

**Rabbi Sharyn Perlman
Parshat Ki Tissa Sermon
Feb. 19, 2022**

“This Has Happened to Me, and I Don’t Like It!”

Shabbat Shalom, Friends.

Let’s take a deep dive into one of the important lessons we learn from the sin of the Golden Calf, and how that lesson affects us at TBI.

According to the Torah (Ex 31:18), Moshe has been on top of the mountain for 40 days, where “God’s finger” has inscribed the words of the 10 Commandments on two stone tablets.

The people have been waiting for their leader to return. Before he ascended the mountain, Moshe told the Israelites that he would return on the 40th day. There seems to have been some confusion about whether or not to count the day he left as the first day, or maybe they didn’t count the “travel time.”

Whatever it was, the people miscounted, and begin to panic when Moshe didn’t return. They saw him go up onto a smoldering mountain, and they’re terrified that their leader has died.

They cry out to Moshe’s brother, Aharon, who was left in charge. Aharon realizes he has to do something, so, very reluctantly, he helps the people build the golden calf.

Meanwhile, Moshe is still on top of the mountain – very much alive. But God, Who sees the people worshipping the golden calf, is Angry, and tells Moshe, go down and see what *your* people has done (Ex. 32:8).

Moshe descends from the mountain, sees the Golden Calf: “And he cast the tablets out of his hands, and broke them beneath the mountain” (Ex 32:19).

*Every time I read this, I hope for a different ending. It’s like watching *The Titanic* over and over, and thinking, maybe this time it won’t sink.*

There are many *midrashim* and explanations about what exactly happened.

One that really speaks to me is found in Pesikta d’Rav Eliezer. Moshe is described as a man in his 80s, who was able to carry the heavy stone tablets down the mountain with ease.

How did he this? The *midrash* says that each letter was written by God, and therefore had its own Spiritual Energy, which gave Moshe the strength to carry the heavy stone tablets.

But when he approached the camp, and saw the people worshipping the Golden Calf, the letters couldn’t bear the sight, and they flew off the tablets to return to Heaven and be with God.

Without the letters, and their Spiritual Energy, the stone tablets became unbearably heavy, slipped from Moshe’s hands, and shattered. The *midrash* is teaching us that Moshe could only bear his heavy burden as long as he had God’s Spiritual Energy helping him.

I think many of us can relate to this. Sometimes, we can feel so overwhelmed by our burdens that the only way we can get through the day is if we rely on God's Spiritual Energy.

After the tablets were shattered, Moshe ascends Mt. Sinai for another 40 days, and brings down a second set of tablets. But the Torah never tells us: what happened to the broken fragments from the first tablets?

The Talmud teaches, "The tablets, and the fragments of the tablets, were placed in the Ark" (B. Bava Batra 14b), referring to the ark that the Israelites carried with them as they traveled through the desert for 40 years.

The Talmud teaches us that the tablets, which were holy because God created them, are still holy, even though they are broken.

Too often, our inclination is to discard that which is broken – including people. From the Rabbis' discussion in the Talmud, we learn that each person is holy – even someone plagued by addiction, or who no longer has the same emotional and cognitive abilities they once had. We are all created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the Image of God, and we are all inherently holy.

The Israelites carried both the broken tablets, as well as the unbroken second set, in the Ark. It's a beautiful image – brokenness and wholeness co-existing side by side.

The *Reishit Chochma*, a Kabbalistic work written in the 16th century, teaches that the holy Ark is a symbol of our heart – our hearts are holy, precisely because they contain both our wholeness and our brokenness. When we confront our brokenness, and acknowledge our vulnerability, that's how we help our hearts to heal.

That's my takeaway from the sin of the Golden Calf.

So, full disclosure:

I developed this idea while I was in rabbinical school; Ki Tissa was my senior sermon.

At the Jewish Theological Seminary, the senior sermon is a rite of passage for every senior in the rabbinical school. Not only do we invite our family and friends, but we speak in front of our deans, professors, mentors, and the JTS student body. It's a big deal.

My senior sermon was four years ago, on Monday afternoon, February 26, 2018.

Exactly one week before, on the Monday of President's Day, I had a horrible accident. I was getting over the flu, and I was finally beginning to feel like myself again. I got up in the middle of the night, passed out, and hit my face on the tile floor. My husband took me to the ER, where I got 20 stitches – both inside and outside my mouth.

I was broken – physically – because I was horribly disfigured and swollen.

And I was also broken spiritually.

I remember thinking, how am I going to get through delivering my senior sermon in one week? I thought, well, I'll just cover it up, not mention it to anyone. It's private. No one has to know.

But then I decided it might be a good idea to let the rabbinical school deans know what happened. And I had to email my professors, to let them know that I would be attending my classes virtually all week, because there was no way I was going to be seen in public until the swelling subsided.

