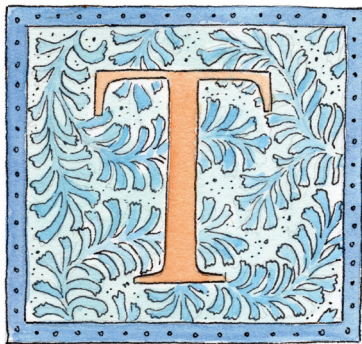


The Jewish Case Against Materialism

Today's many golden calves



HE FLAMES LEAP, and on the foot of the mountain, the violent shadows of dancing men.

The desert breeze brings a whiff of molten gold.

Just an hour earlier, the Israelite men had run to their tents, grabbing gold jewelry from their families. Against the night sky, a wave of glinting earrings rises above the encampment in the wilderness of Sinai, landing in the fire, and as the flames roar, a golden calf emerges.

The men dance and cry, worshipping their new idol, the product of their own adornment.

That biblical image has haunted us for millennia. After Moses returns to the encampment and shatters the tablets, God tells him that he wants to destroy Israel for its betrayal, its descent into paganism, its return to Egyptian ways. The term itself—*golden calf*—would become the epitome of a false icon.

When studying this passage in day school, the story seemed primordial—idols, cult worship, a bizarre episode that belongs in a museum’s ancient-world exhibition. But returning to it as an adult in 21st-century America, as I do multiple times a year, I find something utterly, radically, contemporary about that scene.



A frank consideration of the materialism in our lives is uncomfortable—and ironic, as I sit here, penning this from my synagogue office off Park Avenue. As a rebbetzin on the Upper East Side, I grapple with this spiritual challenge myself, almost on a daily basis. I see golden calves everywhere, and I wonder how many of them we, as a community, have created ourselves.

We live in the wealthiest period of American Jewish history yet. The American Jewish community is financially blessed as never before, with unprecedented opportunity and the largest wealth transfer between generations.

Some of this fortune has escalated beyond our grandparents’ wildest dreams. I am bombarded weekly by invitations to extravagant rooftop parties in the name of saving Israel, where the cost of one evening outfit would be enough to sustain an Israeli military widow and orphans for months. I attend these events from time to time but worry about how even philanthropic and communal activities can so easily be co-opted by a culture of excess.

Even more, as a yeshiva scholarship kid myself, I am troubled about the divide between the haves and have-nots. While the cost of living skyrockets, how many Jewish families partake in the public performance of materialism, while secretly suffering from the financial burden?

Social media plays a large role in an increased desire to flaunt our wealth. We live in a culture of voyeurism, in a sea of targeted advertising

that preys on our basest selves and encourages us to desire every golden calf we see. Much like the golden calf at Sinai, social media draws on our impatience, our misconception and mismanagement of time. And it is no coincidence that the media that literally steal our time steal our money as well. Where do we spend our time? Too often—we spend it on whatever is catching our eye. “Do not stray after your eyes,” the Torah warns us in the Shema prayer, said twice daily (Numbers 15:39). The rabbis tell us that the purpose of this prayer is to teach the acceptance of divine obligation. By saying it, one rejects the other “gods” that pose distractions to true divine purpose. And today the distractions are endless, not to mention quickly monetized.

The monetization of our time and spiritual energy haunts our generation, and the story of the golden calf is a helpful framework for thinking through how to overcome that challenge. The story combines many of the human impulses that pull at us as we try to make the most of the blessings we’ve received: distraction, materialism, and creativity.

The biblical text of the story is in fact only several verses long:

When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, the people gathered against Aaron and said to him, “Come, make us a god who shall go before us, for that fellow Moses—the man who brought us from the land of Egypt—we do not know what has happened to him.” Aaron said to them, “[You men,] take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” And all the people took off the gold rings that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. This he took from them and cast in a mold, and made it into a molten calf. And they exclaimed, “This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!” (Exodus 32:1–4)

See the course of events. The people, after having been shown

wonders by God and taken out of the land of bondage, become impatient. They desperately seek to fill the void of their spiritual attention the moment their spiritual conduit is out of sight and therefore out of mind. But their choice of replacement is one of their own making. They take their gold, hard-won from years of enslavement, and devote their creative powers to the production of an object for spiritual attention. Rather than an example of fundamental evil, it is a story of how easily one's spiritual and material resources can be mischanneled because of spiritual vacuum.

To me, it all sounds familiar, the recurring challenge of material and spiritual needs being easily conflated. In my pastoral role, I am privy to this sad dialectic, and the daily challenge for me is to distinguish between the golden calves and the divine energy that can't be seen, touched, or purchased—an inner void, an aimlessness that I see constantly. The fact is that no amount of material blessing can assuage that gaping void, that feeling of aimlessness that the Israelites first felt upon leaving Egypt and sought to remedy through the reshaping of their material blessing into a false god. It is that same void that drives the author of Ecclesiastes to sit in his palace and pen his doubts about the power of wealth. “Then my thoughts turned to all the fortune my hands had built up, to the wealth I had acquired and won—and oh, it was all futile and pursuit of wind; there was no real value under the sun!...I found that wisdom is superior to folly as light is superior to darkness” (Ecclesiastes 2:11–13).

