

Parasha Page

Parashat Ki Tisa
Parashat Parah

March 5-6, 2010
20 Adar, 5770

TORAH READING: KI TISA (P. 484), MAFTIR (P. 838)

Highlights:

- The people are commanded to contribute a half shekel each for the upkeep of the Sanctuary.
- Through counting the coins, a census figure of the people would be determined.
- Laws relating to the laver, anointing oil and incense are given.
- In enabling the Sanctuary to function, the Sabbath laws must be respected.
- Moshe breaks the Ten Commandments when he finds the people worshipping a Golden Calf.
- A second set of tablets are given.
- Hashem reveals to us the Thirteen Attributes of His Divine nature.

Food for Thought: *TELL IT FROM THE TORAH, GEDALIA PETERSEIL*

- What is the connection between the Mishkan and Shabbat that God tells Moshe that Betzael will be in charge of building the Mishkan, and immediately inserts the mitzva of Shabbat?
- God remembers the sins of the fathers for four generations. How can God punish someone for the sin of his great-grandfather?

HAFTARAH: YEHEZKEIL 36:16-18 (P. 1216) WWW.OU.ORG

Parashat Parah is read on the Shabbat before Parashat HaChodesh which presents us with the *mitzvot* of *Korban Pesach*, because the most common and important time for ritual purification on the part of the people was around the beginning of Nissan, as part of one's preparation for Pesach. Parashat Parah, contains the *mitzvot* of Parah Adumah - that is, the preparing of the potion from the ashes of the Red Heifer, the general *mitzva* of the concept of ritual impurity from contact with a corpse, and the *mitzvot* of purifying oneself with the potion.

The Haftarah takes the concept from the Maftir of an individual becoming ritually impure and requiring purification with special water as an analogy for the people of Israel who defiled themselves with the sin of idolatry and other sins, and the need for a purification process with "God's spiritual waters of the Torah."

PARASHA INSIGHTS

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

"Lord, Lord a God of Compassion..." (Exodus 34:6)

It is difficult to imagine the profound disappointment and even anger Moses must have felt upon witnessing the Israelites dancing and reveling around the Golden Calf. After all of his teachings and exhortations about how God demands fealty and morality –and after all of the miracles God had wrought for them in Egypt, at the Reed Sea, in the desert and at Sinai, how could the Israelites have so quickly cast away God and His prophet in favor of the momentary, frenzied pleasures of the Golden Calf?

"And it happened that when he drew near to the encampment and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses burned with anger and he cast the tablets from his hands, smashing them under the mountain" (Ex 32:19). Whether he broke the tablets in a fit of anger, disgusted with his nation and deeming them unworthy to be the bearers of the sacred teachings of the Decalogue (Rashi), or whether the sight of the debauchery caused Moses to feel faint, to be overcome with a debilitating weakness which caused the

tablets to feel heavy in his hands and fall of themselves, leading him to cast them away from his legs so that he not become crippled by their weight as they smattered on the ground (Rashbam, ad loc), Moses himself appears to be as broken in spirit as were the tablets in stone. After all, ultimately a leader must feel and take responsibility for his nations' transgression! All of these emotions must have been swirling around Moses' mind and heart while the tablets were crashing on the ground.

But what follows in the Biblical text, after capital punishment for the 3,000 ringleaders of the idolatry, is a lengthy philosophical – theological dialogue between Moses and God. This culminates in the revelation of the thirteen Divine attributes and the "normative" definition of God at least in terms of our partial human understanding. What does this mean in terms of Moses' relationship with his nation Israel after their great transgression, and what does this mean for us today, in our own lives?

This was not the first time that Moses was disappointed by the Israelites. Early on in his career, when he was a Prince in Egypt, Moses saw an Egyptian taskmaster beating a Hebrew slave. "He looked here and there, and he saw there was not a man" – no Egyptian was willing to cry out against the "anti-Semitic" injustice and no Hebrew was ready to launch a rebellion – "and he slew the Egyptian task-master and buried him in the sand" (Exodus 2:11). Moses was no fool; he would not have sacrificed his exalted position in Egypt for a rash act against a single Egyptian scoundrel. He hoped that with this assassination he would spark a Hebrew revolution against their despotic captors.

Moses goes out the next day, expecting to see the beginnings of rebellious foment amongst the Hebrews. He finds two Hebrew men fighting – perhaps specifically about whether or not to follow Moses' lead. But when he chastises the assailant for raising a hand against his brother, he is unceremoniously criticized: "Who made you a master and judge over us? Are you about to kill me just as you killed the Egyptian?" (Ex 2:14).

Moses realized that he had risked his life for nought, that the Hebrews were too embroiled in their own petty arguments to launch a rebellion. Upset with his Hebrew relatives, Moses decides to give up on social action and devote himself to God and to religious meditation rather than political rebellion (see Lichtenstein, Moshe, Tzir V'tzon). To this end, he apparently chose to escape to Midian, a desert community whose Sheikh, Yitro, was a seeker after the Divine (see Ex 2:21, Rashi ad loc and Ex 18:11).

Moses spends 60 years in this Midianite, ashram-like environment of solitary contemplation with the Divine, culminating in his vision of the burning bush when Moses sees an "angel of the Lord in flame of fire in the midst of a prickly thorn-bush... and behold, the thorn-bush is burning with fire, but the thorn-bush is not consumed" (Exodus 3: 1-3). The prickly and lowly thorn-bush seems to be symbolizing the Hebrew people, containing within itself the fire of the Divine but not being consumed by it. And God sends Moses back to this developing, albeit prickly Hebrew nation, urging him to lead the Israelite slaves out of their Egyptian servitude.

