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The Lower East Side
Parshat HaShavua sheet

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from around the Internet*

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Parshat Ki Tisa

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ALL THINGS CONSIDERED

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

One of the episodes in the Torah that is most difficult to understand is the story of the Golden Calf. Not only is it almost incomprehensible that a nation which saw the hand of Hashem redeem them had become so perfidious. After such majestic revelation, the words that they used to declare the Golden Calf as their new god are inconceivable.

The Torah tells us that Moshe, according to the Jews' calculations, tarried in returning from Sinai's mountaintop. The Jews panicked. Egyptian converts who joined the Jews at the exodus stirred the crowd. So Ahron stalled for time. He asked them to donate prized possessions — the gold and silver that were taken from the Egyptians and now were worn by the women and children. The men didn't wait for their spouses. In the most enthusiastic response to an appeal to date, they gave their own gold. This gold meant a lot to them. It was their first taste of freedom in 210 years. But they gave impulsively and passionately. Ahron took the gold and heaved it into a large fire, and with uncalled-for input from a few sorcerers, a Golden Calf emerged. That was bad enough. What is more striking is the declaration of the nation that followed. The people danced around their newly created deity and shouted, "These are your gods which brought you up from the land of Egypt!"
(Exodus:32:8)

What could they have meant? Could they truly have thought that the molten image of the Golden Calf led them from Egypt? It's an absurdity! Surely they did not believe that a Golden Calf was their leader.

Rabbi Emanuel Feldman of Atlanta, once made a hospital visit to a gentlemen from south Georgia. He promptly received the following letter: "Dear Rabbi: Thank you for visiting my husband in the hospital. I thought that orthodox Rabbis just sit and study and pray all day. I am pleased that you do not."

Another time, Rabbi Feldman writes, he was on a plane, and due to overbooking he was bumped up from economy class to a seat in the first class section of the aircraft. During the entire flight, a major Jewish philanthropist, who was seated in first class as a matter of monetary right, kept staring at Rabbi Feldman with a look of curious displeasure. As they were departing the aircraft, the wealthy man could control himself no longer. "Excuse me, Rabbi," he imposed. "Do you always fly first class?" At first Rabbi Feldman was taken aback but he composed himself and without apologies he comfortably replied, "Doesn't everybody?"

People have impressions of defining actions, moments, and behavior. "Orthodox Rabbis pray all day and don't tend to the sick." "A Rabbi is paid to fly in economy class — not first class." The same holds true of *mitzvos*. Often we designate certain *mitzvos* as the *raison d'être* of Judaism. Certain *mitzvos* or ideals become a cause célèbre as others fall to the wayside. We ignore some as we point our fingers to *our* favorites and shout, "This is our god!"

The Jews thought that Moshe would never return. They were left in the dessert with nothing — except one *mitzvah*. Their beloved leader Moshe had asked them to ask the Egyptians for gold and silver. And they did. That gold and silver represented their emergence into freedom. It was the remnant of the glory of their redemption and the now-missing man who importuned them to ask for gold. It was all that reminded them of the man that gave them a sense of pride and justice. That gold now stood in front of them in the form of a calf. That gold was now their god! They had chosen a *mitzvah*, cherished it, danced about it, and unfortunately, now they worshipped it.

There is no one aspect to Judaism. There are 613 *mitzvos*, and not one of them can stand alone. When one *mitzvah* is chosen and placed as the defining moment of Judaism, it is nothing more than a Golden Calf. For Judaism cannot depend on one good deed alone.

Money is Like Fire

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"Each person who passes to be numbered, from age twenty, shall give a half-shekel, from a shekel of the Temple,... a donation to *HaShem*." [30:13]

The *Medrash* says, "Rabbi Meir said, the Holy One, Blessed be He, brought out from beneath his throne of Glory a coin of fire, and showed it to *Moshe*, and said to him, like this shall they give."

The *Noam Elimelech* explains why *HaShem* showed *Moshe* a coin of fire. When handling money, he explains, one should remember that a coin is very much like fire. Just as fire can burn and destroy, but can also warm, and cook, and serve in other valuable ways, so too a coin. If one gives a coin for a good purpose, for charity or kindness, then it is very valuable and helpful to a person; but if a person uses his money improperly, then the same coin can burn and cause serious harm.

