

DRASHA FOR PARSHA KI TISA DARCHEI NOAM 2013

How do we understand the incident of the Golden Calf?

In particular what do we make of the people, Aaron, and Moses?

How do we understand their behavior?

Why did the people make the calf and worship it?

Why did Aaron go along with their wishes?

And most importantly why did Moshe break the tablets and then call on the

Levites “to go from gate to gate in the camp and slay every man his brother, and every man his companion, and every man his neighbor.”

At least one interpretation of our Scripture, Yehuda HaLevi’s apologetic for the Jewish people in the Kuzari by does not view the sin as being so serious. Christians and Muslims viewed it as a sign of the Jewish people’s degradation, their loss of closeness to G-d and an end to their claim of being the chosen people. Yehuda HaLevi defends the people in the Kuzari. Quoting from the Art Scroll Judaic Classic, Y.Nachshoni, who summarizes what Halevi says.

“The Israelites only wished a special place where they could focus their prayers and concentrate on serving Hashem. Among the nations of that era, physical forms and symbols functioned as focal points for prayer, like our synagogues today....When Moshe failed to appear, they reasoned let us serve something tangible like the other nations without denying Hashem.”

HaLevi in the people's defense emphasizes that the purpose of the "altar" Aaron built for them was so that the people could have a "feast to Hashem."

If then the nature of the people's infraction was that they wanted to worship Hashem, then why did Hashem threaten the people with extinction for this apparent wrong doing? Why did Moshe have to plead with Hashem to turn away his fierce wrath from the people?

We need to put the sin of the Golden Calf in context. After achieving intimacy of the highest order with the Jewish people on Har Sinai and after delivering to the Jewish people a series of very specific laws that they should follow, most of them of the character of between one human and another in parshat Mishpatim, both Moshe and Hashem disappear. Parshat Mishpatim ends with the following: "And Moses entered into the midst of the cloud and went up into the mount."

Although the text tells us that he stayed in the mountain for 40 days and 40 nights, nowhere does the text say that either Moshe or Hashem informed the people that he would be in the mountain for just this amount of time. While Moshe is in the mountain neither he nor Hashem send the people an email saying

the are ok and that Moshe will be coming down soon. No phone calls of this nature come from Hashem or Moshe to the people.

Was it not reasonable then for the people to believe that this man Moshe who had led them out of Egypt and had performed many miracles for them was now gone? He had come to them from nowhere – he was not one of them but a prince who defied Pharaoh, he was 80 years old, an old man by most standards, he had fulfilled his mission, and now he was gone. Neither Moshe nor Hashem promised the people that he would return.

If we take the book of Exodus as moving in chronological order, the last that the people and Aaron hear from Moshe and Hashem is six chapters and hundreds of sentences previously when Moshe at the end of parshat Mishpatim is invited by Hashem to go up the mountain and receive the tablets. Now what were Hashem and Moshe doing in the mountain? From the text it appears that Hashem was giving Moshe detailed instructions on how to build the ohel moed. In the midst of a cloud Hashem instructs Moshe how to build the sanctuary, the ark, the cherubim, the table, the curtain and coverings, the boards, and the altar. He tells

him how to make the priests' garments, how to consecrate the priests, and how to bring daily sacrifices. The high priest is to be Moshe's brother, Aaron, who will be dressed in a breastplate of judgment with the urim and tumim on his heart and plate of gold on his forehead as he goes into the holy place adorned in a robe of blue and a coat with pomegranates and bells of gold ringing to bear the iniquity of the people.

What an amazing role that Moshe imagines not for himself, a meek person who stumbles when he speaks, but for his brother Aaron. Aaron is the one who helps the people fashion a Gold Calf in Moshe's absence.

At the start of parsha Ki Tisa Hashem tells Moshe how to finance this undertaking and who will be the chief architect and builder. But neither the people nor Aaron know what Hashem and Moshe are up to. Hashem and Moshe do not hold any press conferences at the top of the mountain. They do not send Aaron and the people diplomatic cables. Aaron and the people are in the dark. No wonder they become restless. No wonder they are impatient. They too want to worship this

miraculous G-d who has led them out of Egypt but neither Moshe nor this G-d seem to be around to tell them how.

The people are bereft. Maybe this man Moshe who had led them out of Egypt is not going to return. The people seek some concrete form to worship Hashem and they asked Aaron to make it for them. Indeed Nachshoni quotes R. Yochanan Eyebeschutz as saying that the Golden Calf is like the Cheruvim as both are part of the Celestial Chariot. HaLevi in the Kuzari gives the benefit of the doubt to the people. They seek to worship Hashem but simply did not know how so reverted to what they knew about the worship of gods in Egypt.

The sin of the Golden Calf, HaLevi implies, could have been averted by better communication. The people too want to worship Hashem. Their longings are like that of Moshe and Hashem But the way to worship the G-d that brought the people out from Egypt is delivered to them from on high. This is not participatory democracy. The people have no say the worship will be carried out.

