# *Never Despair!*
## *Rabbi Zev-Hayyim Feyer*

### *Parshat Ki Tisa*

After the Theophanies at the Border-Sea (reading not *Yam-Suf*, but – with a slight change of one vowel – *Yam-Sof*) and at Sinai, Israel was at the highest possible spiritual level.  We had come out of Mitzrayim, the Land of Narrowness, and we had seen G*d's Presence in so many manifestations.  And then, when Moses had been on the mountain (Sinai) for forty days, communing with G*d and receiving the Torah on behalf of the Israelites, the people succumbed to despair and made an idol – a calf of gold – to worship, proclaiming (Exodus 32:4), "**These** [how interesting it is that the declaration is expressed in a plural form] **are your gods, O Israel, which brought you out of the Land Mitzrayim!**"

Just forty days!  So short a time, and how quickly the people yielded to despair!  Rebbe Naḥman of Breslov (1772-1810, great-grandson of the Baal Shem Tov) proclaimed as his watchword, "Jews!  Never despair!"  Despair leads inevitably to idolatry, as the episode of the golden calf teaches us.  But why did the people despair a mere forty days after experiencing G*d's Presence?  It's far too short a time sequence to be credible.  Or is it?

Most human languages can be classified into one of three groups, based on their ancient forms and, in particular, on how numbers appear in their ancient forms.

Some (there are very few remaining today) distinguish between *one* and *many*.  These languages have a word for the number *two* which is similar in sound or structure to the word meaning *many* or *much*.

Many languages distinguish among *one*, *two*, and *many*.  Most of the languages derived from Latin fall into this category, as we see from the similarity of the words for *three* (French *trois*, Italian *tre*) and *very* (French *tres*) or *too much* (French *trop*, Italian *troppo*).

The Germanic languages distinguish among one, two, three, and many, as we see in the German words *vier* (four) and *viel* (much, many) and the English *four* and *very*. The Semitic languages, including Hebrew, although unrelated to the Germanic tongues, fall also into this last category.

Four, in Hebrew (ארבע, *arba*), is linguistically akin to "much" (הרבה, *harbeh*) or "many" (רב, *rav*).[1] The number four, then, in Hebrew, carries the connotation of "many." And tens – thirty, forty, fifty, and so forth – are formed as plural forms of the units. Thirty is a plural form of three, forty a plural form of four, and so on. And we are now coming close to an understanding of why the people despaired after "only" forty days.

If *four* is equivalent to *many*, and *forty* is a plural form of four, then forty carries the connotation of *manies*, and a period of forty days (and we can apply this reasoning to the forty days and nights of Noah's Flood and to our forty years' wandering in the wilderness and to other uses of forty time-periods which we find in the Torah) signifies not only too many days to count (*many*) but so many that their number is even beyond *many*. Forty days is a number of days beyond the ability of the language to comprehend.

Let us, then, have compassion for our ancestors who, after waiting an incomprehensibly long period of time for Moses' return, finally gave up on his ever returning.

And let us also remember the consequences of this despair and respond to Rebbe Naḥman's dictum. "Never despair!"

Shabbat Shalom.

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[1] I do not mean to imply that there is necessarily an etymological link among these words (although I suspect there may be), but only that their similar spelling and sound carries the implications which I discuss here.