



Pinchas 2022

Everybody is Somebody

2 minute read | Straightforward

After assuaging God’s wrath and ending the plague, the Torah hails Pinchas:

פִּינְחָס בֶּן אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן אַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֵן הִשִּׁיב אֶת חַמְתִּי מֵעַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּקַנְאוֹ אֶת קַנְאוֹתַי בְּתוֹכְכֶם וְלֹא כָלִיתִי אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּקַנְאוֹתַי – Pinchas, son of Elazar, son of Ahron HaKohen, has turned My anger away from the Children of Israel with his zealously avenging Me among them so that I did not destroy the children of Israel in My zeal. (25:11)

The naming convention is usually X son of Y, and Rashi highlights how in this instance, the Torah traces Pinchas’ ancestry to his grandfather Ahron. Rashi comments that people had mocked Pinchas as being a grandson of Yisro, a former pagan worshipper, so the Torah goes out of its way to identify Pinchas as having good pedigree; that God didn’t see him as lower class.

This seems to reveal that past a threshold level, lineage and pedigree are things humans get caught up with; God doesn’t actually care! Because in other words, you do not need to be somebody to make things happen because a nobody to us is somebody to God!

Nowhere is this illustrated clearer than the opening of Yirmiyahu, where God appears to Yirmiyahu in his adolescence, and Yirmiyahu doesn’t think he has what it takes, that he’s just a kid and isn’t a speaker:

וַאֲמַר אֲהֵהּ ה' הִנֵּה לֹא-יָדַעְתִּי דָבָר כִּי-נֶעַר אָנֹכִי. וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֵלַי אֶל-תֹּאמַר נֶעַר אָנֹכִי כִּי עַל-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר אֲשַׁלְחֶךָ תֵּלֵךְ וְאֵת כָּל-אֲשֶׁר אֶצְוֶה תִּדְבֹר – I said, “Alas, God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am just a kid!” And the Lord said to me, “Do not tell Me “I am just a kid!” Because wherever I send you, you will go, and whatever I command you, you will say!” (1:6-7)

R’ Nosson Vachtvogel wonders how many potential greats our world has lost to self-doubt. Even if God doesn’t say it to us the way he did to Yirmiyahu, God says it to use just the same – אֶל-תֹּאמַר נֶעַר אָנֹכִי. Let’s remember that we have no reason to suspect Yirmiyahu responds with self-effacing humility; he’s not lying! He has correctly and honestly assessed himself and found himself wanting, yet God still dismisses these excuses – not because they are wrong, but because they ultimately don’t matter.

R’ Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin teaches that you ought to believe in yourself in the same way you believe in God. If you think God doesn’t believe in you, you don’t properly understand what believing in God entails. Your consciousness is rooted in your soul, a fragment of God – חֵלֶק אֱלֹהִים מִמֶּעַל. God saw fit to send that part of Himself into the world in the shape of you, which is to say that God very literally believes in you, and we know that because you are here.



It's easier to believe in yourself if someone else does it first. And God believes in all of us!

So don't forget that God saw fit to share you with us; you're somebody.

Dirty Business

4 minute read | Straightforward

“Thou shalt not kill.”

In almost all times and places, most societies consider murder to be an extremely serious crime. Although it's one of the Ten Commandments, it's probably one of those things that doesn't require revelation for us to be aware of it; it's intuitive and near-universal across almost all ages and civilizations.

In modern political science, we say the state has a monopoly on violence; that the state alone has the right to use or authorize physical force, and individuals do not have the right to commit violence. It is a hallmark of civil society when citizens do not commit wanton acts of violence against each other.

In our tradition, even though Jewish courts and governments historically possessed this power, they were judicious to the extreme in its application; a court that killed more than once in a lifetime was considered bloodthirsty.

And yet, on the other hand, the Torah presents us with the story of Pinchas, heralded as he is for the public assassination of a political leader! His act is jarring for at least two reasons. Firstly, the killing apparently makes him a hero; and secondly, it's an extrajudicial killing – only the state can commit acts of violence, and Pinchas was a civilian!

If Pinchas was just a civilian, and the Torah doesn't advocate violence, how is Pinchas a hero for being a killer?

It's an important question because the answer is revealing.

Pinchas is not a hero for being a killer; he's a hero for something else.

