

Rabbi Noa Kushner
Ki Tisa: No More Starting Over
March 11, 2023

1.
God is not having a good day.
She was already worked to the bone
What, having cajoled, teased out, subtly encouraged, begged
and planted hints until a certain Israelite people
who had previously believed themselves powerless
Were finally, finally ready to leave slavery
Then, she pulled out the stops with 10 (count them) consecutive
plagues
Not to mention the *splitting of the actual sea*

All so that the previously mentioned, very insecure
Israelites
will cross that same sea for themselves,
not at all a given,
And go out into the middle of nowhere,
to a place where God ensured there would literally be *no
distractions*
So that God can give her Torah
a new way to try to be in the world –
One *not* based on force and slavery
So that God can be in covenant with this very people

Covenant, as in "stay together forever,"
That's what covenant means, "Not leaving"
Not unlike the promise of a wedding day

But on this particular wedding day
While working on the promise itself
God peers over and sees this chosen people,
the very ones God labored to ensure would not suffer a single
distraction –
Those same people went and made a *distraction for themselves*,

It seems these people found a loophole in the “together forever”
promise
Or, to put it more clearly, they destroyed the premise of that promise

God peers over and her heart breaks
Because they went and built a golden idol and are praying to it,
blissed out
thanking that idol for taking them out of slavery
As if there’s no longer a possibility of God anywhere else in the
world but in that tragic idol
As if a golden calf could ever encompass the only holiness that
matters.

God closes her Godly eyes and presses her Godly fingers on her
divine temples.
She feels a holy migraine coming on.
Not to mention her divine temper rising, rising, rising to the surface.

2.

Now, I’m afraid I might have to corrupt your impression of a certain
childhood hero
I apologize in advance
But this is a sanctuary, after all, a place where we tell the truth, and
we’re all adults here

You see, in a different, earlier story
Noach, the one with the ark who saved the animals
In the eyes of the rabbis, Noach is not a hero but a coward
You see, way back before our story of today, when Israel worshipped
the golden calf
Way back in the time of Noach
God was also
Let's just say she was also very angry
The world, her world was a immoral, horrific mess
It's another sermon for another time but trust me that world made
today's world look flawless, perfect by comparison
In any case God wanted to destroy everything
And so she confides her plans to Noach and tells Noach to gather
just his family and some animals and build an ark and so on
You might remember
And Noach, see, Noach goes and does what God asks

Noach does not protest, does not ask any questions, does not raise
any counter arguments,
Does not even send God a single emoji of a person shrugging
Just goes and does it all
Even though it means the end of the whole world

Oh, there is so much we could talk about
The rabbis have so much to offer about Noach
But we can sum up their larger view with the following advice:
*If God tells you to save yourself because she is going to destroy the
entire world*
SAY SOMETHING

See, the rabbis are not kind to Noach
They don't see him as a hero, I am sorry to be the one to tell you

They see him as a failure
You might wonder why they don't blame God
And some do that too, I promise, it's another teaching for another
time
For this service we just need to hold on to the idea that Noach's
compliance, his acquiescence is his downfall, and the cost was very,
very high
It was the whole world

3.

Now I want to bring us back to that moment on the mountain top –
Remember God has a raging headache, she can barely think
The Israelites are below, listening to trance, dropping whatever they
are dropping, pretending they found the meaning of life – of course
that meaning has no larger implications, no responsibility, no
enduring structure and therefore, no possibility of real love or
growth or commitment but I digress

God has a raging headache, she can barely think
And so she does the first thing that comes to mind
Moses is in front of her
They have been writing this covenant together, after all

And so she blames Moses
saying, more or less
"These people down there, they're not my people, they're *your*
people!
Now that *they've* gone off script, and you're their representative,
you're worthless to me!
לְךָ יֵרָד
Go down there
And I will destroy them all"

And you see, when these words tumble out of God's mouth
There's a moment, says the tradition
Where Moses is completely drained
Of everything
See, God is not the only one invested in this "Israelite becoming
free" project
Moses too has given a few things up along the way,
He confronted Pharaoh, left everything he knew
So in this moment
What with God blaming Moses
God's fury unleashed
They say Moses is drained of every ounce of his strength
You know what I am talking about?
He loses his *koach* / he is completely powerless
There's nothing left, he's speechless
The tradition says he was like someone who's lost their sight,
He stumbled, couldn't even figure out which way to go
Which way to turn
You ever feel that way?¹

4.

But then, and it's right in Torah, just right before God says she will
destroy –

God says to Moses

וְעַתָּה הֲנִיחָה לִּי

"Now, leave me alone

וְעַתָּה הֲנִיחָה לִּי

¹ BR 42:4

When God says to Moses: Go Down, Moses' face darkened and he stumbled, not knowing which side to descend

so I can destroy them all!”

