

Beshalach 2024

This Cannot Be How It Ends

3 minute read | Straightforward

They thought it was over.

The Jewish People had finally left centuries of oppression behind them and had walked out of Egypt. But barely a few days out, the Egyptian army was in pursuit and had them cornered by the ocean shore, wading in the reeds, open sea in front of them, a cloud of dust from the vengeful Egyptian army on the horizon. They were trapped, and the people despaired.

Yet before God even talks to Moshe, Moshe already knows how to proceed:

אל-תיראו-הַתַּיָּצְבוּ וַיֵּרְאוּ אֶת-יְשׁוּעַת ה', אֲשֶׁר-יַעֲשֶׂה לָכֶם הַיּוֹם – “Have no fear! Stand and wait, and you shall see God’s salvation today!” (14:13)

At this point, the Torah has not recorded an interaction between Moshe and the Creator; Moshe has not been briefed or prepared for what to do in this scenario. And yet he knows.

But how?

The easy answer is that when you’re in a tough spot, have some faith, and it’ll all work out! But apart from being a cop-out answer, it’s true except for when it doesn’t work out. Blind faith is probably not the answer; maybe it’s something else.

Right after the Jewish People are saved, they sing the Song of the Sea. The Torah also records how Miriam led a separate rendition of gratitude, and the Jewish women followed her. It’s curious because it indicates that the Song of the Sea was not enough, that Miriam’s activity was distinct and unique, over and above the Song of the Sea. It’s also curious because the Torah identifies her in a highly unusual way:

... ותקח מרים הנביאה אֶחָזַת אֶהָרֹן, אֶת-הַתֵּף-בְּיָדָהּ; וַתִּצְאֵן כָּל-הַנְּשִׂיִם אַחֲרֶיהָ, בְּתַפִּים וּבְמַחֲלֹת. וַתַּעַן לָהֶם, מְרִיָּם – Miriam the prophetess, sister of Aharon, took an instrument in her hand, and led the women with instruments and dancing. And she sang to them... (15:21)

At this point in the story, we know that Miriam is a heroic leader in her own right who needs no introduction. The Torah highlights her prophecy and association with Aharon, even though she was also a sister to Moshe.



Sensitive to these nuances, Rashi suggests that the Torah alludes here to the prophecy Miriam received when she was only Aharon's sister but not Moshe's.

Pharaoh's mystics had foreseen Moshe's birth and launched a campaign of infanticide against Jewish boys in the preceding months. The Midrash records how Amram and Yocheved, the Jewish leaders of their time, had separated so as not to suffer such a terrible fate. Miriam then experienced the prophecy of Moshe's impending birth. She persuaded her parents to get back together by saying that their action was worse than Pharaoh's decree, as separation prevented the birth of girls as well.

When Yocheved fell pregnant, the Egyptian government kept tabs on her – but Moshe was born prematurely after a six-month pregnancy. When he was born, the Torah describes his appearance as brilliant – וַתֵּרֶא אֹתוֹ כִּי-טוֹב הוּא – which the Midrash suggests is the same brilliance as the light of Creation – כִּי-טוֹב – and the entire house shone.

But despite such an encouraging sign, the moment came where she could hide him no longer – וְלֹא-יָקֻלָּה עִוָּד, הַצְּפִינוּ. After three more months, which would have been a full-term pregnancy, the Egyptians came for her to inspect the child she was due to give birth to. She knew she had to abandon the child prophesied by her daughter. Yocheved placed the boy into a basket and put him in the river. The Torah implies she could not bear to watch – and who could? What chances would one give a baby with no one to care for him, abandoned in a box in a river, in the heat, with an army on the hunt for him no less:

וַתֵּצֵא מִיָּדָהּ, מִה-יִצְשָׁה לּוֹ – וַתִּמְצָב אֶחָתוֹ, מֵרָחֵק, לְדַעָה, מִה-יִצְשָׁה לּוֹ
him...(2:4)

The emphasis is on Miriam; Miriam stayed when Yocheved could not. She had not experienced a new prophecy and was only a child herself. Holding on to her prophecy, one thought guided her – this cannot be how it ends.

And she was right.

The daughter of the Jewish People's oppressors showed up, which would ordinarily be the worst thing that could happen. Still, in a stunning reversal, she displays compassion for the boy and takes him in, ultimate victory seized from the clutches of total defeat.

