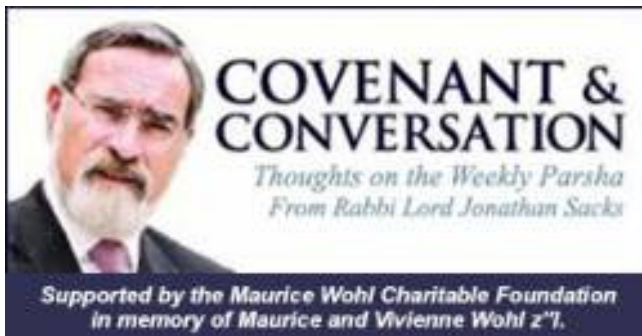


In this Issue

- **Covenant and Conversation** by
Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks
- **M'oray Ha'Aish** by *Rabbi Ari Kahn*
- **Mayanot** by *Rabbi Noson Weisz*
- **Rabbi Frand On the Weekly Torah Portion** by *Rabbi Yissocher Frand*



How Leaders Fail

As we have seen in both Vayetse and Vaera, leadership is marked by failure. It is the recovery that is the true measure of a leader. Leaders can fail for two kinds of reason. The first is external. The time may not be right. The conditions may be unfavourable. There may be no one on the other side to talk to. Machiavelli called this *Fortuna*: the power of bad luck that can defeat even the greatest individual. Sometimes, despite our best efforts, we fail. Such is life.

The second kind of failure is internal. A leader can simply lack the courage to lead. Sometimes

leaders have to oppose the crowd. They have to say no when everyone else is crying yes. That can be terrifying. Crowds have a will and momentum of their own. To say no could place your career, or even your life, at risk. That is when courage is needed, and not showing it can constitute a moral failure of the worst kind.

The classic example is King Saul, who failed to carry out Samuel's instructions in his battle against the Amalekites. Saul was told to spare no one and nothing. This is what happened:

When Samuel reached him, Saul said, "The Lord bless you! I have carried out the Lord's instructions."

But Samuel said, "What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears? What is this lowing of cattle that I hear?"

Saul answered, "The soldiers brought them from the Amalekites; they spared the best of the sheep and cattle to sacrifice to the Lord your God, but we totally destroyed the rest."

"Enough!" Samuel said to Saul. "Let me tell you what the Lord said to me last night."

"Tell me," Saul replied.

Samuel said, "*Although you may be small in your own eyes, are you not head of the tribes of Israel?* The Lord anointed you king over Israel. And He sent you on a mission, saying, 'Go and completely destroy those wicked people, the Amalekites; wage war

against them until you have wiped them out.’ Why did you not obey the Lord? Why did you pounce on the plunder and do evil in the eyes of the Lord?”

“But I did obey the Lord,” Saul said. “I went on the mission the Lord assigned me. I completely destroyed the Amalekites and brought back Agag their king. The soldiers took sheep and cattle from the plunder, the best of what was devoted to God, in order to sacrifice them to the Lord your God at Gilgal.” (I Sam. 15:13–21)

Saul makes excuses. The failure was not his; it was the fault of his soldiers. Besides which, he and they had the best intentions. The sheep and cattle were spared to offer as sacrifices. Saul did not kill King Agag but brought him back as a prisoner. Samuel is unmoved. He says, “Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, He has rejected you as King.” (I Sam. 15:23). Only then does Saul admit, “I have sinned.” (15:24) But by this point it is too late. He has proven himself unworthy to begin the lineage of kings of Israel.

There is an apocryphal quote attributed to several politicians: “Of course I follow the party. After all, I am their leader.”¹ There are leaders who follow instead of leading. Rabbi Yisrael Salanter compared them to a dog taking a walk with its owner. The dog runs on ahead, but keeps turning around to see whether it is going in the right direction. The dog may think it is leading but actually it is following.

