

וירא העם כי בשש משה לרדת מן ההר ויקהל העם  
על אהרן ויאמרו אליו קום עשה לנו אלהים אשר ילכו לפנינו  
כי זה משה האיש אשר העלנו מארץ מצרים לא ידענו מה היה לו:

“When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, the people gathered against Aaron and said to him, ‘Come, make us a god who shall go before us, for that man Moses, who brought us from the land of Egypt—we do not know what has happened to him.’”—Exodus 32:1

## KI TISSA (“*When you take*”)

EXODUS 30:11–34:35



### THE LORD TELLS MOSES TO TAKE A CENSUS

of his people, so that each person over the age of twenty can pay a half-shekel offering to the Lord—a gift that will defend them against disease while providing funds for the maintenance and operation of the sanctuary. The priestly rules for washing before approaching the

Tabernacle are detailed, along with the correct recipe for the aromatic oil that should be burned (it’s a complex creation of myrrh, fragrant cinnamon, aromatic cane, cassia, and olive oil). The composition of the priestly incense is also spelled out; it shall consist of herbs and frankincense.

#### GOD’S ARTIST

Then God reveals that Bezalel, of the

tribe of Judah, has been selected to be endowed with divinely inspired artistic skill. Working with gold, silver, copper, stone, and wood, Bezalel is to execute the designs for the Tabernacle, its furnishings, and the priestly clothing.

The Lord then orders Moses to reinforce the centrality of the Sabbath: Anyone breaking it is to be put to death. The covenant is then proffered, written on two tablets by the finger of God.

## IDLE IDOL

Back down at the foot of the mountain, the people have become concerned about Moses’ extended absence. Fearing him lost, they surround Aaron and pressure him to construct a god they can worship. Aaron orders them to gather up their gold jewelry. He then casts the collection in a mold and forges it into a calf. The people begin to worship the idol as if it is the force that delivered them from Egypt, feasting and dancing around it in celebration.

A disgruntled God monitors the situation and commands Moses to hurry down the mountain, lambasting the Israelites as “stiff-necked” or stubborn. The Lord’s immediate impulse is to destroy them, but Moses counsels caution, urging God to think what pleasure the annihilation of the Israelites will bring the Egyptians. He reinforces this message by reminding God of the covenant made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

As Moses descends, Joshua wonders if they are hearing the sounds of war emanating from the Israelites’ camp. Moses knows better, suggesting it is neither triumph nor defeat they hear, but more the sound of song. But once they come closer and Moses

glimpses the celebration and dancing, he is unable to contain his fury, hurling down the tablets and shattering them before burning down the calf, grinding it into powder, mixing it with water, and forcing the people to drink it.

Moses confronts Aaron, demanding to know what has clouded his brother’s judgment. Aaron defends himself by blaming humanity’s predilection for doing evil. Recognizing the extent to which the Israelites are out of control and the extent of the physical threat they pose, Moses stands by the camp’s gate and asks anyone who remains on God’s side to rally to him. The Levites walk over, and he orders them to pull out their short swords and take revenge on the ringleaders. Their response is immediate: Three thousand of their fellows are massacred.

## FORGIVE AND FORGET?

With order now restored, Moses addresses the people the following day, outlining the process through which they can gain forgiveness. He then approaches the Lord and says that the people will be forgiven or he will quit the entire divine project. God decides that Moses will continue leading the people, but he should let them know

that sinners will receive their punishment in due time. Indeed, a plague soon descends on the people as retribution for their calf-worshipping ways.

Then the Lord tells Moses to continue the journey, restating the covenant; however, God will no longer travel in the people's midst, not wanting to be tempted to destroy them if provoked by their stubborn behavior. An angel will now lead them as they begin to drive enemy tribes out of the land.

The people are upset by this news, so Moses asks God how he will be guided through the wilderness. He demands to learn more about the Lord's true nature, suggesting it would be better not to set foot on the journey than to be left without God's leadership. Moses then asks God to offer a full-frontal revelation, to which the Lord agrees.

