



Va'eschanan 2022

Humility Redux

2 minute read | Straightforward

We take for granted that humility is an admirable virtue, but it's worth taking a moment to consider what humility is and also what it is not.

Humility is commonly understood to mean a low estimate of oneself and one's accomplishments. The Oxford English Dictionary defines humility as "the quality of being humble: having a low estimate of one's importance, worthiness, or merits."

But this doesn't ring true with what Judaism teaches us about the value of humility.

The Midrash famously teaches that Mount Sinai was only a little mountain to show how instrumental humility is.

But if the educational purpose of giving the Torah in such a place is to illustrate the value of humility, then you'd assume a valley would be a more appropriate geological feature to teach the lesson!

So why give the Torah on a mountain at all?

The Shem M'shmuel states that to accept the Torah and live its ideals, you must be like a mountain, not a valley; or as Pirkei Avos puts it, if I don't stand up for myself, what am I?

As important as the quality of humility is, people who accept the Torah upon themselves must consider themselves important and deserving of the Torah.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks teaches that humility is an appreciation of our talents, skills, and virtues. It is not meekness or self-deprecating thought, but the dedication of oneself to something higher.

Rabbi Shlomo Farhi notes that the Torah labels Moshe as the most humble of all men. If humility is simply a low view of oneself, then Moshe, the Lawgiver and single greatest authority on the Torah would meekly cave to any challenge – which he obviously couldn't and didn't. But if humility is about being of service, then Moshe truly was the most humble of all men – Moshe singularly dedicated his entire life to public service. His achievements were never about him or his status; they were all in furtherance of rescuing and building the Jewish people.

It was no lack of humility for Moshe to acknowledge his own authority and leadership. When a person believes they are nothing, then ultimately, the Torah itself will have little effect in elevating him.



Although pride is a dangerous vice in large quantities, a small amount is still an essential ingredient to living a good life.

Pride is about competing – that you are smarter than or richer than; humility is about serving. Humility isn't the opposite of narcissism and hubris; it's the lack of them. In the absence of pride, you find humility, which sees no need for competition.

So perhaps humility is not that you are nothing; it's just that it's not about you anymore. In humility, you are no more and no less than other people. Humility is not about hiding away, becoming a wallflower or a doormat; it is about the realization that your abilities and actions are not better or less. They simply are.

Humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less.

You are Worthy

3 minute read | Straightforward

The Exodus is an orienting event for the Jewish People, a founding moment in our history, with a daily duty to recall it. It's the first thing God has to say to humans at Sinai; God introduces Himself as the God who took us out of Egypt.

Remembering the Exodus is a perpetual mitzvah, and an astounding amount of our daily blessings, mitzvos, and prayers commemorate the Exodus – זָכַר לִיציאת מִצְרַיִם. It is ubiquitous to the extent we could miss the point entirely.

What do we mean when we say that we remember that God took the Jews out of Egypt?

It is essential to understand first principles because they are the foundational concepts that govern the systems built upon them.

If we unpack the story, the Jews in Egypt didn't deserve to be saved because they were so good or so special; in fact, quite the opposite.

The Zohar imagines the angels arguing whether or not God should save the Jews, and the argument was that “this lot are just a bunch of idol-worshippers, and so are those!” The Haggadah admits as much – מִתְחַלְלָה עֹבְדֵי עֲבוֹדָה זָרָה הֵיוּ אֲבוֹתֵינוּ –

When Moshe told the Jews to set aside and take one sheep per family, the Midrash says that “set aside” meant setting aside their idols before taking the sheep for the mitzvah!



When even Moshe, already well on his way to greatness, saw Yisro's daughters getting bullied and got involved in the dispute to protect them, the onlookers mistook him for just another Egyptian!

The Midrash famously states that the enslaved Jews retained their names, clothing, and language. This is often framed as a point of pride, but the point would seem to be that apart from these narrow and limited practices, they were otherwise indistinguishable from Egyptians in every other conceivable way!

Moreover, the generation that left Egypt and stood at Sinai fought Moshe the rest of their lives, begging to go back to Egypt, and was ultimately doomed to wander and die in the wilderness.

