



## Korach 2023

### Calm Among Chaos

3 minute read | Straightforward

Our sages hold Ahron up as the avatar of peace who loved and pursued peace. He is the embodiment of relationships, mending not just spiritual rifts but interpersonal ones as well.

But what was there to fight about in the desert?

There was no struggle for resources and no conventional economy or business to provoke competition or incite envy. They ate magic food and drank magic water, and their clothes were auto-dry cleaned nightly.

There wasn't much to fight about.

R' Meilech Biderman highlights the fundamental truth that even when there isn't anything much in particular worth fighting about, some people will still be inclined to create conflict. Some people don't need legitimate grievances to sow argument and discord; they will incite strife over the most trivial and inconsequential things.

Korach is the Torah's example of this; more privileged than most, but someone else has a little more. So one evening, he rouses a mob for open rebellion and challenges Moshe.

How would you respond to such public and baseless humiliation?

Moshe doesn't take the bait to engage or finish the debate there and then. He calls for a public trial the next morning for all to see, and the story continues the following day.

Rashi notes that instead of engaging, Moshe stalled for time in the hope that Korach and his followers might reconsider and repent, abandoning their challenge and averting the impending catastrophe. But only one person did.

Out of the multitude enflamed by Korach's uprising, only one person sees through the illusion – On Ben Peleth. His moment of clarity doesn't arrive through divine revelation or philosophical insight but through a simple conversation with his wife. She asked him a straightforward question: "What's in it for you?" Whether it was Ahron or Korach as the leader, he'd still only be a disciple, so what did he stand to gain from participating in the dispute? For this, our sages herald her as a woman whose wisdom is constructive – תְּחִמּוֹת נָשִׁים בְּנִתּוֹת בֵּיתָהּ.



But the thing is, there is nothing profound whatsoever about her position. It's common sense! Anyone is capable of cost-benefit analysis; there is nothing wise about it, yet our sages set this wisdom as the gold standard to aim for.

R' Chaim Shmulevitz insightfully suggests that wisdom doesn't always lie in complex philosophies or grand revelations; sometimes, wisdom is remembering and applying simple truths in complex situations. It is not wisdom in the traditional intellectual sense but a different, no less valuable, sort of wisdom: the wisdom of practicality, of understanding human nature, of being grounded in reality, holding onto common sense when the world around you is caught in a storm of confusion.

Moshe doesn't respond in the heat of the moment, and On Ben Peleth's wife wouldn't allow her husband to act in the heat of the moment. These examples offer us a pragmatic approach and grounded understanding of approaching conflict. In the heat of the moment, when our judgment is clouded by emotions, controversy, and mob mentality, it is wise to hit the pause button; it is wise to return to fundamental truths to assess the situation.

These examples encourage us to search for wisdom in simplicity and remind us that not every battle is ours to fight, and guide us toward individual and collective calm amid the storm. They underscore the importance of strategic thought and action in high-stakes situations, which often present an amplified version of reality, forcing us to confront the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous nature of our existence. In an unbalanced situation, remaining calm demonstrates resilience and personal strength. Maintaining a cool head in these moments is a form of embracing this reality and accepting the world as it is rather than as we wish it to be. Our calm can influence those around us, promoting a collective equanimity that can transform potentially destructive situations.

Moshe's pause didn't save everyone, but it saved one family from catastrophe, whose story is a reminder of the importance of maintaining a cool head in high-stakes situations. It illuminates our potential to choose differently, to course correct, and take a step back from the precipice, even when we find ourselves on the verge of disaster. It invites us to recognize the wisdom in everyday pragmatism, the strength in quiet resilience, and the potential for redemption even amidst the most turbulent storms.

Remembering simple things in difficult moments is not simple.

It's wise.

## **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:

וְאִם-לֹא תִשָּׂיג יָדוֹ לְשֵׁתֵי תְרִים אוֹ לְשֵׁנֵי בְּנֵי-יוֹנָה וְהֵבִיא אֶת-קֶרְבָּנוֹ אֲשֶׁר חָטָא עֲשִׂירֵת הָאֶפֶה סֶלֶת – And if one's means do not 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 נִיחַח לֵה'. 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 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 – באשר הוא נשם –

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.

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## **Failure is not Fatal**

3 minute read | Straightforward

Dissatisfied with his middle management role in the tribe of Levi, Korach attempted a coup.

The story unfolds and wraps up with an epilogue that the remaining leaders conducted a public disputation by planting their walking sticks into the ground. Nothing happened to theirs; but Ahron's



instantly blossomed with almonds and flowers, showing Ahron's divine election, that God supported Moshe and Ahron's leadership and not Korach's insurrection.

