

PARSHAH SUMMARY & COMMENTARY

Ki-Tisa

*Exodus 30:11-34:35**Torah Reading for Week of February 16-22, 2003*

The narrative of Ki-Tisa can be roughly divided into three parts: 1) The conclusion of G-d's instructions to Moses regarding the making of the Mishkan (Tabernacle); 2) The sin of the Golden Calf; 3) The granting of the Second Tablets. (For the different opinions among the commentaries as to the chronology of these events, see [below](#)).

Two full Parshiot—*Terumah* and *Tetzaveh*—have already been filled with G-d's detailed instructions on how the people of Israel should construct the Sanctuary in which He promises to "dwell amidst them." Still, several items remain to be described: the manner in which the silver for the making of the "foundation sockets" should be collected, and the making of the Basin ((*Kiyyor*), "Anointing Oil" (*Shemen HaMishchah*) and Incense (*Ketoret*). These items, followed by a roundup of all the Mishkan's components, occupy the first 38 verses of Ki-Tisa.

Half Shekels

The materials for the Mishkan's construction were received "from every man whose heart impels him to give" (Exodus 25:2)—each contributing whatever, and how much, his **generosity** and ability dictated. This rule applied to 14 of the 15 materials used for the Mishkan's construction. There was one material—silver—which G-d instructed should be contributed **equally** by each individual Jew:

And G-d spoke to Moses, saying:

When you raise the head of the children of Israel after their number, they shall each give a ransom for his soul to G-d...

This they shall give, every one that passes among them that are numbered: half a shekel after the shekel of the Sanctuary—a shekel is twenty gera—a half shekel shall be the offering of G-d....

The rich shall not give more, and the poor shall not give less, than half a shekel...

The half-shekels should be designated "for the service of the Tent of Meeting; that it may be a memorial to the children of Israel before G-d, to make atonement for

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THIS THEY SHALL GIVE... HALF A SHEKEL (30:13)

The mitzvah of the half-shekel is that each should contribute a coin that [is valued at] half of the dominant coin of that time. If the prevailing coin is takal, they should give a half-takal; if it is a selah, they should give a half-selah; if it is a darcon, they should give a half-darcon.

(Midrash HaGadol)

Why not a complete coin? To teach us that no man is a complete entity unto himself. Only by joining with another can a person become a "whole thing".

(The Chassidic Masters)

THIS THEY SHALL GIVE (30:13)

G-d took a coin of fire from under His throne of glory and showed it to Moses, saying: "Such as this they shall give."

(Midrash Tanchumah)

Moses could not understand: How could a mere coin serve a person as "a ransom for his soul to G-d"? G-d answered him by showing him a "coin of fire." G-d was saying: When a person performs even a modest act of charity with the fire of passion and enthusiasm, he is indeed giving a piece of his soul.

(The Rebbe of Kotzk)

Money is fire. Like fire it can destroy and annihilate, or illuminate and warm, depending on how it is used.

(Rabbi Elimelech of Lizensk)

THE RICH SHALL NOT GIVE MORE, AND THE POOR SHALL NOT GIVE LESS (30:15)

People differ in their intellect, character and talents, in the quantity of their material resources and the timbre of their spiritual sensitivities. But all are equal in the very basis of their bond with G-d: the intrinsic commitment to Him that resides at the core of their souls. So while every man contributed to the making of the various components of the Sanctuary in accordance with their individual capacity, all gave equally of the silver of which its foundation was made. As regards the foundation of the relationship between man and G-d, the "rich man" cannot give more, and the "pauper" cannot give less.

(The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

AND AARON AND HIS SONS SHALL WASH THEIR HANDS AND THEIR FEET... WHEN THEY COME NEAR TO THE ALTAR TO MINISTER (30:19)

Every person, upon waking in the morning... should wash his hands with [a minimum of] a quarter-log of water poured from a utensil...

Man entrusts his soul [to G-d at night] tired and exhausted, and G-d restores it to him rejuvenated and refreshed so that he may serve his Creator with all his capacity, this being the purpose of man. Therefore we should sanctify ourselves with His holiness and wash our hands with water from a vessel

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your souls."

A water basin and pedestal, both of copper, should be made. These should be placed between the Sanctuary and the Outdoor Altar, so that the priests should **wash** their hands and feet from the water in the basin before "they go into the Tent of Meeting... or when they come near to the Altar to minister."

Anointing Oil and Incense

Take you also the best spices, of pure myrrh five hundred shekels, and of sweet cinnamon twice two hundred and fifty shekels, and of sweet calamus two hundred and fifty shekels; and of cassia five hundred shekels, after the shekel of the Sanctuary, and

of olive oil a hin.

And you shall make it an oil of holy ointment, an ointment compounded after the art of the perfumer: it shall be a holy anointing oil.

Moses is to consecrate the Mishkan and its vessels, as well as those who serve therein (Aaron and his sons), by anointing them with this "Anointing Oil."

The Incense should be prepared from,

sweet spices, storax, and onycha, and galbanum; sweet spices with pure frankincense; of each shall there be a like weight.

And you shall make it an incense, a confection after the art of the perfumer, well-blended, pure and holy.

(The Incense was burnt on the Golden Altar twice a day, as specified in the closing verses of the previous Parshah).

Betzalel and Ahaliav

Having detailed the construction of the Mishkan and all its components, G-d proceeds to designate those who

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before serving Him and ministering to Him, like the Kohen who would wash his hands from the Basin each day before beginning his service...

(Shulchan Aruch HaRav)

All dirt and all filth betake themselves to the "other side" (the forces of evil) which derives sustenance from them; therefore it is a mitzvah to wash the hands...

(Zohar)

THIS SHALL BE A HOLY ANOINTING OIL UNTO ME THROUGHOUT YOUR GENERATIONS (30:31)

Many miracles occurred with the anointing oil which Moses prepared in the desert.

Originally it only measured twelve loggin (a "hin" is the equivalent of 12 loggin, or about 4 liters). Now, consider how much the cauldron absorbed, how much the herbs absorbed, and how much the fire burned, and yet it sufficed for the anointing of the Tabernacle and its vessels, and Aaron and his sons, on each of the seven days of consecration; and High Priests and kings [throughout the generations] also were anointed with it... And that very oil remains in reserve for the [rebuilding of the Sanctuary] in the Messianic Era to come, as it is written: "This shall be a holy anointing oil unto Me throughout your generations."

(Talmud, Hora'yot 11b)

FUMER (30:35)

Since many animals were slaughtered in the sacred place each day, their flesh butchered and burned and their intestines cleaned, its smell would doubtless have been like the smell of a slaughterhouse... Therefore G-d commanded that the Ketoret be burned twice a day, each morning and afternoon, to lend a pleasing fragrance to the Sanctuary and to the garments of those who served in it.

