

College as Standing at Sinai

Yom Kippur, 2001/5762

For years, I did not understand Yom Kippur. *Sin* I understood..., but it made no sense to me that endlessly sitting and reading and going hungry were good ways of dealing with sin. And, as far as I knew, there was not even a good story for this holy day, to relieve the boredom.

As it turns out, there **is** a Biblical story associated with Yom Kippur—a famous one, and fascinating— and that’s where I would like to begin tonight.

According to ancient tradition, Yom Kippur marks the final resolution of the story of the Golden Calf. Here is that story, in brief: Our Israelite ancestors came out of Egypt 3,000 years ago in the spring time—at Passover. They left behind their lives as slaves in Egypt, passing miraculously through the waters of the Red Sea, and emerged into the vast, empty wilderness of Sinai. They wandered without road or map, guided only by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. And after two months, they arrived at the foot of Mount Sinai. Gathered around the foot of the mountain, the entire people saw the mountain begin to tremble and smoke, and, in the presence of this active volcano, our people had a collective, unforgettable direct experience of God... speaking to them out of the fire, the words of the Ten Commandments.

Moses went up the mountain, and according to tradition, there he received the entire Torah in a mystical face-to-face encounter with God. Moses was alone with God for forty days and then descended the mountain, carrying the two stone tablets upon which God had carved the Ten Commandments.

Meanwhile, down below, while Moses was gone, the people were unable to wait, and they gathered around Moses’ brother Aaron and demanded that he make for them, “a god who will go before us.” Aaron saw the people turning into an ugly mob, and then when his comrade Hur tried to reason with them, they killed him. Seeing this, Aaron took their gold jewelry and melted down and cast it into a mold in the shape of a golden calf. When the people saw the calf, they cried out, “This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!” The next morning, they rose up early, offered sacrifices and then ate and drank and began to dance. The text doesn’t state it clearly, but legend tells us that in addition to this dancing there was sex.

It is at this point that Moses arrives. Seeing the calf and the dancing, he hurls the tablets of the commandments to the ground, smashing them, and then he grinds the calf into powder, mixes it with water and forces the Israelites to drink it. Then follows a forty-day period of angry silence... and then another forty days of gradual reconciliation. The end of that long period of reconciliation was this day—Yom Kippur.

When later generations of Jews read this story, they were amazed that the incident of the Golden Calf could have happened so soon after the awesome encounter with God at Sinai. The moment at Sinai is seen as absolutely the *greatest* moment in our entire 4,000 year history—the moment when *all* of us, all at once, experienced enlightenment. Our minds were opened; our previous false ideas and beliefs fell away. We stood there in a state of perfect receptivity, and we heard the word of God. It was, in one primary metaphor, a wedding—the beginning of the marriage of God and the Jewish people. And so it is bewildering that the *worst* moment in our religious history—in which the entire people seems to *abandon* God, turning to idolatry, murder, and promiscuous sex—takes

place almost immediately after the enormous moment of enlightenment at the mountain. As the ancient rabbi Ulla put it: “like a bride who commits adultery while still under her wedding canopy.”

The very best moment and the very worst moment in our relationship with God happen virtually simultaneously! And then Yom Kippur comes along, a few months later, and with it, the decision to carry on in spite of the failure... to continue the marriage, even after the perfect trust has been broken.

Now I have another story to tell. This one happened in Isla Vista, last September... at just about this time of year. This one is not myth and not rumor... just the facts. It was a typical weekend night in Isla Vista. Thousands of students were out on the streets, roving about, going from house to house, from party to party. In one particular house, the drinking had started hours several hours earlier and a Santa Barbara City College freshman wandered in and challenged the guys there to a drinking contest. Without going into all the details, they ended up force-feeding him shots of rum, stripping him naked, writing on him with white-out, urinating on him, sexually abusing him and finally left him on a couch out on the street, covered with garbage. He was found early the next morning and taken to the hospital, where his blood alcohol tested at .36, four times the level at which it is illegal to drive an automobile.

All of this was done here in Isla Vista one year ago, by eight guys of college age and seen by approximately 25 to 30 people. We know about it because it was all filmed on a videotape, which was delivered to the police in June, after having floated around Isla Vista all year long. On the video, some of the people are heard to say, “that’s not right.” But no one called 911. When the video surfaced, and the story broke, a female neighbor commented to a reporter that she was really surprised, because they were basically nice guys.

I have chosen these two stories to tell tonight to make the point to the students here—the heart and soul of this holy congregation—that you are in a Sinai situation. Sinai is the place to which our ancestors came after moving out of the strictly limited, highly structured, life in Egypt and out into the uncharted wilderness. At Sinai, our people came the closest we have ever come to God. . . and at Sinai we fell the furthest we ever have from God.

