

Parashah Seventy

Exodus 32:15–34:26; 2Samuel 22:10–51; Romans 9:14–16

notes by Tim Hegg

The Trap of Idolatry

Sometimes we shake our heads as we read the history of Israel in the Tanach! How could they have been so ignorant, so hard-hearted to have somehow missed all of the mighty acts of God in Egypt, to have forgotten the death of Egypt's first-born, the crossing of the Sea, the drowning of Egypt's finest—how is it possible that only a relatively short time after Moses and the rest ascend the mountain, the people are ready to revert to idolatry as a means of trying to find personal security?

What is more, our text is very explicit that Moses was coming down from the mountain with the tablets which contained the very writing of God, words recognizable because they were in God's own script (וְהַלְחֹת מַעֲשֵׂה אֱלֹהִים הָמָּה וְהַמְּכֻתָּב מִכְּתָב אֱלֹהִים הוּא הָרוּת עַל-הַלְחֹת), “and the tablets were the handiwork of God, and the writing was the writing of God, inscribed upon the tablets”). God has sent His revelation via the hand of Moses, His servant, and the people are engaged in seeking the help of gods who do not exist, who neither speak nor write! In seeking to find their own security, they have failed to prepare to receive the revelation from God, a revelation which would give to them the very path of life.

How had they come to this place? What was it that brought the people of Israel to seek the aid of a stupid idol rather than relying upon the God they knew was there?

Several factors might be cited, but I'll mention only a few. First, they had, over the course of their long stay in Egypt, *absorbed the culture and religion of that place*. We suspect, for example, that they had adopted the Egyptian circumcision which did not remove the foreskin, but only made an incision. After leaving Egypt, they “rolled away” the reproach of Egypt (a euphemistic play on “Gilgal” meaning “wheel” and the circular cutting of circumcision) at Gilgal by being circumcised as God had instructed. To what extent the people had become accustomed to various aspects of the Egyptian religions we are not sure, but it seems very possible that they had retained some “fear” of the gods of Egypt, for the golden calf may well be connected to the Apis Bull. The Satanic culture of Egypt had become an accepted “background” for religious thought in general. Certain aspects may have become “normal” for the Israelites.

Secondly, *they had considered their security to be more in the hands of Moses than in the hands of God*. Notice carefully that they were concerned with the fact that Moses has tarried upon the mountain, not that God had forsaken them. Perhaps they thought that if God had destroyed Moses, then He was angry at them, and so they sought other gods for their protection. But rather than seeking God, they resorted to seeking a false god. They had been led astray by the same sin with which Satan tempted Chavah (Eve)—“has God said?” which is understood to mean, “aren't you suspicious that God is not really looking out for your best interests and that maybe He's just using you?” Instead of seeing themselves as the servants of God, they viewed themselves more as the people of Moses. This is a kind of idolatry, perhaps not as blatant as constructing an idol and bowing to it, but idolatry nonetheless. Because idolatry is putting someone else in God's place.

Just previous to this event God had tested Moses with this very thing: would he be willing to exchange the God of Israel for a self-serving God—a god who is unjust but gives me what I want?

“I shall make your descendants countless as the stars....” Moses would have nothing of it. Either the God of Israel is the true God, or there is nothing left. Genuine faith in God is singular faith—a faith that relies upon the God of Israel and upon Him alone.

In the initial punishment meted out by Moses upon the people, he burns the idol (since it was most likely made of wood overlaid with gold, it burnt easily), grinds it to powder, sprinkles it over water (cp. Deut 9:21, “the brook that came down from the mountain”), and makes the people drink it. Drinking the ashen water reminds one of the test for the unfaithful wife (Num 5), in which the dust from the floor of the Tabernacle and ink from a scroll is mixed with water and then the woman is made to drink the mixture. At Sinai, Israel, as the unfaithful wife of Adonai, is similarly made to drink water mixed with the ashes. Such an ordeal was no doubt humiliating, and Moses clearly humiliates the Israelites by making them “drink their god.” Rather than delivering them from their dilemma, their idol god would end up in the latrine.

