

The Golden Calf truly stands out when we think about parshat Ki Tissa. We have understood this in a particular way throughout our lives and throughout the generations. The Golden Calf represented an object of worship kept from Egypt. When Moses was no longer to be found the people found themselves uncertain fearful. They built a Golden Calf as a representation of God if not a replacement for the God who took them out of the land of Egypt and revealed Himself to them at Sinai.

The people needed to see something. And while the people built the calf, something interesting was happening with Moses himself. There is a dialogue between Moses and God reflecting Moses' need. I believe it parallels the desire of the people to have a material God. Moses asked God to "show me your glory." Moses wanted to see God...and God refuses the request. On the mountain, in an intimate setting with God, Moses wants something no different then what the people desire. They want to see, they want to touch God. They want a "real" experience of God. And so does Moses. At that moment God places a certain limitation upon Moses' knowledge of Him. It is as if the quest for knowledge to see the face of God is not just impossible, but the request is illegitimate. "For no man can see me and live" God said. We must note that the text is not indicating that God doesn't have a face or form, that he is incorporeal, without any physical appearance, but rather God is so awesome, he is so holy, he is so "wholly other" that for a mortal to see him would mean he could no longer exist in the world. It's beyond the realm of possibility.

It's interesting to consider that Moses was looking for the same as the people. Maybe that's why he compassionately advocates for them. He understood their desires. I think there's something very important for us to understand from these texts. And I think we can find something very relevant in them related to current political and religious conversations.

So, we have two scenes. The scene of the people dancing around the Golden Calf and the scene of Moses up on Sinai bereft of a physical presence, a physical representation of God. Do the scenes have anything in common? At first blush no...

The people try to substitute a living God, the God who is giving them a teaching, and a law by which they would live, taught by a living man...with a molten image, with a bull that eats grass.

Moses was also concerned with the appearance of God. He is not an idolater; he is not a cultist. Yet, he wishes to see the Divine image.

Moses is refused, but in the refusal there is a message. God says to him that he will make his ways known to him. After he places him in the cleft of the rock, he reveals to him his ways, his ways of conducting the world. He shows his attributes. "*Adonai Adonai el rachum V'chanun erech apaiyim v'rav cheshed v'emet...*" He shows Moses that He is

graceful and merciful and forgiving and patient. All of these are attributes of which indicate that God is tolerant and forgiving for the limitations of human beings. At the onset, God is stern, he is strict, he is demanding, but after, when the people fail, He doesn't destroy. He is willing to lift them up and give them another chance. It becomes a very important ethical lesson.

The people, who want to see something, worship something built the Golden Calf and Moses who appears to be more refined and spiritual; both are making the same mistake. They are both preoccupied with God, with his being, with what he is and how he is to be defined...they want to see it in a real way. And both fail. And that's the legacy. Other religions that have either a human depiction of a god or a man who comes face to face with God we have neither.

But here, there is something even more essential. And that is taught from the cleft of the rock. There Moses learns that to know God is to know how he is in the world...kind, merciful, compassionate, patient...And to know God is to live God by living a goodly life, a godly life, a life that is dedicated to realizing a vision of God's holiness in the world. We are told how to do that, it is through acts of goodness, acts of justice and acts of kindness. Our truth is, that in spite of all the discussion, conversation, insight, and demands we'll never be there, we'll never have absolute knowledge; we'll never see His face.

For we're given a different form of "faith." Belief cannot be defined. God cannot have form. God's in higher thought, experienced in time and realized in behavior. God can be seen through his acts and benevolence. But there's no form. And no singular definition. I always tell new converts when we first meet "In Judaism there is no dogma, there is no unified theology." But there is an obligation to search, to seek and to do.

There's a discussion in the Talmud. (Baba Batra) We find a debate between Rabbi Akiva and Turnus Rufus. Turnus Rufus, the Roman Governor who some claim is responsible for killing Akiva for teaching Torah, says to Akiva, "... if your God is so good then tell me why is there such poverty in this world, why is there such suffering in this world?" Akiva responds to Turnus Rufus by saying that "God allows there to be poor in the world so that we can alleviate suffering, perform acts of charity and thus find a way to get to heaven." Turnus Rufus responded with a parable. "If there was a king who was angry with his servant and put him in prison and ordered that he shouldn't be given food or drink and then a man went and gave him food and drink. If the king heard he would have been angry and the king would want to put the man to death." Turnus Rufus was arguing if God really rules the world, then God intends the poor to be poor and we should leave them in that state. Akiva asserts that he would feed the man in prison. And that God as king would reward us for such.

Turnus Rufus also compares Israel not to the man who brings food, but to the man who was starving in the jail. He says, "... if you believe in a God who controls the flow of human history, then I am meant to put you and your people to death." Akiva responds to the story in a different way. He brings another parable. "Suppose a king was angry with

his son and he put him in prison and ordered that no food or drink be given to him and went and gave him food and drink. If the king heard of it would he not send him a present?" Akiva understands the love of a father for his son, of a parent of his child. For him it is self-evident. One need not be a Jew. One need not have the Torah to understand and subscribe to it. The king is God and the son who is punished and starving is Israel. God's happiness and God's presence is realized when suffering is relieved.

Turnus Rufus lives in a world of power. In that world God must be seen or touched. Akiva has a different understanding of God. He learns it from Torah and from his own sense of reason. He knows that God taught through the Torah can't be seen; only experienced through goodness and godliness...

