



The Stiff-Necked People • Parshat Ki Tisa

Is there a cure for stubbornness?

Stubbornness is the inflexibility and determination to hold on to a view or belief such that you fail to hear or accept a different position, even a well-reasoned and rational one. Leaders need to be stubborn to succeed but too much rigidity can get leaders into trouble. In her *Harvard Business Review* article “Signs That You’re Being Too Stubborn” (May 21, 2015), Muriel Maignan Wilkins expands our definition:

You keep at an idea or plan, or insist on making your point, even when you know you’re wrong.

You do something you want to do even if no one else wants to do it.

When others present an idea, you tend to point out all the reasons it won’t work.

You visibly feel anger, frustration, and impatience when others try to persuade you of something you don’t agree with.

You agree to or commit halfheartedly to others’ requests, when you know all along that you’re going to do something entirely different.

Wilkins argues that if you’re a stubborn leader, you can hurt yourself and your vision for the future. But in leadership it’s hard to know what separates dogged obstinacy from passionate, visionary determination. We don’t want leaders to let go of good ideas too soon or not stand up with conviction for what they believe in. Here’s how Wilkins parses the issue: “Stubbornness is the ugly side of perseverance.”

We find this ugly side in this week’s sedra *Ki Tisa*. “I see that this is a stiff-necked people (*am kishei oref*)” (Ex. 32:9) says God to Moses. This was not a mere observation of a negative collective disposition. It was in response to the Israelite creation and worship of a golden calf. They were unable to see how wrong they were in betraying God and Moses. God was angry. But how are we to understand God’s anger? Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes, “The ‘anger’ of God, so often expressed in the Hebrew Bible, is actually not anger but anguish: the anguish of a parent who sees a child do wrong but knows that he or she may not interfere if the child is ever to grow, to learn, to mature, to change, to become responsible” (“The Turning Point,” *Beshallah, Covenant & Conversation*).

In this week’s sedra, we are challenged to grow, to learn, to change, and to become responsible. But it will take a long time. The expression “a stiff-necked people” will make several more appearances in our Torah reading: “Moses went back to the Lord and said, ‘Alas, this people is guilty of a great sin in making for themselves a god of gold. Now, if You will forgive their sin [well and good]; but if not, erase me from the record which You have written!’” (Ex. 32:31-32). Moses, who was tasked with admonishing the people, admits their great wrongdoing but also shows his fidelity to them. They may be sinners, but they are *his* sinners – and his penitents. A chapter later, we find another appearance of the same expression.

God told Moses to name this behavior to the

people: “God said to Moses, ‘Say to the Israelite people, ‘You are a stiff-necked people. If I were to go in your midst for one moment, I would destroy you’” (Ex. 33:5). Moses was told to give the people language to describe themselves. Rashi cites a verse from Isaiah that presents God’s strategy and an effective management technique in the face of anger: “Hide yourself for a short moment, until the indignation passes” (Is. 26:20). Fury is all-consuming. Wait for a few moments and let the vehemence of the emotion subside.

Rashi, on Exodus 32:9, explains what it means to be stiff-necked: “They turn their stiffened necks away from those who criticize them and refuse to listen.” Rashi considers the physical movement implied in the term “stiff *neck*” and provides us with a visual image of turning away from important counsel. Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra similarly explains stiff-necked in this context: “The Israelites refused to do as God commanded, like a person who runs in a particular direction and does not turn his head back to the one who calls out to him.” Seforno adds yet another visual cue by describing this kind of neck as an iron ligament that will not allow them the motion to listen to feedback or criticism. He adds that this is a stumbling block to *teshuva*, repentance. In Proverbs, we are told the cost of repeated stubbornness: “One often reproved may become stiff-necked, but he will be suddenly broken beyond repair” (Prov 29:1). When does a stubborn person become broken beyond repair?

Wilkins offers her advice: listen to others instead of automatically shutting them down. Stay open to possibilities, ones that you may not have considered. Admit when you are wrong. A failure of leadership accountability can lead to more mistake making in the future. Finally, Wilkins advises us to decide what we can live with: “Rather than always pushing for your idea, decision or plan, recognize when it’s okay to go with a decision that you can live with even if it’s not your top choice.”

It is not until the book of Deuteronomy that a ‘solution’ to this stubbornness is identified: “Circumcise...the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no more” (Deut. 10:16. This expression is found several more times in Deuteronomy - 9:6, 9:13, 31:27 – because this behavior unfortunately persisted). The opposite of the neck here is the heart. Create an opening in the heart, a small space of humility and vulnerability and the hard, iron neck of arrogance will soften. We can dig our heels in, or we can pour our hearts out. It’s hard, so very hard, to admit a mistake. In the short-term it feels like losing. In the long-term, however, making that hole in the heart, allows the breath and the light in. What’s one stubborn belief that has cost you leadership credibility? How will you improve your life and the life of others if you let it go?