In Praise of Uncertainty
Ki Sisa 2010
The Jewish Center
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On Wednesday morning, I packed my lunch and headed downtown to report for jury duty. After filling out a little paperwork, a clerk explained to all of us prospective jurors the basic process and I fully expected it to be a rather uneventful morning.

As it turned out, though, there was quite a high profile case that was set to select its jury and the clerk informed us that the day’s procedures would be a little different. The judge, he said, would be speaking with all of us as a group and then meeting with each of us individually to determine who might serve on this particular jury.

Rest assured – I was not selected and won’t be spending the next six weeks on Center St. But in the course of his talk with us, the judge said something I’d like to reflect on. “Don’t go home and Google the case,” he cautioned us. “The system we have in which attorneys representing the various parties introduce relevant witnesses and documents – that’s the system that works – it’s balanced and impartial. It’s not perfect, but if we allow it to function as it should, then we’ll be able to feel quite certain that the outcome we reach will be the right one.”

This morning I’d like to consider quite an opposite proposal. If our justice system is interested in producing verdicts that reflect the highest degree of certainty, I’d like to consider for a few moments the virtues of uncertainty – not as a value in the courtroom, but perhaps as a value in more contexts than we typically allow.

For rabbis, Ki Sisa is like an oasis in a homiletic wilderness. The two parshios prior and the two parshios following deal almost exclusively with the Mishkan. The Tabernacle has its own internal beauty and an enormous profundity. But the gripping narrative of the fledgling Jewish nation all but stops. Our parsha this morning doesn’t just pick up the story; it features one of the most perplexing and really most tragic episodes in the entire span of Jewish history.

There are essentially two fundamental questions that emerge from the Torah’s account of the Golden Calf.

1. Why do the people do it? It’s so irrational. Only months earlier Moshe had set into motion the ten plagues that laid waste the most powerful nation on earth. Only weeks prior the people stood by Moshe Rabbeinu as he split the sea and marched the Jewish people to safety. And even more recently than that Moshe had brought the people to the foot of Har Sinai where they experienced divine revelation. How could anyone in their right mind look at a golden statuette and declare as do:

   אלוהי ישראל אשר הצרך מארץ מצרים

   This is your god, Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.
Keep this question in the back of your mind – we’ll return to it in a moment. But let’s focus first on an equally perplexing problem:

2. Why does Aharon let them get away with it? He knows it’s wrong. Why doesn’t he put his foot down and stop them?

Perhaps, as Rashi suggests, Aharon is afraid for his life. As the medrash tells us, Chur tried to stop the revolt and the people killed him. Aharon fears he’ll suffer the same fate – so he tries to bide a little time in the hope that Moshe will return and the people will come back to their senses.

This answer is of course plausible – as are many others. I’d just like to identify why from a characterological perspective this is the case. Accepting Rashi’s schema, why are the players not reversed? Why is Aharon not the zealot who courageously tries to dissuade the masses from committing such a flagrant mistake?

What I’d like to suggest is that Aharon is almost constitutionally incapable of stopping the people. Remember how Chazal describe Aharon? What’s his personality? He’s the אביו של משה ורוחו של משה – he’s the one who places harmony above all else. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks once wrote, “the individual (like Aaron) who chooses peace at any price can sometimes allow those around him to make a golden calf.”

Moshe comes down from atop the mountain and discovers what’s happened. He asks Aharon for an explanation. What’s the first thing Aharon says:

Please, Moshe – don’t be angry.

It’s the most revealing line imaginable. Moshe’s emotional reaction should be a footnote. What matters is the objective reality: Have the people sinned, who’s accountable and what do we now? Who cares if Moshe is angry?

The answer is that Aharon cares. It’s always what he cares about. If there’s conflict, if there’s tension – how can we resolve it so that no one gets upset? It’s a beautiful and sublime quality – until it’s taken too far. He can’t say no to the people because he’s afraid of how they might react. To disallow their conduct would be to enter a sphere of the unknown. Aharon never goes down that path because he needs to occupy a safe reality – a narrative in which the continuation of the story is secure and known.

And it’s really the answer to our first question as well. He just wants things to be שלם – to be whole – to be complete. He has no tolerance for fracture or conflict – which is a different way of saying he has no tolerance for the uncertain or the unknown.

The population responsible for the sin of the golden calf isn’t so different from Aharon himself. They simply have no capacity to tolerate uncertainty. If you look at the text
closely, the Torah says this quite explicitly. You know what sets the people off? Moshe is gone and

We don’t know what’s become of him.

They people say it themselves! It’s the uncertainty – the not knowing – that sends them over the edge.

Living without Moshe is possible. Think of Moshe’s death. Everyone knows his end is looming. He dispenses his deathbed blessings to all the tribes. He’s tapped his successor. There’s no secret. Moshe is going to perish. The people know he won’t be leading them into the Promised Land. So where’s the rebellion? Where’s the uprising? Where’s the mob yelling and screaming, “We can’t go on without our faithful leader?”

The answer boils down to the fear of uncertainty. When what’s to come is unpleasant or even tragic, the human mind has the capacity to wrap itself around the new reality and cope with it as it may. Not knowing is exponentially more difficult.

As noted psychologist Steven Stosny once remarked, “Certainty is an emotional state rather than a rational one.” So it’s no wonder that an uncertain people could act so irrationally. It’s so absurd. Do they really believe that a molten statue took them out of Egypt? Of course not. Yet so gripped are they by their need to know, they act out in a way that defies simple reason.

Perhaps it’s no accident that we so often read Parshas Parah on this Shabbos. The רסה א_sold red heifer – the ashes of which have the capacity to transform the impure and make it pure – is our timeless symbol of that which we do not understand. And yet the Torah asks us to accept it – to live with the knowledge that we don’t know – that we aren’t certain – that we simply can’t explain it.

In our über-rational world in which we privilege information above almost all else – it’s hard for us – it’s a real challenge to tolerate uncertainty. We want to be in the know – and we want to be sure about what we know.

But I would submit to you that becoming comfortable with not knowing and being uncertain – can actually be quite constructive. It points us in the direction of humility, faith and a real need for other people.

Today we’re celebrating Lucius’ bar mitzvah. It’s the moment that marks the beginning of a young man’s journey toward understanding and accepting more parts of Judaism. Lucius – you can be sure that there will be parts along the way that are difficult to understand – or don’t sit well with you. That’s OK. That’s part of what the Torah is trying to convey to us. We don’t have to have all the answers. Things won’t always fit neatly together. It’s in fact when we insist on avoiding conflict or denying the unknown that we end up in the gravest danger.
Tolerance for uncertainty doesn’t have to come at the expense of endeavoring to know and understand. Our quest for Torah and wisdom should know no bounds. But if – after we’ve made our most valiant efforts – we find that we still just don’t know – let’s view that moment as a pathway rather than an end. When faced with our greatest challenges, sometimes the answer is be like Aharon – to reach out and hold someone tight. But sometimes it’s uncertainty itself that needs our embrace.