

Picking up after a Crisis

Before the Golden Calf episode, God had given Moses detailed instructions about how the Tabernacle was to be constructed. Now, *after* the Golden Calf episode, the Tabernacle instructions are implemented. Now that the Lord and his people have resolved their differences, doubt and disobedience are replaced by willing cooperation and the Tabernacle building proceeds with enthusiasm. Do you agree? Let's examine this claim more closely, in conversation with the sages.

Read Exodus 35:21-29. Recall its similarity to the words of an earlier Torah passage (i.e., before the Golden Calf):

"You shall accept gifts for Me from every person whose heart is so moved" (25:2).

Repeated here we find a wonderful picture of community giving, do we not? Why then, do we find a Talmudic teacher, Rabbi Yehuda Ben Pazi, saying, "Can we read these verses and not shudder?"¹

What might cause an attentive reader to shudder, or to at least pause before affirming the favourable scene depicted by the text? Ponder and discuss this with a friend.

Our Rabbi continues, noting how the Torah records two instances of Israelite giving:

"For good—'Every willing heart brought' (for the Tabernacle);

For evil—'All the people broke off' (their ornaments to give to the golden calf)."

So perhaps we shudder to think that the energy being channelled into the present holy task was once directed to an idolatrous one. The memory of the Golden Calf, which involved 'all the people' (32:3) in an enthusiastic pooling of gold jewellery, causes the sages to read the present Torah portion with caution. Even the description of each 'willing hearted' person is cause for pause... Were all the people involved in this act of giving, or only those whose hearts were moved?

Then again, perhaps you took a more optimistic view from the text, like that found in the midrash where Israel is compared to a king's daughter.² She is a fair maiden but one day her face is sunburnt. In answer to her critics she confidently replies that with the appropriate care her fair complexion will return! So it is with Israel, reasons the midrash. The people have been damaged, but they heal. Further, they turn the things of sin (gold ornaments) into a means of making amends and giving glory to God.

Ramban (12th century Torah scholar) concurs with this optimism. For Ramban, this is the whole point of the Torah's repetition of slabs of construction detail: to indicate that while the Tabernacle building task remains the same as in previous Torah portions, the people (post-Golden Calf) are morally and spiritually in a very different place. Do you agree? Contribute an insight of your own.

Notice how traditional Jewish approaches to Scripture seek a holistic view of the sacred text. Each Torah portion tells a story that sheds light on a story in another part of the Bible, leading us to puzzle, ponder, and enter deeply into the mysteries of faith and life.

Think of a period in your life which was 'interrupted' by a major event/crisis. Afterwards, what was the same, and what was different? In what way had you changed?

1. Yerushalmi, Shekalim I, 1 quoted in Leibowitz, 665.

2. Midrash Aggada, Terumah 26.

'Midrash' refers to Jewish storytelling traditions.

Bibliography: Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot* (New York, 1996). Scripture: JPS.

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