



D'var Torah Ki Tisa - March 2, 2024

By Jenna Andelman

Shabbat shalom. I'm Jenna Andelman.

If you're thinking about giving a *drash*, I strongly recommend choosing Ki Tisa. The *parsha* contains an overwhelming list of good topics, which I surely don't need to enumerate for you. After researching several of these possible topics, I have come to believe that this entire section of the *Torah*, from the exodus through Mt. Sinai, the Golden Calf, and the *mishkan*, has an overarching theme: the attempts of the divine and the human to achieve intimacy, with varying levels of success.

Let's start back in Egypt. God has been waiting a long time to marry *B'nei Yisrael*. They were introduced during unsettled times, to say the least, and the people mostly know God by reputation, talked up by Moshe. God visits every Jewish home during a deadly plague, but the ambience isn't quite right for a first date. Then, finally, the people are free and ready for divine marriage. Like any engaged person, God seems excited but not sure exactly how to act.

In *parshat B'Shalach*, God decides not to bring the people straight home to the Promised Land, ostensibly to spare the people military conflict. It seems to *me* that God wants extra time, a honeymoon of sorts, before the daily grind of life in *C'na'an*. God wants to show off a bit for the new fiancée, to make a good impression. Hence, the miracles at the sea (hundreds of them, if the rabbis in the *haggada* are to be believed). At first, the plan seems to succeed, with the people singing God's praises after witnessing the obliteration of their enemies.

Once they're in the desert, though, things take a turn for the worse. After two months of aimless wandering, the people are having second thoughts. Yes, there is a divine pillar guiding them. Yes, they receive *mahn* every day. But something is missing. There is no real interaction with God, except through Moshe. There is no structure. Perhaps going straight to *C'na'an* would have been better after all.

And so God decides to spice things up by lighting a romantic Mount Sinai candle, speaking to the people directly, and writing them a stone love letter. Unfortunately, the sounds and sights of the mountain and the experience of God's voice are just too much. The people recoil.

Plan A - the big-and-small-miracles approach - and Plan B - the dramatic encounter-on-a-mountain approach - have not worked. God invites Moshe up to work on Plan C. While God is taking 40 days to work out the details, though, the people are freaking out. They thought they would have a cool partner,

but this God being is really intense. Hearing just a few sweet nothings pretty much blew their minds. Now their *shadchan* / representative is gone, and they are left in the desert with no instructions from or pathway to their brand-new spouse. In fact, this is the first time in our story that the ball is in the people's court. God and Moshe are busy, and the people need to figure out for themselves how to reach out. In their panic, they do the exact wrong thing - they call their ex.

Now it's God's turn to freak out, and utter chaos ensues. God wants to destroy the people, and Moshe has to do damage control. There's finger pointing. Tablet breaking. Grinding up gold and drinking it, like the *sota* ritual. And Levites on a rampage, with Moshe at their lead. And a plague.

When the carnage is over, God separates from the people, and Moshe tries to intercede. Unlike the people, Moshe is able to interact with God face-to-face, or at least back-to-face. They make up, and God offers the 13 attributes as an apology of sorts and agrees to go among the people again. Moshe even receives some new mitzvot which imply commitment both to the relationship and to their eventual settlement in *C'na'an*.

And then, without any further processing or resolution, everyone, including God, kind of pretends it never happened. There are two new tablets, Moshe returns for another 40-day stint on the mountain. Aharon, who made the calf and had received a death sentence from God, somehow gets his job back, no questions asked. No one wants to talk about what just happened. One *might* argue that this sets a precedent for the next 40 years of the relationship.

So what *has* just happened? Did the people really try to ditch God and turn to an idol? If so, why does God choose to ignore this seeming infidelity?

As the long arc of this *drash* suggests, I believe that something larger is at play. The people have spent two months in the desert engaged to a significant other with no physical presence, communicating through a third party. Things didn't go well at the big encounter at Mt. Sinai, and the people feel alone and adrift. I don't believe that the calf incident is about a nation of slaves or a nation in its infancy, as we often hear. I think this is how *anyone* would react. People need vehicles to bring them close to the divine. If nothing is offered, we create it.

It's not just us and the *mishkan*. It is everybody, everywhere. Think of the beautiful structures people have always built for their deities, some taking much longer than a human lifespan to create. The gorgeous objects made of precious materials, the elaborate sacred clothing, the uplifting sounds and smells, and the rituals, big and small, performed inside these buildings. Structures, objects, and rituals have constantly been updated over the centuries. They fulfill a deep human drive.

Rather than cheating on God with the calf, the people are actually seeking intimacy by creating objects and rituals in the only way they know how. In the ancient Near East, animals were often depicted as being the mounts of the gods, with the gods inhabiting the space above them. With this lens, we might consider how different, really, the calf is from the two golden cherubim that God

chooses to rest on in the *mishkan*. (To be fair, God's *requesting* the cherubim does make a difference, and I also encourage you to look up on Sefaria the rich symbolism the rabbis bestowed upon these figures, including, fittingly, the image of two lovers reaching out for each other.) God seems to understand the people's real motivations and is therefore able to forgive them and move on with the relationship.

As we read the parsha, we may think that we have moved beyond the need for rituals, physical objects, and special spaces to connect with God. However, we still beautify our prayer spaces and ritual objects. Think of the *sefer torah*, *shofar*, *lulav* and *etrog*, seder plate, and *chuppah*. We wear *talitot* and *t'fillin*. We do *b'dikat chametz* and *havdala* and eat in the *sukkah*. We leave notes at the *kotel*. Physical objects and rituals play a critical role even in modern religion because of how powerfully, almost magically, they affect us and make us feel closer to the divine.

I once heard that women in the shtetl used to approach and open the ark throughout the week in order to shout their frustrations and prayers to God. My *minyán* in Chicago had a beautiful custom during *Ne'ilah*. During the service, people would take turns standing before the open ark and offering their final Yom Kipur prayers there. It was an immensely powerful experience, something completely different from *davening* in the pews.

Up on Har Sinai, after false starts and good but misguided intentions, God - who is after all omniscient - has realized what is needed to create a conduit of connection with the people. God offers a space and a set of objects and rituals that, taken together, somehow allow God's presence to dwell in the camp, separated from the people - or at least the priests - by just a single piece of embroidered cloth. Notably, the *mishkan* and its rituals will last even after Moshe is no longer available as intercessor, allowing the possibility of a very long-term relationship.

The people respond (in next week's *parsha*) by enthusiastically carrying out God's instructions and commandments. They are happy and relieved to finally have a way of building a lasting relationship with God. God is presumably pleased to settle into the new marital home with the spouse God has been waiting for for hundreds of years.

Now the marriage is established. Like Moshe, the people are able to come close to God. Aharon, the priests, and the people are given a love language of sacrifices and mitzvot through which to express themselves and communicate with their partner. And all of this is enabled by a beautiful sacred space, sacred objects, and sacred rituals that serve both God's and the people's needs. Perhaps there are still some lovers' spats to come, but for now the newlyweds have found common ground and a path to intimacy.

Shabbat shalom.