

Today's Golden Calf
Shabbat Ki Tissa 5777

April 17, 2017

Rabbi Barry Block

The Children of Israel are frightened. Moses, the only leader they have known, seems to have disappeared. When Moses climbed the mountain to talk to God, he promised to return in forty days. Now, forty days later, Moses hasn't returned. What are the Israelites to do? Moses has been their only link to their Redeemer, a God they can neither see nor hear. They turn to Aaron, their priest, and they ask for a god to save them.

Eager to calm the people's fears, and perhaps his own, Aaron suggests that they turn over their gold to build a molten calf. Ancients were comforted by gods they could touch. What could be more reassuring than a golden symbol of strength? Perhaps Aaron is afraid, too: Scared that the Israelites will depose or even kill him if he doesn't provide tangible reassurance. The rabbis theorize that he may merely want to placate them temporarily, a worthy goal, however despicable his methodology. Aaron may wonder if they're right, that Moses really has disappeared. God only knows – literally, God only knows – what might have happened to him up on that mountain. Maybe Aaron, like the people, is frightened of a future without Moses.

Together, then, Aaron and the Israelites build the golden calf, the greatest national sin in our people's history. Fear is a powerful motivator, sometimes of good; but this time, fear inspires apostasy. God instructs Moses to hurry down the mountain. A chain reaction of anger ensues – Moses hurls the sacred tablets to the ground, crushing them into countless pieces. God threatens to destroy the entire people, saving only Moses, to build up a new people through only his descendants. Moses ultimately prevails upon God to forgive, but only after a plague takes numberless lives. Yes, the golden calf is a story of the people's sin and God's mercy. First, though, it's a tale of fear and the evil it inspires.

Many Americans live in fear for their lives today, wondering when they will next be victimized by violent crime. Our President, in his Inaugural Address, called it, "American carnage." The fact is that, while violent crime rose slightly in 2016, it remains very close to a 20-year low. Few of us are likely ever to be the victims of a violent crime. Nevertheless, turn on the local nightly news; and, as they say, "If it

bleeds, it leads.” A culture of fear is created. People turn to their leaders, like the Children of Israel to Aaron, and they look for a tangible sign of their safety.

For many Americans, the ultimate protection is a firearm. Like the golden calf, a firearm is thought to protect those who cherish and venerate it. Like the golden calf, made of metal, the firearm promises protection against uncertainty – in the case of the calf, the insecurity of a world without Moses; in the case of the gun, the fear of the unknown predator.

Across the country, some Americans have turned to their leaders, like the Israelites to Aaron, and demanded access to guns, anywhere and everywhere. This week, we face the likely adoption of a new law here in Arkansas: Public colleges and universities would no longer be permitted to keep guns off their campuses. Houses of worship, including Congregation B’nai Israel, would be required to post signs in order to prohibit firearms on our property. Guns in bars. Guns in the Capital itself.

The proliferation of guns in the United States has not saved us, any more than the golden calf led the Israelites to freedom. Last year, CBS reported that, “compared to 22 other high-income nations, the United States’ gun-related murder rate is 25 times higher ... [and] the gun-related suicide rate is eight times higher.” Some gun advocates insist that we need more “good guys with a gun,” in places like college campuses and even this Sanctuary, to combat the “bad guy” or the mentally ill person, with a gun, eager to carry out America’s next mass murder. The facts tell the opposite truth: Gun owners and their family members are more likely than other Americans to be victims of gun violence. Women and children are particularly at risk.

How many more children have to die, playing with the gun intended to protect the family, before America takes action?

How many more women have to die, as abuse escalates from words to fists to guns, before America says enough is enough? In this case, the proposed Arkansas law that would put guns in bars is particularly scary. Guns and alcohol do not mix!

How many more Americans have to die at the hands of mentally ill assailants, before we get as serious about treating mental illness as we are about defending the Second Amendment?

Careful attention, excellent news coverage, and a score card have been required to follow the gun legislation winding its way through our state capital in recent weeks. I have often pictured Governor Hutchinson in the role of Aaron, with his own fears, as legislators have come to him with theirs. First, public colleges and universities were to be forced to allow any faculty or staff member with a concealed carry permit to bring a gun onto campus. Governor Hutchinson said “no;” sixteen hours of active shooter training would be required, above the concealed-carry permit. The NRA cried foul; legislators who supported that bill, and the Governor himself, could lose their “A” rating from the NRA. Fear of risky primary elections spread like rumors in the camp during Moses’s delay. Ultimately, the NRA agreed to give an “A” to politicians who support only half of the additional training that the Governor had proposed, but at a golden price: In addition to faculty and staff, public institutions of higher learning would have to permit students above a certain age with the necessary credentials to bear arms on campus. The higher cost: Open season has been declared in the state capital and in bars across the state. Bars! Houses of worship face an unacceptable burden: We must permit firearms on our premises or post signs saying that we do not. Governor Hutchinson, like Aaron before him, effectively said, “bring me your rings,” building a golden calf of guns to assuage the fears of legislators, and maybe his own worries, about losing the NRA’s coveted “A-plus.”

Twice in the last four years, members of our congregation’s Confirmation class have chosen to lobby our representatives in Washington, D.C. on gun violence. Three years ago, one student hailed from a family of avid hunters. They purchase from licensed dealers, which are required to conduct background checks; and they keep their guns locked in a safe, at another location, far from the family home. She worried that unregulated gun show sales put the legitimate rights of responsible gun owners at risk. This year, the students who lobbied on gun violence proudly proclaimed that they are Republicans who support the president. “Law and order,” as our students understand it, requires sensible gun laws.

Ultimately, the sin of the golden calf is idolatry. Even when Aaron calls that molten image by the Holy Name of our God, it is no more than a statue. Idolatry is almost the gravest sin that a Jew can commit. However, most Jews, under most circumstances, are permitted even to bow down to an idol if required to save a human life.

America's gun violence epidemic takes an average of 93 lives a day, each of them worth the life of the whole world. America's gun violence epidemic combines the two gravest sins of Judaism: both idolatry and the taking of life. Firearms have become America's golden calf in 2017, with fearful Americans turning to weapons. They place faith in their own hands, caressing a gun, instead of in the God who shields us in every age.

After the plague, the Children of Israel receive God's grace. Forgiven, they continue their trek toward the Promised Land. America's journey toward justice must include freedom from worry that we will be the victims of the next mass shooting, just as Moses did have to come down from the mountain to lead the people. Let us, like our ancestors before us, move forward, freed of fear, with God's blessing.

Amen.