

God's Presence in the Sanctuary

Shabbat Sh'mini 5783

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Yesterday, I received a lovely invitation to attend an *Iftar* at the Madina Institute. For those unfamiliar with Islam's traditions and terminology, Muslims fast during daylight hours for a full month every year. The meal to break the fast each evening is called an *Iftar*, coming from a root which Arabic shares with Hebrew, meaning, "to conclude."

Ellen Polsky, our Director of Lifelong Learning *Emerita*, was there with me last night, basking in the good food and warm hospitality. As synagogue professionals of long tenure, we marveled that the Madina congregation could muster hundreds of people to gather every night for a month—and feed them all a lovely meal each night! I asked our friends who are among the mosque's founders, Sophia Said and Dr. Sara Tariq, if, when they were working to establish Madina Institute, they ever imagined that so many people would be gathered there, little more than five years after they opened the doors. They did not. Their accomplishment is an extraordinary blessing for our entire community.

The *Iftar* begins with light appetizers to break the fast. Then, the congregation adjourns for prayer before returning for dinner. I was invited into the prayer hall, where I sat in the back in a chair reserved for non-Muslim guests. Prayers are entirely in Arabic, Islam is not my faith, and I understood only the most familiar, repeated phrases. Still, the melodious voice of Imam Mohammed Nawaz and the sizeable gathering of the faithful helped me to enter a prayerful spirit. I experienced the presence of God in that prayer hall.

The community gathered last night seemed united and friendly. Dr. Tariq explained to me that, while most of the founders are of Pakistani descent, many of the newer members are Bengali, meaning that they or their parents came from Bangladesh. Dr. Tariq told me that Pakistanis and Bengalis don't typically get along, resentments still simmering from a 1971 war. Similarly, I have previously been told that bad feelings are common between Pakistani and Afghan Muslims. Moreover, Sara's parents emigrated from India, Pakistan's long-time enemy. Nevertheless, the relations between these Muslim brothers and sisters here in Arkansas are typically good, and the community gathers in unity.

The connection between unity and the ability to experience God's presence was also the theme of Rabbi Ciment's Shabbat message this week. Though the way I'm going to explain that is my own, I am grateful to Rabbi Ciment, because his

email spurred my research, and took me in a different direction than I had originally planned for this sermon.

As we open the Torah to this week's portion, Moses calls Aaron to conduct rituals, prescribing a series of sacrifices, after which, Moses promises, "Adonai will appear to you."ⁱ Aaron then offers those sacrifices, the minute details of which are provided. We see that Aaron "stepped down after offering" these sacrifices.ⁱⁱ Still, God's presence has not yet appeared. The climax is yet to come: "Moses and Aaron then went inside the Tent of Meeting. When they came out, they blessed the people, and the Presence of Adonai appeared to all the people." What happens in this moment that evokes God's presence in the Sanctuary?

Rabbi Ciment's message is apparently based on Rashi's commentary. Rashi imagines that, "when Aaron perceived that all the sacrifices had been offered and the rites performed, and yet the *Shechinah* [God's indwelling Presence,] had not descended for Israel...he was uneasy in mind and said, 'I feel certain that the Holy Blessed One is angry with me.'" Aaron has reason to worry, given his central role in building the Golden Calf. Rashi continues, "He therefore said to Moses: 'My brother Moses! Do you...know that I have [offered all these sacrifices] at your bidding and yet I have been put to shame!' Moses immediately entered with him, and they offered the prayer, and the *Shechinah* descended for Israel."ⁱⁱⁱ

Perhaps Aaron is right. God may be punishing him, withholding the Divine Presence from the Children of Israel because of the part he played in building the Golden Calf. Instead of focusing on the relationship between God and Aaron, though, Rabbi Ciment focuses on the interaction between the two brothers, Moses and Aaron. Noting that the Torah is full of brothers who despise each other, with disastrous results—Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, to name only a few—Rabbi Ciment suggests that God's Presence is a gift to Moses and Aaron for continuing to work together as loving brothers in service of God, despite what might have been a rift over a particularly egregious sin. The brothers may be compared to Pakistani and Bengali Muslims, whose people were at war decades ago, but who now sit down to break bread and to experience the presence of God together.

Rabbi Chaim ibn Attar, an eighteenth century Hassidic commentator from Morocco, teaches that Aaron and Moses each represents "a different nuance and spirituality." Aaron demonstrates the soul-trait of *chesed*, loving-kindness, while Moses exemplifies *g'vurah*, or strength.^{iv} In the instance of the Golden Calf, Aaron exhibits excess *chesed*, loving the people so much that he accedes to their idolatrous wishes. By contrast, Moses reacts with surplus *g'vurah*, so much strength that he shatters the tablets of the Ten Commandments. Only together—

with Aaron balancing Moses’s strength and Moses serving as a counterweight to Aaron’s tendency to go easy—can they bring God’s presence into the people’s midst.

The critical verse in this week’s Torah portion says that Moses and Aaron “blessed the people,” and then, “the Presence of Adonai appeared to all the people.”^v It does not, however, say what blessing they offered. Rashi theorizes that Moses offers words that would appear in the Book of Psalms, “May the beauty of Adonai our God be upon us.”^{vi} Rashi understands that prayer to mean, “May it be God’s will that the *Shechinah* [God’s indwelling presence,] may rest upon the work of your hands.”^{vii} “**Your** hands” in this case means Aaron’s hands, so Moses is asking God to respond to the sacrificial rites his brother has conducted. Rashi imagines that Moses then adds, “My brother Aaron is more worthy and excellent than I am, so that through his sacrifices and ministrations the *Shechinah* will rest upon you, and you will thereby know that the Omnipresent God has chosen him to bring the Divine Presence upon the people.”^{viii}

We can learn from the works of both commentators, Rashi and Chaim ibn Attar, though they lived on opposite sides of the Mediterranean and in different eras, separated by more than six hundred years. Moses recognizes the value in the *chesed*, the loving-kindness, his brother demonstrates, positing that his brother is more worthy than he. Moses’s humility, his ability to value a virtue that his brother possesses more than he does, invites God’s presence.

We live at an era of destructive divisiveness in our society, around the world, across the United States, and here in Arkansas—and some would say, even within our congregation. We can all learn from Moses and Aaron, each valuing the virtues of the other. We may find that God is in places of human interaction across lines of difference, just as the unity of Pakistani and Bengali Muslims evokes the presence of God at Madina Institute. Then, we may find God, right here in this Sanctuary, and wherever we gather for good.

Amen.

ⁱ Leviticus 9:4.

ⁱⁱ Leviticus 9:23.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rashi to Leviticus 9:23.

^{iv} Or HaChaim to Leviticus 9:23.

^v Leviticus 9:23.

^{vi} Psalms 90:17.

^{vii} Rashi to Leviticus 9:23.

^{viii} Rashi to Leviticus 9:23.