That, on a plain reading of the text, was the fate of Aaron in this week’s parsha. Moses had been up the mountain for forty days. The people were afraid. Had he died? Where was he? Without Moses they felt bereft. He was their point of contact with God. He performed the miracles, divided the Sea, gave them water to drink and food to eat. This is how the Torah describes what happened next:

When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered round Aaron and said, “Come, make us a god who will go before us. As for this man Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don’t know what has happened to him.” Aaron answered them, “Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me.” So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. He took what they gave him and he fashioned it with a tool and made it into a molten Calf. Then they said, “This is your god, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.” (Ex. 32:1-4)

God becomes angry. Moses pleads with Him to spare the people. He then descends the mountain, sees what has happened, smashes the Tablets of the Law he has brought down with him, burnes the idol, grinds it to powder, mixes it with water and makes the Israelites drink it. Then he turns to Aaron his brother and asks, “What have you done?”

“Do not be angry, my lord,” Aaron answered. “You know how prone

these people are to evil. They said to me, ‘Make us a god who will go before us. As for this man Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don’t know what has happened to him.’ So I told them, ‘Whoever has any gold jewellery, take it off.’ Then they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this Calf!” (Ex. 32:22-24)

Aaron blames the people. It was they who made the illegitimate request. He denies responsibility for making the calf. It just happened. “I threw it into the fire, and out came this Calf!” This is the same kind of denial of responsibility we recall from the story of Adam and Eve. The man says, “It was the woman.” The woman says, “It was the serpent.” It happened. It wasn’t me. I was the victim not the perpetrator. In anyone such evasion is a moral failure; in a leader such as Saul the King of Israel and Aaron the High Priest, all the more so.

The odd fact is that Aaron was not immediately punished. According to the Torah he was condemned for another sin altogether when, years later, he and Moses spoke angrily against the people complaining about lack of water: “Aaron will be gathered to his people. He will not enter the land I give the Israelites, because both of you rebelled against My command at the waters of Meribah” (Num. 20:24).

It was only later still, in the last month of Moses’ life, that Moses told the people a fact that he had kept from them until that point: “I feared the anger and wrath of the Lord, for He was angry enough with you to destroy you. But again the

Lord listened to me. And the Lord was angry enough with Aaron to destroy him, but at that time I prayed for Aaron too.” (Deut. 9:19-20) God, according to Moses, was so angry with Aaron for the sin of the Golden Calf that He was about to kill him, and would have done so had it not been for Moses’ prayer.

It is easy to be critical of people who fail the leadership test when it involves opposing the crowd, defying the consensus, blocking the path the majority are intent on taking. The truth is that it is hard to oppose the mob. They can ignore you, remove you, even assassinate you. When a crowd gets out of control there is no elegant solution. Even Moses was helpless in the face of the people’s demands during the later episode of the spies (Num. 14:5).

Nor was it easy for Moses to restore order. He must now take a most dramatic action: smashing the Tablets and grinding the Calf to dust. He then asks for support and is given it by his fellow Levites. They take reprisals against the crowd, killing three thousand people that day. History judges Moses a hero but he might well have been seen by his contemporaries as a brutal autocrat. We, thanks to the Torah, know what passed between God and Moses at the time. The Israelites at the foot of the mountain knew nothing of how close they had come to being utterly destroyed.

Tradition dealt kindly with Aaron. He is portrayed as a man of peace. Perhaps that is why he was made High Priest. There is more than one kind of leadership, and priesthood involves following rules, not taking stands and swaying crowds. The

fact that Aaron was not a leader in the same mould as Moses does not mean that he was a failure. It means that he was made for a different kind of role. There are times when you need someone with the courage to stand against the crowd, others when you need a peacemaker. Moses and Aaron were different types. Aaron failed when he was called on to be a Moses, but he became a great leader in his own right in a different capacity. And as two different leaders working together, Aaron and Moses complemented one another. No one person can do everything.

The truth is that when a crowd runs out of control, there is no easy answer. That is why the whole of **Judaism is an extended seminar in individual and collective responsibility. Jews do not, or should not, form crowds. When they do, it may take a Moses to restore order. But it may take an Aaron, at other times, to maintain the peace.**

QUESTIONS (AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE)

1. How did Moses and Aaron's leadership styles complement each other.
2. Why are leaders sometimes criticised for listening to their followers?
3. Is taking responsibility an inherently Jewish concept?

