

TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Ki Tissa, Shabbat Parah

March 6, 2021, 22 Adar 5781

Torah: Exodus 30:11-34:35; Triennial 31:18-33:11

Maftir: Numbers 19:1-22

Haftorah: Ashkenazim: Ezekiel 36:18-36; Sephardim
I Kings 18:20-39

The Cranny of the Gym **Ilana Kurshan**

This week's parsha describes an intimate encounter between God and Moshe that takes place following the incident with the golden calf. Moshe, after pleading with God to forgive the people, entreats God for a private revelation: "O let me behold Your presence" (Exodus 33:18). God rejects Moshe on the grounds that "No man may see Me and live" (33:20). Even so, God compromises with Moshe and grants him a glimpse – and in that moment, we are offered insight into how we, too, can catch sight of God in our world.

God's revelation to Moshe is elaborately choreographed. God instructs Moshe to stand near Him so that He may shield Moshe with His hand as He passes

before him. God then takes His hand away, so that Moshe catches sight of God from behind. According to the Talmud (Berachot 7a), God grants Moshe a glimpse of the knot of God's tefillin, worn at the base of the back of the neck. The tefillin are small boxes containing pieces of parchment inscribed with Biblical verses. Earlier in this passage, the rabbis ask what is written on God's tefillin, and respond that they bear a verse from Chronicles (17:21): "Who is like Your people, Israel, one nation in the land?" That is, God's tefillin attest to the unique connection between God and Israel. And so when Moshe catches a glimpse of God's tefillin knot—the Hebrew word for knot, *kesher*, means bond—he is also being assured of God's irrevocable bond with the Jewish people.

This revelation takes place in the cranny of a rock – in a hidden place where no one is around to bear witness. It is a private revelation for Moshe alone, in striking contrast to the public display at Sinai. The Torah relates that on Mount Sinai, God appeared in a cloud of fire with thunder and lightning, accompanied by shofar blasts as the mountain trembled violently. According to the Talmud (Shabbat 88b), the people were terrified by the divine voice – with each commandment spoken by God, their souls fled and they recoiled twelve miles to the rear, such that the angels had to help them back to their places. The revelation at Sinai was loud and fiery, in stark contrast to the more quiet and subdued revelation to Moshe in the cranny of the rock.

The contrast between these two revelations reminds me of another revelation that took place in the life of my own family a couple of months ago, at my daughters' school Chumash ceremony during the fall of second grade. Ordinarily this ceremony is held in the spacious high-

ceilinged sanctuary of a local synagogue, because the school auditorium is not large enough to contain all the parents, grandparents, and siblings who come to celebrate the occasion. But my daughters' Chumash ceremony was very different – it took place in the midst of the Corona pandemic, during a partial lockdown when the schools were open but parents were not allowed to set foot on the premises. Their ceremony was held in the school gym, a cavernous room with only the tiniest windows to let light in through the crannies. Each second grade class was called to the gym at a different time to receive their Chumash from their teacher. The kids sat in the otherwise empty bleachers and chanted a few verses from the opening of the Torah, and then filed back to their classroom to lower their masks and eat their lunches at their desks. I know this because my girls told me about it afterwards; I wasn't there. When I expressed my disappointment that the school had not even sent a Zoom link, my daughter insisted that "It wasn't such a big deal, Ima." But I begged to differ.

It was true that my girls had not experienced all the festivities and fanfare generally associated with this occasion. The revelation they experienced was more akin to Moshe's private revelation in the cranny of the rock, but it was a revelation nonetheless. Like all the second-grade classes before them, they had also received their own Chumashim, and they would also begin learning the first chapter of Genesis that week. The rabbis teach in Pirkei Avot (3:6) that God is present wherever people sit and study Torah. Even if only one person is engaged in the solitary study of Torah, the divine presence rests upon that individual. As I told my girls, every time they opened their Chumash to learn from it, the divine presence would be right there with them.

Later the school sent pictures of each child receiving his or her Chumash, though I couldn't fully make out my girls' faces – they were obscured by Corona masks. Our parsha teaches that when Moshe came down the mountain, his face was so radiant that the Israelites shrank back in fear, so Moshe had to cover his face with a veil. A veil is not quite a Corona mask, but then again, no two experiences of revelation are the same. Sometimes we catch a glimpse of God from the grand stage of a communal experience; other times we experience God from a hidden cranny where we learn all alone. May the Torah we study remind us of our unique connection to God and of the many possible ways to experience revelation.

