

whoever does work on the sabbath day shall be put to death. ¹⁶The Israelite people shall keep the sabbath, observing the sabbath throughout the ages as a covenant for all time: ¹⁷it shall be a sign for all time between Me and the people of Israel. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day He ceased from work and was refreshed.

¹⁸When He finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, He gave Moses the two tablets of the Pact, stone tablets inscribed with the finger of God.

32 When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain,

16. The observance of *Shabbat* is the eternal obligation of those who participate in the covenant with God.

17. and was refreshed The Hebrew word *va-yinnafash* is derived from the noun *nefesh*, a term that can refer to a person's life essence, vitality, psychic energy, or essential character. The verbal form used here conveys the notion of a fresh infusion of spiritual and physical vigor, the revival of one's total being. Although the word here ascribes human characteristics to God, the language is in-

18. He finished The Midrash notes the similarity of the Hebrew for "He finished" (*kalloto*) and "his bride" (*kallato*), suggesting that when Moses received the Torah he was as joyous as a bridegroom on his wedding day (Exod. R. 41:6). The metaphor of giving the Torah as solemnizing a marriage between God and the Jewish people, with the Torah serving as the marriage document (*k'tubah*), occurs frequently in the Midrash. So does the metaphor of Israel's disobedience being like marital infidelity rather than simply the breaking of a law. Another *midrash* fastens on the similarity

קָדַשׁ לַיהוָה כָּל־הַעֲשֶׂה מְלָאכָה בַּיּוֹם
הַשַּׁבָּת מוֹת יוּמָת: ¹⁶ וְשָׁמְרוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל
אֶת־הַשַּׁבָּת לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת־הַשַּׁבָּת לְדוֹרֹתָם
בְּרִית עוֹלָם: ¹⁷ בֵּינִי וּבֵין בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אוֹת
הוּא לְעֹלָם כִּי־שָׁשֶׁת יָמִים עָשָׂה יְהוָה
אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי
שָׁבַת וַיִּנָּפֵשׁ: ס

שְׁנֵי ¹⁸ וַיִּתֵּן אֶל־מֹשֶׁה כָּכֹלֹתוֹ לְדַבֵּר אֹתוֹ בְּהָר
סִינִי שְׁנֵי לַחַת הָעֵדֻת לַחַת אֲבֵן כְּתָבִים
בְּאֶצְבַּע אֱלֹהִים:

לב וַיֵּרָא הָעָם כִּי־בָשַׁשׁ מֹשֶׁה לָרֶדֶת
מִן־הָהָר וַיִּקְהַל הָעָם עַל־אַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ

tended to impress on the Israelite an awareness of the transcendent value of *Shabbat* observance.

A CODA (v. 18)

This concluding verse, which tells of Moses receiving the tablets of stone, picks up where the last narrative left off—Moses' ascent of Mount Sinai to acquire those tokens of the Covenant (24:12–18). It also serves as the transition to the next episode, which involves the smashing of those tablets.

of the Hebrew words for "He finished" (*kalloto*) and "rule" (*k'lal*); it suggests that at Sinai God gave Moses general rules or principles from which Moses derived the specific details of the Torah's laws (Exod. R. 41:6). This would seem to point to a human element in the development of laws of the Torah. See Comment to 34:1. A *midrash* reads the Hebrew word for "stone" in "stone tablets" (*even*) as *av-ben* (father to son). The Torah was not given to one generation alone, nor was it given only to scholars and leaders. It was meant to be passed on from parent to child.

