



Behaloscha 2022

Attitude Redux

5 minute read | Straightforward

During the Jewish People's time in the desert, God gave a variety of commands.

We expect God to give commands, it comes with the territory, that's what God does, it makes sense. They'd only just left Egypt and stood at Sinai; there was a new religion with new procedures and protocols to implement. And after all, there's no way to know what God wants unless God says so!

What God says, we expect the audience to do, which the Torah dutifully records – וַיַּעַשׂ כֵּן.

But what we might not expect is that the Torah reports with meticulous regularity, each and every time, not just that people obey, but that people carry out their task as per God's command – וַיַּעַשׂ כֵּן הַכַּאֲשֶׁר צִוְּהָהּ ה'. The Torah uses this phrase tens, if not hundreds of times!

If you think about it, apart from the repetitiveness, it's almost entirely redundant. It's not at all obvious what doing something per God's command adds, because, in almost every example, there is literally no other conceivable way to do the thing.

When God says to light the Menora, there is only one way to light a Menora. When God says to take a census of how many people there are, the only way to fulfill the command is to count people. When God says to bring a Korban Pesach, or how to do the Yom Kippur service, or any of the Mishkan-related workflows, or to go to war with Midian, or to execute somebody, there isn't any other way to do any of those things! And yet each time, the Torah doesn't say people followed their instructions; it says that the people followed their instructions faithfully as per God's command – וַיַּעַשׂ כֵּן הַכַּאֲשֶׁר צִוְּהָהּ ה'.

Each time people follow instructions, why does the Torah add that they followed the instructions per God's command?

Perhaps the Torah isn't telling us that they did it; it's telling us how they did it.

R' Shlomo Farhi explains that even when there truly is only one way to do something, there is still a right and wrong way. When the Torah adds that people followed instructions faithfully – וַיַּעַשׂ כֵּן הַכַּאֲשֶׁר צִוְּהָהּ ה' – it's not saying that they did just like they were told; it means that people follow instructions just like when they were told, capturing the snapshot of sentiment or feeling of a particular moment.

When you do anything, even if there's no other way, you can still do it with energy, focus, and joy; or not – a right way and a wrong way, even when there's only one way.



Our sages were sensitive to this subtle but universal nuance.

Rashi quotes the Sifri that Ahron lit the Menora every day, precisely the way Moshe told him for the rest of his life, and never changed or deviated in any way – כְּאִשֶּׁר צִוָּה ה' – the Sifri suggests that our everyday approach to Torah should similarly be with freshness and excitement – וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר – אֲנֹכִי מְצַוֶּה הַיּוֹם עֲלֵי-לְבָבְךָ.

R' Simcha Bunim of Peshischa notes that as much as the comment is about Ahron not changing how he performed his duties, it's equally a comment about how his duties didn't change him. Some people let privilege and honor get to their heads – but not Ahron.

The Sfas Emes notes that lighting the Menora wasn't a particularly prestigious ceremony in that any Kohen could kindle the lights. Still, Ahron took it seriously enough that he insisted on doing it himself every day for the rest of his life – every day, he did it like the moment he received the command.

The Ishbitza notes that the highest praise for Ahron is that he retained that initial desire, that things never got stale or boring for him. He kept challenging himself to find something new and exciting, so he lit the Menora his last time with the same enthusiasm as the first.

The Shem mi'Shmuel notes that the word for training, which means practice repetitions, is cognate to the word for inauguration, the first time you do something – חִינוּךְ / חֲנוּכָה. This suggests that training is not simply a repeat of past performance but the repetition of newness, with each repetition inviting an opportunity to introduce a fresh aspect or dimension.

Attitude and mentality are everything; the mental and emotional components heavily influence the substance of any interaction. Prayer and sacrifice require proper intent to have any substance to them; there is a vast difference between giving someone a hand because you care and giving someone a hand out of pity.

A Torah scroll is quite clearly and obviously a religious article, and yet it has no inherent sanctity from its perfect script and spelling. A Torah scroll is kosher and sacred exclusively if they were written with the express intent of imbuing the words and scroll with sanctity; which is to say that its utility and value as a holy object are solely determined by the mentality of the scribe.

The Mishkan had plenty of unique artifacts like the Menora, but it had some pretty ordinary implements that everyone owns; a shirt, a hat, a cup, and a spoon. What designated these as sacred and distinct is the intention with which they were crafted.

This is a universal truth in all walks of life, from Judaism to art to cooking. A great cook will say their secret ingredient is love; a great artist or sage will say their secret technique is heart and soul.

In the words of Martin Luther King Jr., if a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as a Michelangelo painted, Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He



should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, ‘Here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well.’

Mastery is typically boring. Finishing your fiftieth marathon is probably less special than your first.

It’s normal.

The more we experience something, the more our enthusiasm and attention typically wane. Predictability and comfort put an end to fresh euphoria; when we know what to expect, our excitement wears off, and boredom sets in. That’s why we need to keep things fresh if we’re focused on a long-term project or goal; cruise control is a killer.