A Golden God or a Golden Guide? **Vered Hollander-Goldfarb**

In this Parasha, in chapter 32, we are told about the golden calf. How are we to understand this event? Here is one reading:

Text: Shmot 24:18 and 32:1

(24:18) And Moshe went inside the cloud and ascended to the mountain; and Moshe was in the mountain forty days and forty nights.

(32:1) And the people saw that Moshe delayed to come down from the mountain, and the people gathered themselves together onto Aharon, and said to him: 'Up, make us gods (Elohim) who shall go before us; for this Moshe, the man that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we know not what happened to him.'

- Why do you think that the people were concerned about what happened to Moshe?
- How do the people view Moshe? What (if anything) might have been done to create a different understanding?
- What do you think that the people are asking Aharon to provide for them?
- Based on the consequences, this was a transgression, but was it considered idol worship or something else?

Commentary: Ramban Shmot 32:1

They did not ask for the calf to be for them a God capable of giving life or death, that they would worship. Rather, they wanted it to be instead of Moshe their guide, and that is what Aharon explained, saying 'they only asked that I make them Elohim that will go (plural) before them in your place, sir, for they did not know what would happen to you, and whether you shall return, and therefore they needed someone to guide their way all the time that you are not with them. But if you were to return, they would leave it and follow you as before.'

And so it was. For as soon as the people saw Moshe they left the calf... and allowed him to burn it and spread its ashes on the water, and none of them disagreed with him at all... But if it was their god, there is no way that a person will allow his king and God to be burnt. Could he have burnt their idol in front of their eyes, and they would not stone him?

- According to Ramban, what were the people seeking?
- How does he prove that the calf was not a deity in their minds?
- Reading through chapter 32, what questions could you raise regarding Ramban's reading?
- How do you feel about the people's request? Does Ramban's reading resonate today in any settings?

Mining for a Heart of Gold

Bex Rosenblatt

What is it that makes me me? If I change, through compulsion or through choice, do I still stay who I am? How can I even consider these questions when, if I do change, I won't have an outside perspective on myself to allow myself to notice that I have changed? These questions of identity lie at the core of this week's parasha and haftarah.

In the parasha, Aharon comforts the people at the base of Mount Sinai, agreeing to make them gods to replace Moshe who has disappeared from them. Aharon complies, making the golden calf and proclaiming it the gods that brought them out of Egypt. God sees and threatens to kill these stiff-necked people. God agrees not to kill them only when Moshe reminds God that it would not look good when word reached the Egyptians about what God had done to the people God had liberated. So after some purging of the people by plague, God rewrites the covenant, the Ten Commandments for the people. The people seem not to have changed. They asked for new gods at the first chance they got. But God seems to have become more accepting of who the people are. Moshe ends his argument by reciting the thirteen attributes of mercy of God, summoning forth the identity which would allow God to co-exist with the stiff-necked Israelites.

In the haftarah, it is the people who are changed. The haftarah takes place after the destruction of the First Temple, as Ezekiel addresses the exiled people and gives them hope for return. However, these people are still the same stiff-necked people that they were all the way back during the story of the golden calf. The Book of Ezekiel opens with God's description of the

people as rebellious, just as their ancestors had been rebellious, possessing brazen faces and hard hearts. The idea that the people are hard-hearted appears repeatedly in Ezekiel, usually to express the idea that the people choose to worship idols of stone and wood rather than worshipping God, just as they did with the golden calf.

However, the haftarah offers a way out of this problem. If the hearts of the people have been hard for generations, leading the people to stray again and again, now, God is replacing those hard hearts. In Ezekiel 36:26-27, God says, "And I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit into you: I will remove the heart of stone from your body and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit into you. Thus I will cause you to follow my laws and faithfully to observe my rules." This heart of stone, this dead thing reminiscent of stone idols, stiff-neckedness, and Pharaoh, will be replaced with a heart of flesh. Humanity is recreated in the image of the living God. The stone tablets on which the covenant, the Ten Commandments, had been written is transformed. Rather than acting as a stone in our chests, weighing us down with its impositions, we receive a living heart which allows us to choose to follow those commandments. The next verse completes the covenant ceremony, "You will be my people and I will be your God."

Are we still the same people we were before? No - we've changed, we've grown and improved. God has functioned as the outside perspective, allowing us to let go of the qualities we no longer need while trusting that we will not be losing ourselves in the process. As we begin the transition from Purim to Pesach, may we allow ourselves to trust in that outside perspective, to feel held enough to change. In the words of Psalm 51:11, "Create a pure heart within me, oh God."