Ideals and Realities: Thoughts for Parashat Ki Tissa

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Ki Tissa

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

“When he [Moses] came near to the camp, he saw the calf and the dancing, and Moses’s anger burned, and he threw the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain” (Shemot 32:19).

What was going on within Moses’s mind? He and the people of Israel had recently experienced the most amazing Revelation of God. Life seemed so good, so promising, so infused with meaning. Moses held the tablets of the law, the physical symbol of an ideal spiritual transformation.

But shortly after this spiritual high, the people were dancing around a golden calf. The gap between the ideal world of the Revelation and the real world of idolatry was more than Moses could tolerate. How could he deliver the tablets of Revelation to a people who worshipped an idol? He had to shatter them; the illusion of spiritual perfection had now been shattered.

Idealists can well empathize with Moses. The real world simply does not conform to our aspirations and expectations. We dream of—and work for—a world of peace, harmony, mutual understanding. We hold our dreams in our hands, like the tablets of the law that Moses held at Mount Sinai. But when we behold the wars, hatred, violence, and criminality of humanity, we lose heart. We are tempted to cast down our unrealistic ideals and just accept reality as it is. Our idealistic illusions are shattered.

We might have expected Moses to have given up on the Israelites after the sin of the golden calf. After shattering the tablets, he might have realized that the pieces could not be put back together again; the visionary gleam was gone, and so were the glory and the dream.

But Moses did not give up! Amazingly, he asked God to forgive the people and he put his own life on the line: “And now may You forgive their sin, and if not, please blot me out from Your book that You have written” (Shemot 32:32). Moses requested—and received—a second set of tablets of the law. He would not allow negative realities to divert him from his ideal dreams for Israel and humanity.

Yes, there is a huge gap between the ideal world and the real world. It is easy to lose hope, to give up, to let the broken pieces of the tablets stay broken. It is difficult to overcome defeat and disillusionment. But, like Moses, we need to rally our strength and seek a restored set of tablets.

In a previous devar Torah, I wrote about viewing the world with our eyes open…and with our eyes closed. With eyes open, we see “reality” as it is. With eyes closed, “we look for the hidden signs of

progress and redemption. We attempt to maintain a grand, long-range vision. This is the key to the secret of Jewish optimism. While not denying the negatives around us, we stay faithful to a vision of a world that is not governed by chaos, but by a deeper, hidden, mysterious unity.

The problem of faith today is not how to have faith in God. We can come to terms with God if we are philosophers or mystics. The problem is how can we have faith in humanity? How can we believe in the goodness and truthfulness of human beings? With our eyes open, we must view current events with despair and trepidation. We see leaders who are liars and hypocrites. We see wars and hatred and violence and vicious anti-Semitism. We are tempted to think that chaos reigns.

But with our eyes shut, we know that redemption will come. We know that there are good, heroic people struggling for change. We know that just as we have overcome sorrows in the past, we will overcome oppressions and oppressors of today."

And we turn to the example of Moses who could not repair the shattered tablets, but who went on to request and receive a second set. He did not give up on his God, his people or his ideals. Sometimes it is important to close our eyes in order to see clearly.