

About this week's sidra and essay:

Ki Tisa begins innocently enough as part of the Mishkan blueprint, adding some final details: the coins to be used for the census and in the construction of the silver bases for the Tabernacle's wooden beams; the copper washbasin; the sacred oil used for dedicating the Mishkan and the kohanim (and for the anointing of kings in the future); the incense; and the names of the artisans in charge of construction. Suddenly we find ourselves on the summit of Mount Sinai together with Moshe who, after forty days of study, has just received the two stone tablets engraved by the hand of God. But at this epic moment back on the ground, a disaster was in the making: the Golden Calf that would permanently transform God's relationship with Yisrael. Moshe is curtly dismissed from God's presence, and pleads with God to forgive the people. Yet upon seeing with his own eyes the travesty made of the Ten Commandments, Moshe is moved to shatter the tablets. He then burns the calf, grinds it into fine powder, sprinkles it over water and makes its worshippers drink. Forty days of pleading follow on Sinai, and at last God announces His willingness to forgive and to provide a copy of the ruined tablets – but this time Moshe will have to hew them himself. Moshe spends yet another forty days on Mount Sinai and descends, his face luminous. He presents the second tablets on that day which becomes known forever as the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur.

The shattering of the Luchot Rishonim (First Tablets) changed Yisrael's relationship to Torah, just as the Eigel haZahav (Golden Calf) changed God's relationship to Yisrael. FrameWorks this week considers those changes, and finds that Purim is the link between the earlier and later tablets.

Born to Win

After *Ki Tisa*, nothing can ever be the same. The innocent, wholehearted acceptance of the Torah on Sinai dissolved here into mistrust, and we can only flinch as God suddenly tells Moshe,

Get out! Go down, for the people you took out of Egypt have become corrupt. They have quickly left the way. . . they made themselves a cast-metal calf. . . .(32:7,8)

That Golden Calf constitutes the central tragedy of the Jewish people's relationship with God, the seed for millennia of painful history.¹

No one but Moshe will ever fully fathom how close the nation came to extermination by the *furious outrage which moved God to wipe you out (Devarim 9:19)*. It was only Moshe who, at great personal risk, stood in the way of wholesale destruction.²

Moshe offered his life³ for Yisrael and they came to be called after him, Moshe's people. . . .(*Yishai'ah* 63:12).

Shemot Rabba, 30:4

Neither will anyone but Moshe comprehend the full extent of the historical mutations introduced by the Eigel haZahav. Again it was Moshe who, at great personal cost,⁴ mitigated the worst of those mutations: he persuaded God to maintain His presence in Yisrael and to renew the

covenant of the Torah by reissuing the Luchot haBrit ("Tablets of the Covenant").

[Moshe] said to Him: If Your presence does not accompany us, do not bother taking us from here! For how shall it be known that Your people have gained Your favor unless You go with us. . . .

God said to Moshe: This too that you have asked I will do for you. . . .(33:15-17)

And God said to Moshe: Carve two tablets of stone like the first, and I will inscribe upon the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you shattered. (34:1)

The shattering of those tablets was a shattering of the original vision of the Sinaitic Covenant. The Eigel haZahav is considered a primal evil – a revised rendition of Eden's serpent and a replicate loss of deathless paradise.⁵

אני אמרתי אלהים אתם ובני עליין כולכם
אכן באדם תמותון. . . .

I said, "You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you. . . ." (Tehillim 82:6)

– If only Yisrael had waited for Moshe and not done what they did, no exile and no death could have had power over them, as it says, *The writing was God's writing, incised (harut, חרות) upon the tablets. . . .(32:16)* – [Read that as *heirut*, חירות, i.e. freedom,] freedom from Death. . . .

The moment that Yisrael answered, “*We shall do and we shall hear!*” the Holy One said: To Adam I gave only one mitzva to keep and I made him immortal. . . these, to whom I give 613 mitzvot with all their detail and minutia, must certainly be immortal!

But as soon as they said, “*These are your gods, Yisrael. . .*” (32:4), they became mortal.

