

Hevra,

My derashot for this holiday season will be based on stories of the theme: “When Moses went up to the heavens...” These are all stories that take place at the top of Mount Sinai at the moment of the giving of the Torah. Moses ascends the mountain (Is the mountain heaven?) and disappears into the cloud while we—the people—stand at a safe distance. What happens within that cloud is revealed to us only through the imagination of the Sages. Of course, their imagination is fueled by their ideals, their fears, their hopes and aspirations.

I offer you more stories than I will use—six ancient tales and a seventh story that is a modern revision of the sixth story. I invite you to share your thoughts on these stories with me over the summer. As I did last year, I also invite you to select from each of your four favorite stories one line upon which the story turns, a line that you would choose to put on a card to hand out as a reminder of each story’s essential lesson.

Enjoy the stories.

Rabbi Sager

“When Moses Went Up to the Heavens”

I

When Moses went up to the heavens to receive the Torah, he found the Holy One, blessed be He, sitting in front of a Torah scroll and crowning certain of the letters with the pen strokes that would adorn those particular letters in every Torah for all time. Moses said, “Master of the World, why are you doing this tedious work yourself?” God responded, “One day a teacher will arise who will find meaning not only in every word and letter of the Torah, but he will even learn something from which letters are adorned and which are not. I do the work of crowning these letters myself in anticipation of his Torah, eager to hear what he will teach.”

Moses said, “Master of the World, show him to me!” God said, “Turn around and walk. Moses did so, and he found himself sitting in the eighth row of Rabbi Akiba’s students. Moses did not understand anything that they were saying and he became depressed. But when they arrived at a particular matter, Rabbi Akiba’s students said to him: “Rabbi, how do you derive this? He said to them: “This is a halacha given to Moses on Sinai. Moses’ mind was settled and he returned from the Bet Midrash to the mountain, eager to receive the Torah that Rabbi Akiba would attribute to him.

He came before the Holy One and said, “Master of the World, you have a man such as this and you give the Torah through me? “Silence.” God said to him. “This is how I have decided it.” Moses said, “You have shown me his Torah, now show me his reward.” God said to him, “Return!” He turned backwards and saw the Romans weighing out

Akiba's flesh in the market. Moses protested: "Master of the World, This is his Torah and this is his reward?" God replied: "Silence! This is how I have decided it."

(Babylonian Talmud Menachot 29b)

## II

When Moses went up to the heavens, the angels spoke out before the Holy One, Blessed be He: "Master of the Universe, what business has a woman's child among us?"

"He has come to receive the Torah," God answered.

The angels said: "That secret treasure which you stored away for nine hundred and seventy four generations before the world was created; that is what you want to give to mortals? *What is man that you are mindful of him; the son of man that you pay attention to him?* (Psalm 8:5)"

God said to Moses: "You need to answer them."

"Master of the World," Moses began, "I am afraid that they will burn me to a cinder with their very breath." God replied, "Hold on to the throne of Presence and give them an answer...."

Moses then spoke before God: "Master of the World, the Torah which you are ready to give me, what is written in it? *I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt* (Exodus 20:2)." Turning to the angels, Moses said: "Did you go down to Egypt? Were you enslaved to Pharaoh? Why should the Torah be yours?"

"Furthermore, what is written in it? *You shall have no other Gods* (Exodus 20:3). Do you angels dwell among peoples that engage in idol worship? And again, I ask: What is written in it? *Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy* (Exodus 20:8). Do you angels work, then, such that you need to rest? Again, what is written in it? *You shall not employ [tissa] the name of the Lord your God in vain* (Exodus 20:7). Is there any business dealing [massa] among you in which you might be tempted to use the Name improperly? Again, what is written in it? *Honor your father and your mother* (Exodus 20:12). Do you have fathers and mothers?"

"One more time, I ask: What is written in the Torah? *You shall not commit adultery. You shall not murder. You shall not steal* (Exodus 20:13-15). Is there jealousy among you? Do you have such impulses?"

.... Immediately, each angel became an admirer of Moses and imparted something to him. Even the angel of death imparted something to him.

(Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 88b-89a)

### III

When Moses went up to the heavens, he found the Holy One, Blessed be He, sitting in front of a Torah scroll and crowning certain of the letters with these pen strokes that would adorn those particular letters in every Torah for all time. God, in the midst of his work, said to Moses: “Why are you just standing there looking? Don’t they say, ‘hello’ where you’re from?” Moses replied: “Shall a servant be so bold as to say ‘hello’ to the master?” God said: “You should have at least offered to help.”

(Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 89a)

### IV

All forty days that Moses was in the heavens, God tried to teach Moses the Torah that he would take back to the people of Israel. Try as he did, Moses kept forgetting what he had learned. In frustration he said to God: “Master of the World, I have spent forty days trying to learn and still I know nothing”

What did God do? At the end of the forty days he gave Moses the Torah as a gift... Was it ever reasonable to expect that Moses might have learnt the whole Torah? After all, the Torah itself says: *The measure of it is longer than the earth and broader than the sea* (Job 11:9). Could Moses have learned it all in forty days? No; but it was only the principles of it which God taught Moses and those principles God inscribed upon to tables.

