

32 ¹ 1. When the people saw that Moshe did not fulfill their expectation that he would come down from the mountain, the people gathered against Aharon, and they said to him: Arise, make us gods who shall go before us; for this man Moshe, who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has happened to him.

ל ב וַיִּרְא הָעָם כִּי־בָשַׁשׁ מֹשֶׁה לָרֶדֶת מִן־הַהָר וַיִּקְהַל הָעָם עַל־אַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו קוּם | עֲשֵׂה־לָנוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר יֵלְכוּ לְפָנֵינוּ כִּי־זָה | מֹשֶׁה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הֵעֵלָנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לֹא יָדַעְנוּ מָה־הָיָה לוֹ:

שני לחת העדת. We have already noted in our Commentary on *Bereshis* 1:14–19 that the incomplete written form (כתיב חסר) of the feminine plural represents a plurality of things in one concept — i.e., a uniform common concept embodied in many subjects. So, too, here, the written form “לחת” teaches us to regard the Two Tablets as one unit consisting of two mutually complementary parts. Thus the Midrash: לא זו גדולה מזו (*Shemos Rabbah* 41:6). The Tablet of the duties toward God and the Tablet of the duties toward one’s fellow man are both of the same size, of the same weight, and are of equal importance. Only both together represent the fundamentals of God’s Torah (see Commentary above, 20:14). Placed together, they form a complete cube, with each tablet comprising half the cube (see Commentary above, 25:10).

לחת אבן. Whereas the Ark, which is to receive the Tablets, is made of wood, the Tablets of the Law are made of stone. The given Law is unchangeable, whereas *we*, who receive and fulfill the Law, are to uplift ourselves in it and through it in a process of constant development (see Commentary above, 25:10–11).

כתבים באצבע אלקים. The Tablets are the work of God’s hand, just as the heavens are “the work of Your fingers” (*Tehillim* 8:4); and they bear witness to the revelation of God, just as the miracles of Egypt were “the finger of God” (above, 8:15).

CHAPTER 32

¹ With the instructions for the construction of the משכן and with the handing over of the Tablets of the Testimony, the Lawgiving on high

was completed. Now it was necessary to plant in the nation's midst the Torah, the nation's soul. From the Dwelling Place, the Torah must radiate out to the entire nation, and the spirit of its Divinely ordained mission must fill the heart of each individual member of the nation, in order to realize the promise: **ועשו לי מקדש ושכנתי בתוכם** (above, 25:8).

But even while all this was transpiring on Mount Sinai, events were taking place in the camp below that attested — for all time and only too realistically — to the vast gulf between the historical reality of the people at the Lawgiving and the ideal heights of the Torah which they were to receive.

This gulf had been brought to the people's attention in full seriousness, and through acts rich in symbolic meaning, at the preparations for receiving the Torah: **לך אל העם וקדשתם וגוי והגבלת את העם וגוי וגם הכהנים וגוי יתקדשו** (above, 19:10–22; see Commentary there). As we indicated above, this fact entails fundamental consequences which are the foundation of our faith.

This people, which could not tolerate the absence of its leader Moshe for forty days; which could make for itself a golden calf before the fire and lightning of the Lawgiving had cooled off and while the loud and clear command **“לא תעשה לך פסל”** (above, 20:4) still resounded in its ears — this people was still so remote from the truths and requirements of this Law that it could not possibly have emanated from the people as the product of its spirit and the spirit of the time, like all other religions and codes of law.

At the same time, these events show us the Law in its absolute character — absolute by virtue of its Divine origin and in its inevitable and eternal destiny to attain its realization and win a home for itself on earth. At the very start of the Torah's entry into the world, the unworthiness of the nation that was meant to receive it made it clear that one of the two would have to go: either the Torah or the entire generation of the nation for whom the Torah is destined. The decision was instantaneous: to give up that entire generation, create a new generation capable of accepting this Torah — and wait!

God's statement to Moshe, **ואכלם ואעשה אותך לגוי גדול** (v. 10) — i.e., that the nation that had been established in order to receive the Law should be destroyed, while Moshe and the Law would be assured of a different kind of future — demonstrates from the very outset the ab-

solute character of the destiny ordained for this Law, whose origin is God and whose timelessness springs from God.

No one should ever imagine that the Torah should be adapted to changing times; on the contrary, each generation is entitled to a present and a future only inasmuch as it accommodates itself to the Torah. The Torah is the absolute ultimate goal of the Jewish nation, and the generation of the Lawgiving was still infinitely remote from that goal. If, nevertheless, the Torah, with its unalterable ideal requirements, came down to that generation, the implication is clearly this: The Torah was not given to Israel so that the people should adapt it to the changing times or to suit the people's convenience. Rather, the Torah was given to Israel so that this nation should shape and adapt itself until it has elevated itself to the moral and spiritual heights of this Torah.

