

Torah Weekly

WERE THE FIRST TABLETS A MISTAKE?

12-18 Adar 5786
1-7 March 2026
Torah:
Exodus Exodus 30:11 - 34:35
Parshat Parah: Numbers 19:1-22
Parah: Ezekiel 36:16-36
PARSHAT KI TISA

Calendars
We have Jewish calendars and applications. If you would like one, please send us a letter and we will send you one, or ask the Rabbi/Chaplain to contact us.

Family Programs
Do you have family on the outside struggling? Please have them contact our office to learn more about our family programs. You and they are not alone, we are here to help.

Grape Juice & Matzah
We offer free Grape Juice and Matzoh for you to be able to make the blessings every Shabbos. Please have your chaplain / Rabbi contact us to enroll (available to all prisons).

When I was in yeshivah, there was an oft-repeated anecdote that went something like this:

Imagine a bonfire, a raging, roaring flame licking the sky and sending billows of smoke all around. Then, you stop feeding it and it starts to die down. At first, it reduces only slightly, but eventually, as time goes on and you continue to deny it any fuel, it becomes a small crackle and ultimately peters out.

So it is with life: When you're young, you can often be very spiritual, very pious, and . . . very naïve. And that's a good thing. Why? Because as you get older, you're bound to cool off. Life happens, you get distracted, and before long, the "heat" of your youth is all but forgotten.

It is here that the metaphor kicks in: If you start out with a raging bonfire, chances are you'll be left with at least some sort of smolder by middle age down to the finish line. Even when you stop feeding your fire, there will still be something left. But if you never fed it in the first place, well, then, you'll peter out very quickly.

What Was 'Plan A'?

Parshat Ki Tisa tells the dramatic and tragic story of the Sin of the Golden Calf. Just days after the Jews witness the most spectacular G-dly revelation on record, they sin to catastrophic proportions. As a result, the tablets are destroyed, and only after intense negotiation with G-d does Moses secure forgiveness and a second set of tablets.

This time around, the ceremony was much different. Whereas the first set came along with thunder, lightning, and much pomp, these were given quietly, without fanfare. This was a deliberate change—as Rashi points out:

Since the first [tablets] were

accompanied by loud noises, sounds, and with a multitude, the evil eye affected them. [Our conclusion is that] there is nothing better than modesty.¹

Rashi's reasoning immediately raises the obvious question: Why, then, were the first set given with such fanfare? Did G-d only figure out the advantage of modesty after "plan A" went so horribly awry? That seems unlikely. So why go with pomp if modesty is so much better?

'Plan B' Is Only After 'Plan A'

The answer is that "plan A" really was a good plan, and it remains that way. Moreover, "plan B" is only good as a second option, but not as the first.

To explain:

Take a look at Abraham, the first Jew. He was brash and bold about his beliefs, spreading them far and wide, going down in history as the father of monotheism. Famously, he would provide wayfarers in the desert with food and drink, and then teach them to thank the G-d Who really provided for them. "Abraham converted the men, and Sarah converted the women," we are told. This power couple had a whole factory going on in the Mesopotamian desert.

Apparently, they didn't get Rashi's memo.

And that's because a modest and timid approach is great, but only after the thunder and lighting. Abraham and Sarah were at the beginning of the process, so they needed to operate loud and hot. This way, when they would eventually start cooling off, it wouldn't die out.

When it came to giving the Torah, the same pattern occurred. It started off loud and proud—with thunder and lightning and G-d's presence over the entire world. "Not a bird chirped, nor a cow mooed"² when the Torah was given, so powerful was the impact.

The Jewish people were on board as well. They were on a spiritual high, full of the fire and passion of their newly minted relationship with G-d. It was brash, bold, and beautiful.

But as highs tend to, it wore off very quickly, and sadly, the people sinned with the Golden Calf. At this point, the passionate fire was barely a smoldering ember. It was time to resort to "plan B"—something quieter and more sustainable. And so, the second tablets were delivered without fanfare, for, "There's nothing better than modesty."

But, this "modesty" is only healthy, sustainable, and nurturing coming on the heels of bold passion. It's not as if you can start off with a quiet sustainable flame; with that approach, you'll never get anywhere. It's only when you start off with a roaring fire that you can thereafter let it quiet to a steady crackle.

Start Out Hot

So it is in life.

The honeymoon phase is always the most passionate.

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Whether it's a spiritual or physical experience, more often than not, we start off hot out of the gate.

"Beginning," can be the start of a longer trajectory of life. In a romantic relationship, for example, "beginning" is very often the starting point, when the knot is tied. On a spiritual journey of discovery, say you've discovered Judaism later in life, the "beginning" is often those first days and months of wonder.

But it's not limited to that. "Beginning" can be the start of the day, when you're fresh and inspired, such that your morning prayers are impassioned and lively. By the time your day is halfway through, your afternoon prayers are barely pulling their weight on whatever leftover sputtering flames you can muster.

