



# The Marcos and Adina Katz YUTORAH IN PRINT

## Ki Tisa 5784

### Insights Into Evil

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered February 29, 1964)

**T**he episode of the building of the egel ha-zahav, the golden calf, was probably the most traumatic experience in the life of our nation during its infancy. It left an indelible impression upon the psyche of the folk. Its echo can be detected throughout the life and the literature, the dreams and the liturgy, the destiny and the self-image of our people. It is essentially an inexplicable phenomenon: so soon after the revelation at Mt. Sinai, this same people dances about a golden calf! From dizzying heights to harrowing depths!

Perhaps most incomprehensible is the conduct of Aaron, the Kohen Gadol or High Priest of Israel, the brother of Moses. His role has challenged our commentators, stimulated our exegetes, and perplexed the ordinary reader of the Bible. I would like today not to apologize for Aaron (although his position can be satisfactorily explained under the circumstances), but to point to certain insights resulting from the Rabbis' comments on his role, comments which are especially relevant to some of the central issues of our times and with which I was especially confronted during my recent trip overseas.

We read this morning of the pressure brought by the Israelites upon Aaron to help them build the golden calf, and the stalling and procrastination by Aaron. Then comes the following significant verse: *va-yar Aharon va-yiven mizbeah lafanav va-yikra Aharon va-yomer hag la-Shem mahar*, "and Aaron saw and he built an altar before Him, and Aaron called out and he said there will be a festival to the Lord tomorrow." The plain meaning of this verse, according to Nachmanides, is that Aaron felt that the Israelites were determined to go ahead with their idolatry, and so he built an altar not to the idol, but lefanav, before Him, meaning God, and announced: *hag la-Shem mahar*, tomorrow we will have a celebration not for this idol, but for the Lord.

The verse is introduced by two words, however, which are quite challenging: *va-yar Aharon*, "and Aaron saw." What, exactly, did he see? The Rabbis, quoted by Rashi, tell us the following: *va-yar Aharon – she'hayah bo ruah hayyim she'ne'emar ke'tavnit shor okhel esev*, Aaron saw that the golden calf became infused with the breath of life, that it took on the appearance of an ox grazing in the pasture, feeding on the grass!

What did our Rabbis mean by that? They offer, I believe, a profound comment upon the nature of idolatry. They mean to outline for us three stages in any man's encounter with falsehood of any kind, ancient or modern.

The first stage is one of instinctive revulsion. The idol is immediately repulsive, the falsehood repugnant, the lie revolting. You can see right through the idol: it is illogical and irrational, as any half intelligent child knows. It is simply evil and stands condemned without any further thought.

But then there comes a second stage. As you become accustomed to it, as you study it, you learn that it may work – indeed it does work! You can live with it – and get away with it. Furthermore, it is not as absurd as you originally thought. They are compelling reasons for the existence of idolatry or any false doctrine – sociological, psychological, and historical reasons. A society can be built around it, and survive. There are reasons for idolatry which you must appreciate and understand.

If you stop at this stage of your development, then insight turns to tolerance, tolerance to sympathy, and sympathy to consent and acceptance. If you stop at this stage, then you bow the knee to a statue, you swallow the lie, you swear by falsehood. Then open-mindedness becomes closed-heartedness. What is required is to make the transition from the second to the third stage.

And the third stage is one of deepest insight: with all the understanding, with all the appreciation, with all the study

and awareness and broadmindedness, you recognize the perniciousness, all the ugliness and danger of avodah zarah, and you condemn idolatry as evil throughout.

*Va-yar Aharon*, “and Aaron saw” – this is the crucial point in the development of Aaron’s role. In the beginning, at the first stage, he no doubt believed that the whole plan was ridiculous. It was inconceivable that so soon after Sinai these same Israelites would bow to a mere statue. Give them their little golden statue, he probably told himself, and before long they will laugh at their own error and recognize the absurdity of their request.

But then – *va-yar Aharon*! He saw that the idol became alive: *she’hayah bo ruah hayyim she’ne’emar ke’tavnit shor okhel esev*! When he saw that his lifeless statue was becoming a living thing and that it assumed the attributes of life, he became frightened. He recognized that idolatry has, for its worshippers, certain clear aesthetic values; it can be beautiful, and convincing. Paganism possesses a gripping and imaginative mythology. The idol and its worship respond to man’s inner needs. You can build society and a civilization on such erroneous foundations. You can explain it – and even justify it!

Quickly, therefore, Aaron passed over to the third stage. Precisely at the point of his greatest understanding of the nature of the Israelite idolatry, he announced *hag la-Shem mahar*: no longer will I humor you or entertain your childish and fallacious but highly dangerous notions. Tomorrow we return to the worship of the Lord. *Va-yar Aharon*, the seeing of Aaron, is the instant of insight, the moment of truth.

Both the first and third stage agree in principle and in conclusion. The difference is, that the first is an instinctive black-and-white judgment, whereas the third is aware of the complexities, the subtleties, and the nuances of idolatry, but nevertheless condemns it as evil. In the third stage you recognize, so much more than you do during the second stage, that the idol only goes through motions, but does not really move. It appears to eat, but it is only a mirage: it is only the *tavnit* of a grazing ox. It is an apparition, not a reality – it contains only the *ruah hayyim*, the breath of life, but not *hayyim* itself. The third stage is greater than the first because it is the result of a more realistic appraisal; it is mature, and not guilty of oversimplification and uncomplicated naivete. Hence, it is also more convincing.

This development of insight into evil refers not only to ancient but to modern idolatries as well. Whether it is scientism or materialism, communism or even godless

humanism, the same three stages are required of man: the first, where you acknowledge immediately its absurdity and fallacy; the second, where you begin to appreciate the rationale and explanation; and the third, where, with a great deal more sophistication, you rise nevertheless to the moral heights of rejection. And the same development must apply to one of the most pernicious and idolatrous doctrines in the memory of living man, one that has caused untold grief to uncounted millions in our century: that of race superiority and race inferiority.

My recent trip to South Africa left me overwhelmed by the exhilarating beauty of the country, its great wealth, and the abundance of its natural resources. And yet I had the feeling that it is a tortured country, gripped by a tragic agony that dominates all thinking, underlies all conversations, and pervades all politics in this highly politicized community. The race problem is a pall that, in this land of magnificent climate and almost endless sunshine, darkens the heart of the country from one end to the other. The reaction to Apartheid, the doctrine of separate development of the races based upon the idea that the white race is superior to the non-white, must also go through these three stages.

The first stage is one that has aroused the conscience of mankind in our day and has excited the indignation of the great majority of the countries in the United Nations. There is no question that white supremacy is a foul doctrine and a malignant idolatry. Do we of the twentieth century even have to discuss it? Can there be any question about it? And so we condemn it no matter who are its adherents.

But – *va-yar Aharon*: we must arrive at a second stage far less naïve than the first. We Americans do no favor to the cause of equality if we close our eyes to some of the profound complexities and compelling justifications of this initially repugnant doctrine. And there are certain mitigating facts and factors. The visitor realizes that, despite certain unattractive restrictions, this is not a police state on the style of a Nazi or Communist or Fascist state. It has a proud and independent judiciary, and, despite intimidation, a fiercely free press.

The white man is not a colonialist in South Africa. He came to this country at about the same time the black man did from Central and East Africa – the middle of the 17th century. The Afrikaner especially regards this country completely as his home and has strong patriotic and nationalist feelings about it.

There is no obvious persecution of non-whites in this

country. The black are better off in South Africa than in the independent countries in the rest of the continent. Their economic status here, despite its inferiority to that of the white, is so much more attractive than the rest of Africa, that there is a tremendous illegal immigration of blacks from outside South Africa into the country. Proportionately more blacks and other non-whites are literate and own automobiles than in all the rest of Africa combined. And there never has been a lynching in South Africa.

Furthermore, we cannot compare the situation of the white man in America with that of the white man in South Africa. There, in South Africa, he is outnumbered by about four to one, constituting only three out of a population of fifteen million people. The white man in South Africa, in conversation with an American, will always point to the Congo as an example of what happens when independence is granted to the black man prematurely.

Finally, the idea of “one man, one vote” is, to tell the truth, ludicrous. Even the black nationalist privately admits that it is nothing more than a slogan. You cannot grant full votes to such peoples as are totally illiterate and still living in the most primitive of tribal conditions.

This second stage is one of sophistication and realism, and represents a pragmatic and open-minded appreciation of the hard facts of political and human realities.

And yet, having considered all this, having gone beyond an impulsive good-and-bad judgment of simple and naive solutions, there remains the burning moral issue which emerges from the mass of complexities and subtleties, and demands to be heard and seen and dealt with courageously. The moral issue is simply this: that a human being is a human being, and must be judged as such, and not primarily as black or white or colored or Asian!

When a black university professor is disenfranchised, though he is more literate not only than the white farmer but even than the white millionaire, because he is considered racially inferior – that is a modern form of *avodah zarah*.

When people are forcibly kept apart, when they are ghettoized without having been asked for their opinion – it is an evil which must be exposed.

When by legislation the Bantu or black man is kept to the kind of school system which cynically ensures permanently inferior academic standards, which makes certain that the African will never be able to Westernize, and which will keep apart forever not only the white man from black man, but also tribe from tribe by perpetuating

inter-tribal hostilities – that is cruel.

When South Africa today considers a bill in its Parliament according to which its urbanized Africans will be turned into a portable labor force so that people may be assigned to jobs merely at the whim of some minor official; when a capricious commissioner will be able to separate husband from wife and parents from children merely by saying so – that is inhuman!

When a society is so structured that there can never be communication between equals of different races, so that the only blacks most white people know are their domestic and hired help – that is rotten.

When a business success by a non-white is rewarded by shipping him off to a primitive tribal area called a Bantusan – that is pernicious.

When such policies are advanced by Nazis, Crypto-Nazis, and Nazi sympathizers entrenched in the government – the Minister of “Justice” was interned as a Nazi during the war! – and when the Government is riddled by people who hold membership in a secret society called a “Broederband,” a kind of legally tolerated Klu Klux Klan; when the government can detain any individual in prison for 90 days without giving any reason for its action and can repeat this 90-days detention up to three times without a trial – than all of it is vicious and immoral.

When *va-yar Aharon* that the evil has taken on a *ruah hayyim*, that it has the appearance *ke'tavnit shor oknel esev* – than we must proclaim an end to this kind of immorality, and insist that *hag la-Shem mahar* – that it is time to return to the verities of Torah and Godliness. We Jews have always proclaimed the existence of one God who created one Adam, teaching thereby that all the human race is descended from one father, and that hence no one family of colors is superior to any other.

