

Ki Tissa Ex 30:11-34:35

Introduction (11/18)

Ki Tissa begins with the assignment of a ½ shekel tax on everyone in the Israelite community as per a census to be taken. The main part of this parsha, though, concerns the massive betrayal of the Israelites against God and Moses through the building of an idol, a Golden Calf, crafted by Aaron. The sacred relationship between God and the Israelites is fractured and in danger of being destroyed. Moses seeks to elicit God's mercy for the people and succeeds in saving them, although the perpetrators of the Golden Calf do not escape punishment.

February 15, 2014

Temple Sinai

(first draft)

Questions this portion asks of us:

--What is the distance we need to keep...how close can we draw near?

--What is the duration of our faith?

--How keenly can we listen?

--What can we bear to see?

--Or do we revert to the familiar form of the known?

--Or do we enter into the unknown, enter into uncertainty with our fear in tact and move into unknowing, into awe? Which is faith.

--Or do we vacillate between these two poles, waxing and waning like the moon?

--And the indwelling presence of the Divine Mystery is with us either way.

The Sabbath is the counter-point to our perpetual struggle, to our wrestling with fear and awe. The Sabbath is when the struggle ceases and there is union. The inner-most sanctuary of the indwelling presence opens up to know the Divine. We pause, we rest, to know. There is comfort and ease.

In this portion we have three models of possibility as responses to these questions of where we stand in our relationship with Divine Mystery.

We are the Israelites who struggle to find the right distance to awe, the infinite power of the unknown. They tremble and they quake, they witness, using Moses as an intermediary between themselves and God. They struggle. There is discord. And when they lose faith completely, lost in their fear, they create idols for solace, and become lost in their separation from God. And return again, always mediating the distance.

Then there is Moses who has nullified his separate self. He can speak for and identify with the people, losing any need for self-glorification. Standing firm with thunder and quaking and in the face of annihilation he finds his voice in the thin silence that underlies all the noise. He bridges the people and the Divine.

And then there is Joshua. Quietly waiting for Moses on the mountain. Quietly sitting in the Tent of Meeting while Moses speaks to God face to face. He stays there, not stirring whether God and Moses are present or not. This is a third possibility. The contemplative who finds balance in the underlying silence beneath the noise.

As I was thinking about this portion, I was trying to understand, within my own experience, the Israelites' need for the Golden Calf and their subsequent wild dance of ecstasy which obliterated all their fear. I am going to indulge in a little personal story which helped me understand their plight of abandonment.

When I was little, this was before I started kindergarten, and when the rules of appropriate parenting were different than they are now, I remember this repeatedly occurring, so clearly. My father would come home for lunch so my mother could drive him back to work, so she would have the car. She would leave me home alone. I was perhaps about 4 years old. I remember how nervous this would make me. So I would move the kitchen chair and climb up on the counter and turn on the radio. As tubes inside of the radio lit up, the little

musicians who lived there would come to life. The music was loud! I danced wildly around the kitchen until I was completely absorbed in the dancing and any fear I might have had was completely vanquished. I exhausted myself.

This is how I understand the Golden Calf. Of course, we need to make a Golden Calf and dance wildly around it until we forget our fear of abandonment.

And how is this ecstatic state we use to run away different from the union of Shabbat?

Do we know the roots of both of these?

From the Zohar:

...“any sincere engagement with Torah attracts the Divine Presence”,

“From here, let us join with the Shekhenia, engaging in Torah as we go.”

(Zohar, p. 61, and footnote 15 on the same page.)

Niggun

Part I: We are the Israelites

While Moses was up on the mountain, at the end of the forty days of, God gave the instructions for the Sabbath:

“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.” [Ex 31:16-17]

At the same time, in the minds of the people, Moses was six hours late coming down. (Zohar, p. 85)

That guy Moses has disappeared and we don't know what happened to him! We panic! Our gold is gathered up, melted, and out leaps this Golden Calf. And we dance and we dance until we forget our fear.

