

March 5, 2010

Shabbat Shalom!

As a member of the UNH Chaplains group, I heard a presentation this week on efforts to coordinate services for victims/survivors of domestic violence in the Seacoast. The presenter included in her remarks a chart featuring the “hierarchy of needs” developed by Abraham Maslow, which puts the need for food and shelter on the bottom, followed by security, love/belonging, esteem/self-respect, purpose/meaning, and (at the highest level) self-actualization/hope. In light of the Torah reading for this week, Ki Tisa, which recounts the “Golden Calf” episode, I thought about the Israelites and what drove them to ask Moses’ brother Aaron to fashion for them a visible statue of a god. In our discussion at the Board meeting on the portion, we noted that the Israelites were acting out of fear and a need to feel protected, security that Moses could not provide while he was atop Mount Sinai. The God in whom the Israelites were putting their faith was intangible and unseen, while the calf that they made was tangible and readily available to the eye, giving them a (likely false) sense of safety. One commentator notes that, had the people only given themselves over “intellectually” to another belief, it might have been possible to convince them to end their worship of the calf. Yet, as Moses was atop the mountain, the “sound of song” was making its way to his ears. The people had developed an emotional attachment to this newly-formed representation of a god, one that would not easily be relinquished.

It has likely been difficult in recent months for many Americans, as well as many people around the globe, to move above the bottom two levels, often due to uncertainty and fear of what may come next in the societal and economic challenges we face. In some cases, that fear leads people to join with others in groups that are based primarily on fear rather than on meaning and hope. The hierarchy of needs is often shown as a pyramid, but it could just as well be depicted as a mountain, where the summit is not unlike the vision we might have of Moses on Mount Sinai, in a personal encounter with the divine. Atop that pyramid, or hierarchy, or mountain, we may find not only meaning and purpose but also the essence of our spirit and hope that will take us through the challenges that may come our way. Our faith in the intangible aspects of life, those that are higher in the “hierarchy,” still have the power to lead us through difficult times.

-- L'shalom, Rabbi Larry