



Yisro 2024

Humility Redux

2 minute read | Straightforward

We take for granted that humility is an admirable virtue, but it's worth taking a moment to consider what humility is and also what it is not.

Humility is commonly understood to mean a low estimate of oneself and one's accomplishments. The Oxford English Dictionary defines humility as "the quality of being humble: having a low estimate of one's importance, worthiness, or merits."

But this doesn't ring true with what Judaism teaches us about the value of humility.

The Midrash famously teaches that Mount Sinai was only a little mountain to show how instrumental humility is.

But suppose the educational purpose of giving the Torah in such a place is to illustrate the value of humility. In that case, you'd assume a valley would be a more appropriate geological feature to teach the lesson!

So why give the Torah on a mountain at all?

The Shem Mi'Shmuel states that to accept the Torah and live its ideals, you must be like a mountain, not a valley; or as Pirkei Avos puts it, if I don't stand up for myself, what am I?

As important as the quality of humility is, people who accept the Torah upon themselves must consider themselves important and deserving of the Torah.

R' Jonathan Sacks teaches that humility is an appreciation of our talents, skills, and virtues. It is not meekness or self-deprecating thought but the dedication of oneself to something higher.

R' Shlomo Farhi notes that the Torah labels Moshe as the most humble of all men. If humility is simply a low view of oneself, then Moshe, the Lawgiver and single most significant authority on the Torah, would meekly cave to any challenge – which he obviously couldn't and didn't. But if humility is about being of service, then Moshe truly was the most humble of all men – Moshe singularly dedicated his entire life to public service. His achievements were never about him or his status; they were all in furtherance of rescuing and building the Jewish people.



It was no lack of humility for Moshe to acknowledge his authority and leadership. When a person believes they are nothing, the Torah itself will ultimately have little effect in elevating him. Although pride is a dangerous vice in large quantities, a small amount is still essential to living a good life.

Pride is about competing – that you are more intelligent than or richer than others; humility is about serving. Humility isn't the opposite of narcissism and hubris; it's the lack of them. In the absence of pride, you find humility, which sees no need for competition.

So perhaps humility is not that you are nothing; it's just that it's not about you anymore. In humility, you are no more and no less than other people. Humility is not about hiding away, becoming a wallflower or a doormat; it is about the realization that your abilities and actions are uncorrelated to others.

Humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less.

Ill-Gotten Gains

3 minute read | Straightforward

While still reeling from the extraordinary events at Sinai, the Jewish People started building the Mishkan that would be the focal point of religious life for many generations. While still at the mountain, God instructs the people to build altars for their sacrifices.

Most of the rest of the book of Exodus deals with the construction and assembly of the Mishkan, but with a material interruption for the civil law; the laws of a thief who cannot pay restitution and so must work off his debt, the laws of charity, and the laws of damages and duties of care, among others.

But if the narrative has turned towards the Mishkan, why interrupt it with civil laws?

The Beis Halevi explains that the Torah's prerequisite to constructing the Mishkan is that the people building it and using it live with kindness, charity, and social responsibility. People can pledge all the money in the world to worthy causes, but the contributors and contributions must be kosher, obtained ethically, and with regard to the well-being of others.

The Torah's treatment of a Jew who steals and must work off his debt is illuminating. This Jewish man must be well-treated and cared for, and he is not the permanent property of his owner. But nor is he a fully-fledged Jew for the term of his slavery; his primary obligation is to his owner, and he relinquishes many obligations to observe the Torah as he once did. He is even permitted to marry a



non-Jew in this state and start a family, but these children will not be Jewish and belong to his master.

Perhaps we aren't as sensitive to ill-gotten gains as we should be. This is the Torah's first law after Sinai, telling an unfortunate soul how to navigate the way to mend the crime of theft. The Torah is quite clear that renouncing Judaism, marrying a non-Jew, and having a family of slave children are part of the rehabilitation from how wrong stealing is.

R' Zalman Sorotzkin notes that the Torah has already opened the discussion about the Mishkan, specifically the altars of earth and stone. God initiates the Mishkan construction with materials that are freely available to everyone and of negligible value before asking the people to bring gold, silver, and precious gems. In so doing, the Torah openly states that holiness is universally accessible without glamour.

Before discussing valuable contributions, the Torah emphasizes the need to be scrupulously honest. Before God asks people what they have to offer, God lays out the consequences of theft, demanding that the contributors rightfully obtain their gifts.

