



## **Metzora; Shabbos HaGadol 2022**

### **First Step**

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?

R' Shlomo Farhi explains that 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.

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.

---

## **Under Observation**

4 minute read | Straightforward

The Torah describes a skin condition called tzaraas and many associated laws of diagnosis, quarantine, and rehabilitation. The Torah treats it as a spiritual affliction as opposed to having any apparent medical significance, and as such, it falls under the holiness and purity rubric of the kohen.

The Torah is deliberate and precise that the condition can only be diagnosed or treated by a kohen, the religious leaders of an era before rabbis. If the patient were a learned expert and the kohen an illiterate imbecile, the patient's status still turns on the kohen's word alone and nothing else.



If the kohen doesn't need to know what he's doing, why is the kohen a central figure at all?

Our sages understood that the condition called tzaraas was a symptom experienced by people who gossip and speak ill of others. In this light, it follows that the entire treatment process serves to rehabilitate the patient.

By requiring someone else to make the diagnosis, the Torah acknowledges that it's pretty easy to find faults in others and that it can be hard to see our own; being subjected to the judgment of another is precisely the experience you subject others to when you gossip about them.

It is easy to figure out what others are doing that feels annoying, disappointing, or hurtful. It tends to be harder to figure out what you are doing that is annoying, disappointing, or hurtful. But gossiping about what others are doing gets you nowhere, and the Torah's focus is on reorienting your interactions.

The Tur notes that when the kohen makes his determination, the Torah describes how the kohen quarantines the condition away for a week; not the person – וְהִסְגִּיר הַכֹּהֵן אֶת־הַנִּגַּע שְׁבַעַת יָמִים –

R' Yitzhak Yehuda Trunk highlights how the kohen must look at the condition first but then also looks at the whole person – וְרָאָה הַכֹּהֵן אֶת־הַנִּגַּע / וְרָאָהוּ הַכֹּהֵן – suggesting the need to see an issue for what it is critically but to consider the totality of a person in context; their qualities and redemptive features as well.

One of the laws of diagnosis is that if the condition persists but does not spread, the kohen must declare the illness healed – וְלֹא־פָשָׁה הַנִּגַּע בְּעוֹר וְטִהַר הַכֹּהֵן –. When someone is in a stable medical condition, you might equally describe them as stable and therefore improving; or you might say that the lack of improvement is a sign of deterioration, that they're not going to get better. Neither is wrong, but in terms of our orientation to the world, this law indicates a clear bias towards positivity.

R' Zusha of Hanipol observes how severe the Torah is about gossip and slander; if a person has the propensity for gossip and slander within them, they don't belong around others – כָּל־יָמֵי אֲשֶׁר הַנִּגַּע בּוֹ יִטְמָא – טְמֵא הוּא בְּדָד יֵשֵׁב מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה מִשְׁבּוֹ.

The Rema notes that this could well be someone with tzaraas on their entire body doesn't quarantine; their exterior physical condition matches their inner spiritual condition, and people will know to steer clear just by looking.

R' Yisrael Salanter sharply notes how the punishment of isolation fits the crime. The sin isn't just telling stories about others; it's specifically about finding fault in others, a sin of misappropriating a skill you're supposed to use on yourself. The Torah describes the skin healing from its nucleus but quite literally talks about inverting the eye – הִפְךָ הַנִּגַּע אֶת עֵינָיו –. By placing the laws of Tzaraas next to the laws of kosher, the Torah suggests that what comes out of our mouths is just as important as what



## TorahRedux

goes in. If the condition and isolation are a result of judgmental eyes, then he has healed when his eyes are fixed firmly inward.

The Rambam says that when disaster strikes, it is forbidden to treat tragedy as a chance act of nature or randomness and that all things come from God and should be catalysts for teshuvah. Our response to suffering should be humility and introspection; don't look elsewhere and blame it on those you don't like.

The Brisker Rov taught his students that the prophet Yonah fled from God, preferring to suffer rather than betray his people, but that when God sent a storm after him, he took ownership of the predicament around him – בשלי הסער הגדול הזה. In taking responsibility, you claim the power and ability to respond.

R' Asher of Stolin suggests that the Torah's approach to our personal shortcomings is to be upfront and forthcoming with them – נגוע צרעת פי תקייה בְּאָדָם וְהוּבָא אֶל-הַכֹּהֵן. A problem shared is a problem halved; when people know you have an issue, they are in a position to help you in the way you need it. With self-compassion, you can be gentle and forgiving with yourself enough to display your mistakes and vulnerabilities and can be open with trusted people about the fact that you are flawed, like everyone else. The error of gossip is hiding your faults by exposing other people's rather than doing anything. Share your flaws with trusted teachers and friends; own them before they own you.