The Zohar goes so far as to say that the Jews were on the 49th level of spiritual malaise, just one notch off rock bottom, the point of no return. Rav Kook notes that this adds a particular dimension to the imagery of God's strong outstretched arm – it was a forceful intervention, an emergency rescue of a nation that had stumbled and was about fall off a cliff – *בְּיַד הַחֲזָקָה וּבְזֶרַע נְטוּיָה* –

As R' Shlomo Farhi explains, whenever God is characterized with strength, it indicates God doing something that is undeserved. God does not require more incremental strength to move a grape than a galaxy; but God can force compassion to overwhelm what justice requires – *גּוֹאֵל וְחֹזֵק אֶתָּה*.

That is to say that on a fundamental level, the Jews didn't deserve rescuing at all.

And yet crucially, as R' Chaim Kanievsky notes, God responded to their cries all the same – *וַיַּצַּעַק אֱלֹהֵי – אֱלֹהֵי אֲבֹתֵינוּ, וַיִּשְׁמַע ה' אֶת-קוֹלֵנוּ*.

The Divrei Chaim notes that the very first Commandment is no command at all; God “introduces” himself as the God who took us out of Egypt – *אֲנֹכִי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים*. It's not a command – it is just a simple statement of fact. We might not deserve redemption, yet God redeems us all the same.

R' Tzadok haKohen writes that to remember Egypt is to remember God's first declarative sentence; our God rescues people from Egypt, whoever they are.

The Ropshitzer quipped that *תְּחִלָּה לְמִקְרָאֵי קִדְּשׁ זִכָּר לְיִצְיַאת מִצְרַיִם* – the first step towards holiness is remembering that the same Exodus that rescued people from the abyss once before could be just a moment away.

So when we remind ourselves about Egypt, it's not just that it happened once, but that, as the Lubavitcher Rebbe put it, God's redemption is not contingent on our worthiness.

You don't need to remember the simple historical events of the Exodus; you have to remind yourself that every single last human is worthy of God's unconditional love.



Love's Truest Language

3 minute read | Straightforward

When we think of Mount Sinai, we think of Divine Revelation and all that it means. But apart from the obvious upheaval in spiritual terms, the Torah also describes a great upheaval in physical terms.

In Tanach, whenever there is a theophany, some manifestation of the divine in a tangible, observable way, there is an upending of the natural order. Moshe saw a burning bush that wasn't consumed; the Jews were led through the desert by pillars of fiery cloud. Sinai itself is characterized by fire from the sky, along with loud booms, thunder, and lightning, and the whole mountain quaked, enveloped in a haze of dark cloud and smoke. Our Sages even suggest that when people heard God's Word emerge from the darkness, they died for an instant.

This imagery demonstrates the absolute abnegation of the natural world, and rightly so!

Arguably, the ultimate purpose behind creation was to cultivate a conduit that could receive the Torah; all of existence culminated at that moment at Sinai, and creation achieved its intended purpose when God reached into the universe to give the Torah to humanity, forming an intimate bond between Creator and creation. It follows that the imagery is stark and unnatural; this is the most extraordinary and supernatural event in human experience!

But there's one part that doesn't fit at all.

Among all the intimidating and scary goings-on, there was something else that happened at Mount Sinai too. The little mountain in the desert burst into bloom, with beautiful plants and fragrant flowers sprawling up the hills and into the cloud, so tantalizing that the Jews actually had to be instructed to restrain their animals from grazing the lush greenery!

But why were there flowers on Mount Sinai at all?

R' Shlomo Farhi explains that the flowers demonstrate something that darkness, earthquakes, fire, thunder, and lightning do not. Those things all demonstrate God's power, but flowers illustrate God's love.

There is another famous mountain in our tradition, Mount Moriah, where Avraham and Yitzchak famously stood together, the mountain on which the two Temples stood and where a third will stand once more. This famous mountain was also associated with flowers; the Zohar suggests that the mountain was named Moriah after the fragrant myrrh that grew there.

The legendary mountain is not named for the heroic acts and great deeds that took place there; it's not the Mountain of the Akeida, the Mountain of Commitment and Faith, or the Mountain of Sacrifice. It's named for the sweet-smelling plants that grew there!



TorahRedux

There is an entire genre of romance that hugely impacts how many of us conceptualize love and relationships; a grand gesture is usually the crescendo of a great love story. Yet, as R' Shlomo Farhi teaches, a grand gesture or great sacrifice cannot define a relationship because it is only ever an anomaly.

Over time, love is communicated through a multitude of little things, not any particular one-time thing. What defines the quality of a relationship isn't the great deeds here and there; it's the small gestures, the consistent, subtle, and thoughtful acts that shape how a couple connects and interacts. These small gestures send big signals about who we are, what we care about, and why we do what we do.

