

Ki Sissa

Striving With Our Imperfections

The section that we read today, the intermediate Sabbath of *Pe-sach*, is interesting and yet perplexing. Moses had dedicated his life to bring freedom to his people. He had led them to Mt. Sinai, where they heard the *Ten Commandments*, which they accepted without hesitation.

Then Moses left his people for 40 days. When he returned, he found that all his work had been in vain. The people had built a golden calf and reverted to idolatry. They did not honor their pledge. When Moses saw their pagan revelry, he was filled with consternation and disappointment. He dropped the two tablets of stone on which were inscribed the sacred words of the *Decalogue*. He prayed for death. His work had failed; why should he go on living?

The *Torah* records the dialogue which ensued between Moses and G-d. Moses is frustrated with his place in the world. He seeks to grasp the full meaning of G-d and His relation to man. These passages are not consonant with the happy mood which Passover should engender. Why was this particular story selected for holiday reading?

The clue to an answer may be found in the words which follow the tragic account of the breaking of the stone tablets. After Moses revealed his discouragement and announced his inability to continue his leadership, G-d commanded him: "Carve out two tablets of stone exactly like the first ones." (*Exodus 34:1*) Moses thought he had failed; the tablets which were so precious were destroyed. But G-d indicated to Moses that he was not defeated. He could create another pair which could still teach and inspire the world. Even with a duplicate set of tablets, he could remain a faithful leader and guide to his people.

It is important to grasp the tremendous psychological importance of the *Torah* lesson. We all desire to do good and to live effectively. We start with high hopes of achieving worthwhile goals. We ultimately discover that complete fulfillment is not possible in this world. Even Moses, who was divinely inspired, found that he had failed in much that he wanted to accomplish. The tablets, which were the supreme creation of his career, were shattered at the foot of Mt. Sinai. Yet, said the Lord, he could create

a second copy. While it could not possess the originality of the first, it would be adequate to fulfill its purposes.

Many of us are obsessed by the idea that we have to do things perfectly. Psychologists tell us that when we insist on perfection, we may never accomplish anything, because we have set an impossible goal. The perfectionist aims at that which he cannot realize and ultimately he must become frustrated. The desire for the best is the enemy of the better. We must realize that since we cannot have the best, we must try to come as close to it as possible.

When World War I ended, President Wilson asked Congress to ratify the covenant of the League of Nations. Other nations had joined the League, but his own country did not. The senators debated the treaty and found flaws in it. They pointed to faulty wording. Because it was not perfect, they did not accept it. The peace effort was set back a whole generation.

When the United Nations was organized after World War II, our country joined. Many editorial writers were critical of the charter of the United Nations, and some urged us to withdraw because it was not perfect. It is true that it has not fulfilled our highest expectations, but it is the only world forum there is.

From pulpits and in "op-ed" pieces, we hear and read attacks on Israel. Some people even suggest that we punish Israel by turning our backs on the United Jewish Appeal this year. Why? Because it is an imperfect society. It undoubtedly is, but it is the only country which, like home, must take Jews in when they come there. America, Too, despite its spacious skies and rolling fields of grain, is full of drugs, crime, and homelessness. Yet which one of us is ready to reject or forsake it for this reason? Despite its many weaknesses and problems, it is Israel that will this year welcome tens of thousands of Soviet and Ethiopian and Latin-American Jews.

G-d is not asking us to be perfect. He pleads with us to do the best we can. Let us give as much as we can this year. As we support Israel in its effort to absorb Russian *aliyah*, we are helping some Jews to fulfill the ancient hope of our people: *L'shanah habaah biy'rooshalayim*.

Synagogues and the Golden Calf

In the *Torah* portion *Ki Sissa* we learn about the sin of the golden calf. It is hard to understand the sin of the golden calf. How could the Jewish people, who had been at the heights of spirituality when they received the *Ten Commandments*, sink so low in just 40 days to worship the golden calf? Rashi says that they really sank to the level of idolatry. Others, Eben Ezra, etc., say that they actually did not sink to the level of idolatry but that they just needed a concrete symbol of their faith. Up to this time Moshe had served as their concrete symbol.

