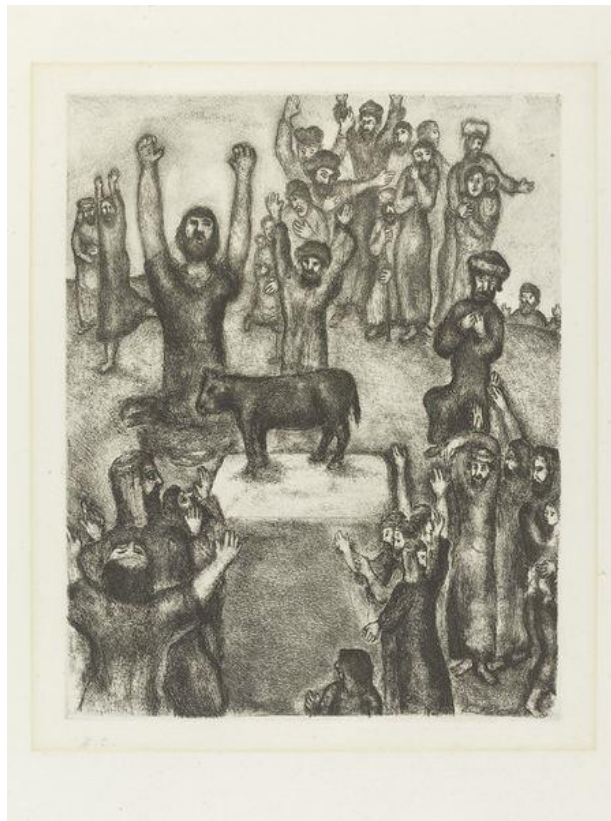


“Aseret ha-Debrot: The Ten Spiritual Principles for Transformation”
Part Three: The Second Spiritual Principle ~ *“Resisting our Golden Calves”*

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Exodus 20:4-5a ~ “You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them ...”



The Worship of the Golden Calf
Marc Chagall (1887-1985)

What do you think of when you hear the number 40? This is a question I always start our Ash Wednesday service with when we begin our Lenten journey to the cross. I get lots of answers from old and young alike. While there is always the joke that it is the day when we take out black streamers to celebrate our fortieth birthday, we know that forty is a very special number in the Bible. Did you know that it comes up 159 times in both the Hebrew scriptures and New Testament? When I ask this question invariably one of our children will raise her or his hand and proudly shout out that Noah spent 40 days on the Ark while God made it rain. Usually a teenage boy will tell us that Goliath taunted Israel for 40 days before David got out his sling shot and killed him. We remember that Jonah, in a prophesy of judgment, gave the city of Ninevah forty days during which to repent. Kings Saul, David, and Solomon each reigned for 40 years.

But most of the answers related to the number 40 point to a time of personal trial and testing that can engender significant spiritual growth in us. The Israelites (whose very name means “the ones who wrestled with God”) spent forty years in the desert on their way to the promised land; Moses fasted for 40 days; Elijah spent forty days and nights wandering to Mt. Horeb; Jesus was tempted for forty days in the wilderness; the Lenten season lasts forty days. It would seem that God places people in difficult circumstances for forty days because God has something special to teach them there. It’s almost like God designs a tailor-made forty-day spiritual boot camp for each of us where God tests people to see the stuff they are made of and whether they can be counted on. These are forty-day refining processes, a refiner’s fire, almost like vision quests, where the hearts of people are tested as they are placed out of their comfort zone with nothing to draw on but their own resources and are asked to do deep soul searching. To see whether they have any other gods before God. To test their priorities. To see whether, in their anxiety and discomfort, they might make an idol in place of the one true God.

After Jesus was baptized he went alone into the wilderness for forty days where he was greeted by the devil, who tested his allegiance to that same God who earlier had met with Moses on Mt. Sinai and said to him and to all of us through him: ***“You shall have no other gods before me.”*** And secondly: ***“you shall not make for yourself an idol.”***¹ Jesus had to withstand the solitude and the temptations of the devil in the desert before he could be used by God. Forty days later he walked out of the desert, having passed all the tests, showing his unwavering allegiance to the one true God by his refusal to engage in any kind of idolatry. Moses was to do likewise.