(Maimonides' Guide to the Perplexed)

Many of the commentaries object to this explanation of the function of the Ketoret; in the words of Rabbeinu Bechayei, "G-d forbid that the great principle and mystery of the Ketoret should be reduced to this mundane purpose." Chassidic teaching, however, applies Maimonides' words as a reference to the spiritual "stench" of the Animal Soul within man, whose sacrifice and dedication to G-d was the deeper significance of the animal offerings brought in the Sanctuary. This explains why the Ketoret was the most sacred component of the Yom Kippur service: the Ketoret represents the power of teshuvah, the sublimation of "foul odors" of man's failings and iniquities into the "sweet fragrance" of a new, invigorated bond with G-d.

SEE, I HAVE CALLED BY NAME BEZALEL... OF THE TRIBE OF JUDAH... AND I HAVE APPOINTED WITH HIM AHALIAV... OF THE TRIBE OF DAN (31:2, 6)

No tribe was greater than Judah and none more lowly than Dan... Said G-d: "Let the one come and be associated with the other, so that no man may despise [his fellow] or be arrogant, for both great and small are equal in G-d's sight."

(Midrash Tanchuma)

AND YOU SHALL MAKE IT A PERFUME, A CONFECTION AFTER THE ART OF THE PER-

AND THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL SHALL KEEP THE SABBATH, TO MAKE THE

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shall be in charge of the work:

*See, I have called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah.**And I have filled him with the spirit of G-d, in wisdom, and in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship; to contrive works of art, to work in gold, and in silver, and in copper; and in cutting of stones, to set them, and in carving of timber, to work in all manner of workmanship.**And I, behold, I have appointed with him Ahaliav, the son of Achisamach, of the tribe of Dan...*

Bezalel and Ahaliav shall oversee a team of "wise hearted" artisans, who shall make:

*The Tent of Meeting, the Ark of the Testimony and the cover that is on it, and all the vessels of the Tent;**The table and its vessels, the pure Menorah with all its vessels, and the Altar of Incense;**The Altar of Burnt Offering with all its vessels, and the Basin and its pedestal;**The prestigious vestments and the holy garments for Aaron the priest, and the garments of his sons, to minister;**The Anointing Oil, and Incense of Spices for the holy place.**"According to all that I have commanded you shall they do."***Shabbat**At Marah, the people of Israel had been instructed to observe the **seventh day** of rest—a mitzvah which was repeated to them when the manna began to fall, and again as the fourth of the Ten Commandments pro-**Commentary**

SABBATH (31:16)

There are two dimensions to Shabbat, referred to in the dual commandment to "keep" it and to "make" it. It is a day possessing an intrinsic holiness from the very beginning of time; this holiness the people of Israel are commanded to keep and preserve. And then there is the command "to make the Shabbat"—to impart greater sanctity and meaning to it by our actions.

(Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak of Lubavitch)

AND ON THE SEVENTH DAY HE RESTED AND WAS REFRESHED (31:17)

Resh Lakish said: On Shabbat eve, G-d imparts an additional soul to the person, and at Shabbat's end, He takes it away.

(Talmud, Beitzta 16a)

AND HE GAVE TO MOSES, WHEN HE HAD CONCLUDED (31:18)

The Sages note the similarity of the Hebrew word kechaloto—"when he had concluded"—with the word d'kekallato, "as his bride," citing numerous ways in which the Torah, referred to in this verse, and the Shabbat, spoken of in the previous verse, are analogous to a bride:

Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said: If one gives a discourse on the Torah which is not as pleasant to those who hear it as the bride is pleasing to her spouse, then it were best that he should not have said it at all. Why is that? Because when G-d gave the Torah to Israel, it was then as dear to them as a bride is to her spouse, as it says, "And he gave to Moses kechaloto."

Just as a bride keeps herself secluded the whole time she is in her father's

house, none knowing her, and only revealing her face when she is about to enter the bridal chamber, as if she were thus proclaiming: "Anyone who can testify anything against me, let him come and do so"—so must a Torah scholar be as modest as this bride, but he must be renowned for his good deeds just as this bride...

(Midrash Rabbah)

Just as a bride comes to her groom beautiful, bejeweled and perfumed, so does the Shabbat come to the people of Israel... Just as the groom dresses in his finest raiment to receive his bride, so does the Jew receive the Shabbat. Just as a groom is pampered and absolved from working all his nuptial days, so is the Jew on Shabbat.

(Midrash)

AND HE GAVE TO MOSES, WHEN HE HAD CONCLUDED SPEAKING TO HIM UPON MOUNT SINAI, TWO TABLETS OF THE TESTIMONY (31:18)

This means that when G-d handed the Tablets to Moses, the people had already made the Golden Calf! Thus the Midrash says:

It is usual for an earthly king to bestow gifts on his subjects and furnish supplies for them, as long as they are loyal to him, being then obliged to support them; but as soon as they rebel against him, G-d forbid, he has no obligation whatsoever towards them, and he immediately cuts off their supplies as a penalty for denying his royal authority. With G-d, however, it is not so; for while they were busy provoking Him to anger below, He was occupied in heaven with bestowing upon them a Torah of life...

(Midrash Rabbah)

WHEN THE PEOPLE SAW THAT MOSES DELAYED TO COME DOWN FROM THE MOUNTAIN (32:1)

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claimed at Sinai. Now, when being told to construct the Mishkan, they are once more commanded::

And the children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, to make the Sabbath throughout their generations, for a perpetual covenant.

*It is a sign between Me and the children of Israel for ever: for in six days G-d made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he **rested** and was refreshed.*

The Golden Calf

The Torah now resumes the narrative (left off at the end of the Parshah of Mishpatim) of the events that followed Moses' 40-day sojourn on Mount Sinai to receive **the Torah** from G-d:

And He gave to Moses, when He had concluded speaking to him upon Mount Sinai, two Tablets of the Testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of G-d.

But down below in the Israelite camp, the people were **already** abandoning their newly-forged covenant...

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people converged upon Aaron, and said to him: "Arise, make us a god which shall go before us; for as for this man Moses, who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we know not what is become of him."

Commentary

When Moses ascended the mountain, he said to them: After forty days, in the first six hours of the day, I shall return. They thought that the day of his ascent should be counted as one of the forty, while he meant forty full, 24-hour days. In truth, the day of his ascent—Sivan 7—should not have been counted, since it did not include its previous night, meaning that the forty days ended on Tammuz 17.

