



Vayakhel 2024

Failure isn't Fatal

2 minute read | Straightforward

We often like to think that if we were to witness the biblical miracles, we'd feel confident that everything is going to work out and that you and your family are going to be safe.

Yet, confounding our expectations, no one who in those circumstances ever seems to feel that way. God could take them out of Egypt, split the sea, and smash their enemies; but Moses was for a little longer than they expected, and they panicked.

A mob cornered Ahron and demanded he come up with something to lead them:

וַיִּקְהַל הָעָם עַל־אַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו קוּמָה עֲשֵׂה־לָּנוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר יֵלְכוּ לִפְנֵינוּ כִּי־זָה מֹשֶׁה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלָנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם לֹא יָדַעְנוּ מַה־הָיָה לוֹ – The people gathered against Ahron and said to him, “Make us a god who will go before us, because Moshe, the man who brought us from the land of Egypt – we do not know what happened to him.” (32:1)

Ahron crafts an idol for them, a Golden Calf, a betrayal of catastrophic proportion.

Seeing that they had seen, this seems quite unforgivable. Moshe destroys the Ten Commandments, and the Jewish People suffer a plague.

It's easy to read this story and be struck by the rashness and poor thinking. Some of our enemies have even pointed to this story as a reason for God to void our covenant and open the door for another religion to supersede Judaism.

But they don't seem to have read the rest of the story.

R' Shmshon Raphael Hirsch notes that this is the very first time the Jewish People have been on the receiving end of God's severity. The paradigm up to this point is that God gets angry at you, it's over, you're done.

But in a highly irregular turn, instead of getting biblical, God talks to Moshe about how God is feeling:

וְעַתָּה הַנִּיחָה לִּי וְיִחַר־אַפִּי בָהֶם וְאֶכְלֵם וְאֶעֱשֶׂה אוֹתָךְ לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל – “Now, let Me be, that My anger may blaze forth against them and that I may destroy them, and make you the great nation.” (32:10)



God doesn't need to threaten anyone, God doesn't need to share how God is feeling. God can just do things; that's why God is God. God isn't acting godly here; God chooses to appear here as an aggrieved lover or partner.

A threat is a statement of intention given to another with the specific goal of provoking some desired response. As our litany of stories of our prophets show, God threatens so people respond. Recognizing the threat as a prompt, rather than a promise, Moshe successfully persuades God to forgive the people.

And the very next thing that follows the Golden Calf is God's instruction to build the Mishkan. As R' Hirsch explains, even before sinners apologize or repent, before any rituals or sacrifices, before fasting and prayer, God has initiated contact and paved a way forward for people who have let God down.

This is a new side of God; God in a covenantal relationship with the Jewish People. Despite the colossal failure to meet the standards expected of covenantal partners, God establishes plainly and unambiguously that this relationship can withstand missteps.

The Golden Calf was the worst thing the Jewish People could do, and yet we find God not only waiting but proactively inviting us back; even an event like the Golden Calf can not destroy the unconditional love between Creator and creation.

Whatever mistakes we've made, we can take heart that we can always make amends.

Your Heart in the Right Place

3 minute read | Straightforward

In every field of human civilization, there are discoveries, technologies, and people that changed everything.

The printing press permanently slashed the cost of information, commoditizing and dramatically expanding the reach of human knowledge. Antibiotics and vaccination neutralized the dangers of the historically leading causes of human death. The internet has transformed how we communicate.

Closer to home, Rashi opened up our literature to the masses. The Rambam organized and synthesized broad and divergent streams of lore and thought into cohesive and comprehensive works of law and philosophy. Aish HaTorah and Ohr Someach demonstrated the urgency of outreach to combat the attrition wrought by assimilation. Chabad put a Jewish embassy in every major city on the planet.



These are all remarkable feats, and they should speak to something deep within us; who hasn't once dreamed of making an impact and leaving the world better off for it? Even once we have matured past the stage of wanting to make the world in our image, we still have ambitions; and we eventually face the question of how we can hope to succeed at those ambitious goals.

