



Tzav 2024

The Eternal Flame

3 minute read | Straightforward

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

Rain is a powerful symbol in the covenantal relationship between God and the Jewish people; unlike Egypt, where the water comes up from the Nile and beneath people's toes, Israel is a land where people must raise their eyes and thoughts to the heavens for rain.

Given rain's prominent role in the agricultural world of our ancestors, it follows that rain features prominently in our daily prayers – משיב הרוח ומוריד הגשם.

But once a year, there was a distinctly unique prayer featuring rain.

The Kohen Gadol would enter the inner sanctum of the Beis HaMikdash on Yom Kippur, perform the ritual service, and say one single prayer, the only prayer ever uttered at Judaism's holiest site. A lot of it was about rain.

Given the heavy agricultural dependency, we might reasonably expect the religious leader and representative of the entire generation to request the right amount of rain at the appropriate time and place, and it does.

But one line of the prayer confounds our expectations.

The prayer asks God to ignore the prayers of travelers who don't want to get wet along the way - וְלֹא תִשְׁמַע לְפָנֶיךָ תְּפִלַּת עֹבְרֵי דְרָכַיִם.

It's arguably the most important day and ritual of the year; if we had to nominate one significant thing to pray for, we might think of several. But even if we have understood how rain is of vital importance, why would ignoring travelers be the single most important thing we have to say about it?

The Alter of Kelm notes how powerful a fervent and heartfelt prayer must be to require counteraction by the Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur in the Holy of Holies; even when it is transparently self-serving and contrary to the needs of the entire people at large.

But perhaps this prayer also reveals a worldview on how to think about the things we need most.



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

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

On its face, this is a simple instruction to the attending Kohanim on duty to regularly stoke and fuel the flame so it would never burn out.

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

Pirkei Avos suggests that these efforts were met with divine assistance; rain would not quench the fire.

Water extinguishes fire; yet even in the realm of the transparently supernatural, our sages specifically understood the divine assistance to take the form of rain that wouldn't put the fire out, as opposed to no rain over the fire. This strongly suggests that it's not viable for there to be no rain here, there, or anywhere. It just doesn't work that way.

The Kohanim would still have to work the fire in adverse weather conditions; God would ensure their efforts were successful.

The eternal flame wasn't fueled by magic; it was driven by raw human willpower and was the source of fires in all the year-round services, from the Menorah to the incense, the crescendo of the Yom Kippur service when the Kohen Gadol said his prayer for the rain.

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

The eternal flame wasn't an external phenomenon; it came from within, entirely generated by humans. You are a miniature eternal flame; you must consistently stoke the fire under whatever conditions at whatever pace allows you to keep at it for decades without burning out.

The Kohanim stokes the flames in the pouring rain, beating winds, barefoot on the slippery stone floors. Our sages well understood the real miracle of the eternal flame; determined willpower and enduring efforts that were blessed with success. The Yom Kippur prayer rejects the immaturity of fair-weather travelers who do not accept that we live in a world that needs rain, a world where it must rain, a world where people are going to get wet and uncomfortable sometimes.

Don't be a fair-weather traveler.



Embrace the crucial role consistency, perseverance, and perspiration play in life; the miracle of the eternal flame only happens once human effort is exhausted.

As R' Chaim Volozhin teaches, we can't choose our circumstances, but we fully control our direction and velocity – לא עזיבך המלאכה לגמור.

R' Joseph B. Soloveitchik suggests that we must broaden the scope and strengthen the intensity of our efforts because the aggregate of all outcomes is entirely contingent on our actions – השתדלות.

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

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

Sensitivity to All Creatures

3 minute read | Straightforward

From the dawn of humanity, people have utilized animals for all kinds of purposes, from farming and hunting to clothing, food, labor, transport, and domestication as pets. Inasmuch as the Torah permits these uses, the Torah categorically prohibits human mistreatment of animals, with a comprehensive list of laws designed to minimize animal suffering resulting from human interaction.

As it relates to food, from field to table, there is a vast corpus of rules that governs everything we put into our mouths and everything we don't; and one of the defining features of observant Judaism is the laws of kosher, in particular, the rules concerning how we obtain edible meat.

R' Avraham Yitzchak Kook suggests that, among other reasons, the Torah's laws of kosher meat consistently demonstrate an underlying principle that humans ought to respect the life and well-being of all non-human creatures.

