

Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah – Ki Tissa

Dates are important to remember. July 4 is a classic example. In this country, it is the day we declared our independence from England. January 15 is another important date. It is the birthday of late activist and dreamer Martin Luther King, Jr. In truth, though, the date itself would be rather meaningless were it not for the events surrounding the date. A great many people were born on January 15, and every country has July 4 on their calendar, but they are only unique and special on ours. What matters is, as Paul Harvey would say, the rest of the story. Of course, I could point out, towards this end, that while June 29, 1863 was the day that George Custer became General, we remember what happened afterward more readily.

In this week's Torah portion, tradition teaches us that we visit an ominous date in our religious history. According to the Mishnah, the 17th of Tammuz is the date that Moses comes down from the mountain and destroys the "Ten Commandment" tablets. It is also the date that the walls of Jerusalem were breached, leading to the destruction of the Second Temple (the Jerusalem Talmud says the First Temple, too). With all of this trauma, I found it a little odd that the late Lubavitcher Rebbe was actually focused more on the day before, the 16th, than on the date we observe remembrances. As I read on, it became clear that we were seeing two different ideas in the text, but I was really taken aback by the way he worked through his analysis. He argued that the day more important than the one when Moses smashed the tablets over the "Golden Calf" incident, was the day it was fashioned. Certainly Moses receives the command to have two angels made of Gold to adorn the ark, so the Rebbe argued that the Golden Calf was not, in and of itself, a problem. It did not become a problem until Aaron called it a God. It is ok for God to tell Moses to make golden images that resemble the heavenly host, but not for a human to do so.

Almost leaving the point, the Rebbe pointed out two other events, that while not technically tied to the 16th, might as well have been. One was the sole day when more of Shammai's disciples were in the Yeshiva than were Hillel's. The Talmud teaches that in making halakhic decisions, the majority always wins. The Talmud also teaches that the better answer is always according to the more globally minded Hillel than the narrowly minded Shammai. Why does Hillel win? He has more disciples who outnumber Shammai's ... except for this one day. On that day all the decisions that were made were overly strict, as per Shammai's teaching. The other event was the day that Ptolemy had the Torah translated into Greek. In both cases the acts themselves are fairly benign, no differently than the creation of the calf. The problem is in the potential damage that these events can cause, as time moves forward. Certainly the narrowness of Shammai's rulings set the stage for an ongoing debate between religious factions over who is ultimately correct. If Hillel's rulings were uniformly accepted, then there would be no room for the narrowness through which many view a single "correct" religious answer. As to Torah, we are taught that it was originally given in 70 languages, Greek being one of them. This translation, though, was part of an attempt by a man to hoard all knowledge in his own personal library. Were we to have left the Torah in its original language(s), we would have to accept that its magic is rooted in its lack of concrete statements, as per our traditional way of reading the text. As written and canonized, Torah has no vowels and no sentences. Its value is not in what it says, but in the way it leads us to discuss and grow in each generation -- even where our reading is very different from that of any generation past. Its value

roots in its global value and flexibility, not in any sense of legalistic dogma one might read into it. In another of the Rebbe's teachings he states that the Torah is the possession of the world, not just the Jews. The differences in traditions stem from what we do with it. Imagine that we could all accept the same parameters, even while we might see widely divergent messages in the text. We would still all earn the same respect and dignity for being on the journey, at all.

Ultimately, we too often focus on the result of work, and not the process that brought the result. What really matters is the attention we pay to the potential blessings or challenges that our processes might bring about. King's birthday is only a day we have artificially chosen to recognize his life's work. The 17th of Tammuz may be the day Moses broke the tablets and Jerusalem's walls were breached, but the events leading up to this day is ultimately what really matters. For me, commemorating the one day is like saying a prayer for a good grade after you turned in the test. The time to have "prayed" was while you were studying. Birthdays and anniversary dates are wonderful if the days in between each have been lived valuably. The time to ensure our solid future is here and now. Acting with diligence and intention today will help to ensure a more secure and more spiritually fulfilled world for tomorrow. Shabbat shalom.