



Ha'azinu, Yom Kippur 2023

Mistakes Were Made

3 minute read | Straightforward

As the Torah wraps up its story, it records every stop between Egypt and the border of the Promised Land. When Moshe retells the story of their journey together, he does the same thing.

It's a nice recap, but it seems odd on closer inspection.

Some of the stops were simple rest stops where nothing relevant happened. On a road trip, the gas station and toilet break aren't part of the itinerary; many of these stops are the functional equivalent, and yet Moshe saw fit to include them.

Far more surprisingly, he lists the places they screwed up. He names and shames each one; the places they clashed with Moshe and defied God, the places they worshipped idols, the places they surrendered to materialism, and the places they succumbed to desire.

It's surprising because humans don't usually emphasize or highlight failures; we typically avoid the stigma and negativity associated with talking about failure.

Imagine reminiscing with your significant other about that restaurant where you had a huge argument. Or that Pesach you insulted your mother-in-law. They're not the kind of things that lend themselves to reminiscence.

One conventional answer is that our actions impact our surroundings; our actions have a ripple effect in the world that leaves some residual mark or impact that lingers on our environment, for better and worse. That's probably true.

But there is a simple yet profound teaching here.

To learn from mistakes.

King David famously states that his sin was constantly before him in his mind's eye. It's not a perpetual guilt complex; the word he uses is related to the notion of mistakes. Better than forgetting past mistakes is recalling them.

There is deep wisdom in recalling failure.



You mustn't forget your mistakes; you must learn from them.

There's a popular folk saying in hard times; if everyone were to put their bundle of challenges into a pile and everyone head to claim one, most would choose their own.

The conventional explanation is based on a preference for familiarity; better the devil you know than the devil you don't.

But perhaps there is something more profound hiding in plain sight.

It's an acknowledgment of our individual paths in life. Your challenges and mistakes are the building blocks of what makes you uniquely you; you are your story. To pick someone else's story is to stop being you and be someone else entirely.

Picking and choosing is impossible; your story is yours, and theirs is theirs. Our trials and our errors shape us uniquely, weaving the tapestry of our existence.

Your bundle of challenges and tribulations isn't just yours because it's familiar; if there is a Creator and Providence, your challenges are, so to speak, designed for you. When the universe puts you in a challenging situation, that challenge has your name on it; it is destined and meant for you.

We ought to humbly remind ourselves that sometimes the circumstances win and judge others accordingly.

The Torah teaches this wisdom by acknowledging the places our ancestors faltered. It reminds us to remember that happens, and it's something we do too; there's no need to pretend otherwise. It's part of our story on a national level; it's part of the human condition. Failures must be integrated into the story of our life.

It's not an ascending narrative that tells a story of things getting better, or a descending narrative tells a story of things getting worse. It is an oscillating narrative that tells a story of ups and downs, triumphs and failures, joy and despair, growth and regression. There were terrible, painful times, but we got through them. There were the best of times we enjoyed; they didn't last, but we survived no matter what.

Everyone makes mistakes. Some minor, some not. Some are recoverable, some not. Don't forget them. Recall them so you can learn from them, and perhaps others will be able to as well.

Mistakes are part of life, and the Torah integrates them into the human story because even in mistakes, there exists within them the possibility of redemption.

Learn from mistakes. Just remember they don't all have to be yours.



The Heart of Worship

3 minute read | Intermediate

Prayer is a central aspect of Judaism, if not all religious beliefs. It is an invocation or act that deliberately seeks out and interfaces with the divine.

Although prayer does appear obliquely or sporadically in the Torah, it is not the predominant mode of worship in the Torah or the ancient world the Torah appeared in, an era where animal sacrifice was a near cultural universal. Our sages went out of their way to teach that prayer doesn't just appear in the Torah; prayer stands in as a direct replacement or substitute for the lapsed sacrifices of long ago.