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein zt"l, asks the following question: why did G-d have to show *Moshe* a coin at all? Why was it so difficult for *Moshe* to understand the size of a half-shekel? The verse says that a shekel was 20 geirah, a known amount, so it should have been easy to determine a half-shekel. Rabbi Feinstein explains that *Moshe* could not understand how people living in a materialistic world could involve themselves with spiritual pursuits. *HaShem* showed him a half-shekel to show him that a person should divide his time: only half of a person's efforts can be devoted to material gain; the spiritual side must be cared for as well. The division also shows a middle ground -- a person living in this world also cannot be so overwhelmed with spirituality that he ignores his material needs. It is crucial to find a balance.

Washing Hands

By Rabbi Berel Wein

In continuing its description of the artifacts that were to be placed in the mishkan, the Torah informs us regarding the kiyor – the type of laver or fountain that was installed in the courtyard of the mishkan and later the Temple in Jerusalem. This kiyor was used by the kohanim – the priestly descendants of Aharon – to wash their hands and feet before entering the mishkan or Temple to begin their daily service to God and to Israel. This washing of hands and feet was not only a matter of cleanliness but it was also a symbolic ritual of preparation for holy service. The washing of the hands of the kohanim remains a ritual till today, when their hands are washed in water before they ascend the podium to bless the congregation. In fact, washing one's hands in a ritual fashion no matter how clean or sterile they are remains a daily part of Jewish life for us all. Before we eat bread we must wash our hands. The washing of our hands is part of the order of the Seder service on Pesach night. When we arise in the morning, we wash our hands. Before prayer services we are also bidden to wash our hands. And when we have completed dealing with our bodily functions we are also instructed to wash our hands. Again, these are not only matters of cleanliness, though cleanliness is a prime virtue in Jewish life, but there is a ritual, spiritual and holy attachment to the washing of hands.

There is an important message implied in this hand-washing regimen of Judaism. It is to impress upon the person the holiness of everything in life and that all that we do is really in service of God. The phrase that was used throughout the Jewish world by the "wakers" in the early morning was "Arise to the service of God." But the service of God requires an appreciation and understanding that we are in fact serving God in our daily lives. Otherwise, without that realization, everything in life becomes prosaic and mundane, habitual rote and sometimes even meaningless. The fact that we are bidden to wash our hands before or after performing many of the most mundane things in life – eating, awaking, dealing with our bodily functions, etc. – reminds us that nothing in life is ordinary, profane or mundane.

Everything is important. Everything is part of the service that we owe to our Creator. Everything therefore requires a sense of purpose and dedication, an understanding of the challenges that life puts before us and that we are commanded to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Washing one's hands is a reminder of this challenge and obligation. Just as the kohain in the Temple had to remind himself daily of the holiness inherent in the performance of his tasks in the Temple by washing his hands and feet before entering upon his daily regimen of work in the Temple, so too are we bidden by the ritual of washing our hands numerous times during the day to remember our duties and challenges to create holiness and spirituality in our everyday lives and affairs. Thus the kiyor and its message survive amongst all of us even today.

“When you take the sum of the Children of Israel according to their numbers, let each one give to Hashem an atonement for his soul when they are counted; then there will be no plague among them when they are counted” (30:12)

Why does the Torah choose to refer to the count taken for the national census with the verb **אָשַׁנָ**, which literally means “to lift up”? R’ Dovid Feinstein explains that the census served a dual purpose. Not only did it enable Moshe to determine the size of the population, but by counting each person individually, every man was made to feel important in his own right. All those who were counted felt lifted up and elevated. As the Ramban writes in Parshas Bamidbar (1:45), each person was personally counted by Moshe, the greatest prophet who ever lived, and Aharon, the kohen gadol. He would be greeted, counted, and blessed by these two great and holy men. Every person who experienced this would feel uplifted and reinvigorated. In this way, the census served to make each individual feel valuable in his own right and not just a number as part of a larger nation.

