

## **Sermon Parashat Ki Tissa 5767**

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We have a number of children, each requiring a different sort of attention. Without going into too much detail about the type of attention each child wants and needs, I would like to share a story with you. Some of our children like company but don't require it. Some of our children would prefer to be left alone. However, when it comes time for homework, Mia, our beautiful black haired child, our only child with black hair, needs company. The truth is she would actually prefer more than company, she would like us to do her homework for her. Gavriella, would like us to see what she has done when she is finished. Adi will show us if we ask and Nina wouldn't let us see what she has done if we begged her, while Mia would like us to do it for her. If I could I probably would. However, we have now arrived at a solution to this problem. I just have to sit with her. Sometimes she can do her work in the kitchen so that Missy can be with her while she is cooking dinner, but regardless, someone has to be in the room. She can do the work. Like all our children, she too is brilliant. It's just that she needs company, but she has to do the work. At the end of the day, we can give her all the company, all the support and all the encouragement she needs, but she has to do the work. She wears us down – she pushes and pushes and sometimes I'll slide her an answer to a multiplication problem, but for the most part we stand firm. We don't make collages, we don't do science fair projects, we don't build model cities. We help quiz for upcoming tests and we check over work, but she has to do it herself. That is far more important to us than whatever grade she happens to get. There is just no excuse for not doing the work. It's actually the only time we truly get angry. We are not concerned with outcomes we are only concerned with effort.

I remember hearing these words from my younger days, "Jay is not working up to his potential." Sometimes they were right and sometimes they were wrong. There were times the work came easily and there were times that no matter how hard I worked it wasn't happening for me. However, my parents would look me straight in the eye and ask for an honest answer. They would ask the question only I could really answer and that was "Am I trying my best?" Regardless of my response, it was a question that all of us must answer all the time and that is,

“Are we doing our best?” I know we can’t put our all into everything because it is impossible to do that, but are we devoting enough time to all the important things in our lives? The various demands on our time dictate how much effort we can reasonably put forth, therefore, we must be prepared to live with the result. This is the question we must ask of our relationships. Today I ask the question of your relationship with God. The answer is simple, you get what you put in.

In this morning’s reading there’s a watershed moment in the history of our growth as a nation. If Heschel is correct and the purpose of doing God’s will of observing mitzvot is about alleviating God’s suffering from isolation, then God needs us. We bring ourselves closer to God through observing the commandments. This morning’s reading is about how that distance was created.

In this week’s reading we hear about the construction and celebration of the Golden Calf. When Moses is absent, the people build an idol. When their direct connection to the Almighty is not present, they immediately create a new god. God’s response is fury and God sends Moses to deal with the problem. Moses takes the tablets and descends the mountain. As he approaches and sees the dancing and singing, he too becomes enraged and smashes the tablets and the Golden calf. In two swift swipes he destroys both the handy work of God and the edifice of the people. The text is clear in both places of exactly what Moses does and the response is equally clear. The Torah teaches us that God became enraged when the Golden Calf was created and God threatened to destroy the entire people. Just a few sentences later, Moses too becomes furious and destroys God’s tablets, the stone tablets that God had created with His own finger. “*V’haluchot ma’aseh elohim hemah* – The tablets were God’s work.” (33:16) Then, restitution becomes clear and making it up is far more difficult than creating it from scratch. God says to Moses, “*Pisol licha sh’nei luchot avanim karishonim asher shibarta.*” Moses, carve two tablets of stone like the first ones YOU broke.” (34:1) Moses has to fix what he broke and so do the Jewish people. When they built the golden calf they severed their relationship with God. So, Moses does something extraordinary. Amidst the chaos of the golden calf incident, Moses takes the tent of meeting outside the camp. Anyone who wants to connect with God, “*kol mivakeish adonai yetze,*” that is anyone who now wants to be in a relationship with God, must now go outside the camp to find Him. No longer will God be easily accessible. If you want a relationship with God then you have to work for it. When the Jewish people wanted God they

had to do something for it, they had to make an effort. Access to God comes with effort and commitment. *“Vhaya kol hamivakesh adonai yatza el ohel moed.”*

The unfolding of events is instructive. Moses does something wrong and it is not easily fixed. When life is given to you on a silver platter, there is often no appreciation for what you have. The person who recovers from a serious illness, the person who has to fight for their life, grows to understand the value of life.

