**SALT – PARSHAT KI-TISA 5782 / 2022**

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Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Ki-Tisa tells of *Benei Yisrael*’s worship of the golden calf just before Moshe returned from atop Mount Sinai. We read that when Moshe descended from the mountain, he was greeted by his attendant, Yehoshua, who had been waiting for him at the foot of the mountain, and who was not aware of what the people were doing. Yehoshua heard noise coming from the camp, and wrongly assumed that these were the sounds of war. Moshe then corrected him, saying that the noise they heard sounded to him like the sound of“*anot*” (32:18). Rashi explains this term as referring to blasphemy, whereas Ibn Ezra interprets “*anot*” to mean “music.” The Ramban understands this word as referring to “*sechok*” – celebration and merriment.

In his discussion of this verse, the Ramban raises the question of why Moshe did not inform Yehoshua of what was happening – that the people had betrayed God and were worshipping a graven image. Moshe spoke to Yehoshua as though he knew nothing about what was happening, saying simply that the noise from the camp sounded like “*kol anot*,” even though Moshe had already been told by God that the nation had worshipped an idol. The Ramban explains, “In his great humility, he did not tell the matter to Yehoshua, because he did not wish to speak of Israel’s disgrace.” Moshe did not tell Yehoshua what happened because he did not wish to unnecessarily indulge in discussing the people’s faults and failings. As there was no practical purpose served by informing Yehoshua about the golden calf at this point, Moshe kept silent about it, rather than needlessly speak about the people’s grave betrayal of God.

Rav Henoch Leibowitz, in *Chiddushei Ha-leiv*, observes how Moshe’s conduct, as understood by the Ramban, sets an example of balancing different emotions and attitudes. As we read in the ensuing verses, Moshe responded very harshly to the worship of the golden calf, shattering the stone tablets, destroying the golden calf, and ordering the tribe of Levi, which did not participate in the idol worship, to execute the offenders. Yet, Moshe’s punitive measures did not diminish from his sensitivity and his insistence on maintaining the people’s respect and dignity. He undertook the harsh measures that he deemed necessary, but no more. He did not indulge in expressing his contempt for the people. He did not seize every opportunity to speak about the gravity of their sin. He remained both stern in his response to the golden calf, and respectful of God’s beloved nation. Moshe here shows us that even when criticism and anger are warranted, we must also be sympathetic and compassionate. There is no contradiction between sharply repudiating inappropriate behavior and admiring and respecting the person or people being repudiated. Even when we are disappointed in, or resentful over, someone’s misconduct, we can express our displeasure without losing all respect for the individual. We are to balance our displeasure with people’s behavior with an awareness of the dignity they nevertheless deserve, and a commitment to preserve that dignity notwithstanding our strong disapproval of their conduct.

Sunday

Parashat Ki-Tisa begins with the command of *machatzit ha-shekel* – the half-shekel tax which each male was required to give each year towards the public offerings in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. Much has been written in an attempt to explain why the Torah specifically commanded donating a half-shekel, instead of a whole unit of currency.

Rav Menachem Mendel of Stropkov (in *Divrei Menachem*) suggested that the *machatzit ha-shekel* represents the physical “half” of our being. All people consist of two elements – a physical body, and a sacred soul. Our challenge is to become complete beings by utilizing our physical properties for the service of God. When we use our bodies for performing *mitzvot*, and tend to our physical needs with the general goal of ensuring our continued ability to serve our Creator, then we transform our physical essence into a spiritual essence, thereby turning ourselves into complete, fully integrated creatures. And thus the Torah commanded giving a half-shekel toward the service in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, symbolizing the elevation of our physical beings and their transformation into spiritual entities.

The Rebbe of Stropkov suggests explaining on this basis the enigmatic comment of the *Midrash Tanchuma* (4), famously cited by Rashi (30:13), that when God presented the *mitzva* of *machatzit ha-shekel*, He showed Moshe a half-shekel made of fire (“*matbei’a shel eish*”). The Midrash understands on this basis God’s command, “*Zeh yitenu*” – “This is what they shall give,” implying that God actually showed Moshe the image of the half-shekel coin which the people were to donate. Significantly, the Midrash found it necessary to add that this was an image of not an ordinary coin, but a coin made from fire. The Rebbe of Stropkov explains that one of the properties of fire is its ability to cleanse. In the laws of *kashrut*, for example, directly exposing a metal utensil to fire is considered an effective means of extracting all particles of the food it had absorbed, thereby rendering it permissible for use after having been used with non-kosher food. The image of the “*matbei’a shel eish*,” then, symbolizes the fact that achieving the concept of the *machatzit ha-shekel*, transforming our physical dimension into a spiritual dimension, requires cleansing ourselves, working to eliminate our natural faults and negative tendencies. Our physical “half” requires an ongoing process of refinement, a dedicated effort to “cleanse” our physical drives and uplift them by directing them towards the service of God.

