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News

Parashat Ki Tissa 5780

Rabbi Danny Rich – 13 March 2020

Parashat Ki Tissa opens with a census of the Israelite people in order to impose a 'one time' poll tax to support the building of the *Mishkan*, God's mobile home which accompanied the Israelites in their wanderings in the desert.

This is followed by the final 'housekeeping' details including how to make the copper laver for the washing of priestly hands and feet, and the recipes for the aromatic anointing oil and incense. The instructions for the construction of the *Mishkan* are completed by the appointment of the supervising contractors, Betzalel and Oholiav.

Parashat Ki Tissa concludes with the creation of a second set of tablets (containing the Ten Commandments) and the renewal of the covenant between God and the Children of Israel – including details of authentic worship and the festivals – in Chapter 34.

The central part of *Ki Tissa* consists of the well-known story of the Golden Calf. Moses is delayed receiving the first set of tables (containing the Ten Commandments) on Mount Sinai – for 40 days and nights – and, perhaps fearing the worst, the Israelites become restless and nervous. They demand of Aaron, Moses' brother who is temporarily in charge, that he create a physical manifestation



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of God in place of Moses. Rather surprisingly Aaron appears to agree without protest. He instructs the people to bring their gold things which he casts into a golden calf to which the Israelites offer sacrifices and around which they dance.

The Torah portrays Moses learning of these matters and ordering Moses to hurry back. God is angry and suggests destruction of the Israelites which Moses deflects with this remarkable observation (Exodus 32:12):

Let not the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that {the Hebrew God} delivered them, only to kill them off in a mountain and annihilate them from the face of the earth'.

As God relents, Moses descends and in anger destroys both the first set of tablets and also the Golden Calf which he grinds into powder, mixes with water and forces the Israelites to drink. He rebukes Aaron who responds with a rather pathetic, *'It was not me. The people asked and it happened'*.

I write this as the world is on the verge of coronavirus pandemic. Governments, public institutions and businesses are beginning to take preventative action. My own daughter's company, for example, has divided its workforce into two. One half works in the office for a fortnight whilst the other works at home and in the next fortnight the teams swap, thereby ensuring that the work continues but one team is never in contact with the second, and, should, the virus take hold, one team can remain at home in isolation whilst the other continues to work on the premises.

The United Kingdom Government has published its formal policy paper, indicating that Britain is currently at the first stage of 'containment' in which the first cases are detected and isolated by border health checks and quarantines in the hope of preventing the virus from taking hold as long as possible. If the virus takes hold, 'delay' is the second stage including the promotion of good hygiene, the possibility of home working and school closures, and the reduction of large public gatherings – all measures intended to slow the spread and cut the peak impact of the virus. The third and final stage is 'mitigation' in which public services expect waves of infection, offer best care for those who become ill, and prepare for emergency and unusual provision for funerals. In my own case, as a chaplain to a large district hospital I am expected to attend for a fitting of a special mask and instruction in putting on – and more important removing specialist clothing – in the event of being on all to the dying and dead.

Does the incident of the Golden Calf help us prepare in any way for what may be to come? I suggest it reminds us of two things. First, most human beings go about their lives with very little thought about what happens during the unexpected, when what we take for granted is taken from us. The Israelites of *Ki Tissa* responded in a particular way to the absence of Moses who had been a part of their daily lives throughout their journey. How will we respond when we cannot kiss each other or shake hands; when we cannot go to school or work; when we cannot sit our GCSEs or gather for football matches, synagogue services and other social occasions?

Second, is the calibre of leadership. Leadership is frequently best tested in a crisis. Aaron faced a crisis. Moses was absent for longer than expected and the Israelites became restless, demanding and finally irrational. In the face of such Aaron simply followed the mass, gave into to its fears, and failed even to attempt, never mind to succeed, in calming public disquiet. He offered no alternative but simply yielded.

In the difficult circumstances of a coronavirus pandemic life will change temporarily and each one of us may be called in different ways to show leadership. It may simply be calmly getting used to changed circumstances; it could involve being a little more vigilant in looking out for vulnerable neighbours, for example; and, in the case of some of us, particularly those in the health and caring services, it may even be a little challenging.

There is little doubt what Liberal Judaism requires of us: to, in a paraphrase of *Pirket Avot* 2:5, where none are showing leadership, show leadership.

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