

Metzora; Shabbos HaGadol 2024

First Steps

2 minute read | Straightforward

On the Shabbos before the Exodus, the Jewish People designated one lamb per household to be the first Korban Pesach and kept it in the home for a few days before Pesach. They would slaughter the lamb and smear the blood on their doors to identify their homes as Jewish, and their families would be saved from the destructive forces in play on the night of the tenth Plague.

On the Shabbos HaGadol, the Shabbos before Pesach, we honor our ancestors who followed the command to set aside a lamb.

But it doesn't align with the way we commemorate things in Judaism. Designating the lamb was a one-off instruction in Egypt; it was never performed again, and we don't actually do anything to reenact it.

If designating the lamb was small enough that we don't have a similar ritual, what was the point of the ritual at all?

R' Shlomo Twersky highlights that while a person can be defined by their aspirations, the kind of person they want to be, a prerequisite step before that is deciding what they don't want to be.

Designating the lamb was not a symbolic indication of their intent to eat it; our sages teach that lambs were sacred in Egypt, meaning that designating a lamb for sacrifice was also a form of sacrilege to Egyptian deities, upholding the as yet unspoken second of the Ten Commandments – to have no other gods.

As R' Shlomo Farhi explains, it might have been a small gesture, but it was significant because it marked a rejection of Egyptian religion. In a sense, the second commandment to reject other gods precedes the first commandment, awareness of the One God. It is insufficient to add the Creator to the pantheon of gods you believe in; you need to believe in One Creator and no others; designating the lamb was a small gesture with enormous significance. It only follows that for us, the ritual would be empty. We already believe in the One God; we don't believe in other powers.

As the Sfas Emes notes, setting the lamb aside was a one-off instruction in Egypt, never imitated later on in any commandments; it is not the action that we need to remember. Instead, we remember the symbolic move the brave Jewish People took, a tentative but concrete and tangible first step.

Shabbos HaGadol also has an element of repentance out of love. Pesach demonstrates the loving relationship between God and the Jewish People; God will act for us before we deserve it. The Jewish People earned eternity and redemption with a token gesture, but a token gesture that gave a foretaste of everything to follow.

Our sages suggest that if a person creates an opening the size of a needle, God can expand the breakthrough into a grand ballroom. Designating the lamb wasn't a big deal at all, but it doesn't exist in isolation. In the context of our history, that first baby step meant everything because everything followed from that first step.

A journey of a thousand miles begins with one step.

Shabbos HaGadol; Shabbos of Greatness

2 minute read | Straightforward

The Shabbos before Pesach is called Shabbos HaGadol – The Great Shabbos. It commemorates the first Shabbos HaGadol in Egypt five days before the Exodus.

On that day, the Jewish People received the first commandment they would ever fulfill, a one-time law that applied only to that Shabbos and never again. They were to designate one lamb per household and keep it in the home for a few days, and the lamb would be the first Korban Pesach. They would slaughter the lamb and smear the blood on their doors to identify their homes as Jewish, and their families would be saved from the destructive forces in play on the night of the tenth Plague.

Multiple elements in this distinctive vignette stick out as highly irregular.

Everyone understands how anniversaries and birthdays work; the Jewish calendar is full of anniversaries. When the date of an event comes back around, you remember what happened on that day in history.

But unlike almost any holiday or event you can think of, Shabbos HaGadol is specifically not on the calendar date of the event. We don't commemorate the legendary ritual five days before Pesach; we celebrate it on the day of the week it fell on – Shabbos. That's not how anniversaries work; that's not how we commemorate any other significant date or event. Your friend's birthday is on the tenth of April; it will never matter that they were born on the second Tuesday in April!

Why do we celebrate this anniversary on Shabbos, a day of the week, rather than a fixed calendar date?



The Sfas Emes teaches that Shabbos frames the boundary and transitions from one week and the next. It is at once the culmination of what came before while setting the tone of what is to come.

