

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS**

### Covenant & Conversation

**T**he more I study the Torah, the more conscious I become of the immense mystery of Exodus 33. This is the chapter set in the middle of the Golden Calf narrative, between chapter 32 describing the sin and its consequences, and chapter 34, G-d's revelation to Moses of the "Thirteen attributes of Mercy", the second set of tablets and the renewal of the covenant. It is, I believe, this mystery that frames the shape of Jewish spirituality.

What makes chapter 33 perplexing is, first, that it is not clear what it is about. What was Moses doing? In the previous chapter he had already prayed twice for the people to be forgiven. In chapter 34 he prays for forgiveness again. What then was he trying to achieve in chapter 33?

Second, Moses' requests are strange. He says, "Show me now Your ways" and "Show me now Your glory" (33:13, 33:18). These seem more requests for metaphysical understanding or mystical experience than for forgiveness. They have to do with Moses as an individual, not with the people on whose behalf he was praying. This was a moment of national crisis. G-d was angry. The people were traumatised. The whole nation was in disarray. This was not the time for Moses to ask for a seminar in theology.

Third, more than once the narrative seems to be going backward in time. In verse 4, for example, it says "No man put on his ornaments", then in the next verse G-d says, "Now, then, remove your ornaments." In verse 14, G-d says, "My presence will go with you." In verse 15, Moses says, "If Your presence does not go with us, do not make us leave this place." In both cases, time seems to be reversed: the second sentence is responded to by the one before. The Torah is clearly drawing our attention to something, but what?

Add to this the mystery of the calf itself -- was it or was it not an idol? The text states that the people said, "This, Israel, is your G-d who brought you out of

Egypt" (32:4). But it also says that they sought the calf because they did not know what had happened to Moses. Were they seeking a replacement for him or G-d? What was their sin?

Surrounding it all is the larger mystery of the precise sequence of events involved in the long passages about the Mishkan, before and after the Golden Calf. What was the relationship between the Sanctuary and the Calf?

At the heart of the mystery is the odd and troubling detail of verses 7-11. This tells us that Moses took his tent and pitched it outside the camp. What has this to do with the subject at hand, namely the relationship between G-d and the people after the Golden Calf? In any case, it was surely the worst possible thing for Moses to do at that time under those circumstances. G-d had just announced that "I will not go in your midst" (33:3). At this, the people were deeply distressed. They "went into mourning" (33:4). For Moses, then, to leave the camp must have been doubly demoralising. At times of collective distress, a leader has to be close to the people, not distant.

There are many ways of reading this cryptic text, but it seems to me the most powerful and simple interpretation is this. Moses was making his most audacious prayer, so audacious that the Torah does not state it directly and explicitly. We have to reconstruct it from anomalies and clues within the text itself.

The previous chapter implied that the people panicked because of the absence of Moses, their leader. G-d himself implied as much when he said to Moses, "Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt" (32:7). The suggestion is that Moses' absence or distance was the cause of the sin. He should have stayed closer to the people. Moses took the point. He did go down. He did punish the guilty. He did pray for G-d to forgive the people. That was the theme of chapter 32. But in chapter 33, having restored order to the people, Moses now began on an entirely new line of approach. He was, in effect, saying to G-d: what the people need is not for me to be close to them. I am just a human, here today, gone tomorrow. But You are eternal. You are their G-d. They need You to be close to them.

It was as if Moses was saying, "Until now, they have experienced You as a terrifying, elemental force, delivering plague after plague to the Egyptians, bringing



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the world's greatest empire to its knees, dividing the sea, overturning the very order of nature itself. At Mount Sinai, merely hearing Your voice, they were so overwhelmed that they said, if we continue to hear the voice, 'we will die' (Ex. 20:16)." The people needed, said Moses, to experience not the greatness of G-d but the closeness of G-d, not G-d heard in thunder and lightning at the top of the mountain but as a perpetual Presence in the valley below.

That is why Moses removed his tent and pitched it outside the camp, as if to say to G-d: it is not my presence the people need in their midst, but Yours. That is why Moses sought to understand the very nature of G-d Himself. Is it possible for G-d to be close to where people are? Can transcendence become immanence? Can the G-d who is vaster than the universe live within the universe in a predictable, comprehensible way, not just in the form of miraculous intervention?

