

Ki Tisa begins with the words which literally translated means “*When you raise the heads of the Israelites*”, but is always translated as “When you take a census”. So after beginning the Parsha with the words, “When you raise up the heads of the children of Israel”, we read of the most devastating spiritual descent in Jewish history. Just a few weeks after receiving the Torah directly from God, and as they are about to be given the two tablets of the covenant, the Jewish people rapidly sink into the decadence of idol worship and as a result, the tablets are smashed. This is hardly what one would describe as “raising the heads” of the Jewish people.

As Rabbi Netter frequently sermonized, he would take a phrase or even a few words and expand on them to present a message that would be meaningful and moving. In this Parsha, there are three words that appear 4 times in this Parsha; Exodus 32:9, 33:3, 33:5 and 34:9. The same three words appear three times in Deuteronomy and once in Chronicles II. The phrase *Am kashei Oreph* is what I would like to expand upon and describe why this term is often used to describe the Jewish people. And that means it may describe every one of us sitting here today. We are often called the Chosen People, the People of the Book, The Eternal People, and Light unto the Nations. But “*Am kashei Oreph*”, a stiff necked people, could mean according to Rashi, “they turn the stiff back of their necks toward them who would rebuke them and refuse to listen”, (Rashi on Exodus 34:9) or the Sforno, “hence there is no hope that they will repent, but follow the stubbornness of their hearts as before” (Sforno on Exodus 32:9). On the other hand Ramban suggests it can be a positive trait as “God is in their midst because they are a stiff-necked people” (Ramban on Exodus 34:9). Throughout the years of wandering in the wilderness, the People Israel was like a rebellious, wayward child, always getting into trouble.

But let us follow the text more closely and determine how Moses and God challenge each other on the concept of *Am kashei Oreph* (a stiff-necked people) and how this apparent stubbornness has kept the Jewish People alive throughout the centuries.

“And Moses hurried and knelt to the ground and bowed, and said, if I have found favor in your eyes, my Lord, may my Lord go among us, because (ki) it is a stiff necked people, and forgive our wickedness and our sin, and take us as your inheritance.”

The difficulty in the verse is self-evident. Moses cites as a reason for God remaining with Israelites the very attribute that God had previously given for wishing to abandon them.

“I have seen these people, the Lord said to Moses, “and they are a stiff necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation.” And again, “Go up to the land flowing with milk and honey. But I will not go with you, because you are a stiff necked people and I might destroy you on the way.”

How can Moses invoke the people’s obstinacy as a reason for God to maintain his presence among them? What is the meaning of Moses statement “may my Lord go among us because it is a stiff necked people”? The Ramban takes this approach.

This is to be understood in its literal sense. God is to go in their midst because they are a stiff necked people, for the Holy One, blessed be He, has become reconciled with them, His presence amongst those who are stiff necked would be better than an angel. For He will want to increase their blessings more, since they are His people and His inheritance.... At a time of goodwill, it is better for them that the Divine glory go with them, because they are a stiff- necked people, and He would more readily show grace and mercy upon His servants.

Thus for the Ramban, it is precisely the waywardness of Israel that requires the close attention of a forgiving God—like a rebellious child for whom the kindest cure is the attentive concern of a loving parent.

There is, however, another more beautiful and far more striking line of interpretation that can be traced across the centuries. In the twentieth century it was given expression by Rabbi Yitzhak Nissenbaum. The argument he attributed to Moses was this: "Almighty God, look upon this people with favor, because now their greatest vice will one day be their most heroic virtue. They are indeed an obstinate people. When they have everything to thank You for, they complain. Mere weeks after hearing your voice, they make a Golden Calf. But just as now they are stiff necked in their disobedience, so one day they will be equally stiff necked in their loyalty. Nations will call on them to assimilate, but they will refuse. Mightier religions will call upon them to convert, but they will resist. They will suffer humiliation, persecution, even torture and death because of the name they bear and the faith they profess, but they will stay true to the covenant their ancestors made with You. They will go to their deaths saying Ani maamin, "I believe". This is a people awesome in its obstinacy—and although now it is their failing, there will be times far into the future when it will be their noblest strength.

The fact that Rabbi Nissenbaum lived and died in the Warsaw ghetto gives added poignancy to his words.

Rabbi Ammi, a third century Talmudist, said Jews were stiff-necked in the sense that they were ready to die for their faith. As Gersonides (Ralbag) explained in the fourteenth century a stubborn people may be slow to acquire a faith but once it has done so, it never relinquishes it.

