Everything I know I learn from the Discovery Channel, the History Channel and the Learning Channel. In truth, I learn a lot at HUC as well, but what HUC offers in depth, cable matches in scope. Did you know that the first Tanks ever used in warfare could not turn or reverse? Did you know that it took science 70 years to figure out how to determine longitude at sea? The handshake first came into use as a method for determining if the approaching person was carrying a gun. I can't tell you much more about any of these things, but I can tell you that they all have one thing in common, they were all at one time a new approach to an old problem. How do you move troops across a battlefield, build a Tank. How do you chart your course while at sea, develop a clock that keeps perfect time. How do you make sure the person you greet doesn't shoot you, in an age where it takes two hands to load and fire a gun, grasp a firm hold of one of those hands. The most powerful thing in the world is a new idea. A new idea can be big, it can forever change the way we look at the world, what was once flat is now round, or it can be small, glue on the back of little yellow pieces makes a great bookmark for a hymnal.

When you think of Judaism you don't think of new ideas, you think of history, you think of maintaining the past, paying homage to it, you think of Teviah bellowing out the word TRADITION! in the shtetl. Even our religious movements, conserve, reform, reconstruct the past. We may do new things but we try very hard to find precedent for them in our collective heritage and story. This is all with one notable exception, the interpretation of scripture. Here new ideas are celebrated, they are welcomed, they are necessary. Our tradition has even made up a special classification for a new idea or approach to an old and sacred text, we call it a *hedush*. And like its

namesake in the secular world, invention or discovery, a *hedush* is the most powerful thing imaginable. The concept of a *hedush* however is not something new, it can be traced back at least as far as the following story from our tradition and indeed it is probably older than that.

Back in the days of the great rabbinic schools, around the time of the writing of the Talmud, a student posed the following dilemma to his teacher. He said, "Rabbi every year we read the same things in the Torah, I have only been a student for 10 years of my life, but already I have heard the story of Moses parting the Red Sea 10 times. Ten times I have read how Abraham nearly sacrificed his son Isaac. Ten times I have read that we fast on Yom Kippur, and in deed ten times I have fasted." "Rabbi", he asked "You are three times my age, and have thus read these things at least that much more than me, don't you ever get bored with them? They always say the same things."

The Rabbi pondered the questions for a moment, the other students in the room slowly backed away certain that the rabbi would rebuke the one who asked a seemingly insolent question. Finally the Rabbi, pulling on his long beard calmly answered the student with the following teaching from the sages. "You are right my son the text never changes, it is one of the constants in life, just like the sun rising in the morning and setting at night, so too the words of Torah will never change. But just as we are different every day that we greet the sun, and every evening when we bid it farewell, so too are we different every time we encounter words of Torah. The value of study comes from the evaluation and examination of how our lives and our opinions regarding the teachings of these texts have changed between now and the last time we read them. In

the change that occurs within ourselves, not in the text, lies the lessons that Torah can teach us in life.

On this Shabbat we read again, the story of the Golden Calf, of Moses leaving the people of Israel camped at the base of Mt. Sinai as he ascended the peak to receive the two tablets of the law. Moses was on the mountain for what seemed like an eternity to the Israelite people, and they grew anxious over his delay, and they commanded Aaron, Moses' brother and the spiritual guardian of the community to build for them a Golden Calf so they could pray and make sacrifices to it as a god. And Aaron, perhaps reluctantly as the Torah commentators suggest agreed to fashion the calf out of gold jewelry collected from the people. God saw this and became increasingly angry and dismayed with the people. God tells Moses, leave me alone for a moment so my anger can rage forth against this people, I will destroy them and make for you a new nation, a greater nation to lead. At this Moses pleads the case of the Israelite people, and God with draws his most sever decree, instead punishing only 3,000 of most idolatrous among the Israelite community with death, and sparring the lives of everyone else.

