THE LITURGICAL FUNCTION OF EXODUS 33:16-34:26

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During the Sukkot festival, on the Sabbath of the intermediate days, Exodus 33:16-34:26 is read in the synagogue. This portion contains a graphic description of the Jewish national shame; the episode of the golden calf. The question could be asked: Since we are nearing the end of the liturgical year, and will soon complete reading of the Book of Deuteronomy, why is there a return to the Book of Exodus?

In the original episode, cast as "way back then," that is, just after the Revelation at Sinai, the children of Israel came very close to being totally destroyed as a people. Such a possibility is shocking on its face! After all the care He had taken to free them from slavery in Egypt, God is here described as so angry at the human decision to flirt with another deity that He determined not just to punish, but to destroy utterly those whom He had so recently liberated (Ex. 32:10, 33:5). Only the bold and powerful intervention of Moses headed off this potential catastrophe (32:11-13, 33:17). Then, after this intervention by the human leader, the Almighty not only relented and forgave, but also allowed Moses to ascend the mountain once again to receive the Divine "Words" (Commandments) (34:1).

Two powerful and seemingly incompatible images are woven together into this single episode. On the one hand, the Israelites were almost destroyed as a people, and great punishment was in fact meted out to them (Ex. 32:25-28). Yet, on the other hand, God was compassionate enough and merciful enough to give the disobedient ex-slaves a second chance to be His people.

While the graphic description of Divine anger and punishment are intended to be forever memorable and didactic for subsequent generations of Israel, it is the description of this second image that I think forms the true literary center, and thus the theological core, of the episode. This is the image that is defined as the moment when God decided to allow Moses to ascend the mountain for a second time, to seek once again Divine guidance for the communal and individual lives of the people. Not only did God forgive them and

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not destroy them ”back then,” but He even allowed them a second chance to enter into full covenantal relationship with Him.[1] Thus, from the standpoint of its literary structure, the story clearly intends the image of the God who forgives to balance the image of the God of wrath and punishment.

The dramatic structure of the story is also designed to induce readers to try to imagine what might have been on the minds of the people as they watched Moses trudge back up Mount Sinai! "What will God require of us this time?" "Will there be any new and exotic commandments?" "Now that God knows how weak we are, will He lighten up just a bit?" "How complicated will it be to understand God's laws this time?" But the text is crystal clear. Moses was not given a new Torah, no new commandments, nothing more modern, nothing easier, nothing harder. Instead, when he came down from the mountain for a second time, Moses brought with him exactly the same words from the Eternal One that he had been carrying down the first time. We will return to this idea shortly.

Liturgically, this particular episode figures prominently into the great drama that is played out year after year in Jewish congregational life. Every year between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, Jews are enjoined to remember and to repent of their "sins" during the preceding year;[2] sins that in some ways were comparable to the construction of that golden calf so long ago. The core biblical story deemed their sin to be flagrant idolatry; modern sins would surely be more subtle, and many people would choose a less offensive term to describe them. Still, the framework for comparison is there because, however we may wish to define it in a modern context, grounding human life upon any power other than God alone is the classic biblical definition of idolatry.

The temptation for the biblical Israelites was to believe that they could build with their own hands a god which they could control. To make this theological point, the biblical story portrays the original golden calf as a solid and visible symbol of rebellion against God. And since no modern Jew would construct or offer prayers to an object as idol, the original biblical example must be understood as paradigmatic, broadly symbolic of rebellion or idolatry in any form.

Thus taken, it may appear to be a form of idolatry for modern Jews to center their lives around material success, or educational achievement, or social triumphs or political gains. In themselves, these things are surely no more

sinful than were the trinkets of jewelry worn by our forebears at Sinai (32:2-3). The sin would consist in the making ordinary things into a monument, of placing ultimate trust in something, anything, created rather than in the Creator.