As R' David Fohrman explains, years later, Moshe knew what to tell the Jews at the shore of the Red Sea because this had happened before; it was the same story!

Jew cornered by Egyptian among the reeds, at the water's edge, all hope fading fast. Moshe had been in this situation before, so he understood to tell them to watch what happens. This cannot be how it ends!



Once they were safe, so many years after her prophecy, Moshe had finally saved their people. It is Miriam's celebration more than anyone else's because this is the ultimate fulfillment of her prophecy – the promised child has saved their people from Egypt for good.

You probably haven't experienced a prophecy of salvation. But all the same, in the heartbreaking moments that look like all is lost, you can invoke the power of Miriam and hold on just a little longer.

This cannot be how it ends.

The Rain Maker

4 minute read | Straightforward

After the daily morning service, most prayer books have a variety of additional prayers. One of them is Parshas HaMan, the section of the Torah that introduces the manna, miracle food from the sky that appeared when the Jewish People were starving and needed it most.

Our sages understand this phenomenon as the ultimate representation of the power over our livelihood and sustenance – Parnassa.

It's a prayer people take extremely seriously as a ritual for merit related to our livelihood, and with good reason. Financial insecurity is one of a human's most elemental and basic fears. It originates in the subconscious; every living creature fears going hungry.

The Beis Yosef says it's a good thing to say every day, and Rabbeinu Bachya adds that whoever says it daily is guaranteed never to lack a livelihood. R' Menachem Mendel of Rimanov established the popular custom of saying it on the Tuesday afternoon of Parshas Beshalach, the section it appears in, with a similar promise.

Some people believe in saying the prayer as the golden ticket to ultimate security.

But if we take a closer read of the story on its terms, we might be surprised by what it has to say to us.

First of all, the way the the story presents itself is that the Creator states at the outset that what will follow is a test of faith – **הִנְנִי מִמְטִיר לְכֶם לֶחֶם מִן-הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֵּצֵא הָעָם וְלִקְטוּ דְבַר-יְיָ בְּיוֹם לְמַעַן אֲנֹסְנוּ הַיְלֵךְ בְּתוֹרַתִי אִם-לֹא** –

A big part of the test is to take only what your family needs – **לִקְטוּ מִמֶּנּוּ אִישׁ לְפִי אֲכָלוּ עֹמֵר לְגִלְגָּלַת מִסֵּפֶר נַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם – אִישׁ לְאִשְׁרָו בְּאֶהְלוֹ תִקְחוּ**



Our animal instinct resists the notion of taking only enough for today; it wants to be acquisitive and gather a stockpile just in case. But however much or little people took, it was only ever just enough – וַיַּעֲשׂוּ כֵן בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּלְקְטוּ הַמֶּרְכָּבָה וְהַמִּמְעִיט. וַיִּמְדוּ בְּעֶמְר וְלֹא הִעֲדִיף הַמֶּרְכָּבָה וְהַמִּמְעִיט לֹא הִחֲסִיר אִישׁ לְפִי־אֲכָלוֹ לְקִטּוֹ.

What’s more, people ignored the explicit instruction against holding and stockpiling, and gather more than they needed – just in case! But it turned rotten and maggoty overnight – וְלֹא־שָׁמְעוּ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּותְרוּ – אַנְשִׁים מִמֶּנּוּ עַד־בֹּקֶר וַיָּרָם תּוֹלְעִים וַיִּבְאָשׁ וַיִּקְצַף עֲלֵהֶם מֹשֶׁה.

R’ Meilich Biderman highlights how Dasan and Aviram, the ever-present villains throughout, try to be sneaky and gather a second helping of manna. Apart from their rebellious act being pointless because the manna goes bad, R’ Meilich points out how short-sighted and plain stupid it is, even beyond the context of magic sky food.

Because if there’s no fresh manna, then in the best case, they have enough to get them through tomorrow. Then what? What about the day after? They have broken the rules, acted selfishly and faithlessly, and aren’t better off; they still live with the same structural uncertainty as anyone else, with only the imagined safety of perhaps a day or two because that’s just how life works.

The story reminds us about the need to put in a certain amount of work every day – וַלְקִטּוֹ דְּבַר־יּוֹם בְּיוֹמוֹ.