Shabbos is the masterpiece of Creation, the finishing touch, and the beginning of everything that follows. The very first Shabbos is about peace and serenity, completion and perfection, redemption and rest with satisfying purpose. Shabbos is one of the cornerstones of Judaism, and it follows why; it lends context and meaning to almost everything else.

The Jewish People didn't yet observe Shabbos in Egypt. Still, by giving them a commandment on Shabbos, they could tap into the spirit of Shabbos, receiving a dose of that peace and serenity, a taste of redemption and purpose that could give them some fuel and momentum for the imminent Exodus.

It wasn't about the calendar date; it was about connecting with Shabbos for the first time and what Shabbos did for them.

Lingering here in the background is another prominent issue. These people had survived nine plagues without a scratch, passively and without lifting a finger. They were safe automatically; they weren't the targets of God's works in Egypt. And yet now, at the last hurdle, they were suddenly in potential danger, and they needed to proactively take the bold step of taking this lamb on Shabbos and smearing its blood on the doorway to be safe.

The Sfas Emes reminds us that these people had ancestral merit but little of their own; they kept their names, clothing, and language, sure, but then literally nothing else. In proactively carrying out the instruction to designate the lamb, the Jewish People took their first independent steps to move toward God, transforming them from passive victims into actors with agency; they grew up, earning the capacity to be great.

So perhaps it's not the Great Shabbos; it's the Shabbos of Greatness, the Shabbos we became capable of Greatness.

Come As You Are

3 minute read | Straightforward

We often think of holiness or sanctity as the hallowed privilege of a rare few, the people who have made it, the inner circle of those who are better and wiser than us. They are the ones who can pray for us, guide us, and bring healing. Sometimes that's true; other times, that view is propounded by self-righteous, holier-than-thou folks who self-serve by making us feel that way.



That being said, it is an objective and measurable fact that some people are further on their religious journey and are more advanced on the observance spectrum.

Make no mistake that everyone has the same obligation to meet the standard of perfect observance of the Torah – so, for example, the Torah unambiguously says to keep Shabbos with no exceptions.

Yet, in the external world where theory meets practice, achieving perfection is neither possible nor actual; that standard has only ever been theoretical. We ought to know better than to hold every human to the same standard.

The only uniform standard everyone is mandated to uphold is the half-shekel donation to the Mishkan, the tiniest sum of money, a de minimis threshold contribution. This contribution went towards the foundation sockets, which compare to our threshold foundation of faith and membership of the Jewish People.

But beyond that basic common and tiny denominator, everyone is radically different. Everyone is born in a particular environment, makes mistakes, and is only capable of so much or going so far. We know this intuitively – it is clear that, like all things in life, there must be a subjective element to religiosity by necessity, and there is.

In as much as sacrifices and the Beis HaMikdash are the domain of the privileged few, every single human may bring an offering. One form explicitly recognizes human subjectivity and meets us where we are, contingent on a person's means – קרבן עולה ויורד. While a wealthy person would bring expensive cattle, a working person would be expected to offer a pair of affordable birds, and a person in poverty would only have to provide some cheap flour:

וְאִם-לֹא תִשִּׂיג יָדוֹ לְשְׁתֵּי תְרִים אוֹ לְשְׁנֵי בְּנֵי-יוֹנָה וְהֵבִיא אֶת-קֶרְבָּנוֹ אֲשֶׁר חָטָא עֲשִׂירֵת הָאֶפָּה סֶלֶת – And if one's means do not suffice for two turtledoves or two pigeons, that person shall bring as an offering for that of which one is guilty a tenth of an ephah of choice flour... (5:11)

Whatever the form, the result is a “pleasant scent,” which is how the Torah describes God receiving them warmly – רִיחַ נִיחֻחַ לֵה'. This is quite obviously a metaphor; burning feathers smell disgusting. And yet unmistakably, the same reception reveals that whatever the form, they are substantively the same, whether bull, bird, or flour; all are warmly embraced, with no distinction between rich and poor – נֹאמַר – בַּעוֹף רִיחַ נִיחֻחַ וְנֹאמַר בְּבֵהמָה רִיחַ נִיחֻחַ, לומר לך אחד המרבה ואחד ואחד הממעט ובלבד שיכוין לבו לשמים.