It's a familiar question because it's universal.

How are you going to succeed at that?

This line of thinking is common and garbs itself in the language of realism. But this line of thinking is actually pessimism in disguise, and ironically, often grants people the certainty they need to excuse themselves from getting started.

Survivorship bias is real. While it's not strictly wrong to say that the number of people who are fortunate enough to successfully pull off massive accomplishments is small, what they all have in common is that they got started, which might be half the battle – לא עליך המלאכה לגמור, ולא אתה בן חורין – ליבטל ממנה. Rashi himself wrote dismissively of people who say it's impossible to finish Shas; the only way it's ever been done is a couple of pages per session.

But there is something else to it as well.

Our sages suggest that the designer in chief of the Mishkan, Bezalel, was exceptionally gifted and perhaps even supernaturally clairvoyant. But when the Torah describes the architects and artisans, the common craftsmen and contributors of the Mishkan construction project, it consistently refers to one unifying characteristic of the men and women who rose to the occasion:

וַיִּקְרָא מֹשֶׁה אֶל-בְּצַלְאֵל וְאֶל-אֹהֲלִיאֵב וְאֵל כָּל-אִישׁ חָכֵם-לֵב אֲשֶׁר נָתַן ה' חָכְמָה בְּלִבּוֹ כֹּל אֲשֶׁר נָשָׂא לְבֹ לְקַרְבָּה אֶל-הַמִּלְאכָה לַעֲשׂוֹת אֹתָהּ: – Moshe called Bezalel and Oholiav, and every skilled person whom Hashem had endowed with skill in his heart, everyone who had given their hearts to undertake the task and carry it out. (36:2)

The Ramban notes that the working population of that moment consisted of freed slaves, who only had experience in manual labor – they were not skilled in metallurgy or textiles! Yet the Torah consistently describes their technical skill as a feature of having a heart for the task in question – חָכֵם-לֵב. The Chafetz Chaim suggests that in doing so, the Torah subtly recognizes the skill of these volunteers as a product not of experience, but of desire; their hearts were in the right place – נָתַן ה' אֹתָהּ בְּלִבּוֹ כֹּל אֲשֶׁר נָשָׂא לְבֹ לְקַרְבָּה אֶל-הַמִּלְאכָה לַעֲשׂוֹת אֹתָהּ.

The Mishkan volunteers could succeed at something unprecedented with no relevant experience because God granted the requisite skill to the people whose hearts were in the right place and whose hearts were invested in the project. R' Noach Weinberg similarly encourages us to invest heart into our undertakings and trust that God sends us the fortune and wisdom required to succeed – יגעתי ולא



מצאתי אל תאמן. If we want the right things for the right reasons, why wouldn't we throw ourselves in the deep end and hope for the best?

The Malbim suggests that all we truly can give is our all, and it's true enough of most things. Who can accomplish the impossible? The people who want it badly enough – רחמנא ליבא בעי. Our Sages taught that you could have anything you want if you want it badly enough – אין דבר עומד בפני הרצון – If you want it badly enough, you'll find a way; and if you don't, you'll find an excuse – מוליכין – בדרך שאדם רוצה לילך מוליכין – אותו.

We all have big goals, and if we expect to influence the quality of our lives, we must be proactive. But what are the chances you get what you want if you don't go after it? And crucially, what are the chances you get it if you go about it half-heartedly?

If you want to succeed, your heart has to be in the right place, and you have to go all-in.

