

TZCHOK IN THE GOLDEN CALF NARRATIVE
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Moses had ascended the cloud on the mountaintop, and disappeared from view, and the Israelites waited at the foot of the mountain, seeing some flashes of fire from above. They wait for forty days, and their leader did not return. Would he, ever? Were they, now, stranded in the wilderness, forsaken by Moses and, perhaps, by God? In their fear, they turned to Aaron asking for an *Elohim* “that will go before us”,¹ lest they be leaderless.

So Aaron instructed them to bring forth their jewelry, and he molded it into a golden calf, saying, “This is your *Elohim*, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.”

And Aaron... built an alter before it, and ... said, “Tomorrow is a festival to the Lord.” And they rose... and brought burnt offerings and brought forward communion sacrifices, and the people came back from eating and drinking and they rose up *letzachek*.²

From the perspective of an Elohist, a Northern Israelite voice within the composite text of the Torah, the erection of this calf at an alter in the wilderness provides an historical precedent for the alters of the Northern Kingdom, erected by Jeroboam,³ each marked by a molten calf. In his critical notes on I Kings, Mordechai Cogan explains that the calves are not likely to denote idolatry. An understanding of Near Eastern iconography clarifies that a variety of animal figures served as pedestals for gods who appeared astride their backs. From this perspective, the Golden Calf was meant as a way of inviting the God of Israel back into their camp, offering Him a new resting place amongst the People, after his long absence on the mountaintop.⁴ The calf was the tangible, visible, platform they fashioned to seat their invisible God, *Elohim*, who brought them up from the land of Egypt.

¹ Exodus 32:4.

² Exodus 32: 5-6, Robert Alter, The Five Books of Moses, W. W. Norton & Co., 2004

³ I Kings 12:25-33.

⁴ Mordechai Cogan, I Kings, The Anchor Yale Bible, Yale University Press, 2008, p. 358.

Even though this tradition, with connotations of honoring and welcoming an indwelling god, may have been well known in Northern Israelite circles, the Torah, in the form in which we have received it, clearly denigrates both the cult object and the cultic event described in Exodus 32. A significant element in the narrative's defamation of the Golden Calf festival is its characterization as an incident of wild debauchery, signified by use of the root "tz-ch-k" to describe Israel's celebration. They went out "letzachek," which we have, commonly, come to understand as meaning, "to revel," wild, uncontrolled, and depraved.

Surely, glad celebration is an important part of sacrificial worship, and there has been a case made for understanding the *tzchok* of the People as simple, joyful singing and dancing, frolicking, if you will. Samuel David Luzzatto, relates the root *tz-ck-k*, commonly translated as "laugh," to the root *s-ch-k*, which is commonly translated as "play." (The BDB concurs.⁵) In the examples he brings, the word relates to music and dance, or the playfulness of music and dance. In II Samuel 6:5 the root is used to describe the dancing that accompanied the Ark of God as it was transported to the City of David: "David and all the House of Israel danced," "*mesachek*," "before the Lord," to the sound of all kinds of instruments. In I Samuel 18:6, "the women of all the towns of Israel came out singing, and dancing [*b*]" "*mecholot*" to greet King Saul," as he returned from war. Their action is repeated in the next verse: "And the dancing women," "*hanashim hamesachkot*," "sang out..."⁶ The parallelism in this text, employing *m-ch-l* and *s-ch-k* as synonyms, both to balance song with dance, is particularly helpful in elucidating *s-ch-k*'s meaning as celebratory dance.

After the *tzchok*-ing of the People in celebration of the Golden Calf, Exodus 32:19 reiterates the scene from Moses's perspective, as he re-entered the camp with the Tablets

⁵ **S-ch-k** is the New Hebrew form of **tz-ch-k**. Brown, Driver, and Briggs: F. Brown, S. Driver, and C. Briggs, The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon, Hendrickson Publishers, 2010, p. 850

⁶ Samuel Luzzatto, as referenced by William H. C. Propp, Anchor Bible Vol. 2A, Exodus 19-40, Doubleday, 2006, p. 553.

of the Law. In verse 19, the word “*mecholot*,” plainly meaning “dances,” is used in place of *tzchok*. Here, as in I Samuel, the scene is described and re-described, using *m-ch-l* and *tz-ch-k* as synonyms.