This insight brings to mind the observation that the Rosh Yeshiva, HaRav Yehuda Amital *zt”l*, would frequently make concerning the worship of the ancient deity *Pe’or*. Tradition teaches that this god was worshipped by defecating in front of the idol. Rav Amital explained that the ideology underlying this seemingly bizarre mode of worship is that everything natural is perfect and requires no refinement. Public defecation as a religious service expresses the notion that anything we feel naturally inclined to do is inherently good and valuable, and thus there is no need for struggle, for discipline, or for self-restraint. The Torah, however, teaches that to the contrary, our natural, ingrained tendencies must be controlled and harnessed, utilized for the purpose of living a life of sanctity and service of God. We need to work to “cleanse” our base drives and instincts, and struggle to uplift them in order to blend the two “halves” of our beings, bringing them both together into the humble, devoted service of our Creator.

Monday

The Torah in Parashat Ki-Tisa tells the troubling story of *Benei Yisrael*’s worship of the golden calf, in response to which God initially decided to annihilate the nation. Moshe successfully intervened on the people’s behalf, and God rescinded His decree. As part of Moshe’s effort to secure forgiveness, He turned to God and said, “Indeed, this nation has committed a great sin; they made for themselves a deity of gold. But now – pardon their sin…” (32:31-32).

The Gemara in Masekhet Yoma (86b) brings a debate among the *Tannaim* regarding Moshe’s intent in stating, “they made for themselves a deity of gold,” making a point of specifying the people’s misdeed. Rabbi Yehuda ben Beteira points to this verse as a source for the requirement to identify one’s precise sin when confessing. According to Rabbi Yehuda ben Beteira, the obligation to confess after committing a sin requires not simply acknowledging that one has acted wrongly, making the generic statement, “I have sinned,” but rather stating precisely what one has done wrong. And thus Moshe, who confessed on behalf of the people, specified the sin which they had committed. Rabbi Akiva, however, disagrees, maintaining that specifying the particular sin is not required as part of verbal confession, and it suffices to simply proclaim, “I have sinned.” To explain why Moshe stated, “they made for themselves a deity of gold,” Rabbi Akiva follows Rabbi Yannai’s interpretation of this verse, whereby Moshe here actually comes to the people’s defense. The emphasis on the gold, Rabbi Yannai asserted, was to note that God had showered *Benei Yisrael* with gold and other treasures after the Exodus, and this abundance of wealth led them astray and resulted in their fashioning a golden calf. Thus, in Rabbi Akiva’s view, Moshe mentioned the people’s worship of the calf not as part of his verbal confession, but rather as part of his effort to advocate for them and have their sin forgiven.

The Rambam, in *Hilkhot Teshuva* (2:3), accepts Rabbi Yehuda ben Beteira’s position. As noted by the *Kessef Mishneh*, the Rambam’s codification of this view seems inconsistent with the rule that *Halakha* follows Rabbi Akiva’s position in his disputes with a colleague. Here, the Rambam sides with Rabbi Yehuda ben Beteira against the opinion of Rabbi Akiva. The *Kessef Mishneh* suggests that the Rambam accepted Rabbi Yehuda ben Beteira’s view because the Gemara later cites Rav as stating that one should publicly confess wrongs committed in public, and privately confess wrongs committed in private. This distinction appears to work off the assumption that one must confess the specific sin he committed, in accordance with Rabbi Yehuda ben Beteira’s position, and for this reason, the Rambam accepted this view.

Rav Menachem Kasher, in *Torah Sheleima* (Shemot 32:21, note 249), references a different version of the text of the Gemara brought in *Dikdukei Sofrim* from the Munich edition of the Talmud. According to this version, the first opinion in the Gemara is cited not in the name of Rabbi Akiva, but rather in the name of a different *Tanna* (Rabbi Yehuda). Quite possibly, Rav Kasher writes, this was the edition used by the Rambam, and thus he did not feel compelled to side with the first view, as it is not ascribed to Rabbi Akiva.

