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Rabbi David Etengoff: Parashat HaShavuah
Parashat Ki Tisa 5774, 2014: "Insights from Rabbi Soloveitchik Zatzal"
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The Golden Calf: Insights from Rabbi Soloveitchik

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the refuah shlaimah of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

One of the best-known passages that occurs in our parasha is that of the Chet Haegel (the Sin of the Golden Calf). Beyond a doubt, it is one of the most difficult and heart-rending incidents in the entire Torah. Our people were nearly destroyed because of this sin. Chazal (Our holy Sages) teach us in a variety of sources that this horrendous act was forgiven, but never "forgotten" by our Creator. This is how our parasha depicts the episode that tore asunder our relationship with Hashem:

Meanwhile, the people began to realize that Moses was taking a long time to come down from the mountain. They gathered around Aaron and said to him, "Make us an oracle to lead us. We have no idea what happened to Moses, the man who brought us out of Egypt. Take the rings off the ears of your wives and children," replied Aaron. "Bring them to me." All the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. He took [the rings] from the people, and had someone form [the gold] in a mold, casting it into a calf. [Some of the people began to] say, "This, Israel, is your god, who brought you out of Egypt." When Aaron saw [this], he built an altar before [the calf]. Aaron made an announcement and said, "Tomorrow, there will be a festival to G-d." Getting up early the next morning, [the people] sacrificed burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. The people sat down to eat and drink, and then got up to enjoy themselves. (Sefer Shemot 32:1-6, this and all Torah translations, The Living Torah, Rav Aryeh Kaplan zatzal)

Year after year we ask ourselves the same question: How was it possible for our ancestors to have participated in this heinous activity? After all, Hashem had just taken them out of Egypt with unrivaled wonders and miracles. In addition, He had revealed Himself to the entire nation at both Kriyat Yam Suf (the splitting of the Sea of Reeds) and at Matan Torah (the Giving of the Torah) on

Mount Sinai. The entire episode seems to defy rational understanding and leaves us baffled.

My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik zatzal (1903-1993), known as "the Rav" by his students and followers, analyzed the Chet Haegel on many occasions. In a public lecture held on March 12, 1979, he labeled this event a "puzzle that deals with great people which reached the highest heights who were converted into a primitive band of idol worshippers and idolaters." Based upon the commentaries of Rabbi Yehudah Halevi (1075-1141), Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra (1089-1164), Rabbi Don Yitzhak Abarbanel (1437-1508), the Beit HaLevi (Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, 1820-1892), and the Malbim (Rabbi Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Michel Wisser, 1809-1879), however, the Rav maintained that the Golden Calf was not really pure avodah zarah (idol worship). Instead, it was, at worst, an instance of shituf (adding or combining) wherein the people viewed the Egel Hazahav as the intermediary between themselves and G-d, rather than His replacement.

Rav Soloveitchik maintained that the entire concept of an intermediary between man and G-d is false from its inception. Unfortunately, many of our ancestors viewed Moshe precisely in this manner:

The sin of the Egel was, in contrast, to the Original Sin, the consequence of man's self-negation and self-downgrading. The awareness of their smallness actually motivated them to sin... the people could not visualize the fulfillment of the great promise without Moshe's leadership. (My transcription, 10 minutes, 17 seconds into the lecture)

The Rav cited Sefer Shemot 32:1 to buttress his contention:

Meanwhile, the people began to realize that Moses was taking a long time to come down from the mountain. They gathered around Aaron and said to him, "Make us an oracle to lead us. We have no idea what happened to Moses, the man who brought us out of Egypt..."

Therefore, the Rav declared: "This was their mistake; no matter that Moses was the greatest prophet, the greatest of all men. Every plain Jew has access to the Ribono shel Olam (The Master of the Universe, transcription my own 11:05-11:18)." Moreover, according to the Rav, Hashem's promise to take the Jewish people out of Egypt was independent of Moshe's presence." Hence, the purpose of the Egel Hazahav was to replace Moshe, not G-d, so that Hashem's spirit could abide therein [i.e. in the Egel], just as it had in Moshe.

Heartbreakingly, even though it was not straightforward idol worship, the Egel Hazahav created a pirood (split) between Hashem and His beloved people that remains in effect until our own historical moment:

After the Revelation [Mount Sinai], Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu [the Holy One blessed be He] was in the midst of the community. When the Jews worshipped the Golden Calf, however, He moved away once again; Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu absented Himself. Had the sin of the Golden Calf not taken place, He would have been with the people forever. Jewish history would have been different. But the people did not understand. They made the Golden Calf, and as a result the Shekhinah [Divine Presence] removed Itself from their midst. (Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, The L-rd is Righteous in All His Ways: Reflections on the Tish'ah be-Av Kinot, Rabbi Jacob J. Schachter, editor, page 111, brackets my own)

The incident of the Golden Calf took place over three thousand years ago. How, then, can we understand it in terms that speak to us in the 21st Century? Once again, we can turn to Rabbi Soloveitchik and his trenchant analysis of this chata'ah gedolah (great sin, Sefer Shemot 32:31):

The Golden Calf epitomizes individuals throughout the ages who have sought to create new forms of religious experience and expression. Although many such efforts may be well-intentioned, they are not legitimate because they lack a divine mandate. This was the essence of the Golden Calf. Tampering with prayer, the priestly blessings, the synagogue or any other form of religious service is another form of that sin. At that time, the Israelites offered sacrifices to G-d. However, because G-d had not commanded such service, it was illegitimate and unacceptable. Therefore, we can see how critical it is that we maintain tradition, particularly regarding prayer. It is important to our survival as a people. (Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Darosh Darash Yosef: Discourses of Rav Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik on the Weekly Parashah, Rabbi Avishai C. David, editor, page 192)

With Hashem's help, may we be zocheh (merit) to witness the fulfillment of Yermiyahu's heartfelt prayer: "Hashiveinu Hashem alechah v'nashuvah chadash yemeinu kekedem" ("Enable us to return to You Hashem and we will return, renew our days as they were in former times"). Then, please G-d, may the Sin of the Golden Calf be erased forever more with the arrival of Mashiach ben David (the true Messiah) and the building of the Beit Hamikdash. V'chane yihi ratzon.

Shabbat Shalom

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from: Shabbat Shalom <shabbatshalom@ounetwork.org> reply-to: shabbatshalom@ounetwork.org date: Thu, Feb 25, 2016

Parshat Ki Tisa: Stubbornness Excerpted from **Rabbi Norman Lamm's** Derashot Ledorot: A Commentary for the Ages Exodus - OU Press and Maggid Publishers

It was Rabbi Simcha Zissel, one of the giants of the Lithuanian Mussar movement, who pointed out an unusual aspect of G-d's reaction to the worship of the Golden Calf by the Israelites. The divine wrath was kindled at the people of Israel not for idolatry, not for faithlessness, but because "hinei am keshei oref hu," "because it is a stiff-necked people." Evidently stubbornness is, in G-d's scheme, more deserving of anger than idolatry. The Torah regards an obstinate character as more evil than a pagan soul. The calamities that followed the Golden Calf were due more to bad character than bad theology.

Certainly this is a valid point. The man with the stubborn streak has a rigid will. His mind is frozen, and so he cannot learn. His soul suffers from a rigor mortis which prevents him from communing with the Source of all life. Brazenness, ignorance, a closed mind, and a dead spirit – these are the prices of obstinacy and the casualties of stubbornness. A stubborn people will persist in its evil ways and never learn the ways of G-d. A stiff-necked people cannot raise its head above the Golden Calf.

And yet the matter cannot be dismissed so simply. A blanket condemnation of stubbornness does not fit in with the complicated facts of today's sidra. For while, on the one hand, G-d points to stubbornness as the root of the sin of idolatry, and while he blames obstinacy for His withdrawal from Israel ("I will not go amongst you because you are a stiff-necked people"), on the other hand, it is this very characteristic that Moses presents as a reason why G-d should rejoin the camp of Israel! In his second prayer of intercession, Moses says "Let G-d go with us because we are a stiff-necked people!" The very reason G-d gave for abandoning Israel is the one Moses presents for His accepting them! If stubbornness is an unconditional evil, an absolute sin, then how can Moses point to Jewish obstinacy as a virtue deserving of G-d's attention?

Obviously, then, stubbornness is a virtue as well as a vice, a mitzva as well as an aveira. To be unbendingly evil is worse than idolatry; to be unbendingly Godly is the greatest virtue. What is dogged obstinacy in the service of a bad cause, is valorous constancy in the service of a good one. Stubbornness depends upon what you do with it and how you wield it. There is an immoral stubbornness that insists, despite all signs of divine faithfulness, that "halo tov lanu shuv Mizrayima," that it is better to live like an Egyptian slave than to die free under G-d in the desert (Numbers :). But there is a moral stubbornness that, despite all reports to the contrary, doggedly insists with Caleb that "alo na'aleh veyarashnu otah," we can reach the Promised Land and build it up. Our Arab cousins practice an immoral stubbornness when they refuse to face the facts of a

divinely guided history and recite daily over Radio Cairo the banal nonsense about pushing the Jews into the sea. But there is a moral stubbornness which refuses to concede that Jews behind the Iron Curtain are lost, and so it waits and prepares until they start to come; a moral obstinacy that will fight tyranny on the beaches, landing grounds, fields, streets, and hills; a lofty stiff-neckedness that will not let freedom's light darken.

Patriots in peace, assert the people's right
With noble stubbornness resisting might.

(John Dryden, Epistle the Thirteenth)

This lovely and blessed tenacity which made the quality of "keshei oref" worthy of divine pleasure, is that which enabled the Jew to face up to the countless challenges thrust upon us by our persecutors throughout the ages. We are a stubborn, stiff-necked, obdurate people. We will not give up our national existence, our faith, our Torah, our G-d.

That is why we are alive to this day. That same quality that made us insensitive to the word of G-d and caused us to dance about a Golden Calf has been sublimated, and has made us strong, powerful people of G-d. That is what Moses meant in his prayer to G-d. The same characteristic that made them blind to you, O G-d, will keep them a holy nation though trial and temptation, through persecution and pogrom once they have accepted You. In every condition and under every circumstance, though ridiculed and laughed at, they will say proudly and stubbornly, "asher bahar banu mekol ha'amim" – G-d has chosen us, and we must teach His word to the world. With principled obstinacy we shall bend the world toward G-d.

