

Parshat Shelach: Holy Chutzpah

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This week's parsha, *parshat Shelach*, features the famous episode of the *meraglim*, the spies. Twelve are sent to explore the land of Israel. Ten speak ill of the place and instill fear in the people. Two—Calev ben Yefuneh and Yehoshua bin Nun—praise it. *Bnei Yisrael*, highly agitated by the bad reports, spend the night crying and lamenting their fate. They determine that they'd rather return to Egypt than proceed onto Canaan. They also deem Calev and Yehoshua worthy of stoning.

It is not a great surprise that God finds this reaction deplorable. Fed up with the ungrateful bunch, God exclaims to Moshe:

(11) How long will this people spurn Me, and how long will they have no faith in Me despite all of the signs that I have performed in their midst? (12) I will strike them with pestilence and disown them, and I will make of you (Moshe) a nation far more numerous than they. (Numbers 14:11-12)

יא וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה עַד־אֵנָה יִנְאַצְנִי הָעָם הַזֶּה וְעַד־אֵנָה לֹא־יֶאֱמִינוּ בִּי בְּכָל הָאֵתוֹת אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי בְּקִרְבּוֹ: יֵב אֶנְנוּ בַדְּבָר וְאוֹרְשָׁנוּ וְאֶעֱשֶׂה אִתְּךָ לְגוֹי־גָדוֹל וְעַצוּם מְמֹנָה: (בַּמִּדְבָּר יֵד:יֵאֵי־ב)

God is essentially ready to give up on the Jewish people.

Moshe, as he is wont to do, begins to lobby God on behalf of the people. It will look bad to the Egyptians and others if You abandon them now, he says. They will think that You were not powerful enough to take them to Israel. They will say:

It must be because the Lord was powerless to bring that people into the land He had promised them on oath that He slaughtered them in the wilderness. (Numbers 14:16)

מִבִּלְתִּי יִכְלֹת ה' לְהַבִּיא אֶת־הָעָם הַזֶּה אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־נִשְׁבַּע לָהֶם וַיִּשְׁחָטֵם בַּמִּדְבָּר: (בַּמִּדְבָּר יֵד:ז)

But then Moshe says something else, a different argument altogether:

Now, please, let the strength of the Lord be increased, as You spoke... (Numbers 14:17)

יז וְעַתָּה יִגְדַל־נָא כַח אֲדֹנָי כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתָּ לְאֹמְרֵי: (בַּמִּדְבָּר יֵד:יז)

He then recites a version of the 13 *middot ha-rachamim*, the 13 Attributes of God's Mercy:

"The Lord is slow to anger and abundantly kind, forgiving iniquity and transgression... (Numbers 14:18)

ה' אַרְךְ אַפַּיִם וְרַב־חַסֵּד נֹשֵׂא עוֹן וְפֹשַׁע וְנִקְהָה... (בַּמִּדְבָּר יֵד:יח)

After offering a pragmatic argument to quell God's anger, Moshe tries a different tactic, a softer one. He reflects back to God who God really is, what kind of mercy God is really capable of. It is not becoming of you, God, to act so cruelly, he seems to say. "*Yigdal na koach Ado-na*"—Let your strength, your compassionate restraint, show. Be a better You. In a most radical way, Moshe reminds God of who God is, and it is this that helps God relent. "וַיֹּאמֶר ה' סְלַחְתִּי כְּדַבַּרְךָ." "we are immediately told. "And the Lord said, 'I pardon as you have asked'" (Numbers 14:20).

