**SALT – PARASHAT KI TISA**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Ki-Tisa (30:34-38) tells of the *ketoret*, the special incense which was prepared with eleven different species of spices. The incense was placed on hot coals and offered on the altar inside the *Mishkan* each morning and afternoon (as we read in the final verses of Parashat Tetzaveh – 30:7-8).

The Gemara in Masekhet Yoma (44a) comments that the *ketoret* was offered to atone for the particular sin of *lashon ha-ra* – gossip and negative speech about others. The basis for this connection, the Gemara explains, is that the *ketoret* was offered “in secret” (“*be-chashai*”), inside the *Mishkan*, just as gossip is generally shared privately, in secret. Whereas all other offerings were brought on the altar which stood outside, in the courtyard, the incense was offered indoors, and is thus associated with *lashon ha-ra*, a violation which is commonly committed in private.

Rav Yoel Herzog, in [*Imrei Yoel* (Parashat Behaalotekha, *derush* 29)](https://www.hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=3411&st=&pgnum=60), develops the connection between the *ketoret* and *lashon ha-ra* further. What makes *lashon ha-ra* so destructive, he explains, is its tendency to spread far and wide, often with great speed. Negative information privately shared with one person can then be quickly disseminated, thereby ruining the subject’s reputation. Rav Herzog proposes that this might be the reason why *Chazal* pointed to *tzara’at* – leprosy – as the punishment for the sin of *lashon ha-ra*. *Tzara’at* is highly contagious, and thus represents the ease with which negative information about a person tends to spread. By the same token, Rav Herzog writes, the Torah prescribes the offering of *ketoret* as the means of atoning for *lashon ha-ra*. The fragrant scent of the incense wafted through the air and spread over vast distances. (In fact, the Mishna (Tamid 3:8) tells that the fragrance of the *ketoret* could be smelled even from the city of Jericho.) The way to reverse the corrosive effects of *lashon ha-ra*, which pollutes the air, creating an environment of negativity and enmity, is through the *ketoret* – creating a “fragrant” environment through positive, uplifting and encouraging words. The offering of the *ketoret* represents the effort we must make to produce a pleasing, joyful atmosphere in our homes, our institutions, our communities, and our world, by speaking kindly and positively. We counter the “stench” of *lashon ha-ra* through the beautiful scent of the *ketoret*, by disseminating joy and cheerfulness instead of cynicism and scorn. And just as the harmful effects of *lashon ha-ra* begin from words spoken privately, so are we able to produce a “fragrance” with the “*ketoret*” that we “offer” in our private lives, within our homes, families and inner circles, through positive, encouraging, and uplifting words which create a beautiful “scent” that will then spread far and wide, profoundly impacting our environment and the world generally.

Sunday

The Torah in Parashat Ki-Tisa tells of the sin of the golden calf, in response to which God decided to annihilate *Benei Yisrael* and produce a new nation from Moshe (32:10). Moshe interceded on *Benei Yisrael*’s behalf, and God accepted his plea and agreed to forgive the people.

Moshe begins his petition by acknowledging, “Indeed, this nation has committed a grievous sin; they made for themselves a golden deity” (32:31). The Midrash (*Shemot Rabba* 47:14) relates that this confession with which Moshe introduced his plea served a tactical purpose. The “angels of destruction,” which are described as prosecuting against *Benei Yisrael* before the Heavenly Tribunal, heard Moshe’s acknowledgment of the severity of the people’s sin, and then decided they would remain silent. They figured that Moshe was essentially doing their work for them, standing before God and prosecuting against *Benei Yisrael*, urging God to punish them severely for their betrayal. Assuming that Moshe would now proceed to successfully advocate for the people’s destruction, these angels withdrew – whereupon Moshe fervently beseeched God to forgive *Benei Yisrael*.

How might we explain the Midrash’s account of Moshe “deceiving” the angels? What lesson does the Midrash seek to convey by depicting the angels as foolishly believing that Moshe was assuming their role as prosecutors?