Or, you sign up for a new parenting course, and in the beginning, you're so fired up and committed to change that your kids look at you with skepticism and wonder if you've gone mad. But then it starts to wear off and you're yelling and threatening them again (hopefully not as much).

This is all normal. Such is life: it starts out hot, and then it cools off.

So remember the truth of the bonfire, and the message of the two-tablet sequence: start off really hot. At those beginning stages, don't worry too much about being tempered and sophisticated. Don't get too concerned that you're being fanatic, or not sufficiently objective. Just go all-in and stoke those flames into a raging inferno.

Why?

Because it's going to cool off; that is almost guaranteed. So if you manage to bring things to a fever pitch, you'll be left with some semblance of healthy inspiration later on. If not, you'll be left with nothing.

And who wants to get stuck with nothing?

By Aharon Loschak

Ki Tisa in a Nutshell

Exodus 30:11–34:35

The name of the Parshah, "Ki Tisa," means "When you take" and it is found in Exodus 30:11.

The people of Israel are told to each contribute exactly half a shekel of silver to the Sanctuary. Instructions are also given regarding the making of the Sanctuary's water basin, anointing oil and incense. "Wise-hearted" artisans Betzalel and Aholiav are placed in charge of the Sanctuary's construction, and the people are once again commanded to keep the Shabbat.

When Moses does not return when expected from Mount Sinai, the people make a golden calf and worship it. G-d proposes to destroy the errant nation, but Moses intercedes on their behalf. Moses descends from the mountain carrying the tablets of the testimony engraved with the Ten Commandments; seeing the people dancing about their idol, he breaks the tablets, destroys the golden calf, and has the primary culprits put to death. He then returns to G-d to say: "If You do not forgive them, blot me out from the book that You have written."

G-d forgives, but says that the effect of their sin will be felt for many generations. At first G-d proposes to send His angel along with them, but Moses insists that G-d Himself accompany His people to the promised land.

Moses prepares a new set of tablets and once more ascends the mountain, where G-d reinscribes the covenant on these second tablets. On the mountain, Moses is also granted a vision of the divine thirteen attributes of mercy. So radiant is Moses' face upon his return, that he must cover it with a veil, which he removes only to speak with G-d and to teach His laws to the people.

IN JEWISH HISTORY

Sunday, 12 Adar, 5786 – 1 March, 2026

Herod's Temple Dedicated (11 BCE)

After 334 years, the 2nd Holy Temple in Jerusalem (see "Today in Jewish History" for Adar 3) was in disrepair. In the year 19 BCE, King Herod I floated the idea of rebuilding and renovating the Temple. Though many Jews were wary of Herod's motives, the renovation was completed eight years later. The new structure was magnificent, causing the Talmud to state: "He who has not seen Herod's edifice has not seen a magnificent edifice!"

Monday, 13 Adar, 5786 – 2 March, 2026

War Against Persian Jew-haters (356 BCE)

On the 13th of Adar of the year 3405 from creation (356 BCE), battles were fought throughout the Persian Empire between the Jews and those seeking to kill them in accordance with the decree issued by King Achashveirosh 11 months earlier. (Achashveirosh never rescinded that decree; but after the hanging of Haman on Nissan 16 of the previous year, and Queen Esther's pleading on behalf of her people, he agreed to issue a second decree authorizing the Jews to defend themselves against those seeking to kill them.) 75,000 enemies were killed on that day, and 500 in the capital, Shushan, including Haman's ten sons (Parshandata, Dalfon, Aspata, Porata, Adalia, Aridata, Parmashta, Arisai, Aridai and Vaizata), whose bodies were subsequently hanged. The Jews did not take any of the possessions of the slain as booty, though authorized to do so by the king's decree. (The Book of Esther, chapter 9).

Maccabee victory (135 BCE)

The Maccabees defeated the Syrian General Nicanor in a battle fought four years after the Maccabee's liberation of the Holy Land and the miracle of Chanukah.

Tuesday, 14 Adar, 5786 – 3 March, 2026

Purim Victory Celebrated (356 BCE)

The festival of Purim celebrates the salvation of the Jewish people from Haman's plot "to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews, young and old, infants and women, in a single day." The events of Purim extended over a period of several years, culminating in the victory celebrations of Adar 14-15 of 356 BCE.

Conclusion of First Gulf War (1991)

On August 2, 1990, the Iraqi army under Saddam Hussein occupied Kuwait. After five weeks of heavy fighting, coalition forces succeeded in liberating Kuwait, and a ceasefire was declared on February 28, 1991, corresponding to the holiday of Purim. Despite threats from Saddam to bombard Israel with chemical warheads, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, stated unequivocally that "the Land of Israel is the safest place in the world," and predicted that the war would be over by Purim.