It is true that we New Yorkers must not rush overzealously to condemn and criticize those in other states, let alone other lands. For (without in any way favoring or denying the claims of certain Negro groups which may or may not be justified) we certainly have not been blemishless ourselves; and our race problem is far less severe and threatening to us than that in South Africa. Nevertheless, wherever one man oppresses another and shuns him because of the color of his skin; wherever one man denies another the benefit of his own labor and the right to the bounty of God's nature because of race or religion, whether it be in Georgia or Johannesburg, in Corona or Capetown; it is idolatry, because it denies the fatherhood of God. It is an affront to Torah, because

Torah recognizes only one Apartheid: that between *tamei ve'tahor*, between pure and impure, good and evil, gentle and wild, malevolent and benevolent. We Jews who have suffered so from silence, from the silence of Popes and Presidents and organized populations during the time we needed help, when our families were slaughtered by the millions, we especially must not keep silent when an injustice is committed against others in our presence.

He who remains stationary in this second stage, he who becomes reconciled to evil merely because he understands the reason for its existence, is bound to suffer the consequences predicted by King David in the Psalms, which we recite during our Hallel. For David said concerning the worshipers of idols, and we may say it as well about one who abides and tolerates the existence of evil of idolatry or any other evil, that *ke'mohem yiheyu osehem*, "as they are so may be their makers." Just as the idol is only apparently alive, but not really so; just as he goes through motions but does not really move; so the idol worshiper and the one who remains silent in its presence is not really and truly alive in the moral sense.

*Peh la-hem ve'lo yedaberu* – for a person of this sort, like a mute statue, has a mouth – but does not speak. He fails to voice protest when conscience challenges him to do so.

*Einayim la-hem velo yiru*, they have eyes but see not – they see only what they please, not the squalor and

suffering produced by evil.

*Aznayim la-hem ve'lo yishma'u*, they have ears but they do not hear the cry of the oppressed.

They have noses but they prefer not to be aware of the stench of slums in which entire families are condemned to a life of poverty and ignorance. They have hands but do not raise them to assist a fellow man, and they have feet which refuse to march on to greater happiness for all humans. Such is not only the worshiper of idols, but also he who sees it and its injustice and remains silent: *lo yehegu bi'geronam*, the throat fails to utter protest and is suffocated in syllables of silence.

Is this third stage in the encounter with evil – whether of godlessness or race prejudice, of avarice or religious bigotry – to which the Torah wishes to lead us in the story of Aaron's role in the making of the *egel hazahav*. It tells us that in an ultimate sense every man must choose for himself between right or wrong not in some far-off world, but here and now, in the real, non-ideal, mundane world.

With Aaron we must rise to the occasion when we can proclaim publicly *hag la-Shem mahar* – tomorrow is a festival for the Lord. Or better yet, let us proclaim with Aaron's brother Moses, *la-tet alekhem ha-yom berakhah* – to prepare for everyone a blessing today – today, not tomorrow.

Read more at [www.yu.edu/about/lamm-heritage](http://www.yu.edu/about/lamm-heritage).

## It's the Thought that Counts

Rabbi Joshua (The Hoffer) Hoffman z"l

In this week's parsha, there is a command to observe the Shabbos, although the nation had already been commanded concerning Shabbos previously. Rashi explains that the command here is mentioned in juxtaposition with the completion of the details of the mishkan, and teaches us that the construction of the mishkan does not supersede the command to cease from work on Shabbos. A number of commentaries try to find additional reasons for this juxtaposition. However, as we will see, more significant than the juxtaposition of Shabbos to the construction of the mishkan is the juxtaposition of both these factors to the incident of the worship of the golden calf, which follows immediately after the command concerning Shabbos.

Rabbi Mordechai Gifter, zt"l, in his *Pirkei Torah*, in an essay entitled, "*Kedushas HaMakom VeKedushas HaZman*," or "Sanctity of Place and Sanctity of Time," asks, why would one think that construction of the mishkan would override

the sanctity of Shabbos, to the extent that the Torah needs to teach us that it does not? He answers that one may have thought that since the purpose of the mishkan is to bring God's presence among us, and Shabbos itself is a sign that God sanctifies us, it is more important to be engaged in building the mishkan, the seat of God's presence in this world, than in observing Shabbos which merely serves as a sign of His presence. Therefore, the Torah teaches us that Shabbos, which brings sanctity to time, is of more importance than the mishkan, which brings sanctity to place. Rav Gifter explains that the world exists because of its connection to God. The further one is distanced from his ultimate source, he continues, the further he is from sanctity. Place is more connected to the physical, and therefore more removed from sanctity than is time. Time, although created by God, is, in essence, something spiritual, removed from any connection to the physical. Shabbos represents that aspect of spirituality inherent in time, since Shabbos, as the



rabbis teach us, is akin to the world to come, and above any restricted notion of a particular point in time, just as God is. Thus, Shabbos overrides the building of the mishkan, because its sanctity is of a higher nature than that of the mishkan.

In light of this analysis, says Rabbi Gifter, we can understand why the section on Shabbos and the mishkan precedes the Torah's account of the sin of the golden calf. The people sinned because they thought Moshe delayed in returning from Mt. Sinai, and therefore thought he was not going to return at all. They made this mistake because they had failed to grasp the notion that spirituality is beyond time. Instead they descended to the world of the physical and judged matters based on physical considerations. Instead of bringing sanctity to the physical things of the world by connecting them to the timelessness of God, they did the opposite and placed artificial limitations onto the notion of time. It is for this reason, he adds, that in parshas Vayakheil, before the Torah records the actual construction of the mishkan, which was to atone for the sin of the eigel, it mentions the observance of Shabbos, in order to teach the nation that the sanctity of time must be recognized as a prelude to the sanctity of place represented by the mishkan, and that, indeed, it is the sanctity of time that they must inculcate into their service in the mishkan.

Perhaps we can add to Rabbi Gifter's comments that it is for this reason that Rashi, unlike the Ramban, explains that the command to build the mishkan, presented in Terumah and Tetzaveh, is out of chronological order. The command to build the mishkan came as an atonement for the eigel. Therefore, we would expect the Torah to record it after the sin of the eigel. However, says Rashi, the Torah is not written in chronological order. Rashi, however, does not explain what the purpose behind this change of order is. Based on Rav Gifter's analysis, we can explain that since the sin of the eigel represented a failure to have a sense of the timelessness of God, and the sanctity of the mishkan was to be based on that sense, the command to build the mishkan is recorded out of chronological order, to underline the factor of timelessness that the mishkan represents (for a somewhat different application of this idea, see Netvort to parshas Terumah, 5766, available at [Torahheights.com](http://Torahheights.com)).

The idea that, by sinning with the eigel, the nation was imposing physical dimensions upon the more spiritual notion of time, can help us understand the midrash that connects the beginning of this week's parsha to the sin of

the eigel. The parsha begins with the command, "When you will take a census of the children of Israel, according to their counts, every man shall give God an atonement for his soul when counting them... This is what they shall give ... half of the shekel ... You shall take the silver of the atonements from the children of Israel and give it for the work of the Tent of Meeting ; and it shall be a remembrance before God for the children of Israel, to atone for your souls" (Shemos 30:12-16). The rabbis tell us (*Yalkut Shimoni*, Terumah, 368) that this half shekel was given as an atonement for the sin of the eigel, and precedes the Torah's recording of that sin in order to provide a cure before the actual sickness. Rav Shlomo Yosef Zevin, in his *LeTorah VeLamoadim*, points out that the word for 'taking a census' - *sisa* - really means to elevate. The external difference between a man and an animal, he explains, is that a man holds his head erect, emphasizing his cerebral aspect, and indicating that it rules over his physical aspect, while an animal keeps its head down, emphasizing its physical dimension, which rules over its mental aspect. When the nation sinned, using its gold to construct an idol that it would bow down to, it emerged as a calf, an animal, thus emphasizing that their behavior was similar to that of an animal, whose physical dimension rules over it. Thus, when they were given a means of atonement, they were told to lift their heads up, thereby emphasizing their more spiritual aspect.

Rabbi Avrohom Aharon Yudelevitch, famed spiritual leader of the Eldridge Street shul on the lower east side of Manhattan in the early part of the twentieth century, writes, in his *Darash Av*, that of the two types of sins, those involved with the spiritual aspect of man, and those involved with the physical, those involved with the spiritual aspect are much more grave. The Talmud (Yoma 29a) tells us that thoughts of sin are worse than the sin itself. The Rambam, in his *Guide for the Perplexed* (3:8), explains that the spiritual aspect of man is of greater importance than his physical aspect, and, therefore, when man rebels against God through heretical thoughts, he is staining a more important part of himself than when he sins against God with his body. According to Rabbi Gifter's analysis of the sin of the eigel, as we have seen, the people placed more emphasis on the physical than on the spiritual, and this is why the sin of the eigel is considered so egregious. For this reason, as an atonement for that sin, the people needed to lift their heads up as they were counted to give the half-shekel, and elevate themselves above the more physical aspect of their existence.

## Looking Back at Hashem's Ways

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted by a talmid from the YUTorah shiur originally entitled, Parsha Bytes -Ki Tisa 5779, and presented at Gruss Kollel in Yerushalayim on February 21, 2019)

One of the more challenging episodes in this week's Parsha is Moshe asking to glimpse Hashem Yisborach. And Hashem responds: *Ve-ra'isa es Achorai, u-Fanai lo yeira'u*. You can see My back, but you cannot see My face. We're not exactly sure what this means since Hashem Yisborach does not exist in physical space, does not have a guf, and does not have a front or back. So there are many allegorical perushim given to this.

