



## Behaloscha 2023

### Face the Facts

3 minute read | Straightforward

When something big and life-changing happens, you might think it's obvious that you notice and act accordingly. But that's only sometimes the case.

As far as significant and life-changing happenings go, the Revelation at Sinai should be up there. God came down to Earth to give humans the Torah! We might expect the beginning of humanity's journey with the Torah to be full of eager excitement, perhaps at least a somber sense of purpose and responsibility. But that's not what happens.

The first excursion away from Sinai winds up in catastrophe; the people bitterly complain about their miserable life in the desert. They seem to have forgotten all about the genocide and slavery; this is a fine example of the slave mentality they could never seem to shake. They fondly reminisce about the good old days of Egypt, when they enjoyed abundant fish, cucumbers, garlic, onion, leeks, and juicy melons. Now they're stuck eating manna from Heaven, fed daily by no less than God Himself, but after experiencing the culinary delights Egypt had to offer, this was bland and boring. They clamor for more enjoyable food and demand some tasty meat, and subsequently, a plague ensues with many casualties.

While the story unfolds in its way, Rashi suggests that it was the manner of their departure from Sinai that cultivated their craving for meat:

וַיִּסְעוּ מִהַר ה' דְּרֹךְ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים – They marched from the mountain of God a distance of three days.... (10:33)

Our Sages compare their attitude to a child running out of school; they couldn't wait to put God's mountain behind them, figuratively and literally. What if God imposed even more laws?! As the Ramban notes, it's not just they traveled a physical distance; it's that they traveled away mentally and spiritually from the mountain, and all it meant – וַיִּסְעוּ מִהַר ה'.

The Chasam Sofer notes that the causation must work both ways; if a poor attitude had fueled their craving for meat, then intuitively, the inverse lesson must be true too, that if they had solemnly carried the Torah and lived up to their responsibilities, then they never could have contemplated that God's cuisine was lousy!

But instead, they ran from destiny.



## TorahRedux

Rather than act like people who had witnessed Sinai, they acted like people who had not, simple folk with simple wants and needs, because who doesn't enjoy a good steak now and then?

But as the story shows, that shouldn't be what satisfies us; that shouldn't be the thing we crave and desire first and foremost. Did they want fresh meat because that's just what humans like, or was it the result of their unwillingness to face the fact of Sinai and rise to its challenge? They might have believed the former, but our Sages believe the latter.

Our Sages labeled their mentality as childish; a child lacks the discipline, experience, maturity, and wisdom to do the hard things they need to but don't want to. A child is not yet ready to grapple with life's challenges.

Only they weren't children.

While we can knowingly sigh at such an obvious error, the Torah is a mirror that tells us who we are, that God can speak to humans, and we will run away. Destiny can call, with the highest and most sacred purpose the universe has to offer, and we will procrastinate with all kinds of creative escapism, avoiding responsibility by indulging ourselves with trivial nonsense.

Consider for a moment what you might be avoiding, failing to recognize, or running away from. At its core, avoidance is an emotion management problem. That feeling you get when there is something you keep kicking down the road? That's a signal.

Something big happened to them, and they ignored it and tried to leave it behind. But life comes at you one way or another, so you've got to take it all with you and incorporate it into your being. The stakes are too high – we can't afford to be childish, and we can't run from who we are.

There are many big and scary things we must do, and we must cultivate the maturity to rise to the challenge.

As Kierkegaard said, face the facts of being what you are, for that is what changes what you are.

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## **Attitude Redux**

4 minute read | Straightforward

God gave various commands during the Jewish People's time in the desert.



We expect God to give commands; it comes with the territory, that's what God does, and it makes sense. They'd 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 כֵּן.

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

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

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 – וַיַּעַשׂ כֵּן כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה'.

When 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 – וַיַּעַשׂ כֵּן כְּאֲשֶׁר 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 – כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה'; the Sifri suggests that our everyday approach to Torah should similarly be with freshness and excitement – וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר – אֲנֹכִי מִצְוָה הַיּוֹם עַל־לִבְכֶּךָ.

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 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 – he did it like the moment he received the command.