Our prayers are replete with requests to restore Jerusalem and rebuild the Beis HaMikdash. However, authorities are divided on whether the future we yearn for heralds a restoration or replacement of animal sacrifice. While that remains speculative until we find out, it is probably fair to say that it is hard for people in the modern world to wrap their heads around animal sacrifice.

Today's near cultural universal is that animal sacrifice is alien and weird, perhaps even disgusting and nasty. Most people don't want to watch an animal get slaughtered; any arcane mysticism is hard to imagine over the blood and gore.

That leaves prayer in a bit of a void; prayer is a stand-in or substitute for animal sacrifice, and yet an animal sacrifice is hard to relate to in almost every conceivable way, so far removed as it is from our primary experience. Moreover, the Torah has long sections devoted to the different categories and kinds of sacrifice and their details and nuances; sacrifice is clearly the primary mode of worship in the Torah's conception, so prayer seems second-rate.

Either way, prayer is hard to understand. If prayer and sacrifice aren't connected, why bother with something the Torah doesn't validate as having much significance? And if prayer is connected to sacrifice, what element of sacrifice do we even relate to?

The Torah opens the section on sacrifices by outlining a scenario where someone wants to bring an offering:

אָדָם כִּי־יִקְרִיב מִכֶּם קֹרְבָן לַיהוָה – When one of you presents an offering for God... (1:2)

Although not readily obvious in translation, the Torah utilizes highly unusual language here. Rather than present the sensible scenario where one of you wants to bring an offering, it literally translates to



when someone offers an offering of you, which is to say, literally of yourselves – אָדָם מִמֶּנּוּ / אָדָם / אָדָם
בְּיִקְרִיב מִמֶּנּוּ.

The Baal HaTanya notes that this reading suggests that at the earliest juncture, the Torah already indicates that as much it's going to talk about animal offerings, it's not about the animal at all; it's about the part of yourself you're willing to offer, and prayer would operate in much the same way – בְּיִקְרִיב מִמֶּנּוּ.

R' Jonathan Sacks teaches that the conventional notion of sacrifice isn't really reflected in the Hebrew term – קָרְבָן. We think of sacrifice as giving something up when the Hebrew word actually means something more like drawing closer – קָרַב. You interact with the divine not with what you give up but by drawing close with what you have; in offering the material to God, you transform the material into the sacred.

God doesn't need our stuff and can't receive it in any tangible way; the Malbim teaches that all a person can ever offer is themselves, which mirrors precisely what the Torah calls for here – בְּיִקְרִיב מִמֶּנּוּ. The Sfas Emes explains that the notion articulated here is that sacrifice and prayer are about aligning ourselves and resources to God's broader plan; prayer isn't secondary to sacrifice; it is the same.

While the form of seeking out the divine may have changed over time depending on the zeitgeist, the substance has remained constant. At the root of all mysticism is a desire to connect with the divine transcendence, and our sages have long identified the inner world of the heart as the battlefield of spirituality – עבודת שבלב. So we can read the Yom Kippur atonement ritual that seems odd to modern sensibilities, yet it maintains relevance to our prayers because the substance transcends the form of the performative aspect; that God forgives humans who want to make amends, goats and string or not.

It's not the form of how it appears so much as it's about the substance of how it is – אחד המרבה ואחד ואחד – הממעט ובלבד שיכוין לבו לשמים.

As Moshe said to his audience, our Creator is always close, quite different from other gods they might have heard of who can only be invoked with specific rituals – כִּי מִיִּגְוֵי גְדוֹל אֲשֶׁר־לוֹ אֱלֹהִים קְרִיבִים אֵלָיו כֹּה אֱלֹהֵינוּ – בְּכִל־קְרָאָנוּ אֵלָיו.

