



## Vayelech; Yom Kippur 2022

### The Eternal Flame

3 minute read | Straightforward

The ancients understood that water is the source of life, that rain and water are life-giving, and that water symbolizes cleansing, regeneration, renewal, fertility, birth, creation, and new life.

Rain is a powerful symbol in the covenantal relationship between God and the Jewish people; unlike Egypt, where the water comes up from the Nile and beneath feet, Israel is a land where people must look up to the heavens for rain.

Given rain's prominent role in an agricultural economy, it follows that rain features in our daily prayers; but there was one time of year when the rain had a unique prayer.

The Kohen Gadol would enter the inner sanctum of the Beis HaMikdash once a year on Yom Kippur and perform the ritual service and say one single prayer – the only prayer ever said at Judaism's holiest site – about rain.

But where we might expect the foremost religious leader and representative of an entire generation to request the right amount of rain at the appropriate time and place, we find that instead, the prayer simply asks God to ignore the prayers of travelers who don't want to get wet on their way.

Given the central importance of rain, why is that the most important thing to say?

There is an interesting directive in the laws of sacrifices about a fire that had to burn in all weather conditions, even in the rain:

אֵשׁ תְּמִיד תִּהְיֶה עַל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ לֹא תִכָּבֵה – Burn an eternal flame on the altar, it can never burn out... (6:6)

On its face, this is a simple instruction to the attending Kohanim on duty to regularly stoke and fuel the flame.

There was nothing magical about it; it could not and did not burn on its own. It required a complex and dedicated logistical operation with constant maintenance and monitoring with round-the-clock shifts year-round, rain or shine, snow or wind.

Pirkei Avos suggests that their efforts were met with divine assistance; when it rained, the rain would not quench the fire, which is to say that our sages specifically understood the divine assistance to take the form of rain that wouldn't put the fire out, as opposed to no rain at all over the fire. The Kohanim would still have to work the fire in adverse weather conditions; God would make sure their efforts were successful.

This strongly implies that no rain here, there, or anywhere is not a viable solution.



R' Shamshon Raphael Hirsch suggests that this illustrates that the heat and warmth of the special moments of life are only fuelled by the grit and consistency of our daily grind. It wasn't an eternal flame so much as a perpetual flame – אש תמיד.

This eternal flame, fueled as it was by raw human willpower, was the source of fires in all the year-round services, from the Menorah to the incense, the crescendo of the Yom Kippur service when the Kohen Gadol said his prayer for the rain. The eternal flame wasn't just something that lies in the external world; it came from within. Perhaps every person is a miniature eternal flame; you must continually stoke the fire at whatever pace allows you to keep at it for decades without burning out.

Our sages understood the true miracle of the eternal flame; determined willpower and enduring efforts blessed with success. The Yom Kippur prayer affirms our worldview; we reject the immaturity of the fair-weather traveler, who does not accept that it will rain. We live in a world where there is rain, a world where it must rain, and people are going to have to be a little wet and uncomfortable.

You must not deny the crucial role consistency, perseverance, and perspiration play in life. Like the eternal flame, the miracle only happens after you've exhausted your efforts.

As R' Chaim Volozhin teaches, while we can't choose our circumstances, we can control our direction and velocity – לא עליך המלאכה לגמר.

R' Joseph B. Soloveitchik suggests that it is a human's duty to broaden the scope and strengthen the intensity of their efforts – השתדלות – because the aggregate of all outcomes is contingent on our efforts.

For the blessing to have a place to land, you need to do all you possibly can; ask not for a lighter burden, but broader shoulders.

All you can do is your best; you must simply hope for the rest.

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## **Fighting Fate**

2 minute read | Straightforward

For many people, one of the most moving parts of the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur liturgy is the Nesaneh Tokef prayer; which vividly describes the courtroom of judgment and sets the stakes as high as possible – determinations of life, death, and everything in between.

The prayer acknowledges that on this today, Heaven determines who lives and who dies, and you take a moment to think about who left us before their time this year. Who will suffer, and who will have it easy; you think of someone who had an awful time recently. Who will be well and who will be weak; you think of that terrible diagnosis you heard about.

