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Major movements often catch us by surprise. The Arab Spring. The fall of the Berlin Wall. Perhaps these were predicted, but it feels so often that movements, in our country, and around the world, gain momentum with unexpected speed. The leap from incipient, beginning, to major, can happen, seemingly, overnight. And there are always explanations, in the rear-view mirror, reasons for why, when and how the tipping point was reached. But in the moment, those are often opaque, obscure.

The great tipping point in the story of the Jewish people occurred when the Israelites cried out loudly enough for their cries, their moans, their pain and suffering, to reach God. God is moved to action, to notice the suffering, and to begin the redemptive process. And Moses is the individual, the human, who leads that redemptive process in the world.

But as we think of the story of Moses, and God, and the Exodus from Egypt, I want to suggest a change to way we usually understand God.

A short digression. Some Jewish theologians, those who study and think about God, understand God not as a real, live, being, but as a metaphor. God represents, God is the title, the name, the identity, we give, to the idea of that who is, of that which is, most sacred and holy in the world. Some even say that the danger is when we forget that the metaphor is a metaphor.

So back to our topic—if God is a metaphor, a title for something, then let's imagine God is the name we give to the collective will of the people Israel in the story of the Exodus. So, it's not that God, a being separate and distinct from the people Israel hears their cries. Rather, there is a collective tipping point where the suffering and the resulting outcry take on a power of their own, the power to inspire leaders, the power, even, to alter the fabric of reality and nature, to smite with plagues, to even part the Sea of Reeds.

We're not used to thinking of the collective, social will of a people performing miracles. But the idea of a group of people, of the power of many to create change, is actually familiar. In the post-biblical world, over and over, change, and movements, have come about through both leadership, as well as the collective will of thousands, or millions of human beings. Petitions, boycotts, mass protests, these things have all changed the course of human history.

You might be wondering how precisely this operates—how does the collective will of a people change the world, on its own?

That's actually why calling, naming, this collective will "God," is so apt—because of the mystery and the inexplicable, ineffable, and yet awesome, radically amazing, nature of the phenomenon.

I'd like to apply this idea of God as the collective will to a kind of delightful midrash (Rashi on Ex. 39:33, and Tanchuma Pekudei 11), a legend, on this week's parasha.

The story goes that after all the parts of the mishkan are built, the Israelites are craving God's presence. They've been missing it since the Golden Calf, when their relationship with God was ruptured. The entire premise and promise of the building project was God's

statement, *ועשו לי מקדש ושכנתי בתוכם*, “Make for me a sanctuary, that I might dwell among them.” They want God’s presence, need it.

Moses blesses the Israelites at the conclusion of the construction, and according to Rashi and the midrash, the blessing is, “May it be the will that God’s presence, Shekhina, will rest upon the work of your hands.” But it doesn’t say “God’s will,” points out the Ketav Sofer, an early modern commentator. It says, “the will,” *יהי רצון שתשרה*, without mentioning God’s will. It’s a prayer for the people to really want God to be present. Because only then will God really be able to be there.

And now, according to the midrash, they’re sitting there, thinking they’re done, and God doesn’t show up. One wise person says, “Have you built it yet?” And they realize they haven’t—it’s all in its different constituent parts, the beams, the table, the hangings. It hasn’t been assembled yet. These Israelites would be a mess at Ikea.

So, they try to build it. And it falls down. And they try again. And it falls down. And they keep trying, and it keeps falling. They really would have been a mess at Ikea, even once they knew that assembly was required!

Finally, Moses goes to God, who says, “It keeps falling down because you were not involved in its work at all. You assemble it.” Because Moses did not do any of the actual work on the Mishkan—it was all the craftspeople, Betzalel, Oholiav. But Moses replies, “The pieces are too heavy for any one person to lift.”

And what does God say? “Try—begin working with your hands and it will stand on its own.”

The way I almost see this whole scene is that if the people, whole-heartedly and purely and deeply want God to be present, Moses can take that collective will and desire for the presence of holiness, convert it to physical force, and assemble the impossibly heavy pieces of the mishkan all by himself.

It takes the collective will, operating through a leader, to effect the desired result. Moses capturing and channeling the holy desires of the people Israel is the essence of leadership—helping people to do what they cannot do by themselves without someone to lead, to organize, to vision.

When everything happens right, when the collective will is for good, and the leadership is for good, then holy, Godly things can happen.

Remember, though, how the people gathered, *ויקהל*—against Aaron, who then channeled their desires into creating a golden calf? And note that Aaron’s description of what happened, when he told Moses about it, was, “I threw the gold in, and out came this calf,” almost as if by itself. We usually construe that as Aaron denying responsibility for the fashioning of the calf. But it actually syncs perfectly with Moses assembling the mishkan. The difference? One purpose is holy, the other is unholy, one sacred, the other, a desecration.

Note that power is found not only in good mass movements, in positive collective will. Tremendous power is found in *any* kind of collective will, whether creative, destructive, or neutral.

It is up to us to work for the things that we see as good, to organize and inspire others to our common causes, to produce the groundswell, the tipping point, that move a movement to change the world. While there is power in all kinds of collective will, what we call God is

found in that collective will, those movements, seeking to repair and heal the world and humanity, to bring peace and security, justice, love and freedom, to all who dwell on earth.  
May this be the will—may this be our will.

Shabbat shalom.