Of course I am not suggesting that your parents are Egyptian Pharaohs, or that your high schools were slave labor camps. But you *have* recently departed from a world of structure, limits and constraints... into a world of unlimited options.

And I am not suggesting, either, that the university faculty here are either God or Moses... although a few may occasionally act as though they are. But a university is our society’s attempt to pass wisdom—which is just another name for Torah—to each new generation. If the university experience works properly, then just like Sinai, the process of teaching will include a volcanic shattering of some of your old ideas... an opening wide of your mind... and the gifting to you of the best voices of wisdom that humanity has produced. This is one half of the Sinai situation—the miraculous, once-in a-lifetime opening of the mind and encountering the voice of wisdom, the voice of God... in all its infinite variety, infinite complexity, infinite clarity and infinite compassion. This university, like all great universities, is our attempt to provide you—the students—with this encounter.

The other half of the Sinai situation, as I described it earlier, is here also. That is the world of the golden calf, in which basically good people turn—suddenly and mysteriously—into a faceless, ugly crowd. Even Aaron, the high priest of his generation, when faced with it, was too frightened to be a man. And, in the case of the freshman from City College, here in IV last fall, even the best of the crowd were too frightened, or too drunk, or too confused to call 911. This is not a normal situation; but it is the dark underside of the Sinai situation. I am regularly asked, by parents, by prospective students, by people in the community: is it a party school? My answer is: No more and no less than every major university in this country. 25 years ago, my friends and I partied at Harvard... partied hard. I wish we had partied less; it was time wasted. And at Mount Sinai, after the people offered sacrifices to the golden calf, it says explicitly that they sat down to eat and drink and then *vayakumu l'tsachek* which (and I think that Professor Garr will back me up on this), can be accurately translated as “they got up to party.” Even Mount Sinai became a party school, and we hear rumors—midrashim, legends and folklore—that the party around the golden calf was not a purely happy party. It included a lot of sex without love, and it even included murder. That it's the dark side of what it means to be a party school. It is the terrifying side of the Sinai situation.

So what is a person supposed to do, how is a person—and specifically a Jew—supposed to live in this Sinai situation? And what can a rabbi say to students who are living there?

The first, and perhaps most important message I have for you tonight is do not lose sight of the fact that you are...for these few sacred years...standing at Sinai. This is moment in your life when our society brings to your doorstep hundreds of the most brilliant teachers, in every conceivable field of knowledge, films, dance, music, and art from all over the globe, vast libraries filled with hundreds of thousands of books. Not to mention a beautiful new Jewish Student Center, brimming with activities. This is the accumulated wisdom and beauty and knowledge of our world. It is at your fingertips for these four or five years, and that is *it*. Then you are done. You'll never have this opportunity again. You are standing at Sinai: open your eyes, open your ears; open your mind. Accept this gift from those who have come before you.

The second thing I would offer you relates to the darker side of this Sinai situation, and that is a simple saying of Rabbi Hillel, who lived approximately 2,000 years ago. You can find it in Pirke Avot, or Ethics of the Fathers. Rabbi Hillel used to say, *b'makom sheh ein anashim, hishtadel lih'yot ish*. “In a place where there are no human beings, strive to be a human being.” I won't say “don't party.” Of course, if you don't feel like it, *then* I would urge you to be true to yourself... and not to submit to peer pressure. But if you enjoy a party, then by all means, enjoy! Our Jewish tradition has nothing against the occasional, good, wild celebration. You need only think of Tevye's song “L'chayim!” in *Fiddler on the Roof*. . . God would like us to be joyful even when our hearts lie panting on the floor; how much more should we be joyful therefore when there's something to be joyful for?!!!! OK... but remember that you are standing at Sinai, and that the first party at Sinai turned ugly. There was sex without love. And even murder. If you find yourself in that situation, alone or with friends, please think of Rabbi Hillel: “In a place where there are no human beings, strive to be a human being.”

And finally, to return to this night of Yom Kippur: you know, in the story of the Golden Calf, when God sees the people turned into a drunken, sexually corrupt mob, He says to Moses: "That's it. I'm done. Give me some room and I'm going to incinerate those idiots!!" Luckily for all of us, Moses manages to calm God down... and finally, about three months later, gets God to say, "OK, let's try again."

It is entirely possible that some of you, maybe many of you, are going to wake up one morning during your time here and feel disgusted with yourself. I don't just mean hung-over. I mean sick at heart about something you did or did not do during the night before. All of us, if we live long enough, experience that intense regret... that desperate desire to turn the clock back.

Yom Kippur is a gift. Yom Kippur teaches. . . simply and honestly... the truth. Which is that we cannot turn the clock back, but we can go forward. With humility and with courage, we can turn toward God. We can face God's anger, and survive. And then, after some time to cool down, we will hear the word from God; "OK, let's try again."

Ken yehi ratson. May this be God's will.

Amen.