HALAKHAH L'MA'ASEH

31:16. shall keep Verses 16–17 are part of the Friday evening and Saturday morning liturgy, and they are recited in the Saturday morning *Kiddush*.

the people gathered against Aaron and said to him, "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." ²Aaron said to them, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." ³And all the people took off the gold rings that were in their ears and brought

אֵלָיו קוֹם | עֲשֵׂה-לָנוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר יֵלְכוּ
לְפָנֵינוּ כִּי-יָדָה | מֹשֶׁה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הֵעֲלָנוּ
מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לֹא יָדַעְנוּ מַה-הָיָה לוֹ:
² וַיֹּאמֶר אֶלֵהֶם אַהֲרֹן פָּרְקוּ נְזָמֵי הַזָּהָב
אֲשֶׁר בְּאָזְנֵי נְשֵׁיכֶם בְּנֵיכֶם וּבְנֹתֵיכֶם
וְהָבִיאוּ אֵלַי: ³ וַיִּתְּפוּרְקוּ כָל-הָעָם אֶת-
נְזָמֵי הַזָּהָב אֲשֶׁר בְּאָזְנֵיהֶם וַיָּבִיאוּ אֶל-

VIOLATION OF THE COVENANT: THE GOLDEN CALF (32:1–33:23)

The account of the tabernacle is briefly interrupted.

THE MAKING OF THE GOLDEN CALF (32:1–6)

1. This verse must be understood in reference to 24:18, which tells of Moses' ascent of the cloud-enveloped mountain and his seclusion there for 40 days and nights. Because Moses has been the exclusive mediator between God and Israel—at the urgent request of the people, as told in 20:15–18—his prolonged absence now causes deep anxiety, a mood made worse by the awareness of the impending departure from Sinai.

make us a god Something to serve as a symbol of God's presence in their midst. Rashbam suggests that they had in mind some instrument for determining the divine will as a replacement for Moses, the absent human medium of divine revelation.

who brought us And now has abandoned us. Even though Moses always stressed that he is only God's agent, they cannot feel God's presence without him.

3. gold rings These may have been among the items the Israelites received from neighbors when they left Egypt, as related in 11:2–3 and 12:35–36.

CHAPTER 32

1. The people—who only a few weeks earlier had been slaves in Egypt where they had witnessed Egyptian idolatry—could not comprehend a God without physical form, as the 2nd commandment called on them to do. (Moses later, in v. 11, refers to "Your people, whom You delivered from the land of Egypt," as if to remind God of the influences to which they had been subjected there. The Midrash compares the situation to that of a man who bought his son a store in a notoriously corrupt neighborhood and then blames the son for having been corrupted there.) The people needed a visible, tangible symbol of God's presence. They had just come from Egypt where everything, even death, was rendered visible (through pyramids and mummies). It was extremely hard for them to grasp the idea that the greatest reality of all is intangible. The text seems to imply that at least some of the people, who saw Moses as an embodiment of God, wanted the Golden Calf to replace the vanished Moses, without whom

they felt abandoned. According to Hirsch, the people did not understand that God had taken the initiative in reaching down to them, believing that Moses had the power to summon God. Without Moses, how would they ever be able to experience God's presence again?

Aaron is consistently portrayed in Jewish lore as a peacemaker and conciliator. Moses was the lawgiver proclaiming standards and prohibitions, the prophet who denounced those who fell short of those standards. Aaron in his priestly aspect met and accepted people where they were. Moses proclaimed, "You shall not!" Aaron welcomed people who brought their purification offerings to atone for their violations. Legends tell of Aaron's efforts to reconcile feuding individuals. In this instance, however, Aaron's inclination to accept, rather than to challenge, popular will led to misfortune.

3. The Talmud says of Israel: "What a peculiar people! When solicited to build the tabernacle, they give generously. When solicited to fashion an idol, they give equally generously" (JT Shek. 1:1).

them to Aaron. ⁴This he took from them and cast in a mold, and made it into a molten calf. And they exclaimed, "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!" ⁵When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron announced: "Tomorrow shall be a festival of the LORD!" ⁶Early next day, the people offered up burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; they sat down to eat and drink, and then rose to dance.

