



Around the Shabbat Table

Ki Tisa/Shabbat Parah Adar 5766

This week's writer: Barbara Kessel, BJE Director of Administration and author of Suddenly Jewish: Jews Raised as Gentiles Discover their Jewish Roots. This "Around the Shabbat Table" is dedicated to the memory of Barbara's father, Hy Baras, who died on March 18, 2003 (18 Adar 5763).

כי תשא

Shalom!

Introduction

On the Shabbat after Purim, we add a reading from the Book of Numbers (BaMidbar) to the weekly Portion (Ki Tisa in the Book of Exodus/Shemot). This additional reading reminds us that in Temple days, Jews who had become ritually impure by coming into contact with a dead body could become purified by being sprinkled with the ashes of a perfectly red cow. This mystical procedure was important in the days before Pesach so that everyone would be eligible to celebrate Passover in the *Beit HaMikdash*, the Holy Temple.

Parashat Ki Tisa ("When you count...") continues the description of God's conversation with Moses on Mount Sinai describing how to build the Tabernacle, the structure that served as an earthly "home" for God that traveled with the Jews through the desert. Every adult male would contribute half a shekel which would be used to both calculate the size of the population (When you count...) and pay for community sacrifices. After describing the Tabernacle's copper washing bowl and the anointing oil and the holy incense, the Torah records that God ends His audience with Moses by reiterating the commandment to rest on the Sabbath. He then gives Moses the two Tablets of the Law.

Meanwhile, the Israelites were camped for more than a month at the base of Mount Sinai, anxious over Moses' lengthy disappearance. In the absence of their leader, they prevailed on Aaron, the High Priest, to fashion for them an idol, a physical representation of God. Aaron collected their gold jewelry and melted it into the shape of a calf. The people brought offerings and feasted. When Moses came down the mountain, he saw the goings-on and smashed the stone Tablets in a fury, calling out, "Whoever is for God, come to me." The tribe of Levi gathered round, and Moses instructed them to stab the idol-worshippers to death. The Levites killed 3,000 Israelites that day.

Moses then went back up the mountain and begged God to forgive the people. God assured Moses that He still intended to bring the Jews to the Land of Israel, as He had promised. At this point, Moses requested of God that He show Himself to Moses. God answered that human beings are not capable of seeing God's face during their lifetimes, but He sheltered Moses in the crack of a boulder and passed by with His back to Moses. He instructed Moses to carve a second set of Tablets, which Moses brought down to the people.



Questions for Your Family's Discussion

1. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (Germany, 1808-1888) suggested that when a person comes in contact with a dead body, that person becomes too depressed to participate in the Temple service.
 - a. Why would being near a dead person cause depression?
 - b. Why can't a depressed person worship God with enthusiasm?
2. The Israelites had just followed Moses out of Egypt, where they lived as slaves for generations, forbidden to think for themselves or choose their own daily activities.
 - a. After all the miracles they witnessed, how can you understand their need for an idol, their craving for a leader in Moses' absence?
 - b. Have you ever been in a situation where you felt too overwhelmed to make a decision without guidance?
3. When Moses asked God not to destroy the Israelites for the Sin of the Golden Calf, he argued that the Egyptians would assume that God brought them out of Egypt just to kill them in the desert.
 - a. Why was this a persuasive argument? Why does God have to be concerned with what people think of Him?
 - b. Is your reputation important to you? Why?
4. The first set of stone Tablets with the Ten Commandments that Moses received was carved by God. After these were smashed, God commanded Moses to chisel the second set of Tablets himself. If you were making your own set of commandments, what rules would they include?

Some Texts to Wrestle With

1. Following Moses' instructions, the Levites killed three thousand of their own relatives, fellow Jews who had worshipped the Golden Calf idol. Moses then (Chapter 32, verse 29) invoked God's blessing on them. Why do they need a blessing now?
2. Our rabbis tell us (Talmud Tractate Brachot 7a) that when Moses asked God to reveal Himself (33:18), he was really asking Him to explain why it sometimes seems as though innocent people suffer, and evil people lead comfortable lives.
 - a. Why is that an important question?
 - b. What would you ask God to explain if you had the opportunity?

3. We know God has no body, so when the text says (33:32) that Moses will see God's back, our tradition interprets this to mean that God showed Moses all of human history, from Creation to the End of Days, showing him the trail of God's footprints through time, and the consequences of mankind's actions. How could this panoramic view help Moses understand God's ways?



Towards an Action Agenda

1. Our parasha opens with the commandment to give a half-shekel toward the maintenance of the Tabernacle. Make a contribution toward your temple's operating fund. (You can also contribute by serving as a volunteer, perhaps to lead a youth group function.)
2. One of the last verses in our parasha (34:18) is the commandment to observe Passover in the spring, the season of our departure from Egypt. Now is the time for spring cleaning, ridding the house of *chametz* and preparing for a week of matza. Grab a mop and do your share!



Shabbat Shalom!

Please join together in learning with other families by sharing your family's discussions and ideas by posting them on our web site. Simply respond with your thoughts and ideas to RavADS@bjeny.org

Around the Shabbat Table is a project of the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York Nassau/Queens Center. If there is any way we can be of service, please contact Rabbi Arnold D. Samlan at the BJE Nassau Queens Center, 516-876-6535, or see our web site: www.bjeny.org

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