

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Ki Tisa
March 2, 2024 *** 22 Adar I, 5784

Ki Tisa in a Nutshell

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

The name of the Parshah, "Ki Tisa," means "When you take" and it is found in Exodus 30:11.

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

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 450 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](#)

[Between Truth and Peace by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l](#)

<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/ki-tissa/between-truth-and-peace/>

Ki Tissa tells of one of the most shocking moments of the forty years in the wilderness. Less than six weeks after the greatest revelation in the history of religion – Israel's encounter with God at Mount Sinai – they made a Golden Calf.

Either this was idolatry or perilously close to it, and it caused God to say to Moses, who was with Him on the mountain, "Now do not try to stop Me when I unleash My wrath against them to destroy them" ([Ex. 32:10](#)).

What I want to look at here is the role played by Aaron, for it was he who was the de facto leader of the people in the absence of Moses, and it was he whom the Israelites approached with their proposal:

The people began to realise that Moses was taking a long time to come down from the mountain. They gathered around Aaron and said to him, "Make us a god [or an oracle] to lead us. We have no idea what happened to Moses, the man who brought us out of Egypt." [Ex. 32:1](#)

It was Aaron who should have seen the danger, Aaron who should have stopped them, Aaron who should have told them to wait, have patience and trust. Instead this is what happened:

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 fashioned it with a graving tool, and made it a molten Calf. Then they said, "'This, Israel, is your god, who brought you out of Egypt,' When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the Calf and announced, "Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord." So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented peace offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry. [Ex. 32:2-6](#)

The Torah itself seems to blame Aaron, if not for what he did then at least for what he allowed to happen:

Moses saw that the people were running wild and that Aaron had let them get out of control and so become a laughing-stock to their enemies. [Ex. 32:25](#)

Now Aaron was not an insignificant figure. He had shared the burden of leadership with Moses. He had either already become or was about to be appointed High Priest. What then was in his mind while this drama was being enacted?

Essentially there are three lines of defence in the Midrash, the Zohar, and the medieval commentators. The first defence, as suggested by the Zohar, is that Aaron was playing for time. His actions were a series of delaying tactics. He told the people to take the gold earrings their wives, sons and daughters were wearing, reasoning to himself: "While they are quarrelling with their children and

wives about the gold, there will be a delay and Moses will come." His instructions to build an altar and proclaim a festival to God the next day were likewise intended to buy time, for Aaron was convinced that Moses was on his way.

The second defence is to be found in the Talmud and is based on the fact that when Moses departed to ascend the mountain he left not just Aaron but also Hur in charge of the people ([Ex. 24:14](#)). Yet Hur does not figure in the narrative of the Golden Calf. According to the Talmud, Hur had opposed the people, telling them that what they were about to do was wrong, and was then killed by them. Aaron saw this and decided that proceeding with the making of the Calf was the lesser of two evils:

Aaron saw Hur lying slain before him and said to himself: If I do not obey them, they will do to me what they did to Hur, and so will be fulfilled [the fear of] the Prophet, "Shall the Priest [Aaron] and the Prophet [Hur] be slain in the Sanctuary of God?" ([Lamentations 2:20](#)). If that happens, they will never be forgiven. Better let them worship the Golden Calf, for which they may yet find forgiveness through repentance. *[Sanhedrin 7a](#)*

The third, argued by Ibn Ezra, is that the Calf was not an idol at all, and what the Israelites did was, in Aaron's view, permissible. After all, their initial complaint was, "We have no idea what happened to Moses." They did not want a god-substitute but a Moses-substitute, an oracle, something through which they could discern God's instructions – not unlike the function of the Urim and Tummim that were later given to the High Priest. Those who saw the Calf as an idol, saying, "This is your god who brought you out of Egypt," were only a small minority – three thousand out of six hundred thousand – and for them Aaron could not be blamed.

So there is a systematic attempt in the history of interpretation to mitigate or minimise Aaron's culpability – understandably so, since we do not find explicitly that Aaron was punished for the Golden Calf (though Abarbanel holds that he was punished later). Yet, with all the generosity we can muster, it is hard to see Aaron as anything but weak, especially in the reply he gives to Moses when his brother finally appears and demands an explanation:

"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...' 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](#)*

There is more than a hint here of the excuses Saul gave Samuel, explaining why he did not carry out the Prophet's instructions. He blames the people. He suggests

he had no choice. He was passive. Things happened. He minimises the significance of what has transpired. This is weakness, not leadership.

What is really extraordinary, therefore, is the way later tradition made Aaron a hero, most famously in the words of Hillel:

Be like the disciples of Aaron, loving peace, pursuing peace, loving people and drawing them close to the Torah. [Avot 1:12](#)

There are famous aggadic traditions about Aaron and how he was able to turn enemies into friends and sinners into observers of the law. The Sifra says that Aaron never said to anyone, "You have sinned" – all the more remarkable since one of the tasks of the High Priest was, once a year on Yom Kippur, to atone for the sins of the nation. Yet there is none of this explicitly in the Torah itself. The only proof-text cited by the Sages is the passage in Malachi, the last of the Prophets, who says about the Kohen:

My covenant was with him of life and peace . . . He walked with Me in peace and uprightness, and turned many from sin. [Malachi 2:5-6](#)

But Malachi is talking about priesthood in general rather than the historical figure of Aaron. Perhaps the most instructive passage is the Talmudic discussion ([Sanhedrin 6b](#)) as to whether arbitration, as opposed to litigation, is a good thing or a bad thing. The Talmud presents this as a conflict between two role models, Moses and Aaron:

Moses's motto was: Let the law pierce the mountain. Aaron, however, loved peace and pursued peace and made peace between man and man.

Moses was a man of law, Aaron of mediation (not the same thing as arbitration but considered similar). Moses was a man of truth, Aaron of peace. Moses sought justice, Aaron sought conflict resolution. There is a real difference between these two approaches. Truth, justice, law: these are zero-sum equations. If X is true, Y is false. If X is in the right, Y is in the wrong. Mediation, conflict resolution, compromise, the Aaron-type virtues, are all attempts at a non-zero outcome in which both sides feel that they have been heard and their claim has, at least in part, been honoured.

The Talmud puts it brilliantly by way of a comment on the phrase, "Judge truth and the justice of peace in your gates" ([Zech. 8:16](#)). On this the Talmud asks what the phrase "the justice of peace" can possibly mean. "If there is justice, there is no peace. If there is peace, there is no justice. What is the 'justice of peace'? This means arbitration."

Now let's go back to Moses, Aaron and the Golden Calf. Although it is clear that

God and Moses regarded the Calf as a major sin, Aaron's willingness to pacify the people – trying to delay them, sensing that if he simply said "No" they would kill him and make it anyway – was not wholly wrong. To be sure, at that moment the people needed a Moses, not an Aaron. But under other circumstances and in the long run they needed both: Moses as the voice of truth and justice, Aaron with the people-skills to conciliate and make peace.

That is how Aaron eventually emerged, in the long hindsight of tradition, as the peace-maker. Peace is not the only virtue, and peace-making not the only task of leadership. We must never forget that when Aaron was left to lead, the people made a Golden Calf. But never think, either, that a passion for truth and justice is sufficient. Moses needed an Aaron to hold the people together. In short, leadership is the capacity to hold together different temperaments, conflicting voices, and clashing values.

Every leadership team needs both a Moses and an Aaron, a voice of truth and a force for peace.

[Ki Tisa: Coins, Cows and Counting by Shimshon Stuart Siegel – with research by Jonathan Neril - Edited by Shoshi Ehrenreich of Grow Torah](#)

<https://www.growtorah.org/shemot/2022/02/16-parshat-ki-tisa-coins-cows-and-counting>

At the opening of Parshat Ki Tisa, Hashem commands Moshe to take a census of Bnei Yisrael 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 Bnei Yisrael 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 on the work of slaves; their culture so intertwined with financial status. Bnei Yisrael'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 Bnei Yisrael in the desert, a shift in our relationship with the material world.

If the half-shekel is Bnei Yisrael's warning against the dangers of placing too much emphasis on wealth, and 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, Bnei Yisrael stumble. When Moshe is on Har Sinai and fails to appear in the moment he is expected, Bnei Yisrael 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 demanded 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 modestly sanctifies Hashem's name, and yet affects the whole world for good.

We celebrate the Exodus from Mitzrayim every year at Pesach and remember revelation and the two sets of luchot every Shavu'ot, but we often 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 draw our attention to a quieter relationship with the world: one based on 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 Bnei Yisrael to contribute equally to the communal project of the construction of a resting place for Hashem, even when they could not 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 toward a healthier social, spiritual, and physical environment. (*Shimshon Stuart Siegel is studying for rabbinic ordination at the Bat Ayin Yeshiva in the Judean Hills.*)

[1] Rashi on Shemot 30:15,16 [2] Shemot, 25:3-7 (translation by Artscroll Mesorah)

[3] Rashi on Shemot 30:13 [4] Noam Elimelech on Ki Tisa, p. 130 in edition of Yarid Hasefarim, Jerusalem 1995. [5] Shemot 12:35-36 [6] Shemot 32:1

[7] Dr. Aviva Zornberg, *The Particulars of Rapture*, Image/Doubleday: New York, New York, 2001. “...in Byzantine art and architecture...gold serves the ‘politics of bedazzlement’; it represents blinding power. One looks and is amazed. In the Mishkan, however, the gold remains, in an important way, invisible. [author’s italics] It is donated by the people in the most homely, familiar forms—personal jewelry, for instance. But the interior of the Mishkan is never seen by them, never grasped by their eyes. It is, strictly—and for all but those who serve in the Mishkan, the priests, and the Levites—the stuff of imagination...”

[8] Rashi on Shemot 32:6

[Ki Tisa: See For Yourself – Benefit of the Doubt by the Accidental Talmudist](https://www.accidentaltalmudist.org/torah/2024/02/27/ki-tisa-smashing-tablets-2/)

<https://www.accidentaltalmudist.org/torah/2024/02/27/ki-tisa-smashing-tablets-2/>

In this Torah portion, God speaks to Moses on Mt. Sinai and gives him two stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments. This holy event is followed by a shocking tragedy: God tells Moses that down below, the Israelites are worshipping a calf made of gold.