The Torah concludes the story by telling us how Ahron's staff became a sacred relic stored in the Mishkan, a powerful symbol of what took place. It's blindingly obvious why the legacy of Ahron's miraculous staff is recorded. It was a long-dead walking stick, and yet it touched the ground and burst into life; it was an object of the highest cultural, historical, and religious significance, giving closure and finality to the story.

But the Torah also has words to say about the vanquished individuals, that they stepped forward to collect their inert walking sticks and went home.

Why does the Torah bother to tell us for posterity that each person took their walking sticks back?

R' Shlomo Farhi notes that in the same way that Ahron's staff was a symbol of victory, these walking sticks were a symbol of defeat – but they took them home just the same. These ordinary and inert walking sticks, with no magical properties, symbolized that these men had reached for greatness but failed. In telling us that each man stepped forward to reclaim his staff, the Torah is telling us that they took ownership of their failed attempt, and in doing so, there is a future after failure.

Their defeat was a reality check, but by owning their failure, they could once again resume their place in the hierarchy they had attempted to overthrow. The man who learns from failure has not truly failed.

It's part of a broader theme in the Torah; failure features prominently throughout, from the very first stories of humans in the Garden of Eden, through the very last stories of Moshe not able to finish his great mission of settling the Land of Israel.

The Torah doesn't shy away from human failure; it leans into it, and perhaps we should reappraise failure in that light.

As Kierkegaard said, life must be lived forwards but can only be understood backward. But because of that, no matter how you look at it, our experiences always have a two-fold significance.

First, there is the initial experience of something; the excitement of meeting someone new, the strangeness of an unfamiliar event, or the pain that follows failure.

But then afterward, there's the meaning that those experiences take on as we reshape and retell them into the story of our lives as they continue to unfold, which has the power to change how we perceive them. Most honest, successful people tell the story of how their failures became stepping stones to more meaningful victories down the road, giving the story of their failure a triumphant ending after all.



You can't learn if you don't try, you can't try if you are afraid to fail, and you can't be good at something if you have not failed multiple times. Learning to manage failure is one of the most important skills you can and must cultivate. If you are someone who never fails, you probably aren't trying enough.

The final word in the story isn't the magical staff; the final word affirms for posterity that these men could recover from failure, that there was a life and future beyond their mistakes.

A person who never makes a mistake has never tried anything. Mistakes can often be a better teacher than success; success only confirms the lessons you expect. But failure teaches you unexpected lessons in ways you can't foresee.

Success is not final, failure is not fatal; it's the courage to continue that counts.

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## **Never Enough**

4 minute read | Straightforward

Most humans born in the past several thousand years have heard of Moshe; he is rightly one of the most recognized figures in human history.

Today, we might reasonably say that a strange burning bush is no basis for a system of government and that supreme executive power ought to derive from a mandate from the masses – although that's not the worldview of the Torah's story. But to the extent there's some truth to that, we might expect Moshe's glittering array of accomplishments would eventually win some popular support.

He stood up to Pharaoh and the Egyptian empire and won. He walked a generation of enslaved people into freedom, led them through a suddenly dry ocean, gathered them at Sinai, generating magic food and water along the barren desert waste, among other significant and unparalleled achievements.

And still, the people complained at every turn, resisting him every step of the way.

One particular time, the infamous Korach raised a formidable following and led an attempted coup and insurrection to supplant and usurp his cousin Moshe:

וַיִּקְהָלוּ עַל־מֹשֶׁה וְעַל־אַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם רַב־לָכֶם כִּי כָל־הָעֵדָה כֹּהִים וְבְתוֹכָם הוּא וּמִדּוּעַ תִּתְנַשְּׂאוּ עַל־קְהָל ה' – They combined against Moshe and Aaron and said to them, “You have gone too far! All the community are holy, all of them! God is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above God's congregation?” (16:3)





But with all Haman’s influence, prestige, power, and wealth, it wasn’t worthwhile to him without one thing:

וְכָל־זֶה אֵינּוֹ אֵינּוֹ שׁוֹה לִי בְּכָל־עֵת אֲשֶׁר אֶנִּי רֹאֶה אֶת־מֶרְדֵּכַי הַיְּהוּדִי יוֹשֵׁב בְּשַׁעַר הַמְּלָךְ: – “Yet all this means nothing to me every time I see that Jew Mordechai sitting in the palace gate!”

Perhaps the rhetoric in Moshe’s reply to Korach is similar – הַמַּעַט מִכֶּם – is everything Korach already has so trivial? Are all the duties, honors, and privileges of the Mishkan still not enough?

Korach craves the one thing out of reach, the priesthood, without which everything counts for naught. Haman desires the one thing out of reach, Mordechai’s submission, without which everything counts for naught. Not only do they take their blessings for granted, they outright trivialize, discount, and devalue everything they have – הַמַּעַט מִכֶּם.

