

Ki Tissa Final Version

Ki Tissa Exodus 30:11-34:35

3.7.2026

I wanted to study this parshah for my 75th birthday because it would have been my bat mitzvah parshah if I'd had a bat mitzvah. . I have no idea what I would have thought about it then. But when I read it now, I see that it speaks directly to what I was experiencing but couldn't articulate at that time—what it's like to be in a relationship with an authority figure—a parent, in my case—who is often consumed with rage. Through its depiction of God and Moses' relationship, it provides something of a picture of what that kind of relationship looks like and, importantly, what kind of conditions need to be met if there's any hope of transforming that kind of relationship into something better. I also think it sheds light on what is and isn't possible in the historical moment we're currently living through.

There are two incidents in this parshah that illustrate these themes and that I want to focus on. The first is the Golden Calf, and, especially, God's reaction to it. The second is Moses' encounter with God when he goes back up the mountain, receives the Ten Commandments again, asks to know who God is, and receives the response that we recite throughout Yom Kippur—Adonai, Adonai, El Rachum v'Chanun.

Let's start with the Golden Calf. The Israelites clearly feel alone, afraid, and abandoned when Moses doesn't return from the mountain.

32:1 "And the people saw that Moses lagged in coming down from the mountain, and the people assembled against Aaron and said to him, 'Rise up, make us gods that will go before us, for this

man Moses who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has happened to him”.

I think “Make us gods that will go before us” is the critical phrase here. The Israelites feel they’ve been abandoned and have no one to lead them. But neither Moses nor God seem to be aware of this. Far from being empathic with the Israelites’ anxiety, God is in a rage, and wants to annihilate them:

32:10 “And the Lord said to Moses, I see this people, and look, it is a stiff-necked people . And now leave me be that my wrath may flare against them, and I will put an end to them, and I will make you a great a nation”.

To his credit, Moses argues against God’s plan to annihilate the Israelites. But he doesn’t say anything about the people’s fears that they’ve been abandoned. He seems to know that he can’t count on God to be empathic. Instead, he tries out a move that rarely works with narcissists: he essentially shames God by asking how God’s behavior is going to look to the neighbors, the Egyptians:

32:11 “why, oh Lord, should your wrath flare against Your people”

32:12 “Why should the Egyptians say, For evil he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains, to put an end to them on the face of the earth?”

Moses’ other attempt to shame God is to remind God of who God is, that he’s the God who promised Abraham: 32:13 “Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel Your servants, to whom

you swore by Yourself and spoke to them, “I will multiply your seed like the stars of the heavens and all this land that I said , I will give to your seed, and they will hold it in estate forever.”

This may actually be just a higher level form of shaming: does God really want to not just be seen as untrustworthy, but to know in his heart of hearts that he actually is untrustworthy, that the whole image he’s created for himself is a sham?

So God relents, to a degree.. Moses and the Levites do annihilate a bunch of the Israelites, but God backs off annihilating everyone. Instead, he says that he won’t go with them.

This might seem like an improvement but, as John Bowlby, the originator of attachment theory in psychology, taught, threatening to abandon a child is the worst thing a parent can do. It sets a child up for a lifetime of insecure attachment. The Israelites appear to be on the road in their relationship to God. And, to make matters worse, God’s threat to annihilate the Israelites still stands. In fact, God says that he won’t go with the Israelites precisely because he would annihilate them if he did:

33:3 “But I shall not go up in your midst...lest I put an end to you on the way”

33:5 “If but a single moment I were to go up in your midst, I would put an end to you”

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ON THE MOUNTAIN: 33:12

I'll skip over the rest of what happens after the Golden Calf and simply note that, just before Moses goes back up the mountain, the Torah remarks upon the intimacy of Moses' and God's relationship:

In the Tent of Meeting "And the Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his fellow" 33:11

But the Torah also remarks upon the Israelites' anxiety about what's going to happen to Moses: "and they would look after Moses until he came to the tent" .

This is a crucial passage, I think, because, unlike earlier, Moses seems to pick up on this anxiety. The evidence for this is that , unlike during his first trip up the mountain, the abandonment issue is at the front of his mind and he won't let go of it.

The first thing Moses says to God is that God hasn't said who is going to come with him on the Israelites' journey:

33:12 And Moses said to the Lord, 'See, You say to me, 'Bring up this people', yet, You, You have not made known to me whom You will send with me."

But there's also a second issue, which strikes right at the heart of the intimacy of the relationship between Moses and God. As voiced by Moses, that issue is essentially, Who are you, anyway?

