



Covenant & Conversation

FAMILY EDITION

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

KI TISSA • כִּי תִּסָּא

BASED ON THE TEACHINGS AND WRITINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS 7"צז

With thanks to the Schimmel Family for their generous sponsorship of Covenant & Conversation, dedicated in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel.

"I have loved the Torah of R' Chaim Schimmel ever since I first encountered it. It strives to be not just about truth on the surface but also its connection to a deeper truth beneath. Together with Anna, his remarkable wife of 60 years, they built a life dedicated to love of family, community, and Torah. An extraordinary couple who have moved me beyond measure by the example of their lives." — Rabbi Sacks

Between Truth and Peace

● This summary is adapted from the video and essay available at www.RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation/ki-tissa/between-truth-and-peace/

Ki Tissa includes one of the most shocking moments of the forty years in the wilderness. Within six weeks of their encounter with God at Har Sinai, Bnei Yisrael make a Golden Calf. Either this was idolatry or perilously close to it, and it causes God to say to Moshe that He will unleash His full wrath on the people.

At the centre of the story is Aharon, leader of the people in the absence of Moshe. It was Aharon whom Bnei Yisrael approached with their proposal to build an idol, and it was Aharon who should have seen the danger of such a request and stopped Bnei Yisrael. Instead, Aharon helped craft the Golden Calf from the people's gold jewellery, and then proclaimed a festival to the Lord.

What was in Aharon's mind while this drama was being enacted? The Midrash and Zohar believe he was buying time for Moshe's return; the Talmud suggests he was choosing the lesser of two evils, so the people wouldn't rebel entirely. Ibn Ezra offers that Aharon viewed the Calf as a temporary substitute for Moses, not as an idol. All the commentators seem to be trying to understand his actions and mitigate his guilt – which fits with the fact that the Torah never explicitly states that Aharon was punished for *chet ha'egel* (the sin of the Golden Calf). It is, however, difficult to see Aharon as anything but weak, especially when Moshe finally appears and demands an explanation: Aharon's response? That the people made him do it. **Deflecting accountability is weakness not leadership.**

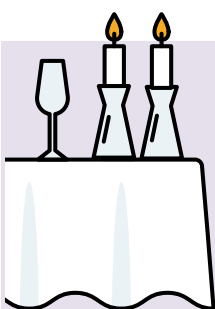
And yet, later tradition made Aharon a hero, celebrating his peace-making nature. Then there is the famous Talmudic discussion as to whether arbitration, as opposed to litigation, is a good thing or a bad thing.

The Talmud supports this by citing a conflict between two role-models, Moshe and Aharon.

Moshe was a man of law, Aharon of mediation. Moshe was a man of truth, Aharon was a man of peace. Moshe sought justice, and Aharon sought conflict resolution.

There is a fundamental difference between these two approaches. Truth, justice, law: these are zero-sum equations. Mediation, conflict resolution, compromise, and the Aharon-type virtues are all attempts to allow both sides feel that they have been heard and their claim has, at least in part, been honoured. Let's go back to Moshe, Aharon, and the Golden Calf. Although it is clear that God and Moshe regarded the Calf as a major sin, Aharon's willingness to appease the people – sensing that if he simply said "No", they would kill him and make it anyway – was not entirely wrong. **To be clear, at that moment, the people needed a Moshe, not an Aharon. But in the long run, they needed both. Moshe as the voice of truth and justice, and Aharon with the people-skills to conciliate and make peace.**

That is how Aharon eventually emerged, in the long hindsight of tradition, as the peace-maker. Peace is not the only virtue, and peacemaking is not the only task of leadership. Yes, the people made a Golden Calf when Aharon was left to lead. But never think that a passion for truth and justice is sufficient. Moshe needed an Aharon to hold the people together. **In short, leadership is the capacity to hold together different temperaments, conflicting voices and clashing values. Every leadership team needs both a Moshe and an Aharon, a voice of truth and a force for peace.**



Around the Shabbat Table

1. Examine Moshe and Aharon's different leadership styles. Which do you find more effective?
2. Can you think of a situation where compromise is more beneficial than holding on to principles?
3. How can we apply the idea of having both a "Moshe" and an "Aharon" to a team environment, like in a collaborative group project or sports team?

Parsha in Passing

Betzalel and Oholiav are appointed to take the lead on the Mishkan's construction, and Bnei Yisrael is asked to donate a half shekel of silver per person towards this project.

Upon Moshe's delayed return from Har Sinai, Bnei Yisrael, with the help of Aharon, crafted and worshipped a Golden Calf. God

contemplates destroying the nation in response, but Moshe advocates for their mercy.

Moshe comes back down the mountain with the Ten Commandments engraved on tablets. But when Moshe witnesses the idolatry himself, he shatters the tablets, annihilates the Calf, and executes the instigators.

Moshe then pleads with God for his own forgiveness.

Moshe ascends Sinai for a second time to receive a new set of tablets inscribed with God's word. There, he also experiences a revelation of God's thirteen attributes of mercy. Radiant from the encounter, Moshe must veil his face, removing it only for communication with God or to relay His laws to the people.