Our sages have a broad and profound debate about good deeds that are the product of bad deeds – מצווה הבאה בעבירה. The parameters of what is disqualifying and how disqualifying it is are technical, but the concept is not. Isaiah unambiguously states that God loves justice, and hates human attempts at holiness with ill-gotten gains – כִּי אֲנִי ה' אֱהָב מִשְׁפָּט שֹׂנְאֵי גִזְלֵי בְעוֹלָה –

A good deed is a good deed – Judaism is not all or nothing. If you need to improve at keeping Shabbos, you should still try to keep kosher! As the Baal Shem Tov teaches, the good deed of charity has a positive real-world impact regardless of intent or origin. But generosity with money dishonestly earned is missing something.

Business is tough; for some people, business is war! But how we put food on the table falls under the rubric of the Torah just as much as keeping Shabbos or kosher. While the specifics are complex and nuanced, the rules of thumb are not.

Follow through. Keep your word. Don't step on people. Pay bills on time. Don't retrade.

There is such a thing as human complexity; what were the terms? Was the service performed within the agreed scope of work? But there is no moral complexity.

The Mekor Baruch states that ill-gotten money is dirty money and dismisses crooks who attempt to launder their reputations with flashy donations. Do not be complicit in their attempts.



R' Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld notes how Moshe needs to appoint truthful men who truly hate ill-gotten gains – אֲנָשֵׁי אֱמֶת שְׂנֵאִי בָצַע – and quips how they had to be truthful first, because money buys you anything; including men who hate money!

For better and for worse, our society is built around capital and access to it. Even if we sometimes ignore or forget, we should remind ourselves that even the most generous donations can't straighten a crook.

Because before you ever do the right thing with your money, it matters every bit as much that you obtained it in the right way.

Love's Truest Language

3 minute read | Straightforward

When we think of Mount Sinai, we think of Divine Revelation and all that it means. But apart from the obvious upheaval in spiritual terms, the Torah also describes a great upheaval in physical terms.

In Tanach, whenever there is a theophany, some manifestation of the divine in a tangible, observable way, there is an upending of the natural order. Moshe saw a burning bush that wasn't consumed; the Jews were led through the desert by pillars of fiery clouds. Sinai itself is characterized by fire from the sky, along with loud booms, thunder, and lightning, and the whole mountain quaked, enveloped in a haze of dark clouds and smoke. Our Sages even suggest that when people heard God's Word emerge from the darkness, they died for an instant.

This imagery demonstrates the absolute abnegation of the natural world, and rightly so!

Arguably, the ultimate purpose behind creation was to cultivate a conduit that could receive the Torah; all of existence culminated at that moment at Sinai, and creation achieved its intended goal when God reached into the universe to give the Torah to humanity, forming an intimate bond between Creator and creation. It follows that the imagery is stark and unnatural; this is the most extraordinary and supernatural event in human experience!

But there's one part that doesn't fit at all.

Among all the intimidating and scary goings-on, something else happened at Mount Sinai too. The little mountain in the desert burst into bloom, with beautiful plants and fragrant flowers sprawling up the hills and into the cloud, so tantalizing that the Jews had to be instructed to restrain their animals from grazing the lush greenery!



But why were there flowers on Mount Sinai at all?

R' Shlomo Farhi explains that the flowers demonstrate something that darkness, earthquakes, fire, thunder, and lightning do not. Those things demonstrate God's power, but flowers illustrate God's love.

There is another famous mountain in our tradition, Mount Moriah, where Avraham and Yitzchak famously stood together, the mountain on which the two Temples stood and where a third will stand once more. This famous mountain was also associated with flowers; the Zohar suggests that the mountain was named Moriah after the fragrant myrrh that grew there.

The legendary mountain is not named for the heroic acts and great deeds that took place there; it's not the Mountain of the Akeida, the Mountain of Commitment and Faith, or the Mountain of Sacrifice. It's named for the sweet-smelling plants that grew there!

There is an entire genre of romance that hugely impacts how many of us conceptualize love and relationships; a grand gesture is usually the crescendo of a great love story. Yet, as R' Shlomo Farhi teaches, a grand gesture or great sacrifice cannot define a relationship because it is only ever an anomaly.

Over time, love is communicated through many little things, not any particular one-time thing. What defines the quality of a relationship isn't the great deeds here and there; it's the small gestures, the consistent, subtle, and thoughtful acts that shape how a couple connects and interacts. These small gestures send powerful signals about who we are, what we care about, and why we do what we do.

