

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

Kol Nidre, the prayer said at the beginning of Yom Kippur, is an enigma wrapped in a mystery, perhaps the strangest text ever to capture the religious imagination. First, it is not a prayer at all. It is not even a confession. It is a dry legal formula for the annulment of vows. It is written in Aramaic. It does not mention God. It is not part of the service. It does not require a synagogue. And it was disapproved of, or at least questioned, by generations of halachic authorities.

The first time we hear of Kol Nidre, in the eighth century, it is already being opposed by Rav Natronai Gaon, the first of many Sages throughout the centuries who found it problematic. In his view, one cannot annul the vows of an entire congregation this way. Even if one could, one should not, since it may lead people to treat vows lightly. Besides which, there has already been an annulment of vows ten days earlier, on the morning before Rosh Hashanah. This is mentioned explicitly in the Talmud (Nedarim 23b). There is no mention of an annulment on Yom Kippur.

Rabbeinu Tam, Rashi's grandson, was particularly insistent in arguing that the kind of annulment Kol Nidre represents cannot be retroactive. It cannot apply to vows already taken. It can only be a pre-emptive qualification of vows in the future. Accordingly he insisted on changing its wording, so that Kol Nidre refers not to vows from last year to this, but from this year to next.

However, perhaps because of this, Kol Nidre created hostility on the part of non-Jews, who said it showed that Jews did not feel bound to honour their promises since they vitiated them on the holiest night of the year. In vain it was repeatedly emphasised that Kol Nidre applies only to vows between us and God, not those between us and our fellow humans. Throughout the Middle Ages, and in some places until the eighteenth century, in lawsuits with non-Jews, Jews were forced to take a special oath, More Judaica, because of this concern.

So there were communal and halachic reasons not to say Kol Nidre, yet it survived all the doubts and misgivings. It remains the quintessential expression of the awe and solemnity of the day. Its undiminished power defies all obvious explanations. Somehow it seems to point to something larger than itself, whether

in Jewish history or the inner heartbeat of the Jewish soul.

Several historians have argued that it acquired its pathos from the phenomenon of forced conversions, whether to Christianity or Islam, that occurred in several places in the Middle Ages, most notably Spain and Portugal in the fourteenth and fifteenth century. Jews would be offered the choice: convert or suffer persecution. Sometimes it was: convert or be expelled. At times it was even: convert or die. Some Jews did convert. They were known in Hebrew as anusim (people who acted under coercion). In Spanish they were known as conversos, or contemptuously as marranos (swine).

Many of them remained Jews in secret, and once a year on the night of Yom Kippur they would make their way in secret to the synagogue to seek release from the vows they had taken to adopt to another faith, on the compelling grounds that they had no other choice. For them, coming to the synagogue was like coming home, the root meaning of teshuvah.

There are obvious problems with this hypothesis. Firstly, Kol Nidre was in existence several centuries before the era of forced conversions. So historian Joseph S. Bloch suggested that Kol Nidre may have originated in the much earlier Christian persecution of Jews in Visigoth Spain, when in 613 Sisebur issued a decree that all Jews should either convert or be expelled, anticipating the Spanish expulsion of 1492. Even so, it is unlikely that conversos would have taken the risk of being discovered practising Judaism. Had they done so during the centuries in which the Inquisition was in force they would have risked torture, trial and death. Moreover, the text of Kol Nidre makes no reference, however oblique, to conversion, return, identity, or atonement. It is simply an annulment of vows.

So the theories as they stand do not satisfy.

However it may be that Kol Nidre has a different significance altogether, one that has its origin in a remarkable rabbinic interpretation of this week's parsha. The connection between it and Yom Kippur is this: less than six weeks after the great revelation at Mount Sinai, the Israelites committed what seemed to be the unforgivable sin of making a Golden Calf. Moses prayed repeatedly for forgiveness on their behalf and eventually secured it, descending from Mount Sinai on the Tenth of Tishrei with a new set of tablets to replace

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those he had smashed in anger at their sin. The tenth of Tishrei subsequently became Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, in memory of that moment when the Israelites saw Moses with the new tablets and knew they had been forgiven.