But even more severe measures are taken: Moses makes an offer to the people to prove their repentance. He asks them to commit to the Lord, but only the Levites make such an open confession. As a result, the Levites are sent, not by Moses, but by God, to go through the camp and slay the idolaters. About 3000 are killed before the massacre stops. This emphasizes a third factor that led the people to idolatry: *they had not understood how much God hates idolatry*. Even Moses, returning to the mountain and offering himself as a substitute for the people (32:32), pleads for God’s forgiveness. But while God forestalls His punishment, He nonetheless promises retribution upon those who had rebelled against Him.

This same theme is continued in chapter 33, though it may not be apparent. Idolatry is not only bowing to a false god, or putting a man in the place of God, *it is also thinking or living as though there is really no need for God*. Israel was to be the primary example of how God relates to His people, so she was the nation redeemed from Egypt and she was the nation among whom the Lord would dwell. Her ability to be a “light to the nations” (Is 42:6) consisted in her willingness to be obedient to God as an open demonstration of who God is (cf. Deut 4:6–8). When the suggestion is made to Moses that an angel would go ahead of them to rout out the enemies of Israel, but that God Himself would not dwell with the people—this was not acceptable to Moses. He was a man who had come to know God, and was known of Him (“I know you by name,” 33:17). Moses had established an intimate understanding of who God is and had entered into a personal covenant with Him. On this basis Moses makes the incredible statement: “...if You do not go Yourself, do not send us up from here” (33:15). Moses could not even think of proceeding with the journey unless he was assured that God would be making Himself known in the midst of the people, abiding with them and thus protecting them along the way. This suggests a fourth factor which led the people into idolatry: *they had been satisfied with a corporate relationship with God*. Moses, on the other hand, had come to understand that God is not only the God of the nation, but also of the individual. This is boldly displayed when Moses makes the straightforward request (33:18): “Show me Your glory.” The interesting thing is that Moses’ definition of God’s glory and God’s own definition may not have been the same. It seems at least possible that Moses was looking for a visible phenomenon (“show me...”) while God clearly teaches that His glory is summed up in the whole of His attributes—His own revelation of Himself known through His written word (Torah) and His works.

The Name of God is the single summation of all that He is—of the sum of His attributes. Thus, when God puts Moses into the cleft of the rock, He first pronounces His ineffable Name, and then

proceeds to reveal His glory by describing His attributes. God’s glory is contained in His goodness (33:19), which is another way of saying His character or attributes (34:6f). It is superfluous to say that one loves God but has no desire to know Him as He has revealed Himself. To be satisfied with the pop-culture definition of God is likewise to engage in idolatry, for the worship of the god which the culture has defined is the worship of “another god.” The same may be said of Yeshua and the definitions which our modern day has attempted to attach to the historical Messiah. Yeshua is the One with whom Moses communicated (Ex 24) for He had visible form (including feet) and ate with him and the others. This One described in our *parashah* is one with Yeshua. We therefore must strive to know Yeshua as He is revealed in Scripture, not as modern society has redressed Him to fit the needs of the time. Our golden calves may be less obvious, but idols nonetheless.

How, then, can we guard against idolatry? How can we prepare ourselves now for the unknown events of the future, regarding which we may feel the panic to make our own security and create our own substitute for God? 1) refuse to accept the idolatry of our culture, regardless of how subtle or pervasive it may be; 2) recognize that God’s appointed leaders are given to lead the people to God, not to replace Him; 3) recognize how much God hates idolatry; 4) don’t be satisfied with a corporate relationship with God—seek a personal one; 5) accept only the self-revelation of God, not the man-made model. This revelation of God is to be found in the Scriptures, in the creation (cf. Ps 19:1ff; Rom 1:19f), and in the person of the Messiah (cf. Heb 1:1–4).

The Presence of God

Moses sought the Presence (literally “face”) of God to be among the people. He realized that apart from God’s presence among the people, there was no reason to go any further. “If Your Presence does not go along (with us), do not bring us forward from here” (33:15). Mere religion is content to travel the journey without God; true worship, based as it is in a covenant relationship with God, recognizes that without His Presence, the outward signs of piety are nothing but an empty shell.

