Golden Calf and consuming fire

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interviewed by Mordechai Beck in the December 2022 issue

Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg (Photo by Joan Roth)

Read Beth Kissileff's review of The Hidden Order of Intimacy *by Aviva Zornberg.*

After writing a book about Genesis, another about Exodus, and another about Numbers, you were hesitant to write about Leviticus.

It seemed rather dry, and full of small details about the functioning of the tabernacle and the priests who operated it. Moreover, I am drawn to narrative, and this book has only two stories in it: the death of Aaron’s sons (Lev. 10:1–2 and 16:1) and that of the son of an Israelite woman and an Egyptian father, who curses God and is stoned to death (24:10–14).

What made you change your mind?

My husband, Eric, encouraged me to look for a way to connect. I looked again at the magisterial Midrash collection known as Midrash Rabba, and there followed a period of thinking through the book. One day, I had a flash of insight about Leviticus as a whole. I saw it, in the main, as a response to the Golden Calf. This insight gave me a structure and a starting point.

Why is the Golden Calf central to your understanding of Leviticus?

I'm influenced here by philosopher Eric Santner's *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life*, in which he brings the thoughts of Freud and Rosenzweig into conversation. The exodus from Egypt becomes a metaphor for leaving a constricted life. There are midrashim that speak of Egypt as representing the concept of *meitzar*—the world of narrow straits from which it is impossible to escape. This is a pun on the Hebrew word for Egypt: *mitzrayim*. In Hasidic texts, this restriction of who we could potentially be comes to represent idolatry. For Santner, Egyptomania is the addiction to psychological defense systems that constrain one from entering into "the midst of life."

Such patterns of thinking and feeling remain a constant force of alienation. For instance, when the biblical text refers to future punishment for the sin of the Golden Calf (Exod. 32:34), Rashi, our greatest interpreter of biblical texts, reads this to mean that a small part of the sin will be paid off in every generation: the punishment will be diffused over the generations. This suggests that idolatry always makes its appearance in history. It is not a purely historical event but rather a psychological element of human life for which we
all bear responsibility.

For me the notion of idolatry has to do with the appetite for easy or immediate answers to intellectual or emotional dilemmas. Our tendency is to make objects fetishes, like the child whose fantasy centers on a doll—when its powers fail, the child destroys it and finds another to replace it. A 19th-century commentary, *Meshech Chochmah*, suggests that Moses becomes a fantasy object of idol worship for the people. When he fails to return from Mt. Sinai, the Israelites turn to the more conventional forms of idolatry: "The man who brought us out of Egypt is no more" (Exod. 32:1). There is a shocking ease to this transition from one idol to another.

The calf is a classic god figure in Egyptian culture. For the Israelites after centuries of assimilation, it is already a fixture in their unconscious minds. The Golden Calf

represents a profound craving, something obsessive that seeks total satisfaction in the world of objects.

What does this innate tendency to idolatry say about the role of the priesthood in Leviticus?

The priests in the tabernacle are, in a sense, functionaries for whom details of ritual are central—like their ceremonial clothing, which creates a symbolic presence in the lives of the people. The danger of this is that the representation becomes all-important.

In the reading of Rashbam (Rashi's grandson), the problem with the sons of Aaron the high priest, Nadav and Avihu, lies in their anxiety to make the rituals that inaugurate the tabernacle produce the outcome that God has promised—the appearance of his presence in the tabernacle. A kind of technical activism drives them to make the system work now. They cannot wait for divine fire but instead bring domestic fire.

A similar frenzy appears when the people make the Golden Calf: "They saw that Moses was delayed." This is a psychological issue. Something of this impatience seems to have become a positive value in our time: we see being proactive as a virtue. In this sense, the Golden Calf makes us think again about the alternative virtues of waiting, of a receptive passivity. Didn't Pascal say that all of humanity's problems stem from our inability to sit quietly in a room alone?

You picture the story of Nadav and Avihu happening on the eighth day of the inauguration of the tabernacle (*mishkan*), which was meant to be the culminating day on which the glory of God would appear and the *shekhina* (Divine presence) would come to rest in the work of the people's hands. What is the meaning of this scene for you?

For months the people had been working conscientiously, until they finally finished building this structure. The glory of God is to appear and give life and meaning to the structure. God's presence will be indicated by a fire descending from the heavens, moving through the Holy of Holies to the external altar to consume the offering. This will be a sign of complete forgiveness for the sin of the Golden Calf. The people experience shame and regret for the sin, and they wait for an epiphany to indicate that God has accepted their atonement.