And yet, for all the severity of judgment, the ending of the prayer seems to throw it out the window entirely. Yes, this is Judgment Day, and sure, your verdict for the year is set today, and this is the decisive moment. And



yet, as much as that may be true, repentance, prayer, and charity will change our fate – ותשובה ותפילה וצדקה מעבירין – אַת רע הגזירה.

But much as we take judgment seriously, we loudly proclaim that our fate is, in fact, not fixed at all because of the notion that we can choose to change and grow.

The word for repentance means homecoming or return; that however lost we may be, we can always find our way back – תשובה. The word for prayer means introspection; we can always take stock for an honest self-appraisal, evaluating and redirecting our direction – תפילה. The word for charity means justice; justice is something humans can create and share with others – צדקה. As the Lubavitcher Rebbe explains, the words we say are all aspects of our lives that we have complete agency and control over.

R’ Micha Berger notes that they parallel the three relationships a person has – charity reflecting our horizontal relationship with each other, prayer reflecting our vertical relationship with God, and repentance reflecting our inner relationship with ourselves.

R’ Jonathan Sacks teaches that the judgment of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur only determines the default trajectory as things stand, but they are not exhaustively binding or rigidly preordained. We can hold on to hope that, ultimately, we can influence and control our destinies.

If you improve one single characteristic, that constitutes a change substantial enough to change and reshape the future.

Change yourself, change your fate.

## What We Do With Broken Things

5 minute read | Straightforward

At Mount Sinai, Moshe ascended for forty days to receive the Torah. He didn’t show up when the people expected, so they got nervous and clamored for a new religious focal point. In a moment of madness, they crafted a Golden Calf, and in a perplexing turn of events, identified it as the god that brought them out of Egypt.

As they celebrate their new object of attention and worship with a festival of dancing, song, and sacrifice, Moshe returns to our world with the original Ten Commandments, a mythical artifact with magical properties crafted by God’s fingers. Moshe enters the camp only to witness these festivities and, utterly horrified, throws down the tablets, permanently shattering them.

With the first tablets broken, Moshe had to repeat the process in an attenuated form; the second tablets are almost second-rate in comparison. Whereas God had crafted the first ones, Moshe – a great human, but still a human – had to prepare the second. The first tablets contained a Torah that humans could never forget; the second ones contain a Torah we forget all the time.



The consequences of the Golden Calf were enormous; God threatened to destroy them all there and then, at least until Moshe intervened. Our sages suggest that the sin was so grave that every bit of human suffering pays down a sliver of the damage done by the Golden Calf.

A common thread people take from this story is the profound loss of what might have been; a more perfect world that never even got a chance to get started. Our sages teach that the letters began peeling off the surface and wafting back to the sky even before Moshe broke the tablets, which is how he understood that his people were no longer worthy.

The lessons of damage and loss are correct but miss something essential.

Moshe shattered the tablets, but what happened to the broken pieces?

When God told Moshe to craft the second set of tablets, God also tells Moshe what to do with them:

וְאָמַרְתָּב עַל־הַלְחַת אֶת־הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ עַל־הַלְחַת הָרְאשֹׁנִים אֲשֶׁר שִׁבַּרְתָּ וְשָׂמְתָם בְּאָרוֹן – “I will inscribe on the tablets the commandments that were on the first tablets that you smashed, and you shall deposit them in the Ark.” (10:2)

Our sages read the instruction to put “them” in the Ark as not only referring to Moshe’s second tablets, which are like the first tablets in content; but that the original shattered tablets were like the second tablets in what Moshe was supposed to do with them – הַלְחַת הָרְאשֹׁנִים אֲשֶׁר שִׁבַּרְתָּ / וְשָׂמְתָם בְּאָרוֹן.

The broken tablets are not buried, not forgotten, not hidden, and not lost. Instead, they are stored in the Ark, alongside the new, whole second tablets. As one writer beautifully put it, shattered remnants of the past still matter, persist in their importance, and deserve preservation and remembrance, just like something whole.