The Chafetz Chaim notes that the principle holds even while the sacrifices have lapsed. If you have the means to help others and do less than you could, you need to step up and meet your duty. To whom much is given, much is expected, and with great power comes great responsibility.

The legendary Reb Zusha of Hanipol would say that when he'd get to Heaven, he wouldn't be afraid to answer why he wasn't like Avraham, because he wasn't Avraham, nor why he wasn't like Moshe,



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because he wasn't Moshe. But when they would ask why he wasn't like Zusha, he'd have no answer for failing to live up to his unique potential.

As much as we all need to be better, you can only move forward from where you are. You are in the right place to do what you need to – המקום אשר אתה עומד עליו אדמת-קדש הוא –

This idea is at the heart of Korach's folly, which leads only to ruin and misery. Everyone's service is different and yet equally welcome.

One of the most powerful phrases in the Torah is when God saw the young Yishmael dying in the desert. 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 here and now – באשר הוא נשם –

In your present condition and natural state, you have a key stake in Judaism and a contribution to make that matters, even before the changes you must still undergo.

You are where you're supposed to be right now, and you are enough.

Regulations Redux

4 minute read | Intermediate

Speed limits, traffic lights, parking meters, building codes, dress codes... it's easy to see rules as restrictive forces in our lives, reducing individual freedom and personal choice.

The Torah is brimming with laws and rules, so it's a critique one can aim at Judaism with some merit and one that has long been raised by seekers.

There are so many rules, and they stack up fast! Eat this, not that, fast then, do this, you can't do that, wear this, you can't wear that. And it goes on and on.

Why can't we just do whatever we want?

The opening story of Creation about the dawn of humanity centers around the imposition of a rule, don't eat from this tree, and humanity's unwillingness to follow the rule – they did it anyway.



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There's a plausible reading here where God is cruel and tantalizing, teasing His creatures by pointing at the beautiful tree they are forbidden to enjoy; the language of prohibition and denial is right there, and it identifies God as the maker and enforcer of a system with arbitrary rules that humans are destined to fail.

But the story that follows about Noah and the Flood is a story about what happens in a world with no rules – total anarchy where everyone is a barbaric savage who pillages and plunders. In Noah and the Flood, we see a world without rules, which leads to chaos and the collapse of civilization, and the unmaking of the world.

No serious person believes that radical anarchy would be sustainable, a total free-for-all where Darwinian principles of survival of the fittest govern the day. Doing anything you want isn't a utopian dream; it's a dystopian nightmare. Every human society at all times in all places has understood that humans need rules and norms; ancient and primitive societies had rules and norms we might object to, but they had rules and norms just the same. The existence of rules and norms is a foundation of human society – no one gets to do whatever they want.

Rules form boundaries that enable and facilitate safe human relations by asserting how to interact, preventing infringement on others or abuse or depletion of a thing. Rules are a basic civic requirement.

Beyond the philosophical, this extends to the essential nature of reality; our universe is a universe of rules, built and run according to rules, the laws of physics that govern energy and matter.

The religious aspect of doing whatever we want is based on the notion that observant Jews are missing out. Sure, there are many things observant Jews can't do or enjoy – bacon, cheeseburgers, lobster, and pepperoni are allegedly some of the big ones.

Yet the Midrash teaches that it is wrong to believe that the Creator denies or prohibits us from the joys of life in any way. Rather, the Torah asks us just to regulate our instincts and stop them from running wild in order to maintain balance in our lives, from greed, hunger, and revenge, to tribal loyalty and sexuality.