“This they shall give, everyone who goes through the counting: half a shekel according to the holy shekel. Twenty gerahs equal one shekel; half of a shekel shall be an offering to Hashem” (30:13)

The Torah set the contribution of every individual at a half-shekel to indicate that each person is incomplete and always has to strive to perfect himself more and more. Whether one is young or old, there is always more to accomplish. When each person gave a half-shekel in order to be counted in the census, it gave him the self-awareness of his shortcomings and the realization that his mission in life was to make himself more complete.

The Vilna Gaon writes that the word **מְחִצָּה** contains an important lesson about the reward that awaits a person who gives charity. The **ו** in the middle, representing tzedaka, is surrounded by **ה**, life, while the outermost letters spell **מְתָ**, death. Charity surrounds a person with life and sends death far away. As the posuk in Mishlei (10:2) states: “Charity saves from death.” This reward fits the mitzvah of charity – when a person gives life to someone in need by giving him food, he earns extended life for himself too. The Gemara in Shabbos 156b records a story regarding the daughter of R’ Akiva that illustrates the power of tzedaka. Astrologers had predicted that she would be killed by a poisonous snake on her wedding day and this troubled R’ Akiva greatly. On the night of her wedding, she was removing a brooch and stuck it in the wall, unwittingly putting it right through the eye of a poisonous snake that had just appeared there. The next morning, when she reached for her brooch, she found the dead snake hanging there and reported what had happened to her father. R’ Akiva asked her what she had done that might have merited this miracle. She told her father that a poor man had come to the door earlier on her wedding day. Everyone had been so busy preparing for the wedding and nobody paid him any attention, but she noticed him and gave him some of the food that was being prepared for the wedding. The charity that she had given had saved her from death. What is the significance that she pierced the snake through its eye? Since she had mercy with her eyesight and looked kindly upon the poor man, the snake that was meant to kill her was struck through its eye.

“And now, let Me be, and let My anger burn against them, and I will finish them off; and I will make you into a great nation” (32:10)

Rashi writes that when Hashem told Moshe to leave Him alone so that he could destroy the nation, Moshe understood that if he were to pray and intercede on behalf of the people, then Hashem would not want to destroy them anymore. Because of His great love for the Jewish people, Hashem tipped Moshe off so that he would understand how to save them. In every generation, Hashem is ready to forgive our sins if we can pick up His messages and do our part to improve.

“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” (32:19)

Why does the posuk stress that Moshe saw the dances around the golden calf? Seforno writes that when Moshe observed how happy the people were that they had sinned, he became extremely angry. Their joy and enthusiasm in serving the calf caused him to lose hope that they could rectify their sinful ways and return to their original state of purity. It was the dancing that led him to decide that the people were unfit to receive the luchos. If sins are considered grievous when done with enthusiasm and dance, then certainly our mitzvos will be enhanced if we feel great joy when performing them. Our enthusiasm shows how much serving Hashem truly means to us. We should observe the mitzvos with great joy and fervor and we will accumulate a great reward for doing so.

by Rabbi Mayer Friedmann

The Golden Calf: Yesterday and Today

by Rabbi Shraga Simmons

As Cecille B. DeMille would say: "Let's set the scene." The Jewish people have just stood at Mount Sinai and heard the Ten Commandments. Their trusty leader Moses announces that he's going up the mountain for 40 days — to learn more Torah and get the stone tablets. The Torah describes what happens next:

The people saw that Moses delayed in coming down from the mountain. They gathered around Aaron, and said to him, "Make us a shrine which will go before us. We have no idea what became of Moses, the man who brought us out of Egypt..." The people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron, who cast them into a molten calf. Some of the people began to say, "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of Egypt." (Exodus 32:1-4)

The question is obvious: If the Jews had just witnessed God's awesome power in the Ten Plagues, the splitting of the Red Sea, and the revelation at Mount Sinai, how could these same people turn around and worship a Golden Calf?!

