

עץ חיים

ETZ HAYIM

TORAH AND COMMENTARY

THE RABBINICAL ASSEMBLY
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¹¹The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ¹²When you take a census of the Israelite people according to their enrollment, each shall pay the LORD a ransom for himself on being enrolled, that no plague may come upon them through their be-

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: ¹²כִּי תִשָּׂא אֶת־רֹאשׁ בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לִפְקֻדֵיהֶם וְנָתַנוּ אִישׁ כְּפָר נַפְשׁוֹ לַיהוָה בְּפָקֹד אֹתָם

THE TABERNACLE, PART 1: INSTRUCTIONS (continued)

APPENDIX TO INSTRUCTIONS (continued)

THE CENSUS AND THE POLL TAX (30:11–16)

God orders Moses to take a census. Males above the age of 20 are to be entered into the records. Census taking in the ancient world, regarded as a necessary administrative measure, was believed to be fraught with danger to the public. Almost invariably it preceded a war or a new tax. The head counts recorded in the Bible are usually related to army service and warfare. Hence, each male in this census is to pay a poll tax of one-half shekel as a ransom for his life and to avert the possibility of a plague. The poll tax here is a one-time im-

position for the building of the tabernacle, not an annual obligation. The expiatory function of the tax connects this topic with that of the verses immediately preceding it.

12. take a census Literally, “raise the head,” i.e., take a head count. Other censuses are reported in the Torah (e.g., Num. 1,3:14ff.).

a ransom for himself Hebrew: *kofer*; refers to a monetary payment made to offset an incurred physical penalty. Apparently, it was taken for granted that a census jeopardizes the lives of those counted; therefore, each individual must redeem his life through payment of a half-shekel. (See 2 Sam. 24, where a plague follows a census undertaken by David.)

At the heart of this *parashah* stands the incident of the Golden Calf, the classic example of Israel’s angering God by worshiping an idol (or, more likely, worshiping God in the form of a physical being, which is forbidden by the 2nd commandment). God is prepared to renounce the covenant with Israel, and Moses has to prevail on God not to do so. The incident of the Golden Calf is preceded by several brief matters involving a census of the people, further details about building the tabernacle, and an additional injunction to keep *Shabbat*. Following the destruction of the Calf, God’s reconciliation with the people is symbolized by the carving of a second set of tablets, because Moses had broken the original set.

CHAPTER 30

12. It has been pointed out that the Hebrew word translated as “each shall pay” (וַיִּתְּנוּ) is a palindrome, spelled the same way from right to left as from left to right. This suggests that charity is a two-way process. One receives even as one gives. This should remind us, according to the Vilna Gaon, that one who gives today may have to receive tomorrow.

This indirect manner of taking a census, having everyone give a standard coin and then

counting coins instead of people, originally may have been rooted in a superstitious fear of the “evil eye.” (If you take pride in how many people are in your family, some disaster will befall one or more of them.) It is reflected in the custom, still observed in some communities, of counting indirectly for a *minyan* rather than numbering people. This custom is given a moral interpretation by traditional and contemporary teachers: (a) Coins are interchangeable but people are not. Every human being is unique and cannot be reduced to a number. (b) “Let each person give a ransom for himself.” Life is a gift and we owe God something just for being alive. We can never take life for granted. Benno Jacob sees the census as a preparation for battle and the half-shekel as an anticipatory atonement for the possibility of shedding blood in battle. (c) The half-shekel should teach us that a person is incomplete, becoming whole only by joining with others. Perhaps it served to remind the male warriors that the women and children who would not be going into battle represented half of the community. (d) After being counted, the shekels were to be used for services in the Tent of Meeting. “Now that there is no Temple with animal offerings, we show our grati-

ing enrolled. ¹³This is what everyone who is entered in the records shall pay: a half-shekel by the sanctuary weight—twenty *gerahs* to the shekel—a half-shekel as an offering to the LORD. ¹⁴Everyone who is entered in the records, from the age of twenty years up, shall give the LORD's offering: ¹⁵the rich shall not pay more and the poor shall not pay less than half a shekel when giving the LORD's offering as expiation for your persons. ¹⁶You shall take the expiation money from the Israelites and assign it to the service of the Tent of Meeting; it shall serve the Israelites as a reminder before the LORD, as expiation for your persons.

¹⁷The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ¹⁸Make

וְלֹא־יְהִיֶה בָהֶם נֶגֶף בְּפָקֹד אַתֶּם: ¹³ זֶה | יִתְּנוּ כָּל־הָעֵבֶר עַל־הַפְּקֻדִים מִחֲצִית הַשֶּׁקֶל בְּשֶׁקֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ עֶשְׂרִים גֵּרָה הַשֶּׁקֶל מִחֲצִית הַשֶּׁקֶל תְּרוּמָה לַיהוָה: ¹⁴ כָּל הָעֵבֶר עַל־הַפְּקֻדִים מִבֶּן עֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וּמַעְלָה יִתֵּן תְּרוּמַת יְהוָה: ¹⁵ הָעֲשִׂיר לֹא־יִרְפָּה וְהֵדֵל לֹא יִמְעִיט מִמִּחֲצִית הַשֶּׁקֶל לְתֵת אֶת־תְּרוּמַת יְהוָה לְכַפֵּר עַל־נַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם: ¹⁶ וְלָקַחְתָּ אֶת־כֶּסֶף הַכֹּפְרִים מֵאֵת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְנָתַתְּ אֹתוֹ עַל־עֲבֹדַת אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וְהָיָה לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְזִכְרוֹן לְפָנַי יְהוָה לְכַפֵּר עַל־נַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם: פ

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: ¹⁸ וַעֲשִׂיתָ

13. half-shekel See Comment to Gen. 23:9.

14. twenty years The age at which an Israelite male became subject to military service.

15. The contribution of the half-shekel has two purposes: to support the work of the tabernacle and to effect expiation for each individual. The tabernacle belongs equally to every Israelite, without regard to social status or wealth. As all human beings are equal before God, there is to be one standard contribution from all, to be neither exceeded nor reduced.

16. service of the Tent The Hebrew word *avodah* can refer both to the maintenance of wor-

ship and to the work of construction. It has the latter meaning in 39:32. Because silver was used in casting sockets for the sanctuary and for the manufacture of other items (38:25–28), *avodah* here must refer to the work of construction.

THE BRONZE LAVER (vv. 17–21)

This vessel was not included in the earlier instructions for several reasons: (a) It was not used in a specific act of divine worship but in preparation for it; (b) because the laver was solely for washing hands and feet, it was not needed for the installation ceremony, which required immersion of

tude for being alive by giving to the poor" (Mid. Lekah Tov). (e) In the early 20th century, the Zionist movement revived the custom of contributing a shekel to establish membership in a Zionist organization as a way of measuring how many people could be counted on to support it.

13. This is what everyone . . . shall pay Prompted by the word "this," the Sages conjecture that God showed Moses a flame in the shape of a half-shekel. Why a flame? Because money is like fire; it can warm and comfort—

or it can consume and destroy (Elimelekh of Lyzhansk).

14. from the age of twenty years up Judaism has always believed that religion, first and foremost, is not for children, although there is much in it that children can join in and appreciate. Primarily, it is for adults who alone can begin to appreciate its breadth and profundity (Hirsch). Children who see their parents taking Jewish obligation seriously are more likely to see it as something they will want to do as adults.

HALAKHAH L'MA'ASEH

30:13. everyone . . . shall pay: a half-shekel This is sometimes cited as the source for collecting the equivalent of half the common currency (in the United States and Canada, a half dollar) from everyone on *Purim*. Whereas this was given to the Temple in biblical times, we now use it for the upkeep of the synagogue or for the poor.

a laver of copper and a stand of copper for it, for washing; and place it between the Tent of Meeting and the altar. Put water in it, ¹⁹and let Aaron and his sons wash their hands and feet [in water drawn] from it. ²⁰When they enter the Tent of Meeting they shall wash with water, that they may not die; or when they approach the altar to serve, to turn into smoke a gift to the LORD, ²¹they shall wash their hands and feet, that they may not die. It shall be a law for all time for them—for him and his offspring—throughout the ages.

²²The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ²³Next take choice spices: five hundred weight of solidified myrrh, half as much—two hundred and fifty—of fragrant cinnamon, two hundred

כִּיּוֹר נְחֹשֶׁת וְכַנּוֹ נְחֹשֶׁת לְרַחֲצָה וְנָתַתָּ אֹתוֹ בֵּין־אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וּבֵין הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וְנָתַתָּ שָׁמֶה מֵיִם: ¹⁹ וְרָחֲצוּ אֶהָרָן וּבָנָיו מִמֶּנּוּ אֶת־יְדֵיהֶם וְאֶת־רַגְלֵיהֶם: ²⁰ בְּבָאֵם אֶל־אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד יְרַחֲצוּ־מִיָּם וְלֹא יָמָתוּ אוֹ בְּגִשְׁתֶּם אֶל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ לְשֵׁרֵת לְהַקְטִיר אֲשֶׁה לַיהוָה: ²¹ וְרָחֲצוּ יְדֵיהֶם וְרַגְלֵיהֶם וְלֹא יָמָתוּ וְהִיְתָה לָהֶם חֻק־עוֹלָם לּוֹ וּלְזֶרְעוֹ לְדוֹרֹתָם: פ

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: ²³ וְאֵתָה קַח־לָךְ בְּשָׂמִים רֹאשׁ מֶרְדְּרוֹל חֲמִשׁ מֵאוֹת וּקְנָמֶן־בֶּשֶׂם מִחֲצִיתוֹ חֲמִשִּׁים וּמְאֹתָיִם וּקְנֵה־בֶשֶׂם חֲמִשִּׁים וּמְאֹתָיִם:

the entire body; and (c) it was not fashioned with materials provided by public donations but from bronze mirrors of the women who served at the entrance of the tabernacle. For practical reasons, the laver was placed between the entrance of the tabernacle and the altar of sacrifice, enabling the priest to enter the sanctuary in a state of ritual purity and bodily cleanliness. A measure of the laver's importance is its inclusion among the vessels consecrated by being anointed with oil (v. 28).

18. copper Better: bronze. See Comment to 25:3.

20. that they may not die See Comment to 28:35. The washing is an essential requirement; its neglect renders the priest's service invalid.

THE AROMATIC ANOINTING OIL (vv. 22–33)

The anointing oil and the spices needed for it are mentioned in 25:6. Spices and perfumes were rare

in the ancient world. They were very costly because of the huge amounts of raw materials needed to manufacture the desired quantity and the great distances transversed in transport—by land caravan or by sea—from Arabia, Somaliland, India, and China. The highly specialized art of perfumery required an exceptional level of skill and experience.

23. The list is set out in order of decreasing value.

solidified myrrh Southern Arabia and Somaliland were the sources of this aromatic gum resin. It exudes as globules from the ducts of the trunk and branches of the trees and flows freely if one makes a cut in the bark. It hardens slowly when exposed to air.

fragrant cinnamon The tree is indigenous to Sri Lanka but was also cultivated elsewhere in Asia.

18. Tradition tells us that the bronze laver and its stand were fashioned from the bronze mirrors formerly used by the Israelite women in Egypt to help make themselves attractive to their husbands. These mirrors enabled Israelite spouses to come together and produce

children even in the midst of Pharaoh's disheartening oppression. When Moses protested their use in the tabernacle, regarding mirrors as symbols of vanity, God reminded him that they had been used to preserve the Israelite nation.

HALAKHAH L'MA'ASEH

30:19. wash their hands and feet See Comments on Num. 6:23, 18:23.

and fifty of aromatic cane, ²⁴five hundred—by the sanctuary weight—of cassia, and a *hin* of olive oil. ²⁵Make of this a sacred anointing oil, a compound of ingredients expertly blended, to serve as sacred anointing oil. ²⁶With it anoint the Tent of Meeting, the Ark of the Pact, ²⁷the table and all its utensils, the lampstand and all its fittings, the altar of incense, ²⁸the altar of burnt offering and all its utensils, and the laver and its stand. ²⁹Thus you shall consecrate them so that they may be most holy; whatever touches them shall be consecrated. ³⁰You shall also anoint Aaron and his sons, consecrating them to serve Me as priests.

³¹And speak to the Israelite people, as follows: This shall be an anointing oil sacred to Me throughout the ages. ³²It must not be rubbed on any person's body, and you must not make anything like it in the same proportions; it is sacred, to be held sacred by you. ³³Whoever compounds its like, or puts any of it on a layman, shall be cut off from his kin.

³⁴And the LORD said to Moses: Take the herbs stacte, onycha, and galbanum—these herbs together with pure frankincense; let there be an equal part of each. ³⁵Make them into incense, a compound expertly blended, refined, pure, sacred. ³⁶Beat some of it into powder, and put some before the Pact in the Tent of Meeting,

24. *hin* See Comment to 29:40.

26–28. The sacred aromatic oil is to be applied to the priests, to the articles of furniture, and to the utensils. The act of anointing consecrates them to divine service. Henceforth, their holiness is contagious. See Comment to 29:37.

31–33. This sacred aromatic anointing oil, with its specific ingredients blended in the appropriate proportions, must never be duplicated or used for any purpose other than that stated here.

THE INGREDIENTS OF THE INCENSE
(vv. 34–38)

The incense to be offered on the golden altar consists of four ingredients.

34. *stacte* A resin of balsam or persimmon.

²⁴ וְקִדְּהָ חֲמֵשׁ מֵאוֹת בְּשֶׁקֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ וְשֵׁמֶן זֵית הַיַּיִן: ²⁵ וְעָשִׂיתָ אֹתוֹ שֵׁמֶן מְשַׁחַת-קֹדֶשׁ רִקְח רִקְח מֵעֲשֶׂה רִקְח שֵׁמֶן מְשַׁחַת-קֹדֶשׁ יְהִיָּה: ²⁶ וּמְשַׁחַת בּוֹ אֶת-אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וְאֶת אֲרוֹן הָעֵדוּת: ²⁷ וְאֶת-הַשְּׁלֶחָן וְאֶת-כָּל-כֵּלָיו וְאֶת-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וְאֶת-כָּל-כֵּלָיו וְאֶת-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וְאֶת-מִזְבַּח הַקְּטֹרֶת: ²⁸ וְאֶת-מִזְבַּח הָעֹלָה וְאֶת-כָּל-כֵּלָיו וְאֶת-הַפִּיֹר וְאֶת-כַּנּוֹ: ²⁹ וְקִדְּשַׁתְּ אֹתָם וְהָיוּ קֹדֶשׁ קֹדֶשִׁים כָּל-הַנִּגַּע בָּהֶם יִקְדָּשׁ: ³⁰ וְאֶת-אֹהֶרֶן וְאֶת-בָּנָיו תִּמְשַׁח וְקִדְּשַׁתְּ אֹתָם לְכַהֵן לִי:

³¹ וְאֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל תְּדַבֵּר לֵאמֹר שֵׁמֶן מְשַׁחַת-קֹדֶשׁ יְהִיָּה זֶה לִי לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם: ³² עַל-בָּשָׂר אָדָם לֹא יִסָּךְ וּבְמַתְכַנְתּוֹ לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ כְּמֹהוּ קֹדֶשׁ הוּא קֹדֶשׁ יְהִיָּה לָכֶם: ³³ אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר יִרְקַח כְּמֹהוּ וְאֲשֶׁר יִתֵּן מִמֶּנּוּ עַל-זֶרַע וְנִכְרַת מֵעַמּוּיוֹ: ס

³⁴ וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה קַח-לָךְ סַמִּים נֹטָף | וּשְׁחַלְתָּ וְחַלְבָנָה סַמִּים וּלְבָנָה זָכָה בָּד בָּבַד יְהִיָּה: ³⁵ וְעָשִׂיתָ אֹתָהּ קְטֹרֶת רִקְח מֵעֲשֶׂה רִקְח מִמְלַח טְהוֹר קֹדֶשׁ: ³⁶ וְשַׁחֲקֶתָ מִמֶּנָּה הֶרֶק וְנִתְתָּה מִמֶּנָּה לְפָנַי הָעֵדוּת בְּאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד אֲשֶׁר אוֹעֵד לָךְ שָׁמָּה

onycha The classic Greek and Latin translations render this as “onyx.”

galbanum A gum resin extracted from a plant that grows in Turkistan, Persia, and Crete. It emits a disagreeable odor when burned. This is diffused, however, when the substance is blended with the other aromatics, and it has the effect of making the latter more pungent.

frankincense A gum resin extracted from trees that are native to southern Arabia and northern Somaliland.

