

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS**

### Covenant & Conversation

It is a moment of the very highest drama. The Israelites, a mere forty days after the greatest revelation in history, have made an idol: a Golden Calf. God threatens to destroy them. Moses, exemplifying to the fullest degree the character of Israel as one who "wrestles with God and man," confronts both in turn. To God, he prays for mercy for the people. Coming down the mountain and facing Israel, he smashes the tablets, symbol of the covenant. He grinds the calf to dust, mixes it with water, and makes the Israelites drink it. He commands the Levites to punish the wrongdoers. Then he re-ascends the mountain in a prolonged attempt to repair the shattered relationship between God and the people.

God accepts his request and tells Moses to carve two new tablets of stone. At this point, however, Moses makes a strange appeal: "And Moses hurried and knelt to the ground and bowed, and he said, 'If I have found favour in Your eyes, my Lord, may my Lord go among us, because [ki] it is a stiff-necked people, and forgive our wickedness and our sin, and take us as Your inheritance.'" (Ex. 34:8-9)

The difficulty in the verse is self-evident. Moses cites as a reason for God remaining with the Israelites the very attribute that God had previously given for wishing to abandon them: "'I have seen these people,' the Lord said to Moses, 'and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave Me alone so that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation.'" (Ex. 32:9)

How can Moses invoke the people's obstinacy

as the very reason for God to maintain His presence among them? What is the meaning of Moses' "because" -- "may my Lord go among us, because it is a stiff -- necked people"?

The commentators offer a variety of interpretations. Rashi reads the word *ki* as "if" -- "If they are stiff-necked, then forgive them." (Exodus 34:9) Ibn Ezra and Chizkuni read it as "although" or "despite the fact that" (*af al pi*). Alternatively, suggests Ibn Ezra, the verse might be read, "[I admit that] it is a stiff-necked people -- therefore forgive our wickedness and our sin, and take us as Your inheritance." (Ibn Ezra, "long" commentary *ad loc.*) These are straightforward readings, though they assign to the word *ki* a meaning it does not normally have.

There is, however, another and far more striking line of interpretation that can be traced across the centuries. In the twentieth century it was given expression by Rabbi Yitzchak Nissenbaum. The argument he attributed to Moses was this: "Almighty God, look upon this people with favour, because what is now their greatest vice will one day be their most heroic virtue. They are indeed an obstinate people...But just as now they are stiff -- necked in their disobedience, so one day they will be equally stiff-necked in their loyalty. Nations will call on them to assimilate, but they will refuse. Mightier religions will urge them to convert, but they will resist. They will suffer humiliation, persecution, even torture and death because of the name they bear and the faith they profess, but they will stay true to the covenant their ancestors made with You. They will go to their deaths saying *Ani ma'amin*, 'I believe.' This is a people awesome in its obstinacy -- and though now it is their failing, there will be times far into the future when it will be their noblest strength."

The fact that Rabbi Nissenbaum lived and died in the Warsaw ghetto gives added poignancy to his words. (This is my paraphrase of the commentary cited in the name of R. Yitzhak Nissenbaum in Aaron Yaakov Greenberg, ed., *Itturei Torah, Shemot* (Tel Aviv, 1976), 269-70. For R. Nissenbaum's remarkable speech in the Warsaw Ghetto, see Emil Fackenheim, *To Mend the World* (New York: Schocken, 1982), 223.)

Many centuries earlier, a Midrash made essentially the same point: "There are three things which are undaunted: the dog among beasts, the rooster among birds, and Israel among the nations. R.

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Isaac ben Redifa said in the name of R. Ami: You might think that this is a negative attribute, but in fact it is praiseworthy, for it means: 'Either be a Jew or prepare to be hanged.'" (Beitza 25b; Shemot Rabbah 42:9)

Jews were stiff-necked, says Rabbi Ami, in the sense that they were ready to die for their faith. As Gersonides (Ralbag) explained in the fourteenth century, a stubborn people may be slow to acquire a faith, but once they have done so they never relinquish it. (Ralbag, commentary to Exodus 34:9)

We catch a glimpse of this extraordinary obstinacy in an episode narrated by Josephus, one of the first recorded incidents of mass non-violent civil disobedience. It took place during the reign of the Roman emperor Caligula (37-41 CE). He had proposed placing a statue of himself in the precincts of the Temple in Jerusalem, and had sent the military leader Petronius to carry out the task, if necessary by force. This is how Josephus describes the encounter between Petronius and the Jewish population at Ptolemais (Acre): "There came ten thousand Jews to Petronius at Ptolemais to offer their petitions to him that he would not compel them to violate the law of their forefathers. 'But if,' they said, 'you are wholly resolved to bring the statue and install it, then you must first kill us, and then do what you have resolved on. For while we are alive we cannot permit such things as are forbidden by our law...'

