



## **Seder Companion 2022**

### **False Start**

3 minute read | Straightforward

One of the primary ways we embrace holiness and spirituality, be it Shabbos or Yom Tov, is by saying kiddush – literally, sanctification. By saying the ritual words, we imbue the day and, therefore, our meal with sacrality.

Doctors sanitize their hands before seeing a new patient, and chefs soap their hands before handling food. But if you've ever been to a Shabbos or Yom Tov meal, you'll know that first, we say kiddush, and then, we ritually clean our hands and break our bread.

Maybe we have it backwards. Why isn't washing our hands the first thing we do, before we make kiddush?

There's a Chassidic fable about a man trudging his way through a swamp, his boots caked in thick, wet mud. Clean boots are great, dirty boots not so much. Be that as it may, he'd better only start thinking about cleaning his boots once well clear of the swamp; there's simply no use stopping to clean them while still ankles deep in mud!

R' Moshe Feinstein explains that true to life, there is no perfect moment to start something. There will always be baggage and resistance, lots of fantastic excuses and justifications not to do the things we could or become the people we should. So we might as well just get started trying to be better humans where we are right now, notwithstanding the fact we all have our baggage.

Judaism does not demand a cleansing and purification of regular people who just want to embrace a little more; you can try to be a better person while still flawed – Kadesh before Urchatz. Maybe the perfect moment you're waiting for is right here, right now.

It's one of the core themes of Peach; redemption for people who don't necessarily deserve it yet – we just need a kickstart. Cleansing and purification are important, and they can come next; but first, get started as and where you are!

R' Shlomo Farhi notes that on the eve of Pesach, we search our homes for chametz with the soft light of a single wick candle; someone who uses a larger, multi-wick fire won't check properly and needs to conduct their search again. A multi-wick flame is much harsher and larger, and therefore, a fire hazard that stops you from checking too closely – and if it doesn't, you might burn the house down!



When you look through the nooks and crannies of your soul, look gently; don't burn the whole thing down.

Sometimes, when we discover and understand those flaws, it's an unpleasant experience that leaves us broken – Yachatz. But when we break our Matza, we don't throw it out; we hold on to it until its time comes, and the poor man's bread transmutes into the afikoman, the sacred crescendo of Seder night. The broken heart of improvement never goes to waste; it is fully redeemable – במקום שבעלי תשובה – עומדין צדיקים גמורים אינם עומדין. The pursuit of excellence requires an intimate relationship with pain; growth can't happen without pain, so much so that it is a recognized medical condition – growing pains.

If our heroes had waited for the perfect opportunity over the moment destiny called, we would have neither heroes nor stories. Taking action is a unifying characteristic; our heroes didn't procrastinate.

We all have to confront the things that hold us back eventually, but there's no reason they should stop us from ever getting started. When our heroes were afraid, and there were plenty of reasons not to act, they acted just the same. That's how they become heroes! Thoughts of waiting for a perfect moment and fear of failure or flaws holding you back only originate from cowardice and fear. The resounding message of Seder night, our heroes, and beyond is that we ought to act with courage and confidence that at least we are trying to do the right thing.

So, of course you're not “there” yet! None of us are. But our future, and yours, rests on whether action will overcome fear and apathy.

Because we are the people who make kiddush before we have washed our hands.

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## **The Shackles of Your Mind**

2 minute read | Straightforward

The redemption story of the Haggadah opens with Matza, the bread of affliction – קָהָ לְחֶמֶת עֲנִיָּא. It's what our ancestors ate, and we invite whoever is hungry to join – כָּל דְּכָפִין יִתִּי וַיִּכַּל –

If you think about it, it's a very strange invitation.

It's one thing to invite people to join your festive meal; but what sort of dubious invitation is it for people to come share your bread of affliction?



R' Jonathan Sacks teaches that what transforms the bread of affliction into the bread of freedom is the willingness to share with others. The distinguished psychologist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl witnessed humanity stripped to its essence in the concentration camps and observed how there were still men walking around comforting others and giving away their last piece of bread despite living under the most terrible conditions. People like these, the ones who placed themselves in service of others, who committed themselves to a greater cause, were the ones who found nourishment even in complete deprivation, who kept their fire burning even in freezing darkness.

The Maharal notes that the Exodus is so fundamental because it imbues Judaism with an essential quality of fundamental freedom – we can utilize our free will with no external coercive influence.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe notes that R' Elazar ben Azariah discovered Ben Zoma's teaching to recall the Exodus at nights on the day he became a leader; because it falls to a leader to be the beacon of hope during times of darkness and difficulty.

It's important to understand the direction of the story the Torah tells; that God physically freed the Jews of that time, but mentally, they never left.

Rav Kook explains that the key distinction between a slave and a free man is not simply physical liberty; there's a mental component as well. There could be an enlightened slave whose spirit is free, and a free man whose whole life is enslaved to his basest desires – physically free, but a slave mentality. The people who walked out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, and stood at Sinai, then spent 40 lost years pining to go back “home” to Egypt.

Only we can free our spirit, which leads us to a shocking but indisputable conclusion.

God can save you from Egypt, but not even God can save you from yourself.

Freedom is oxygen for the soul, and it's a state of mind. Even in the worst of times, we can freely choose to share with others, and in doing so, we become partners in planting the seeds of our own redemption.

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## **Tailoring Your Torah**

3 minute read | Straightforward

While the Seder is about transmitting memories and identity to our children, the Haggadah wisely acknowledges that there is no one-size-fits-all for education, suggesting a tailored approach to respond to each child.



When the wise son asks what the reasons behind our observance are, we give part of an answer, just a law really – אין מפטירין אחר הפסח אפיקומן. The Sfas Emes explains that the starting point of observance is that the Torah is ours, and this is the law. There needn't be a loftier reason than that!

And yet, R' Samson Raphael Hirsch quipped that if you perform symbolic acts without bothering to understand the symbolism, you end up doing a bunch of strange things for literally no reason at all.

R' Shlomo Farhi explains that we need to engage with the wise son and stimulate his thinking. There are many reasons for everything that we do, and different reasons speak to different people. But the reasons are secondary to why we choose to be observant. So we tell him the law with no reason; there is no one single reason, he can search for the ideas that speak to him.

To the wicked son, the Haggadah offers an incredibly harsh rebuke – blunt his teeth and remind him that if he'd been in Egypt, he never would have left – “בַּעֲבוּר זֶה עָשָׂה ה' לִי בְּצֵאתִי לִי מִמִּצְרַיִם.” While our parents' generation might have taken this quite literally, it's not necessarily as harsh as it seems!

R' Shlomo Freshwater observes that before Sinai, people who lost their way tended not to find their way back, for example, the generation of the Flood story, Yishmael, and Esav, among many others. But in a post-Sinai era, this son is fortunate to live in an era where he can make amends. If he'd lived in that ear, he might not have been so lucky! – אֱלֹהֵי הָיָה שָׁם, לֹא הָיָה נִגְאָל.

As far as blunting his teeth, it is famously noted that רשע has a numerological value of 570. Subtract שני, numerological value 366; and the result is 204, the numerological value of צדיק. Behind the cutesy numbers game lies a serious truth. Some children harbor bitterness, negativity, and resentment. Find a way to neutralize the bite, and dig past the surface because there is a wonderful person in there waiting to be recognized.

The simple son can't get past shallow simplicity – “What is this?” But, the Haggadah cautions, don't talk down to him. Rather, patiently explain the answer in a way he can process.

The Haggadah suggests what to say to each son, but not to the son who doesn't know how to ask. Instead of saying anything in particular – the Haggadah just says to give him an opening – אַתָּה פִּתַּח לוֹ.

R' Shlomo Farhi teaches that creating an opening means cultivating curiosity – the entire Seder is full of strange customs and rituals to help do just that. The most wonderful and profound speech just won't matter to someone who doesn't get it, but it is also possible to nurture with silence – חֲנֹךְ לִנְעָר עַל-פִּי דַרְכּוֹ.

Whatever challenges the wise, wicked, simple, and quiet child may pose, at least they are at the Seder. They're present and engaged in different ways, and we can work with that. The Lubavitcher Rebbe wonders about a fifth son – the one who isn't at the seder because we've given up on him.



We can recognize these archetypes in our friends and family, but we may even recognize them in ourselves at different phases of our lives. So take the Haggadah’s advice to heart. Don’t be rigid; know yourself, know your audience, and tailor your message accordingly.

## Keeping Your Word

3 minute read | Straightforward

One of the keys to correctly understanding the Egypt story is that God guided events from start to finish. In case we were hoping to blame the enslavement on human free will and attribute the salvation to God, the Haggadah forecloses that option, reminding us that God had promised Avraham that his descendants would wind up in Egypt for four centuries, but that God would eventually rescue them:

ברוך שומר הבטחתו לישראל, ברוך הוא. שהקדוש ברוך הוא חשב את־הקץ, לעשות כמו שאמר לאברהם אבינו בברית בין הבתרים, ברוך שומר הבטחתו לישראל, ברוך הוא. – Bless the One who keeps His promise to Yisrael, blessed be He; since the Holy One, blessed be He, calculated the end to uphold what He said to Avraham, our father, in the Covenant between the Parts, as it says, “And He said to Avram, ‘You should know that your descendants will be strangers in a land not their own, and they will enslave them and afflict them four hundred years...’”

But if you think about it for a minute, this is faint praise at best. We rightly consider honesty and trustworthiness to be the basic decency requirements we ought to expect from everyone we interact with, let alone the Creator!

What kind of praise is it to say that God keeps His word?

R’ Shlomo Farhi explains that the Haggadah doesn’t mean that God merely keeps His promise; the words literally mean that God protects His promise – שומר.

God had promised four hundred years in Egypt, but Rashi counts only two hundred and ten. The hundred and ninety year discrepancy can be accounted for in different ways; perhaps the Jewish People suffered so egregiously, that four hundred years of quantitative pain compressed to two hundred and ten years of the qualitative equivalent; or that they had stooped to the lowest depths of depravity and required emergency intervention. The missing years are alluded to in the words for calculating the end – חשב את־הקץ – because the word קץ has a numerological value of the missing hundred and ninety years.



