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INSTITUTE הרטמן שלום

Moses at Sinai: God's Partner or Adversary

Part I: The Biblical Story

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The Biblical Story

1. Exodus 32:7–14

(God's First Speech)

7. The Lord spoke to Moses, "Hurry down, **for your people**, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt, have acted basely.

8. They have been quick to turn aside from the way that I enjoined upon them. They have made themselves a molten calf and bowed low to it and sacrificed to it, saying: "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt."

ז וַיִּדְבֹר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵּדַרְדֹּד בִּי שַׁחַת עַמֶּךָ אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלִיתָ מִמִּצְרַיִם: ח סָרוּ מִן־הַדְרֹךְ אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתָם עֲשׂוּ לָהֶם עֲגֹל מִסַּכָּה וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ־לָהּ וַיִּזְבְּחוּ־לָהּ וַיִּנְאֲמוּ־וּ אֵלֶּה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלִיךָ מִמִּצְרַיִם: מִצְרַיִם:

(God's Second Speech)

9. The Lord further said to Moses, "I see that this is a stiff-necked people.

10. Now let me be and my anger will blaze forth against them and I will destroy them and make of you a great nation.

ט וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה רְאִיתִי אֶת־הָעָם הַזֶּה וְהִנֵּה עִם־קִשְׁיָעָרָף הוּא: י וְעַתָּה הִנֵּיחָה לִּי וַיִּחַר־אִפִּי בָהֶם וְאֶכְלֶם וְאֶעֱשֶׂה אוֹתָךְ לְגוֹי גְדוֹל:

(Moses's reaction)

11. But Moses implored the Lord his God, saying, "Let not Your anger, O Lord, blaze forth against **Your people**, whom You delivered from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand.

12. Let not the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that He delivered them, only to kill them off in the mountains and annihilate them from the face of the earth.' Turn from your blazing anger, and renounce the plan to punish Your people.

13. Remember Your servants Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, how You swore to them by Your Self and said to them: I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, and I will give to your offspring this whole land of which I spoke, to possess forever."

14. And the Lord renounced [lit. "repented"] the punishment [lit. "the evil"] He had planned to bring upon his people.

יא ויחל משה את־פני יהוה אלהיו ויאמר למה יהוה יחרה אפך בעמך אשר הוצאת מארץ מצרים בכת גדול ובגד חזקה: **יב** למה יאמרו מצרים לאמר ברעה הוציאתם להרג אתם בהרים ולכלתם מעל פני האדמה שוב מחרון אפך והנחתם עליהרעה לעמך: **יג** זכר לאברהם ליצחק ולישראל עבדיך אשר נשבעת להם בך ונתתם ארבה את־זרעכם ככוכבי השמים וכל־הארץ היא את אשר אמרתי אתן לזרעכם ונחלו לעלם: **יד** וינחם יהוה עליהרעה אשר דבר לעשות לעמו:

Questions for reflection

Different concepts of God and of God's relationship with Moses emerge from this narrative. What possibilities does narrative carry as opposed to law in communicating who God is and what God wants or expects? Do you think the ambiguities or gaps in this narrative are purposeful? If so, how can the reader hold both models of God and the divine-human relationship simultaneously?

Inner-Biblical Interpretation

2. Deuteronomy 9:16–20

16. Then I saw that you had indeed sinned against the Lord your God, by casting for yourselves an image of a calf; you had been quick to turn from the way that the Lord had commanded you.

17. So I took hold of the two tablets and flung them from my two hands, smashing them before your eyes.

18. Then I lay prostrate before the Lord as before, forty days and forty nights; I neither ate bread nor drank water, because of all the sin you had committed, provoking the Lord by doing what was evil in his sight.

19. For I was afraid that the anger that the Lord bore against you was so fierce that he would destroy you. But the Lord listened to me that time also.

20. The Lord was so angry with Aaron that he was ready to destroy him, but I interceded also on behalf of Aaron at that same time.

טז וארא והנה חטאתם ליהוה אלהיכם עשיתם לכם עגל מסכה סרתם מהר מן־הדרך אשר־צוה יהוה אתכם: **יז** ואתפשו בשגגי הלחות ואשלכם מעל שתי ידי ואשברם לעיניכם: **יח** ואתנפל לפני יהוה כראשנה ארבעים יום וארבעים לילה לחם לא אכלתי ומים לא שתיתי על כל־חטאתכם אשר חטאתם לעשות הרע בעיני יהוה להכעיסו: **יט** כי יגרתני מפני הארץ והחמה אשר קצף יהוה עליכם להשמיד אתכם וישמע יהוה אלי גם בפעם ההוא: **כ** ובאתרן התאגף יהוה מאד להשמידו ואתפלל גם־בעד אהרן בעת ההוא:

Questions for reflection

In the model amplified by Deuteronomy, Moses is depicted as an intercessor and a partner in helping God carry out God's larger plan or purpose. God is nervous about Moses' seeming paralysis or inaction after God's first speech and encourages him to step up, which Moses does. Can you think of other examples where God needs people to do God's work and prompts them to serve as partners? What are the theological implications of God needing people to prevent divine destruction?

3. Psalm 106:19–23

19. They made a calf at Horeb and bowed down to a molten image.
20. They exchanged their glory for the image of a bull that feeds on grass.
21. They forgot God who saved them, who performed great deeds in Egypt
22. wondrous deeds in the land of Ham, awesome deeds at the Sea of Reeds.
23. He would have destroyed them had not Moses His chosen one confronted [lit. "stood before"] Him in the breach to avert His destructive wrath.

יט יַעֲשׂוּ־עֵגֶל בְּחֶרֶב וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּ לַמַּסֶּכָּה :
כ וַיִּמְירוּ אֶת־כְּבוֹדֵם בְּתַבְנִית שׁוֹר אֲכָל עֵשֶׂב :
כא שָׁכְחוּ אֵל מוֹשִׁיעֵם עֲשֵׂה גְדִלוֹת בְּמִצְרַיִם :
כב גִּפְלֹאוֹת בְּאֶרֶץ חָם נוֹרְאוֹת עַל־יַם־סוּף :
כג וַיֹּאמֶר לְהַשְׁמִידֵם לִילֵי מִנְּשָׁה בְּחִירוֹ עַמְד בְּפִרְץ לִפְנֵינוּ לְהַשִּׁיב חַמָּתוֹ מִהַשְׁחִית :

Questions for reflection

In this psalm, Moses is described as standing in the breach—an opening in a wall through which an enemy can enter—thereby blocking access to God. The implication is that God is the enemy of Israel bent on destroying them, while Moses is their valiant defender. Is the metaphor of God as enemy one that still resonates today? Under what circumstances might people consider God an enemy and who would be called upon to battle with God?



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