

## Behukottai 5768 Sinai

Shabbat Shalom.

Whew – tough story. Our Torah reading this Shabbat, Parashat Behukkotai, does not present us with easy material. Although there is a beautiful blessing first, more space is taken up by the *tokhehah* - the rebuke, a section of curses. As Talia and Rabbi Jacobs explained, this is not a section of the Torah that sits well with us.

This morning, let's explore this parashah from a different perspective. To do this, let's look for a *leitvort*, a repeating phrase in the text. Also we can look beyond this parashah to last week's reading, *Parashat B'har*, which is normally read together with this morning's reading as a double portion, except on leap years like this year.

So, if we look at these two units, we find something fascinating. We find a frame – a phrase that opens and closes this unit and appears in the middle. What is that phrase? It happens to be a place.

### **Har Sinai**

Shmittah – Sabbatical year and Yovel – the Jubilee year

Idols

Blessings

Curses

### **Mount Sinai**

Build the Mishkan – the portable sanctuary

Again **Mount Sinai** – all Leviticus

So why is Sinai here? What is the significance of reminding us that these laws were given at Sinai?

Harold Kushner in our wondrous Etz Hayim commentary teaches us about the significance of the place – the Torah is revealed at Sinai, in the middle of the desert, an ownerless place. This connects to the laws about the Jubilee year, every 50<sup>th</sup> year, when land would return to its original owners. And we were all equal at Sinai, so this system of equal land sharing is presented before the people come into the land.

Sinai is also humility – midrash – smallest mountain. Its vision of a moral, ethical society would have the greatest impact on the world, an impact that is worked out, for example, in the Jubilee year.

Of course, Sinai is also not only a literal place, but a state of being. There is an expression about Jewish law that we recite to connect a new tradition to something much older: Halakhah L'Moshe M'sinai – this was a law from Moses at Sinai (even when it was not literally!) It is a symbol of the Jewish people's awareness of having stood in God's presence. As the Midrash teaches, the entire Jewish people were at Sinai – past, present and future – all generations were there. Sinai is the place of the greatest authenticity.

But there's something else about Sinai. Aviva Zornberg gave a fascinating lecture this week about why Moses could not enter the land of Israel. I studied with her for a

year at Pardes 15 years ago. In her talk, Aviva delved into the importance of Sinai and what that moment was all about.

One of the key moments of Sinai occurs not at the famous part of Exodus 19 & 20 – the grand revelation with the 10 commandments – but later on in a more private moment between Moshe and God after the incident of the Golden Calf, when Moshe goes up for the second time.

In Exodus 33 Moshe asks to see God's *Kvod* – God's Presence. Moshe wants an intensely personal connection with God. God says that Moshe cannot see God's face, but God continues, "See, there is a place near Me. Station yourself on the rock and, as My Presence (My *Kvod*) passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock and shield you with My hand until I have passed by. Then I will take My hand away and you will see My back, but My face must not be seen." (Ex 33: 21-23)

Moshe gets to see *AHORAI* - God's back – or God's pastness, God's wake. He sees that God was there.

So what happened in that conversation - in that moment of intimacy between God and Moshe?

God shares God's self through a narrative. Perhaps this provided Moses a model for sharing something of himself with the people before his death in the book of *Devarim*. That is what good teachers do – they share themselves.

Moshe is known as Moshe Rabbeinu, Moses our rabbi, our teacher. He becomes the model teacher. He models this in two ways – by sharing himself with the people and by being present for them, by journeying with them.

Back to the curses. These are called the *Tokheha* – like the word *nokheiah* – to be present – to teach, then, is to challenge and to be present.

This rebuke is filled with verses describing the consequences of bad actions – the land will not produce; it will reject us. Rabbi Eddie Feld writes: “Perhaps some of our personal relationships are like that, built on the natural consequences of the particular histories we share with one another. If time after time we respond to a friend, a family member, a colleague, in a way which is caring, helpful, and respectful, then we weave a certain fabric of relationship. We all remember the people who were with us on our special occasions, who went out of their way to celebrate with us even when the timing of our simchas may have been inconvenient. Similarly, we know which friends returned our phone calls promptly when we were struggling, when they knew we were in pain, and we in turn respond to them with especial tenderness. Marriages are built out of that mutual care, and if too often my partner is not there for me, is habitually distracted and self-absorbed, then slowly, something in the relationship changes, a distance, a mistrust is created. Similarly, children can be put ‘on hold’ only to a point. Finally they give up on us, are wounded and turn away.”

So maybe Moshe's relationship with the people is built on Moshe's ability to challenge, to teach. And in order to teach, you must share yourself, make yourself vulnerable, and then you can challenge and have an impact on others

In *Masekhet Avodah Zara*, the Talmud states this well: it takes 40 years to really know another person – the lessons in life are gleaned over time spent together, deeply sharing and knowing each other's stories

Perhaps that is what God modeled for Moshe on Sinai. God revealed God's story to Moshe and inspired him to do the same with the people.

Our parashah then becomes a reminder of how fragile relationships are. When a relationship breaks down, there are consequences. We read that section of Torah quickly, but it is there.

And when one can share one's self and have that type of relationship, sharing and listening to each other's stories and revelations, then one becomes a true teacher, like God on Sinai with Moses his student, modeling this paradigm. Then Moshe shares this with the people – revealing his stories to inspire and challenge them to grow, even after his death.

That is why Sinai is embedded in this parashah and in this part of the Torah. It is to remind us of to share ourselves with each other.

May we all utilize this lesson of Sinai to better know ourselves, and may God's and Moses' model inspire us to share more as teachers and students.

Shabbat Shalom.