NOTES

1. This phrase has been attributed to Benjamin Disraeli, Stanley Baldwin and Alexandre Auguste Ledru-Rollin.



After the Gold Rush

It was all supposed to be so very different: Their stop at Sinai was originally supposed to be brief, but transformative. When the Children of Israel arrived at Sinai, everything seemed so special, so idyllic, in so many ways: They had come together as a nation, bonded in a sense of unity and love, born of a common past and a shared vision of the future. "As one man, with one heart," they prepared themselves to enter into a covenant with God, to take a quantum leap towards the fulfillment of the promises made to their forefathers. In preparation and affirmation of this great moment in history, they brought offerings. And then, the heavens opened; they were granted a vision of God, as He Himself spoke words of holiness to them. The next stop should have been the Promised Land, where they would put the commandments they had just received into practice, creating a new reality, a perfected society and a holy community.

Instead, something went wrong; things began to unravel. After hearing only two commandments, the people felt overwhelmed: The experience was too intense. God had more to say, but the people demurred. They asked that Moshe serve as a conduit, that God speak to Moshe alone, who

would then relay the message to them in a more digestible form.

Moshe was invited to climb the mountain; there were more laws to be taught, more instructions to relay.

While Moshe was away, the people became afraid: What was taking so long? Why had he not returned? Their deepest fear seemed to have been realized: Moshe had died and left them without a leader, before their mission had been accomplished. After all, Moshe was just a man, and men can break your heart; even the best of them are fickle. The people demanded something more sturdy, something more permanent. They settled on a calf made of gold - and declared that this calf had taken them out of Egypt. Their "logic" seems absurd: How could the gold taken from the ears of their loved only that day have been credited with redeeming them from slavery? Even worse: How could they have fallen so far from the pinnacle of spirituality they had achieved 39 days earlier? They had heard two commandments spoken directly by God, and theirs words and actions lay those two commandments to waste: "I am the Lord, your God, who took you out of the land of Egypt; you shall have no gods other than Me. Do not make an idol or any graven image..." How were they capable of fine-tuned cognitive dissonance? How had they managed to so quickly, so completely, almost purposefully negate the awe-inspiring Revelation? Their about-face seems all the more absurd when we remind ourselves that these same people had eaten manna for breakfast that very morning! How outrageous it seems that, as they wiped the last bits of manna from their mouths,

they expressed disbelief in Moshe's ability to survive up on the mountaintop without food or water! With the evidence of God's miracles still between their teeth, how did they lose faith in God so quickly?

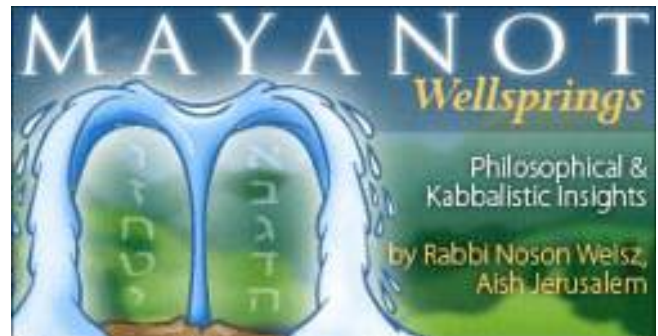
The people seem determined to counter each and every element of the Sinai experience with a counterfeit, contradictory gesture: At Sinai, they had brought offerings as part of the covenant forged with God; now, they brought offerings to the calf. In an unmistakable gesture, they made an exchange, an "upgrade:" In place of the God who had redeemed them from the bondage of Egypt, they had a golden calf. Instead of offerings to honor and praise God, they brought offerings to celebrate the idol they had created with their own hands. In the words of King David:

They made a calf at Horev, and worshipped a molten image. Thus they exchanged their Glory for the likeness of an ox that eats grass.
(Tehilim 106:19-20)

And then, Moshe returned. Tragically, instead of greeting him with songs of praise and joy, instead of honoring the Tablets of Testimony Moshe had brought down from the heavens, they serenaded their calf in a frenzy of idolatrous revelry. Moshe entered the camp unnoticed and, strangely, alone; taking in the outrageous spectacle, he threw the Tablets to the ground, and the shattering sound brought an abrupt end to their orgy. They had been unfaithful, and were therefore subjected to a process not unlike that imposed upon a wife accused of infidelity: Moshe melted the calf,

ground it into a fine powder, and had them all drink the potion made of their "deity."

