

Moses and the Tent of Meeting

One of the more peculiar sections in the Torah comes at the end of this week's Torah portion, when we close the Book of Exodus. We are told that "Moses could not enter the אהל מועד, the Tent of Meeting, because the cloud had settled upon it and G-d's presence filled the Tabernacle."¹ Moses, the one who spoke to G-d פנים אל פנים, face to face, had limitations on when he could connect with G-d! Rashi also finds this perplexing, point out that "another verse states 'when Moses would come to the tent of meeting.'"² The answer is brought by a third verse, that great principle of Rabbi Ishmael, which says "for the cloud rested upon it"; while the cloud was on it Moses was unable to enter, and when the cloud was raised up, Moses would enter and was with G-d.

This demonstrates that even Moses' contact with G-d had limits. He was only able to have a direct encounter with G-d at certain times, when G-d gave him permission. This teaches us that even Moses had limits. In his article "Leading from Within," Parker Palmer writes about

¹ Exodus 40:35

² Numbers 7:89

five “shadows” that leaders face. One of the shadows is *functional atheism*, a belief that “everything rests with me.”³ Moses had begun to overcome his functional atheism in Parshat Yitro, when he heeded his father-in-law’s advice and established other judges to hear cases. Two weeks ago, in Parshat Ki Tisa, Moses implored G-d to let him see G-d’s face, and G-d only let him see His back.⁴ Here Moses finally recognized that as great a leader as he is, his relationship with G-d has limits. He needs to do some personal *tzimtzum*, contracting his self-grandeur and only entering into face-to-face, פנים אל פנים, relationship with G-d when granted permission.⁵

I will never forget a conversation I had while doing a rabbinic internship with the Jewish Council of Urban Affairs in Chicago. Two days a week I went into South Chicago to work at the Inner City Muslim Action Network: a Jew working with Muslims to do criminal justice reform to largely benefit African American Christians. I am by nature a person who likes excitement and adventure, wanting to change the

³ Parker Palmer, “Leading from Within” in *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass Publishers, 2000), p. 9.

⁴ Exodus 33

⁵ See Or HaChaim Exodus 40:35 ד"ב ולא יכול משה לבא אל אהל מועד

world, and I was frustrated that some days were slow at the office. I spoke with my mentor, Kyle Ismail, who said to me, “Ben-you care about doing, but just your being present here means a great deal.”

I was flummoxed by Kyle’s statement: being present? Aren’t we supposed to be doing things to make a difference? After all, we do a lot in Judaism, whether it is preparing for Shabbat, coming together for daily minyan, or participating in programming like Casino Night in March and Sandwich Sunday in early April. Yet I think there is an inherent truth in knowing our personal limits and when we must undertake some *tzimtzum*, changing our focus from doing to being present with whatever we are encountering. Moses is often thought of as impatient, one who wants to lead through action, yet here he waits until the moment is right for him to enter into relationship with G-d.

As we conclude the Book of Exodus, a book centered on journey from slavery into the first stages of freedom, and we transition into Leviticus, a collection of laws that largely do not apply to us without a centralized Temple in Jerusalem, let us take a step back, doing our own

personal *tzimtzum*, being patient for the right moments to step forward and waiting when the time is not right. May we learn this lesson from Moses' example and make it our own.