

Torah Talk with Rabbi Rozenwasser 2021.03.05 Parashat Ki Tissa

Parshat *Ki Tissa*, is, in my opinion, one of the most difficult Parshiot in the whole Hummash. It is embarrassing and, to a certain extent, shameful. In very straightforward terms, this Parsha, containing the narrative of what happened around The Golden Calf, makes one of our weaknesses, lack of patience, the reason for this very bold transgression.

The narrative of the Golden Calf is embarrassing to the point that we have specific instructions to read those verses in a somewhat subdued voice to 'symbolically minimize the embarrassment the congregants experience upon hearing the terrible misdeeds of our ancestors.'

This biblical narrative opens with the following verse:

"When the people saw that Moses was so long (*boshesh*) in coming down from the mountain, the people gathered (*vayikahel*) against Aaron and said to him, "Come, make us a god who shall go before us, for that man Moses, who brought us from the land of Egypt - we do not know what has happened to him." (Exodus 32:1)

Because of Moses's delay, the people get impatient and gather against Aaron with a very troublesome demand: "make us a god!"

As a result of this, Moses is summoned to return to the people immediately and, upon seeing what is happening, he smashes the Tablets that he was carrying in his hands. The smashing of the Tablets is symbolic of the break in the relationship between the people and God. The Children of Israel, by making a Golden Calf, have violated the essence of their Covenant with Adonai.

As Rabbi Silver very poignantly puts it, if there is no Sacred Covenant, there will be no *Mishkan*, no Tabernacle. All these past few weeks, we have been learning about all the details related to the building of the Tabernacle. This comes to a sudden stop with the smashing of the Tablets. Before Israel can rededicate themselves to building a place for God's permanence, the covenant must be reestablished.

And this is going to be Moses's immediate concern. The story cannot continue unless the Children of Israel find forgiveness in God's eyes and the sacred relationship can be re-established. This will be sealed later on in the narrative, with the second set of Tablets.

From the vast number of questions that this story might engender, I will pay attention to one in particular. The question that I would like to address is: what triggered such an extreme behavior on the part of the Children of Israel? The fact that it took Moses a little longer (*boshesh Moshe*) than what they might have anticipated, doesn't seem enough of a reason for them to gather themselves and demand the 'building' of a new god! What did really happen?

In my opinion, the key is in the way we interpret the word *boshesh*. Most versions accept the translation that says that Moshe was delayed.

Yet, there is another possibility. The Hebrew term *boshesh*, could be associated with the word *bushah*, which means shame or embarrassment. If we embrace this possibility, *boshesh* implying embarrassment, then we open the possibility of a much more radical reaction.

Being delayed is an objective piece of information. I am late. I was unexpectedly delayed. This is caused by external circumstances, outside of my control. I have no choice but to accept it, face value. No hidden agenda; no intention to offend anyone.

When, on the other hand, we add a layer of shame or embarrassment, then that same action is not objective or neutral any longer. Now I find a good reason to fill this action, this same happening, with negative feelings. This negative content stems from the feeling of being put to shame or being embarrassed. As a result of this introjection, now I will react in a much more emotional way.

This is what happened to the Children of Israel in the desert. They felt embarrassed, they felt neglected and abandoned; therefore, their reaction was drastic and extreme.

I will suggest that we are, too often, trapped in a similar dynamic. If something happens to us such as someone being delayed for an appointment, we might not be happy about having to wait, but we will, most likely, not retaliate against them. Things happen.

If, on the other hand, we build an additional layer and we interpret that same delay as an aggression or as a way to embarrass us because it was done intentionally, then we will react. Our reaction will, most likely, not be in the most understanding and calming way.

The event, what happened, was exactly the same. The difference resides, exclusively, in the way we read and interpret the facts.

The Children of Israel felt embarrassed and ashamed by Moses's delay and therefore they acted in a way that turned out to be a symbol of what we should have never done, put our trust on a golden calf.

May God always gift us with the vision and the patience for us not to rush into judgment. May we avoid building golden calves in our own lives.

Shabbat Shalom!

Rabbi Eliseo D. Rozenwasser