

The Narrow Bridge

גשר צר מאוד

PARSHA PERSPECTIVES

Short Divrei Torah on Parshas Ki Sisa

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רפואה שלמה פעסל בת גאלדא / לזכות חיליני

WE GET WHEN WE GIVE

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

"Each man shall give an atonement for his soul to Hashem." (30:12)

The Baal HaTurim notes that the word "ונתנו - shall give" is a palindrome, meaning that it can be read the same way forwards as backwards. He writes, "This is to teach you that whatever someone gives to tzedakah will eventually come back to him and he will not lose out in any way."

Presumably, this concept is taken from the verse in Mishlei; "One who is gracious to the poor is considered to have lent money to Hashem, and He will pay him back for his kindness" (Mishlei 19:17; see also Beitzta 15b and Kesuvos 66b). Yet, despite these reassurances, it is still very difficult to actually part with our "hard-earned money" to help someone we do not even know.

So how do we overcome this challenge? One should always bear in mind that Hashem is responsible for our wealth, and as we saw above, He will never let us lose out because of this great mitzvah. Furthermore, the Gemara (Yoma 75a) explains that while the Jewish People were journeying through the desert, each family received exactly the right amount of manna necessary for them. The lesson, says Rav Moshe Feinstein, is applicable to all generations: If Hashem gives someone more wealth than they reasonably need, it must be that the surplus is meant for others (Darash Moshe, Parshas Beshalach).

It is up to us to make an account of all that Hashem has given us, both in terms of financial and physical possessions, as well as our talents and skills. Then we must ask, "Why was I given these gifts? What can I do with them? And how can I use what I have been given to help others?"

(Rav Shimon Shkop would often encourage his students to "give ma'aser" from their talents and knowledge by sharing it with others, and he promised them that just as giving tzedakah comes with a promise of economic enrichment, so too when one gives of his time to help others, he receives great spiritual benefits.)

PROTECTIVE LEADER

Alshich HaKadosh

"And Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying, 'When you take a census of the Children of Israel, according to their numbers, each man shall give an atonement for his soul to Hashem...'" (30:11-12)

An alternative rendering of this passage is: "And Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying, 'When you appoint the head of the Children of Israel...'"

G-d said to Moshe: When you appoint a leader and head of the Jews, choose only someone willing to sacrifice himself as a ransom for his people if need be.

THE HALF-SHEKEL

Reb Noson of Breslov

"And Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying, 'When you take a census of the Children of Israel, according to their numbers, each man shall give an atonement for his soul to Hashem...'" (30:11-12)

It is forbidden to take a census (literally, "head count") of the Jews. Take a half-shekel per person and count the shekalim. (Rashi)

Why should we count the Jews with shekalim and then give charity to avoid the plague that arises from counting people? Wouldn't it be better not to count the people and avoid the danger altogether?

However, the count serves an important purpose. Each Jew is able to serve G-d according to his own capabilities and limitations. The count implies a tzimtzum (constriction) of the desire for G-dliness burning within each person, in order to help each Jew marshal his energies to serve G-d in a measured fashion. The count is effected through the Shekel (שקל), which is similar to a mishkal (משקל, scale) upon which each item is carefully weighed and delineated. Then it can attain perfection. (Likutey Halakhot II, p. 406)

It is forbidden to take a census (literally, “head count”) of the Jews. Take a half-shekel per person and count the shekalim. (Rashi)

It is forbidden to count Jews because a census indicates that there are “many,” which implies differences. When people are not counted, unity reigns. The way to “count” Jews is through the giving of charity - for example, the donation of the half-shekel to the Tabernacle. Giving charity elevates the Jews to the transcendental intellect, for at its root, they are all united. (Likutey Halakhot III, p. 197a)

In unity, there is blessing and truth; in multiplicity, falsehood and curse can arise. The Torah forbids the counting of Jews (which emphasizes their separateness) lest one open the door to falsehood or curses. Instead, Moshe took a census by collecting a half-shekel from each Jew. Since it unites rich and poor, charity represents unity, blessing and truth. (ibid., V, p. 97a)

The initial letters of the words Rosh Bnei Yisrael (ראש בני ישראל, the head of the Jewish people) spell Rabbi (רבי, teacher). This indicates that the Jews require a qualified teacher to transmit G-d’s message.

The giving of the half-shekel was a means of “counting the heads” of Israel (i.e., a “head count” or census). The Torah uses the word rosh (head) to denote that each person is different, having his own boundaries of knowledge and intellect which must be developed and nurtured. “Half” a shekel was given per head to indicate that each person can attain great knowledge but must never venture beyond his limitations. (Likutey Halakhot VII, p. 338)

The Hebrew word lifkod (לפקד, to count) also indicates a “lack,” as in lo nifkad (לא נפקד, no one was missing) (see Rashi on Bamidbar 31:49). Counting Jews (i.e., taking a census) represents a “lack.” However, the giving of the half-shekel - i.e., charity - advances a person to a higher level, beyond that which is lacking. Charity represents a “spirit of life,” drawing life and vitality into whatever is “lacking” to complete and perfect it. (Likutey Halakhot III, p. 272)

Giving charity effects forgiveness much as a fast does. The purpose of a fast is to subjugate and negate the will of the body in favor of the will of the soul. In the same way, the communal sacrifices - which were funded by the giving of charity in the form of the shekalim - represent the idea that a person erroneously heeded his body’s desires and must now negate those animalistic tendencies by rededicating himself to G-d. Thus, the charity given for the Tabernacle and the act of fasting lead to the same goal. (Likutey Halakhot IV, p. 8a)

Ki sisa es rosh (when you count the heads) literally means “when you raise up the head.” The word rosh (head) is singular, referring specifically to “the head” - i.e., to the tzaddik who is the head and leader of the Jewish people. In order to raise up and elevate the true leader of the Jews, you must give charity. (Likutey Halakhot VIII, p. 5b)

CROWNING HASHEM

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

“Each man shall give an atonement for his soul to Hashem.” (30:12)

The idiom for “take a census” (תשא את ראש) literally means “lift up the head.” The Zohar teaches (2:79b) regarding the verse “Moshe ascended to G-d, and G-d called to him” (Shemos 19:3), that all the ascents that a person experiences should be directed toward G-d, in order to crown G-d as King.

This is alluded to in the verse “When you will take a census of the Children of Israel, according to their numbers.” The word for “numbers” (פקודה) also denotes “sovereignty,” as in the verse, “The king commanded (ויפקד)...” (Esther 2:3). Our verse thus continues, “Every man shall give to G-d an atonement for his soul,” implying that all of one’s ascents should be directed only toward G-d to crown Him as King.

OUR PAIN IS HIS PAIN

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

“And each man shall give an atonement for himself to Hashem.” (30:12)

If a person wants to pray for the Jewish people when they suffer for the lack of some need, he needs to elevate the Jewish people. This means that he has to say that their distress is not solely of concern to the Jewish people, but it is also of concern to G-d, since He is our Father. As the Talmud teaches, “When a person suffers, the Shechinah suffers as well” (Chagigah 15b). Accordingly, when a person views the distress of the Jewish nation as G-d’s distress, he elevates the Jewish people to G-d. As a result, G-d will alleviate the suffering of the Shechinah and thereby, they will also be delivered from their distress.

This is the deeper meaning of the verse “When you will take a census (תשא את ראש) the Children of Israel,” which can be read, “when you want to elevate the Children of Israel.” This should be done “according to their numbers” (לפקדיהם), which can be read, “according to their lack,” as in the verse “Dovid’s place was empty (ויפקד)” (I Shmuel 20:25). Thus, the verse can be read, “When the Jewish people are lacking G-d’s goodness, then you should elevate them.” The verse goes on to describe how to elevate them: “Every man shall give to G-d an atonement for his soul.” That is, the person’s soul belongs to G-d, and the person’s pain is also G-d’s pain.

HEARTFELT CHARITY

Kotzker Rebbe

“Each man shall give an atonement for his soul to Hashem.” (30:12)

Moshe wanted to know how a coin could be an atonement for the soul. Hashem told Moshe that if a coin is given away with happiness, then it is for atonement, for when one gives charity with enthusiasm, he is giving with a full heart.

SPLITTING THE RESPONSIBILITY

Reb Simchah Bunim of Pshischa

“This they should give, everyone who passes among the counted, the half-shekel of the holy shekel.” (30:13)

The commandment to give a machatzis ha’shekel was in order “to make an atonement for your souls,” to atone for the sins of the Jewish people. The amount was therefore set at precisely half a coin, to show that the Almighty Himself is responsible for the other half. Had He not created the yetzer hara to tempt us in the first place, we would never have transgressed!

