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Parshat Ki Tisa

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MASKED EMOTIONS

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

In what is probably the most anti-climactic event in Jewish history, the nation that was about to receive the Torah from Moshe turns away from the will of Hashem. After 40 days they begin to worry that Moshe will never return and they panic. They create a new leader for themselves — The Golden Calf. The Torah describes the scene in Exodus 32:6: “The people offered (the calf) peace offerings and they sat down to eat and drink and they got up to revel.”

Hashem immediately commands Moshe to descend Mount Sinai in order to admonish his corrupt nation. As Moshe comes down the mountain he hears tumultuous shouts emanating from the people who were celebrating their new found deity. His student, Yehoshua, also hears the sounds and declares (Exodus 32:17) “the sound of battle is in the camp.” Moshe listens and amends the theory. He tells Yehoshua, “It is not the sound of victory, nor the sound of defeat: I hear the sound of distress.” When Moshe sees the Golden Calf he breaks the Tablets and restores order, sanity, and the belief in Hashem.

What is strange about the episode is the contrast of the sounds made and the sounds heard. If the Jewish People reveled and celebrated then why did Yehoshua hear sounds of war and how did Moshe hear sounds of distress? They should both have heard the sound of celebration and festivity.

Rav Chaim of Sanz had a custom: he would test the local children on a monthly basis. The children would recite orally from the Mishnah or Talmud and Rav Chaim would reward them generously with sweets and money. Once a group of secular Jews decided to dupe Rav Chaim. They taught a Talmudic selection to a gentile child and reviewed it with him until he knew it perfectly. They dressed him like a Chasidic child and had him stand in line with all the other children to be tested. The rabbi listened to the young boy intently. The other children were puzzled: they did not remember this boy from their cheder, yet they were amazed at the remarkable fluency he displayed in reciting his piece. Rav Chaim was not impressed at all. He turned to the young man and said, “please tell your father that there are better ways to earn a few coins!” With that he dismissed the child. The secularists were shocked. “How did the Rabbi know?” Their curiosity forced them to approach Rav Chaim. Rav Chaim smiled as he answered them. “There are two ways to say the Gemorah. One is filled with spirituality. The child’s body is swaying and filled with the emotion of Torah. The other is just repetitive rote. This young man lacked the fire and the true joy that the Jewish children have when learning Torah. I knew he was not one of ours.”

The Jews got up to revel around the golden calf. Moshe and Yehoshua however knew the difference between true joy — simcha — and confusion. The Jews’ revel was in essence distressed but it was masked with drinks and noise makers. True joy is coupled with a certainty and a sense of direction; something lacking for those Jews celebrating the idol. The Jews may have gotten up to celebrate, but it was no celebration. It may have looked like a party to the untrained eye, but Moshe knew the true sound of joy. It did not exist with the Golden Calf. True joy is the harmony of spirituality and contentment. Superficial sounds of euphoria and celebration are heard by those with true insight as sounds of battle and distress.

Everyone Counts

by Eitiel Goldwicht

This week's Parsha begins with God's commandment to Moshe to take a census of the Jewish people. Taking a census of the population is something that governments do in order to keep track of how many citizens they have. There is something interesting though regarding the way in which the Torah commands this count of the Jewish people to take place. On one hand, Moshe is supposed to take a census, but on the other hand he is not allowed to count the people, rather the information is collected by counting coins instead of people – "so that there will not be a plague among them."¹ It is implied that counting people is forbidden, as it may bring on the evil eye. However, if it is not advised to count people, why have them counted in the first place?

Additionally, the word the Torah uses for counting or taking a census is very unusual. Rather than say '*Timne*' or '*Tispor*', the traditional words meaning 'count', we find the words '*Ki Tisa*' which literally means, "when you lift the head of the Jewish People." Why doesn't the verse use one of the traditional words that refer to counting?

