

STUDY GUIDE

The Torah: A Women's Commentary

Parashat Ki Tisa

Exodus 30:11-34:35

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Parashat Ki Tisa Study Guide Themes

Theme 1: The Golden Calf—A Rupture in the Connection between God and Israel

Theme 2: Restoring the Covenant—Healing the Rupture between God and Israel

Introduction



Parashat Ki Tisa marks a pivotal moment in the people's relationship with God. The Israelites—with the enthusiasm of a newly liberated people—have agreed to God's commandments (Exodus 24:3). Their acceptance of God's covenant, perhaps without a full understanding of its responsibilities and ramifications (see Exodus 24:7: literally, "we will do and we will hear"), seems to rely on the constant presence of Moses. As this parashah opens, Moses—the leader who has mediated between God and the people from Egypt to Sinai—has been away for a long time, receiving the details of God's commandments. Although Moses has been given God's instructions for constructing the Tabernacle—God's earthly "residence"—this structure has not been built. Without Moses' presence, the people's confidence in God is shaken. They remain in the midst of the wilderness, seemingly without "a god who shall go before us" (Exodus 32:1). *Parashat Ki Tisa* addresses the people's desire for a physical location where they can have access to God, and it outlines the disastrous results of their efforts to address this need by making a "molten calf." The parashah concludes by reiterating the covenant and reaffirming that the laws it contains will help Israel keep its conduct acceptable to God.

Before Getting Started



Before turning to the biblical text and the questions presented below, use the introductory material in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* to provide an overview of the parashah as a whole. Draw attention to a few key quotations from the introduction to the Central Commentary on pages 495–96 and/or survey the outline on page 496. This will help you highlight some of the main themes in this parashah and give participants a context for the sections they will study within the larger portion. Also, remember that when the study guide asks you to read biblical text, take the time to examine the associated comments in the Central Commentary. This will help you answer questions and gain a deeper understanding of the biblical text.

Theme 1: The Golden Calf—A Rupture in the Connection Between God and Israel



Restive and anxious during Moses' long absence, the people converge on Aaron, demanding "a god who shall go before us" (Exodus 32:1). The desire of this "stiffnecked people" (Exodus 32:9) to have a physical manifestation of God's presence tests their relationship with God, and only Moses' intervention prevents God from destroying them. Moses' anger blazes forth as he shatters the tablets containing God's commandments. He burns the Golden Calf, forces the people to drink a potion containing remnants of the calf he has ground to a powder, and orders the killing of three thousand Israelites. Ambiguities in the story of the Golden Calf raise questions about the intended object of the people's worship and thus about the reactions of both God and Moses.

1. Read Exodus 32:1–6, which describes the origins of the Golden Calf.
 - a. Why is Moses' prolonged stay on Mount Sinai troubling for the people? What is the relationship between Moses' absence and the people's desire for "a god who shall go before us"? In your view, why do the people want a physical representation of God?
 - b. The word *elohim* in verse 1 is a plural noun (translated here as "god"), which can refer either to a single deity ("God") or to more than one god ("gods"). This word is often used to refer to the God of Israel. What interpretive options does this word present for translating this verse? What might this suggest about the object of the people's worship?
 - c. Prior to Exodus 32:1, God receives the credit for freeing the people from bondage and leading them out of Egypt (see Exodus 20:2). At this juncture, to whom do the people give responsibility for leading them out of Egypt? What does this suggest about the status of the relationship between God and Israel at this point?
 - d. In 32:2 Aaron instructs the men to take the jewelry off their household members (wives, sons, and daughters). How does this differ from verse 3? What is the significance of this difference?
 - e. The word *eigel* (v. 4), commonly translated as "calf," refers to a young bull or ox. The bull and ox are symbols of power and virility often associated with gods in the ancient Near East, including the God of Israel. Statues of deities often incorporated such images into the footstools the deity. How might this help you understand what the *eigel* represents for the Israelites?
 - f. What does the Israelites' exclamation in verse 4, along with Aaron's mention of *Adonai* in verse 5, suggest about how the Israelites view the Golden Calf? What seems to be the function of this object?
 - g. How do you view Aaron's response (v. 5) to the people's exclamation in verse 4?
 - h. According to the Central Commentary, which three activities mentioned in verse 6 are part of authorized Israelite worship? What might the addition of the fourth activity suggest?
 - i. Based on your reading of these verses, in what ways do you think that the making of the Golden Calf constitutes a rupture between the people and God?
2. Read Exodus 32:7–14, which describes God's anger about the Golden Calf and Moses' response to God.
 - a. Although the figure of a young bull or ox (*eigel*) was understood by the people to be a

