

## **It Is Time to Hold up the Mirror to Your Inner Life**

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**Parashat Ki Tissa 5768**

I would like you to close your eyes and think about what you look like for just a split second. Then ask, “Is the person you see in your mind’s eye, the same person you see when you look into the mirror?” I certainly don’t. In my mind’s eye I see an 18 year old with long hair. I see a guy with a much larger neck but a thinner torso. What I see in the mirror is a little altered. My wife and I celebrated our 19th wedding anniversary this week and it gave me the opportunity to look at our wedding pictures. I just looked different. It’s remarkable because my wife has not changed a bit, but fortunately and unfortunately I have. I have a little less hair, a few wrinkles that are of course not noticeable to anyone but me, and there’s a little gray in my beard. However, for the most part, I’m still the same height and still have the same color eyes, but I’ve changed. Some changes I embrace, some really bother me, but most of the changes I don’t really care about.

Now, if this is true of our physical selves, then it is also true of our emotional and intellectual lives. The problem lies in the fact that when you look into a mirror, it clearly shows changes. However, we know that looking into a mirror doesn’t really project what is actually there. We see what we want to see and we ignore what we don’t want to see. This is certainly true of our inner lives as well. We grow and we change, all the while not realizing the significant changes we have made in our lives. Three years ago a young family played sports on Shabbat morning, and skipped services entirely. Now, this same family moves within walking distance to the shul, kashers their home and dramatically changes their priorities. In many ways, the family doesn’t even recognize the life they once led, but this is the exception to the rule. For most of us, the changes are more subtle and certainly less obvious, but we need to make them. Then we need to take note of them so we, too, can become conscious, thoughtful and purposeful beings. Buying a home with faith that a community will spring up around you, is only for the strong. For the rest of us the change needs to be slower and more methodical. However, these changes are still important and significant. If the mirror helps us to see our physical self, then prayer, study, and community help us to see our inner self and that is precisely the work of the holy places in our lives.

In this week’s reading, it talks about the most significant mistake the Jewish people make on their journey from slavery to full freedom, from Egypt to the Promised Land. The sin of the Golden calf simply stands as the most significant setback for our nation in the infancy of its development. The golden calf, often categorized as a moment of insecurity that births a dramatic mistake, is foreshadowed in a verse even before the story unfolds. While building the tabernacle, God instructs Bezalel, through Moses, to create a *Kiyor Nichoshet*, (Exodus 31:18) a bronze laver with a bronze stand. This laver was for washing the kohen prior to activities in the holy precincts of the tabernacle. Moses objects. Reading the description of this *kiyor nichoshet* (38:8) found later in the book, the laver was to be made out of the bronze that women use to perform tasks at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. Moses asks, “What’s going on here?” Then the midrash fills in the blank while re-telling the story of a conversation not originally recorded in the Torah, it talks about the following conversation.

Moses comes to God and says “This is not an appropriate place for mirrors. The tent of meeting, the holy tabernacle, is not a place of vanity. It’s simply not appropriate to be using a material that was originally used for such shallow purposes. Holiness is not about what we look like on the outside.” To which God responds, “Ah Moses, so naive. Women use the mirrors to make themselves more beautiful for greater reasons. It wasn’t about vanity. It was about making themselves more attractive to others. It was about the survival of our people. Moses, you just don’t get it. Can you imagine a more important time than the time when our people were stripped of their humanity. Yet these women maintained enough of their dignity to look into the mirror and make themselves appear more attractive.” God says, “This is precisely what the mirrors are all about. This is not only acceptable; it is why the mirrors must be in the holy places. This is a time for personal reflection. This is the place for recognizing change in our lives and in our selves.”

Moses, in just one chapter, will descend the mountain and, once again, act with his hands. The same hands that proved to God he was a leader for our people are the very hands that will be his downfall. Moses uses his hands in four significant moments during his life and the life of the Jewish people. First he rises up to kill the Egyptian who is beating a Jew. Second, in this week’s reading, he takes his staff and hits the rock in order to produce water for the thirsty. Third, he smashes the tablets that were a gift from God. Finally, he hits the rock a second time even though he was told to speak to it. Twice hitting raises him up and twice it brings him down. God carefully instructs Moses that a little self-reflection could have changed his entire life. By applying the midrash here, as our Etz Hayim Humash does, rather than later like Rashi does, our text is making a subtle comment. Earlier self-reflection is always better than later. As Martin Buber taught, “We can be redeemed only to the extent to which we see ourselves.”

After Moses breaks the tablets that were clearly, as the Torah tells us, created *b’etzvah elohim*, by God’s own hand, Moses is told that this time he will have to rewrite them. This time he will have to go up the mountain and fix what he broke. This time Moses will have to use his hands for creative purposes, in the hopes that he will learn the lesson that his hands can be used for creation or destruction. Moses must learn this lesson, even though he never does, that he must become a thoughtful, conscious being, not an impulsive reactionary. The tool to that lies in the mirrors. Once again, Moses is our teacher. Once again, Moses does what we all do and the result is exactly the result we all produce.

In our passion and in our commitment we do things that we later wish we had never done, we smack ourselves on the forehead and say, “When will I learn?” I can’t even count the number of times I say that to myself, but each time I say it, I am learning. I am reflecting on past behavior and I am laying the foundation for change in my life. Today is a day for reflection. Today is a day to figure out how we have changed and where we have not yet changed. Maybe we decide that in areas where we are not willing to change. Sometimes this process is something we can do on our own and sometimes we need others to hold up the mirror for us. As Robert Burns, the great Scottish poet laureate once said, “O would some Power, the gift to give us, to see ourselves as others see us!” Sometimes others have a kinder view of us than we have of ourselves. Today is the day to find out. Today I ask you, “Are you smarter than you were yesterday? Are you making better decisions in your personal and professional lives

than you did yesterday? Are you kinder to others and to yourself than you were yesterday? Are you more patient? Are you calmer? Are you more caring? Are you more passionate? Are you more thoughtful? Are you becoming the person you want to become?" It is time to hold up the mirror to your inner life. You see both God and Moses were correct. It doesn't matter what you look like on the outside. It doesn't matter if a tire has formed around your middle or if your hairline has moved. That just doesn't matter. Moses is right on target – it just doesn't matter. But God's point is true as well. Personal reflection does belong here. For this sanctuary is a place of consideration. It is here, away from the frenetic lives that we lead, that we make decisions about the people we are becoming in the world that is being created. Here is where we decide if we are going to be destructive or imaginative, here is where we decide to remain stagnant in our lives or be inspired by each other, God, and our sacred legacy. I ask you now, to join me at the bottom of page 32 on the Hebrew side of the page, as we read the piece adapted from the words of Martin Buber.

"You cannot find redemption until you see the flaws in your own soul, and try to efface them. Nor can a people be redeemed until they see the flaws in its soul and try to efface them. However, whether it is an individual or a people, whoever shuts out the realization of their flaws is shutting out redemption. We can be redeemed only to the extent to which we see ourselves."

The world is in need of redemption, but redemption must not be expected to happen as an act of sheer grace. Our task is to make the world worthy of redemption. Our faith and our works are preparation for ultimate redemption.