God never endorses the killing; God endorses Pinchas' passion – הַשִּׁיב אֶת־חַמְתִּי מֵעַל בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּקִנְאוֹ אֶת־קִנְאָתִי בְּתוֹכָם. If that sounds like a distinction without a difference, it's not; our Tradition does not laud the killing. Our Sages say that although it may have been the right thing to do, we don't do that – הַלְכָה וְאֵין מוֹרִיךְ כֵּן.

The Chomas Esh reminds us that the Torah speaks to individuals, so you cannot justify your own inaction by pointing to others. The Ten Commandments are stated in the second person, to each of us



personally – I am Hashem your God; Thou shall not kill. Pinchas did his duty to his God as he understood it, the masses be damned – תַּחַת אֲשֶׁר קָנָא לְאַלְהֵיוּ – that’s why he’s a hero, for his boldness and courage.

It’s worthwhile to note that in the heat of the moment, Pinchas could not know what we know. He wasn’t a prophet, and he could not know that the story would have a happy ending for him. Up to that point, as Rashi notes, Pinchas was a nobody in everyone’s eye; he risked his life to stand up and strike. The vast majority of the camp had fallen prey to the nefarious women of Midian, and while some people held back and could remain on the outskirts of the calamity, Pinchas alone stepped into the fray, stood in the center against them, and challenged their ringleader.

Humans are heavily socialized creatures; we often hold ourselves to the standards of the people around us. One adage suggests that our character and mentality are the average of the five people we spend the most time with! We do what others do and don’t do what others don’t; we don’t like to stand out from our peers, so we excuse our shortcomings by hiding in the crowd. After all, are you any better or worse than the next guy?

While it’s undoubtedly the inflection point in the story, it bears considering what Pinchas thought would happen. He can’t have expected to survive, and he stepped into the fray anyway.

That’s why he’s a hero, and it has nothing whatsoever to do with the killing.

He’s a hero because he marches into the unthinkable against all odds. He doesn’t ask or wait for anyone’s permission. He remembers his identity and where he comes from – פִּינְחָס בֶּן-אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן-אֶהֱרֹן הַכֹּהֵן.

Through his bold act, he revealed that the bystanders and victims and ourselves had the power and capacity to do more all along. His daring act stands as an example that ought to make people who believe themselves helpless and powerless dig a little deeper. He doesn’t preach or shout at the people caught up in trouble, nor at the people who are too scared to get involved – he just leads by example; acting bravely and decisively in the face of danger, fear, and uncertainty.

That’s what God endorses, and it’s this act of courage that sparks salvation. God could have stopped the plague at any point; God could have foiled the threat posed by the Midianite women wandering into the camp at multiple junctures along the way. But God deliberately doesn’t step in to avert the catastrophe until one of the people bravely risks himself to do what needs to be done – הָשִׁיב אֶת-הַמָּטִי – מַעַל בְּנִי-יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּקָנָאוֹ אֶת-קְנָאֲתִי בְּתוֹכְכֶם.

The Midrash imagines a primordial internal discussion before God creates humanity, where Charity and Kindness advocate for God to proceed, as humans will be good and kind to each other. But Peace and Truth object because humans will fight and lie. The dispute is tied in deadlock, and God casts Truth from the sky, so Charity and Kindness carry the day, and God creates humanity.



TorahRedux

The Kotzker observes that God had to throw Truth out, not Peace. It wasn't about giving Charity and Kindness a majority; because Truth can stand alone and doesn't require consensus or support. The Truth is the truth, and however many people stand against it, truth speaks for itself.

As the example of Pinchas shows, it takes heroic courage and determination to go against the crowd, tremendous conviction, inner strength, and willpower. Unlike Pinchas, we're probably not going to get a shoutout or magical blessing from God for doing the right thing. But the right thing remains the right thing.

If there's something to do, don't wait for someone else to do it; do it now, and don't think twice. Stop thinking, start doing. Courage isn't the absence of fear; it's just doing it anyway.

It's better to walk alone than in a crowd going in the wrong direction.

Peace Redux

5 minute read | Straightforward

For most of history, the utopian ideal that most cultures and societies strived for has been domination, subjugation, and victory; the pages of history are written in the blood and tears of conflict.

In stark contrast, Judaism's religious texts overwhelmingly endorse compassion and peace; love and the pursuit of peace is one of Judaism's fundamental ideals and is a near-universal characteristic in our pantheon of heroes – בקש שלום ורדפהו. R' Jonathan Sacks notes that the utopian ideal of peace is one of Judaism's great original revolutionary contributions. As Rashi says, all the blessings in the world are worthless without peace.