MESSAGE OF THE SHEKEL

Reb Noson of Breslov

“This they should give, everyone who passes among the counted, the half-shekel of the holy shekel. A shekel is equivalent to twenty geirah.” (30:13)

There were three things that Moshe found difficult to understand until G-d showed him images made out of fire: the New Moon, the Menorah, and the half-shekel. (cf. Bamidbar Rabbah 15:9)

Admittedly, it is difficult to visualize the exact moment at which the New Moon appears. The structure of the Menorah was also very elaborate and would be difficult to visualize. But what was so difficult about the half-shekel, a known unit of currency, that stymied Moshe?

The half-shekel would be given by each Jew to pay for the communal sacrifices in the Tabernacle and also to effect forgiveness for the sin of the golden calf. This sin was an extremely brazen act, committed at a time when the Jews had only recently left Egypt and had witnessed so many miracles, culminating in the Revelation at Sinai. Due to the great wealth they had amassed during the Exodus, the Jews became arrogant and sinned, Moshe did not understand: If wealth leads to arrogance and brazenness, shouldn’t we distance ourselves from wealth completely? How could wealth, the force that brought us to sin, now be used for charity to effect forgiveness for that sin?! G-d answered by showing Moshe that wealth has a positive side, too: its power can be channeled into the building of the Tabernacle, the bringing of sacrifices, and gaining forgiveness. (Likutey Halakhot VII, p. 27a-28a)

By himself, each Jew is lacking. He must join with others to increase holiness. (Likutey Halakhot I, p. 104)

Shekel (שקל) shares the same root as lishkol (לשקל, to weigh). One must weigh his words and deeds in order to act properly in any situation. Giving charity helps a person attain the proper balance (see Likutey Moharan I, 2:4). (Likutey Halakhot VIII, p. 105a)

Every year before Purim, as we give a symbolic half-shekel to charity in remembrance of the half-shekel that was given in the days of the Tabernacle, we draw upon ourselves the sanctity of the Tabernacle. (Likutey Halakhot II, p. 203a)

The word Geirah (גרה) has the same numerical value as Yitzchak (יצחק), who represents judgment. Giving the geirah to charity nullifies the judgments. (Likutey Halakhot I, p. 104)

PARTS OF A WHOLE

Rabbi Solomon B. Shapiro

“This they should give, everyone who passes among the counted, the half-shekel of the holy shekel.” (30:13)

The half shekel is representative of Jewish society. No one person is an island unto himself, whole and complete. Each one of us is but a part of a larger entity, a shul, a neighborhood, an organization.

Giving a half shekel teaches us that isolating oneself from society is not the Jewish way.

HALF OF A WHOLE

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“This they should give, everyone who passes among the counted, the half-shekel of the holy shekel. A shekel is equivalent to twenty geirah.” (30:13)

The half-shekel was an expression of Jewish unity - rich and poor alike gave the same amount. Everyone gave only half a shekel in order to teach us that we can only achieve unity when we all recognize that we are just halves. To be a complete shekel, we must unite with our fellow.

Similarly, we are also only “half” in our relationship with G-d. The ten powers of the soul - our intellect and emotions - parallel the ten powers that G-d used in creating the world and continues to use in order to constantly re-create it. When we channel all ten powers of our soul - every nuance of our being - toward uniting with G-d and fulfilling our Divine mission, we align our soul-powers with G-d’s attributes. Our ten becomes twenty - a holy shekel. (Sefer HaSichot 5752, vol. 2, pp. 440-441) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

POWER OF WEALTH

Rabbi Moshe Schochet

“This is what everyone should give, everyone who passes among the counted, half of the shekel.” (30:13)

Rashi comments that the word zeh - “this,” teaches us that Hashem showed Moshe, in an image of fire, what the coin should look like.

Rav Yisrael Meir Druck (Eish Tamid) asks why Hashem used fire to portray the image of the half of the shekel.

Among the suggestions offered by Rav Druck is that fire can have either a positive effect or a destructive effect depending on how it is used. The same is true with money. Money can help one achieve some great things while at the same time it can cause one to descend to the depths of depravity. It is for this reason that Hashem chose fire as the means to illustrate what the coin should look like.

Based on Rav Druck’s explanation, the Torah is teaching us how careful and calculated we must all be in our approach to materialism.

On the one hand, it can serve as a powerful and positive influence on ourselves and the world around us. On the other hand, we must be vigilant and careful in order to ensure that it is being used in the right way!

COMPLETING OUR SOULS

Reb Chanoch Henoch of Alexander

“This they should give, everyone who passes among the counted, the half-shekel of the holy shekel.” (30:13)

The Jewish People are commanded to give a machatzis ha’shekel - half a shekel, toward the Mishkan. Why not a whole shekel?

The word shekel has the same numerical value (430) as “nefesh” - soul. This alludes to the concept that every Jew is given only half his soul - his neshamah - from Heaven and the other half is his responsibility to create through his Torah, mitzvos and acts of chessed. By doing so, he melds his soul into one finished and perfect specimen.

FLAME OF REPENTANCE

Yid HaKadosh

“This they should give, everyone who passes among the counted, the half-shekel of the holy shekel.” (30:13)

When a flame is burning, it does not remain still. The flame gets bigger and bigger. So it is with a person who does repentance with fervor: It is like the flame that does not rest.

Just as the letters of shekel (שקל, coin) can represent shachbecha (“while you rest”), kumecha (“when you rise up”), lechtecha (“when you walk”); the desire should constantly burn until there is true repentance.

UNITED STRENGTH

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

“This they should give, everyone who passes among the counted, the half-shekel of the holy shekel.” (30:13)

Instead of counting people to establish the Nation’s census, each person was instructed to provide a machatzis ha’shekel (half-shekel), which was counted and then used toward the expenses of the Mishkan (Shemos 30:16).

Why did the coin specifically need to be a half coin? If the purpose was merely to serve as a means of counting the Jewish People, any coin should have been sufficient!

Perhaps the message is that when a group comes together, especially when it is contributing toward the spiritual upkeep and development of their community, each member must approach his role with humility, knowing that however capable he personally may be, his strengths and talents are not complete without the strengths and talents of others.

With this understanding, the Malbim writes that even a wealthy person should be humbled by the fact that he cannot fulfill the mitzvah of tzedakah without a poor person to receive his charity. Therefore, to instill this message in the hearts of the Nation, each person had to specifically represent himself with a half-shekel. (The Malbim writes that possessing such an appreciation will serve as a tremendous merit for protection and success.)

Such an understanding builds a respectful, strong, and united community, the benefit of which can be demonstrated in the following parable:

A man on his deathbed gathered his children together. He asked the youngest to reach under his bed and take out a bundle of sticks bound in a rope. He then instructed his sons to try to break the sticks in two, but none of them were successful.

“Now, untie the rope,” said the father.

The bundle was untied, and twelve sticks were counted, one for each child.

“Now,” said the father, “everyone take a stick and break it.”

Everyone took a stick, some smaller or thinner and some bigger or fatter, and on the count of three, they all broke their stick with ease.

“This is what I wanted you to see,” exclaimed the father, “no matter how big or strong the stick is, it can be easily broken, but when the sticks are bound together as one unit, it cannot. So too, my dear children, however strong or successful or wealthy or clever you are, unless you bind yourselves together, you remain vulnerable and weak. But once you are all bound together, your individual weaknesses will not be exploited, and you will become an unbreakable unit. And this is what I beg of you, my dear children.”

PROPER BALANCE

Rabbi Moshe Schochet

"A wealthy person should not give more, and a poor person should not give less than the half of a shekel." (30:15)

The Torah instructs us in the mitzvah of machatzis ha'shekel - the requirement that each person twenty years and over give a half of a shekel to the Mishkan. One may not give more or less.

The Noam Elimelech shares an incredible insight based on this pasuk. He explains that the Torah is not only referring to the contribution of the machatzis ha'shekel. Rather, the Torah is also teaching us that a person who is affluent in mitzvos should not see himself as great, and a person lacking mitzvos should not see himself as lowly. Instead, each type of person should continue to push themselves in a direction of growth and yiras Hashem.

The Noam Elimelech is highlighting a powerful message. As we progress through life, we can't allow ourselves to become too overconfident or too insecure. We have to remember to stay the course and keep plugging away, especially when it comes to our avodas Hashem. If we keep this in mind, we are sure to guarantee that our relationship with Hashem will continue to grow and flourish!

