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בס"ד

Parashat Ki Tissa Part IV The Golden Calf

1. Introduction

The narration of the golden calf episode begins with, “And He gave to Moses when He finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai the two tablets of the testimony...inscribed with the finger of G-d” (Exod. 31:18).* This verse marks a high point toward finalization of the covenant and resumes the narrative of Exodus 24:12-18 wherein G-d instructed Moses to ascend the mountain so that He may give him the tablets. The last verse in Exodus 24 stated that Moses remained on the mountain forty days and forty nights. The intervening chapters contain the instructions pertaining to the Tabernacle. Here, the narrative continuation informs us of the Israelites’ reaction to Moses’ absence at the end of the forty-day period.

At the point that Hashem presented the tablets to Moses the situation in Israel was basically in order. It is inconceivable that after Israel began worshipping the calf, thus abrogating the covenant, Hashem would transmit the tablets in a “business as usual” manner, without informing Moses of the development and without expressing disappointment in the people. Consider His bitter remarks to Moses the very next morning, when dismissing him from His presence.

With the tablets in Moses’ possession, the next verse shifts the scene to the nation. The people “saw” that Moses was late in returning from his mission upon the mountain – they did not expect him to be away forty days, or any particular number of days – and their patience had run out. They gathered upon Aaron with their demands, which we will discuss shortly.

After receiving the tablets, Moses does not hasten to descend. Although the text makes clear that his audience with G-d was concluded וַיִּתֵּן אֶל מֹשֶׁה כְּכֹלֹתוֹ לְדַבֵּר אֵתוֹ (“And He gave [them] to Moses when He

finished speaking with him”), he chose to linger for the remainder of that day and overnight. It seems to have been his choice to do so. It is difficult for an individual to separate from a lofty spiritual atmosphere in which he had been immersed for a period of time. In addition, Moses may have considered it a point of respect not to take leave of the divine presence promptly upon concluding his audience.

Thus, it is ironic when Scripture states that the people saw “that Moses was late in descending from the mountain” (כִּי בִשְׁשׁ מִּשְׁחָה לָרְדֹת מִן הַהָר), because Moses had indeed tarried on the mountain that last day at his own discretion. He had no idea how badly he was needed below at that time. After all, G-d had kept him on the mountain for forty days and obviously there was no problem. And before ascending he had designated Aaron and Hur to handle any difficult issue that might arise (Exod. 24:14), individuals he surely considered adequate to the responsibility. His assumption was probably related to his most modest character. Indeed, when he later asked Aaron, “What did this people do to you that you brought such great iniquity upon it?” (32:21), he revealed his surprise at his brother’s inadequacy. Accordingly, in the juxtaposition of verses the narrative brings out the sadness that the people’s impatience with Moses’ absence reached the breaking point exactly when Moses already had the tablets and could have returned, preventing the backsliding. Had they remained patient a little longer or had Moses chosen to come down just a little sooner, the catastrophe would have been avoided.

The commentators are divided as to how to understand the golden calf episode. In the ancient Near East, the bull signified strength, vitality and fertility and it was used as a symbol of leadership. In

some cults it was deified while in others it served as a pedestal for a god. The calf, as a young bull, portrayed potential, a symbol that may be associated with a young nation.

Following some talmudic sages (*b. Sanh.* 63a; *b. Abod. Zar.* 53b) and midrashim, Rashi and many commentators speak about the golden calf as a case of idolatry. A strong support is the Psalms verse that refers to the calf: “They exchanged their glory for the image of a bull...They forgot God who saved them” (Ps. 106:20-21, NJPS). Sefer HaKuzari, Ibn Ezra and Ramban, however, belong to another school that sees the golden calf as something very wrong, but far less than idolatry. One of the considerations they cite is that Aaron, an individual of the highest spiritual caliber, directed the manufacture of the calf and built the altar before it. Had he participated in an idolatrous activity, it is hard to understand how G-d then allowed him to attain or retain high-priest status and on occasion granted him prophecies and transmitted laws for Israel through him.

We will focus on the issue concerning the extent of the transgression and will address the question, Why did G-d not inform Moses of the goings-on within Israel on the first day of this endeavor as He so forcefully did on the morrow? In our next study we will discuss Moses’ various prayers on behalf of Israel associated with this episode.

