



Acharei Mos; Shabbos Mevarchim 2024

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:

וְשָׂפַךְ אֶת-דָּמוֹ, וְכִסְהוּ בְעָפָר – 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:

אֶךָ-בְּשָׂרָהּ, בְּנִפְשׁוֹ דָּמוֹ 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:

כי נפש הבשר, בדם הוא, ואני נתתיו לכם על-המזבח, לכפר על-נפשתיכם: כי-הדם הוא, בנפש יכפר – 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 – והאֵרָץ נָתַן לְבָנֵי-אָדָם / טוב ה' לכל ורחמייו 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.

Right Thing; Wrong Time

4 minute read | Straightforward

Few people want to do the wrong thing. Most people want to do the right thing, and usually, it pays off. Sometimes, even when we know the right thing to do, we're afraid to follow through.

But once in a while, even doing the right thing backfires spectacularly.

After an eventful year for the Jewish People, with the Exodus, Red Sea, Sinai, and Golden Calf debacle all in quick succession, the Mishkan was finally ready, and the people could settle down and catch their breath.

The new spiritual infrastructure embodied by the Mishkan was an exciting cause for celebration; the people hadn't had a way to thank their Creator for keeping them through Egypt and ultimately saving them – arguably the thought process behind the excitement for the Golden Calf. The Creator had established a medium through which their worship was welcome; the celebration was genuine, and Ahron's family felt it too. And so, after they had followed Moshe's commanded rituals, Ahron's eldest sons, Nadav and Avihu, wanted to make a token offering of their own, expressing their gratitude and respect on this momentous occasion. The Midrash imagines their joy at seeing a Heavenly fire descend, and suggests that they wanted to join God's act of life and love with one of their own.

But joy turned to ashes, and celebration turned to tragedy:

וַיִּקְחוּ בְנֵי-אַהֲרֹן נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא אִישׁ מִתְּתוֹ, וַיִּתְּנוּ בָּהֶן אֵשׁ, וַיִּשִׂימוּ עָלֶיהָ, קִטְרֹת; וַיִּקְרִיבוּ לִפְנֵי ה', אֵשׁ זָרָה—אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה, אֹתָם. וַתִּצְאָ אֵשׁ ה' מִלְּפָנָיו ה', וַתֹּאכַל אוֹתָם; וַיָּמָתוּ, לִפְנֵי ה' – Nadav and Avihu took pans of fire, in which they placed the spices, and presented it before God; this alien fire which they were not commanded. A great fire emerged and consumed them before God. (10:1,2)

The Torah has no trouble describing people doing something bad or wrong; it conspicuously avoids suggesting that Nadav and Avihu did anything explicitly wrong. Our sages suggest different things that might associate them with wrongdoing, but we are left with the impression that this wasn't wrong so much as it was inappropriate or misguided. Their image is still very much that they were great men



who died a beautiful death before God; failed heroes, and not wayward sinners – ותצא אש מלפני ה' ותאכל – אותם; וימתו, לפני ה'.

R' Jonathan Sacks notes that this story is a caution that our power of initiative might be welcome in the world of action, but we must taper it in the world of spirituality. The world of spirituality is about subduing our ego in honor of God, not asserting it.

The Torah repeatedly affirms where laws come from – אָנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם – Rashi notes that this statement is an echo of Sinai – אָנֹכִי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ – suggesting a direct link from Sinai to the laws; if we accept God as sovereign, these are the laws of the kingdom, and Sinai is interwoven in the fabric of every mitzvah we uphold.

The Sfas Emes understands this as an affirmation of the nature of the Torah, that there is an invisible and intangible component beyond the obvious things we can directly apprehend. The social, inter-personal mitzvos build and develop a cohesive society whether performed intentionally as mitzvos or not; that's just how they work. Acts of charity will inherently bring brotherhood, goodwill, and positivity into the world, regardless of your awareness of a mitzvah called tzedaka.

The power of initiative works in the world of relationships because people are interactive – we can learn and understand how to get along better. But once we step out of the realm of feedback and interactivity, it is deeply presumptuous to continue asserting the power of initiative.

The Ohr HaChaim sharply observes that their initiative to do the right thing at the wrong time got them killed. This story unequivocally conveys the terrifying yet essential lesson that doing the right thing or having noble intentions is not enough; the context must necessarily inform our behavior.

