Taking a Life-breath: Torah Portion *Ki Tissa*

Rabbi Lester Bronstein, Shabbat March 13-14, 2020

The Torah portion for this week is famous – or infamous – for the story of the golden calf. Moses tarries on the mountaintop. The Israelites get nervous and panic. They coax Aaron into helping them make a calf of gold as a substitute for the presumed dead Moses (or maybe for God!). They begin to worship the calf, thus violating everything they have been taught about the dangers of idolatry.

Moses returns in hope, carrying the tablets of the Torah covenant in his elderly hands. Shocked and heartbroken by the sight of the people dancing around the idol, he smashes the tablets. Only eventually (also in this week’s portion) does he reclimb the mountain to receive a new set of tablets and a fresh start for his people.

The story grips us. We know what it means to panic from lack of information. We know what it means to act collectively and irrationally as a response to not knowing what is happening or what is about to transpire. We can forgive our ill-behaved Israelite ancestors, and yet we wish they had “counted to ten” and thought through their actions in a calm, constructive and productive way.

And we certainly understand why Moses loses his temper and his faith; why he shatters the most precious objects the world has ever known; why he must slowly work his way back to a state of trust with his people and with God.

Still, there is another short passage in the portion that stands to give us hope against hope. Before Moses descends the mountain, God tells him that “the children of Israel will be guardians of Shabbat; to *do* Shabbat throughout their generations. This will be a sign between Me and them forever. For in six days God created the heavens and the earth; and on the seventh day God ceased and took a breath.”

In other words, before Moses ever witnesses his people in a frenzy around the golden calf, he receives the antidote to their pain. It is none other than the Shabbat, the unique concept of the Jewish sabbath.

No matter how crazy our lives get, Shabbat comes along to remind us to “cease and take a breath.” It beckons us to stop our frenzy; to count to ten; to look carefully and lovingly at our family and neighbors; to halt our frenetic work for one day so that we can remember who we really are, and why our work is meaningful to us.

Shabbat provides us with an alternate behavioral path – a calm, sane roadway through the dark or the storm. This path is the one that teaches us the skill of slowing down our reactions; of assessing the situation carefully; of determining what can and cannot be accomplished; and of acting in ways that are whole and healing.

Even when times are “normal,” we need the discipline of Shabbat to keep us on a sustainable life trajectory. How much the more so when we are faced with epidemics, pandemics, cultural and political chaos, and a fraying of faith in things we have long believed in. Shabbat by itself doesn’t solve anything. But Shabbat is the exercise that builds our restorative response muscles.

More important, Shabbat is practiced in community, and not just individually. God’s promise in our portion is that Shabbat will keep the entire community of Israel together as the concomitant of Israel’s keeping Shabbat. In other words, only in community can we respond to crisis with hope and clarity. And only a communal practice of Shabbat can give us the presence of mind to learn those clear and hopeful pathways.

Like God, we need to give ourselves one day a week – together – to take a long, deep, cleansing life-breath.