Humans break when overindulged – people everywhere abuse and hurt, cheat and steal, get obese and sick, and tirelessly waste years of life on sexual pursuits. These negative impacts aren't the product of liberty; they're different forms of addiction and brokenness.

Like all cultures and societies, the Torah has lots of rules. And like all cultures and societies, some make more sense than others.

But like all rules and laws, they keep us safe and stop us from getting out of control. They help regulate our enjoyment of life; they enable everything else.



The laws of sexuality regulate that family relationships are inappropriate if combined with sexuality.

The laws of Shabbos are endless; you learn something new every time you learn the laws of Shabbos. But the existence of Shabbos changes and elevates how we experience time – it's not Saturday, a day off work, it's Shabbos! Moreover, Shabbos has kept generations of families and Jewish communities eating, singing, and praying together for life.

The Torah permits a carnivorous diet, which could reasonably be construed as unethical; it asks us to limit our diet to animals with certain features that must be slaughtered humanely. If the Creator is the gatekeeper of Creation, it's not obvious that we should be able to eat living creatures at all! But otherwise, the Torah allows us to enjoy the vast majority of human cuisine prepared in accordance with our culture.

What's more, when taken together, the rules of kosher keep the Jewish People distinct and separate from the world. They elevate the most basic instinct to consume into a religious act, saturated with meaning and purpose. As the Chasam Sofer notes, the kosher laws open with what Jews can eat, the permission, not the prohibition.

As the Meshech Chochma notes, the Creation story isn't about a negative restriction on a tree; it's about a positive command to eat literally everything else in Creation and fill the world with people, broad and permissive, perhaps even indulgent and hedonistic, with one caveat.

The Creator sanctifies human desire with the very first command – the directive to eat and procreate suggests that even our most basic instincts serve God's purposes. Although there's a caveat, even several, the Torah's claim is that God is the gatekeeper of that permission; that's what "Creator" means. If we accept the premise of a Creator, why would we feel entitled to the entire universe?

Beyond the aspect of a legal obligation, the fact that Jews observe a rule or practice makes it a cultural norm, unspoken but socially agreed on, and therefore sanctified by the collective consciousness of all Jewish People.

The Torah has lots of rules and laws. But those laws come from the Creator of Genesis; the God who creates life, loves life, commands life to thrive, and wants that life to love and enjoy.

We do this thing, we don't do that thing. No one gets to do whatever they want, that's not how the world works. We live in societies built on the rule of law, in a rule-based universe.

Rules aren't so terrible.

Isolation Redux

4 minute read | Straightforward

When a person is officially diagnosed with the skin condition the Torah calls tzaraas, the Torah imposes a mandatory seven-day quarantine; the person must leave town and live in solitary isolation. Anyone who lived through COVID has primary experience of isolation and quarantine. However difficult and unpleasant, it has the valuable function of attempting to stop contagion and transmission, saving lives in the aggregate.

Yet our sages teach that this skin condition resulted from gossip and slander, which is to say that it wasn't a contagious or transmissible condition.

So why are quarantine and isolation appropriate?

Perhaps isolation is an appropriate measure for the wrongdoing of harmful speech.

Language distinguishes humans from animals and is the tool that has built and compounded human civilization. More than smarts or strength, it is arguably humanity's most powerful tool to control and influence the world around us.

Gossip has a positive social utility, exposing genuine threats among us, like abusers and molesters. That kind of gossip is not only permitted but arguably mandatory – תועלת; but most gossip doesn't meet that standard. Most gossip is destructive speech that puts others down, modifying bonds and cohesion in an imagined social hierarchy, subtly eroding people's relationships in the perceptions of others. By lowering somebody's reputation, you can feel superior in gaining status relative to the unknowing victim.

So gossip quietly but very literally tears apart the fabric of your community and social circle by planting divisive and harmful ideas and impressions, sabotaging trust and relationships.

If that is correct, then quarantine is highly appropriate – society needs protection, not from the disease, but from the person.

