

This week's parashah, Ki Tissa, is the parashah of the Golden Calf. We are familiar with the broad strokes of the story. The Israelites get nervous because Moshe has been up on Mt. Sinai for too long. They demand that Aaron make a new God for them. Aaron collects their gold, shapes a Golden Calf, and the people feast and worship in the presence of this idol. Up on the mountain, God gets really mad, threatens to annihilate them, and Moshe has to talk God back down from anger, and then go down and deal with the problem himself.

But let's back up a few steps in this story. What, exactly, was the transgression that the people did? Now, certainly, some commentators see the Golden Calf as a direct violation of the 2nd commandment- "you shall have no other Gods beside me." But this view is by no means universal.

If we closely read the description of the anxieties that precipitated the demand for the Golden Calf, they are not so much about God as about Moshe. As Exodus, chapter 32 begins: When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, the people gathered against Aaron and said to him, קִיָּם | עֲשֵׂה-ָ, לָנוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר יֵלְכוּ לְפָנֵינוּ which usually translated as, "Come, make us a god who shall go before us." And their demand continues, "for that man Moses, who brought us from the land of Egypt—we do not know what has happened to him."

The thing about the word "Elohim," translated here as God, is that it also, frequently in Torah, refers to human functionaries. So for example, back in Exodus Chapter 4, when Hashem is giving Moshe his instructions, he tells him that Moshe will be "Elohim" to his brother Aaron. Which could mean, boss," or could mean, "the emissary of God," but certainly doesn't mean God. Likewise, at the beginning of Exodus 7, Hashem tells Moshe, "Natatech Elohim l'Pharaoh."

“I am making you an Elohim to Pharaoh.” Again, not exactly clear what this means, but certainly not God.

So when the people, in this parashah, worry because Moshe is gone, and demand of Aaron, “aseh lanu Elohim,” there are many commentators who say that what they wanted was not a replacement God, but a replacement Moshe. Medieval commentator, Chizkuni says, for example, “There can . . . be no question that what the people demanded of Aaron was not a return to idolatry. . . They . . . requested from Aaron that he make for them a replacement whose function would be similar to what had been Moses’ function vis a vis Pharaoh. . . they wanted to replace the Moses the man, not the deity, or semideity.”

Eighteenth century commentator Or HaChaim also defends the motives of the Israelites, saying, “They wished to construct some symbol of a celestial force which would remind them of G'd in Heaven. The people who initiated the golden calf did not deny for a single moment either the primacy of G'd or the fact that He had made heaven and earth. They merely wanted a go-between them and G'd.”

By understanding the motives in this way, the commentators deal with the implicit question of how Aaron could have gone unpunished for his role in the Golden Calf episode – he was not actually encouraging idolatry, only providing a replacement focal point for faith.

If the people are only wanting a presentation of God to replace Moshe, what is the problem? Yesterday I was listening to a podcast of conversation about the parashah between Rabbi Dov Linzer, the head of the Rabbinical Seminary that my husband attended, and Abigail Pogrebin, a secular Jewish journalist.

Rabbi Linzer suggested “You can worship God *through* an idol, and that’s also corrupting God, because you’ve put something in between you and God that corrupts that idea. It’s a barrier and it means that now you’re thinking about this physical object, which was meant as a means of connecting, but it actually distorts what God is, and it distorts the relationship.”

He continues, “It’s so hard to think that I can talk directly to God – and that’s what the Israelites were feeling: where’s this God! So we try to create things that will take that place. . . . In my community, I think one thing that sometimes takes the place of developing a spiritual relationship to God is a hyperfocus on halachic detail, the details of religious law.” He clarifies that he’s not saying that halachic detail is not important, but that “When all of our conversation is about halacha, we’re not asking the questions we need to be asking.”

I don’t think that our community has the specific problem that Rav Linzer references; most of us are not overly concerned with halacha. But his point remains: sometimes, the problem is not so much that we are worshipping something entirely different than God, as it is I that we are pinning our attention on one *insufficient* representation of the totality of what our spiritual experience could be.

I think that every Jewish community, no matter what movement, indeed every human community, falls into this trap sometimes, of mistaking one lens, one representation, for the whole, and I think it’s useful for us to examine where we put our attention, and whether we allow one aspect of Jewish identity to become an idol that consumes more our attention and experience than it should.

So in our community, I want to suggest that concept of Jewish continuity is one area wherein we might be allowing a symbol to take on more power than it should. Mainstream Jewish institutions are very concerned with the statistics of decreasing synagogue affiliation, decreasing philanthropy to Jewish institutions, and the general question of whether and how Judaism will continue into the next generation.

When we focus intensively on that question, however, we ignore larger questions such as, “What does Judaism mean to *us*? Are we ourselves creating, living and continuing a Jewish experience that is spiritually nourishing and communal relevant for our own generation? What inspires each of us to engage in Jewish community, and what keeps us away?” I suspect that if we take responsibility for those questions, rather than focusing our anxieties on the next generation, our anxieties about the next generation may be moot. Or as Stosh Cotler, the head of social Justice Organization Bend Arc, said to meeting of the UJA-federation heads in New York in 2014, “We are not having a crisis of Jewish continuity, but rather we are having a profound crisis of Jewish communal purpose.”

In practical terms, I would suggest that if we want to see the next generation having a positive relationship with Judaism, we accomplish that most effectively by cultivating our own positive relationships, whether through services, volunteering, activism or learning. I’m never surprised when parents who don’t participate much in Jewish community tell that their children are reluctant to come to services or Talmud Torah. We model by our own choices what is relevant and important.

Is it wrong to care about investing our resources in the Jewish future? Absolutely not! But we diminish the totality of Jewish experience if we neglect our own present, just as our ancestors diminished the totality of their spiritual experience by needing to hinge it all on a single representation, whether the Golden Calf, or Moshe himself.

Everybody worships something. Whether or not we call that God, we all have patterns of how we devote our energy and attention, what ideals we serve and what we see as sacred. The challenge, always, of combatting idolatry, is to open our eyes to those patterns, and enlarge our capacity to engage with the ideals we hold sacred.