

## **TO SEE GOD'S SHADOW**

Joel E. Soffin

This week's parashah, Ki Tisa, portrays several dramatic scenes. In one of them, we find the Israelites camped below Mount Sinai. Moses has been atop the mountain for nearly forty days, and the people are awaiting his return.

All at once, they lose patience or faith and demand a visible sign of God's Presence in their midst. They want Aaron to help them build a golden calf, the epitome of what was just forbidden by the Second Commandment.

Was this an unreasonable request or merely a sign of insecurity? Was the golden calf really an idol representing a god or just a visible means of connecting to God?

We know from the report of this incident in Deuteronomy 9:20 that God was very angry with Aaron for helping to build the golden calf and threatened to kill him. It was only after Moses' intercession on his behalf that he was spared. Worse than this, some three thousand of our people were killed by their fellow Levites for the role they played here.

Yet, if that is the case, why does God react so differently when a short time later Moses himself seems to express the very same need and desire? In Exodus 33:18, Moses says, "Oh, let me behold Your Presence!" In other words, Moses wants to see God.

Now God might have responded in anger and ruled such a request out of order. God might have quoted the words of Ben Sirach (Eccles. 3:21): "Do not pry into things too hard for you or examine what is beyond your reach . . . what God keeps secret is no concern of yours."

Instead, God tries to find a way to meet Moses' request, at least partially. God will pass before Moses, while he is hidden in a cleft in the rock, so Moses can see God's back. While some of the people may have improperly sought an idol to worship, Moses like so many of us wanted to be assured that God's Presence would continue to be with him. He felt a certain insecurity and a need to be connected more directly to God.

Some say that all Moses really saw was the shadow that falls on our lives when God is no longer there. He was able to distinguish between those actions and situations that are filled with holiness and those that are not. Others, like the Chatam Sofer, teach that God's presence may be perceived only after the fact, when we look back on the experiences of

our lives. It seems as if God is acknowledging the legitimacy of our need to be connected more directly to what is godly, to see God's Presence.

Perhaps that's why God chose Betzalel to be the architect of the Tabernacle. Betzalel means "in the shadow of God." It is as close as we can come to seeing God.

So think back over your life. When have you seen the shadow of God? Did you realize it at the time?

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## **HOW OUR BEHAVIOR TOWARD OTHERS REFLECTS OUR FAITH IN GOD**

Ellen Nemhauser

Some say that we live in a faithless age. People struggle to believe in God and wonder what, if any, involvement God has in their lives. But from looking back at the scene in this week's Torah portion, it would appear that even our biblical ancestors lacked faith. Rabbi Soffin points out that in the dramatic scene with the golden calf, the disbelieving Israelites demand a visible sign of God's presence in their midst.

Recall previous incidents in which the Israelites have lost faith. (Exod. 13:11, 16:2, 17:3) In this week's parashah, the people lose faith because they grow impatient, waiting for Moses to return from the mount. In each of the other cases, what triggered our people's loss of faith? Why is it so difficult for the Israelites to remain faithful?

In his thirteenth-century text *Sefer Ma'alot Hamidot*, a book of spiritual values, Yechiel ben Yekutiel writes:

Know, my students, that the virtue of faith [emunah] is honored and very great in the eyes of God. For everyone who deals with others honestly merits and sits in the section of the Holy One.

Yechiel connects faith in God with behaving faithfully and honestly toward others. In this chapter on emunah, the two values are inextricable. It is only when people behave faithfully toward one another that they can succeed in showing faith to the Divine.

Review the incidents where the Israelites repeatedly lost faith in God. How were they behaving toward the people in their midst? In each case, can Yechiel's notion of faith be supported?

It is difficult to speak of our own faith in relationship to the Divine. Spend some time thinking about your personal convictions regarding your relationship with others. In what ways might these convictions reflect your faith in God?

It is clear that we, like our biblical ancestors, may experience a periodic loss of faith. But when we strengthen our resolve to live in accordance with our highest ideals toward one another, it will put us on the path to regaining our faith in God.

