

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

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

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

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

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

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

Yet there is another difference between them, in the opposite direction. An "awakening from above" may change nature, but it does not, in and of itself, change human nature. In it, no human effort has been expended. Those to whom it happens are passive. While it lasts, it is overwhelming; but only while it lasts. Thereafter,

people revert to what they were. An "awakening from below", by contrast, leaves a permanent mark.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The difference between them was that the sanctity of Mount Sinai was momentary, while that of the tabernacle was permanent (at least, until the Temple was built, centuries later). The revelation at Sinai was an "awakening from above". It was initiated by God. So overwhelming was it that the people said to Moses, "Let

God not speak to us any more, for if He does, we will die" (20:16). By contrast, the tabernacle involved human labour. The Israelites made it; they prepared the structured space the Divine presence would eventually fill. Forty days after the revelation at Sinai, the Israelites made a Golden Calf. But after constructing the sanctuary they made no more idols -- at least until they entered the land. That is the difference between the things that are done for us and the things we have a share in doing ourselves. The former change us for a moment, the latter for a lifetime.

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

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

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

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

In Judaism, the natural is greater than the supernatural in the sense that an "awakening from below" is more powerful in transforming us, and longer-lasting in its effects, than is an "awakening from above." That was why the second tablets survived intact while the first did not. Divine intervention changes nature, but it is human initiative -- our approach to God -- that changes us. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt"l ©2026 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"**G**od told Moses to speak to the Israelites and to say unto them, 'But my Sabbaths shall you observe, for it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the Lord who sanctifies you.'" (Exodus 31:13) What is the repetition of the command to observe Shabbat doing in the midst of the description of the Tabernacle in the portion of Ki Tisa? For the last six biblical chapters -- ever since the start of Teruma -- we've been dealing with the elaborate and complex details of the construction and sacred appurtenances of the Tabernacle. Then, seemingly apropos of nothing, the Torah suddenly switches topics: "But my Sabbaths shall you observe." What is the connection?

One reason may be the overwhelming amount of exacting labor that the Tabernacle's construction required, as described in the preceding portions. Undoubtedly, it was important to finish the task as soon as possible, providing a sanctuary which would connect the Israelites to their parent in heaven. We are also aware of how builders of massive and important construction projects will exert all human effort to finish a project, even going full steam ahead seven days a week if necessary. Shabbat may be holy, but so is the Tabernacle. What about working on Shabbat to get the Tabernacle built as soon as possible, thereby allowing the divine service to actually begin? Is it not possible to justify such activity? After all, it is all for the sake of God, for the enhancement of the holy! According to Rashi, the verses dealing with Shabbat in this portion specifically come to forestall such an analysis. Commenting on the verses quoted above, Rashi writes: "Even though you may be anxious and alert to do the work promptly,

Shabbat must not be pushed aside for its account.” (Rashi on Exodus 31:13)

Rashi points out that the word “akh” (but) comes to serve as a limitation, to exclude something. “The terms “rak” and “akh” are always limitations, to exclude [lema’et] Shabbat from the construction of the Tabernacle” (Ex. 31:13, Rashi ad loc.). Hence the Torah is emphasizing that despite the best of intentions, no work on the Tabernacle can take place on Shabbat!

Nahmanides disagrees sharply with Rashi’s usage of the exegetical laws of limitations. Indeed, according to biblical rules of hermeneutics, the result should be the exact opposite of what Rashi claims: not excluding the Tabernacle from work on Shabbat, but rather excluding the usual prohibitions from Shabbat, and allowing the Tabernacle to be constructed even on Shabbat. Ordinarily, if I speak of an all-inclusive concept, the exception will tell me that a specific circumstance falls out- side the purview of the usual application of that system. For example, the Torah commands that on Yom Kippur everyone fast. There is an exclusion or limitation pertaining to Yom Kippur regarding people who are seriously ill; the usual prohibitions of eating and drinking on that day do not apply to them. Similarly, if the akh is a Shabbat exclusion or limitation referring to the Tabernacle, it should mean that the construction of the Tabernacle is excluded from the usual Shabbat prohibitions, and hence it ought to be permitted to construct the Tabernacle on Shabbat. To be sure, Nahmanides agrees with Rashi’s halakhic conclusion that work on the Tabernacle does not abrogate Shabbat. He merely disagrees about the way Rashi derives that halakha. Nahmanides simply includes the Tabernacle in all of the usual Shabbat prohibitions, and refuses to see it as any form of exception to the general Shabbat rules. He must therefore use the word “akh” to teach something else – to refer to another situation (other than the construction of the Sanctuary) which is indeed excluded from the usual Shabbat prohibitions. For Nahmanides, this is the commandment of saving a human life – piku’ach nefesh. Akh comes to tell us that we must waive all Shabbat prohibitions in order to save a human life, that the preservation of life is excluded from the ordinary applications of Shabbat observance.

