

Rabbi Weinreb's Weekly Column:

Ki Tisa - Para

The Hindu Princess and the Golden Calf

She was a Hindu princess. She was one of the brightest students in my graduate school class. We studied psychology, and she went on to return to her country and become a psychotherapist of world renown. For our purposes, I shall refer to her as Streena.

We were a class of 12, and except for one lapsed Catholic, she and I were the only ones who had a serious interest in religion. And we were the only ones who actively practiced our faith.

This was back in the days when religion was far from a popular subject in psychology departments. Religion was seen as foolish, at best, and as quite possibly a sign of neurotic pathology. So neither of us was very public about our religious practices.

In the early afternoons, when the time for the Mincha service rolled around, I would usually find an excuse to absent myself from the psychology department library where our group hung out. There was a small shul not far from the campus, and I would make my way there and unobtrusively return to the library when Mincha was over.

But there were times when it was impossible for me to leave the building. During those times, I would make use of a small side room and pray in private.

It was during one of those times that I discovered that I was not the only one to use that side room for prayers. Streena was there too.

I remember the first time I noticed her there. I had just taken the customary three steps back after concluding my Amida. She was in the far corner of the room, doing her utmost not to disturb me. She was deep in prayer herself, but what was most striking was that she had small object in her hand.

When it was apparent to me that she too had concluded her prayers, I approached her and inquired about that object. She showed me what looked like a small doll, only she referred to it by a Hindu name that meant that it was her deity, her God. Plainly and simply, it was an idol.

Over our years in graduate school, we had numerous conversations about religion, the nature of prayer, and of course the nature of the divinity. I stressed that when I as a Jew prayed, I did not pray to any image, statue or portrait. I prayed to an invisible and unknowable God. She found that impossible to accept. "When I pray", she insisted, "I must have some concrete visual image before me. I know that this little doll

is not the deity. But it is what I call a concretization of the higher power that I worship."

The stark contrast between Streena's mode of prayer and my Jewish conception of the way in which we are to conceive the Almighty is one of the lessons of an exceedingly provocative episode in this week's Torah portion, Ki Tisa (Sh'mots 30:11-34:35). I refer to story of the Golden Calf.

Moshe ascends the mountain to receive the Holy Tablets. He is delayed in his return, and, in their impatience, the Jewish people collect gold, fashion an idol out of it in the shape of a calf, and worship it with sacrifices and an orgiastic feast.

Every reader of the Torah has been puzzled by the sudden descent of the people from a state of lofty spiritual anticipation to the degrading scene of dancing worshipfully before a graven image.

One such reader, himself a pagan, was the king of the Khazars, a nation in Central Asia, whose search for religious truth is the theme of one of the most intriguing books of Jewish philosophy, Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi's Kuzari.

In that king's dialogue with the Jewish sage who is his spiritual mentor, he condemns this behavior and challenges the sage to justify the apparent idolatry of the Jewish people. The sage, who is actually the

voice of the author of the Kuzari, responds, in part:

"In those days, every people worshiped images... This is because they would focus their attention upon the image, and profess to the masses that divinity attaches itself to the image... We do something like this today when we treat certain places with special reverence - we will even consider the soil and rocks of these places as sources of blessing... The objective was to have some tangible item that they could focus upon... Their intent was not to deny the God who took them out of Egypt; rather, it was to have something in front of them upon which they could concentrate when recounting God's wonders... We do the same thing when we ascribe divinity to the skies (for example, we call fear of God 'fear of heaven')..."

This is but one explanation of the motivation for what is one of the greatest recorded sins of our people. But it is an especially instructive explanation, for it renders understandable, in our own terms, an act that is otherwise totally mystifying.

In our own inner experiences of prayer, we have all struggled with the difficulty of "knowing before Whom we stand". It is frustrating to address an abstract, invisible, and unknowable deity. It is comforting to imagine that we stand before a mortal king, or a flesh and blood father figure, someone physical and

real. I think that we can all confess to moments when we have, at least in our visualizations of the Almighty, resorted to the same process of concretization as Streena did.

Ideally, we know that we must resist the temptation to "humanize" God, to anthropomorphize Him. We believe in a deity Who sees but is not seen, hears but is not heard, and who is as far from human ken as heaven is from Earth. In this fundamental belief, we differ from other religions; and indeed not only from Hinduism but from certain forms of Christianity as well.

Nevertheless, we can sympathize with Streena's need to pray to her doll, and in the process we can come to grips with what must have been going on in the minds of our ancestors when they stooped to idolatry and committed the sin which the Almighty has never totally forgiven, the worship of the Golden Calf. 🚫