**S.A.L.T – PARASHAT KI-TISA**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Ki-Tisa (32:15) tells that the stone tablets which Moshe brought down from Mount Sinai were engraved with God’s commands by God Himself, and the text appeared on both sides of the stones. Rashi, based on the Gemara (Shabbat 104a), comments that this marked a miraculous quality of the tablets.

Rav Moshe Greenwald, in his [*Arugat Ha’bosem* (Parashat Balak)](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=39276&st=&pgnum=219), elaborates on the nature and significance of this aspect of the tablets. The Ten Commandments were divided into two groups of five, with the first five commandments engraved on the right tablet, and the last five on the second tablet. If the commandments were written on both sides of the tablets, then it turns out that each stone actually contained all Ten Commandments – five on either side. Since the first five are written on the right stone and the next five on the left, each stone had the first five on one side and the next five on the other. This was done, Rav Greenwald suggests, to emphasize the interconnectedness of the two basic groups of *mitzvot* – our responsibilities to God, which are encapsulated in the five commandments, and our obligations to each other, which are reflected in the last five commandments. If each stone contained just one of the two sets of commandments, this may have given the impression that these two basic areas of responsibility can exist independent of one another. The fact that each stone contained all Ten Commandments underscores the point that our religious observance is fundamentally incomplete if we commit only to one area and not to the other.

The Gemara in Masekhet Megilla (15a) writes that when Ester sent her servant to Mordechai to ask why he sat in mourning (“*la-da’at ma zeh ve-al ma zeh*” – Ester 4:5), she was actually inquiring as to whether the Jews had perhaps transgressed the Torah: “Perhaps Israel had transgressed the five books of the Torah, about which it is written, ‘*mi-zeh u-mi’zeh heim ketuvim*’ (‘they were written on one side and on the other’).” Significantly, *Chazal* associate Ester’s concern for the Jews’ spiritual condition with this particular quality of the tablets – that the text was engraved on both sides. The idea, perhaps, is that when we embark upon the process of *cheshbon ha-nefesh* (introspection), when we examine our current state to identify the areas that require improvement, we need to reflect upon the inseparable connection between the two sets of commandments. We cannot focus on just one or the other, examining either our devotion to God or our interpersonal conduct. When trying to improve, we must bear in mind the fact that “*mi-zeh u-mi’zeh heim ketuvim*,” each stone contained all Ten Commandments, as all areas of Jewish life are deemed equally significant and demand equal focus and attention.

(Based on a *devar Torah* by Rabbi Dov Loketch)

Sunday

When *Benei Yisrael* approached Aharon to ask that he make for them an idol, they based their request upon Moshe’s mysterious absence: “Arise and make for us a deity…because this man, Moshe, who brought us from the land of Egypt – we do not know what happened to him” (32:1). Curiously, the people referred to Moshe in this context as “*zeh ha-ish Moshe*” – “this man, Moshe.” Rather than simply express their concern that their current leader is missing, they made a point of noting that “this man, Moshe” was gone.

[Rav Amnon Bazak](https://www.facebook.com/amnon.d.bazak/posts/584840544985805) suggests that this reference to Moshe perhaps reveals the true, underlying reason for the people’s request. Moshe’s absence was just a pretext; their true motivation was the fact that Moshe was only a “man,” and they wanted an “*elohim*” – a leader to whom they could look as a deity. They saw Moshe’s prolonged absence as an opportunity to find an alternative, to make for themselves an idol which they could view as their divine ruler, rather than be led by a mortal.

Rav Bazak draws our attention to an earlier instance where Moshe is referred to as a “man.” The Torah in Parashat Bo (11:3) describes the high esteem that Moshe earned among the Egyptians, writing, “**the man Moshe** was very prominent in the land of Egypt in the eyes of Pharaoh’s servants and in the eyes of the people.” Tragically, *Benei Yisrael* failed in an area in which the Egyptians succeeded. Although the Egyptians were steeped in idolatry, they were able to admire and respect Moshe even while acknowledging that he was an “*ish*.” *Benei Yisrael*, however, could not feel at ease being led by an “*ish*,” and demanded an “*elohim*.” They did not want a leader with mortal qualities; they could not bring themselves to respect and obey a leader with human limitations and flaws. They were able to respect only a leader whom they could perceive as an “*elohim*” – a divine being. (The painful irony in this demand is that it was expressed at a time when Moshe spent forty days atop Mount Sinai living as angelic being, without food or water. Although Moshe was, in fact, an “*ish*,” a limited human being, for those weeks he succeeded in rising to the level of an angel, transcending the normal limitations of human existence.)