The Izhbitzer 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 miShmuel notes that the word for training, which means practice repetitions, is cognate to the word for inauguration, the first time you do something – חינוך / חנוכה. 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; 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 a religious article, yet it has no inherent sanctity from perfect script or spelling. A Torah scroll is kosher and sacred exclusively when 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 dull. Finishing your fiftieth marathon is less notable than your first.

It's normal.



## TorahRedux

The more we experience something, 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 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 on staying on track, being fully present in each moment, and devoting their full and undivided attention, so things don't get boring.

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

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.

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## Language Redux

4 minute read | Straightforward

Humans are the apex predator on Earth.

We share this planet with thousands of species and trillions of organisms, and none but humans carry a lasting multi-generational record of knowledge of any obvious consequence. And yet, a feral human being left alone in the woods from birth to death kept separate and alive, would be not much more than an ape; our knowledge isn't because humans are smart.

It's because we speak – **מְדַבֵּר**.

We communicate and cooperate with others through language, giving us a formidable advantage in forming groups, sharing information, and pooling workloads and specializations. Language is the mechanism by which the aggregated knowledge of human culture is transmitted, actualizing our intelligence and self-awareness, transcending separate biological organisms, and becoming one informational organism. With language, we have formed societies and built civilizations; developed science and medicine, literature and philosophy.



With language, knowledge does not fade; we can learn from the experiences of others. Without learning everything from scratch, we can use an existing knowledge base built by others to learn new things and make incrementally progressive discoveries. As one writer put it, a reader lives a thousand lives before he dies; the man who never reads lives only once.

Language doesn't just affect how we relate to each other; it affects how we relate to ourselves. We make important decisions based on thoughts and feelings influenced by words on a page or conversations with others. It has been said that with one glance at a book, you can hear the voice of another person – perhaps someone gone for millennia – speaking across the ages clearly and directly in your mind.

Considering the formidable power of communication, it follows that the Torah holds it in the highest esteem; because language is magical. Indeed, the fabric of Creation is woven with words:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים, יְהִי אוֹר; וַיְהִי-אוֹר (1:3) – God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.

The Hebrew root word for “thing” and “word” is identical – דָּבָר / דְּבָר. R' Moshe Shapiro notes that for God – and people of integrity! – there is no distinction; giving your word creates a new reality, and a word becomes a thing. R' Shlomo Farhi points out the obvious destruction that ensues from saying one thing but meaning and doing something else entirely.

R' Jonathan Sacks notes that humans use language to create things as well. The notion of a contract or agreement is a performative utterance – things that people say to create something that wasn't there before; a relationship of mutual commitment between people, created through speech. Whether it's God giving us the Torah or a husband marrying his wife, relationships are fundamental to Judaism. We can only build relationships and civilizations with each other when we can make commitments through language.

Recognizing the influential hold language has over us, the Torah emphasizes an abundance of caution and heavily regulates how we use language: the laws of gossip and the metzora; and the incident where Miriam and Ahron challenged Moshe; among others. Even the Torah's choice of words about the animals that boarded the Ark is careful and measured:

מִכָּל הַבְּהֵמָה הַטְּהוֹרָה, תִּקַּח-לָךְ שִׁבְעָה שִׁבְעָה-אִישׁ וְאִשְׁתּוֹ; וּמִן-הַבְּהֵמָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא טְהוֹרָה הִוא, שְׁנַיִם-אִישׁ וְאִשְׁתּוֹ – Of every clean creature, take seven and seven, each with their mate; and of the creatures that are not clean two, each with their mate. (7:2)

The Gemara notes that instead of using the more accurate and concise expression of “impure,” the Torah utilizes extra ink and space to articulate itself more positively – “that are not clean” – אֲשֶׁר לֹא טְהוֹרָה הִוא. While possibly hyperbolic, the Lubavitcher Rebbe would refer to death as “the opposite of life”; and hospital infirmaries as “places of healing.”



The Torah cautions us of the power of language repeatedly in more general settings:

הא-תלך רכיל בעמך, לא תעמוד על-דם רעה: אני, ה – Do not allow a gossip to mingle among the people; do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor: I am Hashem. (19:16)

The Torah instructs us broadly not to hurt, humiliate, deceive, or cause another person any emotional distress:

ולא תונו איש את-עמיתו, ונראת מאלקיך: כי אני ה, אלקיכם – Do not wrong one another; instead, you should fear your God; for I am Hashem. (25:27)

Interestingly, both these laws end with “I am Hashem” – evoking the concept of emulating what God does; which suggests that just as God constructively uses language to create – שהכל נהיה בדברו – so must we – אני ה. The Lubavitcher Rebbe taught that as much as God creates with words, so do humans.

