



Bo 2023

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 question with hours and minutes, knowing the time also tells us what we need 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 used other 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:

הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֶם רֵאשִׁית חֳדָשִׁים רְאשֹׁן הוּא לָכֶם לְחֹדְשֵׁי הַשָּׁנָה – 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.

Slavery is illegal in most of the world, although it still exists and widely exists in more subtle forms. Slavery isn't just a legal status; it's a state of mind, body, and soul. If you have ever felt helpless or stuck, there's 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 – הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֶם רֵאשִׁית חֳדָשִׁים רְאשֹׁן הוּא לָכֶם לְחֹדְשֵׁי הַשָּׁנָה.

The Shem miShmuel explains that the power of 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 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 as well, to focus on the present day and present moment.

The Torah often speaks to us in terms of here and now – הַיּוֹם / הַיּוֹמָה – which our sages take to mean as references to Teshuva, our capacity and power to change and repent – ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ שֶׁאֵל מֵעַמְּךָ כִּי – וְאַנְחֵנוּ עִם מְרֵעֵיתוֹ וְצֹאן יָדוֹ הַיּוֹם אִם-בְּקִלּוֹ תִשְׁמְעוּ – אִם-לִירְאָה.

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.

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 לְכֶם לְזִכְרוֹן וְחֻגְתֶּם אֹתוֹ חֹג ה' לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם חֻקַּת עוֹלָם תִּחְגְּגוּהוּ – “This day shall be to you one of remembrance; you shall celebrate it as a festival to God throughout the ages, you shall celebrate it as an institution for all time!” (12:14)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

No Man Left Behind

5 minute read | Straightforward

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

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

וַיֹּאמְרוּ עֲבָדֵי פַרְעֹה אֵלָיו עַד־מַתִּי יִהְיֶה זֶה לָנוּ לְמוֹקֵשׁ שְׁלַח אֶת־הָאֲנָשִׁים וַיַּעֲבֹדוּ אֶת־ה' אֱלֹהֵיהֶם הַטֶּרֶם תִּדְעַ כִּי אֲבָדָה מִצְרַיִם: וַיֹּשֶׁב אֶת־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶת־אַהֲרֹן אֶל־פַּרְעֹה וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם לָכוּ עֲבַדוּ אֶת־ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם מִי וּמִי הֵהָלָכִים: וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה בְּנַעַרְיָנוּ וּבְכַנְיָנוּ וּבְגִבּוֹרֵינוּ וּבְכַנְיָנוּ וּבְצִאֲנָנוּ וּבְבִקְרָנוּ גִלְדָּה לָנוּ: וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם יְהִי כֵן ה' עִמָּכֶם כַּאֲשֶׁר אָשַׁלַּח אֶתְכֶם וְאֶת־טַפְּכֶם רְאוּ כִּי רָעָה נָגַד פְּנֵיכֶם: לֹא כֵן לָכוּ־נָא: הַגְּבֵרִים וַעֲבָדוּ אֶת־ה' כִּי אֵתָּה אַתֶּם מְבַקְשִׁים וַיַּגִּישׁ אֹתָם מֵאֵת פְּנֵי פַרְעֹה: Pharaoh's advisers said to him, “How long will this one be a snare to us?! Let the men go to worship Hashem their God! Do you not yet know that Egypt is lost?” So Moshe and Ahron were brought back to Pharaoh and he said to them, “Go, worship Hashem your God! Who will be going?” Moshe replied, “We will all go, young and old: we will go with our sons and daughters, our flocks and herds; for we must observe Hashem's festival!” But he said to them, “Hashem be with you; the same as I mean to let your children go with you! Clearly, you are bent on mischief! No! Your men can go and worship Hashem since that is what you want.” And they were expelled from Pharaoh's presence. (10:7-10)

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

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

This was an enormous and monumental concession! At a minimum, Pharaoh was at least willing to let some of the people go! If nothing else, Moshe could extract some fraction of the people he was tasked with saving. It's not obvious to assume that the only possible plan was for all the people to walk out at



precisely the same time. The mission had long been underway, and this was plausibly the beginning of what succeeding at that mission might look like! Moshe could feasibly take this group out under the ruse of the festival and report to God for new orders about how to save those who remained behind. However many or few people were left behind, God still had to do the same work to get them out! It's not so hard to imagine Moshe accepting Pharaoh's offer as a practical and realistic option – and it's not at all obvious why he didn't.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Quote of the Week



TorahRedux

"If you risk nothing, you risk everything."

– @kpaxs

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

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

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

Neli

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

PPS - *It took me years to start making a parnassa; if anyone you know is looking for a job, please put them in touch with me. With a helping hand from Above, I have successfully helped **7 people** find jobs so far!*

Redux: *adjective* – resurgence; refers to being brought back, restored, or revived; something familiar presented in a new way. Not to see what no one else has seen, but to say what nobody has yet said about something which everybody sees.