Although Rashi and Nahmanides interpret the function of the word “akh” differently, Rashi excluding Shabbat from the work of the Tabernacle, and Nahmanides excluding Shabbat when it poses a danger to human life, I would like to suggest that if we combine both of these interpretations, we arrive at a fundamental and majestic truth about Judaism. In looking at Shabbat in relation to the Tabernacle, Rashi’s akh reminds us that although the holiest and most exalted physical endeavor in this world may be the building of the Tabernacle, nevertheless, akh et shabtotai tishmoru – You must still observe my Sabbaths; Shabbat day is holier than the Tabernacle. Quite simply, the sanctity of time is greater

than the sanctity of space. One of the reasons for this is that a sanctuary in time (to use Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel’s beautiful metaphor for Shabbat) can never be destroyed by human weapons, whereas our sanctuary in space (the Holy Temple) has tragically been destroyed twice. Perhaps that is the deepest reason why Jews have man- aged to live without their Temple, but we could never have survived as a people without Shabbat.

Nahmanides goes one step further. He knows that Shabbat is holier than the Tabernacle, but he stresses a sanctity greater than both a sanctuary in space and a sanctuary in time, namely, the sanctity of the human being, the sanctity of human life created in the divine image. This highest sanctity of all is even alluded to in our verse, which begins with “But my Sabbaths shall you observe [akh et shabtotai tishmoru]” and ends with “For it is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the Lord who sanctifies you” (Ex. 31:13). How will we know this? On one level, when we observe Shabbat rest, it is as a testimony to the divine creation of the universe. But on a deeper level, when we set aside our Shabbat rest in order to preserve a human life, we truly understand the exalted nature of the human being – precisely because humans were created in the image of the divine. On Shabbat I can transgress all the laws in order to save a single human being. In effect, God is saying that the holiest of all his creations, more than any building or any day, is the human being! This fundamental teaching, that in the pyramid of the sacred we advance upwards from sanctity of space to sanctity of time to sanctity of human being, is a principle we tend to overlook in the midst of all our other holy pursuits. Even the most punctiliously observant often seem oblivious to the sacred character of every single individual, Jew or gentile. And the truth is that in the final analysis, it is the human being who either endows or removes sanctity from space as well as from time!

In the area of space, this truth is self-evident. Human beings create or desecrate a home, an office, a synagogue, a Temple – depending on what they do within them. This is even true of ritual objects, which are material articles in space. It is even true of a Torah scroll: The Talmud tells us (Shabbat 116a) that a Torah scroll written by a heretic (with improper intent) is to be burnt.

This is the case, even if that particular scroll appears on the surface to have letter-perfect script and the highest quality parchment. And I would submit that the same principle obtains to the sanctity of time.

Two great Hassidic rebbes, the Voorker and the Kotzker, were once discussing holiness. The Voorker compared the commandment of living in a sukka (booth) with that of taking the “four species” during the Sukkot festival. According to him, the sukka was the more sacred command because, while the command of the four species enables one to hold or encompass holiness, in the sukka it is holiness which holds or encompasses

the individual. The Kotzker responded that from this perspective, Shabbat remains the holiest of all commandments. After all, a person can always walk out of the sukka, but he or she can never walk out of the Shabbat!

But I respectfully disagree; after all, does not an individual walk out of the Shabbat, if they leave the Shabbat table to go to a cinema, or opt not to have a Shabbat meal with candlelight, Kiddush and zemirot, or interrupt the Shabbat meal with angry words or slanderous gossip!? Hence, the highest sanctity of all must still be the human being, who even has this ability to determine the sanctity of time.

Each and every Shabbat we must confront this profound truth of our tradition, that the human being stands at the apex of the sacred. Shabbat teaches – as those of us who have seen medical emergency volunteers with walkie-talkies leaving Shabbat prayers to get into an ambulance and respond to an emergency can testify – that saving a life on Shabbat is not a violation of the law, but is indeed the highest fulfillment of the Shabbat laws and the Torah ideal. *The above article appears in Rabbi Riskin's book Shemot: Defining a Nation, part of his Torah Lights series of commentaries on the weekly parsha, published by Maggid and available for purchase at bit.ly/RiskinShemot. © 2026 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN ZT"l

Wein Online

Though the main topic of this week's parsha is certainly the fateful and nearly fatal incident of the Golden Calf, the opening subject of the parsha also bears study and insight. We see throughout the Torah that there is an emphasis placed on counting the numbers of Jews that left Egypt, those that existed in the Sinai desert and finally, those that arrived in the Land of Israel.

