

Good Shabbos, everyone

Thank you to the *drasha* sponsors:

- Judy and Tommy Weiss, in memory of Judy's mother, Rachel Paschkusz, whose *yahrzeit* is the 24<sup>th</sup> of Adar. May her *neshama* have an *aliyah*.

May the sponsors be rewarded for their support of the shul with *bracha* and *hatzlacha* and good health!

I want to thank everyone who helped make last weekend's "matching campaign" an unbelievable success! The Sunday evening program was a wonderful celebration of the shul, as well as a beautiful tribute to Chavie Klein, a'h, for her inspiring life, and to Ezri and Zahava Klein for carrying on her legacy, with all they do for the shul and the community. I want to thank our President, Kenny Friedman, and everyone who was a part of this important initiative—the volunteers, matchers, and donors. It was an incredible display of unity and *chizuk*. May Shomrei continue to thrive for many years to come!

It is hard to believe that a year has gone by since COVID19 began to directly affect our community. Last year erev Parshas Ki Sisa, we announced that the shul would be open in a limited fashion over Shabbos and would fully close on Sunday morning, after Shacharis. Together with all the other Baltimore shuls and schools, we remained closed for several months. It was a difficult year, but looking back we know that the drastic steps we took helped keep our members and community safe. We should be proud that we took the difficult, but necessary steps to put safety first.

In the *drasha* I sent out the week after we closed, I wrote: *...this [the closing of shuls] should not be taken as a statement that we need to daven less. The opposite is true...we need to daven more. Our acts of hishtadlus, following the recommendation of the medical community and public health experts, must be done together with bitachon, turning to Hashem in this eis tzara... during this time of hester panim, of confusion and darkness. We must recognize that Hashem can end this terrible mageifa, k'heref ayin, in the blink of an eye. Rav Hutner, in a powerful letter, recounts that Dr. Moshe Wallach of Shaarei Tzedek Hospital in Yerushalayim used to say tehillim for patients before he operated. Similarly, Chazal composed a tefilla for taking medication יהי רצון שתהא עסק זה לרפואה ותרפאני "may it be Your will that this medication should help heal and You shall heal me..." At this eis tzara, when we have been called to do hishtadlus that is almost unthinkable, to protect public health--to close our precious shuls and schools, to isolate ourselves in our homes--we must also turn to Hashem like never before. It is absolutely necessary, together with hishtadlus. We must strengthen our tefillos, our talmud Torah, our tzedakah, and our chesed...*

As I reflect upon the past year, I am proud that, as a shul, we did indeed strengthen our *tefillos*, *talmud Torah*, *tzedakah* and *chesed*. Baruch Hashem, through the miracle of modern science, we are now seeing the light at the end of the tunnel. Baruch Hashem, many in our community were already able to receive the vaccine. People are returning to shul. Slowly, things are improving and returning to normal. But we are not out of the woods yet. And, at this time, after a whole year has gone by, and unfortunately more than 533,000 people have died in the United States alone, and more than 2.5 million people have died worldwide, our thoughts and prayers remain with all those who lost loved ones over the past year, and we daven for a *refuah shleima* to all who are still suffering from COVID19. May Hashem end this *mageifa* soon, and restore safety and security, and heal all the sick, amen!

A year later, we must take stock, and look very honestly at where we have been...and how we have changed from this. How have we have grown from this challenging experience?

Pesach is coming...it will be here before we know it. At our *sedarim*, we will begin by asking the famous question מה נשתנה הלילה הזה, why, or how is this night different? I once heard an interpretation of this phrase *derech drush* מה נשתנה מהלילה הזה, "what will change **from** experiencing this night?" The

fundamental question that frames our *seder* is: how will this Pesach night experience transform us? Will we be any different when we put away our Pesach dishes at the end of the holiday?

A lot of work goes into preparing for Pesach. There are specific requirements and dietary restrictions. But after it ends, will anything remain? **Will we be different?**

**Rabbi Jonathan Sacks** wrote:

*“do you know why it is that China lasted so long? Because the Chinese ideogram for crisis also means opportunity. And when a country and a civilization sees a crisis as an opportunity, it is not derailed, it is energized by crisis. Now, there is only one language I know that goes one better than Chinese, and that is Hebrew. Anyone know what the Hebrew word for crisis is? It is mashber. Now, do you know what the word mashber originally meant? It meant a birthing stool. Every crisis, for Jews, is chevlei leida, something new is being born.”*

And this is a question we must ask ourselves on the anniversary of the beginning of these unprecedented times...what have we learned...what new insights...resilience...character traits have we developed?