⁷The LORD spoke to Moses, "Hurry down, for your people, whom you brought out of the land

אֶהְרֹן: ⁴וַיִּקַּח מִיָּדָם וַיִּצַּר אֹתוֹ בְּחֶרֶט
וַיַּעֲשֶׂהוּ עֵגֶל מִסִּכָּה וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלֶּה אֱלֹהֵינוּ
יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הֵעֲלֵנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:
⁵וַיֵּרָא אֶהְרֹן וַיְבִן מִזְבֵּחַ לִפְנֵי וַיִּקְרָא
אֶהְרֹן וַיֹּאמֶר חֲגֵל לַיהוָה מָחָר: ⁶וַיִּשְׁכְּמוּ
מִמָּחָרֶת וַיַּעֲלוּ עֹלֹת וַיִּגִּשּׁוּ שְׁלָמִים וַיֵּשֶׁב
הָעָם לֶאֱכֹל וּשְׁתוֹ וַיִּקְמוּ לְצַחֵק: ^פ
⁷וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵּךְ-רֵד בִּי שָׁחַת
עַמֶּךָ אֲשֶׁר הֵעֲלִית מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם: ⁸סֵרוּ

4. molten Most likely a wooden model was overlaid with gold.

calf Hebrew: *eigel*; refers to a young bull. The bull in the ancient Near East was a symbol of lordship, leadership, strength, vital energy, and fertility and was either deified and worshiped or used to represent divinity. The Bible views the making of a calf as an idolatrous act. This is clearly shown by the Hebrew plural (*eileh elohekha*; literally, "these are your gods") in this verse and in verse 8 (translated here as "This is your god").

The reference here may be to the Canaanite god El, who was represented by a bull. Often, however, the bull, or another animal, served as a pedestal on which the god stood, elevated above humankind. The young bull made by Aaron may then have been a pedestal on which the invisible God of Israel was believed to be standing. His presence would be left to the imagination. Clearly, the people associated the manufactured image with the God who directs history, not with

a deity possessing mythologic associations, for Aaron proclaimed (v. 5) that the following day would be "a festival of the LORD" (*YHVH*). The people, in demanding "a god" because of Moses' disappearance, wanted an appropriate visible object that would recall the divine presence in their midst (see also Jeroboam's bulls in 1 Kings 12:26–30).

they exclaimed The ringleaders of the people, not Aaron.

6. Aaron plays no further role in this narrative.

GOD'S ANGER AND MOSES' INTERCESSION (vv. 7–14)

When the boisterous revelry has reached its height, God informs Moses of what is happening in the camp below.

7. your people A strong intimation of their alienation from God, in contrast to "My people," repeatedly employed until now in divine speech.

5. In an effort to minimize Aaron's culpability, the Talmud vowelizes the Hebrew words for "he built an altar" (*va-yiven mizbei-ah*) so that they mean "he understood because of the one who was killed" (*va-yaven mi-zavu-ah*). The talmudic sages envision an episode in which a leader who stood up to the mob (Hur, referred to in Exod. 17:10 and 24:14) was killed by them. In this interpretation, Aaron pretended to accede to the people's demands not solely to save his life but to prevent the people from committing another grave sin (BT Sanh. 7a).

7. Hurry down . . . from your exalted position on this mountaintop to be with your people at this perilous moment (BT Ber. 32a). "Hurry down," God tells Moses, "even as I did at Sodom, to see for yourself—rather than con-

demn them from afar" (Exod. R. 42:5). The Midrash asks why Moses was not angry at the Israelites as soon as God told him what they had done but waited until he had seen for himself. Did he doubt the veracity of God? The answer: One should never condemn another on the basis of hearsay, no matter how reliable the source (Exod. R. 46:1).

your people These words not only minimize God's relationship to them, they emphasize Moses' close relationship to them. "Moses devoted his life to three things: the Torah, the people Israel, and the pursuit of justice. As a reward, his name was permanently attached to all three: the Law of Moses, 'your people,' and 'you shall appoint judges like yourself'" (Mekh. Shirata 1).

of Egypt, have acted basely. ⁸They have been quick to turn aside from the way that I enjoined upon them. They have made themselves a molten calf and bowed low to it and sacrificed to it, saying: 'This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!'

