

**Teya Klein Berger**  
**Bat Mitzvah D'Var Torah**  
**March 14, 2020**

Shabbat Shalom.

This week's parsha, Ki Tissa, contains many stories. There is the sin of Idolatry with the golden calf, The census of the Israelites, Bezalel and Oholiab, the great craftsmen, and of course the giving of the Ten Commandments. But I will be focusing on a short dialogue between God and Moses up on Mount Sinai. While Moses is receiving the 10 Commandments for the first time, God informs Moses that the Israelites have crafted a golden calf to act as a replacement to Him. They sacrificed to it, they bowed down to it, and they said it was God. God was furious and said, "I see that this is a stiffnecked people. Now let me be, that my anger may blaze forth against them and that I may destroy them..." God had had enough, and was about to commit a genocide of his own people.

But then, Moses intervened. He tries to convince God not to kill the Israelites and he succeeds. And he uses a very human-seeming argument. Speaking to an ineffable God, Moses says, "Let not the Egyptians say it was with evil intent that He delivered them only to kill them off in the mountains and annihilate them off the face of the earth." Moses reminds God what the Egyptians would think of him if he saved the Israelites for nothing. Why would it be the case that God would be persuaded by an appeal regarding

what others thought of him? Why did Moses choose a line of argument that is rooted so much in the ways that **humans** relate to each other?

To give a backstory, the book of Exodus, Shmot, is about how the people of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and his wives develop their community with God and each other in the desert. The person with the closest relationship with God is Moses.

When Moses is up on the mountain, their conversations are about God's laws and rituals the people should follow: both for religious observance and for everyday community life. God's voice is one of teaching and explanation. *Until*, this moment of the revelation of Israelites' betrayal.

Then God's part of the conversation becomes angry and emotional. It is a different kind of voice compared to his previous mode of speaking to Moses as lawgiver and protector.

This brings up the question of whether or how God wants to have more human interaction. As Harold Bloom says, "God is a human, all-too-human, a much, much, too human God." God wants to be recognizable both in humanly recognizable terms but also as all powerful and transcendent. Can it be both? While the Israelites are moving towards Sinai, God is either an invisible presence or the elements of fire and clouds. He never shows a true form or a face. When God gets mad, though, he responds to the very human act of betrayal in a very human way, and, quoting the words of the *Midrash Vayikra Rabbah*, "the heart sunk in the darkness of bad urges." God told Moses-- forget the deal, he would kill everybody for their impatience and disloyalty.

Moses then shifts how he talks with God, appealing to emotion and psychology and the need to be loved. What would Egyptians think of you? They'll think you don't really care about people, you have a tendency to throw extreme temper tantrums, you're not dependable, your word is not your bond. Such reasoning sounds like something one person might say to another person, about to explode in anger. But oddly, it has a positive effect in talking God down from about-to-be unleashed wrath. Why would these arguments be persuasive?

Later in the text, God says, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will announce my name, the LORD, so you can hear it. I will show kindness to anyone to whom I want to show kindness, and I will show mercy to anyone to whom I want to show mercy . But you cannot see my face, because no one can see me and live." In other words, God is telling Moses that no, he can't see God, but God will allow Moses to see his goodness, and kindness, and compassion, just not his face or form. God wants to be known-- but not too well.

At the same time, Moses was also thinking, how is such a tempestuous God going to come through on the promised covenant with the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? Moses therefore reminds God of promises made. In a sense, it puts God in the position of seeing clearly that a pledge was made, in the form of a contract, and God wants to be known as one who honors promises and commitments-- in a way, how we as people would like to see our best selves. And God responds with a disturbing proposal instead: what if I just push them aside, and offer you the legacy of covenant directly? Then you could have your own line of great people descended

directly from you? Moses rejects that offer forcefully; the people, after all, are the people of Abraham and Israel. He cannot and will not forsake them for his own gain. Moses is trying to bring God back, and remind him that awe-inspiring beings should not act that way. In a sense, without Moses to reprimand God, He wouldn't really be so godly. God needs humans to help ground him, and he needs Moses to give him insight on what is right and wrong for the people.

But when Moses comes down the mountain, he mirrors God's initial response and even goes a step farther of carrying it out. He becomes enraged and, as a human, feels a rush of emotions--betrayal, disappointment, fury, embarrassment, and fear. There's no one to talk him down from it or restrain him so he lashes out. He orders the Levites to go out and kill people. Then God sends out a plague to the Israelites, and Moses and God seem to be working together, and feeling the same anger. At this point, Moses and God are connected, and acting alike. Moses feels this connection, and he asks to see God. But what will God show him?

God says, "I will make all my *goodness* pass before you." God behaves with incredible tenderness, and, in one of the most touching moments in Exodus, God says he will place Moses protectively in the cleft of the rock while passing by, and shield him with his hand until he has passed by. It comes across as a very gentle gesture.

Shortly after, God announces what we now call the Thirteen Attributes. Among them, "A God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness..." Slow to anger? Just earlier God was about to let his anger blaze forth

and destroy the entire Israelite population! That is hardly slow to anger. But we see here the influence that Moses has had on God.

And so, as Harold Bloom said, we see a very human God, and a God that can only be Godly in relation to the humans he interacts with.

I would like to thank Rabbi Tilsen and my tutors, Cantor Shoshana Lash and Tova Benson-Tilsen for helping me lead services, read Torah, and explore the meanings of my parshah, and I want to thank Jacob Prince for giving me a good start. I am so thankful to my family who came from Miami, New York, and Chicago, to come support and celebrate with me here today. And to the rest of my family and friends who couldn't make it because of COVID-19, I wish you well, and I hope I can see you soon. Special thanks to my grandma, Leslie Klein, for making my beautiful tallit and the art you see outside. Next, thanks to my parents for helping me think through my D'var Torah, and for keeping me focused and happy throughout this process. Lastly, I would like to thank Hannah, for always stealing the Tikkun Book when I needed it most. And for sticking with me and putting up with me as much as I put up with her. Shabbat Shalom.