



## Emor 2023

### The Heart of Worship

3 minute read | Straightforward

Prayer is a central aspect of Judaism, if not all religious beliefs. It is an invocation or act that deliberately seeks out and interfaces with the divine.

Although prayer does appear obliquely or sporadically in the Torah, it is not the predominant mode of worship in the Torah or the ancient world the Torah appeared in, an era where animal sacrifice was a near cultural universal. Our sages went out of their way to teach that prayer doesn't just appear in the Torah; prayer stands in as a direct replacement or substitute for the lapsed sacrifices of long ago.

Our prayers are replete with requests to restore Jerusalem and rebuild the Beis HaMikdash. However, authorities are divided on whether the future we yearn for heralds a restoration or replacement of animal sacrifice. While that remains speculative until we find out, it is probably fair to say that it is hard for people in the modern world to wrap their heads around animal sacrifice.

Today's near cultural universal is that animal sacrifice is alien and weird, perhaps even disgusting and nasty. Most people don't want to watch an animal get slaughtered; any arcane mysticism is hard to imagine over the blood and gore.

That leaves prayer in a bit of a void; prayer is a stand-in or substitute for animal sacrifice, and yet an animal sacrifice is hard to relate to in almost every conceivable way, so far removed as it is from our primary experience. Moreover, the Torah has long sections devoted to the different categories and kinds of sacrifice and their details and nuances; sacrifice is clearly the primary mode of worship in the Torah's conception, so prayer seems second-rate.

Either way, prayer is hard to understand. If prayer and sacrifice aren't connected, why bother with something the Torah doesn't validate as having much significance? And if prayer is connected to sacrifice, what element of sacrifice do we even relate to?

The Torah opens the section on sacrifices by outlining a scenario where someone wants to bring an offering:

אָדָם כִּי־יִקְרִיב מִמֶּנּוּ קֹרְבָן לַיהוָה – When one of you presents an offering for God... (1:2)

Although not readily obvious in translation, the Torah utilizes highly unusual language here. Rather than present the sensible scenario where one of you wants to bring an offering, it literally translates to



when someone offers an offering of you, which is to say, literally of yourselves – אָדָם מִמֶּנּוּ / אָדָם / אָדָם  
בְּיִקְרִיב מִמֶּנּוּ.

The Baal HaTanya notes that this reading suggests that at the earliest juncture, the Torah already indicates that as much it's going to talk about animal offerings, it's not about the animal at all; it's about the part of yourself you're willing to offer, and prayer would operate in much the same way – בְּיִקְרִיב מִמֶּנּוּ.

R' Jonathan Sacks teaches that the conventional notion of sacrifice isn't really reflected in the Hebrew term – קָרְבָן. We think of sacrifice as giving something up when the Hebrew word actually means something more like drawing closer – קָרַב. You interact with the divine not with what you give up but by drawing close with what you have; in offering the material to God, you transform the material into the sacred.

God doesn't need our stuff and can't receive it in any tangible way; the Malbim teaches that all a person can ever offer is themselves, which mirrors precisely what the Torah calls for here – בְּיִקְרִיב מִמֶּנּוּ. The Sfas Emes explains that the notion articulated here is that sacrifice and prayer are about aligning ourselves and resources to God's broader plan; prayer isn't secondary to sacrifice; it is the same.

While the form of seeking out the divine may have changed over time depending on the zeitgeist, the substance has remained constant. At the root of all mysticism is a desire to connect with the divine transcendence, and our sages have long identified the inner world of the heart as the battlefield of spirituality – עבודת שבלב. So we can read the Yom Kippur atonement ritual that seems odd to modern sensibilities, yet it maintains relevance to our prayers because the substance transcends the form of the performative aspect; that God forgives humans who want to make amends, goats and string or not.

It's not the form of how it appears so much as it's about the substance of how it is – אחד המרבה ואחד ואחד – הממעטט ובלבד שיכוין לבו לשמים.