At every step, the Torah reminds us repeatedly that we don't see things as they are; we see them as we are. Take ownership rather than point a finger.

Humans are highly subjective creatures, and we need to be mindful of how we use our ability to analyze critically. You need to take responsibility for your faults, not point fingers and place the blame elsewhere. Acknowledging imperfections opens the door to doing something about them. Success isn't hiding your cracks or revealing others; it's in honestly confronting yourself and bringing attention to the cracks within.

When everything is someone else's fault, you will suffer a lot. When you realize everything springs from within, you will discover peace and joy.

---

## Isolation Redux

3 minute read | Straightforward

When a person is officially diagnosed with the skin condition the Torah calls tzaraas, the Torah imposes a mandatory seven-day quarantine; the person must leave town and live in solitary isolation.



Anyone who lived through COVID has primary experience of isolation and quarantine. However difficult and unpleasant, it has the valuable function of attempting to stop contagion and transmission, saving lives in the aggregate.

Yet our sages teach that this skin condition resulted from gossip and slander, which is to say that it wasn't a contagious or transmissible condition.

So why are quarantine and isolation appropriate?

Perhaps isolation is an appropriate measure for the wrongdoing of harmful speech.

Language distinguishes humans from animals and is the tool that has built and compounded human civilization. More than smarts or strength, it is arguably humanity's most powerful tool to control and influence the world around us.

Gossip has a positive social utility, exposing genuine threats among us, like abusers and molesters. That kind of gossip is not only permitted but arguably mandatory – חוּעֵלָה; but most gossip doesn't meet that standard. Most gossip is destructive speech that puts others down, modifying bonds and cohesion in an imagined social hierarchy, subtly eroding people's relationships in the perceptions of others. By lowering somebody's reputation, you can feel superior in gaining status relative to the unknowing victim.

So gossip quietly but very literally tears apart the fabric of your community and social circle by planting divisive and harmful ideas and impressions, sabotaging trust and relationships.

If that is correct, then quarantine is highly appropriate – society needs protection, not from the disease, but from the person.

And perhaps there's something else to it as well.

Beyond helping society, perhaps it helps the gossiper as well. They have subverted their precious power of language for nefarious purposes, and isolation from others may help a person who gossips recalibrate how they communicate, reorienting them to their place in society when they rejoin.

Human beings are social creatures; our power of communication is what makes us human, so losing the power of communication is literally dehumanizing. Deprived of human interaction, stimulus, and activity, a person's mind must fill the void of boredom and sensory deprivation. Solitary isolation isn't a trivial thing; the prevailing view holds that, generally speaking, more than 15 days in isolation qualifies as torture; it's not hard to imagine why.



Moreover, this isn't the only time the Torah talks about isolation as a punishment; the Torah describes how the penultimate plague of darkness was experienced by its victims, primarily as a form of isolation:

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

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 isolated, completely cut off from each other – לֹא-רָאוּ אִישׁ אֶת-אָחִיו.

The Chiddushei HaRim highlights that this isolation 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. Our sages go so far as to say that someone in isolation is effectively considered dead to the world.

Humans need each other; it's an existential design feature of being human – לֹא-טוֹב הָיִיתׁ הָאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ.

Our most fundamental nature, the root of our behavior, is generosity, empathy, courage, and kindness. Isolation exposes what it means to be human by stripping those things away.

Perhaps by being alone for seven days, a person who gossips can appreciate their ability to communicate in a new light, cultivating a new understanding of the value of community for when they return.

Human beings are social creatures; make sure you use your precious gift of communication to build, not break. But some breaking can be constructive; not all gossip is destructive; some forms of gossip are not only permitted, but required.

A good rule of thumb that should only fail rarely is that if there is a credible threat to communal safety and wellbeing, it is better to expose the threat than suppress it. Someone's potential status of innocence should never trump everyone else's certain and definite status of safety.

Suppressing public awareness of abusers only protects and serves the interests of abusers. Exposing them is worthy of pride, not shame; utilizing gossip correctly serves to effectively isolate abusers from the general population and protects vulnerable people in our communities.

When there are dangerous folks people need to be careful around, remember that you can serve the highest of purposes in spreading the word.





## Language Redux

3 minute read | Straightforward

Humans are the apex predator on Earth.

We share this planet with thousands and thousands of species, trillions of organisms, and none but humans carry a lasting multi-generational record of knowledge of any obvious consequence. And yet, a feral human being left alone in the woods from birth to death, kept separate and alive, wouldn't be much more than an ape; our knowledge isn't because humans are smart.

It's because we speak – מְדַבֵּר.