What’s more, our sages note that the Torah refers to Haman in the story of Adam and Eve, hinted in God’s language to Adam asking if they ate from the Tree of Knowledge, which can be read as an oblique allusion to Haman – הַמֶּן / הַמִּזְהָרֵץ אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתִי לְבָלְתִי אֶכְלֵ־מִמֶּנּוּ אֶכְלֶתָּ.

Dayan Chanoch Ehrentrau observes that Adam and Eve’s mistake is the same color. God creates the entire universe for them; all of Creation is at their disposal in the palm of their hand. But they crave the one thing out of reach, one tree they can’t eat from, without which everything falls stale and flat.

It’s the same mistake as Korach and Haman, a consistent and recurring mistake humans make from the beginning.

While there is plenty of room for healthy ambition and aspirations for tomorrow, you must still value and appreciate where you stand today; otherwise, what’s it all worth? While you can say you appreciate your blessings, your actions may indicate otherwise.

Gratitude and its inverse form, taking things for granted, are recursive throughout the Torah, consistently one of its core themes and a leading indicator of prosperity or disaster. Korach, Haman, and Adam and Eve all suffered severe punishment for taking their blessings for granted – they lost everything, and everything quickly turned to nothing.

They say you don’t know what you’ve got until it’s gone, but sometimes you do know what you have; you just never think you’ll lose it while you chase the next thing.

Appreciate what you have, and who loves and cares for you. Don’t take the people or things in your life for granted, not just because nothing lasts forever – but because, as Moshe said, is it not enough?





## Refusing the Call

5 minute read | Straightforward

Before introducing us to Moshe, the Torah describes how Yakov's family grew numerous and how the Egyptian government felt threatened by such a sizable population of outsiders. Determined to curb this threat, they devised a means to enslave the Jewish People, which crept slowly until it was intolerable.

Once the Torah has established the setting, the Torah tells us of Moshe's birth and upbringing before he has to flee. Moshe encounters a mysterious burning bush on his travels, and God calls on him to save his people. Curiously, Moshe refuses this call:

וַעֲתָה הִנֵּה צַעֲקַת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בָּאָה אֵלַי וְגַם־רָאִיתִי אֶת־הַלֶּחֶץ אֲשֶׁר מִצְרַיִם לֹחֲצִים אֹתָם: וַעֲתָה לָכֵה וְאַשְׁלַחְךָ אֶל־פַּרְעֹה וְהוֹצֵא אֶת־עַמִּי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם: וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים: ... וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־ה' בִּי: "The cry of the Children of Israel has reached Me; I have seen how the Egyptians oppress them. Come! I will send you to Pharaoh, and you shall free My people, the Children of Israel, from Egypt." But Moshe said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Children of Israel from Egypt?"... Moshe said to God, "Please God, I have never been a man of words, either in times past or now that You have spoken to Your servant; I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." (3:9-11, 4:10)

This is one of the most important stories ever told. Moshe knows where he comes from and has seen his brethren suffering. His birth and upbringing uniquely situate him between both sides to do something about it. No less than the Creator has called on him to greatness, and he refuses, not once, but twice!

How could Moshe possibly refuse the call?

Refusing the call is a literary trope that humanizes the hero, but this story isn't ordinary literature. Moshe's refusal is part of this timeless story because it reflects a fundamental property intrinsic to all humans we must acknowledge and understand.

Moshe didn't doubt that his people could or should be saved; Moshe doubted himself. He had fears and insecurities; he was missing an essential trait to be successful! He wasn't a man of words; how would he persuade anybody to follow him? How would he convince the Egyptian government to let his people go? This isn't faux humility – Moshe articulates an accurate self-assessment; he is right! And yet, the Creator answers that it doesn't matter; he must do it anyway.

When the Mishkan was finally ready for inauguration, Ahron also refused the call, feeling ashamed and unworthy for his responsibility for the Golden Calf incident. Yet in the view of our sages, Ahron's



shame was exactly what distinguished him as the right person; his self-awareness of his shortcomings and his view of the position as one that required gravity and severity. Moshe never says Ahron is wrong; he only encourages him to ignore those doubts and do it anyway – אָמַר לוֹ – שְׁקִיף אֶהְרֵן בּוֹשׁ וַיֵּרָא לְגִשְׁתּוֹ, אָמַר לוֹ – מִשָּׁה, לָמָּה אַתָּה בּוֹשׁ? לָכֵן נִבְחַרְתָּ.