And yet, if the precise explanation for creative accounting is cutesy and whimsical, the fact of it is deadly serious.

In the state the Jewish People left, they were identifiable by fashion, language, and name only. In every other conceivable way, they had no semblance of Jewish identity. Hypothetically, if God had not acted at that moment and they would remain even a little longer, their condition would have further deteriorated, and perhaps only a small remnant might have been rescued. That could plausibly have been one version of keeping to the promise – saving whoever was left.

But God didn't do that. God did not abandon them to their fates, and God would not let them die or fail. Instead, every single man, woman, and child walked out – even though they didn't deserve to. Because God didn't just keep His promise; He protected it – *בְּרוּךְ שׁוֹמֵר הַבְּטָחָתוֹ* –

The Sfas Emes notes that our ancestors were confident in their tradition that they would be mired in Egypt for four hundred years; so much so that they refused to believe that Moshe was there to save them, and quite reasonably so – after all, this redeemer was two centuries early...! And yet, before any explanation, logic, or wordplay about how or why, the simple fact was that it was time to go. Regardless of tradition, of what had been made explicitly clear by no less an authority than God's own word, the time was now, and the discussion evaporates. Because God protects His promise – *בְּרוּךְ שׁוֹמֵר הַבְּטָחָתוֹ*.

On the night we remember redemptions past, fueling our hope for redemptions to come, we ought to remind ourselves that God protects His promise, whatever it takes. We have a rich and vast eschatological literature about what will happen at the end times of Mashiach; will it be easy or painful? Peaceful or tragic? Gradual or sudden? Six thousand years or tomorrow?

The Sfas Emes reassures us that whatever we convince ourselves, we actually have no idea whatsoever. Perhaps once again, the qualitative strain of exile can stand in for a required quantity of years. Yet in the final analysis, it's entirely academic because even if our spiritual assets were entirely exhausted of ancestral credit and merit, we could always count on the Creator's bottomless wellspring of compassion; and the highly persuasive precedent for creative accounting when it comes to these things.

Because *בְּרוּךְ שׁוֹמֵר הַבְּטָחָתוֹ* – God protects His promise.

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## Trading Taskmasters

3 minute read | Advanced



On Seder night, we celebrate the Jewish People's birth as a nation and liberation from slavery. The entire night explores the imperative value of freedom and teaches us that freedom is a mode of thinking under all circumstances; it is not handed to us, it is ours to claim only if we make that choice.

But are we really so free?

Quite arguably, did we not simply trade up for a better taskmaster, swapping service to Pharaoh for service to God?

The notion of swapping masters ignores a crucial distinction between negative liberty, the freedom from, and positive liberty, the freedom to. Negative liberty means freedom from restrictions placed on you by other people; positive liberty means freedom to control and direct your own life, to consciously make your own choices, create your own path and purpose, and shape your own identity in life.

Someone with negative liberty can do as they please, like an infinite vacation. The trouble with negative liberty is that it doesn't exist for long; we are invariably enslaved to someone or something, even if just our conscious habits and subconscious instincts. They may have a good time at first but will eventually become enslaved to some form of addiction, desire, or laziness. That's not being free; that's called being lost.

Freedom worthy of admiration and respect requires positive liberty, taking responsibility for yourself by committing to an idea or purpose, such as a diet and exercise regime for fitness and good health. However difficult or forced, making these choices is actually the highest expression of freedom, and in the long run, you can only benefit.

The Midrash similarly suggests that not only can freedom be found in the service to God, but it is also the only way to ever be truly free. When the Torah says that God carved the Ten Commandments, the Midrash suggests we alternatively read it as liberation through the Ten Commandments – *קְרוּת עַל־הַלְוָה* / *קְרוּת עַל־הַלְוָה*. We earn freedom through the Torah's framework by assuming responsibility for our lives and destiny. It's an externally imposed responsibility, like Pharaoh, but the comparison stops there. The outcome of the Torah's responsibility is the gift of positive liberty, freeing us from slavery to our worst inclinations; resulting in humans that are more humane, kinder, and more compassionate.

The God that rescued the Jewish People from Egypt was the same God that had sent them there in the first place. It's not contrived salvation or engineered heroics because God is not gratuitously cruel. It wasn't Egypt that held the Jews; it was God holding the Jews in Egypt as foretold to Avraham, in response to Avraham's question how God could promise a destiny to his descendants if, at some point, they would inevitably deviate from Avraham's example. The Maharal explains God's answer to mean that the Egypt experience would permanently bind his descendants to the Creator regardless of their mistakes.



R' Shlomo Farhi teaches that God doesn't just save us from things that hurt us; however bitter the lesson might be to learn, the things that hurt us can also function as instruments of saving us from something, providing pathways to positive liberty. The Jewish People left Egypt with the hard-won experience God had promised Avraham, and with that experience accumulated, the ordeal was complete – בְּרַכְשׁ גְּדוּל –

Yet the unspoken inverse of that notion is that if they'd had the experience all along, the ordeal would have been redundant and would never have happened. It was only because they had lost their way, forgetting who they were and where they had come from, that they suffered through centuries of slavery as a result. If they had stooped to pagan idolatry like anyone else, it only follows that they were vulnerable; the inescapable conclusion is that Pharaoh could have only ever have enslaved them so they could rediscover what they had lost! The hand that hurts is the same hand that serves to save – שְׁבִכְל דּוֹר וְדוֹר עוֹמְדִים עָלֵינוּ לְכַלּוֹתֵנוּ, וְהַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא מְצִילֵנוּ מִיָּדָם. However disturbing this lesson is, it is simultaneously deeply comforting, suggesting that all our pain has deep meaning and significance.

We never swapped service to Pharaoh for service to God; because we aren't slaves to God at all. God offers us positive liberty, the freedom to take control of our lives and realize our fundamental purpose in the universe. Accepting the responsibility of service to God may look forced, but we know we are the ultimate beneficiaries of our efforts because we can utilize our freedom to thrive, tapping into our highest and best selves and making our lives matter. God offers humans positive liberty, and through it, cosmic significance.

Our bodies feel pain in response to an injury; your nerves send millions of signals to your brain that something is wrong, hopefully prompting a reaction. Pain has a clearly defined purpose; the only incorrect response is to ignore it.

We shouldn't ignore the pain in our national or personal life, but we possess the freedom and spirit to elevate and transform that pain into meaning and purpose. There is cosmic significance to our hurt. It matters.

The God who heals is the same God who hurts; hurt is a pathway to healing, and compassion can overcome severity – שְׂמֵאל דּוֹחָה וְיָמִין מְקַרְבָּת –

We're never glad for the hurt, but we are free to make it count.

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## **No One Else Can Feel It For You**

2 minute read | Straightforward





The Torah has many laws and doesn't usually specify that we have to keep them; it is assumed.

The Torah's expectation may be a little ambitious, but its threshold requirement is no less than complete observance. While full observance may be difficult for some people in practice, the Torah pulls no punches and makes no exceptions; the laws of Shabbos don't have exceptions for when your team is in the final or you're in the middle of closing a big deal.

So when the Haggadah draws our attention to one particular mitzvah to observe, it sticks out:

אֲפִילוּ בְּלִנּוּ חֻכְמַיִם בְּלִנּוּ נְבוֹנִים בְּלִנּוּ זְקֵנִים בְּלִנּוּ יוֹדְעִים אֶת הַתּוֹרָה מְצֻוֶה עָלֵינוּ לְסַפֵּר בִּיציאת מצרים – Even if we were all wise sages familiar with the entire Torah, the mitzvah is incumbent on each of us to discuss the story of the Exodus...

If we correctly assume that we are supposed to observe all the mitzvos, and tonight's mitzvah is telling the story of Egypt, then what is the point of the Haggadah saying that we have to do the mitzvah – מְצֻוֶה עָלֵינוּ?

R' Benjamin Blech notes that even though everyone has to keep all the mitzvos, it's only rarely that every single individual has to do something for themselves. You can do a whole lot of mitzvos through an agent; people who don't know how to pray can still satisfy their prayer obligation just by listening – שומע כעונה. It's the principle that facilitates everyone listening to the shofar, for example, without actually doing it themselves.

But even during prayer, the go-to example of this principle, there has always been one section the leader can't say for anyone else – מוֹדִים – the section on thanksgiving. At that point, everyone listening has to recite it for themselves.

As technical as it may seem, it's actually quite simple; appreciation is personal. Maybe someone can help you with the Torah reading, but no one can say thank you for you!

The mitzvah of the night isn't to tell the story; if we're doing it properly, the mitzvah is to relive the experience and make it come alive. If that's what we're doing, we have to express gratitude personally, not via an agent or public reading, because genuine appreciation flows from the soul.

Parenthetically, this may shed light on why the Haggadah praises whoever expounds the details – כָּל הַמְרַבֵּה לְסַפֵּר בִּיציאת מצרים הָרִי זֶה מְשַׁבַּח. The Gemara suggests that anyone who prays too much detaches themselves from the world because words are finite, so it is impossible to adequately praise an infinite God because the vocabulary does not exist. And yet, expounding the Exodus' details doesn't fall foul of this rule – הָרִי זֶה מְשַׁבַּח – because whereas praise focuses on the other, the wellspring of gratitude comes from within.



Of course everyone has to personally participate – no one else can feel it for you! And of course there's no limit. Because when we channel gratitude, we have to let it flow freely with no boundaries.

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## Good Fortune

3 minute read | Straightforward

We spend most of the Seder night talking about the Exodus story. But right towards the beginning of the Haggadah, we say something that almost casually dismisses the central theme of the night, the Exodus:

צא וילמד מה בקש לָבֶן הָאֲרָמִי לַעֲשׂוֹת לַיַּעֲקֹב אֲבִינוּ: שְׁפָרְעָה לֹא גִזַּר אֱלֹא עַל הַזְּכָרִים, וְלָבֶן בִּקֵּשׁ לַעֲקֹר אֶת־הַכֹּל – Go learn what Lavan from Aramean sought to do to our father Yakov; Pharaoh only oppressed the males, whereas Lavan tried to destroy it all!