Consider that kosher slaughter, the most obviously exploitative use of animal life, is heavily regulated; the Torah requires the blade to be razor-sharp for a smooth cut and must be concealed from the animal throughout, among many other laws that prevent unnecessary animal distress. The Midrash rhetorically asks what possible difference it could make to God whether an animal dies by a cut in the front of its neck or the back; it concludes that it doesn't make a difference to God so much as it makes a difference to the human, since a front cut is more humane, and refines the humans who observe this law.



The laws of kosher aren't just about how we treat the animal until it dies, but afterward as well. There is a little known law to conceal the blood that is spilled, almost a mini-burial ceremony:

וְשָׁפַךְ אֶת-דָּמוֹ, וְכִסָּהוּ בְעֶפְרָר – Pour out the blood, and cover it with dust. (17:13)

In the Torah's conception, blood is the vehicle for the essence and soul of identity, personality, and vitality, warranting sensitive handling and treatment; it follows that it is disrespectful and inappropriate to consume blood:

אֶדְ-בְּשָׂר, בְּנִפְשׁוֹ דָמוֹ לֹא תֹאכְלוּ – Eat only the meat; do not consume the blood... (9:4)

When we talk about the blood draining from someone's face, or the lifeblood of an organization, we're using the same kind of imagery as the Torah, where blood is the seat and symbol of life and vitality, which may help us understand why blood is a central element of all the sacrificial rituals:

כִּי נִפְשׁ הַבֶּשֶׂר, בְּדָם הוּא, וְאֲנִי נָתַתִּיו לָכֶם עַל-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ, לְכַפֵּר עַל-נַפְשׁוֹתֵיכֶם: כִּי-הַדָּם הוּא, בְּנִפְשׁ וְכַפֵּר בַּדָּם – For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that atones because of the life. (17:11)

The Torah unambiguously permits humans to consume a carnivorous diet, but as Nechama Leibowitz points out, the Torah only reluctantly allows humans to eat meat after the Flood story. As much as humans are the apex predator on Earth, God's compassion goes far beyond humans – וְהִאֲרַז נָתַן לְבְנֵי-אָדָם – / טוב ה' לכל ורחמי על כל מעשיו

The distinction between right and wrong, good and evil, purity and defilement, the sacred and the profane, is essential in Judaism. Beyond Judaism, navigating regulations is part of living and working in a civilized society. The laws of kosher elevate the simple act of eating into a reminder and religious ritual to exercise self-control over our most basic, primal instincts, even the ones to hunt and gather food.

While animals do not possess sentience to understand the notion that life is a sacred thing, humans are not like other animals, and the Torah gives us laws to remind us that there is a difference. R' Shlomo Farhi teaches that the Torah's boundaries should instill sensitivity and reverence for life. Our abilities, choices, rights, strength, and power are not trump cards; just because you can, doesn't mean you should.

You don't need to become a vegan; you can still enjoy your steak and ribs. But you should recognize the Torah's concern for all creatures and not just humans, because the two are linked; someone who is cruel to animals will be cruel to people.



In a largely positive trend, our host cultures have woken up to animal cruelty in recent decades, but we have a proud tradition that is millennia older; the Torah instituted the first systematic legislation prohibiting animal cruelty and mandating humane treatment long ago.

Judaism is in constant dialogue with its surroundings, and we may have to get more familiar with our environment to navigate it properly. On the one end, the Torah's laws don't explicitly regulate intensive factory farming, but it's a product of modern business practices that raises many animal welfare issues, and the relevant parties should be receptive to calibrating how they can do better. On the other end, the tradition of kosher slaughter is in jeopardy in an increasing number of jurisdictions, labeled as backward and cruel; there are some important organizations working tirelessly to protect our tradition that deserve your support.

The Torah has regulated human interaction with animals for thousands of years; the laws of kosher teach us compassion and sensitivity to other creatures.

We should be proud of our heritage.

Unanswered Prayers

4 minute read | Straightforward

Have you ever wanted something so badly that you just kept praying and didn't stop?

Most people have had a time they desperately wanted something, that if they got it, they'd never ask for anything again; to resolve the issue, find the right one, make a recovery, for the thing to work out okay. People pray hard in those moments, with more intention and hope than all the other times the stakes aren't so high.