Said the Holy One: So, you follow the footsteps of the primal Adam! He did not last three hours before I decreed him mortal. I had indeed thought *You are gods*—but you emulated Adam, therefore *You shall die as Adam did. . .* (Tehillim, *ibid*)

Shemot Rabba, 32:1

Within such primal context, one can begin to grasp the magnitude of Moshe’s accomplishment. Instead of experiencing a parallel to Adam’s expulsion from God’s Eden and its “Tree of Life,” Yisrael is allowed to remain at God’s Sinai with its Torah *tree of life* (Mishlei 3:18)—only because Moshe restructures the relationship in a way that was beyond Adam to achieve.⁶ The Shechina will now reside in a diminished *Mishkan*⁷ that *dwells together with them within their impurity* (Vayikra 16:16). The *one day a year* (30:11) that makes this possible, *Yom Kipurim*, is precisely the day that enshrines the presentation of the diminished *Luchot Sheni’im* (Second Tablets).⁸ It becomes a “Day of Atonement” through which diminished *adam* maintains contact with God despite imperfection and failure.

The *Mishkan* is not what we once thought it could be, God is not accessible as once we dreamed He would be, and the Torah is not the pure Life it was meant to be.⁹ *Shavuot* was ruined as *Matan Torah*; instead the *Luchot* and their “Ten Commandments” are ours on *Yom Kippur*. Yet consider this puzzle: though *Ki Tisa* restates the nature of the Torah and the *Mishkan*, it does so invisibly. The casual reader is aware only of a painful interlude after which life goes on, and the *Mishkan* narrative is picked up from where it was left as if nothing particularly earth shattering has transpired. We continue to build a *Mishkan* that limits our access as if this were the reflection of God’s promise that *in every place where My name is mentioned I will come to you and bless you* (20:21).¹⁰ We continue to celebrate Sinai as if we have escaped Adam’s lethal legacy.

The serpent injected Eve with putrefaction, along with all humanity. Only Yisrael, who stood at Mount Sinai, escape this putrefaction.

Avoda Zara, 22b¹¹

We continue to celebrate *Shavuot* as if those first *Luchot* are still ours.

The shattered pieces of the [original] *Luchot* lie in the Ark of the Covenant together with the [second] *Luchot*.

Bava Bathra, 14b

It would seem that somehow all is not lost, and that there is yet access to the promise of the shattered *Luchot Rishonim*—but how?

Our parasha reading is linked annually to the historical solution. For, aside from *Shavuot* and *Yom Kipurim*, there is a *third day of Matan Torah* which transcends (and links) them both: Purim.¹²

כפה עליהם הר כנגינת. . .

The Holy One held the [Sinai] mountain over their head and said, “If you accept the Torah, well and good. But if not—your graves will be right here!” Said R. Aha b. Ya’akov: This provides a compelling escape clause from the Torah.

Said Rabba: Perhaps it did, but Yisrael reconfirmed acceptance during the time of *Ahashveirosh*, as it says, *The Jews confirmed and accepted. . .* (Esther 9:27), i.e. they irrevocably confirmed what they had previously accepted [on Sinai].

Shabbat, 88a

Purim commemorates a much later achievement, but it is destined to outlive both *Shavuot* and *Yom KiPurim*. The memory of Purim is imperishable.

All the holidays will one day cease, but Purim will never cease, as it says,

These days are remembered and observed in every generation: by every family, every province, and every city.

And these days of Purim shall never cease among the Jews, and the memory of them shall never perish among their descendants. (Esther 9:28)

Midrash Mishlei, 9:2

Purim is the day of undying memory—and memory is perishable in the first place only because of the shattering of the original Tablets.

חרות על הלוחות. . .

What is the meaning of “*incised* (harut) upon the tablets. . . (32:16)” ? If those first *Luchot* had never been shattered, there would have been no forgetting the Torah.

“*Incised*” implies deeply engraved and eternally unerasable, i.e. through those *Luchot* the Torah would have been engraved upon Yisrael so as never to be forgotten. —Rashi¹³

Eiruvin, 54a

The day of Torah’s final acceptance is the day of imperishable memory: Purim binds the shattered *Luchot* and the replacement *Luchot* that lie together in the Ark.

Be careful to respect a wise man who has lost the memory of his learning through no fault of his own, for we are taught that “the shattered pieces of the [original] *Luchot* lie in the Ark of the Covenant together with the [second] *Luchot*.”

