

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

Zohar called the Idra Rabba, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his students delve into this question. In a nutshell, they teach that God – like the human beings created in God's image - has a complex personality. And complex personalities have many faces.

To understand Rabbi Shimon's teaching, let's begin on the human end. The Zohar teaches (Tetsaveh 182a) that human beings are constructed from different parts such as the Nefesh (the force of life, the vital principle) and Ruach (which emerges later on in life and which might be understood as sexual and intellectual maturity). The highest aspect of ourselves is called Neshama, and it involves our ability to grasp spiritual truths and to act as a vessel through which God's energy flows into the world. The Zohar teaches that when we are lost in rage, we actually tear out our Neshama, our highest self, and replace it with a "foreign god" who is called rage. The Zohar further teaches that in this state we are not B'tselem Elohim – in the Image of God - but rather B'tselem elohim Acherim – in the image of false gods. In English, we say that a person is "lost in rage." The Zohar takes that literally: the higher self is truly lost and replaced by rage. The rest of the parts of the self become like slaves to that rage.

In the Idra Rabba, Rabbi Shimon teaches that this dynamic is also at play in the divine realm. When Moshe encounters the face of God who wishes to destroy Israel, he encounters something less than God's highest self. That "lower self" of God, as it were, is all about punishment. When God gave Moshe the thirteen principles of mercy after the Golden Calf, God gave him the tools necessary to evoke God's higher self, which includes forgiveness. And so Israel was saved.

There is no doubt that God had every right to be angry. After all that had been done for them, rejecting God should have been unforgivable. Nevertheless, God does not want to be alone, and being in a real relationship sometimes necessitates transcending justifiable anger.

Instructed as we are to "walk in God's ways" - the parasha should direct our attention to how this dynamic plays out in ourselves. When are we slaves of our own rage, so focused on our hurt that we close ourselves off? And when are we our better/higher selves, letting go of the hurt and opening ourselves up to be channels for divine energy? Psychological research has shown how personal health and happiness are closely tied to one's ability to forgive, but I would suggest that our survival and flourishing as a species does as well.

For Discussion: What makes it so hard to transcend our anger? What can we do to help others bring out THEIR best, most compassionate, selves? How can we help them bring out OURS?



TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Shelah Lekha

Shabbat Mevarekhim Hahodesh

June 9, 2018 | 26 Sivan 5778

Annual | Numbers 13:1-15:41 (Etz Hayim p. 840-855; Hertz p. 623-634)

Triennial | Numbers 14:8-15:7 (Etz Hayim p. 845-851; Hertz p. 626-631)

Haftarah | Joshua 2:1-24 (Etz Hayim p. 856-859; Hertz p. 635-637)

D'var Torah: Conquering our Rage

Dr. Shaiya Rothberg, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

This week's parasha contains a fascinating and disturbing interaction between God and Moshe. The background is that the people have sinned again, and God is furious: "'How long will this people despise Me? And how long will they not believe in Me, for all the signs which I have wrought among them?! I will smite them with the pestilence and destroy them!'" (Ibid. 14:11-12). Just like after the sin of the Golden Calf, Moshe is faced with a God who wants to destroy the People of Israel.

But this time, Moshe has new tools at his disposal. After the Golden Calf, God and Moshe reached an agreement that the next time God is overcome by wrath, Moshe will evoke the thirteen principles of mercy, and God will forgive Israel (Shemot 34:6-9). Now, after the sin of the spies, God is again irate, and Moshe evokes the thirteen principles as they agreed: "And now, I pray Thee, let the power of the Lord be great, according as Thou hast spoken, saying: The LORD is slow to anger, and plenteous in lovingkindness, forgiving iniquity and transgression... Pardon, I pray Thee, the iniquity of this people..." (Ibid. 14:17-19). God keeps God's word: "And the LORD said: 'I have pardoned according to thy word'" (Ibid. 14:20).

