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Empowerment

President Richard M. Joel

Parshat Ki Tisa may be the most dramatic parsha in the Torah. Firstly, we build a Golden Calf. Then, Moshe asks to understand G-d's ways, only to be told that no human can fully grasp Hashem's grandeur. Soon thereafter, Moshe davens to Hashem and eventually we return to Divine grace and receive the second set of Luchot. If we read the parsha carefully, perhaps we can discern a central theme, which links many of the parsha's central episodes.

Parshat Ki Tisa is all about empowerment. The Torah is telling us that we must not be passive and wait for Revelation; we are responsible to partner with Hashem and perfect the world.

Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in his recently published book, *To Heal a Fractured World* (page 148-161) notes how central the theme of empowerment is in the Torah. There is a general progression in Torah from a vision of Hashem who is all-controlling to a vision of Hashem who empowers us to partner with Him and complete His creation. When we are preparing to cross the Yam Suf, we are initially told to stand still and that Hashem would fight for us. Immediately after crossing the Yam Suf, however, we once again face a battle, this time against Amalek. Unlike the impending battle against the Mitzrim at the shore of the Yam Suf, in this battle, we immediately take initiative. Although Moshe holds his arms up to focus our thoughts toward Hashem, we are the ones who fight the battle. In a similar vein, the Kedusha which descended upon Mount Sinai came entirely from Hashem. After Mount Sinai, however, we are told to build our own place of Kedusha, to take ordinary wood and gold and fashion it into a Mishkan. Interestingly, the Kedusha of the Mishkan, which we built ourselves, endured. In contrast, after the giving of the Torah, Mount Sinai lost all of its sanctity.

This same theme of empowerment can be seen by

contrasting the two sets of Luchot mentioned in our parsha. The first set of Luchot were fashioned completely by Hashem, as it is stated, "Stone tablets fashioned, written and hewn completely by Hashem." These Luchot were broken, and do not contribute to the Torah which we study today. The second Luchot, in contrast, were fashioned by Moshe Rabbeinu, as it says, "P'sol Lecha Shemei Lucot Avanim KaRishonim." Hashem instructs Moshe to hew the stone for the Luchot himself. Surprisingly, these second Luchot, which represent human involvement, were more permanent. As the Beis HaLevi notes, the way we must study Torah—through labor and exertion—is a direct outgrowth of the second set of Luchot.

There is yet another advantage of human initiative which is highlighted by the second Luchot. The Torah tells us how Moshe's face radiated with a special glow after he brought these Luchot down from Mount Sinai (Shemos 34:29). This glow was not present after Moshe delivered the first Luchot. Human involvement not only produces a more permanent Kedushah, but it changes us as well. As Rabbi Sacks notes, "We are changed, not by what we receive, but by what we do."

Perhaps this is part of the lesson of Moshe's perplexing conversation with Hashem (Shemos 33:18-23). After Moshe asks Hashem to reveal His splendor, he is told, that as a human, he is incapable of perceiving Hashem's glory. However, the story does not end there. Hashem tells Moshe to come and join Him on the rock. Perhaps the message is that as humans our job is not to see Hashem, but to see as Hashem sees. Our challenge is not to perceive the Divine in this world, but to make our vision more like the Divine vision. Or as my daughter Kira aptly puts it, "Our responsibility is not to move to another world, but to move this world."

How Leaders Fail

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

Leaders can fail for two kinds of reason. The first is external. The time may not be right. The conditions may be unfavourable. There may be no one on the other side to talk to. When British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan was asked what was the most difficult thing he had to deal with in government, he replied, “Events, dear boy, events.” Machiavelli called this Fortuna: the power of bad luck that can defeat even the greatest. Sometimes despite your best efforts, you fail. Such is life.

The second kind of failure is internal. A leader can simply lack the courage to lead. Sometimes leaders have to oppose the crowd. They have to say No when everyone else is crying Yes. That can be terrifying. Crowds have a will and momentum of their own. To say No may be to put your career, even your life, at risk. That is when courage is needed, and not showing it can constitute a moral failure of the worst kind.

The classic example is King Saul, who failed to carry out Samuel’s instructions in his battle against the Amalekites. Saul was told to spare no one and nothing. This is what happened, as told in 1 Samuel 15:

When Samuel reached him, Saul said, “The Lord bless you! I have carried out the Lord’s instructions.”

