Today we read what is probably the most shameful moment in our history. You may know some of the customs surrounding this reading of the golden calf: It is chanted softly as a mark of our embarrassment. And while the entire reading is quite long, we never subdivide it – only one person is given the “honor” of the Aliyah for this passage. Taking this Aliyah is a classic example of taking one for the team, we are so abashed by our idolatrous act.

Remember the story of the two guys in shul on Shabbat Parshat Yitro? Like everyone else, they rose for the chanting of the Ten Commandments. Each squirmed a bit as he heard those commandments. The “Thou Shalts” like: Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy....honor your father and your mother. And the “thou shalt nots” like use God’s name cheaply, or steal or covet anything that is your neighbor’s. The two friends looked at each other sheepishly and one said, “Well at least we haven’t worshipped any idols.”

Idol worship is not just bowing down to a golden calf. And although it may feel like a relic, it is not a problem of the past. We are not impervious to venerating a thing and believing it is a manifestation of the Kadosh Baruch Hu. The problem of idolatry is very much with us still. The rabbis call it avoda zara, strange or inappropriate worship.
Avoda zara, idolatry is an intellectual failing, it is the mistaking a piece for the whole. Believing that something created by God is in fact God. Idolatry is the illogical need for a visible, tangible thing to represent a greater Presence, a Presence that can never be captured by an object.

More than an intellectual failing. The Israelites needed a god they could see and touch. They were motivated by fear. Moshe had been on that mountain top for too long. *We don’t know if he’s ever coming back.* *Give us a god we can see and rely on.* Idolatry, in the end, is a failure of courage.

I have not seen any Jews bow down to golden calves. But I do see idolatrous behavior in the Jewish world today. One such expression of avoda zara, idolatry, is the veneration of the Western Wall. The mistaking a piece for the whole, an object for its Creator.

The kotel is a collection of stones formed into a wall. It is not an emanation of God. The Kotel has become a locus of controversy because some believe that those stones have an inherent holiness, k’dusha, and that that k’dusha will be tainted if Jews pray there in a configuration other their own. It is avoda zara, an intellectual failing, to claim that the wall is an object to be worshipped. It is limiting theologically to behave as if God’s Presence could be contained in one site. Particularly troubling when we recall that the Kotel- the Western Wall -- is
actually a retaining wall that was not built by King Solomon following a divine blueprint, or rebuilt as an act of devotion by the exiles who returned from Babylonia but was actually yet another construction projects of one of history’s great builders: King Herod. The same Herod who persecuted Jews without discrimination. Said the Romans who oversaw his puppet regime, “It is better to be Herod’s pig than his son”, because nominally a Jew, Herod was not a big pork eater but he did murder an uncle or two, a wife and a son.

But look, I am not immune to the pull of the Kotel. I know the intensity of standing before it. Like many of you I have stuffed my share of prayers into the cracks of the wall. If the stones of the wall are not inherently holy, there is still a holiness in that place: The holiness with which we have imbued it over the centuries. There is a sanctity to the Kotel because it is the place where we have turned our attention and directed our prayers. It is sanctified by tears and pleas and heartfelt singing. It is holy because we have so deemed it. {Not because it contains God or is an emanation of God.} It is a site to be treasured and honored, not venerated.

It is a failure of courage to need a thing to worship. And it is a failure of courage to presume that this object of worship is so fragile that its sanctity can be
tainted by men and women praying together, or a woman reading Torah on the Kotel plaza.

It was not always like this. It may surprise you to learn that in 1967 when the Temple Mount returned to Israeli hands, it was populated by men and women praying together. Within 48 hours of Israel’s sovereignty of the old City, in time for Shavuot, 250 thousand men and women streamed together to the Wall as an expression of both national and religious solidarity. From earliest records, following the Ottoman conquest in 1517 men and women from all sectors of Jewish life were permitted at the “Wailing Wall” and to affirm their Jewish identity in many different ways. They mourned the destruction of the Temple. They poured out their hearts to G. They recited Psalms, heard sermons, studied sacred texts. Sephardim and Ashkenazim, young and old, male and female, pious and non-religious were drawn to the Wall. This was an affirmation of Jewish identity, a symbol of peoplehood, of being part of Am Yisrael. From 1835 Zionist tourist guidebook.

{Jewish pilgrim in 1863: On Friday afternoons at the Wall: “between 100-200 Jews of both sexes and all ages, standing or sitting, and bowing as they read, chanted and recited, moving themselves backward and forward, the tears rolling
down many a face; they kissed the walls and wrote sentences in Hebrew upon them.”

Why are these descriptions surprising?

Because we have it drummed into our heads that “traditionally” the Kotel has had a separation of men and women. That women do not gather at the Wall to pray. But the first mechitza, barrier that separates men and women at prayer, was built in 1967. (The year the Beatles released Sgt. Pepper, not exactly ancient history.)

R. David Golinkin: “In recent years, the rabbi of the Kotel has expanded the synagogue section of the Kotel plaza. The Kotel Guard now patrol the entire plaza. They have posted large signs warning people to dress modestly. (And I would add that the definition of “modestly” is a moving target. More and more female skin has to be covered.) They tell women and girls not to sing... the result is that non-Orthodox Jews have begun to avoid the Kotel and many military ceremonies have been moved to other locations.”

