

Parashat Ki Tissa: The Calves We Seek

Rabbi Joshua Rabin, Astoria Center of Israel, Astoria, New York¹

1. The Calf in the Background

Malbim on Shemot 32:19

ויהי, הנה עד עתה לא שבר את הלוחות כי חשב שזה עשו בעבור שבושש לרדת ורצו מנהיג במקומו, וכשיראו שבא מן ההר יחדלו ממעשיהם ויעשו תשובה, אבל כשראה שהגם שקרב אל המחנה וראו שבא משה, ובכ"ז היה עדיין העגל והם שמתו עליו במחולות, מזה ראה שבדעתם למרוד בה' ובמשה עבדו ולא עשו שיהיה טלמס ומנהיג רק לע"ז...

As he approached the camp. Moshe initially thought they only made the calf as a substitute for him—because he failed to return when expected—and he was certain they would repent the moment they saw him. That is why he did not break the Tablets immediately. But then when they continued their revelry despite his arrival, he realized that their intention was to rebel against God.

Frans Francken, "The Worship of the Golden Calf"- Version 1 (1630-1635)



¹ All translations are from Sefaria, unless otherwise noted.

2. The Calf at the Center

Ibn Ezra on Shemot 32:19	
<p>וירא את העגל ומחולות...ה"א העגל משרת בעבור האחרת. כמו וירא את העגל והמחולות סביביו. ומרוב קנאת משה שבר הלוחות שהיו בידיו כמו שטר עדות. והנה קרע שטר התנאים. וזה היה לעיני כל ישראל כי כן כתוב:</p>	<p>The verse should be understood as follows: that he saw the calf and the dancing around it. Moses was overcome by great jealousy. He therefore broke the tablets that were in his hands and served, as it were, as a document of witness Moses thus tore up the contract. As Scripture states, "he did this in the sight of all of Israel."</p>

James Tissot, "The Golden Calf" (1896-1902)



3. The Calves We Seek²

John Newton, "The Golden Calf" (1779)		
<p>Yea, Aaron, God's anointed priest, Who on the mount had been He durst prepare the idol-beast, And lead them on to sin.</p> <p>Lord, what is man! and what are we, To recompense thee thus! In their offence our own we see, Their story points at us.</p>	<p>From Sinai we have heard thee speak, And from mount Calv'ry too; And yet to idols oft we seek, While thou art in our view.</p> <p>Some golden calf, or golden dream, Some fancied creature-good, Presumes to share the heart with him, Who bought the whole with blood.</p>	<p>Lord, save us from our golden calves, Our sin with grief we own; We would no more be thine by halves, But live to thee alone.</p>

² John Newton is most famously known for writing the hymn "Amazing Grace."