

Shabbat Shalom.

I'm sure everyone in this room has experienced it: the stinging injustice of a demand you don't wish to obey, such as, "do the dishes." Or a proclamation of doom, such as, "you're fired." Everyone, I mean everyone, has had ample opportunity in his or her life to argue for what he or she believes. The question is not, have you had the **chance** to argue? The question is, **can** you argue and **can** you win? You'll find that in today's Parsha, Ki Tisa, rhetoric and argument play a key role between Moses and God. Let's just say, the outcome favors all of us mortal beings.

Before taking a look at the crucial argument recorded in Ki Tisa, I will sum up the Parsha's main events. Moses has been on Har Sinai for forty days and forty nights, receiving the Ten Commandments. Our stiff-necked ancestors, AKA Bnei Yisrael, grow impatient and lose faith in the certainty of Moses's return. They demand that Aaron build them an idol, which he does, in the form of a Golden Calf. Upon witnessing Bnei Yisrael's idol-worship and corruption, God announces to Moses his intention to wipe them off the earth. In a stunning display of **rhetoric** and **argumentation**, Moses convinces God to retract His destructive plan. After descending from Sinai and witnessing the people's corruption for himself, Moses smashes the two Tablets. He then gathers the Levi'im and orders them to slaughter every idol worshipper they can find; 3000 men are killed that very day. Moses ascends Har Sinai once more, where God reveals his "glory" to Moses and proclaims his Thirteen Attributes of Mercy. God seals a covenant with Moses, in which he promises to dwell only with the Jews. When Moses descends for the second time with new Tablets, his face is infused with the light of God and the people are initially afraid of him. From that point on, he wears a veil over his face, which he removes only when conversing with God. So concludes Ki Tisa.

As you can see, this Parsha is not exactly dull. It is stocked with drama and fear, excitement and guilt, holiness and corruption. The events that take place in Ki Tisa, and the respective outcomes of these events, have shaped the lives of countless generations of Jews and continue to determine the lives we lead, today. For this D'var, I'd like to focus on Moses convincing God to retract His plan to wipe out the Jews. Let's bear in mind that, had Moses been unsuccessful, none of us would be around to debate the point, today.

So let's examine the argument that Moses uses to win God over. For a man who proclaims himself unable to speak, Moses does a mighty impressive job in P'sukim Yud Aleph-Yud Gimmel in the Second Aliyah of Ki Tisa.

His argument begins as a response to God's words:

"Now, leave me to vent my anger on them and put an end to them and make a great nation out of you."

God's use of the word "Hanichah li" (leave me or let me be) is puzzling to several commentators. Nehama Leibowitz writes of the paradox: "The most High requests permission from mortal man?" Rashi points out that Moses had not yet begun to pray for Bnei Yisrael, and yet God beseeched Moses to leave him alone. Rashi concludes that God was giving Moses an opening to argue for the people, and that God's ultimate decision rested on Moses's arguing ability.

And so, against God's outward desire to be left alone, Moses begins his three-Passuk rhetoric, one that has the potential to spare an entire nation. The first third of his argument reads as such:

"Why, O Lord, shouldst Thou vent Thy anger on Thy people, whom Thou didst bring out of Egypt with a great power and a strong hand?"

First of all, Moses refers to Bnei Yisrael as God's people, in direct contrast to God's reference of them as Moses's people a mere three P'sukkim earlier. When God is angry with Bnei Yisrael, He tries to absolve Himself of the responsibility of them, and makes them *Moses's* people instead of His own. But Moses is not having that. He reminds God that Bnei Yisrael are *God's* people, through good times and bad.

Moses then questions God's plan to vent His anger on the people. For this, Moses has been harshly criticized by several sages. Ramban points out that "In the face of a sin of such enormity Moses should have indulged in confession and abject supplication..." Another commentator, Ma'aseh HaShem, argues that Moses should not have reminded God that He brought the Israelites out of Egypt with a "Koach gadol and yad hazakah," because the magnitude of the miracle of Bnei Yisrael's Exodus only magnifies their guilt in constructing the Golden Calf.