It reminds us that working on Shabbos is fruitless – שְׁשֶׁת יָמִים תִּלְקְטְהוּ וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שָׁבַת לֹא יִהְיֶה־בּוֹ: וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי יָצְאוּ מִן־הָעֵם לְלֶקֶט וְלֹא מָצְאוּ.

From the time Adam was cursed to work at the sweat of his brow, and today, arguably more than ever, humans have had to grapple with hustle culture, the idea that working long hours and sacrificing self-care are required to succeed. The Chafetz Chaim reminds us that people who collected more or less weren’t better or worse off than each other; everyone had just enough – וְלֹא הִעֲדִיף הַמֶּרְכָּבָה וְהַמִּמְעִיט לֹא הִחֲסִיר אִישׁ לְפִי־אֲכָלוֹ לְקִטּוֹ.

We would do well to remind ourselves that our opportunities never come from where we expect and rarely do they look how we expect – וַיִּרְאוּ בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל־אָחִיו מִן הוּא כִּי לֹא יָדְעוּ מַה־הוּא –

R’ Meilich Biderman reminds us that the nature of this story is likened to rain – הַגְּנִי מִמָּטִיר לָכֶם לָחֶם – מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם. Humans don’t have the power to make it rain at all, much less the ability to make it rain in a particular amount or moment; act accordingly. We control our output but not the outcome; making a given amount of money isn’t within reach, but making ten phone calls is.

Taking an abstract view of this story, there are clear and relevant lessons we can conclude from a straightforward reading of Parshas HaMan. Perhaps the most significant part of the test represented by the manna is that it doesn’t solve for security at all; quite the opposite. It invites us to live securely within the insecurity – אֶל־יֹותֵר מִמֶּנּוּ עַד־בֹּקֶר –



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The book of Jeremiah tells of how the people neglected the Torah in favor of work, believing they would have nothing to eat if they didn't work relentlessly. Jeremiah held up the jug of manna to remind them that the Creator does not require much to work with to sustain us – כִּי לֹא עַל-הַלֶּקֶחַ לְבַדּוֹ יִתְקֶה – הָאָדָם כִּי עַל-כָּל-מוֹצָא פִּי ה' יִתְקֶה הָאָדָם

The best response to uncertainty is not a wild grasp at certainty; it is being fully present in the moment. Step up, survey the landscape, and make decisions even when uncertain. One of the great lessons of faith is the understanding that everything is going to be okay, even if we don't know how.

Reciting the prayer or reading the story affirms where our security comes from: Above. It affirms what we must do daily – do the work to care for your family, but don't take someone else's portion. It affirms that you must do enough for today and be hopeful for tomorrow because there is no blessing to be found in hoarding today's resources.

This story probably doesn't have the power to give you riches, but it might give you something some of the richest can only ever dream of – enough.

As our Sages guided us, who is wealthy? One who celebrates and takes joy in what he has – אֵיזֶהוּ עֲשִׂיר, הַשֹּׂמֵחַ בְּקִלְקוֹ.

On your quest to be the rainmaker, remind yourself regularly Who makes it rain.

Amalek Redux

4 minute read | Straightforward

The Torah has lots of laws. Some are fun and easy to understand, like Shabbos, and some are fun and challenging to understand, like shaking the Lulav. A rare few are difficult to understand and might also leave us with a sense of moral unease.

One of them is the laws concerning Amalek.

On the back of the miraculous Exodus and escape at the Red Sea, the Jewish People were exhausted and weary when a band of raiders called Amalek attacked the stragglers in the group.

Seeing as the Jewish People are the protagonists and our ancestors, we understand that Amalek is the antagonist. But of all the adversaries of Jewish history, Amalek has a unique distinction, sitting in a class of its own. From the earliest Jewish writings, Amalek is the code word for everything that is wrong with the world ideologically.



The story of the Land of Israel is a story of conquest. In many stories, the inhabitants recognize the geopolitical risk and act accordingly, such as Balak, Sichon, and Og. But that's not how the Torah tells the story of Amalek, who attack not out of self-defense, but because they could, and with great dishonor, by targeting weak stragglers.

By most counts, there are no less than three separate duties incumbent on all Jews as it pertains to Amalek: to remember that Amalek attacked the Jewish People just as they left Egypt; not to forget what they did; and the big one, to eradicate the memory of Amalek from the world.