As Moshe said to his audience, our Creator is always close, quite different from other gods they might have heard of who can only be invoked with specific rituals – כִּי מִיִּגְוִי גָדוֹל אֲשֶׁר־לוֹ אֱלֹהִים קְרִיבִים אֵלָיו כֹּה אֱלֹהֵינוּ – בְּכִלְיִקְרָאנוּ אֵלָיו.

The Izhbitzer suggests that our subconscious hearts and minds hope and pray all the time. When you whisper “Please, God,” hope for the best, or wish that things turn out okay, those unspoken but very real thoughts are prayers that bring tangible wisps of warmth into the world that affirm and sustain, from which things can and will eventually grow – קָרוֹב ה' לְכָל קְרָאיו לְכָל אֲשֶׁר יִקְרָאָהוּ בְּאֵמַת –

As the Kotzker said, where can we find God? Wherever we let Him in.

Sacrifice, like prayer, was always about the inner world of the spirit, about opening your heart and yourself to the universe.

And prayer, like sacrifice, can't change God; but it can change you.

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## **Countdown**

3 minute read | Straightforward

While the Torah tends to designate specific calendar dates for the Chagim, Shavuos is a notable exception. Shavuos was the harvest festival, but it also marks the anniversary of Sinai when the Torah was given to humanity. Yet the way the Torah conceives of it, it's not about a specific calendar date; it's all about the countdown:

וספרתם לָכֶם מִמַּחֲרַת הַשַּׁבָּת מִיּוֹם הַבִּיאָכֶם אֶת-עֹמֶר הַתְּנוּפָה שִׁבְעַת שָׁבָע שָׁבָתוֹת תְּמִימֹת תִּהְיֶינָה. עַד מִמַּחֲרַת הַשַּׁבָּת הַשְּׂבִיעִית תִּסְפְּרוּ חֲמִשִּׁים יוֹם וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם מִנְחָה חֲדָשָׁה לַיהוָה – And from the day on which you bring the sheaf of elevation offering—the day after Shabbos—you shall count seven weeks. They must be complete: you must count until the day after the seventh week—fifty days; then you shall bring an offering of new grain to Hashem. (23:15, 16)

This count from Pesach to Shavuos is the mitzvah we know as Sefiras HaOmer. As the Sefer HaChinuch notes, standing at Sinai, there was an excellent reason to count the days to Shavuos; Moshe was gone, and they were supposed to wait for him to come back, and when they finished counting, they experienced Divine revelation. But when we finish the countdown, nothing ever happens. Shavuos is just an anniversary!

Our ancestors counted a Sefira to Shavuos so they could receive the Torah. Why do we count our Sefira to Shavuos, where nothing happens?

R' Yitzchok Berkovits observes that it is precisely correct to observe that nothing happens on the anniversary of receiving the Torah; because Torah isn't something that happens to humans – that was the one-time event. Since then, it's something humans have to work for, and that's why we count Sefira.

A birthday is just an anniversary, and an anniversary is just an anniversary. If you just wake up on the morning of your kid's birthday, nothing at all will happen. But what can make a birthday or anniversary incredibly special is if you put heart and thought into the days leading up to it. Did you order a cake, balloons, presents, and write cards? Plan a party, invite their friends, remind loved ones, book a table at their favorite restaurant, order their favorite treats? If you did some of those things,



then instead of nothing happening, something extraordinary will happen; just another Tuesday will magically transform into a timeless feeling of deep love and happiness that will linger for a lifetime.

It might not be right to say that revelation at Sinai was the main event, and then the anniversary is just an anniversary. As the Kli Yakar notes, the Torah only ever refers to Shavuot by its agricultural component, and never for the commemorative anniversary aspect of Sinai; because the date that humans receive the Torah is specifically not located in the past – it's forever in the here and now. Quite arguably, it's more correct to say that Sinai was a thing that happened, but it's what we do with it now that is the main event.