Back in the book of Exodus, in *parshat Ki Tissa*, God actually taught Moshe this very formula. Not long after He threatened destruction of the Jewish people on account of *chet ha'egel*, the Golden Calf, God revealed the "forgiveness prescription," the recitation of the 13 Attributes of Mercy, to Moshe. According to the Talmud in *Rosh Hashana*:

[On the verse] "The Lord passed before Moshe and proclaimed" [Exodus 34:6], Rabbi Yochanan said: Were it not written in the text, it would be impossible for us to say such a thing; this verse

"ויעבר ה' על פניו ויקרא" [שמות לד:ו]. אמר רבי יוחנן: אלמלא מקרא כתוב אי אפשר לאומרו, מלמד שנתעטף הקדוש ברוך הוא כשליח

teaches us that the Holy One, blessed be He, wrapped Himself [in a *tallit*] like a leader of prayer, and said to Moshe: "Whenever the Jews sin before Me, let them perform this procedure and I shall forgive them." (BT Rosh Hashana 17b)

צבור, והראה לו למשה סדר תפלה. אמר לו: כל זמן
 שישראל חוטאין יעשו לפני כסדר הזה, ואני מוחל
 להם. (ראש השנה יז:)

The Gemara continues:

Rabbi Yehudah said: A covenant was made regarding the 13 attributes, that they would never return empty. (*Ibid.*)

אמר רב יהודה: ברית כרותה לשלש עשרה מדות שאין
 חוזרות ריקם.

In other words, the thirteen attributes of God's mercy will never fail to elicit God's mercy. So Moshe, in our *parsha*, follows the rules. He employs the formula and God forgives. But *why* does this formula work? What about it is so effective?

The answer lies, I believe, in those introductory words of Moshe in *parshat Shelach*, emphasized in the Torah with an enlarged *yud*: "*V'ata yigdal koach Ado-nai ka'asher dibarta...*" "Now, please, let the strength of the Lord be increased, as You spoke..." (Numbers 14:17). Moshe, with all of his humility and all of his *chutzpah*, stood before God and said, "God, you're bigger than that. You are capable of so much more mercy, so much more kindness, so much more patience."

There's a *gemara* in Brachot that states:

It was taught: Rabbi Yishmael the son of Elisha said: I once entered into the innermost [part of the sanctuary], to offer incense, and I saw Akatrie-I Y-ah [a name referring to the crown of God], the Lord of Hosts, seated upon a high and exalted throne. He said to me: Yishmael my son, bless Me! I said: May it be Your will that that Your mercy suppresses Your anger, and that Your mercy prevail over Your other attributes, and that You deal with Your children with the attribute of mercy, and that You deal with them beyond the letter of the law. And He [God] nodded to me with His head. (BT Brachot 7a)

תניא, אמר רבי ישמעאל בן אלישע: פעם
 אחת נכנסתי להקטיר קטורת לפני ולפנים,
 וראיתי אכתריאל י-ה ה' צבאות שהוא יושב
 על כסא רם ונשא ואמר לי: ישמעאל בני,
 ברכני! אמרתי לו: יהי רצון מלפניך שיכבשו
 רחמיך את כעסך ויגולו רחמיך על מדותיך
 ותתנהג עם בניך במדת הרחמים ותכנס להם
 לפני משורת הדין, ונענע לי בראשו. (ברכות
 ז.)

There is a blessing that a human being can offer God, it seems, and that is a reminder of who God can be in the world. We can reflect God's best self, so to speak, back to God. This is the mystery of the Thirteen Attributes. This is the privilege and the responsibility of our deep, covenantal, reciprocal relationship cultivated over time.

This audacious relationship between God and the Jewish people is also a model for intimate relationships between human beings. Among the many blessings of intimacy is engaging with someone who just might know you better than you know you. As we reveal ourselves to one another, deeper and deeper over time, we come to know layers within one another. We come to appreciate the great capacities that each individual possesses. And with the privilege of that intimate knowledge comes the ability, indeed the responsibility, to remind one another of who we each can be.

We all forget sometimes just how generous and compassionate we can be. We all forget sometimes what greatness we are truly capable of. It is a profound blessing to have a true partner in life to always bring you back to your best self.

Let us be those demanding partners to those we love, and, no less, to the God we love.



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