But what wisdom do we need to redirect our unprecedented blessing away from false gods?



The antidote to materialism is not asceticism. The Talmudic sages long ago instructed us that God “created the evil inclination, and the Torah as its antidote” (Kiddushin 30b). And Torah, I think, can be

broadly defined. Recent studies show that religious people are happier. These studies have received a lot of attention, tending to focus on the communal nature of religious life. As NYU researcher Zach Rausch wrote in June last year, “The secret is likely not any particular belief system itself but the way organized religion and shared beliefs bind communities together.” But what worries me is the spiritual direction of today’s American Jewish community. The Israelites had community, too, and after imploring Aron, their priest, to make for them a new god, they all contributed to and worshiped that god together.

This is a larger question to consider. If community leaders want to lead their communities toward spiritual consciousness and maturity, they must bake that into their communal messaging and programming. We must all ask ourselves: What values emerge, between the lines of our annual calendar? Do my sermons address this challenge of our day: the material distractions from spiritual achievement?

My concern is that often in an attempt to spiritually inspire, we community leaders play into the materialist distraction. As a rebetzin, I am often privy to the worst vagaries of this, particularly in the women’s experiences of communal Judaism. If you’re looking for a boutique fair to buy a new crystal-studded menorah or attend a lavish challah bake, you can find one just about every week in this city. But what about basic Hebrew study that can unlock both our past and our future? Is there a space for women to discuss our history and cornerstone texts? Where does one go to explore centuries of debate on character development? And why is there a lack — is it because it is simpler for the average person to pick a floral arrangement than it is to teach *aleph bet*? How do we attract better talent to help build communities that shift the focus from material acquisition to spiritual growth?

The constant combination of materialism and spirituality hides the source of recent religious revivals across many denominations: the fact that many people are seeking religious meaning as an escape from

material excess. I don't simply posit this from a distance, but I know it, because I see this in my community work, in our little shul where people clamor for prayer, study, ideas, and connection more than ever before. That sheer demand, that craving for substance, in a world where substance is ever more fleeting, gives me hope.

This is not a call to escape wealth, but rather to redirect our aspirations.



The story of Exodus as a whole offers a perceptive account of how our spiritual aspirations can get so easily misdirected. After the redemption from Egypt, Moses and the Israelites sang this song to YHVH. They said: 'I will sing to YHVH, for He has triumphed gloriously...YHVH is my strength and might; He is become my deliverance. This is my God and I will enshrine Him' (Exodus 15:1–2).

But 17 chapters later, they grow impatient, distracted, and most of all, forgetful of their faith. The rabbis interpreted a line from Exodus 15, "This is my God and I will enshrine Him," as an injunction to beautify our sacraments. But we sometimes forget where the sacrament ends and where the beautification begins. We swap one for the other, just as our ancestors did.

Sometimes, when I teach, I ask those around me to tap into their memories as an antidote to this forgetfulness. I ask them to close their eyes and remember their best selves, their highest spiritual selves.

After a moment of silence, I ask softly: "Tell me about this image of yourself. What is the setting for this image?"

A pause. "Are you imagining yourself in Israel, at this very moment?"

Nods around the room, this glittering room high above the Upper East Side. Their best selves are far removed from the rat race here—they are in a distant land, their New York shoes swapped for

simpler sandals, their gait slower, humbler, no longer marching across Midtown streets with self-importance, no longer dancing around leaping flames. My audience seems to soften. Some of them are conjuring their younger selves as students in yeshiva or seminary, or volunteers on a kibbutz or in a hospital—for before they landed here in this concrete opulence, they had a taste of a simpler life that was spiritually, and even materially, rich.

Even with all of its growing sophistication, Israel in the American Jewish imagination is still a symbol of a simpler life. It is a model of Jewish life that is deeply infused with purpose; there is little room for American-style vanities in our tough little homeland. From the secular Tel Aviv protester to the *dati leumi* soldier to the Haredi yeshiva student, life in Israel demands focus on the things that matter, not on the trappings of a consumerist society. For American Jews, Israel should serve as a stark counterpoint to our lives. It is itself the project to balance material and spiritual survival.

Let us consider what it would mean to integrate that vision of our best selves, our “Jerusalem selves”—leading a more intentional, meaningful life, one that is less corrupted by the mercenary—into our daily reality.

That subconscious yearning for a life of purpose over possessions is in each of us, and it is an urgent spiritual challenge for our age, as our time, resources, and attention are constantly squeezed, as societal pressures to worship gold calves grow ever stronger.

For some of us, that yearning is buried deep down. For others, it is closer to the surface. Let us hand that inner whisper a microphone. Let us hear it thunder inside us, like God’s voice at Sinai. *

AVITAL CHIZHIK-GOLDSCHMIDT is a writer and rebbetzin living in New York City.