So sure, Shavuot is just an anniversary; but Sefira is the effort we invest in the lead-up. If we think that Torah is something that just happens to us with no investment of effort or desire, we have fundamentally missed the nature of what the Torah asks of us. We have to search for it, desire it, and labor for it to become a part of us. It does not happen by kicking back to listen to a nice class or reading a good book.

If we believe that the Torah is ultimate wisdom, the handbook for making humans more human, the guide to living a good life, how badly do we want it? How lost are we without it? We know all too well how blind and stupid we can be, hurting ourselves and each other needlessly over the silliest nonsense. The Torah asks everything of us, yet returns everything richer and fuller. If we take it seriously, we can curb our worst excesses, draw out our finest qualities, honing and refining our character and personalities into the brightest fires that warm and light the lives of everyone we touch. But it's not the calendar date that anchors and orients us; because nothing happens; it's just Tuesday! It's our countdown that makes all the difference.

The sad reality is that even the best of us believe that just learning Torah improves our character by osmosis, but most of us know from lived experience that it doesn't; you actually have to put in the effort.

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## Nobody's Perfect

4 minute read | Advanced

Temple service is central to the Torah's conception of religious life. Priests, sacrificial worship, and purity were paramount to conducting daily life.

The Torah discusses these at great length and detail, utilizing the imagery and language of perfection to emphasize their importance.



The Mishkan and Temple are serious communal undertakings that receive substantial attention. They were aesthetically impressive and ornate, with precious metals and stones utilized throughout; the architecture was built and honed with fine precision.

The sacrifices had to be perfect; they couldn't be injured in any way and had to be presented with pristine intention before, during, and after. The sacrifices had to be brought in perfect states of ritual purity; the offeror, offering, and priest required meticulous ritual purity.

The priests were facilitators of the people's religious experiences; their role was to assist the public with the performance of their rituals and maintain the sanctity of sacred space and things. As such, they were expected to embody an idealized form of physical and spiritual purity.

Any contamination, deviation, or flaw disqualifies the whole thing; everything had to be perfect. As such, in what can appear offensive to people with contemporary sensibilities, the Torah blocks priests with disabilities from Temple service:

וַדַּבֵּר אֶל־אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר אִישׁ מִזֶּרְעֶךָ לְדֹרֹתֶם אֲשֶׁר יְהִיָּה בוֹ מוּם לֹא יִקְרַב לְהִקְרִיב לְקֹדֶשׁ אֲלֵקִי (21:16) – Speak to Aaron and say: No man of your offspring with a defect shall be qualified to make the offering to his God throughout the ages. (21:16)

Although such individuals are permitted nearly all other rights and privileges of priesthood, including handling, receiving, and consuming the priestly gifts, they weren't allowed to perform Temple service. Even today, there can be a question of whether individuals with disabilities can participate in the priestly blessing or be counted towards the minimum number required for public prayers.

This notion is at odds with our modern society so heavily focused on inclusion and recognizes the value of all individuals. But where some aspects of inclusion might be controversial, the inclusion of individuals with disabilities, injuries, and special needs is not. One popular activity for young adults in our times is volunteering to visit and care for special needs individuals; the charities, camps, and organizations supporting them and their families are ubiquitous and rightly celebrated.

There's nothing bad or wrong with individuals with special needs; the Torah's exclusion of priests with disabilities appears particularly problematic to us.

Why does the Torah exclude people with disabilities from priestly duties and Temple service?

This question is particularly challenging because it puts a fundamental law in the Torah at odds with a mainstream sensibility that makes a lot of sense; the implication that something is bad or wrong with people with disabilities should be considered highly offensive.

That implication may be wrong.



The cultural and historical context of perfection plays a vital role in our experience and perception.

The Torah treats the requirements of perfect sacrifices in the same section as its treatment of priests with disabilities, and presents a basis for perfect sacrifices; a requirement that the offering be something that people find acceptable and favorable – לְרִצְוֹנְכֶם / כֹּל אֲשֶׁר-בוֹ מוֹם לֹא תִקְרִיבוּ כִּי-לֹא לְרִצּוֹן יְהוָה לָכֶם – . At the very outset, the Torah introduces an element of subjectivity.