Berachot, 8b

Purim is the day of undying memory because it was the first time that the mitzva of memory was fully absorbed: it was the first fully successful encounter with Amalek.

Remember what Amalek did to you. . . . *You shall erase the memory of Amalek from beneath the heaven: Do not forget!* (Devarim 25:17,19)

Did it ever strike you that nothing has been more effective at *maintaining* the memory of Amalek than Yisrael’s continued commitment to “*Remember! Do not forget!*”? It is something of a paradox for the Torah to insist that we “*erase the memory of Amalek*” while demanding that we remember them. Unless memory per se is the most profound destruction of all that Amalek stands for.

The “Shell of Amalek” is the catalyst of forgetting.
R. Moshe Hayim Luzzato¹⁴

“History” is our designation for collective aggregate memory; “identity” is what we call our personal aggregate memory. But history and identity are highly selective memories: they represent commitments and judgments of value and significance. Even on the surface, Amalek’s attack on Yisrael was a skeptical bid to chill the enthusiastic response to the Exodus.¹⁵ But more importantly, Amalek’s anomic offensive was a nihilistic and cynical attempt to reduce not only the events of the redemption but history itself to insignificance.

Forgetting dwells in the nethermost reaches of the Dark Side. . . .

Zohar I:193b

Amalek are the sworn enemies of memory because they are enemies of significance, antagonists of values and belief.¹⁶ The ongoing battle we wage with them is more spiritual than physical, and its weapon *par excellence* is the

significance of memory—individual and historical:
Remember! Do not forget!

The destruction of the *Luchot Rishonim* and their absolute memory was a singular victory for Amalek.

The seed of Amalek, of whom it says *You shall erase their memory from beneath the heaven*, were the ones who caused the shattering of the *Luchot*.

Zohar, I:28b

Along with the loss of the *Luchot* and the loss of memory, came a reduction of individual value and national significance—expressed in the loss of the *ady* (adornment, from the word for “eternity,” ער).

When Yisrael accepted the Torah, God clothed them with His own Glory. . . .as long as this was in their hands, Death had no power over them. . . .

[After the *Eigel haZahav*] God insisted, *Now, strip yourselves of your adornment* (ער) (33:5). . . . When they sinned, the Holy One stripped them of all that excellence, as it says, *So the children of Yisrael stripped their adornments* (ער). . . .(33:6).

Shemot Rabba, 51:8

This undermining of value was a residual effect of the encounter with Amalek.

ואחריתו עדי אובד . . .

Amalek’s. . .end is destruction eternal (ער).
(Bamidbar 25:20)

The national acceptance of reduced stature in recognition of their own failure to maintain value was a necessary element in the rehabilitation of Yisrael.

When the people heard this harsh word, they went into mourning, and none put on his adornment (ער) (33:4).

The later addition “*Yisrael stripped their adornments* (ער) (33:6)” implies that they went even farther than they had originally. . . . Yisrael accepted mortality in full cognizance of what they had done with the *Eigel haZahav*, and this was an important *teshuva* for their transgression.

Ramban, Shemot 33:6

Purim was accomplished through a rediscovery of personal value¹⁷ that ended with a reconstruction of Sinai and Memory. It was achieved by an individual whose accomplishment for her people and for Torah mirrored Moshe’s own.

Moshe offered his life¹⁸ for Yisrael and they came to be called after him, *Moshe's people*. . . (*Yishai'ah 63:12*);

Just as Esther offered her life¹⁹ for Yisrael and they came to be called after her, *to plead for her people*. . . (*Esther 4:8*).

Shemot Rabba, 30:4

Both Moshe and Esther needed to instill the single, surprising element that would lead to reconstruction: *tzni'ut*, צניעות, usually translated as “modesty” (not as an antonym for “arrogance,” but in the sense of “demureness” or “reserve”).

