Idol Worship

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Last week, in parshat Ki Tisa, we witnessed the unregulated exuberance of the participants in the incident of the Golden Calf and thus the need for a more appropriate means for relating to G-d. It was a moral lapse so serious that thousands died because of their participation. Now, in parshiot Vayakhel and Pekude, Moses relays G-d’s antidote to Aaron’s misguided recipe for idolatry. Here the Children of Israel receive the instructions for the communal project of building the Mishkan. And while there is no further mention of the Golden Calf, it is definitely the “elephant in the room.”

A literal definition of idolatry casts the concept as the worship of a graven image. Imagine that an idolator fashions a sun-god, attempting to materialize a process of nature by making it a “thing” and elevating it to a holy status. This example typifies an extreme form of idol worship, but perhaps it can be helpful to expand the concept so that we can identify our own modes of counterproductive thinking that, while not on the level of literal idolatry, can still be problematic. To paraphrase Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, idolatry happens when people mistake “a part for the whole.” He elaborates, saying that idol worship commonly occurs when people over-emphasize what they consider to be a positive idea or behavior to the point where “ends and means” become confused. In other words, when beliefs and/or goals are improperly contextualized the results are often negative. By this way of thinking, idol worship is an issue of over-compartmentalized and insufficiently examined, myopic thinking. This is a problem on an individual level but ever more so on a macro level when ideas of dubious value or destructive modes of thought resonate within a group and take on dangerous momentum.

Once the concept has been broadened it is easy characterize other people’s contrary perspectives as akin to idolary if you think they aren’t understanding something properly. But is it appropriate to voice the accusation of idolatry when discussing groups or individuals? It’s a powerful insult that is most often a matter of perspective and, of course, opinion. What one holds most dear another sees as blatant idolatry. It’s easy to see how quickly that label, when used as a hammer, will become counterproductive. Such branding will inevitably increase conflict. The concept of idolatry is probably best then used to inform self-reflection. It should also be said that many compulsive behaviors are the result of powerful drivers such as physical addiction or other desperate circumstance, so idolatry can be an inappropriate lens for understanding many undesirable behaviors. Still, taking time to reflect on our current priorities and assumptions using that metaphorical frame can clarify our thinking to maintain focus on the endeavors that help us properly realize our aspirations, our values, our commitments, and our goals.

This process of self-examination is how Shabbat ties in. Parshiyot Vayakhel/Pekude are predominantly concerned with the details of the construction of the Mishkan and related accoutrements. Under the guidance of the enlightened, capable, and artistic builder Betzalel, the Children of Israel will undertake an exciting project that inspires the best efforts of all involved. But first things first; they are reminded to keep Shabbat, to regularly pause and rest completely and to separate themselves from their normal endeavors. This reminder, placed at this point in the Torah, shows that a pause for self-reflection is an important counterweight to the trap of idolatry.

Our tradition has given us the deep and fundamental insight that worshipping idols is misguided. Having just made that error, the Jewish people, wandering in the wilderness were given the commandment of building the Mishkan as a remedy which would focus their intentions and energy meaningfully and productively in accordance with moral and ethical values. As Jews, we embrace a legacy that asks us to continuously apply our moral and ethical beliefs in service of the actions that empower us to improve ourselves, our community, and the world. It is left to each of us to try to thoughtfully understand and appreciate our place in the world and to seek discipline and balance in our actions so that they align with our individual and collective goals. Building the Miskan was the starting point for the project, but opportunities to be creative, to learn, to repeatedly fail, and to realize our potential are ongoing.

But we all know what a formidable challenge this is. Our tradition warns, that although essential, rules and rituals can sometimes become an end in themselves at which point they become akin to idol worship. So, I’d like to close with a question. Are there examples that you find compelling from our tradition concerning the danger of losing perspective? Examples of mistaking “the part for the whole” or “the ends from the means?”

Shabbat shalom.