What's more, our sages teach that an individual with unusual facial features or skin pigmentations is not permitted to say the priestly blessing with his brothers; and yet they cite numerous exceptions that are permitted when people are accustomed to the condition – reinforcing the subjectivity of what people do and do not find unsettling.

Beyond the subjectivity of what is and is not perfect, it's probably incorrect to conclude that the Temple processes are perfect because humans need to appear or pretend to be perfect.

Nobody is perfect.

The religious rituals are not magic formulas that are ineffective if not performed perfectly; they are symbolic representations that promote spiritual growth and self-improvement.

As R' Shimshon Raphael Hirsch explains, humans are moral agents responsible for their actions. By bringing a sacrifice, you demonstrate a willingness to stop doing bad things and utilize your ability to act and choose to rededicate your actions and choices to do good things.

The Torah's law isn't a justification that exists in a vacuum; it's subjective, a mirror that reflects its audience's cultural and historical context.

The physical condition of a person or thing was often considered a reflection of spiritual well-being, so deformities were sometimes perceived as a reflection of spiritual imperfections. An injured animal or assistant would then serve as an obstacle to the introspection, self-reflection, and spiritual growth the rituals are intended to stir, not because they are bad, but because that's how they are experienced.

A large part of the sacrificial rituals is about dissociating from imperfection; the simple reality is that until only recently, individuals with disabilities and special needs have been stigmatized and rejected. But thankfully, we have a deeper appreciation of the dignity and value of every individual than our ancestors might have. We recognize that nobody is perfect; people with disabilities or special needs are no less perfect than anyone else.

The sacrificial system allowed people to express their devotion, gratitude, and repentance to God. By offering an unblemished and perfect animal, worshippers demonstrated their commitment to providing their highest and best possible selves.



In other words, the sacrifice is a selfless act that symbolizes the transformation and change in the human.

This recognizes that humans are highly imperfect; the elaborate theatrics of perfection isn't because the things we do and who we are will never be perfect. But our aspirations should be; so the instruments, symbols, and tools should be as perfect as possible. Excluding priests with disabilities from performing certain public services is not a statement on the worth or value of individuals with disabilities; it illustrates the symbolic nature of priestly services.

It's crucial not to compromise on ideals; ideals are the rocket fuel for everything that matters in life, for the people we try to become, and our impact on others.

Today, one of our shared ideals is creating more compassionate and inclusive communities that understand and embrace the experiences of individuals with disabilities and special needs.

The Torah's emphasis on perfection never meant that we should expect ourselves or others to be perfect in every aspect of life. It reminds us that we should strive to uphold our highest values and principles to the best of our abilities while still recognizing and embracing the inherent imperfections and vulnerabilities that make us human.

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## Pure Priorities

5 minute read | Straightforward

In the Jewish Tradition, the human body and human life are sacrosanct, seeing as humans are created in God's image – חָבִיב אָדָם שֶׁנִּבְרָא בְצַלְמֵם.

Traditional burial is mandatory for Jews; other funeral rites, including cremation, are prohibited. The mitzvah of burial includes a component of urgency that, for certain close relatives, nearly all positive obligations are suspended until after the burial has concluded to facilitate prompt burial. It is degrading to allow a body, which remains sacred even in death, to lie idle and unburied – קְבוּרַת הַתְּקַבְּרָנוּ – בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא פִּי־קָלְלַת אֱלֹקִים תְּלוּי.

But although there are tangible and practical laws relating to death, the Torah also talks about intangible laws, the laws of ritual impurity which result from death.

In the Torah's conception of a Jewish nation-state, ritual purity was a prominent element of daily life. All people were to be mindful of their purity status at all times, because a state of impurity makes people unsuited to specific activities and puts them at risk of contaminating sanctified foods and



objects. A person in a state of impurity must undergo a predefined purification process that usually includes the passage of a specified amount of time.