But Samuel said, “What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears? What is this lowing of cattle that I hear?”

Saul answered, “The soldiers brought them from the Amalekites; they spared the best of the sheep and cattle to sacrifice to the Lord your God, but we totally destroyed the rest.”

“Enough!” Samuel said to Saul. “Let me tell you what the Lord said to me last night.” “Tell me,” Saul replied.

Samuel said, “Although you may be small in your own eyes, are you not head of the tribes of Israel? The Lord anointed you king over Israel. And he sent you on a mission, saying, ‘Go and completely destroy those wicked people, the Amalekites; wage war against them until you have wiped them out.’ Why did you not obey the Lord? Why did you pounce on the plunder and do evil in the eyes of the Lord?”

“But I did obey the Lord,” Saul said. “I went on the mission the Lord assigned me. I completely destroyed the Amalekites and brought back Agag their king. The soldiers took sheep and cattle from the plunder, the best of what was devoted to God, in order to sacrifice them to the Lord your God at Gilgal.”

Saul makes excuses. The failure was not his; it was his soldiers’. Besides which, he and they had the best intentions. The sheep and cattle were spared to offer as sacrifices. Saul did not kill King Agag but brought him back as a prisoner. Samuel is unmoved. He says, “Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, He has rejected you as king.” Only then does Saul admit, “I have sinned.” But by then it was too late. His career as a leader was at an end.

There is an apocryphal quote attributed to several politicians: “Of course I follow the party. After all, I am their leader.” There are leaders who follow instead of leading. Rabbi Yisrael Salanter compared them to a dog taken by its master for a walk. The dog runs on ahead, but keeps turning around to see whether it is going in the direction the master wants it to go. The dog may think it is leading but actually it is following.

That, on a plain reading of the text, was the fate of Aaron in this week’s parsha. Moses had been up the mountain for forty days. The people were afraid. Had he died? Where was he? Without Moses they felt bereft. He was their point of contact with God. He performed the miracles, divided the Sea, gave them water to drink and food to eat. This is how the Torah describes what happened next:

When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered round Aaron and said, ‘Come, make us a god who will go before us. As for this man Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don’t know what has happened to him.’ Aaron answered them, ‘Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me.’ So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. He took what they handed him and he fashioned it with a tool and made it into a molten calf. Then they said, “This is your god, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.’ (Ex. 32: 1-4)

God became angry. Moses pleaded with Him to spare the people. He then descended the mountain, saw what had happened, smashed the tablets of the law he had brought down with him, burned the idol, ground it to powder, mixed it with water and made the Israelites drink it. Then he turned to Aaron his brother and said, “What have you done?”

“Do not be angry, my lord,” Aaron answered. “You know how prone these people are to evil. They said to me, ‘Make

us a god who will go before us. As for this man Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him.' So I told them, 'Whoever has any gold jewellery, take it off.' Then they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!" (Ex. 32: 22-24)

Aaron blamed the people. It was they who made the illegitimate request. He denied responsibility for making the calf. It just happened. "I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!" This is the same kind of denial of responsibility we recall from the story of Adam and Eve. The man says, "It was the woman." The woman says, "It was the serpent." It happened. It wasn't me. I was the victim not the perpetrator. In anyone such evasion is a moral failure; in a leader, all the more so.

The odd fact is that Aaron was not immediately punished. According to the Torah he was condemned for another sin altogether when, years later, he and Moses spoke angrily against the people complaining about lack of water: "Aaron will be gathered to his people. He will not enter the land I give the Israelites, because both of you rebelled against my command at the waters of Meribah" (Num. 20: 24).

It was only later still, in the last month of Moses' life, that Moses told the people a fact that he had kept from them until now:

I feared the anger and wrath of the Lord, for he was angry enough with you to destroy you. But again the Lord listened to me. And the Lord was angry enough with Aaron to destroy him, but at that time I prayed for Aaron too. (Deut. 9: 19-20)

God, according to Moses, was so angry with Aaron for the sin of the golden calf that He was about to kill him, and would have done so had it not been for Moses' prayer.

It is easy to be critical of people who fail the leadership test when it involves opposing the crowd, defying the consensus, blocking the path the majority are intent on taking. The truth is that it is hard to oppose the mob. They

can ignore you, remove you, even assassinate you. When a crowd gets out of control there is no elegant solution. Even Moses was helpless in the face of the people at the later episode of the spies (Num. 14: 5).