The answer is that the Jews never built the calf to be worshipped. Here's what happened: When Moses said, "I'm going up the mountain for 40 days," his intent was 40 full days. The people, however, mistakenly included in their count that first day — thus expecting Moses to return one day earlier. (For example, if today is Sunday, and I say you've got "one week" to get a certain job done — it's confusing whether you've got until Saturday or the following Sunday.)

So when Day 39 rolled around, the Jews began to wonder: "Where's Moses?" This caused great anxiety. For although the people knew it was God Himself Who'd orchestrated all the miracles, it was nevertheless Moses who'd raised his staff for the Red Sea to split. They relied on Moses as captain of the team around whom they rallied to get the job done.

Their fundamental mistake? They lost patience, the serenity of knowing that life is a process and everything happens in its time. This lack of trust in made them lose touch with reality and — fueled by fear and anxiety — their imaginations began to run wild. On Day 39, the malcontents in the camp seized on this energy and began circulating rumors that Moses wasn't coming back at all. The Talmud says that they managed to instill so much doubt that the people actually saw a vision of Moses dead! (So strong is the power of suggestion.) Then the Jews reasoned: If Moses isn't coming back, we must craft a replacement. And so the Golden Calf was born. Not as an idol; not as a rebellion against God. But as a figurehead. A mere shrine to replace the missing Moses. The next thing you know, it's full-blown idolatry. What happened?

Maimonides explains that idolatry is not a single step, but rather a process. In the old days, someone would carve a piece of stone and call it the "sun god." He'd want to pay tribute to God as creator of the sun. Before long, they were worshipping the sun itself. They believed that something other than God was the ultimate source of strength and salvation. Today, it's not uncommon to believe that money, fame, stock options, status, an iPhone, or good looks is our source of fulfillment and happiness. Treating something other than God as having ultimate significance is the very definition of idolatry! People start off focused and clear on the priorities of life. But then we get sidetracked and may even forget what we're truly living for. We imagine that putting our trust in [fill in the blank — money, power, beauty, prestige, etc.] will bring me happiness.

Ask the typical high school senior: "Why are you going to college?" He's likely to reply, "Because I need to get a job." "Okay, why do you need a job?" "So I can pay my bills and have peace of mind to pursue the important things in life — family, friends, passions." Check in with him 10 years later — he's likely working 60 hours a week with no time for family, friends or passions.

After Moses came down from the mountain and smashed the Tablets, he issued a pronouncement to all Jews: "You can now turn back and avoid tragedy. Stop worshipping the Golden Calf and affirm your loyalty to God." Only the Tribe of Levi, comprising about 3% of the Jewish population, accepted Moses' words. The other 97% remained stuck in their failed venture. How often do we see someone continuing a destructive relationship simply because they're deeply invested and stuck. The physical or emotional gratification may have us hooked. And once we're in, it's hard to stop.

Recently at a young adult discussion group in Los Angeles, my colleague Rabbi Nachum Braverman tried an experiment. He held up a \$20 bill and made the following announcement: "We are going to auction off this \$20 bill to the highest bidder. The only catch is that whoever finishes as the second-highest bidder, also has to pay their bid, getting nothing in return." The bidding began in a fun and festive tone. Quickly the bidding passed the \$20 mark and was down to two final bidders. At that point, each bidder had to outbid the other in order to avoid becoming the second-highest bidder who would pay for nothing. The mood in the room turned ominous, as everyone realized that someone was about to lose a lot of money! The bidding reached a frenzied panic, the two contestants, locked into a no-win situation. The room was breathless. And finally, that \$20 bill sold for \$76. Crazy.

It's true what they say: "The fight for life is the fight for sanity." Many times in life, we hear a little voice in our head saying, 'Stop the idolatry.' Something will challenge us to stand up and be counted. In which camp are we? Do we have the clarity and conviction to stay on the right track? Because how we respond will have implications not only for us, but for generations beyond. The lesson of the Golden Calf is to think about what we're doing. What starts innocently may turn out tragic. Have we lost sight of our true priorities? Are we being swept away by the mob? We need to take a deep breath and read the signs being sent to us every moment. With the right clarity, when we hear the voice, we will stand up and be counted.

The Road to Hell ...

