

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

The joys (and hang overs) of Purim are still lingering in the air, and the Biblical portion of Ki Tisa arrives to teach us the secret to the most agonizing question of the religionist, the origin of one of the most important lessons of Jewish theology: Why is the Divine face so often hidden from our sights? Why does the world in general and life in particular so often seem to lack G-d's compassion and concern?

After all, Purim is the anti-holiday featuring G-d's hiddenness; that is why G-d's name is absent from the Scroll of Esther. Although the Jewish community of Persia avoids destruction, it must nevertheless undergo a costly battle, at the end of the day Esther remains the Queen of a Gentile despot, and even at the conclusion of the story, "the Jews are still servants to Ahasveros." No wonder we need to drink much wine in order to induce feelings of joy and gaiety! But why must we endure exile and angst, persecution and pogrom, as the built-in cost of our survival? "My G-d, why hast Thou forsaken us?"

Our Biblical portion of Ki Tisa provides the reason. The nation has sinned by worshiping the materialistic, hedonistic, orgiastic golden calf; Moses wishes total absolution for his nation and desires even more: that G-d's "face" constantly be with them (33:15), that they see G-d's "face", that G-d's goodness and compassion constantly be manifest. G-d explains that no individual may see G-d's face and live, that G-d can only lead "from behind," through a glass darkly, in back of a veiled curtain (hestor panim, 33:23). Indeed, the Almighty even reveals why His hiddenness is necessary, is actually a blessing and not a curse:

"I shall send before you an agent (or messenger, or angel, or national leaders) and (in this manner, through the nation and its leaders) I shall banish the Cananites... to the land flowing with milk and honey; but I shall not arise in your midst because you are a stiff-necked people lest I consume you on the way... And the Lord said to Moses, 'Say to the children of Israel, you are a stiff-necked nation; if for one moment I shall arise in your midst, I shall destroy you...' (33:2-5).

G-d's open manifestation and direct intervention in human and cosmic affairs would be a double-edged sword, explains the Bible. Since

immediate reward and punishment means uplifting the righteous and destroying the evil, the Israelites may well have found themselves to have been totally denuded even before their history got underway under such close Divine supervision and intimate, immediate involvement. G-d must therefore operate indirectly through messengers. And so He established a special relationship, a covenant, with our nation, which he shall lead only from behind; our nation which will have the obligation-and mission-to eventually make the world a fitting place for G-d's presence to be in its midst (34:10 ff, and 25:8). However, the nation will experience triumphs and tragedies, privileges and punishments, successes and setbacks, until the eventual vision of the full manifestation of G-d's great and holy Name is realized at the time of Redemption.

It is the Jewish nation, therefore, that will play this special role and it is through the nation that-even if it be obscure-G-d will reveal Himself (or part of Himself, His back) to the world. Hence G-d tells Moses that he must descend from the lofty and supernal heights of the heavens where he is receiving G-d's words and descend to the sinning Israelites around the golden calf-because the nation must be uplifted, purged and purified (32:7,B.T. Berakhat 32). Hence the Second Tablets of Stone are hewn out and written down by Moses, an expression of the new reality that the leaders of the nation must interpret and expand upon G-d's Torah through the explications and applications, the decrees and enactments of the Oral Law. First the nation, G-d's messenger, must become whole and healed; then G-d's Name will be complete and manifest in our midst.

From this perspective, the Purim holiday takes on a new perspective. Yes, G-d is completely hidden in the assimilating, fractious and fragmented Jewish nation living in Persia towards the end of the sixth century B.C.E.. Esther's very name reflects G-d's manifest absence (Esther, hester, hidden) as this woman of noble Jewish ancestry enters the Persian Emperor's harem. There were those Jews who patriotically identified the Persian Palace with the Desert Sanctuary and Holy Temple (Scroll of Esther 1:5,ff), and there were also those Jews who wept each midnight over "tikkun hatzot" (a prayerful plea for restoration of the Temple); there were those Jews who reveled together with the Persians at the sumptuous feast and bar, there were those Jews who ate only fish,

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and there were probably those Jews who showed up but did not even touch a morsel of food. Was it not Haman who described the Jews of Persia as "scattered and separated"? (3:8).