It's called Mount Moriah because God wanted it to smell nice for all the great heroes and future pilgrims who would one day make their way there. It was wholly unnecessary, completely irrelevant, and entirely beside the main point of anything of consequence, but that's why it matters so much. The great epic of Avraham's ordeal is not impacted even slightly by the fact that God made it smell nice, but God did it anyway.

The flowers on the mountains are the most trivial detail, with nothing whatsoever to do with the tremendous meaning and significance of the events that took place at Sinai or Moriah. Still, those flowers say more than any commotion, and that's the part that we remember. To this day, when we celebrate the Torah we got at Sinai, we don't commemorate the darkness by turning out the lights, nor the earthquakes by shaking the tables; Shavuot is the festival of flowers! For centuries, it has been a near-universal custom to decorate our homes and shul with beautiful flower arrangements.

A waiter will give you whatever you asked for, but a lover will give you everything they can. It's not about doing what you need to do; it's about doing all you could do. That slight change in orientation elevates small and insignificant gestures into the most meaningful and loving relationship-affirming rituals.

Are you giving all you could to the ones you love?

Holding Us Over a Barrel

4 minute read | Straightforward

The moment God gave the Torah at Sinai is probably the most important in the Torah. It might be the most important moment in the history of creation. To take it even further, cultivating a channel to receive the Torah might even be the reason for existence itself.

Given the significance of this moment, it should come as no surprise that the Midrashic literature likens Sinai to a wedding ceremony and makes extensive use of the imagery of love and marriage,



demonstrating the powerful bond of commitment between God and the Jewish People, characterized by the all-important unanimous and unconditional acceptance of the Torah – **בְּעֵשָׂה וְיִשְׁמָע**.

However, there is another imagery our sages utilize. The Gemara imagines a scene where God lifts and holds Mount Sinai over the gathered crowd and tells them that if they accept the Torah, all will be well, and if not, they would meet an early grave there and then – **שִׁכְפָה הַקֶּב"ה עֲלֵיהֶם אֶת הַהָר כְּגִיגִית** –

This visual provides a stark contrast with the predominant and prevailing imagery that the Jewish People threw their enthusiastic consent behind accepting the Torah and its precepts. To engage the language of the metaphor, the bride loved the groom, and everything was agreed and resolved. Once the relationship had been firmly established on a bedrock of love and trust, the imagery of coercion and force seems entirely unnecessary, if not an outright oxymoron.

If the Jewish People were eager and willing to accept the Torah, why do our sages use the motif of coercive force at all?

The Baal Shem Tov acknowledges this idealized romantic view; the beginning of most relationships can be characterized by butterflies and excitement, feelings of elation and joy. But, as anyone who has experienced a mature relationship can attest, eventually, there comes a day that the good vibes and pleasant feelings aren't quite there; if the relationship is going to succeed, it needs more than good vibes alone – many relationships fail for not comprehending this notion in its fullness. A successful relationship requires its constituents to also maintain the relationship in the moments that don't feel so good.

The imagery of holding a mountain over the audience is not a literal death threat – the metaphor describes God imploring the audience that this is serious stuff. If that seems so obvious now, it wasn't readily obvious in the moment. Up to that point, being on God's team had been pretty cool and fun – they watched waves of supernatural plagues smite their oppressors; saw a literal ocean split and dry up to escape then obliterate the most powerful military force in the known world; ate magical food from the sky; drank from magic wellsprings in the desert; while protected day and night by miracle clouds that lit up the dark and followed them wherever they went. It's not so hard to guess which side you'd want to be on! But that's not really what accepting the yoke of Torah means or looks like in any material way, so God warns the people that this is a serious undertaking. As the Maharal explains, the Torah can not only be accepted for the glorious moments. It's like the unspoken part of a young couple getting married; no one really wants to tell them, and they probably aren't even equipped to hear it yet, but they have their work cut out to make it work, and it's a lifelong undertaking that will require an enormous amount of investment and sacrifice if they are to have a chance at happiness. They'll most probably learn that lesson for themselves eventually, the hard way.

It's not that the Gemara imagines God threatening to slaughter the Jewish People; it's a warning about what was at stake and how much it mattered. It's a comment on the naivete of thinking that the imagery of a happy wedding could ever be enough to make a relationship work. The happy beginning is an essential starting point of any relationship, but the relationship can only ever be superficial if



that's all there ever is. What the Torah demands from us is a serious commitment – the part that is not easy. It's not all sunshine, rainbows, and redemption – the blood-soaked pages of Jewish history speak for themselves.