To this, G-d replied in a highly structured way. First, He said, you cannot understand My ways. "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and I will show mercy to whom I will show mercy" (33:19). There is an element of divine justice that must always elude human comprehension. We cannot fully enter into the mind of another human being, how much less so the mind of the Creator himself.

Second, "You cannot see My face, for no one can see Me and live" (33:20). Humans can at best "See My back." Even when G-d intervenes in history, we can see this only in retrospect, looking back. Steven Hawking was wrong. (He famously said, at the end of A Brief History of Time, that if we were to reach a full scientific understanding of the cosmos, we would "know the mind of G-d.") Even if we decode every scientific mystery, we still will not know the mind of G-d.

However, third, you can see My "glory". That is what Moses asked for once he realised that he could never know G-d's "ways" or see His "face". That is what G-d caused to pass by as Moses stood "in a cleft of the rock" (v. 22). We do not know at this stage, exactly what is meant by G-d's glory, but we discover this at the very end of the book of Exodus. Chapters 35-40 describe how the Israelites built the Mishkan. When it is finished and assembled we read this:

Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the Mishkan. Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the Mishkan. (Ex. 40:34-35)

We now understand the entire drama set in motion by the making of the Golden Calf. Moses pleaded with G-d to come closer to the people, so that they would encounter Him not only at unrepeatable moments in the form of miracles but regularly, on a daily basis, and not only as a force that threatens to obliterate all it touches but as a Presence that can be sensed in the heart of the camp.

That is why G-d commanded Moses to instruct the people to build the Mishkan. It is what He meant when He said: "Let them make Me a sanctuary and I will dwell (ve-shakhanti) among them" (Ex. 25:8). It is from this verb that we get the word Mishkan, "Tabernacle" and the post-biblical word Shekhinah, meaning the Divine presence. A shakhen is a neighbour, one who lives next door. Applied to G-d it means "the Presence that is close." If this is so -- it is, for example, the way Judah Halevi understood the text (The Kuzari, 1:97) -- then the entire institution of the Mishkan was a Divine response to the sin of the Golden Calf, and an acceptance by G-d of Moses' plea that He come close to the people. We cannot see G-d's face; we cannot understand G-d's ways; but we can encounter G-d's glory whenever we build a home, on earth, for His presence.

That is the ongoing miracle of Jewish spirituality. No one before the birth of Judaism ever envisaged G-d in such abstract and awe-inspiring ways: G-d is more distant than the furthest star and more eternal than time itself. Yet no religion has ever felt G-d to be closer. In Tanakh the prophets argue with G-d. In the book of Psalms King David speaks to Him in terms of utmost intimacy. In the Talmud G-d listens to the debates between the sages and accepts their rulings even when they go against a heavenly voice. G-d's relationship with Israel, said the prophets, is like that between a parent and a child, or between a husband and a wife. In The Song of Songs it is like that between two infatuated lovers. The Zohar, key text of Jewish mysticism, uses the most daring language of passion, as does Yedid nefesh, the poem attributed to the sixteenth century Tzefat kabbalist R. Elazar Azikri.

That is one of the striking differences between the synagogues and the cathedrals of the Middle Ages. In a cathedral you sense the vastness of G-d and the smallness of humankind. But in the Altneushul in Prague or the synagogues of the Ari and R. Joseph Karo in Tzefat, you sense the closeness of G-d and the potential greatness of humankind. Many nations worship G-d, but Jews are the only people to count themselves His close relatives ("My child, my firstborn, Israel" Ex. 4:22).

Between the lines of Exodus 33, if we listen attentively enough, we sense the emergence of one of the most distinctive and paradoxical features of Jewish spirituality. No religion has ever held G-d higher, but none has ever felt Him closer. That is what Moses sought and achieved in Exodus 33 in his most daring conversation with G-d. ©2016 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

**RABBI AVI WEISS**

## Shabbat Forshpeis

**R**abbi Menachem Liebttag argues that the thirteen attributes which are used to describe G-d, parallel attributes of G-d found previously in the Torah. For example, the thirteen attributes begin with the words "Hashem Hashem Kel rahum ve-hanun, the Lord the Lord is a G-d of mercy and graciousness." (Exodus 34:6) Earlier in the ten declarations (aseret ha-dibrot), G-d says "Hashem Kel kana, G-d is a jealous G-d." (Exodus 20:5)

The difference between these two descriptions of G-d is obvious. At Sinai, G-d reveals himself as a G-d of strict judgment. He appears to be harsh. Here, in our portion, G-d, for the first time, paints Himself as merciful.