"Then Petronius came to them (at Tiberius): 'Will you then make war with Caesar, regardless of his great preparations for war and your own weakness?' They replied, 'We will not by any means make war with Caesar, but we will die before we see our laws transgressed.' Then they threw themselves down on their faces and stretched out their throats and said that they were ready to be slain... Thus they continued firm in their resolution and proposed themselves to die willingly rather than see the statue dedicated."

(Josephus Antiquities of the Jews, bk. 18, chap. 8. Cited in Milton Konvitz, "Conscience and Civil Disobedience in the Jewish Tradition," in Contemporary Jewish Ethics, ed. Menachem Kellner (New York: Sanhedrin Press, 1978), 242-43.)

Faced with such heroic defiance on so large a scale, Petronius gave way and wrote to Caligula urging

him, in Josephus' words, "not to drive so many ten thousand of these men to distraction; that if he were to slay these men, he would be publicly cursed for all future ages."

Nor was this a unique episode. The rabbinic literature, together with the chronicles of the Middle Ages, are full of stories of martyrdom, of Jews willing to die rather than convert. Indeed the very concept of Kiddush Hashem, sanctification of God's name, came to be associated in the halachic literature with the willingness "to die rather than transgress." The rabbinic conclave at Lod (Lydda) in the second century CE, which laid down the laws of martyrdom (including the three sins about which it was said that "one must die rather than transgress") may have been an attempt to limit, rather than encourage, the phenomenon.

(Sanhedrin 74a. The three sins were murder, idolatry and incest. Martyrdom was a complex problem at various points in Jewish history. Jews found themselves torn between two conflicting ideals. On the one hand, self-sacrifice was the highest form of Kiddush Hashem, sanctification of God's name. On the other, Judaism has a marked preference for life and its preservation.)

Of these many episodes, one stands out for its theological audacity. It was recorded by the Jewish historian Shlomo ibn Verga (fifteenth to sixteenth centuries) and concerns the Spanish expulsion: "One of the boats was infested with the plague, and the captain of the boat put the passengers ashore at some uninhabited place... There was one Jew among them who struggled on afoot together with his wife and two children. The wife grew faint and died... The husband carried his children along until both he and they fainted from hunger. When he regained consciousness, he found that his two children had died.

"In great grief he rose to his feet and said: 'O Lord of all the universe, You are doing a great deal that I might even desert my faith. But know You of a certainty that -- even against the will of heaven -- a Jew I am and a Jew I shall remain. And neither that which You have brought upon me nor that which You may yet bring upon me will be of any avail.'"

(In Nahum Glatzer, A Jewish Reader (New York: Schocken, 1975), 204-5. It was this passage that inspired Zvi Kolitz's famous Holocaust fiction about one man's defiance of God in the name of God, Yossi Rakover Talks to God (New York: Vintage, 2000).)

One is awestruck by such faith -- such obstinate faith. Almost certainly it was this idea that lies behind a famous Talmudic passage about the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai: "And they stood under the mountain: R. Avdimi b. Chama b. Chasa said: This teaches that the Holy One blessed be He, overturned the mountain above them like a barrel and said, 'If you accept the Torah, it will be well. If not, this will be your burial place.' Said Rava, Even so, they re-accepted the

Torah in the days of Ahasuerus, for it is written, 'the Jews confirmed and took upon them', meaning, "they confirmed what they had accepted before." (Shabbat 88a. See essay "Mount Sinai and the Birth of Freedom," p. 149)

The meaning of this strange text seems to be this: at Sinai the Jewish people had no choice but to accept the covenant. They had just been rescued from Egypt. God had divided the sea for them; He had sent them manna from heaven and water from the rock. Acceptance of a covenant under such conditions cannot be called free. The real test of faith came when God was hidden. Rava's quotation from the Book of Esther is pointed and precise. Megillat Esther does not contain the name of God. The rabbis suggested that the name Esther is an allusion to the phrase *haster astir et panai*, "I will surely hide My face." The book relates the first warrant for genocide against the Jewish people. That Jews remained Jews under such conditions was proof positive that they did indeed reaffirm the covenant. Obstinate in their disbelief during much of the biblical era, they became obstinate in their belief ever afterwards. Faced with God's presence, they disobeyed Him. Confronted with His absence, they stayed faithful to Him. That is the paradox of the stiff-necked people.

