

“Who Am I, And How Did I Get Here?”
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We all arrive at a moment when life catches up with us. Sometimes it is brought on by a personal event or tragedy, and sometimes it is brought on by something bigger than the individual. No matter what it is, life always catches up with us. I am reminded of the runner who loves the feeling of being out on the road and the exhilaration he experiences as his feet hit the pavement and his heart rate rises. He returns from the run with endorphins rushing through his blood stream. He turns to a friend and explains how great he feels and that he just ran this great loop around the Art Museum. He comments on the other runners he saw, he describes the quality of the air and the size of the geese that became an emblazoned memory of this run. He talks of the placid water and the rowers and he speaks of the strength he feels. His friend turns to him and asks, “How long did it take?” The runner proudly responds, adding that, “I ran it two minutes faster than I had the time before.” They share this moment of triumph. Then the friend turns to the runner and asks, jokingly, “What were you running from?” The joke is a simple one. Thinking that a person their age could never run that fast for so long without fear, he imagines he is being chased. The problem is that for the next five years, the joke remains in his head. Every run, every time he laces up his sneakers, he asks the question, “What are you running from?” Later that day, he comes to the realization that running around the Art Museum, no matter how fast you do it, no matter how hard you run, no matter the music you listen to, no matter who you run with, when you run that loop, the run ends up in the same spot where you began.

The lesson is clear, you can’t outrun life. No matter how hard you run, no matter how many miles you log, no matter how far your journey has taken you, you always end up back where you began until you grow to understand who you are and what you are suppose to become. Sometimes life offers you the opportunity to discover the inner you early, and sometimes it comes later in life. Please know that it comes at the time when it is supposed to happen. Unfortunately it doesn’t happen without pain and anguish, because growth is painful, it’s hard.

For years I have taught the story of the golden calf. I usually focus on this God and the Jewish people and the betrayal of the Jewish people in turning to a false god. I have taught of God’s anger and disappointment in the choices of the Jewish people, choices made in convincing Aaron to build them the golden calf. In years past I have offered apologies for the Jewish people, explaining their behavior as scared children who have lost their leader. I have gone so far as to condemn God for such a harsh reaction. I have blamed Aaron for a lack of leadership. I have held the Jewish people responsible for such shallow faith, especially after everything Moses and God have done for them. This year it dawned on me, “What about Moses?”

This story is as much about Moses as it is about God and the Jewish people. You and I would agree that the narrative of building the Golden Calf is a story about infidelity. It is a story about trust; it is a story that, without question, teaches the difference between the temporary satisfaction one may find in material possessions, which stands in stark contrast to the eternal value of a committed relationship to God, begging us all to choose God over gold. However, “What about Moses?”

We sang the words about a half-hour ago in the Shaharit Amidah, *yismach moshe bematnat chelko*. “Moses rejoiced in his lot.” He was happy with the life he had been given. The only problem was that, with the exception of the moment when he breaks out into song after crossing the sea of reeds, finally free from the grip and the torture of Egyptian tyranny, I can’t find another moment when Moses seems happy. In fact, Moses seems to be one of the angriest people in the entire Torah. Our first encounter with Moses as an adult has him killing, not pushing aside, an Egyptian taskmaster. He wasn’t just defending a helpless Hebrew, we meet him killing the Egyptian. When Moses meets God at the Burning Bush, he is filled with so much self-loathing and discontent that he denies the power he holds within. Moses is a man in search of himself and he meets God and God tells him who he is and he tells God that God is wrong. “I know myself better than You.”

Then he begins to own his accomplishments, joyful he breaks out into song as he has finally redeemed his people. However, this happiness doesn’t last long. Soon the people are complaining. Soon he has his father-in-law breathing down his neck, and soon he has God making demands. He grows tired. He is worn down. In this morning’s reading he snaps. He’s had enough. He’s had enough of listening to everyone telling him what to do. The voices have turned to a cackle and the static noise begins to ring in his ears. He has spent 40 days secluded, in the quiet solitude of communion with God, a much needed reprieve from the daily grind of the job, only to be called back just before the vacation is over. Moses went missing not just literally, but figuratively, not just from the Jewish people but from himself. He too had lost his way. Wandering through the desert was not just national it was personal. Just as the Jewish people had to figure out who they were, Moses also had to find himself. It took the incident of the *Golden Calf* to force the issue.

I know this to be true because of one sentence in this week’s reading. Just before everything goes awry, the people gather and ask a simple question, “Where is Moses?” They had grown to rely on him and they had grown to trust him. Even if they couldn’t see the God he spoke of, even if they couldn’t remember the moment of revelation, they had grown to lean on Moses. Now he was missing. I imagine he had been missing for a while, long before he went up the mountain. I imagine he had distanced himself from the daily interaction with the people caught up in the operations. I imagine the long orations which had been the charismatic leadership he had embodied, had long been traded in for the running of the nation. I suppose the regular speeches of hope and dreams had trickled down to a few words here and there, because there was real work to be done now. Meetings had to be held and decisions had to be made. Appointments had to be secured and votes had to be taken. Politicking had to be done and Moses, the leader, had to be transformed, unfortunately, into Moses, the politician. The people uttered the words *lo yadanu meh haya lo*, “We do not know what happened to him.” (Exodus 32:1) What the heck happened to him?