35. refined Hebrew: *m'mullah*; literally, “salted.” In the ancient world, salt was added to incense to enhance the rate of burning and smoking.

36. Each day, morning and evening, some of the blended and pulverized incense is to be placed on the golden altar for the incense offerings.

where I will meet with you; it shall be most holy to you. ³⁷But when you make this incense, you must not make any in the same proportions for yourselves; it shall be held by you sacred to the LORD. ³⁸Whoever makes any like it, to smell of it, shall be cut off from his kin.

קֹדֶשׁ קֹדְשִׁים תִּהְיֶה לָכֶם: ³⁷וְהִקְטַרְתָּ אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשֶׂה בְּמִתְבַּנְתָּהּ לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ לָכֶם קֹדֶשׁ תִּהְיֶה לָךְ לִיהוָה: ³⁸אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר-יַעֲשֶׂה כְמוֹהָ לְהַרְיִחַ בָּהּ וְנִכְרַת מֵעַמּוֹ: ס

31 The LORD spoke to Moses: ²See, I have singled out by name Bezalel son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. ³I have endowed him with a divine spirit of skill, ability, and knowledge in every kind of craft; ⁴to make designs for work in gold, silver, and copper, ⁵to cut stones for setting and to carve wood—to work in every kind of craft. ⁶Moreover, I have assigned to him Oholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan; and I have also granted skill to all who are skillful, that they may make everything that I have commanded you: ⁷the Tent of Meeting, the Ark for the Pact and the cover upon it, and all the

לֹא וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: ²רְאֵה קָרָאתִי בְשֵׁם בְּצַלְאֵל בֶּן-אֹרִי בֶן-חֹר לְמִטֵּה יְהוּדָה: ³וְאִמְלֵא אֹתוֹ רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים בְּחָכְמָה וּבְתַבּוּנָה וּבְדַעַת וּבְכָל-מְלָאכָה: ⁴לְחָשֵׁב מַחְשְׁבֹת לַעֲשׂוֹת בַּזָּהָב וּבַכֶּסֶף וּבַנְּחֹשֶׁת: ⁵וּבַחֲרֹשֶׁת אֲבָן לְמְלָאֵת וּבַחֲרֹשֶׁת עֵץ לַעֲשׂוֹת בְּכָל-מְלָאכָה: ⁶וְאֶנִּי הִנֵּה נָתַתִּי אֹתוֹ אֶת אֹהֱלִיאֵב בֶּן-אֲחִיסָמָךְ לְמִטֵּה-דָן וּבְלֵב כָּל-חָכָם-לֵב נָתַתִּי חָכְמָה וַעֲשׂוּ אֶת כָּל-אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתִךָ: ⁷אֵת אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וְאֶת-הָאָרֶץ לַעֲדֹת וְאֶת-הַכַּפֹּרֶת אֲשֶׁר

37–38. Like the aromatic oil (vv. 31–33), the incense must not be produced for use in any but its prescribed ritual.

CONCLUSION OF INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE TABERNACLE (31:1–17)

APPOINTMENT OF CONSTRUCTION PERSONNEL (vv. 1–11)

The final instruction to Moses relating to the work of the tabernacle concerns the appointment of a supervisory master craftsman named Bezalel,

from the tribe of Judah, and his associate Oholiab, from the tribe of Dan. Presumably, Moses, Bezalel, and Oholiab are to recruit the subordinate workers, here described as those “who are skillful.”

2. singled out by name Commissioned for the task.

7–11. These verses summarize the components of the tabernacle, its furnishings, and appurtenances in an order that differs slightly from that of the previous instructions.

pure lampstand See Comment to 25:31.

CHAPTER 31

3. I have endowed him with a divine spirit Moses had been assuming that he would have to build the items of the tabernacle himself. God now informs him that, despite his great gifts of the spirit, there are other Israelites with unique gifts who can fashion artifacts of holiness capable of bringing people to God (Exod. R. 40:2). To construct most things, one needs only a set of specific instructions. But to fashion something holy—something that will

move others to prayer—being able to follow instructions is not enough. A measure of divine inspiration is required.

6. Bezalel comes from the tribe of Judah, the largest and most prominent of the tribes. Oholiab is from Dan, the smallest tribe. All parts of Israelite society were to be involved in fashioning the Ark (Tanh. 13). Similarly, the recipe for the incense (30:34) includes the foul-smelling galbanum, to teach us that even marginal, disagreeable people have to be included in the community (Rashi).

furnishings of the Tent; ⁸the table and its utensils, the pure lampstand and all its fittings, and the altar of incense; ⁹the altar of burnt offering and all its utensils, and the laver and its stand; ¹⁰the service vestments, the sacral vestments of Aaron the priest and the vestments of his sons, for their service as priests; ¹¹as well as the anointing oil and the aromatic incense for the sanctuary. Just as I have commanded you, they shall do.

¹²And the LORD said to Moses: ¹³Speak to the Israelite people and say: Nevertheless, you must keep My sabbaths, for this is a sign between Me and you throughout the ages, that you may know that I the LORD have consecrated you. ¹⁴You shall keep the sabbath, for it is holy for you. He who profanes it shall be put to death: whoever does work on it, that person shall be cut off from among his kin. ¹⁵Six days may work be done, but on the seventh day there shall be a sabbath of complete rest, holy to the LORD;

THE OBSERVANCE OF *SHABBAT* (vv. 12–17)
The concluding—and, appropriately, the seventh—literary unit within the section of instructions for the tabernacle is devoted to the observance of *Shabbat*.

13. Nevertheless Even though building the tabernacle is a divine command, it does not supplant observance of *Shabbat*.

My sabbaths This phrase is defined in verses 15 and 17. *Shabbat*, i.e., the sanctity of the seventh day of the week, is an integral part of the cosmic order ordained by God.

13. Nevertheless, you must keep My sabbaths Based on this phrase and the passage that precedes it, the Sages derived their definition of work that is forbidden on *Shabbat* from the tasks involved in constructing the tabernacle. If there is a conflict between the holiness of space and the holiness of time, the holiness of time takes precedence. Time came first; the first thing that God sanctified was *Shabbat*. It is accessible to everyone. One cannot defer it or return to it. If one misses the moment, it is gone forever. Based on Akiva's rule that the word translated here as "nevertheless" (*akh*) is

עָלְיוֹ וְאֵת כָּל-כְּלֵי הָאֹהֶל: ⁸ וְאֵת-הַשְּׁלֶחָן וְאֵת-כְּלָיו וְאֵת-הַמִּנְרָה הַשְּׁהֵרָה וְאֵת-כָּל-כְּלֵיהָ וְאֵת מִזְבַּח הַקְּטֹרֶת: ⁹ וְאֵת-מִזְבַּח הָעֹלָה וְאֵת-כְּלָיו וְאֵת-הַבְּיָרוֹ וְאֵת-כִּפּוֹ: ¹⁰ וְאֵת בְּגָדֵי הַשָּׂרָד וְאֵת-בְּגָדֵי הַקֹּדֶשׁ לְאַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֵן וְאֵת-בְּגָדֵי בָנָיו לְכַהֵן: ¹¹ וְאֵת שֶׁמֶן הַמִּשְׁחָה וְאֵת-קְטֹרֶת הַסַּמִּים לְקֹדֶשׁ כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר-צִוִּיתָךְ יַעֲשׂוּ: פ

¹² וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: ¹³ וְאֵתָּה דַבֵּר אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר אַךְ אֶת-שַׁבְּתוֹתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ כִּי אוֹת הוּא בֵּינִי וּבֵינֵיכֶם לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם לְדַעַת כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה מְקַדְּשְׁכֶם: ¹⁴ וּשְׁמֹרְתֶם אֶת-הַשַּׁבָּת כִּי קֹדֶשׁ הוּא לָכֶם מִחַלְלֶיהָ מוֹת יוּמָת כִּי כָל-הָעֹשֶׂה בָּהּ מְלֶאכֶה וְנִכְרְתָה הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהִוא מִקֶּרֶב עַמִּיהָ: ¹⁵ שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים יַעֲשֶׂה מְלֶאכֶה וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שַׁבַּת שַׁבְּתוֹן

a sign The idea of *Shabbat* as a sign is repeated in verse 17. Its observance is a declaration of faith, an affirmation of several tenets at once: that Israel is a holy nation by an act of divine will, not inherently; that the relationship between God and Israel is governed by a covenant; and that the universe is wholly the purposeful product of divine intelligence, the work of a transcendent being outside nature and sovereign over space and time.

15. a sabbath of complete rest See Comment to 16:23.

intended to limit the applicability of a law, the Talmud teaches that in some situations *Shabbat* prohibitions must be set aside. These situations include saving a life and circumcising a baby boy on the eighth day of his life (JT Yoma 8:5).

this is a sign Because keeping *Shabbat* is called a sign (*ot*) of our bond to God, on *Shabbat* we do not wear *t'fillin*, which are also called *ot*, in Deut. 6:8 (BT Er. 96a). It is as much a religious obligation to be scrupulous in the way we work six days a week as it is to be scrupulous about refraining from work on the seventh day.

whoever does work on the sabbath day shall be put to death. ¹⁶The Israelite people shall keep the sabbath, observing the sabbath throughout the ages as a covenant for all time: ¹⁷it shall be a sign for all time between Me and the people of Israel. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day He ceased from work and was refreshed.

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

32 When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain,

קָדַשׁ לַיהוָה כָּל־הָעֹשֶׂה מְלֶאכֶה בְּיוֹם
הַשַּׁבָּת מוֹת יוּמָת׃ ¹⁶ וְשָׁמְרוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל
אֶת־הַשַּׁבָּת לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת־הַשַּׁבָּת לְדֹרֹתָם
בְּרִית עוֹלָם׃ ¹⁷ בֵּינִי וּבֵין בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֹת
הוּא לְעֵלָם כִּי־שָׁשֶׁת יָמִים עָשָׂה יְהוָה
אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי
שָׁבַת וַיִּנְפָשׁ׃ ח

שְׁנֵי ¹⁸ וַיִּתֵּן אֶל־מֹשֶׁה כְּכֹל־תּוֹרַת הַדְּבָר אֲתוֹ בְּהָר
סִינַי שְׁנֵי לַחַת הָעֵדוּת לַחַת אֶבֶן כְּתוּבִים
בְּאֶצְבַּע אֱלֹהִים׃

לב וַיִּרְא הָעָם כִּי־בִשֵׁשׁ מִשֶּׁה לָרְדָת
מִן־הָהָר וַיִּקְהַל הָעָם עַל־אֶהֱרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ

16. The observance of *Shabbat* is the eternal obligation of those who participate in the covenant with God.

17. and was refreshed The Hebrew word *va-yinnafash* is derived from the noun *nefesh*, a term that can refer to a person's life essence, vitality, psychic energy, or essential character. The verbal form used here conveys the notion of a fresh infusion of spiritual and physical vigor, the revival of one's total being. Although the word here ascribes human characteristics to God, the language is in-

tended to impress on the Israelite an awareness of the transcendent value of *Shabbat* observance.

A CODA (v. 18)

This concluding verse, which tells of Moses receiving the tablets of stone, picks up where the last narrative left off—Moses' ascent of Mount Sinai to acquire those tokens of the Covenant (24:12–18). It also serves as the transition to the next episode, which involves the smashing of those tablets.

18. He finished The Midrash notes the similarity of the Hebrew for "He finished" (*kalloto*) and "his bride" (*kallato*), suggesting that when Moses received the Torah he was as joyous as a bridegroom on his wedding day (Exod. R. 41:6). The metaphor of giving the Torah as solemnizing a marriage between God and the Jewish people, with the Torah serving as the marriage document (*k'tubah*), occurs frequently in the Midrash. So does the metaphor of Israel's disobedience being like marital infidelity rather than simply the breaking of a law. Another *midrash* fastens on the similarity

of the Hebrew words for "He finished" (*kalloto*) and "rule" (*k'lal*); it suggests that at Sinai God gave Moses general rules or principles from which Moses derived the specific details of the Torah's laws (Exod. R. 41:6). This would seem to point to a human element in the development of laws of the Torah. See Comment to 34:1. A *midrash* reads the Hebrew word for "stone" in "stone tablets" (*even*) as *av-ben* (father to son). The Torah was not given to one generation alone, nor was it given only to scholars and leaders. It was meant to be passed on from parent to child.

HALAKHAH L'MA'ASEH

31:16. shall keep Verses 16–17 are part of the Friday evening and Saturday morning liturgy, and they are recited in the Saturday morning *Kiddush*.

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, “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

אֵלָיו קוּם | עֲשֵׂה-לָנוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר יֵלְכוּ
לְפָנֵינוּ כִּי-זֶה | מֹשֶׁה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלָנוּ
מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לֹא יָדַעְנוּ מָה-הָיָה לוֹ :
וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם אַהֲרֹן פָּרְקוּ נְזָמֵי הַזָּהָב
אֲשֶׁר בְּאָזְנֵי נְשֵׁיכֶם בְּנִיכֶם וּבְנֹתֵיכֶם
וְהָבִיאוּ אֵלָי :³ וַיִּתְּפְּרוּ כָל-הָעָם אֶת-
נְזָמֵי הַזָּהָב אֲשֶׁר בְּאָזְנֵיהֶם וַיָּבִיאוּ אֶל-

VIOLATION OF THE COVENANT: THE GOLDEN CALF (32:1–33:23)

The account of the tabernacle is briefly interrupted.

THE MAKING OF THE GOLDEN CALF (32:1–6)

1. This verse must be understood in reference to 24:18, which tells of Moses’ ascent of the cloud-enveloped mountain and his seclusion there for 40 days and nights. Because Moses has been the exclusive mediator between God and Israel—at the urgent request of the people, as told in 20:15–18—his prolonged absence now causes deep anxiety, a mood made worse by the awareness of the impending departure from Sinai.

make us a god Something to serve as a symbol of God’s presence in their midst. Rashbam suggests that they had in mind some instrument for determining the divine will as a replacement for Moses, the absent human medium of divine revelation.

who brought us And now has abandoned us. Even though Moses always stressed that he is only God’s agent, they cannot feel God’s presence without him.

3. gold rings These may have been among the items the Israelites received from neighbors when they left Egypt, as related in 11:2–3 and 12:35–36.

CHAPTER 32

1. The people—who only a few weeks earlier had been slaves in Egypt where they had witnessed Egyptian idolatry—could not comprehend a God without physical form, as the 2nd commandment called on them to do. (Moses later, in v. 11, refers to “Your people, whom You delivered from the land of Egypt,” as if to remind God of the influences to which they had been subjected there. The Midrash compares the situation to that of a man who bought his son a store in a notoriously corrupt neighborhood and then blames the son for having been corrupted there.) The people needed a visible, tangible symbol of God’s presence. They had just come from Egypt where everything, even death, was rendered visible (through pyramids and mummies). It was extremely hard for them to grasp the idea that the greatest reality of all is intangible. The text seems to imply that at least some of the people, who saw Moses as an embodiment of God, wanted the Golden Calf to replace the vanished Moses, without whom

they felt abandoned. According to Hirsch, the people did not understand that God had taken the initiative in reaching down to them, believing that Moses had the power to summon God. Without Moses, how would they ever be able to experience God’s presence again?

