

TIMELESS TORAH

KI TISSA: THE SHORT JOURNEY HOME

Healthy Mind, Healthy Soul

One of the greatest challenges to spiritual and moral development is recovering from a perceived failure or setback. Identifying growth pathways is challenging enough, and the risk of continuing to follow a downward spiral once encountered is real. Perhaps this is why a central theme that runs through Parshat Ki Tisa, which has at its heart the episode of the Golden Calf, is the idea that it is always within our capability to recover and uplift ourselves.

The Jewish people abruptly fall from the greatness they attained at Mount Sinai, engaging in rituals that bordered on idol-worship. Yet, the key to the renewal of their religious commitment is found in the very name of the parshah, Ki Tissa, which refers to the reckoning of the population of the nation, carried out through every individual's donation of a *machatzit hashekel* – a half-shekel coin. Although this census is mentioned in the Torah before the Golden Calf, a mainstream opinion among the commentators is that it in fact occurred afterwards, and that its purpose was to ascertain the numbers that survived. According to the Sages (see Ohr HaChaim and Bava Batra 10b), however, the ultimate purpose was deeper than this. After the catastrophe of the Golden Calf, the people were dispirited and despaired of ever regaining their previous lofty state. This census, which involved both an emphasis on the significance of every individual as well as the giving of a small donation as an atonement, was meant to be an uplifting and inspiring experience. This was not simply an exercise in counting the population; here, Moshe was commanded to '*tissa et rosh Bnei*

Yisrael', which translates literally as 'lift up the heads of the People of Israel'. As the Ohr HaChaim (d. 1743) explains, when one encounters spiritual decline, their face drops and they feel a keen sense of lacking. With this census, the people were being taught how to recover: the concept of holiness, in the Ohr HaChaim's words, is found in appreciating one's own self-worth, literally 'raising one's head' to face the future with certainty and conviction.

From Above and Below

The Netivot Shalom (Rabbi Noach Shalom Berezovsky, d. 2000) elaborates on this idea in a discussion regarding the way in which the topic of Shabbat is mentioned in another passage in the parshah. Emphasising the fact that building the Mishkan, despite its paramount importance, could not override Shabbat, the Torah briefly outlines the foundational principles of Shabbat. Firstly, the verse states that Shabbat is a sign of the eternal connection between Hashem and the Jewish people and that through Shabbat, we 'know that I am Hashem, Who has sanctified you' (31:13). In this verse, the Netivot Shalom explains, we find the concept of the sanctity of Shabbat as an *itaruta dil'eila*, inspired from Above. Shabbat is a day that is objectively holy, and it envelopes every Jew with holiness – regardless of their true ability to attain such levels – to the extent that one can feel and experience the aura of the Shabbat within their very being. A few verses later, the Torah again exhorts the Jewish people to keep Shabbat as an everlasting sign between Hashem and the Jewish people: '*V'shamru Bnei Yisrael et haShabbat laasot... beini u'vein Bnei*



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Yisrael ot hi l'olam (31:16-7; Shabbat morning Kiddush). In this second verse, the Netivot Shalom writes, the sanctity of Shabbat is presented not as Divinely inspired but as something that the Jewish people must 'guard (*v'shamru*)' and 'make (*laasot*)'. This refers to someone finding themselves in a spiritual ebb, unable to connect effortlessly to the spirit of Shabbat. To such a person, the Torah counsels that they too can discover an aura of sanctity at their own level, through their own efforts.

In the broader context of the parshah, this message is essential. From their pinnacle at Sinai, the Jewish people had lost much of what they had attained. Yet, they were being taught here that lost levels of spirituality can always be recovered. Indeed, as Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz (d.1979) highlights, one feature of the story of the dramatic descent from Sinai to the Golden Calf is the lesson that elements of the Jewish people had attained the heightened spiritual levels experienced at Sinai without any personal effort. The crucial message is that having been given a glimpse of the potential that could be attained, it was up to every individual person to work towards it themselves in order to sustain it.

Sounds of Struggle

A final perspective on this theme is the role of leaders and educators in recognising the potential of people to regain an upwards trajectory. When Moshe came down from Har Sinai holding the *Luchot*, he was met by his disciple, Yehoshua, who informed him that there was a 'sound of war' in the camp. Moshe responded that this was not a sound of victory nor a sound of defeat,

but rather a '*kol anot*' (32:17). Although the term '*kol anot*' is rendered by Rashi to mean 'a sound of blasphemy', the Yerushalmi (Taanit 4) interprets it more literally, meaning 'a sound of affliction'. According to the Yerushalmi, this was meant as a criticism of Yehoshua; Moshe was hinting to him that as a future leader of the Jewish nation, he ought to be able to discern between a sound of war and other sounds. This requires explanation. Why is the skill of interpreting far-off noises so imperative for a leader?

Rav Shimon Schwab (d.1995) explains that the question here was not about identification of sounds but rather discerning the impetus for them. Both Moshe and Yehoshua could hear the revelry coming from the camp, but while Yehoshua understood this as a rebellion against Hashem, Moshe knew that the people had greater potential than that. As a leader, he instructed Yehoshua, you must know that this tragic mistake the people are making stems from their pain and confusion over my absence. It is your overriding task to help them find a way back home to a place of spiritual security.

Reframing the event of the Golden Calf in this way brings out the essence of the message of the Ohr HaChaim with which we began. A person can temporarily fall to places that are below their real spiritual level, but through focusing on their long-term goals, they can always find within themselves the strength they need to return.

Next Week - VAYAKHEL-PEKUDEI:
STANDING OUT WHILE STANDING
TOGETHER