Moses' prayers, as recorded in the Torah, are daring. But the Midrash makes them more audacious still. The text introducing Moses' prayer begins with the Hebrew words, Vayechal Moshe (Ex. 32:11). Normally these are translated as "Moses besought, implored, entreated, pleaded, or attempted to pacify" God. However the same verb is used in the context of annulling or breaking a vow (Num. 30:3). On this basis the Sages advanced a truly remarkable interpretation: "[Vayechal Moshe means] 'Moses absolved God of His vow.' When the Israelites made the Golden Calf, Moses sought to persuade God to forgive them, but God said, 'I have already taken an oath that Whoever sacrifices to any god other than the Lord must be punished' (Ex. 22:19). I cannot retract what I have said.' Moses replied, 'Lord of the universe, You have given me the power to annul oaths, for You taught me that one who takes an oath cannot break their word but a scholar can absolve them. I hereby absolve You of Your vow.'" (abridged from Exodus Rabbah 43:4)

According to the Sages the original act of Divine forgiveness on which Yom Kippur is based came about through the annulment of a vow, when Moses annulled the vow of God. The Sages understood the verse, "Then the Lord relented from the evil He had spoken of doing to His people" (Ex. 32:14) to mean that God expressed regret for the vow He had taken -- a precondition for a vow to be annulled.

Why would God regret His determination to punish the people for their sin? On this, another Midrash offers an equally radical answer. The opening word of Psalm 61 is *la -- menatzeach*. When this word appears in Psalms it usually means, "To the conductor, or choirmaster." However the Sages interpreted it to mean, "To the Victor," meaning God, and added this stunning commentary: "To the Victor who sought to be defeated, as it is said (Isaiah 57:16), 'I will not accuse them forever, nor will I always be angry, for then they would faint away because of Me -- the very people I have created.' Do not read it thus, but, 'I will accuse in order to be defeated.' How so? Thus said the Holy One,

blessed be He, 'When I win, I lose, and when I lose I gain. I defeated the generation of the Flood, but did I not lose thereby, for I destroyed My own creation, as it says (Gen. 7:23), 'Every living thing on the face of the earth was wiped out.' The same happened with the generation of the Tower of Babel and the people of Sodom. But in the days of Moshe who defeated Me (by persuading Me to forgive the Israelites whom I had sworn to destroy), I gained for I did not destroy Israel.'" (Pesikta Rabbati (Ish Shalom), 9)

God wants His forgiveness to override His justice, because strict justice hurts humanity, and humanity is God's creation and carries His image. That is why He regretted His vow and allowed Moses to annul it. That is why Kol Nidre has the power it has. For it recalls the Israelites' worst sin, the Golden Calf, and their forgiveness, completed when Moses descended the mountain with the new tablets on the 10th of Tishrei, the anniversary of which is Yom Kippur. The forgiveness was the result of Moses' daring prayer, understood by the Sages as an act of annulment of vows. Hence Kol Nidre, a formula for the annulment of vows.

The power of Kol Nidre has less to do with forced conversions than with a recollection of the moment, described in our parsha, when Moses stood in prayer before God and achieved forgiveness for the people: the first time the whole people was forgiven despite the gravity of their sin. During Musaf on Yom Kippur we describe in detail the second Yom Kippur: the service of the High Priest, Aharon, as described in Vayikra 16. But on Kol Nidre we recall the first Yom Kippur when Moses annulled the Almighty's vow, letting His compassion override His justice, the basis of all Divine forgiveness.

