On Taming our Inner "Cats": Thoughts on Parashat Ki Tissa, February 19, 2011

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An ancient Greek parable tells of a cat that was magically transformed into a Princess. The Princess was elegant, well mannered, and always with a ready smile on her face. Everyone seemed to be enchanted by her nobility.

And then, one day, as the Princess greeted a group of admirers, a mouse happened to run into the room. In an instant, the Princess was transformed back into cat-like behavior. The illusion was over. Everyone realized she was not really a Princess after all, but was a cat who was posing as a Princess.

The parable points to a basic issue confronting each human being. Civilization attempts to fashion us into noble, idealistic and moral beings. Yet, we have within us our cat-like qualities and emotions--jealousy, greed, vindictiveness, pride, anger etc. Human life is an ongoing effort to maintain ourselves as noble people, and to keep our inner "cat" under control. The more we can internalize the noble values, the more we can truly transform ourselves into good people. The less control we have over our inner "cat", the greater is the gap between our superficial veneer and our real selves.

This week's Torah portion includes the attributes by which God revealed Himself to Moses. The Talmud teaches that we are to emulate these attributes in our own behavior e.g. to be merciful and gracious, long-suffering and abundant in goodness and truth. To attain these qualities requires constant effort and self-awareness. It is all too possible to adopt these qualities on a superficial level, but not to transform them into our real natures. We can pretend to be kind and compassionate, but have hearts that are selfish, envious and cruel. We can put on an act of being merciful and gracious, but these qualities will not suppress the inner "cat" when we are faced with temptation.

It is important to focus on one of the 13 attributes which sometimes gets forgotten: truth. To be true means to have our external behavior and internal emotions in line with each other. When we are not "true", then we are pretenders and frauds, religious imposters. We may appear to be a Prince or Princess, but

deep down we are still a cat.

In his Laws of Repentance, Maimonides writes of sins for which people generally do not repent. Why not? Because they do not realize that they've sinned. They rationalize their behavior, so as to convince themselves that they've done nothing wrong. If one thinks he/she is a Prince or Princess, and refuses to acknowledge the inner "cat", then such a person is not likely to repent, change or improve.

Such people may fool others. They certainly may fool themselves. But they do not fool the God of Truth.

Angel for Shabbat