Chasam Sofer has a well-known perush that ties back to Moshe's original request—*Hodi'eni nah es derachecha*. He says to Hashem Yisborach: I want to know Your drachim. What does Moshe want to know about? So Chazal say in Gemora Brachos (daf 7a) that Moshe wants to understand how Hashem runs the world. Why is there *tsadik ve-tov lo*, *tsadik ve-ra lo*, and *rasha ve-tov lo*, *rasha ve-ra lo*. How come sometimes events in this world happen in a way that makes sense to us, and other times, we don't understand how Hashem runs the world? How does Hashem reply? *Ve-ra'isa es Achorai, u-Fanai lo yeira'u*. *Achorai* is looking backward. We often tend to look back. Have you ever heard people tell stories of their lives? Looking back at the last ten or twenty years, I see it was all for the best. Having a perspective of time, what I thought was a terrible thing was actually tremendous hashgacha pratis. It was actually all for the best. Of course, not everything becomes clear within ten or twenty years—or even in our one-hundred-and-twenty-year lifetime. Sometimes, we need to look back a thousand years or two. Other times, you must wait till the end of history. And then we can look back and see how everything was for the best. We believe that, ultimately, everything Hashem does is correct. *Ha-Tzur tamim po'alo, ki chol drachav mishpat, Kel Emunah ve-ein ovel, Tzadik ve-Yashar hu*. But, says Chasam Sofer: *Ve-ra'isa es Achorai*—in hindsight, you can always see that everything makes sense. But in the moment, when it's *be-fanecha*, you can't expect to understand. We're not Hashem, and therefore, by definition, we're not going to understand His ways. We must have emunah that everything somehow makes sense in the end.

The Minchas Asher makes a very clever connection. Chazal describe Hashem Yisborach discussing all these very complicated inyanim with Moshe Rabbeinu on top of Har Sinai. Moshe wants to see Rabbi Akiva, who will darshen even the decorative crowns of all the letters in the Torah. What happens to him in the end? Hashem

shows Moshe that Rabbi Akiva was tortured to death by the Romans. They chopped him up and sold his flesh in the Roman butcher shops. And Moshe Rabbeinu says: I don't understand any of this—it doesn't make sense to me. He's so much greater than I am. He was very perplexed by Hashem's ways. Gemara in Menachos (daf 29b) relates that when Moshe says: I want to see this, Hashem responds: *Chazor le-acharecha*. He wants to see what happens at the beginning of Rabbi Akiva—*chazor le-acharecha*. He wants to see what happens at the end of the days of Rabbi Akiva—*chazor le-acharecha*. Why does Hashem keep telling him this? Hashem tells Moshe: You think you're going to be able to understand these things? No. *Ve-ra'isa es Achorai, u-Fanai lo yeira'u*. In hindsight, many years, generations, centuries, perhaps millennia later, maybe it will all make sense. But ultimately, when it's *be-fanecha*, we can't understand Hashem's ways. Even if you are Moshe Rabbeinu—*chazor le-acharecha*. You can only properly see in hindsight. Meanwhile, we can only accept on faith that everything will somehow make sense someday.

Rav Eliyahu Lopian has a very beautiful drash on the pasuk in Shir Ha-Shirim that describes Hashem, allegorically, as *Kol Dodi, hinei zeh bah, mashgiach min ha-chalonus meitzitz min ha-charakim*. He's looking through the windows and peeking through the little cracks. Why is Hashem described in these two ways? On a surface level, you could say it's just using repetitive poetic language. But obviously, there's something more profound than that. So Rav Eliyahu Lopian says: There are two ways we can try to understand Hashem in this world. What's the difference between *mashgiach min ha-chalonus* and *meitzitz min ha-charakim*? Either way, He can see you. Occasionally, you can see Him, and other times you can't. You could look up and clearly see a person looking at you from the window. And then, someone can peer through the cracks. He sees you well, but you don't see anyone. Hashem Yisborach is always looking at us. Sometimes, we actually feel that Hashem is taking care of us. It's an amazingly uplifting experience when we feel His hashgacha. And other times, we don't see anyone looking out for us. We don't see anyone running the world. It appears like the world is hefker—things just happen, and we don't know why. That doesn't mean no one's looking. He is *meitzitz min ha-charakim*. Hashem acts in a hidden way, and we don't immediately see the reasons behind His hashgacha.

Sometimes Hashem is *mashgiach min ha-chalonus*, and sometimes *meitzitz min ha-charakim*. And yet, He's always there running the show. And our job is to reinforce this knowledge. It's not so hard to feel that hashgacha when everything makes sense. The challenge is to know Hashem is there for you even when He's *meitzitz min ha-charakim*. Even when we don't necessarily understand what's going on, and things don't seem to make sense—like the story of Rabbi Akiva—we need to realize *ve-ra'isa es Achorai*, that

## Love of Learning

Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman

**T**hroughout the closing fourteen chapters of Exodus, we observe with awe the creative genius and masterful craftsmanship that helped ensure the construction of the Tabernacle, its vessels, and the priestly clothing. From where did these newly freed slaves become adept at woodworking, stonecutting, and craftwork? When did they acquire the skills, abilities, and knowledge to design, weave, thread, and embroider? How did they become expert goldsmiths, silversmiths, and coppersmiths?

The only possible resolution, writes Nahmanides, is Divine intervention. God singled out Bezalel and “endowed him with a divine spirit” (Ex. 31:3), which enabled him to carry out the construction contract. Why was Bezalel chosen as the leader of this project? There is no explicit indication in the verses as to his particular propensities. We know little of his background. We are afforded no accompanying aptitude test, previous employment history, or remarkable resume.

There is one clue provided, not regarding Bezalel's chosenness, but in describing the skilled artisans who assisted Bezalel in constructing the Tabernacle. For them, instead of just stating that God granted them a “Divine spirit,” the verse relays that “in the hearts of all that are wise hearted I have put wisdom” (Ex 31:6). The prerequisite for Divine wisdom was wise heartedness. If they did not possess any previous experience or expertise, what does it mean that they were wise hearted?

Turning to the story of Solomon for a parallel, Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz in his *Sichot Mussar*, suggests that being wise hearted denotes demonstrating a deep and burning desire for wisdom. Solomon was granted wisdom by God precisely because he desired it. Instead of requesting long life, riches, or military victory, he beseeched God for discernment in dispensing justice (I Kings 3:11-12). The

someday—maybe in our lifetime or maybe in the Olam ha-Emes, after our hundred and twenty—that it will make sense. Everything has a plan. Everything is in the right makom and zman. And it's our job to reinforce our emunah so that whether Hashem is *mashgiach min ha-chalonus* or *meitzitz min ha-charakim*, we can always be aware of Him being there, running the world, and taking care of us. And we must recognize everything that happens is an expression of Hashem's hashgacha and care for His world.

artisans' wise heartedness, argues Rabbi Shmuelevitz, is precisely this love of learning and strong desire to discover. This virtue signaled to God to endow them with the further wisdom necessary for the task.

Midrash Tanhuma connects the model of the wise hearted artisans to Joshua the son of Nun.

God also supplemented Joshua's wisdom with Divine wisdom, filling him with the “spirit of wisdom” (Deut. 34:9). Like Solomon, we find indication that Joshua too was an exemplar possessing an unquenching thirst for knowledge. The verse states that Moses' “servant Joshua, the son of Nun, a young man (*naar*), did not depart out of the Tent” (Ex. 33:11). Following the chronological calculations of the Sages, Ibn Ezra questions the description of Joshua as “a young man,” as he was fifty-six years old at the time. Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Sorotzkin, in his *Rinat Yitzchak*, suggests that “young man” is not a description of age, but of attitude and mindset. Despite his older age Joshua embodied an intense yearning for knowledge and growth. He viewed himself and interacted with others as someone with so much more to learn and achieve. It was his desire to learn that kept him young at heart.

Positive psychology points to love of learning as one of their 24 character strengths important for flourishing. Love of learning is a primary predictor of school satisfaction and school achievement and is one of only two strengths that independently predict well-being. Resonant of Joshua's description as a “young man,” Dr. Ben Kean suggests that “a love of learning may be particularly valuable during older age in that it may prevent cognitive decline.”

Observing the artisans' craving for wisdom, Solomon's pleading for discernment, and Joshua's youthful exuberance for knowledge, we would do well to cultivate our own love of learning and passion for continual growth.



# A Four-Year Revolution

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

**F**our years ago, the world shifted. Beginning in March 2020, humanity suffered a worldwide pandemic which took close to 7 million lives. The Covid-19 outbreak upended our routines, and disrupted our lives, our professional careers, our education, our social interactions, and our travel. We all assumed that this devastating pandemic would be the life-altering episode of our generation, the stories we would convey to incredulous grandchildren. Little did we know that just over three years later an even greater earth-shattering event would rock the foundations of Jewish identity. The tragedy of October 7th dwarfs the shock of the Corona virus. After October 7th, who even mentions the Covid pandemic anymore? October 7th and our responses to this catastrophe will shape our generation's identity. Of course, only Hashem knows what else is in store for us in the future.

During a short, four-year interval, we experienced two overwhelming upheavals, each of which inflicted tragic loss of life. Understandably, during the past few months we were more attuned to our own losses but, unfortunately, there is too much unnecessary death on both sides. It is almost impossible to discriminate between innocent Gazan civilians and the overwhelming majority of Gazans who collaborated with Hamas. Our soldiers discovered Hamas paraphernalia and munitions in almost every civilian home. Yet, there are many totally innocent people who have been caught in the crossfire of this just and moral war. Such is the horrid legacy of terror. It kills indiscriminately.

Both of these cataclysms have left us with questions of faith. Why does Hashem allow a pandemic to take innocent lives? How could He allow such widespread suffering? How could He have permitted October 7th to unfold? Isn't life in Israel meant to be different, immune to the suffering and persecution we endured in exile? The world around us is swirling, and our minds are spinning.

Religious people respond to a crisis with faith, prayers, and good deeds. We respond to aggression and genocidal violence with greater unity of spirit and of action. In the wake of these two overpowering moments, however, we must also adjust our religious voices. These two mega-events taught us that we don't possess all the answers and we must articulate our faith, our religion, and our hopes for Israel in a more unpretentious and humble voice.

## Under a Boulder

Moshe Rabeinu thought that he completely understood Hashem. He had a front row seat to a series of 10 awe-inspiring miracles which liberated a nation of slaves. Moshe had split the seas and ascended the heavens. After the terrible debacle of the golden calf, he fervently prayed for our forgiveness and rescued an entire people from possible extinction. When Moshe's request for penitence was granted, it all seemed to make sense. During these heady months of revelation, Moshe had discovered that Hashem, the God of Creation, was also the God of history, the God of law, and the God of mercy and compassion.

Having discovered these basic tenets of monotheism, Moshe lodged an ambitious request of God: "Show me Your essence and teach me Your ways". Moshe wanted to study the deeper essence of Hashem.

Hashem's response signaled to Moshe that his request was impossible to grant. The human imagination cannot possibly comprehend the divine mystery. Hashem is fundamentally different from human experience and His wisdom and motives lie beyond human reach. As Moshe sheltered under a large boulder Hashem passed before him and cautioned Moshe that Man can never "see" God, nor can he completely grasp Him. From his obscured view "under the boulder" Moshe could only peek at Hashem's "back" and not His essence. He is only granted a fleeting glimpse of Hashem.

