

Shabbat shalom! This sermon is unlike any that I have ever delivered. I don't know, as I write, if anyone will hear this sermon. Perhaps it will be recorded and sent out over the internet. Perhaps it will be read, but never heard. Still, I hope it will somehow find its way into the homes and hearts of many of our congregants, even if I am just a disembodied presence this week.

Coincidentally, that is what our parsha is about. After several weeks of reading about the construction of the Mishkan, and attempts to make immanent the transcendent, we read this week about the creation of the Golden Calf. Gd is a disembodied presence too, and that is difficult for the Israelites.

-כִּי- בְּשֵׁשׁ מִּשָּׁה לְרִדַּת מִן-הָהָר; וַיִּקְהַל הָעָם עַל-אַהֲרֹן, וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו קוּם עֲשֵׂה-לָנוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר יֵלְכוּ לְפָנֵינוּ--כִּי-זֶה מִשָּׁה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלָנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם, לֹא יָדַעְנוּ מָה-הָיָה לוֹ.

"When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, the people gathered against Aaron and said to him, "Come, make us a god who shall go before us, for that man Moses, who brought us from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has happened to him."¹

They want a god, but the problem is the absence of Moses. It seems that people were able to accept a Gd they could not see, but only as long as Moses was there. Moses is their connection to Gd. Without Moses, the people don't know if they will be able to remain in relationship to a Gd without a physical, visible presence.

There is a paradox here. Our religion tells us that the most important things are not things. They are love, compassion, holiness, meaning, kindness. They are not objects, like the Golden Calf. Moses is rightfully angry when the people elevate the Golden Calf to an object of worship. And yet, we are physical beings who exist in the physical world. If we wish to communicate love or compassion, we can only do so through the physical world.

All of these important things are invisible. They are none the less real. We are aware of their existence through their effects on the physical world. If you want to know if someone loves you, see how he treats you. If you want to show your kindness, care for the needs of others. If you want to connect with Gd, look at this beautiful world, in all of its physicality. Look how we exist in a community of caring friends and family.

Like the Israelites, we may find it more difficult to connect to Gd when the physical manifestation of that connection is taken away. For the ancient Israelites, it was the disappearance of Moses. For us, it is not being able to experience our beautiful Shabbat services, not having our presence together, in community, in our sacred space.

1. Exodus 32:1

But in truth, it is not the physical manifestation that is important.

At the end of the Torah, the people are able to go on without Moses. They will have other leaders, some great and some less so. They will have kings and high priests and prophets. Each was effective insofar as he or she could link the people, through his or her physical presence and deeds, to something beyond the physical.

We too can remember the things that are most important, even without being physically present in our building. We are trying our best to use technology to maintain our community. We are calling each other and checking in. We are watching and listening to clips on line. And most importantly, we are remembering that what is important is what is inside of us. What is important is our Jewish connection. What is important is that we remember that Gd is with us, and holiness surrounds us, even when we cannot be in our synagogue.

Even Moses found it difficult to go on worshipping a Gd who was invisible. In our parsha, he called out to Gd, "Oh, let me behold Your glory"² Gd answers "I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim before you the name Eternal, and the grace that I grant and the compassion that I show. But," He said, "you cannot see My face, for man may not see Me and live."³

Gd tells Moses that he will see Gd's 'אֱהָרִי,' that he will see the effects of Gd's presence. He will know Gd is there because of what Gd has done. But the physical presence of Gd no person will see while living.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said that Shabbat is a palace in time, not in space. I invite you to light candles, to sing Shabbat songs, to use all of the physical tools that we have right now, to create something that is beyond words, beyond sounds, beyond the physical. I wish you, from the bottom of my heart, a Shabbat shalom, a Shabbat of good health, a Shabbat of safety, and a Shabbat of holiness.

2. Ibid. 33:18

3. Ibid. 33:19-20