



Around the Shabbat Table Shabbat Ki Tisa 5764

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Introduction

Ki Tisa, this week's parasha, begins with regulations concerning the census, as well as instructions for many of the utensils used in the Tabernacle, and later, the Temple. The first section ends with a reminder of the importance of observing *Shabbat*, the eternal sign of the covenantal relationship between God and Israel. The Hebrew words of this reminder are known to us as the *Veshamru* prayer, which we recite or sing every Shabbat.

The most familiar, puzzling and controversial story in Ki Tisa is that of the Golden Calf. Moses, their leader, had been on Mount Sinai for so long that the Israelites persuaded Aaron to make an idol to lead them. Aaron agreed and fashioned a golden calf. Meanwhile, Moses had just received the Ten Commandments when God informed him of the idolatry of the Israelites who were out of control, bowing and sacrificing to the calf and saying "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!" God was furious and called them a "stiff-necked people" and planned to destroy the ungrateful Israelites. Moses immediately pleaded with God not to destroy the Israelites. First, Moses argues, God must consider God's own reputation. He asked God what the Egyptians would think if God now destroyed this people He so recently freed from Egypt. Will the Egyptians think that God freed them only to destroy them in the desert? Secondly, Moses reminded God of the promises to the Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to make of their descendants a great nation. Will the God who swore these things to the Israelites' ancestors renege now? Moses convinced God to rescind the proposed punishment and then, carrying the Ten Commandments written by God, he returned to the Israelites' camp.

When Moses saw the people out of control, dancing around the Golden Calf, he became so furious that he threw the tablets onto the ground, shattering them into many fragments. He ground up the calf into a powder, mixed it with water, and forced the Israelites to drink it. Next, he rebuked Aaron for giving in to the mob, but Aaron denied

responsibility. Realizing that the guilty Israelites must be punished, Moses enlisted the help of the loyal Levites, who were given the difficult task of killing 3,000 of their fellow Israelites, those who were involved in the sin of the calf.

The following day, Moses once again ascended Mount Sinai to obtain God's forgiveness for the Israelites. Moses told God that if the Israelites were not forgiven, Moses would no longer serve as their leader. God sent a plague as punishment, but also agreed not to destroy them for their idolatry.

Moses set up a tent outside of the Israelites' camp, where he would communicate with God. Moses beseeched God to allow him greater knowledge of God's ways. God replied that no one can see God's face and live, but, since Moses had gained favor with God, he would be allowed to see God's back from a cleft in a rock. Moses was instructed to carve another two tablets of stone upon which God would again write the commandments. In the morning he ascended Mount Sinai, where God passed behind Moses uttering His thirteen attributes such as kindness, compassion and faithfulness. While still on Mount Sinai, Moses pleaded with God to reestablish the Israelites as God's own people. God made another covenant promising to do wonders for the people and to drive their enemies out of Canaan. Moses descended the mountain after speaking with God and his face shone radiantly. Moses taught the Israelites all God's mitzvot and then covered his face with a veil so as not to frighten the people with his glowing countenance.



Questions for Your Family's Discussion

When your family sits down together this Shabbat, here are some questions for you to wrestle with:

1. Why did Aaron help the Israelites to make a Golden Calf? Was Aaron punished for his participation? Have you ever not been directly punished for some wrong? How did it make you feel? Lucky? Guilty? Relieved?

2. Were the arguments that Moses gave God for not destroying the Israelites good ones? Why / Why not?
3. Moses experienced God's presence in the cleft of a rock where he "sees the back" of God. How and where do you feel God's presence?
4. What are the "idols" we worship today? Can they save us or bring us happiness? How can we learn to understand what the really important things in life are?



Some Texts to Wrestle With

How can we experience God's presence?

"God dwells wherever we let God in."

--Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotsk

"The Lord is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth."

-- Psalm 145

The attributes of God

According to the Torah (Exodus 34:6-7), God's attributes, or qualities are:

The Lord! The Lord! A God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; yet He does not remit all punishment, but visits the iniquity of parents upon children and children's children, upon the third and fourth generations.

What do you think of this list? Are there any qualities you would delete or add if you were writing the list?

Finally, according to Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan,

God is "the power that makes for salvation." By salvation, Kaplan means, "those things for which people ultimately search: to find holiness, meaning and peace in life; to bring about the betterment of the world"

[from Exploring Judaism: A Reconstructionist Approach
by Rebecca Albert and Jacob Staub]

How is Kaplan's idea of God's attributes similar to or different from that in Exodus?

Towards an Action Agenda

1. Together with your family, make a list of family priorities and determine how well you are meeting these goals. In what areas are you successful? What can be improved?
2. Both God and Moses do Teshuva, repentance, in this parasha. Have each person in your family think of something they did during the past week for which they want to do teshuva, write it down, and put it in an envelope. Next Shabbat, have everyone look in their envelope and see how successful they have been. Note: According to the rabbis, when you have the opportunity to repeat your error and resist, you have accomplished true teshuva.



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

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