Yet there is another forty-day wilderness boot camp lesson in the Bible that is not talked about as much as the others, and that is probably because it was a complete failure. It is the forty days that the Israelites had to wait while their leader Moses went up to the top of Mt. Sinai for a second meeting with God. After Moses had come down from the top of Mt. Sinai the first time and verbally had given the Hebrew people the ten commandments, we recall that the people responded positively with the words ***“Everything the Lord has said we will do”*** (Exodus 24:3). In last week’s sermon I talked about how pleased and surprised Moses (and God) were with their response.

But Moses could not wait around to see whether they would keep their word, for God called him to come back up for another meeting, saying: ***“Come up to me on the mountain and stay here, and I will give you the tablets of stone with the laws and commands I have written for their instruction.”*** (Exodus 24:12) So off Moses went a second time, vanishing into the top of the mountain as it trembled and smoked, while the Israelites waited anxiously below.

Initially the Israelites likely weren’t all that worried. They probably thought Moses would be gone for a few days, perhaps a week, but the scriptures say that ***“he stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights”*** (Exodus 24:18). Forty days during which both Moses and the Israelites were being tested. During those forty days as Moses sat in God’s presence, he was busy getting all these detailed instructions on an ark of the covenant God wanted constructed that had fine interior design, jewels, cherubim, a mercy seat, curtains, a lampstand made of pure gold, and much more.

But back home on the ranch the people were getting restless. Where was Moses? What was he doing? Why was there no communication? They began fretting and whining. There may have been as many as several hundred thousand men, women, and children camped out, waiting at the base of the mountain in the extreme heat of the day and the bone chilling cold of the desert night. They surely asked themselves how they would get through each day. Where were they to get food and water? What about the enemies through whose territory they were traveling? They started sharing worst case scenarios. Maybe Moses had abandoned them. Maybe he was dead. Maybe they were all just in a collective bad dream. Or maybe all of this was just a giant hoax.

Amnesia took hold. Week after week went by with their memory of God’s saving acts fading away: the God who had helped them escape from slavery under the Egyptians; the God who parted the Sea of Reeds; the God who led them with a pillar of cloud by day

and a pillar of fire by night; the God who rained down manna from heaven for them to eat and provided refreshing water to drink; the God who helped them defeat the Amalekites. The God who had said: ***“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt [Mitrayim], out of the land of slavery, out of the narrow way of seeing things, out of your enslavements and worries.”*** The God who described Godself as ***“merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness”*** (Exodus 34:6, cf. Ps 86:5, 15; Ps. 103:8; Ps. 145:8, Neh 9:31; Num 14:16, Jonah 4:2). The God who had defined the first spiritual principle / commandment as: ***“You shall have no other gods before me.”*** And secondly ***“you shall not make for yourself an idol.”***

Fear and anxiety set in and, as the hours turned into days, and the days turned into weeks, they felt themselves not only deserted by Moses but abandoned by God. The Israelites, who just a few weeks earlier promised to keep these commandments by saying ***“Everything the Lord has said we will do”*** (Exodus 24:3), became so desperate that they decided that to take things into their own hands. They no longer could wait. They no longer could live with uncertainty. Their forty days of trial and testing in God’s spiritual boot camp were overwhelming and frightening to them. They needed to fix their situation.

Have you ever felt like that? When have you experienced living in a state of uncertainty? When your world seems unfamiliar? When you don’t feel in control of things? That the rug has been pulled out from under you? I don’t know about you but right now it feels like we are living in such a state of uncertainty where so many of the things that we took for granted no longer are there. We have to mask up before going into stores or any time we will be less than six feet from others. School may be online. We can’t worship in the beautiful sanctuary of our church. We miss meeting with our Sunday School class. The family reunion has been called off. The vacation plans changed. The enhanced unemployment check won’t be coming in and our house payment may not be deferred. Shaking hands with someone may not be safe. Forget about hugs! The book club at the local restaurant and time at the lake with friends have been cancelled. The ugly veil has fallen and we are shocked and pained by the divisions and polarizations in our society and wonder how we can see things so differently from one another. The band aid has been ripped off the racism that plagues all the interconnected systems of our society. We no longer know what to believe. We fear for our own health and that of others. We live in a state of not knowing. We want to fix our situation. We will do anything to get relief, to soothe our distress, to restore our internal equilibrium. To regain a sense of normalcy.