- legitimate, non-idolatrous religious object, what view of the Golden Calf does the Torah project in these verses? How might you explain God's reaction?
- b. Who receives the blame for the creation of the Golden Calf in verse 8? Compare this to 32:2–5 and 32:22–24. What, in your view, might account for these differences?
 - c. What does the phrase translated here as “stiffnecked people” (v. 9) suggest about what the Golden Calf demonstrates regarding the Israelites' relationship with God?
 - d. What rhetorical strategies does Moses use in verses 11–14 to dissuade God from destroying the Israelites?
3. Read Exodus 32:19–29, which describes Moses' reaction when he descends from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the Pact.
- a. How does Moses react (vv. 19–20) when he comes down from the mountain and sees the Golden Calf and the people dancing? How does this contrast with Moses' words to God in 32:11–13? What do you think accounts for this difference?
 - b. Compare the term for “dancing” in verse 19 (*m'cholot*) with the same term in Exodus 15:20, where it is translated “in dance.” The same word is used to describe women dancing in Judges 11:34, 21:21, 21:23; I Samuel 18:6, 21:12; and Jeremiah 31:4, 31:13. What does the use of this word in Exodus 32:19 suggest about the involvement of women in the episode of the Golden Calf?
 - c. In Numbers 5:11–31 a wife accused of adultery must undergo a ritual where she is forced to drink a potion consisting of sanctified water thought to induce spells, combined with earth from the Tabernacle floor. Compare Moses' actions in Exodus 32:20 with the ritual for a wife accused of adultery. How might the Israelites' actions in regard to the Golden Calf be considered a type of theological adultery?
 - d. How does Aaron's attempt to exonerate himself (Exodus 32:22–24) paradoxically end in ascribing supernatural powers to the calf? How does the Torah portray Aaron's actions in 32:25?
 - e. According to the Central Commentary, how can we understand the phrase “dedicate yourselves” in verse 29 (literally, “fill your hands”)? In your view, which interpretation is more valid and why?
4. Read Post-biblical Interpretations by Judith R. Baskin on page 515.
- a. Read the comment on 32:2–3. According to Midrash *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* 45, only the Israelite men contributed jewelry for the Golden Calf. What was the response of Israelite women to the calf, according to the midrash? What rewards did God give women as a result of their refusal to participate in the making of the Golden Calf? What is your reaction to this midrash in light of the evidence in the parashah that women were active participants in the incident of the Golden Calf?
 - b. Read the comment on 32:19. How does Midrash *Sh'mot Rabbah* interpret Moses' destruction of the tablets? How does this contrast with the view of women in Midrash *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* 45 (above)?
5. Read “A Song of Descent” by Sue Levi Elwell in *Voices*, on page 519.
- a. What connection does the poet make in the first stanza between “Egyptian nights” and the Israelites' celebration before the Golden Calf?

- b. How does the poet understand the Israelites' chanting in the second stanza?
- c. According to the poet, what do the Israelites believe they are worshiping?
- d. What is the poet's attitude toward the people and their celebration of the Golden Calf? How does this compare with the impression of this event in the biblical text?

Theme 2: Restoring the Covenant—Healing the Rupture Between God and Israel



Although ready to destroy the people because of the Golden Calf, Moses persuades God to make the divine presence known to him and the people so that they may go forward. Although the divine self-description that follows emphasizes God's attributes of mercy, kindness, and forgiveness, it reminds the people that violations of the restored covenant will result in punishment through subsequent generations. Moses' transformed physical appearance as he descends the mountain with the new stone tablets reminds the people of God's power and of Moses' role as the only legitimate mediator between them and God.

1. Read Exodus 34:1–9, which describes Moses' second divine encounter on Mount Sinai.
 - a. In verses 2–3, God instructs Moses about who shall approach Mount Sinai. How does this differ from Exodus 19:12–13, 19:17, 19:24, and 20:15, which describe the first revelation at Sinai?
 - b. Compare Exodus 34:4, in which Moses carves the two tablets, with 31:18. What do you think accounts for the difference this second time around?
 - c. Earlier in the parashah the Golden Calf creates discord in the relationship between God and Moses (Exodus 33:3, 33:12–23). How would you characterize the relationship between God and Moses in 34:5? In your view, what does this suggest about what has happened in this relationship? What is the connection between God's relationship with Moses and God's relationship with the people?
 - d. Exodus 34:6–7 contain a divine self-description. How would you summarize the portrayal of God in these verses? How does this description of God contrast with other depictions of God in this parashah?
 - e. According to the Central Commentary, how was the description of God in verses 6–7 labeled in the post-biblical period, and how is it used liturgically? In your view, why is the last part of verse 7 omitted from these liturgical passages?
 - f. How does Moses' use of the term “stiffnecked people” (34:9) compare with the way God uses the same phrase in 32:9? What is the function of the term in 34:9? Why do you think Moses includes himself in asking God's pardon (“Pardon our iniquity and our sin”)?
2. Read Exodus 34:10–16, in which God begins to outline the terms of the restored covenant with the people.
 - a. What does God promise to do in verses 10–11?
 - b. What must the Israelites do in exchange for God's promise?
 - c. How does verse 11 conflict with verse 12? According to the Central Commentary, what might be the reason for this conflict? What other ways might there be to read these two verses?
 - d. What dangers does God warn the Israelites about in verses 12–15?

