

Tzav; Shabbos HaGadol 2023

First Steps

2 minute read | Straightforward

On the Shabbos before the Exodus, the Jewish People designated one lamb per household to be the first Korban Pesach and kept it in the home for a few days before Pesach. They would slaughter the lamb and smear the blood on their doors to identify their homes as Jewish, and their families would be saved from the destructive forces in play on the night of the tenth Plague.

On the Shabbos HaGadol, the Shabbos before Pesach, we honor our ancestors following the command to set aside the lamb.

But it doesn't align with the way we commemorate things in Judaism. Designating the lamb was a one-off instruction in Egypt; it was never performed again, and we don't do anything to reenact it.

If designating the lamb was small enough that we don't have a similar ritual, what was the point of the ritual at all?

Designating the lamb was not a symbolic indication of their intent to eat it; our sages teach that lambs were sacred creatures in Egypt, meaning that designating a lamb for sacrifice was also a form of sacrilege to Egyptian deities, upholding the yet unspoken second of the Ten Commandments – to have no other gods or entities.

As R' Shlomo Farhi explains, it might have been a small gesture, but it was significant because it marked a rejection of Egyptian religion. In a sense, the second commandment to reject other gods precedes the first commandment, awareness of the One God. It is insufficient to add the Creator to the pantheon of gods you believe in; you need to believe in the Creator and no other; designating the lamb was a small gesture with enormous significance. It only follows that for us, the ritual would be empty. We believe in the One God; we don't believe in other powers.

As the Sfas Emes notes, setting the lamb aside was a one-off instruction in Egypt, never imitated later on in any commandments; it is not the action that we need to remember. Instead, we remember the symbolic move the brave Jewish People took, a tentative but concrete tangible first step.

Shabbos HaGadol also has an element of repentance out of love. Pesach demonstrates the loving relationship between God and the Jewish People; God will act for us before we deserve it. The Jewish People earned eternity and redemption with a token gesture, but a token gesture that gave a foretaste of everything to follow.



Our sages suggest that if a person creates an opening the size of a needle, God can expand the breakthrough into a grand ballroom. Designating the lamb wasn't a big deal at all, but it doesn't exist in isolation. In the context of our history, that first baby step meant everything because everything followed from that first step.

A journey of a thousand miles begins with one step.

Shabbos HaGadol; Shabbos of Greatness

2 minute read | Straightforward

The Shabbos before Pesach is called Shabbos HaGadol – The Great Shabbos. It commemorates the first Shabbos HaGadol in Egypt five days before the Exodus.

On that day, the Jewish People received the first commandment they would ever fulfill, a one-time law that applied only to that Shabbos and never again. They were to designate one lamb per household and keep it in the home for a few days, and the lamb would be the first Korban Pesach. They would slaughter the lamb and smear the blood on their doors to identify their homes as Jewish, and their families would be saved from the destructive forces in play on the night of the tenth Plague.

Multiple elements in this distinctive vignette stick out as highly irregular.

Everyone understands how anniversaries and birthdays work; the Jewish calendar is full of anniversaries. When the date of an event comes back around, you remember what happened on that day in history.

But unlike almost any holiday or event you can think of, Shabbos HaGadol is specifically not on the calendar date of the event. We don't commemorate the legendary ritual five days before Pesach; we celebrate it on the day of the week it fell on – Shabbos. That's not how anniversaries work; that's not how we commemorate any other significant date or event. Your friend's birthday is on the tenth of April; it will never matter that they were born on the second Tuesday in April!

Why do we celebrate this anniversary on Shabbos, a day of the week, rather than a fixed calendar date?

The Sfas Emes teaches that Shabbos frames the boundary and transitions from one week and the next. It is at once the culmination of what came before while setting the tone of what is to come.

Shabbos is the masterpiece of Creation, the finishing touch, and the beginning of everything that follows. The very first Shabbos is about peace and serenity, completion and perfection, redemption



and rest with satisfying purpose. Shabbos is one of the cornerstones of Judaism, and it follows why; it lends context and meaning to almost everything else.

The Jewish People didn't yet observe Shabbos in Egypt. Still, by giving them a commandment on Shabbos, they could tap into the spirit of Shabbos, receiving a dose of that peace and serenity, a taste of redemption and purpose that could give them some fuel and momentum for the imminent Exodus.

It wasn't about the calendar date; it was about connecting with Shabbos for the first time and what Shabbos did for them.