When times are especially difficult, we should be aware of how dangerous it can be to rush for a quick fix in our desire to return to a place where we feel we have more control over our lives and our future. In our desire for a sense of security we might end up creating and worshipping false idols. We should take seriously Leonard Felder's word of caution when he writes that "even though several of the major religions speak forcefully against idolatry, it is a very common human tendency to get distracted from your higher purpose or spiritual path and go off on detours and escapes. The most frequent detour or escape seems to occur when people feel anxious or impatient, at which time they tend to be more susceptible to false promises of a quick fix or a way to feel better immediately." (*The Ten Challenges*, pp. 36-37)

The Israelites who were waiting for Moses to return went for the quick fix. They came up with what they thought was a brilliant plan! And guess what their plan was? The Scripture say: "***When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, "Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him."***" (Exodus 32:1)

No longer trusting that God was truly present to them and that Moses would guide them, they decided that they needed to create a replacement God. One that they could see and touch. One that was rock solid. One that glimmered with the external props of materialism and the world's values that made them feel secure. One that they could manage and control. So they gathered their precious gold and jewelry that they had managed to take with them when they escaped from Egypt. They gave it to Moses' own brother Aaron, who cast a mold and built a statue of a Golden Calf. The Golden Calf, which symbolized virility and strength, may be been associated with the Canaanite god El. The next day the Israelites made offerings and danced in a frenzied manner around this idol of a Golden Calf. The Israelites were failing miserably in the test of trusting God during their forty-day spiritual boot camp in the desert as they broke the first and second commandments of not putting anything before God and building idols. Moses came down from the mountain and was furious by what he saw. God was too.

During our lives, God will also take us out in the wilderness for a spiritual boot camp. We will usually be taken kicking and screaming. After all, none of us want to have our world turned upside down. None of us want the rug pulled out from under us. To have our trusted leaders taken away from us, to fear God has abandoned us, and suddenly have to rely on our own wisdom and internal resources as we navigate unfamiliar territory.

Last week when we talked about not having any other gods before God our focus was on getting our priorities straight when we asked whether God was our ultimate concern in life. Putting God first is the foundational spiritual principle without which the others are not really possible. Today we take this one step further as we ask ourselves whether, during this time of uncertainty, we are making any idols for ourselves. During Biblical times, these idols were understood more concretely as the Israelites abandoning their worship of the one true God by worshipping pagan gods such as Astarte and Baal. They fashioned graven images that stood in the place of the one true God. Prophets such as Jeremiah and Isaiah, whom Christians remember for their cries for social justice, railed against the worship of such idols (Jeremiah 10:3-5; Isaiah 44:12-20).

The problem with such idols is that they are fashioned by human minds, hearts, and hands. They are made in our own image and, as such, they are small. Yet we are made in God's image! God, whom the renowned 11th-century theologian Anselm said is "greater than which can be conceived" is beyond all human conception. Rami Shapiro reminds us that "God cannot be imagined and must not be imaged" (*Minyan*, p. 48) God is beyond any of our doctrinal or creedal constructions. God, who defined Godself as "I am who I am," is not a concrete noun that can be fashioned into an idol but rather is a dynamic verb. We should never make idols of ideas or mistake any *ism* for the *Is* (Rami Shapiro, *Minyan*, p. 48). God cannot be contained. Jesus got at this when he told the Samaritan woman at the well that "**God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth**" (John 4:24).

We also might think of idols, of Golden Calves, as (1) anything that stands in the way of our relationship with God or (2) that stands in the way of our knowing that we are the divine beloved children of God or (3) that prevents us from fulfilling our divine purpose in life. Rabbi Ted Falcon defines idolatry as: "the moments when we forget who we really are and instead of remembering that we are sparks of the Divine, we start giving up our power to a guru, an ideology, a romantic obsession, a stressful job that begins to define us, or an unhealthy habit we think we can't live without. Even if we no longer build or worship physical idols like in ancient times, we have modern-day addictions and pressures that cause us to forget that our purpose here is to be a vehicle for Divine energies." (cited Felder, p. 35).

