

PARASHAT KI TISA

Exodus 30:11–34:35

God instructs Moses to collect a half-shekel from every person over the age of twenty when he takes a census of the community. He is told to make a copper container, fill it with water, and place it in the sanctuary that the priests might wash themselves before approaching the altar; he is also to create a special anointing oil for consecrating the furniture of the *mikdash*. Moses is told that the sanctuary furnishings, including the priestly garments, are to be made under the supervision of Bezalel, a skilled artisan. Moses is commanded to remind the people that in observing the Sabbath they celebrate the covenant between themselves and God. The Torah text now shifts back to the time of Moses standing on Mount Sinai. He is given the two tablets containing God's commandments. Forty days have passed, and below the people of Israel approach Aaron, requesting that he create a golden calf for them to worship. Aaron agrees. God tells Moses what has happened, threatening to destroy the Israelites, but Moses pleads for the people and saves them from God's anger. When Moses sees the idol they have built, however, he shatters the tablets God has given him. Entering the camp, Moses also destroys the golden idol and punishes those who have not shown loyalty to God. Fearful that God will abandon the people, Moses asks for proof that God will continue to lead them. God's Presence is shown to Moses as assurance that neither he nor the Israelites will be abandoned. Afterwards, God directs Moses to carve two new tablets and return to Mount Sinai. God commands the Israelites to observe Pesach, Shavuot, and the Sabbath. When, after the second forty days and nights, Moses returns to the people, his face is bright red, radiant from speaking with God; so he covers it with a veil.

OUR TARGUM

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God explains to Moses that, when a census is taken, each person over the age of twenty shall pay a half-shekel. The donation will assure the forgiveness of all sins for the person enrolled in the census.

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God commands Moses to make a copper water container that the priests can wash themselves when they enter the sanctuary to perform their rituals. Moses is also told to create anointing oil out of choice spices and to consecrate the sanctuary furnishings and priestly garments with the oil.

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Bezalel, son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, is appointed as the artisan in charge of making all the furniture and priestly garments to be used in the sanctuary. Oholiab, son of Ahisa-

mach, of the tribe of Dan, is designated as his assistant.

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God commands the people of Israel to observe the Sabbath, calling it "a sign for all time" of the covenant between the people and their God.

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While Moses remains on Mount Sinai, the Israelites protest to Aaron, telling him to make them a golden calf, an idol, to worship, for they did not know what had happened to Moses. Aaron tells them to bring their gold to him. He creates a golden calf, and the people shout, "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!" The next day they offer sacrifices before the golden calf and sit down to eat, drink, and make merry.

God tells Moses what the people have done and threatens to destroy them. Instead of accepting God's judgment, Moses argues with God on behalf of his people. He tells God, "Let not Your anger . . . blaze forth against Your people . . ." so the Egyptians will not be able to say that "the God of Israel liberated this people,



only to . . . annihilate them from the face of the earth.” Moses pleads with God to recall the promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that the Israelites would one day be as numerous as the stars of heaven, secure in their own land. His argument convinces God not to punish the people.

Holding the tablets, Moses comes down the mountain. From a distance Moses, accompanied by Joshua, sees the Israelites dancing before the golden calf. In a rage, he shatters the tablets on the ground and burns the calf. He grinds the calf into powder, sprinkles it into water, and forces the people to drink it.

“What did this people do to you that you have brought such great sin upon them?” Moses asks Aaron.

Aaron immediately blames the people, explaining that they requested an idol and that they are “bent on evil.” Aaron explains to Moses that he told them to give him their gold, which he threw “into the fire and out came this calf!”

Judging that the people are out of control, Moses calls upon all who are loyal to God to join him. All the Levites come forward and, following his direction, they kill those who have demonstrated disloyalty to God. In addition, a plague is sent among the people as punishment for the sin of creating the golden calf.

