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Potomac Torah Study Center
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Tanis Esther Thursday; Purim Friday March 14-15 (posting early)

Note: Because of other obligations and travel, I shall be unable to post again until Vayikra, April 4-5.

NOTE: Devrei Torah presented weekly in Loving Memory of Rabbi Leonard S. Cahan z"l, Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Har Shalom, who started me on my road to learning more than 50 years ago and was our family Rebbe and close friend until his untimely death.

Devrei Torah are now Available for Download (normally by noon on Fridays) at www.PotomacTorah.org. Thanks to Bill Landau for hosting the Devrei Torah archives.

May Hashem protect Israel and Jews everywhere during 5785. May Hashem's protection shine on all of Israel, the IDF, and Jews throughout the world. May the first phase of the agreement continue with the remaining hostages coming home, hostilities ending, and with a new era of security and rebuilding for both Israel and all others who genuinely seek peace.

This week is short for me with Tanis Esther on Thursday and Purim on Friday. Result: two fewer days to work on my Devrei Torah. I do not have time to write a new introduction this week. My discussion of Ki Tisa is a slight modification of my introduction from 5782. Next week I have a short trip to the repair shop, and the following week, I shall be out of town for several days for board meetings for one of my charitable organizations. M"H, I'll be back to post again on April 4 for Vayikra. Meanwhile, my archives for the past five years are available by parsha at PotomacTorah.org – excellent material there.

For an introduction to Purim, I refer everyone to some of the outstanding material below, starting with two insightful essays by Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander. As I have stated in the past, Purim was the first crisis for B'Nai Yisrael after the end of prophesy. With no prophet to bring down Hashem's word to the people, would God still protect B'Nai Yisrael? Mordechai and Esther realized that God had placed them in the Persian capital to be His agent to protect the Jews. They respond, Esther goes from a timid, shy young lady to a aggressive queen, willing to direct the Jews and bring her people's situation to the King. Read Sefer Esther with these words in mind to see how we Jews have the potential to become God's agents to perform tikkun olam.

Ki Tisa contains the well known story of Moshe spending forty days and nights on Har Sinai while Hashem teaches him the Torah and engraves two Tablets with the Aseret Dibrot (Ten Statements) to take down to B'Nai Yisrael. Rabbi David Fohrman (alephbeta.org) observes that the story of Moshe's meetings with Hashem on Har Sinai have numerous parallels in both text and structure to Noach's experiences with the flood. These parallels indicate that we are to compare Moshe's behavior to that of Noach. When Hashem tells Noach that He is about to destroy the world and start over, Noach acts passively. He listens, does what God tells him to do, but does not try to save other people during the 120 years during which he works on his tevah. Moshe, in contrast, fights when God tells him that B'Nai Yisrael have sinned and that they have all earned death for disobeying the Covenant of Divine Justice that they had accepted at Har Sinai. When God tells Moshe to go down so He can destroy the people, Moshe refuses to leave and uses numerous arguments to convince God that He cannot destroy His people, and that if He tries to do so, then Moshe insists that God remove him from His book (take all references to Moshe out of the Torah).

When the Torah moves from Noach to Avraham, the Torah compares Avraham to Noach. Here, the Torah compares Moshe and Noach. As we see many times, the Torah uses parallel sentence structure and language to draw comparisons between individuals and situations to teach us proper behavior.

B'Nai Yisrael expect Moshe to return after forty days on Har Sinai. Their error is counting the day that Moshe departs as the first day rather than counting his first full day after leaving as day one. The people believe that Moshe has died and insist that Aharon make a symbol (idol) to replace Moshe (as a mask or barrier between them and God's presence). Aharon stalls for time, but when the people bring jewelry to melt, a golden cow emerges. The people have a feast, get drunk, and start dancing inappropriately. At that time, God tells Moshe that the people have sinned and sends him down.

God tells Moshe to leave so He can destroy the people and start over with Moshe. However, Moshe realizes that God would not have told him to leave unless he wanted Moshe to challenge him. (If God planned to kill the people, he would have just destroyed them without waiting.) Moshe refuses to leave and bargains for their lives. He tells God that BNai Yisrael are His people, whom He took out of Egypt (not Moshe's people). Moshe states that killing the people would break His promise to the Avot and that the Egyptians (and non-Jews everywhere else) would interpret the killing as indicating that God did not have the power to bring the Jews to the promised land. These arguments work, so God agrees to negotiate a new covenant based on Divine Mercy rather than Divine Justice.

Moshe must destroy the first Luchot, because they are based on Divine Justice. Under the terms of the Har Sinai covenant, the penalty for violating the mitzvot is death. Moshe breaks the Luchot at the most dramatic point, in front of the people, and makes them drink water with the dust of the broken pieces. Rabbi Rhine observes that a great leader can turn a tragic event into something positive. By negotiating a new contract with God, Moshe saves B'Nai Yisrael. If he had not destroyed the Luchot, any time the people sinned (as they did often), they would be subject to a death penalty. With the new contract, God would treat sin under Divine Mercy – forgiveness (Kol Nidre/Yom Kippur) becomes an option.

Rabbi Moshe Rube adds to this interpretation, following Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, z"l. Under the Har Sinai covenant, humans had no space for their own initiative. They could only follow Divine command. The new covenant is the basis of the Oral Torah. Now there is room for human input – a majority of the senior rabbis of the time could interpret the law and make modifications. With human input, the Oral Law lasts. Humans are now partners with the Almighty. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l, adds that the first Luchot lasts only a few hours while the second Tablets endure. He interprets that Divine initiative changes the world but does not change humans. It takes human initiative (interacting with the Divine) to change humans. When Moshe comes down the first time after forty days with Hashem, he is unchanged. When Moshe comes down the second time, after making the second Luchot on which God wrote the mitzvot, his face has a glow that requires him to cover his face from other people. Interaction between humans and God, with human initiative, changes us.

My beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l, loved to delve deeply into the parts of theTorah that seem most difficult for a modern reader to appreciate. He started me studying Torah when I first met him more than fifty years ago, and his lessons over the years bring me more understanding and pleasure each Torah cycle. Now that my grandchildren are starting to study Chumash, I hope to share this love of Torah with them.

Shabbat Shalom,

Hannah and Alan

Much of the inspiration for my weekly Dvar Torah message comes from the insights of Rabbi David Fohrman and his team of scholars at www.alephbeta.org. Please join me in supporting this wonderful organization, which has increased its scholarly work during and since the pandemic, despite many of its supporters having to cut back on their donations.

Please daven for a Refuah Shlemah for Moshe Aaron ben Leah Beilah (badly wounded in battle in Gaza but slowly recovering), Daniel Yitzchak Meir HaLevy ben Ruth; Ariah Ben Sarah, Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Reuven ben Basha Chaya Zlata Lana, Avraham ben Gavriela, Mordechai ben Chaya, David Moshe ben Raizel; Zvi ben Sara Chaya, Reuven ben Masha, Meir ben Sara, Oscar ben Simcha; Miriam Bat Leah; Yehudit Leah bas Hannah Feiga; Miriam bat Esha, Chana bat Sarah; Raizel bat Rut; Rena bat Ilsa, Riva Golda bat Leah, Sharon bat Sarah, Kayla bat Ester, and Malka bat Simcha, and all our fellow Jews in danger in and near Israel. Please contact me for any additions or subtractions. Thank you.

Shabbat Shalom

Hannah & Alan

Haftarat Parashat Ki Tisa: Leadership Lessons from Moshe, Eliyahu and Esther

By Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander * 5785 / 2025
President and Rosh HaYeshiva, Ohr Torah Stone

Dedicated in memory of Israel's murdered and fallen, for the refuah shlayma of the wounded, the return of those being held hostage in Gaza, and the safety of our brave IDF soldiers.

This week's Devrei Torah and Dvar Haftorah from Ohr Torah Stone are dedicated in loving memory of David Siegel z"l.

The parallels between our Parsha and our Haftarah, and between the lives of their respective protagonists, Moshe and Eliyahu, are significant. Following the reading of the story of the sin of the golden calf, most Jewish communities will hear the story of Eliyahu on Har HaCarmel, in his showdown with the prophets of Baal)though those of us fortunate enough to live in Jerusalem and other walled cities will repeat last week's Haftarah about Shaul and Agag this week, in commemoration of Shushan Purim(.

The connection between these two stories is not coincidental. Both offer profound insights into leadership, redemption and the eternal bond between God and the Jewish people – themes that reverberate throughout the Purim story as well.

There is a great deal of resonance between the two stories, with the Jewish people in both incidents straying as far as they possibly can from God, facing the harsh rebuke of the prophet, after which the people redeclare their loyalty to the divine – making the Haftarah a fitting match for the Parsha.

Yet the connection runs even deeper. Already in the Pesikta Rabbati)4(, the 9th century work of rabbinic midrash, our Sages notice that the two figures of Moshe and Eliyahu hold a great deal in common. They are both referred to as 'men of God'; they both ascend to the heavens; they both flee from wicked monarchs; they both execute idolaters; they both construct altars; they both pray for the Jewish people in the merit of our forefathers; and the list continues.

In these two pivotal Biblical characters, we can identify so many moments and characteristics that mark them both, highlighting what it takes to lead the Jewish people towards commitment to God, especially in moments of crisis.

Yet the Pesikta Rabbati, in the midst of listing all the commonalities between Moshe and Eliyahu, directs our attention to a difference between these two giants of Israel.

When Moshe stands at Mount Horeb)Mt. Sinai(, God insists that Moshe stay put – *"and you, stand here with me"*)Devarim 5:28(. On the other hand, when Eliyahu journeys forty days and forty nights in order to commune with God, he elicits the opposite response: *"Eliyahu, what are you doing here?"*)I Kings19:9(While Moshe is invited to the top of the mount, the gateway into the divine abode, Eliyahu is instructed to keep some distance.

This is reflective of the difference in their relationship with the people, their response to crises, and their leadership style.

At the moment of crisis, Moshe and Eliyahu speak with God differently. Moshe's response to God after the sin of the Golden Calf is: if You, God, destroy or disassociate yourself from the people, *"remove me from Your book."* There is no daylight between Moshe and the sinful Jewish people.

Whereas Eliyahu speaks with God in a way that shows concerns for his life and safety, and the distance between him and the people of Israel. *"I)Eliyahu(am moved by zeal for the ETERNAL, the God of Hosts, for the Israelites have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and put Your prophets to the sword. I alone am left, and they are out to take my life."*

The contrast between Moshe and Eliyahu shows that leadership requires a commitment to the people even when they are sinful and destructive. Speaking out against the challenges, and even removing those who have perpetuated the crisis are actions leaders sometimes have to take. But effective leaders do not remove themselves from the entire people.

This tension is deeply reflected in the story of Purim as well, when Esther must decide whether to risk her own safety for the sake of her people. Mordechai encourages her to show fidelity to the nation, which is then concretized by her declaration *"ka'asher avadeti avadeti" – if I am to be destroyed, then I will be destroyed.* This marks the moment in which she chooses solidarity with her people over her own self-preservation.

In our day, we also observe those who may call out the challenges but are still committed to the people. And others who at some point appear to be more concerned about their political life and their future than the needs of the people. *"Leaders"* who are not willing to engage with all the people even while calling out the crisis are not fit to lead.

In the end it is Eliyahu – after his abandonment of the people – who is demanded by God to appoint a successor, his student Elisha. It is Eliyahu who must be present at every brit milah to welcome in the next generation, testifying that despite our many challenges we have not walked away from the covenant. And it is Eliyahu who will call out the Messianic age, testifying to the eternality of our people and our Divine mission.

Hope always remains!

The stories of Moshe and Eliyahu on their respective mountains also reiterate the role of humanity to take responsibility, furthering the idea of the importance of a leader being strongly connected to his people.

Long, long ago, we all stood together at Har Sinai. But when that moment of revelation finished, there was no encore. The Sinai experience, including Moshe's extended stay in the thick of the fog in order to receive the Torah, was only ever meant to happen once.

So while it was fitting for Moshe to stay atop the mount, for Eliyahu it was not. *"At the sounding of the trumpet, they may ascend the mountain,"*)Shemot 19:13(we are told. At the conclusion of the revelation, the doorway to heaven shuts, and all that's left is a mountain without any residual holiness. All further challenges and crises are for us to face, trusting that the Torah can guide us, rather than retreating back to Sinai in the hopes of receiving further instructions.

This idea is profoundly resonant in the story of Purim. Megillat Esther is the only book in Tanach in which God's name is not mentioned – a reminder that even in moments when God's presence seems hidden, it is our responsibility to take action, guided by the values and teachings of our tradition.

Just as Moshe stood unwavering with the people in their darkest hour, and just as Eliyahu was ultimately called to bear witness to the future redemption, Purim calls on us to be present – to confront crises with courage, to strengthen our connection to the community, and to never lose faith that redemption is on the horizon.

* President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone, a modern Orthodox group of 32 institutions and programs. Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin is the Founding Director, and Rabbi Dr. Brander is President and Rosh HaYeshiva. For more information or to support Ohr Torah Stone, contact ohrtorahstone@otsyny.org or 212-935-8672. Donations to 49 West 45th Street #701, New York, NY 10036.

Purim and Pesach: Two Models Of Redemption

By Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander * 5783 / 2023 **
President and Rosh HaYeshiva, Ohr Torah Stone

The holidays of Purim and Pesach are observed in fairly similar ways: Both holidays are centered around feasting. While the tone of the Purim seudah differs from that of the Pesach seder, they are both times that we gather around the table for a festive meal, above-average drinking, and joyous celebration. To make these celebrations possible, we make it a high priority to donate to the poor to ensure that they too can take part in the festivities, be that through *matanot la'evyonim* on Purim or *kimcha d'Pischa* in the lead-up to Pesach and an invitation to the poor to eat with us at the Pesach seder.

Each of these celebrations is coupled with the recounting of the story – on Purim through the Megillah reading, and on Pesach through the recitation of the Haggadah.

Looking further, we see that the holidays themselves are interlinked with one another. Normally we have the tradition of performing a mitzvah at the first opportunity. Yet the Gemara)Megillah 6b(rules that in a leap year, when there are two Adars, Purim is celebrated in the second Adar, in order to juxtapose the two redemptive holidays of Purim and Pesach. What's more, Purim occurs exactly a month before the first day of Pesach, making it the first day we are meant to study the laws of Pesach in preparation for the upcoming holiday)Pesachim 6a(.

Furthermore, upon careful reading of Megillat Esther, we discover that Esther's soirée with Achashverosh and Haman, and Haman's sentencing to the gallows, took place on the first days of Pesach! This remarkable occurrence)mentioned in the piyut *"Vayehi Bachatzi Halayla,"* recited at the conclusion of the seder(leads the Magen Avraham)OC 490:1(, to suggest that we should add an extra dish to our holiday meal on the second day of Pesach to express our gratitude for the downfall of Haman which occurred on that day.

The similarities between these two holidays focus on the fact that they represent redemption of the Jewish people from demise, and therefore their celebration is rooted in activities that require concern for each other. For our redemption as a people and as individuals is only possible when we are concerned for the other. When we recognize our commitment to the other. Being unified and not parochial is what merits us to be redeemed.

Yet even as Purim and Pesach share commonalities and connections, the underlying stories and themes of the two holidays are different from each other. Contrary to the book of Shemot, the Haggadah hardly makes a single reference to Moshe)early manuscripts of the Haggadah contain no references to Moshe(in its recounting of the Exodus narrative. Hashem, it seems, is entirely at the reins, and the human actors, even those at the level of Moshe, are overlooked. But the opposite is the case regarding Purim. In the book of Esther it is Hashem who gets sidelined, so to speak, failing to earn a single mention in the whole Megillah.

The distinction in whose name is missing is, in fact, reflective of the larger thematic difference between Purim and Pesach. **Pesach marks the very beginning of the relationship between the Jewish people and Hashem. In its infancy, with the Jewish people bereft of mitzvot, it is God who works wonders in order to save the Jewish people. Yet in the Purim story, which comes at the tail end of Tanach, when prophecy is over, the Jewish people are led by Esther and Mordechai, gather together in prayer, take initiative, and, with God's ever-present yet invisible hand guiding them, bring about their own redemption.**]emphasis added[

The trajectory of Jewish history, as reflected in the arc of the Jewish calendar, takes us from Pesach to Purim, from *Itaruta dil'eila)"awakening from above"(* to *Itaruta dil'tata)"awakening from below"(.* While our story begins with total dependence upon divine mercy, awaiting and yearning for God's intervention to save us, we eventually find ourselves in the position of Mordechai and Esther, taking the initiative while trusting that God is guiding their way.

It is why the Rambam tells us that in Messianic times, the Book of Esther will, with the five books of the Torah, be the most crucial text of Tanach, for it emphasizes that the final redemption can only be achieved when we recognize that our actions either deter the Messianic moment or hasten its coming.

This journey, this balancing act, is something we all carry with us wherever we go. We are at once recipients and givers, the beneficiaries of divine kindness and the bestowers of kindness upon others in the name of the Divine. We must always pursue the path of *histadlut,* of investing our own efforts, even as we never lose sight of the need for *hashgacha,* Divine Providence. This is true at the broadest level of Jewish history, and it is true for our personal journeys.

As we make our way through this season of festivals of redemption, may we never forget to have faith in God, and faith in ourselves, so we can be partners with the Divine in hastening the redemption of the Jewish people and all of society.

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Ki Sisa: To Put the Picture Back Together Again

By Rabbi Label Lam © 2019 (5779)

> *When He had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, He gave Moshe the two tablets of the testimony, stone tablets, written with the finger of G-d.*)Shemos 31:18(
>
> *Now it came to pass when he drew closer to the camp and saw the calf and the dances – that Moshe's anger was kindled, and he flung the tablets from his hands, shattering them at the foot of the mountain.*)Shemos 32:19(
>
> *And HASHEM said to Moshe: "Carve for yourself two stone tablets like the first ones. And I will inscribe upon the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke.*)Shemos 34:1(

What was in that special gold laden box in the Holy of Holies? The Talmud)Brochos 8A(tells us that both sets of Tablets were in the Holy Ark, the 2nd set of Luchos that were carved by Moshe and the 1st set that was the handiwork of G-d that Moshe shattered in response to the Golden Calf. These are what reside in the heart of hearts of the relationship between HASHEM and the Jewish People. Why? What do they represent?

The Talmud)Sanheidrin(spells out a broad outline of human history. There will be 6,000 years divided up into three sets of 2000 years. The first 2000 years are called *"Tohu v Vohu – void and nothingness."* The word was build with perfection and man was originally in a state of perfection. In this epoch, man is left up to his own devices and he defiles, crashes,

and burns a world that was once pristine and pure.

The next 2000 years begin from 52 years after the birth of Avraham. He rediscovered HASHEM ECHOD and began to teach the world. This period is characterized by the development of the Jewish People and the raining down of prophetic guidance from above to the world below.

The latter era of 2000 years is called the Epoch of Moshiach and it is a world where prophecy is no more but the Torah is already here in this world and yet man is left up to his own devices again without overt miraculous intervention. It's a slug fest, a fight to the end between forces of order and chaos. Why is all this necessary?

Imagine a young child is given by his loving father a beautiful picture in a frame. He is told not to pull the screw out of the corner of the frame. He is tempted to do so and he does it. Now that magnificent picture is really a giant jig saw puzzle and it slowly begins to disassemble. That is the portrait of the first 2000. The child is now crying with all the broken pieces around him, a shattered picture with no apparent order, but with a sense that everything should fit neatly.
Now the father begins to assist the child like a tutor to put the pieces together until the picture is once again complete. The child is pleased beyond words. That little child was like Avraham and his progeny the Jewish People. From a splintered world of idolatry to the building of the Beis HaMikdash and the spreading of the notion of HASHEM ECHOD all over the world, that is the essence of those 2nd 2000 years.

Then the loving father does something surprising and shocking. He pulls the screw out of the corner of the newly framed and perfected picture. The picture begins to fall apart again the child is crying but the loving father reminds him, *"It was given to you whole. It was broken. I helped you fix it. Now you have to put it together again by yourself. It will remain forever as your accomplishment."*

The 1st Tablets were made by HASHEM. They were shattered. The 2nd Tablets were carved out by Moshe. Everyone did Teshuvah and built a Mishkan to **put the picture back together again.**

Good Shabbos!

https://torah.org/torah-portion/dvartorah-5779-ki-sisa/

Names, Not Numbers

By Rabbi Dov Linzer *

Over the course of two parshiyot, the Torah has described the construction of the Mishkan and the making of the priestly garments in great detail. Parashat Ki Tisa is introduced with a seemingly unrelated theme: a census of the people in which each person will pay a half-shekel. Why mention a census now?

Broadly speaking, the Torah is alerting us to the dangers inherent in a major national project such as the building of the Mishkan. We know that an earlier project of this scale did not end well, namely, the construction of the Tower of Babel. The precise sin of the builders of the tower is not spelled out, but it is clear that it had something to do with them being a single people with a single purpose*: "Behold, one nation and one language there is for them all, and this they have begun to do"* (Breishit, 11:6). The problem is not one of achdus; unity is a good thing. Rather, it is the loss of the individual in the process. In such a large-scale and single-minded project, all that matters is the vision and the goal*: "We will make for ourselves a name."* And when this happens on the national level, the will of the people often squashes the importance of the individual. Persons become faceless, interchangeable, and of little worth if any.

The midrash says as much when it states that no one would pay any attention at Babel when a person would fall off the tower, but when a brick would fall, they would cry and bewail its loss (Pirkei Di'Rebbe Eliezer, 24). This is no midrashic exaggeration. It is estimated that close to a half-million people died building the Great Wall of China. The building, the

edifice, the vision, these are all that matters.

What can be done to protect against this, to preserve the humanity of each individual? In the case of the Tower of Babel, the people were dispersed and given new languages. This created diversity and distinctiveness, ensuring that they would not homogenize into a melting pot of faceless unity again.

In the case of the Mishkan, there was another answer. In Parashat Terumah, the command of the Mishkan opens with each individual's personal and self-motivated contribution: *"From every person whose heart moves him, you shall receive My offering"* (25:2). And in this week's parasha, God proclaims, *"Behold, I have called by name Bezalel, son of Uri, son of Hur … and with him Ahaliav, son of Achisamak of the tribe of Dan"* (31:2,6). People are named; they are unique individuals with special talents that each brings to this task. This continues with the women who spun the wool, linen, and goat's hair in Vayakhel (35:25-26). We are also told that the washing basin commanded in Ki Tisa was made from the mirrors donated by women who gathered at the Tent of Meeting (38:8). The Torah goes out of its way to give faces and form to some of the individuals involved in this huge national endeavor.

And there is yet another way that the Mishkan differed from the Tower of Babel: those building the tower sought to reach up to the heavens; those building the Mishkan sought to bring God's presence down to earth. When we attempt to leave our world to reach God, it is easy to make everything in this mundane reality subservient to that lofty goal. In contrast, when we attempt to bring God into our world, we remain anchored to the world in which we live and connected to the people who inhabit it with us.

The command of the census is a part of not losing focus on the individual. By its nature, a census says every person counts. We are not just an abstraction, a *"nation."* We are thousands and thousands of separate, distinct people; we mourn every death, and we celebrate every birth. On the other hand, taking a census can bring about the opposite mentality: Everyone is just a number; no individual matters. If ten people die the total number is smaller, but any other ten people will make up the difference. Any one person is fungible. To counteract this, the Torah commands the giving of the half-shekel as part of the census. As the Rabbis explain it, they were not permitted to count individuals directly. Rather, the number of people would be known by the sum of the half-shekels. We can aggregate and count money, not people. One person and one person and one person do not make three people. People must always remain distinct and unique. They will have names, not numbers. They will always be Reuven, Sarah, and Shimon: *"Behold, I have called by name."*

And there is another corrective: Shabbat. At the completion of the detailed instructions for the Mishkan, the Torah commands again the observance of Shabbat. Shabbat and Mishkan are almost always juxtaposed, and the implicit message — which the Rabbis made explicit — is clear: you must rest on the Shabbat even if it means interrupting the building of the Mishkan. The project is not what is ultimately important. It does not override all and continue without end. There are things in this world that matter more than building the Mishkan, and Shabbat, with its message of human dignity, is chief among them.

Shabbat proclaims that no living thing, and particularly no human, can be made a slave to his work or a means to an end, even a lofty, religious end like the Mishkan. Humans are fundamentally free; they have a basic right to rest, a right to be free from the unrelenting pressures and demands of the world. It is thus no surprise that Shabbat can be violated to save a human life. A major goal of Shabbat is the recognition of each person's humanity, a quality which we cannot allow the larger forces in the world to reduce or eradicate. Naming the individuals, refusing to tally people as numbers, and interrupting the building of the Mishkan for a weekly day of rest allowed a national project of supreme importance to continue with enthusiastic participation and without ever losing sight of the face and individuality of each and every person involved.

The loss of the individual is a matter to be feared not just in worldly projects but in ideologies as well. Whether a project or an idea, the person is lost when something else is assigned a position of ultimate importance. To give an ideology supreme importance can be seen as a modern manifestation of the sin of idolatry. If, in the time of the Torah, idolatry was making something a god which was not in fact God, then a contemporary translation of that would be assigning ultimate value to something which is not of ultimate value. The Torah teaches us that, after God, people are of the greatest value,

and that the mitzvot are overridden to protect human life. Giving anything else, be it any ideology or vision, more importance than real people is turning that ideology into an idolatry.

This brings us to the Golden Calf. In the building of the Mishkan we saw the faces of some of the individuals involved; in the making of the Calf all we see is a faceless crowd. And far from each person contributing according to his or her personal motivation, the entire people act as one undifferentiated unit*: "And the entire people tore off their earrings and brought them to Aharon"* (32:3). It is one mob acting in unison, all giving the same thing, all doing the same thing. With the idolizing of the calf came the formation of an unstoppable mob, and any individual — whether Aharon or one of the people — was swept away by its force.

This remains an ongoing struggle. How do we devote our lives to something larger than ourselves without losing sight of the real people in front of us? This can be a problem when dealing with ideologues, even those working for human rights or other social justice causes. One can reach a point where the work is all about the cause and not about the people it is meant to serve. This can also be a problem in religious leadership. The religious leaders that I am most wary of are those who are the self-proclaimed defenders of the faith. Too often, too many people are sacrificed in the name of religion or for the sake of the cause that they believe reigns supreme. I am personally inspired by religious leaders, be it a rabbi or even the current Pope, who believe that their religion is strong enough to defend itself, who understand that their responsibility is to defend and protect the individual. When we build a Mishkan, when we devote our lives to something larger than ourselves, the names and faces of the real people we encounter must always be in front of us. We must always be able to say: *"Behold, I have called by name."*

Shabbat Shalom!

* Rosh Yeshiva and President, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah.

From my archives.

Thoughts for Purim

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

The Megillah pays close attention to what Mordecai wears. When he learns of the evil decree against the Jews, *"Mordecai rent his clothes and put on sackcloth with ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and cried with a loud and bitter cry."* Mordecai had been one of the regulars at the king's gate -- but the king did not allow people dressed in sackcloth to enter the royal precincts. In her distress, Esther sent Mordecai a change of clothes, which Mordecai rejected.

Mordecai's sackcloth was a blatant symbol of sadness; and also of defiance. He wanted people to see that something was very wrong, and to be outraged by the scandalous decree of the king against the Jews. Mordecai was practicing non-violent protest; his shabby clothes were a visible alarm signal to the public at large.

Later in the story, Mordecai is rewarded for having saved the king's life. Haman is made to walk Mordecai through the streets, while Mordecai is riding the king's horse and wearing clothes that the king had worn. This must have struck the public as very odd. Mordecai – who had recently been wearing sackcloth and who was a member of a people doomed to destruction by the king – is being honored by wearing the king's own clothes! Perhaps the situation of the Jews has improved.

What was Mordecai thinking as he was shown such honor? Perhaps, he thought that he might now have greater access to the king; after having worn the king's clothes, maybe there was a possibility for him to seek an audience with the king and try to convince him to rescind the evil decree. Or perhaps Mordecai sensed that his wearing the king's clothes made the general public view the Jews with greater favor and respect, and that somehow things would turn out alright.

After Esther had successfully intervened on behalf of the Jews, Mordecai became the Grand Vizier. *"And Mordecai went forth from the presence of the king in royal apparel of blue and white, and with a great crown of gold, and with a robe of fine linen and purple."* From wearing sackloth, to wearing clothes borrowed from the king, Mordecai now is dressed in the lavish clothing of a top government official. His clothing symbolizes his power in the kingdom. It reminds Jews and non-Jews that a Jewish man is second to the king.

In spite of his various garbs, Mordecai is the same person inside. He is *"ish yehudi"* – a Jewish man deeply committed to his people. The Megillah ends with a description of Mordecai as *"seeking the good of his people and speaking peace to all his seed."* This inner dignity and strength characterized Mordecai in good times and bad, regardless of the clothing he wore. His garments might be different, but he was always the same trustworthy and faithful Mordecai.

When Jews can emulate Mordecai's steadfastness of purpose, inner poise, and unshakeable commitment – then the Jewish people will be blessed with *"light and happiness and joy and honor."*

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals and rabbi emeritus of the historic Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York City.

https://www.jewishideas.org/thoughts-purim-5770

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Aspirations and Failures: Thoughts for Parashat Ki Tissa

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

Moses descended Mount Sinai, found the Israelites worshiping a golden calf, and he threw down the tablets of God's commandments. The Torah's account of this tragic scene unflinchingly describes the sinfulness of the Israelites, the frustration of Moses, the *"anger"* of the Lord.

The Torah could have omitted this story or edited it to make it look better. But the Torah is an amazingly candid document. In setting the foundations of religious life, the Torah takes under consideration that human beings are not angels. We are capable of great achievements…but also of great failures. We can reach great heights receiving Divine Revelation and we can sink very low worshiping a golden calf.

The Torah doesn't expect us to be perfect; it expects us to strive to be as good as we can be. According to tradition, the second set of Tablets was given on Yom Kippur. This is strikingly symbolic of the nature of life: we sin, we repent, and we have the opportunity to renew ourselves. Failure need not drag us down permanently. The Almighty has built Yom Kippur into our annual observances as a sign of Divine faith in our power to atone for past sins and to improve ourselves in the future.

The Torah teaches that spiritual life has ups and downs. The hallmark of religion at its best is an ongoing sense of striving, failing, growing, falling back, moving forward. It is dynamic and transformative. Religion is not about maintaining a dull status quo; it prods us to reach beyond.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, who was Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Israel in the early 20th century, once compared religious life to being on a ladder. Was someone on a higher rung more *"religious"* than one on a lower rung? Rabbi Kook answered: it depends which direction the people were going. A person might be on a higher rung — with more knowledge and greater level of mitzvah observance — and yet be stagnant or actually on the way down the ladder. Another person

might be on a lower rung of religious knowledge and observance, and yet be ascending, moving up with each passing day. So the one who is ascending is experiencing a dynamic and growing religious life, while the one on the higher rung is experiencing a dry and diminishing religious life. The one on the lower rung is aspiring to grow, while the one on the higher rung has surrendered to rote and dullness.

Religion is not a part time sideline, or something to do in our spare time. It isn't a collection of laws and customs to perform in a mechanical way. It is, at root, a framework for striving toward a dynamic relationship with the Almighty. It is not so much a pattern of life as an attitude toward living, of reaching beyond ourselves, of climbing one more rung in our quest for self-understanding and confrontation with the Divine. [emphasis added]

Yes, we will surely experience failures along the way, just as the Israelites in the Torah did. But we will also experience growth and achievement. It is not the failures that define who we are. It is our aspirations…and our striving to attain them.

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals and rabbi emeritus of the historic Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York City.

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Purim – The Power of Words

by Rabbi Mordechai Rhine *****

The Purim story is a remarkable example of the power of words.

- Haman caused Queen Vashti to be killed because of how he reframed her behavior into a national tragedy.
- Haman attempted to destroy the Jewish people by framing them as awful, through his skillful propaganda.
- Things turned against Haman when Esther denounced him to Achashveirosh.
- Haman's fate was sealed when Charvona framed the situation starkly by describing Haman as a man who built gallows for, *"Mordechai, who spoke favorably for the king."*

The twists and turns of the Purim story are all about words. When we talk, we can think that it was just words. But the Purim story makes it clear that words can build and destroy worlds. As Shlomo stated in Mishlei (18)*, "Death and life are in the hands of our speech."*

Let us consider the lessons of each of these critical junctures in the Purim story.

When Vashti refused to come to Achashveirosh, any responsible marriage counselor would have deescalated the situation and delayed judgment until the king was sober. The king, in a state of drunkenness had asked the queen to come with just her crown (meaning unclothed). It should not have been hard to be a bit understanding, to calm things down, and make peace between husband and wife. Yet, Haman (who hoped his own daughter would be queen) teaches us that even the most understandable offense can be reframed into something awful*. "What will be when other women hear that Vashti did not listen to her husband,"* Haman argued. *"The social structure of the entire kingdom will collapse if*

Vashti is not punished severely." Pure foolishness, but truly the power of words.

Later in the Purim story, Haman approached Achashveirosh with what he considered a great national dilemma. Haman, an antisemite, had identified a nation which he wished to destroy. The problem was that he had no reason to hate these people or to want to destroy them. So, he employed Lashon Horah skillfully in his presentation to Achashveirosh. Because skillful Lashon Horah could destroy even the most kind, innocent, and worthy people. *"There is a people,"* Haman declared, *"Who have infiltrated every part of society; they are different, and the king really has no use for them."* Haman has said nothing; certainly nothing to justify genocide. Yet, through the power of words he framed an entire nation as guilty by claiming they are everywhere, and they are just not profitable.

Interestingly, the downfall of Haman occurred when Esther used simple words to set the record straight. Regarding Haman, Esther says, *"An oppressive man, an enemy, a bad person."* Suddenly Achashveirosh realized that Haman's sweet-talk propaganda was foolish and had no substance. If the ancient alchemist was reputed to be able to turn dust to gold, Haman could turn gold to dust with his foul mouth.

Haman's end was clinched when Charvona verbalized the contrast between Haman and Mordechai. Haman's skill and personal agenda were finally exposed. Haman was on the wrong side of the law. Charvona said*, "Mordechai spoke favorably for the king,"* something that Haman had never done. All Haman did was use his words to bring or try to bring destruction upon people who stood in the way of his ambitions.

The way of a person speaking Lashon Horah is like a spider who first poisons his prey and causes it to disintegrate. Then the spider simply slurps it up. This was what Haman tried to do. Fortunately, the Jews (and the world) were saved from his ambitions.

Interestingly, although Mordechai is a hero of the Purim story, we are told very little in the Megilla about what he said. There is one notable exception. When Mordechai messaged Esther about Haman's plot, the Megilla records two significant sentences, quoting Mordechai's message. Remarkably, although Mordechai could easily be justified in speaking harshly about Haman, he doesn't. In accordance with the wisdom of Hilchos Lashon Horah (even though these laws don't protect a wicked man like Haman) Mordechai simply stated the facts. In fact, Mordechai stated the facts so plainly and professionally that it is a bit unnerving. Mordechai messaged Esther regarding*, "The sum of money that Haman had promised to pay the royal treasury to annihilate the Jews."* Mordechai also communicated*, "the text of the decree which was circulating in Shushan regarding the Jews to destroy them."* He then asked that Esther go before the king and plead for her nation.

Mordechai didn't engage in propaganda or reframing. There was no rant or bad mouthing. Just the facts. It seems that living for a lifetime the life of a Tzaddik had the habits of dignity and professionalism so embedded in Mordechai's personality so that even in this stressful situation Mordechai's conduct remained dignified.

There is so much to learn from the propaganda of Haman that is relevant for our time. The enemies of Israel will try to frame the Jews as the problem, even as they act in ways that are devious and downright evil. They hurl terms of genocide at good people who act in self-defense, to cover up the fact that their charter calls for the annihilation of the Zionist entity, hardly neighborly behavior. But the world will listen to the foolish garbage, as Achashveirosh did, until eventually Hashem will orchestrate someone to call them out on it. The miracle of Purim occurred when people of significance realized who exactly was the evil one in this story.

The power of words can change situations in an instant. May we be fortunate to take the power of words to heart and be careful in how we use them in our own lives, observing the laws of Lashon Horah. May Hashem bless the world with clarity to see evil for what it is despite the propaganda and make miracles for us in our time as he did for our ancestors at this time of year.

With heartfelt blessings for a joyous Purim and a wonderful Shabbas.

* Rabbi Mordechai Rhine is a certified mediator and coach with Rabbinic experience of more than 20 years.

Ki Sisa: The Gold, the Calf, and the Holiday of G-d

by Rabbi Mordechai Rhine * © 2018

The story of the golden calf is well known. After the revelation at Sinai, Moshe ascended the mountain to learn the details of the law. He told the people that he would return after 40 days. They counted inclusively, counting the day of Moshe's ascent. When Moshe didn't return according to their count, fear and panic gripped the people. They created a golden calf to replace their leader Moshe. In fact, they miscounted, as they should have begun with the day after Moshe's ascent.

The question is: what were the Jewish people thinking? How could they have fallen so far as to make an idol just days after the great revelation?

The commentaries describe two responses of the Jewish People to the problem of their missing mentor, Moshe. One response was of spiritual desperation, to create an intermediary between them and G-d, instead of Moshe. From the knowledge they gleaned at the revelation at Sinai the people knew that one of the symbolic conduits of G-d's spiritual energy was a calf (see Radak commentary to Yechezkel 1:27). Focused as they were on spirituality, when they needed to create a new intermediary, they chose a calf.

A second response to the crisis of Moshe's absence was quite the opposite. Instead of looking for a new way to connect with G-d, some Jews gave up on spirituality. Moshe, their mentor, was gone. In their minds, so was the spiritual dream. All that was left was to simply savor the freedom from Egypt. That freedom, and the opportunity for personal wealth, was symbolized by gold.

The golden-calf was a mutual mode of worship, a meeting place of sorts, for both of these groups, both of whom had entered an *"emotional denial"* regarding the great revelation and the start of Judaism. One group chose to substitute the spirituality of Judaism with their own version of spirituality, while the other group chose to deny spirituality entirely. Either way, their approaches were attempts to turn the clock back to "yesterday," a time before the great revelation at Sinai.

The spiritual response of the "calf" and the physical response of the "gold" are responses that exist today in the Jewish world. Often, when people are spiritually unsatisfied, they will choose either an extreme spiritual approach, or an extreme physical one. For example, young adults who are desperately yearning for spirituality may end up in the far eastern religions in their quest for a spiritual alternative. Others respond to their unsatisfied feelings by trashing religion altogether and choosing the approach symbolized by the worship of gold.

There is however a third approach which can be found in Jewish communities today. That is the approach of loyalty. Despite the feelings that observance might seem humdrum, people still observe loyally, even if they can't quite figure it out. This approach is commendable for its persistence. But, it does need a cure because it often leaves people confused and unsatisfied.

A few weeks ago, at the conclusion of our monthly Tehillim class, one of the participants came over to me to say*, "Wow. These explanations are great. I didn't realize that the words of Tehillim have meaning."*

The comment was striking. Here is a person who finishes Tehillim each week with the greatest devotion, but didn't appreciate that the words have meaning. To be observing on a superficial level, and still do so with utmost devotion, takes enormous loyalty. But, we do hope for even better.

When Ahron sees the golden calf and all it represents, he declares, *"Tomorrow shall be a holiday for G-d."* Perhaps his intent was to respond to the void that precipitated each of these approaches.

"No," he was saying, *"We do not need to make our own alternative deities to connect spiritually."*

"No. We do not need to give up, and begin to worship money and physicality instead of G-d."

And, "No," we do not need to give up hope for a meaningful relationship with G-d, and reconcile ourselves to recitals that we don't understand. *"Tomorrow shall be a festival for G-d,"* means that by taking proper action today we can make spirituality meaningful tomorrow.

Ahron's response is that, *"Tomorrow shall be a festival for G-d."* This statement is a truism. Provided that we make good use of our "Todays."

With best wishes for a wonderful Shabbos!

* From my archives – because I must post early this week.

* Rabbi Mordechai Rhine is a certified mediator and coach with Rabbinic experience of more than 20 years. Based in Maryland, he provides services internationally via Zoom. He is the Director of TEACH613: Building Torah Communities, One family at a Time, and the founder of CARE Mediation, focused on Marriage/ Shalom Bayis and personal coaching. To reach Rabbi Rhine, his websites are www.care-mediation.com and www.teach613.org; his email is RMRhine@gmail.com. **For information or to join any Torah613 classes, contact Rabbi Rhine.**

Parshas Ki Sisa – The Value of Experience

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer * (2021)

After Moshe spent forty days on Har Sinai with G-d teaching him all of the Torah, Moshe was told to go down quickly for his people had made an idol. When Moshe gets to the bottom of the mountain, he speaks briefly with his student Yehoshua, who had been waiting there. Yehoshua is unaware of the Golden Calf, noting only there is a sound of great commotion in the camp and assumes there is a battle. Moshe has a brief discussion, disproving the battle theory, and then heads into the camp proper. When he arrives in the camp and sees the Golden Calf before him, Moshe immediately destroys the Luchos – the Tablets containing the Ten Commandments. The Gemara in Yevamos)62a(explains that Moshe understood that after the great sin of the Golden Calf, the Jewish people were not worthy to receive the Torah. When G-d later instructed Moshe to carve out new tablets, G-d referenced the old Tablets using language that indicates praise for Moshe's decision to have broken the first set of Tablets, teaching us that Moshe was right to have destroyed them.