Rashi (Bereishit 18:2) famously cites the comment of the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 50:2), “One angel does not fulfill two missions.” Angels, as *Chazal* describe them, are inherently limited, as they fully devote themselves to just one endeavor, and are incapable of complexity and tension. They can accept only a single “mission,” follow a single direction, and see only a single angle. On this basis, Rav Elya Meir Bloch explained why God prevented the ministering angels from singing praise after the miracle of the sea as the Egyptians drowned (Megilla 10b), but He allowed *Benei Yisrael* to sing. Angels are capable of experiencing just a single emotion, and so if they joyfully sang to praise God for rescuing *Benei Yisrael*, they could not also grieve over the tragic loss of life that this miracle wrought. *Benei Yisrael*, by contrast, as human beings, were able to both jubilantly celebrate their salvation and lament the deaths of the Egyptians. Rav Elya Meir Bloch offered this insight to demonstrate that we are able, and expected, to both celebrate the blessings in our lives and feel pained by the hardships we endure and the losses we’ve suffered.

This perspective on the difference between angels and human beings can perhaps explain the story told in the Midrash of the prosecuting angels’ reaction to Moshe’s introductory statement as he pleaded on behalf of *Benei Yisrael*. The moment the angels heard Moshe proclaim, “Indeed, this nation has committed a grievous sin,” they naturally assumed that he was “on their side.” Incapable of complexity and nuance, Moshe’s acknowledgment of the sin’s severity automatically signaled to the angels that Moshe was now proceeding to advocate for *Benei Yisrael*’s destruction. The angels could never imagine Moshe on the one hand recognizing the gravity of the golden calf, while on the other hand, pleading on the people’s behalf. From their unidimensional outlook, it was possible to be either “for” or “against” *Benei Yisrael*, but not both. Moshe, however, was capable of both acknowledging the grievousness of the people’s sin and loving them unconditionally, to the point where he could plead their case before God.

If so, then the Midrash here teaches us the vitally important lesson that we can, and should, love and respect people despite their flaws and failings. We are fully capable of both firmly disapproving of somebody’s behavior, and genuinely loving and caring about that individual. We must avoid the mistake made by the angels depicted in the Midrash – the mistake of assuming that once we object to something somebody did, we must despise and wish evil upon that person. Instead, we must follow the example of Moshe, whose acknowledgment of the people’s grave mistake did not diminish even one iota from his great love and concern for them, and his commitment to plead their case and ensure they are forgiven.

Monday

Parashat Ki-Tisa begins with the *mitzva* of *machatzit ha-shekel* – the annual payment of a half-shekel by each individual for the funding of the public sacrifices in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. The Torah (30:12) refers to this tax as “*kofer nafsho*” – a “ransom” for one’s soul, meaning, a means of atonement. This is mentioned also several verses later (30:15), where the Torah commands, “The wealthy one shall not increase, and the poor one shall not decrease, from the half-shekel…to atone for your souls.”

A number of passages in the Midrash indicate that the *machatzit ha-shekel* served to atone specifically for the sin of the golden calf. (Although the story of the golden calf is told later in this *parasha*, several Midrashic sources maintain that it occurred before the commands regarding the *Mishkan*, including *machatzit ha-shekel*.) One such passage, in the *Midrash Tanchuma* (Ki-Tisa, 5), anchors this association between the *machatzit ha-shekel* and the golden calf in the common word “*zeh*” (“this”) which they both share. The Midrash comments, “With this term they [*Benei Yisrael*] were elevated, and with this term they were disgraced.” When *Benei Yisrael* approached Aharon and demanded that he form for them a graven image, they explained that they needed a new leader because they did not know what happened to “***zeh*** *Moshe ha-ish*” – “**this** man, Moshe” (32:1). And so when God issued the command of *machatzit ha-shekel*, which served to ‘elevate” the people from the depths to which they had sunk by worshipping the golden calf, He said, “*Zeh yitenu*” – “**This** is what they shall give” (30:13), and proceeded to specify the precise value that is required.

Why would the Midrash emphasize these particular verses? What might the significance of the word “*zeh*” in regard to the connection between *machatzit ha-shekel* and the sin of the golden calf?