HUMILITY AND PRIDE

Reb Noson of Breslov

"A wealthy person should not give more, and a poor person should not give less than the half of a shekel. Giving this contribution to G-d will atone for your souls." (30:15)

The "wealthy" should not think they have attained a greater level of G-dly knowledge, and the "poor" should not think they lack the capability to acquire this knowledge. Each can contribute to the building of the Tabernacle, the Temple of G-d, the holy intellect. (Likutey Halakhot VII, p. 172a)

Shekel (שקל) comes from the same root as mishkal (משקל, scale), which has weights on each side and must be perfectly balanced in the middle. This symbolizes the choice between brazenness and humility. The wealthy must not have arrogance, and the poor must not feel humiliated by false modesty despite their difficulties in life. The scale shows that brazenness and false modesty are the same blemish. (Likutey Halakhot I, p. 90a)

SPACED RUNGS

Rebbe Nachman

"G-d spoke to Moshe, saying..." (30:17)

A Jew ascends the ladder of spirituality by performing mitzvos. The mitzvos correspond to the rungs of the ladder. Just as each rung leads to another, so too, each mitzvah performance leads to another. As our Sages teach: "The reward for a mitzvah is another mitzvah" (Avos 4:2).

However, just as a ladder requires space between its rungs, so too, there must be levels between the mitzvos, for the mitzvos are crucial to our spiritual growth. These levels are alluded to in the oft-repeated and seemingly redundant phrase "G-d spoke to Moshe, saying." (See Likutey Moharan II, 59)

[Rabbi Chaim Kramer adds: The reiteration of this phrase, which interrupts the listing of commandments, alludes to those levels between the performance of mitzvos.

It appears that Rebbe Nachman means that a person must evaluate his performance of the mitzvos - Did he do his best? Was he sincere? How much effort did he put in? and so on - and assess his ability to approach the next mitzvah with an improved recognition of G-d.]

KINGDOM OF KOHANIM

Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

"Make a laver of copper and a stand of copper for it, for washing..." (30:18)

Every morning, right when we wake up, we are required to wash our hands. According to one opinion, we wash because our hands might have touched something that necessitates washing for cleanliness.

The Rashba, however, in one of his responsa (1:191), gives a different explanation. He writes that each morning, we are to acknowledge that we have been created to serve and bring honor to Hashem, and so "we must bring upon ourselves His sanctity, and wash our hands like a kohen who washes."

According to the Rashba, each morning, we are like a kohen preparing to enter the Beis HaMikdash. As God proclaimed before Matan Torah, ואתם תהיו לי ממלכת כהנים - we are to become a "kingdom of kohanim" (Shemos 19:6). Every one of us is a kohen. The world is our "Mishkan," and our "avodah" is קידוש שם שמיים, to bring glory to God through our conduct. The obligation of נטילת ידיים in the morning applies to each and every one of us, not only to rabbis, not only to kollel students, and not only to the outstanding tzaddikim.

Each person is a kohen, and each morning, when we open our eyes and get out of bed, we prepare to serve God in the "Mikdash" - in shul, in the office, at home, in the gym, in the mall, on the highway, on the bus, at a simcha, wherever we are. At all times, we must see ourselves as kohanim in the Beis HaMikdash, charged with the role of serving Him and bringing glory to His Name

FREE FROM IMPURITIES

Rebbe Nachman

“Now, you must take for yourself choice spices: five hundred shekel-weights of pure myrrh...” (30:23)

One of the ingredients in the oil of holy anointing was Mar dror (pure myrrh) which was free of impurities. Targum Onkelos translates this phrase as Meira Dachya, which is similar in sound to Mordechai, the tzaddik who figures prominently in the Purim story.

One who attaches himself to the tzaddik and his teachings - a man “free of impurities” - gains freedom from his materialistic burdens. (See Likutey Moharan I, 10:8)

ANOINTING THE MIND

Rebbe Nachman

“Make it into an oil of holy anointing...” (30:25)

“Oil” refers to the intellect. (Likutey Moharan I, 4:10)

A person must “anoint” his intellect with holiness. When he draws holiness into his intellect, he can continuously expand his mind. (See Likutey Moharan I, 54)

SPICE OF UNITY

Reb Noson of Breslov

“Hashem said to Moshe, ‘Take for yourself spices of nataf, shecheilet and galbanum...’” (30:34)

The ketores (incense-offering) was made from eleven spices, ten of which had fragrant aromas and one, galbanum, which had a foul smell. The fact that galbanum had to be included in the ketores teaches us that we must include even sinners in our prayers. (Kerisus 6b)

The ten sweet-smelling spices also represent the Ten Types of Song (see Pesachim 117a), the height of joy. Yet even these are considered incomplete unless we learn how to blend in even a foul-smelling spice - i.e., to bind ourselves together with sinners and thereby elevate them to G-d. One who does so merits true prayer. (Likutey Halakhot I, p. 2b)

The Ten Types of Song (see Pesachim 117a) correspond to the ten sweet-smelling spices. If one experiences moments of sadness or depression (symbolized by the galbanum), he must grab hold of them and bring them into joy, thereby transforming depression into joy.

This also explains why the ketores (incense-offering) effects forgiveness for slander. The nature of slander is to separate between people. By bringing different types of spices together, the ketores show how we can heal dissension and increase unity among people. (Likutey Halakhot I, p. 312)

PRIORITIZED BY INTENTIONS

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

“See, I have called by name Betzalel the son of Uri... to devise skillful works in gold, silver, and copper.” (31:2-4)

Since machshavos (“skillful works”) may be rendered literally as “thoughts” or “intentions,” this passage can be construed to imply that Betzalel knew the intentions of everyone who contributed gifts for the Mishkan’s building, and he devised a use for each gift - from the feed for the cattle drawing the wagons to the Holy of Holies itself - in accordance with the purity of the donor’s intentions in making the gift. Thus, gifts entirely untainted by ulterior motivations such as pride or ambition on the part of their donor would be placed into the most sacred vessels of the Sanctuary.

DISCOVERING OUR MISSION

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

“See, I have called by name Betzalel the son of Uri, the son of Chur, from the tribe of Yehudah. I have endowed him with a divine spirit: with wisdom, insight, knowledge, and with [skill] in every craft. (31:2-3)

The Torah tells us that due to his deep wisdom, Betzalel was chosen to build everything contained in the Mishkan. Linguistically, the verse says that Hashem had “called” (past tense) Betzalel for this task instead of saying “I am calling” (present tense). This suggests, explains Rav Moshe Feinstein (Megged Givos Olam, vol. 1, p. 97), that Betzalel had already been tasked with this mission. However, this is the Torah’s first reference to Betzalel; if so, when was he previously “called” to take on this monumental mission?

Rav Moshe answers by pointing out the very next verse: “I have filled him with a G-dly spirit: with wisdom, insight, knowledge, and with [skill] in every craft.” From the very fact that Hashem gave Betzalel such unique talents, writes Rav Moshe, it must be that he was destined for this role. Essentially, therefore, his “calling” came from the talents that Hashem had given him, for if a person is blessed with talents or gifts, it means that Hashem has entrusted him with a responsibility to use them in an appropriate way. (This also answers why Hashem told Moshe to “see,” for when Moshe saw Betzalel’s abilities, it was clear that he was destined for the task at hand.)

In fact, Rav Yisrael Salanter took this message so seriously that when he once formulated an ingenious approach to answer a contradiction in the words of the Rambam, instead of being delighted at the brilliance of his resolution, he became disheartened. He said, “If I am able to come up with such a pleasing solution, it must be that I have been granted a great deal of natural ability. In Heaven, they don’t give such things as gifts, rather, they give it as means to serve Hashem, and perhaps I am not using my talents to the fullest.”

While we might not have the exemplary talents as Betzalel or Rav Yisrael Salanter, each of us does possess unique skills and attributes with which to serve Hashem. These qualities should not be considered as mere gifts but as a designation of responsibility, for as we have seen from the message above, when we discover our talents, we have discovered our mission.

SHAPING THE INTELLECT

Rebbe Nachman

"I have imbued all who are wise hearted with wisdom..." (31:6)

G-d places wisdom within the "understanding" of the heart. Although the mind - which corresponds to the sefirah of Chokmah (Wisdom) - contains all the information that a person needs, that information must be processed through the heart - which corresponds to the sefirah of Binah (Understanding). When one's heart gives the proper shape to his intellect, expressing it in good thoughts, words and deeds, his intellect can bear proper fruit. (See Likutey Moharan I, 49:1)

GIFTED WITH SHABBOS

Nikolsberger Rebbe

"Only observe My Shabbosos, for it is a sign between Me and you for your generations..." (31:13)

Hashem did not give Shabbos as a mitzvah to observe, but as a gift from His treasure chest.

EASY PICKINGS

Lenchener Rebbe

"Only observe My Shabbosos, for it is a sign between Me and you for your generations..." (31:13)

While Shabbos gives us rest, it is also the easiest mitzvah to perform. Once Shabbos arrives Friday at sunset, the performance of the mitzvah has begun. It stays every moment and does not leave for even one second until the next night.

SANCTIFIED WORK

Gerrer Rebbe

"Only observe My Shabbosos, for it is a sign between Me and you for your generations..." (31:13)

For the construction of the Tabernacle, the Talmud (Shabbos 73) lists thirty-nine tasks that were needed, representing various forms of labor. We learn from this that just as all the tasks were dedicated for the Tabernacle, so too our weekday activities should emphasize Shabbos, and therefore all work will have a sanctity.