The Maharsh"a)ibid.(asks a thoughtful question. If Moshe understood that the sin of the Golden Calf rendered the nation unfit to receive the Torah, why then did he wait to break the Tablets until he reached the camp? While Moshe was still on top of the mountain, G-d told him that the people had made an idol for themselves. Yet, Moshe did not choose to act then. When Moshe came down the mountain, he stopped briefly for a conversation with Yehoshuia. It was only once Moshe entered the camp proper that he broke the Tablets. If the Jewish people weren't fit to receive the Torah, then why did Moshe wait?

The Mahrash"a quotes the Sefer Ha'ikrim)Ma'amar 4 Chapter 15(who explains that part of the power of experience is that it sharpens and heightens the emotions. A person is more emotionally impacted by what he sees and experiences than by what he knows. When Moshe was on Har Sinai, he knew that the people were sinning, but was not fully emotionally moved and charged by this knowledge. It was only once Moshe had seen it with his own eyes that Moshe was pained to the point where he felt the need to break the Tablets.

At first glance, it would seem that the Maharsh"a is not answering his question. The Maharsh"a's question was only once the Gemara tells us that Moshe's decision to break the Tablets was based on logical reasoning. Since Moshe was aware of the sin before coming down from Har Sinai, then he should have followed the logic and reasoning right away. How does Moshe's greater pain in seeing for himself explain why he didn't act on G-d's word alone?

Perhaps, the Maharsh"a is teaching us that the value of experience is more than just greater understanding and empathy. Experience helps to deepen our appreciation and awareness, even of situations we know. Sometimes even clear ramification may only be noticeable to one who has experience. It was only once he saw with his own eyes that Moshe was able to fully appreciate the gravity of what they had done, and it was only once Moshe had that added level of clarity that he realized that we were no longer worthy of the Torah. The deeper emotional awareness gave Moshe a greater clarity on the logic and reasoning, as well.

While there are many important things in each person's life, and they can't all be fully experienced, Hashem has given us a great gift in our imagination. When we take a few moments to stop and imagine being there, we can gain some level of experience, and with it a greater level of awareness and understanding. By taking a few moments to imagine living someone else's life – with all of their troubles and challenges, we can perhaps gain a new level of empathy. By taking a few moments to consider the world and the setting of the stories of the Torah, we can begin to find new lessons in the same stories we read before. Experience deepens our awareness, awareness deepens our understanding, and we may then see things we had missed before.

* Co-founder of the Rhode Island Torah Network in Providence, RI. Until recently, Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD., and associated with the Savannah Kollel.

Purim: Esther the Thriller

By Rabbi Haim Ovadia *

Of all the gripping tales of the Tanakh, the story of Esther, intricate and elaborate, stands out as one which was written for the stage. The omniscient narrator describes the location, setting, wardrobe, and mood for each episode. The narrative contains all the elements of a great story: intrigues, powerplay, religion, a ruthless villain, a wise man, a captured princess, and a love triangle. But the drama the Megillah provides apparently was not satisfying. Rabbi Elazar, quoted in the Talmud, decided to elaborate on it with this perplexing commentary. When the King asked Esther who is trying to annihilate her nation, she pointed at the King himself, and a disaster was avoided only thanks to an angel who slapped her hand so she would point at Haman.

This Midrash should not be taken literally. Had we been there, we would not have seen an angel, nor would we have seen Esther's hand moving from Ahashverosh to Haman. Rather, R. Elazar conveys a message about Esther's actions. In order to understand what happened at that moment around the King's table we must go back to the transformative verse of the Megillah)5:1(. On the third day, Esther wore royalty and stood in the inner courtyard before the king. Up to this moment Esther is a quiet, timid girl. She does not ask for servants, jewelry, or cosmetics, she does not reveal anything about herself, and she obeys Mordechai. After learning of Haman's decree. Mordechai comes to Esther with a demand, or better yet, a command. He commands her to go to the king and plead for her nation. Esther is initially reluctant, but when she is finally convinced, she upends Mordechai's plan. Instead of obeying him, she commands him to obey her and he does. When she finally approaches the king, as the verse above indicates, she wears royalty, which means that she finally accepts her role as a queen and a powerful woman, who no longer keeps quiet and obeys Mordechai's orders.

The king immediately realizes that she has changed. He looks at her, and for the first time in his life, he sees Esther the Queen. He is dumbfounded, but her radiant presence cuts through the fog of alcohol and shakes him up, and he is willing to offer her half his kingdom. He wants to know what made her risk her life and come see him uninvited.

Esther's words first soothe and flatter him, but she then mentions Haman and throws him into a whirlwind. Esther's courageous act, which could have put her life in danger, plants seeds of suspicion in the king's mind. Is she having an affair with Haman? Is Haman trying to use her to usurp my throne? With distrust brewing towards his closest advisor and his beloved wife, the sleepless king searches the annals for an explanation of people's disloyalty towards him. He asks himself how it is possible that none of his servants informed him about the possible threat. He learns that he has a reputation as an ingrate king, because he never rewarded Mordechai for exposing the assassination plot of Bigtan and Teresh. He decides to reward Mordechai publicly to entice people with information to step forward, and God's hand sends Haman to the royal chambers to confirm the king's suspicion that Haman is eying the throne. The power thirsty Haman tells the king without hesitation that the ultimate honor is to wear royal garb and ride a royal steed, and thus becomes the main suspect, alongside Esther, in a possible coup d'état.

We can now return to the Midrash. When the king asks Esther who is the one who plotted to kill her nation, he knows very well who were the people involved and what nation she is referring to, because only one decree was signed to sanction genocide. What he wanted to know is whether she is blaming him for it. Esther cleverly manipulates Haman and the king into the arena, where they circle each other, vying for her approval. Haman believes that she brings him one step closer to the throne, while the king thinks that perhaps the whole plan to annihilate the Jews was meant to denounce him as tyrant and depose him. It is at that moment of extreme tension, when Esther formulates her answer, that she is potentially pointing at the king, who could have very easily sentenced her and Haman to death.

It is at that moment that Esther, who is herself the מלאך – angel in the sense of messenger, channels all the king's anger and frustration to Haman, but she is still in danger. The king is confused and angry, not sure whom he could fully trust. He goes out for fresh air, maybe a cigar, and when he comes back, he finds Haman at the queen's feet. Ironically, this is the last nail in Haman's coffin. It is not his attempt to murder a whole nation, men, women, and children that gains him the gallows, but rather the king's accusation that he is trying to take Esther from him.

And that is, I believe, the reason the story is the story of Esther, and no one else!

Purim Samaich; Shabbat Shalom.

* Judaic faculty, Ramaz High School, New York; also Torah VeAhava. Until recently, Rabbi, Beth Sholom Sephardic Minyan)Potomac, MD(. Faculty member, AJRCA non-denominational rabbinical school(. **Many of Rabbi Ovadia's Devrei Torah are now available on Sefaria: https://www.sefaria.org/profile/haim-ovadia?tab=sheets** . The Sefaria articles usually include Hebrew text, which I must delete because of issues changing software formats.

The Playing of the Bull and The Squirting of Seltzer

By Rabbi Moshe Rube * (5782)

The Torah describes the final descent of the Jews into this state as "*Vayakumu Litzachek,"* or *"They arose to Tzachek."* Tzachek is a Hebrew word that generally, means to play, sport, laugh, or jest -- in other words, having the nonserious attitude we usually associate when we hear the word play.

Perhaps you agree with the Torah's negative classification of play here. Indeed, many of us can sometimes empathize with the opinion of Krusty the Clown's father, Rabbi Hyman Krustovsky)voiced by Jackie Mason(, when he told his son not to become a clown because *"Life is not fun. Life is serious. Seltzer is for drinking not for squirting."* Or we may like the sentiment expressed about 1930's Jewish culture in the Bronx in Chaim Potok's 1975 novel, *In The Beginning.* There it says that *"childhood was something you grew out of,"* implying that the play attitude was not seen as a positive in that

world.

Of course life isn't all play. However, we cannot prove from this example that the Torah takes a no-holds-barred attitude against it. Examples abound of the word *"Tzachek"* in the Torah used in a positive context.

God loved Avraham's Tzachek)laugh(so much that He commanded Avraham to name his son that word. Sarah describes her blessing of a son as a *"Tzachek"* that God gave her, and the Torah describes Yitzchak as being Mitzacheik Rivkah, his wife. which implies the positive role that play played in their intimacy.

Tzachek can be used in both negative and positive contexts. So maybe we should ask a better question.

Instead of asking for the definitive Torah attitude to play, let's ask what causes play to go so wrong. How do we play like Avraham's laughter and not let our play devolve into the *"playing of the bull"* that Israel committed? What do you think? In what cases can play evolve us and when can it do the opposite?

Let's zoom out a bit first. How the Jews could have gone so wrong right after the giving of the Torah has always been a sticking point for me. What does that say about the meaning of any religious experience if we can sink so low afterwards anyway? The only answer that ever satisfied me was one I read from Rav Aryeh Kaplan, a late Jewish rabbi and teacher who also happened to have a PhD in physics. He pointed out that all was not quite right with the Sinai experience. While we imagine seeing God himself to be the most sublime thing we could aspire to, it actually wouldn't be. Because when we have such a direct experience, we lose any sense of agency we have over ourselves. To fully experience a being like God means to be completely absorbed in Him to such a degree that we lose our independence.

When we as humans lose our perceived independence, our freedom to think and act as we see fit, we rebel. A part of us wants it back, and we will do anything we can to show that we are separate independent thinking beings. If you back someone into a corner they will lash out. That's the imperfection of Sinai. It was such a powerful experience that we lost our sense of agency. We had no way to take part in Jewish tradition. We had no way to express any of our own thoughts. Would you want to be in a relationship like this? Where you have no way to contribute at all? No matter how wonderful, engaging, and spectacular the person you are with is, you will hate it if you never get a chance to talk.

At Sinai, the people were confronted with absolute definitive Truth. So they lost their freedom to be curious, their freedom to explore, their freedom to play. That's when play turns its ugly side. When you or someone outside you tries to remove it by sheer brute force.

Put another way, if you try to force someone to do something, if you take away their choice they will rebel even if you're one hundred percent right. We as humans need the freedom to explore and find the answer for ourselves. All work and no play turns us into robots or rebels.

Here's some stories from Midrash that show us that our predecessors understood this perspective:

> *1(God forces the Jews to accept the Torah by holding Sinai over their heads and threatening to bury them should they refuse to accept. The Jews then rebelled and made the calf.*
>
> *2(King Hezekiah tried in his time to force the Jews to study Torah by threatening them with the sword. His son King Menashe soon after spread idols everywhere in the land of Judah.*

Force never works. That's why in the second try, God told Moshe to write the second Luchot and teach it to Israel. The Torah would now have an Oral dimension. The Oral Torah, all the discussions of the Talmud, Midrash and all the dialogues of Jewish history are our way that we as a nation play and discover. It's how we maintain ourselves not as obedient robots but as partners with God. It's how we can question and challenge even God Himself)as the prophets were wont to do(.

It's how we keep our sense of play.

Although sometimes quirting seltzer can also be effective. I think I've just discovered my Purim costume.

Shabbat Shalom.

Reading Suggestions: See the book Homo Ludens by Johan Huizinga for an in-depth discussion of these and more questions about the play element in culture.

* Senior Rabbi of Auckland Hebrew Congregation, Remuera)Auckland(, New Zealand. Formerly Rabbi, Congregation Knesseth Israel)Birmingham, AL(. I reprinted part 1 last week for Mishpatim.

Rav Kook Torah
Purim: The Joy of Purim

Rav Kook, who had studied in the famed Volozhin yeshiva in his youth, transplanted the Volozhiner Purim merriment to his own yeshiva in Jerusalem, Mercaz HaRav.

Just as he would completely immerse himself in the special holiness of the Sabbath and holidays, so too, the joy of Purim would radiate from his entire being. On Purim, his happiness was evident in his exuberant speech; in his eyes, lit up like two merry torches; in the quickness of his movements; and in the lively content of his Purim Torah.

The joy began on Purim evening. The yeshiva students hastened to the Rav's house wearing a riot of masks and costumes. Some were clothed in the long black coats worn by rabbis and rabbinical judges; others dressed in the shtreimels and colorful striped cloaks typical of the ultra-Orthodox of Jerusalem. A few arrived with exotic turbans and keffiyehs, while others wore the flat caps and short-sleeve shirts of manual laborers.

The Purim festivity was a mixed multitude of colors and hues, a cacophony of singing, cantorial renditions, Talmudic sing-song, and the melodious trope of Megillah reading. In addition to the yeshiva students, many prominent Jerusalemites showed up: Torah scholars and academics, political activists and writers, all of whom came to visit the Chief Rabbi in a time of exuberant happiness.

Rav Kook spoke of the simchah of the Jewish people, an inner joy that sings within the soul. This joy is not like the superficial delight of other nations, one that comes from transient pleasures and fades away in the blink of an eye. *"O Israel, do not rejoice in joy like the nations"*)Hosea 9:1(. No, no, he emphasized. Our joy is fundamentally different.

Our custom is to wear costumes on Purim, the rabbi explained, because it is an auspicious time to frustrate the plans of the prosecuting angel. Temporarily, we adopt the customs of Amalek: we wear his clothes, become inebriated, and act frivolously. The prosecuting angel sees us as one of his own and forgets about us. In this way, the Sages' directive to drink on Purim enables us to abrogate the evil designs of Amalek.

In the middle of his speech, Rav Kook suddenly stood up and began to sing with great elation*, "Do not fear, My servant Jacob! Do not fear, do not fear!"*)Jeremiah 46:27(Then, to confuse the prosecuting angel, he sang the same tune, but translated the verse to Russian. In the following talks, he interjected Russian, German, and English words, thus adding to the general Purim spirit.

When the festivities reached their height, the Rav stood at the head of the table and began a lengthy Purim discourse. He examined every mitzvah in the Torah, interpreting each one as a source for the obligation to drink on Purim. With a wonderful blend of erudition and ingenuity, he derived from every mitzvah a metaphorical, homiletic, mystical, or even

literal proof that one is obligated to *drink "until one is unable to distinguish between cursed Haman and blessed Mordechai"*)Megillah 7b(.

Waging War on Amalek

That was the year in which persecution and violence burst forth across Germany. Synagogues were ransacked and set on fire; Jewish books were burned on public pyres; and Jews were beaten, robbed, and deported. Rav Kook sensed the impending Holocaust.

Suddenly, he rose, slid his hat to the side of his head like a soldier, girded his belt, and barked out like a drill sergeant, *"Come, my sons! Let us forge a battalion to wage war on Amalek!"*

Everyone stood at attention, and the rabbi marched before them. Shouting commands in garbled Russian, he led his 'battalion' through the corridors of the house. He sang, and they repeated after him*, "Blot out! Blot out! Blot out the memory of Amalek!"* He passed among the columns of 'soldiers,' singing with a military tune, *"Let the tribes of His nation sing His praise; for God will avenge His servants' blood, and bring vengeance upon His foes"*)Deut. 32:43(. The rabbi's eyes blazed, his body shook with emotion, and all marched after him in song.

Rav Kook then discharged the 'troops' and they returned to the yeshiva, where he lectured on the special portion of the Jewish people.

Our lot may be one of troubles, but nonetheless, *"Fortunate is the people for whom it is thus"*)Psalms 144:15(. Even if we are persecuted all over the world, we are still privileged, since *"Fortunate* is the people for whom the Eternal is their God")ibid(.

Israel never truly sins. Even in the time of Haman, they only bowed to the idols to show their allegiance; they did not really worship them. Sometimes a Jew puts on a costume and pretends to be a sinner. But on the inside, he is as pure as crystal.

Amalek declared war on Israel. And precisely in times of war, we must engage in Torah study. In the terrifying abyss of the battle between purity and impurity, we make our home in the depths of Torah.

)Stories from the Land of Israel. Adapted from *Mo'adei HaRe'iyah* pp. 263-264; *Celebration of the Soul,* translated by R. Pesach Jaffe, pp. 125-126.(

https://ravkooktorah.org/PURIM_69.htm

A Thought for Purim: What Lessons Can We Learn from the Story of Purim? (2008)

By Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l, Former Chief Rabbi of the U.K.*

Two weeks ago, I was part of a mission that we've done each year for the past six years to bring music and friendship to victims of terror in Israel. This year the mission went to Sderot and Ashkelon and saw at first hand a little of what you have had to live through.

While they were there, a missile landed just a few hundred yards from where they were, and they were shaken. That was just one attack. It's almost impossible for us to imagine what you have gone through, not once but a thousand times, each time with – at best – fifteen seconds warning; each time not knowing where the devastation would fall.

And tragically what you are suffering now is part of a larger pattern that has accompanied Israel since its birth. For sixty years the people of Israel has had to live with war or the threat of war, terror or the threat of terror. No nation on earth has

had to live through what Israel has had to live through, and it has done so with *"koach u'gevurah,"* unshakable courage.

And what Israel has had to suffer is itself part of a larger pattern that goes back to Purim and the book of Esther, the evil wish *"l'hashmid laharog ul'abed et kol hayehudim,"* to kill, destroy, and exterminate every single Jew – the first warrant for genocide, the attempt to deny to the Jewish people the right to be.

Why is it that the people who first taught the world the sanctity of life, has had so often to walk through the valley of the shadow of death?

Why, in a world in which there are 82 Christian nations and 56 Muslim ones, is it so hard for people to accept the right of the Jewish people to just one nation of its own?

Why, when the connection between Jews and the land of Israel goes back more than 3,000 years, far longer than any other nation in the West, do Jews still have to fight for the right to be, a right denied by Hezbollah and Hamas? Heaven alone knows.

But we want you, the people of Sderot, to know that we in British and Commonwealth Jewry are with you. We have said special Tehillim for the people and state of Israel every day, morning and evening, for the past seven years. Your suffering is our pain. Your courage gives us pride.

We learn two lessons from the story of Purim. The first is that *"uMordechai lo yichra v'lo yishtachaveh,"* Mordechai would neither kneel nor bow down. The Jewish people does not bow down to any pressure. Especially the Jewish people in Israel. *"V'hu yolichenu komemiyut l'artzenu,"* and He will lead us upright to our land. Because of Israel, because of your strength, because of your refusal to be intimidated, every Jew walks a little taller today.

The fate of Haman has been throughout history the fate of individuals and nations: that those who try to destroy the Jewish people end by destroying themselves. Great empires sought to harm the Jewish people: from Egypt, Babylon, Greece and Rome in ancient times, to the Third Reich and the Soviet Union in the twentieth century. They seemed at the time to be indestructible. Yet every one of them has disappeared, while our tiny, vulnerable people can still say *"Am Yisrael Chai,"*

We therefore say and pray: *"LaYehudim hayta orah v'simchah v'sasson viykar. Kein tihyeh lachem v'lanu, bimheira b'yameinu, Amen."*

***** https://rabbisacks.org/archive/lessons-we-learn-from-story-of-purim/ This 2008 Purim message from Rabbi Sacks was aimed at the community of Sderot, following an intensified wave of terror from Gaza.

Ki Tissa: Can there be Compassion Without Justice? (5775, 5782)

By Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l, Former Chief Rabbi of the U.K.*

At the height of the drama of the Golden Calf, a vivid and enigmatic scene takes place. Moses has secured forgiveness for the people. But now, on Mount Sinai yet again, he does more. He asks God to be with the people. He asks Him *to "teach me Your ways,"* and *"show me Your glory"*)Ex. 33:13, Ex. 33:18(. God replies:

> *"I will cause all My goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim My Name, the Lord, in your presence … I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But," He said, "you cannot see My face, for no one may see Me and live."* Ex. 33:20

God then places Moses in a cleft in the rock face, telling him he will be able to *"see My back"* but not His face, and Moses hears God say these words:

> *"The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet He does not leave the guilty unpunished.* Ex. 34:6-7

This passage became known as the *"Thirteen Attributes of God's Mercy."*

The Sages understood this episode as the moment in which God taught Moses, and through him all future generations, how to pray when atoning for sin)Rosh Hashanah 17b(. Moses himself used these words with slight variations during the next crisis, that of the spies. Eventually they became the basis of the special prayers known as Selichot, prayers of penitence. It was as if God were binding himself to forgive the penitent in each generation by this self-definition.]1[God is compassionate and lives in love and forgiveness. This is an essential element of Jewish faith.

But there is a caveat. God adds: *"Yet He does not leave the guilty unpunished."* There is a further clause about visiting the sins of the parents upon the children which demands separate attention and is not our subject here. The caveat tells us that there is forgiveness but also punishment. There is compassion but also justice.

Why so? **Why must there be justice as well as compassion, punishment as well as forgiveness?** The Sages said:

> *"When God created the universe He did so under the attribute of justice, but then saw it could not survive. What did He do? He added compassion to justice and created the world."* See Rashi to Genesis 1:1.]Emphasis added above.[

This statement prompts the same question. Why did God not abandon justice altogether? Why is forgiveness alone not enough?

Some fascinating recent research in diverse fields from moral philosophy to evolutionary psychology, and from games theory to environmental ethics, provides us with an extraordinary and unexpected answer.

The best point of entry is Garrett Hardin's famous paper written in 1968 about *"the tragedy of the commons."*]2[He asks us to imagine an asset with no specific owner: pasture land that belongs to everyone)the commons(, for example, or the sea and the fish it contains. The asset provides a livelihood to many people, the local farmers or fishermen. But eventually it attracts too many people. There is over-pasturing or overfishing, and the resource is depleted. The pasture is at risk of becoming wasteland. The fish are in danger of extinction.]3[

What then happens? The common good demands that everyone from here on must practice restraint. They must limit the number of animals they graze or the number of fish they catch. But some individuals are tempted not to do so. They continue to over-pasture or overfish. They justify to themselves that the gain to them is great and the loss to others is small, since it is divided by many. Self-interest takes precedence over the common good, and if enough people act on these instincts, the result is disaster.

This is the tragedy of the commons, and it explains how environmental catastrophes and other disasters occur. The **problem is the free rider,** the person who pursues their self-interest without bearing their share of the cost of the common good. Because of the importance of this type of situation to many contemporary problems, they have been intensively studied by mathematical biologists like Anatol Rapoport and Martin Nowak and behavioural economists like Daniel Kahneman and the late Amos Tversky.]4[ ]Emphasis added[

One of the things they have done is to create experimental situations that simulate this sort of problem. Here is one example. Four players are each given $8. They are told they can choose to invest as much or as little as they want in a common fund. The experimenter collects the contributions, adds them up, adds 50%)the gain the farmer or fisherman would have made by using the commons(, and distributes the sum equally to all four players. So if each contributes the full

$8 to the fund, they each receive $12 at the end. But if one player contributes nothing, the fund will total $24, which with 50% added becomes $36. Distributed equally it means that each will receive $9. Three will thus have gained $1, while the fourth, the free rider, will have gained $9.

This, though, is not a stable situation. As the game is played repeatedly, the participants begin to realise there is a free rider among them even if the experiment is structured so that they don't know who it is. One of two things then tends to happen. Either everyone stops contributing to the fund)i.e. the common good(or they agree, if given the choice, to punish the free rider. Often people are keen to punish, even if it means that they will lose thereby, a phenomenon sometimes called *"altruistic punishment."*

Some have linked participants to MRI machines to see which parts of the brain are activated by such games. Interestingly, altruistic punishment is linked to pleasure centres in the brain. As Kahneman puts it:

> *"It appears that maintaining the social order and the rules of fairness in this fashion is its own reward. Altruistic punishment could well be the glue that holds societies together."]5[*

This, though, is hardly a happy situation. Punishment is bad news for everyone. The offender suffers, but so do the punishers, who have to spend time or money they might otherwise use in improving the collective outcome. And in cross-cultural studies, it turns out to be people from countries where there is widespread free-riding who punish most severely. People are most punitive in societies where there is the most corruption and the least public-spiritedness. Punishment, in other words, is the solution of last resort.

This brings us to religion. A whole series of experiments has shed light on the role of religious practice in such circumstances. Tests have been carried out in which participants have the opportunity to cheat and gain by so doing. If, without any connection being made to the experiment at hand, participants have been primed to think religious thoughts – by being shown words relating to God, for example, or being reminded of the Ten Commandments – they cheat significantly less.]6[What is particularly fascinating about such tests is that outcomes show no relationship to the underlying beliefs of the participants. What makes the difference is not believing in God, but rather being reminded of God before the test. This may well be why daily prayer and other regular rituals are so important. What affects us at moments of temptation is not so much background belief but the act of bringing that belief into awareness.

Of much greater significance have been the experiments designed to test the impact of different ways of thinking about God. Do we think primarily in terms of Divine forgiveness, or of Divine justice and punishment? Some strands within the great faiths emphasise one, others the other. There are hellfire preachers and those who speak in the still, small voice of love. Which is the more effective?

Needless to say, when the experimental subjects are atheists or agnostics, there is no difference. They are not affected either way. Among believers, though, the difference is significant. Those who believe in a punitive God cheat and steal less than those who believe in a forgiving God. Experiments were then performed to see how believers relate to free-riders in common-good situations like those described above. Were they willing to forgive, or did they punish the free-riders even at a cost to themselves. Here the results were revelatory. People who believe in a punitive God, punish people less than those who believe in a forgiving God.]7[Those who believe that, as the Torah says, God *"does not leave the guilty unpunished,"* are more willing to leave punishment to God. Those who focus on Divine forgiveness are more likely to practice human retribution or revenge.

The same applies to societies as a whole. Here the experimenters used terms not entirely germane to Judaism: they compared countries in terms of percentages of the population who believed in heaven and hell:

> *"Nations with the highest levels of belief in hell and the lowest levels of belief in heaven had the lowest crime rates. In contrast, nations that privileged heaven over hell were champions of crime. These patterns persisted across nearly all major religious faiths, including various Christian, Hindu and syncretic religions that are a blend of several belief systems."*]8[

This was so surprising a finding that people asked: in that case, why are there religions that de-emphasise Divine punishment? Azim Shariff offered the following explanation:

> *"Because though Hell might be better at getting people to be good, Heaven is much better at making them feel good." So, if a religion is intent on making converts, "it's much easier to sell a religion that promises a Divine Paradise than one that threatens believers with fire and brimstone."*]9[

It is now clear why, at the very moment He is declaring his compassion, grace and forgiveness, God insists that He does not leave the guilty unpunished. A world without Divine justice would be one where there is more resentment, punishment, and crime, and less public-spiritedness and forgiveness, even among religious believers**. The more we believe that God punishes the guilty, the more forgiving we become. The less we believe that God punishes the guilty, the more resentful and punitive we become.** This is a totally counterintuitive truth, yet one that finally allows us to see the profound wisdom of the Torah in helping us create a humane and compassionate society.]emphasis added[

FOOTNOTES:

]1[The Talmud in Rosh Hashanah 17b says that God made a covenant on the basis of these words, binding Himself to forgive those who, in penitence, appealed to these attributes. Hence their centrality in the prayers leading up to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and on Yom Kippur itself.

]2[Garrett Hardin, "The Tragedy of the Commons," *Vol. Science* 162, 13 December 1968: no. 3859 pp. 1243-1248.

]3[Long before Garrett Hardin, there was an old Hassidic story about a village where the people were asked each to donate an amount of wine to fill a large vat to present to the King on his forthcoming visit to the village. Each villager secretly contributed only water instead of wine, arguing to themselves that such a small dilution would not be noticed in the large gift. The King arrived, the villagers presented him with the vat, he drank from it and said, *"It's just plain water."* I guess many folk traditions have similar stories. This is, in essence, the tragedy of the commons.

]4[See Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation.* New York: Basic, 1984. Matt Ridley, The *Origins of Virtue,* Penguin, 1996. Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow,* Allen Lane, 2011. Martin Nowak and Roger Highfield, *Super Cooperators: Evolution, Altruism and Human Behaviour or Why We Need Each Other to Succeed,* Edinburgh: Canongate, 2011.

]5[Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow,* 308.

]6[Ara Norenzayan, *Big Gods: How Religion Transformed Cooperation and Conflict,* Princeton University Press, 2013, 34-35.

]7[*Ibid.,* 44-47.

]8[*Ibid.,* 46.

]9[*Ibid.*

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE:

]1[Which value is more important to you, justice or compassion?

]2[Do you imagine God primarily as a God of justice or of compassion? Can God be both?

]3[How does belief in a God who punishes lead us to be more forgiving?

https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/ki-tissa/can-compassion-without-justice/ Note: because Likutei Torah and the Internet Parsha Sheet, both attached by E-mail, normally include the two most recent Devrei Torah by Rabbi Sacks, I have selected an earlier Dvar.

From the Golden Calf to the Silicon Chip

By Yehoshua B. Gordon, z"l * © Chabad 2025

The Torah portion of Ki Tisa is well known because it contains the narrative of one of the most tragic moments in our history — the sin of the Golden Calf.

To briefly recap:

Fifty days after leaving Egypt, with the people camped at the foot of Mount Sinai, Moses ascended the mountain for 40 days. When he didn't return on what the people mistakenly calculated as the 40th day, they assumed that he had died. To reinforce their error, Satan conjured a vision of a funeral in the sky, making it appear to the people as though Moses was being carried away in a coffin.

Wishing for a replacement for Moses, the people said*, "Come on!)Let us(make gods that will go before us" — to lead us, to intervene for us, to be there for us — "because this man Moses, who brought us up from the Land of Egypt, we don't know what has become of him."*1

The people approached Aaron, Moses' brother who would later be designated as the High Priest, and demanded*, "Make for us a god!"* Aaron, meaning well and intending to buy time, told them to go home and collect gold from their family members. He hoped that the women and children, who valued their jewelry and precious objects, would not consent — at least not immediately — and this would delay matters until Moses returned. But instead of asking their wives and children for their jewelry, the men immediately removed their own jewelry and gave it to Aaron.)Thus, the women played no part in the affair.(

Aaron took the gold, threw it into the fire, and voila, the Golden Calf was born, a terrible transgression that remained a stain on our people forever. G d wanted to destroy the people and build a new nation through Moses, yet Moses pleaded with G d to forgive their sin. G d ultimately acquiesced and moved on from His plan to destroy His nation.

Golden Paradox

When the people came to Aaron and demanded, *"Make for us a god!"* what material did they use? They used perhaps the most precious material of all — gold. Why did they use gold? And did the fact that they made the calf out of gold place a negative stigma on gold? Is gold now considered something unholy?

An intriguing teaching sheds light on this. The Midrash notes*, "The world was not worthy to have the use of gold, and it was created solely for the sake of the Beit Hamikdash."*2 It follows that gold is inherently holy, created with the primary intent of enabling the Jewish people to construct physical structures that would house G dliness — namely the Tabernacle and then the Holy Temple.

But then, it was specifically used in the most terrible transgression in Jewish history!

So, is gold holy or unholy?

Embrace Technology or Shun It?

To answer this question, let's segue into one of the most important debates of our times: Does technology improve our lives? Should it be embraced or rejected? Is it holy or unholy?

On the one hand, modern technology allows Torah classes to be broadcast on the Internet, reaching people all over the world. Two thousand years ago — and even just a few decades ago — this would have been deemed miraculous. The Rebbe himself appeared to embrace technology, encouraging the teachings of Tanya to be broadcast over radio waves when many considered radio *"impure."* The Rebbe allowed his farbrengens)Chassidic gatherings(to be broadcast over cable television, which was as incredible as it was groundbreaking and historic — a rabbi speaking on cable television, reaching the entire world!

Initially, the Rebbe's talks were heard worldwide through telephone hook-ups. As technology advanced, video broadcasts became available, allowing the community here in Los Angeles — and so many others throughout the world — to watch the Rebbe's talks live. Later, during Chanukah events and Lag BaOmer parades, satellite feeds connected New York, Paris, Jerusalem, Hong Kong, and many other places worldwide, uniting the world through technology.

On the other hand, technology comes with risks. Giving young children unrestricted access to smartphones, tablets, and the Internet can be very dangerous; the content they view could be highly inappropriate. There are predators lurking out there. The Internet is a perilous place.

Is technology holy or unholy? The response to this question is, *"Yes!"*

Back to the question of gold. If you make a Holy Temple out of it, if you use it to construct a Tabernacle, there's nothing holier. *"Gold was only created for the Holy Temple."* If, G d forbid, you use it to create a Golden Calf, an idol, then there's nothing more unholy. Technology is just like gold: when used in the service of G d, there's nothing holier.

My Daily Torah Study classes and weekly sermons are accessed via Chabad.org, the world's largest Jewish educational website. How did it attain this status? Because it had a very early start. With the Rebbe's encouragement, Chabad.org's founder, the pioneering Rabbi Yosef Kazen, of blessed memory, began disseminating Torah in cyberspace when most people were still trying to figure out what the Internet was.

As we've seen, there's no tool more effective than the Internet for spreading Torah worldwide. Through it, Torah can reach millions across the world, something that was impossible without a miracle up to now. Technology is wonderful; there's nothing holier. But, like gold, there's also nothing more unholy. If used inappropriately, the worst the world has to offer is now at our fingertips.

Is technology holy or unholy? The answer is a resounding "Yes!"

Purim Connection

Most years, the portion of Ki Tisa is read during the week of Purim. Even during a Jewish, or lunar, leap-year — such as this year — this parshah is read in proximity to Purim Katan, the "*Minor Purim."* Ki Tisa and Purim thus have a special connection, unveiling an important life lesson for us all.]Editor's note: 5785 is not a leap year -- a leap year comes seven times in 19 years.[

Purim stands out as one of the most extraordinary miracles in Jewish history. To review: The Purim story unfolded during the period of exile between the destruction of the First Holy Temple and the subsequent return and building of the Second Temple. The Jewish people in that era enjoyed unprecedented acceptance amongst the nations of the world. King Ahasuerus, leader of the civilized world at the time, treated the Jewish people with equality throughout his domain.

When Ahasuerus made his famous royal banquet, glatt kosher food was served. The finest kosher wines were available.3

But their participation in that royal feast was a desecration of G d's name because, at the meal, Ahasuerus paraded the utensils of the Holy Temple, and instead of protesting, they joined the party. And that ultimately brought about a complete reversal of fortune for the Jews.4

In an era of total acceptance of the Jewish people, suddenly a decree was brought about by the wicked Haman to annihilate every Jewish man, woman, and child from the face of the earth. Yet a great miracle occurred. Mordechai and Esther awakened a spirit of repentance among the Jewish people. For nearly an entire year, they stood in that spirit and repented completely. G d wrought a miracle, leading to a tremendous turnaround. Haman and his ten sons were hanged, and all his henchmen lost their lives. The Jewish people were recognized as a fine people, dedicated to the Persian-Median government and staunch in their Jewish practice, and everybody lived happily ever after.

That's the Purim story as it is recorded in the megillah, the Book of Esther.

Where is G d?

One of the most intriguing aspects of the megillah is the complete absence of G d's name. In fact, it is the only book in Tanach that does not contain G d's name. There are many suggested explanations for this, but at the most basic level, G d's name does not appear in the megillah because it was a time of great concealment — G d's involvement in the miracle of Purim was deliberately hidden.

This concealment is alluded to in the Torah: The Talmud asks, *"Where in the Five Books of Moses do we find an allusion to the name Esther and the Purim story?"* Everything can be found in the Torah, albeit sometimes only as a hint or an allusion. The Talmud answers:

> *"The verse says, 'V'anochi haster astir panai…' – 'And I will surely hide My face…'5 'Haster')'to hide'(and 'Esther' are phonetically and grammatically similar. This 'hiding' or concealment alludes to the Purim story."*6

There will come a time, G d says, when I will conceal Myself and not be readily available to the Jewish people. I will also conceal Myself within the events of nature: this wonderful, righteous woman, Esther, will be queen, and no one will realize that G d planted her there. This is where we find a hint to Esther in the Torah.

Where can we find a hint to Haman, the villain of the Purim story, in the Torah? This question is also addressed in the Talmud. After Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge, G d spoke to Adam and asked*, "Hamin ha'eitz…?" – "Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?"*7

Our sages taught that Haman's initial success in attempting to harm the Jewish people, G d forbid, was linked to the people's transgression. Which transgression? Partaking of King Ahasuerus' banquet, where they desecrated G d's name by participating in a meal that flaunted the sacred utensils of the Holy Temple. The first word of G d's question to Adam, *"Have you eaten from the tree?" is hamin which is made up of the same letters as the name "Haman."* So Haman's name is found at the very first instance of transgressing G d's will by partaking in forbidden food.8

And finally, the Talmud asked, *"Where is Mordechai's name alluded to in the Torah?"* And the answer is in the parshah of Ki Tisa, where the Torah describes the components and ingredients required to create the anointing oil. One ingredient G d instructed Moses to use was *"pure myrrh,"* which translates in Aramaic to *"mara dachia,"* the consonants of which spell *"Mordechai."*9

The anointing oil symbolizes the concept of elevating something mundane — like spices — to holiness. As the leader of the Jewish people at the time, Mordechai did just that, transforming the mundane, secular aspects of life into holiness. He took his position of political leadership and sanctified it, bringing out its holiness.

Mordechai taught us how to sanctify the everyday aspects of life — including mundane items such as gold or technology.

Is gold holy or unholy? Is technology holy or unholy? Mordechai answered the question with a resounding, *"Yes!"*

This is one of the most beautiful life lessons from our Torah portion, and indeed, it hints at the very purpose of creation, and our role in G d's Divine plan. May we witness the full realization of that plan with the arrival of our righteous Moshiach, who will usher in the era of the Ultimate Redemption — a time when the Divine potential in all things will no longer be concealed, but will be evident for all to see — may it happen speedily in our days. Amen!

FOOTNOTES:

1. Exodus 32:23.
2. Bereishit Rabbah16:2.

3. See Talmud, Megilah 12a, and commentaries ad loc.

4. Talmud Megilah 11b.

5. Deuteronomy 31:17.

6. Talmud Chulin 139b.

7. Genesis 3:11.

8. See Talmud Meggilah 12a; Midrash Shir Hashirim Rabah 7:13; commentary of Monot Halevi in his introduction to the book of Esther.

9. Talmud Chulin 139b

* Rabbi Yehoshua Gordon directed Chabad of the Valley in Tarzana, CA until his passing in 2016. Adapted by Rabbi Mottel Friedman from classes and sermons that Rabbi Gordon presented in Encino, CA and broadcast on Chabad.org. "Life Lessons from the Parshah" is a project of the Rabbi Joshua B. Gordon Living Legacy Fund, benefiting the 32 centers of Chabad of the Valley, published by Chabad of the Valley and Chabad.org.

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/6324150/jewish/From-the-Golden-Calf-to-the-Silicon-Chip.htm

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Ki Tisa: Seeing People in Their Best Light

by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky *

> **"When G-d finished speaking with Moses on Mount Sinai, He gave him the two Tablets of the Testimony."**)Shemot 31:18(

G-d gave Moses the tablets on the 40th day of his stay on the mountain. But the people had already made the Golden Calf on the 39th day! In other words, even after the people had committed this most heinous sin, G-d continued to teach the Torah to Moses, and even gave him the tablets in order to transmit the Torah to all the Jewish people.

Similarly, we should always see people in their best light, encouraging them to study the Torah and fulfill G-d's commandments even if their actions seem to contradict G-d's wishes.

--From Kehot's Daily Wisdom Vol. 2

* An insight by **the Lubavitcher Rebbe** on parshat Va'eira from our *Daily Wisdom* Vol. 2 by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky.

May G-d grant strength and peace in the Holy Land.

Gut Shabbos,

Rabbi Yosef B. Friedman
Kehot Publication Society

]from my archives -- posting early because of Tanis Esther and Purim[

Purim Sameach

Likutei Divrei Torah

Gleanings of Divrei Torah on Parashat Hashavuah via the Internet

Sponsored by Ari and Esther Jacobs in memory of
Ari's mother, Doris Jacobs, a"h, (Dubbah Freida bas Yehoshua)
whose yarzeit is 14 Adar
and Esther's mother, Anita Bogopulsky, a"h, (Yocheved bas Tzvi)
whose yarzeit is 17 Adar

Volume 31, Issue 21 **Shabbat Shushan Purim - Parashat KiTisa** **5785 B"H**

Covenant and Conversation
Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

Between Truth and Peace

Ki Tissa tells of one of the most shocking moments of the forty years in the wilderness. Less than six weeks after the greatest revelation in the history of religion – Israel's encounter with God at Mount Sinai – they made a Golden Calf. Either this was idolatry or perilously close to it, and it caused God to say to Moses, who was with Him on the mountain, "Now do not try to stop Me when I unleash My wrath against them to destroy them" (Ex. 32:10).

What I want to look at here is the role played by Aaron, for it was he who was the de facto leader of the people in the absence of Moses, and it was he whom the Israelites approached with their proposal: The people began to realise that Moses was taking a long time to come down from the mountain. They gathered around Aaron and said to him, "Make us a god [or an oracle] to lead us. We have no idea what happened to Moses, the man who brought us out of Egypt." Ex. 32:1

It was Aaron who should have seen the danger, Aaron who should have stopped them, Aaron who should have told them to wait, have patience and trust. Instead this is what happened:

Aaron answered them, "Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me." So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. He took what they handed him and fashioned it with a graving tool, and made it a molten Calf. Then they said, '"This, Israel, is your god, who brought you out of Egypt, 'When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the Calf and announced, "Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord." So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented peace offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry. Ex. 32:2-6

In memory of Miriam Dreeben, a"h,
(Miriam Bat Chaim Yirmiyahu Halevi) 20 Adar

The Torah itself seems to blame Aaron, if not for what he did then at least for what he allowed to happen: Moses saw that the people were running wild and that Aaron had let them get out of control and so become a laughing-stock to their enemies. Ex. 32:25

Now Aaron was not an insignificant figure. He had shared the burden of leadership with Moses. He had either already become or was about to be appointed High Priest. What then was in his mind while this drama was being enacted?

Essentially there are three lines of defence in the Midrash, the Zohar, and the medieval commentators. The first defence, as suggested by the Zohar, is that Aaron was playing for time. His actions were a series of delaying tactics. He told the people to take the gold earrings their wives, sons and daughters were wearing, reasoning to himself: "While they are quarrelling with their children and wives about the gold, there will be a delay and Moses will come." His instructions to build an altar and proclaim a festival to God the next day were likewise intended to buy time, for Aaron was convinced that Moses was on his way.

The second defence is to be found in the Talmud and is based on the fact that when Moses departed to ascend the mountain he left not just Aaron but also Hur in charge of the people (Ex. 24:14). Yet Hur does not figure in the narrative of the Golden Calf. According to the Talmud, Hur had opposed the people, telling them that what they were about to do was wrong, and was then killed by them. Aaron saw this and decided that proceeding with the making of the Calf was the lesser of two evils:

Aaron saw Hur lying slain before him and said to himself: If I do not obey them, they will do to me what they did to Hur, and so will be fulfilled [the fear of] the Prophet, "Shall the Priest [Aaron] and the Prophet [Hur] be slain in the Sanctuary of God?" (Lamentations 2:20). If that happens, they will never be forgiven. Better let them worship the Golden Calf, for which they may yet find forgiveness through repentance. Sanhedrin 7a

The third, argued by Ibn Ezra, is that the Calf was not an idol at all, and what the Israelites did was, in Aaron's view, permissible. After all, their initial complaint was, "We have no idea what happened to Moses." They did not want a god-substitute but a Moses-substitute, an oracle, something through which they could discern God's instructions – not unlike the function of the Urim and Tummim that were later given to the High Priest. Those who saw the Calf as an idol, saying, "This is your god who brought you out of Egypt," were only a small minority – three thousand out of six hundred thousand – and for them Aaron could not be blamed.

So there is a systematic attempt in the history of interpretation to mitigate or minimise Aaron's culpability – understandably so, since we do not find explicitly that Aaron was punished for the Golden Calf (though Abarbanel holds that he was punished later). Yet, with all the generosity we can muster, it is hard to see Aaron as anything but weak, especially in the reply he gives to Moses when his brother finally appears and demands an explanation: "Do not be angry, my lord," Aaron answered. "You know how prone these people are to evil. They said to me, 'Make us a god who will go before us…' So I told them, 'Whoever has any gold jewellery, take it off. ' Then they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this Calf!" Ex. 32:22-24

There is more than a hint here of the excuses Saul gave Samuel, explaining why he did not carry out the Prophet's instructions. He blames the people. He suggests he had no choice. He was passive. Things happened. He minimises the significance of what has transpired. This is weakness, not leadership.

What is really extraordinary, therefore, is the way later tradition made Aaron a hero, most famously in the words of Hillel: Be like the disciples of Aaron, loving peace, pursuing peace, loving people and drawing them close to the Torah. Avot 1:12

By Adam and Lanie Goldberger
on the occasion of the yahrzeits of
Lanie's mother, Leah bat Shlomo Elimelech, a"h,
which was on 7 Adar and Adam's father,
Yissachar Dov ben Yaacov, a"h, on 21 Adar
There are famous aggadic traditions about
Aaron and how he was able to turn enemies

into friends and sinners into observers of the law. The Sifra says that Aaron never said to anyone, "You have sinned" – all the more remarkable since one of the tasks of the High Priest was, once a year on Yom Kippur, to atone for the sins of the nation. Yet there is none of this explicitly in the Torah itself. The only prooftext cited by the Sages is the passage in Malachi, the last of the Prophets, who says about the Kohen: My covenant was with him of life and peace . . . He walked with Me in peace and uprightness, and turned many from sin. Malachi 2:5-6

But Malachi is talking about priesthood in general rather than the historical figure of Aaron. Perhaps the most instructive passage is the Talmudic discussion (Sanhedrin 6b) as to whether arbitration, as opposed to litigation, is a good thing or a bad thing. The Talmud presents this as a conflict between two role models, Moses and Aaron:

Moses's motto was: Let the law pierce the mountain. Aaron, however, loved peace and pursued peace and made peace between man and man.

Moses was a man of law, Aaron of mediation (not the same thing as arbitration but considered similar). Moses was a man of truth, Aaron of peace. Moses sought justice, Aaron sought conflict resolution. There is a real difference between these two approaches. Truth, justice, law: these are zero-sum equations. If X is true, Y is false. If X is in the right, Y is in the wrong. Mediation, conflict resolution, compromise, the Aaron-type virtues, are all attempts at a non-zero outcome in which both sides feel that they have been heard and their claim has, at least in part, been honoured.

The Talmud puts it brilliantly by way of a comment on the phrase, "Judge truth and the justice of peace in your gates" (Zech. 8:16). On this the Talmud asks what the phrase "the justice of peace" can possibly mean. "If there is justice, there is no peace. If there is peace, there is no justice. What is the 'justice of peace'? This means arbitration."

Now let's go back to Moses, Aaron and the Golden Calf. Although it is clear that God and Moses regarded the Calf as a major sin, Aaron's willingness to pacify the people – trying to delay them, sensing that if he simply said "No" they would kill him and make it anyway – was not wholly wrong. To be sure, at that moment the people needed a Moses, not an Aaron. But under other circumstances and in the long run they needed both: Moses as the voice of truth and justice, Aaron with the people-skills to conciliate and make peace.

That is how Aaron eventually emerged, in the long hindsight of tradition, as the peace-maker. Peace is not the only virtue, and peace-making not the only task of leadership. We must never forget that when Aaron was left to lead, the people made a Golden Calf. But never think, either, that a passion for truth and justice is sufficient. Moses needed an Aaron to hold the people together. In short, leadership is the capacity to hold together different temperaments, conflicting voices, and clashing values.

Every leadership team needs both a Moses and an Aaron, a voice of truth and a force for peace.

Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Sweet and Not So Savory Spices – The Jewish Melting Pot

"And God spoke unto Moses: Take unto you sweet spices, stacte [nataf], onycha [shelet] and galbanum [helbena], these sweet spices with pure frankincense [levona], all of an equal weight." (Exodus 30:34)

One of the most unique aspects of the Sanctuary, continued in the Holy Temples, was the sweet-smelling spices of the incense burned on a special altar and whose inspiring fragrance permeated the House of God. In the portion of Ki Tisa the Torah lists the different spices, and their names – in Hebrew or English – are strange to our modern ears. But stranger still is the Rabbinic commentary that one of those spices – specifically helbena – is hardly sweet smelling. On the contrary, as Rashi writes, helbena "…is a malodorous spice which is known [to us as] gelbanah [galbanum]. Scripture enumerates it among the spices of the incense to teach us that we shouldn't look upon the inclusion of Jewish transgressors in our fasts and prayers as something insignificant in our eyes; indeed, they [the transgressors of Israel] must also be included amongst us" (Rashi, ad loc.).

Rashi is conveying a most significant rabbinic insight. The community of Israel – in Hebrew a tzibur – must consist of all types of Jews: righteous (the letter tzadi for tzaddikim), intermediate (the letter bet for benonim), and wicked (the letter reish for resha'im), just as the incense of the Sanctuary included spices of unappetizing fragrance. Perhaps because we must learn to take responsibility for every member of the "family" no matter what their behavior, perhaps because what appears to us as wicked may in reality be more genuine spirituality, perhaps because no evil is without its redeeming feature or perhaps merely in order to remind us not to be judgmental towards other human beings, the message of the incense could not be clearer: no Jew, even the most egregious sinner, dare be dismissed with mockery and derision from the sacred congregation of Israel. Every Jew must be allowed to contribute, and only when every Jew is included does the sweet fragrance properly emerge.

We have already seen how the Torah portion of Ki Tisa contains another striking example of the significance of every single Jew in Israel in the aftermath of the great sin in the desert. We read that soon after the revelation at Sinai, Moses 'prolonged communion with the divine frightened the people into worshiping a golden calf. Our sages teach:

"And God said to Moses, 'Go down '(Ex. 32:7). Interprets R . Elazar: God was commanding Moses to descend from his elevated position. 'The only reason I gave you greatness is because of Israel, and now that Israel has sinned, what do I need you for?'" (Berakhot 32a)

God is reminding Moses that God's covenant with Abraham was with every single Jew. No Jew dare be discounted; every Jew must be loved, taught, and at least given the opportunity to come closer to God and our traditions. Even the Jew who is serving idols must be spoken to, ministered to!

A month or so after this portion is read, the Seder itself becomes a living demonstration of the necessity to include rather than to exclude any Jew. Take note of the proverbial four children: the wise child, the wicked child, the simple child and the child who knows not what to ask. It is instructive that the wicked child is not defined by the compiler of the Haggada as one who eats non-kosher food or desecrates the Sabbath; the wicked child is rather the one who says "Of what value is this work for you?" Wickedness is defined as excluding oneself from the general Jewish community. And even if a person excludes herself – and is therefore called wicked – we dare not exclude her. Our Seder table must always be welcoming enough to include everyone, no matter who.

Indeed, towards the end of the Seder we are instructed to open the door for Elijah the prophet, forerunner of the Messiah. In the past I've commented that opening the door for Elijah seems superfluous given Elijah's uncanny ability to visit every single Seder in the world; anyone capable of accomplishing such a remarkable feat certainly would not be stopped by a closed door. One answer that I've proposed is that the opening of the door is not really for Elijah; it is rather a symbolic gesture of opening the door to the fifth child, the child who has moved so far from the Jewish people that he isn't even at the Seder! We must go out to find him – even if he is at a neighborhood

dance club or a Far East ashram – and invite him to come back in.

And why is Elijah associated with this gesture toward the fifth child? The closing verse of the last prophet included in the canon, Malakhi, declares: "Behold I will send Elijah, the prophet, before the coming of the great and awesome day of God, and he shall turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers…" (Malakhi 3:23). No one, not the "wicked" child, and not even the "invisible" child, is to be excluded from the Seder, the commemoration of our first redemption. Parents and children must all join together in a loving and accepting reunion.

There is a fascinating halakhic ramification of our desire to include rather than to exclude. The Talmud (Eruvin 69b) suggests that a public desecrater of the Sabbath is comparable to an idolater, whose wine cannot be drunk and who cannot be counted for a statutory quorum (minyan) for prayer. Does this mean that a Jew who does not observe the Sabbath laws and rituals forfeits his rights to belong to a proper Jewish congregation?

One of the towering Torah giants of nineteenth- century Germany, Rabbi David Zvi Hoffman, raises this very question in his collection of responsa, Mellamed Leho'il (Responsum 29), where he resoundingly rules that the Talmudic comparison no longer applies. He explains that during Talmudic times, when the overwhelming majority of the Jewish people was observant, and when a Jew was defined in terms of their Torah observance, any Jew who publicly desecrated the Sabbath was effectively testifying to their exclusion from the Jewish people. Therefore, in Talmudic times, a public Sabbath desecrator became the equivalent of an idolater; in effect, the perpetrator of such a public crime was excluding himself from the congregation of Israel and such a person was thereby relinquishing any rights to Jewish privileges. However, explains Rabbi Hoffman, when – sadly enough – the overwhelming majority of Jews are not observant (and today this is even truer than it was in nineteenth-century Germany), a Jew who publicly desecrates the Sabbath is not at all making a statement of exclusion from the peoplehood of Israel. On the contrary, the very fact that such a desecrater attends a synagogue (if only a few times a year) and is willing to partake in the service indicates a definite feeling of belonging and a will to belong to the historic community of Israel. Therefore, Rabbi Hoffman concludes, a Sabbath desecrater must not only be included in a minyan, but must be encouraged to become more involved.

A Curious Postscript

On a recent plane trip from New York to Israel, I felt myself awakened by a rather startling question. Someone wanted to see my tzitzit (ritual fringes). Still half asleep, I opened my shirt, showing the aggressive questioner what he wanted. I thought that perhaps he needed to borrow them. "Good," he said, "in that case please join us for a minyan for morning prayers." Somewhat confused, I asked him what my wearing or not wearing tzitzit had to do with my joining the minyan. "You know," he said, "you can't pray with just any Jew. But chances are that a Jew who wears tzitzit also observes the Sabbath."

I was quite taken aback, to say the least. I reminded the zealot that the source for the requirement of ten people for a minyan was derived from God's statement to Moses, "How long must I suffer this evil congregation…?" (Num. 14:27). And the evil congregation to which God is referring is the ten out of twelve scouts who didn't want to conquer the Land of Israel. Since the word "eda" (congregation) refers to ten scouts, we know that ten comprise a minyan. Now these ten scouts are considered to have committed one of the most grievous sins of the Bible by their refusal to leave the desert and inhabit Israel. If such individuals are the very source for a congregational quorum, how could someone be excluded if he doesn't wear the ritual fringes?

I did not choose to pray with such a hand-picked group; I chose rather to pray with those who had been rejected by the tzitzit checking minyan gatherer, confident that they would be far more acceptable to the God of compassion and unconditional love to whom we pray!

Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

No Need to Go Anywhere

At the end of the parsha, the pasuk (verse) says, "Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the L-rd, Hashem, the G-d of Israel" (Shemos 34:23). This is the mitzva of "aliyah l'regel" – going up (to Jerusalem) for the Festival. Three times a year, on Pesach, Shavuos, and Succos, the Jews were commanded to go up to the Beis HaMikdash to see and be seen by the Shechinah (Divine Presence of G-d).

The pasuk continues "…and no man shall covet your land when you go up to appear before Hashem your

G-d, three times a year." Hashem guaranteed that we have nothing to fear while everyone is in Yerushalayim. We might have been nervous about leaving no males at home because it would be an open invitation to thieves and enemies. The pasuk says to have no fear — no one will covet our land while we go up to Yerushalayim to see the Shechinah.

The Gemara derives a halacha from this. Whoever does not own land is not obligated to go up to Yerushalayim on the Shalosh Regalim (Pesachim 8b). The whole halacha of going up three times a year is only for someone who owns land.

The Kotzker Rebbe (1787-1859) asked, "Why is it that someone who does not own land is excused from going up to Yerushalayim?" The Kotzker Rebbe answered, "Because he doesn't need to."

Only a person who owns land, who has a connection to this world, who is into materialism, needs to go up to Yerushalayim to see the Shechinah. The person who is unencumbered by materialism does not need to go anywhere to see the Shechinah, because he sees the Shechinah everywhere.

Someone who has property, a mortgage, two garages and a Jacuzzi, etc., etc., needs to go to Yerushalayim to see the Shechinah. However, someone who is free of the materialism of this world sees the Shechinah everywhere, so he is excused from the mitzvah of 'Reiyah, – 'going to be seen.

Dvar Torah: Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

How can we find comfort when tragedy strikes? In Parashat Ki Tisa we are told that Hashem intended to destroy the Jewish people in the aftermath of the worshipping of the golden calf and the smashing of the tablets.

Moshe prayed to Hashem and he said, "Shuv Mecharon Apecha – Please God, relent from Your wrath." "V'Hinacheim Al Hara'a Le'amecha – And reconsider the bad that you are going to be bringing to Your people."

It is fascinating that the term used here is 'V'hinacheim', from 'Nechama' – which means 'comfort'. So why is that term used for 'reconsidering'?

Indeed we find that after Moshe's prayer was successful the Torah tells us, "Vayinacheim Hashem Al Hara'ah – God indeed reconsidered."

What we see from here is that 'comfort' is directly linked to the idea of 'reconsideration'. It is linked to a change of attitude, a change of mind set and a change of action.

In the wake of tragedy when we experience grief, God forbid, one can simply wait for the world to come and bring them pity. One can engage in self-pity. But ultimately, in order to grow, to develop and to move forward, it is important that there is change. Because when one can effect a change of attitude, a change of mind-set and most definitely a change of

circumstances, one is better placed to be able to cope.

Let's consider what happened to the Jewish people after the Shoah, the most horrific national tragedy to have befallen us and perhaps to any people on earth. I think the world would have understood if the Jewish people were condemned to an eternal state of paralysis and depression. But that is not what happened. In the midst of our grief, with the emotional wounds still raw to this day, we have taken action.

In the immediate aftermath of the Shoah, there was a dramatic increase in commitment to Torah and to Mitzvot, to fighting hate and racism, to improving the values of society, trying to guarantee that the scourge of antisemitism would not raise its head again and, most significantly of all, creating the State of Israel.

We changed our national circumstances so that we could move forward constructively.

From Parashat Ki Tisa we learn that in those trying and difficult moments of our lives – and they affect all of us a one time or another – of course there is no easy answer to any situation but most definitely we ned to recognise that 'Nechama' – comfort is not necessarily going to come from what other people will do for us. Rather it is within our hearts, within our minds and within our power to do something in order to bring about the comfort that we need.

Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah

Broken Tablets

Rabbanit Bili Rebenstein (Pizam)

And it came to pass, as soon as he came nigh unto the camp, that he saw the calf and the dancing; and Moshe's anger waxed hot, and he cast the Tablets out of his hands, and broke them beneath the mount." (Shemot 32:19)

The breaking of the Tablets was a formidable action, unfathomable actually. How was it possible for Moshe to break the Tablets that "were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God" (ibid.16)?! Furthermore, Moshe is described as burning hot with temper, as if he had lost good reason. Surely such a description is hardly compatible with the character of Moshe?

Almost all the Torah exegetes took on the challenge of explaining this bewildering deed. One might even say that the number of interpretations offered is as great as the number of commentators. Some explain that Moshe did, indeed, act out of great anger, albeit a justified and appropriate one. Other exegetes say that the breaking of the Tablets was done by Divine order, and was not a spontaneous reaction by Moshe.

The Midrash Avot deRabi Nathan suggests that by breaking the Tablets, Moshe retroactively annulled the oath taken by the people of Israel at Sinai. In so doing, he turned their idolatrous action into a sin committed unknowingly (be'shogeg) rather than a willful one (be'mezid). According to this interpretation of events, Moshe performed a "deed of deliverance", as it were, saving the People of Israel from an even greater iniquity. In keeping with this idea, one might also say that the breaking of the Tablets was done to shock the people of Israel into doing Teshuvah.

Another approach can be found in the Talmud Yerushalmi, and in the somewhat cynical manner in which the breaking of the Tablets is described:

"When Israel sinned in that way, the Holy One wanted to seize them from Moshe's hand, but Moshe's hand had the better of it and seized them from Him." (Talmud Yerushalmi, Venice edition, Tractate Ta'anit, Chapter 4, p. 68, column 3)

The Midrash above describes a struggle between two great powers: Moshe and God Almighty Himself. God wishes to take back the Tablets to Heaven, and yet Moshe uses all of strength in order to keep the Tablets on earth.

In accordance with the words of the Talmud Yerushalmi, let me suggest the following. In the midst of the great struggle between God Almighty and Moshe, the Tablets fell from the hands of both and broke. This interpretation of events renders the breaking of the Tablets an unwilful act on the part of Moshe, no more than an accident. Moreover, it wasn't only Moshe who was responsible for the terrible mishap. God Himself bears the responsibility along with him!

Theologically, the above description of the events at Sinai is a difficult one; so much so, that it would be misguided to take it at face value. Rather, we must say that by presenting the breaking of the Tablets as an accident, the Talmud wishes to highlight the lack of intentionality in the situation at large, and the fact that neither party desired the tragic outcome. By inserting God Himself into this tragic scene, the Talmud Yerushalmi wishes to express the pain of the Shechinah at this terrible misfortune.

It is also possible that the Talmud Yerushalmi wishes to describe the sin itself. Seemingly, the punishment, which is the breaking of the Tablets, is a mirror image of the sin – the making of the golden calf. According to the Kabbalah, the sin, too, was an unintentional action; an awful moment of unpredictable waywardness; an impulsive action with devastating consequences. But not, God forfend, a premeditated deed. Not a willful act.

The Midrash in the Talmud Yerushalmi goes on to paint another picture still: "Rebbi Ezra in the name of Rebbi Jehudah ben Rebbi Simon: The Tablets were a load of forty seah [unit of dry measure] but the writing [the letters] carried them. When the writing flew off, they were too heavy for Moshe's hands. They fell, and broke."

According to this explanation as well, the breaking of the Tablets was not a proactive action on the part of Moshe; rather, it resulted from his inability to carry the weight of the stones from which the spirit [the letters] had been taken. But this description conveys something deeper. The Midrash makes reference to both the physical stones as well as to the written inscription on the stones, and tells us that the letters, i.e. the spirit etched into the stone, flew off and separated from the physical matter.

The Tablets are physical matter which carry the spirit. As such, they may very well be a representation of the people of Israel. The people of Israel, like all humans, are made of physical matter. However, the human material called Israel is able to transcend beyond the physical by means of the spirit. It can be elevated. It can defeat its very own physicalness, as it were.

When we are infused with spirit, we become uplifted; we soar upwards. But when the physical matter pulls downwards, the letters fly off into the air; the spirit becomes disconnected from the physical material and, inevitably, the physical matter comes crashing down and breaks into a million pieces.

Interestingly, this description, is, in many respects, quite the opposite of the traditional explanations given for the breaking of the Tablets. According to the Yerushalmi, Moshe did not break the Tablets; rather, the Tablets fell from his hands. Moreover, Moshe was not angry; he was broken. Just like the Tablets.

Ostensibly, the fact that the letters flew upwards seems to suggest that they no longer belong to us because we failed. We have been left, as it were, with our physical matter only, since we did not let the spirit raise us beyond the physical realm.

And yet, as I see it, Moshe's insistence on holding onto the broken Tablets tells a story of its own. It shows us that despite all, we don't let go. We cling tightly to the Tablets, to the

broken physical matter. And it is precisely in this situation that the spirit suddenly reveals itself again. The Talmud in the tractate of Bava Batra tells us that the broken Tablets were not abandoned in the sands of the desert, but were placed in the Holy Ark for preservation: "…both the second Tablets and the broken pieces of the first set of Tablets were placed in the Ark." (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Bava Batra 14b)

There is something quite powerful in the preservation of the shattered Tablets. It almost seems like a refusal to accept the decree; a desperate attempt to keep holding onto the Covenant. Even if the letters have flown off, even if God Himself has severed the knot, and has left the alliance, we continue to hold on tightly. We refuse to let go.

This insistence ultimately led to a renewed Covenant: "And the Lord said unto Moshe: 'Hew thee two tablets of stone like unto the first; and I will write upon the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which thou didst break." (Shemot 24:1)

In recent months, we have found ourselves broken and shattered time and time again. The letters have flown away, and it sometimes seems that the earth wishes to swallow up the physical matter as well. The story of the breaking of the Tablets teaches us of the strength that exists in that which is broken, the resilience in times of crisis, the power of holding on against all odds. Today, as in the times the Israelites wandered through the desert, we have discovered that the spirit is often found in times when things are most broken; it rises up from the very cracks of the broken material. We, like our forefathers, refuse to let go; we are determined not to give up. Perhaps, we are already witness to how, from the depth of the crisis, new Tablets are being written.

Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

Rabbi Benjamin Yudin

Do Something About It

In Parshas Ki Sisa, we encounter one of the most tragic incidents in Jewish history, that of the golden calf. It is interesting to note that the golden calf is one of the six events the Torah commands us to always remember - "Remember, do not forget how you angered Hashem, your G-d, in the wilderness" (Devarim 9:7). What is significant about this event? Given that the Torah already forbids idolatry in many places, including the Ten Commandments, what additional idea are we being commanded to remember in perpetuity?

We are taught that when Moshe descended from Mount Sinai after spending forty days and nights with Hashem acquiring the Oral Torah, he saw the people dancing around the calf and therefore he shattered the priceless gift of the luchos that G-d himself had made for the Jewish people. The Torah informs us that on the next day Moshe said to the people, "you have committed a grievous sin" (Shemos 32:30). It is interesting to note that the Torah uses the term "chata'ah gedolah", which is the feminine form of the verb to sin, while usually the Torah uses the masculine form, cheit, as opposed to chata'ah. I'd like to suggest that there is a deliberate usage of the feminine form, which denotes a passive form of sin, as opposed to the masculine, which would be understood in the active form.

The Torah (Devarim 21:1-9) describes the case of the unsolved murder, which is addressed via the eglah arufah - the axed calf. Specifically, if we find a dead body in the Land of Israel and we don't know who the murderer is, the Torah describes a ritual whereby an exact procedure is to be followed, as our Rabbis explain, to call attention and public awareness to this tragic event, thereby helping to apprehend the murderer. As part of the ceremony, the elders of the city closest to the corpse are to proclaim, "yadeinu lo shofchu es hadam hazeh - our hands have not spilled this blood." The Hebrew word used for "spilled" is spelled with a hay at the end, which is the feminine form, meaning that not only did the elders not actively participate in the murder of this man, but they also are not even guilty of allowing the victim to leave the city unattended and without provisions for his journey, which would have made him more vulnerable to attack. Therefore, the feminine form is used to show that they are not even guilty of a passive sin. Similarly, the Torah states regarding the mitzvah of tefillin, "V'haya l'os al yadcha - it shall be a sign upon your arm" (Shemos 13:16). The Torah uses the feminine form of the word "yadcha - your hand" to teach us that the tefillin are to be placed on one's weaker hand. Again, the 'hay' at the end denotes weakness as opposed to strong affirmative action.

The Torah teaches in Parshas Bo that approximately six hundred thousand grown men left Egypt, and in this week's parsha (32:28) we see that about three thousand men worshiped the golden calf. At first glance, once could wonder why Moshe and Hashem are making such a big deal about this sin if only one half of one percent of the population was invovled? Why focus on that very small minority when five hundred and ninety-seven thousand men did not participate in this terrible sin? Why does the Torah (32:34) teach us that in the future, whenever Hashem unfortunately has to punish the Jewish people for a particular wrongdoing, there will always be additional suffering for the sin of the golden calf? What was so horrific about this event?

The answer, I believe, is found in the Zohar (191a), which teaches us that the sin of the golden calf is couched in the feminine form, "chata'ah gedolah", to teach us that the great majority of the nation, who did not participate in the sin of the golden calf, were guilty of not stopping the participants from sinning. The sin of the majority was not one of active participation, but one of passive neglect. They violated the mitzvah (Vayikra 19:17) to rebuke a fellow Jew when we see him violating a Torah law, and we are cautioned against failing to do so with the phrase, "do not bear the sin because of him," which is understood by our Rabbis to mean that if one does not rebuke the sinner, it is as if he participated in the sin as well and bears responsibility for it. Thus, in a sense, the silence of the majority caused the golden calf.

I believe that with this understanding we have greater insight into the opening paragraph of this week's Parsha. The Torah informs us that the Jewish nation is to give annually a machtzis hashekel - a half shekel to not only fund the communal offerings, but also to serve as an atonement for their souls. The commentaries ask: what particular sin do these coins atone for? The Medresh Tanchuma (10) and other commentaries believe that the machtzis hashekel atones for the sin of the golden calf. (Lest one be troubled by the fact that the call for the half shekel is placed in the Torah prior to the incident of the golden calf, this is addressed via by the principle that there is no chronological order in the Torah.) We can now understand why the per-capita donation was specifically a half shekel. Just as their sin was one of passivity, as we explained above according to the Zohar, so too they are to bring a half shekel, which represents their partial sinning. What emerges is clearly the teaching of "kol Yisrael areivim zeh la zeh - all Israel is responsible for one another"(Shavuos 39a).

This places great responsibility on the observant Jewish community in America. While, on the one hand, we are exceedingly proud of the growth in Torah observant communities, outside of these strong bastions of religious observance the rate of assimilation and intermarriage is most frightening and presents a bleak picture for the future of the remainder of American Jewry. We dare not respond to this tragedy as our ancestors did in the desert by committing the sin of chata'ah gedolah - of passivity and non-involvement. Will we be able to say "yadainu lo shafchu es hadam hazeh"? Did we do everything in our power to prevent this tragedy? Lest anyone says, "what can we do," I believe there are some valuable programs that can be of help in stemming this negative tide of assimilation. King David says (Tehillim 34:9), "ta'amu u're'u kitov Hashem - contemplate and see that Hashem is good." The literal translation of

"ta'amu u're'u" is taste and see. We have an obligation to reach out and provide a taste of Shabbos and Yom Tov for all Jews, making our shuls and homes welcoming to those Jews who are not yet observant by giving them a pleasant taste of Shabbos and Yom Tov. Each community should encourage having a "Shabbos across their town", whereby observant and not yet observant families enjoy Shabbos together, thereby creating potential bonds for further relationships and growth. Secondly, Orthodox shuls should offer beginner services for those not yet learned and familiar with davening. Thirdly, we should encourage participation in programs, such as Partners in Torah, whereby many who lack formal Jewish education have an opportunity to study by phone or zoom with a partner, even if they are several thousand miles away. This opportunity to study Torah often leads to the forging of positive relationships, which often result in a growth in observance of Torah and mitzvot within the not yet observant community.

The Navi teaches "shlach lachmicha - cast your bread upon the waters", that is to say, we have to do ours. We must take the initiative and, please G-d, He will help these various programs gain momentum and accomplish their lofty goals. Let history not, G-d forbid, say that our generation was guilty of the chata'ah gedolah - passive sin committed by the onlookers at the golden calf, but rather let us respond to the challenges of our times.

Torah.Org Dvar Torah
by Rabbi Label Lam

Can You Have a Clearer Sign than That?

The Children of Israel shall keep the Shabbos, to make the Shabbos an eternal covenant for their generations. Between Me and the Children of Israel it is a sign forever that in a six-day period HASHEM made heaven and earth and on the seventh day He rested and was refreshed. (Shemos 31:16-17)

How do I love the Shabbos!? Let me count the ways! I know this is not a Shakespeare Sonnet but he sure knew how to couch a word. There is something sublimely delicious about Shabbos. It is hard to describe with words alone. It would be like trying to explain colors to a blind person. Once it is experienced though, then it is understood, but still beyond words. The Talmud refers to it as a flavor of the next world. The Torah tells us it is an eternal sign between HASHEM and the Jewish People. If it is a sign, then where is it? How can we see it or sense it?

One Friday night, years back. I don't know what it was that prompted me to make the comment, maybe it was all the lively conversations, or the spirited singing, or the many beer bottles that were on the table, but I flashed back to an earlier, less holy time in my life, and I said, "This is starting to feel like a fraternity party." And one of my boys said, Abba it's an eternity party," and everybody went ooh-ah, it's like it went viral in the room at that time. I don't think we can come up with a better definition for Shabbos than eternity party, ברית עולם ביני ובין בני ישראל, an eternal covenant between HASHEM and the Jewish people. Everyone is sitting together, all over the world, for all time. On Shabbos, we realize it's not like the world says, "whatever" it's forever.

When the Torah tells us that Shabbos is a sign, between Me and the Jewish People, Hashem says, it's not just an external sign, the fact that we're keeping Shabbos, but there's a deep, personal, inner indicator of how our relationship is going with HASHEM. Often when a couple wants to report how their relationship is going in the dating process, they'll tell me that their conversations were lively and they really enjoyed each other's company, but my follow-up question is, "How were the silences?" If the silences were comfortable, and you felt at ease, rather than awkward, with each other, in those quiet moments, then that's a very good sign that the relationship is moving in the right direction.

I'm amazed by the subtle genius of the banking industry that usurped the most important words for relationships and applied them to money: trust, bond, futures, interest, fidelity, investment, balance, value, but now I'm even more amazed by the true genius of the Torah because on Shabbos, money is Muktzah; it's like a piece of wood or a stone. It becomes worthless. And now we can re-apply those terms to the relationships we have with family members and HASHEM. Trust, bond, security, mutual, future, investment, interest, share, value, ultimate value.

I saw a New Yorker cartoon that depicted a fellow lying in a hammock in his backyard, attempting to relax, but there were thought bubbles attached to everything around him, that were declaring, "Fix me," "Paint me," "Repair me," "Mow me," and his eyes were bugging out and you could tell that there was no peace. The beauty, the splendor, the power of Shabbos is mandated in the verse, "six days labor and complete all of your work". How's it possible for a person to complete all of their work in time for Shabbos? And the answer is, on Shabbos it should be considered as if we completed all of our work, because it's with the help of a commandment from the Almighty Himself that we put down the hammer, and we turn off the cellphone, and all of those thought-bubbles go to sleep. And then we can adopt a true repose of tranquility, peace, and rest. Where else in the world is this possible, nowadays?! We have a whole family sitting together for 25 uninterrupted hours without phones!? If HASHEM did not take the phone out of our hands, where would we be!? So, we sit tranquilly and indulge in the quietude and peace of family life and HASHEM's delights. That's a very beautiful sign!

A billion and a half descendants of Yishmael, many of whom are fanatically convinced that they are the new chosen People, move their day of rest to Friday. A billion and a half descendants of Eisov, also convinced that they are the current forebearers of Torah, move their day of rest to Sunday. Both agree that Shabbos is the seventh day. And who's keeping the Shabbos? We, the Jewish People! And the verse openly testifies, "the Jewish people are keeping the Shabbos. to make the Shabbos for their generations, an eternal covenant, between Me and the Children of Israel, an eternal sign.". Tell me please, is it possible, can you have a clearer sign than that?

Mizrachi Dvar Torah

Rav Doron Perez: Servant Leadership

Robert Greenleaf in his book "Servant Leadership" suggests that the paradigm is a leader who is a servant, who serves the people and a cause larger than themselves.

This is what Jewish leadership is all about, as we see with Moshe Rabbeinu, who says to G-d that if He wants to destroy his people, then he was willing to give up his individual life and future for the sake of the people.

Rav Kook, too, speaks so much about serving a cause bigger than ourselves, and often signed his letters as "servant of the holy nation in the holy land." A leader is a servant, not to use the public for their own aggrandizement, but to use their individual talents to serve the public. This is what we have seen, too, since Simchat Torah, October 7th – of people demonstrating that Jewish existence is bigger than ourselves.

In addition, Rav Kook says we can't lose ourselves in our public role, but also as our own personal growth as individuals. We are one for all, but also all for one. We see, similarly, how an entire people are concerned for each and every hostage, each individual, knowing the value of every single life.

Rabbi Dr. Norman J. Lamm's Derashot Ledorot

Insights into Evil

The episode of the building of the *egel ha-zahav*, the golden calf, was probably the most traumatic experience in the life of our nation during its infancy. It left an indelible impression upon the psyche of the folk. Its echo can be detected throughout the life and the literature, the dreams

and the liturgy, the destiny and the self-image of our people. It is essentially an inexplicable phenomenon: so soon after the revelation at Mt. Sinai, this same people dances about a golden calf! From dizzying heights to harrowing depths!

Perhaps most incomprehensible is the conduct of Aaron, the *Kohen Gadol* or High Priest of Israel, the brother of Moses. His role has challenged our commentators, stimulated our exegetes, and perplexed the ordinary reader of the Bible. I would like today not to apologize for Aaron (although his position *can* be satisfactorily explained under the circumstances), but to point to certain insights resulting from the Rabbis ' comments on his role, comments which are especially relevant to some of the central issues of our times and with which I was especially confronted during my recent trip overseas.

We read this morning of the pressure brought by the Israelites upon Aaron to help them build the golden calf, and the stalling and procrastination by Aaron. Then comes the following significant verse: va-yar Aharon va-yiven mizbeah lafanav va-yikra Aharon va-yomer hag *la-Shem mahar,* "and Aaron saw and he built an altar before Him, and Aaron called out and he said there will be a festival to the Lord tomorrow." The plain meaning of this verse, according to Nachmanides, is that Aaron felt that the Israelites were determined to go ahead with their idolatry, and so he built an altar not to the idol, but *lefanav*, before Him, meaning God, andannounced: *hag la-Shem mahar,* tomorrow we will have a celebration not for this idol, but for the Lord.

The verse is introduced by two words, however, which are quite challenging: *va-yar Aharon*, "and Aaron saw." What, exactly, did he see? The Rabbis, quoted by Rashi, tell us the following: va-yar Aharon – she'hayah bo ruah hayyim she'ne'emar ke 'tavnit shor okhel esev, Aaron saw that the golden calf became infused with the breath of life, that it took on the appearance of an ox grazing in the pasture, feeding on the grass!

What did our Rabbis mean by that? They offer, I believe, a profound comment upon the nature of idolatry. They mean to outline for us three stages in any man's encounter with falsehood of any kind, ancient or modern.

The first stage is one of instinctive revulsion. The idol is immediately repulsive, the falsehood repugnant, the lie revolting. Y ou can see right through the idol: it is illogical and irrational, as any half intelligent child knows. It is simply evil and stands condemned without any further thought.

But then there comes a second stage. As you become accustomed to it, as you study it, you learn that it may work – indeed it *does* work! You can live with it – and get away with it. Furthermore, it is not as absurd as you originally thought. They are compelling reasons for the existence of idolatry or any false doctrine – sociological, psychological, and historical reasons. A society can be built around it, and survive. There are reasons for idolatry which you must appreciate and understand.

If you stop at this stage of your development, then insight turns to tolerance, tolerance to sympathy, and sympathy to consent and acceptance. If you stop at this stage, then you bow the knee to a statue, you swallow the lie, you swear by falsehood. Then open-mindedness becomes closed-heartedness. What is required is to make the transition from the second to the third stage. And the third stage is one of deepest insight: with all the understanding, with all the appreciation, with all the study and awareness and broadmindedness, you recognize the perniciousness, all the ugliness and danger of *avodah zarah,* and you condemn idolatry as evil throughout.*V a-yar Aharon*, "and Aaron saw" – this is the crucial point in the development of Aaron's role. In the beginning, at the first stage, he no doubt believed that the whole plan was ridiculous.

It was inconceivable that so soon after Sinai these same Israelites would bow to a mere statue. Give them their little golden statue, he probably told himself, and before long they will laugh at their own error and recognize the absurdity of their request.

But then – *va-yar Aharon*! He saw that the idol became alive: *she'hayah bo ruah hayyim she'ne'emar ke 'tavnit shor okhel esev*! When he saw that his lifeless statue was becoming a living thing and that it assumed the attributes of life, he became frightened. He recognized that idolatry has, for its worshippers, certain clear aesthetic values; it can be beautiful, and convincing. Paganism possesses a gripping and imaginative mythology. The idol and its worship respond to man's inner needs. Y ou *can* build society and a civilization on such erroneous foundations. Y ou can explain it – and even justify it!

Quickly, therefore, Aaron passed over to the third stage. Precisely at the point of his greatest understanding of the nature of the Israelite idolatry, he announced *hag la-Shem mahar*: no longer will I humor you or entertain your childish and fallacious but highly dangerous notions. Tomorrow we return to the worship of the Lord. *V a-yar Aharon*, the seeing of Aaron, is the instant of insight, the moment of truth.

Both the first and third stage agree in principle and in conclusion. The difference is, that the first is an instinctive black-and-white judgment, whereas the third is aware of the complexities, the subtleties, and the nuances of idolatry, but nevertheless condemns it as evil. In the third stage you recognize, so much more than you do during the second stage, that the idol only goes through motions, but does not really move. It appears to eat, but it is only a mirage: it is only the *tavnit* of a grazing ox. It is an apparition, not a reality – it contains only the *ruah hayyim*, the breath of life, but not *hayyim* itself. The third stage is greater than the first because it is the result of a more realistic appraisal; it is mature, and not guilty of oversimplification and uncomplicated naivete. Hence, it is also more convincing.

This development of insight into evil refers not only to ancient but to modern idolatries as well. Whether it is scientism or materialism, communism or even godless humanism, the same three stages are required of man: the first, where you acknowledge immediately its absurdity andfallacy; the second, where you begin to appreciate the rationale and explanation; and the third, where, with a great deal more sophistication, you rise nevertheless to the moral heights of rejection. And the same development must apply to one of the most pernicious and idolatrous doctrines in the memory of living man, one that has caused untold grief to uncounted millions in our century: that of race superiority and race inferiority.

My recent trip to South Africa left me overwhelmed by the exhilarating beauty of the country, its great wealth, and the abundance of its natural resources. And yet I had the feeling that it is a tortured country, gripped by a tragic agony that dominates all thinking, underlies all conversations, and pervades all politics in this highly politicized community. The race problem is a pall that, in this land of magnificent climate and almost endless sunshine, darkens the heart of the country from one end to the other. The reaction to Apartheid, the doctrine of separate development of the races based upon the idea that the white race is superior to the non-white, must also go through these three stages.

The first stage is one that has aroused the conscience of mankind in our day and has excited the indignation of the great majority of the countries in the United Nations. There is no question that white supremacy is a foul doctrine and a malignant idolatry. Do we of the twentieth century even have to discuss it? Can there be any question about it? And so we condemn it no matter who are its adherents.

But – *va-yar Aharon*: we must arrive at a second stage far less naïve than the first. We Americans do no favor to the cause of equality if we close our eyes to some of the profound complexities and compelling justifications of this initially repugnant doctrine. And there *are* certain mitigating facts and factors. The visitor realizes that, despite certain unattractive restrictions, this is not a police state on the style of a Nazi or Communist or Fascist state. It has a proud and independent judiciary, and, despite intimidation, a fiercely free press. The white man is not a colonialist in South Africa. He came to this country at about the same time the black man did from Central and East Africa – the middle of the 17th century. The Afrikaner especially regards this country completely as his home and has strong patriotic and nationalist feelings about it.There is no obvious persecution of non-whites in this country. The black are better off in South Africa than in the independent countries in the rest of the continent. Their economic status here, despite its inferiority to that of the white, is so much more attractive than the rest of Africa, that there is a tremendous illegal immigration of blacks from outside South Africa into the country. Proportionately more blacks and other non-whites are literate and own automobiles than in all the rest of Africa combined. And there never has been a lynching in South Africa. Furthermore, we cannot compare the situation of the white man in America with that of the white man in South Africa. There, in South Africa, he is outnumbered by about four to one, constituting only three out of a population of fifteen million people. The white man in South Africa, in conversation with an American, will always point to the Congo as an example of what happens

when independence is granted to the black man prematurely.

Finally, the idea of "one man, one vote" is, to tell the truth, ludicrous. Even the black nationalist privately admits that it is nothing more than a slogan. Y ou cannot grant full votes to such peoples as are totally illiterate and still living in the most primitive of tribal conditions. This second stage is one of sophistication and realism, and represents a pragmatic and open-minded appreciation of the hard facts of political and human realities.

And yet, having considered all this, having gone beyond an impulsive good-and-bad judgment of simple and naive solutions, there remains the burning moral issue which emerges from the mass of complexities and subtleties, and demands to be heard and seen and dealt with courageously. The moral issue is simply this: that a human being is a human being, and must be judged as such, and not primarily as black or white or colored or Asian!

When a black university professor is disenfranchised, though he is more literate not only than the white farmer but even than the white millionaire, because he is considered racially inferior – that is a modern form of *avodah zarah*.

When people are forcibly kept apart, when they are ghettoized without having been asked for their opinion – it is an evil which must be exposed.When by legislation the Bantu or black man is kept to the kind of school system which cynically ensures permanently inferior academic standards, which makes certain that the African will never be able to Westernize, and which will keep apart forever not only the white man from black man, but also tribe from tribe by perpetuating inter-tribal hostilities – that is cruel. When South Africa today considers a bill in its Parliament according to which its urbanized Africans will be turned into a portable labor force so that people may be assigned to jobs merely at the whim of some minor official; when a capricious commissioner will be able to separate husband from wife and parents from children merely by saying so – that is inhuman! When a society is so structured that there can never be communication between equals of different races, so that the only blacks most white people know are their domestic and hired help – that is rotten.

When a business success by a non-white is rewarded by shipping him off to a primitive tribal area called a Bantusan – that is pernicious. When such policies are advanced by Nazis, Crypto-Nazis, and Nazi sympathizers entrenched in the government – the Minister of "Justice" was interned as a Nazi during the war! – and when the Government is riddled by people who hold membership in a secret society called a "Broederband," a kind of legally tolerated Klu Klux Klan; when the government can detain any individual in prison for 90 days without giving any reason for its action and can repeat this 90-days detention up to three times without a trial – than all of it is vicious and immoral. When *va-yar Aharon* that the evil has taken on a *ruah hayyim*, that it has the appearance *ke ʿavnit shor oknel esev*– than we must proclaim an end to this kind of immorality, and insist that *hag la-Shem mahar*– that it is time to return to the verities of Torah and Godliness. We Jews have always proclaimed the existence of one God who created one Adam, teaching thereby that all the human race is descended from one father, and that hence no one family of colors is superior to any other.

It is true that we New Yorkers must not rush overzealously to condemn and criticize those in other states, let alone other lands. For (without in any way favoring or denying the claims of certain Negro groups which may or may not be justified) we certainly have not been blemishlessourselves; and our race problem is far less severe and threatening to us than that in South Africa.

Nevertheless, wherever one man oppresses another and shuns him because of the color of his skin; wherever one man denies another the benefit of his own labor and the right to the bounty of God's nature because of race or religion, whether it be in Georgia or Johannesburg, in Corona or Capetown; it is idolatry, because it denies the fatherhood of God. It is an affront to Torah, because Torah recognizes only one Apartheid: that between *tamei ve ʿtahor*, between pure and impure, good and evil, gentle and wild, malevolent and benevolent. We Jews who have suffered so from silence, from the silence of Popes and Presidents and organized populations during the time we needed help, when our families were slaughtered by the millions, we especially must not keep silent when an injustice is committed against others in our presence.

He who remains stationary in this second stage, he who becomes reconciled to evil merely because he understands the reason for its existence, is bound to suffer the consequences predicted by King David in the Psalms, which we recite during our *Hallel*. For David said concerning the worshipers of idols, and we may say it as well about one who abides and tolerates the existence of evil of idolatry or any other evil, that *ke ʾmohem yiheyu osehem*, "as they are so may be their makers." Just as the idol is only *apparently* alive, but not really so; just as he goes through motions but does not really move; so the idol worshiper and the one who remains silent in its presence is not really and truly alive in the moral sense.

Peh la-hem ve ʾlo yedaberu– for a person of this sort, like a mute statue, has a mouth – but does not speak. He fails to voice protest when conscience challenges him to do so. *Einayim la-hem velo yiru*, they have eyes but see not – they see only what they please, not the squalor and suffering produced by evil. *Aznayim la-hem ve ʾlo yishma ʾu*, they have ears but they do not hear the cry of the oppressed.

They have noses but they prefer not to be aware of the stench of slums in which entire families are condemned to a life of poverty and ignorance. They have hands but do not raise them to assist a fellow man, and they have feet which refuse to march on to greater happiness for all humans. Such is not only the worshiper of idols, but also he who sees it and its injustice andremains silent: *lo yehegu bi ʾgeronam*, the throat fails to utter protest and is suffocated in syllables of silence.

Is this third stage in the encounter with evil – whether of godlessness or race prejudice, of avarice or religious bigotry – to which the Torah wishes to lead us in the story of Aaron's role in the making of the *egel hazahav*. It tells us that in an ultimate sense every man must choose for himself between right or wrong not in some far-off world, but here and now, in the real, non-ideal, mundane world.

With Aaron we must rise to the occasion when we can proclaim publicly *hag la-Shem mahar*– tomorrow is a festival for the Lord. Or better yet, let us proclaim with Aaron's brother Moses, *la-tet alekhem ha-yom berakhah*– to prepare for everyone a blessing today – today, not tomorrow.

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Purim: An Enduring Festival of Faith and Hope

Rambam closes Hilchot Megillah (2:18) by citing the enigmatic view of the Talmud Yerushalmi ("haneviim vehaketuvim atidin libatel vechamishah sidrei Torah ein atidin libatel; ...Resh Lakish amar af Megillat Esther vehalachot ein atidin libatel...vezichram lo yasuf mizaram") that elevates Megillat Esther above the rest of Nach and that groups it with the Torah itself as the exclusive biblical canon in the era of yemot ha-mashiach. Ra'avad registers his objection to this apparently unvarnished reading that he conceives as being simply untenable. Instead, he proposes that the Yerushalmi intended only to limit public readings to Torah and Megillat Esther, while the canonical status and stature of the entire Tanach remains inviolate. Nonetheless, even in his qualified interpretation, Megillat Esther emerges with elite status that needs to be accounted for. The prooftext invoked by the Yerushalmi - (Megillat Esther 9:28) - is particularly intriguing as it presumably (emphasized by Radvaz, as we shall discuss) accentuates the unforgettable distresses and dangers leading to Purim, alongside and notwithstanding the ultimate joyous conclusion.

The Midrash (Mishlei 9) articulates a parallel perspective on the singular standing of Purim with respect to other moadim - "shekol hamoadim beteilim veyemei haPurim lo yihiyu beteilim". Rashba (Responsa 1:93) was queried about the astonishing assertion that the moadim excluding Purim are subject to cancellation. Even as he emphatically rejected, even dismissed the superficial reading and implication of this text, Rashba posited that the midrash identifies a unique facet shared only by Purim and Yom Kippur. He explains that although other festivals are also depicted as "chukat olam" in the sense of being unqualified annual obligations ("azharah"), only Yom Kippur and Purim are guaranteed ("havtachah") to be eternally relevant and immune to any historical disruption or dislocation, irrespective of Klal Yisrael's conduct! It is curious that while Rashba accounts for Yom Kippur's intrinsic status - the fact that the day itself conveys expiation ("itzumo shel yom mekaper"), perhaps even absent repentance (particularly according to Rebbe [Shavuot 13a] also the author of this midrash), he does not articulate the basis for Purim's special status, almost as if it is self-evident.

Radvaz (Resp. 2:666), responding to a query about the aforementioned Yerushalmi passage, notes the Rashba's discussion of the midrash, integrates the two sources, and provides additional insight into both texts. He suggests that the spiritually conducive climate of the messianic era might render the other festivals somewhat gratuitous, but that Purim's theme, rooted as the Yerushalmi prooftext indicates, in the challenge of severe crisis and calamity and its subsequent joyous resolution remains acutely compelling and ever regnant - "ki yihiyu Yisrael zochrim hatza'ar, vechi nimkeru lemitah, vekol mah she'ira lahem beoto zeman".

Indeed, the change in the Megillah's formulation of this festival reflects an acute focus on hashgachah, faith, spiritual resilience, and indomitable optimism. The Megillah (9:19) initially depicts Purim as a more conventional "yom tov" typically expressed by "simchah u-mishteh" in conjunction with the more specific focus on "mishloach manot ish le-reiehu". The Talmud (Megillah 5b), weighing whether there is a prohibition against "melachah" on Purim ultimately dismisses this ubiquitous and defining mo'ed standard, noting that several verses later, the Megillah (9:22) reformulated the holiday, dropping this typical feature - "Melachah lo kabilu alayhu demeikara ketiv simchah umishteh veyom tov, u-levasof ketiv la'asot otam yemei mishteh vesimchah, veilu yom tov lo ketiv". While the Talmud does not emphasize them, other equally important, albeit subtle changes were also introduced into the new and normative articulation of Purim. The precedence of "mishteh" to "simchah" conveys a different motif than a typical yom tov seduah, one in which the heightened consciousness of Hashem's mercy and generosity triggered by targeted physicality (a proper, reflective application of "ad delo yada") is appropriately employed. [See also the view and formulation of the Yerushalmi Megillah 1:4 regarding the exclusion of seudat Purim on shabbat. I hope to examine this fascinating text and issue elsewhere, as it possibly also crystallizes the unique focus of Purim with respect to the initiatives to formalize it as a festival, as well as its singular features that differentiate it from typical moadim.] Moreover, the exclusion of "yom tov" was accompanied by the inclusion of "matanot l"evyonim", a particularly crucial and defining theme, as we shall briefly elaborate. Especially in light of the elite elevated status of Purim, reflected by the Yerushalmi and midrashic texts, these differences should not be perceived as reflecting a less rigorous protocol, a concession to the rabbinic status of the commemoration. Rather, the changes characterize a bolder spiritual aspiration, one more conducive to highlighting the ubiquity and urgency of Hashem's special providence that stems from the irrevocable and inimitable bond with Klal Yisrael.

Let us briefly focus on the centrality of mattanot l'evyonim as it likely exemplifies Purim's special theme. Rambam (2:17, see Magid Mishnah and also compare with Hilchos Yom Tov 6:20) strikingly asserts that this facet of Purim commemoration surpasses mishloach manot, notwithstanding the fact that it was, unlike mishloach manot, only inserted into the later iteration of Purim. Apparently, the addition of "mattanot l'evyonim" in conjunction with the subtraction of "yom tov" is characteristic. Perhaps Rambam's assertion is further substantiated, maybe even inspired by the view of R. Yosef (Megillah 4b). The Talmud notes that the megillah is not read on shabbat and provides two different rationales. The normative view (Hilchos Megillah 1:13) is that, like lulav and shofar, there is a concern lest one come to violate the prohibition to carry on shabbat. However, the gemara also records R. Yosef's argument that one cannot separate mattanot l'evyonim from keriat ha-megillah inasmuch as there is an urgent expectation of support in conjunction with the keriah - "eineihem shel aniyyim nesuot le-mikra Megillah"- that cannot be met on shabbat! The fear of chilul Shabbat per se is not a sufficient obstacle, but the disappointment of evyonim is! This inextricable link is normatively manifest in the law (Megillah 4b and Rambam Hilchos Megillah 2:14) that although kefarim dwellers who advance their keriat ha-Megilah do not partake of the seudah or mishloach manot until Adar 14, mattanot l'evyonim is fulfilled in conjunction with the earlier keriah to avoid frustrating the hopes of evyonim! The choice of the term "evyonim" rather than "aniyyim" in this context underscores the theme of desperation and the urgency not only of assistance but equally of hope and optimism.

The danger and distress of am Yisrael in the aftermath of Haman's genocidal plot engendered a renewed and advance appreciation for Divine providence, and the role of faith, trust, and optimism. For this reason, Taanit Esther, defined by the charge of "leich kenos ha-Yehudim", plays and outsize role on Purim. [I hope to demonstrate this elsewhere.] The themes of "ve-nahapoch hu", "balayalah hazeh nadedah shenat ha-melech", "u-mi yodea im le-eit kazot higa'at lemlachut" and others highlight the centrality of Divine providence and reflect the special bond that always defines the relationship between Hashem and Klal Yisrael. Rav Amram Gaon ruled that one should say tahanun on Purim, as it is a day that highlights the efficacy of prayer. His stirring articulation of this idea is vital reading. We read the Megillah closely as a "sefer" but equally with a broader vision of hashgachah as an "iggeret" for this very reason.

If the crisis background of Purim was merely the context for greater joy, appreciation, and hoda'ah alone that surely would have been very significant and merited a holiday, although one that was cast in a more conventional form. The decision to structure Purim in a singular manner that more broadly emphasizes the proper halachic way to process and respond to crisis and distress and that embodies the ubiquitous need for faith and trust catapulted Purim still further, establishing it as an elite indispensable moed, as crystallized by the ambitious statements of the Yerushalmi and the midrash.

The crises of recent years have again tested our perspective on Purim. The superficial and mistaken impression that Purim is a celebration or at least a pretext for frivolity precludes its full commemoration in somber times. In fact, as Rashba explains, there is no historical circumstances that would justify cancelling or even minimizing Purim. Indeed, its focus on optimism and faith - shekol kovecha lo yevoshu velo yikalmu lanezah, kol hachosim bach (see also Rambam's stirring depiction of Purim in his preamble to Yad Hachazakah) - establishes a properly appreciated and appropriately celebrated Purim as even more vital in times of uncertainty and crisis.

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Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

KI TISA

In this week's Torah reading we learn of the ingredients and mixture that created the incense offering in the Holy Temple. The list of ingredients and its formula are transmitted to us through the words of the rabbis of the Mishnah and the Talmud. The ingredients and measurements were to be exact and any deviation from the established formula rendered the offering unacceptable.

The incense offering differs from all other Temple offerings because of the fact that it is ephemeral and physically nonexistent. It literally goes up in smoke. However, it leaves a fragrance that is so powerful that, as the Talmud explains, the animal kingdom as far away as Jericho was affected by this fragrance.

There are those who say that the miracle attributed to the Temple in the book of Avot, that no flies appeared on the temple grounds even though it was basically a meat slaughterhouse, was due to the wafting of the smoke that emanated from the incense offering on a daily basis. Be that as it may be, there is no doubt that the incense offering was meant to be a protective measure for the Jewish people. We find later in the Bible that it was used to diffuse plagues that were brought upon the people because of their intransigence and sins. It nevertheless was a lethal offering, which if done improperly and/or without authorization, brought death upon those who practiced it. We see this from the story of the sons of Aaron and from the even greater tragedy of the destruction of Korach and his followers.

The incense offering was a purely spiritual event. It was smoke and air. It left a powerful fragrance, but though it could be appreciated and even internalized it could not be touched or felt by human hands. The service of God is often purely spiritual, characterized by love, devotion and faith. These are not traits that can be held in one's hands or subject to storage. The very vagueness of these necessary spiritual traits makes them difficult to define, let alone observe. And these spiritual traits need to be handled carefully and with proper judgment.

Too much faith can lead to poor decisions and a naïve view of life and religion. Not enough faith will only lead to pessimism and permanent disappointment. The same is true for all other spiritual traits – they are necessary for the correct service of God but they can be easily mishandled and misinterpreted. The Torah purposely defined its physical commandments. These definitions apply even to the spiritual commandments as well. The Torah gives forth a fragrance – a fragrance of goodness, kindness and a whiff of eternity.

Though we no longer have the ability to offer incense on a daily basis, we do have the ability to serve our Creator, in a spiritual sense, with our minds and hearts and souls. Though these may not be physically reflective to others, Heaven recognizes them clearly. It is our incense offering.

Shabbat shalom

Rabbi Berel Wein

The Birth of a New Freedom

Ki Tissa

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Witnessing the birth of a new idea is a little like watching the birth of a galaxy through the Hubble Space Telescope. We can witness just such an event in a famous rabbinical commentary to a key verse in this week's Parsha.

The way to see it is to ask the question: what is the Hebrew word for freedom? Instinctively, we answer cherut. After all, we say that God brought us me-avdut le-cherut, "from slavery to freedom."

We call Pesach, the Festival of Freedom, 'Zeman Cheruteinu'. So it comes as a surprise to discover that not once does the Torah, or even Tanach as a whole, use the word cherut in the sense of freedom, and only once does it use the word, or at least the related word charut, in any sense whatever.

There are two biblical words for freedom. One is chofshi/chofesh, used in connection with the freeing of slaves (as in Ex. 21:2). That too is the word used in Israel's national anthem, Hatikvah, which speaks about "the two-thousand-year hope to be a free people [am chofshi] in our land."

The other is dror, used in connection with the Jubilee year, as engraved on the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia:

"Proclaim liberty [dror] throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof."

Lev. 25:10

The same word appears in Isaiah's great words, "to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom [dror] for the captives. (Is. 61:1)"

However, the Sages coined a new word. Here is the passage in which it occurs:

The Tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved [charut] on the Tablets" (Ex. 32:16). Read not charut, "engraved" but cherut, "freedom," for the only person who is truly free is one who is occupied with Torah study.

Avot 6:2

The reference is to the first Tablets given by God to Moses just before the sin of the Golden Calf. This is the only appearance in Tanach of root ch-r-t (with a tav), but a related word, ch-r-t (with a tet) appears in the story of the Golden Calf itself, when the Torah tells us that Aaron shaped it with a cheret, an "engraving tool." The Egyptian magicians are called chartumim, which may mean "engravers of hieroglyphics." So how did a word that means "engraved" come to mean "freedom"?

Besides which, why was a new term for freedom needed? If the Hebrew language already had two, why was a third necessary? And why did it stem from this word, which meant 'engraved"? To answer these questions, let us engage in some conceptual archaeology.

Chofesh/chofshi is what a slave becomes when he or she goes free. This means that he can do what he likes. There is no one to order him around. The word is related to chafetz, "desire" and chapess, "seek". Chofesh is the freedom to pursue your desires. It is what philosophers call negative liberty. It means the absence of coercion.

Chofesh is fine for individual freedom. But it does not constitute collective freedom. A society in which everyone was free to do what they liked would not be a free society. It would be, at best, like the society we saw on the streets of London and Manchester in the summer of 2011, with people breaking shop windows, looting, and assaulting strangers.

More likely it would be what failed states are today: a society without the rule of law, with no effective government, honest police, or independent courts. It would be what Hobbes called "the war of every man against every man" in which life would be "nasty, brutish and short." Something like this is referred to in the last verse of the Book of Judges: "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did that which was right in his own eyes."

A free society needs law. But law is a constraint on freedom. It forbids me to do something I might wish to do. How then are we to reconcile law and liberty? That is a question at the heart of Judaism – which is a religion of both law and liberty.

To answer this, the Sages made an extraordinary leap of the imagination. Consider two forms of writing in ancient times. One is to use ink on parchment, another is to engrave words in stone. There is a marked difference between these two methods. The ink and parchment are two different materials. The ink is external to the parchment. It is

superimposed upon it, and it does not become part of the parchment. It remains distinct, and so it can be rubbed off and removed. But an engraving does not use some new substance. It is carved out of the stone itself. It becomes part of it, and cannot easily be obliterated.

Now consider these two ways of writing as metaphors for law. There are laws that are externally imposed. People keep them because they fear that if they do not, they will be caught and punished. But if there is no chance that they will be caught, they make break the rules, for the law has not changed their desires. That kind of law – imposed on us like ink on parchment – is a limitation of freedom.

But there can be a different kind of society in which people keep the law not because they fear they will be caught and punished, but because they know the law, they have studied it, they understand it, they have internalised it, and it has become part of who they are. They no longer desire to do what the law forbids because they now know it is wrong and they wrestle with their own temptations and desires. Such a law needs no police because it is based not on external force but on internal transformation through the process of education. The law is like writing engraved in stone.

Imagine such a society. You can walk in the streets without fear. You don't need high walls and alarms to keep your home safe. You can leave your car unlocked and still expect to find it there when you return. People keep the law because they care about the common good. That is a free society.

Now imagine the other kind of society, which needs a heavy police presence, constant surveillance, neighbourhood watch schemes, security devices and personnel, and still people are afraid to walk alone at night. People think they are free because they have been taught that all morality is relative, and you can do what you like so long as you do not harm others. No one who has seen such a society can seriously believe it is free. Individuals may be free, but society as a whole has to be on constant guard because it is at constant risk. It is a society with little trust and much fear.

Hence the brilliant new concept that emerged in rabbinic Judaism: cherut, the freedom that comes to a society – of which Jews were called on to be pioneers – where people not only know the law but study it constantly until it is engraved on their hearts as the commandments were once engraved on stone. That is what the Sages meant when they said, "Read not charut, engraved, but cherut, freedom, for the only person who is truly free is one who is occupied with Torah study." In such a society you keep the law because you want to, because having studied the law you understand why it is there. In such a society there is no conflict between law and freedom.

Where did the Sages get this idea from? I believe it came from their deep understanding of what Jeremiah meant when he spoke of the renewed covenant that would come into being once Jews returned after the Babylonian exile. The renewed covenant, he said, "will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt ... This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time – declares the Lord – I will put My law in their minds and write it on their hearts ..." (Jer. 31:31-33)

Many centuries later Josephus recorded that this had actually happened.

"Should anyone of our nation be asked about our laws, he will repeat them as readily as his own name. The result of our thorough education in our laws from the very dawn of intelligence is that they are, as it were, engraved on our souls."

To this day, many still do not fully understand this revolutionary idea. People still think that a free society can be brought about simply by democratic elections and political structures. But democracy, as Alexis de Tocqueville said long ago, may simply turn out to be "the tyranny of the majority."

Freedom is born in the school and the house of study. That is the freedom still pioneered by the people who, more than any other, have devoted their time to studying, understanding and internalising the law. What is the Jewish people? A nation of constitutional lawyers. Why? Because only when the law is engraved on our souls can we achieve collective freedom without sacrificing individual freedom. That is cherut -– Judaism's great contribution to the idea and practice of liberty.

The Joy of Purim Illuminates the Entire Year
Revivim Rabbi Eliezer Melamed

The essence of Purim is to provide inspiration for the entire year ● Sometimes, in our eagerness to increase joy, we overdo it to the point where it no longer brings happiness ● We need to return to the basics and fulfill the mitzvot of Purim properly ● Any additions beyond that should only be made if they genuinely enhance joy ● Even the mitzvah of drinking should not cause distress to family members ● While the halachic status of Amalek no longer applies today, the principle of completely overcoming a cruel enemy remains valid

Since Purim lasts only one day, and it is impossible to send endless mishloach manot or participate in meals with all relatives and friends, the question arises: To whom should we prioritize sending portions—our closest friends who are always by our side, or those with whom our relationships are sometimes strained? Should we send two lavish portions to select friends, or ten, twenty, or thirty simpler packages? Similarly, with the feast—should we invite family members from this side or that side, close friends, or perhaps new immigrants? Should the meal be for ten participants or fifty?

The answer is that all these ideas are valid, as this is the essence of Purim—to inspire us throughout the year. Although we cannot send portions to everyone on Purim, the beauty of giving can extend beyond Purim itself. Throughout the year, we can send thoughtful packages to friends and acquaintances—for example, when baking challah or preparing a special dish for Shabbat, we can make a little extra and send it to a friend who had a tough week, is celebrating a birthday, started a new job, or lost one. This way, we extend the heartwarming connection of Purim throughout the year.

The same applies to the feast. While we can only dine with a limited group on Purim, the joy of the meal should deepen our appreciation for friendship and connection, encouraging us to participate in our loved ones' celebrations year-round—weddings, brit milah ceremonies, and other family and community gatherings. Similarly, the mitzvah of matanot la'evyonim (gifts to the poor) should inspire us to continue giving tzedakah, such as ma'aser kesafim (a tenth of our earnings) or even a fifth, throughout the year.

The mitzvah of reading the Megillah also provides lasting lessons. Through hearing the Megillah, we learn about God's providence in the world and how evil can be transformed into good. This understanding strengthens us to continue studying Torah and recognizing divine guidance throughout the year.

A Woman's Profound Question About the Joy of Purim

Q: I am a woman for whom Purim has become a difficult day. Instead of being a joyful occasion, it is one of the most burdensome days of the year. The need to prepare numerous mishloach manot, organize the feast, help the children with their costumes, and accompany them in delivering the packages is overwhelming. This is compounded by hearing the Megillah twice, with all the delays and noise during the "Haman" beatings. The feast itself is also stressful. While my husband usually helps with Shabbat and festival meals, on Purim I am solely responsible. Additionally, I worry that my husband might get drunk, leaving me to manage both him and the children, along with the discomfort and embarrassment it sometimes causes. I understand that some women enjoy all of this, but I suspect I am not alone in feeling this way.

A: The problem is that in our desire to increase joy, we sometimes overdo it to the point where it ceases to be joyful. This is true for any good thing—when taken to excess, it becomes burdensome and even harmful. Compliments are pleasant, but when exaggerated, they become ridiculous. Friendship is wonderful, but excessive clinging can become oppressive.

Therefore, it is essential to return to the basics and fulfill the mitzvot of Purim properly, ensuring that any additions genuinely enhance joy.

Mishloach Manot:

The mitzvah is to send two food items to one person. Each spouse should send one package, containing at least two portions. Originally, the Purim meal preparation included the preparation of mishloach manot—sharing from what was already prepared for the feast. This minimized the burden while maximizing joy, as one received the best of what their friend had made. Since there is a mitzvah to educate children, each child should give one package to a friend, and beyond that, additional gifts should only be given if they bring joy.

Megillah Reading:

Similarly, when it comes to the Megillah reading, it is best to find a comfortable environment. Ideally, the Megillah should be read in a public setting, but if the noise of beating "Haman" is disturbing, it is appropriate to attend a quieter reading. As I wrote in Peninei Halacha: "Those who wish to continue the custom of beating 'Haman' may do so, provided that the entire congregation can still hear the Megillah clearly. However, it is preferable to avoid making noise during the reading, and synagogues where most congregants prefer a quiet reading should announce in advance that no noise will be made."

The Feast:

Regarding the Purim feast, instead of organizing an overly large gathering, it is better to hold the meal within the family circle. It can be shared with another family, but it is also perfectly acceptable to celebrate with just the nuclear family. The meal should include bread and be as dignified as a festival meal. While meat is preferred for the main dish, chicken, fish, or even dairy dishes are also acceptable.

The Mitzvah of Drinking:

The mitzvah of drinking on Purim is derived from the verse "to make them days of feasting and rejoicing" (Esther 9:22). There are two primary approaches:

Some hold that one should become intoxicated to the point where they cannot distinguish between "cursed is Haman" and "blessed is Mordechai." However, if a person knows that they might act inappropriately when drunk, they should only drink enough to become drowsy and fall asleep.

Others argue that the mitzvah is simply to drink more than usual but not to become drunk to the point of losing control.

Practical Halacha:

Each person should choose the approach that allows them to fulfill the mitzvah joyfully. If a man's drinking causes his wife distress, he should follow the more moderate approach. If the wife is significantly burdened, this may indicate that he is exceeding even the lenient opinion.

Remembering Amalek:

This Shabbat, we fulfill the mitzvah of reading Parashat Zachor, reminding us not to show excessive mercy to our enemies. History teaches that when we were too lenient, we suffered—whether during King Saul's time, or in the days of King Ahab. Although the specific mitzvah to destroy Amalek no longer applies today, the principle remains that a cruel enemy must be decisively defeated.

The Daily 'Peninah':

On Shushan Purim, participants in the "Peninei Halacha" daily learning program (In Hebrew) will begin the study of Shabbat. By the end of the year, they will complete the two volumes on Shabbat laws, including the 39 melachot, and will then proceed to study the laws of prayer. This initiative involves approximately 6,000 participants across the country.

Parshat Ki Tisa: Sweet and Not So Savory Spices – The Jewish Melting Pot

Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin is the Founder and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone

"And God spoke unto Moses: Take unto you sweet spices, stacte [nataf], onycha [shelet] and galbanum [helbena], these sweet spices with pure frankincense [levona], all of an equal weight." (Exodus 30:34)

One of the most unique aspects of the Sanctuary, continued in the Holy Temples, was the sweet-smelling spices of the incense burned on a special altar and whose inspiring fragrance permeated the House of God. In the portion of Ki Tisa the Torah lists the different spices, and their names – in Hebrew or English – are strange to our modern ears. But stranger still is the Rabbinic commentary that one of those spices – specifically helbena – is hardly sweet smelling. On the contrary, as Rashi writes, helbena "…is a malodorous spice which is known [to us as] gelbanah [galbanum]. Scripture enumerates it among the spices of the incense to teach us that we shouldn't look upon the inclusion of Jewish transgressors in our fasts and prayers as something insignificant in our eyes; indeed, they [the transgressors of Israel] must also be included amongst us" (Rashi, ad loc.).

Rashi is conveying a most significant rabbinic insight. The community of Israel – in Hebrew a tzibur – must consist of all types of Jews: righteous (the letter tzadi for tzaddikim), intermediate (the letter bet for benonim), and wicked (the letter reish for resha'im), just as the incense of the Sanctuary included spices of unappetizing fragrance. Perhaps because we must learn to take responsibility for every member of the "family" no matter what their behavior, perhaps because what appears to us as wicked may in reality be more genuine spirituality, perhaps because no evil is without its redeeming feature or perhaps merely in order to remind us not to be judgmental towards other human beings, the message of the incense could not be clearer: no Jew, even the most egregious sinner, dare be dismissed with mockery and derision from the sacred congregation of Israel. Every Jew must be allowed to contribute, and only when every Jew is included does the sweet fragrance properly emerge.

We have already seen how the Torah portion of Ki Tisa contains another striking example of the significance of every single Jew in Israel in the aftermath of the great sin in the desert. We read that soon after the revelation at Sinai, Moses' prolonged communion with the divine frightened the people into worshiping a golden calf. Our sages teach:

"And God said to Moses, 'Go down' (Ex. 32:7). Interprets R . Elazar: God was commanding Moses to descend from his elevated position. 'The only reason I gave you greatness is because of Israel, and now that Israel has sinned, what do I need you for?'" (Berakhot 32a)

God is reminding Moses that God's covenant with Abraham was with every single Jew. No Jew dare be discounted; every Jew must be loved, taught, and at least given the opportunity to come closer to God and our traditions. Even the Jew who is serving idols must be spoken to, ministered to!

A month or so after this portion is read, the Seder itself becomes a living demonstration of the necessity to include rather than to exclude any Jew. Take note of the proverbial four children: the wise child, the wicked child, the simple child and the child who knows not what to ask. It is instructive that the wicked child is not defined by the compiler of the Haggada as one who eats non-kosher food or desecrates the Sabbath; the wicked child is rather the one who says "Of what value is this work for you?" Wickedness is defined as excluding oneself from the general Jewish community. And even if a person excludes herself – and is therefore called wicked – we dare not exclude her. Our Seder table must always be welcoming enough to include everyone, no matter who.

Indeed, towards the end of the Seder we are instructed to open the door for Elijah the prophet, forerunner of the Messiah. In the past I've commented that opening the door for Elijah seems superfluous given Elijah's uncanny ability to visit every single Seder in the world; anyone capable of accomplishing such a remarkable feat certainly would not be stopped by a closed door. One answer that I've proposed is that the opening of the door is not really for Elijah; it is rather a symbolic gesture of opening the door to the fifth child, the child who has moved so far from the Jewish people that he isn't even at the Seder! We must go out to find him – even if he is at a neighborhood dance club or a Far East ashram – and invite him to come back in.

And why is Elijah associated with this gesture toward the fifth child? The closing verse of the last prophet included in the canon, Malakhi, declares: "Behold I will send Elijah, the prophet, before the coming of the great and awesome day of God, and he shall turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers…" (Malakhi 3:23). No one, not the "wicked" child, and not even the "invisible" child, is to be excluded from the Seder, the commemoration

of our first redemption. Parents and children must all join together in a loving and accepting reunion.

There is a fascinating halakhic ramification of our desire to include rather than to exclude. The Talmud (Eruvin 69b) suggests that a public desecrater of the Sabbath is comparable to an idolater, whose wine cannot be drunk and who cannot be counted for a statutory quorum (minyan) for prayer. Does this mean that a Jew who does not observe the Sabbath laws and rituals forfeits his rights to belong to a proper Jewish congregation? One of the towering Torah giants of nineteenth- century Germany, Rabbi David Zvi Hoffman, raises this very question in his collection of responsa, Mellamed Leho'il (Responsum 29), where he resoundingly rules that the Talmudic comparison no longer applies. He explains that during Talmudic times, when the overwhelming majority of the Jewish people was observant, and when a Jew was defined in terms of their Torah observance, any Jew who publicly desecrated the Sabbath was effectively testifying to their exclusion from the Jewish people. Therefore, in Talmudic times, a public Sabbath desecrator became the equivalent of an idolater; in effect, the perpetrator of such a public crime was excluding himself from the congregation of Israel and such a person was thereby relinquishing any rights to Jewish privileges. However, explains Rabbi Hoffman, when – sadly enough – the overwhelming majority of Jews are not observant (and today this is even truer than it was in nineteenth-century Germany), a Jew who publicly desecrates the Sabbath is not at all making a statement of exclusion from the peoplehood of Israel. On the contrary, the very fact that such a desecrater attends a synagogue (if only a few times a year) and is willing to partake in the service indicates a definite feeling of belonging and a will to belong to the historic community of Israel. Therefore, Rabbi Hoffman concludes, a Sabbath desecrater must not only be included in a minyan, but must be encouraged to become more involved.

A Curious Postscript

On a recent plane trip from New York to Israel, I felt myself awakened by a rather startling question. Someone wanted to see my tzitzit (ritual fringes). Still half asleep, I opened my shirt, showing the aggressive questioner what he wanted. I thought that perhaps he needed to borrow them. "Good," he said, "in that case please join us for a minyan for morning prayers." Somewhat confused, I asked him what my wearing or not wearing tzitzit had to do with my joining the minyan. "You know," he said, "you can't pray with just any Jew. But chances are that a Jew who wears tzitzit also observes the Sabbath."

I was quite taken aback, to say the least. I reminded the zealot that the source for the requirement of ten people for a minyan was derived from God's statement to Moses, "How long must I suffer this evil congregation…?" (Num. 14:27). And the evil congregation to which God is referring is the ten out of twelve scouts who didn't want to conquer the Land of Israel. Since the word "eda" (congregation) refers to ten scouts, we know that ten comprise a minyan. Now these ten scouts are considered to have committed one of the most grievous sins of the Bible by their refusal to leave the desert and inhabit Israel. If such individuals are the very source for a congregational quorum, how could someone be excluded if he doesn't wear the ritual fringes?

I did not choose to pray with such a hand-picked group; I chose rather to pray with those who had been rejected by the tzitzit checking minyan gatherer, confident that they would be far more acceptable to the God of compassion and unconditional love to whom we pray!

Shabbat Shalom

Under the Big Top

By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

"Why do some people wear big yarmulkes that cover their entire head?"

"How large must my yarmulke be?"

"Is there a halachic difference between going bareheaded indoors versus outdoors?"

"Why don't we clip a waterproof yarmulke to our heads while we swim?"

"May one swear an oath, using G-d's Name, while bareheaded?"

Answer:

All of the above questions concern the laws regarding covering one's head and walking bareheaded, a topic mentioned several times in the Gemara. For example:

"Rabbi Huna, the son of Rabbi Yehoshua, did not walk four amos (about seven feet) with an uncovered head, saying, 'The Shechinah is above my head'" (Kiddushin 31a). Similarly, the Gemara says elsewhere that Rabbi Huna the son of Rabbi Yehoshua said about himself, "I will be rewarded, because I never walked four amos with an uncovered head" (Shabbos 118b).

"Ravina was sitting in front of Rav Yirmiyah of Difti when a man passed by and did not cover his head. Ravina said to Rav Yirmiyah of Difti, 'How arrogant is this man (for walking bareheaded in the presence of Torah scholars)?' Rav Yirmiyah responded, 'Perhaps he comes from the town of Mechasya, where the people are so familiar with talmidei chachamim (that in their presence the townspeople do not cover their heads)" (Kiddushin 33a).

"An astrologer told the mother of Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak: 'Your son will be a thief.' To avoid this from happening, she made sure that his head was always covered, and cautioned him: 'Cover your head, so that you will always be in fear of Heaven and always pray for Divine assistance in serving Hashem.' Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak was unaware of the reason behind her instructions, but always followed them meticulously, from his youth and on into adulthood, when he became a great Torah scholar. One day, he was studying Torah under a date palm that was not his, when his head covering fell off. Raising his eyes, he saw the dates, and his yetzer hora overwhelmed him. It was so powerful that he snapped off dates with his teeth, thus fulfilling the prophecy of the astrologer" (Shabbos 156b).

Mesechta Sofrim, which is a collection of beraisos, or halachic teachings of the tanna'im not included in the Mishnah, quotes a dispute whether someone whose head is uncovered

may lead the services by being poreis al shema, which means to recite kaddish and borchu that follow the pesukei dezimra. (There are various opinions as to how much of the prayer is included in poreis al shema, a topic beyond the scope of this article.) The first opinion, mentioned anonymously, permits someone bareheaded to lead the services, whereas the second opinion prohibits doing so, because one may not say Hashem's name with an uncovered head (Sofrim 14:15). In a dispute of this nature, the general rule is that we follow the first opinion, although, in this particular dispute, we find authorities who rule according to the second opinion.

The Rambam about being bareheaded

The Rambam prohibits praying the shemoneh esrei bareheaded (Hilchos Tefillah 5:5), and he also states that it is appropriate for a talmid chacham to cover his head at all times (Hilchos Dei'os 5:6).

Interpreting the Talmudic sources

Based on the above sources, most, but not all, halachic authorities contend that, in Talmudic times, covering one's head was performed on special occasions, such as when praying, reciting blessings, and in the presence of a Torah scholar, but was not always otherwise observed (Tur, Orach Chayim 8, as explained by Darkei Moshe; Shu"t Maharshal #72; Gra on Orach Chayim 8:2). These rulings imply that someone other than a talmid chacham is not required to cover his head, except when davening. As we will soon see, most authorities conclude that, today, one is required to cover one's head, because of reasons that did not apply in the time of the Gemara.

A minority opinion

We must note that one prominent late authority, Rav Shelomo Kluger, understands the Talmudic sources in a different way. He contends that, even in earlier times, it was forbidden to leave one's head completely uncovered. In his opinion, the passages that imply that a person may go bareheaded are, in fact, allowing him to have his head partially covered (Shu"t Ha'elef Lecha Shelomo #3).

Protecting from sin

According to all opinions, covering one's head helps achieve yiras shamayim, being in constant recognition and awe of G-d's presence, as borne out by the anecdote of Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak that I quoted

above. Let us understand this story in its context, which concerns the topic of ein mazal leYisroel.

Ein mazal leYisroel

Hashem set up the world in such a way that the events that transpire in one's life, and even one's personality and tendencies, are influenced by one's mazal. However, because of the principle of ein mazal leYisroel, one can override this preordained fortune through prayer. Recognizing that Hashem is The Source of all, and praying to Him for help and assistance, can change one's situation.

We now understand what Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak's mother did. The astrologer understood the mazalos and knew that her son was born under a mazal that would influence him to steal. Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak's mother knew that although mazalos have a strong influence on a person, their power is not absolute. Therefore, she understood, correctly, that the astrologer's diagnosis presented her with a reason to treat her son in a special way. Since prayer and being careful about mitzvah observance can offset the influence of mazalos, this is what she taught him, knowing that covering one's head provides a strong influence. She was proven correct, because her son developed into a great Torah scholar and yerei shamayim, despite the influences of his personal mazalos. Still, only when he remained on guard and kept his head covered was he able to combat his tremendous drive to steal. The moment his head became uncovered, the temptation to steal overwhelmed him. He now knew that, in spite of his tremendous accomplishments in ruchniyus, he could not relax his guard, even for a second. We also understand why the custom developed that people cover their heads at all times, even though the Gemara did not require it.

Responsum of the Maharshal

With this background, we can understand the following responsum, penned by the sixteenth-century halachic luminary, Rav Shelomo Luria, known as the Maharshal. "I am unaware of a prohibition to recite a beracha without a cover on one's head. Although the Terumas Hadeshen was certain that it is prohibited to mention G-d's Name without one's head being covered, I am unaware of the source of this ruling. He writes that it is a dispute in Mesechta Sofrim, and, furthermore, Rabbeinu Yerucham writes that it is prohibited to recite a beracha bareheaded. Even though I do not dispute the earlier authorities unless I find a major scholar on my side of the dispute, I am inclined to be lenient in ruling that one may recite a beracha and even recite keri'as shema bareheaded. I can prove this from a Midrash Rabbah that states that a human king requires people to rise and uncover their heads in respect, prior to reading a declaration that he has issued, which they then read with great awe and trepidation. Hakadosh Baruch Hu told the Jews that when you read My declaration, the shema, you are not required to stand while doing so, nor are you required to expose your heads." The Maharshal notes that this midrash implies that uncovering one's head while reciting shema is not required, and it is certainly not prohibited.

The Maharshal continues: "Despite my own proofs to the contrary, what can I do that people consider being bareheaded to be prohibited? However, I am astonished at the custom of treating uncovering one's head as a prohibited activity, even when not praying. I have no idea where they got this from. The only source that we find about having one's head uncovered is regarding a woman; it is only a midas chasidus (exemplary conduct) to be careful not to walk four amos bareheaded -- but this midas chasidus applies only to someone walking four amos and not to one walking a shorter distance, as implied by the statement of Rav Huna the son of Rav Yehoshua… . Furthermore, I found written that being bareheaded is a concern only when one is outdoors… . Avoiding reciting G-d's Name with an exposed head is a midas chasidus, just as is avoiding walking four amos bareheaded. However, the Rif wrote that we should protest someone's entering a shul bareheaded, and the Tur wrote that one should not pray bareheaded, but did not prohibit reciting shema bareheaded."

The Maharshal then concludes: "I am powerless to change this approach. Since people are in the practice of not being bareheaded anywhere, I may not be lenient in their presence. I heard of a talmid chacham who used to study Torah bareheaded, saying that the covering bothered him. Although, technically, there is nothing wrong with being bareheaded, even from a perspective of exemplary conduct (midas chasidus), provided one is not saying G-d's Name, nevertheless, a talmid chacham should be careful not to do this, since people may think that he is not serious about his observance of Torah and mitzvos. Therefore, a talmid chacham should not study Torah bareheaded, even in the privacy of his own home, lest someone see him and, as a result, treat him without the proper respect he is due."

In his conclusion, the Maharshal rules that a talmid chacham is required to cover his head. He also contends that one may recite a beracha by placing his hand over his head, despite the rule that one part of the body is not considered a proper cover over another part (see Berachos 24b and Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 74:1). The Maharshal reasons that since, in his opinion, halacha does not require one to cover one's head when saying Hashem's Name, and the reason one needs to cover his head is only so that people not consider him to be someone who does not take the Torah seriously, it is sufficient to place one's hand over one's head to fulfill this concern.

Other authorities

Although the Gra (on Orach Chayim 8:2) echoes the Maharshal's approach to the subject at hand, early poskim follow a more stringent approach. The Terumas Hadeshen (1:10), the Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chayim 91:3, 4) and the Rema (Orach Chayim 74:2) rule that it is prohibited to say Hashem's Name bareheaded, following the second opinion of Mesechta Sofrim. As a result, they conclude that a person may not recite a beracha with only his hand on top of his head, although the Shulchan Aruch permits reciting a beracha with someone else's hand covering your head. As I will explain shortly, the Taz agrees that one may not recite a beracha with only one's hand on top of his head, but he permits standing or walking four amos with one's hand on top of his head.

The Bach (comments to Tur Orach Chayim, Chapter 2) takes issue with a different lenient ruling of the Maharshal, contending that it is forbidden to walk bareheaded even less than four amos.

The Taz's approach

Although the Maharshal concluded that the only reason one should not go bareheaded is because people will look at him askance, the Taz (Orach Chayim 8:3) concludes that, in our day, it is halachically prohibited to be bareheaded. In his opinion, since the gentiles of the Western world are meticulous to uncover their heads upon entering a building, being bareheaded violates the law of bechukoseihem lo seileichu (Vayikra 18:3), one may not follow the practices of the gentiles. This lo saaseh of the Torah is often called chukos akum. There are many opinions among the rishonim and the poskim as to the exact definition of what is included under chukos akum. The Taz explains that since the gentiles consider it unacceptable to have one's head covered indoors, uncovering one's head violates this prohibition.

Thus, according to the Taz, there are two different reasons to have one's head covered: to encourage one's yiras shamayim and because of chukos akum. Placing one's hand over one's head is sufficient to avoid chukos akum, since this shows that one does not want to sit bareheaded, but it is not sufficient to allow one to recite a beracha.

Bareheaded indoors

Based on the Maharshal, the Be'er Heiteiv (Orach Chayim 2:6) rules that, under extenuating circumstances, one is permitted to have one's head exposed while indoors. However, the Bechor Shor (Shabbos 118b) opposes this ruling, contending that having one's head exposed indoors is a more serious violation of chukos akum than outdoors, since the practice of the gentiles is deliberately to be bareheaded indoors.

At this point, we can return to one of our original questions: "Is there a halachic difference between going bareheaded indoors versus outdoors?" According to the Maharshal and the Be'er Heiteiv, although, under normal circumstances, one should cover one's head in both venues, walking bareheaded outdoors is of greater concern. Under extenuating circumstances, the Be'er Heiteiv permitted walking indoors bareheaded. However, the Bechor Shor considers walking bareheaded indoors to be a more serious violation of halacha, since it violates chukos akum,

whereas walking outdoors with one's head exposed violates only the minhag Yisroel.

Livelihood

Although Rav Moshe Feinstein rules according to the Taz that one is required to cover one's head whether indoors or outdoors, he concludes that when one's employment or livelihood may be jeopardized, it is permitted to work bareheaded. This ruling applies only while someone is at his place of work, but once he leaves his place of employment, he must cover his head, since his livelihood is no longer jeopardized (Shu"t Igros Moshe, Orach Chayim 1:1 and 4:2; Choshen Mishpat 1:93). (Those interested in seeing two very different approaches to this question are encouraged to compare Shu"t Nachalas Binyamin #30 and Shu"t Melamed Leho'il, Yoreh Deah, #56.)

Different gentiles

Some authorities note that the Taz's reason should apply only in Western countries and other places where the gentiles have a specific practice to uncover their heads. However, in places where the gentiles have no such concerns, such as in Moslem countries, there is no prohibition of chukos akum in leaving one's head uncovered (Shu"t Igros Moshe, Orach Chayim 1:1). It may still be prohibited because of Jewish custom.

Swearing bareheaded

At this point, let us examine a different one of our opening questions: "May one swear an oath, using G-d's Name, while bareheaded?"

This question returns us to the dispute in Mesechta Sofrim that I quoted earlier, whether one may recite Hashem's Name bareheaded. According to the halachic authorities who rule like the first tanna, there is nothing technically wrong with reciting Hashem's Name bareheaded. Even among those authorities, such as the Terumas Hadeshen (1:10), who rule like the second tanna and prohibit enunciating Hashem's Name bareheaded, many, including the Terumas Hadeshen himself (2:203), rule that one may recite an oath bareheaded. For example, the Beis Lechem Yehudah (Yoreh Deah 157:5) rules that, when no other option exists, it is permitted to swear an oath while bareheaded.

Under the big top

At this point, we can examine two of our opening questions:

"Why do some people where big yarmulkes that cover their entire head?"

"How large must my yarmulke be?"

In the above-quoted responsum of Rav Shelomo Kluger, he ruled that one is required to cover one's head completely when walking outdoors four amos or more. When walking less than this distance, or when walking indoors, one must cover one's head, but it does not need to be covered completely. This explains why some people wear big yarmulkes that cover their entire head.

However, this ruling is not universally accepted. Rav Moshe Feinstein was asked how can people walk in the street wearing only a yarmulke, when Rav Shelomo Kluger required covering one's entire head? Rav Moshe demonstrates that all the major authorities disagreed with Rav Kluger's ruling. Rav Moshe concludes that even a small yarmulke meets the halachic requirements, but that individuals who would like to follow the more stringent opinion of Rav Kluger with regard to walking outside should cover their heads in a way that covers more than half the top of the head.

Swimming bareheaded

Previously, I quoted the following question: "Why don't we clip a waterproof yarmulke to our heads while we swim?"

One of the authorities mentioned above, the Bechor Shor, rules that there is no requirement to cover your head while swimming or while walking from the changing room to the mikveh, not even as a midas chasidus. He demonstrates from passages of the Gemara that midas chasidus does not include covering your head in the mikveh, and also notes that swimming bareheaded does not violate chukas akum, since it is obvious that the uncovered head is not because one is trying to mimic gentile practice.

Conclusion

We see from the halachic sources that covering one's head was a highly respected practice that assisted a person's growth in yiras shamayim. With time, covering one's head became part of the "uniform" of the Jewish man. In addition, there are other halachic reasons to keep one's head covered, such as chukos akum. When donning a yarmulke or other head covering, one should avail himself of the opportunity to think about our Father in Heaven.

The Nazis and Purim
by Jonathan Rosenblum
Mishpacha Magazine

Hitler's identification with Haman, and even before that with Haman's ancestor Amalek, was fully justified

Did you know that Hitler yemach shemo was obsessed with Purim? Well, I didn't either, until I came across an entire chapter devoted to the subject in Rabbi Raphael Shore's new book, Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Jew (about which I'll be writing at much greater length in the near future).

When Hitler declared war on the United States, in the immediate aftermath of Pearl Harbor — as misbegotten a decision for him as Haman's decision to build a gallows 50 amos high upon which to hang Mordechai proved for him — he accused President Roosevelt and the Jews of "preparing a second Purim." In a radio address to the nation in early 1944, when the Allies were already bombing Berlin, Hitler warned of a "second triumphant Purim festival" if the Nazis lost.

Most remarkably, the Nazis fully identified with Haman. Historian Martin Gilbert, in his magisterial The Holocaust: A History of the Jews of Europe During the Second World War, details how in Eastern Europe, the Nazis carried out mass murders of Jews near to Purim on the calendar, or on Purim itself.

And on at least two occasions, ten Jews were hung on Purim day to avenge the ten sons of Haman. In the Polish town of Zdunska Wola, 30 miles west of Lodz, the Gestapo demanded from the Jewish Council ten young healthy Jews "for work." Subsequently, the Jewish Council was ordered to bring them to a place where the gallows had already been prepared and to hang them with their own hands. All the Jews of the town were forced to watch the sight of their fellow Jews writhing on the gallows.

In the Polish city of Piotrkow, on Purim day, the Jews legally living in the ghetto were told that there would be an exchange of ten Jews, who had to possess university degrees, for ten Germans living on a settlement in Palestine. That evening, the Jews thus selected were driven to the Jewish cemetery to be executed. But there turned out to be only eight, so the cemetery watchman and his wife were added to bring the total of those executed to ten — again in revenge for the ten sons of Haman.

HITLER'S IDENTIFICATION with Haman, and even before that with Haman's ancestor Amalek, was fully justified. And not just because he, like Haman, sought to "destroy, to kill, and to exterminate all the Jews." As early as 1920, Hitler wrote that the great war with the Jews would only be won when every single Jew was killed, because if even one survived, the race would be reconstituted.

Amalek is the great denier of Hashgachah Pratis and sower of doubt in Hashem in the world. When the entire world trembled before the Jews after Yetzias Mitzrayim, Amalek attacked and thereby cooled off the bath (of fear of Hashem and His people). In that first battle, Amalek cut off the sign of the covenant between Hashem and the Jewish People and cast it defiantly heavenward. Amalek's descendant Haman believed everything depended on chance, and famously cast lots to determine the day for the destruction of the Jews.

Hitler too believed in a universe governed solely by chance, specifically an evolutionary process driven by random mutations and natural selection. He transferred that view to the social realm and was an ardent proponent of Social Darwinism, the view that mankind develops through the survival of the fittest in a state of perpetual war.

As such, he despised all religion — "humanitarianism" — and the belief that mankind is subject to a Divine moral code. His hatred of the Jews was that they had inflicted the "wound" of morality upon mankind.

Christianity was only a slightly less repugnant stepchild of Judaism in his eyes. A popular song of the Hitler Youth went: "We need no stinkin' Christian virtue."

STILL, HITLER ENTERTAINED a niggling doubt that perhaps "destiny desires the final victory of this little nation." One of the first and ugliest Nazi propaganda films, The Eternal Jew, expressed precisely that point. Though it is a ceaseless catalogue of disgusting images of Jews throughout the ages, its very title captures the fear that the Jews are indeed eternal. That is why Purim played such an outsized role in Hitler's thought, for it provided proof of Hashem's providential protection of the Jewish People.

Hitler did not live to see the final downfall of the Thousand Year Reich, but one of his most vicious henchmen, Julius Streicher yemach shemo, publisher of the notorious Der Stürmer, did. Streicher was tried at Nuremberg for having promulgated Jewish hatred so vile that it incited the Germans to crimes against humanity.

He was hanged along with nine other Nazi war criminals, the last of the ten followers of Haman to be led to the gallows. (In the listing of the ten sons of Haman in the Megillah, three letters are written smaller than the others: tav, shin, and zayin, which are equal in value to the last three digits in 5707, the Hebrew year in which Streicher was executed.) Like Pharaoh at Yam Suf, Hashem kept Streicher alive long enough to understand clearly the truth of what Hitler only suspected: Hashem's divine protection of His chosen people.

As Streicher was about to be hanged — a hanging that was bungled and extended his agony — he shouted out, "Purimfest 1946!"

Drasha

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Parshas Ki Sisa

Higher than Sinai

In the aftermath of the sin of the Golden Calf, Moshe's mortality is transformed to immortality as — anthropomorphic as it may sound — he gets G-d to change his mind.

Hashem, who had threatened to destroy Klall Yisrael after the sin of the Golden Calf, finally assures Moshe that His presence will accompany them on their sojourn. But Moshe, it seems, is still not satisfied. In what appears as a daring move, he asks Hashem for more. Not only does he want assurance of the accompaniment of the Divine presence, Moshe now asks Hashem to "show me Your face" (Exodus 33:18). It is not enough that Hashem forgives the Jews for the most audacious sin of their young history. It is not enough that he assures them that he will guide them in the desert. Moshe wants more! He asks for a mortal existence despite an immortal act. He wants to connect to the corporeal with the Omnipotent in a way never done before. He wants to feast his soul on the most spiritual meal ingested through human vision. He wants to see G-d.

Hashem explains that it is impossible to see Him and live. The human soul cannot be confined to a spatiotemporal existence after it has experienced the endless world of infinite spirituality. And thus the answer is, "No. You may however, see my back" (cf. Exodus 33:20-23). Of course the world of G-d's face as opposed to his back fill tomes of commentators from those who analyze textual reference to the great kabbalists, and it certainly has no place in a fax of internet sheet. What does interest me is Moshe's persistence. Why was he dissatisfied with G-d's first acquiescence? What propelled him, after almost losing Klall yisrael to ask for the greatest show of G-d's bond to His creation's?

Lou Maidenbaum, former President of Met Foods, help establish the Gedaliah Maidenbaum Preparatory School Division of Yeshiva of South Shore. Before passing away last month, he was confined to a hospital in Miami Beach.

But in his sick bed he never lost his spunk, charm or the will to live life to its fullest.

A week before he passed away, he was in his hospital room and was experiencing some discomfort. He pressed the button for a nurse, but no one came. Five minutes later he rang again. Still no response. He tried two more times and then decided a new tactic.

He picked up the telephone and dialed 3 digits. 9-1-1. "Emergency services, came the woman's voice, "what is the problem?" "I'm having difficulty breathing" gasped Lou. "Where are you calling from?" "Mount Sinai Hospital, Room 321," came the response. "Mount Sinai Hospital?" Repeated the incredulous dispatcher, "what are you calling us for? You are in the Hospital already!" Lady," he shouted to the operator. "This is my life we are talking about. And If this is the way I'll get the best response, then I'm calling 911!

Moshe knew that he was — on Sinai — with G-d — receiving the Torah. However, that was not enough. He was not complacent about his accomplishment. He was not content with being the transmitter of eternity. He wanted more! He wanted to attain the highest possible level of mortal achievement. He wanted to see G-d. He wanted to spiritually feast on the face of the Omnipotent. Moshe was only concerned, to attain the greatest degree of spirituality that he possibly could reach. There was nothing else on his mind or in his soul. Hashem responded that if that level is attained, the soul will flee from its mortal constraints and refuse to re-enter a corporal being. "No man shall see Me and live" (Exodus 22:20). So Moshe had to concede with the highest level the physical body could endure. But in Moshe's quest to go higher than Sinai he taught us a great lesson. No matter what level you think you are on, if you are standing on earth, you must reach for the mountain and when you are standing on the mountain you must reach for the clouds. And even if you are standing on a cloud you must reach for the stars.

Good Shabbos

Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

In honor of the marriage of Mordechai Merenstein to Leah Dukler. May they be zocheh to build a bayis ne'eman b'Yisrael!

Parsha Insights

By Rabbi Yisroel Ciner

Parshas Ki Sisa

What's Bad is Good

This week we read parshas Ki Tisa. The central happening of this parsha is the chait ha'egel {the sin of the golden calf} and the ensuing discussion between Hashem and Moshe about how that event would affect the way Hashem would deal with Klal Yisroel {the Nation of Israel}. This is very applicable to the Purim holiday that we celebrate this week as Purim both ushered in and revealed to us the essence of a new stage.

Hashem instructed Moshe, together with Bnei Yisroel {the children of Israel}, to ascend to Eretz Yisroel {the Land of Israel}. "V'shalachti l'fanecha mal'ach {And I will send before you an angel}[33:2]." This angel will clear the way for you as you ascend "to the land flowing with milk and honey [33:3]."

The S'forno explains that Moshe was being told to take Bnei Yisroel out of the wilderness wherein they needed to be sustained miraculously. This was a level that they were no longer worthy of after the chait ha'egel. Instead, they were instructed to go to the land flowing with milk and honey. There they could be sustained in a non-miraculous manner.

"And the nation heard this bad news (that Hashem would not be resting amongst them to the degree that He had been) and they mourned [33:4]." The Bnei Yisroel mourned this loss of closeness between them and Hashem.

Hashem responds that "in one moment, while I'm going up with you (if you'll rebel against me) I'll destroy you [33:5]." The S'forno explains that Hashem was explaining to them that they were mourning and upset over something that was in their best interests. The degree to which Hashem's presence is revealed determines the severity of the affront when we rebel against Him. Being an "am k'shay oref {a 'stiff-necked people}" we were better off having a mal'ach {angel} travel with us in the place of Hashem Himself.

Moshe continue to plead on behalf of Bnei Yisroel until Hashem acquiesced — He would accompany them. The mal'ach was put on hold until he appeared to Yehoshua when Yehoshua was about to begin his conquest of Eretz Yisroel.

Bnei Yisroel having elevated themselves through their t'shuvah {repentance} represented by their mourning, coupled with the prayers of Moshe, brought about the situation where it would no longer be better to have a mal'ach accompany them. Until that point, however, what we perceived as a cause for mourning was actually the best possible thing for us.

This is one of the basic teachings of Purim, contained in a seemingly very strange commandment. We know that the job of a Jew is to always retain focus of who he is and why he was sent down to this world. The more trying and difficult the situation through which one can maintain that focus — the greater the individual. Yet, on Purim, we seem to be commanded to lose focus! "Ad d'lo yadah bain arur Haman l'baruch Mordechai" — we are commanded to reach a state where we can't differentiate between "cursed is Haman" and "blessed is Mordechai". How can this commandment be understood?

The miracle of Purim took place during a very confusing period of our history. The first Temple had been destroyed and we were in the midst of the Babylonian exile. The era of prophecy had drawn to a close. Yirmiyahu's prophecy of our being redeemed after seventy years was quite ambiguous in terms of from when those seventy years should be counted. Acheshverosh's party was made to celebrate the expiration of those seventy years (according to his miscalculation) and the subsequent end of the nation of Israel. In his eyes, seventy years passing without the Jews being redeemed meant that Hashem had rejected them as a people and as a nation. (With this in mind, we can better understand the enormity of the sin of the Jews attending and participating in such a celebration.)

It is stated in our prayers that ultimately, "Hashem will be (recognized as) King over the entire land, on that day Hashem and His name will be One." In this world we have different names for Hashem which represent the different ways that we perceive Hashem's dealings with us. We have names for Hashem which refer to His attribute of mercy and other names which refer to His attribute of Justice. In the confusion of this world we see certain things as being 'tov' {good} and other's as 'ra' {evil}. Hashem's name in not One. However, ultimately, we will have the clarity of vision to see how it was all one attribute — different ways of bringing about that very same result. At that time His name will be One.

At this confusing time in our history, Hashem needed to clearly show us that we had not been dismissed from our national mission nor had we been set adrift. Although there no longer were open revelations of Hashem to man, He was still intimately involved in shaping and guiding the happenings of the world. There would be a lot of apparent 'ra' going on, but that too would be harnessed by Hashem's guiding hand to shepherd this world toward its destiny.

At the time of Purim, Haman, the scion of Amalek, had brought the nation of Israel to the verge of annihilation. He had successfully removed Queen Vashti, allowing for his own personal power to grow. He had built gallows upon which he planned to publicly hang Mordechai, the leader of the Jews. He had set a date for the total destruction of the Jews and he had the whole kingdom as eager and ready accomplices. It was a time of overpowering 'ra'.

It was then that Hashem, who's name is not mentioned even once throughout Megilas Esther, showed that Haman was actually unwittingly preparing the Jewish nation's redemption with every step of his scheme of destruction. His removal of Queen Vashti opened the way for Queen Esther. The gallows he prepared for Mordechai raised the ire of Achashverosh, prompting him to proclaim that Haman and his sons should be hung on those very gallows. The day set aside for our destruction turned into a day for us to avenge our enemies.

Each episode of the Megilah, if viewed as an isolated incident, could have been considered a simple coincidence. The entire Megilah, however, with its delicately woven series of events all combining into an exquisite tapestry, is clearly nothing else but the loving hand of Hashem. Concealed, yet coordinating the events, leading to the redemption of Bnei Yisroel and a subsequent rededication to Him and His Torah.

The miracle of Purim affords a view from the future, from the end of time, from the time of absolute clarity. From the "day that Hashem and His name will be One." A glimpse of that unity. An understanding that everything — all that we perceive as 'tov' and all that we perceive as 'ra' — is used by Hashem to bring about the ultimate destiny of Klal Yisroel. There is no difference between "cursed is Haman" and "blessed is Mordechai". All are tools in the hands of Hashem Echod {One).

Wishing you a joyous Purim and a good Shabbos,

Yisroel Ciner

The Megillah for Today

A Purim Message

The ArtScroll / Mesorah Heritage Foundation

Chazal taught that although there were hundreds of thousands of prophets, only those prophecies that had messages for future generations were included in Neviim and Kesuvim (the Holy Books of Prophets and Writings). This applies to the Book of Esther as well — the last Book to be included in the Kisvei Kodesh.

Indeed, it is striking that much of Megillas Esther parallels current Jewish history. Anti-Semitism was obviously present, if not rampant, in ancient Persia; otherwise, Haman's proposed genocide could not have come so close to success. Just as one cannot legislate love, one cannot legislate hatred great enough to bring about mass murder of men, women, and children. For nine years in Shushan and Persia, most Jews thought the way to survive in a foreign, inhospitable culture was to "adapt." Thus they participated too enthusiastically in Achashveirosh's long-lasting gastronomic carousal, and even intermarriage was not uncommon.

But when Haman's decree became law and Mordechai and Esther called for prayer and fasting, the inner Jewish spark of holiness became reignited, and in the aftermath of the Purim miracle there was a new embrace of Torah, an embrace that was even more fervent than the acceptance of the Torah at Mount Sinai.

Present but Unseen

An enduring and important lesson of Purim — one that illuminates and gives hope in all future exiles — derives from the surprising fact that the Name of Hashem does not appear in Megillas Esther. To unperceptive eyes, the Megillah reads like an exciting adventure story composed of a string of random, unrelated events that took place over a period of nine years, and then the author ties them all together in a surprise, happy ending. Nothing G-dly about that.

But to us, who see things through Torah lenses, Megillas Esther shows that Hashem orchestrates events, even when He appears to be absent.

Throughout Jewish history's many exiles, expulsions, and spiritual declines, the Megillah reminds us that Hashem does not forsake His nation. As Mordechai declared to a hesitant Esther, "Relief and salvation will come to the Jews from a different place"; the question is not if there would be salvation, but how and when, and who would be Hashem's agent. The result of the Purim miracle was twofold. Jews realized that it was a miracle, that it proved that the scattered, "random" events were far from random, that they were all ingredients of Hashem's plan. And when the climax came, the Jews of Shushan realized that there were two competing scenarios, Haman's and l'havdil Hashem's, and that the key that overturned Haman's designs was Jewish faith, prayer, and allegiance to the Torah.

The Eternal Spark

In our own time, we have seen similar recognition that we are the nation of Torah and its Giver. Soldiers, many of whom had never learned Talmud before, or who had not opened a Gemara in years, suddenly felt a compulsion to learn Torah. The inner Jewish soul was expressing itself in time of danger.

Mesorah Heritage Foundation and the Schottenstein family collaborated to print paperback Gemaras and Chumashim. To date, close to half a million Gemaras have been distributed, and photos abound of soldiers with rifles on their shoulders and Gemaras on their laps, as they learn during respites.

Zaka volunteers, who have a truly grisly and holy responsibility, often are traumatized after constant exposure to their heartbreaking work. How could the volunteers find the strength to cope and continue? Gedolim were consulted, and The answer was "Torah". In response, Zaka offered its members the opportunity to join in learning Tractate Bava Basra with Daf Yomi. The response was astounding and overwhelming.

Not long ago, 600 Zaka volunteers, from chareidi to semi-secular, came together to make a siyum, with their volumes of the Schottenstein Hebrew Talmud.

Many hostages and their families became baalei teshuvah. The inner spark — the pintele Yid — became ignited by adversity and privation. Instead of losing hope they gained faith.

Who in his "right mind" could have predicted such a thing?

Megillas Esther is the last of the Kisvei Kodesh, the only one that was created in galus. The Jewish people remained in galus after the Purim miracle, so Megillas Esther represents the message of Jewish survival no matter where, the proof that the "Protector of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps," not in the torture tunnels of Gaza, not on the campuses of Harvard or Columbia, not wherever Jews are in spiritual or physical danger, not at times when it seemed that the Torah world was terminally ill.

The sacred Books of Tanach are sealed, but the book of Jewish eternity is still being written. And you, the friends and supporters of ArtScroll/ Mesorah, are still writing chapters in that book.

Thanks to you, our writers and editors are continuing our half-century of dedication of bringing Torah to our brethren in their own language. As you read these lines, they are writing new ones, all in the service of Hashem and His people, and all made possible by your generosity.

The ancient Purim miracle was the prelude to the building of the Second Beis HaMikdash. May this Purim be the prelude to the coming of Mashiach and the building of the Third and permanent Beis HaMikdash, speedily, in our time.

H A P P Y P U R I M !!! The ArtScroll / Mesorah Heritage Foundation family Rabbi Gedaliah Zlotowitz Rabbi Nosson Scherman Rabbi Sheah Brander

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Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Ki Sisa

The Symbolism of the Half Shekel Donation – Part One

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly portion: #1241 The Case of the Mishloach Manos That Was Delivered to the Wrong Person. Good Shabbos!

The Symbolism of the Half Shekel Donation – Part One

Parshas Ki Sisa begins with the mitzvah of Machatzis Hashekel – the census based on the standard donation of a half shekel coin from all males aged twenty years and up, whether rich or poor. Rashi comments on the words "zeh yitnu" ("this they shall give") (Shemos 30:13): "He showed him a fiery coin whose weight was a half shekel and said (to Moshe), 'this is what they shall give.'"

Chazal say that Hashem had to show the coin to Moshe physically because he had difficulty conceptualizing the idea of donating a coin. This is not the first time Chazal say that Moshe had difficulty picturing something in his mind without a Divinely-provided visual aid. Chazal say that Moshe could not picture in his mind exactly what the Menorah was to look like, so, there too, Hashem showed him the image of a Menorah.

The Menorah was extremely intricate, so it is easy to understand the difficulty Moshe had creating that particular kayli (vessel). Moshe couldn't quite envision it, so Hashem showed him what it looked like. Similarly, Chazal say by the parsha of the sheratzim – which crawling reptiles were forbidden and which were permitted – that Moshe also needed the Ribono shel Olam to show him what the specified sheratzim looked like. That is also very understandable.

However, many commentaries are troubled about the drasha in this week's parsha. It is not so difficult to imagine what a coin looks like. Moshe Rabbeinu was certainly aware of what coins looked like and he did not need a picture to figure out the coins with which the census payment was to be transacted. Even in the days of Avraham Avinu, coins were used in the transaction of the purchase of Sora's burial plot. So, a first question is, what was so difficult that necessitated Moshe being shown a coin? A second question is, what is the significance of Hashem showing Moshe a coin of fire? Obviously, the coins that would be donated would be made of gold, silver, or copper, not of fire. Why did Hashem specifically show Moshe a coin of fire?

The Oznayim l'Torah (Rav Zalman Sorotzkin (1881-1966)) explains (as do others) that Moshe Rabbeinu was not perplexed by what a coin looks like. Rather, Moshe couldn't understand the fact that the census donation was called a kofer nafsho (atonement) (Shemos 30:12). Moshe did not understand how money could be a kaparah. Moshe knew full well that money is not necessarily the vehicle to bring kaparah to people.

Rav Zalman Sorotzkin says that the Ribono shel Olam was trying to teach something to Moshe Rabbeinu by specifically showing him a fiery coin, rather than one made from precious metal. We cannot live without fire. It cooks our food. It heats our homes and makes us comfortable. Yet fire, as we all know, can be terribly destructive. Fire has this duality – this paradox – that a person cannot live without it, and yet it can be one of the most destructive forces.

This is what the Ribono shel Olam was trying to show Moshe Rabbeinu. Moshe, you are perplexed as to how money can be a kaparah (an atonement)? Money can be a kaparah because it depends on what you do with it. You can do tremendous things with money, and the world could not exist without money. We would not be in the building we are in without money. We would not be as educated as we are without money. However, just like when fire is not properly controlled, it can be extremely hazardous, so too, if money is not properly controlled, it can be extremely hazardous. That is when it becomes destructive.

Rav Sorotzkin also points out a second observation related to the idea that by the census, "he'ashir (the rich man) shall not give more and the poor man shall not give less." (Shemos 30:15) The same half shekel coin was supposed to atone for everyone – both the rich man and the poor man. Without knowing specifically how much a half shekel coin was worth in those days, it is understandable how such a donation might serve as a kaparah for a poor man. A poor man will need to dig deep into his pockets and forgo the value of this half shekel coin. For him, such a donation can quite conceivably serve as a kaparah. But how can the same half shekel coin serve as a kaparah for a rich man? Whatever a half-shekel was worth, it was not very much. It certainly did not serve as a significant sacrifice for men of means.

Rav Sorotzkin explains that the kaparah for the ashir was not related to digging deep into his pocket for the half-shekel. The kaparah for the ashir emanates from needing to stay in the same line as the poor man in order to donate his half-shekel coin. For an ashir, who is used to VIP treatment (Ich bin nisht fun di pashete mentchin), this is beneath his dignity. He is used to first class seating. He is knocked down several pegs psychologically by needing to sit in economy class with everyone else. For him, that is a kaparah.

The bottom line is that there was kaparah for both the rich and the poor, even though the kaparah came about in different ways. For the poor person it came about because he had to make a financial sacrifice even for a half-shekel. For the rich person there is also a sacrifice, to find himself on the same level as the simple people, the masses.

The Symbolism of the Half Shekel Donation – Part Two

I saw another insight on the symbolism of a fiery coin. There is an interesting Medrash Rabbah in last week's parsha (Tezaveh) explaining the metaphor "Ki ner mitzvah v'Torah ohr" (for a candle is a mitzvah and the Torah is light) (Mishlei 6:23). It is a well-known fact that it is difficult for people to part with their money. For some people, it is more difficult and for some people it is less difficult, but in general, it is not easy for a person to part with his hard-earned money.

Hashem speaks of a "coin of fire." The idea is that it is possible to light a thousand other candles from a single lit candle without diminishing the first candle's light at all. This census donation is the first time Hashem is

asking us to give tzedakah (charity). Hashem is reminding us that tzedakah is like fire: When you give, it does not diminish the fire from which it came. This is what Hashem is teaching us with the pasuk "Ki ner mitzvah v'Torah ohr."

The Rambam writes in Hilchos Matonos L'aniyim: "A person never becomes poor from giving charity."

The "coin of fire" teaches us this lesson: Don't think you will be lacking after giving this half-shekel coin. Just as a single candle can light a thousand candles without diminishing its light at all, that is the way tzekakah is as well.

This fits in with a comment of the Baal Haturim in this week's parsha. "v'nasnu ish kofer nafsho…" (and a man will give an atonement for his soul…" (Shemos 30:12). The Baal Haturim writes that the word v'nasnu (vov-nun-saf-nun-vov) can be read forwards and backwards without changing its meaning or spelling. This teaches, he writes, that whatever a person gives in tzedakah will return to him and he will not be missing anything from having given it.

I knew someone who invested a lot of money with Bernie Madoff and lost his entire retirement account when the Madoff Ponzi scheme collapsed. However, the money this fellow had given to tzedakah, he of course had not given to Bernie Madoff. That money remained with him. In other words, he lost the money he wanted to invest – to make his fortune. But the money that he gave to tzedakah remained forever to his credit.

A person needs to keep these facts in mind: A person never becomes impoverished from tzedakah and tzedakah is like fire in that it can light other fires without its light being diminished.

Parshas Ki Sisa

Rav Yochanan Zweig

This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of bas Pinchos, Anna Salver.

Analyze This

And the Almighty passed by before him, and proclaimed, Hashem, Hashem […] (34:6).

Rashi (ad loc) explains that the name "Hashem" refers to the Almighty's attribute of mercy. Rashi goes on to quote the Gemara in Rosh Hashanah (17b), which explains why the Torah mentions the name "Hashem" twice in the possuk: "The first name 'Hashem' refers to the attribute of mercy before a person sins, and the second one refers to the attribute of mercy after one sins."

The Ohr HaChaim (34:6) quotes Rosh's comments on the Gemara: "Why does one need the attribute of mercy before one sins; 'Because Hashem knows that a person is going to sin.'" The Ohr HaChaim understands this to mean that even though Hashem knows that a person is going to sin He takes no action because of his attribute of mercy.

The Ohr HaChaim asks; "I do not understand this answer, for if Hashem would punish someone before that person sins (knowing that a sin is going to be committed), then what is the point of someone being born? Hashem, with His omniscience, can hold every soul accountable to their future actions and judge them right away."

In other words, since Hashem knows what a person is going to do, He can hold him responsible prior to him actually sinning. Therefore Hashem, in His benevolence, initiates the attribute of mercy and withholds punishment. As the Ohr HaChaim points out, this approach presents a philosophical dilemma: What is the point of living if Hashem has already begun judging you before you actually act?

A careful reading of Rosh's actual words can, perhaps, give us a different understanding of what he really means. The exact language of Rosh is, "Even though He knows that a person will eventually come to sin, He treats each person with the attribute of mercy." Rosh never says anything about Hashem's right to punish which, in turn, is being restrained by the attribute of mercy.

Perhaps Rosh means to say something entirely different. Very often when a person knows that he is being carefully evaluated or analyzed, such as on a first date or when a mother-in-law comes to visit, he is very uncomfortable and feels as though he is navigating landmines; every step has to be carefully considered before being made.

Similarly, when you are driving next to a state trooper on the highway you will inevitably feel like that trooper is just waiting to pounce and give you a ticket for some infraction.

Unfortunately, many people also feel this way about their parents or spouse; "they are just waiting for me to make a mistake so that they can criticize me." This leads to a terrible family dynamic because there is an inherent discomfort in being around that person. No one likes to feel like they are being judged every second of every day.

Thus, Rosh is teaching us a fundamental lesson in Hashem's benevolence. Of course Hashem judges us and there is accountability; that is a basic tenet of life. But He does so in order to help us make decisions that are good for us and the world around us. The point of creation is for Hashem to bestow good upon us, therefore, even when mistakes are made He initiates His attribute of mercy to lessen or eliminate the punishment.

Just as one would feel more comfortable driving next to a state trooper with a "get out of jail free" card in one's pocket, so too does Hashem provide a cushion by letting us know that there is an attribute of mercy even before we sin. Hashem displays His mercy first to demonstrate that He isn't looking to pounce on us for mistakes.

Hashem is also demonstrating the delicate balance that we must strive to achieve with our families. Of course there must be accountability in a family, but we must always convey that it is coming from a place of love; we support each other, even when one makes a mistake, because we care much more about what is done right than what is done wrong.

Eternally Yours

Let my anger burn against them and I shall annihilate them […] Moshe pleaded with Hashem […] why should Egypt say, 'With evil intent did He take them out […] to annihilate them from the face of the earth' (32:10-12).

Parshas Ki Sisa details the unfaithfulness of Bnei Yisroel through their sin of the Golden Calf, and Hashem's threat to totally wipe out the Jewish people. Moshe begs Hashem to reconsider with the argument that if Hashem annihilated Bnei Yisroel then the Egyptians would say that Hashem took them out of Egypt with the intention of destroying them. Seemingly, Moshe is saying that it reflects poorly on Hashem to destroy Bnei Yisroel.

On the face of it, this argument seems nothing short of ludicrous. First of all, Hashem made such incredible miracles on behalf of the Jewish people – the ten plagues, the splitting of the Red Sea, and the delivery of food and water in the desert – where is the intent to destroy them? But even more compelling, Bnei Yisroel actually committed a capital offense by being unfaithful to Hashem. Clearly, Hashem is well within His right to utterly wipe them from the face of the earth.

In order to understand what Moshe is really saying we have to consider the state of Bnei Yisroel when they were about to leave Egypt. During the time that it took for the ten plagues to play out (close to a year) there was a dramatic shift in the status of the Jews in Egypt. In fact, Chazal teach us that a full eighty percent of the Jews didn't leave Egypt. During that year of plagues, the Egyptians had developed a whole new respect for the Jews who now had a powerful ally that was punishing the Egyptians for their misdeeds. Jews also began to accumulate wealth because they were impervious to the effect of the plagues. Furthermore, the Egyptians began to build friendships with members of Bnei Yisroel.

Consider for a moment an individual who has a guaranteed job with a generous salary and an employer that will guarantee his future. He enjoys the city he lives in and the friendships he has built over time. What do you think would happen if this person were to be offered a new job with a salary that is five times what he is currently earning but with two stipulations: 1) he has to move to a new city 2) the new job carries no guarantees – that is he can be fired "at will." Clearly, this individual would be crazy to leave his comfortable guaranteed first job and an environment he loves.