Of course, as God doesn't have a back this phrase is merely a metaphor. The Hebrew word for back is "achorai", which alludes to the conclusion of a process, rather than its inception. By declaring that Man can only glimpse His "back", Hashem assured Moshe that ultimately, when history concludes, divine actions will make logical sense. Until then, they will remain mysterious and cryptic. Hiding under a boulder, the greatest prophet learned that God is unknowable.

## Under Two Boulders

The past four years we have lived under two boulders: the Corona boulder and the Oct. 7th boulder. Each of these humbling catastrophes has taught us to speak less boldly and less confidently. We need to discover a voice of uncertainty and humility.

Life in the modern world infused us with too much confidence. Technology, democracy, capitalism, and science all empowered us toward greater optimism and



greater confidence. Our opinions were too overconfident, and Covid-19 dealt a crushing reminder about the limits of modern culture. It helped us replace our voice of confidence with a voice of vulnerability.

Life in Israel over the past 20 years was even more empowering and even more confidence-infusing. During this period of dizzying and euphoric success our population soared, our economy boomed, and we formed strategic peace alliances with numerous Arab neighbors. Dubbed a start-up nation we became the envy of the world. Israeli know-how and technology enabled us to desalinate sea water and made us naively assume that we could build an impenetrable wall to protect us from our murderous neighbors.

Our confidence has now been shattered. The Arab world isn't yet ready to embrace us and the world at large is still not ready to allow us to live peacefully in our homeland.

Viewing our presence in Israel through a religious lens provides a further boost of confidence. Redemption is an essential tenet of Jewish belief. History has a predetermined endpoint, pivoted upon the restoration of our people to their ancient homeland. So much of the past 75 years in Israel appeared to sync with our prophetic expectations. It was obvious that Jewish history was veering toward its pre-programmed endpoint. Absolutely certain that we "knew" the arc and timelines of history we spoke with confidence and conviction. Everything seemed to be humming along, until Oct 7th.

## From Highest Highs to Lowest Lows

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

**T**his week's parsha, Parshas Ki Tisa, opens with further instructions and details regarding the building of the Mishkan. We learn of the *machatzis ha'shekel* (which is also read before Purim, for Parshas Shekalim), the spices for the anointing oil, the eleven spice mixture of the *ketores* (daily incense offering), and the construction of the *kiyor*, the copper laver from which the kohanim washed their hands and feet before their daily service.

In the beginning of Chapter 32, the Torah turns to a very different - and tragic - topic: that of the *Eigel ha'Zahav*, the sin of the Golden Calf. A mere forty days after Matan Torah and the Revelation at Sinai, when the entire nation heard and saw the Voice of Hashem (*keviyachol*), after a brief miscalculation as to Moshe's anticipated arrival, and their subsequent panic with his lateness/absence, a golden

### Few Words

In Kohelet Shlomo Hamelech writes "Don't speak impetuously and don't be rash with your feelings, because God inhabits Heaven, and you live below on Earth. Therefore, your words should be few". Over the past four years, Heaven and the ways of Hashem have seemed more distant than ever. Under these conditions we must speak less, and when we do speak, we should voice our opinions with greater humility and less certainty.

Of course, faith outlasts any event on this earth, as tragic and horrific as it may be. My revered mentor, HaRav Aharon Lichtenstein remarked that faith should be so sturdy that you are capable of being the last Jew to walk out of Auschwitz and still maintain your faith. Faith provides certainty and hope, especially during dark times. However, just because we are faithful doesn't mean we have all the answers. If anything, faith enables us to live under the weight of unanswerable questions. Faith allows us to embrace the unknown, but not to assume that we know everything.

We must learn to better calibrate our voices between faith and uncertainty. We don't have all the answers. We know the general trajectory of history but cannot guarantee every step of the process. More humility and less conviction. More modesty and less confidence. After four years and two heavy boulders our voice must be less presumptuous. Hopefully, this chaotic four-year revolution will provide us all with a more measured and mature voice.

calf is constructed. In a shocking turn of events, the people worship around the golden calf, offering sacrifices and dancing around it, declaring 'these are your gods, O Israel, who took you out of the land of Egypt!' (Shemos 32:4).

When Moshe returns from atop the mountain, the scope of the disaster is realized, by him, Aharon his brother, as well as the nation.

This is a sin that is most difficult to comprehend and fathom. How could a nation that forty days earlier saw the greatest Revelation ever witnessed by mankind, fall so low and commit such a spiritual travesty?

Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb writes, "It was over forty years ago, but I remember the feelings very well... It was just after I had completed all of my course requirements and dissertation defense in the process of obtaining my doctorate in psychology. This was the culmination of

several years of study and much hard work. The ordeal was now over and celebration was in order. Along with my wife, young children, several other students, and friends, I did, indeed, celebrate. But then, it was suddenly over. I found myself moody and depressed. A sense of emptiness surrounded me, and these feelings lingered for quite some time. I tried to rid myself of my moodiness in various ways, and it was a difficult time for those around me as well. Luckily, my negative feelings were soon gone, as mysteriously as they had come.

“Sometime later I learned this phenomenon was very common. When people achieve great accomplishments, having put great effort and toil into them, they experience a sense of exhilaration and excitement, a ‘high.’ But often very soon after, there is a ‘comedown,’ a real low, that follows the high. It is as if, now that the goal with which one has been long preoccupied has been reached, life has become meaningless. There is nothing further to do, no ongoing purpose. A sense of emptiness ensues. The struggle to fill this sense of emptiness is fraught with danger... and attempting to fill this emptiness may result in great, and sometimes tragic, difficulties.

“This psychological phenomenon helps to explain the incident of the Golden Calf. Just a few weeks ago, the nation experienced the most momentous occasion in human history. Hashem revealed Himself at Har Sinai, they heard the voice of G-d, and were spiritually elevated by His revelation. They were, almost literally, on a ‘high.’

“And yet, after 40 days and 40 night with Moshe atop the mount, the people come down from their high. His disappearance mystifies them and they panic in their sense of emptiness... A few weeks ago they were on the highest level possible, and now they were dancing before an idol? While it is inexplicable, it is also a common human phenomenon. People are capable of attaining greatness, but they are not as capable of sustaining greatness (italics added). They can achieve ‘highs’ of all kinds, but they cannot necessarily maintain those ‘highs.’ There is an

inevitable ‘comedown.’

“... This is an important lesson for our spiritual lives. Often we experience moments of intense spirituality. But those moments are often brief and fleeting. When they are over, we feel empty, and may despair of ever returning to those precious experiences. We must take hope in the knowledge that almost all intense human experiences are transitory, and are followed by feelings of hollowness... Ups and downs, peaks and valleys, are to be expected, in all aspects of our lives...

“This is the lesson of the Golden Calf. The people ascended a great spiritual high at the mountain of Sinai. They then descended into an orgy of idolatry. But with G-d’s bountiful mercy, (and repentance and fervent prayers,) they received the Divine assurance that G-d would forever remain in their midst” (*The Person in the Parasha*, Maggid, OU Press, p.239-242).

This insight and lesson is relevant for all of us in our daily lives. There are certainly times in life when we experience moments of great ‘revelation,’ intensity, excitement and ‘highs.’ Be it a special experience in Eretz Yisrael, a simcha shared with family and friends, a trip exploring the wonders of Hashem’s world, or an impactful event, something out of the ordinary. These blessed times in life elevate, inspire and invigorate us.

However, we must be realistic in our approach to life and avodas Hashem. While the moments of inspiration are impactful, most of life is spent through the daily routine of the ‘everyday.’ Compared to the exalted times, these are the ‘lows.’ If we remember that G-d can be found in all times and all places - and both the inspiring times and everyday times are moments in which we can and must serve Him - then we can appreciate the ‘highs’ and be prepared not to fall with the ‘lows.’

With this realistic approach, we will place Hashem before us always and with consistency (cf. Ps.16:8), and rejoice both in the great moments, and in the blessings of everyday.

## Rav Soloveitchik on Ki Tisa: An Avraham Moment

Rabbi Aaron Goldscheider (Excerpted from *Torah United, Teachings on The Weekly Parashah From Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, and The Chassidic Masters* (Ktav, 2023))

In an unforgettable derashah, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik compared the personalities of Avraham and Moshe. He contrasted their unique traits and even speculated about who should be considered the greater of the two.<sup>1</sup>

In a lengthy passage, The Talmud says explicitly that in at least one respect Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov outshined Moshe. God appeared to them without the Tetragrammaton, that is to say in a reduced way without manifest miracles, and commanded them to do various

things. When they faced adversity in carrying them out, they did not complain to God or second-guess Him. Moshe was privy to open miracles, yet when his first encounter with Pharaoh was unsuccessful, he was quick to question the veracity of the divine promises.<sup>2</sup> According to the Sages, it seems his faith was weaker than that of his illustrious forebears.

Furthermore, the Rav observed, in our daily prayers we invoke the Patriarchs in the Amidah, addressing “the God of Avraham, the God of Yitzchak, and the God of Yaakov,” but not “the God of Moshe.” He does not seem to rank with them.

Yet, Moshe’s achievements are legendary. One of the thirteen principles of faith composed by the Rambam is that Moshe was and will always be the greatest of our prophets. This even has a biblical source: “There has not since risen a prophet in Israel like Moshe, whom God knew face to face” (Deuteronomy 34:10). If God Himself attested this about Moshe, in this respect he must have outpaced the Patriarchs.

Given the evidence in both directions, the Rav suggested that an accurate assessment of Moshe requires examining his actions during the episode of the golden calf, which was a pivotal episode in his life.

### A Moment to Shine

God tells Moshe, “Go down, for your people whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt have acted corruptly” (Exodus 32:7). Rashi cites the Talmud, which interprets “Go down” to mean “Go down from your greatness, for I only gave you greatness on their account.” After all, what is a leader without a people? If the people have debased themselves, the leader must be demoted too. Rashi then adds a gloss from a Midrash: “At that moment, Moshe was banished by decree of the Heavenly Court.”<sup>3</sup> Moshe’s excommunication signals a precipitous loss of status.