Here we hide from fear. We are stiff-necked. As we dance, we are incapable of hearing, incapable of transformation. And we can make a fetish, a Golden Calf out of anything. We could have even had made the Tablets into a fetish, and call them God.

(ideas from Zornberg, p. 424 and the Ishbitzer, p. 170)

So, here are the two poles within us, the roots of the perpetual covenant, the Sabbath, and the root of forgetting, the panic of separation, discord. This juxtaposition--holding together the thoughts of the Sabbath and dance of the Golden Calf is important.

The Sefat Emet thinks about the glory of the Sabbath.

He writes, and I quote at length:

“Sabbath is the root of life. On the holy Sabbath this root is aroused in each thing. That is why the Sabbath is called ‘rest’, because it returns each thing to its root.” (p. 129)

“All week long we should look forward to this turning to our root and the place of our rest, since this is where we truly live. That is what is meant by keeping the

Sabbath--to be in a state of anticipation all week long, saying; When will the holy Sabbath come, so I can go back to my place!" (p. 130)

The "Sabbath keeps and preserves us.." (p. 130)
It keeps us connected to the root of human life.

"You shall keep my Sabbaths, a sign between Me and you throughout the ages, that you may know that I The Lord make you holy." [Ex 31;13] The sages note that the Sabbath was given in secret." (p. 129)

(Moses was alone with God up on the mountain at the time.)

"This can be understood in connection with the verse [concerning the future of the temple] 'The gate of the inner court which faces East shall be closed on the six working days; it shall be open on the Sabbath...' [Esek 46:1] For on the Sabbath the innermost secret is revealed. Just as it is true for our blessed God, so it is the case for the souls of Israel: their innermost hearts are open on the Holy Sabbath." (p. 129-130)

"And where ever there is inwardness, there needs to be protected. That is why the verse says 'keep My Sabbaths.' ...Since the Sabbath is a foretaste of the world to come, on this day the soul is revealed just a bit. This is what the sages meant when they spoke of an 'extra soul' on the holy Sabbath. And that is why we recite kiddush over the wine--to show that the soul is now open and wine, like the soul, must be guarded from the stranger's touch." (p. 131)

The Sabbath is this promise of intimacy with the innermost secret, a knowing of the immutable relationship with Divine Mystery.

And when we are separate from that knowing, how long does it take us to forget we ever knew?

Is faith the practice of remembering what we only sometimes know?

Moses is six hours late coming down from the mountain! Are we abandoned?

This is that seventh day, the Sabbath. Can we be open to knowing so it can keep us the remainder of the week?

How close can we get to that inner chamber before we start setting up a barrier we think protects us, but in actuality keeps us in separation?

And no matter how far into exile we go, the Divine Indwelling goes with us, if we loosen our stiff necks and listen. (Zohar, p. 61, especially footnote 15)

Chant:

Lishuatcha kiviti Yah

קִוִּיתִי יְהוָה, לִישׁוּעָתְךָ

I wait / hope for your salvation (Genesis 49:18)

Silence

Part II: Moses

We can look and wonder at Moses and what he demonstrates. He knows the frustration of trying to lead such a bunch of whiney, stiffed neck people, and he keeps arguing with God on our behalf. In his continuous petition, he mitigates God's wrath, bringing in the voice of compassion. He knows who we are and does not separate himself from us in order to gain God's glory. He demands that God not separate Godself from us.

As a result, God promises us, passing before Moses, "a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin;

yet He does not remit all punishment, but visits the iniquity of parents upon children and children's children upon the third and fourth generations." [Ex 34:6-7]

"Moses hastened to bow low to the ground in homage, and said, "If I have gained Your favor, O Lord, pray, let The Lord go in our midst, even though this is a stiff-necked people. Pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for Your own." [Ex 34:8]

From the Sefat Emet,

The sin of the Golden Calf was one of falling out of oneness, the sin of disunity.