*Benei Yisrael*’s decision to worship a calf in response to Moshe’s extended absence bespoke an overdependence on his leadership. They felt lost and helpless without Moshe, such that when he did not return when they expected him to, they resorted to the drastic measure of creating a graven image which they would regard as their leader in his place. The phrase “*zeh Moshe ha-ish*” perhaps expresses this exaggerated role which the people ascribed to Moshe, to the point where they felt helpless without him. This mistake was corrected through the institution of *machatzit ha-shekel*, which emphasizes the equally vital role played by each and every member of the nation. Whereas the golden calf resulted (at least in part) from a feeling of helpless dependence on one individual, the obligation of *machatzit ha-shekel* highlights the value of each and every person, that our success as God’s special nation requires the contribution of each member. As the Torah emphasizes, “The wealthy one shall not increase, and the poor one shall not decrease.” *Machatzit ha-shekel* is all about the incalculable value and importance of each person, regardless of who he or she is. This *mitzva* therefore serves to correct the mistake of the golden calf, which resulted from the people’s overdependence on their leader. As important as Moshe – and all capable leaders – undoubtedly are, ultimately, our nation’s success depends not on just any single individual, but rather on the combined efforts and each and every one of us.

Tuesday

The obligation of *machatzit ha-shekel*, which the Torah introduces in the beginning of Parashat Ki-Tisa, requires each member of the nation to pay an annual half-shekel tax to the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. The Talmud Yerushalmi (Shekalim 2:3) offers an explanation for why the Torah required paying specifically this amount – a half-shekel: “Because they sinned with the [golden] calf in the middle of the day, they shall give a half-shekel.” This amount was chosen for the annual tax because this payment serves to atone for the grievous sin of the golden calf, which occurred at midday. This follows the tradition mentioned in other sources (such as the Yerushlami, Ta’anit 22b) that *Benei Yisrael* had expected Moshe to return from atop Mount Sinai that day, and they waited until noon. After half the day passed, they despaired, and they decided to approach Aharon and demand that he create for them a graven image. The half-shekel paid to the *Beit Ha-mikdash* commemorates the sin committed by the people after half the day passed and Moshe did not return.

What might be the significance of the fact that the sin of the golden calf unfolded at midday? Why is this particular detail worthy of commemoration through the *machatzit ha-shekel*?

Perhaps, the time of day when this tragic incident occurred is to be seen as symbolic of the broader context of the golden calf. *Benei Yisrael* committed this act of betrayal at their most glorious moment, when they shone the brightest, having just proclaimed their unbridled and unwavering commitment to obey God’s laws. Not even six weeks earlier, they beheld God’s revelation and heard His pronouncement of the Ten Commandments, marking the peak of the bond between them and the Almighty. The Gemara (Gittin 36b) says about the sin of the golden calf, “How risible is a bride who is unfaithful inside her wedding canopy.” Just as the wedding marks the moment when the love between the bride and groom reaches its greatest level, so did *Matan Torah* signify the moment of greatest love between God and *Benei Yisrael*. The golden calf occurred at “midday,” when *Benei Yisrael*’s “light” shone more intensely than at any other point in our nation’s history.

The *machatzit ha-shekel*, which funded the public sacrifices in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, calls upon us to work towards returning to our “midday,” to try to shine our brightest. We all, invariably, will have “brighter” and “darker” moments, but we must always strive to be our very best. The *machatzit ha-shekel* funded the public sacrifices, which included the daily *tamid* sacrifice, which was offered each morning and afternoon. Each day, we are given a new opportunity to shine brightly. The command of *machatzit ha-shekel* teaches us that even if we’ve failed in the past, nevertheless, we can still restore our “midday” condition, and illuminate the world like the midday sun, each of us in his or her own unique way.