Why did the Almighty respond with such stinging reproach to Moshe? Perhaps the following passage in the Talmud reveals God’s motivation:

*Whereupon Moshe’s strength ebbed such that he had no strength to speak. As soon as God said, “Leave me alone, that I might destroy them” (Deuteronomy 9:14), Moshe said, “This matter depends on me!” He immediately rose, strengthened himself in prayer, and pleaded for mercy.*

*It is comparable to a king who was enraged at his son, and while he was administering a severe beating to him, his friend sat before him and was afraid to say anything to him. The king said [to the prince], “Were it not for this friend of mine*

*sitting before me, I would kill you.” The friend said, “The matter depends on me!” Immediately he rose and saved him.<sup>4</sup>*

The Rav suggested that when God proposed destroying the Jewish people, He did not mean it. It was a test of leadership to see whether Moshe would rise to the occasion. Until now, Moshe had led the people with signs and wonders. Unlike Avraham, he was further given clear directives and instructions, guided every step of the way by God. Now that he was a persona non grata, he presumably had lost the King’s favor. The parable demonstrates the grave danger he faced: if he tried to defend the prince, he might lose his position. Would he step up to God to avert an evil decree, as Avraham did at length for the wicked city of Sodom?

Moshe had an “aha” moment. He realized that even after losing his privileged position, if he protested strongly enough God might yet change His mind. So, Moshe acted without delay and at great risk to himself, willing to be blotted out of the entire Torah. This was Moshe’s “Avraham moment,” when he showed himself to be a true, capable, fully invested leader:

*Rabbi Abahu said: Were this verse not written in the Torah, it would be impossible to say it. It teaches that Moshe grabbed hold of the Holy One like a person grabs his friend by the clothes, and said before Him: “Master of the Universe, I will not let you go until You forgive and pardon them.”<sup>5</sup>*

Moshe went so far as to slight the honor of the King, disregarding the potential repercussions, in order to save his people.

As a result, Moshe became the “father” of the Jewish people. God said, “I will wipe them out and make you into a great nation” (Exodus 32:10), and although the former did not come to pass, God’s beneficent promises are fulfilled. The entire people became Moshe’s children. This is why certain laws are called “a halachah to Moshe from Sinai” (הַלָּכָה לְמֹשֶׁה מִסִּינַי), and the betrothal ceremony is performed “according to the law of Moshe and Israel” (בְּדֶת מֹשֶׁה וְיִשְׂרָאֵל). Because he was ready to sacrifice everything on behalf of the nation, the entire Torah is Moshe’s.

### The Glow

On January 28, 1980, the Rav attended a farbrengen, a gathering of Lubavitch Chassidim, marking thirty years since Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson became the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe. The following day, Rabbi Avraham Shemtov asked the Rav to share his impressions. The Rav posed a question about the episode of the golden calf. Moshe supplicated God for eighty days, after which he



received the second set of tablets. Then, the Torah tells us, “The skin of his face had become radiant” (Exodus 34:30). Why only now did his face glow, and not with the first tablets?

Before receiving the second tablets, Moshe beseeched God to forgive the Jewish people, protesting God’s terrible decree. He laid his life on the line for those who according to strict judgment did not deserve it. The prayers of Moshe on that lonely mountaintop elicited our most powerful and dramatic liturgy, our lifeline when all else fails, the thirteen attributes of mercy. Through all this, Moshe was transformed:

*During the first forty days and nights on Mount Sinai, Moshe was a Rosh Yeshiva; during the following eighty days he was transformed into a rebbe [...] the person who suspends his entire self for his people, the individual who will quarrel with God Himself for his nation.*

The Rav turned to Rabbi Shemtov and said about the Lubavitcher Rebbe:

*I knew the Rebbe in Berlin. I knew him as a great Torah scholar, a brilliant man, an extraordinary genius. But now – sitting at the farbrengen in tribute to the 30th anniversary of his leadership – I observed that glow... the glow spread over Moshe’s face when he descended with the second tablets after eighty days of complete dedication and commitment, the glow reserved for the human being who sacrifices everything for the Jewish people.<sup>6</sup>*

### Exploring the Rav’s Insight

Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin observed that both Avraham and

Yaakov were called upon by God with a repetition of their name: “Avraham, Avraham” (Genesis 22:1) and “Yaakov, Yaakov” (Genesis 46:2). In both cases there is a pesik, a vertical line graphically separating each mention of the name, signaling to the reader to pause. This marker does not appear in the actual Torah scroll but is part of an oral tradition reproduced in all printings. Notably, when God first speaks to Moshe, saying “Moshe, Moshe” (Exodus 3:4), there is no pesik. Rabbi Herschel Schachter explains that in Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin’s thinking, usually there is a gap, a pesik, dividing a person’s potential from their actual achievements. Moshe had no such gap, having merged the potential with the actual. He actualized all of the talents and capacities within him to become the most elevated of human beings.<sup>7</sup>

1. For the full analysis, only parts of which are presented below, see Lustiger, *Derashot Harav*, 77–103.
2. Sanhedrin 111a.
3. Rashi on Exodus 32:7, s.v. לך רד, citing Berachot 32a and Midrash Tanchuma, Ki Tisa, §22.
4. Berachot 32a.
5. Ibid.
6. Rabbi Y.Y. Jacobson, “The Glow,” <http://www.southbrunswickchabad.com/page.asp?pageID=%7B90893D59-4D70-459B-9527-6C3CA30A7FBE%7D> (accessed March 3, 2021). Ellipses in the original.
7. Rabbi Herschel Schachter, “Striving to Reach One’s Full Potential” <https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/891692> (accessed March 4, 2021). See *Nefesh ha-Chayim*, pt. 3, ch. 13 (end).

## Shabbat as a Priority in Jewish Life

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

Although there are many dramatic moments in the latter parts of parashat Kee Tisah, the early parts of the parasha continue to dwell on the theme of building the Mishkan, the portable Tabernacle that accompanied the people during their travels in the wilderness. It is in parashat Kee Tisah that G-d instructs Moses to fashion the kiyor, the Laver, provides the formula for the Shemen ha’Mishcha, anointing oil and the Ketoret, the incense, and designates Bezalel and Oholiyav to oversee the design and construction of the Tabernacle.

The Torah then recounts the fateful narrative of Moses receiving the tablets, and describes the unforgettable scene at which Moses breaks the tablets when he sees the people joyously worshipping the Golden Calf. Between the theme

of the Tabernacle and the Golden Calf, however, the Torah, unexpectedly, enjoins the People of Israel to keep the Sabbath.

In Exodus 31:13, G-d instructs Moses to speak to the Jewish people and to say to them: אֲנִי אֶת שַׁבְּתֹתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ, כִּי אוֹת הוּא בֵּינִי וּבֵינֵיכֶם לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם, לָדַעַת כִּי אֲנִי הֵשֵׁם מְקַדְּשְׁכֶם. *However, you [the people of Israel] must observe My Sabbaths, for it is a sign between Me and you for your generations, to know that I am the L-rd, who makes you holy.* The Torah goes on to say that anyone who desecrates the Sabbath shall surely die. Jews, declares the Torah, may work for six days, but the seventh day is to be set aside as a sacred day to G-d in which no work shall be done. The Torah (Exodus 31:17), then affirms that the Sabbath day is an אוֹת – “oh,” a



“sign,” between G-d and His people that He made heaven and earth in six days, and rested on the seventh day.

Throughout the five books of the Torah, the Sabbath is mentioned many times, and the penalties for violating the Sabbath are repeated not infrequently, underscoring the seminal importance of the Sabbath day. As would be expected, whenever the Torah mentions Shabbat, it is within an appropriate context. However, here, in parashat Kee Tisah, mention of Shabbat seems to be rather out of context. Shabbat, seemingly, has nothing to do with building the Tabernacle, and certainly nothing to do with the sin of the Golden Calf. Why then is the observance of the Sabbath cited precisely at this point?

Most people, even those minimally organized, set priorities and organizational lists for themselves. Many men and women constantly update their memos in which they spell out, in order of importance, the tasks that need to be done. They are forever arranging and re-arranging their schedules in the hope that they can get everything done, which, of course, is usually not possible. In reality, they aspire to attend to, at least, the most important matters!

At times, the choices that people face when setting priorities are challenging, but the immediate consequences are usually apparent. So, for instance, if a person has gone to great lengths to plan a special vacation, but suddenly feels persistent chest pain, he/she and his/her family will, in most instances, choose to forgo the trip in order to make certain that no one's health is compromised. Oft times, the correct choice is rather vague. If the same person was planning a vacation and an unexpected lucrative business opportunity arose, that person may also choose to put off the trip, or decide to pass on the business opportunity.

But what do you do when you have two seemingly conflicting Divine commands, the first, to build a Tabernacle, a place in which the Jewish people are to focus on G-d, and the second to observe the Sabbath day by not doing any creative labor? Does the sacred opportunity to build a dwelling place for G-d override the Sabbath, or does the sanctity of the Sabbath override building the dwelling place for G-d?

With no guidance from the Torah, it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to argue definitively in favor of fulfilling one Divine directive over another.

Now we see that there is a very cogent reason that the admonition regarding Shabbat was included at this point of the parasha—virtually mid-point in the instructions regarding fashioning the Tabernacle. It is clearly and boldly to underscore the paramount importance of Shabbat.

Even though it means delaying the completion of the Tabernacle, Shabbat may not be violated.

This principle is spelled out even more definitively in parashat Kedoshim, Leviticus 19:30, where the Torah exhorts the people: אַתְּ שִׁבְתָּתִי תִשְׁמְרוּ וּמִקְדָּשִׁי תִירָאוּ, אֲנִי ה' אֵלֶיךָ. *You shall observe My Sabbaths, and My sanctuaries shall you revere, I am the L-rd.* Sabbath comes before the sanctuary, and is infinitely more important than the Mishkan.

The issue of setting Shabbat as a foremost priority is not simply an ancient hypothetical construct, it is alive-and-well and particularly relevant today. Religious authorities, teachers, rabbis, outreach workers, are all faced with this challenging dilemma on a regular basis. May one invite a Jew to a join a family Shabbat meal or to attend Shabbat synagogue services, when it is known that that Jew will violate the Shabbat by traveling in a forbidden manner to the synagogue or to the host's home?

Interestingly, this very question, on a grand scale, was faced by leaders of traditional Judaism in the 1950s. Urban sprawl had advanced to become suburban sprawl. Jews were moving to the “burbs,” cars were becoming more and more fashionable. Saturdays had become “family days” to drive to the supermarket, to movie theaters, and to beauty parlors, while the synagogue pews were left increasingly empty. The rabbis' dilemma was formidable. Should a rabbi instruct his congregants to drive to shul on Shabbat, after all, they're going to drive anyway? On the other hand, true, they'll drive anyway, but may a rabbi encourage his congregants to drive in order to fulfill the “mitzvah” of being in synagogue on Sabbath?