Leviticus 23:40 recounts the *mitzvot* of observing the festivals to include a prescription for rejoicing. Deuteronomy 12:12 and 18 teach that rejoicing at the time of making offerings to God is part what Israel, and Israel’s sons and daughters and slaves and Levites, will do to express gratitude for being brought into the Holy Land and prospering there. Deuteronomy 16: 11 and 14 add the sojourner and the orphan and the widow to the list of celebrants commanded to rejoice at festival-time. But in these instances, the word “*sameach*” is used, rather than “*tzchok*.”⁷

Although the BDB translates “*litzchok*” as “to laugh,”⁸ and despite the examples, above, of the word’s use denoting joyful dance, *tz-ch-k* is a more nuanced root, maybe even a more darkly shaded root, and cannot simply be understood as an expression of *simcha*. We might want to consider, for example, that Michal chastises David for “exposing” himself in his whirling dance before the Ark of the Lord,⁹ and that the women of Shiloh were abducted while dancing at a religious festival.¹⁰

The BDB offers that *letzachek* means to jest, to sport, to play, to make sport, as in mockery, or to toy with, as in a conjugal caress. The noun *tzchok* is laughter but it can be a person made *into* laughter, a “laughing stock.”¹¹

The most notable use of the root *tz-ch-k* appears in the *Yitzchak* story. God tells Abraham that Sarah will be blessed to bear a son, and Abraham laughs, saying, “to a hundred-year-old will a child be born? Will ninety-year-old Sarah give birth?”¹² Sarah repeats his

⁷ Propp, p. 553.

⁸ BDB, p. 850

⁹ II Samuel 6:14-22.

¹⁰ Judges 21:19-23.

¹¹ BDB, p. 850.

¹² Genesis 17:16-17.

incredulousness when she overhears the angels' annunciation and "laughs inwardly, saying, 'After being shriveled, shall I have pleasure, and my husband is old?'"¹³ The text has already indicated that she was long menopausal,¹⁴ and, now, Sarah adds a conjugal complain, as Abraham has become impotent. How, then, will she conceive? When asked why she's laughed, Sarah denies laughing, "for she was afraid,"¹⁵ further suggesting that this *tzchok* was derisive in nature.

Robert Alter makes an example of the repeated use of the root *tzchok* to demonstrate the fine definition possible in biblical narrative when a word root is repeated, with variation.¹⁶ Here, we begin with Abraham's open laugh of surprise. Cynicism builds with Sarah's laugh of disbelief and her internal expression of absurdity. Indeed, the root will be repeated when Sarah laughs after *Yitzchak's* birth,¹⁷ transformed, by the impossible made real, from a *tzchok* full of bitterness to a laugh of joy and belief.

Even so, it is a complex moment. Sarah laughs in triumph, inviting the community to celebrate her son's weaning, but there is a lingering sense of the absurdity of the situation. Alter wonders: "Is God doing something *to* her (Sarah) as well as for her?" He points out that *tzchok* is often linked in parallelism with "*laag*," "scorn."¹⁸ Awareness of this connection maintains the allusion to mockery in the word *tzchok*, even when used in a more positive context. Alter concludes: "All who hear of [*Yitzchak's* birth] may laugh, rejoice with Sarah, but the hint that they might also laugh *at* her is evident in her language."¹⁹

In the Ishmael story, which begins in the very next sentence, Sarah sees Ishmael *tzchok*-ing, and he is banished. Here, the word is in *piel* (emphatic) form: "*metzachek*."²⁰ There

¹³ Genesis 18:12.

¹⁴ v. 11.

¹⁵ v. 15.

¹⁶ Alter, p. 87.

¹⁷ Genesis, Chapter 21.

¹⁸ Alter, p. 102

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Genesis 21:9.

have been exegetical attempts to justify Ishmael's expulsion by explaining *tzchok* in the *piel* form to mean homosexual behavior, tying Ishmael's *tzchok* to the suggestion of sexual activity in Lot's *tzchok* with his sons-in-law,²¹ also expressed as "*metzachek*." Looking at other instances in which "*metzachek*" appears in the Torah does reveal that this form connotes a sexual sort of "play," as in *Yitzchak* and Rebecca's playfulness with one another,²² and as in Potiphar's wife's accusation of sexual advances on the part of Jacob.²³

