

9 *Ki Tissa*

THE GOLDEN CALF:
FIRE IN THE BONES

[30:11-34:35]

1. *The Golden Calf: Fickleness or Intransigence?*

MOSES IS GIFTED WITH TORAH

The pivotal experience of the Exodus is surely the Revelation at Mount Sinai, twinned with the Golden Calf that so rapidly follows it. Indeed, if we adopt the midrashic flashback perspective on the narrative,¹ the Golden Calf is deceptively separated in the biblical text from the moment of Revelation: narrated twelve chapters later, it actually preceded all the data of the Mishkan. Essentially, it is inseparable from the encounter with God at Sinai.

By the time the reader of the Torah reaches this narrative, however, it has been long “repressed,” during the externalized legal passages relating to the Mishkan. The Golden Calf is a disaster that has been waiting to happen. Inconceivable treachery, it is also an inevitable reaction to Revelation. Indeed, the paradox of the Golden Calf centers on the work of memory: it is both forgetting and remembering, in a complex sense that we shall explore. Forgetting the glory of Sinai, the people also fix themselves in a posture of rigid loyalty to memory that is no less relevant to the idolatrous passion.

Forty days on Mount Sinai culminate in a gift from God to Moses:

When He finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, He gave Moses the two tablets of the Covenant, stone tablets inscribed with the finger of God. (31:18)

The gift is narrated with succinct force: it occurs at the end of a process of language, “when He finished speaking with him.” After such speech, a silence falls; and stones are given, accepted. These stones are engraved with letters, words. They, too, are language, but they represent the permanent residue of a dialogue between God and man.

The relation between the many words of Mount Sinai and the scripted stones is questioned by the Talmud:

At first, Moses would learn Torah and forget it—until it was given him as a gift, as it is said, “He *gave* Moses . . .”²

In this midrash, the Torah is experienced first as material to be mastered, susceptible to all the slippages of memory. Moses plays the role of the human being eroded by failures of retention: to be a “learner and forgetter,” is to represent the pathos of the human situation in time. These forty days of strenuous encounter with God culminate in an act of total gift: “and He gave . . .” is God’s fulfillment of His original promise to Moses: “Come up to Me on the mountain and wait there, and I will give you the stone tablets with the teachings and commandments which I have inscribed to instruct them” (24:12).

Here, all Moses’ strenuous efforts to retain the Torah in memory are superseded by an act of divine generosity: the bestowal of total recall. Effectively, Moses becomes supernaturally *gifted*. Or, to frame the idea differently, the nature of God’s gift is that He gives Moses relief from the approximations and frustrations of the learning process.³ These stones, inscribed by the finger of God, offer a formalized resolution of all the struggles of speech with God. That original study partnership,⁴ the *chevrutha* of God and Moses, each speaking with the other, has come to its climax in a gift that will make further dialogue irrelevant. Embracing the stones traced by God’s finger, Moses has reached a moment of apotheosis, of total mastery. “Great things are done when men and mountains meet” (William Blake).

This moment, however, is the last moment of an old world. As it is narrated in this single verse that prefaces the story of the Golden Calf, we half notice that God’s gift has not registered its weight in Moses’ arms. That weight will be sensed only after the crisis, as Moses descends the mountain

with the two tablets of testimony *in his hand*" (32:15). Then, the Torah will linger over the tablets, the writing, as objects *in Moses' hand*; their divine origin, the supernatural script will be pressed home at the very moment that Moses will smash them. Now, however, in the last tableau at the top of the mountain, before the Golden Calf narrative, God's gift remains strangely impalpable.

