

Keep It Going

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This week's parsha of Ki Sisa contains peaks of glory and splendor, depths of catastrophe, and a cataclysmic blow, followed by the greatest message of forgiveness in the Torah.

The calamitous sin and subsequent climb back to teshuvah resound through the ages.

The parsha recounts how the Bnei Yisroel were counted and learned of the ketores and its powers. Hashem told Moshe that he had selected Betzalel to construct the Mishkon, its keilim, and the bigdei kehunah. The gift of Shabbos was granted to us and Moshe was given the luchos.

But then the people sinned and fashioned the Eigel, changing the trajectory of history until today. Moshe descended from Har Sinai with the luchos Hashem had written and transferred to him. Upon witnessing the depravity to which his people had sunk, he threw the luchos to the ground and smashed them. He summoned the Levi'im to join him in waging war against the sinners.

Hashem wanted to destroy the Jews, but He relented after Moshe's pleas and quick action. Moshe was permitted to ascend the mountain once again and transcribe the luchos for deliverance to the chastised Jewish people. Hashem revealed the 13 Middos to Moshe and promised to allow the nation to enter the Promised Land.

It is apparent that as those who caused the Eigel accomplished their goal of weakening proper Torah leadership. The instigators of the Eigel, which they said would lead the Jews in place of Moshe, were the Eirev Rav, who had joined the

Jewish people as they exited Mitzrayim. When they succeeded in persuading Aharon to hesitantly participate in their plan, Hashem told Moshe, "Lech Reid," the literal meaning of which is to go down and return to his people.

Chazal (Brachos 32a) saw a deeper meaning in the words "Lech Reid." They explained that Hashem was telling Moshe, "Go down from your greatness, for I have only made you great because of Yisroel, and now that Yisroel has sinned, of what use are you?"

Very strong words.

The Peirush HaGra on Chumash (Shemos 32:7), quoting the Tikkunei Zohar, says, "Ispashuta d'Moshe bechol dor vador. In every generation, there is a nitzutz, a part of the neshomah, of Moshe Rabbeinu present in one great man." Through him, the light of Torah is transmitted to all the talmidei chachomim of the generation. All the chiddushei Torah that are nischadeish in the world are due to the "hashpo'as ohr," or influence, of Moshe Rabbeinu.

Several times a week, we say, "Vezos haTorah asher som Moshe lifnei Bnei Yisroel...beyad Moshe." As we point at the Sefer Torah and strain to see the holy letters on its parchment, we proclaim that this is the same Torah that Moshe transmitted to our forefathers.

The chet ha'Eigel put that gift in danger, jeopardizing our ability to receive and understand the Torah.

At the time of the Eigel, when Moshe became weakened to such a degree that he dropped the luchos, a tremendous diminution of Torah knowledge was caused. It also brought about all the exiles our people have since endured.

The Vilna Gaon writes (Even Sheleimah 13:8) that in our time, the Eirev Rav is basically composed of five groups of people: baalei machlokes and lashon hora, baalei ta'avah, hypocrites, people who seek honor to make a name for themselves, and people who crave money. He continues: "The worst are those who cause machlokes, and they are Amaleikim. Moshiach will not arrive until the world is rid of them."

Our actions have consequences. What we permit other people to do has consequences. We all know that machlokes plagues our people, but we need to declare that we have had enough of it and rise up against those who cause machlokes. We need to work to spread peace and harmony in our community. We need to put aside petty differences. We need to work together and support good people doing good things instead of playing along with hypocrites and greedy people. There are many good people out there. Let's get behind them. Let's give good people a chance.

Everything we have and want depends on that.

There are ramifications when we do a mitzvah. It strengthens us and strengthens the world. It adds kedusha to our lives and also allows us to tap into the ohr of the nitzutz of Moshe Rabbeinu.