God’s fire does indeed appear and consumes the sacrifices as promised. But at that precise moment, Nadav and Avihu enter the tabernacle with “a strange fire,” a fire that God did not command (Lev. 10:1). And the fire of God comes forth and consumes them.

Rashbam reads this in the most dramatic way. The fire that consumes the sacrifices is the same fire that consumes the priests. From a literary point of view, this is an earthshaking moment. The fire that is meant to bring the tabernacle to life is the same fire that destroys the young priests “in the presence of God” (10:2). At the very moment of ecstatic life, when the people are rejoicing and falling onto their faces, we read about sudden death. The young priests die without any clear explanation. Through the generations, commentaries struggle to find meaning in this mysterious disaster.

It seems to me that the literary mystery represents a theological mystery. What is central is the priests’ impatience to make the story meaningful. In the biblical story, we simply read about the ritual processes that lead to God’s presence appearing. The Midrash emphasizes the delay, the human experience of nothing happening, and with it a feeling of humiliation and shame: all our hard work to build this tabernacle, to go through the lengthy rituals, has come to nothing! This is experienced as rejection, a slighting of human effort. They can’t tolerate the anxiety, and they provide a homemade solution.

On any other day, this would have been a legitimate means of burning sacrifices. But on this day, it is the wrong solution for what they seek—a sign from God that their penitence is accepted.

Psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas has created a word for a new disorder: *normotic*. This is a disorder of infatuation with the normal, which offers easy solutions to dilemmas. The priests can’t wait for God. They preempt—and prevent—the process of sanctification. Waiting, attending to their desire, making space for the future to unfold: these are, it seems, unbearable experiences. So they resort to everyday, well-practiced solutions.

In doing this, they pick up the theme of the Golden Calf. Moses is late—*boshesh* in Hebrew—in returning from Mt. Sinai. The Israelites feel that they have been left high and dry. The Midrash offers a pun on *boshesh*: it’s six o’clock, he should be back! It’s rather like the White Rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland*, a comic impatience. In the

daring reading of *Meshech Chochma*, Moses has become for them a figure of godlike power; it was he who brought them out of Egypt. Now Moses is absent, and the focus of their inner lives has disappeared. He promised to be back at midday, and it is midday plus *x* minutes! It's no longer a matter of being 40 days late; a few minutes' delay is enough to topple their entire belief system. So they fall back on the pagan norms of the past.

One of the images of God in the Torah is as a consuming fire. Moses' first encounter is with God at the burning bush, which offers the paradox of fire: it lives by consuming its fuel. What is it about God that we are supposed to learn from such an image?

If God's presence is like fire, then coming too close is dangerous. But, the story claims, this fire—Moses' mission from God—will not destroy him. His life is to be lived in intimacy with the Divine, and yet he will not be consumed. The fire image evokes both death and life.

The Jewish tradition has many examples of martyrdom in the name of heaven. The fire that consumes is a realistic image of an extreme event, even of an extreme desire: the desire to annul oneself for God. This idea is not attractive to modern sensibility, but it plays a real role in religious feeling. At the same time, it contains its opposite: the desire to live life for God. The consuming fire is an image that is free to undermine itself. Most fires do consume, but not this one.

A consuming fire is a dynamic vision in contrast with the Golden Calf. The idol is a fixed image, an image whose nature and meaning are clearly known. It's an icon in the culture—the satisfaction of what I already know that I need. No need to think or to dream. The Golden Calf appeals to a dead imagination.

The life of imagination moves restlessly from image to image. Moses asks God at the burning bush, "What is Your name" (Exod. 3:13)? The people need a name, something that they can grasp. God answers, "*Ehye asher ehye*" ("I will become what I will become"). The verb "to be" is repeated without a predicate. What God is, or will be, is left to the open future, to the divine imagination.

For the human being, this is a frustrating answer. It names by refusing to name. A space must be left for the God who is not predictable, who cannot be imagined as simply part of the system. We might call this the space of human uncertainty or even human imagination.

What ultimately stands out for you in your interpretation of Leviticus?

There are so many ways of understanding the Torah. So I say to myself, I've written this book on Leviticus, what do I do with it? How do I put it into action? That was the idea of the tabernacle. You had to make it. Create it, fulfill its demands, and—in later times—study it. The Torah is a work of the mind, of creating a world of inner reality, sacredness. To understand Torah, you must use your imagination.