

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**CHIEF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS**

### Covenant & Conversation

**F**raming the epic events of this week's sedra are two objects -- the two sets of tablets, the first given before, the second after, the sin of the Golden Calf. Of the first, we read: "The tablets were the work of G-d; the writing was the writing of G-d, engraved on the tablets."

These were perhaps the holiest object in history: from beginning to end, the work of G-d. Yet within hours they lay shattered, broken by Moses when he saw the calf and the Israelites dancing around it.

The second tablets, brought down by Moses on the tenth of Tishri, were the result of his prolonged plea to G-d to forgive the people. This is the historic event that lies behind Yom Kippur (tenth of Tishri), the day marked in perpetuity as a time of favour, forgiveness and reconciliation between G-d and the Jewish people. The second tablets were different in one respect. They were not wholly the work of G-d: Carve out two stone tablets like the first ones, and I will write on them the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke.

Hence the paradox: the first tablets, made by G-d, did not remain intact. The second tablets, the joint work of G-d and Moses, did. Surely the opposite should have been true: the greater the holiness, the more eternal. Why was the more holy object broken while the less holy stayed whole? This is not, as it might seem, a question specific to the tablets. It is, in fact, a powerful example of a fundamental principle in Jewish spirituality.

The Jewish mystics distinguished between two types of Divine-human encounter. They called them *itaruta de-l'eylah* and *itaruta deletata*, respectively "an awakening from above" and "an awakening from below." The first is initiated by G-d, the second by mankind. An "awakening from above" is spectacular, supernatural, an event that bursts through the chains of causality that at other times bind the natural world. An "awakening from below" has no such grandeur. It is a gesture that is human, all too human.

Yet there is another difference between them,

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in the opposite direction. An "awakening from above" may change nature, but it does not, in and of itself, change human nature. In it, no human effort has been expended. Those to whom it happens are passive. While it lasts, it is overwhelming; but only while it lasts. Thereafter, people revert to what they were. An "awakening from below", by contrast, leaves a permanent mark.

Because human beings have taken the initiative, something in them changes. Their horizons of possibility have been expanded. They now know they are capable of great things, and because they did so once, they are aware that they can do so again. An awakening from above temporarily transforms the external world; an awakening from below permanently transforms our internal world. The first changes the universe; the second changes us.

Two Examples. The first: Before and after the division of the Red Sea, the Israelites were confronted by enemies: before, by the Egyptians, after by the Amalekites. The difference is total.

Before the Red Sea, the Israelites were commanded to do nothing: "Stand still and you will see the deliverance G-d will bring you today... G-d will fight for you; you need only be still." (14:13-14).

Facing the Amalekites, however, the Israelites themselves had to fight: "Moses said to Joshua, 'Choose men and go out and fight the Amalekites'" (17:9).

The first was an "awakening from above", the second an "awakening from below."

The difference was palpable. Within three days after the division of the Sea, the greatest of all miracles, the Israelites began complaining again (no water, no food). But after the war against the Amalekites, the Israelites never again complained when facing conflict (the sole exception -- when the spies returned and the people lost heart -- was when they relied on hearsay testimony, not on the immediate prospect of battle itself). The battles fought for us do not change us; the battles we fight, do.

The second example: Mount Sinai and the Tabernacle. The Torah speaks about these two revelations of "G-d's glory" in almost identical terms:

The glory of G-d settled on Mount Sinai. For six days the cloud covered the mountain, and on the seventh day G-d called to Moses from within the cloud. Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of G-d filled the tabernacle.

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The difference between them was that the sanctity of Mount Sinai was momentary, while that of the tabernacle was permanent (at least, until the Temple was built, centuries later). The revelation at Sinai was an "awakening from above". It was initiated by G-d. So overwhelming was it that the people said to Moses, "Let G-d not speak to us any more, for if He does, we will die" (20:16). By contrast, the tabernacle involved human labour. The Israelites made it; they prepared the structured space the Divine presence would eventually fill. Forty days after the revelation at Sinai, the Israelites made a Golden Calf. But after constructing the sanctuary they made no more idols -- at least until they entered the land. That is the difference between the things that are done for us and the things we have a share in doing ourselves. The former change us for a moment, the latter for a lifetime.

There was one other difference between the first tablets and the second. According to tradition, when Moses was given the first tablets, he was given only Torah shebikhtav, the "written Torah". At the time of the second tablets, he was given Torah she-be'al peh, the Oral Torah as well: "R. Jochanan said: G-d made a covenant with Israel only for the sake of the Oral Law, as it says: "For by the mouth of these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel"" (Ex. 34:27).

