

Making Space for Life

Rabbi Joel Alter (RS), Congregation Beth Israel Ner Tamid (Milwaukee, WI)



It's not for nothing, this reputation God has for consuming anger. The Torah itself makes the case. Our parashah opens with yet another instance of God hovering at the brink. God is prepared to wipe us out in a rage over our incessant violations of the inviolable. We read in [Numbers 25:10-15](#) that God grants Pinehas a "covenant of peace" for having leapt into action (at the end of last week's parashah), publicly slaying two people who grossly violated sacred boundaries before the entire people. "Pinehas," God explains, "has turned back My wrath from the Israelites by displaying among them his passion for Me, so that I did not put an end to the Israelites through My zeal." (25:11)

Let's note some key words in this verse. I've bolded words to which I'll return below.

Heshiv et hamati – turned back My wrath

Velo kiliti et benei yisrael – I did not put an end (from *kol* – all or complete) to the Israelites

Bekinati – through My zeal

The above translations are borrowed from Robert Alter (no relation) and the New JPS translation. Everett Fox is even more incendiary:

"...has turned my venomous anger from the Children of Israel... so that I did not finish off the Children of Israel in my jealousy."

Can we live with this God? It seems that to be committed to God is to stride across a volcano. Or that we're in covenant with a venomous and jealous serpent (God forbid!) predisposed to lashing out at our missteps and provocations. Indeed, life with God means being perpetually at risk of total destruction. And yet, somehow, this perilous existence is supposed to express God's love and zeal for us?

Now, to be fair, our parashah also offers an alternate portrait of God. In chapter 27, the daughters of Zelophehad request from Moses a variance in inheritance law. As their father had no sons, the established law would have the family's portion (still to be assigned in the still-to-be-conquered Promised Land) bequeathed to their male cousins instead of to them. "Why should our father's name be withdrawn from the midst of his clan because he had no son?" (27:4) Again we have the prospect of total disappearance, of vanishing in God's uncompromising realm. This time the threat is not God's punishing personality, but rather the application of God's law. Moses hears their request and brings it to God for adjudication. God promptly replies, "Rightly do the daughters of Zelophehad speak" and authorizes direct inheritance to a daughter in the absence of a son. (Equal rights for women follow in Jewish tradition, but that's a separate discussion.) Here we see God quick to preserve one who is at risk of disappearing and a ready willingness to adjust and accommodate in order to do so.

The next passage is the essential counterbalance to the seemingly uninhabitable territory of our parashah's opening. God instructs Moses to ascend Mount Aravim whence—as the final act before his life ends—he will view the Promised Land. (27:12) Upon learning that his own death is now upon him, Moses makes an extraordinary plea:

"Let the LORD, God of the spirits for all flesh (*kol basar*), appoint a man over the community, who will go out before them and come in before them and who will lead them in and out on the march so that the LORD's community will not be like a flock that has no shepherd." ([Num 27:16-17](#))

Moses, a shepherd from his first to his last, knows well what becomes of a shepherdless flock. It quickly scatters and will be entirely lost, as if it never was. Individual sheep may

survive in the wilderness, but the collective—the flock, identified with its master and the land on which it pastures and grows—will vanish. And so Moses asks that God appoint a successor, and thoughtfully names the credentials he feels the new leader must have. It seems impossible that God did not already intend to appoint a successor to Moses as God had for Aaron. Why, then, does Moses make this request?

Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, in his commentary *Kedushat Levi*, infers a quality of leadership that Moses seeks but does not make explicit: to speak to the merits of the people she or he leads. That is, that any leader of the Jewish people must speak to *our* merits, must be ready to defend us, given that we do not and will not carry out God's will consistently as angels do. As people, mere *basar vadam*—flesh and blood—we are out of necessity preoccupied with our own sustenance. With that preoccupation, we sometimes fail to carry ourselves as servants of God.

Levi Yitzhak teaches that Abraham served a meal to angels—who have no need for food—when they visited him in [Genesis 18](#) in order to give them insight into the human experience. Abraham's meal was a lesson in human dependency. The angels would see the effort that goes into preparing a meal and setting the table. They would note the time it took to eat and they would observe the flow of dinner table conversation. They would learn that humans are bound up in this experience, this need, multiple times a day each day. And so on with our other needs and preoccupations. This would teach the angels what it is to be human and allow them to better understand the space in which we live our relationship with God and God's demands. It would allow them to speak to our merits.

Moses, says Levi Yitzhak, understood that God, “God of the spirits for all flesh,” recognizes the dependency of humans — “all flesh”—and brings compassion and boundless patience to bear in carrying humanity in the world. God speaks to the merits of humanity all the time; that's how and why humanity persists in spite of its incessant violations of the inviolable. Moses made his plea to be assured that after

Moses's departure from the world, God would find a leader who would speak passionately to God specifically of the merits of the Jewish people and thereby secure God's compassion and patience for them. For we are mere flesh and blood—*basar vadam*.

The frightening language of the opening of our parashah is quietly echoed every day in the words with which we begin the weekday *ma'ariv* (evening) service—a citation from [Psalms 78:38](#):

Vehu rahum yehaper avon velo yash-hit
Vehirbah lehashiv apo velo ya'ir kol hamato

“God is merciful, forgives iniquity, **does not** destroy, is quick to **turn away** His ire, and **keeps His anger in check**.”

A 10th century siddur known as *Mahzor Vitry* prescribes also reciting [Deuteronomy 4:31](#) at the beginning of the evening service: “For the LORD your God is a merciful god. He will not let you go and will not destroy you.”

Opening the evening service as we do reflects anxiety on the one hand and confidence on the other. Anxiety: because darkness stirs up fear, but also because the passing of a day means the passing of chances to do right. We cannot take back what we did or didn't do in the course of a day. It is done. But the verses express, too, confidence that God is compassionate and will be there with us again come morning. Only a moment later in the service we proclaim that God loves us eternally. With this voice of confidence, we commence our evening prayers.

Life with God can be permeated by fear. But our parashah teaches—and our evening liturgy affirms—that God worries about exacting wrath. God worries that our proximity to God puts us at risk. And so God is happy for anything that makes it possible for us to live with God. Especially for people who, with great love, look for the best in others and speak to their merits. For people, be they national leaders or leaders in more intimate realms like family, who channel God's own love and make space for life.

This commentary originally appeared in 2015.