Avos d'Rabbi Nosson suggests that the mightiest heroism lies not in defeating your foes, but in turning enemies into friends. The Midrash says that the world can only persist with peace, and the Gemara teaches that all of Torah exists to further peace – דְרַכֵּיהָ דְרַכֵּי-נְעָם; וְכָל-נְתִיבוֹתֶיהָ שְׁלוֹם – Peace features prominently in the Priestly Blessing, and the visions of peace and prosperity in the Land of Israel – וְנִתְתִּי שְׁלוֹם בְּאֶרֶץ / יֵשָׂא הַפָּנִי אֵלַיָּהּ, וְיִשָּׂם לָהּ שְׁלוֹם –

We ask for peace every time we pray and every time we eat – שִׁים שְׁלוֹם / עוֹשֶׂה שְׁלוֹם בְּמִרוֹמָיו – Wishing for peace has been the standard Jewish greeting for millennia – שְׁלוֹם עֲלֵיכֶם. Peace is ubiquitous in our lexicon, and it's not a trivial thing.

We all know peace is important, and peace sounds great in theory, but uncomfortably often, the reality is that peace is too abstract, too difficult, too distant, and too remote.



What does peace look like practically speaking, and how do we bring more of it into our lives?

Before explaining what peace is, it's important to rule out what it's not. Peace is not what many or most people seem to think.

Peace doesn't mean turning the other cheek and suffering in silence. Your non-response to conflict contributes to a lack of overt hostility that is superficial and only a negative peace at best. Sure, there is no external conflict, but everyone recognizes that conflict is there, even if it's unspoken and even if it's only internal. It's a position of discomfort and resentment – possibly only unilateral – and it may genuinely be too difficult or not worth the headache to attempt to resolve. Be that as it may, that is obviously not what peace is; it's not a state of blessing at all. It's the kind of status quo that lasts only as long as sufficiently tolerable, but it's a lingering poison that slowly suffocates; it's only a ceasefire or stalemate, it's certainly not peace.

Peace also isn't the lack of conflict that stems from being weak and harmless. It's not good morality if you don't fight when you're meek and harmless. You haven't made that choice; you simply have no alternatives. Pirkei Avos is dismissive and disdainful of people who don't stand up for themselves – אַן אֵין אָנִי לִי, מִי לִי אֵין. In a world of pacifists, a bully with a stick would rule the world. There's nothing moral about being harmless.

There absolutely are moments the Torah requires us to stand up for ourselves and each other; authorizing and sometimes even mandating aggression as just and necessary – עַת לְאַהֲבָה וְעַת לְשׂוֹנֵא, עַת – מִלְחָמָה וְעַת שְׁלוֹם. In the story of Balak and Bilam, Pinchas restores peace through an act of shocking public violence, and yet he is blessed with peace for restoring the peace; his courageous act makes him the hero, and not the people who were above it all and didn't want to get involved.

But we do not value or respect strength and power for its own sake; the One God of Judaism is not the god of strength and power and is firmly opposed to domination and subjugation. Our God is the god of liberty and liberated slaves, who loved the Patriarchs because of their goodness, not their power, who commands us to love the stranger and take care of the orphan and widow. So being powerful and strong doesn't mean you go around asserting yourself, bullying and intimidating people; but it does mean that if someone threatens you and the people you love, or the orphans and widows in your community, you are equipped to do something about it. Carl Jung called this integrating the shadow, making peace with a darker aspect of yourself. When you know you can bite, you'll rarely have to.

R' Shlomo Farhi teaches that peace is more than a state of non-aggression; peace is a state of mutual acceptance and respect. Peace does not require the absence of strength and power; peace is only possible precisely through the presence and proper application of strength and power – they are prerequisites – ה' עֵז לְעַמּוֹ יִתֵּן, ה' יִבְרַךְ אֶת עַמּוֹ בְּשָׁלוֹם – Peace requires us to cultivate the inner strength and courage to allow others to get what they need.

In Isaiah's hopeful visions, today featured prominently and optimistically on the wall of the United Nations building, world governments disband their armies and repurpose their weapons into



agricultural tools. In this utopian vision, it's not that states are too weak to defend themselves, a negative peace with no violent conflict; it's the opposite. It's a vision of positive peace; complete and perfect security with mutual respect and tolerance, where states will resolve differences peacefully without resorting to hostilities.

As the Ohr HaChaim notes, the word for peace is cognate to wholesomeness, a holistic and symbiotic harmony of constituent parts – שלום / שלמות.

