

SUMMER

THE GOLDEN CALF: DID GOD OVERREACT?

Summer Sermon Series V

August 7, 2015

Shabbat shalom!

My wife Sandy Lynn and I have been watching a brilliant TV series called “The Hour.” It’s one of those exceptionally well-written British dramas, produced by the BBC and set in the 1950’s, with a behind-the-scenes view of how the BBC news department handled some of that era’s major news events.

One of the main characters is the news director, a man who is always calm and above the fray – a man of impeccable manner with one neurotic flaw – he can’t stand when a single paper on his desk isn’t precisely lined up, neat and parallel. The greater the crisis, the more he nervously has to straighten his desk, until one climactic event so rattles even this unflappable man that he finally goes over the edge – first pushing everything around him askew, then in an uncharacteristic burst of anger smashing his furniture and hurling whatever he can reach across the room. He comes unglued... but it is the crisis that ultimately leads to resolution and healing – and a satisfying denouement to the show.

My sermon this Shabbat is the last of this year’s Summer Sermon Series, in which we have considered some of Torah’s odd episodes – “odd” in the sense that we’ve wondered what God could have been thinking, or what the Torah is trying to teach us from the stories of God’s expulsion of humans from the Garden of Eden, or God’s destruction of the world (except for those on the 400-foot-long ark), or God’s calling a halt to the Tower of Babel building project, or God’s strange decision to have Abraham slay his first-born son.

Tonight’s story is the story of a man who had always been seen for his leadership; for being the calm in the center of the storm – the man who had only to raise his staff and the waters parted to let his people through. But now, in a moment of crisis, the man we know as Moses just can’t take any more. This time, he raises his arms high not to part the waters, but to smash the tablets engraved by God with the commandments that Moses had just received. Moses comes off the mountain carrying the precious tablets, sees his beloved but rebellious people dancing around a calf made out of gold, and in a burst of fury smashes the tablets.

Questions abound, and our tradition has wrestled with them ever since:

First, why did the Israelites make a golden calf? Apparently, in many Near Eastern religions the bull symbolized power. Once Moses went up the mountain – and after 40 days for all the Israelites knew never to return – the Israelites built the Calf not as idolaters but, according to our tradition, to symbolize God’s power.

We understand Moses’s reaction, like the parent who screams to the children, “Look what you’ve done! I can’t leave you alone for a moment!” But what is stranger, to my mind, is God’s reaction. God is ready to destroy not just tablets, but the entire people. Our tradition teaches that about 3,000 people were involved in making the calf, out of over 600,000 Israelites; actually, since those 600,000 in the Biblical account were all men, if we count in the women and children we’re probably over 2,000,000 – and God wants to kill them all.

Think of it – God makes the world, isn’t happy with the result, and brings a Flood before starting over; the people want to build a tower so they can worship God from a high place, and God confuses their language into a Babel and scatters them over the face of the Earth. Torah even records Abraham’s long argument with God not to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah because some righteous people might be living there. And now this: 3,000 people rebel, and God decides to dump the lot of them, some 2,000,000 people in all.

But Moses takes a stand – against God. Moses argues that God made a promise to the patriarchs to make their offspring a great nation; could we accept a God that breaks promises? Moses argues that if God destroys his people, the Egyptians might think that God had liberated them only to annihilate them. And Moses argues – in the ultimate example of speaking truth to authority – because Moses is convinced that God’s judgment is unfair – after all, by one account in our midrashic tradition, the Israelites had learned of their idolatry in Egypt, and who had brought them to Egypt in the first place?

One aspect of Judaism that I love and appreciate is that we have a religious tradition where arguing with God is not evil; it’s a good thing. We have a tradition in which Elie Wiesel, who knows a lot about losing faith, can teach that it wasn’t the people who lost faith; it was God who lost faith in His people, while it was Moses, the human leader, who argued with God and is therefore the one who never lost faith in his people.

We are blessed with a tradition that can question why God throughout the Torah says “My people,” but now, revealing His intent to destroy them, speaks to Moses of “your” people. Apparently, when the Israelites are good, God considers them to be God’s people – but when they do something evil, all of a sudden they’re no longer God’s people, they’re Moses’s people! God comes across, in other words, as jealous, mean-spirited and petty.

God’s temperament was a subject of rabbinic inquiry more than 1,500 years ago, when the early rabbis told the story of how God argued with His ministering angels over whether to do a creation at all. “Don’t do it,” warned the angels. “You’re fine here in heaven just with us; you don’t need a creation, and anyway, your judgments are too harsh; no creation of yours will ever last.” Finally the angels convince God that if God would temper God’s judgments with an equal measure of mercy, the angels would support the creation, because it would have a chance to last, and God agreed, though apparently He needed reminders from the likes of Abraham and Moses to show some mercy.

What might all this teach us? Certainly, the value of questioning, of not coming to snap judgments, of using reason and conscience to do what is right and reasonable – even in the face of what we hear as God’s command, if that command is beyond reason. Certainly, we learn the value of not being overly judgmental, of following the advice of the angels to temper judgment with mercy – including in our families, in our business relationships and in how we view the issues of society. One aside: Personally, I’m appalled that our governor has announced his intent to defund Medicaid payments to Planned Parenthood in Alabama – an agency that provides cancer screenings, well-woman exams, birth control options, STD testing and treatment and other services. Such an action could well be illegal, but more than that violates what I see as the values so well demonstrated by the Torah stories we have been exploring. As the great Rabbi Hillel said over 2,000 years ago, “Judge not another until you are standing in his place.”

One more thing:

I started by describing a British TV series, where a great crisis leads ultimately to healing and resolution. The broken tablets destroyed by Moses also ultimately represent opportunities for a new beginning, for growth, and a second chance. Sometimes, it takes a shattering to start anew. We know that life is often shattered, or fractured, and we certainly know that Judaism had has more than its share of shattering events in our history. Yet somehow these have made us stronger. Being

able to look beyond the shattering of the moment towards a more positive future is surely a sign of health.

The story is told of an earthquake survivor who was only able to salvage one brick from his home. He was quoted as saying that he would build his new home as soon as the tremors stopped, with that one brick as part of the new foundation. It's an attitude that we find in Judaism – not to seek perfection, but in salvaging and building on from whatever our lot might be.

Judaism knows what it is to be shattered, and we know how to build. Mark Twain described Palestine as a desolate wasteland; we built Tel Aviv on sand dunes and a nation on desert and swamp. We were decimated by the Holocaust, and built the state of Israel.

Even our rituals reflect this attitude. What do we do at the climax of a wedding? We shatter a glass, to show that marriage is fragile and imperfect, yet in that very fragility the couple builds something new, together. At our funerals we tear our clothing, or a ribbon, to show that the fabric of our life has been torn – and yet life goes on and can thrive, just as scars are stronger than unblemished tissue. The Western Wall in Jerusalem represents one of the worst shatterings of our long history, yet as we look at remnants from Solomon's Temple, Herod's Temple, Byzantine reconstructions, Crusader additions and Ottoman improvements, it is paradoxically in the collage that one discerns the unique, mosaic truth of life, for the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. There's more love and concern and character in the patchwork pieces than in any perfect treasure.

“And it came to pass, as soon as Moses came close to the camp, he saw the golden calf and the dancing. And Moses was angered, and he cast the tablets out of his hands and broke them beneath the mountain.”

And from this we learn that the very foundation of our faith rests in how we confront life's broken tablets, and how we use life's fragmentation and imperfection as opportunities to build a better future.