

## The Idolatry of Politics

Parashat Ki Tissa 5783

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From the time my parents took us to DC when I was about 14 or 15, I knew I wanted to go into politics.

There was a certain mystique to it all: the majestic marble buildings, the people on their way to work on the subway, in their crisp suits reading *The Washington Post*, the big black SUVs with tinted windows and big serious-looking guys with tinted glasses and earpieces.

It was sublime and filled me with awe.

A guy I worked with on the Hill once said, "If you ever look up at the Capitol building and it doesn't give you goosebumps, you know it's time to go back home."

Eventually, I made it there for real. I got to live and work every day in a place that, to me, felt other-worldly—a place that seemed so far and above and detached from ordinary places and, yet at the same time, felt like the center of the universe.

(That's what they call "Inside the Beltway Syndrome," by the way. It's a documented pathology.)

But at some point along the way, I got a reality check.

Nothing big or traumatic or remarkable, really; just a casual conversation I remember having with a coworker one day.

We'd been there about a year at that point, and I remember asking him: "So, what do you think about the Senate so far?"

And I'll never forget his answer. He said, "Meh. Just a bunch of idiots with fancy titles."

Whether he realized it or not, he had made a simple and yet deeply profound observation about politics: That, despite the pageantry and the power and the mystique, these larger-than-life figures who seem to rule the world are, when it comes right down to it, just *people*. Human beings.

And like all human beings, they are inherently flawed. And like any process or institution designed and run by human beings, the process and institutions of politics are inherently flawed, corruptible, and, in fact, corrupted.

The "performative magic" of politics and government, to borrow a phrase from the anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu, has a way of making Washington seem mystical, even sacred.

But no amount of magic can make gods out of ordinary people.

You might think what I'm saying is obvious. "Of course, we know politicians are not gods. Far from it."

But I disagree. We might know it intellectually, but we don't know it spiritually.

In fact, I believe that we in America have made politics into our national religion.

And I don't mean that in the trivial sense like someone might say: "Football is my religion." I mean it in the substantive sense of the term. And I mean it in a way that is dark and disturbing.

Politics, to my mind, has become one of the gravest forms of idolatry in the modern world.

More on that in a moment. First, a quick look at the parashah.

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Parashat Ki Tissa tells what I consider to be perhaps the most profound story in the whole Torah, and that is the story of the Golden Calf.

Here's how the Torah describes it:

"When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, [they] gathered against Aaron and said to him: "Come, make us a god who shall go before us, for that man Moses—the man who brought us from the land of Egypt—we do not know what has happened to him.

"Aaron said to them, 'Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me. And all the people took off the gold rings that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron.

"He took [the gold] from them and fashioned it with a graving tool and made it into a molten calf. And they exclaimed, 'This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!'" (Exodus 32:1-4)

It's an obviously ridiculous statement. Who in their right mind would believe that this *golden calf*—which they know Aaron made because, well, they *gave* him the materials to make it—is the god "who brought you out of the land of Egypt!"?

Just a few chapters back, these same Israelites had seen God split the sea to save them from Pharaoh's pursuing army. They sang "Mi Chamocha," proclaiming God as the author of miracles and salvation.

How could they now worship an idol made of their own jewelry?

The answer suggested by our tradition is: fear.

Feeling abandoned by Moses and God—who, for all they knew, had run off together and left the people to fend for themselves—they were disoriented: They had no idea where they were or where they were going or whom to look to for guidance and support.

The God who had brought them out of Egypt and split the sea was *abstract*; not only had none of them actually seen this God but, apparently, God existed somewhere out there, beyond their reach—and beyond their *control*.

What they needed now was not some invisible, inaccessible deity. They needed something that would enable them to take control of their situation.

So, like the man who captures an all-powerful genie in a bottle, Aaron said he could capture the infinite God, who transcends the world, and contain that God in a work of Aaron's own hands.

Now, instead of the people being subject to the power of a God they could not see, this new visible, worldly, material god would be subject to *their* control: Using tools and the metal forge, they could quite literally mold and manipulate this god to their own ends.

"Ultimately," wrote the 20th-century American Jewish philosopher Will Herberg, "all idolatry is worship of the self-projected and objectified: All idolization is self-idolization, individual or collective."<sup>1</sup>

The worship of the Golden Calf, the work of human hands, was nothing more than the worship of the human self, writ large—a worship rooted in fear and the need for control.