(p. 133)

Here Moses restores that unity.

"Because he risked his life for the children of Israel and refused to separate himself from them, he and they were truly joined together, not to be divided."

(pp. 132-3)

From the Zohar,

"When they came before Rabbi Shim'on he saw a sign in their faces He said, 'Enter, holy children! Enter, beloved of the King! Enter, my beloved ones! Enter, beloved of one another!

For Rabbi Abba has said, 'All those Companions who do not love one another depart from the world before their time....All companions who do not love one another divert themselves from the straight path....For Torah entails love, brotherhood, and truth.."

(p. 76)

Can we learn to love our companions, all those who accompany us on this journey through the wilderness? Can we understand unity?

Chant:

V'yachayd l'vavaynu l'ahavah u'l'yirah et sh'mecha

Unify our hearts to love and to be in awe of Your Name/Essence

(From the Liturgy).

Silence

Part III: Joshua

When God was in the middle of his wrath toward the stiff-necked Israelites, he told Moses that it was impossible to be among the people without destroying them. So, quoting the text:

“ Now Moses would take the Tent and pitch it outside the camp, at some distance from the camp. It was called the tent of Meeting, and whoever sought the Lord would go out to the Tent of Meeting that was outside the camp. Whenever Moses went to the Tent, all the people would rise and stand, each at the entrance of his tent, and gaze after Moses until he had entered the Tent. And when Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the Tent, while He spoke with Moses. When all the people saw the pillar of cloud poised at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise and bow low, each at the entrance of his tent. The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as one man speaks to another. And he would then return to the camp; but his attendant, Joshua son of Nun, a youth, would not stir out of the Tent.”

[Ex 33:7-11]

Putting myself in the narrative, it is easy to see myself standing by my tent flap watching the scene unfold with awe and reverence. God is at such a comforting distance--present but not too close, and I am glad that Moses is carrying on the conversation over there.

Sitting in this quiet of this room, now I am wondering what Joshua is doing in the tent, just sitting there whether Moses and God are in conversation or not.

This is the same Joshua who went part way up the mountain with Moses, who could remotely know both Moses's communion with God and the noise of the Israelites as they fashion and celebrate the Golden Calf.

We can imagine him sitting here as we are.

Or we can imagine ourselves on the Mountain or in the Tent of meeting. So much noise and so much quiet.

Not wavering. Cultivating faith.

Zohar quotes the book of Joshua:

"Happy are the righteous, who know mysteries of Torah and cleave to Torah, fulfilling the verse 'You shall meditate on it day and night.' " [Joshua 1:8]

"To love Ya your God, to heed His voice and to cleave to Him, for that is your life and the length of your days." (Zohar, p. 105)

No one is in a constant state of union with the flow of Emanation of the Divine. Our relationship with the Shekhinah waxes and wanes like the moon.

For Moses, who can be known as the spouse of the Shekhinah, there can be constancy. For Joshua, there can be some qualities of constancy, reflecting the fullness and the waning of light.

For us, as we sit in this tent, perhaps we can find the door to our innermost heart, to knowing the indwelling presence does not leave us. And sometimes we just forget. Because we forget does not mean we are abandoned.

Chant:

Shavti b'vayt Adonai, I place myself in Your care

I will live in God's house (Psalm 23:6)

Silence

Niggun

Rhonda Karlton Rosen at Temple Sinai

Chant, David Goldstein

Resources:

Rabbi Mordechai Yosef of Isbitza, translated and edited by Betsalel Philip Edwards, Living Waters, 2001

Rabbi Yehyah Leib Alter of Ger, translated and interpreted by Arthur Green, The Language of Truth, 1998

The Zohar Vol VI, translation and commentary by Daniel C. Matt, 2011

Zornberg, Avivah Gottlieb, The particulars of Rapture, 2001