Whereas *metzachek* is taken to infer sex in the Lot and Ishmael texts, sexual activity not actually elaborated upon, in these latter two instances the word's meaning is explicit. Genesis 26:7-8 juxtaposes *Yitzchak*'s untruthful claim, that Rebecca is his sister, with Abimelech's observation of behavior to the contrary. The fact that they are engaged in *tzchok*, "*metzachek*," convinces the king that they are, in fact, husband and wife. Everett Fox translates: "...there was *Yitzchak* laughing-and-loving with Rebecca his wife!"²⁴ Potiphar's wife uses the word in accusation, grabbing Joseph's garment, which he rips through and leaves in her hand as he flees. Then, holding the garment as evidence for her husband to see, Potiphar accuses: "There came to me the Hebrew servant... to *play around* with me!"²⁵ Everett Fox translates: "play around;" William Propp suggests that a colloquial paraphrase of both the root *s=ch-k* and the root *tz-ch-k* is: "fool around."²⁶

The simplest meaning of *tzchok* in the Ishmael narrative is that he is a child observed at play, "*metzachek*;" the most egregious meaning (but the easiest to reconcile with his banishment) is that he played, sexually, with his half-brother, abusing the child. Still, with Ishmael's *tzchok* appearing in such close proximity to that root's conveyance of mockery in the previous narrative (of *Yitzchak*'s birth), the feel is continuous, particularly with this thematic root repeated, yet again, as we transition to a different story involving

²¹ Genesis 19:14.

²² Genesis 26:8.

²³ Genesis 39:17.

²⁴ Everett Fox, The Five Books of Moses, Shoken Books, 1995.

²⁵ Genesis 39:17, Fox translation.

²⁶ Propp, p. 553

Yitzchak. In keeping with this continuity, Sarah hears mockery in Ishmael's laughter, and isn't that enough to incite her?

The root's variety of suggested affects allows translators of the Golden Calf narrative to choose a particular nuance. The JPS translation prefers: "...and they rose 'to dance'."²⁷ Robert Alter translates: "...and they rose up 'to play'," noting that the "play" of *tzchok* involves dance but, less neutrally, implies a bacchanal of food and drink, song²⁸ and dance²⁹, culminating in orgiastic activity.³⁰

Also acknowledging sexual connotation, Everett Fox³¹ and William Propp³² both translate *letzachek* as "to revel." To revel is to rejoice, to savor, to feast on and glory in; it is also to indulge. It is to wallow, get high, make merry, cut loose, *overindulge* or *overdo*. Revelry is celebration, a fling, a romp a carnival, a bacchanal.³³

Sex, to be sure, was not part of authorized Israelite worship.³⁴ But there is a way in which the Pentateuch describes apostasy as infidelity. Exodus 34:14, describes God as jealous: "...you shall not bow to another god for the Lord, His name is Jealous, a jealous God He is." Alter reads a quasi-sexual characteristic in this jealousy. "The God who has chosen Israel implicitly represents Himself as Israel's husband and lover (a metaphor that both Hosea and Jeremiah will make explicit), and when the Israelites betray Him by worshipping other gods, they go 'whoring,' and are unfaithful as an errant spouse is sexually unfaithful."³⁵ The revolutionary idea of a single God banning all rivals is powerfully anthropomorphic. "God does not tolerate rivals to the hearts of his people

²⁷ The Rabbinical Assembly of The United Synagogue of the Conservative Movement, *Etz Hayim Torah and Commentary*, 2001; English translation by The Jewish Publication Society, 1999.

²⁸ Joshua heard the sound of the people as it shouted, in v.18.

²⁹ As Moses drew near the camp, in v. 19, he saw the calf, and the dancing.

³⁰ Alter, *ibid*.

³¹ Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses*, Schocken Books, 1995, p. 441

³² William H. C. Propp, *Anchor Bible Vol. 2A, Exodus 19-40*, Doubleday, 2006, p. 539.

³³ J. I. Rodale, *The Synonym Finder*, Warner Books, 1978, pp. 1033-4

³⁴ Propp, p. 553.

³⁵ Alter, p. 510.

Israel.”³⁶ Directly after naming God “Jealous,” the next verses (15 and 16) invoke the metaphor of whoring three times.

Numbers 25, in its account of Israel “whoring” after *Baal Peor*, provides the visceral image of the Israelite man and his Midianite woman, who, upon hearing the decree to impale Israelite chiefs on account of the idol worship, come, weeping, to the tent of meeting, where they are, indeed, stabbed through. With this action, Israel is spared further punishment. The disloyalty of Israel to her One God is clearly symbolically tied to the unholy union of an Israelite man and a woman who is “other,” and further, the symbol is made palpable by their actual horrible death by stabbing, the errant Israelite man impaled through her “*kubah*,” her “box.” *Kubah* may mean “alcove,” but even so, the word is close to “*kevah*,” “belly,” and only a slightly veiled euphemism for the locus of desire.

