

## Bo 2024

### The Long Way

3 minute read | Straightforward

The Exodus story is a foundation of Judaism and features prominently in most of our mitzvos and prayers.

Aware of the magnitude and scope of the Exodus, God tells Moshe and Ahron in real-time how consequential this story will always be:

וְהָיָה הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה לָכֶם לְזִכְרוֹן וְחִגְתֶּם אֹתוֹ חֵג ה' לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם חֻקַּת עוֹלָם תִּחְגְּגוּהוּ – “This day shall be to you one of remembrance; you shall celebrate it as a festival to God throughout the ages, you shall celebrate it as an institution for all time!” (12:14)

We practice this command in festive detail at the Seder, as the Haggadah recounts the story of the Jewish people’s birth and liberation from Egypt and slavery.

But there’s a significant issue we ought to recognize immediately, without which the entire remembrance is irreparably compromised with no contemporary relevance at all.

We are fortunate to live in a vanishingly rare era of safety and prosperity, which obscures the fact that the Jewish People people have been exiled and persecuted time after time in place after place for most of our history.

But even today, we’re not as safe as it superficially seems.

Although largely safe from physical danger, the spiritual dangers have never been more powerful or seductive; most of our people are at different stages of assimilation or disorientation, disconnected in whole or in part from their heritage identity.

What’s the point of talking about redemption that happened long ago when we’re not yet redeemed today?

The Meshech Chochmah explains that if it were nothing more than the anniversary of physical liberation, it would make little sense to celebrate in a time of subjugation. But if we understand it correctly as the founding archetype of the liberation of the spirit, then it necessarily continues to have a residual effect forever as the source of all freedom, as the Torah so powerfully puts it, promising us today that our Seder matters and reflects that moment in full – וְחִגְתֶּם אֹתוֹ חֵג ה' לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם חֻקַּת עוֹלָם.



As the Lubavitcher Rebbe explains, the Seder does not reinforce that an Exodus happened that one time; but that an Exodus can happen.

R' Jonathan Sacks notes that throughout the highs and lows of Jewish history, our people have celebrated the Seder at the heights of civilization and in ghettos and concentration camps under conditions similar to or worse than Egypt.

The Exodus we celebrate was imperfect – it did not lead to a full and final utopia for anyone. The formerly enslaved people fought God and Moshe for the rest of their lives, yearning to return to the Egypt that had shackled them.

But the Torah and Haggadah openly embrace the notion of an imperfect and partial redemption; both subvert our expectation of a happily ever after ending where the Jewish People live in peace and prosperity in Israel.

R' Shai Held notes that by celebrating imperfect redemption, the Haggadah seems to powerfully suggest that the journey is more important than the destination. The Gemara warns against believing someone who says they have searched for answers but found nothing. As R' Louis Jacobs put it, the search for Torah is itself Torah, and in that search, we have already found. There is plenty of space between all and nothing; as the Kotzker put it, the searching is the finding.

The question's premise is false; things don't need to be perfect to be a whole lot better. Humans are not robots, and we are all perfectly imperfect in our own way.

We have yet to make it all the way, but the only analysis is that each step further is vastly better than no way.

There is still quite some way to go, but you're a long way from where you used to be, and that's also worth celebrating.

Our Seder isn't the anniversary of an ancient generation's liberation long ago; each of us must feel as though we experienced the great departure from Egypt. Our Seder continues it, reminding us that redemption exists, redemption can happen, and we are all worthy of it.



## 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 לְכֶם רֵאשִׁית חֳדָשִׁים רְאשׁוֹן הוּא לְכֶם 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 – *החדש הזה לכם ראש חדשים ראשון הוא לכם לחדשי השנה*.

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 – *הדברים הם אלוקים חיים בלכם היום*.

The Torah often speaks to us in terms of here and now – *ועתה / היום*. Our sages take these references to Teshuva, our capacity and power to change and repent – *ה' אלוקיך שאל מעמד פי אם ליראה*. Because in one day, everything can change – *היום אם בקולו תשמעו*. As R' Baruch of Mezhibozh teaches, forget the past; right now, be a Jew – *ועתה ישראל!* The Chafetz Chaim takes this to be a reference to introspection – *ועתה ישראל מה ה' אלוקיך שאל מעמד* – 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 – *ראה אנכי נתן לפניכם היום ברכה וקללה*. Rashi quotes a Midrash that every day, we should perceive our experience of Judaism as brand new – *היום הזה ה' אלוקיך מצוה*.