And it was Esther, although she is reluctant at first and tries to convince Mordecai to stop his demonstrations, who eventually understands that even partial victory could only be won if the Jewish community were to unite under G-d. Hence, while Mordecai only stresses that Esther must remonstrate before Ahasveros, Esther demands that first "Mordecai must go and assemble all the Jews of Shushan together, to declare a period of fasting and prayer; Do not eat or drink anything for three days and nights. My servant girls and I will do the same. After that, I shall go to the king...and if I am destroyed, I shall be destroyed...(4:15,16)."

Esther wins the day-but only after she unites the Persian Jewish Community. And so our method of celebrating Purim expresses the unifying of our communal ties: giving charity to the poor, giving gifts to our friends, joining in communal meals, and reading the Scroll of Esther in large, communal gatherings. The more our nation unites, the more will G-d's Name be united; at that time we will witness the unification of the world under the one G-d of justice, compassion and peace. © 2006 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

Although the "golden calf" was certainly one of the lowlights of Jewish history (if not the lowest), the aftermath provides a window into the world of repentance. Included in the lessons of returning to G-d after turning away from Him are the Thirteen Attributes (Shemos 34:6-7), the "Hashem, Hashem" prayer that is at the center of our Selichos (supplications to G-d for forgiveness). This prayer is so powerful that the Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 17b) tells us that, done properly, it always works.

In "Imray Chayn," Rabbi Yehuda Levenberg, shlita, brings a series of communications between him, Rabbi Shalom Shechter, and Rabbi Meyer Soloveitchik, regarding when G-d taught this prayer to Moshe. Was it at the beginning of the last set of 40 days that Moshe spent atop Mt. Sinai, i.e. Rosh Chodesh Ellul, or was it

on the last day, leading to the forgiveness that occurred on that very first Yom Kippur, on the 10th of Tishrei in 2449?

A straightforward reading of the verses would indicate that it was the former. Moshe asks to "see G-d's glory" (33:18), with G-d responding that he can get as close as humanly possible via a process that includes being taught the Thirteen Attributes (33:19-23, see Rashi on 33:19). This is immediately followed by G-d instructing Moshe to carve out new Luchos (tablets) and to meet Him back atop the mountain (34:1-3). Moshe does so (34:4), and G-d teaches him the Thirteen Attributes (34:5-7). It sure seems as if this happened right away, as soon as Moshe went back up the mountain.

Conceptually, this makes sense as well. If G-d was willing to give the nation a replacement set of Luchos containing the divinely written/carved "Ten Commandments," He had obviously already forgiven them. The next step should be fulfilling Moshe's request to "see G-d's glory" (or getting as close as possible), which would be on that first day. Why delay it any longer? In fact, the Netziv (Haamek Davar, Shemos 34:2) says that Moshe was told to "be prepared" because shortly he would experience this awesome glimpse of "G-d's glory."

On the other hand, the Tosfos Shantz (Bava Kama 82a) says that it was on Yom Kippur (i.e. the last of those 40 days) that He taught Moshe the Thirteen Attributes, when he accepted the second Luchos. Similarly, the Vilna Gaon (Aderes Eliyahu, Shemos 33:7) says that Moshe's requests were answered on Yom Kippur, when G-d "passed before him" (quoting the words the Torah uses immediately prior to the Thirteen Attributes). Additionally, as part of our Yom Kippur Musaf prayers (pg. 608, second line, in the Artscroll Machzor) we refer to "today" (Yom Kippur) being the day that G-d stood with Moshe and called out the Thirteen Attributes.

This is also implied in Pirkay d'Rebbe Elazar (46): "Moshe said, 'on Yom Kippur I will see the glory of the Holy One, blessed is He, and afterwards I will attain forgiveness for the sins of Israel.'" Not only was the forgiveness attained on Yom Kippur, but so was the glimpse of "G-d's glory." However, there is one not-so-minor wrinkle. A little later (towards the end of that same chapter), when giving the "play-by-play" of Moshe's glimpse, we are told that after G-d removed His protective palm (as it were), "Moshe began to cry out in a great voice and said, 'Hashem, Hashem, G-d of mercy, etc.' Moshe said to Him, 'please forgive the sins of Israel regarding the [golden calf].'" Here, it was *Moshe* who said the Thirteen Attributes, not G-d! Didn't G-d have to first teach this prayer to Moshe before he could use it?

