

AN EXAMINATION OF AARON'S ROLE IN THE SIN OF THE GOLDEN CALF

GEULA TWERSKY

INTRODUCTION

Aaron's involvement in the fashioning of the golden calf is difficult, if not impossible to reconcile with the high regard afforded him in the Bible in his role as high priest. Whereas severe retribution is meted out to Israel for their participation in the golden calf affair, Aaron escapes relatively unscathed despite the crucial role he played in its inception. This despite the fact that the Bible is unapologetic in its depiction of Aaron as the mastermind of the calf's construction (Ex. 32: 1-6).

When Moses confronts Aaron and questions him regarding his role in the affair, Aaron appears to shirk responsibility by deflecting the blame onto the people. Aaron further challenges credulity by suggesting that the calf somehow 'sprang forth' on its own. Aaron's version of the events and his denial of an active and central role in the calf's construction seem to lack credibility (Ex. 32:21-24).

Deuteronomy's recounting of the episode omits Aaron from the narration of the event. He is only mentioned at the very end of the text, where we are informed that Moses' prayers saved Aaron from certain death (Deut. 9:16-20). There are only two other places in the Bible where the sin of the golden calf is directly referenced, and in neither text is there any mention of Aaron or his involvement (Ps. 106: 19-23; Neh. 9:17-18).

PREVIOUS SOLUTIONS

It has been suggested that the golden calf was intended to serve as a pedestal upon which God would be understood to be enthroned, much like God's suggested enthronement upon the cherubim.¹ Depictions of Ancient Near Eastern gods standing upon a bull are cited in analogy.² This approach fails to address the gnawing fact that no such pedestal was ever prescribed for ritual use within the Temple. Furthermore, this approach fails to explicate Aaron's

Geula Twersky has MA's in Bible from Yeshiva University and from Bar Ilan University and has been teaching Bible for over two decades. She is also a professional artist www.geulaart.com.

bizarre claim that the calf of his own handiwork somehow 'sprang forth' (Ex. 32:24).

Chaya Ayun-Shraga argues that Aaron behaved appropriately in the golden calf event. She attributes the fiasco to Moses' exclusive leadership style and the elite way in which he mediated between the people and an obscure God.³ This suggestion flies in the face of the fact that whereas many are held accountable by the text for their role in the sin of the golden calf, Moses is not one of them. God himself makes it abundantly clear that not only is Moses blameless, he is the only one worthy of surviving the golden calf affair. God's suggestion that all of Israel be wiped out, and that Moses be installed as the new patriarch is reason enough to reject any suggestion of fault or blame on Moses' part (Ex. 32:10).

Hamilton relies on Aaron's defense in Exodus 32:22 to explain that Aaron was trying to save Israel from imminent danger:⁴ "Do not be angry, my lord," Aaron answered. "You know how prone these people are to evil , *ki bera hu*". The Rabbis also take the approach that Aaron was trying to stall the people, who were spiraling out of control.⁵ Most of the classical commentators understand Aaron's statement here to be referring to Israel's proclivities toward sin, and Aaron's attempt to steer them in the opposite direction.⁶ However, how could the fashioning of a molten image possibly serve to prevent Israel from transgression? And if Aaron's intentions were truly to stall Israel, thereby preventing them from accomplishing their aims before Moses' return, why did Aaron waste no time, and embark upon the task of fashioning the calf with such alacrity? The Rabbis attribute Aaron's celerity to Israel's enthusiasm for collecting the requisite gold for the molten image.⁷ This however, fails to adequately explain Aaron's prompt facilitation of the calf's formation.

A NEW APPROACH

The key to understanding Aaron's enigmatic role in the sin of the golden calf rests on a thorough understanding of the word *masseka*, which lies at the center of the biblical narratives recounting the incident (Ex.32:4, 8; Deut.9:12, 16). While it is generally assumed that the root of *masseka* is *nesek*, meaning to pour, or cast a molten image,⁸ it is also possible to understand the word *masseka* as deriving from *masak* which means both to mix wine as well as to pour molten metal.⁹ Two appearances of the root *masak* in

the Bible may shed light on our understanding of the word *masseka* in the sin of the golden calf.

