



Carnegie Shul Chatter

February 16, 2022



Zoom in for Services

Shabbat services will be held by Zoom through February, beginning at 10am and lasting 60-90 minutes. A link is sent to all Shul members; if you don't receive it, contact Wendy Panizzi at panizziw@gmail.com.

Beyond Belief

In his commentary on this week's parshah, Rabbi Sacks asks about the Golden Calf, "Were they seeking a replacement for him (Moses) or God? What was their sin?"

Personally, I cannot fathom that our ancestors, who had just witnessed the miracles of the Exodus, the plagues, and the parting of the Red Sea, could for any reason construct the Golden Calf. Was Moses' long stay on Sinai disconcerting? Probably. But to lose faith this quickly in God? A terrible sin.

We live in a time of rising anti-Semitism. Our parent's generation experienced the Holocaust, Hitler's attempt to wipe all Jews off the face of the earth, and yet we keep our faith. We do not build a Golden Calf.

I can't imagine Hashem's anger when he witnessed the construction of the Golden Calf, but as has always been the case, God forgave.

That is my opinion. What is yours?

Ki Tisa in a Nutshell

Exodus 30:11–34:35

From Chabad.org

The people of Israel are told to each contribute exactly half a shekel of silver to the Sanctuary. Instructions are also given regarding the making of the Sanctuary's water basin, anointing oil and incense. "Wise-hearted" artisans Betzalel and Aholiav are placed in charge of the Sanctuary's construction, and the people are once again commanded to keep the Shabbat.



When Moses does not return when expected from Mount Sinai, the people make a golden calf and worship it. G-d proposes to destroy the errant nation, but Moses intercedes on their behalf. Moses descends from the mountain carrying the tablets of the testimony engraved with the Ten Commandments; seeing the people dancing about their idol, he breaks the tablets, destroys the golden calf, and has the primary culprits put to death. He then returns to G-d to say: "If You do not forgive them, blot me out from the book that You have written."

G-d forgives, but says that the effect of their sin will be felt for many generations. At first G-d proposes to send His angel along with them, but Moses insists that G-d Himself accompany His people to the promised land.

Moses prepares a new set of tablets and once more ascends the mountain, where G-d reinscribes the covenant on these second tablets. On the mountain, Moses is also granted a vision of the divine thirteen attributes of mercy. So radiant is Moses' face upon his return, that he must cover it with a veil, which he removes only to speak with G-d and to teach His laws to the people.

This week's parshah, Ki Tisa, is one of the most fascinating of the entire Torah. It includes the story of the Golden Calf and much, much more. I am including today Rabbi Jonahan Sacks' commentary about this parshah, but since Rabbi Sacks writes at length about Chapter 33 of Exodus, I am also including first the text of Chapter 33.

Shemot - Exodus - Chapter 33

1 *The Lord spoke to Moses: "Go, ascend from here, you and the people you have brought up from the land of Egypt, to the land that I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying: 'I will give it to your descendants.'*

2 *I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivvites, and the Jebusites*

3 to a land flowing with milk and honey; because I will not go up in your midst since you are a stiff necked people, lest I destroy you on the way."

4 [When] the people heard this bad news, they mourned, and no one put on his finery.

5 And the Lord said to Moses: "Say to the children of Israel: 'You are a stiff necked people; if I go up into your midst for one moment, I will destroy you; but now, leave off your finery, and I will know what to do to you.'"

6 So the children of Israel divested themselves of their finery from Mount Horeb.

7 And Moses took the tent and pitched it for himself outside the camp, distancing [it] from the camp, and he called it the tent of meeting, and it would be that anyone seeking the Lord would go out to the tent of meeting, which was outside the camp.

8 And it would be that when Moses would go out to the tent, all the people would rise and stand, each one at the entrance of his tent, and they would gaze after Moses until he went into the tent.

9 And it would be that when Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and He would speak with Moses.

10 When all the people would see the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise and prostrate themselves, each one at the entrance of his tent.

11 Then the Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as a man would speak to his companion, and he would return to the camp, but his attendant, Joshua, the son of Nun, a lad, would not depart from the tent.

12 Moses said to the Lord: "Look, You say to me: 'Bring this people up!' But You have not informed me whom You will send with me. And You said: 'I have known you by name and you have also found favor in My eyes.'

13 And now, if I have indeed found favor in Your eyes, pray let me know Your ways, so that I may know You, so that I may find favor in Your eyes; and consider that this nation is Your people."

14 So He said, "My Presence will go, and I will give you rest."

15 And he said to Him, "If Your Presence does not go [with us], do not take us up from here.

16 For how then will it be known that I have found favor in Your eyes, I and Your people? Is it not in that You will go with us? Then I and Your people will be distinguished from every [other] nation on the face of the earth."

