

**Israel's Original Sin**  
***Parashat Ki Tissa***  
**Beth Shalom, Cambridge, 2009**

Our *parasha* contains an extraordinary narrative transition. Exodus chapter 31 concludes with the climax of the divine revelation on top of the mountain, “When God finished speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai, He gave him the two tablets of the Pact, stone tablets inscribed with the finger of God.” The unique revelation has been completed, now the essence of that revelation is transmitted to Moses in a physical form, as a permanent record to accompany the Israelite people throughout the generations.

At that climactic moment, there is a lightning shift of scene—we can imagine it in a movie—from the top of the mountain to its base, juxtaposing the interaction between God and Moses with the behaviour of the people down below. In just six verses, we read an account of activities that appear to be the absolute antithesis of what has occurred above. The Israelites prevail on Aaron to make a god for them that they can see, he collects their gold jewellery, melts it down and fashions a calf, the people exclaim, in some of the most chilling words of the Bible, a terrifying inversion of the first commandment on the tablets: *Eleh elohekha Yisrael, asher he-elukha me-Eretz Mitzrayim*, “This is your god, (literally, “These are your gods”), O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt,” and then the following day the people arise early (*va-yashkimu* – ironically the same verb used of Abraham to fulfil God’s commandment of the *Akedah*) to offer sacrifices, they eat and drink, and rise *le-tsahek*, variously translated, to make merry, to revel, to dance, suggesting some kind of sacred orgy.

It is astonishing that this passage ever made it into the Bible. There are very few instances of nations preserving in a privileged position of their founding narrative an account of such breathtaking national failure. Other failings are also recounted with painful forthrightness in the Torah—the constant murmuring and complaining, the rebellion led by Korah and his allies against the leadership of Moses and Aaron, the failure of will in response to the majority report of the scouts. But nothing is as serious as this. It is, as one scholar has put it, the original sin of the Israelite people, an account of national apostasy accompanying the very birth of the nation.

It leads God to propose an act of genocide, and it takes all the persuasive powers of Moses to salvage a future for the people of Israel. How

easy it would have been to suppress this narrative, to repress the collective historical memory of whatever reality underlies the verses at the beginning of chapter 32. The presence of these verses in our Torah is amazing testimony to the fearless honesty of the Biblical tradition, and to its capacity for caustic self-criticism later reflected in the Prophets.

As painful as it is to read these verses as an account of behaviour in the distant past, the image of the golden calf has also had a long legacy of application to the present. Jewish preachers have used it in the rhetoric of self-criticism. To take just one example, the American progressive rabbi Emil G. Hirsch, excoriating the materialism of some Jews near the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, said that these Jews “not only worship the golden calf—but pick up the pieces of the broken tablets and try to sell them”.<sup>1</sup>

More important, it is a source of anguish to see the way it has served to foster antagonism between Christians and Jews. This narrative has a long sombre history of being removed from its original context of internal, self-criticism, and used as a weapon of attack against the Jews by Christian preachers and polemicists. It begins in the Jerusalem oration of Stephen, recorded in the 7<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Book of Acts: “They made the bull-calf, and offered sacrifice to the idol, and held a feast in honour of the thing their hands had made. But God turned away from them and gave them over to the worship of the hosts of heaven” (Acts 7:41-42).

As documented in a study by an Italian scholar, translated into English as *The Golden Calf and the Origins of the Anti-Jewish Controversy* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), many of the Church Fathers took elements of this narrative and presented them as a paradigm not just for the Jews in biblical times but for the Jews throughout history:

- as an apostate people constantly rebelling against God;
- as a carnal, sensual people whose religious celebration reaches a pinnacle with eating and drinking and orgiastic dancing;
- as a corporeal, materialistic people, unwilling to accept an abstract, invisible god, insisting on a god they could touch and see.

(The irony of accusing Jews of corporealism as exemplified by the golden calf narrative, when it was Christian theology that required an incarnation of God in a human being and led to Christians throughout history standing before an image on a cross and saying, in effect, “This is your God, O [new] Israel”—that irony does not seem to have dawned on the writers.)

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Gershon Greenberg, “The Significance of America in David Einhorn’s Conception of History”, *AJHQ* 63 (1973): 163; I owe this reference to Naomi Cohen.

Even in the modern period, when anti-Jewish ideologies broke their ties with Christian religion, the power of the golden calf episode as paradigmatic of Jewish behaviour remains unabated. In a publication called “The Rabbi’s Speech” based on the novel “Biarritz,” one of the two main sources for the infamous Protocols of the Elders of Zion, a Rabbi is reported to proclaim proudly to his fellow Israelites at a secret meeting in the cemetery of Prague, “Ours is that God of today whom Aaron raised up for us in the desert, that Golden Calf, that universal deity of the age.”