Our *parashah* teaches us that Moses erected a “tent of meeting” (אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד) far outside of the camp. Here he would go to meet with God in order to receive from Him direct instructions for the people. Apparently Joshua would also go with him, for the text indicates that when Moses would come out of the tent, Joshua would remain within it (33:11). Interestingly, the Hebrew calls Joshua יהושע בן־נון, *Yehoshua bin Nun*. While this spelling for “son” (which is usually בֶּן or בִּן in construct form) is not uncommon (found 17x in the Tanach), the Sages remark that it is most often found in those places where “understanding” is emphasized (analogous to Hebrew בִּין, “to understand”). They make a midrash on Joshua’s name: בִּינוּן means “a person of understanding,” and suggest that Joshua, as the chosen disciple of Moses, had been granted the particular gift of understanding as he was preparing eventually to assume leadership after the death of Moses.

If we might be allowed our own midrash, it seems interesting to me that the scenario presented in our *parashah* models the mysterious inner workings of God Himself. The tent of meeting, set up outside of the camp, clearly portrays an incarnational model. That is, the sanctity of Mt. Sinai is transported to the earth through the tent of meeting, where the Presence of God is revealed in the “face to face” meetings with Moses. The text is clear that Moses’ relationship with God was different than other prophets. While they received God’s revelation in dreams or visions, when they were not in the full use of their faculties, Moses converses with God while fully conscious, as a

man speaks with his friend (cf. 33:11). In this capacity, Moses foreshadowed the Messiah Himself, Who could claim that “All things have been handed over to Me by My Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him” (Matt 11:17; Lk 10:22). The relationship of the Messiah to the Father was unique, foreshadowed by the unique relationship that Moses had with God. But in a typical or midrashic sense, what is foreshadowed by Joshua? Perhaps it is not too far-fetched to see in Joshua the work of the Spirit, Who aided the Messiah in His work, and Who gives *understanding* to the words of Messiah (cf. Jn 14:26). When Moses leaves the tent of meeting, Joshua remains. This is illustrative of the teaching of Yeshua, that though He would depart and return to the Father, He would send the Spirit Who would remain with His followers and lead them in the truth.

As Moses petitions the Almighty on behalf of Israel, He seeks God’s assurance that He will, indeed, go with them—that He would graciously abide (reveal His Presence) in their midst. God grants the request of Moses based upon the unique relationship he has with the Almighty: “I will also do this thing of which you have spoken; for you have found favor in My sight and I have known you by name” (33:17). As a portend of the Messiah’s own intercession, we are reminded that God’s grace comes to us, not because of what we have done, but because of who Messiah is. God grants the requests of our Intercessor, and as a result, we are blessed.

God instructs Moses to ascend the Mountain again, and to bring with him two new tablets upon which He would re-write the Ten Words, since the first set of tablets were destroyed because of the people’s disobedience (34:1). This time, Moses goes up alone, leaving Joshua in the camp. When he arrives at the top of the mountain, God descends in the cloud, and fulfills His promise to reveal His glory to Moses. This He does not only in a visual way, but in declaring His Name to Moses, that is, describing Himself in attributes of mercy. The Sages enumerated Thirteen Attributes from this text (34:5–7), though they differed slightly on how the various terms should be grouped, and exactly what was meant by each of the terms. The most common enumeration is found in *b.Rosh Hashanah* 17b.

We note first of all that the Tetragrammaton is given twice. The Masoretic accentuation indicates that the first occurrence stands alone, while the second is combined with אֱל, thus, יהוה, יהוה אֱל, “Adonai, Adonai (Who is) God.”

1. יהוה - the Eternal, Ineffable Name of God reveals His eternal, unchangeable character, and therefore His utter faithfulness to His word. His promises are secure, because He never changes (Mal 3:6). As the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, He has promised to abide with His people, and to fulfill in them all of His sovereign designs.

