

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-

רַבְנָה וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ עָלֵינוּ לֵאמֹר כִּי
תְשַׁא אֲחִירָאשׁ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְפָקְדֵיכֶם
וּנְתַנְנוּ אֲישׁ כֹּפֵר נְפָשׁוֹ לִיהְיוֹת בְּפֶקַד אֲתֶם

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” (וְנֹתֶן) 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־יִהָיָה בַּתְّם נֶגֶף בְּפֶקַד אֶתְכֶם :¹³ זֶה א
יִתְנוּ כָּל־הָעֵבֶר עַל־הַפְּקָדִים מִחְצִית
הַשֶּׁקֶל בְּשֶׁקֶל הַקְדֵּשׁ עֲשָׂרִים גֶּרֶה הַשֶּׁקֶל
מִחְצִית הַשֶּׁקֶל תְּרוּמָה לְיהוָה :¹⁴ בְּלֹא
הָעֵבֶר עַל־הַפְּקָדִים מִבֵּן עֲשָׂרִים שָׁנָה
וּמַעַלָּה יִתְןּוּ תְּרוּמָת יְהוָה :¹⁵ הַעֲשֵׂיר
לְאִירְבָּה וְהַדָּל לֹא יִמְעַט מִמְּחִצִּית
הַשֶּׁקֶל לְתֵת אֶת־תְּרוּמָת יְהוָה לְכַפֵּר
עַל־נְפָשֹׁתיכֶם :¹⁶ וְלֹקַחְתָּ אֶת־כְּסֻף
הַכְּפָרִים מֵאַת בָּנִי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְנִתְתַּת אֲתָּךְ
עַל־עֲבֹדָת אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וְהִיא לְבָנֶיךָ
יִשְׂרָאֵל לְזֹבְרֹן לִפְנֵי יְהוָה לְכַפֵּר עַל־
נְפָשֹׁתיכֶם : פ

¹⁷ וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: וְעַשֵּׂית

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

14. twenty years The age at which an Israeli 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

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

כִּיּוֹר נְחַשָּׁת וְכָנוֹ נְחַשָּׁת לְרֵחֶזֶה וְנַתְּתָּ
אֲתָּו בֵּין־אַהֲל מֹועֵד וּבֵין הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וְנַתְּתָּ
שְׁמָה מִים: ¹⁹וְרַחֲצֻו אַהֲרֹן וּבָנָיו מִפְנֵנוֹ
אֲתִידִיכֶם וְאֲתִירְגֵּלִיכֶם: ²⁰בְּבָאָם אַל־
אַהֲל מֹועֵד יְרַחֲצֻרְמִים וְלֹא יִמְתֹּה אָז
בְּגַשְׁתָּם אַל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ לְשָׁרֶת לְהַקְטֵיר
אֲשָׁה לְיהוָה: ²¹וְרַחֲצֻ יְדִיכֶם וּרְגִילִיכֶם
וְלֹא יִמְתֹּה וְהִתְהַלֵּה לָהֶם חֲקָעוֹלִים לוֹ
וְלֹרְעָו לְדוֹרָתֶם: פ

²²וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֱלֹמֶשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: ²³וְאַתָּה
קְחֵלֶךָ בְּשָׂמִים רָאשׁ מִרְדּוֹר חַמְשָׁ
מִאוֹת וְקָנְמָנ־בְּשָׂמָמָתְוּ חַמְשִׁים
וּמְאַתִּים וְקָנְהָרְבָשָׁם חַמְשִׁים וּמְאַתִּים:

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.

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. וְקַדְשָׁה חִמְשׁ מֵאוֹת בָּשָׂקֶל הַקְּדוֹשׁ וְשָׁמֶן זִית הָין:²⁵ וְעַשְׂיוֹת אָתוֹ שָׁמֶן מְשֻחָתָר קְדוֹשׁ רָקֶחֶת מְרַקְבָּת מַעֲשָׂה רָקֶחֶת שָׁמֶן מְשֻחָתָר קְדוֹשׁ יְהִיָּה:²⁶ וְמְשֻחָתָר בּוֹ אַתְּ אָהָל מוֹעֵד וְאַתְּ אַרְזֵן הַעֲדָת: וְאַתְּ הַשְׁלִיחֵן וְאַתְּ-כָל-בְּלִיו וְאַתְּ-הַמְּנֻרָה וְאַתְּ בְּלִיה וְאַתְּ מִזְבֵּחַ הַקְּטָרָת:²⁸ וְאַתְּ-מִזְבֵּחַ הָעָלָה וְאַתְּ-כָל-בְּלִיו וְאַתְּ-הַכְּבִיר וְאַתְּ בְּנָנוּ: ²⁹ וְקַדְשָׁתָת אַתְּם וְהִיּוּ קָדְשָׁ קָדְשִׁים כָּל-הַנֶּגֶע בָּהֶם יְקַדֵּשׁ:³⁰ וְאַתְּ-אַהֲרֹן וְאַתְּ בְּנֵי תְּמִשָּׁח וְקַדְשָׁת אַתְּם לְכָהָן לֵי: ³¹ וְאַל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל תֹּרֶבֶר לְאָמֶר שָׁמֶן מְשֻחָתָר קְדוֹשׁ יְהִיָּה זֶה לֵי לְדוֹתֵיכֶם: ³² עַל-בָּשָׂר אָדָם לֹא יַסְךְּ וּבְמַתְבָּנָתוֹ לֹא תַעֲשֵׂו כִּמְהוּ קָדֵשׁ הוּא קָדֵשׁ יְהִיָּה לְכֶם: ³³ אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר יַרְקַח כִּמְהוּ וְאֲשֶׁר יַתֵּן מִפְנָיו עַל-זַר וְנִכְרָת מַעֲמִיו: ס ³⁴ וַיֹּאמֶר יְהָוה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה קְח־לְךָ סָמִים גַּטֵּף וְשְׁחַלְתָּ וְחַלְבָנָה סָמִים וְלִבְנָה וּבָה בְּדַ בְּבָדְרַ יְהִיָּה:³⁵ וְעַשְׂיוֹת אַתְּ הַקְּטָרָת רָקֶחֶת מַעֲשָׂה רָקֶחֶת מְמָלֵח טָהוֹר קָדֵשׁ: ³⁶ וְשְׁחַקְתָּ מִפְנָה הַדָּק וְנִתְתַּחַתָּה מִפְנָה לִפְנֵי הַעֲדָת בְּאַהֲלָל מוֹעֵד אֲשֶׁר אָוֶן לְךָ שָׁמֶה

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.³⁷ But 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. ³⁸ Whoever makes any like it, to smell of it, shall be cut off from his kin.