Not by accident does the main narrative of the Book of Esther begin with the words "And Mordechai would not bow down" (Esther 3:1). His refusal to make obeisance to Haman sets the story in motion. Mordechai too is obstinate -- for there is one thing that is hard to do if you have a stiff neck, namely, bow down. At times, Jews found it hard to bow down to God -- but they were certainly never willing to bow down to anything less. That is why, alone of all the many peoples who have entered the arena of history, Jews -- even in exile, dispersed, and everywhere a minority -- neither assimilated to the dominant culture nor converted to the majority faith.

"Forgive them because they are a stiff-necked people," said Moses, because the time will come when that stubbornness will be not a tragic failing but a noble and defiant loyalty. And so it came to be. *Covenant and Conversation 5779 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l* ©2019 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## Shabbat Shalom

"**A**nd God spoke unto Moses: Take unto you sweet spices, stacte [nataf ], onycha [shelet] and galbanum [helbena], these sweet spices with pure frankincense [levona], all of an equal weight." (Exodus 30:34) One of the most unique aspects of the Sanctuary, continued in the Holy Temples, was the sweet-smelling spices of the incense burned on a

special altar and whose inspiring fragrance permeated the House of God. In the portion of Ki Tisa the Torah lists the different spices, and their names -- in Hebrew or English -- are strange to our modern ears. But stranger still is the Rabbinic commentary that one of those spices -- specifically helbena -- is hardly sweet smelling. On the contrary, as Rashi writes, helbena "...is a malodorous spice which is known [to us as] gelbanah [galbanum]. Scripture enumerates it among the spices of the incense to teach us that we shouldn't look upon the inclusion of Jewish transgressors in our fasts and prayers as something insignificant in our eyes; indeed, they [the transgressors of Israel] must also be included amongst us" (Rashi, ad loc.).

Rashi is conveying a most significant Rabbinic insight. The community of Israel -- in Hebrew a *tzibur* -- must consist of all types of Jews: righteous (the letter *tzadi* for *tzaddikim*), intermediate (the letter *bet* for *benonim*), and wicked (the letter *reish* for *resha'im*), just as the incense of the Sanctuary included spices of unappetizing fragrance. Perhaps because we must learn to take responsibility for every member of the "family" no matter what their behavior, perhaps because what appears to us as wicked may in reality be more genuine spirituality, perhaps because no evil is without its redeeming feature or perhaps merely in order to remind us not to be judgmental towards other human beings, the message of the incense could not be clearer: no Jew, even the most egregious sinner, dare be dismissed with mockery and derision from the sacred congregation of Israel. Every Jew must be allowed to contribute, and only when every Jew is included does the sweet fragrance properly emerge.

We have already seen how the Torah portion of Ki Tisa contains another striking example of the significance of every single Jew in Israel in the aftermath of the great sin in the desert. We read that soon after the revelation at Sinai, Moses' prolonged communion with the divine frightened the people into worshipping a golden calf. Our Sages teach: "And God said to Moses, 'Go down' (Ex. 32:7). R. Elazar interprets: God was commanding Moses to descend from his elevated position. The only reason I gave you greatness is because of Israel, and now that Israel has sinned, what do I need you for?" (Berakhot 32a)

God is reminding Moses that God's covenant with Abraham was with every single Jew. No Jew dare be discounted; every Jew must be loved, taught, and at least given the opportunity to come closer to God and our traditions. Even the Jew who is serving idols must be spoken to, ministered to!

A month or so after this portion is read, the Seder itself becomes a living demonstration of the necessity to include rather than to exclude any Jew. Take note of the proverbial four children: the wise child, the wicked child, the simple child and the child who knows not what to ask. It is instructive that the wicked

child is not defined by the compiler of the Haggadah as one who eats non-kosher food or desecrates the Sabbath; the wicked child is rather the one who says "Of what value is this work for you?" Wickedness is defined as excluding oneself from the general Jewish community. And even if a person excludes herself – and is therefore called wicked – we dare not exclude her. Our Seder table must always be welcoming enough to include everyone, no matter who.

