

Parshat Ki Tissa

Moses on Education: Breaking Through the Zoom Screen Emily Singer - Advanced Kollel: Executive Ordination Track

I would like to dedicate this dvar Torah to the memory of my mother-in-law Joann Singer, a woman who, more than anyone I have ever met, truly celebrated everyone for who they are.

Exactly a year ago, before students across the globe were learning on Zoom, Sivan Rahav Meir likened the scene in this week's parsha, parshat Ki Tissa, to the split-screen on a television. Her reference was to televised debates, but as an educator today it's hard to avoid the image of our students separated by thin lines that can represent a vast physical and emotional divide. Who is listening? Is anyone learning?

Rahav Meir suggests that the line in the parsha splits across the middle of the screen, with Moses and God on top, on the mountain learning Torah, preparing to share it with the people. The Israelites are just below, but worlds apart, building the golden calf, saying "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt." Everyone is working toward the same goal, to bring the people closer to God. But they couldn't be farther apart.

When God "sees" what the people have done, He is furious. God had great plans for the Jewish people – a Torah to guide their way, with rules that they would follow and be holy. How could they have rebelled so quickly and so thoroughly? They are "a stiff-necked people," and in His wrath God seeks to destroy them.

But if God is so angry, why does He give the Israelites another chance? Why doesn't He cut his losses and give the Torah to someone else, a softer-necked people, or give up the whole project altogether? Perhaps the Torah would be best preserved in some celestial museum, behind a safe layer of plexiglass. Why put it in the hands of those who don't appreciate it?

But this of course is not what God wants at all. The Torah was written for the Israelites, for this stiff-necked people. Sometimes God appears to give up on the people while Moses defends them. At other times Moses seems to lose faith, and God steps in. But in Exodus 33:11, when God speaks to Moses face-to-face, according to Rashi, he says, "If I am angry and you are angry, who will bring them closer?" Even in the most infuriating and seemingly hopeless moments, the goal is clear. The Torah wasn't written for the sake of being kept in Heaven. It was written for the people, to help and to guide them, and in our parsha, they need it more than ever.

However, you can't give someone something they do not wish to receive. Especially not an education. As Moses descends from the mountain with the first two tablets in hand, he knows what the people have done because God told him. They have become corrupt, they've built a golden calf and worshipped it. God was prepared to consume them, but Moses interceded, imploring Him to give them a second chance. So why, when Moses gets closer to the people, does he suddenly become consumed with anger and throw down the tablets?

Moses thought the people were distraught and needed help, but in fact, they were singing and dancing. They didn't appear upset about having been abandoned. They had forgotten everything they'd been taught, and they were happy, celebrating. They didn't need God. So why should they receive the tablets? And how would they ever learn?



But perhaps it is Moses who needs to learn – he can't educate the people from the other side of the Zoom screen. If I may overdo the metaphor, Moses is the Zoom host, and he must be present in all of the breakout rooms. When Moses returns to God, he doesn't ask for the people to be destroyed, nor does he demand they be forgiven. Instead he throws his lot in with the people. In 32:32 he makes an offer to God, saying if you forgive the people, great, but if not, then take me out of the story. I am with them.

God agrees to allow Moses to lead the people on to the Promised Land, but He's not prepared to cross the Zoom screen and join them, for fear He will become angry "and consume them." He offers to send an angel to guide them instead.

But the people need more than direction. Moses understands that they need for God to believe in them as well. How will he convince God to join them, this people who continues to disobey and to rebel at every turn? This "stiff-necked people?"

The answer is in the question. In Exodus 34:7-8, Moses argues in the people's favor that He should forgive them and stick with them BECAUSE they are a stiff-necked people.

Rashi suggests that God should forgive the people since they are stiff-necked, and therefore need greater understanding. Chizkuni adds that an angel won't be able to forgive the people, and in their travels they will surely sin and need God's help.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks suggests a totally different approach. Perhaps God should forgive the people not because they need help, but because the very fact that the people are stiff-necked is why they were chosen in the first place.

Talmud Masechet Beitza 25b states, "There are three things which are undaunted: the dog among beasts, the rooster among birds, and Israel among the nations. R. Isaac ben Redifa said in the name of R. Ami: You might think that this is a negative attribute, but in fact it is praiseworthy, for it means: Either be a Jew or prepare to be hanged." It is their obstinacy itself that has preserved the Jewish people over the ages.

These are the people, strong-willed and resourceful, who will challenge and innovate. Once the Torah is truly theirs, it is they who will continue to make it relevant for future generations. Their leaders need only share, listen, respect and support. This is how Abraham nearly saved Sodom and how Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai secured the future of Judaism, not to mention the ever-growing presence of women's voices in Jewish scholarship and leadership today.



Emily Singer is a teacher, social worker and freelance writer. Singer and her husband, Ross, were rebbetzin and rabbi of Vancouver's Shaarey Tefilah congregation until 2004. The Singers spent two years in Jerusalem and then moved to Baltimore, MD., where Ross was rabbi at Congregation Beth Tfiloh and Emily taught Judaic studies at Beth Tfiloh High School, until they moved to Israel in 2010. Emily received her Israeli English Teaching license from Shaanan college in 2013. Currently, she works at the Shaked School at Kibbutz Sde Eliyahu where she teaches English and Literature and serves as the English coordinator.