The difference between the Written and Oral Torah is profound. The first is the word of G-d, with no human contribution. The second is a partnership -- the word of G-d as interpreted by the mind of man. The following are two of several remarkable passages to this effect: R. Judah said in the name of Shmuel: Three thousand traditional laws were forgotten during the period of mourning for Moses. They said to Joshua: "Ask" (through ruach hakodesh, the holy spirit). Joshua replied, "It is not in heaven." They said to Samuel, "Ask." He replied, "These are the commandments -- implying that no prophet has the right to introduce anything new." (B.T. Temurah 16a) "If a thousand prophets of the stature of Elijah and Elisha were to give one interpretation of a verse, and one thousand and one sages were to offer a different interpretation, we follow the majority: the law is in accordance with the thousand-and-one sages and not in accordance with the thousand prophets." (Maimonides, Commentary to the Mishneh, Introduction)

Any attempt to reduce the Oral Torah to the Written -- by relying on prophecy or Divine communication -- mistakes its essential nature as the collaborative partnership between G-d and man, where revelation meets interpretation. Thus, the difference between the two precisely mirrors that between the first and second tablets. The first were Divine, the second the result of Divine-human collaboration. This helps us understand a glorious ambiguity. The Torah says that at Sinai the Israelites heard a "great voice velo yasaf" (Deut. 5:18). Two contradictory interpretations are given of this phrase. One reads it as "a great voice that was never heard again", the other as "a great voice that did not cease" -- i.e. a voice that was always heard again. Both are true. The first refers to the Written Torah, given once and never to be repeated. The second applies to the Oral Torah, whose study has never ceased.

It also helps us understand why it was only after the second tablets, not the first, that "When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of Testimony in his hands, he was unaware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with G-d" (34:29). Receiving the first tablets, Moses was passive. Therefore, nothing in him changed. For the second, he was active. He had a share in the making. He carved the stone on which the words were to be engraved. That is why he became a different person. His face shone.

In Judaism, the natural is greater than the supernatural in the sense that an "awakening from below" is more powerful in transforming us, and longer-lasting in its effects, than is an "awakening from above." That was why the second tablets survived intact while the first did not. Divine intervention changes nature, but it is human initiative -- our approach to G-d -- that changes us. ©2013 Chief Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and torah.org

**RABBI BEREL WEIN**

## Wein Online

**M**oshe is absent from the people of Israel for forty days. This seems to trigger a disastrous turn of events that results in the incident of the Golden Calf. Why is Moshe's absence such a cataclysmic event in the evolving story of the constant and continuing backtracking of Israel from its Sinai commitment? After all, every rabbi is entitled to a vacation away from his flock.

The commentators to Torah over the centuries have long debated the issue of the absence of Moshe and its connection to the sin of the Golden Calf. Many saw it as a sign of immaturity on the part of the people, in thinking that Moshe was their security blanket and that they could not serve G-d without his help and intervention. Others interpreted Moshe's absence as a separation trauma in which Israel believed that Moshe,

after being in Heaven once already, so to speak, could not readjust to earthly existence and would perhaps never return.

This would have signaled to the people that Torah and G-d's commandments were heavenly, other-world issues that could have no daily relevance to their mortal existence upon earth. This is an idea that the Torah itself has to constantly counteract -- that the Torah is not in Heaven and it is not for Heaven. It is for humans and intended to direct us in our earthly existence. The rabbis taught us in the Talmud that the Torah was not given to celestial angels. It was given to fragile, vulnerable, sinful human beings.

Moshe is not blamed for his absence. After all, he followed G-d's commandment to remain on the summit of Mount Sinai after the granting of the Torah to Israel. He certainly cannot be faulted for obeying the commands of the Lord. Yet his absence seems to be a contributing factor in the grievous sin of the Golden Calf.

I think that Moshe's absence, which after all was occasioned by a command from G-d, was not really the main problem that troubled the Jewish people. Rather, it was the choice of Aharon and Chur to replace him that proved troubling, as events later proved. Chur was too strong a person and, in his confrontation with the people, was killed. Aharon was too accommodating and compassionate a person and in his goodness and identification with the people and their demands he contributed to the sin of the Golden Calf.

Moshe was the perfect blend of strength and compassion. The rabbis criticized King Saul for being too strong on one occasion and too weak and compromising in another situation. A leader must encompass within one's personality both strength and compassion, firmness and the ability to compromise. The greatness of a leader is determined by the ability to be firm when necessary and accommodating when that occasion arises.

