

Torah Thoughts Ki Tisa

5778:

F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote: “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.” Sometimes called cognitive dissonance, being able to live with the tension between a thing and its opposite is what makes for a complex life.

The last sections of the book of Exodus concern the construction of the *mishkan*, the Tabernacle. For five consecutive weeks we read about the *mishkan*'s dimensions, its furnishings, the materials used to construct it, the clothing of the priests who will officiate in it, as well as the ritual by which they will be ordained as *kohanim*. The one interruption in this lengthy description is the account of the Golden Calf. It would have made just as much sense, or more sense, for the Torah to tell us this story immediately after describing the revelation of law at Sinai. Why does it instead defer that telling until the middle of the description of the *mishkan*?

There are two verses that may help to explain. The first appears at the very beginning of the command to build the *mishkan*: God tells Moses “Let them make me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them.” By creating a sacred space, God’s presence will abide in the camp. But in Ki Tisa this week, in reaction to the debacle of the Golden Calf, God says “I will not go in your midst, for you are a stiff-necked people.” Here, God’s absence is either a punishment itself, or a way of protecting the people from the punishment that would result from God being in their midst. In either case, God will not be ‘dwelling among them.’

By juxtaposing the *mishkan* materials with the Golden Calf story, the Torah forces us to confront two directly opposing ideas: God dwells among us; God is not in our midst. Those two concepts can be understood as representing the constant tension between feeling God’s presence or God’s absence, what theologians call God’s immanence and God’s transcendence. We are to create the structures that will forge a connection between ourselves and the divine - the *mishkan*, sacrifice, a moral law - knowing that God is at a remove, and that it is our actions that will either invite God into the tent or drive God away. By placing the *mishkan* and the Golden Calf together, the Torah reminds us that in order to benefit from God’s presence in our own sacred space, we must remember our ancestors sins, and our own, in order that God will indeed dwell among us.

Shabbat shalom