

This Week In Torah Ki Tisa
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The Psalmist wrote, “Open to me the gates of righteousness that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD.” [Psalm 118:19] These words are said with yearning on Yom Kippur as the *Neilah*; we want to know what is ahead of us. We want to be successful in our petitionary prayers and desire for *teshuvah*/repentance. Yet, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak [d. 1810] warned us that we will never go through those gates for, as we enter one, another appears before us. It is not a cruel Divine joke, but an observation that we will never be perfected. A part of us will always be missing; that is the difference between being created in the image of God and being God. It doesn’t mean that the work of Yom Kippur was in vain; rather, it is the sincere realization of who we really are and how much more we can become.

Rabbi Levi Yitzhak taught that *Neilah* should be said with joy and pride as well as yearning because “God’s salvation” will support us. He compared this to a parent teaching a child to walk. When a child takes their first steps, the parent moves back, encouraging the child to walk a step further. It may seem that the parent is illusive and creating distance, but in actuality the parent is encouraging and nurturing. That, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak said, is the essence of the relationship we have with God that is captured in the Psalm.

German Jewish theologian Hermann Cohen [d. 1918] was a disciple of the teachings of Immanuel Kant. He favored studying concepts through rational discourse rather than intuition. In his famous book *Star of Redemption*, Cohen spoke of an evolving practice. It was a philosophy of “not yet”—Do you keep the Sabbath? Not yet. Are you kosher? Not yet. Do you deal ethically with people? Not yet. Cohen’s teaching is similar to Rabbi Levi Yitzhak’s, but the two men could not be any different—a chasid and a rationalist who lived by the *wissenschaft deJudentum* [the scientific and rational approach to studying Judaism]. Yet these parallel thoughts help frame an understanding of this week’s *parasha*, which tells the tale of the golden calf.

The scene was set: Moses left the people for a significant time—40 days and nights, to be exact. The one who shared with them that God was with them, who had no name other than “*Eheyeh asher eheyeh*—I am what I am” and could not be seen, was gone. There was no intermediary. Left alone, the golden calf was built and dedicated through a ceremony was [as the Midrash tells us] filled with debauchery.

The Rabbis teach us that on top of Mount Sinai, God told Moses what was occurring and interceded on the people’s behalf. The people never knew how close they came to total annihilation. In Deuteronomy, it is written of this moment: “I feared the anger and wrath of the LORD, for he was angry enough with you to destroy you. But again the LORD listened to me.” Moses even went as far as to offer himself up as a sacrifice for this sin—check out the story in Exodus Rabbah.

Moses was a great leader, but not a perfect man. He knew it—in fact, as he stood before God, he wondered out loud, why him? “Who am I to go to Pharaoh, that I should take the Children of Israel out of Egypt?” God answered: “It was I who sent you.” God said that Moses was a prophet; “this shall be your sign that I was the One who sent you.” The great Moses knew he was incomplete; he was humble

in his attitude which made him even more worthy. He was not arrogant, but modest. He stammered when he spoke, but he was God's mouthpiece. To paraphrase the Psalmist, he was the rock that the builder rejected that became the chief cornerstone. Yet, he was the only one who knew God face-to-face with such intimacy.

Now—here is the scene at the base of Mount Sinai: the people approached Aaron for a god that they could worship. Their reason was partly out of an irrational fear—they were alone in the wilderness. The only person that they trusted was gone; the God that Moses spoke of was not performing any miracles for them at that moment. They built to fill a void.

Part of their reason to build the golden calf was out of arrogance; it was the opposite of the *tzinut* [modesty and humility] that Moses embodied. They built it because they could. RaSHI commented that they were so gluttonous and drunk that they engaged in sexual immorality. That means they had one Hell of a party.

The third reason was shared by Rabbi Jonathan Slater, who described that the golden calf symbolized the fallibility of human beings to conquer the *yetzer haRah*, the evil inclination. This calf became the constant symbol of the Israelites failing to have full faith in God. They built the golden calf because they could not suppress the urge not to.

Whatever the motivation was to build it, each possibility gave them an opportunity to be whole—to have a sense of *shlemut* in their lives. We can relate to this! We work to get stuff or a better life or achieve a status. We create a version of a golden calf in our own lives—things that move us away from our spiritual core and our relationship with God. These golden calves distract us from worshipping and hearing the One and only God.

Often we seek to fill emptiness or a void with a golden calf. Rabbi Levi Yitzhak and Hermann Cohen both remind us that having a void is perfectly acceptable; it is the opportunity for us to become *tzadekim*, righteous individuals. Moses was imperfect and that made his spiritual search so rewarding. Those who worshiped the golden calf created a false sense of perfection. For them, the words of the Psalmist can actually be achieved—they could enter the gates of righteousness. But that, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak said, is a false reality. We are always a work in progress, suggested Hermann Cohen. Always in the process of becoming... the work never ends.

The Psalmist taught: "Open to me the gates of righteousness that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD." Yearn for entry, gaze upon it, seek ways to get closer to it—but know this, be proud and happy that you will never go through it. For if you did, then it becomes your golden calf—a false diety.