These laws are serious and are part of the rare category of mitzvos that apply to all people at all times under all circumstances.

But isn't it a little unsettling?

It sounds uncomfortably like a mitzvah to commit genocide, the moral argument against which is certainly compelling, especially for a nation who heard the commandment "do not kill" from God's voice at Sinai, even more so having suffered a genocide in living memory. Although some people have no trouble understanding it that way, you're in good company if you find difficulty in a commandment to kill Amalek today.

Long ago, the Gemara dismissed the notion of practicing the straightforward interpretation, pointing to a story in the Prophets where the Assyrian king Sennacherib forcibly displaced and resettled the entire Middle East, eliminating distinct bloodlines of racial descent.

While this elegantly eliminates the problem in a practical sense – there is no problem because the law can no longer apply – the moral issue remains open.

Over centuries, a substantial number of prominent halachic authorities have clarified that the status of Amalek is not racial; that although a tribe called Amalek attacked the Jewish People and formed the context for the law, the law is not and never was an instruction to commit genocide against those people. While the Gemara says that Amalek can never join the Jewish People, it also says that descendants of Amalek taught Torah in Israel, suggesting that their women, or children of women who married out, could lose their identity as Amalek. If Amalek isn't a race, there is no law to kill such a particular group, and there is no moral dilemma.

R' Chaim Brisker explains that Amalek is not a particular group of humans; it is a conceptual category. It's an attitude and ideology that transcends any specific race or individual and persists forever, an archetype of evil that we must fundamentally stand against and be on alert for. Writers through the ages have labeled enemies or opposition as Amalek, which, although often lazy, correctly categorizes and formalizes this eternal struggle.



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The perpetrators of the original crime are all dead, and modern society does not believe in the heritability of guilt. But the offense isn't simply that they physically attacked the Jewish People; as Rashi explains, it's that they cooled us off along the way while we were weary – אֲשֶׁר קָרָה בְּדַרְדָּרָה וַיִּזְנַב בָּהּ – פְּלִי-הַנְּשָׁלִים אַחֲרֶיהָ וְאַתָּה עָנִף וַיִּגַע.

As the Netziv points out, it would be self-defeating and tautological to have an eternal command to destroy something's memory; the Torah makes that impossible simply by mentioning it.

The Kedushas Levi goes further and suggests that Amalek's legacy lies in the heart of every person.

We might stop to wonder if the ideology of Amalek is all around us in the social Darwinist culture we have built ourselves, which is, at its core, a simple application of survival of the fittest behavior.

Sure, the malignant form of Amalek looks like a Haman or a Hitler. But the benign form is all around us, in ourselves and others. It's not any particular humans we need to overcome, but their attitude and ideology. The fight against Amalek does not end even though the nation is long gone; its legacy remains, and it's the legacy that poses a threat.

A Chassidic aphorism observes that Amalek is numerically equivalent to doubt – עמלק / ספק.

In our day-to-day lives, that looks like when you consider doing something bold or different, and someone, perhaps even yourself, pokes holes or second-guesses the new initiative. “I want to try this new idea, but maybe I shouldn't? What if it's the wrong choice? Maybe I don't deserve it?” Or perhaps, “Why start or support that project—aren't there far more important ones?”

The attack in Rephidim only happens opportunistically when people are caught off guard – רַפִּידִים / רפיון ידים.

Anthropologists and psychologists have long observed the phenomenon of crab mentality in some groups. The metaphor derives from a pattern of behavior noted in crabs when trapped in a bucket – any individual crab could easily escape, but the others will undermine its efforts, ensuring the group's collective demise. In some groups, members will attempt to reduce the self-confidence of any member who achieves success beyond the others, whether out of envy, resentment, spite, or competitive feeling, to halt their progress. The wrong circles have powerful inertia that draws members towards conformity and mediocrity in a self-fulfilling negative feedback loop.

Letting feelings of self-doubt and personal incompetence persist is called impostor syndrome. You can baselessly hold back from doing things that could transform your life because you're not ready to face the reality of your own potential greatness.

As the Mishna in Pirkei Avos says, eliminate doubt – הַסְתַּלֵּק מִן הַסֵּפֶק.



