



5 ways to pick up after a crisis

A crisis like the Golden Calf can surely make or break a people! After today's Torah discussion, imaginatively place yourself in the shoes of one of the Israelites. What thoughts and questions might be yours as you make the transition from Golden Calf to Tabernacle-building? For example...

Life goes on. “Despite the calamity of the Golden Calf, God still loves our people, Israel. The Tabernacle plan remains, and we are being called to implement it.”

Learn from mistakes. “What was our fundamental mistake with the Calf? Jealousy of Moses? Lack of trust in God? Was the Calf a security blanket as we hankered for the familiarity of Egypt (where cultic statues abounded)?”

Make changes. “I realize now that there is no going back to Egypt. I accept that this desert experience is our daily life for now,

and Moses is our leader. I resolve to stop grumbling!”

Find a path forward. “There is only one path: forward to the Promised Land. Moses is convinced that this Tabernacle will help. A work that directs our attention to God and community sounds sensible to me!”

Trust. Contribute. Risk. “The Tabernacle work is a free invitation. There are some who won't participate. They prefer to lick their wounds, sulk, play it safe. I can understand their pain. But if we don't step out in faith and service, what hope is there for our future?”

Light of Torah is a ministry arising from the Catholic community. In the spirit of Vatican II's call to Jewish-Christian reconciliation, Light of Torah encourages Torah reflection in homes and parishes, drawing on the insights of Jewish interpretative traditions. Reproduction permitted for non-commercial pastoral use.

Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

“Access to sacred scripture ought to be widely available to the Christian faithful”

— Vatican II: Dei Verbum, 22

In some countries, ‘access to scripture’ can mean being able to own and read a bible. But even in countries where bibles are readily available, there remains a sizeable challenge to convince many among our Catholic faithful to open their bibles and take an interest!

This *Light of Torah* series addresses this task from a specific angle, focusing not on a familiar part of the bible (e.g., the Gospels), but on the first five books—the Torah. There we find lively narratives alongside ancient laws and listings of ritual detail. Not always easy reading for the average parishioner! Yet we proceed with joy and hope, teaching the reader to explore the text by learning from the wisdom of the Jewish tradition; for the questions and insights of the Jewish sages articulate a long, enduring love affair with God's Word. With their help, our Catholic people can discover a renewed fascination with the beauty and richness of our shared Scriptures.



Exodus 35:1—38:20

Vayakhel:
‘he convoked’



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Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar
of Torah readings:

Exodus 35:1—38:20

Before the Golden Calf episode, God had given Moses detailed instructions about how the Tabernacle was to be constructed. In this week's Torah portion, which takes place *after* the Golden Calf episode, the Tabernacle instructions are implemented. Now that the Lord and his people have resolved their differences, doubt and disobedience are replaced by willing cooperation and the Tabernacle building proceeds with enthusiasm. Do you agree? Let's examine this claim more closely, in conversation with the sages.

Tasting Torah

Read Exodus 35:21-29. Recall its similarity to the words of an earlier Torah portion (i.e., before the Golden Calf): *"You shall accept gifts for Me from every person whose heart is so moved"* (25:2). Repeated here we find a wonderful picture of community giving, do we not? Why then, do we find a Talmudic teacher, Rabbi Yehuda Ben Pazi, saying, *"Can we read these verses and not shudder?"*¹

What might cause an attentive reader to shudder, or to at least pause before affirming the favorable scene depicted by the text? Ponder and discuss this with a friend.

Touching Torah

Our rabbi continues, noting how the Torah records two instances of Israelite giving:

"For good—'Every willing heart brought' (for the Tabernacle);

For evil—'All the people broke off' (their ornaments to give to the golden calf)."

So perhaps we shudder to think that the energy being channelled into the present holy task was once directed to an idolatrous one. The memory of the Golden Calf, which involved 'all the people' (32:3) in an enthusiastic pooling of gold jewellery, causes the sages to read the present Torah portion with caution. Even the description of each 'willing hearted' person is cause for pause... Were *all* the people involved in this act of giving, or only those whose hearts were moved?

Depthing Torah

Then again, perhaps you took a more optimistic view from the text, like that found in the midrash where Israel is compared to a king's daughter.² She is a fair maiden but one day her face is sunburnt. In answer to her critics she confidently replies that with the appropriate care her fair complexion will return! So it is with Israel, reasons the midrash. The people have been damaged, but they heal. Further, they turn the things of sin (gold ornaments) into a means of making amends and giving glory to God.

Ramban (12th C. Torah scholar) concurs with this optimism. For Ramban, this is the whole point of the Torah's repetition of slabs of construction detail: to indicate that while the Tabernacle building task remains the same as in previous Torah portions, the people (post-Golden Calf) are morally and spiritually in a very different place. Do you agree? Contribute an insight of your own.

Notice how traditional Jewish approaches to scripture seek a holistic view of the sacred text. Each Torah portion tells a story that sheds light on a story in another part of the bible, leading us to puzzle, ponder, and enter deeply into the mysteries of faith and life.

Doing Torah

Think of a period in your life which was 'interrupted' by a major event/crisis. Afterwards, what was the same, and what was different? In what way had you changed?



Faith & life

A young father makes the comment that one of the greatest gifts he can give his children is a positive self-esteem:

"Whatever 'dark' experiences they face during their lifetime, I hope that a good self-image will be a sustaining light, helping them to see things more clearly, especially their immeasurable worth in the eyes of God."

[1] *Yerushalmi, Shekalim I, 1* quoted in Leibowitz, 665.

[2] *Midrash Aggada, Terumah 26*. 'Midrash' refers to Jewish storytelling traditions.

Bibliography: Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot* (NY, 1996).
Scripture: JPS.