Nor was it easy for Moses to restore order now. He did so only by the most dramatic action: smashing the tablets and grinding the calf to dust. He then asked for support and was given it by his fellow Levites. They took reprisals against the crowd, killing three thousand people that day. History judges Moses a hero but he might well have been seen by his contemporaries as a brutal autocrat. We, thanks to the Torah, know what passed between God and Moses at the time. The Israelites at the foot of the mountain knew nothing of how close they had come to being utterly destroyed.

Tradition dealt kindly with Aaron. He is portrayed as a man of peace. Perhaps that is why he was made High Priest. There is more than one kind of leadership, and priesthood involves following rules, not taking stands and swaying crowds. The fact that Aaron was not a leader in the same mould as Moses does not mean that he was a failure. It means that he was made for a different kind of role. There are times when you need someone with the courage to stand against the crowd, others when you need a peacemaker. Moses and Aaron were different types. Aaron failed when he was called on to be a Moses, but he became a great leader in his own right in a different capacity. Aaron and Moses complemented one another. No one person can do everything.

The truth is that when a crowd runs out of control, there is no easy answer. That is why the whole of Judaism is an extended seminar in individual and collective responsibility. Jews don't, or shouldn't, form crowds. When they do, it may take a Moses to restore order. But it may take an Aaron, at other times, to maintain the peace.

The Sin of the Golden Calf

Rabbi David Horwitz

R. Judah Ha-Levi, in his work Kuzari, presents the Jewish philosopher's reply to the king's question: how could the generation that had just witnessed the theophany at Har Sinai descend to the depths of pagan idolatry and worship a calf? In light of Judah ha-Levi's notion of the inborn moral greatness of the Jewish people, the question is even more striking: how could this

greatness be reconciled with the sin of idolatry? Judah ha-Levi (Kuzari, Book I, chapter 97), speaking through the voice of the haver, answers as follows:

All the people in those times worshipped images. Even the philosophers who demonstrated the unity and existence of the Deity were unable to dispense with an image to which they directed their worship. They explained to the masses

that this image attracted some divine quality to be shown the same reverence we give to our holy places. The masses could only be persuaded to accept the worship of a tangible image. The children of Israel waited for Moses to bring them down something tangible from his communion with the Almighty, as he had promised them, to focus their worship, on the lines of the pillar of cloud and pillar of fire which accompanied them on their departure from Egypt. The people heard the Ten Commandments and Moses went up the Mount to bring down the tablets and make them an ark to constitute for them a tangible symbol containing the covenant of God. The people were left waiting for Moses to come down without having changed their mien, ornaments or garments since the time they had stood at the foot of the Mount during the Revelation. But they had remained as they were, waiting for Moses who was forty days late, not having taken with him any food and having left them with the intention of returning the same day. Then some of the people were overcome with frustration and dissension was sown until some individuals were prompted to ask for a tangible object of worship in the manner of the other nations without repudiating God Who had brought them out of Egypt, merely requesting it should be placed before them to gaze upon when they related the wonders of their God... as we do with the sky.

Nechama Leibowitz, *Studies in Shemot: Part 2 (Mishpatim-Pekudei)* (Jerusalem, 1976, translated and adapted from the Hebrew by Aryeh Newman), pp. 550-52, divides R. Judah Ha-Levi's explanation into a statement of what the children of Israel were not guilty of, and what they were guilty of. In the foregoing paragraph, it is clear that he believes that they were not guilty of idolatry. They merely wanted to facilitate their worship of God through material symbols. In that case, however, one wonders, what were they guilty of? The answer is simply that God had prohibited the fashioning of images, in spite of any meritorious intent. Kuzari continues:

Their offence lay in the fashioning of an image which had been forbidden them and in attributing Divine sanctity to the product of their own desires and hands without having been commanded to do so by God. In extenuation of their sin we should remember the lack of unanimity which preceded it, and the fact that the worshippers of the Golden Calf constituted only 3,000 out of a mass of 600,000 persons. But the excuse of the leaders who helped in making the Calf was that they did so for the purpose of distinguishing between the believer and disbeliever in order to put to death those caught actually worshipping it. Their culpability lay in leading the rebellion

from the realm of thought into that of deed.