THE GOLDEN CALF: THE TIME FACTOR

From the image of Moses, supremely gifted at the top of the mountain, then, the narrative cuts to the Israelites, at the base of the mountain:

And the people saw that Moses was delayed in coming down from the mountain, and they gathered against Aaron and said to him, "Come, make us a god who shall go before us, for that man Moses, who brought us up from the land of Egypt—we do not know what has happened to him."
(32:1)

The contrast between above and below is subtly suggested. Between the solitary grandeur of Moses in the presence of God and the panicked abandonment of the people, the narrative mediates by the use of the word *boshesh*: "he was delayed." In itself exotic—never found elsewhere in the Torah⁵—the word conveys the quality of the people's rebellion. "The people saw that Moses was delayed": the people perceive a *lateness*, an absence that is measured by time. The reader knows that Moses is sublimely present at the top of the mountain, while the people at the base are almost comically provoked by lateness.⁶ The peculiar anxiety of this sense of the missed moment is fleshed out by Rashi:

"... Moses was delayed..." an expression of lateness... When Moses ascended the mountain, he told them: In forty days' time, I shall be back, in the first six hours of day (i.e. before midday). They thought that the day of his ascent was included in the count, while he meant forty complete days, which began with the night. Since he ascended on the seventh of Sivan, the count began the following night and ended on the seventeenth of Tammuz. But on the sixteenth of Tammuz, Satan came and threw the world into chaos: he showed them an image of darkness and deep fog and chaos, as if to say, "Surely Moses is dead—that is why chaos is come to the world."⁷

Implicit in this reading is a pun on the word *boshesh*—*Ba shesh!*—"The sixth hour has come!" The people's nervous perception of lateness is graphically plotted in a scenario of temporal misunderstanding. Rashi amplifies the text with a narrative of specific disappointment: "*Ba shesh!*—the promised time has come—and that man Moses... we do not know what has happened to him." The speech conveys the people's pervasive anxiety about Moses: "We have *never* known exactly how to define him,⁸ and now he has disappeared into the fire, and the sixth hour of the fortieth day has come..." Moses' elusive quality is confirmed when a time schedule is betrayed. A latent anxiety about Moses' nature, about his essential affiliations, is activated in an apparently trivial moment of lateness.

Rashi, citing the Talmud,⁹ explains the rational basis for the misunderstanding. The calculation of the forty-day period is distorted by a full twenty-four hours, if the count begins by day instead of at night. The idolatrous project of the Golden Calf, in effect, is predicated on an *ambiguity*, for which Moses is at least partially responsible. This ambiguity, apparently technical in nature, produces a time lag in the people's expectations and the residue of that time lag is the Golden Calf.

If we explore the midrashic narrative further, we find that its mythic imagery largely serves to exonerate the people. Not content with the scenario of a misunderstood time frame, the midrash has Satan show the people an "image of darkness, deep fog and chaos, *as if to say*, Surely Moses is dead..." That is, a mass hallucination affects the people. Indeed, in Rashi's Talmudic source, the satanic fantasy is of Moses dead on a bier. In response to this hallucination the people cry: "*this* man Moses, who brought us up from the land of Egypt—we do not know what has happened to him."

A specific image of Moses, satanically generated, is responsible for the people's faithlessness. The world becomes a phantasmagoric blur; chaos is come again. Imagination spawns icons of meaninglessness. In Rashi's Talmudic source, Satan moves from insidious speech to visual fantasy; only then, afflicted by a vision of horrifying intimacy, the people make their demand of Aaron. Manipulated by Satan, their panic response seems almost plausible.¹⁰

The weight of the time factor in the people's betrayal is reminiscent of infant experience as described by D. W. Winnicott in *Playing and Reality*. He writes of the trauma suffered by the infant if the mother is absent for a period that exceeds the infant's capacity to retain her in imagination:

The feeling of the mother's existence lasts x minutes. If the mother is away more than x minutes, then the imago fades, and along with this the

baby's capacity to use the symbol of the union ceases. The baby is distressed, but this distress is soon *mended* because the mother returns in $x+y$ minutes. In $x+y$ minutes the baby has not become altered. But in $x+y+z$ minutes the baby has become *traumatized* . . . We must assume that the vast majority of babies never experience the $x+y+z$ quantity of deprivation. This means that the majority of children do not carry around with them for life the knowledge from experience of having been mad. Madness here simply means a *break-up* of whatever may exist at the time of a *personal continuity of existence*.¹¹

The condition that Winnicott simply terms, "madness," is, I suggest, the condition of the people experiencing an $x+y+z$ quantity of deprivation. Some essential root of continuity with the personal beginning has, for them, been snapped. That this is a question of time, of lateness, is only apparently a trivial circumstance. For time is of the essence in questions of attachment and separation, trust and trauma.

