

Parashat Ki Tissa 5773 – The Golden Calf of Excess

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My father's friend Michael likes to tell a story about the time he was visiting the Jerusalem Great Synagogue and he stayed for a *shiur*, a class. He didn't realize it, but the class was intended only for men and Michael was sitting with his wife. The rabbi who was teaching the class came up to him and said, "You know, this class is only for men, so perhaps your wife should leave." And he waited a moment. And then the rabbi continued, "But you know, now that I see that I've embarrassed you— and I take seriously the prohibition against embarrassing another person in public— I want to invite your wife to stay."

Michael loves to tell that story. Obviously the value of separation of the sexes was important. But that value was not absolute; and when he recognized that by prioritizing this particular value he was violating another commandment from the Torah, the rabbi backed off.

Apparently there were others in the room who didn't see the values conflict and they shot Michael enough dirty looks that eventually he and his wife just got up and left. But I like the story. It is possible for observance of a commandment to become an obsession, a fetish— perhaps even a form of idolatry.

There is an interesting pivot in today's Torah portion, Ki Tissa. For the past two weeks we have busied ourselves with heaps of instruction about the Tabernacle, the priestly vestments, and other details that must be followed to the letter: "ככל אשר צותיך יעשו", Just as I have commanded you, they shall do."

But the Torah pivots: "The Lord said to Moses, 'Speak to the Israelite people and say: **אך את שבתתי תשמרו**, Nevertheless you must keep My Sabbaths." You might have thought that because this construction project was so important (after all, you are building a resting place for God), perhaps you could skip a few Shabbatot to get the job done. But no, we can't allow excessive commitment to one commandment to trump our other responsibilities and values.

Which brings us to the most prominent feature of the *parasha*, the sin of the Golden Calf. There is a debate among the Rabbis about the Torah's "beef" with the Calf. Whether or not we were told explicitly that this was the case, most of us were raised on Rashi's interpretation. The Golden Calf was an idol. While Moses was up on Mount Sinai receiving the Torah from the True and Living God, the people were working with Aaron to construct an idol; they bowed down to a physical object and believed it had powers, and that's a great sin.

But not everyone agrees. We just read all that stuff about the Tabernacle, the Cherubim and everything else; clearly the Torah didn't have a problem with gold. The 13th century Spanish scholar Nachmanides has too much respect for the Jewish people to imagine that they would actually worship a

calf: “כי אין טפש בעולם שיחשוב כי הזהב הזה אשר היה באזניהם הוא אשר הוציאם ממצרים,” in his words, “There is nobody in the world who could be so stupid to believe that the same gold that had once been in their ears was the One who had taken them out of Egypt!” Nachmanides says that the calf itself was not idolatrous; people knew it was only representative of God’s power and there’s nothing wrong with physical reminders of God’s presence. The Ner Tamid, the Torah that we parade around and kiss – these represent larger ideas and concepts, and so we are reverent – but that’s not idolatry.

Where was the great sin according to Nachmanides? It came the next day when they sat down to eat and drink. And then they rose up to dance – but not regular dancing. It was *l’tzachek*, which implies frivolity, sexual immorality, idolatry. The sin was excess. There was nothing wrong with the calf until the people obsessed; they went overboard and it turned into something more.

Nachmanides message is quite like that of the Prophets. Many people get the false impression that the prophets didn’t like sacrifice, as Hosea says, “It is goodness I desire and not sacrifice, כי חסד ולא זבח חפצתי.” But this is not accurate. The prophets didn’t mind sacrifice; they wanted the people to observe sacred rituals. But they didn’t want attention to the details of the ritual – of our responsibilities towards God – to *take the place of* the whole gamut of responsibilities towards other human beings. You need both. And when you take attention to the rituals to the extreme you can cross a line and essentially invalidate the ritual. The ritual becomes an idol.

You know that I have been outspoken about the fight for religious pluralism in Israel. It’s not that I have a problem with the Orthodox or even the ultra-Orthodox. I actually admire their commitment to Torah study and their religious fervor and passion. The problem arises when attention to detail becomes so extreme that it trumps all the other commandments about the way you treat other human beings. The most obvious example is when some members of that community encounter egalitarian worship and respond in the extreme – shouting, taunting, even throwing trash and dirty diapers at the “perpetrators.” If your commitment to your view of *halakhah*, of Jewish law, tells you that it is okay to insult or threaten other Jews, then your commitment has become idolatrous.

Same thing with the controversy over what is called “Equality of the burden, שוויון בנטל.” Israel is a special society and there is something positive about the idea that in the one Jewish country there are people who serve by committing themselves to studying and preserving Jewish texts. There is no other country in the world where *yeshiva* study might be considered national service. But when that commitment to study is taken to the extreme, when commitment to study means that an entire population can free itself from other responsibilities towards the state and the family and the economy, that commitment becomes problematic. Torah study becomes a Golden Calf.

Shifting to this country— last night our government jumped over the fiscal cliff it created for itself with the sequestration, each side blaming the other for pushing us off. But I don’t think it’s a matter of right versus wrong. I don’t think you can say that the ones who want to cut spending are right and the others are wrong. You can’t say the ones who want to raise taxes to fund government’s

responsibilities are right and the others are wrong either. Each side is worshipping its own calves. When you take a perfectly reasonable idea and you stick to it to the point that no other idea can be legitimate and no compromise can be made and you are going to hold to your plan until the other side comes around to see it your way— regardless of the consequences—well then you have crossed the line from governance to idolatry. That’s the golden calf.

Same thing with guns. Some people want to frame this as a battle between good and evil. Guns are either good ... or they are bad. Lawmakers either believe in the Second Amendment or they are trying to take away your rights. Guns and gun rights become objects of worship. I don’t know exactly where the line is, but I am sure it exists: Child safety locks, background checks, limits to the number of guns an individual can have or the number of bullets that can be fired in an incredibly short period of time, allowances for research into the effects of guns, the right of a doctor to ask a patient if there is a gun in the home, laws against carrying a gun into an airport or a school or daycare center or a synagogue— some of these ideas might be good, some might be bad. ... But if your position is that every limit is wrong, if your position is that if it can be manufactured we should be able to carry it in public, at that point perhaps the gun has become a golden calf, a legitimate right carried to the extreme.

There are tons of other examples.

- Homework is a good thing, but when high school students are up to all hours of the night completing assignments, when they complain of anxiety and don’t feel they can do anything else. ...
- Sports are a lot of fun; they build character and commitment. But when coaches tell players they can’t go to Hebrew School or play a musical instrument or even another sport. ...
- Mitzvah projects that have to be done on Shabbat morning. ...
- When I think I’m so right that I can denigrate or embarrass or belittle another person, maybe I am worshipping a Golden Calf.

That’s the lesson of Parashat Ki Tissa. Aaron began on a perfectly legitimate enterprise, but the people’s commitment and zeal took them too far. Our task for this Shabbat is to look out for the golden calves in our own lives, to watch out for the extremes, to ask ourselves: “At what expense?” And in many cases to pull back in order to do more good and to bring more blessing to our lives, to our people, and our world. Shabbat Shalom.