



## Vayechi 2023

### Don't be Afraid

2 minute read | Straightforward

After Yosef revealed himself to his brothers, he invited their entire family to relocate from the famine-plagued Canaan to Egypt's fertile and prosperous land under Yosef's protection and influence. When Yakov discovered his long-lost son was alive and well, he was overwhelmed at the prospect of reuniting the family before he died. But he had reservations, and God had to reassure him:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהֵי אָבִיךָ אֶל-תִּירָא מִרְדֵּה מִצְרַיִם כִּי-לְגוֹי גָדוֹל אֲשִׁימָךְ שָׁם – And He said, “I am God, the God of your father. Don't be afraid of going down to Egypt, for there I will make you into a great nation”. (46:3)

Undoubtedly, God was speaking to some nerves or anguish Yakov was experiencing at the idea of leaving the land of his fathers. Yakov was afraid of the unknown, leaving the safety, security, and comfort of the land his family had grown up in. But fear makes us withdraw, which may be the point God was addressing.

And God's reassurance contains a powerful notion that reverberates through the ages. Difficulties don't have to diminish – they can be the making of us. Strength and growth come with pain and sacrifice.

Of 3,000 or so years of Jewish history, perhaps 400 at best were sovereign and secure, with the rest in one exile or another. Yet, the trajectory has only been upwards. There is no greater freedom than knowing we can thrive in exile.

It's ultimately true of life itself – we build through overcoming adversity with self-sacrifice. So counterintuitively, outstanding achievements are not despite adversity; they are a product of it. Leaning into the challenge will be the making of you – כִּי-לְגוֹי גָדוֹל אֲשִׁימָךְ שָׁם – that's the only place it can happen.

When everything is easy, it's hard to be our best, and Yakov's life embodied this. His family could only be reunited in a foreign land, paving the way to slavery and eventual redemption. His life was truth and greatness, but always with pain and on the run.

R' Yitzchak Berkowitz teaches that this theme is recursive – time and again, the resistance is not the obstacle – it's the catalyst. The obstacle is the way. It's the story of the matza on Pesach; it's the story of Purim and Chanuka. Overcoming the challenge is what lets us become great.

That's not to diminish in any way the severity of the different ordeals life hurls our way – the struggle is real.



But we don't have to be shackled by our shackles; the challenges can give us a siege mentality. The key to unlocking this superpower is God's message to humans.

Don't be afraid.

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## Living with Differences

3 minute read | Straightforward

The formative stories in the book of Genesis are powerful and moving.

They tell us where we come from, what our heroes and role models looked like, and how they got there. We recognize the individual protagonists' greatness when we read these stories, but the stories also include plenty of failings.

In the stories of Yakov's children, there is constant tension, a sibling rivalry. Yet Yakov's children are the first of the Jewish People; the first generation to be entirely worthy of inheriting the covenant of Avraham collectively – מטתו שלימה / שבטי י-ה.

While the Torah's terse stories obviously cannot capture who these great people truly were in three dimensions, we shouldn't ignore that the Torah deliberately frames the stories a particular way, characterizing and highlighting specific actions and people. We should sit up and notice, wondering what we are supposed to learn from the parts that won't quite fit with our picture of greatness.

Each generation of our ancestral prototypes added something – Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yakov. What are we supposed to make of the apparent disputes and strife between Yosef and his brothers?

R' Yitzchak Berkovits suggests that one lesson is how perilously close people came to killing one of their own in Yosef, how their inability to tolerate Yosef nearly ruined them, with a straight line from their disagreements to centuries of enslavement in Egypt.

While we can't get to some ultimate historical truth of the matter, the Torah's characterization is unequivocal. As much as we believe that there is a right and wrong approach to life and that we must fight for what we believe in, we must still love and tolerate people we disagree with. If, in our pursuit of truth and justice, we end up dividing the family, hating and alienating others, we have gotten lost along the way.

