

Parshat Ki Tisa 5780

There are some significant themes in *Ki Tissa* from which to choose a topic for a D'Var Torah: *Parshat Parah*, *Chet ha'eigel*, the giving of the first and second set of *Luchot* to mention but three. The focus I have selected are four *passukim* that otherwise might be glossed over and which serve a purpose to heighten the drama of what was to come. They separate the dialogue between G-d and Moses on top of the mountain and Moses reaction to the activities after seeing the golden calf at the camp beneath.

The first two verses describe the *Luchot*, namely that there were "... written on both sides; on the one side and on the other were they written. Now the *Luchot* were the handiwork of G-d, and the writing was the writing of G-d, graven upon the *Luchot*" (Ch32 v15-v16).

The question is asked why this description is not at the end of the last chapter, where chronologically Moses actually received them? "*He gave Moses, when he had finished speaking with him on Mt Sinai; the two Luchot of the testimony, Luchot of stone written with the finger of G-d*" Ch31 v18.

There are many examples which suggest an issue of chronology in a biblical text, to which the usual response is, "There is no earlier or later in the Torah". This expression is first found in Mekhilta Shirata 7 referring to the order of verses in the Song at the Sea as well as in Sifre Bemidbar 64, which notes that Ch9 carries the date "*the first month of the second year*" while Barmidbar Ch1 records events that occurred "*in the second month*" of that year. This principle suggests that while chronology is the most frequent criterion for the organisation of Torah material, often we must search for other, non-chronological criteria that give meaning to the order or juxtaposition of texts in the Torah. In our example Ramban suggests that the non-chronological description of the making of the *Luchot* was specified at this juncture to stress their sacrosanct nature and throw into sharp relief the awesome nature of the deed that was to come.

The second two verses form a separate paragraph describing the meeting between Moses and Joshua at the foot of the mountain at some distance from the camp. We know from the end of *Mishpatim* that Joshua accompanied Moses until he began to ascend the mountain. Now we learn that Joshua remained for the whole 40-day period at the foot of the mountain, while waiting for Moses to return to camp.

These two verses report a brief but puzzling conversation between the two, where Joshua guesses the cause of the noise from the camp: "*When Joshua heard the sound of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses 'there is the sound of a battle in the*

camp'. And he said, 'not the sound of a song of mastery nor the sound of a song of defeat, a singing sound do I hear'". Ch32 v17-v18

It seems that Joshua, who had no knowledge of the golden calf, offers an opinion on the source of the sound to Moses - who had already been told by G-d of the *Bnei Yisrael's* activities while he was on the mountain. Indeed, the Abarvanel understands Moses response 'not the sound of a song of mastery' as a contradiction to Joshua's understanding of the noise but leaves us asking why Moses did not explain what it actually was. Ramban's explanation seems to go a little further, noting that if Moses could differentiate between different kinds of noises (i.e. the song of mastery and the song of defeat), he nevertheless said that it was a noise of song that was inaudible to him because in his great humility he did not tell Joshua the unvarnished truth, and speak disparagingly of Israel. For that reason, Ramban comments that Moses tells Joshua it was the noise of merriment.

Ramban's explanation of Moses' conduct seems to be consistent with other examples where he tried to make allowances for Israel's behaviour. Moses did not want to criticise *Bnei Yisrael* unless it was for the purpose of teaching them a lesson to improve themselves. Therefore he was reluctant to let Joshua have the "latest news" of their disgrace.

The Ibn Ezra quoting the Saadya Gaon takes an alternative interpretation, namely that the *va-yomer* in the beginning of v18 indicates a pause in the speech, with Joshua continuing to speak afterwards. Therefore, Joshua opened by voicing his misgivings at the sound coming from the camp by suggesting that enemies were attacking. He waited for Moses to reply, but Moses kept silent. Joshua strained his ear to catch the sound coming from the camp and corrected his first impression as if half thinking aloud: 'well if it's not this, and not the other; it is evidently that'. Once again Moses did not react, neither confirming nor denying his conclusions but rather keeping his anger to himself.

So, given that these verses seem irrelevant to the forthcoming episode of the *Chet ha'eigel*, commentators have been curious as to its purpose. Nehama Leibowitz proposes this as another example of creating more tension before the next episode. The latter two verses express Moses' inner suffering, shock, and indignation, his inability to find words to express his feelings. He could find no time to pay attention to his loyal disciple who had waited so patiently for 40 nights. Moses did not turn to him or reply to him but was wrapped in his silence focusing on the task ahead – passing judgement on the sinners.