Sacred Fire

3 minute read | Straightforward

The Torah reports God's instruction to Moshe to conduct a census of the Jewish People by counting adult males. The conventional methodology of counting is inappropriate for this task, and God orders Moshe to instead use a proxy for counting heads – a half-shekel fixed financial contribution per person. Count the donations, and that's how many people there are – one step removed:

כי תשא את־ראש בני־ישראל לפקדיהם ונתנו איש כפר נפשו לה' בפקוד אתם ולא־יהיה בהם נגף בפקוד אתם: זה יתנו כל־העבר על־הפקדים ממצית השקל בקדש עשרים גרה השקל ממצית השקל תרומה לה – “When you take a census of the Israelite men according to their military enrollment, each shall pay the Lord a ransom for himself on being enrolled, that no plague may come upon them through their being enrolled. This is what everyone who is entered in the records shall give: a half-shekel...” (30:12,13)

In almost every instance the Creator speaks, the Torah doesn't lead us to understand that this speech has any physical element, perhaps not even an audible sound. But in the instruction to count the Jewish People, the Torah uses language that is tangibly concrete and physical – זה יתנו – “This shall they give.”

Sensitive to this nuance, our sages suggest that the Creator pulled a fiery coin in the form of a half-shekel from beneath the Divine Throne and showed it to Moshe – “This.”



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We might understand the premise of a vision that helps Moshe practically understand the physical properties of such a coin. But the coin described isn't a metal coin; it is a fiery coin.

Why was the coin made of fire?

Interactions with the Creator commonly feature fire as a standard building block of prophetic vision. Fire is immaterial, visible energy – not to mention dangerous and scary. The effortless control of fire is a powerful symbol of the Creator's total control over the elements and matter.

But our sages' words teach far more than predictable cliché.

Tosfos point out that Moshe had seen money before and understood what a coin was; where he was struggling was the notion that something as mundane and terrestrial as money could affect the soul. The Kotzker suggests that the Creator pulls a fiery coin out from beneath the Divine Throne in response, not because there is power in currency, but in its fire – the fire and spirit that animate the giving is what have the redemptive effect on the soul. "This."

The Noam Elimelech teaches that the point isn't that the specific coin the Creator summoned was made of fire; but that all coin is fire.

Fire is technology, and its use depends on the user and the context. Fire can symbolize creativity, transformation, and destruction; it can mean heat and warmth or burning ruin. Money is also a form of technology, a medium of exchange that facilitate transactions and the exchange of goods and services. Like fire, each exchange is transformative and can be creative or destructive.

It's not wrong to have money. It's not wrong to want money. But it's dangerous to love money, embracing the fire – that's how you burn the house down. It's essential to strike a balance; money is just a tool. It is not just a means to improve your own life but the lives of many others; love the goodness you can do with it.

Our sages teach that righteous people value their money more than their own bodies. R' Meir Shapiro suggests that is because righteous people know how much they can do with it; how many poor families they can feed, and how many communal institutions they can support.

If all coin is like the fiery half-shekel everyone gave, we ought to remember that it symbolized the equality of all community members and was the symbol of their obligations to support the community and its institutions. Your giving must be broad and generous, animated with a spirit that sets your soul on fire.

Our sages teach us that the Creator pulled the coin from beneath the Divine Throne.

Remember that's where it comes from – and be careful not to burn yourself.



Attitude Redux

4 minute read | Straightforward

God gave various commands during the Jewish People's time in the desert.

We expect God to give commands; it comes with the territory, that's what God does, and it makes sense. They'd just left Egypt and stood at Sinai; there was a new religion with new procedures and protocols to implement. And after all, there's no way to know what God wants unless God says so!

What God says, we expect the audience to do, which the Torah dutifully records – וַיַּעַשׂ כִּן.

But what we might not expect is that the Torah reports with meticulous regularity, every time, not just that people obey, but that people carry out their task as per God's command – וַיַּעַשׂ כִּן כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' – The Torah uses this phrase tens, if not hundreds, of times!

If you think about it, it's almost entirely redundant, apart from the repetitiveness. It's not obvious what doing something per God's command adds because, in nearly every example, there is no other conceivable way to do it.

