

Ki Tisa 5786

March 7, 2026

Responding to Leo Dale and Zeb Gordon

Responding to War

Leo and Zeb, you could not have given more perfect divrei Torah for this particular week. Thoughtful questions, deep wisdom, important truths.

Leo, I'll start with you. In looking at the story of the golden calf, you asked: why do some people keep their faith while others lose it? What you found is that it's difficult to believe in something invisible. When the unexpected happens, like Moses doesn't come down from the mountain and we are in a strange wilderness feeling lost, we can panic and jump to the conclusion that he's dead. When life gets tough, maybe even really tough, when bad things happen, we might start to question whether we should trust in what we can't see. When your great Zaide Harry lived through the Holocaust, and was in constant danger, and many members of his family were killed, he started asking "where is G-d?" and it wasn't until it was over that he could rebuild his faith. I was just in Berlin and Poland with 26 CBE teens, and I have so much to say about that trip that I don't have time to say now. We know that many people lost their faith in the hell of the Shoah, but I am always struck by the courage of so many people who kept their faith or returned to their faith after facing that abyss. Leo, you taught us that even though it can be difficult, "The teaching of the Jewish faith is that your faith lives inside you and you don't need something tangible to believe in G-d."

Our parasha this week, Ki Tisa, is about idolatry, and idolatry is about expediency. It is about ascribing the power of salvation to something conveniently tangible – a thing or a person. When we are in trouble, when we are in need, when we experience uncertainty, when we are afraid, we look for something solid that will save us. And we're often willing to give over our power, our faith, our loyalty to that person or thing. But the truth is that salvation – freedom, justice, societal healing, the repair of the world – only comes about through what is invisible.

What is invisible but real is a force interconnecting all things, within and beyond all things, a force that pushes us toward freedom, toward justice, toward life. You do not need to believe in G-d to believe in this force. You can think of it as the interconnected living system on the earth. You can think of it as the inner feeling you have of connection to other people and other life, as that pull within to do good, to do right, to seek justice. Some people like me call that G-d, some call it life force or the will to freedom. Gandhi called it soul force. Whatever you call it, it is real. And it is the only thing that will actually save us – that invisible interconnecting force.

When I think about the incident of the golden calf, I think not only about loss of faith in an invisible G-d, but also about a failure of a particular kind of imagination called moral imagination. The people couldn't imagine that Moses was alive at the top of the mountain receiving wisdom about a new way to live, that he was busy all that time learning about how to direct our lives toward justice and the healing of our world. They could only imagine that he was dead. So they turned to an idol to save them.

Moral imagination is the ability to envision new possibilities and a better world through a combination of empathy and creativity. The best Jewish teacher of moral imagination — though I don't believe he used the phrase — was Nahman of Bratslav. He taught that when everything seems hopeless, we are to look for a single point of goodness within. He taught that even when it seems that there is no goodness within another person, if we search we will find it. And if we see that point of goodness in another, we will help them to see it in themselves. Both faith and moral imagination involve believing in what you cannot see, whether that is G-d or the goodness of other human beings or the possibility of what you can create together.

Idolatry is the opposite of moral imagination. Instead of taking on the complex problems of the world through empathy with others, you find the nearest object and decide that it will save you. We live in a time of rampant idolatry. Trumpism is idolatry — it is the false belief that through concentrated power, Donald Trump will save America. Trumpism is also a failure of moral imagination — it is losing faith in the goodness in humanity, giving up on the idea that we are connected to each other and that we have the ability to create a better future together.

Unfortunately, this war is not about moral imagination. As the Trump administration has said clearly, it is not about regime change in Iran. For Trump, it is the further pursuit of domination through violence. For Netanyahu, it is preemptively striking Israel's worst enemy while it is weak, and probably an attempt to hold onto power and win the upcoming elections.