God promises to give the Land of Israel to the people—after driving out the Canaanites, Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites—but not to dwell in their midst because they are “stiff-necked.” The people react with fear, take off their fine clothing and jewels, and begin to mourn. God instructs them to leave off their fine clothing and jewels, pledging to decide their destiny.

THEMES

Parashat Ki Tisa contains two important themes:

1. The sin of the golden calf.
2. Protesting on behalf of others.

PEREK ALEF: *Why Did They Build the Golden Calf?*

Consider the following facts: Moses returns to Egypt in order to free the Israelites from bondage.

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Moses appeals to God, “Unless You go in the lead, do not make us leave this place.” God responds by assuring Moses that he has gained God’s favor and that the people will be led by God’s Presence. “Let me see Your Presence,” Moses challenges. God answers, “You cannot see My face, for no person may see Me and live.” Moses is told to hide in the cleft of a rock to await God’s Presence.

Afterwards, as instructed by God, Moses carves two new stone tablets and carries them to the top of Mount Sinai. There God’s Presence passes before him, declaring: “The Lord! the Lord! a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, rich in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin.”

Moses asks God to forgive the people, and God makes a covenant with them. God will drive out the inhabitants of the land against which the Israelites are advancing. The Israelites are commanded by God to tear down all altars of idol worship, not to marry from among the inhabitants of the land, and to observe Pesach, Shavuot, and Shabbat. In addition, God orders them to bring choice first fruits to the sanctuary for an offering and to refrain from ever boiling a kid in its mother’s milk.

Moses writes down all these commandments. After forty days and nights of fasting, Moses returns to the people. The skin of his face is bright red, radiant from speaking with God. When he finishes teaching the people all that God had said, he covers his face with a veil. From that time on, whenever he concludes speaking to the people, he replaces the veil over his face.

He and his brother, Aaron, risk their lives in persuading Pharaoh to liberate the Israelites. The people achieve freedom and are saved from pursuing Egyptian troops. They arrive safely at Sinai, hear the words of God spoken to them through

Moses, and are commanded to build a sanctuary for the worship of God. Finally, Moses climbs to the top of Mount Sinai where he stays for forty days and nights in order to bring back the sacred tablets of the Ten Commandments.

Everything seems to point to success for the people of Israel. They have known the bitterness of slavery, the pain of oppression, but now they are tasting the pleasures of victory and liberation. Each day they are fed with manna and, through Moses, are receiving instruction and commandments from God.

With all of these benefits, why do they suddenly lose faith in Moses? Why do they gather before Aaron demanding that he build them a golden calf? Why are they willing to donate their gold for such an idol? Why, after hearing the first of the Ten Commandments, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt," and the second, "You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image. . . ," does Aaron deliberately mold a golden calf, saying nothing when the people proclaim, "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt"? What prompts the people to abandon the teachings of both Moses and God?

The answer given by many interpreters is "fear." Forty days and nights have passed since Moses left them and climbed to Mount Sinai. Perhaps he is dead; perhaps he has abandoned them. Their anxiety mounts. What are they to do? Where are they to turn? Who will lead them now? Terrified, filled with uncertainty, they say to Aaron, "Come, make us a god who shall go before us, for that man Moses, who brought us from the land of Egypt—we do not know what has happened to him."



Peli

*The masses must have a leader
Moses is but a few hours late, and they, without
much hesitation, with little reservation, un-*

ashamedly rewrite history; this calf is your god that brought you out of the land of Egypt. . . . Moses, the teacher and lawgiver, is all but forgotten. . . . How swift and how shocking! And how typical of mass psychology! They, the masses, must have a leader. What a gap between Moses and a handmade calf! But to them this gap does not matter. "Make us a god who shall go before us!" They are ready to follow blindly any leader, be he a Moses or a golden calf. (Pinchas Peli, Torah Today, pp. 91-92)

