

D'var Torah for Parshat Ki tisa

By Uriel Pavolotzky's

After the Jewish people heard the Ten Commandments, Moshe told the nation that he would go up to Mount Sinai for forty days and forty nights to receive the Tablets and learn Torah with G-d. As Rashi explains, the Jews incorrectly counted the few hours remaining in the day he went up as the first day so that when he had one more day to go, they thought Moshe might not be coming back. So they decided to build a golden calf; an object that they thought could bring G-d's blessings to them and guide them through the desert.

When Moshe returned and saw what the people had done, he smashed (or dropped) the Tablets, and went about to punish the perpetrators. He asked for volunteers to help:

וַיַּעֲמֵד מֹשֶׁה בַּשַּׁעַר הַמַּחֲנֶה וַיֹּאמֶר מִי לַה' אֵלַי וַיֹּאסְפוּ אֵלָיו כָּל־בְּנֵי לֵוִי:

"Moses stood in the gate of the camp and said: "Whoever is for the Lord, [let him come] to me!" And all the sons of Levi gathered around him."

Rashi quotes the Talmud which notices that all the tribe of Levi came!

מכאן שכל השבט כשר

"From here [we learn] that the entire tribe was righteous". -[from Yoma 66b]

This means that the tribe of Levi had nothing to do with the golden calf. They didn't support it, they didn't worship it, and they were totally against it. Before I looked at the commentaries for a reason for their opposition, I thought that the explanation must be that they were more serious about worshiping G-d and more knowledgeable about the Torah ideas handed down from the Patriarchs. Indeed, the Talmud says that the tribe of Levi had not been enslaved. They were the spiritual elite.

But then, I saw that The Baalei Tosafot (French scholars of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries) gave an entirely different explanation. This is what they say:

וַנִּרְאֶה לְפִי שֶׁהָיוּ שֹׁבְטֵי לְוִי קְרוֹבִים לְמֹשֶׁה לְפִיכֹךְ לֹא נִתְרַצָּה אֶחָד מֵהֶם לְהִמִּיר מִנְהִיג בְּמִקְוָמוֹ

"It appears that because the tribe of Levi was related to Moshe not one of them would agree to replace Moshe as leader."

The Baalei Tosafot say that the loyalty of the tribe of Levi towards Moshe assured that the entire tribe stayed away from the Golden Calf. The people who led the making of the Golden Calf must have had very convincing reasons why it was a proper thing to do. The Baalei Tosafot are implying that the Levites' great dedication to G-d would not have saved them from going along with it. Only their personal loyalty to Moshe, their "tribemate" gave them the strength to say "No" to the project.

This teaches us a very important idea! We all have times of weakness when we are very close to doing something wrong. But, if we have a friend or somebody to whom we feel connected, it will help us get through it. For example, in the תורה when Yosef was in Potiphar's house, he wanted to sleep with Potiphar's wife, but when Yosef thought of his father, he knew that he wouldn't like it. This helped save him from doing the wrong thing. This shows how important loyalty and friendship are. We should make friends with good people so when we don't have the strength to do the right thing, we will do it so we won't disappoint our friends. Our relationships with our parents and teachers can also help us this way. It was these relationships that helped the tribe of Levi and Yosef get through hard times, and they can help us too.