



Between Absence and Emptiness

R. Tali Adler – adler@hadar.org

Parashat Tetzaveh 5785

Tetzaveh is a *parashah* of absence.

While Moshe has been a constant presence since the beginning of Shemot, in Tetzaveh, Moshe's name is not mentioned a single time.

The Ba'al ha-Turim¹ tells us that this is deliberate:

קיצור בעל הטורים שמות כז:כ

לא הזכיר משה בזה הסדר משא"כ בכל החומש שמשעה שנולד משה אין סדר שלא הוזכר בה... והטעם משום שאמר מחני נא מספרך אשר כתבת וקללת חכם אפי' על תנאי באה ונתקיים בזה.

Abridged Ba'al ha-Turim to Shemot 27:20

This is the only *parashah* in the Torah since Moshe first appears in which he is not mentioned... This is in fulfillment of the curse that he proclaimed against himself, “[And if not,] blot me out from Your book” (Shemot 32:32). Although this curse was conditional

¹ R. Ya'akov ben Asher (c. 1270-1340), the son of the Rosh, was the extremely influential halakhic writer of the Arba'ah Turim, from Germany and then Spain. He also wrote a Torah commentary that often focuses on the mystical meaning.



upon God's refusal to forgive the people for the sin of the [Golden] Calf, the curse of a scholar is fulfilled in some way, even when made conditionally.

The Ba'al ha-Turim, explaining Moshe's name's absence from this *parashah*, points to Moshe's conversation with God in the *parashah* that will follow this one, when He will threaten to destroy the Jewish people for the sin of the Golden Calf. There, Moshe will give God an ultimatum:

שמות לב:לא-לב

³¹וַיָּשָׁב מֹשֶׁה אֶל ה' וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנִי חָטָא הָעָם הַזֶּה חָטָא גְדוֹלָה וַיַּעֲשׂוּ לָהֶם אֱלֹהִי זָהָב: ³²וְעַתָּה אִם תִּשָּׂא חָטָאתָם וְאִם-אֵין מִחְנִי נָא מִסִּפְרְךָ אֲשֶׁר כָּתַבְתָּ:

Shemot 31:31-32

³¹Moshe went back to God and said, "Alas, this people is guilty of a great sin in making for themselves a god of gold. ³²Now, if You will forgive their sin [well and good]; but if not, erase me from the record which You have written!"

Moshe's ultimatum is a statement of values: if you do this thing, if you destroy the people I love, remove my name from your Torah, because I want no part of it. God relents, but according to the Ba'al ha-Turim, the mark of Moshe's protest remains in this prior *parashah*, that actually precedes their sin.

The Ba'al ha-Turim's answer, however, leaves us with another question. Even if Moshe's name must be absent from one *parashah* as a result of his ultimatum, why did God choose Tetzaveh to be the *parashah* of absence? Tetzaveh is a counterintuitive choice in that it comes before Moshe's ultimatum. We might have expected the *parashah* chosen to be one that immediately follows the ultimatum in order to show that it is a consequence of Moshe's



words. Why instead remove Moshe's name from this *parashah*, the *parashah* before the sin of the Golden Calf and the ultimatum that follows?

Perhaps, in some way, the Torah is teaching us not to make the mistake our ancestors made when they realize Moshe's absence:

שמות לב:א

וַיֵּרָא הָעָם כִּי בִשְׁשׁ מִשָּׁה לָרֶדֶת מִן הָהָר וַיִּקְהֵל הָעָם עַל אַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו קוּם עֲשֵׂה לָנוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר יֵלְכוּ
לִפְנֵינוּ כִּי זֶה מִשָּׁה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלָנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם לֹא יָדְעָנוּ מָה הָיָה לוֹ:

Shemot 32:1

When the people saw that Moshe was so long in coming down from the mountain, the people gathered against Aharon and said to him, "Come, make us a god who shall go before us, for that fellow Moshe—the man who brought us from the land of Egypt—we do not know what has happened to him."

The sin of the Golden Calf, the sin in the wake of which Moshe will issue his ultimatum, is born from the people's inability to cope with Moshe's absence. Panicked, they immediately assume that Moshe's absence means that they have been abandoned, and look for a replacement.

In giving us a *parashah* without Moshe's name immediately before Ki Tissa, the *parashah* in which we read about the sin of the Golden Calf, the Torah allows us to enter into our ancestor's experience. We read this *parashah* and notice that Moshe is missing, just as they experienced Moshe's absence.

This time, however, the absence is different, and that difference lies in what the Ba'al ha-Turim tells us: that Moshe's absence is not a sign of abandonment, but of love. Moshe's name is



missing precisely because he loves us, and is willing to fight God for us. In Moshe's absence, we find, stronger than ever, Moshe's love.

Maybe the Torah is teaching us what our ancestors, waiting at the foot of Sinai, did not understand: Yes, Moshe will be late coming down the mountain. Yes, you will worry, and you will miss him, and you will be scared. And even when he comes down, you will live with dread, because you know that one day he will once again ascend a mountain, and this time he will never come down.

But remember that absence is not emptiness. Understand, when you read this *parashah*, that even though he is not mentioned, Moshe is more present here than ever before. Know that he is there in the spaces between the words, remembering you, fighting for you, daring for you. Remember that even in his absence he is there, loving you beyond what the words of the Torah can express.

Remember, most of all, that even when you do not see him; even on the days when his name is not on the page or on your lips, you carry him, always, in your heart.