⁹The LORD further said to Moses, "I see that this is a stiffnecked people. ¹⁰Now, let Me be, that My anger may blaze forth against them and that I may destroy them, and make of you a great nation." ¹¹But Moses implored the LORD his God, saying, "Let not Your anger, O LORD, blaze forth against Your people, whom You delivered from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand. ¹²Let not the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that He delivered them, only to kill them off in the mountains and an-

מִהָר מִן־הַהָרָה אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתָם עָשׂוּ לָהֶם
עֵגֶל מִסָּכָה וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ־לּוֹ וַיִּזְבְּחוּ־לּוֹ
וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלֶּהָ אֱלֹהֵיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הֵעֵלֹךְ
מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:

⁹ וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה רְאִיתִי אֶת־הָעָם
הַזֶּה וְהִנֵּה עַם־קָשֶׁה־עֶרְףְּ הוּא: ¹⁰ וְעַתָּה
הַנִּיחָה לִּי וַיִּחַר־אַפִּי בָהֶם וְאָכַלְתִּם
וְאַעֲשֶׂה אוֹתָךְ לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל: ¹¹ וַיַּחַל מֹשֶׁה
אֶת־פָּנָיו יְהוָה אֱלֹהָיו וַיֹּאמֶר לָמָּה יְהוָה
יִחַרָה אַפִּי בְעַמִּי אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתָ מֵאֶרֶץ
מִצְרַיִם בְּכַח גָּדוֹל וּבְיָד חֲזָקָה: ¹² לָמָּה
יֹאמְרוּ מִצְרַיִם לֵאמֹר בְּרָעָה הוֹצִיאָם
לְהָרֵג אֹתָם בְּהָרִים וּלְכַלֵּתָם מֵעַל פְּנֵי

8. to turn aside from the way The text does not say "from Me"; the people have adopted pagan modes of worship, but still they worship the God of Israel.

9. I see Divine "seeing" as opposed to Aaron's "seeing" in verse 5.

stiffnecked A frequent image of obstinacy, derived from the farmer's experience with work animals. When an animal's neck is stiff, it is hard for the driver using the reins to turn it in any direction.

10. a great nation The phrase evokes the di-

vine promises made by God to Abraham and is seized on at once by Moses.

11. Moses rejects God's offer to make his own descendants the sole heirs to the promises made to the patriarchs. This unselfish characteristic is again displayed in verse 32.

12. The effect of the events of the Exodus would now be undone, for the basic objective of the events in Egypt was that the Egyptians might "know" the Lord, i.e., recognize His incomparable nature.

9. a stiffnecked people Ami is quoted in the Midrash: "Is that a criticism? Rather it is to their credit. That stubbornness is what has permitted us to remain Jews" (Exod. R. 42:9). According to Abravanel, to be stiffnecked means to be unable to turn one's head and look down the road to see the consequences of one's actions.

10. let Me be In the words of the Midrash: Who is stopping God—that God must say, "Let Me be"? It seems to be a hint that God wants to be talked out of such fierce anger (Exod. R. 42:9). This may have encouraged Moses' intercession on the people's behalf. A striking *midrash* pictures God as a wife and Moses as God's husband (*ish ha-elohim*, "the man of God" [Deut. 33:1], understood as "the husband of God") exercising his right to cancel God's vow, as a husband in ancient times could annul a vow that had been made by his wife in his hearing; see Num. 30:14 (Exod. R. 43:4). The Mid-

rash envisions God saying, "Whenever I win an argument with My children, as at the time of the Flood or of Sodom and Gomorrah, I lose" (i.e., God ends up destroying culpable human beings). "Whenever I lose an argument, I win" (as here, when Moses persuades God not to punish Israel) (PR 21).

11. Moses implored The unusual Hebrew verb translated as "implore" (*va-y'hal*) resembles the verb meaning "to be sick," which prompted the Midrash to suggest that Moses became physically ill when he realized what the people had done. God then responded, not so much to Moses' argument as to the strength of his love for and identification with his people (Exod. R. 43:4).

12. Let not the Egyptians say Should God renounce the people now, not only Israel will suffer but God's reputation, so to speak, would be diminished as well.

nihilate them from the face of the earth.' Turn from Your blazing anger, and renounce the plan to punish Your people. ¹³Remember Your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, how You swore to them by Your Self and said to them: I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, and I will give to your offspring this whole land of which I spoke, to possess forever." ¹⁴And the LORD renounced the punishment He had planned to bring upon His people.

