



The Parasha with Rabbi Dweck

Highlights for

Parashat Ki Tisa: Changing the Course of History

SUMMARY

Parashat Ki Tisa focuses on the fashioning of the golden calf while Moses is on Mt. Sinai. Confronted with divine anger and a threat of destruction, Moses steps into his role as a leader by challenging God to uphold His original covenant with the Patriarchs, in its broadest parameters. Through a powerful defense, Moses secures forgiveness for the people, ensuring that God will continue to walk with them despite their ‘stiff-necked’ nature.

The Vacuum of Absence

While Moses was on top of Mt. Sinai receiving the Torah, the people became unruly and miscalculated the timing of his return. Feeling abandoned, they sought to create a tangible stand-in for the presence of God.

When the guidance of Moses and the audible voice of God went quiet, it created a vacuum. The people filled this vacuum with the golden calf, falling back into a primal slave mentality influenced by their hundreds of years in Egypt.

The Divine Ultimatum

God described Israel as an **עם קשה ערף** (‘stiff-necked nation’) in Exodus 32:9 and proposed to wipe them out and start a new nation specifically through Moses. God used the phrase **לי הניחה** (‘allow me’) in the next verse, which indicates that Moses had the capacity to talk God back into the covenant.

Historically, God was not a stranger to destroying things that did not work, as seen in the Midrashic account of previous worlds or the generation of the flood. Moses, however, was hired specifically for moments like this—to bring God back down to the people.

‘As long as there is even one Jew left in the world, God is not forsaken.’

The Setup for Failure

The Talmud (Berakhot 32a) explains that Moses used harsh words against God, arguing that the people had been set up for failure. He compared the situation to a father who bathes his young son, dresses him in gold, and places him in front of a house of ill repute.

Moses argued that as former slaves who had only ever seen idolatry, the people did not yet have the skills to fill the vacuum of Moses’s absence with anything else. He insisted that God could not pick and choose which aspects of the people He preferred; they were His people in their entirety.

The Permanence of Brit

Moses’s ultimate argument rested on the ‘contract’ God made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He noted that starting over with him would not change the nature of the offspring, as Moses was also a descendant of the same lineage.

By appealing to God's commitment to the forefathers and the potential for Egypt to mock the Exodus, Moses secured a change in the divine course. God agreed to spare them and continue the Mishkan project, dwelling among them in the midst of their impurities.

Questions for the Table

1. **Understanding Failure:** Moses defended the people by pointing to their environment and history. When others fail us, how can looking at their 'fullest context' help us find a path toward forgiveness?
2. **Filling the Vacuum:** The golden calf was a response to a vacuum of leadership and voice. How can we build the personal skills to fill quiet or difficult times with positive values rather than old habits?
3. **The Choice of Belonging:** Moses argued that God chose the people in their entirety, including their flaws. How does recognizing our inherent belonging to the Jewish people influence our commitment to the covenant today?

About Rabbi Joseph Dweck: Rabbi Dweck has held rabbinic leadership roles in the US and the UK. He is the Rosh Bet Midrash of TheHabura.com and the Rabbi Levy Chair of Jewish Wisdom at the London School of Jewish Studies. For more check out The Office of Rabbi Dweck (rabbijosephdweck.com).

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