Admittedly, in his pursuit of domination, Donald Trump sometimes creates outcomes that we like. He freed the hostages, and for that I will forever be grateful. The fact that Nicolas Maduro is no longer running Venezuela and Ayatollah Khomeini is no longer running Iran – these are changes that many freedom-seeking people in those countries have wanted for a long time.

An end to this regime in Iran would be a tremendous healing, for the Iranian people and also for the Jewish people and for the American people. Tens of thousands of Jews fled Iran after the Islamist revolution that brought the Ayatollah to power. The Iranian government has fomented hate and violence against Israel and the United States for almost fifty years, taking Americans hostage, sponsoring terrorism against us, dedicating itself to the death of Israel, and running a forever proxy war through Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis that brought us the brutal massacre of October 7th.

As Thomas Friedman wrote in the Times this week, “There is no single event that would do more to put the whole Middle East on a more decent, inclusive trajectory than the replacement of Tehran’s Islamic regime with a leadership focused exclusively on enabling the people of Iran to realize their full potential with a real voice in their own future.”

But the problem is that Donald Trump is not concerned with that objective. He is happy to have Maduro’s entire regime remain in place in Venezuela, and he does not have a plan for who should run Iran next. He couldn’t care less about a free Iran. He only wants to be the most powerful person in the world and to have greater personal control over those two oil producing countries; he only cares that whoever replaces Khomeini will bow to him.

And it may be that his primary audience for this war... is us. In just a few months, he has used our military lawlessly to blow up boats in the Caribbean, to kidnap the leader of Venezuela, and to assassinate the leadership of Iran while starting a multi-front war in the Middle East, all without Congressional approval, all without any public discussion, without consulting allies, and with blatant disregard for domestic and international law.

This is a classic authoritarian move designed for the audience at home. He has already told us and shown us that he plans to deploy our military in our cities against our own people. The message of this war to us is unbridled, absolute, lawless power. "You're thinking about protesting ICE? You're thinking about speaking up against the administration? You're thinking of running or voting against him and his party? Look at what this man is capable of. Do you want to be in his crosshairs? Wouldn't it be safer to side with the most powerful guy in the room, the most powerful guy on the planet? He'll deliver you Iran. He'll deliver you the world."

It is possible that a government will emerge in Iran that is one step closer to the freedom the Iranian people have been seeking for more than a century. It is also possible that a government will emerge that is farther from that freedom and just as likely to mow down its citizens when they march for change. Almost never has a healthy democracy emerged from a violent coup, particularly if the violence comes from an outside power.

It is much more likely that it is the moral imagination of the people of Iran that will bring them freedom. It is precisely their moral imagination and the interconnecting force pulling them to freedom that has led the people of Iran to rise up over the course of the last 47 years, from the Green Movement to the Women, Life, and Freedom uprising, to the protests of the last two months when more than a million people filled the streets. Everything we do next should be to bolster and strengthen that moral imagination.

Our world is so full of video games and simulations we might forget that the images we see of death and destruction in Iran, Lebanon, and Israel, and the American service members who've lost their lives – these are real people like you and me. I have been texting with Israeli friends who are terrified and spending their nights in bomb shelters and safe rooms. Many of you I'm sure are

in touch with friends and family who are running for their lives every day. In the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza, Palestinians don't have bomb shelters. Many Israeli Palestinians don't have bomb shelters. Bedouins don't have bomb shelters. The people of Iran and Lebanon for the most part don't have bomb shelters. The more than 100 girls at the school in Minab, those girls were bright and beautiful children with families who loved them more than anything else in the world. We pray for the safety and protection of every single innocent person caught up in this war.

The violence that Trump and Netanyahu are employing in this war: the destruction of homes, schools, neighborhoods, and hundreds of lives, soon to be thousands of lives, is causing more trauma and more anger in an already traumatized region already overflowing with anger.

