

Ki Tissa 5778

Shabbat is the cure

Tucked into a very full Torah portion this week, in just a few verses, is one of the Torah's injunctions to keep Shabbat:

And the Lord said to Moses: Speak to the Israelite people and say: Nevertheless you must keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between Me and you throughout the ages, that you may know that I the Lord have consecrated you. You shall keep the sabbath, for it is holy for you. He who profanes it shall be put to death: whoever does work on it, that person shall be cut off from his kin. Six days may work be done, but on the seventh day there shall be a sabbath of complete rest, holy to the Lord; whoever does work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death. The Israelite people shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout the ages as a covenant for all time; it shall be a sign for all time between me and the people of Israel. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day He ceased from work and was refreshed.

We know this short passage better than we think we do: *Veshamru v'nai Yisrael et ha-Shabbat* forms the center of the Shabbat morning Amidah and the introduction to the morning Kiddush. [That 'traditional' tune was actually composed by somebody, by the way: a shout out is due to Rabbi Moshe Rothblum of Valley Village, Los Angeles!]

We could legitimately ask why the narrative of the Calf is interrupted in this way. What could Shabbat possibly have to do with those events? As far as we can tell from the Torah, they don't take place on Shabbat and the old and the new tablets have plenty in them about Shabbat without any additional commentary!

I want to suggest - and I wish I could remember the place where I first came across this idea, because I know I learned it somewhere - that the Torah never presents a problem without also supplying the solution.

The Golden Calf narrative is certainly problematic. Even the plain text of the Torah is enough to make us wonder: what on earth happened? The people had witnessed the miracle of the splitting of the Red Sea and the thunder and lightening of revelation, in which God had promised them a treasured and special connection with holiness. In a lesser-known passage, they had seen their 70 elders go up with Moses and Aaron, Nadav and Avihu, to feast with God. Surely they had a sense of...awe, wonder, faith...? What happened?

And the Midrashim created around the narrative - we have only three of many examples in the brochure [which I asked you to read during the Torah reading] with the 'back stories' they supply, serve to make the question of 'what happened?' even more complex.

As you can see from them, there are three different aspects to the people's sudden loss of faith.

The first is the sense that time has run out. As anyone who has worked as an attorney knows - and Leopold Sher, I am looking at you because you teach this - counting time can be challenging. An example: we sit Shiva for 7 days (that's what the word means). But which seven? It turns out that we sit for seven days *from and including* the day of the funeral. If the people thought that Moses said he would come back in 40 days and the day he said it was day 1 of the count...and if Moses thought that the day he said it was day 0 (in other words, he was counting *from*, not *from and including*) we can understand how catastrophic it must have been for the people when he was a day late!

The second is that the people fall prey to the worst kind of hopeless despair. Using the literary imagery of Satan seizing the opportunity to create chaos, the Midrash suggests that the people suffered a collective hallucination of Moses dangling between earth and sky. This is a hideous image: their leader, on whom they depend to the extent that we can imagine them being imprinted like little ducklings, dangling from heaven like some terrifying marionette whose strings are about to be cut.

And the third is that the people become murderously enraged. Their fear and terror spills out into assassination. It's not so long since they heard the injunction not to murder, but no matter: they are so done with leaders that they are ready to do without them altogether. In that moment they are a rabid pack, a mob, hardly human any more.

Impatience; despair; rage. All of which are preceded by the description of Shabbat. Why? I suggest, that the Torah's remedy is pre-emptive. Each of these very human responses to difficulty can be healed by...Shabbat.

Ramban, Nachmanides, teaches that when the Torah says *Shabbat Shabbaton* - a Sabbath of complete rest - we are being reminded that Shabbat is the foundation of the world. If the people had accurately known when Shabbat was, if they had been able to ground themselves properly in time, they might have been better able to count it.

Sa'adia Gaon, quoted by the commentator Ibn Ezra, understands the Hebrew *ot hi* - Shabbat as a sign - means that Shabbat is what keeps us distinct as a people. Closing up shop, avoiding travel, not engaging in business - all of those remind us of who we truly are. If the people had been more secure in their identity, they might have recognized that hallucination for what it was - a painted devil, sent to disrupt them.

And Shabbat is the day of the soul. That mysteriously beautiful word *vayinafash* only occurs once in Torah. The commentator Rashi teaches that it means the taking of a different breath: Ramban teaches that it means we get an additional soul to walk with us for the day. Regardless, the contrast with that outburst of murderous rage could not be more pronounced; murder takes away a soul, Shabbat revives the one we have and gives us another to go with it.

Had the people been able to apply the remedy, perhaps they would not have needed the Golden Calf.

And as for them, so for us too. If we cast our minds back over just the past week in our lives, we can all of us find examples of impatience, despair and rage. Even if we didn't feel it ourselves, there are multiple places to notice it around us.

And Shabbat is one answer to not letting ourselves be possessed by them. Shabbat is the day on which we take ourselves back again.

I know that it can be challenging to keep Shabbat. I know that we are beset by so many distractions and necessities and compromises and even temptations. That phone...it would be so easy just to pick it up. That Amazon order...it would be so easy to place it.

But by guarding Shabbat - *veshamru v'nai Yisrael* - we link ourselves to the way we count holy time, and remind ourselves who we are, and come back to ourselves.

It's a great invention. And it's there waiting for us any time we get things wrong.

Shabbat shalom.