

Seder Companion 2023

False Start

3 minute read | Straightforward

One of the primary ways we welcome the holiness and spirituality of Shabbos or a holiday is by starting the meal with kiddush – literally, sanctification. By saying the ritual words, we imbue the day and our meal with sacrality. Then, we ritually wash our hands and break our bread.

Yet chefs soap their hands before handling food, and doctors sanitize their hands before seeing a patient.

Why don't we start by washing our hands and only then make kiddush?

There's a Chassidic tale of a man trudging through a swamp, his boots caked in thick, wet mud. Clean boots look great; dirty boots, not so much. But there's no use stopping to clean those boots when they're still in the mud! It only makes sense to think about cleaning your boots once you're out of the swamp.

As R' Moshe Feinstein explains, true to life, there is no perfect moment. 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 be. So we might as well get started at being better humans right where we are, even though we all have baggage.

To be sure, sometimes Judaism does require purification first – a ritual immersion, a sacrifice, purity to enter the Beis HaMikdash and eat some sacred foods; but those are the exception, not the rule. The rest of the time, Judaism does not require cleansing and purification of ordinary people trying to do a little better; you can do better while still imperfect – Kadesh before Urchatz.

It's one of the core themes of Pesach; redemption for people who don't necessarily deserve it yet – we just need a kickstart. Cleansing and purification are essential, and they can come next; but first, get started as and where you are. Maybe the perfect moment you're waiting for is right now.

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, but there's no reason they should stop us from getting started. Our heroes experienced fear and doubt, and there were plenty of reasons not to act, but they acted just the same; that's how they became heroes!



Thoughts of waiting for a perfect moment and fear of failure or flaws holding you back 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.

The Shackles of Your Mind

2 minute read | Straightforward

The redemption story of the Haggadah opens with Matza, the bread of affliction – **הָא לְהֵמָּא עֲנִיָּא**. It's what our ancestors ate, and we invite whoever is hungry to join – **כָּל דְּכַפֵּין יִתֵּי וְיֵילֵל**.

If you think about it for a moment, it's a weird invitation.

Sharing is caring, and hospitality and kindness are essential Jewish values. But the Haggadah doesn't call for people to join our festive meal!

What sort of generosity is there in inviting people to share the bread of affliction?

The Chiddushei HaRim highlights that the worst punishment God could inflict on Egypt was darkness, short only of death itself – people were isolated from and could not see each other. Our sages go so far as to say that someone in isolation is effectively considered dead to the world. Humans need each other; it's an existential design feature of being human – **לֹא-טוֹב הֵיחֹת הָאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ**.

Perhaps one of the first steps towards redemption is experiencing pain together; even when we don't have much, at least we have each other.

R' Jonathan Sacks suggests that our willingness to share with others transforms the bread of affliction into the bread of freedom.

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 pieces of bread despite living in the most wretched circumstances. 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,



whose fires kept burning even in times of absolute freezing darkness. 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 redemption.

The Maharal notes that the Exodus is fundamental because it imbues Judaism with an essential quality of absolute freedom – Judaism is born with the removal of coercive influence.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe notes that R' Elazar ben Azariah discovered Ben Zoma's teaching to recall the Exodus at night 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.

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

It's essential to understand the direction of the story the Torah tells. God physically freed the Jews of that time, but mentally, they never left, which leads to a shocking but indisputable conclusion.

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

You don't need much to share; do it and set your spirit free.

The Power to Become

3 minute read | Straightforward

The Haggadah recounts how Pharaoh enslaved our ancestors in Egypt, but God rescued them and us from an existence of perpetual servitude to Egypt:

עֲבָדִים הָיִינוּ לְפָרְעָה בְּמִצְרַיִם, וַיּוֹצִיאֵנוּ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מִשָּׁם בְּיַד חֲזָקָה וּבְזֵרַע נְטוּיָה. וְאֵלֹהֵי לֹא הוֹצִיאָה הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא אֶת אֲבוֹתֵינוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם, – הָרִי אֶנּוּ וּבְנֵינוּ וּבְנֵי בְנֵינוּ מִשְׁעָבָדִים הָיִינוּ לְפָרְעָה בְּמִצְרַיִם. The Lord, our God, took us out from there with a strong hand and an outstretched forearm. And if the Holy One, blessed be He, had not taken our ancestors from Egypt, we and our children and our children's children would all be enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt.



The Haggadah states this in the affirmative; God promised to rescue the Jewish People, and God followed through. The Haggadah then states this in the negative; if God had not followed through, the Jewish People would not have been rescued.

But these statements are functionally equivalent and mean the same thing. What does the second one add that isn't evident with the first?

The first statement highlights a superficial aspect of redemption; the Jewish People were undergoing immense difficulty, and God saved them. But perhaps the second statement adds another dimension; if God hadn't saved them, they would have been fundamentally stuck – מְשֻׁעָבְדִים.

Millions of African people were enslaved and brought to America in more recent history. While slavery has been outlawed for generations, a certain stuckness has persisted long after slavery has become history, at least partly as a result of disconnection from their heritage. People don't know where they come from, inhibiting them from accessing the fullness of who they are.

With the Exodus, the Jewish People were permanently bestowed with the power of redemption, the ability to change and experience things dynamically, the ultimate cure to stuckness and stagnation. We weren't stuck with Egypt, and we weren't lost to Egypt; we have moved on from Egypt fully. Egypt is gone, and the cruel monster Pharaoh is a joke today, a weak pretender to greatness and strength.

People can get stuck, like quicksand. Egypt gradually worsened, starting relatively benign, descending slowly into full-blown enslavement and ethnic cleansing. The situation deteriorated even after Moshe appeared and entered the mix. The turning point in the story is when the people cry out, and God hears them after generations of trauma – וַיִּרְא אֶת-עֲנִיָּנוּ וְאֶת עֲמֻלְנוּ וְאֶת וּבִצְעַק אֶל-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ, וַיִּשְׁמַע ה' אֶת-קִלְנוּ, וַיִּרְא אֶת-עֲנִיָּנוּ וְאֶת עֲמֻלְנוּ וְאֶת וּבִצְעַק אֶל-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ. Their cry wasn't even a prayer – it was a sigh of utter despair from pain and anguish, not religious sentiment, although cries of pain are a form of prayer as well. The people had given up, never believing nor hoping that Moshe would or could save them; they were stuck.

The Shem miShmuel explains that the power of the Seder night is that its story of freedom on a national level offers us the opportunity to become free of the tendencies and troubles that hound us on a personal level. With the power to change, hard times no longer need to be so scary; they too, shall pass.

