

Yasher Koach, Siona.

Not only did you *speak* about the faith you had to cultivate in yourself to reach this moment, but you also *showed* us what you're capable of. In that way, you embodied your teaching, leading by example.

As you drew us to consider, this week's parsha describes the biggest failure of leadership in the entire Torah. It only takes a few verses to describe the golden calf episode, but constructing that idol is generally understood to be the gravest sin the Israelites ever commit in the Torah. And though it's a short text, it appears with almost cinematic sequencing. Exodus 31 ends with God handing Moses the tablets of the Law, ready to bring them to the people. The scene ends, and chapter 32 cuts to the people growing restless after so long without Moses to lead them. In the very first verse, they cry out and demand that Aaron makes a god for them to worship. And in verse two, he starts to do exactly as they say. It takes only four more verses for this epic mistake to be fully made.

The people were angry and scared for a long time, we can understand. But it takes only six verses for them to lose themselves, and betray God and abandon their highest ideals. And when they break their most sacred rule, their entire system collapses in an instant.

Given the gravity of this sin, Siona, you asked why Aaron went along with it. He obviously knew better. And you gave us good answers from our tradition. Maybe he was stalling, says the Midrash, until Moses could come back and save the day. But as we see, he didn't waste any time. And as you suggest, even if the rabbis try to redeem Aaron, there really is no good reason why he capitulated to the people's wishes. Instead, he never should've agreed to build the golden calf in the first place. And as a leader, he should have tried harder to lean into his values, even pushing himself to have hard conversations to remind the people to believe in God, and to live up to their potential.

But Aaron made an expedient choice. He did the thing that felt good in the moment, which satisfied the primal desire for mutiny among the people. He gave them what they wanted and protected himself temporarily. But in so doing, he completely lost the thread. And as a result, the people were nearly annihilated in the verses thereafter.

Each year when we come to this parsha, inevitably we think about our own leaders, and about leadership more broadly. And *this* year, cast against the backdrop of the past few months – when we've spoken at almost every Shabbat service about the danger that

actions of our current government pose to democracy writ large – it's hard not to see further parallels between all that and this week's Torah portion. As the president makes decisions that are politically convenient but simultaneously threaten the very Constitution that ensures his office and upon which we rely.

What stuck out most to me, during this year's reading of Ki Tisa, was just how quickly the whole relationship between God and the people eroded because of a lapse in the leader's judgment. The narrative and the essence of the Torah are each predicated on the Israelites following one eternal God. And yet this arrangement was almost entirely unraveled in just a few verses. So, too, it seems, is our carefully calibrated system of government by the people, imperiled further with each passing day. It feels like it's happening so fast.

This week, we had yet another reason to be alarmed by threats to constitutional norms.

By now, it's well known that a Columbia grad student was arrested and detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement without having been charged with any crime. One week ago exactly, ICE agents showed up at the home of Mahmoud Khalil, a pro-Palestinian activist, to tell him that his student visa had been revoked, when they didn't know he had a green card, bringing him into custody and holding him in a detention center in Louisiana. To date, he has still not been charged with a crime. In our legal system, people with green cards are afforded due process...and the officials moved so quickly that it seemed that he was not. Which has the potential to set a precedent for the government detaining and possibly deporting people at will. Fortunately, a U.S. District Court ruled that he can't be deported before a judicial process that includes his lawyers. But the *attempt* to swiftly deport Mahmoud Khalil is chilling.

In a way, it wasn't a surprising attempt. President Trump promised during his campaign to deport anti-Israel student activists, and he's now trying to make good on that promise. But no matter what we think about the student protest movement, at Columbia or anywhere else, no matter what we think about Mahmoud Khalil and the slogans he's chanted or protests he's organized, this is not a way forward for a country that values democracy. It is an expedient choice for the president, which has been praised by some supporters of Israel in the short term, because it appears on its surface like support for the students who were legitimately harmed by the ferment on campus. But make no mistake: this has the potential to reverberate far beyond this one scenario, jeopardizing even more established norms of our legal system, and, I believe, it has the potential to put Jews in greater danger.