There is a very significant lesson here regarding human nature. We can understand from the commandment to count the people of Israel, that there are two conflicting human needs within each of us. On the one hand we all strive to be unique and special, to stand out and become someone. On the other hand, we want to be a part of something bigger than ourselves, part of a group or community, most of all, we want to belong. How can we belong and stand out at the same time? When counting the entire population these conflicting human needs are magnified. When so many people are counted, one might feel that he or she is just a number, one in many millions, perhaps even insignificant. Yet one cannot ignore the fact that a census is very important to understand the power of the entire people together.

Therefore, in Judaism a census is done through a counting of coins rather than people. Jewish wisdom is teaching us that a census is not just about counting every person, rather making every person count. Everyone must give half a shekel, giving a little of themselves, their earnings, towards a larger goal and mission that cannot be completed without them. Each and every Jew is integral, the mission can only be completed if everyone participates and takes part together. The words '*Ki Tisa*' are very precise, 'when you lift the head of the Jewish people', meaning, they must be counted and accounted for in a way that they know they matter and count.

This is why when God blesses Avraham that he will have many children, He uses two examples, that his descendants will be 'like the stars in the sky and the sand by the seashore'². The sand is special in it that one grain alone is worthless, but together, a beautiful white sand beach is formed, its beauty comes from the blending together of every grain into one. The stars are different though, there are also millions of stars but each one is a world in its own right, they each have a name and a specific orbit. The Jewish people embody both of these elements, each one is a star onto themselves, and together we form something that no individual can create.

Through the counting of the Jewish people in this week's Torah portion, we are taught the importance of recognizing the special qualities of each individual, yet at the same time understanding the power of unity and being a part of something greater than ourselves.

The Day of Opportunity

by Rabbi Eli Scheller

However, you must observe my Shabbos, for it is a sign between Me and you for your generations, to know that I am Hashem, Who makes you holy. (Ex. 31:13)

The verse states that Shabbos is a sign between us and God. What does it mean that Shabbos is a "sign"?

Imagine that it's been a long day and you barely ate anything. You hop over to the pizza shop and the lights are off - the store is closed. "Interesting," you think to yourself, "they are never closed at this time." A few days later you pass by in the morning and again it's closed. You figure that the owner must be away on vacation. A week later it's still closed. You assume that they must be renovating. One day you pass by and you see that the sign "Delicious Pizza" has been removed. You now understand that the store has closed down. Once the sign is removed you know it no longer exists.

Shabbos is the cornerstone of our faith and is equivalent to all of the commandments, for through the commandment of Shabbos one expresses his belief that God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. Observing Shabbos indicates that one believes in the Creator. When one desecrates Shabbos he's removing his sign of being a believing Jew.(1)

Shabbos helps us understand our place in the world. During the week human beings are busy building and changing the world. Every seven days we stop, we pull back from building the world and remind ourselves that we are not God. In ceasing from all creative activity we make the statement to ourselves and to humanity that although we can manipulate the world, we don't own it; the universe belongs to God.

Shabbos is not a day of restrictions; it's a day of opportunity. It's a day you can sit back knowing that you're in God's hands and that everything is being taken care of for you. It's a day that enables you to refresh, reconnect and reJEWvenate.

“The rich shall give no more and the poor shall give no less than half a shekel, to give the offering to Hashem, to atone for your souls” (30:15)

The Torah set the contribution of every individual at a half-shekel to indicate that each person is only a half in their own right. A person cannot truly perfect himself without finding a spouse who will complete him, a friend who will complement him, or a teacher who can lead him to perfection. When a person gave a half-shekel to represent himself 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.