I believe we must always strive to fulfil our promises. If we fail to keep our word, eventually we lose our freedom. But given the choice between justice and forgiveness, choose forgiveness. When we forgive and are worthy of being forgiven, we are liberated from a past we regret, to build a better future. *Covenant and Conversation 5780 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l ©2020 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"**W**hen Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the Two Tablets of the covenant law in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord" (Exodus 34:29) What is the significance of the dazzling radiance of Moses's face and why did it not attain this shining glow until he received the Second Tablets on Yom Kippur? And, perhaps the most difficult question of all, why did Moses break the first tablets? Yes, he was

bitterly disappointed, perhaps even angry, at the Israelites' worship of the Golden Calf only 40 days after God's first Revelation on Shavuot; however, these tablets were "the work of God and they were the writing of God." How could the holiest human being take the holiest object on earth and smash it to smithereens? Was he not adding to Israel's sin, pouring salt on the wounds of the Almighty (as it were)? My revered teacher, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, taught that Moses emerges from our portion of Ki Tisa not only as the greatest prophet of the generations but also as the exalted rebbe of Klal Yisrael (All of Israel), as Moshe Rabeinu; Moses the teacher and master of all the generations. This unique transformation of his personality took place on Yom Kippur; it is the sobriquet of Rebbe which occasions the rays of splendor which shone forth from his countenance.

The midrash on the first verse of the Book of Leviticus, "And [God] called out to Moses and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting..." provides a remarkable insight.

The biblical word for "called out" in this text is *vayiker*, a word which suggests a mere chance encounter rather than an actual summoning or calling out of the Divine; indeed, our Masoretic text places a small letter 'alef' at the end of the word. The midrash explains that it was Moses's modesty which insisted upon an almost accidental meeting (*veyikra*) rather than a direct summons.

However, when God completed the writing down of the Five Books, there was a small amount of ink left over from that small 'alef'; the Almighty lovingly placed the surplus of sacred ink on Moses's forehead, which accounts for the glorious splendor which emanated from his face.

Allow me to add to this midrash on the basis of the teaching of Rabbi Soloveitchik. The essence of the Second Tablets included the Oral Law, the human input of the great Torah Sages throughout the generations which had been absent from the first tablets.

Hence Chapter 34 of our portion opens with God's command to Moses, "Hew for yourself two stone tablets" – you, Moses, and not Me, God; the first tablets were hewn by God and the commandments were engraved by God, whereas the second tablets were hewn by the human being Moses and the commands were engraved by him. The chapter concludes: "The Lord said to Moses, 'Write for yourself these words for on the basis of these words [the Oral Law, the hermeneutic principles and the interpretations of the rabbis of each generation] have I established an [eternal] covenant with Israel.'"

Rabbi Soloveitchik maintains that during the 40 days from the beginning of the month of Elul to Yom Kippur, Moses relearned the 613 commandments with the many possibilities of the Oral Law; Moses's active intellect became the "receiver" for the active intellect of

the Divine, having received all of the manifold potential possibilities of the future developments of Torah throughout the generations. This is the meaning of the Talmudic adage that "Every authentic scholar ('talmid vatik') who presents a novel teaching is merely recycling Torah from Sinai."

In this manner, Moses's personality became totally identified and intertwined with Torah, a sacred combination of the Divine words and the interpretations of Moses. Moses became a living 'Sefer Torah', a "ministering vessel" (*kli sharet*) which can never lose its sanctity.

The Beit Halevi (Rav Yosef Dov Baer Halevi Soloveitchik, the great-grandfather of my teacher) maintains that the special radiance which emanated from Moses's countenance originated from the concentrated sanctity of Moses's identity with the many aspects of the Oral Torah which his own generation was not yet ready to hear, but which Moses kept within himself, for later generations. Whenever the inner world of the individual is more than it appears to be on the surface, that inner radiance becomes increasingly pronounced and externally manifest. Moses's radiant glow was Oral Torah dependent, not at all germane to the first tablets, which contained only the Written Law; the glow expressed the radiance and love which would suffuse the manifold interpretations which were beneath the surface, but would emerge throughout the future generations of oral interpretations to come!