And if we need to convince ourselves further of the worthiness of the right kind of stubbornness, let us turn to the haftara where we are given the immortal picture of the prophet Elijah on Mount Carmel, challenging the priests of the idol Baal, swaying his people to him and away from Baal by the miraculous fire from heaven which consumes his sacrifice. What was Elijah's purpose in this dramatic moment? To prove G-d's existence? Is it possible or even proper to prove G-d by this kind of histrionics which could possibly be duplicated by a skilled magician? Not at all. What Elijah proposed in his sudden appearance out of the desert was to change the character of the people from the spiritual flabbiness of fence-sitting religiosity and wishy-washy faith back to the toughness of "am keshei oref." Remember the challenge the prophet flung at this uncertain people, wavering 'twixt G-d and Baal? "Ad matay atem poshim al shetei hase'ipim," how long will you waiver between two opinions, how long will you keep jumping from one branch to the other like a bird that cannot decide where it wants to go? How long will you postpone the hard and tough choice: either G-d or Baal? The prophet was tired with the softness of the Jewish spirit of his day. He wanted to do away with the jelly-fish spirit. He longed for the "am keshei oref," for a flint-minded, stiff-necked people whose head could not be turned by the glitter of golden idols and whose heart would not be turned to the temptations of petty pagan customs.

How interesting is the biblical idiom for stubbornness – "keshei oref," "a stiff neck." A man who has a stiff neck finds that his body and head must face in the same direction. In the evil, wrong kind of stubbornness, his head follows his body and his mind justifies his material cravings. In the right kind of stubbornness, his body follows his head, and he disciplines himself to follow his principles. When there is "poshim al shetei hase'ipim," when there is flabbiness, then head and body face different directions – the mind expresses the best of intentions, while the body indulges in the worst kind of deeds. G-d condemned the wrong kind of stubbornness. Elijah condemned all kinds of moral flabbiness. Moses praised the right kind of stubbornness – where the principles prevail and body must follow mind.

That this teaching of Judaism is as important today as always goes without saying. Our fight for freedom against tyranny, for Jewishness against assimilation, for the moral life against degeneracy – all these depend, in the end, on how properly stubborn we are. But today allow me to mention very briefly but one element of Jewish obstinacy that we must reaffirm urgently. We are a people who have never allowed our poor and unfortunate to become public charges. We have always taken care of our own. It is a wonderful tribute to our stiff-neckedness that we New York Jews, in keeping with this tradition of tzedaka and caring for our fellow Jews, have always supported the central, over-all agency for such purposes: The Federation of Jewish Philanthropies. The

Federation cares for people in our city, through hospitals, orphanages, family and vocational guidance, summer camps, and Jewish education. It is the source of percent of Jewish sponsored care in this city. Last year, the Federation suffered a \$2 million deficit. This year it faces the alarming deficit of \$4 million. The Federation now faces a crisis in maintenance – it needs no less than \$18 million this year just to continue its work without any expansion or improvement. We are called upon, we of the Jewish Center, to show our moral and ethical strength, to rally to the call of tzedaka, to reaffirm our insistence that we take care of our own, that no Jew ever be forced into the humiliation of the public ward. It is a peculiar feeling, and we are stubborn about it – but it is part of our moral heritage. Let us not stand accused of Elijah’s jibe “ad matayatem poshim al shetei hase’ipim.” How long will we remain ambivalent and uncertain whether we will practice tzedaka or not? Let us brace ourselves, and support the Federation even if it hurts a bit. For we are “am keshei oref.”

The Halakha teaches us that an animal whose spine is broken is tereifa – it is not kosher. And if we are in doubt, the Halakha prescribes this interesting test: grasp the spine at its base. If it leans over at the side, that is the sign of a fracture, and the animal is a tereifa. If it stands erect, then the spine has its natural hardness and it is kosher.

If we want to be kosher Jews, Jews who are genuine and authentic heirs of the Torah tradition, we must possess strong backbones and stiff necks. We must show spine and stubbornness in the face of adversity and challenge. We must not bow before persecution; we must not bend the knee for any of the modern idols. We must stand proudly and straight upon our sacred principles. Then we shall be kosher Jews. Then we shall not have reason to fear Elijah’s taunt. Then we shall prove worthy of Moses’ prayer and G-d’s affirmative answer to that prayer: “yelekh na Hashem bekirbenu ki am keshei oref hu” – let G-d go amongst us, for we are a stiff-necked people.

From: Shabbat Shalom <shabbatshalom@ounetwork.org> reply-to: shabbatshalom@ounetwork.org date: Thu, Feb 25, 2016 at 5:16 PM

The Closeness of G-d

Britain’s Former Chief **Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks**

The more I study the Torah, the more conscious I become of the immense mystery of Exodus 33. This is the chapter set in the middle of the Golden Calf narrative, between chapter 32 describing the sin and its consequences, and chapter 34, G-d’s revelation to Moses of the “Thirteen attributes of Mercy”, the second set of tablets and the renewal of the covenant. It is, I believe, this mystery that frames the shape of Jewish spirituality.

What makes chapter 33 perplexing is, first, that it is not clear what it is about. What was Moses doing? In the previous chapter he had already prayed twice for the people to be forgiven. In chapter 34 he prays for forgiveness again. What then was he trying to achieve in chapter 33?

Second, Moses’ requests are strange. He says, “Show me now Your ways” and “Show me now Your glory” (33:13, 33:18). These seem more requests for metaphysical understanding or mystical experience than for forgiveness. They have to do with Moses as an individual, not with the people on whose behalf he was praying. This was a moment of national crisis. G-d was angry. The people were traumatised. The whole nation was in disarray. This was not the time for Moses to ask for a seminar in theology.

Third, more than once the narrative seems to be going backward in time. In verse 4, for example, it says “No man put on his ornaments”, then in the next verse G-d says, “Now, then, remove your ornaments.” In verse 14, G-d says, “My presence will go with you.” In verse 15, Moses says, “If Your presence does not go with us, do not make us leave this place.” In both cases, time seems to be reversed: the second sentence is responded to by the one before. The Torah is clearly drawing our attention to something, but what?

Add to this the mystery of the calf itself – was it or was it not an idol? The text states that the people said, “This, Israel, is your G-d who brought you out of Egypt” (32:4). But it also says that they sought the calf because they did not know what had happened to Moses. Were they seeking a replacement for him or G-d? What was their sin?

Surrounding it all is the larger mystery of the precise sequence of events involved in the long passages about the Mishkan, before and after the Golden Calf. What was the relationship between the Sanctuary and the Calf?

At the heart of the mystery is the odd and troubling detail of verses 7-11. This tells us that Moses took his tent and pitched it outside the camp. What has this to do with the subject at hand, namely the relationship between G-d and the people after the Golden Calf? In any case, it was surely the worst possible thing for Moses to do at that time under those circumstances. G-d had just announced that “I will not go in your midst” (33:3). At this, the people were deeply distressed. They “went into mourning” (33:4). For Moses, then, to leave the camp must have been doubly demoralising. At times of collective distress, a leader has to be close to the people, not distant.

There are many ways of reading this cryptic text, but it seems to me the most powerful and simple interpretation is this. Moses was making his most audacious prayer, so audacious that the Torah does not state it directly and explicitly. We have to reconstruct it from anomalies and clues within the text itself.

The previous chapter implied that the people panicked because of the absence of Moses, their leader. G-d himself implied as much when he said to Moses, “Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt” (32:7). The suggestion is that Moses’ absence or distance was the cause of the sin. He should have stayed closer to the people. Moses took the point. He did go down. He did punish the guilty. He did pray for G-d to forgive the people. That was the theme of chapter 32. But in chapter 33, having restored order to the people, Moses now began on an entirely new line of approach. He was, in effect, saying to G-d: what the people need is not for me to be close to them. I am just a human, here today, gone tomorrow. But You are eternal. You are their G-d. They need You to be close to them.

It was as if Moses was saying, “Until now, they have experienced You as a terrifying, elemental force, delivering plague after plague to the Egyptians, bringing the world’s greatest empire to its knees, dividing the sea, overturning the very order of nature itself. At Mount Sinai, merely hearing Your voice, they were so overwhelmed that they said, if we continue to hear the voice, ‘we will die’ (Ex. 20:16).” The people needed, said Moses, to experience not the greatness of G-d but the closeness of G-d, not G-d heard in thunder and lightning at the top of the mountain but as a perpetual Presence in the valley below.

That is why Moses removed his tent and pitched it outside the camp, as if to say to G-d: it is not my presence the people need in their midst, but Yours. That is why Moses sought to understand the very nature of G-d Himself. Is it possible for G-d to be close to where people are? Can transcendence become immanence? Can the G-d who is vaster than the universe live within the universe in a predictable, comprehensible way, not just in the form of miraculous intervention?

To this, G-d replied in a highly structured way. First, He said, you cannot understand My ways. “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and I will show mercy to whom I will show mercy” (33:19). There is an element of divine justice that must always elude human comprehension. We cannot fully enter into the mind of another human being, how much less so the mind of the Creator himself.

Second, “You cannot see My face, for no one can see Me and live” (33:20). Humans can at best “See My back.” Even when G-d intervenes in history, we can see this only in retrospect, looking back. Steven Hawking was wrong. I Even if we decode every scientific mystery, we still will not know the mind of G-d.

However, third, you can see My “glory”. That is what Moses asked for once he realised that he could never know G-d’s “ways” or see His “face”. That is what G-d caused to pass by as Moses stood “in a cleft of the rock” (v. 22). We do not know at this stage, exactly what is meant by G-d’s glory, but we discover this at the very end of the book of Exodus. Chapters 35-40 describe how the Israelites built the Mishkan. When it is finished and assembled we read this:

Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the Mishkan. Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the Mishkan. (Ex. 40:34-35)

We now understand the entire drama set in motion by the making of the Golden Calf. Moses pleaded with G-d to come closer to the people, so that they would encounter Him not only at unrepeatable moments in the form of miracles but

regularly, on a daily basis, and not only as a force that threatens to obliterate all it touches but as a Presence that can be sensed in the heart of the camp.

That is why G-d commanded Moses to instruct the people to build the Mishkan. It is what He meant when He said: "Let them make Me a sanctuary and I will dwell (ve-shakhanti) among them" (Ex. 25:8). It is from this verb that we get the word Mishkan, "Tabernacle" and the post-biblical word Shekhinah, meaning the Divine presence. A shakhen is a neighbour, one who lives next door. Applied to G-d it means "the Presence that is close." If this is so – it is, for example, the way Judah Halevi understood the text 2 – then the entire institution of the Mishkan was a Divine response to the sin of the Golden Calf, and an acceptance by G-d of Moses' plea that He come close to the people. We cannot see G-d's face; we cannot understand G-d's ways; but we can encounter G-d's glory whenever we build a home, on earth, for His presence.