However, the most beautiful moment in this story is the poignant interchange between God and Moses as Moses sits down to rewrite the document he had destroyed. As he is about to rewrite the story, Moses says to God, “I am ready to right the wrong but don’t leave me alone.” *“Hareini Na et kivodecha,”* “Let me know you are here with me.” (33:18) God tenderly responds, *“Ani a’avir kol tuvi al panecha.”* “I will let you know that I’m here so don’t worry, I’m not going any where. When you are in a real relationship there is no abandonment. When two parties really care for each other they don’t turn their backs on each other. No doubt the Jewish people and even Moses have made mistakes, but there is no turning and running. Moses and the Jewish people are flawed.

What is remarkable is that their desire to maintain their relationship is so strong that they’re willing to do the work to make it right. There is no genius in this. It’s just hard work. As Einstein has taught, genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration. If we want to make magical things happen in our lives we have to be willing to work to make it happen. The famous cliché is so true, the harder the work the luckier I get. It’s true in all areas of our lives. It’s true of our relationships with each other; it’s true in our career. For today, it’s also about your connection with the Divine.

It’s strange but true. As a young person you go to the ophthalmologist every other year, you go to the internist every year and to the dentist every six months. That’s because different parts of our body require different degrees of attention. I think this is true. So I tell you, your soul requires even greater attention. If you want to make sure your soul is healthy you have to do the work. You can’t just come once or twice a year. Your soul is not like your internal organs – it

needs more work. Our tradition says, “*yomam valeila*,” day and night we must do the work. If you want to be connected to what we are doing here, then you have to make a commitment to be here. If you want to feel like you are in a relationship with God, then you have to show up and do the hard work of learning the liturgy and the laws.

Unfortunately, we live in a world where we are all looking for the next big thing and many are looking for the get rich quick plan. Sometimes it happens. There are those who win the lottery and that’s why it’s such a huge industry. The majority of us don’t. Those who are successful in life, marriage, or career have gotten that way through hard work - both day in and day out effort. I wish there was a magic pill we could take so it would be easier, but I suppose it is in the effort that value is attained. You remember the commercial for Smith Barney where the actor says at the conclusion, “We make money the old fashioned way, we earn it.” Judaism, like anything else, must be learned and it must be earned. We no longer live in the coercive ghetto society of Eastern Europe. We need to make the choice to participate - no one is going to force you. Once you decide to commit, then you must be willing to make the effort.

This past week, after years of trying to have a child, a young couple finally adopted a beautiful boy. They are overjoyed because a magnificent gift has been given to them. Now that this little boy has been brought into their family, the next step is to bring this boy into our faith community. So, like all converts, we brought him to the “*mikveh*” and there, by the ritual waters, they thanked God and blessed their prized possession. Then they declared their intention to raise him into a life of mitzvot, commandments, a life of “*Gemilut Hasidim*” acts of good deeds. They spoke of their intentions and their hopes and as hard as it was for them to finally have a child of their own, the truth is the work begins now. Child rearing is extremely hard. Raising children requires unique individualized attention. Each of our children certainly requires something different, but helping a child grow into adulthood is like shining silver. You need the right materials. You need to rub really hard because it takes some elbow grease, however, the most magnificent aspect of it is that, when it’s done and you’ve done it right, you may have sweated a little bit, but at least you can see yourself in it. That is true of your connection with God and the community. It takes hard work, it takes sweat and sometimes tears, but when your done you’ll be able to see yourself reflected in its majesty.