On the 16th of Tammuz Satan came and filled the world with darkness and confusion. Said he to them: "Where is your teacher Moses?" "He has ascended on high," they answered him. "The sixth hour has come," said he to them, but they disregarded him. "He is dead"—but they disregarded him. So Satan showed them a vision of Moses' bier. This is what they said to Aaron, "For this man Moses, who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we know not what is become of him."

(Rashi; Talmud, Shabbat 89a)

THE PEOPLE CONVERGED UPON AARON, AND SAID TO HIM: "ARISE, MAKE US A GOD..." AND AARON SAW; AND HE BUILT AN ALTAR BEFORE IT (32:1-5)

What did Aaron see? He saw his nephew Hur slain before him. [As related above in Exodus 24:14, Moses placed Aaron and Hur, the son of Miriam and Caleb, in charge of the camp when he ascended the mountain.] When the people demanded an idol, Hur arose and rebuked them, whereupon they rose against him and killed him. They then came to Aaron, and said to him: "We will do to you what we have done to this man"...

Aaron tried to busy them with tasks. He said to them: "Remove the golden earrings, which are in the ears of your wives"—a most difficult thing, for the women, who saw all the miracles that G-d performed in Egypt, at the Sea and at Sinai, would surely not participate... When the women did not do as the men demanded, the men removed their own jewelry, as it says, "And all the people unloaded the golden earrings which were in their ears."

They wanted to build the altar together with Aaron, but he would not allow

them, saying: "Allow me to build it by myself, for it is not befitting the respect due to the altar that another should build it." Aaron's intention in this was to delay matters, saying to himself: "By the time I build it all by myself Moses will come down." But when he had built it Moses had not yet descended.

What did Aaron do? He said: I shall postpone it until tomorrow, as it is written: "And [Aaron] proclaimed: Tomorrow is a feast to G-d!" His intention was to the true G-d, being certain that by the morrow Moses would come and they will serve G-d. But they "Arose early in the morning..."

(Midrash Tanchuma; Rashi)

AND ALL THE PEOPLE UNLOADED THE GOLDEN EARRINGS WHICH WERE IN THEIR EARS... (32:3)

Said Rabbi Aba bar Achah: There's no understanding the character of this people! They're solicited for the Golden Calf, and they give; they're solicited for the Sanctuary—they give.

(Jerusalem Talmud, Shekalim 1:1)

AND THEY ROSE UP EARLY ON THE MORROW (32:6)

Five misfortunes befell our forefathers on the 17th of Tammuz: the Tablets were shattered, the daily offering [in the Holy Temple] was discontinued, a breach was made in the city [walls of Jerusalem allowing the Roman conquest of the city] and Apostomos burned the Torah and placed an idol in the Temple.

(Talmud, Taanit 26a-b)

AND G-D SAID TO MOSES: "GO DOWN..." (32:7)

What is meant by "Go down"? Rabbi Elazar said: G-d said to Moses: "Moses, descend from your greatness. Have I given you greatness other

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And Aaron said to them: "Remove the golden earrings, which are in the ears of your wives, of your sons, and of your daughters, and bring them to me." And all the people unloaded the golden earrings which were in their ears, and brought them to Aaron.

And he received the gold at their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool and made it a molten calf. And they proclaimed: "This is your god, O Israel, which brought you up out of the land of Egypt."

And Aaron saw; and he built an altar before it, and proclaimed: "Tomorrow is a feast to G-d!"

And they rose up early on the morrow, and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to disport themselves.

Moses Pleads for His People

And G-d said to Moses: "Go down, for your people, which you have brought up out of the land of Egypt, have become corrupt. They have turned aside quickly from the way which commanded them..."

"Now therefore let Me alone, that my wrath may burn against them, and that I may consume them: and I will make of you a great nation."

And Moses besought the L-rd his G-d, and said: "Why, O G-d, should Your wrath burn against Your

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than for the sake of Israel? And now Israel have sinned; then what do I want with you?"

Straightaway Moses became powerless and had no strength to speak. But when G-d said, "Let Me alone that I may destroy them," Moses said to himself: "This depends upon me," and he stood up and prayed vigorously and begged for mercy. It was like the case of a king who became angry with his son and began beating him severely. His friend was sitting before him but was afraid to say a word until the king said, "Were it not for my friend here who is sitting before me, I would kill you." Said the friend to himself, "This depends on me," and immediately he stood up and rescued him.

Rabbi Abbahu said: Were it not explicitly written, "Let Me alone that I may destroy them," it would be impossible to say such a thing: this indicates that Moses took hold of G-d like a man who seizes his fellow by his garment, and said to Him: "Master of the Universe! I will not let You go until You forgive and pardon them."

(Talmud, Brachot 32a)

AND G-D SAID TO MOSES: "GO DOWN, FOR YOUR PEOPLE, WHICH YOU HAVE BROUGHT UP OUT OF THE LAND OF EGYPT, HAVE BECOME CORRUPT" (32:7)

G-d does not say, "the people have become corrupt," but "your people." Whereupon Moses said: "Master of the Universe! Since when are they my people?" Said G-d: "They are your people, for when they were yet in Egypt, I told you that I will bring forth 'My hosts, My people the children of Israel' (Exodus 7: 4). Did I not instruct you not to allow a mixed multitude to be mingled with them? But you, being kindly and righteous, did say to Me: 'The penitent must always be accepted.' Knowing, however, what they would one day do, I disagreed, but nevertheless I fulfilled your request, with the result that it was just these people who made the Calf."

(Midrash Rabbah)

THEY HAVE TURNED ASIDE QUICKLY FROM THE WAY WHICH I COMMANDED THEM

(32:8)

This can be compared to a king who betrothed a lady with two precious pearls which he gave her himself, sending another eight with his messenger. While she was flirting with her paramour, she lost the two pearls the king had given her, and when the king discovered this, he banished her from his house. Her intimate friend then came to plead with the king on her behalf, saying: "Your Majesty, when will you find another so beautiful and praiseworthy as she is?" The king replied: "By heaven! I gave her myself two pearls and sent another eight with you. Should she not have at least lost two of those that I sent with you, even three of them or even all of them? But so much did she insult me, that she must actually lose the two pearls which I myself gave her! (The first two of the Ten Commandments, "I am the L-rd your G-d," and "You shall have no other gods before Me"—which the people violated by worshipping the Golden Calf—were given by G-d directly to them, while the other eight were conveyed through Moses).

(Midrash Rabbah)

AND MOSES BESOUGHT THE L-RD HIS G-D (32:11)

There was not a corner of the heavens with which Moses did not grapple to attain G-d's forgiveness of Israel.