Regardless, the *Kessef Mishneh* observes that the Rif and Rosh appear to have disagreed with the Rambam, and followed Rabbi Akiva’s position, that one does not need to specify his sin when confessing. This is the view taken by the *Kessef Mishneh* himself in the *Shulchan Arukh* (O.C. 607:2), though he adds that when confessing silently, it is preferable to specify the misdeed.

Rav Yitzchak of Vorka (cited in *Shemuat Yitzchak*) extended Rabbi Akiva’s understanding to the first clause of this verse – “Indeed, this nation has committed a great sin” – suggesting that this, too, was actually part of Moshe’s defense. He draws an analogy to a child who was, irresponsibly, playing on top of a table, and then fell and got hurt. If the child is not seriously injured, the parent would sharply scold the child for his foolishly reckless behavior. But if the child’s injury is serious, the parents would not scold him – they would immediately tend to the child and provide all the care and affection he needs. Rav Yitzchak of Vorka boldly posited that this was Moshe’s intent in proclaiming before God, “This nation has committed a great sin.” He sought not to emphasize the magnitude of their guilt, but rather to plead that they required help. After committing such a grievous act, the nation was seriously “wounded.” They needed God’s assistance to spiritually repair themselves.

Harsh punishment is not always the appropriate response to misbehavior. Sometimes, misconduct is a symptom of an “injury” or malady that needs to be cured. In such instances, the sinner requires sensitivity, support and encouragement to improve, rather than condemnation. In choosing the proper response to wrongful behavior, we must carefully consider if perhaps the underlying spiritual ill is best treated not through censure, but rather through compassion and warmth in order to inspire and facilitate a process of growth and improvement.

Tuesday

We read in Parashat Ki-Tisa that after God informed Moshe of His decree to annihilate *Benei Yisrael* after the sin of the golden calf, Moshe “petitioned” (“*Va-yechal*”) God on the people’s behalf, begging Him to rescind the decree (32:11). God accepted Moshe’s plea, and agreed not to annihilate the nation.

The Midrash (*Shemot Rabba* 43:3) suggests reading the word “*va-yechal*” to mean “sweeten” (“*chilui*”), and draws a connection between Moshe’s plea and the events that occurred in Mara, as we read earlier in Sefer Shemot (15:23-25). After crossing through the sea, *Benei Yisrael* journeyed for three days without encountering any water, until they finally discovered water in Mara – only to find out that the waters were bitter and undrinkable. God showed Moshe a branch of a tree and instructed him to cast it into the water, at which point the water was miraculously transformed into sweet drinking water. The Midrash relates that at Mara, upon realizing that the water was bitter, Moshe thought to himself, “Why was this water created? What benefit does the world receive from it?”

God then said to Moshe, “Do not say this! Are they not My handiwork? Is there anything in the world that was not created for a purpose?” He proceeded to instruct Moshe to transform the bitter water into sweet, refreshing drinking water.

Later, when God decreed to annihilate the people in response to their worship of the golden calf, Moshe invoked the incident at Mara, reminding God, so-to-speak, of how He instructed Moshe not to discount the bitter water and to instead transform it into sweet water. “Now, too,” Moshe said, “sweeten Israel’s bitterness and cure them.” The Midrash comments that this is the meaning of “*va-yechal*” – that Moshe begged the Almighty to “sweeten” *Benei Yisrael*’s sin, just as He sweetened the bitter waters of Mara nearly three months earlier.

This comparison drawn by the Midrash, between the miracle of Mara and *Benei Yisrael*’s recovery following the worship of the golden calf, powerfully expresses the belief in people’s capacity for change. When we see somebody acting wrongly, we might react as Moshe did upon encountering the bitter waters of Mara. We might assume that this individual is irredeemable, permanently incapable of achieving or producing. The Midrash here teaches that just as God miraculously sweetened the bitter waters of Mara, so are all people capable of “sweetening” their “bitter” behavior, and recovering from even the greatest failures. *Benei Yisrael*’s transformation after the worship of the golden calf is to be seen as a model of the “sweetening” of the “bitterest” failures, showing us that even after falling to the lowest depths, all people are capable of lifting themselves out of the abyss and charting an entirely new course.