R' Daniel Rowe suggests that the first step of breaking free is recognizing how damaging stuckness and stagnation are. The leafy vegetation that served as abundant comfort food in Egypt is bitter Maror; Egypt's comforts are still bitter. The crutches that help you come to terms with and accept stuckness are not comforts at all; they are the deepest kind of bitter. God doesn't just save people from suffering; God offers people the way out of stuckness.



If freedom means a life rooted in the future, with the ability to choose and become, then its prerequisite is to taste the bitterness of what is missing in the present, that this moment isn't good enough.

No One Else Can Feel It For You

2 minute read | Straightforward

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

The Torah's expectation may be a little ambitious, but its threshold requirement is no less than its 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 an exception for when your team is in the final, or you're at the closing steps of a big business deal.

But the Haggadah draws our attention to observe one particular mitzvah:

אַפִּילוּ בְּלִנּוּ חֲכָמִים בְּלִנּוּ נְבוֹנִים בְּלִנּוּ זְמָנִים בְּלִנּוּ יוֹדְעִים אֶת הַתּוֹרָה מְצֻוֶה עָלֵינוּ לְסַפֵּר בִּיצִיאַת מִצְרָיִם – 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 must keep every mitzvah, it's vanishingly rare for everyone to do it themselves. There are so many you can do through an agent; people who don't know how to pray can still satisfy their prayer obligation just by listening – שׁוֹמֵעַ כְּעוֹנֵה. It's the principle that facilitates everyone listening to the shofar, for example, without actually doing it themselves.

But even within 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 must say it individually.

It sounds technical, but it's 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 do it correctly, we relive the experience and make it come alive. If that's what we're doing, we must 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 לְסֵפֶר בְּיַצִּיאת מִצְרַיִם 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 participate personally – 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.

In the Heart of Darkness

2 minute read | Straightforward

Right towards the beginning of the evening, the Haggadah says that the mitzvah of Seder night is for everyone to participate as much as possible. The Haggadah immediately follows this instruction with a vignette about five sages in Bnei Brak who did precisely that.

They got so caught up in the Seder discussion that the night got away from them, and they missed the sunrise.

But it's tough to miss the sunrise. However engrossed you are in what you're doing, you can tell whether it's day or night without thinking.

What is the point of this story?

R' Daniel Rowe suggests that the story isn't an example of how immersed the sages were in their discussion; it occurs during an era of religious oppression and persecution under the Roman Empire. The sages didn't miss the sun because they were out of touch with the world around them; they missed the sun rising because they observed their Seder in hiding with no natural light, in a cave or crawl space.

The story of our sages in Bnei Brak is the Haggadah's instruction played straight; their example inspires us to practice their faith and hope.



It's also a meta-commentary on the Haggadah. Having set out how universal the mitzvah is, even to people who know it all – וְאֵפִילוּ בְּלִנּוּ חֲכָמִים בְּלִנּוּ גְבוּרִים בְּלִנּוּ זְקֵנִים בְּלִנּוּ יוֹדְעִים – the Haggadah reminds a would-be know-it-all that the sages who composed the Haggadah and actually knew it all took their Seder seriously. They weren't preaching from the comfort of an ivory tower – their example serves as a living expression of their teaching; this story doesn't tell us the value of their teaching – it shows it.

The Jewish view of time is that calendar dates start in the night and end the following evening, suggesting that darkness is a prelude to the beauty of brightness and illumination; we must navigate the darkness with faith and hope for a better day – וְאֶמְנַתָּהּ בְּלֵילוֹת –

The sages under siege in Bnei Brak directly inform our understanding of Ben Zoma's insight that follows; the mitzvah of remembering redemption is in the nights. As the story of the sages in Bnei Brak teaches, we must remember that better times exist and are coming, even amid the insecurity and uncertainty of the unknown and even in times of concealment and total darkness.

Tailored 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 – אֵין מְפַטְרִין אַחַר הַפֶּסַח אֶפְיִקוֹמָן –. The Sfas Emes explains that the starting point of observance is that the Torah is ours, and this is what the law requires. 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 wind up doing a bunch of strange things for literally no reason at all.

R' Shlomo Farhi explains that we engage with the wise son and stimulate his thinking. There are so many reasons for the things we do, and people are drawn to different explanations. So we tell him the law without a reason; there is no single reason, and he can seek out ideas he finds meaningful. But the reasons are secondary to why we choose to be observant.

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 – הַקָּהָה אֶת שִׁנָּיו וְאָמַר לוֹ: בְּעִבוּר זֶה עָשָׂה ה' לִי בְצֵאתִי מִמִּצְרַיִם. לִי וְלֹא-לוֹ. אֱלוֹ הָיָה שָׂם, לֹא הָיָה נִגְאָל



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The Haggadah doesn't label this child wicked for his actions, beliefs, or observance levels; only because he doesn't identify with the Jewish people – לפי שהוציא את עצמו מן הקהל כפר בעקר. The Yismach Yisrael of Alexander notes that over and above religious activity, identifying with the Jewish people is the main thing here; that is why there was an Exodus and why we have a Seder – הָ has a numerological value of 12 – as in the twelve tribes of Israel. Subtracting from twelve kicked off the whole Egypt experience when Yosef's brothers tried to eliminate him!

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. He might not have been so lucky if he'd lived in that era – אלו הנה שם, לא הנה נגאל –. But fortunately, we live in a post-Sinai era where we can always make amends.

The Haggadah says to blunt his teeth; our parents' generation might have taken this literally, but it's not necessarily as harsh as it seems.

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 profound truth. Some children harbor bitterness, negativity, and resentment. Neutralize the bite and dig past the surface; a wonderful person is waiting to be recognized.

The simple son can't get past shallow simplicity, asking "what" rather than "why?". His innocent curiosity is pure and wholesome, not naïve, but rather in a constant state of wonderment. The Haggadah cautions us not to talk down to him, but to answer on his level, to patiently explain the answer in a way he can process.

The Haggadah suggests what to say to each son except the son who doesn't know how to ask; the Haggadah says to give him an opening – אַתָּה פָּתַח לוֹ. R' Shlomo Farhi teaches that creating an opening means cultivating a space for curiosity – the entire Seder is full of strange customs and rituals to help do just that. The most beautiful and profound speech won't matter to someone who doesn't get it, but it is also possible to nurture with silence – תַּנְהוּ לְנֶעֱרַע עַל פִּי דְרָכוֹ.