Why did Moses break the first tablets? Moses understood that there was a desperate need for a second set of tablets, born of God's consummate love and unconditional forgiveness, with an Oral Law which would empower the nation to be God's partners in the developing Torah. But God had threatened to destroy the nation. Moses breaks the first tablets as a message to God: Just as the tablets are considered to be "ministering vessels" which never lose their sanctity even if broken, so are the Jewish People, *Knesset Yisrael*, teachers and students of Torah, "ministering vessels," who will never lose their sanctity, even if God attempts to break them! The Jewish nation, repositories of the oral teachings, are the heirs to the eternal sanctity of Moses their Rebbe. ©2020 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

The thirteen attributes which are used to describe God, parallel attributes of God 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 God of mercy and graciousness." (Exodus 34:6) Earlier in the Ten Declarations (*Aseret Ha-dibrot*), God says "Hashem Kel kana, God is a jealous God." (Exodus 20:5)

The difference between these two descriptions

of God is clear. At Sinai, God reveals himself as a God of strict judgment. He appears to be harsh. Here, in our portion, God, for the first time, paints Himself as merciful.

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

Furthermore, in Exodus 34, God is described as rahum from the word rehem which means womb. This because God's love for us, like the love of the womb, is infinite and unconditional.

Hanun stems from the word hinam, which literally means free. God's love is free, even if not reciprocated. These terms in contrast to God described in the aseret ha-dibrot, Kel kana - a God of jealousy and vengeance.

It is not surprising that the thirteen merciful attributes appear immediately after Moshe (Moses) tells the Jewish people that because they worshipped the golden calf, an angel, not God, would henceforth lead them. This disturbs the nation and they demand that God 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 God's direct accompaniment. Only when God allows strict law to merge with mercy does He agree to lead the people directly.

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

Created in the image of God, we too should follow God's footsteps. As God tempered justice with mercy, so should we give ourselves and others the benefit of the doubt and judge favorably. ©2020 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

One of the more mystical rituals in the mishkan was the ktoret – the offering of incense on the altar. The incense, when burned by fire, provided a fragrant cloud of smoke that permeated the tent of the mishkan. The Torah is very exact and detailed in describing the ingredients and formula that formed the ktoret in the mishkan and later in the Temple, which produced this powerful fragrance. The Talmud states that when the incense was being prepared in the Temple in Jerusalem the goats pasturing downwind in Jericho sneezed!

There is no doubt that the incense did provide a very strong and pungent fragrance, though nowhere is it mentioned what this fragrance was comparable to. The Talmud adds that if the incense mixture would be combined with honey, then its smell would be so pleasant that it would prove to be irresistible. Why, then, was no honey added to the formula of the incense? The Torah itself forbade this addition to the incense mixture, by stating explicitly that honey was not to be introduced on the altar. There is a profound lesson to be learned here.

The Torah's instructions are not to be improved upon by human tastes, fads and currently popular ideas. The mystique of the incense offering is not to be enhanced by human preferences. Jewish history has shown us that all such "improvements" were eventually discarded. The Torah deals with eternity, and not with current moods that always change. The Torah itself is the sole arbiter of what the fragrance of the incense offering should be.

The incense offering was also deemed to be dangerous, if not lethal, to those priests performing the service. This was especially true on Yom Kippur when the High Priest himself performed the service upon entering the Holy of Holies with the incense pan and coals in his hands and arms. The Talmud records that during Second Temple times there were many priests who were unworthy of being the High Priest and obtained their position only by means of corruption and graft. Their corpses literally had to be dragged out of the Temple's precincts, since they died from the incense offering ritual. We do not find such lethal danger attached to any other duties of the High Priest in the Temple service.

But as in the physical world, so, too, is it in the mystical spiritual world – that which has the power to destroy also possesses the power to heal and bless. The incense offering was the source to ensure financial prosperity and abundance for the Jewish people. Even today, biblical verses regarding the incense offering are recited daily by many as a prayer for monetary success and physical welfare. It is the mystery of all this that so intrigues us. It remains one of the hidden treasures of the Torah that are not yet revealed to us. The ktoret retains its eternal fragrance of mystery. And we are not to add or detract from its Torah formulation. ©2020 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

RABBI DAVID S. LEVIN

The Golden Calf

The sin of the Eigel HaZahav, the Golden Calf, is one of the most difficult sections in the Torah to comprehend. The B'nei Yisrael had escaped the slavery and hardship of Egypt, witnessed the plagues in

Egypt and the miracles that were performed there, experienced the saving power of Hashem with the miraculous crossing of the Yam Suf, and arrived at Har Sinai to receive the Torah where they heard Hashem's voice speaking to them. And during all this time they rose in their level of holiness, so that they were now on the highest level of holiness and righteousness that Man can achieve. Yet within a period of forty days they slipped to perform the greatest collective sin of the Jewish people.