The Izhbitzer suggests that our subconscious hearts and minds hope and pray all the time. When you whisper “Please, God,” hope for the best, or wish that things turn out okay, those unspoken but very real thoughts are prayers that bring tangible wisps of warmth into the world that affirm and sustain, from which things can and will eventually grow – קָרוֹב ה' לְכָל קְרָאָיו לְכָל אֲשֶׁר יִקְרָאָהוּ בְּאֵמַת –

As the Kotzker said, where can we find God? Wherever we let Him in.



Sacrifice, like prayer, was always about the inner world of the spirit, about opening your heart and yourself to the universe.

And prayer, like sacrifice, can't change God; but it can change you.

Come As You Are

3 minute read | Straightforward

We often think of holiness or sanctity as the hallowed privilege of a rare few, the people who have made it, the inner circle of those who are better and wiser than us. They are the ones who can pray for us, guide us, and bring healing. Sometimes that's true; other times, that view is propounded by self-righteous, holier-than-thou folks who self-serve by making us feel that way.

That being said, it is an objective and measurable fact that some people are further on their religious journey and are more advanced on the observance spectrum.

Make no mistake that everyone has the same obligation to meet the standard of perfect observance of the Torah – so, for example, the Torah unambiguously says to keep Shabbos with no exceptions.

Yet, in the external world where theory meets practice, achieving perfection is neither possible nor actual; that standard has only ever been theoretical. We ought to know better than to hold every human to the same standard.

The only uniform standard everyone is mandated to uphold is the half-shekel donation to the Mishkan, the tiniest sum of money, a de minimis threshold contribution. This contribution went towards the foundation sockets, which compare to our threshold foundation of faith and membership of the Jewish People.

But beyond that basic common and tiny denominator, everyone is radically different. Everyone is born in a particular environment, makes mistakes, and is only capable of so much or going so far. We know this intuitively – it is clear that, like all things in life, there must be a subjective element to religiosity by necessity, and there is.

In as much as sacrifices and the Beis HaMikdash are the domain of the privileged few, every single human may bring an offering. One form explicitly recognizes human subjectivity and meets us where we are, contingent on a person's means – קרבן עולה ויורד. While a wealthy person would bring expensive cattle, a working person would be expected to offer a pair of affordable birds, and a person in poverty would only have to provide some cheap flour:



ואם־לא תשיג ידו לשתי תורים או לשני בני־יונה והביא את־קרְבָנו אשר חטא עֲשִׂירַת הָאֶפֶה סֶלֶת suffice for two turtledoves or two pigeons, that person shall bring as an offering for that of which one is guilty a tenth of an ephah of choice flour... (5:11)

Whatever the form, the result is a “pleasant scent,” which is how the Torah describes God receiving them warmly – רִיחַ נִיחֹחַ לֵהּ. This is quite obviously a metaphor; burning feathers smell disgusting. And yet unmistakably, the same reception reveals that whatever the form, they are substantively the same, whether bull, bird, or flour; all are warmly embraced, with no distinction between rich and poor – נאמר – בעוף ריח ניחוח ונאמר בבהמה ריח ניחוח, לומר לך אחד המרבה ואחד הממעט ובלבד שיכוין לבו לשמים.

The Chafetz Chaim notes that the principle holds even while the sacrifices have lapsed. If you have the means to help others and do less than you could, you need to step up and meet your duty. To whom much is given, much is expected, and with great power comes great responsibility.

The legendary Reb Zusha of Hanipol would say that when he’d get to Heaven, he wouldn’t be afraid to answer why he wasn’t like Avraham, because he wasn’t Avraham, nor why he wasn’t like Moshe, because he wasn’t Moshe. But when they would ask why he wasn’t like Zusha, he’d have no answer for failing to live up to his unique potential.

As much as we all need to be better, you can only move forward from where you are. You are in the right place to do what you need to – המקום אשר אתה עומד עליו אדמת־קדש הוא –

This idea is at the heart of Korach’s folly, which leads only to ruin and misery. Everyone’s service is different and yet equally welcome.

