

## Torah for Turbulent Times: The Holiness Within - Praying Together (And Apart)

\*Join us for the next Torah discussion over Zoom! Each Shabbat morning @ 11:00am\*

Chili is on the stove, cornbread is in the oven, working, fluttering around the house, cleaning, thinking, uncertainty looms, school is cancelled, parents are working from home, Shabbat services are virtual, loneliness, walking the dog, anxiety, frittering away, fear, Passover?, my daughter's bat mitzvah!?, homemade biscuits in the oven (again), praying and searching... "Where is holiness?" Holiness is Within. *We can find Holiness Within the Ark of our lives.* That is, within our hearts, our homes, our communities - Holiness is Within the Ark of our lives. This past Shabbat a small group of us gathered to pray together, and apart. We sat six feet from each other, spreading out across the full room of our sanctuary and social hall. It was very different. We sang louder. We prayed together. We prayed apart. And, we talked Torah.

What did the Israelites do in their time of uncertainty, as Moses was up on Mount Sinai those 40 days and nights? Was he practicing social distancing? How did they feel as their fearless leader vanished as it were? Anxious, worried, lonely, scared, in need of a leader and a G-d, some direction. Thus we get the famous story of the golden calf, an attempt by the people, as I see it for today's times anyway, an attempt to fill the giant void in their life caused by - uncertainty.

You likely remember that in a fit of rage, Moses hurled the first set of tablets that G-d had given him on top of the mountain to the ground. They smashed into pieces. Some have wondered, "Whatever happened to those broken pieces?" They are never again mentioned in the Torah. While Moses was clearly upset, can we really blame the people? After all, in their lives up to now, they were used to tangibles. In times of uncertainty, maybe we would have all felt like doing the same thing (or worse), who knows?

In our times now, when concern is heightened literally for the health of everyone around us and life as we know it is truly uncertain, what can we do? While we know that building some material object to take the place of our real concern is irrational, aren't we willing to do almost anything just to get to a place of feeling secure, certain, safe, healthy, and "normal" again? If nothing else, I imagine that that golden building project, as damned as it was from the start, must have somehow brought comfort, as fleeting as it was, soothed the minds of the people and if nothing else kept them occupied for a bit. Not that I'm suggesting we get to work on a golden calf, but as we begin to make more time in our daily routines for disruption, for uncertainty, for filling the void - what *can* we do?

One midrash, using a proof text from Ecclesiastes 3:1, suggests that Moses literally cast away the stones of the broken tablets: "To every thing there is a season and a time for every purpose under the heaven: ...a time to cast away stones and a time to gather stones." This midrash is based on the awareness that the verb used in

Ecclesiastes for "cast away" is identical to the verb used in Ki Tisa to describe Moses' casting the tablets to the ground. (Exodus Rabbah 46:2) As it turns out, the Rabbis suggested that the broken pieces not only had value in themselves, but they were also made of sapphires. God gave those broken chips of the tablets to Moses for safekeeping.

As we know, everything, even in its brokenness, has some value. Of late, the bits and pieces of our lives feel more scattered, fractured, disrupted, and inconvenienced. Just as those pieces of the tablets had meaning, our lives continue to have value, no matter how broken things might seem. "Rabbi Judah bar Ilai taught that two arks journeyed with Israel in the wilderness - one in which the Torah was kept and one in which the tablets broken by Moses were kept. The one in which the Torah was placed was kept in the Tent of Meeting; the other, containing the broken tablets, would come and go with them." (Sefer Ha-Aggadah, p. 89, from Talmud Yerusalmi, Shekalim 1:1)

It seems that even if we wanted to leave these pieces behind, we can't - because they are somehow integral to our lives. When things are whole, we're thus always reminded of the brokenness of our world (just as a glass is smashed at a Jewish wedding). And, conversely, as we're experiencing so much uncertainty and brokenness in our routines, in our financial system, in our daily lives, in *everything*, perhaps one spiritual message is to remember and work towards bringing as much wholeness as we're able to into the ark of our lives - by being together with our loved ones, by caring for each other, by remaining a supportive community, by connecting virtually, by taking a walk, by calling a friend, and by simply washing our hands well. When we practice these well, then we really do bring all the pieces - broken and whole - into the Holy Ark of our lives.

We can find holiness *within* the Ark of our lives.

-Rabbi Mark