¹⁵Thereupon Moses turned and went down from the mountain bearing the two tablets of the Pact, tablets inscribed on both their surfaces: they were inscribed on the one side and on the other. ¹⁶The tablets were God's work, and the writing was God's writing, incised upon the tablets. ¹⁷When Joshua heard the sound of the people in its boisterousness, he said to Moses, "There is a cry of war in the camp." ¹⁸But he answered,

"It is not the sound of the tune of triumph,
Or the sound of the tune of defeat;
It is the sound of song that I hear!"

¹⁹As soon as Moses came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, he became en-

הָאָדָמָה שׁוֹב מִחֵרוֹן אַפֶּיךָ וְהִנָּתָם עַל-
הָרָעָה לְעַמֶּךָ: ¹³זָכֹר לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק
וּלְיִשְׂרָאֵל עַבְדֶּיךָ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתָּ לָהֶם בְּךָ
וַתְּדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים אֲרִבָּה אֶת-זֶרְעֲכֶם כְּכּוֹכְבֵי
הַשָּׁמַיִם וְכָל-הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר אָמַרְתִּי
אֲתָן לְזֶרְעֲכֶם וְנָחֳלוּ לָעַלְמָּה: ¹⁴וַיִּנָּחֶם
יְהוָה עַל-הָרָעָה אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר לַעֲשׂוֹת
לְעַמּוֹ: פ

¹⁵וַיִּפֶּן וַיֵּרֶד מֹשֶׁה מִן-הָהָר וּשְׁנֵי לַחַת
הָעֵדֻת בְּיָדוֹ לַחַת כְּתָבִים מִשְׁנֵי עֲבָרֵיהֶם
מִזֶּה וּמִזֶּה הֵם כְּתָבִים: ¹⁶וְהַלָּחַת מַעֲשֵׂה
אֱלֹהִים הֵמָּה וְהַמְּכָתֵב מִכְּתָב אֱלֹהִים
הוּא חֲרוּת עַל-הַלָּחַת: ¹⁷וַיִּשְׁמַע יְהוֹשֻׁעַ
אֶת-קוֹל הָעָם בָּרֶעָה בָּרָעוּ וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-
מֹשֶׁה קוֹל מִלְחָמָה בַּמַּחֲנֶה: ¹⁸וַיֹּאמֶר

אֵין קוֹל עֲנֹת גְּבוּרָה
וְאֵין קוֹל עֲנֹת חַלּוּשָׁה
קוֹל עֲנֹת אֲנָכִי שֹׁמֵעַ:

¹⁹וַיְהִי כַּאֲשֶׁר קָרַב אֶל-הַמַּחֲנֶה וַיֵּרָא

13. Remember See Comment to 2:24.

14. the LORD renounced Moses' intercession succeeded in averting the threatened punishment.

MOSES SMASHES THE TABLETS AND
DESTROYS THE CALF (vv. 15–20)

15. bearing the two tablets Although their size is not recorded here, their maximum dimensions can be determined by the size of the Ark in which they were to repose, as presented in 25:10.

16. God's work . . . God's writing This verse amplifies God's instruction to Moses in 24:12.

incised Hebrew: *harut*; found in the Bible only here.

17. Joshua He was stationed partway up the mountain awaiting Moses' return, as told in 24:13; thus he could hear the rising din but could not view the scene.

18. But he answered Verses 7 and 8 tell us that Moses has already been informed.

19. As Moses approaches the camp and wit-

13. Remember Your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Israel The reference to the patriarchs here involves the concept known as "the merit of the ancestors" (*z'khut avot*). Our own failings are balanced in part by the remembered virtues of our forebears. Solomon Schechter translated this concept felicitously as "original virtue," in contrast to the notion of "original sin" inherited from one's ancestors. The Mid-

rash here compares Israel to a grapevine. Just as branches bearing new grapes support themselves on earlier, dead branches, so the Israelites and later generations of Jews are supported and sustained by the example and memory of their departed ancestors (Exod. R. 44:1).