We also have to explain why, if G-d had already agreed to give a second set of Luchos before

Rosh Chodesh Ellul, is the "Day of Forgiveness" not until (at least) 40 days later, on Yom Kippur (Tishrei 10).

What occurred during those 40 days on Mt. Sinai? Even according to those that say the Mishkan was first commanded after the sin of the golden calf, this commandment didn't occur until Yom Kippur (see Rashi on 33:11). If so, these 40 days were not spent learning about the details of the Mishkan. Seder Olam Rabbah (6) says that Moshe reviewed the Torah during this time. Just as during the first 40 days, when he received the first Luchos, G-d had taught him the Torah, when he received the second Luchos he spent 40 days studying it again. Nevertheless, numerous sources indicate that even after spending (the middle) 40 days asking G-d to forgive the nation for its sin, complete forgiveness had not yet been achieved.

Moshe had succeeded (see 32:10-14) in convincing G-d not to completely destroy the nation (according to some before descending the mountain on the 17th of Tamuz; according to others this wasn't even attempted until first destroying the golden calf and beginning the teshuva (repentance) process, i.e. during the middle 40 days). He had also succeeded in convincing Him to re-establish His covenant with us, including giving the Torah (again) and bringing us to the Promised Land. But there were things that were still not the same. The Ramban (34:9; see also 34:6) says that G-d had still not agreed to "dwell among them," which manifested itself in the building of the Mishkan. From the things G-d told Moshe after the prayer that followed the Thirteen Attributes (34:10) we can see the things that had not been attained before then.

The Talmud (Rosh Hashana 17b) describes G-d's teaching Moshe the Thirteen Attributes as a lesson in how to pray for forgiveness. Obviously, then, it was G-d that "called out" (34:6) the Attributes. Even if this occurred on the first day back on top of Mt. Sinai, Moshe must have realized that he would be there for the same 40-day period as when he was given the first Luchos. And because he knew that the nation had not yet been completely forgiven (see 32:34) and he had just been given the key to achieving forgiveness, every day he used this newly-learned prayer to chip away at it, similar to the "maavir rishon rishon" (removing sins one by one) that we refer to before reciting the Thirteen Attributes in our Selichos. This could be what the Pirkey d'Rebbe Elazar refers to when telling us that Moshe waited until Yom Kippur to ask for forgiveness; the longer he waited to ask, the more he will have chipped away each day, and the better the chance he could achieve full forgiveness on the last day. He didn't see "G-d's glory" just one time; every time he called out the Thirteen Attributes G-d passed before him, and the nation was closer to being forgiven.

As the Vilna Gaon put it (34:6), "and these were the prayers that [Moshe] did all 40 of these days

in order to return the Divine Presence among us." Yes, G-d had taught it to Moshe on the first of these 40 days, but Moshe "called it out" for the rest of them, culminating in our complete forgiveness on Yom Kippur, which was followed by the commandment to build the Mishkan. © 2006 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

One of the most extraordinary images in the Torah appears in this week's portion. Moshe (Moses) asks G-d "Show me your glory." G-d responds that He cannot be seen by any human being. But, G-d tells Moshe, "Stand in the cleft of the rock" and "you will see My back, but My face must not be seen." (Exodus 33: 17-23) What does this mean?

The Midrash maintains that Moshe was asking G-d for an understanding of why there is evil in the world. An especially relevant question coming as it does after the Jews experienced so much upheaval after leaving Egypt. G-d's response was that as events unfold, they cannot be easily understood. Only after an event, often as long as many years later can one gain a glimpse and comprehend what had occurred. When G-d tells Moshe, you can see me from behind, but not from the front, He may be saying that events can only be understood in hindsight.

Another possibility comes to mind. Perhaps Moshe was asking G-d for proof of His existence. Moshe may have felt that such a proof was needed by Am Yisrael after they rejected G-d by building the Golden Calf. But such a proof does not exist. After all, if G-d is G-d, proof would limit Him. And so, G-d tells Moshe, "You cannot see me from the front." There is no proof of My existence. Rather, one should concentrate on understanding the characteristics of G-d, the benevolence of G-d, the kindness of G-d. It's these characteristics that are symbolized by G-d telling Moshe He can be seen from the back.