But it doesn't quite resonate.

Pharaoh was a genocidal despot who cruelly enslaved an entire race and murdered children indiscriminately – לֹא גִזַּר אֱלֹא עַל הַזְּכָרִים. He ticks every box on the villain archetype bingo card, which is in large part why the Exodus was such a big deal.

Our ancestor Lavan, although a tricky swindler, nonetheless provided refuge and safe harbor when Yakov was on the run with nowhere to go, and over time, provided him with a family, a home, and tremendous wealth.

In what universe can we plausibly say that Lavan was worse than Pharaoh? Moreover, doesn't that totally undermine Pharaoh's atrocities, and perhaps the entire Seder?

R' Jonathan Sacks suggests that the Haggadah reminds us of Lavan as a warning that threats don't always look like the atrocities of Pharaoh; sometimes they appear as a kindly person who took you in and gave you everything.

There's nothing surprising about our response to clear and obvious danger. When calamity strikes, in the face of a Pharaoh type villain, we know what to do; across the ages, in the face of adversity, Jews have been resilient, doubling down on study, prayer, and observance – וְכִאֲשֶׁר יַעֲנֵנו אֱתוּ בֵן יִרְבֵּה וְכֵן יִפְרֹץ –

The danger Lavan poses is far more insidious; Yakov might forget who he was – לַעֲקֹר אֶת־הַכֹּל. Affluence, no less than genocide or slavery, threatens Jewish continuity by making us forget who we are and why.



Before Moshe’s death, he warned his current and future audience about a subtle mistake humans are consistently prone to:

הַשְׁמֵר לָּהּ, פֶּן-תִּשְׁכַּח אֶת-ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ, לְבַלְתִּי שְׁמֹר מִצְוֹתָיו וּמִשְׁפָּטָיו וְחֻקֹּתָיו, אֲשֶׁר אֶנְכִי מְצַוֶּה הַיּוֹם. פֶּן-תֹּאכַל, וְשָׂבַעְתָּ; וּבָתִּים טִבִּים תִּבְנֶה, וְיִשְׁבְּתָה. וּבָקָרְךָ וּצְאֲנָה יִרְבּוּ, וְכֶסֶף וְזָהָב יִרְבּוּ-לָּךְ; וְכָל אֲשֶׁר-לָּךְ, יִרְבֶּה-לָּךְ; וְלִבְּךָ, לִבְבָּה; וְשָׂכַחְתָּ אֶת-ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ, הַמּוֹצִיאֶךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עֶבְדִּים – Take care that you don't forget the Lord your God and fail to keep His commandments, rules, and laws, which I instruct you today: when you have eaten, and you are satisfied and built fine houses to live in, and your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold have increased, and everything you own has prospered, be careful that your heart does not grow haughty and you forget the Lord your God—who freed you from the land of Egypt, home of slaves... (8:10-14)

The Beis Halevi highlights that Yakov feared facing his brother Esau on two counts – the hand of his brother, and the hand of Esau – מִיַּד אָחִי מִיַּד עֵשָׂו. We know all too well about Esau’s destructive capacity for violence – מִיַּד עֵשָׂו, but Yakov understood that Esau’s warm embrace of brotherhood was no less of a threat – מִיַּד אָחִי.

For everyone who died in pogroms, Crusades, the Inquisition, or the Holocaust, there are memorials and prayers, history, and proclamations of “Never Again.” But, in the words of R’ Noach Weinberg, there is a spiritual Holocaust taking place right now. How many souls do we lose to assimilation, to a friendly society that opens its arms to us and beckons oh so invitingly?

It is one thing to believe in God when you need His help. It is another thing entirely when you have already received it.

Perhaps Lavan is worse because when faced with a Lavan, people obviously slip away, invisible and silent, without resistance.

The Haggadah and the entire Seder night provide the antidote – צֵא וּלְמַד. If you hold on to your identity, your history, and where you come from, you will not lose your way.

## **All About Appreciation**

3 minute read | Straightforward

The Seder is all about reliving the Egypt experience and making it come alive.

Among the focal points of the Haggadah readings are verses and expositions tracing our history to and from Egypt:

אַרְמֵי אֲבֹד אָבִי, וַיֵּרֵד מִצְרַיִם, וַיִּגְרֶשׁ שָׁם בְּמַתִּי מֵעֵט; וַיְהִי-שָׁם, לַגּוֹי גָּדוֹל עֲצוּם וְרָב. וַיִּרְעוּ אֶתְנוּ הַמִּצְרַיִם, וַיַּעֲנוּנוּ; וַיִּתְּנוּ עָלֵינוּ, עֲבָדָה קָשָׁה. וּנְצַעַק, אֶל-ה' אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ; וַיִּשְׁמַע ה' אֶת-קִלְנוּ, וַיֵּרָא אֶת-עֲנָנָנוּ וְאֶת-עַמְלָנוּ וְאֶת-לַחְצָנוּ. וַיּוֹצֵאֵנוּ ה', מִמִּצְרַיִם, בְּיָד חֲזָקָה וּבְזֵרַע נְטוּיָה, וּבִמְרָא גָדֹל-וּבְאֹתוֹת, וּבְמִפְתִּימִים. וַיִּבְאֵנוּ, אֶל-הַמִּקְוֶה הַזֶּה; וַיִּתֵּן-לָנוּ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת, אֶרֶץ זֵבֶת חֶלֶב וּדְבָשׁ. וַעֲתָה, הִנֵּה הֵבֵאתִי אֶת-רֵאשִׁית וּנְשִׂמָתָהּ בְּכָל-הַטּוֹב, אֲשֶׁר נָתַן-לָהּ – You will answer and say before your God, “The Aramean pursued my father, and he descended to Egypt, and dwelled there, where he became a nation, great and many. Egypt cruelly afflicted us, and they gave us hard labor. We cried out to Hashem, God of our fathers, and He heard our cries, and saw our suffering and affliction. He extracted us from Egypt with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, with great wonders and miracles; and brought us to this place. He gave us this land, flowing with milk and honey. And now, see I have brought my first fruit, which God has granted me, and I place it before God.” He shall place it before God and bow, and rejoice at all the good he has been given. (26:5-11)

While this is a pretty succinct overview of the Egypt story, you might be surprised to learn that this section isn't taken from the Exodus story and has nothing at all to do with Egypt!

We might expect the Haggadah readings to come from the primary record the stories come from, the book of Shemos. Instead, this section actually comes from all the way at the end of the Torah, the portion about the mitzvos of the Land of Israel. It is part of the prayer the farmers would recite when they presented their first fruits, tracing the Jewish People's history so that they would cherish their land.

If the Haggadah is about how we left Egypt, why does the Haggadah quote a paraphrased story and not the original?

The Sefer HaChinuch explains that Seder night is not only about the story; it's about experiencing gratitude. The original sections of the story are narrative history, and they lack the context of gratitude that the evening requires, whereas the sections about the mitzvos of the Land of Israel are infused with gratitude throughout, so it makes sense that the Haggadah quotes from the paraphrased sections.

The Abarbanel suggests that if the Seder is about gratitude, then its central highlight, the Pesach offering, is essentially a Toda offering, the thanksgiving sacrifice. The Toda was the most common sacrificial offering and was obligated of someone released from jail, or crossed an ocean or a desert, or recovered from illness. This mirrors the course of the Exodus, where the Jewish People were liberated from slavery, crossed both ocean and desert, and were healed of all sickness when they stood at Sinai. The Toda consisted of a lamb presented with 40 loaves of bread and had to be consumed within a day – which is quite obviously impossible. The only solution would be to invite friends and family to participate in the celebration, again mirroring the Pesach offering requirement of consuming it in its entirety with friends and family.

The conclusion of the farmer's blessing beautifully captures what we're trying to achieve; to rejoice in every single thing Hashem does for you and your household – וּנְשִׂמָתָהּ בְּכָל הַטּוֹב אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לָהּ ה' אֱלֹהֶיהָ וּלְבֵיתָהּ –



Because experiencing gratitude and joy with loved ones is what Seder night is all about.

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## Transmitting Memory

2 minute read | Straightforward

The Seder is replete with strange customs and rituals to encourage questions that we answer with stories.

But why don't we just read the story?

Aside from the fact that the story is incredibly long, R' Tzadok haKohen explains that the perpetual mitzvah of remembering the Exodus is not enough on Seder night; Seder night is not a history lesson. The Haggadah's goal is engagement, the vehicle for which is questions – ואפילו כלנו חכמים כלנו נבונים כלנו – וקנים כלנו יודעים את התורה מצוה עלינו לספר ביציאת מצרים.

R' Shmshon Raphael Hirsch explains that the two Hebrew words for inheritance have very different meanings – נחלה / ירושה. The root נחל means a flowing river, and the root רשת means conquest or capture, as in מורשה קהלת יעקב.

R' Jonathan Sacks teaches that tradition is not inherited the way a river flows – we cannot make the grave error of assuming our children will just follow their heritage. Tradition is an inheritance secured through conquest because when you invest in your learning, you have earned and acquired your knowledge. Children and questions are central to the Seder because through their questions, they make what is ours into theirs.

When the wise son asks what the point of it all is, we answer that we don't eat anything after the Korban Pesach. Rav Kook understands this as an allegory; let your children experience the lingering aftertaste of our traditions, don't dilute them.

We all grew up sharing a table with extended families, and we don't just tell stories. We taste the strange foods, the Matza, Maror, and Charoses, talk about what it means to be free, and sing songs to celebrate our blessings. Everyone remembers being the one to ask the four questions and steal the afikoman. As we grow up, we become the ones to answer the questions, and it's our afikoman getting taken. The Seder's enduring power is its way of transmitting our memory and identity across generations. It should be no surprise that more people go to a Seder than to shul on Yom Kippur.