Indeed, towards the end of the Seder we are instructed to open the door for Elijah the prophet, forerunner of the Messiah. In the past I've commented that opening the door for Elijah seems superfluous given Elijah's uncanny ability to visit every single Seder in the world; anyone capable of accomplishing such a remarkable feat certainly would not be stopped by a closed door. One answer that I've proposed is that the opening of the door is not really for Elijah; it is rather a symbolic gesture of opening the door to the fifth child, the child who has moved so far from the Jewish people that he isn't even at the Seder! We must go out to find him – even if he is at a neighborhood disco or a Far East ashram – and invite him to come back in. And why is Elijah associated with this gesture toward the fifth child? The closing verse of the last prophet included in the canon, Malakhi, declares: "Behold I will send Elijah, the prophet, before the coming of the great and awesome day of God, and he shall turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers..." (Malakhi 3:23). No one, not the "wicked" child, and not even the "invisible" child, is to be excluded from the Seder, the commemoration of our first redemption. Parents and children must all join together in a loving and accepting reunion.

There is a fascinating halakhic ramification of our desire to include rather than to exclude. The Talmud (Eruvin 69b) suggests that a public desecrator of the Sabbath is comparable to an idolater, whose wine cannot be drunk and who cannot be counted for a statutory quorum (minyan) for prayer. Does this mean that a Jew who does not observe the Sabbath laws and rituals forfeits his rights to belong to a proper Jewish congregation? One of the towering Torah giants of nineteenth-century Germany, Rabbi David Zvi Hoffman, raises this very question in his collection of responsa, *Mellamed Leho'il* (Responsum 29), where he resoundingly rules that the Talmudic comparison no longer applies. He explains that during Talmudic times, when the overwhelming majority of the Jewish people was observant, and when a Jew was defined in terms of their Torah observance, any Jew who publicly desecrated the Sabbath was effectively testifying to their exclusion from the Jewish people. Therefore, in Talmudic times, a public Sabbath desecrator became the equivalent of an idolater; in effect, the perpetrator of such a public crime was excluding himself from the congregation of Israel and such a person was thereby

relinquishing any rights to Jewish privileges.

However, explains Rabbi Hoffman, when – sadly enough – the overwhelming majority of Jews are not observant (and today this is even truer than it was in nineteenth-century Germany), a Jew who publicly desecrates the Sabbath is not at all making a statement of exclusion from the peoplehood of Israel. On the contrary, the very fact that such a desecrator attends a synagogue (if only a few times a year) and is willing to partake in the service indicates a definite feeling of belonging and a will to belong to the historic community of Israel. Therefore, Rabbi Hoffman concludes, a Sabbath desecrator must not only be included in a minyan, but should be encouraged to become more involved. ©2019 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

#### RABBI BEREL WEIN

### Wein Online

**P**opulation numbers do matter and they matter greatly. This is undoubtedly one of the many messages communicated to us in the Torah reading of this week. We see throughout the Torah that the Jewish people are counted often and in fairly exact detail. This is because there is an obvious lesson that has to be absorbed within Jewish society and that is that in order for Judaism and its value system to continue to operate and be of influence in world society, there must be a physical Jewish people.

There is no Judaism without Jews. And even though we are relatively small in number, when compared to the billions of others that inhabit our planet, the number of Jews that are in the world is a very important matter. One of the more worrisome developments in the Jewish world after World War II has been the lack of any real increase in the Jewish population. Apparently, there were 19 million Jews in the world in 1939 and about 13 million Jews in the world in 1945. Since then – almost 80 years later – the overall Jewish population in the world is estimated to be only about 15 million people. And this number undoubtedly includes many people who call themselves Jewish but who under many interpretations of Jewish law are not really Jews.

It was estimated in 1950 that there were about 6 million Jews living in the United States. Though no real accurate account is available today, estimates range between 4.5 million to 7.5 million Jews. Again, this estimate does not take into account Jewish law, but rather only deals with people who identify themselves as being Jewish. As one can see this is a woeful and tragic situation.

There are many factors that go into this population crisis in the Jewish world. Very high rates of intermarriage never produce Jewish children in any meaningful way. There is a tendency for Jews in the Western world, particularly in the United States, to place education and profession above marriage, family

and children. There is also a general social feeling in the world that personal comfort and happiness is all that is important, which is juxtaposed to marriage and raising children which might engender sacrifice and stress.

Statistics have shown that large families with many children, are only found amongst Orthodox Jews throughout the Diaspora. Here in Israel the birth rate is, thank God, high and stable, even in much of the non-Orthodox community. Again, except for the Orthodox, Jewish communities in the diaspora are rapidly shrinking and the prognosis for the future is very clouded and dire.

