

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Ki Tisa/Shabbat Parah
March 6, 2021 *** Adar 22, 5781

Kol Rina – An Independent Minyan, is a traditional egalitarian community. We are haimish (homey/folksy), friendly, participatory, warm and welcoming. We hold weekly services in South Orange as well as holiday services and celebrations which are completely lay led. We **welcome all** to our services and programs from non-Hebrew readers to Jewish communal and education professionals.

[Parasha in a Nutshell](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2833/jewish/Ki-Tisa-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2833/jewish/Ki-Tisa-in-a-Nutshell.htm

The people of Israel are told to each contribute exactly half a shekel of silver to the Sanctuary. Instructions are also given regarding the making of the Sanctuary's water basin, anointing oil and incense. "Wise-hearted" artisans Betzalel and Aholiav are placed in charge of the Sanctuary's construction, and the people are once again commanded to keep the Shabbat. When Moses does not return when expected from Mount Sinai, the people make a golden calf and worship it. G-d proposes to destroy the errant nation, but Moses intercedes on their behalf. Moses descends from the mountain carrying the tablets of the testimony engraved with the Ten Commandments; seeing the people dancing about their idol, he breaks the tablets, destroys the golden calf, and has the primary culprits put to death. He then returns to G-d to say: "If You do not forgive them, blot me out from the book that You have written." G-d forgives, but says that the effect of their sin will be felt for many generations. At first G-d proposes to send His angel along with them, but Moses insists that G-d Himself accompany His people to the promised land. Moses prepares a new set of tablets and once more ascends the mountain, where G-d reinscribes the covenant on these second tablets. On the mountain, Moses is also granted a vision of the divine thirteen attributes of mercy. So radiant is Moses' face upon his return, that he must cover it with a veil, which he removes only to speak with G-d and to teach His laws to the people.

[Parah in A nutshell](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/73199/jewish/Parah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/73199/jewish/Parah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

In preparation for the upcoming festival of Passover, when every Jew had to be in a state of ritual purity, the section of Parah (Numbers 19) is added to the weekly reading this week. Parah relates the laws of the Red Heifer with which a person contaminated by contact with a dead body was purified.

[Haftarah for Shabbat Parah in a Nutshell: Ezekiel 36:16 - 36:38](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/655981/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/655981/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This week's special haftarah mentions the "purifying waters" that G-d will sprinkle upon us with the coming of Moshiach. This follows the theme of this week's additional Torah reading — the purifying qualities of the "Red Heifer." The prophet Ezekiel transmits G-d's message: The Israelites have defiled the Holy Land with their idol-worship and immoral ways. As a result, they will be sent into exile. "And they came to the nations where they came, and they profaned My Holy Name, inasmuch as it was said of them, 'These are the people of G-d, and they have come out of His land.'" So G-d will take them out of their exile — but not by

virtue of the Israelites' merits: "Not for your sake do I do this, O house of Israel, but for My Holy Name, which you have profaned among the nations."
G-d will bring the Israelites back to the Holy Land and purify them with the waters of the Red Heifer. The people will feel ashamed of their actions, and after they will have undergone the process of purification and repentance, G-d will rebuild the country and bestow upon it prosperity and bounty.
"I will resettle the cities, and the ruins shall be built up. And the desolate land shall be worked, instead of its lying desolate in the sight of all that pass by. And they shall say, 'This land that was desolate has become like the Garden of Eden, and the cities that were destroyed and desolate and pulled down have become settled as fortified [cities].'"

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

How Leaders Fail (Ki Tissa 5781) by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l
<https://rabbisacks.org/ki-tissa-5781/>

As we have seen in both Vayetse and Vaera, leadership is marked by failure. It is the recovery that is the true measure of a leader. 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. Machiavelli called this Fortuna: the power of bad luck that can defeat even the greatest individual. Sometimes, despite our best efforts, we 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 could place your career, or 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:

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.” (I Sam. 15:13–21)

Saul makes excuses. The failure was not his; it was the fault of 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.” (I Sam. 15:23). Only then does Saul admit, “I have sinned.” (I Sam 15:24) But by this point it is too late. He has proven himself unworthy to begin the lineage of kings of Israel.

There is an apocryphal quote attributed to several politicians: “Of course I follow the party. After all, I am their leader.”[1] There are leaders who follow instead of leading. Rabbi Yisrael Salanter compared them to a dog taking a walk with its owner. The dog runs on ahead, but keeps turning around to see whether it is going in the right direction. 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 gave 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 becomes angry. Moses pleads with Him to spare the people. He then descends the mountain, sees what has happened, smashes the Tablets of the Law he has brought down with him, burns the idol, grinds it to powder, mixes it with water and makes the Israelites drink it. Then he turns to Aaron his brother and asks, “What have you done?”