That's the power of ritual, simple things we do as children because it's fun, and as adults, because we know that our identity is one of the most precious things we can pass on.



We can't just tell stories at the Seder, that would miss the point entirely. Seder night is about what we do together as an expression of collective memory and shared ideals.

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## Just Open The Door

3 minute read | Straightforward

Towards the Seder's conclusion, there is a near-universal tradition to open the door and pour a cup of wine for the legendary Eliyahu HaNavi, harbinger of redemption in general, and Mashiach in particular. Customarily, this is an honor bestowed on an elder, or perhaps someone who is sick or needs to get married.

Taking the legend of Eliyahu HaNavi at face value, it's not hard to understand why we might want the herald of redemption to visit our Seder; who among us doesn't need their dose of deliverance? But while all the Seder's gestures and rituals are laden with meaning, no one seriously thinks that Eliyahu uses the front door to attend!

So why do we open the door?

The Midrash imagines God telling us that if we open up an opening the size of the eye of a needle, God will expand our efforts into an opening the size of a hall. R' Shlomo Farhi suggests that if God asks us to open up all year round and remove the boundaries and impediments holding us back, then the magic of Pesach is that we don't even have to do that! The Chag is called Passover because God passes over boundaries – וַפָּסַח. In other words, the door is open; we just need to show up!

But there might be something else to it as well.

The Seder prominently features four cups of wine that mark stages of redemptions past; we honor Eliyahu with the fifth cup for redemptions yet to come. What that means then, is that the Seder's theme isn't solely about celebrating past redemptions; it's also fundamentally about hope – proactively anticipating redemption, looking for it, and seeking it out.

We open the Haggadah reading with an open invitation to all to join our Seder, closing with the wish to merit another Seder in Israel – כָּל דְּכַפֵּין יִיתִי וְיִיכַל, כָּל דְּצָרֶיךָ יִיתִי וְיִפְסַח. הַשְׁתָּא הָבָא, לְשָׁנָה הַבָּאָה בְּאַרְעָא דְיִשְׂרָאֵל – In other words, we begin the Seder by proclaiming our hope and inviting the world to share in it as well.

The Yerushalmi tells of two sages traveling through the night. As the sun slowly broke over the horizon, dispelling the darkness that had defined their journey, one sage commented that redemption is exactly the same. There's a long period of darkness, but then suddenly, there's just a glimmer of



brightness on the horizon, then a faint ray of light, until the sun finally crests over the horizon, and before long, it's a bright new day, and darkness is a distant memory.

Centuries of trauma in Egypt came to a decisive end in exactly this way. After flashes of hope, God struck the Egyptian firstborn on the very first Seder night while the Jewish People were locked in their homes – לא תצאו איש מפתח-ביתו עד-בקר. When morning came, a new era had dawned with it. The Sfas Emes reminds us that our exile and troubles are only until dawn comes – עד-בקר.

In a certain sense, perhaps that's the promise embodied by Eliyahu HaNavi, the eternal symbol of hope. We don't need to open the door for Eliyahu HaNavi; he probably doesn't use doors. But maybe, like those sages among so many others who came before us, we open the door for a hopeful and yearning look. The imagery of the custom for an elder or a person in distress opening the door is powerful and moving; this person is actively looking for the first glimmer of light, still holding onto hope.

Our ancestors held on to hope in far worse circumstances, and we can too. Dawn's early light always came for them eventually, and it's coming for us too. You might even catch an early glimpse!

You just have to open the door.

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## **The Universal and the Particular**

2 minute read

Straightforward

15th April 2019

The Exodus story is long and complex, with many different stages. The Ten Plagues took place over the course of a year or so, but it wouldn't have been any less cool or impressive to rescue the Jewish People in the space of a day. The theatre of a long and drawn-out Ten Plagues is deliberate then, rather than miraculously magic the Jewish People out or flatten Egypt instantly.

Why did God take His time saving the Jewish People?

If the goal is to save the Jewish People, then the question is a great question; God should have done it as quickly and efficiently as possible!



The story plainly states that saving the Jewish People was not God’s only priority, that God had other goals as well. Among others, the Torah states that as much as the Jewish People must understand there is a God, Egypt must come to understand this as well – וַיִּדְעוּ מִצְרַיִם כִּי-אֱלֹהֵי ה'. Beyond simple comeuppance or karma, more than punishment or vengeance for centuries of oppression, God deems it independently necessary for Egypt to recognize the One God.

When the vanquished Egyptian army drifted in the waves of the Red Sea, the Jews celebrated, and the Midrash imagines how the angels in Heaven attempted to applaud the great salvation as well, but God would not tolerate it- “Shall angels sing while My creations drown?!”

Quite obviously, God’s analysis fundamentally differs from ours – כִּי לֹא מִחֻשְׁבוֹתַי מִחֻשְׁבוֹתֵיכֶם –

The conclusion of the book of Jonah carries a similar sentiment, where God admonishes Jonah for caring about his narrow corner of the world without caring for a metropolis full of people and animals simply because they aren’t his countrymen:

– וַאֲנִי לֹא אֲחֻס׃ עַל-נִינְוָה הָעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁכְּבָה הָרַבָּה מִשְׁתִּים-עֶשְׂרֵה רְבֹו אָדָם אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָדַע בֵּין-יְמִינוֹ לְשִׁמְאֹלוֹ וּבַהֶמָּה רַבָּה – “Should not I care about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who don’t yet know their right hand from their left, and many animals as well?!”

The Lubavitcher Rebbe notes that one of our liturgy’s sharpest prayers about Gentiles, the request at the Seder for God to pour out His wrath on them over our exile – שִׁפְךָ חֲמַתְךָ אֶל-הַגּוֹיִם – is qualified with the caveat of those who do not recognize God – אֲשֶׁר לֹא יָדְעוּךָ –

From its earliest moments and consistently throughout, God’s goal has never been to save the Jewish People to the exclusion of greater humanity. The Torah’s utopian vision for the world has consistently been a universal one where all humans recognize God – בֵּיתִי בֵּית-תְּפִלָּה יִקְרָא לְכָל-הָעַמִּים / וְכָל בְּנֵי בָשָׂר יִקְרָאוּ / בְּשִׁמְךָ / וַיִּקְבְּלוּ כָלֵם אֵת עַל מַלְכוּתְךָ –

While the Lubavitcher Rebbe and his followers have certainly taken outreach to its furthest conceivable limits, it is worth dwelling on the principle. The Torah is not a pathway to personal joy and reward just for Jews; the Gemara and the Rambam emphatically affirm that Gentiles go to the same places we do when we die.

God doesn’t whisk the Jewish People out of Egypt and into freedom in an instant because that is not what God wants from our universe.

We would do well to remember that as much as our people have a sacred mission, the rest of the world matters and serves God’s purposes too, just in a different way.



## **The Long Way**

3 minute read | Straightforward

The Exodus story is a foundation of Judaism and features prominently in most of our mitzvos and prayers.

Aware of the magnitude and scope of the Exodus, God tells Moshe and Ahron in real-time how consequential this story will always be:

וְהָיָה הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה לָכֶם לְזִכְרוֹן וְחַגְתֶּם אֹתוֹ חַג ה' לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם חֻקַּת עוֹלָם תִּחְגְּלוּהוּ – “This day shall be to you one of remembrance; you shall celebrate it as a festival to God throughout the ages, you shall celebrate it as an institution for all time!” (12:14)

We practice this command in festive detail at the Seder, as the Haggadah recounts the captivating story of the Jewish people’s birth and liberation from Egypt and slavery.

But there’s a significant issue we ought to recognize immediately, without which the entire remembrance is irreparably compromised with no contemporary relevance at all.

We are fortunate to live in a vanishingly rare era of safety and prosperity, which only serves to obscure the fact that our people have been persecuted in one exile after another for most of our history. Even today, although largely safe from physical danger, the spiritual dangers have never been more powerful or seductive; most of our people are at different stages of assimilation or disorientation, desperately lacking clarity and direction.

What’s the point of talking about redemption that happened long ago when we’re not yet redeemed today?

The Meshech Chochmah explains that if it were nothing more than the anniversary of physical liberation, it truly would make little sense to celebrate in an era of subjugation. But if we understand it correctly as a spiritual liberation, then it continues to have a residual effect forever – וְחַגְתֶּם אֹתוֹ חַג ה' לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם חֻקַּת עוֹלָם.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe explains that the Seder’s goal is not just to remember that an Exodus happened once; but that an Exodus could happen at all.

R’ Jonathan Sacks notes that Jews have celebrated this throughout the highs and lows of our history, in ghettos and concentration camps, under conditions similar to or worse than Egypt.



## TorahRedux

Even the Exodus itself was imperfect – it did not lead to a full and final utopian life in Israel. The freed slaves fought God and Moshe for the rest of their lives, yearning to go back to Egypt.

Remarkably, the Torah and Haggadah openly embrace the notion of an imperfect and partial redemption; both subvert our expectation of a happy ending resulting in the Jewish people living happily ever after in peace and prosperity in Israel, which suggests that the premise of the question is false.

However flawed that generation's ability to embrace a new path might have been, they planted the seeds of redemption in the blueprint of our DNA. Humans are not robots, and we are all perfectly imperfect in our own way.

We don't need to mark the anniversary of an ancient generation's liberation long ago; we remember in order to celebrate what germinates from the seed planted by the Exodus – the innate ability to redeem ourselves.

Each of us in every generation must feel as though we experienced the great departure from Egypt, forever remembering that whatever troubles we face, the tools of redemption are already there, and salvation could be just a day away.

R' Shai Held notes that the Haggadah seems to powerfully suggest that the journey is more important than the destination. The Gemara warns against believing someone who says they have searched for answers but found nothing. As R' Louis Jacobs put it, the search for Torah is itself Torah, and in that search, we have already found; or as the Kotzker put it, the searching is the finding.