Moshe was and is the prime example of such leadership qualities. He fights a civil war against the architects of the Golden Calf and at the same time pleads the case for forgiveness of the Jewish people from G-d. It is the absence of such a perfectly balanced personality, which can destroy the leader of a people.

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#### **RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## **Shabbat Shalom**

“I will send an angel (messenger) before you, I will drive out the Canaanites..., bring you to a land flowing with milk and honey, but I will not go in your midst” (Ex 33:3).

Ki Tisa is the most theological portion of the Pentateuch. It deals with one of the most profound issues facing our religion; what is the nature of G-d's involvement with the world in general and with Israel in particular? This is one of the most difficult passages in the Bible, so how should we understand chapters 33 and 34 of the Book Exodus - the central chapters of this week's Biblical portion? It is precisely this conundrum which we will attempt to tackle.

The Israelites certainly felt G-d's involvement and protection during the period of the plagues and the splitting of the Reed Sea. They continued to sense G-d's close connection when they stood at Mount Sinai and heard His commanding voice. But then, Moses absented himself and seemed to have absconded into splendid, supernal isolation with the Divine, leaving the nation bereft of both leadership and the divine presence. They panicked, and regressed into the hedonistic and destructive idolatry of the Egyptian Golden Calf. They lost their moorings!

Now, after they have accepted their punishment and are about to continue their journey, they have one major, but crucial request: They wish G-d to enter into their midst, so that they will always be sure of His protective presence. They want to live in a world in which G-d's supportive compassion will always be manifest, not in an agonizing uncertainty, in which G-d's face is often hidden.

G-d has already informed them, however, that they must first "make a Sanctuary for Him" - prepare the world so that it will be ready for His presence - "and then He will dwell in their midst." In the words of the Kotzker Rebbe, "Where is G-d? Wherever you let Him in." First make a sanctuary where G-d can dwell, and then He will descend into its midst.

Hence, G-d explains to Moses, the spokesman for his nation, "I will send an angel (messenger) before you, I will drive out the Canaanites..., bring you to a land flowing with milk and honey, but I will not go in your midst" (Ex 33:3). You will have messenger-angels who will lead you, you and they will have to make the decisions and follow through on the actions; but you will not see My face, and I will not be visibly in your midst. This is for your own good: "I will not go in your midst because you are (still) a stiff-necked (stubborn and rebellious) nation, lest I destroy you on the way" (Ex 33:2, 3,5).

It is premature for you to have Me in your midst, G-d explains, until the nation has properly repented and is ready for redemption. G-d is loving and compassionate, but He has high standards. If His presence is truly in our midst, if He has no opportunity to "look away" (as it were), then He will have to punish in the same way that He rewards. We are better off with G-d always ready to step in and prevent disaster, but from behind a cloud - so that He will be able to back off, look away, as it were, from punishing us severely,

even though we might very well deserve such punishment.

Moses continues to press, entreating, "How shall it be known that Your nation has gained Your favorable grace unless You go (on the journey) together with us ("imanu"), so that we may be distinguished, your nation and I, from every other nation on the face of the earth?" (ibid 16). But G-d doesn't acquiesce. Yes, He will reveal the "paths" on which He wishes Israel to walk and by means of His divine Torah, he will show them how He wants them to live. He will send leaders, prophets, teachers and generals to lead them in the right direction. But, they will have to follow their leaders without ever seeing G-d's face or having G-d's presence in their midst, until they take responsibility for their actions, repent and become worthy.

During the early Biblical period, certainly when the Israelites were in Egypt and for most of the First Commonwealth Period. G-d was still very active "behind the scenes" - because, after all, the Jewish people was very much in its infancy. It was during the Second Commonwealth, and especially in our period, that G-d expected and expects us to initiate, to play center stage in our journey towards redemption. He promises, however, that when we truly wish to become pure, He will aid us and that He guarantees our eventual repentance and world redemption. © 2013 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

#### RABBI DOV KRAMER

## Taking a Closer Look

“**A**nd he (Moshe) saw the [golden] calf and [the] dances, and Moshe's anger raged and he threw the tablets from his hands and he broke them at the bottom of (lit. under) the mountain” (Sh'mos 32:19). There is much discussion about why Moshe broke the Luchos, the tablets into which G-d carved the words He spoke publicly at Mt. Sinai, the “Ten Commandments.” One of the more famous explanations (see Sh'mos Rabbah 43:1 and 46:1, Midrash Tanchuma Ki Sisa 30 and Eikev 11, Avos d'Rav Noson 2:3 and Ibn Ezra) compares Moshe breaking the Luchos to an emissary of the king (or of one of his officers) who tears up a royal marriage contract after discovering something unsavory about the person he was supposed to deliver it to, as it would be much worse when the king finds out what happened if the marriage was official than if it wasn't.

