



Nitzavim; Rosh Hashana 2022

Mental Game

3 minute read | Straightforward

Why do some people accomplish their goals while others fail?

Usually, we default to talking about skill and talent. That's when we say things like he is the smartest, or she is the quickest.

Sometimes, we talk about luck. That's when we say things like someone was in the right place at the right time, or they finally caught a break.

But we all know there is more to it than that.

Talent and luck are part of what it takes, sure. But when we look at top performers across all fields, there's something that outweighs both – mental game.

We recognize that top performers have an insatiable desire to persevere that carries them through the troughs of adversity and resistance and into the heights of achievement and success. They have both reactive and proactive qualities; they can endure difficult situations until they persevere and overcome adversity, obstacles, or pressure. They then go on to maintain focus and motivation when things are going well to achieve their goals consistently.

Talent and skill have normal distributions; some people have more, and some people have less. But research has consistently shown that strength or smarts aren't the most accurate predictions of achievement. Instead, it was grit – the perseverance and passion to achieve long-term goals – that made the difference.

We've probably seen evidence of this in our own lives. There's that friend who squandered their talent, and then that other person who gave their all to accomplish their goal, no matter how hard it was or how long it took. In other words, talent is overrated.

R' Shmshon Raphael Hirsch notes that humans are created in God's image, meaning humans possess a capacity for free choice that distinguishes us from all other creatures.

R' Noach Weinberg teaches that desire, the free will to persevere, is evenly distributed, meaning that every one of us has an equal ability to choose, which ought to be hugely empowering. It means any of us can accomplish real greatness, and it starts with just choosing to want it badly enough.

The notion that humans have free will is the radical proposition that cuts to the very core of Judaism:



הַעֲדוֹתַי בְּכֶם הַיּוֹם אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ הַחַיִּים וְהַמְּוֹת נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ הַבְּרָכָה וְהַקְּלָלָה וּבַחֲרָתָּ בַחַיִּים לְמַעַן תַּחֲזֶה אִתָּה וְזָרַעַד
heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life, so you and your children will live! (30:19)

As the Rambam wrote, every one of us could choose to be as righteous as Moshe himself if we genuinely wanted to. Avos d'R' Nosson teaches that the entire Torah is within everybody's reach – עמלה של תורה, כל הרוצה ליטול יבוא ויטול / מורשה קהלת יעקב.

You have to believe in yourself and in your ability to do it – וְצַדִּיק בְּאִמּוּנָתוֹ יִהְיֶה. The Ramban suggests that it's heresy to doubt yourself!

R' Tzadok HaKohen explains that believing in God necessarily requires that you believe in yourself. God put you here to do something, so God obviously believes in your ability to perform. It follows that if you don't think God believes in you, you don't properly believe in God!

Your mental game plays a more important role than anything else in achieving your health, business, and life goals. That's good news because while you can't do much about the genes you were born with, you can do a lot to develop mental toughness. Mental toughness is a learned trait that anyone can develop.

There is undoubtedly some natural inclination that makes self-mastery easier for some people, but it is not a limiting factor in itself, however. Everyone's ability to think, plan and execute is enough if they make use of it.

Regardless of the talent you were born with, you can become more consistent and disciplined, and you can develop superhuman levels of mental toughness.

It's something you build, but it's also something you maintain and grow. Newly conquered territory becomes your new comfort zone soon enough.

When things get tough for most people, they find something easier to work on. When things get difficult for mentally tough people, they find a way to stay on course. There will always be extreme moments that require incredible bouts of courage, determination, resiliency, and grit, and even the best of us will fail. There will never be a human who only succeeds and does not fail – כִּי אָדָם אֵין צַדִּיק – בְּאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה טוֹב וְלֹא יִחָטָא.

Every tough-as-nails person has faced sink-or-swim moments, and they didn't choose to sink, float, or tread water. They chose life; they chose to swim. Every descendant of Jewish history is the heir to an intrinsic and inescapable legacy of people who chose to live proactively and not reactively. The bedrock of contemporary Jewish life today was substantially laid by Holocaust survivors, people who chose life, building anew in the wake of the devastation they endured.



