

## *Moses in Active Prayer*

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The Golden Calf episode is a critical point in the God-Israel relationship. While Moses is up the mountain, his absence in the camp below (an absence perhaps far too long for a people desperate for firm leadership) creates a void that is unhappily filled.

Read the account of the Israelites' actions in 32:1-6, then read the dialogue that ensues between God and Moses in 32:7-14. Note the repetition, the interesting inclusions and puzzling aspects about the text. What does a close reading reveal about the developing relationship between the characters? With whom do your empathies lie? What insights emerge?

*The Lord spoke to Moses, "Go down at once! your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely" (32:7).*

Do you hear in God's words the extent of the tragedy at hand? *Your* people? Wait a minute, isn't this *God's* own people whom *God* brought out of Egypt? Can the Almighty really be wiping his hands of the Israelites? Surely not! And yet verse 9 only feeds our concern: "I have seen this people, how stiffnecked they are." Where we might have expected God to say 'my' people instead we find 'this' people. What we are hearing is not just disappointment, it is utter estrangement! Do you agree? What thoughts emerged from your own discussion? Support your comments with close reference to the text.

Perhaps you also noted the strong response of Moses. If he takes a punch, he certainly gives back a right hook! "Oh Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, who you brought out of the land of Egypt" (32:11). Moses has the gall to remind God of God's own doings: This is *your* people, Lord, to whose ancestors you swore a divine promise! (see vv. 12-13). Can you sense the electricity of the moment. Like a married couple experiencing a major conflict, God and Israel (with Moses as mediator) find themselves

at crossroads: will they find their way to a deeper union, or will this incident tear them apart?

In the tradition we find some sages criticizing Moses' response. How dare he speak with such irreverence to Almighty God! Yet, within that same tradition, a deep sensitivity to the sacred text allows for a defence of Moses. "Now, let me alone," says God (v.10) immediately before his stated intention to destroy his people. Say the Jewish sages, this unusual and seemingly unnecessary phrase ('let me be', 'leave me') offers a vital clue that God is stalling for time and in fact wants Moses to intervene! Says Rashi,<sup>1</sup> echoing midrashic interpretations:

"Moses had not even begun to pray for them, yet God said: 'Leave Me alone'? But here He gave Moses an opening and informed him that the matter depended on him."

In other words, amidst divine heartbreak God creates a space for more to happen, and Moses is astute and responsive enough to take the hint. He throws himself into active prayer. Indeed, the Jewish sages view Moses as a master of prayer, an intimate of God, boldly confident in the divine-human relationship and prepared to 'give all' according to the urgency of the situation.

### **Reflection**

Am I trusting enough to approach the Lord with directness, confidence, boldness, in my prayer life? What do I learn from the example of Moses?•

1. Rashi, 11<sup>th</sup> C. Torah commentator, cited by Leibowitz, 565.

Bibliography: Freedman & Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah: Exodus* (New York: Soncino, 1983); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot* (New York, 1996). Scripture: NRSV.

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