

Sometimes It's Good to Have a Stiff-Neck!

Parashat Ki Tissa/Shabbat Parah; 20 Adar 5777/March 18, 2017 [Bar Mitzvah of Noah Hoch]
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I'm not sure if the Canadians who are here heard about our big snow storm this past week. A massive nor'easter swept across the region dumping 1.5" of snow on us! That's about 3.8 cm for those who use the metric system. Schools were closed, businesses were closed—Soldierfit where Gerry and I work out cancelled all their classes on Tuesday! Those 1.5" of snow paralyzed us! And we had a late start the next morning because it was really windy and cold. Aliza told me the other day that they had 40 cm of snow, 16" of snow in Montreal this past week, and I'll bet all the schools were open! In any case, with the kids off of school we had some very nice family time together. And the highlight of the day for me was when Sari and I took our daughters to the movie theater. [By the way, how is it that movie theater employees can always get to work on snow days? No one else can get to work, but they're always there!] *Baruch Hashem* the theaters were open on Tuesday, and Sari, the girls and I saw the movie "Hidden Figures." The movie is about three extraordinary African American women--each one a mathematical genius--who are employed by NASA at the beginning of the manned space flight program, the race with the Soviet Union to put a human being into space. While most of us remember names like Alan Sheppard, Neil Armstrong, and John Glenn, none of those astronauts would have made it into space or back to earth alive were it not for the complex mathematical calculations of Katherine Goble, Mary Jackson, and Dorothy Vaughn. The film traces their struggle against racism and segregation, misogyny and sexism. It was inconceivable at the time that an African American or a woman could be an engineer, a mathematician, or a computer scientist, particularly in NASA's predominantly white, male culture. But these women would not take no for an answer! They refused to accept the roles that society thrust upon them. And they challenged convention and authority with grace, with elegance, and with unbelievable conviction. All the while I'm sitting there in the theater and I'm thinking...what am I going to say in shul on Shabbat? What am I going to say at Noah Hoch's bar mitzvah...all these rabbis in shul, including a future rabbi, a teacher of rabbis, a bunch of rabbis' kids; all these *talmidei chachamim* from Berman Hebrew Academy are here...what's my *Shabbos drasha*? Well thanks to Taraji Henson, Octavia Spenser, Janelle Monae and of course Kevin Costner, Jim Parsons, Kirsten Dunst, and the entire cast of Hidden Figures, it hit me!

In the parasha this morning, and in Noah's beautiful *d'var Torah* we learned about the terrible act of rebellion and apostasy known as *chet ha'egel*, the sin of the Golden Calf. The site of the Israelites dancing and singing and worshipping this idol so infuriates God that he tells Moses to stand back as He prepares to utterly destroy them. 'I know all about this people,' God says to Moses, *v'hinei am k'shei oref hu*, **they are a stiff necked people.**¹ Now I've had a stiff neck, and it is not pleasant. Take your hand and run it up and down the back of your neck... You have seven discs back there with roots and nerves connected to them that can become herniated, pinched, ruptured, slipped, collapsed, bulged...not only from a specific neck injury, but from stress, bad posture, even a bad pillow. Of all the things God could have called the Jewish people, He calls them literally 'a pain in the neck.' This seems to be a timeless ailment that the ancients understood just as well as we do. Everyone can identify with how agonizing, and excruciating it is to have a pain in the neck. So God says, 'I'm just going to destroy them once and for all, then my neck will be pain free forever.' But Moses intervenes, and better than any chiropractor or massage therapist tells God that He can't just destroy the Jewish people. You made promises to their ancestors, Moses reminds God. Plus it would be terrible PR for you God. Everyone will say that God freed the Jewish people only to destroy them in the wilderness. That's not what you want people saying about You God, Moses counsels. In other words, destroying the Jewish people is not the cure for them being such a pain in the neck.