In this week's parsha the Torah provides us with the "Jewish" way of counting the people of Israel. We do not count people directly but rather indirectly, as is the case of the half-shekel tax that was imposed by Divine commandment at the beginning of this week's parsha. The number of Jews present and accounted for was arrived at by counting the number of half-shekels that were collected.

We also see later in Jewish history, at the time of King Saul, when he wanted to conduct a census of Israel he did so by having everyone donate a sheep. He then counted the sheep, again not counting the people directly. Even when we count the ten people necessary for a prayer quorum we do not count them directly but rather only by counting the number of words that appear in a certain verse in the Bible.

The Talmud teaches us that King David was found guilty and punished for counting the people directly during his reign. Why is the Torah so interested

in the numbers of Jewish population? And why is the Torah so loath to count people in a direct manner?

Even today, the census here in Israel, unlike the ones I remember in the United States, is taken indirectly and no one has ever appeared at my door here in Jerusalem to count how many people live in our home. Apparently this is the "Jewish" way of determining population numbers, always in an indirect fashion.

I think that the lesson here is fairly obvious. No two people are alike and each one is really number one by himself or herself. There is no number two because there is no one else like number one. The uniqueness of every individual is one of the axioms of Jewish life and thought. While people may appear to be similar they are never identical.

Fingerprints and DNA testify to this phenomenon in the physical world. In the spiritual and personal world of our souls, personalities, creativity and accomplishments are unique to each one of us. We are all different for so have we been created by the Lord.

The Torah treats every individual as special and because of this, places a emphasis on the numbers of the Jewish people. Look and see how many different people exist within us and yet somehow we are all connected and part of the great whole that is the people of Israel! By counting people directly we somehow minimize their individual qualities and uniqueness.

The Torah, which is interested always in promoting individuality and creativity, counts us many times to indicate our importance, but never directly. The Talmud teaches us that the greatness of God can be seen in the fact that all human beings are stamped from the same die and yet no two are alike.

The Torah wishes us to understand and appreciate this lesson and transmit it to our lives through our actions and attitudes, our behavior and sensitivities. By so doing we "raise our heads" – *ki tisa et rosh bnei yisrael* - and become worthy of the Lord counting us amongst the eternal people of Israel. © 2014 Rabbi B. Wein zt"l - 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

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Prosecutor and Defender

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

The principle of "*Ein kategor na'aseh sanegor*" ("A prosecutor cannot become a defender") means that items which contributed to Jews sinning cannot be used as part of the divine service to bring the Jews atonement. Thus, the Rosh Hashanah *shofar* is not made from the horn of a cow, because it brings to mind the sin of the Golden Calf. However, according to the Talmud, this principle is limited to articles that were used for the divine service in the Temple (such as a *shofar*, which was blown there daily). Thus, the *Parah Adumah*

(Red Heifer) could be used to atone for the sin of the Golden Calf, since the ceremony involving it took place outside the Temple.

If this is correct, why can't a *Kohen* who committed murder recite the priestly blessing? *Tosafot* (*Yevamot 7a*) suggests that the reason he is excluded is "*Ein kategor na'aseh sanegor.*" But this blessing is recited outside the Temple, so he should be permitted to do so! It would seem that outside the Temple, what is permitted for the divine service is the use of an object (such as gold or a cow's horn) even though it might bring to mind a certain sin. In contrast, the sinner himself (such as a *Kohen* who committed murder) may not perform the divine service, even outside the Temple.

If this is correct, how do we explain the command to Aharon to take a calf during the eight days of the dedication of the Tabernacle (*Vayikra 9:2*)? Rashi answers that this was done to indicate that G-d had forgiven the Jewish people for the sin of the Golden Calf. But based on what we just said, a calf itself should not have been allowed! It would seem that when asking forgiveness for a specific sin, the chance of true repentance increases when the very item which was used to commit the sin is used for atonement. This is why the gold donated to make the Tabernacle was able to atone for the gold which people had enthusiastically donated to make the Golden Calf. © 2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Aharon's Dilemma

There are many different topics found in Parashat Ki Tisa, from the Machazit HaShekel, bringing to the Temple a half-shekel from each adult male for Temple sacrifices, to the Golden Calf, the most grievous sin of the Jewish Nation, to the Thirteen Names (Attributes) of Hashem. We have discussed the Golden Calf in previous years, but we have not discussed the unique and dangerous role that Aharon, the Chief Priest, played.