17 And the Lord said to Moses: "Even this thing that you have spoken, I will do, for you have found favor in My eyes, and I have known you by name."

18 And he said: "Show me, now, Your glory!"



19 He said: “I will let all My goodness pass before you; I will proclaim the name of the Lord before you, and I will favor when I wish to favor, and I will have compassion when I wish to have compassion.”

20 And He said, “You will not be able to see My face, for man shall not see Me and live.”

21 And the Lord said: “Behold, there is a place with Me, and you shall stand on the rock.

22 And it shall be that when My glory passes by, I will place you into the cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with My hand until I have passed by.

23 Then I will remove My hand, and you will see My back but My face shall not be seen.”

The Closeness of God

Ki Tisa (Exodus 30:11-34:35)

by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

Many nations worship God, but Jews are the only people to count themselves His close relatives.

The more I study the Torah, the more conscious I become of the immense mystery of Exodus 33. This is the chapter set in the middle of the Golden Calf narrative, between chapter 32 describing the sin and its consequences, and chapter 34, God's revelation to Moses of the “Thirteen attributes of Mercy,” the second set of tablets and the renewal of the covenant. It is, I believe, this mystery that frames the shape of Jewish spirituality.

What makes chapter 33 perplexing is, first, that it is not clear what it is about. What was Moses doing? In the previous chapter he had already prayed twice for the people to be forgiven. In chapter 34 he prays for forgiveness again. What then was he trying to achieve in chapter 33?

Second, Moses' requests are strange. He says, “Show me now Your ways” and “Show me now Your glory” (Ex. 33:13, 33:18). These seem more requests for metaphysical understanding



or mystical experience than for forgiveness. They have to do with Moses as an individual, not with the people on whose behalf he was praying. This was a moment of national crisis. God was angry. The people were traumatised. The whole nation was in disarray. This was not the time for Moses to ask for a seminar in theology.

Third, more than once the narrative seems to be going backward in time.

In verse 4, for example, it says “No man put on his ornaments,” then in the next verse God says, “Now, then, remove your ornaments.” In verse 14, God says, “My presence will go with you.” In verse 15, Moses says, “If Your presence does not go with us, do not make us leave this place.” In both cases, time seems to be reversed: the second sentence is responded to by the one before. The Torah is clearly drawing our attention to something, but what?



Add to this the mystery of the calf itself - was it or was it not an idol? The text states that the people said, “This, Israel, is your God who brought you out of Egypt” (Ex. 32:4). But it also says that they sought the calf because they did not know what had happened to Moses. Were they seeking a replacement for him or God? What was their sin?

Surrounding it all is the larger mystery of the precise sequence of events involved in the long passages about the Mishkan, before and after the Golden Calf. What was the relationship between the Sanctuary and the Calf?

At the heart of the mystery is the odd and troubling detail of verses 7-11. This tells us that Moses took his tent and pitched it outside the camp. What has this to do with the subject at hand, namely the relationship between God and the people after the Golden Calf? In any case, it was surely the worst possible thing for Moses to do at that time under those circumstances. God had just announced that “I will not go in your midst” (Ex. 33:3). At this, the people were deeply distressed. They “went into mourning” (Ex. 33:4). For Moses, then, to leave the camp must have been doubly demoralising. At times of collective distress, a leader has to be close to the people, not distant.

There are many ways of reading this cryptic text, but it seems to me the most powerful and simple interpretation is this. Moses was making his most audacious prayer, so audacious that the Torah does not state it directly and explicitly. We have to reconstruct it from anomalies and clues within the text itself.

The previous chapter implied that the people panicked because of the absence of Moses, their leader. God himself implied as much when he said to Moses, “Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt” (Ex. 32:7). The suggestion is that Moses' absence or distance was the cause of the sin. He should have stayed closer to the people. Moses took the point. He did go down. He did punish the guilty. He did pray for God to forgive the people. That was the theme of chapter 32. But in chapter 33, having restored order to the people, Moses now began on an entirely new line of approach. He was, in effect, saying to God: what the people need is not for me to be close to them. I am just a human, here today, gone tomorrow. But You are eternal. You are their God. They need You to be close to them.

It was as if Moses was saying, “Until now, they have experienced You as a terrifying, elemental

force, delivering plague after plague to the Egyptians, bringing the world's greatest empire to its knees, dividing the sea, overturning the very order of nature itself. At Mount Sinai, merely hearing Your voice, they were so overwhelmed that they said, if we continue to hear the voice, 'we will die' (Ex. 20:16)." The people needed, said Moses, to experience not the greatness of God but the closeness of God, not God heard in thunder and lightning at the top of the mountain but as a perpetual Presence in the valley below.