Perhaps most relevant to us is the power of people to create change. The Eirev Rav weakened Moshe's abilities by sowing dissent and confusion, taking away the koach that had fueled Klal Yisroel's leader.

Leadership starts from the ground up.

When Shlomo Hamelech was given the ability to choose any gift, the wise king didn't select power, might or influence. He asked for a lev shomeia, a heart that would perceive and discern the needs of others.

A wonderful gift, to be sure, but what does it have to do with his mission to lead?

Baalei mussar explain that Shlomo Hamelech understood that the surest way to lead is to listen to the people and to develop an authentic and genuine interest in what ails them and what they care about. A leader who can accomplish that will earn the affinity of the people and they will follow him.

We must learn the lesson in our world as well.

In order to battle the Eirev Rav of our day, in order to curb machlokes which weakens the Moshe Rabbeinus of the dor, in order to vanquish the various fakes and fakers – the Eigels of the day – so that we can get closer to the coming of Moshiach, we have to be more intelligent about the way we address people. It is way too easy to preach and lecture others, admonishing them for what we think they are doing wrong, but that may not be what works anymore.

To be an effective leader and communicator, we have to listen to the people and understand how they think and why they act the way they do. We have to live in the moment and perceive the current mindset in order to bring about change. We have to have a lev shomeia if we want to influence people to lead better lives and to give up their petty battles and other behaviors that are in line with the conduct of the Eirev Rav.

To be able to reach people, you need to also be an effective communicator, and that requires knowing what is going on in the big world out there. If you don't know

what is going on, if you don't know the news and you don't know what people are thinking, then you cannot speak to them in a way that is relevant to them.

The Torah is the same, and the lesson is the same, but the mode of expression evolves. People's minds work differently than they did fifty years ago. There are different temptations and different sets of values. Children today aren't brought up the way we were.

When I was a child, my parents didn't have much and most of the people we knew were barely scraping by. There were a couple of wealthy people in town. Life was much simpler and most of the things everyone takes for granted today did not exist then.

Today, few people live like we did back then, and it is folly to expect people to go back to living that way. It is a losing battle. Today, people are much more affluent, and even simple people live on a much higher level than we did.

To give an example, in my family, we were just reminiscing that for *mishloach manos*, my mother would bake cupcakes and put them on a plain paper plate with a small bottle of Kedem wine and a small red box of raisins. It would be covered with a plastic bag and sealed with a twister. For the fancier ones, my parents would add a can of sardines. Go try that today. But we were happy delivering them around town and getting back similar packages.

Life has changed appreciably since then. The children are different and what appeals to them is different. It is our duty to find the demands, approach, language and words that work today, so that they can learn, grow and succeed in Torah and Yiddishkeit.

If we teach them at a young age that Hashem created the world and directs everything that happens, and that they have a neshomah that is a cheilek Eloka mimaal, and it obligates them to be better but also enables them to do so, as well as the other basics, then everything will fall into place as they grow and advance. But if they don't have a good foundation, then it will be doubly difficult to straighten them out later in life as things get more serious and complicated.

When you want to improve people and set them straight, you need to build them up. You have to let them know that you believe in them and their ability to be better and do better. We need to let them know that we think higher of them and their abilities. Positive messages accomplish a lot more than negative ones.

All the biographies that have been coming out lately are filled with stories of how gedolim, rabbeim and regular people considered other people's thoughts and feelings when dealing with them. It's almost as if they are painted as doting old grandfathers, but that is what is in vogue today and what people want to hear and read.

A story is told about a fellow who comes to shul and sits in his seat from the beginning of brachos until Shemoneh Esrei. After davening, the rov bangs on his shtender and points out that it is improper to sit while reciting Vayevorech Dovid.

The man rises from his seat and proclaims loudly, "Ah halbe yohr, for half a year, zitz ich ohn parnossah, I 'sit' here with no source of income, and no one says a word. One day zitz ich beim davenen, one day I sit during davening, and it becomes a big commotion. All of a sudden, everyone notices me."