JOYFUL FOR THEIR JOY

Gerrer Rebbe

"Only observe My Shabbosos, for it is a sign between Me and you for your generations..." (31:13)

In the Amidah (silent prayer) of Sabbath morning, we say: "Moshe rejoiced in the gift of his portion." When Moshe discovered that Israel appreciated the gift of Shabbos and the Holy Days, he was joyous.

SANCTIFIED BY SHABBOS

Shem MiShmuel

"Only observe My Shabbosos, for it is a sign between Me and you for your generations..." (31:13)

The Hebrew word ach ("only") may be construed as excluding Shabbos from the days on which the work of the Mishkan may be done. (Rashi)

The Ramban asks: If the expression ach implies a narrowing qualification, it would have to set limits to the sanctity of Shabbos, but isn't this passage intended to magnify the importance of Shabbos by indicating that one may not even work on the Mishkan's construction on Shabbos?

He answers as follows: The Torah frequently employs the expression ach to indicate a modification of what has been said before (as in "let them be married to whom they think best; but only into the family of their father's tribe shall they be married" - Bamidbar 36:6; or in "Rise up, go with them, but only the word that I speak to you, that you shall do" - Bamidbar 22:20).

In this passage, too, ach denotes a modification of what has gone before, i.e., that the Sanctuary that has been discussed in detail in the passages immediately preceding will indeed be a true dwelling place of the Holy Presence "but only if you shall keep My Shabbosos." This implies that "if you will not keep My Shabbos, all the work will have been done in vain."

Hence, if Shabbos observance is an essential prerequisite for the Mishkan's sanctity, it stands to reason that Shabbos takes precedence over the work connected with the Mishkan's construction, and no such work may be done on Shabbos.

SHABBOS AND THE TZADDIK

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

"Only observe My Shabbosos, for it is a sign between Me and you for your generations..." (31:13)

We can say that the Torah alludes here to a different idea. If all the Jewish people would observe Shabbos properly, that would be ideal. However, since regrettably many do not observe Shabbos properly, the Torah gives us the following assurance:

The tzaddikim of every generation do keep Shabbos properly, giving pleasure to G-d. Moreover, the tzaddik himself is referred to as "Shabbos," as is known (Zohar 2:94b). This is why the verse tells us, "Only observe My Shabbosos," alluding to the situation when the Shabbos observers are in the minority - since the word "only" is limiting. The verse commands, "Observe My Shabbosos," which literally reads: "My Shabbosos, you will guard." Taking the word for "My Shabbosos" as the subject rather than the object of the verb "you will guard," this phrase can be read, "My Shabbosos will guard you" indicating that through the tzaddikim, who are called "Shabbos," the Jewish people are safeguarded from harm. In the merit of the Shabbos observance of the righteous, the rest of the Jewish people are shielded and protected.

This is because, as the verse continues, "it is a sign between Me and you." The tzaddik is also referred to as a "sign" (Zohar 1:266a). The tzaddik is a sign and serves as an indication of the bond that exists between the Jewish people and G-d, so that all "know that I am G-d Who sanctifies you," meaning that through tzaddikim the holiness of G-d is publicized. The righteous bring enlightenment to the world, informing humanity of G-d's holiness. By the tzaddikim serving as such a sign, the Jewish people are elevated and protected against harmful influences. Since tzaddikim observe Shabbos properly, G-d considers it as if all the Jewish people observe Shabbos properly.

Thus, allegorically, this verse can be read, "[Even if] only [some of you observe Shabbos properly,] the tzaddikim [who are called 'Shabbos'] will safeguard you, for [the tzaddik] is a sign [of the bond] between Me and you, making it known that I am G-d Who sanctifies you."

GIFT OF SHABBOS

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

"You shall speak to the Children of Israel, saying, 'Only observe My Shabbosos, for it is a sign between Me and you for your generations, to know that I am G-d Who sanctifies you.'" (31:13)

G-d wanted to give all the Jewish people a portion in the World to Come. Therefore, He gave them Torah and mitzvos so they could earn it by studying the Torah and observing the commandments (Makkos 23b). Now, G-d wished to give the Jewish people a foretaste of the reward they would receive in the World to Come, and so He gave them Shabbos. The delight experienced on Shabbos is akin to the bliss experienced in the World to Come (Berachos 57b). On Shabbos, everyone can discern this spiritual pleasure.

However, the reward for a mitzvah is not given in this world (Kiddushin 39b), so how is it possible for a person to experience the bliss of Shabbos if Shabbos bliss is a taste of the reward for our observance of the mitzvos? For this reason, G-d cleverly gave Shabbos to the Jewish people not as a reward but as a gift. Although the reward

for mitzvos is not given in this world, G-d can give a gift in this lowly world, allowing those who perform His will by observing Shabbos to experience a delight that approximates the bliss experienced in the World to Come.

This is the deeper meaning of the phrase "Only observe My Shabbosos," which we can interpret to mean, "I cannot give you the reward for observing Shabbos in this world, but by observing Shabbos, you will have a taste of the spiritual pleasure that awaits you as your reward, and this will serve as a sign - an indication - regarding the reward you will receive in the World to Come."

That is what the verse means when it says, "It is a sign... to know that I am G-d Who sanctifies you," implying that "through observing Shabbos, you will know that I am G-d Who sanctifies you, thereby preparing you for the eternal world, the world that is a continuous experience of the heightened Divine consciousness of Shabbos" (see Tamid 7:4, Rosh Hashana 31a).

This is what G-d commanded Moshe here. He told Moshe to inform the Jewish people not about the mitzvah of Shabbos itself, but about this precious gift - what they will be able to grasp on Shabbos, that is, a taste - of the spiritual bliss of the World to Come. For Moshe had already informed them about all the mitzvos. Here, however, he explained to them the virtue they would attain by observing this mitzvah, that is, the pleasure they would experience on Shabbos, so that the Jewish people would better appreciate the reward awaiting them in the future.

EAGER FOR SHABBOS

Ohr HaChaim

"The Children of Israel shall observe Shabbos, observing Shabbos throughout their generations..." (31:16)

The word v'shamru should not be translated as, "And they shall guard," but rather as, "And they shall anticipate." This is from the description of Yaakov Avinu with regard to the dreams of his son Yosef: V'aviv shamar es ha'davar - "And his father [anxiously] awaited the fulfillment of the thing [Yosef's dreams]" (Bereishis 37:11).

Similarly, every Jew should not simply guard the sanctity of Shabbos, but rather he should anticipate it. One should not enter the holy Shabbos complacently, or consider it a burden, but rather await it with great eagerness, as one would await the arrival of a most revered guest.

NEVER TOO LATE

Reb Noson of Breslov

"The Children of Israel shall observe Shabbos." (31:16)

The Torah juxtaposes the mention of Shabbos with the account of the golden calf. In the merit of Shabbos, there is always hope. Even if a person commits the worst sin - even if he worships idolatry - he can repent and be forgiven. (Likutey Halakhot III, p. 38a)

JUST ONE SHABBOS

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

“The Children of Israel shall observe Shabbos.” (31:16)

The Talmud states, “If the Jewish people were to observe two Shabbosim, they would immediately be redeemed” (Shabbos 118b).

When a person observes Shabbos properly and correctly, he receives vitality and spiritual sustenance from that Shabbos for the entire week that follows, enabling him to serve G-d that week (Zohar 1:75b).

And when a person serves G-d the entire week, it becomes easier for him to observe the following Shabbos properly. And so the cycle continues.

On this basis we can solve an apparent contradiction. In the Talmud Yerushalmi, it says, “If the Jewish people were to keep a single Shabbos, they would immediately be redeemed” (Yerushalmi Taanis 1:1). Yet in the Talmud Bavli, it says two Shabbosim, as cited above.

Of principal importance is the observance of a single Shabbos. When a person observes even a single Shabbos properly, then the following week he will serve G-d with a pure heart, and as a result it will be easy for him to observe the second Shabbos properly.

Consequently, of foremost importance is to properly observe a single Shabbos. Through observing a single Shabbos correctly, the observance of the second Shabbos is facilitated, and likewise the subsequent Shabbos, and so on.

This idea is alluded to in the verse “The Children of Israel shall observe Shabbos,” implying that they should keep a single Shabbos, in order “to make Shabbos,” alluding to the second Shabbos, which implies that the next Shabbos will be observed much more easily. This is the deeper interpretation of the passage as a whole: “The Children of Israel shall observe Shabbos to make Shabbos.”

SHABBOS DWELLING

Yalkut Reuveni

“The Children of Israel shall observe Shabbos, observing Shabbos throughout their generations...” (31:16)

Le’dorosam (“throughout their generations”) is spelled without the vav. Hence, it may be read le’dirosam (“throughout their dwelling places”).