At another time in my life I might have added to this, that it was also the punishment of the Jewish people to have to read this story year after year. It is filled with irony and a sense of the inevitable. Every year we must read that the people lost faith in God and Moses, for which they paid a terrible price. And every year when we read the text we are reminded of the guilt we must feel over this incident, that the price the people paid would have been much higher were it not for Moses, the leader we had abandoned, coming to our defense and arguing with God on our behalf. You wonder

where the notion of Jewish guilt comes from, indeed it is not new at all, it is at least as old as this biblical story.

But our tradition challenges us to find new insight and meaning in this text, to look at it through the lens of our lives today, at this very moment. To build upon the answers and insights of previous readings and previous generations and find something in ourselves that is new or different from when we examined it last, to make a *hedush*.. For me that new insight, that new perspective on an old story was found in the Midrash I have included on your Daf T'fillah, the yellow piece of paper you hopefully took as you entered the sanctuary. In studying this parsha I happened upon the following Midrash, which I invite you to follow along with me as I read it out loud.

And God spoke to Moses and said, "The people have made a golden calf and bowed down to it, and prayed to it and sacrificed to it proclaiming, "This is your God O' Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt." And God further said to Moses, I see that this is a stubborn people, now leave me alone so that my anger may rain down upon them and destroy them. Then I will start over again, and you Moses will be the leader of a great nation. But Moses implored God not to do this, he said to God: "Please don't let your anger rain down upon Your people, the people whom you delivered out of Egypt from bondage to freedom. Do not destroy this people because of their one mistake, instead turn from your anger and renounce your vow to punish them.

God considered what Moses had said and turned back to him and explained, "but I have declared a law, and made a vow, whoever among my chosen people Israel who bows down to an idol and proclaims it to be their God shall be killed. This is the

law, and I made a vow to up hold it, get out of my way so I may destroy this people and make for you a new and greater nation.

At this Moses rebuked God, he argued with God, he pleaded with God, He cried out to God: "God of all the world! Did you not give us the law of absolution from a vow, whereby power is given to a learned man to absolve any one from his vows? Is this not the purpose and intention of the sacred Kol Nidrei prayer which we offer to you on Yom Kippur. In my forty days and forty nights that I just spent with you on top of this mountain you explained this law and its universal application for all of Israel. You explained even a judger of others who desires to have his decisions held valid, must subject himself to this law. Are you not now passing judgement upon the people, are you not subject to the same law of absolution. And Moses, his face red with anger and frustration, demanded of God: Do not destroy these people because of a technicality, absolve yourself of this vow and deal more even handedly with your chosen people.

And then, God seated himself before Moses, and Moses wrapped his robe around him, and instructed God in how to take back his vow. V'yidaber Adoni el Mosheh lamor, and the Master of the universe spoke to Moses and said: " I repent because of the evil that I had determined to bring upon My people." And Moses, his arms and robe wrapped around God, cried out: "You, the Master of all the World, you are absolved from your oath and vow."

This Midrash adapted from a collection of midrashim known as Yalkut Reubeni teaches us two very important and for me new things about those harrowing few moments when Moses and his ability to reason with God, to find a *hedush* in dilemma

before him was all that stood between the Jewish people and their utter destruction at God's divine wrath. First it teaches us just how close the Jewish people came to being destroyed for their act of insubordination by erecting and praying to the Golden Calf. That this deed was in direct violation of the letter and spirit of the law, when God commanded in the second commandment you shall not make a graven image and pray to it, cannot be disputed.

According to the terms of the covenant, the contract between God and the people, God has every right and indeed an obligation to wipe them off the face of the earth for their transgression, and were it not for Moses' *hedush*, we should have no doubt that this is just what God would have done. We are reminded of Abraham and his plea to God to spare the cities of Sodom and Gemorrah, but for the evidence of 10 righteous souls among all that are in the city. God promises Abraham that he will spare the whole city if ten righteous people can be found, but they are not found and God, keeping his promise levels the cities in an instant. We have no reason to think that the outcome would be any different for the Children of Israel as God looks down upon them and sees them praying to the Golden Calf.