Aaron is consistently portrayed in Jewish lore as a peacemaker and conciliator. Moses was the lawgiver proclaiming standards and prohibitions, the prophet who denounced those who fell short of those standards. Aaron in his priestly aspect met and accepted people where they were. Moses proclaimed, “You shall not!” Aaron welcomed people who brought their purification offerings to atone for their violations. Legends tell of Aaron’s efforts to reconcile feuding individuals. In this instance, however, Aaron’s inclination to accept, rather than to challenge, popular will led to misfortune.

3. The Talmud says of Israel: “What a peculiar people! When solicited to build the tabernacle, they give generously. When solicited to fashion an idol, they give equally generously” (JT Shek. 1:1).

them to Aaron. ⁴This 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!” ⁵When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron announced: “Tomorrow shall be a festival of the LORD!” ⁶Early 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.

⁷The LORD spoke to Moses, “Hurry down, for your people, whom you brought out of the land

אֶהָרִן: ⁴ וַיִּקַּח מִיָּדָם וַיִּצַר אֹתוֹ בַּחֶרֶט וַיַּעֲשֶׂהוּ עֵגֶל מִסֶּכֶה וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלֹךְ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם: ⁵ וַיֵּרָא אֶהָרִן וַיִּבֶן מִזְבֵּחַ לִפְנֵי וַיִּקְרָא אֶהָרִן וַיֹּאמֶר חַג לַיהוָה מָחָר: ⁶ וַיִּשְׁפְּימוּ מִמַּחֲרֹת וַיַּעֲלוּ עֹלֹת וַיִּגִּשׁוּ שְׁלָמִים וַיֵּשֶׁב הָעָם לֶאֱכֹל וְשָׂתוּ וַיִּקְמוּ לְצַחֵק: ⁷ וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵּךְ-רֵד בְּיַד שַׁחַת עַמֶּךָ אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלִיתָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם: ⁸ סוּר

4. molten Most likely a wooden model was overlaid with gold.

calf Hebrew: *eigel*; refers to a young bull. The bull in the ancient Near East was a symbol of lordship, leadership, strength, vital energy, and fertility and was either deified and worshiped or used to represent divinity. The Bible views the making of a calf as an idolatrous act. This is clearly shown by the Hebrew plural (*eileh elobekha*; literally, “these are your gods”) in this verse and in verse 8 (translated here as “This is your god”).

The reference here may be to the Canaanite god El, who was represented by a bull. Often, however, the bull, or another animal, served as a pedestal on which the god stood, elevated above humankind. The young bull made by Aaron may then have been a pedestal on which the invisible God of Israel was believed to be standing. His presence would be left to the imagination. Clearly, the people associated the manufactured image with the God who directs history, not with

a deity possessing mythologic associations, for Aaron proclaimed (v. 5) that the following day would be “a festival of the LORD” (*YHVH*). The people, in demanding “a god” because of Moses’ disappearance, wanted an appropriate visible object that would recall the divine presence in their midst (see also Jeroboam’s bulls in 1 Kings 12:26–30).

they exclaimed The ringleaders of the people, not Aaron.

6. Aaron plays no further role in this narrative.

GOD’S ANGER AND MOSES’ INTERCESSION (vv. 7–14)

When the boisterous revelry has reached its height, God informs Moses of what is happening in the camp below.

7. your people A strong intimation of their alienation from God, in contrast to “My people,” repeatedly employed until now in divine speech.

5. In an effort to minimize Aaron’s culpability, the Talmud vowelizes the Hebrew words for “he built an altar” (*va-yiven mizbei-ah*) so that they mean “he understood because of the one who was killed” (*va-yaven mi-zavu-ah*). The talmudic sages envision an episode in which a leader who stood up to the mob (Hur, referred to in Exod. 17:10 and 24:14) was killed by them. In this interpretation, Aaron pretended to accede to the people’s demands not solely to save his life but to prevent the people from committing another grave sin (BT Sanh. 7a).

7. Hurry down . . . from your exalted position on this mountaintop to be with your people at this perilous moment (BT Ber. 32a). “Hurry down,” God tells Moses, “even as I did at Sodom, to see for yourself—rather than con-

demn them from afar” (Exod. R. 42:5). The Midrash asks why Moses was not angry at the Israelites as soon as God told him what they had done but waited until he had seen for himself. Did he doubt the veracity of God? The answer: One should never condemn another on the basis of hearsay, no matter how reliable the source (Exod. R. 46:1).

your people These words not only minimize God’s relationship to them, they emphasize Moses’ close relationship to them. “Moses devoted his life to three things: the Torah, the people Israel, and the pursuit of justice. As a reward, his name was permanently attached to all three: the Law of Moses, ‘your people,’ and ‘you shall appoint judges like yourself’” (Mekh. Shirata 1).

of Egypt, have acted basely. ⁸They 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!"

⁹The LORD further said to Moses, "I see that this is a stiffnecked people. ¹⁰Now, let Me be, that My anger may blaze forth against them and that I may destroy them, and make of you a great nation." ¹¹But 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. ¹²Let not the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that He delivered them, only to kill them off in the mountains and an-

מהר מן-הדרך אשר צויתם עשו להם
עגל מסכה וישתחוו-לו ויזבחו-לו
ויאמרו אלה אלהיך ישראל אשר העלוף
מארץ מצרים:

⁹ ויאמר יהוה אל-משה ראיתי את-העם
הזה והנה עם-קשה-ערוף הוא: ¹⁰ ועתה
הניחה לי ויחר-אפי בהם ואכלם
ואעשה אותך לגוי גדול: ¹¹ ויחל משה
את-פני יהוה אלהיו ויאמר למה יהוה
יחרה אפך בעמך אשר הוצאת מארץ
מצרים בכח גדול ובכד חזקה: ¹² לממה
יאמרו מצרים לאמר ברעה הוציאם
להרג אתם בהרים ולכלתם מעל פני

8. to turn aside from the way The text does not say "from Me"; the people have adopted pagan modes of worship, but still they worship the God of Israel.

9. I see Divine "seeing" as opposed to Aaron's "seeing" in verse 5.

stiffnecked A frequent image of obstinacy, derived from the farmer's experience with work animals. When an animal's neck is stiff, it is hard for the driver using the reins to turn it in any direction.

10. a great nation The phrase evokes the di-

vine promises made by God to Abraham and is seized on at once by Moses.

11. Moses rejects God's offer to make his own descendants the sole heirs to the promises made to the patriarchs. This unselfish characteristic is again displayed in verse 32.

12. The effect of the events of the Exodus would now be undone, for the basic objective of the events in Egypt was that the Egyptians might "know" the Lord, i.e., recognize His incomparable nature.

9. a stiffnecked people Ami is quoted in the Midrash: "Is that a criticism? Rather it is to their credit. That stubbornness is what has permitted us to remain Jews" (Exod. R. 42:9). According to Abravanel, to be stiffnecked means to be unable to turn one's head and look down the road to see the consequences of one's actions.

10. let Me be In the words of the Midrash: Who is stopping God—that God must say, "Let Me be"? It seems to be a hint that God wants to be talked out of such fierce anger (Exod. R. 42:9). This may have encouraged Moses' intercession on the people's behalf. A striking *midrash* pictures God as a wife and Moses as God's husband (*ish ha-elohim*, "the man of God" [Deut. 33:1], understood as "the husband of God") exercising his right to cancel God's vow, as a husband in ancient times could annul a vow that had been made by his wife in his hearing; see Num. 30:14 (Exod. R. 43:4). The Mid-

rash envisions God saying, "Whenever I win an argument with My children, as at the time of the Flood or of Sodom and Gomorrah, I lose" (i.e., God ends up destroying culpable human beings). "Whenever I lose an argument, I win" (as here, when Moses persuades God not to punish Israel) (PR 21).

11. Moses implored The unusual Hebrew verb translated as "implore" (*va-y'hal*) resembles the verb meaning "to be sick," which prompted the Midrash to suggest that Moses became physically ill when he realized what the people had done. God then responded, not so much to Moses' argument as to the strength of his love for and identification with his people (Exod. R. 43:4).

12. Let not the Egyptians say Should God renounce the people now, not only Israel will suffer but God's reputation, so to speak, would be diminished as well.

nihilate them from the face of the earth.’ Turn from Your blazing anger, and renounce the plan to punish Your people. ¹³Remember Your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, 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.” ¹⁴And the LORD renounced the punishment He had planned to bring upon His people.

¹⁵Thereupon 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. ¹⁶The tablets were God’s work, and the writing was God’s writing, incised upon the tablets. ¹⁷When Joshua heard the sound of the people in its boisterousness, he said to Moses, “There is a cry of war in the camp.” ¹⁸But 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!”

¹⁹As soon as Moses came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, he became en-

הָאֲדָמָה שׁוֹב מִחֲרוֹן אַפָּךָ וְהִנָּחֵם עַל-
הַרְעָה לְעַמֶּךָ: ¹³ זָכֵר לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק
וּלְיִשְׂרָאֵל עַבְדֶּיךָ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתָּ לָהֶם בְּךָ
וַתְּדַבֵּר אֲלֵהֶם אַרְבָּה אֶת-יִזְרְעֶכֶם כְּכּוֹכְבֵי
הַשָּׁמַיִם וְכָל-הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר אָמַרְתִּי
אֵתָּן לְיִזְרְעֶכֶם וְנָחֳלוּ לְעֹלָם: ¹⁴ וַיִּנָּחֵם
יְהוָה עַל-הַרְעָה אֲשֶׁר דִּבַּר לַעֲשׂוֹת
לְעַמּוֹ: פ

¹⁵ וַיִּפֹּן וַיֵּרָד מִן-הָהָר וּשְׁנֵי לַחַת
הָעֵדוּת בְּיָדוֹ לַחַת כְּתָבִים מִשְׁנֵי עַבְרֵיהֶם
מִזָּה וּמִזָּה הֵם כְּתָבִים: ¹⁶ וְהִלָּחַת מֵעֲשֵׂה
אֱלֹהִים הַמָּה וְהַמְּכֹתֵב מִכְּתָב אֱלֹהִים
הוּא חָרוֹת עַל-הַלָּחַת: ¹⁷ וַיִּשְׁמַע יְהוֹשֻׁעַ
אֶת-קוֹל הָעָם בָּרֶעָה בָּרָעוּ וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-
מֹשֶׁה קוֹל מִלְחָמָה בַּמַּחֲנֶה: ¹⁸ וַיֹּאמֶר

אֵין קוֹל עֲנוֹת גְּבוּרָה
וְאֵין קוֹל עֲנוֹת חֲלוּשָׁה
קוֹל עֲזוֹת אֲנֹכִי שֹׁמֵעַ:

¹⁹ וַיְהִי כַּאֲשֶׁר קָרַב אֶל-הַמַּחֲנֶה וַיִּרְא

13. Remember See Comment to 2:24.

14. the LORD renounced Moses’ intercession succeeded in averting the threatened punishment.

MOSES SMASHES THE TABLETS AND
DESTROYS THE CALF (vv. 15–20)

15. bearing the two tablets Although their size is not recorded here, their maximum dimensions can be determined by the size of the Ark in which they were to repose, as presented in 25:10.

16. God’s work . . . God’s writing This verse amplifies God’s instruction to Moses in 24:12.

incised Hebrew: *harut*; found in the Bible only here.

17. Joshua He was stationed partway up the mountain awaiting Moses’ return, as told in 24:13; thus he could hear the rising din but could not view the scene.

18. But he answered Verses 7 and 8 tell us that Moses has already been informed.

19. As Moses approaches the camp and wit-

13. Remember Your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Israel The reference to the patriarchs here involves the concept known as “the merit of the ancestors” (*z’khut avot*). Our own failings are balanced in part by the remembered virtues of our forebears. Solomon Schechter translated this concept felicitously as “original virtue,” in contrast to the notion of “original sin” inherited from one’s ancestors. The Mid-

rash here compares Israel to a grapevine. Just as branches bearing new grapes support themselves on earlier, dead branches, so the Israelites and later generations of Jews are supported and sustained by the example and memory of their departed ancestors (Exod. R. 44:1).

19. A Rabbinic legend describes Moses, a man of advanced age, carrying the heavy stone tablets down the mountainside with ease. But

raged; 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.

²¹Moses said to Aaron, “What did this people do to you that you have brought such great sin upon them?” ²²Aaron said, “Let not my lord be enraged. You know that this people is bent on evil. ²³They said to me, ‘Make us a god to lead us; for that man Moses, who brought us from

אֶת־הָעֵגֶל וּמַחֲלֵת וַיַּחֲרֵ־אֶף מֹשֶׁה וַיִּשְׁלַךְ מִיָּדוֹ מִיָּדָיו אֶת־הַלְּחֹת וַיִּשְׁבֵּר אֶתְּמָם תַּחַת הַהָר: ²⁰ וַיִּקַּח אֶת־הָעֵגֶל אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ וַיִּשְׂרֹף בְּאֵשׁ וַיִּטְחֵן עַד אֲשֶׁר־דָּק וַיִּזֹּר עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם וַיִּשְׁק אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: ²¹ וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־אַהֲרֹן מַה־עָשִׂיתָ לָּךְ הָעָם הַזֶּה כִּי־הִבֵּאתָ עָלֵינוּ חַטָּאת גְּדוֹלָה: ²² וַיֹּאמֶר אַהֲרֹן אֶל־יִחִיר אֶף אֲדֹנָי אַתָּה יָדַעְתָּ אֶת־הָעָם כִּי בָרַע הוּא: ²³ וַיֹּאמְרוּ לִי עֲשֵׂה־לָּנוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר יִלְכוּ לִפְנֵינוּ

nesses the scene, he realizes the full extent of the people’s degradation and recognizes the enormity of their sin. He no longer is thinking of appeasing God. He, too, burns with anger.

he hurled the tablets This was not an impetuous act; rather, it quite deliberately signified the abrogation of the Covenant. In ancient Near Eastern legal terminology “to break the tablet” means to invalidate or repudiate a document or agreement.

at the foot of the mountain Where the people were assembled.

20. The same series of destructive acts is found in the description of the annihilation of the god Mot, god of the underworld, in Ugaritic literature. It conveys a picture of the total annihilation of the obnoxious object.

water Unidentified here, the water is described in Deut. 9:21 as “the brook that comes

down from the mountain.” This implies a single source of water for the entire camp so that, apparently, no individual could escape drinking the mixture.

made the Israelites drink it And thereby to identify the transgressors (cf. the trial by ordeal in Num. 5:12–31).

AARON’S APOLOGIA (vv. 21–24)

Moses breaks his silence. The question he puts to Aaron is actually a harsh rebuke.

21. great sin This is a legal term. Found in ancient Near Eastern marriage contracts, it always refers to adultery, suggesting here that the worship of the Golden Calf is an act of gross infidelity.

22–24. Aaron excuses himself by reviling the people and glossing over his involvement in the making of the calf image. He also claims that he did not fashion it, implying divine approval!

when he sees the Israelites dancing around the Golden Calf, the letters fly off the tablets, which become two large blank stones. At that point, they become too much for Moses to carry; they fall from his grasp and break. When Moses felt he was bringing God’s word to a people eager to receive it, he was capable of doing something difficult and demanding. When he had reason to suspect that his efforts were in vain, the task became too hard for him (PdRE 45). Another *midrash* pictures Moses deliberately breaking the tablets of stone, not out of anger or a sense that Israel was not worthy of them but to destroy the evidence that Israel had ever been commanded not to worship idols (Exod. R. 43:1). “Sometimes, canceling the Torah is the only way to save it” (BT Men. 99b).

A 19th-century commentator observes that Moses here makes the point that there is no intrinsic holiness in things. Only God is intrinsically holy. Physical objects can be holy only insofar as they lead people to God. When Israel disregards the words on the stone tablets, they become mere stones (*Meshekh Hokhmah*).

Hirsch asks why Moses broke the tablets in despair only when he saw the Israelites dancing around the Calf (v. 19)—and not earlier, when he learned of their transgression (v. 8). He answers his own question: “When false conceptions of idolatry are rooted merely in the intellect, they can be eradicated by intellectual argument and instruction.” When the attachment to wrongdoing reaches the emotional level, however, it becomes nearly impossible to talk people out of it.

