

**KI SISA (EXODUS 30:11-34:35)**

## Cut Two Tablets and Call Me in the Morning

2002 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

G-d was angry.

It was the greatest communal sin in Jewish history. Fearing that Moses wasn't coming back from Mt. Sinai, the Israelites replaced him with a Golden Calf. Idol worship was a violation of the Second Commandment, given a mere forty days before. G-d was prepared to annihilate them all, and to establish a new nation, starting fresh with Moses.

Moses, too, was angry. He descended the mountain with two stone Tablets, inscribed with the Ten Commandments. When he saw the orgy first-hand, he smashed the Tablets on the ground; the nation didn't deserve them.

Now came the hard part. ...Moses said to the people, *"You have committed a terrible sin. Now I will go back up to G-d and try to gain forgiveness for your crime."* (Exodus, 32:30)

The Torah goes on to describe the dialogue between Moses and G-d. Moses begged G-d to forgive the Nation. He also requested that he be permitted to learn the divine essence of G-d.

In the end, it all appears to have been pretty simple:

*G-d said to Moses, "Cut two stone Tablets like the first ones. I will write on those Tablets the same words that were on the original Tablets that you broke...Climb Mount Sinai in the morning, and wait for Me on the mountain." G-d revealed Himself in a cloud...and (Moses) called out in G-d's Name...G-d passed before him and proclaimed, "G-d, G-d, a merciful and kind G-d, slow to anger, and abundant in kindness and truth; He remembers kindness for thousands (of generations), forgiving sin, rebellion and error, and cleanses..." (Ibid, 34:1,2,5-7)*

The above phrase, known as the "Thirteen Attributes of Mercy," forms a major part of the pre-Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur liturgy. According to the Talmud, (Rosh Hashanah 17b), G-d was teaching Moses how to achieve forgiveness for Israel when we sin. "Whenever Israel sins," He said, "let them recite these verses, and I will forgive them."

Sounds pretty easy. Too easy. Is that all it takes to be forgiven for sinning? Did you worship idols and rebel against G-d today? Maybe a little murder and adultery while you're at it? No Problem! Take two Tablets, say thirteen attributes and a few "Hail Moses-es" and call me in the morning! You're all set! All

is forgiven!

Is that all that is necessary? Does G-d REALLY mean that all we have to do, as he said to Moses, is “recite these verses, and I will forgive them?!” Is that what Judaism is all about?! Do whatever you want, and then say a few verses and then everything is okay?! Sounds like another religion!

I believe that the answer to this question may be found in the Mechilta. At the Red Sea, we sang, “*This is my G-d, and I will glorify Him.*” (Ibid, 14:2)

Abba Shaul interprets this verse as an obligation to emulate G-d. Just as He is “*merciful and kind,*” so too must we be. Just as He is “*slow to anger,*” so too must we be.

The reason we read and re-read the “Thirteen Attributes of G-d’s Mercy” on Yom Kippur is NOT to serve as a magical formula to automatically absolve us from responsibility for our actions. Rather, it is to teach us how to be G-dly.

We have to learn to be like G-d. We are asking Him to overlook our shortcomings; we’re asking Him to be patient with us. G-d has a question for US: “You want to be treated kindly? How kind are YOU? You want Me to be compassionate? How’s YOUR compassion toward others? How patient are YOU when someone wrongs you?”

If you want kindness, learn to be kind. If you want forgiveness, learn to forgive.

Have a great Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplovitz

---

© 2002 Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplovitz. Reprint permitted for non-commercial use with attribution to torahtalk.org.