- e. According to the Central Commentary, to what does the term “sacred posts” (Heb. *asherim*) refer? What do the repeated polemics against Asherah in the Hebrew Bible suggest?
 - f. According to the text, what is problematic about marriages between Israelite men and Canaanite women (v. 16)? In your view, what accounts for the mention of this concern at this point in the parashah?
3. Read Exodus 34:29–35, which describes Moses’ physical transformation after his encounter with God.
- a. What is Moses’ physical appearance as he comes down from the mountain (v. 29)? In your view, why was Moses not aware of this change?
 - b. According to the Central Commentary, what are the different interpretations of the Hebrew phrase *karan or panav*, translated here as “the skin of his face was radiant” (v. 29)? What do these differing interpretations have in common?
 - c. What is the reaction of Aaron and the chieftains to Moses’ changed appearance (v. 30)? Compare this with Exodus 33:20. What can we learn from these two verses about what it means to have an intimate encounter with God?
 - d. How do you understand the significance of the veil Moses places over his face (vv. 33–35)?
4. Read Post-biblical Interpretations by Judith R. Baskin on page 515: “And Adonai said to Moses: Write down these commandments” (34:27).
- a. According to the comment on 34:27, what question does Midrash *D’varim Rabbah* 3.17 seek to answer?
 - b. How does the analogy in the midrash help you to understand the answer to this question?
5. Read the Contemporary Reflection by Zoë Klein, on pages 516–17.
- a. How does Klein reinterpret the potion Moses makes the people drink (32:20)?
 - b. According to Klein, how can the two tablets God gives Moses (31:18) be seen as a *ketubah* (marriage contract)?
 - c. How does the veil worn by Moses to cover the radiance of his face (34:29, 34:33) support Klein’s interpretation of this parashah?
 - d. According to Klein, how is the revelation at Mount Sinai like a wedding?
 - e. How does *Midrash HaGadol* use the image of a mythic wedding?
 - f. What do these interpretations of the relationships between God, Moses, Torah, and Israel add to your understanding of this parashah?
 - g. Klein portrays the incident of the Golden Calf—and Moses’ response to it—as part of a complex wedding celebration. What do you think might be motivating Klein to so radically reinterpret this story? In real life, ruptures such as the one between Moses and the people are not so easily healed. Can you think of a situation in your own life when a breach in a relationship was repaired? What made this healing possible?
6. Read “Elul” by Rivka Miriam in *Voices*, on page 520.
- a. For what do the rocks, the heights, and the sea need to be forgiven?
 - b. How does the poet contrast forgiveness with these aspects of the natural world?
 - c. What does the image “blurred as the line between dusk and sunset” suggest about forgiveness?
 - d. How do you interpret the image of forgiveness falling “on its knees before itself” in the poem’s last line?

- e. Can you think of a time when you did not know how to ask for forgiveness? Can you contrast this with a situation in which it was less difficult to ask for forgiveness?
- f. In your view, how does this poem explore the healing of the ruptures between God and Israel and Moses and the people in this parashah?

Overarching Questions

As you study these parts of the *parashah*, keep in mind the following overarching questions. If time permits, conclude the class with these broader questions:

1. How do you understand the Israelites' need for a physical location where they can gain access to God or sense God's presence? How do you experience this need in your own life?
2. Can you think of a time when you were changed as a result of a rupture in a personal relationship that later was healed? What changes transpired, and how did the process of mending the relationship make them possible?

Closing Questions

1. What new insight into the Torah did you gain from today's study?
2. What other new insights did you gain from this study?
3. What questions remain?



The Torah: A Women's Commentary
Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea R. Weiss, editors
New York: WRJ and CCAR Press, 2008
wrj.org | ccarpress.org

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