When Shabbos enters and the dwelling place of the Jewish home is ready to receive it, if the Shabbos table is set and the lights have been kindled, the Shechinah says: “I will dwell here with you.”

MARK OF SHABBOS

Chofetz Chaim

“It shall be a sign between Me and the Children of Israel forever...” (31:17)

The Shabbos is the sign, the identifying mark, of a Jew. Just as the sign on the door of a home indicates who lives inside, so too, Shabbos is a sign marking the place where a Jew dwells. Likewise, a shop that is closed on Shabbos is marked as a Jewish enterprise.

SEEING THEIR BEST

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“When G-d finished speaking with Moshe on Har Sinai, He gave him the two Tablets of the Testimony.” (31:18)

G-d gave Moshe the tablets on the 40th day of his stay on the mountain. But the people had already made the Golden Calf on the 39th day! In other words, even after the people had committed this most heinous sin, G-d continued to teach the Torah to Moshe, and even gave him the tablets in order to transmit the Torah to all the Jewish people.

Similarly, we should always see people in their best light, encouraging them to study the Torah and fulfill G-d’s commandments even if their actions seem to contradict G-d’s wishes. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 11, pp. 179-180) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

STAFF OF TORAH

Rebbe Nachman

“When G-d finished speaking with Moshe on Har Sinai, He gave him the two Tablets of the Testimony.” (31:18)

The Tablets measured six handbreadths long by six handbreadths wide. (Bava Basra 14a)

The Tablets correspond to the letter vav (ו), which has the numerical value of six and which is shaped like a staff. The Torah that a person studies is like a staff which he can use to beat his evil inclination and drive it away. (See Likutey Moharan I, 1:7)

NEVER GIVE UP

Rabbi Moshe Schochet

“And the people saw that Moshe was delayed in coming down from the mountain, the people gathered against Aharon and said to him, ‘Come, make us a god who shall go before us.’” (32:1)

The Torah (32:1-35) highlights one of the most infamous episodes in all of the Torah, that of the Golden Calf. Many have tried to understand how it could be possible that the Jewish people, just weeks after having received the Torah, were dancing around an idol.

Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz (Sichos Mussar) suggests an explanation based on the Gemara in Shabbos (89a). The Gemara records that the Satan approached Klal Yisrael on what they thought was the 40th day. They were wondering why Moshe had not yet descended from Har Sinai. After a back-and-forth discussion, the Satan presented an

image of Moshe in a coffin, claiming that Moshe had died and would not be returning. When Bnei Yisrael saw that image, they immediately approached Aharon with the idea of constructing the egel.

Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz explains that when Klal Yisrael thought that their leader Moshe had died, they felt lost and hopeless. It is possible that a person could have just experienced prophecy, when having received the Torah, and then when experiencing despair, fall as low as dancing around an idol, just a few short weeks later.

Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz is teaching us a very important lesson. Giving up cannot and should not be part of our vocabulary. While we all must confront difficult situations and challenges throughout our lives, we must constantly forge ahead. With this approach in mind, we can use the obstacles that we are presented with as opportunities to strengthen ourselves and our relationship with Hashem!

FINDING THE TZADDIK

Reb Noson of Breslov

“And the people saw that Moshe was delayed in coming down from the mountain, the people gathered against Aharon and said to him, ‘Come, make us a god who shall go before us. For we don’t know what happened to this man Moshe who took us out of the land of Egypt.’” (32:1)

At Sinai, the Jews merited to a holy spirit. They had already witnessed many miracles - the Ten Plagues, the Splitting of the Sea - and had just merited the Revelation and the Giving of the Torah. How could it be that after witnessing all these miracles, they made a golden calf and worshipped it as a god? Moreover, if that generation of spiritually - aware Jews could make a golden calf after receiving the Torah, how can the Torah influence the drives and desires of lesser generations?

G-d did not create the world for angels but for human beings, in order to give man a forum for exercising his free will. Opposing man are the forces of evil, which continually seek ways to deflect each person from G-d. The main means of concealing G-d from a person is by concealing the tzaddikim who can teach him about G-d. Therefore, we find that the people made the golden calf because “Moshe was delayed... we do not know what happened to him.” When the tzaddik is concealed, G-d is concealed. (Likutey Halakhot II, p. 122a)

The same applies to each generation, as the verse states: “Go... to the judge of that time” (Devarim 17:9; see Rashi). Each leading tzaddik in his time is compared to Moshe. Today, the fact that the Jews have already received the Torah gives them the merit and ability to find the tzaddik in each generation who will draw them close to G-d. Thus, it is written, “They will believe in you, too, forever” (Shemos 19:9). In every generation, they will merit to faith and belief in the tzaddik. (Likutey Halakhot II, p. 244)

The Jews had just received the Torah from G-d Himself and had collectively attained a level of ruach ha’kodesh (Divine inspiration). How was it possible to fall so quickly and precipitously into idol worship?

The Jews’ error lay in thinking that Moshe was gone. We learn from this episode never to become lax in our spiritual vigilance. No matter what level we have attained, we must continually strive towards higher levels. These levels are revealed through the tzaddik, who surpassed our plateau long ago. By continually reaching out to the tzaddik’s influence and teachings, to the level of Divine inspiration which he has attained, we will not err and think we have already “made it.” No, we will always seek greater heights. But if we become lax and do not seek the tzaddik or his guidance, we can fall dismally. We can even make a golden calf, notwithstanding the awesome spiritual achievements we have previously attained. (Likutey Halakhot VII, p. 214a)

The main blemish of the golden calf can be traced to the mixed multitude veering away from Moshe’s leadership: “For we don’t know what happened to this man Moshe.” Had they remained steadfast in their faith in Moshe, they would have asked Aharon, Chur, and/or Yehoshua to teach them how to continue in the path that Moshe had revealed. Instead, they rejected the tzaddik. This ultimately led to idolatry. (Likutey Halakhot VIII, p. 243a)

We see that the power of the mixed multitude lies in their ability to arouse questions and doubts about the true tzaddikim, the true leaders. (Likutey Halakhot I, p. 248)

STRAIGHT TO THE SOURCE

Rebbe Nachman

“Make us a god that will go before us...” (32:1)

The Jews erred in thinking that they needed an intermediary between themselves and G-d.

They received manna directly from Heaven; their water came from a rock that accompanied them on their journeys; the Clouds of Glory cleaned their clothes; and even more, they attained an open revelation of G-d. Yet they mistakenly continued to think that they needed an intermediary - and now that Moshe had failed to return from the mountaintop, they sought a god, or “authority.”

Similarly, some people believe that G-d must work through natural means. They think that a sick person can be healed only if he takes medicine, and that someone can earn a living only through natural means. None of this is really necessary. If G-d wants, He can provide healing and livelihood even without these means.

We must not view these intermediaries as inherently important, but pray to G-d directly to fulfill all our needs. (See Likutey Moharan I, 62:6)

TOOL OF RENEWAL

Premishlaner Rebbe

"And he fashioned it with a tool." (32:4)

When a person repents, a new person is created as though a new child is born. Cheret, "tool," represents charatah, "regret." In having regret (charata) to the point of repentance, one fashions a tool (cheret) to become a new person.

HEIGHTS OF REPENTANCE

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"And they offered sacrifices [to the calf]." (32:6)

How could the people who witnessed G-d's miracles and experienced His revelation at Har Sinai commit such a blatant transgression so soon afterward? True, only a small percentage of the people worshipped the Calf, but even this is hard to imagine.

The sages of the Talmud therefore teach us that indeed, the Jews at that point were incapable of sinning. In order to enable the people to rise to the heights of spiritual achievement only attainable through repentance, G-d "forced" the entire incident upon them.

In this light, we can all focus on our past misdeeds as opportunities through which we can scale spiritual heights that we could not rise to otherwise. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 16, pp. 412-413) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

DEPENDENT ON THE PEOPLE

Rebbe Nachman

"G-d told Moshe, 'Go down, for your people whom you took out of the land of Egypt have become corrupt.'" (32:7)

G-d had raised Moshe to a high spiritual level for the sake of the Jewish people. Since now they had descended from their level, he, too, had to "go down" spiritually. (Rashi)

The tzaddik's ability to attain great spiritual levels and Torah insights is dependent on the nation. (See Likutei Moharan I, 49:7)

PROPER PROCRASTINATION

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"They have departed quickly from the way I commanded them; they have made for themselves a molten calf..." (32:8)

The fact that the Jewish people sinned with the Egel Ha'zahav is something that we are suffering from until this very day, since the magnitude of this action is so great, and the ramifications are extremely far-reaching. Rav Gamliel Rabinowitz shlit'a explains this tremendous atrocity by zeroing in on one small word: maher (quickly).