No action exists in a vacuum. The right thing to do depends entirely on the context; circumstances, timing, and relevant values are necessary to determine the rightness of an action. If you're doing the right thing but the timing creates problems, it wasn't actually the right thing to do at that time. Doing the right thing without an awareness of context and timing very quickly becomes the wrong thing – אָשָׁר לֹא צִוָּה.

This reflects a school of thought in philosophy called consequentialism, which teaches that the only way to determine whether something was morally correct or not is the consequences of that action. The Torah pays respect to these great men, but the outcome was that they died.

And our lives are like that in many ways.

If a young man wants to buy flowers for his wife, he should probably remember the red rose bouquet she chose for their wedding because they are her favorite. If he buys her a beautiful arrangement of white tulips for her birthday, we understand that he probably hasn't done the right thing. While he



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meant well and has done something genuinely and objectively nice, the context determines that red roses would have been the way to go.

Many variables go into something working out well, but what that means, then, is that the right person at the wrong time, or the right deal at the wrong time, or the right job at the wrong time, are actually all the wrong thing, and we would do well to let go of them and make our peace. More than a simple misfire, bad context or timing reveals a fundamental incompatibility and misalignment.

There is no shortage of positive outlets for your enthusiasm and initiative, no shortage of good causes to contribute to and volunteer for.

But when it comes to using your initiative, it is imperative to be in tune with the context of your physical and spiritual environment because, as the famous proverb goes, the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

Attitude Redux

4 minute read | Straightforward

God gave various commands during the Jewish People's time in the desert.

We expect God to give commands; it comes with the territory, that's what God does, and it makes sense. They'd just left Egypt and stood at Sinai; there was a new religion with new procedures and protocols to implement. And after all, there's no way to know what God wants unless God says so!

What God says, we expect the audience to do, which the Torah dutifully records – וַיַּעַשׂ כִּן.

But what we might not expect is that the Torah reports with meticulous regularity, every time, not just that people obey, but that people carry out their task as per God's command – וַיַּעַשׂ כִּן כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה'. The Torah uses this phrase tens, if not hundreds, of times!

If you think about it, it's almost entirely redundant, apart from the repetitiveness. It's not obvious what doing something per God's command adds because, in nearly every example, there is no other conceivable way to do it.

When God says to light the Menora, there is only one way to light a Menora. When God says to take a census of how many people there are, the only way to fulfill the command is to count people. When God says to bring a Korban Pesach, or how to do the Yom Kippur service, or any of the Mishkan-related workflows, or to go to war with Midian, or to execute somebody, there isn't any other



way to do any of those things! And yet each time, the Torah doesn't say people followed their instructions; it says that the people followed their instructions faithfully as per God's command – וַיַּעַשׂ כִּן כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה'.

When people follow instructions, why does the Torah add that they followed the instructions per God's command?

Perhaps the Torah isn't telling us that they did it; it's telling us how they did it.

R' Shlomo Farhi explains that even when there truly is only one way to do something, there is still a right and wrong way. When the Torah adds that people followed instructions faithfully – כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' – it's not saying that they did just like they were told; it means that people follow instructions just like when they were told, capturing the snapshot of sentiment or feeling of a particular moment.

When you do anything, even if there's no other way, you can still do it with energy, focus, and joy, or not – a right way and a wrong way, even when there's only one way.

Our sages were sensitive to this subtle but universal nuance.

Rashi quotes the Sifri that Ahron lit the Menora every day, precisely the way Moshe told him for the rest of his life, and never changed or deviated in any way – כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה'; the Sifri suggests that our everyday approach to Torah should similarly be with freshness and excitement – וַהֲיִי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר – אֲנִכִּי מִצִּוְתָהּ הַיּוֹם עַל־לִבְבְּךָ.

R' Simcha Bunim of Peshischa notes that as much as the comment is about Ahron not changing how he performed his duties, it's equally a comment about how his duties didn't change him. Some people let privilege and honor get to their heads – but not Ahron.

The Sfas Emes notes that lighting the Menora wasn't a prestigious ceremony in that any Kohen could kindle the lights. Still, Ahron took it seriously enough that he insisted on doing it himself every day for the rest of his life – he did it like the moment he received the command.