Hence, in the aseret ha-dibrot, Hashem (the Lord), the special name for G-d which connotes mercy, is mentioned only once. Here, in our portion, Hashem is mentioned twice, to teach us that G-d is not only merciful before we sin, but even after. (Rabbeinu Tam, Rosh HaShanah 17b)

Furthermore, in Exodus 34, G-d is described as rahum from the word rehem which means womb. This because G-d's love for us, like the love of the womb, is infinite and unconditional. Hanun stems from the word hinam, which literally means free. G-d's love is free, even if not reciprocated. These terms in contrast to G-d described in the aseret ha-dibrot, Kel kana - a G-d of jealousy and vengeance.

It is not surprising that the thirteen merciful attributes immediately appear after Moshe (Moses) tells the Jewish people that because they worshipped the golden calf, an angel, not G-d, would henceforth lead them. This disturbs the nation and they demand that G-d himself lead them. In the end, the Almighty relents. (Exodus 33)

It is here that the merciful attributes appear for the first time. From a legal perspective, the Israelites were not deserving of G-d's direct accompaniment. Only when G-d allows strict law to merge with mercy does He agree to lead the people directly.

Today we take these attributes of mercy for granted as they are part of our Jewish consciousness. But when first introduced, these characteristics were revolutionary.

G-d's decision to lead the Jewish people

mercifully is of tremendous import. Created in the image of G-d, we too should follow in His footsteps. As G-d tempered justice with mercy, so should we give others and ourselves, the benefit of the doubt and judge favorably - with love. ©2016 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 BEREL WEIN**

## Wein Online

**T**his week's parsha illustrates the problem that the Jewish people have with unlimited prosperity. With their pockets bursting with the wealth of Egypt and eating free food day in and day out, and with their wealth burning a hole in their pockets, they looked for expression to their newfound prosperity. And so the story of the Golden Calf follows.

There are many explanations offered by the commentators to the Torah as to why the Jewish people reverted to idol worship so soon after the grandeur of the revelation at Mount Sinai. However, the inability to deal with great and sudden wealth is certainly one of the factors involved. The rabbis ruefully commented: "You have flooded them with so much wealth and goodness that they cannot accept and deal with it."

This is especially true when prosperity is a sudden phenomenon, when wealth follows immediately after almost abject poverty and slavery. The transition is too sudden and too extreme. And, more often than not, it occasions illogical and often self-destructive behavior, which is a good description of the Golden Calf syndrome.

It is obvious that if the Jews would not have had large amounts of gold handy and available there could not have been a Golden Calf at all. One of the economic byproducts of great wealth is the search for an outlet to spend it. The enormous current market for luxury items, most of them truly unnecessary for good living, is testimony to this human urge. And so the Golden Calf becomes the god that absorbs wealth, talent and industry.

The rabbis of the Talmud commented that Jews do much better spiritually speaking in much more modest financial circumstances than with great wealth. For most of the past two millennia during the long dark times of the Exile, dealing with wealth was not a Jewish problem. There always were individual Jews who somehow achieved great wealth and power but the overwhelming majority of Jews were poor if not even destitute.

Over the past half century, both in the United States and Israel, the Jewish community has become quite prosperous. There are a great many really wealthy Jews. The challenge becomes how to channel

this wealth into the Mishkan and not into the Golden Calf. This is a national issue. On a personal level there has to be a concerted effort to prevent family dysfunction, which is often the result of sudden and unexpected wealth.

Wealth and humility do not often combine in one personality. The ability to handle one's wealth and material possessions wisely, with balance, is a major challenge, and it should be recognized as such. The Torah and the Talmud do not preach poverty as an ideal way of life or as a value on its own. The Torah always preaches balance in almost all ways of living. This balance is the key to avoid the Golden Calf syndrome. We pray to be blessed with financial prosperity but we should also pray to be blessed with the wisdom and balance to handle it properly. ©2016 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 SHLOMO RISKIN**

## Shabbat Shalom

**"W**hen you lift up the heads of the children of Israel to count them (in a census), let each one give an atonement offering for his soul when they are counted, so that there not be a plague in the counting of them" (Exodus 30:12) This opening verse of our Biblical portion teaches that it is forbidden to take a number count of the Israelites, a census activity which Jewish organizations are constantly involved in doing. This prohibition is reinforced by the prophet Hosea (chapter 2), when he declares: "The number of the children of Israel shall be as the sands of the sea, which cannot be numbered and cannot be counted..." And historically even King David learned the bitter lesson of the power of this command, when-against the will of his Chief Commander Joab- he ordered a census, and the Israelites suffered a plague (II Samuel, 24). Why can't we count Jews? What is the meaning of "giving atonement offering for his soul"? And didn't Hosea realize that we are not now- and were not in his day nor in any other time in Jewish history- as numerous as the sands of the sea?

