

Rabbi Rami Shapiro

Shabbat Pesach (Exodus 33:12-34:26, Numbers 28:19-25 >

### OVERVIEW

The special Torah reading for the Shabbat which falls in the middle of Pesach is the story of Moshe's desire to see God's "face;" i.e., to know God in some special extraordinary way. God shows Moshe God's "back," as it were, as Moshe is hidden in the cleft of a rock, and God's merciful qualities are called out. The covenant is renewed, and commandments are given pertaining to the rejection of idolatry, to the holidays, to the first born of animals, and to the dietary laws. A small reading from the book of Numbers which describes the Pesach temple sacrifices concludes the reading.

### IN FOCUS

"God said to Moshe: 'Carve for yourself two stone tablets like the first ones, and I will write on those tablets the words that were on the first ones which you broke.' " (Exodus 34:1)

### PSHAT

In Exodus 32, Moshe angrily shatters the first tablets of the law when he sees the Israelites worshipping the Golden Calf. Now that Moshe wants to see God's "glory," God tells him to go back up the mountain alone, this time with tablets that Moshe himself has prepared.

### DRASH

Why did God command Moshe to carve his own tablets? Couldn't God have just given Moshe tablets like the first time? Rashi makes the midrashic comments: "You broke the first ones, you carve the new ones!" What I love about Rashi's midrash is that it reminds us of our own responsibility in fixing what's broken- God helps out but it takes some effort on our part.

Now, the obvious question is: what does this verse, and the whole story of Moshe's desire for a revelation of God's Presence, have to do with Pesach? On the most basic level, this story is a lead-up to some verses which speak of the Festival of Matzot, but there must be more going on. Taking a step back, this whole section of the Torah is about rejecting idolatry, from the story of the Golden Calf through the commandments Moshe receives after the revelation of God's attributes. In a sense, Moshe wants the same thing that the Israelites wanted when they built their Golden Calf in chapter 32: he wants a visible, palpable sense of God's Presence, a concrete image he could comprehend and carry with him.

No go, says God: you will know Me only by apprehending my merciful attributes and qualities, not by "seeing" Me directly. Not only that, but God warns Moshe sternly about following the religious practices of the neighboring tribes- and then tells Moshe that the Israelites must celebrate the holidays, the first being the Festival of Matzot.

To me, the idea of "idolatry" is not so much about bowing down before an image but about arrogance, of thinking that one knows it all, of thinking there's nothing higher or beyond our own ideas and conceptions and creations. Pesach is a direct antidote to arrogance: we scrub our houses for chametz, which is often understood to represent "puffed-up" pride and self-centeredness, and we know we'll never get it all. The laws and customs of Pesach are rich and complex, and there's something new to learn every year- every seder can be a different experience, with new conversations, new questions, new insights. Conversely, we can make the holiday itself an "idol" by thinking we know it all - "been there, done that." Somebody who doesn't learn something new every year at Passover, or who thinks they've done the holiday in an absolutely perfect way, isn't getting the message at all.

Getting back to our verse, I see the story of Moshe and the second tablets as a lovely metaphor for the attitude of humility and openness that is the opposite of the "idolatry" we've been talking about. Moshe is told: you do your part by carving the tablets- i.e., put some effort into preparing a space- and God will enter that space. God doesn't hand it to us "carved in stone," as it were, and neither are we to write our own law- but something in the middle, with God and humans meeting and reaching for each other. Pesach, like the second tablets, takes some effort; the reward is learning God's ways in new and ever deeper ways, if we are truly open.

Shabbat Shalom and Hag Sameach,