

Shabbat Parashat Ki Tissa/Shabbat Parah Old Habits Die Hard

Habits are very hard to break. Routines are very difficult to change. There are many examples in the world of this reality. Ask someone who has ever tried to stop biting their fingernails how hard it is to do it. Did you ever notice how basketball player LeBron James used to chew on his fingernails when he was sitting on the bench during a time out or when he was getting a short rest in his early years in the N.B.A.? Journalists and sports commentators regularly used to ask him about his habit because of the impact it had on his public image. It made him look childish, immature, and unable to control his nerves. His reply was that it had nothing to do with nerves; it was just a bad habit that he picked up when he was a really young kid. He knew full well that it was a bad habit, bad for his teeth, and damaging to his public image. He just had a really hard time breaking the habit. Old habits are VERY hard to break.

This issue is relevant to this week's *parasha* because the Israelites have a bad habit that comes to the fore in a most disturbing way. You see, after 400 years of slavery of Egypt, the Israelites have become a people that easily loses its faith. They have very little confidence. When they are promised something, they have a hard time being sure that the person will follow through. In this week's *parasha*, Moses promises the people that he will come down from Mount Sinai at the end of forty days and forty nights. When it seems to the people that he is not coming down on time, they ask Aaron to build them a god of gold...the *Egel HaZahav*/Golden Calf. In Egypt, their strength of faith was beaten out of them by the task masters. Even after being freed from slavery with the miracles of the ten plagues, saved from the on-coming attack of the Egyptian chariots with the parting of the Reed Sea, and hearing the teaching of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai, they still go back to their old habit of losing faith in God at the first sign of doubt. Old habits are VERY hard to break.

While there is a good explanation for why the Israelites built the Golden Calf, that does not mean that it was acceptable. In fact, we know that God punishes the people severely for their wrongdoing. Similarly, while we might be able to explain some of our questionable behavior as resulting from bad habits, that does not mean that we should not do everything in our power to change and reverse the habit. The Israelites who were freed from Egypt never found a way to stop their faith-losing habit. As a result, they were punished with the loss of the right to enter the Promised Land after failing to believe that they could conquer it when the 10 faithless scouts brought back their negative report on the Canaanites who lived there. Only Calev and Y'hoshu'a, two people who proved their faith, were allowed in from among the millions of adult-age Israelites who left Egypt. It would be an absolute shame if any of us were not able to find it within ourselves to reverse our bad habits and be stuck with them for life. It will take a lot of hard work, lots of reminders, and lots of concentration, but it is doable.

Whether you are a "nail biter" or a person with another bad habit that is worth breaking, make this Shabbat a time to make a "resolution" and commitment to work on stopping one bad habit that you know you have. Both the result of reversing the habit and all the work that it took to get there will be well worth it and you will receive your gift of "going into the Promised Land."

Shabbat Shalom!