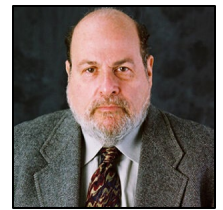


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תרומה תשפ"ג

## Gold and Incense: For Better and for Worse

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Parashat Terumah begins the long section of the Book of Exodus that deals with the Tabernacle, its furniture and vessels, and the garments of the high priest. The only interruption in this mass of cultic detail is the narrative of the sin of worshipping the Golden Calf and its aftermath in [Exodus 32–34](#). The ritual details continue into Vayikra with the list of sacrifices in the cult. The climax of the entire cultic section is [Leviticus 9](#) and 10, where the Tabernacle is dedicated with elaborate rites.

It is easy to be overwhelmed by the multiplicity of ritual details. Moreover, the topic seems to be of little concern to a Judaism that has been without a temple cult for two thousand years. But there are important lessons to be learned if one steps back from the mass of detail to focus on larger patterns and connections. An element from Parashat Terumah, and another from next week's parashah, Tetzaveh, are especially significant in terms of their relationship to what will follow.

The first is the relationship between the opening commands of the parashah and the story of the Golden Calf in Ki Tissa. The account of the divine commission to construct the Tabernacle in [Exod. 25–31](#) and its performance in [Exod. 35–40](#) contrast with the making of the Golden Calf and its aftermath. Very striking is the similarity between the initial command in Terumah and the construction of the Calf. In the case of the Tabernacle, the Israelites are requested (not commanded) by God to offer gold, silver, and bronze. The precious metals are to be offered by those whose heart moves them to donate it. In the case of the Calf, there is a similar offering, specifically of gold. But this offering is commanded—not recommended—by Aaron and comes specifically from the earrings of the Israelites. The source is ironic because the ear is symbolic of obedience and by

telling them to “tear off” (*pirku*) their earrings ([Exod. 32:2](#)), Aaron is telling Israel to abandon their allegiance to God. The irony is even greater: at the very moment that Moses is receiving laws about the shrine, cult, and priesthood, Aaron, the future high priest, is abetting apostasy. His later excuse that the Calf just “came out” from the fire rings hollow. Aaron presents his handiwork as “the gods (plural) who led you out of Egypt.” ([Exod. 32:4](#))

Now the source of the metallic offerings, both in the case of the Golden Calf and of the Tabernacle, was the precious objects Israel took as spoils from the Egyptians when they left Egypt. There, too, was an element of “offering,” because [Exod. 12:36](#) states that God inclined the Egyptians to be generous with Israel so that they “willingly” offered them their gold. No doubt they were by now happy to speed Israel on its way at any cost. So the same items were put to two radically different ends, to make the abomination of idolatry and its counter, the sacred shrine and its vessels. The differences between the accounts of the Golden Calf and the building of the Tabernacle suggest that some important theological points are being made.

One of these involves the contrast between the nature of the events. The Golden Calf was made in blind fear and panic, resulting in hasty, clumsy actions. Unlike Bezalel, who supervised the completion of the Tabernacle, Aaron was no craftsman. One can imagine the ridiculously awkward image he must have made. Afterward the Israelites “rejoice” (and Cecil B. DeMille may have been midrashically correct to depict the rejoicing onscreen as an orgy); it seems to have consisted of little more than a loud, incoherent din, as Moses seems to say to Joshua when he hears the ruckus ([Exod. 32:18](#)). The images used present the whole event as an example of chaos.

In contrast, there is a sense of complete, controlled order in the command to build the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle). God is the architect with the plan (*tavnit*), and Moses is to supervise the *melakhah* (work of construction) with the staff appointed by God, headed by Bezalel. Admittedly, the repetition of the details of construction may prevent the narrative from being in any way dramatic in literary terms, unlike the lively, violent story of the Calf from its inception to the smashing of the tablets to the final punishment of the sinners and Moses's impassioned intercession for Israel. But non-drama is precisely the point. The Tabernacle represents the created order that replaced chaos. The building of the sacred space was a plan, carried out with deliberation. The initiative was divine and a definitive hierarchy was established to achieve the aim: God, Moses, Bezalel, the offerings of the people. The story of creation in [Gen. 1](#) is also deliberately undramatic, taking the form of an ordered chronological list. In both cases, the form reflects the meaning: divine order overcomes chaos.

Yet despite the sense of order, there was no compulsion. The fact that the chain begins with a vision of God gives it coherence and made the people willing to comply. The Golden Calf, on the other hand, begins with democracy at its worst—a chaotic, panicked mob that forces a weak leader into foolish, self-destructive action. The proverb says that, “When there is no vision the people get out of control” (*be'en hazon yippara am*; [Prov. 29:18](#)). The same unusual verb, *para*, is used by Moses to describe what Aaron has done and its effect upon the people: “Moses saw that the people were out of control (*parua*) because Aaron had let them get out of control” (*pera'o*; [Exod. 32:25](#)). Their chaotic looseness represents, in midrashic wordplay, a kind of spiritual re-subjugation to *paroh*, Pharaoh. Against such enslaving chaos the sacred shrine is held up as a model of ordered, creative freedom.

In Tetzaveh, the element that is connected to a later story is the last command in the parashah: to make a golden altar for incense. ([Exod. 30:1-10](#)) Incense was an essential aspect of all ancient cults, imparting a sweet smell that was believed to ascend to, and attract, the deity and making the smell of sacrificial slaughter more tolerable. God enjoins especially

that no “alien incense” (*ketoret zarah*, v.9)—meaning incense that is improper in some way—be offered on it. The use of the term “alien, strange” for the fiery incense offering draws attention to itself; it is intended to be connected to the last events in the entire cultic narrative, the dedication of the cult in [Leviticus 9](#) and 10. [Leviticus 10](#) recounts how Nadav and Avihu, the two eldest sons of Aaron, offered “strange fire” (*esh zarah*), probably just the sort of “alien incense” forbidden in [Exodus 30](#), for which they were immediately killed by a flame from God. It is not stated just why their offering was improper, but the deadly results put a negative pallor on what had been a joyous day. God issues a warning that all aspects of the cult performed by the priests who are allowed to come near His own holiness must be done with the greatest care. The assumption seems to be that Aaron's sons had treated their duties in a cavalier way. The holy must not be treated casually, as something common and ordinary. The same applies to the entire mass of cultic detail in Exodus and Leviticus. Each detail is vital to maintaining the link between God and Israel.

It might seem that such stress on exact and careful performance of the sacrificial ritual would have little meaning today, but in fact the messages arising from the relationship of Parashat Terumah and Parashat Tetzaveh to the story of the Golden Calf and to the deaths of Nadav and Avihu complement one another. The relationship to God must be freely undertaken if it is not to develop into something idolatrous, but it must never be so unmindful of God's otherness and holiness as to become something casual.

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