

#TheDress – Parashat Ki Tissa

White and gold. Blue and black. We all remember how just a few years ago the internet exploded in controversy over the color of a lace Bodycon dress made by the British retailer Roman. Many of us can be counted amongst the over 73 million people who viewed #the dress, breaking records and ultimately causing sales of the garment to increase by more than 850%. But for those who somehow escaped the frenzy, let's back up for just a moment.

Dress fever began when Caitlin McNeill, an aspiring folk singer from Scotland, posted a picture on her Tumblr account of an outfit that her mother's friend had worn to a recent wedding. Looking at the photo, viewers disagreed – and vehemently! – about the color of the dress with some seeing it as being white and gold and others insisting it was rather blue and black. Husbands and wives found themselves at odds. Celebrities jumped into the fray. Retailers seized the moment with Oreo tweeting a picture of their original and golden packages side by side and Coca Cola suggesting that the dress might actually look better in red and white. And, of course, scientists stepped in to try and explain why a whole mess of people with good vision and no history of color blindness could so passionately disagree about something that should be fairly obvious and objective.

The dress, in reality, is blue and black and the perceptual differences evidently have to do with the way individuals see objects in daylight, where our visual systems compensate for the chromatic bias of sunshine by adjusting our perception of the item itself. Because the background color context for the dress in Caitlin's picture was so unclear, different brains filtered the light differently which consequently changed the way the dress appeared to them. All of this is fairly complicated and a bit beyond my ken as ophthalmology and neuroscience were certainly not included in the rabbinical school curriculum at JTS. The idea of wanting to trust what we see and see what we trust, however? Well these concepts date right back to our Tanakh!

This week's Torah portion, Parashat Ki Tissa, may not have amassed enough acclaim to almost break the internet but it, too, deals with a mob of unruly people and what happens when their eyes lead them astray. With Moses up on Mount Sinai to receive the tablets of the Ten Commandments, the Israelites are left alone without any tangible representation of the Divine. Confusing the temporary, physical departure of their leader for a more permanent, existential abandonment by God and God's prophet, the Israelites prevail upon Aaron to make them a statue for, in their own words, "that man, Moses, who brought us from Egypt – we do not know what has happened to him" (Exodus 32:1). Putting too much stock into that which the eyes can (or cannot) see, the Israelites are tricked by the illusion of God's absence and fall into chaos.

While the sin of the golden calf is often thought of as being idol worship – that is, creating a molten cow to serve in place of the One True God – many commentators instead understand the Israelites as seeking to create not an idol but rather a "pedestal" – an object that would physically represent the Divine and remind the people of God's presence rather than one to be worshiped in God's stead. Indeed, upon seeing the calf emerge from its mold the people exclaim, "This is your God, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt" (Exodus 32:4). It is unlikely that the Israelites truly believe this cow to be a new deity responsible for the deliverance they witnessed at the hands of HaShem so very recently. Rather, the golden calf seems to represent for the people the presence of God which they so desperately miss at this particular moment in time.

And the Israelites are not alone – neither in wishing to see tangible evidence of God's presence nor in understanding that the concrete can often serve as a stand-in for something more ethereal. Later in our parasha Moses himself finds it difficult to be in relationship with a God he cannot perceive, asking to see the Divine face as he pleads "Hareni na et c'vodecha – Please let me behold Your presence!" (Exodus 33:18). In response, God places Moses in the cleft of a rock, the Divine hand covering our leader's eyes so that only God's back but not the Divine countenance can be seen. While many sages interpret this episode as being about intellectual understanding – Moses wishing to know and comprehend the ways of the Divine – it seems equally possible that Moses simply needed solid,

physical confirmation of God, wishing to see something material and distinct. We like to trust what we see and see what we trust. In this regard, Moses is no different from Caitlin McNeill.