But for most of life's circumstances and challenges, toughness simply comes down to being more consistent than most people. Every day, cultivate your mental game a little and make life-affirming and life-enhancing choices.

Choose life – ובחרת בחיים.

Because hard work beats talent when talent doesn't work hard.

Transcending Time

3 minute read | Straightforward

From Rosh Hashana through Sukkos, honey features prominently at the festive meals. Honey is sweet, and it functions as a symbol for the sweet new year we yearn for.

But think about it for a moment, using honey is odd. Honey is sweet, but it comes from bees, which have a painful sting and are not kosher creatures.

Honey is a complex sugar; why don't we use simple cane sugar, a naturally growing plant that metabolizes into the energy that fuels all living things?

The universe operates on fundamental laws of physics that express empirical facts and describe physical properties of how the natural universe works. One such law is the law of entropy, which describes how natural states tend to undergo increasing decay and disorder over time. Eventually, all things break down.

The Midrash suggests that the notion of Teshuva predates the universe, which suggests that it is of a higher order that transcends its constraints; Teshuva is above space and time, and therefore not subject to entropy.

Creation is an environment where humans can make choices. The nature of a test is that it is challenging; you can pass or fail. As much as God can want us to pass a test, the objective fact remains that tests can and will be failed. But God is not gratuitously cruel and does not set us up to fail; the fact we can fail necessarily requires the existence of Teshuva, so failure is not the end. A person can learn from their mistakes, put it behind them, and move on.

R' Nechemia Sheinfeld explains that the supernatural aspect of Teshuva is that it unwinds the effect of time and entropy; we can repair our mistakes, removing the decay, leaving only the lesson we have learned. Teshuva is not an after-the-fact solution; it's baked into the fabric of the creation process, so redemption is structurally possible from the outset.



Existence without Teshuva would be static and stagnant – there would be no recovery from failure or setbacks, no growth, and therefore no life. Teshuva must predate existence, because that’s the only way life can change and become.

With Teshuva, sins and transgressions can be recategorized based on motivation. When Teshuva is motivated by fear, sins are downgraded to accidents and oversights; when motivated by love, sins can become merits. It’s intuitive; the way a person adapts their past mistakes materially affects the way you incorporate the lessons learned to be a better person.

It’s a bit like learning to ride a bicycle. The first time you lose your balance, you fall and hurt yourself. Maybe next time you wear a helmet and pads, and you slowly learn how to keep your balance. If you focus on how bad falling hurts, you’ll never learn to ride the bike. But once you learn to keep your balance, you forget about falling, and maybe you don’t need the pads anymore. You now know how to ride a bicycle.

R’ Shlomo Farhi teaches that this is why the Hebrew word for “year” – שנה – is cognate to the words שני and שנוי – “secondary” and “change” respectively. Today’s achievements are built on the foundations of yesterday; a repetition would be no different from what came first, and a fresh start can’t carry the lessons along the way. This may help explain why we temporarily behave more diligently day between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur – a reliable foundation is the precursor of a strong building.

R’ Meir Shapiro teaches that this is why specifically honey, and not sugar, is the centerpiece of the holiday imagery. Honey is kosher, despite being a product of non-kosher origins, and maybe you get stung. It’s complex, not simple. But doesn’t that sound a lot like Teshuvah? You made mistakes that weren’t so kosher, maybe they stung a little, and they weren’t so simple, but you can learn and grow from them all the same – you’ve made something kosher from something that’s not.

As R’ Nachman of Breslov taught straightforwardly: if you believe you can break, then believe you can fix.

How to Pray

3 minute read | Straightforward

Prayer is deeply personal, and everyone prays in their own way.

While there are different approaches to precisely how prayer works or what it affects, we assume that the omnipresent and omniscient God is listening, and we know that not every prayer is answered in the way we might hope.



We intuitively understand that the Creator is the Source of all blessing, the final and only destination for all our hopes and dreams. The stakes couldn't be higher – the Creator holds all the cards and pulls all the strings, with the power of life and death and everything in between.

So it's important to pray properly so God will listen.