33:13 And You, You have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my eyes And now if, pray, I have found favor in your eyes, let me know.

pray. Your ways that I may know You, so that I may find favor in your eyes. And, see, for this nation is Your people”.

What Moses seems to be saying here is, It's nice that I've found favor in your eyes, but I don't know who you are. Who is it that I'm finding favor with? Someone who will abandon his people in a fit of rage? And, speaking of fits of rage, it's not enough for me to find favor in your eyes. The Israelites have to find favor, as well.

It's at this point, I think, that Moses has fully accepts his role as leader of the Israelites. He's not buying the idea that they should be abandoned or annihilated. And he's not going to allow himself to be bought off by God at the expense of them. He's not Tim Cook or the president of Columbia University. He's not going to cut his own private deal to find favor with God.

In fact, he's so relentless in his insistence that God go with the Israelites, that he tells God not to take the them anywhere, to just end the journey here, if God isn't going to go with them:

33:15 “”And he said to Him, if your presence does not go, do not take us up from here. And how, then, will it be known that I have found favor in Your eyes, I and Your people? Will it not be by your going with us...?”

I think it's crucial to this story that it's only after Moses has stood up to God in this way that God reveals himself to Moses. But I think the revelation isn't so much a revelation of who God has been up to this point as it is a revelation of God's new understanding of who he is. In other

words, I think God changes as a result of his encounter with Moses. And it's exactly this change that's expressed in the famous passage that we recite repeatedly on Yom Kippur, "Adonai, Adonai, el rachum v'chanun":. God passes before Moses and God calls out: 34:6-8 "The Lord, the Lord! A compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, and abounding in kindness and good faith, keeping kindness for the thousandth generation, bearing crime, trespass, and offense, (and the part we don't say on Yom Kippur, yet he does not wholly acquit, reckoning the crime of fathers with sons, and sons of sons, to the third generation and the fourth".)

Oh, really? Slow to anger? Keeping kindness for the thousandth generation? Bearing crime, trespass, and offense? Is this the same God who annihilated the Israelites and threatened to abandon them because of the Golden Calf? I don't think it is.

I think God comes to understand that God can't have a relationship with Moses and the Israelites if God is going to threaten to annihilate the people or abandon them every time he doesn't get his way. God has to stay in the relationship even when the people aren't constantly singing his praises and doing everything God asks them to. God has to relinquish some of his narcissism, if you will. And this can only happen if the relationship to Moses and the Israelites matters to God more than his power and need for recognition do.

I think this is a very difficult—if not impossible—move for many people to make. We have one of those people in the White House right now. But the Torah gives us a model of how to do it. God chooses to stay in the relationship when he could just take all his toys and go home. Or when he could exercise his power to keep everyone in line by bombing the Canaanites or turning the Levites into his own masked army just to show everyone who's boss.

But God chooses not to use all the power he has. And this can happen, I think, only because God chooses not to be defined solely by his own power. Part of God's self-definition is still about his power and authority. He doesn't wholly acquit individuals and their descendants of

their crimes. But he makes a much larger place for kindness and faithfulness in his self-definition.

For people in power—parents, political leaders, other authorities—, at least— and presumably, for God, as well—this means accepting a certain amount of vulnerability. They're vulnerable to being proven wrong. They're vulnerable to having their flaws exposed. They're vulnerable to looking bad. They're vulnerable to being shamed. They have to have enough confidence in who they are not to be undone by this. That's the model the Torah is giving us here.

Unfortunately, in both my personal and professional experience, this kind of change doesn't happen very often. So, after describing the change in God's self-understanding, it would be good if this parshah gave us some understanding of who we need to be in the face of overweening, arbitrary authority. Unfortunately, the Israelites actually fall short here. When Moses comes down from the mountain, what seems to impress them isn't God's newfound compassion and faithfulness but, as the text says, Moses' physical appearance—namely, his face. “When he came down from the mountain... Moses did not know that the skin of his face had glowed when he spoke with Him. And Aaron, and all the Israelites, saw Moses, and look, the skin of his face glowed, and they were afraid to come near him”.

I may be especially taken with this passage because my dad was a dermatologist. The two things he hated most were tattoos and sunlamps.

These days we don't need sunlamps for our faces to glow. Orange bronzer will do the trick. Sadly, we've learned where the acceptance of an authority who requires that takes us.

What Ki Tissa is pointing to is something different. The real signs of legitimate authority—of genuine humanity— are kindness, faithfulness, and the acceptance of vulnerability that contains the excesses of narcissistic rage. Ken y'hi ratzon.