Still another approach is that Moshe was asking G-d, especially after the Jews were punished for having built the Golden Calf, how Divine judgment works. G-d's response is that decisions are not based on strict law, rather on a law that tempers justice with mercy. You cannot see me from the front, may mean that the world could not exist if G-d judged us with pure judgment alone. Only from the back, only with law mingled with kindness can the world endure. Indeed, only with this mixture did G-d allow the Jews as a people to survive after the sin of the Golden Calf. Not coincidentally, G-d's thirteen attributes of mercy soon follow in the text. (Exodus 34:6-7)

One final thought. Could it be that when Moshe tells G-d, let me see you from the front, G-d responds that built into his essence is deep humility? This may be the meaning of our text. G-d is saying "I don't want the honor of being seen from the front, but rather modestly

from the back." As G-d displays the trait of humility, so too should we attempt to learn the lesson of walking humbly in the world.

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RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

In continuing its description of the artifacts that were to be placed in the mishkan, the Torah informs us regarding the kiyor - the type of laver or fountain that was installed in the courtyard of the mishkan and later the Temple in Jerusalem. This kiyor was used by the kohanim - the priestly descendants of Aharon - to wash their hands and feet before entering the mishkan or Temple to begin their daily service to G-d and to Israel. This washing of hands and feet was not only a matter of cleanliness but it was also a symbolic ritual of preparation for holy service. The washing of the hands of the kohanim remains a ritual till today, when their hands are washed in water before they ascend the podium to bless the congregation.

In fact, washing one's hands in a ritual fashion no matter how clean or sterile they are remains a daily part of Jewish life for us all. Before we eat bread we must wash our hands. The washing of our hands is part of the order of the Seder service on Pesach night. When we arise in the morning, we wash our hands. Before prayer services we are also bidden to wash our hands. And when we have completed dealing with our bodily functions we are also instructed to wash our hands. Again, these are not only matters of cleanliness, though cleanliness is a prime virtue in Jewish life, but there is a ritual, spiritual and holy attachment to the washing of hands.

There is an important message implied in this hand-washing regimen of Judaism. It is to impress upon the person the holiness of everything in life and that all that we do is really in service of G-d. The phrase that was used throughout the Jewish world by the "wakers" in the early morning was "Arise to the service of G-d." But the service of G-d requires an appreciation and understanding that we are in fact serving G-d in our daily lives. Otherwise, without that realization, everything in life becomes prosaic and mundane, habitual rote and sometimes even meaningless. The fact that we are bidden to wash our hands before or after performing many of the most mundane things in life - eating, awaking, dealing with our bodily functions, etc. - reminds us that nothing in life is ordinary, profane or mundane.

Everything is important. Everything is part of the service that we owe to our Creator. Everything therefore requires a sense of purpose and dedication,

an understanding of the challenges that life puts before us and that we are commanded to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Washing one's hands is a reminder of this challenge and obligation. Just as the kohain in the Temple had to remind himself daily of the holiness inherent in the performance of his tasks in the Temple by washing his hands and feet before entering upon his daily regimen of work in the Temple, so too are we bidden by the ritual of washing our hands numerous times during the day to remember our duties and challenges to create holiness and spirituality in our everyday lives and affairs. Thus the kiyor and its message survive amongst all of us even today. © 2006 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. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory.

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Amnon Bazak

Twice in this week's Torah portion there is a description of Moshe descending from Mount Sinai. The first time Moshe carries the first set of tablets, before the sin of the Golden Calf, and the second time he holds the second set of tablets, after the sin. One of the conspicuous differences between the two times is the additional element the second time - the fact that Moshe's face had a glow. According to the Torah, from the moment Moshe descended from the mountain his face shone, and he therefore made a mask for himself which he would wear whenever he was not standing before G-d or bringing the Divine words to Bnei Yisrael. Then Moshe would remove the mask, and Bnei Yisrael would hear G-d's words while they could see his shiny face. Why did this change come about the second time that Moshe descended from the mountain?