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 if a fifth son isn't in the Haggadah or at the Seder because everyone has given up on him; everyone deserves a place at the table.

As the Sfas Emes reminds us, the Haggadah acknowledges and welcomes the presence of all types of children and has something unique to say to each.

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.



Transmitting Memory

3 minute read | Straightforward

The Seder is replete with strange customs and rituals to encourage questions.

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 knowledge and history of the Exodus is not enough on Seder night, nor are the reasons behind the mitzvos, nor even the cleverest thumbwavy pedantry. The Haggadah's goal is engagement, the vehicle for which is stories – ואפילו בלגו חכמים בלגו נבונים בלגו זקנים בלגו יודעים את התורה מצוה עלינו לספר ביציאת מצרים.

Seder night is a night of storytelling. The goal of our Seder should be to engender a feeling, an experience of emotional connection, a sense of wonder, and a sense of identity and heritage. On Pesach, we refill the fuel tank of our spirit, rooting our identity in where we come from, overflowing with the wealth of knowing where we come from and where we can go. Our reaction should be awe, amazement, curiosity, and wonder – it's not the time to explain a halachic discrepancy. Even the wisest of us must undergo this journey every year because there isn't just more to know; there is further and deeper to experience beyond the assimilation of more information.

R' Shamshon 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 should not assume that children will be inclined to follow their heritage. Tradition is an inheritance secured through conquest by being invested in your learning, earning, and acquiring the hard-won appreciation and understanding. 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.

A great Seder holds a mirror to our hearts that tells our universal tale of pain and redemption and affirms that redemption exists and will always be more resilient than any force of transient evil or misfortune. A great Seder is a source of lasting inspiration not just in our lives, but for countless generations to come, as with countless generations before – **בְּכָל־דּוֹר וְדוֹר חֵיב אָדָם לְרִאוֹת אֶת־עַצְמוֹ כְּאִלוֹ הוּא יֵצֵא –** **גְּמִזְרֵיָם.**

The Jewish People leave Egypt, ushering in a new age of freedom and victory, culminating at Sinai. Still, victory is not everlasting; no triumph over evil is. Eventually, Moshe will die, and so will all his people. Darkness and persecution will find their way into the world again, and the struggle begins anew, which brings us back to the importance of the Seder experience; reading stories at the Seder misses the point.

To comprehend the experience we are living, we must, by imagination and intellect, be lifted out of it. We must be given to see it whole, but since we can never wholly gaze upon our own life while we live it, we gaze upon the symbol that comprehends our own.

The Seder is such a symbol, persisting as a mother of truth through countless generations, with the approval of each person to participate. When you see yourself as part of the Seder experience – **חֵיב אָדָם –** **לְרִאוֹת אֶת־עַצְמוֹ** – part of the living history that is still becoming, with the ebbs and flows of light and darkness, the great translation has occurred, and you are lifted out of yourself to see your life wholly.

That's the power of ritual, simple things we do as children because they're fun and as adults, because we know that our identity is one of the most precious things we can pass on. Seder night is about what we do together as an expression of collective memory and shared ideals.

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: ויאמר לאברהם, ידע תדע כי־גר יהיה ורעה בארץ לא להם, ועבדים וענו אתם ארבע מאות שנה – 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 we ought to expect and require 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 word doesn’t mean that God keeps His promise; it means 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 maybe 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 tiny remnant might have been rescued. That could have been a plausible variant form of keeping the promise – saving what little was left.

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

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. 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 they were wrong, and 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 any analysis 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 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 have no idea. The qualitative strain of exile might stand in for a required quantity of years once again, or perhaps something else. Yet, in the final analysis, it's entirely academic because even if our spiritual assets were completely exhausted of ancestral credit and merit, we can 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.

Trading Taskmasters

4 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.

People in retirement can do as they please, like an infinite vacation. But as many retirees and their families can confirm, lack of routine and structure is negative liberty; it doesn't feel great for long, and people invariably become enslaved to someone or something, even habits and subconscious instincts, leading to addiction, boredom, depression, or laziness. That's not being free; that's called being lost.

Discipline and freedom only seem to sit on opposite ends of the spectrum; they are tightly connected, in fact. If you want freedom, the only way to get there is through discipline.

Everyone suffers from one of two pains; the pain of discipline or the pain of regret. The difference is discipline weighs ounces while regret weighs tons. Counterintuitively, life gets harder when you try to make it easy. Exercising is hard, but never moving makes life harder. Uncomfortable conversations are hard, but avoiding every conflict is harder. Mastering your craft is hard, but having no skills is harder. Easy has a cost.

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 the highest expression of freedom, and you can only benefit in the long run.

The Midrash similarly suggests that not only can freedom be found in service to God, but it is also the only way to 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 – תְּרוּת / תְּרוּת עַל-הַלְקָחַת / עַל-הַלְקָחַת. 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 more compassionate, humane, and kind humans.

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 about 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 protecting 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 גָּדוֹל –

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 –



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Pharaoh was a genocidal despot who cruelly enslaved an entire race and murdered children indiscriminately – לא גזר אלא על הנזקרים. 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 is characterized as a tricky swindler who provides refuge and safe harbor when Yakov is on the run with nowhere to go. Over time, Lavan gives him his family, a home, and tremendous wealth and resources.

In what universe can we plausibly say that Lavan was worse than Pharaoh? Moreover, doesn't that 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 in the form of the kind person who took you in and gave you so much.

Nothing is surprising about our response to imminent danger. When calamity strikes in the form 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, repentance, and enhanced observance – וכאשר יענו אתו בן ירבה – וכן יפריץ.

The danger Lavan poses is far more insidious. Lavan doesn't hurt Yakov in the physical world; he hurts Yakov in the world of spirit, making Yakov forget who he was – לעקר את-הכל. Affluence, no less than genocide or slavery, threatens Jewish continuity by making us forget who we are.

For the many souls lost to pogroms, Crusades, the Inquisition, or the Holocaust, there are memorials and prayers, history books, and proclamations of "Never Again." But, in the words of R' Noach Weinberg, there is a spiritual Holocaust with no memorials or monuments; how many souls have been lost, assimilated to an open society that so warmly invites us in?

