

Ki Tisa / Parah, 5781
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The frequent coincidence of Parashat Ki Tisa, which describes the calamitous sin of the Golden Calf, and Parashat Parah, which details the elusive ritual of the Red Heifer, was not lost upon our sages. The Midrash analogizes the relationship between these two bovines to the relationship between a mother and her young child. Just as a mother may clean up the mess made by her child in the king's palace, the adult Red Heifer atones for the spiritual stain made by the Golden Calf:

אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא תבא פרה ותכפר על מעשה העגל
The Holy One Blessed be He said: Let the cow come and atone for the act of the calf
(Pesikta Rabbati 14:1)

Ktav Sofer suggests that the relationship between these two animals runs deeper than their mere species. The great tragedy of the Golden Calf stemmed from the basic human drive towards conformity and acceptance. The emerging Jewish nation ignored its own moral compass and succumbed to the pressures and taunts of the ערב רב, the group of foreigners that accompanied them from Egypt, proclaiming to them from the outside, “אלה אלוהיך ישראל” -- *this is your god, O Israel*. The Jewish nation's failure to listen to its inner sense of right and wrong in the face of external goading resulted in calamity that would tarnish history forever. As a rectification for this sin, G-d provided the Red Heifer, an enigmatic ritual that defies rational logic and naturally incurs the ridicule of others:

לפי שהשטן ואומות העולם מונין את ישראל לומר מה המצוה הזאת ומה טעם יש בה

For the Evil Inclination and the nations of the world mock Israel, saying what is this commandment, what rationale is there for it? (Rashi Bamidbar 19:2)

The Red Heifer atones for the Golden Calf by providing a deliberate opportunity for a Jew to defy the impulse to conform. Even if others mock him or her for this practice, he or she steadfastly serves G-d in calm and perfect faith, prioritizing inner conviction over external approbation. In doing so, a Jew rectifies the root character deficiency underlying the sin of the Golden Calf. There is no greater source of atonement than this.

What the Golden Calf revealed on the population level is equally true on the individual level. One of the most difficult challenges we face every day of our lives is to not betray ourselves. When we find ourselves constantly looking outwards -- considering how we are projecting ourselves towards others, seeking constant approval and reinforcement from the outside world -- we demonstrate cruelty to ourselves, and lose sight of our soul's unique mission

in this world. The Jewish tradition teaches that we are most fully alive when our outside actions reveal our inner Divine soul. But when we submit to the wills and satisfactions of other people against our own better judgment, we end up living a false self.

Self-betrayal is rewarded handsomely by society, no doubt. There are plenty of lucrative promotions, prestigious school admissions, and coveted news writeups waiting for individuals who are ready to compromise on their inner truth for the sake of approval. There are plenty of “friends” who will be glad to include someone who is willing to silence his or her embarrassing inner voice for the sake of approval. But ultimately, no amount of money, prestige, or acceptance can ever compensate for the feeling of existential loneliness that follows our self-abandonment. As a teacher of mine once observed, the reality of this world is that conflict and disapproval of someone are ultimately inevitable. If we try to avoid conflict and disapproval from everyone else, we will ultimately develop them within ourselves.

While our Sages underscore the importance of a “שם טוב” -- *good name*, it must never come at the expense of listening to our true selves. People-pleasing is one of the deeply rooted tendencies of the evil inclination, and a good number of the mistaken decisions and regrets that we experience in life may be traced back to this impulse going unchecked. Many good and honest people have found themselves enmeshed in scandals that are simply not them, through the basic inability to incur the disapproval of others who made unethical requests of them. Others have awakened at some point during their adult years, recognizing that so much of the life they have lived has been a lie -- serving only to incur the approval and admiration of others -- and are filled with a sense of frustration and remorse. The approval of others ultimately does little to sustain us. The more that we can come to recognize our own value and worth, the less we will feel a need to artificially feed it through others.

In the spirit of the Ktav Sofer’s elucidation, the Novardok Mussar movement of pre-World War II Europe was known for encouraging its students to engage in practices of deliberate self-effacement in front of others. Classically, a student would be encouraged to enter a hardware store and ask to purchase a fish, intentionally incurring ridicule and degradation from the store owner and onlookers. While one might expect such repeated exercises to lead to depression and low self-esteem, it has been said that the opposite was true: students of Novardok actually lived the happiest of lives. Their extreme practices trained them to not be overly concerned with the perceptions or approval of others. Freed from the shackles of people-pleasing, they lived a life of contentment and peace, with genuine connections to the people who mattered in their lives, and an unwavering belief that they were living lives that were true to themselves. Whether one chooses to adopt the specific practices of Novardok or not, Novardok’s ideology, along with Parashat Ki Tisa and Parashat Parah, are all welcome reminders of the dangers that come from abandoning ourselves for the approval of others. As new movements in the western world appear quicker and quicker to ridicule anyone who chooses

to disagree with them, let us never cave to the pressure of the mob, and recommit to remaining faithful to ourselves and our G-d. Fads and ideologies will always come and go like the wind, but our inner truth lives forever.