When God says to light the Menora, there is only one way to light a Menora. When God says to take a census of how many people there are, the only way to fulfill the command is to count people. When God says to bring a Korban Pesach, or how to do the Yom Kippur service, or any of the Mishkan-related workflows, or to go to war with Midian, or to execute somebody, there isn't any other way to do any of those things! And yet each time, the Torah doesn't say people followed their instructions; it says that the people followed their instructions faithfully as per God's command – וַיַּעַשׂ כִּן כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה'.

When people follow instructions, why does the Torah add that they followed the instructions per God's command?

Perhaps the Torah isn't telling us that they did it; it's telling us how they did it.

R' Shlomo Farhi explains that even when there truly is only one way to do something, there is still a right and wrong way. When the Torah adds that people followed instructions faithfully – וַיַּעַשׂ כִּן כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' – it's not saying that they did just like they were told; it means that people follow instructions just like when they were told, capturing the snapshot of sentiment or feeling of a particular moment.



When you do anything, even if there's no other way, you can still do it with energy, focus, and joy, or not – a right way and a wrong way, even when there's only one way.

Our sages were sensitive to this subtle but universal nuance.

Rashi quotes the Sifri that Ahron lit the Menora every day, precisely the way Moshe told him for the rest of his life, and never changed or deviated in any way – כְּאִשֶּׁר צִוָּה ה' – the Sifri suggests that our everyday approach to Torah should similarly be with freshness and excitement – וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר – אֲנֹכִי מְצַוְךָ הַיּוֹם עַל-לְבָבְךָ.

R' Simcha Bunim of Peshischa notes that as much as the comment is about Ahron not changing how he performed his duties, it's equally a comment about how his duties didn't change him. Some people let privilege and honor get to their heads – but not Ahron.

The Sfas Emes notes that lighting the Menora wasn't a prestigious ceremony in that any Kohen could kindle the lights. Still, Ahron took it seriously enough that he insisted on doing it himself every day for the rest of his life – he did it like the moment he received the command.

The Izhbitzer notes that the highest praise for Ahron is that he retained that initial desire, that things never got stale or boring for him. He kept challenging himself to find something new and exciting, so he lit the Menora his last time with the same enthusiasm as the first.

The Shem miShmuel notes that the word for training, which means practice repetitions, is cognate to the word for inauguration, the first time you do something – חִינוּךְ / חֲנוּכָה. This suggests that training is not simply a repeat of past performance but the repetition of newness, with each repetition inviting an opportunity to introduce a fresh aspect or dimension.

Attitude and mentality are everything; the mental and emotional components heavily influence the substance of any interaction. Prayer and sacrifice require proper intent to have any substance; there is a vast difference between giving someone a hand because you care and giving someone a hand out of pity.

A Torah scroll is quite clearly a religious article, yet it has no inherent sanctity from perfect script or spelling. A Torah scroll is kosher and sacred exclusively when written with the express intent of imbuing the words and scroll with sanctity, which is to say that its utility and value as a holy object are solely determined by the mentality of the scribe.

The Mishkan had plenty of unique artifacts like the Menora, but it had some pretty ordinary implements that everyone owns; a shirt, a hat, a cup, and a spoon. What designated these as sacred and distinct is the intention with which they were crafted.



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This is a universal truth in all walks of life, from Judaism to art to cooking. A great cook will say their secret ingredient is love; a great artist or sage will say their secret technique is heart and soul.

In the words of Martin Luther King Jr., if a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as a Michelangelo painted, Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, 'Here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well.'

Mastery is typically dull. Finishing your fiftieth marathon is less notable than your first.

It's normal.

The more we experience something, our enthusiasm, and attention typically wane. Predictability and comfort put an end to fresh euphoria; when we know what to expect, our excitement wears off, and boredom sets in. That's why we need to keep things fresh if we're focused on a long-term project or goal; cruise control is a killer.

It's often seen with young athletes or scholars who lose their way – they think they've made it and stop putting in the work that would take them to the elite tier. The seasoned pros always comment on how essential it is for youngsters to maintain their concentration and focus on staying on track, being fully present in each moment, and devoting their full and undivided attention, so things don't get boring.

