

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

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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**Does God Get Carried Away?:
 A Case of Inner-Biblical Midrash**
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What does it mean to be *El kana*, "a jealous / zealous God"?

This phrase appears in the Second Commandment:

You shall not bow down to [other gods] and you shall not worship them, for I am YHVH your God, *El Kana*, one who takes note of the sin of parents upon children, upon third and fourth [generations], to those who hate Me. But I am one who does love to the thousandth [generation], to those who love me and to those who keep My commandments. (Exod. 20:5-6 / Deut. 5:9-10)

I have left *kana* untranslated because the word is inherently ambiguous: it means something like either *jealous* or *zealous* or some combination. The Second Commandment plays into this ambiguity by using the phrase *El Kana* as the hinge between these two related but distinct concepts:

- (i) Israelites can't worship other gods ("you shall not bow down to them etc." = *jealous* of other gods),
- (ii) God will punish and reward disproportionately, i.e. on the perpetrators' descendants as well ("one who takes note . . . one who does love etc." = *zealous*, whose emotions take over).

This description of God as *zealous*, is problematic. Do we really believe that God lets God's emotions obscure God's better judgment? This is even more troubling when combined with the notion that God rewards or punishes disproportionately; it can seem like a grotesquely unjust theological position to take. In the words of Abraham, "Can the judge of the whole world not do justice?!" (Gen. 18:25). Why does God not punish and reward people fairly?

However, *El Kana* is repeated in our parashah, in Exodus 34, and a close reading suggests that Exodus 34 was aware of the earlier use of this phrase in

the Second Commandment and deliberately rereads it in a subversive way, limiting its meaning and application into obscurity.

Exodus 34 directly quotes the Second Commandment in this passage and attaches several explanatory notes (direct quotations are italicized below). As we shall see, one of these explanatory notes completely changes the meaning of *kana* from its original sense in the Ten Commandments:

YHVH passed by before him and declared, “YHVH, YHVH, a merciful and compassionate God, slow to anger, full of love and truth, *one who guards love to the thousandth [generation]*, lifting off transgression, guilt and sin, but [God] will surely not make innocent [i.e. will not avoid giving punishment], *one who takes note of the sin of parents upon children and on children’s children, upon third and fourth [generations].*” (vv.6-7, emphasis added)

For you shall not bow down to another God, for YHVH’s name is *Kana*, He is *El Kana*. (v.14)

Exodus 34 splits up these two concepts (*jealous* and *zealous*) and applies *El Kana* to only *one* of them. When discussing God’s disproportionate rewards and punishments, it emphasizes God’s compassion and mercy. Then, later, when the text discusses worshipping other gods, only then does it bring in *El Kana*. In other words, Exodus 34 is aware of the reading that you might have had of the Second Commandment that God lets God’s emotions lead God’s actions and specifically counters it: God is *jealous* according to the later passage, but not *zealous*.

Similarly, the Midrash can say:

“*El Kana*”¹—[God says:] I rule over *kinah*, *kinah* does not rule over Me.

“[Similarly:] I rule over slumber and slumber does not rule over Me, as it is said, ‘See God neither slumbers, nor sleeps—Guardian of Israel!’ (Psalm 121:4).” (*Mekhilta Derabbi Yishma’el*, 20:5)

Just as God never sleeps, this audacious midrash on the Second Commandment makes the claim that God is never overtaken by emotions. To the contrary—God has complete control of God’s emotions. It may seem shocking that this midrash reads the verse exactly opposite to the way

it must have been intended, but it is aided by the fact that Exodus 34 already made this interpretative move when it separated God’s *kinah* from the concept of God’s disproportionality.

But that is not all Exodus 34 did. The disproportionality in reward and punishment in the Second Commandment is presented as something that God *does*: One of the things that God does is be zealous and lavishly reward those who love God, as well as punish those who hate God. In contrast, Exodus 34 presents something that God *is*. God is merciful and compassionate, God doesn’t just “do love”—God “guards love,” suggesting that God is always looking for ways to bestow love.

Furthermore: in the Second Commandment, God’s reward or punishment is binary—either you receive love (if you love God) or punishment (if you hate God). But in Exodus 34, love and punishment are both handed out to *everyone*. Imagine you are being punished for any sins committed by your parents and grandparents, as this text suggests. Now weigh into this that you are also being rewarded for the merit of your ancestors *to the thousandth degree*. Surely the effect of this is to totally overwhelm the punishment with love!

Subtly, by making only a few additions, Exodus 34 totally subverts the message of the Second Commandment in two ways:

- (i) it removes from God’s *kinah* any notion that it might refer to God being overwhelmed by God’s emotions and rewarding or punishing beyond what is appropriate;
- (ii) it completely wipes out the two-generation punishment in a swath of mercy and compassion owing to the merit of a thousand preceding generations.

This teaches us how we can read the same words and, with some light additions and recontextualization, totally reimagine what they might be saying to us. This is what it means for the Torah to be the word of God, to be ever-relevant. Exodus 34 believed fully in a God called *Kana*, but not in the way that the Second Commandment intended!

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