At the beginning of the 19th century, the Jewish population in Europe had shrunk to about 3 million Jews. By the beginning of World War II, it had risen to approximately 11 million Jews. This enormous growth over a short period of time enabled the Jewish people to somehow weather the storm of the Holocaust and rebuild itself in the miraculous fashion that it has done here in Israel and throughout the world. But we should always remember that numbers matter. ©2019 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com)

#### **RABBI AVI WEISS**

## **Shabbat Forshpeis**

Is it appropriate to challenge God when things are going wrong? The role of the prophet is usually associated with transmitting the word of God to his people. Yet there are times when the prophet takes on another role—that of the defense attorney for the people of Israel, protecting Am Yisrael and cajoling God to intercede.

Although there are no prophets today, it seems that God wants each of us to make such demands of Him. In doing so we acknowledge that we are in a true relationship with God and God has the power to fulfill our requests.

This idea of making demands of God is echoed in this week's portion. After the Jews constructed the golden calf, Moshe (Moses) who is atop the mountain, is told by God "haniha li-let me be," so that I can destroy the Jewish people (Exodus 32:10).

Why does God demand "haniha li," the Midrash asks? After all, Moshe was not holding on to God. It can be compared, the Midrash continues, to a king, who becomes angry with his child. Taking him into a small room, the king begins to yell, "Leave me alone to kill him." The child's teacher passes by and hearing the king, wonders: The king and his child are alone inside, why does he shout, "leave me alone?" Obviously the king really wants me to go make peace between him and his child. What he's really saying is: "don't let me

kill him, stop me." In this case, what was said may have meant the exact opposite.

The Midrash concludes that although God says to Moshe, "Let me be," what He's really saying is: "Moshe please don't let me be. Stop me. Don't let Me destroy the people. Intervene on their behalf." God wanted to witness Moshe's care for the Jewish people and therefore gave him the chance to challenge God. By entering into dialogue of challenging God, the Jewish people were saved.

It is told that when the Klausenberger Rebbe came to America he insisted that the tokhaha, the passages in the Torah referring to the curses upon the Jewish people, be read aloud. (Leviticus Chapter 26) His Hasidim were distressed. After all the custom is to read the curse in a low tone and for that matter to read it quickly. The Klausenberger explained: During the Shoah I lost my wife and eleven children. As I begin anew, I insist that the curse be read loud and I insist that it be read slowly. This is my, way of saying: "Listen Oh Lord, each of the curses have come true. Now," the saintly Klausenberger Rebbe said, "I insist that the time of blessings, which are also contained in this part of the Torah, come true." Because of his commitment to the relationship with the Divine, the Klausenberger Rebbe approached God with ahavat Yisrael and demanded of God that a new era begin.

Part of entering into a serious relationship is by placing demands on the other. We must uphold our responsibilities by doing our share in fulfilling our partnership with God to redeem the world. But, in the same breath, we have a right and even a responsibility to respectfully ask: "Oh Lord are You doing enough?"

Only then, will we respect what God actually wants from us, to hear our voices and to create a true covenantal relationship. ©2019 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

#### **ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT**

## **Golden Calf**

*Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss*

In this week's portion we read of the sin of the Golden Calf. The Torah later (Devarim 9; 6) recalls this by stating "remember (Zachor); Do not forget how you angered Almighty G-d in the Desert". It would seem that just as we can fulfill the Mitzva of Zachor (with relation to Amalek and the story of Purim) by listening intently to the reading of the Torah that week, so also we can fulfill the Mitzva of "Zachor" in relation to the Golden Calf, by simply listening intently to the reading of the Torah of that week. Yet many of our Rabbis do not include this Mitzva in the list of the six hundred and thirteen Mitzvot. The Ramban (Nachmanides) queries whether this Mitzva should be counted at all, since it was a one-time

occurrence and is not applicable for generations.

Even if we state that it is a Mitzvah for future generations, no Rabbi believes that by listening to the story of the Golden Calf in this week's portion, one fulfills the Mitzvah of "Zachor" (to remember). Perhaps it is because here, we are telling a story which humiliates and embarrasses the Jewish people.

The author of the "Sefer Charedim" states that perhaps the Mitzva here for generations is that just as we must remember the sin of our forefathers, individually we should look introspectively at our own lives and repent if we are not worthy. The Magen Avraham on the Shulchan Aruch (code of Jewish law) strengthens this point by stating that we should concentrate on the word b'ahavah" (with love) that appears before the reciting of the Shema in our daily prayers, to stress that we must strive to love G-d even in trying times. Perhaps this is why the portions that are in one's Tifillin are wrapped with the hair of a calf; to remind us of the sin of the "Golden Calf". ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

#### **RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ**

## **Shabbat Shalom Weekly**

**M**oshe is on Mt. Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments. The Almighty relates to him all that has happened in the creating of the golden calf and with the worshipping of it. Then the Almighty concludes with this final verse in summation as to why He wants to annihilate the Jewish people: "... I have seen this people and they are a stiff-necked people" (Exodus 32:9).