In all walks of life, the highest form of mastery is valuing each repetition and finding its novelty and excitement.

It's not redundant for the Torah to say each time that people did the right thing in the right way for the right reason. It is ubiquitous because it reflects a truism of life, a constant reminder that is universally true.

The way you do things matters.

Living with Newness

4 minute read | Straightforward

One of the foundational skills children learn early on is how to read a clock.

What time is it?



It's not simply a question of hours and minutes; there is something deeper to the question. If you know what time it is, you also know what to do. It's morning, wake up and eat breakfast before school or work. It's nighttime, time to wind down and go to sleep. The time of day, the time of year, the seasons, and the calendar all establish the boundaries and time frames upon which our world is built, with specific routines for morning, afternoon, evening, and night, summer, fall, winter, and spring.

Different cultures have established various systems and calendars to measure time. Today, most of the world uses the Gregorian calendar, a fixed calendar determined by how long the earth takes to make one complete orbit around the sun.

The Torah asks us to track time using the moon as a frame of reference; when people spot the new moon, they would report it to the highest court, which declares the beginning of a new month – Rosh Chodesh. It's not Rosh Chodesh because there's a new moon, but because the Jewish leaders say so. It's the very first commandment in the Torah, given to the Jewish People still enslaved in Egypt:

הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֶם רֵאשִׁית חֳדָשִׁים רְאשׁוֹן הוּא לָכֶם לְחֹדְשֵׁי הַשָּׁנָה – This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you. (12:1)

There are lots of mitzvos, so one of them has to come first. But why is establishing the lunar calendar through Rosh Chodesh the first mitzvah as opposed to any other?

The story of the birth of the Jewish People begins at a time of stuckness, with the Jewish People systematically subjugated and oppressed, powerless objects with no choice or control over their circumstances.

Although slavery is illegal in most of the world, it persists today. What's more, slavery isn't just an abstract legal status or even just a phenomenon that still occurs in some dark corner of the world; it's also a state of mind, body, and soul that can happen to anyone. Thankfully, we don't have much primary lived with the experience criminal aspect of actual human trafficking; but if you've ever felt helpless, powerless, or stuck, you have experienced an element of slavery.

When we internalize that forces of change exist and that we have the power to harness and steer them, the possibilities are limitless. This moment can be different to the moments that have come before; this newness is the beginning of all newness – הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֶם רֵאשִׁית חֳדָשִׁים רְאשׁוֹן הוּא לָכֶם לְחֹדְשֵׁי הַשָּׁנָה.

The Shem miShmuel explains that the power of the Exodus story is that its story of freedom on a national level offers us the opportunity to become free of the tendencies and troubles that hound us on a personal level. The sense of futility, powerlessness, and stuckness that come from being burnt out or overwhelmed is poison. With the power to change, hard times don't need to be so scary anymore, and the world isn't threatening; it can be full of exciting possibilities. It follows that the first mitzvah is the one that empowers us to change by giving us a symbol of change.



One preeminent historian has observed that the worst thing about history is that people try to correct the past. People try to save the past, which is impossible; you cannot go back to the past and save the people there or prevent past injuries. We only have the present circumstances and perhaps a hopeful look to the future.

But as much as stuckness can come from attachment to the past, R' Nachman of Breslev teaches us to avoid dwelling too much on the future and focus on the present day and present moment. As R' Hanoch Heinoch of Alexander teaches, we can attach ourselves to vitality by being present – ואָתָם הַיּוֹם הַדִּבְּקִים ה' אֱלֹקֵיכֶם חַיִּים כְּלַכֶּם הַיּוֹם.