The second commandment, when read within the larger context of the Israelites fashioning and worshipping a Golden Calf, also issues an important warning that we should heed, especially at this particular juncture in our history when we are in the midst of a pandemic, economic distress, racial unrest, and intense polarizations. And that warning is that we are most susceptible to create and bow down to false idols during moments in our lives when we feel anxious or out of control. It is precisely during these uncertain times that we need to be on our spiritual guard against the idolatrous temptation of losing sight of the one true God, of no longer listening to God's voice, of losing our spiritual compass, of forgetting that we are the divine children of God who are called to a divine purpose.

It is precisely during these anxious times that we need be so very intentional about anchoring ourselves in God by being especially faithful to our own unique spiritual practices that might include prayer and meditation, Bible and devotional reading, rituals of gratitude, grace, Sabbath rest, time experiencing the sacred dimension of life in nature, volunteering, porch sitting, puttering or gardening to stop the incessant chatter of our monkey minds, mindfulness exercises, meditative walking or jogging, attending small groups via Zoom or in person when it is safe, journaling, spiritual friendships where we will receive encouragement, confess, be disciplined, and called to be our best selves, and worship outdoors in our church parking lot, in our homes, or online. Whatever practices that keep you experiencing and drawing upon your connection to God, whose love will never let you go!

Unfortunately, the Israelites let down their spiritual guard as they waited for forty days for their leader Moses to return with a word of encouragement and direction from God. They did not want to wait. They did not trust. They could not "be still and know that God is God." They wanted their painful anxiety to go away immediately. They were uncomfortable with the uncertainty, the waiting. It became unbearable. Sarah Silverman describes this feeling in the movie *Take This Waltz* with the words: "You think everything can be worked out if you just make the right move? That must be thrilling... Life has a gap in it. It just does. You don't go crazy trying to fill it like some lunatic." So instead of being extra careful to find ways to place their trust in God as they waited, they went for the quick fix: the Golden Calf. And they lost themselves in dancing around it like lunatics.

We too live in an "instant society" of quick fixes and instant gratification and Golden Calves. Not forty days. Not forty hours. Not even forty minutes. We want things done in forty seconds.

We want the quick and easy as we believe that all lines must be kept moving and that we must “make life happen” rather than simply let life happen. This is what the Israelites were doing when they made the Golden Calf. Rather than waiting in the present moment, trusting that Moses would return with a message from God, they kept all lines moving and “made life happen,” going for the easy fix by making an idol: a Golden Calf.

We too are quickaholics. We run the danger of worshipping a Golden Calf rather than the true living God. We run the danger of substituting a genuine worship of our living God with what Sue Monk Kidd calls “Instant Religion” or “Short Cut Religion” or “Quickaholic Spirituality” or “Mac-faith” (Sue Monk Kidd, *When the Heart Waits: Spiritual Direction for Life’s Sacred Questions*, pp. 24-25). It is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer described as “cheap grace.” But will this “Mac-Faith” sustain us when God sends each of us to our own spiritual boot camp? If you were waiting in the desert and there had been no visible sign of Moses for forty days, would you have gotten impatient and started doubting your belief in that caring and loving God you had felt so strongly about not too long ago? How well developed is your ability to live in the unknowing? How comfortable are you with uncertainty? How are you doing during this global pandemic and time of unrest? What does your perseverance muscle look like? Would you have been able to wait and trust or would you have given over your gold jewelry to build an idol? Would you give yourself over to frenzied dancing around a Golden Calf? Or would you understand the following words written by poet T.S. Eliot:

“I said to my soul, be still, and wait. ...
So the darkness shall be the light,
And the stillness the dancing.”

Closing Prayer: God, many of us feel anxious and afraid during this present pandemic and time of uncertainty. We so often do not recognize the world around us. We wait for things to return to normal, to regain a sense of internal equilibrium and peace and, as we do so, let us put our trust in you, knowing that with your help we will be able to handle whatever comes our way, trusting that we are secure in your love and that you are already in our every future, even if it is not the one we imagine. We lift up this prayer in the name of your son Jesus. Amen.

¹ It is interesting that the Jewish people put these two together as one commandment (and it actually makes sense to me that they would do that), since both relate to improper worship, while we Christians separate them into two commandments.