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!”

²⁵Moses saw that the people were out of control—since Aaron had let them get out of control—so that they were a menace to any who might oppose them. ²⁶Moses stood up in the gate of the camp and said, “Whoever is for the LORD, come here!” And all the Levites rallied to him. ²⁷He said to them, “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Each of you put sword on thigh, go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay brother, neighbor, and kin.” ²⁸The Levites did as Moses had bidden; and some three thousand of the people fell that day. ²⁹And Moses said, “Dedicate yourselves to the LORD this day—for each of you has been against son and brother—that He may bestow a blessing upon you today.”

³⁰The next day Moses said to the people, “You

כִּי־יָזָה | מֹשֶׁה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלָנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ
מִצְרַיִם לֹא יָדַעְנוּ מַה־הָיָה לוֹ: ²⁴ וְאָמַר
לָהֶם לְמִי זֶהָב הַתְּפָרְקוּ וַיִּתְּנוּ־לִי
וְאִשְׁלַכְהוּ בָאֵשׁ וַיֵּצֵא הָעֶגְלָה הַזֹּה:

²⁵ וַיִּרְא מֹשֶׁה אֶת־הָעָם כִּי פָרַע הוּא
כִּי־פָרַעַה אֲהַרֹן לְשִׁמְצָה בְקַמִּיהֶם:
²⁶ וַיַּעֲמֵד מֹשֶׁה בַשַּׁעַר הַמַּחֲנֶה וַיֹּאמֶר מִי
לַיהוָה אֵלָי וַיֵּאֲסֹפוּ אֵלָיו כָּל־בְּנֵי לֵוִי:
²⁷ וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם כֹּה־אָמַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל שִׁימוּ אִישׁ־חַרְבּוֹ עַל־יָרְכוֹ עִבְרוּ
וְשׁוּבוּ מִשַּׁעַר לְשַׁעַר בַּמַּחֲנֶה וְהָרְגוּ אִישׁ־
אֶת־אָחִיו וְאִישׁ אֶת־רֵעֵהוּ וְאִישׁ אֶת־
קָרְבוֹ: ²⁸ וַיַּעֲשׂוּ בְנֵי־לֵוִי כַדְבַר מֹשֶׁה וַיִּפֹּל
מִן־הָעָם בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא כִּשְׁלֹשָׁת אֲלָפֵי
אִישׁ: ²⁹ וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה מֵלֹאֵו יָדְכֶם הַיּוֹם
לַיהוָה כִּי אִישׁ בָּבְנוּ וּבְאָחִיו וּלְתַת
עֲלֵיכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּרַכָּה:

³⁰ וַיְהִי מִמָּחָרָת וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הָעָם

out came this calf As though it produced itself.

SELECTION OF THE LEVITES (vv. 25–29)

The destruction of the Golden Calf sparks a riot among its worshipers. The Levites are called in to suppress it and to punish the guilty ones.

25. since Aaron . . . out of control This is a clear rejection of Aaron’s lame excuse and a condemnation of his action.

26. all the Levites Moses’ own tribe. They remained faithful to the Covenant and maintained the purity of Israel’s worship. This is the foundation story for the special place of the Levites in Israelite religion.

27. Thus says the LORD This solemn formula is employed here to signify that the assignment to the Levites is beyond the right of any human authority to impose. It cannot be taken as a precedent for the disposition of future cases.

slay brother They must be absolutely impartial while carrying out their grim task.

MOSES’ SECOND INTERCESSION (vv. 30–34)

Moses, through his first intercession with God, secured the annulment of the divine decree to destroy Israel. Now he attempts to gain complete forgiveness for the people.

30. The next day After the carnage.

27. This is indeed a harsh measure, made intelligible by the realization that the idolatry of the calf worshipers very nearly caused God to give up on everyone, ending the Israelite enterprise almost as soon as it had begun. The Midrash recalls that the Levites’ eponymous ancestor, Levi son of Jacob, did something similar when he slaughtered the men of Shechem to avenge the dishonoring of his sister, Dinah; see Gen. 34 (Sifrei Deut. 349). The tribe of Levi

would soon be asked to sublimate its fierce passion in the task of guarding and transporting the portable shrine. Just as the people have to learn not to treat an idol as an embodiment of God, God has to learn not to expect the average person to comprehend a totally abstract, invisible deity. The answer to the quest for a representation is not a Golden Calf but the tabernacle, as discussed in the previous and subsequent *parashiyot*.

have been guilty of a great sin. Yet I will now go up to the LORD; perhaps I may win forgiveness for your sin.”³¹ Moses went back to the LORD and said, “Alas, this people is guilty of a great sin in making for themselves a god of gold.³² Now, if You will forgive their sin [well and good]; but if not, erase me from the record which You have written!”³³ But the LORD said to Moses, “He who has sinned against Me, him only will I erase from My record.³⁴ Go now, lead the people where I told you. See, My angel shall go before you. But when I make an accounting, I will bring them to account for their sins.”

³⁵Then the LORD sent a plague upon the people, for what they did with the calf that Aaron made.

33 Then the LORD said to Moses, “Set out from here, you and the people that you have

אתם חטאתם חטאה גדלה ועתה אעלה אל-יהוה אולי אכפרה בעד חטאתכם: ³¹ וישב משה אל-יהוה ויאמר אנא חטא העם הזה חטאה גדלה ויעשו להם אלהי זהב: ³² ועתה אם-תשא חטאתם ואם-אין מחני נא מספרך אשר כתבת: ³³ ויאמר יהוה אל-משה מי אשר חטא לי אמהנו מספרי: ³⁴ ועתה לך | נחה את-העם אל אשר-דברתי לך הנה* מלאכי ילך לפניך וביום פקדי ופקדתי עליהם חטאתם: ³⁵ ויגף יהוה את-העם על אשר עשו את-העגל אשר עשה אהרן: ט

go up To the summit of Sinai.

31–32. The prayer blends confession with a plea for pardon. And another element is introduced: Moses ties his personal destiny to his people’s fate. There can hardly be a more impressive example of selfless “love of Israel.”

erase me from the record This request seems to reflect a widespread ancient Near Eastern popular belief in the existence of heavenly “books.” Here, Moses’ request is framed in the figurative language of the book of life. He is asking to die if Israel is not forgiven.

33–34. God responds to Moses’ entreaty, demanding individual accountability. In addition, the people as a whole bear collective responsibility. Divine promises of national territory made to the people of Israel are unalterable, but total absolution for the sin of the Golden Calf cannot be given. The Israelites receive a suspended sentence; they are on probation. The punishment, however, will come in due time (see Ezek. 20).

35. This verse belongs after verse 20, where it would indicate that the water ordeal caused the guilty ones to be stricken—the goal of a similar procedure to be followed in the case of a suspected

adulteress (Num. 5). The calf worshipers thus would have been readily identifiable to the Levites.

for what they did This difficult phrase seems to mean that Aaron and the people shared the blame equally; they, for demanding a visible “god”; he, for yielding to them.

MOSES SEEKS GOD’S CONTINUED PRESENCE (33:1–23)

Although Moses’ intercession saves the people from annihilation, the Israelites have not yet secured full pardon and reconciliation with God. The unifying theme of this chapter is Moses’ concern for the continued presence of God in the midst of His people, as symbolized by the mobile sanctuary.

WITHDRAWAL OF THE DIVINE PRESENCE (vv. 1–6)

Implementation of the punishment decreed in 32:10 has been suspended, only because of God’s promise to the patriarchs (32:13), not because of the people’s merit.

1. Set out Hebrew: *lekh alei*; literally “go, ascend.” This is in contrast to 32:7, *lekh red*, “go,

לג וידבר יהוה אל-משה לך עליה מזה אתה והעם אשר העלית

v. 34. סבירין ומטעין “והנה”

brought up from the land of Egypt, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, ‘To your offspring will I give it’—²I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites—³a land flowing with milk and honey. But I will not go in your midst, since you are a stiffnecked people, lest I destroy you on the way.”

⁴When the people heard this harsh word, they went into mourning, and none put on his finery.

⁵The LORD said to Moses, “Say to the Israelite people, ‘You are a stiffnecked people. If I were to go in your midst for one moment, I would destroy you. Now, then, leave off your finery, and I will consider what to do to you.’” ⁶So the Israelites remained stripped of the finery from Mount Horeb on.

⁷Now Moses would take the Tent and pitch it outside the camp, at some distance from the camp. It was called the Tent of Meeting, and

מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם אֶל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר וְשָׁבַעְתִּי
לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וְלִיעֲקֹב לֵאמֹר לְזֶרְעִי
אֶתְנַנֶּה: ² וְשִׁלַּחְתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ מִלְאָךְ וְגֵרְשִׁיתִי
אֶת-הַכְּנַעֲנִי הָאֱמֹרִי וְהַחִתִּי וְהַפְּרִזִּי הַחִוִּי
וְהִיבוֹסִי: ³ אֶל-אֶרֶץ זָבַת חֶלֶב וְדָבֶשׁ כִּי
לֹא אֵעֲלֶה בְּקִרְבְּךָ כִּי עִם-קִשְׁה-עֲרֹף
אֶתָּה פֶּן-אֲכַלֶּךָ בַּדֶּרֶךְ:

⁴ וַיִּשְׁמַע הָעָם אֶת-הַדְּבַר הַרָע הַזֶּה
וַיִּתְאַבְּלוּ וְלֹא-שָׂתוּ אִישׁ עֲדָיו עָלָיו:

⁵ וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה אַמֵּר אֶל-בְּנֵי-
יִשְׂרָאֵל אַתֶּם עִם-קִשְׁה-עֲרֹף רַגַע אַחַד
אֵעֲלֶה בְּקִרְבְּךָ וְכָלִיתִיךָ וְעַתָּה הוֹרֵד עֲדִיךָ
מֵעֲלֶיךָ וְאֲדַע מָה אֵעֲשֶׂה-לָּךְ: ⁶ וַיִּתְנַצְּלוּ
בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת-עֲדֵימָם מִהַר חוֹרֵב:

⁷ וּמֹשֶׁה יָקַח אֶת-הָאֹהֶל וַנִּטְהַלּוּ מִחוּץ
לַמַּחֲנֶה הַרְחֵק מִן-הַמַּחֲנֶה וַקָּרָא לוֹ אֹהֶל

descend,” signifying that there has been a reversal of fate.

you Moses’ request in the last part of 32:32 is emphatically denied.

the people It is no longer “your people” as God said to Moses in 32:7. The shift connotes some softening of the effect of Israel’s alienation from God.

2. an angel The promise of 23:20–33 and 32:34 is repeated, but here the emissary is not designated “My” angel. The change is ominous.

3. I will not go . . . lest I destroy you Paradoxically, God’s withdrawal of His Presence is a merciful measure; it is intended to avert the inevitable destructive consequences of another episode such as that of the Golden Calf.

4. This decision has a shattering effect on the people, for it was the absence of a representation of God’s immanence that had provoked the demand for a material image in the first place.

5. leave off The people have already done this. Hence, it is best to invert the order of verses 4–5, taking verse 4 as the response to the divine command.

6. from Mount Horeb on From that time on, throughout the wilderness wanderings. It is

a sign of the people’s remorse over their transgression. See Comment to 3:1.

MOSES’ EXCEPTIONAL STATUS (vv. 7–11)

This section continues the theme of God’s presence and connects with verse 3. Because God withholds His indwelling in the camp of Israel, Moses employs an extraordinary stratagem. He pitches “the Tent” outside the camp. This is not the tabernacle—which has not yet been constructed—but a private tent where he might commune with God.

7. the Tent The definite article seems to indicate a well-known, specific tent, although one has not yet been mentioned. Apparently, it was the site of Moses’ previous dialogues with God. It is possible that there were two different traditions regarding a “tent,” with the tabernacle in the heart of the camp serving as a shrine for sacrifices without speech, and the Tent outside serving as a place for inquiring of God.

outside the camp, at some distance The description draws attention to the Israelites’ alienation from God. The camp has become polluted spiritually through the impurity brought on by the episode of the Golden Calf.

whoever sought the LORD would go out to the Tent of Meeting that was outside the camp. ⁸Whenever Moses went out to the Tent, all the people would rise and stand, each at the entrance of his tent, and gaze after Moses until he had entered the Tent. ⁹And when Moses entered the Tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the Tent, while He spoke with Moses. ¹⁰When all the people saw the pillar of cloud poised at the entrance of the Tent, all the people would rise and bow low, each at the entrance of his tent. ¹¹The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as one man speaks to another. And he would then return to the camp; but his attendant, Joshua son of Nun, a youth, would not stir out of the Tent.

¹²Moses said to the LORD, “See, You say to me, ‘Lead this people forward,’ but You have not made known to me whom You will send with me. Further, You have said, ‘I have singled you out by name, and you have, indeed, gained My favor.’ ¹³Now, if I have truly gained Your favor, pray let me know Your ways, that I may know You and continue in Your favor. Con-

9. at the entrance of the Tent Not inside the tabernacle, where the divine Presence is said to rest continuously and where God converses with Moses from within the Holy of Holies. The place of communication here is at the entrance, where God’s self-manifestation is intermittent.

11. face to face The same expression is used in Deut. 34:10, whereas in Num. 12:6–8 it is said that God communicated with Moses “mouth to mouth.” This figurative language is intended to convey the pre-eminence and uniqueness of Moses as a prophetic figure who experiences a special mode of revelation. His experience is personal and direct, not mediated through visions or dreams, and the message always is plain and straightforward, free of cryptic utterances.

Joshua He remained inside the tent and did not share in Moses’ direct experience with God.

DIALOGUE WITH GOD (vv. 12–23)

This section depicts how Moses and God engage in the intimate talk mentioned in verse 11.

מוֹעֵד וְהָיָה כָּל־מִבְקֵשׁ יְהוָה יֵצֵא אֶל־
 אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד אֲשֶׁר מֵחוּץ לַמִּחֻנֶּה: ⁸ וְהָיָה
 כִּצְאֵת מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הָאֹהֶל יָקוּמוּ כָל־הָעָם
 וְנִצְבּוּ אִישׁ פֶּתַח אֹהֶלוֹ וְהִבִּיטוּ אַחֲרֵי
 מֹשֶׁה עַד־בָּאוּ הָאֹהֶלָה: ⁹ וְהָיָה כִּבָּא
 מֹשֶׁה הָאֹהֶלָה יֵרֵד עַמּוּד הָעָנָן וְעָמַד
 פֶּתַח הָאֹהֶל וְדַבֵּר עִם־מֹשֶׁה: ¹⁰ וְרָאָה
 כָּל־הָעָם אֶת־עַמּוּד הָעָנָן עֹמֵד פֶּתַח
 הָאֹהֶל וְקָם כָּל־הָעָם וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ אִישׁ
 פֶּתַח אֹהֶלוֹ: ¹¹ וְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה פָּנִים
 אֶל־פָּנִים כַּאֲשֶׁר יְדַבֵּר אִישׁ אֶל־רֵעֵהוּ
 וְשָׁב אֶל־הַמִּחֻנֶּה וּמִשְׁרָתוֹ יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן־נּוּן
 לֹא יֵמֵשׁ מִתּוֹךְ הָאֹהֶל: ^ס

¹² וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־יְהוָה רְאֵה אֵתָהּ אֹמֵר
 אֵלַי הֲעַל אֶת־הָעָם הַזֶּה וְאֵתָהּ לֹא
 הוֹדַעְתָּנִי אֵת אֲשֶׁר־תִּשְׁלַח עִמִּי וְאֵתָהּ
 אֹמְרָתָּ יִדְעֶתִיךָ בְּשֵׁם וְגַם־מִצְאָתָּ חֵן
 בְּעֵינַי: ¹³ וְעֵתָהּ אִם־נָא מִצְאָתִי חֵן
 בְּעֵינֶיךָ הוֹדַעְנִי נָא אֶת־דְּרָכְךָ וְאֶדְעֶךָ

12. Moses now reverts to the subject matter of 32:34 and 33:1–3—the order to proceed to the Promised Land without the tabernacle, the token of God’s immediate presence in the camp of Israel. He complains that the aforementioned “angel” is unidentified. Is it to be human or celestial? Is God’s name to “be in him,” as is promised in 23:21, or not?