Several Roshei Yeshiva (see Rinas Yitzchok III on 32:27 and Iyun HaParsha #63, <http://tinyurl.com/be3c9fr>) ask how Moshe breaking the Luchos made a difference, since the prohibition against idol worship (including the consequences of violating the prohibition) had already been issued and was still in affect (as evidenced by the death penalty being carried out on the violators, see 32:27-28 and 32:35).

There are several notable differences between how things were before and how they were after the sin of the golden calf. When (chronologically) the Mishkan was commanded is the subject of much discussion, with some commentators suggesting that it only became necessary after the nation had sinned (see S'fornu on 25:9 and 20:21), or that some aspects were different because of it (see <http://RabbiDMK.posterous.com/Parashas-Ki-Sisa-5772>). Rabbi Yaakov (Lorberbaum) of Lisa (the author of the Nesivos HaMishput), in Nachalas Yaakov (Parashas Vu'eschanan), attributes the differences between the first set of Luchos (in Parashas Yisro) and the second set (in Parashas Vu'eschanan) to the decline in the spiritual level of the nation due to the sin of the golden calf. The Talmud (Bava Kama 54b-55a) says the word “good” was not included in the first set of Luchos so that the good that was intended should not be lost after they were broken. Whatever this means, it is obvious that breaking the Luchos was more than just a symbolic gesture, and permanently affected the covenant between G-d and the Children of Israel; otherwise, having “good” included in the first Luchos wouldn't prevent them from also being included in the second ones.

There are several Midrashim that describe a virtual tug-of-war over the Luchos. Some (e.g. Tanchuma Eikev 11, Yerushalmi Taanis 4:5) describe G-d holding on (as it were) to one side of the Luchos--trying to prevent Moshe from taking them down from Sinai--while Moshe held on to the other, while others (e.g. Avos d'Rav Noson 2:3 and Sh'mos Rabbah 46:3) describe the 70 elders trying to grab the Luchos away from Moshe to try to prevent him from breaking them. These Midrashim cannot mean that there was an actual tug-of-war over the Luchos, as G-d doesn't have physical hands to grab onto one end, and if He really wanted to take the Luchos back from Moshe, He obviously could have. Also, there doesn't seem to be any communication or contact between Moshe and anyone other than Yehoshua until after he broke the Luchos (see 32:19); even though he did it “before their eyes” (D'varim 9:17), making sure they saw that he broke them, he did it “under the mountain,” and only Yehoshua was with him until they reached the camp. Rather, the Midrashim are trying to convey the idea that G-d didn't really want to let Moshe take the Luchos with him (either to prevent him from giving it to the nation or to prevent him from breaking them) and the nation (or at least its leaders) didn't want Moshe to break them and destroy the symbol of their covenant with G-d.

Although the leaders may not have realized that the Luchos (and what they represented) could be replaced, and therefore tried to stop Moshe from breaking them, G-d had to know that they could, or at least that the nation couldn't live up to the ideals that the first Luchos represented (which is why He wanted to wipe them out and start anew, see Sh'mos 32:10 and

D'varim 9:14). Why did G-d want to, at least initially, keep the Luchos in heaven rather than just instructing Moshe to break them? I would suggest that the message G-d was trying to send by not letting Moshe take the Luchos right away was that He still wanted the ideal situation that the Luchos represented to exist, at least conceptually. By taking the Luchos and breaking them, Moshe was sending the message that this ideal is too much to expect from mere mortals (bear in mind that after accepting the Torah until the sin of the golden calf, death would not have applied to the Children of Israel, see Sh'mos Rabbah 51:8). The breaking of the Luchos signified a change from the ideal relationship that couldn't be sustained to the possibility of a more realistic relationship, one that Moshe was able to get the nation ready for after helping them recover from their sin, was able to convince G-d to accept, and was represented by the second set of Luchos.