Wednesday

Parashat Ki-Tisa begins with a series of commands that complete the section of instructions regarding the *Mishkan* which *Benei Yisrael* built at Mount Sinai. One of these commands is to prepare the *ketoret* – the special incense which was offered on the golden altar inside the *Mishkan* twice each day and produced a fragrant scent. The Torah (30:34) lists the various spices that were blended together to prepare this incense. These included *chelbena* (commonly identified as galbanum), which, *Chazal* teach, actually emitted a foul odor. However, when it was mixed with the other spices, it enhanced the overall fragrance of the *ketoret*. The Gemara (Keritut 6b) famously views this blending of the *chelbena* with the other spices as a symbol for the inclusion of sinners in our communal prayers. Just as God required including the foul-smelling *chelbena* in the *ketoret* for the sake of enhancing its scent, so are we to include even sinners in our prayers, and their participation contributes positively to the prayer experience and its effectiveness. And thus the Gemara teaches, “Any fast day that does not include the sinners of Israel is not a fast day.” When we assemble together for fasting and prayer in times of crisis, we must include even the sinners, just as the *ketoret* included the *chelbena*.

*Keli Yakar* adds a different insight into the symbolism of the blending of the *chelbena*, viewing the spices as symbolic of our actions. Just as all the spices were fragrant except one, we, too, generally conduct ourselves in an appropriate, “fragrant” manner, but also have flaws and occasionally fail. The Gemara in Masekhet Yoma (86b) famously teaches that wholehearted repentance, driven by genuine love of God (as opposed to fear of punishment), has the effect of not only erasing one’s guilt, but transforming the misdeeds into sources of merit. When we repent with sincerity, our wrongs retroactively become catalysts for growth, and are thus considered merits. *Keli Yakar* suggests explaining the blending of the *chelbena* as a symbol of this transformation. We have the ability to take our “*chelbena*,” the “foul” elements of our character and conduct, and make them “fragrant.” If we learn from our mistakes and struggle to overcome our faults, then they undergo the same change as the *chelbena*, and have the effect of enhancing the “scent” and quality of our behavior and our being. The *ketoret* calls upon us to take note of the “*chelbena*” within ourselves and, through the process of repentance, work towards transforming our negative qualities into something “fragrant” and beautiful. Rather than ignore or accept our faults and failings, we should seek to learn from them and use them in our ongoing effort to grow, whereby they blend together with the other, “fragrant” elements of our beings and contribute towards our development into the kind of people we are meant to be.

Thursday

We read in Parashat Ki-Tisa that when Moshe returned from atop Mount Sinai, where he had spent forty days receiving the Torah from God, he first met his loyal attendant, Yehoshua. The Torah relates that Yehoshua heard “shouting” coming from the Israelite camp (“*kol ha-am be’rei’o*”), which he mistook as the sounds of warfare (32:17). In truth, however, these were the sounds of the people’s revelry as they celebrated with their newly-fashioned golden calf. As we read earlier (32:6), the people arose that morning, offered sacrifices to the graven image, and had a feast with merrymaking. This was the “shouting” that Yehoshua heard. As *Targum Yonatan ben Uziel* writes in explaining this verse, Yehoshua heard “*kad meyabeiv be-chedva kadam igla*” – “as [the people] shouted before the calf.”

Rav Zalman Sorotzkin, in his *Oznayim La-Torah*, notes the word “*meyabeiv*” used by *Targum Yonatan* in reference to the people’s revelry. The verb *y.b.v.* is familiar to us from the Gemara’s discussion in Masekhet Rosh Hashanah (33b) of the meaning of the word “*teru’a*” with which the Torah introduces the obligation to sound the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah (“*yom teru’a yiheyeh lakhem*” – Bamidbar 29:1). The Gemara cites Onkelos’ translation of this word as “*yebava*,” which the Gemara understands to mean “wailing,” as evidenced by the description in Sefer Shoftim (5:28) of the mother of the Canaanite general Sisera who wailed – “*va-teyabeiv*” – as she waited in vain for him to return from battle. Based on this definition of the word “*yebava*,” the Gemara establishes that the word “*teru’a*” denotes a wailing sound, though different opinions exist as to which precise kind of wailing is indicated by this term (hence the different variations which we blow on Rosh Hashanah, in order to satisfy all opinions). Surprisingly, Rav Sorotzkin observes, *Targum Yonatan ben Uziel* uses this verb, which denotes wailing in grief, in reference to *Benei Yisrael* merrymaking as they celebrated the golden calf.

