

LOOKING FOR GOD IN ALL THE WRONG PLACES

By Magidah Khulda bat Sarah

The Torah reading for Shabbat (Sabbath) *chol hamoeid* (intermediate days of) Sukkot is from the book of Shemot (Exodus 33:12-34:26). For some time we read from the book of Deuteronomy, but at the time of Sukkot we go back to the book of Exodus—*parasha* (Torah portion) Ki Tisa. It may be helpful because of that to remember where we are in the Torah and what's been happening.

We're not far from the sin of the *egel maseicha* (עגל מסכה), the molten calf. You may remember that after the incident of the molten calf, God removed God's presence from among the people. And in our reading for Shabbat *chol hamoeid* Sukkot, we find Moses pleading with God, saying: "If you're not going with us, don't make us go. And please, put Yourself back in our midst." (Exodus 33:15) And then, shortly after that, the reading ends with a listing of the *shalosh regalim* (the three festivals of Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot.)

Someone once asked me: What kind of holiday is Sukkot? Isn't Sukkot, he said, just another way of celebrating the harvest? And I replied, it is and it isn't.

Of course, all three festivals—Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot—otherwise referred to as the *chag ha'asif* (חג האסיף), each a feast of ingathering, are commonly explained on the basis of their agricultural connection. It's a natural way to look at it, if you're a farmer.

Imagine yourself standing on a small hill above a field of plants that you have carefully seeded and cultivated, and tenderly cared for. Now you step back, perhaps leaning on your shovel. You look down the little valley at the labor of your hands. Even at a distance, you can see the dark bunches of your grapes hanging, and stalks of corn drying. I've done well, you think. And perhaps you think to yourself, how beautifully nature has cooperated.

Perhaps in that moment you come to believe that your happiness and feeling of closeness to God depends somehow on your communion with *nature*.

I have known such a moment. I have felt such a thing myself. As a small child, I lived for a time on a ranch in northern California, 25 miles west of Ukiah, on a dirt road, out in the redwoods. I can remember as if it were yesterday, wading across the shallow waters of a stream in summer, walking in the woods to pick berries, the scent of the berries, the scent even of the dust of the redwoods that came up with every step.

It seems to me that I have spent a good deal of my adult life looking for a way to get back to that life, and not succeeding. If only I could find my

way back, I thought, I would feel good, I would feel close to God.

And yet right in the middle of our fantasy of communion with nature and the harvest, the Torah calls us back. Just when we're thinking how nice, how cozy it would be to stay at home enjoying the fruits of our labor, the Torah interrupts us to say: *shalosh regalim*. (Exodus 34:23-24)

Regel is foot. *Shalosh regalim* means get up on your feet and "foot it," so to speak, to the Sanctuary, three times each year. The *shalosh regalim* say to us: It's not nature that you have to celebrate.

Why not?

First, the Torah says, just at the time when it's so tempting to regard the fruits of our labor as *ours*, just at the time when it's so tempting to say, me, my hand and nature got me this wealth of harvest, the Torah says: *No*.

It's not yours. It's not your harvest. It's not your land. It's not even your hand. For, after all, did *you* create your own hand?

But it also says that nature is not the way to get close to God; if it had been, then the Torah would have encouraged us to stay home and enjoy nature. Instead, our rabbis have said: When spring beckons, when summer ripens the fruit, when autumn brings the harvest, you are not to celebrate nature with her gifts, but rather your spring, in summer your maturity, and in fall your consummation, as a people of the Torah.

But what does this mean? And if not through nature, then how do we get close to God?

In a way, Moses effectively asks the same question: Given the mess that was created with the golden calf, how am I supposed to know what to do? How am I to know Your ways, O God? (Exodus 33:13) And then Moses has the nerve to say to God: "I want to see you! I want to see God!" (Exodus 33:18)

But isn't this what we all wish for? Don't we all want to have an experience of awe, of being close to God? And how does God respond to Moses?

By causing all God's glory to pass in front of Moses. What Moses actually saw remains unknown to us, but we are told the "names" by which that which he saw was explained to him. (Exodus 34:6) Which is where we get the *yud gimmel midot shel rachamim*, the famous 13 attributes of God's compassion. We sing about them on High Holy Days: God is one, God is the source of all energy, God is merciful, gracious, patient, kind, true, showing kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving our mistakes and *even* our intentional mistakes, and even our intentional mistakes that we

make over and over again, and yet holding us accountable.

So now we know what God is, but what does it mean for us?

Our rabbis answer: Come and look at the three little words used to describe the position Moses will be in when he “sees” God: God says to Moses: *hinei makom iti* (הנה מקום אתי)—look, there’s a place next to me, there is a place *with* me.

And our rabbis say that the sense of these words “next to” changes the meaning of this verse completely. For next to suggests that you’re standing *with* someone, looking at something together. So that the verse does not mean seeing God, but rather seeing the world with God’s eyes, seeing the world as God sees it.

And how does God see the world?

In what sounds like a contradiction in terms, God sees the world in the uniformity of its diversity. From our up-close experience as humans, of course it looks like a mish-mash of creation, chaos. Things made up of things, made up of things, made up of things—boxes inside boxes. To see the uniformity is to see the uniformity of one God in the creation, but . . . at the same time, to see the diversity of the particulars.

Take for example the question of kindness. God shows kindness, the rabbis have said, in different ways to different people. Because what is a kindness to one of us may not be so to another, and may actually represent an insult or an injury. And if we understand our fellow human beings and ourselves through God’s eyes, then we are also to act as God would act, according to the diversity of the creation, according to the particulars.

It means giving consideration to the particular person and situation, being kind in the way that is appropriate to each person and place and time.

I mention kindness here because the rabbis say that the Torah begins and ends with God’s kindness for humans. The Torah begins with God clothing Adam and Eve, and the Torah ends with God burying Moses. And, of course, everything in between also reflects God’s kindness—the myriad small acts of healing and potentials for growth.

And so, our rabbis teach, should life begin and end for us—in the myriad opportunities for kindness that we have to choose between—day after day.

Chesed (חסד—kindness) is defined by the rabbis as both the highest expression for the love that

God shows to human beings and the highest degree of doing good that we human beings can accomplish. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) teaches that they are really the same thing.

So, our rabbis would say, you want to see God? Then see yourself in God’s image. And act as God would act.

ALL THINGS ARE MADE OF SMALLER THINGS

What does it take
To bring about
The kingdom of God on earth?
We search
And never know
The kingdom’s end.
We strain
To find an order in the skies,
To find our place
And count our part.
The moon, the stars—
Which are we?
Dust.
Small stones
Skipped into a summer sea.
And yet,
The largest things
Are made of smaller things.
Drops divide the waters of the sea,
And drops divide those drops.
And sands of moons
And distant stars
Are also small.
And none is lost.
And so
Are all small acts of kindness
Like drops of water
That can wear away a stone
To its very heart,
Or make a well
Spring up,
Or wash away
A shadow on a soul
And help to bring it
In the light.
Which are we?
And where?
A little lower
Than the angels.

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