It’s something often seen with young athletes or scholars who lose their way – they think they’ve made it and stop putting in the work that would take them to the elite tier. The seasoned pros always comment on how essential it is for youngsters to maintain their concentration and focus to stay on track; to be fully present in each moment and devote their full and undivided attention so things don’t get boring.

In all walks of life, the highest form of mastery is in valuing each repetition and finding the novelty and excitement in it.

It’s not redundant for the Torah to say each time that people did the right thing in the right way for the right reason. It is ubiquitous because it reflects a truism of life, a constant reminder that is universally true.

The way you do things matters.

Face the Facts

3 minute read | Straightforward

When something big and life-changing happens, you might think it’s obvious that you notice and act accordingly. But that’s not always the case.

As far as big and life-changing happenings go, the Revelation at Sinai ought to be up there. God came down to Earth to give humans the Torah! We might expect the beginning of humanity’s journey with the Torah to be full of eager excitement, or perhaps at least a somber sense of purpose and responsibility. But that’s not what happens.

The very first excursion away from Sinai winds up in catastrophe; the people bitterly complain about their miserable life in the desert. They seem to have forgotten all about the genocide and slavery, and this is a fine example of the slave mentality they could never seem to shake. They fondly reminisce



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about the good old days of Egypt, when they enjoyed abundant fish, cucumbers, garlic, onion, leeks, and juicy melons. Now they're stuck eating manna from Heaven, fed daily by no less than God Himself, but after experiencing the culinary delights Egypt had to offer, this was bland and boring. They clamor for more enjoyable food and demand some tasty meat, and subsequently, a plague ensues with many casualties.

While the story unfolds in its way, Rashi suggests that it was the manner of their departure from Sinai that cultivated their craving for meat:

וַיִּסְעוּ מִהַר ה' דְּרֹךְ שְׁלֹשָׁת יָמִים – They marched from the mountain of God a distance of three days.... (10:33)

Our Sages compare their attitude to a child running out of school; that they couldn't wait to put God's mountain behind them, figuratively as well as literally. What if God imposed even more laws?! As the Ramban notes, it's not just they traveled a physical distance; it's that they traveled away mentally and spiritually from the mountain and all it meant – וַיִּסְעוּ מִהַר ה'.

The Chasam Sofer notes that the causation must work both ways; if a poor attitude had fueled their craving for meat, then intuitively, the inverse lesson must be true too, that if they had solemnly carried the Torah and lived up to their responsibilities, then they never could have contemplated that God's cuisine was lousy!

But instead, they ran from destiny.

Rather than act like people who had witnessed Sinai, they acted like people who had not, simple folk with simple wants and needs, because who doesn't enjoy a good steak now and then?

But as the story shows, that shouldn't be what satisfies us; that shouldn't be the thing we crave and desire first and foremost. Did they want fresh meat because that's just what humans like, or was it the result of their unwillingness to face the fact of Sinai and rise to its challenge? They might have believed the former, but our Sages believe the latter.

Our Sages labeled their mentality as childish; a child lacks the discipline, experience, maturity, and wisdom to do the hard things they need to but don't want to. A child is not yet ready to grapple with life's challenges.

Only they weren't children.

While we can knowingly sigh at such an obvious error, the Torah is a mirror that tells us who we are, that God can speak to humans, and we will run away. Destiny can call, with the highest and most sacred purpose the universe has to offer, and we will procrastinate with all kinds of creative escapism, avoiding responsibility by indulging ourselves with trivial nonsense.



Consider for just a moment what you might be avoiding, failing to recognize, or running away from. At its core, avoidance is an emotion management problem. That feeling you get when there is something you keep kicking down the road? That's a signal.

Something big happened to them, and they ignored it and tried to leave it behind. But life comes at you one way or another, so you've got to take it all with you and incorporate it into your being. The stakes are too high – we can't afford to be childish, and we can't run from who we are.

There are lots of big and scary things we have to do, and we must cultivate the maturity to rise to the challenge.

As Kierkegaard said, face the facts of being what you are, for that is what changes what you are.

Language Redux

3 minute read | Straightforward

Humans are the apex predator on Earth.

We share this planet with thousands of species and trillions of organisms, and none but humans carry a lasting multi-generational record of knowledge of any obvious consequence. And yet, a feral human being left alone in the woods from birth to death kept separate and alive, would be not much more than an ape; our knowledge isn't because humans are smart.

It's because we speak – מְדַבֵּר.

We communicate and cooperate with others through language, giving us a formidable advantage in forming groups, sharing information, and pooling workloads and specializations. Language is the mechanism by which the aggregated knowledge of human culture is transmitted, actualizing our intelligence and self-awareness, transcending separate biological organisms, and becoming one informational organism. With language, we have formed societies and built civilizations; developed science and medicine, literature and philosophy.

With language, knowledge does not fade; we can learn from the experiences of others. Without learning everything from scratch, we can use an existing knowledge base built by others to learn new things and make incrementally progressive discoveries. As one writer put it, a reader lives a thousand lives before he dies; the man who never reads lives only once.