Everyone is human and has free will; therefore, it follows that we all err at times. It is true that Bnei Yisrael made a terrible mistake, but the fact that they fell so fast is an even greater tragedy.

When we are faced with a nisayon, a decision needs to be made quickly! We must take a stand and fight against the yetzer hara. Just putting up a fight will allow us to slow down the evil influences that surround us.

We may even "borrow" a tactic that our greatest enemy uses to make us sin...

Amalek uses the concept of machar (tomorrow) to make us push off doing mitzvos. The pasuk states: V'tzei hilachem ba'Amalek machar (Shemos 17:9). Moshe was telling them, "Go out and fight Amalek with the power of 'machar.'"

Amalek / the yetzer hara tells us, "Of course you should learn Torah and do mitzvos, but not now, tomorrow!" This idea can be turned around and utilized to fight against the Amalek inside us that tries to make us sin.

The difference between מהר (quickly) and מחר (tomorrow) is a little tiny piece of a letter that symbolizes that tiny second it takes for one to fall and begin a long, slippery descent to the lowest of the low.

We must jump quickly to do the will of Hashem, but when something is wrong or even questionable, we must say, "Let me wait till tomorrow. Let me think it through." Surely, by then we will have the time to gather our strength to overcome and emerge victorious from even the most difficult test!

STIFF-NECKED STRENGTH

The Izbiter

"I have seen this people, and behold! It is a stiff-necked people." (32:9)

This is a statement of praise, as mentioned in the Midrash Rabbah. The fact that they are a stiff-necked people allows them to withstand the persecutions of exile.

PROPER PRAYERS

Rebbe Nachman

"Moshe pleaded before G-d his Lord..." (32:11)

Va'yechal (ויחל, he pleaded) is similar to Chalah (חלה, activated).

Through proper prayer, one activates the merits of the Patriarchs, which protect the Jews and enhance the sanctity of the Holy Land. (See Likutei Moharan I, 55:8)

When praying to G-d on behalf of others, the tzaddik minimizes the gravity of their sin. When he rebukes others, however, he explicates the seriousness of their wrongdoing. (See Likutei Moharan I, 22:1)

TIME TO PRAISE, TIME TO REBUKE

Ropshitzer Rebbe

“Moshe turned and descended from the mountain.” (32:15)

This is a lesson for our leaders. While Moshe was with Hashem, he was constantly praising the Jews. However, when he came down from the mountain, he admonished them.

This shows that a leader should praise his people to others, but when he is talking to them in person, he can enumerate their transgressions.

PERMANENTLY ENGRAVED

Sefas Emes

“The Tablets are the work of G-d.” (32:16)

The writing of the Ten Commandments on stone became indelibly inscribed in the hearts of the people forever. That is why it is “the work of G-d.”

SHATTERING THE LUCHOS

Reb Noson of Breslov

“And Moshe stood at the gate of the camp and said, ‘Whoever is for Hashem, [come] to me!’ and all of the Leviim gathered to him.” (32:26)

Moshe had to effect forgiveness for the Jews after they made the golden calf. He realized that unless he entered the depths of sin, he could not elevate from there the souls that had fallen. By breaking the Tablets, Moshe demonstrated his willingness to sacrifice himself completely for his people. He was willing to sacrifice everything he had worked to attain in order to effect forgiveness even for those Jews who were most distant from G-d.

We find that this act of self-sacrifice was so great that G-d thanked him for it, saying: “The first Tablets that you shattered” (Shemos 34:1). Our Sages read *Asher shibarta* (אשר שברת, that you shattered) as *yashir kochakha she’shibarta* (ישיר כחך ששברת, you should have more strength now that you shattered them) (Shabbos 87a).

Were the Tablets not broken, the Torah would never be forgotten. (Eruvin 54a)

By breaking the Tablets, Moshe showed that a person who commits a grave error should not think that all is lost. Instead, he should forget his wrongful past and begin anew. (Likutey Halakhos V, p. 230)

The breaking of the Tablets signifies forgetting the past and getting on with our lives. Were we to remember every bad thing that we did or that happened to us, we would never be able to move forward. Since the Tablets were broken, we are able to forget and move on with our lives. (ibid., I, p. 480)

HOLY ZEAL

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

“And Moshe stood at the gate of the camp and said, ‘Whoever is for Hashem, [come] to me!’ and all of the Leviim gathered to him.” (32:26)

The tribe of Levi, who rushed forth to defend the honor of Hashem were told subsequently by Moshe to kill anyone who was guilty of serving the Golden Calf, even if they were a close relative. Without hesitation, they all went and fulfilled Moshe’s words, leaving around three thousand men dead (Shemos 32:27-28).

This tremendous zeal to fulfill Moshe’s words is somewhat understandable to us. After all, Hashem spoke “face to face” with Moshe, and so when it was Moshe who was telling the Leviim to kill everyone involved in the sin, they knew that it was one hundred percent the will of Hashem and in turn they acted with great joy to fulfill His will.

Today, we do not have Moshe telling us what to do and how to live our lives. We do not have Prophets around to direct us at every turn, and we do not even have the possibility to ask the gedolim of our generation every little question we may have. If so, is life just a “guessing game” where we hope that we are fulfilling Hashem’s will but in reality we can never be sure?

The Toras Avraham answers that Hashem gave the post-prophecy generation a wonderful gift - the ability and inner clarity to determine the correct path for each of us to take once we make an honest cheshbon ha’nefesh, personal accounting of our lives.

But even when we make a decision, we need to constantly ask ourselves, am I heading in the right direction or am I only doing this because it was the right decision all that time ago? In essence, this is the message of the Ramchal’s opening words of the Mesillas Yesharim:

“The foundation of saintliness and the root of complete service [of Hashem] is man’s [ability to] evaluate and validate what his obligation is in the world and towards what he needs to direct his vision and aspiration in everything that he is working on all the days of his life.”

This approach was firmly taken by the Chofetz Chaim during the twenty five years that it took to write the acclaimed Mishnah Berurah. It was during those years that he suffered many personal tragedies including the loss of children and immense poverty. One day, after returning home to witness his bare house and hungry family, he banged on the table and declared “Satan, Satan, you won’t stop me! The world needs the Mishnah Berurah!”

Despite all of the challenges, when he could have looked at everything that was befalling him as a “Heavenly sign” to stop what he was doing, the Chofetz Chaim decided what his obligation was at that time and did not let anything stop him from achieving his service to Hashem. And now, over one hundred years later, the entire

Ashkenazi world relies almost exclusively on the teachings of the Mishnah Berurah which came about because the Chofetz Chaim decided that this is what he had to do for the Jewish People.

WILLING TO RISK IT ALL

Chiddushei HaRim

“And Moshe stood at the gate of the camp and said, ‘Whoever is for Hashem, [come] to me!’ and all of the Leviim gathered to him.” (32:26)

There were many Israelites who did not participate in the sin of the golden calf. The reason the Leviim were singled out was because they were ready to give their lives to fight against idolatry. Others were either neutral or not willing to get involved.

TRUE REGRET

Rabbi Yechezkel Taub of Kuzmir

“Moshe went back to Hashem, and said, ‘I implore! This people have sinned a great sin.’” (32:31)

If Moshe intended to pray to G-d in order to obtain forgiveness for the Jews, why did he stress the enormity of their sin?

He did this in order to emphasize their repentance. The basic prerequisite for true repentance is the acknowledgement of the full extent of one’s sin. People who are truly repentant seek neither excuses nor extenuating circumstances for their conduct but are contrite and filled with remorse.

Adam’s repentance for his sin in the Garden of Eden was of no avail because he claimed as an excuse “the woman whom You gave to be with me” (Bereishis 3:12).

Moshe, desiring to have his people’s repentance accepted by G-d, said: “Oh, this people have sinned a great sin - They freely admit that they were guilty of a terrible sin. They neither seek excuses for their behavior nor attempt to justify it. They are filled with remorse and authentically repent of their sin.

For this reason, O G-d, they are deserving of Your forgiveness.”

RECALLING OUR FAITH

Reb Shmuel Shmayeh Ostrovitzer

“Moshe went back to Hashem, and said, ‘I implore! This people have sinned a great sin.’” (32:31)

The word “this” is unnecessary. What Moshe was saying was that the people who transgressed were the same people who at the crossing of the Yam Suf said, “This is my G-d, and I will praise Him.” It was “this” same people who had sinned.

HUMBLE LEADER

Rebbe Nachman

“Yet now, if You will forgive their sin. But if not, erase me, I pray You, from Your book...” (32:32)

A humble Torah scholar can gain forgiveness for the sins of his people. Im ayin (if not) can also be translated as “if nothingness,” indicating total humility. Here Moshe is saying: Please forgive the Jews if I am completely humble. Otherwise, do away with me, lest I grow haughty.

