

# Between Heaven and Earth

by [Ehud Neor](#) (June 2024)



The Adoration of the Golden Calf –Nicolas Poussin, 17th C

**There was an image in** my last article, "[Blessing Israel](#)," that stayed with me after I published it: the plane full of passengers flying from Tel Aviv to Boston. On that plane, suspended between Heaven and Earth, was the body of Ezra Schwartz of blessed memory, as was I, thinking of dear Ezra the whole flight, and what his murder meant for him, his family, his community, and the Jewish people. It may seem obsessive, but this is the effect that murderous attacks have on Jews. The Jewish people is now obsessing over the meaning of October seventh. The sadness for the Jews when these things happen is the realization that hovering in the background is a

world peering in at the stricken Jews as if in need of a narcotic high, to snort in a measure of Jewish suffering, unable to do long without.

Adorned with these thoughts I entered Shabbat. The Torah reading for that Shabbat is one of the most difficult for the Jewish people. The reading relates the story of the Sin of the Golden Calf.

How was it possible that a people who had reached exalted heights of prophecy at the foot of Mount Sinai, such that the lowest of handmaids amongst them had greater prophecy than Ezekiel, could fall so low so soon to utter spiritual dankness? This was to be God's holy nation, a Kingdom of Priests? We return to this reading every year, and it is a face-slap every time. As is my custom, I looked again to the Jewish commentaries, and this time one jumped out at me. The Israelites thought that Moses was overdue to come back down from his meeting with God on Mount Sinai to resume his duties as their leader. This one moment of uncertainty created an opportunity for Satan to work his wiles. He conjured up a vision of a deathbed in the sky, pointed up at it and cried out "Moses is dead!" Fake news, but perfect timing. The people became frantic and quickly produced a new object of worship, the Golden Calf.

There is not a Jew who has read that passage over the centuries who has not asked himself: "How could they have been so stupid?" The stark answer to that question is always the same and is simple and depressing. It is because that is the way we are, Jew and Gentile alike. We cannot abide life without an object of worship.

I immediately juxtaposed that pointing to the deathbed in the sky with a different deathbed, that of the El-Al plane I had flown in with the body of Ezra Schwarz. One vision a fake conjuring to entice the Jewish people to abandon their calling as a Holy Nation of Priests, and the other vision, of a

congregation of simple Jews such as myself keeping the commandment of accompanying Ezra to his final resting place.

Ezra, of blessed memory, had been murdered for being a Jew. On this flight he was surrounded by individuals who could be killed for the same reason, for just being Jews. At the same time, this flying congregation was a rebuttal of Satan and his fake deathbed. This people, called from on high for a mission to all humanity, immediately failing in that call in the worst way, only to rise up to face endless challenges to their faith—to their fate—for thousands of years until they are found sitting together in a metal tube speeding through the sky, Jews of all types, religious, secular, conservative liberal and progressive, rich and poor, all somehow aware that what separates them from Ezra is a veneer of normalcy as thin as the sheet metal between them and the frozen air blasting by, that once pierced leads to calamity, drinking a cup of tea or eating a snack, this people, the Jews, were still looking forward hopefully in their travels through space and time towards a peaceful destination. This feat of endurance that traverses generations is the testimony of the Jew as he hovers between Heaven and Earth. Moses did not die on that day, though he did eventually go the way of all flesh, but not before transmitting to the next generation that which defines the Jew: the eternal truth delivered to an entire people at Mount Sinai.

In addition to that vision of a proto-funeral procession in the sky, my brother's kindness and withholding of judgement after his brush with the police also stayed with me. I had forgotten about it over the years, and it was the writing about it that renewed my feeling of awe towards that rare act. Unexpected kindnesses should be remembered and cherished and shared over the years. Those kindnesses are what give us strength.

*And the Lord said to Moshe, Go, get thee down; for thy people, which thou broughtest up out of the land of Mizrayim, have become corrupt.*

*They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them: they have made them a molten calf, and have worshipped it, and have sacrificed to it, and said, These are thy gods, O Yisra'el, which have brought thee up out of the land of Mizrayim.*

*And the Lord said to Moshe, I have seen this people, and, behold, it is a stiffnecked people.*

*Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn against them, and that I may consume them: and I will make of thee a great nation. [Exodus 32:7-10](#)*

Initially God spoke harshly with Moses. Moses was understandably crushed because everything God said about the Jews was true. All seemed lost. Then God spoke with Moses in a different tone of voice, softer, appeasing (the difference is lost in this English translation, where both addresses to Moses are rendered: "And the Lord said to Moshe"). God is telling Moses that He has a problem with the people of Israel, not with Moses, and suggests that He wipe the slate clean and start over, and have Moses, Noah-like, build an ark and fill it with a better, more obedient people. The turning point is the phrase: "now therefore let me alone." Jewish commentary to this asks rhetorically: "Moses was holding God back?" Moses immediately recognized that God had given him an opening, not to be the leader of a different nation, but to plead on behalf of the People of Israel as-they-were, guilty, but repentant. Which Moses proceeded to do, successfully.

This reminded me of my encounter with my brother on that morning in Sharon, Massachusetts. He spoke harshly to me, saw that I was flummoxed, then gave me an unexpected opening, and

allowed me to speak my way back unto conciliation. I am not suggesting (heaven forbid) that my brother was God and I Moses, rather, that we, Jew and Gentile, have it within ourselves to echo in our daily lives the holiness taught in the Bible, and it is incumbent upon us to know the Bible, and to choose the Good.

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