

Parshat Ki Tisah: Overcoming obstacles to fulfill our goals – March 2, 2013

Once upon a time, a tiny caterpillar dreamt that she had to reach the top of a great mountain. Although she knew that the journey would be long and difficult, she was convinced of the importance of her mission; therefore, she got up early the next morning, to start her risky adventure.

The caterpillar met all kinds of animals along the way, and each one of them gave her a different argument to make her give up her mission. Despite all the advice and warnings, the tiny insect turned a deaf ear and continued forward. She knew it wouldn't be easy, but in her heart she felt an impulse that moved her to keep going, even against all the criticisms she heard.

After several days, the caterpillar was still marching. Until the time came when, exhausted by the arduous trip, she stopped and stood paralyzed in the middle of the road. All the animals approached her, to witness the predictable end of this stubborn caterpillar, who had not listened to their advice. And when they all considered her dead, her rigid body began to break apart and large and beautiful wings appeared. A large butterfly emerged from the shell and, with only a batting of wings, took flight toward the top of the great mountain.

We all have our own dreams and aspirations, in relation to our occupational training, new endeavors, expectations concerning marriage and our children's education. Surely all of us, at some point, have devoted ourselves, full of idealism, to some cause we deem worthy of fighting for. But perhaps we can find the best example in the Torah, in the person of Moses. Our leader devoted his life to the difficult mission of getting the people of Israel out of Egypt, awakening in them the faith in a single God, and leading them through the wilderness to the land of Israel. Moses devoted his life to a mission full of obstacles and mishaps. He faced a querulous people, unreceptive and unprepared for this difficult adventure: to learn to live in freedom.

In our parashah, Ki Tissa, we will encounter the most critical moment of Moses' mission. While he was at the top of Mount Sinai, receiving the

Tablets of the Law and sealing the covenant with God, the people had manufactured a golden calf and were worshipping it in a heathen feast. I'm sure all of you know how the story ended: our leader comes down from the mountain carrying the Ten Commandments, and when he sees what is happening, he throws the tablets to the ground and destroys them, overwhelmed, full of wrath, and overcome by great frustration.

The Torah shows us Moses' most human facet. After devoting himself entirely to the people, relinquishing the luxuries and comforts he enjoyed in Egypt, the people's ungratefulness must have been, for him, the clearest sign of the failure of his mission. Nevertheless, the Jerusalem Talmud[1] surprises us with a different version of the story, which makes us see Moses from an even more human perspective. At the time when the people were plotting this great act of idolatry, the letters on the Tablets, engraved by God Himself, started to fall off the stone and fly across the sky. At that moment, according to the story, the Tablets no longer represented God's word, but rather became a simple stone that, due to their weight, Moses was no longer able to support.

The image presented by the Jerusalem Talmud is pretty powerful: Moses, somehow old but inspired with the force granted by love to his mission, is capable of descending the mountain carrying the heavy Tablets of the Law with no problems whatsoever. After the great sin, though, seized by frustration, he feels the force abandoning him, lets the Tablets fall, and the continuity of his mission stands at risk.

Just like Moses, how often have obstacles and frustration made us feel that we have lost our faith and original idealism, putting our most yearned-for goals and dreams at risk of being thwarted along the way? How often does it occur that community leaders, religious and political leaders, feel that, for each problem they have to overcome, their task becomes more and more heavy, making some of them abandon the attempt and drop the load before giving themselves one more chance?

But the story of Israel and its covenant with God has a happy ending. After the crisis, and thanks to the people's repentance, Moses recovers his faith and again falls in love with his mission. No sin or obstacle can drive him off definitively from the cause he so faithfully

pursued: Moses walks up the mountain once again and returns with new Tablets, intact this time, as is his unconditional love for the children of Israel.

No transcendental project is free of difficulties and frustrations. Moses teaches us that the yoke of a mission can be heavy, but the obstacles that appear on our way only strengthen us as human beings, giving us the possibility of harvesting with joy what we planted with tears and sacrifice. With idealism, faith, perseverance, and why not, also a little stubbornness, every goal can be met at the end.

May God bless us so that we can learn from the example of our great teacher and, notwithstanding the challenges we face, continue to dream passionately, so that we can see our goals and most yearned-for purposes come true.

Shabbat Shalom!