

Ki Tisa 5780

Sam Loff – 13th March 2020

Good Dvar Torahs begin with an anecdote. It's obvious. Anecdotes are disarming, they familiarise you with me and make you feel like we're connected. They are personal and have a clear message that is cleverly communicated without being explicit.

I have been thinking about what anecdote to start with but honestly I am so full of despair at the moment I can't come up with a good one.

Do I talk about the toilet paper? Do I talk about the recession? The climate crisis? The impending strain on our healthcare system? Do I say some ridiculous thing about songs to sing when you wash your hands? Do I make light? Can I make a joke?

I am sorry but I cannot, and I will not. 2020 has been off to a sobering start. Between coronavirus and the bushfires, not a day has passed without me feeling the suffering of our planet and its inhabitants.

This week's parasha is Ki Tisa, and it's one of my favourites. It details some interesting commandments including a uniform tax applied to the entire community, the commandment to observe Shabbat, as well as how to prepare some ritual objects. But what makes Ki Tisa a blockbuster parasha is the story of the Golden Calf.

In brief, while Moses is on Mount Sinai receiving the commandments, the people become impatient waiting for his return. They approach Aaron and ask him to 'make us a god'. Aaron instructs them to take off their own rings and jewels which he melts to form the Golden Calf. They exclaim "This is your God, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!". They have a festival to celebrate this god, offering sacrifices, feasting, drinking and dancing.

When God finds out, he tells Moses, saying "leave me alone so my anger may blaze forth against them and that I may destroy them". Moses begs him not to, appealing to God's sense of pride and his promises to multiply the people as the stars of heaven. Finally, God acquiesces.

Moses then descends the mountain with the tablets on which he had inscribed the commandments. Upon finding the people singing and dancing with the Golden Calf, he himself becomes enraged and smashes the tablets. Moses takes the Golden Calf, incinerates it, grinds it to powder, sprinkles it in the water, and makes the people drink it.

Moses asks Aaron why he made this Golden Calf. Aaron, taking no personal accountability for his role in the situation, responds by blaming the people for becoming impatient waiting for Moses to return. In other words, Aaron claims that he was merely appeasing the uncertain, impatient and confused masses by creating the Golden Calf. As further punishment, Moses instructs the Levites to kill 3000 people.

The parasha goes on with further details about punishment, and further conversations between Moses and God, but I really wanted to focus on the Golden Calf, and idolatry.

The Golden Calf is a motif that has been wrung out endlessly by commentators. Idol worship has been denigrated. Pagan rituals diminished and ridiculed. All a seemingly endless effort to create some hierarchy that places religious monotheism above all other forms of worship.

But I have been reflecting on my own false idols. All the things I emphasise, because unseeability, unknowability, uncertainty, and patience are just too uncomfortable. I ask myself: in the face of uncertainty, what do I cling to?

Here are some of my false idols:

Striving for recognition, prestige and status. Contorting myself to arrive at some imagined desirability, thinness or health. Comparing myself to others. Accumulation of money and material possessions. Chasing after perfect relationships, love and adoration. Endless ways and means I prop up my own personal identity and hold onto it like it's a real and solid thing. Perhaps if I hold the right opinions, ideologies and thoughts, I will be considered clever and articulate and you will like me more.

When I don't know what the world is going to look like tomorrow, do I melt my money to hoard goods for my own protection, or do I look to support those around me?

I spoke to a psychologist recently who told me that life is about the tension between self-interest and co-operative altruism. Ever ready for an argument, I disagreed. I told him the dichotomy is false, or at least not as pronounced as we're led to believe. I see co-operative altruism as *in* our self interest.

And I don't think I'm being quixotic or rose coloured here. I of course recognise that we all have very valid personal needs: needs to be loved and fed and housed and safe. And I also recognise the abundant privilege I have to not worry about those things.

However, I still challenge this notion that self interest and cooperative altruism lie at diametrically opposed ends of a scale with a war being waged in between. Because I know that my individual existence is only possible within community, in connection with others.

The gravity of this has never felt more palpable. At the moment, every single person is only one or two contact points away from someone who is vulnerable within the community. Someone for whom contracting COVID-19 wouldn't just be 'a bad flu'. We are being encouraged by health authorities to practice social distancing and isolation not necessarily because it's in our individual self-interest, but because it's in our collective best interest.

But if we are only one or two contact points from causing harm, the same must go in reverse. We must be one or two contact points away from being of profound benefit. Supporting someone in crisis. Making a decision that benefits the environment or our community.

I am better off when you are better off. I am freer when people I have not met and will never meet are freer. I am happier when you are happier. And this isn't just some high ideal: we've all become painfully aware that we don't grow our own food, we don't make our own fabrics and clothes, we don't milk our

own cows, we don't treat our own illnesses and diseases. Our cities are 99% of the time highly functioning webs of life which we rely on to function. And aside from the practical, don't we all crave belonging? To love and be loved? To sing, to celebrate, to mourn, to grieve? To hold space and to support each other?

So today I ask myself, faced with this uncertainty, the weight of despair and anxiety, will I bow to my false idols, or will I turn towards those around me, offering what support I can and allowing myself to be supported.

Will we respond by sureing up our personal identities housed within these skin suits, or will we recognise that in sitting with that uncertainty and unknowability, we are interconnected and interoperable; a network of organisms entirely dependent upon each other for survival and for thriving.

My own commitment is to sit within the discomfort of this uncertainty. To allow my heart to break for our world, for our climate, for its inhabitants. For all the sick and grieving. For all those in fear. I commit to becoming uncomfortable; to excavating my false idols and burning them to the ground.

Shabbat Shalom