This last passage obviously refers to the conduct of Aaron the High Priest. In correspondence with his previous remarks; Judah Ha-Levi does not see in Aaron's behavior any acquiescence in idolatry. Rather, it was the assistance in the same in making a representation of God (an image) that God had forbidden.

Their sin did not constitute a total repudiation of the service of Him who brought them out of Egypt, but was rather a partial repudiation of His commands. The Almighty had warned them against making images and they had made one instead of waiting. They themselves had no right to determine the mode of worship and make an altar and sacrifices in accordance with it. Their conduct can be compared to the parable of the fool who we mentioned who entered the doctor's dispensary and he prescribed the drugs, thereby killing the patients who would have been saved by being given the proper dose by the doctor himself. The people did not intend to commit idolatry but imagined that they were striving to worship the true God. For this reason they applied to Aaron to translate their strivings into reality. Their sin seems much more serious today because few indulge in actual worship of images as they did in those days. If instead they had built a house of worship to suit their own wishes it would not have seemed so serious to us since we are accustomed today to build our own houses of worship and even maintain that the Divine Presence rests on them and that angels encamp around them. Were it not for the necessity in exile of keeping the community together, this conduct of ours would be forbidden just as it was in the days of the kings when they denounced those who made their own private places of worship which were called "high places." Pious kings tore them down in order to preserve the uniqueness of the house which God Himself had chosen. In those days images were not in themselves forbidden, as we may note from the Divine command to make the cherubim. Despite all this the worshippers of the Golden Calf were punished and put to death, 3,000 persons in all out of 600,000; but the manna did not stop, the pillar of fire continued to lead them and the prophetic spirit did not persist in their midst. The only thing that they were deprived of was the two tablets which Moses broke and interceded with God to restore. These were resorted to and that iniquity was expiated.

Nechama Leibowitz (p. 552) comments:

Judah Ha-Levi maintains that the legitimacy of the cherubim and the forbidden nature of the Golden Calf derived

solely from the express command of God Himself. Images were not in themselves reprehensible. The Calf was forbidden because it was not made at the bidding of the Almighty. The cherubim were permitted because they were made in accordance with His wish. Man must not arbitrarily make his own laws, create his own ritual. This must be determined strictly in accordance with the Divine wishes. Eloquent indeed is Ha-Levi's parable of the physician and his drugs which are effective only when prescribed as authorized, but which, if made up by the patient himself at his own whim and fancy will

A Sin for the Ages

Rabbi Shmuel Goldin

Rooted at the base of Sinai, the Israelites grow restive as they wait for Moshe to descend from the mountain's summit. Turning to Aharon, they demand, "Rise up, make for us gods who will go before us, for Moshe – this man who brought us out of the land of Egypt – we do not know what has become of him!"

Aharon responds by instructing the people to contribute gold, which he fashions into a molten calf. He then proclaims, "A festival for the Lord tomorrow!"

Rising early the next morning, people bring offerings and celebrate with food, drink and revelry.

Even before Moshe descends from the mountain, God informs him of the sin of the golden calf and threatens the nation with immediate extinction, only relenting after Moshe's impassioned pleas.

The perpetrators of the sin are punished and the rest of the nation earns forgiveness through repentance. The sin of the golden calf remains, however, according to rabbinic thought, a seminal transgression that continues to affect the Jewish people in countless ways across the centuries.

Questions

No event within Jewish history is more puzzling or more frightening than the chet ha'egel.

How could the people who experienced the Exodus from Egypt, the parting of the Reed Sea, the defeat of Amalek, the gift of the manna and the powerful Revelation at Mount Sinai fail so completely in the very shadow of that mountain?

Forty days earlier, against the dramatic backdrop of God's manifestation at Sinai, the Israelites heard the clear commandment against idol worship. How could they now,

not only fail to cure him but may well kill him.

I would add that with this explanation, which entails a mitigation of the sin of the Golden Calf, an aspect of the inner character of Judah Ha-Levi emerges as well. He now appears not only as a defender of the Jewish faith against its Islamic, Christian, and philosophic opponents, but, in the manner of R. Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev so many hundreds of years later, as a defender of the Jewish people in front of God.

at the first sign of difficulty, create and deify a golden calf?