At that time, faced with this imponderable conundrum, the non-Orthodox rabbis issued a position paper intended to strengthen Sabbath observance, recommending a number of actions. They stated that, although driving on the Sabbath is prohibited, if one is going to drive anyway, it is preferable to drive to a synagogue! Unfortunately, most people only remembered the “driving part” of the document and forgot the other suggestions intended to increase Sabbath observance.

The Orthodox clergy faced a similar dilemma. After all, many of their congregants were so-called “non practicing Orthodox Jews.” These were Jews, who, if they attended a synagogue, would insist on attending only an Orthodox synagogue, but they themselves were not fastidious regarding strict ritual observance. The Orthodox decisors looked long-and-hard for a loophole, but none could be found. In fact, when faced with the verses in Exodus 31 and Leviticus 19, the rabbis realized that there was no “wiggle

room” at all, and were unhappily forced to state categorically that it is better for a Jew to stay home, rather than violate the sanctity of Sabbath. After all, they reasoned, if one may not violate the Sabbath even to build the Tabernacle or Solomon Temple in Jerusalem, then how can a Jew violate the Sabbath in order to drive to a synagogue service in Syosset, Long Island? (No offense meant to Syosset.)

In reality, there was not much difference between many of those who attended the Orthodox synagogues and their non-Orthodox counterparts, after all, both drove on Shabbat. The non-Orthodox Jews drove on Shabbat, with the reluctant approval of their rabbis. Non-practicing Orthodox Jews drove on Shabbat, despite the strong disapproval of their rabbis.

More than seventy years have passed since those fateful decisions were made, and history can now be brought to bear on the wisdom of those respective decisions. In retrospect, it seems likely that the decision of the non-Orthodox leaders to give “unofficial” approval of driving on Shabbat, enabled more non-Orthodox Jews to move to the suburbs, where they relocated further away from the center of Jewish communal life—after all, they could always drive to the synagogue. Orthodox Jews, on the other hand, remained more or less within the proximity of their traditional “ghettos,” in order to be within walking distance of their synagogues.

It could very well be, that the decision of the non-Orthodox leaders to allow driving on Shabbat is what really broke the back of Jewish communal life for the non-Orthodox. In retrospect we now know that community involvement is primary and essential for a strong Jewish life. Living within walking distance of a synagogue, within close proximity to major Jewish institutions and shopping centers, strengthens Jewish observance, and is an essential ingredient to Jewish growth. Having local synagogues and mikvaot, Jewish bookstores and kosher restaurants, Jewish learning centers and Jewish schools within a local community, surely serves as a source of communal strength and encouragement. When those institutions are spread about and not easily accessible, many Jews simply chose not to make the effort to travel, and fail, therefore, to attend or utilize these facilities. Perhaps, most important of all, is that the lack of mobility on Shabbat for traditional Jews results in intergenerational closeness, encouraging families to dwell near one another, thus strengthening the vital family bonds.

It appears that the Al-mighty, in His infinite wisdom, knew that this would be the reality of the 20th and 21st century. The Torah is, after all, a book of wisdom, and declares that Shabbat is an overriding priority for maintaining Jewish identity. That wisdom and insight is proving to be more correct, every single day, of every single year.

## Being Part of Something Larger Than Ourselves

Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

**P**arshas Ki-Sisa begins with the mitzva of השקל, the half-shekel tax which every member of Benei Yisrael was required to donate toward the Beis Ha'mikdash, and which was used also for when a census was taken. When Benei Yisrael needed to be counted, they were not to be counted directly, but rather by having each person donate a half-shekel. These coins would then be counted to determine the number of people in the nation. Hashem told Moshe, ולא יהיה בהם נגף בפקוד אותם – *when Benei Yisrael are counted in this fashion, they protect themselves from the danger of a plague* (30:12). Counting the people directly runs the risk of bringing a plague, and so we are commanded to count people indirectly, through the method of the השקל donation.

Why is it dangerous to count people directly? Why does this pose the risk of a plague, and how is this risk averted through the donation of the השקל?

Rabbeinu Bechayei explains that when people are

counted, each person is assigned a number, and is thus seen as a separate individual. When Hashem looks at a person in isolation, Rabbeinu Bechayei explains, He judges that person with strict scrutiny. If a person stands on his own, the Hashem opens his file, so-to-speak, and reviews all his conduct. He looks carefully at how he spent his time – all the opportunities for Torah learning that he squandered, and all the opportunities for chesed and community involvement that he failed to seize. He looks at this person's bank account, and sees all the money that he could have donated to worthy causes but chose to spend on other things. He looks at his browsing history, at his tax returns, and at all his interactions with other people. And, invariably, the person will be found to be unworthy. None of us are perfect. We all have blemishes on our record. And so if Hashem carefully reviews our record, we will be found guilty.

The way to earn a favorable judgment, Rabbeinu

Bechayei writes, is through מחצית השקל, by seeing ourselves as only “half,” as but a segment of the tzibur (community) and of the nation. When we take responsibility for the people around us and for all Klal Yisrael, then we are assessed not as individuals, but rather as part of the nation. The מחצית השקל went toward the קרבנות ציבור, the public sacrifices, which were offered on behalf of the nation as a whole. This is how we find favor in Hashem’s eyes – by becoming part of the tzibur, rather than keeping to ourselves and living as separate individuals.

Rav Yisroel Meir Druck, in his *Lahavos Eish*, elaborates on this notion, and applies it to the institution of תפילה בציבור – public prayer. People sometimes tell me that they find they daven better at home, with their children, or outside in the yard, in solitude. But we need to remember that when we daven alone, Hashem takes out our file and reviews it with harsh scrutiny. When, however, we assemble all together ברוב עם הדרת מלך, congregating in shul, forming a large, beautiful tzibur praising Hashem and beseeching Him for compassion, He looks lovingly

upon us. We are then judged not as separate individuals, but rather as a collective unit, as a magnificent assembly of people, and Hashem warmly accepts our tefilos. Indeed, the Gemara teaches that the tefilos of the tzibur are never rejected. When we see ourselves as מחצית השקל, as members of a larger whole, our prayers are more readily accepted than we stand before Hashem alone, exposing ourselves to scrutiny.

Seeing ourselves as מחצית השקל also means that we must assume responsibility for all our fellow Jews. If, indeed, we are not separate, distinct individuals, but rather just “halves,” parts of a tzibur, then we must be committed to that tzibur. We need to get involved, to do our share, to help shoulder the burden. When there is a communal need, we cannot sit back and let other people handle it. When our brothers and sisters in Eretz Yisrael are in crisis, when there are soldiers on the front lines, and hostages in Hamas’ terror tunnels, we must see this as our problem, and do what we can to help out. This is our responsibility as מחצית השקל, as parts of something much larger than ourselves.

## Breaking the Luchos

Rabbi Immanuel Bernstein

וַיְהִי כַּאֲשֶׁר קָרַב אֶל הַמַּחֲנֶה וַיֵּרָא אֶת הָעֵגֶל וּמִחֻלַּת וַיַּחַר אַף מֹשֶׁה וַיִּשְׁלֹךְ מִיָּדוֹ אֶת הַלִּחֹת וַיִּשְׁבֵּר אֹתָם תַּחַת הָהָר.

*It happened as (Moshe) drew near the camp and saw the Egel and the dances, Moshe became angry and he threw down the luchos from his hands and smashed them at the foot of the mountain. (32:19)*

**T**he simple understanding of why Moshe smashed the luchos is that, upon seeing that the Jewish People had descended into idolatry and made the golden calf, he judged that they were not deserving of receiving the luchos.

### Holy Objects, Places – and People

The Meshech Chochmah explains that there is a deeper theme here. Throughout Torah we encounter numerous entities which possess kedushah. They may be physical entities, such as the Mishkan and its vessels; they may be places, such as Eretz Yisrael and Yerushalayim and they may be people, such as Moshe Rabbeinu. It is critically important to realize that none of the above entities possess independent kedushah. Rather, the kedushah which exists in any entity is that which is bestowed upon it by Hashem, and remains so subject to Hashem’s will that it remain. Thus, when the Torah commands (Vayikra 19:30)

וּמִקְדָּשִׁי תִירָאוּ, *And you shall fear my sanctuary.*” The Gemara (Yevamos 6b) clarifies:

לֹא מִן הַמִּקְדָּשׁ אֲתָה יִירָא אֲלֵא מִמִּי שֶׁהִזְהִיר עַל הַמִּקְדָּשׁ.

*You are not to fear the Mikdash itself, rather, the One who commanded you concerning the Mikdash.*

This fundamental idea is depicted very clearly by the Gemara elsewhere (Gittin 56b) which relates that although ordinarily, no one could enter the Kodesh Hakodashim on pain of death, the wicked and depraved Titus was able to enter there with a harlot and emerge unscathed.

At that stage, the sanctity which pertained to the Kodesh Hakodashim – the holiest of places – had been removed. The reason it is imperative to maintain this pure perspective on kedushah is that if people should ascribe essential kedushah to anything other than Hashem, they may come to relate to that entity as an independent source of spiritual influence and, accordingly, as something deserving of worship. An expression of this perspective may be found in the reaction of the Plishtim to the plague which erupted in response to their taking the Aron: מִי יִצִּילֵנוּ מִיַּד הָאֱלֹהִים: הָאֲדִירִים הָאֵלֶּה, *Who will save us from this mighty deity?*” (Shmuel-1, 4:8). They ascribed the plague to the Aron itself, not to the God whose Presence resided there.



In the case of Moshe Rabbeinu, mistaking his exalted level of kedushah as integral – and not instilled by Hashem – may lead people to believe that he is an independent source of Torah and mitzvos. In reality, Moshe is incapable of generating mitzvos. His exalted level is related to his status as faithful transmitter of the mitzvos.

This entire issue is compounded by the fact that, since time immemorial, physical man found it difficult to relate to an abstract Deity. This resulted in people turning to physical objects as representations of spiritual forces. Indeed, according to numerous mefarshim, this tendency was the origin of avodah zarah. Upon coming to relate to certain objects as representing higher forces, people then degenerated to relating to those objects as deserving of worship themselves.<sup>1</sup>

### The Chet Ha'Egel

All of the above tendencies formed part of the Chet Ha'Egel as Bnei Yisrael capitulated upon seeing that Moshe had not yet returned. In Moshe's absence, they turned to a physical object to which they could relate and which they could serve, going so far as identifying it as the force which had taken them out of Mitzrayim.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the very fact that they considered an object to be a substitute for Moshe meant that, on a certain level, they had made a similar mistake about Moshe himself, ascribing to him independent spiritual power and relating to him as the force behind their Exodus from Mitzrayim. They were unable to fully relate to Moshe, whom they could see, as acting purely in the role of emissary of an incorporeal and unknowable God.