If it sounds pithy or trite, just know that that's quite literally Amalek's great crime – trying to hold the Jewish People back just as they were beginning to break through, discouraging them just as they were getting started and finding their feet – אֲשֶׁר קָרָה בְּדַרְךָ וַיִּזְנוּב בְּךָ כְּלִי-הַנְּחֻשָׁלִים אֶתְרִיד וְאַתָּה עָיַר וַיִּגַע.

It's not apologetics or mental gymnastics; it neatly fits the words and is something we recognize all around us.

Haters rarely hate you; far more often, they hate themselves because you're showing them a reflection of what they wish they could be, and they don't like feeling inadequate.

Shine bright and soar, and forget about the people who tried to hold you back.

Nostalgia Redux

6 minute read | Advanced

Life comes at you fast.

The days fly by, and the pressures and responsibilities mount. This deadline, that presentation, the big test. Health, relationships, kids, finances. The further out you go, the more complex and uncertain it all gets. There's rarely someone who can share your unique load, and it's a lot to handle. But that's what being a grown-up is in the modern world.

Changing times and complex, pressure-filled moments can trigger feelings of loneliness, social exclusion, and meaninglessness, and our instinct is often to look backward, to take a trip down memory lane and seek solace in the past, recalling happier, simpler times. Personal nostalgia can provide comfort and a sense of continuity; collective nostalgia can foster a sense of community and preserve cultural history. Sitting with an old face, or visiting an old favorite spot, can bring the feeling of the good old days flooding back. This phenomenon is not unique to the modern era; it's a profoundly human predisposition that transcends time and culture.

But nostalgia can have a negative shadow when it gets to the point of idealizing the past and avoiding reality. We see this reflected in the experiences of the Jewish People in the Torah, their struggles mirroring our own. Stuck in the desert wilderness with no natural food or water, their nostalgia for Egypt expresses itself in their repeated pining to return to Egypt.

But we know the Egypt story better than that. They were neither safe nor happy!



The Torah documents Egypt as a sustained and systematic crime against humanity, with a litany of atrocities and human rights abuses. Without any embellishment from Midrash, the plain text of the narrative reports some of the worst possible human experiences: enslavement, violence, infanticide, and organized genocide as a form of population control.

They were liberated from all that by the Creator with open miracles, sustained by magic food from the sky and an enchanted spring sheltered by supernatural clouds. But forget all that; those Egyptian cucumbers were oh-so crunchy and delicious!

What insanity possessed them to want to go back to Egypt?

We must remember that if they were insane, they wouldn't have been held responsible for their outburst, and their story would be irrelevant to sane readers. They weren't insane; they were human, like us, and humans get nostalgic sometimes.

These stories showcase the allure of nostalgia and its incredible power to revise history and reality while simultaneously removing us from the present so the moment passes us by.

In their wild distortion, life in Egypt may have been awful, but at least it was predictable. Magic food and water are disappointing and unsatisfying, and what if it all stopped tomorrow? That's not a way to live!

So they reminisce about the cucumbers and meat stews and forget the babies drowned in the river; selective memory is a feature of nostalgia. Even the meat pots were only at the very end of their time in Egypt, once they had already been emancipated from enslavement but not yet liberated from the borders of Egypt.

They long to regress to an immature state, the learned helplessness and mediocrity of captivity. They experience fauxstalgia, false nostalgia, and idealize a past that never was, with a corresponding refusal to embrace the positive changes of the present and take responsibility for their future.

Of course, some level of nostalgia is normal. We exist within dimensions that give us a certain degree of spatial freedom; left and right, up and down, backward and forwards. We can re-organize the space we move around in, thereby increasingly turning it to our advantage; humans have largely mastered the physical environment.

But when it comes to time, we are stuck to just one dimension; forcibly and inevitably pushed into a single direction into an unknown future that we observe from the infinitely tiny sliver that we call the present, a brief instance of conscious awareness that almost instantaneously slips away to become the past. In the dimension of time, there is no going back, no going left or right; there is not even standing still. No matter how much we struggle, no matter how much we resist, we are utterly at the mercy of time.



It can't be bargained with. It can't be reasoned with. It doesn't feel pity, or remorse, or fear. And it absolutely will not stop. As such, time is also a source of existential dread. We fear the future, both in the sense that it is unknown and that it will inevitably and unstoppably impose itself on us, helpless and defenseless.

So we experience a nostalgia trip, an escape for a fleeting moment, retreating to the good old days.