Because a human cannot survive seeing God's face, the Lord instructs Moses to place himself on a rock so he will be shielded in a crevice as the flyby occurs. Moses carves the covenant onto two replacement stones and ascends the mountain. The Lord descends in a cloud. Moses proclaims God's name, and as the Lord passes by him, exclaims, "The Lord, The Lord,

compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and good faith, kind to the thousandth generation, forgiving crime, transgression, and sin, yet willing to visit punishment of parents upon their children and descendants up to the third and fourth generation."

Once Moses has begged for forgiveness on behalf of the Israelites, God restates the covenant and promises to work wonders on their behalf. The Israelites will destroy every tribe that confronts them, because God is a jealous force. The Israelites are reminded that they cannot craft idols of their own, and are commanded to maintain the Festival of Unleavened Bread, dedicate their firstborn to God, keep the Sabbath, and maintain the Harvest Festival and the Festival of Ingathering.

Moses is on the mountaintop for forty days and nights, during which he does not eat or drink. He descends with the commandments on the tablets, unaware that God's presence has made his skin glow. The radiance makes Aaron and the leadership afraid to come near him, but Moses calls them back and tells them all that God has instructed. After that, he begins to wear a veil, taking it off only to consult with the Lord.

# RICH COHEN

Everything you've heard about the golden calf is wrong. For starters, it was not a calf. It was more like a pig, with a snout nose and fiery eyes, like a god of yore, but then, later, swine were made verboten. But not yet; remember, this happened long before Deuteronomy had been written. Second, this idea that in making the thing I was transgressing or violating, behaving like a moron who did not understand that it was He of the unsayable name, He who wrestled Jacob in the desert as the moon wept, who freed us, well, that is another untruth. I knew and loved God, but I did what I did because my brother left me in the desert with about 600,000 newly freed, utterly psychotic slaves while he went into the mountains to “figure a few things out.”

When you go away like that, how long are you usually gone? For me, it's hours. If I'm gone more than a day, my wife calls the cops and the neighbors start combing the weeds along the running path to see if I've dropped dead of a heart attack or cut my own throat. Moses was gone three weeks before the people boiled over and started demanding an answer, a plan, a way to relieve all that accumulated suffering. And remember who I was dealing with! This was a mob! At first, I said, “No, no, Moses will be back.” But finally, when it was do something or let them riot and kill one another, I decided to act. What the hell? Let's make an idol, as of old. A calf? No, a swine, which was my way of adding a subtext.

On one level, it's a tchotchke like back in Egypt, whereas on another it's an admonition. It tells the people, You're behaving like pigs. And this notion, written into the book of Exodus thousands of years later by people with their own agendas, that the Israelites bowed before it as if it were God? Not true! The golden calf—I will call it that, as that's how it's become known—was a symbol, a way of concentrating the brain, giving

the people something to look at as they worshipped the pillar of smoke or fire they followed in the desert. (And what is a pillar of smoke or fire if not another kind of symbol?) Why? Because they needed it. Moses had left, God was talking to someone else, and they needed a rail to hold.

That's what I gave them. So I reject the notion that we were worshipping a foreign god. We were worshipping the One God via One Calf. The real issue was the matter of creating idols. We did do that. We were worshipping with the aid of an icon, and it's a sin. It's also about the hardest demand of our faith. Cleanse your mind of images, leave it open to nothing, thus everything. Nearly impossible! Just look how image-filled the Jewish and Christian world is even today! And these were the first people told to do it. But here's the key: They had not been told yet. You've got me in your books for violating a law that had yet to be written! I think, in your country, you're protected by an ex post facto law. You can't be charged for breaking a rule if that rule did not exist when you broke it. When I built the calf, Moses was still up the mountain. There were no commandments, no law forbidding what I was doing. So condemn me, but please notice how God never did so. The priests come from me; I was the first of the line, the father of vestments. If you don't believe it, check your New York phone book and count the number of Cohens. So add me to that list of those Jews condemned for doing what had to be done. And, by the way, and this is the last thing, I neither looked nor talked anything like Edward G. Robinson. I was in fact a very decent-looking man.