The *Luchot Rishonim* were destroyed because they were given with public fanfare. . . . Said the Holy One, “There is nothing better than *tzni'ut*, as it says, *What the Lord requires of you: Only to do justice, and to love goodness, and to walk modestly with your God.* (*Micha 6:8*)”

Tanhuma, *Ki Tisa*, 31

Her name was Hadassah, but she was called Esther (“hidden”) because she kept her affairs hidden. . . .
Megilah, 13a

Because of the *tzni'ut* of Rachel she merited that Sha'ul should be her descendant, and because of the *tzni'ut* of Sha'ul he merited that Esther should be his descendant. . . .

Megilah, 13b

This same *tzni'ut* was the element that motivated the construction of the *Mishkan*.

Before the *Mishkan* was built, God spoke to Moshe [in the open] at the bush. . . in Egypt. . . in Midian. . . at Sinai. . . .

When the *Mishkan* was constructed, God said, “There is nothing better than *tzni'ut*, as it says, *walk modestly with your God.* (*Micha 6:8*)”

Bamidbar Rabba, 1:3

Now, it is certainly true that Esther *begins* her career with a great deal of modesty:

Esther asked for nothing but what Hegai, the king's eunuch, guardian of the women, advised. . . . (*Esther 2:15*);

Esther did not reveal her kindred or her people, as Mordechai had instructed her;

Esther obeyed Mordechai's bidding, as she had always done. . . . (*ibid. 2:20*).

Her personality was so unassertive that everyone believed she was the girl next door;²⁰ she was pliable enough to satisfy any fantasy.²¹

But what are we to make of the dramatic transformation of Esther as the story progresses? She takes the lead with Mordechai:

Mordechai went and did exactly what Esther commanded him (*ibid. 4:17*);

she manipulates the king and Haman, both:

Said the king, “Hurry up Haman to do what Esther demands!” (*ibid. 5:5*);

she provides Mordechai his new position:

Esther appointed Mordechai over the estate of Haman (*ibid. 8:2*).

Her control of the king is so absolute that he melts in her presence—observe how the irate Ahashveirosh turns positively placid after he begins to object to Esther about the casualty figures in Shushan:

In Shushan alone the Jews have killed five hundred men, as well as Haman's ten sons! What must they have done in the provinces of the realm! . . . Well, what is your wish now—it shall be granted! (*ibid. 9:12*).

Purim and the Megilah come from Esther:

Esther's ordinance validating these observances of Purim was recorded in a book (*ibid. 9:32*).

It was Esther who insisted upon the canonization of the Megilah, it was Esther who opposed the leading sages of the generation, and it was Esther who prevailed.

Esther sent to the Sages: Write me up for posterity! They answered: You are going to arouse anti-Semitism among the nations [by commemorating this victory].

She sent back: Am I not already recorded in the *Annals of the Kings of Media and Persia* (*ibid. 10:2*)?

Esther sent to the Sages: Write me up for posterity! They answered: [The Torah says] *Did I not write you thrice. . . .* (*Mishlei 22:20*), i.e. three, but not four, times.

[Amalek is mentioned once in Shemot, once in Devarim, once in the Book of Shmuel. —Rashi] Then they discovered a verse in the Torah [that supported Esther]: *Inscribe this as a memory in a book. . . .* (*Shemot 17:4*), “*Inscribe this*” refers to [the attack of Amalek] mentioned here [in Shemot] and in Devarim; “*memory*” refers to [the attack on Amalek]

written up in the prophets [Shmuel]; “*in a book*” implies that [we should indeed] write the Megilah. . . .

Megilah, 7a

This later picture of an independent, outspoken, assertive and highly successful Esther stands in strong contrast to the retiring woman who captured the heart of Ahashveirosh. The modesty which is the hallmark of Purim seems to have disappeared—unless we have completely misunderstood *tzni’ut*. A re-examination of the concept might be in order:

Because of the *tzni’ut* of Rachel she merited...Esther.
Megilah, 13b

Esther’s *tzni’ut*, then, is an outgrowth of the *tzni’ut* of Rachel—but why would Rachel be considered a paradigm of *tzni’ut*?

What example do we have of Rachel’s *tzni’ut*?

[When Ya’akov proposed to Rachel she warned him of her father’s deceit.] “About what will he attempt to cheat me?” asked Ya’akov.

“I have an older sister,” she answered, “and he will not marry me off before her.”