But in such instances, nostalgia can become an avoidance mechanism, pulling you away from dealing with present realities and future uncertainties, and it becomes toxic nostalgia, poison in the plainest sense, preventing the possibility of progress and growth. Longing for an oversimplified and idealized past is just a means of coping with feelings of disorientation or powerlessness in the face of challenging complexities and uncertainties in the present and future.

What's more, since nostalgia is inherently oriented towards simpler and unambiguous emotions and times, overuse of it as an emotionally regulatory strategy in a complex world is sure to backfire. Anchoring to the past instead of grappling with the present and working towards a better future is a recipe for catastrophe – and it can happen to all of us.

And the good old days aren't even what you think they were; nostalgia can distort our perception of reality. The scientific understanding of memory is clear that memory is not a perfect record of past events but a reconstruction influenced by current knowledge, beliefs, and emotions. This can lead to a distorted, romanticized view of the past where we remember things as better than they were, a golden age that reflects our hopes and fears, obscuring the complexities and contradictions of our actual experiences.

Nostalgia is a seductive liar; our memory isn't always so honest.

Too often, leaders talk about declinism, which sounds like when people talk about those kids these days; things aren't what they used to be; things were better back in the day.

It's not true.

One of the great tragedies of European Jewish history was the burning of twenty-four wagons of sacred texts; today, every person with an internet connection has instant access to the most complete library of Jewish literature ever assembled.

The great yeshivas of pre-war Europe combined didn't come close to the headcount of even one of the famous yeshivas of our day. How many mothers and children regularly died in childbirth? How many people died of hunger and poverty? How many illiterate generations lived and died with easily treated illness?



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Rashi described his crushing poverty as a millstone around his neck; how many people would sponsor him if he lived in our day? How many blood libels, crusades, expulsions, and massacres? While the only acceptable level of anti-Semitism is none, the anti-Semitism of our time is laughably trivial compared to the history books.

If our ancestors could choose any time to be alive, they'd probably pick ours.

We live in a time of plenty. Sure, there are plenty of excesses, but by any standard humans can measure, there has never been so much Torah study, charity, community advocacy and support, and general safety and security in Jewish history.

There is no precedent for our time, but there's a precedent for not living in the moment. Nostalgia is an illness for people who haven't realised that today is tomorrow's nostalgia – אֶל־הַתְּאֵמָר מָה הָיָה שְׁהַיְמִים הָרִאשׁוֹנִים הָיוּ טוֹבִים מֵאֵלָּה כִּי לֹא מִחֲכָמָה שְׂאֵלָתָ עַל־זֶה.

We are not living in a time of decline. History is taking shape, and we make the same mistake as our ancestors in the wilderness if we pretend otherwise. We are blessed to live in a time of abundant ascendancy; we'd better notice so we can actively participate.

We are decades into the Jewish Renaissance, and the world has changed; some people's eyes are wide shut, still fighting battles they lost a long time ago. Some people are still fighting the internet; everyone's been online for years. Some people are still fighting the State of Israel; it's three generations old and arguably the greatest supporter of Torah in history. Does a flaming Beis HaMikdash need to fall out of the sky before we acknowledge we're not in medieval Europe anymore? Stuck in the past with no precedent, they don't have the toolbox to offer relevant guidance for the present moment.

Through our stories, we live with the ghosts of our ancestors. Through their example, we can learn what they could not. We can excuse our ancestors, who carried generational trauma from lifetimes of normalized atrocities.

But what's our excuse?

Banish the ghosts or redeem them. People wish there was a way to know you're in the good old days before you've actually left them. This is that moment; wake up and take it in.

The Golden Age of Judaism isn't behind us; we're living in it.

Prayer Redux



7 minute read | Advanced

Prayer is one of Judaism’s essential and fundamental practices.

Through prayer, we commune with the Creator, affirming our connection, dependency, and gratitude to the Source of all life.

The theurgy of prayer – the metaphysics of how prayer works and what it does – is complex and, in all likelihood, fundamentally unknowable. It’s not obvious how you’d test whether or not prayer works because the universe is, self-evidently, a much bigger place than your personal wish list.

What we do know is that at all times and all places throughout our history, the Jewish People have always turned to God in prayer for health, success, and salvation. It is almost universally understood that prayer plays a prominent role in the efforts and energy we must expend to get the outcomes we want – as well as the ones we don’t.