The rabbis say, what is idolatry anyway? They say that idolatry is when we serve the servant instead of the master. What they meant by that is that in the ancient world the people worshipped the sun and the moon and the stars and other natural forces. They felt that these natural forces were servants of G-d and were doing His bidding, but they also felt that these forces had an independent will and could be influenced to deviate from the course that had been set out for them by the Holy One Blessed be He, if they were worshipped. Their idolatry in many instances was not in denying G-d but in trying to appeal to His servants to deviate a little from their prescribed course so that those who worshipped them could benefit. This, of course, is nonsense. We all know that the sun and the moon must follow the regular laws of science, that all natural laws are, so to speak, cut and dried, that no natural bodies can deviate from their assigned function. It is true that they work within parameters, but these parameters are set by G-d, and a person's prayer to them or a nation's prayer to them will have no effect. Therefore, idolatry is really when a people confuses means and ends. They confuse the means which were created by G-d's beneficence with G-d Himself.

The Jewish people at the time of Mount Sinai were looking for some concrete expression of their faith, and when they saw that Moshe was not coming down from Mount Sinai, according to Eben Ezra and others, they felt that they had to have a concrete expression of faith, that they had to worship something that they could see and feel and touch as an expression of G-d's own majesty. When G-d saw that they were worshipping idols, He told Moshe to go down because "your people have become corrupted

that you have brought up from the land of Egypt.” G-d first says that He is going to destroy the Jewish people but, at Moshe’s urging and, of course, G-d wanted Moshe to urge Him to do this, He agreed to spare the people. Moshe then turned and went down the mountain with the two tablets of G-d which were engraved by G-d’s own hand, by the energy that came from G-d. We do not literally mean a “hand.” He took these tablets with him. Originally, Moshe Rabbeinu thought the people were worshipping other nation’s idols, idols that were well known, that they were just engaged in regular idol worship and he felt he could dissuade them from this worship, but that is not actually what happened. When they worshipped the golden calf, they said, “This is your god, Israel.” In other words, this was the god of Israel that they were worshipping, only in a concrete form. When he came down and saw them prancing and dancing around the golden calf, he took the tablets and smashed them. The rabbis ask, how could he have done such a thing? How could Moshe have smashed the tablets that were written by G-d Himself? Wasn’t that a great sacrilege? The rabbis say, no, G-d approved of what Moshe did. Why? Because the Jewish people would have substituted worshipping the tablets for the golden calf. Many times we Jewish people would rather worship a concrete object instead of following the moral teachings of our religion. In the *Kuzari*, which was written over 900 years ago, Yehuda HaLevy mentions that the golden calf was similar to our synagogues today. What did he mean by that? He meant that many times people worship the bricks and the stone of the synagogue rather than worshipping G-d and following His laws the way that they should. A synagogue is only bricks and stones. The people thought they were being holy by being dedicated to what today would be considered a synagogue, but they were not holy; they were sinners. These people did not have loyalty to Hashem and His religion. They did not have full loyalty to the principles for which a synagogue stands. They only had loyalty to a building because their family belonged to it or because they liked its appearance or because their friends belonged to it, but they had not loyalty to the principles for which the synagogue stands. They liked to worship a concrete object, something which they felt was holy. We in Judaism do not have big cathedrals. We have never been interested in big cathedrals because we will end up many times worshipping a place. The place, itself, is

thought to be holy. The place, itself, becomes more important than morality and justice. That, of course, is what caused the destruction of the Temple. The prophet said, "I do not like Your Temple anymore." G-d had told him to say, "because your hands are filled with violence. You cheat people and harm people. You steal from people. You do not keep your contracts with people. Therefore, your Temple is worthless." And the Temple was destroyed.