The Izhbitzer notes that the highest praise for Ahron is that he retained that initial desire, that things never got stale or boring for him. He kept challenging himself to find something new and exciting, so he lit the Menora his last time with the same enthusiasm as the first.

The Shem miShmuel notes that the word for training, which means practice repetitions, is cognate to the word for inauguration, the first time you do something – הַיְנוּךְ / הַנוּכָה. This suggests that training is not simply a repeat of past performance but the repetition of newness, with each repetition inviting an opportunity to introduce a fresh aspect or dimension.



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Attitude and mentality are everything; the mental and emotional components heavily influence the substance of any interaction. Prayer and sacrifice require proper intent to have any substance; there is a vast difference between giving someone a hand because you care and giving someone a hand out of pity.

A Torah scroll is quite clearly a religious article, yet it has no inherent sanctity from perfect script or spelling. A Torah scroll is kosher and sacred exclusively when written with the express intent of imbuing the words and scroll with sanctity, which is to say that its utility and value as a holy object are solely determined by the mentality of the scribe.

The Mishkan had plenty of unique artifacts like the Menora, but it had some pretty ordinary implements that everyone owns; a shirt, a hat, a cup, and a spoon. What designated these as sacred and distinct is the intention with which they were crafted.

This is a universal truth in all walks of life, from Judaism to art to cooking. A great cook will say their secret ingredient is love; a great artist or sage will say their secret technique is heart and soul.

In the words of Martin Luther King Jr., if a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as a Michelangelo painted, Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, ‘Here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well.’

Mastery is typically dull. Finishing your fiftieth marathon is less notable than your first.

It’s normal.

The more we experience something, our enthusiasm, and attention typically wane. Predictability and comfort put an end to fresh euphoria; when we know what to expect, our excitement wears off, and boredom sets in. That’s why we need to keep things fresh if we’re focused on a long-term project or goal; cruise control is a killer.

It’s often seen with young athletes or scholars who lose their way – they think they’ve made it and stop putting in the work that would take them to the elite tier. The seasoned pros always comment on how essential it is for youngsters to maintain their concentration and focus on staying on track, being fully present in each moment, and devoting their full and undivided attention, so things don’t get boring.

In all walks of life, the highest form of mastery is valuing each repetition and finding its novelty and excitement.



It's not redundant for the Torah to say each time that people did the right thing in the right way for the right reason. It is ubiquitous because it reflects a truism of life, a constant reminder that is universally true.

The way you do things matters.

Who Watches the Watchman?

6 minute read | Straightforward

The Torah details many laws that help regulate society. As with any legal system, the Torah anticipates that sometimes people will fail, break the law, and what to do about it.

But sometimes, it's already too late. Some crimes go unsolved in what is called a cold case, when there are no leads, no suspects, and no witnesses, which is particularly dangerous for the obvious reason that the perpetrator remains at large and unidentified.

The Torah describes such an example.

In the event an unidentified body is discovered in an unpopulated area, the Torah commands a specific and highly bizarre ritual, where the elders and leaders of the closest city take a calf to a nearby river or stream, break its neck, and make a public proclamation they didn't kill this innocent person:

וַעֲנוּ, וְאָמְרוּ: לֹא שָׁפְכָנוּ אֶת-הַדָּם הַזֶּה, וְעֵינֵינוּ, לֹא רָאוּ. כִּפּוּר לַעֲמֹד יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר-פָּדִיתָ, הוּא, וְאַל-תִּתֵּן דָּם נָקִי, בְּקֶרֶב עַמֶּךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל; וְאָתָּה, תִּבְעֵר הַדָּם הַנָּקִי-מִקֶּרְבֵּךָ: כִּי-תַעֲשֶׂה הַיָּשָׁר, בְּעֵינֵי ה' – וְנִכְפַּר לָהֶם, הַדָּם. וְאָתָּה, תִּבְעֵר הַדָּם הַנָּקִי-מִקֶּרְבֵּךָ: כִּי-תַעֲשֶׂה הַיָּשָׁר, בְּעֵינֵי ה' וְאָמְרוּ, וְאָמְרוּ: לֹא שָׁפְכָנוּ אֶת-הַדָּם הַזֶּה, וְעֵינֵינוּ, לֹא רָאוּ. כִּפּוּר לַעֲמֹד יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר-פָּדִיתָ, הוּא, וְאַל-תִּתֵּן דָּם נָקִי, בְּקֶרֶב עַמֶּךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל; וְאָתָּה, תִּבְעֵר הַדָּם הַנָּקִי-מִקֶּרְבֵּךָ: כִּי-תַעֲשֶׂה הַיָּשָׁר, בְּעֵינֵי ה' – וְנִכְפַּר לָהֶם, הַדָּם. וְאָתָּה, תִּבְעֵר הַדָּם הַנָּקִי-מִקֶּרְבֵּךָ: כִּי-תַעֲשֶׂה הַיָּשָׁר, בְּעֵינֵי ה'

