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Agudas Achim Congregation
Parashat Ki Tissa
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Finding God in the Aftermath of Huwara

It was the summer of 1995, and I was enjoying my sixth summer at Camp Ramah in the Berkshires. Part of the Ramah experience, in addition to playing lots of Frisbee, embarking upon multi-day canoe trips, and taking Shabbat walks with my first girlfriend, was learning from many mentors and teachers. One such beloved teacher, a rabbinical school student, was Matthew Eisenfeld. He made Jewish learning fun, engaging, and exhilarating. Everyone loved learning with Matt. He shared with us that he would study in Israel this coming year and looked forward to teaching again next summer. The summer ended much as it usually does, with tears and hugs. The common refrain was always, "see you next summer!" And then the countdown began until the summer of '96. The days went by as usual until the phone rang on February 26, 1996.

I picked up the phone and was greeted by a somber voice calling from the Camp Ramah office. "I am calling to let you know that a beloved member of our camp community, Matthew Eisenfeld, along with his fiancé, Sarah Duker, were traveling from Jerusalem to Jordan yesterday when a bomb ripped through a packed city bus. Twenty-five people were killed, including Matt and Sarah. Please let us know if you would like to speak with someone to help process this horrific tragedy." I don't remember many other details of the conversation, but I know it was the first time I had a personal relationship with a victim of a terrorist attack.

I think about Matt every year around the time of his *yahrzeit*, and this year, on his 27th *yahrzeit*, tragedy struck once again. On that very day this year, two brothers from the settlement of Har Bracha, near Nablus, Hallel and Yagel Yaniv, were murdered by a Palestinian terrorist as they drove in slow traffic through the village of Huwara. "Words can't describe this disaster," their

mother said, "instead of accompanying children to the wedding canopy, we need to bury them." And then, one day later, I saw the Facebook post of our previous shelicha, Yasmin, a native of West Hartford, CT, sharing the next tragedy. Twenty-seven-year-old Elan Ganeles, who was in Israel attending a wedding, was driving when two Palestinian terrorists drove up to his car and opened fire. Despite heroic medical attention, Elan did not survive. Once again, parents and grandparents, along with an entire nation, mourn the loss of life tragically cut short by hatred. The pit in my stomach continues to grow. When will this violence end?

Unfortunately, it hasn't. The violence continued, and it continued in a way that truly made that pit grow in unexpected ways. Following the murder of the Yaniv brothers, a mob of violent Jewish extremists, responding to organized calls on social media, descended upon Huwara, setting fire to homes, businesses, and cars, killing one Palestinian and injuring many more. This was a moment of self-righteous vigilantism. And then this group of marauders had the audacity to take a break from their pillaging to daven *ma'ariv* in front of the burning fires, piously reciting the words of the evening prayer. "והוא רחום יכפר עון ולא ישחית, והרבה להשיב אפו ולא יעיר כל חמתו" – God is compassionate and will wipe away sin, not wreak destruction; for again and again God acts with restraint, refusing to let rage become all-consuming." What a cruel irony. One has to really not be paying attention to these words to recite them while committing such heinous acts. I cannot think of a greater desecration of God's name and the memory of those two brothers, to Elan, to those critically wounded in Tel Aviv Thursday night, and to religion. How on earth is it possible that no one is sitting in jail right now? In the words of Major General Yehuda Fuchs, chief of the IDF Central Command, "ה' הושיעה, "what unfolded in Huwara was a pogrom perpetrated by criminals." "ה' המלך יעננו ביום קראנו – God help us – surely our sovereign will answer us as in the hour of our calling." These words fall on deaf ears. God...where are you?!?

In 1989, Israeli singer and songwriter Chava Alberstein wrote and recorded a modern version of Chad Gadya. The song debuted shortly after Israel entered Lebanon and the first Palestinian uprising. The song was quickly barred from broadcast on government-controlled airways, but public pressure ultimately caused the ban to be lifted. Now it is a fixture on playlists in the weeks leading up to Passover. While the original song in our Haggadah ends with God slaying the Angel of Death, in this version, God is absent. Following the traditional lyrics, Alberstein sings: “Why are you singing this traditional song? It's not yet spring, and Passover's not here. And what has changed for you? What has changed? I have changed this year. On all other nights, I ask the four questions, but tonight I have one more: How long will the cycle last? How long will the cycle of violence last? The chased and the chaser; The beaten and the beater; When will all this madness end? I used to be a kid and a peaceful sheep; Today, I am a tiger and a ravenous wolf. I used to be a dove, and I used to be a deer. Today I don't know who I am anymore. Deezvan abba beetray zuzay – our father bought for two zuzim one little kid, one little kid...And we start all over again.”