Isaiah 65:11 admonishes those who have abandoned the Temple of God for astrological deities, placing offerings upon their cultic table, and filling the *mimsak*. While it was historically assumed that the word *mimsak* meant mixed wine,¹⁰ the definition nonetheless does not adequately suit the context. The word *mimsak* in the verse appears parallel to *shulhan*, table, and should likewise refer to a ritual object upon which or into which offerings are placed. *Mimsak*'s juxtaposing with *shulhan* casts serious doubt on the mixed wine definition.

Proverbs 23:30 reprimands those who tarry over wine and who inspect *mimsak*. The classical exegetes assume the verse to be about people who scrutinize mixed drinks,¹¹ *mimsak*. Dahood notes that Hebrew already has two words for this, *mesek* and *mezeg*.¹² He argues that the text in Proverbs is describing the bibbers that come to inspect the wine-vessel, not those who engage in "trials of blended wine".

New light is shed upon the meaning of *mimsak* in a Ugaritic list of merchandise which lists *mmskn* "mixing bowl" following *spl* "a large vessel".¹³ Like *mimsak*, the word *masseka*, may be understood to be a nominal form of the root *msk*, indicating a vessel meant to contain liquid.¹⁴

Thus, it is possible that the *masseka* which Aaron constructed was a golden vat fashioned with a calf décor intended to serve as a ritual laver, perfectly in line with the design of Solomon's laver which would later function in first Temple. This would seem to be Aaron's original intention in creating the 'golden calf', which is described as a *masseka*, as I will now explain.

Moses' ascent of Mount Sinai (and the ensuing sin of the golden calf), is preceded in Exodus by instructions for the construction of the Tabernacle's ritual laver (Ex.30:17-21). The text twice repeats that the laver served the purpose of preventing death. There is no apotropaic power contained within the laver. Rather, it is the act of washing one's hands and feet as divinely decreed before engaging in a ritual act which ostensibly prevents death. In other words, the Temple laver played a critical role in the act of sanctifying one's self in anticipation of serving God.

It is reasonable to assume that Aaron constructed a laver adorned with the calf motif, with the expressed intention of preventing Israel from engaging in foreign worship. The laver's critical role in the process of ritual sanctification before Divine service may have seemed suitable by Aaron for the purpose of forestalling sin. The presence of a ritual laver placed before an altar clearly and explicitly constructed for the worship of God and dedicated to His service, as Aaron himself announced in Ex. 32:5, *Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord*, conveyed the implicit message that purification and sanctification were required tasks in preparation of Divine service. That is not to say that Aaron used the laver; nor for that matter did he use the altar that he constructed. Both were meant to function together as a reminder of the need to dedicate all worship to God alone within the framework of Divinely mandated service.

The image of the calf or bull was a common symbol associated with ritual lavers in the ancient world. First and foremost, the lavers in Solomon's Temple featured multiple bovine images. The main laver in Solomon's Temple, enormous in its proportions and compared to the sea, was adorned by not only one, but by twelve massive bulls (1 Kgs 7:25-26). In addition to the main laver, Solomon also constructed ten smaller lavers on portable stands which were all decorated with bull images (1 Kgs 7:27-29). The significance of the multiple bovine images on Solomon's temple cannot be understated. They point to the existence of a larger phenomenon in temple décor which warrants further investigation. Witnesses to the bull motif adorning ritual lavers in the first millennium include a variety of archeological finds: A Syro-Hittite Iron Age temple in Jarablus was found to contain two large bulls sculpted out of basalt block, containing a shallow reservoir on the top, ostensibly for ablutions.¹⁵ A Hittite cult vessel from 850-750 BCE found at Yazilikaya features two bull men holding a libation vessel.¹⁶ An enormous five foot tall stone laver adorned with figures of bulls within its four handles was found at Amathus in Cyprus, which stood in the court of a 6th century BCE Phoenician temple.¹⁷

The affinity between the bovine image and ritual lavers in the ancient world could possibly be understood in light of the cow's association in ancient Egypt with the Nile River and the life giving properties of running water.¹⁸ This suggestion finds support in Joseph's interpretation of Pharaoh's dream

in which seven healthy cows represented seven years of plenty brought about by the overflow of the Nile River, and seven lean cows represented famine, caused by the Nile River's failure to rise. It should be noted that while Aaron's golden calf was not a fully mature bull, it is nonetheless considered to be from the bull family and is referred to as such in the Psalms (Ps. 106:20).

