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Filling Absence with Presence

Torah Tzivah Lanu Moshe. The Torah, and its content, was commanded to us through Moshe our teacher. And, from the day that he was named, early in Parashat Shmot, until the very last verses of the Torah, his leadership and his service of God, and his Ahavat Yisrael, his love for his people, and his name are ubiquitous.

But Moshe's name does not appear in Parashat Tetzaveh. From Sefer Shemot until the end of the Torah, this is the only parashah in which Moshe's name does not appear. Rabbi Yaakov ben Asher, in the fourteenth century, noticed the absence of Moshe's name and suggested an explanation.

When Moshe was told about the sin of the golden calf and God's initial plan to wipe out the Israelites and start again with Moshe, Moshe's response to God was to plea for mercy and to utterly reject God's offer:

וְעַתָּה אִם-תִּשָּׂא חַטָּאתָם וְאִם-אֵין מִתְנִי נָא מִסִּפְרֶךָ אֲשֶׁר כָּתַבְתָּ:

Now, if You will forgive their sin [well and good]; but if not, erase me from your book which You have written

Moshe's bold statement "I don't want to be included in your book if you carry out this threat to destroy Israel" was effective. We were forgiven. And, Moshe's words were fulfilled too - but only in miniature. His name was taken out of the prior parashah.

Moshe's name is not in Parashat Tetzvah. But now each verse without his name testifies to his dedication as a teacher. He's not in the parashah because he cared for us. His name doesn't appear because he protected us. And so one hundred one verses without Moshe's name, ends up being one hundred one verses in which Moshe's legacy is recalled, with love. We appreciate him more this week because his name is absent.

There is another name whose absence is felt this week. God's name is absent from the Megilat Esther. This makes the book relatable and contemporary; God's name doesn't appear in most other accounts of politics and palace intrigue. And God's absence makes the story secular and scary. Who is in charge? Achashverosh? The Talmud questions whether Achashverosh is a wicked king or a foolish king. But why choose? He is a wicked king because he is foolish. It's terrifying for our safety to depend on the whim of a king who deposes his wife at the advice of his advisor and then deposes his advisor at the advice of his wife! We don't say Hallel on Purim, the Talmud explains, because at the end of Megilat Esther we are still his servants. "We are still the servants of Achashverosh." אַכְתִּי עַבְדֵי אַחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ אֵנָּה, Rava said, in Megillah 14a, centuries after Megilat Esther was written. And centuries after Rava, we still live in a capricious and unpredictable world.

Have you ever heard the Purim song "V'Gam Charbonah Zachor l'Tov?" (I'll sing it at kiddush if you like). It was very popular with some of the British students who were with me at yeshiva in Israel many years ago. I think it's actually one of the most profound messages of Purim. Charbonah was the advisor to Achashverosh who saw that the tide had turned against Haman and who then recommended that Haman be hanged upon the gallows he had built for Mordechai.

Charbonah is not an ally. He's a fair-weather friend. It just so happened that at the right moment, his interests aligned with ours and that led to the downfall of our enemy. Gam Charbonah Zachor l'Tov. We remember him in a positive way too on Purim because it worked out well for us and we choose to take that win.

And once we choose to take that win, we put God back into the megillah. Many sofrim, scribes, write out Megillat Esther so that each column of writing begins with the word "HaMelekh" the king. When we read about King Achashverosh being unable to sleep, many readers have the custom of reading that reference with the melody of Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur. It is no longer a story about King Achashverosh but a story about Ha-Melekh - The King. In this way, we transform the megillah into a story of God acting behind the scenes. God's name is not explicit, and God's presence isn't really implicit, God's presence is asserted. It is a choice to see God in history and politics and human affairs and that is a choice we make on Purim.

Hillel and Akiva are currently learning the mishnayot of Massechet Ta'anit with their mother. Just last week, as I was doing dishes, I heard them learning about the religious response to a plague:

כּו עיר שֶׁיָּשׁוּ בָּהּ דָּבָר אוּ מִפְּלֵט, אוֹתָהּ הָעִיר מִתְעַנֶּה וּמִתְרַעַת, וְכָל סְבִיבוֹתֶיהָ מִתְעַנּוֹת וְלֹא מִתְרַעֲוֹת. רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא אוֹמֵר, מִתְרַעֲוֹת וְלֹא מִתְעַנּוֹת. אֵיזְהוּ דָּבָר, עִיר הַמּוֹצִיָּאָה חֲמֹשׁ מֵאוֹת רַגְלֵי, וְיִצְאוּ מִמֶּנָּה שְׁלֹשָׁה מֵתִים בְּשִׁלְשָׁה יָמִים זֶה אַחַר זֶה, הָרִי זֶה דָּבָר. פְּחוֹת מִכָּאן, אֵין זֶה דָּבָר:

And so too a city which has a "dever" or [its buildings] collapse that city fasts and they sound a blast, but those [in the places] around it fast but do not sound the alarm. Rabbi Akiva says: they sound the alarm but do not fast.

When they learned this mishnah, my children stopped at the word "dever" Where did they know it from? In just a few more weeks we will dip our fingers into wine and intone, "dam, tzfarde'ah, kinim....dever." Dever is a plague, and the response to plague in the Mishnah, fasting and public prayer, evokes the dever of the Biblical plagues. It is God's finger, smiting and punishing. The only response is to pray for mercy.

That isn't how we experience illness or pandemic. We don't see God's finger as clearly. Our world is much more like the world as it is described in Megillat Esther.

But, prayer isn't the only response to illness in the Torah and the rabbis embrace a different ethic of healing as well. When the Torah describes the responsibilities of one who causes an injury to his victim, the Torah says that the one who causes injury is responsible for medical costs. וְרָפָא וְרָפָא. We are studying these laws with the 3rd-8th grade students in the shul's Mishmar program this week.

But the school of Rabbi Yishmael, as quoted in Massechet Berachot say something different: מִכָּאן שְׁנִיתָנָה לְרֵשׁוּת. From here we know that doctors are allowed to heal. We do not have to rely exclusively on prayer to protect against injury or illness. We can use medical interventions to protect ourselves and the Torah endorses and blesses those efforts.

The efforts of doctors nurses and public health officials all fall within the rubric of לְרֵשׁוּת לְרָפָא and the healing they provide is not contrary to prayer, but is the mechanism for God's healing to manifest itself in this world.

This is a time of great uncertainty and vulnerability. The Mishnah goes on to say that the definition of "dever" is five casualties in a city. Thank God we have not reached that standard in Chicago but there are many cities that have already reached that grim statistic.

We don't know what the future will bring. There may be more casualties. There may very well be additional quarantines imposed by health officials. We may have to be absent in some ways from one another's lives.

But we were reminded this morning that Moshe was absent from the parashah out of his love and concern for us. That's how we will step back, temporarily, from each other's lives should that become necessary. And just as we read God's presence into the megillah, let's read God's presence into the international cooperation, and into the heroic acts of care undertaken by doctors, nurses, and others. Let's read God's presence into the efforts by teachers to engage their quarantined students online. Let's read God's presence into the generous acts of care by those who have offered to read the megillah through open windows into the homes of quarantined Jews this week. Let's read God's presence into the triumph of the human spirit as it manifests itself in the progress of medical science. מְכַאן שְׁנִיתָנָה רְשׁוּת לְרֹפֵא לְרִפְאוֹת — "וְרִפְאָ וְרִפְאָ".