The People Must Come Before the Law (Ki Tisa)
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2/14/2014

It has been said that 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 flat again in a different way. It can be small, glue on the back of little yellow pieces makes a great bookmark, or transformative like a cellphone or the internet.

When we think of Judaism we don't think of new ideas, we think of history, we think of maintaining the past, we think of Tevah 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.

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.

Every year when we read this story 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. And we wonder where Jewish guilt comes from?

But the value of *Hidush* challenges us to find new insight and meaning in this old and troubling text. For me that new insight, that new perspective on an old story was found in the following Midrash.

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 judgment 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 the 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. Second, 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 judgment, and a judgment, even a divine judgment 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.

The same is true 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?

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, '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 us and those we love are resolved, and ultimately repaired.

What have I done? 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?*