By Sheldon Stern

Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Levi (Berachos 59A) states that if one sees a perfectly cloudless sky, he blesses Oseh Maaseh Bereishis. The rationale is that such a pristine firmament hearkens back to the Creation. Rav Chisda, however, disagrees arguing that from the time the Temple was destroyed, there's never been such a sublime sky. This is based on the notion that a deficit in this world, i.e. the Temple's absence, affects the world(s) above. This concept dovetails with the principle that our world and the heavens are intimately intertwined. The Gemara, also Berachos 59 A. outlines Hashem's mechanism in bringing the Mabul. He removed two stars from the constellation called Kimah leaving a gaping hole through which the supernal waters descended and inundated our planet. When it was time to end the deluge, Hashem took two stars from a neighboring constellation(Ayish) and used them to plug the gap. We see then that G-d put two stars in an unfamiliar location. Given the thesis that the two worlds parallel each other, it should follow that two stars on Earth are not where they belong. I would suggest that Parshas Chukas and Ki Sissa, stars; no megastars by any estimate, meet our criteria. Chukas is about the Parah Adumah, the red heifer that was burned, and its ashes, along with certain paraphernalia, then used to purify those who were Tamei Mes. So this ostensibly, is the province of Sefer Vayikra, yet it's found in Bamidbar. And our Parsha, which details the Chet Haeigel, would fit right in Sefer Bamidbar along with the other instances in which our forebears slipped up. So why, instead, does it occupy such a transcendent position between the Parshas which detail the Mishkan's construction?

The Gemara, in numerous places, notes that Hashem isn't like a king of flesh of blood. who, when irked by his servants, lops off their heads. In Parshas Ki Sissa, Hashem alludes to this. He tells Moshe, in the aftermath of the sin of the Golden Calf, that He wants to start all over again, building a new nation from His trusted servant. Moshe, of course, "convinces" the Creator to abandon the plan by advancing a Kal VChomer to wit, "If a nation built on three legs(the Avos) can't stand what chance would a nation that stands on one leg have? In truth, Hashem had no intention of eliminating the Jewish people, because He knows we're eternal. He simply wanted Moshe to come to our defense and thereby increase his Zechusim. But with this, we can answer our question. By placing Ki Sissa in proximity with the Mishkan, Hashem is teaching us a timeless Mussar lesson. No matter how royally we mess up, either individually or as a nation, Hashem is always prepared to welcome us back under His wings. If the Akeidah is the gift that keeps on giving, having sustained us throughout the millennia, the sin of the Eigel is considered the source of all sins, Yet a few months later Israel was busy preparing a home, a Dirah Tachttonah for the Ineffable One.

This idea is critical because the Yetzer hora would have us believe exactly the opposite. He'll tell us that we've fallen out of favor with the Supreme Being and that rift can't be mended. But this leads to another question, "If Ki Sissa serves as a reminder that Hashem is the Master of forgiveness it should've been placed before Parshas Trumah. Our point then would have been manifest, despite our nation's egregious transgression Hashem welcomed them back into His good graces and urged them to build Him a Mishkan. And such a transition could've been seamless. Remove the first section of Ki Sissa which discusses the Machtzis Hashekel and insert it into Parshat Terumah where it would be part of Moshe's appeal. So why instead is it located smack dab in the middle between Tetzaveh and Vayakhel? So perhaps Hashem is teaching another Mussar lesson. Bernard of Clairvaux, a twelfth-century abbot said, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions."(the French equivalent of course.) By situating Ki Sissa within the Parshas of the Mishkan, the Torah is teaching an object lesson, "When you get an idea to do something right make sure you get it done, because the Yetzer hora will fight you tooth and nail. And what makes him such a tough nut to crack is that while he's your eternal enemy he cloaks himself in the guise of friendship. Sure you have to give Tzeddaka but are you sure it should go to that organization? I heard that they're loaded and they use most of the money on their salaries.