The Sfas Emes suggests that Yosef's criticisms stemmed from the fact that he had different, which is to say, higher standards than his brothers. Being the closest to his father, he was the best placed to claim authority from his father's teachings; and being so highly attuned, he was sensitive to his



brother's nuanced missteps, so while Yosef's brothers could not dispute his greatness, they determined that his standards were destructive.

It's not so hard to see why. Although they were the heirs of Avraham's covenant, it was intolerable to have someone so demanding and oversensitive policing them day and night. In their estimation, it was untenable for a viable Jewish future.

The brothers would eventually see that Yosef wasn't a threat, that he had been on the right track all along, just not the right one for them. But they would only realize too late, after the family had already suffered greatly from the fallout, and would be mired in Egypt for centuries as a result.

R' Yitzchak Berkovits suggests that the lesson for us is to learn to live with high standards in the place where theory and practice meet.

Daily, we see the razor-sharp edge of absolute truth clashing with the realpolitik of practical rather than moral or ideological considerations. It's impossible to measure and quantify values or where to draw the line; it's deeply personal and subjective to specific circumstances, continually hinging on so many practicalities.

Yosef and Yehuda never clash about what's true, or what matters. They agree entirely about the value of Avraham's legacy, but they could not agree on what that might look like. One of the story's lessons is the error of confusing theory with practice; with no difference in values, we can and should tolerate differences in practice.

Two of the most fundamental principles of the Torah and life are loving your neighbor and the image of God, both of which speak to the dignity of others – *ואהבת לרעך כמוך / צלם אלוקים*. Reserving love and compassion for people who are just like you is not the Torah's greatest principle – that would demand literally nothing of us. We must tolerate the existence of those who are not just like us, which is incredibly hard.

Like Yosef, we mustn't be afraid of high standards. But if we aren't quite ready to live that way, we should at the very least tolerate others who do have high standards. Society has to tolerate the person who wants things to be better just as equally it has to tolerate the person who can't quite live up to that just yet.

Because true to life, you can't teach someone anything you've chased them away.

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## [Avoiding I Told You So](#)

4 minute read | Straightforward



The book of Genesis concludes with Yosef's story.

It's worth noting that roughly a quarter of the book revolves around Yosef as the central character, making him its most prominent protagonist by a distance.

As an adolescent, Yosef was his own worst enemy, sharing vivid dreams with brothers already jealous of his special relationship with their father. Determining that this arrogant dreamer was unworthy of their great ancestral legacy and posed a threat to its future, the brothers disposed of him, selling him into ignominious slavery.

But he could not be stopped. Undeterred, he climbed his way out the depths of slavery and false imprisonment without faltering until he reached the height of Egyptian aristocracy.

The story reaches its climax with Yosef positioned as the fully naturalized Egyptian ruler of all, Tzafnas Paneach. In a stunning reversal, his brothers unwittingly made their way to him:

וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְשֹׁבֵר בְּתוֹךְ הַבָּאִים פִּי־הֵיךָ הֲרָעַב בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן. וַיֹּסֵף הוּא הַשְּׁלִיט עַל־הָאֶרֶץ הוּא הַמְּשֻׁבֵּר לְכָל־עַם הָאֶרֶץ וַיָּבֹאוּ אֵתֵי יוֹסֵף וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ־לוֹ אַפַּיִם אֶרְצָה. וַיֵּרָא יוֹסֵף אֶת־אֶחָיו וַיִּכְרַם וַיִּתְּנָכַר אֲלֵיהֶם וַיִּדְבֹּר אִתָּם קָשׁוֹת וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵיהֶם מָאִין בָּאתֶם וַיֹּאמְרוּ מֵאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַיִּשְׁבְּרֵם אֶת־אֶחָיו וַיִּכְרַם יוֹסֵף אֶת־אֶחָיו וְהֵם לֹא הִכְרָהוּ – The sons of Israel were among those who came to procure rations, for the famine extended to the land of Canaan. Now Yosef ruled the land; it was he who dispensed rations to all the people of the land. Yosef's brothers came and bowed low to him, with their faces to the ground. When Yosef saw his brothers, he recognized them; but he acted like a stranger toward them and spoke harshly to them. He asked them, "Where do you come from?" And they said, "From the land of Canaan, to procure food." For though Yosef recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him. (42:5-8)

It's hard to overstate the importance of this moment, quite arguably the moment the entire book of Genesis turns on.

