



***Sustaining Relationship:  
Torah Reflections on Parashat Ki Tisa  
Exodus 30:11 – 34:35***

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*Parashat Ki Tisa* offers a range of perspectives about a core human struggle: our relationship with God. This relationship matters; it determines the way we see our world and our place in it. Yet the God depicted in the Torah does not make the connection easy. We see God as abstract, sometimes loving, sometimes punitive, always demanding—relationship-challenged (and challenging) to be sure.

The beginning of this portion offers exacting details about the creation of a sacred space. God states that “I have granted skill to all who are skillful, that they make everything that I have commanded you” (Exodus 31:6). So craftsmanship matters. Visual magnificence matters too. Earlier, for example (Exod. 25:10-11), God states that the ark (holder of God’s words) must be of acacia wood, overlaid, inside and out, with pure gold with gold molding around it.

To receive all such instructions, Moses climbed to the top of Mount Sinai which, we are told, was emitting smoke and thunder, and was trembling. While Moses was far off, talking with God on this scary mountain, the Israelites on the ground were having a hard time. Yes, Moses had promised to bring back more words from God, but he had disappeared for an awfully long time. Who wouldn’t be impatient and frightened in that circumstance? So the people pooled all the gold they could collect and made a calf—an imposing, shiny, gorgeous sculpture. I understand the impulse. Had I been there, I too would have longed for something concrete to count on, and I might well have thought that calf just the ticket.

The golden calf, however, has come down through the ages to represent the worst of human faithlessness and superficiality. Why? The creation of beautiful objects is hardly forbidden. In this very *parashah*, we’ve been commanded to do just that. Nor are we discouraged from seeking comforts in difficult times. So there is nothing intrinsically wrong with the golden calf or, by extension, with the props of modern life: works of art, cool gadgets, medical discoveries, even the diversions of soap operas and computer games, to name a few. Such things are here to be enjoyed and used. Some of them can serve as bridges to God: symbols of God’s grandeur and evidence of God’s existence. But the builders of the golden calf went too far; they confused their creation with the totality of God. They gave up the search. They settled.

Later in the portion, we get another insight into this issue. Turns out the impatient multitude was not alone in wanting a clearer picture of God. Not many verses later, Moses himself pleads with God, “let me behold Your Presence!”

(Exodus 33:18) It seems even Moses, the great leader, the prophet who had a privileged, intimate relationship with God, had trouble with abstractness and ambiguity. He too yearned for something concrete to help him approach the deepest mysteries of creation.

This part of our parashah reveals a gentle, understanding, and accommodating aspect of God. God warns Moses that “you cannot see My face, for man may not see Me and live” (Exodus 33:20), but meets him half-way. God tenderly offers to protect Moses from harm, while letting him glimpse God’s presence. “I will make all My goodness pass before you, ...and the grace that I grant and the compassion that I show.” (Exodus 33:19.)

This parashah leaves no doubt that God is multi-faceted and not accessible to human depiction or understanding. Maintaining a relationship with God, then, is a continuing and complex struggle, even in the best of times. Hard times might create a particularly strong urge to settle for whatever version of the golden calf offers respite. But for me, the message of this parashah is that the struggle for relationship with God is valuable, worth the effort even, and perhaps especially, in the darkest of days. This struggle comes from our core, speaks to our deepest yearnings, and helps us perceive the eternal presence of goodness, grace, and compassion.

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