

Dvar Torah Ki Tisa
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Shabbat Shalom. The parsha today addresses one of the main examples of misdeeds in Jewish history. The building of the Golden Calf. I believe that this stemmed from Aaron, Moses's brother. Ultimately, Aaron's decision led to a terrible spiral of devastating and brutal outcomes. The question is- why did Aaron disobey God's commands to not worship idols?

During their wandering, the people were having a hard time. They were camping around everywhere, there was no clear destination, and they had a tense relationship with God. Doubt about the fate of the people was increasing. Throughout their time in the wilderness, the Israelites complained (legitimately) to Moses and Aaron about a lot of things. They complained about the lack of food, so Moses asked God and there was mana. Then the Israelites complained about water, so Moses asked God, God instructed Moses to strike the rock, and there was water. In other words, the people were extremely reliant on Moses. Moses was the one person whom the people really trusted, although at times a more shaky trust than at others. Moses took care of problems, and reassured the upset persons that God was still there.

Then finally, they arrived at a destination. Mount Sinai. The people camped at the base of the mountain while Moses went up to speak with God. At the base of the mountain, the Israelite people were nervous, uncertain, and concerned about their fate. They weren't sure what was to become of them and although they had been told there would be a homeland, they never seemed to get any closer to it-- a disturbing thought. The people quarreled with each other, but their grievances

couldn't be solved because Moses (who had always resolved everything) was up on the mountain. Without Moses, everyone became distressed, and the more time he spent up on the mountain, the more bothered the group became.

As they said bitterly: "... that man Moses, who brought us from the land of Egypt—we do not know what has happened to him." Therefore, the people were forced to look for new leadership. Now, it seemed, Aaron was the only option for the people.

Aaron, Moses's brother, was first seen in the Torah when he was recruited to speak to Pharaoh and go on the long journey to free the Israelites. Aaron was never really very independent, he was mainly the voice of God. As Mark Kirschbaum, a Torah commentator, says, "It is significant that when he (Aaron) performed his wonders, it was not by virtue of any innate ability or individual initiative but only by divine command, mediated by Moses." Aaron may have been just as scared as the people at the foot of Mount Sinai. He was just another guy, though he was a high priest. Aaron didn't know how to lead- he helped only with rituals, not major decisions. Aaron also received complaints, but unlike Moses, he lacked the capability to act upon them. Aaron was a person who doubted his abilities to be a leader and a problem solver.

Here was the scene: a tense social situation, a people who were not used to making collective or major decisions, and an inexperienced leader. Moses was up on the mountain having his deep conversation with God and receiving the Torah. But Aaron felt that he was down in the trenches having to deal with hard reality and receding faith.

In the past, God had always made it clear that God was there. There was evidence of God's existence. When God brought the plagues, that was evidence. When God split the sea, that was evidence. As we read earlier in Shmot, "Israel saw

the wondrous power which God had wielded.” ...And when Moses spoke with God in the Tent of Meeting, there was a pillar of smoke. There were many miracles that could be used as evidence of God’s existence. Even if God couldn’t be seen as an entity or being, there was always something there once in a while that would prove that God was alongside the people. But, at the foot of the mountain, once Moses went up to talk with God, many indications of God’s presence went away.

That being the case, Aaron displaced the focus and expectations of the people onto something visible and tangible. The change in focus, he decided, needed to be something the people could *see*, since they had lost faith and trust in God, and lost faith in the idea that God was still there even though he couldn’t be seen. Thus, the golden calf came into being. In fact, Aaron denies altogether that he even made it: it just popped out of the flames. Together the Israelites and Aaron made a catastrophic decision violating the central principle of Judaism.

Building an idol was just about the **worst** action Aaron could have chosen. Throughout the entire Torah, God said that he was one. God told Moses that he was the ONLY God, and God told Abraham that he was the ONLY God. Did Aaron miss the point? Was it mere forgetfulness within either the people or himself? So, why did Aaron choose to build an idol for the people? Even after God told them not to. Why didn’t he hold a meeting to make sacrifices? Or make everyone pray extra hard? Hold a banquet? Ask **Miriam** for advice? There are endless things he could have done, so why did he choose the worst option?

One answer could be that the Israelites had not yet received the Ten Commandments and/or the Torah yet, and the rules were not yet set in stone. But that doesn’t get us very far in understanding the nature of people and leadership. We have to probe a bit deeper to understand how the Israelites worked their way through one of the greatest tests and crises they had yet faced since leaving Egypt.

Aaron feared he faced a crisis of social disorder and that the crisis of disorder outweighed that of faith. I believe that Aaron chose to execute the worst option following God's laws because he believed that a leader could only prioritize one, especially when everything else seemed so uncertain. Either maintain social order, or maintain the people's commitment to God. In this case, Aaron chose social order. In constructing the calf, the people's anxiety and distress levels, it seemed, died down. And at first it's celebratory. But when Moses saw the scene he exploded and sent everything into a fury of chaotic retribution and punishment. Moses asks Aaron-- "why did you lead these people into committing such a sinful act?"

There are other ways, though, that we might think about leadership that could have led this community of people to act more responsibly and in the interests of a greater whole. I'd like to use an example from the African American Civil Rights Movement in the U.S. in the 1950s and 1960s. Ella Baker and Septima Clark were civil rights leaders in the American South but in a different sense from male leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King Junior. Dr. King led large marches and gave speeches in front of extremely big crowds of people. Ella Baker and Septima Clark acted differently. They acted "behind the scenes," in a sense. These women thought that leadership was about helping others find their own potential, and they created the means of giving others the capacity to solve problems on their own. For example, they founded citizenship schools for poor people, so they could learn how to improve their lives together and build strong communities. As Ella Baker said: "Give light and the people will find a way."

This relates to the parsha because it shows another way of imagining the connection between leaders and people. Clearly, then, there are approaches that can lead to a positive conclusion, as opposed to the actions Aaron took. Aaron could have chosen a route that would help the people to build up their own capacities to

act responsibly as a nation, and understand the need to balance social order and faith. The two women (Septima Clark and Ella Baker) handled *their* situation extremely differently from Aaron. Their style of leadership required time, patience, and carefully bringing people along. Aaron cracked under pressure and gave in to immediate impulses which in no way built the strength and independence of the people.

Of course, when Moses found the people around the golden calf, he didn't exactly offer *uplifting* leadership either! That was just leadership by fury. Insane fury. Indeed, Moses shoves water filled with powdered gold down the Israelites throats! Then he wages war on half the population, eliminating all who didn't follow him. Thus the people ended up devastated and despondent.

Moses went back up the Mountain in despair, hoping for a way to redeem Aaron and the people and maybe even himself. In this second round conversation, it became clear that God would no longer appear to the people directly. He wouldn't be seen in any form. Instead, they worked on a legal and moral code together. When Moses went down the second time, as a radiant leader, people had to *listen* to the moral and legal code and enter the spiritual community of Israel. It was made possible through a new kind of leadership: not just the cycle of orders-and-complaints between the people and Moses, but Moses along with the new judges he appointed as Yitro suggests.

So, Ki Tisa doesn't just have to just be a story of *poor* leadership but could also be a transition to a new *kind* of leadership that supports interdependence within the community.

[TAKE BIG BREATH AND WAIT A COUPLE SECONDS]

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Be aware of heartbeat. Read more slowly than you think you need to. Going to be speaking into a microphone- get used to sound. Sense when mic is picking up voice. SPEAK INTO THE MIC! Think about the end of the sentence.