This, to say that suggestion of sexual “play” surpasses implication of a celebration gone too far, or corporeal impropriety at the foot of the holy mountain. It raises the question of Israel’s loyalty to her divine spouse.

The insinuation of sexual frivolity, bacchanalian revelry, and “whoring,” is supported by the punishment Moses enacts, so similar to the ritual of *sotah*, the ordeal of bitter water, developed to apply in certain cases of suspected adultery.³⁷ Although he had defended the People in the face of God’s anger, when Moses reenters the camp and sees the calf and the *tzchok* with his own eyes, he becomes as enraged as God had been. “His nose flared” in anger.³⁸ Propp notes that *sotah*, too, is enacted in instances wherein a husband suspects adultery and is exceedingly angry in his “storm wind of jealousy.” *Sotah* consists of having the wife drink a vile potion containing ink of a written curse; if the wife is guilty, her belly swells. Moshe burned the calf, ground it fine, mixed its ashes with water, and had the People drink.³⁹ Propp contends that the calf-water also sorted the

³⁶ Alter, p. 430, in a note on Exodus 20:5.

³⁷ Numbers 5:11-31.

³⁸ Exodus 32:19.

³⁹ V.20.

unfaithful from the faithful.⁴⁰ *RAMBAM* extends the disgrace beyond whoring Israel to include a profound degradation of her consort. The calf passed through the bodies of the Israelites, reappearing in their feces.⁴¹

Moses's smashing of the tablets was not just an emotional display; it symbolized a rupture in the Covenant between Israel and God, between divine husband and chosen wife. Indeed, it was more than a symbolic act. In the Ancient Near East, to destroy a contractual document was to actively nullify its contents. Assyrian vassal treaties were ritually smashed after Nineveh's fall, and in Zechariah 11:10, a staff was "cleft in two so as to annul the Covenant."⁴²

My conclusion regarding what *tzchok* means in the context of the Golden Calf is that it means revelry of an unseemly nature, fraught with overtones of mockery and disloyalty, and implicit with undertones of sexual frenzy. *Letzachek* is so offensive an action (or word!) as to incite, first, God, and then, Moses, to want to break the Covenant. The question is *why* this word, replete with abounding negative connotations, is employed, here, defaming what could well be a fully Yahwist celebration? After all, this celebration parallels celebration of the Covenant, described in Exodus 24, where the Israelites also sacrificed and ate a sacred meal in the presence of a revealed deity.

Aaron declared the Calf, "your God who brought you up from the land of Egypt," and Propp brings support of the notion that "the diety of the Exodus possessed a taurine aspect," as is described in Numbers 23:22 and 24:8: "God, who takes them/him out from Egypt; he has, indeed, wild-ox prongs."⁴³ But despite sociological, and archeological, and textual evidence upholding Israel's allegiance to their God, and evidence of monotheist intent in the golden Calf incident, the Torah denigrates this alter, this object, and this ritual as being defined by *tzchok*. Why?

⁴⁰ Propp, p. 559.

⁴¹ Ibid. p. 560.

⁴² Nachum Sarna, as quoted by Propp, p. 558.

⁴³ Ibid. p. 552.

The answer seems to be political. Even more than it parallels the celebration of the Covenant at Sinai, the Golden Calf celebration resembles description of the cult of Jeroboam, who introduced a calf into cultic worship in the Northern Kingdom. Modern scholars regard one narrative as editorializing upon the other, Exodus 32 an allegorical attack on Jeroboam.⁴⁴ Through this lens, a Levitical political agenda emerges in the authorship of the Golden Calf narrative, which seems polemical, a *parody* of the cult of the calf at the alters of Bethel and Dan. Propp says that, “the Redactor of the Torah was a participant in the last days of the epoch battle of the Levites.”⁴⁵ It is possible that the sin of the Golden Calf is a telling of the sin of the Northern alters which were established as alternatives to the Levitical center in Jerusalem.

After the Monarchy fractured (c. 920 B.C. E.), the Southern Kingdom kept the sacred Ark containing the Tablets of the Law, an object that had originally been a Northern cultic object, before Solomon ensconced it in his Temple in Jerusalem. Propp calls the Ark a “hostage” that compelled Northerners to continue to make pilgrimage to Jerusalem.⁴⁶ When Jeroboam was elected king of the ten northern tribes, one of his first acts was to erect alters at the southern and northern edges of his kingdom so that his subjects would have their own sacrificial centers.