(Midrash Rabbah)

WHY, O G-D, SHOULD YOUR WRATH BURN AGAINST YOUR PEOPLE? (32:11)

When Israel committed that act, Moses arose to appease G-d and said: "Master of the Universe! They have given You an assistant, and You are annoyed with them? Why, this Calf which they have made will be Your assistant: You will cause the sun to rise while it will cause the moon to rise; You will look after the stars and it will see to the constellations; You will cause the dew to descend and it will cause the winds to blow; You will make the rains come down, while it will be responsible for the growth of plants."

Said G-d to him: "Moses! You err as they do! For there is nothing real in it."

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people, whom You have brought forth out of the land of Egypt with great power, and with a mighty hand? Wherefore should Egypt speak, and say: 'In evil did He bring them out, to slay them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from Your fierce anger, and relent of this evil against Your people!

"Remember Abraham, Isaac and Israel, Your servants, to whom You did swear by Your own self, and did say to them: 'I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have spoken of will I give to your seed, and they shall inherit it for ever.'"

And G-d regretted the evil which he thought to do to

His people.

The **Breaking** of the Tablets

Moses descends the mountain, carrying the Two Tablets on which the Ten Commandments were "inscribed from end to end, **on the one side and on the other** were they written... And the tablets were the work of G-d, and the writing was the writing of G-d, engraved upon the tablets."

Joshua, who had been awaiting Moses return at the very foot of the mountain, wonders at the sounds coming from the camp. "There is a noise of war in the camp," he says to his master.

"These are not shouts of victory," says Moses, "neither is it the wail of defeat. I hear the sound of **singing**."

And it came to pass, as soon as he came near to the camp, that he saw the calf and the dancing; and Moses' anger burned, and he threw the tablets out of his hands, and broke them at the foot of the mountain.

Commentary

Said Moses: "If this be the case, 'Why should Your wrath burn against Your people?'"

(Midrash Rabbah)

WHY, O G-D, SHOULD YOUR WRATH BURN AGAINST YOUR PEOPLE, WHOM YOU HAVE BROUGHT FORTH OUT OF THE LAND OF EGYPT? (32:11)

What was his idea in mentioning here the going out of Egypt? Because it was thus that Moses pleaded: "Master of the Universe, see from which place You have brought them forth—from Egypt where everyone worships lambs."

Said Rabbi Huna in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: It can be compared to a wise man who opened a perfumery shop for his son in a street frequented by harlots. The street did its work, the business also did its share, and the son's youth likewise contributed its part, with the result that the son fell into evil ways. When the father came and caught him among the harlots, he began to shout: "I will kill you!" But his friend was there, and he said: "You were the cause of this youth's corruption, and you shout at him? You set aside all other professions and have taught him only to be a perfumer; you skipped over all other districts and opened a shop for him just in the street where harlots dwell..."

This is what Moses said: "Master of the Universe! You passed over the entire world to have Your children to be enslaved only in Egypt, where all worshipped lambs... Bear in mind whence You have brought them forth!"

Another interpretation:

This is what Moses said: "Master of the Universe! When I asked You what their merit was that You should redeem them, since they are idolaters, You

said: 'You see them only now as idolaters, but I can foresee them departing from Egypt, and My dividing the Red Sea for them, and bringing them into the wilderness, and giving them the Torah and revealing Myself unto them face to face, and they accepting My kingship—yet denying Me at the end of forty days by making the Calf!' (This is the meaning of what G-d said to Moses at the burning bush, "I have heard their cries"—I hear already their cries around the Calf).

"Since You have told me of their making a Golden Calf long before You did deliver them," argued Moses, "why do You seek to slay them now that they have made it?" It was for this reason that Moses mentioned the Exodus from Egypt in his plea for mercy.

Another interpretation:

It can be compared to a king who had an uncultivated field and who said to a tenant-laborer: "Go improve it and convert it into a vineyard." The laborer went and tended the field and planted it as a vineyard. The vines grew and produced wine, which, however, became sour. When the king saw that the wine had become sour, he said to the laborer: "Go and cut it all down; what is the use to me of a vineyard that produces vinegar?" But the laborer pleaded: "O my lord and king! Consider what sums you invested before the vineyard was planted, and now You want to cut it all down! Do not give me the reply, 'But its wine becomes sour,' for this is due to the newness of the vineyard, and a freshly-planted vineyard cannot produce good wine."

Similarly, when Israel made the Golden Calf, G-d intended to destroy them, but Moses pleaded: "Master of the Universe! Did You not bring them forth from Egypt, a place of idol-worshippers? They are yet young, as it for it says (Hosea 11:1), 'When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son.' Be patient with them yet awhile and go with them, and they will yet perform good deeds before You."

(Midrash Rabbah)

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And he took the calf which they had made, and burnt it in the fire, and ground it to powder, and scattered it upon the water, and made the children of Israel drink of it.

Moses admonishes Aaron for having "brought a great sin" upon the people. Aaron replies that he had no choice but to go along with their demands.

Moses stands at the gate of the camp and calls out:

"Whoever is for G-d, come to me!"

The tribe of Levi gather round him. Moses instructs them to put to death the major culprits in the making of the Calf, even if they be their "brother, friend or close relation." The Levites execute about 3,000 men. "Today you are ordained," says Moses, as the tribe dedicated to the service of G-d.

Estrangement and Rapprochement**Commentary**

REMEMBER ABRAHAM, ISAAC AND ISRAEL (32:13)

Moses pleaded: "Master of the Universe! Why are You angry with Israel?" "Because they have broken the Ten Commandments," said G-d. "Well," said Moses, "they possess a source from which they can make repayment... Remember that You tested Abraham with ten trials? Let those ten serve as compensation for these ten." This is why Moses said, "Remember Abraham...."

Another interpretation:

Moses spoke thus: "Master of the Universe! Do the dead live [in the World to Come]?"

Said G-d: "Moses, have you become a heretic?"

But Moses answered: "If the dead are not brought to life in the World to Come, then You are free to do all that You intend. But if they be alive, what will You say to the Patriarchs when they will arise and seek from You fulfillment of the promise which You have made them? What answer will You give them? For did You not promise them that You would increase their children as the stars of heaven?"

(Midrash Rabbah)

AND G-D REGRETTED THE EVIL WHICH HE THOUGHT TO DO TO HIS PEOPLE (32:14)

Moses absolved his Creator of His vow. When Israel made the Calf, Moses

On the following day,

Moses returned to G-d, and said: "I beseech You: this people has sinned a great sin, and they have made them a god of gold.

"Now, if you will forgive their sin—; and if not, pray, blot me out of Your book which you have written."

