

THE GOLDEN CALF AND RA

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No episode in Scripture has been more troubling than the incident of the Golden Calf. It is termed in Exodus 32 no less than three times as *chataah gedolah*, a sin of the highest magnitude. Its ramifications have been far-reaching. So deadly was its impact on Israelite-Jewish history that, according to the Talmud,¹ every calamity which ever befell Israel contained a small ingredient of retribution for the sin of the Golden Calf. The Israelites came perilously close to being annihilated by God Himself because of what transpired.

To recount briefly: Moses tarried on the mountain. The people grew increasingly anxious. Fearing he might not return, they audaciously demanded that Aaron make them a god [*aseh lanu elohim*] who would walk before them (to lead them). Aaron did not resist their demand, but mandated that all their gold earrings be brought to him. Hurriedly, they complied. Thereupon, Aaron proceeded to fashion a Golden Calf.

The people then ran amok. They arose early, offered sacrifices, engaged in feasting, carousing, and sexual orgies.² They danced around the Calf and proclaimed: '*This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt*'

(v. 4, 8). Moses, meanwhile, descending from the mountain carrying the Tablets of the Covenant, beheld the wild celebrations. Outraged, he smashed the Tablets and cried out: '*Whoever is for God, follow me*' (v. 25). The Levites rallied to his side, and were enjoined to take up arms and punish the perpetrators. Three thousand were slain. Aaron was reprimanded for his role but went unpunished.

A number of questions come to mind. To begin with, why a calf, and a golden one, to boot? What was there about this Calf that generated such frenzied excitement? Did the people really believe that the Calf just fashioned brought them out of Egypt?

Noted biblical scholars maintain that the Calf was not intended to supplant or reject God.³ What the people asked for was a replacement for Moses, but

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not of God. All they sought was some visible entity to fill the void caused by Moses' absence. The Calf was not dissimilar to the cherubim in the Tabernacle. God is described as *yoshev kruvim*⁴ [enthroned on the cherubim]. It served merely as a seat or pedestal for an invisible God. Conceptually, the Golden Calf and the cherubim were virtually identical.

One might ask: If, according to this view, the Calf was just another version of the cherubim, why was its creation regarded as the most heinous and egregious iniquity Israel ever committed? How does this account for Moses' explosive wrath when he espied it? What so infuriated Moses that he resorted to such drastic action as shattering the Tablets and issuing a clarion call to arms, culminating in 3,000 deaths?

The very words Moses exclaimed, '*Whoever is for God, follow me,*' belie such a notion. Obviously, to him, those dancing around the Calf were not engaged in a celebration of God. Moreover, how correct is it that Aaron saw in the demand of the people a replacement for Moses but not for God? The text states quite explicitly and unequivocally that what the people clamored for was that Aaron make them a god [*aseh lanu elohim*], in contrast to *the man Moses* [*ha'ish Moshe*] (Ex. 11:3). The people not only acclaimed the Calf as a god, but as the god (and no other) who brought them out of Egypt.

What kind of god was the Calf? Was this concocted by sheer chance, as Aaron seemingly implied in his explanation to Moses (v. 24), or was this the embodiment of a god they had known and perhaps worshipped whilst in Egypt? Interestingly, there is a midrash⁵ which links this episode to what they had done before. When Moses was pleading before God, he declared in effect: What can you expect from a people that heretofore worshipped lambs? But was it only lambs they worshipped there? A closer look is in order.

In Psalm 106:19-20, there is a passage stating: *They made a calf in Horeb and worshipped a molten image; thus, they exchanged their glory for the likeness of a bull eating grass.* A calf and a bull parallel one another here, for a calf is but a young bull at the peak of its youthful strength.

In ancient Egypt, the most important object of worship was the bull.⁶ Both gods and kings were called "bull" as a title. The bull was considered not only the abode of a god but its active and objective manifestation. The people of Egypt saw heaven as an immense and friendly cow standing over them. In Sabennytus⁷ its ancient god was the divine calf.

The Apis bull of Memphis came to be associated with the solar deity Ra, the oldest⁸ as well as the father of all the Egyptian gods. The worship of Ra was both ancient and universal. Ra⁹ was often thought to have been a golden calf, born in the morning from a heavenly cow, and growing into a bull by day. In Israel itself, mention is made as late as the time of Josephus¹⁰ of the temple of the golden calf at Dan (where Jeroboam installed one of his calves) as if its ruins at least were still visible at that later date.

A calf as a young bull at the height of its vigor was associated with fertility.¹¹ Amongst pagans, fertility rites were marked by untamed and unbridled revelry. The figure Aaron created was bedecked with gold. Was the gold just something decorous or ornamental, or of much greater significance?