“You shall make a washstand of copper and its base of copper for washing, and you shall place it between the Tent of Meeting and the altar, and you shall put water therein” (30:18)

The Kiyor was made from copper mirrors that the women donated to the Mishkan. In Parshas Vayakheil, Rashi comments that Moshe felt it was not appropriate for the mirrors to be used for the holy construction because they were objects used for vanity. Hashem told him to use them anyway because they had been used for a lofty purpose in Mitzrayim. When the men would come home from their hard labor, the women would adorn themselves and show their husbands how beautiful they looked in their mirrors. They would comment about how beautiful they looked compared to the men in order to entice them so that they would be with them despite their weariness. Because of this, many children were born in Mitzrayim. Since the women used these mirrors for the sacred goal of having children and not just for vanity, it was indeed fitting that they be used in the Mishkan. We learn from these women to be optimistic and to always have hope for the future, even in the worst of circumstances. Hashem wanted the Kohanim to be reminded of this optimism every time they began their service, when they washed their hands and feet, so that this optimism would be expressed through the service that they would perform. After all, they were the leaders of the people and oftentimes leaders face major challenges and are under a great stress. Hashem wanted the Kohanim to remember to have a positive attitude as they began their holy tasks each morning.

The Children of Israel shall observe the Sabbath, to make the Sabbath an eternal covenant for their generations” (31:16)

The Or HaChaim explains that the word “shamar,” “to observe,” also means “to anticipate.” He writes that everyone should look forward to the coming of Shabbos. We should not be upset by the fact that we cannot work on Shabbos. Instead, we should long for the coming of Shabbos with love. R’ Moshe Feinstein said that a generation of Jews was lost because they felt that Shabbos was a burden and that it was too much of a bother. Had they fully appreciated the beauty of Shabbos, they would never have become lost. The only way to keep Shabbos properly is through anticipating Shabbos. One who looks forward to Shabbos will be driven to learn the laws of Shabbos and will thereby keep it properly. The Shabbos has to be kept “for their generations” because parents have to be aware that Shabbos is the continuity of our religion. It is of extreme importance that the next generation continues to keep Shabbos. This is accomplished by making Shabbos beautiful with food, song, and expressing a general love of the Shabbos.

“They have quickly turned away from the path that I have commanded them; they have made themselves a molten calf! They have prostrated bowed to it, slaughtered sacrifices to it, and said: These are your gods, O Israel, who have brought you up from the land of Egypt.” (32:8)

How is it that the Jewish people sinned so egregiously by making a golden calf only a short period of time after hearing Hashem speak to them at Har Sinai? R’ Chaim Shmulevitz explained that the people thought that Moshe Rabbeinu had died, since he had not returned at the time that they were anticipating his arrival. This left them feeling leaderless and a person who lacks proper guidance will falter very quickly. The story of the golden calf shows us the importance of having a rabbi or a mentor, someone to listen to and seek advice from.

“Hashem said to Moshe: Carve for yourself two stone tablets like the first ones, and I shall inscribe on the tables the words that were on the first tablets, which you shattered” (34:1)

R’ Moshe Feinstein asks: Why did Moshe have to make the second luchos? Why could Hashem not make them, just as He had made the original luchos? He answers that the people sinned with the Golden Calf, because they thought that since the luchos were being made by Hashem, the Torah was not attainable by human beings without a special intermediary, such as Moshe Rabbeinu. They created an image of an ox to serve in this capacity in Moshe’s absence and to help them get closer to Hashem and learn His Torah. To correct their mistaken understanding, Hashem told Moshe to make the second luchos himself so that the people would realize that a human being has a part in Torah without any emissary. It is within a person’s reach to get close to Hashem on his own.

Quick 'n Easy

by Rabbi Shaul Rosenblatt

The story of the Golden Calf is one of the most incredibly honest stories told by any religion. The Jewish people experience the seminal moment in its history - direct communication with God at Mount Sinai - and 40 days later, they are worshipping an idol.

It is yet another example in the Torah of something that human beings surely would not have written. If you are trying to sell a religion, you don't want to reveal that even those who had the most powerful experience were not all that impressed. (When British businessman Gerald Ratner jokingly told everyone that his jewelry was no good, it nearly caused his company's collapse.)

But if God is writing the book, He has nothing to prove. But much to teach. And the incident of the Golden Calf is brimming with wisdom.

It says to me that experiences, no matter how powerful and how inspirational, do not change us fundamentally. I know that personally I could fall into the trap of "seeing" God directly - and worshipping an idol a few weeks later. Memories fade; experiences are forgotten; highs settle down. Quick fixes just don't last.