What brought about this sin? Moshe's "delay" in returning to the Camp of the B'nei Yisrael was not a delay but a miscalculation by the people. There are many times in the calendar on which we say miktzat hayom k'kulo, a portion of the day constitutes a complete day, so the Jews counted that first partial day instead of beginning their count one day later. That problem was not the cause of the Eigel HaZahav but merely precipitated the panic that ensued.

HaRav Shmshon Raphael Hirsch explained that the B'nei Yisrael were overly dependent on Moshe for their level of spirituality. Though they had risen from to the highest level of spirituality and righteousness before receiving the Torah, this faith had not yet become internalized. Their religious level was not superficial, but when a person does teshuvah and raises himself to new heights, the temptation to slip becomes even stronger. Uncertainty and a feeling of unworthiness eat away at one's new convictions. It is only when one continues in this new level for many years that one can become certain that this new height can be maintained. The Rambam explains that Man must make changes slowly in order for them to be solidified in his character. He refers to the "inevitability of gradualness." The B'nei Yisrael changed too quickly and did not have time for this growth to sink in. The B'nei Yisrael also associated this growth with Moshe. They saw him as a special leader who enabled them to accomplish their growth. When they feared that Moshe was not returning, they lost faith in themselves and their ability to continue at such a high level of spirituality. Once the seed of fear was planted, their world fell apart quickly.

The B'nei Yisrael also misunderstood Moshe's greatness. They failed to see him as the messenger of Hashem but viewed him as one who had "surpassed human nature and become god-like". Hirsch says that the people believed that Moshe influenced Hashem's actions and Hashem felt obligated to protect the B'nei Yisrael because Moshe was in their midst. They attributed the miracles in Egypt and at Yam Suf to Moshe's influence on Hashem. This misinterpretation led the Jews to panic even more when Moshe appeared to have died.

The Ramban explains that with Moshe's "loss" the people looked for a replacement of Moshe, not a replacement of Hashem. The Ramban disagrees with

Hirsch's feeling that the people saw Moshe as a god. When the B'nei Yisrael asked Aharon to make for them "elohim, deity or judge," they do not mean gods or a god. They merely want another person who will lead them through the desert. They thought that if they worshipped Hashem through this statue, they would not view it as a god but as a way to focus their thoughts to the One on high. They expected that Hashem would bless them and lead them through this "symbol" just as He had done through Moshe. However, once the idol was made it reminded them too much of their old ways and they succumbed to the temptation of avodah zarah, idol worship.

Our great Rabbis ask why Hashem allowed the B'nei Yisrael to believe that Moshe had died. Had Moshe descended early, the people would have been saved from such a horrible sin. Some have answered that Hashem wished to show the B'nei Yisrael the incredible depth of His forgiving power when the people would do teshuvah. But Hashem does not cause people to sin just so that He can demonstrate His ability to forgive. In some ways that argument excuses the B'nei Yisrael from the sin itself. Can we really say that it is not their fault for sinning because this is what Hashem wanted? That would not explain why our Rabbis say that every sin that we, as a people, perform is a part of the sin of the Eigel HaZahav. Hashem does forgive us with His incredible mercy, but the sin is ours and the everlasting taint of that sin is ours.