Ya’akov supplied her with passwords to ensure her identity. When the wedding night arrived [and Leah was substituted for Rachel], Rachel exclaimed, “Now my sister will be shamed!” So she gave over the passwords to Leah.

Megilah, *ibid.*

Rachel is a very caring sister indeed, to allow Leah to come between herself and the man she loves. But what does any of that have to do with *tzni’ut*?

She gave over the passwords to Leah—that was an expression of *tzni’ut*, for she did not want it public knowledge that Ya’akov had given her passwords.

Rashi²²

Rachel could easily have thwarted her sister’s marriage and still saved her from any embarrassment. All she had to do was let it be known that she and Ya’akov had taken precautions to prevent any substitutions. But she would not do that because it would have meant exposing the depth of her relationship with Ya’akov to people who would have belittled it.²³ *Tzni’ut* means sensitivity to the possible cheapening of what is unique and dear.

The Torah traces the source of all that went wrong in Eden to two words:

ויהיו שניהם ערומים ולא יתבושו

“*v’lo yitboshasu*” — *they felt no shame* (*Bereishit* 2:25).

They had no awareness of *tzni’ut*... —Rashi

But this is said of the time *before* the awareness of good and evil—why in the world *should* a completely innocent man and woman feel any shame in the warmest and most sharing connection?²⁴ Here, too, we suffer from an ambiguous translation. “Shame” (*bsh*) is not meant here as “embarrassment” but in its earliest sense: the *capacity* for suffering humiliation (the usage survives in the negative: “He is shameless!”). To be without shame is to be without a sense of the individual and distinctive; to go naked is to accept that all are basically *the same*. Eden presented an insoluble dilemma: to be innocent is to be deprived of unique identity, to have no vulnerability, nothing to protect, nothing to care about that is one’s own. Vulnerability²⁵ is the essence of true relationship, yet vulnerability is destroyed by innocence.

Tzni’ut is the sensitivity to vulnerability, the need to protect what is most valuable. Indecent exposure is not embarrassing – it is insulting, for shamelessness ridicules the singular. *Tzni’ut* is not mere modesty—it is *reserve*, an avoidance of familiarity among people or situations that do not warrant exposure. But “reserve” also means to maintain for special future use, when the moment is right and the reserves are required. That is why the greater the *tzni’ut*, the greater the beauty and power that can be exposed at the perfect moment. Esther nursed the belief that she was born to win, and the more she knew it to be true, the more careful and caring she was of her own specialness.

Esther was the woman of the moment, *just such a moment* (*Esther* 4:14), cashing in her immense reserves to crush the enemy of uniqueness. Esther’s *tzni’ut* gave her a sensitivity to the unique confluence of history, individuals, cultures, and political forces that made Purim possible. This is why it was Esther who became the champion of significance and memory.

Write me down for posterity. . . *Inscribe this as a memory in a book. . .* (*Shemot* 17:4).

This is why it was Esther who brought Yisrael to a reaffirmation of the original covenant on Sinai: *The Jews confirmed and accepted. . .* (*Esther* 9:27); Esther who defeated the cynicism of Amalek; Esther who could take the first step towards restoring the lost *ady* ornaments, towards ending the long night of forgetting.

A song of the morning star. . . (*Tehillim* 22:1) –

Esther is compared to the first rays of the dawn, the end of the night. . . .

Yoma, 29a

Esther and her capitol of Shushan are very much part of our lives here in Yerushalayim, where Purim is not observed on

Adar 14. Instead, on Adar 15, we observe *Shushan Purim*. When the Temple stood here, it too commemorated Esther's capitol with an entryway named *Shushan Gate*, complete with an engraved image of Shushan.²⁶ There is no finer name for Esther's own city, and its Hebrew meaning has become popularized in the Purim song, *Shoshanat Ya'akov*: the rose²⁷ (*shoshan*) as a symbol for all Esther believed and achieved.

*My beloved has gone down to His garden. . .
To look through the gardens and to pick roses,
I am my beloved's,
And my beloved is mine—
The searcher for roses. (Shir haShirim 6:2,3)*

As a king goes into his garden and saw beautiful perfect roses with a heavenly smell. Said the king, "Pick them now, at the instant of perfection. . . ."