“Do not be angry, my lord,” Aaron answered. “You know how these people are prone 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 blames the people. It was they who made the illegitimate request. He denies 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 such as Saul the King of Israel and Aaron the High Priest, 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 that point: “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’s demands during the later episode of the spies (Num. 14:5).

Nor was it easy for Moses to restore order. He did so with the most dramatic of acts: 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. And as two different leaders working together, 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 do not, or should not, 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.** [1] This statement has been attributed to Benjamin Disraeli, Stanley Baldwin and Alexandre Auguste Ledru-Rollin.

[The Path to Justice \(Ki Tissa\) by Rachek Kahn-Troster](https://www.jtsa.edu/the-path-to-justice)

<https://www.jtsa.edu/the-path-to-justice>

I've been a human rights activist for more than a decade, beginning my work by organizing the Jewish community to speak out against torture. One of the first things I learned—a theme that resurfaces across many of the campaigns for human rights that I have been part of—is that when people act out of fear, when their sense of safety and security is challenged, they make unfortunate choices. They are often willing to make choices that make them *feel* safe, rather than choices that are effective in dealing with what is actually threatening them. Once these non-solutions take hold and provide an aura of comfort, it is hard to shift people to a different point of view. People tolerate torture because they have been told it “works,” or they tolerate harsh and ineffective police tactics, like stop and frisk, against people of color because they believe that the presence of police inherently makes their neighborhood safer.

In my experiences as an advocate, when facing the sense of safety and the logic of fear, responding with Jewish values—*But every human being is created betzelem elohim, in the image of God!*—could come across as weak or naïve. Logic and statistics didn't fare so well, either. What did work was shifting the statement of values: giving voice to shared values, combined with the self-interest that was a key component of the fear. Appealing to the Golden Rule alone didn't work, but saying *We don't commit human rights abuses as a nation because we want to protect our own troops from similar harms* did. It's hard as a leader to take this approach, because it is more nuanced and requires listening. It's much easier to lead people using fear—or, at the very least, to not challenge or sit with their heightened emotions.

This week's parashah, Ki Tissa, tells the story of a failure of leadership and the challenge of rebuilding trust, nestled within the broader narrative of the creation of sacred space, shared ritual, and God's revelation. As our parashah unfolds, Moses has been up on Mount Sinai, receiving God's revelation, for a very long time. As readers, we can see that the Israelites are about to receive tremendous gifts from God, including the instructions for the Tabernacle and the tablets on which the 10 Commandments are inscribed.

But Moses's absence has left a void for the Israelites in their relationship with God. They fall back on what they know, asking for a physical manifestation of their deity to reassure them of God's presence in their midst (Exod. 32:1). Faced with this panic, Aaron fails as a leader. Rather than resisting—or even responding with a counter-narrative rooted in the values that were animating their fear—he reflexively responds with actions. He gives the people what they want (Exod. 32:2–5). Thus with their sense of safety and normalcy assured, the Israelites can resume their patterns of life, feasting and giving thanks to their illusion of God.

When God reports to Moses what has happened in his absence, you can see a frustration with the Israelites, not on account of their lack of faith, but because of their stubbornness (God calls them “stiffnecked”) and their lack of empathy and imagination. The experience of the Exodus has not freed them from their need for safety and security, nor from their old ways of thinking. Moses talks God down, but God's frustration is understandable.

But Moses, too, is only able to lead from fear, to respond to the Israelites with vengeance. True, Moses does successfully talk God down, with an eye to public messaging (Exod. 32:11–14), preventing God from wiping out the people and starting over. But it doesn't last. Upset with and angered by the reality of what he sees when he journeys down Mt. Sinai, Moses responds with not just anger but cruelty. Moses can't help but be righteous for God's sake (Exod. 32:20, 25–29), no matter the cost. But righteousness can be destructive. It is a commonplace understanding in social justice circles that abuses hurt not just the victim but also the perpetrator, and in acting from fear, Moses perpetuates the crisis, culminating in a plague sent by God (Exod. 32:35).