The question was accurate, that we've not yet made it all the way; but it's vastly better than no way.

There is still quite some way to go, but you're a long way from where you used to be, and that's worth celebrating as well.

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## **You are Worthy**

3 minute read | Straightforward

The Exodus is an orienting event for the Jewish People, a founding moment in our history, with a daily duty to recall it. It's the first thing God has to say to humans at Sinai; God introduces Himself as the God who took us out of Egypt.



## TorahRedux

Remembering the Exodus is a perpetual mitzvah, and an astounding amount of our daily blessings, mitzvos, and prayers commemorate the Exodus – זָכַר לִיציאת מצרים. It is ubiquitous to the extent we could miss the point entirely.

What do we mean when we say that we remember that God took the Jews out of Egypt?

It is essential to understand first principles because they are the foundational concepts that govern the systems built upon them.

If we unpack the story, the Jews in Egypt didn't deserve to be saved because they were so good or so special; in fact, quite the opposite.

The Zohar imagines the angels arguing whether or not God should save the Jews, and the argument was that “this lot are just a bunch of idol-worshippers, and so are those!” The Haggadah admits as much – מִתְחַלְלָה עֹבְדֵי עֲבוֹדָה זָרָה הֵיוּ אֲבוֹתֵינוּ –

When Moshe told the Jews to set aside and take one sheep per family, the Midrash says that “set aside” meant setting aside their idols before taking the sheep for the mitzvah!

When even Moshe, already well on his way to greatness, saw Yisro's daughters getting bullied and got involved in the dispute to protect them, the onlookers mistook him for just another Egyptian!

The Midrash famously states that the enslaved Jews retained their names, clothing, and language. This is often framed as a point of pride, but the point would seem to be that apart from these narrow and limited practices, they were otherwise indistinguishable from Egyptians in every other conceivable way!

Moreover, the generation that left Egypt and stood at Sinai fought Moshe the rest of their lives, begging to go back to Egypt, and was ultimately doomed to wander and die in the wilderness.

The Zohar goes so far as to say that the Jews were on the 49th level of spiritual malaise, just one notch off rock bottom, the point of no return. Rav Kook notes that this adds a particular dimension to the imagery of God's strong outstretched arm – it was a forceful intervention, an emergency rescue of a nation that had stumbled and was about fall off a cliff – בְּיַד חֲזָקָה וּבְזֶרַע נְטוּיָה –

As R' Shlomo Farhi explains, whenever God is characterized with strength, it indicates God doing something that is undeserved. God does not require more incremental strength to move a grape than a galaxy; but God can force compassion to overwhelm what justice requires – גּוֹאֵל וְחֹזֵק אֶתָּה –

That is to say that on a fundamental level, the Jews didn't deserve rescuing at all.



And yet crucially, as R' Chaim Kanievsky notes, God responded to their cries all the same – וַנִּצְעַק אֱלֹהֵי' – אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ, וַיִּשְׁמַע ה' אֶת-קוֹלֵנוּ.

The Divrei Chaim notes that the very first Commandment is no command at all; God “introduces” himself as the God who took us out of Egypt – אֲנֹכִי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים – It's not a command – it is just a simple statement of fact. We might not deserve redemption, yet God redeems us all the same.

R' Tzadok haKohen writes that to remember Egypt is to remember God's first declarative sentence; our God rescues people from Egypt, whoever they are.

The Ropshitzer quipped that תְּחִלָּה לְמִקְרָאֵי קֹדֶשׁ זָכַר לִיציאת מצרים – the first step towards holiness is remembering that the same Exodus that rescued people from the abyss once before could be just a moment away.

So when we remind ourselves about Egypt, it's not just that it happened once, but that, as the Lubavitcher Rebbe put it, God's redemption is not contingent on our worthiness.

You don't need to remember the simple historical events of the Exodus; you have to remind yourself that every single last human is worthy of God's unconditional love.

## In a Hurry

2 minute read | Straightforward

Almost all mitzvos and rituals have a commemorative or symbolic aspect: we have two challahs on Shabbos to symbolize the double portion of manna on Shabbos; we sit in sukkahs because our ancestors sat in sukkahs.

But there's something unusual about Pesach that is uncommon, if not unique.

The mitzvah of Matza is not commemorative of the fact that it's what our ancestors ate when they left Egypt; we eat Matza specifically because of the way they left Egypt, which was in a hurry – בהפזון. Our ancestors left in a hurry and didn't have time to bake bread properly, so we prepare our bread quickly as well.

“Quickly” is an adverb; it modifies leaving Egypt. Mitzvos usually commemorate concrete events and things. Even more than the fact of leaving Egypt, why is the fact it happened quickly so significant?



## TorahRedux

In the context of mitzvos, Judaism places utmost value in urgency – זריזין מקדימין למצות. R' Yitzchok Hutner suggests that this principle is derived from the Matza our ancestors ate because they had to leave in a hurry.

The Torah urges us to observe the mitzvos, which the Midrash alternatively reads as Matzos – ושמרתם את המצות. Taking the analogy at face value, rushing to do a mitzvah is not an extra credit; because if it's anything like Matza, then waiting would spoil it – מצוה הבאה לידיך אל תחמיצנה. So if a mitzvah comes your way, don't delay!

The Vilna Gaon notes that in our daily prayers, we thank God for creating space and time – ברוך עושה בראשית. In the moment God took the Jews out of Egypt, they became bonded and connected to the transcendent Creator. That connection distorts time because when the temporal meets the eternal, the result is haste; where נצחי interacts with זמן, you get הפזון. The moment God executed the Final Plague, a moment that transcended all time and decisively won the day, happened כהצות, in a non-moment. God does not act in time and so does not take His time.

As complicated as it may sound, it's quite intuitive; when something matters, it demands urgency. R' Shlomo Farhi teaches that a lack of urgency ruins mitzvos because it profanes something sacred into just another item to procrastinate on the to-do list.

Speed and urgency are not just the specific way our ancestors left Egypt; they are the only way our ancestors could ever have left Egypt. The point of the story isn't simply that the Jewish People left Egypt. It's that they left quickly. Leaving "quickly" is everything – it's the moment of magic, the moment God honoured His promise to Avraham to bind and bond with the Jewish People forever. It was an emergency, and it was urgent; quick.

When the time came for God to act for us, God was decisive. When it's time for us to act for God, we ought to reciprocate.

The way you do things matters. If it matters, be decisive.

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## **The Strength to Carry On**

3 minute read | Straightforward

The Torah describes how Pharaoh resists Moshe's requests to let his people go, and so God sends waves of plagues. At multiple points in the Exodus story, Pharaoh is ready to cave and concede, when God hardens Pharaoh's heart, giving him the resolve to avoid doing the right thing, delaying the Jewish People's eventual liberation.

Once he was ready to concede, what was the point of hardening his heart?

The Sforno suggests a compelling answer.

One of the keys to correctly understanding the Exodus story is that getting the Jewish People out of Egypt was not the exclusive goal. It demands nothing of God to flatten Egypt or magic the Jews out. Instead, lots of other things happen that aren't reducible to the goals of a defeated Egypt and a free Jewish People. The Exodus, like Creation, was not instantaneous; it was a deliberately gradual and incremental process.

There are two words the Torah uses to describe what happens to Pharaoh's heart: strength and heaviness – **חזק / כבד**. Where Hashem acts directly, there is only **חיזוק** – Hashem gives him the strength to carry on.

The story is very clear why, and it slips right under the radar. Hashem explicitly states the purpose of what is to come to Moshe, foreshadowing the first plague:

– **וידעו מצרים כי-אני ה', בנטתי את-ידי על-מצרים; והוצאתי את-בני-ישראל, מתוכם** – “Egypt will know that I am the Lord when I stretch My hand over Egypt and take the Jews from them.” (7:17)

We've read this story a few times, and our eyes glaze over because we know it a little too well, and we ought to remember that at this point in the story, no one knows what God can do – not Moshe, and certainly not Pharaoh. The Jewish People only know they are descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yakov; and that they believe in the One God of their ancestors. But that's really it – no one knew God had actual power; no one had ever seen or heard of a miracle. Quite arguably, there hadn't been a miracle since the Flood, which had almost no survivors. So with good reason, Pharaoh mocked Moshe:

– **מי ה אֲשֶׁר אֲשַׁמֵּעַ בְּקוֹלוֹ לְשַׁלַּח אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא יָדַעְתִּי אֶת-ה וְגַם אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא אֲשַׁלַּח** – “Who is this Lord that I should heed Him and let Israel go?! I don't know this Lord, and I won't let Israel go!” (5:2)

So when God flexed a strong and outstretched arm on Egypt, people were rightly terrified, and so Pharaoh needed strength to continue. If he tried to save Egypt out of fear of destruction, that would be the wrong reason! So God gave Pharaoh the resolve to withstand his own fear, up to the seventh plague.

But after the seventh plague, the task is seemingly complete; and Pharaoh concedes entirely:

– **וַיִּקְרָא לְמֹשֶׁה וּלְאַהֲרֹן, וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם, חָטְאתִי הַפְּעַם: ה, הַצַּדִּיק, וְאַנִּי וְעַמִּי, הָרָשָׁעִים. הַעֲתִירוּ, אֵל-ה, וְרַב, מִהֵיט קִלְתִּי אֱלֹהִים וַיִּשְׁלַח פְּרֹעָה, וַיִּקְרָא לְמֹשֶׁה וּלְאַהֲרֹן, וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם, חָטְאתִי הַפְּעַם: ה, הַצַּדִּיק, וְאַנִּי וְעַמִּי, הָרָשָׁעִים. הַעֲתִירוּ, אֵל-ה, וְרַב, מִהֵיט קִלְתִּי אֱלֹהִים** – Pharaoh sent for Moshe and Ahron, and said to them, “Now I have sinned. Hashem is righteous; my people and I are guilty. Beg the Lord to bring an end to this flaming hail; I will free you; you will be here no longer...” (9:27,28)



Egypt has been educated – וַיְדַעוּ מִצְרַיִם כִּי-אֱלֹהֵי ה' – but this is not the end. With three more plagues to come, God tells Moshe that he has a new audience now:

– וְלִמְעַן תְּסַפֵּר בְּאָזְנֵי בְנֶי-וְכוּנֹה-בְנֶה, אֵת אֲשֶׁר הִתְעַלְלֹתִי בְּמִצְרַיִם, וְאֵת-אֶתְחִי, אֲשֶׁר-שָׁמַתִּי בָם; וַיְדַעְתֶּם, כִּי-אֱלֹהֵי ה' – So that you tell over to your sons and daughters how I toyed with Egypt, with my wonders that I cast on them, and you will know that I am the Lord. (10:2)

Now it is about the Jewish People – וַיְדַעְתֶּם כִּי-אֱלֹהֵי ה' –

Now, the Jewish People need to understand what Hashem would do for them. It was understandably mind-bending for them to comprehend what was taking place, and they fought against a life of miracles for the rest of their days. But even if that generation wouldn't see it, their children would.

