

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Ki Tissa
February 19, 2022*** 18 Adar, 5782

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)

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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.

[Haftarah in a Nutshell: I Kings 18:20-39](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/819865/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

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In this week's *haftarah*, Elijah the Prophet demonstrates the worthlessness of the Baal, just as Moses chastised the Israelites for serving the Golden Calf, as discussed in this week's Torah reading.

The background of this week's *haftarah*: King Ahab and Queen Jezebel ruled the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and encouraged the worship of the Baal deity as well

as other forms of idolatry. To prove that G-d alone is in control and provides sustenance, Elijah decreed a drought on the kingdom—no rain fell for three years. When Ahab then accused Elijah of causing hardship for the Israelites, Elijah challenged him to a showdown. He, Elijah, would represent the cause of monotheism, and 850 idolatrous "prophets" would represent their cause. Ahab accepted.

The *haftorah* begins with Elijah, the Baal prophets, and many spectators gathering atop Mount Carmel. Elijah rebuked the people of Israel, uttering the famous words: "How long will you hop between two ideas? If the L-rd is G-d, go after Him, and if the Baal, go after him."

Elijah then stated his challenge: "Give us two bulls and let them [the Baal prophets] choose one bull for themselves and cut it up and place it on the wood, but fire they shall not put; and I will prepare one bull, and I will put it on the wood, and fire will I not place. And you will call in the name of your deity, and I will call in the name of the L-rd, and it will be the G-d that will answer with fire, he is G-d."

The people agreed to the challenge, and the prophets of the Baal were first. The prophets' entreaties to their god went unanswered. Elijah taunted them: "Call with a loud voice, for you presume that he is a god. [Perhaps] he is talking or he is pursuing [enemies], or maybe he is on a journey; perhaps he is sleeping and will awaken..."

As evening approached, Elijah took center-stage. He built an altar, laid his offering upon it and surrounded it with water. "Lord, the G-d of Abraham, Isaac and Israel," he declared. "Today let it be known that You are G-d in Israel and that I am Your servant, and at Your word have I done all these things. Answer me, O L-rd, answer me, and this people shall know that You are the L-rd G-d..."

A fire immediately descended from heaven and consumed the offering, as well as the altar and the surrounding water. "And all the people saw and fell on their faces, and they said, "The Lord is G-d, the L-rd is G-d."

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

[Can There Be Compassion Without Justice from the Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust](https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/ki-tissa/can-compassion-without-justice/)

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/ki-tissa/can-compassion-without-justice/>

At the height of the drama of the Golden Calf, a vivid and enigmatic scene takes place. Moses has secured forgiveness for the people. But now, on Mount Sinai yet again, he does more. He asks God to be with the people. He asks Him to "teach me Your ways," and "show me Your glory" (Ex. 33:13, Ex. 33:18). God replies:

“I will cause all My goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim My Name, the Lord, in your presence ... I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But,” He said, “you cannot see My face, for no one may see Me and live.”

Ex. 33:20

God then places Moses in a cleft in the rock face, telling him he will be able to “see My back” but not His face, and Moses hears God say these words:

“The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet He does not leave the guilty unpunished.

Ex. 34:6-7

This passage became known as the “Thirteen Attributes of God’s Mercy.” The Sages understood this episode as the moment in which God taught Moses, and through him all future generations, how to pray when atoning for sin (Rosh Hashanah 17b). Moses himself used these words with slight variations during the next crisis, that of the spies. Eventually they became the basis of the special prayers known as Selichot, prayers of penitence. It was as if God were binding himself to forgive the penitent in each generation by this self-definition.[1] God is compassionate and lives in love and forgiveness. This is an essential element of Jewish faith.

But there is a caveat. God adds: “Yet He does not leave the guilty unpunished.” There is a further clause about visiting the sins of the parents upon the children which demands separate attention and is not our subject here. The caveat tells us that there is forgiveness but also punishment. There is compassion but also justice. Why so? Why must there be justice as well as compassion, punishment as well as forgiveness? The Sages said:

“When God created the universe He did so under the attribute of justice, but then saw it could not survive. What did He do? He added compassion to justice and created the world.”

See Rashi to Genesis 1:1.

This statement prompts the same question. Why did God not abandon justice altogether? Why is forgiveness alone not enough?

Some fascinating recent research in diverse fields from moral philosophy to evolutionary psychology, and from games theory to environmental ethics, provides us with an extraordinary and unexpected answer.