This perspective--using crisis and challenge as a growth opportunity--helps explain a challenging concept we are confronted with in today's Parsha. Every year, when we read Parshas Ki Sisa, and recount the *cheit ha-egel*, the sin of the golden calf, which occurred just weeks after *Mattan Torah*—I feel so disappointed. For the past several weeks, we have been reading about the progress and development of the new emerging Jewish nation—a slave nation that had fallen to the 49<sup>th</sup> level of *tumah*. . .but was finally picking themselves up, steadily getting themselves back on their feet.

We read proudly of the Jewish people following Hashem's commandment to put blood of the *korban Pesach* on their doors, at great risk to their own lives. This was an important first step for the Jewish people.

We read about the Jews following God into the wilderness, with only enough food for a short while. As the Navi Yirmiyahu praised them

ירמיהו פרק ב פסוק ב

(ב) הָלֹךְ וְגִקְרָאתְךָ בְּאֶזְנֵי יְרוּשָׁלַם לְאֹמֵר כֹּה אָמַר יְקֻנֵּךְ זִכְרָתִי לְךָ חֶסֶד נְעוּרֶיךָ אֲהַבֵּת כְּלוּלֶתְךָ לְכַתֹּף אַחֲרַי בְּמִדְבָּר בְּאַרְץ לֹא זְרוּעָה:  
*Go proclaim to Jerusalem: Thus said the LORD: I accounted to your favor The devotion of your youth, Your love as a bride— How you followed Me in the wilderness, In a land not sown.*

We read about the Jewish people uniting to receive the Torah—כאיש אחד בלב אחד, united and committed.

Everything seems to be going so well. . .it seems like they are really going to make it. . .and then disaster strikes...the *cheit ha-egel*.

Do we really have to read about this low point? Do we have to be reminded of it every year?

Why is it even mentioned in the Torah? Not only does the Torah mention it, but we are specifically told that we must always remember it.

דברים פרק ט:ז (ז) זכר אל תשכח את אשר הקצפת את ה' אלהיך במדבר למן היום אשר יצאת מארץ מצרים עד באכם עד המקום הזה ממרים הייתם עם ה':

*Remember, do not forget, how you provoked God, your God, in the wilderness; from the day that you left the land of Egypt until you came to this place, you have been disobedient with God.*

The **Malbim** understands that Parshas Parah, which according to Chazal is the remedy for the sin of the *cheit ha-egel*, is actually a fulfillment of this Torah Mitzva to never forget this incident.

What emerges is an important insight into the nature of our holiest book, the Torah, and an insight into our worldview in general—how to deal with the past. The Torah is not a fairy tale, filled with only the nice things the Jewish people did and the positive experiences that happened to our people. It gives us an honest accounting, through a genuine portrayal of real people, with their real mistakes and character flaws, real incidents, some painful and embarrassing. The Torah does not whitewash mistakes or painful memories, and we are specifically encouraged not to forget them, either.

On Holocaust Memorial Day, last year, **Rabbi Jonathan Sacks** gave the following speech: *Time and again the Bible uses the word Zachor, remember; and that is what we do today, on International Holocaust Memorial Day. We remember the victims of the Holocaust...*

*Why is it important to remember? Because memory of the evils of the past is the best way of avoiding evils in the future. We cannot bring the dead back to life, but we can ensure that they did not die in vain. Those who forget may repeat. Those who remember know that we have to find another way.*

*One of the greatest privileges of my life has been coming to know Holocaust survivors. . . They had walked, each one of them, through the valley of the shadow of death, yet never have I met people with such a tenacious hold on life.*

*But what I found most moving was the way in recent years they have shared their memories with others, especially with children, the builders of our future. I can hardly begin to understand the courage it takes to relive the pain of those nightmare years. Yet they have done so ...*

***What they've wanted to say is: don't take freedom for granted; cherish it. Don't take prejudice for granted; challenge it. Don't stand by in the face of violence and hate; defend the defenceless and show them they are not alone.***

*Evil happens when people let it happen, and our best defense against it is never to forget where evil leads. That is why International Holocaust Memorial Day was established, and why today, 75 years after the liberation of Auschwitz, we remember what once was, and pray for the strength to ensure that never may such things happen again.*

**George Orwell**, in his classic work *1984* warned of a world in which  
“*The past was erased, the erasure was forgotten, the lie became the truth.*”

While we understand why something as colossal as the Holocaust needs to be remembered, why must we remember the *cheit ha-egel*? Is it even relevant to our times? Why remember everything?