The purpose of the story as a paradigm for subsequent generations becomes even more striking when the issue of forgiveness is examined. Surely the Torah intends for readers to be shocked that people who had so recently been rescued from slavery would turn their backs on the One who had freed them with great power and miracles. And the structure of the Torah story also makes it noteworthy that the God who had been forgotten by His own people would still forgive. But this is precisely the idea that has remained central in Judaism from ancient into modern times. Indeed, the primary function of the ancient story has always been to teach each generation that God does in fact forgive, and that the pattern for His forgiveness is derived from the experiences of our ancestors at Sinai. It is the nature of the God of Judaism to offer a second chance, to repeat the words that permit human entry into meaningful covenantal relationship with the Almighty.

But although there was good news back then, it is important that the true nature of that good news be understood. God offered a second chance to them and Judaism teaches that He continues to offer many "second chances" to Jews in every generation. But as mentioned earlier, we cannot fail to notice in the biblical reading that none of the "Words" – that is, Commandments – were changed between Moses' first and second trips up Mount Sinai. The plain sense of the passage, then, is that although God was willing to forgive our Ancestors after their awful sin back then, the requirements placed upon them by the Almighty remained exactly the same even after forgiveness had been granted.

By extension, I further take this to mean that the purpose of the passage was to indicate that the requirements of Torah were to remain constant for all Jews no matter how often they might fail and have to go back to the beginning to start all over again. What must be emphasized is this: In the core biblical story, the tablets that Moses had smashed in anger were destroyed, but the demands of God were not even slightly damaged, and these demands are what remained unchanged. The text underscores this fact by asserting three times that the new Words being received by Moses were exactly like the first ones

(34:1, 2, 4). So the people at Sinai did receive a second chance. But they were not granted an easier or a diluted chance. The original tablets were shattered , but the original Words remained firm and clear.

Each year, as the annual reminder of this drama leading to Simchat Torah is played out, the liturgy of Judaism emphasizes the importance of a fresh start, made possible by repentance and Divine forgiveness. But the liturgy is also clear that what the Jew will be asked to do, the values by which all will be required to live during each coming year, will be no different from what has been commanded in all previous years. That is why the liturgical cycle reaches so far back into Exodus to reread such an unflattering story.

Finally, at the annual arrival of Simchat Torah, with all the children present, with the dancing and the singing and the joy of the celebration, it may be tempting to forget how truly serious the whole liturgical drama is. But Jews who are no longer children must celebrate Simchat Torah in the light of the rereading of the golden calf episode. And it is very much an adult responsibility to balance the "joy" of Torah by setting it into its proper context alongside the "requirements" of Torah. The way in which the early framers of the liturgy framed such a dramatic liturgical reminder of the serious nature of idolatry is designed to help Jews maintain that sense of proportion and perspective.

Let there be no misunderstanding. On Simchat Torah, the final verses of Deuteronomy should be read with a sense of achievement and great joy, and it is perfectly proper for Jews to celebrate, to dance, to sing, to express gratitude and thanks to God. Jews must always acknowledge with joy that the Torah is God's greatest of all gifts. But when one scroll rolled to the end of Deuteronomy is set aside to begin the reading from a different scroll opened to the first verses of Genesis, it is essential that a fundamental truth of Judaism be grasped. The Torah about to be to read is the same Torah that has just been completed. The words will be very familiar, for nothing in the "new" Torah will have changed, and none of her requirements will be lessened. Unchanged also will be commandments explaining both Jewish privilege and Jewish responsibility. In fact, Jews will spend the entire new year hearing "words" of Torah "just like" the old words that are familiar and well known. Spiritual success in each successive year will depend upon the extent to which each person remains faithful to the words they have been hearing all of their lives. There is nothing new here.

But this raises a different concern and question. Since it is a fact that the words of Torah will remain unchanged, the only question remaining would seem to be whether the Jewish level of obedience to Torah will also be just as before. Hope for improvement in modern Judaism thus derives both from the concrete example at Sinai and from the corporate experience of subsequent generations of faithful Jews who first shaped and then reaffirmed repeatedly the liturgical context in which Exodus 33:16-34:26 may be viewed.

NOTES

1. Note the wording of Exodus 34:1, and note especially the word *brit* in 34:10.
2. See on this point Charles David Isbell, "Why Jonah Is Read On Yom Kippur," *Central Conference of American Rabbis Journal*, Summer, 1998, pp. 84-99.

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