The answer is to be found in a very strange incident during the judgeship of Gideon, great leader of Israel, against the Midianite enemy (Judges 6-7), which is cited by Chief Rabbi Sacks in his "Covenant and Conversation". G-d encourages war against Midian, Gideon assembles 32,000 soldiers, and G-d says they are too many for Him to place Midian in their hands (sic)!? Gideon allows exemption for those who are frightened and wish to return home; only 10,000 remain. G-d believes that there are still too many and orders Gideon to take his men to a waterway and have them drink. Ninety seven hundred kneeled down on

their knees to drink and three hundred lapped up the water with their hands, remaining in an upright position. G-d has Gideon wage the battle only with the 300 who did not kneel- with those soldiers who understand that it is only permissible to kneel before G-d. Even though the opposing Midianite forces were "innumerable (unable to be counted) like the sand at the edge of the sea in large quantity (Judges 7:12)", the small band of 300- waging a surprise nocturnal battle accompanied with great victorious sounds of the Shofar- won the day!

The message is indubitably clear. A census presupposes that in battle and when compared to other nations, there is strength in numbers, numbers count. The Divine commandment forbidding a census comes to teach that if G-d is with Israel, then numbers become totally unimportant; to be alone with G-d is to always be with a majority of one. And to be with G-d means to be righteous, to be committed to the cause, to believe in oneself, in one's nation and one's mission. A small band of dedicated people willing to sacrifice one's life to a Divine cause- such as a Jewish homeland poised and inspired to teach the world about a G-d of love, morality, pluralism and peace- is automatically as numerous as the sands at the edge of the shores of the sea. Such an army is as united as are the sands of the sea, and such an army contains soldiers each of whom is willing to give up his life (soul) as an atonement for G-d. That is why we successfully defeated all of the Arab hordes with a population of barely 600,000 in our War of Independence. Jews who lack the faith to risk their lives meaningfully in a just war for the sake of peace may well find that their lives will be take absurdly by plague, G-d forbid.

And if our Biblical portion begins by teaching that it is forbidden to count Jews in a census for the sake of comparison to other nations, it continues on to teach that nevertheless every single Jew within Israel certainly does count. Moses is atop Mt. Sinai (or in the supernal heavens) receiving the Decalogue of morality from G-d, while the panicking Israelites- having expected their great prophet to return on the fortieth day when he planned his return for the forty first day- are worshipping the golden calf. G-d commands Moses: "Get down, because your nation whom you took up from the land of Egypt is acting perversely" (Exodus 32:7)

The Sages of the Talmud expand on G-d's words: "Get down from our exalted state. I only gave you greatness because of your nation. Now that your nation is sinning, what do I need you for? " (B.T. Berakhot 32a). Picture the scene: here is the greatest Kollel (Rabbinical Seminary) in history, with the Almighty as Dean of the Academy (Rosh HaYeshiva) and Moses as disciple (avrech). Nevertheless, G-d explains that He did not enter into a covenant with the elite, most dedicated Jewish scholars; G-d entered into

a covenant with every single Jew, from the elders and judges to the choppers of wood and the drawers of water.

Just as a Holy Torah Scroll is invalidated by a single letter which is missing, so is historic Israel (Knesset Yisrael) invalidated if one Jew is disaffected. Moses must go down to his errant nation and lift up each of the Israelites, restore every Jew to the commitment of the Divine message and mission. Yes, the Jews must not be counted, but each and every Jew certainly counts! ©2016 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