This mistake is alluded to in the People's words to Aharon as a prelude to making the Egel, *כִּי זֶה מֹשֶׁה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הֵעֵלָנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם לֹא יָדָעְנוּ מָה הָיָה לוֹ* For this man Moshe, who took us out of Mitzrayim, we do not know what has become of him." (Ibid. pasuk 1) Similarly, Hashem apprises Moshe of this misdirected notion when he informs him of the Egel,<sup>8</sup> *כִּי שָׁחַת עַמְּךָ אֲשֶׁר הֵעֵלִיתָ מִמִּצְרַיִם* For your nation, which you took out of Mitzrayim, has – acted destructively. (Pasuk 7)

The Meshech Chochmah further explains that it is concerning this tendency Chazal (Vayikra Rabbah 18:3) state that even when Bnei Yisrael stood at Har Sinai and received the Torah, their hearts and mouths were not in complete alignment. Chazal adduce in this regard the pasuk in Tehillim<sup>10</sup> which says *עִמּוֹ נִכּוֹן לֹא וּלְבָבָם לֹא יָדָעוּ* With their tongues they spoke falsehood to Him and their heart was not set with Him. This does not mean that they harbored at that time any intentional plans to deviate from the Torah. Rather, it refers to the fact that they had not fully attained the purity of vision whereby they could interact with the

sanctified entities of the mitzvos while, at the same time, ascribe essential kedushah to Hashem alone.

### Moshe's Decision to Break the Luchos

Upon witnessing the critical error of the Bnei Yisrael, Moshe made the decision to break the luchos. This was not "just" a result of the fact that the Jewish people did not deserve to receive them. Moshe felt that in their current state, if he were to present them with the luchos, they would take the very same allegiance which they had given to the Egel and direct it instead to the luchos! Hence, Moshe smashed the luchos in front of their eyes. This was indeed a traumatic event, but it was also sorely necessary and profoundly revealing.

In principle, there could be no holier entity than the luchos. They were both fashioned and engraved by Hashem Himself. And yet, Moshe was communicating that all that sanctity was invested in them in order for the Bnei Yisrael to fulfill Hashem's will and live by His Torah. Should Bnei Yisrael fail to do that, the luchos would cease to serve their function and, at that stage, would have no more kedushah than pieces of pottery. By breaking what were once the holiest objects in existence, Moshe was reclaiming the concept of holiness.

### The Timing of Hashem's "Yasher Koach" to Moshe

The breaking of the luchos was thus done in order to impress upon Bnei Yisrael the true nature of kedushah and to direct their religious devotion to Hashem alone. Indeed, although the decision to break the luchos was Moshe's, Chazal inform us that Hashem expressed His full endorsement of that act. Later on in our Parsha,<sup>11</sup> when commanding Moshe to prepare a second set of luchos, Hashem says:

*פָּסַל לָךְ שְׁנֵי לַחֹת אֲבָנִים כְּרֹאשֵׁינִים וְכָתַבְתִּי עַל הַלַּחֹת אֶת הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ עַל הַלַּחֹת הָרִאשֹׁנִים אֲשֶׁר שָׁבַרְתָּ.*

*Carve for yourself two stone tablets like the first ones, and I shall inscribe on the tablets the words which were on the first tablets which you broke.*

The Gemara (Bava Basra 14b) notes that the concluding words *אֲשֶׁר שָׁבַרְתָּ*, which you broke, seem entirely redundant. Moshe Rabbeinu knows full well that the first luchos were "the ones which he broke!" Why is this mentioned here? The Gemara expounds the word, *אֲשֶׁר*, which as relating to the word *אִישׁוּר*, endorsement.

*אמר לו הקב"ה למשה יישר כחך ששברת!*

*Said the Holy One, Blessed be He, to Moshe, "You did well to smash them!"*

It is most interesting to note that the words which Chazal identify as indicating Hashem's endorsement of



Moshe breaking the first luchos appear in the context of His command to Moshe to prepare the second luchos. What is behind the timing here?

In truth, the Meshech Chochmah explains that the full message which Hashem wished to communicate came from the first and second sets of luchos combined!

### Whole Luchos and Broken Luchos

The Gemara (Bava Basra ibid.) informs us that לוחות ושברי לוחות מונחין בארון, the Aron contained not only the intact second set of luchos, but also the broken pieces of the first set.

What is the purpose of placing the pieces of the first luchos in the Aron when they no longer had any words of Torah written on them?

The answer is, this is exactly the point. On the face of it, the first luchos, which were fashioned by Hashem, contained a much higher level of kedushah than the second luchos, which were fashioned by Moshe. And yet, the first luchos were broken while the second ones remained intact! It is specifically this contrast which emphasizes that the kedushah of an object depends solely on Hashem willing that it contain kedushah, as a function of Bnei Yisrael fulfilling His will. As such, the first luchos made by Hashem – which then saw Bnei Yisrael dancing around the Egel – lay broken in pieces next to the second luchos made by Moshe, which saw Bnei Yisrael in a state of Teshuvah and dedication to fulfilling Hashem's will.

## Writing a New Torah

Rabbi Dr. Kenneth Brander

**M**ere days after experiencing the height of divine revelation, the Jewish people transgress. Falling into an idolatrous stupor, they join together to fashion a golden calf, which they worship at the foot of Mount Sinai. Upon his descent from the mountain, Moshe discovers what has transpired, has the participants in the worship executed, and beseeches God not to destroy the people entirely.

In the face of this tragedy and chaos, God responds, according to Rashi (Shemot 31:18) and others, by commanding the Jewish people to construct the Mishkan, the portable tabernacle within which the Divine presence would rest during their journey through the wilderness and into the land of Israel. While there is a countering view, adopted by Ramban, that the Mishkan was always a part of the divine plan, Rashi and his rabbinic colleagues

Accordingly, says Meshech Chochmah, we now understand why Hashem's "yasher koach" to Moshe for breaking the first luchos appears together with the instruction that Moshe –not Hashem! – carve out and prepare the second luchos.

The breaking of the luchos was unquestionably a tragic episode and a major trauma for the Jewish People. However, in light of our inability to relate to them correctly at that time, those original luchos were of greater service to us as broken pieces than when they were whole, allowing us to attain a true appreciation of the nature of holy objects, and of holiness itself.

1. The Meshech Chochmah adds that an additional error which led to avodah zarah was that people felt it was beneath the dignity of an Infinite God to concern Himself with the goings on of the lower realms; rather, He relates purely with higher beings, such as angels, constellations etc.. Hence, they felt that their prosperity would come from petitioning those elevated beings. As he explains, the flaw in this reasoning is that fails to take into account that, relative to an Infinite Being, all other beings are equally finite and lowly – be they angels, constellations, human beings or ants! Hence, if the Creator relates to even the most elevated of His creations it is entirely reasonable that He will relate to all of them and supervise them. This central idea is what we express in the Shema אֱחָד 'ה', Hashem is our God," i.e. He supervises us and provides for us – ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ "when we say that – Hashem is One," He is the only One Who can do so.
2. See Shemos 32:4.

see within the directive to build the Mishkan a corrective response to the making of the golden calf. What is this meant to reflect?

R. Yehuda Halevi (Kuzari I:97) notes that the Jewish people hadn't meant to abandon God when worshiping the golden calf. Rather, in the aftermath of the revelation at Mount Sinai, the people yearned for a physical manifestation of the divine, just as they had experienced at Matan Torah. The episode of the golden calf came to highlight that the Jewish people had a spiritual need that had been left unmet, a need for a physical medium with which to engage with God. The Mishkan, then, is not merely a means of atonement for the collective sin of the Jewish people, but God's own acknowledgement that, in the wake of this moment of crisis, a new path within Torah observance was needed, one that reflected the spiritual

position of the Jewish people themselves.

The instruction to build the Mishkan is inseparable from the very notion of Torah Shebe'al Peh, the Oral Torah, suggests R. Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, more commonly known as the Beit Halevi (Sheilot u'Teshuvot Beit haLevi, Drasha #18). Borrowing from the Midrash Tanchuma (Ki Tisa #34), that the giving of the second set of luchot was the moment when the Oral Torah was first developed, the Beit Halevi contrasts the relationship the Jewish people has with the Torah given with the first luchot, conceived to be totally written without any Oral law, and the reconstituted Torah with the second luchot, in which Torah was divided into two, with a written and an oral paradigm. When we received the first luchot, all of the Torah was intended to be written, assuring that no parts would be forgotten. Our role was merely to serve as the guardians of the sacred text, charged to protect and observe it.

But with the giving of the second luchot, the notion of an Oral Torah was developed, and the Jewish people became, so to speak, the very parchment upon which sections of the Torah were written. We became a part of the ever-expanding Torah, the authors of Torah that, by divine decree, is meant to respond to changes in our own circumstances, a Torah that has eternal divine principles but recognizes contemporary needs as essential to the very formation of Torah. The cataclysm of the golden calf was a "fortunate fall" that generated a new reality, in which Torah

itself took on a new divine rooted evolving form.

We, too, have confronted a cataclysm, a shock to our core with ripple effects yet unknown. The reality we face in the aftermath of October 7 and the ensuing war and hostage crisis poses new challenges. We are charged to find the courage to seize this opportunity, foisted upon us but critical nonetheless, to build back our society with unity, to find common ground between the various sectors of our people to ensure our resilience and solidarity in the future. Like after the golden calf, we must use this moment to be committed to grow and deepen the Torah of Achdut, and create new paradigms of engagement. As Rabbi Elchanan Nir of Yeshivat Siach Yitzchak has poignantly written in a moving, post-October 7 poem, "Now We Need a New Torah."

Paraphrasing Rabbi Nir: in this moment of crisis, we need a new Torah, a new Mishna, a new Gemara, a new Hasidism, a new Zionism and a new Rav Kook. A new love out of the terrible weeping. As with the second set of luchot, this renewal of Torah will remain rooted in the ancient words of the past, even as it takes new form in the present.