One of the most powerful phrases in the Torah is when God saw the young Yishmael dying in the desert. The Midrash imagines the angels arguing against divine intervention to save Yishmael because of the atrocities his descendants would commit, but they lose the argument because God evaluates things differently. God answers the boy based on where he is and the facts and circumstances as they are here and now – בְּאֶשֶׁר הוּא שָׁם –

In your present condition and natural state, you have a key stake in Judaism and a contribution to make that matters, even before the changes you must still undergo.

You are where you’re supposed to be right now, and you are enough.

Take Responsibility



4 minute read | Straightforward

One of the core themes of the High Holy Days is God's capacity for and predisposition towards forgiveness, culminating in the day designated and named for forgiveness, Yom Kippur.

But as much as we believe God will forgive anyone, we also believe in the prerequisite requirement to show up and take responsibility. As R' Jonathan Sacks teaches, forgiveness can only exist where repentance exists, and repentance can only exist where responsibility exists.

Responsibility is a uniquely human quality; it suggests a duty or obligation that can sometimes be burdensome and make you uncomfortable. The Rambam notes that reward and punishment only make sense if humans have moral agency and free choice, or in other words, responsibility. Without choice, it would be unfair and wrong for God to hold you responsible for bad things you did because you were incapable of choosing otherwise; responsibility only exists alongside the ability to decide how to act.

Taking responsibility is the theme of one of the most prominent prayers of the High Holy Days, as well as the span of days before and in between, the Viduy prayer, where everyone publicly confesses a litany of misdemeanors, sins, and wrongdoings while they beat their hearts. There is something beautiful about the entire Jewish people publicly taking responsibility, acknowledging their failures and weaknesses together, and publicly undertaking to do better, even if you're alone or with total strangers.

It's beautiful enough that many communities have the custom of singing the confession prayer in tune. It's not the most upbeat song, but there is an element of happiness and joy in confessing our failings.

The confession isn't a performative theatrical ritual; honestly acknowledging that you did something wrong is the only way you can begin to fix it. Beyond being a key technical component of Teshuva, confession is how we take responsibility.

As R' Shlomo Farhi reminds us, taking responsibility transforms how a slight is observed. If you go to a shopping center with piles of rubble, you won't go back, but you'd feel differently if the store hung signs asking you to excuse their appearance while they undergo renovations scheduled for completion by April. The acknowledgment makes you more patient and forgiving that the experience was below expectations.

By confessing to a list of severe transgressions that largely – hopefully – don't apply to you, perhaps it makes it easier for you to acknowledge some of your genuine shortcomings and makes you a little more empathetic to those of the people in your life. We're all human; like you, we have all made mistakes.



But perhaps beyond taking responsibility with the Jewish People, it's also partly a confession of responsibility for the Jewish People; our sages teach that the Jewish People are responsible for each other, and we confess in the collective plural – אשמנו.

Who have we let down? For every lost soul, hurt soul, at-risk teen, and struggling family – how do communal structures and systems enable these outcomes, what does the community do or not do, and what can we do differently and hopefully better next time? Think whose pain you're not seeing or hearing – בגדנו.

We ought to consider the advice we have given over the years, what guidance our leaders and institutions have given our brothers and sisters, and evaluate any negative consequences as part of our responsibility for others – יעצנו רע.

It can only be different or better if you take responsibility and do something about it. Not only is not knowing not an excuse; errors, omissions, and mistakes over things that aren't your fault are a feature of the confession prayer itself – על חטא שחטאנו ביודעים ובלא יודעים / בבלי דעת / בשגגה.

If whatever is wrong isn't your fault, then you can't do anything differently next time, and nothing can change; it would be impossible to move on and heal from anything wrong with you. You can only do better next time if you can take responsibility.

If you've seen two kids playing rough until they get hurt, you know it doesn't matter if it was a mistake; head injuries don't require intention, and nor do the things we all do that wind up hurting others.

