

PARASHAT KI TISA

RABBI SHMUEL RABINOWITZ

Sin, compassion and leadership

The main story in this week's Torah portion, Ki Tisa, is one of the most embarrassing ones at the beginning of the Jewish nation's history: the sin of the golden calf. It happened when Moses went up to Mount Sinai and stayed for 40 days in order to receive the Divine directives written in the Torah. The nation waited for him at the foot of the mountain, but days went by and Moses did not return. There were people – according to tradition, they were the “erev rav,” non-Jews who attached themselves to the Jewish nation in the Exodus from Egypt, who had not let go of the idolatrous Egyptian culture and wanted to create a substitute: a god in the form of a calf.

These people turned to one of the respected people in the nation, Chur – the son of Miriam the prophetess, who refused to cooperate with them and paid for this with his life. Immediately afterward, these same people turned to Aaron, Moses's brother, and demanded of him, “Come on! Make us gods!” Aaron, apprehensive of more bloodshed, preferred to cooperate with them. He tried to postpone the creation of the calf under different pretexts, but the pressure from the nation was ultimately decisive. With surprising generosity, they donated the gold jewelry they had brought from Egypt, and melted it to create the golden calf.

The calf was made, and Moses descended from Mount Sinai and was faced with the shocking sight of the nation dancing around the golden calf, ecstatically calling out, “These are your gods, O Israel, who have

brought you up from the land of Egypt!”

It is not difficult to imagine the depths of Moses's disappointment, frustration and torment. During that past year, Moses had courageously faced Pharaoh, the Egyptian king, and demanded that he free the Hebrew nation of slaves and allow them to leave Egypt. With the help of manifest miracles and the 10 plagues that God brought down on Egypt, Moses succeeded in his mission and liberated the nation. He led them through the sea, arriving at Mount Sinai, where they experienced a public Divine revelation, the only one in history, in which they heard the Ten Commandments. And now, it seemed, the nation had gone back to its ways, to Egyptian idol worship, to dancing around a golden calf.

Moses began a series of actions. First, he broke the Tablets of the Covenant that he had brought down from Mount Sinai, understanding that a nation that worships a golden calf could conceivably also make the tablets into a sort of idol. After that, he burned the calf and punished those who had initiated the sin. Then Moses turned to God to plea that He not punish the nation for their sin. During the prayer, a fascinating dialogue took place between Moses and God; one which its significance has been analyzed by commentators and philosophers for generations. We will take a peek at the writings of the giant of Jewish thought, Maimonides, who dedicated a long chapter to this in his monumental book “A Guide to the Perplexed.”

Moses asked two requests of God. The first: “...let

me know Your ways, so that I may know You - so that I may find favor in Your eyes” (Exodus 33, 13); and the second: “Show me, now, Your glory!” (ibid ibid, 18). Maimonides explains that Moses wanted to know the ways in which God leads the world, and in addition, he wanted to grasp godliness itself. God refused the second request: A human being, even the greatest human like Moses, is incapable of grasping the essence of God. It is beyond human capability. But God answered the first request in the affirmative:

“I will let all My goodness pass before you...” (ibid ibid, 19)

What did God teach Moses about His ways of leading the world? He taught him about the virtues of compassion that represent Divine leadership. Here, Maimonides adds significant insight: Why did Moses ask to know the ways of God? Because Moses understood that a human leader must adopt these ways when dealing with the nation. The incredible disappointment brought upon Moses by the nation's creation of the calf led him to search for the Divine paths a leader should take.

These paths are the 13 attributes of compassion. Just as God is capable of forgiving the sins of humans, so humans are called upon to forgive the sins of others. A worthy leader is one who is guided by compassion. Moses learned this after the sin of the golden calf. It is a lesson we should also learn and internalize.

The writer is rabbi of the Western Wall and Holy Sites.

DAVID WOLPE

Why break the tablets?

Coming down from Sinai with the carved tablets from God, we can understand Moses's anguish at the golden calf. Still, it is hard to understand why Moses broke the tablets.

One explanation is that it was pure rage. Once he saw the Israelites dancing about an idol, Moses could no longer contain himself.

But this seems inadequate. Why should his reaction to the perfidy of the people be to destroy the work of God, the most valuable single item in the history of the world? Was he that incapable of self-control? Better to have marched back up the mountain to deposit the tablets somewhere safe.