This was the situation Bnei Yisroel faced after the ten plagues. For all intents and purposes the Egyptians were accepting them as friends and doing business with them. This is why so many stayed behind. The only possible reason that Bnei Yisroel could rationalize leaving Egypt was that Hashem was promising them a guaranteed permanent relationship. Of course, the destination was mostly unknown to them, but their desire to enter into a permanent relationship with Hashem propelled the remaining twenty percent to leave Egypt and follow Hashem.

This is Moshe's argument, "Hashem, the reason Bnei Yisroel left Egypt is because of the guarantee of a permanent eternal connection. If you wipe them out, the Egyptians will laugh and say Hashem never intended to have a permanent relationship with them; the Jews were fooled!" By redeeming us from Egypt, Hashem guaranteed that we would survive as a nation – His nation. This is what Bnei Yisroel bought into when they decided to leave Egypt. Hashem agrees with Moshe's argument and the threat of annihilation is removed.

This is also what is said in the Haggadah; "In every generation someone rises up to annihilate the Jewish people – and every time Hashem saves us from their hands." This, perhaps, is the greatest miracle of all. Every empire that sought to destroy the Jewish people is long gone and mostly forgotten. Yet, the Jewish people not only survived, we have thrived and succeeded under the bleakest of circumstances. This is a testament to Hashem's promise of our continued existence because of our eternal relationship with Him.

The Man with the Golden Arm Who Saved Millions

By Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

Tara Delia/Australian Red Cross Blood Service

"Thank you for donating almost $7 million to our Boca Raton Synagogue community." Chaim didn't know what I was talking about when I called him to thank him. $7 million? He had made a generous contribution but only a fraction of that enormous amount. Why was I thanking him for something he didn't give?

Two months earlier, Chaim was visiting Boca Raton and made an appointment to meet with me. Before we began discussing the topic he had come to meet about, he casually asked me about the BRS campus expansion. "Why is there no energy or excitement, where is the publicity and active campaign?" I shared that we had been successful raising a significant amount but had hit a wall and encountered some challenges that were holding us back. "Why not do a matching campaign? Raise new money from matchers who give on condition that the local and global community respond generously and match it." I reflexively shot him down and told him we don't do those kinds of things, that will never work, it isn't for us. He made one more push, explaining why he thought it was a good idea, and we quickly pivoted to his topic.

For the rest of that day, I couldn't stop thinking about what he said. Maybe we could do a matching campaign. Maybe it would create an energy, buzz, community buy-in, and excitement. Surely it was worth a try. Fast forward less than two months and not only did we meet our goal of $6 million, we Baruch Hashem blew past it and are so grateful that people continue to give, as our work is not yet done.

Chaim had "randomly" come to Boca and "coincidentally" chose to meet when he spontaneously, "happened" to raise the idea of a matching campaign and the result was an influx of almost $7 million towards helping us build a center of Jewish life and learning from which to share Torah light and inspiration to the world. Had I not alerted Chaim, he would come upstairs after 120 and Hashem would say, yasher koach on raising almost $7 million for a community in Florida you don't even live in.

One person can make an enormous difference with the right word in the right moment and we never know which word and which moment.

Esther didn't want to go to Achashveirosh without being invited, she hesitated to reveal her true identity and wanted to continue to keep it a secret. Esther preferred the passive route, the spectator position. But thanks to Mordechai's encouragement and power of persuasion, she mustered the courage and conviction to enter without invitation, to speak despite the risk. The result was one woman saved an entire nation. The story of Megillas Esther and the power of Purim is the story and directive to go from passive to active, from bystander to bringing about redemption. Never underestimate your power to positively impact the world when you simply care enough to step up instead of sitting back.

In 1951, a 14-year-old Australian boy named James Harrison had major surgery to save his life, the removal of one of his lungs. He was alive, thanks in large part to a vast quantity of transfused blood he had received. He was hospitalized for three months but when he came out, he was determined to pay it forward by donating blood himself. The problem was Australia's laws required blood donors to be at least 18 years old. After turning 18, Harrison made good on his promise, and despite a fear of needles, he began to donate blood regularly.

At the time, doctors in Australia were struggling to figure out why thousands of births in the country were resulting in miscarriages, stillbirths or brain defects for the babies. In 1967, they discovered the babies were suffering from Haemolytic Disease of the Newborn, or HDN. The condition arises when a woman with an Rh negative blood type becomes pregnant with a baby who has Rh positive blood, and the incompatibility causes the mother's body to reject the fetus's red blood cells.

לע"נ
יוחנן בן יקותיאל יודא ע"ה
שרה משא בת ר' יעקב אליעזר ע"ה
ביילא בת (אריה) לייב ע"ה
אנא מלכה בת ישראל

Doctors in Australia discovered that a very rare antibody in blood called Anti-D could be used to make a lifesaving medication that when given to mothers whose blood is at risk of developing HDN would keep the baby safe. Researchers scoured blood banks to see whose blood might contain this antibody and found a donor in New South Wales named James Harrison. Scientists asked him to participate in an experimental Anti-D program that turned out to be effective in saving these babies.

For more than 60 years, Harrison donated blood every single week and his plasma was used to make millions of Anti-D injections. Every ampoule of Anti-d ever made in Australia has a piece of James in it. Because about 17% of pregnant women in Australia require the Anti-D injections, the Australian blood service estimates that Harrison has helped 2.4 million babies in the country.

After donating 1,100 times, at 81 years old, despite wanting to continue, James Harrison was forced to retire from donating blood. James Harrison, appropriately nicknamed "The man with the golden arm," passed away last month at the age of 88, one person who without exaggeration saved millions of lives.

Don't underestimate your ability to impact others. Chaim contributed millions of dollars to our community without even knowing it. James Harrison saved millions of babies in Australia. Queen Esther, with one act of sacrifice and courage, saved the Jewish people.

To the world, you may be one person, but to one person, you may be what saves their world.

Rav Kook Torah

Ki Tissa: Wisdom for the Wise

When appointing Betzalel and other craftsmen to construct the Tabernacle, God declared, "In the heart of all wise-hearted, I have placed wisdom" (Ex. 31:6).

Why should God give wisdom to the wise — it is the fools who need it!

A person who wishes to increase his physical strength will not achieve his goal by developing his intellectual powers. He needs to concentrate on building up his body, with physical exercise, healthy food, and proper sleep.

But the opposite can also be true. When we strengthen the body, we enable the mind to reach its full potential. This is nature's rule of "A healthy mind in a healthy body."

Beyond the objective of strengthening the intellect and broadening one's knowledge lies an even higher goal: the pursuit of ruach hakodesh (divine inspiration) and prophecy. The relationship between the body and the mind parallels the relationship between 'natural wisdom' (the arts and sciences) and 'divinely-emanated wisdom.' We may aspire to prophetic enlightenment, but we must first gain proficiency in the natural sciences.

Maimonides mentions this requisite intellectual preparation for prophecy in the Mishneh Torah, Yesodei HaTorah 7:1:

"Prophecy is only bestowed to a sage who is great in wisdom, of strong character... And he must possess an extremely expansive and accurate worldview."

We need to expand all of the mind's intellectual capabilities in order to fulfill the rule of "a healthy mind in a healthy body" on a spiritual level. Then an enriched prophetic inspiration will emerge within the broadened framework of a penetrating, enlightened mind.

(Gold from the Land of Israel, pp, 158-159. Adapted from Orot HaKodesh vol. I, pp. 66-67)

Siyum in memory of YOCHANAN BEN YEKUTIEL YEHUDA (JOCHANAN KLEIN) is ready to enroll.

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Megillat Esther: She'Asah Nissim La'Avoteinu

by Rabbi Yitzzhak Etshalom

I. WHERE IS GOD IN THE MEGILLAH?

Every year on Purim, Jews all over the world fulfill the Mitzvah of K'riat haMegillah – reading the complete Book of Esther from a proper scroll. Before beginning, the reader/leader recites three B'rakhot – the middle of which is Birkat haNes (the blessing recited at the commemoration of a miracle): Barukh…she'Asah Nissim la'Avoteinu baYamim haHeim baZ'man haZeh (Who performed miracles for our ancestors in those days at this time [of year]). Considering that, unlike the Exodus (and all other Biblical miracles), God's hand is nowhere to be found in the text of the story of Esther and Mordechai, we have to wonder which miracle is the focus of this thanksgiving to God? For which Nes are we praising God? (Parenthetically, the same question could be asked in reference to Hanukkah, where the most central "miracle" we celebrate is a military victory which did not, from the accounts we have, include any miraculous intervention in the conventional understanding of the word. To whatever extent this shiur answers the question vis-a-vis Purim, that answer should carry the same validity for the Hanukkah question. Significantly, Purim and Hanukkah are the two occasions when this B'rakhah is recited.)

A second question, certainly related to the first, focuses on one of the unique features of the Megillah. As is well known, Esther is the only book in T'nakh with absolutely no mention of God (by any Name). Much as the Midrash interprets some occurrences of "the king" in Esther (e.g. 6:1) as a reference to God, this is certainly not p'shat. Why is this story even included in the Biblical canon?

Before moving on, it is prudent to note that some approaches within Rabbinic literature see "hidden Nissim (miracles)" throughout our story; these are, however, not evident from the p'shat. In keeping with the general approach of this shiur, we will try to identify the Nes/Nissim within the text of the Megillah.

In order to provide satisfactory answers to these two questions, we will have to address two issues – the nature of a Nes and a new understanding of the story line in Megillat Esther.

II. NES L'HITNOSES

The root of Nes is N-S-S – which means "banner". See, for instance, the verse in T'hillim (60:6): "You have given those who fear You a Nes l'hitNoses – (a raised banner), to rally to it out of bowshot."

A miracle (i.e. deliberate suspension of the laws of physics in order to save the righteous individual or people) is a raising of the banner of God's Name in the world – hence the word Nes. (See also B'resheet 22:1 and see if this approach explains Avraham's "trial" – see also Midrash Rabbah ad loc.)

There is more than one way in which God's Name becomes glorified in this world. Besides an overt intervention, it is possible for human beings to make His Name manifest by demonstrating the most noble of traits. Keep in mind that we are all created in God's "Image" (whatever that may mean…conscience, free will etc.). When we demonstrate the most noble side of human existence and utilize those traits in the most productive manner possible, this is another (certainly more subtle) demonstration of God's power and glory. It is possible for a Nes to take place within the realm of human valor; although it should be stated that unless the people in question take the next step and utilize this experience to enhance their direct relationship with God, it may be that the whole enterprise would be considered a vain effort.

I would like to suggest that the two most noble human traits, each of which is a reflection of the Tzelem Elokim (Image of God) which sparks all of us, are Wisdom and Courage. I am not talking about wisdom or courage in the usual sense; rather about a special kind of wisdom, a unique type of courage and a special synthesis of the two. We will explore these two characteristics throughout the story and clarify how each was utilized in the most productive and positive manner to bring about the successful salvation of the Jews.

Instead of focusing on one or two passages in the Megillah, we're going to read through the whole story and point out the key "Nes-points" along the way. You'll need a copy of the text – all citations, unless otherwise noted, refer to chapters and verses within the Book of Esther.

As we read through, I will point out several other "layers" of the story – or, alternately, several other ways to read the story and the various messages embedded in the text. As usual, we will be reading the text alone; I will point out various Rabbinic interpolations and interpretations as needed for support and illustration.

III. CHAPTER 1

A) THE PARTY (1:1-1:8)

One other "layer" of the story is satiric; especially when viewed within the context of the rest of T'nakh (as will be explained later), the text

is a clear parody. Of what…we will see.

As the story opens, we meet our first player: Achashverosh. Although he is described as a powerful king, ruling over 127 provinces from Hodu (India?) to Kush (Ethiopia?) – we soon find that his power is more illusion than reality.

First of all, the party about which we read in the first chapter (1:3-8) seems to be his inauguration ball (see v. 2); yet it only takes place in the third year of his rule. This seems to indicate that the transfer of power into his hands was not so smooth. We will soon see that plots abound in and around his court and that his control over the realm is not very secure.

The description of the party brings three issues to the fore:

The many allusions to the Mishkan (Tabernacle) / Mikdash (Temple). Keep in mind that the Ba'al haMegillah (author) expects every reader to be familiar with T'nakh and will pick up any word-associations made here. Among the materials described here are several which are prominent in the Mishkan: T'khelet (royal blue), Argaman (purple), Kessef (silver) and Shesh (marble). Indeed, the Midrash posits that the vessels which Achashverosh used at this party were the vessels of the Mikdash – this interpretation was probably motivated by the many Mikdash-associations in the description of the party.
(Rav Menachem Liebtag has a fascinating shiur on exactly this point – with many more illustrations. You can find it at his Tanach Study Center Website: it comes highly recommended!)

Achashverosh seems to be very insecure – both personally and politically. He spares no expense to show off his wealth – and specifically invites the governors, ministers and soldiers of the Persian and Medean armies. It seems that he is trying to consolidate his power and bring the military into his good graces. At the end of his six-month party (!), he invites all the citizenry of Shushan to his gala bash. This insecurity will increase and become a prominent feature in the events of the Megillah.
The image of Achashverosh's kingdom, a monarchy governed by protocol. Note how often the word Dat – a Persian word meaning "custom" or "protocol – shows up in the Megillah: 20 times! (Save for one verse in Daniel, it doesn't appear in any other books of the T'nakh). This would seem to indicate that everything in Achashverosh's realm was done "properly" and that the system was orderly and just. We soon find that this kingdom of Dat is just as illusory as his power.

B) VASHTI (1:9-22)

Vashti is not, properly speaking, a "player" in this narrative. She is much more of a foil, presented as the set-up for the story to unfold. Even after she is gone (dead? exiled?), her shadow hangs over the palace – but more on that later.

The first indication that Achashverosh's power is a lot of fluff is when he decides to show off his beautiful queen (presumably to outshine the beauty of their wives) – and she refuses to come out! This great king, protector of the realm, defender of the empire, ruler of Persia, etc. etc. controls nothing! His own queen refuses him and is not obeisant to his wishes. (Although in modern times this would seem to prove nothing about his political power – in Persia of 2500 years ago, this "failing" was quite telling – as we see from the tone of the letters sent out at the end of the first chapter).

We soon learn something else about the king. For all of his power – he never makes any decisions (is he passive-aggressive?). As a matter of fact, he doesn't ever say "no" to any of his advisors! A strange king – a classic "yes-man" sitting on the throne.

We get some insight into how his advisors have learned to "play him". Memuchan (who the Gemara identifies as Haman) knows that if he advises the king to kill (or banish) Vashti on account of her defiance of the king – the drunk monarch may wake up on the morn and feel foolish and humiliated that he had to exile the queen for his own honor – and take out his anger on Memuchan. In order to get the king to "get rid" of Vashti, Memuchan appeals to Achashverosh's sense of justice. He is the defender of men's rights throughout the kingdom and must act decisively on behalf of all the poor princes and governors throughout the Empire whose wives will surely rebel, following Vashti's (unpunished) lead. By appealing to Achashverosh's sense of nobility, the wise advisor allows the king to do what he wants without feeling a sense of humiliation.

Two more notes about the first chapter. First of all, as the Gemara points out, this first set of letters (v. 22) seems to be quite foolish. The king sends out letters to every province, announcing that every man rules in his own house!!???! (According to the Gemara, this caused the second letters – announcing the "loosing" of Jewish blood – to be taken less seriously by the citizenry who already case a jaundiced eye on this king's pronouncements).

Second, as R. David Hentschke points out (Megadim vol. 23), the kings has to send these letters to each province in their own language (v. 22 – this phrasing shows up several times in the Megillah). As powerful as the king may be, he hasn't been successful in establishing Persian as the language of the realm; perhaps his rule is not so ironclad as it might seem (reminds us a bit of the USSR???).

IV. CHAPTER 2

A) A NEW QUEEN (2:1-4)

We are quickly reminded of Achashverosh's inability to decide anything for himself. It takes his servants to suggest finding a new queen by gathering all of the maidens to Shushan for a "tryout" with the king.

As any student of T'nakh remembers, such a call went out once before – when David was old and near death. As we read in the beginning of Melakhim (Kings), they searched for a young maiden throughout Yisra'el – and found Avishag haShunamit. Note the contrast – whereas the one girl was found (although many undoubtedly would have wanted to be chosen); here, all the girls have to be forcibly brought to Shushan (note the wording in v. 3). And why not…who would want follow Vashti?

There is another interesting allusion in v. 3: The phrase v'Yafked haMelekh P'kidim v'Yik'b'tzu reminds us of a nearly similar phrase used in the first "Jew in the foreign court" story. When Yosef successfully interprets Pharaoh's dreams, he advises that Pharaoh appoint officers to collect the wheat of the seven plentiful years – Ya'aseh Pharaoh v'Yafked P'kidim…v'Yik'b'tzu… (B'resheet 41:34-35). This allusion is not for naught; the Ba'al haMegillah is showing us how Achashverosh and his servants viewed these young girls – just like wheat to be collected and brought to the palace.

B) MORDECHAI AND ESTHER (2:5-20)

We are immediately introduced to our two heroes – Mordechai and Esther. It is critical to note that both of these names are not only Persian (and not Hebrew) – they are both pagan names related to various gods of the pantheon! The Esther-Ishtar-Astarte connection is well-documented (besides the fact that the Megillah explicitly gives her "real" name – Hadassah); our heroine is named for the goddess of fertility. The Gemara (BT Menahot 65) gives Mordechai a more "Jewish" name – Petah'ya – and, again, the Mordechai-Marduk (god of creation in many mythologies throughout the Near East) connection has been extensively written up.

Why do these two righteous people, through whom God saves His people, have such names?

[note: Jews taking – or being given – non-Jewish "alternate" names when in the foreign court is the norm in T'nakh. Note Yoseph, who is named "Tzoph'nat Pa'a'ne'ach" by Pharaoh; Daniel, who is named "Belt-Shatzar" by N'vuchadnetzar, as well as Daniel's three companions. Note that Jews were occasionally given names which were associated with pagan gods – compare Daniel 1:7 with 4:5. Mordechai and Esther seem to be two examples of the same phenomenon. Note that according to the Gemara (BT Megillah 13a), the name "Esther" was given to her by the non-Jews, in response to her beauty.]

Even more curious is Mordechai's insistence that Esther not reveal her identity (as a Jewess) while in the palace (v10, 20). As we shall soon see, even Mordechai's identity was not obvious; he was not distinguished in any external way from any other citizen.

There are a couple of verses which are telling within the scope of Esther's successful entrance into the palace.
(v. 16) – Esther was finally chosen in the seventh year of Achashverosh's reign – in other words, the selection of a queen took four years. (One very tired king! – See 2:12; even in his hedonistic behavior, he followed Dat!).

(v. 17-19) Compare the royal feast in honor of his queen (ironically – "in place of Vashti" – the dead (or exiled) queen's shadow hangs over the palace and Esther is likely aware that her fate may be no better than her predecessor's) with v. 19. As much as the king loves Esther – his servants are bringing more virgins into the palace! Insecure is the best description of anyone with a position of power in this court.

C) THE PLOT (2:21-23)

As we all know, this little paragraph is critical to the later success of our heroes. Note, however, that it is Achashverosh's own guards – who are charged with defending him – who are plotting against him. This kingdom is, indeed, unstable and always ready for a shake-up.

V. CHAPTER 3

A) ENTER HAMAN (3:1-7)

Suddenly – and very much out of the blue – Haman is elevated to a position of importance in the kingdom. This again demonstrates – despite the appearance of Dat – the helter-skelter way in which power and impotence, success and failure – even life and death – are handled most capriciously in the palace.

As much as we know about Achashverosh's terrible insecurity – we quickly learn about Haman's personal devil – his ego. Imagine that the king of the greatest empire on earth has just appointed a relative nobody (as it seems Haman was beforehand) to be grand vizier and that all citizens should pay him homage. Wouldn't he be too enthralled with the sudden attention and respect to care about one or two people who don't bow down? Not Haman – his ego just takes him right past all the knee-benders and focuses his attention on the one person who refuses to bow – Mordechai. As much as we would expect him to be happy with the new position – he is merely enraged (and seemingly obsessed with that rage) at Mordechai.

Note that it isn't obvious to Haman that Mordechai is Jewish – Haman has to find that out from someone else in order to figure out which

nation to destroy (as he wants to annihilate all of Mordechai's people. By the way, this paints Haman as much less of an ideological anti-Semite than we are used to thinking – but that belongs to another shiur.) Evidently, Mordechai's behavior – or, at least his dress and external demeanor – did not mark him as a Jew. Just like his niece, he seems to have been quite assimilated (see the Book of Ezra for more background on this phenomenon).

Now – Haman, the grand vizier of the kingdom of Dat, decides to wipe out an entire nation due to the slight to his ego. How does he decide when to do it? By lottery (Pur)! What a joke this Dat proves to be!

B) ACHASHVEROSH AND HAMAN (3:8-15)

There isn't a whole lot say here; the dialogue between these two speaks for itself. Although everything is done properly, the reader instinctively feels that a king who is willing to condemn a people without even finding out who they are (read 3:8-11 carefully) is not doing a good job of running his empire.

In order to keep an eye on the story, let's put together the chronology of events. The king's party (Vashti's farewell bash) took place in the third year of his reign. Esther was crowned – and Mordechai saved the king's life – in the seventh year. Haman had the letters (allowing the anti-Semites to kill the Jews) sent out on Nissan 13 in the twelfth year of the king's reign. In other words, Esther has been queen for a bit more than four years by this time – and her identity was still a total secret.

VI. CHAPTER 4

A) ESTHER AND MORDECHAI (4:1-17)

Mordechai finds out about this plot – and begins to demonstrate signs of "Teshuvah" (repentance). (Compare 4:1,3 with Yonah 3:5,6,8) He does not, however, do this in front of the palace gate, where he seems to retain his composure. He does, however, get the message in to Esther as to what is going on and he pleads with her to go to the king and have Haman's order overturned.

We are immediately reminded of how capricious this king really is. The beloved queen hasn't seen the king in thirty days (v. 11) (and probably wonders in whose arms he sleeps tonight) – and even she is subject to death if she comes to him unbeckoned unless he agrees to see her (shades of Vashti again)!

At this point, Mordechai sends the message which turns Esther around – and she begins to demonstrate not only her tremendous commitment and courage to her nation; but also an amazing type of wisdom – those very characteristics which reflect her Tzelem Elokim in the most powerful way.

For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this. (4:14)

Mordechai told her about the B'rit (covenant) between God and the B'nei Yisra'el. We are promised that we will outlive all of the Hamans – but that B'rit only applies to the nation as a whole, not to individuals or families. Esther – you may make it through this next upheaval – and you may not. In any case, the Jews will be saved, as God always has His ways of keeping the B'rit.

Esther realizes the wisdom and truth of this argument and acquiesces to Mordechai's plea. Now, she plans her strategy…let's take a peek behind the scenes. First, a few words about this remarkable type of wisdom.

It is natural to see everything in life through the eyes of our experience. This is why honest people often find it difficult to disbelieve others or question their motivations; they cannot recognize the lie in the other person's words because they have no such possibility inside of their own hearts. In the same way, kind people often ascribe positive motives to questionable behavior of others – because they could never recognize mean thoughts in others as they have no such thoughts in their own persona.

It takes a tremendous type of wisdom to separate yourself from what you instinctively feel and how you usually view the world and to see it from the other person's perspective. While this may be easy in a sympathetic conversation (although not nearly as easy as it seems); it is most difficult when deciding how to fight an enemy. The trick is to learn how to think like the enemy – without becoming the enemy.

This was perhaps the greatest miracle of Hanukkah – that the Maccabees were able to think like Greeks (it certainly took great strategy to outfox that mighty army with a small band) – without becoming Greeks (well, not for a couple of generations at least).

In the same way, we will see how Esther manipulates Achashverosh and Haman into a fateful (and, for Haman, fatal) collision course – simply by playing them according to their own personalities and weaknesses.

VII. CHAPTER 5

A) ESTHER AND ACHASHVEROSH (5:1-5)

Let's keep in mind that Esther is risking her life to come into Achashverosh's throne room – and she knows that the king knows this. In other words, she is aware that Achashverosh will consider her request to be very important – important enough to risk her life. We would think that when the king favors her and agrees to grant nearly any request – "even until half the kingdom" – that she would seize this opportunity and ask for salvation and for Haman's orders to be rescinded.

Instead, she invites Achashverosh and Haman to a special party she has prepared for that very evening. Why didn't she ask for salvation at this point?

Esther understood a great deal about politics. Remember – she hasn't seen the king for thirty days. Even if she is still his favorite – she is still not on the "inside" right now. Haman, on the other hand, has just had a drinking party with the king (3 days earlier), celebrating their letters sent out to kill the Jews. If she were to accuse Haman, the king might not believe her and the whole effort would be lost.

She invites the two of them to a party. As disgusting as the prospect sounds, it is the first step in a brilliant plan of psychological warfare.

Let's consider how each of them would react to this invitation:

Haman, as the consummate egotist, has his ego blown up even bigger than before (as we will soon see). He alone is invited to sup with the king and queen!

Achashverosh, on the other hand, must be suspicious. There has already been (at least) one plot on his life – now, Esther risked her life just to invite him and Haman to a party? Is something going on between the two of them (more on this later)? Are they plotting against me?

B) THE FIRST PARTY (5:6-8)

At this party, the king expects to find out what Esther really has on her mind – maybe his suspicions were for naught? Instead, she surprises him by asking him to return – with Haman – for another party the next night!

Following the psychological makeup of our two party guests – each of the states of mind described above became exacerbated.

Esther knew that Haman's ego would continue to grow – and she also knew that he would leave the palace via the gate – and see Mordechai sitting there. Just feed his ego – and he will self-destruct.

C) HAMAN AT HOME (9-14)

Indeed, Haman becomes so enraged when he sees Mordechai that, after a short bragging session with his family, he runs back to the palace to ask Achashverosh to allow him to hang Mordechai immediately. He cannot wait eleven months to kill his arch-nemesis – he needs satisfaction right away (ah, the impetuous egotist.)

VIII. CHAPTER 6

A) HAMAN AND ACHASHVEROSH (6:1-10)

Why couldn't the king sleep? The Gemara provides the obvious answer – he had thoughts of plot and coup on his worried mind. Why did he call for his chronicles to be read? It seems that this powerful king, ruler over 127 provinces – had no friends. There was no one he could trust or turn to. Esther had planted a terrible bug in his mind – two parties in a row with Haman – what are the two of them planning to do? Indeed – what have they already done?

Just as the king discovers that he owes Mordechai a favor from over four years ago – and decides that the way to gain the allegiance of the citizenry is to publicly demonstrate the rewards of loyalty to the crown – Haman turns up in the outer courtyard of the palace. The king had to wonder what Haman was doing there so late at night (!?!) The king summoned Haman for some advice – and for a chance to take him down a peg or two. Now, the king demonstrates some acumen of his own.

In 6:6, the king asks Haman what to do for someone he really favors. Haman, that old egotist, is so caught up in his own power, that he describes a truly regal parade which he assumes will feature him as the honoree. How very surprised he is when the king orders him to take the self-same Mordechai and lead him on the king's horse.

(Note that the phrase to be called out while leading this honoree: Kakhah ye'Aseh la'Ish Asher… shows up in one other place in T'nakh. This is the beginning of the formula of Halitza – the refusal of Levirate marriage, which accompanies the woman's disdainful spit. [D'var[D'varim 25:9]ur own conclusions about the satiric effect accomplished by the Ba'al haMegillah).

B) HAMAN AND MORDECHAI (6:11-14)

Haman returns to his house “in mourning”. The Rabbis have a lot to say about the events of this morning – but, even on a p’shat level, it is clear that Haman’s fortunes have taken a significant turn for the worse. He is quickly rushed to the second party – and, in his case, his own farewell.

IX. CHAPTER 7

A) THE SECOND PARTY (7:1-9)

This is the denouement of the story as far as we are concerned. Haman still doesn’t know who Esther is – but he is clearly shattered and his ego is as fragile as ever. Achashverosh is equally disturbed and must be getting more confused by Esther’s repeated parties without asking for what she really wants (it is clear that the king knows she wants something more – which is why he keeps asking her).

Now, she pulls out all the cards. The king thinks that she and Haman are hatching a plot against him (and have been having an affair?) – and suddenly Haman is revealed as the villain who is plotting against her. Haman thinks that he is still on the road to satisfaction in the matter of the Jews; he’ll just need to wait until Adar. He has no idea that Esther is one of “them”.

Esther points to Haman and all is lost. The confusion and anger of the king, the confusion and fear of Haman – create an emotional jumble which ultimately leads to the king’s explosion when he finds Haman lying on Esther’s divan, begging for mercy. Haman is erased and (here we go again) Mordechai takes his place (compare 8:2 with 3:10). The capricious king has (for the meantime) elevated the Jews and they are saved. We all know, however, that the happy ending of the story isn’t permanent and that the rocky shores of existence in exile (which is probably one of the sub-messages of the Megillah) are not safe for Jews.

X. POSTSCRIPT

We have taken a cursory look at some of the events as described in the Megillah and found that Esther displayed extraordinary wisdom and courage in her successful effort to save her people. We are very right to regard this as a Nes as it is a reflection of God’s Image as found within our heroine. God’s Name is not found – because, unlike Pesach, this is not a story about the suspension of the laws of nature. It is, rather, a story about human strength and nobility used in the most positive and productive effort imaginable – the salvation of Am Yisra’el. (That and a really great satire of the Persian Kingdom)

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MEGILLAT ESTHER, ITS 'HIDDEN' MESSAGE

Is the Megilla a satire? It certainly contains many strange details that beg interpretation. But if so, why would a satire be included in the Tanach. In the following shiur, we attempt to 'unmask' Megillat Esther by considering its historical and prophetic setting.

INTRODUCTION

We begin our study with one of the most well known psukim of the Megilla:

> "Ish **yehudi** haya be-Shushan ha-**bira** - u-shmo **Mordechai**" (see Esther 2:5).

Even though this pasuk is proudly read aloud by the entire congregation, most people do not appreciate its prophetic 'sting'. However, an ear tuned to the prophecies of Zecharya and familiar with Tanach immediately catches its irony, as:

ish yehudi - implies more than simply someone who is Jewish;
ha-bira - implies more than just 'the capital city'; and
Mordechai - is not a Jewish name!

* The phrase **ish yehudi** is mentioned only one other time in the entire Tanach - in Sefer Zecharya 8:23. There it describes a devout Jew in the city of Jerusalem - leading a group of non-Jewish followers in search of God.

* the word **ha-bira** in Divrei Ha-yamim (see 29:1 & 29:19) is used by King David to describe specifically the bet ha-mikdash (the Temple). Prior to the time period of Megillat Esther, the Hebrew word bira finds no other mention in Tanach.

* The name **Mordechai** is probably the most provocative word in the entire Megilla for it stems from the name of the Babylonian deity -Marduk (see II Kings 25:27 & Yeshayahu 39:1!). Prior to the Babylonian exile, no one would have dared give his son such a 'goyish' name.

[This does not imply that Mordechai was assimilated, rather his name may reflect the assimilation of his generation.]

And this may be only one of many psukim of the Megilla that are filled with irony and possibly satire. Yet, if this conclusion is correct, we must explain why the Megilla would employ satire to deliver its prophetic message. Furthermore, we must also determine more precisely what that prophetic message is, and how it relates to our celebration of Purim.

To answer these questions, our shiur will take the following steps:

I. Base our above assumption that the Megilla should contain a prophetic message, related to its historical setting.
II. Review both the historical and prophetic setting of the time period of the Megilla.
III Search for a thematic connection between this setting and the story in the Megilla, and support it with both textual and thematic parallels from other books in Tanach.
IV. Explain why the Megilla employs this unique style.
V. Explain how the celebration of Purim, as defined in the Megilla, relates to this theme.

PART I - 'HESTER PANIM'

As every book of the Tanach contains a prophetic message, Megillat Esther should be no different. It is commonly understood that the Megilla teaches us how to see the 'hidden hand' of God behind the events that ultimately lead to Bnei Yisrael's salvation from Haman. Some even suggest that the Megilla's use of the name Esther (from the Hebrew verb 'lehastir' - to hide) instead of her real name - Hadassa (see 2:7) teaches us this very lesson.

However, if the Megilla wants to show us how God saved His people, why isn't this message explicit? Furthermore, why isn't God's Name ever mentioned? Most every other sefer in Tanach expresses this point explicitly. Why is Megillat Esther different?

Furthermore, most all other seforim in Tanach explain not only how God saves Am Yisrael, but also why they are being punished. This theme of divine retribution is explicit in the Torah in the tochachot (Vayikra 26:3-46, Devarim 11:13-17, 28:1-69, etc.) and reiterated over and over again by all of the prophets. In fact Chazal's explanation of the name Esther reflects this very same concept:

> "Esther min ha-Torah minayin?"
> [What is the source in Torah for the story of Esther?]
> "ve-Anochi haster aster panai ba-yom ha-hu"
> [I will surely hide my face from you on that day.]
> (Devarim 31:18 / See Chullin 139b).

However, if we take a closer look at that pasuk in Devarim, we find that its message is significantly different. Rather than explaining how God 'saves' Am Yisrael in a 'hidden manner', it explains how God 'punishes' them:

> "And God told Moshe, after you die... this nation will leave Me and break My covenant...And My anger will be kindled against them on that day and I will forsake them, ["ve-histarti panai"] and I will hide My face from them... and many evils and troubles shall befall them - & they will say on that day, these evils are because God is not among us.
> - Ve-anochi haster astir panai ba-yom ha-hu -
> and I will hide My face from them on that day because of all the bad that they have done... [Therefore,]
> - Write down this song and teach it to Bnei Yisrael, so that it will be My witness..." (see Devarim 31:16-18).

In these psukim, God warns Bnei Yisrael that should they betray His covenant, great evil will befall them. Even though it may appear to Bnei Yisrael that God has left them, these psukim teach them that God only appears to be 'hiding His face' ['hester panim"] from them. Nonetheless, Bnei Yisrael are expected to realize that their punishment is from God. Therefore, Moshe is to teach Bnei Yisrael Shirat Ha'azinu in order that they recognize this. The shira will teach Am Yisrael to contemplate their predicament and relate their punishment to their wayward behavior. To verify this point, simply read Shirat Ha'azinu [note especially 31:19-20.]

Above all, Shirat Ha'azinu explains how we are to determine why we are being punished. In that song, we are told:

> "Zechor yemot olam, binu shnot dor va-dor..." (Devarim 32:7).
> [Remember the days of old; consider the years of ages past.]

The shira teaches us to contemplate our history, especially how and why we were chosen (see 32:8-9), in order to realize why we are being punished. It reminds us that when something does go wrong, it is our fault, not God's (see 32:4-6!).

Even though God may hide His face, Shirat Ha'azinu does promise that God will ultimately redeem His people, however, not necessarily because they deserve redemption. Rather, God will have mercy on our pitiful predicament (see 32:26-27, also 32:37-38) and save us at the 'last minute'.

Most all of the prophets deliver a very similar message. They explain to Bnei Yisrael what they have done wrong, and hence why they are being punished. Prophecy teaches man not only to thank God for salvation, but also to recognize his faults and correct his mistakes.

Therefore, the Megilla should be no different, and especially because its name alludes to the pasuk in Chumash that commands us to search for a reason why we are punished.

[This supports the Gemara's question in Masechet Megilla 12a (middle) "sha'alu talmidav et Rashb"i: mipnei ma nitchayvu..."]

Even though the Megilla does not provide an explicit reason for this impending punishment, this background and its name suggest that we search for a 'hidden' (or implicit) one. To find that reason, we must consider prophetic and historical setting of that time period.

PART II - HISTORICAL AND PROPHETIC SETTING

The opening psukim of the Megilla immediately point us to its time period (see 1:1-3). Achashverosh is a Persian king who reigns from India to Ethiopia in the city of Shushan. Considering that Cyrus (=Koresh) was the first Persian king, the story in Megillat Esther takes place during the Persian time period and thus after the time period when the Jews had an opportunity to return to Jerusalem.

Even though there is a controversy concerning precisely which Persian King Achashverosh was, he most certainly reigned after Koresh (the first Persian king), and thus, after Yirmiyahu's seventy years were over.

[Note: If you are not familiar with this time period, it is highly recommended that you review Kings II 23:31-25:12, Ezra 1:1-10 and 3:1-4:7, and Yirmiyahu 29:1-15. As you read Ezra 1:1-9, note how the Jews who did not make 'aliya' were encouraged to send 'money' instead! Seems like not much has changed in 2500 years!]

For those of you unfamiliar with this time period, here is a quick overview:

In the first year of his reign, Koresh issued his famous proclamation allowing and encouraging all of the Jews of the Persian Empire to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. The prophets clearly understood this historic decree as the fulfillment of Yirmiyahu's prophecy (see Ezra 1:1-9, II Divrei Ha-yamim 36:20-23). As God had promised, the time of redemption from the Babylonian Exile had come.

YIRMIYAHU'S SEVENTY YEARS

To appreciate the prophetic importance of this opportunity, we need only quote Yirmiyahu's final message to the Babylonian Exile in regard to what was 'supposed' to happen when these seventy years were over:

"Thus said the Lord, when the 70 years are complete, I shall remember you and keep my promise to return you to this land.... [At that time.] you shall call out to Me - you shall come and pray to Me - and I will hear you...and you will ask for Me and find Me; if you will search for me with all your heart. Then I will be there for you, and I shall turn away your captivity and gather you from all the nations wherein you may be dispersed... and I will return you to the land from which you were exiled ..." (29:10-14).

According to Yirmiyahu, the return of the Exile would not be automatic. Rather, it was God's hope that their return would be catalyzed by sincere repentance and a yearning to return. In other words, God intended for the Babylonian Exile [as the word 'exile' implies] to be temporary. People don't stay in 'exile' unless they are forced to be there. Exile implies that one cannot return to his own land. [Otherwise the translation of 'galut' would be 'diaspora' instead of 'exile' / hey, not a bad idea!]

Note as well how Yirmiyahu's message is congruent with a primary theme of Chumash, i.e. God's desire for the Jewish people to become His 'model' nation - a vehicle through which all nations will come to recognize God (see Devarim 4:5-8 & Shmot 19:4-6). Recall as well that in that ideal setting, the bet ha-mikdash in Yerushalayim was to serve as a symbol of this national purpose.

[See previous shiurim on Parshiot Re'eh, Noach, and Vayetze. Recall that the mikdash is referred to as: "ha-makom asher yivchar Hashem le-shaken **shmo** sham"/ see Devarim 12:5-14.]

God's decision to destroy that Temple and exile his people was for a rehabilitative purpose. According to Yirmiyahu, God's hope was for the Exile to 'learn its lesson' during these seventy years in Bavel. Afterward, God hoped that the nation would be spiritually ready and anxious to return to their homeland, and to reconstruct their symbolic shrine - the Temple in Jerusalem.

Precisely as Yirmiyahu had predicted (seventy years after Bavel had risen to power), the opportunity to return arose when the Babylonian empire fell to Koresh (= Cyrus the Great), the first king of the Persian Empire (see Yirmiyahu 25:11-12, Ezra 1:1).

A MISSED OPPORTUNITY

Unfortunately, the response of the Exile to this historic opportunity was less than enthusiastic. A group of some forty thousand did return; however, the majority of Am Yisrael remained in Bavel. For an insight into the tragedy of the missed opportunity we need only quote the explanation given by Rav Yehuda Ha-Levi in Sefer Ha-Kuzari (II.24):

"Had the entire nation enthusiastically answered the divine call to return to the Land, the idyllic prophecies of the return to Zion would have been fulfilled and the Shchina would have returned. In reality, however, only a small portion returned. The majority remained in Bavel, willfully accepting the exile, as they did not wish to leave their homes & businesses etc." (sounds familiar...)

Even those who did return lacked enthusiasm. The apathy of the returnees is echoed in the prophecies of Chagai and Zecharya, the prophets of this time period (see Chagai 1:1-3; 2:3 see also Zecharya 4:10; 6:15; 7:4-7; 8:6.

. How does all of this relate to Megillat Esther?

How could it not relate!

Could the fact that Am Yisrael remained scattered among the 127 provinces of the Persian Empire, while they could have returned a generation or two earlier to Jerusalem, not relate to the prophetic message of the Megilla?

Considering that Yirmiyahu's seventy years are over, why are so many Jews living in Shushan and all over the Persian empire during the time period of Achashverosh?

Could not this fact alone supply sufficient reason for God to consider Am Yisrael negligent of their covenantal responsibilities?

With this in mind, we must now take a second look at the Megilla in search of at least a 'hint' of this theme.

PART III - THE THEME OF THE MEGILLA AND ITS SATIRE

Based on this historic and prophetic setting, one could suspect that the impending destruction of Am Yisrael by Haman may be a Divine punishment for their apathy. After all, the Jews living in the Persian empire appear to have:

* preferred Shushan over Yerushalayim;
* opted to subjugate themselves to Achashverosh rather than respond to God's call to return to their land;
* Replaced the bet ha-mikdash with the palace of Achashverosh! ["ve-nahafoch hu"]

Even though this prophetic message is not explicit in the Megilla, we will now show how it may be hidden in its satire.