In a different vein, the rabbis maintain that the sin of the golden calf reverberates across the ages, affecting each era of Jewish history. And yet, the chet ha'egel seems irrelevant to our lives – an ancient event rooted in idolatrous practices distant from our experience. What possible eternal message might be contained in what the rabbis clearly perceive to be a formative, instructive tragedy?

Approaches

A. In spite of the apparent disconnect between the chet ha'egel and the backdrop against which it occurs, initial sources do view and identify this sin as an outright case of idol worship.

"By worshiping the calf, the Israelites clearly indicated their acceptance of idolatry," the Talmud proclaims, mirroring a position which finds even earlier voice in a passage of Tehillim: "They exchanged their glory for the image of a bull that feeds on grass." Similar opinions are found in the Midrash, as well.

A powerfully insightful approach to the behavior of the Israelites at the foot of Sinai can be gleaned from the writings of the Rambam. In his Guide to the Perplexed, this great scholar develops the principle that human behavior does not change abruptly and that a people cannot journey immediately from one extreme to the other: "It is not in man's nature to be reared in slavery... and then 'wash his hands' and suddenly be able to fight the descendants of giants [the inhabitants of the land of Canaan]."

The Rambam goes on to explain that the full transformation of the Israelites eventually requires a forty-year period of wandering and "schooling" in the wilderness

– a period during which they acquire the traits necessary for successful nationhood.

Abrupt events, no matter how miraculous and awe-inspiring, do not carry the power to make fundamental changes to human nature. True behavioral change is gradual. In spite of all they had seen and experienced, the Israelites standing at the foot of Sinai were unable to make the leap beyond their idolatrous origins. Battered by the fearful forces surrounding them, bewildered by Moshe's apparent disappearance, they return to the comfort of the familiar – and create an idol of gold.

B. In stark contrast to those who view the actions of the Israelites at Sinai as classically idolatrous, numerous scholars offer radically different approaches to the chet ha'egel.

Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, for example, maintains that the Israelites are actually motivated by a desire to worship God effectively. Reared among religions that make extensive use of physical images, the Israelites feel unable to approach their God in the absence of a tangible symbol towards which to focus their devotion. The people fully expect that Moshe, with his descent from Mount Sinai, will bring such a symbol: the Tablets of Testimony (inscribed with the Ten Declarations). When they conclude that Moshe has failed to return with the tablets, the Israelites turn to Aharon and demand a substitute.

Rabbi Yehuda goes on to explain that the nation's transgression lies not in their fundamental intent or assumptions, but in their methods. Symbols are certainly critical to Judaism, as can be seen from the extensive use of symbolic ritual in the building and operation of the Mishkan. Only symbols that flow from God's law, however, are acceptable. The Israelites have no right to devise and create their own mechanism through which to approach God. Their sin can be compared, says Rabbi Yehuda, to an individual who enters a doctor's dispensary and prescribes drugs – thereby killing the patients who would have been

saved had they been given the proper dosage by the doctor himself.

Numerous later authorities follow in the footsteps of Rabbi Yehuda Halevi's interpretation, some with attribution and some without.

In his work the Beis Halevi, Rabbi Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik offers a slightly variant approach. The Israelites know that the ritual service will be performed by a specific individual, Aharon, and will be conducted in a specific location, the Mishkan. They therefore believe that they have the right to create their own "Tabernacle" as they see fit. They fail to realize, however, that each detail of the Sanctuary is purposeful, filled with divinely ordained mystery and meaning.

Other commentaries, including the Ramban, Ibn Ezra and Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, focus on the wording of the Israelites' demand of Aharon: "Rise up, make for us gods who will go before us, for Moshe – this man who brought us out of the land of Egypt – we do not know what has become of him!"

The Israelites, they say, are not attempting to replace God. They are, instead, attempting to replace Moshe. Deeply frightened by Moshe's apparent disappearance (their fear exaggerated, the rabbis say, by an error they make in computing the days of Moshe's absence), the people feel unable to approach God without the benefit of the only leader they have known. They therefore demand of Aharon that he create a new "leader."

The sin of the Israelites, says Hirsch, lies in the "erroneous idea that man can make, may make, must make a 'Moses' for himself..." The grave error in their thinking is their belief that in order to bridge the unimaginable chasm between man and the Divine, an intermediary is required. This suggestion is diametrically opposed to the fundamental Jewish belief in man's ability to forge his own direct and personal relationship with God.

