

Ki Tisa: A Four-Year Revolution

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Four 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 7^t, 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.

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.

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