


The words are meant only as a starting point that we're to transcend quickly. Both traditional and contemporary metaphors are useable as long as they help to open us up to the depth and meaning of the text. But by working too hard to measure the precise nature of the false clothes in which we dress the divine, we lose sight of what lies beyond the horizon.

We're ready to develop a feminist understanding of liturgy that begins with an assumption that words are, in a way, incidental. While, to some extent, our metaphors for the divine are tied to our experiences of God — that one creates the other — shall we allow those metaphors to bind us to a certain way of meeting God? And how might our understanding of metaphor mirror the messy complexity of the human encounter with the Holy One? Do we allow room for contradiction, for the possibility that our experiences of the divine might include new information that challenges the easy, comfortable assumptions used initially when these metaphors were created?

A theology of contradiction doesn't make

presumptions about the experiences we will have when we enter into conversation with God. Worrying too much about language and metaphor can keep us from being open to surprises in our experience of the divine that belie our safe categories. God should challenge us and challenge us again. God should cause us to rethink and rework our assumptions about life, other people, the world, ourselves, and God. If we're so tied to the idea that God is, *necessarily*, a compassionate, loving mother figure or a peacemaker, or any other metaphorical image, we're going to miss vital information that contradicts our neat labels. We have to learn to become less attached to our metaphors so we can meet the God who dwells outside of them.

Often, the magic happens when we allow the porousness of a challenging text to be an entry-way into dialogue. When we embrace the complexity — make room for contradiction — we find ourselves able to hold more than we thought possible. Our understanding of and relationship to God expands ever wider. 

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The Golden Calf: Turning Away From God

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According to Exodus 32, the Golden Calf was an idol fashioned by Aaron to appease the anxious Israelites while Moses sat atop Mount Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments. The Israelites provided Aaron with their gold jewelry and earrings, allowing

swapping an abstraction for materiality.

The calf is a metaphor of turning away from God. It demonstrates both the physicality and the clarity of idolatry: One could worship either God or the calf. All of idolatry is dichotomized — us or them, truth or objects, faith or doubt. One believes either in an incorporeal and powerful God, or in the magic of inanimate metal and wood.

While a third option exists at least theoretically — that one may see a material object as a tangible reminder of some deeper reality — in Judaism, the lesson of the Golden Calf denies that possibility. Instead, we learn that holding an image in hand means rejecting the larger truth it represents. One must choose either the piety of believing a larger truth or the sin of worshipping its earthly stand-in.

Metaphor has the power to shape the way we envision the world even when we are not truly aware of its effect. Sometimes a metaphor is so foundational that the words themselves fade into irrelevance, and even when they are no longer in front of our minds, they shape our understanding of the world. Such is the case

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him to fashion a molten calf, ready to be worshiped as the God who effected their exodus from Egypt. The Torah and later Jewish thought unequivocally regard the act of creating this Golden Calf as a sin of the highest degree.


Fashioning the Golden Calf was not merely the most blasphemous sin of the Jewish people; it was also a metaphor that shapes how we view idolatrous acts. According to the Golden Calf narrative, the idolatrous sin included doubting God's presence, creating a material object, and then assuming that the tangible is more powerful than the ineffable. In other words, the essential sin of idolatry is

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with the Golden Calf. It is an “invisible” metaphor. Its power as a metaphor shapes our thinking even when we no longer think about the actual incident of Aaron, Moses, and the people. Even today, the assumption of a dichotomy between abstraction and materiality in faith is fundamental to the way that Judaism encounters the limits of idolatry.

Here are some ways that the metaphor still works: In contemporary Judaism, meditation, yoga, and psychotherapy can be nice complements to spiritual pursuits. These abstractions are reasonable ways to enrich one’s conception of God, even though they are not inherently Jewish ways of being. What makes these activities acceptable is that they are abstract and contain no material essence. There is no warning bell of idolatry because there is no tangible manifestation. Instead, these practices tuck into the broad range of expressions of Jewish faith, from atheism to monotheistic devotion to nearly polytheistic thought. With no materiality attached, there is no conflict — or at least, no sin. Buddhist thought, mindfulness meditation, blessing circles, and yogic mantras all insinuate themselves into our practice (or find their more native Jewish counterpart) without incident.