The best point of entry is Garrett Hardin’s famous paper written in 1968 about “the tragedy of the commons.”[2] He asks us to imagine an asset with no specific owner: pasture land that belongs to everyone (the commons), for example, or the sea and the fish it contains. The asset provides a livelihood to many people, the local farmers or fishermen. But eventually it attracts too many people. There is over-

pasturing or overfishing, and the resource is depleted. The pasture is at risk of becoming wasteland. The fish are in danger of extinction.[3]

What then happens? The common good demands that everyone from here on must practice restraint. They must limit the number of animals they graze or the number of fish they catch. But some individuals are tempted not to do so. They continue to over-pasture or overfish. They justify to themselves that the gain to them is great and the loss to others is small, since it is divided by many. Self-interest takes precedence over the common good, and if enough people act on these instincts, the result is disaster.

This is the tragedy of the commons, and it explains how environmental catastrophes and other disasters occur. The problem is the free rider, the person who pursues their self-interest without bearing their share of the cost of the common good. Because of the importance of this type of situation to many contemporary problems, they have been intensively studied by mathematical biologists like Anatol Rapoport and Martin Nowak and behavioural economists like Daniel Kahneman and the late Amos Tversky.[4]

One of the things they have done is to create experimental situations that simulate this sort of problem. Here is one example. Four players are each given \$8. They are told they can choose to invest as much or as little as they want in a common fund. The experimenter collects the contributions, adds them up, adds 50% (the gain the farmer or fisherman would have made by using the commons), and distributes the sum equally to all four players. So if each contributes the full \$8 to the fund, they each receive \$12 at the end. But if one player contributes nothing, the fund will total \$24, which with 50% added becomes \$36. Distributed equally it means that each will receive \$9. Three will thus have gained \$1, while the fourth, the free rider, will have gained \$9.

This, though, is not a stable situation. As the game is played repeatedly, the participants begin to realise there is a free rider among them even if the experiment is structured so that they don't know who it is. One of two things then tends to happen. Either everyone stops contributing to the fund (i.e. the common good) or they agree, if given the choice, to punish the free rider. Often people are keen to punish, even if it means that they will lose thereby, a phenomenon sometimes called "altruistic punishment."

Some have linked participants to MRI machines to see which parts of the brain are activated by such games. Interestingly, altruistic punishment is linked to pleasure centres in the brain. As Kahneman puts it:

"It appears that maintaining the social order and the rules of fairness in this fashion is its own reward. Altruistic punishment could well be the glue that holds societies together."[5]

This, though, is hardly a happy situation. Punishment is bad news for everyone. The offender suffers, but so do the punishers, who have to spend time or money

they might otherwise use in improving the collective outcome. And in cross-cultural studies, it turns out to be people from countries where there is widespread free-riding who punish most severely. People are most punitive in societies where there is the most corruption and the least public-spiritedness. Punishment, in other words, is the solution of last resort.

This brings us to religion. A whole series of experiments has shed light on the role of religious practice in such circumstances. Tests have been carried out in which participants have the opportunity to cheat and gain by so doing. If, without any connection being made to the experiment at hand, participants have been primed to think religious thoughts – by being shown words relating to God, for example, or being reminded of the Ten Commandments – they cheat significantly less.[6] What is particularly fascinating about such tests is that outcomes show no relationship to the underlying beliefs of the participants. What makes the difference is not believing in God, but rather being reminded of God before the test. This may well be why daily prayer and other regular rituals are so important. What affects us at moments of temptation is not so much background belief but the act of bringing that belief into awareness.

Of much greater significance have been the experiments designed to test the impact of different ways of thinking about God. Do we think primarily in terms of Divine forgiveness, or of Divine justice and punishment? Some strands within the great faiths emphasise one, others the other. There are hellfire preachers and those who speak in the still, small voice of love. Which is the more effective?

Needless to say, when the experimental subjects are atheists or agnostics, there is no difference. They are not affected either way. Among believers, though, the difference is significant. Those who believe in a punitive God cheat and steal less than those who believe in a forgiving God. Experiments were then performed to see how believers relate to free-riders in common-good situations like those described above. Were they willing to forgive, or did they punish the free-riders even at a cost to themselves. Here the results were revelatory. People who believe in a punitive God, punish people less than those who believe in a forgiving God.[7] Those who believe that, as the Torah says, God “does not leave the guilty unpunished,” are more willing to leave punishment to God. Those who focus on Divine forgiveness are more likely to practice human retribution or revenge.