2. Day One

At its initiation, the golden calf appears not to have been an idolatrous enterprise. On a slippery slope, perhaps, but nonetheless within monotheistic parameters. It progressively deteriorated to become truly idolatrous, at least for a limited number of individuals.

The people recognized Moses as their leader, who, as a prophet, was the source of Hashem’s word to them and who, under Hashem’s guidance, had led them out of Egypt. They had no idea he would be away for as long as he was, and toward the end of the forty days it seemed to them that he was not going to return. (The statement at the end of Exodus 24 informing that Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights was written retrospectively, incorporated where it is in the text to conclude that portion of the

narrative. There is no indication that even Moses knew how long he would be away.) The people point out that he is מִשְׁחָה מֵאִישׁ, Moses the mortal, manifesting their conviction that humans are not gods, a sign of the success the new religion was having in inculcating this belief in them. They had observed that he had not taken food or drink with him (see Exod. 34:28) and that Mount Sinai was beyond the area upon which manna fell.

Undoubtedly terrified at the prospect of having to negotiate the desert and reach their promised homeland without Moses, a unique leader, the people approached Aaron. They respected the hierarchical order Moses had established and recognized Aaron as a leader. But they realized that he lacked the superior qualities of Moses, and so requested that he provide a system that could substitute for their absent leader.

The Israelites understood that a human leader, as great as he might be, was mortal and limited. Accordingly, they desired a substitute for Moses that would be free of human limitations and be a permanent reminder of Hashem in one form or another. Influenced by the thinking of the time, they seemed to believe that such a tangible symbol could be invested with the necessary sanctity to make it acceptable to Hashem and be a vehicle through which He would provide them His word. Their request to Aaron “make an *elohim* for us” (עֲשֵׂה לָנוּ אֱלֹהִים) probably means make for us an artifact (in the sense of an icon) that will serve as a reminder of Hashem. It will display His glory and be His representative – not a representation of Him – or perhaps it would be a pedestal upon which He may manifest His presence, invisible as it may be. (The latter would be similar to how many commentators interpret the theme of the cherubim in the Holy of Holies.)

At first there was no intention to deify the artifact or to serve it in any way; Aaron therefore cooperated with the request, manufacturing the golden calf.

Upon its completion, the people exclaimed, “These are your gods, Israel, who brought you forth from the land of Egypt” (v. 4), applying to the calf the clause they had earlier employed to describe Moses, “who brought us forth from the land of Egypt” (v. 1). The words invoke G-d’s opening pronouncement of the Decalogue in which He proclaims, “I am Hashem,

your G-d, who brought you forth from the land of Egypt” (20:2). The people are not denying that Hashem brought them forth from Egypt – they could not have been so foolish to suddenly believe a nonsensical assertion contradicting their experience. Rather, they are saying that this artifact is the representative of Hashem who had brought them forth from Egypt.

However, although it seems logical to describe the first part of the episode in this manner, certain words the people are quoted as saying are too idolatrous for this explanation. It is inconceivable that they actually uttered such words to Aaron and he continued to cooperate with them. They are quoted as using a plural verb both at the time of their request, אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר יֵלְכוּ לְפָנֵינוּ (“gods who will go before us”) and upon the calf’s completion, אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם (“who [they] brought you forth from Egypt”) as well as a plural pronoun אֵלֶּה אֱלֹהֵיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל (“these are your gods, O Israel”), in each case requiring that the subject be construed as the plural “gods.” How is such blasphemous language to be understood?

It seems that these usages are not the actual words they might have uttered but are to be taken as applications of a literary device. It is the case of the omniscient narrative that is written after the conclusion of the event; it knows what Aaron didn’t know, that a problem of idolatry had already set in, albeit in a clandestine form and people were already slipping on the slope. Accordingly, it takes the outcome of the episode into account and denigrates whatever their actual statements were, substituting idolatrous phrases for them. This episode is cited in the book of Nehemiah. There, the central problematic phrase of our account is quoted with both a singular pronoun and singular verb: וַיֹּאמְרוּ זֶה אֱלֹהֵיךָ אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלִיךָ מִמִּצְרַיִם (“They said this is your [singular] god who brought you [singular] forth from Egypt” [Neh. 9:18]).