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### **SHATTERING THE TABLETS... FOR OUR SAKE**

George Stern

"As soon as Moses came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, he became enraged; and he hurled the tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain." (Exodus 32:19)

What might cause you to shatter something that is very important to you? How would you react if, on this very Shabbat, your rabbi, noting the failure of most of the congregation to keep the Sabbath (see Veshamru in this week's parashah [31:16-17]) lifted up the scroll and threw it to the ground, ripping the parchment in two? Would you vote to have the rabbi fired? Would you rush to repair the scroll? Would the incident teach you any lasting lessons?

What do traditional midrashim and commentaries say about Moses' action? Some say Moses broke the tablets to save Israel from God's wrath, reasoning: If they [Israel] hadn't yet received the laws, they couldn't be expected to keep them! (see Exodus Rabbah 43:1) Another midrash says that Moses sought to deflect some of God's anger onto himself: "When he realized that there was no future hope for Israel, he linked his own fate with theirs and broke the tablets so that God would have to save them in order to forgive him." (Exodus Rabbah 46:1) When is it appropriate for a person to shield someone else from punishment? Was Moses in this instance serving a higher good?

Other midrashim suggest that Moses shattered the tablets in full sight of the people to show them the terrible consequences of their apostasy-their turning away from God. Have you ever had to resort to drastic measures in order to teach a lesson? Have you yourself ever learned something from such measures?

It's fascinating to note that God does not punish Moses. Some commentaries say God actually approved of the tablets' destruction. In Studies in Shemot, Nehama

Leibowitz quotes Rabbi Meir Simcha Hacoen as follows: "Torah and Faith are the essentials of the Jewish nation. All the sanctities-the Holy Land, Jerusalem, etc.-are secondary and subordinate entities hallowed by virtue of the Torah.... For this reason God approved of Moses' action and said, 'More power to you for having broken them.' By this he [Moses] had demonstrated that the tablets themselves possessed no intrinsic holiness." Sanctuaries and land are not inherently sacred: People and actions are. God cares about how we act.

Finally, tradition tells us that the broken shards of the tablets were kept in the Holy Ark. Perhaps they are the Kabbalists' "broken vessels" that contain parts of the divine, which we must "pick up" and restore. It is not enough to read Torah as if it were a completed document; we must "put it together," assemble and reassemble its pieces, and make it relevant during each moment. Torah is like a computer-age jigsaw puzzle with an infinite number of correct solutions. We can never "finish it" because there will always be another way to put the pieces together.

In the end, then, Moses shattered the tablets-with God's approval-for our sake, so that our minds would never grow numb for lack of challenges and we would never tire of seeking meaning in our tradition, thereby discovering God.

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### **MOSES' AURA**

Audrey Friedman Marcus

"And as Moses came down from the mountain bearing the two tablets of the Pact, Moses was not aware that the skin of his face was radiant, since he had spoken with God. Aaron and all the Israelites saw that the skin of Moses' face was radiant; and they shrank from coming near him." (Exodus 34:29-30)

Commentators have analyzed the origin of these rays, variously called "beams of splendor," "divine rays of glory," or incorrectly "horns." The Sages said they came into existence when God shielded Moses with his hand as Moses waited in the cleft of the rock for God's Presence to pass by. R. Judah ben Nachman said in the name of R. Simeon ben Lakish that a little ink was left on the pen with which Moses had written, and when he passed this pen through his hair, the beams of splendor appeared. In Tosefot it is said that God granted Moses these brilliant rays after the incident of the golden calf to show the Israelites that no one resembled Moses and that they had erred in seeking a substitute for him.

It seems clear that the rays originated somehow during Moses' encounter with God. Perhaps they also resulted from Moses' newfound self-confidence as a leader. After all, he overcame a physical disability, learned to stop running from responsibility, led his people to freedom, spoke to God, and received the Law. Surely he was burning with excitement and pride as he came down from the mountain the second time.