Rav Sorotzkin boldly suggests that *Targum Yonatan* perhaps sought to allude to the fact that *Benei Yisrael*’s revelry was tempered by pangs of conscience. Even as they gleefully celebrated, their inner spark of sanctity and devotion to God caused them to “grieve.” Their merriment was not wholehearted; it was mitigated, if only slightly, by a sense of discomfort and unease. Their emotional state at these moments is depicted by *Targum Yonatan* by the phrase “*meyabeiv be-chedva*” – “gleefully wailing.” Their festivity was “gleeful,” but also accompanied by an inner “wailing,” a degree of grief, borne out of their realization of how they were betraying their core values and principles, and God Himself. This resulted in a feeling of angst and emotional unrest, even as they feasted and reveled around the golden calf.

Friday

The Torah in Parashat Ki-Tisa tells of the tragic incident of the golden calf – the graven image which *Benei Yisrael* worshipped at Mount Sinai after concluding that Moshe, who had climbed to the mountaintop to receive the Torah from God, would not be returning. We read that the morning after the golden calf was fashioned, the people “woke early…ate and drank,” and then proceeded “*le-tzacheik*” (32:6). This term – which stems from the root *tz.ch.k.*, “laugh” – is generally understood as a reference to merrymaking, and thus, as the Ramban writes, this verse thus tells of the people’s revelry and gaiety as they celebrated their new deity. The *Midrash Tanchuma*, cited by Rashi, adds that the verb *tz.ch.k.* can also refer to promiscuity and murder, and the Torah thus indicates that the people were guilty of more than just frivolous merriment – they engaged in forbidden relationships, and they killed Chur, Moshe’s nephew, who opposed the idea to make a golden calf.

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch adds that “*le-tzacheik*” implies a scornful rejection of religious principles. It denotes a cynical attitude, or, in Rav Hirsch’s words, “a feeling of superiority over something important, great, high, noble.” Rav Hirsch explains that the service of God requires one to “submit himself and give himself up to the dictates of His holy laws of morality,” to “something which is higher than Man, something high, great…” By contrast, those who create their own gods seek to free themselves of restraint and submission, by deciding that their “god” wants them to do precisely what it is that they wish to do. Thus, Rav Hirsch explains the phrase “*le-tzacheik*” in the context of the golden calf as referring to “deliberate debauchery to demonstrate the freedom from moral chains, a mockery of the laws of morality by a canonization of immorality.” The people’s worship of the golden calf was accompanied by a feeling of contempt for the lofty ideals, and the rules, obligations and responsibilities, which they had previously accepted upon themselves.

A creative explanation of “*le-tzacheik*” is suggested by Rav Tzvi Hersh Farber, in his *Kerem Ha-tzevi*. He proposes that there were those among the nation who argued against the idea to make a golden calf, and warned the rest of the people that if they abandoned God, He would no longer sustain them with the miraculous manna. Rav Farber writes that this might have been the reason why Aharon, after fashioning the golden calf, told the people that they should celebrate the following day (“*chag le-Hashem machar*” – 32:5). He expected God to withhold the manna in response to the people’s betrayal, and that when the people saw the next morning that their daily food ration did not arrive, they would immediately regret this decision. However, the next morning, the people saw that the manna did, in fact, descend from the heavens, just as it did every other morning. God continued feeding and caring for *Benei Yisrael* despite their having betrayed Him, and so He sent the manna as usual that morning, after the people created a graven image which they then called their god. Rav Farber suggests that this is the meaning of the verse, “The nation sat to eat and drink, and they arose *le-tzacheik*.” As they sat down to eat just as they ate every other morning, they cynically ridiculed Aharon and the others who warned that their food rations would be denied if they betrayed the Almighty.

**THE FIRST DECADE OF SALT ARCHIVES CAN BE FOUND AT:**

[www.etzion.org.il/en/salt-archives.html](http://etzion.org.il/en/salt-surf-little-torah-archives)

**MORE RECENT INSTALLMENTS OF SALT DIVREI TORAH CAN BE FOUND AT:**

[www.etzion.org.il/en/topics/salt-surf-little-torah-weekly-files](http://www.etzion.org.il/en/topics/salt-surf-little-torah-weekly-files)