Ki Tisa 5780: Holy Cows!

Judaism seems to love countdowns. We count the 40 days between Passover and Shavuot, known as the Omer. We count the three weeks leading up to Tisha B'Av with special haftarah readings known as the Haftarot of Affliction and then the seven weeks from Tisha B'Av to Rosh Hashanah with seven Haftarot of Consolation. In fact, the whole month of Elul is in a way a 29-day countdown to Rosh Hashanah. And this time of year, we count five shabbatot that lead up to Passover, with special haftarah, and in some synagogues, with a special maftir Torah reading for the first four of those shabbatot. This shabbat is the third in that series and is known as Shabbat Parah, named for the special red cow (parah) that appears in the maftir reading (Numbers 19:1-22).

This year, Shabbat Parah happens to coincide with the Torah portion, Ki Tisa. Ki Tisa contains further details about the construction of the mishkan (portable sanctuary) and the giving of not one but two sets of 10 commandments. Why the need for the second set? Ki Tisa also contains one of the most infamous, cringe-worthy moments in the Torah: the construction of the golden calf. The golden calf leads to Moses’ smashing of the first tablets and God’s near renunciation (not to mention near obliteration) of the Israelites en masse.

The red cow of Shabbat Parah offers a glimpse into the system of what we might call “ritual eligibility” in ancient times. The English language has no appropriate words for a direct translation of the Hebrew terms tamei and tahor and unfortunately, the translations most often used, pure and impure, are full of judgemental associations. Here I will instead use the terms, “ritually ready” and “ritually unready” to describe these states. Within this system, a system that still exists in many iterations of Judaism, albeit in a very different form, throughout everyone’s life, a person moves back and forth constantly between a state of ritual eligibility or tamei and ritual ineligibility or tahor. Ineligibility might be triggered by any number of events, including normal bodily functions, eating something non-kosher, being diagnosed with certain skin diseases, and contact with a dead body.

Those who came in contact with a dead body would need to participate in a special ceremony conducted by a priest and aided by members of the community who ceremoniously burn the body of a purely red (or light brown, or yellow, depending on interpretation) cow without blemish or any derivation of color and who has never been made to work with a yoke. The ashes of that extraordinarily rare cow would then be mixed with water from a running source and could be used to cleanse the person who came in contact with the dead. The Israelites, we should remember, did not live in an age of hospitals and intensive care units. Death was common, and even being in the same tent as someone who has died was enough to render someone ritually ineligible.

So, on this shabbat, tradition offers us the story of two cows - one whose purpose brings us closer to the divine and another whose purpose specifically distances us from the divine. Perhaps this is a long way of saying, while not all cows are created equal … it’s what you choose to do with a cow that matters.

Similarly, we all experience emotions, and it is what we do with those emotions that matter. Paul Thagard, a Canadian philosopher and cognitive scientist, has described a psychological theory called the semantic pointer theory of emotions that explains how one emotion can trigger other related emotions. Confusion, for instance, can lead to anxiety and fear. Fear can easily lead to anger, especially considering how similarly the two emotions affect our nervous system - heavy breathing, elevated heart rate, etc.
We don’t need a d’var torah to tell us that the last few weeks have been full of confusion, anxiety, and fear. The Israelites in Ki Tisa let their anxiety and fear get the better of them and made a hasty and ultimately costly decision. Moses, on the other hand, remains calm and convinces God that the Israelites are worth saving, that this was just a temporary lapse in their collective judgement.

We must first recognize that fear and anxiety are normal parts of our human experience. Our challenge now, however, is to bring careful awareness to our emotions so that they don’t run away from us. Whether it’s from a distance as we read the news or when we pass someone in a grocery store who is wearing a face mask, our emotions are real, and those emotions are valid.

However, as the great 20th century philosopher Yoda said, “Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering.” We must now do what we can, to let fear lead to compassion, and compassion lead to kindness, and God willing, kindness will lead to healing. Community depends on support and kindness, and it is in times of uncertainty that we need community the most. I wish you all a shabbat of peace, of compassion, and kindness.

Shabbat Shalom,
Cantor Ellerin

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