19. A Rabbinic legend describes Moses, a man of advanced age, carrying the heavy stone tablets down the mountainside with ease. But

ragged; and he hurled the tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain.²⁰ He took the calf that they had made and burned it; he ground it to powder and strewed it upon the water and so made the Israelites drink it.

²¹Moses said to Aaron, "What did this people do to you that you have brought such great sin upon them?" ²²Aaron said, "Let not my lord be enraged. You know that this people is bent on evil. ²³They said to me, 'Make us a god to lead us; for that man Moses, who brought us from

אֶת־הָעֵגֶל וּמָחַלֹת וַיַּחֲרֹךְ אֹפֶן מִשָּׁה וַיִּשְׁלֹךְ
מִיָּדוֹ מִיָּדָיו אֶת־הַלְּחֹת וַיִּשְׁבֵּר אֹתָם תַּחַת
הָהָר: ²⁰ וַיִּקַּח אֶת־הָעֵגֶל אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ
וַיִּשְׂרֹף בָּאֵשׁ וַיִּטְחֶן עַד אֲשֶׁר־דָּק וַיִּזֹּר
עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם וַיִּשְׁק אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:
²¹ וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־אַהֲרֹן מַה־עָשִׂיתָ לָּךְ
הָעָם הַזֶּה כִּי־הִבְאֵתָ עָלָיו חַטָּאת גְּדוֹלָה:
²² וַיֹּאמֶר אַהֲרֹן אֶל־יְהוָה אֵף אֲדֹנָי אֲתָה
יָדַעְתָּ אֶת־הָעָם כִּי בָרַע הוּא: ²³ וַיֹּאמְרוּ
לִי עֲשֵׂה־לָּנוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר יִלְכוּ לִפְנֵינוּ

nesses the scene, he realizes the full extent of the people's degradation and recognizes the enormity of their sin. He no longer is thinking of appeasing God. He, too, burns with anger.

he hurled the tablets This was not an impetuous act; rather, it quite deliberately signified the abrogation of the Covenant. In ancient Near Eastern legal terminology "to break the tablet" means to invalidate or repudiate a document or agreement.

at the foot of the mountain Where the people were assembled.

20. The same series of destructive acts is found in the description of the annihilation of the god Mot, god of the underworld, in Ugaritic literature. It conveys a picture of the total annihilation of the obnoxious object.

water Unidentified here, the water is described in Deut. 9:21 as "the brook that comes

down from the mountain." This implies a single source of water for the entire camp so that, apparently, no individual could escape drinking the mixture.

made the Israelites drink it And thereby to identify the transgressors (cf. the trial by ordeal in Num. 5:12–31).

AARON'S APOLOGIA (vv. 21–24)

Moses breaks his silence. The question he puts to Aaron is actually a harsh rebuke.

21. great sin This is a legal term. Found in ancient Near Eastern marriage contracts, it always refers to adultery, suggesting here that the worship of the Golden Calf is an act of gross infidelity.

22–24. Aaron excuses himself by reviling the people and glossing over his involvement in the making of the calf image. He also claims that he did not fashion it, implying divine approval!

when he sees the Israelites dancing around the Golden Calf, the letters fly off the tablets, which become two large blank stones. At that point, they become too much for Moses to carry; they fall from his grasp and break. When Moses felt he was bringing God's word to a people eager to receive it, he was capable of doing something difficult and demanding. When he had reason to suspect that his efforts were in vain, the task became too hard for him (PdRE 45). Another *midrash* pictures Moses deliberately breaking the tablets of stone, not out of anger or a sense that Israel was not worthy of them but to destroy the evidence that Israel had ever been commanded not to worship idols (Exod. R. 43:1). "Sometimes, canceling the Torah is the only way to save it" (BT Men. 99b).

A 19th-century commentator observes that Moses here makes the point that there is no intrinsic holiness in things. Only God is intrinsically holy. Physical objects can be holy only insofar as they lead people to God. When Israel disregards the words on the stone tablets, they become mere stones (*Meshekh Hōkhmah*).