And if you don't take responsibility, you are performing empty confession theater, which, with a large scoop of irony, is also a part of the confession prayer – ועל חטא שחטאנו לפניך בידוי פה.

Accept responsibility for your actions. Be accountable for your results. Take ownership of your mistakes – including the ones that weren't your fault.

There's nothing easy about taking responsibility for yourself – it requires enormous reserves of honesty and strength to confront the realization that you are the one who's been holding yourself back this whole time.

When you take responsibility for yourself, you can stop relying on others to take responsibility for you. You should want to take responsibility for yourself, your life, your family, your friends, your community, and all the people who need you.

A group's long-term success depends to a large extent on its leader's willingness to take responsibility for failure; our sages praise people whose words God concurs with, citing the time Moshe intervened



to save the Jewish People after the Golden Calf, acknowledging his people’s responsibility for the calamity, and taking responsibility for protecting them:

סְלַח־נָא לְעוֹן הָעָם הַזֶּה כַּגְּדֹל חַסְדְּךָ וְכַאֲשֶׁר נִשְׁאַתָּה לְעַם הַזֶּה מִמִּצְרַיִם וְעַד־הַנֵּה. וַיֹּאמֶר ה' סְלַח־תִּי כְדַבְרְךָ: – “Please pardon the sin of this people according to Your great kindness, as You have forgiven this people ever since Egypt.” And God said, “I have pardoned, as you have asked.” (14:19,20)

There is a good reason to sing the confession, and it’s the same reason we sing that repentance, charity, and prayer have the power to change the future.

The moment you take responsibility for everything is the moment you can change anything.

What We Do With Broken Things

5 minute read | Straightforward

At Mount Sinai, Moshe ascended for forty days to receive the Torah. He didn’t show up when the people expected, so they got nervous and clamored for a new religious focal point. In a moment of madness, they crafted a Golden Calf, and in a perplexing turn of events, identified it as the god that brought them out of Egypt.

As they celebrate their new object of attention and worship with a festival of dancing, song, and sacrifice, Moshe returns to our world with the original Ten Commandments, a mythical artifact with magical properties crafted by God’s fingers. Moshe enters the camp only to witness these festivities and, utterly horrified, throws down the tablets, permanently shattering them.

With the first tablets broken, Moshe had to repeat the process in an attenuated form; the second tablets are almost second-rate in comparison. Whereas God had crafted the first ones, Moshe – a great human, but still a human – had to prepare the second. The first tablets contained a Torah that humans could never forget; the second ones contain a Torah we forget all the time.

The consequences of the Golden Calf were enormous; God threatened to destroy them all there and then, at least until Moshe intervened. Our sages suggest that the sin was so grave that every bit of human suffering pays down a sliver of the damage done by the Golden Calf.

A common thread people take from this story is the profound loss of what might have been; a more perfect world that never even got a chance to get started. Our sages teach that the letters began peeling off the surface and wafting back to the sky even before Moshe broke the tablets, which is how he understood that his people were no longer worthy.



The lessons of damage and loss are correct but miss something essential.

Moshe shattered the tablets, but what happened to the broken pieces?

When God told Moshe to craft the second set of tablets, God also tells Moshe what to do with them:

וְאָכַתְבַּ עַל־הַלְּחֹת אֶת־הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ עַל־הַלְּחֹת הַרְּאשֹׁנִים אֲשֶׁר שָׁבַרְתָּ וְשָׂמְתָם בְּאָרוֹן – “I will inscribe on the tablets the commandments that were on the first tablets that you smashed, and you shall deposit them in the Ark.” (10:2)

Our sages read the instruction to put “them” in the Ark as not only referring to Moshe’s second tablets, which are like the first tablets in content; but that the original shattered tablets were like the second tablets in what Moshe was supposed to do with them – וְשָׂמְתָם בְּאָרוֹן / אֲשֶׁר שָׁבַרְתָּ / הַלְּחֹת הַרְּאשֹׁנִים.