Arnold Ehrlich, author of *Mikra Kipshuto*, has a provocative and interesting answer. He notes that the Rabbis relate that God said to Moses: “*Yishar kohacha* that you broke them!” (Shabbat 87a). God apparently approved of Moses's action. This signals that more than anger was at stake.

Ehrlich believes that Moses saw the calf

and thought: If the Israelites worship this calf, which they created with their own hands, what will they do when they see the tablets carved by God? Surely, they will turn these tablets, which are so much more precious than the calf, into an idol! If I don't destroy the tablets, they will commit the ultimate desecration.

By smashing the tablets, Moses was making a declaration to all of Israel: Even the handiwork of God, which you might think of as inviolable, is nonetheless just another thing. It is not a God – it is a physical artifact. I am destroying it to return you to the greater truth, which is that you were not delivered from Egypt by a thing, but by an intangible, unfathomable God, no more embodied in the tablets than in the calf.

Idolatry is a persistent temptation to human beings. Modern observers are often surprised when they see or read that digging up an ancient Israelite site, there are idols, especially fertility idols, in abundance. But we should not be surprised; the prophets are always yelling at the Israelites about worshiping idols, and

one doesn't yell at people repeatedly to stop doing something that they never do. Idolatry was rife in Israel, and combating it was a long, difficult project.

To take an object as in some sense Divine is to limit the reality of God, to make God small. Anything limited that evokes absolute devotion is idolatry. For the only absolute is God. An idol suggests that somehow things can be measured in human terms, that our capacities are sufficient to comprehend the transcendent. Idolatry is not only about making God small, but also about making human beings too big.

Perhaps the people did not conceive of the idol itself as a god (for after all, as Ramban argues, the golden calf was more a substitute for Moses than God – it was when Moses disappeared that the people built it). But, as Solomon Schechter wrote, establishing an intermediary between God and human beings is tantamount to setting up another God, which is always a cause of sin.

The Israelites were not ready for the direct, unmediated relationship to God.

They wanted something they could touch or see, to prove the reality of what they could not see. But Judaism refashioned ritual objects from good luck charms or conduits to God into reminders and symbols of our history and connection to God. We took the physical and stripped it of its ultimate power in the minds of human beings, for ultimacy belongs only to God.

The golden calf was a turning point in history not only for the sin but for Moses's reaction. Moses smashed the tablets forever and always not to punish but to elevate. The fragments remind us of the fate of all physical things, but the message reminds us of the eternity of the Creator of all.

(For those who wish to study the meaning of idolatry more deeply, Kenneth Seeskin wrote a wonderful short book, *No Other Gods*, and Moshe Halbertal with Avishai Margalit a more comprehensive philosophical guide, *Idolatry*.)

The writer is the Max Webb Senior Rabbi of Sinai Temple, Los Angeles. Twitter: @rabbiwolpe.

JUDAISM 3.0
GOL KALEV

The failure of the Aharon-Hur Administration

Ceremonial transitions of power and authority of an elite might be two lessons learned from the events of the Golden Calf

As he ascended to Mount Sinai, Moses temporarily relinquished power to Aharon and Hur. We do not know exactly what transpired during those 40 days, but we do know the result: the building of a Golden Calf, the near obliteration of the Israeli nation, and the subsequent execution of 3,000 of the perpetrators.

To investigate the failure of the Aharon-Hur administration, one must go back to the revolutionary reforms enacted by Moses at Jethro's advice just a few weeks prior. Up until then, people came to Moses “to inquire of God.” Moses explained this system of government to Jethro: “when they have a matter, it cometh unto me; and I judge between a man and his neighbor, and I make them know the statutes of God, and His laws.”

The Moses to God administrative system worked since the people “believed in the LORD, and in His servant Moses.” But then suddenly, intermediaries were appointed. Those judges did not profess to have a direct line to God, but rather the ability to apply what Moses taught them. It was a sudden shift from prophecy to judgment. At least those “secular” judges operated under the auspices of Moses and could elevate big matters to him, but then Moses appointed two autonomous leaders, who ruled based on a one-line mandate: “And to the elders he said, wait for us here until we return to you, and here Aharon and Hur are with you; whoever has a case, let him go to them.”

This is the government structure under which the events of the Golden Calf occurred.

Moses seemed to apply the lessons of this structure's failure. From thereon, transition of powers were done through a grandiose ceremony, as opposed to a one-line mandate. When Moses transitioned his priestly power to his brother Aharon, it was done through a multi-week ceremony, when decades later, Aharon transitioned power to his son Elazar it was done in a celebrated ritual on Hor HaHar, and when Moses himself transferred his power to Joshua, it was done through a detailed ceremony that made clear that Joshua is the new leader and that God is with him.

