilizes this imagery to evoke a sense of urgency – quickly squeeze in your final prayers, because the gates are closing! The Gemara concludes that regardless, the gate of tears is always open; presumably, because tears are heartfelt and sincere, and the pain that generates tearful prayers loads them with a potency that Heaven cannot refuse.

The Jewish People were desperate, and they cried out for help. Why would God get annoyed?

The imagery of gates in Heaven is powerful and compelling, but it appears to have a flaw. The metaphor doesn't work for a gate of tears because a gate that never closes is no gate at all!

The Kotzker Rebbe sharply teaches that the gate of tears is still a gate, because not all tears are equal; some tears are indeed turned away. The gate is shut to crocodile tears – superficial sorrow that is insincere, like when people attempt to use grief to excuse inaction.

In the story of Pinchas, Balak and Bilam successfully schemed to hurt the Jewish People by sending the young women of Midian into the Jewish camp to seduce the men; and most of the young men found it impossible to resist. The camp succumbed, sparking a devastating plague.

But the Midianite women were not successful at drawing in all the Jews; some of them resisted the obvious temptation, and, unsure what to do, they went to the holiest man, their leader Moshe, at the most sacred spot they knew, the Mishkan, to cry and pray – וַהֲפִיחַ בְּכֵימָם, פָּתַח אֱהֵל מוֹעֵד –

These people of moral fiber cried and prayed for help, but that didn't save the day.

R' Moshe Sherer highlights how the Torah explicitly credits Pinchas's assassination of the provocateurs for stopping the plague, and not anyone's prayers – וַיִּדְקֹר אֶת-שְׁנֵיהֶם-אֶת אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְאֶת-הָאִשָּׁה – אֶל-קִבְרֹתָהּ; וַתַּעֲצֹר, הַמַּגֵּפָה / הַשִּׁיב אֶת-חַמְתִּי מֵעַל בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל, בְּקִנְיָאֵו אֶת-קִנְיָאֵתִי.

When something is wrong and we respond only with thoughts and prayers, they are only crocodile tears, lip service, pearl-clutching, and window dressing. The pain may be real, but prayers don't help if your approach to problem-solving is fundamentally broken.

As much as there may be stories of people praying for magical solutions that materialize out of thin air with no human input, the Torah in these stories seems to dismiss the notion of thoughts and prayers as a substitute for action.

At the Red Sea, God urges Moshe to have his people quickly get a move on. The Midrash expands this discussion to say that God told Moshe that it was an inappropriate moment for lengthy prayers; when danger is close, it is time to act.

Rashi suggests that God was annoyed at the people's prayer at the sea because they seized their ancestral craft – תְּפִשׂוּ אֲמִנוֹת אֲבוֹתֵם. The Maharal explains that prayer isn't craftsmanship, like carpentry or plumbing. Prayer is supposed to be heartfelt and soulful! But they cried out to God as the last resort of their ancestors; a weak effort that betrayed deep fear and insecurity and the cynical despair of helplessness, that all was lost. It was an inferior, or at least suboptimal prayer, an immature prayer that betrayed a lack of belief, both in God and in themselves, that there was nothing they could do!

Only they were wrong to think that there was nothing else they could do, and we'd be equally wrong for thinking prayer could ever work in a vacuum.

As R' Shlomo Farhi explains, they should have believed enough in their prayer to stop praying and get moving, but they were frozen and paralyzed.

In sharp contrast, our ancestor Yakov prepared to reunite with Esau years after wronging him and meticulously prepared for their meeting. He prepared for peace by sending waves of lavish gifts to Esau; prepared for battle and victory, arming his young family and training them; prepared for defeat and death, dividing his family in two, in the hope that the second camp might escape without Esau ever knowing they existed; and then finally, he prays that God be with him and that his family should survive.

As R' Noach Weinberg highlights, Yakov prepares for peace, victory, and death; which is to say that he did no less than everything possible to prepare for all eventualities before prayer, even though God had already promised to be with him and that his children would inherit the land and his legacy.

Maybe that's what our efforts have to look like to give our prayers a hook to latch on to – even when God promises.



God didn't want their prayers at the Red Sea, because it wasn't time to pray; it was time to act! But they couldn't, because they had given up, and were totally consumed with fear. Perhaps that lends enduring power to the legacy of Nachshon ben Aminadav, whom the Midrash heralds for clambering into the water when he could not yet know what would happen, because just maybe there was one last thing to try before giving up, finding room for a ray of hope amid the clouds of despair – a hope that drove action.

R' Shlomo Farhi suggests that the biggest challenge to our faith and belief is time; that we give up prematurely.

By wading into the water, Nachshon showed people who thought they had reached the outer limit of what they could do and revealed to them that the boundary was just a little further than they'd thought. They'd stopped at the shore, but he boldly and bravely stepped into the impossible and waded up to his neck, without waiting for instructions, leading by example in the face of uncertainty, the quality of his tribe, Yehuda. And when he did that, he sparked salvation, upending the entire natural order, and the ocean split for all.

Perhaps that underpins God's irritation at why they cry out – they are parked on the beach, crying; but what exactly do they expect God to do with that?! We can almost hear God begging for something to work with – tell them to get up and get going!

To be sure, we should not judge our ancestors too harshly for being afraid. The fight, flight, or freeze response is hardcoded into our DNA and predates human consciousness; people do tend to freeze when their families are about to get massacred.

But God speaks through them to us, and we should ask ourselves if our own prayers are corrupted by fear or despair and yet still wonder why our prayers go unanswered. We need to audit our lives, soul searching about whether we truly mean our prayers. Does the way you spend your life align with what you claim to want? Does what you pay attention to and devote time to reflect that? We should wonder if God might give us a similarly terrifying answer – “With what you're giving Me to work with, what exactly do you expect Me to do?”

If you're crying crocodile tears, you shouldn't be surprised that your prayers don't seem to be working; you may need to confront the reality that your prayers are wildly mediocre.

You won't get the dream job you don't apply to. You won't get healthy if you don't diet and exercise. You won't pass the test if you don't study the material. You won't get rich if you don't invest. Your relationship won't go anywhere if you don't give your partner attention. You won't succeed if you don't try. That's just how it works. If you expect your prayer to change that fundamental reality, you will likely continue to be disappointed – the world has never worked differently. You absolutely have to try, and even then, you have to try very hard indeed.



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We need to animate our lives with action and hope, like our ancestor Yakov, like our hero Pinchas, and invoke the incredible bravery of Nachshon. God desperately wants to shower us with blessings, but we need to build the vessels that will contain those blessings or they'll have no place to land.

The future is concealed and uncertain; what lies ahead is shrouded in the darkness of the unknowable. But we can illuminate it with bold and decisive actions that brighten each step along the way. And with each step, certainly pray to meet with good fortune and success.

If there's something you've been praying on for a while, stop being a soldier and think like a general – strategize for a moment. Every person who wants something different from their performance than what they're getting is doing something to perpetuate that. Bluntly ask yourself what you could be doing better to make it happen, and do those things.

Miracles do happen, but they start with your level of effort and dedication toward your dreams. Thoughts and prayers are not a substitute for action.

You must believe in a positive outcome enough to invest real effort into making it a reality.

Quote of the Week

Without discipline, you are nothing because you will give up at the first inconvenience.

Thought of the Week

Mordechai Rotenberg's work is big on this idea, and he talks about having a "Midrashic" approach to your life's narrative, going beyond the peshat meaning of what's happened to you and asking, "what can I take out of this?" and "reinterpreting" your past

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.



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

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 - 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.