So how can we move forward from this kind of crisis, from the retreat into anger and fear? As an activist, I've tried to learn how to craft messages and build bridges to take people beyond the places where they feel that they are stuck. Only once people are unstuck can they envision new worlds or be open to new ideas. In the fight against torture, that meant taking the values conversation from the abstract to the concrete. If people act from fear to protect themselves or the people that they care about, they can also change if they believe it will enable themselves and their loved ones to thrive.

As the reality of the sin of the Golden Calf sinks in, God returns to the theme of covenant (Exod. 33:1–3), a shared commitment that is based in the relationships of

the past and the potential of the future. God contextualizes the reality of what the Israelites have done within the larger scope of the history of their relationship. And it is then that they begin to repent (Exod. 33:4), when they are able for a moment to see beyond their present selves and envision a new world. Despite all the suffering and death that has occurred, only a reaffirming of values rooted in relationship can trigger self-reflection.

And that is the essence of how Moses, God, and the Israelites move forward from the incident of the Golden Calf. It is true that something profound in the relationship between God and the Israelites is forever shattered. Moses becomes even more of an intermediary for the divine message, as the Israelites can only look on whenever God's presence descends into their midst (Exod. 33:7–11). But the renewed covenant that follows, including a new set of tablets to replace what was shattered (Exod. 34:10–27), isn't just a retelling of God's promise to Abraham. In order to truly heal and move forward, there has to be a shared acknowledgement of what happened and how to prevent it from happening again.

The new covenant is rooted in action, both to avoid idolatry and to live out the blessings of being God's people through the pilgrimage holidays. The Israelites and God are able to affirm their connection not just in the abstract and in history, but through the possibility of shared future experience rooted in deeds. We, too, can overcome that which divides us by uncovering our shared values, and by actualizing these values we can, eventually, overturn systems of injustice in our world. *(Rachel Kahn-Troster is an Adjunct Instructor in Professional and Pastoral Skills at JTS and the Deputy Director of T'ruah; <https://truah.org/>)*

In Fear, What Will We Choose to Build by Rabbi Mary Zamore

<https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/fear-what-will-we-choose-build>

As former slaves, the Israelites were no strangers to backbreaking labor to glorify Pharaoh and Egyptian deities. During their transformational journey from Egypt to The Promised Land, the Israelites build two notable structures for their own use. The first, the Mishkan, the portable Tabernacle, was commanded by God, with its details shared throughout the book of Exodus. The other is the Golden Calf, which is described in this week's parashah. Extreme opposites in impact and legacy, these two structures represent the best and worst uses of human capital and wealth in the face of fear.

Throughout their wilderness journey, the Israelites struggle with feelings of insecurity. At times of challenge, they long for what they knew, their old lives. They complain bitterly, "What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt?...it is better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness." (Exodus 14:11-12)

The construction of the Golden Calf is rooted in this continual sense of dread. In Ki Tisa, while Moses is away for days receiving the law from God on Mt. Sinai, a

faction from among the Israelites confronts Aaron, demanding that he make them a god to lead them. Aaron responds by ordering the men to “tear off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” (Exodus 32:2) The collected earrings are molded into a calf and the people exclaim, “This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!” (Exodus 32:4) Jewish tradition considers the idolatrous worship of the Golden Calf to be the gravest sin committed by the Israelites, with God’s punishment for this disloyal act continuing for generations. (BT, Sanhedrin 102a)

In the **Talmud**, the school of Rabbi Yanni (Israel, 3rd c. CE) taught that Moses defended the Israelites and faulted God, saying, “the gold and silver You lavished upon Israel [during the Exodus from Egypt] until they said enough... caused Israel to make the [Golden] Calf.” (BT, Berakhot 32a) This attempt to diffuse God’s anger against the unfaithful Israelites upholds the idea that wealth is a naturally corrupting force. The counter argument is that the Israelites’ creation of the Mishkan demonstrates that wealth can be used for good. It was fear and trepidation, not wealth, that led to the creation of the idolatrous Golden Calf. Our tradition grapples with why the Israelites became fearful in Moses’ absence. The rabbis offer an imaginative explanation that the Israelites became worried due to a miscommunication concerning Moses’ return. When he did not reappear at the expected hour, Satan misled the Israelites with the lie that Moses had died. (BT, Shabbat 89a) According to this explanation, building the Golden Calf was the desperate act of a people who feared being leaderless.

