

Selected Shorts: Ki Tissa
Rabbi Eliot Malomet March 6, 2021 22 Adar 5781 Shabbat Parah

שמות ל"ב
(יב) כִּי תִשָּׂא אֶת־רֹאשׁ בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל...

Exodus 30:12

(12) *When you take a census of the Israelite people... We have some unfinished mishkan business. Instructions for a half-shekel per person assessment; the copper washstand, the anointing oil, the aromatic incense, and the designation of Betzalel (his name is short for betzelem Elohim) as head "image of God" to oversee the project.*

שמות ל"א:ז-י"ז
(טז) וְשִׁמְרוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־הַשְּׁבֻט לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת־הַשְּׁבֻט לְדֹרֹתָם בְּרִית עֹלָם: (יז) בֵּינִי וּבֵין בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֵזֶה הוּא לְעֹלָם כִּי־עָשִׂיתָ יָמִים עֲשָׂה ה' אֶת־הַשְּׂמָמִים וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ וּבִיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שָׁבַת וַיִּנְפְּשׁ:

Exodus 31:16-17

(16) *The Israelite people shall keep the sabbath, observing the sabbath throughout the ages as a covenant for all time: (17) it 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.* Shabbat is Judaism compressed in one mitzva. Why the need to insert a passage on Shabbat in the middle of the *mishkan* instructions? The *mishkan* consecrates space; Shabbat consecrates time. The *mishkan* represents the covenantal relationship in space; Shabbat represents the covenantal relationship in time. Shabbat re-enacts the drama of creation; the *mishkan* is the mirror of creation in seven stages.

שמות ל"ב:א
(א) בִּיַּרְא הָעָם כִּי־בִשְׁשׁ מִשָּׁה לָרְדַת מֹרֶה־הָרַר

Exodus 32:1

The people saw that Moses delayed descending from the mountain Why does Moses delay? Does he want to remain up there? Is the catastrophe due to Moses' indulgence or the people's impatience? *the people gathered against Aaron... We have had different kinds of assemblies, group movement, collective activity, complaining, singing and war prior to this moment, but this is the first time that the people assembles by itself without an initiator. Bored, frustrated, angry, worried, fearful, the rumblings mount and the formation of a mob is inevitable and irresistible. The primitive political instrument emerges*

to satisfy the deepest human needs. We have to appreciate what Aaron feels right now: "HELP!" *and they said to him, "Come, make us a god"* This declaration makes us recoil. We can empathize with their feelings of urgency and trauma, but not with their primitive yearnings for a comforting and reassuring idol. And yet, we all possess an idolatrous instinct: "idolatry is one resolution of the human dilemma" (Zornberg). How else to understand the universal veneration of power, celebrity, nature, and beauty? How else to understand the challenge of an invisible God? Like a dream, this story asks us to take a leap of empathy into the lives of all the characters and imagine what they experience.

who shall go before us... This is the deeply human desire to be led by a power. *for that man Moses...* Do we detect a little anger here? They feel abandoned. *who brought us from the land of Egypt— Ouch!* This is the great theological switch. The entire Passover Seder is the ritual inversion of this calamitous claim!

לֹא יָדַעְנוּ מָה־הָיָה לוֹ:
We do not know what has happened to him. The people does not have the emotional maturity to deal with his absence. They've already replaced God with Moses, and now want to replace Moses with a god.

שמות ל"ב:ה'
(ה) בִּיַּרְא אֶהָרִן בִּנְכוּן מִזְבֵּחַ לְפָנָיו וַיִּקְרָא אֶהָרִן וַיֹּאמֶר תַּג לֵה' מִחָר:

Exodus 32:5

(5) *When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron announced: "Tomorrow shall be a festival of the LORD!"* Having asked for and collected the gold earrings, having smelted them, and having poured the gold into the mold, having presented the finished product to the exaltation of the people, "This is your God, Israel!" it is clear that Aaron is running out of delaying tactics. Opposition would have meant death; but delay is now complicity. *Aaron saw* exactly what? That he could perhaps buy a little more time? That he might yet be able to deflect the people's passion? *If only my brother would hurry up already!* What is he going to do? To do nothing invites suspi-

cion. As a priest, he does a priestly thing: he builds an altar and declares a ceremonial feast. He is now fully complicit. And, he trapped himself.