The crescendo of the Exodus came with the decisive miracle at the Red Sea. The ocean parted, giving the desperate Jewish People safe passage while simultaneously obliterating their great tormentors in one fell swoop. The Splitting of the Red Sea is one of the most captivating and magical moments in the entire Torah, and prayer plays a prominent role in the build-up:

וּפָרְעֹה הִקְרִיב וַיִּשְׂאוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־עֵינֵיהֶם וַהֲגִהוּ מִצְרַיִם נֹסַע אֲחֲרֵיהֶם וַיִּירָאוּ מְאֹד וַיִּצְעֲקוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־ה' – As Pharaoh drew near, the Jewish People caught sight of the Egyptians advancing upon them. Greatly frightened, the Jewish People cried out to the Lord. (14:10)

But surprisingly, and quite unlike how we might expect, this prayer is not well received:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה מַה־תִּצְעַק אֵלַי דְבַר אֶל־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּסְעוּ – Then the Lord said to Moshe, “Why are you crying out to Me!? Tell the Jewish People to get going!!” (14:15)

With righteous outrage, we might wonder why God gets annoyed that the people cry out. The Jewish People have made it to the beaches with their children and everything they own. They have no boats and cannot swim to safety; just over the horizon, there is a hostile force in hot pursuit. By any reasonable standards, they are out of time and out of options. They are desperate, so they cry out to God for help; we cannot doubt that their fears and tears were genuine.

Moreover, our sages imagine Heavenly gateways for prayers, suggesting that prayers are accepted or denied based on circumstances, quality, and timing. The Neila prayer on Yom Kippur extensively utilizes this imagery to evoke a sense of urgency – quickly squeeze in your final prayers because the gates are closing! The Gemara concludes that regardless, the gate of tears is always open, presumably, because tears are heartfelt and sincere, and the pain that generates tearful prayers loads them with a potency that Heaven cannot refuse.



If crying to God for help is what you are supposed to do, why did God get annoyed at their prayer?

The imagery of gates in Heaven is compelling, but it appears to have a fatal flaw. The metaphor doesn't work for a gate of tears because a gate that never closes is no gate at all!

The Kotzker Rebbe sharply teaches that the gate of tears is still a gate because not all tears are equal; some tears are indeed turned away. The gate is shut to crocodile tears – superficial sorrow that is insincere, like when people attempt to use grief to excuse inaction.

In the story of Pinchas, Balak, and Bilam successfully schemed to compromise the Jewish People by sending the young women of Midian into the Jewish camp to seduce the men; most young men found the temptation impossible to resist, sparking a devastating plague.

But the Midianite women were not successful at drawing in everyone; some of them were strong enough to resist, and, unsure what to do, they went to the holiest man, their leader Moshe, at the most sacred spot they knew, the Mishkan, to cry and pray – וְהָמָּה בָּכִים, פָּתַח אֱהֵל מוֹעֵד.

These people of moral fiber cried and prayed for help, but that didn't save the day.

R' Moshe Sherer highlights how the Torah explicitly credits Pinchas's assassination of the provocateurs for stopping the plague, and not anyone's prayers – וַיִּדְקֹר אֶת-שְׁנֵיהֶם-אֶת אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְאֶת-הָאִשָּׁה – אֶל-קַבְּרָתָהּ; וַתַּעֲצֹר, הַמַּגֵּפָה / הַשִּׁיב אֶת-חַמְתִּי מֵעַל בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל, בְּקִנְיָאֵן אֶת-קַבְּרָתִי.

When something is wrong, and we respond only with thoughts and prayers, they are crocodile tears, lip service, pearl-clutching, and window dressing. The pain and tears may be honest, but prayers don't help if your approach to problem-solving is fundamentally broken.

As much as there may be stories of people praying for magical solutions that materialize out of thin air with no human input, the Torah dismisses the notion of thoughts and prayers as a substitute for action.

At the Red Sea, God urges Moshe to have his people quickly get a move on. The Midrash expands this discussion; God rebuked Moshe that it was an inappropriate moment for lengthy prayers – there was danger close, and it was time for decisive action.