The same applies to societies as a whole. Here the experimenters used terms not entirely germane to Judaism: they compared countries in terms of percentages of the population who believed in heaven and hell. “Nations with the highest levels of belief in hell and the lowest levels of belief in heaven had the lowest crime rates. In contrast, nations that privileged heaven over hell were champions of crime. These patterns persisted across nearly all major religious faiths, including various Christian, Hindu and syncretic religions that are a blend of several belief systems.”[8]

This was so surprising a finding that people asked: in that case, why are there religions that de-emphasise Divine punishment? Azim Shariff offered the following explanation:

“Because though Hell might be better at getting people to be good, Heaven is much better at making them feel good.” So, if a religion is intent on making converts, “it’s much easier to sell a religion that promises a Divine Paradise than one that threatens believers with fire and brimstone.”[9]

It is now clear why, at the very moment He is declaring his compassion, grace and forgiveness, God insists that He does not leave the guilty unpunished. A world without Divine justice would be one where there is more resentment, punishment, and crime, and less public-spiritedness and forgiveness, even among religious believers. The more we believe that God punishes the guilty, the more forgiving we become. The less we believe that God punishes the guilty, the more resentful and punitive we become. This is a totally counterintuitive truth, yet one that finally allows us to see the profound wisdom of the Torah in helping us create a humane and compassionate society. [1] The Talmud in Rosh Hashanah 17b says that God made a covenant on the basis of these words, binding Himself to forgive those who, in penitence, appealed to these attributes. Hence their centrality in the prayers leading up to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and on Yom Kippur itself. [2] Garrett Hardin, “The Tragedy of the Commons,” Vol. Science 162, 13 December 1968: no. 3859 pp. 1243-1248. [3] Long before Garrett Hardin, there was an old Hassidic story about a village where the people were asked each to donate an amount of wine to fill a large vat to present to the King on his forthcoming visit to the village. Each villager secretly contributed only water instead of wine, arguing to themselves that such a small dilution would not be noticed in the large gift. The King arrived, the villagers presented him with the vat, he drank from it and said, “It’s just plain water.” I guess many folk traditions have similar stories. This is, in essence, the tragedy of the commons. [4] See Robert Axelrod, The Evolution of Cooperation. New York: Basic, 1984. Matt Ridley, The Origins of Virtue, Penguin, 1996. Daniel Kahneman, Thinking, Fast and Slow, Allen Lane, 2011. Martin Nowak and Roger Highfield, Super Cooperators: Evolution, Altruism and Human Behaviour or Why We Need Each Other to Succeed, Edinburgh: Canongate, 2011. [5] Kahneman, Thinking, Fast and Slow, 308.[6] Ara Norenzayan, Big Gods: How Religion Transformed Cooperation and Conflict, Princeton University Press, 2013, 34-35. [7] Ibid., 44-47. [8] Ibid., 46. [9] Ibid.

[A Radical Shabbat: Continuity and Discontinuity: Ki Tissa by Rabbi Aviva Richman](https://www.hadar.org/torah-collection/aviva-richmans-divrei-torah)

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In Parashat Ki Tissa, we transition abruptly from many chapters describing the mishkan, in all of its perfect detail, to our first major sin as a people: creating the golden calf. Between these two very different poles—the ideal and the real—the Torah interjects with a brief discussion of Shabbat. This textual order is not merely coincidental.¹ In Hassidic interpretation, we live this out in our own lives, as

Shabbat each week brings us back to our “pre-sin” state. Shabbat reminds us that, at our core, we have the capacity to live inside our vision for what should be, even as that vision may usually feel unattainable in the midst of the incremental work of our day-to-day lives.

After finishing the instructions for how to build the mishkan, the Torah re-introduces the importance of Shabbat:

Exodus 31:13

Speak to the people of Israel and say: Nevertheless, you must keep My sabbaths, for this is a sign between Me and you throughout the ages, that you may know that I, YHVH, have consecrated you.

Rashi explains that the word “nevertheless” comes to “exclude Shabbat from the work of the mishkan.”² It is not totally clear what he means.³ In 1871, the Hassidic teacher, the Sefat Emet, shares the little bit he remembers from his grandfather’s interpretation of this cryptic phrase:

Sefat Emet Ki Tissa 1871

...My teacher said the explanation is that, just like the mishkan is the matter of God’s Indwelling Presence and also the matter of Shabbat is the elevation of all creatures, so the Torah makes an exclusionary ruling, that the matter of the mishkan does not apply on Shabbat. His words need explanation, for I don’t remember any more.

