

פרשת כי תשא

OVERVIEW

Our Sidrah continues with and completes the description of the sanctuary with its contents and the priestly garments. It stipulates a contribution of a half-shekel to be given by every man over twenty years of age and to be used for the maintenance and repairs of the hallowed objects as well as the public sacrifices. The individual contributions also served as a means to conduct a census of the male population. The Sidrah concludes with the detailed composition of the incense and a description of the large copper basin used for the sanctification of the priests before their service in the sanctuary.

After a brief reference to the institution of the Sabbath, the text records Moshe's receiving the atone tablets of the law which he is to place in the holy ark.

This is followed by the episode of the golden calf recounted here in graphic detail. The people, desperate at the delay of Moshe's descent from the mount, implore Aharon to create a likeness of "the god who brought you out of Egypt". Aharon's protests are in vain. The people's fury overwhelms him and the ghastly orgy at the base of the statue completes the intriguing portrait of this first and most momentous national rebellion.

G-d's reaction is not long in coming. Moshe is commanded to descend from the mount to discipline the hysterical crowd and to punish the guilty. After attempting to intercede with G-d on behalf of the people, Moshe comes down without awaiting the divine decision. Confronted with the shocking spectacle of the mad dance around the golden calf, he smashes the precious tablets to the ground and begins at once with the tragic task of punishing the guilty. The ringleaders, 3000 men in all, suffer the penalty of death at the hand of the Levites.

Having established the authority of the law but moved by compassion for those who were too weak to resist the seduction of the leaders, Moshe returns to the summit to renew his entreaties with G-d to grant a full pardon to the participants in the rebellion. An epic "contest" ensues between man and G-d which ends with G-d's promise to "show mercy on those on whom I show mercy".

A second pair of stone tablets seals the new covenant. A stern admonition to maintain the loyalty and faith in G-d is followed by a succession of ordinances. Among them: consecration of the first-born, man or animal; the three pilgrimage festivals; and especially the Pessach sacrifice.

Again Moshe stays in the presence of G-d for forty days and nights. How different is his return from the mount when, unlike his previous descent, the people receive him in respectful silence as he comes down with the new tablets in his raised hands, his face radiating the reflection of divine glory. At first he is unaware of the transformation of his countenance. When he becomes

aware of it, he veils his forehead, humbly and modestly, the true servant and man of G-d.

COMMENTARY

The half-Shekel

Unlike the Egyptian temples which formed a separate entity cut off from the people, and many religious sects that are for all practical purposes states within the state, the sanctuary with all its institutions and the priests serving therein were to be open and accessible to all the people. The nation's participation in the construction and functioning of the sanctuary was inspired by the people's desire to maintain an intimate contact between the so-called profane and the so-called religious activities. Every Jew is a quasi "founding member" of the sanctuary, partner and participant. But his contribution is limited to half of the Jewish monetary unit. The work of a single individual will always remain a fragment, it requires an equally devoted sacrifice on the part of his brother to complete the work. At the same time, the very act of giving accentuates the idea that by giving of oneself, of one's own resources, life itself receives its true meaning in the sight of G-d. While no one is entitled to stand aside, no one's ambition must be allowed to let him complete the work on his own. As the "Ethics of the Fathers" put it "it is not up to you to complete the work, yet you are not free to desist from it".

According to the oral tradition three types of contributions were prescribed:

1. The half-shekel for the counting of all men above twenty years of age (verses 13-14);
2. The annual levy, of a half-shekel for the purpose of defraying the expenses of providing the public offerings;
3. A voluntary contribution towards the repairs and embellishment of the sanctuary.

In commemoration of the nationwide giving of the half-shekel in the month of Adar, we recite this introductory portion of our Sidrah in our synagogues on the Sabbath preceding the beginning of Adar. Everyone, rich or poor, is obliged to pay the same amount. Before G-d, the rich man can do no more and the poor man shall do no less, than the half of a whole shekel. The famous doctrine of "the equality of all men" – that claims to be a fairly recent discovery – is eminently evident at the outset of our national history.

The Oil of Sanctification

Every achievement, however perfect, can contribute to the improvement of the human condition only if it has a moral purpose. In the sanctuary, this is symbolized by the oil of sanctification that bestows the divine stamp on the human initiatives elevating them from their physical origin to the lofty heights of spiritual perfection.

The strict prohibition regarding the copying of the sacred oil's chemical composition stresses the unique character of this oil which was also used for the crowning of the Jewish kings giving a spiritual flavor to the mundane power.