God is teaching His greatest prophet that his religious goal must not only be Divine meditation, but also human communication; and specifically taking the Israelites out of Egypt and bringing them to the Promised Land, no matter how hard it may be to work with them.

Now let us fast forward to the sin of the Golden Calf and its aftermath. Moses pleads with God to forgive the nation. God

responds that He dare not dwell in the midst of Israel, lest He destroy them at their next transgression. Moses then asks to be shown God's glory, to understand God's ways in this world. God explains that a living human cannot see His face, since that would require a complete understanding of the Divine.

But His back – a partial glimpse – could and would be revealed. Moses then stands on the cleft of a rock on Mount Sinai, the very place of God's previous revelation of the Ten Commandments, and he receives a second revelation, a second "service to God on this mountain."

"...Moses arose early in the morning and ascended to Mt. Sinai... taking the two stone tablets in his hand. The Lord descended in a cloud and stood with him there, and he called out with the Name Adonai [YHVH]. And Adonai [YHVH] passed before him and he proclaimed: Adonai, Adonai, El [God], Compassionate and forgiving, Slow to Anger and Abundant in Kindness and Truth..." (Ex 34: 4-7).

In this second revelation, God is telling Moses two things: first of all, that He is a God of unconditional love, a God who loves the individual before he/she sins and a God who loves the individual even after he/she sins (Rashi ad loc), a God who freely forgives. Hence God will never reject His covenantal nation, will always forgive with alacrity and work with Israel on the road to redemption. Secondly, if God is fundamentally a God of love and forgiveness, we must be people of love and forgiveness. From Moses the greatest of prophets to the lowliest hewers of wood and drawers of water, just as He (God) loves freely and is always ready to forgive, so in all of our human relationships we must strive to love generously and always be ready to forgive. This second Revelation is the mirror image of the first, yes, we must firmly ascribe to the morality of the Ten Commandments, but we must at the same time be constantly aware that the God of the cosmos loves each and every one of His children, and is always ready to forgive us, no matter what.

PRAYER INSIGHTS

CHIEF RABBI SIR JONATHAN SACKS

Part 1

Prayer is the language of the soul in conversation with God. It is the most intimate gesture of the religious life, and the most transformative. The very fact that we can pray testifies to the deepest elements of Jewish faith: that the universe did not come into existence accidentally, nor are our lives destined to be bereft of meaning. The universe exists, and we exist, because someone—the One God, Author of all—brought us into existence with love. It is this belief more than any other that redeems life from solitude and fate from tragedy.

In prayer we speak to a presence vaster than the unfathomable universe, yet closer to us than we are to ourselves: the God beyond, who is also the Voice within. Though language must fail when we try to describe a Being beyond all parameters of speech, language is all we have, and it is enough. For God who made the world with creative words, and who revealed His will through holy words, listens to our prayerful words. Language is the bridge joining us to Infinity.

Judah Halevi, the great eleventh-century poet, said that prayer is to the soul what food is to the body. Without prayer, something within us atrophies and dies. It is possible to have a life without prayer, just as it is possible to have a life without music, or love, or laughter, but it is a diminished thing, missing whole dimensions of experience. We need space within the soul to express our joy in being, our wonder at the universe, our hopes, our fears, our failures, our aspirations—bringing our deepest thoughts as offerings to the One who listens, and listening, in turn, to the One

who calls. Those who pray breathe a more expansive air: "In the prison of his days/Teach the free man how to praise" (W.H. Auden).

From Universal to Particular

In general, sequences of Jewish prayer move from the universal to the particular. Grace after Meals, for example, begins with a blessing thanking God "who in His goodness feeds the whole world." The second blessing moves to particularities: Israel, liberation from slavery, "the covenant You sealed in our flesh," Torah and the commandments. We thank God "for the land [of Israel] and the food." The third is more narrowly focused still. It is about the holy city, Jerusalem.

The same pattern exists in the two blessings before the Shema in the morning and evening service. The first is about the universe ("who gives light to the earth," "who creates day and night"), and the second is about Torah, the specific bond of love between God and the Jewish people. Look and you will find many other examples in the siddur. (The one exception is Aleinu, whose first paragraph is about Jewish particularity and whose second is a universal hope.)

This movement from universal to particular is distinctively Jewish. Western culture, under the influence of Plato, has tended to move in the opposite direction, from the concrete instance to the general rule, valuing universals above particularities. Judaism is the great counter-Platonic narrative in Western civilization.

Moving from the universal to the particular, the prayer book mirrors the structure of the Torah itself. Genesis begins, in its first eleven chapters, with a description of the universal condition of humankind. Only in its twelfth chapter is there a call to an individual, Abraham, to leave his land, family and father's house and lead a life of righteousness through which "all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

There are universals of human behavior: we call them the Noahide Laws. But we worship God in and through the particularity of our history, language and heritage. The highest love is not abstract but concrete. Those who truly love, cherish what makes the beloved different, unique, irreplaceable: that is the theme of the greatest of all books of religious love, The Song of Songs. That, we believe, is how God loves us.

Prayer requires intense concentration, and this takes time. It is impossible to move directly from the stresses and preoccupations of everyday life into the presence of eternity. Nor should prayer end abruptly. It must be internalized if it is to leave its trace within us as we move back into our worldly pursuits. Maimonides writes that because prayer needs mental focus, "One should therefore sit awhile before beginning his prayers, so as to concentrate his mind. He should then pray in gentle tones, beseechingly, and not regard the service as a burden that he is carrying and which he will cast off before proceeding on his way. He should thus sit awhile after concluding the prayers, and only then leave. The ancient saints used to pause and meditate one hour before prayer and one hour after prayer, and spend an hour in prayer itself" (Laws of Prayer 4:16).

http://www.ou.org/index.php/jewish_action/article/57273/

