

Exodus 32:1-14

I follow Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg on Twitter because she is an amazing thinker— theologically and politically. Something she wrote recently seemed so important and interesting that I decided everybody had to hear it. I have my own thoughts that I want to share about this, but her essay is long. So I decided I'll share her essayⁱ in its entirety today, and follow up in my next sermon with what it sparked in me—and perhaps people here will also have thoughts they want to share.

Let's talk about trauma, terror and the Golden Calf for a moment, shall we? And, of course, what's happening today.

OK, let's start back in Egypt. The Israelites were in Egypt for 400+ years, enslaved for part of that time, at least a couple of generations--infant Moses was part of Pharaoh's genocidal scheme, which he started only after his oppression with hard labor didn't stop the Israelites from flourishing as much as they could under the circumstances.

The Israelites, who only ever knew enslavement, are present for the terror of the 10 plagues, the breathlessness of that preparation to flee. The Red Sea parting.

It's a lot.

Then, after 7 weeks of liminality in the desert, we get to Mt. Sinai, and Revelation.

Which is... also a lot.

"Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke, for God had come down upon it in fire; the smoke rose like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled violently. The blare of the horn grew louder and louder. As Moses spoke, God answered him in thunder..... All the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the blare of the horn and the mountain smoking; and

when the people saw it, they fell back and stood at a distance. 'You speak to us,' they said to Moses, 'and we will obey; but let not God speak to us, lest we die.'"

This divine revelation is SO MUCH, and the Israelites are down for Moses going and getting Torah and telling them what's in it, but need a break from all this raw theophany.

This is a useful time to note that Moses had a unique experience vis a vis his Israelite brethren.

He was raised in Pharaoh's palace, remember?

By the time he was an adult he knew he was an Israelite, but he didn't grow up with the same experiences of oppression and trauma.

There's a lot to unpack in what it means to have a leader for liberation who isn't carrying the same trauma as you. His lived experiences were so different from EVERYONE ELSE'S. So Moses, the guy who'd told them that getting out of Egypt was possible, who got them out of Egypt, who arranged with God for all the stuff to happen in the desert these last 7 weeks, that guy--he goes all the way up Mt. Sinai, leaves everyone down there at the base, waiting.

And so now the Israelites have been taken out of Egypt, had a profound but terrifying experience, and then their leader bounces, and they're supposed to just... chill.

And it's one week. Another week. Still no Moses. Waiting.

Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky talk about leadership a lot. They talk about how people want authority to show up and provide protection, direction and order.

And how real (adaptive, they call it) leadership is about helping people face loss, to see and accept that now won't be like then.

They talk about the difference between technical and adaptive challenges. Technical

fixes are ones where the solution can be known; you maybe need to call in the right expert, but there's clarity to be had about what to do. Adaptive challenges are ones that put us onto entirely new terrain. Nobody had ever solved this problem before, not in this way, with these factors. Or maybe it's just new terrain for us, but there's an existential change in there, something that alters our identity.

So now the guy that the the Israelites had been looking to for protection, direction and order... is up on top of Mt. Sinai. And he's been gone. And the Israelites are no longer in the horrific, oppressive, but familiar space of Egypt. They're in the desert, alone. With no way to make sense of everything that's just happened.

And who's been left in charge? Aaron. Who, unlike Moses, did not grow up in a palace. He is every bit as traumatized as the people he is supposed to be leading, he is also dealing with and processing the same stuff they are.

The people say, "Let's make a god who can lead us, who can provide protection, direction and order, because who knows if Moses is even coming back ever."

Aaron: OK!

He is longing for this too. They make the golden calf and say, "This is the god who took us out of Egypt!" they just transfer all their FEELINGS onto this object.

That may be like the objects they saw worshiped in Egypt. Familiar, known. Not like all that terrifying thunder and lighting and revelation business that was new and scary! And then led to us being left alone! And scared! This? This we know.

It was an attempt to create a technical solution to an adaptive problem. They could not handle all the loss and change, they wanted a quick fix, a known answer to this problem. But

this was an adaptive challenge--one that put them on entirely new terrain.

And there was a leadership void. There was nobody there to help them bridge this loss, to make sense of how profoundly different today was than yesterday, to hold their fears about what wouldn't be the same. So they rushed in to make today just like yesterday. But it was false.

Just like the people rushing back to their regular lives, in total denial of the pandemic and what it means for us are doing. Yes.

Cases in many places are skyrocketing. Because of the determination to reopen hair salons and the like, because of refusals to wear masks. Because of Memorial Day pool parties and the determination to force things back to normal, when they aren't yet, when a deadly disease is still on the loose without vaccine or reasonable cure. Because of letting the rhetoric of individual rights trample any consciousness that ever could exist of care for the collective. It is not the Israelites' fault that they were left without the leadership they needed. Aaron was just as panicked and traumatized as they were. He did not have the necessary tools to navigate his own feelings about this moment, let alone help his whole community with theirs. Sometimes in the leadership vacuum, real leadership emerges to help move people in the correct next direction.

I might suggest that this round of BLM protests are that--a response to a leadership void that has moved the country to a bold new vision of what might be possible.

And sometimes it becomes the golden calf--the fetishization of the familiar and the known at the expense of everything we know to be true--the Israelites had crossed the Red Sea! THEY EXPERIENCED REVELATION!

We KNOW people will die if we don't take precautions!

We need leadership that is brave and bold and that holds the pain and fear that people are feeling and helps them to see a vision of what's possible that is new, that is the change that is needed--that is not clinging to a past that will never again be.

How can we hold each other in this space of unknowns?

What do we need to do to let go of who we have been so that we can become who we still yet can be?

How can we make our decisions about our future from a place of vision, not fear?

Even if we don't have all the answers now, even if there are some answers that cannot yet be known, how can we use the ways in which this time invites us to expand our understanding of what's possible?

How can we integrate the best of what we know to be true into how we live?

[me again] These are such important questions. They require us to slow down and live with them, to resist the temptation to make quick technical fixes. The situation is urgent, but the quickest fixes are the wrongest ones, as Aaron and the Israelites found out to their grief. We have to tolerate the uncertainty for as long as it takes, while also holding fast to these certainties:

- 1) We come to know God through the vulnerable and oppressed.
- 2) God is *for* the poor.
- 3) God always provides a way forward.

Let us pray:

God, when the "what-ifs" become overwhelming, help us to stay present in your presence. When our worlds shrink to what we can manage, deepen our capacities to manage just a bit

more. Ground us in resilience and in your revolutionary patience, so that we all, together, the whole human family, move toward making the world as you intend it to be. Amen.

¹ Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, Facebook, June 28, 2020.