That is why Moses removed his tent and pitched it outside the camp, as if to say to God: it is not my presence the people need in their midst, but Yours. That is why Moses sought to understand the very nature of God Himself. Is it possible for God to be close to where people are? Can transcendence become immanence? Can the God who is vaster than the universe live within the universe in a predictable, comprehensible way, not just in the form of miraculous intervention?

To this, God replied in a highly structured way. First, He said, you cannot understand My ways. "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and I will show mercy to whom I will show mercy" (Ex. 33:19). There is an element of divine justice that must always elude human comprehension. We cannot fully enter into the mind of another human being, how much less so the mind of the Creator himself.

Second, "You cannot see My face, for no one can see Me and live" (Ex. 33:20). Humans can at best "See My back." Even when God intervenes in history, we can see this only in retrospect, looking back. Steven Hawking was wrong.^[1] Even if we decode every scientific mystery, we still will not know the mind of God.

However, third, you can see My "glory." That is what Moses asked for once he realised that he could never know God's "ways" or see His "face." That is what God caused to pass by as Moses stood "in a cleft of the rock" (v. 22). We do not know at this stage, exactly what is meant by God's glory, but we discover this at the very end of the book of Exodus. Chapters 35-40 describe how the Israelites built the Mishkan. When it is finished and assembled we read this:

Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the Mishkan. Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the Mishkan. (Ex. 40:34-35)

We now understand the entire drama set in motion by the making of the Golden Calf. Moses pleaded with God to come closer to the people, so that they would encounter Him not only at unrepeatable moments in the form of miracles but regularly, on a daily basis, and not only as a force that threatens to obliterate all it touches but as a Presence that can be sensed in the heart of the camp.

That is why God commanded Moses to instruct the people to build the Mishkan. It is what He



meant when He said: “Let them make Me a sanctuary and I will dwell (ve-shakhanti) among them” (Ex. 25:8). It is from this verb that we get the word Mishkan, “Tabernacle” and the post-biblical word Shekhinah, meaning the Divine presence. A shakhen is a neighbor, one who lives next door. Applied to God it means “the Presence that is close.” If this is so - it is, for example, the way Judah Halevi understood the text^[2] - then the entire institution of the Mishkan was a Divine response to the sin of the Golden Calf, and an acceptance by God of Moses’

plea that He come close to the people. We cannot see God's face; we cannot understand God's ways; but we can encounter God's glory whenever we build a home, on earth, for His presence.

That is the ongoing miracle of Jewish spirituality. No one before the birth of Judaism ever envisaged God in such abstract and awe-inspiring ways: God is more distant than the furthest star and more eternal than time itself. Yet no religion has ever felt God to be closer. In Tanakh the prophets argue with God. In the book of Psalms King David speaks to Him in terms of utmost intimacy. In the Talmud God listens to the debates between the sages and accepts their rulings even when they go against a heavenly voice. God's relationship with Israel, said the prophets, is like that between a parent and a child, or between a husband and a wife. In The Song of Songs it is like that between two infatuated lovers. The Zohar, key text of Jewish mysticism, uses the most daring language of passion, as does Yedid Nefesh, the poem attributed to the sixteenth century Tzefat kabbalist R. Elazar Azikri.

That is one of the striking differences between the synagogues and the cathedrals of the Middle Ages. In a cathedral you sense the vastness of God and the smallness of humankind. But in the Altneushul in Prague or the synagogues of the Ari and R. Joseph Karo in Tzefat, you sense the closeness of God and the potential greatness of humankind. Many nations worship God, but Jews are the only people to count themselves His close relatives (“My child, my firstborn, Israel” Ex. 4:22).

Between the lines of Exodus 33, if we listen attentively enough, we sense the emergence of one of the most distinctive and paradoxical features of Jewish spirituality. No religion has ever held God higher, but none has ever felt Him closer. That is what Moses sought and achieved in Exodus 33 in his most daring conversation with God.

NOTES:

¹ He famously said, at the end of *A Brief History of Time*, that if we were to reach a full scientific understanding of the cosmos, we would “know the mind of God.”

² Judah Halevi, *The Kuzari*, 1:97.

Yahrtzeits

This week the Carnegie Shul acknowledges the yahrtzeits of:

Zelda Levine Hoffman

Mitchell Jay Lederstein

Katie Ruth Oskie

Jennie Miriam Zionts

Rose Drill Klein

Simon (Si) Perlman

Clara Cohen

Lillian Hellman

Don Herman Perlman

Goldie Dorn

May their memories be for a blessing.

Donations

The Carnegie Shul is most grateful for the following recent donations:

Irwin and Lori Norvitch

In memory of Alex Cowan