Moshe called out, rallying those who were faithful, those who were devoted to God. Those who answered his call, those in whom the spirit of God was reawakened, were called upon to take arms and purge the community of sinners. This was the final step: The holiness they had achieved at Sinai had been defiled, their covenant with God had been trampled; God had been exchanged for a calf. And now, the unity and friendship they had achieved was exchanged for the sword, as families were torn apart, and brothers turned against one another. The memory of Sinai, the entire Sinai experience, was ruined. The words they had heard had been twisted, the offerings had been rededicated to idol worship, and the sense of brotherhood dissipated. Had they only been able to wait for Moshe to descend from the mountain, they would have danced with the Tablets, etched by the hand of God, in an unforgettable "Simchat Torah." A little more faith could have brought them a great deal of love.



Golden Calf

"Moses saw the people, that they were exposed, for Aaron had exposed them to disgrace among those who rise up against them." (Exodus 32:25)

The story of the Golden Calf still reverberates to Israel's shame after a lapse of nearly 4000 years. Israel's detractors inevitably point to it. Quite apart from the disgrace, the story of this sin is surely one of the most perplexing incidents related in the Torah. A mere 40 days before they served the Golden Calf, the Jewish people stood at the foot of Mount Sinai and heard the command: "You shall have no other gods before Me" from God Himself. Even wishy-washy people such as we have more powerful short-term memories than that!

The fact that they disobeyed the commandment is not the most incomprehensible aspect of their behavior. The truly perplexing question is this: How is it possible that people who experienced the miracles of the Exodus, who spoke to God personally at Mount Sinai, who were subsisting on manna, and living under God's cloud even as they built the Golden Calf – how was it possible

for such people to believe that the idol they built had any power?

We shall attempt to plumb the mystery in this essay; we shall retell the story the way that Nachmanides and the other medieval Torah commentators present it. With their assistance, we shall attempt to place ourselves on the scene and see if we can empathize with the thoughts and feelings of the Jewish people of 4000 years ago. We hope to demonstrate that all of us would probably have done exactly what they did had we been there with them.

THE INITIAL MISUNDERSTANDING

"The people saw that Moses had delayed in descending the mountain, and the people gathered around Aaron and said to him, 'Rise up, make for us gods that will go before us, for this man Moses who brought us up from the land of Egypt - we do not know what became of him!'" (Exodus 32:1)

Rashi explains that the sin of the Golden Calf originated in a misunderstanding. Moses ascended Mount Sinai on the 7th day of the Jewish month of Sivan with the stated intention of being gone for forty days and returning on the morning of the forty-first day. The people interpreted this statement to include the day of the ascent in the count of the forty days, and therefore expected Moses to return on the morning of the 16th of Tamuz. Moses actually meant that he would be away a full forty days and nights. The day of his ascent could not be counted as part of the forty days since he left in the morning (in the Jewish

calendar the day starts in the evening and part of the day had already passed by the time of his departure), and the day of his projected return was the 17th of Tamuz, the day on which he duly arrived, right on schedule.

We must approach the misunderstanding that occurred here in Jewish cultural terms to appreciate it fully; the misunderstanding concerned the proper way to interpret spoken words. The interpretation of scriptural words is a rabbinic function par excellence. There is no doubt that the greatest rabbinic authorities of the desert generation, including Aaron himself, were consulted. Many people are aware that rabbinic decisions always reflect the majority consensus. This means that according to the best rabbinic authority available at the time, the correct interpretation of Moses' words was that he would be back on the 16th. Torah tradition teaches that the best rabbinic authority is the true Torah position. The conclusion: the Jewish people were fully justified to conclude that Moses was late.

The next issue: if he was late what could account for the delay? After all, Moses was not on an ordinary journey. He went to heaven to visit with God. His tardiness could not be attributed to delayed buses or trains, airplane crashes or similar calamities that generally account for tardiness. If he did not return on schedule as he had foretold, he was obviously not returning at all.