We can point to several reasons why people would be inclined to search for an “*elohim*” as a guide and leader instead of an “*ish*.” One reason is that viewing somebody as an “*elohim*,” as a being with supernatural capabilities, absolves them of the need to try to emulate that figure. If our leader transcends human limitations, then we, who are bound by those limitations, cannot possibly reach anywhere near that person’s stature, and so we might as well not even try. But when we are led by an “*ish*,” by a person beset by the same weaknesses, struggles, natural drives and negative inclinations that we confront, but who nevertheless succeeded in achieving greatness, we are challenged. We cannot excuse ourselves with the claim that we are but an “*ish*,” mere mortals, incapable of rising to towering levels of spiritual greatness. The primary message we are to learn from Moshe Rabbenu and other models of greatness is that humans can rise to spiritual heights, that our human qualities are not inconsistent with spiritual achievement, and that our natural flaws and shortcomings do not excuse us from the obligation to strive to grow and to serve our Creator at the highest level we can.

Monday

Parashat Ki-Tisa begins with the *mitzva* of *machatzit ha-shekel* – the annual half-shekel tax paid by every member of the nation which was used to fund the public sacrifices in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*.

The Midrash (*Tanchuma*, Ki-Tisa 5) draws an association between this *mitzva* and the sin of the golden calf, of which we read later in the *parasha*. The Torah commands with regard to the *machatzit ha-shekel*, “*Zeh yitenu…machatzit ha-shekel*” – “This is what they shall give…a half –shekel…” The word “*zeh*” (“this”), the Midrash observes, also appears in the context of the golden calf, as when the people approached Aharon and asked that he make an idol for them, they said, “*Ki* ***zeh*** *Moshe ha-ish…lo yadanu meh haya lo*” – “For **this** man, Moshe - we do not know what happened to him.” The Midrash comments, “[The nation] was lowered with the term ‘*zeh*’ and was elevated with the term ‘*zeh*’.” Somehow, the *mitzva* of the half-shekel serves as the antidote, or rectification, of the golden calf, “elevating” the nation after it had plummeted to the depths of idol-worship.

The basis for this link can perhaps be found in the particular verse cited by the Midrash, in which *Benei Yisrael* explain to Aharon their need for a new leader: “For this man, Moshe - we do not know what happened to him.” One of the causes of *cheit ha-eigel* (the sin of the calf) was the people’s overdependence on Moshe. As soon as they concluded that Moshe would not be returning from the top of Mount Sinai, they concluded that they must abandon everything he taught them. Without Moshe, the people figured, they cannot follow the faith they learned from him. They therefore did a complete about-face, returning to the idolatrous beliefs and practices of Egypt, convinced that they had no other choice now that Moshe was gone.

The rectification of this mistaken outlook is the *machatzit ha-shekel*, a *mitzva* which underscores the powerful effect of each individual’s own small contribution. God’s presence is brought into and kept in the *Mikdash* not through “Moshe Rabbenu,” the nation’s leader, but rather through the humble donation made by each and every member of the nation. This *mitzva* emphasizes that what matters most is not the person at the top, but rather each person making his or her own contribution. *Cheit ha-eigel* occurred because the people felt they could not continue without Moshe; the *machatzit ha-shekel* conveys the message that we can, as long as each person does his or her share and we work together to bring the Divine Presence into our midst.

