

Parashat Ki Tisa, 5774, 2014:

The Golden Calf: Insights from Rabbi Soloveitchik

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, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the refuah shlaimah of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

One of the best-known passages that occurs in our *parasha* is that of the *Chet Haegel* (the Sin of the Golden Calf). Beyond a doubt, 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 a variety of sources that this horrendous act was forgiven, but never “forgotten” by our Creator. This is how our *parasha* depicts the episode that tore 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, this and all Torah translations, *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 baffled.

My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and followers, analyzed the *Chet Haegel* on many occasions. In a public lecture held on March 12, 1979, he labeled this event a “puzzle that deals with great people which reached the highest heights who were converted into a primitive band of idol worshippers and idolaters.” Based upon the commentaries of Rabbi Yehudah Halevi (1075-1141), Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra (1089-1164), Rabbi Don Yitzhak Abarbanel (1437-1508), the Beit HaLevi (Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, 1820-1892), and the Malbim (Rabbi Meïr Leibush ben Yehiel Michel Wisser, 1809-1879), however, the Rav maintained that the Golden Calf was not really pure *avodah zarah* (idol worship). Instead, it was, at worst, an instance of *shituf* (adding or combining) wherein the people viewed the *Egel Hazahav* as the intermediary between themselves and G-d, rather than His replacement.

Rav Soloveitchik maintained that the entire concept of an intermediary between man and G-d is false from its inception. Unfortunately, many of our ancestors viewed Moshe precisely in this manner:

The sin of the *Egel* was, in contrast, to the Original Sin, the consequence of man’s self-negation and self-downgrading. The awareness of their smallness actually motivated them to sin... the people could not visualize the fulfillment of the great promise without Moshe’s leadership. (My transcription, 10 minutes, 17 seconds into the lecture)

The Rav cited *Sefer Shemot* 32:1 to buttress his contention:

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...”

Therefore, the Rav declared: “This was their mistake; no matter that Moses was the greatest prophet, the greatest of all men. Every plain Jew has access to the *Ribono shel Olam* (The Master of the Universe, transcription my own 11:05-11:18).” Moreover, according to the Rav, Hashem’s promise to take the Jewish people out of Egypt was independent of Moshe’s presence.” Hence, the purpose of the *Egel Hazahav* was to replace Moshe, not G-d, so that Hashem’s spirit could abide therein [i.e. in the *Egel*], just as it had in Moshe.

Heartbreakingly, even though it was not straightforward idol worship, the *Egel Hazahav* created a *pirood* (split) between Hashem and His beloved people that remains in effect until our own historical moment:

After the Revelation [Mount Sinai], *Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu* [the Holy One blessed be He] was in the midst of the community. When the Jews worshipped the Golden Calf, however, He moved away once again; *Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu* absented Himself. Had the sin of the Golden Calf not taken place, He would have been with the people forever. Jewish history would have been different. But the people did not understand. They made the Golden Calf, and as a result the *Shekhinah* [Divine Presence] removed Itself from their midst. (Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The L-rd is Righteous in All His Ways: Reflections on the Tish’ah be-Av Kinot*, Rabbi Jacob J. Schachter, editor, page 111, brackets my own)

The incident of the Golden Calf took place over three thousand years ago. How, then, can we understand it in terms that speak to us in the 21st Century? Once again, we can turn to Rabbi Soloveitchik and his trenchant analysis of this *chata’ah gedolah* (great sin, *Sefer Shemot* 32:31):

The Golden Calf epitomizes individuals throughout the ages who have sought to create new forms of religious experience and expression. Although many such efforts may be well-intentioned, they are not legitimate because they lack a divine mandate. This was the essence of the Golden Calf. Tampering with prayer, the priestly blessings, the synagogue or any other form of religious service is another form of that sin. At that time, the

Israelites offered sacrifices to G-d. However, because G-d had not commanded such service, it was illegitimate and unacceptable. Therefore, we can see how critical it is that we maintain tradition, particularly regarding prayer. It is important to our survival as a people. (Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Darosh Darash Yosef: Discourses of Rav Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik on the Weekly Parashah*, Rabbi Avishai C. David, editor, page 192)

With Hashem's help, may we be *zocheh* (merit) to witness the fulfillment of Yermiyahu's heartfelt prayer: "*Hashiveinu Hashem alechah v'nashuvah chadash yemeinu kekedem*" ("Enable us to return to You Hashem and we will return, renew our days as they were in former times"). Then, please G-d, may the Sin of the Golden Calf be erased forever more with the arrival of *Mashiach ben David* (the true Messiah) and the building of the *Beit Hamikdash*. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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