

NEW PERSPECTIVES, OLD COMPLAINTS

Rosh ha-Shana Morning II

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We read from the Torah five times during the High Holy Days. A few things are included. Much is not.

Let's first recap what we do read. Both yesterday's reading and today's came from Genesis, the first book of the Torah. Yesterday's portion told of the birth of a son, Isaac, to Abraham and Sarah, the first patriarch and matriarch. This morning's reading is from the following chapter of that book. It describes the *Akidah*, an incident that almost led to Isaac's premature demise. Adonai tells Abraham to take Isaac to Mt. Moriah and prepare him as a sacrifice. Abraham proceeds to do so until an angel intervenes and Isaac is spared.

Our next reading will come on Saturday, *Shabbat Shuva*. This is the final portion of the annual weekly cycle and encompasses the penultimate chapter of the Torah. Moses, the leader of the Israelites since their enslavement in Egypt, offers final thoughts for the community before they proceed to the Promised Land and his life ends.

The Yom Kippur morning Torah reading is also from Deuteronomy. It is a section of one of Moses's earlier valedictory addresses. The final High Holy Days reading, which takes place on Yom Kippur afternoon, is the Holiness Code from Leviticus.

So what's left out?. Currently, we do not read anything from Exodus. But this congregation's practice was different before we adopted our current *machzor*, which focuses upon the traditional Torah readings. For many years the Torah reading on the second day of Rosh ha-Shana was an excerpt from Exodus describing the building of the Tabernacle.

Then there is the Torah's remaining book: Numbers. As far as I can recall, this congregation has never read from Numbers during the High Holy Days. So I have never had the opportunity — at least until today — to talk at the High Holy Days about my favorite Torah book.

Of course, the reason for my affection towards Numbers may explain why it is not a prime choice for High Holy Days reading. An objective of the High Holy Days is to provide admirable examples for people to emulate. Good luck finding these in Numbers, where no one seems to be presented at their best.

Certainly not the community. They're busy complaining throughout the book. They complain about the lack of variety in their diet and a shortage of water. They lament that they will be slaughtered by more powerful inhabitants once they enter the Promised Land. A group of disaffected priests attempts to launch a revolt against Moses.

Adonai frequently comes across as aggrieved or peeved — and does not suffer silently. Faced with misconduct and impiety, Adonai sets fires in the camp, inundates it with quail, and afflicts the people with disasters. Over 40,000 people die in two plagues,, a quarter-million in a fire. In the

interest of retribution, Adonai ensures that nearly none of the individuals liberated from Egypt will ever set foot in the Promised Land. Nor are those in the leadership immune from punishment. Miriam is stricken with a skin disease attempting to justify denigrating comments about her brother Moses as a prophecy. Moses himself is punished for disobeying an instruction.

While Moses's portrayal is more benign, he is hardly a model of satisfaction. Several times he must dicker with Adonai to reduce a proposed punishment for the community. And in one memorable passage, he displays his own grievance, telling Adonai, "I cannot carry all the people by myself, it is too much for me. If you would deal thus with me, kill me rather, I beg you, and let me see no more of my wretched mess."

The contrast between Abraham's dutiful stoicism in today's Torah portion and the pushback and complaining Moses provides in Numbers could not be more vivid. Leave aside for a moment the question of which example is more admirable. There's little doubt which one is more realistic.

The Jews in Numbers were hardly the last to express dissatisfaction and grievance. Look at the scriptures: Those prophets certainly know how to kvetch! Look at your family tree: mine certainly has its share of complainers. And I do not seem to be alone in this regard.

Look at popular culture. Complaining Jews on your TV! Consider "The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel," the streaming series about a trailblazing mid

century woman comedian from New York City. It's central to the plot the the title character, Miriam Masiel, and her family are Jewish. During her initial standup routine in the first episode, Mrs. Maisel has more than a few complaints — mainly about Mr. Maisel, soon to be her ex-husband. But she also carps about the location of the bathroom in the club where she is performing, as the flushing drowns out her punchlines.

Then there are complaints in song. Noah Kahan is a commercially successful 27 year old pop singer who has introduced himself at concerts as “the Jewish Ed Sheeran,” Sheeran being an English singer with two of the top twenty highest-grossing concert tours ever. In the chorus of his song “New Perspective,” Kahan offers a cranky observation on development in his native Vermont:

Ooh, this town is for the record now
The intersection got a Target
And they're calling it downtown
You and all of your new perspective now
Wish I could shut it in a closet
And drag you back down.

Should the High Holy Days be principally a time for the airing of grievances? Of course not. Jews already have a book of Lamentations. And we are not here to engage in a songwriting workshop.

To the contrary, we need to do more than catalog problems during the High Holy Days. We need to identify solutions. Yet here complaining can

play a role. New perspectives are best when they remedy known problems. And while some complaints are mere grievances, real problems are at the core of others.

After all, much of Moses's complaining in Numbers involved real problems. He was required to lead a quarrelsome people while conveying to them the messages of a demanding, and frequently temperamental, Adonai. A good deal of Moses's complaining yielded substantial benefits: subordinates to relieve his burdens, a council of elders to improve morale, more lenient treatment for the people from Adonai. While several of the solutions that Adonai provided, such as food falling from the sky and water flowing from rocks, were truly divine intervention, others were not. Instead, they were ones Moses could have applied using the resources available to him.

We too can use our complaints beneficially. Well-intentioned advice offered during the High Holy Days — follow heroic examples! take a spiritual inventory! — may sometimes seem unrealistic or overly abstract. Our own problems, however, are quite concrete. The first step to solving a problem is acknowledging it. What should one do next? The temptation to whine, in lyric or prose, or pound on the table may be high, but is unlikely to yield a solution. What about adopting the stoicism of Abraham? It worked for him in today's reading, but his approach does not receive uniform acclaim. Our own *machzor* contains a *midrash* asking in effect why Abraham didn't push back and complain, rather than waiting for serendipity to solve his problem.

God does not communicate directly with us, unlike Abraham and Moses. But, as spiritual leaders often tell us, the High Holy Days liturgy allows one to communicate with the divine through prayer. Perhaps you don't really believe that. Or you perceive that the notion that God — or anyone else with the power to help — hears your prayers to be fanciful. Nevertheless, the High Holy Days liturgy provides numerous examples of attainable positive behaviors, as well as copious advice on what to avoid. It also provides the opportunity for self-reflection. Recall, Moses could have found several solutions to his complaints right in front of him had he focused. Self-reflection, even if borne out of exasperation, may also work for you.

Even if you have spent the last few minutes daydreaming about how it might be satisfying to shut down my perspectives by stuffing them in a closet, it will have served a purpose if you are thinking about positive things you can do instead. So complain, act annoyed, perhaps even feel sorry for yourself. But then attempt to identify possible solutions. You won't be acting like Abraham in today's portion, but you will be in fine company: that of Moses.. *Shana Tova*.