

## DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

### “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Ki Tisa  
March 2024 / Adar I 5784

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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

### Ki Tisa – Being careful not to embarrass others

In this week's Parsha of Ki Tisa we read about the terrible sin of the Egel Hazahav (the Golden Calf). If you pay attention to the reading at shul this Shabbat you might notice something unusual. The first aliya, that of Kohen, is considerably long. The second aliya, that of Levi, is even longer. In fact, it is one of the longest aliyot of the entire Torah<sup>1</sup>, even longer than the aliyot during the weeks in which we read a double Parsha. Why is that the case?

The Torah teaches us that the entire tribe of Levi did not participate in the sin of the Egel Hazahav. When Moshe came down from Har Sinai and saw what was going on, he said “Whoever is for Hashem, join me”. The entire tribe of Levi gathered around him (Shmot 32:26). At Moshe's command, the Leviim then went through the camp killing the perpetrators of the sin. The first two aliyot are deliberately longer than usual so that the entire story of the Egel Hazahav is read while a Levi is called up to the Torah. The reason for this deliberate orchestration is to avoid the possibility of causing embarrassment. There is a chance that a non-Levi may feel embarrassed to be called up for a portion that discusses a sin of his ancestors. Only the Leviim can be sure that their family was innocent of this sin.

However, when we examine the episode of the Egel Hazahav, we see that there are a number of mitigating factors that lower the severity of the transgression.

- The number of people that were killed as punishment for the Egel Hazahav, as a percentage of the population, was remarkably low. This suggests that the vast majority of Bnei Yisrael did not commit avoda zara.
- The Midrash tells us that it was mainly the Erev Rav (the ‘mixed multitude’ of non-Jewish people who followed Bnei Yisrael after the Exodus) who were involved in the sin.
- According to the Midrash, many of the people who were involved in the sin were acting out of genuine fear, after the Satan showed them an image of Moshe in his coffin. The people were genuinely afraid that Moshe was dead, and they were desperate for guidance. They panicked and they did not know what else to do.

These mitigating factors would likely reduce the embarrassment that a descendant of the perpetrators would feel. However, Chazal were exquisitely sensitive to even the slightest chance of such discomfort. Therefore, they implemented the unusual divisions of the aliyot of this Parsha to minimise even this slim chance of causing pain.

The famous story in the Torah of Yehuda and Tamar teaches us this lesson of sensitivity to the feelings of others.<sup>2</sup> Tamar was being led to the furnace for capital punishment for acting immorally. She sent an encrypted message to Yehuda, revealing that she became pregnant from the owner of the signet ring, cloak and staff that she had in her possession. Though she could have tried to save herself by revealing Yehuda's identity, she chose to risk being put to death rather than embarrassing

<sup>1</sup> It is the longest second (Levi) aliya of the entire Torah. There are other aliyot that are longer such as the 6<sup>th</sup> aliya in Ki Tavo (63 verses) and the 4<sup>th</sup> aliya in Naso (48 verses).

<sup>2</sup> Breishit, Chapter 38.

Yehuda in public. The Gemara derives from here that it is better for a person to cast themselves into a fiery furnace than to embarrass someone in public.<sup>3</sup>

Some authorities<sup>4</sup> accept this ruling on face value. They understand that one is obligated to pay with their life to prevent another from being shamed! This would mean that there are actually four cardinal sins for which we must give up our lives (the other three being murder, idolatry, and forbidden relations). However, the Shulchan Aruch and the Rambam do not bring this as the halacha. The Meiri (Brachot 43b) explains that in *theory* it is preferable to be burnt alive rather than shame someone, but in *practice*, one must follow the halachot of pikuach nefesh and not place their life in danger. The Pnei Yehoshua (Bava Metzia 59a) understands that one is *permitted* (although not obligated) to sacrifice their life to save someone from shame, and this would not be considered a transgression of the prohibition of committing suicide. Similarly, according to the Pnei Yehoshua, if one shames another to save their own life, it is not equivalent to one who saves himself through killing another.

Whichever approach we follow, it is certainly clear that we should go to great lengths to be sensitive to others and to avoid causing embarrassment.

One example of this behaviour is the incident related in the Gemara of Mar Ukva and his wife.<sup>5</sup> They would regularly give charity anonymously to a poor neighbour. If the neighbour found out that Mar Ukva and his wife were helping him, he would feel uncomfortable every time he saw them. One day the neighbour came outside to pursue the anonymous benefactors in order to discover their identity. Mar Ukva and his wife fled so that the recipient should not feel embarrassed from the fact that his neighbours were his benefactors. The only place that they could hide was in a hot furnace. Due to their great merits, they were protected from harm and emerged safely.<sup>6</sup>

This trait of being sensitive to other's feelings and avoiding causing embarrassment originates from the more general Torah teaching of *v'ahavta l'reiecha kamocho* – loving our neighbour like ourselves. Just as we would go to great lengths to protect ourselves from shame or humiliation, so too we should make the same effort to minimise the discomfort of others.

In the following situations, the risk of causing embarrassment may be particularly high:

- Parents are responsible for teaching and guiding their children and they often need to give them 'constructive criticism'. However, parents should try to be careful to avoid causing their children unnecessary embarrassment in front of their siblings or friends.
- Though teachers are responsible for teaching and guiding their students, they too should take care not to embarrass their students in front of their peers.
- In managing their staff, employers should endeavour to provide any necessary negative feedback in private.

Let's try something this week:

1. Be aware of other people's feelings and sensitivities and make every effort to avoid placing someone else in a position of shame.
2. We can also actively create situations which negate embarrassment. For instance, when hosting the needy for a meal, we can genuinely thank them so much for making our Shabbat experience more enjoyable.
3. If we have caused others to feel embarrassed, we should apologise and ask for forgiveness. Though it is difficult, the feeling of accomplishment and relief when we are forgiven is worth it!

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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<sup>3</sup> This incident appears in Brachot 43b, Sotah 10b and Baba Metzia 59a.

<sup>4</sup> Tosefot (Sotah 10b) and Rabbeinu Yona (Shaarei Teshuva 3:139).

<sup>5</sup> Gemara Ketubot 67a.

<sup>6</sup> Mar Ukva's feet did start to burn from the hot floor, and he had to stand on his wife's feet to protect himself from the heat. His wife explained that her merits were slightly greater because she would often give ready to eat food to poor people whereas Mar Ukva usually gave money.