And, this, it's right in the Talmud
One of the best pieces of Talmud
Moses suddenly understands that this phrase

הַנִּיחָה לִּי

“Leave me alone!”

Is his *opportunity, his window*

The color returns to his face

He knows what to do

Because in Jewish, and I dare say in other traditions

“Leave me alone” means, “Help me.”

You see, as my teacher Avivah Zornberg notices via Rashi,
God says, “Leave me alone!” but Moses hasn't started talking yet!²

Maybe Moses just realized God needed help in that moment and
didn't know how to ask for it

But maybe, some mystics in the Zohar say, that God also gave a
secret hint in that phrase הַנִּיחָה לִּי

You see, hidden in הַנִּיחָה לִּי / “Leave me be!”

Is the name ‘Noach’

You hear it? ‘Hanicha’ / ‘Noach’

And so in that moment, Moses heard, Moses knew
God was saying, in her way
“If you leave me alone now, you will be like Noach
And the world will be destroyed again

² Zornberg / Rashi / Exodus, p. 413

And the destruction will also be on your hands”

That hint is all Moses needs

In just that moment, Moses springs into action

Tradition says he prays, some say he prays for 40 days and 40 nights³ that’s what he was doing all that time

Some say he prays with such fervor he’s running all around the top of that mountain, getting a fever in his bones

Some say Moses became like a prosecutor, creating elaborate arguments,⁴

“God, when I didn’t want to go, you told me to swear by my name to Israel! I risked it all. You promised them a place, a future! Now what do you want me to say to them?!”⁵

Moses even, and the rabbis said this, not me

Moses even grabs God by the collar, the way one person would grab his neighbor

Saying, “You promised our ancestors!”⁶

Not once, many times!

These were real promises God

And I won’t let you deny them

³ ER 44:1 / Moses prayed, pleading for 40 days and 40 nights that god would forgive the people

⁴ ER 43:4 / Moses introduces the idea that God could break God’s own vow

⁵ Ber. 32a:26 / ...Moses said before the Holy One, Blessed be He: Master of the Universe, You told me to go and say to Israel [that you would redeem them] in My name, I went and told it to them in Your name. I have already told Israel of God’s promise to the forefathers. Now what do I say to them?

⁶ Zornberg / Do not let me be, don’t keep me trapped in the present, help remember the past, previous promises, p. 413

I won't let you forget who you said you wanted to be
Who we could all be together, even still, even now!"

Moses was like an immovable rock.
Saying, "I will not leave until you forgive them God"

5.

And here we are at the heart of the matter
As the kids say
Find someone who loves you the way Moses loved God
Find someone, or I don't know, maybe find a tradition, a community,
who loves that way
Where destruction is not an option
Where starting all over is no longer on the table

6.

And you see this year I noticed something I never noticed before
See, there is a lot in this Torah about Israel messing up and
forgiveness in the end
There's a lot about Moses breaking those tablets and having to
make a new set
And we know this day was the first Yom Kippur

But, even though I always knew Moses talked God down in that
moment
Talked God down from her fury
I never thought about God becoming a new kind of God on that day
One who keeps *her own covenant*
One for whom the option of destruction, self destruction, starting
over is simply unavailable

You see there's so much going on in this story we could be forgiven
for missing it
But we know from the tradition that the definition of *t'shuvah*
Of admitting where we went wrong and changing our ways for good
That's *t'shuvah*
The test of our *t'shuvah* is when we're presented with a similar
situation once again
When were presented with a situation like the one we messed up
last time
But this time see, we don't make the same mistake again
That's *t'shuvah*
Promises are nice
Rainbows are nice
Words are nice
But the test is in how we act

And so here, right here in the chaos of this week's Torah
God is so close to walking away, starting over, destroying everything
But because of Moses
Who even, I noticed, uses the word for *t'shuvah* in what he says

שׁוּב מִחַרֹּן אַפֶּךָ⁷

God, TURN from your anger (!)

And maybe it is *because* Moses says the word for *t'shuvah*
God finally understands that it is not only Moses and Israel who are
on trial
God understands that in a real covenant
The wedding contract, the "not leaving"
It goes in all directions, it means
Israel cannot leave

⁷ Ex. 32:12 / shuv!

Moses cannot leave
We cannot leave
And God, she realizes she also cannot go anywhere

See on this day
God begins, defines a new way to be
A new way of staying for always
The covenant behind the covenant
Because on this day, you see
God created holy staying⁸

⁸ Ber. 32a:31 / God to Moses: Your words have helped keep me alive (working with a verse from Numbers)