



## **In the Wake of the Golden Calf: Is God Punishing Us?**

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## Exodus 20:1-5, The First Few of the "Ten Commandments"

וידבר אלהים את כל-הדברים האלה לאמר: (ס) אנכי ה' אלקיך אשר הוצאתיך מארץ מצרים מבית עבדים: לא יהיה לך אלהים אחרים על-פני: לא תעשה-לך פסל | וכל-תמונה אשר בשמים | ממעל ואשר בארץ מתחת ואשר במים | מתחת לארץ: לא תשתחוה להם ולא תעבדם כי אנכי ה' אלקיך אל קנא פקד עון אבת על-בנים על-שלשים ועל-רבעים לשנאי: God spoke all these words, saying: <sup>2</sup>I the Lord am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage: <sup>3</sup>You shall have no other gods besides Me. <sup>4</sup>You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth. <sup>5</sup>You shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I the Lord your God am an impassioned God, visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children, upon the third and upon the fourth generations of those who reject Me,

### Plan A

#### Exodus 25:8 & NJPS<sup>1</sup>

ועשו לי מקדש ושכנתי בתוכם: And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them.

#### Exodus 29:43-46

ונעדתי שמה לבני ישראל ונקדש בכבדתי: וקדשתי את-אהל מועד ואת-המזבח ואת-אהרן ואת-בניו אקדש לכהן לי: ושכנתי בתוכם בני ישראל והייתי להם לאלקים: וידעו כי אני ה' אלקיהם אשר הוצאתי אתם מארץ מצרים לשכני בתוכם אני ה' אלקיהם: <sup>43</sup>and there I will meet with the Israelites, and it shall be sanctified by My Presence. <sup>44</sup>I will sanctify the Tent of Meeting and the altar, and I will consecrate Aaron and his sons to serve Me as priests. <sup>45</sup>I will abide among the Israelites, and I will be their God. <sup>46</sup>And they shall know that I the Lord am their God, who brought them out from the land of Egypt that I might abide among them, I the Lord their God.

### The Crisis

#### Exodus 31:18-32:1 (nb: these are consecutive verses)

ויתן אלימשה ככלתו לדבר אתו בהר סיני שני לוח העדות לוח אבן כתבים באצבע אלהים: וירא העם כי-בשש משה לרדת מזההר ויקהל העם על-אהרן ויאמרו אליו קום | עשה-לנו אלהים אשר ילכו לפנינו כי-זוה | משה האיש אשר העלנו מארץ מצרים לא ידענו מה-היה לו: <sup>18</sup>When He finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, He gave Moses the two tablets of the Pact, stone tablets inscribed with the finger of God. <sup>32</sup>: When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, the people gathered against Aaron and said to him, "Come, make us a god who shall go before us, for that man Moses, who brought us from the land of Egypt—we do not know what has happened to him."

