

Message: "Idols Borne of Impatience"

Scripture: Exodus 32:1-14

³When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." ²Aaron said to them, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." ³So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. ⁴He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" ⁵When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord." ⁶They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

⁷The Lord said to Moses, "Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; ⁸they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'" ⁹The Lord said to Moses, "I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. ¹⁰Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation." ¹¹But Moses implored the Lord his God, and said, "O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? ¹²Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. ¹³Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, 'I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'" ¹⁴And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

Has this ever happened to you?

You've lost something; you've scoured the house, looking in every nook and cranny; you are plagued with the notion that you just had it, you can almost envision the item, when you used it last, where you put it last, but, after checking that location for the thousandth time, you again feel offended that the object didn't magically appear on its own. And so you do what any frustrated, impatient, frantic person would do - you order a new one on Amazon prime, and check the box for "overnight

delivery" justifying to yourself that you really do need the item immediately; or perhaps even more immediately, you know where you can buy one, and drive your car to the store and make a purchase.

You know what comes next, don't you?

You finish clicking "place order now" on the computer, or return home with the newly-purchased item, to discover within an average of 9.3 minutes that the item was sitting at home almost in plain sight, or was hidden in a pocket or drawer, or had fallen in between the cushions on the couch. The most accurate expression of our typical reaction at such times comes from Homer Simpson, when he slaps his head and shouts "Doh!"

We can imagine the same kind of experience in the people of God at the foot of Mount Sinai, thinking they have lost God. Their main connection with God, Moses, has been gone for a long, long time; curiosity has turned to confusion which has turned into fear that grows into angst; as time goes on without Moses, the angst turns into irritation and exasperation; impatience provides the fertile soil for all these things to grow in their hearts. In their impatience, the people had grown so restless they decided to create their own god, something more manageable and responsive than that other God who delivered them from slavery but now seemed to not be around much.

And so, somewhat surprisingly, Moses' brother Aaron attempted crowd control by acquiescing to their demands and organized the creation of the golden statue of a calf. Their new god created, their praises reoriented, their idolatry confirmed, they were underway with their new deity when who should reappear but Moses, holding two stone tablets upon which were written the rules for living under the God they had just abandoned. You can almost see Aaron and possibly even the people of Israel doing the same thing as they witnessed Moses coming down from the mountain where he had disappeared to a long time ago - slapping their foreheads and shouting "Doh!." And I cannot help but wonder if Moses wishes he had two tablets of Advil or Tylenol rather than those ones made of stone.

The preamble to the golden calf says much about human nature, for we often find ourselves repeating this same folly, and so very often it is due to our tendency towards impatience. We toss out the enduring good for a more expedient evil; we

postpone virtue for a more responsive vice; we fashion idols of a more concrete, accessible nature at the expense of a more nebulous, uncontrollable deity that operates on its own timetable rather than ours. And this gets us into all sorts of trouble, trouble we should know awaits us down the road whenever we attempt to manipulate what's real.

Think of today's golden calves, things and people who invite us to bow down to worship them, think of the deification of wealth or possession, of privilege and power, of military might and media control. We do not have to think very far to come up with examples of loyalties to particular political figures, or loyalties to particular sports franchises, or loyalties to certain entertainment icons, or loyalties to particular cultural exclusions. When such loyalties go too far, they become nothing less than worship - and if you have ever wondered how on earth people can vote for certain leaders, or do such crazy things as sports fans do, or rave incoherently over a favorite star or musician, or pledge their lives to defend an oppressive cultural tradition, look to the very short step between loyalty and worship, where the line between what is sacred and what is profane has become terribly skewed.

No wonder God gets impatient with the people of Israel; no wonder God gets impatient with us today. But the interchange between Moses and God demonstrates a profound difference between our impatience and God's impatience - we may turn to golden calves, but God turns towards us. God certainly could turn away from us, but never does, even as we continue to demonstrate our negligence and animosity towards the divine and what works best for all lives. It is God's stubborn love, of which Moses reminds him, that is the foundation of a grace we do not deserve, but desperately need.

This is where a powerful word of hope comes to the human race, a word that the faithful hear and those without faith long for - our God is a patient God, whose patience is garnered for our sake. We probably all know deep down that the idols we create are temporary affairs unworthy of life's devotion; we continue to worship them at our own peril. But a constant alternative is offered that can provide the kinds of things false gods never can - things like clarity of conscience and the joy of forgiveness and the pursuit of meaning and the counter-intuitive blessings of love and a sense of eternity that speaks beyond the confines of what

we have here.....so many things which people are seeking but never gaining through golden calves are readily available if the mystery of God replaces the certainty of the idol.

You've probably heard the story about a monastery somewhere which welcomes novitiates into their practice for a month at a time, to test how much of a claim the world has upon their lives. It is a simple place, with rooms containing four walls, a bed and a small table - no dressers, mirrors, closets, or even lights. The practice of the monastery is to embrace simplicity in all ways possible, that the life of prayer may be uncluttered and sincere. On the wall of each room, seen just as you enter from the door, is a sign that says, "Tell us what you need, and we'll teach you how to live without it." Golden calves are the first thing to go when what we truly need is understood.

Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg is a Scottish contemporary [Torah](#) scholar and author. She writes with particular interest in what the account of the Golden Calf says about our human condition. She says that "idolatry always makes its appearance in history. It is not a purely historical event but rather a psychological element of human life for which we all bear responsibility. It is the practice of trying to erase Gods mystery, of trying to pin God down in terms of our comprehension and control. But God is unpinnable; that's the point of being divine!A space must be left for the God who is not predictable, who cannot be imagined as simply part of the system."

If we expect anything to take the place of God, we will find our lives filled with frustration; thus is the practice of so very much of the world, and why so very much of the world is subject to profound discouragement. But if we allow space for the mysterious, unpredictable, and unpinnable God, we discover in the midst of that uncertainty the only path to sanity in this life. To know that God is, and is with us, and is for us, needs no idol to convey.