



***Parashat Ki Tissa***

***People of the Question***

by Cynthia Hoffman on Friday March 05, 2010

19 Adar

Exodus 30:11-34:35

Judaism describes itself (in a quote from the Koran) as the People of the Book. But Rabbinic Judaism describes itself as the People of the Question. Where did Cain and Abel's wives come from (check Rashi on this one for a good giggle); why did Noach just build an ark without asking God why God was about to destroy the entire world? And in Torah, God actually debates the merits of sharing with Abraham what he's about to do to S'dom and Amora [typically written Sodom and Gamora-ed.]. Unlike Noach's speechless submission, Abraham's response is to argue with God about his intentions.

S'dom and Amora mark the first time in Torah when God's plans are challenged: What if there are 100 good people in the city? Will you still kill them all? How about 50? 25? 10? And if finally, God ends up removing the lone good person from the cities and destroying them after all as he planned, the precedent has now been set: God tolerates, maybe even encourages, argument and conversation about his actions and intentions.

As modern Jews, this point is important: we teach our children that asking questions is the order of the day, that Judaism is a religion that encourages us to ask questions. And Abraham's first arguments with God in Torah are the proof text for such assertions. The Talmud, in fact, insists that God enjoys it when his children best him!

Ki Tissa has a lot of meaty stuff in it, about idolatry, and covenant, and then renewed covenant; it has a Golden Calf and a Golden Mishkan; it has not just one, but two separate admonitions about Shabbat. But it also has an argument between Moshe and God; Moshe, who in the manner of Abraham before him, challenges God to rethink his intentions.

The Children of Israel have let their fears overcome them and have betrayed God's faith in them. God, who doesn't appear to have changed much since the time of Noach, decides that he's going to kill them all and start over again. This echoes back to God in the time of Noach, who wanted to destroy the world he created because everyone is evil; and God in the time of Abraham who wanted to destroy S'dom and Amora because the people there were evil. Here, in Ki Tissa, God wants to destroy the Children of Israel because they have betrayed him.



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But Moshe challenges God about his first impulse, which is to destroy them. When God says “Now let me be, that my anger may blaze forth against them and that I may destroy them, and make of you a great nation,” Moshe appeals to God’s pride, noting that if God does destroy the Israelites, the Egyptians will think he only rescued the Israelites in order to kill them all off more easily. Moshe additionally reminds God of the *Brit Bein haBetarim* (‘Covenant between the Parts’): “You swore to them by Your Self and said to them: I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, and I will give to your offspring this whole land of which I spoke, to possess forever.”

But finally, Moshe says “If you cannot give the people forgiveness, then blot me out from Your book which You have written.” Moshe refuses to be the person with and from whom God starts over; Moshe refuses to be made a great nation.

God’s eventual response is “Whoever has sinned against Me, him I will blot out from My book!” And then sets the Levites to the task of killing off only those who are guilty of making the Golden Calf in the first place.

In Torah, then, God can not only be negotiated with, as Abraham does in Lech Lecha, God can be convinced to change his course, as he does here in conversation with Moshe.

Technically, I suppose, we talk with God every time we daven. And though unlike Moshe and Abraham, we don’t often get a direct response to our words, if we’re patient, eventually we can see our way clear to some understanding of God’s will for us, even if only in the smallest ways. I must say, however, that as a lesbian, I’ve been a pretty angry person these last few years, and a lot of my anger, when it isn’t directed at myself, has been directed at God. What do you mean a lesbian cannot become a Rabbi? How dare the state suggest that my relationship is anything less than the relationships of others because my partner is a woman! Of course, my anger might more properly be directed at people who think they’re doing God’s work, but I figure God can take it.

When I’m ready to have a chat with God, I will follow the leads of Moshe and Abraham before him, and work through this bitterness I’m starting to drown in. But I no longer wonder where I got the idea that it was okay to be angry at God. Or to disagree with God. I learned to challenge God by studying Torah.

As we enter the Passover season, and move from slavery to freedom, may we all remember to value the questions we ask at least as much as we value the answers we receive. And keep in mind that the people who think they know what God means probably don’t have any better idea than we do what it might take to change God’s mind.



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