The way to create change is to build up the people through warmth, concern and a lev shomeia, not by talking down to them or castigating them.

It was the people who gave Moshe Rabbeinu the koach and the people who removed his koach when they rebelled with the sin of the Eigel.

Listen to the people and you will lead.

Rav Yeshayale of Kerestir was one of the most beloved and revered tzaddikim in prewar Hungary. Jews from across the country were drawn to his tiny town, eager for the rebbe's brocha and advice.

Once, before tekias shofar on Rosh Hashanah, Rav Shayele closeted himself in his room to prepare for the exalted moments. A chossid peeked in, certain that he would see the rebbe engaged in Kabbalistic ritual, saying Tehillim or reciting words of the Zohar.

The chossid saw the rebbe patiently slicing pieces of cake and preparing platters. The rebbe noticed the curious chossid and explained. Since the minhag of chassidim is not to eat before tekios, the rebbe understood that the mispallelim would no doubt be famished by the end of davening. He wanted to make sure that no one would have to wait following davening and that they would be able to enjoy Kiddush and a bite of food immediately.

The rebbe used the moments before tekios as Shlomo Hamelech taught. Rav Shayele connected with the hearts of his people and prepared food for them. Only after doing that was he ready to go to tekias shofar and plead on their behalf, for he was a true leader.

A yeshiva bochur was found being mechallel Shabbos a few times in his yeshiva dormitory. The heads of the yeshiva went to Rav Elazar Menachem Man Shach for pro-forma permission to expel the boy.

Rav Shach was in his twilight years, extremely weak and feeble, and rarely saw people. Because of the severity of this situation, the roshei yeshiva were permitted to enter his room to discuss the matter with him. He listened to them and was engrossed in thought for several minutes. Finally, with a weak voice, he said to them, "What is the financial situation in the boy's home? Do his parents have shalom bayis?"

The rabbonim were bewildered by the questions. "How should we know what goes on in his home?" they asked.

Rav Shach strengthened himself, grasped the table, and pulled himself up in his chair. Tears were flowing down his cheeks and his voice was stronger than it was before. He turned to the people who had come to his home convinced that he would rubber stamp their decision. "Rodfim, leave my home! I don't want to talk to you. You don't know what is going on with the boy. You don't know what is going on in his home. The only thing you know is that you want to put him out in the street. Leave."

Like all parshiyos and lessons in the Torah, these lessons are eternally relevant.

We have a fractured generation. People are dispirited, families are broken, and tzaros abound. In order to connect to other people and be helpful to them, we have to understand what lies in their hearts and what keeps them awake at night. What worries them? What bothers them? What are they thinking about? What are their wants and desires? Do they have ambition? Do they want to excel at anything? If not, why not? Are they making ends meet? Do they have a decent place to live? Can they afford their rent or mortgage? Are they happy with the way their children are turning out? How is their health? What is the path to affecting their thoughts and behavior?

And children are more troubled than ever before. Too many kids aren't happy at the time of their life when they should be the happiest, growing, learning, and making friends without having too many outside pressures. Instead, too many youngsters are upset with themselves, with their folks, with their school, their teachers, and who knows what else. They need help. They need direction. They need reinforcement.

They need people like us to take an interest in them and a liking to them. They need people to hear them and reach them on their level. The Torah has all the answers to whatever their questions are, no matter the topic, but we need loving, caring, thinking people who can deliver those answers in a way the youngsters can understand and accept so that they can get on with leading happy and productive lives.

We need to wipe out the vestiges of the Eirev Rav from our midst and benefit from the unblocked light of Moshe.

Let us resolve to remove the vestiges of the Eigel by loving all good people and respecting all who deserve to be respected; treasuring our friends, elders and rabbeim; bringing people together; staying away from things fake and false, and doing what we can to prepare the world for the coming of Moshiach.

In other words, keep the spirit of Purim going all year long!