"The people saw that Moshe delayed in descending the mountain, and the people gathered around Aharon and said to him, 'Rise up, make for us gods who will go before us, for this Moshe, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt – we do not know what became of him!' Aharon said to them, 'Remove the golden rings that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.' The entire people unburdened themselves of the golden rings that were in their ears, and brought them to Aharon. He took it from their hands and bound it in a scarf, and made it into a molten calf; then they said, 'These are your gods, O Yisrael, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.' Aharon saw and built an altar before him; Aharon called out and said, 'A festival to Hashem tomorrow!' They arose early the next day and offered up olah-offerings and brought peace-offerings; the people sat to eat and

drink, and they got up to sport." After Moshe came down from the mountain and burned the Golden Calf and ground it until it was powder, and then spread it upon the water, and made the B'nei Yisrael drink from it, he confronted Aharon: "Moshe said to Aharon, 'What did this nation do to you that you brought a great sin upon it?' Aharon said, 'Let not my master's anger burn; you are aware that the nation is in a bad state.'"

The Ramban explains that the biggest misunderstanding in the first sentence which must be clear before judging the people is the key word "Elokim." Often this word can mean gods or a name of Hashem, but it can also mean judges or leaders. The Ramban suggests that the people did not seek gods to lead them, because it would seem to be foolish; Moshe was a leader not a god, so when he delayed and was presumed dead, they wanted leaders to guide them, not gods. The Ramban believes that the rebels were not seeking to replace Hashem, only to replace Moshe. Though this may have been their original desire, once the Golden Calf was made, they looked upon it as a god and worshipped it.

There is a problem with the Ramban's interpretation of events because of a Midrash which is quoted by ibn Ezra. The Midrash tells us that Moshe had instructed the people to consult with Aharon and Chur, Miriam's son and the nephew of Moshe and Aharon, should a problem occur while Moshe was on Har Sinai. This was to be a forty-day period, during which Moshe learned all the intricacies and clarifications of the Torah which later became known as the Oral Law. From the fact that the rebels did not meet with Chur, the Midrash explains that the people had killed Chur when he tried to stop them. This presents a serious problem for the Ramban, for if the rebellion was only to appoint a leader, it is unlikely that Chur would have challenged them with his life at stake.

HaRav Shmshon Raphael Hirsch explains that the rebels did believe that they needed gods to lead them, not men. "They saw in Moshe, not the instrument of Hashem's Will, chosen and sent by the completely free initiative of Hashem, but a human being who, by himself, had surpassed ordinary human nature and become god-like." They believed that Moshe had influence on Hashem and could make Him free the people from Egypt. It was not the Torah that offered them "Rules of Life," but for them "it was the demigod nature of the man, Moshe, which was the necessary link for their connection with Hashem." Hirsch continues, "They had not yet completely and clearly absorbed the Jewish conception that Man has free access directly to Hashem, without the necessity of any intermediary, and that the one and only necessary condition is acting in obedience to the behests of Hashem."

Ibn Ezra also helps us to understand Aharon's position. Aharon's assumption that the rebels wished to replace Hashem also, follows upon the death of his

nephew. Aharon saw desperation in their actions, and he understood that, if they killed Chur for refusing them, they would also kill him. One might view Aharon's actions as concern for his own life, but that would be a misinterpretation. Aharon did not fear death; he had served Hashem well and believed that his reward after death would not be diminished. What Aharon feared was that Hashem would not forgive the rebels together with the B'nei Yisrael who did not protest against them. Aharon was afraid that his murder would lead to the destruction of the Jewish People. He could tolerate his own death, but he would never permit himself to be a part of that destruction.

If we look at Aharon's actions, we can see what the Rabbis explain were his attempts to stall the people until Moshe would arrive. (Moshe only counted full days in his forty-day count. He went up on the mountain after part of the day had already passed. He was meant to arrive the next day, in line with his count.) "Aharon said to them, 'Remove the golden rings that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.'" The Ohr HaChaim describes the exactness of Aharon's words. It is as if Aharon was saying, "You take them, your wives and children may not bring them; they must be gold, not silver; they must be from their ears, not noses or bracelets." All of this would take time, it would require that they not send the gold back with a messenger, nor could they have one person gather it from them to deliver a full bundle. The men might feel that it was too much of a burden to walk so far with so few earrings which contained so little gold. The Kli Yakar suggests that the children and the wives would also be reluctant to give up their jewelry, and there would be arguments and even fights to prevent the husbands from taking their gold.

