

A Tale of Love and Chutzpah

This week's Parsha is Parshat Ki Tissa, which tells the tragic story of the Golden Calf. As you remember, Moshe was up Mount Sinai collecting the 10 Commandments and the children of Israel, insecure in his absence, prevailed upon Aaron to collect gold in order that they could build what became the calf.

Hashem is so angry that he threatens to bury the entire people and start afresh, a new nation with Moshe as their father. A lesser man might have seized this opportunity for ultimate kavod.

Moshe's vigorous advocacy for the Israelites illustrates his passion and compassion as a leader, something we often lose sight of amidst all the drama of the miracles and all the laws.

Their dialogue atop Sinai teaches us many valuable lessons.

Once Moshe persuades Hashem not to destroy the people, Hashem responds, "I shall guide them to the Promised Land, but I shall send an angel to lead them in my place, for they are a stiff-necked people, and I might yet destroy them on the way."

Hashem would keep close – but not too close.

The response of the children of Israel to this is that they go into mourning. They didn't want an angel. They wanted God.

An amazing negotiation ensues, with Moshe not pleading for mercy but pressing Hashem for concessions...

"make known to me Your ways, in order that I can better understand you. And recognise that this nation is Your people!"

Hashem reassures Moshe, "My Presence will go with you..."

Not content, Moshe challenges Hashem further; "if Your Presence does not go along, then do not bring us forward from here; otherwise, how will it be known that I have found favour in Your sight?"

The chutzpah of it! How could Moshe begin to believe that Hashem would not make good on His promise that His Presence would lead?

Again, Hashem reassures Moshe. "Even this will I do!"

Still no thanks... Moshe challenges Hashem one more time; "show me now Your glory!"



With this, Hashem promises that His goodness will pass before Moshe for Moshe to see his attributes, "*A'donoy A'donoy E'l Rachum veChanun*", the Lord God, merciful and compassionate, slow to anger, but abundant in kindness and truth..."

This is a remarkable and compassionate revelation from a God who had been pushed to the limits.

Previously we had seen Hashem as strict in justice, jealous and angry. Now Hashem is revealed as merciful, compassionate and forgiving.

What catalyses the transformation?

Two things: Moshe's humble love for his people and Moshe's chutzpa in advocating their cause.

Fundamentally, Moshe appreciated how important it was that Hashem's presence be imminent and not remote or delegated. The children of Israel needed to feel that Hashem was close. They needed to know that Moshe was walking with God; not as an independent operator. It had to be clear that Hashem, himself, was with them and that they had been forgiven.

The crisis had started because Moshe had been away and the people had felt abandoned. Hence, Moshe demands that the relationship not continue as a frosty distance but a warm journey together.

How often our fights and squabbles end with one side, asserting the moral high ground and demanding that the other follow with blind and unfeeling adherence.

Moshe teaches that redemption comes with rapprochement – when we are bold, showing tenacious love and opening our hearts with compassion.

Wishing you all a Shabbat Shalom

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jeremy Lawrence". The signature is stylized and written in cursive.

Rabbi Jeremy Lawrence