What is it that makes our stiff-neckedness the "final straw" for the Almighty?

Rabbi Simcha Zissel of Kelm explains that the main fault of the Jewish people was that they were stiff-necked. That is, they lacked the flexibility to admit that they made a mistake. When someone is flexible, even if he makes many mistakes he will regret them and will change. However, if a person is inflexible, when he makes a mistake, he will not repent and improve.

It is important to be flexible to improve oneself. There is also a time to be inflexible when upholding values and maintaining one's honesty and integrity. *Dvar Torah based on Growth Through Torah by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin ©2019 Rabbi K. Packouz & aish.com*

#### **RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY**

## **Masked Emotions**

**I**n what is probably the most anti-climactic event in Jewish history, the nation that was about to receive the Torah from Moshe turns away from the will of Hashem. After 40 days they begin to worry that Moshe will never return and they panic. They create a new leader for themselves -- The Golden Calf.

The Torah describes the scene in Exodus 32:6: "The people offered (the calf) peace offerings and they

sat down to eat and drink and they got up to revel."

Hashem immediately commands Moshe to descend Mount Sinai in order to admonish his corrupt nation. As Moshe comes down the mountain he hears tumultuous shouts emanating from the people who were celebrating their new found deity. His student, Yehoshua, also hears the sounds and declares (Exodus 32:17) "the sound of battle is in the camp." Moshe listens and amends the theory. He tells Yehoshua, "It is not the sound of victory, nor the sound of defeat: I hear the sound of distress." When Moshe sees the Golden Calf he breaks the Tablets and restores order, sanity, and the belief in Hashem.

What is strange about the episode is the contrast of the sounds made and the sounds heard. If the Jewish People reveled and celebrated then why did Yehoshua hear sounds of war and how did Moshe hear sounds of distress? They should both have heard the sound of celebration and festivity.

Rav Chaim of Sanz had a custom: he would test the local children on a monthly basis. The children would recite orally from the Mishnah or Talmud and Rav Chaim would reward them generously with sweets and money. Once a group of secular Jews decided to dupe Rav Chaim. They taught a Talmudic selection to a gentile child and reviewed it with him until he knew it perfectly. They dressed him like a Chasidic child and had him stand in line with all the other children to be tested.

The rabbi listened to the young boy intently. The other children were puzzled: they did not remember this boy from their cheder, yet they were amazed at the remarkable fluency he displayed in reciting his piece. Rav Chaim was not impressed at all. He turned to the young man and said, "please tell your father that there are better ways to earn a few coins!" With that he dismissed the child.

The secularists were shocked. "How did the Rabbi know?" Their curiosity forced them to approach Rav Chaim. Rav Chaim smiled as he answered them. "There are two ways to say the Gemorah. One is filled with spirituality. The child's body is swaying and filled with the emotion of Torah. The other is just repetitive rote. This young man lacked the fire and the true joy that the Jewish children have when learning Torah. I knew he was not one of ours."

The Jews got up to revel around the golden calf. Moshe and Yehoshua however knew the difference between true joy -- simcha -- and confusion. The Jews revel were in essence distressed but it was masked with drinks and noise makers. True joy is coupled with a certainty and a sense of direction; something lacking for those Jews celebrating the idol. The Jews may have gotten up to celebrate, but it was no celebration. It may have looked like a party to the untrained eye, but Moshe knew the true sound of joy. It did not exist with the Golden Calf. True joy is the

harmony of spirituality and contentment. Superficial sounds of euphoria and celebration are heard by those with true insight as sounds of battle and distress.  
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### **RABBI MORDECHAI WILLIG**

## **TorahWeb**

**M**oshe said, "Please show me Your glory." Hashem said, "I will call out with the Name Hashem before you" (Shemos 33:19). Rashi explains this teaches us the order of requesting mercy. As you see Me enwrapped and reciting the Thirteen Attributes, you should teach Yisroel to do so.

Hashem passed before him and called out the Thirteen Attributes (34:6,7). Hashem, as it were, enwrapped Himself like a shaliach tzibbur and told Moshe, When Yisroel sin before Me, they should perform this order before Me in this order and I will forgive them (Rosh Hashana 17b).

