

Exodus 32:7-14

The LORD said to Moses, "Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'" The LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation." But Moses implored the LORD his God, and said, "O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, 'I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'" And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

(NRSV)

A: *What is the subject of the text?*

The subject of the text is a collective whole – the disobedient people of Israel.

B: *What is said about the subject?*

God describes to Moses the disobedience of the people, having turned aside from divine command, and instead worshipping a graven image of a golden calf, fashioned by their own hands in the absence of Moses. God tells Moses of his intention to destroy Israel, and to rebuild the chosen people from the remnant of Moses' lineage.

C: *What is the purpose of what is said?*

It is almost as if God was testing Moses, leaving the fate of Israel open-ended, to see if Moses will take full ownership of the people, and plead their case despite their obvious and grievous disobedience. Indeed, Moses rises to the challenge, arguing with God and presenting him with several convincing reasons to spare Israel. God changes his mind.

Chapter 32 of Exodus is a classic example of the old adage "While the cat's away, the mice will play." Moses has traversed Mt. Sinai to commune with and receive

instruction from the Lord. In lieu of Moses' presence, the people petition Aaron to make gods for them. It is interesting that the absence of the emissary of the one true God does not result in atheism, but rather the worship of false gods. Though the deliverance from Egypt was fairly recent in the history of the fledging nation of Israel, the reasoning given to Aaron in 32:1 is: "We do not know what has become of [Moses]." The people reveal a complete lack of trust, not only in Moses' ability to lead, but in God's trustworthiness to deliver Moses back to them. It is as if to say: out of sight, out of mind. It is disappointing that Aaron – God's hand-picked priest, right-hand to Moses, and fellow witness to God's mighty acts of deliverance – is so quickly convinced by mob-think.

That brings us up to speed to verse 32:7, in which YHWH instructs Moses with a sense of immediacy to **לֵךְ-יָרֵד** *go down, descend* at once. The verb here, from the root **יָרַד** is in the Qal Imperative, which according to Arnold and Choi on page 63 "is used only in positive expressions of volition." In other words, while God is speaking personally to Moses (as is evidenced by the use of the divine name), his command is not absolute. Moses here still has a choice of whether or not to follow God's order to leave his presence and attend to the misguided people. In the English, we miss out on this subtle nuance, one that makes a world of difference in light of Moses' initial refusal.

It is interesting that the Qal Imperative also made an appearance in Genesis 12:1, when God (not yet then revealed as YHWH) commands Abram to leave his homeland. Here, Abram had a choice. God lays before him the promise to make of him a great nation, one which has come to fruition in the children of Israel, recently delivered from captivity. Here, God is making the same proposition to Moses, yet via the concept of negative space. God's wrath would create a vacuum in his promise to Abram, and to

remedy this problem God offers to give Moses what is rightfully that of Abraham – the paternal right to father a great nation. Clearly, God does not think of Israel as a great nation any longer, as they debase themselves before graven images. This is reflected in his phrasing to Moses, calling them “your people” rather than “my people.” They have forsaken the Lord and his command, so he in turn is about to forsake them.

God seemingly, albeit briefly, has handed over ownership of Israel entirely to Moses. It is as if YHWH is revealing himself to Moses in a vulnerable way – He is at his wits end, and consults the advice of a trusted friend. Theologically speaking, we know that God does not *need* the advice of humans. In light of that understanding, we are to see the question of what to do with Israel, as well as the potential lineage guarantee, as a test of character for Moses. At this point, either choice would have been the right one. Israel had walked away from God in the spiritual sense, just as Moses had departed from them in order to ascend the mountain. God would have been justified in wiping them out.

Yet, Moses’ heart is for his people, though he did not grow up as one of them. The verb **תָּוַשׁ** translated in the NRSV as *acted perversely* is in the perfect tense, most likely used here in the sense of being completed. Not unlike Abraham in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah, Moses here is being given a choice of how God should deal with an utterly depraved population. Moses appeals to God on the basis of logic. It simply would not make any sense to have delivered his people, only to destroy them in the wilderness. Moses asks *What would the neighbors think?* Surely the nearby countries would balk at the idea of a fickle deity who saves his followers only to destroy them after so much effort has been spent to ensure their safety.

The imagery in 32:9 is vivid. עַם־קָשִׁיָּהּ-עֲרֵף – a *stiff-necked people* – have fashioned for themselves a beast of burden. They are as hard to lead as a real, live calf would have been – young, stubbornly resistant to authority, and seemingly impossible to break. Moses has relinquished the reins to Aaron, who is having significant difficulty keeping the raging, bullish population under control.

Verse 32:10 is also graphically depicted. The וַיִּחַר־אַפִּי – *face, anger* of God burns hot against the Israelites, and God tells Moses to depart from him. It is interesting that the word here for wrath can also mean face, especially considering that YHWH does not actually allow Moses to see his face. Also of note is that when Moses has been in God's presence, the face of Moses becomes radiant. Such concentrated, focused anger from the face of God is being prepared in order to consume Israel in all its wickedness. Yet, this very same face which burns hot with anger is also that of a kind and loving God, one from whom Moses is able to coax mercy.

In verse 32:12, Moses suggests that neighboring nations will propose that God brought Israel into the wilderness with בְּרָעָה an *evil* purpose. It seems ludicrous to think that God's purpose could be evil, but in the simplest of terms, that which is good is according to God's will and that which is evil is against it. Therefore, having just defeated Pharaoh's anti-creation agenda of destruction and subjugation, it would be counter-productive for God to himself instantiate the same sort of destructive action. The human is successful in his interchange with the divine, and YHWH then עַל־הַרְעָה turns *from evil*. Again, it is not to say that God is at all capable of evil in the absolute moral sense. Rather, his anger subsided and he decided not to carry out his plan. In so doing,

Moses again reaffirms full ownership of his role as leader of Israel, and descends down the mountain to exact judgment, though it will be considerably less severe than what God had proposed. Interestingly, the interchange between Moses and God is mirrored between Aaron and Moses in 32:22 – “Do not let the anger of my lord burn hot; you know the people, that they are bent on evil.” The concept of remnant is also in play, as with Sodom and Gomorrah. Just as Lot was found to be righteous, the sons of Levi are set apart, and come to Moses when he summons those faithful to YHWH.

In summation, the conversation between God and Moses is similar to that of God and Abraham. God leaves the fate of Israel in Moses’ hands, with the proposed course of action to destroy Israel and raise up from Moses’ house the new lineage of chosen people. Much like Abraham, Moses has compassion for his people, and pleads with God to spare them. God does so, but still requires judgment upon Moses’ return to the camp. The blasphemers are made to consume the very dust of their hastily constructed graven image. The punishment is swift and bloody, but nowhere near as terrible as utter annihilation.