The inevitable, inescapable conclusion arrived at by the Jewish people: they were stuck in the desert, with no one to lead them to their destination and no one to act as a go-between with God.

If we found ourselves stuck in such a situation, we would be helpless to help ourselves out of it. We would be forced to sit still and await developments, which might be an unpleasant state to be in, but conflict-free. Unlike us, the Jewish people of the desert generation possessed the spiritual technology to manufacture a go-between with God. Their very superiority to us placed them in the grip of a dilemma we would never have to face.

THE GO-BETWEEN DILEMMA

A very widespread Jewish maxim states: "one should not rely on miracles" (Talmud, Shabbat 32a) – we know it in our vernacular as 'God helps those who help themselves'.

As God gave the Jews the spiritual technology to replace Moses He would arguably expect them to use it. If you know how to manufacture your own miracles there is no obvious reason why miracles should not fit under the umbrella of the prohibition to wait for God's miracles. God would surely have contacted them if He had not already given them the skill to contact Him. Under the circumstances, the temptation to help themselves out of their dilemma by employing the spiritual technology in their possession must have been enormous.

What about the possible violation of the prohibition against idol worship that they heard on Mount Sinai? Well, what about it? Surely that prohibition was addressed to people who wanted to escape from God or worship Him in some perverted way, not to people who were using their spiritual skills to re-establish their contact with God!

Nachmanides points out that the Jewish people never said of the Golden Calf, "Look Israel this is your God who created the heavens and the earth!" They did not even say "This is the God that brought you out of Egypt and sent you all those miracles!" Instead they said, "This is the manifestation of the Divine Spirit that rested on Moses and guided you through the desert since leaving Egypt."

To actually carry on conversations with God, the Jewish people realized that they must wait for God to contact them first; it is beyond human capacity to manufacture something that can replace Moses entirely; but the Golden Calf can replace Moses the Guide and continue to show them the correct path through the desert.

The prohibition against idol worship in the Ten Commandments literally states, "You shall have no other gods *in My Presence*." How can such a prohibition apply to people who are desperately seeking to place themselves once more in God's Presence, who missed this Presence so desperately that they could not tolerate being bereft of contact with it even for a single day!?

The preceding is a fairly accurate presentation of the commentators' explanation of the sin of the Golden Calf. But if this is an accurate picture of what happened why is the Golden Calf considered such a great sin? "...and on the day that I make My account, I shall bring their sin to account against them." (Exodus 32:34) Mercifully, God consented not to punish the entire nation at that time, but He declared that whenever they would sin in the future, they would suffer some of the

punishment that they should have received in retribution for the sin of the Golden Calf. (Rashi)

THE SIN OF IDOLATRY

It is apparent that despite all the good intentions, the sin of the Golden Calf is still characterized as the sin of idolatry, the greatest sin in the Torah, a violation of the second of the Ten Commandments. Good intentions clearly do not have the power to transform the quality of an action. When the Torah defines an act as a transgression, the pureness of the motivation of the violator cannot render it permissible. You are judged by your deeds, not by the quality of your motivations.

Let us clarify the point with the aid of the following reference from the Talmud:

A sin performed with purity of motive has more merit than a mitzvah that is done with an ulterior motive, as it is written: *"Yael, the wife of Chever Hakeni is more blessed than the women of the tent."* (Judges 8) Who are the women of the tent? Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah. (Talmud, Nazir 23b)

The Talmud explains that this passage compares the commission of sins out of pure motives to the performance of good deeds with selfish motives. Yael committed the sin of adultery with the purest of motivations. She had adulterous relations with Sisra, a Canaanite general, in order to wear him out and put him to sleep. She then assassinated him in his sleep thereby ending the war and saving many Jewish lives.

The passage declares that the commission of Yael's sin is more praiseworthy than actions of the Matriarchs who are offered as the example of people who perform Mitzvot with ulterior motives. The Matriarchs gave their maidservants to their husbands when they were barren - an apparently unselfish action. For the sake of bringing Jewish children into the world they voluntarily elected to share their husbands with other women - but they had an ulterior motive - they were hoping that in the merit of their act of self sacrifice they would be allowed to bear children of their own.