The mistake the Jewish people made was to rely on the high of Sinai, rather than buckling down to the hard work of sustained and steady growth. Once they had forgotten the high, they were nearly the same people as they were before it.

It's the same old story that Judaism always preaches: The only way to true fulfillment is via an incremental path. There are no shortcuts to greatness, only the long and winding road of waking up early and facing days and months and years of challenge and struggle.

Think about your own life, your challenges and hurdles. There is always a short easy solution, and the long hard one. The Jewish people were looking for the easy option. Let's not make the same mistake.

Moshe's Self-Sacrifice

by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen

After the Jewish people sin with the Golden Calf, God tells Moshe they are deserving of destruction and He wants to start the nation again with Moshe as the sole ancestor. He then tells Moshe to leave Him alone so He can destroy the nation.

Rashi points out that Moshe infers from God's words that if Moshe would not leave Him alone He might not destroy them. With this faint ray of hope, Moshe argues that despite their heinous sin, it would not be constructive for God to destroy the nation that He had just taken out of Egypt. His arguments worked and God indeed forgives the people.

Rabbi David Fohrman notes that there are a number of uncanny similarities between this passage and another defining episode that took place hundreds of years earlier – the destruction of the world in the time of Noach and Noach's role in that tragic event.

Before we discuss the comparisons between the two occurrences, it is instructive to note that there are general comparisons between Moshe and Noach: Firstly, there are only two times in the entire Torah where the word, *teivah* (ark) appears. The first is Noach's *teivah* and the second is the *teivah* that Moshe was placed into by his mother when she put him in the river. Moreover, in both instances, the Torah recounts how these arcs were lined on the inside and outside. Conceptually, the cases overlap as well, as in both instances, a person found shelter from threatening waters in some kind of ark.

Secondly, the *Midrash* explicitly compares Noach and Moshe. It relates that Moshe was greater than Noach because, earlier in the Torah, Noach was called '*Ish tzaddik*' (a righteous man) and later in the Torah he is described as '*Ish Adamah*' (man of the Earth), which represents a lowering of his status. In contrast, Moshe is initially called *Ish Mitzri* (Egyptian man) but is later described as *Ish Elokim*, (man of God) which indicates a rise in status.

But it is in the two episodes where the similarities really stick out: We'll begin each comparison with this Torah portion and then go back to the Torah Portion of Noach: Firstly, when God first confronts Moshe about the Golden Calf, He says, "Go down, because your people, that you took out of Egypt, have **corrupted** themselves." The root word used to describe the people's corruption is '*shicheit*'. The passage about the Flood begins with the words, "God looked upon the land, and indeed it was **corrupt**, because all flesh had **corrupted** its way upon the land." Again, the root word, '*shicheit*' is used here, twice.

Another similarity is that both stories feature a time period in which the main protagonists spend forty days in an extreme environment with no outside access to food. Moshe is atop Mount Sinai receiving the Torah from God, while Noach is in the ark.

Another parallel in word usage is found when God decides how to proceed in His plans for destruction in both events. With regard to the Golden Calf, God decides not to destroy the nation: “And God **regretted** having said He would bring destruction upon His people.” The word for regretted is ‘veyinachem’. In Noach, the Torah relates, “And God **regretted** having made man on earth and His heart was saddened.”⁹ Here too, the word for regret is ‘veyinachem’.

We have seen a number of striking similarities between these two stories, and yet it is evident that they diverged from each other in a decisive manner: In both, the people corrupted themselves and God expressed a desire to wipe out most of the world and leave one righteous person remaining. Yet in the story of Noach, God followed through with His plan, whereas in the passage of the aftermath of the Golden Calf, God ‘changed His mind’ so to speak. Consequently, the identical root word, ‘veyinachem’ has an opposite meaning in the two episodes – with regard to the Flood, it refers to going back on the decision to create mankind, and in the Golden Calf, it refers to going back on the decision to destroy the Jewish nation.

