

Bitachon: Trusting God during a Pandemic
Shabbat Ki Tissa 5780

March 13, 2020 Rabbi Barry H. Block
(trusting in God from Moses' perspective)

Traditional Jews often write two Hebrew letters, bet-hay, at the top of any document. That's an acronym standing for, b'ezrat ha-Shem, "God willing." Many will pepper their conversations with the same phrase, for example: "I'm looking forward to seeing you at Temple, God willing." From a traditionally religious point of view, the implication is that no plan will come to fruition without God's help. For all of us, whatever our theology, it's a statement of uncertainty. We can plan, but we cannot know what our future holds.

When I was younger, I would respond to an invitation: "I'll be there!" Since then, life has thrown me curve balls, as it does everyone. Now, I may be equally eager to anticipate a future event, but I'm far less cavalier. My response these days: "I plan to be there." Or even, "I'll be there, God willing."

Our Jewish tradition offers much more than those two words, "God willing," as we face uncertainty. Indeed, Judaism teaches us to live with a sense of security—in Hebrew, bitachon. We are enjoined to do everything we can to help ourselves in a difficult situation. Having done what we can, our sages offer us hope, based on experience and faith, that we will be O.K. No, we cannot guarantee the outcome, but we can live with trust in God's help, come what may.

Now, permit me to offer three thoughts from our tradition about how we might approach this difficult and uncertain time with a sense of security and trust:

1. In this week's Torah portion, Moses finds himself in an untenable situation. After dealing with the Golden Calf crisis, God commands Moses to continue leading the people toward the Promised Land. Moses sees that as an impossible task. Frustrated, he accuses God of giving him insufficient information to complete the task. Moses insists on actually seeing God. Even Moses, God's most faithful servant, needs in-person reassurance that everything will work out well.

God responds: "[Y]ou cannot see my face, for a human being cannot see Me and live...See, there is a place near Me. Station yourself on the rock, and, as My presence passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock and shield you with My hand until I have passed by. Then I will take My hand away and you will see My back..." Our sages are troubled by the suggestion that God has all these body parts. Some suggest that the Torah is offering us a metaphor: We can see God's back—that is, we can see what God has already done. We cannot see God's face—that is, what the future will bring.

Moses learns the lesson: Life is uncertain, but God will always be with him. Now, he proceeds to lead the people to the border of the Promised Land. Let us, like Moses, endure this uncertain time with the faith that

God is with us, come what may.

2. “A Jewish folktale relates that King Solomon was once presented with a ‘magic’ ring inscribed with the words, *gam zeh ya’avor*, ‘This, too, shall pass.’ In his wisdom, Solomon realized that, even as these words kept him grounded in jubilant times, they also provided him with tremendous comfort when he was troubled.

Trusting in God from the people Israel:

This week’s parasha includes one of the most famous stories in the Bible, the episode of the Golden Calf. Moses goes up to receive the first set of tablets of the covenant on Shavuot. While Moses is up on Mount Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments, the Israelites become concerned that he has not returned after being away for 40 days and 40 nights, the traditional biblical phrase for a very long time. Like a child whose mommy or daddy has gone away, the Israelites begin to cry out that something has happened to their teacher, fearing he will never return. Even after God has redeemed them from bondage and provided for their well-being while they have been in the desert, they still do not have enough faith in God and worry that their leader has been taken away.

כִּי זֶה מֹשֶׁה הָאִישׁ FOR AS FOR THIS MOSES — This Moses implies that Satan showed them something that looked like Moses being carried on a bier in the air high above in the skies (cf. Shabbat 89a).

אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלֵנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם [THAT MAN] THAT BROUGHT US UP OUT OF THE LAND OF EGYPT, and who used to show us the way we had to go; now that he is dead we need gods which shall go before us.

For when Moses ascended the mountain he said to them (to the Israelites): at the end of a period of forty days (i. e. on the fortieth day) I shall return during the first six hours of the day (before noon). They thought that the day on which he ascended the mountain (the seventh of Sivan) was to be included in this number (thus — Sivan having 30 days — he was expected back before noon on the sixteenth of Tammuz). In fact, however, he had said to them “after forty days” meaning complete days — forty days, each day together with its night that precedes it — (as is the customary Jewish reckoning; cf. Genesis 1:5: וַיְהִי עֶרֶב וַיְהִי בֹקֶר). Now, as regards the day of this ascent, its night was not part of it that it can be reckoned as a complete day, for he ascended on the seventh of Sivan early in the morning (cf. Rashi on Exodus 19:3); it follows therefore that the fortieth day really fell on the seventeenth of Tammuz and not as the people had believed on the sixteenth. On the sixteenth of Tammuz Satan came and threw the world into confusion, giving it the appearance of darkness, gloom and disorder that people should say: “Surely Moses

is dead, and that is why confusion has come into the world!” He said to them, “Yes, Moses is dead, for six hours (noon) has already come (בא שש = בשש) and he has not returned etc.” — as is related in Treatise Shabbat 89a (cf. Rashi and Tosafot there and Tosafot on Bava Kamma 82a (ד"ה כ"ד)). One cannot, however, say that they erred only on account of it being a cloudy day, their mistake consisting in not being able to distinguish between forenoon and afternoon, and that thus they were correct in their supposition that he was to return on the sixteenth of Tammuz; for this assumes that he really returned on the day when they made the calf, but that they were under the impression that noon was past — for, as a matter of fact, Moses did not come down until the following day (the day after they had made the calf), for it is said (v. 6) “And they rose up early in the morrow, and brought up burnt offerings” — and only afterwards the Lord said to Moses (v. 7) “Go, go down; for thy people ... have corrupted themselves”.

Much like a baby who needs its pacifier, the Israelites seek out something familiar to comfort them during this most stressful time. They turn to Aaron who has been left in charge during Moses’s absence, telling him to make them idols to worship, something with which they were familiar and comfortable from their 400 years of bondage in Egypt.

Just like Moses, we also want to “know” (be close) to God. In today’s society there are many obstacles that keep people from their closeness to God. Sometimes God seems close and at other times God seems far away or even absent. Oftentimes, this distance is equated with a lack of trust, much like the Israelites experienced. Likewise, we might feel a void.

There are many reasons for this divide. There may be internal influences such as negative or conflicting emotions (anger, doubt, sadness) and lack of spiritual connection. In addition to the inner conflicts one may have, there may be external factors that color our thinking about God’s role in the world and in our lives. These influences include other people, the media, one’s personal past (negative worship or religious school experiences), and historical events (the Shoah and September 11, 2001). . According to gurus of popular spirituality, all of this pessimism comes from fear, qualified as the absence of love. Furthermore, these spiritual leaders state that without love, there can be no Godness.

Just as with an impatient people who imagine the worst when their leader has failed to return from his mission, we also live in a world of great uncertainty.

Despite what a circa 1985 Madonna says, relying on the material for solace is beyond misguided; it is profane. Instead we should attempt at every opportunity to engage in the sacred work of the soul. Just like Moses, we may never get to see God, but if we trust enough, we, too, can fully embrace that God is always there for us, *El rachum v'chanun*.