It is interesting to note that although after descending Mt. Sinai Moshe "drew nearer to the camp" (32:19), he broke the Luchos "at the bottom of the mountain." Our sages connect this "bottom of the mountain" to the place where Moshe had built an altar and 12 pillars when the covenant was enacted (24:4, see Bamidbar Rabbah 9:48), although it is unclear whether Moshe broke them at that spot to signify that the covenant itself was still intact or that it was no longer intact. (Some suggest that he did so to indicate that the sin was shared by all 12 Tribes, not just those who actually worshipped the golden calf.) A connection can also be made to the "bottom of the mountain" (Sh'mos 19:17, see also D'varim 4:11) that the Talmud (Shabbos 88a) says was literally "under the mountain," as G-d "held Mt Sinai above them," threatening them to either accept the Torah or be killed. By breaking the Luchos "under the mountain," Moshe was telling G-d that He shouldn't hold the nation completely responsible for not living up to a covenant that they really weren't ready for, yet was forced upon them; the covenant was still intact, but the full consequences of not living up to its ideal form shouldn't be insisted upon.

The king's messenger tearing up the marriage contract didn't preclude the royal wedding from ever taking place; the contract just had to be rewritten. If/when it was, it would be with the knowledge and understanding of what had occurred. By breaking the Luchos, Moshe ended any possibility of the nation (or anyone else) being held to the previous standard, one that included the entire nation deserving death for allowing the few to worship the golden calf, and then started the process that led to a more realistic expectation of what the covenant entailed. Even then, some still deserved the death penalty, but not the entire nation. Once this was accomplished, the next steps could be taken, allowing Moshe to receive a second set of Luchos, which represented the covenant that is still in effect to this day. © 2013 Rabbi D. Kramer

## MACHON ZOMET

# Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Mordechai Greenberg,  
Rosh Yeshiva, Kerem B'Yavne

**T**he shattering of the Tablets by Moshe has provided opportunities for many discussions and sermons.

The main question is the following: How did Moshe dare to break Tablets which were written directly by "the finger" of G-d, when the damage caused was much greater than any possible benefit? One of the commentators who noted that Moshe's act involved an important principle of Judaism was the "Meshech Chochma," who discussed the matter at great length.

"And you shall fear my Temple" [Vayikra 19:30]  
-- You do not fear the Temple itself but rather the One who warned you about the Temple (Yavamot 6b). This statement means that no object exists in the world that is holy in itself. Even when we treat an object as being holy, what we mean is that we are using it to perform the will of G-d, who is the only part of reality that can truly be considered holy. The only thing that makes an object holy is the mitzva to which it is linked. The Temple is a holy place because the Holy One, Blessed be He, has a desire to have a dwelling place down below, as is written, "I will dwell within them" [Shemot 25:8]. But when Yisrael commits a sin and the Shechina leaves, no vestige of holiness remains at the site. Nothing happened to Titus when he brought a prostitute into the Holy of Holies, because after the Shechina left the area it was nothing more than a collection of wood and stones.

Bnei Yisrael made the mistake of thinking that Moshe was holy in his own right, and that is why they worried so about his slow return, which led to G-d telling him, "Descend, for your nation... has become corrupt" [Shemot 32:7]. In what way did they become corrupt? They said, "you took the nation out of Egypt" [ibid]. They thought Moshe was a deity and that he had taken them out of Egypt. "And therefore Moshe screamed out: Do you think that I have any power and any sanctity without the commands of G-d, so that you made a calf when I was not there? G-d forbid saying this, I am a man just like you, and the Torah does not depend on me."

The Pelishtim had similar thoughts when the Ark was brought to their camp. They said, "Who can rescue us from the hand of this tremendous G-d?" [Shmuel I 4:8]. Moshe was afraid that if he gave the people the Tablets they would think that they are Divine in themselves, and they might replace the Golden Calf by the Tablets.

In order to root out from Bnei Yisrael the mistaken assumption that there are objects which are holy in their own right, Moshe shattered them. This meant that even objects which are imprinted with a Divine action do not have any innate value of their own. And the Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Moshe, "G-d

bless you for shattering them" [Shabbat 87b]. He commanded Moshe to carve out two new tablets, but this time they would be manmade. We are taught that both the whole Tablets and the remains of the shattered ones were put in the Ark, to show that the first Tablets, the ones made directly by G-d, have been shattered, while those made by the hands of Moshe remained whole. (Bava Batra 14). "This teaches us that no created object has innate holiness, but it only stems from the fact that Bnei Yisrael observed the Torah which is the will of the Creator, the only true essence."

