

Ki Tisa Study Guide - Idolatry

Source Sheet by Judith Spicehandler

Exodus 32:1

(1) When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, the people gathered against Aaron and said to him, “Come, make us a god who shall go before us, for that fellow Moses—the man who brought us from the land of Egypt—we do not know what has happened to him.”

Rashi on Exodus 32:1:2-4

(2) אשר ילכו לפנינו [MAKE US GODS] WHICH SHALL GO BEFORE US — They wished to have many gods (the words **אלהים** is to be taken as plural since the verb **ילכו** is plural; cf. Sanhedrin 63a). (3) **כי זה משה האיש** FOR AS FOR THIS MOSES — This Moses implies that Satan showed them something that looked like Moses being carried on a bier in the air high above in the skies (cf. Shabbat 89a). (4) **אשר העלנו מארץ מצרים** [THAT MAN] THAT BROUGHT US UP OUT OF THE LAND OF EGYPT, and who used to show us the way we had to go; now that he is dead we need gods which shall go before us.

שמות ל"ב:א'

(א) וַיֵּרָא הָעָם כִּי־בָשַׁשׁ מֹשֶׁה לָרֶדֶת מִן־הַהָר וַיִּקְהַל הָעָם עַל־אַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו קוּם | עֲשֵׂה־לָּנוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר יֵלְכוּ לְפָנֵינוּ כִּי־זֶה | מֹשֶׁה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלָנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לֹא יָדַעְנוּ מָה־הָיָה לוֹ:

רש"י על שמות ל"ב:א':ב'-ד'

(ב) **אשר ילכו לפנינו**. אלוהות הרבה אוו להם (סנהדרין ס"ג): (ג) **כי זה משה האיש**. כמין דמות משה הראה להם השטן, שנושאים אותו באויר רקיע השמים (שבת פ"ט): (ד) **אשר העלנו מארץ מצרים**. והיה מורה לנו דרך אשר נעלה בה, עתה צריכין אנו לאלוהות אשר ילכו לפנינו:

Exodus 32:2-5

(2) Aaron said to them, “[You men,] take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” (3) And all the people took off the gold rings that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. (4) This he took from them and cast in a mold, and made it into a molten calf. And they exclaimed, “This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!” (5) When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron announced: “Tomorrow shall be a festival of יהוה!”

Rashi on Exodus 32:5:4

(4) חג לה' A FESTIVAL TO THE LORD — not to the golden calf. In his heart it (the feast) was for Heaven (the Lord). He felt confident that Moses would return by the morrow and that they would worship the Omnipresent (Leviticus Rabbah 10:3).

Exodus 32:7

(7) יהוה spoke to Moses, “Hurry down, for your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt, have acted basely.

Rashi on Exodus 32:7:3

(3) THY PEOPLE HAVE CORRUPTED THEMSELVES שחת עמך (acted basely) — It does not say the people have corrupted but “thy” people — the mixed multitude whom you received of your own accord and accepted as proselytes without consulting Me. You thought it a good thing that proselytes should be attached to the Shechina — now they have corrupted themselves and have corrupted others (Exodus Rabbah 42:6).

שמות ל"ב:ב'-ה'

(ב) וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶהְרֹן פָּרְקוּ נְזָמֵי הַזָּהָב אֲשֶׁר בְּאָזְנֵי נְשֵׁיכֶם בְּנֵיכֶם וּבְנֹתֵיכֶם וְהָבִיאוּ אֵלַי: (ג) וַיִּתְּפְּרוּ כָּל-הָעָם אֶת-נְזָמֵי הַזָּהָב אֲשֶׁר בְּאָזְנֵיהֶם וַיָּבִיאוּ אֶל-אֶהְרֹן: (ד) וַיִּקַּח מֵיָדָם וַיִּצַר אֹתוֹ בְּחֹרֶט וַיַּעֲשֶׂהוּ עֵגֶל מִסַּכָּה וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלֶּה אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֲשֶׁר הֵעֲלֹהָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם: (ה) וַיֵּרָא אֶהְרֹן וַיָּבֹן מִזְבֵּחַ לְפָנָיו וַיִּקְרָא אֶהְרֹן וַיֹּאמֶר חָג לַיהוָה מָחָר:

רש"י על שמות ל"ב:ה':ד'

(ד) חג לה'. בלבבו היה לשמים, בטוח היה שיבא משה ויעבדו את המקום:

שמות ל"ב:ז'

(ז) וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵּדַרְדֹּד בִּי שַׁחַת עַמֶּךָ אֲשֶׁר הֵעֲלִיתָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:

רש"י על שמות ל"ב:ז':ג'

(ג) שחת עמך. שחת העם לא נאמר, אלא עמך — ערב רב שקבלת מעצמך וגירתם ולא נמלכת בי, ואמרת טוב שידבקו גרים בשכינה — הם שחתו והשחיתו (שמות רבה):

Exodus 32:8

They have been quick to turn aside from the way that I enjoined upon them. They have made themselves a molten calf and bowed low to it and sacrificed to it, saying: "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!"

