

Postcards from the Edge of the Promised Land

“Conversation and Covenant”

[Exodus 19:1-6](#)

In the midst of all these other celebrations of the day, we return to *Postcards from the Edge of the Promised Land*—stories from the long and bumpy road that led the Israelites from slavery in Egypt on their way to the promised land, toward freedom.

Today we come, as you just heard, to a chapter that begins about three months after Moses and the people have been out in the wilderness. They’ve crossed the Red Sea, which had seemed like an impossible obstacle. They’ve discovered that somehow, despite all their worries, their absolute sureness that they would die of starvation, enough food appears every day. Fresh water seems to be buried deep in the desert’s rocks. They are further from home than they’ve ever been before, and they’re not sure where they’re headed or how long it’s going to take to get there; but they have not been abandoned.

They come this day to the base of Mount Sinai. The people make camp there, and Moses goes up the mountain. He hears God say, ‘Tell the people this: You have seen how I protected you. I carried you on eagles’ wings. I brought you out of slavery, to be my people, my treasure. Listen: I have something in mind for you. Keep covenant with me; be my partners. And if you can do that, I will make you a kingdom of priests, a special people who can bring to me the concerns of the whole earth. A holy nation.’ Moses comes down from the mountain and repeats God’s words to the people. And of course, they love it. They’re in. This is easy. They answer immediately: ‘Everything God says, we will do.’

Good. All set. Moses goes back up the mountain. I’ll be gone forty days, he says—which means, in the symbolic language of the Bible, *a long time*. ‘Got it,’ the people say. But as the days wear on, they get anxious, nervous. Was that supposed to be forty days *and* nights? Forty business days, or including weekends? Where is that Moses? He’s taking too long. Maybe he’s gone away—just him and God by themselves. Maybe he’s discovered a spa, and he’s just hanging out there. Why can’t he send a message?

But Moses hasn’t forgotten them. He’s up on the mountain, in intense conversation with God. Something important is happening. All those forty days Moses was up on Mt. Sinai with him, God was talking, giving to Moses—to pass on to the people—himself. God is hardly ever that talkative. God gives Moses the Law. The Ten Commandments. He pours himself out, says to Moses, ‘This is what I have in mind. This is how you will be my people, how you will live as my reflection, my image, on earth.’

Until this point, all the gods that people had known, in any religion in very civilization on earth, had been identified by a territory. There was a god of Egypt, a different god in China. Each place had its own deity, and each god was powerful only in its own place. Now, these people, the Israelites, would carry God with them. The God of all people would be everywhere this people went.

At the end of the forty days, when God finished talking to Moses on Mt. Sinai, God gave Moses two stone tablets bearing the covenant—the law. The letters, the words, the Bible says, were “*written with the finger of God.*” (Exodus 31:18)

In the meantime, back at camp, the people have gotten restless. ‘This Moses fellow’ they say—as if he’s suddenly someone they barely know—seems like he isn’t coming back. Aaron, Moses’ brother, has been left in charge. ‘OK,’ Aaron says. ‘I have an idea. Give me your gold—your rings, and earrings, whatever you can find. And he takes all that gold, melts it down, and shapes it into a golden calf. A statue of a cow. Happy?’ he asks—and they are. The people feel suddenly, ridiculously, reassured.

A statue—an idol—is much less demanding than ‘that Moses fellow’. It stays in one place, where they can see it. It doesn’t keep saying things that make life hard: challenging them, pushing them to keep moving, telling them to trust a God they can’t see. Actually, the statue of the calf reminds them a little of home, how things used to be, in Egypt. They can just stop here, rest a little. And they do. Around the golden calf they do the same rituals they had used to worship God. They eat and drink. Have a good time. They dance. As though this is enough. As though this idol made out of melted gold is all the God they ever needed—something to reassure them and make them comfortable.

Back up on the mountain, God can see what’s happening. ‘You better get down there,’ God says to Moses. ‘It’s really bad. I’m seriously thinking about blowing everything up and starting over.’ Moses pleads with God on behalf of the people. ‘Don’t do that,’ he says. ‘They’re anxious. They’re afraid. Look at how much you’ve got invested in them. You brought them out of Egypt. You got them through the Red Sea. You promised that you would bless them—remember? Don’t give up on them now.’