If we view the making of the Golden Calf according to this interpretation, then how are we to understand Hashem's desire to destroy the people on account of the Golden Calf? Is the great sin of the people that they do not have patience? They want to worship Hashem now, not tomorrow. Their sin is that they want immediate gratification and for this sin Hashem wants to utterly destroy them. In a heroic move Moshe defends the people but then he too loses it when he actually sees the nature of the people's worship. The scripture says that he got angry. He got angry and destroyed the tablets. He burned the Golden Calf, ground it into powder, mixed it with water, and made the people drink of it. While Moshe quells Hashem's anger, when Aaron tries to pacify Moshe by pointing out that he bears some blame for what occurred – because he did not tell the people when he would return from the mountain – Moshe gets even more irascible. Moshe calls out "Who is on G-d's side?"

The Levites hear his call and slaughter 3000 of their brethren, setting in motion a justification for revolutionary violence used by a host of characters in history according to Michael Walzer in his book *Exodus and Revolution*. This host of characters extends from St. Augustine, Machivaell, Calvin, Cromwell, to Lenin. The

Levites become Moshe's revolutionary guard, the vanguard of his revolution.

According to this narrative, the anti-revolutionaries deserve to die. They must be purged for defying just authority. Moshe, according to Walzer, gives cover to nearly every revolutionary tyrant in history wishing to keep themselves in power and impose a utopian vision on people before the people are ready for it.

If the people's great sin is lack of patience, what can we say about Moshe? Anger, according to Rambam, is the worst sin that a human can commit. Aristotle claimed that a person should be praised for being angry at the right time but the Rambam in the Mishne Torah disagrees. Rambam quotes the Sages:

"Anyone who becomes angry is like one who practices idolatry. If he is wise, his wisdom flees from him. If he is a prophet--his prophecy flees from him. If you live with rage, your life is not worth living,"

These are very strong words. If taken literally they mean that in being so hot-tempered, Moshe gave up his right to prophecy. Indeed, later in the parsha Moshe himself is seen as doubting his continued closeness to Hashem. Thus, we can ask with some legitimacy, what if Moshe had not lost his temper? What if he had shown greater patience? What if he had empathized with the people and considered their longing to serve Hashem however misguided, well-intentioned?

What if he had understood his own role in bringing about this tragedy, would all of Jewish history be different?

Moshe could have approached the situation differently. He could have shown that he understood that the people's urges were noble, if ill-directed. He could have used the opportunity of the Golden Calf to reason with the people and to instruct them by saying something like the following:

“I understand that you were afraid when I did not return from the mountain right away. I too understand how fervent your yearning is to worship Hashem. However, this calf is not the right way to do it. So let's destroy it. Let's do away with it. What Hashem gave me in the mountain is a much better plan for fulfilling your urge to worship G-d. Look at what is in my hands. These are the tablets from Hashem from His own hand that I want to share with you. Consider what Hashem has given me in the mountain and abandon this rotten calf and start to fulfill G-d's words.”

Maybe this scenario is entirely unrealistic. A leader's character does not change so easily. Moshe always was a distant leader and a passionate one – protective of the people certainly – but never really at one with them – never really comfortable with them – always someone at odds with the people Hashem called on him to lead and questioning Hashem whether he should be the people's leader. But the repercussions of this situation are so sad – a leader who has a

problem with his anger and who is distant from the people whom he is called on to lead and a people maybe intent on doing the right thing but just freed from slavery in the immoral society of Egypt with all the traits of that bad experience still clinging to them.

What happens next may be the plan of Hashem but it is tragic. As Moshe loses his closeness to the people, Hashem distances Himself from the people. He tells Moshe that he will no longer directly accompany the people. They will have an angel to go with them.

As Moshe loses his closeness to the people, he also loses his closeness to Hashem. Though Moshe speaks to Hashem face to face as no other human being, he cannot see Hashem's face. Moshe wishes to see that face. He wishes to understand Hashem's deepest secrets. He wants the intimacy with Hashem that he may have had on the mountain, but Hashem only shows Moshe His back.

The sin of the Golden Calf is a turning point. Moshe is stripped of any foresight he previously may have had. Hashem permits just to have just the benefit of

hindsight. After the sin, Moshe no longer has the same assurance he previously had of what is to come next

Moshe and the Jewish people are now in the precarious predicament we have faced ever since, the predicament of uncertainty. The first tablets are no more. All that is left are the shards. We must rebuild the tablets on our own. The edifice for our collective life is more human. It is less divine and being less divine it is less secure.

We go on after the sin of the calf, the sin of the people's impatience, the inability of Moshe and Hashem to effectively communicate, and Moshe's anger. We go on with Hashem's assurance of his eternal mercy, a wonderful gift, but perhaps it could have been different, if the people had been more patient, Hashem and Moshe better communicators, and Moshe less angry.

Shabbat Shalom.