

Was the Golden Calf Really a Case of Idolatry?

The Exodus story of the rebellion at Mt Sinai, where the Israelites erect a golden calf, raises an interesting question. Up until this point the Israelites had witnessed miracle after miracle at the hand of God who had delivered them from Egypt. Having been lifted so high, how could they fall from grace so suddenly, embracing pagan idolatry in the blink of an eye? This question intrigued Israel's sages through the ages. Let's join in the discussion of Jewish commentators...

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." (Exodus 32:1)

Was the Israelites' sin really idolatry? Read 32:1 carefully. Are the people trying to replace God or simply looking for a visual symbol to sustain their faith in God at a time of insecurity? Moses, after all, has been gone a long time. Yes, he is up the mountain communing with God, but if he is any kind of responsible leader shouldn't he be back by now? The sages note that the Hebrew word *boshesh*, 'delayed' (32:1), can be translated as 'shamefully-late'.

Drawing on the Oral Tradition of Judaism, some commentators say that the people were seeking not another god but rather another leader like Moses. Others say that the real sin of the people was their attempt to devise their own prescriptions for worship rather than wait for Moses to come back with a list of God's explicit wishes.

Yet other sources do not support this view. Psalm 106:20 ("*They exchanged their glory for the image of a bull that feeds on grass*") plainly describes idolatry. So too does the Talmud: "By worshipping the calf the Israelites indicated that they accepted idolatry."¹ Rashi² seems to agree: "They desired many gods."

But if their sin was idolatry, we are back to our original question: how could a people raised so high, fall so far?

Perhaps the answer is not so hard to find when we reflect on the fact that any kind of lasting transformation of character takes time. A dramatic conversion or miracle may begin the process, but lasting transformation only comes through persistent application of beliefs and principles in the crucible of daily living.

It involves the "inevitability of gradualness" says Maimonides.³ Having been reared in slavery, the Israelites were hardly capable of rising up with the strength to fight giants. "God in his wisdom contrived that they wander in the wilderness till they had become schooled in courage, since it is well known that physical hardships toughen and the converse produce faintheartedness."⁴

Table topic: Think of other biblical stories where a person or community of apparently invincible faith was suddenly shown to be morally weak? E.g., King David; Peter the Apostle; the Galatians. Why are these stories important to us?

Journal topic: Draw a timeline tracing your own journey to maturity; e.g., as a man/woman, as a spouse/parent, as a committed Christian, etc. Highlight the 'character building' events of progress and setback, success and failure. Is there a 'golden calf' moment marked on your timeline?

1. Avodah Zarah 53b.

2. Rashi: revered medieval scholar

3. Maimonides: 12th C., great post-Talmudic authority on Judaism.

4. Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, quoted by Leibowitz, 555.

Sources: Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York, 1995); Freedman & Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah* (London/New York, 1983); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot* (New York, 1996).

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