Titus Flavius Josephus, born as Yosef ben Matityahu, a first century Jewish scholar, records in his famous Historical masterpiece, *Antiquities of the Jews*, this extraordinary obstinacy in the first recorded incidents of mass non-violent civil disobedience. It took place during the reign of one of the most pathological of Roman Emperors, Caligula (37-41 C.E.), the third Emperor of Rome.

He had proposed placing a statue of himself in the precincts of the Temple in Jerusalem, and had sent the military leader Petronius to carry out the task, if necessary by force. This is how Josephus describes the encounter between Petronius and the Jewish population at Ptolemais (Acre).

But there came ten thousand of the Jews to Petronius at Ptolemais to offer their petitions to him that he would not compel them to violate the law of their forefathers. "But if," they said "you are wholly resolved to bring the statue and install it, then you must first kill us, and then do what you have resolved on. For while we are alive, we cannot permit such things as are forbidden by our law...."

Petronius was angry at them and said: "Caesar has sent me. I am compelled to observe his decrees..." Then the Jews replied, "Since, therefore you are so disposed, O Petronius, that you will not disobey Caesar's orders, neither will we transgress the commands of our law..."

When Petronius saw by their words that their determination was hard to be removed, and that...he would not be able to be obedient to Caligula in the dedication of his statue, and there must be a great deal of bloodshed, he took his friends and servants and hastened to Tiberius.

Then Petronius came to them (at Tiberius) "Will you then make war with Caesar, regardless of his great preparations for war and your own weakness?" They replied, "We will not by any means make war with Caesar, but we will die before we see our laws transgressed." Then they threw themselves down on their faces and stretched out their throats and said that they were ready to be slain. And this they did for forty days, neglecting to till their soil, though this was the season for sowing. Thus they continued firm in their resolution and proposed to themselves to die willingly rather than see the statue of Caligula dedicated. Faced with such heroic defiance on so large a scale, Petronius gave way and wrote to Caligula urging him, in Josephus' words, "not to drive so many tens of thousands of these men to distraction; that if he were to slay these men, he would be publicly cursed for all future ages."

Nor was this a unique episode. The Rabbinic literature together with chronicles of the middle ages are full of stories of martyrdom, of Jews willing to die rather than convert. Indeed the very concept of Kiddush ha-Shem, sanctification of God's name, came to be associated in the halakhic literature with willingness to die rather than transgress.

In the Book of Esther, which we read this week, the real test of faith came when God was hidden. (The Book of Esther does not contain the name of God). The rabbis suggested that the name Esther is an allusion to the phrase *haster astir et panai*, "I will surely hide My face." The book relates the first warrant of genocide against the Jewish people. That Jews remained Jews under such conditions was proof that they did re-affirm the covenant. Obstinate in their disbelief during much of the Biblical era, they became obstinate in their belief ever afterward. Faced with God's presence, they disobeyed Him. Confronted with His absence, they stayed faithful to Him. This is the paradox of the stiff-necked people.

Not by accident does the main narrative of the Book of Esther begin with the words, "and Mordechai would not bow down." His refusal to submit to Haman sets the story in motion. Mordechai is also obstinate—for there is one thing that is hard to do if you have a stiff neck, namely, bow down. At times, Jews found it hard to bow down to God—but they were certainly never willing to bow down to anything less. That is why according to Rabbi Jonathon Sacks, the Jew, alone, of all of the many peoples who have entered the arena of history, even in exile, dispersed and everywhere a tremendous minority—neither assimilated to the dominant culture nor converted to the majority faith.

Our stiff-neckedness has served us well. A key ingredient in what no less divergent personalities as Rav Yaakov Emden (18th century Rabbinic scholar) and Mark Twain, both pointed out as one of the great enigmas and miracles of human civilization: the immortality of the Jew. Does anyone doubt that by all standards of natural history, we ought to have been a relic of the past, an academic fascination for aspiring PhDs.

As Rabbi Yitzhak Nissenson said in the Warsaw ghetto in 1942, before he was murdered by the Nazis, "Forgive them because they are a stiff-necked people, because the time will come when the stubbornness will not be a tragic failing but a noble and defiant loyalty." And so it came to be.

I will end with the words of Rabbi Asher Brander, (long time Rabbi of Westwood Kehilla in Los Angeles) in his commentary on Ki Tisa.

"May it be God's will that we stubbornly cling en masse to our heritage until the whole world is filled with the recognition of God and His Torah—speedily in our days!"

Shabbat Shalom