G-d says to Moses: "Whoever has sinned against Me, him will I blot out of My book." He tells Moses to lead them on to the Promised Land, but that His own presence will not go with them; instead, He will send His angel. G-d also says that while He will not mete out the full punishment of their sin, "On the **day** that I remember, I will remember their sin upon them."

Moses moves his tent outside of the camp, and "all who sought G-d" would go there. There, "G-d would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his fellow." Moses' faithful servant, Joshua, remains at all times in his master's tent.

Moses is not reconciled with G-d's reserved forgiveness. Again he approaches G-d, and says: "If Your own presence does not go [with us], do not take us out of here." This time G-d acquiesces: "My presence shall go, and I shall lead you."

began to persuade G-d to forgive them; but G-d said: "Moses, I have already taken an oath that 'He that sacrifices unto the gods... shall be destroyed' (Exodus 22:19), and I cannot retract an oath which has proceeded from My mouth."

Said Moses: "Master of the Universe! Did You not grant me the power of annulment of oaths? (see Numbers 30:3)? If a jurist desires that others should respect his laws, he must be the first to observe them. Since You have commanded me concerning the annulment of vows, it is only right and proper that You should follow this procedure Yourself."

Whereupon Moses wrapped himself in his tallit and seated himself in the posture of a rabbinical judge, and G-d stood before him as one asking for the annulment of his vow; for so it says, "Then I sat in the mount" (Deuteronomy 9:9).

What did Moses say to Him? A most difficult thing. Rabbi Yochanan said: The difficult thing he said was: "Do You now regret Your vow?" G-d replied: "I regret now the evil which I said I would do unto My people." When Moses heard this, he proclaimed: "Be it absolved for You, be it absolved for You. There is neither vow nor oath any longer..."

(Midrash Rabbah)

ENGRAVED (CHARUT) ON THE TABLETS (32:16)

Had the First Tablets not been broken, no nation or people could have subjugated the Jewish people, as it is written, "Charut on the Tablet." Do not read *charut* (engraved), but *cheirut* (free); on account of these Tablets, Israel would have remained ever free.

PARSHAH SUMMARY & COMMENTARY

Ki-Tisa

Exodus 30:11-34:35

Torah Reading for Week of February 16-22, 2003

"Show me Your glory," begs Moses.

"You cannot see My face," says G-d "for no man shall **see** Me, and live... You shall see My back, but My face shall not be seen."

The Second Tablets

And G-d said to Moses: "Hew for yourself two tablets of stone like the first; and I will write upon these tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you did break.

"Be ready in the morning; and come up in the morning to Mount Sinai, and present yourself there to Me on the top of the mountain.

"And no man shall come up with you, neither let any man be seen throughout all the mountain..."

On the mountain, G-d reveals to Moses His "Thirteen Attributes of Mercy":

G-d, G-d, mighty, merciful and gracious; long-suffering, and abundant in love and truth; keeping kindness for thousands [of generations], forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin; who clears guilt]...

G-d renews His covenant with Israel.

And Moses was there with G-d forty days and forty nights; he did neither eat bread, nor drink water; and he wrote upon the tablets the words of the covenant, the ten Words.

When Moses descends from the mountain, his face shines with a divine light. So overpowering is its luminescence, that Moses wears a **veil** to shield the people from it, which he removes only when he conveys to them the laws and teachings he receives from G-d.

Commentary

(Talmud and Rashi, Erubin 54a)

Rabbi Judah says: [They would have been] free from the pain of exile. Rabbi Nechemiah says: [They would have been] free from the angel of death.

(Midrash Rabbah)

[WHEN MOSES] SAW THE CALF, AND THE DANCING... HE THREW THE TABLETS OUT OF HIS HANDS AND BROKE THEM AT THE FOOT OF THE MOUNTAIN (32:19)

Moses already knew about Israel's worship of the Golden Calf; but when he saw how much they were enjoying their fall, he realized that their covenant with G-d had been utterly repudiated by them.

(Soforno)

AND HE THREW THE TABLETS OUT OF HIS HANDS (32:19)

The Tablets were each six handbreadths long and three handbreadths wide. Moses held two handbreadths [of the Tablets' length], G-d held two handbreadths, and in between were two handbreadths of space. Moses' hands prevailed, and he grabbed hold of the Tablets and broke them.

(Jerusalem Talmud, Taanit 4:5)

AND MOSES RETURNED TO G-D, AND SAID: "... THIS PEOPLE HAS SINNED A GREAT SIN (32:31)

What did Moses do? He went up to G-d, and said: "This people has sinned

a great sin!" When G-d saw this He said to him: "Moses, you, too, are angry with them? We cannot both be angry. When you see Me pour hot water, you pour cold, and when you see Me pour cold, you pour hot..."

(Yalkut Shimoni)

BLOT ME OUT OF YOUR BOOK WHICH YOU HAVE WRITTEN (EXODUS 32:32)

Moses' name appears in every Parshah in the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers (the Book of Genesis predates Moses' birth; Deuteronomy consists wholly of a first-person narrative spoken by Moses). Every Parshah, that is, except for one: the Parshah of Tetzaveh (Exodus 27:20—30:10), which includes not a single mention of Moses' name. The reason for this is that Moses said to G-d: "If You do not [forgive Israel], blot me out of Your book which you have written." For the censure of a righteous person, even if made conditional on an unfulfilled stipulation, always has some effect.

(Baal HaTurim)

While Moses' name does not appear in the Parshah of Tetzaveh, Moses himself is very much present: the entirety of Tetzaveh consists of G-d's words to Moses. Indeed, the Parshah's first word is ve'attah, "and you"—the "you" being the person of Moses.

Indeed, the word "you" connotes its subject's very self, while a person's name is a more superficial handle on his personality. This means that Moses is more present in this Parshah—that is, present in a deeper, more essential way—than any mention of his name could possibly express.

This is fully in keeping with the Baal HaTurim's explanation (cited above). Because Moses was prepared to forgo mention of his name in the Torah for

Commentary

the sake of his people, he merited that his quintessential self—the level of self that cannot be captured by any name or designation—be eternalized by the Torah. It is this level of Moses' self that is expressed by his "nameless" presence in the Parshah of Tetzaveh.

(The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

ON THE DAY THAT I REMEMBER, I WILL REMEMBER THEIR SIN UPON THEM (32:34)

There is no misfortune that does not have in it something of the sin of the Golden Calf.

(Talmud, Sanhedrin 102a)

YOU CANNOT SEE MY FACE, FOR NO MAN SHALL SEE ME AND LIVE (33:20)

So said G-d to Moses: When I wanted to show you My face in the burning bush, you did not want to look [as it says, "And Moses hid his face, for he feared to look upon G-d" (Exodus 3:6)]. Now that you want to, I am not willing.

