

Devar Torah for Ki Tisa
2/26/05

"To err is human. To forgive, divine." This week, God is divine as ever. Forgiving the people and reestablishing a covenant with them, after the dastardly, and, well, *close* to unforgivable sin of the Golden Calf. But sometimes, God's forgiveness stretches our religious imagination. After all, when God announces to משה (Moshe, *Moses*), that God will destroy the Israelite people, is it not safe to assume that God's decree is just. How can משה justify trying to talk God out of this decree. And yet, משה does just that.

In the Babylonian Talmud (Berachot 32a), Rava comments on the words of שמות לב:יא (Ex. 32:11) "וַיִּתְחַל מֹשֶׁה אֶת-פָּנָיו ד' אֱלֹהֵי" and *Moses besought God*." He says that God had made a vow to destroy the people, and that Moses would not stop praying until God rescinded. Rava uses a play on words, pointing out that the word וַיִּתְחַל and *Moses besought* is similar to the word "נִחַל, *rescind*," where in ג:ל במדבר (Num. 30:3) we are told that one who makes a vow may not rescind. The Gemara explains about God: הוּא אֵינוּ מִיחַל אֲבָל אֲחֵרִים מַחְלִין לוֹ: *God does not rescind, but others can make God rescind*. In this case, Moses' prayers were enough to change the situation so that God would not destroy Israel.

A few weeks ago, we sat and Kiddush and studied a commentary by my teacher Chacham Sassoon (Destination Torah p. 65-66 on "Until (or while) thy people pass . . ."). In that commentary, we were introduced to a piece of Talmud (Sanh. 98b) which stated that there were certain miracles that were destined to be done on behalf of the Jewish people, but that the sins of the Jewish people stopped them. Chacham Sassoon explained: ". . . sin can cost a promisee his entitlement even to divine blessing. . . . How much more, then, must predictions of doom be seen as conditional, being liable to reversal as the Divine Justice sees fit. When Jonah prophesied, 'In forty days Nineveh shall be overthrown' (Jonah 3:4), from great to small his audience understood that if they repented they might yet avert the overthrow of the city."

We learn from this that though Gods will is immutable, our actions can change how God's will operates. *We can change God's mind*. And all we need to do in order to change God's mind, is to change our own.

"To err," is indeed human. And "to forgive" is divine. But in order for the divine to forgive, the human should first correct the error. Every year on the high holidays, and hopefully every day of the year, we ask God for forgiveness. As well we should. But sometimes, we don't spend enough time giving God a reason to forgive us. When we ask God to forgive us for wronging someone, do we also work to make right whatever we did wrong? When we recognize our failure to follow God's תורה (*Torah*) and מצוות (*mitzvot*, commandment), do we redouble our efforts to fulfill those mitzvot? Maybe choose one more *mitzvah* that we can make a regular part of our lives? God's capacity to forgive, God's power to change God's mind, is conditioned on our ability to change our own minds.

וּקְרַבְנוּ מַלְכְּנוּ לְעִבּוּדְךָ, *Return us our father to your Torah, draw us oh sovereign to your worship*. May we be privileged to always grow in our observance of Torah and fulfilling of מצוות. And may our efforts be worthy of God's reward.