That is the ongoing miracle of Jewish spirituality. No one before the birth of Judaism ever envisaged G-d in such abstract and awe-inspiring ways: G-d is more distant than the furthest star and more eternal than time itself. Yet no religion has ever felt G-d to be closer. In Tanakh the prophets argue with G-d. In the book of Psalms King David speaks to Him in terms of utmost intimacy. In the Talmud G-d listens to the debates between the sages and accepts their rulings even when they go against a heavenly voice. G-d's relationship with Israel, said the prophets, is like that between a parent and a child, or between a husband and a wife. In The Song of Songs it is like that between two infatuated lovers. The Zohar, key text of Jewish mysticism, uses the most daring language of passion, as does Yedid nefesh, the poem attributed to the sixteenth century Tzefat kabbalist R. Elazar Azikri.

That is one of the striking differences between the synagogues and the cathedrals of the Middle Ages. In a cathedral you sense the vastness of G-d and the smallness of humankind. But in the Altneuschul in Prague or the synagogues of the Ari and R. Joseph Karo in Tzefat, you sense the closeness of G-d and the potential greatness of humankind. Many nations worship G-d, but Jews are the only people to count themselves His close relatives ("My child, my firstborn, Israel" Ex. 4:22).

Between the lines of Exodus 33, if we listen attentively enough, we sense the emergence of one of the most distinctive and paradoxical features of Jewish spirituality. No religion has ever held G-d higher, but none has ever felt Him closer. That is what Moses sought and achieved in Exodus 33 in his most daring conversation with G-d.

1. He famously said, at the end of A Brief History of Time, that if we were to reach a full scientific understanding of the cosmos, we would "know the mind of G-d." 2. Judah Halevi, The Kuzari, 1:97.

From: Shema Yisrael Torah Network <shemalist@shemayisrael.com> to: Daf Hashavua <daf-hashavua@shemayisrael.com> date: Thu, Feb 25, 2016 Subject: **Daf Hashavua by Kollel** Beis HaTalmud - Parshas Ki Sisa

Parshas Ki Sisa
The Heart of the Mishkan
Rabbi Yosef Levinson

In this week's Parsha, the Torah continues to discuss the Mishkan. The Torah devotes four and a half parshios to the Mishkan. All the necessary materials, Keilim and the actual structure of the Mishkan are listed and discussed in great detail, and then repeated again when the Bnei Yisrael constructed and assembled it. Rabbi Miller writes that the Torah devotes more space to the Mishkan than any other subject. What are we to learn from this?

The passuk states "zeh yitnu" - they should give this. Rashi writes that Hashem showed Moshe Rabbeinu a shekel of fire. Hashem pointed to this coin of fire and told Moshe that this is the coin that the Jewish people should give. The Midrash states, that Moshe had difficulty understanding the mitzva of the machatzis hashekel, donating a half shekel coin for the Mishkan. Therefore Hashem showed him this fiery coin.

What did Moshe Rabbeinu find so hard to grasp about giving the machatzis hashekel? And what purpose did the revelation of a shekel of fire serve?

Hashem asks of us: "V'asu li Mikdash" - And make for Me a holy place. The passuk does not say make Me a place and I will make it holy. Rather, it says you should make for Me a holy place. Once we sanctify the Mikdash, then,

"V'Shachanti b'socham" - I will dwell in your midst. How is it possible for basar v'dam, humans of flesh and blood, to draw the Shechina HaKedosha from the Heavens down to Earth? This is exactly what was troubling Moshe Rabbeinu.

The Megillas Sesarim (authored by the Nesivos HaMishpat) explains that it was the love displayed by the Bnei Yisrael for Hashem that brought the Shechina down to this world. This is what Hashem revealed to Moshe; the fiery shekel represents the love that burns within us for the Ribbono Shel Olam (see Shir HaShirim 8:6; and 3:10 with Tzror HaMor). By donating towards the Mishkan with nedivas halev, (generous heart) we cause Hashem to reside among us.

In Parshas Teruma, the Torah lists all the materials that were required to construct the Mishkan. Interestingly, although the avnei shoham and avnei melu'im, the precious gems for the ephod and choshen (breastplate) were by far the most valuable of all the items listed, they are the last to be mentioned.

The Or HaChaim offers two explanations. First, he writes that all the other donations came with a tremendous sacrifice. People toiled hard to acquire what they had. On the other hand, the Gemara relates (Yoma 75a) that the precious stones fell with the man, there was no effort on the part of the Nesi'im (princes of the tribes). It is very difficult for one to part with something that they acquired through a great deal of toil. The Gemara (Bava Metzia 38a) observes that one would rather have one measure of the produce of their own field than nine measures of someone else's. Even if eighty-nine percent of their fruit would spoil, nevertheless, one prefers the remaining eleven percent of their own than having the entire crop from someone else's field. When one then goes ahead and donates his earnings, this shows his love for the recipient of his kindness. Therefore all the other donations demonstrate a deep love for Hashem, the necessary ingredient to bring the Shechina down. The Torah lists the materials according to the nedivas halev that was displayed by the donors and not by the value of the gift.

The Or HaChaim offers another explanation. The Nesi'im were the last to bring a gift for the Mishkan. Hashem showed his displeasure with their donation by mentioning it last. Similarly, the word Nesi'im is written without a yud when the Torah mentions their gift.

Why did the Nesi'im wait til everyone else brought their contributions before bringing their own? Rashi explains that the Nesi'im said that they could really donate all the funds and materials required for the Mishkan, but this would deprive others of the opportunity to share in the mitzva. Therefore, they reasoned, they would let everyone else give first and then they would contribute everything that was lacking. However, everyone else gave so generously that nothing was lacking besides the avnei shoham and avnei melu'im. This was all the Nesi'im could donate. Rav Chaim Shmulevitz points out that the intentions of the Nesi'im were very noble. He questions why the Torah would look askance at their actions (See Sichos Mussar Ma'amar 9, 5731 and Ma'amar 22, 5732).

He explains that their logic was indeed sound. The reason that they were taken to task however was for calculating and postponing their contribution. One who has true nedivas halev, runs at the first opportunity to serve Hashem. The fact that they did not reveals a small lack of nedivas halev on their part. They should have rushed forward to give something. Moshe would surely have told them if they were being too generous.

Rav Chaim Shmulevitz concludes that Hashem wants to dwell in the midst of each and every Jew. When we learn Torah for the sake of Hashem and we display nedivas halev, then we will merit to be a Mishkan for Hashem.

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From: Rabbi Yissocher Frand <ryfrand@torah.org> reply-to: do-not-reply@torah.org to: ravfrand@torah.org date: Thu, Feb 25, 2016 at 8:05 PM subject: Rabbi Yissocher Frand - Parshas Ki Sisa

Rabbi Yissocher Frand Parshas Ki Sisa

We Do Not Need To Worry About Our Land During Aliyah L'regel
Yad Yechiel These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 46, Dealing with Illness on Shabbos. Good Shabbos!

Leave The Worrying To -- Avinu BaShamayim

The pasuk at the end of the parsha says, "Three times in the year all males should appear before the Master, Hashem, G-d of Israel" [Shmos 34:23]. This is the source of the obligation to be "Oleh Regel" -- to go up to the Beis HaMikdash in Yerushalayim -- on Pesach, Shavuot, and Succos. The next pasuk continues, "...no man will covet your land when you go up to appear before Hashem, your G-d, three times a year" [34:24].

The simple interpretation of these pasukim is that the primary thrust of the mitzvah is to be "Oleh Regel". As a secondary point, the Torah informs us that while a person is away from home performing this mitzvah, there is no need to fear that someone will covet his land.

However, there is also a deeper message. The Talmud says that a person who does not own land in Eretz Yisroel is exempt from the mitzvah of making the Festival Pilgrimage [Pesachim 8b]. We cannot apply the pasuk "no man will covet your land" to such a person.

This seems grossly unfair. Why should someone be exempt from "being seen by HaShem" (mitzvas Re'iyah) just because he does not own real estate? Is the Torah discriminating against the poor? What is the connection between going up three times a year and owning land?

Furthermore, the pasuk uses a strange expression: "Three times in the year, all males should appear before the Master (haAdon), Hashem..." The phrase "Adon Hashem" is a very uncommon expression. In fact, the only other place in Chumash where this expression is used is in Parshas Mishpatim [23:17], again in connection with this same mitzvah of going up to Yerushalayim on the Festivals.

The Sforno [Rav Ovadia Sforno] in Parshas Mishpatim says that the use of the word "Adon" alludes to the fact that HaShem is also the Master of the Land, as it is written "For all the Land belongs to Me" [Shmos 19:5]. In other words, in the final analysis, the Ribbono shel Olam owns everything.

Through this Sforno, we can understand a new insight into the mitzvah of Aliyah l'regel, going up to Jerusalem on the holidays. The mitzvah is not merely to go up to Yerushalayim and have a Yom Tov in the presence of and under the influence of the Beis Hamikdash. The purpose of the mitzvah is to emphasize that I can leave my house, my land and my property unattended and not worry about them. Why can I do that? I can do that because, ultimately, they are not mine. Why should I worry about this land? It is not mine to worry about -- it is HaShem's land. He will worry about it. He will take care of it.

When a person returns a rental car, he merely drives up to the return stand, drops off the keys and drives away. Does he need to worry about what will happen to the car? Avis worries about that! It is not your car. It is their car.

So too, when the Jewish people go to Yerushalayim for the Festivals, not worrying about the land is a means of testifying that HaShem is the Master of the Land, and He will take care of it.

Consequently, one who does not have land, cannot participate in this mitzvah, because he cannot demonstrate this confidence in HaShem's ownership of the land through his traveling to Yerushalayim.

The Torah emphasizes this same concept through the Mitzvah of Shmita, the Mitzvah of Yovel, and other Mitzvos. All teach the same lesson -- we are not the "baale-bos" [contraction to ba'al habayis - owner of the house, meaning the one in charge]. A person's beautiful home, on top of the hill, is not really his, because 'All the Land belongs to Me'.

Others Won't Covet Our Land If They Recognize That Our Land Is Special

Why will we not need to worry that someone will take away our land and property while we are away? On a simple level, we understand that HaShem, in fact, performs a miracle. No one will covet our land because HaShem will miraculously see to it that such coveting will not take place during this time.

However, the Mikdash Mordechai [Rav Mordechai Ilan] suggests that perhaps this phenomenon is not a miracle. How else can we explain this guarantee? How can HaShem provide such an assurance without a miracle? The Mikdash Mordechai explains how such an assurance can exist without a miracle, based on an Ibn Ezra.

The Ibn Ezra [Rav Avraham Ibn Ezra] teaches a principle in Chumash on the pasuk in the Aseres HaDibros [Ten 'Commandments'] "Thou Shalt Not Covet" [Shmos 20:14]. Everyone asks, 'How can the Torah dictate emotions?' How can the Torah tell me not to be jealous if, in fact, I am jealous?