That is the essence of idolatry.<sup>2</sup>

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So, back to politics.

I believe that, over time, politics in America has come to be driven by fear.

Some would say: For good reason; there's a lot to be afraid of, and the people in power have a lot of influence over those things.

But that fear, in my view, has become so strong that it has led us to what the philosophers Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit call the "error" of idolatry.<sup>3</sup>

That error is the misplacement of ultimate faith and power in something that is *not* God—something that, in this case, is merely *human*—out of the mistaken belief that this something can bring the salvation we yearn for.

This fear of evil befalling us has thus driven us into what the 19th-century Bible commentator Malbim describes as the "*mikdash hevel*—the sanctuary of vanity." (Commentary to Psalm 5:8)

In that hall of mirrors, flawed human beings and their corruptible and corrupt institutions are capable of saving the world.

But it's a promise that is destined to fail. We know this from experience and history. As the psalm says, "Put not your trust in princes." (Psalm 146:3)

It's common these days to describe our political parties as "tribes," because our loyalty to them is so visceral. But I think they are better described as "churches" who cast themselves as the sole possessors of truth, with pieties to perform and doctrines of belief to which adherents must profess loyalty or else be excommunicated.

And think about how we accord our politicians—though flawed human beings they are—the status of gods, who, if they are part of our church, can do no wrong; and if they are part of the other church, can do no right.

Slogans like "We are the ones we've been waiting for" and "Make America Great Again" are undeniably messianic and quasi-religious: They suggest that *human beings*—the avatars of a political movement and their followers—can bring about the redemption of history.

No biblical prophet ever claimed as much.

But this spiritual outlook on the world is alluring, as idolatry always is, because it offers meaning and purpose and control over our own destiny by promising that we *human beings* are the ultimate power in the universe.

By our vote, by our lobbying, by our proclamations and fulminations, we can mold the gods toward our own ends.

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I do not mean to say that the political process is not important. It *is* important, and we *should* participate in it, we should vote, and we should advocate for what we believe in.

The problem isn't participating or believing in the process. The problem, as Herberg suggests, is *absolutizing* the process—by which he means making it the end all—be all and the dominant force in one's life, or in the collective life of our society.

Tragically, though, I think this is exactly what we have done.

Over time, the sphere of politics has swollen to immense proportions and annexed nearly every part of life.

What is there anymore that is beyond its reach?

Friendship? Thanksgiving dinner? The workplace? The school? The library?

None of these.

Everything, it seems, has been subsumed into politics; every person and every experience is viewed through a political lens.

Even religion, which theoretically should be sealed off from the realm of politics, has come under its auspices, as some of us look to our faith traditions and our clergy only to justify our own political preferences.

As Herberg put it, "[W]e make God into the sanctifier and protector of the idols we *really* love with all our heart and all our might. ... In proclaiming as ultimate the ideas and programs to which we are devoted, we are but proclaiming the work of our minds to be the final truth of life."<sup>4</sup>

This absolutization of politics is exceedingly dangerous because, if politics is in fact the key to our salvation, and if the political church with which we identify is the sole possessor of truth, then what would be considered *too far to go* in securing the ability of that church and its prophets to implement their agenda?

The answer, I think, is: nothing. Nothing would be seen as too far to go if that's what's right and truth demands.

Which is why I believe that the idolatry of politics will ultimately lead to totalitarianism in America, whether of the right or the left.

I really hope not, but I worry that that's where we're headed.

In that vein, I want to close with something Will Herberg wrote back in 1952:

"The object of idolatrous worship may be, and in fact generally is, some[thing that is] *good*;"—such as, I would add, politics—"but since it is not God, it is necessarily a good that is only partial and relative. ... What idolatry does is to convert the object into an absolute, thereby destroying the partial good within it and transforming it into a total evil."

I pray that we will turn back from this dangerous path.

1 Will Herberg, *Judaism and Modern Man*, 96

2 See Malbim to Psalm 5:8: "The idol worshiper serves and prays to the idol from a condition of fear of evil [happening to him], and he wants to appease the idol so that it won't cause evil to befall him, up to the point that his fear of evil brings him into a sanctuary of vanity."

3 See Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*

4 Herberg, 95-96