Similar examples of such rays or beams are found in Navajo rock painting, Buddhist sculptures, Indian paintings, depictions of the birth of Venus, etc. (Michelangelo's Moses in Rome shows Moses with horns rather than rays.) The halos that adorn paintings of Christian religious figures are another example of such rays. These halos symbolize the radiation of inner light flowing outward through the purified, consecrated personality. Straight radiating lines in a halo represent the power of the sun or soul.

Some say the soul is a radiant body of light or form of radiance and that an aura is the light of the soul shining through. Thus the rays that emanated from Moses might have been his aura. Auras are said to increase in size and brilliance when the activity of the soul is intensified, perhaps during prayer or meditation or in moments of deep spiritual inspiration.

When a person is excited or proud about something, people say his or her face shines. (Plaut, p. 665) Perhaps this is caused by the soul shining through-as did Moses' at this moment in time.

#### Questions For Discussion

1. Moses had a "peak experience." Describe any experiences you have had that made you feel radiant.
2. What do you think happened to Moses' radiance? How long did it last? How long could the people see it? How long was it so strong that he had to cover his face with a veil? What do you do to maintain your state of exultation?
3. Which interpretation of the beams of glory do you prefer? Why?
4. Why didn't Moses have a radiant face when he came down from the mountain the first time?
5. Only some people can see auras. Why could all the Israelites see the radiance of Moses' face?
6. Do you believe in auras? Have you ever seen one? Might auras be caused by some form of energy field that exists around us and all natural objects?

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#### MAKING MATTERS COUNT

*Stacy Offner*

This week's Torah portion, Ki Tisa, is filled with action, drama, and explosive notions of faith and fear. Not once but twice, we are taken on a journey with Moses to the top of the mountain, where he encounters God and receives the teachings that will guide the Jewish people forever. We read about mountain climbing, tablet smashing, golden calf worship, anger, fury and, tragically, much killing as well.

But what particularly strikes me is a seemingly simple verse that occurs at the beginning of the parashah. God instructs Moses: "When you take a census of the Israelite people according to their enrollment, each shall pay Adonai a ransom for himself on being enrolled...." (Exodus 30:12) Why must a ransom be paid to Adonai by each person who is counted?

In *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, Rabbi Gunther Plaut explains that "counting was considered a privilege belonging to God, and humans conducting a census without divine approval thereby placed themselves in dire danger." (p. 632) Only God merits the privilege of counting. But surely we human beings count things all the time. We count what we have; we count what we don't have; we count our money, our attendance, our votes, and our Beany Babies. We count just about everything that is quantifiable.

So what makes counting a divine act? Maybe it is precisely because human counting is so quantifiable. We cannot count love, and we cannot count faith, and we cannot count patience, and we cannot count belief. But these kinds of counting are the most important of all!

If we think about it, the ways in which we use the word "count" reveal that we know that God's kind of counting is most important. We say "Let's make this one count" when we mean "Let's make it matter." We say "I'm counting on you" when we mean that we are depending on someone. All of a sudden, we can see that counting is not just about numbers but about significance and dependability as well.

Just think: Our parashah teaches us that the two stone tablets were written "with the finger of God" (Exodus 31:18), the very part of our body that we use when counting.

Could it be that our parashah begins with this lesson about counting because it is the key to understanding all that is yet to unfold regarding the golden calf, the smashing of the tablets, and the second opportunity that Moses and the people are given to do the right thing?

How would the story of the golden calf have been different if, while waiting for Moses to come down from the mountain, the Children of Israel had made each day count instead of counting the days until Moses' return? How would the story of our lives be different if instead of counting our money, we made our money count; if instead of counting the days until our next vacation, we made each day count? The question is, Can we be counted upon?

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## **ART FOR GOD'S SAKE**

*Nancy M. Berman*

The profound and dynamic drama in this week's Torah portion ranges from God's design specifications for the wilderness Tabernacle, to the sin of idol worship (the golden calf), to Moses' subsequent ascent of Mount Sinai to receive a second set of tablets that reestablish God's covenant with the Israelites. Some of the Torah's most powerful and informing events in the evolution of the Jewish religion and peoplehood appear in Parashat Ki Tisa.

