

## **Ki Tissa 5781 - The Cleft in the Rock**

In a recent article for Time Magazine, Tara Law explored the phenomenon known as the 'third quarter phenomenon.'<sup>1</sup>

Third quarter phenomenon happens when people are approaching the end of a long period of isolation. It was first named in 1991, when researchers identified it in Antarctic scientists, astronauts and others. It hasn't yet been definitively proven, but there's evidence of it.

About 75% of the way through an isolating event, the researchers noticed a concentration of mood changes in those they were studying. They noted that there was a higher level of anxiety than previously, a dread of the future while at the same time a longing for the isolation to end. Little irritations began to loom bigger - people's habits began to get on each other's nerves. And there were higher levels of frustration overall as well.

The people being studied spoke about discovering antidotes to these feelings - setting a routine, reminding themselves of the importance and meaning of their mission, punctuating the day with small, fun things to do. Most important, they said, was to identify the phenomenon early, before it got a real hold on them. After that, it became really difficult to shift.

Does any of this sound familiar?

We are definitely living through a third quarter now, and I wonder if we've noticed any of the effects the researchers described in our own lives. Are we a bit anxious than we feel we 'should' be? Are our family members' habits driving us nuts in a different kind of way? Are we subdued and fearful? Perhaps we ourselves are proof that third quarter phenomenon really does exist.

For myself, I'm convinced about third quarter phenomenon (I can say that because I'm a rabbi and not a scientist.) That's because it existed earlier than 1991. Quite a lot earlier, actually.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://time.com/5942577/third-quarter-covid-19-pandemic-advice/>

The whole of the Torah follows the shape of third quarter phenomenon. All the new beginnings of Bereishit, the drama of Shemot and the consolidation that takes place with the rules of Vayikra are thrown into disarray by the book of Bamidbar, the most chaotic book of the Torah, with no clear structure but a disproportionate number of frustrations and arguments. The spies, Korah, the plague of the serpents, Aaron and Miriam ganging up on Moses...even though the chronology is different, the shape is clear. Things tend to go off the rails as we get closer to the end.

And the shape is there in this week's Torah portion too. Moses has spent 40 days up the mountain in conference with the Holy One, surrounded by deep darkness - *arafel*. What better metaphor for his total isolation? He knows that the end of this time is approaching. Then he is confronted by the people's faithlessness in building the Golden Calf and a different reason to go down from the one he expected (32:7). Unlike those astronauts, Moses knows while he's still at the top of Sinai that the mission he's been working on has already failed. Can we even begin to imagine his dread, his frustration, his anxiety?

It's no wonder he melts down (pun intended for Hugo).

And yet. When Moses goes back up the mountain after breaking the tablets, the Holy One provides him with a gift: an antidote to third quarter phenomenon. And this is what it looks like (if you want to follow along, it's on page 539 of the Humash, beginning Exodus 33:17).

We know this passage well. Moses has asked for a personal encounter with the Holy One - his way of searching for an offset to what he is feeling. And instead of brushing him off - because how can a human encounter the Holy One and still stay alive? - the Holy One grants Moses' request in a different form. Moses is placed in a cleft in the rock and sheltered by the Holy One's own hand as a flood of goodness passes before him and the aspects - the *middot* - of the Holy One are proclaimed. It is an encounter that is no less powerful for being indirect. And Moses will hold it to his heart, never speaking of it again.

What is that cleft in the rock? Rashi notes that the word the Torah uses is 'a place near Me,' and quotes a Midrash that the cleft is where Shekhinah, the most accessible aspect of the Holy One - can be found. It's a place of intimate encounter, even if the encounter is only with a tiny part of what is infinite. And once Moses has been put in this place of intimacy, this safe place, this place of connection, he is able to go back down the mountain and continue the story.

And perhaps that's what we need now, too - a safe place where Shekhinah can be found, to get us through the third quarter and into the next stage of the journey.

What are the practices we need to take us to that safe place? Perhaps we need to focus on our prayer. Perhaps we need to be outside in nature - the gift that endured through COVID. Perhaps we need to be reaching out to each other and connecting. Perhaps we need to focus on gratitude for what we still do have, for the people who care for us, seen and unseen. And perhaps - like those scientists and astronauts - we need to remind ourselves of our mission and our sense of purpose and resilience. Maybe our Sedarim this year will celebrate that specifically.

It's the third quarter. We've been here before. Let's remember that we know what to do.

Shabbat shalom.