Beyond the specifics of the ritual that require their own explanation, it's quite something for the Torah to require the elders, sages, and leaders to say they weren't the killers.

Would anyone seriously suspect that they were?

Rashi explains the proclamation to mean that they didn't know there was a traveler and therefore were not complicit in the murder by letting them travel in a dangerous area alone. The Sforno similarly explains that they must affirm that they didn't knowingly permit a murderer to roam free.

The Chasam Sofer takes a very different approach, observing that it is straightforward to say the murder was not their fault, but they don't get to say that. In this reading, the ceremony is not a declaration of innocence; but a public statement of collective responsibility and guilt, a confession and acknowledgment that the crime happened on their watch.

Or in other words, there is no question of why the Torah summons the elders and sages and leaders to answer for the quiet mystery death of an innocent; it's the answer.

“Our hands didn't kill this person; we didn't hold the knife, or the gun, or give them the pills. But that's as far as we can go in disclaiming responsibility. Because we weren't looking, we weren't paying the close attention this person deserved and needed, so the criminal – and the victim – slipped right through our fingers.”

When the Torah describes the Mishkan construction process, it presents an exhaustive account of each donation because the leaders were publicly accountable for each contribution; and that's just for finances! As the Lubavitcher Rebbe said, people are not dollars.

If you are surprised the Torah requires leaders to account for human life, then, like the sages who perform the ritual, you haven't been paying attention.

In the section detailing the rituals for sacrificial atonement, the Torah talks about leaders who make mistakes:

אֲשֶׁר נָשִׂיא יִקְטֹא וְעָשָׂה אֶחָת מִכָּל־מִצְוֹת הַאֲלֹקִים אֲשֶׁר לֹא־תַעֲשֶׂינָהּ בְּשִׁגְגָה וְאִשָּׁם – When a leader incurs guilt by doing unwittingly any of the things which God commanded not to do, and he realizes his guilt... (4:22)

The Torah plainly and unambiguously talks about when, and not if, leaders make mistakes because avoiding mistakes in power is impossible; we need to stop pretending otherwise because denying errors compounds them and makes things worse. Very few people expect a society without any wrongdoing, but corruption and impotence in dealing with misconduct are highly destructive; the cover-up is always worse than the crime.

When politics demands a lie, but people demand the truth, you get corruption. Leaders that face painful truths are not just morally preferable; they save lives. Wilfully blind leaders playing make-believe about real problems in our community alienate and disillusion people who care, weakening their ties to a community that won't show care and concern to the people who need it! We can't afford to tolerate leaders who fixate on maintaining the illusion of infallible perfection and divine knowledge. We will never correct our community's mistakes so long as we deny them and don't confront them. While we can't reasonably expect perfect leaders, we can reasonably expect perfectly compassionate and honest leaders who will do what is right and proper.



On Yom Kippur, the great Day of Atonement, the Kohen Gadol's first atonement ritual is a personal confession for himself and his family, publicly owning his mistakes.

Every year before Tisha b'Av, we publicly read Isaiah's explicit rage against corrupt leadership and broken institutions that don't protect the vulnerable – רָחֲצוּ הַזְכוּ הַסִּירוּ רֵעַ מֵעֲלֵיכֶם מִנְגִּד עֵינֵי חֲדָלוּ הִרְעוּ: לְמַדּוּ הַיֵּטֵב – דְּרָשׁוּ מִשְׁפָּט אֲשֶׁרׁוּ חָמוּץ שִׁפְטוּ יָתוֹם רִיבוֹ אֶלְמָנָה... שְׂרִיף סוֹרְרִים וְחֲבָרֵי גִבּוֹרִים כֵּלּוּ אֶהָב שְׂחָד וְרִדְף שְׁלֹמֹנִים יָתוֹם לֹא יִשְׁפֹּטוּ וְרִיב אֶלְמָנָה לֹא יִבּוֹא אֲלֵיהֶם.