Moshe made the ultimate sacrifice of offering himself before G-d in order to save every Jew. Even though the people sinned, he never dissociated himself from them, but always bound himself to them in order to draw them close to G-d. (See Likutey Moharan II, 82)

G-d’s Name is associated with the Jewish nation (Yerushalmi, Taanis 2:6). Moshe prayed to G-d to forgive the Jews for His Name’s sake, because if the Jews were to suffer, then G-d, through His association with us, would also suffer.

PLEADING FOR THE PEOPLE

Kli Yakar

“Yet now, if You will forgive their sin. But if not, erase me, I pray You, from Your book...” (32:32)

An alternative rendering of this passage is: “Yet now, whether or not You will forgive their sin, erase me, I pray You, from Your book...”

Moshe said to G-d: In either case, “erase me, I pray You, from Your book.” If You are willing to forgive them if they have someone to suffer for their sins, I am willing to serve as their instrument of atonement. And if You are not willing to forgive them, what use is my life? I have nothing left for which to live.

DENYING THE ILLUSION

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“My Presence will [again] go [with you].” (33:14)

By virtue of our Divine soul, we are all inherently and irrevocably bound to G-d, and are incapable of denying that bond - or even wanting to deny it.

We can go against G-d’s will only when our mind is overtaken by the illusion that ignoring this bond is somehow advantageous (Sotah 3a). But even then, deep down, we remain faithful to our intrinsic bond with G-d. (Tanya, Chapter 24)

We know that the illusion is a ruse. We are always able and ready to renew and reinstate our relationship with G-d. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 15, p. 407) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

SELF-SACRIFICE

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"My Presence will [again] go [with you]." (33:14)

Moshe asked G-d to omit his name from the Torah if He would refuse to forgive the Jews. Moshe was willing to sacrifice his connection with the Torah for the sake of his people - all of his people, even those who worshipped the Golden Calf.

We can all emulate Moshe's self-sacrifice for the Jewish people. It is not sufficient to simply fulfill the commandment to "love your fellow as yourself"; we must be ready to sacrifice even that which we hold most dear for the benefit of the Jewish people in general and for every single Jew in particular - no matter how far away he may seem at that moment from G-d and His Torah. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 21, pp. 175-177) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

RECEIVING BY GIVING

Rabbi Elimelech Biderman

"And I will show favor when I choose to show favor." (33:19)

The Avodas Yisrael zy"ta taught, based on this pasuk, that sometimes Hashem causes a poor person to make his way to you just so that you have the opportunity to show him mercy and be gracious with him; and it will be with that particular merit that Hashem will show you mercy and be gracious with you (i.e., He can now give you from His endless source of blessing and goodness, midah k'neged midah, measure for a measure.)

You may think that you are doing the poor person a favor, but the reality is that Hashem is setting you up to receive incredible blessing and goodness from Him.

THE OMNIPRESENT

Rebbe Nachman

"And Hashem said, 'Behold, there is a place by Me, and you shall stand upon the rock...'" (33:21)

G-d is the Place of the World, but He Himself has no place (i.e., G-d is beyond spatiality). (Rashi)

Someone who has a heart that experiences G-dliness will never say that a particular place is not for him. For when one is with G-d, he too, transcends space, and he can find and experience G-dliness everywhere. (See Likutei Moharan II, 56)

WHEN TO STAND TALL

Rabbi Meir Shapiro of Lublin

"And Hashem said, 'Behold, there is a place by Me, and you shall stand upon the rock. When My glory passes by, I will put you in the cleft of the rock...'" (33:21-22)

Thus did G-d instruct the leader of the Jews: "Behold, there is a place by Me"; there comes a time at which My honor is at stake. Then "you shall stand upon the rock," tall and erect and firm as a rock to defend the honor of G-d. But "when My glory has passed by," when that moment has passed and the issue under debate is purely personal and of secondary importance, then you shall stand "in the cleft of the rock," hidden and humble.

STAYING WITHIN OUR LIMITS

Rebbe Nachman

"When My glory passes by, I will put you in the cleft of the rock. I will shield you with My hand until I pass by." (33:22)

A person requires limits on his search for G-dliness so he will not go beyond his capabilities. Although Moshe attained the highest perception of G-d that a man can reach in this world, he too, required limits regarding that perception. Thus, G-d placed him in a crevice. (See Likutei Moharan II, 5:7)

For the same reason, G-d placed His hand over Moshe. Otherwise, G-d's awesome light would have overwhelmed him. (See *ibid.*, II, 82)

BINDING KNOT

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"You may see My back; but My face may not be seen." (33:23)

By His "back," G-d meant, allegorically, the knot of His head-tefillin.

Our connection to G-d can be envisioned metaphorically as a multi-stranded cord tied to us on one end and to Him on the other. When we sin, we sever one of the strings that compose that cord.

In order to repent, we have to strengthen our commitment to G-d's will specifically with regard to how we just went against it. We have to tie a knot precisely where the string was severed. Joining two pieces of a severed string with a knot creates a stronger connection between the two pieces than existed before they were severed. (Igeret HaTeshuvah, Chapter 9)

This is why, when describing the process of repentance, G-d showed Moshe specifically the knot of the tefillin. Tefillin expresses our connection to G-d, and the knot teaches us that when it is necessary to repair that connection, we do so by strengthening our observance and our awareness that G-d is present in all facets of our lives.

By strengthening our connection to G-d, we hasten the advent of the messianic Redemption, when G-d's presence will be openly revealed - and it will no longer be necessary to remind ourselves of its reality. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 21, pp. 236-237) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

CLEAR IN RETROSPECT

Chasam Sofer

"You may see My back; but My face may not be seen." (33:23)

An alternative rendering of this passage is: "...and you may see [My ways] afterwards, but [they] may not be seen before."

Frequently, we don't understand the purpose of historical events or other events during our lives. Only after the passing of time do these events, and Providence's purpose in bringing them to pass become clear to us.

Thus, says the pasuk, "You may see My back" - only after the occurrence do we realize what Providence had in store for us - "but My face may not be seen," for at first it is impossible to know.

MODESTY AND DESIRE

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"Carve out for yourself two stone tablets like the first ones. And I will write upon these tablets the words which were on the first tablets that you broke." (34:1)

Moshe descended the mountain to the sound of merry-making in the camp of Israel. Upon seeing the Golden Calf and the manner in which the people were serving it, Moshe threw down the Luchos in anger and shattered them into pieces. After he dealt with the idolaters, Hashem told him to prepare a second set of Luchos like the first set, and to ascend the mountain again, alone, with these stones. The Midrash Tanchuma (Ki Sisa 31) contrasts these instructions to those regarding the first Luchos, which were given before the entire nation amidst thunder, lightning, and smoke on Har Sinai.

The midrash points out that because the first Luchos were given with great publicity, they were affected by an ayin hara and had no permanence. Even though it was Hashem Who brought about all this publicity, a negative "eye" was still attached to it. The lesson culled from this midrash is: Nothing can be more successful than that which is done modestly.

However, this midrash can be understood on a deeper level. The famed Kotzker Rebbe, Rav Menachem Mendel Morgenstern zt'l, explains that because the first Luchos had been given with such great fanfare and publicity, they acquired their holiness much more directly from the Almighty. On the other hand, the second set of Luchos was given to the Jewish people modestly, to the extent that it had to be sought out by the people; these Luchos could not be effective unless the people actually wanted them.

We see from here that only that which is acquired by one's wishes and desires, combined with his efforts, can attain permanence. That which comes without effort has much less chance of continuity.

DRINKING RESPONSIBLY

Ruzhiner Rebbe

"Carve out for yourself two stone tablets..." (34:1)

The Rebbe came to his beis medrash (house of study) unexpectedly and found a few students drinking whiskey.

Embarrassed, one of the students explained that the Koretzer Rebbe said that when Chasidim sit in a group and drink, it is the same as if they were studying Torah.

"That may be true," said the Ruzhiner, "with one difference. It is written: 'When you carve out (p'sal) two tablets' then it is holy. But it also is written: 'Do not make yourself an idol (pessel)' (Shemos 24:4), for it now becomes unholy. They are the same letters, but with a different meaning."

"When Chasidim sit and drink to bring a sense of unity and love for each other to strengthen their service to Hashem, then it is holy. However, if one drinks in the middle of the day for one's own gratification, then it is 'Do not make for yourself an idol.' It is better to learn Torah." (V. Cohen)

EQUIVALENCE AND COMPASSION

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

"G-d passed before him and proclaimed..." (34:6)

Rashi remarks that this verse teaches us that G-d enwrapped Himself in a tallis like the cantor leading congregational prayers.

My master and teacher, R' Dov Ber, the Maggid of Mezeritch, taught that the thirteen hermeneutical principles by which the Torah is expounded correspond to these thirteen attributes of mercy.

