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Weekly Words of Torah

D'var Torah for Parashat Ki Tisa

by FRANKIE SANDMEL • 2/18/2022 | 17 Adar 5782

This week I'm thinking a lot about what it means to build trusting, caring relationship. In our Parsha, a LOT happens. (Seriously. Its a thriller.) But from my perspective it can all be boiled down to a series of striving between, God, Moses and Israel to connect with one another, and a demonstration of how, no matter the intentions, that striving can sometimes fall short.

If our Parsha were a movie, I imagine it in split screen:

> On one side, we see God and Moses on top of a Mount Sinai. God is carving the tablets with the commandments to bring down to Israel. The Torah tells us they are carved by God's hands directly. The early Rabbis elaborate on this, telling tales of magical tablets where the words are legible from both sides, the letters shine divine light, and somehow even the letters that would be physically impossible to carve out of stone are perfectly formed.

> On the other side, we see the Israelites beginning to lose hope, beginning to waver in their faith. The Israelites are in totally new territory with this God whom they can't see or imagine physically, and whom they don't yet know how to worship. They gather together all of their gold, bring it to Aaron, and ask to make an Golden Calf.

In these two scenes, Israel is yearning to be loved by God and falls into the only patterns they know about - idolatry and sacrifice, the practices they knew in Egypt. Meanwhile, God is yearning to show love for Israel, and spends 40 whole days creating a lavish gift to bestow upon them. I imagine God so invested in perfection that God doesn't notice Israel's patience and faith wavering. God can't even imagine that they don't need this fancy gift to feel loved.

When Moses gets to the bottom of the mountain and sees the Golden Calf that the Israelites have created, he's livid. He smashes the tablets -- it's unclear whether Israel even got to see them. There's anger, hurt, and a fair amount of punishment doled out. And then, Moses tries again.

This time the time on the mountain is shorter and the tablets him brings back are simpler - no glowing letters or magical light. Just rock.

The rift between God and Israel at the foot of Sinai, the hurt they cause towards each other around the Gold Calf, is one that it takes a long time to recover from. But it makes me wonder, in the first round, was God thinking about Israel when God made the tablets -- did God's gift come from a place of empathy and care for them, or was God still focused on showing off and impressing them?

And from the other side, it is clear that Israel didn't fully understand the way God needed to be shown love, or they

weren't quite ready to show up in the way God had hoped.

Communicating love is something that its very hard to get right. There are so many assumptions and expectations floating around us that often what we hope to communicate with our words or actions gets lost in translations. Grand gestures fall short, words get misinterpreted, intentions are obscured by actions.

From my point of view, its incredible the God, Israel and Moses are able to recover from this slight -- this transgression leads to an argument, but it doesn't spoil the relationship. Personally, I'm heartened to see that even God has to learn how to care for Israel in a way that can be received.

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