What the people might have said

Philosopher Martin Buber suggests that the people were in a state of panic and said to one another: Moses "has vanished completely. He said that he is going aloft to the God up there, when we need the God down here just where we are; but he has not come back, and it must be supposed that that God of his has made away with him, since something or other between them was clearly not as it should have been. What are we to do now? We have to take matters into our own hands. An image has to be made, and then the power of God will enter the image and there will be proper guidance." (Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant, Harper and Row Publishers, Inc., New York, 1958, p. 151)

Philosopher Yehudah Halevi agrees with this assessment of their situation and claims that only 3,000 of the 600,000 people liberated actually requested that Aaron build the golden calf. These people were not really idolaters, Halevi explains. In the absence of Moses, they were simply desperate to have "a tangible object of worship like the other nations without repudiating God who had brought them out of Egypt." Having waited so long for Moses to return, they were overcome with frustration, confusion, and dissension. As a result, they divided into angry parties, differing with one another over what they should do. No longer able to control their fears, a vocal minority pressured Aaron into taking their gold and casting it into a golden calf.

Furthermore, argues Halevi, the creation of the golden calf was not such a serious sin. After all, he explains, making images or using them for wor-

ship was accepted religious practice during ancient times. God had commanded the people to create the cherubim and place them above the ark. If the people made a mistake, Halevi says, it was not in refusing to worship God, but in their impatience. Instead of waiting for the return of Moses or for a message from God, they took matters into their own hands and acted as if they had been commanded to replace their leader with a golden idol. It was for their impatience, not for creating an idol, that they were punished. (*The Kuzari* 1:97)

Yehudah Halevi's carefully reasoned excuse for the behavior of the Israelites is very different in tone from the criticism of them offered by the author of Psalm 106. Speaking of their liberation, the Psalmist writes, "God delivered them from the foe, redeemed them from the enemy. . . . But they soon forgot God's deeds. . . . There was envy of Moses in the camp, and of Aaron. . . . They made a calf at Horeb and bowed down to a molten image. They exchanged their glory for the image of a bull that feeds on grass. They forgot God who saved them, who performed great deeds in Egypt. . . ." In other words, the creation and worship of the golden calf by the Israelites was a brazen act of disloyalty to the God who had freed them from Egyptian bondage.

Many of the early rabbinic interpreters of Torah agree with the author of Psalm 106. Building the golden calf was an act of idolatry, and the people's worship of it was nothing less than a signal that they accepted idolatry and were defying the second of the Ten Commandments: "You shall have no other gods beside Me. You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image. . . . You shall not bow down to them or serve them. . . ." (Exodus 20:3-5; *Avodah Zarah* 53b)

As to why the Israelites chose idolatry, some of the early rabbis suggest that they found the worship of a God without form, shape, and color very difficult. They wanted a god like the Egyptians—one that was carried from place to place; one of glistening gold; a bull symbolizing power that would march before them and, they believed, protect them. So they came to Aaron and said, "Come, make us a god. . . ." Because the Israelites sought to imitate the Egyptians and practice idolatry, say the rabbis, they were punished for their sin. (*Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer* 45)

Some interpreters put forward the observation that it was the men, not the women, who were guilty of creating the idol and worshiping it. They point out that Aaron cleverly looked for a way to divert the men from their desire for an idol. Because Aaron knew that the women would refuse to donate their gold rings to such a project, he deliberately told the men: "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives. . . ." As Aaron had hoped, the women were unwilling to donate their rings. "We will not give our rings to create an idol!" they told the men. So the men removed the rings from their own ears and built the golden calf. (*Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer* 45)

Other interpreters blame Aaron, not the Israelites, for the sin of creating the golden calf. They maintain that, when the people began to speak critically of Moses and his failure to return after forty days, Aaron failed to provide an explanation to calm their fears.