#### **RABBI DOV KRAMER**

### **Taking a Closer Look**

**"A**nd you shall take the silver of atonement from the Children of Israel and include it with [the rest of] the work for the Tent of Meeting, and it shall be for the Children of Israel as a remembrance before G-d to atone for your souls" (Sh'mos 30:16). Although the "silver of atonement" is presented as being an atonement for counting the amount of people in the nation (30:12), necessary to avoid something bad happening because of the process of counting (see Rashi), here it is presented as a long-term atonement, ever-present in the Mishkan. If the purpose of giving a half-shekel was to avoid the negative consequences of being counted (by counting the half-shekalim instead), why did it become a permanent "remembrance" in the Mishkan; wouldn't the act of counting the coins instead of the people have been enough? Additionally, since the issue of avoiding directly counting people applies whenever a census is taken, why didn't the coins used for any subsequent "counting" have to become a "remembrance" too? And why is there no mention of coins being used for the census taken shortly after the Mishkan was built (Bamidbar 1:2), or for the census taken shortly before the nation entered the Promised Land (Bamidbar 26:2)? If "when you count the Children of Israel" (30:12) each person who is counted must give a half-shekel for atonement, why didn't they? And if they did, why weren't they mentioned?

Another issue this "silver of atonement" raises is that these half-shekalim made up all of the silver that was accounted for and used in the Mishkan (Sh'mos 38:25-28). If all of the silver necessary for the Mishkan came from the mandatory half-shekalim, why was silver included as one of the materials that must be donated willingly (25:2-3)? This question is discussed by numerous commentators (<http://tinyurl.com/zjrunez>), but perhaps we can present another possibility.

Last week (<http://tinyurl.com/z9kv8eh>), I discussed why the incense altar wasn't commanded until after the section of the commandments for the Mishkan and its vessels, including the priestly garments, was completed. I referenced the approach of Rabbi Moshe Shamah and Rabbi Meir Spiegelman that

initially, before the sin of the golden calf, there would not have been an incense altar, but it became necessary because of the sin. Therefore, when the commandments for the Mishkan as it was originally intended were given (during Moshe's first 40-day period atop Mt. Sinai), the incense altar wasn't included, but after that section was completed, the Torah tells us about the commandment for the incense altar, which was added during Moshe's last 40-day period on Mt. Sinai.

Rabbi Shamah further suggests that the commandment to collect the mandatory half-shekalim "for atonement" was given during that last 40-day stay as well, with the "atonement" being for the sin of the golden calf, not for counting people. According to Rabbi Shamah, the "plague" (30:12) that was avoided by giving the half-shekalim was not one that would have otherwise been caused by counting people directly, but a plague associated with the sin of the golden calf (see 32:35). However, the wording of the verse (30:12), that there would not be a plague "when they are counted," strongly implies that the plague being avoided would have been because of the counting, as if it wasn't, the words "when they are counted" have no relevance to the timing of the plague. On the other hand, as previously mentioned, if the purpose of the half-shekalim was to avoid the consequences of taking a census, why weren't they mentioned by the other censuses?

I would therefore suggest that although taking a census by counting people directly is problematic, and can bring a plague (or other disasters), giving half-shekalim is not the only way to avoid such consequences. As long as the people aren't being counted directly, the problem is avoided. The half-shekalim mandated here were meant as an atonement for the golden calf (as Rabbi Shamah suggests), and were therefore used in the Mishkan as a permanent "remembrance" of this atonement. However, once giving the half-shekalim became necessary, counting them instead of the people accomplished something else as well -- it avoided a potential plague that could have resulted from counting the people directly. True, this could have been accomplished in other ways too (by counting slips of paper, or names written on pieces of paper, or taleisim), but since the half-shekalim were being collected anyway, counting them to determine the number of people made the most sense. This was done at the subsequent censuses as well, where the half-shekalim were given for the offerings brought in the Mishkan (see Rashi on 30:15), but because it was not the only way to avoid the consequences of counting people directly, it was not mentioned there.

Since the atonement for the sin of the golden calf was only necessary after the sin had been committed, the mandatory half-shekelim were not part of the original commandment, when the materials to be

donated voluntarily were listed (25:3-7). At that point, since the silver needed for the Mishkan would not have been collected through mandatory donations, it would have had to come from voluntary donations. It was only after the "silver of atonement" became necessary that there was no longer a need for any silver to be donated voluntarily.

