



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHEMOT > Ki Tisa

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

February 27, 2016

Ki Tisa

Stubborn and Undaunted



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

SHEMOT > Ki Tisa > Stubborn and Undaunted

February 27, 2016

ABSTRACT

The word “stubborn” has many synonyms: adamant, determined, dogged, headstrong, inflexible, obstinate, persistent, persevering, relentless, single-minded, steadfast, tenacious, unshakable, unbending, undaunted, willful, bullheaded, hardheaded, stiff-necked ...

Is being stubborn positive or negative? When you describe a fellow as stubborn, is it a critique of his character or a compliment?

What about a nation of people described as stubborn – stiff-necked, to be exact – is that critical or complimentary of its character?

The Torah says: “The Jewish people are a stiff-necked, obstinate and stubborn people.”

The Midrash asks: “Is this a compliment?”

Why?

If you possessed the most valuable asset in all of existence, would you employ a committed, headstrong, unbending, persevering security firm to protect the asset, or bodyguards that would run at the first sign of gunfire?

The most valuable asset is entrusted to the Jewish people precisely because of their perseverance and stubbornness. Come hell or high water – and both have come – God knows that His treasure will be safe with them.

So, now, would you want to be described as stubborn?

STUBBORN, UNDAUNTED, PERSEVERING, IRREPRESSIBLE

1. Stubborn Genes (Joke)

The drive began pleasantly enough. Husband and wife exchanged pleasantries. After all, they hadn't spent quality time together for several years now due to their hectic schedules.

"My dear, you look lovely today," said husband to wife.

"Why, thank you darling," replied wife to husband. "And I must say you are driving exceptionally well - at the speed limit, so safe."

This calm lasted for the first hour of the ride.

Into hour two, both he and she were beginning to grind their teeth like rubber on asphalt. He turned the channel to sports-talk radio. She changed it back to classical music. He rolled down the windows; she turned up the heat.

Inevitably, it devolved into full-out war. When the yelling stopped, stubborn silence permeated the vehicle, with neither wife nor husband willing to concede to the other.

After several miles down a country road with neither one uttering a word, the husband pointed to a passing barnyard with a mule inside, and sarcastically asked his wife: "Are these, perchance, a relative of yours?"

"Yep," the wife sharply replied. "by marriage."

2. Extreme Stubbornness (Story)

The dictionary defines stubbornness as "having or showing dogged determination not to change one's attitude or position on something, especially in spite of good arguments or reasons to do so."

The thesaurus lists the following synonyms for stubborn: adamant, determined, dogged, headstrong, inflexible, obstinate, persistent, persevering, relentless, single-minded, steadfast, tenacious, unshakable, unbending, undaunted, willful, bullheaded, hardheaded, stiff-necked...

The following story is an example of extreme stubbornness:

World War Two ended in 1945 but Hiroo Onoda, a Japanese intelligence officer, refused to surrender until 1974. Yes, for nearly thirty years he stubbornly refused to recognize defeat.

His is a tale of stubbornness like no other.

Onoda was ordered to gather intelligence information in the Philippines against the Allies. As he never received a change of orders, he stayed at war even though the rest of the world had ended fighting.

Finally, in March of 1974, he surrendered but only after his former commander flew to the Philippines to reverse his original orders to spy on Americans troops.

He was 52 years old when he came out of hiding, erect but emaciated, still wearing his 30-year-old imperial army uniform, cap and sword, all still in good condition, though patched many times over.

He received a massive heroes' welcome upon returning home, where he was eventually offered a job heading a children's nature school. "I don't consider those 30 years a waste of time," Onoda said in a 1995 interview with Associated Press. "Without that experience, I wouldn't have my life today."

How did he manage to hold out all those years?

To answer that question, we have to understand that before and during the war, Japanese were taught absolute loyalty to the nation and the emperor. Soldiers in the Imperial Army observed a code that said death was preferable to surrender. And so he refused to give up even when other Japanese soldiers did.

As he struggled to feed himself, Onoda's mission became one of survival. He stole rice and bananas from locals, and shot their cows to make dried beef, triggering occasional skirmishes.

The turning point came in February 1974, when he met a young Japanese globe-trotter, Norio Suzuki, who came looking for him in the Philippines. Suzuki quietly pitched camp in lonely jungle clearings and waited. “Oi,” Onoda eventually called out, and began speaking with him.

