

Freeing Ourselves from the Golden Calf

A Homily on [Exodus 32: 1-14](#)

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Have you ever suffered from a stiff neck? I have, and it was chronic. My chiropractor even had a fancy name for it: *torticollis*, commonly known as *wryneck*. You lose your mobility, your ability to turn your head left or right, so that when you want to talk to someone, you have to move your entire body like an animated mannequin.

I don't know how I threw it out, but I lived with it for some time so that it became my new normal.

When I finally began treatment, it took months from an upper cervical specialist to get healthy again.

I would lay down sideways on Dr. Roberts' special table, he'd lower the headpiece, push down on the atlas just below my skull, and then—POP! All would be well again. For a time.

But then, inevitably, the atlas would slip back to the spot it had become accustomed to.

Over and over I'd go back, because that vertebra had forgotten its natural place, its original state. It had become used to being out-of-whack. That was its new norm.

I'd forgotten what flexibility felt like until it was finally corrected and I could lay down again without pain, turn left and right, run faster, ride my bike longer.

My stiff neck was a physical condition.

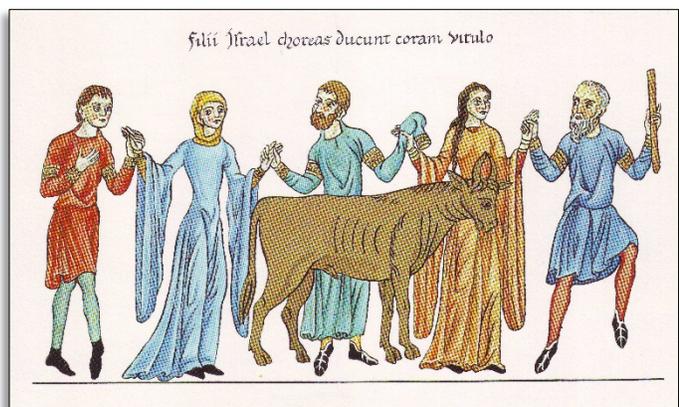
The Israelites' problem in [today's passage from Exodus](#), on the other hand, is entirely spiritual. They've been compressed, stifled by slavery for so long, they can't remember what it's like to be free.

God calls them—stiff-necked.

The Hebrew term here is *qasheh oreph*.

Oreph means the back of the neck.

Qasheh, the descriptive word, means hard, severe, obstinate, oppressed.



By Herrad of Landsberg (c. 1130-1195), *Hortus Deliciarum*. Wikimedia Commons

They've lost the natural spiritual flexibility with which we are all born.

Despite God's and Moses' best efforts, the Israelites want their golden calf—they want security, predictability, assurance, the old way of doing things. They want to store tomorrow's food today.

They have seen enough signs to know that they should just *trust*. Moses *will be back* from the mountaintop:

- They've seen the staff turn into a snake
- They've seen Moses' leprous hand healed once it's pulled from his garment
- They've seen water turn to blood before their eyes
- They've lived through the pass-over
- They're following a pillar of cloud in the day and of fire at night
- They've seen the parting of the seas
- Witnessed the destruction of Pharaoh and his army
- Fed on manna in the desert
- Drank of the water from the rock

They've been receiving miracles to convince them *intellectually* that they should just trust!

And yet. They are used to their old ways, just like the atlas of my neck. They were slaves, but at least they were cared for, at least they had roofs over their heads, some reliable—if scant—meals. They knew where they stood, and that kind of safety can be alluring. Addictive.

It's the kind of safety that keeps a captive gorilla from leaving its cage once the door is opened.

And it might also be that miracles alone are not enough.

To the Israelites, miracles provide the intellectual confirmation of the universe taking care of them, but what they *really* need is *practice in freedom*: more steps into the great unknown desert, more gathering of just enough manna for the day, more stones for pillows, more trust in the sufficiency of the present moment, in the great pillar of mystery.

They need more practice.

My Zen teacher's teacher's teacher, [Master Taisen Deshimaru](#), used the word *congealed* to describe this kind of spiritual stiffness or intractability.

He says in [The Way of True Zen](#) that “an internal revolution is important, but hard: ... A man congeals like a man. A woman congeals like a woman. An intellectual congeals like an intellectual. A madman congeals like a madman” (29).

We might add any label here: a Christian congeals like a Christian, a liberal like a liberal, a slave like a slave.

For Deshimaru the Zen master, the fix for this human condition is not intellectual, just as it couldn't be for the Israelites. Freedom won't come from witnessing miracles, just like knowing what a limber neck is doesn't make your stiff neck limber. No amount of miracles will make a congealed person supple.

But through practice, Deshimaru says, the person "joins the cosmic order, then the mind grows soft and supple and there is no longer any reason to hide or run away from anything. The mind, the spirit, is always shining, sparkling, day after day. That is sainthood. The quality is straight, the consciousness unresisting" (29).

The consciousness unresisting: that does not sound like the Israelites in this moment. They aren't there yet. They've gone *all in* for the golden calf.

They don't need more miracles. They simply need to take the next step into the great mystery.

In the [*Tao Te Ching*](#), *The Way of Inner Strength*, Lao-tzu says,

Men are born soft and supple;
Dead, they are stiff and hard.
Plants are born tender and pliant;
Dead, they are brittle and dry.

Thus, whoever is stiff and inflexible
Is a disciple of death.
Whoever is soft and yielding
Is a disciple of life.

The hard and stiff will be broken.
The soft and supple will prevail. (76)



By Robert via Wikimedia Commons

Pharaoh was a disciple of death—stiff, inflexible—and he was broken by the waves of the Red Sea.

The Israelites are brittle and dry, too, and the cosmic order is about to crush them.

Lucky for them, they get another chance—a chance to take the next step in trust, in presence, in acceptance. Freedom comes at a price, but it is the end goal of this existence, and we should all turn toward it.

In what ways are we congealed, stiff-necked, inflexible, brittle? What are *our* golden calves?

I am a slave to my smartphone. I hold myself back for fear of the future. I'm stingy with my time. I fail to see the person behind the ideology. I'm impatient in line. I feel entitled to a certain respect.

Becoming aware of the golden calves we have forged in our minds is a good first step toward freedom.

However, what is the *next* step? Do we continue to be slaves to our delusions? Are we waiting for a miracle? Throwing out a prayer for deliverance?

Or do we confront those delusions as they arise, acknowledge them without judgment, and let them pass like waves? Do we remain here-and-now, steady in reality, present, content with the manna of the day?

Freedom is not just a concept, just like Zen and Christianity are not just concepts. And it's not a destination either. It is a practice, a way, THE WAY—the path of here-and-now, the path we can walk, one step at a time, with those whom we are lucky enough be travelling alongside.

May our consciousness be unresisting.

May we be tender and pliant.

May we be disciples of life.

Works Cited

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