The Ibn Ezra explains that when a person is jealous of his neighbor's house or his neighbor's car or his neighbor's wife it is because he believes that he is really entitled to that house, car or wife. The Ibn Ezra points out that the villager does not desire the daughter of the King. He has no expectation to marry into the royal family and consequently does not think about taking the King's daughter for his wife. We do not covet the Crown Jewels of England. That is out of our league.

This, says the Ibn Ezra, is what the Torah expects from us regarding the commandment "Do Not Covet". When we see someone else's car or house, we should tell ourselves -- "I have no relationship to that". Just as I do not covet the Crown Jewels, I do not covet my neighbor's house. It is his house. He needs it. HaShem gave it to him. I have no relationship to it.

The Mikdash Mordechai explains that this too is the reason why the pasuk says 'no man will covet your land'. If we go up on the Festival, and fulfill the mitzvos with all their implications, then we will reach a wonderful level that we as Jews will understand that all the Land (and everything in it) belongs to HaShem. We are not the owners. We accept any way that HaShem chooses to distribute His property.

If we reach that wonderful level, other nations will not desire our land either, because they will look at us and recognize that we are special. They will recognize that our land is, in fact, special -- that our land is not like their land and that they can never hope to have a claim on our land, any more than we can have a claim to the Crown Jewels. By reaching the high spiritual level attained by spending the Festival under the influence of the Beis Hamikdash, we are putting ourselves in a different league and consequently "no man will covet our land".

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This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. A listing of the halachic portions for Parshas Vayakeil/Pikudei is provided below: CDs, MP3s or a complete catalogue can be ordered from the Yad Yechiel Institute, PO Box 511, Owings Mills MD 21117-0511. Call (410) 358-0416 or e-mail tapes@yadyechiel.org or visit <http://www.yadyechiel.org/> for further information.

From: Office of Rabbi Berel Wein <info@jewishdestiny.com> reply-to: info@jewishdestiny.com date: Wed, Feb 24, 2016 at 2:28 PM subject: Parshat Ki Tisa 5776- Rabbi Berel Wein

Rabbi Wein's

Weekly Blog

KI TISA

This week's parsha illustrates the problem that the Jewish people have with unlimited prosperity. With their pockets bursting with the wealth of Egypt and eating free food day in and day out, and with their wealth burning a hole in their pockets, they looked for expression to their newfound prosperity. And so the story of the Golden Calf follows. There are many explanations offered by the commentators to the Torah as to why the Jewish people reverted to idol worship so soon after the grandeur of the revelation at Mount Sinai. However, the inability to deal with great and sudden wealth is certainly one of the factors involved. The rabbis ruefully commented: "You have flooded them with so much wealth and goodness that they cannot accept and deal with it." This is especially true when prosperity is a sudden phenomenon, when wealth follows immediately after almost abject poverty and slavery. The transition is too sudden and too extreme. And, more often than not, it occasions illogical and often self-destructive behavior, which is a good description of the Golden Calf syndrome. It is obvious that if the Jews would not have had large amounts of gold handy and available there could not have been a Golden Calf at all. One of the economic byproducts of great wealth is the search for an outlet to spend it. The enormous current market for luxury items, most of them truly unnecessary for good living, is testimony to this human urge. And so the Golden Calf becomes the god that absorbs wealth, talent and industry. The rabbis of the Talmud commented that Jews do much better spiritually speaking in much more modest financial circumstances than with great wealth. For most of the past two millennia during the long dark times of the Exile, dealing with wealth was not a Jewish problem. There always were individual Jews who somehow achieved

great wealth and power but the overwhelming majority of Jews were poor if not even destitute. Over the past half century, both in the United States and Israel, the Jewish community has become quite prosperous. There are a great many really wealthy Jews. The challenge becomes how to channel this wealth into the Mishkan and not into the Golden Calf. This is a national issue. On a personal level there has to be a concerted effort to prevent family dysfunction, which is often the result of sudden and unexpected wealth. Wealth and humility do not often combine in one personality. The ability to handle one's wealth and material possessions wisely, with balance, is a major challenge, and it should be recognized as such. The Torah and the Talmud do not preach poverty as an ideal way of life or as a value on its own. The Torah always preaches balance in almost all ways of living. This balance is the key to avoid the Golden Calf syndrome. We pray to be blessed with financial prosperity but we should also pray to be blessed with the wisdom and balance to handle it properly. Shabbat shalom Rabbi Berel Wein Subscribe to our blog via email or RSS to get more posts like this one.

From: Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein <ravadlerstein@torah.org> to: mchochmah@torah.org date: Thu, Feb 25, 2016

Meshech Chochmah - Parshas Ki Sisa

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

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Parshas Ki Sisa

Undivining Moshe When he approached the camp and saw the eigel and the dancing, Moshe got angry. He cast the luchos from his hand and broke them at the foot of the mountain.

Meshech Chochmah: At the core of the Jewish nation are Torah and belief in Hashem. All kedushah is a derivative of them. All that we treat as sacred, be it Eretz Yisrael or Yerushalayim, is nothing but a detail or subset of the larger Torah, and draws its special holy character from the Torah itself. The Torah's authority is universal, in that it applies to all people and at all times. All stand equal in their essential obligation to it, both the great and the simple.

The greatest of people – Moshe Rabbenu – is described[2] as having no other role than as a faithful intermediary, conveying the Torah to the people from on High. Torah does not inhere in Moshe. He has no part in its content or authority. Those are sourced entirely in the Source of all sources, in Hashem Himself.

Holiness, in other words, is not an inherent property. It is not even a constant property that continues on, once attached to something. Rather, it is a function of an ongoing connection with Hashem, Whose closeness to it is what generates and continues holiness.

This is not as intuitive as you might think. In fact, many people struggled with the notion of G-d as the infinite and limitless Cause of all existence, and Who is entirely beyond the reach of human comprehension. If He is so lofty, so remote what is it, then, that provides the spiritual energy of the palpable, observable world, in all its complexity? While G-d may be the ultimate Source of all existence, surely something else – acting on His authority – is the active agent that brings order and purpose to vastness of the physical world. That something else, conceived of as a surrogate of the inscrutable G-d, was the ultimate spiritual being that Man could really relate to. Man's religious service would be devoted to this lesser divinity.

This, then, became a common search of pagans. They would create different images, believing that they could invite this more immediate and comprehensible divinity to take up residence within those icons. The great Supervisor of the Universe would then join those people, and be venerated by the community.

Many of the Bnei Yisrael had not purged themselves of this belief. They had seen Moshe the same way – as a being in which this active supervisory spirit had become carnate. When Moshe delayed in returning, they immediately set out to provide a substitute home for the being that weeks before had taken them out of Egypt.

Moshe's reaction was furious. "Do you think that I am somehow inherently special, and that is why I ascended the mountain to bring you the Torah? I am a human like you! The Torah does not depend on me at all. Had I not been born,

Torah would exist in its fullness and without any change whatsoever. I have no role in its existence."

Evidence of this would come soon enough. For thirty-eight years that the Bnei Yisrael were banned from entering the Land, Hashem would not speak directly to Moshe. The Divine Word did not come naturally to him. He was not possessed of some essential holiness and power; his access to G-d was a function of Hashem's closeness to His people!

The mishkan and batei mikdash also evidence that holiness derives entirely from Hashem's residence within them, and not from any intrinsic properties. Titus suffered no injury when he entered the Holy of Holies with a courtesan. He did not defile a holy place, because by the time he entered, it was no longer holy! The animating source of its holiness was the Shechinah, and it had departed prior to Titus' arrival.

Similarly, the keruvim were not mysterious articles of veneration. They served as reminders of the existence of angels, and symbols of the spiritual status of the Jewish people, by either looking at each other (at times of national elevation) or away from each other. They sat atop the aron, but not in it. Inside the aron were only the luchos – and a sefer Torah! Those were what counted!

We can now appreciate the fuller meaning of our pasuk. Moshe approached, and saw the eigel and the dancing. He saw that the people around the golden calf were fully into its service. There was conviction written all over their faces. Moshe did not find people who paused every now and then to look back at the mountain, to see if perhaps Moshe was still on his way. Moshe was able to approach the camp without anyone noticing that he had arrived! Moshe realized that the people believed in faulty ideas about himself, about Providence in the physical world, and about the nature of holiness.

He therefore taught a powerful and dramatic lesson. He shattered the luchos. He said, in effect, that the tablets had no intrinsic holiness, and could be broken if they no longer served their purpose. If the luchos, inscribed by Hashem, could be treated that way, then so could anything else under the right circumstances. No earthly kedushah was inviolate, because every thing's kedushah was contingent upon its connection to Hashem.

While the Rambam identified thirteen principles of faith, some are logical outgrowths of others. We should understand the fifth principle – that we do not pray to any entity other than Hashem – follows directly from the first principle, the existence of a Being Who creates and oversees all other existence. Those who worshipped other beings could not believe that G-d could or did supervise events in the lowly, physical world. Nor could they accept the notion that there is no supervision, and all phenomena occur randomly. They found such a position absurd and unbelievable. That led them to the conclusion that G-d must have left room or delegated authority for oversight of our world to some other being or beings. Those people who worshipped, propitiated, longed for those authorities would be able to tap into their reservoirs of good.

Their mistake was in failing to accept the first principle, which leaves no room for any other. If Hashem is the sole cause, creator, and overseer, there is nothing else that can be worshipped!

If this reasoning sounds familiar, it should. We review it twice daily when we recite the Shema, proclaiming to the world that Hashem, the cause of all existence is Elokeinu, our G-d, meaning that He alone in fact provides the providence and oversight for all events in our lives. Because this is true, He is One, meaning that there is no need to invent any deity or intermediary to receive our prayers.

[1] Based on Meshech Chochmah, Shemos 32:19 [2] Devarim 5:5 Torah.org: The Judaism Site Project Genesis, Inc. 122 Slade Avenue, Suite 250 Baltimore, MD 21208 <http://www.torah.org/> learn@torah.org (410) 602-1350

From: **Rabbi Chanan Morrison** <chanan@ravkooktorah.org> reply-to: ravkook-list+owners@googlegroups.com date: Wed, Feb 24, 2016 at 5:08 AM subject: **[Rav Kook Torah]** Ki Tisa: Moses' Extraordinary Prayer
Ki Tisa: Moses' Extraordinary Prayer

Perhaps the lowest point in the history of the Jewish people occurred shortly after the Torah's revelation at Mount Sinai. Without Moses' leadership and guidance, the people turned to idolatry, worshipping a golden calf. Divine justice

demanding that this terrible betrayal be punished severely, but Moses "pleaded before G-d" on their behalf (Ex. 32:11).

The word for 'pleaded' - 'va-yechal' - is not the usual expression for prayer. The Sages offered several explanations why the Torah used this particular word to describe Moses' prayer. Rabbi Elazar noted that 'va-yechal' shares the same root as *choleh* (sick). Moses prayed for the sake of Israel so intensely that he became ill from the effort.

