

Dear Chavraya,

The tension was palpable at the base of the mountain. The crowd was becoming rowdy. The people fretted, "What had happened to this man Moses?" He had gone up the mountain for what they assumed would be a short time, to then return to them with God's teaching. Instead, Moses seemed to have disappeared, forty days and he had still not returned. For all of the miracles that had occurred, and the exodus itself, God remained an abstraction to the people. It was Moses whom they needed, a flesh and blood leader to offer guidance, hope and comfort. As fear gripped the camp, Aaron succumbed to the clamor of the people for a tangible sign of leadership, of Moses', of God's, a reminder that they were not alone.

In this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Ki Tissa*, the incident of the Golden Calf occurs. It is a fascinating context of swirling human dynamics, of fear, of tension, mistrust of self and others, a loss of vision in the needs of the moment. An event that seems to betray all that had transpired, the drama of liberation and the lofty ideals of Sinai, the Golden Calf is regarded as a moment of shame in our people's history. And yet, stepping back, putting aside judgment, it is so real and so human, and so much about us as well as about our ancestors.

For all of those who rush to judgment, condemning the incident of the Golden Calf as simple idolatry, there are those who approach it with compassion, and with a deeper understanding of the human condition. For these commentators, it is not God whom the people seek to replace, but rather the absent Moses, whom they assume has died and will not return. In this view, out of their need for something tangible and immediate, the people have violated the third of the Ten Commandments, not to create images, rather than the second Commandment, not to worship another god.

At times, we too succumb to fear and expediency, substituting something of the moment for that which has abiding import. While material goods overwhelm values of the spirit in contemporary culture, in this year's reading of the Golden Calf I find myself reflecting more on the replacing of higher priorities and values with lesser ones. Values that seem intangible become real through action. We challenge the Golden Calf within ourselves when we rise to the ideals of the mountaintop. It can happen in deceptively mundane moments, as well as through deeper reflection on purpose and meaning; when we pause to address remarks that are racist or sexist, homophobic or xenophobic, and all that is otherwise demeaning of God's image; or when we consider the tone of our own words and the quality of our interactions. It may be in raising our voices to challenge assumptions that perpetuate war and injustice, or seeking ways of ethical investment and support for local initiatives of positive change.

With the same compassion that we might bring to understanding our ancestors, so we might gently challenge ourselves. Guided by the view from the top of the mountain, we give purpose and direction to what unfolds below.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor