

The Ugly Truth

This week's Torah portion, *Ki Tisa*, presents the greatest challenge to the new relationship between God and Israel. With God's revelation at Sinai still fresh in the people's minds, Israel, inexplicably, resorts to constructing a golden calf to replace Moshe and, ostensibly, God. The fallout is severe, but Moshe labors intensively to mend the wounded relationship.

Though the damage raises doubts about Israel's loyalty to God, the healing process makes possible even greater closeness in the form of the revelation of God's 13 attributes of mercy. (Exodus 34:6-7) God presents Moshe with a timeless formula to help mend the broken relationship between God and His people. The attributes have become so central to our image of restoration that they are the very crux of our atonement process, which reaches its climax at the Yom Kippur service; in this phrase, we find a hopeful expression about the possibility of repair on our Day of Atonement.

In our rabbinic tradition, when Moshe appeases God and brings Him back from the brink of annihilating Israel, Moshe longs for God to "let me know Your ways." (ibid, 33:13) On the straightforward reading, Moshe's request makes sense: After the sin, God's relationship to the people is tenuous, but with a deeper level of understanding the future of their relationship will be secured.

The Talmud, however, records a conversation between Moshe and God which seems far from simple: 'God, let me know your ways' "Creator of the world, why are there righteous people who live comfortably while other righteous people suffer? And why are there wicked people who live comfortably while other wicked people suffer?" God replies: "Moshe, a righteous person who lives comfortably is wholly righteous; a righteous person who suffers is not wholly righteous. A wicked person who lives comfortably is not wholly wicked; while, a wicked person who suffers is wholly wicked." (TB Brachot 7a)

The timing for this conversation seems strange. Moshe is trying to appease God after God expresses legitimate rage for the people's misdeeds. Why does Moshe try to uncover the secret why bad things happen to good people? But from another perspective, the conversation about God's fairness seems immediately relevant. Moshe's is at odds with fairness. God's near cataclysmic rage pushes Moshe to question: Is God truly fair? The problem of disproportionality arises as it relates to Israel but it is a common problem: Why do bad things happen to good people of any faith? God's answer, mediated by the Talmud, may not satisfy the student, but it is an attempt to demonstrate a God of Justice.

The price of intimacy may open our eyes to ugliness, but an ugly honesty is something we can live with.

Shabbat Shalom Umevorach,
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