



Parashat Ki Tisa

Dancing at Sinai

by Rabbi Jacob Staub on Saturday March 10, 2007

20 Adar 5767

Exodus 30:11 - 34:35, Shabbat

I remember vividly the way, as a nine-year-old student at an Orthodox yeshiva in the Bronx, I was troubled when we first studied *Parashat Ki Tisa*. How could the Israelites have been so myopically impatient?!! They had been witness to the plagues. They had been delivered out of Egyptian bondage. They had sung God's praises on the shore of the Sea while watching their Egyptian pursuers drown. And now, asked to wait a mere forty days while Moses ascended Mount Sinai to receive the Torah, they couldn't wait? And. . .they needed a molten calf to worship?

I was an exemplary yeshiva *bochur*, at the top of my class, the pride of my teachers. My parents made no secret about having named me Jacob Joseph so that I would be a great rabbi like Rabbi Jacob Joseph, and no thoughts of rebellion had yet arisen in my mind. And so, I assented to my teacher's traditional interpretation of the narrative: Aaron was right in characterizing the people as "bent on evil" (Exodus 32:22). They had already murmured about the shortage of water (15:22-25) and bread (16:2-36). They were a stiff-necked people with a slave mentality. The Israelites could not enter the Promised Land until those born into slavery had died out in the wilderness and a new generation, born in freedom, had emerged.

A year or two away from my first conscious reflections on my attraction to other boys, I nevertheless internalized the message. We are sinners and descendants of sinners. We are fortunate to have been chosen to receive the Torah, and only through obedience to its commandments, can we overcome our base inclinations. Otherwise, we are doomed to our sinful lives.

Decades later, long after I had become a Reconstructionist rabbi, this *parashah* continued to trouble me, year after year. I even published an article about it. ("Bless Us, Our Father: Parenting and Our Images of God," *The Reconstructionist* [Spring 2000].) I would become angry at the God portrayed in the story. The Israelites, who were presumably several months into a new form of worship of an imageless God, revert to their prior practices, under the guidance of Aaron—who does end up *Kohen Gadol* (High Priest). As a result, God wants to wipe out the



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entire people. Moses convinces God not to do so, and instead, Moses directs the Levites to slaughter 3000 people, followed by a God-sent plague.

If such a God (or Moses, for that matter) were to come to me for counseling, I would recommend anger management therapy! Clearly, the people who authored this text experienced God as an autocratic, ruthless tribal chief—not anyone in whose image I would want to be created. I would prefer to worship and emulate a Being with some compassion, who forgives our limitations, supports us as we falter, and calls us back as we stray.

I yearn for an image of God who forgives a sinful people, but I yearn even more for an image of God who embraces difference rather than condemns it. Moses, up on the mountain, was teaching a kind of worship without molten calves and joyful dancing. Some of the Israelites in the valley below were worshipping God by dancing around a molten calf. Can we imagine a story in which Moses respects difference rather than exterminating it?

One definition of the verb “to queer” is “to question all norms.” If we are going to queer Jewish traditions, there is no more important and formidable place to start than at *Ma’amad Har Sinai*—the narrative of the Sinaitic revelation of the Torah. According to rabbinic tradition, it was here that the 613 *mitzvot* were commanded, here that the one, true way (*halakhah*) to worship the one, true God was revealed. This is the text that provides the foundation for the assertion that there are divinely commanded norms—and the mandate for enforcing those norms, even unto death.

Yet, at the very moment when Moses was receiving the Torah, the text reveals that there were other alternatives. Later interpretations have labored hard to explain the magnitude of the sin of the Golden Calf. The Israelites, however, were not such terrible people. According to rabbinic interpretation, only they, among all of the 70 nations, were so virtuous as to respond, “*Na’aseh venishma*” / “We accept the Torah from God sight unseen and commit to doing whatever God commands us before we hear the details.” And they were following the instructions of Aaron, Moses’ brother, soon to be anointed High Priest of Israel, (32:2-6), contrary to his semi-truthful account when Moses later grills him (32:22-24).

It is not so difficult, then, to imagine that the Israelites were worshipping in ways that they *thought* were acceptable and were surprised by the fervor of Moses’ condemnation. And not so farfetched to imagine that Moses might have descended after forty days, delighted in his people’s enthusiasm, and patiently set out to teach them a new way of worship that was still unfamiliar to them.

Why was Moses so short-tempered and intolerant? According to many contemporary Bible scholars, he wasn’t. Five hundred years later, after the Assyrian conquest of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, the leaders of the Kingdom of Judah set out to write a history that blamed



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Israel's defeat on the sins of King Jeroboam, who had made two golden calves for the temples in Bethel and Dan (I Kings 12:25-31). Until then, worship had taken place throughout the land in local shrines; now, worship became centralized in Jerusalem, where the leadership could control it. In the wake of the traumatic Assyrian invasion, difference and diversity was suppressed—even retroactively back to the retelling of the Sinai narrative.

So, Moses was *portrayed* as intolerant by writers who, in their own time, were seeking license to stamp out contemporary diversity. We have no record of what Moses might really have been like. Perhaps he *was* patient and forgiving. Perhaps, his experience as an outsider in the palace of Pharaoh, in the Land of Midian, and even among the Israelites (with whom he had never lived) sensitized him to difference and softened his heart. We don't know that he was, but neither do we know that he wasn't.

I close with a poem that I wrote several years ago on the topic (published first in [Zeek](#) [July 2005] and more recently in [Ashe: Journal of Experimental Spirituality](#) 5/4 [Winter 2006]: 408-409).

Golden Calf

Jacob J. Staub

From the valley below, the ebullient notes of celebrants,
the beat of tambourines liberated after four hundred years of abuse.

Sing unto the One,
Who smites the tyrant,
Who hears the cries of the oppressed,
Who parts the Sea and plants the seeds for generations yet unborn.

Ana, pool your gold. *Adonai*, give it to God.
Hoshi'a, smelt it down. *Na*, cast the throne.
Ashira, link your arms. *Ladonai*, circle the fire.
Ki, spin into oblivion.
Ga'oh, let go, let go, let go.
Ga'ah, God is One, we are one.
With broken bodies of former slaves, we undulate,
following the Source enthroned into the wilderness of promise.

And up over the ridge, the Levites wait, in formation,
swords on thighs, servants of the Lord, privileged
to follow orders, to do as they are told.



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A martial clan descended from the heroes of the Battle of Shechem,
they wear their forebears' medals proudly.
They have been instructed in the proper use of herbs and oils,
in the dire consequences of disobedience, of initiative, of openheartedness.
In formation, they await the signal from Moses, down from the mountain,
to charge, to slay three thousand defenseless, spent from a night of celebration.

Moses claims that You love only him,
that we were spared because he intervened,
that You do not like our offering.
Moses, who has never seen Your face—
not in the silent, steamy eyes of Tzipporah,
from whom he stays cloistered,
not in the bloody foreskins of his sons,
whom he ignores in the name of his holy work.
Moses, who doesn't touch.
Moses, who doesn't dance.
Moses, the bridegroom of blood.

Guide him please, Holy One of Compassion.
We don't need another Pharaoh to lead us into freedom.
Love him doubly, forgive him his wrath.
He was taken as an infant from his mother.
Only You know what befell the lad in the palace,
but below, all we see is his sweltering rage.
Otherwise, as You surely can foresee,
generations will mistake
fervent worship for idolatry.



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