

Parashat Ki Tisa 5778, 2018:

*And the Schechinah Has Come Down For the Jewish People*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, Shayna Yehudit bat Avraham Manes and Rivka, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, Yekutiel Yehudah ben Pessel Lifsha and Shoshana Elka bat Etel Dina, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* contains numerous themes. In my mind, however, it is preeminently associated with the *Chet Haegel* (the Sin of the Golden Calf). I am bothered to the depths of my being by the entire episode. After all, year after year we ask ourselves the same question: “How is it possible for our ancestors to have participated in this heinous activity?” Hashem had just taken them out of a house of bondage (Egypt) with unrivaled wonders and miracles. In addition, He had revealed Himself to the entire nation at both *Kriat Yam Suf* (the splitting of the Sea of Reeds) and *Matan Torah* (the Giving of the Torah) on *Har Sinai* (Mt. Sinai). The entire episode leaves us mystified. Indeed, it seems to defy rational understanding.

Although the people’s actions are very difficult to understand, Aharon’s actions were in some ways incomprehensible. In fact, a straightforward reading of the text appears to place him directly at the center of the sin:

Take the rings off the ears of your wives and children, replied Aaron. “Bring them to me.” 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.” (32:2, 4-5) (Translation, *The Living Torah*, Rav Aryeh Kaplan *zatzal*)

What did Aharon actually do?

- 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 is not the behavior that we would have imagined from one of our greatest spiritual leaders, the first *Kohen Gadol*. We would hardly have expected him to accede to the people's wishes – let alone, seemingly, encourage them!

Beyond question, Aharon clearly sinned. Therefore, the *Midrash Tanchuma* to Parashat Shemini (10) asks the following question:

The Torah states: “Take for yourself a bull-calf [as your sin offering, *Sefer Vayikra* 9:2]” – why does it not say a “*par*” (“mature bull”)? This comes to teach us that through [the golden] calf, the Priesthood was nearly wrested from your hands (*elah al yedei aegel nitfakfak hakahunah b'yadecha*), and via [this] calf the Priesthood is firmly established in your hands (*u'b'aegel mitbasusah b'yadecha*). (Translation my own)

Rashi (1040-1105), basing himself upon this *Midrash*, notes the following: “Take for yourself a bull-calf [This was] to inform [Aaron] that the Holy One, blessed is He, had granted him atonement through this calf for the incident involving the [golden] calf, which he had made.” (This, and the following Torah and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The theme of Aharon's sin, and consequent recognition of guilt, is presented in the halachic *Midrash* to *Sefer Vayikra* known as the *Sifra* (9:16). Rashi paraphrases this source in his commentary on *Sefer Vayikra* 9:23:

When Aaron saw that all the sacrifices had been offered and all the procedures had been performed, and yet the *Shechinah* [Divine Presence] had not descended for Israel, he was distressed. He said, “I know that the Holy One, blessed is He, is angry with me [because of my role in the Sin of the Golden Calf], and on my account the *Shechinah* has not descended for Israel.” So he said to Moses, “My brother Moses, is this what you have done to me that I have entered and been put to shame?” At once, Moses entered [the Tent

of Meeting] with him, and they prayed for mercy. Then the *Shechinah* came down for Israel.

Almost all of the classic *meforshim* (Torah Commentators) agree that Aharon did something fundamentally wrong; where they disagree is in their interpretations of his actions. Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim ben Aaron Luntschitz (1550–1619) *zatzal*, known as the Kli Yakar after the title of his most famous and beloved work, begins his commentary to *Sefer Vayikra* 9:2 by noting that there are those who ask why, on the day of the establishment of the *Mishkan* (Portable Desert Sanctuary), Aharon brought the bull-calf as his sin offering, whereas the Jewish people brought their bull-calf as an *olah* (totally burnt offering, see *Sefer Vayikra* 9:3). In his explanation, he notes that there was a fundamental difference in how Aharon sinned, in contrast to the nation's sin. He suggests that Aharon's sin was one of action (*kum v'aseh*), rather than one of thought (*machshavah*):

This is the case since Aharon certainly had absolutely no intention of idol worship (*Avodah Zarah*); instead, the essence of his sin consisted of his action, i.e. he actively created the Golden Calf. As the Torah states: "Then the L-rd struck the people with a plague, because they had made the calf that Aaron had made." (*Sefer Shemot* 32:35). Why does the Torah emphasize "the calf that Aaron had made?" This comes to teach us that Aharon's only sin consisted in creating the Calf, rather than in any thought-based (*machshavah*) activity. This is why Aharon brought his bull-calf as a sin offering to bring about atonement for his action-based sin, whereas the Jewish people who sinned in both action and thought - since beyond question they intended to perform idol worship - brought their bull-calf as an *olah* as expiation for their additional thought-based sin. (Translation and emphasis my own.)

According to the Kli Yakar, Aharon's violation was a sin of commission, of action, rather than one of thought. His mind remained pure from any thought or intention of idol worship. Yet, although his actions lacked a thought component, Aharon's feelings of guilt were appropriate and representative of the gulf between G-d and himself that he had caused. Therefore he declared to Moshe, "I know that the Holy One, blessed is He, is angry with me [because of my role in the Sin of the Golden Calf], and on my account the

*Shechinah* has not descended for Israel.” In order to remove the yawning chasm that separated Hashem from Aharon – and by extension, Hashem from the Jewish people - “Moses entered [the Tent of Meeting] with him, and they prayed for mercy. Then the *Shechinah* came down for Israel.” Moshe and Aharon prayed together to end the separation that had prevented the Divine Presence from dwelling amongst the Jewish people. By joining forces in prayer, they were able to close the gap that had separated *Klal Yisrael* (the Jewish people) from their Creator.

We live in an age of Jewish fragmentation. There are seemingly impenetrable walls between Torah observant and not yet Torah observant Jews. Moreover, the Orthodox Jewish world itself is filled with often-warring factions, mistrust, and lack of respect for differing authentic halachic opinions. *Chazal* (our Sages of blessed memory) identified such *sinat chinam* (baseless hatred) as the reason for the destruction of the second *Beit Hamikdash* (*Talmud Bavli, Yoma 9a*). This is a grievous sin, and we must not shy away from labeling it as such. Here, as well, we must emulate Moshe and Aharon; and join in prayer and as one united people. If we can do this, if we can close the breaches that separate and alienate us from one another, then we will be able to remove the distance that exists between Hashem and our nation.

With the Almighty’s mercy and our heart-felt desire, may the time come soon when we will join together in prayer and proclaim as one, “The *Schechinah* has come down for Israel.” *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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\*\*\* I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.