2. יהוה אֱל - The combination of יהוה with אֱל emphasizes the power of God. Not only is He the eternal, unchangeable One (infinite in time and space), He is also all-powerful (infinite in power). He will perform all of His holy will because He is able to do so. He orders the events of the universe, and is able to bring all things to their appointed end. “For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen!” (Rom 11:36).

3. רַחוּם - Compassionate. God’s mercies are demonstrated continually, for they are new every morning (Lam 3:23). In His compassion, He forestalls His condemnation of sinners, and provides payment for their sin through the substitute sacrifice of His own Son. God’s compassion is fully seen in Messiah’s work on our behalf.

4. וְחַנוּן - and Gracious. God is gracious to the undeserving. He understands the distresses that come upon His people, and He comes to them with grace, with aid for their troubles.

5. אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם - Slow to anger. Both with the righteous and the unrighteous, God is patient. Instead of immediately enacting the punishment that sin deserves, He gives them time to consider their actions and to seek repentance. Through His word, He makes known what is right and wrong, and calls sinners to repent.

6. וְרַב-חֶסֶד - and Abundant in Lovingkindness. The word חֶסֶד, *chesed* may have a connection to “covenant faithfulness.” Even when His people are faithless, He remains faithful to His covenant, because He cannot deny Himself (2Tim 2:13).

7. וְאֱמֶת - and Truth. God is abundant in lovingkindness and truth. The two terms (חֶסֶד and אֱמֶת) may function as a hendiadys (two terms combined to give one thought), emphasizing that God is faithful to His covenant promises because He is always true. He never speaks falsehood. All of His words are eternally true.

8. נֹצֵר חֶסֶד לְאֲלָפִים - Preserver of lovingkindness to thousands. God’s grace is infinite. He intends to bring to Himself a host of people that no one can number, of every tribe, kindred, and tongue (Rev 5:9). God’s grace is not limited by man’s rebellion. He is able to change the heart of man, and bring all of His chosen ones to Himself (Jn 6:37).

9. נֹשֵׂא עֲוֹן - Forgiver of Iniquity. God is said to forgive in three categories, and each of these have been traditionally taken as a separate attribute of God. In this case, iniquity is usually understood to be intentional sins, and specifically sins against one’s fellow man. God forgives even intentional sins for those who seek His forgiveness and who repent of their sin.

10. וּפְשָׁע - and Transgression. This word is taken to emphasize sins of rebellion against God in particular. God is willing to forgive those who sin directly against Him if they seek His forgiveness and turn from their rebellion.

11. וְחַטָּאָה - and Sin. The Sages suggest that the emphasis of this word is that of “sin done out of carelessness or apathy.” These may be sins committed out of ignorance or weakness. Yet even these are sins, for if a person were diligent to know the gravity of defying God’s will, they would not sin through carelessness. Still, God is willing to forgive such sins if one seeks His forgiveness and is committed to a life of righteousness.

12. וְנִקָּה - and Cleanses. When one seeks forgiveness from God, and turns from his sin, God cleanses him of that sin, meaning He wipes the record of that sin away. “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1Jn 1:9). “As far as the east is from the west, so far have I removed your transgressions from you” (Ps 103:12).

13. לֹא יִנְקֶה פְקֹד עֲוֹן - He will not cleanse *but* visits iniquity. God’s mercy and grace does not over-

turn His justice. He deals justly with iniquity. Yet He “visits” the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and grandchildren to the third and fourth generation. While the word פָקַד can have the sense of “punish” or “bring judgment,” it can also have the sense of “make careful inspection,” as well as to “instruct, command, urge.” The sins of the fathers affect their children. Yet God, in His justice does not punish the children for the sins of their fathers (Deut 24:16). He recognizes that the sins of the fathers have a negative affect on their children, and so He comes “visiting” them with instruction, giving them His Torah of truth by which they will know His will and be able to discern what is right and wrong. Still, if the children refuse to turn from the sins of their fathers, and if they walk in the ways of their fathers, God’s justice will prevail. Each generation will reap what they sow.