

D'var Torah from Rabbi London on Parashat Ki Tisa:

In this week's Torah portion, Ki Tisa, the Israelites grow restless waiting for Moses, who has been on Mt. Sinai for 40 days while receiving the Torah from God. Perhaps the Israelites think Moses is not coming back and that they will have to navigate the wilderness alone. As they succumb to their fears, they pressure Aaron to build a golden calf for them to worship. They must know on some level that this is wrong. Of the ten commandments, the first three make clear that there is only one God in the universe and that no graven images of God are to be made. Yet, the people feel compelled to create something tangible to latch onto to assuage their fears and calm their uncertainty.

Given the rapidly changing circumstances right now, today—the concerns over the spread of a contagion in our midst, and not knowing how long this will last—I must say that I identify with the feelings of the Israelites a little bit. We know there are things we can do in our current situation that can make us safer, like limiting our physical contact with others and being careful to wash our hands and refrain from touching our faces, but the shutting down of so much of our world and not knowing who will get sick has left us all ill at ease, disappointed that we are not able to do things we were looking forward to doing, and, let's face it, scared as well.

We are in uncharted waters, looking for something to moor ourselves to. I understand the Israelites' desire to create a "god" that they can see, touch, and, most, importantly, control. A pandemic puts us face to face with our human frailty and the reality that we can't control as much as we'd like. The reality we face is that we can and must take precautions, but we cannot completely safeguard ourselves, especially from the emotional turmoil that many of us are feeling due to the uncertainty and that our lives have been turned on their heads. We might like to construct a golden calf of concrete assurances and definitive safety in order to deal with the dis-ease we feel. But like the Israelites who watched their "god" ground into dust by Moses, we will also find that this approach is ultimately a futile way to deal with our anxieties and disappointment.

So what can we glean from the golden calf narrative that might guide us today? The story of the golden calf appears in the Book of Exodus after the Israelites are given the instructions for building the Tabernacle, the portable wilderness sanctuary, and the laws for observing Shabbat. Following the golden calf episode, in which the Israelites experience Moses' rage and the breaking of the first set of tablets, the Israelites are reminded once again to observe Shabbat and the Tabernacle is constructed. In other words, from chapter 25 in the Book of Exodus until the end of the book, the narrative order is Tabernacle, Shabbat, golden calf, Shabbat, Tabernacle. It's as if to say the Tabernacle and Shabbat are the antidote for the golden calf.

These final chapters of the Book of Exodus are guiding us as to how to cope with anxiety, fear, and disappointment. Our sanctuaries in space (our synagogues) and our sanctuaries in time (Shabbat) are good places and times to turn to help us grapple with our feelings. Holy places

and times designated for rest and reflection can't make the uncertainty disappear, but they can help us cope in these trying times.

When I was living in Israel during the first Gulf War in 1991, I was glued to the t.v. and radio to get news of the war. The constant barrage of news, however, would sometimes overwhelm me, and I had to take a break from the media bombardment. Israelis call it a "news diet."

I hope on this Shabbat, you can take time for rest and reflection, connection to community whether in person or from a distance, and a break from the 24/7 news cycle. We need space and time to acknowledge our feelings, sit quietly and contemplate, intone ancient words, sing, and connect with friends and family. I know that we all can't be together physically in our sanctuary on this Shabbat, but we can access our community via streaming and take this Shabbat to connect with loved ones and check in on people who might be home bound.

I pray for everyone's physical health and that we may find comfort and the support of our community wherever we may spend this Shabbat.