קָרְשִׁים תַּהֲיוּ לֵיכֶם: ³⁷ וְהַקְרְבָתָה
אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשֶׂה בְּמִתְפְּנַתָּה לֹא תַעֲשֶׂו
לֵיכֶם קָדֵשׁ תַּהֲיוּ לְפָנָי לְיהוָה: ³⁸ אִישׁ
אֲשֶׁר-יִעֲשֶׂה כִּמְ�ה לְהַרְחִיכָּה וְנִכְרַת
מִעַמָּיו: ס

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

לֹא וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר:
² רָאָה קָרְבָּנִיתִי בְּשֶׁם בָּצְלָאֵל בֶּן-אוֹרִי
בֶּן-חוֹר לְמַטְהָ יְהוָה: ³ וְאִמְלָא אֶת־זֶה
אֱלֹהִים בְּחִכְמָה וּבְתִבְונָה וּבְרָעָת וּבְכָל־
מְלָאכָה: ⁴ לְחַשְׁבָּן מְחַשְׁבָּת לְעַשְׂוֹת
בְּזָהָב וּבְכְסָף וּבְנָחָשָׁת: ⁵ וּבְחַרְשָׁת אַבְנָן
לְמַלְאָת וּבְחַרְשָׁת עֵץ לְעַשְׂוֹת בְּכָל־
מְלָאכָה: ⁶ וְאַנְּיִ הַנֶּה נְתַתִּי אֶת־זֶה
אֲחַלְיאָב בֶּן־אַחִיכִיסְמָל לְמַטְהָ-יִדְן וּבְלַב
כָּל־חַכְמַ-לְבָב נְתַתִּי חִכְמָה וְעַשְׂוֹ אֶת
כָּל־אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתֶךָ: ⁷ אֶת אַהֲל מָוֶעֶד
וְאַתְּ-הָאָרֶן לְעַדְתָּ וְאַתְּ-הַפְּרָת 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

עליו ואות כל-בְּלִי הַאֲזָלֶל: ⁸וְאַתְּ הַשְׁלֵחַ
וְאַתְּ בְּלִי וְאַתְּ הַמְנֻרָה הַטְהָרָה וְאַתְּ
כָּל-פְּלִילָה וְאַתְּ מִזְבֵּחַ הַקְטָרָת: ⁹וְאַתְּ
מִזְבֵּחַ הַעַלְהָה וְאַתְּ כָּל-בְּלִי וְאַתְּ הַכְּבֹיָר
וְאַתְּ יְפָנוֹ: ¹⁰וְאַתְּ בְּגָדֵי הַשְׂרָד וְאַתְּ בְּגָדֵי
הַקָּדְשָׁה לְאַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֵן וְאַתְּ בְּגָדֵי בְּנֵי
לְכֹהֵן: ¹¹וְאַתְּ שְׁמֵן הַמְשֻׁחָה וְאַתְּ
קְטָרָת הַסְּפָרִים לְקַדֵּשׁ בְּכָל אֲשֶׁר-צִוִּיתָךְ
יעשָׂו: פ

¹²וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֱלֹמֶשֶׁה לְאָמֵר: ¹³וְאַתָּה
דָּבָר אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְאָמֵר אַתְּ אֶת־
שְׁבָתָתִי תְּשִׁמְרוּ בַּיּוֹם אֲזֶן הָוָא בֵּין־
וּבֵין־יכֶּם לְדָרְתֵיכֶם לְדָעַת כִּי אַנְיָה יְהוָה
מִקְדְּשָׁכֶם: ¹⁴וְשִׁמְרָתֶם אֶת־הַשְׁבָּתָה כִּי
קָדֵשׁ הָוָא לְכֶם מְחֻלְלֵיהֶנֶּה מוֹת יוֹמָת בַּיּוֹם
כָּל־הַעַשָּׂה בְּהַמְלָאָכָה וּנְכָרְתָה הַנֶּפֶשׁ
הָהָוָא מִקְרָב עַמִּיחָה: ¹⁵שְׁשַׁת יְמִים יִعַשֶּׂה
מְלָאָכָה וּבַיּוֹם הַשְׁבִּיעִי שְׁבָת שְׁבָתוֹן

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.¹⁶ The Israelite people shall keep the sabbath, observing the sabbath throughout the ages as a covenant for all time:¹⁷ it 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,

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-yinna'ash* 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-

קָרְדֵשׁ לִיהוָה כָּל־הַעֲשָׂה מֶלֶאכָה בַּיּוֹם
הַשְׁבָת מֹתֵת יוֹמָת :¹⁶ וְשָׁמְרוּ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
אֶת־הַשְׁבָת לְעֹשָׂת אֶת־הַשְׁבָת לְדוֹרָתֶם
בְּרִית עוֹלָם :¹⁷ בְּיָנוּ וּבִין בָּנִי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־
הַוָּא לְעַלְם בִּיד־שְׁבָת יְמִים עֲשָׂה יְהוָה
אֶת־הַשְׁמִים וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ וּבַיּוֹם הַשְׁבִּיעִי
שְׁבָת וִינְפֵשׁ : ס

שְׁנִי¹⁸ וַיִּתְּנֵן אֱלֹהִים בְּכָל־תוֹ לְדִבֶּר אֹתוֹ בְּהָר
סִינֵּי שְׁנֵי לְחֹתֶת הַעֲדָת לְחֹתֶת אָבִן פְּתֻכִים
בְּאַצְבֵּעַ אֱלֹהִים :

לְבָב
וַיַּרְא הָעָם כִּי־בָשָׂש מֹשֶׁה לְרַדְתָּ
מִן־הַהָּר וַיַּקְהֵל הָעָם עַל־אַחֲרָיו וַיֹּאמְרוּ

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

אֵלֶיךָ קֹם | עֲשֵׂה-לְנוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר יַלְכֵל
לְפָנֶינוּ בִּירָזָה | מֹשֶׁה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הַעֲלָנוּ
מִאָרֶץ מִצְרָיִם לֹא יַדְעָנוּ מִהָּרִיחָה לֹו:
וַיֹּאמֶר אֶלָּהֶם אָהָרָן פְּרֻקֵּל נְזָמֵן הַזָּהָב
אֲשֶׁר בָּאָזְנֵי נְשֵׁיכֶם בְּנֵיכֶם וּבְנֵתֵיכֶם
וְהַבְיאוּ אֵלִי: ³ וַיִּתְפַּרְקֵל כָּל-הָעָם אֶת-
נְזָמֵן הַזָּהָב אֲשֶׁר בָּאָזְנֵיהֶם וַיִּבְיאוּ אֵל-

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

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 elohekha*; 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

אהרן: ⁴ וַיִּקְחֵ מֵידָם וַיִּצְרֵר אֹתָו בְּחֶרֶט וַיַּעֲשֵׂה עֲגָל מִסְכָּה וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֱלֹהִים יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הָעָלוֹת מִאָרֶץ מִצְרָיִם: ⁵ וַיֹּירַא אֶחָד אֶחָד וַיַּבְנֵן מִזְבֵּחַ לִפְנֵי וַיִּקְרָא אֶחָד אֶחָד וַיֹּאמֶר חִגְג לְיְהוָה מַחְרָה: ⁶ וַיִּשְׁבְּיָמוּ מִפְּנֵיחָת וַיַּעֲלֻ עַלְתָּה וַיִּגְשֹׁו שְׁלָמִים וַיִּשְׁבַּע הָעָם לְאָכֵל וְשָׁתּוּ וַיִּקְמֹו לְצַחַק: ⁷ פ וַיֹּזְדַּבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לְקָרְבָּן בַּיּוֹם שְׁחַת עַמְּךָ אֲשֶׁר הָעֵלִית מִאָרֶץ מִצְרָיִם: ⁸ סָרוּ