The Ibn Ezra explains that the Torah is suggesting that when something terrible happens in a community, that community has some introspection and soul searching to do. In fact, this is the Rambam's universal guidance on how to respond to tragedy; bad things happen in a climate and environment, and we can identify the factors that make them more likely to occur in a given context and change them.

We don't often have to deal with murders in our community, but the Torah doesn't explicitly talk about murder at all – כִּי־יִמָּצָא חָלָל בְּאֶדְמָה... נִפְלַ בְּשָׂדֶה לֹא נוֹדַע מִי הַכָּהוּ –

R' Aaron Lopiansky teaches that we must not mistakenly classify sexual abuse as a sin or misdemeanor. It is no exaggeration to say that sexual abuse is a matter of life and death, among the most severe crimes a human can commit, right alongside murder, which ties back into the severity of the sage's confession over an unidentified body.

If a survivor of abuse commits suicide, who really killed them?

R' Aharon Lichtenstein warns against resorting to the no-true-Scotsman fallacy – “he wasn't really one of us!” We don't get to disclaim wrongdoers after the fact when they fit in seamlessly alongside the best and brightest our community has to offer until being found out. We have to be willing to ask the difficult question of what allowed them to hurt vulnerable people yet blend right in with us.

There are good reasons why victims are scared to report crimes in our community, and if you want to sleep well at night, make sure you're not one of them. People who have experienced abuse and trauma are not damaged goods, not pitiful, stained misfits who deserve your deepest sympathies. It's not their fault. You need to believe them, and you need to believe in them. The abuser's best friend is the Sefer Chofetz Chaim; they rely on and exploit the fact that their victim will remain silent.

You can be very sure there are victimized and vulnerable people in your circles. If you don't know of any offhand, you ought to wonder why no one trusts you enough to share that with you. It starts with not turning away or keeping silent when people misguidedly or maliciously defend abusers; victims must know in their bones that you are with them all the way, otherwise you are complicit.

The Torah uses emotion extremely sparingly, so we ought to sit up and notice when it does. The way the Torah uses the imagery of spilled innocent blood to demand the sages publicly beg forgiveness is



particularly powerful; the Torah has no tolerance for unanswered crimes, where the victim dies alone and invisible – וְאֵל-תִּתֵּן דָם נָקִי, בְּקִרְבֵּי עַמֶּךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל; וְנִכְפַּר לָהֶם, הַדָּם. וְאַתָּה, תִּבְעֵר הַדָּם. הַנָּקִי-מִקְרָבָךְ –

Every time one of our institutions acts to protect a victimizer instead of the victim, we fail that test.

On Shabbos, Jewish communities worldwide for generations have said a prayer for the victims with a particularly stirring line:

כִּי-יִדְרֹשׁ דְּמִים אוֹתָם זָכָר לֹא-שָׁכַח צְעַקְתָּ עַנְוִים – For He does not ignore the cry of the distressed; He who requites bloodshed is mindful of them.

The Torah plainly and unambiguously demands that leaders take extreme ownership and recognize the systemic failures that lead to an innocent person’s untimely death, with a ritual of collective responsibility for contributory negligence, that they did not meet their duties of care to the standards the victim required.

Today, purging ourselves from the guilt of innocent blood and doing what is right and proper in the eyes of God means allegations should be taken seriously and thoroughly, and impartially investigated. We do what is right and proper by upholding the rule of law, applying the law evenly, without fear or favor, even if the accused is someone we care about and look up to. Call the police, and report the abuse. Make sure the authorities know and make sure competent mental health professionals are involved. If there’s the slightest hint of impropriety or wrongdoing, the institution must reorganize.

The Torah’s consistent vision of our society is that we stand up for each other, and most especially for those who cannot stand up for themselves. Systemic failures in our entire communal framework allow such things to happen, and the Torah calls on the leaders of that framework to account for bad things that happen on their watch.

“We didn’t see! We didn’t know!” These excuses don’t cut it when your head is in the sand and you didn’t do anything last time around. The errors and omissions for things we weren’t paying attention to are still sins that require rectification on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur – שׁוּגַג / עַל חַטָּא שְׁחָטָנוּ בְיוֹדְעִים – וּבְלֹא יוֹדְעִים.