And perhaps there's something else to it as well.

Beyond helping society, perhaps it helps the gossiper as well. They have subverted their precious power of language for nefarious purposes, and isolation from others may help a person who gossips recalibrate how they communicate, reorienting them to their place in society when they rejoin.

Human beings are social creatures; our power of communication is what makes us human, so losing the power of communication is literally dehumanizing. Deprived of human interaction, stimulus, and activity, a person's mind must fill the void of boredom and sensory deprivation. Solitary isolation isn't a trivial thing; the prevailing view holds that, generally speaking, more than 15 days in isolation qualifies as torture; it's not hard to imagine why.

Moreover, this isn't the only time the Torah talks about isolation as a punishment; the Torah describes how the penultimate plague of darkness was experienced by its victims, primarily as a form of isolation:

לֹא־רָאוּ אִישׁ אֶת־אָחִיו וְלֹא־קָמוּ אִישׁ מִמְּקוֹמוֹ – People could not see one another, and for three days no one could get up from where he was... (10:23)

Presumably, Egyptian adults weren't like children who are scared of the dark; it's not just that it felt like blindness, it's that their worlds were isolated, completely cut off from each other – לֹא־רָאוּ אִישׁ אֶת־אָחִיו.

The Chiddushei HaRim highlights that this isolation was the worst punishment God could inflict on Egypt, short only of death itself – that people could not see each other. In a very real way, recognizing another human and moving ourselves to help them cuts to the very heart of what it means to be human, and we should take that notion seriously. Our sages go so far as to say that someone in isolation is effectively considered dead to the world.

Humans need each other; it's an existential design feature of being human – לֹא־טוֹב הָיִוֹת הָאָדָם לְבִדּוֹ.

Our most fundamental nature, the root of our behavior, is generosity, empathy, courage, and kindness. Isolation exposes what it means to be human by stripping those things away.

Perhaps by being alone for seven days, a person who gossips can appreciate their ability to communicate in a new light, cultivating a new understanding of the value of community for when they return.

Human beings are social creatures; make sure you use your precious gift of communication to build, not break. But some breaking can be constructive; not all gossip is destructive; some forms of gossip are not only permitted, but required.

A good rule of thumb that should only fail rarely is that if there is a credible threat to communal safety and wellbeing, it is better to expose the threat than suppress it. Someone's potential status of innocence should never trump everyone else's certain and definite status of safety.



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Suppressing public awareness of abusers only protects and serves the interests of abusers. Exposing them is worthy of pride, not shame; utilizing gossip correctly serves to effectively isolate abusers from the general population and protects vulnerable people in our communities.

When there are dangerous folks people need to be careful around, remember that you can serve the highest of purposes in spreading the word.

But in almost every other instance, there's a relationship tax; the friction that inevitably results when two humans interact. If you want people to be in your life, it's important to overlook minor frictions such as occasional misunderstandings, small disagreements, differences in preferences or habits, and unintentional mistakes. The law of the metzora mirrors human interaction; people who engage in gossip and slander can often experience loneliness and isolation, the consequence of people keeping their distance in order to protect themselves from drama and conflict.

To have other people in your life, you have to be willing to endure and ignore a certain amount of friction.

I dedicate TorahRedux in loving memory of my late grandfather, HaGaon HaRav Yehuda Leib Gertner ben HaRav HaChassid Menachem Mendel

I hope you enjoyed this week's thoughts. If you have questions or comments, or just want to say hello, it's a point of pride for me to hear from you, and I'll always respond.

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

Neli

PS - *Friends, for some time now, I've been incredibly blessed with business ventures that have allowed me to pour my heart into TorahRedux. Life happens, and I am now in active search of new opportunities and collaborations to invest myself into. If you're working on something cool, I'd love to hear from you. No pressure or expectations - just the possibility of building something valuable together. You can reach me at neli@hendon.io.*

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.