[Note: Before we continue, it is important to clarify a problematic issue. We are about to relate many elements in the story of the Megilla to a satiric commentary on Persian Jewry. This does not mean that these events did not actually occur. The story of the Megilla is true and based on historic facts. However, its prophetic message is conveyed through the use of literary tools, such as satire and irony. Often, criticism is more poignant when delivered implicitly rather than explicitly. (Lehavdil, take for example George Orwell's criticism of the Russian revolution in 'Animal Farm'.)]

TEXTUAL AND THEMATIC SUPPORT

For a start, we will bring two examples where there appears to be an 'echo' of God's voice behind certain statements in the Megilla.

For example, the story of Vashti may reflect God's utter disappointment with Am Yisrael for not returning to Israel to fulfill their divine purpose, to become God's 'model' nation:

"[Vashti was called to] come to the king and show all the nations her beauty... but she did not come as the King commanded, and he became very angry..." (see Esther 1:9-12).

Is not Vashti's behavior similar to that of Am Yisrael? Is not the King's conclusion similar to God's? Is not the fear that all the women in the Persian kingdom will now disobey their husbands ironic? If Am Yisrael (destined to be an 'or la-goyim') does not respond to its divine call, what could God expect from other nations?

[Note that in earlier prophecy, Am Yisrael is often compared to God's wife - see Hoshea 2:4,16-18. See also Zecharya 1:1-3, note 'shuvu eilai...' and 'va-yiktzof', compare 1:12.]

Furthermore, who is the real king in the Megilla? Chazal raise the possibility that the word 'ha-melech' [the King] in the Megilla may be 'kodesh', as it often [in a hidden manner] may be referring to God and not to Achashverosh.

Even Haman's petition to Achashverosh to destroy Am Yisrael may echo a similar complaint that God may have against His own nation:

> "There is a certain nation scattered among the nations whose laws are different than any other nation, but the laws of the King they do not keep, and it is not worthwhile for the King to leave them be" (3:8).

In a certain way, Haman's accusation is similar to God's threat in Shirat Ha'azinu to destroy am Yisrael for not keeping His laws (32:26). After all, what purpose is there for God to keep His people if they refuse to obey Him and fulfill their divine goal?

Even though these first two examples may appear a bit 'stretched', a more convincing textual proof is found in the parallel between Achashverosh's palace and the bet mikdash. This parallel is significant for it reflects the fact the Bnei Yisrael had neglected the bet ha-mikdash in Yerushalayim, preferring instead to be dependent on the palace of Achashverosh. We begin by comparing the overall structure of each:

KODESH KODASHIM - CHATZER PNIMIT

The Megilla refers to the most inner chamber of the king's palace as the 'chatzer ha-pnimit' (5:1), where entry to anyone is forbidden under threat of death - unless called to enter (as Esther feared in 4:11). Here we find an obvious parallel to the kodesh ha-kodashim in the mikdash (Purim - kippurim!).

KODESH - CHATZER CHITZONA

The 'waiting area' outside the inner chamber is called the 'chatzer ha-chitzona' (6:4). Here 'ro'ei pnei ha-melech' (1:14) like Haman himself are allowed to enter freely. This is parallel to the kodesh where kohanim are permitted to enter.

> [See description of the Temple in Yechezkel 40:18-19.]

AZARA - SHA'AR BET HA-MELECH

In front of the palace is 'sha'ar bet ha-melech' where people like Mordechai are permitted to stand (2:18,21). However, here one must dress properly ('aveilut' is not permitted), therefore he cannot be there dressed in sackcloth (see 4:2!). This area is parallel to the azara in the mikdash.

YERUSHALAYIM - REHOV HA-IR SHUSHAN

This is the area 'lifnei sha'ar ha-melech' (4:2) or 'rechov ha-ir' (4:6) where Mordechai can dress in sackcloth. This is parallel to the city of Yerushalayim surrounding the mikdash.

This parallel is strengthened by the Megilla's use of the word bira to describe Shushan. As we explained in our introduction, in Divrei Ha-yamim, the only other time in Tanach prior to Megillat Esther where this word is mentioned, bira describes specifically the bet ha-mikdash, and in the context of its purpose to serve as a national center and symbol of God's Name. [See DH I 29:1 & 19, you should read from 29:1-25 to see the context. (You'll find there a familiar passage from davening, which maybe you will now understand a little better.)]

> [See also Masechet Middot I:9, where the Mishna refers to the bet ha-mikdash as the bira.]

Other parallels to mikdash are found in the use of key words such as 'yekar ve-tif'eret' (1:4); 'tekhelet, butz, ve-argaman' (1:6) in the Megilla's description of the king's party.

> [Based on these psukim, the gemara (Megilla 12a) claims that Achashverosh donned the 'bigdei kohen gadol' at his party!]

Even the 6-month party followed by a seven-day special celebration may parallel the six months that it took to build the mishkan (from Yom Kippur till Rosh Chodesh Nissan) followed by the seven-day 'milu'im' ceremony. Likewise, Chazal explain, 've-keilim mi-keilim shonim' (1:7) as referring to the vessels of the bet ha-mikdash.

Chazal even suggest that Haman's decree may have been Am Yisrael's punishment for drinking from these keilim or alternately for their participation in and enjoyment of the royal party (see Megilla 12a).

> [Note that according to pshat, the keilim had returned with Sheshbatzar during the time of Koresh (see Ezra 1:7-8). However, the Midrash emphasizes the thematic connection between the party and Bnei Yisrael's lack of enthusiasm to build the mikdash.]

Hence we can conclude that the Megilla's satire suggests that during this time period Am Yisrael had replaced:

* God with Achashverosh;
* God's Temple with Achashverosh's palace; and
* Yerushalayim ha-bira with Shushan ha-bira! ['ve-nahafoch hu']

70 DAYS / 70 YEARS

Another seemingly unimportant detail in the Megilla concerning when the two decrees were sent might also allude to this prophetic backdrop.

Recall that the original decree calling for the destruction of the Jews was sent out on the 13th day of Nisan (3:12). Several days later Haman was hanged and Esther pleaded from the king to repeal this decree (8:3-6). Achashverosh agreed; however, the actual letters were not sent out until the 23rd of Sivan - some two months later (8:9)! What took so long?

By carefully comparing these two dates, we again find an amazing reminder of Yirmiyahu's prophecy of the seventy years. Between the 13th of Nisan until the 23rd of Sivan - 70 days elapsed (17+30+23). During these seventy days, all of the Jews throughout the Persian empire were under the tremendous peril of impending destruction, thinking that their doom was inevitable. Could this be an ironic reminder to the Jewish people that they had not heeded Yirmiyahu's prophecy of what he expected from Bnei Yisrael once the seventy years had expired (see 29:10-14!)?

A similar concept of suffering for a sin, a day for a year (and vice versa), is found twice in Tanach in related circumstances. After the sin of the 'meraglim', the forty days are replaced by the punishment of forty years of wandering. Here, too, the nation opted not to fulfill their divine destiny, preferring a return to Egypt to the conquest of Eretz Yisrael. Yechezkel, too, is required to suffer 'a day for each year.'

> [For 390 days followed by an additional 40 days, he must lie on his side and repent for the sins of Israel and Yehuda that led to the destruction of Yerushalayim (Yechezkel 4:1-14!)].

A similar claim is made by the Midrash which suggests that Achashverosh threw his 180 day party in celebration of the fact that Yirmiyahu's seventy years were over and the bet ha-mikdash was not rebuilt. In pshat, this explanation is unreasonable. Why should the most powerful king of civilization worry about the prophecies of Yirmiyahu, while the Jews themselves do not listen to him? However, on the level of drash, this explanation is enlightening. Chazal, in the spirit of the Megilla - 've-nahafoch hu' - put into Achashverosh's mind what should have been in the mind of Am Yisrael, i.e. the fulfillment of Yirmiyahu's prophecy of seventy years and the desire to return.

PESACH AND PURIM

Based on our understanding thus far, it is also understandable why Israel's salvation from Haman's decree comes only after Am Yisrael collectively accept a three day fast. This fast takes place on the 15,16, & 17th of Nisan. Interestingly enough, the events that led to the repeal of Haman's decree take place 'davka' during the holiday of Pesach - the holiday on which we celebrate our freedom from subjugation to a foreign nation and the beginning of our journey to the Promised Land.

PART IV - WHY SATIRE?

We have shown that the Megilla is laced with allusions to the fact that Am Yisrael does not answer its divine call during the Persian time period. But the question remains, why is this message only hinted at but not explicitly stated by Chazal? Most probably for the same reason that it is not explicit in the Megilla.

This is the power of satire. In order to strengthen the message, a powerful point is not explicitly stated, but only alluded to. The direct approach used by the other 48 nevi'im of Tanach had not been very successful.

[See Masechet Megilla 14a (top) - "gedola hasarat ha-taba'at shel Haman yoter mi-48 nevi'im..."!]

One could suggest that Anshei Knesset Ha-gdola, in their decision to write (see Bava Batra 15a] (and later canonize) Megillat Esther, had hoped that a satirical message would be more powerful than a direct one. Hence, Midrashim of Chazal that comment on the Megilla may follow a similar approach.
[Note how the prophet Natan's message to David ha-melech in regard to his sin with Bat-sheva was much more powerful because he used the 'mashal' of kivsat ha-rash" (see II Shmuel 12:1-7!).]

PART V - THE MINHAGIM OF PURIM

Up until this point we have explained how the satire in the Megilla may reflect a prophetic censure of Am Yisrael in Bavel for not returning to Yerushalayim when the opportunity arose during the time of Koresh. However, if our assumptions are indeed correct, then we would expect the outcome of the Megilla, or at least the celebration of Purim for future generations to reflect this theme.

Instead, we don't find any 'mass aliya' movement after our salvation. Nor does the celebration of Purim (with 'mishteh' and sending 'mishloach manot') appear to reflect this theme in any manner.

However, with a 'little help' from the prophecies of Zecharya, we can suggest an answer for these questions as well. To do so, we must first identify who the specific Persian King Achashverosh was.

SOME MORE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The topic of the history of the Persian time period is very complicated and the subject of a major controversy between most Midrashei Chazal and the historians (& a minority opinion in Chazal). To explain this controversy is beyond the scope of this shiur, instead we will simply present the two conflicting opinions concerning when Achashverosh reigned.

According to Seder Olam (and hence the majority opinion in Chazal), Achashverosh was the Persian King immediately after Koresh, but before Daryavesh, and thus the story of the Megilla takes place after 'shivat tzion' (the return to Zion during the time of Koresh) but before the second bet ha-mikdash is actually built.

According to this opinion, the events of the Megilla had a tremendous affect on the situation in Yerushalayim. Only two years after the story of Megilla, King Darius, son of Esther gives the Jews permission to return and build the Second Temple. Construction began during the second year of Darius (= Daryavesh).

The events of the Megilla also appear to have catalyzed a major aliya movement. According to Chazal, Ezra's aliya from Bavel took place only a few years afterward, during the seventh year of his reign of Daryavesh (who Chazal identify with Artachshasta / see Ezra 7:1-9).

Thus, according to Seder Olam's opinion, the events of the Megilla indeed had a major effect on the rebuilding of the Temple and shivat tzion - the return to Zion.

According to most historians (and a minority opinion in Chazal / see Tirgum ha-shiv'im & Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer chapter 49), Achashverosh was the Persian king who succeeded Darius (486 - 465 BCE), and thus the story of the Megilla takes place some forty years after the second Temple was built, and thus after Chagai & Zecharya's plea to return and fulfill the potential of Bayit Sheni. [Its construction began in 521 BCE / in the second year of Darius the Great; hence the story in the Megilla takes place in 474 BCE.]

According to this opinion, no major event takes place immediately after the events in the Megilla. In fact, over two decades pass before a new wave of olim come with Ezra and Nechemya to help strengthen the city of Yerushalayim. [The historians identify Artachshasta with Artexerxes, not the same king as Darius.]

If our assumption concerning the satire of the Megilla is correct, why don't we find a mass aliya movement immediately after the miracle of Purim. [Jews of the twentieth century could ask themselves a similar question!]

Furthermore, according to either opinion, shouldn't the manner by which we celebrate Purim relate to this theme and satire?

Finally, why is it necessary to celebrate Purim for all generations? Purim is not the only time in our history when Bnei Yisrael are saved from terrible enemies. Chazal go even one step further. They claim that Purim will be the only holiday kept at the time of the final redemption! (See Rambam Hilchot Megilla, Esther 9:28 and commentaries).

THE MEGILLA AND SEFER ZECHARYA

If we follow the opinion of the 'historians' in regard to the time period of Megillat Esther, then the prophecies of Zecharya concerning the potential of Bayit Sheni precede the story in the Megilla. If so, then we posit that numerous textual parallels between the Megilla and Sefer Zecharya are intentional. In other words, when 'anshei knesset ha-gedola' wrote Megillat Esther (most likely during the time period of Ezra / see Bava Batra 15a), they assumed that anyone reading the Megilla was familiar with Sefer Zecharya, and hence would understand the implicit meaning of these parallels.

We will now show how the Megilla may suggest that Am Yisrael's predicament during the time period of Achashverosh was caused because of Zecharya's prophecies (a generation earlier) were not taken seriously! To appreciate this message, we must study Zecharya chapters 7->8.

For a background, review the first six chapters of Sefer Zecharya, noting how they focus on one primary theme - the return of the Shchina to Yerushalayim. However, Zecharya warns numerous times that the Shchina's return will be a function of Am Yisrael's covenantal commitment (see 6:15). Redemption is indeed possible; however, Zecharya insists that the 'spiritual' return of Am Yisrael was no less important than their physical return:

"Shuvu eilai.. ve-ashuva aleichem" (1:3, see also 8:7-8).

[It is highly suggested that you read at least the first two chapters of Zecharya (note 'hadassim' and 'ish rochev al sus' in chapter 1, and 'prazot teshev Yerushalayim' in chapter 2) and then chapters 7-8 before continuing.]

SHOULD WE FAST ON TISHA BE-AV?

According to Chagai 2:18, construction of the Temple began on this same year, i.e. during the second year of Daryavesh. Zecharya chapter seven opens two years later when an official delegation from Bavel arrives in Jerusalem to ask Zecharya a very fundamental question:

"Ha-evkeh be-chodesh ha-chamishi?" Should we continue to fast in the 5th month (i.e. the fast of Tisha Be-av)? (see 7:3)

The question appears to be quite legitimate. After all, now that the Temple is rebuilt, there no longer appears to be a need to fast. However, Zecharya's lengthy and official reply (7:4-8:23) to this question contains an eternal message that relates to the very nature of the ideal redemption process.

In Zecharya 7:4-7, God appears to be quite disturbed by the people's question regarding the need to fast. Instead of showing their interest in the greater picture of the redemption process, the people seem only to be interested in whether or not they have to fast. In the eyes of the prophet, their question reflected a general attitude problem in regard to the entire redemption process.

God's answer implies that the fast of Tisha Be-av is not a divine commandment - rather it was a 'minhag' instituted by Chazal to remember not only the Temple's destruction, but also the reason why the churban took place (see 7:5-6). Thus, God explains, feasting or fasting is man's decision, while God is interested in

something much more basic - that Bnei Yisrael keep the mitzvot which they had neglected during the first Temple period (see 7:5-14).

Zecharya continues his answer with two chapters of 'musar' (rebuke) in which he emphasizes the most basic mitzvot that Bnei Yisrael must keep in order for the Shchina to return:

"EMET u-mishpat shalom shiftu be-sha'areichem, ve-chesed ve-rachamim asu ish et achiv. Almana, ve-yatom ve-ani al ta'ashoku..." (7:8-10).

- Truth, social justice, helping the poor and needy, and thinking kindly of one's neighbor, etc.

God is anxious for His Shchina to return, but in order for that to happen, Yerushalayim must first become a city characterized by truth (8:1-3). God foresees the return the exiles from lands in the east and west. With their return, God and His nation will become once again covenantal partners, through "emet & tzedaka" (see 8:7-8).

Finally, after many words of encouragement and repeated 'musar' (see 8:11-17), God finally answers the original question concerning the fast days. Should Am Yisrael return to Israel and keep "emet ve-shalom, the four fast days commemorating the destruction of Yerushalayim will become holidays:

"tzom ha-rvii, v'tzom ha'chamishi... [The four fast days] will be instead for Yehuda days of celebration... [on the condition that] they will love **emet & shalom**" (see 8:18-19 / note parallel to Megilla 9:30-31!)

After two chapters of rebuke, Zecharya finally answers the people's original question. Should Bnei Yisrael indeed show their devotion to God, i.e. if they practice 'emet u-mishpat shalom', then the fast days, the days of crying for Jerusalem, will become holidays instead.

Should Bnei Yisrael indeed love keeping emet & shalom (these two words simply summarize the primary points raised by Zecharya in this perek), then the redemption process will be complete.

ISH YEHUDI

Zecharya concludes this prophecy with his vision of numerous people from many great nations will one day come to Yerushalayim in search of God. They will gather around the ish yehudi, asking for his guidance, for they will have heard that God is with His people (8:20-23).

Had Am Yisrael heeded this prophetic call in the time of Koresh and Daryavesh, then they would not have been scattered among 127 provinces during the time of Achashverosh. One could suggest that instead of celebrating with the Persians at the party in Shushan, the Jews could (& should) have been celebrating with God at His bet ha-mikdash in Yerushalayim.

The ish yehudi would have been in the bira in Yerushalayim, making God's Name known to other nations; instead, the Megilla opens as an ish yehudi is found in the bira of Achashverosh in Shushan, ironically carrying the name of foreign god.

[One could also suggest that Mordechai's institution of the yearly celebration of Purim relates specifically to this prophecy. First of all, note how this day is described as one that turns around from 'yagon' to 'simcha', from 'mourning to holiday' (see Esther 9:22). Purim may symbolize the manner in which the fast days for Jerusalem will one day become holidays.]

This parallel to Zecharya could explain the reason for the special mitzvot that Mordechai instituted for Purim in his first letter (see 9:20-22). They reflect Zecharya's repeated message of helping the needy (matanot le-evyonim/ note 7:10) and thinking nicely of one's neighbors (mishloach manot ish le-re'eihu / note 8:16-17!). Once a year we must remind ourselves of the most basic mitzvot that we must keep in order that we become worthy of returning to Yerushalayim and rebuilding the Bet ha'mikdash.

Certain halachot instituted by Chazal may reflect this message. Interestingly, Shushan Purim is replaced with Yerushalayim Purim for the walled cities from the time of Yehoshua bin Nun replace the walled city of Shushan! [See Yehoshua 21:42 and its context, compare to Esther 9:2.]

SHALOM VE-EMET

Although this explanation for certain minhagim of Purim may seem a bit 'stretched', textual proof is found in the closing psukim of the Megilla (9:29-32 / read it carefully!).

Mordechai and Esther need to send out a second 'igeret' (letter) explaining and giving authority ('tokef') to the minhagim of Purim explained in the first igeret. What was the content of this special second letter? To our surprise, one short phrase:

"Divrei shalom ve-emet"! [See 9:30, read carefully.]

These two key words point us directly back to Zecharya's prophecy about the fast days becoming holidays (read Zecharya 8:18-19 again)! They explain not only when, but also why the fast days will become holidays - i.e. if Bnei Yisrael keep shalom and emet! The second igeret may simply be an explanation of the purpose of the minhagim of Purim - Mordechai and Esther use this letter to explain to Am Yisrael why Purim has been established - a yearly reminder of the prophecies of Zecharya which remain unfulfilled.

The continuation of this igeret strengthens this interpretation. Under what authority (tokef) does Mordechai institute these halachot?

"Ka'asher kiymu al nafsham divrei ha-tzomot ve-za'akatam" (9:31) [Compare these psukim carefully to Zecharya 8:18-19.]

Recall, God had told Zecharya that fast days and feast days are up to man to decide. Now, according to the second igeret, just like ('ka'asher') the prophets instituted four fast days in order that we remember Yerushalayim, Mordechai institutes a 'feast day' to remember Yerushalayim.

[Note that this pasuk cannot be referring to our Ta'anit Esther, for if it refers to the three day fast, that fast was a one time event and was not "al nafsham ve-al zar'am". Likewise, it cannot be the fast of the 13th of Adar, as that custom only began during the time period of the Ge'onim. Therefore, it must refer to the four fast days on Jerusalem.]

So why didn't everyone return immediately afterward to Israel?

Most probably, after the events of the Megilla, a mass return to Yerushalayim was not realistic. Nonetheless, Mordechai wanted to institute a holiday that would remind Am Yisrael that should such an opportunity arise (once again), that they will know how to relate to it properly. Sefer Zecharya and its theme of shalom ve-emet serve as the spiritual guide.

[This interpretation may help explain why the celebration of Purim will remain even after our final redemption.]

Purim, therefore, has deep meaning for all generations. Its message may have been 'hiding' behind the costumes, the drinking ("ad de-lo yada"), the 'purim Torah', and 'shalach mannos'. It may have been lost within our ignorance of Tanach. Its message, however, remains eternal, just as our aspirations for Yerushalayim and the establishment therein of a just society - remain eternal.

purim sameiach,
menachem

****

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PARSHAT KI-TISA

No matter how one explains the story of 'chet ha-egel' [the sin of the Golden Calf], we encounter a problem.
If we understand (as the psukim seem to imply) that Bnei Yisrael truly believed that it was this 'golden calf' (and not God) who took them out of Egypt - then it is simply hard to fathom how an entire nation would reach such a senseless conclusion!

But if we claim (as many commentators do) that Aharon had good intentions, for he only intended for the 'egel' to be a physical representation of God (who took them out of Egypt) - then why is God so angered to the point that he wants to destroy the entire nation!

In this week's shiur, we look for the 'middle road' as we attempt to find a 'logical' explanation for the events as they unfold, based on our understanding of the overall theme of Sefer Shmot.

INTRODUCTION

According to the popular Midrash, quoted by Rashi (see 32:1 'ba-shesh'), Bnei Yisrael's miscalculation of Moshe's return by one day led to the entire calamity of 'chet ha'egel'. However, when one examines the details of this story (as other commentators do), a very different picture emerges that provides a more 'logical' explanation for the people's request.

In the following shiur, we follow that direction, as we examine the events as they unfold in Parshat Kitisa in light of (and as a continuation of) the events that transpired at the end of Parshat Mishpatim (see 24:12-18).

Therefore, we begin our shiur by quoting the Torah's description of Moshe's original ascent to Har Sinai for forty days, noting how Moshe never provided the people with an exact date of his expected return:

> "And God told Moshe, come up to Me on the mountain... then Moshe ascended God's Mountain. To the elders he said: **'Wait here** for us, **until we return** to you. Behold, Aharon and Chur are with you, should there be any problems, go to them..." (see 24:12-14).

Carefully note how Moshe had informed the elders that he was leaving 'until he returns', without specifying a date! Even though several psukim later Chumash tells us (i.e. the reader) that Moshe remained on the mountain for forty days (see 24:18), according to 'pshat', the people have no idea how long Moshe would be gone for.

> [And most likely, neither did Moshe or Aharon. It is important to note that Rashi's interpretation carries a very deep message re: the nature of patience and sin, but it is not necessarily the simple pshat of these psukim.]

A LOGICAL CONCLUSION

Considering this was not the first time that Moshe had ascended Har Sinai to speak to God (see 19:3,20; 24:1,2); and in each previous ascent Moshe had never been gone for more than a day or two - Bnei Yisrael have ample reason to assume that this time he would not be gone much longer. After all, how long could it possibly take to receive the 'luchot, Torah, & mitzva' (see 24:12): a few days, a few weeks?

Days pass; weeks pass; yet Moshe does not return! Add to this the fact that the last time that Bnei Yisrael saw Moshe, he had entered a cloud-covered mountain consumed in fire (see 24:17-18), hence - the people's conclusion that Moshe was 'gone' was quite logical. After all, how much longer can they wait for?

Assuming that Moshe is not returning, Bnei Yisrael must do something - but what are their options?

* To remain stranded in the desert?
  Of course not! They have waited for Moshe long enough.
* To return to Egypt?
  "chas ve-shalom' / (of course not!). That would certainly be against God's wishes; and why should they return to slavery!
* To continue their journey to Eretz Canaan?
  Why not! After all, was this not the purpose of Yetziat Mitzraim - to inherit the Promised Land (see 3:8,17 6:8)?
  Furthermore, that is precisely what God had promised them numerous times, and most recently in Shmot 23:20?

This background helps us understand why Bnei Yisrael approached Aharon, whom Moshe had left in charge (see 24:13-15) and why their opening complaint focused on their desire for new leadership - to replace Moshe. Let's take a careful look now at the Torah's description of this event:

> "When the people saw that Moshe was **so delayed** in coming down from the mountain, the people gathered on **Aharon** and said to him: Come make us an **elohim** that will **lead us** [towards the Promised Land] **because** Moshe, who took us out of the land of Egypt [and promised to take us to Eretz Canaan], we do not know what has happened to him" (32:1).

As your review this pasuk, note the phrase "elohim asher **yelchu** lefaneinu". In other words, note how the people do not request a new god, but rather an **elohim** [some-one /or thing] that that will 'walk in front', i.e. that will **lead** them [to the Promised Land].

To understand how 'logical' this request was, we need only conduct a quick comparison between this pasuk and God's earlier promise (in Parshat Mishpatim) that He would send a "**mal'ach**" to lead them and help them conquer the Land:

> "Behold, I am sending a **mal'ach - lefanecha** [before you] - to guard you and **bring you to the place** that I have made ready..."
> (see 23:20 / Note the Hebrew word '**lefanecha'**!)

And two psukim later, God continues this promise:

> "ki **yelech mal'achi lefanecha** - For My angel will **go before you**, and bring you to the Land..." (23:23)
> [Note again - **lefanecha**, and the word **yelech**.]

Recall as well that this was the last promise that they had heard before Moshe ascended Har Sinai. When Bnei Yisrael first heard this promise, they most probably assumed that this **mal'ach** would be none other than Moshe himself. [Note how the **mal'ach** must be someone who commands them, leads them, while God's Name is in his midst (see 23:21-22, compare 19:9).]

Now that Moshe is presumed dead, the people simply demand that Aharon provide them with a replacement for (or possibly a **symbol** of) this **mal'ach**, in order that they can **continue** their journey to the Promised Land. Note once again:

> "Come make us an **elokim** - asher **yelchu lefaneinu**!" (32:1) [Again, note yelchu & lefaneinu]

In fact, from a simple reading of the text, it appears as though Aharon actually agrees to this request:

> "And Aharon said to them: Take off your gold... and bring them to me... He took it from them and cast in a mold and made it into a molten calf..." (32:2-4).

If our interpretation thus far is correct, then the people's statement (upon seeing this Golden Calf): "This is your god O' Israel - who brought you out of the land of Egypt" (32:4), does not need to imply that this Golden Calf actually took them out of Egypt. [After all, they had already stated in 32:1 that Moshe had taken them out of Egypt!] Rather, the people are simply stating their own perception - that this **egel** (which Aharon had just made) represents the God who had taken them out of Egypt and will hopefully now act as His **mal'ach** who will lead them on their journey to Eretz Canaan.

In other words, in Bnei Yisrael's eyes, the **egel** is not a **replacement** for God, rather a **representation** of His Presence!

> [See a similar explanation by Rav Yehuda HaLevi in Sefer HaKuzari I.77! See also Ibn Ezra & Ramban on Shmot 32:1]

This would also explain Aharon's ensuing actions: To assure that the **egel** is properly understood as a **representation** of God, Aharon calls for a celebration:

> "And Aharon saw, and he built a **mizbeiach** in front of it, and Aharon called out and said: A celebration **for God** [note: be-shem **havaya**] tomorrow" (32:5).

Furthermore, this 'celebration' parallels the almost identical ceremony that took place at Har Sinai forty days earlier - when Bnei Yisrael declared 'na'aseh ve-nishma'. To verify this, we'll compare the Torah's description of these two ceremonies:

* In Parshat Mishpatim - after Moshe sets up 12 monuments:

> "...and they **woke up early** in the morning, and they **built** a **mizbeiach** at the foot of the mountain and twelve monuments for the twelve tribes of Israel... and they offered **olot** and sacrificed **shlamim**" (24:4-5).

* In Parshat Ki-tisa - after Aharon forges the **egel**:

> "...and they **woke up early** in the morning [after Aharon had **built a mizbeiach** in front of it /32:5], and they offered **olot** and sacrificed **shlamim**..." (32:6).

Note the obvious parallels: waking up in the morning, building a **mizbeiach** in front of a 'symbol' (representing their relationship with God), offering **olot** & **shlamim**, and 'eating and drinking' (compare 24:11 with 32:6).

Furthermore, recall how that ceremony included Moshe's reading of the 'divrei Hashem' - which most likely included the laws of Parshat Mishpatim - including God's promise to send a **mal'ach** to lead them (see 23:20-23. Hence, not only are these two events parallel, they both relate to Bnei Yisrael's acceptance of a **mal'ach** that will **lead** them to the land ['asher **yelchu** lefaneinu']!

Finally, note how **both** ceremonies include a **mizbeiach** that is erected in **front** of a **symbol** representing God:

* In Parshat Mishpatim, the symbol is the twelve monuments, possibly representing God's fulfillment of brit avot.
* In Parshat Ki-tisa, the symbol is the **egel**, representing the **mal'ach** (which God had promised) that will lead them.

> [Note, that this parallel actually continues in the **mishkan** itself! In front of the **mizbeiach** upon which Bnei Yisrael offer **olot** & **shlamim**, we find the **aron** & **keruvim** - that serve as symbol of God's covenant with Bnei Yisrael at Har Sinai. Later, this very **aron** leads Bnei Yisrael through the desert towards the land (see Bamidbar 10:33) as well as in battle (see Bamidbar 10:35 & Yehoshua 6:6-10). This can also explain why the Torah refers to this calf as an 'egel **masecha**' (see 32:4) - implying a 'face covering', hiding the true face, but leaving a representation of what man can perceive.]

WHY 'DAVKA' AN EGEL?

Even though our interpretation thus far has shown how the **egel** can be understood as a symbol of God's Presence, we have yet to explain why specifically an **egel** is chosen as that representation. Chizkuni offers a ingenious explanation, based on yet another parallel to Ma'amad Har Sinai.

Recall that at the conclusion of the ceremony at Har Sinai (24:1-11), **Aharon**, Nadav, Avihu, and the seventy elders are permitted to 'see' God:

> "And they saw **Elokei Yisrael** and - 'tachat **raglav'** - under His feet was like a shining sapphire..." (24:10)

Obviously, God does not have 'feet'! However, this description reflects a certain spiritual level. Moshe, for example, achieved the highest level - "panim be-panim" - face to face. In contrast, the seventy elders perceived 'tachat **raglav'** -(God's feet), reflecting a lower spiritual level.

> [This may relate to the people's request for a more distanced relationship, where Moshe served as their intermediary (see 20:15-18 and Devarim 5:20-26).]

Although it is very difficult for us to comprehend the description of God in such physical terms, Chizkuni (on 32:4) notes that we find a very similar description of the **Shchina** in Sefer Yechezkel:

> "And their feet were straight, and the bottom of their **feet** were similar to the feet of an **egel**..." (Yechezkel 1:7).
>
> > [See also the textual parallel of 'even sapir' / compare Yechezkel 1:26 with Shmot 24:10.]
>
> [Alternately, one could suggest that an **egel** was chosen to represent the **parim** which were offered on Har Sinai during the ceremony when God informed them about the **mal'ach** (see 24:5/ note that an egel is a baby 'par').]

So if the people's original request was indeed 'legitimate', and Aharon's 'solution' a sincere attempt to make a representation of God - why does God become so angered? Why does He threaten to destroy the entire nation?

To answer this question, we must once again return to our parallel with Parshat Mishpatim.

A CONTRASTING PARALLEL

Despite the many parallels noted above, we find **one** additional phrase that is unique to the story of chet ha-egel, and creates (what we refer to as) a contrasting parallel. Note the final phrase of each narrative:

* At Har Sinai (in Parshat Mishpatim):

> "... and they beheld God and they **ate** and **drank**" (24:11).

* At chet ha-egel (in Parshat Ki-tisa):

> "they sat to **eat** and **drink** and they rose **letzachek**" (32:6).
>
> > [We call this a 'contrasting parallel'.]

It is not by chance that many commentators find in this word the key to understanding Bnei Yisrael's sin.

Even though the simple translation of 'letzachek' is laughing or frivolous behavior, Rashi raises the possibility that it may refer to licentiousness (or even murder / see Rashi 32:7 and Breishit 39:17). Certainly, Chazal understand this phrase to imply more than just 'dancing'. To Aharon's dismay, what began as a quiet ceremony turned into a 'wild party'. The celebration simply seems to have gotten 'out of hand'. [Soon we will explain why.]

To support this understanding of letzachek, let's 'jump ahead' to the Torah's account of Moshe's descent from Har Sinai (when he breaks the luchot), noting what Moshe and Yehoshua hear from the mountain.

First of all, note Yehoshua's initial reaction to the 'loud noise' that he hears:

> "And Yehoshua heard the sound of the people - **be-rei'o** - screaming loudly, and said to Moshe: there are sounds of **war** in the camp. But Moshe answered - these are not the sounds of triumphant, nor are they the groans of the defeated, they are simply sounds [of wildness/ frivolity] that I hear" (32:17-18).
>
> > [Note Targum Unkelus of 'kol anot' in 32:18 - kol de-me**chaychin**, compare with Tirgum of letzachek in 32:6 of le-**chaycha**; clearly connecting the loud noises to the loud laughing of "va-yakumu letzachek"!
> > Note also the word **be-rei'o** - from shoresh 'lehariya' - to make a sound like a **tru'a**, but the spelling is **r.a.a.h**. reflecting its negative context like the word 'ra'a' = bad or evil! Compare also with 32:22!

The noise from this 'wild party' was so loud that it sounded to Yehoshua like a war was going on!

Note as well what provoked Moshe to actually break the tablets: "And he saw the **egel** and the **dancing** circles and became enraged" [va-yar et ha-egel u-**mecholot**...] (32:19).

Moshe was upset no less by the 'wild dancing' than by the egel itself! [See commentary of Seforno on this pasuk.]

With this in mind, let's return now to study the Torah's account of God's anger with chet ha-egel, as recorded earlier in chapter 32.

First of all, as you review 32:5-7, note how God only becomes angry (and tells Moshe to go down) on the day **after**

Aharon made the egel! Now if Bnei Yisrael's primary sin was making the egel, God should have told Moshe to go down on that very same day. The fact that God only tells him to go down on the **next** day, and only after we are told that - "va-yakumu letzachek" - supports our interpretation that this phrase describes the primary sin of chet ha-egel.

BACK TO OLD HABITS

What led to this calamity? What was this noise and 'wild party' all about? Even though it is based on' circumstantial evidence', one could suggest the following explanation:

Even though the celebration around the egel initiated by Aharon began with good intentions (see 32:5 - 'chag l-Hashem'), for some reason, Bnei Yisrael's behavior at this party quickly became wild and out of control. Apparently, once the drinking, dancing, and music began, the nation impulsively reverted back to their old ways, regressing back to their Egyptian culture. [Even though this may not sound very logical, as most of us are aware, it is unfortunately human nature.]

To understand why, let's return to our discussion of Bnei Yisrael's spiritual level in Egypt, based on Yechezkel chapter 20, and as discussed in length in our shiurim on parshat Va'era and Beshalach:

Before the exodus, Bnei Yisrael were so immersed in Egyptian culture that God found it necessary to demand that they 'change their ways' in order to prepare for their redemption (see Yechezkel 20:5-9). Even though they did not heed this plea, God took them out of Egypt in the hope that the miracles of Yetziat Mitzraim, and their experiences on the way to Har Sinai would create a 'change of heart' (see TSC shiur on Parshat Beshalach). When they arrived at Har Sinai, Bnei Yisrael's proclamation of na'aseh ve-nishma (see 19:3-8 & 24:7) showed God that they were finally ready to become God's special nation.

THE LAST STRAW

Unfortunately, the events at chet ha-egel forced God to change this perception. Bnei Yisrael's inexcusable behavior at this celebration reflected the sad fact that despite His numerous miracles, deep down, nothing had really changed. God became more than angered; He became utterly disappointed. All of God's efforts to 'train' His nation (since Yetziat Mitzrayim) seemed to have been in vain.

In summary, we have suggested that there were **two** stages in Bnei Yisrael's sin at **chet ha-egel**.

* The first - making a physical representation of God - even though this was improper, it was understandable.
* The second - the frivolous behavior after the eating and drinking at the conclusion of the ceremony - was inexcusable.

We will now show how these two stages are reflected in God's 'double statement' to Moshe (32:7-10) in the aftermath of this sin:

(1) - 32:7-8 / God's first statement:

> "And **God spoke to Moshe**: Hurry down, for your people have acted basely ['ki shichet amcha']... they have turned astray from the way that I commanded them [see 20:20!] - they made an egel masecha [a representation of Me]...

(2) - 32:9-10 / God's second statement:

> "And **God spoke to Moshe**: I see this nation, behold it is an 'am ksheh oref' [a **stiff necked people**]. Now, allow Me, and I will kindle My anger against them and I will destroy them and I will **make you** a great nation [instead]."
>
> [Note, that "va-yomer Hashem el Moshe" is repeated **twice**, even though Moshe does not speak in between.]

God's first statement describes the act that began with good intentions but was nonetheless forbidden [see Shmot 20:20 -"lo ta'asun iti elohei kesef..."]. Although this sin requires rebuke and forgiveness (see 32:30), it was not severe enough to warrant the destruction of the entire Nation.

God's second statement is in reaction to 'va-yakumu letzachek', i.e. their frivolous behavior. Because of this regression to Egyptian culture, God concludes that they are indeed a 'stiff-necked people' - **unable to change their ways**. Therefore, God concludes that He must destroy Bnei Yisrael, choosing Moshe to become His special nation instead.

Similarly, these two stages are found in the conversation between Moshe and Aharon in the aftermath of this event:

> "And Moshe said to Aharon: What did this people do to you that **caused** you to bring upon them such a terrible sin? ... Aharon answered: You know this people - 'ki ve-ra hu' - their ways are evil" (32:21-22).

One could suggest that Aharon's conclusion is based on his previous experiences with Bnei Yisrael. It is clear, however, that Moshe understands that Aharon had no intention that this situation would get out of hand. After all, Aharon himself is not punished. In fact, he later becomes the Kohen Gadol [High Priest].

Once Aharon had explained to Moshe what transpired (32:22-24) in the **first** stage, Moshe already understood what happened in the **second** stage:

> "And Moshe 'saw' the people - 'ki paru'a hu' - that they became wild (out of control), for Aharon had caused them to become wild [to the point of] their demise, **be-kameihem** - when they **got up** [to dance/ possibly reflecting '**va-yakumu** letzachek'! [see 32:25].

Finally, the **two** levels that we later find in Bnei Yisrael's actual punishment may also reflect these two stages. First, the three thousand 'instigators' who incited this licentious behavior (stage 2) are killed. For that rebellious group, there is no room for forgiveness (32:26-29). However, on the second day, Moshe approaches God to beg forgiveness for the rest of the nation (see 32:30-32). Even though they had sinned, Moshe hopes to secure them a pardon - because their actions began with good intentions (stage 1).

Ultimately, Moshe will receive this pardon - but it won't be very simple.

DELAYED PUNISHMENT OR FORGIVENESS

Even though God had originally agreed to Moshe Rabeinu's first request not to totally destroy His nation (see "va-yechal Moshe... va-yinachem Hashem al ha-ra;a..." / 32:11-14), his next request for forgiveness in 32:31-32 clearly indicates that the execution of the 3000 'instigators' did not absolve the rest of the nation.

To our surprise, Moshe's second tefilla (in 32:30-32) does not achieve forgiveness! To prove this point, take a careful look at God's response to Moshe's second tefilla:

> "And God told Moshe: He who has sinned to Me shall be punished. Now go **lead** the people to [the place] that I said [i.e. to Eretz Canaan], behold My angel will accompany you, and on the day that I will punish you, I will punish you" (32:34).

Note that God instructs Moshe to lead Bnei Yisrael to the Promised Land, thus fulfilling brit avot (as Moshe demanded in 32:13), but He still plans to later punish them for chet ha-egel, at the time that He finds fit. Note however, that even though brit avot will be fulfilled, brit Sinai remains 'broken'! To prove this, note how chapter 33 explains what God told Moshe in 32:34:

> "And God said to Moshe - Set out from here, you and the people that you have brought out of Egypt to the Land that I swore to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov (brit avot)... but **I will not go in your midst** for you are a stiff- necked people, lest I destroy you on the journey" (see 33:1-3).

In contrast to God's original promise at Matan Torah that He will send a **mal'ach** with **His name** in their midst ['shmi be-kirbo' / see 23:20-23], now He emphatically states that He will no longer be with them - "ki **lo** a'aleh be-kirbecha" (33:3). Due to chet ha-egel, Bnei Yisrael are no longer worthy of the special relationship of **brit Sinai**.