In addition to the magnitude of these events and the eminence of Moses, Aaron, and Joshua, this text also introduces us to a new and, by biblical standards, a seemingly minor character: "God spoke to Moses, saying: See, I have singled out by name Bezalel...I have endowed him with a divine spirit of skill, ability, and knowledge of every kind of craft: to make designs for work in gold, silver, and copper, to cut stones for setting and to carve wood-to work in every kind of craft [to] make everything that I have commanded you: the Tent of Meeting, the Ark for the Pact...and all the furnishings of the Tent." (Exodus 31:1-7)

Is Bezalel really a minor person in the biblical story? What is so important about his role that God singles him out by name? As an artist, Bezalel has been endowed by God with supreme aesthetic and technical capabilities. Why does God feel that an artist is the only person who can be trusted to captain the construction team of "all who are skillful" (other artisans) so that they may fashion and execute God's precise plan for the Sanctuary of service in the desert? The implication is that Bezalel the artist is a person with special talents who is not only inspired by God but also reflects the

creative aspect of God. God gives the artist the unique ability to take the divine architectural vision and realize it on earth through craftsmanship that is worthy of the holiness of the Sanctuary and the ceremonial implements. By creating these items, which are necessary for the worship of God, the artist becomes an integral part of the process that enables human beings to love God.

This requisite for beauty-aesthetic integrity-as one of the attributes of holiness desired by God follows a passage in which God commands three things: the creation of a "laver of copper...for washing" (Exodus 30:18); a sacred anointing oil; and incense that "should be most holy to you." (Exodus 30:36) Each of these items is also necessary for the purification and consecration that sanctify God's sacred space, ritual objects, and priestly practice.

God's appointment of Bezalel as the chief architect and artist for the Tabernacle illuminates how instrumental both the making and the beauty of holy items are to the creation and condition of holiness and sanctity. Not every person is talented or qualified enough to achieve the "beauty of holiness." The midrash tells how Moses himself failed as an artist in the fabrication of the golden menorah even after God had instructed him how to make it three times: "When [Moses] found it still hard to form...the candlestick, God quieted him with these words: 'Go to Bezalel, he will do it right.'" (Ginzberg, p. 411) The name *Bezalel* means "In the Shadow of God" in English. With such a name and God-given task, Bezalel represents the importance of the arts to the relationship between God and human beings. They bring holiness, spirituality, and humanity to our lives. The artist creates beauty in the world that reflects the beauty with which God imbues the world. Bezalel, whose artistic spirit "shadows" God's intentions, exemplifies the creative abilities that all of us, created in God's image, possess. They are our God-given gift through which we express our relationships with others, with the world, and with God.

Some points to consider:

1. Is praying in a place of beauty important to you? Why or why not?
2. Is the creative process in each of us an essential part of our humanity? Explain.
3. How are we linked to Bezalel's contribution to the Tabernacle when we use beautiful ceremonial objects such as the Kiddush cup or candlesticks you are using for this Shabbat celebration? How does using a beautiful ritual object link our modern lives with those of our ancestors in the desert?

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## A TIME TO CAST AWAY... AND A TIME TO GATHER

*Barnett J. Brickner*

This week's parashah, *Ki Tisa* (*Exodus* 30:11-34:35), contains a story with which most of us are familiar - the breaking of the first set of tablets by Moses when he sees the people dancing around the golden calf. In a fit of rage, Moses hurls to the ground the tablets that God had given him on top of the mountain. He burns the golden calf and grinds it into powder, mixes the powder with water, and makes the people drink it. Clearly this is not one of Moses' better moments. And after all the dust has settled, we are left to wonder about what happened to the broken pieces of the tablets of the Covenant (at least I am). They are never again mentioned in the Torah. We hear about them only in *midrasheem*.