Moses is gone. They turn to Aaron and they say, not, “Where is Moses, the guy who crossed the Red Sea with us?” Not, “Where is Moses who brought us manna from heaven?” No, they ask Aaron, “Where is that man, Moses, the one who brought us out of Egypt?” “Where is that guy?” “We know where Moses the administrator went, and we know where Moses the judge went. He is up on that mountain. No Aaron, we want to know where our Moses went. We want to know

where that guy who cared about us went. We want to know where our protector went. We want to know where our leader went. Aaron, our Moses seems lost.”

Moses comes down the mountain and is faced with the reality that he has done nothing. He took the people out of Egypt but he couldn't take Egypt out of the people. He thought maybe he was finished and wasn't needed any more and that he would simply fade into the background. He thought he had completed his task and now the people would be on auto-drive, only to realize they needed so much more and that he needed so much more. He came down the mountain and in a moment of fury, he says “I'm back.” and they are willing to do whatever he says. Then he turns to God and says the very same thing. “I'm back.” He tells the Jewish people that they have done wrong, but it is fixable. Then he turns to God and says, “If You want, You can kill them, but if You do, You are going to have to take me with them.” I can almost hear the roar of the crowd. It is clear, Moses has returned to them. God says *lech nechei et ha'am*, “Now you're ready to go back and lead once again. (32:35) “Moses, you had lost your way. Moses you had lost your vision and worse, you lost your conviction.” To paraphrase from another tradition, “Moses you were lost but now you are found, you were blind, but now you see.”

To you I say the same thing. You may be lost, but you will be found. You may feel blind but, once again, you will see. We live in dark times and we need those who speak of hope and dreams to step forward and, once again, speak those words. We are a country that has lost its way, but we will right the course. Moses redeemed a people, but more than that, he freed himself. It was a journey, and at many points I'm sure he said, “What am I doing this for?” “What's in it for me? I go to bed every day discouraged.” Then he is given the gift of real challenge and he realizes it's not about happiness. It's about meaning and purpose, it's about satisfaction. It's about redeeming a people and it's about living up to our God-given potential. Not wasting a life, not wasting a moment, and not wasting a breath. This morning's reading is about loyalty, it's about fidelity, it's about commitment and it has nothing to do with anyone but ourselves. This morning's story is about loyalty to ourselves and it's about commitment to ourselves.

My wife has been reading me pieces of a book that is simply perfect. The book is called *The Dance: Moving to the Deep Rhythms of Your Life*, by Oriah. In it, the author speaks deeply about life's journey towards self. She offers an interesting linguistic analysis of a phrase and she says there is a difference between “I deserve” and “I am deserving of.” She explains “I deserve” means I worked hard, I folded the laundry, I made dinner, I deserve to sit down and catch my breath. I have earned a break.” The phrase “I am deserving of,” means something different. “I am deserving of,” means, “I have innate value and there is a reason why I am here. There is purpose to my existence, and on the merit of that existence I am deserving of . . .,” and you fill in the blank. “I am deserving of love and respect. I am deserving of the great happiness I hold in my heart. I am deserving of the freedom I enjoy.” To you I say, “You are deserving of finding yourself, or redeeming yourself, or loving yourself.” That is the difference between I deserve and I am deserving of...”

Dr. Dan Gotlieb, a noted psychologist and local radio personality, tells a magnificent story. Early in his life, he was in a terrible accident that left him, essentially, a quadriplegic. After his wife left him, he went about rebuilding his life. One day he was in the lobby of a corporate building waiting for a meeting to start. He had arrived early and decided to have a cup of coffee. As is

normal for him, he often rests his attaché case on his knees because he uses it as a tray to hold his mug. I ask you to imagine a man in his fifties, confined to a wheelchair, with an attaché case on his knees and a mug resting on the case. Without a word, a woman comes over to him, not really looking him in the eyes, rather averting her view, and she places a dollar in his mug.

Instead of getting angry and instead of making a scene, he chooses to chuckle to himself at the absurdity of the misunderstanding. As he tells the story to a group of rabbis, he adds the line, “I know that no matter what happens to me, as long as I have my mug I can make a living.” It is part joke and part real. It is his way of making the point, “What do I really need?” What he is really saying is, “As long as I know my value and am true to myself, I will be fine.” He tells this story to illustrate the point that, as rabbis, we must make sure not to make the mistake of seeing the situation and not the person. We, too, must make sure we see ourselves, not the position in which we find ourselves. We, too, must make sure not to focus on the situation, but rather to see the person. These are dark times but may your light continue to shine.