

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

We find this ugly side in this week’s sedra *Ki Tisa*. “I see that this is a stiff-necked people (*am kishai 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

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.”

people: “God said to Moses, ‘Say to the Israelite people, ‘You are a sti-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 sti-necked: “They turn their sti-necked necks away from those who criticize them and refuse to listen.” Rashi considers the physical movement implied in the term “sti-neck” and provides us with a visual image of turning away from important counsel. Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra similarly explains sti-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 reprovved may become sti-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.”