Before Moshe's death, he warned of precisely this pitfall because humans are consistently prone to falling in:

השומר לה, פן-תשכח את-ה' אלקיך, לבלתי שמר מצותיו ומשפטיו וחקותיו, אשר אנכי מצוך היום. פן-תאכל, ושבעת; ובתים טובים תבנה, וישבת. ובקרד וצאנה ירבו, וכסף וזהב ירבה-לה; וכל אשר-לה, ירבה. ורם, לבבה; ושכחת את-ה' אלקיך, המוציאך מארץ מצרים מבית עבדים – 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 prayed for God to save him from the hand of his brother, the hand of Esau – מיד אחי מיד עשו – because each strategy requires different treatment – the destructive

capacity for violence – מִיד עֲשׂוּ – but also the warm embrace of brotherhood that is no less of a threat – מִיד אֶתְּי.

Perhaps that's why the Haggadah reminds us that Lavan might be worse than Pharaoh. Faced with Lavan, people are oblivious to the threat, invisibly slipping away, silent, and without putting up a fight.

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

The Haggadah and the Seder provide us the antidote – צַד וּקְמָד. Hold on to your identity, your history, and where you come from.

When you know who you are, it's harder to get lost.

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 in honor of the legendary Eliyahu HaNavi, the harbinger of redemption in general, and Mashiach in particular. Customarily, this is an honor bestowed on an elder, or perhaps someone hoping for their own redemption, someone sick or looking 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; everyone could use an extra dose of salvation in their lives.

But while all the Seder's gestures and rituals are meaningful, no one seriously thinks 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 ballroom. 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 have to do even that. The Chag is called Passover because God passes over boundaries – וּפָסַח. 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 דְּכַפִּין יִיְתִי וַיִּיכַל, כָּל דְּצָרֵיךְ יִיְתִי וַיִּפְסַח. הַשְּׁמָא הָכָא, לְשָׁנָה הַבְּאָה בְּאַרְעָא דְיִשְׂרָאֵל* – In other words, we begin the Seder by proclaiming our hope, inviting the world to share in it as well.

The Yerushalmi tells of a sage traveling through the night. As the sun slowly broke over the horizon, dispelling the darkness that had defined their journey, the sage thought that redemption is exactly the same. There's a long period of darkness; then there's a small 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 reached a decisive end precisely 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 – *לֹא תֵצְאוּ אִישׁ מִפֶּתַח-בֵּיתוֹ עַד-בֹּקֶר*. When morning came, a new era had dawned with it. The Sfasc Emes reminds us that our exile and troubles are only until dawn comes – *עַד-בֹּקֶר*.

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 an elder or a person in distress opening the door is powerful and moving; this person is holding onto their hope, taking proactive measures.

One of the morning blessings thanks God for giving the rooster the understanding to distinguish between day and night – *הַגּוֹמֵן לְשִׁכּוּי בֵּינָה לְהַבְחִין בֵּין יוֹם וּבֵין לַיְלָה*. Although every creature with eyes knows the difference, R' Meilech Biderman teaches that the rooster gets special recognition because it crows while it's still dark, just before dawn. In Perek Shira, a song that attributes different verses to different creatures and cosmic entities, the rooster sings how it hopes and yearns for God's salvation – *לִישׁוּעַתְךָ הַ קְיִיטִי הַ* – the rooster knows before dawn that the darkness is coming to an end and that the sun will rise once more.

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

You just have to open the door.

The Universal and the Particular

2 minute read | Straightforward

The Exodus story is long and complex, with many different stages. The Ten Plagues took place over 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 excellent; 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, but God had other goals. 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 יֵשְׁבֶהּ הָרַבָּה מִשְׁתִּים-עֶשְׂרֵה רְבֹו אָדָם אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָדַע בֵּין-יְמִינוֹ לְשִׂמְאֹלוֹ וּבִהֵמָה 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 – שְׁפֹךְ 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



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But even though change can be difficult, change is real, and you can be very sure that in a lot less than a year, everything can change several times over.

On a micro-scale, our lives are only ever one phone call away from going off the rails; health, finances, and relationships can evaporate from one moment to the next. On a global scale, a market crash, a war, a terror attack, and a virus have changed the world in the space of a few days in ways we never thought possible.

The world has transformed a few times, even in recent memory; we have lived it. A year is a really long time.

But that force of change doesn't just serve destructive purposes; it also exists for good. Technological breakthroughs, vaccines, peace, and powerful ideas have also changed the world in a few days.

Who is exactly the person they were a year ago, exactly where they were a year ago, physically, emotionally, spiritually, financially, and personally?

In a year, defeat can turn into victory. In a year, the single one can be married. In a year, the childless one can have children. In a year, the sick one can heal. In a year, the business can turn around. In a year, failure can turn into success.

The whole Seder night, we have read and talked and sang about our belief in redemptions past. We sign off with a final affirmation that redemption lies ahead too.

“Next year, in Jerusalem rebuilt.”

It's not just a thing we say; it's not just a fun song we sing with the people we love.

It's something we say because it is self-evidently true. This time next year, you can be a different person; and the world can be a different place, reshaped in ways we never imagined.

A year is a really long time – לשנה הבאה בירושלים הבנויה.

Next year, in Jerusalem rebuilt!

In a Hurry

2 minute read | Intermediate

Most mitzvos and rituals have a commemorative or symbolic aspect: two challahs on the Shabbos table symbolize the double portion of manna on Shabbos, and sitting in a sukkah commemorates how our ancestors sat in sukkahs.

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

We don't eat Matza because our ancestors ate Matza on the way out of Egypt; we eat Matza because of the way they left Egypt – in a hurry – בהפזון. They rushed out and didn't have time to bake their bread, so we also eat quickly prepared bread.

“Quickly” is not a tangible event or thing. It's an adverb; it modifies the concept of leaving Egypt. More significant than the fact of leaving Egypt is that it happened quickly.

Why is leaving Egypt quickly more significant than leaving Egypt at all?

In the context of mitzvos, Judaism highly values urgency – זריזון מקדימין למצות. R' Yitzchok Hutner suggests that the source of this principle is derived from the Matza our ancestors ate because they left 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; it's the only way to do it because if it's like Matza, waiting spoils it – מצוה הבאה לידיך אל תחמיצנה.

The Vilna Gaon notes that in our daily prayers, we thank God for creating space and time – ברוך עושה. At 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 interacts with the eternal, the result is haste – נצחי / זמן / הפזון. The decisive moment God executed the Final Plague and won the day was a moment that transcended time; it happened in a non-moment – כהצות. God does not act in time and so does not take His time.

It might seem abstract and complex, but it's simple and intuitive; when something matters, it demands urgency. R' Shlomo Farhi teaches that lack of urgency spoils mitzvos because it turns sacred into profane, and something that ought to matter is relegated to another item on the to-do list.