That brings us to you, Zeb. You wanted to understand Moses's anger when he saw the people dancing around the golden calf and shattered the tablets of the Ten Commandments, and then punished them harshly by making them grind up the golden calf and drink it. You rightly pointed out that this wasn't the only time Moses got angry, but that throughout his life his anger led him to act rashly in ways that did not serve him. You went on to offer us complex and deeply insightful wisdom on anger and how to work with it.

You warned, quoting Reish Lakish, that "when a person gets angry his wisdom departs from him." Or in your words, "the thing that makes you who you are basically gets thrown out the window." And therefore you taught, "When you are ANGRY it's not a good idea to do things you ARE DRIVEN to do..." because "when anger leads to violent actions it is a weakness not a strength." And you said, "we can have more control over our own destiny if we channel our anger than if we crash out."

You taught us that anger interferes with our ability to know who we are, that anger overrides the best of who we are. When not channeled properly, anger leads to violence which leads to more anger. In this way, anger is an impediment to moral imagination, because moral imagination is built upon our capacity to see and believe in human goodness, and when we feel angry, that belief is shaken or overridden. If we want human beings to be able to imagine a future that is good for

them and their neighbors, we will do everything possible to reduce violence, and as you taught us Zeb, to redirect our anger, to transform it into something new.

This transformation is what the midrash teaches about the golden calf. Shemot Rabba 51:8 tells us that the gold that the people took out of their ears and off their wrists to make the calf was repurposed for the mishkan, also known as the Tabernacle, the portable sanctuary the people carried through the wilderness. When asked to donate their gold to make the calf they brought more than enough, and when asked to donate that same gold to make the mishkan they again brought more than enough. In this way, the gold itself became the vehicle for atonement. *That* is moral imagination. Take the very material of your idolatry, from your mistaken belief that an idol had the power to save you, and turn it into a structure where you can serve the invisible interconnecting force that calls you to freedom, that calls you to your own moral imagination.

The best thing we can do in the face of this war is to build our moral imagination and to support the people of Iran to hold onto theirs. One of the most popular chants of the protestors has been “No Gaza, No Lebanon, my life for Iran.” The protestors don’t want their resources being used to fight Israel anymore. They want their resources for building up their own country. In other words, with a free Iran there would be no more Hamas, no more Hezbollah. Meaning there would be no one propping up Benjamin Netanyahu, whose longevity in office has been made possible by Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran. Meaning that a free Iran would bring a free Israel. And as Tom Friedman wrote this week, without the Islamist regime of Iran, there are seven nations who would be ready to recognize Israel if it were to accept the establishment of a Palestinian state. Meaning that a free Iran would bring not just a free Israel but a free Palestine.

How do we build that moral imagination? We start inside of ourselves and we start with prayer. Out of all the swirling noise, all of the idolatry out there, we come together in our sanctuaries to remember what will actually save us. It is the way your skin tingles when you see a person being courageous on behalf of someone in harm’s way. It is that feeling in your chest that we are better than this. It is that knowing in your gut that change is possible. What we do in prayer is take those feelings and express them. What we do in prayer is put to words our moral imagination of the world that should be. Prayer is how we feel our way into that world. We evoke it. We call it forth. What we do in prayer is redirect our

hearts from the ordinary human wants that everyone has – to be liked, to have everything – to the transcendent human wants of freedom and justice for all, the desire for a world that cares for people and all living things. What we do in a sanctuary like this is to say week after week after week, “yes it looks dire and even impossible, but we know it is possible. We insist it is possible.”

So, Leo, I call on us today to not give up our faith. And Zeb, I call on us today to transform our anger into moral imagination. I call on us today to imagine a free United States of America. I call upon us to imagine a free Iran. I call upon us to imagine a free Israel. And I call upon us to imagine a free Palestine. And I know that if we try, if we really try, we can imagine Iran, and Israel, and Palestine living in the same region in safety, in brother- and sisterhood, and in peace.

Im tirtzu ein zo aggadah.

Ken Yehi Ratzon.