



Parsha Ki Tissa
I Kings 18:1-39
February 14, 2014 / 14 Adar 1 5774

Life in 2014 is full of imminent opportunities for acquisition. Our toddlers' tiny fingers know how to swipe iPhone screens before they can handle a fork, and that's all it takes to accidentally buy Turbo Tax on Amazon Prime. Streaming movies, a new book for the Kindle, modest fame (it's always just one more Twitter follower or Facebook friend away), or fine olive oil freshly pressed somewhere in a hamlet in Tuscany and flown in on a jet for members of the Olive Oil of the Month Club are all just one click away. In America, we live in an unprecedented time of more.

Ironically, Lynne Twist suggests that the first thing that most Americans think about in the morning and the last thing that we ponder before we fall asleep involves some form of insufficiency. In *The Soul of Money* (pp. 43--45), she writes, "For me, and for many of us, our first waking thought of the day is 'I didn't get enough sleep.' The next one is 'I don't have enough time.' Whether true or not, that thought of not enough occurs to us automatically before we even think to question or examine it. We spend most of the hours and the days of our lives hearing, explaining, complaining, or worrying about what we don't have enough of... This internal condition of scarcity, this mind set of scarcity, lives at the very heart of our jealousies, our greed, our prejudice, and our arguments with life."

It's not a great stretch to see our seemingly unlimited access to "stuff" as posing a threat to our equanimity. In moments of uncertainty, it is easy enough to turn to a little shopping therapy to deal with this "internal condition of scarcity." It is part of the story of the human condition that we fill this emptiness with something that we hope will make us feel renewed, spiritually satiated. At times we have filled this with idolatry, at others, with fervent consumption. But alas, the quick fix that works in the moment is more often than not, a temporary cure.

Parashat Ki Tissa tells this story. As soon as Moses is gone from the Israelite camp for a little too long, the sense of scarcity and lack is so overwhelming that the Israelites join together to construct the golden calf, a temporary fix toward which they can direct their sense of insecurity. We don't spend much time thinking about how good that must have felt in the moment, but I envision that a euphoria swept through the camp as the Israelites imagined that this new God would fill them up with a sense of protection and security. But of course, that euphoria is quickly replaced with the depths of scarcity, anxiety, and an intense regret for having perverted their desire for safeguard into a gleaming, golden idol that was powerless to protect them from the ignited ire of the Holy One.

This story plays itself out over through our history. The haftarah takes place during the reign of King Ahab (871---852 BCE) and describes a similar scenario. The Israelites have largely filled their sense of scarcity with the worship of Baal instead of Adonai, and Elijah attempts to correct this choice. In a dramatic display of God's power and the impotence of the prophets of Baal, Elijah reinforces the foolishness of looking to false gods to fill an inner void. A pyrotechnic, fire---consuming sacrificial feat took place on top of Carmel Mountain, reminding the Israelites that their true God is Adonai, reinforcing the notion that the only way to fill that spiritual void is through developing a sustained relationship with God. Easy fixes are transient. A true connection with the Divine Being requires a continuous spiritual practice, not a quick fix. After God's presence is manifest through this demonstration, all of the Israelites fall to their knees and proclaim, "ה' הוא האלהים / ה' הוא האלהים" "The Lord Alone is our God, the Lord Alone is our God." These are precisely the words that we say right before we blow the shofar at the end of our fast on Yom Kippur. We spend twenty five hours redirecting ourselves toward filling our sense of lack with a connection to the Holy One rather than the consumption that has become second nature. And in the moment that we feel cleansed and open to finding a new path back to God, we say the very same words that were uttered before Elijah on top of that mountain: "ה' הוא האלהים הוא האלהים" "The Lord Alone is our God, the Lord Alone is our God." I often think that we are speaking more to ourselves than anyone else.'

Food for Thought:

1. The word that best captures our connection to God is a brit, or covenant. Covenantal relationships are built over time and often through unglamorous, small acts of piety. What are such acts in your life? How might you establish new ways to contribute to this covenant.
2. In this haftarah, Elijah is God's representative, making God's will clearly known and manifest for all to comprehend. Has there ever been a time in your life in which you felt so connected to God that you felt "called" to behave a certain way?
3. What are the important things in your life that you wish you made more time for? What are the things that you spend too much time on? Is it realistic to think of a way to let go of something that may make time for something that is more important to you?

From the Editors: Join the discussion of this commentary in Mentschen, the FJMC's online forum.

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