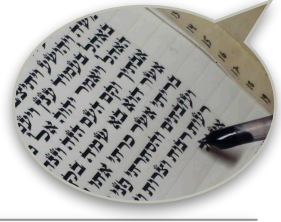




The Collective Conversation

Weekly Torah Essays from the
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community



Sefer Shemot

Parshat Ki Tisa • Shabbat Parah

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All That is Gold Does Not Glitter

- Lord of the Rings

By Yaron Weitzman

In his week's *parsha* we read about the story of *egel hazahav*, which leads to a very obvious and often-asked question: How could the Israelites, after being freed from slavery, and after witnessing a miracle as awe-inspiring as the splitting of the Red Sea, so quickly turn away from God?

First, let's recap how we get to the golden calf. It starts with *Moshe* traveling up *Har Sinai* to hear from God. It's there he'll receive the Ten Commandments. The problem is that *Moshe's* gone for a while and while he's gone the Israelites grow scared and impatient.

וַיֵּרָא הָעָם כִּי בִשֵּׁשׁ מִשֶּׁה לָרֶדֶת מִן־הָהָר וַיִּקְהֵל הָעָם עַל־אַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו קוּם עֲשֵׂה־לָנוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר יֵלְכוּ לִפְנֵינוּ כִּי־זֶה | מִשֶּׁה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלֵנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לֹא יָדַעְנוּ מַה־הָיָה לוֹ

When the people saw that Moses was late in coming down from the mountain, the people gathered against Aaron, and they said to him: "Come on! Make us gods that will go before us, because this man Moses, who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we don't know what has become of him."

You know what happens from here. *Aharon* instructs the people to hand over their gold earrings and builds a golden calf. Then, *On the next day they arose early, offered up burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings, and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and they got up to make merry.*

This causes God to interrupt his pow-wow with *Moshe*. Go, He tells *Moshe*, descend, for your people that you have brought up from the land of Egypt have acted corruptly. God then threatens to destroy the Israelites. *Moshe*, however, does some negotiating (read: begging) on his people's behalf, descends the mountain, smashes the two tablets, burns the calf to the ground, makes the people drink the melted gold, 3,000 men are killed via sword and then, yada yada yada, the Israelites are back on the path to the land of milk and honey.

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OK, so back to our original question: Why were the Israelites able to so quickly abandon their faith? Or, to quote Nechama Leibowitz, z"l, "How was it conceivable that forty days after the Sinai Revelation, with the commandments, 'I am the Lord,' and, 'Though shall have no other Gods but Me' still ringing in their ears, they could seek other Gods?"

Different *mefarshim* offer different answers to this question. Some blame *Aharon* for poor leadership. Others talk about how hard it was for the Israelites to break their slave mentality. But I like Leibowitz's answer most:

"Miracles, however awe-inspiring, cannot change human nature. They can only momentarily shake the human soul out of its everyday concepts, but they cannot in themselves effect a lasting transformation." Leibowitz adds, "One single religious experience, however profound, was not capable of changing the people from idol worshippers into monotheists. Only a prolonged disciplining in the precepts of the Torah directing every moment of their existence could accomplish that. The all-embracing character of the Torah's observances regulating the individual's relations with himself, family, and society constitute the surest guarantee against moral relapses."

We can connect this to a thought Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l, discusses in his book, "Studies in Spirituality." According to Rabbi Sacks, the reason God

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commanded *Moshe* to instruct the Israelites to build the *Mishkan*—an instruction we also read about in this week's *parsha*—is because *Moshe* "pleaded with God to come closer to the people, so that they would encounter Him, not only at unrepeatable moments in the form of miracles but regularly, on a daily basis." This, in the view of Rabbi Sacks, "is the ongoing miracle of Jewish spirituality. No religion has ever held God higher, but none has ever felt Him closer." And, as pointed out by Sacks, humans considering themselves "close" to God was once a revolutionary concept.

That we read this *parsha* between *Purim* and *Pesach* is appropriate. Both holidays represent the sort of big miracles that are easy to commemorate and celebrate and which serve as the foundation of our faith. But it's also important to remember that living a Jewish life, building a Jewish home, and raising a Jewish family—things that can mean different things to different people— isn't something that can be just flipped on for the holidays. It takes finding our personal versions of the *Mishkan* in our daily lives and using that to connect with God. In other words: It takes work. But that's the case with most things worthy of pursuing. And it's only after that work that we receive the payoff.

Yaron lives in the community with his two kids, Maayan and Lior, and wife, Micole, who told him it was very, very wrong to insert a "yada yada yada" into a vort.

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