At this point, you might be questioning my statement that Moses's rhetoric was really quite so brilliant. You might be saying, how can that be, when Moses's first few words have already been ripped apart by the greatest sages to date? In my own defense, I point to Abravanel, who rushes in to Moses's defense. Abravanel says that when God brought Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt, He knew very well that they were from a land of idol-worshippers and had therefore known idolatry all their lives. It took a "yad hazakah" to remove them from a place of such gross abominations, and Moses meant to remind God to have mercy on a nation that merely fell back on old practices. Hopefully you are convinced, because it's time to move on. The next part of Moses's argument, Passuk Yud Bet, reads:

“Why let the Egyptians say, ‘so God meant evil when He took them out—to kill them in the mountains and wipe them off the face of the earth?’ Turn from Thy fierce anger and repent of the evil (Thou dost intend) against Thy people.”

Nehama Leibowitz comments that Moses’s first “why” question (from Passuk Yud Aleph) was directed explicitly toward the relationship between God and Bnei Yisrael. Here, in the second Passuk, the “why” extends outward and concerns the other nations of the world. Moses invokes God’s self-consciousness about possible negative world opinion toward Him, should He annihilate Bnei Yisrael. This time working against me, Abravanel poses the obvious question, “What does it profit God whether the Egyptians honor Him or otherwise, that He should refrain from dealing justly in His world and with His people?” Point well taken, Abravanel.

I, however, feel that Moses’s implication of God’s potentially-lowered reputation is highly effective. Throughout the Tanach, God displays human-like qualities, from His jealousy to His forgiveness to His wrath to His love. No one, man or God alike, enjoys being in a state of disrepute. If one of God’s chief purposes is to endorse holiness and harmony among the people of the world, then surely He would care deeply if the Egyptians and the rest of the world viewed Him as a hypocrite: One who delivered Bnei Yisrael from Egypt and bondage, only to slaughter them soon after. In reminding God of the contradiction in this plan, Moses simultaneously reminds God of His duty to set a good example for the world, that they may choose to leave their idols and worship the true Adon Olam. Moving on to the third, and final, component of Moses’s rhetoric and argument in favor of Bnei Yisrael. In Passuk Yud Gimmel he states:

“Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel Thy Servants to whom Thou didst swear by Thy own self: I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the sky, and all this land of which I have spoken, I will give to your descendants and they shall possess it forever.”

This last appeal by Moses is a direct echo of God’s covenant to Abraham, a covenant with which we are all very familiar. God’s covenant with Abraham was the pivotal beginning of God’s relationship with the Jewish people; that very covenant bound God inextricably with Abraham’s descendants all the way up to Moses, and all through the post-Biblical generations. By reminding God of this sacred covenant, Moses puts the issue into perspective. A sin such as the Golden Calf, while certainly a sin of great magnitude, should not, and must not, be enough to destroy the covenant that made Bnei Yisrael a nation. Moses employs a time-honored strategy used over and over in rhetoric: citing the words and deeds of the people who came before him, placing his faith in his roots and ancestry.

Some of the world’s greatest orators and rhetoricians have returned to the wise words or actions of their forefathers in order to strengthen their arguments. John Stuart Mill, 19th century British philosopher, refers to Socrates in his most famous work, *On Liberty*. Similarly, Martin Luther King, Jr. refers to the forefathers of the American nation his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.”

It appears that Mill and King took a leaf out of Moses’s book.

Well, there you have it. That concludes Moses’s short, but brilliant rhetoric. And you know what? God relented. Aside from a measly 3000 people massacred on Moses’s orders, Bnei Yisrael was saved. Moses, the man famous for his poor oratory ability, proved himself more than capable on Har Sinai under the pressure of God’s hasty wrath.

So, in the future, when preparing an argument to use against my parents, friends, employers, teachers, or proclaimers of doom, I'll be sure to look to the greatest Jewish prophet as my guide. Step 1: Pose a cuttngly clever "why" question. Step 2: Appeal to the person's ego by reminding them of their "yad chazakah" or other noble deeds. Step 3: Invoke their sense of guilt by implying a threat to their reputation. Step 4: Cite cases from ages past. I feel that if those rhetorical tactics worked for Moshe Rabbenu, then there's a good chance they'll work for you and me.