Evidently, the glow in Moshe's face can be linked to the other differences between the two times that the tablets were given. The first set was given accompanied by thunder and lightning in front of the entire nation, while all the people heard how G-d spoke to Moshe. The important aspect of the first set of tablets consisted of the experience at Mount Sinai, a one-time Divine revelation to the nation of Yisrael. The tablets that were received at this momentous occasion served as testimony of the events that occurred. The clear testimony about their Divine character is noted three times in the Torah portion: "Two tablets of testimony, stone tablets written by the finger of G-d" [Shemot 31:18]; "And the tablets were an act of G-d, and the writing was writing by G-d, engraved on the tablets" [32:16].

However, the great emphasis on the events of the revelation had a price. The experience was so

exalting that when it was over the people found it hard to return to a normal routine, and the need to continue their spiritual experience led to the sin of the Calf. Thus, it became clear that the covenant with G-d could not be based on the memory of a single momentous event. Rather, it must be based on the main objective - the contents of the message at Mount Sinai. And therefore the second ascent to Mount Sinai, after the sin of the Calf, was done in a more modest way. "Let no man ascend with you, and let no man be seen anywhere on the mountain" [34:3]. In this case, the tablets were made by Moshe, both in hewing them out (34:4) and in their writing (34:27). When Moshe descended the second time, he no longer carried a miraculous object, a testimony of the great events that took place on the mountain.

The repeated declaration that the tablets were a work of G-d is now replaced by the new phenomenon, that of the glow on Moshe's face. This is also emphasized three times. "And Moshe did not know that his face had begun to shine when He spoke to him. And Aharon and all of Bnei Yisrael saw Moshe, and behold his face shone, and they were afraid to approach him... And Bnei Yisrael saw that the skin of Moshe's face glowed." [34:29-30,35]. The miraculous phenomenon was no longer the tablets, which were testimony of a unique occurrence, they were replaced by Moshe's face. That was a continuing effect, one that Bnei Yisrael could see every time Moshe brought them the word of G-d. Thus, both sets of tablets taken together were a complete expression of the link between the Almighty and Bnei Yisrael: The first tablets were testimony of the events at Mount Sinai, and the second tablets were testimony of the continuing revelation in the Tent of Meeting

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

This 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 be 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. Regrettably, 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. © 2006 Rabbi D. Siegel & torah.org

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

This week's Parsha, Ki Tisa, records the annual half Shekel donation, which was used to purchase the communal sacrifices, and to count the number of citizens. The Passuk (verse) states that the wealthy should not increase, nor should the poor decrease the required amount (30:15). Why can't a wealthy person show his generosity by sponsoring those who are less fortunate? More importantly, though, what's the significance of giving HALF a Shekel, as opposed to a whole one? Some commentaries explain that the half-Shekel represents the idea that no Jew is complete without another. This would answer the half-Shekel question, but still wouldn't explain why the rich couldn't sponsor the poor.

Rabbi Zweig explains that the half Shekel was not just a financial gift, but also represented the soul of each person. The statement the Jews were making by giving the half Shekel was that they were giving themselves over to G-d and acknowledging that He holds their other half! It was for this reason that each person had to give individually and no one could donate in place of another; their giving was not an expression of generosity, rather an acknowledgment that they (and their actions) ultimately belonged to G-d. Once Jews make this declaration, G-d in return begins to act as our owner, and takes care of our needs (as we see in the story of Purim). This is also practical advice for us today: Whenever we feel like we're not close to where we should be in life, religion, and personal growth, we shouldn't give up, but rather remember that all it takes is HALF a step of commitment and initial effort. Once we take that first step, G-d will meet us half way, and

be there for every step of OUR way! © 2006 Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.

DR. AVIGDOR BONCHEK

What's Bothering Rashi

Our Parsha tells of the Nation's inconceivable fall from grace and horrendous sin when 3,000 of its members worshipped the Golden Calf, merely days after they all had personally experienced the extraordinary spiritually encounter with G-d, hearing His voice proclaim to them, "I am the Lord your G-d Who brought you out of the land of Egypt."

