

Teaching God?

Introduction

This week's Torah portion, *Ki Tisa*, God tells Moses He plans to destroy Israel because they built and worshiped a Golden Calf while Moses was receiving the tablets of the Law on Mount Sinai:

The Lord further said to Moses, "I see that this is a stiff-necked people. 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." [Exodus 32:9-10]

Moses argues strenuously with God on behalf of the Jewish people:

Don't let the Egyptians say, "It was with evil intent that He delivered them, only to kill them off in the mountains and annihilate them from the face of the earth."

Turn from Your blazing anger, and renounce the plan to punish Your people.
[Exodus 32:12]

In all, Moses brought ten very clever arguments to change God's mind: Don't destroy Your own possession, don't abandon Your plan, worry about Your image, keep Your promises, remember that not *all* Israel worshiped the Golden Calf, I absolve You of Your vow (to destroy idolatry), You Yourself caused Israel to sin, don't be angry just because Israel wanted to make your job easier, I am angry too, don't take me for granted.

God listens to Moses, follows his advice, and does not destroy the Jewish people.

Another instance of God being swayed by argument: God tells Abraham about His plan to destroy Sodom. Abraham argues that it would be unfair if some of the people living there are righteous. He succeeds in "bargaining" God down to ten righteous people whose merit would prevent the destruction.

So God can be swayed! Job:

הוּא יִקְטֹלֵנִי לֹא [לִּי] אֶנְחָל אֶת־דַּרְכֵי אֱלֹהִים

Yea, though He slay me, still will I trust in Him, *but I will argue my case before Him.* [Job 13:15]

Solving biblical disconnects

Going beyond swaying God, the ancient rabbis resolve some biblical disconnects in a manner that is nothing short of astonishing.

-Punish only those who did wrong. Midrash:

The Holy One, blessed be He, said [note: In our portion]:

[I will] visit the iniquity of parents upon children and children's children.

[Exodus 34:7]

Moses said, "Master of the Universe, many evildoers produced righteous ones!

Should they be removed for the iniquities of their parents?

Terach was an idol-maker, but his son, Abraham, was righteous;

so too [King] Hezekiah was righteous, but [King] Ahaz, his father, was an evildoer;

[King] Josiah was righteous, but [King] Amon, his father, was an evildoer.

Is this proper that the righteous be struck for the iniquities of their parents [or children]?"

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him, "Behold, you have taught Me! By your life, I will nullify My words and preserve your words, as it is stated [in

Deuteronomy]:

Parents shall not die for the [sins of their] children, and children shall not die for the [sins of their] parents. [Deut. 24:16]

And, by your life, I shall write [these things] in your name, as it is stated [when this teaching is invoked in the Book of Kings]:

As it is written in the Torah of Moses, commanded by God. [2 Kings 14:6]

[Numbers Rabbah 19:33]

-Teach Israel before you punish them. Midrash:

[Moses] said in front of [God], "Master of the Universe, from where does Israel know that what they did [was wrong]? Did they not grow up in Egypt? And all people in Egypt are idolaters. And when You gave the Torah, You did not give it to them, and they were also not standing there, as it is stated:

And the people remained at a distance. [Exodus 20:18]

You only gave it to me, as it is stated:

And [God] said to Moses: "Ascend to the Lord." [Exodus 24:1]

And when You gave the [Ten Commandments], You did not give [them] to them.

You did not say, "אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם I am the Lord, your God [in the plural]"; but rather

"אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיךָ I am the Lord, your God [in the singular]". [Hence] You said it to *me*. Did I sin?"

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him, "By your life, you have spoken well.

לַמַּדְתָּנִי – *Lamadtani!* You have taught Me! From now on, I will say 'אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם I am the Lord, your God [in the plural]'."

