

“Just Forty Days Later”
Devar Torah for Parashat Ki Tisah¹
Copr. 2011 Rabbi Noah Gradofsky

How could they do it? Forty days earlier, they stood at the foot of Sinai at the moment of revelation. Months earlier, a string of unparalleled miracles had freed them from slavery. Forty days after revelation, they were building a golden calf and declaring and celebrating it as a God.

I think we all look at this story with shock. How could the people of Israel have degenerated so quickly from the heights of spiritual awareness to the depths of idolatry?

Certainly part of the answer lies in considering the circumstances of the people, and in considering exactly what was their intention towards the Golden calf. For example, did they believe the calf to be a god, or merely some physical representation of, or conduit to, God (which, nonetheless would be an egregious sin, but one with which we could perhaps more easily identify).

But I think another part of the answer lies in understanding something about the nature of humanity. Humans are a fickle species. Our memories are limited, and our attitudes are capable of changing over time. What was an overwhelmingly powerful experience one day, fades into a distant memory over time.

The truth is, this part of human nature is one of our greatest strengths. Were it otherwise, were it that the power of any experience was permanent, we might become trapped by the worst of our experiences. Our moments of anger, our moments of tragedy, might be allowed to control our destinies. Instead, we have the ability to move on, to move forward.

But at the same time, the fact that our memories are limited and that the power of our past experiences fade over time creates a great challenge. It means that any one positive experience, any one moment of inspiration, cannot guarantee our future. And hence, a mere forty days after standing at the revelation at Sinai, the Israelite people were creating the golden calf. Similarly, even our most meaningful experiences in life – moments where we are inspired to do more, to do better can quickly fade into distant memories.

What does this mean for us? It means that if we seek genuine spirituality and moral development, that it is not enough merely to seek isolated moments of grandeur. Because no matter how powerful those moments might be, no matter how much כוונה (*kavanah*, intent, fervor) we might establish for a moment, that *kavanah* will be of ever-decreasing effect if we don't match that *kavanah* with קבע (*keva*, consistency).

Last week, as משה רבינו (*Moshe Rabbenu*, Moses our Teacher) was instructed on the dedication of the משכן (*Mishkan*, Tabernacle), *Moshe Rabbenu*, was told about just one sacrificial ritual to be performed in the Tabernacle after its dedication. He was told not of the Passover offering, nor of the Yom Kippur offering. Instead, *Moshe Rabbenu* was instructed וְזֶה אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשֶׂה עַל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ כְּבָשִׂים בְּנֵי שָׁנָה שְׁנַיִם לְיוֹם תְּמִיד. אֶת הַכֶּבֶשׂ הָאֶחָד תַּעֲשֶׂה בֶּבֶר קָר וְאֶת הַכֶּבֶשׂ הַשֵּׁנִי תַעֲשֶׂה בֵּין אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשֶׂה עַל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ כְּבָשִׂים בְּנֵי שָׁנָה שְׁנַיִם לְיוֹם תְּמִיד. אֶת הַכֶּבֶשׂ הָאֶחָד תַּעֲשֶׂה בֶּבֶר קָר וְאֶת הַכֶּבֶשׂ הַשֵּׁנִי תַעֲשֶׂה בֵּין הָעֲרֻבִים *and this is what you shall offer upon the altar, year old lambs, two a day, consistently. The one lamb you shall offer in the morning, and the other lamb you shall offer at twilight.* (Ex. 29:38-39) It seems that this ritual is highlighted to teach us that consistency in our relationship with God can be more important than even the most powerful spiritual moments, if those events were to exist in isolation.

¹ This Devar Torah uses a verse appearing in Parashat Tetzaveh (Ex. 32:39) which is the parasha immediately preceding Ki Tisah, and thus this Devar Torah could easily be used for Tetzaveh as well.

Judaism teaches that consistency is an important part of religious and moral development. Out of the command of regular sacrifices, Judaism asks that we pray every day, because we realize that even the greatest heights of *kavanah* can be rendered obsolete if they are not complemented with *keva*, consistency. We seek to study *Torah* on a regular basis so that we remain in constant dialogue with God and we are constantly aware of what God asks of us. We seek to apply the lessons of our Torah and the inspiration of our prayers to every interaction we have with others – so that our dedication to caring and compassion, to decency and honesty permeates every relationship we have in life, be it an isolated interaction with a stranger on the street or our every-day relationship with our friends, family, co-workers, customers and clients.

Just forty days after standing at Sinai, the Israelite people built the golden calf. It is a lesson that no matter how strong the dedication, no matter how significant the moment, the heights of inspiration can only endure when they are translated into consistent behavior. May we be blessed with the dedication to find for ourselves a great bounty of inspiration and fervor, and may we also be privileged to translate the heights of our *kavanah* into the consistent behaviors that reinforce and implement our dedication to the highest of spiritual and moral existence.