We can understand the pressures that forced Aharon to act against the command of Hashem. If we look upon his actions as governed by fear of his own death, we lose faith in Aharon as a leader. If we understand that he acted to save the people by stalling and preventing their sinning further, we comprehend his reasoning. Whether he was right or wrong is a matter of debate, but he chose, knowing the consequences. We must ask ourselves whether we have the strength to choose correctly on issues with serious consequences as he did. © 2026 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI YITZCHAK ZWEIG

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

This past week, as I watched part of the president's State of the Union address, it was hard to ignore the conspicuous divisions within our political parties. I again considered how important it is to maintain an objective perspective in one's life, and to internalize the reality that much of what we perceive is predicated on who we are and our prior life experiences.

Even more importantly, we must be mindful that

there are often other valid perspectives as well.

Of course, this can be very difficult to put into practice, a concept which is illustrated by the following story.

A young couple moved into a new neighborhood and began to settle into their home. The next morning, while they were enjoying their morning coffee at the kitchen table, the young woman saw her neighbor hanging her freshly laundered wash outside to dry.

She could not help commenting; "That laundry is not very clean. Perhaps her washing machine is malfunctioning. Another possibility is that she doesn't even know how to wash correctly or maybe she needs better laundry detergent." Her husband looked on, remaining silent.

For the next few days, every time her neighbor hung her wash out to dry the young woman made similar remarks. A week later, the woman was surprised to see a nice clean wash on the line and said to her husband, "Wow, either she's using better detergent or she's finally learned how to wash correctly. I wonder who taught her?"

The husband smiled and replied, "I got up early this morning and cleaned our windows." What we perceive when watching others depends on the clarity of the lens through which we are looking. Often our view is clouded by jealousy, anger, disappointment, and similar frustrations. We often pass judgement on others and events without having a complete grasp of all the relevant facts.

Additionally, let's face it, nobody like the feeling of being judged. I will go out on a limb here and state that many (if not most) of people's insecurities stem from their perception that other people are constantly judging them. Perhaps this is why so many people are obsessed with controlling the narrative of that perception, through social media and other shallow activities that portray them in a certain light.

It is also no wonder that some of the most insecure people are those who are constantly "living in a fishbowl" such as those in the entertainment industry. It's one of life's great paradoxes; how people yearn so dearly for specific achievements (e.g. fame) but yet are so miserable when they get exactly what they wanted and worked so hard to accomplish.

But everyone, at some level, is concerned with someone else passing judgements on our behavior.

Consider what happens when you're driving down the highway and you spot a state trooper suddenly driving behind you. Immediately, your heart leaps into your throat. Your eyes dart to your dashboard as you frantically check your speed. You temporarily become a model driver -- dutifully using your turn signal to get into another lane while silently praying that the patrol officer is more interested in locating the nearest donut shop than pulling you over. It takes at least a few minutes after the trooper gets off at the exit before you begin to feel

comfortable speeding again.

When it comes to interpersonal relationships this is much more difficult to navigate. Many people are in relationships that force them to feel like they're walking on eggshells much of the time. Often it is a parent or spouse who is constantly critical and judging of every area of their lives. Consequently, this makes it very difficult to be around them because, after all, there is no easily accessible "off ramp." In such a situation daily living can become very stressful, even painful.

This week's Torah reading gives us a remarkable insight into the way the Almighty views our acts, and in particular, our transgressions. This is very significant because He is, of course, the final and "ultimate judge" of all of mankind.

This week's Torah portion contains the passage that relates the unfortunate incident of the sin of the "Golden Calf" -- in which the Israelites rejected a direct connection to the Almighty -- and the subsequent fall from grace as a result of that betrayal. Moses attempts to "mend the fences" as it were, and as a result of his urging the Almighty instructs Moses in the specific path for achieving repentance.

Part of the "forgiveness formula" that the Almighty relates to Moses is the method by which they are to ask forgiveness for their transgression -- this is known as the "Thirteen Attributes of Mercy." To this day, the "Thirteen Attributes of Mercy" comprise a key element of the liturgy on Yom Kippur -- the "Day of Repentance."