The first principle, that of deriving a minor principle from a major principle [קל וחומר, kal vachomer, literally, "light and heavy"] corresponds to the Divine Name Kel.

The second attribute, that of "compassionate," corresponds to the principle of how identical phrases in different verses indicate similarity in the detail of a law [גזרה שווה, gezeirah shavah, literally, "a decree of equivalence"].

This principle relates to the trait of compassion because, as a general rule, when a rich person has compassion for a pauper, the rich person must empathize with the pain and distress of the pauper in order to arouse his mercy for him. In this way, he puts himself on equal footing with the poor person, and the rich person is able to show mercy for the pauper, having placed himself on an equal standing with him.

G-d, as it were, does the same thing. As the verse says, "I am with him in his distress" (Tehillim 91:15). That is why the trait of "compassionate" is comparable to the hermeneutical principle of gezeirah shavah, which implies equivalence, as just explained.

ATTRIBUTES OF MERCY

Reb Noson of Breslov

"G-d passed before him and proclaimed, 'G-d! G-d! Compassionate and Gracious G-d, Slow to Anger, Great in Kindness and Truth...'" (34:6)

When G-d revealed Himself to Moshe, He taught him the Thirteen Attributes of Compassion. The main attribute is Erekh Apayim (Slow to Anger). One who has patience can outlast everything that seeks to overwhelm him, mitigating decrees and drawing lovingkindness and forgiveness so that he can enter into the service of G-d. (Likutey Halakhot I, p. 126-128)

G-d's Holy Name YHVH represents chessed (kindness). G-d did not create man and then leave him to fare for himself in this world. Rather, in His great kindness, He gave man the Torah and the ability to draw close to Him. But what happens if a person distances himself from G-d through sin? Therefore, it is written, "G-d, G-d" - meaning, "I am G-d before man sins, and I am G-d [even] after he sins." The latter level represents a much greater degree of chessed and therefore greater perfection, since G-d still has compassion for the sinner and will even transform his sins into good deeds if he repents before Him. (Likutey Halakhot III, p. 466)

The Thirteen Attributes of Compassion contain the attribute of Slow to Anger for the wicked as well as for the righteous, because G-d always seeks to judge everyone favorably. Thus, "He guards Lovingkindness for thousands" - even though a person has sinned thousands of times and made thousands of blemishes, G-d can and will forgive him (if he repents). (Likutey Halakhot I, p. 1b)

HASHEM'S KINDNESS

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"[G-d] preserves kindness for two-thousand generations... He remembers the premeditated sins of the fathers." (34:7)

G-d articulated these same two ideas in the Ten Commandments (Shemos 20:5-6) but in reverse order: "I am G-d... who remembers the premeditated sins of the fathers... and who shows kindness for two-thousand generations." Furthermore, in the Ten Commandments G-d says that He "shows kindness," while in this passage He says that He "preserves kindness."

We can explain these differences by noting that G-d demonstrates two types of kindness:

The first is the kindness that He shows toward someone who has done something wrong. Such a person needs G-d's kindness in order to rectify his misdeeds. This is the type of kindness referred to in the Ten Commandments, in which G-d describes Himself as "showing kindness" after the "sins of the fathers."

The kindness referred to here, in contrast, is that which G-d shows us simply because He loves us. This kindness is mentioned *before* any mention of sin. Therefore, G-d describes Himself here as "preserving," i.e., storing up His kindness for use at all times and under all circumstances. (Torah Ohr 69c) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

THE SPARK WITHIN THE SIN

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"...forgive premeditated misdeeds, rebellious misdeeds, and unintentional misdeeds." (34:7)

The Hebrew word for "forgive" (נָשָׂא) used in this verse literally means "carry" or "lift." Based on this, Rabbi Yisrael Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Chasidism, taught that G-d elevates the spark of holiness in the misdeed. Nothing, not even a sin, can exist unless it contains a spark of holiness. When a person repents, G-d elevates the Divine spark in his misdeed and returns it to its Divine source.

Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of the Chabad branch of Chasidism, explained this idea as follows: It is indeed impossible to elevate a sinful act; such an act is evil, and the only proper treatment for it is to renounce it. In contrast, the power of desire vested in the act is not evil, for it is possible to utilize this power to desire good as well as evil. When we repent properly, we divest our power of desire of its veneer of evil and restore it to its holy source. (Likutey Torah 4:61d) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

MERCIFUL SUPPLY AND DEMAND

Dubno Maggid

"Let Hashem, I pray you, go in the midst of us, for it is a stiff-necked people, and pardon our iniquity and our sin..." (34:9)

This passage can be explained with a parable: A peddler was standing on a broad and elegant avenue selling wooden spoons. He remained there all day, hawking his wares, but didn't make a penny. Arriving home late at night with an empty wallet he told his sad tale to a friend.

The friend demanded, "Didn't you know that the people on that avenue use only silver spoons? They're rich. They don't need your wooden spoons. Why not go to the street of the shoemakers? That's where you'll make some sales."

Similarly, Moshe spoke to G-d after G-d had shown him all the Divine attributes that He had "in stock" (mercy and grace, slowness to anger, readiness to forgive iniquity and transgression, and so forth - pesukim 6 and 7). Moshe said: "Let Hashem go in the midst of us" - the people. The angels in Heaven do not sin. They do not need Your Divine attributes. It is only our world here below that is in need of them, for Israel "is a stiff-necked people." Hence, O G-d, "pardon our iniquity and our sin."

DAYS FOR PREPARATION

Koznitzer Rebbe

“For a six-day period you may work, and on the seventh day you shall rest; you shall rest from plowing and harvesting.” (34:21)

The Hebrew word for plowing is charish, חרש. The ח stands for חמישי (Thursday), the ג stands for גביעי (Wednesday), and the ש stands for שישי (Friday). This tells us that Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday should be used as days to prepare for Shabbos.

WORRY-FREE SPEECH

Reb Elazar HaLevi Horowitz

“For a six-day period you may work, and on the seventh day you shall rest; you shall rest from plowing and harvesting.” (34:21)

The words tishbot (“you shall rest”), charish (“plowing”), and katzir (“harvesting”) teach us that on Shabbos one must not talk about subjects that are of a weekday nature. If we must discuss them, then it should be done in the shortest possible way (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 307).

By changing the vowels of the words - charish becoming charash (“to be quiet”) and katzir becoming katzer (“short”) - the pasuk suggests that one should be quiet and short in words, so that “tishbot” - you may rest.

DIVINE NOURISHMENT

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“[While Moshe was on Har Sinai] he ate no bread and drank no water.” (34:28)

Just as the physical food we eat nourishes our bodies, the Torah that we study and internalize nourishes our Divine soul. Thus, although Moshe did not consume physical food during each of the forty-day periods that he was atop Har Sinai, he most certainly consumed “spiritual” food, as he spent the entire time learning the Torah directly from G-d.

Referring to Moshe on Har Sinai, it is said in the Tehillim (78:25), “A [mortal] man ate the bread of the angels.” The angels subsist on whatever G-d allows them to comprehend about Him; they internalize this comprehension, and it fuels their existence. Moreover, their delight in this comprehension inspires them to Divine ecstasy, which they express by constantly singing songs of praise to G-d. When Moshe was on Har Sinai, he too subsisted on his comprehension of Divinity and the delight accompanying this comprehension.

Similarly, we can taste something of this spiritual nourishment and delight whenever we study the Torah, provided that we approach it as did Moshe, constantly aware that we are “hearing” it directly from G-d. (Ohr HaTorah, Shemos, vol. 6, pp. 2159-2160)

ACCORDING TO THE EFFORT

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“Moshe was not aware that the skin of his face had become radiant.” (34:29)

G-d Himself chiseled the first set of tablets out of the rocks on Har Sinai, whereas the second tablets were chiseled by Moshe. Nevertheless, it was specifically after receiving the second set of tablets, rather than the first set, that Moshe’s face shone.

This is because when something is given to us from G-d without our having worked to earn it, it does not penetrate our very being. It is thus no accident that the first tablets were broken, whereas the second set never were. When we work for something, it can remain with us permanently; something that is received unearned can be more easily lost.

Because Moshe chiseled the second tablets himself, their holiness could penetrate his physical body, and therefore his face shone. Similarly, the effort we expend in studying the Torah and fulfilling G-d’s commandments refines even our physical bodies. If we exert ourselves to the point that the Torah penetrates us, our faces glow. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 36, p. 179) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

MASKING HIS HUMILITY

Rabbi Akiva Eiger

“...and he put a veil on his face. But when Moshe went in before Hashem to speak with Him, he would remove the veil until he came out...” (34:33-34)

Moshe was the humblest of all men. But he was also the Jews’ leader and ruler. He therefore had to conceal his humility behind a veil of sternness and dignity. But when he went “before Hashem to speak with Him,” Moshe removed the mask of majesty and stood humbly before G-d, revealing his true humility.

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