The Gemara teaches that verbal abuse is arguably worse than theft; you can never take back your words, but at least a thief can return the money!

The idea that language influences and impacts the world around us is the foundation of the laws of vows, which are significant enough that we open the Yom Kippur services at Kol Nidrei by addressing them.

Our sages praise people whose words God concurs with, one of which is the language of repentance. Words have the power to activate a force that predates Creation; Moshe intercedes on behalf of the Jewish People for the calamitous Golden Calf, and God forgives them specifically because Moshe asked – ויאמר ה' סלחתי כדברך –

Of course, one major caveat to harmful speech is intent. If sharing negative information has a constructive and beneficial purpose that may prevent harm or injustice, there is no prohibition, and there might even be an obligation to protect your neighbor by conveying the information – לא תעמוד על-דם רעה.

As R' Jonathan Sacks powerfully said, no soul was ever saved by hate; no truth was ever proved by violence; no redemption was ever brought by holy war.

Rather than hurt and humiliate, let's use our language to educate, help and heal; because words and ideas have the power to change the world.

They're the only thing that ever has.



## Sharing the Load

5 minute read | Straightforward

The Torah's story traces the origin of the Jewish People, from the dawn of humanity, through our first ancestors and their families, to their eventual subjugation in Egypt. These stories revolve around the struggle to realize God's promise for their children to live peacefully and securely in their homeland.

The homeland is a core driver of the Torah's entire story, it's where the story has been heading from the beginning. With the people stuck in Egypt, God rescues them by sending Moshe to overthrow the world's most powerful civilization and empire with the aid of transparently magical and supernatural forces, which sustain the Jewish People through years of wandering through a barren wasteland, until they finally make it to the border of the Promised Land. This is the culmination of the Torah's story, and there is going to be a profound transition.

They'll have to fend for themselves to a much larger extent, and Moshe won't be able to join. They won't be wanderers anymore; they will be colonists and settlers. It's been a long ride, but they have finally made it.

The trouble is, no sooner than they're even in sight of the place when a good twenty percent of the people decide that after all that, they don't really want the Promised Land after all.

Clans from Reuven, Gad, and Menashe take a fancy to the wrong side of the border, which is just too perfect for all their sheep and cattle. So they ask Moshe if they can settle there and relinquish any claim to the Land of Israel, a request that seems as breathtaking in its audacity as its stupidity.

They turn their back on the literal Promised Land God had promised them and their ancestors. They turn their back on the fulfillment of their ancestors' hopes and dreams, the promise that was an essential part of their heritage and identity. They even turn their back on respectable values – the Midrash observes that they asked to build stables for their cattle before mentioning settlements for their children, suggesting that they cherished their money more than human life.

What's more, to refuse the Promised Land is not just to choose a different physical path but, by definition, a very different spiritual path as well; they arguably turn their back on God in a certain sense. Years later, the book of Joshua records a story where they have to prove that they still believe in the God of Israel – because that was in question to a certain extent.

Not to mention, entering the Land of Israel is a sensitive topic for Moshe. It's the thing he is most desperate for, something he prayed countless times for trying to persuade God, and the one instance God refused Moshe and his prayers. These people have his dream within reach, and they don't even want it!





It's hard to overstate what a betrayal this was, and Moshe treats it as such. Perhaps the only reason it doesn't end with the devastation and death that so many similar biblical stories have is that this group didn't act impetuously; they sought guidance and permission from Moshe. But that doesn't make the ask any less disturbing. And perhaps in a sense, asking permission is worse, because at least in the other instances, they were hungry or impassioned!

This interaction is one of Moshe's last – he's not going to the Promised Land; he knows this is the end of the line for him, and this will be one of his final lessons. It's unquestionably one of his most timeless and essential.

Moshe doesn't take them to task for turning their back on the Promised Land, God, their heritage, their ancestors, or for overrating wealth. He could have set them straight on any or all of those counts, but he doesn't.