R' Shlomo Farhi suggests that the Gemara specifically teaches this lesson by employing imagery of a barrel, a hollow object that confines and traps its contents instead of, say, a hammer or blunt instrument which would be used to flatten. The antidote to the immaturity of the excitement of happy beginnings is recognizing that there are times when commitment feels like being trapped. It's true of relationships, and it's true of religion. There's a moment we feel called and seen, and a moment we feel invisible and ignored; the things that can make it wonderful are part of what can make it so hard. There's no such thing as picking and choosing part of a person, or part of the Torah, for some of the time. It just doesn't work that way.

But while it's well and good to suggest the lesson of forceful imagery is to teach us the seriousness of the subject matter, it is almost universally understood that agreements entered into under coercion are not binding – we would never enforce a contract signed at gunpoint. Based on this intuitive reasoning, the Gemara questions the imagery of coercion and wonders if it compromises if not entirely undermines the basis of accepting the Torah – taking the imagery of the metaphor at face value, we wouldn't be partners with God; we'd be victims! The Gemara responds that to the extent this is a serious question, the Purim story remedied this, because the Jewish People accepted the Torah anew entirely of their own volition – קיימו מה שקיבלו כבר.

R' Jonathan Sacks observes that the Gemara concludes what we know intuitively – you cannot teach something that matters through coercion; you cannot impose truth by force. Even if God were to try, it simply doesn't work like that. We can only say that people accept ideas and beliefs to the extent people can freely choose and embrace them.

As important and exciting as the moment captured at Sinai was, the wedding is not the relationship. The people who stood there that day lacked context – the bigger picture that accepting the Torah fits into. After the Purim story, the people had learned that lesson the hard way. With this mature understanding, they could freely accept what had been accepted so long ago with newfound and hard-won insight.

A lack of problems cannot be the bedrock of a great relationship; it will only ever become great when its participants are invested enough to weather and work through difficult problems.



Killing Envy

5 minute read | Straightforward

If you had to sit in a room for a month and compile a top ten list of Judaism's most important concepts, most people would probably come out with something that looks a lot like the Ten Commandments.

We'd probably start with the notion that there is One God, and not to betray faith in the One God by taking God's name lightly or directing attention towards other deities. We'd all agree that humans should not kill other humans. Most of us would agree on the importance of observing Shabbos, which honors God and the natural order of Creation, acknowledging the bounds of human creativity in space and time. We'd probably agree on the importance of venerating our parents and honoring the people that raised us.

These laws are intuitive; they make sense – we understand why these are some of the most important things God has to say to humans.

But then there's one that probably wouldn't spring to mind for most people:

וְלֹא תִחְמַד אִשֶּׁת רֵעֲךָ. וְלֹא תִחְמַד אֶת בֵּית רֵעֲךָ שְׂדֵהוּ וְעַבְדוֹ וְאִמָּתוֹ שׂוֹרוֹ וְחִמְרוֹ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר לְרֵעֲךָ – You shall not covet your neighbor's wife. You shall not crave your neighbor's house, or his field, or his male or female slave, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's. (5:18)

Coveting. Envy. Jealousy. Wanting.

Is warning us off jealousy really one of the most important things God has to say to humanity?

Well, apparently so. So let's take it seriously enough to consider why that might be.

The destructiveness of murder and theft are obvious, as they utterly disregard the autonomy and integrity of other humans and their rights to life and property. But the destructiveness of envy and jealousy are deceptively subtle in comparison because it seems so harmless. It's a victimless crime – who are you hurting?

Perhaps it's precisely that line of thinking that allows it to slip under our radars stealthily, and we should be concerned because, in reality, there is a victim of jealousy, and you haven't noticed because it isn't someone else – it's you.

Envy suffocates you and slowly poisons your soul. Anger and hatred are occasionally justified – some things should not be tolerated and require our outrage to prompt decisive action. We should hate Nazis, and we should get angry when they march in public and express their ugliness; we then need to send them scurrying back to the dark crevasses they crawled out of.

Our Sages actually allow a very narrow form of jealousy towards someone who is highly accomplished. But even then, our Sages only permit a positive and productive form of action-oriented jealousy, where you use it as fuel to motivate you to raise your game and match their efforts. Are those good qualities replicable? Practice them, and you too can have those qualities. The unspoken corollary here is that our Sages take it as a given that you cannot, without putting in the same effort that someone else did, expect to be worthy of an equal opportunity to participate in the accomplishment. This conception does not allow for armchair envy and everyday jealousy; you cannot expect to achieve your targets without paying your dues and putting in the work.