THE POWER OF GOOD INTENTIONS

Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin (Nefesh Hachaim, Gate 1) explains that this rule regarding the power of good intentions to redefine actions that would ordinarily be sins as mitzvot applied only before the Jews formally accepted the Torah on Mt. Sinai. Once the Torah became binding as law, every Jew is obligated to observe the commandments to the letter. No longer can pureness of heart elevate sins and turn them into mitzvot.

If we regard the sin of the Golden Calf objectively, and strip away the motivation behind its commission, it is quite clear that it would have to be considered idolatry committed with full awareness. The enormity of the lesson we must learn from its commission is clear. All of us would instinctively adopt the response of the Jewish people of the desert generation under similar circumstances. It seems that we have learned very little in the interim. We are still

inclined to evaluate our moral behavior in terms of our motivations instead of objective criteria.

The essence of Torah observance is contained in accepting the Torah's dictates as the objective standard of behavior. Observant Jews do not evaluate the moral correctness of their actions on the basis of the purity of their motivations. On the contrary; the purity of their motivations is judged by whether the Torah defines the action they are driven to implement as a mitzvah or a sin.

THE POSITIVE ASPECT

But the story of Golden Calf has a powerful positive side as well:

R' Joshua ben Levi taught: "The Jews only made the Golden Calf to open the way for repentance. It is written, *'If only they would retain this feeling in their heart, to fear Me and observe all My commandments ... forever.'*" (Deut. 5:26) (Talmud, Avoda Zara 4b)

The Maharal of Prague (in *Tiferes Yisroel* and *Gvuros Hashem*) gives us the key to penetrate to the depths of this passage:

One of the first requests that we make to God each day is to preserve and protect us from having to face tests. "...*Do not bring us into the power of error, nor into the power of transgression and sin, nor into the power of challenge, nor into the power of scorn....*" It is possible to fail tests, and we beseech God to preserve us from such failures. Why should God test us against our will when we feel that we are unprepared?

"And it happened after these things that God tested Abraham..." (Genesis 22:1)

Nachmanides explains; tests are relative. God only tests the righteous; when He gives them the test He knows they will pass. It is we people who feel tested; it is only by going through the character building experience offered by God's test that we can actualize the potentials in our characters that we ourselves are totally unaware of. God does not test people who have a serious chance of failing the test. Why would He? It is clearly not to their advantage.

The passage of Talmud that links the sin of the Golden Calf to opening the gate to repentance is a response to a question that begs to be asked. Why didn't God prevent the whole situation that led to the sin from ever arising? He knew the dangerous misinterpretation that the Jewish people had reached regarding the meaning of the forty days. He could easily have sent Moses down a day early, or He could have contacted Aaron or Miriam, both prophets, and informed them that Moses would only be returning the next day and thus eliminated the whole problem. Why did God allow a situation to develop that led to Israel committing such a tragic error?

The Talmud answers; this great error paved the route to a greater good, a brand new world: the World of Repentance.

THE ATTRIBUTES OF MERCY

God passed before him and He proclaimed, "YHVH, YHVH, God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abundant in kindness and

truth; preserver of kindness for thousands of generations, forgiver of iniquity, willful sin and error..."
(Exodus 34:6,7)

The Divine qualities listed in this passage are known as the "Thirteen Attributes of Mercy."

Rabbi Yochanan taught: "If it would not be expressly stated in the Torah, it would be sacrilegious for us to think it. God wrapped Himself in a prayer shawl like a cantor, and showed Moses how to pray. He told him, 'Whenever Israel sins, they should pray before me in this fashion and I will forgive them.'" (Talmud, Rosh Hashana, 17b)

This commitment to listen to prayers couched in terms of the principles of mercy amounts to a special covenant. A prayer that includes the recitation of the thirteen principles of mercy will never go unanswered. (Yalkut, Ki Tisa, 398)

But there is a serious conceptual problem behind the very notion of these principles of mercy. God has been practicing His attribute of Mercy since the moment of creation. The Torah states at the beginning of Genesis:

"These are the unfolding events of the heavens and the earth at creation - on the day that YHVH Elohim made earth and heaven." (Genesis 2:1)

The name YHVH refers to God's attribute of mercy; the name Elohim refers to His attribute of justice. Rashi (ibid.) informs us that whereas

initially God had planned to create the world using only the attribute of justice, He realized that the world could not endure under such a regime and therefore He not only added the Attribute of Mercy to the creation mix, He even gave it precedence over the attribute of justice.