Sforno on Exodus 32:8:1

סרו מהר, they have strayed very quickly, etc. I have not even been able to complete the gift of the Torah I had wanted to give to you. A reference to "the Torah and the Mitzvah" in Exodus 24,12.

שמות ל"ב:ח'

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

ספורנו על שמות ל"ב:ח':א'

סרו מהר. קודם שאגמור לתת לך מה שיעדתי לתת, והם התורה והמצוה אשר כתבתי:

Other idols in the form of calves constructed by the Israelites:**I Kings 12:26-30**

(26) Jeroboam said to himself, "Now the kingdom may well return to the House of David. (27) If these people still go up to offer sacrifices at the House of GOD in Jerusalem, the heart of these people will turn back to their master, King Rehoboam of Judah; they will kill me and go back to King Rehoboam of Judah." (28) So the king took counsel and made **two golden calves**. He said to the people, "You have been going up to Jerusalem long enough. **This is your god (Here are your Gods)**, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!" (29) He set up one in Bethel and placed the other in Dan. (30) That proved to be a cause of guilt, for the people went to worship [the calf at Bethel and] the one at Dan.

Rashi on Hosea 13:2:1

And now Jehu's dynasty, who saw all this, continue to sin.

מלכים א י"ב:כ"ו-ל'

(כו) ויאמר ירבעם בלבו עתה תשוב הממלכה לבית דוד: (כז) אם-יעלה העם הזה לעשות זבחים בבית-יהוה בירושלם וישב לב העם הזה אל-אדנייהם אל-רחבעם מלך יהודה והרגני ושוב אל-רחבעם מלך-יהודה: (כח) ויועץ המלך ויעש שני עגלי זהב ויאמר אלהם רב-לכם מעלות ירושלם הנה אלהיך ישראל אשר העלוך מארץ מצרים: (כט) וישם את-האחד בבית-אל ואת-האחד נתן ב-דן: (ל) ויהי הדבר הזה לחטאת וילכו העם לפני האחד עד-דן:

רש"י על הושע י"ג:ב':א'

עתה. בית יהוא שראו כל זאת יוסיפו לחטוא:

Hosea 13:2

(2) And now they go on sinning;

They have made them **molten images**,

Idols, by their skill, from their silver,

Wholly the work of artisans.

Yet for these they appoint people to sacrifice;

They are wont to **kiss calves!**

הושע י"ג:ב'

(ב) וְעַתָּה | יוֹסֵפוּ לַחֲטֹא וַיַּעֲשׂוּ לָהֶם
 מִסֻּכָּה מִכֶּסֶפֶם כְּתִבוּנָם עֲצָבִים מַעֲשֵׂה
 חָרָשִׁים כָּלֵה לָהֶם הֵם אֲמָרִים זִבְחֵי אָדָם
 עֲגָלִים יִשְׁקֹוּ:



Encyclopedea Judaica, Golden Calf
 CALF AND BULL SYMBOLISM

The narrative of the golden calf cannot be understood without relating it to the erection of two golden calves in the temples of *Beth-El and *Dan by *Jeroboam I of Israel (I Kings 12:26ff.). Not only are the general features of the story similar in both accounts, but the explanatory formula in Exodus 32:4b, 8b – "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt" – is virtually identical to the one in I Kings 12:28b. Scholars are divided on the question of the chronological relationship of the two accounts. The traditional view is that the Jeroboam incident is dependent on the Exodus story (see Cassuto, loc. cit.). Other scholars, however, hold the view that Exodus 32 presupposes I Kings 12.

The bull had an important role in the art and religious texts of the ancient Near East. The storm-god *Hadad is frequently represented standing on a bull. Taking these facts into account it is generally assumed (after H. Th. Obbriek) that Jeroboam's calves corresponded to the *cherubim of Solomon's Temple, i.e., they were regarded as seats or pedestals upon which the Lord was thought to stand invisible to human eyes. M. Haran remarks that if Jeroboam's calves were considered pedestals, then they were not meant to be an exact replica of cherubim connected with the *Ark of the Covenant because the Ark and its cherubim were kept in the publicly inaccessible Holy of Holies while the calves were placed in the courts of the Temple, where the people could see and kiss them (cf. Hos. 13:2). It is also possible that the calves were, from the beginning, meant to represent the Lord like the images in the sanctuaries of Micah and Dan (Judg. 17:4; 18:14, 15–31; cf. M. Haran, in B. Zvieli (ed.), *Siḥot ba-Mikra*, 1 (1968), 214; idem, in: *Biblica*, 50 (1969), 264).