On the other hand, everyday jealousy is the ultimate manifestation of entitlement, laziness, and a scarcity mindset – that there’s not enough of something to go around, so if others have it, it means you can’t. It’s a mentality that creates a landscape of fear, and the world descends into a cutthroat competition of survival of the fittest, a vile manifestation of social Darwinism. It might be the nastiest emotion we can have!

But unless we’re invoking envy to do better, it isn’t just a dangerous sin; it’s a stupid sin as well because it’s one of the only ones you could never possibly have any fun at. It’s a serious hidden drawback to the way we live today, with unlimited information at our fingertips, stoking feelings of inadequacy and jealousy by comparing what we have with the thin slice we see of other people’s lives. All pain, no gain, and yet we wonder what the harm is.

You pass the test, but compare yourself to the best student in class, without knowing that they haven’t met their friends for six months. You work long and difficult hours and compare yourself to the guy in shul who just made an easy fortune, without knowing that his firm is being investigated and he is in serious jeopardy. You marry a complete human with flaws but compare them to people on social media in the top 1% of looks, smarts, or wealth without seeing their multitudes of flaws. You buy a house and discover issues but compare it to the nicest house on the block without knowing that the gorgeous-looking house has major deferred structural issues and actually needs a full gut renovation. Does any of this sound uncomfortably familiar?

So sure, maybe we know that envy is terrible, but you can’t just change the way you feel, so what can we do, practically speaking?

Firstly, let’s read the words.

“Do not kill” and “Do not steal” are simple two-word instructions, and we understand that we are to apply them broadly and generally. Unlike those and several others, envy, the one that doesn’t spring to mind as easily, is spelled out in explicit detail, with seven specific hypotheticals before the general rule.

Maybe it would be too hard to prohibit jealousy because we can’t just stop feeling the way we feel. But God doesn’t just tell us not to be jealous – God tells us how to avoid it entirely. Don’t be jealous of this in particular; don’t be jealous of that – **בֵּית רֶצֶף / עֲדָהוּ / וְעַבְדּוֹ / וְאֶמְתּוֹ / שׂוֹרוֹ / וְתַמְרוֹ** – you can’t cherry-pick



certain aspects of someone else's life. To have what they have, you'd have to be them, so, as the Sfas Emes notes, if you are going to be jealous of someone, you must be willing to swap your entire life for theirs – וְכָל אֲשֶׁר לְרֵעֵךְ.

Or, in other words, if you're seeing someone's highlight reel, just remember that you can't correctly judge the whole by a part.

But secondly, and more fundamentally, we need to reorganize how we see the world and remind ourselves that God's blessings are not finite. There isn't a fixed amount of happiness, health, love, or money in the world, so it's not a zero-sum game. Someone else's good fortune cannot subtract from yours, and it cannot diminish the pool of blessings available to you in the future. His is his – אֲשֶׁר לְרֵעֵךְ – and yours is yours, and we need to respect that boundary down to the smallest detail scrupulously. God's blessings are abundant, not scarce.

As our Sages guided us, who is wealthy? One who celebrates and takes joy in what he has – אֵיזוֹהוּ עָשִׂיר, הַשִּׂמְחָה בְּהַלְקוֹ. One interpretation even inverts the plain reading, from celebrating what you have, to celebrating what he has – בְּהַלְקוֹ. We should take this sage wisdom to heart, kill the scarcity mindset, and cultivate an abundance mentality. 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.

So perhaps warning us against envy really is one of the most important things God has to say to us; it might be the sin with the highest destructiveness to innocence ratio. It withholds you from your highest consciousness and prevents you from being you in all your fullness; it stops you from being happy and limits your ability to embrace your blessings.

So don't look at your neighbor to see if you have as much as them; the only time you should look at what your neighbor has is to make sure that they have enough.

No person has the power to have everything they want, but it is within everyone's power not to want what they don't have and to cheerfully put to good use what they do have.

While you can't have everything you want, it's such a blessing to want what you have.

Thought of the Week

"Time spent has nothing to do with job done."

– Naval Ravikant



Quote of the Week

“For a sfek sfeika of a derabbanan people are machmir, but for the mitzvah mideurayta of kavod haberiyos they're not.”

– R' Yissocher Frand

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!

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.