I have singled you out by name Literally, “I know you by name.” This Hebrew idiom, with God as the subject, is applied to no one else in the Bible. It signifies a close, exclusive, and unique association with God.

13. let me know Your ways Moses asks for comprehension of God’s essential being—the attributes that guide His actions in dealing with humankind, the norms by which He operates in His governance of the world. “Ways” here is a play on the literal and the figurative meanings of Hebrew word *derekh*; it means both the right path through the wilderness and also God’s way of acting, His nature.

sider, too, that this nation is Your people.”
 14And He said, “I will go in the lead and will lighten your burden.” 15And he said to Him, “Unless You go in the lead, do not make us leave this place. 16For how shall it be known that Your people have gained Your favor unless You go with us, so that we may be distinguished, Your people and I, from every people on the face of the earth?”

17And the LORD said to Moses, “I will also do this thing that you have asked; for you have truly gained My favor and I have singled you out by name.” 18He said, “Oh, let me behold Your Presence!” 19And He answered, “I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim before you the name LORD, and the grace that I grant and the compassion that I show. 20But,” He said, “you cannot see My face, for man may

this nation Moses stresses that the people Israel, and none other, constitute God’s people. He wants to extend God’s favor to embrace Israel as well as himself.

14. God does not yet respond to Moses’ last point but addresses only his immediate personal concerns.

lighten your burden Literally, “I will give you rest.” This phrase is normally found in a context of giving relief from national enemies, especially in relation to the occupation of the Land. The Hebrew word for “rest,” *m’nuhab*, probably means “camping places,” a pun on Hebrew for “camp” (*mahaneh*) (see Num. 10:33).

15–16. Moses, sensitive to God’s omission of any mention of Israel, reacts immediately by stressing the people’s interests, thereby affirming once again that he sees his own reputation inextricably bound up with the fate of his people. Note his repetition of “us” and “Your people.”

we may be distinguished Israel’s distinctiveness lies in its unique relationship with God.

18. Oh, let me behold Your Presence! Hebrew: *kavod* (Presence); one of the most impor-

לִמְעַן אֲמַצְאֶחֶן בְּעֵינֶיךָ וְרִאֵהָ כִּי עִמָּךָ
 הַגּוֹי הַזֶּה: 14 וַיֹּאמֶר פָּנֵי יִלְכוּ וְהִנְחֹתִי
 לָךְ: 15 וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אִם-אֵין פָּנֶיךָ הַלְכִים
 אֶל-תַּעֲלֵנוּ מִזֶּה: 16 וּבַמָּה | יוֹדַע אִפּוֹא
 כִּי-מִצְאָתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ אֲנִי וְעַמֶּךָ הַלּוֹא
 בְּלִכְתָּךְ עִמָּנוּ וְנִפְלִינוּ אֲנִי וְעַמֶּךָ מִכָּל-
 הָעַם אֲשֶׁר עַל-פְּנֵי הָאָדָמָה: פ
 רביעי 17 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה גַם אֶת-הַדְּבָר
 הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתָּ אֶעֱשֶׂה כִּי-מִצְאָתָהּ חֵן
 בְּעֵינַי וְאֲדַעֲךָ בְּשֵׁם: 18 וַיֹּאמֶר הֲרֵאֵנִי נָא
 אֶת-כְּבוֹדְךָ: 19 וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנִי אֶעְבִּיר כָּל-טוֹבֵי
 עַל-פְּנֶיךָ וְקִרְאתִי בְשֵׁם יְהוָה לְפָנֶיךָ
 וְחִנַּתִּי אֶת-אֲשֶׁר אֲחֹן וְרַחֲמֹתַי אֶת-אֲשֶׁר
 אֲרַחֵם: 20 וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא תוּכַל לִרְאֹת אֶת-

tant concepts in biblical theology. See Comment to 16:7. Here Moses is pleading for an exclusively individual experience, one close at hand and immediate, as a response to his personal request there and then.

19. all My goodness This refers to the compassionate attributes that God reveals in dealing with His creatures (see 34:6–7).

proclaim . . . the name LORD This name is *YHVH*; see Comment to 3:14. This clause parallels the immediately preceding one—“I will make all My goodness pass before you.” It reaffirms God’s intention of voluntarily disclosing to Moses His defining characteristics. This is fulfilled in 34:5.

and the grace Literally, “I shall be gracious to whomever I am gracious and I shall show mercy to whomever I show mercy.” The syntax indicates indefiniteness, as in 3:14. God is reminding Moses that He is a free agent. There is no magical practice that is automatically effective in influencing His behavior.

20. Moses’ second plea is only partially granted. By virtue of their humanity, human beings, in-

CHAPTER 33

19. I will make all My goodness pass before you We encounter the reality of God when we experience goodness in the world, from the gift of life itself to the discovery of the capacity

to do good in our own souls, and the love and generosity of people around us whom God has inspired to do good.

20–23. What does it mean that a human being cannot see God’s face—but can see God’s back? In the words of the Ḥatam Sofer, we can-

not see Me and live.”²¹ And the LORD said, “See, there is a place near Me. Station yourself on the rock²² and, as My Presence passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock and shield you with My hand until I have passed by.²³ Then I will take My hand away and you will see My back; but My face must not be seen.”

פָּנַי כִּי לֹא-יִרְאֵנִי הָאָדָם וְחַי: ²¹ וַיֹּאמֶר
 יְהוָה הֲנֵה מְקוֹם אֶתִי וְנִצַּבְתָּ עַל-הַצּוּר:
 וְהָיָה בְעֵבֶר כַּבְּדִי וְשִׁמְתִיךָ בְּנִקְרֹת ²²
 הַצּוּר וְשִׁכַּתִּי כַפִּי עָלֶיךָ עַד-עֲבָרִי:
 וְהִסַּרְתִּי אֶת-כַּפִּי וְרָאִיתָ אֶת-אֲחֵרָי ²³
 וּפְנֵי לֹא יִרְאוּ: ס

34 The LORD said to Moses: “Carve two tablets of stone like the first, and I will inscribe upon the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you shattered. ²Be ready by morning, and in the morning come up to Mount Sinai and present yourself there to Me, on the top of the mountain. ³No one else shall come up with you, and no one else shall be seen

לד חמישי וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה פָּסֵל-לָךְ
 שְׁנֵי-לְחֹת אֲבָנִים כְּרֵאשֹׁנִים וְכַתְּבַתִּי עַל-
 הַלְּחֹת אֶת-הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ עַל-הַלְּחֹת
 הָרֵאשֹׁנִים אֲשֶׁר שִׁבַּרְתָּ: ² וְהָיָה נֶכּוֹן
 לְבַקֵּר וְעֹלִיתָ בְּבֹקֶר אֶל-הָרַם וְנִצַּבְתָּ
 לִי שָׁם עַל-רֹאשׁ הָהָר: ³ וְאִישׁ לֹא-יַעֲלֶה
 עִמָּךְ וְגַם-אִישׁ אֶל-יִרְאָ בְּכָל-הָהָר גַּם-

cluding Moses, cannot directly and closely observe God.

21. on the rock At the top of Mount Sinai (see 34:2). For a similar scene, see 1 Kings 19.

22. My Presence passes by Rashbam notes that God’s action is characteristic of covenant making, as in Gen. 15:17 and Jer. 34:18,19. The manifestation of God here would then be a ceremony that signals renewal of the Covenant.

23. My back This daring human image for God, contrasted with the usual biblical term *panim*, “face, presence,” refers to the traces of the divine Presence, the afterglow of His supernatural radiance.

must not be seen No human being can ever penetrate the ultimate mystery of God’s Being. Only a glimpse of the divine reality is possible, even for Moses.

RENEWAL OF THE COVENANT (34:1–35)

PREPARATORY MEASURES (vv. 1–3)

Moses, assured that God will manifest His Presence privately to him, is instructed to prepare for the experience, which actually initiates the re-statement of the Covenant.

1. Carve God had given the first set to Moses. **words** They are identified as the Decalogue in verse 28.

3. No one else This time Aaron is excluded, because of his role in the episode of the Golden Calf.

not see God directly. We can only see the difference that God has made after the fact. We can recognize God’s reality by seeing the difference God has made in people’s lives.

rather than by a perfect deity. Heschel taught that God revealed the Torah to Moses in all its fullness; and Moses, a finite human being, wrote down what he could comprehend. The Talmud tells us that the fragments of the first set of tablets were carried in the Ark along with the replacement set (BT Ber. 8b). That which was once holy retains its holiness even when it is broken. So too the elderly, the senile, and the infirm may not be cast aside. They must be accorded the reverence they have earned in their lives.

CHAPTER 34

1. The first set of tablets was fashioned by God alone. Moses passively received them. The second set will be a joint divine-human effort (Y. Nissenbaum). This second set was written with a greater knowledge of human weakness, at the hand of an imperfect human being,

anywhere on the mountain; neither shall the flocks and the herds graze at the foot of this mountain.”

⁴So Moses carved two tablets of stone, like the first, and early in the morning he went up on Mount Sinai, as the LORD had commanded him, taking the two stone tablets with him. ⁵The LORD came down in a cloud; He stood with him there, and proclaimed the name LORD. ⁶The LORD passed before him and proclaimed: “The LORD! the LORD! a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, ⁷extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; yet He does not remit all punishment, but visits the iniquity of parents upon children and children’s children, upon the third and fourth generations.”

GOD’S SELF-DISCLOSURE (vv. 4–9)

5. stood . . . proclaimed The text is ambiguous. The subject of the two verbs may be either Moses, as verses 2 and 33:21 indicate, or God, as the first clause and 33:19 would suggest. Or perhaps the first verb is governed by Moses and the second by God.

THE DIVINE RESPONSE (vv. 6–7)

These verses are the divine response to Moses’ two requests—that he “know” God’s ways (33:13) and that he “behold” God’s Presence (33:18). God’s mysterious passing before Moses answers to the second; the recital of the divine attributes, to the first. God’s self-disclosure is confined to a proclamation of His moral qualities. To “know” them is to achieve a higher conception of Deity.

6. The LORD! the LORD! The Hebrew text also allows the first *YHVH* to be taken as the subject of the antecedent verb; thus “And the LORD proclaimed.”

6–7. These two verses contain a passage recited and chanted on the High Holy Days and the Festivals. This summary of God’s compassionate qualities is known as the “Thirteen Attributes of God” or the “Covenant of the Thirteen” (*b’rit sh’losh esrei*).

visits the iniquity of parents upon children and children’s children Bothered by the ap-

הִצָּאן וְהִבָּקֵר אֶל-יָרְעוּ אֶל-מֹול הַהָר
הַהוּא :

וַיִּפְסֹל ⁴ וַיִּשְׁבֶּם מֹשֶׁה בְּבִקְרָ וַיַּעַל אֶל-הָר סִינַי
כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה אֹתוֹ וַיִּקַּח בְּיָדוֹ שְׁנֵי
לְחֹת אֲבָנִים : ⁵ וַיֵּרֵד יְהוָה בַּעֲנָן וַיִּתְיַצֵּב
עִמּוֹ שָׁם וַיִּקְרָא בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה : ⁶ וַיַּעֲבֹר
יְהוָה | עַל-פָּנָיו וַיִּקְרָא יְהוָה | יְהוָה אֵל
רַחוּם וְחַנוּן אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם וְרַב-חַסֵּד וְאֱמֶת :
⁷ נִצְרָ * חֶסֶד לְאֱלֹפִים נֹשֵׂא עֵינָי וְפֹשַׁע
וְחַטָּאָה וְנִקְהָ לֹא יִנְקָה פֶקֶד | עֵינָי אָבוֹת
עַל-בָּנִים וְעַל-בָּנֵי בָנִים עַל-שְׁלֹשִׁים וְעַל-
רַבְעִים :

v. 7. נ' רבתי לפי נוסחים מקובלים

compassionate and gracious In the Decalogue (20:5–6) the order of attributes, unlike here, presents judgment before kindness. Emphasis and priority are here given to God’s magnanimous qualities rather than to His judgmental actions.

kindness and faithfulness The Hebrew words *hesed v’emet* appear frequently together to express a single concept. *Hesed* involves acts of beneficence and obligation that flow from a legal relationship. See Comment to 15:13. *Emet*, usually translated “truth,” encompasses the notions of reliability, durability, and faithfulness. When used together, the two words express God’s absolute and eternal dependability in dispensing His benefactions.

7. extending kindness The phrase may express either God’s continuous *hesed* or the idea that merit for the *hesed* that people perform endures beyond their own generation.

He does not remit Divine mercy does not mean that sinners can expect wholly to escape the consequences of their wrongs.

parent unfairness of the text, a Hasidic interpretation takes it to mean that God holds parents responsible for not giving their children a proper religious and moral upbringing. We recognize the unfairness of such punishment, yet it is true that the bad habits of parents are too often repeated by their children, for whom parents are the primary role models.

⁸Moses hastened to bow low to the ground in homage, ⁹and said, “If I have gained Your favor, O Lord, pray, let the Lord go in our midst, even though this is a stiffnecked people. Pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for Your own!”

¹⁰He said: I hereby make a covenant. Before all your people I will work such wonders as have not been wrought on all the earth or in any nation; and all the people who are with you shall see how awesome are the LORD’s deeds which I will perform for you. ¹¹Mark well what I command you this day. I will drive out before you the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ¹²Beware of making a covenant with the inhabitants of the land against which you are advancing, lest they be a snare in your midst. ¹³No, you must tear down their altars, smash their pillars, and cut down their sacred posts; ¹⁴for you must not worship any other god, because the LORD, whose name is Impassioned, is an impassioned

8 וַיִּמְהַר מֹשֶׁה וַיִּקְדוּ אֶרְצָה וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶה׃
9 וַיֹּאמֶר אֶם־נָא מִצָּאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ אֲדֹנָי יִלְחַנְנָא אֲדֹנָי בְּקִרְבָּנוּ כִּי עַם־קָשָׁה־עֲרָף הוּא וְסָלַחְתָּ לְעֹונָנוּ וּלְחַטָּאתָנוּ וַיִּנְחַלְתָּנוּ׃

שׁי 10 וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה אֲנֹכִי כֹרֶת בְּרִית נֹגֵד כֹּל־עַמֶּךָ אֶעֱשֶׂה נִפְלְאוֹת אֲשֶׁר לֹא־נִבְרָאוּ בְּכָל־הָאָרֶץ וּבְכָל־הַגּוֹיִם וְרָאָה כָּל־הָעַם אֲשֶׁר־אִתָּה בְּקִרְבּוֹ אֶת־מַעֲשֵׂה יְהוָה כִּי־נֹרָא הוּא אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי עֹשֶׂה עִמָּךְ׃ 11 שְׁמַר־לְךָ אֶת אֶת אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי מִצְוֶךָ הַיּוֹם הַהַנִּי גִרְשׁ מִפְּנֵיךָ אֶת־הָאֱמֹרִי וְהַכְּנַעֲנִי וְהַחִתִּי וְהַפְּרִזִי וְהַחִוִּי וְהַיְבוּסִי׃ 12 הִשְׁמַר לְךָ פֶּן־תִּכְרֹת בְּרִית לְיוֹשְׁבֵי הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אִתָּה בְּאֵ עֲלֶיךָ פֶּן־יִהְיֶה לְמוֹקֵשׁ בְּקִרְבֶּךָ׃ 13 כִּי אֶת־מִזְבְּחֹתָם תִּתְּצוּן וְאֶת־מִצְבֹּתָם תִּשְׁבִּרוּן וְאֶת־אֲשֵׁרֵיוּ תִּכְרֹתוּן׃ 14 כִּי לֹא תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לְאֵל אֲחֵר* כִּי יְהוָה קָנָא שְׁמוֹ

v. 14. ר' רבתי לפי נוסחים מקובלים

9. Moses emphasizes God’s merciful qualities in asking that the punishment in 33:3 be set aside. *even though* Allow for human frailty.

