

Parashat Ki Tissa 5781

This Shabbat's Parasha, Ki Tissa, begins with a census, talks a little about the Tabernacle, then has the famous paragraph *V'Shamru* (Etz Chayim p. 529verse 16 – 17) about keeping Shabbat, which we just sang a little while ago, and then gets into the most striking element of the Parasha, which is the episode of the Golden Calf (*egel hazahav*).

There are so many elements of this story that are striking. One obvious question is what is the connection between keeping/protecting/guarding Shabbat and the Golden Calf incident that would explain their juxtaposition in the text?

The Golden Calf, no matter how you understand it, whether it's supposed to be god (as in p. 531 verse 4: "these are your gods Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt"); or if you understand it as being a replacement for Moses whom the masses had said in verse 1 on p.530 that they didn't know where Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, was; or if you think that the Golden Calf or young bull was a kind of pedestal for the invisible G!d – no matter what the alternative, it still is some form of idol.

I think nowadays we also have our own idols – and I don't mean movie stars or rock stars – I mean things to which we give much too much importance. It is interesting that the second saying in the *Aseret HaDibrot*, the Ten Utterances (aka the Ten Commandments), is not to make images of G!d i.e. not to make material out of something that is transcendent of anything material. All that is material is not eternal, obviously. When people talk about materialism it means that "things" are given an attention and status that is much more central than values of the spirit – whether you understand the spirit, or the spiritual, as a traditional view of G!d or a belief in the value of life or the human spirit.

What if the people you are addressing think materialism is just fine and dandy, and leave us alone already with this spiritual stuff? What if the people you are addressing like things the way they are? What if they think the rich should get richer and the poor are poor only because they lack all ambition and that is not our responsibility. That is certainly not an uncommon belief. And though it is certainly true that we did not create their poverty, nevertheless maybe we can do something to help them rise above their poverty and out of their poverty. If you look at the incredible example of Dr. Irving Fradkin, of blessed memory, with dollars for scholars –

he truly believed that if young people were given the opportunity to study, they could raise themselves up and aspire to greater opportunities. Some of you might remember that New York City had a virtually free City University system – a college in every borough and usually a junior college (a two-year or community college) too – basically tuition free. The quality of at least three of those City University schools: CCNY (Manhattan), Brooklyn College and Queens College was very high. Many Jews who came from immigrant families, whose parents struggled to barely make ends meet, were able to get a free education and to move into the middle class. Many of the Jewish intellectuals of the Upper West Side of Manhattan in the 1930s, '40s, '50s and even '60s were educated at CCNY. It's probably not news to anyone that that system of the City University of New York is far from free today – and therefore not as accessible to current generations of people. Society stopped feeling that it was its responsibility to help people rise to a higher level. Maybe there are people who think that that idea of trying to help people rise to the middle class through public education is a liberal idea and for some people labeling something “liberal” is an implicit criticism or even an insult. The Torah, however, thinks it is society's responsibility to take care of those who are less fortunate. On Purim it is a special Mitzvah to give to the poor without judgment. Our tradition has certainly made education a central value. That is very true both “religiously” and culturally. In our religious tradition study of Torah in its broadest meaning (that is Torah referring to not only the Five Books of Moses, the Chumash, but also Talmud, Midrash, Jewish Philosophy, Kabbalah, Codes of Jewish Law, etc.), was the highest value. When speaking about various mitzvot in the Talmud, for example, at the end it will often conclude with: “but the study of Torah is equal to all of them (together). In Hebrew the phrase is *Talmud Torah* (the study of Torah) *k'neged kulam* (equal to all of them). In our cultural tradition the belief in education as primary has remained very true. Wealth was never seen as a marker of wisdom, although having the wherewithal to give a lot to *tzedakah* was seen as a great mitzvah.

Let's get back to Moses. He comes down from Mt. Sinai and he sees how far the people have sunk. G!d wants to abandon them or worse. But Moses pleads on their behalf. He knows that what they have done is terrible in the eyes of everything he believes in. But he does not abandon them – he believes essentially that they are not beyond hope. In Pirkei Avot it says do not judge another person until you have come to their place. How easy it is to judge – how difficult it is to actually be in another person's place – and thus be truly able to understand them.

How difficult it is to listen to someone whose ideas we disagree with – especially over issues that really mean a lot to us. Just imagine if it is that difficult to listen to someone else on an individual basis, how difficult it must be to negotiate peace with your enemy. But it can be done. It has happened in the past. If we do not hold out hope for that possibility – the only option is despair or endless bloodshed and violence and seeing your enemy as less than human. That has certainly been done to us many times. Moses could have despaired over his people, but part of what made him such a great leader was that he loved the people even when he saw how flawed they were.

