

A Teaching from Rabbi Weintraub:

Ki Tissa — Avoiding Panic

Shabbat Ki Tissa / Shabbat Para | 18 Adar; 13-14 March 2009

The Torah portion this week contains one of the most famous and pivotal stories in the Torah: Moses ascends Mount Sinai to receive the Torah but unexpectedly tarries. B'nai Yisrael, the Children of Israel, become frightened. They had only known visible, human leaders; first, negatively, Pharaoh, then, positively, Moses. Now the leader is gone. They pressure Aaron: "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 now what became of him!" (Exodus 32:1). Aaron yields to their desperation, and joins in the construction of the Golden Calf. G-d is enraged, and threatens to destroy the people.

B'nai Yisrael had just beheld the revelation at Sinai, a spiritual experience so elevated that the Midrash says that a common servant was given the vision of later, ecstatic Biblical prophets. How could they have gone from this spiritual peak, down to idol worship, in just a few weeks?

The Midrash (Exodus Rabbah 41:7) imagines that Satan, whose whole purpose is to drive people to evil, saw this crisis as an opportunity. He created an optical illusion so that "Moses appeared suspended between heaven and earth", that is, "departed", dead, and the people panicked.

When we are in a normal emotional state, we do not let events distort our vision or sway our normal judgment. When we are overwhelmed, or bewildered, it is possible to slip, even unknowingly, into despair. Then "all bets are off" and we can think catastrophically, see things as they are not, and react in ways which harm our own interests. Raba, a Fourth Century Talmudic sage, taught "People are not held responsible for what they say when in distress" (Bava Batra 16b; this also explains why torture and forced confessions are unknown in Jewish tradition).

Thus, G-d forgives B'nai Yisrael despite the largeness of their transgression. When a person or society is basically frightened, as opposed to malicious, sick, as opposed to evil, the proper response is not blame or punishment but encouragement of ways to repair behavior. In the midst of any crisis – moral, political, economic – the challenge is to hold our gut reactions in check and look for sustained and hopeful ways of turning things around, even if these require confession, patience and sacrifice.