In this conception, the broken tablets are a striking symbol of brokenness and wholeness coexisting side by side at Judaism’s most sacred site. The comprehensive picture of the Golden Calf story and its aftermath should reorient our attitude to broken things and setbacks. It’s not a story about breaking things; it’s a story about what we do when we break things, and the epilogue is that you pick up the pieces and move forward.

In Japanese culture, there is an art form of restoring broken pottery by gluing the cracks and seams distinctively, often with gold lacquer; breakage and subsequent repair are part of the proud history of the object, rather than something to disguise.

Perhaps the first tablets represent an idealism that crashes into reality and shatters into pieces. While admittedly easy to say, perhaps their example shows that these hopes aren’t permanently lost to the ether. Rather than becoming cynical and jaded from traumatic experience and upheaval, discarding the vision of what could have been, you might be able to recover remnants that persist, integrating them with the real world you inhabit. It won’t look quite how you thought, but maybe some parts can in certain ways. Sometimes we have to break or let go of what we hoped could be in order to make way for what is and can still become.

Moshe didn’t break the tablets out of violent anger; his people and their world simply weren’t ready for the first tablets. Letting go of them, however damaging and terrible, was a necessary part of the healing process, paving the way for his people to build a world on a foundation of broken ideals. There’s nothing sad about that; that’s just the way life is.



## TorahRedux

The Torah closes with a line of praise for Moshe, the faithful shepherd, endorsing his strength and valor – וְלִכְלֹל הַיָּד הַחֲזָקָה וְלִכְלֹל הַמְּוֹרָא הַגָּדוֹל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה מִשָּׁה לְעֵינַי כֹּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר שִׁבַּרְתָּ / יִישַׁר כַּחַד שְׁשִׁבְרָתָּ.

On Simchas Torah, after we complete the Torah with that line, we immediately begin again, a new beginning built on breaking, breaking that is holy, breaking that God endorses, and breaking that stands before us and alongside the best we have to offer. From the ashes of this colossal failure, God teaches Moshe how his people can make amends and gives him the formula that features so prominently in our prayers on Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur. The healing from the rupture led to the Mishkan project, which all subsequent prayer, sacrifice, and worship center around. The remarkable quality of comebacks is not in spite of setbacks; it is because of them.

The Megaleh Amukos notes that the season of repentance and making amends is Ellul, an acronym for the Ark, the tablets, and the broken tablet they sit alongside – אֵלוּל / אַרְוֹן לוֹחַת וְשִׁבְרֵי לוֹחַת. More to the point, the second tablets are delivered on Yom Kippur itself.

We all break things, and we experience brokenness in different ways over the course of our journey. When we lose someone, that loss leaves a void with their shape imprinted in our hearts, and we carry that brokenness forever. After pain and loss, life goes on, only differently than before; we now live with two sets of tablets.

We might call forgetting and moving on from what we break bouncing back, but that's not how people are; that's not how the world works. Everything leaves its mark; a scratch, a bruise, or sometimes a deep scar or void that never entirely goes away.

Perhaps we're not supposed to bounce back at all; maybe it's better to bounce forward.

Take heart in the image of Moshe on his hands and knees, lovingly gathering the precious fragments, collecting every shard, then gently placing each sacred sliver one by one in the Ark, a brilliant glimmer of hope that lingers for posterity.

The shattered remnants of the past belonged in the Ark, and we ought to remember that the Ark wasn't a mere prop; it featured prominently in the Jewish People's travels and wars. It went out in front of them, leading the way, which is to say that any step forward was paved by the broken tablets as much as the whole tablets.

We live in a world of the second tablets. Although the first ones couldn't exist in their wholeness, they could exist in their brokenness, and maybe we can pick up some of those pieces and find a place for them to help shape our world.

There is no paradox of broken and whole; they coexist in a reciprocal interaction. We must find a way to marry the broken with the whole, hopeful idealism with gritty reality.

Brokenness is not something to conceal or deny; it is an essential part of being human. The moments that break us are as significant to our growth as the moments that make us whole. We can find sanctity not only in whole tablets; but in shattered ones, as well.



