

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Tetzaveh
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Ki Tisa – Turning a negative trait into a positive trait

In this week's Parasha of Ki Tisa, we read about the sin of the golden calf. This is a very difficult sin to understand. It occurred a mere 40 days after Hashem Himself appeared to Bnei Yisrael and commanded them not to worship idols. How could Bnei Yisrael sink so low, so soon after experiencing the Divine revelation?

Some commentators point out that it was mainly the *erev rav* (the mixed multitude of people that came along with Bnei Yisrael when they left Mitzrayim) that were responsible for the sin of the golden calf. Others point out that most of Bnei Yisrael were not directly involved in the idol worship, but rather sinned by allowing it to happen. Other commentators explain that Bnei Yisrael had pure intentions but were very misguided. They thought that Moshe had passed away and they were desperate for a tangible means of connecting with Hashem. Without Moshe to guide them, they thought that building a physical object was the only way that they could connect with the Divine. Yet, despite any of these explanations, the sin of the golden calf still represents one of the lowest points in our national history.

After the sin of the golden calf, Hashem was very angry with Bnei Yisrael. He told Moshe that he would destroy the nation and make Moshe and his descendants into a great nation instead. Moshe jumped to Bnei Yisrael's defence and demonstrated remarkable self-sacrifice. Moshe said to Hashem that if He did not forgive Bnei Yisrael, then Hashem should erase Moshe's name from the entire Torah. Moshe did not give up in his defence of Bnei Yisrael until Hashem agreed to forgive them!

Let's have a closer look at Hashem's complaint against Bnei Yisrael and at Moshe's defence:

*“And Hashem said to Moshe: ‘I have seen this people and behold, Am K’she Oref Hu (**they are a stiff-necked people**).”* (Shemot 32:9)

Hashem considers Bnei Yisrael an "Am K'she Oref" – a stiff-necked people. This essentially refers to their characteristic of stubbornness. Rashi explains the expression as follows: Bnei Yisrael turn the hardness of the backs of their necks toward those who reprove them and they refuse to listen.

Now let's consider Moshe's defence of the people. As Bnei Yisrael's defence attorney, we would expect Moshe to focus on Bnei Yisrael's positive character traits in order to convince Hashem that Bnei Yisrael deserve to be forgiven. However, Moshe pleads as follows:

*“If I have now found favour in Your eyes, O Lord, let the Lord go now in our midst **כי (because) they are a stiff-necked people**, and You shall forgive our iniquity and our sin and take us as Your possession.”* (Shemot 34:9)

Ironically, though Hashem wants to destroy Bnei Yisrael because they are stiff-necked, Moshe argues that they should be forgiven for exactly the same reason – because they are stiff-necked!

Moshe uses the Hebrew word 'כי' (ki) which is usually translated as 'because'. However, Rashi explains that 'ki' can have a number of different meanings. In this case, Rashi understands 'ki' to mean 'if'. So according to Rashi, the translation of Moshe's plea thus reads: "...let the Lord go now in our midst **if** they are a stiff-necked people...". Rashi is explaining that Moshe was asking for mercy. According to this interpretation, Moshe is in effect acknowledging that Bnei Yisrael have this negative character trait of stubbornness and then asking Hashem to have mercy on them since they are 'handicapped' by this inborn tendency. That is exactly **why** they need Hashem's forgiveness and mercy.

In contrast, the Meiri¹ understands this word 'ki' differently. He interprets it as 'because'. Based on this interpretation, Moshe is arguing with Hashem that Bnei Yisrael deserves to be forgiven precisely **because** they have this character trait of stubbornness. This sounds strange. Hashem was angry at Bnei Yisrael because they are a stiff-necked people. And Moshe is asking for Hashem's forgiveness by highlighting the fact that they are stiff-necked. That doesn't sound like a good strategy for a defence attorney!

Let's examine this further.

Moshe was a prophet. This means he had the benefit of foresight. He was aware that the Jewish people were destined to face untold suffering over the course of our history. He could foresee thousands of years of persecution, pogroms, destruction, exiles, the inquisition, the holocaust, the intifada, October 7th, Bondi Beach...

Most people who would have to face such suffering would say to Hashem: "Is this the price of your Torah? Is this what it means to be your chosen people? We're not interested! You can keep your Torah and keep your reward!" However, Moshe also foresaw that unlike most other people, the Jews would remain loyal and faithful to Hashem despite so much suffering. Why? Precisely because they are an Am K'she Oref. A stiff-necked people. Our stubbornness is our strength!

The Meiri's interpretation teaches us that this character trait of stubbornness can be viewed not only as positive, but as an essential ingredient of serving Hashem. This trait of stubbornness can be described as persistence and loyalty, no matter what. Moshe argued that Bnei Yisrael should be forgiven for the golden calf precisely because they have this character trait.

Moshe took a negative character trait, the trait that led to idol worship, the worst of all sins. Yet, based on the Meiri's interpretation, Moshe turned that character trait around and showed it in a positive light. This teaches us that all character traits can have a time and place when they are appropriate. We may just have to search for the positive spin. Such a perspective can help us to get on better with others. It can also help us to be comfortable with our own character traits and thus have a higher self-esteem.

The Chovot Halevavot² lists a number of character traits that are usually seen in a negative light and should generally be avoided, and he instructs us as to the occasions in which they are in fact appropriate.³ For example, the Chovot Halevavot states that pride is appropriate when meeting those who deny G-d, so that we feel superior to them and feel comfortable opposing their views. Similarly, the Chovot Halevavot writes that anger can be appropriate when we see falsehood prevailing over truth. In addition, sometimes it is appropriate to show anger, for example when disciplining children (although we should not truly feel the anger inside⁴).

It might be relatively easy for us to find the positive spin on our own character traits and therefore judge ourselves favourably. But we may find it more challenging to see the positive side of some traits in other people.

Let us try to emulate Moshe and work hard to put a positive spin on other people's character traits. This may be easier in practice if we keep in mind that we are all created in Hashem's image.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to keep in mind that all character traits, even those that are usually considered negative, can have a positive aspect and are appropriate in some circumstances.
2. Choose a person with a character trait that really annoys you.
3. Now, contemplate a positive side to that very same character trait. Think about how that characteristic has helped you or the wider community in some way.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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¹ A French scholar from the time of the Rishonim (1249-1316).

² By Rabbi Bachya ben Yoseph ibn Paquda. The English translation of this book is called "Duties of the Heart".

³ See Gate 3, Chapter 10 in Chovot Halevavot.

⁴ Sometimes this is easier said than done!