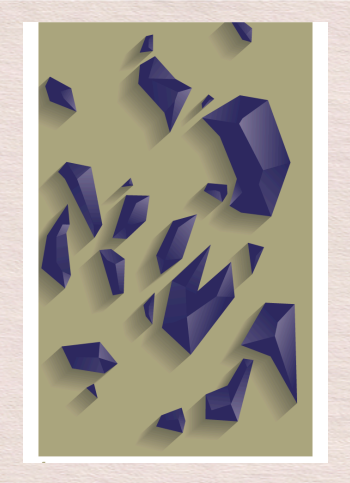
Ki Tisa: Shemot (Exodus)

What's it all about?



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The Israelites are commanded to contribute exactly half a shekel each towards the building of the Mishkan. Instructions are given about the Mishkan's water basin and other essentials, and two "wise-hearted" artists, Betzalel and Aholiav, are entrusted with the Mishkan's construction.

When Moses lingers on Mount Sinai, the people, restless, make a golden calf and worship it. God offers to destroy the entire nation and begin anew, but Moses intervenes on their behalf. **He descends from the mountain carrying the two tablets containing the Ten Commandments, and when he sees the people dancing around their idol, he smashes the tablets to the ground.**

Moses implores God to forgive the Israelites, and then returns to the mountain where he crafts a new set of tablets. When he returns, his face is so radiant that he must cover it with a veil, which he removes only to speak with God and teach the people Torah.

"“I have observed this people, and it is indeed a stiff-necked people.”"

Take a deeper dive

This week's parsha is one of the Torah's most dramatic. The sin of the golden calf, coming so soon after the transcendent moment of receiving God's commandments, is difficult for us to understand. It's difficult for Moses, too: As soon as he descends from the mountain and sees the people dancing around the calf, he becomes enraged, hurling the tablets from his hands and shattering them at the foot of the mountain.

The 16th century Italian rabbi known as Sforno explains: "Moses's anger," he wrote, "was aroused over the fact that people rejoiced over the damage to themselves they had caused." In other words, it wasn't just the sin that shocked him; it was how brazen and gleeful the Israelites were about it all.

Still, smashing the tablets? Can we imagine a rabbi, say, upset because people are talking during prayer, grab the Torah scroll from the ark and toss it on the ground? **Isn't it the sort of wrath that should immediately disqualify Moses from any leadership role?**

The 15th century Spanish Rabbi Yitzhak Arama explains that Moses's smashing of the tablets was meant to address precisely this last matter. He tossed the tablets on the ground to drive fear and shame into the hearts of the sinful Israelites.

And indeed, as the parsha draws to an end, Moses emerges as a tremendous defender of the Jewish people, going as far as asking God to erase his own name from the Torah should the Almighty choose not to have mercy on the sinful Israelites.

The language that he uses when asking HaShem for mercy is telling. "If I have gained Your favor, O my lord," Moses says, "pray, let my lord go in our midst, even though this is a stiff-necked people. Pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for Your own!"

The Hebrew word for "even though," Ki, the rabbis explained, could also mean "because of." And this, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks suggested, was just the stunning, transcendent nature of Moses's defense: Sure, he told HaShem, these Jews are stiff-necked, but **just as their stiff-neckedness led them to sin, so it could lead them to stubbornly keeping your commandments** even when everyone else in the world insists that they assimilate. For this insight, Moses's face radiates with divine light and the people are saved.

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