In every story up to this point, siblings could not get past their differences, and families would fracture and splinter off in separate ways. But this time, something different happens, and it's because Yosef did something different.

We can be confident that Yosef remembered his childhood dream that his siblings would one day bow before him; sharing this vision was the very thing that had torn him from his family and landed him in his current position!

Then this moment happens – they bow and humbly beg for his benevolence and assistance. Despite their best efforts, his dream has come true, and this moment utterly vindicates him. The upstart dreamer had, in fact, been a full-fledged prophet all along!

We can't begin to imagine all the years of pain and hurt, the difficulties and torment he experienced, first at home, then through abduction and slavery, then prison and later in politics, in utter isolation.



But this moment conclusively proves that however childish or immature he had been, they were completely and utterly wrong.

If he were to reveal his true identity now – the moment his brothers are on the floor beneath him, entirely at his mercy – can we begin to imagine the sense of power and vindication those words might be laden with? How tantalizingly sweet would those words taste rolling off our tongue?

Yet, presented with the ultimate I-told-you-so opportunity, Yosef turned away from that path and towards the road to reconciliation, paving the way for the family to let go of past differences successfully.

The Kedushas Levi highlights how gracious and magnanimous it was for Yosef to avoid rubbing in this complete and total vindication. He recognized exactly who they were, remembered precisely what they had done, and only troubled himself to make sure that in their lowest moment, they would not recognize him – וַיֵּרָא יוֹסֵף אֶת־אֶחָיו וַיִּכְרַם וַיִּתְנַבֵּר אֲלֵיהֶם וַיְדַבֵּר אִתָּם קְשׁוּת –

Yosef refused to kick them when they were down, and would ultimately offer a positive spin on the entire story, that God had ordained the whole thing to position him to save them from their predicament – שְׁמַנֵּי אֱלֹהִים לְאֶדוֹן לְכָל־מִצְרַיִם / לֹא־אַתֶּם שָׁלַחְתֶּם אֹתִי הִנֵּה כִּי הֵאֲלֵהֶם / כִּי לְמַחְנֶה שָׁלַחְנִי אֱלֹהִים לְפָנֵיכֶם –

All grown-up now, Yosef is able to understand that his dreams were not about him; he was able to recognize that he was a tool. There was no glory to be had in his power, wealth, and success, or even his prophetic ability, except to the extent he could use it to help others and heal the rift in his family he had contributed to. No one had understood his childhood visions; they weren't going to bow because he was better than them but because he was going to save them all. From this point on through the end of the story, he repeatedly makes sure to feed and care for his brothers and their families.

In this moment, this hero of heroes acted from his heart instead of his pain. He truly was better than the brothers who had once tried to break him; rather than make them bitter too, he healed them all.

Most families are at odds a little too often, that is, assuming they're even on speaking terms! Inevitably, there are quite a few I-told-you-so moments. It's a rehash of the cycle of most of the book of Genesis, a tale as old as time, and perhaps even the natural course of life. But just because it's natural, that doesn't mean it has to be that way. It's not inevitable.

We should remember that our greats weren't robotic machines. They hurt each other deeply and caused their family immense and undeserved pain. Yet when things came back around, although they had not forgotten, they faced those moments with compassion and humility, invoking the power to defuse decades of hurt.



The legacy of these stories is that humans have the ability to choose to avert cycles of hurt, the power to fill that void with healing. Be the person you needed when you were hurting, not the person who hurt you.

Break the cycle.

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## [How to Not Kill Your Family](#)

6 minute read | Straightforward

There is a treasured custom in some communities for parents to bless their children before kiddush on Friday night. Traditionally, fathers will bless their sons to be like Ephraim and Menashe and their daughters like the Matriarchs.

It's not hard to understand why we'd want our daughters to be like the Matriarchs; they are the role models and heroines in the stories of our greats. While we have others, such as Miriam and Devorah, the Matriarchs are a natural conceptual category that we intuitively understand.