It should be noted that when Moshe repeated G-d's commandments to the nation, including the list of materials to be donated voluntarily (35:5-9), silver was still included, even though Moshe certainly didn't relay this commandment to the nation until after the sin of the golden calf had already been committed, and therefore after all the silver needed for the Mishkan would be collected through the mandatory half-shekalim. Nevertheless, we do not need to fall back on all the other answers given for why silver was included in the original list, as when Moshe repeated the list to the nation he wasn't listing all the things that needed to be donated voluntarily, but all the things "that G-d [had] commanded" (35:4) to be donated voluntarily, i.e. the original list, and at the time of the original commandment silver still needed to be donated voluntarily. Rather than G-d repeating every detail of the Mishkan again when He told Moshe that the Mishkan project was back on (during the last set of 40 days), He only told him what had changed, i.e. which things were being added (such as the incense altar) and which things should be done differently (such as how the pillars of the doorway were coated, see <http://tinyurl.com/ojht4vq>). Those things that remained the same, though, which was most of the Mishkan, didn't need to be repeated; all that had to be told to Moshe was that the Mishkan that was described to him in detail approximately three months earlier (during his first 40-day stay atop Mt. Sinai) should be built, albeit with the following changes/additions. Since the list of materials needed didn't change, there was no specific second commandment repeating them. Therefore, when Moshe repeated the original commandment to the nation, he didn't change anything from what G-d had originally told him, and he included everything that G-d had included. True, silver no longer needed to be donated voluntarily, but since Moshe was repeating G-d's commandment as faithfully as possible, this distinction wasn't made.

After the sin of the golden calf, it became necessary for each and every adult male to donate a half-shekel as an atonement for it. By counting these half-shekalim, the number of adult males could be determined without counting them directly, thereby avoiding any of the adverse consequences that counting people directly can bring. And because these half-shekalim provided enough silver for the Mishkan, even though before the sin of the golden calf silver would have had to be donated voluntarily, this was no longer the case. ©2016 Rabbi D. Kramer

**HARAV SHLOMO WOLBE ZT"L**

## Bais Hamussar

"After He finished speaking with him on Har Sinai, He gave to Moshe two tablets of testimony; stone tablets written by the finger of Hashem" (Shemos 31:18). Since this conversation which took place was one sided with only Hashem speaking to Moshe, shouldn't the Torah have written, "After He finished speaking to him" instead of "with him?" Rashi explains that actually a discussion took place. After Moshe heard all the commandments from Hashem they then discussed them together! The only question is, for what reason did Hashem feel it necessary to discuss together with Moshe everything that He had just finished teaching him?

Rav Wolbe (Shiurei Chumash ibid; Parshas Yisro 19:17) cites the Maharal's explanation of this event. He writes that the commandments of the Torah differ greatly from the decrees and edicts enacted by human monarchs. Their decrees might have been composed by whim, and all of them are subjective since they are based on the ruler's own intellect and understanding. Thus, there is no reason for the monarch to discuss his decrees with his constituents because regardless of their truth the decrees must be accepted. In contrast, the commandments of the Torah are absolute and incontrovertible.

After Hashem taught Moshe the entire Torah, He discussed each mitzvah with him and showed him how every aspect of the Torah is necessary and indispensable.

With this idea, we can elucidate a Rashi earlier in Sefer Shemos. The Torah tells us (Shemos 19:17) that during Matan Torah Bnei Yisrael stood "under the mountain."

Rashi, quoting Chazal, explains that Hashem uprooted the mountain and held it threateningly above their heads, thereby forcing them to accept Torah. Elsewhere Chazal tell us that after Moshiach comes and Bnei Yisrael will receive their just reward for performing the mitzvos of the Torah, the other nations will step forward and complain to Hashem:

"Why didn't You hold the mountain above our heads and force us to accept the Torah like you did to Bnei Yisrael?" Hashem will respond that they cannot complain, since even the seven mitzvos that they were commanded they did not fulfill (Avodah Zara 2b).

Rav Wolbe explains that Hashem held the mountain over the heads of Bnei Yisrael only after they had decided on their own volition to accept the Torah with their wholehearted declaration of "na'aseh v'nishma." After they made the first step, Hashem rewarded them with a dose of Heavenly assistance, and He, so to speak, "held the mountain over their heads." In other words, after Bnei Yisrael accepted the Torah, Hashem revealed to them what He discussed

with Moshe. He showed Bnei Yisrael how every aspect of the Torah is entirely necessary and crucial for the existence of the world. Chazal are telling us that they were intellectually forced to accept the Torah because its truth was made glaringly clear. The other nations did not take the first step by fulfilling the seven mitzvos given to them. Therefore, they did not merit the Heavenly assistance which comes to those who demonstrate their eagerness to submit themselves to Hashem's will.