I believe the answer to this is found in a **Gemara in Bava Basra 14b** שברי לוחות מונחין בארון

The broken *luchos*, which Moshe smashed when he saw the Jewish people dancing around the golden calf--were kept **together** with the new *luchos* in the *aron hakodesh*.

Although instinctively, the Jews probably would rather have hidden the broken *luchos*, or buried them in the ground like *shaimos*, Hashem required them to be kept with the new *luchos*. Why?

It must be that **the lessons we can learn from the broken *luchos* are just as valuable as the lessons to learn from the second *luchos*.**

**Rabbeinu Gershon** points out, based on the dimensions of the *aron*, that

שברי לוחות מונחין בארון תחת השלימות.

the *shivrei luchos* (the broken *luchos*) were underneath the new *luchos*. **This symbolizes not only their importance; but that our mistakes can become the foundation of success.**

תלמוד בבלי יומא פ"ו ע"ב: [ה] אמר ריש לקיש גדולה תשובה שזדונות נעשות לו כזכיות...

**Reish Lakish**, one of the greatest Amoraim and also a famous Baal Teshuva, who became observant as an adult, teaches that when one does *teshuva*, his past mistakes can become merits. This sounds strange, but, he is teaching an important lesson. There are two ways to deal with a difficult past, once

we have persevered and moved past the difficulty or the mistake. One way is to forget or erase the past. To hit delete on that part of our lives. **The other way is to learn from the mistake—build upon it; refine yourself and grow from the experience—use it to advance and mature—and not pretend the mistake never happened.**

In that way, the mistakes of the past can become the foundation of a successful future.

It was this argument that Moshe Rabbeinu used to convince Hashem to spare the Jews after the *cheit ha-egel*. Moshe told Hashem and the Jewish people that by learning about themselves from the *cheit ha-egel*—they could grow—be better—be stronger and more spiritual—and this experience could help with future success.

Hashem mentions to Moshe three times that the character trait that led the Jewish people to worship the *egel* was עם קשה עורף, stubbornness—an inability to get past their previous mode of worship—idolatry—and an inability to change and adapt to the new reality their faith now dictated.

Yet, in an interesting twist, Moshe Rabbeinu, while defending the Jewish people, states emphatically that they are stubborn—and that is why you should forgive them.

שמות פרק לד שמות פרק לד

(ט) ויאמר אם נא מצאתי חן בעיניך אדני ילך נא אדני בקרבנו כי עם קשה ערף הוא וסלחת לעווננו ולחטאתנו ונחלתנו:

That is God's argument to destroy them. How is Moshe now using it as a defense?

ר' חיים פלטיאל שמות פרשת כי תשא פרק לד פסוק ט תלמיד של מהר"ם מרוטנברג אלף ה' 13 גרמניה  
ד"א הזכיר זכותם כי עם קשה עורף לפשוט צוארם על יחוד השם.

**Rav Chaim Paltiel**, a student of the Mahara"m MiRottenberg, explains that Moshe was telling Hashem—yes, the Jewish people made a mistake; yes, they are stubborn—but I have confidence that they can use this experience to learn for the future, and to grow from that very character trait that led them to the *egel*. If you give them a chance, they will prove to be equally stubborn about their *emunah* in Hashem.

This is Moshe's message to Hashem—the trademark stubbornness can be used for the positive—to cling to Hashem. The Jewish people can refine themselves by learning from their experiences with the *cheit ha-egel*.

In light of this explanation, it seems clear why the Torah tells us to read about the mistake of the *cheit ha-egel*. In Yiddishkeit, we do not believe in revising or changing or whitewashing our history. Instead, we read about it—**all of it**--to learn about ourselves—to learn about our character and to learn from our mistakes. We believe in the idea: *Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it*. But more than that—beyond just not repeating it—**we can grow from our past**—we try to refine ourselves by learning lessons and learning about ourselves from studying the past.

During this difficult year, we have learned a lot. We have learned what it means to need others. We have learned about the power of *chesed*, about *emunah*--our reliance on Hashem, about the centrality of shul and community. We have learned to appreciate many things we have long taken for granted. We have discovered a strength of character deep within ourselves, and have worked on our spiritual growth during this challenging time. May we use this challenge and crisis as a *mashber* to spur us to continued growth and to live lives where we appreciate all the gifts Hashem bestows upon us and find ways to dedicate ourselves to helping others. May we merit to see the day when this challenge will be behind us, and may Hashem restore us to the ideal times *חדש ימינו כקדם*, with a return to *Yerushalayim habenuya... bimhera viyameinu...amen*.