1. Unless otherwise noted, all biblical translations are from the NJPS Tanakh.

## Exodus 32:7-14, Moses Convinces God not to Destroy Israel

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵּדְרֹד בִּי שַׁחַת עַמְּךָ אֲשֶׁר הֵעַלִית מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם: סרו מהר מן־הדרך אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתֶם עֲשׂוּ לָהֶם עֵגֶל מִסֶּכֶה וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ־לוֹ וַיִּזְבְּחוּ־לוֹ וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלֶּה אֱלֹהֵיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הֵעַלְוֹךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם: וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה רְאִיתִי אֶת־הָעַם הַזֶּה וְהִנֵּה עַם־קֹשֶׁה־עֲרֹף הוּא: וְעַתָּה הִנְיָחָה לִּי וַיַּחַר־אַפִּי בָהֶם וְאֲבַלְמָּה וְאֶעֱשֶׂה אוֹתָךְ לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל: וַיַּחַל מֹשֶׁה אֶת־פְּנֵי ה' אֶלְקִינוּ וַיֹּאמֶר לָמָּה ה' יַחַרָּה אַפְּךָ בְּעַמְּךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בְּכַח גְּדוֹל וּבְיַד חֹזֶקָה: לָמָּה יֹאמְרוּ מִצְרַיִם לְאָמֵר בְּרַעְיָה הוֹצִיאָם לְהַרְגֵם אֹתָם בַּהָרִים וּלְכַלֵּתָם מֵעַל פְּנֵי הָאָדָמָה שׁוּב מִחֲרוֹן אַפְּךָ וְהִנָּחֵם עַל־הָרַעְיָה לְעַמְּךָ: זָכֹר לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וּלְיִשְׂרָאֵל עַבְדֶּיךָ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתָּ לָהֶם בְּךָ וַתְּדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים אַרְבָּה אֶת־זַרְעֲכֶם כְּכּוֹכְבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם וְכָל־הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר אָמַרְתִּי אֶתֶּן לְזַרְעֲכֶם וַנְּחַלּוּ לְעַלְמִים: וַיִּנָּחֵם ה' עַל־הָרַעְיָה אֲשֶׁר דִּבַּר לַעֲשׂוֹת לְעַמּוֹ: <sup>7</sup>The Lord spoke to Moses, “Hurry down, for your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt, have acted basely. <sup>8</sup>They have been quick to turn aside from the way that I enjoined upon them. They have made themselves a molten calf and bowed low to it and sacrificed to it, saying: ‘This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!’” <sup>9</sup>The Lord further said to Moses, “I see that this is a stiffnecked people. <sup>10</sup>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.” <sup>11</sup>But Moses implored the Lord 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. <sup>12</sup>Let not the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that He delivered them, only to kill them off in the mountains and annihilate them from the face of the earth.’ **Turn from Your blazing anger, and renounce the plan to punish Your people.** <sup>13</sup>**Remember Your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,** how You swore to them by Your Self and said to them: I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, and I will give to your offspring this whole land of which I spoke, to possess forever.” <sup>14</sup>**And the Lord renounced the punishment He had planned to bring upon His people.**

## Plan B

### 32:30-33:6, An Angel of God Will Lead the People

וַיְהִי מִמָּחֳרַת וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הָעַם אַתֶּם חַטָּאתֶם חַטָּאתֶם גְּדוֹלָה וְעַתָּה אֵעֲלֶה אֵלֶיָּהּ אֹלֵי אֲכַפְּרָה בְּעַד חַטָּאתֵיכֶם: וַיָּשֶׁב מֹשֶׁה אֵלֶיָּהּ וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנִי חַטָּאתִי הֵעֵם הַזֶּה חַטָּאתִי גְדוֹלָה וַיַּעֲשׂוּ לָהֶם אֱלֹהֵי זָהָב: וְעַתָּה אִם־תִּשָּׂא חַטָּאתֶם וְאִם־אֵין מַחְנִי נָא מִסִּפְרֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר כָּתַבְתָּ: וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה מִי אֲשֶׁר חַטָּאתִי אֲמַחֲנוּ מִסִּפְרֵי: וְעַתָּה לֵךְ אֶנְחָה אֶת־הָעַם אֶל אֲשֶׁר־דִּבַּרְתִּי לָךְ הִנֵּה מִלְאָכִי יֵלֵךְ לִפְנֶיךָ וּבִיּוֹם פְּקֻדֵי וּפְקַדְתִּי עֲלֵיהֶם חַטָּאתָם: וַיִּגַּף ה' אֶת־הָעַם עַל אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ אֶת־הָעֵגֶל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה אֶהָרֹן: וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵּךְ עִלָּה מִזֶּה אַתָּה וְהָעַם אֲשֶׁר הֵעַלִית מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וּלְיַעֲקֹב לֵאמֹר לְזַרְעֶךָ אֶתְנַנָּה: <sup>30</sup>The next day Moses said to the people, “You have been guilty of a great sin. Yet I will now go up to the Lord; perhaps I may win forgiveness for your sin.” <sup>31</sup>Moses went back to the Lord and said, “Alas, this people is guilty of a great sin in making for themselves a god of gold. <sup>32</sup>Now, if You will forgive their sin [well and good]; but if not, erase me from the record which You have written!” <sup>33</sup>But the Lord said to Moses, “He who has sinned against Me, him only will I erase from My record. <sup>34</sup>Go now, lead the people where I told you. **See, My angel shall go before you. But when I make an accounting, I will bring them to account for their sins.**” <sup>35</sup>Then the Lord sent a plague upon the people, for what they did with the calf that Aaron made. Then the Lord said to Moses, “Set out from here, you and the people that you have brought up from the land of Egypt, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, ‘To your offspring will I give it’—

וְשַׁלַּחְתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ מַלְאָךְ וְגָרַשְׁתִּי  
 אֶת־הַכְּנַעֲנִי הָאֹמֹרִי הַחִיטִּי וְהַפְּרִזִּי הַחִוִּי  
 וְהַיְבוּסִי: אֶל־אֶרֶץ זְבַת חֶלֶב וְדָבָשׁ כִּי  
 לֹא אֵעֲלֶה בְּקִרְבְּךָ כִּי עִם־קִשְׁי־עֵרֶף  
 אַתָּה פְּרוֹ־אֲכֹלֶךָ בַּדֶּרֶךְ: וַיִּשְׁמַע הָעָם  
 אֶת־הַדְּבָר הַרַע הַזֶּה וַיִּתְאַבְּלוּ וְלֹא־שָׁתוּ  
 אִישׁ עֵדִיו עֲלָיו: וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה  
 אֲמַר אֶל־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אַתֶּם  
 עִם־קִשְׁי־עֵרֶף רַגַע אֶחָד אֵעֲלֶה בְּקִרְבְּךָ  
 וְכִלִּיתִיךָ וְעַתָּה הוֹרֵד עֵדִיךָ מֵעֲלֶיךָ  
 וְאֲדַעַה מָה אֵעֲשֶׂה־לְךָ: וַיִּתְנַצְּלוּ  
 בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־עֲדֵידֵם מִהָרַ חוֹרֵב:

<sup>2</sup>I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites—<sup>3</sup>a land flowing with milk and honey. **But I will not go in your midst, since you are a stiffnecked people, lest I destroy you on the way.**  
<sup>4</sup>When the people heard this harsh word, they went into mourning, and none put on his finery.  
<sup>5</sup>The Lord said to Moses, “Say to the Israelite people, ‘You are a stiffnecked people. If I were to go in your midst for one moment, I would destroy you. Now, then, leave off your finery, and I will consider what to do to you.’”<sup>6</sup>So the Israelites remained stripped of the finery from Mount Horeb on.

**Exodus 33:12-19, Moses Asks to Know God Better and Rejects Plan B; God Relents**

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־ה' רְאֵה אֶתָּה אֹמֵר  
 אֵלַי הֵעַל אֶת־הָעָם הַזֶּה וְאַתָּה לֹא  
 הוֹדַעְתָּנִי אֶת אֲשֶׁר־תִּשְׁלַח עִמִּי וְאַתָּה  
 אָמַרְתָּ יִדְעֵתִיךָ בְּשֵׁם וְגַם־מִצָּאת חֵן  
 בְּעֵינָי: וְעַתָּה אֲסַנֵּא מִצָּאתִי חֵן  
 בְּעֵינֶיךָ הוֹדַעְנִי נָא אֶת־דַּרְכְּךָ וְאֲדַעַךָ  
 לְמַעַן אֲמַצְא־חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ וּרְאֵה כִּי עַמְּךָ  
 הַגּוֹי הַזֶּה: וַיֹּאמֶר פְּנֵי לָלוּ וְהִנַּחְתִּי לְךָ:  
 וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אִם־אֵין פְּנִיךָ הַלְכִים  
 אֶל־תַּעֲלֵנוּ מִזֶּה: וּבִמָּה | יוֹדַע אֶפְּוֹא  
 כִּי־מִצָּאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ אֲנִי וְעַמְּךָ הַלּוֹא  
 בְּלִכְתָּךְ עִמָּנוּ וְנִפְלִינוּ אֲנִי וְעַמְּךָ  
 מִכָּל־הָעָם אֲשֶׁר עַל־פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה: (פ)  
 וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה גַם אֶת־הַדְּבָר הַזֶּה  
 אֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתָּ אֵעֲשֶׂה כִּי־מִצָּאת חֵן  
 בְּעֵינֶיךָ וְאֲדַעַךָ בְּשֵׁם: וַיֹּאמֶר הָרֵאנִי נָא  
 אֶת־כְּבוֹדְךָ: וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנִי אֶעֱבִיר  
 כָּל־טוֹבֵי עַל־פְּנֶיךָ וְקִרְאתִי בְּשֵׁם ה'  
 לְפָנֶיךָ וְחִנַּתִּי אֶת־אֲשֶׁר אַחַן וְרַחֲמֵתִי  
 אֶת־אֲשֶׁר אֲרַחֵם:

<sup>12</sup>Moses said to the Lord, “See, You say to me, ‘Lead this people forward,’ but You have not made known to me whom You will send with me. Further, You have said, ‘I have singled you out by name, and you have, indeed, gained My favor.’<sup>13</sup>Now, if I have truly gained Your favor, pray let me know Your ways, that I may know You and continue in Your favor. Consider, too, that this nation is Your people.”<sup>14</sup>And He said, “I will go in the lead and will lighten your burden.”<sup>15</sup>And he said to Him, “Unless You go in the lead, do not make us leave this place.<sup>16</sup>For how shall it be known that Your people have gained Your favor unless You go with us, so that we may be distinguished, Your people and I, from every people on the face of the earth?”  
<sup>17</sup>And the Lord said to Moses, “I will also do this thing that you have asked; for you have truly gained My favor and I have singled you out by name.”<sup>18</sup>He said, “Oh, let me behold Your Presence!”<sup>19</sup>And He answered, “I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim before you the name Lord, and the grace that I grant and the compassion that I show.

**Possibility**

**Exodus 34:1**

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה פֶּסֶל־לֶחֶם שְׁנֵי־לַחַת אֲבָנִים  
 כְּרֵאשִׁימִים וְכַתַּבְתִּי עַל־הַלַּחַת אֶת־הַדְּבָרִים  
 אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ עַל־הַלַּחַת הָרֵאשִׁימִים אֲשֶׁר שִׁבַּרְתָּ:

The Lord said to Moses: “Carve two tablets of stone like the first, and I will inscribe upon the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you shattered.

**Rashi on Exodus 32:34** (from MS Leipzig 1, courtesy of alhatorah.org)

**וביום פקדי, וגומ' - עתה שמעתי אליך** **But when I make an accounting** - I hear you and will not destroy them all at once. But whenever I exact punishment from them for their sins, I will exact from them some measure of this sin along with the other sins. And no suffering comes upon Israel that does not have within it some measure of the sin of the calf.

**Rashi's Source, BT Sanhedrin 102a** (Davidson Talmud, courtesy of sefaria.org)

**ירמיהו נא, יח** בעת פקודתם יאבדו תנא משום רבי יוסי עת מזומנת לפורענות **(ישעיהו מט, ח)** בעת רצון עניתיך תנא משום ר' יוסי עת מזומנת לטובה **(שמות לב, לד)** וביום פקדי ופקדתי עליהם חטאתם תנא משום רבי יוסי עת היא מזומנת לפורענות **(בראשית לח, א)** ויהי בעת ההיא וירד יהודה מאת אחיו תנא משום ר' יוסי עת מזומנת לפורענות

The verse states: **“At the time of their punishment, they shall perish” (Jeremiah 51:18)**. It was taught in the name of Rabbi Yosei: The phrase “at the time” indicates that it is a time ordained for calamity. The verse states: **“In an acceptable time have I answered you” (Isaiah 49:8)**. It was taught in the name of Rabbi Yosei: The phrase “in an acceptable time” indicates that it is a time ordained for good. The verse states: **“On the day when I punish, I will punish their sin upon them” (Exodus 32:34)**. It was taught in the name of Rabbi Yosei: The phrase “on the day when I punish” indicates that it is a time ordained for calamity. The verse states: **“And it came to pass at that time, and Judah descended from his brothers” (Genesis 38:1)**. It was taught in the name of Rabbi Yosei: The phrase “at that time” indicates that it is a time ordained for calamity.

**Rashi ad loc**

**וביום פקדי - בתשעה באב שבכל** **But when I make an accounting** - On the ninth of Av of each of the forty years they were in the desert, [this was] a day ordained for calamity. [On it] the spies returned, and both the First and Second Temples were destroyed.

**Mishna Taanit 4:6** (sefaria.org translation)

חמשה דברים ארעו את אבותינו בשבעה עשר בתמוז וחמשה בתשעה באב. בשבעה עשר בתמוז נשתברו הלוחות, ובטל התמיד, והבקעה העיר, ושרף אפוסטמוס את התורה, והעמיד צלם בהיכל. **On the ninth of Av:** It was decreed that our ancestors should not enter the land, The Temple was destroyed the first and the second time, Betar was captured, and the city was plowed up. When Av enters, they limit their rejoicing.