On the other hand, when we swap that abstraction for materiality, we often have a distinctly uncomfortable feeling. Consider, for example, Jewish sentiments about Christmas trees. While Jews might carve pumpkins in October and feast on turkey in November, there is remarkably little tolerance for a tree in December. Embracing the icon of another faith is still recognizable as the most basic of errors. Taking on another’s materialized symbol of truth is like putting one’s earrings directly into Aaron’s bag, an unredeemable sin.

The real legacy of the Golden Calf has been to limit our understanding of the first commandment: “You shall have no other Gods besides me.” While this commandment should serve as the most sweeping prohibition against idolatry, we rely instead on the more narrowly construed second commandment, “You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image.” Can we reclaim this lost ground by viewing the Golden Calf not as the paragon of wrongdoing, but rather as a mere instance of it? This, in turn, would allow us to better understand all of the other “gods” modernity begs us to worship, the material and incorporeal, the holy and profane. 

What is metaphor?

Readers of the classical grammatical treatise *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White might be disappointed to find that the only mention of “metaphor” in the index yields this less-than-helpful advice: “When you use metaphor, do not mix it up. That is, don’t start by calling something a swordfish and end by calling it an hour-glass.” The writer Janet Burroway, in her *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*, asserts, “Metaphor is the literary device by which we are told that something is, or is like, something that it clearly is not, or is not exactly, like. What good metaphor does is surprise us with the unlikeness of the two things compared while at the same time convincing us of the truth of the likeness. In the process it may also illuminate the meaning of the story and its theme.” She continues: “Comparison is not a frivolity. It is, on the contrary, the primary business of the brain ... the basis of all learning and reasoning.” From the *Fiddler on the Roof* (which implies something of the unsteadiness of breaking with tradition) to the “Wailing Wall” (a faith so reverent, a sorrow rooted so deep in history, the stones themselves weep), metaphor moves us in a way that simple statements do not. This is even more so for the biblical narratives and liturgy our essayists explore in this issue of *Sh’ma*. —J.R.

The Warrior God as Midwife

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A midrashic passage in the Babylonian Talmud, or Bavli, (*Sotah* 11b) explains that Israel was delivered from Egypt as a reward for the righteous women of that generation. Utilizing verses from Deuteronomy, Ezekiel, the Song of Songs, and Psalms, the Bavli weaves its tale. When the Israelite women go to draw water, God makes sure that their water pitchers fill with small fish. In defiance of Pharaoh, the women cook the fish, bring it to their husbands working in the fields, wash their husbands, feed them, and have sexual intercourse with them. The women conceive, and when the time comes to give birth, they return to the field and deliver their babies under apple trees. God sends a heavenly emissary to act as midwife, washing and straightening the limbs of these newborn babies. Taking over from the divine emissary, God also becomes a midwife and provides food to the new mothers — an oil cake and a honey cake. The Egyptians try to kill these mothers and

children. But a miracle takes place and the ground swallows the women and children, protecting them from Egyptian wrath. Once the Egyptians leave, the women and babies — again miraculously — burst forth from the land and eventually return to their homes. Liberated from Egyptian slavery, they stand at the Sea of Reeds after the drowning of Pharaoh and his army and recognize God. Having seen God at the place of birth and having then been rescued by God, the women and children now point to God and proclaim, “This is my God and I will praise Him.” (Exodus 15:2)

This midrash imagines God as a savior — a divine midwife who encourages conception, helps with delivery, and protects mother and child after birth. The entire story is striking — perhaps most so for its final ingredient, a quote from the “Song at the Sea.” These biblical verses, Exodus 15:1-21, are Israel’s victory hymn to God after the Egyptian army drowns. The verses overwhelmingly use the metaphor

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