Language doesn't just affect how we relate to each other; it affects how we relate to ourselves. We make important decisions based on thoughts and feelings influenced by words on a page or conversations with others. It has been said that with one glance at a book, you can hear the voice of



another person – perhaps someone gone for millennia – speaking across the ages clearly and directly in your mind.

Considering the formidable power of communication, it follows that the Torah holds it in the highest esteem; because language is magical. Indeed, the fabric of Creation is woven with words:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים, יְהִי אוֹר; וַיְהִי-אוֹר (1:3) – God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.

R’ Jonathan Sacks notes that humans use language to create things as well. The notion of a contract or agreement is a performative utterance – things that people say to create something that wasn’t there before; a relationship of mutual commitment between people, created through speech. Whether it’s God giving us the Torah or a husband marrying his wife, relationships are fundamental to Judaism. We can only build relationships and civilizations with each other when we can make commitments through language.

Recognizing the influential hold language has over us, the Torah emphasizes an abundance of caution and heavily regulates how we use language: the laws of gossip and the metzora; and the incident where Miriam and Ahron challenged Moshe; among others. Even the Torah’s choice of words about the animals that boarded the Ark is careful and measured:

מִכָּל הַבְּהֵמָה הַטְּהוֹרָה, תִּקַּח-לָךְ שְׁבָעָה שְׁבָעָה-אִישׁ וְאִשְׁתּוֹ; וּמִן-הַבְּהֵמָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא טְהוֹרָה הוּא, שְׁנַיִם-אִישׁ וְאִשְׁתּוֹ – Of every clean creature, take seven and seven, each with their mate; and of the creatures that are not clean two, each with their mate. (7:2)

The Gemara notes that instead of using the more accurate and concise expression of “impure,” the Torah utilizes extra ink and space to articulate itself more positively – “that are not clean” – אֲשֶׁר לֹא – טְהוֹרָה הוּא. While possibly hyperbolic, the Lubavitcher Rebbe would refer to death as “the opposite of life”; and hospital infirmaries as “places of healing.”

The Torah cautions us of the power of language repeatedly in more general settings:

וְלֹא-תִלְךָ רֵכִיל בְּעַמֶּיךָ, לֹא תַעֲמֹד עַל-דַּם רֵעֶךָ: אָנֹכִי, ה' – Do not allow a gossip to mingle among the people; do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor: I am Hashem. (19:16)

The Torah instructs us broadly not to hurt, humiliate, deceive, or cause another person any emotional distress:

וְלֹא תוֹנוּ אִישׁ אֶת-עֲמִיתוֹ, וְיִרְאַתָּ מֵאֱלֹהֶיךָ: כִּי אָנֹכִי ה', אֱלֹהֵיכֶם – Do not wrong one another; instead, you should fear your God; for I am Hashem. (25:27)

Interestingly, both these laws end with “I am Hashem” – evoking the concept of emulating what God does; which suggests that just as God constructively uses language to create – שֶׁהַכֹּל נִהְיָה בְּדַבְּרוֹ – so must we – אָנֹכִי ה'. The Lubavitcher Rebbe taught that as much as God creates with words, so do humans.



The Gemara teaches that verbal abuse is arguably worse than theft; you can never take back your words, but at least a thief can return the money!

The idea that language influences and impacts the world around us is the foundation of the laws of vows, which are significant enough that we open the Yom Kippur services at Kol Nidrei by addressing them.

Of course, one major caveat to harmful speech is intent. If sharing negative information has a constructive and beneficial purpose that may prevent harm or injustice, there is no prohibition, and there might even be an obligation to protect your neighbor by conveying the information – לא תעמד על-ל-רעה.

As R' Jonathan Sacks powerfully said, no soul was ever saved by hate; no truth was ever proved by violence; no redemption was ever brought by holy war.

Rather than hurt and humiliate, let's use our language to educate, help and heal; because words and ideas have the power to change the world.

They're the only thing that ever has.

Quote of the Week

“Nothing in this world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful people with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated failures. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent.”

– Calvin Coolidge

Thought the Week

I used to say, “If you will take care of me, I will take care of you.” Now I say, I will take care of me for you, if you will take care of you for me. - Jim Rohn

The greatest gift you can give others is your own personal development and care.

– Dr. Emily Anhalt, @DrEmilyAnhalt



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 a niche business that allows me to spend substantial time on TorahRedux, and I welcome your assistance in furthering my goal to keep publishing quality content that matters. I help NY home care companies implement compliant Wage Parity plans that enhance recruitment and retention; whether or not that was comprehensible, if you know anyone in the New York home care field, please introduce me!

PPS - I want to use my reach to help more people in more ways; this is me shooting my shot at another one. Several of my home health clients are hiring at all levels from entry-level to management. Please send me a resume and a one-line explanation of what kind of role would be the best fit and I'll make some introductions.

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.