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 – *ועתה אליהם עזבו ואלו יחר בעיניכם פימכתם אתי הנה פי למחנה שלחני אליהם לפניכם* –



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.

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

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## **Trading Taskmasters**

4 minute read | Advanced

On Seder night, we celebrate the Jewish People's birth as a nation and liberation from slavery. The entire night explores the imperative value of freedom and teaches us that freedom is a mode of thinking under all circumstances; it is not handed to us; it is ours to claim only if we make that choice.

But are we really so free?

Quite arguably, did we not simply trade up for a better taskmaster, swapping service to Pharaoh for service to God?

The notion of swapping masters ignores a crucial distinction between negative liberty, the freedom from, and positive liberty, the freedom to. Negative liberty means freedom from restrictions placed on you by other people; positive liberty means freedom to control and direct your own life, to consciously make your own choices, create your own path and purpose, and shape your own identity in life.

People in retirement can do as they please, like an infinite vacation. But as many retirees and their families can confirm, lack of routine and structure is negative liberty; it doesn't feel great for long, and people invariably become enslaved to someone or something, even habits and subconscious instincts, leading to addiction, boredom, depression, or laziness. That's not being free; that's called being lost.

Discipline and freedom only seem to sit on opposite ends of the spectrum; they are tightly connected, in fact. If you want freedom, the only way to get there is through discipline.

Everyone suffers from one of two pains; the pain of discipline or the pain of regret. The difference is discipline weighs ounces while regret weighs tons. Counterintuitively, life gets harder when you try to make it easy. Exercising is hard, but never moving makes life harder. Uncomfortable conversations are hard, but avoiding every conflict is harder. Mastering your craft is hard, but having no skills is harder. Easy has a cost.

Freedom worthy of admiration and respect requires positive liberty, taking responsibility for yourself by committing to an idea or purpose, such as a diet and exercise regime for fitness and good health. However difficult or forced, making these choices is the highest expression of freedom, and you can only benefit in the long run.

The Midrash similarly suggests that not only can freedom be found in service to God, but it is also the only way to be truly free. When the Torah says that God carved the Ten Commandments, the Midrash suggests we alternatively read it as liberation through the Ten Commandments – תְּרוּת / תְּרוּת עַל-הַלְּחָת / עַל-הַלְּחָת. We earn freedom through the Torah's framework by assuming responsibility for our lives and destiny. It's an externally imposed responsibility, like Pharaoh, but the comparison stops there. The outcome of the Torah's responsibility is the gift of positive liberty, freeing us from slavery to our worst inclinations, resulting in more compassionate, humane, and kind humans.

The God that rescued the Jewish People from Egypt was the same God that had sent them there in the first place. It's not contrived salvation or engineered heroics because God is not gratuitously cruel. It wasn't Egypt that held the Jews; it was God holding the Jews in Egypt, as foretold to Avraham, in response to Avraham's question about how God could promise a destiny to his descendants if, at some point, they would inevitably deviate from Avraham's example. The Maharal explains God's answer to mean that the Egypt experience would permanently bind his descendants to the Creator regardless of their mistakes.

R' Shlomo Farhi teaches that God doesn't just save us from things that hurt us; however bitter the lesson might be to learn, the things that hurt us can also function as instruments of protecting us from something, providing pathways to positive liberty. The Jewish People left Egypt with the hard-won experience God had promised Avraham, and with that experience accumulated, the ordeal was complete – בְּרַכְשׁ גָּדוֹל.

Yet the unspoken inverse of that notion is that if they'd had the experience all along, the ordeal would have been redundant and would never have happened. It was only because they had lost their way, forgetting who they were and where they had come from, that they suffered through centuries of slavery as a result. If they had stooped to pagan idolatry like anyone else, it only follows that they were vulnerable; the inescapable conclusion is that Pharaoh could have only ever have enslaved them so they could rediscover what they had lost! The hand that hurts is the same hand that serves to save –



שְׁבֹכֵל דוֹר וְדוֹר עוֹמְדִים עָלֵינוּ לְכַלּוֹתֵנוּ, וְהַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא מְצִילֵנוּ מִיָּדָם. However disturbing this lesson is, it is simultaneously deeply comforting, suggesting that all our pain has deep meaning and significance.