In the Purim story, Mordechai asks Esther to go to the king to save her people and Esther refuses the call, not wanting to risk her life; she has correctly assessed the facts and is indeed in danger. But as Mordechai says, that doesn't matter; if Esther remains paralysed by her fears, she will lose the opportunity to step up. The call to action is open before her; and she must do it anyway – פִּי אִם-הִקְרַשׁ – תִּתְחַרְשִׁי בְּעַת הַזֹּאת רִוּחַ וְהִצְלָה יַעֲמֹד לְיְהוּדִים מִמְּקוֹם אַחֵר וְאַתָּה וּבֵית-אָבִיךָ תֵּאבְדוּ וּמִי יוֹדֵעַ אִם-לָעַת כְּזֹאת הִגַּעְתָּ לְמַלְכוּת.

The book of Jeremiah opens with a similar vignette. Jeremiah reports that God appeared to him in his youth, and called upon him to be the prophet for his generation; like his forebears, Jeremiah protests that he is just a kid and is not a speaker. In what we can now recognize as a consistent fashion, God dismisses these excuses; not because they are wrong, but because they don't matter – he's got to do it anyway – וַיְהִי דְבַר-ה' אֵלַי לֵאמֹר: בְּטָרְם אֲצַרְךָ בְּכַטָּן וְדַעַתִּיךָ וּבְטָרְם תֵּצֵא מִרְחֹם הַקְּדוֹשִׁים נְבִיא לְגוֹיִם נִתְתִּיךָ: וְאָמַר אֶתָּה אֲדַנִּי הַ הִנֵּה – לֹא-יְדַעְתִּי דְבַר כִּי-נֶעַר אָנֹכִי: וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֵלַי אַל-תֹּאמַר נֶעַר אָנֹכִי כִּי עַל-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר אֲשַׁלְּחֶךָ תִּלְדָּה וְאַתָּה כָּל-אֲשֶׁר אֲצַוְךָ תִּדְבַר.

The Torah is deliberate in how it presents stories; there are lessons in what it leaves in and leaves out. Of all the small interactions that don't make the final cut, we should note that refusing the call is an interaction the Torah consistently deems necessary in multiple unrelated stories; our greatest heroes don't just jump at the chance to do what is clearly the right thing.

Who is perfect enough to fix the problems in your community? Who is perfect enough to lead the people you love to greatness? The Torah seems to endorse and validate this sentiment, insisting that it has got to be you despite your flaws – אַל-תֹּאמַר נֶעַר אָנֹכִי – Ironically, the people who are deluded and narcissistic enough to think they are perfect would be the worst candidate; the Torah holds Korach up as the counterexample.

If you have adequately honed your sensitivities, you recognize you have a lot of work to do, and so many people need your help. You might even hear a call to action reverberating deep within. But you doubt yourself, and you refuse the call. You're scared – and you should be! There is plenty to fear, and the stakes couldn't be higher. The undertaking the Torah calls us to is enormous, too enormous to accomplish on our own; yet it calls on us just the same – לֹא עָלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה לְגִמְרָה, וְלֹא אַתָּה בְּנֵן חוֹרִין לְבַטֵּל מִמֶּנָּה –

There is moral fiber in quieting the voice of self-doubt and stepping up to answer the call anyway – אָם – אִין אָנִי לִי, מִי לִי. וּכְשֶׁאֲנִי לְעַצְמִי, מָה אָנִי.

The Torah calls on humans, keenly aware of our fears, flaws, imperfection, and insecurities. We mustn't engage those self-same fears, flaws, imperfections, and insecurities as excuses to neglect our duty. The Torah repeatedly tells us they don't matter; do it anyway!



Moshe, Ahron, Jeremiah, and Esther all expressed a form of impostor syndrome, the feeling that whatever job you're in, you're not qualified for it and that people will figure out any minute that you're a poser with no clue what you're doing. Your self-awareness serves you well by accurately identifying gaps in your skillset but does you a disservice by stopping you from trying. You have to silence the doubt in yourself when it gets to the point of holding you back from doing transformational things simply because you're not quite ready to face the reality of your own potential greatness.

Our pantheon of heroes is replete with imperfect individuals who had good reasons to refuse the call. Each excuse was entirely accurate; we ought to draw immense comfort and power from how universal self-doubt and uncertainty are. The Torah's consistent thematic response to our greats, and through them to us, echoing and reverberating for all eternity, is simply that there's work to do, and someone has to do it.

So why shouldn't it be you?

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### Quote of the Week

If you think a thing is impossible, you'll make it impossible. Pessimism blunts the tools you need to succeed.

— Bruce Lee

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### Thought of the Week

Total freedom is overrated.

Much better to live a life of commitment.

To your spouse, children, community...

Complete freedom is a life of loneliness.

— Bryant Suellentrop, @SullyBusiness

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## TorahRedux

*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](mailto: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.