(Talmud, Berachot 7a)

Shimon ben Azzai said: I found a scroll of genealogical records in Jerusalem and therein was written... that [King] Manasseh slew Isaiah... He brought him to trial and then put him to death. He said to him: Your teacher Moses said, "For no man shall see Me and live," and you said, "I saw the L-rd sitting on a throne, high and exalted" (Isaiah 6:1).

How, indeed, do we resolve the contradiction between these two verses? In accordance with what was taught: All the prophets looked into an opaque glass (seeing but a reflection of the Divine), but Moses looked through a clear glass.

(Talmud, Yevamot 49b)

AND G-D SAID TO MOSES: "HEW FOR YOURSELF TWO TABLETS OF STONE LIKE THE FIRST; AND I WILL WRITE UPON THESE TABLETS THE WORDS THAT WERE ON THE FIRST TABLETS, WHICH YOU DID BREAK" (34:1)

There was once a king who went off on a distant journey and left his bride with her maidservants. Because of the promiscuity of the maidservants, rumors began circulating about the king's bride. The king heard of this and wished to kill her. When the bride's guardian heard this, he tore up her marriage contract, saying: "Should the king say, 'My wife did such and such,' we shall say to him, 'She's not your wife yet.'"

The king subsequently investigated and found that the corruption came from the maidservants, and was reconciled with his bride. Said the bride's guardian to the king: "Sir, make her another marriage contract, for the first one was torn up." Said the king to him: "You tore it up, so you supply the paper and I shall write on it with my hand."

The king is G-d, the bride is the nation of Israel, the corrupt maids are the eirev rav (the "mixed multitude" who had joined the Jewish people at the Exodus and were responsible for the making of the Golden Calf), the

bride's guardian is Moses, and the marital contract is the Torah. Thus, when G-d forgave the Jewish people, He said to Moses: "Hew for yourself two tablets of stone."

(Midrash Tanchuma; Rashi)

G-d said to Moses: Do not be distressed over the First Tablets, which contained only the Ten Commandments. In the Second Tablets I am giving you also Halachah, Midrash and Aggadah.

(Midrash Rabbah)

Had Israel not sinned with the Golden Calf, they would have received only the Five Books of Moses and the book of Joshua. Why? Because, as the verse (Ecclesiastes 1:18) says, "Much wisdom comes through much grief."

(Talmud, Nedarim 22b)

Both the [Second] Tablets and the broken Tablets, were placed in the Ark.

(Talmud, Bava Batra 14b)

AND NO MAN SHALL COME UP WITH YOU, NEITHER LET ANY MAN BE SEEN THROUGHOUT ALL THE MOUNTAIN (34:3)

The First Tablets, which were given in great fanfare and noise, were destroyed, while the Second Tablets, given in private, endured. For there is no better trait than intimacy.

(Rashi)

G-D... LONG-SUFFERING AND ABUNDANT IN LOVE (34:6)

When Moses ascended to heaven, he found G-d sitting and writing "long-suffering." Said Moses to G-d: "Master of the Universe! Long-suffering to the righteous?" Said G-d: "Also to the wicked." Said Moses: "Let the wicked perish!" Said G-d: "See now that you will need this." When Israel sinned, G-d said to Moses: "Did you not tell Me to be long-suffering only toward the righteous?" Said Moses to Him: "Did You not say to me, 'Also to the wicked?'"

(Talmud, Sanhedrin 111a)

WHEN MOSES WENT IN BEFORE G-D TO SPEAK WITH HIM, HE REMOVED THE VEIL... AND [SO HE] SPOKE TO THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL THAT WHICH HE WAS COMMANDED... [AFTER THAT] MOSES PUT THE VEIL UPON HIS FACE AGAIN (34:33-35)

Moses did not use his "veil" when teaching Torah to the people—even though the divine radiance emitted by his face was overpowering for them—covering his face only after he finished communicating G-d's laws to them.

This teaches us how we are to approach the various involvements of life.

The study of Torah and the observance of the mitzvot should always be approached without inhibition or constraint. No matter how lofty and overwhelming the endeavor may seem, here we are in our element, since G-dliness is the natural habitat of the Jew.

PARSHAH SUMMARY & COMMENTARY

Ki Tisa: Sin and Sanctity

From the Chassidic Masters

The Sanctuary and the Calf: a question of chronology

Following the Torah's account of the revelation at Mount Sinai and Moses' ascent to the top of the mountain to receive the Torah from G-d, come 16 chapters—comprising the Torah sections of *Terumah*, *Tetzaveh*, *Ki-Tisa*, *Vayak'hel* and *Pekudei*—in which are related:

- a) G-d's instructions regarding the building of the Sanctuary (Exodus 25-31, covering the sections of *Terumah*, *Tetzaveh*, and the first part of *Ki-Tisa*);
- b) The sin of the Golden Calf and the granting of the Second Tablets (Exodus 32-34, all in *Ki-Tisa*);
- c) The people's donation of the materials for the Sanctuary (Exodus 35) and the Sanctuary's construction, erection and sanctification (Exodus 36-40; these comprise the sections of *Vayak'hel* and *Pekudei*).

In keeping with the rule that “There is no earlier and later in Torah” (i.e., the Torah does not necessarily relate events in the order in which they occurred), the biblical commentaries differ as to the chronology of these events. All told, there are no fewer than three different versions of the time-frame of the Mishkan's making vis-a-vis the making of the Golden Calf.

The following timeline, spanning a period of almost ten months, is agreed to by all:

On **Sivan 6** (or 7, according to Rabbi Yossi), G-d revealed Himself to all of Israel and proclaimed the Ten Commandments; on the following day, Moses ascended Mount Sinai to receive the Torah from G-d.

Forty days later, on **Tammuz 16**, the people made the Golden Calf, and rose early the next morning to worship it. On **Tammuz 17** Moses descended from the mountain carrying the Tablets of the Testimony; upon seeing the people dancing around their idol, he smashed the Tablets at the foot of the mountain.

On **Tammuz 19**, Moses ascended Mount Sinai for a second 40 days to plead for forgiveness on Israel's behalf. At the end of this period, G-d tells him to hew two new tablets, upon which He will inscribe the Ten Commandments, to replace the broken tablets.

On the **1st of Elul**, Moses ascended the mountain

with the tablets he hewed for a third forty days, which concluded on the **10th of Tishei** (Yom Kippur). On that day, Moses received the Second Tablet from G-d and G-d expressed His full forgiveness of Israel's sin.

