

If we can come to G-d's restfulness...

Every Friday night, as we prepare to welcome Shabbat through the psalms of Kabbalat Shabbat, the very first psalm we sing is Psalm 95, which concludes:

אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה | אֶקוּט בְּדוֹר וְאֶמַּר עִם תַּעֲרִי לִבִּי הֵם וְהֵם לֹא יִדְעוּ דֶּרֶכִּי:
אֲשֶׁר-נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי בְּאֶפְי אִם-יִבְאוּן אֶל-מְנוּחָתִי:

Singing these Hebrew lines in the Kabbalat Shabbat nusach is the sound of “it's almost Shabbos!” And the melody is so sweet and beautiful, especially when sung by a community together led by a gifted chazan (may we soon merit to be able to safely gather and sing Kabbalat Shabbat together again), that it's easy to overlook what the verses are actually saying:

“Forty years long did I loathe this generation and I said, ‘It is a people that errs in their heart, and that do not know my ways: whereupon I swore in my anger that they should not enter into my rest.’”

The Psalmist, speaking in G-d's name, describes G-d's frustration with the generation that left Egypt, whose faithlessness ultimately led G-d to condemn them to perish in the wilderness, and to delay the entry of their children into the Land for 40 years. These harsh words are hard to reconcile with the sweetness of the melody, or the mood of Kabbalat Shabbat. As we turn from the business and the haste of the week, leaving aside the practical preparation for Shabbat, beginning to prepare ourselves spiritually to enter into the day of rest, it is jarring to be reading, much less singing, about G-d's anger with a rebellious people, who how for forty years defied him, until the entire generation died out. Is this a way to welcome Shabbat? What were the Kabbalists in Tsfat thinking when they made this the first psalm we sing to welcome Shabbat?

Let's talk about that generation and their remarkable rebelliousness. They begin doubting and complaining almost as soon as they leave Egypt, but their first big rebellion occurs in this week's parsha, Ki Tissa. These are a people who experienced G-d's deliverance from Egypt first-hand. They witnessed the miracles and the plagues that G-d inflicted upon the Egyptians, and the parting of the sea, when, according to the Rabbis, even the lowliest maidservant in the nation saw G-d more clearly and directly than the greatest of the prophets of subsequent generations. A few weeks later, they experienced the revelation at Sinai, when G-d revealed His commandments to the people through the 10 divine utterances. And then, a few weeks after that, this exalted generation decides to make themselves a golden calf to worship, directly defying the prohibition against idolatry which they themselves had heard directly from G-d not even two months earlier. How could they have sunk so low so fast?

The answer, I believe, is impatience. In Shemot Chapter 32:4 we read, “And when the people saw that Moshe delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aharon, and said to him, Up, make us gods, which shall go before us; for as for this man Moshe, who brought us up out of the land of Mizrayim, we know not what is become of him.” It was Moshe's delay in coming down the mountain that led the people to demand an idol to worship.

Why should that be? Moshe had been gone forty days. That might not seem like a long time, but there was no cell service on Sinai, no email, no Whatsapp to help Moshe keep tabs on the

people or them on him. For forty days they had no communication from their leader, and not only their leader, but the man who was the sole emissary between the people and G-d. This people who were used to having their hours and minutes managed by foremen, their days and weeks by the bureaucrats of the Egyptian slave state, who were not used to being masters of their own time for a minute, suddenly found themselves without anyone telling them what to do with themselves for 40 whole days. At first it must have felt liberating. A carnival atmosphere, but eventually, as the days went by, the people must have felt the absence of structure, and begun counting the days until Moshe would come back and tell them what to do next, feeling more and more eager and impatient for the return of their leader their connection to G-d.

And when the 40th day came, and Moshe still wasn't back, their patience finally ran out, and they went to Aharon, the next best thing to Moshe himself, demanding that he provide them a god to serve. If they can't have direct word of G-d, mediated by Moshe, the people are willing to settle for making up a god. It's not that they sought to abandon God and follow someone else. Rather, in their anxiety at being left without a leader to guide them, to relay G-d's word to them, they actually convinced themselves that this object they were serving could provide them with divine guidance and instruction.

If this seems surprising, I don't think it is. After all, when people are in a panic, when we experience something that makes us uncomfortable and frightened, very often we react without really thinking rationally, and do things that in a calm, clear state of mind we would never do. I once had a neighbor who had a fear of dogs. And once, he was walking with his infant son in a stroller, and his four year old son walking beside him. When another neighbor's dog came running at him, barking, he panicked, he left his two children behind while he ran the other way. It wasn't that he didn't love his children, but in his panic, he simply wasn't thinking.

I think we all sometimes act like that neighbor of mine. We do things that in a calm state of mind we recognize are irrational or even wrong. But even without a clinically diagnosable phobia like my neighbor had, when we experience fear, or pain or anxiety, we can become desperate to eliminate the uncomfortable feeling that we act impulsively, doing things that we know are wrong or self-defeating. A man who loves his children might abandon those children when he is in the grip of panic. A people that have experienced the reality of G-d's providence first hand, reacting out of fear and anxiety can stoop to constructing idols.

The feeling of fear or anxiety or pain is not the problem. The impulse to avoid those uncomfortable feelings at all costs is the problem. Before we could enter the promised land, we as a people had to learn how to live with fear and discomfort, without reacting impulsively to try and avoid it. When we learn to sit with discomfort, with fear, with anxiety, with confusion, without feeling compelled to try to eliminate such unpleasant feelings, then we can reach a level of spiritual maturity that allows us to make wise decisions, and avoid behaviors that hurt ourselves and others.

How does this connect us to Psalm 95, the first psalm of Kabbalat Shabbat? In the psalm G-d describes how he was fed up with that generation for 40 years. Where the people lost faith after 40 days of silence, G-d tolerated 40 years of rebellion and faithlessness, waiting for the moment the people would be ready to enter the land. The Hebrew, which we understand to mean that G-d swore not to let them enter the land, literally translates "I swore in my anger, if they come to my rest..." trailing off mid thought, implying that if a people as impatient as that generation came to G-d's rest, the consequences would be too terrible to mention. What is G-d's rest? To the rest of dwelling in the land of Israel? The rest eternal repose in Gan Eden? Or perhaps the rest, the *menucha*, of Shabbat. The

people who are so impatient will never know the delight of Shabbos rest, because resting on Shabbos requires us to accept things as they are for 25 hours, without rushing to fix what is broken or uncomfortable. Another way to read that verse is that G-d swore in His anger, "If that people ever come to my rest..." meaning "if they ever come to my level of patience, my level of forbearance, the restfulness of being able to live with whatever comes my way, there is no telling what good things await them. The root of the word rest, menucha, is nun-vav-chet, which is also the root of the name Noach. Noach, who survived the flood which G-d brought to destroy evildoers from the earth, was the beneficiary of G-d's patience and forbearance. Before the flood, G-d resolved to destroy humanity because of our wickedness; after the flood, G-d promised not to destroy us again, in spite of our wickedness. G-d, cultivated menucha, restfulness, the ability, as it were, to live with the discomfort of seeing His Creations disobey his will. If we can come to His restfulness, His menucha, some semblance of His patience, forbearance, ability to tolerate unpleasant things...there is no expressing the spiritual delights that await.