The spiritual role of the mishkan and Shabbat seem to serve a similar function, but in opposite directions. The mishkan represents God “coming down” to our earthly dimension; Shabbat represents all creatures “going up” to God. One might think these are complementary and work in tandem, but the point here is that, for some reason, they cannot sit side by side.

As Sefat Emet revisits this puzzling concept year after year he explains why the work of the mishkan is irrelevant to Shabbat. First, we have to understand that at Sinai, we had attained a status like angels, with no barrier between ourselves and God, no gap between our “real” and “ideal” selves.⁴ The golden calf corrupted this status, and the point of the labors of the mishkan was to bring us back to our pre-sin state:

Sefat Emet Ki Tissa 1878

... this was repaired through the work of the mishkan, which involves clarifying the 39 labors, which include all of human action... Through the toil of doing everything with kedushah (holiness), we merit to find the glow of the Divine Presence in every place.

We see here that building the mishkan was not a one-time opportunity for Israel to make amends for their sin, but rather represents the work of all of human labor during the week.⁵ In this frame, the goal of our mundane work is like the goal of the mishkan, to distill God’s presence hidden within the world around us, in all of the mess of materiality and limitations of human existence.

But the nature of Shabbat is different:

However, on Shabbat Benei Yisrael didn't sin... keeping Shabbat remains pure, without the need for any clarification.

The weekday work of laboring to distill some semblance of Divine Presence within the world around us suddenly disappears on Shabbat. Shabbat brings us back to our pre-sin state (to Exodus 31, so to speak) when we didn't need the work of the mishkan to seek out God's presence, because God's presence was so clearly around us—and even in us.

Shabbat represents a total paradigm shift, not just taking a break from our usual work:

And in Rashi: “‘Shabbat Shabbaton’ (Exodus 31:15)—A restful rest, not temporary.” This means that the rest should not be holding back from doing work for the time being but forgetting the whole concept of work.

On Shabbat, the to-do list evaporates as we tap into the core reality of who we are. There is no gap between us and God, between the people we are and the people we want to become. We bear witness to the fundamental power and possibility of the inner capacity of ourselves and the world around us.

Now we understand the force of the original idea, that Shabbat must be “excluded” from the work of the mishkan. The work of the mishkan is not just a different means to achieve a similar end; it is actually antithetical to Shabbat, an affront to the spiritual reality Sefat Emet describes. Through the gift (perhaps even “grace”) of Shabbat each week, we are already close to God, and contain within us the person we want to be. Seeking out someone right in front of you reflects that you are not seeing them, or adamantly denying their existence. Pursuing “the work of the mishkan” on Shabbat would undermine the already present force of our relationship with God, and the truth of our inner being.

The Sefat Emet suggests that, in our spiritual lives we regularly toggle between the modes of incremental growth during the week, and an asymptotic discontinuity towards the infinite on Shabbat. We must have a dynamic spiritual practice. Yes, most of our time we are in the mode of incremental progress towards an unreachable goal. But we have to interrupt that mindset and realize that, if we are true to who we are, we can already recognize the person we want to become and taste the world we are trying to build. The radically disruptive leap of Shabbat renews our vision each week in two ways. Shabbat can reaffirm what we already think we are ultimately striving for, but it can also unsettle our regular spiritual trek, allowing us to adapt our vision of what we need to work towards.

The dynamic modes of building towards closeness that Sefat Emet describes in our relationship with God can hold true on the interpersonal plane as well. In general, we may find ourselves trying to incrementally grow closer to others, especially after a time of conflict or misunderstanding (like the golden calf). Yet, Shabbat reminds

The Aromatic Smokescreen: Ki Tissa by Ilana Kurshan

https://drive.google.com/file/d/16_FvTOikN20QhxJ6y6dOvgG-tEU6Filu/view

Our parashah, famous for describing Moshe's receipt of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai and the people's construction of the golden calf down below, also contains God's instructions to Moshe concerning the preparation of the Ketoret, the incense offered in the Tabernacle along with the daily sacrifices. The incense, a combination of herbs "expertly blended, refined, pure, sacred" (Exodus 30:35), had a very specific recipe with precise quantities, as detailed by the Talmudic sages (Keritot 6a). The Talmudic discussion of the Ketoret offers insight into why the incense is discussed here in the Torah, in a parashah otherwise preoccupied with the revelation at Sinai.