Although we no longer practice most purity laws today, we still retain certain ritual practices such as immersion for our bodies or kitchenware as a legacy of these laws.

Traditionally, the job description for any practicing Kohen was to be knowledgeable and fluent in this arcane and specialized body of law, which was essential given their role in Temple service as well as their year-round consumption of sacred foods that only a Kohen could interact with and only while in a state of ritual purity.

The way the Torah categorizes impurity doesn't neatly correlate with anything we can relate to today; it has nothing to do with hygiene or sin.

But perhaps it's something like this.

Death is the archetypal trigger of existential dread; the confusion and disorientation that result from contemplating our subjective experience of thinking, feeling, and acting in this mode of existence as meaningless and absurd. All you have ever known is your conscious attachment and connection to the universe we experience; one day, that will cease to exist.

The notion of death exposes the fleeting fragility of human life, a thought antithetical to our entire primary experience in this living universe, undermining any real meaning or value to our lives, and exposure to it imparts a status-affecting condition called tuma, which loosely translates to impurity.

Someone out of the state of ritual purity is disqualified from a realm of everyday activities in the land of Israel. Still, for most people, it doesn't matter most of the time, so most people didn't have to be mindful of these laws and can attend to the dead with no issue.

Given that a kohen's life and work revolve around purity, it follows that a kohen's attending to the dead is more restricted; even today, a kohen may not intentionally come into contact with a dead body nor approach too closely graves within a Jewish cemetery, except for certain legally defined close relatives.

The Kohen Gadol was held to even stricter standards; he wasn't even allowed to contaminate himself to attend to a deceased parent.

Beyond the hierarchy of purity standards that exists for people, there is also a hierarchy of purity in time. Before Yom Kippur, the Kohen Gadol would isolate for seven days to attain the highest purity status and perform his most sacred ritual duties in the Holy of Holies on the holiest day of the calendar.



While it's clear that ritual purity plays a central and pervasive role in the Torah's conception of Jewish life, there is a revealing exception. In a landscape where purity is everything, the Torah obligates all Jewish people to take responsibility for the burial of an unattended Jewish body; this obligation supersedes every purity law and is almost if not entirely overriding – מת מצוה.

If you hear about a Jewish person who has died and has no one to perform a Jewish burial, there is a rare mitzvah to handle the burial personally, and even a Kohen is obligated. Usually, since the Kohen is unrelated, he would not otherwise be permitted to handle the burial. But there is no one else, and the obligation to immediately bury unattended dead is so compelling that it even obligates a Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe highlights this hierarchy of laws to reveal the Torah's sense of where human priorities ought to lie.

Even the holiest person, on the most sacred day of the year, about to perform his holiest and most core function, must roll up his sleeves and wade into someone else's mess and get their hands dirty. This explicitly states that no one is above serving others; it is a grave mistake to be too good for that. The correct decision under the circumstances is to forgo performing his duties on Yom Kippur; the Torah that demands his Yom Kippur service states that it is subject to his duty to bury the dead.

The Torah obligates all of us to take responsibility for the unattended dead; the Lubavitcher Rebbe asks us to wonder what it might ask of us concerning the living dead, people born Jewish and yet totally unaffiliated, cut off, and isolated from any trace of Judaism?

While the analogy isn't precise, perhaps it's directionally accurate.

The Jewish People are a sanctified nation where all are called to serve – מְמַלְכֵת כְּהֲנָנִים וְגוֹי קָדוֹשׁ.

However holy or self-righteous, the Torah demands that you get off your high horse, roll up your sleeves, and attend to physical and spiritual orphans, people who don't have anyone else. If the Kohen Gadol encounters an unattended dead body on Yom Kippur, his role and duties are suspended entirely; his only responsibility is to help the person in front of him.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe's followers took this teaching to heart; pioneering heroes and their brave families moved across the globe to set up a Jewish presence. They stepped far beyond their comfort zones with enormous self-sacrifice out of concern for others.

