

Love and Hate in Times of Struggle: Devarim, Shabbat Chazon 2020

As we live through this time of crisis and uncertainty in our lives and across our world, we are also in the lowest of emotional times in the Jewish calendar. This is the Shabbat before Tisha B'Av, the 9th of Av, the day for remembering Jewish national tragedy. This fast day, which we will observe this Wednesday evening and Thursday, marks not only the destruction of both Temples, and periods of Jewish exile and suffering; our tradition associates it with a long list of other catastrophes, including the expulsion of the Jews from Spain during the Inquisition, and terrible turning points of the Holocaust. Perhaps something that is shared by all of these events is something that we recognize well right now: a time of tragic loss of life; a complete disruption of the "normal," uncertainty about the future and all of the anxiety and grief that accompanies those.

During this pandemic, as at other times of struggle, we may relate to the themes of Eichah, the book of Lamentations which we will chant Wednesday evening. In this highly emotional book, the author cries out to God with these angry, terrifying words: "You have clothed Yourself in anger and pursued us,,,"You have screened Yourself off with a cloud, that no prayer may pass through" (Lam. 3:44). That is how we sometimes feel when we suffer, whether as a group or as individuals. We sometimes feel rejected and abandoned by a God who does not hear us.

No matter what our understanding of God and God's role in suffering, it is human nature to sometimes feel that "someone" is "out to get us " and "someone" often becomes God. This sense is often not about theology, about our rational beliefs, but rather about emotions, our gut feelings. It can be a feeling of terror, the feeling of being abandoned by God, maybe even *hated* by God.

Why do I use an extreme word like "hate"? Because in today's Torah portion, that is the intense emotion Moshe describes - feeling *hated* by God. In Parshat Devarim, Moshe begins his eloquent review of the Israelites' forty years of wandering in the desert. He recounts the catastrophic incident of the twelve scouts, and the people's lack of trust in God's plan. (This is, by the way, one of the tragedies which Jewish tradition dates to the Ninth of Av – the day the scouts return with their report!) In a striking statement, Moshe places their lack of trust in God not in a theological but in an emotional context. He declares, "You sulked in your tents and you said, 'it is because God hates us that God brought us out of the land of Egypt...' (Deut. 1:27). You said, 'it is because God hates us What a shocking, provocative statement!

Why would the Israelites feel *hated* by God? God has freed them from slavery, given them the Torah, and the promise of the land of Israel - God loves the people of Israel! What is going on in this relationship?

The Biblical scholar Dr. Aviva Zornberg imagines that the Israelites in the wilderness were like adolescents. Like teenagers, they are in a painful time of maturing, craving independence and autonomy, and at the same time resenting their parents for challenging them, and blaming their parents for their conflicted feelings of both love and hate. Precisely through the gifts God has given the Israelites, God has disturbed the status quo, pushed the people to grow and become independent adults committed to a covenant with God. Like teens, part of them yearned to be back in the simpler times when they were fed, told what to think, enslaved but cared for, and able to worship however they wished. They may feel hated by God for the demands placed upon them to grow into a mature, responsible people.

So how does Moshe respond to this complex developmental stage of his people? And what can it teach us about how we might respond when we are in a time and place of struggle, maybe even feeling 'hated'?

Moshe, the quintessential teacher and leader, begins by acknowledging the people's anger and fear, which he describes as feeling hated by God. Then, in the opening of next week's parsha, Moshe talks about his own personal tragedy: God's decree that he will not enter the Promised Land. He relates how he begged and pleaded with God to change that decree, to allow him to at least pass through the land just one time. And he tells how God refused his request with harsh words, ordering him never to raise the issue again.

Dr. Zornberg asks, Why does Moshe relate this private exchange to the people? Why tell the Israelites how God rebuffed him? This is something many leaders would not do. He did so, she replies, to serve as a role model. Moshe was dealt a cruel blow, when he was not permitted to see his mission come to fruition. Of all people, Moshe would have good reason to feel rejected, angry, maybe...HATED by God.

Instead, he says, I begged, and God said absolutely not. Moshe then immediately goes on to talk to the people about absolute commitment to God. He reiterates the Ten Commandments, and presents the Shma with its exhortation to love and be loyal to Adonai. In reaction to crushing disappointment, Moshe does not turn away, "sulk," or become disloyal. Rather, he reaffirms his commitment to remain in the relationship and to honor its deepest teachings.

The lesson here is not that one cannot be angry at God or protest suffering. On the contrary. Moshe's journey of relationship with God is multi-layered, filled with protest, struggle, love and hate. It may be precisely because Moshe has struggled so much in his relationship with God, that he can now be at such a deep level of understanding. The most profound relationships, we know, can develop only after love and hate have been experienced, explored and survived together.

It is a meaningful quirk of timing that the Torah mentions God's hatred in the portion we always read on the Shabbat before Tisha b'Av. As we focus on the most painful episodes of Jewish history, maybe we feel hated by God; maybe we do as we live through this painful pandemic. How do we respond?

Judaism does not tell us to roll over and passively accept suffering, whether at the hands of people or of God. But it does teach that a genuine loving relationship is not always pretty or easy; it includes hardship and struggle. As Moshe taught as far back as Biblical times, that the Jewish response to natural feelings of betrayal, anger and despair, is to stay in the relationship, to continue to follow the path of *mitzvot* in our actions. We acknowledge the primal emotions that we all sometimes experience, and then we try to do the right thing. Care for one another, for ourselves, and protect life.

in times of challenge and suffering, remaining true to our values and our commitments is how we sustain ourselves and love one another, and God, with all our hearts, all our souls and with all our might.

Wishing strength and wisdom to us all and a Shabbat Shalom