It would seem that we are witnessing conflicting desires in God. On the one hand, God flies into a rage and wants to kill us all. But in parallel, God provides Moshe with the tools to arouse God's own powers of forgiveness to overcome that desire. How are we meant to understand this theologically? In a part of the

D'var Haftarah: Unlikely Inspiration

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Almost everyone has heard of Ruth the Moabite. In the rabbinic tradition, she became the paradigm for the ideal convert to Judaism when she refused to leave her mother-in-law after the death of her husband, saying: “your people shall be my people, your God, my God.” (Ruth 1:16) But Ruth is not the only “non-Jewish” heroine who the rabbinic tradition holds up as a paradigm of loyalty to God and the Jewish people. She is joined but the unlikely hero of our haftarah, Rahab, the harlot.

Rahab’s righteousness is displayed when she literally saves the lives of the spies whom Joshua sent to scout out Jericho. But it is her dramatic statement to the spies that led a number of sages to consider her a righteous convert. She tells them: “I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that your terror has fallen upon us and that all the dwellers of the land quake before you. For we have heard how the Lord has dried up the Sea of Reeds before you when you came out of Egypt and what you did to the two Amorite kings across the Jordan, to Sihon and to Og, whom you put to the ban. And we heard, and our heart failed, and no spirit in any man rose before you, for the Lord your God, He is God in the heavens above and on the earth below...” (Joshua 2:9-11) While not as definitive as Ruth’s famous loyalty oath, Rahab’s statement contains within it both a recognition of God and God’s special relationship with Israel.

And just as Ruth, though a Moabite, became the progenitor of King David, so to Rahab is considered the progenitor of a long line of priests and prophets. According to an early midrash: “...Eight priestly prophets were the offspring of Rahab the harlot and these are they: Jeremiah, and Hilkiyahu, Shariah and Mahasiah, Baruch, and Neriah, Hanamel and Shalom. Rabbi Yehudah: Also Huldah the prophetess was among the grandchildren of Rahab the harlot.” (Sifre Bamidbar 78, Kahana ed. vol. 1 p. 189)

This midrash follows the pronounced Biblical tendency to attribute fantastic roles to characters (especially women) who were not normally thought to have a special status in their societies. But the midrash goes one step further - explaining WHY the Bible has this tendency: “And we can learn a lesson here – if someone from a foreign people is willing to put themselves out and risk their life by drawing herself close to God, Israel who lives by the Torah, should be willing all the more so.” (Sifre, p. 189 – adapted translation) In other words, if Rahab (or Ruth) was capable of such dedication and selflessness, surely we should be as well!

But as we so often see, we Jews are often NOT so clear-eyed and appreciative of what we have. Sometimes it takes fresh eyes - often unexpected ones - to remind us of the power of God and Torah. May the Jewish people continue to inspire, and be inspired by, righteous converts!

Parashat Shelah Lekha Self-Study

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Moshe sends a delegation (often referred to as ‘the spies’) to tour the land of Israel prior to entering it. Their report causes a panic at the end of which the people get 40 years in the desert, and only the next generation will enter the land. In the second part there are several Mitzvot that might have some connection to what happened.

- 1) The delegation that Moshe sends is composed of 12 representatives of the tribes (13:1-16), going around to check the land. Is it possible for such a group to spy unnoticed? So what do you think that Moshe had in mind when he sent them?
- 2) The members of the delegation come back carrying from the fruit of the land: grapes, pomegranates and figs (13:23-24). What do you think crossed the people’s minds when they saw this fruit? (If you need some reference point, check out last week’s parasha 11:5.)
- 3) The delegation delivers its information about the land, listing the nations that they encountered there. The first one mentioned is Amalek (13:29). Why was Amalek listed first? How do you expect the audience to react? Why?
- 4) After God decrees that this generation will not enter the Land of Israel, a group decides to none the less go to the land now (14:40-45). Do you think they did this to show good will or out of rebellion? Try to prove your answer from the text.
- 5) In the following chapter we learn about the mitzvah of taking out Challa from the dough to be given to the Kohen (15:17-21). It is presented as something that will be done once they reach the land. Why do you think that there was no expectation that this will be done before getting to the land?

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We welcome your comments: torahsparks@uscj.org

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