Moses also seems to apply another lesson from the Aharon-Hur failure: the introduction of an elite. Those two items – ceremonial transition and the authority of a Moses-appointed elite have proven extraordinarily successful.

The transition to the Levites lasted for over 1,000 years until the Temple was destroyed, and the transition of priestly powers lasts till today. Nobody questions the elite status of the Cohens, such as being the first to have the honor of Aliyah when the Torah is read in synagogues.

While the ceremonial transition of powers to an elite were successful, the unceremonial transition of powers



PRAYING DURING the priestly blessing at the Kotel, Sukkot 2018. (Noam Revkin Fenton/Flash90)

was not. There was no ceremony anointing the tribe of Judah. This could perhaps explain the people's lack of acceptance of Hur and rejection of Caleb, president of Judah and only tribal leader who joined Moses and Joshua's call to proceed to the promised land.

This rejection continued in King David's dynasty, whose rule over the united kingdom lasted for only two generations and was then met with the call: We have no portion in David, neither have we inheritance in the son of Jesse; every man to his tents, O Israel.

So the people accept when it is clear Moses delegated, such as in the case of the Cohens and the Levites, but not when it is unclear such as in the case of Judah.

Hence, when the Temple was destroyed and a new elite emerged – the Pharisees sages (*Chazal*) – they too established that their source of power is from Moses – the Oral Torah! Indeed, Rabbinical Judaism, which they seeded, remained the organizing principle of Judaism through 2,000 years of exile.

Yet, while preserving Judaism, this system failed to lead the Jews back home. Theodor Herzl set forth to do just that with the cooperation of the rabbis. Herzl, like Moses, understood the need for ceremonies and for an elite: “I am a staunch supporter of monarchical institutions,” he wrote and then explained: “These allow a continuous policy, and represent the interests of a historically famous family born and educated to rule, whose desires are bound up with the preservation of the state.”

In Christian Europe, there was broad acceptance till the 20th century that God appointed the monarchs, hence the monarch's desires are bound-up with the preservation of the state.

Once Europe stopped believing in the Divine, it also stopped believing in Divine-right-monarchies, and over the last century, new elites have filled the void.

In Great Britain it has been the civil servants. Prime

ministers such as Tony Blair recounted their shock upon taking office as to just how little power they had relative to the civil service. This arguably created a continuous policy that Herzl attributed to the monarchs, and hence could “balance” erratic choices by the electorate.

IN EUROPE, it is arguably the European Commission which has limited direct accountability to Europeans. For example the commission's policies toward Israel are by far more critical than that of its member countries and its citizens. This too is an opportunity to balance “uneducated” views by the European electorate. After all, not everybody can be a foreign policy expert. For example, while individual Europeans might think that the European interest is prosperity for Palestinians, the European Commission has been aggressively sabotaging Palestinian employment and

mentorship in Jewish-owned businesses, such as in SodaStream.

In Israel, there was a clear elite in the early days: the Ben-Gurion-led left-wing Ashkenazi who built the country and its institutions. Since 1977, when the Labor party was voted out, Israel seems to have gradually gravitated toward a model of multiple-elites such as the Druze in the police, Arabs in pharmaceutical and medical fields, ultra-Orthodox in motorcycle medics that saves thousands of lives every month, the national-religious in service, volunteering and ideology, and seculars in the judicial system and academia. Perhaps applying the lessons of the Aharon-Hur administration, such a model of multiple elites might be a necessary interim step before a model of no-elites.

Yet perhaps there is also another lesson from the failure of the Aharon-Hur administration that is relevant today. Moses checked the co-head's power, and their mandate was not conveyed directly to the people, but rather to the elders. They were a weak executive by design. As there has been an unprecedented global shift of power over the last century from absolute regimes to checked executive, one should apply the lessons and beware of inadvertently creating breeding grounds for golden calves.

Herzl understood that. Indeed, he identified weaknesses of the French democracy system and architected a more perfect version of European liberalism in the Jewish state. We do not have Moses today to appoint elites, but we do have the writings of Herzl – perhaps it is time to begin studying them, as a tool to create a more perfect society in Israel and around the world.

The writer is the author of the upcoming book *Judaism 3.0*. For details: Judaism-Zionism.com; for his geopolitical articles: EuropeAndJerusalem.com. For his commentaries on the weekly Torah portion: ParashaAndHerzl.com