What are the requirements of a proper prayer that God will listen to?

If you think need righteous and holy saints to pray for you and bless you, you might be surprised because the Torah plainly states otherwise.

In the story of Yitzchak's life, the Torah recounts how his mother Sarah identified the older Yishmael as a corruptive influence on the young Yitzchak, and she sent Yishmael and his mother Hagar away from the family home.

The Torah tells how Hagar and Yishmael wandered, lost in the wilderness, until they ran out of water, and Yishmael slowly dehydrated. Knowing no one was coming to the rescue and with certainty that her son would die suffering, she cried out in complete and utter despair – ותשא אֶת-קִלְיָהּ וַתִּבְרֹךְ.

Completely and utterly miraculously, the Torah tells how Hagar received a vision of a nearby oasis, and she rushes to get the water she needs to save her son.

This seems to conform with our conventional understanding of prayer; the desperate mother crying for her suffering child.

But the Torah does not give credit to Hagar. An angel speaks with her and tells her that everything is going to be okay because the Creator has listened to the prayer – but not Hagar's:

וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶת קוֹל הַנְּעִר וַיִּקְרָא מִלְאָךְ אֱלֹהִים אֶל הַגֵּר מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מַה לָּךְ הַגֵּר אֵל תִּירָאִי כִּי שָׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶל קוֹל הַנְּעִר בְּאֶשְׁרָה הוּא – God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called out to Hagar from heaven, and said to her: “Don't worry, Hagar; God has heard the voice of the boy in his state.” (21:16)

God listens to Yishmael's prayer, not Hagar's – כִּי שָׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶל קוֹל הַנְּעִר.

The story never ascribes an action or a word to Yishmael; he is a passive object in the story, the object of his mother's prayers, the person acted upon, and not the actor.

A mother's tears for her dying son did not move the heavens. But what moved the heavens was the voice of a dying boy, and he never even says a word! Perhaps, in his suffering, he cried or sighed; not even significant enough for the Torah to record it as an action he took.

That literally invisible moment of pain or sadness is what drives the entire story and goes on to shape history, and perhaps it should shape our understanding of prayer.



There are no requirements to pray properly; you just have to mean it, and you don't have to be anyone or anything special. You can just be a kid, and you can just cry because it hurts.

The Midrash imagines the angels arguing against divine intervention to save Yishmael because of the atrocities his descendants would commit, but they lose the argument because God evaluates things differently. God answers the boy based on where he is and the facts and circumstances as they are – בְּאִשָּׁר הוּא נֶשֶׁם.

The story of Yishmael teaches us that prayer isn't confined to ritualized formalities, and maybe that's partly why we read this story on Rosh Hashana.

It doesn't matter who you are or what you've done. You don't need to know how to pray or understand the words.

Our sages conclude from the stories of our ancestors that God loves righteous prayers – הקדוש ברוך הוא מתאוה לתפילתן של צדיקים. R' Shlomo Farhi highlights that God loves righteous prayers, not prayers of the righteous – תפילתן של צדיקים / תפילת צדיקים –

You don't have to be perfect to generate a perfect prayer. Our daily prayers affirm that God is close to the people who call on Him truthfully – יקראוהו באמת, לכל אשר יקראוהו באמת. It is not beyond any of us to ask for help and truly mean it – יקראוהו באמת –

Everyone is capable of a one-off, pure prayer.

Just a single moment of pain from a suffering boy moved the heavens. It is not beyond us.

Symbols Matter

3 minute read | Straightforward

One of the highlights of the Jewish calendar is the Rosh Hashana seder, where it is customary to eat some fun symbolic foods.

Dip the apple in the honey is a timeless classic with an iconic song for a sweet new year, and every community has countless others with puns and wordplay in every language, from bananas, beans, beets, dates, and fish; to leeks, pomegranates, pumpkins, and sometimes a whole lamb head.

What turns the simple food into a time-honored tradition is the small ritual or prayer that accompanies it: apples are sweet, so we wish for a sweet year. Pomegranates are full of seeds, so we wish to be full of good deeds. The head is where the brain is, so we pray to be leaders, not followers. French-speaking communities eat a banana – which they pronounce like “Bonne Année,” the French greeting for “Happy New Year.”



This all sounds like good-natured, light-hearted fun, and it is.

But it's more than that too.

Our sages affirmed that symbolism matters – סימנא מלתא.

Symbolism plays an essential role in human culture. Through symbols, we find meaning in the physical world, which becomes transparent and reveals the transcendent. Certain symbols are cultural universals, primal archetypes intuitively understood that derive from the unconscious and require no explanation, like mother and child or light and darkness.

History doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes – our ancestors' history foreshadows and symbolizes a possible future – מעשה אבות סימן לבנים.

R' Shlomo Farhi explains that these symbols are meant to bring our thoughts and aspirations into the world of action. We dip the apple in the honey and sing and smile, but it actually functions as a placeholder for a universal blessing for a sweet new year.

When Israel's prophets would warn the Jews of impending exile, they wouldn't just talk about doom. They would also incorporate a symbolic visual representation of some kind, offering an experience of the prophecy through action and primary experience rather than mere words alone. When Jeremiah told of the burdens that lay ahead, he wore a cattle yoke; When Isaiah spoke about the people's exposure and vulnerability, he walked around nearly naked. When Ezekiel spoke of the dirty and poor nutrition the Jewish People would experience, he baked a kind of inferior bread over human excrement. The action was not just an eccentric restatement of the message; it was a crucial part of their duty to warn.

These symbols initiate action in the external world, starting the process of realizing our thoughts, wishes, hopes, and dreams.

The apple and honey are staples at every Rosh Hashana table, accompanied by a prayer that the year ahead be good but also sweet. Because not everything sweet is good, and not everything good is sweet – תחדיש עלינו שנה טובה ומתוקה –

Although probably not the most appetizing of symbols, some communities eat a small piece of a fish head or lamb head, with a wish to be among the heads and not the tails – שנהגה לראש ולא לזנב.

When looking at an animal, it may seem like the head and tail are the same, just a body length apart.

R' Shlomo Farhi suggests that, actually, although the tail can occupy the same physical space as the head, it can never occupy the same conceptual space because the head leads, and the tail only ever follows.



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While we can't control all the circumstances, variables, and people that are part of our lives, we always get to choose and exercise our free will. While we can't choose to be happy, healthy, or successful, we can choose to take steps towards making those things more possible and likely.

In other words, all we can choose is what we choose.

If choices define you, and you are a passenger to someone else's preferences, you are functionally their tail; floating with the current is not the same as swimming.

R' Shimshon Pinkus explained it as a wish for a year that is intentional – לראש; with a forward state of becoming, with constant course corrections – שנהיה; because if your actions today are based on yesterday's decisions, you end up being your own tail!

Symbols matter. There is a good reason that these symbols are profoundly beloved and universally accepted in every Jewish home.

These symbols initiate action in the external world, starting the process of realizing our thoughts, wishes, hopes, and dreams.

Make sure you're doing all you can to make them come true.

Onward

4 minute read | Straightforward

The Torah's stories have captured the awe of audiences for three millennia, and rightly so.

The Torahs tell us of astonishing moments like The Binding of Isaac, the ultimate test of human commitment with the future in the balance, and salvation averts tragedy through transparently divine intervention at the very last moment.

The Torah tells us of the harrowing crossing at the Red Sea, where the defenseless Jewish People desperately fled their oppressors, with the most advanced and formidable army in the world in hot pursuit. In a defining moment that upends the entire natural order of our universe, Moshe holds out his staff, and God parts the waters for the Jewish People to walk across the dry ocean floor. The Egyptian army attempts to follow, but once Moshe's people have crossed safely, the sea suddenly reverts back to normal, and the Egyptians are drowned.

The Torah tells us of the theophany at Sinai, where the people gathered at a mountain enveloped in cloud and smoke, quaking, with fire and lightning flashing overhead, amid the sound of booming thunder and shofar blasts; and then the Jewish People hear the voice of God through the uproar.