The attribute of mercy was applied to the affairs of the world from the very first, so what quality of mercy is being added by this new covenant that our Torah portion speaks of? What exactly are the "Thirteen Attributes of Mercy"?

GOD'S RELATIONSHIP WITH HUMANITY

In his work *Derech Hashem*, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzatto, a well known medieval Jewish thinker and Kabbalist explains that God had certain non-negotiable goals when He created the world. One of these goals was the establishment of a relationship with humanity that would be sufficiently intense to justify the maintenance of a visible Divine Presence in the physical world. Even if it required the intervention of His attribute of mercy to maintain this relationship with humanity, the world could continue as long as the relationship was possible.

But when God is compelled to withdraw His Presence from the physical world, one of the basic goals of creation is frustrated, and the world must therefore come to an end. This is the situation that requires the application of the thirteen Principles of Mercy. These principles are in the nature of emergency measures. Through their application the world and its purpose are redefined and life can continue past the crisis point on a lower level. At this point the measures of the regular Attribute of Mercy kick in once

again and help to keep the world functioning at the newly defined lower level.

REDEFINING EXISTENCE

When the Jews made the Golden Calf, in violation of the commandment, "*You shall have no other gods in My Presence*," the only way to continue to maintain the relationship with man was to withdraw this Presence. As the maintenance of the Presence was one of the goals of creation, the world had to be recreated on a lower level in order to continue. The Thirteen Principles of Faith had to be applied. This redefinition is described in the following passage;

'I shall not ascend among you, for you are a stiff-necked people, lest I annihilate you on the way.' (Exodus 33:3)

The world can continue despite the Golden Calf but on a lesser level without direct contact with God's Presence. When God's Presence is removed, the violation of the commandment forbidding '*other gods in My Presence*' assumes a lesser degree of severity.

But the Jewish people refused to accept existence on this lower level; despite the commission of the sin they wanted to continue living in what is called 'My Presence'. This can only be done if the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy - which were meant to be applied only to get us past emergencies - became an integral part of our everyday interaction with God.

God's intention to withdraw His Presence was not punishment oriented but the direct result of the application of the Principles of Mercy. If the

intensity of relationship that allows God's Presence to be manifest is attempted with people who are not up to it spiritually, crisis points will crop up so frequently that the Thirteen Principles of Mercy, intended to be emergency measures must become a part of everyday life to keep the world on track.

To maintain God's Presence among them despite their sin the Jewish people had to persuade God to change his policy regarding the role of the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy. They had to be transformed from emergency measures to becoming a part of everyday life.

REPENTANCE

How did the Jewish people persuade God to adopt this change in policy? They repented.

What does repentance mean?

The Hebrew word for "repentance" is *teshuva*, which also means to "return." Return to what?

Seven things were created before the world; the Torah, repentance, Gan Eden, Gehenom, the Heavenly Throne, the Holy Temple and the name of the Messiah. (Talmud, Pesachim, 54a)

Repentance rightfully belongs to a prior world, a brighter reality where the Divine Presence is less hidden. Someone who has access to this brighter world basks in the Divine Presence regardless of the quality of his deeds.

In Hebrew, a "world" is an *olam*, a word that literally means "concealment." There are many such worlds according to Jewish thought because

there are many levels of concealment of the Divine Presence. The seven things that were created before our world have a common factor. In each of them the Presence of God is exposed to open view. Gan Eden, Gehenom, the Heavenly Throne....Our own level of reality is the level of free will and must contain a greater degree of concealment. Were we sensitive to the Divine Presence that permeates existence, we would be conscious of the fact that our existence is drawn from constant inputs of Divine Energy and we would lose our free will.

To make our existence possible a curtain of concealment had to be drawn between the world of 'repentance' and our own. In our world the attachment to God's Presence is not automatic; it depends on man's free will actions.

