

Ki Tissa: Moses Was Late in Coming Down From the Mountain
Rabbi Eliot Malomet March 7, 2026 18 Adar* 5786 Shabbat Parah
**Yahrzeit of Rabbi Yakov Hilsenrath, zt"l.*

The most consequential verse in what will become the story of the Golden Calf is this one:

וַיִּרְא הָעָם כִּי בִשְׁשׁ מִשָּׁה לָרְדָת מִן הַהָר וַיִּקְהַל הָעָם עַל אֶהָרֹן
 וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו קוּם עֲשֵׂה לָנוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר יֵלְכוּ לִפְנֵינוּ כִּי זֶה מֹשֶׁה
 הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלֵנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לֹא יָדַעְנוּ מָה הָיָה לוֹ.

Now the people saw that Moses was late in coming down from the mountain, so the people assembled against Aaron and said to him: Arise, make us a god who will go before us, for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him! (Exod. 32:1):

In dramatic terms it is the point where the action turns. To recap: God has already issued the Ten Commandments, but they have not been written down. God invited Moses to come up to the mountain, **וְהָיָה שָׁם -and be there** - for an undisclosed amount of time - **וְהָיָה לְךָ אֶת לַחַת הָאֲבָרֹת וְהַתּוֹרָה - that I may give you tablets of stone: the Instruction and the Command that I have written down, to instruct them** (Exod. 24:12). It was at that point that Moses ascended the mountain. But then the Torah inserts this after-the-fact detail about how long he would end up staying there:

וַיָּבֵא מֹשֶׁה בְּתוֹךְ הָעָנָן וַיַּעַל אֶל הַהָר וַיְהִי מֹשֶׁה בְּהָר אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם
 וְאַרְבָּעִים לַיְלָה.

Moses came into the midst of the cloud and he went up the mountain. And Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights. (Exod. 32:1)

This is **dramatic irony**, a favorite brushstroke in the storyteller's art. It keeps us engaged in the story because it creates tension between the audience and the characters. We know something that the characters do not. **The storyteller is preparing us to expect that something big is going to happen in forty days and nights, Moses' descent from the mountain, but also puts a question in our minds: what is going to happen then?** We know when Moses is going to come down. But Moses doesn't. Aaron doesn't. The Elders don't. And most importantly, neither does Israel. From the time that Moses went up the mountain to get the Tablets of the Testimony, it is quite plausible that each day the Israelites turned to each other in anticipation, asking themselves, **Is he coming down today? Is today the day?** **The people saw that Moses was late in coming down the mountain.**

Commentary: 1. Literal Interpretation. **They literally saw him.** Not to be pedantic, but how high was the mountain? In the northeast of the US, we are used to seeing the Adirondacks or the Appalachians. In NJ we have the Kittatinny Ridge at the Delaware Water Gap and the Watchung Mountains in the north of the state. It is practically impossible to see anything on them with the

unaided eye because they are also densely forested. **But throughout the world there are plenty of small, rocky, unforested mountains where it is indeed very possible to see things from a considerable distance.¹ If the verse says that they saw him hesitating, then perhaps it means that they actually saw him taking his time up there!** If Mount Sinai was a smallish, rugged, mostly rocky mountain, then it would have been relatively easy for an average person to locate a solitary human figure on it. They would have seen Moses from time to time, and we can imagine that such a sighting would have elicited their excitement. But we can



also imagine that after a critical number of days, they would have begun to ask each other, **"How long has it been? Why is he not coming down yet? You would think that after x number of days he would want to be back with us."** One week. Two weeks. A month goes by. Here they are still at the base of the mountain, and their leader is still up there, doing what? Maybe they did see him in a trance or in prayer or in any number of positions and poses. But after a while they would have begun to feel that he was uninterested in them. In short, when they **actually saw him tarrying** on the mountain, they felt abandoned by him the way a child feels when their father is away from home and not in a big hurry to come back. We can understand their feeling of hurt and anger. In this light, their desire to commission **a god who will go before us** is a form of acting out. **2. Figurative Interpretation.** **They can't see him and concluded that he was tarrying.** As we know **seeing** is a metaphor for **understanding**. They marked the days that had elapsed since he went up the mountain with anticipation for his return so that they could resume their journey to the land of Canaan, **and they perceived that he was experiencing some kind of delay.** This made them speculate. **Did he vanish? Was he still alive? Did he sneak away?** After forty days and forty nights, a generous amount of time that also carries symbolic heft, they concluded that he was not coming back. **They commissioned Aaron to make a god to restore their certainty in their state of bewilderment about their future.** **3. Psychological/Theological Interpretation.** The word **בִּשְׁשׁ -boshesh** is quite unusual. Translator Everett Fox notes that **boshesh carries the connotation of "causing-shame**

¹ Such as some mountains in Arizona, such as Dove Mountain, pictured above, with human figures visible.

