

Vayechi 2023

Imagination Redux

3 minute read | Straightforward

The power of human imagination is incredible.

If you've ever daydreamed or watched children play, you've experienced firsthand the ability to form images of things or ideas in the mind. When we read stories or consume different media, our minds light up with wonder and possibility, experiencing and feeling things that might not exist in the external world but are very real to us.

The ability to imagine is not trivial; the thoughts and beliefs generated in the internal world drive actions and behaviors that shape the external world.

But imagination isn't simply idle daydreaming or fantasy, nor even just internal play we then act out externally. It's a distinctly human quality to think about the future and plan for it, to conceptualize a possible future, and then try to make it a reality.

Without an imagination, you would be stuck living within the confines of what you already know. A world without imagination would be a world without creativity and would leave us with little capacity to experiment, explore, innovate, solve problems, or even entertain ourselves.

The capacity for imaginative thought is an exceptionally creative activity and arguably even a religious act – it is the tool that enables change. The power of imagination speaks to the core of not only who we are but also who we might become, and as such, aligns closely with our essential nature as beings created in the image of the Divine.

This profound understanding of imagination is vividly illustrated in the biblical narrative of Yosef and Yakov's reunion.

Yosef's brothers abducted him in childhood and trafficked him into slavery. They covered up their crime by telling their father a wild animal had mauled him, and Yakov lived unconsolated in all the years that followed. When fortune brought his brothers before him, Yosef took the opportunity to bring healing to his family, and Yakov went down to Egypt to see his long-lost son once more. In the pivotal moment, Yakov remarks that he never believed such a thing was possible:

וַיֹּאמֶר יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל-יוֹסֵף רְאֵה פָנָיךְ לֹא פָלַתִּי וְהִנֵּה הִרְאָה אֶתִּי אֱלֹהִים גַּם אֶת-יַרְעֻךָ – And Israel said to Yosef, “I never imagined I'd see you again, and now God has even let me see your children as well!” (48:11)



Our sages teach that at this moment, Yakov uttered Shema Yisrael, a centerpiece of Jewish prayer that affirms the unity and power of the Creator.

We might think that Yakov says this prayer out of appreciation; he is thankful for once again laying eyes on his son Yosef before he dies.

But his words suggest something deeper than gratitude, something much more like shock or surprise – לא פלתי –

Rashi takes this expression to mean deliberative thinking or judgment. The Rashbam explains that Yakov never allowed himself to dare to hope he might see Yosef again. The Chizkuni understands it to mean that Yakov had not even prayed to see Yosef again, an impossible expectation given that a wild animal had killed him, noting that the word Yakov uses is cognate to the word for prayer – / תפלה – פלתי.

Or, as we might say today, Yakov never imagined that he might see Yosef again.

The suggestion of an association between prayer and imagination is exceptionally powerful. R' Judah Mischel observes that the obvious implication is that part of prayer is allowing yourself to dare to imagine that things can be different or better, that something else is possible.

Our sages teach that you must not give up; even with a sword resting on your neck, you should still pray for an escape.

Taking these insights together, we come to understand that the moment of Yakov and Yosef's reunion captures an essential teaching that the bounds of our imagination are not the limits of what is possible.

Our capacity for imagination transcends mere thought and goes far beyond what we perceive as possible and deep into the realm of faith and hope. R' Meilich Biderman teaches that the human predisposition towards hope and optimism is one of God's greatest expressions of kindness.

We all face situations that seem impossibly far, irrevocably broken, and irretrievably lost. This story challenges us to dare envision a world beyond the confines of our current reality, to pray, hope, and work towards the seemingly impossible because absurdly improbable things happen all the time.

Fuse your prayers with the power of imagination – not as an escape from reality, but as a bridge from the inner world to a brighter, better world that might still be possible.



Truth Redux

5 minute read | Straightforward

The universe is a competitive place, and every creature is in an existential struggle to survive. As Darwin showed, the fittest to survive adapt best to their circumstances, using all tools at their disposal.

Everyone is trying to get by, so what wouldn't you do to pass the test, get the job, win the relationship? People always exaggerate and lie on resumes, interviews, dates, and sales pitches. It's a strategic tool for gaining an advantage, no different from how a predator utilizes camouflage to catch its prey. In the context of individual survival and success, so the thinking goes, all is fair.

The only trouble is that it's dishonest. While some people navigate the world that way anyway, most people are uncomfortable lying.

But consider a more commonplace scenario, the most trivial interaction we encounter daily. How are you doing today? I'm fine, thank you.

It's not always so true, is it? You might be tired, stressed, and worried. You are feeling hurt or sad about that thing. You're not always okay, but you say you are and soldier on.

Our sages identify the quality of truth as the signature of the Creator, a profound suggestion that truth is not just a moral or ethical principle but a fundamental building block of the universe woven into the fabric of reality.

The Torah lists many laws and prohibitions; our sages saw value in establishing protective fences around the kind of things that tend to lead to boundary violations. There is one glaring exception – dishonesty. The Torah prohibits deception under a multitude of circumstances but, uncharacteristically, also sees fit to expand the boundary and instructs us to distance from dishonesty generally – *מִדְּבַר שֶׁקֶר תִּרְחֶק*. If you know some of the Torah's stories, this makes sense.