Now here's where it gets really interesting...When Moses returns a second time to plead the case of the Jewish people and to beg God not to abandon them, Moses says:

*Im na matzati chen be'einecha Hashem, If I have gained Your favor God, yeilech na Hashem be'kirbeinu, please go with us, stay with us, ki am k'shei oref hu, BECAUSE we are a stiff necked people.*²

God shouldn't abandon us BECAUSE we're a stiff necked people? I thought being stiff necked was bad! I thought being stiff-necked, stubborn, inflexible, obstinate, pigheaded...can you imagine anything worse than a Jew being pigheaded? That's what got us into trouble in the first place! That's what caused us to build the Golden Calf! Now all of a sudden it's a positive attribute?!

¹ Exodus 32:9-10

² Exodus 34:9

No one, in my opinion, explains this seeming contradiction better than Rabbi Yitzhak Nissenbaum.³ Rabbi Nissenbaum was a Polish Rav, a Hebraist, an early religious Zionist, an author, and a preacher. When the Nazis came to power in Poland, he did not abandon his community in Warsaw, and eventually he was murdered in the Ghetto. In explaining Moses's argument to God, he said: "Almighty God, look upon this people with favor, because what is now their greatest vice will one day be their most heroic virtue." You see, being stiff-necked can be a negative trait or a positive one; it can be harmful or helpful; detrimental or beneficial...it all depends on how it is used.

If being stiff necked means that you're close minded, or intolerant, or that you literally can't turn your head to consider the perspective of the person next to you, then it is definitely a negative attribute. People who are stiff-necked in that way will never grow, never change, never consider anything beyond their narrow, myopic view of the world. That's a harmful way to live. It's harmful to your relationships with other people, and it's harmful to your own ability to learn and to grow as an individual.

But stiff necked can also mean tenacious, steadfast, resolute, and persistent. According to Rabbi Nissenbaum, this has been the secret to the survival of the Jewish people. Our stiff necked determination is what enabled us to stand up to czars and pogroms and assimilation and anti-Semitism; it is the very resolve that has given us the strength to never give up on our existence as a people, or our commitment to Torah or Jewish tradition. That's the good way to be stiff necked! That's why Moses proposes to God that maybe He should rethink punishing them for this trait, and instead see it as being the Jewish people's very survival strategy in the long run.

In yesterday's Wall Street Journal, Robert Woodson Sr., the founder of a center here in Washington that works to transform troubled neighborhoods and schools, reduce violence, and provide technical and educational training to at risk youth, wrote about attending a book signing last week with the author of *Hidden Figures*, the book that the movie was based on.⁴ The auditorium at the University of Mary Washington was filled to capacity, as people clamored to ask questions and to learn more about the three remarkable women in the story. He wrote, rather controversially I thought, "The most powerful antidote to disrespect is not protest but

³ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks: "A Stiff-Necked People," Ki Tisa 5768

⁴ *'Hidden Figures is a Powerful Story of Black Achievement,'* Wall Street Journal, March 16, 2017

performance” ...He continued “The strongest people in the world are not those most protected: They are the ones who must struggle against adversity and obstacles and surmount them to survive. The women of Hidden Figures,” he wrote, “embodied this maxim.” Those three women were definitely *k’shot oref*, they were stiff necked, in the best sense. In the sense that they held their heads high, went to work every day in a place that was principally biased against them, and demonstrated by their grit and intelligence and commitment that they would not be held back or held down by any system. Sari and I wanted our daughters in particular to see that because we want them to have that kind of stiff neck in the world. The truth is, as inspiring as Hidden Figures was, the story of the Jewish people’s relentless survival tells a similar story. We should all be a little more stiff necked in our lives: stiff necked for goodness, stiff necked for justice, stiff necked for kindness and compassion, stiff necked for living confident, joyful, meaningful Jewish lives without excuses or apologies. Or as Rabbi Norman Lamm writes in his commentary to our parasha,⁵ “We must show spine and stubbornness in the face of adversity and challenge. We must not bow before persecution; we must not bend the knee for any of the modern idols...then shall we prove worthy of Moses’ prayer and God’s affirmative answer to that prayer: *yelech na Hashem bekirbenu ki am k’shei oref hu*—let God go amongst us, for we are a stiff necked people.”

⁵ Lamm, Norman. *Derashot Le’Dorot, Exodus*, 2013. “Stubbornness,” [February 28, 1959]. Page 189