One *midrash*, using a proof text from *Ecclesiastes* 3:1, suggests that Moses literally cast away the stones of the broken tablets: "To every thing there is a season and a time for every purpose under the heaven: a time to be born and a time to die...a time to cast away stones and a time to gather stones." This *midrash* is based on the awareness that the verb used in *Ecclesiastes* for "cast away" is identical to the verb used in *Ki Tisa* to describe Moses' casting the tablets to the ground. (*Exodus Rabbah* 46:2) However, because the rabbis were uncomfortable with this conclusion, they completed the *midrash* by suggesting that the broken pieces not only had value in themselves, they were also made of sapphires. God gave those broken chips of the tablets to Moses for safekeeping.

Building on this idea, "Rabbi Judah bar Ilai taught that two arks journeyed with Israel in the wilderness - one in which the Torah was kept and one in which the tablets broken by Moses were kept. The one in which the Torah was placed was kept in the Tent of Meeting; the other, containing the broken tablets, would come and go with them." (*Sefer Ha-Aggadah*, p. 89, from *Talmud Yerusalmi, Shekalim* 1:1)

A third *midrash* states that the broken pieces of the tablets and the whole second set of tablets were placed side by side in one ark, not two. And from this the rabbis inferred a teaching about the importance of respecting the elderly: "Take care to respect an old man who, through [the] unavoidable circumstances [of aging], has forgotten what he once knew." (*Talmud, Menachot* 99a; also *Berachot* 8b)

Thus it is clear that the rabbis were unable to simply forget about the *sh'vurei luchot*, the "broken tablets," of the Covenant. They insisted on giving the broken pieces not only value but also importance. Somehow they were going

to include them as part of the Torah tradition, which, when you think about it, makes a lot of sense because the Torah is more than an object, whether it is made of stone or of parchment. For the rabbis, as it is for us, Torah was the living expression of the covenantal relationship between God and the Jewish people. And as in all relationships, there are pieces that, even though they are not whole, cannot simply be left behind. Those broken pieces are also part of our inheritance: They go where we go.

### Questions for Discussion

1. What is broken in your life that you carry with you?
2. How does what is (or was) broken help make you whole?
3. What do you think you must do to find sh'leimoot (completeness) in order to help yourself become more psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually whole?

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## A SIGN FOR ALL TIME

*Nina Mizrahi*

When Parashat *Ki Tisa* begins, God has nearly completed the divine instruction to Moses, and the people are awaiting Moses' descent from Mount Sinai with great impatience. In a moment of weakness, they surrender to their need for a visible, concrete god and fashion the golden calf. Just prior to these events, God speaks to Moses about God's plans for building the Tabernacle. God then reminds the Israelites of the commandment to observe Shabbat even when they are engaged in the holy work of constructing the Tabernacle. (*Exodus* 31:12-17) *Shem MiShmuel* comments that the sanctuary will be a dwelling place of the Holy Presence, "but only if you shall keep My Sabbaths." This implies that if the Israelites do not keep Shabbat, their work will have been in vain.

We are also told that the violation of Shabbat is punishable by the death penalty. (*Exodus* 31:14) But how are we to understand this statement when we know that the law explicitly states that the saving of a human life takes precedence over Shabbat? The Rabbi of Miedzieboz finds the answer to this question in the second half of verse 14, which says, "Whoever does work on it [Shabbat], that person shall be cut off from among his kin." That is, when a Jew willfully profanes the Sabbath, his or her soul is cut off from its very roots, and it is as if the person has been put to death. Thus the Rabbi of Miedzieboz deduces that the law concerning the precedence of human life over Shabbat is not applicable. Furthermore, we are instructed to continue

this observance "throughout the ages as a covenant for all time." (*Exodus* 31:16)

Shabbat observance, then, is clearly not optional: "It shall be a sign for all time between me and the people of Israel. For in six days *Adonai* made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day God ceased from work and was refreshed." (*Exodus* 31:17) Shabbat is a living expression of God's commitment to us. As Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf recently commented at a 1999 UAHC Biennial workshop on how to enrich our personal Sabbath experience, "Shabbat is not for us. It is for God!" This does not mean that a strict halachic observance is more authentic (read "better") or even desired. Rather, it suggests that our emphasis should be on making a commitment to some form of observance that is constant, deep, and God-centered.