Speed and urgency are not just descriptions of how our ancestors left Egypt; they are the only way they could ever have left Egypt. The essential 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 magic of God honoring His



promise to Avraham to bind and bond with the Jewish People forever. It was an emergency, and it had to be urgent and 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 Strength to Carry On

3 minute read | Straightforward

The Torah describes how Pharaoh resists Moshe's requests to let his people go, so God sends waves of plagues. At multiple points in the Exodus story, Pharaoh is ready to concede, but 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 only goal. It demands nothing of God to flatten Egypt or magic the Jews out. Instead, many other things happen that aren't reducible to the purposes 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 God acts directly, there is only היזוק – God gives him the strength to carry on.

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

וַיִּדְעוּ מִצְרַיִם כִּי-אֲנִי ה', בְּנֹטְתִי אֶת-קִדְי עַל-מִצְרַיִם; וְהוֹצֵאתִי אֶת-בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל, מִתּוֹכָם – “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

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 וְחִגְתֶּם אֹתוֹ חֵג ה' לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם חֲקַת 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 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 obscures the fact that the Jewish People people have been exiled and persecuted time after time in place after place for most of our history.

But even today, we’re not as safe as it superficially seems.

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, disconnected in whole or in part from their heritage identity.

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 would make little sense to celebrate in a time of subjugation. But if we understand it correctly as the founding archetype of the liberation of the spirit, then it necessarily continues to have a residual effect forever as the source of all freedom, as the Torah so powerfully puts it, promising us today that our Seder matters and reflects that moment in full – וְחִגְתֶּם אֹתוֹ חֵג ה' לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם חֲקַת עוֹלָם –

As the Lubavitcher Rebbe explains, the Seder does not reinforce that an Exodus happened that one time; but that an Exodus can happen.



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R' Jonathan Sacks notes that throughout the highs and lows of Jewish history, our people have celebrated the Seder at the heights of civilization and in ghettos and concentration camps under conditions similar to or worse than Egypt.

The Exodus we celebrate was imperfect – it did not lead to a full and final utopia for anyone. The formerly enslaved people fought God and Moshe for the rest of their lives, yearning to return to the Egypt that had shackled them.

But the Torah and Haggadah openly embrace the notion of an imperfect and partial redemption; both subvert our expectation of a happily ever after ending where the Jewish People live in peace and prosperity in Israel.

R' Shai Held notes that by celebrating imperfect redemption, 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. There is plenty of space between all and nothing; as the Kotzker put it, the searching is the finding.

The question's premise is false; things don't need to be perfect to be a whole lot better. Humans are not robots, and we are all perfectly imperfect in our own way.

We have yet to make it all the way, but the only analysis is that each step further is 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 also worth celebrating.

Our Seder isn't the anniversary of an ancient generation's liberation long ago; each of us must feel as though we experienced the great departure from Egypt. Our Seder continues it, reminding us that redemption exists, redemption can happen, and we are all worthy of it.

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.



Remembering the Exodus is a perpetual mitzvah, and an astounding amount of our daily blessings, mitzvos, and prayers commemorate the Exodus – זָכַר לְיִצְיַאת מִצְרַיִם. 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 great or unique; they were quite the opposite. And that's the point we need to remember.

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!

Even when Moshe, already well on his way to greatness, intervened to protect Yisro's daughters from bullies, onlookers mistook him for some random Egyptian!

The Midrash famously states that the enslaved Jews retained their names, clothing, and language. This is frequently – and mistakenly – framed as a point of pride when it seems the point is that apart from these narrow and limited practices, they were indistinguishable from Egyptians in every other conceivable way!

Moreover, the generation that left Egypt and stood at Sinai fought Moshe for the rest of their lives, begging to return 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 mighty and 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 וּבְזֵרַע נְטוּיָה –

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

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 but 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; God rescues people from Egypt, whatever they have done and whoever they have become. Our God initiates the great Exodus before the Jewish People ever take a single step of their own to be better – אֲנֹכִי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים.

The Ropshitzer quipped that תְּחִלָּה לְמִקְרָאֵי קִדְּשׁ זָכָר לִיצִיאַת מִצְרַיִם – 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. As the Kozhnutzer Maggid reminds us, the Creator chooses us at our worst – מִתְחִלָּה עוֹבְדֵי עֲבוּדָה זָרָה הָיוּ אֲבוֹתֵינוּ –

Take this lesson to heart; it’s one of the vanishingly few that the Torah specifically asks us to remember at all times – לְמַעַן תִּזְכֹּר אֶת-יוֹם צֵאתְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם כֹּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ –

And it’s clear why.

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

Living with Newness

3 minute read | Straightforward

One of the key skills children learn is how to read a clock; what time is it?

Beyond answering the basic question with hours and minutes, there is something deeper behind the question; knowing the time means knowing what to do. The time of day and time of year, the seasons, and the calendar establish the boundaries and time frames upon which our world is built, with specific routines for morning, afternoon, evening, and night, summer, fall, winter, and spring.



Different cultures have established various numeral systems and calendars to measure time. Today, most of the world uses the Gregorian calendar, a fixed calendar determined by how long the earth takes to make one complete orbit around the sun.

The Torah asks us to track time using the moon as a frame of reference; when people spot the new moon, they would report it to the highest court, which declares the beginning of a new month – Rosh Chodesh. It's not Rosh Chodesh because there's a new moon, but because the Jewish leaders say so. It's the very first commandment in the Torah, given to the Jewish People still enslaved in Egypt:

החודש הזה לכם ראש חדשים ראשון הוא לכם לחדשי השנה – This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you. (12:1)

There are lots of mitzvos, so one of them has to come first. But why is establishing the lunar calendar through Rosh Chodesh the first mitzvah as opposed to any other?

The story of the birth of the Jewish People begins at a time of stuckness, with the Jewish People systematically subjugated and oppressed, powerless objects with no choice or control over their circumstances.

Although slavery is illegal in most of the world, it persists. Moreover, slavery isn't just a legal status; it's a state of mind, body, and soul. If you have ever felt helpless or stuck, you have experienced an element of slavery.

When we internalize that forces of change exist and that we have the power to harness and steer them, the possibilities are limitless. This moment can be different to the moments that have come before; this newness is the beginning of all newness – החודש הזה לכם ראש חדשים ראשון הוא לכם לחדשי השנה.