/embarrassment” from whence we get the word, **בושה-busha**, an epithet used today against people who have done shameful or despicable things. In his translation, *the people saw that Moses was shamefully-late in coming down from the mountain*, which adds an entirely new dimension of honor to the story. For if *punctuality is the politeness of kings*² then Moses would have shown the people honor by coming down from the mountain in a timely manner. Even a king conveys humility and respect for others by being punctual. He considers the feelings of others. He recognizes that everybody's time is valuable. Punctuality at an event honors the hosts and the attendees. Conversely, showing up late, especially if the rest of the people in attendance are depending on you, is a sign of disrespect. It causes unnecessary anxiety and worry, and even resentment. The people, in perceiving Moses to be **shamefully late**, are affronted by him. *They commissioned Aaron to make the god out of their sense of humiliation.* **ויקהל העם על אהרן - so the people assembled against Aaron.** **Commentary.** The people understand that Aaron is next in command. They have already seen him in action as Moses' spokesman, and someone who, while not at Moses' level, is also endowed with unique powers. Even though Aaron is accessible to them, **he is not attuned to their sense of abandonment, anxiety and feeling of being dishonored.** Someone more politically astute would have gotten out in front of the people to alleviate their concerns and reassure them that everything was going to be okay. None of that happens. Rather, the text gives us the impression that while the people approached him cordially, it was not without the possibility that they were also ganging up on him.³

ויאמר אליו קום עשה לנו אלהים -and said to him: Arise, make us a god. Later on in the story, when Moses confronts Aaron about making the Golden Calf - *What did this people do to you that you have brought upon it [such] a great sin!* (Exod. 32:21) - Aaron tries to defend himself by repeating their request. But let's note the difference between those two statements:

When the people approach Aaron (32:1)	When Aaron recounts to Moses what the people said to him:
קום עשה לנו אלהים	עשה לנו אלהים
Arise, make us a god.	(-----) Make us a god.

When Aaron recounts the people's request to Moses, he leaves out the word **Arise!** What's going on here? **Arise** is a word of invitation. When they say **Arise...** they mean: *Hey Aaron, come and help us do this. Arise. We want you to*

² *L'exactitude est la politesse des rois.* This proverb is attributed to Louis XVIII of France.

³ The verb **ויקהל-vayikkahel-and they were assembled** is the same here, as in two other volatile instances: the Korahite rebellion (Num. 16:3) where Korah and his cohorts ganged up on Moses and Aaron, and the near-riot at Mei Meriva (Num. 20:10) where the people ganged up on Moses

join us! When he reports this to Moses, he leaves out the **Arise** and says only **make for us**. A subtle distinction, yes, but it means that Aaron has transformed their request into a kind of order or ultimatum.⁴ **עשה לנו אלהים אשר ילכו לפנינו -make us a god who will go before us.** **Commentary:** In their defense, the people do not explicitly ask for a god **to worship**. Rather, they ask for a god **to go before them**, to lead them. While they are certainly guilty of their *desire* to concretize a divine power into a tangible idol, they are not liable for making it because Aaron made it! **But had Moses not tarried, none of his would have happened.**

וישחט את האיש אשר ילכו לפניו -for this Moses, this man. **Commentary:** This is the crucial moment. They are realizing that Moses is not a divine being. The man who performed miracles and spoke to God was, in the end, just a man. **He is not godly or godlike. He is nothing extraordinary. He did take us out of Egypt, but he is just an ordinary man. A disappointment. Mortal. Fallible. And moody to boot.**

ולא ידענו מה היתה לו -we do not know what has become of him! **Commentary:** **1. Literal.** *He behaved a certain way when he left us, but his character has changed.* **2. Non-Literal.** *Did he vanish? Disappear? Die? Maybe he is with God in a way that we cannot understand. We. Don't. Know. What. Happened. To. Him. It is bewildering. We are dumbfounded.* **3. Psychological/Theological.** *We just don't understand. Perhaps he hates us. Perhaps by taking such a long time to come down, he is showing us how he really feels about us. We are getting the message. He is dishonoring us. We are gobsmacked and flabbergasted.*

In this reading, everybody bears some guilt. The people for submitting to the idolatrous impulse. Aaron for his failure to lead and his complicity in the act. And Moses for his conscious or unconscious tardiness. In the end it is God who has to get Moses to descend the mountain because things have gotten out of hand. God wants to destroy the people and recreate a people with Moses. But Moses staves off God's anger, urging God to consider his reputation and remember his promise to their ancestors. But also, perhaps out of a realization that, in this complex moment, he, Moses, bore some of the responsibility as well. **Shabbat Shalom!**

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Today is Day 8 of a new war. May God protect the IDF and all US forces who are risking their lives to defeat a tyrannical regime and create a new future for Israel, the Iranian people, the region and the world. AMEN!

and Aaron to complain that they had no water. It's hard not to think that some kind of ganging-up-on-Aaron isn't also taking place here.

⁴ Some other examples of this usage: God **invites** Abraham, **קום התהלך בארץ -Arise and walk yourself about the land,** (Gen. 13:17); Rebekah **urges** Jacob: **יקום ברח לך אל לבן אחי -Arise and escape to my brother Lavan, in Haran** (Gen. 27:43).