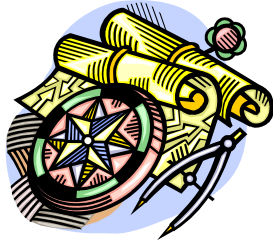


A Year of Encompassing Torah



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Parashat Ki Tisa

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This is how we shall accrue our mitzvah points:

**Barukh atah Adonai,  
Eloheinu Melekh ha-Olam,  
Asher kidishanu b'mitzvotav  
v'tzivanu la'asok b'divrei torah...**

**Praised are You Adonai, our God,  
The Sovereign of all worlds,  
Who has made us holy with your mitzvot,  
And commanded us to engage ourselves  
with words of torah.**

***To be fully engaged with Torah  
Is to wrestle with Torah –  
To challenge our tradition while loving it,  
To question it while celebrating it.***

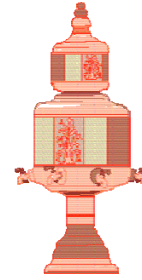
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An Added Blessing For Spiritual Direction

*"Yihyu l'ratzon imrey fi v'higion libi
lifaneycha Hashem Tzuri v'Go'ali*

May the expressions of my mouth
and **the thoughts of my heart**
find favor before You, G-d,
my Rock and my Redeemer."

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### **Parashat Ki Tissa The Battle of the Sexes**

In the section dealing with the building of the "mishkan" several weeks ago, we were informed that the inside of the container that would eventually hold the Ten Commandments as well as the Spirit of the Divine was to be lined in gold. Sitting on top of the "mishkan" were two cherubim facing one another. According to a *midrash*, the two were to be fashioned as a pair, but were not identical. In fact, the two looked longingly at one another when the presence of God appeared between them in the open space between their faces, as if the two were lovers.

As we look more closely at the Torah portion for this week we see several references to the two genders, both stated and implied. We begin with the census that Moses is instructed by God to complete. A half-shekel is to be collected from every male above the age of twenty. In Judaism, it is considered superstitious to count people directly, even when attempting to establish if there are enough adults present to recite "Kaddish." Instead we use a verse from the prayer service that has ten words. In ancient Israel, coins were counted to establish the strength of the people.

But why did they use half a shekel instead of a whole one? Surely one shekel could be afforded by everyone in the community in the same way that we would count dollar bills instead of fifty cent pieces! According to one commentary, the half shekel represents the fact that for every man who was counted as part of the census, he was incomplete if we do not consider the woman and their children who remained behind when the men went to battle. One of the lessons that the Torah teaches us is the significance of marriage as a partnership in

which husband and wife must work towards building a relationship with one another that fosters their fidelity.

In another scene that is a part of the Torah reading for this week we read about the insecurity of the people when Moses does not return to them after disappearing on the mountain to be with God. Even though the Ten Commandments were read several weeks earlier, in actuality, Moses returns with them in his hands *prior* to the building of the “*mishkan*” (tabernacle) whose blueprints were shared with us weeks earlier as well. Somewhere, someone misunderstood when the fortieth day would take place. When Moses did not return on what they thought was the appointed day, Aaron was convinced by the people in power to build a calf which would become a stool for God, a place for them to focus their attention instead of on a God who was mysteriously absent in their sight. When Aaron asked the men to bring to him the gold from the earrings of the men, the women and the servants, only the men donated to the building of the golden calf. No mention is made in regard to the women letting go of their personal jewelry.

When Moses discovered what they had done when he returned with the Ten Commandments in hand, he made sure that the men atone for their sin of not trusting in God. The golden calf they constructed was made into dust and then mixed with water which the men then drank. It is reminiscent of the ceremony that takes place later on in the Bible when a woman is accused of being unfaithful to her husband. Dirt is mixed with water which she then must drink as a test of infidelity. Although the role is reversed in the scenario of the golden calf, what remains common to both situations is the lesson of being faithful to those whom we love and cherish, even when we long for them in their absence.

Because the women were faithful to God by not giving up their gold earrings, tradition holds that they were rewarded with *Rosh Chodesh* as a holiday at the beginning of each new month. In some ways (or should I say “in all ways”) women are more understanding than men when it comes to relationships and the need for emotional strength. When it came time to construct the laver for the priests to use in their service to God, it was the women who came forward with the proper materials. Unlike other

priestly instruments, the laver was to be constructed from bronze.

We are told in a *midrash* that the women of Israel donated the mirrors that they brought with them for this sacred purpose. It was these same mirrors that they used to see themselves when they adorned themselves before going out to the fields of Egypt to be with their husbands. The men decreed that they would not have sexual relations with their wives so that the Pharaoh could not throw their infant sons into the Nile. However, *Yocheved* (the mother of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam) insisted that this was not the way for the Israelites to respond to the decree of the Pharaoh. As a result of their insight and their persistence, we owe a debt of gratitude to the Israelite women of that generation.

Finally, when it came time for the Israelites to accept God’s commandments, the Torah tells us that God held the mountain above their heads as if to coerce them. In another *midrash* we are told that the mountain became a *chuppah*, a wedding canopy in which God became betrothed to Israel. God has always held the fidelity of Israel to the highest of standards when talking about His relationship to them. In the *Shema* we read about the significance of letting our eyes lead us astray in that regard, lest our hearts and our minds follow what we see in some other deity.

What emerges from our lesson this week is not a battle that takes place between the sexes. Rather, the battle that takes place is within ourselves and our relationships with the significant others in our lives – whether they be with a spouse, a child, a friend, a colleague, or even with God. The gold that was used to build the golden calf reflected back upon the people an image that was not flattering to those who saw them from a distance. When it came time to build the *mishkan*, which was a concession from God when the Divine Spirit recognized Israel’s need to relate to something more evident than an unseen force in their lives, the gold that was used to adorn the relationship was reserved for the inside of the container.

Although the Torah relates to us the wisdom craftsmanship that went into the building of this special piece, and the man chosen to construct it was endowed with a unique spirit for such matters, we all know that the Spirit of God could never be contained in a single box. Rather, God

resides in the hearts of those who seek out the Divine Spirit. Happiness and longevity are not things that can be crafted by others and then put on display for all to see. What we learn from this week's Torah portion is that completeness is something that can only be found when we find the other half that belongs to us in this world.

In the opening verses we come across the Hebrew word "*u'natnu*," which means "and they gave" and refers to the many items given by the people to create the sacred objects used by the priests in honoring God. One commentator notes that the Hebrew word can be read the same way forwards and backwards. This is to remind us that in any given relationship there must be a reciprocal give and take that is equal to both sides. One cannot compromise to the other a greater share of understanding and doing. Only when both parties accept the responsibility equally of maintaining the relationship will there be a flourishing between them.

May this Shabbat be a time when we experience the joy that comes when we are in the moment with those whom we love, giving as well as receiving – of our family, our friends, our inner selves, our spouse, and our God.