It's called Mount Moriah because God wanted it to smell nice for all the great heroes and future pilgrims who would one day make their way there. It was wholly unnecessary, completely irrelevant, and entirely beside the main point of anything of consequence, but that's why it matters so much. The great epic of Avraham's ordeal is not impacted even slightly by the fact that God made it smell nice, but God did it anyway.

The flowers on the mountains are the most trivial detail, with nothing whatsoever to do with the tremendous meaning and significance of the events that took place at Sinai or Moriah. Still, those flowers say more than any commotion, and that's the part that we remember. To this day, when we celebrate the Torah we got at Sinai, we don't commemorate the darkness by turning out the lights or the earthquakes by shaking the tables; Shavuot is the festival of flowers! For centuries, it has been a near-universal custom to decorate our homes and shul with beautiful flower arrangements.

An employee will give you whatever you ask for, but a lover will give you everything they can. It's not about doing what you need to do; it's about doing all you can. That slight change in orientation elevates small and insignificant gestures into the most meaningful and loving relationship-affirming rituals.



Are you giving all you can to the ones you love?

Slept In At Sinai

3 minute read | Straightforward

Have you ever overslept for something important?

That early morning wakeup for the final exam, to catch a flight to the long-awaited vacation or the big wedding day.

For most people, it's pretty hard to oversleep the morning of anything important; it's hard to get any sleep on the eve of such anticipated moments. The anxiety that keeps you up all night is the same anxiety that bolts you straight out of bed come morning.

And yet, our sages teach us that that's precisely what happened to the Jewish People camped at the foot of Mount Sinai; they had been eagerly awaiting Moshe's return with the Ten Commandments, the culminating moment of Creation, and they overslept.

This anecdote is one of the sources of the treasured custom of staying up the night of Shavuot immersed in Torah study. When the Creator offers you a piece of eternity, so the thinking goes, who really needs to sleep? If you knew tomorrow was the second coming of the Creator or Mashiach, you wouldn't be getting any sleep.

And yet, in this telling, the spiritual awakening of the Jewish People and humanity starts with a snooze!

Let's remember that in this multitude of millions of men, women, and children who overslept is the litany of greats and sages who appear in the Torah. Miriam, Elazar, Itamar, Nadav, Avihu, Pinchas, Caleb, the tribal chiefs, and the sages.

How did everyone oversleep?

The Arugas HaBosem suggests that the intuition that such a thing doesn't happen naturally is correct; it was a supernatural slumber, the kind the Creator sets on the first man – וַיִּפֹּל ה' אֱלֹהִים תְּרִדְמָה עַל־הָאָדָם – וַיִּישָׁן.



R' Meilech Biderman teaches that the Creator deliberately establishes the archetype of Torah at Sinai in this way, establishing for all generations that you can be late, tired, and still half asleep but still be invited and expected to attend the awakening at Mount Sinai.

You might believe you're not ready, and you might even be right, but readiness isn't a requirement.

What's more, the sense of tiredness and unpreparedness was not just an internal sensation of their bodies and consciousness; it manifested externally in the real world as well. When they woke and showed up at the foot of the mountain, they encountered an environment shrouded with darkness, cloud, and fog – עָרָפֶל / עָנָן / חֹשֶׁה.

The darkness and fog at Sinai are the uncertainty, mystery, and awe that often accompany profound spiritual experiences. The Chiddushei HaRim teaches that this is not a potential obstacle to our spiritual experience that must simply be overcome; it is an integral feature and part of the essential nature of the work we are called to do. The mountain was obscured in the way the path forward on the journey of our spirit is often obscured; they showed up just the same.

In a world where it's all too easy to feel distant or disconnected from our heritage, our spirituality, or even from each other, the act of showing up can be a profound statement of commitment and engagement. The Jewish people overslept, but they still showed up to receive the Torah. It was dark and foggy, but they were there, ready to engage and participate, without being perfectly prepared. Both these teachings reject the notion of being perfectly prepared or fully awake to engage. They suggest that the act of engagement itself, of showing up, is valuable and meaningful, even if we are not perfectly prepared.

Uncertainty and mystery are often part of our spiritual journeys. We may not always feel fully prepared or awake. We may feel unsure, lost, tired, or even afraid. But the act of showing up, of being present and ready to engage, is the first and most important step towards connection, meaning, and growth.

We, too, can show up and engage with our spirituality, even in the face of uncertainty and mystery.

You might be late to the party, but you're still invited.