Rashi suggests that God was annoyed at the people's prayer at the sea because they seized their ancestral craft – תִּפְשׂוּ אֲמִנוֹת אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם. The Maharal explains that prayer isn't craftsmanship, like carpentry or plumbing. Prayer is supposed to be heartfelt and soulful! But they cried out to God as the last resort of their ancestors, a weak effort that betrayed deep fear and insecurity and the cynical despair of helplessness that all was lost. It was an inferior, or at least suboptimal, immature prayer that betrayed a lack of belief, both in God and in themselves, that there was nothing they could do!

Only they were wrong to think there was nothing else they could do, and we'd be equally wrong for thinking prayer could ever work in a vacuum. As R' Shlomo Farhi explains, they should have believed enough in their prayer to stop praying and get moving, but they were frozen and paralyzed.

In sharp contrast, our ancestor Yakov prepared to reunite with Esau years after wronging him and meticulously prepared for their meeting. He prepared for peace by sending waves of lavish gifts to Esau; prepared for battle and victory, arming his young family and training them; prepared for defeat and death, dividing his family in two in the hope that the second camp might escape without Esau ever knowing they existed; and then finally, he prays that God is with him and that his family survives.

As R' Noach Weinberg highlights, Yakov prepares for peace, victory, and death, which is to say that he did no less than everything possible to prepare for all eventualities before prayer, even though God had already promised to be with him and that his children would inherit the land and his legacy.

Maybe that's what our efforts have to look like to give our prayers a hook to latch on to – even when God promises.

God didn't want their prayers at the Red Sea because it wasn't time to pray; it was time to act! But they couldn't because they had given up and were consumed with fear. Perhaps that lends enduring power to the legacy of Nachshon ben Aminadav, whom the Midrash heralds for clambering into the water when he could not yet know what would happen because just maybe there was one last thing to try before giving up, finding room for a ray of hope amid the clouds of despair – a hope that drove action.

R' Shlomo Farhi suggests that the biggest challenge to our faith and belief is time, that we give up prematurely.

By wading into the water, Nachshon showed people who thought they had reached the outer limit of what they could do and revealed that the boundary was just a little further than they'd thought. They'd stopped at the shore, but he boldly and bravely stepped into the impossible and waded up to his neck without waiting for instructions, leading by example in the face of uncertainty, the quality of his tribe, Yehuda. And when he did that, he sparked salvation, upending the natural order, and the ocean split for all.

Perhaps that underpins God's irritation at why they cry out – they are parked on the beach, crying, but what exactly do they expect God to do with that?! We can almost hear God begging for something to work with – tell them to get up and get going!

To be sure, we should not judge our ancestors too harshly for being afraid. The fight, flight, or freeze response is hardcoded into our DNA and predates human consciousness; people tend to freeze when their families are about to get massacred.



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But God speaks through them to us, and we should ask ourselves if our own prayers are corrupted by fear or despair and yet still wonder why our prayers go unanswered. We must audit our lives, soul-searching about whether we truly mean our prayers. Does the way you spend your life align with what you claim to want? Does what you pay attention to and devote time to reflect that? We should wonder if God might give us a similarly terrifying answer about what we're asking God to work with.

If you're crying crocodile tears, you shouldn't be surprised that your prayers don't seem to be working; you may need to confront the reality that your prayers are wildly mediocre.

You won't get the dream job you don't apply to. You won't get healthy if you don't diet and exercise. You won't pass the test if you don't study the material. You won't get rich if you don't invest. Your relationship won't be meaningful if you don't give your partner attention. That's the way the world works; if you expect your prayer to change that fundamental reality, you will likely continue to be disappointed.

You need to animate your life with action and hope, like our ancestor Yakov, like our hero Pinchas, and invoke the incredible bravery of Nachshon. God desperately wants to shower us with blessings, but we need to build the vessels that contain those blessings, or they have no place to land.

The future is concealed and uncertain; what lies ahead is shrouded in the darkness of the unknowable. But we can illuminate it with bold and decisive actions that brighten each step along the way. And with each step, certainly pray to meet with good fortune and success.

If there's something you've been praying on for a while, stop being a soldier and think like a general – strategize for a moment. Every person who wants something different from their performance than what they're getting is doing something to perpetuate poor outcomes. Bluntly consider what you could be doing better to make it happen, and do those things.

Miracles happen, but they start with your effort and dedication toward your dreams. Thoughts and prayers are not a substitute for action.

You must believe in a positive outcome enough to invest real effort into making it a reality.

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.



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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.