In short, as soon as the Torah came down to Israel, over whom it was meant to reign supreme, the golden calf incident presented it with its first challenge: The Torah is to demonstrate its Divine power by training this people to accept it out of complete submission, and the Sanctuary of the Torah is to be first and foremost a place of *כפרה*, a place of unceasing education toward a better and purer future.

Before the Sanctuary of the Torah was erected, the people and the *כהנים* had to be made aware of their need for *כפרה*. We dare to say "had to be." For this whole episode of the golden calf is crucial for understanding the objective character of the Torah, the meaning of the Sanctuary of the Torah, and the people's relation to both. In light of the general factors indicated above and the special factors that will be examined below, this incident looms so large in its importance that we may assume that this whole absence of Moshe for forty days was meant to be a test for the people. From this test the people were to learn — by way of actual historical experience, before the Torah's entry into their midst and before the construction of its Sanctuary — a certain truth, the knowledge of which is a necessary condition for the Torah's and Sanctuary's educative influence on us.

בוש is the *pi'el* of *בוש*, whose original meaning is "to feel disappointment" (see Commentary, *Bereshis* 2:25). Thus *וַיִּחִילוּ עַד־בוֹשׁ* (*Shoftim* 3:25), they waited until they were disappointed in their expectations — i.e., they waited until they realized that their expectations would not be fulfilled. *בושש*, then, means: to disappoint some-

one's expectation to such a degree that he despairs of its fulfillment. Moshe had been absent for so long that they despaired of his returning.

ויקהל העם על אהרן means: to gather in masses against someone, to overpower someone through the force of a mass gathering. This expression appears in Scripture in two other places — **ויקהלו על משה ועל אהרן** (*Bemidbar* 16:3, 20:2) — and in both cases Moshe and Aharon offer no opposition, not even through a counterclaim. At the rebellion of Korach, Moshe first fell upon his face, and only after hearing the Word of God did he confront the rebels. In the second case, Moshe and Aharon saved themselves from the crowd by going to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. Thus, **על הקהל** always denotes overpowering someone against his will, and this is also the implication of the concluding verse of the golden calf narrative: **על אשר עשו את העגל אשר עשה אהרן** (below, v. 35), where it is evident that the people were the driving force behind Aharon's deed: the people ordered it, and Aharon was forced to obey.

We find exactly the same mode of expression in *Bereshis* 39:22 (see Commentary there): **ואת כל אשר עשים שם הוא היה עושה**, which is the continuation of the first part of the verse: "The chief of the prison committed to Yosef's hand all the prisoners who were in the prison." The meaning of **ואת כל אשר וגו'** is as follows: All was done at Yosef's command; they all had to follow his orders. The intelligence and the will were his; all the other people served as instruments for carrying out his will. Accordingly, what they did was really his doing. So, too, here, what Aharon did was the work of the people.

עשה לנו אלהים אשר ילכו לפנינו כי זה משה האיש וגו'. The purpose — **אשר ילכו לפנינו** — and the reason — **כי זה משה האיש** — show clearly that this was not a case of idolatry in the usual sense, not a betrayal of God. What the people wanted Aharon to make was meant to take the place of Moshe, not to take the place of God. They presumed that Moshe had died in an accident; they therefore demanded of Aharon that he make for them a "Moshe" figure that would never be lost. But that they pinned their hopes for the future on the existence of a "Moshe" figure, and the erroneous notion that man can, may, and indeed should make for himself a "Moshe" figure — these are notions totally antithetical to the basic truths of Jewish belief regarding the nature of God and the mutual relationship between God and man. These truths had been made clear to the people by God's warning immediately after the rev-

elation at Sinai: אתם ראיחם וגו' לא תעשון אתי וגו' (above, 20:19–20; see Commentary there).

לא תעשון אתי . . . מזבח אדמה תעשה לי!: These words of admonition, which complement each other, mark the parting of ways between the Divine-Jewish view and the heathen non-Jewish view of man's relationship to God. It is a delusion to think that man *can* make for himself a god — i.e., that *he* can set before himself an image, an asset, a power, an institution, a man, as *his own* highest ideal, and that this thing that he has chosen to worship will then be invested with Divine power by the Highest Power Who rules the world, and will thenceforth become the upholder of his fate.

To what may this be compared? To a steel rod that has no magnetic power. It is a delusion to think that, by the laws of physics, one need only hang it continuously in the correct magnetic direction for it to become magnetized and to become a magnet.

It is a delusion to think that man *needs to* make for himself a god — i.e., that, to ensure his future, he should set before himself things of his own choosing and of his own making as the embodiment of *his own* highest ideal, in respect to the Highest Power Who rules the world, of Whom he has a vague perception. The heathen imagines that through these things he shows his homage to this Highest Power, wins His grace, and fulfills his duty by acknowledging his dependence on Him. It is nonsense and a delusion to think of man's basic dependence on God — or on the power that he regards as his god — in terms of fate and in the passive terms of human relationships.