THE GOLDEN CALF SUBSTITUTES FOR MOSES

The analogy with that infant experience that cannot tolerate unpunctuality in the love-object leads us further afield. The midrashic pun on *Ba shesh*—"It's six o'clock!"—intimates the infantile, compulsive quality of the people's dependence on Moses. In one of Rashi's sources, the satanic motif is narrated thus:

The Rabbis said: Satan was effective (lit., "he found his hands") at that time: Moses was seen *suspended between heaven and earth*, and the people pointed him out with their fingers saying, "This man Moses . . ." ¹²

The mass hallucination has Moses suspended between heaven and earth, removed from them, neither among them nor in front of them; his image hovers, with a mythic ambiguity, between the upper and lower realms. And that ambiguity about the God-man Moses is Satan's strongest suit. Compelling their imagination, elusive to rational understanding, child of two cultures and speaker of no language, Moses torments the people by his absence. Like Gracchus the Hunter, in Kafka's story, the Moses-figure in their imagination needs to be released from a limbo that is neither life nor death. The hold that his figure has on their fantasy means, on the one

hand, a madness of deprivation, and, on the other, an astonishing ease of substitution.

This, indeed, is one of the mysteries of the Golden Calf episode. For Moses—or the icon of him to which he is satanically reducible—is both essential and exchangeable. This, of course, is the way of all fetishes: they evoke a visceral need, withdraw all power into themselves, and yet are susceptible to cruel destruction, if they betray the adoration of their worshipers.

If a few hours' absence beyond Winnicott's x -period can lead the people to "madness," this must raise questions about the nature of the connection between people and leader. If what is at stake is life's continuity, then the ruthlessness with which a grotesque substitution is effected both is and is not astonishing.

The people's view of Moses is most lucidly limned in their words of abandonment: "This man Moses who brought us up from the land of Egypt . . ." Meshech Chochma¹³ reads powerfully: for them, Moses has become the source of supernatural power—it is he who has brought them out of the land of Egypt. Just here, at root, is their pathology: as God diagnoses it to Moses a few verses later, "Go down, for your people *whom you brought up from the land of Egypt*, have acted corruptly" (32:7). Implicitly, God tells Moses: The people's corruption consists in their projecting all power onto *you*. In other words, Meshech Chochma implies, idolatry has begun long before the Golden Calf emerges from the fire. Moses himself has become a fetish in the sensibility of the people. In Winnicott's terms, a madness of discontinuity has afflicted them, in which they are unable to "use" Moses in his absence, unable to sustain the "personal psychic reality" of his image.¹⁴

Responsibility for this "idolatrous" state of affairs is, however, not easily determined. If the infant-mother analogy is accepted, the issue of responsibility becomes difficult, perhaps even irrelevant. A disruption has occurred between the two protagonists, and out of this disruption emerges, with a bizarre naturalness, the Golden Calf. The relation between Moses and the people is exposed, at a moment of strain, as one of pathological dependence: pathological, clearly, in its grotesque progeny. The scorn of the Psalmist places the narrative in satirical perspective: "They have exchanged their glory for an image of a bull that feeds on grass!"¹⁵ Between God and the Calf, Moses emerges, unexpectedly, as a problematic transitional figure.

To see the genesis of the Golden Calf—of fetishisms and idolatries—in a projection of divine power onto the image of Moses is to remember the people's plea, in the very heart of Revelation: "You speak with us and we will listen; but let not God speak with us, lest we die" (20:16). Later, Moses de-

89. Yalkut Shimeoni 941.
90. The sages of the Amoraic period had the custom of calling one another, generically, "Moses."
91. Likkutei Moharan, 64. See my discussion of this passage on pp. 190–192.
92. *Ethics of the Fathers*, 1:17.
93. I owe the analogy between the *chalal panui* and "potential space" to Rabbi Daniel Epstein.
94. Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), 42.
95. See Benjamin, *Bonds of Love*, 44.
96. See Rashi to 4:14: "All anger narrated in the Torah leaves a trace . . ."
97. Tanchuma Devarim 1.
98. *Pri Tzaddik*, Tetzaveh, 2.
99. *The Exile of the Word*, 197.
100. *Towards Reading Freud*, 163.
101. Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love*, 48.

