

Torah Thoughts Ki Tisa

5779:

Is it possible for an agent of destruction to also be the agent of healing for the very destruction that they have caused?

In parshat Ki Tisa this week we read the episode of the Golden Calf, when the Israelites engage in the pagan practice of worshipping a visual representation of God. That appalling incident is followed by another that we often overlook, though it too seems appalling. As punishment for their infidelity to God, three thousand of the people are killed by the Levites. Moses orders the killing, and tells his brother Levites to show no mercy, to ‘slay brother, neighbor and kin’ who were involved with the pagan debauchery of the Calf. The only way to alleviate our natural revulsion at this passage is to remember that this was to have been the moment that the people received the Torah, cementing their relationship with the God who had redeemed them from slavery. If the worship of the Calf went unpunished, it would have doomed the entire people to destruction.

What is instructive is that the Levites become the shleppers for the mishkan in the wilderness and, later, the support staff for the kohanim at the Temple in Jerusalem. It is through their efforts in transporting, building and breaking down the mishkan and assisting the kohanim that communication with God is made possible. The same vigilance and zeal the Levites showed in standing for God after the incident of the Golden Calf would later be turned to protecting the ark and other sacred implements of worship. From that perspective, the Levites’ actions toward their fellow Israelites is quite consistent: Their role is to serve and protect God’s honor; when those things are threatened, even by other Israelites, the Levites’ first loyalty will always be to God.

By helping to foster communication between the human and divine, the Levites create a reality in which God’s words can have an impact. Without them, it would be impossible to know God’s will for creating a world of justice, righteousness, love. At the beginning of our national history, the Levites made that possible, paradoxically, through violence. Subsequently, their efforts would be manifest through labor, their campaign against pagan worship transformed into one for God’s worship. Throughout their history, the Levites maintained their loyalty and service to God, making it possible for all of us to maintain our own relationships with the divine.

Shabbat shalom.

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