



“The Five Books of Moses:
Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

21 Ki Tissa—Golden Giving

שמות לא

יח ויתן אל-מ'שה ככל'תו לדבר אתו בהר סיני שני לח'ת העדת לח'ת אבן כתבים באצבע אל'הים.

שמות לב

א וירא העם כי-ב'שש מ'שה לרדת מן-ההר ויקהל העם על-אהרן ויאמרו אליו קום עשה-לנו אל'הים אשר ילכו לפנינו כי-זה מ'שה האיש אשר העלנו מארץ מצרים ל'א ידענו מה-היה לו. ב ויאמר אלהם אהרן פרקו נזמי הזהב אשר באזני נשיכם בניכם ובנ'תיכם והביאו אלי. ג ויתפרקו כל-העם את-נזמי הזהב אשר באזניהם ויביאו אל-אהרן. ד ויקח מידם ויצר א'תו בכרס ויעשהו עגל מסכה ויאמרו אלה אל'היך ישראל אשר העלוך מארץ מצרים. ה וירא אהרן ויבן מזבח לפניו ויקרא אהרן ויאמר חג ליהנה מחר. ו וישכימו ממחרת ויעלו ע'ל'ת ויגשו שלמים וישב העם לאכ'ל ושתו ויקמו לצחק.

ז וידבר יהוה אל-מ'שה לך-רד כי שחת עמך אשר העלית מארץ מצרים. ח סרו מהר מן-הדרך אשר צויתם עשו להם עגל מסכה וישתחוו-לו ויזבחו-לו ויאמרו אלה אל'היך ישראל אשר העלוך מארץ מצרים. ט ויאמר יהוה אל-מ'שה ראיתי את-העם הזה והנה עם-קשה-ע'רף הוא. י ועתה הניחה לי ויחר-אפי בהם ואכלם ואעשה אותך לגוי גדול. יא ויחל מ'שה את-פני יהוה אל'היו ויאמר למה יהנה יחרה אפך בעמך אשר הוצאת מארץ מצרים בכ'ח גדול וביד חזקה. יב למה יאמרו מצרים לאמר ברעה הוציאם להר'ג א'תם בהרים ולכל'תם מעל פני האדמה שוב מחרון אפך והנחם על-הרעה לעמך. יג זכ'ר לאברהם ליצחק ולישראל עבדיך אשר נשבעת להם בך ותדבר אלהם ארבה את-זרעכם ככוכבי השמים וכל-הארץ הז'את אשר אמרתי אתן לזרעכם ונחלו לע'לם. יד וינחם יהוה על-הרעה אשר דבר לעשות לעמו.

טו ויפן ויכד מ'שה מן-ההר ושני לח'ת העדת בידו לח'ת כתבים משני עבריהם מז'ה ומז'ה הם כתבים. טז והלח'ת מעשה אל'הים המה והמכתב מכתב אל'הים הוא חרות על-הלח'ת. יז וישמע יהושע את-קול העם ברעה ויאמר אל-מ'שה קול מלחמה במחנה. יח ויאמר אין קול ענות גבורה ואין קול ענות חלושה קול ענות אג' כי ש'מע. יט ויהי כאשר קרב אל-המחנה וירא את-העגל ומח'ל'ת ויחר-אף מ'שה וישלך מידו את-הלח'ת וישבר א'תם תחת ההר. כ ויקח את-העגל אשר עשו וישר'ף באש ויטחן עד אשר-דק ויזר על-פני המים וישק את-בני ישראל. כא ויאמר מ'שה אל-אהרן מה-עשה לך העם הזה כי-הבאת עליו חטאה גד'לה. כב ויאמר אהרן אל-יחר אף אד'ני אתה ידעת את-העם כי ברעה הוא. כג ויאמרו לי עשה-לנו אל'הים אשר ילכו לפנינו כי-זה מ'שה האיש אשר העלנו מארץ מצרים ל'א ידענו מה-היה לו. כד ואמר להם למי זהב התפרקו ויתנו-לי ואשלכהו באש ויצא העגל הזה.

Shmot 31

18 When S/He finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, S/He gave Moshe the two tablets of the Pact, stone tablets inscribed with the finger of God.

Shmot 32

1 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 man Moses, who brought us from the land of Egypt — we do not know what has happened to him." 2 Aaron said to them, "Break off the gold rings that are on the ears of your spouses, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." 3 And all the people broke off the gold rings that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. 4 This he took from them and cast in a mold, and made it into a molten calf. And they exclaimed, "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!" 5 When Aaron saw this, he built



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an altar before it; and Aaron announced: "Tomorrow shall be a festival of the Lord!" 6 Early next day, the people offered up burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; they sat down to eat and drink, and then rose to dance.

7 The Lord spoke to Moses, "Hurry down, for your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt, have acted basely. 8 They have been quick to turn aside from the way that I enjoined upon them. They have made themselves a molten calf and bowed low to it and sacrificed to it, saying: 'This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!'"