At some point a critical line was crossed: An artifact that was originally designated to be a reminder of Hashem was eventually taken as a representation of Him, imagined to possess intrinsic meaning and somehow a polytheistic motif was added to the golden calf.

It should be borne in mind that even an artifact that was merely a reminder of Hashem may have already

been declared to be sinful. Subsequent to the Decalogue, Hashem had instructed Moses to inform Israel, “Do not make with Me gods of silver and gods of gold...” (לֹא תַעֲשׂוּן אִתִּי אֱלֹהִי כֶסֶף וְאֱלֹהִי זָהָב וְגו') [Exod. 20:20]), a somewhat ambiguous formulation with which He banned the making of silver or gold icons. Does that command refer to artifacts that were made to be reminders of Him or to idols that were gods besides Him? Aaron may very well have taken it in the latter sense. Even if the law did prohibit an icon that was a reminder of Hashem, it would not have been a violation of the second commandment and an annulment of the covenant if it was not an item that was intended to be worshipped.

When Jeroboam constructed golden calves for the Northern Kingdom to provide his constituents an alternative to going to Jerusalem, he inaugurated them with the identical clause used in our passage, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you forth from the land of Egypt” (1 Kgs. 12:26-30). Although the king’s larger purpose was surely sinful in diverting the people from going to Jerusalem, at least in the early stages those calves also were probably not idolatrous and a certain ambiguity seems to have remained through the years concerning them. (In some ways, that transgression appears to be a macrocosm of our episode.)

“Aaron saw” what was transpiring (Exod. 32:5). This may refer to his realizing that some people were going too far. He built an altar before the calf and declared, “A festival for Hashem tomorrow.” By defining the calf as associated with the service of Hashem, he intended to prevent any pagan deities from being brought in. By postponing cultic service to the next day, he probably intended to dampen the enthusiasm and work toward confirming the nation’s commitment to Hashem. And possibly, by the next day, Moses would have returned. Clearly, the pressure of the events overwhelmed him.

Although there were stirrings of problems within the nation, at this point G-d did not intervene to curtail Moses’ visit on high and hasten his return as He did the next morning. He has granted human beings freedom of will and He is patient with them. He hopes they will remain faithful and correct themselves when they backslide, as He was patient with Jeroboam and his golden calves and as He related to Israel

throughout Scripture. Here, on the first day, the situation had not yet become idolatrous and whatever slippage had occurred was still reversible; consequently He remained hopeful.

3. Day Two

The people rose early the next morning and “they sacrificed burnt offerings and presented sacrifices of well-being, the people sat to eat and drink and they rose to engage in revelry” (v. 6). Aaron is not mentioned. By then the situation significantly deteriorated and he became irrelevant. The narrative does not specify that they bowed to or sacrificed to the calf, just that they performed sacrifices. This indicates that at first they refrained from a public manifestation of idolatry, reluctant to reveal their intentions publicly.

As they sacrifice, Hashem tells Moses to descend, for “his” (Moses’) people, that he (Moses) has led out of Egypt, have become spiritually corrupt. With these remarks, Hashem makes a point to distance Himself from the people. He reveals to Moses that “they bowed to it and they sacrificed to it” (וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ לוֹ וַיִּזְבְּחוּ לוֹ) and they proclaimed, “these are your gods,” etc. (v. 8). Tragically, they transgressed the second commandment and the covenant was annulled.

Hashem further said to Moses that He “sees these people and behold, they are a stiff-necked people” (v. 9). With Moses’ acquiescence He will annihilate them and start over with Moses, and make him into a great nation. This request for Moses’ agreement – “and now, let Me be” (וְעַתָּה הִנְיָהָה לִּי) – provides an opening for Moses to pray. It is an indication of divine compassion even at the moment of wrath.