It might be a bit much to ask that of yourself, but you don't have to move to the middle of nowhere to recognize that attending to the needs of others is one of the Torah's highest priorities. The Kotzker mocked the Tzaddik in pelts, a holy man in his fur coat. When people are cold, does the righteous man gather materials to light a fire, or does he huddle in his warm jacket, praying intensely for their wellbeing?



When God talks to Avraham about what it would take to save the people of Sodom, God's conception of righteous people worth saving is people who are out on the streets, engaging with and influencing their surroundings – צדיקים בתוך העיר.

We don't live with purity at the forefront of our minds. But the Torah consistently reminds us where the purity of our priorities must lie.

Caring for others is a core part of the spiritual life. A spiritual life that doesn't engage the world with acts of care and compassion towards others isn't spiritual at all.

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## **An Eye for An Eye Redux**

5 minute read | Straightforward

One of the most bizarre and incomprehensible laws of the entire Torah was also one of the ancient world's most important laws – the law of retaliation; also called lex talionis:

עַיִן תַּחַת עֵינֹן שֵׁן תַּחַת שֵׁן יָד תַּחַת יָד רֶגֶל תַּחַת רֶגֶל: – An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a hand for a hand, a foot for a foot. (21:24)

The law of retaliation isn't the Torah's innovation; it appears in other Ancient Near Eastern law codes that predate the text of the Torah, such as the Code of Hammurabi. All the same, it appears three times in the Torah, and its words are barbaric and cruel to modern eyes, easily dismissed as unworthy of humane civilization.

People who wish to express their opposition to forgiveness, concession, and compensation, insisting on retaliation of the most brutal and painful kind, will quote “An eye for an eye” as justification, conjuring a vision of hacked limbs and gouged eyes.

This law is alien and incomprehensible to us because we lack the necessary context; we fail to recognize its contemporary importance to early human civilization.

The human desire for revenge isn't petty and shallow. It stems from a basic instinct for fairness and self-defense that all creatures possess; and also from a deeply human place of respect and self-image. When a person is slighted, they self-righteously need to retaliate to restore balance. It makes sense.

The trouble is, balance is delicate and near impossible to restore, so far more often, people would escalate violence, and so early human societies endured endless cycles of vengeance and violence. In this ancient lawless world, revenge was a severe destabilizing force.



This is the context we are missing. In such a world, societies developed and imposed the law of retaliation as a cap and curb violence by prohibiting vigilante justice and disproportionate vengeance. An eye for an eye – that, and crucially, no more. It stops the cycle of escalation, and tempers, if not neuters, the human desire for retribution. Crucially, it stops feuds from being personal matters, subordinating revenge to law and justice by inserting the law between men, a key political theory called the state monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force.

R' Jonathan Sacks observes that the same rationale underlies the Torah's requirement to establish sanctuary cities. The Torah inserts laws between the avenger and the killer, and a court must give the order. Revenge is not personal, and it is sanctioned by society.

This was familiar to the Torah's original audience. We ought to reacquaint ourselves with this understanding – the law is not barbaric and primitive at all; it's essential to building a society.

Even more importantly, our Sages taught that these words are not literal, and instead, the remedy for all bodily injury is monetary compensation. The Torah forecloses compensation for murder – לא תקחו לא תפיש רוצח. כופר לנפש רוצח. The fact the Torah chooses not to for bodily injuries necessarily means compensation is allowed. And since people are of different ages, different genders, and in different trades, with discrete strengths and weaknesses; mirroring the injury isn't a substitute at all, so paying compensation is the exclusive remedy, in a sharp application of the rule of law – there shall be only one law, equitable to all – משפט אחד יהיה לכם.

Before dismissing this as extremely warped apologetics, the overwhelming academic consensus is that no society practiced the law as it is written. Today, we readily understand that if we suffer bodily injury, we sue the perpetrators' insurance company, and the ancient world understood that tradeoff too.