Immediately following the construction of the golden calf, and Israel's declaration of *These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt*, Aaron erected an altar in front of the calf and announced, *Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord* (Ex.32:4-5). The placement of the altar to God in front of the calf, which is described as a *masseka*, is reminiscent of the positioning of the Temple altar before the laver/*masseka*: *Then the Lord said to Moses; "Make a bronze basin, with its bronze stand, for washing. Place it between the tent of meeting and the altar, and put water in it* (Ex.30:17-18). Aaron's placement of an altar dedicated to God before the *masseka*-laver, aimed at forestalling sin by reminding Israel of their dedication to God and by redirecting Israel to His service.

An important factor that needs to be addressed is that while the ritual laver was meant to contain water, there is nothing in the story of the golden calf that suggests that Aaron's *masseka* contained any water. Exodus makes clear that water was only to be added to the laver at the time of the completion of the construction of the tabernacle (Ex. 40:1-7). It is therefore not surprising for the laver to have been dry at the time of the event, as it had not yet been installed and sanctified for ritual use. Aaron himself clearly stated it was not yet time for the service. Whereas Aaron intended for his *masseka* or laver, to function within the framework of the service of God, it was misused and abused by the people.

Later, in the period of the Israelite monarchy in 1 Kgs. 12:29, we are told about the reinstatement of the cult of the calf. This event took place after a hiatus of several hundred years. While its connection to the original golden calf event was deliberately intended by Jeroboam; that is not to say that Aaron's underlying intentions in erecting the calf were thoroughly understood years later. After all, the Israelites at the time of the event itself misunderstood and corrupted Aaron's true purpose.

THE GOLDEN CALF AND THE ERRANT WOMAN

A close of reading the text reveals a constellation of nuances which reverberate between the sin of the golden calf and its aftermath to the ritual of the *sota*, the errant woman, in Numbers 5, pointing to a conceptual correlation between the two.¹⁹ God's relationship to Israel is ubiquitously portrayed in the Bible as analogous to a marital relationship.²⁰ One prominent example of this analogy is the frequent use of the term *zenut*, or extramarital promiscuity, to describe Israel's idolatrous tendencies. The sin of the golden calf and the laws pertaining to the errant woman share the common themes of adultery and the imbibing of a potentially deadly elixir. The centrality of the unusual root *para* in both texts reinforces this connection (Ex.32:25; Nu.5:18).

The Rabbis point out the parallelism between the aftermath of the sin of the golden calf and the ritual of the errant woman and develop it further.²¹ They compare the erasing of the scroll containing the curse in the *sota* ritual, to the breaking of the tablets of the law. The Rabbis further linked these two scenarios by attributing the animation of the golden calf to the divine name, which had been cast into the molten gold.²² Accordingly, when the golden calf was ground up and mixed into an elixir, Israel was made to drink from the divine name. In a similar fashion, the *sota* was made to drink from an elixir containing the divine name.²³ The Rabbis point out that the 'holy water' given to the *sota* to drink was taken from the ritual laver.²⁴

The parallelism between the *sota* ritual and the resolution of the sin of the golden calf points to a relationship between the golden calf and the Tabernacle's ritual laver. The critical role that the Temple laver played in the *sota* ritual serves as an indicator that Aaron's primary intention in the golden calf affair was to use the erection of a ritual laver as a means for preventing Israel's infidelity. The purpose of the water of the *sota*, whose source was the ritual laver, was to facilitate a complete reconciliation between husband and wife.²⁵ This is evident from the plain sense of the text. There are numerous examples of Divine capital punishment in the Bible which do not call for human participation (Ex. 22:22-23; Ex. 23:7; Lev. 17:10). God doesn't require man's help in punishing the adulterous woman. It is reasonable to assume that the primary purpose of the *sota* ritual is not to punish the guilty but to exonerate the innocent.²⁶ This approach is reinforced with the ritual's concluding verse in which the exonerated woman is blessed with seed (Nu.