Although Hashem contemplated destroying the nation, it turns out that the number found guilty and put to death was “about three thousand” (32:28), a relatively small percentage of the nation. It may be assumed that there were a significant number of sympathizers and borderline people who were not punishable in the tribunals that Moses convened to judge them. Surely, there were very few who had been willing to oppose the project’s ringleaders; none are mentioned in the text. Until Moses arrived on the scene, it seems that the ringleaders had been allowed to take charge of the situation. In any event, Israel is to be judged by all its

parts (see Josh. 7), so in His anger G-d considered terminating the nation that behaved as it did after all He did for them. (That the number put to death was “about three thousand” supports the view that the golden calf was not launched as an idolatrous project.)

Next in the text comes Moses’ תְּפִלָּה prayer. In his Deuteronomy description of the calf episode (Deut. 9), Moses does not mention a prayer at the corresponding point in the narrative, that is, while he was still on the mountaintop. Ibn Ezra, in harmonizing the two accounts, considers the Deuteronomy account as peshat, that Moses prayed only after destroying the calf, when he returned to the mountain. Ibn Ezra reasons that while the people are engaged in idolatry it is time for action, not prayer. According to him, the Exodus account employs the principle of “there is no earlier or later in the Torah.” Presumably, Moses’ prayer was placed earlier in the narrative in order to be attached to G-d’s utterance expressing His contemplating the destruction of Israel, not to leave that depressing possibility unmitigated in the text.

However, we may ask, on the contrary, how could Moses descend while G-d is considering destroying the nation, without at least a short prayer, in order to try to ameliorate the situation? Is it not appropriate to immediately focus attention on considerations that broaden the context, bringing other factors into play, despite their being far removed from Israel’s present thinking? We will discuss the prayer in our next study, interpreting it as having been proffered immediately, before Moses descended the mountain, as presented in the Exodus text. The Deuteronomy account is another matter.

After G-d consented not to destroy the nation, Moses descended from the mountain. As he approached the camp and observed the scene, he became enraged. He cast the tablets from his hands – after all, they no longer possessed their sanctity since the covenant was annulled – breaking them at the foot of the mountain. Although he had heard about the transgression from Hashem, experiencing it by seeing it added a dimension. With this act he signaled to the people that they had abrogated the covenant.

When he arrived at the camp he burned the calf, ground it into powder, sprinkled it upon the water and gave the powdered water to the nation to drink (a

procedure reminiscent of the suspected adulteress ritual). With the cooperation and dedication of the Levites, he proceeded to have the guilty put to death, the number being “about three thousand.” This is recorded in an ambiguous manner, but it is clear that there was little if any opposition to him, as the nation did not doubt his authority. This is another indication that the majority of the people did not identify with the sinful project and that it probably began without idolatrous intentions.

Moses asked Aaron for an explanation as to his role in what transpired: “What did this people do to you that you have brought such great iniquity upon it?” (Exod. 32:21). His question presupposes that Aaron would never willingly participate in an idolatrous venture. It also implies that he assumed a gradual, insidious process had set in. Aaron’s three-verse answer, albeit subjective and defensive in that he did not acknowledge his poor leadership and felt personally innocent, does support the view that the situation had gradually gotten out of control. In the beginning of his response he said, “You know this people that it is [mired] in evil” (v. 22). It should be noted that in Deuteronomy Moses states that G-d had held Aaron responsible, and would have put him to death, if not for Moses’ intercessional prayer on his behalf (Deut. 9:20).

The next day – having assumed national remorse – Moses informed the people that he was once again going to ascend the mountain where he will pray to try to achieve atonement for them, a subject we will discuss in our coming study.

Endnotes

* In the Masoretic Text this verse follows a *setumah* (a space within the line separating “paragraphs”) and begins a new section. The chapter division that appears in most printed Bibles immediately following this verse resulted from considering the giving of the tablets as closing the subject of the Tabernacle, the repository for the tablets. However, it is much more likely that the Tabernacle segment comprises its own section from Exodus 25:1 through 31:17, concluding with the Sabbath passage, and that this verse resumes the narrative from 24.18.

** The term *בִּשְׁוֹ* (being late) appears to be related to the word *בִּוֹשׁ* (to be ashamed) and may have once been an indication of being significantly late, to the degree that would cause an individual to be shamed or embarrassed (see Judg. 3:25; 5:28; 2 Kgs. 2:17).

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