What was the cause of such diverging climaxes to these two stories? It is evident that the cause is the dramatically different reactions of the two main protagonists – Moshe and Noach. When God tells Noach of His plans to destroy the world, we do not see that Noach argues. Rather, he dutifully follows through with God’s instructions of how to proceed. In contrast, when God expresses a similar plan to Moshe, he fights back and somehow ‘convinces’ God to refrain from His plan. One may argue that the two situations were different and that the Generation of the Flood was more of a lost cause than that of the Golden Calf. However, this assertion is disproved by a *Zohar* cited by the *Sukkat David* which tells us that had Noach argued if Noach would have waged such a forceful argument on behalf of his generation, as did Moshe, the Flood would have never occurred.

It seems that the outstanding trait that enabled Moshe to stand up to God at a time of Divine Wrath was his *mesirat nefesh* – self-sacrifice, and more precisely his willingness to risk his own safety and well-being in order to help others. Rabbi David Fohrman, outlines a number of times in Moshe’s life where self-sacrifice was displayed, the first being by someone else on Moshe’s behalf. When baby Moshe was placed in the river, he faced almost certain death until Pharaoh’s daughter saved him at considerable personal risk to herself, given that her father had decreed the destruction of all Jewish babies. Thus, at the beginning of his life, he was saved by an act of self-sacrifice.

When Moshe grows up, he sees a Jewish slave being beaten by an Egyptian, and he kills the aggressor, saving the victim. This was an act of great personal bravery and it meant that he was in effect leaving behind his privileged existence as a member of the palace. Soon after this, Moshe again places himself in danger when he tries to prevent two Jews from fighting, and the ramifications of this act are immediate as he is forced to leave Egypt. Yet again, Moshe puts himself at risk when he confronts a gang of shepherds who are harassing Tzipporah and her sisters, even though he is greatly outnumbered. The common denominator of all these episodes is that someone constantly put himself at risk in order to help others. This was the same trait that he so dramatically demonstrated after the Golden Calf.

We know that Moshe was adorned with numerous wonderful character traits, but it is possible that his self-sacrifice was one of, if not, the defining reason as to why God chose him to be the leader of the Jewish people at a time of great danger. Indeed, he put himself in great danger in his confrontations with Pharaoh. Yet, Rabbi Forhman suggests, his willingness to risk everything to defend the Jewish people at their lowest point, after the Golden Calf, demonstrates more than anything else the self-sacrifice that resulted in him being chosen as the Jewish people’s leader.

Invoking the Thirteen Attributes

by Rabbi Zev Leff

Following God’s promise not to destroy the Jewish people, after the sin of the Golden Calf, Moses requested that God make known to him the qualities of Divine mercy. In response, God showed Moses a prophetic vision, in which He was wrapped in a Tallit as a communal prayer leader, while reciting the Thirteen Attributes of Divine Mercy (Talmud, Rosh Hashana 17b). God informed Moses that whenever the Jewish people sin in the future, they should recite the Thirteen Attributes, and He will forgive them. Moses subsequently employed the Thirteen Attributes during the second and third 40-day periods on Mount Sinai, which culminated with the atonement on Yom Kippur.

Rabbi Yehudah in the Talmud adds that a covenant exists concerning these Thirteen Attributes, guaranteeing their effectiveness forever. The Brisker Rav explains that all the mercy that the Jewish people would require until the final redemption was, as it were, deposited into an account at that time, to be withdrawn when necessary. Today, writes Rabbeinu Bachaye, we are without the Holy Temple, without a High Priest, and without the sacrifices to aid in atoning for our sins. All that is left is the ability to invoke these Thirteen Attributes of Divine Mercy in our prayers. Though we do not understand the true nature of these terms, and we lack the perception of how they affect the Heavenly realms, still they remain the key with which to open the gates of mercy in every generation for both the community and the individual.

