

Endless Love

This Shabbat, February 1, 2014, is Rosh Chodesh Adar 1. This being a leap year in the Hebrew calendar, Purim will arrive in Adar 2 that starts a month from now, leaving this Adar empty of Jewish holidays. But here in the US, February brings a different celebration. Every February 14, Americans send each other boxes of chocolate, teddy bears or flowers to celebrate romance and love. On Valentine's Day, more fresh-cut flowers will be purchased and exchanged as gifts than on any other day of the year. Valentine's Day is more than sentimental – it's also a major industry, that is, when you care to send the very best.

What so many of these gifts have in common is the card they come with which more often than not is decorated with these chubby little rosy cheeked arrow-toting babies looking like angels with wings.

Some say they're supposed to represent Cupid, the son of the ancient Roman goddess Venus, whose arrows caused instant passionate love to burn in the heart of whoever they were aimed at.

They're also called cherubs, a term that mistakenly connects them back to the angel-like images that hovered over the ark in the Mishkan, the mobile desert sanctuary which was assembled and disassembled as the children of Israel moved through the desert. In fact, this week's parashah, Terumah, contains the instructions for building the Mishkan and the various vessels and items that were placed within it, including the ark, the altar, the menorah, the table for the showbread, and the cherubs, or keruvim.

Inside the Holy of Holies was the ark. A solid slab of pure gold was placed above the ark as a covering for it, called the kapporet. At either end of the kapporet a cherub was carved -- a creature with human, animal and birdlike features -- so that each faced the other, with their wings facing upwards. What was most dramatic about this all was the belief that when Moses would enter the Mishkan to encounter God, God's voice would descend from heaven precisely into the space between the two cherubim. As the Torah describes in our portion:

We've spoken many times about the essence of the sin of idolatry. Why is it so wrong to make an idol, to make an image of God? Because in making a concrete image we limit what it is we might believe God to be. To portray God is to define, constrain, and restrict God. It leads us to the mistaken notion that any of us can know exactly what God is, and worse, to the dangerous notion that any of us can know exactly what God wants of us.

There is only one thing we can say about God with any confidence: God is always *eyn sof*, without limit. As many as there are hearts and minds and spirits there are ways of understanding what God is and how we might become close to God.

Perhaps this emptiness between the keruvim in the heart of the elaborate Mishkan served as a critical check on our human tendency to mistake materialism with meaning, concrete with conviction. Perhaps the *eyn sof* is what the emptiness between the keruvim ultimately symbolized: the infinite, undefined presence of God in the world.

There is something else in our story of building the Mishkan that's infinite and undefined. Consider the neighborhood where it was built. Location, Location, Location. Where are we now in the Torah? Wandering in the desert. In the midst of becoming. In a place of profound physical and spiritual dislocation. It's in this place that we're commanded to build this magnificent sanctuary in which God and we are to meet.

The contrast between the gorgeous aesthetics of the Mishkan and the vast, undefined plains of the desert could not be more glaring. And yet, the contrast is what teaches one of the most profound lessons of the Torah.

Like the *eyn sof* between the keruvim, the limitless divine presence between the cherubs, the desert symbolizes the limitless terrain of human existence. Our lives can take any number of directions. Our relationships can take any number of forms. Like the constantly shifting sands of the desert floor, we move through lives filled with continual change and transformation, both inner and outer. Where we are at one point in our lives, in our work, in our relationships, is not the same place we find ourselves the next day, or next month, or next year. We strive for stability, but we can't suppress change. The best we can do is to learn to adapt to change that inevitably comes our way.

We may feel rooted one moment; and untethered the next. We may feel centered one moment, and without direction the next. We may feel strong one moment, and vulnerable the next. We may feel a sense of belonging one moment, and the sting of exile the next.

The message of building the Mishkan in the land of possibilities, which is what the vastness of the desert symbolizes, is that there is no place and no time in our lives when we are to feel that connection to the holy is elusive or impossible. There is no location on the map of human life from where God remains beyond our reach.

Perhaps the message is even stronger. Perhaps the message is that when we feel that we are not in a mental or spiritual space to study Torah, or observe Jewish traditions, or connect to community, that's precisely the time when we ought to, with even greater intention, greater kavana.

The space of divine possibility between the cherubs of the Mishkan is mirrored by the landscape of human possibility in which it stands.

As Bnei Yisrael carried the Mishkan with them throughout their journeys, so may we be blessed with the inspiration and the strength to carry the divine presence, the Torah and all her beauty and wisdom, with us wherever we may go.

And while I'm not going to comment on the non-Jewish origins of Valentine's Day, let me just say this: if any of you are going to exchange cards with pudgy little red-faced angels this coming Valentine's Day, just remember the lesson of the keruvim: you're honoring not only what you mean to one another at this time in your lives, but the infinite possibilities of what your love can come to mean in the years ahead, and the infinite places it can take you.

Shabbat Shalom.