

## **Ki Tissa 5777**

### **God's Back**

In the Sisterhood class this week, we had a long and important discussion about theology, which was prompted by what looked like an act of bad behavior by God. Our discussion took us far and wide as we grappled with what it means to try to integrate our holy texts into our adult theology.

And reflecting on the conversation afterwards, I realized that this week's parashah presents us with a similar need to wrangle.

It contains one of the most intimate encounters between Moses and God described in the Torah. The people have just built the Calf. God is - to put it mildly - upset. Moses has just - barely - managed to save God from destroying the newly-created nation. God, at this point of the narrative, is being described in ways that sound familiarly human and badly behaved: accusatory, blaming, hurt...

But then, the text takes a different turn. Moses, perhaps feeling that the relationship with God is more equal and honest than it's ever been before and that this whole experience with the Golden Calf has perhaps cleared the air, or raised the relationship between him and God to a new level, pleads audaciously, 'You have called me by name: you have told me I have done well: show me your ways, and let me know you!'

But rather than respond directly, God assures Moses that 'My presence will go with you.' A process of negotiation begins, which concludes with the agreement that God will make all God's glory 'pass before' Moses, who will be hidden (for safety) in a cleft in the rock, with God's hand over him for additional protection - but Moses will not be able to see God's face. And so it is. God passes, and Moses sees only God's back. The rabbis of our tradition put it, poignantly, that Moses sees the knot of God's tefillin. And Moses - or perhaps even God - proclaims the 13 attributes of God which have been adopted into our liturgy - *Adonai, Adonai, El Rahum Vehanun...*and so on.

But Moses never does get to see God's face.

It's not entirely clear what this episode does to God and Moses' ongoing relationship. The next interaction between them is a long way hence - at the beginning of the book of Vayikra, in fact, and constitutes God 'calling' to Moses in order to give him the instructions for the sacrifices the people are to make.

Moses, for his part, keeps the episode to himself. Although he mentions the Golden Calf when he's retelling the narrative in Devarim (you'll find it in chapters 9 and 10), he doesn't retell this particular part. I'm struck by the silence.

And the whole episode raises a question for me: if the leading prophet of our tradition cannot have a direct encounter with God, then what kind of relationship can we ourselves hope for? Why does it have to be so difficult? Surely it's God's job to *be* God and be available, and by the way, to be good?

But one of the answers we came up with in the Sisterhood class - there were others, it was a really rich conversation - is that these stories from our tradition, in which God seems to misbehave or be unavailable, are ultimately there for a reason. The enormity of what God is cannot be contained or comprehended by a human being. And therefore the stories of our tradition, however noble and fundamental to the way we see the world, can only express dimensions of that enormity. Sometimes those dimensions behave predictably or in accordance with our expectations. But sometimes they do not.

And when we encounter a set of behaviors that provoke or even annoy us, we are prompted to look more deeply into the story than we might previously have done, and to ask, 'what is this here to teach me?'

We asked that question of God misbehaving with Saul, and we can ask it here also. We can read God's back being turned to Moses as a rejection or as an invitation. If we read it as a rejection, then that's game over. But if we read it as an invitation, I think the lesson we are drawn into is a profound one.

Let me approach it by way of a story.

When my friend Gabrielle's son Zev was three years old, he marched into the room and announced:

*Mommy!! I don't know what God looks like! You HAVE to tell me!*

Zev speaks for all of us. There is a part of us, just like the part of Moses that asks for the direct encounter, that NEEDS to know. But it doesn't work like that. We don't get to encounter God by way of a voice booming from the sky: the clouds never part to reveal an awesome Divine being. Instead, our encounters with God are indirect and fragmentary - though we can live off the energy of them for a long time. The deeper truth this particular story teaches us is that we only ever get to see God's back.

And the proof of that is that we can only speak about God by using metaphors.

A metaphor comes from the Greek word 'to carry' and it is a way of carrying meaning, wrapping something big up in something that we can understand. We have no choice but to use metaphors when we describe God, because God is too great to be contained and human language is the only language we've got.

The evil spirit sent 'from God' to torment Saul, God's back turned to Moses - those are metaphors. And in our own search for God, we need to use metaphors that are meaningful to us.

One such set of metaphors is the way we habitually describe God.

And those metaphors can become problematic if they are not compelling for us. Naming God as our 'king', or our 'father' might not work for us - though we are lucky if it does, since the authors of the Siddur like these very much!

But for those of us for whom it doesn't work - and I am one of them - if we are not careful we end up dismissing God because of our own faulty God-language. I find that when my own theology is stuck, it sometimes helps to change the metaphor.

What others could we use?

Our tradition has many suggestions. Here are just a few: spring of water, Gardener, lion, Healer, Nameless One, mother, rose, Holy One, hero, lover, Ultimate, Mystery. And there are many more.

So let me invite you to experiment. Try subjecting God - or however you name God - to some mature scrutiny. Explore what it feels like to search for the power behind, or the mind of, or the reason for, the universe in which we live in terms that speak to you personally. Every time we pray, every time we say a blessing - try replacing the word 'God' with a new name, and see what happens.

Because this seems to be the way of our story. The people don't get a tangible thing to worship. It would appear that Moses doesn't get one either. And neither do we.

Yet God's back seems to be enough, even for Moses. At the very end of this parshah we read that he came down the mountain, holding the two new tablets of stone, the symbol of the new promise, and that the skin of his face was shining so brightly that he had to veil himself.

And all the way through the rest of his journey, Moses continues to seek God. His great Song at the end of the Torah contains a whole new set of metaphors for God that he's never used before.

As we struggle to explore and inhabit our own theologies, let us hope that our faces will also shine; and that like Moses, we won't stop trying.

Shabbat shalom.