

Ki Tissa 2/08  
**Don't Have a Cow, Rabbi!**

“And on his farm he had a cow. Eee ayy eee ayy oh. With a...” You “moo moo here” like the best of them. But I want to see if you really are like cows. So I want to tell you a story... about a cow.

It's a story found in the Talmud (Pes. 112a) about the famous Rabbi Akiva and his student Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai. During the height of the Roman persecutions, Rabbi Akiva was thrown in jail. (You may recall that we read about his ultimate fate in the martyrology section of YK musaf service). So Akiva was in jail because among other things, the Roman's forbid the teaching of Torah. They sought to destroy not only the Jewish people but the Jewish soul. Well, all alone in jail, along comes his student Rabbi Shimon who had come to visit his teacher. When the guard turned away, Shimon whispered to Akiva, “Master, teach me Torah.” But Rabbi Akiva responded, “I will not.” Disappointed, Rabbi Shimon countered: “But if you don't teach me Torah, I will tell my father Yohai, and you'll be handed over to the government.” Ok, so let's pause here for a minute. Clearly, Rabbi Shimon's threat makes no sense for two reasons: Akiva was already in jail; he was already under the watchful eye of the government. And second: Shimon hated the Romans. He never would have handed his teacher over to them. Rabbi Shimon's statement, then, “I'll tell my father who'll hand you over to the government” can only be understood as the response of someone desperate to learn from his teacher. He was grasping at straws, trying any tactic. What happened? Rabbi Akiva responded to his student: “Listen, I know you want to learn and don't you think I want teach you? “My son, the cow wants to nurse more than the calf want to suckle.” Yoter mima shehaegel rotze linok, para rotza l'hanik. I do want to teach you,” Akiva was saying. “But look, I am in jail. I can't take any more chances. My life is on the line if we get caught.” And Rabbi Shimon in anguish replied- “Am I not in just as much danger if I don't drink, if I don't learn your Torah.”

I love this story. It speaks to us on many levels. Torah is likened to life-giving mother's milk that nourishes our people. So vital, so essential is it, that we should risk our lives for it. Though perhaps not the most flattering image, Rabbi Akiva is described as cows- which is probably better than pig!- his student is pictured as a calf. The rabbi has to teach- he can't hold in his insights and his wisdom. And the pupil? He has to learn, so desperate is he for knowledge. Together, they need each other; they rely on each other.

This story has much to teach us about Torah and about pedagogy. But I share it with you today as a way to think about the role of a rabbi. As many of you know, we are in the process of searching for a second rabbi at Beth El. I like to think of the process as a shidduch, a matching process. We need to find not just a bright person but the right person. So we are giving great thought about what our congregation should our look for in a rabbi. Some want a rabbi who is great with youth. Others want a rabbi who will make services inspiring. Still others seek a scholar. Finding one person that can meet all our expectations is frankly impossible. But we have a good pool of applicants. And our search committee is excellent.

Our search committee and advisory group have developed a set of criteria and have created a list of topics and questions to explore with potential candidates. That is their role. But what should we, the general congregation look for? Another cow story provides a hint. Rabbi Akiva spoke of an egel, a calf. In our parasha, we read a very different account of an egel, heit haegel, the story of a golden calf.

Why did the Israelites build a golden calf? In just two verses, the Torah introduces the background to the scene. Listen carefully: “The Israelites saw that Moshe delayed in coming down the mountain. So they gathered together around Aaron and said, ‘make us a god who will walk before us because we don’t know what happened to Moshe, the man who brought us up from Egypt.’” Did you catch that? Here’s a quick summary: “Moshe is gone. Aaron, make us a god. Because we don’t know what happened to Moshe.” It’s a total non sequator! It doesn’t make sense. If the point of the story is that the Israelites wanted to worship a golden calf, then it would have said: “Where is Moshe? It’s been over 40 days. He must have abandoned us. Anyways, we give up on human leaders. Aaron, make us a god we can see, one who will take us the rest of the way home.” But that is not what the Torah says. The focus of the verses is on Moshe. The Israelites don’t know what happened to him and feel lost without their leader. This is the way the medieval Spanish commentator, Ramban, Nachmanides reads the story. He writes: “The Israelites did not want a god; they did not ask for a golden calf. Rather, they wanted a leader in place of Moshe. They wanted a moreh derekh, a guide who would show them the way.”

Now “hold on,” you might say. Don’t the Israelites explicitly tell Aaron, “make us a god aseh lanu elohim?” How can we say they simply wanted a new leader? Ramban doesn’t answer this objection. So I’d like to suggest a solution. Actually two. Elohim can of course mean god so aseh lanu elohim could mean “make us a god.” But in other places in the Torah, this word “elohim” refers to humans. In Deut. “elohim” occasionally means “judges.” And in Genesis it means “nobility” or “princes.” So perhaps here, the people are calling out to Aaron, “Moshe is gone. Appoint another princely leader, another Moshe Rabbeinu, Moses our teacher.” Just as Pirkie Avot prompts us “aseh l’kha rav, find a teacher,” so too here, the Israelites cry out, “aseh lanu elohim, find us another ish elohim a holy man to lead our people to freedom.”