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These are some of the defining stories of our history and exhibit the dizzying heights of the supernatural. They showcase what is fundamentally magical about the Torah.

But despite the power of these moments to captivate us, the Torah doesn't indulge us by dwelling on them even a little. Just like that, with the stroke of a pen, the Binding of Isaac is behind us, the Red Sea is old news, Sinai is history, and it's time to move onward:

וַיָּשָׁב אַבְרָהָם אֶל-נֶעְרָיו וַיִּקְמוּ וַיֵּלְכוּ יחדוֹ – Avraham returned to his stewards, and they got up and left together... (22:19)

וַיֵּצֵאוּ מִן-סוּף, וַיֵּצְאוּ אֶל-מִדְבַּר-שׁוּר; וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁלֹשַׁת-יָמִים בַּמִּדְבָּר, וְלֹא-מָצְאוּ מַיִם – Moshe and the Children of Israel set out from the Red Sea. They went on into the wilderness of Shur; they traveled three days in the wilderness and found no water. (15:22)

רַב-לָכֶם שָׁבַת, בְּהַר הַזֶּה. פָּנוּ וּסְעוּ לָכֶם – You have stayed long enough at this mountain. (1:6)

We have these distinctly unique stories of the Divine manifested in our universe, and then the Torah just moves briskly onward – וַיֵּצֵאוּ מִן-סוּף / וַיֵּצְאוּ אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל מִן-סוּף / רַב-לָכֶם שָׁבַת, בְּהַר הַזֶּה פָּנוּ וּסְעוּ לָכֶם.

The Torah does not dwell in the magical moments, and the starkness of the almost dismissive continuity is jarring; and there is a vital lesson here. It suggests that even after the greatest of heights, the most momentous achievements, and the most incredible successes, the Torah simply notes that once you get there, you can't stay long, and before you know it, it's time to continue the journey and move onward.

Onward is an interesting word – positive and proactive, meaning going further rather than coming to an end or halt; moving in a forward direction. As the Izhbitzer explains, part of growth is moving on and walking away from the place you once stood. We can't stay because the moment is gone – it's gone in time, irretrievably behind us, and it's our responsibility to realize that distance in mental and physical space too.

It's true to life as well; the world will not dwell in your magical moments. Whether you ace the test, get the girl, close the deal, buy the house, sell the business, have the baby, or whatever the great achievement is; it's still Tuesday, you're still you, you still have deadlines, you still have to get into better shape, your siblings still get on your nerves, and your credit card bill is still due. And so, by necessity, there comes a time to move onward.

In the boring and dull moments, we may well find ourselves thirsty with nothing to drink. But this, too, as the Izhbitzer teaches, is part of the process of growth. Eventually, those bitter waters can transform into a sweet oasis, and what appeared to be downtime is integrated into the journey forward.

Even the Golden Calf story has redeeming elements; apart from the important teaching that using iconography to worship the One God is still idolatry, it decisively demonstrates God's predisposition

for forgiveness and paves the way to the Mishkan and all the resultant forms of interacting with the Divine.

Do not fool yourself into thinking that what got you to where you are will fuel you on to further heights; that energy does not simply overflow into everything else. Success is not final, and failure is not fatal; the proper response to both is the same – onward.

This lesson is challenging enough, but the Izhbitzer takes us further and forewarns us that what follows the heights of success is rarely smooth and straightforward lulls and plateaus of accumulation and consolidation to catch our breath; we can often expect an inverse experience in short order. All too often, great heights are followed by sharp declines and drawdowns, troughs and valleys; Avraham gets home to find his wife has died; the miraculous rescue at the Red Sea is directly followed by the people's complaints about the local water being too bitter, and the people worship a Golden Calf at the foot of Mount Sinai itself.

Quite arguably, a failure to move on was the mistake at the heart of the debacle of the scouting mission to Israel – the spies just wanted to stay put in the safety of God's embrace in the desert. They weren't wrong; the road ahead was fraught with danger! But that's not how the world works; stagnation is not God's design for us or the universe – life must change, move, and evolve. Staying put and stagnating is what's unnatural.

