

I Will Dwell in the Midst of You
(Part 1)
Read Exodus 32:1-6

The most heinous act of rebellion in Israel's history was the golden calf disaster. Israel had erected a calf of gold for worship in the Wilderness merely weeks after Yahweh, their God, had liberated them from their Egyptian oppressors (Exodus 32:1-6). The act was so despicable that Yahweh contemplated wiping out His own people. It was particularly tragic since Yahweh had promised Israel, "I will be your God, you will be My people, I will dwell in the midst of you" (Exodus 6:7).

Forty days prior to this blasphemy with the calf, the Israelites had committed themselves to a covenant with Yahweh. They had agreed to obey God's Law by proclaiming in unison, "All the words which Yahweh has said will we do" (Ex. 24:3). Consequently, Moses "rose up in the **early morning**, and **built an altar**" to present **burnt and peace offerings** to Yahweh (v. 4). Again, Israel voiced her assent to "be obedient" to all that Yahweh had commanded (v. 8). One of these commandments included a ban on idolatry. Moses, Aaron, and seventy elders then traveled up Mount Sinai for a covenantal meal; they "**ate and drank** with God" (v. 11). As the others returned to the community of Israelites, Moses continued his trek up the mountain. The purpose for this trip was to receive additional communication from God—the instructions for building a tabernacle for God to dwell in the midst of His people.

However, after the children of Israel had awaited Moses' return for forty days, they became uneasy. As a result, they insisted that Aaron construct a calf to replace their God, who seemed as absent as Moses (Ex. 32:4). Once the idol was formed, Aaron and others announced, "These are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up out of the land of Egypt." Thus, they blatantly insulted their God who wished to dwell in the midst of His people. Mirroring the previous actions of Moses, Aaron then **built an altar** (v. 5). And, in the **early morning**, the people presented **burnt and peace offerings**. Following these sacrifices, they **ate and drank** in a covenantal ritual, not before Yahweh, but before the golden calf. Furthermore, the people mimicked pagan idolaters by committing sexual perversions on the desert sands—they "rose up to play" (v. 6).

More extraordinary than the Golden Calf narrative, however, is the location of this story in the book of Exodus. It is situated in the middle of God's blueprints for building the Tabernacle, God's tangible evidence that He was dwelling in the midst of His people. The pattern Moses is following by arranging the narrative this way—Tabernacle instructions//Golden Calf incident//Tabernacle instructions--is called a "sandwich" (Ex. 25-40).

A sandwich is made of two slices of bread and some lunchmeat. In Exodus, the two slices of bread surrounding the lunch meat are two nearly identical sets of Tabernacle plans in the narrative. The Golden calf incident is the lunchmeat placed between the two slices of bread (Ex. 32-34). The sandwich technique highlights Israel's pagan act of idolatry. Her idolatry is also revealed as more hideous by its setting in the midst of God's instructions for living amongst His people.

Following Israel's morally degenerate actions, yet still a part of the lunchmeat within the sandwich, is Yahweh's reaction to Israel's transgression (Ex. 32-33). Though Yahweh declares that He will destroy the Israelites and begin anew with Moses, Moses

prays that Yahweh will relent. And, Yahweh does pardon His people. He reveals Himself as “compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness” who also “forgives iniquity, transgression, and sin” (Ex. 34:6-7).

The sandwich technique not only highlights the great sin of Israel, but, more importantly, God’s great love and forgiveness. God kept His promise in spite of the golden calf, in spite of the broken covenant, and in spite of the idolatrous carousing. He was their God, they were His people, and He would continue to dwell in the midst of them. And, because He is gracious, compassionate, and abounding in lovingkindness, the Tabernacle instructions resume--as though nothing had happened.

I am indebted to my teacher, Dr. Schnittjer, who, in his book “The Torah Story,” explained the relationship between the tabernacle instructions and the golden calf incident.