Taking God's Name in Vain

3 minute read | Straightforward

One of the Ten Commandments is the commandment against taking God's name lightly:

לֹא תִשָּׂא אֶת־שֵׁם־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשׁוֹן כִּי לֹא יִנְקֶה ה' אֶת אֶת־שֵׁרֶרֶשׁ אֶת־שְׁמוֹ לְשׁוֹן – Do not take the name of the Lord your God in vain; for the Lord will not hold guiltless the one that takes His name in vain. (20:7)

This law encourages people to treat God's name with reverence and respect, affirming that abusing God's name shows a lack of humility and gratitude and is a way of disdain the Creator's power and authority. Practically speaking, observant Jews today do not pronounce God's name as written and are careful in treating any document containing God's written name, using substitutes instead, like Creator, Hashem, Lord, or God.

But what does it mean to take God's name in vain?

Some people believe it to mean cursing. Others think it means casually swearing, like “I swear to God” or “God damn it.” Refraining from coarse and foul language is a good idea and a worthy struggle, but that doesn't capture the essence of this law.

To be sure, swearing, in the old-fashioned sense, is partly covered. In any matter of doubt, a person would hold a religious article and swear in God's name; the willingness to take an oath in God's name with the implied invitation of punishment if the oath-taker was lying is taken to support the truth of the statement being sworn to.

But this is not the commandment against false oaths – that would be covered by the Tenth Commandment.

To do something in vain is to do something without success or result; Rashi narrowly suggests that this law is about a pointless invocation of God's name, like swearing that the sky is blue. Everyone knows that – that would be taking God's name in vain.

The Ohr HaChaim suggests a broader and more profound meaning to this law. The verb of the mitzvah means to carry or to bear; the prohibition is on bearing God's name lightly, carrying it with you in deception. It means falsely invoking God to advance your own self-interest, being false with God or others in God's name, or, in other words, holding yourself out as more pious and righteous than you are.

On Rosh Hashana, we read the story of Chana. Chana was married to a righteous man named Elkanah, who had another wife, Penina. Penina had children, and Chana did not. When it was time to



bring a sacrifice in the Sanctuary, the whole family went to Shilo and enjoyed the festivities. Penina teased Chana about where her children were, and Chana cried and refused to eat. When Elkanah saw her crying, he tried to comfort her, but Chana would not be comforted. She went to the courtyard, silently poured out her heart in prayer, and was soon blessed with a son, the legendary prophet Shmuel.

We read this story in part because it illustrates the power of prayer, but it also shows something else.

Penina's behavior is striking in its shocking cruelty. Her only saving grace is that she had the best intentions, which is that she wanted to push Chana to the point that she'd pray and be answered. And the story bears this out – Penina is indeed the catalyst.

The Kotzker highlights how her behavior was so monstrously evil that it could only have been for the highest and most sacred purpose, or, in other words, bearing God's name in vain.

R' Jonathan Sacks notes how much religious extremism and violence are committed in the name of God. As the Dudaei Reuven notes, all the most terrible crimes against humanity are carried out under the cloak of truth, justice, and uprightness.

If only it were as easy as substituting an “Oh my goodness” for an “Oh my God.”

Whenever a calamity happens, the proper thing to do is introspect and repent. But there will always be a clown who says it's because of this or that: talking in shul, hair coverings, knee coverings, the gays, or whatnot. Next time you notice, note how they deceptively invoke God's name to establish an in-group and out-group dynamic, virtue signal, and manipulate people to advance their agenda and control others – all with the best intentions.

Don't tell a grieving family it's part of God's plan. Do not say or do awful things to others and claim it's God's will or what God wants. That's using God's name in vain.

Taking God's name seriously demands that we audit and introspect ourselves for self-righteousness and any sense of self-serving holier-than-thou superiority. It is complex and requires us to live intentionally with decency, humility, and honesty toward others and ourselves.



Holding Us Over a Barrel

4 minute read | Straightforward

The moment God gave the Torah at Sinai is probably the most important in the Torah. It might be the most crucial moment in the history of creation. To take it even further, cultivating a channel to receive the Torah might even be the reason for existence itself.

Given the significance of this moment, it should come as no surprise that the Midrashic literature likens Sinai to a wedding ceremony and makes extensive use of the imagery of love and marriage, demonstrating the powerful bond of commitment between God and the Jewish People, characterized by the all-important unanimous and unconditional acceptance of the Torah – *בְּעֵשָׂה וְנִשְׁמָע*.

