Aspirations and Failures: Thoughts for Parashat Ki Tissa

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Ki Tissa

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Moses descended Mount Sinai, found the Israelites worshiping a golden calf, and he threw down the tablets of God's commandments. The Torah's account of this tragic scene unflinchingly describes the sinfulness of the Israelites, the frustration of Moses, the "anger" of the Lord.

The Torah could have omitted this story or edited it to make it look better. But the Torah is an amazingly candid document. In setting the foundations of religious life, the Torah takes under consideration that human beings are not angels. We are capable of great achievements…but also of great failures. We can reach great heights receiving Divine Revelation and we can sink very low worshiping a golden calf.

The Torah doesn't expect us to be perfect; it expects us to strive to be as good as we can be. According to tradition, the second set of Tablets was given on Yom Kippur. This is strikingly symbolic of the nature of life: we sin, we repent, and we have the opportunity to renew ourselves. Failure need not drag us down permanently. The Almighty has built Yom Kippur into our annual observances as a sign of Divine faith in our power to atone for past sins and to improve ourselves in the future.

The Torah teaches that spiritual life has ups and downs. The hallmark of religion at its best is an ongoing sense of striving, failing, growing, falling back, moving forward. It is dynamic and transformative. Religion is not about maintaining a dull status quo; it prods us to reach beyond.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, who was Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Israel in the early 20th century, once compared religious life to being on a ladder. Was someone on a higher rung more "religious" than one on a lower rung? Rabbi Kook answered: it depends which direction the people were going. A person might be on a higher rung—with more knowledge and greater level of mitzvah observance—and yet be stagnant or actually on the way down the ladder. Another person might be on a lower rung of religious knowledge and observance, and yet be ascending, moving

up with each passing day. So the one who is ascending is experiencing a dynamic and growing religious life, while the one on the higher rung is experiencing a dry and diminishing religious life. The one on the lower rung is aspiring to grow, while the one on the higher rung has surrendered to rote and dullness.

Religion is not a part time sideline, or something to do in our spare time. It isn't a collection of laws and customs to perform in a mechanical way. It is, at root, a framework for striving toward a dynamic relationship with the Almighty. It is not so much a pattern of life as an attitude toward living, of reaching beyond ourselves, of climbing one more rung in our quest for self-understanding and confrontation with the Divine.

Yes, we will surely experience failures along the way, just as the Israelites in the Torah did. But we will also experience growth and achievement. It is not the failures that define who we are. It is our aspirations…and our striving to attain them.