The Maharal (Be'er Hagola 4, Machon Yerushalyim edition, p. 488-499 with Rav Hartman's notes) explains that it is impossible to see Hashem's glory. One can only see His attributes and thereby cleave unto Him, which was Moshe's request. We are taught to cleave unto His attributes, particularly Chesed (Sotah 14a). By performing Chesed on our own beyond absolute requirements, we fulfill "After Hashem your G-d you shall walk" (Devarim 13:5).

If one concentrates in Tefilla and does not turn away from Hashem, Hashem responds by being with him completely. A shaliach tzibbur wraps himself in a talis, so as not to look right or left, to daven with total kavana, from the depths of his heart (see Mishna Berura 91:6). Hashem is close to those who call to Him truthfully (Tehillim 145:18).

The Maharal notes that one who is in crisis is more likely to daven with the focus linked to *ituf*. Thus, a "poor man prays when he is enwrapped" (Tehillim 102:1) both physically, in a talis (Metzudah) and mentally, focused on his crisis, without any distraction (see *perushei Maharal in Artsroll Tehilim Mikra'os Gedolos* 2017 edition), pouring out his heartfelt prayer to Hashem (*ibid*). Similarly, (*ibid* 107:4-6) when hungry, thirsty and lost in the desert, the enwrapped souls cry out to Hashem in their crisis, and He saves them from their dangerous plight. When one concentrates completely, without turning right or left, Hashem responds in kind, enwrapping Himself as a shaliach tzibbur. Hashem is then close to the person, who then cleaves to the goodness of Hashem, achieving the greatest possible closeness, as Moshe requested.

Tefilla without any extraneous thoughts, as the Maharal defines proper prayer, is exceedingly difficult to achieve. Even the Amora'im did not always succeed (see *Yerushalmi Brachos*, end of 2:4).

Perhaps for this reason, the Ramban (*Sefer Hamitzvos* 5) limits the Torah obligation of prayer to

times of crisis. In an *Eis tzara* focused prayer is more attainable. As there is "no atheist in a foxhole," tefilla when life is on the line is more intense and focused. In shul, uninspired tefilla is often followed by devotional Tehilim in case of war or life threatening illness. Intense prayer, and even tears, are much more common on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur when the books of life and death are open before Hashem.

The Rav zt"l (*Reflections of the Rav*, p. 80-81) suggested that the Rambam agrees fundamentally with the Ramban. He counts daily prayer as a Torah command because, in a sense, every day is an *eis tzara*. Our lives are always in danger, and our continued existence and welfare depend on Hashem's kindness. Internalizing this idea is the key to focused prayer.

The Rashba (*Berachos* 13b) states that if one's mind wanders in the middle of the first Beracha of Shemone Esrei it may invalidate the beracha (see *Be'ur Halacha* 101:1). We don't repeat Shemone Esrei if we fail to focus on the meaning of the first bracha only because we will likely fail in our second attempt as well (*Rama Orach Chaim* 101:1). The other case when distraction is possibly an invalidation is the first passuk of Shema. For this reason, it is customary to cover our eyes so that we should not look at anything which will prevent kavana (*Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim* 61:5).

The first beracha of Shemone Esrei and the first passuk of Shema are not supplications. They affirm belief in Hashem and His rule as a King who helps, saves and protects us. We must recite these prayers with no distractions. This will allow us to focus for the remainder of Shema and Shemone Esrei. One's head covered by a talis in Shemone Esrei resembles covering one's eyes at the beginning of *Kriyas Shema*.

When we daven, every effort should be made to avoid distractions. During the entire Shemone Esrei, one must either close his eyes or read from a siddur (*Mishna Berura* 95:5). Even during *Chazaras Hashatz*, one should follow along by looking in the siddur (*Mishna Berura* 96:9).

The Chasam Sofer (*Choshen Mishpat* 190) rules that we separate women from men in shul so that when men daven, they should not be distracted by the sight or the voice of women. For prayer to be effective, one's thought must be pure and focused. Nowadays, cellphones, especially smartphones, pose a constant distraction. Except for emergency responders, these devices should, ideally, not even enter the shul. Certainly, except for emergencies, email and text messages should not be read or sent. Obviously, all sounds must be turned off, lest others be distracted as well. A shul must be accorded at least as much respect as a courtroom and a theater.

