

God: perceived in partnership

by Luisa Moss

This week's Torah reading is Ki Tisa, Exodus 30:11-34:35

Talking about God is not an easy topic. Every person has a personal idea of whom and what God is and if God even exists. This year as my 3rd through 6th graders gather for *tefillah* on Monday nights we have been discussing God. I have been amazed by my students' ability to articulate their beliefs and discuss their struggles to find a relationship with God.

One of my students' greatest challenges is their inability to see God. Similarly, in this week's Torah reading, the Israelites who just a few weeks earlier had been living in Egypt and witnessed idolatry, are told that they must now believe in only one God. The idea that a physical God did not exist was incomprehensible to them. In parshat, *Ki Tisa* we experience the building of the golden calf. The Israelites built the golden calf to provide a visible symbol of God's presence. Moses, their conduit to God, has been up on a mountain and they do not have anyone to turn to for guidance. According to Samson Raphael Hirsch, "the people did not understand that God had taken the initiative in reaching down to them, believing that Moses had the power to summon God. Without Moses, how would they ever be able to experience God's presence again?"

In today's hands-on world, God's lack of a physical presence makes belief even more difficult. While we are not alone in the desert like the Israelites, life presents itself with moments of vulnerability. The Torah does not offer us a physical description of God but it does offer us a myriad of descriptions that help us personify God. In this parsha, we have a striking example of God as a parent. God is angry at the Israelites for building the golden calf and punishes them, but God still loves them and will always take care of and protect them. Parents find at times that they must scold or punish their children for doing wrong but the love for their children runs much deeper. God punished the Israelites so that they would learn what they did was wrong and so they would modify their behavior. Parents often feel the same way and want to help their children learn from experience. God may serve as a role model for us on how to respond to inappropriate behavior; the reprimand immediately follows the misstep, an explanation helps us and guides others to make a better decision in the future, and the "covenant of love/loyalty" remains intact.

As a Jewish educator, I try and help my students bridge the gap between not being able to see God and yet visualizing God by en-



couraging them to see themselves as God's partner. The Jewish people made a covenant to work as partners with God to help make the world a better place. I ask my students to think about different ways that they can be a partner with God. God withdraws from doing everything (*tzimtzum*) to make space for us to do our share. What in this world needs our help to make it a better place? Are you frustrated with global warming? Can your individual act to recycle or do a watershed cleanup make a difference? Perhaps you are heartbroken about the hunger and homeless issues that afflict our neighbors. Collect food for the hungry or bring games to play with children in a shelter. Each step we take to help one another allows us to come closer to God and make the world we live in a better place. Our actions reflect God's ways. As the kabbalists explain, we come into a shattered world and our responsibility is to help put the broken shards back together and restore the world to a place of wholeness and completion. In this way we become partners with God in the ongoing work of creation.

On this Shabbat, *Ki Tisa*, may we be blessed with the wisdom to accept challenges, a sense of patience, and the ability to connect to the Divine as we work towards a more complete world.

Family discussion questions:

1. Role play, you are God and you see the Israelites building a golden calf how would you have responded? If you were Moses?

2. Does your family have a *brit* (covenant) of house rules? If not, consider creating one together. How would it address behaviors in public spaces? Would it cover behavior in "private spaces?"

3. Are there incentives/ consequences? What is the motivation behind stipulating them?

4. While we cannot see God's likeness, how can we feel God's presence?

5. How can we create a relationship with God? How can we be a partner with God?

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