God cares about us all, and God will do something about it.

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## Pharaoh's Responsibility

3 minute read | Straightforward

One of the foundations of religion and morality is free will.

With good reason, Maimonides identifies free will as a foundational principle underpinning the entire Torah. If humans can't deliberately choose between right and wrong, there can be no reward or punishment. If we can't choose, our actions have no value as we don't control them; if you are bad, it's not your fault because being good is impossible.

The Exodus story poses a problem to this, however.

Throughout the story, God tells Moshe that He has hardened Pharaoh's heart, and so Pharaoh refuses to free the Jews. But if God had hardened his heart, Pharaoh's free will was hopelessly compromised; how was punishing Pharaoh deserved or fair?

Maimonides's exposition of free will explains that it is possible to do something so bad egregious that the path of making amends and repentance is foreclosed, and the person can no longer turn back to where they once were.

We understand this; there is an old folk saying that the axe forgets; but the tree remembers, meaning that the person who hurts another forgets but the person who gets hurt will not. Someone abusive can reform themselves, regret their actions, and resolve never to hurt another person again, and they



should do all those things! But the point is, they can only hope to find a new path; they can never return to their old one, and that's what happened to Pharaoh.

Pharaoh's government enslaved, tortured, and murdered people, particularly children; justice itself required that he be prevented from making amends.

Pharaoh was so far down his path of madness and violence that he could not see or hear his people suffering, and his adviser's pleas fell on deaf ears:

הֲטָרָם תִּדַע כִּי אֶבְדָּה מִצְרַיִם – “Do you not see that Egypt is already lost?” (10:7)

Contemporary psychology might call this a form of cognitive dissonance, the uncomfortable feeling you experience when two of your beliefs are in conflict. When confronted with challenging new information, people may seek to preserve their current understanding of the world by rejecting, explaining away, or avoiding the new information, or convincing themselves that no conflict really exists. We can lie to ourselves to justify bad decisions and hypocrisy.

Pharaoh was determined to hold onto his power over his Jewish subjects, but this was at odds with his duties to the Egyptian people who were suffering. These beliefs were incompatible, but Pharaoh would not address the systemic issue and let the Jewish People go; he would only ever ask Moshe to remove the symptoms of the plague at hand.

Where was Pharaoh's free will? Where is ours? Cognitive dissonance is ubiquitous.

The Midrash warns us that sin is like a passing visitor, then a houseguest who overstays their welcome, and before long, it's master of the house. R' Jonathan Sacks suggests that we can all too easily become prisoners to our own pride on a microcosmic level.

It's not so difficult to imagine becoming so entrenched in a worldview that you get tunnel vision and can't change course.

R' Yisrael Salanter says that the first time you do something wrong, it's a sin. When you repeat it again, it seems permitted. When you do it the third time, it can feel like a mitzvah!

R' Shimshon Pinkus suggests that this is the definition of the Rosh Hashana blessing to be the head, and not the tail – שְׂנֵהֲיָהּ לְרֹאשׁ וְלֹא לְזָנָב. It's a wish for an intentional year, with conscious and constant course corrections, because if today's actions are based on yesterday's decisions, you end up being your own tail!

As much as we celebrate the prospect of freedom, you must consciously choose it daily.





## No Man Left Behind

5 minute read | Straightforward

After many long and grueling years enduring enslavement, the Creator had at long last dispatched Moshe to save the Jewish People. During one round of talks, Moshe suggested a more modest request to Pharaoh than letting his people go for good; instead, he proposed taking them into the desert for a multi-day festival, leaving open the possibility that they would return once the festivities were completed.

At this point, since Egypt had already experienced several plagues, cracks began to appear in the Egyptian government's resolve:

וַיֹּאמְרוּ עֲבָדֵי פַרְעֹה אֵלָיו עַד־מַתִּי יִהְיֶה זֶה לָנוּ לְמוֹקֵשׁ שְׁלַח אֶת־הָאֲנָשִׁים וַיַּעֲבֹדוּ אֶת־ה' אֱלֹהֵיהֶם הַטֶּרֶם תִּדְעֵ כִּי אֶבְדָּה מִצְרַיִם: וַיֹּשֶׁב אֶת־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶת־אַהֲרֹן אֶל־פַּרְעֹה וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָהֶם לָכוּ עֲבָדוּ אֶת־ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם מִי וּמִי הַהֹלְכִים: וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה בְּנִעְרֵינוּ וּבְנֹקְנֵינוּ גִלְדֵּם בְּבָבֵינוּ וּבְבָבוֹתֵנוּ בְּצִאֲנֵנוּ וּבְבִקְרָנוּ גִלְדֵּם כִּי תִגִּיה' לָנוּ: וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָהֶם יְהִי כֵן ה' עִמָּכֶם כַּאֲשֶׁר אֲשַׁלַּח אֶתְכֶם וְאֶת־טַפְכֶם רָאוּ כִּי רָעָה נָגַד פְּנִיכֶם: לֹא כֵן לְכוּ־נָא: פַּרְעֹה: הַגְּבָרִים וְעֲבָדוּ אֶת־ה' כִּי אִתָּה אַתֶּם מְבַקְשִׁים וַיַּגִּרֶשׁ אֹתָם מֵאֶת פְּנֵי פַרְעֹה: Pharaoh's advisers said to him, "How long will this one be a snare to us?! Let the men go to worship Hashem their God! Do you not yet know that Egypt is lost?" So Moshe and Ahron were brought back to Pharaoh and he said to them, "Go, worship Hashem your God! Who will be going?" Moshe replied, "We will all go, young and old: we will go with our sons and daughters, our flocks and herds; for we must observe Hashem's festival!" But he said to them, "Hashem be with you; the same as I mean to let your children go with you! Clearly, you are bent on mischief! No! Your men can go and worship Hashem since that is what you want." And they were expelled from Pharaoh's presence. (10:7-10)

Outside of wondering whether this alleged festival was mere diplomatic posturing or perhaps a genuinely lost festival we might otherwise mark, Pharaoh's advisors took it seriously and at least attempted to meet Moshe halfway.

While Moshe delivered a compelling and powerful speech about going with everyone, men and women, young and old, categorically refusing to leave anyone behind, it's worth dwelling for a moment on why Moshe wouldn't take Pharaoh up on his counteroffer to take the men out of Egypt.

This was an enormous and monumental concession! At a minimum, Pharaoh was at least willing to let some of the people go! If nothing else, Moshe could extract some fraction of the people he was tasked with saving. It's not obvious to assume that the only possible plan was for all the people to walk out at precisely the same time. The mission had long been underway, and this was plausibly the beginning of what succeeding at that mission might look like! Moshe could feasibly take this group out under the ruse of the festival and report to God for new orders about how to save those who remained behind. However many or few people were left behind, God still had to do the same work to get them out! It's



not so hard to imagine Moshe accepting Pharaoh's offer as a practical and realistic option – and it's not at all obvious why he didn't.

Why wouldn't Moshe accept a partial victory and take the first opportunity he had to get some – even if not all – of the Jewish People out of Egypt?

The Shem mi'Shmuel explains that Moshe's speech to Pharaoh highlighted a core value – if he had to leave even one single soul behind, it would be better if they stayed put.

Healthy humans have concentric relationship circles. I am at the center, then perhaps my spouse and children, then parents and siblings, then friends and extended family, then community and acquaintances. The Torah's expectation of us is that we expand our consciousness so that those circles be proximate enough to our own that your wellbeing impacts mine.

Pharaoh was a savvy villain and exploited this to great effect by presenting Moshe with such a choice – Moshe could never accept it. The apparent personal victory for Moshe succeeding in part but having to leave some people behind wouldn't be a partial victory – it was no victory at all. At best, a personal win is the starting point of helping others; and if we have the gall to take the win and abandon others to their fates, not only is it not a victory – it is actually a defeat. Pharaoh's offer was empty; it offered nothing we could live with.

This is by no means the most practical value to live by. Moshe's refusal indicated that he'd rather they all stay put – in Egypt! – than leave a man behind. But choosing to live with ideals is never easy; putting values before profit or self-preservation has tangible drawbacks and real-life consequences. It takes immense willpower and inner strength to avoid cutting corners. But that's what all the stories of our greats call us to, with acts of courage and decency that fan the flames of idealism in our hearts, inspiring a desire to be just as bold and noble.

If we doubt the sacrosanctity of caring about the people we might leave behind, it's worth recalling the penultimate plague of darkness; and in particular, the effect it had on the people who experienced it:

לֹא־רָאוּ אִישׁ אֶת־אָחִיו וְלֹא־קָמוּ אִישׁ מִתַּחַת־יָדָיו – People could not see one another, and for three days no one could get up from where he was... (10:23)

We need to remind ourselves that, presumably, Egyptian adults weren't like children who are scared of the dark; it's not just that it felt like blindness, it's that their worlds were completely cut off from each other – לֹא־רָאוּ אִישׁ אֶת־אָחִיו.

