



# DVAR TZEDEK

## Parshat Ki Tisa 5768

By Rabbi Elliot Rose Kukla

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When I was in rabbinical school, I officiated at a Bat Mitzvah for Beatrice, a young girl who was reading from this week's *parshah*, *Ki Tisa*. As we studied the famous story of the golden calf, she asked me an excellent question: "What is wrong with idol worship, anyway?" After all, she pointed out, the synagogue was filled with beautiful holy objects, like an intricate stained-glass window, a filigreed eternal light and the ornately dressed Torah scroll itself.

I carefully explained to Beatrice that the problem with idols is that instead of serving as symbols of holiness, they replace holiness. Jewish sacred symbols, I claimed, are just tools to remember the central teachings of the Torah. They remind us that we should be kind to each other and pursue justice. An idol is something that is worshiped as an end in and of itself.

Beatrice listened carefully to my explanation for quite some time before responding: "I have one more question. If the Torah scroll is just a symbol that is supposed to remind us to be nice to each other, then why did you snap at me when we were practicing and I almost dropped it?"

There's nothing like solid *to'che'cha* (timely rebuke) from a 13-year-old to give a new rabbi perspective. Idol worship is hard to avoid.

In this week's *parshah*, while Moses is receiving the tablets of the Torah from God, the people get restless. "Come make us a god..." they say to Aaron. He melts down their jewelry and forms a glittering golden calf. The people see it and exclaim, "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the Land of Egypt!"<sup>1</sup> This incident is the primary example of idolatry in Jewish tradition. The people replace the worship of an ineffable, omnipotent God with a human-made, hastily constructed, showy *chotch'ke*.<sup>2</sup>

When Moses comes down the mountain and sees the people reveling in idolatry, he becomes enraged and smashes the tablets. Ironically, in that moment, Moses makes the same mistake as the people. Instead of seeing the tablets as symbols of holiness that can help heal the community, he sees them through the eyes of idolatry. In breaking the tablets, Moses treats them like Divine objects – magical talismans – that the people are no longer worthy to receive, instead of recognizing that they can serve as a pathway to the Divine. He confuses the medium for the message.

This year as we read *Parshat Ki Tisa*, we are called to examine our lives and ask ourselves what objects and ideas we treat as idols that keep us away from justice, as opposed to symbols that lead us toward it. Beatrice, my Bat Mitzvah student, taught me how easy it is slip into idol worship even of the Torah itself. Moses treated the tablets of the Torah like idols when he smashed them because he felt the people did not deserve them. I treated the Torah scroll like an idol when I was overly careful of the scroll itself and carelessly hurt the feelings of a child. We treat the Torah scroll as an idol in our congregations when we parade it gloriously through our synagogues on Shabbat, but don't internalize and put into practice its teachings of justice.

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 32:1-5

<sup>2</sup> Yiddish for a cheap, showy trinket.

Does your synagogue contribute as much money to social justice efforts as it does to maintaining the beauty of its building? If not, you may want to ask yourself what values the symbols in your sanctuary represent – are those values as evident and embedded in your community as the physical structure that houses your congregation?

Do fixed ideas about your own capacity keep you from organizing for justice and advocating for change? When we say we don't have time to work for change, we are treating our schedules as an idol – fixed, immutable and all powerful.

This week, as we read *Parshat Ki Tisa*, may we refuse to worship the golden calves in our own lives and in the lives of our communities. May we remember that gold does not equal holiness and that the presence of a Torah scroll does not equal the presence of Torah. Torah is made real only through acts of justice and tireless compassion.



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