Friends, for the past two months, and really for a long time even before that, we've spoken about the rising tide of authoritarianism in this country. We've been aghast at federal agencies gutted, world leaders undermined, and executive orders that harm some of the most vulnerable Americans. But the example of Mahmoud Khalil poses a danger to American democracy yet unseen over the past months, and we need to pay close attention to what comes next. Both because it really matters for the future of anyone exercising a Constitutionally-protected right to disagree with their government. And because of the way in which Jews are being centered in the national story.

Now, it may be that some of us here in this room feel that Mahmoud Khalil is not someone who deserves our protection or empathy. As a leader in the protest movement at Columbia, a movement that has included documented instances of anti-Semitism, which we have also described from this bimah, it would be all too easy for some of us to feel a kind of catharsis. In fact, it feels like this detention was intended to make us feel that relief...as a kind of favor to those of us who love and care about Israel. You may have seen, for instance, that the White House released an official post of Kahlil's photo with the words "Shalom Mahmoud" emblazoned upon it. But even if you abhor everything that Khalil stands for – especially if so! – it is so important that we advocate for his rights to due process and free speech. And I should add that that image from the White House and the broader messaging about him to the Jewish community is a perversion of what it means to be in solidarity with Jews.

The strategy of this Administration seems designed to drive a wedge through Jewish communities. Forcing a conflict between the id and superego of American Jewry, banking on the belief that we will be guided by our anger and *not* by our fidelity to democratic values. It is a test, as much of us as Jews, as it is of our legal system. And our task now is to push ourselves and push our fellow Jews to see beyond the specific emotions many of us feel when we consider this activist, and the many pro-Palestine activists who will likely come next, and perhaps also the pro-Ukrainian activist, or the anti-tariff activist, or the LGBT activist, or the green card holder, or the naturalized citizen, or eventually the citizen...whoever is targeted next...we must push ourselves to look beyond what we think personally about these groups...so that we can see clearly what is fully at stake. That is, due process of the law, free speech, and the security of anyone who might be deemed an enemy of this administration, for really any reason.

It may be that many of us in this room have already drawn this conclusion. It may be that what I'm saying really worries you. But I know, from conversations I've had with Jews in my life, and from reading the responses of different Jewish organizations...I know that this is not settled for us. We are in a very scary political moment, after having endured a year and a half of trauma as a people. It's a lot. And I understand why we

might not want to make common cause with activists who, in many cases, have failed to see our perspective and our pain. But here, too, we have to go slowly. We have to take this law by law. Piece by piece. Our democracy was built to ensure that we weren't rushing to a conclusion. And it is so essential that we hold onto the thread of democracy as we proceed politically and emotionally through this world.

We know, from this week's Torah portion, the pitfalls of moving too quickly. We know, also, the problem of being guided only by fear or knee jerk emotions. It doesn't work out the way we think it will. There always has to be an eye on the bigger picture – democracy, in the case of America, and the relationship with God, in the case of the Israelites.

You asked, Siona, why did Aaron go along with the Israelites when they demanded that he craft for them a god. And as we've established, he made the wrong decision. But it's not hard for us to imagine why the people were so adamant that he do so. They were frightened. They'd been led into a desert by Moses, a man who left them alone with Aaron, with no certainty that he would return. We can have empathy for these Israelites who were terrified, who were still reeling from a recent trauma, seething with unresolved emotions. But it was precisely that trauma response that caused them to make rash decisions and claims that ignored the bigger picture, and ultimately jeopardized their relationship with God.

The Piaczetter Rebbe taught that we should read the events of the Torah as if they are happening to us now. That every feeling the Israelites expressed might be feelings we would have in any generation.

And so it is for us. This most recent episode in these still early days of the Trump administration is a test for us. And it is a bitter, torturous test because of the ways in which we still reel from the trauma of October 7th and its aftermath. But, following the example of what not to do, in our efforts *not* to craft some golden calf of scorn, we must push ourselves to see the bigger picture. To fight for what *is* right, as opposed to what *feels* right in the heat of debate. Especially, when we are still in so much pain. And in so doing, we can push ourselves to lead. Slowly and carefully. In the *right* way, for this moment, and for our future.

Shabbat Shalom.