The Torah is a guide to life – תורת חיים – and one of the defining features of living things is motility – they move independently. We shouldn't be so shocked by the ebbs and flows of life itself, moving and changing, with concomitant ups and downs. When living things don't move, they quickly atrophy, stagnate, wither, and before long, they die. Living things must move and push to grow healthy and strong. You can fall down and run out of breath plenty of times along the way, but that's part of it, so long as you, eventually, get back up and keep moving onward.

As R' Shlomo Farhi explains, if you look at stock market performance over a century, the zoomed-out time frame looks like a smooth and steady incline; and yet, when you zoom in to years, months, weeks, days, and hours, the amount of choppiness and volatility increases. On an extended time frame, each individual part matters less. The bouncing highs and lows blend into a smooth line that only goes one way – onwards and upwards.

The past is not gone or forgotten; it forms the basis and foundations of today.

Although we can't dwell in the moments of achievement, perhaps there is a part we can carry in our hearts and minds.

And as we go, it comes with us, ever onward.



The Binding of Isaac Redux

5 minute read | Straightforward

The Binding of Isaac, the Akeida, is one of the most challenging stories in the Torah. Our best and brightest sages and philosophers have grappled with it since time immemorial, and with good reason.

The Torah is the source code for what we understand to be moral. Yet God asks Avraham to murder his son, and the Torah confronts the reader with a fundamental question: can God ask us to do something immoral and wrong?

The story concludes with a retraction of the notion that Avraham would need to follow through and kill his son in God's name. God is impressed that Avraham doesn't withhold his son, and we come away understanding that God does not ask us to do the unethical. In stopping Avraham at the very last moment, God drives home the point that there is no sanctity in child sacrifice and death; this God is different. This God is the God of life.

But while the ending is illuminating, the way we interpret the story up until the reversal matters.

To be sure, there is a diverse spectrum of legitimate discourse; we should evaluate their relative standing with regard to the values they teach. The ramifications of what we teach our children are enormously consequential, so we need to get it right.

If we think about God's instruction and say that up until the final moment, God truly meant it and only then changed His mind, then it destroys our conceptualization of universal ethics and morality because they are ad hoc and fluid; morality is only whatever God says it is from one moment to the next.

If we were to think that Avraham truly and simply desired to obey God and sacrifice his son and that he regretted not being able to obey God's command, then the whole story makes no sense. Child sacrifice was common in that era – if Avraham was willing to murder his son, it destroys the entire notion of his great sacrifice! More pointedly, if Avraham was all too willing to murder his son, it destroys Avraham as any sort of role model, and it would be perverse to teach children that this is what greatness looks like.

But of course, apart from the fact these interpretations leave us in moral turpitude, they also make no sense in the broader context of the Torah, which explicitly condemns child sacrifice on multiple occasions.

By necessity, we need to reject the notion that Avraham truly and simply wished to sacrifice Yitzchak. The story only makes sense if it was hard – excruciatingly hard, and fortunately, that's very much the story the Torah tells. At no point does the story suggest that this is easy for Avraham, and actually, quite the opposite.



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Until this point in Avraham’s life, his commitment to life and commitment to God were in perfect harmony – God wanted Avraham to be good to others, and he was. Now that God asked him to sacrifice his son, he had a dilemma because his two great commitments were no longer in alignment:

ויאמר קחנא את־בְנֶךָ אֶת־יִצְחָק אֲשֶׁר־אָהַבְתָּ אֶת־יִצְחָק וְלֶדְדָּךְ אֶל־אֶרֶץ מֹרְיָה וְהַעֲלֵהוּ שָׁם לְעֹלָה עַל אֶחָד הַהָרִים אֲשֶׁר אֹמַר אֵלֶיךָ... בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי וַיֵּשָׂא אֲבִרְהָם אֶת־עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא אֶת־הַמָּקוֹם מֵרָחֹק... וַיִּשְׁלַח אֲבִרְהָם אֶת־יְדוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת־הַמַּאֲכָלֹת לִשְׂחֹט אֶת־בְּנֹו וַיֵּרָא אֶת־הַמָּקוֹם מֵרָחֹק... וַיִּשְׁלַח אֲבִרְהָם אֶת־יְדוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת־הַמַּאֲכָלֹת לִשְׂחֹט אֶת־בְּנֹו – And He said, “Please take your son, your favored one, Yitzchak, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you...” On the third day, Avraham looked up and saw the place from afar... And Avraham sent his hand and picked up the knife to slay his son. (22:2,4,10)

The Ran highlights out that God never commanded Avraham to sacrifice his son; God only requests it – “Please” – קח־נָא. This is not an instruction that demands obedience; it is a request that does not mandate compliance.