However, there is another imagery our sages utilize. The Gemara imagines a scene where God lifts and holds Mount Sinai over the gathered crowd and tells them that if they accept the Torah, all will be well, and if not, they will meet an early grave there and then – *שִׁכְפָה הַקַּב"ה עֲלֵיהֶם אֶת הַהָר כְּגִיגִית* –

This visual contrasts starkly with the predominant and prevailing imagery that the Jewish People threw their enthusiastic consent behind accepting the Torah and its precepts. To engage the language of the metaphor, the bride loved the groom, and everything was agreed upon and resolved. Once the relationship had been firmly established on a bedrock of love and trust, the imagery of coercion and force seems entirely unnecessary, if not an outright oxymoron.

If the Jewish People were eager and willing to accept the Torah, why do our sages use the motif of coercive force at all?

The Baal Shem Tov acknowledges this idealized romantic view; the beginning of most relationships can be characterized by butterflies and excitement, feelings of elation and joy. But, as anyone who has experienced a mature relationship can attest, eventually, there comes a day when the good vibes and pleasant feelings aren't quite there; if the relationship is going to succeed, it needs more than good vibes alone – many relationships fail for not comprehending this notion in its fullness. A successful relationship requires its constituents to maintain the relationship in the moments that don't feel so good.

The imagery of holding a mountain over the audience is not a literal death threat – the metaphor describes God imploring the audience that this is serious stuff. If that seems so obvious now, it wasn't readily obvious in the moment. Up to that point, being on God's team had been pretty cool and fun – they watched waves of supernatural plagues smite their oppressors; saw a literal ocean split and dry up to escape then obliterate the most powerful military force in the known world; ate magical food from the sky; drank from magic wellsprings in the desert; while protected day and night by miracle clouds that lit up the dark and followed them wherever they went. It's not so hard to guess which side

you'd want to be on! But that's not really what accepting the yoke of Torah means or looks like in any material way, so God warns the people that this is a serious undertaking. As the Maharal explains, the Torah can not only be accepted for the glorious moments. It's like the unspoken part of a young couple getting married; no one wants to tell them, and they probably aren't even equipped to hear it yet, but they have their work cut out to make it work. It's a lifelong undertaking that will require an enormous amount of investment and sacrifice if they are to have a chance at happiness. They'll probably learn that lesson for themselves – the hard way.

It's not that the Gemara imagines God threatening to slaughter the Jewish People; it's a warning about what was at stake and how much it mattered. It's a comment on the naivete of thinking that the imagery of a happy wedding could ever be enough to make a relationship work. The happy beginning is an essential starting point of any relationship, but the relationship can only ever be superficial if that's all there is. What the Torah demands from us is a serious commitment – the part that is not easy. It's not all sunshine, rainbows, and redemption – the blood-soaked pages of Jewish history speak for themselves.

R' Shlomo Farhi suggests that the Gemara explicitly teaches this lesson by employing imagery of a barrel, a hollow object that confines and traps its contents instead of, say, a hammer or blunt instrument which would be used to flatten. The antidote to the immaturity of the excitement of happy beginnings is recognizing that there are times when commitment feels like being trapped. It's true of relationships, and it's true of religion. There's a moment we feel called and seen, and a moment we feel invisible and ignored; the things that can make it wonderful are part of what can make it so hard. There's no such thing as picking and choosing part of a person, or part of the Torah, for some of the time. It just doesn't work that way.

But while it's well and good to suggest the lesson of forceful imagery is to teach us the seriousness of the subject matter, it is almost universally understood that agreements entered into under coercion are not binding – we would never enforce a contract signed at gunpoint. Based on this intuitive reasoning, the Gemara questions the imagery of coercion and wonders if it compromises, if not entirely undermines, the basis of accepting the Torah – taking the imagery of the metaphor at face value, we wouldn't be partners with God; we'd be victims! The Gemara responds that to the extent this is a serious question, the Purim story remedied this because the Jewish People accepted the Torah anew entirely of their own volition – קיימו מה שקיבלו כבר.

R' Jonathan Sacks observes that the Gemara concludes what we know intuitively – you cannot teach something that matters through coercion; you cannot impose truth by force. Even if God were to try, it simply doesn't work like that. We can only say that people accept ideas and beliefs to the extent people can freely choose and embrace them.

As important and exciting as the moment captured at Sinai was, the wedding is not the relationship. The people who stood there that day lacked context – the bigger picture that accepting the Torah fits into. After the Purim story, the people learned that lesson the hard way. With this mature TorahRedux | Ancient Words, Timeless Wisdom Subscriptions and feedback: Neli@TorahRedux.com



understanding, they could freely accept what had been accepted so long ago with newfound and hard-won insight.