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-

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-

מִהְרָן מִן־הַדָּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתֶם עֲשׂוּ לְהֵם
עַגֵּל מִסְכָּה וַיִּשְׂתַחַוו־לָו וַיִּבְחֹזְלָו
וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֱלֹהֵינוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הַעֲלוֹךְ
מִאָרֶץ מִצְרָיִם :
וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֲלֵיכָהּ רְאֵיתִי אֶת־הָעָם
הַזֶּה וְהַנֶּה עַמִּיקָּשָׁה־עָרָף הוּא : ¹⁰ וְעַתָּה
הַנִּיחָה לִי וַיְחִרְאָפֵי בָּהּ וְאֶכְלָם
וְאָשַׁה אֹתָךְ לְגֹוי גָּדוֹל : ¹¹ וַיַּחַל מֹשֶׁה
אֶת־פָּנָיו יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ וַיֹּאמֶר לְמִה יְהוָה
יְחִרָּה אֶפְךְ בַּעֲמֹךְ אֲשֶׁר הַזְּאת מִארֶץ
מִצְרָיִם בְּכָחּ גָּדוֹל וּבִיד חִזְקָה : ¹² לִפְנֵי
יֹאמְרוּ מִצְרָיִם לְאָמֵר בְּרֻעה הַזְּכִיאָם
לְהַרְגֵּן אֶתְכֶם בְּהָרִים וְלִכְלַתֶּם מִעַל פָּנֵי

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-

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.

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-

האדמה שוב מחרון אפר והנחתם על הרעה לעמך:¹³ זכר לאברם ליצחק ולישראל עבדיך אשר נשבעת להם בר ותדבר אליהם ארבה אתי־זעכם בכוכבי השמים וככל־הארץ הזאת אשר אמרתי אתן לזרעכם ונחלו לעלם:¹⁴ וינחם יהוה על־הרעה אשר דבר לעשות בעמו: פ

¹⁵ ויפן וירד משה מן־ההר ושני לחות העדרת בידיו לחות בתבאים משני עבריהם מזוה ומזה הם בתבאים: ולחות מעשה אליהם הנה והמקtab מכתב אליהם הוא חרונות על־המלחות:¹⁶ וישמע יהושע את־קול העם ברעה ברעו ויאמר אל־משה קול מלכמתם בפניכה:¹⁷ ויאמר אין קול ענות גבורה אין קול ענות חלואה קול ענות אני שמע:¹⁸

¹⁹ ויהי באשר קרב אל־המבחן וירא

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-

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. ²⁰He 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

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.

be 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

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).

את-העגל ומחלות ויחר-אף משה ויישלך
מידו מידיו את-הלהות וישבר אתם תחת
ההר: ²⁰ וילקח את-העגל אשר עשו
וישרף באש ויתחן עד אשר-דק ויזיר
על-פני המים וישק את-בני ישראל:
²¹ ויאמר משה אל-אהרן מה-עשה לך:
העם הזה כירחאת עליו חטא גדלה:
²² ויאמר אהרן אל-ייחר אף אדני אתה
ידעת את-העם כי ברע הוא: ²³ ויאמרו
לי עשה-לנו אל-הים אשר ילבו לפנינו

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!

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 (*Meshkeh Hokhma*).

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

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. 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

בִּרְזָה | מֹשֶׁה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הָעַלְנוּ מִארֶץ
מִצְרַיִם לֹא יַדְעֻנוּ מִהִדְתֵּיהָ לֹז: ²⁴ וַיֹּאמֶר
לָהּם לְמַיִּזְבֵּחַ הַתְּפִירָקָו וַיִּתְנוּ לְלִי
וְאַשְׁלַכְתֶּה בְּאֶשׁ וַיֵּצֵא הַעֲגָל הַזֶּה:

²⁵ וַיַּרְא מֹשֶׁה אֶת-הָעָם כִּי פְּרֻעַ הַזֶּה
כִּי-פְּרֻעָה אַהֲרֹן לְשִׁמְצָה בְּקִמְיהֶם:
וַיַּעֲמֹד מֹשֶׁה בַּשְּׁער הַמִּחְנָה וַיֹּאמֶר מַיִּ
לִיהְוָה אֱלֹהִי וַיָּסֶפוּ אֶלְיוֹ בְּלִבְנֵי לֵוִי:
וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּם בְּהָאָמֵר יְהֹוָה אֱלֹהִי
יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׁמוֹ אִישׁ-חַרְבָּוּ עַל-יְרָכָו עַבְרוֹ
וְשׁׁוּבוּ מִשְׁעָר לְשַׁעַר בְּמִחְנָה וְהַרְגוּ אִישׁ
אֶת-אֶחָיו וְאִישׁ אֶת-רֹעָהוּ וְאִישׁ אֶת-
קָרְבָּו: ²⁸ וַיַּעֲשׂוּ בְנֵי-לֵוִי בְּדָבָר מֹשֶׁה וַיַּפְלֵל
מִן-הָעָם בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא בְּשִׁלְשָׁת אֱלֹפִי
אִישׁ: ²⁹ וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה מְלֹאו יְדֵיכֶם הַיּוֹם
לִיהְוָה כִּי אִישׁ בְּבָנָו וּבְאֶחָיו וְלִתְתַּ
עַל-יְכָם הַיּוֹם בְּרָכָה:

³⁰ וַיְהִי מִמְּחֹרֶת וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-הָעָם

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.

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 *parashiyyot*.

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.”

³⁵ Then 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 גָּדוֹלה ועֲתָה עַלְהָה
אל-יְהוָה אָוְלִי אַכְפָּרָה בְּعֵד חַטָּאתֶיכֶם:
³¹ וַיֵּשֶׁב מֹשֶׁה אֶל-יְהוָה וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנִי חַטָּא
הָעָם הַזֶּה חטאתי גָּדוֹלה וַיֹּעֲשׂוּ לְהָם אֱלֹהִי
זָהָב:³² וְעַתָּה אָסִתְתָּשָׁא חַטָּאתֶיכֶם וְאָמַר
אַין מְחַנִּי נָא מִסְפְּרָךְ אֲשֶׁר בְּתַבְתָּה:
³³ וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה מַיִּן אֲשֶׁר חַטָּא
לְךָ אַמְחַנְנוּ מִסְפְּרִי:³⁴ וְעַתָּה לְךָ וְנַחַת
אַתְּ-הָעָם אֶל אֲשֶׁר-דִּבְרָתִי לְךָ הַנָּהָה*
מִלְאָכִי יָלַךְ לִפְנֵיךְ וּבַיּוֹם פָּקָדִי וּפְקַדְתִּי
עַלְהָם חַטָּאתֶיכֶם:³⁵ וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אַתְּ-הָעָם עַל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂו
אַתְּ-הָעָגָל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה אֶחָרֶن: ס

לָג
וַיֹּדְبֵּר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לְךָ
עַלְהָה מִזֶּה אַתָּה וְהָעָם אֲשֶׁר הַעֲלִיתָ

סבירין ומטעין “הנה” n. 34.