It is difficult to grasp how after such an experience these privileged humans could have done such a thing. We probably never will be able to fully understand this. Our Sages have warned us against such judgementalism when they said, "Don't judge your fellow until you have come to similar circumstances (and then see how you yourself act.)" With this in mind let us look at a verse and Rashi's comment on it.

"And the people saw that Moses had delayed in descending from the mountain and the people gathered around Aaron and said to him, 'Rise up, make for us G-ds who will go before us, for the man Moses, who brought us up from Egypt. We do not know what became of him.'" (Exodus 32:1)

"Who will go before us"-RASHI: "They desired to have many G-ds."

On what basis does Rashi conclude that the people wanted "many G-ds"? Maybe they just wanted one G-d to replace Moses, as they seem to be saying?

Do you see which word(s) (in the Hebrew) indicate that they wanted many G-ds?

An Answer: The Hebrew has "asher yei'lchu" meaning "who will go (in the plural verb) before us." So it wasn't one G-d that they asked for; the plural verb shows that it was G-ds, in the plural, that they desired.

A Question: But this interpretation is problematic because the word "elohim," meaning G-d, is always in the plural even when it refers to the One G-d, Hashem. So the plural verb ("they will go") is appropriate. Maybe they desired only one G-d and referred to him as "elohim," just as Hashem is also called "Elohim" (in the plural)?

Can you justify the explication?

An Answer: Hashem is referred to as Elohim in the plural, as a sign of respect (in English this is called "the Royal We"). Just as "Adonoi," another name for Hashem, literally means "my Lords" in the plural. But whenever Hashem is called Elohim, in the Torah, the verb is always in the singular. As in the oft repeated phrase "Va'y'daber Elohim..."-"And G-d spoke..."-the verb "spoke" is in the singular. But in our verse the people used the plural "they will go," indicating that they desired many G-ds. This is the basis for Rashi's interpretation.

What difference does it make if they desired just one G-d to replace their leader or if they desired many? Both requests are blasphemous. What message does such a request convey?

An Answer: It is not the arithmetic difference that makes the difference. We could just as well ask: What difference does it make that Hashem is one? What's the big deal?

The idea is that there is only one ruler of the universe, one ruler who demands and deserves our complete allegiance. More than one ruler would mean that a person might, at times, follow one and at other times follow the other G-d's demands. The decision whom to follow at any one time would undoubtedly depend on which demand was more appealing to the believer. This is not just a matter of "dual loyalty," that is less significant. More significant is the fact that one's service to his masters is, in the final analysis, a "service" to his Lord but actually just a front for a self-serving worship; a self-centered religion. His G-d can make no demands of him which would require the worshiper's self sacrifice because he can always appeal to his other master, his other G-d, to find an easier path.

To make the matter more concrete we can take as an example disciplining one's child.

As is known to too many parents, when father and mother don't agree on matters of discipline, the child can always escape the rigorous demands that discipline always requires, by appealing to the other parent's mercy. When the child succeeds in this maneuver, he remains undisciplined and may often cause a battle between the G-ds of the household, while he walks away Scott-free.

Such is the heresy of "serving" many G-ds!
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Daf HaShavua

by Rabbi Chaim Kanterovitz, Yeshurun Synagogue

The Torah this week lists the ingredients needed for the anointing oil used in the anointing of the Kohanim, the Mishkan and its vessels. The very first ingredient listed is called "Mor Dror" usually translated as pure myrrh.

The Talmud, in a homiletic understanding, views these words as representing a hint in the Torah to Mordechai, the hero of the Purim story (Chullin 139:b). This, we are taught, is because the Aramaic translation of "Mor Dror" is "Mira Dachya", a phrase which means pure myrrh, but which sounds and is spelled like the name "Mordechai".

In his commentary on the Talmud, Rashi takes this idea further still. He comments that, in effect, the listing of Mordechai's name at the top of the ingredient list in the Torah teaches us that Mordechai was, indeed, the first or, rather, the senior and greatest of

the Jewish leaders and righteous men of his time. Maharshah and the Commentary Torah Temmimah both present similar opinions and praise Mordechai in his role of leadership as "the head of all the aromatic spices", an expression used in reference to the Sanhedrin and righteous men of his generation.