Well, as we know, unfortunately Aaron just doesn’t get the message. Aaron is the one who suggests that the Israelites take off their jewelry to make a golden calf. There is much to consider in Aaron’s response. Did he not understand what the Israelite’s truly wanted? Or perhaps, did he know the Israelites better than they knew themselves and provided them not with what they said they wanted but what they secretly desired? I’ll leave these questions for us to ponder. But I would like to pause to consider a phrase used in Ramban’s commentary on this passage. In Moshe’s absence, the Israelites sought a moreh derech, a guide, a teacher of the way. This term, moreh derekh offers a helpful way to think about rabbinic leadership and what we at Beth El seek in a second rabbi.

Our own Rabbi Herring, recently wrote an article that appeared in a Jewish journal about the evolving role of the rabbi. We have to reconceptualize the role of the rabbi, Herring argued. No longer do rabbis have a monopoly on Jewish learning. Today, Jewish and non Jewish faculty at university Jewish study departments are often better versed in rabbinic texts and theology. No longer, are rabbis called upon to serve primarily as a mara d’atra, as halakhic authorities deciding matters of Jewish law for their

congregations. And finally, with the growth of Jewish communal organizations and foundations, no longer do rabbis have a monopoly on Jewish communal leadership. For Rabbi Herring, the term that best captures the multi-faceted role that rabbis play- from preacher to counselor, teacher to supervisor- is the term *morei derekh hayim*, a guide to the Jewish way of life. As Herring writes: “every pastoral, educational or administrative encounter with other human beings provides a rabbi with an opportunity to share some aspect of Jewish wisdom, at whatever point along their life’s journey the rabbi meets them.”

This phrase “*moreh derekh*” captures the sense that a rabbi should guide a spiritual seeker on her unique pathway; a rabbi should help others reveal and then follow the unfolding of their life’s journey. In this sense, the description of a rabbi as a “*moreh derech*” reflects our zeitgeist, our age with its emphasis on individuality and on spiritual quests. In the context of our parasha, however, “*moreh derech*” broadens the scope of a rabbis’ role from catering to individual needs to creating and caring for communities. Ramban reminds us that the role of a leader is to guide the community toward a particular destination. Like Moshe rabbeinu who with God’s help led an admittedly circuitous route through the desert towards a promised land, so too is the role of rabbi to inspire and sometimes goad us to explore a path we might not otherwise choose ourselves. A *moreh derech* in the fullest sense- that is what we seek in our second rabbi here at Beth El.

I can’t predict who that individual will be. And while I know that some may prefer a man. Others would like to see a woman. I just want... a cow. I am looking for a rabbi, a woman or a man who simply has to share the riches and beauty of our Jewish tradition, whose Torah will nourish us and whose wisdom will lead us. But here is the thing- for us to attract that kind of rabbi, we have to be like a calf. We have to want to drink. And this is what candidates are going to look for in us.

After weeks like this past one, we are reminded that we we’ll never attract rabbis to Minnesota with our weather. And though inside there is warmth, *heimiskeit* isn’t enough. And so besides judging his *dvar Torah* or the way she interacts with teens, we must ask ourselves, are we like calves? Are we thirsty? Can we, like Rabbi Shimon say, “but rabbi, if I don’t drink my life is also in danger?”

A story from this past week offers one answer. A few days ago, I was teaching a class. At the end of the lesson, one participant was fidgeting in his chair. He raised his hand and said, “when I came into the class, I had to go to the bathroom. But the learning was so interesting, that I didn’t want to miss a thing and so held it the whole time!” Then he ran out of the room. Here the problem was not that he was too thirsty but that he drank too much! Yes, some of us are thirsty. But too many of us, way too many of us are not.

The Torah is likened to water? Are we thirsty for Torah? The psalmist says “*tzama nafshi l’el hai*, I thirst for the living God.” Do we thirst for God? The prophet says “let justice shall roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.” Do we draw from these *maaneyi hayeshua* these wellsprings of salvation? In ancient days, the community gathered around a well. We as a community must return to this well to drink, not just during this coming period of interviews. We must address these questions before and long after our second rabbi is found.

In *Pirkie Avot* we read, “open your house to scholars and drink deeply of their words *havei shoteh b’tzama et divreihem.*” In the coming weeks, let us open our doors

and greet these rabbinical candidates with warmth. Let's interview them. And when they interview us, they should find us humming "with a moo moo here."

Shabbat Shalom