

What does a nation do when it is gripped by fear? When a country's leadership seems aloof and distant, even absent, is it likely - even inevitable - that people will seek any "false god" who will offer them security? In the face of enemies, real or just perceived, why is it that people so often turn towards leaders whose promises are empty and who, in reality, offer nothing? And, finally, in lieu of a leadership of maturity and character, why do people turn from decency towards an abandonment of all virtue?

These are questions at the heart of this week's *parasha* - the Torah portion that deals with the Golden Calf.

Moses is a leader who is, by temperament and background, set apart from his people. Raised as an Egyptian prince he did not experience the slavery of the Hebrews, even though he rebelled against it. More than that, it is evident from the Torah that he is a bit reserved, if not aloof. He rarely speaks to the Pharaoh or his own people. That he leaves for Aaron, his brother. Alluded to in the Torah - and much more explicit in later rabbinic traditions - is the sense that Moses separates himself from his wife and children so he can devote himself to his people. Moses is a leader who inspires his people, then, but is apart from them. He is a member of the "elite".

That emotional separation is reinforced when he goes up Mt. Sinai to receive the Torah. In fact, this week's Torah portion says that it is this distance between the leader and the people that is the source of their anxiety:

The people saw that Moses dilly-dallied coming down from the mountain,
And the people crowded around Aaron,
And told him, "Get up! Make us a god that will go before us,
Because this one, Moses, the man who raised us from the land of Egypt,
We don't know what became of him."

Aaron tells them "have your wives, sons and daughters bring gold", and they immediately do so. Then, with Aaron's help, a calf is forged from that gold. "These are your gods," the people proclaim, "that raised you from the land of Egypt." Not only this, the people abandoned all sense of propriety. The

Hebrew says they got up לצחק *l'tzachek*, which literally means to "laugh" or "play", but most commentators see as alluding to something much worse. Rashi, in fact, says that it implies not only sexual license, but murder.

Just a few months out from the Exodus from Egypt how could the Israelites so blatantly disregard the facts? How could they turn the memory of what really happened on its head? It is because, one rabbinic tradition answers, they were desperate for a "quick fix". (Exodus Rabbah 41:7)

This week's *parasha* is, at one level, a reminder to the Jewish people not to turn from God or to abandon the Torah. But it is also a cautionary tale about society and politics. It shows how easily and quickly we can move towards a false god, turn from the law that gives order and stability to our lives, to accept something we previously thought was wrong as good and what is clearly a lie can be called the truth. The Golden Calf is a warning of human excess and wrongdoing that is the outgrowth of fear.

We live in a time where - here in the United States and in many nations in the West - there is concern about the "elites" being out of touch with the people. The rise of unrest in Africa and the Middle East (though elsewhere, too) has led to the greatest movement of human refugees since the end of the Second World War. The gap between those who have and those who do not is growing. This year it was reported that 62 people own as much as 50% of the world's population. An article in *Fortune* magazine last September indicated that our country, supposedly a bastion of equality, had the greatest wealth inequality of 55 nations studied.¹ Many who work hard feel - with some justification - that the cards are stacked against them. Economic globalism and technological changes are leaving many feeling that they have no place, that there is nothing that will assure them - and their children after them - security and a future of hope. It is no surprise that people are unsure about the values that bind our nation - or the West - together. They are anxious about the future. But the move to populism and rejection of the norms of liberal

¹ <http://fortune.com/2015/09/30/america-wealth-inequality/>

democracy that have secured the West for the past two generations is leading to dangerous choices.

Rabbinic tradition is based in a deep understanding that there are no easy or quick answers. Yes, government can be corrupt. But it is not inherently so, which is why the law serves as a brake on human avarice and greed. Jewish traditions gave great weight to the rule of the majority, but the majority cannot act without restraint to harm the powerless and the poor. In their judgment on the Israelites, our sages underscored the danger of populism, which they understood can easily become mob rule.

The tragedy of the Golden Calf is that it shows how quickly civil and decent society can abandon its sense of morality. In this story, once the boundaries of the law are crossed it is as if *all* boundaries of what is seemly, appropriate and right are cast aside. Rashi plays with this when he expands on the Hebrew in the Torah that says the people "played" around. He is definitely on to something in the story, for in the end no legal system can fully create a decent society. There has to be, in each of us, an internal morality - some voice of conscience (of God, if you will) that says, "I will not say this because it robs another of his or her dignity" or "I refuse to do that because it is simply cruel and callous." To defame others because they disagree, to turn a blind eye to sexual degradation, to simply ignore those who lie and call it "truth", to say it is not society's role to care for those who are hungry, is engage in the sin of the Golden Calf.

It is true that Moses is a far from perfect leader. His lack of ability to connect with his people is no excuse, however, for them to react as they do. The Israelites, throwing all caution to the wind, forget that they were granted liberty not simply to be free, but to take upon them selves the responsibility that comes with serving God. In the Bible - and in later traditions - this meant that it was not only a personal, but communal responsibility, to protect the stranger in our midst, lift others with our words, to respect the rule of law and the judges who uphold it. And it also meant a respect for the government

(with all its manifold flaws), for without the bounds a government imposes we face the immorality of the mob and/or the insecurity of anarchy.

What, then, does this tale in Torah teach we must do?

- First, we need realize that the best of leaders are simply human - and that is why leadership has to be constrained by a legal system grounded in a sense of human liberty and dignity.
- Second, we must be patient and steadfast. Moses was gone only 40 days - and the people threw all caution to the wind. It is hard, particularly when we feel as if society is not moving forward or even regressing, to remain levelheaded and clear eyed. In the Torah Sinai was not the destination; it was the means to get there. In our time, we won't reach the Promised Land right away, but it does not mean that there is no better world ahead. A righteous nation is one where all make shared sacrifice, not equally, but fairly, so that a deeper equality can be created.
- Third, we ought to understand that when the truth is thrown out, nothing else is sacred. In *Mein Kampf* Hitler said it is possible to use a lie so "colossal" that no one would believe that someone "could have the impudence to distort truth so infamously." But the people of Israel did exactly that when they built the Golden Calf. After the Holocaust we know that it is possible to lie with impudence and distort the truth - and it will be believed. Those who keep telling lies in the hope that others will just believe them must, therefore, never be allowed to deceive us.
- Fourth, we have to be cautious of those who claim that they speak for "the people" and act on their behalf. The tale of the Golden Calf is a reminder that the majority can incline towards evil and push one to leadership with the claim that she or he speaks for everyone, when clearly they do not.

So is there hope? Of course - and the the Torah ends on a more optimistic note, though only in next week's portion, when the gold that had been used for the Golden Calf is later collected for covering the Ark that will contain the Torah. What, then, is the final and hopeful message? The yearning of a nation for strong and able leadership is good. But, we are reminded, that desire must be expressed - by the nation as a whole and by its leaders - in the demand that we "act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God."²

² Micah 6:8