

Geulas Yisrael # 92

Ki Tisa : Stubborn In All the Right Ways

Moshe Taragin

Up in heaven, Moshe Rabeinu hadn't yet heard the disastrous news. Preoccupied with the stony luchot he was unaware of the debacle unfolding below. The magic of matan Torah had faded and the commitments of נעשה ונשמע proved to be brittle. The nation of Hashem had quickly degenerated into idol worship and wild debauchery. Moshe was instructed to immediately descend the mountain to witness, firsthand, the moral decline of his nation. The luchot, etched with Hashem's letters, would not last long.

Subsequently, Hashem threatened to annihilate Am Yisrael and reboot history with Moshe as the founder of a new chosen nation. And then, shockingly, Hashem dubbed us with a seemingly derogatory term. In the past He had promised that we would be His valued treasure or עם סגולה and that we would be a nation of nobility. At this disgraceful moment of national dishonor Hashem disapprovingly framed us as an obstinate nation or an עם קשי עורף

Despite the dramatic miracles we had witnessed, and despite hearing the directly revealed voice of Hashem at Har Sinai, we were too headstrong to obey Hashem's very simple instructions. Most of the Torah had yet to be delivered, but we had already been warned three times not to indulge in pagan worship. Yet, the moment that Moshe tarried in his return from the mountain, our faith wilted and we shamelessly crafted a golden image, casting aside all our promises and all our faith.

Refusal to Listen

Our stubbornness would resurface hundreds of years later. In the desert, our stubbornness prompted the egel misadventure, but in the first Beit Hamikdash era our persistent recalcitrance doomed us to our first exile. During this extended period of moral decay Hashem sent numerous nevi'im to rebuke us hoping to correct our religious malfunction. Stoutly refusing to heed their sincere appeals, we also murdered and imprisoned some of these divine agents.

In the desert we had been too wooden-headed to follow simple instructions and to appreciate the grand miracles we had experienced. During the first Beit Hamikdash era we were too obstinate to follow the desperate pleas of Hashem's messengers who risked their lives to voice unpopular but necessary moral reprimand.

A flaw *and* a Blessing

By labelling us as קשי עורף Hashem wasn't just criticizing our failures, He was also describing our national character. Our obstinacy, though toxic when left unchecked, is also an invaluable asset of Jewish history. In his Sefer Hakuzari, Rabbi Yehuda Halevi asserted that Hashem chose our people because we displayed the two instinctive character traits absolutely vital for our historical calling: the ability to process supernatural information and our relentless stubbornness. Knowing that we would face a hostile world, opposed to our mission, Hashem selected a stout people capable of withstanding scorn and hostility. Appreciating the possibility and even likelihood of Jewish exile, Hashem selected a tough-necked people who wouldn't break under the pressures of history.

Courage at Sinai

From the very outset of Jewish history, even before our journey to exile, our audacity came in handy. What other nation would have the brazen nerve to stand beneath a fiery mountain, engaging with the booming voice of Hashem? As the Midrash comments אמר רב נחמן: תדע לך שהם קשים, כשבא הקב"ה ליתן להם את התורה מה כתיב בהם: "ויהי ביום השלישי כבד על ההר וקול שופר חזק מאד". This midrash doesn't bemoan our boldness but acknowledges that without this stoutheartedness we could not have withstood Sinai. Only a stiff-necked people could face the infernal fire atop the mountain and not turn their heads away.

Though critical of our obstinacy during the egel, Hashem Himself realized that only a brawny nation would be capable of accepting the divine will and of subscribing to a monotheistic religion. Nations of lesser bravery would have folded. During the egel our excessive stubbornness

sabotaged our relationship with Hashem. However, throughout history it would preserve that relationship.

Defying History

During the long night of Jewish exile it would take all of our considerable stubbornness just to survive a two thousand year onslaught. Had we not been קשי עורף it is unlikely we would have survived this dark tunnel of history. Or as the midrash reports אמר ר' יצחק בר רדיפא בשם ר' אמי: אתה - סבור שהוא לגנאי, ואינו אלא לשבחם: או יהודי או צלוב - Rebbi Yitzchak bar Radifa affirmed that our stubbornness emboldened us to face relentless religious pressure throughout our exile. Throughout our history we declared: "either we remain Jewish, or we are prepared to die".

In our early history our obstinacy produced the egel and wrecked the Mikdash. Later on, it preserved our religious faith amidst a maelstrom of religious persecution and unending pressure to abandon our ancient faith. Sometimes it pays to be stubborn in all the right ways.

20th century Obstinacy

In the 20th century we drew upon this national trait of tenacity in facing two unprecedented historical challenges. We endured a nightmarish holocaust which would have ripped the faith out of every other nation. To be honest, many Jews lost their faith in the Holocaust, and you must never judge a person before you walk a mile in their shoes. However, as a nation, we have rebuilt our communities, revitalized our Torah commitment, and steadfastly refused to buckle in the face of such unspeakable tragedy. Our stubborn commitment to Hashem allowed us to pass through the gates of hell and remain committed to our covenant and to our love for Hashem.

A few years afterwards we were beckoned home. We anticipated a hero's welcome, but, instead, were contested by an entire world. Once again, as our ancestor Avraham, we stood on one side of the river in opposition to an entire world which disclaimed our right to our ancient homeland. But we are too stubborn to simply walk away. Despite the improbable odds, we secured our state and turned her into a global superpower.

Evidently, Hashem chose well. More compliant people would have less stamina and less historical insolence. Sometimes our stubbornness creates havoc and dooms our moral behavior. However, for the past two thousand years it has been indispensable in helping us navigate the crosswinds of history and in resettling the plains of redemption.

So, the next time you are frustrated by a Jew and their stubborn behavior, just know that you are not alone. Hashem is also frustrated, sometimes. Jews are born stubborn and without this obstinance we would not be here today.

Now that we have returned home to conclude history, it is actually time to turn our necks around and look back at our history. When we were stuck in the mud of history it was difficult to make sense of the process. Now that we have emerged from the tunnel of history it is easier to appreciate the fearsome challenges of Jewish history, which brought our people such glory but also exacted such a heavy price.

Our stiff necks have navigated us home. Now that we are home look back at our stiff-necked refusal to look back. Turn your head around, and appreciate how stubborn we have been . Hashem chose well. We too stubborn to believe otherwise.