

Ki Tissa – 5783

When we read Torah, as we do, from week to week, we tend to lose track of time and lose the continuity of the story. I think though, for purposes of studying somewhat in depth, the lessons of this week's parsha, it would be beneficial to take a longer view back as we move forward in the story. The commentary in Eitz Chaim suggests remembering that we are looking at events that occurred over a few short weeks. During that span of time, the Children of Israel have gone from slavery in Egypt to the witnessing the miracle of the parting of the Sea of Reeds and the drowning of the Egyptians as they chased their former slaves into the desert. From there, this new nation of Israel has gone to Mount Sinai where their leader, the one who commanded them to prepare for the Exodus, stretched out his hand over the waters of the Sea of Reeds, and then watched as Pharaoh and his army were drowned by the returning waters. Moses has led them to Mount Sinai where he has ascended and been gone for not days but weeks.

While Moses was on the mountain listening to the word of God and receiving the Ten Commandments, he was also told about the building of the Mishkan or Tabernacle and the roles of the priests and the Levites. Now, in these last few chapters of Shemot, HaShem no sooner tells Moses how Aaron and his sons are to be anointed then, we learn through His words that Aaron has allowed the people waiting below to make a Golden Calf. Various midrashim explain that, as I pointed out in my Davar Torah two weeks ago, the Israelites are not ready yet to accept the idea of a god who is all powerful and everywhere but lacking in physicality. The Egyptian gods had their power in inanimate things – temples, sphinxes, pyramids, idols. Without Moses to convince them otherwise, they plead with Aaron to make them a golden calf so that they can embody it with the power of their new god.

Moses has been gone so long that they require that to lessen their anxiety. Aaron commits the incomprehensible and unforgiveable act by collecting gold and making the calf. But HaShem commits the next incomprehensible and unforgiveable act by telling Moses and telling Moses that he wants nothing to do with this stiff-necked people and wants to withdraw from the contract. He calls for death and Moses begs HaShem to spare the Israelites that end because then it will only give the Egyptians cause for celebration. He does not beg on behalf of the people the way Abraham bargained at Sodom for the life of the minority who have not erred. But now Moses commits the third incomprehensible and unforgiveable act by hastening down the mountain and proceeding to break the tablets in a fit of anger because now he sees the reality of what the people have done. He calls for death in the camp and then HaShem follows with a plague. In the end, untold thousands have been eliminated.

In her Davar Torah this week, which our weekly eMessage links to in Torah Sparks, Bex Stern-Rosenblatt focusses on these Incomprehensible and seemingly unforgivable acts and poses a very important and meaningful question. She asks if her readers have ever committed an act so contrary to good and moral behaviour that the guilt can sometimes be overwhelming. She points to Aaron's agreeing to build the golden calf, to HaShem's fit of anger and threat to cancel the contract with the Jewish people, which was first made with Abraham, and to Moses who broke the tablets and called for death in the camp. She argues that this high drama is resolved for all parties and for all of us when we feel guilty for sins committed by seeking grace. But what is this grace and how do we come by it?

Most of us know and understand what happens when a Catholic goes to Church and makes confession. WE can all call to mind visual reminders of what is confessed to when priest sits behind a cloth curtain and petitioner

bare his or her soul because we have seen it in the movies or read of it in books all our lives. It usually ends with the priest telling the confessor to say so many hail Mary's and to pray. We don't have a priest to intervene between ourselves and HaShem. We pray in the synagogue and of course, we have Yom Kippur when we are expected to not only confess our sins, one of which is that we are a stiff-necked people, and vow to not make the same mistakes or commit the same sins again.

I referred to our being a stiff-necked people because that is exactly what HaShem says to Moses. He tells him to tell the people they are so stiff-necked that if he was to go again in their midst, he would destroy them. At the end of our parsha this week, HaShem reminds his people through Moses when he rises again to the top of Mount Sinai of all the essential elements of the covenant HaShem made with the People of Israel and carves anew two tablets. When Moses descends this time, the face of Moses is radiant, the physical symbol of the grace of HaShem and every time he enters into the tabernacle to talk with HaShem the same thing happens. The lesson for us is that when we pray, when we, on our own, attempt to make amends for our sins, whether they be big or small, our voices and our actions will find favour with HaShem, We will redeem ourselves and find grace by confronting that which we know to be wrong and attempting to make things right, not just with the other person but with HaShem too. Divine grace or favour with HaShem is there for us when we seek it out.

In my mind, in Ki Tissa we are taught that not only was HaShem in search of man, but man was in search of Hashem and only when there is reciprocity will we find that which we seek. Grace radiates outwards when we work to fulfill our end of the bargain so hard won with HaShem. Shabbat shalom.