The broken tablets are not buried, not forgotten, not hidden, and not lost. Instead, they are stored in the Ark, alongside the new, whole second tablets. As one writer beautifully put it, shattered remnants of the past still matter, persist in their importance, and deserve preservation and remembrance, just like something whole.

In this conception, the broken tablets are a striking symbol of brokenness and wholeness coexisting side by side at Judaism’s most sacred site. The comprehensive picture of the Golden Calf story and its aftermath should reorient our attitude to broken things and setbacks. It’s not a story about breaking things; it’s a story about what we do when we break things, and the epilogue is that you pick up the pieces and move forward.

In Japanese culture, there is an art form of restoring broken pottery by gluing the cracks and seams distinctively, often with gold lacquer; breakage and subsequent repair are part of the proud history of the object, rather than something to disguise.

Perhaps the first tablets represent an idealism that crashes into reality and shatters into pieces. While admittedly easy to say, perhaps their example shows that these hopes aren’t permanently lost to the ether. Rather than becoming cynical and jaded from traumatic experience and upheaval, discarding the vision of what could have been, you might be able to recover remnants that persist, integrating them with the real world you inhabit. It won’t look quite how you thought, but maybe some parts can in certain ways. Sometimes we have to break or let go of what we hoped could be in order to make way for what is and can still become.

Moshe didn’t break the tablets out of violent anger; his people and their world simply weren’t ready for the first tablets. Letting go of them, however damaging and terrible, was a necessary part of the healing process, paving the way for his people to build a world on a foundation of broken ideals. There’s nothing sad about that; that’s just the way life is.



The Torah closes with a line of praise for Moshe, the faithful shepherd, endorsing his strength and valor – וְלִכְלֹל הַיָּד הַחֲזָקָה וְלִכְלֹל הַמּוֹרָא הַגָּדוֹל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה מֹשֶׁה לְעֵינֵי כָל־יִשְׂרָאֵל – אֲשֶׁר שִׁבְרָתָ / יִישַׁר כְּתָבֶךָ שִׁבְרָתָ – breaking the tablets

On Simchas Torah, after we complete the Torah with that line, we immediately begin again, a new beginning built on breaking, breaking that is holy, breaking that God endorses, and breaking that stands before us and alongside the best we have to offer. From the ashes of this colossal failure, God teaches Moshe how his people can make amends and gives him the formula that features so prominently in our prayers on Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur. The healing from the rupture led to the Mishkan project, which all subsequent prayer, sacrifice, and worship center around. The remarkable quality of comebacks is not in spite of setbacks; it is because of them.

The Megaleh Amukos notes that the season of repentance and making amends is Ellul, an acronym for the Ark, the tablets, and the broken tablet they sit alongside – אֵלוּל / אַרְוֹן לוֹחַת וְשִׁבְרֵי לוֹחַת – More to the point, the second tablets are delivered on Yom Kippur itself.

We all break things, and we experience brokenness in different ways over the course of our journey. When we lose someone, that loss leaves a void with their shape imprinted in our hearts, and we carry that brokenness forever. After pain and loss, life goes on, only differently than before; we now live with two sets of tablets.

We might call forgetting and moving on from what we break bouncing back, but that's not how people are; that's not how the world works. Everything leaves its mark; a scratch, a bruise, or sometimes a deep scar or void that never entirely goes away.

Perhaps we're not supposed to bounce back at all; maybe it's better to bounce forward.

Take heart in the image of Moshe on his hands and knees, lovingly gathering the precious fragments, collecting every shard, then gently placing each sacred sliver one by one in the Ark, a brilliant glimmer of hope that lingers for posterity.

The shattered remnants of the past belonged in the Ark, and we ought to remember that the Ark wasn't a mere prop; it featured prominently in the Jewish People's travels and wars. It went out in front of them, leading the way, which is to say that any step forward was paved by the broken tablets as much as the whole tablets.