And in his earliest recorded anti-Semitic letter, from 1919 at the very beginning of his political career, Hitler wrote, “There lives amongst us a non-German, alien race, unwilling and indeed unable to shed its racial characteristics, its particular feelings, thoughts and ambitions and nevertheless enjoying the same political rights as we ourselves do. And since even the Jew’s feelings are limited to the purely material realm, his thoughts and ambitions are bound to be so even more strongly. Their dance around the golden calf becomes a ruthless struggle for all the possessions that we prize most highly on earth.” In these texts, the golden calf is an image of Jewish materialism and preoccupation with wealth—ignoring the detail that in the narrative the Israelites give up their gold jewellery to be refashioned in an image that they will no longer possess.

Let me suggest a way of escaping this rather sordid and depressing story of the golden calf as a trigger for intolerance through an alternative reading. This narrative might be read to illustrate a tension between two components of the religious sensibility that are present in both Judaism *and* Christianity and other religious traditions (a tension that I believe is also the central theme of Peter Shaffer’s play *Equus*, which had a re-opened in London). There is the religious impulse bound up with an intense absorption of the entire human being, sense as well as intellect, body as well as spirit. We see this in

- the Bacchic orgies and the Dionysiac revels of the pagan Greeks and Romans,
- the ecstatic dances of the whirling dervishes in medieval Turkey,
- the trance-like chantings of the Hare Krishna followers,
- the emotional outpourings of the Christian revivalists and Jesus-freaks,
- the singing and dancing of Hasidim around their rebbe who is understood to be a channel for the flow of divine energy into the world.

There is, to be honest, something appealing in this form of religiosity, which may lead to an experience of overwhelming intensity that few of us know. Dancing ecstatically around the golden calf may indeed have been a more intense and exhilarating experience than living a life regulated by the Ten Commandments, and *kal ve-homer* than a life regulated by the totality of the rules understood to be the substance of divine revelation, with their ritual *and* ethical demands.

The other component of these religions, the one we identify especially with the classical Jewish tradition, is suspicious that this sensual mode of religious expression

- idealizes personal self-indulgence and self-gratification at the expense of social responsibility;
- that it makes the cultivation of one's own private emotional experience paramount over the bonds that link us to other human beings;
- that it may lead to the pothead whose ultimate value is a drug-induced high, to the "emancipated" playboys and playgirls whose only criterion for sexual activity is the quality of their own orgasm, or to the fanatic whose ultimate aspiration is a quick entry to paradise through suicide bomb self-destruction alongside many others.

This alternative ethic of Judaism and Christianity and Islam alike teaches that the most ennobling experience in life is not in the gratification of our impulses, however rapturous and exhilarating this may be, but in transcending ourselves in relationships with others, in moulding our lives through the guidance, structure and discipline of tradition.

Yet there is extremism in this direction as well, one that we know all too well from some groups within the Jewish community: a religious life so entirely disciplined and regimented by rules governing every detail of ritual behaviour, based on the belief that every such detail is commanded by God, that the true religious impulse may be stifled.

Last Sunday's *Observer* [March 8, 2009] carried an article about a shrine at the burial place of an 18<sup>th</sup>-century Muslim mystic at the foot of the Khyber Pass in Pakistan. For centuries, Muslim musicians and poets have gathered to sing their songs to the saint by the light of the moon. About 10 years ago, a Wahhabi *madrassa* was founded nearby, and the director denounced the activities at the shrine as idolatry, saying "Music is against Islam. Musical instruments lead men astray and are sinful. They are forbidden, and these musicians are wrongdoers". Ten days ago, on Thursday, March 5, a few hours after the Sri Lankan cricketers were ambushed in Lahore, the shrine was blown up by Wahhabi fundamentalists.

(Compare the model of Moses confronting the Golden Calf with violence and bloodshed (Exod. 32: 28); our own tradition is not free from the potential for such fanaticism.)

Our challenge, as Progressive Jews is to find the proper balance between these two components of the religious life: to promote a model in which the guidance and structure of tradition will be paramount while preventing it from becoming stultifying and rigid, to foster the role of personal religious experience without allowing it to become a self-indulgent substitute for our obligations to others.

But the Golden Calf is, ultimately, an idol. The God of our tradition bids us discover that it is not in mystical ecstasy, but in the far more prosaic *mitzvot* of “normal” life in the context of family and friendship and society, guided by the divine ideals of ethical conduct, that we can both serve God and find our greatest fulfillment.