INAUTHENTIC AND AUTHENTIC WORSHIP (vv. 10–26)

This section concentrates on two fundamental issues that flow directly from the people’s sin: false modes of worship (vv. 10–17) and the legitimate festivals and ritual obligations to God (vv. 18–26).

APOSTASY (vv. 10–17)

Mindful of the act of apostasy, the renewed covenant contains stricter admonitions than those

given before (23:23,24) regarding the inroads of foreign forms of worship into the religion of Israel. If the people Israel is to be “distinguished . . . from every people on the face of the earth” (33:16), they must make themselves unique by exclusive loyalty to their covenantal relationship with God.

13. sacred posts Hebrew: *asherim* (singular *asherah*); pagan objects of worship often mentioned in the Bible. These wooden poles derive their name from the Canaanite fertility goddess Asherah, whom they symbolized.

14. any other god This Hebrew phrase in the singular—*el aher*—appears nowhere else in the

10. The Decalogue proclaims universal laws applicable to all humanity. This supplemental covenant deals with the specific rituals of the Israelite people. Our calendar and our kitchens would keep the Jewish people distinctive.

13. Why this troubling emphasis on destroying the holy places of the Canaanites and shunning their sacrificial occasions? The

Israelites were a young, impressionable nation, and the Torah is concerned that the highly sexualized, orgiastic fertility cult of the Canaanites would be irresistibly seductive for them (as the incident of Baal-peor in Num. 25 attests). Even decent people can be vulnerable to sexual temptation, which is why the Torah speaks out in such extreme, uncompromising terms against the Canaanite cult.

God. ¹⁵You must not make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, for they will lust after their gods and sacrifice to their gods and invite you, and you will eat of their sacrifices. ¹⁶And when you take wives from among their daughters for your sons, their daughters will lust after their gods and will cause your sons to lust after their gods.

¹⁷You shall not make molten gods for yourselves.

¹⁸You shall observe the Feast of Unleavened Bread—eating unleavened bread for seven days, as I have commanded you—at the set time of the month of Abib, for in the month of Abib you went forth from Egypt.

¹⁹Every first issue of the womb is Mine, from all your livestock that drop a male as firstling, whether cattle or sheep. ²⁰But the firstling of an ass you shall redeem with a sheep; if you do not redeem it, you must break its neck. And you must redeem every first-born among your sons.

None shall appear before Me empty-handed.

אל קנא הוא: ¹⁵ פן-תכרת ברית ליושב הארץ וזנו | אחרי אלהיהם וזבחו לאלהיהם וקרא לך ואכלת מזבחו: ¹⁶ ולקחת מבנותיו לבנותי וזנו בנותיו אחרי אלהיהן והזנו את-בנותי אחרי אלהיהן: ¹⁷ אלהי מסכה לא תעשה-לך:

¹⁸ את-חג המצות תשמר שבועת ימים תאכל מצות אשר צויתך למועד חדש האביב כי בחדש האביב יצאת ממצרים:

¹⁹ כל-פטר רחם לי וכל-מקנה תזכר פטר שור ושה: ²⁰ ופטר חמור תפדה בשה ואם-לא תפדה וערפתו כל בכור בנותי תפדה

ולא-יראו פני ריקם:

Bible. The Hebrew word *aper* in the text of the Torah has an enlarged letter *resh* to avoid confusion with the similar-looking letter *dalet*, which would make the word read *ehad*, meaning “one.”

impassioned Emphasis on the punitive aspect of the divine personality is prompted by the apostasy of the Golden Calf.

16. lust after The Hebrew verb זנה, literally “to engage in prostitution,” is often used figuratively to express the people’s infidelity to the covenant with God. Its use here may allude to the sexual immorality often associated with pagan worship, particularly with the popular excesses in connection with the Golden Calf, as mentioned in 32:6.

17–28. The laws that follow are referred to by scholars as “The Cultic Decalogue,” though they differ among themselves as to the precise enumeration of the laws. Like the actual Decalogue (Exod. 20:2–14), these laws are considered to be terms of the Covenant (v. 27). Unlike them, they incorporate the requirement of observing the three pilgrimage festivals.

17. molten gods The warnings against idolatry in all its forms conclude with this prohibition

because the Golden Calf is frequently referred to in the Bible as a molten image.

FESTIVALS AND RELATED RELIGIOUS OBLIGATIONS (vv. 18–26)

The topics in this section are associated with those of the preceding because the narrative about the Golden Calf recounts that a “festival of the LORD” was proclaimed and burnt offerings and sacrifices were brought (32:5–6). Hence, there is now a need to restate briefly the list of the legitimate festivals of the Israelites, previously set forth in 23:12–19.

18. Feast of Unleavened Bread The list begins with this feast rather than with *Shabbat* because the Golden Calf had been identified with the God of the Exodus and because the beginning of the ancient Israelite calendar occurs in the spring. See Comment to 12:2.

19–20. The law of the firstborn follows because it too is grounded in the Exodus (13:2,11–15). The text presupposes our familiarity with that passage. See Comments to 13:13 and 22:29.

None shall appear See Comment to 23:15.

²¹Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall cease from labor; you shall cease from labor even at plowing time and harvest time.

²²You shall observe the Feast of Weeks, of the first fruits of the wheat harvest; and the Feast of Ingathering at the turn of the year. ²³Three times a year all your males shall appear before the Sovereign LORD, the God of Israel. ²⁴I will drive out nations from your path and enlarge your territory; no one will covet your land when you go up to appear before the LORD your God three times a year.

²⁵You shall not offer the blood of My sacrifice with anything leavened; and the sacrifice of the Feast of Passover shall not be left lying until morning.

²⁶The choice first fruits of your soil you shall bring to the house of the LORD your God.

You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk.

²⁷And the LORD said to Moses: Write down

21 שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תַּעֲבֹד וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי
תִּשְׁבֹּת בְּחָרִישׁ וּבִקְצִיר תִּשְׁבֹּת:

22 וְחַג שָׁבֻעַת תַּעֲשֶׂה לָּךְ בְּבוּרֵי קִצִּיר
חֻטִּים וְחַג הָאָסִיף תִּקּוּפַת הַשָּׁנָה:

23 שְׁלֹשׁ פְּעָמִים בַּשָּׁנָה יִרְאֶה כָּל־זְכוּרְךָ
אֶת־פָּנָי הָאֵדֶן | יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

24 כִּי־אוֹרִישׁ גּוֹיִם מִפְּנֵיךָ וְהִרְחַבְתִּי אֶת־
גְּבוּלְךָ וְלֹא־יִחַמְדוּ אִישׁ אֶת־אַרְצְךָ

בְּעֵלְתְּךָ לִרְאוֹת אֶת־פָּנָי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ
שְׁלֹשׁ פְּעָמִים בַּשָּׁנָה:

25 לֹא־תִשְׁחַט עַל־חֶמֶץ דָּם־זִבְחֵי וְלֹא־
יִלֵּין לִבְקָר זָבַח חַג הַפֶּסַח:

26 רֵאשִׁית בְּבוּרֵי אֲדָמְתְּךָ תָּבִיא בֵּית
יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ

לֹא־תִבְשֹׁל גְּדִי בְחֵלֶב אִמּוֹ: פ

27 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה כְּתֹב־לְךָ אֶת־
שְׁבִיעִי

As Rashi notes, this statement is a separate injunction, unconnected to the law of the firstborn. It belongs after verse 23.

21. The inclusion of the law of *Shabbat* here, after *Pesah* and the firstborn, presupposes a view that the institution of *Shabbat* is based on the Exodus, as in Deut. 5:15, and not on Creation, as in Exod. 20:11.

work The soil.

even at plowing time and harvest time The busiest times of the agricultural year must give way to the commandment to observe sacred time. This sacrifice becomes a true test of faith.

22. Feast of Weeks See Comment to 23:16.

23. See Comment to 23:17. The formulation in the verse here is an expansion of the parallel text.

24. Another test of faith. This injunction clearly does not refer to local shrines but assumes the existence of some central or, at least, regional

sanctuary that, for many, will be far from home and will require a pilgrimage.

covet See Comment to 20:14.

when you go up It is assumed that the central shrine will be situated on an elevation.

25. sacrifice of the Feast of Passover See Comment to 12:11.

26. See Comment to 23:19.

EPILOGUE: MOSES REACHES THE PINNACLE OF EMINENCE (vv. 27–35)

The narrative returns to the role and the status of Moses. The episode of apostasy began with a disparaging reference to him in verse 32:1; it closes with an account of his glorification. Apparently, Moses is instructed to write down the commandments contained in the foregoing (vv. 11–26), just as, following the original covenant, he wrote down “all the commands of the LORD” (24:4).

24. no one will covet your land The verb translated as “covet” is the same one used in the 10th commandment (Exod. 20:14), lead-

ing some scholars to surmise that in both locations it refers to seizing by force rather than simply envy.

these commandments, for in accordance with these commandments I make a covenant with you and with Israel.

²⁸And he was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights; he ate no bread and drank no water; and he wrote down on the tablets the terms of the covenant, the Ten Commandments.

²⁹So Moses came down from Mount Sinai. And as Moses came down from the mountain bearing the two tablets of the Pact, Moses was not aware that the skin of his face was radiant, since he had spoken with Him. ³⁰Aaron and all the Israelites saw that the skin of Moses' face was radiant; and they shrank from coming near

27. with you and with Israel This unexpected placing of Moses before Israel reflects his role as the dominant figure in dealing with the apostasy and in successfully interceding with God on Israel's behalf. It signals the transition to the final episode, which concentrates on Moses' exaltation.

28. The first half of this verse is the scriptural way of describing Moses' withdrawal into solitude at the onset of his experience on the mountain.

forty A symbolic number in the Bible, often associated with purification and the purging of sin.

wrote down In light of verse 1, the subject of the verb may be God.

the Ten Commandments The Hebrew phrase *aseret ha-d'varim* is also the formal title given in Deut. 4:13 and 10:4. See the introduction to Exod. 20.

THE RADIANCE OF MOSES' FACE (vv. 29–35)

Moses descends the mountain carrying the two inscribed tablets that bear witness to the renewal of the covenant between God and the people Israel. On his face is an awe-inspiring radiance emit-

הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה כִּי עַל־פִּי | הַדְּבָרִים
הָאֵלֶּה כָּרַתִּי אִתְּךָ בְּרִית וְאֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל :
וַיְהִי־שָׁם עִם־יְהוָה אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם
וְאַרְבָּעִים לַיְלָה לֶחֶם לֹא אָכַל וּמַיִם לֹא
שָׁתָה וַיִּכְתֹּב עַל־הַלְּחֹת אֶת דְּבָרֵי הַבְּרִית
עֲשֶׂרֶת הַדְּבָרִים :

וַיְהִי בְרֻדַת מֹשֶׁה מֵהָר סִינַי וּשְׁנֵי לְחֹת
הָעֵדוּת בְּיַד־מֹשֶׁה בְּרֻדָּתוֹ מִן־הָהָר וּמֹשֶׁה
לֹא־יָדָע כִּי קָרַן עוֹר פָּנָיו בְּדַבְּרוֹ אִתּוֹ :
וַיֵּרָא אֶהֱרֹן וְכָל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־מֹשֶׁה
וְהִנֵּה קָרַן עוֹר פָּנָיו וַיִּירָאוּ מִגִּשְׁתֹּ אֱלֹוֹ :

ted as the afterglow of his encounter with the splendor of the divine Presence. It reaffirms his role as the unique intimate of God, the sole and singular mediator between God and His people; it also testifies to the restoration of divine favor to Israel. As such, the narrative forms a fitting conclusion to the entire episode of the Golden Calf. It further serves as an appropriate transition to the last segment of the Book of Exodus—the account of the construction of the tabernacle that is to symbolize the presence of God in the midst of the people Israel.

29. tablets of the Pact See Comment to 25:16.

was radiant A unique phenomenon conveyed by a unique Hebrew verb *karan*. The word *keren* means both “a ray of light” and “a horn.” The latter is the source of Michelangelo's portrayal of a “horned” Moses. (It is interesting to note that horns were associated with divinity in Mesopotamia and Canaan, where the gods were portrayed with horned helmets.) Numerous biblical passages bear witness to a widespread poetic notion of God enveloped in light. Moses' radiance is a reflection of the divine radiance.

27. in accordance with Hebrew: *al pi*, literally “by the mouth of”; understood by the Sages to mean “orally” and to refer to an oral Torah that accompanied the written Torah. This oral Torah (*torah she-b'alpeh*) serves to illuminate obscurities, harmonize contradictions, and, in general, make possible the practical application of the written Torah's laws in everyday life.

28. forty days and forty nights The Midrash tells the story of a prominent rabbi named Yohanan who sold his family's vineyard to finance his studies of Torah. He explained, “I exchanged something that took six days to fashion (real property in this world, as described in Gen. 1) for something that took forty days to fashion” (Exod. R. 47:5).

him.³¹ But Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the chieftains in the assembly returned to him, and Moses spoke to them.³² Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he instructed them concerning all that the LORD had imparted to him on Mount Sinai.³³ And when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face.

³⁴ Whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with Him, he would leave the veil off until he came out; and when he came out and told the Israelites what he had been commanded,³⁵ the Israelites would see how radiant the skin of Moses' face was. Moses would then put the veil back over his face until he went in to speak with Him.

31–35. In the immediate presence of God, Moses' radiance is replenished. When he mediates the word of God to the people, his radiance serves to authenticate the divine source of the message.

On neither occasion would a veil be appropriate, for it would interfere with his effectiveness as a leader. In his capacity as a private individual, however, Moses veils his face as a matter of course.

31 וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים מֹשֶׁה וַיָּשָׁבוּ אֵלָיו אֶהֱרֹן
וְכָל־הַנְּשָׂאִים בְּעֵדָה וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה אֲלֵהֶם׃
32 וְאַחֲרֵי־כֵן נִגְשׂוּ כָּל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּצְוֶם
אֶת־כָּל־אִשָּׁר דִּבֶּר יְהוָה אֵתוֹ בְּהַר סִינַי׃
33 וַיִּכְלַ מֹשֶׁה מִדַּבֵּר אֹתָם וַיִּתֵּן עַל־פָּנָיו
מִסּוּדָה׃

34 וּבָבֹא מֹשֶׁה לִפְנֵי יְהוָה לְדַבֵּר אֵתוֹ יָסִיר
אֶת־הַמִּסּוּדָה עַד־צֵאתוֹ וַיִּצָּא וְדִבֶּר אֶל־בְּנֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־אֲשֶׁר יִצְוָה׃ 35 וַרְאוּ בְּנֵי־
יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־פְּנֵי מֹשֶׁה כִּי קָרַן עוֹר פְּנֵי
מֹשֶׁה וְהֵשִׁיב מֹשֶׁה אֶת־הַמִּסּוּדָה עַל־פָּנָיו
עַד־בֹּאוֹ לְדַבֵּר אֵתוֹ׃ ס

19

The LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: ²This is the ritual law that the LORD has commanded:

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר: ²זֹאת חֻקַּת הַתּוֹרָה אֲשֶׁר־צִוָּה יְהוָה לֵאמֹר:

The Generation of the Exodus: The March to Transjordan (continued)

PURIFICATION FROM CONTAMINATION BY A CORPSE (19:1–22)

Contamination that results from contact with a corpse is mentioned elsewhere in the Torah (see, e.g., Lev. 21:1–4; Num. 6:6–13). Here, the Torah prescribes the method of purification. In this rite, the blood of an all-brown (“red”) cow is not of-

fered on the altar; it is burned together with the cow’s body, so that the ashes may be used as an ongoing instrument of purification. As in all purification offerings, the man who burns the cow becomes impure himself.