Suzuki returned to Japan and contacted the government, which located Onoda’s superior – Major Yoshimi Taniguchi – and flew him to the Philippines to deliver his surrender order in person.¹

This is called perseverance. This is called stubbornness. This is called wholly and completely committed.

3. Steak & Eggs (Humor)

Which reminds me of that classic fundraising anecdote:

A cow and a chicken are walking down the road. The chicken says: “Hey, cow, I was thinking we should open a restaurant!”

Cow replies: “Hmm, maybe, what would we call it?”

The chicken responds: “How about ‘Steak-n-Eggs’?”

The cow thinks and asks: “Great. And how would the business partnership work?”

The chicken replies: “Why, it would be a fifty-fifty partnership, of course!”

The cow contemplates, then says: “No, thanks, Mr. Chicken. You see, you would contribute, certainly, but I would be completely committed.”

¹ <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2014/01/17/onoda-japanese-world-war-ii-soldier-who-waited-until-174-to-surrender-dead-at-1.html>.

4. Is Stubbornness a Good Thing?

This all begs the question: Is stubbornness a good thing or a bad thing? Does stubbornness yield positive results or negative?

When you describe a fellow as stubborn, is it a critique of the fellow's character or a compliment?

What about a nation of people described as stubborn – stiff-necked, to be exact – is that critical of the nation's character or complimentary?

Would you want to be described in this way?

5. Golden Calf

Speaking of stiff necked people...

They are responsible for the greatest no-no in Jewish history.

A few short weeks after receiving the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai – including the one which prohibits worshipping false gods – the Israelites built the Golden Calf, a false deity if there ever was one.

God was not happy. And by not happy I mean positively livid. As the Torah relates:

And the Lord said to Moses: "I have seen this people and, behold, they are a stiff necked people. Now leave Me alone. My anger will be kindled against them so that I will annihilate them, and I will make you into a great nation."²

This seems to imply that stiff-necked stubbornness is a negative trait, the reason these folks created the Golden Calf and begun the Jews' demise.

But then, a few verses later, in discussing forgiveness, the Torah quotes Moses speaking to God:

² Exodus 31:9-10.

“If I have now found favor in Your eyes, O Lord, let the Lord come now in our midst, [for we]³ are a stiff necked people, and You shall forgive our iniquity and our sin and thus secure us as Your possession.”⁴

This seems to be saying that Moses wants God to forgive the Jewish people precisely because of their stiff-necked stubbornness.

So then we are led to ask:

What is stubbornness? And does it birth golden calves or forgiveness?

6. The Midrash

The Midrash relates the following discussion among the rabbis on this subject:

Said Rabbi Yokim: “Three creatures are persevering: among the animals it is the dog; among birds it is the rooster; and among nations it is Israel.”
Said Rabbi Yitzchak bar Radifa in the name of Rabbi Ami: “You may think it says this as a critique, but in reality it is a compliment! [As it says:] Either a Jew or the gallows” ... Said Rabbi Avin: “Until this day, in the Diaspora, Israel is called the stubborn nation.”⁵

The Midrash clearly implies that being called stiff-necked or stubborn is a compliment, not a critique. How is it complimentary? The Midrash says: *Either a Jew or the gallows*. This is a bit cryptic. What does it mean?

The commentaries explain:⁶ In looking for a nation to which He would give the Torah, God searched for one specific characteristic. And it was not piety, humility, or scholarship. Nope. It was stubbornness. That’s right, stubbornness. Why was God looking for stubbornness?

³Rashi ad loc translates this “as if,” meaning “even if” they are a stiff necked people, they should be forgiven. The literal reading however seems to suggest that it is because they are stiff necked people they should be forgiven.

⁴Exodus 34:9.

⁵Exodus Rabba 42:9.

⁶Matnot Kehunah and Etz Yosef ad loc.

God knew that His chosen people, bearers of the eternal flame that is the Torah, would face persecution like no people on earth. And so they did – from the Amalekites to the Babylonians to the Persians, Greeks, Romans, Crusaders and Nazis. They were persecuted precisely because they were Jews. No other reason. This is what the cryptic words of the Midrash mean, *Either a Jew or the gallows*, time and time again, the Jews were threatened to renounce the Torah or be killed.

God knew that the only way for the Jews to maintain their allegiance to Torah was if they were endowed with a healthy dose of one characteristic: stubbornness.

This is why being called a stiff-necked people is a compliment. And this is why, as the wise and eternal words of the Midrash convey, even until this day the Jewish people are known the world over as a stubborn people.

No other people could have done what we have done – gone through what we have gone through yet maintained our tradition and stayed true to our soul.