9 The Lord further said to Moses, "I see that this is a stiffnecked people. 10 Now, let Me be, that My anger may blaze forth against them and that I may destroy them, and make of you a great nation." 11 But Moses implored the Lord his God, saying, "Let not Your anger, O Lord, blaze forth against Your people, whom You delivered from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand. 12 Let not the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that He delivered them, only to kill them off in the mountains and annihilate them from the face of the earth.' Turn from Your blazing anger, and renounce the plan to punish Your people. 13 Remember Your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, how You swore to them by Your Self and said to them: I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, and I will give to your offspring this whole land of which I spoke, to possess forever." 14 And the Lord renounced the punishment S/He had planned to bring upon His/Her people.

15 Thereupon Moses turned and went down from the mountain bearing the two tablets of the Pact, tablets inscribed on both their surfaces: they were inscribed on the one side and on the other. 16 The tablets were God's work, and the writing was God's writing, incised upon the tablets. 17 When Joshua heard the sound of the people in its boisterousness, he said to Moses, "There is a cry of war in the camp." 18 But he answered, "It is not the sound of the tune of triumph, Or the sound of the tune of defeat; It is the sound of song that I hear!"

19 As soon as Moses came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, he became enraged; and he hurled the tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain. 20 He took the calf that they had made and burned it; he ground it to powder and strewed it upon the water and so made the Israelites drink it.

21 Moses said to Aaron, "What did this people do to you that you have brought such great sin upon them?" 22 Aaron said, "Let not my lord be enraged. You know that this people is bent on evil. 23 They said to me, 'Make us a god to lead us; for that man Moses, who brought us from the land of Egypt — we do not know what has happened to him.' 24 So I said to them, 'Whoever has gold, take it off!' They gave it to me and I hurled it into the fire and out came this calf!"



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Context

Parashat Ki Tissa opens with commandments pertaining to the Mishkan. Every Israelite is required to offer a half-sheqel toward the sacred service. The Kohanim-priests must wash before they serve. A sacred combination of fragrant spices is to be prepared to anoint the vessels and the priests. Bezalel, child of Uri, is imbued with divine spirit and appointed to oversee the arts and crafts of building the Mishkan and all of its implements, making certain to desist from the labor to honor Shabbat.

While Moshe is receiving these instructions on Mount Sinai, the people grow impatient for his return, and, under Aaron's leadership, contribute toward a different project. When Moshe descends from the mountain and finds the people celebrating the golden calf, he smashes the stone tablets inscribed by God. Moshe both attains divine mercy on behalf of the Israelites, and, with God, punishes them for their idolatry. After the trauma, God accedes to Moshe's yearning to see the divine. Having ascended again up the mountain, Moshe—glowing with the divine radiance—brings back a second set of tablets, this time carved by his own hand.

Explorations

Shortly after the revelation at Sinai, and the covenant the Children of Israel undertake with God, they stray from their commitment and perform forbidden idol worship. Sensing that Moses is not returning from Mount Sinai at the expected time, the people grow anxious and afraid. Some gather and instruct Aaron to fulfill their desire to see a god before them.

² Aaron said to them, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." ³ And all the people took off the gold rings that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. (Shmot 32)

The blatant unfaithfulness of the Israelites is matched by Aaron's cooperation in their apparent mutiny against Moses and God. Aaron does not hesitate to issue a command to create a new form of worship that will satisfy peoples' desire. Similarly to the donations to the Mishkan, Aaron proposes to collect the peoples' contributions of gold.

Perhaps with the intention to absolve Aaron for his participation in the idolatry, many commentators interpret that Aaron tries to delay or prevent the people from actually committing the transgression. His instruction to the men to take jewelry from their family members is an attempt to buy time, they argue.

According to most interpreters, the text specifically does not refer to the women giving their gold. On the one hand, this interpretation of the text praises women for their steadfast faithfulness to God, and patience with Moshe's absence. On the other hand, this reading explicitly excludes the women from “all the people”,

And all the people broke off the gold rings that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. (Shmot 32: 3, my emphasis)



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While both agree that the women do not contribute their gold to the cause, [Midrash Tanchuma](#) and Rashi understand Aaron's logic about the women and children's possible reasons differently. According to Rashi, Aaron assumes, "The women and the children have affection for their jewelry and will delay the matter, and during this time Moses will come" (on 32:2).

Rashi assumes that women and children are less likely than men to part with their jewelry. Linking the children and the women infantilizes and trivializes the women's attitude about their jewelry. The women, like children, care so much for their appearance and their possessions that they are oblivious to the proposed sin of disobeying God's commandment. Both children and women are thereby accused of being covetous and self-engrossed.

Midrash Tanchuma attributes to the women more noble reasons for not parting with their gold. "Aaron told them (the men) something difficult so that the women would delay the action because they saw all of the miracles and heroic acts that God did in Egypt, and at the Sea, and at Sinai. They went to the women, but the women stood up to them and said, 'God forbid that we would deny God who did all of these miracles and heroic acts for us and commit idolatry'" (Ki Tissa 19).