That the gold was not something incidental can be adduced from the manner it all came about. For when Aaron called upon the people to divest themselves of their gold, and they readily and hastily complied, then it becomes abundantly clear that what was being fashioned was not something they hit upon by chance. Rather, they were embarking upon a project with a specific purpose in mind. They were out to make a god, and not just any god, but one in the form of a golden calf.

Who was the god depicted as the Golden Calf? Was it not a god they had known and perhaps worshipped in Egypt? For Ra was portrayed as a golden calf in the morning. Indeed, the text states, they arose early, offered sacrifices, and then carried on in the manner befitting fertility rites – feasting, carousing, performing licentious acts. It was not the Golden Calf as such, but as the embodiment of Ra, who was being hailed as the one who brought them out of Egypt. For Ra was also a universal god. The God of Israel was being replaced by the pagan deity Ra.

Moses, reared in the royal court of Egypt, was undoubtedly familiar with the worship of Ra. What he witnessed was not a celebration of God, but the affirmation of a pagan deity. It was apostasy, pure and simple. The people were backsliding into paganism. His anger was not misplaced. For as the psalmist put it: *They exchanged their glory for the likeness of a bull eating grass.*

Is there any textual evidence that the Golden Calf was the embodiment of Ra? Throughout Scripture, numerous pagan deities are mentioned by name. In the case of Egypt, all deities are subsumed under the rubric of *elohay Mi-*

zraim [Egyptian gods]. Scholars have nonetheless detected oblique references to Ra. In Hebrew, the noun "*ra*" denotes evil. Still, it is not inconceivable that on occasion it could also be an allusion to Ra.

Rashi, for example, quotes a midrash on Exodus 10:10 where Pharaoh addresses Moses and Aaron: '*So be the Lord with you, as I will let you go, and your little ones; see you that evil [רַעַל] (ra'ah) is before your face*'. He interprets "*ra'ah*" in that verse as the name of an evil star. Cassuto, however, sees this word as a reference to Ra. In this context, the verse would read, 'See that the power of my god Ra shall rise against you.'

Likewise, in Exodus 32:12, when Moses pleads with God: '*Wherefore should the Egyptians speak, saying: For evil [רַעַל] did He bring them forth?*' The word *for evil* [*b'raah*] can also be taken as a reference to Ra. The verse would then read: "Wherefore should the Egyptians say, Ra brought them out to slay them in the mountains?"

It is noteworthy that in Exodus 32, the chapter on the Golden Calf, the letters "*ra*" appear in no less than seven words. Two verses stand out as likely allusions to Ra. In verse 17, *and when Joshua heard the noise of the people*, the word rendered as noise is "*b'reoh*." Cassuto points out that the Massoretes left the letter "*he*" [ה] in the *ketib*, to emphasize a play on words with "*b'raah*" in verse 12. Thus, Joshua standing on the slope of the mountain heard not simply noise but "*b'raah*," an affirmation of Ra. As the midrash¹² commenting on the words "*kol anot*" in the following verse states, these are not voices in song but "*kol harufin v'gedufin*," voices of blasphemy and sacrilege.

Another likely allusion to Ra can be discerned in Aaron's response to Moses: '*Thou knowest the people are set [b'ra] on evil*' (v. 22). Here, the reference could also be to Ra, and Aaron was saying to Moses: "Thou knowest the people are still set on Ra." Israel may have left Egypt, but worship of the chief Egyptian god Ra had still not left Israel.

NOTES

1. Sanhedrin 102A.
2. Exodus 32:5. Rashi interprets "*l'tzahak*" as licentiousness. "*Tzahak*" has a sexual connotation. See Genesis 26:8 and 39:17.
3. W. F. Albright, *The Biblical Period from Abraham to Ezra*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1963) p. 60; and *From the Stone Age to Christianity*. (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1957) pp.

- 266, 300-301; Y. Kaufmann, *Toldat Haemunah Hayeshaelet. Book 1.* (Tel Aviv: D'vir, 1947) p. 259; and *The Religion of Israel*, trans. Moshe Greenberg, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960) p. 271; Nahum Sarna, *Exploring Exodus.* (New York: Schocken Books, 1954) p. 217; M. D. Cassuto, *Perush al Sefer Sh'mot.* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1944) pp. 284-289.
4. Psalm 80:2.
5. Sh'mot Rabbah 41.
6. S. Mercer, *The Religion of Ancient Egypt.* (London: Luzac & Co., 1949) p. 21.
7. E. Wallis Budge. *From Fetish to God in Ancient Egypt* (London: Ballantyne Press, 1915) p. 21.
8. Budge, pp. 110, 230.
9. Mercer, pp. 128, 230, 232.
10. Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, 4:1:1.
11. Cassuto, p. 289.
12. Shemot Rabbah,, 41.
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