These same interpreters also embellish the Torah's report. They say that, when Hur, one of Moses' loyal assistants, accused those who were speaking against Moses of being "brainless fools," Aaron said nothing. As a result, the mob murdered Hur. Then they approached Aaron, warning that they would do the same to him. Fearing for his life, Aaron gave into their demands, took their gold, and created the calf. Instead of taking the risk, speaking out, and providing strong guidance in the absence of his brother, Aaron capitulated to the demands of the mob. His lack of courage and leadership, these interpreters believe, brought about his people's shocking sin of idolatry. (*Exodus Rabbah* 41:7)

Aaron refuses to take responsibility

When Moses asks Aaron why he allowed the people to create an idol, he protests "that he never intended to fashion a golden calf. It was all a tragic accident. He simply threw the gold into the fire to be melted down, and 'there came out this calf.' He could not foresee the consequences of his acquiescence to the demands of a rebellious people." (Silverman, From Week to Week, p. 79)



Steinsaltz

Modern commentator Adin Steinsaltz agrees with this assessment of Aaron. He labels the episode of the golden calf “the worst failure of his career.” Yet, just as Yehudah Halevi sought to excuse the behavior of the Israelites, Steinsaltz offers an apology for Aaron. “When he agreed to cooperate in the casting of the golden calf, he was undoubtedly proceeding along his own mode of leadership—given to compromise and acquiescence—with the accompanying perils of ‘distorting the truth for the sake of peace.’” Aaron is willing to indulge in idolatry in order to pacify the people. (*Biblical Images*, Basic Books, New York, 1984, pp. 75–79)

As Steinsaltz portrays him, Aaron leads by testing the wind, by sensing where the pressure is likely to be, and then rushing to carry out the expectations of others. His guiding principle is peace at any price, compromise to avoid confrontation. For that reason, he offers no argument when the people tell him to create an idol. He desperately wants to be loved and to be popular. If the price others demand is a golden calf, that’s what he will give them.



Leibowitz

Nehama Leibowitz sees in the story of the golden calf not just Aaron’s failure, or the sin of the Israelites, but a deliberate warning that human beings are capable of acting nobly at one moment and ugly at the next. Leibowitz observes that “we should not be astonished at the fact that the generation that had heard the voice of the living God and had received the commandment ‘You shall not make other gods besides Me’ descended to the making of the golden calf forty days later. One single religious experience, however profound, was not capable of changing the people from idol worshipers into monotheists. Only a prolonged

disciplining in the laws of Torah directing every moment of their existence could accomplish that.” (*Studies in Shemot*, pp. 554–556)

From Nehama Leibowitz’s point of view, the story of the golden calf is not just about what happened on the Sinai desert centuries ago. It is about human beings in every age. The Torah relates the tale of the Israelites’ sin to teach that yesterday’s charity may be followed tomorrow by selfishness and insensitivity. Each day is filled with new choices. The role of constant Torah study is to keep an individual asking, “What is the next mitzvah I must do?”

Why does the Torah include this incident about the golden calf? No one can be sure. It may have been placed in this section of Torah because those who experienced it could not forget it. The shock of the incident remained, and they related it from generation to generation as a story they could neither understand nor give up. Perhaps it is included in the Torah because, as some interpreters suggest, it captures the fear and confusion of the people and Aaron when Moses failed to return from Mount Sinai. Still other commentators may be correct in viewing this incident as an indication of Aaron’s lack of leadership or as a significant insight into the way people fall from their good intentions when they are confronted with the glitter of gold.

What can be said is that the story of the golden calf has stimulated the genius of Jewish interpreters throughout the ages. They have found within it a wide variety of meanings and lessons. Today, however, the riddle remains. What is the meaning of this curious tale? Why was it included in the Torah text?

PEREK BET: *Moses Protests on Behalf of His People*

Imagine Moses carefully making his way down Mount Sinai, holding the heavy carved tablets of the Ten Commandments. Among the words inscribed on them are “You shall have no other gods beside Me. You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image. . . .” For forty days and nights he has been alone at the top of the mountain. Now, as he is descending, God informs him

that the Israelites have not only made a golden calf but are worshipping it as their god.

Before Moses has a chance to answer, God tells him that, because the Israelites are a stubborn people, God will destroy them and create another people for Moses to lead.

