

כִּי תִּסָּא

## Ki Tissa

## The Women Didn't Build the Golden Calf—or Did They?

The people saw that Moses delayed coming down from the mountain [where he was receiving the Ten Commandments from God]. The people gathered against Aaron and said to him, "Rise, make us a god who shall go before us; for that man Moses, who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has happened to him." Aaron said to them, "Take off the rings of gold that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." And all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. He took it from their hands and cast it in a mold and made it into a molten calf. And they said, "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt" (EXODUS 32:1-4)

TO READ THE STORY OF THE GOLDEN CALF from a feminist point of view, one must begin with *Rosh Chodesh*, the holiday celebrating the new moon, the new month of the Jewish year. Why *Rosh Chodesh*? Jewish tradition says that *Rosh Chodesh* was a holiday given to women

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as a reward for their refusal to give their earrings to be used to make the golden calf. A midrash explains, "The Holy One . . . gave the women their reward in this world and in the world to come. What reward did God give them in this world? That they should observe the New Moons more stringently than the men."<sup>1</sup> "More stringently" means that women were to take a holiday from work on *Rosh Chodesh*, making even more sure than the men were that they weren't performing any kind of work-related tasks. Just as men traditionally thanked God for stricter obligations to fulfill mitzvot from which women's exemption came to be understood as exclusion, so here the stringency of the women's obligation is seen as a reward.

But where does this notion that women did not participate in the building of the calf come from? "Aaron said to them, 'Take off the rings of gold that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.' And all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron." It does not say that the women refused. For a woman, reading these few lines with a feminist awareness not present in the Torah, the truth hits hard. For when Aaron speaks to "the people," he is speaking to the men, telling them to "take off the rings of gold that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters." And therefore, when "all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears," "all the people" can refer only to the men.

We know this is an exclusion, because we know that when the Torah means specifically to include women, it does. For example, when the people of Israel begin to bring materials to build the *misbkan*, the Tabernacle in the wilderness, the Torah very clearly specifies, "Men and women came, all whose hearts were moved, all who would make a wave-offering of gold to the Eternal, brought clips, earrings, rings, and pendants—all gold objects" (Exod.

35:22). This kind of inclusion makes exclusion even more obvious. Just as Moses separated the women from “the people” before the giving of the Torah at Sinai by saying to “the people,” “Be ready for the third day [the day on which God would come down on Mount Sinai]; do not go near a woman” (Exod. 19:15), so to build the golden calf, Moses’ brother, Aaron, excludes women from “the people” by saying, “Take off the rings of gold that are on the ears of your wives.”

Rebellion against such decrees seems inevitable, and various midrashim come to describe it: the women refused to give up their earrings for such a creation! *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, for instance, imagines that the women heard what Aaron had said, “but were unwilling to give their earrings to their husbands. . . . [They] said to them: You desire to make a graven image and a molten image without any power in it to deliver.”<sup>2</sup> As the men rebel against God, the women rebel against the men, choosing to remain faithful to God while the men try to remove their jewelry. Some midrashim suggest that Aaron instructed the men as he did because he knew that the women would refuse. Some say he imagined they would refuse out of vanity, not wanting to give up their beautiful gold rings.<sup>3</sup> But others, such as *Tanhuma Yelamdenu*, see an expression of faith in the women’s refusal: “Aaron told them to do this difficult thing because [he was aware that] the women would not agree to it. They had seen the miracles and the deeds that the Holy One had wrought for them in Egypt, and what had transpired at the Red Sea and at Sinai, and so they went to the men and said: God forbid that we should renounce the Holy One, who has performed all these miracles and mighty deeds in our behalf, in order to fashion an idol.”<sup>4</sup>

Why are the women so faithful to God? Have they made a promise we do not know of, some pledge behind the scenes? We

might almost imagine them as married, remaining steadfast in their wedded connection even when an attractive alternative comes along. This possibility is heightened when we look at the Aramaic translations for the word “rings” in Aaron’s instruction, “Take off the rings of gold that are on the ears of your wives.” In Hebrew, a ring is a *nezem*, plural *n’zamin*, and “rings of gold” are *nizmei ha-zahav*. In Aramaic, though, seen in both *Targum Onkelos* and *Targum Yonatan* for Exod. 32:2–3, “rings” are *kadabei*, whose root is *k-d-sh*, related to the Hebrew *kadosh*, *kiddush*, *kiddushin*. All are generally translated as something having to do with holiness, but the root originally meant “set apart,” for that is the definition of holiness. When they wed, a couple sets one another apart from all others, and the central ritual of wedding is *kiddushin*—the setting apart. It is symbolized by a ring, often made of gold. When Abraham’s servant Eliezer goes to meet Rebekah and her family and to convince her to come back with him to marry Isaac, he brings her jewelry as engagement gifts, including a “gold nose-ring whose weight was a half-shekel” (Gen. 24:22, 30, 47). Here, too, the Aramaic translation reads *kadaba*, and here the ring is clearly a sign of betrothal.

Suddenly, these rings that the women refuse to give to their husbands as an offering take on new meaning. They must be a symbol of setting apart, of wedding or engagement. Perhaps the rings in their ears are engagement or wedding rings, symbols of the bonds these women share with their husbands, and thus too precious to give up for the making of foolishness like this golden calf. Even if their husbands do not share their compunction, they will insist on preserving those bonds. And this idol made of gold will surely shatter those bonds: how can they remain married to these easily swayed men?

