

Echoes of Eden

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The View From Above

Of all the elements of the sin of the Golden Calf, the most striking is the stark contrast: Moshe stands on the top of the mountain, in the stratosphere both physically and spiritually, about to receive the Torah, while at the foot of the mountain the people sink to the lowest possible level, rebelling against every religious, social and spiritual norm.

It is the split screen that haunts us; those who stand below are involved in such demeaning behavior that we imagine they must have been oblivious to the goings on above. If we overlay our mental image of these two scenes with appropriate background music, the contrast is brought into even sharper focus: Above, Moshe's rendezvous with God might be accompanied by the softest, most angelic and harmonic sounds - perhaps a heavenly harp or the most sublime violin concerto. At the foot of the mountain, we might expect to hear rhythmic, tribal drums piercing the air, whipping the people into recklessness, egging them on to join in the orgiastic frenzy (perhaps the Rolling Stones' "Sympathy for the Devil" might capture the mood).

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The contrast is heartbreaking; we read with bated breath, hoping that they will come to their senses, break the trance they are in, and lift their eyes up for even a brief glance, and remember what is going on just above them. The

contrast reminds us of some of the worst human behaviors in the most intimate relationships: A wife cheats on her husband as he sits in the bank, arranging the mortgage for their dream home. A husband cheats on his wife as she goes into labor and is trying to make her way to the hospital. It is the contrast of dedication versus infidelity, commitment versus mayhem, love versus lust, building a relationship versus seeking instant gratification, eternity versus immediacy, body versus soul, animal instinct versus human decency.

Stark contrast such as this does not just “happen”: In order to sin, one must become completely unaware of what takes place above, beyond oneself. Only the conscious turning away, averting one’s gaze from heaven, allows this behavior. At Mount Sinai, the first step is the removal of Moshe; in their minds, he is dead. Once free of their external “super ego” the people are at liberty to walk on the wild side, to allow the “id” to run wild. Moshe is no longer there to scold them, and they allow themselves to live in the moment, and degrade themselves in the process.

Of course, Moshe is quite alive. Not only is he still at the peak of Sinai, he takes up their pathetic case and argues like the bravest defense attorney for his client - who is in fact impossibly guilty and without merit. Had he rejected them in disgust we would have understood his position; his defense of this primitive people is as surprising as it is uplifting. And yet, Moshe speaks with conviction. He knows that they are capable of more. He is convinced that they have, in the depths of their collective identity, decency that will yet emerge. Moshe is convinced that this is a people that has not yet peaked, a people with greatness in its future. Moshe believes in the Jewish People, and their ability to have a healthy relationship with God, a relationship of fidelity and reciprocal love.

And this brings us to the second point: While man lives below without thought of what is taking place above, while he puts thoughts of heaven out of his mind in order to sin, what saves him from himself and his own sin is the ‘goings on’ in heaven. At the very moment that they bow to the golden

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calf and muster up every last ounce of their energy to block out all thoughts of God and Moshe, purposefully averting their gaze from the peak of the mountain, it is precisely the conversation taking place on the peak of the mountain that saves them from obliteration. As the outrage reaches a crescendo, the forgotten and rejected Moshe prays to a forgotten and rejected God on behalf of a people with a very short memory and limited faith. The truly

amazing thing is that God accepts the prayer: God, too, ultimately believes in the Jewish People, and is willing to overlook their indiscretion and continue to build a relationship them.

Did these people – do we – ever take a moment to consider what transpired in heaven while we behaved so badly down below? Perhaps if we did, we would not need a Moshe to scold us. We would be simply too embarrassed to sin again. Did this contrast, the “split-screen” image of those critical hours and days, ever become as apparent to them as it should be to us? Perhaps focusing on the split-screen contrast might help bring our condition into focus, highlighting for us the absurdity of averting our eyes from what goes on beyond ourselves. Adopting the perspective of the loftier, more holy side of that split screen, as opposed to the clouded, limited perspective of the other half, is surely the key to living a holier life.

For a more in-depth analysis see: <http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2014/02/audio-and-essays-parashat-ki-tisa.html>