The construction of the Mishkan's components and vessels was completed 2 1/2 months later, on the **25th of Kislev** (the first day of Chanukah). But the Mishkan was not set up until more than three months after that, on the **1st of Nissan** (preceded by a week of “initiation,” Adar 23-29).

The above is derived by the Talmud from the Torah's account. The point of contention between the commentaries concerns G-d's instructions regarding the Mishkan and the people's donation of its materials.

Nachmanides is of the opinion that these occurred in the order in which they appear in the Torah. Thus, G-d's instructions to Moses regarding the Sanctuary (recounted in *Terumah* and *Tetzaveh*) came immediately after the revelation at Sinai, during Moses' first 40 days on the mountain. Their implementation, however, was delayed by Israel's sin and the need for Moses to obtain G-d's forgiveness and a second pair of Tablets, so that the donation of the materials described in the beginning of *Vayak'hel* (Exodus 35) occurred on Tishrei 11, the day after Yom Kippur, followed by the Mishkan's construction and erection as per above.

Rashi (who follows the Midrash Tanchuma), notes the many Scriptural and Talmudic indications that the Sanctuary was in response to, and an atonement for, the sin of the Golden Calf. Accordingly, Rashi is of the opinion that the divine instructions contained in the sections of *Terumah* and *Tetzaveh* were communicated to Moses on Yom Kippur, following Israel's repentance, G-d's (full) forgiveness, and Moses' receiving of the Second Tablets.

A third opinion is that of the **Zohar**, which states that both G-d's instructions and Israel's donation of the materials occurred before the sin of the Golden Calf. (Thus, explains the Zohar, the people had to “unload the golden earrings which were in their ears” to provide gold for their idol, since their gold had already been donated for the making of the Mishkan.) According to this, the making of the Sanctuary was not a result of Israel's sin and their repentance thereof, but a mitzvah that was commanded, and begun to be implemented, before the incident of the Golden calf.

The Tzaddik, the Baal Teshuvah and the Sinner

The Lubavitcher Rebbe points out that these three versions describe three different states of the people

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Ki Tisa

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commanded and empowered to make an abode for G-d.

According to the Zohar, the commandment to make a Mishkan was directed to a nation of *tzaddikim*—perfectly righteous individuals untainted by sin or wrongdoing (in accordance with the Talmudic statement that, at Sinai, the people of Israel were born anew, and thus as pure of guilt or an iniquitous past as a newborn infant.) The dedication of the materials of the Mishkan was likewise by *tzaddikim*. This implies that the making of a physical home for G-d was possible only because the materials for its construction were dedicated (and thus sanctified) by a people still not tainted by that corruptive use of their gold, and that only such materials could have been fashioned into a home for G-d.

According to Rashi, the commandment to make a Mishkan was directed to *baalei teshuvah* (“returnees” or “penitents”)—individuals who had fallen prey to the corruptions of the material, but had rebounded from their downfall to forge a new, invigorated bond with G-d. Indeed, the implication is that had the people of Israel not sinned by making and worshipping a calf of gold, there would not have existed the necessity—nor the opportunity—for a physical structure to house the Divine presence in the Israelite camp.

The common denominator between these two approaches is that the sin of the Golden Calf did not actually interject (as it does in the text) between the commandment to build the Mishkan and the donation of its materials by the people: according to the Zohar both occurred before Israel’s worship of the Golden Calf, and according to Rashi both came afterwards. In other words, both approaches share the notion that the commandment to build the Mishkan would not have “survived” Israel’s sin. Indeed, such was the case with the very covenant forged between G-d and Israel: the Tablets were broken, and a new set had to be hewn and inscribed following the reconciliation of G-d and Israel. Indeed, there were several marked differences—for the better and for the worse—between the two sets of Tablets.

In this lies the uniqueness of Nachmanides’

approach, which insists on a “straight” reading of the text and an interpretation of the events that places G-d’s instructions for the making of the Mishkan before the sin of the Golden Calf, and the beginning of their implementation began after the sin and Israel’s repentance. According to Nachmanides, the command and empowerment to build a home for G-d remained in force even as the people worshipped an idol of gold. Unlike the Torah itself (!), the command to build the Mishkan was not revoked, and no “second edition” was necessary. This means that the ability to make a Sanctuary for G-d rests also with a nation of *resha'im*, sinners and transgressors of the divine will!

In other words, says the Rebbe, the different interpretations of the Torah’s account put forth by the Zohar, Rashi and Nachmanides revolve around the following question: Who can make a “dwelling for G-d in the physical world”? The perfect *tzaddik*? The unique personality of the *baal teshuvah*? Or even the iniquitous *rashah*?

There is an approach that says that only a *tzaddik* can take lowly objects such as gold, wood or animal hides and transform them into an abode for the divine presence. True, the spiritual *tzaddik* has no real connection with these materials: the glitter of gold means nothing to him, nor is he moved by the comforts of fine linen or the beauty of artistically woven tapestries. But precisely this is what qualifies him as a builder of a Mishkan. Because he is aloof from the enticements of the material, he can uncover the spiritual potential within the “lowly realm” without being ensnared by its lowliness. This is the approach of the Zohar, which sees the building of the Mishkan as having been possible only with materials donated by the perfectly righteous.

A second approach argues that only the *baal teshuvah*, who *has* fallen prey to the corruptions of materiality, can truly exploit its divine potential. Only the *baal teshuvah* knows the material world “from within,” having himself been very much a part of it; only the *baal teshuvah* is a living example of the transformation of lowly into lofty, as one who has exploited the momentum of his fall to attain even greater heights of connection to G-d. Thus, goes this line of thinking, if Israel had not fallen to the nadir of material corruption by worshipping an idol of gold, the making of a home of gold for G-d would not have been possible. This is the concept behind Rashi’s interpretation, which dates the divine commandment to build the Mishkan on the 10th of Tishrei, following Israel’s return to G-d and the renewed covenant it produced.

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A third approach rejects the entire concept that making a “dwelling for G-d in the physical world” requires any particular state or spiritual condition. Is this not the very purpose of G-d’s creation of the world? Is this not the essence of man’s mission in life? Man never loses this capacity, for it is integral to his very being. This aspect of the Torah is never revoked or “broken”: in whatever situation a person finds himself, even that of a still-unrepentant sinner, he can make his material existence a home for “He who dwells amongst them in the midst of their impurities” (Leviticus 16:16). This is the conception behind Nachmanides’ reading of the chapters of the latter half of Exodus, by which the commandment to build the Mishkan remains in force throughout the ups and downs of Israel’s relationship with G-d, even as the rest of the Torah is shattered to pieces.

