

Talia Feldberg

D'var Torah **KI TISA**

“Last night I was awakened from a fitful sleep shortly after two o’clock in the morning, by a shrill, sibilant, faceless voice. I couldn’t make it out at first, in the dark bedroom, and I said ‘I’m sorry, you will have to talk a little louder’. And the voice said to me ‘I want you to tell the people the truth, not an easy thing to do, because the people don’t want to know the truth.’ And I said ‘You’re kidding. What should I know about the truth.’ But the voice said to me, ‘Don’t worry about the truth. I will put the words in your mouth.’ And I said, ‘What is this, the burning bush? I’m not Moses’. And the voice said to me, ‘And I’m not God, what has that got to do with it?’

So says Peter Finch as Howard Beale, the crazed news anchor billed as the “mad prophet of the airways”, in the film “Network”. Although Howard Beale may not actually be talking to God, Moses, in my Torah portion, does. Not only does he talk to God, he is allowed an extremely rare opportunity: seeing God. Actually, to be perfectly accurate, God says, and I quote “You cannot see my face, for man cannot see my face 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; but my face must not be seen.” Reading this, I immediately thought back to Hebrew School when I was small. One of the first lessons I learned was that God was everywhere. There is obviously something logically wrong here. If God is everywhere, he must be invisible. If he is invisible how does Moses see him? Then if Moses can see him and God is everywhere, then shouldn’t everyone be able to see him?

Then there’s the other possibility. That Moses doesn’t actually see God. That instead of seeing a giant, robe-clad back, he simply sees evidence that God has been there. Perhaps the flowers are in greater bloom, the trees taller, the sun brighter. Perhaps the ground is dry and the grass is on fire (remember, God has just been a burning bush). And maybe nothing supernatural even happened, maybe Moses simply felt he was seeing proof of God previously passing by. But I think we can apply this principle to our own lives. Maybe we can’t see some people. Maybe they’re dead, or they live too far away. But we can see the evidence of them. Not simply in photographs or stories, but in how they’ve made a difference in things that affect us. And even if there’s someone who you can’t stand being around, think of how they’ve affected your life, and even if you wish they didn’t exist, try to find some way that they’ve changed your life for the better. And so it goes with God. Maybe you can’t see God, and maybe you don’t want to, but you can see how belief in God has helped things.

Before I continue, I want to get one thing straight. Whenever I say “God”, I’m using mental quotation marks. I’m not talking about a man in the sky with a beard who controls everything. I’m not talking about a Hindu god or a Buddhist god or even a Christian god. I’m talking about the concept of a higher power, and as we see it in the Jewish Religion. God in Judaism is the single supreme ruler, who created the universe and governs it. Now, I’m not saying that all Jews believe that. Your religion, at least for the first part of your life, is what you were born in to, not what you believe. God, I think, is something subjective and highly personal. Everyone views God as something different. Some do consider him the controller and creator of everything. Some don’t believe, or are unsure of, the existence of anything resembling a supreme being, and believe that things are dictated by the laws of science and chance. And some don’t believe in the literal existence of God at all. They don’t actually believe an old man with a beard lives in the sky and decides everything that happens. They do think, however, that there is something, real or not, to blame when things go wrong, to thank when something good happens, or to ask when you need a little help or something special.

Which leads me to another question, one that has been baffling people for centuries. Did man create God, or did God create man? Perhaps God was meant to help people cope, to give them faith and strength. Maybe he was meant as a metaphor for things we can’t control. Perhaps asking Him for help won’t literally do anything, but it can give comfort to know that you have done as much as you can to help make something that is out of your control happen. I know that that’s how I think of God. I don’t

think there is a supreme being or ruler. I have, however, in moments of frustration asked my version of God for help. I think that the world was created in several million years, not seven days, but when I am grateful that something did or did not happen I thank God. Albert Einstein once said, "I believe in a God, who reveals Himself in the lawful harmony of the world, not in a God Who concerns Himself with the fate and the doings of mankind." I agree with that completely. When I see a war, or a natural disaster, or even if something perfectly fine happens, I don't say "God caused this". The natural course of events caused it, or else it simply happened. But when I see things generally moving along pleasantly, I can see God in that.

And maybe God also reveals himself, or we imagine him, in everyday things. Take, for example, the Mona Lisa. One obviously can't worship the painting as God, because that is idolatry, and according to biblical law, a capital crime. And obviously God didn't put it there, Leonardo da Vinci did. But doesn't it seem like there is an element of the divine in the fact that a mere person, albeit a highly talented person, can take paint, and canvas, and make something so beautiful? But that's an obvious example. The Hasidic rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotsk, says "He who cannot see God everywhere cannot see God anywhere". So take, for example, a chair, a simple wooden chair. Obviously God didn't place the chair wherever it is. A tree was planted, grew up, and was cut down. It was then made into that chair. But, however clichéd, doesn't it seem like there is a bit of the mystical in the fact that a tiny little seed can become a big tree, and ultimately a chair, an extremely useful item that can be used in a variety of ways. And I suppose that's what The Kotsker Rebbe means. If you can't see divinity in both a simple everyday object and a great work of art, then you can't really see God in anything. And maybe that's what they were trying to teach me in Hebrew School. God really *is* everywhere. So the next time you see something beautiful, or even something not, try to see God in it. Because you know what? He's probably there.

And now for the thank you's. First of all, thank you to my madricha, Shira Lissek, for being so incredibly patient, and teaching me all the Hebrew you just heard, which is a lot harder than it might seem. Also, thank you to Rabbi Niles for helping me with my speech, and to all my friends and family for being here today. And most importantly, thank you to my parents for being supportive, planning this whole thing, and especially for bugging me to practice my haftorah.