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On Needing Certainty Now

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Imagine, for a moment, that you are an Israelite at the foot of Har Sinai. Over the past few weeks, your life has been turned upside down: you have witnessed mind-boggling miracles, you have been freed from slavery, and you have been brought out into the wilderness, to the bottom of Har Sinai. Too scared to go up the mountain (Exod. 19:18, 23), you and your fellow Israelites remain camped out below as Moses goes up and down, eventually staying up on top as God teaches him and prepares the Tablets. You know that you are going somewhere that you should consider home—to be sure, a place that you have never seen—and you know that many of your practices must change. You know that God is so awesome that being in their presence is scary. And now your leader—whom you are still learning to trust—has disappeared into the clouds. What is an Israelite to do? How is one to cope with the extreme uncertainty and the drastic changes with which they are faced?

In the *Mei Hashiloah*, the Izbitzer (R. Mordechai Yoseif Leiner, 1801–1854) points out that the story of the Golden Calf appears just after God had taught Moses about the Sabbath. The Israelites, he says, knew that Moses had just learnt these laws, and thus anticipated the complete redemption, "the day that will entirely be the Sabbath" (M. Tamid 7:4), at which time God's plans and needs will be known with certainty. Reflecting on the lack of clarity in their own current situation, the Israelites turned to Aaron and created the Golden Calf, "for truly, the creation of the Golden Calf was because they wanted God to show them his order and his ways for all time" (*Mei Hashiloah* I). The Israelites needed certainty, and they needed it *now*. And so, they turned to Aaron and received the Golden Calf, a leader that will not budge, one that will not disappear into the clouds nor criticize their ways—a reliable thing that will give them what they want, when they want it.

We all know what happens next. God lets Moses know what's up. Moses gallantly defends the Israelites, but when he comes down the mountain, the sight is so difficult that he breaks the tablets. The Golden Calf is destroyed, and many Israelites are killed in punishment.

While Moses is distraught, somehow, he gets himself through the ordeal. He even gets the Israelites (or at least, some of them) through it as well, as he convinces God not to destroy the nation. The tablets are remade, this time by Moses's hands.

But when those first tablets were broken, something in Moses broke too. And to get through his despair, he now needs to know that God will remain with the Israelites. He needs God to be seen—ostensibly so that it be known that God's people have gained favor (Exod. 33:16), but ultimately because Moses *himself* wants to behold God's presence (Exod. 33:18). Moses asks to see God—he asks for something tangible that can prove God's presence, so that he can be certain of God's favor towards him and the Israelites. In the end, God acquiesces, but with a catch: God agrees only to show him their back, as God's face "must not be seen" (Exod. 33:20).

Seeing the back of God teaches Moses that God indeed loves and cares for the People of Israel. According to the Talmud (BT Berakhot 7a), God showed him the knot (*qesher*) of their head tefillin (*tefillin shel rosh*), a sign that, as interpreted by the Izbitzer, "we"—the People of Israel—"are connected (*mequsharin*) to God." But in the context of Moses's progress in the parshah, it is clear that this is something that *he* needs for *himself*. The difficult, tragic, and

even violent events surrounding the receiving of the Torah have tested his own faith in the People of Israel and in their unique relationship with God.

And there is more: not only is there a catch—God reveals himself, but only in a minimal, if symbolically laden, fashion—but there is also a price. For when Moses now comes back to the people, they cannot look at him, as "the skin of his face was radiant" (Exod. 34:29). Moses received the clarity he was looking for; God gave him the sign, if indirectly. But the sign left its mark, and now Moses—who has never been a man of words—must speak through a veil.

We all need that certainty. We find comfort in knowing that our beliefs are correct, either because we share them with a crowd or because we have found some other sign that makes us feel vindicated. As we see in this week's parshah, a major part of the Israelites' growth is coming to terms with uncertainty, learning that quick confirmation can be nothing more than an idol. And so too does Moses grow in a similar fashion—his need for affirmation in the face of doubt consumes him, and he is transfigured by the sign that God gives him, left not unrecognizable but at a permanent disconnect from others. We all desire that certainty, but so too must we all acknowledge the toll that conviction can take.

The Art of Torah

Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, Director of Israel Programs

Too often, the arts are underappreciated in the Jewish community. A common misperception exists that equates the visual arts with idolatrous practice. Yet, here at the heart of Torah in Parashat Ki Tissa, we learn of the individual central to the building of the Tabernacle, Bezalel.

God spoke to Moses saying, "See, I have singled out by name Bezalel, son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. I have endowed him with a divine spirit of wisdom, understanding and knowledge in every kind of craft; to make designs for work in gold, silver and copper, to cut stones for setting and to carve wood—to work in every kind of craft." (Exod. 31:1–5)

Notably, this artisan is singled out from among the Israelites as a result of his special qualities. How may the reader differentiate among these three attributes of wisdom, understanding, and knowledge?

Rashi, our prolific medieval exegete, sheds light on the nuanced and substantive shades of difference among these terms. First, wisdom is described by Rashi as knowledge that one learns from others. In other words, one must be in the midst of and connected to a community to be imbued with *hokhmah*, wisdom. One may not be an island unto one's self. Wisdom comes from shared experience and symbiotic interaction. Second, Rashi explains understanding as a sense born of one's own heart and soul. Understanding (*tevunah*) flows from the heart of a human being. Once a lesson is learned and internalized, understanding and insight follow. Third, we are presented with knowledge. The gift of knowledge, Rashi asserts, is the result of God's inspiration. Knowledge (*da'at*) reflects the sacred spirit at the heart of God. Horizontal experience then leads to vertical inspiration. That is to say, the wisdom of community leads to a deeper understanding of self and ultimately to knowledge of God's Presence.

Taken collectively, these three attributes (wisdom, understanding, and knowledge) also make up the spirit of the artist. Once these qualities meld, a tabernacle or, more literally, a dwelling place of God comes to fruition. In his timeless commentary, Rashi teaches us far more than solely about the building of the biblical Tabernacle. He teaches us about the unique soul of the artist and the endless potential to experience the divine through the handiwork of a human creator. May Parashat Ki Tissa truly open the door to embracing the artist and the arts in Jewish life.

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