When we see a fellow Jew who is committing crimes or sinning before Hashem, we must speak up and try to prevent him from sinning. We must be careful to do this quietly at first to allow the person to change without embarrassing him in public. But if this is not successful, we must speak out to protest this behavior. We must be careful of our motives and our methods in trying to prevent this sin. We cannot gloat at the downfall of others. We must try to act l'sheim shamayim, for the sake of Heaven. We must look within ourselves to be certain that our own actions are also free from sins which will affect others. Our sins are used by the world to demonstrate that our Torah values are no better than their values, our lives are no more special than their lives. But we are not simply concerned with their opinions. We must be concerned with our opinions of ourselves. When we dedicate ourselves to a Torah way of life, we understand the beauty that is there. When others destroy that beauty, it affects the way that our own people view us. Our children cannot accept the hypocrisy of our lives when they see us study Torah and then lead a different life in which Torah values are not consistent. Our love of Torah must also lead to our love of all of our fellow Jews whether they are religious or not. We are permitted to seriously dislike their behavior, but we may not ever dislike them. Had each Jew maintained his own personal level of holiness from the time of the

receiving of the Torah, there would have been no Eigel HaZahav. But we see that this did not happen. However, had each Jew maintained his love for his fellow Jew and watched out for him and protected him, he might have been able to prevent those who strayed from performing this sin. May we learn to take responsibility for our fellow Jews and for all Mankind with love and devotion to Hashem's ideals. ©2020 Rabbi D.S. Levin

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 JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"**A**nd how shall it be known that I and your people have found favor in your eyes if You are not going with us? And we shall be distinguished..." (Shmos 33:16) With the sin of the golden calf, in which a small group of people felt they needed an intermediary between them and G-d, the Jewish People all lost the close connection they had

with Hashem. He almost destroyed them but Moshe pleaded on their behalf and persuaded Hashem to spare them (which is the role of a Jewish leader.)

Hashem had stated that due to our stubbornness, He could not be in our midst lest He destroy us. Instead He would send an angel to lead us. Here, Moshe was explaining how important it was for Hashem to be with us. When he said, "How shall it be known?" the Ramban comments that when we left Egypt, it was clear that Hashem was protecting us and doing all these miracles for us out of love. Even forty years later, when Yehoshua sent spies to Jericho, Rachav told them that people were terrified of them because of this. If Hashem did not remain with Klal Yisrael as they entered the land of Canaan, people would say that we captured it like in any other wars.

Moshe also asked that we be distinguishable from all other nations and in the next posuk Hashem responds that He will agree to this. No longer would His Shechina, His holy countenance, rest on any nation but ours. Even when Bilaam prophesied, it was not from connection to the Shechina.

There is a similar concept earlier in the Parsha. Moshe is commanded to anoint the various vessels of the Mishkan, as well as Aharon and his sons. This anointing would serve to make them all holy and sanctified. The posuk concludes that once a vessel has been consecrated, anything that touches it will become sanctified as well.

Rashi qualifies this. He says that something which belongs in the vessel, such as oil or flour, will become sanctified. Something that does not belong there, such as pebbles for instance, will not become holy. This is similar to the idea that Hashem will sanctify the Jewish People with His presence but would not do the same for other nations.

Even if they do have some interaction with Hashem, as Bilaam did, it will not be the same relationship as ours. With that said, it behooves us to recognize that we, like the oil or flour in the holy vessel, are supposed to be in Hashem's presence! We are MADE to become holy and it is a distinction that our nation alone can claim.

Hashem is holy and His Torah is holy. The mission for us, then, is to live up to the holiness we can achieve and not to, Heaven forbid, contaminate or waste the opportunity. When Hashem said we were a stiff-necked people with whom He could not travel, Moshe begged Him to do so anyway. Why did Hashem acquiesce? The Vilna Gaon explains that it was because the very stubbornness which makes us stick to our sins is what will enable us to maintain our purity and resolve when we repent and become holier people.

Looking for a storage warehouse for the army's supplies, a contingent of government officials chose the local Shul in Raminov. The heads of the Kehila ran to R' Mendele for guidance.

One person suggested that when they told the officials that the roof leaks and all their supplies would be ruined, they would change their minds. All agreed that this seemed a good plan.