This is not Orthodoxy. This is extremism that feels threatened by the very presence of a differing religious expression. Never have any Masorti, Reform or Modern Orthodox sought to displace hareidi worship at the Wall. Only to live
alongside it, recognized as legitimate according to halacha, as legal under Israeli law.

Thirty-three years ago, approximately 70 women from a variety of denominations gathered at the Kotel with a Sefer Torah to conduct a women’s prayer service in accord with halacha. Rabbi Yehuda Getz who was the Kotel Administrator at the time, permitted the women to complete their service, stating they were not violating halacha. But women and men from both sides of the mehitza screamed, cursed and threatened the small gathering of Nashot HaKotel, Women of the Wall. Less than one month later the Ministry of Religion and Ministry of Justice promulgated a new regulation to “prohibit any religious ceremony at a holy place that is not in accordance with the custom of the holy site and which offends the sensitivities of the worshippers at the place.” This regulation is still in place. Penalty for its violation is 6 months in jail and or a fine. That bears repeating: any religious ceremony that is not in accord with the custom of the holy site or that offends the worshippers can land you in jail for six months. Left unarticulated: what exactly is the custom of the holy site and whose sensitivities are of concern.

Dr. Shulamit Magnus, (of Women on the Wall): “To claim that women cannot pray [at the Kotel] as a group, with voice, tallit tefillin, because these are
innovations, ‘violations of custom,’ is absurd. Men doing any of this, or holding bar mitzvah or wedding ceremonies, is an innovation. So is the mehitza dividing men and women. Shall it be abolished on grounds of being an innovation in custom?”

Nashot HaKotel has been meeting every Rosh Hodesh since 1989. Arrests of women of the wall began in 2004. Charges include disrupting the peace, carrying a Sefer Torah, praying in Tallit.

In April 2013, after 50 arrests and detentions Judge Moshe Sobell wrote a landmark decision concluding that Nashot HaKotel had not violated laws regarding worship at the wall and that “local custom” at the kotel should be interpreted in accord with national and pluralistic interpretations, not solely Orthodox sensitivities.

And yet outrages continue: Students are bussed in from hareidi institutions to disrupt the women davening. Typical tactics include spitting, whistling, throwing objects over the mechitza, and name-calling of the vilest ilk. A few examples: male supporters of Women of the Wall passed a Torah to the women through the mehitzah. The Torah was one of hundreds held at the Kotel for “public” use which men can access freely while women’s requests are refused. WOW succeeded in reading Torah but the men who handed the Torah to the women were physically
assaulted and then detained for questioning. Women have been banned from entering the Kotel for wearing a Kippah

By August of 2015 harassment came from both ultra-Orthodox onlookers and police as women read Torah and blew shofar.

*As donors to Women of the Wall, David and I receive occasional mailings. Here’s something we received this month: “WOW presents you with a piece of a Women of the Wall Siddur that was destroyed by an angry ultra-Orthodox mob on Rosh Hodesh Tammuz (11 June 2021). The incident at the Western Wall hearkened back to a time when Torah scrolls were burned by the ancient Romans so that Jewish people were unable to access Jewish text. WOW sets free the words of Torah for all who wish to embrace them.” This was a very effective fundraiser in our house.

In 2017 an agreement was reached between rabbi of the Kotel, WoW, Masorti, Reform, government to create space at Robinson’s arch for egalitarian prayer – not on the kotel plaza but accessible to kotel. The Western Wall agreement would have vastly upgraded the current egalitarian section and made it a state-recognized holy site, as well as giving representatives of the non-Orthodox movements a say in the site’s governing body. It would reserve the current Kotel plaza for traditional Orthodox prayer.

Not ideal, but remarkably agreed to. Under pressure from ultraorthodox parties in his coalition, Prime Minister Netanyahu froze the agreement and eventually disengaged from it entirely.
We had reason to hope that the current administration would have moved forward with the agreement:

five of the current government’s eight parties campaigned on implementing the deal reached in 2016 and criticized former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s 2017 decision to shelve the plan, due to pressure from Haredi coalition partners. Perhaps most crucially, those Haredi parties, which initially agreed to the compromise before shifting to loudly oppose it, were left out of the government formed in June.

Yet Bennett, together with other senior, right-wing members of his government, have decided not to enact the agreement. Bennett was asked why his government has failed to take up the agreement it appeared so primed to resurrect.

“Controversial topics — and this is a controversial topic in this coalition... we knew in advance that we cannot advance everything,” Bennett said, adding that MKs in his Yamina party, along with other right-wing members of the government, were opposed to the Kotel compromise. “Therefore, we will only act with consensus,” he added, all but shutting the door on the matter for the foreseeable future.

Bennett, like Netanyahu before him, has capitulated to the fetishism of the Kotel and to the fear brought to bear by this avoda zara. If you are displeased
with PM Bennett’s decision to shut down the agreement, I invite, suggest, urge you to let him know. Easiest way to do this is in this week’s mazal tov email, a link to click to add your name to those protesting to Bennett.

Women of the Wall write, “Why the Kotel? it is the only remaining wall left of the Second Temple- the place where our ancestors went to seek G-d. We aspire to do the same: with prayer, reverence, and joy. The Kotel is a central symbol of Jewish unity to Jews around the world. It is not an object to be worshipped, but a site that can inspire us. Tell PM Bennet that you want for all Jews the opportunity to be so inspired.