Tuesday

In the final paragraph of the *Orach Chayim* section of the *Shulchan Arukh* (697:1), we find three opinions regarding the observance of what is known as Purim Katan – the 14th and 15th of Adar Rishon (in a leap year, when an extra month is added to the calendar). Although we observe Purim in Adar Sheni, certain observances apply on the 14th and 15th days of Adar Rishon. According to the first view cited by the *Shulchan Arukh*, on Purim Katan we omit *tachanun* and the Psalm of “*Ya’ankha Hashem be-yom tzara*” (Tehillim 20) from the prayer service, and eulogies and fasting are forbidden. The second view, by contrast, permits eulogies and fasting. The Rama, after noting that the accepted practice follows the first opinion, proceeds to cite a third view, which maintains that there is an obligation of *mishteh ve-simcha* – feasting and rejoicing – on Purim Katan. This is the view of the Ran, in Masekhet Megilla (3b in the Rif). The Rama writes that although common practice has not accepted this view, “nevertheless, one should indulge a bit in eating.”

The *Ketav Sofer* (Parashat Tetzaveh) advances the remarkable claim that those who follow the Rama’s ruling, and feast on Purim Katan, must also give *matanot la-evyonim* (gifts to the poor) on Purim Katan. He reaches this conclusion on the basis of the Rambam’s famous comments in Hilkhot Megilla (2:17) that it is preferable to enhance one’s performance of *matanot la-evyonim* on Purim than to enhance his feasting. The Rambam explains, “…for there is no greater or more glorious joy than to gladden the hearts of the poor, orphans, widows and foreigners.” Naturally, then, if one wishes to follow the stringent view requiring feasting on Purim Katan, it stands to reason that he must apply this stringency also to *matanot la-evyonim*, which takes precedence over feasting.

[Rav Asher Weiss](http://www.torahbase.org/%D7%90%D7%93%D7%A8-%D7%A8%D7%90%D7%A9%D7%95%D7%9F-%D7%95%D7%A9%D7%A0%D7%99/) dismisses this theory, noting the Mishna’s explicit ruling in Masekhet Megilla (6b) that the obligations of Megilla reading and *matanot la-evyonim* do not apply on Purim Katan. In fact, the Ran, who wrote that feasting is required on Purim Katan, reached this conclusion on the basis of the Gemara, which inferred from the Mishna’s statement that eulogies and fasting are forbidden on Purim Katan. The Ran contended that this prohibition is a function of the obligation to feast on Purim, and so if this prohibition applies on Purim Katan, then the feasting obligation likewise applies. It thus emerges that the very Mishna which serves as the source for this position states explicitly that *matanot la-evyonim* is not required on Purim Katan. Quite clearly, then, notwithstanding the Rambam’s timeless exhortation to spend more on *matanot la-evyonim* than on the Purim feast, this is not relevant to Purim Katan, when the obligation of *matanot la-evyonim* does not apply, even according to the view that the feasting obligation does.

Interestingly, Rav Weiss notes, the *Ketav Sofer* himself takes the opposite view elsewhere in his writings. In one of his published responsa (Y.D. 136), the *Ketav Sofer* observes that the Rambam makes no mention of an obligation to feast on Purim Katan (see Hilkhot Megilla 2:13), and he explains that the Rambam took this position because of the aforementioned Mishna. Once the Mishna established that the obligation of *matanot la-evyonim* does not apply on Purim Katan, the Rambam reached the conclusion that the obligation to feast, which he views as a lower level obligation than *matanot la-evyonim*, cannot possibly apply. Thus, the *Ketav Sofer* himself acknowledged that there is no requirement to give *matanot la-evyonim* on Purim Katan.

Wednesday

Yesterday, we noted the view taken by some *Rishonim* requiring festivity on Purim Katan – the 14th and 15th days of Adar Rishon. This view is cited (and subsequently rejected) by Tosefot, in Masekhet Megilla (6b), who note that this is the implication of the Mishna, which states that the only difference between Adar Rishon and Adar Sheni is the obligations of Megilla reading and *matanot la-evyonim* (gifts to the poor). It appears that only these obligations do not apply on Adar Rishon, but the other obligations, such as feasting, do.

