Resisting the Bullies: Thoughts for Parashat Ki Tissa

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Ki Tissa

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When the Israelites pressed Aaron to make them an idol of gold, the Torah informs us: “And all the people broke off the golden rings which were in their ears and brought them unto Aaron” (Shemoth 32:3). It seems that “all the people” participated in idolatrous behavior.

Yet, when it came to contributing to the building of the Mishkan, the sanctuary of God, the Torah states that donations were to be given only by those with generous hearts, “of every person whose heart was willing” (Shemoth 25:2). The donations came not from “all the people” but from a smaller group of willing donors.

Professor Yeshaya Leibowitz, in his book “Yoke of Torah,” offers his interpretation as to why these events differed. Simply stated, it is much easier to get drawn into doing evil than into doing something righteous. Once the Israelites went into a frenzy to make an idol, “all the people” were swept up in the excitement; all of them contributed quickly and generously. But when it came to building the Mishkan, many were reluctant to part with their valuables. There are mental obstacles to contributing to a worthy cause. Donors need to battle with internal resistance. They need to let their generosity overcome their possessiveness.

Professor Leibowitz’ observation is bolstered by the Midrash. At the time of the golden calf, the Israelites had two main leaders in the absence of Moses: Aaron and Hur. The Midrash posits that Hur resisted the idolatrous masses, and they murdered him! Seeing this, Aaron decided it was safer to go along with the crowd rather than to stand up against them. Hur, who stood for courageous righteousness, died a martyr’s death. Aaron, who went along with the sinning

crowd, survived and even went on to serve as High Priest.

Yet, I wonder if “all the people” who contributed their gold earrings really were ideologically convinced to engage in idolatry. I suspect that a rather small group made the decision and usurped the leadership. When no one (other than Hur) stood up against them, they became increasingly arrogant. They murdered Hur to set an example: resistance doesn’t pay. They cowed the masses of Israelites, who handed in their gold earrings because they were too afraid to resist; or because they were too apathetic to fight the in-group. Their participation wasn’t enthusiastic and ideologically motivated; it was more like a passive going along with the tide.

It is easier to go along with evil than to stand up defiantly against evil.

It is easier to join with bullies or to look the other way, rather than to confront them.

A recent study has reported that severe bullying is quite common for many students. Forty-one percent of middle school and high school students in the United States report that they were bullied at least once during their current school term. About eleven percent of boys report that they are bullied once a week or more. Of the boys who report being bullied, nearly eighteen percent are hit, slapped or pushed once a week or more. (Michael E. McCullough, “Beyond Revenge,”Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 2008, p. 35)

The easier it is for bullies to cow their victims, the easier it is for them to continue their bullying. If the victims are too weak or too afraid to resist, the bullies are emboldened to increase their arrogance and their violence.

But it’s not just the inability of victims to resist: it’s the inability or unwillingness of all the witnesses to come to the aid of the victims. The masses, by their passivity, allow the bullies to flourish and to create an environment of fear. Some attempt to befriend the bullies, so as to protect themselves from being bullied themselves. Others feel too weak to confront the bullies, so they look the other way. Those who stand up to the bullies run the risk of being beaten up and humiliated in the eyes of others.

It is easier to go along with the tide than to stand up in righteous opposition. It is easier to donate gold earrings for a golden calf than to incur the wrath of the bullies who are leading the idolatrous movement.

From the days of the golden calf to our own times, bullies have attempted to assert their leadership by means of violence and the instilling of fear. They have depended on the weakness of the victims to resist. Even more, they have depended on the “silent majority” that lacks the courage to stand tall.

Bullying takes many forms in our society. Sometimes it is overtly violent. Sometimes it is the surreptitious usurpation of power by undermining all opposition. Sometimes it shows itself in tyrants and dictators; and sometimes it shows itself in power hungry individuals in all walks of life. The common denominator is that bullies prevail by crushing or intimidating opposition.

There are many people today, in all walks of life, who call on us to donate our “gold earrings” to create all sorts of “golden calves.” Are we donating or are we rallying our courage and our morality so that we can resist?

Angel for Shabbat