

*Ki Tissa*: Patience or Truth: By Which Criterion Shall We Be Judged?

D'var Torah for Shabbat Ki Tissa, February 18, 2022

Rabbi Lester Bronstein, Bet Am Shalom, White Plains NY

The most mystical moment in the entire Torah, perhaps in the entire Jewish sacred tradition, is the moment when God partially grants Moses's request to see God's *kavod*, or glorious presence. "No one may see me and live," he is told, and yet he is granted permission to take cover in the cleft of the rock as God's mysterious aura passes by.

As Moses beholds the *achorai*, the "back" or perhaps "aftermath" or "wake" of God's being, God self-describes in the form of thirteen adjectives. Taken together, they form our closest approximation of what the concept of God "means," as it were, and what it means to be marvelously and frighteningly *close* to God.

Immediately thereafter, God carves a new covenant on a new set of tablets and hands them to Moses. At which point, he "hurries to bow low," and then rushes down the mountain to deliver this new covenant to his newly chastised and humbled flock.

The Rabbinic tradition struggles as much with the meaning of Moses's "hurrying" and "bowing low" as it does with the contents of the pronouncement on the tablets. These two interpretations reflect the anxiety of being Jewish, i.e. of being a people who are flawed and error-prone like all other peoples, but who consider ourselves to be held tightly to a standard that no one – *no one* – can truly live up to. It is a standard based on the two opposite poles of truth and forgiveness,

judgement and mercy. They take into account the idea that God self-describes as “truth” or “truthfulness,” but also as “long-suffering” and “slow to anger.” And that God warns that in addition to being ready to forgive to the thousandth generation, God is also prepared to extend punishment to the fourth generation of those who refuse to atone and change.

Here are two snapshots that typify the Rabbinic penchant for embracing paradoxes:

1. *And Moses hurried and bowed low to the ground. (Exodus 34:8)*

Kli Yakar (16<sup>th</sup> century Lvov, western Ukraine): Why did Moses hurry? What was the rush? Because when the Blessed Holy One began to recount to Moses the generations upon which would be visited the iniquities of the ancestors, “on the children and the children’s children to the third and fourth generations,” Moses trembled and feared lest the count continue to infinity.

Thus he hurried and bowed low to God in order to stop it, so that, as it were, the accounting would continue no further.

2. *And Moses hurried and bowed low to the ground. (Exodus 34:8)*

Baruch Halevi Epstein (*Torah T’mimah*, Lithuania 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century): What did Moses see? (quoting Sanhedrin 111): Rabbi Hanina ben Gamla said, he saw the divine attribute of *erekh apayim*, long suffering and patience. And the Rabbis said, he saw the divine attribute of *emet*, truth.

To comprehend the argument over the meaning of Moses’s bowing, we have to ask whether it was an act of thanksgiving or an act of prayer.

Rabbi Hanina held that it was an act of thanksgiving, as if to say, when Moses saw the attribute of long-suffering and patience, he rejoiced, because this divine aspect would shield the Jewish people. And that's why he bowed low.

But the Rabbis held that the bowing was Moses's act of prayer, for when he saw that God would judge using the attribute of truth, he feared that because of this criterion the Jewish people would be judged as guilty. Therefore he hurried to bow low in prayer.

The upshot? Both are true. We need to incorporate the paradox into our own lives, our own behaviors, and our own expectations for ourselves and others. We need to judge by the measure of truth, but also by the measure of compassion. We need to allow ourselves to be held to the highest level of honesty, but also to forgive ourselves and others when we fall short and beg to get a second chance. Finally, we need to understand that there is no "closeness" – no passing within range of God's holiness – without knowing that relationship requires both unwavering responsibility and a willingness to live with something less than perfect – in ourselves, in others, and even in God.