The Chiddushei HaRim highlights that this was the worst punishment God could inflict on Egypt, short only of death itself – that people could not see each other. In a very real way, recognizing another human and moving ourselves to help them cuts to the very heart of what it means to be human, and we should take that notion seriously.



The distinguished psychologist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl witnessed humanity stripped to its essence in the concentration camps and observed how, despite living under the most terrible conditions, there were still men walking around comforting others and giving away their last piece of bread. People like these, the ones who placed themselves in service of others, who committed themselves to a greater cause, were the ones who found nourishment even in complete deprivation, who kept their fire burning even in total darkness.

In the wake of a disaster, whether earthquake, flood, terror attack, or other catastrophe, people are consistently altruistic, urgently engaged in coming together to care for themselves and those around them, strangers and neighbors as well as friends and loved ones. Every single incident has citizens who come to rescue those in need, providing evacuation and other necessities like food, clothes, medicine, and shelter. There are always first responders, but also plain everyday people from all walks of life, putting their lives on the line to help.

Most people, deep down, want to be pretty decent, reflecting a deep and profound longing for community and connection.

It's why stories of bravery and sacrifice tend to resonate so strongly, especially when they involve ordinary people. They are reminders of who we know we can be, of who we want to be. They are antidotes to a culture of toxic individualism, cynicism, and general self-centeredness, a culture that dismisses collective meaning in favor of individual gains, that sees altruism only as a personal expense, not as a source of fulfillment, as something from which you receive as much as you give.

Our most fundamental nature, the root of our behavior, is generosity, empathy, courage, and kindness. The shadows of the plague of darkness expose what it is to be human by stripping those things away. It ought to be incredibly telling that one of the most terrible things the Egyptians experienced was a divinely imposed solitary confinement that served to isolate people from each other.

What's more, if we don't really see our fate as bound to each other, to the people we love and everyone around us, we might accidentally be inviting the plague of darkness into our lives, carrying its shadows with us, long after Egypt has faded into the distance.

While reaching for greatness, we cannot forget each other. If we do, we forget ourselves.

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## **Refusing the Call**

5 minute read

5th January 2021

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

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

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

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

How could Moshe possibly refuse the call?

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

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



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

In the Purim story, Esther also refuses the call, not wanting to risk her life. Mordechai gives her a similar response – she has correctly assessed the facts and is indeed in danger. But that doesn't matter; the call to action stands open, and someone has got to respond. If Esther focuses on her fears and flaws, then she will lose the opportunity to step up, and someone else will – כִּי אִם-הִתְחַרַּשׁ תִּתְחַרְשִׁי בַּעֲת – הַזֹּאת רִוּחַ וְהַצֵּלָה יַעֲמוּד לְיְהוּדִים מִמָּקוֹם אַחֵר וְאֵת וּבֵית-אֲבִיךָ תִּאֲבְדוּ וּמִי יוֹדֵעַ אִם-לֵעֵת כְּזֹאת הַגַּעַת לְמַלְכוּת.

The book of Jeremiah opens with a similar vignette. Jeremiah reports that God appeared to him and called upon him to be that generation's prophet. Like Moshe, Jeremiah protests that he is just a kid and is not a speaker, and in what we can now recognize as a consistent fashion, God dismisses these excuses – not because they are wrong; but because they ultimately don't matter – וַיְהִי דְבַר-ה' אֵלַי לֵאמֹר: – כְּטָרִם אֶצְרָךְ בְּכָטָן יְדַעְתִּיךָ וּבְטָרִם תֵּצֵא מִרְחֹם הַקִּדְשׁוֹתֶיךָ נְבִיא לְגוֹיִם נִתְתִּיךָ: וְאָמַר אֲהֵא אֲדַנִּי הַ הַנְּהָ לֹא-יְדַעְתִּי דְבַר כִּי-נֶעַר אָנֹכִי: וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֵלַי אֶל-תֹּאמַר נֶעַר אָנֹכִי כִּי עַל-כֵּל-אֲשֶׁר אֲשַׁלְחֶךָ תִּלְוֶה וְאֵת כָּל-אֲשֶׁר אֶצְוֶה תִּדְבֹר.

The Torah is deliberate in how it presents stories to us; what it leaves in, and also what it leaves out. Of all the small interactions that don't make the final cut, we should take note that refusing the call is an interaction the Torah deems necessary for us to know about many of our heroes. Our greatest heroes don't just jump at the chance to do what is so obviously the right thing; whether the right thing isn't so obvious in the moment, or whether they didn't eagerly jump for other complex reasons. The Torah's stories consistently contain a refusal of the call; our legends also experienced doubt and uncertainty, just like we do.

Who is perfect enough to fix the problems you see around your community? Who is perfect enough to lead the people you love to greatness? Ironically, anyone deluded and narcissistic enough to think they are perfect enough would be the worst candidate. The Torah seems to be saying that it has got to be you – אֶל-תֹּאמַר נֶעַר אָנֹכִי –

If you have adequately honed your sensitivities, you recognize you have a lot of work to do and so many people need your help. You might even hear a call to action in your life vibrating deep within, but it's not enough. You doubt yourself, and you refuse the call. You're scared – and you should be! There is plenty to be scared of, and the stakes couldn't be higher. The undertaking the Torah calls us to is enormous, too enormous to accomplish on our own; yet it calls on us just the same – לֹא עָלֶיךָ – הַמְּלָאכָה לְגִמּוֹר, וְלֹא אַתָּה בְּן חוֹרִין לְבַטֵּל מִמֶּנָּה.

There is moral fiber in quieting the voice of self-doubt and stepping up to answer the call anyway – אָם – אֵין אָנִי לִי, מִי לִי. וּכְשֶׁאֲנִי לְעַצְמִי, מָה אָנִי



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

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

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

So why shouldn't it be you?

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## Choreographed Futility

4 minute read | Straightforward

Towards the beginning of the Exodus story, God gives Moshe his great mission.

Moshe initially resists and says that the Jewish People will not listen to him. Although our sages criticize him for this, he demonstrates that he is highly attuned to his environment because, sure enough, that's precisely what happens:

וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה בֶּן אֶלְבָּנִי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֶל-מֹשֶׁה מִקֶּצֶר רוּחַ וּמַעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה – But when Moshe told this to the Israelites, they would not listen to Moshe, their spirits crushed by cruel bondage. (6:9)

Exactly as Moshe had predicted, they didn't listen, and this theatre only caused Moshe and his exhausted people unnecessary aggravation, disappointment, and frustration. It's hard to see this as anything other than choreographed futility – a colossal waste of time, energy, and effort on all counts from the very outset.



This is consistent with a broader motif throughout the entire Torah, filled as it is with so many aborted attempts, failed efforts, and wasted opportunities.

Generally speaking, it is usually worth giving something a go, because you never know; but in this instance, everyone did know – they knew it wasn't going to work!

Moshe knew they wouldn't listen. God knew they wouldn't listen. Yet God sent Moshe anyway. Why would God bother sending Moshe on an exercise in futility?

The Sfas Emes teaches that there is no such thing as futility when trying to help people. This particular chapter of the story illustrates that it's never one specific interaction that has an instantaneous magical breakthrough effect; the helper must persist. Words can take root even if they don't immediately blossom and yield fruit; the lack of immediate and apparent results doesn't mean the efforts are wasted.

The Netziv highlights how the Torah is replete with phases and stages that indicate gradual transformation; for example, there are five expressions of redemption, ten plagues, and each phase of Dayeinu.

Let's remember that we are reading the Exodus story, the grandest redemption story in history to date, and this is how it starts. Moshe is frustrated, his people are hurting and spent, and he can't get them to entertain the dream or notion that things could change for the better. Not even the most legendary redemption story has an instant turning point or pivotal moment; it starts like this – boring and painfully slow. Nothing happens! On Seder night, we celebrate the great miracles, but maybe we should read these few lines as well and remember what change actually looks like, not only in our daily lived experience but as attested to in the Torah's own words.

The Chizkuni suggests that it's not that they wouldn't listen, but that they couldn't; they were structurally and systemically too traumatized to have the mental or physical capacity to hold on to hope. And even so, God sends Moshe to them with words that are not lost to the ether. Even if they can't internalize the message, it is objectively important that they see Moshe trying to help them, that they hear the words; and accordingly, that we hear that interaction through the ages as well. There are times a person is so stuck that they don't want to be saved; and still, you can't abandon them.

Right after this unsuccessful effort to encourage his people, Moshe reports back to God, and a nonchalant God tells them straightforwardly that their mission is going ahead on schedule and as planned:

וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה לְפָנָיו ה' לֵאמֹר הֲנִי בְנִי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא־שָׁמְעוּ אֵלַי וְאִיךָ יִשְׁמְעֵנִי פֶּרַעַה וְאֲנִי עֶרְל שִׁפְתָּיִם. וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־אַהֲרֹן וַיִּצְוּם אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶל־פֶּרַעַה מְלֶךְ מִצְרָיִם לְהוֹצִיא אֶת־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם – But Moshe appealed to God, saying, “The Israelites would not listen to me; how then should Pharaoh heed me, a man of impeded speech!” So



## TorahRedux

God spoke to both Moshe and Ahron regarding the Israelites and Pharaoh king of Egypt, instructing them to deliver the Israelites from the land of Egypt. (6:12,13)

But what follows this powerful reaffirmation of the mission isn't a renewal or redoubling of efforts. The Torah interrupts this story mid-paragraph with a tangential breakdown of the heritage and lineage of the Jewish families in Egypt in exhaustive detail.

It's unclear what this breakdown is doing in this story, but perhaps it ties into the notion of efforts not going to waste.

The Ishbitzer teaches that in the instant we choose to pray, before uttering a word, God is poised to listen, which is to say, God responds before we have reached out. In the physical world, Moshe tried to encourage the Jewish People, but they couldn't hear him. But in the spiritual world, which is to say the world of the spirit, the Torah tells us who they were and where they came from, that they were descendants of Yisrael. Perhaps their identity could be a hook Moshe's words latched on to in their intangible subconscious.