Sometimes those prayers are fulfilled, and the perfect outcome materializes. There are countless books filled with such stories, and their popularity is a product of how inspiring they are and how they supply us with hope to not give up on our own dreams and wishes.

But what about all the other times when the hoped-for outcome doesn't happen?

No one writes those books; no one would read those books. But it happens all the time.

It even happens to the best and brightest of us, to no less than Moshe himself. In his parting words to his people, he tells them how he prayed and prayed for God's permission to enter the Land of Israel, the culmination of his life's work and the only personal indulgence he ever asked for, but God bid him



R' Shmshon Raphael Hirsch notes that this ritual symbolizes how today was built on yesterday; we are yesterday's children. We honor the past by starting the day with an acknowledgment, incorporating an aspect of it into our being, but most of it has to be left behind to move on and start the day fresh. We must build on and respect the past, but we cannot spend too much time and energy focused on the rearview mirror. Each day brings new challenges, obligations, and opportunities, and we must ultimately leave the past behind us.

The Izbhitzer suggests that this ritual acknowledges and affirms our unanswered prayers, the orphan prayers that get left behind. The day begins with a recognition that even the holiest efforts experience waste, friction, transaction tax, fatigue, and wear and tear. Nothing is lossless, even the best things. Something is always lost in translation; not everything can go the way we hope. But that doesn't mean the efforts went to waste; the ritual itself refers to the uplifting of this waste – תרומת הדשן.

Some of our efforts and prayers turn to ash; unanswered prayers are a thing, and the Temple service began at dawn by sweeping and disposing of yesterday's ashes.

Something might be wrong with the road we hoped to travel, or it might be perfect but not meant to be; the hopes and dreams of yesterday might not be the road we must ultimately take. For good reason, we pray on Rosh Hashana to be like heads, not tails. Memory and identity can be burdens from the past; you can live perpetually as yesterday's tail and never live freely in the present.

R' Shlomo Farhi teaches that there are places, people, and things that come into our lives and shape us for better and for worse; you can only move forward from the place and person you used to be. Those hard-won lessons are precious and something to be thankful for; uplifting of ashes. Be thankful, and let them go gently, so you don't get stuck; disposal of ashes. Hold on to the things that deserve to be held on to, but hold on out of a renewed commitment to today and tomorrow – not because of inherited commitments from the past.

The thing you prayed for might have been the right thing to pray for yesterday, but today's service calls for a fresh start or at least a fresh analysis.

We must cherish and honor our past hopes and dreams but ultimately let go and release them to face each day anew.

The Clothes Make the Man

5 minute read | Straightforward



TorahRedux

From all over the world, Jews would come to the Mishkan and Beis HaMikdash for spiritual healing and engagement with the divine transcendence. Offering services far beyond the regular public programming and sacrifices, the Kohanim, the priests on duty, would attend to people's personal spiritual needs, helping them bring sacrificial offerings to find atonement or thanksgiving, whatever their circumstances.

The Torah describes a plain and simple uniform that all on-duty Kohanim would wear: linen shorts with a matching long-robed shirt, a belt, and a turban.

The uniform was modest and minimal, but like all dress codes, uniforms pose a challenge. How we dress is a form of self-expression; doesn't imposing a uniform dress code stifle individuality and human freedom?

Clothing is a basic form of self-expression, and self-expression is vital to emotional growth and well-being. We use freedom of expression, including clothing choice, to cultivate the ability to make choices about how we express ourselves, an integral part of learning a broader responsibility for our choices and healthy personal development. If you've ever seen a child put up a big fight about getting dressed, you've seen just how important it is, emotionally speaking, to be able to control your outward appearance as part of being in control of your identity. There should be no question that you can tell something about a person by how they dress. While imprecise, it's directionally accurate.

Yet, be that as it may, the nature of a public-facing service job is that you must somewhat check yourself at the door. There's plenty of time for self-expression, but it might not be the right moment to express yourself fully when a client or patient requires your advice and compassion.