Early Biblical religion is replete with examples of pedestals – physical objects that stand in for God’s presence and remind us that God is near. During the Israelite’s period of desert wandering, a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night led our ancestors from slavery to freedom. During Temple times, the sacrificial system gave the people a concrete way of expressing commitment and devotion by offering animals rather than mere words. Perhaps the best example of an ancient pedestal is the Mishkan – the elaborately decorated portable sanctuary that God commanded that we build, its resplendent colors and fabrics evoking the riches of royalty. With its two cherubim on top of the ark, representing the seat of God’s agency, the Mishkan perhaps was not so very different from the golden calf except for one crucial feature – the fact that God Godself had ordained it. When a pedestal comes from God, it is a tool for achieving spiritual closeness; on human authority alone it becomes blasphemy.

The great Biblical commentator Rashi, famous for his belief that the Torah is a-chronological and shouldn’t necessarily be read in the order in which it is presented, argues that our parasha, Ki Tissa, is one of those examples where the Torah is written out of sequence and imagines that the laws regarding the Tabernacle were actually given after the sin of the golden calf as a sort of Divine concession to human frailty. Seeing that the people needed something concrete to symbolize the Divine, a tangible project into which to channel their efforts, God commanded the building of the Tabernacle to re-direct the people’s need for the physical towards a holy purpose. Seen in this way, the episode of the golden calf is still a failing on the part of the people but it is a failing borne out of desire for connection rather than a failing borne out of rejection or denial or preference for a different deity. The Israelites needed to be able to see What they trusted. When they could not, they built a pedestal so they could trust What they saw.

We often view ourselves, today, as infinitely more sophisticated than our primitive forebears – needing neither pillar of cloud nor fire to sense God’s presence, offering prayers rather than animals in

order to connect with the Divine. And yet Caitlin McNeill's dress reminds us that we, too, look to our eyes to confirm the reality of the world around us and find it more than a little unnerving when others don't see things quite the same way we do. While mere entertainment value or curiosity over the optical illusion of the photo was, I'm sure, responsible for a good deal of #thedress phenomenon, I believe that part of the viral nature of the meme – and certainly the intensity and often nastiness of the debate over blue and black versus white and gold that it spawned – has to do with this latter point, how threatening it can be to sit in a place where our assumptions are challenged, how very much we all wish that others would see things in exactly the same way that we do.

In one of the more thoughtful pieces I've read about the internet sensation of the dress, blogger Teri Trespicio catalogues four basic reactions that individuals have had to the picture describing them, essentially, as "What's wrong with me?" "What's wrong with you?" "Let's not talk about it!" and "This is fascinating." Trespicio suggests that these same four reactions are generally the way individuals respond when faced with stress or conflict – we blame the other, we blame ourselves, we try to avoid the situation, or – when we're at our best and boldest – we aspire to see the possibility inherent in coming to understand another person's point of view, we see challenges as promoting learning and growth rather than as offering personal threat or attack. The ancient Israelites found it too uncomfortable to sit in place – one of distance from their God and anxiety about the future – so they instead built a calf to relieve their feelings of abandonment and distress. Folks on the internet make insulting comments about those in the other camp or about being preoccupied with a silly dress in the first place.

There is another way to react, however, when we feel vulnerable, a way suggested by Moses in our parasha this week. "Hareni na et c'vodecha" – says Moses to God – "Please let me behold Your presence." Whether wishing to see physical evidence of the Divine or wanting to understand more about how God works, Moses did not blame others or blame himself, not retreat or hide when feeling distance and tension in his relationship with the Divine. Rather he led with curiosity – help me learn

more! – and went on to have a kind of intimacy with God unparalleled by any other person ever to live.

We, as humans, like to trust what we see and see what we trust. And we find it very uncomfortable when our perceptions of the world don't accord with those of others. We band together into factions of like-minded souls. We discredit the opposing side and resort to ad hominem attacks. We blame and avoid; we distance and retreat. By embracing openness and curiosity, however, rather than fear and judgment when faced with a differing perspective we can keep ourselves away from rushing to judgment, protect ourselves from the sins of a calf that was gold. Or perhaps, it was really blue and black.

Shabbat Shalom!

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