

How do you think that each of them felt in this situation? (Try to imagine what each might have thought about the actions of the other.)

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The weekly Haftarah Commentary
By Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Senior CY Faculty in Talmud and Midrash,
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TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Ki tissa

Shabbat Parah

March 17-18, 2017 – 20 Adar 5777

Annual (Exodus 30:11-34:35): Etz Hayim p. 523-546; Hertz p. 352-368

Triennial (Exodus 30:11-31:17): Etz Hayim p. 523-529; Hertz p. 352-356

Maftir (Numbers 19:1-22): Num 19: 1-22; Etz Hayim p. 880-883; Hertz p. 652-655

Haftarah (Ezekiel 36:16-38): Etz Hayim p. 1286-1289; Hertz p. 999-1001

Moses' Finest Hour

Rabbi Gail Diamond, freelance translator/editor, served as Associate Director and taught at the Conservative Yeshiva from 2001 to 2015.

Parshat Ki Tissa or parts of it are read no less than nine times during the year. In addition to its place in the yearly cycle, we read parts of Ki Tissa on five fast days and on two Shabbatot of festivals (Pesach and Sukkot). The beginning of the portion is also read on Shabbat Shekalim.

The dramatic center of the portion is the story of the sin of the Golden Calf that takes place when Moses is on Mount Sinai with God. The dialogues between Moses and God at this moment become the basis of our Torah reading for fast days.

When God first learns of what the people have done, God tells Moses (Ex. 32:7):

“Go and descend [*lech red*], for your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt, have acted basely [*shichet*].”

According to Rabbi Elazar in Talmud Berachot 32a, God's statement, "Go and descend" is a direct challenge to Moses and his leadership:

"And the Lord said to Moses: 'Go and descend'." What is the meaning of 'go and descend'? Rabbi Elazar said: The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Moses: "Moses, descend from your greatness. Isn't it only for the sake of Israel that I granted you prominence; and now that Israel has sinned, why do I need you?" Immediately, Moses' strength waned and he was powerless to speak.

God tells Moses to leave him alone so that He can destroy the people. In Exodus 32:10, the Hebrew is *haniha li*, colloquially, "lay off me." In the retelling in Deuteronomy 9:14, God says, "*heref mimeni*," from the root *resh-pay-heh*, "leave me be".

The Talmudic explanation continues:

"Leave Me be, that I may destroy them" (Deuteronomy 9:14). Moses said, 'this matter is dependent upon me.' Immediately he stood up and prayed vigorously and begged that God show mercy.

According to Rabbi Elazar, when God told Moses to "lay off," Moses immediately realized his power to change the situation. God's words had a paradoxical effect – Moses became more intent on using his power to save the people.

According to Rabbi Abbahu, Moses' tenacity and audacity are made even more clear from God's statement, "Leave me be."

"Now leave Me be, that My wrath will be enraged against them and I will consume them; and I will make of you a great nation" (Exodus 32:10). Rabbi Abbahu said: Were the verse not written in this manner, it would be impossible to utter it. "Leave Me be" teaches that Moses grabbed the Holy One, Blessed be He, as a person grabs his friend by his garment, and said before Him: Master of the Universe, I will not leave You be until You forgive and pardon them.

This is perhaps Moses' finest hour, arguing with God on behalf of the people. The Torah recounts how Moses, rather than backing down, implores God and asks God to "Turn from Your blazing anger and renounce the plan to punish Your people." (Exodus 32:12). And, perhaps surprisingly, God listens to Moses.

This Talmudic teaching reminds us that great leaders must act on behalf of those they lead, that spiritual audacity is not a luxury but a necessity, and that even the greatest of sins can be forgiven.

A Vort for Parashat Ki tissa

Rabbi Daniel Goldfarb, CY Faculty

When Moses summoned "whoever is for the Lord" at the sin of the Golden Calf, "all the Levites rallied to him" (Ex 32:26). Were they the only ones in the camp who were "for the Lord"? Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Alter (the *Chiddushei HaRim*, founder of the Ger Hasidic dynasty, Poland 1798–1866) says of course not, there were many more who did not agree with the worship of the calf – only 3,000 were punished – but they did not have the courage to stand up and protest. Only the Levites did. The others did not want to get involved. Sound familiar?

Table Talk

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, CY Faculty

After having received the instructions for the Mishkan (Tabernacle) we taking a break to see what the people are doing while Moshe is up on the Mountain receiving the tablets. Here comes the story of the Golden Calf!

- 1) Among the things that are needed for the Mishkan is the *Ketoret* (incense) which will be placed before the testament ark (30:34-38). Why do you think that it would be placed there? For extra challenge: Check out Mishna Yoma 5:1 that describes the ritual of Yom Kippur. What might that add to your understanding of the use of the *Ketoret*?
- 2) While we have been reading the past 2 Parashot, Moshe was up on Mount Sinai speaking with God and receiving the Tablets. How do the people react to his long absence from the camp (31:18- 32:1)? Based on what they say, what seems to be their greatest concern?
- 3) How does Aaron respond to the people that came with the demand that he should create gods/a God for them (32:2-6)? Could he have handled the situation differently? Why do you think that he chose to handle it this way? Based on the story told in the Torah, who seems to be in control in the event?
- 4) After convincing God to hold off punishing the people, Moshe comes down the mountain to begin to figure out what is happening and deal with the people's actions (32:15-20, 26-34). What does he do? Why do you think that he does each of these actions?
- 5) In addition to dealing with the people, Moshe faces Aaron (his brother). What does he say to Aaron (32:21-25, 35)? How does Aaron explain what happened?