This same path was followed by the prophets of Yisrael, when they shouted out, "Do not follow the false words, saying, they are the Sanctuary of G-d... Can one steal, murder, and commit adultery... and still come to stand before Me in this house... and say, we are saved... Has this house become a den of criminals?" [Zecharia 7:4-11]. © 2013 Rabbi A. Bazak and Machon Zomet

#### RABBI AVI WEISS

## Shabbat Forshpeis

**A**s Moshe (Moses) descends the mountain, aware that the Jews had made the golden calf, Joshua awaits him. Hearing noise coming from the camp, Joshua tells Moshe that he hears the voice of war. In the words of Torah, "when Joshua heard the sound of the people...he said to Moshe, there is a sound of battle in the camp." (Exodus 32:17) Moshe responds that it is not the sound of war in the camp, but rather the sound of anot. (Exodus 32:18)

What exactly does this term mean?

Abarbanel suggests that Joshua did not know that the golden calf had been built. Hearing sounds, he assumed it was that of war. Moshe, aware of the reality of the situation, responds that it was not the sound of war, but rather "it was simply the sound of people making a noise." For Abarbanel, anot simply means "noise."

Ramban suggests that anot describes the type of noise being heard. Moshe "was reluctant to speak disparagingly of Israel. So he told him [Joshua] that it was the noise of merriment." For Ramban, anot means a joyous song. As Nechama Leibowitz explains, "Moshe would never denounce his people unless it were for the purpose of reproving them....He was reluctant to let Joshua have the 'latest news' of their disgrace."

Another thought comes to mind. Joshua may have indeed known what happened. He may have been telling Moshe that the Jews have rebelled, and in fact, are prepared if you will, to go to war with G-d. Joshua's words then make sense: "There is a sound of battle in the camp."

Moshe responds that he understands the actions of the people to be very different. He states that he does not hear the voice of victory or defeat as Joshua does, but he hears the voice of a nation

painfully crying out. From this perspective, the word anot comes from the word enui which means "affliction"; the people were afflicted and confused. They were confused about their relationship to G-d and were in deep conflict about belief.

For Joshua, the cry means that the Jews were rebelling. Kol milchama, "the sound of battle" not only reflected the actions of the people, but was also advice to Moshe that he should take up arms in response to the challenge.

Moshe, who hears the cry as the confused state of belief of the people, believed that the reaction should be to bring the Jews back through love and care.

While it is true that Moshe takes strong action and shatters the Tablets and thousands of Jews die, it must be remembered that it is G-d's thirteen attributes of mercy that brings about the giving of the second set of Tablets. (Exodus 34:6-7)

The message: When seeing someone struggle with faith, we should hear a cry rather than rebellion and respond with love and mercy. © 2013 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

#### RABBI MORDECHAI WILLIG

## TorahWeb

**“H**ashem said to Moshe, 'When you will raise the head of Bnei Yisrael (Shemos 30:11,12).' The verse (Tehilim 3:3) 'Many say of my soul, 'There is no salvation for him from Hashem forever' speaks of the nations of the world who say, 'A nation that heard at Sinai, 'I am Hashem your G-d, you shall not have other gods' (Shemos 20:2,3), and forty days later said 'These are your gods, Yisrael' (32:4), can they have salvation? There is no salvation for him [Yisrael] forever!' But You, Hashem, are a shield for me, the One who raises my head (Tehilim 3:4); we were guilty of a capital offense punishable by severing of the head, but You protected us and instead raised our head through Moshe as it says, 'When you will raise the head.'" (Tanchuma 4)

Am Yisrael was despondent after committing the sin of idolatry a mere forty days after kabolas HaTorah. The nations scoffed at us, predicting that we could never be saved. Yet, after our precipitous decline from the highest spiritual point in our history to the depths of sin and despair, Hashem, through Moshe, raised our heads. He commanded us to build the Mishkan, using our shekalim to achieve atonement for our sins, including the Golden Calf.

The Tanchuma interprets the pesukim in Tehilim as referring to the personal sin of David Hamelech as well.

"Many (Do'eg and Achitofel) say of me, 'One who captured the sheep and killed the shepherd (i.e. who married Batsheva and killed her husband Uriah

and Am Yisrael by the sword of war), can he be saved from his son Avshalom (Tehilim 3:1)? There is no salvation for him (David) forever! But You, Hashem, are a shield for me, in the merit of my ancestors, as You said to Avraham, 'I am a shield for you' (Bereishis 15:1). I was guilty of an offense punishable by severing of the head, but You raised my head through Nossan the prophet. When I said, 'I have sinned to Hashem' he said 'So, too, Hashem has set aside your sin, you shall not die.' (Shmuel II, 12:13).

