



Parashat Kee Tisa

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It was once said that the further the Israelites moved away from Egypt, the bigger the miracles they needed to believe in God. Imagine, a group that had lived through the “10 plagues” and the splitting of the Sea, and the Revelation at Mt. Sinai *still* lost their faith when Moshe took some time coming down from the mountain.

As you’ll recall, when Moshe stayed up on the mountain for a while, the Israelites went to Aharon and said: עֲשֵׂה לָנוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר יֵלְכֵנוּ לְפָנֵינוּ “make us a god who shall go before us...”

Why did they ask for a “god”? מִשָּׁה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הֵעֵלָנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לֹא יָדָעְנוּ מֵהֵיכָּה לֵוֹ “Moshe, that man, who brought us up from Egypt...we don’t know where he is!”

There’s obviously a mix-up here. Is Moshe a man? Is he a god? Is he God’s assistant? Is he their leader or is God?!

If that weren’t enough, listen to what they say when Aharon melts down the jewelry and makes a “molten” or “golden” calf: אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הֵעֵלֹדָּךְ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם “This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.”

It’s easy to think that the Israelites slipped back into idol worship; after all, they were in Egypt for so many years, what else did they know? But we have to remember that people in the ancient near east didn’t really believe that wooden or stone idols were actual gods. They thought of them as *symbols*.

So making the Golden Calf wasn’t about making a “god” – it was finding something they could “look” at, so they would be reassured that God – with a capital G – was still with them.

We are a very visual species. We evolved to standing upright so we could see greater distances. Listen to the words we use: when we understand something we say “I see;” When we talk about the future we say “we have vision” or “we’re looking forward.” For the ancient Israelites, Moshe’s time on the mountain meant they had no leader because they had no *visual* reminder of God.

Remember the movie *The Queen* with Helen Mirren? After the death of Lady Di, the Prime Minister begged the queen to make a public appearance, so the citizens of England would see that she cared about them, that she knew they were grieving.

We, too, need reassurances. We'd love to know that God hears our prayers, that He will protect us; that He approves of our decisions. We have many things that assault our eyes and ears – whether on TV, the internet or in real life – but we don't have day-to-day physical proof that God exists, that He's protecting us or guiding us. When we don't "see" God, we are filled with anxiety and doubt. And when we have our doubts, we make our own golden calf, our own idols. We get wrapped up in the lives of celebrities, the lifestyles of the rich and excessive for escape.

Some people turn to pseudo-religions, or groups with charismatic leaders, often with unsatisfactory results. Read the lyrics to Don Henley's song *Learn to be Still*:

We're like sheep without a shepherd
We don't know how to be alone
So we wander 'round this desert
And wind up following the wrong gods home
But the flock cries out for another
And they keep answering that bell
And one more starry-eyed Messiah
Meets a violent farewell

The Israelites in the wilderness were not united. They were anxious, they had doubts. They marched from place to place as a large group, but they were isolated from one another. They didn't see themselves as a people with common beliefs and goals.

So, is there a way to find reassurance that God is on the job, that He cares about us? Is there a way to reduce the anxiety of not always "seeing" God? Yes – it's called *kehilla* – community. Not just any *kehilla*, but one that shares our values and is committed to the other people in the group. When we are with people who are pulling together, we feel comforted, validated, connected. When we see ourselves in the faces of others, we don't need a Golden Calf.