According to Rabbi Eliezer the Great, the word 'va-yechal' even indicates the specific illness that afflicted Moses. Moses suffered from *achilu*, a fever in the bones.

Why should Moses' efforts for the sake of the Jewish people make him ill? What is the significance of a fever in his bones?

Intensity of Prayer

The gravity of the Sin of the Golden Calf should not be underestimated. It was not a foregone conclusion that G-d would forgive the Israelites. Divine justice dictated that the Jewish nation deserved to be destroyed for this calamitous breach of faith.

Moses could not offer just any prayer in their defense. Their sin was beyond the normal efforts of the great leader to rectify. In order to recover, to some extent, the spiritual state they had attained at Sinai, Moses needed to pray with an intensity that exceeded his natural powers. The exertion was so great that Moses became ill. This is one implication of the word 'va-yechal' - a pleading so intense that it disrupted his body's normal functioning.

Awakening the Fire in the Bones

Rabbi Eliezer the Great provided an additional insight into Moses' extraordinary prayer. Although bones are not particularly sensitive, they nevertheless contain a condensed essence of life. (The word *etzem* in Hebrew means both 'bone' and 'essence.')

When the life-force has left all other parts of the body, it still remains in the bones. A starved individual, just barely alive, will appear to be a walking skeleton.

Thus bones are a metaphor for the marrow of life, stored deep inside the body. This life-force is not normally felt, unless it is awakened by a very powerful force. Ezekiel thus described the national revival of the Jewish people with a vision of dry bones coming back to life.

Moses was unable to plead the case of the Jewish people using only his natural powers. He needed to awaken all of his powers, even those hidden deeply within. His extraordinary effort was in equal measure to the people's cataclysmic spiritual breakdown. The nation's descent into idolatry could not be corrected by the regular influence of ethical life alone. It was necessary that powers from the soul's essence - from the people's inner goodness and holiness, hidden deeply in their bones - be awakened.

Since these aspects of life are ordinarily hidden, their awakening is an unnatural, even extreme measure. Moses' plea for the sake of Israel at that critical time was thus based on a special fire - a fire of holiness, smoldering inside their very bones.

(Sapphire from the Land of Israel. Adapted from *Ein Eyah* vol. I, pp. 144, 146)

From: Shema Yisrael Torah Network <shemalist@shemayisrael.com> to: Peninim <peninim@shemayisrael.com> date: Thu, Feb 25, 2016

Peninim on the Torah

by Rabbi A. Leib Scheinbaum

Parshas Ki Sisa - When you take a census of Bnei Yisrael according to their numbers. (30:12) How does one count the Jewish People? We are taught that at the Bris Bein HaBesarim, Covenant of the Parts, Hashem promised Avraham Avinu, "Gaze now, toward the Heavens, and count the stars if you are able to count them...so shall your offspring be!" (Bereishis 15:5) We are not countable - just like the stars. Likewise, it says that the number of Jews will be like the sand of the sea - which also cannot be counted. The Talmud Yoma 22b, distinguishes between a time in which the Jewish People carry out the will of Hashem and a time in which they do not. How is it possible not to be countable? Numbers are an absolute. If one has a machine capable of counting at his disposal, he will ultimately be able to count them. If they are people, and there are numbers available, then they can be counted.

Horav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, zl, explains that the key is to compare Klal Yisrael to stars. Koh yiheyeh zaracha, "So will be your offspring," is a reference to qualitative value, not quantitative. Every star gives off its own degree of light. Some stars have a certain amount of light, while others have hundreds of times more light. Thus, it is impossible to count the qualitative number of stars, because the light which emerges from each individual star is distinct from the others, and hence, uncountable.

When Jews carry out the will of Hashem they are not countable, because each Jew serves Hashem on his own personal *madreigah*, spiritual level. Each Jew shines differently. When they are not worthy of qualitative counting, however, when it is their bodies which are counted - it is quite a different story.

Ki Sisa es rosh Bnei Yisrael - V'nasnu ish kofer nafsho laHashem, "When you take a census of Bnei Yisrael according to their numbers, every man shall give Hashem an atonement for his soul." The Jewish Nation is not counted as other nations are counted. The other nations count bodies. We do not count bodies, because, by placing a quantitative number on the Jewish People, we are attributing distinction to the body - not the mind. When the body has greater value than the mind, we are risking a plague.

When we count by having each Jew offer an atonement for his soul, we demonstrate that our concern is to know how many Jews care about Torah and Klal Yisrael. How many Jews take an active role in participating with the nation? How many Jews sacrifice themselves for Torah? They are the ones to be counted! They are the ones who are included in Moshe Rabbeinu's book, his roll book of the nation. They are the ones who comprise *Knesses Yisrael*.

The wealthy shall not increase and the destitute shall not decrease from half a shekel. (30:15)

It is not uncommon for someone who has struck it rich, who has received the blessing of wealth from Hashem, to think that the world belongs to him. While this is certainly not the Torah way, human nature often prevails. It goes so far that one begins to believe that, if he were not deserving of all of this good fortune, he would not be its recipient. Apparently, he is a "good guy," who is worthy of this blessing. As a result, a *baal mamon*, one who has been blessed with wealth, becomes a *baal gaavah*, arrogant and pompous, often lordling himself over others, because, after all, he has it all.

We, sadly, find the opposite attitude among those who are relegated to living a life of poverty. While there are varied levels of poverty - none of them is encouraging for a person's psyche. One who is impoverished often feels that he is a *lo yitzlach*, unsuccessful, just cannot make it; nothing ever seems to go his way. It becomes so bad that one who is poor feels worthless, second class, and obsequious to anyone and everyone who has more than he does.

Let me add that these feelings of both superiority or inferiority are transitory. They travel down the generational chain to their offspring. Parents who view themselves as inferior invariably raise their children with similar feelings of mediocrity, resulting in either intense timidity or overcompensation manifest by exaggerated aggressiveness. Those who are infused with a sense of entitlement may outdo their parents with social behavior that is overly pretentious and arrogant.

Having said this, we lay the groundwork for the Torah's admonition, "The wealthy shall not increase, and the destitute shall not decrease." Zeichar Binyamin interprets this *pasuk* homiletically: "The wealthy shall not increase," the fact that you have been blessed with material abundance does not grant you license to arrogate yourself, to increase your feelings of superiority. It does not, in any way, mean that you are more "increased" than others, that you have greater attributes, that you are more worthy. It means nothing of the sort - other than demanding greater responsibility, increased obligation. It does not reflect anything about your character. Likewise, "The destitute shall not decrease." The fact that you do not have an abundance of wealth, that you are poverty-stricken, does not grant you the right: to be depressed; to believe that you are unworthy, without much value, a useless, unproductive person. Money does not define who you are. Our greatest Torah leaders were poor, and, despite their indigence, they rose to incredible prominence, inspiring generations of Jews.

One name which immediately comes to mind is that of Horav Aryeh Leib HaKohen Heller, zl, the author of the *Ketzos HaChoshen*, *Avnei Milluim* and *Shev Shemaita*, three *sefarim* which changed the way we study *Gemora*. The

Chafetz Chaim, zl, would relate the interesting origins of the Ketzos. Rav Yechiel Michel Heller was forced to flee Russia, finally finding a safe haven in Stanislaw, Galicia. A descendant of Horav Yom Tov Lipa Heller, author of the Tosfos Yom Tov, and a premier scholar in his own right, he was accorded the respect reserved for a man of his stature. While there, a shidduch, matrimonial match, was proposed for his brilliant son, Yosef, with a poor girl from a reputable family. The two sets of parents agreed to the shidduch, although in the back of their minds they were increasingly concerned about how the young couple would be supported. Their joy was ambivalent. Looking for sound advice, they sought the counsel of Horav Chaim Halberstam, zl, Sanzer Rav. Their question was simple: Should they go through with the marriage, since there were absolutely no funds on either side with which to support the young couple?

The Sanzer Rav advised them to continue as they had been doing until that time. The chosson's parents would continue supporting their son, and the kallah's parents would do the same with their daughter. A match of two such distinguished families should not be halted due to lack of money. The arrangement continued for a number of years - even after children were born. They simply divided the children. The older son, the Ketzos, ate with his father, while his brother, Rav Yehudah, author of the Kuntros HaSefeikos, ate with his mother. Years later, the family was reunited when they came into some money.

The Ketzos took the position of Rav in Rozintow and later in Staria, where he taught many distinguished disciples. These rabbinical positions paid practically nothing. Indeed, the Ketzos knew nothing but poverty his entire life. The table upon which he learned, wrote and ate was a board placed over two barrels. During the cold winter months, he would sit all day in bed, wrapped in a blanket. This is where he wrote his magnum opus, the Ketzos HaChoshen. In order to keep the ink from freezing, he kept placing the ink under his pillow to keep it warm.

When Rav Aryeh Leib completed his Ketzos, he sought approbations for his sefer. He traveled to Horav Tzvi Hirsch Bushka, and, after presenting him with the manuscript, asked him to review it and give his approbation.

"What chiddushim, novel ideas, are included herein which will add to the commentary of Horav Yonasan Eibeshitz in his commentary, Kaeisi u'Pleisi? Nonetheless, leave it here. I will glance at it."

The Ketzos returned to his lodgings for the night. The next day, shortly before Minchah, the shul's shamash banged on the bimah and announced, "The entire assemblage is invited to gather at the Rav's house to begin a processional to the shul, as we accompany the induction of a new Sefer Torah to our shul." Excitement immediately filled the room, as everyone anticipated the pomp and joy of bringing a new Torah to its place in the shul's Aron Kodesh. Rav Aryeh Leib joined the throng. He was not a member of this community, but a simchah of such stature was not a daily occurrence.

As Rav Aryeh Leib moved closer and closer to the Rav carrying the Torah, he became more and more excited. He finally saw Rav Tzvi Hirsch carrying the covered Torah in his arms. As Rav Aryeh Leib came closer, Rav Tzvi Hirsch lifted the wrap, revealing the "Sefer Torah," which was none other than the manuscript of the Ketzos HaChoshen!

Rav Aryeh Leib HaKohen Heller achieved the epitome of Torah scholarship without such supportive accoutrements as pedigree, wealth, or friends in high places. It was his unparalleled diligence, commitment and extreme devotion to Torah that earned him his place in the past, present and future of Torah scholarship.