There are two basic opinions as to how the Thirteen Attributes work. According to some commentators (*Tzror Hamor, Reishis Chochmah* and *Alshich*), the mere recitation of these attributes is not enough. One must accompany their recitation with action by emulating these attributes in his relationships with his fellow man. (Rabbi Moses Cordevero in the first chapter of *Tomer Devorah* gives guidance as to how to integrate these attributes into one's interpersonal relationships.) For this reason, says the *Ma'or Vashemesh*, these Divine attributes are only recited in a *minyan*. It is difficult for any one individual to embody and apply all of these attributes in his personal life. However, among a congregation, all of the attributes can be found.

The prophetic vision of God wrapped in a Tallit relates to this need to emulate His Attributes by reminding us of our obligation to perform all the Mitzvot. The Tallit hints to the fact that one must clothe himself in these attributes and not merely recite them.

Ibn Ezra asks why we wear a large Tallit only during prayer (while otherwise we wear a small fringed garment underneath our shirt). Would it not be more logical to wear a reminder of God's Mitzvot when engaged in our mundane pursuits? The wearing of a Tallit addresses the danger that one will mistakenly think that the words of prayer are enough to effect Divine mercy. The Tallit reminds us that lip service alone is not effective. One must live and fulfill that which his prayers represent.

The second line of opinion (*Tzedah Laderech* and *Bnei Yissachar*) views recitation of the Thirteen Divine Attributes as effective by itself. They point to the fact that the first three attributes, according to many opinions, are proper names of God which do not lend themselves to emulation.

Two questions must be addressed according to the opinion that the mere recitation is effective. First, how can mere recital of words be effective? And if it can, how can we reconcile this to the fact that these attributes are often recited without any noticeable result? The Maharal answers the first question. Even if recitation is sufficient, he writes, it must be with concentration, intention and understanding. This is hinted to by the wrapping of the Tallit over one's head. The Tallit signifies concentration and the banishment of outside distractions.

The recitation of these attributes creates a period of Divine favor and grace brought about by recitation of the Divine Attributes (Malbim). In this respect, the Heavenly Kingdom patterns itself after the earthly kingdom: the periods of Divine favor and grace, parallel those times when an earthly king grants pardons not mandated by the law (Netziv). There are, says Ramchal, two types of Divine Providence, one in which God has, as it were, subjugated Himself to a system of reward and punishment dependent on man's conduct, and another where God acts independent of man's worthiness.

We can elucidate this last idea as follows: The entire creation was designed so that God could shower good on man, the ultimate good being the experience of the Divine Presence. To that end, God created a physical world in which man can earn this reward and develop his relationship with God through Torah and mitzvot. At the same time, God created an intricate system of reward and punishment through which His kindness is funneled.

Under normal circumstances, kindness outside this system would be detrimental to man, for it would suggest to him that justice does not exist and one can receive good without deserving it. That would obscure recognition of God. However, there are times when the application of justice would permanently impair kindness and thus place the entire purpose of creation in jeopardy. At such times, God chooses to let us know that He exists by showering upon us undeserved kindness beyond our understanding.

But to receive this undeserved beneficence, we must first recognize that this mercy and kindness emanates from God and is not an indication (God forbid) of a random universe and refutation of God's control over the world. Hence, the necessity to recite these attributes with intention and concentration to bring about this period of favor.

Although there is a covenant that the recitation of these attributes is always effective, this depends, according to the first opinion, on our emulation of these attributes and, according to the second opinion, on their being said with concentration, intention and understanding. Though a proper recitation of the Divine Attributes is always effective according to the Vilna Gaon, sometimes the effect only results in mitigation of the Divine decree, not its complete annulment (*Tzedah Laderech*). That is why we sometimes fail to see the effect of the recitation.

We are now in the midst of trying times for the Jewish people, a time in which we need Divine mercy. Let us attempt to recite, learn and live these Divine Attributes of Mercy - and thereby fulfill all these various opinions - so that we can partake of the abundant wellsprings of Divine mercy already prepared for us, and effect a period of Divine favor and grace.