The Torah teaches that when the Israelites stood before God on Mount Sinai, there was "a dense cloud upon the mountain," and "the smoke rose like the smoke of a kiln" (Exodus 19:16-18). It is an image strikingly reminiscent of the Talmud's discussion of the role played by the Ketoret in the rituals of Yom Kippur, when the High Priest would enter the Holy of Holies. The Torah teaches that the High Priest was allowed to enter this most sacred chamber only when carrying the incense, because the cloud of smoke rising from the incense had to occlude the ark covering. Only then would God appear: "For in a cloud shall I be seen on the cover" (Leviticus 16:2). The cloud of smoke from the Ketoret thus facilitated the manifestation of God's presence, which could take place only when the High Priest's vision was clouded by the smoke from the Ketoret. "No man can see me and live," as God tells Moshe in our parashah (33:20); even the High Priest must rely on the buffer of the incense smoke to safeguard against the dazzling and dangerous intensity of unmediated revelation.

The Talmud (Yoma 38a) explains that the smoke from the incense rose straight up like a column—or perhaps like the smoke of a kiln—and then descended and spread, filling the entire chamber of the Holy of Holies. No one knew what was responsible for this property, called Maaleh Ashan, the raiser of smoke, except for one particular family, known as Avtinas, who passed the secret of the Ketoret down through the generations and refused to share it with anyone else. The Talmud relates that when the Avtinas family would not divulge their secret, the sages removed them from office and sent for specialists from Alexandria, Egypt, who were experts at preparing incense. But the Alexandrian apothecaries were unable to make the smoke ascend straight up. So the sages had no choice but to reinstate the Avtinas family. Recognizing how much they were valued, the Avtinas family doubled their rate, and it is for this reason, says the Talmud, that the family is not remembered favorably.

The Ketoret was thus bound up in mystery and concealment – not only did the cloud of incense serve to keep the divine image occluded, but the recipe was a

closely guarded family secret. The Talmud (Keritot 6a) tells us only that it consisted of eleven spices, ten of which were fragrant and one of which—the galbanum (chelbenah)—smelled foul. But combined with the other ingredients, the galbanum lent the Ketoret exactly the right aroma. The rabbis use the Ketoret as a parable to teach that just as the foul-smelling ingredient was necessary to give the entirety its desired fragrance, so too every congregation needs to include its sinners. Abaye derives this notion from a verse in Amos, where God “builds His upper chambers in the heavens and establishes His bundle on the earth” (6:9). The people are described as a bundle, suggesting that we must all—righteous and sinners—approach God together in our prayers. We do not leave sinners to come before God on their own, because all of us at some point are sinners. The galbanum alone would smell terrible, and none of us imperfect human beings would want to stand alone before the divine Judge. As a community, however, we compensate for and conceal one another’s shortcomings, allowing the sinners among us to blend in with everyone else.

When read in the context of our parashah, the Ketoret serves to remind us that revelation is never direct and unmediated, whether it is the high priest entering the Holy of Holies in a cloud of smoke, or whether it is the collective experience of the Jewish people standing before a dense cloud at the foot of Mount Sinai. For us, too, the divine encounter is inherently occluded – we do not necessarily know when God is speaking to us, or when our prayers are being answered. We experience the divine through smoke and haze, as part of a community created by the bundling and blending together of many individuals. Perhaps the secret recipe for a holy community is the recognition that all of us need one another when standing before God. *(Ilana Kurshan is the author of If All the Seas Were Ink, published in 2017 by St. Martin’s Press. She has translated books of Jewish interest by Ruth Calderon, Benjamin Lau, and Micah Goodman, as well as novels, short stories, and children’s picture books. Kurshan is a graduate of Harvard University (BA, summa cum laude, History of Science) and Cambridge University (M.Phil, English literature).*

[Parshat Ki Tisa: Coins, Cows and Counting by Shimshon Stuart Siegel with research by Rabbi Yonathan Neril](https://www.growtorah.org/shemot/2022/02/16-parshat-ki-tisa-coins-cows-and-counting)

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At the opening of Parshat Ki Tisa, Hashem commands Moshe to take a census of B’nei Yisra’el by collecting a half-shekel coin from each adult. The silver from these coins is to be used to make the sockets that hold the planks of the Mishkan, which will be Hashem’s sanctuary among the people.[1]

