

Dvar Torah on Parashat Ki Tissa, by Emmanuel Navon

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If you ever wondered why some people in the Midwest and elsewhere believe that Jews have horns on their foreheads, the answer lies in today's *Parasha*. It says in the Torah portion we just read that when Moses came down from Mount Sinai carrying the Ten Commandments, his face was shining.

The text reads as follows: ומשה לא ידע כי קרן עור פניו, which means: "And Moses didn't know that his face was shining" (Exodus, 34, 29). The verb קרן ("karan") means "was shining" or "was radiant." In modern Hebrew, we use the word קרינה (which comes from the same root), to talk about the risks of cell-phone radiation.

But used with a different vowel, the combination of the three letters ק/ר/ן means something entirely different. קרן ("keren") means "horn." And in the early Greek and Latin translations of the Bible, such as the translation of Aquila and of the Vulgate, the verse "and Moses didn't know that his face was shining" was mistranslated by "and Moses didn't know that there were horns on his skin."

This is what we call today "getting lost in translation." And this little mistake had far reaching consequences. Some are anecdotal and amusing. Michelangelo's famous sculpture, for example, depicts Moses with horns on his head. But some consequences are less amusing. In the Middle-Ages, Jews were typically portrayed with horns. Throughout History, depicting Jews with horns became a classical anti-Semitic canard.

This is why our Sages say: **החיים והמוות בידי הלשון**, which means that language is the source of life and death. The misuse of language, even the smallest mistake, can have dreadful consequences. Which is why you are not allowed to read from a Torah scroll if even one letter shows the smallest defect.

But if the change of a vowel can create terrible mistakes, it can also be used as an eye-opener. Our Sages were experts in making-up good puns by playing with vowels, precisely because puns can be an excellent teaching tool. And one very famous pun comes from this week's *Parasha*, where we read that the Ten Commandments were engraved in stone.

The Hebrew word for “engraved” is **חרות** (“harut”). In the *Treatise of the Fathers* (“Pirkei Avot”), our Sages say: Don't read it **חרות** (“harut”) but **חרות** (“herut”). The verse, of course, says “harut” and not “herut.” But “herut” means freedom, and so what our Sages are teaching us with this pun is that there is no freedom without rules engraved in stone.

This is a powerful message. Freedom is often understood as the ability to do what you want. But in Judaism, there is no freedom without the rule of law. While the children of Israel became technically free after they broke the yoke of Pharaoh and left Egypt, they only became a free people after receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai. This is why we count the 49 days of the *Omer* between *Pessah* and *Shavuot*: to make us realize that coming out of Egypt was not an end in itself.

Many people today talk about the Egyptian revolution, but we Jews did that three thousand years ago. The purpose of our revolt, however, was not only to get rid of a tyrant. It was to establish a new society based on the rule of law. And this is how we became free.

So how could the children of Israel possibly make a golden calf and call it their god, after witnessing the crossing of the Dead Sea and after hearing the voice of God at Mount Sinai? This is a tough question that has puzzled our commentators throughout the ages.

In his famous book *Kuzari*, Rabbi Yehuda Halevi tries to be apologetic about the sin of the golden calf (לעגל העגל in Hebrew). He claims that the children of Israel were not guilty of actual idolatry but were only trying to worship God through something visual. Other Jewish sources, however, argue that the golden calf was pure idolatry. This is the position of Rashi and of the Talmud in the volume called *Avodah Zarah*.

For puzzling as it is, the sin of the golden calf is not the only case in the Bible where the children of Israel repudiate their faith with such impunity. In Chapter 18 of the first Book of Kings, for example, we read a similar story. After Elijah the Prophet proves to his audience that idolatry is nonsense, the Jews proclaim loud and clear: “The Lord is God, the Lord is God.” And yet, the very next day, the same Jews go back to idolatry and start persecuting Elijah the Prophet.

But the fact that the sin of the golden calf may not be that unique in the Bible, and the fact that our Sages disagree about whether or not this sin constituted true idolatry, does not answer the question of how the children of Israel could possibly call a sculpture their god, forty days after the Sinai revelation.

My understanding is that the children of Israel were rebelling against freedom. This may sound strange, for who doesn't want to be free? But the freedom against which the children of Israel were rebelling was not the freedom from tyranny. They were rebelling against the true freedom envisioned by the Torah, the freedom that can exist only if men abide by certain rules.

And you just have to read some of the rules listed in today's *Parasha* to understand why some people would want to rebel. For a start, the *Parasha* opens by saying that you have to pay tax. Now, in order to pay tax you need to work and make a living. But then you're not allowed to work as much as you want. Once a week, for 24 hours, you are prohibited from working. And the *Parasha* makes a point of insisting on the importance of Shabbat. All in all, we have no less than 613 commandments to observe. This is certainly not what most people understand by freedom.

And this is why the children of Israel decided to throw a party while Moses was writing down the Constitution. The verse says: וישב העם לאכול ושתו ויקמו לצחק (Exodus, 32, 6), which basically means that people ate, drank, and laughed. This is the type of freedom they were expecting when they rebelled against Pharaoh and

ran out of Egypt: enjoying the good life and not having anyone telling you what to do.

But in real life, it doesn't work like this. The Book of Genesis says that יצר לב האדם רע מנעוריו, which means that the heart of man has evil inclinations since young age. Set men free without rules and they do evil.

This is why so many revolutions ended up in tyranny and turned into regimes that were actually worse than the ones they overthrew. France became an inferno following the French Revolution and only became a democracy after Napoléon reestablished the rule of law. The Russian revolution only replaced one tyranny by another.

In England and in America, by contrast, revolutions did produce freedom precisely because in those countries rebelling against tyrants was never understood as an end in itself, and because freedom was rightly perceived as emanating from the rule of law.

The English-speaking peoples, as Churchill famously called them, have been fortunate to reap the benefits of an idea that was originally spelled out by the Torah. Unfortunately, the children of Israel failed to grasp that message right after coming out of Egypt. But it is never too late to learn from your mistakes, even after three-thousand years. For the Jewish people was then, and continues to be today, in charge of bringing to the world the light and wisdom that man still needs to become truly free.