Quite remarkably, according to our sages the Almighty modeled this process for Moses; wrapping Himself in a "tallit -- prayer shawl" and proceeding to show Moses how it's done:

"And the Almighty passed by before him, and proclaimed, 'Hashem, Hashem [...]' (Exodus 34:6). The famous medieval commentator Rashi (ad loc) explains that the name "Hashem" refers to the Almighty's attribute of mercy. Rashi goes on to quote the Talmudic passage (Rosh Hashanah 17b), which explains why the Torah mentions the name Hashem twice in the verse: "The first name 'Hashem' refers to the attribute of mercy before a person sins, and the second one refers to the attribute of mercy after one sins."

The great sage of the 13th century known as Rabbeinu Asher (more commonly referred to by his acronym, "Rosh"), whose place is cemented in Jewish scholarship as one of the great pillars of Jewish law, wonders: "Why does one need the attribute of mercy before one sins? Rosh answers that it is most definitely necessary; 'because Hashem knows that a person is going to sin.'"

The 18th century scholar, Rabbi Chaim ibn Attar, in his epic work on the Bible known as Ohr HaChaim asks: "I do not understand this answer, for if the Almighty would punish someone before that person sins (knowing that a sin is going to be committed), then

what is the point of someone being born? God, with His omniscience, can hold every soul accountable to their future actions and judge them right away."

In other words, since God knows what a person is going to do, He can hold him responsible prior to him actually sinning. Consequently, God, in His benevolence, initiates the attribute of mercy and withholds punishment. But as the Ohr HaChaim points out, this approach presents a philosophical dilemma; what is the point of living if the Almighty has already begun judging you before you actually act?

A careful reading of Rosh's actual words can, perhaps, give us a different understanding of what he really means. The exact language of Rosh is, "Even though He knows that a person will eventually come to sin, He treats each person with the attribute of mercy."

Rosh never says anything about God's right to punish which, in turn, is being restrained by the attribute of mercy. Rosh seems to be saying something entirely different.

Very often when a person knows that he is being carefully evaluated or analyzed, such as on a first date or when a mother-in-law comes to visit, he is very uncomfortable and feels as though he is navigating landmines; every step has to be carefully considered before being made. This can be extremely stressful.

Unfortunately, many people also feel this way about their parents or spouse; "they are just waiting for me to make a mistake so that they can criticize me." This leads to a terrible family dynamic because there is an inherent discomfort in being around that person. No one likes to feel like they are being judged every second of every day.

Thus, Rosh is teaching us a fundamental lesson in God's benevolence. Of course, He judges us and there is accountability; that is a basic tenet of life. But He does so in order help us make decisions that are good for us and the world around us. The point of creation is for God to bestow good upon us; therefore, even when mistakes are made, God initiates His attribute of mercy to lessen or eliminate the punishment.

Just as one would feel more comfortable driving next to a state trooper with a "get out of jail free" card in one's pocket, so too the Almighty provides us assurance by letting us know that there is an attribute of mercy even before we sin. He displays His mercy first to demonstrate that He isn't looking to pounce on us for mistakes. The attribute of mercy before we sin is so that we understand that His ongoing benevolence is to support us, not knock us down.

Similarly, God is also demonstrating the delicate balance that we must strive to achieve in our own lives and within our families. Of course there must be accountability in a family, but we must always convey that it is coming from a place of love and concern for the other person. We must always support each other, even when one makes a mistake. Because what we truly want

from our loved ones is personal growth; at the end of the day, we care much more about what is done right than what is done wrong. © 2026 Rabbi Y. Zweig & shabbatshalom.org

RABBI MORDECHAI WILLIG

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

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

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

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

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

"David was not in a state to sin with Batsheva, as it is written (Tehilim 109:22) 'My heart, i.e. my evil inclination, has died within me. Am Yisrael were not in a state to sin by worshipping the Golden Calf, as it is

written (Devarim 5:26) 'Would that their hearts be theirs to fear Me and observe all My commandments forever.' Then why did they in fact sin? So that if an individual sins we tell him to learn from David; if the community sins we tell them to learn from Am Yisrael. Hashem decreed that they sin and repent to demonstrate that repentance is always possible." (Avodah Zarah 4b, 5a, Rashi).

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

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

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

Individually, we must emulate David; collectively we must emulate Am Yisrael who atoned for their grievous sin by building the Mishkan with their shekalim. By overcoming the yetzer hara and lifting our heads, may we speedily merit the coming of Mashiach ben David and the rebuilding of the Bais Hamikdash. © 2013 Rabbi M. Willig & The TorahWeb Foundation, Inc.