A more rational explanation of the Golden Calf was given by Judah HaLevi (Spain, 12th c.), who argued that the Israelites were “unable to dispense with an image to which they directed their worship” because they were, surrounded by pagan idolators. (The Kuzari, as quoted in Nehama Leibowitz, *New Studies in Exodus*, 550) HaLevi’s words highlight the discomfort the Israelites felt during the shift from inhabiting a world of polytheism to one of monotheism centered on a deity without form or body. In Moses’ absence, they revert to the Egyptian ways. A structure devoted to God, the Mishkan also addresses the Israelites’ unease. This portable Tabernacle provided focus for the Israelites’ connection with God, as described, “And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them.” (Exodus 25:8) God, however, is not limited to any space. In a midrash, Moses even asks, “Master of the Universe, the highest heavens cannot contain You, and yet you say, ‘Let them make Me a sanctuary?’” (Pesikta DeRav Kahana 2:10) Rabbi Umberto Cassuto (Italy, 20th c.) provides this answer: “Once they set out on their journey [leaving Mt. Sinai], it seemed to them as though the link had been broken, unless there was in their midst a tangible symbol of God’s presence among them.” (A Commentary on the Book of Exodus, 319) The Mishkan, therefore, is designed to sooth the Israelites at a time of discomforting transformation.

During times of uncertainty, we can react in a Golden Calf manner, trying to replicate the past, or in a Mishkan manner, gathering others' talents and resources to find a solution for the common good. Communal anxiety runs high today, and it is tempting to seek comfort in what we have known and done before. Transformative solutions, however, require that we move forward to stability and the betterment of all. In fear, what will we choose to build?

May we build a Mishkan as an answer to the challenges, leading us forward, connecting us to God and each other. (*Rabbi Mary L. Zamore (she/her) is the executive director of the [Women's Rabbinic Network](#). She is the editor of [The Sacred Exchange: Creating a Jewish Money Ethic](#) (CCAR Press, 2019) and [The Sacred Table: Creating a Jewish Food Ethic](#) (CCAR Press, 2011), designated a finalist by the National Jewish Book Awards*)

God, as Defined by God

(With a Little Help from Covenantal Friends): Ki Tissa by Rabbi Yitz Greenberg

https://mechonhadar.s3.amazonaws.com/mh_torah_source_sheets/GreenbergParashatKiTissa5781.pdf?utm_campaign=Dvar%20Torah%205781&utm_medium=email&_hsmi=113614836&_hsenc=p2ANqtz-OU7aqwf2GeSsEQIQEW9enM7mp3e0irp_b6oQGNarrBvbEBC2IfytdykFihQreVSzoz6MgmXt5VjAw7DLK_9iFQ-tp_Q&utm_content=113614836&utm_source=hs_email

What is God's true nature? Loving? Just? Jealous? Punitive? Forgiving? There is contradictory evidence in our lives and experiences. Moses experiences the extremes of unparalleled closeness to God out of common concern and communication to Israel. Then he walks on the knife's edge of divine anger threatening to wipe out Israel for betraying the covenant by worshipping a Golden Calf. This drives Moses to ask God directly "...show me Your way that I may know You..." (Exodus 33:13). Moses wants to understand what God's nature is really like. The initial divine response is that humans can not grasp a true picture of God but only a partial, as it were, side view.¹ But then God offers a self-definition. This became the most influential guideline in the tradition to the true nature of the Divine.

Exodus 34:6-7

[The] **Loving God** [YHVH—the Divine name expressing God's close involvement with humans, including the covenant].

Loving God [YHVH—remains that way even after humans sin or betray the covenant].²

Mighty One [who is] **Merciful** and **Gracious** (gives goodness one sidedly without quid pro quo).

Slow to anger/long suffering and **overflowing with love** and commitment.³ Guards **covenantal love** for **thousands of generations**.

Forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but **does not wipe out guilt**.

Punishes the iniquity of the fathers up to the children, children's children and to the **third and fourth generation**.

Two observations leap out in reading this definition. One is that this is overwhelmingly a portrait of a loving, caring, giving, forgiving Deity. (So much for the stereotype that the God of Hebrew Scriptures is a God of Wrath). The second is that the last phrase [nevertheless does not wipe out guilt] is in contradiction—or at least, is in tension—with the main description. How can these two qualities be reconciled? Implicit in this clash is a deeper message that there is no static, once-and-for-all definition of God. The divine-human relationship is dynamic and interactive.