7. What is Stubbornness?

The mystics⁷ teach that stubbornness comes from a place deeper than intellect – from the stiff strong neck that upholds the head and is the foundation for the mind.

When one is stubborn, one remains committed to something even when it doesn't make sense. The Japanese soldier is case in point. This kind of behavior is not reasoned – it is beyond logical.

(This is actually hinted at in the name of this week's Torah reading, *Parshat Ki Tisa*.⁸ As Rashi explains, *Tisa* is a term for "bearing." By being stubbornly persevering, by transcending intellect and logic,

⁷See Torat Shmuel 5635 II, p. 499; 5640 II, p. 714; Sefer Hamaamarim 5666, p. 123; 5687, p. 55; 5692, p. 402; 5707, p. 232; Sichot Kodesh 5736 I, Vayakhel/Shekalim, p. 519.

⁸See Sichot Kodesh *ibid*.

we actually bear the sin and transform it. With perseverance we transform the sin of the Golden Calf. This is the whole idea of Yom Kippur.)

But there are two sides to stubbornness: there is stubbornness that causes sins like the Golden Calf, and there is stubbornness that maintains Judaism even through the greatest trials and tribulations. The latter is the cure and remedy for the former.

This is what Moses told God when he said: *“We are a stiff necked people, and You shall forgive our iniquity and our sin and thus secure us as Your possession.”*

Precisely because we are a stiff-necked people, Moses asked God to forgive us.

Let me explain to you his logic.

8. God’s Security Firm

Say you had the most valuable item in existence. You wanted to ensure that this treasure will remain safe and secure forever. You are aware of the shadows lurking, a plethora of challenges that will arise along the way – thieves trying to steal it, nations threatening its bearers, people trying to devalue or distort its power.

You need a team of professional bodyguards to shield and protect this priceless item. Will you hire a security firm that wavers at the first challenge or one that hangs tough, persevering in the face of adversity?

The Torah, divine wisdom, is the most valuable asset in existence. And God needed the right, persevering people to protect it.

Yes, because of their stubbornness, they made a mistake with the Golden Calf. A bad mistake.

But it wasn’t the end of the story. Like all powerful personality features, stubbornness can be used negatively or positively. Their stubbornness could also wield fruitful results.

When God threatened to end His contract with His chosen security firm, the Jewish stubbornness kicked into overdrive.

Moses, the leader of the security firm and head bodyguard, told God:

“Sorry, Almighty Sir, but this contract is eternal. Nothing, and I mean nothing, can sever us from our goal of serving You, by maintaining, protecting and teaching Torah to all the world. Sure, in our stubbornness we gravely overreacted and sinfully created a Golden Calf, but a mistake can be rectifiable through sincere teshuva. As a matter of fact, the same trait that got us into trouble can be mobilized to safeguard the Torah and bear its message for all eternity.”

9. Personal Lesson: Stay Stubborn, Stay Committed

Each and every one of us is gifted with the most valuable asset in existence – the Torah. It is our job to keep it and protect it come what may – and what may will surely come.

So we need to stay stubborn. Unwaveringly stubborn and committed to our values.

Stubbornness in marriage may not be such a good thing – unless you and your spouse are both stubborn, determined, headstrong, strong-willed, obstinate, unbending, uncompromising, tenacious, in the *same* direction. That is, you are both stubbornly dedicated to perpetuating the Torah, and its goodness and kindness.

You – and we all – must find the Torah within, the light within, and remain stubbornly committed to its pursuit. When we have such an anchor, every challenge, worry, concern is overcome by the focus of our purpose.

It is only scary before we commit. But once we do, life becomes one big exercise in fulfilling our divine purpose.

10. Stub Hub (Conclusion)

If one errs on the side of stubbornness, one can overcome that error by utilizing the same stubbornness toward healing and reconciliation and reaching and even greater connection.

From everything a lesson must be learned. Hiroo Onoda, that Japanese officer, teaches us that we fight even when the world says the war is over.

God wanted to give the Torah to such a stubborn, persevering people, who will fight evil even when the rest of the world surrenders to it.

Even when faced with setbacks, fight for your love, for your family, for your values, for everything you truly believe in. Absolute commitment is our most powerful resource – to forge ahead, with strength, courage and fortitude.

Precisely this attitude will ensure that our loves and our relationships will endure and flourish.

And that the war for justice and virtue will end in everlasting victory for the side of good and eternal peace for all.

Shabbat Shalom!