We never swapped service to Pharaoh for service to God; because we aren't slaves to God. God offers us positive liberty, the freedom to take control of our lives and realize our fundamental purpose in the universe. Accepting the responsibility of service to God may look forced, but we know we are the ultimate beneficiaries of our efforts because we can utilize our freedom to thrive, tapping into our highest and best selves and making our lives matter. God offers humans positive liberty and, through it, cosmic significance.

Our bodies feel pain in response to an injury; your nerves send millions of signals to your brain that something is wrong, hopefully prompting a reaction. Pain has a clearly defined purpose; the only incorrect response is to ignore it.

We shouldn't ignore the pain in our national or personal life, but we possess the freedom and spirit to elevate and transform that pain into meaning and purpose. There is cosmic significance to our hurt. It matters.

The God who heals is the same God who hurts; hurt is a pathway to healing, and compassion can overcome severity – שְׁמַאל דּוֹחָה וְיָמִין מְקַרְבֶּת.

We're never glad for the hurt, but we are free to make it count.

## **No Man Left Behind**

5 minute read | Straightforward

After many long and grueling years enduring enslavement, the Creator had at long last dispatched Moshe to save the Jewish People. During one round of talks, Moshe suggested a more modest request to Pharaoh than letting his people go for good; instead, he proposed taking them into the desert for a multi-day festival, indicating that they would return once the festivities were completed.

At this point, since Egypt had already experienced several plagues, cracks began to appear in the Egyptian government's resolve:

וַיֹּאמְרוּ עַבְדֵי פַרְעֹה אֵלָיו עַד־מַתִּי יִהְיֶה זֶה לָנוּ לְמוֹקֵשׁ שְׁלַח אֶת־הָאֲנָשִׁים וַיַּעֲבְדוּ אֶת־ה' אֱלֹהֵיהֶם הַטֶּרֶם תִּדַע פִּי אֲבָדָה מִצְרַיִם: וַיֹּשֵׁב אֶת־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶת־אַהֲרֹן אֶל־פַּרְעֹה וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָהֶם לְכוּ עַבְדוּ אֶת־ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם מִי וּמִי הֵהָלָכִים: וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה בְּנִעְרֵינוּ וּבְנִקְנֵינוּ גִלְדָּה בְּבָנֵינוּ וּבְבָנוֹתֵנוּ בְּצִאֲנָנוּ וּבְבִקְרָנוּ גִלְדָּה פִּי חַגְיָה לָנוּ: וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָהֶם יְהִי כֵן ה' עִמָּכֶם פֶּאֶשֶׁר אֲשַׁלַּח אֶתְכֶם וְאֶת־טַפְּכֶם רְאוּ פִּי רַעַה נִגְדָּה פְּנֵיכֶם: לֹא כֵן לְכוּ־נָא: פַּרְעֹה's advisers said to him, "How long



will this one be a snare to us?! Let the men go to worship Hashem their God! Do you not yet know that Egypt is lost?” So Moshe and Ahron were brought back to Pharaoh and he said to them, “Go, worship Hashem your God! Who will be going?” Moshe replied, “We will all go, young and old: we will go with our sons and daughters, our flocks and herds; for we must observe Hashem’s festival!” But he said to them, “Hashem be with you; the same as I mean to let your children go with you! Clearly, you are bent on mischief! No! Your men can go and worship Hashem since that is what you want.” And they were expelled from Pharaoh’s presence. (10:7-10)

Outside of wondering whether this alleged festival was mere diplomatic posturing or perhaps a genuinely lost festival we might otherwise mark, Pharaoh’s advisors took it seriously and at least attempted to meet Moshe halfway.

While Moshe delivered a compelling speech about going with everyone, men, and women, young and old, categorically refusing to leave anyone behind, it’s worth dwelling for a moment on why Moshe wouldn’t take Pharaoh up on his counteroffer to take the men out of Egypt.

This was an enormous and monumental concession! At a minimum, Pharaoh was at least willing to let some of the people go! If nothing else, Moshe could extract some fraction of the people he was tasked with saving. It’s not obvious to assume that the only possible plan was for everyone to walk out at precisely the same time. The mission had long been underway; this was plausibly the beginning of what succeeding at that mission might look like! Moshe could feasibly take this group out under the ruse of the festival and report to God for new orders about how to save those who remained behind. However many or few people were left behind, God still had to do the same work to get them out! It’s not hard to imagine Moshe accepting Pharaoh’s offer as a practical and realistic option – and it’s unclear why he didn’t.