God listens to Moses, loves him for his loyalty to his people. God changes his mind. ‘OK,’ he says. ‘You go.’

Moses went down the mountain, sure everything was going to be all right. But he hadn’t seen what God saw. When he gets to the bottom and sees that the people are *dancing*, he’s furious. He thought that when they saw him they’d be ashamed of their impatience, conflicted by their faithlessness. But they’re not. They’re *dancing*—as though no one has been harmed by their disloyalty.

It had to be a moment of terrible loneliness for Moses. The people he had argued with God for, begged God to forgive. His people, and they are not with him. They don’t actually trust God at all. They don’t even think they need God.

Moses, in a rage, smashes to the ground the stone tablets he had just carried off the mountain.

Imagine the moment. The silence. The shock. The complete brokenness. The stones with God’s words, written by God’s own finger, are lying on the ground, shattered into a thousand pieces.

The story of the golden calf is, in some way, the story of Israel’s original sin. Just as Christian theologians have reached back to the story of Adam and Eve’s disobedience in the Garden of Eden to explain why humans can’t seem to get things right, Jewish writers go back to this moment, when the people God saved for freedom were ready to replace God with an idol.

Two important things happen in the next moments, the next days. In the ancient text, it says that Moses throws the golden calf in the fire, grinds it into a powder, scatters the powder in water and makes the people drink it. It sounds gross, but think with me about the symbolism. Taking something into your body—eating, drinking—is how we internalize the things we remember most deeply. We just said that a

few minutes ago at communion—remember? Jesus said, “Every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, remember me.” Don’t forget this moment, Moses seems to be saying to the people: you will need this memory of how easy it is to abandon the real God for something flimsier, something that is no God.

And then Moses trudges back up the mountain, and God gives Moses the law again—speaks again the Ten Commandments. Only this time, God says to Moses, ‘You go find the pieces of stone. And you write the words down with your own hand.’ Maybe God too has learned something about how his creation learns best; that their obedience follows the law they’ve had a hand in creating and communicating.

When Moses comes down the mountain again, the people are chastened, and they are ready to move again. They will carry the two new stone tablets—the symbolic presence of God with them—in a the Ark, a big, ceremonial wooden box built just for that purpose. Into that box they put not only the new tablets, but something else: the broken pieces they have picked up from the first stones, the tablets that got smashed—as though those broken pieces too are precious.

The *midrash* says they did this so that they will never forget that brokenness and wholeness co-exist side by side. In the world. In God’s heart. It’s the same reason a Jewish bride and groom shatter a glass under the wedding canopy, and why every Passover Seder begins by breaking a whole piece of matzah. It’s the same truth that led Jesus to say, as he broke a loaf of bread, “My body, broken. Remember me this way.”

We too are inclined to abandon truth when it seems like God is taking too long to make us brilliant and successful. We construct idols to make us feel better about ourselves—small gods, programs for our own happiness. And sometimes our idols sneak up on us. We get used to things as they are. We lean on them; we trust them; and soon we think we cannot be whole without them. My family. My church. My pastor. But the thing about idols is that they’re not ever big enough or strong enough to support us. They were never intended to be gods. They will always disappoint us. They too get broken.

We need a bigger God.

The real God seems not to be thrown off by brokenness. No matter how many times we turn our backs and set up something small and more controllable in God’s place, no matter how far we wander off-track, no matter how unreliable we are as partners and lovers, God seems to be in it with us for the long haul. Standing by, ready to write words of life on our hearts again. To hold the broken pieces right there next to the beautiful new ones. To love us, forgive us, welcome us back.

And every time, we will be raised again from the places we have fallen, healed in the spots where we have been broken. Made strong enough to sing as we have sung this morning—with gratitude and hope in *God’s* promise.

Resources for these sermons:

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation, Exodus: The Book of Redemption*, Maggid Books and The Orthodox Union, 2010

Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus*, Schocken Books, 2001