Furthermore, the act of entering into covenant, which turns love into commitment, has an effect both immediately and as the covenant continues. The clash of forgiving and of not wiping out is an invitation to the human partner to resolve the conflict. Indeed in Deuteronomy, Moses rules that “fathers shall not be put to death (punished) for children(‘s sins) and children shall not be put to death (punished) for father(‘s sins), every man shall be put to death (punished) for his own sins” (Deuteronomy 24:16). To which a midrash responds that Moses made this new ruling and God consented to his judgement (Bemidbar Rabbah 19).⁴

Since this was God speaking of God, later generations privileged this text as a kind of meta-theological, meta-halakhic, authoritative statement by which to write and rewrite what God was instructing for their time. They directly quoted—or intertextually referenced these verses—to understand God’s nature.

This begins even elsewhere in the Bible. When God wants to wipe out the people of Israel for accepting the spies’ negative report about the land of Canaan, Moses quotes these words back to God directly as a counter-argument (Numbers 14:18). In the prophetic period, Joel calls uses these words to encourage the Jews to repent before a combined famine and military invasion wipes out the land and its people. Since God is merciful and forgiving, he argues, repentance can reverse the decree of destruction (Joel 2:13-14). As a final example, the prophet Jonah explains that he fled from God’s call in order to avoid being the messenger to Nineveh. He explains that he knew that God, being merciful and forgiving, would let Nineveh off the hook, annul their punishment, and thus leave Jonah looking like a false prophet (Jonah 4:2).

The Rabbis continued the focus on the verses in Ki Tissa as the ultimate definition of God, so authoritative that one can depend on it in charting our religious behaviors. Calling the definition “The Thirteen Middot” (“Character Traits,” that are primary aspects of the Divine in encounter with humans), they placed them at the center of the Yom Kippur liturgy of repentance as well as in all Selihot (penitential prayers) services during Elul (in the run up to the High Holy Days) and throughout the year.

The Rabbis also continued the process of interpretation and reshaping of the divine words in a remarkable fashion. Despite their general rule in the liturgy to use verses from the Torah only in their exact primary textual form, they cut out the last part of the last verse which declares that God will not forgive but will punish in the following

generations. Even more dramatically they cut it in the middle of the phrase, **ve-nakeh lo yenakeh** [literally; forgiving? No, not forgiving]. The Divine self-definition now read: **ve-nakeh, forgiving** iniquity and transgression and sin. By authority of these covenantal partnership actions, the Divine self-definition became that God is **totally forgiving**.⁵

This is not some arbitrary Rabbinic change. The dynamic of living in covenant with God for more than a millennium taught the Rabbis that God, in essence, was a forgiving, not a punishing, Deity.

One can argue that the dynamic of interaction in the covenant affected God—not just our understanding of God’s nature. After all, the Sinai covenant establishment could be interpreted as a **conditional** election of Israel: “**If you listen to My voice and keep My covenant**, you shall be my treasure among the nations...” (Exodus 19:5). This suggests that if Israel fails to obey God’s voice and betrays the covenant, then it could well forfeit its chosenness. This understanding is supported by God’s initial response to Israel’s betrayal of the covenant by building a Golden Calf. God proposed to wipe out the people, Israel, and replace it with Moses’ descendants and those who remained faithful (Exodus 32:9-10).

Moses insisted that whatever the fate of the Jewish people, it must be his fate. He persuaded the Lord instead to forgive the whole people. There is a replay of this scenario after the fiasco of the spies’ negative report. One might say that in these two incidents God learns that the attachment to Israel has grown so much that the Lord is not ready to kick Israel out of the covenant for failure to live up to its terms. The divine love has grown into unconditional commitment.

This understanding was the message of the great prophets of Israel when the First Temple was destroyed. Many Israelites were concerned that if God allowed the Temple’s destruction and the Jewish people to be exiled from Israel, it could only mean that the Lord had rejected Israel because of its repeated gross violations of the covenant—both in worshipping idolatrous cults and in stealing and abusing from fellow human beings. The prophets responded that God punished Israel only for the moment and for their own good. They assured the people that God’s love had grown in the course of living the covenant over the centuries. The covenantal dynamic showed that God had become all forgiving. Even better, the divine attachment to Israel and the covenant had become unbreakable. In the words of Isaiah “...I hid My face from you for a moment—but with everlasting covenantal love I will gather you to me in mercy... The mountains will dissolve and the hills crumble but my committed love shall not depart from you and my covenant of peace [with you] shall never be removed” (Isaiah 54:9-10).¹ *Shabbat Shalom*.

¹“You can see My back but My face can not be seen” [by humans] (Exodus 33:23). ² Talmud Rosh Hashanah 17b. ³ Interpreting תָּמָא וְטוֹב as a hendiadys, not as two separate qualities.