Anticipating and Appreciating the Gift of Shabbos

Rabbi Dovid Gottlieb

Whereas Parshas Terumah details the structure of the Mishkan, Parshas Tetzaveh primarily addresses the Bigdei Kehunah (the Priestly Vestments) and the initiation procedures for Aharon and his sons to serve as Kohanim. It seems quite puzzling that Parshas Tetzaveh also includes the commands of kindling

the Menorah and erecting the Mizbach Ha-Zahav - the Golden Altar, designated for burning Ketores (incense offering) in the Mishkan - for these two mitzvos appear to be unrelated to the Bigdei Kehunah or the initiation of the Kohanim. One would expect that kindling the Menorah and erecting the Mizbach Ha-Zahav would appear in

Parshas Terumah, alongside the commands to construct both the Menorah and the Mizbach Ha-Nechoshes - the Bronze Altar, used for most other sacrifices. Why, then, does the Torah omit the lighting of the Menorah and the construction of the Mizbach Ha-Zahav from Parshas Terumah and reserve them for Parshas Tetzaveh?

In Parshas Ki Tisa the Torah reiterates the obligation and significance of Shabbos. Most well known are the teachings which are derived from the juxtaposition of the laws of Shabbos to the construction of the Mishkan. However, there are a number of other important – though more subtle – lessons that can be gleaned from inferences in the text as well.

“Ve’shamru Benei Yisrael es ha-Shabbos,” the Children of Israel shall observe Shabbos, “la-asos es ha-Shabbas le’dorosam beris olam,” to make Shabbos an eternal covenant for their generations (Shemos 31:16). A number of commentators have taken note of the Torah’s choice of the word “ve’shamru” in describing the people’s observance. The Ibn Ezra, for example, suggests that this implies a more comprehensive obligation which includes thinking about Shabbos throughout the week and making sure that all necessary preparations are taken care of before Shabbos (see also Mechilta Yisro #7).

The Chizkuni adopts the same basic approach as the Ibn Ezra, but in his presentation he adds one word, noting that we are obligated to “observe and anticipate it (Shabbos) all of the days of the week.” The Chizkuni is making the important point that it is not enough to simply observe Shabbos – even with all of its dos and don’ts – but it’s also about our attitude; we must anticipate Shabbos, excitedly awaiting its arrival each week. The notion that we should anticipate Shabbos adds an important dimension to our religious outlook as it highlights that Shabbos is not a burden but a special gift which – like other gifts – we should look forward to.

Aside from the impact that such a mindset has on our own observance, it will undoubtedly also impact the way our children view Shabbos. Perhaps that is why the immediate continuation of the pasuk focuses on the “eternal covenant” that Shabbos will “be for their generations.” In light of the Chizkuni’s explanation perhaps the message is that if we truly look forward to the arrival Shabbos this will inevitably impact and influence our

children so that the observance of Shabbos is maintained “le’dorosam,” throughout the generations.

Another important – and related – insight focuses on a similar word choice just a few pesukim earlier. “Ach es Shabsosai tishmoru,” however, you must observe my Shabboses, “ki os hi beini u-veineichem le’doroseichem,” for it is a sign between Me and you for your generations (31:13). The Midrash (Mechilta Ki Tisa #1) maintains that the word “tishmoru” alludes to the fact that aside from biblically prohibited melacha there are additional rabbinic prohibitions that further limit the work which can be done on Shabbos.

The “Reisha Rav,” Rabbi Aaron Levine (Ha-Derash Ve’Ha-Iyun) notes that the cumulative impact of these prohibitions guarantees that Shabbos is a day of rest and free from work. Yet, explains R. Levine, rest is not necessarily a good thing; it all depends on what we do when freed from work. Sometimes the “shevisa atzmah,” the rest itself causes a person – without the regular structure of responsibility and with excess free time – to sin. The goal of Shabbos is, obviously, not to be an unproductive, let alone destructive, day of rest. The real purpose of Shabbos, maintains R. Levine, is to take advantage of the rest and free time to devote energy to spiritual pursuits that aren’t given enough attention during the busy work week.

