

PARSHAT KI TISSA  
 “The Need for Time”  
 delivered by Rabbi Alan B. Lucas  
 March 14, 2009

This week, in our Torah reading, we meet *Moshe Rabeinu* at what was to be the pinnacle of his career. Moshe the lawgiver, inspired by Divine Words - his arms holding aloft the tablets of the Law of the Covenant - this is the moment he had been living for; the culmination of all that came before. The suffering in Egypt, the deliverance by God’s hand, the miracle at the Sea - all was prelude to this moment, the overture, as it were, to the climax that was now at hand. He had freed the people from physical bondage, led them to safety, and brought them to the foot of this mountain to receive God’s revelation. Now, in presenting them with these *luchot*, he would bestow upon them the sublime gift of true freedom, the Torah.

So, here was Moshe, descending the mountain, Divine Light glowed from his face, he raises his hands to give the tablets, engraved with the words of eternity, carved by the hand of God, to the people of Israel –he moves his gaze from heaven to earth, and what does he see?

Does he see an expectant, grateful, receptive people? No, what awaits him are a group of frenzied, dissident, rebellious, idolatrous, people, dancing around a calf made of gold, he sees his own brother Aaron an accomplice to this outrage. This moment, which was supposed to be the climax of his career is instead deeply tragic - Moshe experiences defeat instead of victory, disappointment instead of fulfillment.

One can almost see his face filled with the glory of God, fall; his hands, holding the tablets carved by God, suddenly become heavy; the gift which had been light as air becomes a dead weight, a burden. He is heartbroken and he is outraged. Why? Not just because of the tablets - it is his whole life that has been betrayed. All his dreams and all his hopes have been shattered with that golden calf. So Moses shatters the tablets right in front of the people and calls for God to send a severe punishment for their sins.

Crisis comes in many forms. And the economic crisis that has descended upon us has many of the same dynamics that I see in this story from today’s torah reading. I speak to people who have had their entire fortunes wiped out in the Bernie Madoff scandal. I listen, as they talk in terms not much different from the scene I just described with Moses. One moment they are approaching the culmination of their lives – the climax for which they have spent so many years working and saving. Their dreams are within reach. And in an instant everything is gone. All that they thought they had has disappeared. Like Moses in today’s *parasha* these victims – and there are many of them in our community - are experiencing a sense of defeat instead of victory, disappointment instead of fulfillment. Like Moses they are heartbroken and outraged.

And then there are those who are losing their jobs due to the economic downturn. Maybe it is you or someone you know. Here to they are in shock, they did nothing wrong – on the contrary they did everything right – they worked hard, showed up diligently they were valued members of the team but still they were called in and told, “we are going to have to let you go,” cutbacks, my hands are tied. On Thursday, UJA-Federation in New York terminated 52 staff members throughout their New York offices. In a letter sent out on Thursday, John Ruskay the

UJA Chief Executive and in it he wrote: "Impacted staff members are being provided severance and other support but this will be exceedingly painful for those who will need to seek employment in this difficult economic climate. And it will also be challenging for those who remain -- those of you who will be torn from close associates and who will be expected to continue to provide the excellent level of professionalism we have come to expect from all of our employees." Can you imagine what it was like at those offices this week?

Our government announced the loss of 650,000 more jobs in the month of February alone. The banking system has all but collapsed. Retirement plans by the hundreds of thousands have been postponed indefinitely. One estimate suggests that 45% of the world's wealth has disappeared in the current global credit crisis.

And it all happened so fast – one moment we are all dancing around the golden calf – it just seemed like one long endless party – that the good times would never end – that we were entitled to our jobs, our raises, our every increasing home values. Some of us watched the excesses of others and wondered what we were doing wrong? People were earning, and spending incredible amounts of money. And truth be told, most of us got caught up in the frenzy in the orgy of spending and consumption. We banged our timbrels and beat our drums and just assumed our homes would continue to go up in value, our salaries would rise forever, our lives would just keep getting better and better – and on and on we danced.

And then the music stopped. And like Moses and like the children of Israel we are in shock. We are dazed by the sudden change in our reality. What seemed like such a good idea yesterday – today seems --- well a bit silly, unnecessary, even over the top. We look back on the scene from yesterday – of us dancing around the golden calf – and well, truth be told, we are embarrassed – what were we thinking? How could we have been so foolish? So naïve.

And now that we have been caught, now that reality has reared its head – where do we go from here? How do we rebuild our lives when all that we have believed in has been taken away from us? Our motto had been that silly bumper sticker, you know the one that said: "The one who dies with the most toys – wins". And, then we thought it was funny, then we thought it was cute – today we are embarrassed by such conspicuous consumption and in shock we ask how should we rebuild our lives and upon what shall we base them when all the gods we have worshipped have proved to be false?

Our initial response is not unlike Moses – we want punishment and revenge against those who have so misled us. We stand outside the courtroom as Bernie Madoff is paraded in and we shout off with his head. Victims go on TV and say they hope he is held in solitary confinement and forced to clean toilets. Somehow it has all become *his* fault. As we ignore our own complicity in the frenzy and greed that had overtaken us all. The children of Israel initially pointed the finger at others as well. "It wasn't my idea!" they shouted, "We were just going along with the crowd, following the herd, doing what everyone else was doing – is it our fault we didn't want to be left behind?"

Yes, we feel angry and outrage and betrayal. Just like they did so long ago on the plains of Moab. And our first reaction is that someone needs to pay –we want punishment and revenge on someone somehow. We are angry with those CEO's whose banks we are baling out – the ones throwing the lavish parties. We are angry with our elected officials who seem to be so ineffective in the face of this crisis. And we are disgusted with Madoff. But, even though he is led off to jail – we don't feel better. We realize that it solves nothing and brings us little relief there has to be more than revenge as an antidote to our dilemma.