Why two tables? It was in order to correspond with heaven and earth, with a bride and a groom, with two groomsmen and also with this world and the World to Come.

(Exodus Rabbah 41:6)

### V

*The Lord came down in a cloud; He stood with Moses there and proclaimed the name “Adonai”. The Lord passed before him and proclaimed: “Adonai! Adonai! Compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation... Moses hastened to bow his head to the earth* (Exodus 34:5-6).

What did Moses see in the parade of Divine qualities that made him quickly bow his head? Rabbi Hanina ben Gamala said, He saw the quality of *slow to anger*. The Rabbis say: He saw the quality of *faithfulness*.

There is an ancient teaching agreeing that it was the quality of *slow to anger* that made Moses bow his head:

When Moses went up to the heavens, he found the Holy One, blessed be He, sitting and writing *slow to anger*. Moses said to him: “Master of the World, no doubt you propose to be slow to anger at the righteous.”

God replied: “Even to the wicked.”

Moses said: “Just let the wicked perish!”

God answered: “Be careful what you ask for.”

When Israel sinned by listening to the ten spies who predicted that Israel could not succeed at entering the land, God said to Moses: “Didn’t you say to me that my attribute of being ‘slow to anger’ should be reserved for the righteous’?”

But Moses replied: Master of the World! Didn’t you then say to me, ‘Even to the wicked’?”

And that conversation between God and Moses is hinted at in what Moses said to God after the spies’ return: *And now, let the Lord’s forbearance be great, as you have said: Adonai! Slow to anger...* (Numbers 14:17).

(Sanhedrin 11a-b)

## VI

When Moses went up to the heavens after the tragedy of the golden calf, he heard the voice of the Holy One, Blessed be He, as He was sitting and studying the parashah of the Red Heifer/Parah Adumah, that unique sacrifice whose ashes would be an essential ingredient of the highest level of purity. God was quoting the law in the name of its speaker: “Rabbi Eliezer says: A calf is called an ‘eglah’ when it is one year old and a ‘parah’ is a calf that is two years old.”

Moses said before the Holy One, Blessed be He: “Master of the world: The upper worlds and the lower worlds are at your command and yet you sit and quote the law in the name of a human?”

The Holy One replied: “Moses, there will someday be a tzaddik who will begin his own Torah with the Torah of Red Heifer purity. That Torah will begin: *Rabbi Eliezer says: An ‘eglah’ is a calf that is one year old and a ‘parah’ is a calf that is two years old....*”

Moses said, “Master of all Worlds, may it be your will that he be one a descendant of mine. God said to him: By your life! He will descend from you. As it is written: And the name of one son is Eliezer (Exodus 18:4)....

Said God, “Let a calf come and atone for the golden calf.”

(Pesikta d’Rav Kahanna 4:7, 8)

VII—A modern version of the midrash from Pesikta d’Ravi Kahannah

On the day when the mountain crumbled for Moses, he broke the tablets, burned the golden calf, ground it fine and scattered its dust over the water. It was from the murky water that he made all of the rebels drink, and he killed three thousand of them. The next day he ascended to the heights one more time in order to receive new stone tablets. Again he walked on gleaming white clouds until he reached the purple velvet curtain. Behind the curtain, as always stood the open Holy Ark and within it were resting the thousands of heavenly tablets rolled and robed.

...To his great happiness Moses had come for forty more days and nights of learning in hevruta/partnership with God. The thought that if he had not shattered the tablets he would not have returned to this place made him weep. He sensed that the great mitzvah of writing the new stone tablets came along with the transgression of breaking the first tablets. Someone within him broke the tablets in order to return to the divine hevruta

In his haste, Moses drew back the curtain and...entered into the Divine Studio. There, the Holy One sat with his back to him, as he was swaying in front of his lectern made of bdellium and singing to himself in the ancient and eternal learning chant. The studying voice of the Holy One sang in sorrow: “Rabbi Eliezer says: “An ‘eglah’ is a calf that is one year old and a ‘parah’ is a calf that is two years old...”. Moses identified this chanted passage as the first Mishnah of the tractate Parah and he thought that it was not by chance that the Holy One decided to receive him with the chanted learning from the heavenly tablet of Tractate Parah. “It seems logical,” Moses said to himself, “that the Holy One had not yet paid attention to the three thousand dead that I slew yesterday, and now he busies himself with tractate Parah in order to find a purification remedy.”

“Let the red heifer (parah adumah) come and atone for the golden calf,” Moses quoted from the heavenly scroll of Pesikta d’Rav Kahana, and immediately he stood tall and pleaded on Israel’s behalf before the Holy One...

(from, Come to the Holy Place, by Ari Elon)