Moses, of course, could have accepted the offer. He had already experienced many unpleasant moments with the Israelites. They had complained about his leadership and about the lack of food and water on the desert. They had even accused him of liberating them from Egypt in order to let them die in the wilderness. Why not exchange the Israelites for another people?

Despite the arguments in favor of abandoning them, Moses surprisingly seeks to protect the Israelites from God's decision to destroy them. For centuries, Jewish interpreters of this Torah portion have been questioning the reason. Why does Moses choose to intervene and plead for the survival of those who are worshipping a golden calf?

Among the early rabbis, there were those who believed that Moses defended his people because he was convinced that God's judgment was unfair. It was God, they explained, who had brought the Israelites to Egypt where they had learned about idolatry. "How," they imagined Moses asking, "could God now blame them for worshipping a golden calf?"

Rabbi Huna compared the situation to a father who opened a business for his son on a street filled with evildoers. When his son began acting unethically, the father became angry and threatened to punish him. A friend intervened and told the father: "You are as guilty as your son. Did you not place him on a street of evildoers, in a place where he could pick up bad habits? Did you not expect that the environment would have an influence upon him?" (*Exodus Rabbah* 42:10)



Abravanel

The blame for bad habits

Don Isaac Abravanel believes that Moses said to God: "You know very well that You brought

them forth out of the land of Egypt, a land filled with idolatry. . . . Why do You become angry when they fall back on their old practices? For habit has become second nature to them, and that was what led them to build and worship the golden calf."

In other words, Rabbi Huna believes that Moses intervened on Israel's behalf because he was convinced that their worshipping the golden calf was actually God's fault. The people had not chosen to live among idolaters in Egypt. God had placed them in an evil environment where they had learned bad habits. They were incapable of overcoming the conditions in which they had been reared as children and had survived as adults. Moses understood their burden and, according to Rabbi Huna, intervened to save the Israelites to prevent God from doing a great injustice.

Modern author Elie Wiesel agrees with Rabbi Huna. He sees Moses as a brave defender of his people who argued: "Whose fault is it, God, theirs or Yours? You let them live in exile, among idol worshipers, so long that they have been poisoned; is it their fault that they are still addicted?"

Wiesel also observes: "In spite of his disappointments, in spite of his ordeals and the lack of gratitude he encountered, Moses never lost his faith in his people. Somehow he found both the strength and the courage to remain on Israel's side and proclaim its honor and its right to live." (*Messengers of God*, pp. 200–201)

Excusing the idolatry of the people of Israel because of their exposure to an evil environment, however, is not the only reason given for Moses' intervention on their behalf. The early rabbinic interpreters also point out that Moses was upset by the language God used when talking about the people of Israel. At other times, God had always referred to Israel as "My people." Now, in announcing their punishment to Moses for making the golden calf, God called them "your people," as if to imply that their evildoing was Moses' fault—when they were "good," they belonged to God, but, when they were "bad," they were Moses' responsibility.

Rabbi Berechiah, quoting Rabbi Levi, compared the situation to a king who had a vineyard that he rented out to a grower. When the wine

produced by the grapes of the vineyard was excellent, the king would proudly proclaim, "What fine wine *my* vineyard produces!" When the wine was inferior, the king would blame the grower. "What terrible wine *you* produce!" Upon hearing the criticism, the grower confronted the king and told him, "The vineyard is yours whether it produces superior or inferior wine!"

Moses spoke out, explains Berechiah, because he felt that he was being blamed unfairly for the evil behavior of the people. Berechiah imagines Moses complaining to God: "Ruler of the universe, You can't have it both ways. It cannot be that, when they are good and follow all Your commandments, they are *Your* people, and, when they are unfaithful and do not carry out Your commandments, they are *my* people. They belong to both of us, and neither of us can abandon them." (*Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* 16)

As Rabbi Berechiah sees it, Moses is upset, not only with God's failure to take responsibility for Israel's building and worshiping an idol, but also for blaming him for their evildoing. Such blame is unjust. It is even a sign of disloyalty. How can you abandon that which you love? So Moses intervenes, protesting to God.