If good people don’t enforce what is right and proper against abusers and criminals because we’re afraid of backlash or negative attention, then the abusers and criminals win by default because no one bothered to stop them.

It’s not the mayor, Rosh Yeshiva, or local rabbi who must perform the ritual; it’s all of them, which is to say that no one gets to say it’s not their fault. We are responsible for both our actions and inactions.

Who watches the watchers? All of us – לְשֹׁפְטִים וְשֹׁטְרִים תִּתְּנוּ-לָהֶם בְּכָל-שְׁעָרֵיכֶם.

The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good people to do nothing. We deserve leaders who protect the people who need it most, and we ought to demand that; if we can't disempower bad leaders, we need new institutions and leadership.

Leaders are responsible for their communities, but communities are responsible for who they will follow.

Living with Newness

4 minute read | Straightforward

One of the foundational skills children learn early on is how to read a clock.

What time is it?

It's not simply a question of hours and minutes; there is something deeper to the question. If you know what time it is, you also know what to do. It's morning, wake up and eat breakfast before school or work. It's nighttime, time to wind down and go to sleep. The time of day, the time of year, the seasons, and the calendar all 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 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 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 לְכֶם רֵאשִׁית חֳדָשִׁים רְאשׁוֹן הוּא לְכֶם 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 many mitzvos, so one 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 today. What's more, slavery isn't just an abstract legal status or even just a phenomenon that still occurs in some dark corner of the world; it's also a state of mind, body, and soul that can happen to anyone. Thankfully, we don't have much primary lived with the experience criminal aspect of actual human trafficking, but if you've ever felt helpless, powerless, 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 – **החדש 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. The sense of futility, powerlessness, and stuckness from being burnt out or overwhelmed is poison. 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.

One preeminent historian has observed that the worst thing about history is that people try to correct the past. People try to save the past, which is impossible; you cannot go back to the past and save the people there or prevent past injuries. We only have the present circumstances and perhaps a hopeful look to the future.

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. As R' Hanoch Heinoch of Alexander teaches, we can attach ourselves to vitality by being present – **ואתם – הדיבקים ה' אלקיכם היים כלכם היום**.

The Torah often speaks to us in terms of here and now – **ועתה / היום**. Our sages take these references to Teshuva, our capacity and power to change and repent – **ועתה ישראל מה ה' אלקיך שאל מעמך כי אם-ליראה** – Because in one day, everything can change – **היום אם-בקלו תשמעו** – As R' Baruch of Mezhibozh teaches, forget the past; right now, be a Jew – **ועתה ישראל!** The Chafetz Chaim takes this to be a reference to introspection – **ועתה ישראל מה ה' אלקיך שאל מעמך** – what does this moment require?

It follows that our sages wisely guide us to seize every moment; if not now, when? As the Chiddushei Harim observes, every “now” has a different duty, calling for some new, renewed, or entirely other choice or deed. As R' Ahron of Karlin points out, each moment has its resolution; each moment of existence is incomparably unique, never existing before in the history of Creation, and never to be repeated before becoming irretrievably lost forever.

As the Vilna Gaon points out, Moshe speaks in the present tense to offer us all the power to choose – **ראה אנכי נתן לפניכם היום ברכה וקללה**. Rashi quotes a Midrash that every day, we should perceive our experience of Judaism as brand new – **היום הזה ה' אלקיך מצוה**.



TorahRedux

Even once a person has resolved to change, they can still be anchored by the weight of their wrongdoing. The Shinover Rav suggests that although the past can't be undone, it can be creatively reinterpreted, in the way Yosef reframes a troubled past with his brothers to relieve them of their guilt – וְעַתָּה אֵלֶי־תֵצְבוּ וְאֵלֶי־יִחַר בְּעֵינֵיכֶם בְּיַמְכִרְתֶּם אֹתִי הַנְּהָה כִּי לְמַחְזָה שָׁלַחֲנִי אֱלֹהִים לְפָנֵיכֶם – What happened then wasn't so great, but that brought us to where we are, here and now, and you can only move forward from where you are!

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 symbolic 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 is an instruction to live by and with the power of change and renewal. It is a mitzvah to live presently with this moment and make it count.

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

I dedicate TorahRedux in loving memory of 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

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.