The Shem miShmuel explains that the power of the Exodus story is that its story of freedom on a national level offers us the opportunity to become free of the tendencies and troubles that hound us on a personal level. With the power to change, hard times don't need to be so scary anymore, and the world isn't threatening; it can be full of exciting possibilities. It follows that the first mitzvah is the one that empowers us to change by giving us a symbol of change.

The sense of futility, powerlessness and stuckness that come from being burnt out or overwhelmed is poison. But as much as stuckness can come from attachment to the past, R' Nachman of Breslev teaches us to avoid dwelling too much on the future and focus on the present day and present moment.

The Torah often speaks to us in terms of here and now – היום / ועתה – which our sages take to mean as references to Teshuva, our capacity and power to change and repent – ועתה ישראל מה ה' אלקיך שאל מעמך כי – ואנחנו עם מרעיתו וצאן ידו היום אם-בְּקִלּוֹ תִשְׁמְעוּ – אם-לִירָאָה.



The world tracks time using the sun; the Sfas Emes notes that the nations of world history rise and fall like the sun, lasting only when things are bright. The Jewish People track time using the moon, persisting in darkness, and even generating light among total blackness.

The very first mitzvah is the lunar calendar, the only calendar with a visual cue for changing times; and a powerful symbol of change, a natural metaphorical image of a spiritual reality. It's not just an instruction to count the time but a commandment to rule over time and even natural phenomena. It's a mitzvah to live by and with the power of change and renewal.

Every day, every week, and in truth, every moment, is brand new, brimming with freshness, vitality, and renewal.

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, however.

Throughout the story, God tells Moshe that He has hardened Pharaoh's heart, and Pharaoh refuses to free the Jews. But if God had hardened Pharaoh's heart, his free will was hopelessly compromised; why was Pharaoh's punishment?

Maimonides's exposition of free will allows for the possibility of doing something so egregiously wrong that the path of making amends and repentance is foreclosed, and the person can no longer return to who they once were.

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 does not. Someone abusive can reform themselves, regret their actions, and resolve never to harm another person again; they should do all those things. But 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 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 the Egyptian people overwhelmed by the plagues, and his adviser's pleas fell on deaf ears:

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

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

Contemporary psychology might refer to this as a form of cognitive dissonance, the uncomfortable feeling when two beliefs conflict. When confronted with challenging new information, people may seek to preserve their current understanding of the world by rejecting, explaining away, avoiding the new information, or convincing themselves that no conflict exists.

If we are puzzled about Pharaoh's free will, we ought to invert the question back at ourselves because people lie to themselves all the time to justify bad decisions and hypocrisy. It's not so difficult to imagine becoming so entrenched in a worldview that you get tunnel vision and can't change course.

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 pride on a microcosmic level.

R' Yisrael Salanter says that the first time you do something wrong, it's a sin. When you repeat the sin, it seems permitted. When you do it again 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 – שְׂנֵקֵיהָ לְרִאשׁ 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 value the notion of freedom, you must consciously choose it daily.



recovered from illness. This mirrors the course of the Exodus, where the Jewish People were liberated from slavery, crossed both sea and desert and healed of all sickness when they stood at Sinai. The Toda consisted of a lamb with 40 loaves of bread and had to be consumed within a day – which is obviously impossible. The only solution would be to invite friends and family to participate in the celebration, mirroring the Pesach offering requirement of consuming it 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 – וְשִׂמְחַת בְּכֹל הַטּוֹב אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לָךְ הַאֱלֹהִים וּלְבֵיתְךָ –

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

The Unburning Bush

4 minute read | Straightforward

One of the most iconic scenes in the Torah is the burning bush. It is the turning point in the Exodus story; having described the cruel extent of the Jewish People’s enslavement and suffering, the burning bush is the moment the Creator reaches out to Moshe to intervene, setting events in motion that permanently shape human civilization.

Moshe has fled Egypt as a fugitive and has built a new identity and life as a shepherd in Midian. One day in the wilderness, he chases a stray lamb and encounters the arcane:

וּמִלֶּשָׁה הָיְתָה רֹעֵה אֶת-צֹאן יִתְרוֹ חֹתְנוֹ כִּי־הָיוּ מִדְּבַר מִדְּבַר וַיִּנְהַג אֶת-הַצֹּאן אַחַר הַמִּדְבָּר וַיָּבֹא אֶל-הַר הָאֱלֹקִים חֹרֵבָה: וַיֵּרָא מִלְּאֵךְ ה' אֵלָיו בְּלִפְתֵּי-אֵשׁ מִתּוֹךְ הַסִּנֵּי וַיֵּרָא וַהֲגִה הַסִּנֵּי בְעַר בָּאֵשׁ וְהַסִּנֵּי אֵינֶנּוּ אֶכְלָל: ... וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-תְּקַרֵּב הֵלֶם שְׁלִי-נִעְלִיךָ מֵעַל רִגְלֶיךָ כִּי הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עוֹמֵד עָלָיו אֲדַמְתִּי-קֹדֶשׁ הוּא: ... וַיֹּאמֶר ה' רְאֵה רְאִיתִי אֶת-עֲנִי עָמִי אֲשֶׁר בְּמִצְרַיִם וְאֶת-צַעֲקוֹתָם שָׁמַעְתִּי מִפְּנֵי נִגְשָׁיו כִּי יִדְעוּתִי אֶת-מִכְאֲבָיו... וְעַתָּה הִנֵּה צַעֲקוֹת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל בָּאָה אֵלָי וְגַם-רְאִיתִי אֶת-הַלַּחֵץ אֲשֶׁר מִצְרַיִם לֹחֲצִים אֹתָם: ... וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹקִים אֶל-מֹשֶׁה אֲהַיְהֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה וַיֹּאמֶר כֹּה תֹאמַר צַעֲקוֹת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶהְיֶה שְׁלַחְנִי אֵלֶיכֶם: Now Moshe, tending the flock of his father-in-law Yisro, the priest of Midian, drove the flock into the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a blazing fire out of a bush. He saw the bush in flames, yet the bush was not consumed... And He said, “Do not come closer. Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground...” And the Lord continued, “I have seen the plight of My people in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I am mindful of their suffering... Now the cry of the Israelites has reached Me; moreover, I have seen how the Egyptians oppress them... And God said to Moshe, “I will be what I will be.” He continued, “Tell the Israelites, “I Will Be,” sent me to you.” (3:1,2,5,7,9,14)

Apart from the local significance in this story, this interaction is one of the Torah’s vanishingly rare instances of a theophany, a physical manifestation of the divine in a tangible, observable way, which is



always accompanied by an upending of the natural order – the appearance of physics-bending supernatural properties.