We live in a world of the second tablets. Although the first ones couldn't exist in their wholeness, they could exist in their brokenness, and maybe we can pick up some of those pieces and find a place for them to help shape our world.



There is no paradox of broken and whole; they coexist in a reciprocal interaction. We must find a way to marry the broken with the whole, hopeful idealism with gritty reality.

Brokenness is not something to conceal or deny; it is an essential part of being human. The moments that break us are as significant to our growth as the moments that make us whole. We can find sanctity not only in whole tablets; but in shattered ones, as well.

If we honor that brokenness and carry it with us, it can become sacred, Holy of Holies. In the words of the Kotzker, there is nothing so whole as a broken heart.

The Water of Life

5 minute read | Advanced

Symbolism plays an essential role in human culture. Through symbols, we find meaning in the physical world, which becomes transparent and reveals the transcendent. Certain symbols are cultural universals, primal archetypes intuitively understood that derive from the unconscious and require no explanation, like mother and child or light and darkness.

As the Torah draws to its close, Moshe says goodbye with a timeless ballad laced with beautiful metaphor and symbolism:

יַעֲרַף כַּמָּטָר לִקְחוּ, תִזֹל כַּטַּל אֶמְרָתִי, כַּשְּׁעִירִם עַל־דָּשָׁא, וְכַרְבִּיבִים עַל־עֵשֶׂב – May my discourse come down as rain; my speech distill as dew; like showers on young vegetation; like droplets on the grass. (32:2)

Many ancient cultures believed 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. Water symbolizes the universal reservoir of all possible existence, supports every creation, and even precedes their form. The Torah’s creation myth aligns with this archetype, with primordial water everywhere, from which everything subsequently emerges:

וְהָאָרֶץ הִתְהַוָּה תְּהוֹ וּבְהוּ וְחַשְׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם – The earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep, and the spirit of God hovered over the waters... (1:4)

The Mikvah ritual bath is central to Judaism and draws heavily on this archetype, symbolizing rebirth and renewal. Moreover, with our knowledge of the water cycle, we have learned the literal truth of water as the solvent of life and regeneration; and in fact, the search for liquid water in the universe serves as a close proxy to the search for life beyond our planet.



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But Moshe doesn't say the Torah is like water; he compares the Torah to rain – יַעֲרַף כַּמָּטָר לַקָּהִי. They do have a lot in common; both are life-giving, cleansing, regenerative, restorative, and like rain, the Torah came from the sky to affirm and sustain us. So sure, the Torah is like rain!

But Moshe doesn't simply say that the Torah is like rain; he says it's also like dew – יַעֲרַף כַּמָּטָר לַקָּהִי, תִּנּוּל – כִּטְל אֲמֵרְתִּי.

But what is dew, if not just another form of rain and water?

To unlock the symbol and discover the meaning, we must establish the technical difference between rain and dew.

Dew occurs when you have a cold object in a warm environment. As the object's exposed surface cools by radiating heat, atmospheric moisture condenses faster than it evaporates, resulting in the formation of water droplets on the surface. In other words, a cold object in a warm environment can draw moisture out of the ambient surroundings.

There's a Torah that's like rain, that comes from the sky, and that hopefully, you've experienced at times, perhaps a flash of inspiration that came out of nowhere, the moments you feel alive. But that doesn't happen to everyone, and even when it does, it doesn't happen all the time. To borrow rain's imagery, this kind of inspiration is seasonal only. If you're counting on the rain to get by, what happens when the rain stops?

Perhaps precisely because of this problem, there's a Torah that we can experience that feels more like dew. A warm environment that doesn't come from the sky, that we can generate and cultivate ourselves, and which draws out the life-affirming properties from within and around us.

R' Simcha Bunim m'Peshischa notes that we can't expect our efforts and interactions with Torah to have an instant magical transformational effect like a rain shower; it's far more subtle, like dew. A morning's dew is not enough to nourish a plant, but with the regular appearance of morning dew, the days stack up, and despite no noticeable daily effect, the plant will grow.