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[Parshapotpourri] **Parsha Potpourri by Oizer Alport** - Parshas Ki Sisa

Parshas Ki Sisa - Vol. 11, Issue 21 Compiled by Oizer Alport

He'ashir lo yarbeh v'ha'dal lo yam'it mi'machatzis ha'shekel (30:15) In the Yotzros for Parshas Shekalim, the basis of the chazzan's refrain during the Mussaf prayers is a petition, Ohr paneach aleinu Adon ne'sa v'shekel esa b'vais nachon v'nisa - Master, raise the light of Your face upon

us, and I will raise a shekel in the firm and exalted Temple. Why do we beseech Hashem for the opportunity to contribute a shekel to the Beis HaMikdash when the Torah specifically emphasizes that every Jew must contribute half of that amount, not more and not less?

Rav Yehoshua of Belz suggests that this glaring difficulty provides us with an ingenious resolution to another question. The Gemora in Berachos (20b) records that the Heavenly angels challenged Hashem that if He wrote in the Torah (Devorim 10:17) that He doesn't show favoritism, how could He be partial to the Jewish people (Bamidbar 6:26)? Hashem replied, "How can I not show them favor after I commanded them to recite Birkas HaMazon after eating to the point of satiety (Devorim 8:10) and they are stringent to do so even after consuming less?"

We learn from this Gemora that the Jewish people merit preferential treatment for performing mitzvos in a stricter manner than required by the Torah. If so, how can we request in the refrain from Yotzros such treatment in conjunction with the contribution of the half-shekel? This is one of the few mitzvos where the Torah actually forbids us to be stringent by giving more.

The Mishnah in Shekalim (1:6) rules that when two people jointly give one shekel, they are required to add a small sum (known as kalbon) corresponding to the amount that they saved by not having to pay the money-changer to break the shekel into two half-shekels. By bringing one whole shekel, it is possible to give more than is required, and it is this opportunity that we request of Hashem. Doing so will cause Him to shine on us the light of His face, may it be speedily in our days.

V'atah kach lecha besamim rosh mar deror chamesh me'os (30:23) When the Megillah first introduces us to Mordechai, it tells us not only his name, but the names of several of his ancestors, recording that he was Mordechai the son of Yair, who was the son of Shimi, who was the son of Kish (Esther 2:5). Why does the verse mention all of these generations, especially when the commentators point out that these weren't his actual father, grandfather, and great-grandfather, but more distant ancestors? The Gemora (Megillah 12b) explains that each name teaches us something: "Ben Yair" teaches that Mordechai was "me'ir eineihem shel Yisroel bi'tefilaso" - he lit up the eyes of the Jews through his prayers, "Ben Shimi" indicates that Hashem was "shama el tefilaso" - listened to his petitions, and "Ben Kish" hints that "hikish al da'lsei Rachamin" - Mordechai knocked on the doors of Mercy.

The Vilna Gaon explains that a person has 4 primary senses: sight, hearing, smell, and speech. Three of these are needed for the purpose of learning Torah: sight to see what one is learning, hearing to listen to what the Rabbi is teaching, and speech to share one's knowledge with others. The sense of smell has no connection to Torah study, but its place is in the Divine Service in the Temple, as the verses in the Torah which discuss the offerings repeatedly speak about them as being a "reiach nicho'ach l'Hashem - pleasant smell to Hashem. Today when we don't have offerings, we instead have prayer in their place. The Gemora in Chullin (139b) asks where Mordechai is hinted to in the Torah, and it answers that he is alluded to in the beginning of Parshas Ki Sisa, where the Torah lists the choice spices that were used in creating the anointing oil. The first of the spices is called "mar deror" - pure myrrh - which the Targum translates into Aramaic as "mara dach'ya", which sounds like Mordechai.

The Vilna Gaon explains that the Torah is teaching us that the choicest of all of the spices is Mordechai, which means that he is the most connected to the concept of prayer which corresponds to the sense of smell. For this reason, the Gemora teaches that he had all four of the senses present in his prayers, as he lit up the eyes of the Jewish people with his entreaties, Hashem listened to his prayers, he knocked on the doors of Mercy by speaking his petitions, and his very name and essence connote that his prayers were the epitome of a "reiach nicho'ach l'Hashem."

The Haggadah Shel Pesach Reiaich Duda'im takes this Gemora one step further. The Rambam writes (Hikchos Klei HaMikdash 1:3) that the pure myrrh in the anointing oil was made from the blood of a non-kosher animal from India. The Raavad disagrees vehemently, arguing that no part of a non-kosher animal could ever be part of something that is used in the Beis HaMikdash.

The Kesef Mishneh defends the Rambam by explaining that since the substance in question is dried out and ground into a fine powder, it's considered a totally different object and is therefore permitted even though it originally came from a non-kosher animal. Even so, why is Mordechai alluded to specifically in an object which has such questionable origins?

The Medrash comments on a verse in Iyov which says (14:4) Mi yitein yahor mi'tamei by explaining that this verse refers to the concept of something pure coming out of something impure, such as the red heifer making one person pure but another person impure. One of the examples given is the pure and holy Mordechai who was descended from the impure Shimi ben Geira. This is alluded to by the fact that Mordechai's name is hinted to in a non-kosher animal which according to the Rambam finds its way into the Beis HaMikdash.

As far as why Mordechai's name is alluded to in the Targum instead of in an actual verse in the Torah, a sefer called Divrei Purim explains that because a critical part of the miracle of the Megillah was due to Mordechai's knowledge of other languages so that he could understand the plot of Bigsan and Seresh who spoke in a foreign language assuming that nobody listening could understand them, Mordechai's name is therefore hinted to in the Targum's translation into a foreign language.

As an interesting aside, although the Gemora provides a source for Haman from a verse in Parshas Bereishis, Rav Yosef Chaim Zonnenfeld suggests that he is also alluded to in the section of spices together with Mordechai. Of the 11 spices, all are sweet-smelling except for Chelbenah - galbanum (30:34) - which has a very foul odor. Not surprisingly, the word *çiãdã* has the same numerical value as Haman.

V'shamru V'nei Yisroel es haShabbos la'asos es haShabbos Idorosam bris olam beini u'vein B'nei Yisroel os hee l'olam ki sheises yamim asah Hashem es haShomayim v'es ha'aretz uvayom ha'shevi'I shavas vayinafash (31:16-17) These verses discuss the mitzvah of observing and guarding Shabbos, which is a sign between Hashem and the Jewish people. In commanding the Jewish people to observe Shabbos as an eternal covenant, why does the Torah write the word "olam" - forever - with the letter "vav" and then switch one verse later to write it without the letter "vav?"

The Gemora in Shabbos (69b) records an interesting dispute regarding the law governing a person who finds himself lost in the desert, and because he doesn't know what day it is, he is unsure when to observe Shabbos. Chiya the son of Rav maintains that the person should observe the following day as Shabbos and then count six days before again observing Shabbos. Rav Huna argues that he should first count six days and only then observe the first Shabbos.

The Gemora explains that Chiya the son of Rav derives his opinion from the first person, Adam, who was created on Friday. For Adam, Shabbos was the next day, followed by six days of the week and then another Shabbos. Rav Huna, on the other hand, focuses on the Creation of the universe. From this perspective, first there were six days of the week and only then came Shabbos. The law is decided in accordance with the opinion of Rav Huna.

The Vilna Gaon brilliantly suggests that the anomaly in our verses teaches this law. Because the second occurrence of the word "forever" is written without a "vav," it can also be read as meaning "hidden." The Torah prescribes that a person to whom Shabbos is "hidden," as he is lost in the desert and doesn't know which day of the week it is, should follow the order of the Creation of the world as per the opinion of Rav Huna, in that first there were six weekdays (ki sheises yamim asah Hashem es ha'Shomayim v'es ha'aretz) and only then came Shabbos (u'vayom ha'shevi'i Shavat vayinafash).

Answers to the weekly Points to Ponder are now available! To receive the full version with answers email the author at oalport@optonline.net. Parsha Points to Ponder (and sources which discuss them):

1) Rashi writes (30:34) that one of the spices included in the incense - galbanum - had a foul aroma, but it was included to teach us the importance of including wicked Jews when we pray and fast. If one has a choice between praying in a minyan where everybody is righteous or in a minyan where some are wicked, which should he choose? (Sefer Chassidim 770, Ayeles HaShachar)

2) Rashi writes (32:29) that the righteousness of the tribe of Levi during the sin of the golden calf earned them the right to serve in the Temple instead of the first-borns. Still, Rabbeinu Bechaye writes that even today it is a great merit to be a first-born, and this is still considered a spiritual advantage relative to other Jews. Where do we find that this advantage is legally taken into account to give a first-born precedence due to his additional holiness? (Mishnah Berurah 128:22)

3) Rashi writes (34:29) that Moshe descended from Mount Sinai with the second set of Tablets on Yom Kippur. How was he permitted to carry the Tablets from the mountain, which is a private domain, to the Jewish camp, a public domain, on Yom Kippur? (Ramban 18:13, Shu"t Rivash 96, Panim Yafos, Chasam Sofer 20:22, Tzafnas Paneiach and Rinas Yitzchok Devorim 10:5)

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Rabbi Gil Student

by Editor on November 17, 2015

Klal Perspectives, Technology

To read this issue's questions, CLICK <http://klalperspectives.org/fall-2015/fall-2015-questions/Torah-Authority-in-the-Internet-Age>

A famous saying has it that Jews in America are just like everyone else, only more so. Perhaps when it comes to the Internet, Jews are like everyone else, only less so. The following thoughts are admittedly impressionistic due to a lack of data. Moreover, I am not a sociologist. However, I am very much involved in the use of the Internet for Orthodox communal purposes. Likely because of that role, I have been observing the Orthodox community's interaction with the Internet, particularly since the focus on its dangers was raised in broad communal terms in the Asifah of 2012. With that reference, I should disclose that I strongly opposed the Asifah, for reasons I will explain below.

The Internet's impact on general society has certainly seeped into the Orthodox Jewish community, but to a lesser degree for us than for others because of our unique communal and

cultural traits. For example, Shabbos observance forces us offline for approximately 25 hours a week. On occasion, throughout the year, we have prolonged electronic "fasts" due to Yamim Tovim, sometimes lasting as long as three consecutive days. Forced to live in the pre-Internet era for these short periods, we exercise the skills that the Internet tends to suppress, such as holding conversations without electronic interruptions. Similarly, though our schools' policies limiting Internet use are generally observed only in the breach, the concerned attitude toward Internet use conveyed by our yeshivos and rabbis force us to at least construe Internet use as an option, rather than an unquestioned necessity. Nevertheless, just as the Internet has dramatically changed general society, it has had a substantial impact on our community as well.

In this essay, I will discuss some of the benefits that the Orthodox community has enjoyed by capturing the opportunities afforded by the Internet, but also the significant drawbacks. Some of the more obvious and seemingly pressing issues generated by the Internet are, from a historical perspective, not particularly concerning. There is, however, another issue that is historic and theologically urgent, threatening to undermine our entire communal order and tradition. That issue will be discussed in the second half of this essay. I believe that, unfortunately, there is no simple solution for these problems. However, the old approach, exemplified by the aforementioned Asifah, is doomed to failure. I can only suggest another approach that may not be popular, but it is all I have.