The bridge between these two worlds is the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy. The Attributes are the curtain. They connect our world to the prior hidden world of repentance where restoration to the Divine Presence is a matter of course.

THE PRICE OF THE COVENANT

A covenant is a two-sided agreement. Both sides have to surrender something precious to them to make it work. The Jewish people were willing to pay the ultimate price to obtain the covenant of the thirteen principles of mercy. They were willing to surrender life itself to retain their access to the Divine Presence. They said:

*"If Your Presence does not go along,
do not bring us forward from here."
(Exodus 33:15)*

Knowing the level of this sacrifice, knowing that there is nothing more precious to a human being than his very life, God was also willing to make a sacrifice. He consented to abandon His original plan and allow the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy that were placed behind the curtain that conceals the world of repentance to be exposed to plain view and thus move over to our side of the curtain and become a part of our everyday reality.

As long as the bridge exists as part of everyday life it is possible for God to maintain His presence in the physical world after all. Whenever the mercy of creation runs out we can draw on the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy by the terms of the covenant and keep the world going.

Yet everything still depends on one's deeds. The inclusion of these attributes in the everyday world is in return for man's willingness to surrender life itself to achieve the 'return' of repentance. To repent is to return, but one cannot return to the place where one started. The way back involves going higher, closer to the point of origin of all being, to the reality of the Divine Presence that lies concealed behind the curtain.



Only the Landowners

No one shall covet your land when you go up to be seen before the God your Lord three times a year. (Shemos 34:23)

Three times a year, all Jewish males are required to fulfill the mitzvah of *aliyah laregel* by going to the *Beis Hamikdash* in Yerushalayim and celebrating the festivals "before the Master, God, the Lord of Israel." But who is going to keep an eye on the farm while everyone is away? No one. The Torah assures us (Shemos 34:24) that it will not be necessary, because "no one shall covet your land when you go up to be seen before the God your Lord three times a year."

This is quite a strong promise, and it is obviously meant to allay the fear of the more hesitant souls. It does not seem to be central to the mitzvah of *aliyah laregel*. And yet, the Talmud derives (*Pesachim* 8b) from this verse that only landowners are required to make the pilgrimage to Yerushalayim. Landless people, to whom the promise of "no one shall covet your land" cannot be applied, are not required to go.

Why should someone be deprived of "being seen by God your Lord" just because he doesn't own any real estate? Is this fair? What is the

connection between going up three times a year and owning land?

We also find here a Name of Hashem - *Adon*, the Master - that rarely appears in the Torah - only twice, here and in *Parashas Mishpatim* (Shemos 23:17), both regarding to the mitzvah of *aliyah laregel*. What does this signify?

Sforno in *Parashas Mishpatim* points out that the title *Adon*, the Master, is used to indicate that Hashem is the Master of the Land. In this light, perhaps we can see the mitzvah of *aliyah laregel* from a new perspective. The essence of the mitzvah is not only to celebrate the festivals in Yerushalayim in the *Beis Hamikdash*, which is indeed a wonderful thing. On a deeper level, however, the mitzvah impresses on each of us that the whole world belongs to Hashem and not to me. I can leave my house and my farm and my property unattended, and I don't have to worry about it. Why? Because essentially it is not mine. Hashem promises that "no one shall covet the land" and I will be able to return and pick up the thread of my life. And I can be very calm about it, because it is not really my land after all is said and done. It all belongs to Hashem.

If so, we can well understand why a landless person is exempt from the mitzvah. He can certainly go to Yerushalayim and celebrate if he wishes, but the mitzvah of *aliyah laregel* does not include him since he has no land anyway, and the critical message of the mitzvah does not apply to him.

The Kotzker Rebbe offers a different answer to this question. Why is a landless person exempt



Ki Tisa (Exodus 30:11-34:35) *advanced compendium*

from the mitzvah of *aliyah laregel*? Because he doesn't need it.

Only the landowner, whose vision is blurred by materialism, needs to go up to Yerushalayim to see the *Shechinah*. The landless person, the poor man who lacks material things and whose vision materialism has not blurred, does not need to go to Yerushalayim to see the *Shechinah*. He sees It everywhere.

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