During a recent pulpit exchange, a local conservative rabbi praised the Reform Movement for the *kavanah*, "intent," that accompanies choice in personal observance. But he also reminded our congregation of the merits of *keva*, "fixed observance." What does it mean when we choose to pass on Shabbat because there is something else we would rather do? What do we lose when we fail to understand when to stop building in order to join with God in the sanctification of time? Do we put our souls at risk when we ignore the commandment "Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy"? (*Exodus* 20:8)

As the Reform Movement seeks to delineate its essential principles of belief and practice, perhaps we need to ask ourselves what prevents us from making a commitment to the very experience that is intended to be a taste of the World to Come.

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## **TO HAVE OR TO BE?** *Yael Splansky*

Although it was not long ago that the Children of Israel offered their precious stones and metals for the building of the Tabernacle, now they melt down their earrings for a god of gold. Although it was not long ago that they danced on the shores of the sea and sang songs of praise to their Creator, now they dance around a material god of their own creation. The building of the golden calf is the Jewish "original sin."

In this week's Torah portion, *Ki Tisa*, we have two contrasting scenes. First, there is what the psychologist and social philosopher Erich Fromm would describe as a nonreligious experience because it is driven by ego, greed,

and fear. Tired and hungry from their wanderings in the desert and leaderless and afraid because Moses is up on the mountain, the Children of Israel fashion an idol. When God seems distant and abstract, they seek comfort in the tangible, the own-able.

However, later in the *parashah*, there is a second scene. Moses leaves the camp. He leaves behind the noise and possessions, the hierarchies and demands of his people in order to enter the Tent of Meeting. Having suspended his ego, greed, and fear, Moses is motivated by a pure desire to be in the Presence of God. And the result is a religious moment so intense that Moses has to wear a veil over his face to shield himself from the radiance.

Today we may have traded in the calf of gold for the Visa gold card, but how much has really changed? We live in a society that teaches us to seek comfort in what we can own. Fromm shows how much language affects our behavior: Not only do we have a house or a bank account, but we also say we *have* a wife, a friend, or a child. We *have* knowledge. We *have* feelings. We even claim to own our actions, for example, I *have* to work or I *have* to go to temple.

In many other languages, including Hebrew, the verb "be" is used instead of the verb "have." For example, *Yesh li*, "There is to me," is used instead of "I have," as in There is to me a family and There is to me a headache. Verbs of being like I *am* in love and I *am* a Jew make a stronger impact.

But statements of being, make us vulnerable because they expose who we are and who we are not. As a result, we prefer to employ expressions of ownership. However, the Psalmist warns us: "Their idols are...the work of men's hands. They have mouths, but cannot speak; eyes, but cannot see; ears, but cannot hear. Those who fashion them, all who trust in them, shall become like them." (Psalms 115: 5-8)

When in the Tent of Meeting Moses pleads with God: "Oh, let me behold Your Presence!" (*Exodus* 33:18), God reveals God's self to Moses by the name *Y-H-V-H*, from the verb "be." Our God is a God of being, not having: "*Adonai!* *Adonai!* I am compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin." (*Exodus* 34:6-7) "I am,...I am,...I am,..." says the God of being.

*Parashat Ki Tisa* challenges us with the following question: To have or to be? Two choices are laid out before us: to build idols or to enter the Tent of Meeting; to live in the

realm of ego, greed, and fear or to come out from our hiding places behind the calves of gold, to enter into the Tent of Meeting, and to emulate the God of being.

