

Vayakehl - Pekudei

וַיְהִי בַּחֹדֶשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן, בַּשָּׁנָה הַשְּׁנִיית בְּאֶחָד לַחֹדֶשׁ הַיּוֹקֵם, הַמִּשְׁכָּן

Exodus 40:17 *And so it was that in the first month in the second year, on the first day of the month, the tabernacle was erected.*



Watercolor Artist: Leon Sitarchuk "Moses and the Golden Calf"

This week's double portion comprises the final chapters of the book of Exodus - the last of five portions in which the Torah describes the building of the tabernacle in great detail. The texts these past several weeks have also detailed the many donations brought by the Israelites. However, the saga of the Golden Calf in the portion *Ki Tisa* interrupts the building construction. Then, right away, the directives are repeated anew, as though the distraction and corruption might have erased the memory of how to build G-d's dwelling place.

The parallels between the description of the golden calf episode and the narratives concerning the building of the tabernacle are striking.

The Israelites demand that Aaron build for them a molten calf, just as G-d instructed the people to build a tabernacle. Aaron appeals to the people to submit their gold and, just as they did for the tabernacle, they bring their donations of gold to him. An altar is built around the calf, just as was done for the tabernacle altar. The people celebrate in both instances with sacrifices, food, and drink. The golden calf is exalted as the one who "brought the people out of Egypt." In the tabernacle account the Israelites are reminded that the Divine presence will abide amongst them, through the G-d who "brought them out of Egypt." The message of these parallel narrative sections seems to say that the lessons learned about righteous and proper behavior can also be applied to irreverent and improper behavior. Inevitably, the choice lies with the people as to how they will use their knowledge.

Like their biblical ancestors in the desert, modern Israelis have experienced feelings of failure and hopelessness which have at times led to corruption and immorality. Some have feared (and there are those who continue to fear) that the Jewish homeland will eventually be a thing of the past. The despair might come from impatience or a sense of frustration with leadership and the will of the majority, who elected the leaders. Just as the Israelites waited for 40 days and nights for Moses to progress down the

mountain, so too do some Israelis wait for real progress and direction, leaders in whom they can place their faith and trust. Yet Israel, a relatively young democracy, is continually confronted by obstacles, both external and internal. Wars with neighboring nations, the influx and absorption of refugees, domestic relations with non-Jewish citizens, ultra-religious government officials who represent a small segment of Israeli citizenry, and balancing foreign support with criticism of domestic and foreign policies stand in the way of desired progress.

In both the temporal and spiritual realms, biblical Israel and modern Israel are complicated places. Negligence and negativity in leadership can lead to disillusionment in the people. Yet the will to progress, to pick up and begin again, persists. Turning challenges into opportunities is a hallmark of Israel's history. Perhaps the greatest boost to modern day citizens is witnessing, through ancient narrative, ancestors' ability to reboot and rebuild even after setbacks. While the theme of Israel's national anthem is "hope" there is no word in the Hebrew lexicon for "optimism." And, maybe this is not surprising, for as David Henderson from The Center for Courage and Renewal remarks, "When optimism gets ground up by reality, hope will go toe-to-toe with reality because of a heart that simply refuses to quit."

One message of these five portions is that despite setbacks and missteps of both the people and their leadership, there is always the possibility to regroup and reset the course for Israel to continue building and thriving.

Discussion Questions

1. When Israel's leaders are accused and found guilty of crimes, what effect does it have on internal and external support of Israeli politics? Consider the indictment of former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert for bribery and obstruction of justice and/or Members of Knesset Haim Ramon and Tzahi Hanegbi for their respective misconduct. [On one hand, this affirms Israel's democratic and transparent nature, on the other hand, politicians being corrupt disappoints and sullies the nature of politics].
2. Where is the evidence that Jewish and Arab Israelis are hopeful for the future? Examine the way in which progress ensues in this realm of keeping Israel Jewish and still democratic.

Additional Resources:

Meir Elran, Eran Yasiv, Mohammad Abo Nasra, "[The Five-Year Plan to Integrate the Arab Population in Israel: A Quantum Leap Forward?](http://www.inss.org.il/index.aspx?id=4538&articleid=11389)" *INSS Insight*, February 2, 2016, <http://www.inss.org.il/index.aspx?id=4538&articleid=11389>

Israel21c Staff, "[Arab-Israeli Tech Hub Opens Near Tel Aviv](http://www.thetower.org/2995oc-arab-israeli-tech-hub-opens-near-tel-aviv/)," *The Tower*, February 22, 2016. <http://www.thetower.org/2995oc-arab-israeli-tech-hub-opens-near-tel-aviv/>

Shoula Romano Horing, "[Can Israeli Arabs be Fully Loyal Citizens?](http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4750994,00.html)" *Ynet News*, January 11, 2016. <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4750994,00.html>