

Five years and one week ago, when I pressed submit on my rabbinical school application, I did so with great trepidation. It wasn't because I had decided only weeks earlier that I wanted to be a rabbi. It was because I was scared I wouldn't get in, worried I was missing something every rabbi should have: a personal theology. I didn't know what God meant to me, and had never really experienced a divine presence. I had just spent a lot of time reading about God in college. To me, God was a character about whom I wrote papers, not a *present* being with whom I had a relationship.

Here is what I know now: I am not the only rabbi who struggles to have a personal relationship with God, most definitely not the only Jew. Just turn to this week's parsha, Ki Tisa, to find plenty of people yearning for a relationship with God.

Let's paint the scene: Moses disappears on Mount Sinai to convene with God and he's been gone longer than expected. The Israelites grow restless. This is a people who has watched God perform miracles regularly: the 10 plagues, the parting of the sea, manna, a thunderstorm before giving the commandments. The Israelites are accustomed to a God who isn't just present, but who appears through grand gestures. But now—radio silence.

So what do the Israelites do? They do what any of us would do when our comfortable reality suddenly changes. They panic.

When the people see that Moses is delayed, they approach Aaron, saying: **קוּם עֲשֵׂה־לָנוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר יֵלְכוּ לְפָנֵינוּ** "Arise, make us an *elohim* who shall go before us"<sup>1</sup>. Elohim usually means God, but the Israelites yearn for something to fill the gaping hole left by *Moses's* absence, something to repair their severed access to God.

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 32:1

Scared and alone, vulnerable in the wilderness, the Israelites are desperate to be in relationship with God. So they build a golden calf—an idol—to fill the void. In retrospect—*three thousand years* of retrospect—it's easy to criticize the Israelites for this transgression. They *just received* the commandment: “You shall have no other God besides Me. You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image”<sup>2</sup>. There's no question their golden project was a major violation of a Divine command.

Ramban is empathetic: he interprets their request for a new *elohim*, not to replace God, but to be their new leader, replacing Moses and serving as their guide in Moses's absence<sup>3</sup>.

The Israelites create a vessel to try and access God. What they don't know is that God is looking for something similar: among the laws Moses receives during his 40 days on the mountain are the blueprints for the mishkan or tabernacle—a physical structure in which God will dwell amongst the people. But Moses doesn't make it down in time to stop the people from literally taking matters into their own hands—creating an idol, referred to in Deuteronomy as *מַעֲשֵׂה יָדָם* the work of their hands<sup>4</sup>.

The Israelites are grieving the perceived loss of Moses who has served as their leader and conduit to God. In their moment of fear, uncertainty, and loss, they act without a sense of groundedness and rationality. They crave connection but lack guidance for how to reach out in God's transcendence. Instead, their attempt to *build* a relationship fails miserably.

But the parsha doesn't end before giving us *another* model for being in relationship with God that feels more sustainable even if it is harder to attain. When Moses seeks to be close with God, he approaches God thoughtfully, communicating his desires for further depth.

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<sup>2</sup> Exodus 20:4

<sup>3</sup> Ramban on Exodus 32:1

<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 27:15

Moses and God have already established a relationship: Moses is messenger to the people while confronting God on the people's behalf when they go astray. As Psalm 106 says: [God] would have destroyed them had not Moses, [God's] chosen one, confronted [God]"<sup>5</sup>. Moses can speak openly and honestly with God. And the two interact on a level playing field, פְּנִים אֶל-פְּנִים "face to face, as one person speaks to another"<sup>6</sup>.

Yet Moses seeks to better understand God, pleading honestly and vulnerably אִם-נָא מְצַאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ הוֹדַעְנִי נָא אֶת-דְּרָכֶךָ וְאִדְעָה לְמַעַן אֶמְצָא-חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ "If I have truly gained Your favor, pray let me know Your ways, that I may know You and continue in Your favor"<sup>7</sup>. הוֹדַעְנִי נָא אֶת-דְּרָכֶךָ "pray let me *know* Your ways". Unlike the Israelite people, Moses isn't asking God to be his leader or redeemer, he is looking to simply know God on a deeper level, to learn from God's ways.

Moses asks to know more and God responds with the description: "Adonai Adonai, a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin. Yet... not remitting all punishment, but visiting the iniquity of parents upon children and children's children, upon the third and fourth generations."<sup>8</sup>

In this moment, Moses gains deeper knowledge of God. In a moment of intimacy, almost vulnerability, he learns of God's greatest qualities and imperfections. Moses allows God to obstruct his view as God passes, letting himself be vulnerable in his lack of sight for a moment.

It is in this revelation that Moses is able to ask what his people could not. Moses bows before God and pleads for God's forgiveness and rededication to the errant people—an appeal the Israelites were unable to make for themselves, lacking a foundational relationship of trust and communication.

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<sup>5</sup> Psalm 106:23

<sup>6</sup> Exodus 33:11

<sup>7</sup> Exodus 33:12-13

<sup>8</sup> Exodus 34:6-7

Here's what we learn: The Israelite people messed up big time in the way they sought a relationship with God. In God's absence, they were bereft and attempted to summon God's presence but instead crafted God's worst nightmare. They acted without communication, without intimacy, without seeking to actually know God, hungering instead for more miracles. While we can empathize with a people acting out of desperation, this is simply not how we ought to conduct ourselves.

By contrast, Moses finds a moment to speak to God face to face, making clear his desires and asking, with consent and curiosity, to *know* God. He seeks a relationship rather than a way in which God can serve him. Only after God and Moses have established this more intimate relationship does Moses make a plea for his people. While Moses' approach isn't always easier, it is the pathway to a deeper, more meaningful relationship.

Friends, I have some bad news for you: I am not Moses... and neither are you.

I do not have an intimate relationship with God that I can leverage to get God to show up for my whole community, or even for myself alone.

What I do have is five years of rabbinical school in which I have explored different theologies and ways to be in relationship with God. I have found most personally meaningful Martin Buber's idea that God can be found in relationships. By connecting deeply with others, we uncover sparks of the divine.

In what Buber calls an I-Thou relationship, we truly see another human being on a deep level, baring our souls and allowing ourselves to be truly known. Through these relationships we gain access to something greater. Buber writes, "Every *particular* Thou is a glimpse through to the *eternal* Thou"<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Hurwitz, p. 70

We build these intimate relationships with friends when we speak honestly and vulnerably about our own lives as well as our differences. And now, too, as I enter into the rabbinate I uncover this beautiful depth through offering pastoral care. In serving college students seeking meaning and elders seeking answers, I have gotten to *know* people in every season of their life more deeply.

I am grateful to have found *knowing* relationships with my teachers and mentors, peers and friends, family and loved ones, all of whom have brought me to where I am today. And the relationships themselves have become sacred and holy. It is with a growing comfort with my conception of the divine and the bountiful relationships I have with other human beings, through whom I gain that spark of access to God, that I now prepare to graduate rabbinical school (yes, I got in).

As we seek our own I-Thou relationships, let us aspire to communicate, learning how others *want* to be in relationship. Let us bring curiosity, seeking to know one another on a deeper level. Whether we hope to find the divine in our relationships or simply grow in the beauty of deep connection with one another, let's seek that out, even when it's not the easiest option.

Thank you.

Please rise for Kaddish D'Rabbanan.