Why wouldn’t Moshe accept a partial victory and take the first opportunity he had to get some – even if not all – of the Jewish People out of Egypt?

The Shem miShmuel explains that Moshe’s speech to Pharaoh highlighted a core value – if he had to leave even one single soul behind, it would be better if they stayed put.

Healthy humans have concentric relationship circles. I am at the center, then perhaps my spouse and children, then parents and siblings, then friends and extended family, then community and acquaintances. The Torah expects us to expand our consciousness so that those circles are proximate enough to our own that your well-being impacts mine.

Pharaoh was a savvy villain and exploited this to great effect by presenting Moshe with such a choice – Moshe could never accept it. The apparent personal victory for Moshe succeeding in part but having to leave some people behind wouldn’t be a partial victory – it was no victory at all. At best, a personal win is the starting point of helping others, and if we have the gall to take the win and abandon others





to their fates, not only is it not a victory – it is actually a defeat. Pharaoh's offer was empty; it offered nothing we could live with.

This is by no means the most practical value to live by. Moshe's refusal indicated that he'd rather they all stay put – in Egypt! – than leave a man behind. But choosing to live with ideals is never easy; putting values before profit or self-preservation has tangible drawbacks and real-life consequences. It takes immense willpower and inner strength to avoid cutting corners. But that's what all the stories of our greats call us to, with acts of courage and decency that fan the flames of idealism in our hearts, inspiring a desire to be just as bold and noble.

If we doubt the sacrosanctity of caring about the people we might leave behind, it's worth recalling the penultimate plague of darkness; and, in particular, the effect it had on the people who experienced it:

לֹא־רָאוּ אִישׁ אֶת־אָחָיו וְלֹא־קָמוּ אִישׁ מִתַּחַתָּיו – People could not see one another, and for three days no one could get up from where he was... (10:23)

We need to remind ourselves that, presumably, Egyptian adults weren't like children who are scared of the dark; it's not just that it felt like blindness, it's that their worlds were completely cut off from each other – לֹא־רָאוּ אִישׁ אֶת־אָחָיו.

The Chiddushei HaRim highlights that this was the worst punishment God could inflict on Egypt, short only of death itself – that people could not see each other. In a very real way, recognizing another human and moving ourselves to help them cuts to the heart of what it means to be human, and we should take that notion seriously.

The distinguished psychologist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl witnessed humanity stripped to its essence in the concentration camps and observed how, despite living under the most terrible conditions, there were still men walking around comforting others and giving away their last pieces of bread. People like these, the ones who placed themselves in service of others, who committed themselves to a greater cause, were the ones who found nourishment even in complete deprivation, who kept their fire burning even in total darkness.

In the wake of a disaster, whether earthquake, flood, terror attack, or other catastrophe, people are consistently altruistic, urgently engaged in coming together to care for themselves and those around them, strangers and neighbors as well as friends and loved ones. Every single incident has citizens who come to rescue those in need, providing evacuation and other necessities like food, clothes, medicine, and shelter. There are always first responders, but also plain everyday people from all walks of life putting their lives on the line to help.

Most people, deep down, want to be pretty decent, reflecting a profound longing for community and connection.



## TorahRedux

It's why stories of bravery and sacrifice tend to resonate so strongly, especially when they involve ordinary people. They are reminders of who we know we can be, of who we want to be. They are antidotes to a culture of toxic individualism, cynicism, and general self-centeredness, a culture that dismisses collective meaning in favor of individual gains, that sees altruism only as a personal expense, not as a source of fulfillment, as something from which you receive as much as you give.

Our most fundamental nature, the root of our behavior, is generosity, empathy, courage, and kindness. The shadows of the plague of darkness expose what it is to be human by stripping those things away. It ought to be incredibly telling that one of the most terrible things the Egyptians experienced was a divinely imposed solitary confinement that isolated people from each other.

What's more, if we don't see our fate as bound to each other, the people we love, and everyone around us, we might accidentally be inviting the plague of darkness into our lives, carrying its shadows with us long after Egypt has faded into the distance.

While reaching for greatness, we either remember each other or we forget ourselves.

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*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.