And Jeroboam said in his heart, “...If this people goes up to make slaughter-offerings in YHWH’s House in Jerusalem, then this people’s heart will return to their lordship, to Rechovam Judah’s king...” So the king... made two gold calves and said to [the people], “Enough for you of going to Jerusalem! See: your *Elohim* Israel, who took you up from the land of Egypt.” And he put one [calf] at Bethel and he put one [calf] at Dan. That proved to be the cause of guilt... And he made the shrines and appointed priests from the people... who were not from Levi’s sons. ... And he went up by the alter... to sacrifice to the calves that he had made... And he made a festival for the Israelites...⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Ibid. p. 576. With regard to the dating of the narratives of the Golden Calf and Jeroboam’s inauguration of the alters at Bethel and Dan, Exodus 32 could be a response to the recorded description in I Kings 12:25-33, or it could be a response to the historical acts of Jeroboam. In the later case, Propp explains, Exodus 32 could be older than I Kings 12:25-33 and closer to the historical events.

⁴⁵ Ibid. p. 574.

⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 575.

⁴⁷ King I 12:26-33.

Comparing the I Kings and Exodus descriptions of the inaugurations of the Northern Israelite shrines and the Golden Calf incident, we find many similarities. In both narratives a disgruntled people nominate a leader who fashions the calf/calves to facilitate contact with YHWH, who seems to be absent. In both cases the calf/calves are identified as “God of Israel...who took you up from the land of Egypt.” The leader ordains sacrifices and a festival, condemned as sinful. In some sense, the calves stand in for the Tablets of the Law. Moses has delayed in bringing this tangible evidence of the Revelation and Covenant down from the mountain and into the camp, into the People’s midst, and the Kingdom of Judah has sequestered the Tablets in the temple, far from the physical environs of Northern Israelites. Whatever the substantive relic of the Tablets represented, its physicality was absent, and replaced by another material signifier of YHWH.⁴⁸

Both texts are disapproving, polemical accounts. Kings I 12:30 clearly identifies Jeroboam’s action as “*chatat*,” “sin”. Indeed, the rest of Kings seems to evaluate each subsequent king of the Northern Kingdom by the measure of whether he did or did not abstain from participating in Jeroboam’s cult. Exodus 32 elaborates on God’s anger with Israel, then Moses’s anger, Aaron’s culpability and the People’s punishment.

But nowhere in the account of Jeroboam’s inauguration of his calf cult is there suggestion of revelry or of “*tzchok*” in any of its permutations. This unseemliness is *added* in the polemic of the Golden Calf, suggesting a further degree of depravity in the Northern cult that is being caricatured. The purpose of “*tzchok*,” and all it implies, is to exaggerate the Northern sin, by making it visceral, a bacchanal the reader can bodily imagine as wild, mocking, unsavory and immoral – not just a political solution, and not just a theological departure from Southern ideology and practice.

Further, in addition to evidence that the calf was a divine escort or pedestal, and not an idol, and in addition to evidence that the calf symbolized YHWH, not a rival god, there is also evidence that the calf symbolized Ephraim, Jeroboam’s tribe, the major tribe of the

⁴⁸ M. Aberbach and L. Smoler, as quoted by Propp, p. 576.

North. Jeremiah 31:9 and 20 describe Ephraim as an undisciplined *calf*, but, still, YHWH's darling. In Josiah 11:1-4, Ephraim is likened to both a child and a calf: "I trained Ephraim, carried him in my arms... with... chords I pulled them, with ropes of love, and I was to them like those who place a yoke over his jowls."⁴⁹

If the Golden Calf represents the Northern tribes themselves, then they, like the calf, are melted down and consumed, swallowed up. But in the next chapter of Exodus, Chapter 33 and on into Chapter 34, the Tablets are recreated and the Covenant is restored. Perhaps the allegory contains not just defamation, and a description of the calf-cult's dissolution, but also some measure of promise that re-enfranchisement is possible, in the future.

In explicating the textual evolution of Exodus, Propp suggests that, working after the fall of the Northern Kingdom, the Redactor of the Torah combined the northern covenant narrative of the Elohist with the southern narrative of the Yahwist as "successive acts of drama, separated by the Golden Calf debacle."⁵⁰ As the text is redacted, Exodus 32 - 34 presents adjoining narratives of "concord, rebellion and reconciliation."⁵¹ The collage created by the Redactor offers the Covenant to all of Israel, gathering in the ten lost tribes, reuniting the whole of God's beloved People in the composite of our sacred story.

⁴⁹ Propp p. 579.

⁵⁰ Ibid. p. 580.

⁵¹ Ibid. p. 151.

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