

Shabbat Ekev Sermon 5777

A Polish town had just one cow to its name and its milk ran dry. The townsfolk did some research and bought a replacement cow from Minsk for only 1,000 rubles. It was a great cow, gave lots of milk and lots of cream. Everybody loved it. Then the people decided they would mate the cow and get more cows and would never again have to worry about their milk supply. They bought a bull and led the cow and the bull into the pasture. But things were not that easy - when the bull came in from the right to mate with the cow, the cow moved to the left and when the bull moved in to mate the cow from the left, the cow moved to the right. This went on all day. In desperation, the people asked their rabbi what to do - he was very wise. "Rabbi, we've tried all day to mate our cow, but when the bull moves in from the right the cow moves left, and vice versa. What shall we do?" The rabbi said to them, "Nu, why did you buy a Minsk cow?" "Rabbi," they said, "you are so wise. We never told you that we bought the cow from Minsk. How did you know?" The rabbi said, "My wife is from Minsk."

As part of his continuing recollection of the Israelites' journey to this point, Moses recalls the episode of the Golden Calf, when it became clear just how depraved the people had become in his absence. At the time of the original episode, and again here remembering it, both God and Moses refer the Israelites as *am k'shei oref*, "a stiff-necked people." It's a well-known appellation, particularly applied to the Israelites and, later, their descendants the Jews. The imagery, drawn from inalcitrant beasts of burden, would have been as familiar to ancient societies as as dogs and cats are to us. An ox or donkey bearing a heavy load or pulling a plow were crucial to agriculture and commerce; a stubborn one who refused to move, who stiffened its neck, making it impossible to work.

We all know people whom we describe as stubborn. Typically we mean that they won't budge from a position once they've taken it - be it an opinion about a movie or a restaurant, or their view on an issue in the news - no matter what kind of counter-argument is offered. But it's hard to imagine that because they stick unswervingly to a particularly view that we would then sentence them to death. And what one person describes as stubborn, another will deem principled. Just because I refuse to do something that I'm told doesn't necessarily mean I'm stubborn; I could be taking a principled, well-reasoned stand. The kind of punishment that the Torah describes seems far out of proportion to mere stubbornness, or a difference of opinion, so being stiff-necked must be something rather more serious than, say, a refusal to ever try chopped liver again, a pledge that I made to myself and have stubbornly stuck to since I was about ten years old. What is it about this particular episode - the Golden Calf - that so enraged God and Moses, so much so that it was deemed a kind of stubbornness beyond rehabilitation?

We have to remember what was at stake. Moses' return from the top of Mt. Sinai was to be the concluding act of the covenant between God and the people. Having been delivered from slavery in Mitzrayim to freedom, and having come face to face with the divine, pledging that they would faithfully fulfill all of God's demands, the people now abrogate the very contract that Moses had ascended the mountain to sign on their behalf. At the precise moment that Moses had expected to present the people with the tablets of the law, cementing the legal relationship between them and God, they show themselves to be incapable of simply holding themselves in check for a few weeks. We know from later episodes that this would not turn out to be an isolated event when it came to defying God; there will be a dozen other refusals, complaints and outright rebellions against the leadership of Moses and Aaron and, by extension, the God whose

will they communicate. Being stiff-necked was not garden-variety stubbornness but something deeper, something in the character of the people as a whole.

The commentators help us to understand: Sforno says that the phrase *k'shei oref* refers to a person who is incapable of looking back, someone who sets their course and then refuses to consider any other way. Rashi, the most studied commentator of all, says that the phrase describes someone who stiffens their neck against rebukes from others, who refuses to listen. Like the ox who won't plow, or the donkey that won't bear the load, the stiff-necked person does not simply refuse to do what someone says, but appears to refuse their very nature, the purpose for which they have been created. God freed the people from bondage not just because God's a nice guy, or because freedom alone was the people's destiny. Pharaoh was cruel, and God would relieve the Israelites' suffering, but the purpose of the exodus was not freedom as an end but rather for freedom as a means of enacting God's law, of living lives of righteousness, to become a holy people in a sacred land. What the Golden Calf incident proved was not that these people were not quite ready for that destiny, but rather that they were totally incapable of fulfilling it. As their later failure to conquer Canaan finally convinced God, there was something deeply wrong with their character.

It is therefore not a surprise to find that each time the phrase *am k'shei oref* is used in the Torah, it is accompanied by a threat of annihilation: These people are so arrogant, so unresponsive to the divine command, God says to Moses, that the only appropriate response is to *shmeiss* them and start again with Moses, as God threatens to do. [As an aside, Moses has a moment like this as well, when he gets so fed up with the people that he begs God "Please kill

me!” God and Moses each have occasion to have to calm the other down, talk them down from the ledge, so to speak. The two of them have that kind of relationship. But I digress.]

Each of us has a right to our opinions, to what we like or don't, to do things the way we wish. What the idea of *k'shei oref*, coupled with the threat of total destruction, teaches us is that sticking to familiar ways while never reflecting on other possibilities, never admitting the existence other paths or options, can be fatal, in a manner of speaking. Judaism is the great religion of reason, of logical argumentation, of seeking truth in order to become a priestly nation. When we refuse to acknowledge other points of view or give them due respect, we are *am k'shei oref*. When we take a stand rooted in habit rather than on its intrinsic value, we are *am k'shei oref*. And when we refuse to even listen to one another out of sheer intellectual laziness, we are *am k'shei oref*.

Every one of us thinks, at some level, that we know better than everyone else, that what we believe is best because it is we who believes it. What *am k'shei oref* teaches us is that we must always be open to being convinced, that the capacity to change course and adjust our expectations is what makes us worthy of being the inheritors of Jewish tradition. We honor that tradition best when we questions ourselves the most. We must constantly ask “Are we doing the right thing, right now?” Relaxing our necks a bit, we will find that even when we truly should stay true to our views, we do so with a better understanding of other people's motives, and our own. In doing so we remain ever deserving of entering into a sacred covenant with the divine.

Shabbat shalom.

Ekev 5777 Notes

Torah:

Parshat Ekev continues Moses' lengthy speech to the Israelites as they are about to enter Canaan, an address that takes up the bulk of the book of Devarim. Here he reminds them of God's many blessings for them in the land, remembers the Golden Calf episode and its aftermath, which we will hear more about later, and reminds the people that a cause and effect relationship obtains between them and God, a passage that would later become well known as the second paragraph of the Shema that we recite twice daily.

1	Deut. 7:12-8:10, p. 980	
2	Deut. 8:11-9:3, p. 984	
3	Deut. 9:4-29, p. 984	
4	Deut. 10:1-11, p. 988	father of baby
5	Deut. 10:12-11:9, p. 990	mother of baby
6	Deut. 11:10-21, p. 994	Baby naming, v'haya im shamo'a
7	Deut. 11:22-25, p. 996	
M	Deut. 11:22-25, p. 996	

Haftarah:

Isaiah 49:14-51:3

This is the third haftarah in a series of seven prophetic passages tied to the weeks leading into the High Holidays. Here, Isaiah compares our relationship to God with that of a mother and child or an estranged husband and wife, among other images, relationships that bind us so closely together that we can always hope for healing, despite temporary troubles. It can be found at the back of the humash beginning on page 1197.