Or perhaps the rings in their ears symbolize their connection

to God, their way of setting themselves apart as a people linked to the One who cannot be seen, but whose miracles are fresh in mind. Women, seeing in this special link an echo of their promised fidelity to their husbands, hold fast to it, and refuse to let their husbands take the rings to create an alternate "god." For them, there is only the God who brought them out of slavery in Egypt, and they refuse further slavery to human-made gods.

It seems like a lovely picture—the women, more faithful than their men, refusing to part with their special, holy, setting-apart rings, refusing to participate in the creation of a golden idol, even as their men do participate. There is a problem, however, with this idyllic scene: Jewish tradition, using the same language, the same terms, sees this same scene as one of complete infidelity, by the whole people of Israel, women and men. And when it is viewed in this way, most often the metaphor used for the entire unfaithful people of Israel is that of the adulterous wife.

When Jacob and his family leave Shechem following the rape of Dinah and their violent destruction of the place and its inhabitants, Jacob says to his household, "Turn away the alien gods in your midst," and his family "gave to Jacob all the alien gods in their possession, and the rings that were in their ears . . ." (Gen. 35:2, 4). Similarly, the Book of Judges tells us of Gideon's victory over the Midianites, after which a man of Israel asks Gideon to rule over the Israelites. Gideon replies, "I will not rule over you, and my son shall not rule over you; Adonai will rule over you." He then asks each of them to give him the "earring [he had received] as booty." When they all did so, "Gideon made an ephod of it [his gold] and set it up in his town. . . . All Israel went astray after it . . ." (Judg. 8:22–27). The Hebrew for "went astray" is *va-yiznu*, literally translated as "they went whoring." Suddenly, *kol Yisrael*—"all

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Israel"—is likened to a whore, a woman who will go with any man for pay or other reward. How surprising, then, to find that the Aramaic translation of "earring" in the Judges passage is *kalasha*. Again, a symbol of being set apart, but how and by whom? The prophet Hosea provides an answer. Speaking God's words, he describes the people of Israel not as a whore, but as an unfaithful wife, abandoning her husband, God, whose anger blazes: "I will punish her / For the days of the Baalim, / On which she brought them offerings; / And put on earrings and jewels, / And went after her lovers, / And Me, she forgot / —declares the Eternal!" (Hos. 2:15). Once again, "earrings" are translated in the Aramaic as *kalasha*—again, the people of Israel is viewed as a woman set apart, here understood as "apart from God," rather than "a part of" or "apart with."

Little wonder, then, that *Exodus Rabbah* describes the building of the golden calf as follows: "It can be compared to a king who sent a marriage-broker to betroth a wife unto him, but while the broker was on his way, the woman corrupted herself with another man."<sup>5</sup> The king is God, the broker is Moses, and the woman is the people of Israel going astray after "another man"—the calf.

In this context, one of Moses' more puzzling responses to the golden calf becomes clear: "He took the calf that they had made and burned it in fire; he ground it until it was powder and strewn it upon the water and made the Israelites drink it" (Exod. 32:20). What made Moses think of this, we wonder—until we remember the biblical ritual of the bitter waters, designed to "prove" whether a woman suspected of adultery was in fact adulterous:

The priest shall bring her near and stand her before the Eternal. The priest shall take holy [again, the root *k-d-sh*] water in an earthen vessel and shall take some of the earth that is on the floor of the Tabernacle and put

it into the water. . . . The priest shall administer an oath to the woman, saying to her, "If no man has lain with you, if you have not gone astray in uncleanness while married to your husband, stay clean of this bitter, cursing water. But if you have gone astray while married to your husband and have become unclean . . . may the Eternal make you a curse and an imprecation among your people, just as the Eternal causes your thigh to sag and your belly to distend, may this cursing water enter your body, causing the belly to distend and the thigh to sag. . . ." (Num. 5:16-22)

Is Moses testing the people, as a jealous husband would test a wife, by having them drink the powdered calf? Does he hope to see in them some sign of remorse, of return and reconciliation? Marital infidelity was the ancient Israelites' clearest model for infidelity to God, for they saw their relationship to God in marital terms. Only marriage's intimacy would do to describe the close bond of God and Israel, so only the deep pain of marital infidelity would do to describe the rupture of that bond.

Women as well as men can well understand the use of marital metaphors to describe the bond between God and people. But modern women, long accustomed to a more equitable understanding of marriage than were our biblical ancestors, cannot help but be frustrated by the repetition of the metaphor of the straying wife for Israel's frequent lack of fidelity to God. There must be other metaphors we might use today to describe the sometimes shaky bond that grew between Israel and our God. And there must be a way to describe women's involvement in the building of the golden calf, that powerful act of rebellion against a God barely yet known, that does not fall back on the "saint-whore" contrast by which our

tradition, as described here, either sees women as the righteous refusers or applies the metaphor of whore or adulterous wife to rebellious Israel.

Perhaps the image of rebellious teenager would serve us better today: Israel is coming into its own, following the childhood of Genesis, and is on the verge of accepting adult responsibility, symbolized by the Ten Commandments. At just that moment, the teenager fomented one last, great rebellion, one that will grab the parents' attention fully, and will forestall the inevitable acceptance of responsibility. This image is accessible to all readers who themselves have been that rebellious teenager, or who are, or have been parents of same. It removes permanent blame from the perpetrator of this rebellious act, which the rabbis referred to always as "That Deed," seeing it instead as a normal part of a person's and our people's growth and development. Best of all, it removes the onus of perfect piety or wanton promiscuity from the women, who may now be seen as fully part of the whole people of Israel.