The entire episode of the Golden Calf is striking. One of the things that often impressed me in terms of the story itself is that it occurs a mere forty days after standing at the foot of Mt. Sinai and witnessing the peak moment for the Jewish people. Whatever you may think actually happened at Mt. Sinai at that time, nevertheless in the Torah itself it is depicted as the Jewish people in its entirety having an experience of the Presence of G!d which they found totally overwhelming. How is it possible that the effect of that experience did not last long enough in people’s consciousness to enable them to avoid resorting to idolatry.

Can you imagine Moshe’s frustration coming down from Mt. Sinai carrying the tablets in his hands and seeing the people reveling around the Golden Calf?!! On p. 533 verse 15-16 it says that the Tablets were G!d’s work and the writing was G!d’s writing *Kharut al halakhot*” i.e. incised into the stone tablets. In Pirkei Avot 6:2, it says don’t read it as *kharut al halakhot*, but rather as *kherut al halakhot*, freedom through the tablets of stone, for no one is truly free except those who busy themselves with the study of Torah.” Why do you think Pirkei Avot says this? Also what is the connection between the Golden Calf and the study of Torah? The question is not quite as clear as I would like it to be. I think that the challenge is the high demands being made of the Jewish people: we are supposed to be “a light unto the nations,” (Isaiah said that, but it’s consistent with the other expectations), a *mamlechet Kohanim*, a kingdom of priests, and a *goy kadosh*, a holy nation. We’re supposed to worship the one true G!d of the universe who has no physical form. In the Ten Commandments (which Moses breaks, *nebekh*, during our Parasha), immediately after the first Commandment (which in our tradition is seen as the recognition of G!d - *Anokhi Hashem Elokekha* - is the Commandment that there should be no other gods and that you shall not make idols or images. That is a constant theme in the Torah. The Haftarah’s theme with Elijah is also about Elijah’s fight against idolatry (which he dramatically wins, but then runs

away to the desert to save himself – and where does he go? Back to Mt. Sinai – called *Khorev* in the Elijah story).

What does the Torah say about Moshe's response? I already gave it away. However there's a Midrash which is repeated in the Zohar which tells the story in a very different way. Remember the writing on the tablets, what does our Parasha say about the writing? It is not your normal writing. The Midrashic reading says that the letters themselves carried the stone. That is why Moses could hold them in his arms because the Divine letters actually held up the tablets. When they came into contact with the Golden Calf as Moses descended the mountain, they flew back to their source and the stone tablets became too heavy to bear and Moses dropped them. Another reading of the story is that Moses smashed the tablets, but he did so in order that the tablets themselves not become another idol, worshipped in place of G!d or as an intermediary. Throughout the tradition we read about not allowing Moses to become treated as more than human. He is a great leader of flesh and blood, one who refuses to relinquish his people despite their grave shortcomings. As great as his frustration with his people may have been, he always cares about them from the lowliest to the greatest.

One more point in the Parasha that I believe is related to this (which I mentioned at the beginning): Guarding and keeping Shabbat. Notice, Shabbat itself is disembodied too. It is not a physical thing in space as much as an oasis in time as Heschel referred to it. I think that Shabbat in some way is seen as an antidote for idolatry. On Shabbat we are not supposed to pray for our physical needs. It is a day in which to cultivate the soul, the spirit, that which is disembodied in our lives, but eternal. Not a very popular idea these days when the focus of society is so physical and material. We cannot live without the physical, but where is the holiness in our lives if we are so focused on the physical and neglect our souls, our inner life – and leave no time for it? I think that's why Pirkei Avot says we should read the verse not as engraved in the stone tablets, but freedom through the stone tablets, i.e. the study and practice of Torah, the cultivation of our inner lives rather than servitude to the physical to the neglect of the inner.

One last footnote. We also find what we call G!d's thirteen attributes mentioned in this Parasha – the words we sing on the High Holidays and on regular holidays right before taking out the Torah. The words that say G!d is *rakhum v'khanun, erekh apayim v'rav khesed ve'emet* (that G!d is compassionate and gracious, long-suffering and greatly loving and great in truth, etc). When crafting the Siddur, the prayer book, the rabbis cut off the verse before its actual end

and conclude the prayer with the word “*v’nakeh*” (and G!d exonerates i.e. wipes the slate clean – *nakeh* literally is “to clean”). However in the Torah there are more words, adding that though G!d is so forgiving, people will be held accountable, G!d won’t totally exonerate them. The Rabbis took the phrase and used the part that was most uplifting and made that the liturgical tradition. That is partially how commentaries worked too – rabbis would use part of a verse to make their point. They generally looked for the most inspirational parts and focused on them, trying to help people connect to the Divine.

Shabbat Shalom.