

TIMELESS TORAH

PARSHAT KI TISSA - Frozen In Time: Echoes of Forgiveness

The Eternal People

Parshat Ki Tisa includes the episode of the Golden Calf, whose powerful repercussions reverberate throughout Jewish history. The positioning of the verses leading up to this event illustrate the drama of a nation who had been at the pinnacle of spiritual attainment, having just received the Luchot, engraved by Hashem Himself, yet immediately fall to a state where Hashem declares that He will wipe them out entirely. Powerfully, however, the main theme that runs through this parshah is that of forgiveness, and in particular, the willingness of Moshe to entreat Hashem to allow the Jewish people to survive and make amends for their misdemeanours.

Remarkably, of the two prayers offered by Moshe on behalf of the Jewish people, the Ramban contends that the first one was said before Moshe had even descended from the mountain. So great was Moshe's faith in both Hashem's willingness to forgive and the Jewish people's ability to grow that immediately upon hearing about the sin of the Golden Calf, he prayed that Hashem should forgive them. We find, further, that Hashem responded in kind. Throughout this episode, the Jewish people are referred to as '*amcha* — your (referring to Moshe's) nation,' or '*ha'am* — the nation', but never as Hashem's nation. This devastating expression of Hashem's detachment of Himself from His people changes only towards the end of the *parshah*. There, the people are told that they will not merit the direct Presence of Hashem taking them into Eretz Yisrael, but they will be led by an emissary.

Distressed by this news, the people cried out in mourning. At that point, for the first time since the formation of the Golden Calf, the verse (33:5) refers to *Bnei Yisrael*, the name that denotes Hashem's everlasting love for His people. Although the tone of the ensuing verses is still harsh, and the consequences of the sin were still being felt, the people were assured with these words that Hashem would never forsake them.

Becoming Spiritual Seekers

If we look at the way the commentators analyse the sin of the Golden Calf, we find that the faith that Moshe Rabbeinu had in them was, in fact, reciprocated. One of the main factors that contributed to the Golden Calf was the Jewish people's perspective on Moshe's role and their concern that he might have left them.

Most commentators, including the Ibn Ezra and Ramban, explain that the Golden Calf was not initiated out of a desire for idol-worship. Instead, after the Jewish people miscalculated the time that Moshe was supposed to return from Har Sinai and became concerned that he had actually died there, they panicked and sought to find a replacement. Quoting the Kuzari (written by Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi, d. 1141), Rav Soloveitchik (d. 1993) explains that the Jewish people wanted to create a physical representation towards which they could direct their service to Hashem. This means that when they saw that Moshe had not returned from the mountain, they felt that they had lost the intermediary between themselves and Hashem, and they attempted to find a repository with which they could locate their Divine service.



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Ostensibly, they were seeking to enhance their religious service, but this was a form of religious expression that had been forbidden to them. The fundamental message here, Rav Soloveitchik explains, is that we must learn to channel our religious devotion and fervour only in the way that we have been commanded to do so by Hashem.

According to Rav Hirsch (d.1888), the Jewish people saw Moshe as someone who had surpassed ordinary human nature and become godlike, able to influence Hashem's will. This is what they were attempting to replace, and the error of the Golden Calf was thus a pagan delusion that views divine service in terms of passive human relationships. The idea that one fulfils their duty solely by paying homage and acknowledging their dependence on a higher power is the precursor to crude spiritual fetishism. Instead, a basic tenet of Judaism, argues Rav Hirsch, is that mankind may not and cannot make for themselves any kind of god, even as an intermediary. He or she cannot draw Hashem near by representing the godly in corporeal form, but must rather draw near to Hashem by filling themselves with spiritual and moral content as commanded by Hashem.

Fascinatingly, the common theme behind both of these approaches is the way in which the Jewish people perceived Moshe as a kind of intermediary between themselves and Hashem. Throughout the ages, the Jewish people have been led by many great leaders, but at this early stage, we were taught that our leaders are human beings who, while being powerful role

models and even teachers of Hashem's will, cannot replace our own direct connection to Hashem.

The end of this episode illustrates what is perhaps the remedy to these mistaken beliefs. The verses say that Moshe took his tent and pitched it outside the camp, calling it an '*ohel moed* — a tent of meeting'. Anyone who was a '*mevakesh Hashem* — one who seeks Hashem' would have to make their way there (33:7). According to Targum Yonatan, this tent was a '*beit ulpana* — a place of learning', and people would go there to do teshuvah; they would confess their sins, pray, and thus achieve atonement. In other words, after the sin of the Golden Calf, Moshe distanced himself from the people, and the mode of service transformed to individual proactivity. Until this point, the Jewish people had been told what to do by Hashem through Moshe, and they had, as a nation, performed Hashem's will. From now, religious growth was defined by the 'seekers of Hashem'. The message that we take from this parshah is that we have values that are worth standing up for, and we have the ability to embrace them ourselves. We can and should be inspired to seek spirituality in our own lives through the empowering knowledge that no one else will do it for us.

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