All True

“These and these are the words of the living G-d” says the Talmud of differing interpretation of Torah by its sages. G-d’s dwelling on earth can, and must be, all three: a home for G-d built by the pristinely righteous, an abode build by the transformative power of *teshuvah*, and a divine inhabitation of every human effort to serve Him, no matter how lowly its origin.

Indeed, the Rebbe points out, the Ark in the original Mishkan contained the first, broken Tablets as well as the second set. Thus it housed: a) the First Tablets, granted to a nation of *tzaddikim*; b) these, however, were broken, representing the depths of iniquity to which Israel had descended in the interim; c) the Second Tablets, embodying the power of *teshuvah*.

Thus the divine command to make for G-d a dwelling out of the materials of physical life is addressed to the *tzaddik*, to the *baal teshuvah* and to the *rashah*.

To the *tzaddik* it says: You are never too holy, too spiritual, too pure, to engage in the task of making Me at home in the lowliest elements of My creation. Indeed, because of your holiness, spirituality and purity, there is a dimension of My home on earth that only you can create for Me.

To the *baal teshuvah* it says: When you agonize your your iniquitous or merely negative past (as you should), remember this: it is that very past that makes you the builder of a most central component of My home on earth. You, and only you, can achieve a true *transformation* of materiality into G-dliness.

And to the *rashah* it says: No matter how distant your daily behavior is from My program for life, no matter how it conflicts with My will, when you do a single Mitzvah—a single deed that I have commanded—that part of your physical life shall become an home for My presence.

Parah: The Calf’s Mother

Certainly the most esoteric chapter in the Torah are the laws of the “Red Heifer” (*Parah Adumah*), commanded by G-d to Moses in Numbers 19 as an antidote to the state of ritual impurity engendered by contact with death. The Midrash describes how King Solomon, “the wisest of men,” was baffled by it; and how Moses, the very vehicle of G-d’s communication of His Torah to man, turned pale upon encountering the prospect of contamination by death, and found utterly incomprehensible the process of its rectification, crying out to G-d: “Master of the universe! This is a purification?!”

It’s not just that the law of the Red Heifer cannot be logically explained; indeed, there exists an entire category of mitzvot, called *chukim* (“decrees”), whose defining criteria is that they transcend human understanding. What’s unique about the Red Heifer is that while the other *chukim* at least follow an internal logic of their own, the laws of the Red Heifer are fraught with paradox and inconsistency. To cite but several of numerous examples:

a) The ashes of the Red Heifer remove the most severe of all impurities; yet those involved in its preparation become ritually impure themselves.

b) The Red Heifer must be completely red (as few as two hairs of a different color disqualify it)—a color which has connotations of sin and deficiency in Torah and Torah law; yet it must also be “perfect, without blemish.”

c) The Torah commands that it be slaughtered outside the holy city of Jerusalem (in contrast with other *korbanot*, which must be slaughtered in the courtyard of the Holy Temple). On the other hand, it must be slaughtered within the sight of the Holy Temple and its blood is sprinkled “toward the Holy of Holies”; according to one opinion, it must be slaughtered by the *Kohen Gadol* (High Priest) himself, wearing the “white

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garments” reserved for the Yom Kippur service in the Holy of Holies.

d) The two components of the purifying mixture—ashes and spring water—represent two contradictory forces: fire, which represents the power of ascent, and water, which embodies the quality of “settling down” and saturation.

Thus the laws of the Red Heifer are introduced by the Torah with the word “This is the *chok* of the Torah”, as if to say: this is the Torah’s ultimate *chok*, the mitzvah that most vividly demonstrates the supra-rationality of its divine commandments.

The Mystery of Death

Indeed, explains the Lubavitcher Rebbe (in a talk delivered upon the conclusion of the *sheloshim* (30-day morning period) after his wife), the most incomprehensible of human experiences—the phenomenon of death—can be sublimated only with the most incomprehensible of divine mitzvot, the ashes and water of the Red Heifer.

Physically and biologically, death makes perfect sense (indeed, it is the phenomenon of life that defies explanation). Yet we all—even a man such as Moses—find death utterly incomprehensible, utterly devastating to our sense of reality. Despite all the “evidence” to the contrary, something deep inside us insists that life is the natural, axiomatic state of the human being, and that its cessation is a violation of the most basic law of existence.

For such, in truth, is the fundamental nature of man. True, the human body is physical flesh, and as such, shares the dissolutive nature of all things physical. But it is animated by a soul that is a “spark of the Divine” and fortified with the eternity and indestructibility of its Source. In essence, human life is eternal.

Indeed, the first man was created to live forever. But then he violated the Divine will, thereby distancing himself from his Source and introducing the phenomenon of death into the human experience.

Our Sages tell us that when the Children of Israel stood at Sinai to receive the Torah from G-d, they were restored to the original perfection in which man was

first created. The Torah reinstated the original, unadulterated bond between G-d and man, so that man was once more granted “freedom from the Angel of Death.”

But this time, too, the state of perfect connection to G-d was short-lived. Forty days after the people of Israel stood at Sinai, they transgressed the divine decree “You shall have no other gods before Me” by worshipping a calf of gold. The pestilence of death, introduced into the world by Adam’s sin and banished at Sinai, was reintroduced by the sin of the Golden Calf.

This explains the connection between the Red Heifer and the Golden Calf expressed in the Midrashic parable:

A maid’s child once dirtied the royal palace. Said the king: “Let his mother come and clean up her child’s filth.” By the same token, G-d says: “Let the Heifer atone for the deed of the Calf” (Midrash Tanchuma, Chukat 8).

In our post-Calf world, the imperfection in our relationship with G-d finds its most noxious expression in the phenomenon of death. Contact with death thus spawns the most severe form of spiritual impurity, which can be mitigated only by the mother of the Golden Calf, the most supra-rational of the divine decrees—the Red Heifer.

This was G-d’s reply to Moses’ cry, *Master of the universe! This is a purification?! “Moses,”* G-d said, “it is a *chok*, a decree that I have decreed.” Certain things are so overwhelming to My creations that they can only be overcome by submitting to an absolute command from an absolute authority. I have therefore commanded laws to instruct you what to do when your lives are touched by death. These are supra-rational, even irrational laws, for only such laws can facilitate your recovery. It is only by force of an utterly incomprehensible divine decree that you can recover from such utter devastation to a living being’s self-definition.

Ultimately, however, there will come the day that the original bond between man and G-d will once more be restored. This time, our prophets promise, it will be immune to disruption by sin, since G-d will “slaughter the inclination for evil” in the heart of man and “remove the spirit of impurity from the earth,” with the result that “death shall cease forever.”