

# The Golden Calf and the Idolatry of Knowing

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וַיִּרְא הָעָם, כִּי-בִשְׁשׁ מִשָּׁה לָרֶדֶת מִן-הַהָר  
וַיִּקְהַל הָעָם עַל-אַהֲרֹן, וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו  
--קוּם עֲשֵׂה-לָנוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר יֵלְכוּ לִפְנֵינוּ  
כִּי-זֶה מִשָּׁה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלָנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם  
לֹא יָדַעְנוּ מָה-הָיָה לוֹ.

*“When the people saw that Moses  
delayed to come down from the mount,  
they gathered unto Aaron, saying:*

*'Up, make us a god **who shall go before us!***

*For this Moses, the man that brought us up out of Egypt,  
**we know not** what is become of him.'*

When I was in tenth grade chemistry class, Mr. Lew Acampora, known to us affectionately as Uncle Tungsten, for his favorite element, #74 on the Periodic Table, demonstrated for us a deep secret of life and its opposite - stasis, in a profound and unwitting explanation of the dynamics in the above verse from our parsha. ([See a video of that experiment here](#), a supersaturated solution of sodium acetate acting out one of my favorite metaphors, explanation anon.

**“When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mount...we know not what is become of him”** - This verse sets the stage for one of the greatest and most famous *sins* of human history, the creation and worship of the golden calf. So what was

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the great sin, as Moshe later refers to it? *Why* was building the calf so great an error?

Resisting the temptation to regard the sins and wayward ways of the desert-wandering People of Israel with scorn and contempt- (really, a golden calf!?), rather following the suggestion of the Piasezner Rebbe to enter the stories of the Torah as if they're happening to us now, let's take a look from their perspective:

The people saw that Moshe wasn't coming down. According to their calculation, he should be here already. He's not here. Up until now all we've had to do is follow Moshe, and now he's not here. And we're stuck out here in the middle of nowhere. Uh oh.

Doubt.

Fear.

Anxiety.

Uh oh.

Uncertainty.

Confusion.

Heart is beating faster, not sure what to do, which way is forward, which way is safety, which way is right.

And then, a glint of salvation, *Aaron*, "make us a god who shall go **before us**"! Whew, relief! something solid to grab on to. Going before us we can know *ahead* of time where we're going, what to expect, what's expected of us, in whose footsteps we march, who we are. We're safe. We're idol worshippers.

The situation of Bnei Yisrael is the challenge of the human condition dramatized to the height of its existential import- how do we respond to the fundamental experience of uncertainty inherent in life?

Our bodies and minds have evolved over eons where uncertainty and change constantly pose a potential threat to survival. Neuroscientist and meditation teacher Rick Hanson writes:

*"Everything changes. That's the universal nature of outer reality and inner experience. Therefore, there's no end to disturbed equilibria as long as you live. **But to help you survive, your brain keeps trying to stop the river, struggling to hold dynamic systems in place, to find fixed patterns in this variable world, and to construct permanent plans for changing conditions.**" (Buddha's Brain, The Practical Neuroscience of Love, Happiness, and Wisdom, p. 33-34)*

We are constantly trying to close all the loops in our lives. An unclosed loop is uncomfortable. Some choice lines from Ehud Banai, in his song *Egel*

*HaZahav/Golden Calf* ([hear it here](#)), illustrate this tendency and its cost:

**In a closed circle** they dance around / round and round the golden calf

**No one to give direction** / forgetting themselves / They dance around the golden calf

ושוכחים את עצמם / רוקדים סביב עגל הזהב / מי יתן כיוון... / במעגל סגור מסתובבים / סביב עגל הזהב

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Just as in the science experiment above where the dynamism of the liquid solution allows for constantly shifting forms, once there is *something* to grab on to, something to coalesce around, to hide behind, then everything becomes fixed, reified, set. The dynamism of a living covenantal relationship with life and the Divine is sacrificed at the idolatrous altar of bovine safety.

Abiding in the space of unknowing is a critical stage of growth in both macro and micro situations. In the psychology of personal growth, the stage known as ‘moratorium,’ of not having a clearly defined identity, of exploration and experimentation, is the sine qua non that allows for the authentic discovery of a new identity, a process which cycles through our lives time and again. It’s a process I’m undergoing at this very moment as old layers of self are shed, unsure what and who will emerge into the next chapter of my life, which values are core, and yet, from past experience, practice, and intuition, I trust that the unfolding process has an order and guidance unto itself. I remember on my Bronfman summer the unnerving prospect that questioning my own path and Jewish identity meant a tacit admission that my parents’ path and choices might not be perfect and all-encompassing. Exactly the dilemma here at the foot of the mountain. Having had someone to follow, then that leader disappears or no longer meets all the needs of the current moment. There is a Japanese Zen saying, “Today’s enlightenment is tomorrow’s delusion.” Even enlightenment isn’t a reliable perch.

The encounter with uncertainty and its attendant inclinations are just as present in our day-to-day conversations and interactions. How often do you notice people allowing silence in a conversation? and how often is that silence allowed to be pregnant, and then to deliver, rather than be awkward? Usually we rush to fill silence with words, we jump into *elohai masecha*, the gods of mask, which we are adjured to avoid, occupying roles and identities which give us a fleeting sense of relief from the bare nakedness of vulnerable encounter, yet alienate us from connections of depth, authenticity, and intimacy.

So what is the alternative? The very words with which the sin is described invite an intertextual reference that points towards an answer. Whereas here it says עשה לנו אלהים אשר יכלו לפנינו, make us a god *who shall go before us*, the same words are used in the opposite paradigm, where the Divine enjoins Avraham:

Go before me and be whole/innocent/unadulterated (Genesis 17:1)

התהלך לפני והיה תמים – בראשית יז:א

The model to which we are called is one of stepping out before even God, stepping into life with the *unadulterated* eagerness of a healthy child at play. And then Avraham falls on his face. Not trying to hold a pose, but aware of the power of the Divine instruction, of the invitation to life, and totally letting go into it, face first.

If you’d like to experiment, you might regard a situation or unresolved issue in your life, asking yourself, what is the felt sense of that situation? Rather than trying to figure it out, which you’ve probably spent a fair bit of time doing, notice what happens in your body. Abide with that felt sense, allowing it space and time to disclose its own meaning and insight.

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A different application and practice of 'going before' could be through stream of consciousness speech, or any kind of improvisational activity, whether alone in the presence of the Divine or with another person, noticing the vulnerability and the inclination to control and censor what we say before it comes out, and what comes up as one relaxes into the process. Toes in the sea of uncertainty and sand slipping away underfoot, we let fall again and again, till the controlling self abates and the Shechina dwells in our midst.

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