5:28). Given the parallelism between God's relationship with Israel and a spousal relationship, the implications of the *sota* model here are clear. Here too the goal was reconciliation. It is noteworthy that it was specifically the women of the congregation, who did not contribute gold for the construction of the golden calf,²⁷ who were the ones to donate the copper ornaments, or mirrors, which overlaid the laver in the Tabernacle according to the Rabbinic tradition.²⁸

Aaron's aim in erecting a bovine motif-ritual laver, like the role of the laver in the *sota* ritual, was to reconcile Israel with God. Aaron's feverish haste in erecting this calf/laver was calculated to accomplish this goal in time; before Moses' descent from the mountain with the tablets of the law, and the imminent consecration of the covenant. Understanding Aaron's role in the sin of the golden calf as a failed effort to reunite Israel with God explicates his remark to Moses that Israel had been spiraling dangerously out of control, '*be-
ra*'. Aaron was well aware of the idolatrous proclivities of the nation and understood the urgent need to restore the integrity of Israel's relationship with God. This understanding fits well with what we know about Aaron, and his penchant for using Tabernacle institutions in unorthodox ways as a means for saving the people from their own folly. For example, we read of Aaron bringing the incense offering outside of the Tabernacle confines in order to prevent the spread of a deadly plague (Num. 17:12). Aaron's fashioning of the golden calf was intended to turn Israel's attention towards the service of God and away from foreign worship. Regrettably, instead of forestalling sin, Aaron's actions promoted it. Despite Aaron's best intentions, Israel misappropriated the vessel of Aaron's handiwork as an object of worship.

CONCLUSION

The story recounted in the Bible encapsulates both Aaron's perspective as well as that of the people. We encounter two sharply contrasting perspectives on Aaron in the Bible; one which is extremely laudatory and positive and one which is intensely critical. The negative perspective relates exclusively to Aaron's role in facilitating the sin of the people. It is the result of his actions as opposed to the act itself which is criticized. In Deuteronomy the creation of the calf as a sinful object is attributed exclusively to the people. Aaron is

never castigated for his personal actions, only for the consequences which resulted from them. This point is proposed by Abravanel in his commentary on *Parshat Ki Tisa*.

The biblical narrative focusses on two issues. The primary issue is the sin of the people. The secondary issue is Aaron's facilitative role. The topic of the Bible's narrative is not what Aaron intended. That is a third issue which is left for us to figure out based on the clues that the Bible provides, but only incidentally. The Bible is not Aaron's defense. The Bible is accusing Israel of what they did wrong, and Aaron is implicated as an accessory.

The Bible's description of the calf as *masseka*, is particularly apt. The word *masseka* can be interpreted as either a laver or a molten image. While Aaron intended the former, it ended up becoming the latter. This one word encapsulates the basis for both Aaron's culpability in the creation of the calf as well as his ultimate pardon and exoneration.

NOTES

1. Cf. H. T. Obbink, "Jahwebilder," *ZAW* 47 (1929), 264-274; W. F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1957), 299-301; N. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Origins of Biblical Israel* (Knopf Doubleday, 2011), 218.
2. Ronald Clements, *Exodus* (CBC 32; Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1972) on Ex. 32:4 adds that in Canaanite mythology the gods El and Baal often were depicted upon a bull.
3. Chaya Ayun-Shraga, *Beit Mikra* 55.2 (2010), p. 60-80.
4. Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), p. 546.
5. *Exodus Rabbah*, Tezaveh 37; *Numbers Rabbah*, Bahaalotcha 15.
6. Cf. Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Nachmanides and Hizkuni on Nu.32:32; David Hacoeh suggests that *bera* here stems from the Arabic word *tivra* meaning generosity of spirit. This explanation doesn't take into account the use of the same word within the same general context in vs.12 where it clearly refers to evil intentions and death. Cf. David ben Raphael Chaim Hacoeh, "You know that the nation is bera," *Beit Mikra* 129 (1992), (Heb.), <http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/kitveyet/betmikra/ki-bera.l.htm>
7. *Pesikta Zutra* Exodus 32:2.
8. The word *nesek* may also mean to pour as a libation, to form an alliance, (which is related to pouring a libation, since alliances were often formed through the ceremonial pouring of a libation), and to weave a web or cloth, hence to cover. Cf. HALOT, ' *masseka*, ' p. 605; BDB', *nesek*, ' p. 651a.; Gesenius, *Gesenius's Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament*, *nesek*, ' p. DLIII; John D. W. Watts, *Word Biblical Commentary: Isaiah 1-33* (Vol. 24; Edinburgh: Nelson, 2005), p. 462; cf. also Even Ezra and Kimchi on Isa.30:1.
9. Cf. HALOT, ' *masak*, ' p. 605; Jastrow, ' *masak*, ' p. 807a.
10. Cf. Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Kimhi, Isa. 65:11.
11. Cf. Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Prov. 23:30.