Part I: The Internet and the Individual

Facilitating Increased Torah Learning

Probably the most significant contribution of the Internet has been its dramatic expansion of the sheer volume of Torah that is available to be learned. The immense stores of Torah articles, books and audio lectures posted online, and thereby accessible to all, are astounding. A simple personal device can store more information, study tools and resources than the ancient library in Alexandria. This new technology allows yeshiva graduates to listen to, and learn from, their rabbeim for years after leaving the yeshiva, something that was but a rare treat in earlier times. Perhaps the even greater innovation is its enabling of graduates of one yeshiva to learn from rabbeim of another yeshiva. The Gemara (Avodah Zarah 19a) encourages Torah learning from more than one teacher, since such practice broadens one's understanding of Torah. As never before, the Internet allows mature students to learn from the widest selection of leading talmidei chachamim and magidei shiur.

The access to one's earlier rabbeim, as well as to others, meets different needs for different people. For some, an ongoing connection to the rabbeim of their younger years expands the teachers' influence into the student's adult years. Others, who never really connected to their rabbeim while in yeshiva, find new rabbeim better suited to their disposition or learning interests. Yet others may have had excellent relationships while in yeshiva, yet discover on the Internet new rabbeim who are better suited to their needs as an adult, and to their more mature emotional and intellectual orientation. They now have many more options to find a *derech* in learning that matches their proclivities. But this opportunity also highlights a danger.

Whose Derech?

Most men leave yeshiva while in their twenties, but never stop growing and changing. Such continuing development is both natural and wonderful. On the one hand, the Internet allows rabbeim and others with traditional Torah voices to play an integral role in this maturation process. On the other hand, the Internet makes it easier than ever for fully committed and believing Orthodox Jews to find themselves attracted to different streams of thought and practice. Rather than going "off the derech," they are going "off their derech." This tendency is particularly pervasive among those intellectually inclined, and in my experience is actually far more common than the more-frequently-discussed phenomenon of individuals going "off the derech" completely.

Perhaps for social and family reasons, and perhaps because it makes them more comfortable, most people who change beliefs, whether off the derech or off their derech, do not actually leave their community. They keep their new attitudes more or less to themselves and alter little in their outward behavior; they certainly do not change the schools to which they send their children. This absence of social expression greatly diminishes the impact of Internet-induced derech issues. It is true that some young people are leaving the community, but that was also the case in the 1950's, 60's, 70's, 80's and 90's. One should not minimize the pain and concern related to any individual leaving the community, or to the spiritual damage of any individual abandoning traditional beliefs. But, the Internet does not appear to be causing any sort of exodus from our communities.

More Learning Opportunities, Yet Less Time Learning

Greater than its impact on the Orthodox Jew's theological views is the Internet's consumption of a colossal amount of time. The frum Jew has no shortage of demands on his or her time, yet technology is unquestionably diverting time from other far more important and productive uses. This diversion desperately requires corrective action.

The onslaught of e-mails, many demanding immediate attention, is a normative part of everyone's day. Rabbis report that they spend huge parts of their day responding to e-mails and texts from their congregants. On the one hand, this expanded contact between rabbi and congregant is wonderful. On the other, it detracts from other activities the rabbi had otherwise

committed to be doing, such as spending time with his family, planning communal events and learning Torah. Not only rabbis carry this new burden. Leaving an office at day's end no longer allows one to enter into an alternative restricted zone of family, Torah study and other activities. Emails, texts and cell phones allow the office to be an intrusive and demanding part of life, at any time and in any place. Moreover, social media and many websites are intentionally designed to capture the viewer's attention for extended periods of time. People read innocuous status updates and watch mildly interesting videos, despite recognizing that they are wasting time. But the intrusion into time otherwise more wisely allocated is but one dimension of the issue. A second dimension is the resulting comprised ability to focus.

A personal device may contain Tanach, Shas and several hundred sefarim, including rishonim and poskim and almost everything else. When learning this Torah on a device, it is hard not to take an occasional peek at e-mail. In fact, simply having the device accessible creates this urge. Similarly, typing on a smartphone could be writing a devar Torah one minute and texting the next. While these functional overlaps can theoretically be conquered with self-control, self-control is a trait that has always suffered a supply/demand imbalance.

The distractive nature of devices is recognized by the technology industry. In fact, apps and programs have been introduced to force users to focus; alas for a variety of reasons they inevitably fail. Ultimately, the most effective strategy to manage this challenge is by employing a time log, which is a daily or weekly estimate of the time spent online. After keeping such a log for a few weeks, and seeing the shocking amount of time spent unproductively online, conscientious people will inevitably take action to reduce their usage.

Inattention Span

Many have written, with varying degrees of alarm, about the widespread decrease in the attention span of the Sesame Street, and now Internet, generations. I find myself struggling to read long articles and, le-havdil, occasionally skipping to the end of long teshuvos. There is even a trend among Religious Zionist sefarim to include a summary at the end of each teshuvah. I am not sure how that started, but it is quite a reflection of the needs of the current generation.

Teachers and rabbis must adjust their styles to accommodate the realities of their less attentive listeners. The days are long gone when Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik, z"tl, could capture an audience's attention for a four-hour lecture. To maintain students' attention, we must intersperse stories and surprising insights into our adult education classes. To a degree, this practice, though necessary, has watered down some of the learning in our community. It has also given higher profiles to rabbis who excel in infotainment, which sometimes comes with the risks attendant to a charismatic personality (ve-ha-meivin yavin). Writers, too, need to entertain. Articles need cliffhangers and teasers to get people to read to the end.

But the implications of the Internet to our community are even more ominous and profound. Shmutz

The well-publicized 2012 Asifah was mentioned in the introduction, above. The focus of the Asifah was almost exclusively on preventing access to the inappropriate material available online. Similarly, ongoing discussions abound in shuls and by rabbis concerning the allegedly rampant infidelity caused by the Internet. I suggest that this narrow focus is misplaced.

By its nature, the yetzer hara finds opportunities to wreak havoc. The Internet did not introduce marital cheating nor is looking at inappropriate things a new concern or practice. For centuries, even prior to the Internet, the yetzer hara enjoyed much tragic success. Even in more recent times, summer bungalow colonies have, arguably, been a far bigger source of infidelity than the Internet. Certainly, those engaged in extramarital affairs use any technology available, including cellphones and social media. These technologies may be tools of choice, but eliminating them will not hinder cheating spouses. Admittedly, this perspective is premised on anecdotes alone, but so is the view that the Internet is the primary inducer of misbehavior.

That is not to suggest that the Internet is not rampantly abused and that it need not be assiduously controlled. However, the tone and rhetoric regarding its dangers must be appropriately measured lest the damage of the rebuke be more devastating than the improper behavior being addressed.

For example, we are often warned that Internet users can lose their neshamos or entire olam haba with the click of a link. This declaration is incredibly unhelpful. We believe that people can do teshuvah until their last breathing moment. It is horribly inappropriate to employ language that effectively writes off those who have sinned – whether by viewing online pornography or otherwise – by asserting that they are a lost cause. People make mistakes; in moments of weakness they make bad choices. We must vociferously discourage inappropriate behavior but the wholesale and absolute marginalization of those who succumb to temptation is not productive. In fact, some people are addicted to pornography and they need professional help. If their behavior is simply characterized as evil, they will not likely seek the necessary aid. Others can stop their inappropriate behavior, and should be effectively motivated to do so. Rather than loud clamoring, the most effective method to motivate the ceasing of hidden behavior is to promote the threat of discovery (see Berachos 28b).

Internet filters are necessary but filters alone are insufficient, particularly on mobile devices.

Image and ad blockers are also very important. But more powerful are stories of men losing their families and livelihoods because of their accessing pornography. If people realize that they are

likely to get caught and are truly scared of what will happen to them when they are caught – what their children, friends and bosses will think of them – they will stop if they can. Sadly, we do not lack for many true stories that can bring this message home. The stories must be utilized to scare people away from pornography and infidelity. Imposing the requisite fear of discovery does not require fire and brimstone rhetoric. Every rabbi and educator, in their own style, should repeatedly remind people that no one is truly anonymous online; every search can be traced and every user unmasked; and thus, eventually, misdeeds will be disclosed.

However, the language and tactics were not the primary failing of the Asifah. Rather, something more fundamental was missing, the discussion of which requires us to look from a communal perspective and take a brief historical and theological detour to see the truly historic change the Internet has caused.

Part II: The Internet and the Community

Mockery and A Weakened Communal Leadership

Online mockery and derision are ubiquitous. Their pervasiveness imbues readers with a diminished sensitivity to improper language and to attitudes that are fundamentally anathema to being a frum Jew. More than that, however, is the impact of anonymous frontal attacks on communal leadership. In the face of unbridled and unabashed anonymous bomb throwing, many community leaders simply choose to avoid the heat by saying nothing publicly. Whether or not this intimidation is the very goal of the derision, the community suffers immeasurably from the silencing of at least some of its leadership. Because of the widespread mockery and uncharitable reading of the media, particularly on the Internet, the community is being deprived of invaluable guidance and a sorely needed counterbalance to the rather loud and incessant voices that are unsympathetic to Torah tradition.

This is all in addition to the traditional damage caused by ever-present mockery, cynicism and frivolity. They destroy faith in, and respect for, others, and diminish the inclination to accept rebuke. The Internet has raised the impact of mockery to new heights, thereby decreasing teshuvah in the world.

None of these evil challenges, however, are new. Mockery is denounced in Tanach, indicating that it has been a problem since time immemorial. In our own lifetimes, we recall how Israeli reporters would attend the speeches of Rav Elazar Shach and Rav Ovadiah Yosef, waiting with bated breath to mock their teachings. The Communists in the early twentieth century mercilessly mocked rabbis and Judaism in newspapers, theater and other media. Even our forefather Avraham Avinu faced the leitzanei ha-dor who would mock him.

The impact, as well, is not unprecedented. In the past, mockery has won impressive victories. A century and a half ago, yeshiva benches were emptied to the halls of Communism and Socialism, largely due to a campaign of mockery against traditional Judaism. Compared to the spiritual devastation wrought in such eras, twenty-first century Internet challenges may pale in comparison. Perhaps Heaven has mercy on our outgunned community.

The unique challenge of Internet mockery, however, is the Internet's unparalleled penetration into our communities, our schools and our homes. In other situations, however uncomfortable the mockery, we can tolerate the unpleasantness by avoiding it. The intrusion of the Internet, however, has diminished the ability to avoid it, even for those in the most insular of communities.