Moses descends the mountain and when he sees the people dancing around their golden idol, he smashes the tablets in fury. But why doesn’t he smash them as soon as he hears what is going on? Moses only gets angry when he personally witnesses the misbehavior. Does he not believe what God tells him?

The Midrash explains that Moses wanted to teach the Israelites proper behavior. We should not give credence to a negative report about someone. As it is written, “Even if one hears something critical from a trustworthy person, one is not permitted to accept his word and take action on it if he does not see it himself.” (Shemos Rabbah 46:1)

Moses modeled giving others the benefit of the doubt. Imagine how different the world would be if we all gave each other the benefit of the doubt!

Like Moses, may we merit to see the best in others, even when it’s difficult!

[Ki Tisa: Democracies and Holiness Require Open Space by Rabbi Andrea Goldstein](https://truah.org/resources/andrea-goldstein-ki-tisa-moraltorah_2024/)

https://truah.org/resources/andrea-goldstein-ki-tisa-moraltorah_2024/

A number of years ago, I was working with a bar mitzvah student whose Torah portion was Ki Tisa. After reading through the portion together, he said, "I'm not sure I see what's so bad about the Golden Calf. The people were scared, and they built something to help them be less afraid. Isn't the Golden Calf like a security blanket that kids sleep with when they are afraid of the dark?" It was an interesting observation.

The story of the Golden Calf takes place within the third of five different Torah portions that focus primarily on the creation of the Mishkan, the Tabernacle where God's presence was to dwell among the people. Comparing these two building projects, one can see numerous similarities:

The creation of the Mishkan and the creation of the Golden Calf involved the participation of most people within the community. Both projects required the collection of precious metals. Both projects had the effect of bringing the people together, working toward a common goal. And, as my bar mitzvah student noted, both brought the people comfort, helping them to feel that they were not alone in the wilderness.

Of course, there were some important differences between the projects as well. The building of the Mishkan was commanded by God, arguably as a demonstration of love for the people. The casting of the Golden Calf came directly from the people, generated by their uncertainty and fear. The Mishkan was a place where God's presence could be felt, while the Calf was, in the people's mind, a substitute for God. Also, for all its specificity and beauty, the Mishkan was largely a structure made up of empty spaces. Yes, the table, lampstand, and altar were all important. However, the Mishkan and the courtyard surrounding it were dominated by a sense of spaciousness. Rabbi Shefa Gold teaches that the most sacred part of the Mishkan, the Holy of Holies, was empty of all furnishings, save the Ark, precisely so that space for God could exist. In contrast, the Calf was solid, existing, in Gold's words, "only of and for itself." It left no room to encounter the Divine ([Torah Journeys](#), 91).

I would argue that the spaciousness and openness of the Mishkan was the source of its holiness. The Polish Chasidic master, Menachem Mendel of Kotzk (1787–1859), teaches that each of us is to build our own *mikdash me'at*, our own small sanctuary, within the recesses of our hearts (quoted in *Itturei Torah*). If we do, then God will dwell with us, no matter where we are.

In building this *mikdash me'at* within, we must remember that sense of spaciousness that was such an integral part of the original Mishkan. Only from an open and spacious heart can we experience a connection to what is holy. From a spiritual practice perspective, this means that when we focus solely on what we

want and need, and what we think we deserve, then what we create within is actually a Golden Calf instead of a *mikdash me'at*.

Today it feels as though more and more of us are worshiping our own Golden Calves and forgetting about the spaciousness that is required to bring about holiness in this world. This, of course, is understandable, when we see that the very foundations of democracy, both in the United States and in Israel, are at risk. We fill in all the empty spaces with *our* values, *our* arguments, and *our* vision of the world as it ought to be, in an effort to stem a frightening tide that wants to rush in and fill that void.

However, when we do this, we forget that democracies, like the Mishkan, also require open spaces where ideas can be freely exchanged. Today more than ever, in our synagogues and in our communities at large, we need these kinds of open spaces where people can come together to talk freely about our differences and listen deeply to one another so we might also see what unites us. To do this, Ki Tisa reminds us that the best way to enter into these spaces and this kind of dialogue is by cultivating our own inner spaciousness. Doing so will allow us to fight for the values we hold dear while listening to the other, whether that other is the one we presume to be our "opponent," or maybe even the presence of the Holy One. (*Rabbi Andrea Goldstein has served as a rabbi at Congregation Shaare Emeth in St. Louis, Missouri, for the past 26 years. She is also the founder and director of the Jewish Mindfulness Center of St. Louis.*) *****

YAHRTZEITS

Sarah McNamara remembers her father Edward K. Zuckerman on Sat. March 2.

Bobbi Ostrowsky remembers her father Buddy Edelman on Sat. March 2.

Cynthia Schwartz remembers her father Burton Schwartz on Tues. March 5

Bob Woog remembers his wife Babara P. Woog on Wed. March 6

Margie Freeman remembers her father Dr. Elias Freeman on Thurs. March 7