David Hamelech was undoubtedly devastated when he recognized and confessed to the enormity of his sin. His enemies were certain that his punishment, the rebellion of Avshalom, would be fatal. But Hashem protected David from Avshalom and restored his kingdom. His confession granted atonement for his sin and He merited an eternal dynasty.

"David was not in a state to sin with Batsheva, as it is written (Tehilim 109:22) 'My heart, i.e. my evil inclination, has died within me. Am Yisrael were not in a state to sin by worshipping the Golden Calf, as it is written (Devarim 5:26) 'Would that their hearts be theirs to fear Me and observe all My commandments forever.' Then why did they in fact sin? So that if an individual sins we tell him to learn from David; if the community sins we tell them to learn from Am Yisrael. Hashem decreed that they sin and repent to demonstrate that repentance is always possible." (Avodah Zarah 4b, 5a, Rashi).

Am Yisrael was guilty of idolatry and David's sin bordered on immorality and murder. If teshuva is effective for the three cardinal sins for which one must give up his life, it can certainly atone for lesser sins.

When a person sins, the yetzer hara says to him, "Your situation is hopeless. There is no point in attempting to correct your mistake. Since you are spiritually doomed, continue in your sinful ways and enjoy life. You have nothing to lose." Parshas Ki Sisa combats this insidious notion. The Tanchuma (3) interprets Ki Sisa in the future tense. When we read it every year, it is as if Moshe stands there and raises our heads. The eternal lesson of the atonement for the sin of the Golden Calf is that no situation is hopeless!

Every person has moments of spiritual angst. Some commit serious sins, other lesser ones. Many realize that they are not davening and or learning Torah properly. Most recognize that they are not actualizing their full potential, neither in serving Hashem nor in helping other. The Satan says "It is too late to change or improve." When this happens we must remember the timeless message of Ki Sisa. In the absence of prophecy, we must, with the help of our spiritual leaders, lift up our own heads. Despair is a tool in the arsenal of the yetzer hara, and must be avoided in all circumstances.

Individually, we must emulate David; collectively we must emulate Am Yisrael who atoned for their grievous sin by building the Mishkan with their shekalim.

By overcoming the yetzer hara and lifting our heads, may we speedily merit the coming of Mashiach ben David and the rebuilding of the Bais Hamikdash. © 2013 Rabbi M. Willig & The TorahWeb Foundation, Inc.

### RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

## Haftorah

**T**his week's Haftorah, read in conjunction with Parshas Parah, describes the Jewish people's state of purity in the time of Mashiach. Hashem reminds them of their sinful behavior that kindled His wrath and sent them into exile. After endless years of darkness Hashem will purify His children and return them home. The prophet Yechezkel says in Hashem's name, "And I will sprinkle pure waters upon you that will purify you from all your impurities and repulsive actions..." (36:25) Yechezkel is referring to the Jewish people's ultimate state of purity wherein Hashem will totally cleanse them from sin. Yechezkel compares this spiritual cleansing to purification from ritual impurity. It is worthwhile to understand this particular analogy. Instead of comparing this purification to the traditional immersion process Yechezkel compares it to the sprinkling of the red heifer waters. This detailed and mysterious procedure purified one from direct contact with a corpse. Such contact produced the most severe state of ritual impurity and required a unique purification process. Yechezkel's analogy suggests a direct corollary between sin and death. Apparently, the ultimate removal of sin is similar to the removal of the impurity of death.

Let us examine the nature of the red heifer process and understand its relationship to sin. We read in the maftir portion of Parshas Parah that the kohain was commanded to slaughter the heifer and sprinkle its sacrificial blood outside the Bais Hamikdash's walls. The kohanim then burned the heifer's body and mixed her ashes with spring water producing a ritual mixture. The mixture was then sprinkled on anyone who was associated with a corpse. The Sages comment on the unique nature of this sacrifice and explain that it atoned for the Jewish nation's sin of the golden calf. They show how every detail of this sacrifice ran parallel lines with the details of the sinful golden calf experience. (see Rashi to Bamidbar 19:2 II)

This indicates a direct relationship between the spiritual impurity of death and the golden calf. For this reason the purification process began with atonement from the golden calf sin. In fact, the purifying mixture was a product of the atonement of that sin. Whenever the Jewish nation required purification ashes they would atone for the golden calf sin and produced their necessary mixtures. Apparently, this sin's impact was so far reaching that it left an indelible impression on the Jewish people's ritual purity. Yet, this atonement was specifically related to association with a corpse and only required when producing purifying ashes.