Some turn their eyes heavenward and wait for Hashem to help them in their spiritual struggles. Should it not come, they complain, "Why don't you help me like you helped Yankel and Shmerel." Chazal are informing us that to merit Hashem's assistance, one has to take the first step himself. Show Hashem that you believe in Him, show Him that you trust Him or how you are interested in growing in your avodas Hashem and yiras Shamayim. All you have to do is initiate, and Hashem will respond with a generous dose of Heavenly assistance! ©2016 Rabbi S. Wolbe zt"l & AishDas Society

**RABBI YITZCHOK ADLERSTEIN**

## Undivining Moshe

**W**hen he approached the camp and saw the eigel and the dancing, Moshe got angry. He cast the luchos from his hand and broke them at the foot of the mountain.

Meshech Chochmah: At the core of the Jewish nation are Torah and belief in Hashem. All kedushah is a derivative of them. All that we treat as sacred, be it Eretz Yisrael or Yerushalayim, is nothing but a detail or subset of the larger Torah, and draws its special holy character from the Torah itself. The Torah's authority is universal, in that it applies to all people and at all times. All stand equal in their essential obligation to it, both the great and the simple.

The greatest of people -- Moshe Rabbenu -- is described (Devarim 5:5) as having no other role than as a faithful intermediary, conveying the Torah to the people from on High. Torah does not inhere in Moshe. He has no part in its content or authority. Those are sourced entirely in the Source of all sources, in Hashem Himself.

Holiness, in other words, is not an inherent property. It is not even a constant property that continues on, once attached to something. Rather, it is a function of an ongoing connection with Hashem, Whose closeness to it is what generates and continues holiness.

This is not as intuitive as you might think. In fact, many people struggled with the notion of G-d as the infinite and limitless Cause of all existence, and Who is entirely beyond the reach of human comprehension. If He is so lofty, so remote what is it, then, that provides the spiritual energy of the palpable, observable world, in all its complexity? While G-d may

be the ultimate Source of all existence, surely something else -- acting on His authority -- is the active agent that brings order and purpose to vastness of the physical world. That something else, conceived of as a surrogate of the inscrutable G-d, was the ultimate spiritual being that Man could really relate to. Man's religious service would be devoted to this lesser divinity.

This, then, became a common search of pagans. They would create different images, believing that they could invite this more immediate and comprehensible divinity to take up residence within those icons. The great Supervisor of the Universe would then join those people, and be venerated by the community.

Many of the Bnei Yisrael had not purged themselves of this belief. They had seen Moshe the same way -- as a being in which this active supervisory spirit had become carnate. When Moshe delayed in returning, they immediately set out to provide a substitute home for the being that weeks before had taken them out of Egypt.

Moshe's reaction was furious. "Do you think that I am somehow inherently special, and that is why I ascended the mountain to bring you the Torah? I am a human like you! The Torah does not depend on me at all. Had I not been born, Torah would exist in its fullness and without any change whatsoever. I have no role in its existence."

Evidence of this would come soon enough. For thirty-eight years that the Bnei Yisrael were banned from entering the Land, Hashem would not speak directly to Moshe. The Divine Word did not come naturally to him. He was not possessed of some essential holiness and power; his access to G-d was a function of Hashem's closeness to His people!

The mishkan and batei mikdash also evidence that holiness derives entirely from Hashem's residence within them, and not from any intrinsic properties. Titus suffered no injury when he entered the Holy of Holies with a courtesan. He did not defile a holy place, because by the time he entered, it was no longer holy! The animating source of its holiness was the Shechinah, and it had departed prior to Titus' arrival.

Similarly, the keruvim were not mysterious articles of veneration. They served as reminders of the existence of angels, and symbols of the spiritual status of the Jewish people, by either looking at each other (at times of national elevation) or away from each other. They sat atop the aron, but not in it. Inside the aron were only the luchos -- and a sefer Torah! Those were what counted!

We can now appreciate the fuller meaning of our pasuk. Moshe approached, and saw the eigel and the dancing. He saw that the people around the golden calf were fully into its service. There was conviction written all over their faces. Moshe did not find people



who paused every now and then to look back at the mountain, to see if perhaps Moshe was still on his way. Moshe was able to approach the camp without anyone noticing that he had arrived! Moshe realized that the people believed in faulty ideas about himself, about Providence in the physical world, and about the nature of holiness.