R' Mendele, however, heard this and said they were sorely mistaken. In fact, he said, it was because of the leaky roof that this decree befell them. "If we don't actively take care of our own Shul, and degrade its honor by allowing the roof to leak, what do you expect of the non-Jews? Go fix the roof right away and everything will be alright." And so it was. © 2020 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Consumer Oriented

In one of the most difficult portions of the Torah, and chapters in our history, this week the Children of Israel make a Golden Calf and serve it. The act warrants their annihilation, and Hashem threatens Moshe with just that, adding that He is ready to build a nation from Moshe himself. "Hashem said to Moses, 'I have seen this people, and behold! it is a stiff-necked people: And now, desist from Me. Let My anger flare up against them, and I shall annihilate them, and I shall make you a great nation.'" (Exodus 32:9-10) But Moshe beseeches Hashem to forgive the nation for the calamitous sin of the Golden Calf, and Hashem acquiesces, offering an historic formula which is the precursor to every prayer of penitence. Hashem entails the supplication that is known as "the thirteen attributes of Hashem."

They include the words "Hashem, Hashem, G-d, Compassionate and Gracious, Slow to Anger, and Abundant in Kindness and Truth..." (Exodus 34:6-7).

Those powerful, deep, and concise statements that embody anthropomorphic qualities to an Omnipotent Creator contain significant meaning far beyond mortal comprehension.

What is astonishing is that almost immediately after Hashem forgives the people, Moshe beseeches Hashem to accompany them for the precise reason that Hashem was angered by them!

"If I have now found favor in Your eyes, my L-rd, let my L-rd go among us -- for it is a stiff-necked people, and You shall forgive our iniquity and error, and make us Your heritage." (Exodus 34:9) Was it not stiffneckedness that caused Hashem to want to annihilate them?

It had become a nuisance for most of those who strolled in the Swiss forest in the early 1950s. Hikers would come home and spend time removing the sticky cockleburs that had fastened to their clothing. But it was something that their forebears had lived with for years and another hindrance that nature had put in their way.

But George de Mestral did not look at the cockleburs that had snagged his sweater as a

nuisance. In fact, he realized that Divine genius played a vital role in their physiology.

Returning home after a walk one afternoon, he took out a microscope to get a better look at Hashem's prodigy. When he realized that the burs were actually comprised of thousands of natural hooks that would engage countless loops he realized that this was no nuisance of nature. Their sticky nature was actually the way that these seed pods were transported to find new breeding grounds. They would latch themselves to the fur of animals and be transported.

De Mestral realized that he could carry this wisdom to the more mundane world. And so with a system of a fuzzy felt and crocheted hooks, he combined more than just two divergent materials. He also combined two words, velvet and crochet, now employed in the lexicon and inventory of both schoolchildren and rocket-scientists. He invented, or perhaps introduced us to, Velcro®.

The Dubno Maggid explains that after Moshe heard the wondrous quality of Unrestricted Compassion, he realized that Hashem was actually offering a product that was well-tailored to our mortal needs. It was in fact Moshe's biggest argument for Hashem to accompany His nation.

"Angels don't need those attributes! It is the fallible human who needs that ever-lasting, unceasing mercy! It is only because we are stiff-necked that we need Your unending kindness!"

That is why after Moshe heard Hashem's argument, followed by His attributes, he presented his plea for Divine accompaniment. Often, we do not take advantage of the great goodness of Hashem. We leave His attributes in heaven, distancing our mundane needs from His all-powerful abilities. Moshe teaches us that it is distinctly our capriciousness and mortality that needs His omnipotence. We must realize that the attributes of Hashem are specifically assigned to sustain His nation. And all we have to do is utilize that unceasing, unyielding, and everlasting product to our advantage. © 2020 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & torah.org

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

This week's Haftorah, read in conjunction with Parshas Parah, describes the Jewish people's ultimate state of purity. The prophet Yechezkel says in the name of Hashem, "And I will sprinkle upon you pure waters which will purify you; from all your impurities and repulsiveness I shall purify you." The prophet is referring to our final stages of purification wherein we will be completely cleansed from all sin. He likens this experience to that of one who is purified from ritual uncleanness. However, it is worthwhile to note the specific process which is chosen. Instead of comparing our purification to the traditional immersion process the prophet compares our final stages to the

sprinkling of the holy waters. This elaborate and specific procedure was reserved for one who came in contact with a corpse. This contact produced a severe state of ritual uncleanness which required a unique purification procedure. This symbolism suggests a corollary between our association with sin and our association with death. Our ultimate state of purity will apparently be likened to the removal of the ritual effects of death.