This 'downgrade' is reflected in God's next commandment

that Bnei Yisrael must remove 'their jewelry' that they received on Har Sinai, undoubtedly the symbol of the high level they reached at **matan Torah** (see 33:5-6). Furthermore, Moshe must now move his own tent **away** from the camp, in order that God can remain in contact with Moshe (see 33:7).

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

A very strange predicament has arisen (that often goes unnoticed). Even though Bnei Yisrael will not be destroyed (thanks to brit avot), God instructs Moshe to continue on to Eretz Canaan **without** brit Sinai. [Imagine, a Jewish State without 'kedusha', several thousand years before Theodore Herzl!]

As unthinkable as this sounds, God's decision is very logical. Considering His conclusion that Bnei Yisrael are an 'am kshe oref' - a stiff-necked people (see 32:9, 33:5), and hence will not change their ways, there appears to be no other solution. After all, should He keep His **Shchina** in their midst, Bnei Yisrael would not be able to survive.

Fortunately for Am Yisrael, Moshe Rabeinu is not willing to accept God's decision. As we will see, his next argument will set the stage for the declaration of God's **midot ha-rachamim**:

> "And Moshe beseeched God: 'Look, you have instructed me to lead this people... but recognize that this nation is **You**r people!
>
> God answered: I will lead [only] you. But Moshe insisted: "Im ein panecha holchim al ta'alenu mi-zeh" - Unless **Your presence will go with us,** do not make us leave this place. For how should it be known that Your people have gained Your favor unless You **go with us**..." (33:12-16)
>
> [These psukim are quite difficult to translate, I recommend that you read the entire section inside.]

Note how Moshe demands that God keep His Presence [**Shchina**] with them, threatening a 'sit down strike' should God refuse. Most powerful is Moshe's demand that God recognize that they are His people - "u-**re'eh** ki amcha ha-goy ha-zeh" (see 33:13). God ['kivyachol'] now faces a most difficult predicament.

* On the one hand, He cannot allow His Shchina to return - for according to the terms of **brit Sinai** - this 'am ksheh oref' could not survive His anger, and would eventually be killed.
* On the other hand, He cannot leave them in the desert (as Moshe now threatens), for **brit avot** must be fulfilled!
* But, He cannot take them to the land, for Moshe is not willing to lead them **unless** He returns His **Shchina**.

Something has to budge! But what will it be?

It is precisely here, in the resolution of this dilemma, where God's 13 **midot ha-rachamim** enter into the picture.

A NEW COVENANT

Let's take a look now at God's response to Moshe's request. Note that here is first time in Chumash where God introduces the concept of divine mercy:

> "And God said to Moshe, 'I will also do this thing that you request... [to return His **Shchina** / Moshe then asked that God show His Glory -] then God answered: ' I will pass all my goodness before you, and I will proclaim **My name** before you, and **I will pardon** he whom I will pardon and **I will have mercy** on he to whom I give mercy (ve-chanoti et asher achon, ve-richamti et asher arachem")... (33:17-22).

In contrast to His original threat of immediate punishment should they sin (if God is in there midst), now God agrees to allow Bnei Yisrael a 'second chance' (should they sin). This divine promise sets the stage for the forging of a **new** covenant though which **brit Sinai** can be re-established, for it allows the Shchina to return without the necessity of immediate severe punishment.

Therefore, God instructs Moshe to ascend Har Sinai one more time, in a manner quite parallel to his first ascent to Har Sinai [but with significant minor differences], to receive the **second luchot** (see 34:1-5 and its parallel in 19:20-24).

As we should expect, the laws should and do remain the same. However, their **terms** must now be amended with God's attributes of mercy. Hence, when Moshe now ascends Har Sinai, it is not necessary for God to repeat the **dibrot** themselves, for they remain the same. Instead, God will descend to proclaim an amendment to how He will act in this relationship - i.e. His attributes of mercy.

As God had promised in 33:19 (review that pasuk before continuing), a new covenant, reflecting this enhanced relationship, is now forged:

> "And God came down in a cloud...& passed before him and proclaimed: ' Hashem, Hashem Kel rachum ve-chanun, erech apayim ve-rav chesed ve-emet, notzer chesed la-alafim" (34:5-8).

THE CONTRAST BETWEEN THE ATTRIBUTES

With this background, we can now better appreciate the words that God chose to describe His new **midot**. To do so, we must first quickly review God's **midot** as described at Ma'amad Har Sinai in parshat Yitro.

Recall that the **dibrot** included not only laws, but also describe **how** God will reward (or punish) those who obey (or disobey) His commandments. Let's review these 'original' attributes by noting them (in **bold**) as we quote the Commandments:

> "I am the Lord your God...
> You shall have no other gods besides Me...
> Do not bow down to them or worship them, for I the Lord am a **Kel kana** - a **zealous** God
> **poked avon avot al banim** – **remembering the sin** of parents upon their children... for those who reject Me [**le-son'ai**], but
> **oseh chesed - showing kindness**... for those who love me and follow my laws - [**le-ohavai** u-leshomrei mitzvotai]"
> (see 20:2-6).

Note how the second Commandment includes three divine attributes:

1) **Kel kana** - a zealous God
2) **poked avon avot al banim - le-son'ai**
   harsh punishment for those who reject God
3) **oseh chesed la-alafim - le-ohavai**
   Kindness & reward for those who follow God.

Similarly, in the third Commandment, we find yet another **mida** [divine attribute]:

> "Do not say in vain the **name** of God - ki **lo yenakeh Hashem** - for God will **not forgive** he who says His Name in vain" (20:7).

Let's add this fourth attribute to the above list:

4) **lo yenakeh Hashem** - He will not forgive

How should we consider these four attributes? At first glance, most of them seem to be quite harsh!

Even the **mida** of **oseh chesed** - Divine kindness, does not necessarily imply **mercy**. Carefully note in 20:6 that God promises this kindness **only** for those who **follow** Him, and hence not for any others. Most definitely, all four of these attributes are quite the opposite of mercy, they are **midot ha-din** - attributes of exacting retribution.

Although these **midot** have their 'down side', for they threaten immediate punishment for those who transgress (le-son'ai), they also have their 'up side', for they assure immediate reward for those who obey (le-ohavai). In other words, these **midot** describe a very intense relationship, quite similar to [and not by chance] to God's relationship with man in Gan Eden (see Breishit 2:16-17).

MORE MIDOT HA-DIN

Yet another example of this intense relationship, and another attribute as well, is found at the conclusion of the unit of laws in Parshat Mishpatim. Recall that immediately after the Ten Commandments, Moshe was summoned to Har Sinai to receive a special set of commandment to relay to Bnei Yisrael (see Shmot 20:15-19). At the conclusion of those laws, God makes the

following promise:

"Behold, I am sending an angel before you to guard you on the way and help bring you into the Promised Land. Be **careful** of him and **obey** him, Do not defy him - **for he shall not pardon your sins -"ki lo yisa le-fish'achem**", since My Name is with him...

[On the other hand...]

"...should you obey Him and do all that I say - **I will help you defeat your enemies**... (see Shmot 23:20-24).

Once again, we find that God will exact punishment should Bnei Yisrael not follow His mitzvot and reward (i.e. assistance in conquering the Land) should they obey Him.

Finally, after chet ha-egel, we find that God intends to act precisely according to these attributes of **midat ha-din**:

"And God told Moshe, go down from the mountain for your people has sinned... they made a golden image... and now allow Me, and **I will kindle My anger** against them that I may destroy them -**ve-yichar api bahem**..." (see Shmot 32:7-10).

Here we find yet another divine attribute - **charon af Hashem** - God's instant anger.

Let's summarize these six attributes that we have found thus far. Later, this list will be very helpful when we compare these **midot** to God's **midot** in the second **luchot**.

1) **Kel kana**
2) **poked avon ... le-son'ai**
3) **oseh chesed... le-ohavai**
4) **lo yenakeh**
5) **lo yisa le-fish'achem**...
6) **charon af**

We will now show how these six examples of **midat ha-din** relate directly to the **new** attributes that God now declares. Note the obvious - and rather amazing - parallel that emerges:

FIRST LUCHOT	***SECOND LUCHOT***
1) Kel **kana**	Kel **rachum ve-chanun**
2) **poked avon**...le-son'ai	**poked avon** avot al banim...
3) **oseh chesed** la-alafim ... **le-ohavai**	**rav chesed** ve-emet **notzer** chesed la-alafim...
4) **lo yenakeh**	**ve-nakeh**, lo yenakeh
5) **lo yisa lefisheichem**	**nosei avon ve-fesha**...
6) **charon af**	**erech apayim**

FROM DIN TO RACHAMIM

Each attribute from the original covenant switches from **midat ha-din** to **midat ha-rachamim**. [To appreciate this parallel, it is important to follow these psukim in the original Hebrew.]

Let's take now a closer look:

A. **Hashem Kel rachum ve-chanun** --> (1) **Hashem Kel kana**
rachum ve-chanun based on 33:19 (see above)
a **merciful** God in contrast to a **zealous** God

B. **Erech apayim** --> (6) **charon af**
slow to anger in contrast to **instant** anger

C. **Rav chesed ve-emet** --> (3) **oseh chesed**... **le-ohavai**
abounding kindness for all, potentially even for the wicked
[This may allow the possibility of 'rasha ve-tov lo']
in contrast to **exacting** kindness, and hence, limited exclusively to those who obey Him.

[Note that the mida of emet is now required, for this abounding kindness for all must be complemented by the attribute of truth to assure ultimate justice.]

D. **Notzer chesed la-alafim** --> (3) **oseh chesed**.... **le-ohavai**
He **stores** His kindness, so that even if it is not rewarded immediately, it is stored to be given at a later time.
[This may allow the possibility of 'tzadik ve-ra lo']
in contrast to **immediate** kindness and reward for those who follow Him.

E. **Nosei avon ve-fesha**... --> (5) lo yisa le-fish'achem ...
forgiving sin in contrast to **not forgiving** sin.

F. **Ve-nakeh, lo yenakeh** --> (4) **lo yenakeh**
sometimes He will forgive, sometimes He may not.
[See Rashi, forgives those who perform teshuva.]
in contrast to **never** forgiving.

G. **Poked avon avot al banim**..--> (2) **poked avon** le-son'ai
He **withholds** punishment for up to four generations
[in anticipation of teshuva / see Rashi]
in contrast to **extending** punishment for up to four generations.

[Even though these two phrases are almost identical, their context forces us to interpret each pasuk differently. In the first luchot, all four generations are punished, in the second luchot, God may **hold back** punishment for four generations, allowing a chance for teshuva. See Rashi.]

These striking parallels demonstrate that each of the '13 midot' lies in direct contrast to the midot of the original covenant at Har Sinai.

This background can help us appreciate Moshe's immediate reaction to God's proclamation of these **midot**:

"And Moshe hastened to bow down and said: 'If I have indeed gained favor in Your eyes - **let Hashem go in our midst** - 'ki' = **even though** they are an **am ksheh oref** -a stiff necked people, and you shall pardon our sin..." (34:8-9)

God's proclamation that He will now act in a less strict manner enables Moshe to request that God now return His **Shchina** to the people **even though** they are an am ksheh oref. Note how this request stands in direct contrast to God's original threat that "he will not go up with them for they are a stiff necked people, less He smite them on their journey..." (see 33:3/ compare with 34:9)!

These Divine attributes of mercy now allow the Shchina to dwell within Yisrael even though they may not be worthy.

From a certain perspective, this entire sequence is quite understandable. For, on the one hand, to be worthy of God's presence, man must behave perfectly. However, man is still human. Although he may strive to perfection, he may often error or at times even sin. How then can man ever come close to God? Hence, to allow mortal man the potential to continue a relationship with God, a new set of rules is necessary - one that includes **midot ha-rachamim**.

The original terms of **brit Sinai**, although ideal, are not practical. In this manner, **midot ha-rachamim** allow **brit Sinai** to become achievable. These midot ha-rachamim reflect God's kindness that allows man to approach Him and develop a closer relationship without the necessity of immediate punishment for any transgression.

SELICHOT

This explanation adds extra meaning to our comprehension and appreciation of our recitation of the Selichot. Reciting the 13 **midot** comprises more than just a mystical formula. It is a constant reminder of the **conditions** of the covenant of the **second luchot**. God's attributes of mercy, as we have shown, **do not guarantee** automatic forgiveness, rather, they **enable the possibility** of forgiveness. As the pasuk stated, God will forgive only he whom He chooses ("et asher achon... ve-et asher arachem" / 33:19). To be worthy of that mercy, the individual must prove his sincerity to God, while accepting upon himself not to repeat his bad ways.

shabbat shalom,
menachem

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FOR FURTHER IYUN - for Part One

1. It is not clear why Aharon does not insist that the people be patient and wait for Moshe. Note that, according to 24:14, the people are instructed to turn to Aharon **and** Chur, should a problem arise. Interestingly enough, Chur is never mentioned again.

Relate this to the Midrash that explains Aharon's behavior because Chur had told them to wait and was killed.

2. Note the use of the word 'shichet' in 32:7. In Devarim 4:16 we find a similar use of this shoresh in relation to making a physical representation of God with **good** intentions!
Read Devarim 4:9-24 carefully and note its connection to the events at chet ha-egel. Use this parallel to explain 4:21-23.

3. See the Rambam's first halacha in Hilchot Avoda Zara. Relate his explanation of the origin of Avoda Zara to the above shiur.

FOR FURTHER IYUN - for Part Two

A. As the new covenant allows for mercy, the perception of God becomes less clear. While the first covenant boasted a clear relationship of 'panim el panim' (face to face / 33:11), this new covenant, even to Moshe, is represented by a 'face to back' relationship:

> "But, He said, you can not see my face ... Station yourself on the Rock as My Presence passes by ... you will see my back, but
> My face must not be seen."["**Lo**Tuchal lir'ot **panai** - ki lo yir'ani ha-adam va-chai -... ve-ra'ita et **achorai** - u-**panai** lo yira'u.]
> (33:20-23).

This new level has a clear advantage, midat ha-rachamim - however there is still a price to pay - the unclarity of Hashem's hashgacha. No longer is punishment immediate; however, reward may also suffer from delay. Hashem's hashgacha becomes more complex and now allows apparent situations of tzadik ve-ra lo-
rasha ve-tov lo.

1. See Chazal's explanation of "hodi'eni na et drachecha" (33:13) How does this relate to our explanation?
2. As communication is clearer when talking face to face with someone as opposed to talking to someone with his back turned, attempt to explain the symbolism of the above psukim.
3. Why must Moshe Rabeinu also go down a level in his nevu'a?

B. The second luchot are carved by man, and not by God. Attempt to relate this requirement based on the nature of the 13 **midot**.

Relate this to the mitzva for Bnei Yisrael to build the Mishkan, which follows in parshat Vayakhel.
Compare this to the mitzva to begin building a **sukka** immediately after Yom Kippur, and in general, why the holiday of **Sukkot** follows Yom Kippur.

C. After God declares His 13 midot of Rachamim (34:6-9), He makes a promise (34:10), and then adds some commandments (34:11-26).

Are these commandments new, or are they a 'repeat' of mitzvot which were given earlier in Parshat Mishpatim?

[Relate especially to Shmot 23:9-33.]

If so, can you explain why they are being repeated?

[Hint: Which type of mitzvot from Parshat Mishpatim are not repeated?] Relate your answer to the events of chet ha-egel.

D. In the story of chet ha-egel, we find a classic example of a 'mila mancha', i.e. use of the verb 'lir'ot' - to see [r.a.h.].

Review chapters 32->34 in this week's parsha while paying attention to this word. 'See' for yourself if it points to a theme. As you read, pay careful attention to: 32:1, 32:5, 32:9, 32:19, 32:25, 33:10, 33:12-13!, 33:20-23, 34:10, 34:23-24!, 34:30, and 34:35. What does it mean when God 'sees'..., when man 'sees'..., and when man 'sees' (or is seen by) God? Relate also to the use of this verb (r.a.h.) at Ma'amad Har Sinai, especially 20:15, 20:19. See also 19:21, 24:10, & Dvarim 5:21! Could you say that 'seeing is believing'?

If you had fun with that one, you can also try an easier one: the use of the word 'ra'a' [evil / reish.ayin.hey.] in 32:12-14. Relate to 32:17, 32:22, 32:25?, 33:4. Relate to Shmot 10:10; see Rashi, Ramban, Chizkuni, Rashbam.

E. Chazal explain that God's original intention was to create the world with his attribute of 'din' [judgement], but after realizing that it could not survive, He included (in His creation) the attribute of 'rachamim' [mercy] as well. [See Rashi Breishit 1:1 - 'bara Elokim...']

Relate this to the above shiur. Would you say that this Midrash reflects Sefer Shmot as well as Sefer Breishit.

F. Note 'kol tuvi' in 33:19. Relate this to "va-yar Elokim ki tov" mentioned after each stage of **creation** in Breishit chapter 1.

Can you relate this to the above question and above shiur?

See also Rambam Moreh Nevuchim I:54 / second paragraph.

[page 84 in Kapach edition Mosad Harav Kook]

G. Note 34:10 "hinei anochi koret brit..." & 34:29-30. Relate this to why we refer to midot ha-rachamim in selichot as 'brit shlosh esrei' .

H. Connect **Part I** of the above shiur to a similar concept of a mal'ach leading Bnei Yisrael, represented by a physical symbol - as in Bamidbar 10:33:"ve-aron brit Hashem noseia lifneihem derech shloshet yamim la-tur lahem menucha". See also Bmd. 10:35-36 & Yehoshua 6:6-11.

Parshat Ki Tisa: A Conspiracy to Forgive (Part I)

by Rabbi Eitan Mayer

PARASHAT KI TISA

Over the past few weeks, we have been dealing with the "Mishkan Unit," the second half of Sefer Shemot. To very briefly recap:

1) Parashat Teruma & Tetzaveh: the command to Bnei Yisrael to build a Mishkan (portable temple) for Hashem to occupy.

2) Parashat Ki Tisa (1st half): in response to the worship of the "egel" (golden calf), Hashem cancels His command to the people to build the Mishkan. Since He has withdrawn His Presence from the people, there will be no need for them to build a temple to house His Presence.

3) Parashat Ki Tisa (2nd half): forgiveness -- the Mishkan command is reinstated as Hashem returns His Presence to His forgiven people.

4) Parashat VaYak'hel & Pekudei: The report of the actual performance of the command to build the Mishkan.

INTRODUCTION:

Parashat Ki Tisa raises so many questions: what are Bnei Yisrael really looking for in creating and worshipping the egel -- another God, or another Moshe? How do we understand Aharon's role in facilitating the egel fiasco? But we will leave these questions for another time. In this week's shiur, we will focus on the truly complex process of forgiveness for the crime of the egel (golden calf); next week, we will continue with the same topic (since next week's parasha, V-Yak'hel, repeats Parashat Teruma for the most part). I know that this is somewhat inconvenient, so if you'd prefer to receive Part II this week, email me at emayer@ymail.yu.edu and I will send it to you ASAP. Be warned, though, that it's a lot of material.

The process of forgiveness takes place in two different arenas: 1) Interaction between Hashem and Moshe, and 2) interaction between Moshe and the people.

AT THE BARGAINING TABLE WITH GOD

The conversations in our parasha between Hashem and Moshe comprise a process of negotiation and bargaining through which Moshe successfully 'convinces' Hashem to forgive the people for worshipping the egel. These conversations are exceedingly complex and require very thorough unpacking. Often, when we encounter negotiations in the Torah, it seems unclear what is at issue and what each party is arguing. This tendency is especially pronounced in Ki Tisa, where a superficial read shows Moshe simply repeating the same "Forgive the people" request again and again, and Hashem responding indirectly and, often, obscurely. Hopefully, a more careful look will shed light on the substance of the negotiations:

a) What do Hashem and Moshe want at each stage of the conversation?
b) What is Moshe's strategy in 'convincing' Hashem to forgive the people? A careful reading of Moshe's requests and arguments reveals a definite strategy, to which Moshe remains faithful and which eventually succeeds in achieving his goal for the people.

MOSHE AND THE PEOPLE:

Moshe's relationship with the people through this crisis is also complex and subtle: Is his role to represent the people and achieve forgiveness for them, or to represent Hashem and punish the people -- or both?

THE EGEL:

We pick up as the Torah reports that the people make the egel and worship it:

SHEMOT 32:1-4:

The people saw that Moshe was delayed in descending the mountain. They gathered upon Aharon and said to him, "Arise and make us a god to go before us, for this Moshe, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we have no idea what has happened to him . . . . They made a plated calf ("egel") and said, "This is your god, Yisrael, who brought you up from the land of Egypt."

At first, the people credit Moshe credit with "bringing us up from the land of Egypt." But once they have created the egel, the people transfer this credit to the idol: "This is your god, Yisrael, who brought you up from the land of Egypt." Who indeed brought the people up from the land of Egypt? To us it seems clear that it is Moshe and not the golden calf who deserves credit, but when we turn to the conversation between Hashem and Moshe, it is apparent that they, too, debate this question: Who brought Bnei Yisrael up from the land of Egypt? This question, a recurring theme in the struggle between Hashem and Moshe, will assume tremendous importance as we continue.

PLACING THE BLAME:

The Torah now 'switches cameras' from the scene of the egel-worship to the scene at the top of Har Sinai, as Hashem reports to Moshe what the people have been up to in his absence. As you read the section (reproduced below), think about the following questions:

1) Whose nation is it that has worshipped the egel?

2) Who is responsible for "bringing them up from Egypt"?

3) Whose God/god is whose?

4) What arguments does Moshe use to convince Hashem not to kill the people, and why?

SHEMOT 32:7-14

Hashem said to Moshe, "Go down [the mountain], for YOUR NATION has become corrupt, whom YOU BROUGHT UP from the land of Egypt. They have turned aside quickly from the way which I commanded them; they have made for themselves a plated calf and have bowed down to it, sacrificed to it, and said, "This is your god, Yisrael, who brought you up from the land of Egypt."

Hashem said to Moshe, "I have seen this nation, and it is a stiff-necked nation. Now, let Me alone, so My anger may burn against them and I will consume them, and I will make you into a great nation."

Moshe beseeched Hashem, his God, and said, "Why, God, let Your anger burn against YOUR NATION, whom YOU BROUGHT out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? Why should Egypt say, 'Evilly did He take them out, to kill them in the mountains and wipe them off the face of the Earth'? Return from Your burning anger, and retract the evil [decree] for Your nation! Remember Avraham, Yitzhak, and Ya'akov, Your servants, to whom You swore by Your name, saying, 'I shall increase your descendants as the stars of the sky, and all of this land which I have mentioned, I shall give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever." God retracted the evil He had said He would do to His nation.

WHOSE NATION?

Hashem claims that this nation is "amkha," your (Moshe's) nation. He distances Himself from the people at the same time as He makes Moshe responsible for them and their actions. This is the first hint Hashem drops that Moshe is supposed to rise to the people's defense.

But Moshe shoots back that the nation is Hashem's nation, insisting that He 'must' acknowledge His connection to them. This is one of the major themes which will control much of what Moshe says in Ki Tisa in attempting to regain Hashem's favor for the people.

WHO "BROUGHT THEM UP FROM EGYPT"?

Hashem claims that it is Moshe who brought the people out of Egypt. This is yet another way of making Moshe

responsible for the people, and therefore a hint to him that he is supposed to defend them. It also distances Him from the people, weakening the covenantal relationship as it sarcastically echoes the idolatrous people's claim: The people first gave Moshe credit for taking them out of Egypt, and then transferred this credit to the egel; Hashem does the same thing, first giving credit to Moshe and then quoting the people giving credit to the egel. The subtext: "What chutzpah! First they give you credit, then they give the idol credit, when it was I who took them out of Egypt! Not just idol-worshippers, but ungrateful idol-worshippers!"

But Moshe claims that it was Hashem who took the people out of Egypt. Moshe is once again reminding Hashem of His relationship with and responsibility for Bnei Yisrael.

THIS GOD IS MY GOD, THIS GOD IS YOUR GOD . . .

Hashem, furious with the people for worshipping the idol, echoes their claim that for them, the egel is god. Moshe does not try to argue with Hashem on this score; it would be tough to make the case that the people remain devoted to Hashem while they idolatrously cavort around the work of their own hands at the foot of the mountain. Reflecting the fact that at this point, it is Moshe alone who remains faithful to Hashem, the "narrator" of the Torah refers to Hashem as Moshe's God alone: Moshe beseeches "the Lord, HIS God."

MOSHE'S EMERGENCY RESPONSE

Moshe marshals several arguments to convince Hashem not to kill Bnei Yisrael on the spot:

1) Relationship: You have already taken them ("YOUR nation") out of Egypt with great fanfare and a display of awesome power.

2) Hillul Hashem (desecration of God's name or reputation): the Egyptians will think of You as an evil God, confirming their pagan beliefs that a deity is basically a demonic being who must be appeased, rather than what You are, a benevolent being who must be positively worshipped.

As we saw in Parashat Bo, one of the primary aims of the plagues and the other miracle of the Exodus was to teach Egypt and the rest of the world about Hashem's power and His benevolence toward His nation. Nothing could uproot this lesson more thoroughly than Hashem's destruction of that special nation.

3) Past Promises: You have sworn to their forefathers that they will inherit the land.

None of Moshe's arguments come anywhere near saying that the people actually deserve to survive on their own merits; all of Moshe's arguments depend on external factors.

One other interesting note to the above scene is that although the text gives the impression that Moshe immediately responds to Hashem's fury by begging Him to spare the people, after which he descends the mountain to deal with the people himself, mefarshim (commentators) disagree about the chronology of the scene.

Ibn Ezra believes that Moshe does not actually respond here, and that he first goes down to destroy the egel and punish its worshippers; only then does he return to Hashem and deliver the tefila (prayer) above (this requires Ibn Ezra to assert that the Torah records Moshe's tefila here out of chronological order). Ibn Ezra is motivated to read the story this way partly for textual reasons, but also (as he states) because he thinks it impossible that Hashem would forgive the people while the egel remained among them.

Ramban, however, believes that Moshe does respond immediately to Hashem's threat to destroy the people. He, too, is motivated partly by textual reasons, but also by the argument that Moshe simply did not have the 'luxury' of descending the mountain to deal with the sinners. He had to deal with the Divine emergency and convince Hashem not to simply wipe the people out; then he could begin to address their crime.

DEALING WITH THE PEOPLE:

Moshe succeeds in saving the people from immediate, utter destruction, but there is still a lot left to do:

1) To seek complete forgiveness from Hashem for the people. So far, all he has achieved is preventing Hashem from

destroying Bnei Yisrael. He still must give the relationship a future.

2) To punish the people, help them understand the magnitude of what they have done, and guide them in a process of teshuva (repentance).

First, the Torah says that Moshe turns to go down to 'take care' of the people. But then, strangely, the Torah pauses for a detailed description of the Luhot and how specially they were formed; one senses that the Torah treats us to this detailed description of the divinely carved character of the Luhot because they are about to be smashed.

SHEMOT 32:19-20 --
When he approached the camp and saw the egel and the dancing, Moshe's anger burned. He cast the Luhot from his hands and shattered them at the base of the mountain. He took the egel they had made, burned it in fire, ground it up fine, spread it over the surface of the water, and made Bnei Yisrael drink.

"PLANNED SPONTANEITY":

The Torah's account of Moshe's approach to the camp makes it sound like seeing the egel and the dancing is what arouses his anger. But we know that Moshe already knows what is ahead even before he sees it -- after all, Hashem himself has told Moshe how they have been keeping busy while he is gone -- and in fact, Moshe tells Yehoshua what is ahead as they descend the mountain! Why does the Torah make it sound as if the sight of the egel and the dancing arouses Moshe's anger? Why is he angry only now, and not since all the way back when he heard about the egel? Furthermore, while the Torah makes Moshe's smashing of the Luhot sounds like a spontaneous reaction to spontaneous anger, since we know that Moshe has known about the egel the whole way down the mountain, it seems logical that he brings the Luhot with him for the express purpose of smashing them. How do we look at the smashing of the Luhot -- as a calculated demonstrative act or a spontaneous expression of fury?

Note also the irony connected with Moshe's anger: while we just heard him beg Hashem, "Al ye-khereh apekha," "Do not let Your anger burn," now we see him doing exactly that himself: "Va-yi-khar af Moshe"! Note also the irony in that despite his begging Hashem not to kill the people, he is about to turn around and do exactly that himself! Yes, Hashem had wanted to kill everyone and Moshe had "only" 3,000 people killed, but it is still highly ironic that the defender turns into the accuser! Moshe has us coming and going -- is he with us or against us?

Moshe's job is to heal the relationship between Hashem and Bnei Yisrael. This means he has to play both ends. **When Moshe faces Hashem and Hashem tells him to stand aside so that He can blast the people with a lightning bolt (so to speak), Moshe knows that even in His anger, Hashem is hinting that Moshe should defend the people -- Hashem wants to be appeased.** (If He did not mean to hint to Moshe to stand his ground and defend, He would just blast the people without warning Moshe). Moshe plays the role of appeaser, reminding Hashem of all the reasons He shouldn't destroy the people. Moshe's role in the face of Hashem's anger is to hold his own anger completely in check for if he, too, becomes angry, how will he be able to save the people?

But when Moshe faces the people, he allows his anger to blossom. The people have been attacked by a virulent form of spiritual cancer, and to survive they need radical surgery. If, without knowing the context, you watched a surgeon amputate a limb, you might think the surgeon a cruel torturer. But the truth is that he or she is a healer; without the amputation, the patient would die. Moshe seems full of cruelty and anger, but the truth is that he comes as a healer. The people need an amputation to avoid the greater threat, so that Hashem will be satisfied that justice has been done. Also, in order to be rehabilitated back into relationship with Hashem, the people need to experience punishment and guilt. They need to understand what they have done, deeply regret it, and deeply desire to return to Hashem. So when Moshe faces the egel and the dancing, he gives free reign to the anger he choked back before.

The mefarshim pick up on various themes which hint that part of Moshe's strategy is to induce in the people an awareness of what they have done and a sense of guilt. Seforno addresses the question of Moshe's use of the Luhot to teach the people a lesson:

SEFORNO, SHEMOT 32:15:
"With the two tablets in his hand": He [Moshe] reasoned that when he returned, they would repent, and if not, he would smash them [the Tablets] right in front of them to shock them into repentance.

The smashing of the Luhot is not a completely spontaneous reaction to Moshe's own anger; it is something he plans

while he makes his way down the mountain. His anger at seeing the egel and the dancing -- anger which he purposely lets loose at this point -- adds authentic passion to the gesture of smashing the Luhot in front of the people.

Ramban adds to the picture with his explanation of why Moshe has the people drink the dust of the egel. Other mefarshim say that eating the dust reveals who has participated in the worship: just as the waters drunk by the sota [woman accused of adultery] show whether a woman has been unfaithful, these waters will show if the people have been unfaithful to Hashem. But the Ramban adds a different suggestion, a psychological one:

RAMBAN, SHEMOT 32:20:
. . . He wanted to show contempt for what they had made, so he ground up their god and put it into their bellies so that they should excrete it in their excrement, as it says, "Cast them [your idols] out like an outcast, tell them, 'Get out!'" (Isaiah 30:22). According to our rabbis, he also meant to test them like a sota, so that "their belly would swell and their thigh fall away," and that is the truth.

Before they can do teshuva, Bnei Yisrael need to understand what they have done and develop a sense of revulsion for it. They need to feel a powerful sense of harata [regret], an integral part of teshuva. One way of making the people feel this revulsion is to transform the egel, the object of their worship, into something palpably disgusting; in addition, Moshe's action forces the people to demonstrate (literally) their rejection of the egel, also a basic element of teshuva.

Moshe's next task is to respond to the demands of justice by wiping out the chief participants in the worship of the egel. Last week we developed the picture of the Kohen as a person who relinquishes his personhood, his individuality, in order to function as a proper conduit between Hashem and the people. If this Kohenic character is shared to some degree by the rest of Shevet Levi, it fits that specifically Levi volunteers to mete out punishment in Hashem's place, ignoring the bonds of love and friendship in representing Hashem's justice to the people -- in carrying out in microcosm the destruction Hashem had wanted to carry out in macrocosm.

A CONSPIRACY TO FORGIVE:

This brings us to the next encounter between Hashem and Moshe.

SHEMOT 32:30-35 --
The next day, Moshe said to the people, "You have sinned greatly; now I shall ascend to Hashem -- perhaps I will be able to atone for your sin." Moshe returned to Hashem and said, "O, this people have sinned greatly and made for themselves a golden god. Now, if You will forgive them, [good,] but if not, erase me from the book You have written!" Hashem said to Moshe, "Whomever has sinned against Me, him will I erase from My book! Now go and lead the people to the place of which I have spoken to you; My angel shall go before you. But on the day I choose, I will recall their sin upon them!"

Moshe saved the people's lives with his first tefilla, but now he must find a way to convince Hashem to forgive them and reestablish relationship with them. He adopts a very aggressive strategy: "Erase me from the book You have written!" Many of us know Rashi's interpretation: "Erase me from the Torah." But most other mefarshim disagree and say that "the book You have written" is not the Torah, it is the Book of Life, or the book of merits and sins which is before Hashem. In other words, "If You will not forgive them, then kill me!" (Rashbam and others).

"NO" MEANS "YES":

On the surface of things, Hashem seems to brush Moshe off and refuse his request -- "I will erase the sinners, not you. Now go back to your job and lead the people." But buried in this refusal is something quite new: "Take them to Israel" (!) Not only will Hashem not destroy Bnei Yisrael, but in fact they will still be traveling to Eretz Yisrael to inherit the land promised to them. This subtle shift -- subtle because it seems buried within a context of refusal of Moshe's bold demand -- is a pattern which spans the parasha: Moshe demands complete forgiveness in different ways, and Hashem, seeming to refuse, actually grants the request in part. The cumulative result is that Hashem edges closer and closer to completely forgiving the people, until, close to the end of the parasha (as we will see next week), He forgives them completely and returns His Presence to them.

This pattern raises our awareness of a fascinating aspect of these conversations: Hashem seems angry and vengeful, threatening to destroy the people, refusing to forgive, turning Moshe down again and again. But along the way, Hashem continues to drop hints to Moshe that he is doing the right thing by defending Bnei Yisrael and challenging Hashem's decrees. If not for these hints, it would be difficult to understand why Hashem does not simply blast Moshe to dust for his

chutzpah and stubbornness [who is more "keshei oref" than Moshe himself?] in refusing His commands: "Leave Me, so that I may destroy them!" Moshe refuses to budge, and instead launches into a tefila to save Bnei Yisrael -- a successful tefila. Moshe understands that by telling him to "stand aside" so that he can destroy the people, Hashem is really saying, "Don't stand aside! Play the defender!" Hashem certainly does not need Moshe to stand aside to strike at Bnei Yisrael, so when Hashem asks Moshe to make way, Moshe reads, "I [Hashem] am so angry that I am about to destroy the people. The only thing 'in the way' is you, Moshe -- the only thing that can stop Me is your interceding for the people. If you stand aside, if you do not pray for them, I will destroy them."

Moshe then takes the initiative, demanding forgiveness or death (reminding all of us Americans, of course, of Patrick Henry). While the exoteric formulation of Hashem's response is a refusal, it is actually a partial accession to Moshe's request. As we will see, this pattern is one that will continue. [You may recall that Avraham displays similar 'chutzpah' in challenging Hashem's plan to destroy Sedom and Amora. Avraham knows that he is expected to challenge; if not, God would have had no need to tell him of His plans for Sedom.]

Hashem does not want to destroy the people; He wants to forgive them. He communicates this to Moshe in subtle ways, but on the surface He remains angry and distant. In a sense, Hashem and Moshe are partners in a conspiracy of mercy, an under-the-table effort to forgive the people. Moshe immediately senses this and plays the role of audacious defender, while Hashem continues to play the role of vengeful and angry prosecutor and punisher. Hashem helps Moshe, as we will see, by supplying Him with the strategy which will allow him to achieve the goal desired by both of them: the return of Hashem's Presence to the people.

This 'conspiracy,' and the fact that Hashem is implicitly instructing Moshe to play the defender's role, is noted by Hazal in a midrash quoted by Rashi (33:11). Moshe has moved the "Ohel Mo'ed" outside the camp, a move interpreted by Hazal as Moshe's understanding that just as Hashem has withdrawn from the Bnei Yisrael, so should His faithful servant, Moshe, withdraw from them. But Hashem tells Moshe that he is wrong:

RASHI 33:11 --
Hashem told Moshe to return to the camp. He said to him, "If I am angry, and you are angry, who will draw the Bnei Yisrael close?!"

Despite His anger, Hashem wants to forgive the people, and He communicates this to Moshe, although perhaps with subtler hints than the conversation imagined by the midrash to express this idea.

MY ANGEL SHALL GO BEFORE YOU":

Getting back to the scene above, although Hashem promises to punish the people at some point, it seems that they are basically "back on track" to go to Eretz Yisrael and inherit the land. If so, however, then the parasha should end here; the reason it does not is also 'buried' in this section: "My angel shall go before you." Hashem Himself will not be coming with the people (=no Mishkan, as we have discussed at length). Moshe notices this, and does not respond -- but he also does not carry out Hashem's orders! So Hashem gives the orders again. Usually, when the word "va-yomer" appears to tell us that someone says something, and then "va-yomer" appears again to introduce another statement by the same person, the implication is that the other party to the conversation has not responded to the first statement; the first party has paused, waiting for a response, but when it does not come, he begins again, so the Torah gives us another "va-yomer," as it does here:

SHEMOT 33:1-6:
HASHEM SAID ["va-yomer" again] to Moshe, "Go, arise from here, you and the nation you brought up from Egypt, to the land I promised to Avraham, to Yitzhak, and to Ya'akov, saying, 'To your descendants shall I give it.' I will send an angel before you, and I shall drive out the Kena'ani, Emori, Hiti, Perizi, Hivi, and Yevusi. [Go to] the land flowing with milk and honey. But I will not go up with you, for you are a stiff-necked nation, and I might destroy you on the way." The people heard this evil thing and mourned. No one put on his decorative ornaments. Hashem said to Moshe, "Tell the Bnei Yisrael, 'Your are a stiff-necked people; if I accompany you for even a second, I will destroy you. Now remove your decorations, and I will decide what to do to you."

Hashem repeats to Moshe the command to lead the people to Eretz Yisrael (since Moshe has not budged so far), repeats that He will send an angel before them, and makes even clearer than before that He Himself will not be making the trip with them. It seems that there is no progress in the forgiveness effort. But a second look shows that Moshe's silent refusal to budge has quite effectively 'changed' Hashem's mind on several scores:

1) The land has now become "the land I promised to the Avot," not simply "the place I told you," as in Hashem's last command. This implies that Hashem has accepted Moshe's reminder (in his first tefila) that He promised the land to their forefathers, and that He therefore 'must' acknowledge a strong historic connection with and commitment to the people.

2) The angel will not just "go before them," but will help them conquer the powerful nations there.

3) The land is described as a wonderful place to be, flowing with milk and honey. The angry Hashem who commanded, "Take them to that place I told you!" now says, "Take them to the land flowing with milk and honey, the land promised to their forefathers, the land I will help them conquer through My angel." The latter statement simply cannot come out of an angry countenance.

4) Hashem's not accompanying the people is formulated not as a punishment, a punitive withdrawal of the Divine Presence, but as a form of mercy. Hashem recognizes that the people's ingrained habits and beliefs make it impossible for them to walk the straight and narrow, remaining always completely obedient. If He were to accompany them personally, any failure on their part to meet divine standards of faithfulness would demand that He destroy them, for His accompanying them would mean that any rebellion would be "in His face" and demand swift and extreme punishment. Hashem must withdraw so that when the people fail, they will, in a sense, be rebelling only against Hashem's angel, not against the Divine Presence itself.

The Torah tells us that the people hear this and mourn, understanding that their behavior has caused the departure of the Shekhina. But then, puzzlingly, Hashem commands Moshe to deliver this message again. Also puzzling is Hashem's command to the people to remove their ornaments, despite the fact that the Torah tells us that the people, in their mourning, had already removed their ornaments on their own, caught up in sadness and guilt. Why command what has already been done?

Hashem's command to Moshe to repeat to the people that He will not accompany them fits perfectly into the pattern we have noted of Hashem's external anger but internal mercy and desire to forgive. Hashem is trying to emphasize to the people that the withdrawal of His Presence is not a punishment, but a merciful recognition that the people cannot handle the demands of faithful obedience implied by Hashem's immediate personal Presence. And the command to remove the already-removed decorations reinforces the impression that Hashem is only externally angry -- He decrees a non-decree, prescribing mourning that the people have already performed independently. He purposely adds nothing substantive to the people's mourning or sadness, only preserving the outward facade of His unforgiving, blaming posture.

We will continue next week with the final scenes of the 'conspiracy to forgive.'

Shabbat Shalom

Note: Emphasis added