He takes them to task for turning their back on their brothers:

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה לְבְנֵי־גַד וְלְבְנֵי רְאוּבֵן הַאֲחֵיכֶם יָבֹאוּ לְמִלְחָמָה וְאַתֶּם תָּשֻׁבוּ פֹה – Moses replied to the Gadites and the Reubenites, “Shall your brothers go to war while you remain here?!” (32:6)

In this interaction, Moshe emphasizes the foundational concepts of brotherhood, collective identity, loyalty, and sharing the burden of responsibility.

From the beginning, Moshe's core defining characteristic is loyalty to his people. He sees someone getting beaten and risks his life to intervene and protect an otherwise total stranger. He sees his people suffering for too long and boldly accuses God of gratuitous cruelty towards his brothers – לָמָּה לְעַבְדֵי מֹשֶׁה בְּכַל־בֵּיתִי נִצְאָמֵן הוּא – הֲרַעַתָּה לְעַם הַנְּהַי לָמָּה זֶה שְׁלַחְתָּנִי וְעַתָּה אִם־תִּשָּׂא חַטָּאתָם וְאִם־אֵין – וְעַתָּה אִם־תִּשָּׂא חַטָּאתָם וְאִם־אֵין – מִחֲנִי נָא מִסַּפְרָךְ.

Nobody could be more qualified than Moshe to talk about loyalty; and no lesser than God testifies to Moshe's fidelity, not just to his employer but to his people as well – עֲבַדֵי מֹשֶׁה בְּכַל־בֵּיתִי נִצְאָמֵן הוּא – In sharp contrast, the villainous Bilam is mocked as a faithless man loyal to nobody but the highest bidder – בלעם / בלא עם.

Our sages teach that all of Israel is interconnected – כל ישראל ערבים זה בזה – suggesting not just connected or linked things, but something gestalt, a new entity, wholly integrated into itself. Our sages liken the Jewish People to a boat – if there is a hole in the hull, we recognize the entire vessel, not just the hull, is in danger and requires your immediate attention and repair.

This story is explicitly political; Moshe expressly rejects the individualistic mentality of self-interested autonomy and liberty. It is wrong to enjoy yours before helping your brothers get theirs; your duty

and responsibility are to help them get theirs too, and when we organize our societies, people with a libertarian skew ought to remember Moshe's words.

The premise of Moshe's rhetoric is that it is selfish to take without giving back, that it is a self-evident dishonor and disgrace to abandon your brothers to their fates without facing the challenge alongside them. Regardless of your personal beliefs, this orientation is why Chabad volunteers and kiruv professionals set up Jewish infrastructure across the planet and why Israeli citizens commonly take a firm stance on the central importance of national military service.

It is important to note that collective responsibility has an outer boundary; the notion of collective responsibility in guilt is fundamentally problematic and a critical ingredient in genocidal and totalitarian thinking – the Church used such reasoning to justify centuries of antisemitic oppression. The only proper basis for blame and fault is an individual's moral responsibility, but collective responsibility can still be a helpful concept regarding proactive direction. We didn't destroy the Temple; that's not our fault. But we're collectively responsible for why it hasn't been rebuilt yet, and we can channel our energies to do better.

Moshe's emphasis on the responsibility between brothers is the culmination of another central theme of the Torah; the Genesis stories open with Cain asking the existential, haunting, and unanswered question – “Am I my brother's keeper?”. Genesis tells the stories of generations of families that could not learn to keep each other until Yehuda breaks the cycle and risks everything to stand up and be a keeper for his brother Binyamin.

Moshe's rhetoric in this story is another firm indication that, yes, you are your brother's keeper; and if you missed that, you haven't been paying attention. It's one of the most important interactions you can have; remembering your brother might be one of the simplest rules in life, but it is certainly one of the hardest for us to practice.

The distorted spirituality and wayward values reflected in the choice to refuse the Promised Land were problematic but somewhat tolerable for Moshe. But disloyalty to their brothers, any loosening of the connection and identity with the greater Jewish People, was a bridge too far.

You might not want to be so observant, or you might not want to sign up for the Israeli army; those might be reasonable personal choices – אֶל תִּדּוֹן אֶת תְּבַרְךָ עַד שֶׁתִּגִּיעַ לְמִקוּמוֹ. But you can't choose to avoid your contribution to the Jewish People's well-being.

