

The heart too is likened by the Hasidic mystics to the Holy of Holies in the ancient Temple: centering our inner lives in the sacred—in contemplation of the sublime wonder of living in this divinely breathed world—is what may make the mundane burden of everyday life float and glide with an unexpected and miraculous lightness of being. When the divine letters leave us—or when we are adrift from our spiritual center—we are then burdened with a heart of stone; or, at the least, with a heart weighed down by the heaviness and suffering of being human. And so, each one of us utters a prayer softly spoken that our hearts may be made light once again, carried on the wings of a sublime and numinous poetry—music of the ever-flowing breath of God.

Professor Fishbane's most recent book is The Art of Mystical Narrative: A Poetics of the Zohar (Oxford University Press, 2018).

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כי תשא תשע"ט



A Bearable Lightness

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In this week's parashah, we encounter two iconic moments in the epic story of Benei Yisra'el and their reception of the Torah. The first is known as the sin of the golden calf, when the impatience of the people waiting for Moshe's return leads to their worship of a gleaming physical form in place of God, their redeemer. This narrative event comes to be not only a climax in the biblical story, but also serves as the paradigmatic image of idolatry through two millennia of Jewish theology. The second iconic moment occurs upon Moshe's descent from Mount Sinai, holding the two tablets of the covenant made with the finger of God. Encountering this ultimate violation, Moshe dramatically smashes the sacred tablets at the foot of Sinai.

We may observe that the sequence of events here in Exodus 32 highlights the tension between impatience, anger, and suspicion, on the one hand—and patience, calm, and compassion, on the other. This narrative dynamic seems to suggest one of the key ethical-spiritual lessons of Parashat Ki Tissa. The people of Israel are unable to give Moshe and God the benefit of the doubt amidst their anxiety and fear of the unknown. In a moment of great personal weakness and flawed leadership, Aaron too gives in to this pressure and impatience, directing the people to contribute their gold to the making of the *egel hazahav*—and then to worship it. The people may be said to worship the ultimate idol of materialism—a literal embodiment of reverence for superficiality, the fleeting importance of material objects—contrasted with the transcendent spirituality of Divinity. *Don't be fooled by the value of what you see at first glance*, the biblical text and subsequent Jewish tradition appear to be teaching us; *true spiritual meaning and religious faith require patience and optimism, and trust in a force larger than oneself and often invisible to the physical eye.*

But perhaps even more significant is God's initial reaction to the idolatry of the people. As we read in Exodus 32:9–10: "God further said to Moshe, 'I see that this is a stiff-necked people. 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.'" It is Moshe the man who tries and succeeds in calming down an enraged God, displaying Divinity as flawed and emotionally tormented, in need of intervention to come back from the precipice of anger's destructive power: "But Moshe implored YHVH 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.'" Far from the perfect and emotionally indifferent deity of some later Jewish theology (particularly that of Maimonides), here the God of the Hebrew Bible is tormented by emotional volatility and indecision. God here functions as a model for the human being who struggles with the destructive power of rage, with the ultimately fragile nature of human feeling and the need to cultivate tranquility and centeredness—either through a Moshe-like other or through solitary practice.

Ironically, it is the act of expressing anger itself that is described as nothing less than idolatry (*avodah zarah*) in later Jewish sources, first in classical rabbinic literature and then further evocatively in the medieval kabbalistic masterpiece, the Zohar. As the Zohar puts it, building upon the older texts, a person tears the very fabric of their soul in the moment of anger. This is true even if it is not externalized and expressed; an inner state of *sinah*, of hatred, corrodes the inner sanctuary of a person. And who among us has not struggled mightily with this emotional challenge?

Moshe's dramatic act of thrusting the tablets of the covenant to the ground and breaking them would seem to reflect the prophet's failure to rise above his shock and anger at witnessing the full force of the Israelites' idolatry. This moment would apparently parallel the wrathful despair felt by God Himself just a bit earlier in the narrative. And this surely is part of the lesson we ought to take from this scene. How should one react in the heat of crisis and rage? How best to cool the fires of such emotion?

But something very different may also be learned from this paradigmatic event in the Scriptural tale. According to a midrashic motif, preserved in a few rabbinic sources, the stone upon which the Ten Commandments were inscribed was unbearably heavy, and it was only the divine letters, placed there in the act of God's writing ("stone tablets inscribed with the finger of

God" [Exod. 31:18]), that made the *luhot*, the tablets, light enough for a human being to carry. The supernatural life-force of Divinity gives the mundane—in a reversal of Milan Kundera's famous turn of phrase—a *bearable lightness*.

According to the Jerusalem Talmud (*Ta'anit* 4:5), the letters flew off the stone tablets prior to Moshe's act of breaking them, seemingly as a revulsion of the heavenly writing at the sin of idolatry. The divine writing itself is thus implied to have a life and near persona in the narrative; at the very least there is a kind of magnetic tension of polar opposites between the metaphysical lettering and radical mundane blasphemy. But it is especially the dynamic of heaviness and lightness here that is so theologically and psychologically evocative: taken figuratively, it is the infusion of divine vitality, the inner force of spirituality, that makes the burden of physical life bearable. And this may be extended, I suggest, to the inspiration of artistic creativity—to the poetry that fills life with wonder and sustenance.

Here yet another rabbinic midrash is brought to mind: the divine writing which was "*harut al haluhot*" ("inscribed on the tablets") is creatively interpreted as "*herut al ha-luhot*" ("freedom placed upon, or infused into, the tablets" [see, for example, *M. Avot*, 6:2; *Avot DeRabi Natan*, 2:3; *Tanhuma, Ki Tissa*, 16:6]). The spiritual vitality of Torah opens up a fresh freedom of inner sight, a realization that the world as we might superficially perceive it is not all that there is to existence and living; we are liberated into a deeper religious consciousness and awareness of divine presence. And moving even farther into the mystical thought of the Jewish tradition: the tablets of the covenant (the *shenei luhot haberit*) received at Sinai symbolically represent the tablet of the human heart. When we can open ourselves to fully receive the divine letters and words onto the page of our innermost selves, when we are able to cultivate true spiritual readiness and empathic presence to the divine creation all around us, then our lives become infused with not only a bearable, but a transcendent lightness.

This meaning is partially anticipated already in *Midrash Vayikra Rabbah* (35:4), in which the heart sunk in the darkness of bad urges is characterized, quoting Ezekiel 36:26, as a "heart of stone." The prayer of the homilist, comparing the heart to the elements of the Sinaitic tablets, is that God might cast off this heart of stone and transform the hard toughness of the *yetzer hara*, the Evil Inclination, into a heart softened into kindness.