Sending those emails was a *huge* leap out of my comfort zone, because sharing something so personal didn't come easily for me.

But you know what happened? Amazing things.

The dean called to see if there was any way he could be helpful. There was.

The associate dean called, and she suggested that I find a way to "use" the accident in my sermon. I did.

And my professors sent beautiful emails, full of empathy, asking if they could share what happened with my fellow classmates. They did.

And I was overwhelmed by the response: an outpouring of love, and care, and concern, and offers of help.

And I was stunned to realize how foolish it would have been for me to willingly forego all that warmth, caring, and support!

And in my moments of feeling overwhelmingly broken that week, I realized that offering our broken selves to family, friends, and community, is not a weakness; *it's a strength*.

When we share what's going on with others, we don't impose our burdens on them. Rather, like the Spiritual Energy in the letters on the stone tablets, sharing our story is what helps us bear our own burdens.

When we give up the veneer of perfection, and share our pain with others, we free ourselves from the prison of our own self-judgment, which is often the harshest and most critical.

Most important, when we learn how to practice self-compassion, we develop compassion for others.

When my daughter, Ariela, was five years old, we were at the park near our home in Montreal. She bumped her head and started crying. After a few minutes of my comforting her, she went to play by herself in the sandbox. But I saw her scowling, so I asked if her head still hurt. And my beautiful five-year-old looked up at me and said, "This has happened to me, and I don't like it!"

I get it.

We all face unanticipated traumas, but we don't have to face them alone.

Our shul is blessed with many *brachot*, and one of those blessings is our amazing Chesed/Bikkur Cholim committee. A group of wonderful and devoted volunteers who want to help by doing acts of *chesed*, lovingkindness.

I'm not a big believer of “things just happening” ...

Earlier this week, totally out of the blue, I was hit with a nasty stomach virus. I didn't mention it to anyone; my husband is a wonderful caregiver, and we were managing just fine.

But on Thursday morning, I got a text message from Rabbi Mishkin about some shul business, and I shared with him that I was down with a stomach bug. He immediately texted back, saying that he wanted to bring me chicken soup from Ben's, and asked if there was anything else we wanted.

I was blown away; first, because I was just thinking that after two days of feeling yucky, I should have some chicken soup! And second, because that little text – “I'd like to do something to help” – that simple act of *chesed*, was *so* appreciated.

That's what the TBI *chesed* committee is about – angels who do God's work, by helping us when we need help. But they can't do their *chesed*, if they don't know you need something.

Four years ago, when I gave my senior sermon, I had to learn how to say, “This has happened to me, and I don't like it.” And this week, as I was preparing this sermon, I needed to learn that lesson again.

So, I'm asking, reminding, cajoling each of you, to *please go out of your comfort zone, and let people know when you need help*. And if you know of someone else who needs help, please let me or Rabbi Mishkin know, or any of the members of the Chesed committee.

Remember: *Asking for help is not a sign of weakness, it's a sign of strength*. And it also helps create community. Because when you ask for help, you enable people to do the *mitzvah* of helping you. It's a win-win for everyone.

May we be blessed to not need help. But when we do, may we be blessed with the courage and the strength to say, “This has happened to me and, and I don't like it, but I need your help.”

And may God help us open our broken hearts, because when we do, we never know what love, what *chesed*, and what humanity, rushes in.

Prayer of Gratitude for Thanksgiving

TBI 7th Grade

Nov. 21, 2021

Prayer of Gratitude for Thanksgiving

Blessed are You, God.

We are grateful for family and friends.

Thank you for food and water.

Thank you for safe shelter.

Thank you for our education.

Thank you for the feeling of home.

We are grateful for the gift of life.

Thank you for keeping us clothed.

Thank you for filling our homes with love

Thank you for making me, me.

We are grateful for always having enough.

Thank you for giving us different interests.

Thank you for the love of a pet.

Thank you, God, for the creation of the world and all that is in it!

Ameyn!!

This beautiful and thoughtful “Prayer of Gratitude for Thanksgiving” was written as a cooperative class effort by TBI Hebrew High Students, guided by Rabbi Sharyn Perlman, the week before Thanksgiving. We’re so proud of the values shared by our TBI High students!

A Prayer of Gratitude for Thanksgiving

Hi God.

Thank You for everything You have given us.

Thank You for family.

Thank You for giving us life.

We are grateful for being able to have what we need.

Thank You for the ability to learn new things every day.

Thank You for all the opportunities You give us.

We are grateful for a safe place to live.

Thank You for entertainment and sports.

Thank You for the ability to make friends and have friends and BFFs.

For all this and more, we thank YOU!