Hirsch asks why Moses broke the tablets in despair only when he saw the Israelites dancing around the Calf (v. 19)—and not earlier, when he learned of their transgression (v. 8). He answers his own question: "When false conceptions of idolatry are rooted merely in the intellect, they can be eradicated by intellectual argument and instruction." When the attachment to wrongdoing reaches the emotional level, however, it becomes nearly impossible to talk people out of it.

the land of Egypt—we do not know what has happened to him.’²⁴ So I said to them, ‘Whoever has gold, take it off!’ They gave it to me and I hurled it into the fire and out came this calf!”

²⁵Moses saw that the people were out of control—since Aaron had let them get out of control—so that they were a menace to any who might oppose them. ²⁶Moses stood up in the gate of the camp and said, “Whoever is for the LORD, come here!” And all the Levites rallied to him. ²⁷He said to them, “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Each of you put sword on thigh, go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay brother, neighbor, and kin.” ²⁸The Levites did as Moses had bidden; and some three thousand of the people fell that day. ²⁹And Moses said, “Dedicate yourselves to the LORD this day—for each of you has been against son and brother—that He may bestow a blessing upon you today.”

³⁰The next day Moses said to the people, “You

בִּיָּזָה | מֹשֶׁה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלָנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ
מִצְרַיִם לֹא יִדְעֵנוּ מַה-הָיָה לוֹ: ²⁴ וְאָמַר
לָהֶם לְמִי זָהָב הִתְפַּרְקוּ וַיִּתְּנוּ-לִי
וַאֲשַׁלְכֵהוּ בָאֵשׁ וַיֵּצֵא הָעֵגֶל הַזֶּה:

²⁵ וַיֵּרָא מֹשֶׁה אֶת-הָעָם כִּי פָרַע הוּא
כִּי-פָרַעַה אֶהְרֹן לְשִׁמְצָה בְּקִמְיָהֶם:
²⁶ וַיַּעֲמֵד מֹשֶׁה בְּשַׁעַר הַמַּחֲנֶה וַיֹּאמֶר מִי
לַיהוָה אֵלָי וַיֵּאֲסֹפוּ אֵלָיו כָּל-בְּנֵי לֵוִי:
²⁷ וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם כֹּה-אָמַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל שִׁימוּ אִישׁ-חֶרֶב עַל-יָרְכוֹ עֲבְדוּ
וְשׁוּבוּ מִשַּׁעַר לְשַׁעַר בְּמַחֲנֶה וְהָרְגוּ אִישׁ-
אֶת-אָחִיו וְאִישׁ אֶת-רֵעֵהוּ וְאִישׁ אֶת-
קָרְבוֹ: ²⁸ וַיַּעֲשׂוּ בְנֵי-לֵוִי כְדִבְרֵי מֹשֶׁה וַיִּפֹּל
מִן-הָעָם בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא כְּשִׁלְשֹׁת אֲלָפֵי
אִישׁ: ²⁹ וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה מֵלֹאֹ יִדְכֶם הַיּוֹם
לַיהוָה כִּי אִישׁ בָּבְנוּ וּבָאָחִיו וּלְתַת
עֲלֵיכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּרָכָה:

³⁰ וַיְהִי מִמָּחָרָת וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-הָעָם

out came this calf As though it produced itself.

SELECTION OF THE LEVITES (vv. 25–29)

The destruction of the Golden Calf sparks a riot among its worshipers. The Levites are called in to suppress it and to punish the guilty ones.

25. since Aaron . . . out of control This is a clear rejection of Aaron’s lame excuse and a condemnation of his action.

26. all the Levites Moses’ own tribe. They remained faithful to the Covenant and maintained the purity of Israel’s worship. This is the foundation story for the special place of the Levites in Israelite religion.

27. Thus says the LORD This solemn formula is employed here to signify that the assignment to the Levites is beyond the right of any human authority to impose. It cannot be taken as a precedent for the disposition of future cases.

slay brother They must be absolutely impartial while carrying out their grim task.

MOSES’ SECOND INTERCESSION

(vv. 30–34)

Moses, through his first intercession with God, secured the annulment of the divine decree to destroy Israel. Now he attempts to gain complete forgiveness for the people.