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,

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

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

מְאָרֶץ מִצְרַיִם אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעֲתִי לְאַבְרָהָם לְיַצֵּחַ וְלִיעַקְבּוֹ לְאמֹר לֹא תַּעֲשֶׂה אֶת־הַכְּנֻעַן הָאַמּוֹר וְהַחֲתִי וְהַפְּרָזִי הַחֲנוּ וְהַיְבוֹסִי: ² אֶל־אָרֶץ זֹבֵת חָלֵב וּדְבָשָׂר בַּיּוֹם אֲלֹהָה בְּקָרְבָּךְ כִּי עַמְּקַשְּׁה־עָרָף לֹא אָלַלְתָּה פָּנֶיךָ בְּדַרְךָ:

וַיִּשְׁמַע הָעָם אֶת־הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה וַיִּתְאַבֵּל וַיַּעֲשֶׂה אִישׁ עָדִיו עַלְיוֹ: ⁵ וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אִם־אָמַר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אַתָּם עַמְּקַשְּׁה־עָרָף רָגַע אֶחָד אֲלֹהָה בְּקָרְבָּךְ וּכְלִיתִיר וְעַתָּה הַוֹּרֶד עַדְיוֹ מַעַלְיוֹ וְאַדְעָה מֵהָאֲשָׁה־לָךְ: ⁶ וַיִּתְנַצֵּל בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־עָדִים מִתְּרַחְרַב:

⁷ וְמֹשֶׁה יָקַח אֶת־הָאָהָל וְנִטְהַלּוּ מִחוֹזֶה לְמִחְנָה הַרְחִיק מִן־הַמִּחְנָה וְקָרָא לוֹ אָהָל

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.
 8 Whenever 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. 9 And when Moses entered the Tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the Tent, while He spoke with Moses. 10 When 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. 11 The 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.

12 Moses 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.’ 13 Now, 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.

מועד ויהי כל-מבקש יהוה יצא אל-אַהֲל מועד אשר מוחוץ למחנה: ⁸ ויהי ביצאת משה אל-האַהֲל יקומו כל-העם ונצבו איש פתח האַהֲל וhabito אחריו משה עד-בָּאו הַאֲהָלָה: ⁹ ויהי פָתָח משה הַאֲהָלָה ירד עפּוֹד הענֵן ועמד פָתָח האַהֲל ודרב עם-משה: ¹⁰ וראה כל-העם את-עפּוֹד הענֵן עמד פָתָח האַהֲל וקם כל-העם והשתתחו איש פָתָח האַהֲל: ¹¹ ודבר יהוה אל-משה פניהם אל-פְנִים כאשר ידבר איש אל-רעשו רשב אל-המִחְנֶה ומשרתו יהושע בן-נון נער לא ימיש מטוּך הַאֲהָל: ס

שלישי ¹² ויאמר משה אל-יהוה ראה אתה אמר אל-העל את-העם זהה ואתה לא הודיעתני את אשר-תשלח עמי ואתה אמרת ידעתיך בשם וגו' מזאת חן בעני: ¹³ ועתה אסינא מזאת חן בעיניך הודיעתני נא את-דרכך ואדעך

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.”¹⁴ And He said, “I will go in the lead and will lighten your burden.”¹⁵ And he said to Him, “Unless You go in the lead, do not make us leave this place.”¹⁶ For 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?”

17 And 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.”¹⁸ He said, “Oh, let me behold Your Presence!”¹⁹ And 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.²⁰ But,” 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’nuhah*, 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-

טמען אֲמִצָּאתְךָ בַּעֲנֵינֶךָ וְרָאָה כִּי עַמְּךָ
הָגֹוי הָהָה: ¹⁴ וַיֹּאמֶר פָּנִי יַלְכֹּו וְחִנְחָתִי
לְךָ: ¹⁵ וַיֹּאמֶר אֶלְיוֹ אָסִמְאֵין פִּנְךָ הַלְּבָנִים
אַל-תַּעֲלִנּוּ מִזָּה: ¹⁶ וּבָמָה | יַוְדוּ אַפּוֹא
כִּי-מִצְאָתִי חָנָן בַּעֲנֵינֶךָ אָנִי וְעַמְּךָ הַלְּאָ
בְּלַבְתָּךְ עַמְּנוּ וּגְפֻלִּינוּ אָנִי וְעַמְּךָ מַפְלָ-

הָעָם אֲשֶׁר עַל-פָּנֵי הָאָדָמָה: ¹⁷ פְּרַבְישִׁי וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֱלֹמֶשָּׁה גַּם אֶת-הַדָּבָר
הָהָה אֲשֶׁר דִּבְרָת אַעֲשָׂה כִּי-מִצְאָתְךָ
בַּעֲנֵינִי וְאַדְעַךָ בְּשָׁם: ¹⁸ וַיֹּאמֶר הָרָאַנִי נָא
אֶת-כְּבָדְךָ: ¹⁹ וַיֹּאמֶר אָנִי אַעֲבִיר בְּלִיטָבוֹי
עַל-פָּנֵיךְ וּקְרָאתִי בְּשָׁם יְהוָה לְפָנֶיךְ
וְחִפְתַּח אֶת-אַשְׁר אָחָן וּרְחַמְתִּי אֶת-אֲשֶׁר
אַרְחָם: ²⁰ וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא תַּוְكַּל לְרֹאֹת 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 Hatam Sofer, we can-

not see Me and live.”²¹And the LORD said, “See, there is a place near Me. Station yourself on the rock²²and, 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.²³Then I will take My hand away and you will see My back; but My face must not be seen.”

פָנִי כִּי לְאִירָאַנִי הָאָדָם וְחַי: ²¹ וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה הַגָּה מָקוֹם אֲתִי וַיַּצְבַּת עַל-הַצּוֹר:
²² וְהִיא בַּעֲבָר בְּבָדֵי וַשְׁמַתִּיק בְּגַדְרָת הַצּוֹר וַשְׁפַטֵּי כַּפְעַי עַלְיךָ עֲדָעָבָרִי:
²³ וְהַסְרָתָל אַתְּ-פֶפַי וְרָאֵית אַתְּ-אַחֲרִי וְפָנִי לֹא יִרְאֹו: 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

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 reinstatement of the Covenant.

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.

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,

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.

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.

חמייש **ל** וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה פָּסֶל-לְקֻשְׁנִי-לְחוֹת אֲבָנִים בְּרָאשָׁנִים וּבְתַבְתִּילָן הַלְּחוֹת אֲתִיה-דְבָרִים אֲשֶׁר הִיוֹעַל-הַלְּחוֹת הָרָאשָׁנִים אֲשֶׁר שְׁבָרָת: ² וְהִיא נְכוֹן לְבָקָר וּעַלְית בְּבָקָר אֶל-הָרָסִינִי וַיַּצְבַּת לִי שְׁם עַל-רָאשׁ הַהָר: ³ וְאִישׁ לְאַיִלָּה עַמְּךָ וְגַם-אִישׁ אֶל-יְנָא בְּכָל-הָהָר גַּם

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-

הצאן והבקר אל-ירעו אל-מול ההר
ההיא:
⁴ ויפסל שני-לחות אֲבָנִים כְּרָאשָׁנִים
וישבם משה בבקר ויעל אל-הר סיני
פאשר צוה יהוה אליו ויקח בידו שני
לחות אבניים: ⁵ וירד יהוה בענן ויתיאב
עמו שם ויקרא בשם יהוה: ⁶ ויעבר
יהוה על-פניו ויקרא יהוה | יהוה אל
רחום ותנוון ארך אפים ורב-חסד ואמת:
⁷ נער* חסל לאלפים נשא ען ופשע
וחטאה ונכח לא ינכח פקד | ען אבות
על-בניים ועל-בני בנים על-שלשים ועל-
רבעים:

v. 7. נ' רבתה 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

⁸וַיִּמְהָר מֹשֶׁה וַיַּקְדֵּשׁ אֶרֶץ וַיִּשְׂתַחֲווּ
⁹וַיֹּאמֶר אֱמֶן מֵצָאתִי חַנּוּ בְעִינֵיכֶם אֱדֹנִי
יְלִרְנָא אֱדֹנִי בְּקָרְבָנוּ כִּי עַמְּקָשָׁה
עָרָק הָוּא וִסְלָחָת לְעֵונָנוּ וְלִחְטָאתָנוּ
וְנִחְלְתָנוּ:

¹⁰וַיֹּאמֶר הָנָה אָנֹכִי כָּרְתָ בְּרִית נֶגֶד
כָּל-עַמָּךְ אֲשֶׁר נָפְלָאת אֲשֶׁר לְאַנְבָרָאוּ
בְּכָל-הָאָרֶץ וּבְכָל-הַגּוּם וּרְאֵה כָּל-הָעָם
אֲשֶׁר-אַתָּה בְּקָרְבָו אֶת-מְعָשָׂה יְהוָה כִּי
נוֹרָא הָוּא אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי עֲשָׂה עָמָךְ: ¹¹שָׁמַר
לְךָ אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מִצּוֹה הַיּוֹם הַנֶּנוּ
גָּרְשׁ מִפְנֵיךְ אֶת-הָאָמָרִי וְהַבְּנָעָנִי וְהַחֲטָאי
וְהַפְּרָזִי וְהַחֲנִי וְהַיְבוֹסִי: ¹²הַשְׁמָר לְךָ
פָּנִים-תְּכֻרְתָ בְּרִית לִיּוֹשֵׁב הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר-אַתָּה
בָּא עַלְيָה פָּנִים-יְהִי לְמוֹקֵשׁ בְּקָרְבָךְ:
¹³כִּי אֶת-מִזְבְּחֹתָם תִּתְצֹוּן וְאֶת-מִזְבְּחָתָם
תִּשְׁבְּרוּן וְאֶת-אִשְׁרָיו תִּכְרֹתוּן: ¹⁴כִּי לֹא
תִּשְׂתַחֲווּ לְאָל אַחֲרָךְ כִּי יְהוָה קָנָא שָׁמָנוּ

v. 14. ר' רבתי לפ' נוטחים מקובלין

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.¹⁵ You 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.¹⁶ And 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.

17 You shall not make molten gods for yourselves.

18 You 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.

19 Every first issue of the womb is Mine, from all your livestock that drop a male as firstling, whether cattle or sheep.²⁰ But 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.

Bible. The Hebrew word *aher* 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 *ונָה*, 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

אל קָנָא הוּא :¹⁵ פָּנִיתְכָרֶת בְּרִית לַיּוֹשֵׁב
הָאָרֶץ וְזַנְנוּ | אַחֲרֵי אֱלֹהִים וְזַבְחוֹל
לְאֱלֹהִים וְקָרָא לְפָנָיו וְאַכְלָתָ מִזְבְּחָה :¹⁶
וְלִקְחָתָ מִבְנָטוֹ לְבָנָיו וְזַנְנוּ בְּנַתָּיו אַחֲרֵי
אֱלֹהִים וְזַנְנוּ אֶת־בָּנֵיךְ אַחֲרֵי אֱלֹהִים :¹⁷
אֱלֹהִי מִסְכָּה לֹא תַעֲשֵׂה־לְךָ :¹⁸
אֶת־חַג הַמִּצְוֹת תִּשְׁמַר שְׁבֻעָת יְמִים
תִּאֲכַל מִצּוֹת אֲשֶׁר צוִיתָךְ לְמוֹעֵד
חַדְשָׁ הַאֲבִיב בַּיּוֹם הַחְדָשָׁה כִּי בְּחַדְשָׁ הַאֲבִיב יֵצָא
מִמּוֹצְרים :

19 כָּל־פֶּטֶר רָחֵם לֵי וּכְל־מִקְנֵן תַּזְכֵּר פֶּטֶר
שֻׁוּר וְשָׂה :²⁰ וּפֶטֶר חַמּוֹל תִּפְדֵּה בְּשָׂה
וְאִם־לֹא תִּפְדֵּה וּנְרַפְּתָו בְּלִבְנֵיךְ
תִּפְדֵּה
וְלֹא־יָרָא פָנֵי רַיקָם :

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

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

²¹שְׁשָׁת יְמִינֵם תַּעֲבֹד וּבַיּוֹם הַשְׁבִיעִי
תַּשְׁבַּת בְּחֶרְיוֹן וּבְקָצִיר תַּשְׁבַּת:
²²וְחַג שְׁבָעָת תַּעֲשֶׂה לְךָ בְּפֹורִי קָצִיר
חַטִּים וְחַג הַאֲסִיף תַּקְוֹפָת הַשְׁנָה:
²³שֶׁלּוּשׁ פָּעָם בְּשָׁנָה יְרָאֶה בְּלִזְכָּרָךְ
אַתְ-פָּנֵי הָאָזְן | יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:
²⁴כִּי-אָזְרִישׁ גּוֹיִם מִפְנֵיךְ וְהַרְחַבְתִּי אֶת-
גְּבוּלֶךָ וְלֹא-יִחַם אִישׁ אַתְ-אֶרְצָךְ
בְּעַלְתָּךְ לְרֹאֹת אַתְ-פָּנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ
שֶׁלּוּשׁ פָּעָם בְּשָׁנָה:
²⁵לֹא-תַשְׁתַּחַט עַל-חֶמֶץ דְּמִזְבְּחָי וְלֹא-
יַלְּיִן לְבָקֵר זָבֵחׇ תְּגֵגֵה הַפְּסָחָה:
²⁶רִאשְׁתָּה בְּפֹורִי אַדְמָתָךְ תְּבִיא בֵּית
יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ
²⁷לֹא-תַבְשֵׁל גְּדִי בְּחֶלֶב אָמוֹ: פ
שְׁבִיעִי וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֱלֹמֶשׁ בְּתַבְ-לָקָע אַתְ-

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 *asaret 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-

הַדְבָרִים הָאֱלֹהִים בַּי עַל־פִּי | הַדְבָרִים
הָאֱלֹהִים בְּרִתִּי אֶתְכֶם בְּרִית וְאֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל:
²⁸ וַיַּהֲיוּ שְׁמֵם עַמִּיכֶם אֶרֶבְעִים יוֹם
וְאֶרֶבְעִים לַיְלָה לְחַם לֹא אָכֵל וּמַיִם לֹא
שְׁתָה וַיַּכְתֵּב עַל־הַלְּחָות אֶת דְבָרַי הַפְּרִיטָה:
עִשְׂרַת הַדְבָרִים:

²⁹ וַיְהִי בְּרִדְתָה מִשְׁחָה מִתְהָרֵסִי וְשַׁנִי לְחוֹת
הַעֲדָת בַּיְדֵי־מִשְׁחָה בְּרִדְתָהוּ מִן־הָאָרֶץ וּמִשְׁחָה
לְאִידְעָה בַּי קָרְנוֹן עֹור פָנָיו בְּדִבְרָו אָתוֹ:
³⁰ וַיַּרְא אַהֲרֹן וּכְלָבָנִי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־מִשְׁחָה
וְהַפְּנֵה קָרְנוֹן עֹור פָנָיו וַיַּרְאוּ מְגַשֵּת אַלְיוֹ:

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

³⁴Whenever 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,³⁵the 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.