The *Sefat Emet* ([commentary to Masekhet Megilla](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=14522&st=&pgnum=248)) proposes a novel reading of the Mishna that yields a much different halakhic conclusion. He suggests that the Mishna refers only to situations of *be-di’avad* – after the fact, if a person observed the Purim obligations on Adar Rishon, which we are not meant to do. When the Mishna rules, “There is no difference between the first Adar and the second Adar except Megilla and *matanot la-evyonim*,” it means that when it comes to the other Purim obligations, one who performs the given *mitzva* on Adar Rishon has fulfilled his obligation. Certainly, however, according to the *Sefat Emet*’s reading, the *mitzvot* should all optimally be observed in Adar Sheni. The Mishna speaks only of one who mistakenly performed the *mitzvot* in Adar Rishon, but presumes that they should optimally be observed only in Adar Sheni.

The basis for the *Sefat Emet*’s reading is the Gemara’s discussion of the Mishna, which begins by making a comment relevant to the *arba parashiyot* – the four special Torah readings conducted starting on the Shabbat before Adar. As the Mishna implies that there halakhic parity between Adar Rishon and Adar Sheni, the Gemara suggests that a congregation that mistakenly read the *arba parashiyot* in Adar Rishon has fulfilled its obligation. Leaving aside the Gemara’s conclusion, this comment would seem to indicate the Gemara understood the Mishna as speaking specifically of situations of *be-di’avad*, where a Purim observance was conducted in Adar Rishon. Optimally, however, it is clear that all observances should take place only during Adar Sheni.

On this basis, the *Sefat Emet* suggests that in terms of practical halakha, one specifically should not have a feast on Purim Katan. If he does, then he fulfills the annual obligation of feasting on Purim, and thus forfeits the optimal *mitzva*, which is to feast on Purim in Adar Sheni. This novel suggestion runs in opposition to the ruling of the Rama, in his final comments in the *Orach Chayim* section of the *Shulchan Arukh*, that it is proper to indulge a bit on Purim Katan.

As noted by [Rav Asher Weiss](http://www.torahbase.org/%D7%90%D7%93%D7%A8-%D7%A8%D7%90%D7%A9%D7%95%D7%9F-%D7%95%D7%A9%D7%A0%D7%99/), the *Sefat Emet*’s novel reading of the Mishna is not offered by other commentators and clearly has not been accepted.

Thursday

The Gemara (Beitza 16b, Taanit 27b) cites the famous comment of Reish Lakish, “The Almighty gives a person an extra soul on Erev Shabbat, and it is removed from him when Shabbat departs.” The source for this concept of the “extra soul,” as the Gemara notes, is a verse in Parashat Ki-Tisa (31:17) which tells that on the seventh day, after creation, “*shavat va-yinafash*” – God “desisted and rested.” Reish Lakish interpreted the word “*va-yinafash*” as an allusion for “*vay aveda nefesh*” – “Oh, the soul has been lost.” The conventional understanding of this remark is that the word “*va-yinafash*” alludes to the loss of a soul which occurs each week with the conclusion of Shabbat, and thus this term introduces the concept of the “additional soul” received on Shabbat and then lost after Shabbat.

The Kotzker Rebbe, however, advanced a much different understanding of the Gemara’s comment, which results, in turn, in a much different understanding of the entire notion of a “*neshama yeteira*.” He explains that the lament for the departed soul described by the Gemara refers not to the loss of an extra soul received on Shabbat, but rather for the symbolic “loss” of the soul we already have. When Shabbat sets in, the Rebbe said, and we have the opportunity to pause from our normal weekday routine and reflect upon our lives, we bemoan the “loss” of our “soul” – the opportunities we had squandered during the week, the time which should have been utilized for lofty purposes but which we instead wasted. We cry, “Oh, the soul has been lost” not on Motza’ei Shabbat, but at the beginning on Shabbat, when we are able to step back and take stock of our lives. And this, the Kotzker Rebbe explains, is the meaning of the notion of the “extra soul” we receive on Shabbat. The opportunity for reflection, contemplation and introspection enables us to replace the “lost soul.” By recognizing the time and opportunities that we have wasted, we become capable of improving ourselves going forward and to use our time and talents properly in the future.