Many times throughout Jewish history we find the same thing, that people worship the buildings that they build. They worship the names that are in the building but they do not follow the principles of the religion. They do not know that the synagogue, itself, is useless and worthless unless the people are following through on the moral teachings of the Torah, unless the people are actually implementing the teachings of the Torah. Who needs a synagogue if it is based on immorality? Who needs synagogue if it is just a show-off institution? Many of our younger people have noticed that for many of those who control the synagogues in America, the most important thing is not spirituality or following G-d's commandments. The most important thing is just to show off to your gentile neighbors what a luxurious place you have. The synagogue is not an institution which is meant to further Judaism; it is just an institution which is meant to celebrate the wealth of certain people or meant to show off the loyalty of certain families and, therefore, these young people daven in their own home, in their living room. They get a *minyan* and that is all they need because the important thing about the synagogue is what it stands for. Does it stand for the principles of Judaism, or is it just an institution like the tablets which, if the people are not worthy, will be broken? Many synagogues throughout the ages have been broken. They became nothing more than rubble and stone because the people who worshipped in them did not follow and implement the teachings of our faith. People confuse means with ends. The synagogue is a means in order to keep the Jewish religion. It is not an end in itself. The most important thing is not to keep a synagogue alive (if a synagogue is acting in an unjust and immoral way, then that synagogue does not deserve to exist), but to keep the principles of the synagogue alive.

That is why Moshe broke the tablets because they would have be-

come an object of veneration themselves, and that is wrong. When Moshe went up, he left behind two leaders, Chur and Aaron, but later when he comes down from Mount Sinai, he finds only Aaron. What happened to Chur? One explanation says that Chur was killed by the people because he would not listen to the people when they urged him to build a golden calf. Others say, no, he resigned. He refused to listen to the people. The people said that he could not be their leader unless he listened to them, unless he helped them build a golden calf. Even though we know only 3,000 people worshipped the golden calf (there were only 3,000 who were killed because of this sin), yet they formed a mighty organized group. The rest of the people did not take an active interest. The rest of the people were punished because they did not intercede. They did not step forward and say it was wrong what these 3,000 are doing. Chur said, "I resign. I don't care if you are an organized group. It is wrong what you are doing." Aaron, the rabbis say, sinned because he listened to this organized group. He did it with good motives, they said, because he thought he could change them and turn them and show them that this worshipping of an object was wrong, that they had to worship not an object but G-d by living a moral life. G-d was angry at Aaron. Later Aaron did *teshuva* and he was appointed high priest, but we always have to remember that when we are dealing with a synagogue, with institutions, that they are only a means to an end. They are not an end in themselves, that it is not important to maintain an institution if it has to be maintained by immoral means. If a synagogue does immoral and illicit things, it does not deserve to exist. I remember once, not in this synagogue but in another synagogue, that a man came forward and offered \$50,000 to the synagogue if he would be honored at a dinner. Unfortunately, this man controlled all the gambling dens and prostitution houses in that town. The rabbi had a big fight with the board and made a lot of enemies before the board would agree not to give that man the dinner. How could the synagogue board even consider giving him a dinner? He was a man of ill repute. How could you shame the synagogue this way? Many of the board said the synagogue needed the money. \$50,000 is a lot of money, but a synagogue is not an end in itself. A synagogue is only a means to a great end. It is meant to help us worship G-d by following His commandments. When we allow a synagogue to do immoral things, then

we are just worshipping the synagogue, and when we worship a synagogue, that is the same as worshipping the golden calf. The rabbis say that the sin of the golden calf occurs throughout all Jewish history. The reason for this is because many times many Jews confuse the means with the ends. When people worship the synagogue instead of worshipping G-d by keeping His laws, then that synagogue does not deserve to stand. We must worship G-d by keeping His commandments.

I am reminded of the story they tell about Gabriel, who came to G-d and said that the gates of heaven needed repair. G-d told him to go ahead and fix them but first to get some bids. He went to a carpenter. The carpenter said he could fix it for \$500. Then he went to an electrician because he was thinking of getting a new electric gate. The electrician said it would cost \$5,000. Then Gabriel went to a contractor and asked how much it would cost. The contractor said it would cost \$20,500, and Gabriel asked why. He replied, "Well \$10,000 for you, \$10,000 for me, and \$500 for the carpenter." Synagogues can become corrupt. Synagogues can do evil, too, unless they realize that they are not an object of worship. We only worship G-d, and that we do by keeping His laws, by being moral decent people who keep our contracts, who keep our word. May we all do this so the *Mashiach* will come. Amen.