We communicate and cooperate with others through language, giving us a formidable advantage at forming groups, sharing information, and pooling workloads and specializations. Language is the mechanism by which the aggregated knowledge of human culture is transmitted, actualizing our intelligence and self-awareness, transcending separate biological organisms, and becoming one informational organism. With language, we have formed societies and built civilizations; developed science and medicine, literature and philosophy.

With language, knowledge does not fade; we can learn from the experiences of others. Without learning everything from scratch, we can use an existing knowledge base built by others to learn new things and make incrementally progressive discoveries. As one writer put it, a reader lives a thousand lives before he dies; the man who never reads lives only once.

Language doesn't just affect how we relate to each other; it affects how we relate to ourselves. We make important decisions based on thoughts and feelings influenced by words on a page or conversations with others. It has been said that with one glance at a book, you can hear the voice of another person – perhaps someone gone for millennia – speaking across the ages clearly and directly in your mind.

Considering the formidable power of communication, it follows that the Torah holds it in the highest esteem; because language is magical. Indeed, the fabric of Creation is woven with words:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים, יְהִי אֹר; וַיְהִי-אֹר – God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. (1:3)

R' Jonathan Sacks notes that humans use language to create things as well. The notion of a contract or agreement is a performative utterance – things that people say to create something that wasn't there before; a relationship of mutual commitment between people, created through speech. Whether it's God giving us the Torah or a husband marrying his wife, relationships are fundamental to Judaism.





We can only build relationships and civilizations with each other when we can make commitments through language.

Recognizing the influential hold language has over us, the Torah emphasizes an abundance of caution and heavily regulates how we use language: the laws of gossip and the metzora; and the incident where Miriam and Ahron challenged Moshe; among others. Even the Torah’s choice of words about the animals that boarded the Ark is careful and measured:

אֶשֶׁר לֹא מִכָּל הַבְּהֵמָה הַטְּהוֹרָה, תִּקַּח-לָךְ שְׁבָעָה שְׁבָעָה-אִישׁ וְאִשְׁתּוֹ; וּמִן-הַבְּהֵמָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא טְהוֹרָה הוּא, שְׁנַיִם-אִישׁ וְאִשְׁתּוֹ – Of every clean creature, take seven and seven, each with their mate; and of the creatures that are not clean two, each with their mate. (7:2)

The Gemara notes that instead of using the more accurate and concise expression of “impure,” the Torah utilizes extra ink and space to articulate itself more positively – “that are not clean” – אֲשֶׁר לֹא טְהוֹרָה הוּא. While possibly hyperbolic, the Lubavitcher Rebbe would refer to death as “the opposite of life”; and hospital infirmaries as “places of healing.”

The Torah cautions us of the power of language repeatedly in more general settings:

לֹא-תִלְךָ רֶכֶּיל בְּעַמֶּיךָ, לֹא תַעֲמֹד עַל-דַּם רֵעֶךָ: אֲנִי, ה' – Do not allow a gossip to mingle among the people; do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor: I am Hashem. (19:16)

The Torah instructs us broadly not to hurt, humiliate, deceive, or cause another person any emotional distress:

וְלֹא תוֹנוּ אִישׁ אֶת-עֲמִיתוֹ, וְיִרְאַתָּ מְאֹלֵהֶיךָ: כִּי אֲנִי ה', אֱלֹהֵיכֶם – Do not wrong one another; instead, you should fear your God; for I am Hashem. (25:27)

Interestingly, both these laws end with “I am Hashem” – evoking the concept of emulating what God does; which suggests that just as God constructively uses language to create, so must we – אֲנִי ה'. The Lubavitcher Rebbe taught that as much as God creates with words, so do humans.

The Gemara teaches that verbal abuse is arguably worse than theft; you can never take back your words, but at least a thief can return the money!

The idea that language influences and impacts the world around us is the foundation of the laws of vows, which are significant enough that we open the Yom Kippur services at Kol Nidrei by addressing them.

Of course, one major caveat to harmful speech is intent. If sharing negative information has a constructive and beneficial purpose that may prevent harm or injustice, there is no prohibition, and



there might even be an obligation to protect your neighbor by conveying the information – לא תעמוד על-דם ריבך.

As R' Jonathan Sacks powerfully said, no soul was ever saved by hate; no truth was ever proved by violence; no redemption was ever brought by holy war.

Rather than hurt and humiliate, let's use our language to educate, help and heal; because words and ideas have the power to change the world.

They're the only thing that ever has.

---

## Thought of the Week

It is entirely possible for people to have the same experience repeatedly and fail to learn from it effectively.

We do not learn from experience, we learn from reflecting on experience.

– @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.*

Neli

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

**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.