Humans have certain behaviors hardcoded into our biological makeup – we make snap judgments from very thin slices of information, including conclusions from how someone dresses. These are powerful drives, and we'd be lying to ourselves if we thought we could suppress subconscious instincts; they are subconscious. So while there are plenty of highly successful or learned people who avoid formal wear on principle and achieve incredible heights wearing gym clothes and flip flops, the fact remains that when you're trying to impress, regardless of your merits, everyone knows you're better off in a suit than pajamas.

How someone dresses is, of course, not a reliable or proper way to judge a person at all, but the fact remains that appearances matter. Sitting in the emergency room with a troubling health concern, you might get thrown off a little if the doctor walks in with ripped jeans and spiky chains over a tank top. In scrubs or a clown costume, he's still the same doctor; the scrubs also help you.

When you're at the hospital, and you see someone in scrubs in the hallway, you instantly know an incredible amount of relevant and valuable information about that person – they work at the hospital, they know their way around the building, they know a lot about health and the human body, they can direct you where you're trying to go. But most importantly, you know they're there to help you; the



hospital dress code utilizes nonverbal communication to foster a sense of comfort and gravity that allows patients and their families to feel comfortable and at ease, all before a single word needs to be said.

And it's no different for spiritual health and well-being.

The Torah mandates a simple dress code for on-duty Kohanim, consisting of a plain and simple uniform, spirit scrubs if you like, out of concern for the weary and troubled souls who came from far and near.

Dress codes are effective. Dress codes work. While it's not an absolute and immutable law, it is a pretty good rule of thumb, a heuristic that primes us to act a certain way. And to be sure, what we're discussing is the textbook definition of superficial – but that's human nature and psychology; we have a strong bias and inclination towards the superficial. The way you present yourself matters.

Dress codes level the playing field by peeling away distractions and removing barriers to people getting what they need. Uniforms aren't intimidating the way fancy clothes are; uniforms aren't off-putting the way old, raggedy clothes are. Everyone on duty appears equal, at least in an outward sense. Uniforms also create a psychological bond, building a group identity that motivates individuals to do more; you see this in the military, police, school, and work. It can help engender feelings of support: you see others working with you and recognize that they aren't just doing it as individuals for personal reasons. When you are servicing the public, it is not about you because you are expressly not representing yourself. Tellingly, the uniforms were procured with public funds and owned by the Beis HaMikdash endowment.

There is nothing inherent about dress codes or uniforms that makes you better at what you do for wearing those clothes, but the fact you're wearing them signals, at least to some people, that you're willing to put them first. And even if you don't think that's true, it is still a reason somebody else might think it is true, and that's reason enough.

Like other uniforms, the Kohanim's uniform conveys information and fosters comfort and security, setting the tone for meaningful and high-signal interactions with spiritual seekers. But like a doctor in scrubs, the dress code is only skin deep.

It's important to stress that appearance isn't everything – far from it. No two doctors or people are the same, even though they may wear the same uniform. They each have different personalities and sensitivities, and assuming a basic threshold of competency; they distinguish themselves with their bedside manner – what they're like to interact with. Our Amida also has a uniform structure, morning, noon, and night, Sunday through Friday, yet no two prayers are alike – the feeling we invest in each word is different each time. R' Shlomo Farhi highlights that even as similar as the Kohanim's uniform was, each set of clothing still had to be tapered to the contours of the wearer's body, with no



loose fabric. No two people are alike, and even two conversations with the same person aren't interchangeable; uniformity doesn't mean homogeneity, and common form is not common substance.

Shakespeare wrote that the clothes make the man, but if that's a little wide of the mark, it's probably correct to say that the clothes set the tone. In your own house, yard, or office, do whatever and be whoever you like. Who's to say otherwise? But in other-facing, client-facing, or public-facing positions, you should be mindful of how you look to people who don't know to give you the benefit of the doubt. Plenty of major companies have relaxed dress codes for non-client-facing positions, but you can be sure that the client-facing positions are suited and booted!

The value articulated by a dress code or uniform policy is that while they may not help everyone, they provide substantial benefits to portions of the population disadvantaged in specific contexts.

So perhaps dress codes don't compromise individuality or self-expression; maybe they curb the outermost and superficial part of ourselves, and that's the part we can afford to sacrifice for other people's comfort in public service.

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

I hope you enjoyed this week's thoughts. If you have questions or comments, or just want to say hello, it's a point of pride for me to hear from you, and I'll always respond.

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

Neli

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

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