Parsha People

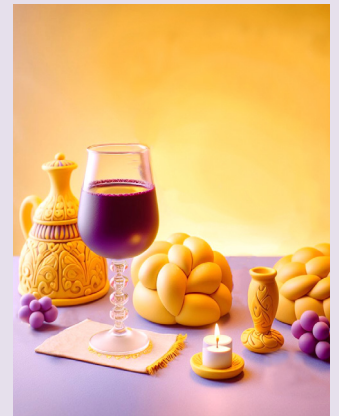
Aharon: In turmoil's midst, a calf they insist. A bridge of calm to pacify, until Moshe descends Har Sinai.

Golden Calf: Built from your desire - to decrease impatience - I am mired. The jewels that are molten have made a calf that is golden.

Moshe: Descending the mountain,

Luchot in hand, proud of us and for all that we stand. But wait! You and your Calf have ruined the plan!

Shabbat: I am steady and sure; each week, I am your cure. After the Calf, in sin's profound aftermath, I stand as a sign that God's love is divine, unbroken, eternal, and ever so fine.



Parsha Practical

One of the most apparent mitzvot in this week's parsha is the commandment not to worship idols. In the times of the Torah, this clearly applies to the physical representations of other deities that non-Jewish nations would worship. But fast forward 2,000 years, when we don't see idolatrous statues on every street corner.

How do we internalise this mitzva and apply it to our modern times? One of the ways we see idolatry today is through our obsession with technology. These modern idols can subtly become central in our lives, diverting our dedication from serving God or focusing wholeheartedly on other vital values, like our family.

How do we combat this

phenomenon? Interestingly enough, following the sin of the Golden Calf, Bnei Yisrael is given the mitzva of Shabbat. Perhaps this day of focus on God is the antidote to their propensity to idol worship.

Similarly, one of the ways we can actively combat our modern-day idolatry is by turning our screens off on Shabbat, a good reminder of our priorities and commitments, ensuring that we remain focused on what truly matters.

Parsha Playoff

Trust plays a big part in this week's parsha. The trust Bnei Yisrael had that Moshe would return, and Moshe's trust in Bnei Yisrael that they would be faithful to God. Let's explore the trust in our homes! In **"Heed my Voice!"** family members pair up. In each pair, one person is blindfolded and the other guides them from a starting-point to a finish line in an open space, using only voice instructions to navigate simple obstacles.

After completing the course, roles are reversed, allowing each person to experience both leading and following. Feel free to add small variables, like stepping over a pillow or eating a bite of challah at the table!

Parsha Puzzle

❏ There are three words in parshat Ki Tissa which are palindromes (meaning they read the same forwards as backwards). How many can you find?

▲ The three words are "mayim" (Shemot 30:18), "v'natnu" (Shemot 30:12), and "shalosh" (Shemot 34:23).

Adapted from *Torah IQ* by David Woolf, a collection of 1,500 Torah riddles, available from Amazon.



Parsha Philosophy

We have to wonder: during the incident with the Golden Calf, what is the essence of Aharon's character, and what is the meaning of his more significant role in the leadership of the Jewish people?

Rabbi Sacks reflects on the complexities of leadership, the

nuances of human character, and the indispensable balance between justice and peace. He suggests that Aharon, potentially criticised for his role in creating the Golden Calf, could also be seen as an arbitrator trying to manage a volatile situation in Moshe's absence, and

he concludes that there is immense value in Aharon's leadership style.

This perspective invites a reconsideration of Aharon's actions not as complete failures of leadership but also as attempts to navigate an impossible situation with his tools of deferral and peace.

- Consider a time when you were (or in the future might find yourself) faced with a situation where all options would result in challenging outcomes. How would you find your way through to a decision?



Parsha Parable

Friendship is Golden

In a little town in Israel, there lived two friends: Natan and Avi. In their free time they were inseparable, usually spending their time together exploring every nook and cranny of the huge forest nearby.

One day, the two friends discovered a pond shimmering with golden light. Captivated, they decided it would be their new secret spot. For Avi especially, there was something hypnotising about the place. But soon, Avi began telling Natan he was too busy to hang out, and then visiting the golden pond alone. Natan felt a growing emptiness without his friend, but Avi didn't notice.

Curious, and a bit hurt by his friend's changing attitude, one day Natan decided to follow Avi through the forest and talk to him.



He soon found his friend once again entranced by the pond's glow, having forgotten that this was once their shared sacred space.

"Avi, why have you chosen this pond over our friendship?" Natan asked, his voice full of sadness.

Seeing Natan's hurt, Avi blinked away the golden light and realised his mistake. The allure of the pond had blinded him to the value of their bond. "Natan, I'm so sorry. I lost sight of what's important. Please, can you forgive me?" Avi asked sincerely.

Thinking of all the good times they'd shared and the good times he could look forward to, Natan chose forgiveness. "Our friendship is worth more than any pond, even a golden and glowing one. Let's not let this come between us!"

Together, they walked away from the pond, understanding that the true treasure was their friendship.



Parsha Ponderings

What Would You Do...

if you were Aharon? Would you buy time or explore other options? How would you talk to the people?

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