As R' Shlomo Farhi points out, dew is gentle, not overwhelming. Plants can't survive forever on dew alone, but it can be enough to keep them going until the rains return. When you are running cold, a warm atmosphere will nurture and sustain you, but you should remember that it can't take you all the way; there will come the point that you need to proactively follow through with renewed drive and desire to grow once more.

The Torah conditions timely rain on the product of outward effort:

וְהָיָה אִם-שָׁמַעַתְּ אֶת-שְׁמֵעִי אֶל-מִצְוֹתַי אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי מְצַוֶּה אֶתְכֶם הַיּוֹם לְאַהֲבָה אֶת-ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וּלְעֲבֹדוֹ בְּכָל-לִבְבְּכֶם וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁכֶם. וְנִתְתִּי מְטָר-אֲרָצְכֶם בְּעֵתוֹ – If then, you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day, loving the Lord



your God and serving Him with all your heart and soul, I will grant the rain for your land in season... (11:,13,14)

The Ishbitzer suggests that dew is a product of internal effort, a reflection of our hearts and minds. Subconsciously, our hearts and minds hope and pray, day and night, without stop. When you so much as hope for the best, or that things turn out okay, or even whisper “Please, God,” those thoughts bring wisps of warm vitality into the world that affirm and sustain growth and life. Given the mythical potency of dew and its connection to humble yet persistent origins, our sages suggest that, of all things, dew contains the latent power to resurrect the dead at the End of Days.

There are times you’ll have flashes of divine inspiration, but at some point, that’s going to dry up. Reassuringly, as Moshe said so long ago, it doesn’t just come from the sky; it can emerge slowly with determination and environmental support. Perhaps then, dew is the symbol of human-driven inspiration – אהערותא דלתתא.

Half the year we pray for rain, but half the year we also pray for dew; remember that you are more like a plant than a robot. You have fallow and fruitful seasons, needing different things at different times; a light drizzle right now, a little more sun next week. It is a design feature, not a flaw, and is a far healthier approach to adopt than perpetual sameness.

This isn’t cutesy wordplay; the metaphor is quite explicit. If Moshe’s words are the water, then we are the grass and leaves, the tree of life itself, encouraged to endure and grow strong – כשעירם עלי-דשא, וקרביבים עלי-עשב.

When you go into the woods, you see all kinds of trees. One is stunted, another is bent; you understand it was obstructed or didn’t get enough light, and so it turned out that way. You don’t get emotional about it, you allow it; that’s just the way trees are. But humans are like that too – כי האדם עץ – השדה. All too often, rather than accept ourselves and others, we are critical, whether self-conscious or judgmental, critical of a way of being other humans for the way they are. But humans are like trees; this one was obstructed like this, that one didn’t get enough that, so they turned out that way.

Trees lose their leaves in the cold dark winters, but they do not despair, secure in the knowledge that spring will return before long and they will blossom once again. You might be in the thick of winter, but hold on; you too will blossom once again.

If you’re waiting for inspiration or a sign, it might be a while, it might not come at all, or this might be it.

Cultivate an environment around yourself with structure, systems, and people that will foster, nurture, and support your growth. You will not rise to the level of your goals; you will fall to the level of your systems. It’s simply unsustainable to have big goals with no supporting infrastructure.



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Your goal should not be to beat the game but to stay in the game and continue playing so that you can in turn foster a gentle and nurturing environment that will warm others too.

Moshe's timeless blessing is hauntingly beautiful and refreshingly real. Moshe speaks through the ages and reminds us the Torah is not just water, the stuff of life. It is the water we need in good times and the dew that gets us through hard times.

The metaphor itself acknowledges and validates that there are times the rains just won't come. But in the moments where the Torah won't be our rain, it can be our dew.

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.