30. The next day After the carnage.

27. This is indeed a harsh measure, made intelligible by the realization that the idolatry of the calf worshipers very nearly caused God to give up on everyone, ending the Israelite enterprise almost as soon as it had begun. The Midrash recalls that the Levites’ eponymous ancestor, Levi son of Jacob, did something similar when he slaughtered the men of Shechem to avenge the dishonoring of his sister, Dinah; see Gen. 34 (Sifrei Deut. 349). The tribe of Levi

would soon be asked to sublimate its fierce passion in the task of guarding and transporting the portable shrine. Just as the people have to learn not to treat an idol as an embodiment of God, God has to learn not to expect the average person to comprehend a totally abstract, invisible deity. The answer to the quest for a representation is not a Golden Calf but the tabernacle, as discussed in the previous and subsequent *parashiyyot*.

have been guilty of a great sin. Yet I will now go up to the LORD; perhaps I may win forgiveness for your sin.” ³¹Moses went back to the LORD 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!” ³³But the LORD said to Moses, “He who has sinned against Me, him only will I erase from My record. ³⁴Go now, lead the people where I told you. See, My angel shall go before you. But when I make an accounting, I will bring them to account for their sins.”

³⁵Then the LORD sent a plague upon the people, for what they did with the calf that Aaron made.

33 Then the LORD said to Moses, “Set out from here, you and the people that you have

אתם חטאתם חטאה גדלה ועתה אעלה
אל־יהוה אולי אכפרה בעד חטאתכם:
³¹וישב משה אל־יהוה ויאמר אנא חטא
העם הזה חטאה גדלה ויעשו להם אלהי
זהב: ³²ועתה אם־תשא חטאתם ואם־
אין מחני נא מספרך אשר כתבת:
³³ויאמר יהוה אל־משה מי אשר חטא־
לי אמחנו מספרי: ³⁴ועתה לך | נחה
את־העם אל אשר־דברתי לך הנה*
מלאכי ילך לפניך וביום פקדי ופקדתי
עליהם חטאתם:

³⁵ויגף יהוה את־העם על אשר עשו
את־העגל אשר עשה אהרן: ס

לג וידבר יהוה אל־משה לך
עלה מזה אתה והעם אשר העלית

v. 34. סבירין ומטעין "והנה"

go up To the summit of Sinai.

31-32. The prayer blends confession with a plea for pardon. And another element is introduced: Moses ties his personal destiny to his people's fate. There can hardly be a more impressive example of selfless "love of Israel."

erase me from the record This request seems to reflect a widespread ancient Near Eastern popular belief in the existence of heavenly "books." Here, Moses' request is framed in the figurative language of the book of life. He is asking to die if Israel is not forgiven.

33-34. God responds to Moses' entreaty, demanding individual accountability. In addition, the people as a whole bear collective responsibility. Divine promises of national territory made to the people of Israel are unalterable, but total absolution for the sin of the Golden Calf cannot be given. The Israelites receive a suspended sentence; they are on probation. The punishment, however, will come in due time (see Ezek. 20).

35. This verse belongs after verse 20, where it would indicate that the water ordeal caused the guilty ones to be stricken—the goal of a similar procedure to be followed in the case of a suspected

adulteress (Num. 5). The calf worshipers thus would have been readily identifiable to the Levites.

for what they did This difficult phrase seems to mean that Aaron and the people shared the blame equally; they, for demanding a visible "god"; he, for yielding to them.

MOSES SEEKS GOD'S CONTINUED PRESENCE (33:1-23)

Although Moses' intercession saves the people from annihilation, the Israelites have not yet secured full pardon and reconciliation with God. The unifying theme of this chapter is Moses' concern for the continued presence of God in the midst of His people, as symbolized by the mobile sanctuary.

WITHDRAWAL OF THE DIVINE PRESENCE (vv. 1-6)

Implementation of the punishment decreed in 32:10 has been suspended, only because of God's promise to the patriarchs (32:13), not because of the people's merit.

I. Set out Hebrew: *lekh alei*; literally "go, ascend." This is in contrast to 32:7, *lekh red*, "go,