But of all the great heroes in our heritage, why are Ephraim and Menashe, in particular, the specific role models we would want our sons to emulate?

Ephraim and Menashe occupy a distinctly unique conceptual category; they transcend a natural hierarchy. While hierarchies are inherent to family dynamics and structures, it is highly irregular to see generation jumpers. Yet, these young boys earned parity with their uncles a generation earlier and are counted as tribes alongside Yakov's sons.

But transcending family dynamics wasn't just something that happened to them when Yakov blessed them; transcending family dynamics was a fundamental reflection of who they were.

The Bnai Yissaschar explains that every generation in Genesis suffered rivalry rooted in unequal blessings, favor, or talent, whether from God or a parent. Brothers kill each other in the case of Cain and Abel, come close to it with Yakov and Esau, and fight and fracture in every other instance. But when Yakov crossed his hands and blessed his younger grandson with the better blessing ostensibly fit for the elder without a word of protest, it was the first time a snubbed sibling didn't have a moment's thought of entitlement or jealousy.

Ephraim and Menashe showcase what is arguably the most difficult of the Ten Commandments, the commandment of envy – [וְלֹא תַחְמֹד](#). It's difficult to practice because jealousy originates in the subconscious. The only solution is to adopt the perspective that God's blessings are abundant; not exclusive, finite, scarce, or zero-sum, that there isn't a fixed amount of happiness, health, love, or money in the world, so someone else's good fortune cannot subtract from yours, and it cannot





diminish the pool of blessings available to you in the future. Ephraim and Menashe lived that in their relationship with each other.

As R' David Wolpe notes, this is the first time siblings show acceptance of inequality. It's the way the world is; we simply have to accept that there will be different distributions of blessings, gifts, talent, and luck. And the acceptance of God's gifts at unequal levels is the only way brothers succeed in not killing each other.

Put simply, their relationship with each other transcended competitive dynamics and hierarchies, and there is no better blessing to wish on our sons.

That's great, and it has merit enough to stand on its own, but it still doesn't get to the core of the matter, which is where this quality came from.

My Zaide suggested that if your father is Yakov and you are born, raised, and live in his house, it's relatively easy and not especially surprising that you follow his way. In comparison, to be born in Egypt, the crown jewel of a world devoid of spirituality and meaning, whose culture was excess and materialism, rife with lust and idolatry; and yet master the spiritual life as well as any of Yakov's sons, is the ultimate achievement.

So perhaps the blessing we wish on our children is to master both worlds – the private world of spirituality and the public world of commerce and community, participating without being consumed.

But perhaps there's something else, hiding in plain sight.

In social psychology, self-categorization theory is the concept of how we categorize and perceive ourselves and others. We categorize our role in the society as the self – “I;” the social self – “we;” and the comparative outgroup – “them.” The “us” versus “them” mentality is natural and stems from our deep evolutionary need to belong to a group in order to survive, belong, and flourish.

Where Yosef's brothers went so wrong was that they identified him as the outgroup, the other, the enemy, a threat, and not one of them. As the Sfas Emes notes, part of what was so mortifying by Yosef's grand reveal was that their threat assessment and identification had been so badly miscalibrated; Yosef may have been an annoying, immature, troublemaker, but he had always and only ever been one of them. By not protesting at the superior blessing given to his younger brother, Menashe revealed that he understood his role as a brother and ally; he was not competing with his brother.

And here's the essential point – if Menashe learned this lesson from observing his father's life story, cast out from his family then subsequently healing, ultimately rising and magnanimously reuniting his family; then it could never be a lesson that can be repeated or passed on, and blessing our children with a quality they could not possibly hope to emulate doesn't ring true or make any sense. In that



case, the blessing to our children would be to have a father like Yosef, which is self-referential and absurd, so they must have learned this lesson in a way that everyone can.

Most of us want to protect our children from struggles because if we shoulder their burdens, they'll be happier, right? Not usually. Children are happiest when parents bolster and support their children's ability to tackle life's challenging experiences.

