

MEGILLAH 31A*

WHEREVER YOU FIND THE STRENGTH OF THE HOLY ONE,
PRAISED BE GOD, YOU FIND GOD'S HUMILITY.

On Yom Kippur, we read "After the death" [Leviticus 16] and we conclude with "For thus said He who high aloft forever dwells" [Isaiah 57:15]. At Minhah, we read about forbidden relations [Leviticus 18] and we conclude with Jonah. Rabbi Yohanan said: "Wherever you find the strength of the Holy One, praised be God, you find God's humility." This is written in the Torah, repeated in the Prophets, and reiterated in the Writings. It is written in the Torah: "For the Lord your God is God supreme and Lord supreme" [Deuteronomy 10:17] and it says right after that "but upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow." It is repeated in the Prophets; "For thus said God who high aloft forever dwells, whose name is holy" [Isaiah 57:15] and it says right after "yet with the contrite and lowly in spirit." It is reiterated in the Writings, as it says: "Extol God who rides the clouds; the Lord is God's name" [Psalms 68:5] and it says right after that "the father of orphans, the champion of widows."

CONTEXT

In a discussion on which Torah reading is read and which haftarah is chanted on certain holidays, Rabbi Yohanan notes that each mention of God ("the Holy One, praised be God") extols not only God's strength but also God's humility and compassion for humanity. Thus the mention of the haftarah for Yom Kippur morning, taken from Isaiah and referring to God as high and mighty King, reminds Rabbi Yohanan of this rule: God's strength and humility are always intertwined in the biblical text. Rabbi Yohanan, being a master teacher and scholar, easily finds three verses where both God's strength and concern for people go hand-in-hand. These verses come from the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings - the three sections of the Hebrew Bible.

According to Rabbi Yohanan's Midrash, God is supreme in power and might, riding in the clouds, yet also humble - down to earth and caring for those human beings who need a champion for their cause. God's strength and accompanying kindness are written in Torah, repeated in Prophets, and reiterated in the Writings, proof positive that wherever we find the strength of the Holy One, we also find God's humility. Perhaps Rabbi Yohanan's words, and his attempt to expand our view of God's attributes, can help us refocus our view of greatness - not only God's, but also our own. If we are to follow God's ways and imitate God's attributes, then we have to understand real stature. True greatness is powerful, expansive and broad-based, yet it is also quiet and understated. Wherever there is strength, there should also be compassion.

The Tractate Megillah discusses not only the reading of the Megillah the scroll of Esther on Purim, but also many of the laws regarding the reading from the Torah (Five Books of Moses) and haftarah (readings from the Prophets on Shabbat and holidays), The Mishnah preceding this section of Gemara outlines the Torah readings for holidays like Passover and Rosh Hashanah. The Gemara expands upon the theme, giving not only the Yom Kippur morning Torah reading (from Leviticus 16) but also the haftarah (from Isaiah 57).

QUESTIONS

1. How do you define greatness?
2. How does Rabbi Yohanan define greatness?
3. In what ways can we, as human beings, demonstrate both strength and compassion? Give examples.
4. In what ways does this lesson about strength and humility enlighten our conversation about bullies?