

Shabbat Ki Tisa 5784  
Together in Tough Times  
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Shabbat Shalom.

Anonymous quotes about friendship take two tracks. First are the funny, like this one: “Good friends buy you food. Best friends eat your food.” Because much of friendship is about who you eat with and have fun with.

Then there are the serious quotes, like this one: “Friendship isn't about whom you have known the longest; it's about who came and never left your side.” Because true friendship is measured by who sticks with you during difficult moments.

Actually, it's Moses who leads me to thinking about friendship. The leader of the Israelites, we see him embody this value that equally pertains to friendship, as well as other relationships. In doing so, he solidifies himself as the ultimate leader of the Jewish people

Parashat Ki Tisa reveals the Israelites' lowest moment, as well as perhaps Moses's greatest moment. At the start of today's reading, the Israelites are flying high. G-d had delivered them from Egyptian slavery through the 10 plagues and the splitting of the sea. Now in the desert marching to the promised land, G-d provides them with food, manna, as well as water and shade. Additionally, G-d had just revealed the Torah to Moses and the Israelites on Mount Sinai, complete with the ten commandments.

Now it's easy to understand the consternation and boiling anger from both G-d and Moses when Moses descends the mountain to discover that after all these divine kindnesses, the Israelites are worshiping an idol, the golden calf, breaking the first two of those ten commandments in the process. Talk about betrayal and rebellion.

G-d has had enough. He tells Moses: “Now let Me be, that My anger may blaze forth against them and that I may destroy them, and make of you a great nation” (Ex. 32:10). In other words, since the people had clearly rejected G-d, G-d was through with this unfaithful people. Relationship over. But G-d made clear that He still wanted Moses. G-d would enter into a relationship with a new people with Moses at its head, for Moses had done nothing wrong.

Now, how does Moses respond? He had a few choices. He could have agreed with G-d, for the golden calf was indeed an egregious sin. Or he could have said nothing, like

Noah did in Genesis, for it's hard to speak in the presence of an angry G-d. Instead, Moses does something else entirely. He confronts G-d in G-d's anger and urges Him to forgive the Jewish people, if for no other reason than to keep the promise G-d made to the patriarchs and matriarchs. Tellingly, Moses says to G-d: "Alas, this people is guilty of a great sin in making for themselves a G-d of gold. Now, if You will forgive their sin, well and good. But if not, erase me from the record which You have written" (Ex. 32:31-33).

In other words: G-d, if you destroy them, destroy me too. If they go, I go, for my lot is with this people, my people.

This bold response moves G-d to forgive the people as a whole, save only those who committed the sin.

The Golden Calf is the moment when the Israelites have reached rock bottom. This is the moment when it's easy for Moses to walk away. And yet it's precisely this moment when Moses sticks with them. In doing so, he saves the nation and demonstrates unsurpassed loyalty to his people.

We're not sure what he sees in this petulant people; the Torah does not say. Is he remembering the glory days of the past? Is he wanting to preserve the covenant of the present? Or is he convinced of the potential of the next generation? Whatever it is, Moses puts We before Me. He endangers his life because he attempts to change the mind of G-d Who is enraged. And he imperils his legacy because it's not obvious that G-d will forgive in this moment. But in word and deed, Moses says: This is my people, for better and for worse.

The Rabbis are captivated by this idea, of sticking with another in a time of danger and misfortune. I want to share two examples from the Torah before I bring it back to today.

A few chapters earlier in Exodus, the Israelites battle its arch-nemesis Amalek. Something unusual about this battle is that Moses stands on the top of the mountain, while Joshua leads the troops in battle below. When Moses raises his staff in the air, the Israelites prevail. But when he lowers his staff, Amalek surges ahead. So Moses stands with his arms upraised for as long as he can. But he's 80 years old and his arms get tired. At this point, Moses sits down on a rock and two men prop up his arms so the staff is still upraised until victory.

The Talmud wonders, Why does Moses sit on a rock, of all things? This is Moses, the leader of the nation! Surely they could find something a little more comfortable, like a pillow or a cushion. But Moses insists on a rock. Rashi answers: Moses reasons, Israel

is in a state of pain, so I too shall be with them in a state of pain. In other words, since the nation's life is in danger, it wouldn't be right for him to be sitting in luxurious comfort. In this small way, Moses shares their pain, even when he doesn't have to.

The second example from the Torah is brought to you by the Midrash Mamas study group, with whom I learned the following Midrash, or rabbinic legend. We all know that when G-d introduces Himself to Moses for the first time in Exodus, G-d speaks from a burning bush. Why is that the place, of all places? There could have been no physical object at all, or it could have been a place more impressive than a dirty, *farshtinkener* desert thornbush.

Rabbi Hiyya and Rabbi Yehuda answer that this is G-d's way of standing with the Israelites in their low moment of Egyptian slavery. These rabbis say: come witness the compassion exhibited by G-d. For when Israel is mired in torment, G-d too is troubled. G-d spoke from a lowly place, the thornbush, to show solidarity with the enslaved Israelites. Here it is not Moses who stands by their side in their time of need, but G-d.

The Torah speaks of Moses' leadership, but I think this lesson pertains to us today as well, in all our relationships. I think of deep friendship as well. The test of true friendship is who stands with us in our challenging moments, like Moses did. It's easy to celebrate with us when the going is good, and much harder to stand by our side when it's not.

In my own life, I felt this most deeply, not from a friend but a teammate. I played soccer in high school, and I was the sweeper, the last defender before the goalie. So I never scored any real goals, but I occasionally scored an own goal, when it went into the wrong net and cost us a goal. It is the worst feeling you can have on a soccer field, worse than getting nutmegged, and there is nothing like it in all of sports, just handing the other team a goal, when one goal often determines the game.

My own goal was particularly humiliating in a certain game against Middleton, where late in the close game I was trying to clear the ball in a chaotic moment in our box, but the ball hit the outside of my foot, not the inside, and bounced into our own net. At that moment, I wanted to disappear, because I knew I lost our team the game, even though there were 5 minutes left. And I was right, we didn't win.

But my biggest takeaway, what I remember most, was our captain Matt coming up to me, looking me in the eye when I didn't want to see anybody, and saying, "Hey, you're still my go-to sweeper. I need you. Let's get it back." And those words really did help me lift my head up and keep going. It took a moment for him to say that, but those words lasted decades. That's why Matt was team captain.

For all of us today, the test in a relationship - any relationship- is what we do when our loved one or teammate is in a low place. If someone picks us up in our own challenging moment, keep that friend. If you see this happening to another person, be that friend.

What Moses teaches us thousands of years ago remains timeless and true today: when we encounter someone in their low place and stand with them, we lift them up, and we elevate ourselves as well.

Shabbat Shalom.