## Rashi on Exodus 33:19 - The Eternal Keys to God's Forgiveness

**ויאמר אני אעביר, וגו' – הגיעה שעה** **And He said, "I will make pass..."** The time has arrived for you to see My Kavod, what I will allow you to see.  
**שתראה [ב]כבודי מה שארשה אותך** For I need to teach you the order of the prayers for לראות לפי שאני צריך ללמדך סדר when you thought it necessary to ask for mercy on behalf of Israel, you reminded Me of the merit of the forefathers, thinking that if the merit of the forefathers is depleted, there will be no more hope. I will make all of my trait of goodness pass before you on the rock, and you will be placed in the cave.  
**לפניה שכתשנצרכת לבקש רחמים על**  
**ישר' הזכרת לי זכות אבות, כסבור**  
**אתה שאם תמה זכות אבות אין עוד**  
**תקוה. אני אעביר כל מדת טובי לפניך**  
**על הצור, ואתה נתון במערה.**

**וקראתי בשם י"י לפניך – ללמדך סדר** **and I will proclaim before you the name Lord** - in order to teach you how to request mercy even if the merit of the forefathers is exhausted. And just as you see me wrapped [in My *tallit*] and reciting the 13 attributes (Exodus 34:6-7), teach Israel to do so. And by their mention before Me of "merciful and gracious," for My mercy is without end.  
**בקשת רחמים אף אם תכלה זכות**  
**אבות וכסדר שאתה רואה אותי**  
**מעוטף וקורא שלש עשרה מדות הוי**  
**מלמד את ישר' לעשות ועל ידי**  
**שיזכירו לפני רחום וחנון כי רחמי לא**  
**כלים. [...]**

**ורחמתי – עד שאחפץ לרחם. עד כאן** **And the compassion that I show.** To the extent that I desire to show mercy. To this point, He had promised him [Moses] to be merciful only sometimes. But at the time of the making [of the new covenant], He said to him, "Behold, I establish a covenant..." (Exodus 34:10). He promised to him [Moses] that they [Israel] would not leave empty-handed [i.e., without His mercy].  
**לא הבטיחו אלא עתים אענה עתים**  
**לא אענה אלא בשעת מעשה אמ' לו**  
**הנה אנכי כרת ברית {שמות ל"ד:י'}**  
**הבטיחו שאינן חוזרות ריקם.**

## Rashi on Exodus 34:1 - Recommitment

**פסל לך – אתה שברת ראשונות,** **Carve [for yourself]** - You broke the first ones. Carve yourself another set. An analogy to a king who travelled over-seas and left his wife behind with her maidservants. As a result of the degenerate conduct of the maidservants, wicked rumors spread about her [the wife]. Her good friend arose and tore up her *ketubah* and said, "If the king says she should be killed [as an adulteress], one can say to him that 'she is no longer your wife.'" The king investigated and found that the degenerate behavior was only that of the maidservants. He reconciled with his wife, and her good friend said to the king, "Write for her another *ketubah* because her [first] *ketubah* was ripped up." He [the king] said to him [her good friend], "You ripped it up. You buy for yourself more paper, and I will write upon it with my own writing." So the king is the Holy One, the maidservants are the [Egyptian] rabble, and the good friend is Moses. This is why it [the Torah] says, "Carve for yourself."  
**משל למלך**  
**שהלך למדינת הים והניח ארוסתו**  
**עם השפחות מתוך קילקול**  
**השפחות יצא עליה שם רע עמד**  
**שושבינה וקרע כתובתה, ואמ'**  
**אם יאמר המלך להורגה, אומר לו**  
**המלך עדיין אינה אשתך. בדק המלך**  
**ומצא שלא היה הקילקול אלא מן**  
**השפחות, נתרצה לה, אמ' לו**  
**שושבינה, כתוב לה כתובה אחרת**  
**שנקרעה כתובתה, אמ' לו אתה**  
**קרעתה אותה אתה קנה לך נייר**  
**אחרת ואני כותב בכתב ידי, כך**  
**המלך זה הק', השפחות, אילו**  
**ערב רב השושבין זה משה לכך**  
**נאמ' פסל לך.**