

**MARCH 5, 1999**

**PARASHAT KI TISA**

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In this week's Torah portion, Jews grow horns. No, it's not the creation of the BCC klezmer band, Gay Gezundt -- it's not trumpets and trombones and french horns -- it's not "Jews with horns" the wonderful name of one of the Klezmatic's CDs. This week Moses grows horns: you know the famous Michaelangelo sculpture of Moses -- the one in which Moses, gorgeous in body and face, has two small horns growing out of his head? As many of you know, Michaelangelo's vision comes from a misreading of the text that has lasted generations and led to all sorts of misunderstandings. The Hebrew text does not say, as the Vulgate and later Christian translations have it, that when Moses came down from Mt. Sinai with the second set of tablets his face was "horned." The Hebrew doesn't say "keren," meaning horn, but rather karan or [r/] panav -- "the skin of his face radiated" [Ex. 34:29-30]. Even though it wasn't horns, though, the way Moses looked was kind of scary. So scary that when Aaron and the Israelites saw "that the skin of Moses' face was radiant, they were afraid to approach him" [34:30]. Apparently Moses kept this glow, and would let it shine whenever he went to speak with God, and whenever he reported to the Israelites what God said to him [34:32]. Mt. Sinai and then the Tent of Meeting, where Moses would later go to speak with God, turned out, I guess, to be the prototype of tanning parlors! Whenever Moses would finish telling the Israelites the words of God, he would cover his face with a veil.

All of this happens after the golden calf was created, worshipped and then destroyed by an enraged Moses, after he shatters the tablets that God had just delivered into his hands. Imagine how that gold calf had sparkled in the sunlight. Perhaps Moses' face itself took on the glow, the brightness of the golden calf. The Israelites by now are calmed by the reappearance of Moses and the presence of God, humbled by the anger of Moses and God when they saw the golden calf and perceived how quickly the Israelites had abandoned them as leader and as God. Now God and Moses do offer them comforting substitutes: a freshly carved version of the tablets, and Moses -- all aglow.

I want to ask you a few questions tonight, and although I don't want you to answer these questions aloud tonight, I hope you'll think about them, and if you're interested in pursuing a conversation about them -- I hope you'll make an appointment to talk with me. I'd be really interested to do so.

So here are the questions: is there any place for God in your life? If so, where? How do you include God in your day-to-day, or even your Shabbat-to-Shabbat life?

If you answered "yes" to the first question: is there any place for God in your life? . . . Then, think about this also, is there any place or time when God has been/or is absent from your life? What does it take for you to know God is present in your life? in the world?

And if you answered "no" to that first question: is there any place for God in your life? . . . Why not? What takes up the space that God might like to occupy?

A couple of weeks ago when a group of us were in Costa Mesa for the UAHC regional conference, we studied with Dr. Carol Ochs, a professor of Jewish thought and spirituality at Hebrew Union college in NY. Dr. Ochs made reference to the research work of a colleague of hers who studies people's understanding of God. Many people, maybe even most -- I don't remember the statistics -- form a view of God by the time they are around 6 years old. Interestingly, they really never change that view -- God, for them, is whatever their unsophisticated 6 year old mind envisioned, loosely based on whatever figures of authority they are familiar with at age 6: parents, police officers, teachers, etc. Then they -- should we say, "we"? -- put the image away and pull it out again only in crisis times of our life, when suddenly we feel a need for God in our lives. But what do we have when we reach for that God of ours? Something, Dr. Ochs, says, something as fleabitten, raggedy, and uncomfoting as the teddy bear we had at age 6 may be to us so many years later, as adults. Now maybe some of you find comfort in that teddy bear that's losing its stuffing, but not most of us probably. We might smile at that bear, we might even still love it, but it's not really who we want to hug in tough times. With what else in our lives do we settle for our six year old view of things? Not much.

"It's really not good that you're not a kid," Eli (age 4) said to his mother, Fran, the other day, "because you just don't understand me." At the time he said this Eli was trying to throw a water balloon into a fan. Kids and adults do have very different visions of things -- as well they should, even if it makes understanding one another difficult. So shouldn't we be eager to move beyond our childhood understanding of God?