12. Mitchell Dahood, *Proverbs and Northwest Semitic Philology* (Rome: Gregorian Biblical BookShop, 1963), 49.
13. C. Virolleaud, *Le Palais royal d'Ugarit 2. Mission de Ras Shamra 7* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale/Librairie C. Klincksieck, 1957), 103.18; C. H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Manual* (AnOr 35: Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1955), 290, no. 1134; Gregorio Del Olmo Lete and Joaquin Sanmartin, *A Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language in the Alphabetic Tradition, part one, (a-k)*, (trans. W. Watson; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 582; The New Jewish Publication Society translates Isaiah 65: 11 as cups.
14. The correspondence between *memsak* and *masseka* are similar to the relationship between the following noun pairs: *malben-levena* (brick), *midrash-derasha* (homily), *mishar-sehora* (merchandise).
15. Leonard C. Woolley and Richard D. Barnett, *Carchemich Report on the Excavations at Jarablus on Behalf of the British Museum, vol. III: The Excavations in the Inner Town and the Hittite Inscriptions* (London: British Museum, 1952), p. 157-290.
16. Raz Kletter, Irit Ziffer and Wolfgang Zwickel, *Yavneh I: The Excavation of the 'Temple Hill' Repository Pit and Cult Stands* (Volume 30 of *Orbis biblicus et orientalis / Series archaeologica*; Fribourg: Academic Press, 2010), p. 64-65.
17. Sydney Smith, *Edinburgh Review, Or Critical Journal 174* (Edinburgh: A & C Black, 1891), p. 112; John G. R. Forlong, *Encyclopedia of Religions, vol. III* (New York: Cosimo, 2013), p. 260; Cf. <http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/vase-amathus>
18. Cf. Edward William Lane, *Description of Egypt: Notes and Views in Egypt and Nubia, Made During the Years 1825, 26, 27 and 28: Chiefly Consisting of a Series of Descriptions and delineations of the Monuments, Scenery, of Those Countries* (Cairo: American Univ. Press, 2000), p.58; Gerald Massey, *Ancient Egypt- Light of the World, Vol.1* (Altenmünster: Jazzybee Verlag, 2014), p.313.
19. Cf. Exodus 34: 14, 15.
20. Hosea's prophecy, for example, explores the theme of Israel's marital-like relationship with God, in depth.
21. *Bamidbar Rabba*, 9:48.
22. *Bereishit Rabbati*, Vayehi p.264 s. v. 'vayahantu oto'. The Rabbis further connect the golden calves of Jeroboam to the sin of the golden calf by suggesting that it too was animated by the divine name. Cf. TB *Sota* 47a.
23. Numbers 5:21, 23, TB *Shabbat*, 116a.
24. *Sifrei* Naso, 10.
25. TB *Sukkah* 53b; TB *Makot* 11a; TB *Hulin* 141a; *Tosefta Shabbat* 13:5.
26. The Bible's purpose in exonerating the errant woman through the Sota trial may also be deduced from the ritual's glaring divergence from the analogous Ancient Near Eastern procedure which had the errant woman flung into the river. Cf. Judith Hauptman, *Rereading the Rabbis: A Woman's Voice* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), 16.
27. Ex.32:2-3. The verse says that the men removed the gold from their wives and children. Cf. *Bamidbar Rabbah*, Pinhas, 21:10.
28. Ex. 38:8; Onkelos, Rashi and Ibn Ezra ad loc.