Lingering here in the background is another prominent issue. These people had survived nine plagues without a scratch, passively and without lifting a finger. They were safe automatically; they weren't the targets of God's works in Egypt. And yet now, at the last hurdle, they were suddenly in potential danger, and they needed to proactively take the bold step of taking this lamb on Shabbos and smearing its blood on the doorway to be safe.

The Sfas Emes reminds us that these people had ancestral merit but little of their own; they kept their names, clothing, and language, sure, but then literally nothing else. In proactively carrying out the instruction to designate the lamb, the Jewish People took their first independent steps to move toward God, transforming them from passive victims into actors with agency; they grew up, earning the capacity to be great.

So perhaps it's not the Great Shabbos; it's the Shabbos of Greatness, the Shabbos we became capable of Greatness.

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 תִשְׁכַּח לְפָנֶיךָ תְּפִלַּת עוֹבְרֵי דְרָכִים.

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.



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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' Shmshon 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 – אש תמיד.

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 עזיך המלאכה לגמר.

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.

Unanswered Prayers

4 minute read | Straightforward

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

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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 to stop. It wasn't going to happen, and his prayers would remain unanswered; or at least answered in the negative, if that makes any difference.

Prayer isn't a wish fulfillment scratch card game; unanswered prayers are a corresponding aspect of prayer that we must acknowledge, that some of them probably aren't going to go exactly the way you'd like. For our intents and purposes, some prayers go to waste.

The Izhbitzer notes that all existence is wasteful. Entropy is part of all existence and our basic reality; the appearance of decay, randomness, uncertainty, and unwanted outcomes or outputs. Every interaction might have a desired or likely end goal or output, but there will be an inescapable by-product associated with it. Friction is a result of existing, where all effort takes a toll, the transaction tax of all things. In this conception, the Izhbitzer teaches, waste is not a bug; it's a feature we need to reorient ourselves to.

Fruit and nuts have peels and shells, which we consider waste in terms of our goal of what's edible; yet they're fully functional in fulfilling their natural purpose of protecting the fruit. In reality, they are not waste matter in any real sense of the word; Parenthetically, this example deliberately utilizes the imagery of the shells and husks spoken of in Kabbalah – קליפה.

We are finite and limited; all we know is waste. You can be as energetic as you like, but in a couple of hours, you'll be exhausted, your muscles will fatigue, and you will need to rest, eat, and sleep. When you sleep, your brain clears waste. When you eat and drink, your body will process the calories and nutrients, and you'll need the restroom to pass waste matter. When you breathe, you breathe out waste gas, carbon dioxide. Our bodies and minds waste; all energy and matter eventually wastes.



It is significant that Pharaoh, the Torah's great villain, claims to prove his divinity by pretending he did not pass waste; not producing waste indicates something genuinely supernatural, unlimited, and infinite.

The very first service of the day in the Temple was sweeping up the remnants from the day before:

וְהָרִים אֶת־הַדָּשָׁן אֲשֶׁר תֹּאכַל הָאֵשׁ אֶת־הָעֵלֶה עַל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וְשָׂמוּ אֶצְלַי הַמִּזְבֵּחַ. וּפָשַׁט אֶת־בְּגָדָיו וְלָבַשׁ בְּגָדִים אֲחֵרִים וְהוֹצִיא אֶת־הַדָּשָׁן וְהָרִים אֶת־הַדָּשָׁן אֲשֶׁר תֹּאכַל הָאֵשׁ אֶת־הָעֵלֶה עַל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וְשָׂמוּ אֶצְלַי הַמִּזְבֵּחַ – He shall take up the ashes from the fire, which consumed the burnt offering on the altar, and place them beside the altar. He shall then take off his vestments, put on other vestments, and carry the ashes outside the camp to a pure place. (6:3,4)

The altar had a fire perpetually fueled with logs by crews round the clock, with a constant stream of sacrifices burnt in whole or in part. Slaughtering and burning animals is messy; there is waste, and the day would begin with a simple dust-sweeping ritual. Some ash would be scooped up and brushed into the floor cracks, becoming integrated into the structure of the Temple. The rest of the ash got carried to a designated quiet spot and deposited and buried, to be left in state. It wasn't a competitive or glamorous job; it was janitorial and practical, starting the day by cleaning the workspace.

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 – תְּרוּמַת הַדָּשָׁן.

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



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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.

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 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 broker healthcare businesses for sale; I kindly ask for your blessings and prayers, and introductions to anyone who might want to buy or sell a healthcare business!*

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.