The only effective defense to mockery is sophistication. Rabbis need to become PR mavens, savvy in the judicial use of media to convey a message. The current generation of gedolim grew up in a different era and cannot be expected to master new media. The next generation, however, must become media savvy. An excellent example is Rav Shlomo Aviner in Israel, who has developed relationships with the media and publishes with such frequency and ferocity that his views cannot be easily distorted. He is well-known for answering all text message questions, affording him a radical availability, allowing anyone to directly ask his opinion on almost any subject. We cannot defeat mockery outright, but we can wage a good fight. That effort, however, requires a willingness to use the right weapons. Leading rabbis need to follow basic PR ideas like staying positive, learning what your opponents are saying and trying to convince bystanders and not your opponent.

Mockery is a clear internet challenge to Torah leadership but the very culture of the Internet poses a more subtle and pervasive challenge to the Torah tradition.

Democratization of Torah

Though Torah study is a universal Jewish obligation, mastery of Torah is a prized and limited achievement. Prior to the publication of the Talmud, when the Torah was primarily transmitted orally, only those who studied in the controlled environment of a yeshiva academy could ever gain access to the "texts." And only those with phenomenal memories could actually master the material. Everyone else recognized their own limitations in scholarship and, to a great degree, had no choice but to defer to the wisdom and guidance of their rabbis. Their only alternative, if we can call it that, was to reject the oral tradition outright and adopt the more accessible text of the Bible as the sole source of religious truth.

This wish to minimize rabbinic influence could likely have been the allure of the Sadducee, and later Karaite, ideology. These were paths that allowed for Torah expertise without the prerequisite of mastering the oral Torah. In this sense, the Sadducees were religious populists, democrats of the religious spirit. They sought to wrench religious authority away from the rabbis

and allow everyone to participate equally. Rather than spreading greater knowledge, they reduced the knowledge requirement and merely distributed authority more arbitrarily. We can sense a rebirth of this strategy in the Internet era.

The Torah, however, does not encourage populist authority, but rather places authority on the shoulders of the contemporary, scholarly experts. The “priest and the judge who shall be in that day” serve as the highest religious decision-making body, from whose rulings we must not “deviate right or left” (Devarim 17:11). Through the teachings of the oral tradition, the Sages taught that Torah mastery and guidance requires true, substantive expertise. Absent both intellectual and moral mastery, the Torah’s lessons are vulnerable to distortion, whether deliberate or otherwise. Therefore, rabbis must shepherd their flocks and nurture a connection to Torah in the proper measures, as befitting their spiritual readiness. Sometimes, restricting access to certain types of information is appropriate.

Torah for Scholars

There is a concept of “halachah ve-ein morin ken,” which translates as “this is the law but we do not teach it this way.” This principle reflects the fact that the law occasionally includes dimensions that create opportunities for abuse. This ruling is only appropriate for Torah scholars who are equipped to appreciate these legal dimensions within a fuller context.

This attitude can be criticized as paternalistic and condescending. Who are the rabbis to decide who is ready to learn certain things, and who is not? Who are they to restrict access to dimensions of the Torah; after all, is not Torah the inheritance of the entire nation?

On the other hand, if it is true that certain knowledge will be abused if shared, or be wholly misunderstood and then misapplied, is a degree of restriction not appropriate? For example, is it appropriate to teach an entire community how to delay divorce proceedings through legal technicalities, or how to pursue other activities that are invaluable when applied appropriately, but devastating when not? Are there not topics that should be broached only with those who are sufficiently mature or sophisticated to understand and utilize them appropriately? Of course not all information is ripe to be shared with everyone. Yet, this seemingly elitist attitude is certainly being challenged by contemporary societal attitudes.

One might have thought that the centralized influence of the rabbis would diminish when, out of necessity, the Oral Torah was committed to writing. The recording and resulting text of the Oral Torah, however, was so confusing and voluminous, and its manuscripts so rare, that few could claim to master it. Torah remained within the exclusive purview of the experts, and the rabbis remained the sole source of Jewish information. During that period, rabbis could and frequently did challenge each other, often heatedly. Texts were checked against rabbinic assertions, and compilations of arguments were tested against other views. Yet, due its complexity, the discussion remained closed to those without proper training. The barrier to entry was years of textual study and apprenticeship.

The exclusive access to views and arguments then began to diminish. Certainly the introduction of the printing press played a significant role in the democratization of Judaism, but another culprit demands notice. Not only were texts made readily accessible, but summary works, like Ba’er Heitev, condensed complex textual debates into manageable digests. These books allowed proficiency to masquerade as expertise. To the uninitiated, someone able to skim the summaries could appear to be a master, a lamentable situation in any field. Being familiar with the Mishnah Berurah’s position on a particular law cannot compare to having extensively studied the underlying texts, commentaries and codes.

Torah in a Democratic Age

Halachic Judaism may have now truly entered its democratic age. Electronic databases, and the Internet in particular, produce an ever greater democratization of knowledge. Those who do not even know Hebrew can Google their way to proficiency, on some level. The clever yeshiva graduate, who is familiar with the ways of the Talmud and codes, but has certainly not yet mastered them, can use Google and databases to amass impressive arguments and even produce seemingly informed articles. One can even become a decade-long Torah blogger without having mastered the Talmud. The Internet is a magnification of the once minor threat of democratization of Torah.

In this age, can the traditional respect of, and deference to, expertise survive? Does “halachah ve-ein morin ken” have any meaning in the electronic age?

One strategy for Torah leaders is to bemoan this democratization by standing their ground and denouncing the non-experts who overstate their competence for the intellectual frauds that they are. Unfortunately, however, calling out frauds generally alienates more than it attracts. The authentic scholar appears self-serving and uncharitable, even when he is entirely correct. Similarly, debate will fail, since the audience lacks the requisite sophistication and training to evaluate the credibility and strength of competing arguments. Consequently, such debates are won through rhetoric and simplistic formulations, usually the province of the fraud, and not authenticity and truth, the province of the scholar.

Authority has been transferred to the people. The Asifah failed to recognize this and therefore proposed solutions to the Internet that immediately failed. Respected communal leaders attempted to impose strict limitations on Internet use. Among the proposals were communal requirements of “kosher” devices or mandatory expulsion from school of students whose families

access the Internet at home. Even the subsequent Flatbush Asifah, which was more moderate in its tone, attempted to impose communal guidelines limiting Internet use. This approach will continue to fail because the Internet is about democracy and autonomy, which is in direct contradiction to externally imposed limits. Today, even insular Chasidic groups struggle to maintain Internet limits; more open communities have no chance for success. In a contemporary Western society, a direct fight against autonomy and freedom will lose.

Since the times of Korach, Torah leadership has faced challenges to its authority. Each generation needs its own way of protecting our sacred tradition and community against what Rav Joseph Soloveitchik aptly called a “common-sense rebellion” against Torah expertise. To address the unique dangers of the Internet, we need an approach that is appropriate for today.

Dealing with Democracy

I hesitatingly propose here a three-pronged approach to address this dramatic advance in the democratization of Torah knowledge: Clarification, Courtesy and Circumscription.

People now want to be convinced, not just informed. Leading rabbis ought to expand on their halachic and hashkafic decisions beyond brief statements, in a format and language that is widely accessible. They ought to explain why they reached their conclusions and discuss the possibilities they rejected. Rabbis should expect to face bold challenges and prepare in advance by including in their teshuvos and statements arguments against potential objections. In the past, only the most expansive thinkers wrote at such length. Today, however, all rabbis must clarify their views in depth before subjecting them to the inevitable challenges. This method will not prevent challenges but it will convince many readers and will gain the respect of many others who find themselves forced to think hard about the subject.

Courtesy is probably the most important element of this approach. If one rosh yeshiva denounces another in unpleasant terms, he teaches the public that insulting leading rabbis is acceptable in communal discourse. It does not matter that the general public is unqualified to judge who is truly learned or that this behavior has great precedent. Harsh language is a weapon that will always be turned back on its speaker. In today’s environment, when you insult one rabbi, you insult them all, as well as yourself. The first step to protecting the respect due to the Torah and its teachers is to speak pleasantly, even if strongly, about the people with whom one disagrees most.

Finally, we have to recognize that the drive for autonomy is the strongest force in Western society. No one can win a frontal attack on personal autonomy. Rav Yosef Shaul Nathanson (Divrei Shaul, third edition, Devarim 21:11) offers a profound psychological interpretation of the Torah’s response to an unstoppable desire. He explains that rather than forbid that which will be committed anyway, the Torah creates a structure of laws around the action to limit its impact (compare with Rashi, Mo’ed Katan 17b d’h mah and Moreh Nevuchim 3:32). Rav Nathanson derives this approach from the eishes yefas to’ar and finds it elsewhere. This approach can be applied in contemporary society without permitting anything that is forbidden, which is of course beyond our ability.

For example, consider a rabbi who is approached by a congregant who has studied the issue and concluded that halachah permits using an umbrella on Shabbos within an eruv. The rabbi can respond that this is incorrect or that the poskim have considered and rejected this possibility. The congregant may or may not listen. Alternatively, the rabbi can make a deal with the congregant as follows: In public in their community, the congregant has to follow the rabbi’s rulings for the sake of communal harmony. But if the congregant is able to write his thoughts in the traditional Hebrew style of halachic discourse and publish the article in a respected Torah journal, thereby entering the discourse of halachah, then the rabbi supports the congregant’s right to follow his opinion in private or when away from home. Encourage his additional learning, challenge him to conduct a rigorous analysis that will pass the review of an experienced Torah editor, and genuinely respect his sincere search for devar Hashem. In this way, individual initiative and autonomy are supported, the congregant feels valued, but his opportunity for deviance from communal norms is limited.

This is just one possible example. The goal is to offer legitimate opportunities for personal autonomy without undermining the halachic process and the authority of Torah scholars. If this particular application is deemed untenable, perhaps a better example can be constructed of limited religious autonomy, circumscribed by rules to protect the integrity of community and tradition. Similar approaches can also be adapted for hashkafah, within the bounds of the thirteen ikkarei emunah (principles of faith). Complete autonomy yields communal chaos. Limited autonomy, within a cohesive community, allows people the independence they crave while preserving tradition.

In sum, democratization cannot be defeated. Printed books, summaries, Torah databases and the Internet are here to stay. The ideal answer to this dilemma is mussar. When people grow in humility and learn to recognize their own shortcomings, they inevitably learn to respect the expertise of great Torah scholars. The arrogance and desire for shortcuts give way to an appreciation of mastery gained through hard work.

However, if we wait for everyone to become masters of mussar, we will be waiting a long time. In the meantime, we can cautiously change the discourse in our community and allow, even encourage, limited autonomy.

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