Resilience, or better yet, antifragility is not an inherited genetic trait; it is earned and honed. It is derived from the ways children learn to think and act when they are faced with obstacles, large and small. The road to resilience comes first and foremost from children's supportive relationships with parents, teachers, and other caring adults. These relationships become sources of strength when children work through stressful situations and painful emotions.

With antifragility, we don't merely recover; we also add some other thing on top. When we're infected with a virus, we heal and become immune to subsequent infection. It is more than resilience, which is the return to a fixed state. Antifragile is a dynamic state that requires some stressor to stimulate growth

But without stimulus, we can atrophy. Moshe warned of the day the Jewish People would get too comfortable and lose their way:

וַיִּשְׂמֶן יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּבְעֹט שְׂמֶנֶת עֲבֵיתָ כְּשֵׁית וַיִּטֹּשׂ אֱלֹהִים עֲשָׂהוּ וַיִּנְבֵּל צוּר יְשַׁעְתּוֹ – So Jeshurun grew fat and kicked, you grew fat and gross and coarse, and forsook the God who made him, and spurned the Rock of his support. (32:15)

The Haggadah echoes the same by warning us of the threat of Lavan; Pharaoh is a direct threat we know to be cautious about, but a devious Lavan poses an indirect threat equally serious. If Yakov had stayed with Lavan, he might have been fabulously wealthy; and he would not have lost his life, but he would have lost his soul.

We are products of modernity, for which there is no shame; we cannot be anything other than what we are. But what defines us, and what does not? We are Jews; our history and our culture define us, not the society we live in. Our society can influence the expression of our history and our culture, and a Jew today looks different from a Jew in the Middle Ages or a Jew five centuries from now.

When our enemies threaten our very lives, “us” and “them” are self-explanatory and straightforward, but we currently live in one of the rare periods where that's not the case – thankfully! But the threat is never gone; it merely contorts itself into a different form. While everyone knows that assimilation is a silent killer, materialism is only a slightly less malignant form of assimilation but still very much within the same conceptual category.

So perhaps while “us” and “them” were faulty in Yosef's brothers, they were rediscovered and reclaimed by Yosef and his sons; and that's the heart of what we wish for our sons. To know who they





are, to correctly identify threats, to stand up in the face of adversity, to rise to the challenge, and to thrive in overcoming it.

In our families and communities, we can and must correctly identify the “us,” who we are alongside each other, and stand up to “them,” the challenge that modern culture poses. If you cannot correctly tell “us” from “them,” then all the concomitant dangers naturally follow when we turn what should be “us” into “them” – competition, fear, jealousy, anger, alienation, and literal or metaphorical death.

Our sons will go out into the world and confront all sorts of trials we cannot imagine or prepare them for, and because they will face those challenges differently and achieve different outcomes.

So we desperately wish for them to be like Ephraim and Menashe because although neither easy nor guaranteed, their example proves that by facing challenges together, it is possible to remain brothers and allies, united in happiness with and for each other, so long as they know who they are, where they come from, and what they stand for and against.

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## Quote of the Week

נֵר הַנּוֹכַח מִיִּסְיַף וְיִהְיֶה לְךָ

אוֹתִיּוֹת נֶחֱמָו

The greatest נחמה you can give a person is to remind them that their candle can never be extinguished and that they are loved with an everlasting love."

– Rabbi Dr Benjy Epstein, @beherenow365

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## Thought of the Week

“Rav Ya'akov Kamenetsky ZT"L, asked his students what their #NewYearsResolutions were.

In shock, the students asked "But it isn't the Jewish new year?"

He responded "The entire country is using this as a time for self reflection and self improvement, and we wont?!"

– Shua Brick, @BrickShua



## 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 niche 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 want to talk to home care companies, so if you know anybody in the home care industry, please introduce me!*

**PPS** - *It took me years to start making a parnassa; if anyone you know is looking for a job, please put them in touch with me. With a helping hand from Above, I have successfully helped **7 people** find jobs so far!*

**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.