In the course of this *parashah*, Miriam dies, Aaron dies, and Moses is sentenced to die without reaching the Promised Land. A transition of generations is taking place. The narrative’s center of gravity is moving farther from Sinai and closer to the challenge of conquering the Promised Land. Soon there will be no Israelites left who actually stood at Sinai, only Israelites who have heard about it from parents and grandparents.

CHAPTER 19

Before continuing with the narrative, the Torah offers us the strange ritual of the brown (“red”) cow. It is the classic example of a law that defies rational explanation. Indeed, the general tenor of the commentaries asks us to accept this law without understanding it, as a sign of love for and trust in God. The commentators hold that it would be almost unseemly to search for a rational explanation, implying that God’s word would be acceptable only if it fit our canons of reasoning. Human failure to understand a truth does not make it any less true. The Midrash pictures King Solomon, the wisest man in the Bible, saying, “I have labored to understand the word of God and have understood it all, except for the ritual of the brown cow” (Num. R. 19:3). “These laws are decrees from God and we have no right to question them” (Num. R. 19:8). “It is more praiseworthy to do something solely because God commands it than because our own logic or sense of morality leads us to the same conclusion” (*Sifra K’doshim*). The Tosafot compare this commandment to a lover’s kiss which cannot be explained but can only be experienced (BT Av. Zar. 35a).

Yet there have been persistent efforts to uncover the lessons taught to us by this ritual. Although the Torah describes the ritual as purifying a person of contamination from contact with a dead body and nothing else, the Midrash widens the scope to include moral contamination, especially idolatry, viewing this special cow as the antidote for the sin of the Golden Calf. “Let the mother come and repair the damage the offspring has caused” (Num. R. 19:8). Ramban, noting that the passage comes immediately after the completion of the tabernacle and the challenge to Aaron’s priesthood, understands it as a way of preventing ritually unfit people from violating the sanctity of the tabernacle. Israel of Ruzhin points out that this cow purifies the impure but renders the pure impure; God similarly purifies those who approach the sanctuary in a spirit of humility with knowledge of their own inadequacies, but condemns those who come in a spirit of arrogance and a claim to perfection. A modern commentator suggests that the ritual’s purpose is psychological. To heal a person burdened by a sense of wrongdoing, who feels the purity of his or her soul has been compromised, we take an animal completely without blemish and sacrifice it, as if to imply that perfection does not belong in this world. Perfect creatures belong in heaven; this world is given to the inevitably flawed and compromised.

Because this rite is inoperative today, so that there is no way to purify the ritually contaminated, some halakhic authorities consider all Jews ritually unfit to enter the Temple Mount lest they inadvertently tread on the site where the holiest precincts of the temple once stood in Jerusalem.

Instruct the Israelite people to bring you a red cow without blemish, in which there is no defect and on which no yoke has been laid. ³You shall give it to Eleazar the priest. It shall be taken outside the camp and slaughtered in his presence. ⁴Eleazar the priest shall take some of its blood with his finger and sprinkle it seven times toward the front of the Tent of Meeting. ⁵The cow shall be burned in his sight—its hide, flesh, and blood shall be burned, its dung included—⁶and the priest shall take cedar wood, hyssop, and crimson stuff, and throw them into the fire consuming the cow. ⁷The priest shall wash his garments and bathe his body in water; after that the priest may reenter the camp, but he shall be impure until evening. ⁸He who performed the burning shall also wash his garments in water, bathe his body in water, and be impure until evening. ⁹A man who is pure shall gather up the ashes of the cow and deposit them outside the camp in a pure place, to be kept for water of lustration for the Israelite community. It is for purification. ¹⁰He who gathers up the ashes of

דָּבַר | אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּקְחוּ אֵלֵיךָ פָּרָה
אֲדָמָה תְּמִימָה אֲשֶׁר אֵין-בָּהּ מוֹם אֲשֶׁר
לֹא-עָלָה עָלֶיהָ עַל: ³ וַנִּתַּתָּם אֵתָהּ אֶל-
אֱלֶעָזָר הַכֹּהֵן וְהוֹצִיא אֵתָהּ אֶל-מַחוּץ
לַמַּחֲנֶה וְשָׁחַט אֵתָהּ לְפָנָיו: ⁴ וְלָקַח
אֱלֶעָזָר הַכֹּהֵן מִדְּמָהּ בְּאֶצְבָּעוֹ וְהִזָּה אֶל-
נֶכַח פְּנֵי אֹהֶל-מוֹעֵד מִדְּמָהּ שֶׁבַע פְּעָמִים:
⁵ וְשָׂרַף אֶת-הַפָּרָה לְעֵינָיו אֶת-עֹרָהּ וְאֶת-
בְּשָׂרָהּ וְאֶת-דָּמָהּ עַל-פְּרִשָׁה יִשְׂרָף:
⁶ וְלָקַח הַכֹּהֵן עֵץ אֲרָז וְאֵזוֹב וְשִׁנֵּי תוֹלַעַת
וְהִשְׁלִיךְ אֶל-תּוֹךְ שַׂרְפַּת הַפָּרָה: ⁷ וְכִבֵּס
בְּגָדָיו הַכֹּהֵן וְרַחֵץ בְּשָׂרוֹ בַּמַּיִם וְאָחַר
יָבוֹא אֶל-הַמַּחֲנֶה וְטָמֵא הַכֹּהֵן עַד-
הָעֶרֶב: ⁸ וְהִשְׂרַף אֵתָהּ יְכַבֵּס בְּגָדָיו בַּמַּיִם
וְרַחֵץ בְּשָׂרוֹ בַּמַּיִם וְטָמֵא עַד-הָעֶרֶב:
⁹ וְאָסַף | אִישׁ טָהוֹר אֵת אַפְּרֵי הַפָּרָה
וְהִנִּיחַ מַחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה בְּמָקוֹם טָהוֹר
וְהִיתָה לְעֵדוֹת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמִשְׁמַרְתָּ לְמִי
נִדָּה חֲטָאת הוּא: ¹⁰ וְכִבֵּס הָאֶטָּף אֶת-

THE BROWN ("RED") COW (vv. 1–13)

2. red Hebrew: *adom*, which here probably means "brown"—for which there is no word in the Bible. The idea is to increase, symbolically, the amount of blood in the ashes.

red . . . without blemish Better: "unblemished brown." A cow completely uniform in color, without specks of white or black or without even two black or white hairs, is extremely rare.

no yoke has been laid It must not have been used for profane purposes.

3. in his presence The cow will also be burned in the presence of Eleazar, indicating that it is imperative for the officiating priest to supervise the entire ritual.

4. sprinkle it seven times This act consecrates the cow as a purification offering.

6. priest Any priest, not just Eleazar.

hyssop, and crimson stuff Hyssop, an aromatic plant, is widespread in the land of Israel. Crimson yarn refers to the dye extracted from a "crimson worm," used in the weaving of the sa-

cred garments of the high priest and the inner curtains of the tabernacle.

7. wash his garments and bathe his body If he bathed first, his unwashed garments would recontaminate him.

until evening Whoever handles a burnt *hattat* offering may enter the camp as soon as he has laundered his clothing and bathed (see Lev. 16:26,28), provided he does not partake of sacred food until the evening.

8. He who performed the burning It is also presumed that he who gathers up the ashes remains outside the camp until after he has laundered and bathed, precisely as the contaminated priest has done.

9. A man Not necessarily a priest.

to be kept The ashes of the brown ("red") cow must be guarded scrupulously lest they become contaminated.

It is for purification These ashes mixed with water will be sprinkled on corpse-contaminated individuals to remove the impurity.

10. wash his clothes It is understood that he will also bathe his body.

the cow shall also wash his clothes and be impure until evening.

This shall be a permanent law for the Israelites and for the strangers who reside among you.

¹¹He who touches the corpse of any human being shall be impure for seven days. ¹²He shall purify himself with [the ashes] on the third day and on the seventh day, and then be pure; if he fails to purify himself on the third and seventh days, he shall not be pure. ¹³Whoever touches a corpse, the body of a person who has died, and does not purify himself, defiles the LORD's Tabernacle; that person shall be cut off from Israel. Since the water of lustration was not dashed on him, he remains impure; his impurity is still upon him.

¹⁴This is the ritual: When a person dies in a tent, whoever enters the tent and whoever is in the tent shall be impure seven days; ¹⁵and every open vessel, with no lid fastened down, shall be impure. ¹⁶And in the open, anyone who touches a person who was killed or who died naturally, or human bone, or a grave, shall be impure seven days. ¹⁷Some of the ashes from the fire of purification shall be taken for the im-

אֶפְרַיִם הַפָּרָה אֶת־בְּגָדָיו וְטָמָא עַד־הָעֶרֶב
וְהִיטָהּ לִבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלִגְרַם הַגֵּר בְּתוֹכָם
לְחֻקַּת עוֹלָם:

¹¹ הַנִּגְעַת בְּמַת לְכָל־נֶפֶשׁ אָדָם וְטָמָא
שִׁבְעַת יָמִים: ¹² הוּא יִתְחַטֵּא־בּוֹ בַּיּוֹם
הַשְּׁלִישִׁי וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי יִטְהַר וְאִם־לֹא
יִתְחַטֵּא בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי
לֹא יִטְהַר: ¹³ כָּל־הַנִּגְעַת בְּמַת בְּנֶפֶשׁ הָאָדָם
אֲשֶׁר־יָמוּת וְלֹא יִתְחַטֵּא אֶת־מִשְׁכַּן יְהוָה
טָמָא וְנִכְרְתָה הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהוּא מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל כִּי
מִי נָדָה לֹא־זָרַק עָלָיו טָמָא יְהִיָּה עוֹד
טָמְאָתוֹ בּוֹ:

¹⁴ זֹאת הַתּוֹרָה אָדָם כִּי־יָמוּת בְּאֹהֶל
כָּל־הַבָּא אֶל־הָאֹהֶל וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר בְּאֹהֶל
יִטָּמָא שִׁבְעַת יָמִים: ¹⁵ וְכָל־כֵּל פְּתוּיָח
אֲשֶׁר אֵין־צְמִיד פְּתִיל עָלָיו טָמָא הוּא:
¹⁶ וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר־יָגַע עַל־פְּנֵי הַשְּׂדֵה בְּחָלָל־
חָרֵב אִוּ בְּמַת אִו־בְּעֵצִים אָדָם אִוּ בְּקִבֹר
יִטָּמָא שִׁבְעַת יָמִים: ¹⁷ וְלִקְחוּ לְטָמָא

strangers All those who dwell in the Holy Land, Israelites and non-Israelites alike, must purify themselves of corpse contamination lest they defile the sanctuary by bearing their impurity within the community.

11. seven days Similarly, in ancient Babylonia, one who came into contact with dust from a place of mourning was required to offer sacrifices to the god Shamash, to bathe, change clothing, and remain inside the house for seven days.

13. defiles the LORD's Tabernacle Severe impurity is dynamic and can attack the sanctuary through the air. Corpse-contaminated individuals who prolong their impurity have defiled the sanctuary from afar, even without entering it.

shall be cut off If the neglect was deliberate

(see 15:30–31). (If the neglect was accidental, a purification offering is brought.)

PURIFICATION BY SPRINKLING (vv. 14–22)

14. enters the tent The impurity emitted by the body is trapped by the roof, so to speak, and cannot rise. Hence, every person and object under the roof is contaminated.

15. every open vessel A tightly closed vessel made entirely of earthenware, however, will not admit the “vapors” of impurity given off by the corpse; its contents remain pure.

fastened down The lid is attached by cords passing through holes in it and through the handles of the vessel. Such a lid would keep the vessel tightly closed and preserve it from defilement.

HALAKHAH L'MA'ASEH

19:14. When a person dies Once the Temple was destroyed, we could not purify ourselves from this type of ritual impurity. Now all but *kohanim* may attend funerals (see Lev. 21:2). We rinse our hands upon leaving the cemetery or upon entering a house of mourning after the funeral, in symbolic recollection of this law.

pure person, and fresh water shall be added to them in a vessel. ¹⁸A person who is pure shall take hyssop, dip it in the water, and sprinkle on the tent and on all the vessels and people who were there, or on him who touched the bones or the person who was killed or died naturally or the grave. ¹⁹The pure person shall sprinkle it upon the impure person on the third day and on the seventh day, thus purifying him by the seventh day. He shall then wash his clothes and bathe in water, and at nightfall he shall be pure. ²⁰If anyone who has become impure fails to purify himself, that person shall be cut off from the congregation, for he has defiled the LORD's sanctuary. The water of lustration was not dashed on him: he is impure.

²¹That shall be for them a law for all time. Further, he who sprinkled the water of lustration shall wash his clothes; and whoever touches the water of lustration shall be impure until evening. ²²Whatever that impure person touches shall be impure; and the person who touches him shall be impure until evening.

20 The Israelites arrived in a body at the wilderness of Zin on the first new moon, and

shall be impure Open earthenware vessels are impure forever and must be broken.

18. A person who is pure This obvious condition is made explicit to bar those who had already handled the ashes and were thereby contaminated.

מֵעֵפֶר שֶׁרִפֹּת הַחֲטָאִת וְנָתַן עָלָיו מִיִּם שְׁנֵי חַיִּים אֶל-כֹּלֵי: ¹⁸ וְלָקַח אֲזוּב וְטָבַל בְּמֵיִם אִישׁ טָהוֹר וְהִזָּה עַל-הָאֹהֶל וְעַל-כָּל-הַכֵּלִים וְעַל-הַנְּפֹשׁוֹת אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ-שָׁם וְעַל-הַנְּגַע בְּעַצֶּם אֹו בְּחָלָל אֹו בְּמֵת אֹו בְּקִבֵּר: ¹⁹ וְהִזָּה הַטָּהוֹר עַל-הַטָּמֵא בְּיוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי וּבְיוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי וְחֲטָאוּ בְּיוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי וְכִבֵּס בְּגָדָיו וְרָחַץ בְּמֵיִם וְטָהַר בְּעֶרְב: ²⁰ וְאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר-יִטְמָא וְלֹא יִתְחַטֵּא וְנִכְרְתָה הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהִוא מִתּוֹךְ הַקָּהָל כִּי אֶת-מִקְדָּשׁ יְהוָה טָמָא מִי נִדָּה לֹא-זֹרֵק עָלָיו טָמָא הוּא:

²¹ וְהִיְתָה לָהֶם לְחֻקַּת עוֹלָם וּמִזָּה מִי-הַנְּדָה יְכַבֵּס בְּגָדָיו וְהַנְּגַע בְּמִי הַנְּדָה יִטְמָא עַד-הָעֶרֶב: ²² וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר-יִגְעֹבוּ הַטָּמֵא יִטְמָא וְהַנֶּפֶשׁ הַנִּגְעַת הַטָּמֵא עַד-הָעֶרֶב: פ

כ וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל כָּל-הָעֵדָה מִדְּבַר-

on all the vessels Afterward these must undergo washing, as people must.

19. Full purification comes only after laundering and bathing.

21. See Comment to 19:10.

22. Whatever That is, anything or anyone.

FROM KADESH TO THE STEPPES OF MOAB (20:1–22:1)

THE SIN OF MOSES AND AARON (20:1–13)

After Miriam's death, the people complain about the lack of water. Moses and Aaron are com-

manded to bring forth water from the rock. They produce the water but in so doing commit a sin akin to heresy and are condemned by God to die in the wilderness.

CHAPTER 20

1. The Talmud connects Miriam's death to the preceding passage. "Just as the ashes of the

brown cow atone for sin, the death of a righteous person does the same" (BT MK 28a). In the wake of a good person's death, we are moved to re-examine our own lives.