³¹ וַיָּקֹרֶא אֱלֹהִים מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּשְׁבּוּ אֱלֹהִים אֶחָד
וְכָל-הַנְּשָׁאִים בְּעֵדָה וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה אֱלֹהִים:
³² וְאַחֲרִיכֶן נָגְשׂוּ כָל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיַּצְוֹם
אֶת כָּל-אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יְהוָה אֲתָּה בְּהָרָסִינִי:
מִפְטִיר ³³ וַיַּכְלֵל מֹשֶׁה מִזְבֵּחַ אֱתָּם וַיִּתְּנֵן עַל-פְּנֵיו

מסוּהָ:

³⁴ וּבָבָא מֹשֶׁה לִפְנֵי יְהוָה לְדִבֶּר אֲתָּה יִסְירֵ
אֶת-הַמְּסֻהָּה עַד-צִאתוֹ וַיֵּצֵא וַיַּדְפֵּר אֶל-בְּנֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת אֲשֶׁר יָצָה: ³⁵ וְרָאוּ בְנֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת-פָּנֵי מֹשֶׁה בְּיַקְרֵן עֹזֶר פָּנֵי
מֹשֶׁה וְהַשִּׁיב מֹשֶׁה אֶת-הַמְּסֻהָּה עַל-פְּנֵיו
עַד-בָּאוּ לְדִבֶּר אֲתָּה: ס

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.

הפטרת כי תשא

HAFTARAH FOR KI TISSA

1 KINGS 18:1–39 (*Ashk'nazim*)

1 KINGS 18:20–39 (*S'fardim*)

This *haftarah* focuses on a dramatic contest between the prophet Elijah and the prophets of Baal. It is the climax to three years of drought brought upon the land as punishment for the pagan practices fostered by King Ahab (871–852 B.C.E.) and his wife, Jezebel. Elijah, to conclusively dramatize before the nation the superiority of God and the folly of pagan nature worship, challenges Ahab to gather the prophets of Baal and of Asherah on Mount Carmel. These prophets beseech Baal to ignite their altar, ranting and raving without success. When the ancestral God of Israel miraculously answers Elijah with fire, the people twice proclaim: “The LORD alone is God.”

The *haftarah* ends with this liturgical credo. It does not include the subsequent verses (18:40–45) about the slaughter of the false prophets or the downpour that fulfills the opening prophecy. In this way the reading emphasizes the defeat of false worship and the ecstatic conversion of the people back to God alone.

Ashk'nazim read both the contest and its prologue as the *haftarah* (18:1–39). *S'fardim* read only the contest of faith (18:20–39).

By first pouring water on the altar, Elijah heightens the drama and apparently also mocks a magical practice of pouring water on the ground to induce rain. Thus a divine miracle, contrasted with a magical ritual, highlights the power of God over nature. In a similar contrast, the prophets of Baal cut themselves and spill their blood as a means of manipulating their god. The God of Israel is moved by the words of prayer, not by the wounds of the flesh.

The word *kol* (voice) is used ironically in this text. Elijah (18:27) mocks his prophetic foes by telling them to “shout louder” (*kir-u v'kol gadol*), for perhaps Baal is asleep or otherwise occupied. But there is no sound (*kol*) from Baal, no re-

sponse. This pun hinges on the fact that *kol* also means “thunderclap,” the very signature in sound of Baal, the god of rain, who is said to ride the clouds as his chariot. The phrase *ein kol* (there was no sound) thus makes a polemical point: There is no god of thunder.

The contrasting positive credal formula, “The LORD alone is God” (*YHVH hu ha-Elohim*), is the climax of the drama. Elijah tauntingly plays with words in this phrase when he urges the pagan priests to “Shout louder! After all, he is a god” (*ki elohim hu*, v. 27). This contrasts sharply with Elijah’s appeal to the Lord, “Let it be known (*yivada*) that you are God (*ki attah elohim*) in Israel” (v. 37), as well as with the people’s credo of faith in the God of Israel (*YHVH hu ha-Elohim*) in verse 39. Similar credos are found in Ps. 100:3 and 1 Kings 8:60.

The spiritual fickleness of the people and the struggle of their leaders to teach them to know and acknowledge God are themes that permeate the Hebrew Bible. In this *haftarah*, the credo and renewed faith are asserted only after the people, who have been hopping between theologies like a bird among branches (1 Kings 18:21), overcome their ambivalence.

RELATION OF THE HAFTARAH TO THE PARASHAH

These readings from the Torah and from the Prophets join two moments of betrayal in ancient Israelite religious history: The apostasy of the people before the Golden Calf in the wilderness and the later worship of the Baals of the Land. Both required the intercession of a leader to restore true worship. Both Moses and Elijah ascend a mountain and zealously fight apostasy, invoking ancestors in prayer (Exod. 32:13; 1 Kings 18:20–

21,36). Both are the agents of a covenantal affirmation by the people (Exod. 24:7; 1 Kings 18:39), and both force the people to make a choice for God and to destroy the sinners (Exod. 32:26–29; 1 Kings 18:40).

In linking the *parashah* and the *haftarah*, the Sages produced a searing indictment of idolatry. The Torah narrative mocks the impatience of the crowd, and juxtaposes the words on the Tablets with the visible form of the Calf. The prophetic

passage derides the indecision of the masses and contrasts the prayer of the pagans with Elijah's prophetic voice. Through this connection of the two texts, the Sages stress that the sin at Sinai was not only a perversion of the past but also endures as an ever present danger. In both cases, the anxieties caused by divine absence and earthly needs may threaten monotheism at its core. These liturgical readings are a warning and a proclamation of divine transcendence for the community of faith.

18

Much later, in the third year, the word of the LORD came to Elijah: "Go, appear before Ahab; then I will send rain upon the earth." ²Thereupon Elijah set out to appear before Ahab.

The famine was severe in Samaria. ³Ahab had summoned Obadiah, the steward of the palace. (Obadiah revered the LORD greatly. ⁴When Jezebel was killing off the prophets of the LORD, Obadiah had taken a hundred prophets and hidden them, fifty to a cave, and provided them with food and drink.) ⁵And Ahab had said to Obadiah, "Go through the land, to all the springs of water and to all the wadis. Perhaps we shall find some grass to keep horses and mules alive, so that we are not left without beasts."