A lack of problems cannot be the bedrock of a great relationship; it will only ever become great when its participants are invested enough to weather and work through complex issues.

Killing Envy

5 minute read | Straightforward

If you had to sit in a room for a month and compile a top ten list of Judaism's most important concepts, most people would probably come out with something that looks like the Ten Commandments.

We'd probably start with the notion that there is a Creator and not to betray faith in the Creator by taking God's name lightly or praying to other deities. We'd all agree that humans should not kill other humans. Most of us would agree on the importance of observing Shabbos, which honors the Creator and the natural order of Creation, acknowledging the bounds of human creativity in space and time. We'd probably agree on the value of respecting our parents and honoring the people who raised us.

These laws are intuitive; they make sense – we understand why these are some of the most essential things the Creator has to say to humans.

But then there's one that probably wouldn't spring to mind for most people:

וְלֹא תִחְמַד אִשֶּׁת רֵעֶךָ. וְלֹא תִתְאָוֶה בֵּית רֵעֶךָ שְׂדֵהוּ וְעַבְדוֹ וְאִמָּתוֹ שׂוֹרוֹ וְחִמְרוֹ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר לְרֵעֶךָ – You shall not covet your neighbor's wife. You shall not crave your neighbor's house, or his field, or his male or female slave, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's. (5:18)

Coveting. Envy. Jealousy. Wanting.

Is warning us off jealousy one of the most important things God has to say to humanity?

It's on the list, so we can conclude that the answer to that question is yes, and that we ought to consider why.

The destructiveness of murder and theft are obvious, as they utterly disregard the autonomy and integrity of other humans and their rights to life and property. But the destructiveness of envy and



jealousy are deceptively subtle in comparison because it seems so harmless. It's a victimless crime – who are you hurting?

Perhaps it's precisely that line of thinking that allows it to slip under our radars stealthily, and we should be concerned because, in reality, there is a victim of jealousy, and you haven't noticed because it isn't someone else – it's you.

Envy suffocates you and slowly poisons your soul. Anger and hatred are occasionally justified – some things should not be tolerated and require our outrage to prompt decisive action. We should hate Nazis, and we should get angry when they march in public and express their ugliness; we then need to send them scurrying back to the dark crevasses they crawled out of.

Our Sages allow a very narrow form of jealousy towards someone highly accomplished. But even then, our Sages only permit a positive and productive form of action-oriented jealousy, where you use it as fuel to motivate you to raise your game and match their efforts. Are those excellent qualities replicable? Practice them, and you, too, can have those qualities. The unspoken premise here is that our Sages take it as a given that you cannot expect to be worthy of an equal opportunity to participate in the accomplishment without putting in the same effort that someone else did. This conception does not allow for armchair envy and everyday jealousy; you cannot expect to achieve your targets without paying your dues and putting in the work.

On the other hand, simple jealousy is the ultimate manifestation of entitlement, laziness, and a scarcity mindset – that there's not enough of something to go around, so if others have it, it means you can't. It's a mentality that creates a landscape of fear, and the world descends into a cutthroat competition of survival of the fittest, a vile manifestation of social Darwinism. It might be the nastiest emotion we can have!

But unless we're invoking envy to do better, it isn't just a dangerous sin; it's a stupid sin as well because it's one of the only ones you could never possibly enjoy. It's a severe hidden drawback to how we live today, with unlimited information at our fingertips, stoking feelings of inadequacy and jealousy by comparing what we have with the thin slice we see of other people's lives. All pain, no gain, and yet we wonder what the harm is!

You pass the test but compare yourself to the best student in class, without knowing they haven't met their friends for six months. You work long and difficult hours and compare yourself to the guy in the neighborhood who just made a fortune without knowing that his firm is under investigation and he is in serious jeopardy. You marry a complete human with flaws but compare them to people on social media in the top 1% of looks, smarts, or wealth without seeing their multiple flaws. You buy a house and discover issues but compare it to the nicest house on the block without knowing that the foundation is weak and needs to be torn down. Does any of this sound uncomfortably familiar?



So sure, maybe we know that envy is terrible, but you can't just change the way you feel, so what can we do, practically speaking?

Firstly, let's read the words.

“Do not kill” and “Do not steal” are simple two-word instructions, and we understand that we are to apply them broadly and generally. Unlike those and several others, envy, the one that doesn't spring to mind as quickly, is spelled out in explicit detail, with seven specific hypotheticals before the general rule.