This midrash attributes to the women more appreciation for God's miracles and awe of God's commandments. While the men fail by their impatience and fall into idolatry, the women resist the idolatry because they see that it denies God's greatness. As a direct reward for their piety, women are given the festival of Rosh Chodesh, the New Moon,

Aaron debated with himself, saying: If I say to Israel, Give me gold and silver, they will bring it immediately; but I will say to them, Give me your spouses' and your children's earrings, then immediately the matter will fail, as it says, "And Aaron said to them, break off the golden rings." The women heard (this), but they were unwilling to give their earrings to their spouses; but they said to them: You seek to make a molten image without any power in it to redeem. The Holy One, blessed be S/He, rewarded the women in this world and in the world to come. What reward did S/He give them in this world? That they should observe the New Moons more stringently than the men, and what reward will S/He give them in the world to come? They are destined to be renewed like the New Moons, as it is said: Who satisfies your years with good things; so that your youth is renewed like the eagle (Ps. 103:5)." (*Pirke De-Rabbi Eliezer*, chapter 45)

While the Torah mentions the celebration of the new moon,

And on your joyous occasions - your fixed festivals and new moon days - you shall sound the trumpets over your burnt offerings and your sacrifices of well-being." (Bamidbar 10:10)

this midrash strengthens a rabbinic tradition that affiliates Rosh Hodesh with women. Commenting on a talmudic passage, Rashi brings the same explanation as the midrash from PdRE above (Megilla 22b). The *Shulchan Aruch* relates that the custom for women not to work on Rosh Chodesh is a good and proper one (*Orech Chayim* 417:1). The [Rama](#) explains about this ruling that women should refrain from spinning, weaving, and sewing on Rosh Chodesh—skills that women contributed to the building of the Mishkan.



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Although the women do not contribute their gold, and join in the idolatry of the golden calf, their refusal to contribute and their reminder of the greatness of God does not succeed to prevent the idolatry. The men are so committed to their idolatry—they part with their own gold rings so willingly that their enthusiasm overcomes the women whose resistance does not even delay the idolatrous festival. Aaron, too, fails to prevent or delay the idolatry; indeed he seems to participate in it.

After atonement for the incident, and calm is restored, Moshe himself yearns to see God—a desire not so different from the Israelites' longing that brought on the idolatry.

Questions for Discussion

Notice the violent connotation of Aaron's instruction “to break off” the golden rings compared with the commandments to take voluntary offerings for the building of the Mishkan. What is the significance of this contrast for the two different projects? How can we make sure that the manner of our collecting and giving reflects the sanctity of the project to which we are giving?

Our resistance or refusal to participate in action we believe to be wrong is sometimes insufficient to prevent it. In a personal example from your daily life, consider how to adopt a more proactive strategy, offering alternate, better courses of action that might prevent the negative actions from occurring.

The women who refuse to give up their gold for idolatry model personal, local activism. While their success is disputable, they suggest personal activism on the local level. Another example of such activism may be found in Aristophanes' ancient comedy, *Lysistrata*, in which a group of women from opposing states unite to end the Peloponnesian War. The women withhold sex from their mates until the men finally agree to lay down their weapons and work towards achieving diplomatic peace. What do you think about women's collective action for political and or theological ends? See the [Lysistrata Project](#).

Our cultures continue to inculcate women's attachment to jewelry and obsession with personal vanity—Rashi's approach. Discuss and evaluate advertising and other media that broadcast these messages.

Begin to compare the desires for closeness to God that motivate the Israelites to build the golden calf and the Mishkan—we will learn more about the aspects of closeness that the Mishkan enables as we proceed.

Study Links

During the latter part of the 20th century, Jewish women revived the celebration of Rosh Chodesh as part of an awakening of feminist impulses in Jewish observance. Penina Adelman's book, [Miriam's Well](#) has become a classic guide, documenting the events created by a women's collective in Boston, B'not Eish. [Here](#) is a review. You might use these study units in the context of a monthly Rosh Chodesh gathering.



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For a variety of resources about celebrating Rosh Chodesh, visit the [Ritual Well site](#).

Summary of Issues

Many commentators attribute a form of pure faith to women that guards us from betraying the covenant with God and committing idolatry. While this attitude appears to reward women, at the same time, it expresses elements of paternalism, tracking women into separate observances and excluding women from the community.

Methods & Observations

This analysis of the gold-giving episode shows how commentators import gender into the Torah text. Though the text itself states explicitly that

- Aaron—apparently addressing the men—calls upon them to break off the earrings of the women and children, and
- All of the people break off their gold earrings and take them to Aaron,

the tradition that the women did not participate dominates. On the basis of this gendering of the text and many assumptions about women's beliefs and priorities, sages construct practices and rituals defined by sexual difference. This process begs the question why the sages are so concerned with sexual difference, and how and whether we also ought to be.

Contact

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