Now let's end by taking a closer look at the expression. In last week's essay on Parshas Tetzaveh, Mendel Berlin quoted the saintly Chofetz Chaim. He criticized the Cheder Rabbi who kicked Leible Bronstein out of the yeshiva, The preeminent Godol of pre-war Europe blamed the Rabbi for causing all the death and devastation wrought by little Leible, now the infamous Leon Trotsky. To be sure, the Rabbi thought he was doing the right thing. When he came to the next world he likely defended himself by saying that he gave the boy the same tough love that his Rebbeim subjected him to. But there's another element to consider. Let's say you go to a shul whose Shabbos minyan starts at 9 am but they have an 8:30 shiur that's well attended. You know you should go, you want to go, but you never make it. But is it fair to say that such a person belongs in hell? The answer is a resounding yes. To understand this we need to rethink our conception of Gehinnom. Rabbi Miller nailed it. Gehinnom is the world of regret. It's where your entire life will be replayed before your eyes and you'll see all the mistakes you made and all the opportunities you blew. And it'll hurt like hell. The point to recognize is when you have an idea to do something good, that's coming from Hashem. He's providing opportunities for immortality and you'll be heartbroken when you discover what you missed. Obviously, you can't act on everything, but that's why one must have a Rav to bounce ideas off. Navigating the course of one's life isn't easy, but it's the most important thing you'll ever do.

Heresy Cloaked in Piety

By Rabbi Yossy Goldman

How did the Jews, who had just weeks earlier personally experienced the Revelation at Sinai and the Ten Commandments, justify their demand for an idolatrous golden calf?

Well, on the face of it, it did seem as if it might have been a genuine expression of a need for leadership. What was their argument? *Make for us gods who will lead us, because this man Moses who took us out of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him* (*Exodus 32:1*). Moshe was still up on the mountain, appeared to be late in returning, and they feared he wasn't coming back at all. The people's demand for a visible, tangible leader to replace Moses appeared reasonable. Arguably, it seemed to be a sincere call for religious guidance and for a means of better identifying with the One G-d.

But where did it end? Not only in blatant idolatry but also in adultery and even murder. The verse (*ibid.*, verse 6) reads "*And they arose to revel*". Commentary interprets the word *litzacheck*--"to revel"--as depraved merry-making which included wild orgies of unbridled immorality and the killing of Hur, son of Miriam, who tried to stop them.

Here we find a profound message as relevant today as in days of old. It sometimes occurs that people make demands cloaked in piety or religious fervor. But, beneath the surface lies a selfish desire and sinister motivations. Often, people ask for G-d, when what they really want is sin!

Where was G-d during the Holocaust? This most disturbing question may be asked in a variety of ways. It could be out of a genuine desire to understand the most challenging philosophical issue of the day. On the other hand, it might also be asked almost flippantly as a convenient excuse for one's own religious inadequacies.

A good test of where the question is coming from is this. If I gave you a watertight answer for the question of G-d and the Holocaust (assuming I had one), would you begin living a G-dly life? Would you start putting on *tefillin* today? Will you be in Shul tomorrow? If not, then the fact that you don't do so now cannot be attributed to your having a gripe with G-d. Either you weren't raised with that important tradition or you aren't sure how to do it, or perhaps you just couldn't be bothered and are using the Holocaust as a convenient rationalization.

Do you know how expensive it is to keep Kosher? Again, this may be a passionate cry of religious zeal, or perhaps a real concern to make kosher food more accessible to the masses. Unfortunately, it might also be a cheap excuse for someone who has no intention of keeping kosher at any price.

I once heard a story about three Jewish apostates in Russia of old. They met for drinks in the local tavern and were discussing the reasons why each of them left the faith. One says being a Christian opened new doors for him in business. The next said he fell in love with the squire's daughter and had to convert to marry her. The third says he had philosophical difficulties with the Torah and Talmud and was inspired by the theological doctrines of Christianity. Whereupon his friends told him in no uncertain terms that he was bluffing. "That story you can tell the goyim," the other two turned scoffed. "Us Jews you can tell the truth..."

Let us be honest. Why blame our own inadequacies on a mysteriously inexplicable G-d or on a Judaism we find fault with? Why say we are looking for G-d when we are really looking for the path of least resistance? Let us not abuse that which is holy for purposes of self-justification.

Even if we are not prepared to live a holy life, at least let us be honest.