

The Day is Short, but Our Story is Long

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Whenever we read a story in the Tanakh, we can come up with different possibilities for where it starts and where it ends. Should we look to the smallest coherent passage? A series of smaller stories that together form a larger arc? Can we connect stories across chapters or even across books?

Parashat Ki Tissa narrates the dramatic episode of the golden calf. While the story of the golden calf certainly can stand on its own, we can also place it into conversation with other pieces of the biblical story, both near and far. Within the book of Exodus, certain details link the golden calf story with the account of revelation at Sinai. Mount Sinai is the site of the Israelites forming a covenant with God, but it is also the site of them violating that covenant. It's where God tells Moses to go up and receive the stone tablets, and where Moses carries down those tablets before he witnesses the Israelites partying and hurls the tablets to the ground. The word *kol* (which we might translate "sound," "noise," or "thunder") recurs in the context of God's revelation, only to recur in the account of the golden calf with respect to the Israelites' ill-advised festivities. In these ways, the golden calf story is inextricably connected to the initial moment of revelation and lawgiving at Sinai, even as it threatens to destroy that covenantal foundation.

We can also identify a further connection between the accounts of revelation and the golden calf in both stories' references to Egypt and the Exodus. The covenant itself rests upon the foundation of what God did to the Egyptians, for the Israelites:

"You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Me. Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the

peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine."
(Exod. 19:4–5)

God refers not only to having saved the Israelites, which perhaps is reason enough for them to serve God, but also to what God "did to the Egyptians." Although God does not spell out what that means, the Israelites of course understand; they saw with their own eyes how God pummeled the Egyptians with plagues and drowned them during the Exodus. Thus, the reference to what they saw God do to the Egyptians may imply a warning: Look what God can do to you if you do not accept God's terms.

If we view the covenant through this lens, we might question the extent to which the Israelites could have refused God's proposal. And in fact, drawing on language from Exodus 19, the rabbis similarly suggest that the covenant at Sinai was coerced through a divine threat of violence:

"They took their places 'at the foot of the mountain" [Exod 19:17]. Rabbi Avdimi bar Hama bar Hasa said: This teaches that the Holy One Blessed be He overturned the mountain above them like a tank, and said to them, "If you accept the Torah, good, but if not—here shall be your grave." (BT Shabbat 88a)

Returning to the story of the golden calf, we find repeated references to Egypt. While in one instance, Moses appeals to God not to destroy the Israelites by imagining what the Egyptians might say, the remainder of these cases refer either to Moses, God, or the golden calf as the one who delivered the Israelites from Egypt. Arguably, the text would read just as coherently without most of these references to Egypt, so why include them? In my view, the repeated mentions of Egypt build on their function at the beginning

of the revelation account: they remind the Israelites of the violence of which God is capable. But if at the beginning of revelation, God only *implies* a threat of violence should the Israelites not accept God's terms, in the story of the golden calf that threat becomes explicit, as God prepares to destroy the Israelites wholesale. Of course, the story continues; Moses successfully intervenes on Israel's behalf, and God allows for a new set of tablets and a repaired covenant.

The links between the accounts of revelation at Sinai and the golden calf suggest that we read these episodes as part of a single, protracted story of the foundation of Israel and God's covenantal relationship. This relationship experiences bumps from the very beginning but survives devastating mistakes and existential threats. This is a relationship with staying power.

This year, Shabbat Parashat Ki Tissa arrives on the heels of Purim. As in the story of the golden calf, the story of Purim involves a threat of annihilation, if under different circumstances. In the Talmudic passage cited above, Rava responds as follows to the suggestion that God effectively coerced the Israelites into accepting the covenant:

“Even so, they again accepted it (i.e., the Torah) in the time of Ahasuerus, as it is written: קִיְמוּ וְקִבְּלוּ הַיְהוּדִים ‘The Jews undertook and accepted’ (Esther 9:27)–The Jews undertook that which they had already accepted.” (BT Shabbat 88a)

Although at Sinai the Israelites experienced duress, during the Purim story the Jewish people were thoroughly *uncoerced* and embraced the Torah willingly. Rava connects the dots between two seemingly distant and disparate stories.

In the face of crisis, it can feel like there are no options and no future. Certainly, in different ways, the stories of the golden calf and of Purim point to such moments, and the Jewish story has included many more moments that have felt inescapably grim. But the story of the Israelites continues past the episode of the golden calf, and the story

of Esther creates a legacy that we continue to participate in today. Let us remember that though, to quote Rabbi Tarfon, “the day is short” (Avot 2:15), our story is long.