⁴ This midrash has God saying to Moses: “You taught me [the law of no vicarious punishment]. I swear that I will nullify my words [punishing future generations] and uphold your words.” ⁵ This is actually

only one step further than the original Divine self-definition which spoke of punishing. However, it said that God exercised covenantal love for thousands of generations whereas the punishment continues for only up to four generations (see Exodus 20:5 and 34:7). This means that the minimum ratio of loving forgiveness to punishment is 500 to 1!

[Ki Tissa by Rabbi Shaul Rosenblatt](https://mailchi.mp/tikun/haazinu5781-2578727?e=e0f2ca6c0d)

<https://mailchi.mp/tikun/haazinu5781-2578727?e=e0f2ca6c0d>

This week, we begin with a census of the Jewish nation. Each person, rich or poor, had to give a half shekel for upkeep of the Tabernacle.

The portion's centrepiece, however, is the story of the Golden Calf. The Jewish people, having heard God speak to them at Mt. Sinai only forty days previously, decided to build an idol. It's shocking, but something I'm going to talk about below. The portion concludes with Moses' return from Sinai, with 'horns'. When put in context, though, the word keren clearly means, 'ray of light' and not 'horn'.

Unfortunately, some Christian scholars of the Middle Ages misread the Hebrew and one can still find statues (I saw one once in Vilnius) of Moses with large bulls' horns.

This Golden Calf is the most honest story ever told by a religion. A nation experiences the seminal moment in its history – that of direct communication from God at Mt Sinai, then, a mere forty days later, they create an idol and say, 'this is your god, oh Israel'. It's sheer madness.

I'm reminded of the downfall of Ratner's jewellery chain thirty years ago when Gerald Ratner publicly boasted about how bad his product was. And, of course, everyone stopped buying. Here, the Torah admits that its product was just not good enough for those who received it. If so, how is anyone else going to be impressed? But if God is writing the book, he has no one to impress. An honest rendition is good enough – warts and all.

What jumps out at me, however, is the insightful message that the story conveys about human nature – that change happens from the inside out, never the other way around. External experiences never effect meaningful change. It only happens from within. The Jewish People had an incredible experience. They heard God, himself, speaking to them. It was so overwhelming that the Torah tells us they 'saw' the sounds and 'heard' the visions. But experience is never more than fleeting. And when it wore off, a mere forty days later, they were right back where they started. Genuine human change starts from within. It begins with a kernel of humility; somehow, some way, we become open to being different. We become open to the possibility that our past need not define our future. It only requires a tiny smidgen of openness, like a pitch-black room at midday; open the door just a tiny fraction and light will flood in.

When we are open to the possibility of change, change becomes genuinely possible. A change of thinking, a change of heart, new insight, new perspective, new choices to be made. It's always there to be had. We just need to be open to it.

If there's something in life that we are looking to change, the outside world is the wrong place to look. People and experiences will not help. As evidenced by the Mt Sinai experience, inspiration born from outside events is short lived. Inspiration born of our own willingness to see something new, however, has the power to turn our lives around.

Yahrtzeits

Rabbi Lisa Vernon remembers her friend Abner Herbst on Saturday March 6th (Adar II 22).

Sarah McNamara remembers his father Edward K, Zuckerman (Yisrael Ben Hananya Leib) on Saturday March 6th (Adar22).

Bobbi Ostrowsky remembers her father Buddy Edelman (Yisroel Ben Leb) on Saturday March 6th (Adar 22).

Lenny Levin remembers his brother Joseph Levin on Sunday March 7th (Adar II 23)

Linda Chandross remembers her father Daniel Glick on Sunday March 7th (Adar 23)

Cynthia Schwartz remembers her father Burton Schwartz (Dov B'er ben Avraham Zvi haLevi v'Sarah Miriam) on Tuesday March 9th (Adar 25).

Bob Woog remembers his wife Barbara P. Woog (Shoshanah Halvah bat Avraham va Sarah) on Wednesday March 10th (Adar 26).

Margie Freeman remembers her father Dr. Elias Freeman (Eliahu Ben Matityahu v'Sarah) on Thursday March 11th (Adar 27).

Our regular weekday evening minyan will take place on Monday, March 1, beginning at 8:00. Your presence allows mourners and those observing yahrzeits to say Kaddish. Please support your Kol Rina friends by attending.

Use the following Zoom link to attend:

<https://zoom.us/j/97663987468?pwd=NjFhaVZUZkpSZ3pxQWJjOU5UWFR4QT09>