Wednesday

Parashat Ki-Tisa begins with the command of *machatzit ha-shekel*, which requires every member of the nation age twenty and above to donate a half-shekel toward the treasury of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. These funds were used to purchase the public sacrifices which were offered on behalf of the entire nation.

The Rambam, in the beginning of *Hilkhot Shekalim* (1:1), writes that the half-shekel tax must be given all at once; one cannot pay the required amount in smaller installments. Different theories have been offered to explain the Rambam’s ruling, which does not appear to have a clear Talmudic source. (And, as many have noted, the *Arukh* disputes this position, in the entry “*Teva.*”) The Mabit, in his *Kiryat Sefer*, suggests that this *halakha* stems from the Torah’s command regarding this mandatory donation, “The rich shall not exceed, and the poor shall not diminish from, a half-shekel” (30:15). At first glance, the Mabit writes, there is no need for the Torah to specifically instruct that the poor may not give less than a half-shekel. After all, as this is the required amount, it seems self-evident that one should not donate a lower sum. Necessarily, then, this verse instructs that a poor individual, despite his financial struggles, may not pay the required sum to the Temple treasury in small installments, and must instead pay the entire sum all at once like everybody else. This explanation was offered by others, as well, including the Chida, in his *Nachal Kedumim* (Parashat Teruma).

The Rogatchover Gaon (Rav Yosef Rosen of Dvinsk), in *Tzofnat Panei’ach* (in the “*hashmatot*” to the *Hafla’a* section), offers a much different approach. He notes a discussion among the *Rishonim* regarding a person who vowed he would not receive benefit from his fellow’s property, and that fellow later donated something to a public fund. According to some views, once the item has been donated for a public use, and thus becomes public property, it is no longer identified with the donor. As such, the one who took the vow is permitted to benefit from it. The Rogatchover Gaon cleverly applies this line of reasoning to explain the Rambam’s ruling regarding the *machatzit ha-shekel* donation. If a person pays the donation in installments, these small installments cannot combine to fulfill his obligation to give a half-shekel. After all, once he pays the first installment to the public fund, it is no longer associated with him. Hence, his subsequent installment bears no connection to the first, and so he can never complete his required donation of a *machatzit ha-shekel*.

Rav Dov Berish Zuckerman (writing in *Ha-darom*, vol. 36, p. 33), questions the Rogatchover Gaon’s theory in light of the Rambam’s ruling in a different context. In the beginning of *Hilkhot Temura* (1:1), the Rambam addresses the case of one who performs *temura* – transferring the sanctity of a consecrated animal onto a different animal – with an animal consecrated as a public sacrifice. The Rambam writes that such a case is the same as that of a person who co-owns a consecrated animal with a partner, and performs *temura* with that animal (i.e. he has transgressed a Torah violation, but the *temura* is ineffective, and the second animal is not consecrated). By making this comparison, the Rambam takes the view that every Jew is considered a co-owner of public funds and assets. If so, then presumably, one who makes his half-shekel donation in installments retains his connection to each small installment he pays by virtue of his shared “ownership” of these funds. As such, he should then be able to complete the required sum of a *machatzit ha-shekel* through his subsequent payments.

Thursday

We read in Parashat Ki-Tisa of the sin of the golden calf, which occurred at the very end of Moshe’s forty-day stay atop Mount Sinai, where he received God’s commands to convey to the people. God informed Moshe of what the people had done, and then said, “Now let Me be, and My wrath shall be aroused against them and I will destroy them, and turn you into a large nation” (32:10).

Rashi, citing the *Midrash Tanchuma*, explains the phrase “*hanicha li*”(“let Me be”) as a subtle invitation to Moshe to pray on the people’s behalf. God was indicating to Moshe that He would annihilate *Benei Yisrael* only if Moshe would “leave Him alone” and not interfere with His plan. Moshe understood God’s intent and immediately proceeded to pray on the people’s behalf and implore God to rescind His decree, thereby saving *Benei Yisrael*. This interpretation is also followed by Ibn Ezra (*Peirush Ha-katzar*). (See Chizkuni for an entirely different approach.)

The Ridvaz (Rav Yaakov David Willovsky), in *Nimukei Ridvaz*, offers an additional insight into the phrase “*hanicha li*” in this verse. In the previous verse, God said to Moshe, “I have seen this nation – and they are a stiff-necked nation.” The Ridvaz explained that God here was giving the reason why He issued His decree without allowing the nation the opportunity to repent. Seeing that the nation was “stiff-necked,” and adverse to confessing wrongdoing and to change, God was not, initially, prepared to grant a temporary reprieve in the hope that *Benei Yisrael* would repent. And thus He told Moshe, “*Hanicha la*” – to refrain from asking the punishment to be delayed to give the people an opportunity to undergo a process of repentance.

