

INSIGHTS

Into The Weekly Parsha

בס"ד

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This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of Yirmiyahu Gedaliah ben Avroham Abish. "May his Neshama have an Aliya!"

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Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

PARSHAS KI SISA

Earring for Hearing

And Aharon told them, "Take the rings off the ears of your wives and children and bring them to me." All the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aharon (32:2-3).



This week's *parsha* recounts the story of the sin of the golden calf. When the people thought that Moshe was delayed in returning from Mount Sinai, they approached Aharon and demanded that he provide them with new leadership. As Rashi (ad loc) explains, they had miscalculated the time that Moshe was due to return. Aharon, in an effort to buy some time and divert their zealotry, suggested that he would fashion for them an object and ordered them to remove the earrings from their wives and children.

Aharon reckoned that the women and children would resist giving up their earrings and this would delay their evil intentions, buying enough time for Moshe to return (see Rashi 32:2). However, the men circumvented Aharon's plan by removing their own gold earrings instead as material for the idol.

If one were to imagine how this group must have looked when they received the Torah on Har Sinai, with their light colored clothes, earrings, and sandals, they would more closely resembled beach goers on South Beach than Yeshiva *bochurim*. After all, the Torah and Chazal only record that they wore earrings, we have no mention anywhere of black hats or white shirts.

But one must wonder, what is this obsession with earrings? Why is everyone wearing earrings? Furthermore, what is

Aharon's thought process when telling them to bring the earrings? This is the generation that left Egypt with literally tons of gold. The Mishkan alone had over 4,300 lbs. of gold donated (see 38:24). Asking individuals to bring in the tiny bit of gold that an earring is made out of seems very inefficient. Even if that was Aharon's intent – that the inefficiency would lead to a delay – they could have circumvented this as well by each bringing in gold coins or objects made of gold. Why did they bring earrings, which would have required a vast number to meet the requirements of gold needed for a large idol?

In his commentary on the first of the *Aseres Hadibros*, Rashi explains that Hashem said, "I am the one who took you out of Egypt, from the house of slaves" to tell Bnei Yisroel that they were now His subjects (see 20:2). The whole purpose of leaving Egypt and accepting the Torah was that we became servants of Hashem. In *Parshas Mishpatim* we learn that if someone wants to remain a permanent slave he must have his ear pierced (see 21:5 and Rashi ad loc). Bnei Yisroel, as slaves of Egypt, had pierced ears and wore earrings.

Why the ears? Because it represents the need to listen and to obey what they are told to do. Fascinatingly, the Talmud says that if one blinds another person's slave he must pay for the damage he caused. However, he if causes the slave to lose

his hearing he must pay the entire value of the slave, because he rendered the slave valueless (*Bava Kama* 85b). This is why we pierce the ear of one who desires to remain a slave permanently.

Rashi (32:3) explains the words in the verse "*the entire people removed their earrings*" to mean they unburdened themselves. What is the *possuk* talking about – what kind of burden is wearing an earring?

At Har Sinai, Bnei Yisroel accepted servitude to Hashem, to be his subjects. Aharon actually understood exactly what they were trying to do; they were trying to throw off the yoke of servitude to Hashem. Creating an idol made of earrings perfectly represented what they were trying to accomplish. This is why he asked for the earrings. But he asked only for those of the women and children, knowing that they weren't prepared to abrogate their commitment to Hashem – hoping it would delay them until Moshe returned and restored order.

Nevertheless, the men used the opportunity to "unburden" themselves, and as a symbol of their freedom they removed their own earrings. They no longer viewed themselves as slaves. This act was a total reversal of what was achieved at Mount Sinai. This broke their subjugation to Hashem, brought death back to the world, and almost caused the destruction of the entire Jewish people.

No Tiptoeing

Hashem passed before him and proclaimed, "Hashem, Hashem, God, Merciful and Gracious..." (34:6)

After the sin of the Golden Calf, when Moshe pleaded for forgiveness from Hashem on behalf of Bnei Yisroel, Hashem relents and teaches Moshe the special formula for requesting forgiveness from Hashem – the thirteen attributes of mercy. This prayer is the cornerstone of our pleadings during the ten days of repentance, and utilized throughout the year on different occasions.

Rashi (ad loc) quotes the Gemara (*Rosh Hashana* 17b) that explains why the first two of the thirteen attributes of mercy are identical 1) Hashem 2) Hashem: This is the name of God that alludes to His attribute of mercy and hints that Hashem is merciful 1) before he sins and 2) after he sins.

Rosh on the Gemara asks, "Why does one need mercy before one sins?" His first answer is that Hashem knows you're going to sin, nevertheless he treats you as though you haven't sinned. The Ohr Hachaim on our *possuk* asks: If Rosh is right then all of creation has no purpose, because Hashem knows what everyone is going to do (i.e. who will sin) and Hashem can punish a person before he's even born! So, what is the purpose of any of it?

The answer to the Ohr Hachaim's question is that of course Hashem wouldn't consider punishing someone before they sinned. Otherwise, what would be the point of creation? The whole concept of Hashem's knowledge cannot interfere with our free choice to be able to choose to do the right thing.

A careful reading of Rosh is the key. He never says that Hashem has mercy before we sin so as not to punish us. Rosh just says that Hashem has mercy on us even though he knows we are going to sin. Rosh means to teach us a very deep insight into Hashem's attitude toward mankind.

Anybody who has any experience in family counseling will tell you that one of the issues in difficult family dynamics is the unease of the environment. One (or both) of the spouses inevitably says, "I feel like I am walking on eggshells – I don't know when I am going to be jumped on for doing something wrong." There is a feeling that the partner is constantly looking to find a fault with one's actions.

This is what Rosh is telling us; even though Hashem knows we are going to sin, He isn't waiting to pounce on us – He wants us to feel comfortable. He isn't just waiting for us to make a mistake, even though in reality He knows that we are about to sin. He is merciful with us so that we understand that we can make the decisions we want without constantly feeling that someone is waiting for us to fail. The mercy is in allowing us to live a life unfettered by the vision that someone is looking over our shoulder to catch us doing something wrong. This is a remarkable gift from Hashem as it allows for true freewill and enables us to make our own choices. Thus, when we make the proper choice, we know that it was completely our decision and not us merely constrained by fear of punishment.

Did You Know...

Most people believe that only the names of the twelve tribes were inscribed on the precious stones of the *choshen*, the breastplate. However, in addition to the names of the twelve tribes, the stones also contained the names Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov and the words: "[all these are] the tribes of Yeshurun" (*Yoma* 73b). These words could not be omitted since the whole Hebrew alphabet had to be included, in order that, on consulting the *Urim* and *Tumim*, the high priest might be enabled to form words from the individual letters on the stones that would then light up to deliver a message.

There is much discussion in the commentaries as to exactly which stones contained which letters and in what order. A proper treatment of the subject is beyond the scope of this column. However, it is interesting to note that there is a view that each stone had six letters on it, which means in total there were seventy-two letters on the *choshen*, corresponding to the *Shem Hameforash*.

While we are on the subject of the *choshen*: According to the Gemara in *Sotah* (48b), no chisel was allowed to touch the stones, nor was it permitted to mark the names of the twelve patriarchs on the stones by means of paint or ink. The engraving was therefore done by means of the *shamir*, which was placed on the stone, and had the marvelous power of cutting it along the lines of the letters of the proper names.



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