Make no mistake, there is a war out there. Our brothers and sisters are on the front lines battling the forces of assimilation, abuse, apathy, ignorance, illness, intermarriage, and poverty. You probably know your capabilities, and you may or may not have the skills and experience to be a front-line activist, advocate, coordinator, educator, or fundraiser. But honestly consider what you have to offer the Jewish People on any of those fronts, small or large, and remember what one of Moshe's last teachings asks us.



Shall your brothers go to war while you remain over here?

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## Nostalgia Redux

6 minute read | Advanced

Life comes at you fast. The days fly by, and the pressures and responsibilities mount. This deadline, that presentation, the big test. Health, relationships, kids, finances. The further out you go, the more complex and uncertain it all gets. There's rarely someone who can share your unique load, and it's a lot to handle. But that's what being a grown-up is in the modern world.

Changing times and complex, pressure-filled moments can trigger feelings of loneliness, social exclusion, and meaninglessness, and our instinct is often to look backward, to take a trip down memory lane and seek solace in the past, recalling happier, simpler times. Personal nostalgia can provide personal comfort and a sense of continuity; collective nostalgia can foster a sense of community and preserve cultural history. Sitting with an old face, or visiting an old favorite spot, can bring the feeling of the good old days flooding back. This instinct is not unique to the modern era; it's profoundly human and transcends time and culture.

But it can also result in idealizing the past and avoiding reality. We see this reflected in the experiences of the Jewish People in the Torah, their struggles mirroring our own. Stuck in the desert wilderness with no natural food or water, their nostalgia for Egypt expresses itself in their repeated pining to return to Egypt.

But we know the Egypt story better than that. They were neither safe nor happy!

The Torah documents Egypt as a sustained and systematic crime against humanity, with a litany of atrocities and human rights abuses in the plain language of the story. Without any embellishment from Midrash, the plain text of the narrative reports some of the worst possible human experiences possible; enslavement, violence, infanticide, and organized genocide as a form of population control.

But sure, apart from all that, those Egyptian cucumbers sure were crunchy and delicious! They were liberated from all that by the Creator with open miracles, sustained by magic food from the sky and an enchanted spring sheltered by supernatural clouds.

What insanity possessed them to want to go back to Egypt?



We must remember that if they were insane, they wouldn't have been held responsible for their outburst; and their story would be irrelevant to sane readers. They weren't insane; they were human, like us, and humans get nostalgic sometimes.

These stories showcase the allure of nostalgia and its power to revise history and reality while simultaneously removing us from the present so the moment passes us by.

Life in Egypt may have been awful, but at least it was predictable. Magic food and water are disappointing and unsatisfying, and what if it all stopped tomorrow? That's not a way to live!

But this wildly distorts their Egypt experience; they reminisce about the cucumbers and meat stews, and they forget the babies drowned in the river, highlighting the selective memory of nostalgia. Even the meat pots were only at the very end of their time in Egypt, once they had already been emancipated from enslavement but not yet liberated from the borders of Egypt.

They long to regress to an immature state, the learned helplessness and mediocrity of captivity. They experience fauxstalgia, false nostalgia, and idealize an outdated past that never existed, with a corresponding refusal to embrace the positive changes of the present and take responsibility for their future.

Of course, some level of nostalgia is normal. We exist within dimensions that give us a certain degree of spatial freedom; left and right, up and down, backward and forwards. We can re-organize the space we move around in, thereby increasingly turning it to our advantage; humans have largely mastered the physical environment.

But when it comes to time, we are stuck to just one dimension; forcibly and inevitably pushed into a single direction into an unknown future that we observe from the infinitely tiny sliver that we call the present, a brief instance of conscious awareness that almost instantaneously slips away to become the past. In the dimension of time, there is no going back, no going left or right; there is not even standing still. No matter how much we struggle, no matter how much we resist, we are utterly at the mercy of time.

It can't be bargained with. It can't be reasoned with. It doesn't feel pity, or remorse, or fear. And it absolutely will not stop... ever. As such, time is also a source of existential dread. We fear the future, both in the sense that it is unknown and that it will inevitably and unstopably impose itself on us, helpless and defenseless.

So we experience a nostalgia trip, an escape for a fleeting moment, retreating to the good old days.