Maybe it would be too hard to prohibit jealousy because we can't just stop feeling the way we feel. But God doesn't just tell us not to be jealous – God tells us how to avoid it entirely. Don't be jealous of this in particular; don't be jealous of that – וְחָמְרוּ / שׁוּרוּ / וְאַמְתּוּ / וְעַבְדּוּ / שְׂדֵהוּ / שְׂדֵהוּ / בֵּית רֵעֵךְ – you can't cherry-pick certain aspects of someone else's life. To have what they have, you'd have to be them, so, as the Sfats Sfats notes, if you are going to be jealous of someone, you must be willing to swap your entire life for theirs – וְכָל אֲשֶׁר לְרֵעֵךְ.

Or in other words, if you're seeing someone's highlight reel, remember that you can't correctly judge the whole by a part.

But secondly, and more fundamentally, we need to reorganize how we see the world and remind ourselves that God's blessings are not finite. There isn't a fixed amount of happiness, health, love, or money in the world, so it's not a zero-sum game. Someone else's good fortune cannot subtract from yours and cannot diminish the pool of blessings available to you in the future. His is his – אֲשֶׁר לְרֵעֵךְ – and yours is yours, and we need to respect that boundary down to the smallest detail scrupulously. God's blessings are abundant, not scarce. The Ibn Ezra suggests that the practice of this law requires that you refine yourself to have no interest in what is not meant for you.

As our Sages guided us, who is wealthy? One who celebrates and takes joy in what he has – אֵיזֶהוּ עָשִׂיר, אֵיזֶהוּ עָשִׂיר. One interpretation even inverts the plain reading, from celebrating what you have to celebrating what he has – בְּהַלְקוֹ. We should take this sage wisdom to heart, kill the scarcity mindset, and cultivate an abundance mentality. Someone else's prosperity and success don't make your own any less likely, so be happy when someone else wins because yours is no further away.

So perhaps warning us against envy is one of the most important things God has to say to us; it might be the sin with the highest destructiveness to innocence ratio. It withholds you from your highest consciousness and prevents you from being you in all your fullness; it stops you from being happy and limits your ability to embrace your blessings.

So don't look at your neighbor to see if you have as much as them; the only time you should look at what your neighbor has is to ensure they have enough.



No person has the power to have everything they want, but it is within everyone's power not to want what they don't have and to cheerfully put what they do have to good use.

While you can't have everything you want, it's such a blessing to want what you have.

Friends From Far Away

5 minute read | Straightforward

Moshe is arguably the most significant person in the Torah, whose impact as a lawgiver, teacher, and savior has been felt worldwide by most major religions for over three millennia.

He was undoubtedly a brilliant and astute person whose measured thinking carried immense gravity. At a bare minimum, before any of the more expansive literature, the Torah's plain text testifies that Moshe regularly spoke with God Himself and that he retained his sharpness and vigor until his very last breath.

Moshe had only just decisively rescued the Jewish People from Egypt and its formidable military. His newly liberated people had no government, so Moshe was the only person with the apparent authority to settle people's disputes.

Morning till night, he would arbitrate and resolve problems. The trouble is, he quickly ran into a capacity problem; people were coming to him non-stop, and it was too much. He was exhausted!

So the Torah introduces Yisro, who tells Moshe that it simply can't be correct for there to be one sole arbiter of justice for so many people! So Yisro advises Moshe to train some honest and competent men to share the burden, and they'd refer to Moshe any cases they could not resolve on their own. Moshe implements Yisro's proposal, and the new organizational structure of the justice system proves to be a resounding success. Moshe is no longer stretched so thin, and Yisro goes on his way.

This story is almost funny to read – it just seems absurdly trivial!

Sure, we can say that Moshe believed he was required to teach everyone himself – וְהוֹדַעְתִּי אֶת-חֻקֵי הָאֱלֹקִים – but he was limited by the same twenty-four hours in a day as anybody else who has walked the earth. Who hasn't experienced a productivity bottleneck at some point in their lives? It is such a basic problem! Of course, anyone who's been there recognizes that, however basic and common, it is still a serious problem. Yet as basic as the problem is, the Torah introduces Yisro, who proposes a solution that is equally basic and can be found in any book on business management or organizational



strategy: to optimize workflow efficiency, the individual at capacity must delegate tasks, distribute that work for others to perform to reduce bottlenecks and improve throughput.

None of this is complicated or groundbreaking, yet it occupies a non-trivial amount of space in the Torah. Rashi says that Yisro's very name alludes to the extra portion added to the Torah through his input and initiative. Could Moshe not figure out how to delegate effectively on his own? What is remotely remarkable about Yisro's solution?

