

Parashat Ki Tisa 5772, 2012:

*Understanding Aharon's Love of, and Sacrifice for, the Jewish People*

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, my sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, and Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Yehonatan Binyamin Halevy ben Golda Friedel, and Miriam bat Bilhah Batsheva.

One of the best-known passages that occur in our *parasha* is that of the *Chet Haegel* (the Sin of the Golden Calf). It is one of the most difficult and heart-rending incidents in the entire Torah. Our people were nearly destroyed because of this sin. *Chazal* (Our holy Sages) teach us in many sources that this horrendous act was forgiven, but never “forgotten” by our Creator. This is how our *parasha* depicts the episode that threatened to tear asunder our relationship with Hashem:

Meanwhile, the people began to realize that Moses was taking a long time to come down from the mountain. They gathered around Aaron and said to him, “Make us an oracle to lead us. We have no idea what happened to Moses, the man who brought us out of Egypt. Take the rings off the ears of your wives and children,” replied Aaron. “Bring them to me.” All the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. He took [the rings] from the people, and had someone form [the gold] in a mold, casting it into a calf. [Some of the people began to] say, “This, Israel, is your god, who brought you out of Egypt.” When Aaron saw [this], he built an altar before [the calf]. Aaron made an announcement and said, “Tomorrow, there will be a festival to G-d.” Getting up early the next morning, [the people] sacrificed burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. The people sat down to eat and drink, and then got up to enjoy themselves. (*Sefer Shemot* 32:1-6, translation, *The Living Torah*, Rav Aryeh Kaplan *zatzal*)

Year after year we ask ourselves the same question: How was it possible for our ancestors to have participated in this heinous activity? After all, Hashem had just taken them out of Egypt with unrivaled wonders and miracles. In addition, He had revealed Himself to the entire nation at both *Kriyat Yam Suf* (the splitting of the Sea of Reeds) and

at *Matan Torah* (the Giving of the Torah) on Mount Sinai. The entire episode seems to defy rational understanding and leaves us mystified.

Aharon's actions are particularly difficult to understand. A straightforward reading of the text appears to place him directly at the center of the sin. Let us review what he actually did:

- He told the nation to donate gold and bring it to him.
- He collected a great deal of gold from many of the people.
- He had someone mold the gold into the form of a calf.
- He built an altar in front of the Golden Calf.
- He announced that there would be a festival to G-d the next day.

This certainly does not appear to be behavior one would attribute to one of the greatest spiritual leaders, of the Jewish people, the first *Kohen Gadol*. We would hardly have expected him to accede to the people's wishes – let alone, seemingly, encourage them!

According to the Ramban (1194-1270) and Seforno (1475-1550), *Moshe Rabbeinu* (our Teacher Moshe), perceived Aharon's actions in a purely negative fashion. He placed unequivocal blame squarely upon Aharon's shoulders. Therefore, an angry Moshe rebuked him and said: "What did the people do to you, that you brought upon them such a great sin?" (*Sefer Shemot* 32:21) The Ramban saw Aharon's actions as tantamount to true idol worship, describing his personal sin as: "... being in the category of those sins that one should be willing to die for rather than violate." In addition, he paraphrased Moshe's words in the following manner: "What kind of hatred did you have against this people that motivated you to destroy and annihilate them?" In other words, Aharon was guilty of a second sin: He led the people toward idol worship. Moreover, the Ramban

suggested that instead of living up to his recognized role as a *mechaper* (someone who helps bring about the people's atonement) and a *mochiach* (someone who exhorts the people toward proper behavior), Aharon apparently did the exact opposite. As such, he "acted like an enemy who wanted evil to befall them."

Seforno sees Moshe as having criticized Aharon for a very specific sin, namely, for having declared that "Tomorrow, there will be a festival to G-d." According to his view, this was even "worse than the purposeful and rebellious sin of their having created the [Golden] Calf." In fact, he sees this *chate* (sin) as the motivation for Moshe's heartfelt pleading with Hashem to save the nation. When Moshe prays for the salvation of our people, he uses the term "*chataah gedolah*" ("a great and grievous sin"). This sin, says Seforno, was precisely Aharon's declaration of "the Festival." He further interprets the content of Moshe's question to Aharon as really meaning: "Even though the people surrounded you and forced you to create the [Golden] Calf, what did they do to you to force you to declare a festival to take place tomorrow?" The announcement of an upcoming celebration and apparent acquiescence to the Golden Calf's creation was "the cause of the rejoicing around the [Golden] Calf which was even worse than its initial construction." Like the Ramban, Seforno sees Aharon as having failed to live up to his true role as a leader of the Jewish people.

Whether we follow the Ramban's or Seforno's approach in analyzing Aharon's sin(s), we are left with a fundamental problem: What could have motivated Aharon to act in this manner, i.e., what could have caused him to fall to this level? At first blush, it would appear that Aharon was motivated by fear. *Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 7a*, relates how

Aharon's nephew, Hur, was murdered by the people for refusing to participate in the construction of the Golden Calf:

“And when Aaron saw it, he built an altar before it.” [*Sefer Shemot* 32:5] What did he actually see? — R. Benjamin b. Japhet says, reporting R. Eleazar: He saw Hur lying slain before him and said [to himself]: If I do not obey them, they will now do unto me as they did unto Hur, and so will be fulfilled [the fear of] the prophet, Shall the Priest and the Prophet be slain in the Sanctuary of G-d? [*Megillat Eichah* 2:20]  
(Translation, *Soncino Talmud*, brackets my own)

Even if Aharon was motivated by a visceral and understandable fear of death, this, however, would have been insufficient cause to engage in any form of *avodah zarah* (idol worship) since, as the Ramban points out, it is “... in the category of those sins that one should be willing to die for rather than violate.” (*y’aharag v’al y’aavor*, *Talmud Bavli*, *Sanhedrin* 74a). Why, then, did Aharon help create the Golden Calf? The answer is found at the end of the above-quoted Talmudic passage: “Shall the Priest and the Prophet be slain in the Sanctuary of G-d? [*Megillat Eichah* 2:20] - and they [the Jewish people] will never find forgiveness. Better let them worship the golden calf, for which offence they may yet find forgiveness through repentance.” In short, in a poignant and profound act of self-sacrifice, Aharon compromised himself and his *schar l’olam habah* (reward in the world to come) to save *klal Yisrael* (the Jewish People). He did this out of his overpowering love for the Jewish people and his desire to have peace. These qualities were Aharon's hallmarks: “Hillel said: Be of the disciples of Aharon, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving your fellow creatures and bringing them close to the Torah.” (*Pirkei Avot* 1:12) Little wonder then, at Aharon's death, the entire nation was in deep mourning: “The whole congregation saw that Aaron had expired, and the entire house of Israel wept for Aaron for thirty days.” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 20:29) Rashi (1040-1105), basing himself upon several Midrashic sources, explains: “**the entire house of Israel**

[both] the men and the women, for Aaron had pursued peace; he promoted love between disputing parties and between man and wife.” (Translations from the *Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

In sum, Aharon’s actions were motivated by unequalled love and devotion to the Jewish people. He acted in a completely self-sacrificing manner, in an attempt to guarantee the future of our nation. His intentions, therefore, were unparalleled in their care and concern for others – irrespective of the heavy personal cost he had to pay. With G-d’s help, may we, too, learn to act with Aharon’s heartfelt love and devotion toward our fellow Jews, and if necessary, be willing to engage in acts of self-sacrifice on their behalf. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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