Throughout the Torah, dishonesty appears as a consistent signature of its antagonists. The snake is the archetypal trickster whose deception assimilates Creation back into the formless chaos. Ephron does business with Avraham as a crook. Esau presents himself to his father with false piety. Lavan swindles Yakov, not to mention his own daughters, out of years of peace and happiness. Joseph's brothers cover up his abduction by faking his death. Pharaoh's slavery started by cheating the Jewish People with phony work quotas; he flip-flops about letting them go. Korach masks his self-serving ambition to foment a populist revolution. Bilam denies his goals to God and himself in pursuit of power and wealth. Among many issues with the infamous scout report about the Land of Israel, the scouts were biased and dishonest in their presentation of their experience.



But we don't require the Torah to reveal that dishonesty is bad; it's easy to explain, and there are so many reasons!

You have more to gain from keeping your home than stealing your neighbor's; not stealing is a social contract that mutually benefits all. Everyone hates getting cheated or deceived, so lying or stealing is at least hypocritical and violates Hillel's Golden Rule of all things – don't do to others what you wouldn't want them doing to you.

As a matter of principle and outside of the consideration of benefits or consequences, lying is wrong because it hurts the person being manipulated and violates and ignores their autonomy; that person cannot and would not otherwise consent to be lied to or interacted with under false pretenses. If you could have achieved your goal without the lie, you would not have had to lie. Humans are created in the Divine image; violating the autonomy and dignity of another also compromises your own.

What's more, the societal implications of dishonesty are far-reaching. Our society is based on a foundation of mutual trust and honesty, and the only way to obtain any benefits from deception is in a world of trust and honesty; dishonest people hide in the camouflage of the much larger crowd of honest people – שְׁפֹת־אֱמֶת תִּכּוֹן לְעַד וְעַד־אֲרֵגִיעָה לְשׁוֹן שָׁקֵר. If we understand ethics to be universal standards of conduct, deception is self-evidently unethical because it would devalue and erode the foundation of mutual trust and honesty to the point that no one would trust anybody, and there would be no further benefits to dishonesty.

Truth is a cornerstone of civilization and the reality of our primary experience. Honesty builds trust, so people can rely on each other's words and actions, cooperating and collaborating, prerequisites for a society to function effectively. Without honesty, trust breaks down, leading to suspicion, conflict, and a lack of cooperation. Rules and laws depend on honesty to maintain stability and order; justice can only exist with truth and accountability. Relationships require honesty to establish understanding, respect, and mutual support. Business and commerce can only happen in an environment of honesty. Simply put, people can only lie in a world of truth, the world we know – אֱמֶת וּמִשְׁפָּט שְׁלוֹם שְׁפֹטוּ בְּשַׁעֲרֵיכֶם.

Beyond human culture, the consistency inherent to scientific principles and the laws of physics of the universe itself is an expression of truth, the signature of the Creator that makes the universe go – אֱמֶת מֵאֲרֵץ תִּצְמַח וְצִדְקַת מַשְׁמַיִם נִשְׁקָר. Unsurprisingly, the Torah places such a strong emphasis on honesty.

No dishonest scales at work, don't deceive your business counterparts, don't testify falsely, keep your word, and a litany of others, with a general rule to avoid dishonesty. Truth is the world we know, the Divine signature. Healthy people are truthful people; we don't want to lie.

Are those everyday white lies a violation of Divine truth?



In context, everyone readily understands it's probably polite fiction, a form of basic social lubricant. Communication is about more than words; it's a convention of how humans interact. Conventions are subjectively followed when there is a general expectation that others will also follow them. Social grease is not dishonest when it's what people expect; deception is only deceptive when the intent is deception. When you respond that you're okay, you're not lying, even though it's not true. No one is looking for, nor expecting, a truthful report on your life; it's a social handshake, nothing more.

Our sages even went as far as permitting outright falsehood under certain circumstances for the sake of peace. Does the dress make her look fat? You will hopefully understand that her question is not intended literally; the wise here recognize an unspoken invitation for reassurance. It's not dishonest to give the reassuring response you're being implicitly asked for. Telling her she's beautiful, or saying you're okay, isn't lying. It's not even polite compliance with the request; it is fully aligned with truth and perpetuates life and all Creation.

As the school of Hillel taught, don't tell the bride she's ugly! Use your common sense, be normal – אִתְּךָ דַּעֲתוֹ שֶׁל אָדָם מְעוֹרְבֵת עִם הַבְּרִיּוֹת.

In our daily lives, we are constantly navigating the complex landscape of truth and deception. We tell white lies to maintain social cohesion, and some of us encounter more harmful forms of dishonesty.

Cultivate a habit of honesty in your life; be mindful of the words you speak and the actions you take. Strive for authenticity in your relationships and integrity in your efforts. Even small acts of honesty contribute towards a culture of trust and respect.

Truth is more than just a moral principle – it's a fundamental aspect of existence, the divine signature. In a world that can often seem full of deception and dishonesty, be a bearer of truth, showcasing the divine signature in all aspects of your life.

Because truth is not just about what we say to others – it's also about being true to yourself.

[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:

וַיִּשְׂמַן יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּכְעַט שְׂמֹנֶת עֲבִית כְּשִׁית וַיִּטֵּשׂ אֱלֹהִים עֲשָׂהוּ וַיִּגְבַּל צוּר יִשְׁעָתוֹ (32:15) – 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.

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.



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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.

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.