### Questions for Discussion

1. Can you cite some instances when we use "having" although we wish to express "being"?
2. What are today's incarnations of the golden calf?
3. How can we, like Moses, suspend ego, greed, and fear?
4. Following God's example of articulating the divine thirteen attributes, try using "I am" statements to express the essence of who you are.

### CALVES, CRISIS, AND COMMUNAL LEADERSHIP Peter Schaktman

When Moses fails to return at the expected time from his encounter with God on the mountain, his absence leads to the first major crisis since the Israelites crossed the Sea of Reeds, a crisis that will change the people forever. The desert uprising that culminates in the creation of the Golden Calf is also a test of leadership and of two leaders in particular—Moses and Aaron. Their respective responses to the matter at hand are instructive not only in the context of a people wandering through the wilderness but also to anyone who leads—or participates in—a religious community.

Inherent in any crisis of leadership are choices that have to be made. Rarely is the “right” choice self-evident. Embedded in every alternative are the values that inform it. What leadership choices were made by Aaron and Moses, and what values can be discerned in their respective responses to the throng they encountered?

First to confront the mob was Aaron, from whom the people demanded a tangible symbol to replace the missing Moses. The text of the Torah paints Aaron as acquiescent, cooperative, and unquestioning of their demands. In this episode, Aaron as leader is responsive to the desires of the assembled Israelites but in a way that fails to help the people move spiritually to where they need to be. His response, elicited by fear, is tragically ineffective in the end. Leadership decisions based on fear usually are.

For Moses, on the other hand, the crisis presented by the Golden Calf creates an opportunity for transformation, first of the leader and ultimately of the led. Up to this point of the narrative, Moses has been remarkably passive, doing God's bidding but taking little initiative of his own. No longer the man to whom God has to say, “Why do you cry

out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward” (Exodus 14:15), Moses now takes decisive action and in so doing owns his sacred responsibility. He shatters the tablets, literally breaking the covenant before the Israelites can be held fully accountable for its provisions. Unlike Aaron, who refers to the Israelites as a “they” who are inclined to evil, Moses reiterates his and God's identification with the people, appropriately excoriating them but ultimately persuading *Adonai* to restore and maintain their status as God's covenantal partners.

To remain cognizant of covenantal values even in the midst of a crisis is perhaps the most significant challenge facing all Jewish communal leaders in every generation. In extenuating Aaron's actions, the Rabbis emphasize this. They imagine that after Aaron was given the gold rings collected by the men, he turned his face heavenward and said: “To You, enthroned in heaven, I turn my eyes.’ You know all thoughts: It is against my will that I am about to do this” (*Tanchuma, Ki Tisa 19*). In their attempt to restore Aaron's reputation, the Rabbis thus create a scenario whereby his acceding to the popular will was necessary and seemingly the only alternative, something that is rarely the case in reality. Nevertheless, they emphasize Aaron's efforts in the midst of this confrontation to remain connected to his core values and, in this case, to the source of those values, God.

Moses demonstrates the same commitment in an even more palpable way later in the narrative when he sets as a condition of his continued leadership his being granted the opportunity to “know [God's] ways” (Exodus 33:13) and to “behold [God's] Presence” (Exodus 33:18).

Like Moses and Aaron, those of us who take part in Jewish communal life today deeply desire to experience God's essence, to see God or manifestations of God in all that we do. And like the Israelites in the wilderness, we sometimes express this desire in misguided ways. “When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, the people gathered against Aaron, *vayikahel ha-am al-Aharon*” (Exodus 32:1). Although Nahum Sarna points out that the preposition *al* used here suggests that the people's act had a menacing quality, it is perhaps the verb *vayikahel* that is more significant. This is the first time that this verb is applied to the people, the first time the group that left Egypt is described as having gathered as a *kahal*, “community,” rather than a chorus of malcontents. They are frightened, filled with anxiety and dread, and maybe even bent on evil, but they are a community. And it is in this context of community—and perhaps only in this context—that sacred relationships, as well as golden calves, can be forged. The challenge faced by our leaders today is to embody the sacred in all that they do so that our

communities can participate with them in sacred relationships and turn away from golden calves.

