



Torah Reflections on *Parashat Ki Tissa*

Exodus 30:11-34:35

Imagine: After communing with God on Mount Sinai for 40 days and nights, an inspired Moses, Tablets in his arms, returns to his people and finds them dancing around the Golden Calf. With impulsive and unrestrained anger, Moses smashes the Tablets, and only later, after he has destroyed the Golden Calf and made the Children of Israel ingest its ashes, does he ask Aaron why this sin has occurred. In the eyes of Moses, his people betrayed him. A part of himself, his spiritual and physical community, malfunctioned to the point of non-recognition. When he first left camp to ascend Mount Sinai, this body had appeared united and strong. However, the apparent well-being and cohesion had broken down or proven illusory.

After this bone-shaking crisis, Moses pleads with God for reassurance, for the intimacy of intimacies—please, let me see Your very Being, let me know Your essence. Moses yearns to grasp existence as a unified whole. He wants to see beyond the confounding uncertainties, contrasts and contradictions. God grants Moses his request, but with a twist. Moses will not be allowed to see God's face, "but My back, you shall see" (Exodus 33:23). Moses asks for the piercing clarity that comes from viewing another's face and looking into another's eyes, and God offers him instead, a view from behind. A view of a part of the Divine that remains concealed. When Moses cries out for insight, he is granted a glimpse of that which lies outside his normal field of vision, for it is there that the revelation he so desires, resides.

Expanding on the image of a personified God, the Talmud explains the viewing of God's back: God showed Moses the knot of the *tefillin* at the back of God's head!¹ The knot on the tefillin binds the physical body to the invisible and the infinite; so the Talmudic language symbolizes what Moses sees in that moment—how all parts of creation tie into each other.² Tefillin crowns and sits on top of the head, above the seat of reason. The clarity Moses seeks lies beyond the world of rational thought, so God responds with an image that requires examination from more than just the naked eye. It's when Moses allows himself to see with the totality of his being, not just with his eyes, that he gets a glimpse of the radiant unity of it all.

A knot can entangle and entrap as well as bind and fortify. When we look at a physical knot, we have faith that in addition to the parts of it that we can see, there are other parts that lay buried and hidden from view. We understand and accept that the knot needs both its exposed and its non-visible parts in order to exist. What appears connected and entangled in one environment often unravels into distinct clarities when viewed in a broader context. Intersecting lines on a two dimensional piece of paper may transform into never-meeting skew lines in three-dimensional space. Likewise, interpersonal knots may dissolve when additional points of view enter the picture. Whether physical or metaphysical, we perceive and identify knots according to how the world looks in our eyes, and to what we need, at a particular moment in time. We

acknowledge their essential, binding nature—or we untangle them—when our needs and current perceptions of reality are broadened. Having faith in the existence of other dimensions and perspectives encourages us to look at knots in ways that are not immediately apparent.

Through his plea, Moses asks to see unity in the world around him. God's response elevates Moses from passive recipient to divine collaborator: before his second visit, God tells him, human involvement will be required. This time around, Moses, as an active partner, must make a second set of tablets out of stone, just like the God-made Tablets that he broke. It is during this second visit to Mount Sinai, after the spiritual crisis of Moses and his people, that God allows Moses to stand in the cleft of the rock and to experience the transition point between the physical world and the Source of creation. This interaction with the Divine transforms Moses' consciousness.

As Moses descends Mount Sinai for the second time, his face glows with Divine light reflecting his profound experience of unity. Walking to rejoin his people, his arms tightly cradle the stone Tablets that he made from his physical, revealed world and upon which God wrote from the spiritual, hidden dimension. "The eye of Moses is to see the underlying uniformity in all this diversity, this highest harmony of all harmonies, not merely to get an idea of it, to grasp it, to understand it, but actually to see it."³

Just as the physical body changes as it moves through time, the conscious body expands and contracts as it moves through experience. Like Moses, we yearn to understand, particularly as we encounter crises and tangles in our lives. And so, like Moses, we must see not only with our eyes, but also with the totality of our being. May we have the desire to examine the visible knots in our worlds, and the courage to seek out and view what they conceal. May we find there blessings, and strength, and peace.

¹ Talmud Bavli, Berachos 7a.

² Talmud Bavli, editorial commentary on Berachos 7a, Schottenstein Edition, Mesorah Publications, Inc., 1997.

³ Rabbi Samson R. Hirsch, Hirsch Commentary on the Torah, Vol. 2, Exodus, p.641, Judaica Press, 1966.



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