## THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

**BY RABBI DR. TZVI HERSH WEINREB**
OU Executive Vice President, Emeritus

# The Inevitable Comedown

It was over fifty years ago, but I remember the feelings very well. They were overwhelming and were not dispelled easily.

It was just after I had completed all of my course requirements and dissertation defense in the process of obtaining my doctorate in psychology. Like any graduate school experience, this was the culmination of several years of study and hard work. The ordeal was now over, and a celebration was in order.

And celebrate I did, together with my wife, my young children, several other students, and assorted friends. But then, the celebration was suddenly over. I found myself inexplicably moody and depressed. A sense of emptiness enveloped me. At first, I thought it was just a result of a transition from a state of being busy to a state of boredom.

However, the feelings lingered for quite some time. I tried to rid myself of my moodiness in various ways, and it must have been difficult for those close to me to be around me. Luckily, the feelings were soon gone, as suddenly and as mysteriously as they had come.

Quite a while later, I learned that this curious phenomenon was very common. When people achieve great accomplishments, having put great effort and toil into them, they experience a sense of exhilaration and excitement. A "high." Soon afterwards, and often very soon afterwards, there is a "comedown" from that "high."

It is as if, now that the goal with which one had been long preoccupied was reached, life had become meaningless. There is nothing further to do, no ongoing purpose. A pervasive sense of emptiness ensues.

The struggle to fill that emptiness is fraught with danger. In my own case, the emptiness thankfully passed in relatively short order, with no harm done, and no unusual "acting out" on my part. But others in similar predicaments frequently attempt to fill that emptiness in ways which result in great, and sometimes tragic, difficulties.

The psychological mechanism I have just described helps to explain a most puzzling event in this week's Torah portion, *Parshat Ki Tisa* (*Exodus* 30:11-34:35). I refer, of course, to the episode of the Golden Calf.

Just a few short weeks ago, in the Torah portion of *Yitro*, we read of how the Children of Israel experienced the most momentous occasion in human history. The Almighty revealed Himself to them at Mount Sinai in an awe-inspiring atmosphere of thunder

and lightning. They heard the voice of God, and they were spiritually elevated by His revelation. They were, almost literally, on a "high."

Moses then ascends Mount Sinai and remains there for forty days and forty nights. During that time, the people come down from their "high." His disappearance mystifies them, they become impatient and irritable. We can empathize with their sense of emptiness, although we are shocked by the manner in which they choose to deal with that emptiness.

"When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mount, the people came together unto Aaron, and said unto him: 'Up, make us a god...' And all the people broke off all the golden earrings which were in their ears and brought them unto Aaron...he...made it a molten calf and they said: 'This is thy god, O Israel...'He built an altar before it...And the people sat down to eat and to drink and rose up to make merry." (*Exodus* 32:1-6)

What a comedown! How can one explain a process of spiritual deterioration as drastic as this? Just weeks ago, the Jewish people were on the highest possible level of religiosity and commitment to the one God. Now they are dancing and prancing before a golden idol. Is this not inexplicable?

Yes, it is inexplicable, but it is a common human phenomenon. People are capable of attaining greatness, but they are not as capable of sustaining greatness. They can achieve "highs" of all kinds, but they cannot maintain those "highs." There is an inevitable "comedown."


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This concept is so very well expressed in the following verse:

Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord?

Who may stand in His holy place?" (*Psalms* 24:3)

Homiletically, this has been interpreted to mean that even after the first question is answered, and we learn "who may ascend the mountain," the question still remains: "Who can continue to stand there?" It is relatively easy to ascend to a high level; much more difficult is remaining at that high-level and preserving it.

My revered colleague, one of the most insightful spiritual thinkers of our age, the late lamented Rav Adin Steinsaltz, believed that the best example of deterioration following an exciting climax is the experience of childbirth itself. He pointed to the phenomenon known as "postpartum depression." A woman, a mother, has just experienced what is probably the highest of all "highs," the emergence of a child from her womb. But quite commonly, that experience is followed by a sense of depression, which is sometimes incapacitating, and sometimes even disastrous.

The physiological process of giving birth calls upon the utilization of every part of the mother's body, from her muscles and nervous system to her hormonal fluids. Her body has exerted itself to the maximum. In the process she has achieved the greatest of all achievements, the production of another human being.

But soon afterwards, when the body, as it were, has nothing left to do, she feels depleted and empty. She can easily sink into a depression, sometimes deep enough to merit a clinical diagnosis of "postpartum depression."

This is an important lesson in our personal spiritual lives. Often, we experience moments of intense spirituality, of transcendence. But those moments are brief, and transitory. When they are over, we feel "shortchanged," and we despair of ever returning to those precious experiences.

We must take hope in the knowledge that almost all intense human experiences are transitory, and are followed by feelings of hollowness. We can ascend the mountain, but we cannot long stand there.

We must humbly accept our descent, our frustrating failures and limitations, and persist in climbing the mountain. Ups and downs, peaks and valleys, are to be expected in all aspects of our life.

We will experience "highs," but we must expect the inevitable "comedown." And we must hang in there and try and try again to recapture those "highs."

This is the lesson of this week's *parsha*. Our people ascended a spiritual mountain. They then descended into an orgy of idolatry. But then they persisted and with the assistance of God's bountiful mercy and, as we read later in the Torah portion, received this divine assurance:

"And he said, behold, I make a covenant: Before all Thy people I will do marvels, such as have not been done in all the earth…And all the people…shall see the work of the Lord…" (*Exodus* 34:10) ■