We can leave theology to the theologians, our job is to live life each day and make the world a little bit better, to be involved in acts of Tikun Olam and each one of us knows how we can do that.

Recently, you may have read about Pope Benedict XVI's decision to bring back an old prayer into the Good Friday liturgy of the Catholic Church. It's a prayer, as you know, that calls for the conversion of the Jews. What does it mean, calling for the conversion of the Jews? Simply put, conversion of the Jews means that there is a sense in Catholicism that the redemption of the world will come when all believe in God as they do. God as he is defined through a body. Jesus' crucifixion and his resurrection is the ONLY path toward redemption, the only path towards salvation; the only way to know God.

To require all the faithful to pray for our conversion is a deep affront...In the past it has opened gates of resentment, triumphalism and violence. It's at the root of the deepest Christian anti-Semitism which has led to unparalleled suffering.

In Islam also, THE way includes submission to God, to Allah as defined by His prophet Muhammad and described in the writing of the Koran. The ultimate mission is for all people to believe his vision and to live this way.

This is something that makes us quite unique. We have learned that there's a place in the world to come for any righteous person. We have learned that the Torah has seventy faces. We learned that revelation has a subjective component. And we have learned that God can't be seen but is known through his attributes...each attribute with a relative dimension and a subjective perspective. We have a unique contribution to make. Because we can claim from our tradition that we can live next to those who believe differently. Nobody has access to the Absolute truth...we are all seekers.

We must be disturbed with the political conversations that take place drawn between Creationism and Darwinism. And that's a discussion that is also taking place in the courts right now in the state of Florida. It's disturbing when the public conversation is about religion that is blind to scientific contributions and historic realities. My religious faith is reasonable and if it can't stand up to the tests of reason then it needs to be adjusted.

The inability of those “religious personalities” who cannot integrate reason and scientific inquiry, and discovery, modernity and history with faith is simply dangerous. They potentially can catapult all of us back into a pre-modern world; a world where respect for individual rights is trampled by the chauvinistic triumphalism of uncompromising faiths. The beauty of what we have is that we can be religious and be open to thought and discovery and change. We can be religious and say “I’m not certain.”

One of my goals in life has been to develop a theology of pluralism. And I believe it begins with a God that cannot be seen or absolutely known, but grows from human response. Our law may be described as a revealed law, but it needs thoughtful minds to be interpreted. And it needs to grow as humanity grows and changes and develops. Maybe this is why Moses can’t see God in the narrative.

Moses learns about a God who can be understood in the crucible of human experience and through human imperfection. That’s why God is defined as merciful and graceful and patient, forgiving and kind. That’s the God that we continually seek.

The Golden Calf narrative comes obviously to teach there can’t be any representation of something which can’t be seen. Moses, on the mountaintop learns that lesson too.

I have been involved in interfaith dialogue with other Jews and Christians and Muslims. My experience in the dialogue is that it is very interesting to hear what people believe, but there is rarely anything significant that happens beyond the fact of it “being interesting.” The dialogue will not convince anyone of “truth;” everybody has their own sense of truth in spiritual matters. The purpose is elsewhere. The purpose is to enter into relationship. And in relationship we express ourselves in ways that reflect God.

Jealously, hostility, dishonesty, manipulation, the abuse of power, violence those all push God out of the world; whereas the attributes that are described, attributes of forgiveness and mercy, kindness and love bring God into the world.

This is what’s reflected in Baba Batra and expressed by Akiva. This is found in the great work of Maimonides: *The Guide to the Perplexed*, written some eight hundred years ago. He discussed some of the most profound subjects of theology and Aristotelian philosophy and he expounded on the knowledge of God and how it may be attained. He ends the entire work of “*The Guide*” by stating that true knowledge of God lies not in intellectual or mystical apprehension of the god head, but in imitating God’s ways in the ethical sense. He quotes Jeremiah “For let him who glories takes glory in this: that he comprehends and knows me that I am the Lord who performs love, justice and righteousness in the earth. For these things I take delight,” says the Lord.

In the end our religious lives are about our lives and what we do, how we respond, how we are. For us it’s encapsulated in imitating attributes of goodness, it’s concretized with a law and given vitality through learning.

So that's really the challenge and that's why at the core of our religious system of living are mitzvot: the obligations of life itself. We are bound by a law that demands ethical treatment of humanity and animals and plant life and all of creation. This is where God is found.

Over the years we have seen culture move from the middle part of the twentieth century, from a God is dead movement to a world where conversations about God are part of Presidential races and claims of God's presence in physical ways have become daily features. It is not that simple and it doesn't exist on either end. Claiming the death of God was clearly a reflection of the world that had sunk into such incredible moral abyss after the Holocaust. God was missing. Now, we are challenged to find God in other ways. It is not by turning inward, and not in superstitious incantation and symbols, but rather in some reaching out. Great challenges are right around us. There is the challenge of the homeless and the challenges of poverty and the challenges of loneliness brought about by broken families and aging. You want to find God? I think he is those opportunities to help others, to visit the sick, to comfort mourners, acts of Tzedakkah and Gemulit Chasidim.

Maybe that's why we read the narratives of the Golden Calf and the description of Moses' desire to see God face to face in the same parshah. I read the narrative over and over again and it maybe our way of saying the only one who can truly redeem your world is you.

Shabbat Shalom