As we experience it, all fire requires fuel to combust, which is what generates flames; there is no such thing as burning with no fuel. Fire and burning are inseparable; they are the same thing.

This interaction is cryptic, and the imagery is deliberate; God doesn't act gratuitously or because it sounds cool – even though it certainly does!

Why does God choose a burning bush to communicate with Moshe?

God's self-introduction is essential and, in a way, tells us a lot about what God wants us to know. God self-describes as אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה, a complex form of the infinitive “to be.” It might mean “I am what I am,” or perhaps “I will be what I will be.”

The Midrash expounds on this conversation and says that when God seeks to be seen as compassionate, God is called Hashem. When God desires justice, God is called God. What that means, then, is that God is fluid and free-spirited, always in a state of being and becoming, transcending any single definition. We can not understand God as God is, only what God does.

This encounter also reveals where God can be found. In the wilderness, in the void, in the middle of nowhere – בְּמִדְבָּר; in the middle of apparent destruction, in the burning pain of exile – בְּעֵר בָּאֵשׁ; and also nature and the low places – מִתּוֹךְ הַסִּנְיָה.

God tells Moshe to remove his shoes because the place he stands is holy soil; a person who lives with the awareness that the place you stand is also the place God is found lives with the secret of creation, that the Divine is here with us.

R' Shlomo Farhi teaches that the story of the burning bush is a metaphor that contains the imagery and symbolism of Moshe's place in everything to come. Moshe was in the desert, and God appeared before Moshe noticed; God was already there. God is there, and engages Moshe specifically because he notices the bush – וַיֵּרָא ה' כִּי סָר לְרֵאוֹת וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו – What Moshe sees isn't a burning bush but an unburning bush, that the fire doesn't seem to consume the bush – מִדּוּעַ לֹא יִבְעַר הַסִּנְיָה –

R' Shlomo Farhi suggests that this contains a crucial insight into what qualified Moshe, above all others, to be the lawgiver and redeemer of the Jewish People, trusted over all others. In times of difficulty, positive and upbeat people will attempt to focus and redirect their attention towards positivity; look on the bright side; it could be worse, it's part of God's plan – heads in the sand, pretending to ignore the pain of whatever transition is taking place. Pessimistic people can be fully consumed by how terrible and unfortunate it is, how bad things are, and how bad it hurts; the essence of who they are gives way entirely to the ordeal.



TorahRedux

Neither is wrong, but this story teaches us a third way. Moshe sees past the bush that is on fire; he sees a fire that does not consume, which, as applied to the circumstances of his people, suggests an attitude of recognizing the devastating pain of his people falls short of ruin.

God wants Moshe to see the fire but not to miss the properties it retained; the fire will not consume the bush, and the fires of Egypt will not destroy his people.

The Zohar suggests that the burning bush was a hint that even though the Israelites were suffering in Egypt and would suffer many exiles, they had God's protection and would not be consumed; as the thornbush is the least of the plants, the Jewish People occupied a lowly and despised position in Egypt, and the burning fire was a symbol of their oppression. The bush burning yet not being consumed symbolized that the oppressed people would not be destroyed by their enemies and that their hostility would be ultimately unsuccessful and fruitless.

Moshe can hold the notion of their suffering in mind without a diminished understanding of the nature of what they were; in immense pain and suffering, totally on fire, and yet still fundamentally whole, that things were hard, but everything was going to be okay.

Moshe would not look away from a Jew getting beaten by a taskmaster, and he would not look away from Jews fighting each other. He didn't ignore their hurt, nor did he magnify it. He didn't say they'd be okay or to get over it. He didn't passively witness any of those things; he actively engaged with them.

The burning bush symbolizes the Divine Presence before redemption; the Midrash teaches that God feels our pain and is a partner in our troubles. The burning bush is an image of God's presence and protection in the face of danger and oppression and reveals where we can find God – in hard times and places, right there alongside us.

Choreographed Futility

4 minute read | Straightforward

At the beginning of the Exodus story, God tasks Moshe with his great mission. Moshe initially resists, saying 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 בֵּן אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה מִקֶּצֶר רוּחַ וּמֵעֲבֹדָה 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 outset.

This is consistent with a broader motif throughout the entire Torah, filled 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 wouldn't 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 chapter of the story illustrates that there'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 step of Dayeinu.

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 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 God tells them straightforwardly that their mission is going ahead on schedule and as planned:

וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה לִפְנֵי ה' לֵאמֹר הֲבֵן בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא־שָׁמְעוּ אֵלַי וְאִיךָ יִשְׁמְעוּנִי פַרְעֹה וְאֲנִי עֶרְל שְׂפָתַיִם. וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־אַהֲרֹן וַיֹּצִיאוּם אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶל־פַּרְעֹה מִלֶּדָה מִצְרַיִם לְהוֹצִיא אֶת־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם – 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 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. Their identity could be a hook Moshe's words latched on to in their intangible subconscious.

Moshe's words weren't futile because they didn'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 registered 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 they were worth fighting for, and we must also recognize that.

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 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 doesn't look like progress; sometimes, it even looks like a step backward.

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.

Refusing the Call

4 minute read | Straightforward

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 enslave the Jewish People, which crept slowly until it was 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 a 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־הַלֶּחֶץ אֲשֶׁר מִצְרַיִם לֹחֲצִים אֹתָם: וַעֲתָה לֵכָה וְאַשְׁלַחְךָ אֶל־פַּרְעֹה וְהוֹצֵא אֶת־עַמִּי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם: וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים מִי אֲנֹכִי כִי אֵלֶךְ אֶל־פַּרְעֹה וְכִי אוֹצִיא אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם: ... וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־ה' בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם: – “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 one of the most important stories ever told. Moshe knows where he comes from and has seen his brethren suffering. His birth and upbringing uniquely situate him between both sides 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?

Refusing the call is a literary trope that humanizes the hero, but this story isn't ordinary literature. Moshe's refusal is part of this timeless story because it reflects a fundamental property intrinsic to all humans we must acknowledge and understand.

Moshe didn't doubt that his people could or should be saved; Moshe doubted himself. He had fears and insecurities; he was missing an essential trait to be successful! He wasn't a man of words; how would he persuade anybody to follow him? How would he convince the Egyptian government to let his people go? This isn't faux humility – Moshe articulates an accurate self-assessment; he is right! And yet, the Creator answers that it doesn't matter; he must do it anyway.

When the Mishkan was finally ready for inauguration, Ahron also refused the call, feeling ashamed and unworthy for his responsibility for the Golden Calf incident. Yet in the view of our sages, Ahron's shame was exactly what distinguished him as the right person; his self-awareness of his shortcomings and his view of the position as one that required gravity and severity. Moshe never says Ahron is wrong; he only encourages him to ignore those doubts and do it anyway – אָמַר לוֹ – שְׁהִיָּה אֶהְרֵן בּוֹשׁ וַיֵּרָא לְגִשְׁתָּ, אָמַר לוֹ – מִלְּשָׁה, לָמָּה אָתָּה בּוֹשׁ? לָכֵן נִבְחַרְתָּ.

In the Purim story, Mordechai asks Esther to go to the king to save her people and Esther refuses the call, not wanting to risk her life; she has correctly assessed the facts and is indeed in danger. But as Mordechai says, that doesn't matter; if Esther remains paralysed by her fears, she will lose the opportunity to step up. The call to action is open before her; and she must do it anyway – פִּי אִם־הִתְחַרַּשׁ – תַּחֲרִישִׁי בְּעַת הַזֹּאת רִוּחַ וְהִצְלָה יַעֲמוּד לְיְהוּדִים מִמְּקוֹם אַחֵר וְאֵת וּבֵית־אָבִיהָ תִּאֲבְדוּ וּמִי יוֹדֵעַ אִם־לָעַת כְּזֹאת הִגַּעְתָּ לְמַלְכוּת.

The book of Jeremiah opens with a similar vignette. Jeremiah reports that God appeared to him in his youth, and called upon him to be the prophet for his generation; like his forebears, Jeremiah protests that he is just a kid and is not a speaker. In what we can now recognize as a consistent fashion, God dismisses these excuses; not because they are wrong, but because they don't matter – he's got to do it anyway – וַיְהִי דְבַר־ה' אֵלַי לֵאמֹר: בְּטָרְם אֲצַוְךָ בְּכַטָּן וַיְדַעְתִּיךָ וּבְטָרְם תִּצָּא מִרְחֹם הַקִּדְשִׁיתִיךָ נְבִיא לְגוֹיִם נִתְתִּיד: וְאָמַר אֶהְיֶה אֲדֹנָי הַיְהוָה – לֹא־יִדְעָתִי דָבָר כִּי־נֶעַר אָנֹכִי: וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֵלַי אַל־תֹּאמַר נֶעַר אָנֹכִי כִּי עַל־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר אֲשַׁלְחֶךָ תִּלְוֶה וְאֵת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר אֲצַוְךָ תִּדְבֹר.

The Torah is deliberate in how it presents stories; there are lessons in what it leaves in and leaves out. Of all the small interactions that don't make the final cut, we should note that refusing the call is an interaction the Torah consistently deems necessary in multiple unrelated stories; our greatest heroes don't just jump at the chance to do what is clearly the right thing.



Who is perfect enough to fix the problems in your community? Who is perfect enough to lead the people you love to greatness? Ironically, the people who are deluded and narcissistic enough to think they are perfect would be the worst candidate. The Torah seems to be saying that it has got to be you – אל-תאמר נער אֲנֹכִי.

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 reverberating deep within. But you doubt yourself, and you refuse the call. You're scared – and you should be! There is plenty to fear, 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 – לא עָלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה לְגִמְרָה, וְלֹא אַתָּה בְּךָ חוֹרֵינִי לְבִטֹּל מִמֶּנָּה –

There is moral fiber in quieting the voice of self-doubt and stepping up to answer the call anyway – אֵם אֵין אָנִי לִי, מִי לִי. וּכְשֶׁאָנִי לְעֶצְמִי, 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 neglect our duty. The Torah repeatedly tells us they don't matter; do it anyway!

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 will 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 excuse 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 greets, 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?

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, indicating 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 יְהִיָּה זֶה לָנוּ לְמוֹקֵשׁ שְׁלַח אֶת־הָאֲנָשִׁים וַיַּעֲבֹדוּ אֶת־ה' אֱלֹהֵיהֶם הַטֶּרֶם תִּדַע כִּי אֲבָדָה מִצְרַיִם: וַיֹּשֵׁב אֶת־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶת־אַהֲרֹן אֶל־פַּרְעֹה וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָהֶם לְכוּ עֲבֹדוּ אֶת־ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם מִי וּמִי הַהֵלְכִים: וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה בְּנִעְרֵינוּ וּבְנֹתֵינוּ גֵלְדָּהּ בְּכַנְיָנוּ וּבְכַנּוֹתֵנוּ כְּצִאֲנָנוּ וּבְכַקְרָנוּ גֵלְדָּהּ כִּי תִגְדֶּה לָנוּ: וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָהֶם יְהִי כֹן ה' עִמָּכֶם כַּאֲשֶׁר אֲשַׁלַּח אֶתְכֶם וְאֶת־טַפְכֶם רְאוּ כִּי רָעָה נִגְדָּה פְּנִיכֶם: לֹא כֹן לְכוּ־נָא: פַּרְעֹה: פָּנֵי 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 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 everyone to walk out at precisely the same time. The mission had long been underway; 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 hard to imagine Moshe accepting Pharaoh's offer as a practical and realistic option – and it's unclear 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 miShmuel 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 expects us to expand our consciousness so that those circles are proximate enough to our own that your well-being 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־פְּתָיו – 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 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 pieces 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.



TorahRedux

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 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 isolated people from each other.

What's more, if we don't see our fate as bound to each other, 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 either remember each other or we forget ourselves.



Postscript

I hope these thoughts help uplift your family's Seder experience.

TorahRedux is my pride and joy, the product of thousands of hours of learning, research, writing, editing, formatting, and preparation. My hope is that these thoughts help you live a little better, in the way they have for me.

My business, Hendon Advisors, allows me to dedicate time to TorahRedux, and I welcome your assistance in furthering my goal to keep publishing high-quality Parsha content that makes a difference. I broker the purchase and sale of healthcare businesses; I kindly ask for your blessings and prayers, and introductions to anyone who might buy or sell a healthcare business, and if you work in healthcare, reach out to me at neli@hendon.io.

Thanks for reading!

Neli

In honored memory of my late grandfather, HaGaon HaRav Yehuda Leib Gertner ben HaRav HaChassid Menachem Mendel ז"ר

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.