As Avraham struggled with turmoil about the position he was in, he looked up and saw the mountain in the distance – וַיֵּרָא אֶת־הַמָּקוֹם מֵרָחֹק. The Nesivos Shalom notes that there is a reference to one of God’s names, the Omnipresent, the attribute that God is everywhere and the place of all things – הַמָּקוֹם. In this reading, the whole affair felt wrong to Avraham. He’d opposed human sacrifice pagan worship his whole life, and yet here he was, about to destroy his life’s work and snuff out his family legacy. He felt alienated and distanced from God – וַיֵּרָא אֶת־הַמָּקוֹם מֵרָחֹק.

At the story’s dramatic crescendo, the Torah uses remarkable imagery to characterize what took place. Avraham does not simply pick up the knife; he “forces his hand” – וַיִּקַּח אֶת־הַמַּאֲכָלֹת. The Torah dissociates Avraham from his disembodied hand because Avraham was resisting what he was doing.

The Kotzker suggests that even to the musculoskeletal level, the cumbersome description of Avraham’s belabored muscle movements truly expressed and mirrored God’s desire that Yitzchak would remain unharmed – כָּל עֲצָמוֹתָי תֵּאֱמָרְנָה.

Lastly, R’ Shlomo Farhi notes that Avraham’s entire characterization in this story is lethargic, illustrating the slow heaviness with which he moves through the story. But lethargy runs counter to everything we know about Avraham up to this point! He is introduced to us as someone who eagerly and enthusiastically goes where God tells him, who runs after guests to invite them in, and who hurries to feed them. In this story, he is in stark contrast with his energetic fervent self because he faces the greatest challenge of his life, and it is antithetical to his very being.

Of course, we know how the story ends. God would never ask us to do something unethical. But how we tell the story matters just as much as how it ends.

This gut-wrenching story of moral turmoil is held in the highest esteem by humans and by God. And that’s because it wasn’t easy. It is not a story about blind faith and obedience but the exact opposite.



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It is all too rare that we face a moral choice that is truly black and white. Most of the time, it's not a starving orphaned widow with cancer whose house burned down, knocking on the door asking for help. Far more often, we face a difficult choice between competing ideals, none of which will resolve the situation in a manner that perfectly aligns with an established code of ethics or norms.

Will we tell the truth and be honest when confronted, or keep a secret and loyally honor a promise? Will we prioritize individual needs to greatly help a few or communal needs to adequately help many? Will we be just, fair, and equal in our relationships, or will we be compassionate and merciful based on each circumstance? Will we prioritize the present or the future?

We would do well to remember our role models. They weren't primitive people – they were refined humans doing their best to ethically navigate a world of murky choices. And while society may have changed in form, it hasn't changed in substance, and humans haven't changed much at all.

Doing the right thing is plenty hard enough; but you first have to identify what the right thing truly is, which is far harder. It gets to the core of our mission in life, and we must take strength from the stories of our greats – this is the way it's always been, and we must persevere all the same.

Quite tellingly, we read this story on Rosh Hashana. Sure, we read it in part to recall the great merit of our ancestors, and perhaps that is a complete reason. But perhaps it can also remind us that the greats also had their struggles with no clean choices.

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.

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 niche 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 consult for NY home care companies, so if you have a contact in the NY home care industry, please introduce me!*

PPS - *If anyone you know is looking for a job in healthcare, please put them in touch with me. With a helping hand from Above, I have successfully helped **3 people** get jobs in healthcare so far!*



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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.