

From Purim to Pesach: Parashat Ki Tissa

by Rabbi Jill Jacobs, Jewish Funds for Justice • March 9th, 2007

In the Jewish calendar, there is no official countdown period between the holidays of Purim and Pesach, as there is between Pesach and Shavuot. Whereas we connect the holidays marking the exodus from Egypt and the subsequent revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai by counting each day in between, we have no such ritual means of connecting Purim with Pesach.

Historically, of course, Purim and Pesach have little in common: the Purim story purports to take place in Persia around the fifth century BCE, at least eight hundred years after the Exodus is said to have occurred. While Pesach commemorates the journey of the entire Jewish people out of a foreign land and toward sovereignty in their own homeland, Purim celebrates the experience of a single Diaspora community, and does not indicate any longing for a return to the land of Israel.

Historical and geographical differences aside, Purim and Pesach still feel intrinsically connected, at the very least because the first boxes of matzah generally appear on the supermarket shelves just as the last hamentaschen are being eaten. More significantly, within the book of Esther itself, the decree to destroy the Jewish people is issued the day before Pesach (which, interestingly, the secular-sounding Jews of Persia seem not to be celebrating). The irony, of course, is that the Jews of Persia find themselves facing almost certain destruction on the very day on which Jews celebrate redemption.

Perhaps the most glaring difference between Purim and Pesach concerns the relative role of God in each story. Famously, God is entirely missing from the Purim story, and the name of the heroine—Esther—comes from the Hebrew word for hiddenness. At various points in the Bible, God threatens to “hide God’s face” from the Jewish people—that is, to ignore the suffering of the people. Nowhere in the Bible is this hidden face of God more apparent than in the story of Purim, in which the Jews appear to be left to their own devices to save themselves from destruction. In contrast, God is visibly and exceedingly present in the story of Pesach. As the Haggadah reminds us, it is God in God’s full glory—and not an angel or human representative—who brings the people out of Egypt. As the Israelites cross the sea into freedom, they sing, “this is my God, whom I will glorify,” as if they are literally pointing to a God who is present and apparent.

Parshat Ki Tissa, which we read this Shabbat, begins our transition from the hidden God of Purim to the visible God of Pesach. Appropriately, both of these aspects of God show up in full force in the parashah. On the one hand, the face-to-face encounter between God and Moses is the single most intimate encounter between God and humanity described in the Torah; on the other hand, the construction of a golden calf indicates the extent to which the people felt the absence of a tangible God.

This simultaneous absence/presence of God is best encapsulated in the moment in the parashah when Moses begs God to show God’s face. God does, eventually, speak to Moses face-to-face. In this moment, though, God responds, “you will see my back; but my face must not be seen.”

(Exodus 33:22) We might understand this exchange as indicative of the teasing intimacy dance that continuously characterizes the relationship between God and humanity.

It is common to note the ways in which God hides the divine face from humanity—after all, huge pockets of the world seem to have been abandoned by God and God’s creations. It is certainly difficult to catch a glimpse of divinity in areas of abject poverty, or in places where disease is rampant and health care is unavailable or unaffordable.

It is also common to note the ways in which the divine presence appears in the most unexpected places. In a recent blog post, for example, I spoke about two women in Nogales, Mexico who—out of their own pockets, feed hundreds of migrants and resident children every day.

Neither of these pictures is complete, however. A focus on the “points of light” ignores the ways in which divinity is seriously and painfully lacking from certain areas of the human experience, and a focus on the hidden face of God leaves us with little hope for change.

Instead, we find ourselves in the place between Purim and Pesach—in a constant dance, in which we sometimes encounter clear indications of God’s presence, and sometimes find the divine presence entirely hidden from us.