Well, it seems that Mordechai was indeed revered, but how, then, do we explain the well known statement of our Sages that Mordechai was expelled from the Sanhedrin? If he was so senior and great, so righteous and special that he was "the first of all the aromatic spices", why was he expelled?

Let me take you back to the Megillah itself. You will recall that, after his sleepless night, King Achashverosh directed that Mordechai ride through the streets dressed in royal clothes with none other than Haman leading him. Our Sages infer from the language used there that Mordechai actually enjoyed the humiliation of Haman, his enemy. This was deemed unworthy for a member of the Sanhedrin. One who derives honour and pleasure from the downfall of one's enemy had no place in the Sanhedrin, the supreme body of Jewish law.

The Tur (Laws of Pesach) brings two reasons why we do not recite the Shehecheyanu benediction during the Kiddush of the last two nights of Pesach. The first reason he brings is that these are not new festivals, unlike the last two days of Sukkot, which are festivals in their own right. But there is another, deeper reason. On the last two days of Pesach we commemorate the crossing of the Reed Sea, when the Egyptians, G-d's creatures, drowned. This, we are told, should mute our joy. This is also one of the reasons why we recite a shorter Hallel (songs of praise and joy) during the last days of Pesach.

When some tragedy befalls our enemy, whether it be a personal enemy, or an enemy of our nation, we must hear the words of King Solomon "at the downfall of your enemy you shall not rejoice" (Proverbs 24:17). We should always be aware that all human beings are G-d's creatures and, after all, cannot be worse than Haman or the Egyptians. It is all too often that we are prompted to derive pleasure from the downfall of others. Through the above Talmudic statement, our Sages let us know that it is an attribute which should be eliminated.

Home and Away

by Rabbi David Lister, Muswell Hill Synagogue

The imagery of Psalm 137 is famous: By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down. We also cried when we remembered Zion. Our persecutors demanded, "Sing a song of Zion for us!"

A close reading of the psalm reveals an acute review of the miseries of exile.

The Israelites only sat down at the river, because they had been hounded relentlessly out of their homeland, and this was their first chance to rest.

And even now, as shock gave way to bitter grief, they had no time to cry. Their captors insulted their most precious memories, flippantly calling for holy Temple songs as mere entertainment.

Ezekiel makes this incident still more haunting with his message in our Haftarah (verse 19): "I scattered them among the nations... According to their way and their misdeeds I have judged them."

The gloom of exile was a measure for measure punishment. G-d loves us dearly, and we are precious to Him. But when we drive Him out of our lives, neglecting His Torah, it is as if He suffers the pangs of exile. When we treat His commandments with scorn, we are committing a desecration. The Babylonian exile reflected the exile that we had visited upon G-d.

And, of course, this being Judaism, there is an upside. If we reinstate G-d in our lives, He will, once again, judge us according to our way, and lead us back home.

PARSHAT PARAH

by Rabbi Emanuel Levy, Palmers Green & Southgate Synagogue

This Shabbat is known as Parshat Parah on account of the special Maftir we read which deals with the purification rites for one who had become defiled by being in contact with the dead or under the same roof as a deceased person. Such an individual had to be sprinkled with the ashes of the Red Heifer, and only then would he become naturally purified. The reading of this Parshah at this time served as a timely reminder to all those who embarked on their journey to the Temple with their Pascal Lamb. They had to purify themselves otherwise they could not enter the precincts of the Temple.

Defilement by the dead is a difficult concept which has been greatly misunderstood, and has nothing to do with physical cleanliness. In general terms it has been explained as follows: whenever there is holiness and that 'kedushah' departs, the void is filled with its opposite, its mirror image:

'tumah' or impurity. A living person bears a Divine Soul and therefore possesses holiness-but when he dies and his spirit leaves him, 'kedushah' departs and 'tumah', impurity, must enter. That is why a cadavre is a source of 'tumah'.

The birth of a completely Red Heifer a few years ago-an extreme rarity- has been taken by some as a sign that perhaps Mashiach is on his way! Only when the Temple is rebuilt and these rites are reintroduced will all those defiled-and that includes the majority of us all-become ritually pure. May this come about speedily in our days.