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1. See chapter 7, pp. 318–322.
2. B. Nedarim 38a.
3. See Ha-amek Davar to 31:18.
4. See Rashi and Ha-amek Davar to 31:18.
5. *Boshesh* is used twice in the Book of Judges: 3:25 and 5:28.
6. Ha-amek Davar suggests an unexpected connection between the pre-sin condition of Adam and Eve, naked and *unashamed* (*lo yithboshashu*), and the notion of lateness. Although shame (*bosh*) and lateness (*boshesh*) seem unrelated, the Hebrew word used in the Genesis narrative is, in fact, derived from the "lateness" root. Because of this anomaly, Ha-amek Davar explores the phenomenological connections of shame and lateness: locating the meaning of the sin in the genesis of consciousness, with its impediments to self-forgetful union, whether mystical or sexual. Here, too, one may suggest, the dependence of the people on the consciousness of time is a bathetic counterpoint to the Revelation.
7. Rashi to 32:1.
8. See Ha-amek Davar to 32:1.
9. B. Shabbath 89a.
10. See Maharal, Tiffereth Yisrael, 48.
11. Winnicott, *Playing*, 97.
12. Shemoth Rabba 41:10.
13. Meshech Chochma to 32:19.
14. See Winnicott, *Playing*, 97.
15. Ps 106:20.
16. Rashi to Deuteronomy 5:24. See my discussion of this crisis on pp. 283–284.
17. See C. S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1957).

18. Beit Yaacov Yithro 114. I am grateful to R. Daniel Epstein, whose reference in a lecture alerted me to this passage.
19. "Circles," in Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Selected Essays*, ed. Larzer Ziff (New York: Penguin Classics, 1985), 226.
20. Freud 14:257. I am indebted to Mark Edmundson's discussion of Emerson and Freud in his *Towards Reading Freud*.
21. Emerson, "Circles," 227.
22. Emerson, "Threnody," in *The Portable Emerson* (Viking Press, 1962), 340.
23. Burke uses this expression to describe Freud's reformulation of the "old doctrine of original sin," in comprehensive sexual terms (*Permanence and Change*, 127).
24. B. Shabbat 88b.
25. There is a contrasting midrashic tradition that does minimize the people's sin; that, for instance, lays the blame on the *Erev rav*, the "mixed multitudes" (Exod 12:38), that left Egypt together with the Israelites. See, e.g., Tanchuma 19; Midrash HaGadol to 32:1; Zohar 2:191.
26. B. Sanhedrin 63a.
27. See chapter 2 for my discussion of the "autism" of Pharaoh, and of Moses and the Israelites: Egypt is constructed in midrashic language as the symbolic territory of insensibility, out of which the Israelites must be "born."
28. Burke, *Permanence*, 125.
29. *Ibid.*, 71.
30. *Ibid.*, 74.
31. *Ibid.*, 129.
32. Freud 14:255.
33. Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in Ziff, *Selected Essays*, 190.
34. Edmundson, *Reading Freud*, 149.
35. Emerson, "Compensation," quoted in Edmundson, 135.
36. Freud, 14:255.
37. Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *Selected Essays* (New York: Penguin, 1982), 181.
38. Philip Rieff, *The Mind of the Moralists* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 166.
39. Seforno to 32:9.
40. Tanchuma 22.
41. See Or HaChaim to 32:11.
42. B. Berachoth 32a.
43. Ps 106:23; used as a proof-text in midrashic descriptions of Moses' role as intercessor. See, e.g., Shemoth Rabba 43:1.
44. Adam Phillips, *The Beast in the Nursery* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), 95.
45. Zohar 67b.
46. B. Berachoth 32a.
47. Heschel compares God's anger to that of parents who experience "spiritual dependence" in relation to their children: they "are in misery when unable to love" (*The Prophets*, 294).