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## **AARON, MOSES, AND THE GOLDEN CALF**

Allison Bergman Vann

The responses of Aaron and Moses to the incident of the Golden Calf are strikingly different. Aaron fails to exert decisive leadership to prohibit this blatant act of idolatry. Nachmanides explains that “Aaron let the people loose, and left them without any counsel or instruction, so that they became like sheep scattered among the mountains without counselor and guide.” Aaron is unwilling to lead the people; instead, it seems, he let the people lead him.

Furthermore, it appears that Aaron is a collaborator—if not an instigator—in the creation of the idol. Yet he attempts to hide his role, by blaming the people who were “bent on evil.” He tries even further to shun blame by stating that the Golden Calf had simply appeared from the fire.

Moses, by contrast, acts more responsibly. When God tells him about the Golden Calf, Moses begins his descent back to his community. It is interesting that he does not destroy the stone tablets when he hears of the sin, but only after he sees the people dancing around the Golden Calf.

Perhaps Moses shatters the Ten Commandments when he realizes that the tablets themselves can be regarded as idols, and not as a means to cleave to God. A nineteenth-century commentator noted that, “There is no intrinsic holiness in things. Only God is intrinsically holy. Physical objects can be holy insofar as they lead people to God” (*Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary* [Philadelphia: JPS, 2001] p. 534).

Moses, the uncompromising idealist, is concerned about the connections that he and the people have to God. On the other hand, Aaron, the pragmatist and peacemaker, is preoccupied with preserving his own wellbeing and his popularity with the people.

Aaron’s leadership style is in stark contrast to that of Moses. Although Moses is humble, he stands up to scrutiny and challenge, while Aaron is quick to appease and coddle

the people. Moses is willing to see potential merit where Aaron sees evil. And, Moses takes the weight of the community’s sin on his shoulders, while Aaron is too weak to accept responsibility.

Later commentators depict Aaron as a victim. For example, a popular midrash informs us that Aaron acted simply to placate the people until Moses returned. We also read the following in *Tz’edah Ur’edah*, a seventeenth-century Eastern-European text comprised of Torah commentary, midrash, and ethical teachings:

Aaron told them, “Take your wives’ earrings and I will make a god of them.” He thought that the wives would not give over their jewelry so readily, thus allowing Moses more time to return. Aaron himself knew that Moses was to return the next day, but Israel, in their wickedness, refused to listen to him. Aaron feared that they would kill him, as they had killed Hur, his nephew.

Other midrashim follow the same line, excusing Aaron’s behavior with rationalizations, such as this: Aaron was attempting to follow God’s wishes, but feared for his life, and therefore he constructed the idol as a delaying tactic.

It is apparent that the ancient Rabbis understood the gravity of the sin of the Golden Calf, but they were concerned with upholding Aaron’s reputation. When Moses addresses God, he speaks of the people, not of Aaron. Moses successfully enables Aaron not only to preserve his life, but also to continue as a leader of the people, by establishing the Aaronide priesthood.

Yet, if we create a way out for Aaron despite his actions, then it is difficult to derive a sound lesson from the Golden Calf saga. Aaron’s rejection of responsibility and the midrashic painting of him as a victim can soften the powerful message of this narrative: it is important to own up to one’s actions.

Ever since the days when Adam blames Eve and Eve blames the serpent for the eating of the forbidden fruit, the attempt to transfer responsibility has been a powerful human tendency.

So many times, when we are accused of a wrongdoing, we quickly point a finger in the other direction. Whether or not that finger is pointed in the right direction, we are obliged to recognize that we have naturally defensive natures. I am struck by how Aaron’s reaction is so similar to my own or to what I have observed in others. Aaron reaction is, simply put, instinctive. Who, after all, wants to be wrong?

Yet, taking responsibility is a goal to be achieved and a sign

of spiritual maturity. In this instance, Moses is a superior teacher to Aaron.

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