

Parshat Ki Tissa
Breaking the Tablets
Emily Bell - Beit Midrash Program Class of 2023

This week's *parsha*, Ki Tissa, sees the Jewish people navigating an early setback in their budding covenantal relationship with God. In the Golden Calf episode, we see the Israelites committing a collective transgression so great that it is said that all subsequent generations of the Jewish people will pay for it. But through Moshe's righteous anger and decisive action, we also have the promise of not just achieving collective atonement, but becoming true partners with God in our own healing.

While the *parsha* and subsequent rabbinic tradition are careful to note specific groups within the Israelite camp that did not participate in the sin of the Golden Calf, it is also made clear that the blame for this sin, and its punishment, falls on the Israelite people as a whole. Even when Moshe successfully averts God's wrath from completely destroying the Israelites altogether, God promises:

וּבְיוֹם פְּקוּדֵי וּפְקוּדֹתַי עֲלֵהֶם חַטָּאתָם...

...And on the day of reckoning, I will punish them for their sins. (Shemot 32:34)

Here, Rashi also notes a discussion in Sanhedrin in which Rabbi Yitzhak explains that the punishment for the sin of the Golden Calf is incomplete and will continue to be visited upon all subsequent generations of the Jewish people (Sanhedrin 102a). So despite God's promises in this very *parsha* to be compassionate, merciful, slow to anger and quick to forgive, it seems the Israelites are condemned to bear the guilt of the Golden Calf forever.

In Tractate Rosh Hashana, however, the rabbis offer a different, more hopeful view. Rav Huna explains:

בתחילה – צדיק, ולבסוף, חסיד.

At the time of judgment, God rules with justice, but ultimately, God will show mercy. (Rosh Hashana 17b)

The Gemara goes on to say that, whereas for individuals, God can avert the harshness of a sentence even *after* the decree is made – hence the opportunity to do *teshuva* between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur – when it comes to communal repentance for a collective transgression, God's mercy extends even past

sentencing. In other words, for communal transgressions like the Golden Calf, forgiveness is always possible.

And how do we do collective *teshuva*? In the same discussion in Rosh Hashana, Rava goes on to say that atonement comes not through sacrificial offerings, but through Torah study. Indeed, the saga of the Golden Calf concludes with Moshe going back up the mountain where he learns Torah directly from God and then comes back down and teaches it to the people.

Thinking about our own times, it's easy to despair at some of the collective transgressions in our Jewish communities – abuse of power across all institutions and movements, oppression of our most marginalized, and crass materialism that I would argue borders on idol worship. While of course Torah study is important, doubling down on time in the *beit midrash* feels somewhat inadequate given the urgency of these issues facing the Jewish people. What else can we learn from Moshe's actions in Ki Tissa?

In contrast to his brother's appeasement of the crowd, Moshe takes decisive action against the idol worshippers as soon as he returns to the camp, smashing the tablets of the law, destroying the idol, and leading the Israelites to repent. There's a debate among the sources as to his motivation in smashing the first set of tablets. Our *parsha* states that when Moshe came down the mountain and approached the camp and saw the Golden Calf, "he became enraged, and he hurled the tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain." (Shemot 32:19) But when Moshe recounts the incident later on in Devarim, he does not mention his anger. Rather than a rash decision made in anger, the shattering of the tablets seems to be a more deliberate action.

Back in Ki Tissa, Rashi cites Tractate Shabbat:

שבר את הלוחות: מאי דריש? אמר: ומה פסח שהוא אחד מתרי"ג מצות, אמרה תורה: "וכל בן נכר לא יאכל בו." התורה כולה [כאן] וישראל משומדים – על אחת כמה וכמה.

And [Moshe] broke the tablets. Where did he interpret this from? He said: 'With regard to the Pesach sacrifice, which is only one of six hundred thirteen mitzvot, the Torah states: "no apostate shall eat of it." All the more so are they unworthy of partaking in the entire Torah.'" (Shabbat 87a)

So Moshe's destruction of the tablets, while in anger, was also a calculated decision to prevent the Israelites, who were at that moment all committing apostasy, from further defiling God's law. His display of righteous anger was almost a

record-scratch moment that forced the Israelites to pause and confront their own iniquity, eventually setting the stage for their collective *teshuva*.

Miraculously, God gives the Israelites another chance to receive God's law, with Moshe carving two new stone tablets. This second set of stone tablets, crafted by both God and Moshe together, differed from the first sets which were crafted entirely by God. We could see these as less special because they were not entirely divinely crafted, but I prefer to think of this as the beginning of a new partnership between God and the Jewish people by which we are able to not just receive Torah, but create and disseminate it – all because Moshe let loose a searing rebuke to his people in the face of their immorality.

Kindness, mercy, slowness to anger – we learn these attributes of God from this *parsha* and invoke them every year as part of our communal atonement. But silence in the face of injustice is no kindness, and certainly not an attribute of God. Moshe's example teaches us that we cannot be bystanders to the issues that plague our Jewish communities today. Our righteous anger can be a tool by which we disrupt the moral confusion and complacency that is preventing us from repairing our relationship to the Divine, so that we may one day merit true partnership in God's Torah.



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