

## The Desperate (and Comprehensible) Project of the Golden Calf



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After the Israelites' exodus from Egypt, the Torah focuses on the project of how they could ensure God's immanence, or retained presence, within their world. God instructs the Israelites to build the Mishkan, or Tabernacle and establishes the sacrificial system to insure God's continued presence. The episode of the Golden Calf seems like a grave error in this process that demands interpretation. Why would the people violate the second commandment they had just received and turn to idolatry?

The episode opens:

וַיֵּרָא הָעָם כִּי-בָשַׁשׁ מֹשֶׁה לְרִדְתַּת מִן-הָהָר וַיִּקְהַל הָעָם עַל-אַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו קוּמ עֲשֵׂה-לָנוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר יֵלְכוּ לִפְנֵינוּ כִּי-זָה מֹשֶׁה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלֵנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לֹא יָדַעְנוּ מַה-הָיָה לוֹ:

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 fellow Moses—the man who brought us from the land of Egypt—we do not know what has happened to him." (Exod. 32:1)

The verse suggests a deep sense of loss as Moses remains on Mount Sinai with God. In light of their anxiety about Moses' whereabouts, Aaron requisitions gold jewelry from the Israelites. The people give willingly, even eagerly, and the gold is molded into the golden calf. This narrative makes clear the Israelites' desire, or Aaron's assumption of their desire, to gain access to the divine on a material level. Up until this point they have been recipients of God's great acts and now in their moment of despair they lack the tools to engage appropriately—tools Moses is busy receiving atop the mountain.

Prior to this episode, the Israelites repeatedly experience God's immanence. God appears to Moses in the burning bush, brings the plagues upon the Egyptians, parts the Red Sea, closes it once again over the Israelites' enemies, delivers manna and finally, creates the supernatural storm atop Mount Sinai while delivering the commandments. God repeatedly appears in great redemptive acts. Yet in all these significant moments of God's presence, the Israelites only bear witness and benefit from God's acts, lacking instructions for how to respond. Fear of God's absence, along with the desire to be active partners in relationship, leads the Israelites to create the Golden Calf.

This seeming lapse in faith might be forgivable prior to the giving of the Torah. Yet Moses receives the laws about societal norms in addition to those outlining the construction of the Tabernacle immediately *before* the Golden Calf.

To make sense of this glaring violation, Rashi employs the Talmudic principle: *אין מוקדם ומאוחר בתורה* there is no "earlier" or "later" in the Torah; it is not recorded in chronological order. Rashi claims the building of the Golden Calf took place *before* the Israelites were given instructions to build the Mishkan. He understands the timeline based on the Hebrew dates associated with the events of the Torah, aligning the golden calf with the 17th of Tammuz; God and the Israelites' reconciliation with the Day of Atonement, Yom Hakippurim; and the gifting of the first contributions to the Mishkan on the day after, the 11th of Tishrei. This timeline suggests that the sin of the Golden Calf took place long before the Israelites got instructions for building the Mishkan.

Ramban, however, feels strongly that the Torah was recorded in chronological order—he sees the text as intentional and its order significant. He writes:

ועל דעתו: כל התורה כסדר, שכל המקומות אשר בהם יאחר המוקדם יפרש בו

Ramban understands the whole Torah to be in order, excluding only specific cases in which the Torah explicitly states when, sequentially, an event took place (Commentary on Leviticus 16:1).

I want to understand the Bible as Ramban does, recorded in chronological order, yet I have the same urge as Rashi to blame the Golden Calf on the Israelites' ignorance of the Tabernacle instructions. We could argue that God gives instructions for the building of the Mishkan and creation of a sacrificial system in Moses' *second* trip up the mountain, and *before* he can deliver these laws to the people, they take matters into their own hands. God thus understands the human desire to actively participate in their relationship with God, addressing that very need in requesting the creation of the Mishkan. But the people take matters into their own hands *before* they hear God's request, fulfilling their innate need to partner with God.

Despite the seriousness with which God regards the Israelites' betrayal, the following beautiful midrash connects the gifted gold for the Mishkan to the gifted gold for the Golden Calf. I find it summons the sympathy I think the Israelites deserve:

ישראל נתנו זהב לעגל עד שאמר להם די, ונדבו זהב למשכן עד שאמר להם די, שנאמר (שמות לו, ז): והמלאכה היתה דים לכל המלאכה לעשות אתה והותר. אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא יבוא זהב המשכן ויכפר על זהב העגל

Comparing two moments when the Israelites donated gold to a communal project, the midrash (Shemot Rabbah 51:8) suggests that on both occasions the Israelites were moved to keep giving to the point that they had to be told “enough,” that their donations would more than suffice. This midrash sees in the Israelites a profound need to give. In this sense, the Golden Calf was fulfilling a need that God anticipated and was prepared to help them satisfy. Had the

Israelites summoned a bit more patience, the upcoming construction of the Mishkan could have fulfilled their desire to give tangibly to connect with God.

God established Divine immanence among the Israelites and then proceeded to change course. If we see the Israelites as ignorant of the upcoming construction of the Mishkan, as an infantile faith community just beginning to have a more reciprocal relationship with God, we might muster up empathy for a people desperate for greater guidance on how to restore God's Divine Presence within the community.