Perhaps the answer is what we sense – there is nothing remarkable about this conversation other than the fact of the conversation itself.

People speculate on the Torah's political stances regarding capitalism, socialism, or what have you – but here, in the same section the Torah is given, the Torah quite plainly states that it is not exhaustive, that it doesn't purport to contain every single kernel of wisdom that could ever exist.

Sure, it has a comprehensive framework covering the full spectrum of human experience. Still, it also leaves plenty of details for humans to figure out for themselves, in this instance, effective government. Yisro proposed an idea about improving Moshe's administration, and the Torah explicitly takes a pragmatic approach; if it works – great!

The Ishbitzer suggests that when God tells us not to carve graven images or sculptures, it is essentially a commandment against rigidity. Rigidity almost assures self-destruction in the long run. As Charles Darwin said, it is not the strongest of species that survives, nor the most intelligent; it is the most adaptable to change.

While it might be intuitive to delegate tasks – that intuition still came from a human; it is not obvious that the Torah endorses and adapts to human intuition, which is what is so remarkable about Moshe's problem and Yisro's solution.

What's more, the solution didn't simply come from a human; it came from a Gentile! At a minimum, the Torah takes a nuanced view on Gentiles here – that Yisro is welcome; and his wisdom is welcome too. He correctly identifies a problem in Jewish society; he proposes a practical solution, and Moshe embraces and successfully implements his policy suggestions with God's blessing. Aside from the pragmatic approach to government, this interaction is highly significant because, so far, almost every Gentile in the Torah has been one villain or another! Pharaoh, Egypt, Amalek, and perhaps Yishmael, Esau, Lavan, and Ephron.

Given the well-documented history, it is only too easy to generalize that Gentiles are not our friends – they only want to hurt us, they have nothing to offer, and we ought to keep our distance. This conclusion does not stretch the imagination, and it's a safe bet that asks nothing of us. Trust nobody; everyone hates us!



TorahRedux

But in this story, the Torah affirms that for all the enemies out there – however many and dangerous – we might also encounter allies along the way. The Ibn Ezra suggests that the Torah explicitly infers this lesson by introducing Yisro immediately after battling Amalek. In Yisro, we learn that not only do allies exist whom we ought to welcome, but there also exists the possibility that they bring experience, knowledge, or wisdom that we ought to welcome too.

To be sure, it is a minefield to navigate how to live with this, and you should seek guidance from a trusted advisor; because our culture is not their culture, and our values are not their values. But educated and experienced leaders with the maturity to appreciate nuance should recognize that the Torah plainly states that value can exist that originates outside the Torah and beyond our society from people who don't come from the same places we do.

This bold thought shouldn't be as threatening or radical as it may appear at first glance. Using the digital technology that went into writing this sentence so that you could then use the same technology to read it with, it's something we should recognize is true. The Torah doesn't tell humans about electricity or indoor plumbing. As R' Shlomo Farhi notes, there is no religious imperative to reject something purely because it doesn't originate from within the Torah's culture. It's something our sages understood long ago – חכמה בגוים תאמין. If it works – great!

Moshe was intelligent; he likely understood the value of delegating but still believed he had to do it all on his own until Yisro cautioned him otherwise. By reporting this banal conversation in such detail, it seems that the Torah embraces an element of flexibility or fluidity in how we navigate the dynamic environments we encounter in the world. Yisro probably didn't innovate management science and delegation – that's nothing we can't figure out on our own. Perhaps the story's conclusion is that we can figure things out on our own; we have the discretion to determine how to build and operate a society using the Torah's guidelines.

When we encounter uncharted territory and unprecedented obstacles in our community and society, as we inevitably will, we have to remember that not only is figuring out the solution not against the Torah but figuring out the solution is the embodiment of the Torah's highest ideals.

Staying alive in an ever-changing world requires flexibility and the ability to roll with the punches and modify your approach.

As the saying goes, the trees that flex in the wind survive, and the ones that do not bend will break.



TorahRedux

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.

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. My business, Hendon Advisors, allows me to dedicate time to TorahRedux, and I welcome your assistance in furthering my goal to keep publishing high-quality Parsha content that makes a difference. I source and broker the purchase and sale of healthcare businesses; I kindly ask for your blessings and prayers. If you are a buyer of healthcare businesses or can make introductions to healthcare operators who might buy or sell, just reply to this email to get in touch.*

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.