

# Weekly Words of Torah

## Prayer Counts: Parshat Ki Tissa

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### Framing

Parshat Ki Tissa falls in between the parshiyot that include the commandment to build God's house in the desert, the *mishkan*, and those that depict the actual building of the *mishkan*. The central narrative of Ki Tissa includes the Israelites' creation of the Golden Calf, Moshe's smashing of the Divinely written tablets, and God's forgiveness of the people.

### Access Points

■ **The way to be counted is through contribution.** In our parsha, the Torah instructs Moshe to take a census of the Israelite people. However, instead of counting people one person at a time, Moshe is told to count the people through a set financial contribution of ½ shekel per male aged 20 and up. This money-oriented counting serves as a census for how many men are of military age. But it also has an added value, as God commands each of the people being counted to offer a standard donation that will serve the whole community through contributing toward the *mishkan*. Rashi teaches that the money will serve as an atonement because the money could be used to purchase animals for sacrifices. (Rashi on Exodus 30:16). In this case, being counted means giving of oneself, in two important ways.

■ **When the Israelites were at risk of destruction from God's anger, Moshe pleaded and petitioned God. We must emulate Moshe.** After their sin of creating the Golden Calf, God expressed a willingness to start a new nation from Moshe, and destroy the people (Exodus 32:10), and Moshe steadfastly argued on the people's behalf. Moshe employed several tactics, including evoking our forefathers as he argued that even a people that has gravely sinned deserves to be forgiven. Moshe empathizes with the people to the extent that he says that if God does not forgive the people, then he should be erased from God's book (Exodus 33:32). The 13th-century French commentator Hizkuni suggests that Moshe is referring to the heavenly "Book of Life" where all those who are destined to live have their names recorded. Moshe understands his fate as inherently sealed with the Israelites whose lives are on the line.

■ **Use historical, petitional language.** The most familiar passage in the parsha are the 13 attributes of mercy which first appear in Exodus 34:6-7. In addition to this week, we read the passage with the attributes of God's mercy during *Tahanun*, on the fast days in our calendar, and most famously during Selichot and on Yom Kippur. The famous piyut calls on God to remember us mercifully now as God did when he taught Moshe how to attain forgiveness for the Israelites sins. God, you have taught us to say these 13 attributes. Remember us today through this covenant of the 13 attributes just as you taught them to Your humble servant (Moshe).

### Call to Action

Pick one thing to do for the hostages and post it publicly. Commit to a daily act of prayer on behalf of the hostages, either through your own words or through our traditional language.

### Closing Intention

The parsha reminds us that every person matters, and that through the power of one person's prayers, a whole community can be saved. Don't underestimate the possibility of your individual actions to comfort, to raise awareness, or even, evoke Divine mercy.