



Parashat Ki Tisa

Fine Lines, Laughter, and the Play of Twos: Living with Wonder

by Dr. Sarah Pessin on Saturday March 18, 2006

17 Adar 5766

Exodus 30:11 - 34:35, Shabbat Parah

In his *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Milan Kundera poignantly draws our attention to the fineness of the line between the laughter of the devil and the laughter of the angel as worlds apart in some sense, and yet a hair's breadth apart in another.

In Parashat Ki Tisa, we repeatedly see this idea of the fineness of lines between things and their opposites: Ki Tisa is a sustained exploration of boundaries, and the sometimes-clear, sometimes-unclear-and oftentimes small but always critical-movement from one side to the other.

In this way, Ki Tisa offers us a telling insight into what we may call 'living with wonder'-a state of mindful joy which allows a person to feel vibrant and alive and filled with hope even when circumstances on the outside are, well, downright draining. The right attitude on the inside-one of quiet faith as opposed to one of anger and self-pity-can profoundly impact on how one experiences day-to-day letdowns and frustrations. It is, in this sense, often a very fine line which separates living in a wonderful world from living in a world filled with disconnection and disappointment. Ultimately, it is not so much the external state of things, but our inner attitudes which make a world of difference.

To see this, we turn first to an examination of binaries and fine lines in Ki Tisa, and then, returning to Kundera on laughter, to an especially strong illustration in this week's parasha of how the fine lines you cross with the attitudes you embrace will ultimately dictate whether you will be laughing with the devils or laughing with the angels.

on twos: part one (binaries, opposition, and fine lines)

Parashat Ki Tisa is a whirlwind of binaries: repetitions, doublings, duplicitous dual loyalties and double dealings, oppositions, masks, and mirrors.

Following only a few chapters after Moses' initial ascent up the mountain to commune with God (Exodus 19:3) and the consequent pronouncement of the Ten Commandments (Exodus



BOSTON | DENVER | SAN FRANCISCO

Working for the full inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Jews in Jewish life

20:2-14), Ki Tisa sees Moses going up and down the mountain to visit with God two more times, ultimately bringing two sets of Tablets down—the first set, which were shattered at the sight of the Israelites worshipping at the Golden Calf (31:18, 32:15-19), and the second set which God urges Moses to carve out to replace them (Exodus 34:1-5; 34:27-29). Notice the doublings: two sets of tablets, which are themselves not only *facing* slabs of stone, but which are, as we are told, scripted on *both sides* (Exodus 32:15).

Dual loyalties and *two-faced* dealings follow close behind in the famous Golden Calf incident. The Israelites, fearing that Moses will not return from atop the mountain, beseech poor Aaron to build them a new God, a metallic bovine whose glittery presence they honor with Dionysian fits of revelry (32:6, 32:17-19).

It is in this spirit of binaries and doublings that Ki Tisa offers two particularly salient illustrations of how things and their opposites are sometimes a fairly fine line apart. First, the identical act of removing jewelry occurs in the parasha once in the service of sin (32:2-4), and once again in the service of repentance (33:4-6). Same act, opposite implications. Secondly, the fine powder of spices made to welcome God's presence before the Ark of the Covenant (30:36) is brought into contrast with the fine powder into which Moses grinds the remains of the Calf (32:20). Same kind of substance (fine powder in both cases), opposite implications.

Clearly playing with the contrast of twos, Ki Tisa draws our attention to the fine crossover from one thing to its opposite.

on twos: part two (laughing with angels, and the message of wonder)

Reflecting on the message of Ki Tisa on the interfacing of twos, we return to Kundera on laughter. In fact, recounting the infamous incident of the Golden Calf, Ki Tisa touches explicitly on the notion of laughter: describing the sinful shenanigans at 32:6 explicitly in terms of a sinful revelry, Ki Tisa here uses a word in Hebrew which is directly linked to the Hebrew verb “to laugh” (*li-tzhok*). Thinking of the Golden Calf story in terms of laughter, we are met with a kind of negative laughter—the cynical, angry, self-pitying laughter of the human spirit which doesn't get its way, doesn't have its hopes filled, doesn't get what-it-wants-when-it-wants-it (“Where the hell is Moses? When is he coming back?”), and, as such, lashes out.

Here, in living with attitudes of demand and anger, the human spirit crushes itself-it goes off the deep end, taking the fullness of anticipation and turning it loose on itself in a self-pitying bout of self-destruction. Here, the human spirit, in its negative outlook on its world, comes—we may say in the language of Kundera—to laugh with the Devil.



BOSTON | DENVER | SAN FRANCISCO

Working for the full inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Jews in Jewish life

But what a world of difference attitude makes. Thinking of the revelry of the Golden Calf text now with the express notion of laughter in mind, we are drawn to make an immediate text-link and, as such, to discover a very different kind of laughter indeed:

“And Sarah laughed to herself saying, ‘After I have withered, will my skin be made delicate again?’...” (Genesis 18:12)

Illustrating a laughter opposite in kind to the cynical “devil laughter” of the Golden Calf account, this Genesis text reveals Sarah, now a woman well into her golden years, overcome with a moment of awestruck wonder at the thought of having finally had her long-unfulfilled dream of having a child come true, and laughing. In fact, the name of her son Isaac – “*Yitzhak*” in Hebrew—precisely plays on the Hebrew verb “to laugh” (*li-tzhok*). Here, in the image of Sarah’s laughter, we find a pureness of heart and faith, an attitude of gracious acceptance and joy even in the face of hardship—a laughter which bubbles up from-to use Kundera’s imagery—the place of angels.

Illustrating the strong difference that attitude can make, the Sarah “laughter text” – in direct contrast to the Golden Calf account—shows the human spirit in its place of wonder: sitting always with its as-of-yet-unfulfilled anticipations (“Where is the son I have dreamed for?”), and never getting willful or demanding, but waiting. And waiting. And waiting. And never giving up. And never turning itself into anger and self-destructive pity. It never, as it were, “laughs with the Devil” – and in this way, comes to laugh with the angels. For even if Sarah’s hope (in this case, Isaac) had not come to pass, Sarah’s life lived in the spirit of hope—with no demands and always with the energy of wonder—would already have been the better life. Gentle anticipation for what may come: living in the space of hope with the laughter of angels.



BOSTON | DENVER | SAN FRANCISCO

Working for the full inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Jews in Jewish life

www.keshetonline.org