He therefore taught a powerful and dramatic lesson. He shattered the luchos. He said, in effect, that the tablets had no intrinsic holiness, and could be broken if they no longer served their purpose. If the luchos, inscribed by Hashem, could be treated that way, then so could anything else under the right circumstances. No earthly kedushah was inviolate, because every thing's kedushah was contingent upon its connection to Hashem.

While the Rambam identified thirteen principles of faith, some are logical outgrowths of others. We should understand the fifth principle -- that we do not pray to any entity other than Hashem -- follows directly from the first principle, the existence of a Being Who creates and oversees all other existence. Those who worshipped other beings could not believe that G-d could or did supervise events in the lowly, physical world. Nor could they accept the notion that there is no supervision, and all phenomena occur randomly. They found such a position absurd and unbelievable. That led them to the conclusion that G-d must have left room or delegated authority for oversight of our world to some other being or beings. Those people who worshipped, propitiated, longed for those authorities would be able to tap into their reservoirs of good.

Their mistake was in failing to accept the first principle, which leaves no room for any other. If Hashem is the sole cause, creator, and overseer, there is nothing else that can be worshipped!

If this reasoning sounds familiar, it should. We review it twice daily when we recite the Shema, proclaiming to the world that Hashem, the cause of all existence is Elokeinu, our G-d, meaning that He alone in fact provides the providence and oversight for all events in our lives. Because this is true, He is One, meaning that there is no need to invent any deity or intermediary to receive our prayers. (Based on Meshech Chochmah, Shemos 32:19) ©2016 Rabbi Y. Adlerstein & torah.org

### **MACHON ZOMET**

## **Shabbat B'Shabbato**

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Rosh Yeshiva, Kerem B'Yavne  
Translated by Moshe Goldberg



"Look, I have announced the name of Betzalel Ben Uri..." [Shemos 31:2]. This phrase is repeated in the Torah portion of Vayakhel, but there Moshe is speaking and he tells Yisrael, "Look, G-d has announced..." [35:30]. In the Talmud

(Berachot), it is written that no official should be appointed to lead the community unless the people are consulted first, as is shown by this second verse. G-d asked Moshe, is Betzalel acceptable to you? He replied, if he is acceptable to you, is it not obvious that I will accept him? G-d replied, in spite of this, go and ask Yisrael. And the people said, if Betzalel is acceptable for you and the Holy One, Blessed be He, isn't it clear that we will accept him too? Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook explains that a leader in Yisrael must have three characteristics:

(1) Good behavior and a pure heart, righteousness, and honesty. These traits can only be known by G-d, since only He is familiar with the inner workings of the heart.

(2) The deep wisdom that a leader must have. This good trait can be seen by other people, but only if they are unique -- very wise people who can see his thought processes. Not everybody knows how to find out about this.

(3) Charisma, external attractiveness, the ability to talk, and the ability to connect to other people. This trait can be recognized by all the other people.

However, there are various levels of all these matters. The leadership will be firmly established only if it is based on the above three traits, and they must appear in the above sequence. That is, the main thing to consider first is the trait of righteousness and piety. Wisdom comes next, and the last element to be considered is charisma. Only in this sequence will the leadership be able to gain the confidence of the people. However, if the sequence is reversed and charisma becomes the most important trait while righteousness is viewed as the least important one, the leadership will be merely a distorted version of the truth.

When the Holy One, Blessed be He, asked Moshe for an opinion about Betzalel, he replied to the specific question that was asked. The question was about Betzalel's wisdom. He replied, "If he is acceptable to You, he must clearly be acceptable to me." That is, the good trait that I can discern is second in importance to the spiritual perfection that only G-d could determine. And then Moshe went to consult with Bnei Yisrael, specifically whether they saw a trait of charisma in Betzalel. They replied in kind: "If he is acceptable to you, he will certainly be acceptable to us." That is, after the Holy One, Blessed be He, testified to Betzalel's honesty and righteousness and Moshe testified about his wisdom, the people also affirmed that they recognized his perfection.

In the end, it is clear that charisma is an important trait for a leader as long as it is combined with the main traits -- righteousness, uprightness, honesty, and wisdom. When charisma is disassociated from the other traits and becomes the only trait by which a person is judged, the leadership is doomed to fail.