Peace isn't a lack of external conflict, and it doesn't even necessarily mean a lack of conflict at all. Even in Isaiah's visions of a peaceful future, does anyone seriously think husbands and wives won't still sometimes disagree about whose family to spend the holiday with? Which school to send their kid to? That organizations won't have internal disagreements about budget or direction? Then and now, humans are human; we are not robots, and inevitably, we will have our differences! But if peace simply means that those differences can be accepted or settled peacefully, then perhaps peace isn't the unreachable idealism we may prefer to imagine. It's just about putting in the effort to learn to live with our differences.

Ralph Waldo Emerson quipped that nobody can bring you peace but yourself. When you feel secure, you'll have security. It takes benevolence, confidence, and unshakeable strength and power; those come from within. If you do not have peace, it's because you are not yet at peace.

There is a very good reason that envy figures as one of the most important things God has to say to humans – וְלֹא תִחַמְדּוּ. As our Sages guided us, who is wealthy? One who celebrates and takes joy in what he has – אֵיזָהוּ עָשִׂיר, הַשִּׂמְחָה בְּחֵלְקוֹ. One interpretation even inverts the plain reading, from celebrating what you have, to celebrating what he has – בְּחֵלְקוֹ. Someone else's prosperity and success don't make your own any less likely, so be happy when someone else gets a win because yours is no further away. The Ksav Sofer highlights that this is the Torah's blessing of peace; an internal peace of being satisfied and living with security, happy for both yourself and for others – וְאַכְלֵתֶם לְהַמְכֶם לְשָׂבַע וְיִשְׂבְּתֶם לְבָטָח.

If we value and desire peace, we must first regulate and then free ourselves from looking at others with grudges, grievances, and jealousy. As one comedian said, the only time you look in your neighbor's bowl is to make sure they have enough. When other people's achievements and success no longer threaten us, we can develop lasting and peaceful co-existence and harmony. The differences are still there, but it's not the other person that changes at all; it's how you look at them. Your dream of peace starts with you, and it's an important step that bridges the world we live in with the ideal world of tomorrow. If you cannot accept others, it's because you haven't yet accepted yourself.

What better blessing could there be than to live in balanced harmony with yourself, to be completely secure and at peace? To wholly embrace your differences with your spouse, your parents, your siblings, your relatives, your neighbors, your community, your colleagues, and ultimately, everyone you meet? And if we infused our notion of peace with any momentum, maybe the whole world could experience it too.



So, of course we ask for peace every day! In every prayer, and every time we greet someone. As the Gemara says, peace is the ultimate container for blessing, and it's intuitive; we all know it's true.

We just have to live like it!

The Heart of Worship

3 minute read | Straightforward

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 בִּיִּיקָרִיב מִזֶּם קֶרְבָּן 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 מִמֶּךָ בְּיַקְרִיב / אָדָם – בְּיַקְרִיב מִמֶּךָ.

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 – בְּיַקְרִיב מִמֶּךָ.

R' Jonathan Sacks teaches that the conventional notion of sacrifice isn't really reflected in the Hebrew term – קָרָבָן. 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 – בְּיַקְרִיב מִמֶּךָ. 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 – עֲבוּדָה שְׂבִלָב. 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 – אֶחָד הַמְרַבֵּה וְאֶחָד וְאֶחָד – הַמִּמְעִיט וּבִלְבָד שִׁיכוּיִן לְבוֹ לַשָּׁמַיִם.

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 קְרִבִים אֵלָיו כֹּה אֱלֹקֵינוּ – בְּכָל־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 – קְרוֹב ה' לְכָל קְרָאָיו לְכָל אֲשֶׁר יִקְרָאָהוּ בְּאַמְתּוֹ.

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.

Quote of the Week

"All of life is the study of attention; where your attention goes, your life follows"

– Jiddu Krishnamurti

Thought of the Week

“We should not pretend to understand the world only by the intellect; we apprehend it just as much by feeling. Therefore the judgment of the intellect is, at best, only a half-truth, and must, if it is honest, also admit its inadequacy.”

– Carl Jung

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 a niche business that allows me to spend substantial time on TorahRedux, and I welcome your assistance in furthering my goal to keep publishing quality content that matters. I help NY home care companies implement compliant Wage Parity plans that enhance recruitment and retention; whether or not that was comprehensible, if you know anyone in the New York home care field, please introduce me!



TorahRedux

PPS - Several of my home health clients are hiring at all levels from entry-level to management. Please send me a resume and a one-line explanation of what kind of role would be the best fit and I'll make some introductions.

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.