The Ridvaz explains on this basis Moshe’s response to God, asking why He would be angry at the nation “which You took from Egypt with great might and with a strong hand” (32:11). Moshe pointed to the fact that *Benei Yisrael* were able to be brought out of Egypt, that instead of assimilating, they stubbornly retained their identity and distinctiveness throughout their centuries of exile and persecution. Indeed, they are a “stiff-necked nation,” but this quality is what enables them to resiliently survive under harsh conditions and while living among other peoples. Moshe also invoked God’s promise to the patriarchs that their descendants would be granted the Land of Israel “forever” (“*ve-nachalu le-olam*” – 32:13). God designated *Benei Yisrael* as the eternal nation, which would exist forever and represent Him to the world for eternity. Such a mission could be fulfilled only by an “*am keshei oref*,” a nation that is “stiff-necked” and persistent. As such, Moshe argued, *Benei Yisrael*’s stubborn nature should not be a reason to annihilate them – because it is this very quality which will ensure their survival throughout their turbulent history. While our quality of “*keshei oref*” often makes it especially difficult for us to break bad habits, to humbly confess wrongdoing, and to make the positive changes we need to make, it also empowers us to resist pressures and temptations to abandon our faith and our religious observance. We must strive to be flexible and openminded enough to honestly scrutinize our behavior and make positive change, but also rigid and unyielding in resisting the forces that threaten to tear us away from our devotion to God.

Friday

We read in Parashat Ki-Tisa of the sin of the golden calf, and Moshe’s response upon seeing the spectacle of the people worshipping a graven image. He threw to the ground the stone tablets which he had received from God, and which bore the inscription of the commandments, symbolizing the covenant the nation had just forged with the Almighty. Many commentators addressed the question of why Moshe had brought the tablets from the mountaintop if he was going to break them. He had already been informed of the people’s sin by God, and so he was well aware of what they were doing. If he shattered the tablets because the people were not worthy of them after this act of betrayal, then why did he bring the *luchot* (tablets) from the mountaintop in the first place?

Seforno (32:15), implicitly addressing this question, explains, “For he figured that when he returns to them, they will repent, and if not, then he would break them [the tablet] in front of their eyes, to their dismay, in order that they repent.” In other words, Moshe brought the tablets to the people in the hope that they would repent upon seeing him with the tablets, and planning to break the tablets if they did not, as a tactic to arouse their hearts to repent. Seforno later writes (32:19) that when Moshe saw the people’s glee and merrymaking as they worshipped the golden calf, he realized that the only hope for their repentance would be by shattering the tablets.

It is worth noting that earlier, when God first told Moshe about the people’s worship of the golden calf, He said to Moshe, “I have seen this nation – and they are a stiff-necked nation” (32:9). Rashi and Seforno explain the term “stiff-necked” as referring to the tendency to resist criticism and refuse calls to change. God Himself told Moshe that the people were stubborn, unyielding, and unreceptive to criticism – and yet, nevertheless, Moshe still hoped that the people would repent upon seeing him return to the camp, or, at very least – as in fact happened – after he shattered the tablets.

The reason, as some have explained, is because Moshe understood that even people who are unreceptive to direct, verbal criticism can be influenced in other ways to change. Even though *Benei Yisrael* were an “*am keshei oref*” – “stiff-necked nation,” people who would ignore criticism and refuse calls for change, they might still be driven to acknowledge their wrongdoing and commit to change through other means of influence. Moshe had hoped that his very presence, and the sight of the stone tablets chiseled by God and bearing His inscription, would have such an effect. When it didn’t, he resorted to the more drastic measure of shattering the tablets. And, in the end, the people repented and again became worthy of a close relationship with God.

Many – or most – people do not take kindly to criticism, and will instinctively resist when they are told they are acting wrongly. However, this does not mean that they can never change. Even if they will not respond to explicit repudiation, they might very well respond to other, less direct and less hurtful, means of influence. Parents, educators and leaders facing the challenge of trying to influence those who are “stiff-necked” must follow Moshe’s example and find methods which will not invite resistance or resentment, and can thus have the desired impact.