The Rebbe’s reading of the Gemara represents the diametric opposite of the conventional understanding of the “*neshama yeteira*.” This concept is generally understood as referring to a spiritual “charge” that God grants us on Shabbat, the enhanced ability to elevate ourselves and refine our characters and conduct. According to the Rebbe of Kotzk, however, the “*neshama yeteira*” is not something given to us, but rather something we have to work to build for ourselves. Shabbat forces us to step out of normal workweek routine, which should, in turn, motivate us to build a “new soul,” through sincere resolve and hard work. The occasion of Shabbat does not “magically” elevate us, but rather challenges us by forcing upon us the disquieting recognition of our shortcomings and of the work we need to invest to grow and improve.

Friday

The Gemara comments in Masekhet Berakhot (32a) that when Moshe pleaded to God on *Benei Yisrael*’s behalf after they worshipped the golden calf, he defended them with the claim that God in a sense facilitated the sin by showering them with gold: “This is what Moshe said before the Almighty: Master of the world! It is because of the silver and gold that You showered upon Israel until they said, ‘Enough!’ that caused them to make the calf.”

Much has been written to explain the connection between *Benei Yisrael*’s wealth and their desire to fashion and worship idol, but there is also another intriguing point that arises from the Gemara’s comment. The vast amounts of gold and silver in *Benei Yisrael*’s possession at Mount Sinai came from the Egyptians. The Torah tells of how *Benei Yisrael* took the Egyptians’ possessions with them as they left the country (Shemot 12:35-36), and several Midrashic sources (such as *Mekhilta*, Bo 13; *Shir Hashirim Rabba* 1:54) relate that the Egyptians decorated their chariots with gold and silver when they pursued *Benei Yisrael*, and these washed ashore after the Egyptians were drowned at sea. On both these occasions – the night of the Exodus, and following the miracle of the sea – *Benei Yisrael* accumulated vast amounts of riches. Interestingly enough, regarding both these occasions, *Chazal* note a clear distinction between Moshe and the rest of the people. The *Mekhilta* (to 13:19) tells that when *Benei Yisrael* left Egypt, the people were preoccupied with collecting spoils, whereas Moshe chose instead to fulfill the *mitzva* of retrieving Yosef’s remains so they could be brought to the Land of Israel for burial. And later (15:22), the *Mekhilta* comments that Moshe had to expend great efforts to convince the people to leave the shores of the *Yam Suf* after crossing the sea, as they wanted to stay and collect all the lavish decorations that washed ashore. Rather than stay and collect wealth, Moshe felt that the people should move on to receive the Torah at Mount Sinai.

It emerges, then, that Moshe did not participate, at least not the way the rest of the nation did, in the collection of gold and silver, and on the second occasion, he even opposed it. While it is true that God showered *Benei Yisrael* with wealth, they needed to take the time to collect it – something which Moshe declined to do, as he prioritized loftier goals and ideals.

Off this backdrop, Moshe’s defense of *Benei Yisrael* becomes truly remarkable. He pointed to the fact that they were tempted to sin by their wealth – even though he himself did not collect wealth as they did. When the people were busy collecting spoils, Moshe had his sights set upon more important matters, and yet, he accepted their decision and still viewed their wealth as a mitigating factor on the basis of which their sin could be forgiven. He opposed, or at least distanced himself from, the accumulation of gold and silver, but he did not hesitate to defend *Benei Yisrael* by blaming their grave mistake on their gold and silver.

We have much to learn from Moshe about the way we ought to relate to others who fall short of the standards that we set for ourselves and try to follow. Moshe was able to understand and evaluate *Benei Yisrael* on their level. He recognized that while he felt no need to collect gold and silver in Egypt or at the sea, it was natural for *Benei Yisrael* to do so, and it was then natural for this wealth to pose a formidable spiritual challenge which they failed to overcome. Rather than react to the people by saying, “You see, if you would have refrained from collecting spoils as I did, this would not have happened,” he instead looked upon them with sensitivity and understanding. He related to them on their level, as they were, without comparing them to himself. We can feel proud of our achievements, but we must not look disdainfully upon those who have not reached the standards to which we strive. We must follow Moshe’s example of sensitivity and favorable judgment, of going to great lengths to defend and look positively upon the people around us, rather than viewing them with condescension and a feeling of superiority.