

Drasha for Parashah Ki Tissa, March 15,2025 - Joan Bradus

in memory of my father Yisrael Moshe ben Ira vBlimah whose yahrzeit is tomorrow.

How do we know what God wants from us? In today's world, and in years past, many people have claimed to speak in God's name, to tell us what we are allowed to do and not allowed to do because they know what God wants. But how do we know? Passages from our Torah are used to support contradictory actions – we are told to love our neighbor as ourselves in one passage, and then told not to marry them, and even destroy them in another passage. We are told to be kind to the stranger because we were strangers in the land of Egypt, but we are also told to expel certain residents of the land that God promised us, though they were resident there and we were strangers to them. How do we know which is correct?

In today's parashah, Ki Tissa, we read about God's instruction to Moses on Mount Sinai while the Israelites await below. Remember that the Israelites all heard God's voice in the thunder and lightning and begged Moses to be their mediator. Nevertheless, a few weeks after the Revelation at Sinai, they coaxed Aaron into creating an idol for them to focus on in worship. This is when Moses comes down from the mountain, destroys the stone tablets that God had inscribed, and persuades God not to destroy the Israelites. Moses then returns up the mountain and when he comes back down, the tablets he carries were those that he/Moses inscribed conveying God's instructions.

We Jews today hold that the Torah is a record of God's revelation of God's will, and that revelation is passed down through a direct connection to successive generations of teachers and rabbis. However, it seems to me that the second set of tablets was qualitatively different from the first. Our own Chumash commentary notes that the second set of tablets was written with a greater knowledge of human weakness. Heschel taught that Moses, a finite human being, wrote down what he could comprehend. And midrash states that even those who heard God speak at Sinai only heard what each individually could understand. It therefore makes sense that there would

be contradictions, as each of us, even today, interprets what we hear based on our own experience and expectations.

How do we know what God wants? The Torah that we read is composed of different memories of the encounter at Sinai mediated by the collective experiences of the authors. Rabbi Edward Feld, in his book, *The Book of Revolutions*, goes so far as to document 4 revolutions in the development of the Torah as we know it, all tied to historical events in the history of the Israelites after Sinai. Two of those revolutions occurred in response to the Babylonian exile. One of those revolutions led to the often-xenophobic admonitions in Deuteronomy believing that disaster occurs when we are not strictly obedient to God's commands. A different response led to the holiness code in Leviticus which also originates in exile but reflects the sense that individuals should emulate God's holiness and God's attributes in civil society. This is where we are told to love our neighbor and be kind to the stranger, to be mindful of the poor, etc.

Rabbi Neil Gillman taught, at a Netivot Shalom retreat several years ago, that "Judaism is what Jews say it is." Centuries after the Torah was codified, and after centuries of rabbinic Oral Torah, applying its teachings to their own times, it is now our turn. And the contradictions in the written text are even more troubling today, especially after the creation of the nation state of modern Israel, a place that we have the power to put these instructions into action. How do we handle those contradictions?

The rabbis have a story to guide us. Here I am grateful to Rabbi Jacob Rubenstein who summarized a story from *Tanna de-vei Eliyahu* 2. A king had two servants whom he loved. He gave each some wheat - and left. One servant preserved what he had been given. The other took the wheat and ground it, removed the chaff, kneaded it, and baked it into a loaf of bread. When the king returned, he rejoiced in sharing the bread with the second servant—and the first servant was distraught. The king gave his servants wheat but no instructions. The first servant diligently preserved what he received, transmitting it untouched and unchanged. His sincere efforts are revealed as misguided, a fundamental misunderstanding of the king's gift.

The second servant radically discarded parts of the gift - its chaff - because it was unappealing. And realizing that her gift was incomplete on its own, she added external components - water and yeast - to realize its life-giving potential. Through selective removal and addition, the servant transformed inedible wheat into life-sustaining and delightful bread.

This story claims that God gave Israel Torah as wheat from which to produce flour.

We are to live Torah the way this servant baked bread: recognizing that some parts harm and removing them; recognizing that we need ideas from outside and adding them - and thereby creating a Torah that nourishes, delights, and joins us to one another and to God.

Our tradition says that we were all present at Sinai, future generations included. Here, then, is the revelation according to Joan, with an assist by Rabbi Shai Held. Our Torah as written reflects the biases and limitations of the people who wrote it down, but if we look carefully enough, we can discern what might have been in the first set of tablets; we can get glimpses of what we are meant to do and be. Rabbi Held says that Judaism is about Love. God loves us as individual human beings, and we reciprocate that love by loving those whom God loves, ourselves, our neighbors, and the strangers among us. The world we live in is God's gift to us and we are to care for it, and each other.

We can see this in the laws about slavery. A society of former slaves could not envision a world without slaves, so the Torah has rules about how to treat slaves, rules that don't support hereditary slavery, and rules that require reparations so that freed slaves can start anew with dignity. After many generations we now understand that slavery is wrong. And while some people still read the passage about prohibited sexual relationships literally, the more modern view is that these laws are meant to prohibit incestuous relationships and those that involve abuse of power and authority. And, consider the laws of Shmitah and Jubilee. It seems clear to me that they were designed to prevent the creation of a permanent underclass. They also prevent a large division between the haves and the have-nots and force us to care for our physical world.

How do we know what God wants from us? What might the original tablets have contained? We should use as our guide those passages that command care for human wellbeing and dignity. Fight injustice; treat those who are different than we are with respect; try not to do harm. We need to cling to that, especially in these times when there is a strong pull in the other direction. As Micah wrote so long ago, "What does God require of us? That we act justly, with lovingkindness and walk humbly with God."

Shabbat Shalom.