If we honor that brokenness and carry it with us, it can become sacred, Holy of Holies. In the words of the Kotzker, there is nothing so whole as a broken heart.

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## Prayer Redux

7 minute read | Straightforward

Prayer is one of Judaism’s essential and fundamental practices.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

With righteous outrage, we might wonder why God gets annoyed that the people cry out. The Jewish People have made it to the beaches with their children and everything they own. They have no boats and cannot swim to safety; just over the horizon, there is a hostile force in hot pursuit. By any reasonable standards, they are out of time and out of options. They are desperate, so they cry out to God for help; we can have no doubt that their fears and tears were deeply real.

What’s more, our sages imagine Heavenly gateways for prayers, suggesting that prayers are accepted or denied based on factors like circumstances, quality, and timing. The Neila prayer on Yom Kippur extensively utilizes this imagery to evoke a sense of urgency – quickly squeeze in your final prayers, because the gates are closing!



The Gemara concludes that regardless, the gate of tears is always open; presumably, because tears are heartfelt and sincere, and the pain that generates tearful prayers loads them with a potency that Heaven cannot refuse.

If crying to God for help is what you are supposed to do, why did God get annoyed at their prayer?

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

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

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

But the Midianite women were not successful at drawing in everyone; some of them were strong enough to resist, and, unsure what to do, they went to the holiest man, their leader Moshe, at the most sacred spot they knew, the Mishkan, to cry and pray – וְהִמָּה בְּכִים, פָּתַח אֱהֶל מוֹעֵד.

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

R' Moshe Sherer highlights how the Torah explicitly credits Pinchas's assassination of the provocateurs for stopping the plague, and not anyone's prayers – וַיִּדְקַר אֶת-שְׁנֵיהֶם-אֶת אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְאֶת-הָאִשָּׁה אֶל-קִבְתָּהּ; וַתַּעֲצֹר, הַמַּגֵּפָה / הַשִּׁיב אֶת-קִנְאָתִי אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל, בְּקִנְאוֹ אֶת-קִנְאָתִי.

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

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

At the Red Sea, God urges Moshe to have his people quickly get a move on. The Midrash expands this discussion; God rebuked Moshe that it was an inappropriate moment for lengthy prayers – there was danger close, and it was time for decisive action.

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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





## TorahRedux

You won't get the dream job you don't apply to. You won't get healthy if you don't diet and exercise. You won't pass the test if you don't study the material. You won't get rich if you don't invest. Your relationship won't be meaningful if you don't give your partner attention. That's the way the world works; if you expect your prayer to change that fundamental reality, you will likely continue to be disappointed.

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

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

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

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

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

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## Quote of the Week

"I was able to ask him, 'Hey man, do you have any advice?' He said, 'They asked you there for a reason, dude; just be yourself.' He, in that one sentence, allowed me to calm down. Allowed me to be myself... He's the reason I'm here."

— John Cena talking about The Rock

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*I present TorahRedux l'ilui nishmas my late grandfather, HaGaon HaRav Yehuda Leib Gertner ben HaRav HaChassid Menachem Mendel.*

*I hope you enjoyed this week's thoughts. If you have questions or comments, or just want to say hello, it's a point of pride for me to hear from you, and I'll always respond. And if you saw, heard, read, or watched anything that spoke to you, please send it my way - [Neli@TorahRedux.com](mailto:Neli@TorahRedux.com).*

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

Neli

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## TorahRedux

***PS** - TorahRedux is my pride and joy, the product of thousands of hours of learning, research, writing, editing, and formatting. I have been blessed to operate a niche business that allows me to dedicate a substantial amount of time to TorahRedux, and I welcome your assistance in furthering my goal to keep publishing high-quality Parsha content that makes a difference. I consult for NY home care companies, so if you have a contact in the NY home care industry, please introduce me!*

***PPS** - If anyone you know is looking for a job in healthcare, please put them in touch with me. With a helping hand from Above, I have successfully helped **3 people** get jobs in healthcare so far!*

**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.