In this vein, non-essential conversations must be avoided in shul. The *Shulchan Aruch* (*Orach Chaim* 51:4) prohibits all conversations between Baruch

She'amar and the end of Shemone Esrei. The Mishna Berura (9) citing Eliyah Raba (3) extends the prohibition until after Tachanun, thereby including Chazaras Hashatz as well, a point explicitly and frighteningly made in the Shulchan Aruch (124:7). The Eliyah Raba (ibid) forbids conversation during tefilla b'tzibbur until after Aleinu as well as idle chatter in shul at all times.

The Maharal adds that Hashem taught Moshe not only what to say -- in context, the Thirteen Attributes, and by extension, the words of our tefilla -- but also how to pray: enwrapped in a talis, DENOTING TOTAL AND UNDISTRACTED CONCENTRATION. May we all strive towards that ideal, so that our tefillos be answered and our mutual closeness to Hashem be achieved. ©2019 Rabbi M. Willig & TorahWeb.org

### RABBI NAFTALI REICH

## Legacy

Things don't just happen by themselves. And yet, when the Jewish people built a golden calf while Moses was away on the mountaintop receiving the Torah from Hashem, something very strange happened. The Midrash in this week's Torah portion tells us that the people threw their golden ornaments into the flames and a fully formed golden calf emerged. Amazing! Why would such a thing happen? Surely, this must have been an aberration. Surely, something like this could not happen again.

But wait. Let us peek into next week's Torah portion. Lo and behold, the same thing happens. The people are building the Tabernacle, Hashem's earthly Abode. The time arrives for the construction of the golden candelabrum, the mystical symbol of wisdom that will illuminate in the Inner Sanctum. The construction of this transcendent vessel is exceedingly complicated, and to make matters even more difficult, the entire candelabrum is to be made from a single ingot of gold. Although he gives it his best effort, Moses cannot accomplish this baffling task. Finally, Hashem tells Moses to throw the gold into the fire and the candelabrum will emerge by itself. And this is exactly what happens. What is the connection between these two strange phenomena? Is it coincidence that they transpired one right after the other?

The commentators explain that these two incidents are actually two sides of the same coin. They both reflect the tremendous power inherent in the human will. When a person's heart is set on a goal, when he is consumed with a flaming desire to attain that goal, nothing can stand in his way. Where there is a will there is way, says the old adage. The implication, of course, is that human ingenuity can always discover a solution to any problem. But it is far deeper than that. The human will generates an almost mystical energy that can penetrate any barrier. When Moses did not return from the mountaintop on schedule, the people were confused and disoriented, and they instinctively

turned to their old idolatrous habits for reassurance. In their distress, they were overcome with a burning desire for the illusory comforts of the idol worship to which they were accustomed in Egypt. This desire was so strong, the Torah tells us, that all they had to do was throw their golden ornaments into the fire and the golden calf emerged.

But just as the human will penetrates all barriers to attain its sinister goals, it can also be channeled to the good. If a person is inspired to reach for the highest spiritual goals, his very desire will generate a mystical energy that will carry him there, one way or another. This is what Hashem was teaching Moses. Nothing stands in the way of the indomitable human will, not even the near impossibility of forming the intricate candelabrum from a single piece of gold. The fire of his enthusiasm would create the candelabrum even if his hands could not.

This was the true reversal of the sin of the golden calf. The flaming desire to sin had generated the abominable idol. But now Moses channeled his flaming desire in the opposite direction, and by doing so, he created the perfect vessel of wisdom and spiritual illumination.

A great emperor of ancient times ruled most of the civilized world with an iron hand. After he was assassinated, civil war broke out among his potential successors to the throne. Both pretenders to the throne were powerful charismatic figures, and each was able to rally many local kings and princes of the empire to his standard. The war raged on for several years until one of the pretenders finally emerged victorious and was acclaimed as the new emperor. One of the kings who had fought valiantly on the side of the loser feared for his life. He traveled to the imperial city and pleaded for an audience with the new emperor. The audience was granted, and the defeated king prostrated himself before the new emperor.

"What have you to say for yourself?" declared the emperor.

"Your majesty," said the king, "do not look at whose friend I was but rather at what sort of friend I was. You saw that I was a loyal and devoted friend to your rival. If you honor me by accepting my friendship, you now know what sort of friend I will be to you."

The emperor smiled and nodded. "You have spoken well, my friend. Your life is spared, and you will retain all your lands and honors."

In our own lives, it is important to recognize the enormous power we hold in our own hands. We are capable of attaining any goals we pursue with true single-minded perseverance, but sometimes we would do well to stop and consider where we are going. Only if we channel our energies correctly and pursue goals of enduring value can we truly enrich our lives and find true happiness and fulfillment. ©2019 Rabbi N. Reich & torah.org