

Parashat BaMidbar 5780

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There is a story of Rav Zusya, the brother of the famed Rav Elimelech of Lishensk and a student of the great Magid of Mezeritch.

Once Zusya prayed to God: "Lord, I love you so much, but I do not fear you enough! Lord, I love you so much, but I do not fear you enough! Let me stand in awe of you like your angels, who are penetrated by your awe-inspiring name." And God heard his prayer, and his name penetrated the hidden heart of Zusya as it does those of the angels. But Zusya crawled under the bed like a little dog, and animal fear shook him until he howled: "Lord, let me love you like Zusya again!" And God heard him this time also.¹

Zusya wanted to fear God, but he could not handle the fear that coursed through his body when he feared God the way that the angels feared God. We need to be careful for what we wish for. Sometimes it is better to leave beautiful things hidden, and allow the imagination to take its course than to allow everything to be revealed.

In this week's Torah portion, we not only get a detailed accounting of every person in the Israelite Camp, but we learn the jobs of all of the subtribes of the Levites. The Levites were responsible for carrying and servicing all of the objects that were used for ritual.

The Torah goes through great details about how the sons of Aaron needed to dismantle the objects of the sanctuary and cover them with the special cloths. When it comes time to move the objects from place to place the subtribe of the family of Kehat will come to carry them away. The Torah contains a mysterious verse:

(ולא יבאו לראות כבלע את הקודש ומתו: פ)

But let not [the Kohathites] go inside and witness the dismantling of the sanctuary, lest they die.

There is an unusual word there *k'bal'a*. It is usually translated as "dismantling". But a more accurate translation is "as one swallows". So, a better translation might be: do not allow them to go inside and see – as one swallows – the holy, and die.

Some of the commentators say that this means even for an instant. I imagine this to describe a gulp. A gasp of breath. The inexplicable noise and reaction we make when we are shocked.

After all, the Torah doesn't say *ha-mishkan* – the sanctuary, it says *ha-kodesh* “the holy.” In other words, if the Kohathites peek under the covers and see the dismantled pieces of the tabernacle, they will have seen the holy in an unholy way. It will be so shocking that it will cause them to gulp, gasp for breath and die.

After all, the Tabernacle is simply a bunch of hardware, wood, cloth, and metal. The priests themselves, though holy, were human beings. They were each flawed.

The Kohathites are human like everyone else, and they need holiness in their lives. Were they to see dismantled sanctuary, they could lose their faith completely and die a spiritual death.

The fact is, we all need blue cloths in our lives. It is rare that any of us have a role model who hasn't teetered on his or her pedestal. It is rare that there is a religious space or place that is without blemish. But we need to remember that all of places and people that facilitate holiness are just that: facilitators of something greater.

The Kohathites didn't peek under the blue cloth for another reason. They needed to be able to worship when the Tabernacle was assembled. If they peeked under the cloth, they would not be able ever see the Tabernacle as the Tabernacle again. The next time they would see it in its greatness, they would only be able to see it as a collection of parts – never as a whole. Instead of saying to themselves: this is the place where we worked together as an entire community to create a dwelling place for God's presence, they would say: that's a board, that's a pole, that's a curtain.

The hardest endeavor, though, is to have both. To be able to see the places of sanctity that are broken apart, and not lose faith in the potential of the holy. Can we find ways to see in the people we admire, in the spaces we appreciate, the communities that we love the imperfections – and not gulp and die? Is there a way we can peek under the blue cloth and still see the holy? In a world of imperfections, this is the challenge for the spiritual person. To see

the whole, and appreciate the holy contained within. Even when it seems to be broken into pieces.

¹ Buber, Martin. Tales of the Hasidim . Kindle Edition.