Remember the Sabbath

After completing the detailed account of the construction of the Sanctuary, the Torah focuses again on the central position of the Sabbath in the life of our nation. We must refrain from ever violating its sacred institutions whose sole guarantors are the Jewish families and their Individual members.

The Golden Calf

1. Its causes and motives.

The astounding event of the golden calf is considered to be an unexpected return to a state of spiritual aberration, a sudden decline of a people whose memories of the Egyptian terror and idol worship should have made it immune to such conduct. Yet we are confronted with the incredible spectacle of an aroused crowd offering sacrifices to the idol and exclaiming "these be your deities, o Israel, that brought you up out of the land of Egypt".

There may be an explanation to the puzzle: it is certain that as a consequence of its bitter experiences, Israel felt secure in its knowledge and recognition of an Almighty G-d. Yet it had not mature sufficiently to free itself from the heathen concept of a deity possessed of human attributes, such as change of mood, requiring constant gifts of sacrifices to soothe its anger, a. o. In the eyes of the people Moshe is a "super-human" whose expertise in magic persuades and dominates even a deity. They thought him to be capable of initiating the revelations emanating from G-d. It explains their desolation at the puzzling delay of his return that leads to their impatient outburst "up, make us a deity who shall go before us, for this man Moshe, we know not what has become of him".

Theirs is not really a heathen cult but an erroneous concept of the divine mirrored in the golden calf. It is unquestionably a mortal threat to the future of a people who are ready to replace the true monotheism with an only too human fetishism. At that point they failed to understand the essence of the divine: G-d and His law are immortal, eternal, independent, never earthbound. As to Moshe - he will die and others will take his place.

2. Aharon.

There is no need to try to justify the inglorious role played by Moshe's brother. He acted under heavy pressure by the people to which he offered only token resistance. As a man of peace he attempts to gain time by asking for contributions of gold and ornaments hoping that the women would hesitate to part with their jewelry and thus allow time for Moshe's expected return.

There remains the question why he formed the sinister calf with his own hands instead of remaining passive.

Perhaps he hoped that an idol constructed by him in full sight of the people would cause them to reflect on the absurdity and senselessness of the scene. To no avail. The people's frenzied quest for a deity of their own making could not be contained. Aharon's compromise only served to make matters worse. Moshe alluded to this when he asked his brother "what did this people do to you that you have allowed such a great sin to come upon it?" (32:21) Aharon's reply is strikingly simple and straightforward: "You know the people when they are in a state of evil" (22), i.e. he admits to his mistake of having bowed to the people's demand.

3. The punishment

In contrast, Moshe's leadership is never more clearly evident than in the unfortunate episode of the golden calf. He acts swiftly and decisively without regard for his and his family's reputation. The people, confused and paralyzed by the immensity of their transgression, make no attempt to defend themselves. They had acted like children, their punishment will have to fit their crime: "You thought this was your deity, well then, you will drink up your deity". That in which they had placed their trust to ensure their physical survival had to find a quick end to its brief existence in their own bodies. Thus does a Moshe teach and educate. The fact that no hand was raised to save their deity from the hands of the man Moshe, was the first sign of repentance. In order to prevent a repetition of the tragedy, it was necessary to eliminate the ringleaders and to restore the authority of the law. Three thousand men are slain by the Levites, the only tribe that did not participate in the rebellion. (Its exemplary conduct brought the tribe the priesthood that was initially reserved for the first-born males.)

The second set of Tablets

Why were the new tablets of the law given to the people immediately following their treacherous act? Why was there no interval to test the sincerity of the people's repentance and allow for the process of rehabilitation? Using force to suppress a revolt does not necessarily eliminate a state of popular unrest. Steps must be taken to placate and calm the people by catering to their protest, justified or not. Not so Israel. Nothing can induce G-d to alter even one iota of the form, spirit and contents of the divine law. That is the significance of the second tablets given as the first divine gesture of atonement and forgiveness. It is a clear message to Israel: upholding the eternal law of the Torah will be forever and unalterably your task and mission as the nation of G-d.

First publication in the French Language during WWII in Occupied France as "La Tohra Commentée" © 1945 Marc Breuer. Translated to English by R' Marc (מרדכי) and Jacob Breuer זצ"ל. Missing parts translated from the original French text by Elie Winsbacher. Edited and Published in English with permission of the author's family by Elie Winsbacher . © 2003. Based on the teachings of Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch זצ"ל. To receive electronically, please send email to: e.w@att.net or download from the website of the Central Organization for Jewish Outreach at <http://www.cojo.net>.