

Ki Tissa 5779
Missing the Signs
Rabbi Betsy Forester

With all that happens in this week's *parashah*, I find myself terribly disappointed in the two main characters, God and Moshe. The incident of the Golden Calf is a direct result of their poor leadership at a critical moment.

The problem begins well before anyone thinks about a golden calf. A close reading of the text reveals that God is not angry over the Israelites' worship of the calf. God is angry at the nation's stubbornness. After all that God has done for them, they persist in needing a tangible sign of God's presence. They are unprepared for an abstract God. It is commonly held among biblical scholars that the sin of the Golden Calf actually precedes the command to erect the Tabernacle and initiate the sacrificial cult. In other words, our parashot do not come to us in chronological order. For our sages that is not a problem, based on a principle that the Torah's narratives do not necessarily come in chronological order. And so, the actual sequence is that the Israelites worship the Golden Calf, God acknowledges their need for a visible sign of God's presence among them, and so God commands the establishment of the Mishkan and its associated rituals.

All of that, to me, is wrapped up in a profound not getting it on the parts of God and Moshe. They miss the people's fundamental anxiety and their need for assurance that their leaders are trustworthy and that their leaders care for them. The fact that our classical commentators also miss that point, so taken are they by the sin of the nation in worshipping a molten god, is indicative of a tendency among those who lead to fail to grasp what their followers need most.

The Ushbitzer Rebbe teaches that the Israelites, having just bound themselves in covenant with God and taken on a profoundly exciting

mission as a beloved nation, actually are on a very high spiritual level before Moshe goes up on the Mountain and fails to return for 40 days, and they are on a high spiritual level when they build the calf. The Ushbitzer sees the construction and worship of the calf as a mischanneling of their religious intention to connect with the God who has just bound Godself in relationship with them and given them Torah. I find that completely plausible.

How is it that God sees what the people are about to do and does not say to Moshe, “whoah, we’d better postpone the rest of our conversation so you can get down there and reassure those people that I care, that I will be with them--and that you care for them and will guide them toward this new way of life?”

How is it that Moshe leaves his people for such a long time and then delays his return? How is it that neither of them seems to consider how it is for a nation not yet oriented to their covenant--a nation that has just said “we will do and we will hear--twice--” not to hear and not to see any evidence of a plan for them to learn what they are supposed to come to do and understand? Here, we have a group that already has appointed leaders, that already has a rudimentary judiciary, a group that has been raised up and empowered, and yet nobody knows what is going on. Nobody has a voice in what comes next or a clue about what Moshe and God are doing while they wait for way too long.

Of course, we know what’s keeping Moshe and God so busy. They are making amazing plans. God has incredibly specific ideas of what God wants the people to make and do, and Moshe is getting it all down. It is all very important. And they are in their own world up there on the mountain.

Moshe seems so shocked when he hears the noise from below. And his first move, after shattering the tablets, is to blame Aharon for the whole mess. It is painful. Moshe demands: “Whoever is for God, come to me” and

only the Ritual Committee--Levites--show up! Oy. How he has lost his flock when he is up there planning so many good things for them. And he responds by presiding over the killing of 3,000 Israelites. Gevalt! I wish I were making this up.

The next day Moshe is ready to plead for his people. Now we see his suffering, as he tells God that he's ready to give it all up and die. Leading the people is just too hard. He wants God to make the problem go away or take him out of it. He still doesn't get it.

Perhaps there is a more compassionate way to read this narrative. In the midrash, when Moshe sees the people dancing before the Calf, something happens to the Tablets of God's law that he holds in his arms. The letters fly off! According to that midrash, Moshe realizes the tablets are worthless without God's word inscribed on them. More importantly, he understands that nothing can be more important than the loving relationship God wants with this freaked out nation, and that for him personally, leading in law will be meaningless without his own solid relationship with them as well. He loves the people more than he loved those tablets of law. And so he redeems his people by his own act of defiance. He knows that God will be angry at them because of the Golden Calf, and he sees the damaged relationships clearly in that moment. He binds his fate to theirs, smashing the tablets and saying to God, "they have sinned and I have sinned. Forgive me along with them, and if you won't forgive them, write me out of your book." And God does forgive, although not without exacting punishment. In this midrashic move. Moshe redeems himself, and God as well.

As teachers, advisors, confidantes, parents, chairpeople, team captains, lovers, and friends, it can be so easy to miss the signs that we have lost touch with those we want to lead--or with those we love--when we are up on our own proverbial mountain, making plans. Moshe and God have a special relationship and it comes at a cost. They always risk being in their

own world, so to speak. Let us learn from them. Even when our vision is right and good, we cannot lead in a vacuum. We cannot make plans without relationship, buy-in, and shared process. Nobody wants to be like Moshe, calling out “come to me” and only our closest circle stands up.

We need to be very aware of the signs that we may be losing those we want to love, to lead, and to build with because when we miss the signs, here’s what happens: People become anxious, disempowered, and unhappy. They feel uncared for, manipulated, and insignificant. We think we are building a future on a solid foundation, and just like that, it is as if the letters that spell our bond and commitment to one another fly off, and we are left with a heavy burden and plans that will never land as we had hoped.

And it happens all the time, at all levels of power and in all kinds of relationships. I have been on both sides of this dynamic and I have learned a few things about how we can become more alert to the the needs of those we lead, the emotions that are bubbling beneath the surface. And so I would like to offer just three humble suggestions for how we can NOT be like Moshe and God in today’s parashah:

1. We can see the people in front of us, ask them what they think and how they feel, and—here’s the important part—pay attention. We should take silence as an instruction to probe more.
2. We can be as transparent about as possible and involve others in our process as much and as often as possible. And we can slow down to check that we are sharing and listening authentically.
3. We must remember that all people need a sense of significance and belonging, and those are grounded first and foremost in the ways in which we care for one another relationally. The ways we show up for each other matter more than the plans we make for each other’s benefit when we are apart.

I have a vested interest in thinking about these things. Soon, our congregation will embark on a new strategic plan. We will develop our mission, vision, and plans for the next five years. Lay leadership and I will need to hear from you and work with you so that we can move forward as a community, united in purpose and secure in a shared sense of caring for one another as we look to the future.

We can look for inspiration to another midrash (Exodus Rabbah 46:1). Here, Moshe is despondent after destroying the tablets, and God consoles him, saying, “Do not grieve about the first tablets. They only contained the Ten Commandments, but in the two tablets I am about to give now, there will also be laws, midrashim, and aggadot.” Some scholars interpret this to mean that the second tablets contained all possible understandings of Jewish practice. I would add that the second set contain the lived experiences of the people who carry those laws and practices forward. They are inscribed from the heart of the people.

The tablets on which we write out who we are and what we stand for cannot be inscribed only on high and they cannot be imposed from above. In our personal lives, our professional lives, and as a congregation, may we do our best to be mindful of the relationships that are the bedrock all that we want to achieve.