If people of opposing views and backgrounds can share an armored personnel carrier on the frontlines, we can all certainly live together as well. Like with the golden calf incident, evolutionary growth in our relationship with God and with others must arise from this catastrophe. Shared growth, and a better world, must emerge from our great sacrifice.

## Haftarat Ki Tisa: The Encounter between Eliyahu Ha-Navi and the Prophets of Ba'al: Challenging Religious Syncretism

Dr. Jill Citron Katz (From *From Within the Tent: The Haftarat, Essays on the Weekly Haftarah from the Rabbis and Professors of Yeshiva University*, YU Press, 2011)

**I**n the haftarah for Ki Tisa, we read that "*ha-ra'av chazak be-Shomron*" – "the famine was severe in Shomron" (Melakhim Aleph 18:2). This by itself is not that remarkable, as famines were relatively frequent in the Land of Israel. What makes this famine unusual, however, was that it led to a dramatic showdown between Eliyahu Ha-Navi and the prophets of Ba'al.

To understand this confrontation, we need to appreciate the religious dynamics of the First Temple Period. The Israelites and Judahites – contrary to popular belief – did not abandon worshipping Hashem. Rather, their problem was religious syncretism, i.e., the blending of the worship of Hashem with that of other deities. While such syncretism itself is clearly forbidden by the Torah, the people were susceptible to such practices for a number of reasons.

First, Canaanite culture was still widespread throughout the land. Much of Israelite material culture derived from Canaanite prototypes, so much so, that it is often difficult to distinguish an Israelite vessel or tool from a Canaanite one. Second, Phoenician culture exerted influence through both economic and diplomatic relationships that were generally beneficial. The marriage between Achav and the Phoenician princess Izevel solidified these bonds, while at the same time infusing pagan worship into the royal household. And, third, the Canaanite deities were less abstract than some might think. These gods had easy-to-understand roles with tangible representations such as small figurines, bulls, or trees.

The two main culprits for this syncretism were the two major Canaanite/Phoenician deities: Asherah and Ba'al.

According to Canaanite myths, Asherah was the chief female deity, the life-bestowing, mother goddess who was represented by a limbless tree trunk (often carved) planted in the ground. Ba'al, who was both her son and consort, emerged as the principal male fertility deity, responsible for routine aspects of daily life, such as rain, crops, and livestock. The worship of both Ba'al and Asherah included cult prostitution, a form of sympathetic magic meant to ensure the continued fertility and productivity of the land. While Asherah could be further worshipped in sacred groves, Ba'al was associated with animal sacrifices and divination.

Another aspect to consider of this confrontation was the role of the Israelite king Achav (873–852 bce). While we are well aware that Achav strayed religiously, we often neglect to acknowledge his political accomplishments. Following in the footsteps of his father Omri, Achav transformed the small and politically unstable kingdom of Israel into a military power, capable of not only defeating the Arameans, but also preventing incursions into the region by the Assyrians. Israel also gained in economic importance as trading relations flourished with both Phoenicia and Aram.

It was during Achav's reign that the building of the Israelite capital at Shomron was completed. Located on a dominating hill, halfway between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River, the ancient city of Shomron was situated in a fertile zone known for its wine and oil production. In building their capital, Omri and Achav selected an innovative configuration in which the palace and the other administrative buildings were constructed in the highest part of the city, which was then strongly fortified as a separate enclosure. Like the contemporary opheleth in Jerusalem, the acropolis at Shomron served as a sophisticated royal citadel and stronghold to contend with both internal and external dangers. This security was matched by its luxury. In one building, over 500 pieces of carved ivory – furniture inlay imports from Phoenicia – were found.

The construction of the capital itself would have been cause for alarm to Eliyahu. It signaled the rising strength of the monarchy and its attendant estrangement from the general populace. Many of the fears elucidated by Shmuel about the perils of kingship appeared to be coming true (Shmuel Aleph 8:10–20), not least of which was the great effort and expense Achav devoted to the raising of horses for chariots and cavalry. The great luxury enjoyed by the palace further exacerbated the division between elites and commoners. While the king rested on beds of ivory, the farmers were literally concerned about their next meal.

Finally, with the introduction of pagan worship in the capital, Achav contributed to the insidious and pervasive practice of religious syncretism – the blending of Canaanite and Phoenician religious traditions with Israelite ones.

At first glance, it might seem that Achav was no syncretist, but simply a pagan. After all, he married a Phoenician princess, built an altar and temple to Ba'al in Shomron, actively worshipped Ba'al and Asherah, and accepted into his palace hundreds of prophets of Ba'al and Asherah. On the other hand, Achav did not interfere with the continued worship of Hashem. He retained as his chief steward the "God-fearing" Ovadiah, who had rescued 100 prophets of Hashem. Moreover, Achav respected Eliyahu as a navi of Hashem, agreeing without hesitation to the proposed showdown at Har Ha-Carmel between Hashem and Ba'al. And, finally, after the contest, Achav accepted Hashem's victory and did not obstruct the subsequent massacre of the prophets of Ba'al.

In light of the above, we are able to grasp this confrontation as not only a battle between Hashem and Ba'al or as a battle between prophet and king, but rather as a battle for the heart and soul of Israel. The question was not simply "who will bring the rain?" The question was how to convince the Israelites to give up their religious syncretism and worship Hashem alone. As Eliyahu expressed: *"ad matai atem poschim al shetei ha-se'ipim"* – "How long will you dance between two opinions?" *"im Hashem ha-Elokim, lekhu acharav, ve-im ha-Ba'al lekhu acharav"* – "If Hashem is the God, go after Him! And, if the Ba'al, go after it!" The message was clear: you have to choose; you cannot worship both. Significantly, at this point, the people did not answer Eliyahu. They apparently saw nothing wrong with their syncretism.

The stage was therefore set for the dramatic confrontation. The playing field was made level by the fact that the ritual selected – animal sacrifice – was a shared practice among Israelites and Canaanites/Phoenicians. Why animal sacrifice was practiced is itself an interesting question. While the meaning was complex and varied from culture to culture, the underlying procedure was essentially the same: "This procedure consists in establishing a means of communication between the sacred and profane worlds through the mediation of a victim, that is, of a thing that in the course of the ceremony is destroyed."

In offering sacrifices (*korbanot*), Israelites, Canaanites, and Phoenicians were participating in a well-established Ancient Near Eastern pattern. Textual sources reveal many of the particular reasons for individual sacrifices, but the



common idea was that through sacrifice, people established a propitiatory relationship with the divine, a by-product of which was sanctifying human consumption of meat. In the case of ancient Israel, *korbanot* were offered for much of the same reasons we now associate with prayer: to praise Hashem, to become closer to Him, to express thanks, love, and gratitude. Sacrifices were also offered to mark holidays and festivals, to cleanse a person of ritual impurity, and to atone for human transgressions.

The Canaanites and Phoenicians also offered sacrifices to establish a relationship with their deities. From textual sources, a few differences emerge from Israelite practice. The first is that the Canaanites and Phoenicians believed that in offering the sacrifice they were literally providing food for their gods. The second is that the sacrifices were often linked to the practice of divination by observing the animal's behavior during and after its slaughter and from marks and flaws detected on the victim's body. The third is that the sacrifices were not generally associated with personal atonement.

On Har Ha-Carmel, both sides were given a bull and the opportunity to offer a burnt sacrifice, or *olah*. This particular type of offering is very simple and extremely common. The *olah* was completely burnt and not eaten. Symbolically, this type of offering was appropriate to the situation as it represented complete submission to Hashem. It expressed a desire to commune with Hashem and be unified with Him. By choosing a simple offering with a straightforward meaning, Eliyahu was making the contest as transparent as possible. There was neither opportunity for hidden tricks nor any reason to complain about unfair advantages. This was as fair a contest as could be devised, and the winner would be clearly manifest. The only difference between this and the usual *olah* sacrifice was that, in this case, Hashem had to provide the fire.

As the description of the dramatic encounter makes clear, the offering of sacrifices was a multi-sensory experience. The prophets of Ba'al prepared the bull and prayed to their god, perhaps reciting sacred texts. They danced around the altar and cut themselves with their weapons. If they had musical instruments, they surely would have used them. Except for the self-mutilation, the ritual behavior ascribed to the prophets of Ba'al would not have raised any eyebrows among the Israelites because this type of ritual performance was familiar to them from their own experience. This is what made the syncretism so hard to remove – it did not appear so foreign.

Despite going through the proper motions, the prophets

of Ba'al failed to bring about the desired result. Their ritual performance failed. The best they could hope for was a stalemate.

The action now shifted to Eliyahu. Aware of the dramatic backdrop and the expectancy of his audience, he carefully and deliberately supervised the preparation of the *olah*. As with any successful ritual performance, Eliyahu's movements included formality, symbolism (12 stones to represent the 12 tribes), repetition (three times water is poured on the wood and bull), and enhancement (he planted seeds in a trench encircling the altar). By allowing the prophets of Ba'al to proceed first, Eliyahu gained home-field advantage, the opportunity for a walk-off base hit.

Eliyahu called out, and Hashem answered with a consuming fire. For the people, this was an intensely spiritual encounter, and they reacted accordingly. As they fell down, they twice proclaimed "*Hashem hu ha-Elokim*" – "Hashem – He is the God!" (Melakhim Aleph 18:39) becoming, at least for the moment, true believers. Their faith received a further boost when shortly thereafter Hashem ended the drought and brought the much needed rain.

The victory had been unmistakably won, yet the practice of religious syncretism did not end immediately. Why? Understanding the reasons syncretism was so hard to remove may be best explained by mathematical logic, particularly the principles used to establish truth values of mathematical statements. Syncretism – the blending of belief systems – operates essentially as a disjunction. In logic, a disjunction is a compound sentence formed by using the word "or" to join two simple sentences. What this means is that the statement can be true when only one part is true. Thus, the Israelites did not perceive Ba'al as false just because it was Hashem who answered them.

Yet this episode on Har Ha-Carmel was a watershed moment. It turned back the rising tide of syncretism just when syncretism was on the verge of gaining official political recognition – the marriage of Achav and Izevel symbolized this, while their actions promoted it. It is no coincidence that this episode featured one of Israel's strongest prophets against one of Israel's strongest political kings.

Eliyahu's victory offered a harbinger of hope that true faith in the Oneness of Hashem could one day be established. The long drawn-out process required the implementation of significant reforms and the experience of great national tragedy, but ultimately the day arrived when every Jew could utter "*Hashem hu ha-Elokim*" – "Hashem – He is the God!" and believe it without any conflict in their heart.