[Numbers Rabbah 19:33]

-Let us offer peace before going to war. Midrash:

Rabbi Yehoshua of Siknin said in the name of Rabbi Levi: ... God commanded [Moses] to make war on Sihon, as it is said:

Rise, take your journey, and pass over the brook Arnon; behold, I have given into your hand Sihon the Amorite, king of Heshbon, and his land; begin to possess it, and contend with him in battle. [Deuteronomy 2:24]

But he did not do so, and [the Torah says]:

And [Moses] sent messengers out of the wilderness of Kedemoth to Sihon king of Heshbon with words of peace... [Deuteronomy 2:26]

God said to [Moses]: I have commanded you to make war with him, but instead you began with peace. By your life, I will confirm your decision. Every war upon which Israel enter, they shall begin with [a declaration of] peace, as it is said [in the Torah]:

When you approach a city to fight against it, first make them an offer of peace. [Deut. 20:10]

[Deuteronomy Rabbah 5:13-14, Numbers Rabbah 19:33]

-Don't give the people more to worry about. Torah at the Burning Bush:

Moses said to God, "When I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is His name?' what shall I say to them?"

And God said to Moses, "אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה *Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh* – I will be what I will be." He continued, "Thus shall you say to the Israelites, 'אֶהְיֶה *Ehyeh* – 'I will be' -- sent me to you." [Exodus 3:13-14]

The Talmud comments:

The Holy One, Blessed be He, told Moses to go and tell Israel: "[Tell them My name is 'I will be what I will be', meaning] I will be with them in *this* enslavement just as I will be with them in *other* enslavements [in the future]."

Moses said before Him: "Master of the Universe, they have enough [trouble now]. [There is no need to tell them about future] suffering – let it come at its appointed time. The Holy One, Blessed be He, agreed and said to [Moses]: Go and tell Israel only that 'I will be' has sent me to you." [Berakhot 9b]

Giving advice to God

-Take wisdom where you find it. Talmud:

Rabba bar Sheila found Elijah [the prophet and] said to [him]: What is the Holy One, Blessed be He, doing?

[Elijah] said to him: He is speaking laws transmitted by all of the Sages, but He will not speak in the name of Rabbi Meir.

He said to him: Why? [Elijah] replied: Because he learned laws from the mouth of Aher [the rabbi who became a heretic].

He said to him: Why [should he be judged unfavorably for that]? Rabbi Meir [just] found a pomegranate, ate its contents and threw away its peel.

[Elijah] said to him: [God accepted your argument]. Now God is saying: My son, Meir, says... [Hagigah 15b]

(This is a good lesson in this age of “cancel culture”.)

-Don't interfere in our interpretations of Torah. The Talmud reports that God intervened in favor of one rabbi when several rabbis were discussing an issue, but the rabbis reminded God that He gave them the Torah to interpret themselves by majority vote:

לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם הִיא -- The Torah is not in heaven. [Deut. 30:12]

So they decide, by majority vote, against the rabbi supported by God. And the Talmud reports that God was pleased and said: “My children have bested Me!” [Bava Metzia 59b]

-You can dislike, but not hate. Talmud:

אמר רבי שמעון בן יוחאי ארבעה דברים הקב"ה שונאן ואני איני אוהבן

Rabbi Shim'on bar Yoḥai said: There are four matters that the Holy One, Blessed be He, hates, and I, too, do not love them: ____ [Niddah 16b]

Can God be “taught”?

In all these cases, God does not get angry at Abraham or Moses or the rabbis for questioning His plan. God actually considers their points, accepts them, and concedes He made “mistakes”.

Can God “make mistakes”? God can be “taught”? Is Moshe to be called “Rabbenu” (Our Teacher) not only to people but also to God? Jewish lore treats God almost like a member of the family, an equal – criticizing Him, negotiating with Him, arguing with Him, even teaching Him a thing or two.

Conclusion

God's relationship with Israel is a very complex one. In addition to the thanksgiving, the praises, the supplications, and the reverence; we have argumentation, disagreement, negotiation, “teaching” Him in hopes of swaying Him, even vituperation. No wonder the name “Israel” means “He who struggles with God”.