But wait, we notice the story in our Bible does not end here. There is more. If there was only this, it would indeed be a rather depressing one, a downer of a sermon, and our predicament would not offer much hope. But there is more, thank God there is more and better yet, it is at this point that the story really begins to get fascinating. Moses is not a tragic figure who concludes his career depressed and in defeat and the children of Israel are not left standing in embarrassed and destitute at the foot of Mount Sinai. Moses is destined to play an even nobler role than before and even greater heroism and wisdom will be his legacy. The people of Israel will journey from Mount Sinai and ultimately enter the Promised Land.

So, the next part of the story becomes critical. We lean forward with eager and expectant interest to learn how he did it. What does Moses do next?

Instead of wallowing in anger, frustration and defeat, Moshe undergoes a dramatic transformation, a turning point in his faith, in his character and in his leadership. He picks himself up, from the greatest defeat and disappointment of his life, he takes his staff and he climbs the mountain a second time. And the second time was not like the first. His heart was heavier; his spirits were not as exuberant. Some of the enthusiasm and vigor, some of the intensity and hope had died within him. But up the mountain he goes. And, again, just like the first time, it takes 40 days until he once again is able to descend from the mountain of the Lord with the *luchot* in his hands and this time he delivers them to his people as divine and true. And this second time the people are there ready to accept the Torah, ready to follow his lead - at long last Moses experiences his moment of triumph.

What happened? What happened between the sin of the first and the acceptance of the second? What changed the story from tragedy to an inspiring epic? And is there anything from this that can give us hope in our time of need? For the challenge that confronts us today is not only about the economy, it is the fundamental challenge of learning how to cope with disappointment in life. Is there any human life that hasn't witnessed broken tablets? If today's torah portion has something to teach us about how to surmount disappointment and failure and the shattering of our dreams and learn how to climb once more to the mountain of vision and faith - than let's have it because it is a truth we can all use and one we desperately need today.

How did Moses do it? Where did he find the strength to climb the mountain a second time? I searched the Torah for his secret, for some insight into what Moses did and how he was able to do it. And I found a couple things of interest that may be relevant to our dilemma.

What happened after the bitter disappointment of the golden calf? The Bible doesn't say much, but it does say: *Veheye nachon laboker -*"and it came to pass on the morrow..." There is a miracle tomorrow. Time had to intervene, a day had passed and then a night. There was time to think, to meditate, to consider; time to pray and to regroup. And when the morning rose, Moses was changed. His mood was changed. His attitude was changed. When you read the Torah and see the words that Moses spoke when he saw the children of Israel dancing before the golden calf you see that they are angry words, and bitter words, outraged words - but the next day, his words are different. On the morrow, he was transformed; he was greater, more merciful, more understanding. *Veheye nachon laboker-* tomorrow, tomorrow God will work miracles for you - you must believe in tomorrow.

We too must begin by believing in tomorrow. And we must be willing to wait for tomorrow. While it is clear that this downturn is going to be more sever and longer lasting than we had hoped it would be we must continue to believe that there will be a better tomorrow. We may not, we dare not despair of its coming. If it seems impossible, than *Veheye nachon laboker* - maybe things will look differently tomorrow.

Judaism has an enormous wisdom in "*shiva*" - which requires us to remove ourselves from the world for seven days after a tragic loss. Anger, grief and frustration are not the best soil out of which to produce rational decisions. So we take some time - *Veheye nachon laboker* – maybe things will look different tomorrow. Parents have long believed in a “time out” – when things get out of hand, when the confrontation becomes a little too intense – we call a “time-out” we need a time out: take a deep breath, don’t over react – as the kids would say: just chill.

What we need now is a little time and a little distance and an awful lot of faith. Perhaps this is what the Torah is trying to teach us, that there are wonders concealed in tomorrow, that we can make good tomorrow what has been broken today; we can make whole tomorrow what has been smashed today.

We have learned this in our own lives. There are those among us who have known grief, who have know suffering and loss. Who have known moments, that appeared so dark that it seemed that there would be and could be no better tomorrow. But we have endured the pain, suffered through the loss and we know that there is a measure of relief that tomorrow brings.

Now don’t misunderstand me. This is not enough. Time does not heal all wounds. And given a hundred tomorrows, not everything will be all well again. Sometimes things do not heal all by themselves. Time flows passively and cannot always produce miracles and transformations. In the field of human relations, the mere passing of days and nights does not correct problems. It is a necessary but not sufficient ingredient in the recipe of healing. But time allowed Moshe to cool off, to regroup and to find the hope and faith to climb the mountain a second time, time gave the children of Israel the chance to see the error of their ways and to atone for their sins and to change.

So there is work to be done. If it was not the same Moshe who came down the mountain the second time, it was also not the same children of Israel who were waiting for him at the bottom. The second time he comes down they are no longer dancing around the golden calf, - no they too have changed. *Ahare chen nigshu et b'nai yisrael* - this time the children of Israel drew near to Moses as he descended the mountain with the tablets of God in his hands - this time we were ready to heed the word of the Lord.

The excesses of the past number of years embarrass us. Greed does not become us. We need to return to the basics we need to be reminded that life is not about the things we posses but the relationships we treasure. It is not about the toys we own but the kind of people we are and can be.

The Torah portion for today teaches us to believe in a better tomorrow -*Veheye nachon laboker*.

We Jews know how to restore, rebuild and renew our faith.

We have had to do it too many times before. As Jews we have learned how to ascend the mountain of Sinai again and once more bring back the tablets of truth and of justice mercy and

compassion - and the second tablets and their achievement are even greater and more precious than the first.

We hope and we pray that God will grant us the strength to climb the mountain one more time. And this time, I hope we get it right.