But in such instances, nostalgia can become an avoidance mechanism, pulling you away from dealing with present realities and future uncertainties, and it becomes toxic nostalgia, poison in the plainest sense, preventing the possibility of progress and growth. Longing for an oversimplified and idealized



past is just a means of coping with feelings of disorientation or powerlessness in the face of challenging complexities and uncertainties in the present and future.

What's more, since nostalgia is inherently oriented towards simpler and unambiguous emotions and times, overuse of it as an emotionally regulatory strategy in a complex world is sure to backfire. Anchoring to the past instead of grappling with the present and working towards a better future is a recipe for catastrophe – and it can happen to all of us.

And the good old days aren't even what you think they were; nostalgia can distort our perception of reality. The scientific understanding of memory is clear that memory is not a perfect record of past events but a reconstruction influenced by current knowledge, beliefs, and emotions. This can lead to a distorted, romanticized view of the past where we remember things as better than they were, a golden age that reflects our hopes and fears, obscuring the complexities and contradictions of our actual experiences. Nostalgia is a seductive liar; our memory isn't always so honest.

Too often, leaders talk about declinism, which sounds like those kids these days; things aren't what they used to be; things used to be better back in the day. It's just not true.

One of the great tragedies of European Jewish history was the burning of twenty-four wagons of sacred texts; today, every person with an internet connection has instant access to the greatest library of Jewish literature. The great yeshivas of pre-war Europe combined didn't come close to the headcount of some of the famous yeshivas of our era. How many mothers and children regularly died in childbirth? How many people died of hunger and poverty? Rashi described his crushing poverty as a millstone around his neck; how many people would sponsor him if he lived in our day? How many blood libels, crusades, expulsions, and massacres? While the only acceptable level of anti-Semitism is none, the anti-Semitism of our time is laughably trivial compared to the history books. If any of our ancestors could choose a time to be alive, they'd probably pick ours.

We live in a time of plenty. Sure, there are plenty of excesses, but by any standard humans can measure, there has never been so much Torah study, charity, community advocacy and support, and general safety and security in Jewish history.

There is no precedent for our time, but there's a precedent for not living in the moment. Nostalgia is an illness for people who haven't realised that today is tomorrow's nostalgia – אֶל־תִּאֶמֶר מָה הָיָה שְׁהַיְמִים – הָרֵאשִׁימִים הָיוּ טוֹבִים מֵאַלֶּה כִּי לֹא מִחֲכָמָה שָׂאֵלָתָ עַל־זֶה.

We are not living in a time of decline. History is taking shape, and we make the same mistake as our ancestors in the wilderness if we pretend otherwise. We are blessed to live in a time of abundant ascendancy; we'd better notice so we can actively participate.

We are decades into the Jewish Renaissance, and the world has changed; some people's eyes are wide shut, still fighting battles they lost a long time ago. Some people are still fighting the internet; TorahRedux | Ancient Words, Timeless Wisdom      Subscriptions and feedback: [Neli@TorahRedux.com](mailto:Neli@TorahRedux.com)



## TorahRedux

everyone's been online for years. Some people are still fighting the State of Israel; it's three generations old and arguably the greatest supporter of Torah in history. Does a flaming Beis HaMikdash need to fall out of the sky before we acknowledge we're not in medieval Europe anymore? Stuck in the past with no precedent, they don't have the toolbox to offer relevant guidance for the present moment.

Through our stories, we live with the ghosts of our ancestors. Through their example, we can learn what they could not. We can excuse our ancestors, who carried generational trauma from lifetimes of normalized atrocities.

But what's our excuse?

Banish the ghosts or redeem them.

People wish there was a way to know you're in the good old days before you've actually left them. This is that moment; wake up and take it in.

The Golden Age of Judaism isn't behind us; we're living in it.

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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?*

Neli

**PS** - *TorahRedux is my pride and joy, the product of thousands of hours of learning, research, writing, editing, and formatting. I have been blessed to operate a business that allows me to dedicate a substantial amount of time to TorahRedux, and I welcome your assistance in furthering my goal to keep publishing high-quality Parsha content that makes a difference. I broker healthcare businesses for sale; I kindly ask for your blessings and prayers, and introductions to anyone who might want to buy or sell a healthcare business!*

**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.