Rav Avraham Pam (Atarah La’melech) cites a beautiful teaching of the Chafetz Chayim which makes this very point. In one of the most famous Shabbos zemiros we declare that, “kol meakdesh shevi’i kara’uy lo, kol shomer Shabbos ka’dos me’chalelo. The Chafetz Chayim explained that this refers to two different types of Shabbos observance. On the one hand, some people avoid all of the prohibitions of Shabbos – “shomer Shabbos ka’dos” – and therefore avoid its desecration, “me’chalelo.” However, there are other people who go even further and are “meakdesh shevi’i,” who don’t just avoid violating Shabbos but appreciate its spiritual potential and observe Shabbos the way it was truly intended, “kara’uy lo.”

The ability to focus on and deepen our relationship with Hashem is one of the beautiful gifts of Shabbos. If we truly appreciate this opportunity we will both anticipate and take advantage of the special power of Shabbos.

Stresses, Senses and Spiritual Strengths

Rabbi Yehuda Septimus

We find something striking about the flow of the topics in Parshiyos Terumah and Tetzaveh. Parshas Terumah begins with a discussion of the mishkan. Hashem commands[i] Moshe to build a mishkan, “v’asu li mikdash v’shachanti b’socham.” The Torah then describes how each of the keilim of the Mishkan are supposed to be built. The Torah then describes the mishkan itself. That is in Parshas Terumah. In Parshas Tetzaveh the Torah moves on to discuss the kohanim. First, the Torah discusses the bigdei kehuna and how they are supposed to be made. Then the Torah[ii] describes the process of the initiation and consecration of the kohanim, “this is what you shall do to them to consecrate them to serve as kohanim.” So at this point, we have the mishkan itself, the keilim of the mishkan, the begadim of the kohanim, and the initiation of the kohanim. At this point, one would think we are ready to have the shechinah dwell in the Mishkan and dwell in our midst, as the Torah describes earlier at the beginning of Parshas Terumah.

Stress affects the body. It affects the soul. Physical and spiritual senses are affected differently, in different people, by different stresses. The midrash in this week’s parshah describes the impact of stress on Moshe’s senses (Shemot Rabbah 42:24):

בשעה שאמר לו הקב"ה לך רד חשכו פניו של משה ונעשה כסומא מן הצרות ולא היה יודע מאיזה מקום לירד והיו מלאכי השרת מבקשים להרגו אמרו הרי השעה להרגו... מה עשה אחז בכסא של הקב"ה ופרש הקב"ה טליתו עליו שלא יחבלוהו שנאמר (איוב כו) מאחז פני כסא פרשו עליו עננו מהו פרשו נוטריקון פרש רחום שרי זיו עננו עליו:

When the Holy One said to Moshe, "Go, get thee down" [due to chet ha-egel] Moshe's face grew dark. In the greatness of his distress, he became as one blind... The ministering angels, saying, "This is the time to slay him," were indeed about to slay

him... What did he do? He took hold of the throne of the Holy One, and the Holy One spread His mantle over him, so that they should not harm him.

When Moshe is confronted by the consequences of the chet ha-egel his sense of sight fails him. As is often the case in high stakes situations, the loss of but one of the five senses is critical. Moshe’s life is endangered by the angels who did not want God giving the Torah to humans and who now see an opportunity in Moshe’s moment of weakness. What does Moshe do? He takes hold of HaKadosh Baruch Hu’s Throne, so to speak.

How, we might ask, was Moshe able to take hold of Hashem’s throne – if he couldn’t see it? The answer, I believe, is that while stress can weaken the physical senses, it can also serve to strengthen the spiritual senses. Moshe may not have been able to see at that moment. But his ability to perceive God was not diminished. To the contrary, it was strengthened. When one of our senses is compromised we look to the others to function on a higher level to compensate for the loss. When circumstances challenge us physically, our spiritual wellbeing can also become compromised. Or – it can become strengthened in order to compensate for the loss.

This is what happens to Moshe in the midrash. This is what happens to Esther, who confronts Achashverosh, asking him not to destroy the Jewish People – after three days of fasting! Our fasting on Ta’anit Esther might weaken us physically. But it is up to us to determine that it strengthens us spiritually, serving as spiritual preparation for the wonderful but spiritually challenging holiday ahead. When we experience physical weakness, we can, and must, compensate for the physical weakness – by finding spiritual strength.