Reasons for protest

U. Cassuto imagines that Moses told God: "Don't let other people conclude that all Your work in liberating this people was done in vain!" And Moses also argued: "These Israelites are Your people. Don't allow the Egyptians to come along and say that You intended to destroy them from the very beginning of their liberation." Furthermore, Cassuto says that Moses reminded God that, if the Israelites were annihilated, God would be known as a liar. Had not God promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the patriarchs of the people, that their descendants would live forever? It was these arguments, Cassuto explains, that convinced God to forgive the people. (A Commentary on the Book of Exodus, pp. 415-416)

Nehama Leibowitz points to another reason Moses chose to plead for the survival of the people

of Israel rather than allow God to destroy them. It was a matter of God's reputation!

Leibowitz reminds us that Moses challenged God with a warning. "Let not the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that God delivered them, only to kill them off in the mountains and annihilate them from the face of the earth.'" (Exodus 32:12)

According to Leibowitz, Moses feared that God's punishment of Israel, no matter how just, would be misinterpreted by the Egyptians and other peoples. They would conclude that their idols were more loyal and generous than the unseen power of God and that it was dangerous to follow the God of Israel. "Far from educating and promoting the cause of justice," Leibowitz comments, God's destruction of Israel "would bring the divine reputation into disgrace . . . the cause of falsehood would be promoted and that of truth set back." For these reasons, Leibowitz explains, Moses decided to plead with God to forgive Israel rather than to punish the people for making and worshiping the golden calf. (*Studies in Shemot*, pp. 575-576)

Why does Moses intervene to save the people from God's intention to destroy them for creating the golden calf? Interpreters provide a variety of reasons that may have moved the great liberator and leader of the Israelites. He was motivated by sensitivity to their past and to the habits and customs they had learned through long years of living in a corrupt environment of slavery and idolatry. Perhaps he felt pity for them, sensing that the Israelites were frightened and uncertain of where he and God were leading them. It is also possible Moses concluded that destroying the Israelites was a bad strategy for God. It would ruin God's reputation. No one would have faith in a God who liberated in order to destroy and whose promises were lies!

Did Moses really think all these thoughts? No one really knows. Yet the biblical story of his protest to God on behalf of the Israelites captures our attention, just as it appealed to the imagination of commentators. For them, Moses became a model from whom to learn. Just as he intervened to save his people from what he believed was God's unjust punishment, so too were human beings to

intervene and save the innocent whenever they were threatened.

Protecting others from harsh judgments by pleading their case, by urging an understanding of those pressures and conditions over which they may have little or no control, is judged within Judaism as a high moral obligation.



Zugot

Rabbi Hillel taught: "Judge not another until you are standing in his place." (*Avot* 2:5) Philosopher Hasdai Crescas observed that "true justice is tempered with mercy." (*Or Adonai*)

Moses' intervention on behalf of his people is an ethical model worthy of imitation. Undoubtedly, that is why the *Zohar* praises him above all the heroes of the Torah as the "faithful shepherd" of Israel. (Commentary on Exodus 32:32)

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. How do fear and frustration cause a people to abandon democracy or freedom? Can you give other examples when, out of confusion or fear, people have given up their liberties and accepted the tyranny of dictatorships?
2. What role did Aaron play in the building of the golden calf? Could he have intervened and stopped the people from creating the idol, from breaking the law? Did he demonstrate weak or clever leadership? Was he a failure or success? Why?
3. Does society today worship idols? What are our "golden calfs"?
4. What do the commentators identify as the reasons for Moses' protest to God on behalf of the Israelites? How would you compare Aaron's agreement to build the golden calf with Moses' defense of the people when God announces that they are about to be destroyed? What arguments does he use to convince God not to punish the people for building the golden calf?