Realities and Falsehoods : Thoughts for Parashat Ki Tissa

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Ki Tissa

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A jazz pianist complained to the club owner about the piano, but the owner did nothing. Angry and frustrated, the pianist announced that he would not show up for work until the piano was repaired. A week later, he received a call from the owner that the piano was now fine. The pianist returned to work, but found that the piano was still badly out of tune. He confronted the owner: “I thought you told me the piano was now fine; but it is not fine at all.” The owner replied with a surprised look. “I did have the piano fixed. Don’t you see that it has been freshly painted?”

This story epitomizes a massive and ubiquitous problem that faces human beings. We are confronted with items, individuals, and institutions that are seriously flawed. Instead of analyzing the problem and coming to a reasonable solution, there is a tendency to seek superficial cover-ups that merely serve as camouflages. We think that if we paint the piano, put make-up on an individual, or do a p.r. job for an institution…we thereby have solved the problem. But, of course, we have left the core problem in tact; it will surface soon enough in spite of the artificial cover-up job.

In this week’s Torah portion, we read the truly startling story of the Israelites and the golden calf. Moses had ascended Mount Sinai and the people were awaiting his return at a certain time. In their calculation, the time had elapsed. Immediately they panicked and compelled Aaron to make a golden calf for them to worship. When Moses came down from the mountain and saw the Israelites worshiping the golden calf, he cast the Tablets of the Law to the ground and shattered them. The Israelites suffered great punishment for their foolishness.

When Moses failed to appear at the time they expected him, how did the Israelites evaluate the situation? What options did they have? They could have

waited another day or two to see if Moses would return? Or they could have appointed Aaron or Hur to become their leader in place of Moses. But instead of going to the core of the problem and finding a solution, they sought a quick fix. They wanted a golden calf, even though the idol surely could not replace Moses, nor could it provide proper leadership.

Why would anyone want a glittering calf instead of a real human leader? Why would anyone forsake God in order to worship idols?

Sometimes people are simply perverse or misguided. Sometimes they are fearful or confused. In desperation, they may turn to a physical entity that they think is "good luck" or to which they attribute magical powers--even divinity.

What is the essence of idolatry? It is the attribution of false value to an object. Idolaters think that if they worship an idol, bow to it, bring it offerings--then it must be god! They convince themselves that a falsehood is actually true. If they can get others also to foster the falsehood, this gives it the appearance of being true. The evil of idolatry is: believing in falsehood, abandoning truth. The Torah warns us not to fall into this trap. This applies not only to idols, but to everything and everyone. Demagogues and p.r. experts try to make us believe things we know to be wrong or unnecessary; a great many people succumb to these falsehoods. The Torah commands us to cling to truth, to reject lies.

In our society, there are many who foster an idolatrous worldview. They attempt to convince us that a painted piano is fixed, even if it is out of tune. They promote products or people or institutions by spinning superficial images that are false and rotten at the core. They seek to make us fall into line with the crowd, so that we suspend our own clear judgment. The Torah warns us: do not be an idolater, do not veer from truth, do not falsely evaluate things or people.

The Talmud (Hagigah 14b) tells of four great sages who entered the "pardes" i.e. the world of profound speculation. Rabbi Akiva, one of the four, warned the others: "when you reach the domain of pure marble, don't call out 'water, water'; as it is written (Psalms 101:7), one who speaks falsehoods will not be established before My eyes." Rabbi Akiva knew how easy it is to mistake clear marble for water, a metaphor for how easy it is to succumb to falsehood instead of clinging to truth. The marble looks so much like water: but it is not water, it is cold stone. If you wish to pursue truth, you need to evaluate people and things as they really are--not as they appear to be.

Golden calves do not bring redemption. Painted pianos do not produce good music if the piano is out of tune. Fakes and demagogues cannot lead us to a promised land. If we succumb to falsehood, we will surely pay the consequences.

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