How much money would the victim accept to forgo the satisfaction of seeing the assailant suffer the same injury? How much money would the assailant be willing to pay to keep his own eye? There is most certainly a price each would accept, and all that's left is to negotiate the settlement figure, which is where the court can step in. Even where the law is not literally carried out, the theoretical threat provides a valuable and perhaps even necessary perspective for justice in society.

It's vital to understand this as a microcosm for understanding the whole work of the Torah. There is a much broader point here about how we need to understand the context of the Torah to get it right, and we need the Oral Tradition to get it right as well. The text is contingent, to an extent, on the body of law that interprets and implements it.

Without one or the other, we are getting a two-dimensional look at the very best, or just plain wrong at worst. If we were pure Torah literalists, we would blind and maim each other and truly believe we are doing perfect like-for-like justice! After all, what more closely approximates the cost of losing an



eye than taking an eye?! Doesn't it perfectly capture balance, precision, and proportionality elegantly? It holds before us the tantalizing possibility of getting divinely sanctioned justice exactly right!

But we'd be dead wrong. Taking an eye for an eye doesn't fix anything; it just breaks more things.

The original purpose of the law of retaliation was to limit or even eliminate revenge by revising the underlying concept of justice. Justice was no longer obtained by personal revenge but by proportionate punishment of the offender in the form of compensation enforced by the state. While not comprehensive, perhaps this overview can help us look at something that seemed so alien, just a bit more knowingly.

There's a valuable lesson here. The literal reading of *lex talionis* is a vindictive punishment that seeks pure cold justice to mirror the victim's pain and perhaps serve as a deterrent.

With our new understanding, compensation is not punitive at all – it's restitutive and helps correct bad behavior. You broke something or caused someone else pain, and now you need to fix it – and you don't have to maim yourself to make it right!

R' Shlomo Farhi notes that our sages taught a form of stand your ground doctrine; when someone is coming to kill you, you can use deadly force and kill them first. But even that is tempered with a caveat that if you have the ability to neutralize them without killing them, you aren't permitted to use deadly force. De facto, it's fully conceivable that in the heat of the moment, there is a split-second decision and you can't afford to be precise, but de jure, the point stands that even when force is authorized, there is no free pass. Our sages require scholars to stand up for themselves in the way a snake does; snakes have no sense of taste or smell, and a scholar's self-defense must be free of petty vindictiveness – תלמיד חכם שאינו נוקם ונוטר כנחש, אינו תלמיד חכם.

There is nothing outdated about the law of retaliation. It's as timely as ever because we all break things. We hurt others, and sometimes we hurt ourselves too. Our Sages urge us to remember that one broken thing is bad, and two broken things are worse. We can't fix what is broken by adding more pain and hope to heal.

Taking it further, there is a wider lesson here as well. In seeking justice for ourselves, we needn't go overboard by crushing our enemies and hearing the lamentations of their women. We can and should protect ourselves and our assets, but we needn't punish our adversaries mercilessly such that they never cross us again. In a negotiation, don't squash the other side just because you can. It's about making it right, not winning. Channeling the law of retaliation, don't escalate. Think in terms of restitution, not retribution.

Do all you must, sure, but don't do all you could.



## TorahRedux

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

*I hope you enjoyed this week's thoughts. If you have questions or comments, or just want to say hello, it's a point of pride for me to hear from you, and I'll always respond. And if you saw, heard, read, or watched anything that spoke to you, please send it my way - [Neli@TorahRedux.com](mailto:Neli@TorahRedux.com).*

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

Neli

**PS** - *TorahRedux is my pride and joy, the product of thousands of hours of learning, research, writing, editing, and formatting. I have been blessed to operate a business that allows me to dedicate a substantial amount of time to TorahRedux, and I welcome your assistance in furthering my goal to keep publishing high-quality Parsha content that makes a difference. I broker healthcare businesses for sale; I kindly ask for your blessings and prayers, and introductions to anyone who might want to buy or sell a healthcare business!*

**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.