הַפְּטָרָה פְּרַשְׁת פָּרָה

HAFTARAH FOR PARASHAT PARAH

EZEKIEL 36:16–38 (*Ashk'nazim*)

EZEKIEL 36:16–36 (*S'fardim*)

This *haftarah* is one of the prophecies of hope and consolation that Ezekiel addressed to the Judean exiles in Babylon. These oracles, whose larger theme is the reversal of failures in Israelite history, begin in Ezek. 33 (dated *Tevet* 585 B.C.E., according to 33:21). Chapters 35 and 36:1–15 in particular provide consolation to the nation after the taunts of their enemies (see Ezek. 35:10–12, 36:2–3, 5, 13). The nations mocked Israel, saying: “These are the people of the LORD, yet they had to leave His land.” Because of this, God’s holy name was profaned among the nations (36:20–21). God determines to act for His own honor, promising the nation redemption from exile and restoration to its ancestral homeland (vv. 22–28). God is determined to sanctify His great name through a unilateral act of redemption, described in verses 22–32. As Eliezer of Beaugency noted, this entire unit is framed by a sharply worded statement of divine motivation: “Not for your sake will I act, O House of Israel” (v. 22).

Ezekiel gives particular emphasis to issues of purification and spiritual renewal along with the theme of national redemption. Ritually purified by divine action, the people will dwell in their homeland and observe the Covenant (36:25–28). This topic heralds concern for the approaching festival of *Pesah*, because certain impurities could bar a worshiper from its celebration (see Num. 9:1–14). Echoing this matter, a special passage is added to the regular Torah portion for this *Shabbat*. In that selection, taken from Num. 19:1–22, in which the ashes of the so-called red heifer (*parah adumah*) are used in a priestly ceremony of ritual bathing and purification from defilement. Through these readings, the ongoing community of Israel is reminded that one must begin the holiday in a proper physical and spiritual state.

By custom, *S'fardim* conclude the *haftarah* at verse 36, thus ending on a positive note after the divine call to Israel to “Be ashamed and humiliated because of your ways” (v. 32). The practice for *Ashk'nazim* concludes the *haftarah* with the next oracle (vv. 37–38), comparing the vast throngs of people in the homeland to the multitude of sheep in Jerusalem on a festival day. This image was interpreted in antiquity as a reference to the flock of Israel “coming to Jerusalem at the time of the feast of Passover” (Targ. Jon.).

Part of the national transformation, unilaterally performed by God for His own sake, is a revivification of heart and spirit. God will give the people a new heart to know Him and will put His spirit within them as a concrete act of inspiration. Israel will thus be re-created, a new Adam to be restored to a land that “has become like the garden of Eden” (v. 35).

This re-creation is the core of national purification and the climax of the divine acts of sanctification. The destiny of God and Israel are thus mysteriously linked. The defilement of Israel leads to the profanation of God’s name, and the purification of Israel results in the sanctification of God’s name on earth. Their relationship is marked positively at the end of this prophetic passage by the forecast of a renewal of the Covenant. Reborn in heart and spirit, Israel will again serve God and His law: “Then you shall dwell in the land which I gave to your fathers, and you shall be My people and I will be your God” (v. 28). The return to the homeland is thus also a symbolic return to Mount Sinai and its spiritual demands.

RELATION OF THE HAFTARAH TO THE CALENDAR

Parashat Parah (Num. 19:1–22) is the third of

four special Torah passages added to the regular *Shabbat* portion in the weeks before *Pesah*. The theme of each reading is different, yet rabbinic tradition correlated each of the four readings with prophetic selections that reinforce the main theme of purification. (For details on the scheduling of the special Torah portions, see the introduction to the *haftarah* for *parashat Sh'kalim*.)

Clear links exist between this special Torah reading and the *haftarah*. Thematically speaking, the Torah passage presents an ancient rite of detoxification whereby individuals who have become impure through contact with the dead are purified and restored to the community; the cor-

responding prophetic passage announces Israel's revivification (a new heart and a new spirit) as well as its purification by God. Meanwhile, both the technical language of purity-impurity and the terms for sacred ritual bathing (among others) connect these two texts verbally.

Parashat Parah was recited at this season from early Rabbinic times (M Meg. 3:4) and was understood to signal to the entire community that the *pesah* sacrifice should be performed in ritual purity (see Rashi on BT Meg. 29a). The *haftarah* invigorates the present preparations for *Pesah* by envisioning a new era of purification and of transformed religious consciousness.

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¹⁶The word of the LORD came to me: ¹⁷O mortal, when the House of Israel dwelt on their own soil, they defiled it with their ways and their deeds; their ways were in My sight like the impurity of a menstruous woman. ¹⁸So I poured out My wrath on them for the blood which they shed upon their land, and for the fetishes with which they defiled it. ¹⁹I scattered them among the nations, and they were dispersed through the countries: I punished them in accordance with their ways and their deeds. ²⁰But when they came to those nations, they caused My holy name to be profaned, in that it was said of them, "These are the people of the

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¹⁶ וַיְהִי דְבַר־יְהוָה אֵלַי לֵאמֹר: ¹⁷ בְּנ־אָדָם בַּיַּת יִשְׂרָאֵל יֹשְׁבִים עַל־אֲדָמָתָם וַיִּטְמְאוּ אוֹתָהּ בְּדַרְכָּם וּבַעֲלִילוֹתָם כְּטִמְאַת הַנְּזִיָּה הַיְתֵה דַרְכָּם לִפְנֵי: ¹⁸ וְאֶשְׁפָּךְ חֲמָתִי עֲלֵיהֶם עַל־הַדָּם אֲשֶׁר־שָׁפְכוּ עַל־הָאָרֶץ וּבִגְלוֹלֵיהֶם טִמְאוּהָ: ¹⁹ וְאֶפְיֵץ אֹתָם בְּגוֹיִם וַיִּזְרוּ בְּאֶרְצוֹת כְּדַרְכָּם וּכְעֲלִילוֹתָם שִׁפְטֵתִים: ²⁰ וַיָּבֹאוּ * אֶל־הַגּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר־בָּאוּ שָׁם וַיַּחֲלִלוּ אֶת־שֵׁם קֹדְשִׁי בְּאֵמֹר לָהֶם עַם־

v. 20. סבירין ומטעין לשון רבים

Ezekiel 36:17–19. The prophet's priestly orientation shows through his presentation of moral sins as the cause of the Land's ritual impurity. Similarly, the purification of the nation in verse 25 is portrayed in cultic terms. (Likewise, the vocabulary of defilement, purification, sprinkling, and pure water is employed in connection with the rite of the heifer—the special Torah portion read on this *Shabbat*; see Num. 19:11–13,17.) The punishment of exile is presented here as recompense for ritual and moral crimes.

O mortal Hebrew: *ben adam*; literally, "O son of man." A common characterization in the vocabulary of this prophet. Ezekiel's mortal nature is emphasized, perhaps counterpointing his

humanity to the divinity of the beings he communes with; chapters 1, 8–11, 40–42).

like the impurity of a menstruous woman Refers to her ritual impurity (see Lev. 15:19ff.). Hebrew: *ha-niddah*; literally, "the menstruous woman." The definite article personifies the simile, rather than indicating a general state of impurity. The link between ritual impurity in this verse and bloodshed in verse 18 suggests that the figure here alludes to moral and ritual crimes elsewhere denounced by the prophet (18:6, 22:3–13). For Ezekiel, the theme has real cultic consequences. As a result of its "menstrual impurity," the nation is banished from the Land.

20. they caused My holy name to be profaned By referring to God in a demeaning way. The na-

LORD, yet they had to leave His land.”²¹ Therefore I am concerned for My holy name, which the House of Israel have caused to be profaned among the nations to which they have come.

²²Say to the House of Israel: Thus said the Lord God: Not for your sake will I act, O House of Israel, but for My holy name, which you have caused to be profaned among the nations to which you have come. ²³I will sanctify My great name which has been profaned among the nations—among whom you have caused it to be profaned. And the nations shall know that I am the LORD—declares the Lord God—when I manifest My holiness before their eyes through you. ²⁴I will take you from among the nations and gather you from all the countries, and I will bring you back to your own land. ²⁵I will sprinkle pure water upon you, and you shall be pure: I will purify you from all your impurities and from all your fetishes. ²⁶And I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit into you: I will remove the heart of stone from your body and give you a heart of flesh; ²⁷and I will put My spirit into you. Thus I will cause you to follow My laws and faithfully to observe My rules. ²⁸Then you shall dwell in the land which I gave to your fathers, and you shall be My people and I will be your God.

²⁹And when I have delivered you from all your impurity, I will summon the grain and make it abundant, and I will not bring famine upon you. ³⁰I will make the fruit of your trees and the crops of your fields abundant, so that you shall never again be humiliated before the nations because

יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי וּמֵאֲרָצוֹ יֵצְאוּ: ²¹וְאֶחְמַל
עַל-שֵׁם קְדוֹשִׁי אֲשֶׁר חִלְּלוּהוּ בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל
בְּגוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר-בָּאוּ שָׁמָּה: ²²ס
לֵכֵן אֲמַר לְבֵית-יִשְׂרָאֵל כֹּה אָמַר אֲדֹנָי
יְהוָה לֹא לְמַעַנְכֶם אֲנִי עֹשֶׂה בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל
כִּי אִם-לְשֵׁם-קְדוֹשִׁי אֲשֶׁר חִלְּלִתֶם בְּגוֹיִם
אֲשֶׁר-בָּאתֶם שָׁם: ²³וְקִדְשִׁיתִי אֶת-שְׁמִי
הַגָּדוֹל הַמְּחֻלָּל בְּגוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר חִלְּלִיתֶם
בְּתוֹכָם וַיְדַעוּ הַגּוֹיִם כִּי-אֲנִי יְהוָה נֹאֵם
אֲדֹנָי יְהוָה בְּהַקְדְּשִׁי בְּכֶם לְעֵינֵיהֶם:
²⁴וְלִקְחִיתִי אֶתְכֶם מִן-הַגּוֹיִם וְקִבַּצְתִּי
אֶתְכֶם מִכָּל-הָאֲרָצוֹת וְהִבֵּאתִי אֶתְכֶם
אֶל-אֲדַמְתְּכֶם: ²⁵וְזָרַקְתִּי עֲלֵיכֶם מִיַּם
טְהוֹרִים וּטְהַרְתֶּם מִכָּל טְמְאוֹתֵיכֶם
וּמִכָּל-גְּלוּלֵיכֶם אֲטַהֵר אֶתְכֶם: ²⁶וְנָתַתִּי
לְכֶם לֵב חָדָשׁ וְרוּחַ חֲדָשָׁה אֶתֶן בְּקִרְבְּכֶם
וְהִסְרֹתִי אֶת-לֵב הָאֶבֶן מִבְּשָׂרְכֶם וְנָתַתִּי
לְכֶם לֵב בָּשָׂר: ²⁷וְאֶת-רוּחִי אֶתֶן
בְּקִרְבְּכֶם וְעָשִׂיתִי אֶת אֲשֶׁר-בְּחַקִּי תֵּלְכוּ
וּמִשְׁפָּטֵי תִשְׁמְרוּ וְעָשִׂיתֶם: ²⁸וַיִּשְׁבַּחְתֶּם
בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נָתַתִּי לְאֲבֹתֵיכֶם וְהֵייתֶם לִי
לְעָם וְאֲנֹכִי אֶהְיֶה לְכֶם לֵאלֹהִים:
²⁹וְהוֹשַׁעְתִּי אֶתְכֶם מִכָּל טְמְאוֹתֵיכֶם
וְקִרְאתִי אֶל-הַדָּגָן וְהִרְבִּיתִי אֹתוֹ וְלֹא-
אֶתֶן עֲלֵיכֶם רָעַב: ³⁰וְהִרְבִּיתִי אֶת-פְּרִי
הָעֵץ וְתִנְוַבַּת הַשָּׂדֶה לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר לֹא
תִקְחוּ עוֹד חֲרַפַּת רָעַב בְּגוֹיִם: ³¹וְזִכְרְתֶם

tions interpreted Israel’s exile as a sign of divine impotence, not as punishment (Rashi, Radak).

22. Not for your sake Or: “Not on account of your merits” (Abravanel). The motivation for divine action is regard for God’s own name alone.

26. I will give you a new heart Along with Ezek. 11:19, other prophecies contemplate a radical transformation of Israel’s religious spirit, after the exile, through sovereign and unilateral divine fiat (see Jer. 24:7, 31:32–33). In its focus on a

unilateral divine action, this image seems to reflect some of the despair in the exilic period over the independent incapacity of the human spirit to return faithfully to God, or at least a strong feeling that without divine initiative true repentance could not take place.

28. you shall be My people and I will be your God A technical covenant formula (see Jer. 11:4). Also in 16:60 and 37:26, Ezekiel anticipates a new covenant after the exile.

of famine. ³¹Then you shall recall your evil ways and your base conduct, and you shall loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abhorrent practices. ³²Not for your sake will I act—declares the Lord God—take good note! Be ashamed and humiliated because of your ways, O House of Israel!

³³Thus said the Lord God: When I have purified you of all your iniquities, I will people your settlements, and the ruined places shall be rebuilt; ³⁴and the desolate land, after lying waste in the sight of every passerby, shall again be tilled. ³⁵And men shall say, “That land, once desolate, has become like the garden of Eden; and the cities, once ruined, desolate, and ravaged, are now populated and fortified.” ³⁶And the nations that are left around you shall know that I the LORD have rebuilt the ravaged places and replanted the desolate land. I the LORD have spoken and will act.

³⁷Thus said the Lord God: Moreover, in this I will respond to the House of Israel and act for their sake: I will multiply their people like sheep. ³⁸As Jerusalem is filled with sacrificial sheep during her festivals, so shall the ruined cities be filled with flocks of people. And they shall know that I am the LORD.

אֶת־דַּרְכֵיכֶם הָרָעִים וּמַעַלְלֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר
לֹא־טוֹבִים וּנְקֻטָּתְכֶם בְּפְנֵיכֶם עַל עֲוֹנוֹתֵיכֶם
וְעַל תּוֹעֲבוֹתֵיכֶם: ³² לֹא לְמַעַנְכֶם אֲנִי־
עֹשֶׂה נְאֻם אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה יוֹדַע לְכֶם בּוֹשׁוּ
וְהִכְלַמוּ מִדַּרְכֵיכֶם בַּיִת יִשְׂרָאֵל: ^ס
³³ כֹּה אָמַר אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה בְּיוֹם טַהְרֵי אֶתְכֶם
מִכָּל עֲוֹנוֹתֵיכֶם וְהוֹשַׁבְתִּי אֶת־הָעָרִים
וְנִבְנוּ הַחֲרוּבוֹת: ³⁴ וְהָאָרֶץ הַנְּשֻׁמָּה תִּעֲבֹד
תַּחַת אֲשֶׁר הִיְתָה שְׂמֵמָה לְעֵינַי כָּל־
עוֹבֵר: ³⁵ וְאָמְרוּ הָאָרֶץ הַלְּזוֹ הַנְּשֻׁמָּה
הִיְתָה כְּגַן־עֵדֶן וְהָעָרִים הַחֲרוּבוֹת
וְהַנְּשֻׁמוֹת וְהַנְּהַרְסוֹת בְּצוּרוֹת יִשְׁבוּ:
³⁶ וַיִּדְעוּ הַגּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר יִשְׂאָרוּ סְבִיבוֹתֵיכֶם
כִּי אֲנִי יְהוִה בְּנִיתִי הַנְּהַרְסוֹת נְטַעְתִּי
הַנְּשֻׁמָּה אֲנִי יְהוִה דִּבַּרְתִּי וְעָשִׂיתִי: ^ס
³⁷ כֹּה אָמַר אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה עוֹד זֹאת אֲדַרְשׁ
לְבֵית־יִשְׂרָאֵל לַעֲשׂוֹת לָהֶם אַרְבֵּה אֹתָם
כְּצֹאן אָדָם: ³⁸ כְּצֹאן קִדְשִׁים כְּצֹאן
יְרוּשָׁלַם בְּמוֹעֲדֶיהָ כֵּן תִּהְיֶינָה הָעָרִים
הַחֲרוּבוֹת מְלֵאוֹת צֹאן אָדָם וַיִּדְעוּ כִּי־אֲנִי
יְהוִה: ^ס