The Torah often speaks to us in terms of here and now – הַיּוֹם / וְעַתָּה. Our sages take these references to Teshuva, our capacity and power to change and repent – ה' אֱלֹקֵינוּ שָׂאֵל מֵעַמָּךְ כִּי אִם-לִירְאָה – וְעַתָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל מָה ה' אֱלֹקֵינוּ שָׂאֵל מֵעַמָּךְ. Because in one day, everything can change – הַיּוֹם אִם-בְּקִלּוֹ תִשְׁמְעוּ – הַיּוֹם אִם-בְּקִלּוֹ תִשְׁמְעוּ. As R' Baruch of Mezhibozh teaches, forget the past; right now, be a Jew – וְעַתָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל! The Chafetz Chaim takes this to be a reference to introspection – וְעַתָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל מָה ה' אֱלֹקֵינוּ שָׂאֵל מֵעַמָּךְ – what does this moment require?

It follows that our sages wisely guide us to seize every moment; if not now, when? As the Chiddushei Harim observes, every “now” has a different duty, calling for some new, renewed, or entirely other choice or deed. As R' Ahron of Karlin points out, each moment has its resolution; each moment of existence is incomparably unique, never existing before in the history of Creation, and never to be repeated before becoming irretrievably lost forever.

As the Vilna Gaon points out, Moshe speaks in the present tense to offer us all the power to choose – הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מְצֻוֶה – הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מְצֻוֶה. Rashi quotes a Midrash that every day, we should perceive our experience of Judaism as brand new – הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מְצֻוֶה – הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מְצֻוֶה.

Even once a person has resolved to change, they can still be anchored by the weight of their wrongdoing. The Shinover Rav suggests that although the past can't be undone, it can be creatively reinterpreted, in the way Yosef reframes a troubled past with his brothers to relieve them of their guilt – וְעַתָּה אֵל-תִּעַצְבוּ וְאֵל-יִחַר בְּעֵינֵיכֶם כִּי-מִכְרַתְּם אֹתִי הַזֶּה כִּי לְמַחְנֶה שָׁלַחֵנִי אֱלֹהִים לְפָנֵיכֶם – וְעַתָּה אֵל-תִּעַצְבוּ וְאֵל-יִחַר בְּעֵינֵיכֶם כִּי-מִכְרַתְּם אֹתִי הַזֶּה כִּי לְמַחְנֶה שָׁלַחֵנִי אֱלֹהִים לְפָנֵיכֶם. What happened then wasn't so great, but that brought us to where we are, here and now, and you can only move forward from where you are!

The world tracks time using the sun; the Sfas Emes notes that the nations of world history rise and fall like the sun, lasting only when things are bright. The Jewish People track time using the moon, persisting in darkness, and even generating light among total blackness.

The very first mitzvah is the lunar calendar, the only calendar with a visual cue for changing times; and a powerful symbol of change, a natural metaphorical image of a spiritual reality. It's not just an instruction to count the time but a commandment to rule over time and even natural phenomena. It is a mitzvah to live by and with the power of change and renewal. It is a mitzvah to live presently with this moment and make it count.



TorahRedux

Every day, every week, and in truth, every moment, is brand new, brimming with freshness, vitality, and renewal.

I present TorahRedux l'ilui nishmas my late grandfather, HaGaon HaRav Yehuda Leib Gertner ben HaRav HaChassid Menachem Mendel.

I hope you enjoyed this week's thoughts. If you have questions or comments, or just want to say hello, it's a point of pride for me to hear from you, and I'll always respond.

If you liked this week's edition of TorahRedux, why not share it with friends and family who would appreciate it?

Neli

PS - *TorahRedux is my pride and joy, the product of thousands of hours of learning, research, writing, editing, and formatting. My business, Hendon Advisors, allows me to dedicate time to TorahRedux, and I welcome your assistance in furthering my goal to keep publishing high-quality Parsha content that makes a difference. I source and broker the purchase and sale of healthcare businesses; I kindly ask for your blessings and prayers. If you are a buyer of healthcare businesses or can make introductions to healthcare operators who might buy or sell, just reply to this email to get in touch.*

Redux: *adjective* – resurgence; refers to being brought back, restored, or revived; something familiar presented in a new way. Not to see what no one else has seen, but to say what nobody has yet said about something which everybody sees.