But Moses makes a *hidush* , Moses sees what God cannot see, a new way of looking at a now old and familiar problem. And Moses tells God that his vow was made in error, anger clouded his judgement, and a judgement, even a divine judgement made in anger and the heat of an argument must be rejected. Furthermore, Moses reminds God that a system has been established for one who makes a vow and then discovers that it was in error. Such a person can and should absolve themselves of that vow, lest they go through with something because they feel they have no other choice.

What would have been the result if God kept his vow and destroyed the Jewish people? Would that have finally taught them their lesson? Yes, for they never would have made such an error in Judgement again. They never would have done it again, because they wouldn't be around to do it. Their relationship with God would be over the very instant God fulfilled the promise to destroy. And so it is in our relationships with one another, at the very instant we make good on our threats made in anger, at our promises of this or that retribution, in that instant we destroy the relationship and all hopes of future reconciliation.

How many of us have vowed never to speak to a sibling again?

How many of us won't step foot inside this person's home or that synagogue?

Who among us right now is harboring a grudge?

In the very instant we fulfilled these promises, these vows made in anger and haste we destroyed the very relationships we so passionately wanted to protect. We sacrificed our relationships with one another upon the alter of technicality, saying I can't go back on my word, I swore to myself I would never speak to that person again, be with that person again, care about that person again. And what have we gained from it, as Moses cautioned God, we gained only loneliness and isolation. We proved no point, because their was no one left to prove it to.

But Moses' *hidush,* goes beyond even the most personal relationships. Consider the strife that exists in the Jewish community today, the discord and distance that continues to grow between the liberal and traditional Jewish communities? How much of this is based on vows made in anger, adherence to the letter of the law, when the spirit of the law has been all but forgotten. I'm only 28 years old, in my life time I

danced with the Torah at an orthodox shul, in my life time, orthodox teens were members of my youth group, we ate together, prayed together and we even played basketball together, on the same team no less. What stands in the way of us doing that to day?

I have no doubt that some of what divides us is a matter of Jewish law which may take as long to undo as it did to create, but much of what divides us is not a matter of legalism, it is not a principle of law, rather is it is our very own oaths and vows against one another. We have compounded our divisions, with promises of hatred and disdain. Where once their was a divide, we, on both sides of the divide have built walls instead of a bridges. And in doing so, in allowing our frustration filled vows, our anger induced oaths to overpower our common sense. We have contributed to the destruction of the very thing we desired to maintain, the unity of the Jewish people.

Just as those promises made out of love, understanding and compassion, those vows upon which marriages, families and relationships are formed and based must never be broken, this text, through Moses' *hedush* comes to teach us that promises made in anger, rage and vindictiveness must conversely never be kept, and in fact must be abandoned. They breed only further anger and distancing, and ultimately, as they would in our parsha they will destroy the very relationship, they very people we endeavor to build and maintain.

Vows are important, I would not want to live in a world were promises made are not promises kept, but vows are not absolute, they are not beyond reproach, they are not more important than the people to whom they are directed.

In our Midrash, God cries out in pain and anguish upon Moses' shoulder, Ó‰†Ú_È·È what have I done? I have vowed to destroy the very purpose for my existence the very thing I hold most dear. Where upon Moses spreads open his arms and wraps God in the warmth of his embrace. And here is the *hidush,* with a hug and not a vow made in anger the conflicts and hurt feelings between God and his people, between the Jewish people, between us and those we love are resolved, and ultimately repaired. Ó‰†Ú_È·È, what have I done, Ó‰†È‰È‰†‡·†‰Á„È_ what will be my new approach, what steps will I take today, in this instant to repair the relationships I have destroyed by placing anger before reason, by placing vow ahead of love. Today, what will be our *hedush?*