Of course some of you might argue, some argued at Torah study last night, that our childlike view of God comes largely from the God we read of in Torah. God Godself doesn't seem all that sophisticated in some of the Torah stories. Take the golden calf story we read of this week. God is so hurt and angry (and then so is Moses) at the Israelites who seem to lose faith so quickly. In a matter of a mere forty days without God and Moses in their face, they're ready to move on to another leader and another god -- and not just any god, but a golden calf, for goodness sake -- an inanimate idol -- the epitome of all God has tried to get them

to turn away from.

It didn't work too well, this plan by God, to take Moses off and explain everything to him so that he could explain everything to us. While God and Moses were off communing together on top of Mt. Sinai, the Israelites panicked down there at the foot of Mt. Sinai, and left their good intentions in the dust. While God was describing to Moses what Shabbat should be -- in terms so familiar to us because we recite those same words in the V'shamru prayer every Friday night -- the Israelites are doing the opposite of taking shabbat, instead of seeking rest, instead of remembering creation, they move faster and faster, act without giving it any thought at all, working themselves into a frenzy instead of "stopping to breathe."

Easy to do, isn't it? Work yourself into a frenzy, I mean, forget about the possibilities of shabbat, of stopping to rest, of contemplating God or your relationship to God. It's easier to panic, to get anxious, to drag out an old teddy bear and find it wanting. By the end of this story -- after the calf is destroyed, the rebels punished, the rebellion put down; after lots of death and destruction actually, after some order is finally restored, even Moses seems to catch a bit of the anxiety bug. "If your presence does not go (with us), do not bring us up from here! For wherein, after all, is it to be known that I have found favor in Your eyes, I and Your people? Is it not precisely in that you go with us, and that we are distinct, I and your people, from every people that is on the face of the earth?" [mostly Fox, 33:15-16] Moses asks God if he could take a look -- at God that is, and God agrees to it -- I will show you my Glory, says God, but not My face. And Moses follows God's instruction, stationing himself in the cleft of a rock from which he sees the glory of God pass by [33:20-34:1f].

What has changed? God is there in all God's glory; and Moses himself radiates with the nearness of God. No longer are God and Moses distant, up some mountain, out of sight if not out of mind. No longer are the people alone. When they want to be inspired, they have only to remember the face of Moses, beneath the veil, the light of God radiating out from a human face. Who needs to see God face-to-face when you have Moses all lit up, a reminder of God's glory?

It's interesting to read this portion, as we do so often, in the week of Purim, the week when we also read the Book of Esther, one of only two books of the Bible that does not even mention God, let alone God's glory. One might argue that the story of Purim offers a more adult, less "teddy bear" understanding of God. For in the Purim story the Jews manage to save themselves and defeat their enemies on their own, without direct intervention from God. It seems, perhaps, more like real life, where we seldom see people glow with the glory of God, let alone see God's Glory on its own. And yet, what do we do with the Purim story? We make fun out of it. We dress up in silly costumes and parody the story. We make it into kids' stuff -- fluff -- the stuffing of a teddy bear. Maybe the absence of God in this story makes us too nervous to take it all seriously. Or maybe the Jews behaviour --

slaughtering our enemies at the end of the book -- makes us too nervous to celebrate soberly. After all, when we read of the death and the slaughter that the golden calf incident brings forth, we don't do so with a party. It is a sobering vision indeed; we never as a community try to imitate the party that follows the worship of the golden calf.

Whatever silliness we take part in on Purim, we also do two other things as well: we give gifts to our friends and to the poor. We acknowledge others -- deliberately make ourselves aware both of friends -- people dear to us -- and strangers who need us. Tradition tells us to put gifts directly into the hands of the poor if we can, not just into our tzedakah pushke. Such an instruction encourages us to look into the face of another, just as we might do with friends too, when we give or receive gifts.

Looking into the face of -- that's finally what it's all about, isn't it? Moses' glowing face becomes the Israelites' substitute for seeing God. We look into the face, even if a bit fearfully, of one who has seen God. We like it, and we shrink from it, sometimes we cover it with a veil for it is too much for us. It is the same with friends and lovers and with strangers in need -- we sometimes shrink a bit from looking directly at them. It sometimes feels frightening and sometimes awesome (the word *yira* in Hebrew means both fear and awe -- as in *Yamim Noraim* -- Days of Awe, Days of Fear).

Abraham Joshua Heschel, I think it was, said that if you look into the eyes of another, deep into their eyes, you'll see there the spark of the Divine, the spark of God's presence. There in each other's faces, and in our own if we look in the mirror, is the face of God, with us, as we go on our way. We can see it whenever we feel ready to look.

Shabbat Shalom