

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



Bronze Bull, Golden Calf

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Photo: *Raging Bull—Wall Street*, Sylvain Leprovost, CC BY 2.0, [flic.kr/p/8qjLc](https://www.flickr.com/photos/8qjLc)

The metal bovine with a peculiar magnetism that is known as the Golden Calf (Exod. 32) brings to mind Arturo Di Modica's *Charging Bull* (1989). A potent Financial District icon, it exerts a remarkable pull on passersby (on its webcam you can see the crowd so often around the statue). According to the artist's website, it was designed as a "symbol of virility and courage" and "the perfect antidote to the Wall Street crash of 1986," but it was also created without the invitation of the Wall Street community and was promptly removed from its original location in front of the New York Stock Exchange.

Charging Bull was eventually embraced by the traders as a totem and source of good luck. Its golden predecessor, however, was ground to dust. The image of a bull was a common depiction of gods in the ancient Near East, but our parashah could not be clearer in rejecting it.

Glistening, muscular, dynamic, and intensely animal, *Charging Bull* has an allure that is undeniable, and the sculpture seems a fitting mascot for the highly charged financial business of its neighborhood. It sheds light on why such a creature was once a symbol for a mighty god—and invites us to speculate as to why such an image was so adamantly disowned by the Torah.

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פרשת כי תשא תשע"ו



Who Wrote the Ten Commandments?

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Where does our Torah come from? Did all the words of the Torah come from heaven, so that the Torah is a perfect divine work? If that is the case, then the tradition the Torah inaugurates is one that human beings should accept in its entirety without introducing any changes. Or is the Torah itself the result of human-divine collaboration? If that is the case, the tradition the Torah inaugurates may allow some change, at least by those Jews of each generation who accept the Torah and live by its commandments.

Several 20th-century Jewish thinkers—for example, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Franz Rosenzweig, and Louis Jacobs—endorse the second possibility. They propose a *participatory* model of revelation: the words we find in the Torah are human responses to God's command. Most people assume that pre-20th-century Jewish texts endorse only the first of the two possibilities: the Torah's wording comes directly from God; the role of Moses and the Israelites at Sinai was merely to receive passively, not to participate actively in the creation of Torah. But I don't think this assumption is correct. While the Torah's own descriptions of revelation at Sinai sometimes support the presumption that the Torah's wording comes from heaven, at several points these same texts hint at the participatory model. The Torah seems to want us to find value in both ideas as we contemplate where our religion comes from.

This week's parashah contains a fine example of this tendency to bolster both views. Exodus 31:18 tells us that God "gave Moses two tablets of the covenant, tablets of stone written with the finger of God." This verse teaches that the words on the tablets were heavenly in origin. So does Exodus 32:15–16: "Moses . . . descended the mountain, with two tablets of the covenant in his hand . . . The tablets were God's work; the writing was God's writing, inscribed into the

tablets.” These verses indicate that the wording of the Torah’s laws, or at least of the Ten Commandments, comes directly from God.

The Israelites never had the opportunity to acquire direct knowledge of what was written on these tablets. Moses shattered them before any Israelites saw them (32:19). God then directed Moses to replace the tablets. The new set of tablets was to result from cooperation between Moses and God: “The LORD said to Moses: ‘Carve two stone tablets like the original ones, and I shall write down on the tablets the words that were on the original tablets you broke’” (34:1). The writing is supposed to be God’s, not Moses’s.

When Moses prepares the second set of tablets, however, the information our parashah provides moves in a different direction: “He was with God 40 days and 40 nights; he ate no food and drank no water; and he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments” (34:28). The subject of the verb *wrote*, like the subject of the preceding three verbs, seems to be Moses. (The Karaite biblical commentator Abū al-Faraj Hārūn ibn Faraj discusses the syntax we find here, explaining that in a series of verbs, the subject remains the same unless a new subject is introduced.) This verse contradicts the plain sense of God’s command in 34:1. Many scholars, ancient, medieval, and modern, attempt to avoid this problem by asserting that the real subject of the verb *write* in 34:28 must be God, even though wording of the verse does not indicate a change in subject. (This interpretation appears, for example, in the classical medieval commentaries of Rashbam, ibn Ezra, and Ramban.)

Other interpreters, however, maintain that Moses, not God, wrote the second set of tablets (see, for example, Exodus Rabbah 47:2). These interpreters explain the contradiction between 34:1 and 34:28 by suggesting that in verse 1 God does not intend literally that He will write the second set, but that Moses will do so on His behalf. According to this reading, the verb back in 34:1 was in the first person only to show that God approves what Moses writes or that God provides Moses strength to carry out the writing. (On these interpreters, see Saul Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine*, 80–82, and Menahem Kasher, *Torah Shelemah*, 22:126–27.) Grammatically, this is a stronger interpretation: Moses took on what was originally supposed to be God’s role, and he participated in place of God in producing the words on the tablets the Israelites received.

Even according to the simplest reading of 34:1, the second set of tablets was to result from cooperation between Moses (who carved the tablets out of stone) and God (who was supposed to write on them). But 34:28 goes further: it tells us that both the tablets and the writing are the work of Moses.

Several medieval rabbinic commentators (Isaiah of Trani, *Moshav Zekenim*) point out a significant difference between the way Exodus describes the first and second sets of tablets: while it specifies that the writing on the first tablets was divine (31:18), it refrains from providing this information in regard to the second set of tablets. This contrast weakens the attempt of commentators like Rashbam to import God as an unspoken subject into 34:28.

It is understandable that scholars debate who actually wrote the second tablets. The Book of Exodus seems not to intend us to come to a conclusion; had it so intended, it could have phrased itself with a level of clarity easily achievable within the norms of Hebrew grammar and syntax. We ought not strive, then, for a level of clarity that scripture denies us. Rather, we should recognize that the description of the second tablets—the tablets actually given to the Israelites—fits a pattern of ambiguity that also appeared in Parashat Yitro (in Exodus 19–20 and 24), which similarly hints at both active and passive roles for Moses and the Israelites.

The Book of Exodus wants us to realize that human beings participated in the creation of the Torah. But it does not want us to be too sure about how far that participation extended. It teaches us that the authority behind the commands that came from Sinai is divine, and thus that all Jews are required to observe Jewish law. But it also suggests that, to some degree, observant Jews of each generation, like those at Sinai, can participate in writing the law. It is in the tension between these two views of tradition and change that the most authentic and ancient form of Judaism dwells.

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