

Ki Tissa – Working with Fire

Silent Center of Things

5775 Text Study by Yael Shy

24 I said to them, 'Who has gold?' So they took it [the gold] off and gave it to me; I threw it into the fire and out came this calf."

כַּד נֹאמֵר לָהֶם לְמִי זָהָב הִתְפָּרְקוּ וַיִּתְּנוּ לִי
וַאֲשַׁלְכֵהוּ בְּאֵשׁ וַיֵּצֵא הָעֵגֶל הַזֶּה:

(Exodus, Chapter 32:24)

That is Aaron, Moses's brother, in this week's parsha, speaking about how the golden calf came to be created. The fire seems to have a life of its own, bursting forth with an idol, with almost no human intervention necessary.

In next week's parsha, Moshe asks for gifts of precious metals and many other things for the tabernacle, and again, with great fervor, the Israelites come forward with so much gold and riches that Moshe has to tell them to stop, as they have more than they need.

So we have two parallel situations – Aaron asking for gold for the calf, and the people giving, and Moshe asking for gold for the Tabernacle, and the people giving. Both are placed into the fire to create something new. What is the difference?

The Fire of Anxiety

When Aaron throws the gold in the fire, the people are filled with terror and anxiety. Moses has been gone for over a month. They are terrified of being abandoned, of being alone. Avivah Zornberg calls their generosity with their gold not openness of heart, but a nervous tic. They are in effect saying: "I'll give you everything I have if you make this terrible feeling of loneliness go away."

But is it any wonder that out of the fire popped a gold calf, which was a familiar symbol – something easily grasped and understood by the people? At that time, people worshiped calves like we worship celebrities. It was easy. Familiar. Comforting. Aaron's words make perfect sense -- In drops the gold, out pops the calf. To the Israelites, it was almost easier to create the calf than it was not to.

Most of us have probably had experiences very similar to this. Times when the heat and discomfort of fear is so intense it's almost intolerable. I know in my life, there have been times when the intensity of anxiety, of not knowing what the future holds and of feeling afraid and alone have led me to reach out not just for external and familiar quick-fixes like television or substances, but also for tired and well-worn storylines about whatever it is I'm anxious about, in a desperate attempt to gain control. Things like, "This never work out," "Don't get your

hopes up,” “I *know* this new thing I’m trying will fail.” “I am “this” type of person, so this will turn out “this” way,” etc., etc., etc.

Underneath the fear, of course, is vulnerability. We have so little control or knowledge of how things will turn out and admitting that is very hard. The Israelites didn’t know Moshe would return to them. It is easy to judge them – to shake our fists and see their behavior as weak, or ridiculous. However if you have ever been in the shaky beginning of a new relationship, or had to wait to hear the results of a medical test or a job interview, it is likely you too have flailed around for a familiar idol you could grab. You too may have too easily fashioned a golden calf escape mechanism you’ve created and worshiped at many times before, rather than wait one second longer in the heat of those feelings.

The trouble is, those solutions don’t really work. At best, they get us through the night only to wake up in the same heat of anxiety and misery in the morning. At worst, they can cause us – like the Israelites – to sabotage ourselves, our work, our relationships, and cause a lot of pain – all from our anxiety and fear.

The Fire of Desire

But in that terror of not knowing is something else --- a great desire. The people’s hearts are on fire with desire for connection and to not be alone. They are aflame with the desire to feel loved and cared for. The flip side of all anxiety is actually desire. We are afraid of not getting something we want because we want that thing so badly. It is a directly proportional relationship.

In next week’s parashot, the Israelites get another chance to get it right. Moses goes back to God and assembles the people again and conveys the instructions for the sanctuary.

Another fire is created, and Moses asks the people to reach into their heart and bring forth their gold and offerings, and they do. That same fire is in their hearts –but now we have a much more careful process for facilitating intimacy with the divine.

This new process is painstakingly perfect – detail-by-detail, patient and divinely inspired. In fact, according to Zornberg, the genius of the architect of the tabernacle is “his sense of timing, his ability to resist the urge to make the facile images that will clip the wings of imagination.” He is passionate – yes – when working with fire, but it is a passion born of love and patience, not fear. He can stay in that heat much longer without hasty action.

So how do we practice *this* type of action in our lives? How do we use our fires to create careful and holy work when our bodies are going crazy with anxiety, fear, terror? When we are tempted to grab the closest stale storyline, or familiar solution to get rid of the feeling?

The text gives us the answer.

Stillness. In the case of this week's and next week's parsheot, that stillness is represented in the commandment to observe Shabbat. On Shabbat, – the holiest of holy days – kindling fires are prohibited. God seems to tell us that before we act, we must learn to sit in the middle of our lives– even if they are filled with the heat of anxiety or desire. We sit there and practice our muscle of not grabbing the easy way out. We sit and breath and notice what happens when we don't fill the space. What new voices and solutions come to us from that place of emptiness – of stillness? Zornberg says, "For reverie to be possible, time has to be made for time." That stillness, that breath, is the ground zero for imagination and for the creation of new solutions and new sanctuaries.

Practice Guidance

If something in your life is unnerving, unsettling, or causing you anxiety: First, notice what it is. Notice if you have a desire to "worship" at a familiar idol (food, television, sex, sleep) rather than be with the anxious feelings. Notice where the desire is located within the anxious situation, and allow the feelings of desire to wash over you, rather than living only in the fear. Breath. Be as still as possible. Tell yourself that you will *not* abandon yourself in the shakiness of this situation. Hold the fear and desire gently within the stillness, and see what emerges. Take your time.