שמות ל"ב:ו'

(ו) וישלמו ממחרת ויעלו עלת ויגשו שלמים וישב העם לאכל ושתו ויקמו לצחק:

Exodus 32:6

(6) *They got up early the next day and offered up burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; they sat down to eat and drink, and then rose to make merry.* The day starts with piety. They are eager to worship with dawn. Their sacrifices are solemn but they turn festive. Why not? They are simply imitating what Moses' does with Yitro (prior) and with the leadership at Mount Sinai. We detect a hint of populist envy here: *The elites have had their solemn feasts, and we've gotten what? Manna!* Loosened by food and drink, the people take the festivity to the next level. לצחק has a broad semantic range, but we can rule out volleyball and comedy shows. In their primal piety the private is public; sex, the most powerful human force, is channeled for worship.

שמות ל"ב:ז'

(ז) וידבר ה' אל-משה לך-יד כי שחת עמך אשר העלית מארץ מצרים:

Exodus 32:7

(7) *The LORD spoke to Moses, "Hurry down, for your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt, have acted basely.* We have to have empathy for God here as well. The sarcasm and irony reflect the depth of the divine hurt.

שמות ל"ב:י'

(י) ועתה הגיחה לי ויסר-אפי בהם ואכלם ואעשה אותך לגוי גדול:

Exodus 32:10

(10) *Now, let Me be, that My anger may blaze forth against them and that I may destroy them, and make of you a great nation.* So great is God's injury, that God is willing to deploy the Noah strategy: destroy and start over with one good man (is there a hint of Noah in the word *haniha*?). Moses, out of a sense of realism and responsibility, is not interested in entertaining this idea for a millisecond. He redirects God's anger, and implores God to relent (*vayenahem*). Arguably, this is Moses' finest hour.

(יט) ויהי כאשר קרב אל-המחנה וירא את-העגל ומהלת ויסר-אף משה וישלף מינדיו את-הלוח וישבר אותם תחת החר:

Exodus 32:19

(19) *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. The letters flew off the tablets. Purged of the sacred words inscribed by God, all that remained was blank stone (Midrash). Thus they became too heavy for Moses to carry so he dropped them. Or did he cast them? Deliberate or impulsive? If it is an impulsive act it satisfies his anger. If it is deliberate, it subverts the idolatrous impulse and shatters the spell of the fetishized object.

שמות ל"ד:ד'

(ד) ויפסל שגיר-לוחת אבנים פראשנים וישפם משה בבקר ויעל אל-הר סיני פאשר צנה ה' אתו ויקח בגדו שגיר לוחת אבנים:

Exodus 34:4

(4) *So Moses carved two tablets of stone, like the first, and early in the morning he went up on Mount Sinai, as the LORD had commanded him, taking the two stone tablets with him.* This is the ultimate do-over. But whereas God fashioned the first set, Moses fashioned what would become the permanent set. The midrash places both sets, the broken and the whole, in the Ark, serving as a permanent reminder of the rupture of the relationship, and an eternal symbol of its restoration.

שמות ל"ד:כ"ט

(כט) ויהי כרדת משה מהר סיני ושגיר לוחת העדת ביד-משה בדתו מורה-ההר ומשה לא-ידע כי קבו עור פגיו בדברו אתו:

Exodus 34:29

(29) *So Moses came down from Mount Sinai. 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 Him.* The first set of tablets are engraved by God after a powerful spectacle of fire and thunder, accompanied by the blasts of trumpets. The second set are done by Moses himself without spectacles or fanfare. But his face radiates. Like the phosphorescent rock that glows after its exposure to high energy light, here the skin of a mere mortal becomes illuminated after being exposed to God!

...והשיב משה את-המסכה על-פגיו עד-באו לדבר אתו:

Exodus 34:35

...Moses would then put the veil back over his face until he went in to speak with Him. The people are terrified of Moses' "radio-active" visage. Proximity to God has rendered Moses' life a sustained drama of concealment while with the people and revelation while with God.

Meditate on that one. Shabbat Shalom!