Our tradition is full of moments where God seems distant, if not entirely absent. As Parashat Ki Tissa opens, Moses is on Mount Sinai and the Israelites are growing increasingly anxious. He's been gone from the community now for more than a month without a word from him or God. Will he ever return? Will God ever speak again? Are the people of Israel doomed, abandoned in the wilderness, without a leader or direction? Some of the people brazenly defy the second of the Ten Commandments by building a gold calf for idol worship. When, at last, Moses returns from the mountaintop, “as soon as [he] came near the camp and saw the calf dancing, he became enraged; and he hurled the tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the

mountain” (Ex. 32:19). God threatens to destroy the entire nation until Moses convinces God to punish only those who sinned.

The prolonged absence of God and Moses sparks this sad story in a foreshadowing of a theological theme that carries through the Torah and the rest of the Hebrew Bible: as the Bible moves forward, God becomes less and less prominent, to the point of seeming completely absent. Whereas God is the main personality in the earlier biblical books – God creates the universe, brings a great flood, calls Abraham and Sarah to leave home for Canaan, and much more – as we get further along in the Bible, God gets less and less mention. By the book of Esther, read earlier this week, God doesn't even speak, isn't spoken to, and isn't even named! And what happens in God's absence? Sure, the book of Esther and the Purim story is a cautionary tale against reliance on a foreign power, but it also highlights another major risk – the very hatred that Jews are required to defend against, the very real existential threats, the pernicious face of anti-Semitism that has not gone away, all of these might make us violent in return. The 9th chapter of Esther describes the murderous rampage the Jews undertook even after the wicked Haman was defeated. And when it all ended, they asked to do it again.

In response to a different tragedy, a different reprisal following a Palestinian attack decades ago, the great Israeli philosopher and scholar Yeshayhu Leibowitz wrote: “Only the decision of one who is capable of acting, and on whom rests the responsibility for acting or refraining from acting, can pass the genuine test of morality. We, the bearers of a morality which abominates the spilling of innocent blood, face our acid test only now that we have become capable of defending ourselves and responsible for our own security...It is possible to justify this action, but let us not try to do so. Let us recognize its distressing nature” (*After Kibeyeh*). Leibowitz goes on to describe the story of Shekhem in which Shimon and Levi murder the males of the city in defense of their

sister Dina. These sons of Jacob did not act out of pure wickedness and malice, Leibowitz claims. They had a decisive justification: "Should our sister be treated as a harlot?" Nevertheless, because of this action, these two tribes of Israel were cursed for generations by their father Jacob. The ethical reality for Jacob is the same as in the book of Esther and the same as the incident in Huwara: there may well be actions that can be vindicated and even justified, but that does not make them right.

We are experiencing what feels like an Eclipse of God – moments when people behave in ways that make it hard, if not impossible, for God to be seen. But God is, in fact, always present. Just as a solar eclipse occurs when something – the moon – gets in the way and obscures the light, so too the feeling of God's eclipse is nothing more than humanity getting in the way of God and earth, obscuring God's light. Like every generation before us, we have the power and the capacity to end this eclipse and encounter God's light once again.

Personally, I have found God's presence in the accounts of individuals offering visits of consolation in Huwara with Tag Meir – a Jewish organization in Israel that went from house-to-house meeting with Palestinian families whose homes were set on fire by rioters just days prior. I see God's presence in the video footage my colleague Rabbi Leor Sinai sent to me standing next to the Ayalon Highway in Tel Aviv alongside activists holding Israel's flag and protesting despite increasing fears of violence. I see God's presence in the letter signed by 120 US Jewish leaders, including former ADL and AIPAC chiefs, directed against Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich's visit to the US, saying his history of incendiary remarks "should not be given a platform in our community," particularly after he called to "wipe out" the Palestinian town of Huwara (*Times of Israel*). And I see God's presence in the simple yet vital mitzvot of *matanot l'evyonim* and *mishloach manot* – the Purim holiday's command to give gifts to the poor and to our friends. As

my teacher Yehuda Kurtzer taught, "the answer to a world in which you are not sure whether God sees you anymore is to take seriously the responsibility to see others" (*Purim, But Make it Darker*). When God seems absent, when the world seems upside down, show some compassion and do acts of kindness. Just do the things that will turn the world back over and reveal God's presence.

Last week I had a wonderful discussion with our 7th graders after Shabbat services. They had many questions for me following up on their life-cycle class. Of all their questions, there was one that continues to resonate. "What does it mean to be created in the image of God?" There is no easy answer, but I think it begins with recognizing the infinite value and infinite potential of every human being. And when we are able to make this recognition, we realize that God is not absent at all. God is truly everywhere we see the faces of God's creation.