In any case Jeroboam's initiative must have had some basis in an old tradition, otherwise he could not have succeeded in his enterprise. Jeroboam's bulls, contrary to the Ark symbolism, were meant to be accessible to worshipers in the temples (cf. I Kings 12:27); and thus they developed from symbols of the Lord to fetishes in their own right (cf. e.g., II Kings 17:16; Hos. 8:5–6; 10:5; 13:2).

What is the reason God forbids worship of idols? (Quoted in <https://www.paulkipnes.com/living-holy-life/>)

“Why are graven images forbidden by the Torah?” I once heard 20th century Jewish thinker Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel ask. Why is the Torah so concerned with idolatry? You might think (per Rabbi Moses Maimonides) that it is because God has no image, and any image of God is therefore a distortion. But Heschel read the commandment differently. “No,” he said, “it is precisely because God has an image that idols are forbidden. You are the image of God. But the only medium in which you can shape that image is that of your entire life. To take anything less than a full, living, breathing human being and try to create God’s image out of it—that diminishes the

divine and is considered idolatry.” You can’t make God’s image; you can only be God’s image.

Searching for God's Face by Yehuda Amichai

Moses, our teacher, only once saw the face of God
and forgot. He did not want to see the wilderness
not even the promised land, but only the face of God.
He struck the rock in the fury of his longings
he went up and down Mt. Sinai, he shattered the two
tablets of the covenant and made a golden calf, he searched
in fire and cloud. But he remembered only
the strong hand of God and his outstretched arm
not his face and he was like someone who wants
to remember the face of a loved one but cannot.
He made himself a police sketch from the face
of God and from the burning bush and from the face
of Pharaoh’s daughter who leaned over him when he was an infant in the basket,
and he distributed the picture to all the tribes of Israel
and throughout the wilderness. But no one had seen
and no one recognized. And only at the end of his life,
on Mt. Nebo did he see and die
with a kiss from God’s face.

משה רבינו ראה רק פעם אחת את פני האלהים
ושכח. הוא לא רצה לראות את המדבר
ואפילו לא את הארץ המבטחת, אלא רק את פני האלהים
הוא הכה בסלע בזעם געגועיו
הוא עלה להר סיני וירד, הוא שבר
את שני לוחות הברית ועשה עגל זהב, הוא חפש
באש ובעשן, אבל הוא זכר רק
את יד האלהים החזק ואת זרועו ה־נטויה
ולא את פניו והיה כמו אדם שרוצה
לזכר את פני מי שאהב ולא יוכל
הוא עשה לעצמו קלסטרון מפני
האלהים מפני הסנה הבוער מפני
בת פרעה שנרכנה מעליו כשהיה תינוק בתבה,
והפיץ את ה־תמונה בכל שבטי ישראל

ובכל המדבר, אבל איש לא ראה
 ואיש לא הכיר. ורק בסוף חייו
 על הר נבו ראה ומת
 בנשיקת פני האלהים.

The Other Side of the Story
Rabbi Rachel Barenblat

Already so many changes.
 Our long column of refugees
 snaking into the wilderness.
 Through the sandal-sucking mud
 where the waters had been.
 Their men and horses consumed.
 And then that Voice
 speaking directly into us,
 reverberating in our chests...!
 But Moshe ascended by himself
 into the sapphire sky
 and he didn't come back.
 Of course we asked Aharon
 to make something to remind us
 we weren't as alone as we felt.

Golden Calf
Rabbi Jill Hammer

I confess it didn't look like God
 to me, but maybe it looked like God
 to someone. One never knows what that one
 looks like, as seen behind a cloud
 on the top of a mountain, or hiding
 in a scraggly thornbush among sheep,
 or in the howl of wind moving the sea,
 slipping children out of a womb
 into freedom, or maybe tucking a blanket
 into a floating basket.
 And when they later said: no, that's not what
 God looks like; you deserve to die
 for making such an error;

how could you mistake a gold monstrosity
for God? I thought: you too mistake things for God—
priests and prophets with staves and snakes,
laws engraved in stone,
the way your household is organized,
who's on top and who isn't.
You too grope toward the ineffable,
weaving cherubim into a curtain that screens nothing.
If it was a mistake, it's one among a thousand mistakes
like a straw among piles of hay. Perhaps
before we point fingers, before we shatter tablets
and set kin against kin, we should sit in the silence
one more minute. We all give our earrings
to make something. What's it going to be?



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