⁶They divided the country between them to explore it, Ahab going alone in one direction and Obadiah going alone in another direction. ⁷Obadiah was on the road, when Elijah suddenly confronted him. [Obadiah] recognized him and flung himself on his face, saying, "Is that you, my lord Elijah?" ⁸"Yes, it is I," he answered. "Go tell your lord: Elijah is here!" ⁹But he said, "What wrong have I done, that you should hand your servant over to Ahab to be killed? ¹⁰As the LORD your God lives, there is no nation or kingdom to which my lord has not sent to look for you; and when they said, 'He is not here,' he made that kingdom or nation swear that you

יְהָוָה וַיֹּהֵי יְמִינֵם רַבִּים וּדְבָרֵיהָו הִיא אֶל-אֱלֹהֵי הָעוֹלָם בְּשָׁנָה הַשְׁלִישִׁית לְאמֹר לְךָ הָרָא אֶל-אֲחָב וְאֶתְנָה מֶטֶר עַל-פָּנֶיךָ הַאֲדָמָה: ² וַיַּלְּכַל אֱלֹהֵי הָהָרָא אֶל-אֲחָב וְהַרְעָב חֹזֶק בְּשָׁמְרוֹן: ³ וַיַּקְרָא אֲחָב אֶל-עַבְדֵי הָאֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר עַל-הַבַּיִת וּעַבְדֵי הָאֱלֹהִים הַיְהוּדִים מִאֵל אֶת נְבִיאֵי יְהָוָה וַיַּקְרַב עַבְדֵי הָאֱלֹהִים מִאֵל נְבָאִים וַיַּחֲבִיאִם חִמְשִׁים אִישׁ בְּמִעְרָה וּכְלַבְלָם לְחַם וּמִים: ⁵ וַיֹּאמֶר אֲחָב אֶל-עַבְדֵי הָאֱלֹהִים לְךָ בָּאָרֶץ אֲלָכָל-מַעֲנֵנִי הַמְּלִים וְאֶל כָּל-הַנְּחָלִים אָוְלִי וּנְמַצֵּא חַצֵּיר וְנִיחַדְתָּ סָוס וּפָרָד וְלוֹא נְכַרְתָּ מִהְבָּהָמָה: ⁶ וַיַּחֲלַקְוּ לָהֶם אֶת-הָאָרֶץ לְעַבְרֵי-הָאָרֶץ אֲחָב הַלְּךָ בַּדָּرָךְ אֶחָד לְבָהּוּ וּעַבְדֵי הָאֱלֹהִים בַּדָּרָךְ וְהַנֶּה אֱלֹהֵי קָרְאָתוּ וַיַּכְרַבְוּ וַיִּפְלַּח עַל-פָּנֶיךָ וַיֹּאמֶר הָאֱתָה זֶה אָדָנִי אֱלֹהֵי הָאֱלֹהִים לֹא אָנִי לְךָ אָמַר לְאָדָנִי הַנֶּה אֱלֹהֵי: ⁸ וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא אָנִי לְךָ אָמַר לְאָדָנִי כִּי-אַתָּה אֱלֹהֵי: ⁹ וַיֹּאמֶר מִה חֲטָאתִי בִּי-אַתָּה נְתַנְּךָ אֶת-עַבְדֶךָ בִּיד-אֲחָב לְהַמִּתְנִי: ¹⁰ חִי | יְהָוָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ אֱמִינָתְךָ וּמַמְלָכָה אֲשֶׁר לְאַ-שְׁלָחָ אָדָנִי שָׁם לְבַקְשָׁר וְאָמְרוּ אַיִן וְהַשְׁבִּיעַ אֶת-הַמְּמָלָכָה וְאֶת-הַגּוֹן בְּ

could not be found.¹¹ And now you say, ‘Go tell your lord: Elijah is here!’¹² When I leave you, the spirit of the LORD will carry you off I don’t know where; and when I come and tell Ahab and he does not find you, he will kill me. Yet your servant has revered the LORD from my youth.¹³ My lord has surely been told what I did when Jezebel was killing the prophets of the LORD, how I hid a hundred of the prophets of the LORD, fifty men to a cave, and provided them with food and drink.¹⁴ And now you say, ‘Go tell your lord: Elijah is here.’ Why, he will kill me!”

¹⁵Elijah replied, “As the LORD of Hosts lives, whom I serve, I will appear before him this very day.”

¹⁶Obadiah went to find Ahab, and informed him; and Ahab went to meet Elijah.¹⁷ When Ahab caught sight of Elijah, Ahab said to him, “Is that you, you troubler of Israel?”¹⁸ He retorted, “It is not I who have brought trouble on Israel, but you and your father’s House, by forsaking the commandments of the LORD and going after the Baalim.¹⁹ Now summon all Israel to join me at Mount Carmel, together with the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel’s table.”

²⁰Ahab sent orders to all the Israelites and gathered the prophets at Mount Carmel.²¹ Elijah approached all the people and said, “How long will you keep hopping between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; and if Baal, follow him!” But the people answered him not a word.²² Then Elijah said to the people, “I am the only prophet of the LORD left, while the prophets of Baal are four hundred and fifty men.²³ Let two young bulls be given to us. Let them choose one bull, cut it up, and lay it on the wood,

לא ימץאה*: ¹¹ ועתה אתה אמר לך אמר לאדני הבה אליו: ¹² זהה אני אלה מאתר ורוח יהוה ישאל על אשר לא-אדע ובאת לhnid לאחאב ולא ימצאה והרגני ועבדך ירא את יהוה מגערי: ¹³ הלא-הגד לאדני את אשר עשית בהרג איזבל את נביי יהוה ואחבא מנביי יהוה מהו מהו איש חמשים חמשים איש במערה ואכלכלם לחם ומים: ¹⁴ ועתה אתה אמר לך אמר לאדני הבה אליו והרגני: ס ויאמר אלהו כי יהוה צבאות אשר עמדתי לפניו כי ביום אראה אליו: ¹⁵ וילך עברדיוו לקראת אחאב ויגד-לו וילך אחאב לקראת אליו: ¹⁶ ויהי בראות אחאב את-אליהו ויאמר אחאב אליו הattach זה עכבר ישראל: ¹⁷ ויאמר לא עברתי את-ישראל כי אם-אתה בית אביך בעובכם attach את-מצוות יהוה ותלך אחרי הבעלים: ¹⁸ ועתה שליח קבץ אליו את-כל-ישראל אל-הר הרכמל ואת-נביי האשרה ארבע מאות וחמשים נביי האשרה ארבע מאות אבל שליחן איזבל:

²⁰ וישלח אחאב בכל-בני ישראל ויקבץ את-הנביאים אל-הר הרכמל: ²¹ ויגש אליו אל-כל-העם ויאמר עד-מתי אתם פסחים על-שתי הסעפים אמי יהוה האלים לבו אחריו ואמיר הבעל לבו אחריו ולא-ענו העם אותו דבר: ²² ויאמר אליו אל-העם אני נותרתי נביא ליהוה לבני נביי האבעל ארבע-מאות וחמשים איש: ²³ ויתנו לנו שניים פרים

but let them not apply fire; I will prepare the other bull, and lay it on the wood, and will not apply fire. ²⁴You will then invoke your god by name, and I will invoke the LORD by name; and let us agree: the god who responds with fire, that one is God.” And all the people answered, “Very good!”

²⁵Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, “Choose one bull and prepare it first, for you are the majority; invoke your god by name, but apply no fire.” ²⁶They took the bull that was given them; they prepared it, and invoked Baal by name from morning until noon, shouting, “O Baal, answer us!” But there was no sound, and none who responded; so they performed a hopping dance about the altar that had been set up. ²⁷When noon came, Elijah mocked them, saying, “Shout louder! After all, he is a god. But he may be in conversation, he may be detained, or he may be on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and will wake up.” ²⁸So they shouted louder, and gashed themselves with knives and spears, according to their practice, until the blood streamed over them. ²⁹When noon passed, they kept raving until the hour of presenting the grain offering. Still there was no sound, and none who responded or heeded.

