

DVAR TORAH – PARASHAT KI TISA – SHABBAT, 19 FEBRUARY 2022

Sefer Shemot acknowledges our debt to God for pointing us in the right direction, geographically and halachically. We grow up with the stories about the Exodus (Parashat Bo), the 10 Commandments (Yitro), the Mishkan (Terumah to Pekudey) and the Golden Calf (today, Ki Tisa). But there may be something even more important – continuity. The crucial words might be: “...I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob...” [Ex. 3: 6]. The writer wanted to re-connect the Israelites, infused with Egyptian culture, with the God of **Sefer Bereishit**, the God Who had promised their ancestors a land of their own.

In Bereishit, God is personal. He “speaks” directly to individuals. God talks to Adam four times; Adam responds once. Three times to Eve; she responds once. Twice to Cain - one of those occasions is a proper conversation, the first in the Torah. Four times to Noah who remains silent. 11 times to Abraham, five of which spark dialogues. Once to King Abimelech who questions God’s decision. Just once to Sarah and once to Rebecca, neither of whom reply. Twice to Isaac and four times to Jacob, who also remain silent. 33 communications with 10 different people. Nine of those 33 episodes are dialogues.

In Shemot, God will talk to all the people once, but to individuals? Only to Moses. They will converse aplenty. Moses will even challenge God, as in this week’s Sidrah. In Bereishit, the only dialogue with God that remotely comes anywhere near the level that Moses attains is that achieved by the Philistine, Abimelech. Abraham’s advocacy on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah is just too meek.

However, in Shemot, a heretical idea is introduced, namely doubt. Does God really intend to intercede because of His covenants with the Avot (forefathers)? And this heresy is introduced by none other than Moses when he says to God: “But behold, they [the Israelites] will not believe me and will not listen to my voice, for they will say, “The Lord has not appeared to you.”” [Ex. 4:1]. Moses is really saying that **he** has doubts. If he is not convinced, how will he convince others?

How does God counter such scepticism? By providing physical signs of His power, which will prove that He means business. First and foremost, He must convince His messenger, Moses. Hence, the burning bush unconsumed by fire, Moses’ staff transformed into a snake, and Moses’s hand becoming temporarily leprous. And one miracle follows another, in an attempt to convince the Israelites that God, and only God, can provide a better and more secure life – the 10 plagues that afflict all of the land of Egypt except Goshen where the Israelites live, the splitting of the Reed Sea, the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night, the conversion of brackish water into sweet, drinkable water, the sudden appearance of quails, the daily supply of manna, the transformation of Mt Sinai into a volcano, and the Divine Revelation where God talks to all the people from the summit of Mt Sinai accompanied by thunder, lightning and the sound of the shofar.

All these miracles are packed into just 10 chapters in the first half of Shemot. **To no avail.** The people remain unmoved by God’s signs. They lack faith in His ability to deliver the goods. That brings me to our time.

Last year, a theologian died at the young age of 97. Richard Rubenstein graduated from Hebrew Union College and was ordained at the Jewish Theological Seminary. He gained universal recognition for his first book, **After Auschwitz** (1966), in which he resurrected the thesis espoused by Friedrich Nietzsche and others that God was dead. After the Shoah, how could anyone still hold the Biblical view that God was a personal, caring, protective deity? Was the Shoah not the ultimate sign of God's self-imposed exile or His impotence?

I get it but I am puzzled. Did Rubenstein believe in an interventionist and benevolent God **before** the Holocaust? What about the pogroms of 1881 in Czarist Russia's Pale of Settlement? Or the Cossack pogroms of 1648 in Ukraine? Or the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492? Or the loss of 600,000 lives in the Bar Kochba revolt between 132 and 135 CE?

Conversely, how could he be sure that God had not facilitated the acceptance by the UN of the 1947 Partition Plan? Or Israel's military victories in 1948, 1967 and 1973? Or the rescue of the Jews of Yemen and Ethiopia? However, even if God had provided physical manifestations of His omnipotence, would we have believed them? In this scientific age, what sort of empirical evidence would be needed to sweep away our scepticism? Would we behave any differently from the Israelites? Look at some people's reactions to vaccines which have proved their efficacy for the last 226 years?

Hannah Rubenstein said that her father never renounced a belief in a God and attended shul every Shabbat. According to a colleague, Rubenstein saw God as the "Lord of all Creation" Who left human beings to make their own moral choices. For Rabbi Rubenstein, the Biblical view of God was dead, but **religion was not**. Biblically prescribed rituals had bound us together and offered us tools for grappling with life's difficulties. His colleague said that "Rubenstein looked on a sacred day like Yom Kippur as a response to the human need to face our own imperfections and our own capacity for change, rather than as a day on which God sits in judgment of mankind." For Rubenstein, religious interactions were important. Sharing prayers, songs, study and rites of passage were a bulwark against despair and apathy. They offered us comfort, hope and meaning.

Talking of meaningful rites of passage, Miri, Simon and I would have observed the yahrzeit for Sue today, if not for the fact that it is a leap year. Sue was more observant and had much more faith than I. It was Sue who wanted to join Masorti, and she was duly rewarded. The unexpected emergence of this community enabled her to embrace her very feminine tallit, a source of considerable, spiritual strength. And at the very end, she asked for a complete Shabbat morning service at home. We were able to hold two. I think about Sue every day, and I don't know if she would have accepted that the traditional view of God was redundant.

Shabbat Shalom.

Nahum Gordon