In order to properly understand this relationship let us examine for a moment the nature of this unique purification process. In the special Torah reading for Parshas Parah, we learn about the sacrificial service of the red heifer. Its complex conditions and regulations indicate the uniqueness of this sacrifice. After slaughtering the heifer and sprinkling its blood outside the Bais Hamikdash, the heifer was completely burned. Its ashes were then mixed with spring water and a ritual mixture was produced. This mixture which was then sprinkled on the person who came in contact with the corpse ritually cleansed him from his impurity. Our Chazal (Sages; see Rashi Bamidbar 19:2 II) comment on the unusual nature of this sacrifice and explain that it served as an atonement for the Jewish nation's sin of the golden calf. They reveal that the effects of that sin are ongoing and a constant atonement is necessary. It stands to reason from this that the ritual impurity of death is interrelated with the spiritual impurity caused by the sin of the golden calf. For as we see, before one can be purified from contact with death he must undergo spiritual atonement for the sin of the golden calf. The spiritual impact of that sin is apparently so powerful that it produces an ongoing effect on the ritual purity status of every Jew.

This intriguing phenomenon can be understood through the profound insights of Chazal in Mesichta Avoda Zara (5a). The Talmud teaches us that the Jewish people once transcended the curse of mortality and qualified to be eternal physical beings. Their display of readiness to accept and follow the will of Hashem was so sincere and intense that they actually transformed their physical bodies into semi spiritual entities. Even their bodies cooperated with their spiritual drives and contributed to their perfect service of Hashem. However, the Talmud informs us that this experience was unfortunately short-lived. After forty days of spirituality the Jews succumbed to fear and anxiety. They responded to the devastating notion that their leader Moshe Rabbeinu could have permanently departed from them and they desperately sought some new approach to life. This panic resulted in the shameful sin of the golden calf. In retrospect it was that serious plunge which returned the curse of mortality to the Jewish people. From that point and onward the body returned to its total physical entity, bearing the shame of sin. It possessed, once again all of the earthly urges and cravings which lure one away from fulfilling

the will of Hashem.

We now return to the ritual ashes and the sacrifice of the red heifer. The Sefer Hachinuch (Mitzva 263) explains the origin of the ritual uncleanness of death. When one passes away, the soul leaves and the body remains a total physical entity. Now, barren of any association with spirituality the body projects a complete image of vanity. It represents earthly urges and desires and is associated with all the sinful practices of its lifetime. This identity and association stems back to the shameful plunge of the golden calf. It was then that the Jewish body reverted back to its present physical state, introducing ritual impurity after death. Atonement from this sin became a prerequisite for ritual purity. One must first recognize the severe repercussions of straying from Hashem, seeking alternate approaches to life. Only after detaching himself from this deep-rooted urge can he qualify to be cleansed from the ritual impurity caused by such association. The waters of the red heifer can now detach him from the impurities of the physical body and restore him to the proper appreciation for his true entity, body and soul.

We have now discovered the direct corollary between the purification from the effects of death and our ultimate state of purity. The prophet describes our ultimate purity in the following words. "And I shall give you a new heart and I will place a new spirit in your midst and I'll remove the stone heart from your flesh." Ramchal in Daas Tvunos (3:40) explains that these words refer to the lifting of the curse of mortality. The level of spirituality will be so uplifting that the body will be elevated to a semi state of spirituality. Even our physical urges and cravings will be directed to Hashem and no trace of sin will remain. The ritual waters which originally detached us from our association with death and the urges of sin will ultimately remove the entire curse of death from amongst us. Our acceptance of the will of Hashem will be so sincere and intense that even our physical bodies will only crave to serve Hashem. May we merit to witness this very soon. © 2020 Rabbi D. Siegel & torah.org