Moshe's words weren't futile because they don't exist in isolation; they pooled into a more extensive relationship full of interactions, and this was just one of many. They weren't futile because change happens gradually, incrementally, and slowly. They weren't futile because they still register on a subconscious level. They weren't futile because they were the Children of Israel, and he was going to save them and stand with them at Sinai. They weren't futile because the people needed to see someone show them that they were worth fighting for, and we need to recognize that as well.

We read about this ostensibly failed interaction, and it's blindingly obvious that although the words might not have landed perfectly, these efforts were anything but futile.

Nothing ever happens in a day. In the words of Steve Jobs, most overnight successes take a really long time.

God sent Moshe to talk to people when everyone knew it wouldn't change a thing, but this failed interaction goes on to form a part of a foundation that all future growth and progress can be built upon. It's not wasted breath; it's an investment in posterity.

Time and again, we expect ultimate salvation, a moment everything changes and turns around, and we get disappointed because the world doesn't work like that. God very deliberately sends Moshe on a mission he already knows he cannot possibly succeed at, highlighting to Moshe and to us that apparent failure and setbacks are not futile. God sends Moshe because humble beginnings and failed efforts are independently valuable, regardless of the outcome.

If you've clashed with someone in a relationship that matters to you, you know that you can't fix things with a good one-liner. No single idea or thought will make them suddenly understand, no light





bulb will turn on that changes everything. Reality is far more modest than that; each kind word and positive interaction is a deposit into an account balance that barely seems to grow at the start. It's painfully slow, frustrating, and it doesn't look like progress; sometimes it even looks like a step backwards.

If you're stuck in trouble and can't hear a kind word, hold on. If you're trying to help someone who won't hear or see it, keep it up.

It wasn't futile then, it's not futile now.

## Taboo

5 minute read | Straightforward

One of the painstakingly detailed aspects of the Mishkan's planning and development is the process of materials procurement. Aside from the portions about the fundraising, the Torah includes a public ledger accounting for all sources and uses, recording where every last donation ended up.

While not exactly riveting, there is a discrepancy in how the Torah accounts for how they utilized the donations of bronze:

וַיְהִי כִּשְׁבַע עָשָׂר אֶלְפִים וָאַרְבַּע־מֵאוֹת שֶׁקֶל. וַיַּעַשׂ בָּהּ אֶת־אֲדָנֵי פֶתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וְאֵת מִזְבַּח הַנְּחֹשֶׁת וְאֵת־מִכְבַּר הַנְּחֹשֶׁת אֲשֶׁר־לוֹ  
The donated bronze came to 70 talents and 2,400 shekels. From it, he made the sockets for the entrance of the Tent of Meeting; the bronze altar and its bronze grating and all the utensils of the altar; the sockets of the enclosure and the sockets of the gate of the enclosure; and all the pegs of the Mishkan and all the pegs of the enclosure. (38:29-31)

The Abarbanel notes that there is a bronze vessel we know of that doesn't feature on this list, the washbasin. It is categorized separately from the general bronze accounting because this bronze didn't come from the main bronze operating account; it came from a wholly separate source to the rest of the general fund:

וַיַּעַשׂ אֵת הַכִּיּוֹר נְחֹשֶׁת וְאֵת כַּנּוֹ הַנְּחֹשֶׁת בְּנֹו נְחֹשֶׁת בְּמִרְאֵת הַצַּבָּאוֹת אֲשֶׁר צָבְאוּ פֶתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד  
He made the washbasin and its stand of bronze, from the mirrors of the women who amassed at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. (38:8)

Rashi quotes a fascinating Midrash that when the women of Israel wanted to donate their makeup mirrors to the Mishkan fund, Moshe considered rejecting these mirrors since they are, on their face, tools of immodesty. Notionally correct, humans use cosmetics to enhance their appearance,



aesthetically speaking. While not the same, physical attractiveness is tightly correlated with sexual attractiveness; so cosmetics and makeup, superficially at least, serve the purposes of desire and lust, which are more aligned with the evil inclination – תאוה. But despite this, God interceded and instructed Moshe to readily accept these mirrors, declaring them the dearest of all contributions.

The subtext of this unusual vignette is that when the enslaved men in Egypt were exhausted and spent from backbreaking forced labor, they no longer wanted to be with their wives, the thought being that with no more children, their misery would come to an end. To counter this, the women would bring their husbands food and drink, and used these personal makeup mirrors to seduce their husbands with great success, directly resuscitating the imperiled future of the Jewish People. Rather than simply perceiving these actions as mere gratuitous and mundane acts of the flesh, God recognized their heroic valor in the Jewish People's hour of great need.

Let's recall the explicit point of Pharaoh's enslavement of the Jewish People was for population control; their fertility was a threat so Egypt pursued oppressive policies to suppress it. But it didn't work, and this teaching credits the brave Jewish women for that. It also affirms that even the most accomplished leader could fail to recognize their true value; but as our sages ultimately say, the Jewish People were saved from Egypt in the merit of righteous women.

R' Shmshon Raphael Hirsch highlights the deep significance of how even something as mundane as a mirror, a symbol that functions to draw attention to the human body as an object of sensual desire, can be co-opted and integrated into Divine service.

The symbolism goes deep; the washbasin functions to consecrate hands and feet, which is to say we can elevate and refine our simple flesh and blood bodies. There is no separate track for holy things – we create holiness through our ordinary actions and footsteps. The mirrors we might have thought of as impure are actually sacred, and they change the directional flow of people who use the washbasin from impure to pure.

The separate accounting of the women's bronze mirrors contains an important and illuminating insight into the role of intimacy. It's taboo to discuss sexuality, to the extent that it is not uncommon for people to write off the whole topic as forbidden and associate it with guilt and shame; and yet one of its vessels became not only a central feature in the Mishkan but quite plausibly the dearest donation of the lot!

It is imperative to separate what's kosher from what's not, right from wrong. The laws of איסורי ביאה and עריות are extremely severe and have catastrophic consequences highlighted by, among others, Hoshea and Yirmiyahu. They matter! But we must remember that the very first commandment from God to humans is to be fruitful and multiply. The Sefer Hachinuch observes that the mitzvah's essential nature is that God desires a world populated with life, which is intuitive, because we are designed to precisely that specification, along with every other living thing. It's actually a defining feature of being a living thing!



Judaism is extremely focused on the purity of our sexuality. Adam and Chava were created naked and felt no shame until later in the story when they eat from the Tree of Knowledge. There was nothing intrinsically bad about their naked bodies, and so no shame associated with it; they were living expressions of holiness even in their natural state. Only once they gained a deeper perception and understanding of consciousness could they comprehend the notion that sexuality could be immoral and so their nakedness could be shameful and embarrassing.

We often childishly characterize Satan as this evil other that is at odds with God's purposes, but this could not be more wrong. Satan is a trusted member in good standing of God's forces and has a decisive and important role to play in the universe's destiny. Nechama Leibowitz teaches that the same impulses which can lead us to destruction can just as equally lead us to sanctity – to building our families and perpetuating the future. Our sages recognized the need to serve God with our better and worse inclinations – בְּכָל־לִבְבְּךָ – literally, “hearts”, in the plural.

While we may categorize desire as originating in the baser or evil inclination, we must recognize its necessity as an essential precursor to life, to the extent that the Midrash labels that evil inclination as “very good.” Like eating or drinking, it is an essential biological driving force that is integrated and synonymous with being alive, and when controlled, and channeled in the appropriate context, it can be sacred.

R' Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz teaches that Judaism does not exist to quell or quash the forces of human nature; the constraints of the Torah's laws leave room for those forces to be beneficial and constructive. As the famous song goes, beauty and grace are vain; but vain only in the sense that they are transient, that there is more to life than preoccupation with your image. But vain doesn't mean they are bad; beauty is a gift, and modesty should not be properly understood as a denial of it.

We may even think that beauty, desire, and sexuality are good in our homes, but still inappropriate in the Mishkan; a place where we strive to be above any distraction and just focus on God, where physical impulses should remain outside. In a meta sense, that might even be a reasonable reaction to this entire teaching! And yet, speaking directly to this notion that even Moshe could get behind, Rashi and our sages straightforwardly and unambiguously point out that God does not see it that way, and we still think it's inappropriate, we might need to recalibrate – קַבֵּל, כִּי אֱלוֹהֵי הַבְּיָרִין עָלֵי מִן הַכֹּל –

Human desire can be elevated into the sanctified life force of Judaism, showcased by the persistence of Jewish women who used their sexuality to save the Jewish people. For God, sexuality is an important part of our lives and therefore is a core part of the religious sphere.

The separate treatment of the women's makeup mirrors highlight that intimacy and everything associated with it can be sacred, and what God considers among the dearest thing we have.



## Postscript

While I still have your eyeballs - professionally, I specialize in Wage Parity for New York home health companies (LHCSA / CDPAP). If you have a relationship with anyone at a New York home health company, I kindly request that you please reach out and make an introduction - I have something they probably need.

I started writing Divrei Torah in 2009 as a contemporary anthology of some of the Torah's most powerful ideas, presented in a clear and simple format, to leave you with a portable takeaway that will resonate with the way you choose to live.

Learning is a transaction – an exchange of the student's time for the teacher's information. Accordingly, I research and write with painstaking ruthlessness out of respect for the reader, with the singular goal of slashing the transaction cost of a meaningful idea. If this exchange was worth your while, I have a Whatsapp group and email list I post to regularly, and invite you to join - please email me at [neligertner7@gmail.com](mailto:neligertner7@gmail.com). Please also reach out to me with any questions, comments, or feedback, and especially if you have your own Divrei Torah to share with me - we get better together!

It also provides what I find to be a really nice way to stay in touch.

My hope is that these thoughts help you live a little better, in the way they have for me.

Thanks for reading.

Neli

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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).*

Neli

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



## TorahRedux

**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.