

## Ki Tisa 2020 (Exodus 30:11-34:35)

This is an action-packed and momentous Torah portion. It is the Parsha of the Golden Calf and the 10 commandments. Among other things, it is also the parsha in which the Jews are counted and each person (read male over 20) is required to give a half shekel tithe to be used for the building and outfitting of the Tent of Meeting, a human (this time, Moses) once again bargains with God not to kill the people (more on this later), and we are told more than once to keep the Sabbath.

God singles out by name, Bezalel, whom he has bestowed with great creativity in all manner of craft and art, and apparently with the ability to motivate the other craftsmen, artists and builders involved in the construction and decoration of the Tabernacle. I initially thought I'd address the role of the artist and craftsperson in our lives, our society and in here at Temple Shalom. This seemed easy. My mother was a great lover of art, and growing up in NYC, I was exposed to a lot of it; I married into a family of artists and fine craftspeople, and I live with an

artist; the synagogue is full of artists and craftspeople, some with obvious skills and others whose skills require a bit more probing to discover. I'll probably come back to this sometime when I'm asked again to do another d'var on Ki Tisa.

Several commentators have chosen to write on the directive from God to build a washstand of copper and the instructions on how the priests are to use it to wash their hands and feet every time they enter the Tent of Meeting. Commentators have often remarked that this led to the Jews concern regarding washing and cleanliness and may have contributed to lower rates of certain infectious diseases among the Jewish community in the past. This seemed pertinent with the spread of COVID 19 and the constant admonition that we wash our hands frequently. But I just couldn't get inspired about soap and water and hand sanitizer.

I finally decided to discuss something else, an interesting description of the Israelites as a “stiff necked people”, *K’shei oreph*, that is found here and elsewhere in Torah. In the context of this parsha it is used to bolster 2 opposite sides of the argument between God and Moses regarding the survival of the Israelites. Here is the context: God sees that the people have made the Golden Calf and is understandably furious at them; they have been stubborn and impatient and lost faith in spite of their miraculous escape from Egypt which should still be fresh in their minds...who can blame God? God says to Moses “I have seen this people and behold! They are a stiff necked people.” He follows by threatening to annihilate them. So Moses pleads with God not to do this; he gives several sensible reasons (32: 11-14) and he is very persuasive and God relents.

Clearly, God’s description of the Am Yisroel as stiff necked is meant to be damning, not complimentary. In this case the term is used because they have refused to believe, to trust, to listen, to have an open mind.

Rashi and Sforno noted that a stiff neck prevents someone from turning his face left or right. Taken less literally, a stiff necked person does not see around him, does not consider multiple points of view and refuses to listen to others. From God's point of view, they are out of control and will not remain faithful to God.

Moses sees things differently. In fact, he sees being stiff-necked as an asset, albeit one that can make relationships rather difficult and challenging at times, and maybe just about drive you to do something you might regret. Here is the how Moses sees things. (34:9) Moses says, "If I have now found favor in your eyes, O Lord, let the lord go now in our midst (even though/because) this is a stiff necked people. Pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your own."

How can being obstinate, stubborn and need I say, stiff necked, be an asset? I immediately thought of my daughter in this context. Some of you know Kyla, she was born on 25 Kislev, the first day of Chanukah,

and came out with a mind of her own! At 2 days old, like many babies, Kyla developed neonatal jaundice. For those who don't know, the cure for this is exposure to sunlight. Since sunbathing is not recommended in Winnipeg in December, Kyla was placed (eyes properly shielded) on a mini tanning bed. Everyone tried to position her correctly, on her back or side, but she would have none of it! She cried constantly until someone finally (against normal procedure) put her on her tummy. We knew we were in for trouble. We were prepared, she would be stubborn, stiff-necked, but also persistent and not likely to give up or give in. And so it is, she has gone far, accomplished a lot and is spending this year at Harvard as one of the few female orthopedic trauma surgeons in N. America.

As Moses expected, being stiff necked has been the Jews survival strategy. It has enabled us to persist in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles. We only have to think of the Purim story, the triumph of the Maccabees, our survival and resilience after the

destruction of the Temple and our persistence in the face of unutterable horror borne of anti-Semitism in more recent times during the Inquisition, the pogroms and the Holocaust. Moses point...we would have given up, lost faith and disappeared had we not been stiff-necked!

Closer to home, unrelenting commitment and persistence have kept Temple Shalom going through some challenging times when our survival might have been in question. And I am sure that in your own lives, persistence and stubbornness (and hopefully support and understanding from family, friends and the Temple community) have enabled you too to overcome difficulties and challenges. So take Tylenol as needed but as Jews, we will continue to be stiff necked.