All these are delusions which from time immemorial have dominated the highest aspirations of the members of the non-Jewish world, and which have produced both crude and spiritual fetishism.

In opposition to these delusions stands the truth of Judaism, which is meant to put an end to all the delusions of subjective idolatry, no matter what form it takes.

Man cannot make for himself a god; he need not do so and he may not do so. Man cannot draw God near to himself by representing the godly in a corporeal form; rather, man should draw *himself* near to God in every aspect of his life by filling his whole being with spiritual and moral content and by subordinating all his activities to God's commandments.

In order to attain closeness to God and to secure for himself God's

protection and guidance, it is not God that man must influence, but *himself*. He should be preoccupied not with shaping his fate, but with shaping his deeds; the only way in which he can also influence his fate is by suiting his way of life to God's Will.

First of all, however, man must recognize that God has no physical quality on which a coercive influence could be exerted through some subjective action, in order to harness that quality to man's own subjective will. Rather, He ברוך הוא is a personal Being possessed of absolute freedom, free will, and unlimited power, a Being Who rules the world in freedom and Who has revealed to man His Will as the absolute measure of all things and as the absolute norm for the free will of man.

To God's Will man must surrender his whole being — joyfully, freely, and with all the strength of his personality. Only then will the blessings of Providence shower down upon him and bring success to the work of his hands. Obedience to God out of free will is always and everywhere all that is necessary to bring blessing to man — to the community and to the individual; and there is absolutely nothing that can take its place.

All subjective caprice is like heathenism and idolatry, for it is based on the delusion that man can arbitrarily exert a controlling influence on the shaping of his future, which is equivalent to the belief that man can bend the Will of the Divine. Thus man places his own ego on par with — even in opposition to — God's Will. This is the essence of what Shemuel said to Sha'ul long ago: הִנֵּה שָׁמַעַ מְזִבַּח טוֹב לְהִקְשִׁיב מִחֶלֶב אֵילִים כִּי: חֲטָאֵת־קָקֶסֶם מְרִי וְאֶנֶן וּתְרִפִּים הַפְּצָר, “Obedience is better than sacrifice, paying heed than the fat of rams; for the sin of witchcraft is disobedience, obstinacy and following oracles are self-willed acts” (*Shemuel I*, 15:22–23).

Those who said to Aharon: “Arise, make us gods who shall go before us; for this man Moshe, who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has happened to him,” were caught up in a delusion of idolatrous subjectivism. They saw Moshe not as an instrument of God's Will, chosen by God and sent on God's initiative, but as a human being who, on his own, had surpassed ordinary human nature and become godlike. They thought that, through his influence, he could bend the Will of the Divine and that his existence could assure them God's protection. In their eyes, it was not God Who had brought them out of Egypt through the agency of Moshe, but Moshe who had caused God to perform this work of deliverance.

2 Aharon said to them: Take off the golden rings that are in the ears of your wives, your sons and your daughters, and bring them to me. ב וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִם אֶהְרֹן פָּרְקוּ נְזֻמֵי הַזָּהָב אֲשֶׁר בְּאָזְנֵי נְשֵׁיכֶם בְּנֵיכֶם וּבָנֹתֵיכֶם וְהָבִיאוּ אֵלַי:

In their view, the eternal bond with God was not formed by the Divine Torah given to them through Moshe. The eternal guarantee of God's protection and of the intimacy with God attainable by each individual, without an intermediary, was not the Divine rules for life — i.e., the משפטים — which would remain with them even when the temporary transmitter had departed. Rather, they considered the personality of Moshe, a man who was close to God, as the vital link in their connection with God. Only as long as he was alive could they be certain of God's protection.

They believed that Moshe's relationship with God had been initiated not by God but by Moshe; hence, they reasoned, if Moshe was no longer alive they could, and indeed must, take some action on their own in order to force God's hand. They had not yet completely absorbed the Jewish conception that man has direct access to God, without the need for any intermediary, as long as he conducts himself in accordance with God's Will. Or perhaps the fear that henceforth they would have to wander through the wilderness without a leader to guide them caused them to doubt this truth.

“אשר ילכו לפנינו” can hardly be taken literally. After all, there was nothing in their experience that could have led to the belief that an idol-god can be a guide. There is only one way to make sense of this demand: By placing such an idol at their head, they sought to secure for themselves God's guidance in the future as well.

2–4 As already noted on verse 1, the implication of verses 1 and 35 is that Aharon acted under the coercive pressure of a powerful mob. In *Devarim* 9:20 it explicitly says that Aharon committed a serious sin. He should have opposed the people in word and in deed — even at the risk of his life.

He thought, however, that it was prudent and therefore proper to yield to the people — for their own sake. This is how his actions have