³⁰Then Elijah said to all the people, “Come closer to me”; and all the people came closer to him. He repaired the damaged altar of the LORD. ³¹Then Elijah took twelve stones, corresponding to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob—to whom the word of the LORD had come: “Israel shall be your name”—³²and with the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD. Around the altar he made a trench large enough for two *seahs* of seed. ³³He laid out the wood, and he cut up the bull and laid it on the

ויבחרו להם הכהן האחד ויונתחו
וישמו על העצים ואש לא ישימו ואני
אעשה | אתי-הכהן האחד וננתתי על-
העצים ואש לא אשיהם: ²⁴ וקראתם בשם
אל-היכם ואני אקרא בשם-יהוה והוא
האללים אשר-יענה באש הוא האלים
ויען כל-העם ויאמר טוב הדבר:
²⁵ ויאמר אל-יהו לנביאי הבعل בחורו לכם
הכהן האחד ועשו ראשונה כי אתם
הרבאים וקראו בשם אל-היכם ואש לא
תשימו: ²⁶ ויקחו את-הכהן אשר-נתן
לهم ויעשו ויקראו בשם-הבעל מה-בקר
ועדר-הathanrim לאמור בעל עננו ואין
קול ואין ענה ויפסחו על-המזבח אשר
עשה: ²⁷ ויהי בathanrim ויהתל בהם
אל-יהו ויאמר קראו בקהל-גadol פיר
אל-הים הוא כי שיח ובישייג לו וכי
דרך לו أولי ישע הוא ויקץ*: ²⁸ ויקראו
בקול גдол ויתגדו במשפטם בחרבות
וברמחים עד-ספרדים עליהם: ²⁹ ויהי
בעברathanrim ויתנבו עד לעלות
המנחה ואין-קהל ואין-ענה ואין-קשב:
³⁰ ויאמר אל-יהו לכל-העם גשו אליו
וינשו כל-העם אליו וירפא את-מזבח
יהוה החרוס: ³¹ ויקח אל-יהו שתים
עשרה אבנים במספר שבעה בני-יעקב
אשר היה דבר-יהוה אליו לאמור ישראל
יהיה שם: ³² ויבנה את-האבנים מזבח
בשם יהוה ויעש תעלה בית סאותים
רעה סכיב למזבח: ³³ ויעזר את-העצים

חסר י' בשורה v. 27.

1 Kings 18:24. I will invoke the LORD by name In Scripture, Abraham is the first to call upon God by His name (Gen. 12:8). Such invoca-

cations are repeatedly referred to in the Book of Psalms in connection with an appeal for divine aid (see Ps. 3:5, 102:3).

wood. ³⁴And he said, “Fill four jars with water and pour it over the burnt offering and the wood.” Then he said, “Do it a second time”; and they did it a second time. “Do it a third time,” he said; and they did it a third time. ³⁵The water ran down around the altar, and even the trench was filled with water.

³⁶When it was time to present the grain offering, the prophet Elijah came forward and said, “O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel! Let it be known today that You are God in Israel and that I am Your servant, and that I have done all these things at Your bidding. ³⁷Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that You, O LORD, are God; for You have turned their hearts backward.”

³⁸Then fire from the LORD descended and consumed the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, and the earth; and it licked up the water that was in the trench. ³⁹When they saw this, all the people flung themselves on their faces and cried out: “The LORD alone is God, The LORD alone is God!”

36. Let it be known today that You are God

The Lord is challenged to manifest His power publicly, thereby showing the supremacy of Israel's national God. Similar language is found in the famous ordeal between the young David and the giant Goliath (1 Sam. 17:46).

37. that this people may know Specific actions that point convincingly to divine power constitute a form of proof throughout the Bible. Best known is the repeated idea that the plagues will convince both Israelite and Egyptian: They “shall know” that “I am the LORD” (see Exod. 6:7, 7:5, 10:2, 14:4).

for You have turned their hearts backward This phrase is theologically difficult, because it suggests that God was the cause of Israel's waywardness. Rabbinic tradition resisted the plain sense of this passage—reinterpreting the phrase to say that, despite divine efforts, the people bear responsibility for their actions. Thus: God “turned their hearts” for goodness, but (reading the text as elliptical) the people rebelliously turned “backward.” Alternatively, perhaps the prophet's re-

וַיָּגַתְח אֶת־הַפֵּר וַיִּשְׁמַע עַל־הַעֲצִים:
³⁴ וַיֹּאמֶר מֶלֶאכָה אֶרְבֻּעָה כְּדִים מִים וַיַּצְקֹן
 עַל־הַעֲלָה וַיִּלְבֹּשׁ עַל־הַעֲצִים וַיֹּאמֶר שָׁנָנוּ וַיִּשְׁנוּ
 וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁלֹשָׁו וַיִּשְׁלֹשָׁו: ³⁵ וַיַּלְכֹּו הַמִּים
 סְבִיב לְמִזְבֵּחַ וְגַם אֶת־הַתְּעֵלָה מֶלֶאכָה
 מִים:

³⁶ וַיְהִי | בָּעֵלָת הַמְנַחָה וַיָּגַשׂ אֲלֵיכָה
 הַגְּבִיא וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אֶבְרָהָם יְצָחָק
 וַיִּשְׂרָאֵל וְאַתָּה יְווּדָע כִּי־אַתָּה אֱלֹהִים
 בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל וְאַנְיִי עֲבָדֶךָ וּבְדָבֵרֶךָ
 עָשָׂיתִי אֶת כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים הַאֱלָה: ³⁷ עַנְנִי
 יְהוָה עָנָנִי וַיַּדְעַל הָעָם הַזֶּה כִּי־אַתָּה
 יְהוָה הָאֱלֹהִים וְאַתָּה הַסְּבָט אֶת־לִבָּם
 אַחֲרֵפִית:

³⁸ וַתִּפְלֶל אֲשִׁיהוֹה וַתִּאֶכְלֶל אֶת־הַעֲלָה
 וַיִּתְהַעֲלֵם וַיִּתְהַעֲלֵם וַיִּתְהַעֲלֵם
 וַיִּתְהַעֲלֵם אֲשֶׁר־בְּתַעַלה לְחַכָּה: ³⁹ וַיַּרְא
 בְּלַהֲעַם וַיַּפְלֹלוּ עַל־פְּנֵיהם וַיֹּאמְרוּ יְהוָה
 הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים יְהוָה הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים

mark is an expression of despair, when faced with the unfathomable mystery of human sin and resistance to repentance (M. Greenberg).

39. The LORD alone is God Hebrew: *YHWH hu ha-Elohim*. This proclamation is the quintessential expression of monotheism. The pronoun (“He”) has an emphatic thrust. Its force is dramatized in the divine assertions found in late prophecy, where God Himself vaunts His power with the words: “Understand that I am He (*hu*); before Me no god was formed, and after Me none shall exist” (Isa. 43:10, cf. v. 13). The exclusivist emphasis is also found in other passages (Deut. 4:35; Isa. 45:5). This concept and this language entered Jewish liturgy. Every service of prayer, weekdays or holy days, ends with the words of *Aleinu* in which the Jew proclaims allegiance to God alone and anticipates a messianic time when all people will do likewise. At the end of the final service of *Yom Kippur* faithful Jews repeat their ancestors' words, publicly proclaiming seven times, “The LORD alone is God.”