Midrash haNe'elam, Bereishit

The uniqueness of the individual and his moment, the significance of memory and history, the belief that we were born to perfection—the legacy of Esther is *Shoshan*.

No one else can find the roses as God can—even when they are surrounded by thorns, *He searches for the roses.*

Zohar, I:20a



Happy Purim!

endnotes:

- ¹ Cf. Shemot 32:34; Sanhedrin 102a
- ² Tehillim 106:23; cf. Shemot Rabba, 23:1
- ³ Shemot 32:32
- ⁴ Devarim 9:19
- ⁵ This is a fundamental theme that crosses all midrashic approaches. See e.g. Eiruvim 54a; Avoda Zara, 5a; Shemot Rabba, 41:7; 51:8; Vayikra Rabba, 18:3; Bamidbar Rabba, 16:24; Shir haShirim Rabba, 8:4; Tanhuma, *Ki Tisa*, 16; *Shelach*, 13:1; *Eikev*, 8; *Tanna deBei Eli'ahu Z.* 4:5; Zohar I:37b and 131b.
- ⁶ Zohar, I:131b
- ⁷ *Seforno* 31:18 maintains that the entire *Mishkan* was only necessitated by the *Eigel haZahav*. Cf. the approach of Ibn Ezra 31:18 (short version) and of Rashi op. cit. But whatever the approach regarding chronology, the undeniable structure of the

Torah's *presentation* must be seen as essential to understanding the nature of the relationship of *Mishkan* to the *Eigel haZahav* and to sin.

⁸ Ta'anit, 30b; Bava Bathra, 121a

⁹ Cf. Zohar I:131a

¹⁰ Cf. *Seforno*, Shemot 25:10, s.v. *Vechain ta'asu*, ד"ה וכן תעשן

תעשן

¹¹ Cf. also Shabbat, 146a

¹² The Cabalistic etymology of *Yom Kipurim* is *Yom ki-Purim*, a "day like Purim" (*Kitvei Ari, Mo'adim, Purim*), which makes Purim primary and *Yom Kipurim* secondary. The relationship is not as far-fetched as it may initially appear—these are the only two days incorporating *pur*, 'lottery' or 'drawing' (Vayikra 16:8-10 and Esther 3:7). Cf. *Tikunie Zohar*, 21

¹³ s.v. *lo nishtakcha*, לא נשתכח

¹⁴ Manuscript of R. Michael Tirani, 8°5217 Hebrew University Library. Published as *Megillat Setarim*, Warsaw, 1889, and in *Otzrot Ramha*"l, B'nei Beraq, 1986

¹⁵ *Remember...how they met you on the way...* (Devarim 25:17,18)

"Met you" (*karcha*) implies coincidence, happenstance (*mikreh*)...impurity (*keri*)...cooling all enthusiasm (*kar*)... (— Rashi)

¹⁶ Amalek's tactics of attacking significance also played a central role in the Nazi's war against the Jews.

¹⁷ I leave the dear reader to discover the Purim mitzva associated with the acronym מ"מ.

¹⁸ Shemot 32:32

¹⁹ Esther 4:16

²⁰ Megilah, 7a

²¹ Megilah, 13a

²² Rashi, Megilah, 13b, s.v. *mesaratan*

²³ The atmosphere for such ridicule had been carefully created by Lavan to cynically avoid precisely the problem the passwords presented. Cf. Bereishit Rabba, 70:19 and 70:12.

²⁴ "They were copulating openly in the presence of the serpent." Bereishit Rabba, 18:6; Rashi, Bereishit 3:1, s.v.

Vehanachash

²⁵ This explains the usage of *bsh* as the root of "testicles" in Devarim 25:11, the basis of monetary payment for causing shame. Testicles are not "shameful," but they are painfully vulnerable.

²⁶ Cf. Middot, I:3 and Menachot, 98a

²⁷ The *shoshanat ha'amakim* is usually taken to mean the *lilium convallium*, a small white lily, and translated "lily of the valleys." Traditional midrashic sources, however, identify it with the red rose. Modern Hebrew usage accepts informally *shoshana* as *vered*, rose. Cf. Ben Yehuda, *Dictionary and Thesaurus of the Hebrew Language*, p. 7002, who recognizes the validity of "rose."