The two previous parshiyot, Terumah and Tetzaveh, feature detailed instructions for the construction of the Mishkan and all of its utensils. At the beginning of Parshat Terumah, Hashem told Moshe to call for a donation of precious goods to be used in the project: “Gold, silver, and copper; and turquoise, purple, and scarlet wool; linen

and goat hair; red-dyed ram skins, tachash skins, acacia wood; oil for illumination, spices for the anointment oil and the aromatic incense; shoham stones and stones for the settings..."[2] The silver half-shekel, which is to be used to make the very foundation of the Mishkan, is only prescribed now, two parshiyot later. What was the Torah's intention in delaying this instruction?

The Midrash says that Hashem showed Moshe a half-shekel coin made of fire and said, "Like this one shall they give." [3] The Noam Elimelech (Reb Elimelech of Lizensk; Poland, 18th century) explains that money is like fire; it can be used to create, protect and nourish, or it can be used to harm and destroy. [4] The silver half-shekel stands at the opening of our parsha as a warning of the potential dangers of wealth.

Most of the donations for the Mishkan came from the great wealth that B'nei Yisra'el requested (following Hashem's command) and were given from their Egyptian neighbors as they were preparing to emerge from slavery. [5] Mitzrayim's wealth was based in the work of slaves; their culture so intertwined with financial status. B'nei Yisra'el's reclamation of this wealth is the first step in its transformation. The Mishkan takes the riches from Mitzrayim's hierarchical system, and, as is shown by the half-shekel, uses it to show the equality of each member of B'nei Yisra'el. The silver is now elevated by sanctifying it in its use for Hashem. This process is a part of the paradigm shift affected by B'nei Yisra'el in the desert, a shift in our relationship with the material world.

If the half-shekel is B'nei Yisra'el's warning against the dangers of placing too much emphasis on wealth, then the ensuing sin of cheit ha'egel is a mark of their failure to heed it. Just as they are poised to affect a worldwide paradigm shift, B'nei Yisra'el stumble. When Moshe is on Har Sinai and fails to appear in the moment he is expected, the Israelites panic and demand a tangible representation of Hashem's power, building a Golden Calf. In contrast to the intricate details of the Mishkan, the Golden Calf was made haphazardly, after the people demand no more than, "Make us gods that will go before us!" [6] The Calf satiates the need for a physical god, but it is empty, disastrous, even; the golden statue is not a pathway to Hashem.

As contemporary commentator Dr. Aviva Zornberg points out, the most precious golden parts of the Mishkan (the Aron and the golden keruvim resting on top of it) were not within view of anyone, ever, except for the Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur, and to him only through the fog of incense. [7] In contrast, the eigel hazahav, and the sins that attended it, stood exposed before all the people. [8] Proper use of material wealth sanctifies Hashem's name in a way that is modest, and yet affects the whole world for good.

We celebrate the Exodus from Mitzrayim every year at Pesach, remember revelation and the two sets of luchot every Shavu'ot, but too often we ignore what comes in between. The Exodus and revelation, from the plagues to the splitting of the Yam Suf and onto the thunderous Har Sinai, feature nature in its extremes: hail,

thunder, fire, etc. used to display Hashem's power. The eigel hazahav shows artificiality in excess: displays of wealth and human creation, possessions that separate us from Hashem and leave destruction in their wake. But the half-shekel and the Mishkan draws our attention to a quieter relationship with the world: one based in justice, equality, humility and the careful use of our resources. Hashem commands Moshe to collect the half-shekel in the context of a census. "Ki Tisa," often translated as "when you count [the people]," literally means "when you lift." The donation of a silver half-shekel allowed each member of B'nei Israel to contribute equally to the communal project of the construction of a resting place for Hashem, even when they cannot necessarily see the results of their donation. This is transformative in and of itself. Dedicating ourselves and our resources in a modest, holy and reparative way elevates each of us, placing us on a path towards a healthier social, spiritual and physical environment.

Yahrtzeits

Sarah McNamera remembers her father Edward K. Zuckerman on Wednesday February 23rd (Adar 22)

Bobbi Ostrowsky remembers her father Buddy Edelman on Wednesday February 23rd (Adar 22)

Linda Chandross remembers her father Daniel Glick on Thursday February 24th (Adar 23)