We can appreciate this intriguing phenomenon through the Sages' profound insight in Mesichta Avoda Zara (5a). They teach us that when the Jewish people received the Torah they transcended the curse of mortality. They cleaved to Hashem's will with such intensity that their bodies were transformed into semi-spiritual entities. After two thousand years of world existence the body finally cooperated with the soul and created a harmonious unit of Hashem's perfect service. Regretfully, this lofty experience was short lived and, after forty days of elevation the Jewish people succumbed to fear and anxiety. They doubted if their revered leader Moshe Rabbeinu would ever return and desperately sought a qualified spiritual replacement. This set the stage for their insincere Egyptian converts who seduced the Jewish people into idolatry. This infamous plunge returned them to mortality. Their bodies returned to their physical state replete with all earthly urges and cravings.

We can further develop this through Sefer Hachinuch's understanding of the red heifer and its ritual mixture. He explains death's ritual impurity in the following manner. When one passes away, his soul departs from his body leaving behind a total physical entity. The body, barren of any trace of spirituality, projects a penetrating image of vanity and reflects a lifetime of earthly urges and sinful practices. Direct contact with a barren body damages one's spirituality and renders him ritually impure. This impure status has a positive effect and forces one to view his body and its effects in a different manner. His impure predicament reminds him that his body was meant to unite with his soul and he helps one senses the repulse of total earthly cravings. (Sefer Hachinuch Mitzva 263)

In truth, this vanity and sinful association traces back to the Jewish people's shameful sin of the golden calf. That single act returned the Jewish body to its physical state and created its ritual impurity. During that infamous scene the Jewish people traded their closest relationship with Hashem for shameful bodily cravings. Although this became reality their brief Har Sinai experience proved that one can free himself from earthly drives and direct his total being towards Hashem.

We now understand the red heifer's crucial role in the purification process. We realize that atonement from the golden calf was a prerequisite for ritual purity. Hashem introduced this impurity to assist one in detaching himself from his physical drives. One's impure state sent him a clear message about the body's shameful role in sin. However, one was reminded that his physical cravings were not necessarily part of his Jewish psyche. There was a time in the Jewish people's history where body and soul craved for something of true content and substance namely, association with Hashem. The first step of purification was to contemplate the damaging effect of physical drives. After detaching oneself from his deep rooted urges the

red heifer mixture completed the process. Its goal was to remind one of his true potential, to unify body and soul thereby achieving spiritual perfection.

We can now begin to understand Yechezkel's comparison between ultimate purity from sin and the red heifer mixture. The prophet Yechezkel describes this ultimate purity in the following words, "And I shall give you a new heart and place a new spirit in your midst and remove the stone heart from your flesh..." (36:26) Ramban teaches us that this refers to the Jewish people's pure desire to fulfill Hashem's will. The time will ultimately arrive for the body and all its drives to take a back seat. The Jewish people in the Messianic era will return to Adam's perfect state before his involvement in sin. Their single minded desire will be similar to that of the Jewish people during their first forty days at Har Sinai. They will totally detach themselves from physical passions and crave for the closest relationship with Hashem. (Ramban D'vorim 30:6) This process will ultimately return them to their semi-spiritual state of Har Sinai. This time, however, it will be everlasting and Hashem will permanently remove the curse of mortality from His people. (see Daas T'vunos 3:40)

The analogy of the purifying waters is now complete. Throughout the years, the red heifer's sacrificial waters purified one from association with earthly cravings. The ritual mix removed ritual impurity and reduced one's sinful urges. In addition, the atonement process brought one in contact with his soul's innermost cravings, to cleave to Hashem. It linked one to his glorious past at Har Sinai and inspired him to his glorious future in Meshiach's times. And it will ultimately complete its role and detach the Jewish people from all physical drives and passions and direct body and soul's total focus towards Hashem.

How timely is this lesson immediately following Purim with our sights set on Pesach. The mitzvos of Purim allows us to contact our innermost feelings and ascertain our true essence. After this uplifting experience we begin preparing for our total redemption. Indeed, the Sages teach us that as the Jewish people were redeemed from Egypt in the month of Nissan they will be ultimately redeemed in that same month. May we merit that this refer to our upcoming Nissan. © 2013 Rabbi D. Siegel and torah.org

