

SHAPING OUR GOLD

Ki Tissa 5779

I.

SIR TERRY PRATCHETT, one of Britain's great authors and one of my personal favorites, has an essay in his collected non-fiction in which he describes an old tradition that used to take place in a village not far from his own that he later worked into one of his books. A shepherd would be buried with a piece of wool on his shroud, so that he be excused for all the times he missed church during lambing. "A good shepherd," Sir Terry Pratchett writes, "should know that the sheep come first."

I find this tradition beautiful – it brings to mind the concept of *ha-osek ba-mitzvah patur min ha-mitzvah*, that when a person is fulfilling one mitzvah, they are exempt from fulfilling others – and I know I want to talk about it another time in a different context, I'm just not sure what that will be. But, today, I want to focus on Terry Pratchett's interpretation of this tradition. Because, for all that I love Terry Pratchett and find so much of what he writes entertaining, engaging, and inspiring, his theology does not gel well with mine. He was a passionate humanist, who had very strong and very negative views on religion.

And so, he sees this tradition of burying a shepherd with a piece of wool as evidence of what he terms a "loyalist" relationship with God, which he borrows from people in Ireland who describe themselves as loyalist despite opposing the crown. As he explains, "a loyalist arrangement is a dynamic accord. It doesn't mean we will be blindly loyal to you. It means we will be loyal to you if you are loyal to us. If you act the way we think a king should act, you can be our king."

This, he argues, was the same mentality as the people who placed the wool on the shroud. To him, the act symbolized a mentality of "if you are the God, we think you are, you will understand. And if you are not the God we think you are, [we don't want you]."

And, while Terry Pratchett admires this approach, it is antithetical to Judaism. First and foremost, what binds us to God is a *berit*, a covenant. Neither side gets to back out simply because they don't like what the other side is doing. But there's another reason this view goes so strongly against the grain of our beliefs, and that's because it assumes that God's will should be aligned with ours.

II.

I noticed something so obvious about the *chet ha-egel*, the sin of the golden calf, that I'm embarrassed I never realized it before. *It's made of gold*. Now, obviously, I already knew that, but I never noticed its significance. Because gold is one of the central materials of the *mishkan*: it's the material out of which both the *aron*, the ark of the covenant, and the *menorah* are made. Indeed, Newton's own Nahum Sarna, in his JPS commentary to *Sefer Shemot*, suggests that the calf would have been made from a wooden model overlaid with gold – a process very similar to the construction of the *aron*.

The *egel ha-zahav*, the greatest sin of the Jewish people, is made out of the very same material and potentially process that the most important objects in the service of God were made. The line

between *avodah zara*, idolatry, and *avodat Hashem*, service of God, is so fine that the only thing that distinguishes them is intention. As Nahum Sarna explains, “Throughout the Near East the bull was a symbol of lordship, leadership, strength, vital energy, and fertility. As such, it was either deified and worshiped or employed in representation of divinity. . . . Aaron seems to have followed contemporary artistic convention, the young bull would have been the pedestal upon which the invisible God of Israel was popularly believed to be standing.”

Despite the popular misconception, the *egel ha-zahav* was not made to replace God but, rather, to replace the service of God. I’d argue that it’s there as an alternative to the *mishkan*. The people don’t want an *aron* and a *menorah* made of gold, they want a calf of gold like everyone else. “If you are the God we think you are, you will understand.” This is the people’s true sin, they don’t want a covenantal relationship, they want a loyalist one.

III.

A few weeks ago, I said that I wanted to use several *derashot* to explore a crucial question we face: how do we articulate a positive vision of Orthodoxy in the modern world? One that is unapologetic in its observance, yet active in its engagement with the wider world? Then I got sick and felt that the last couple of *parashot* didn’t lend themselves to best exploring this question. But I think that the *chet ha-egel*, the sin of the people we read this morning, captures a crucial aspect of our Orthodoxy.

We shape our lives. God may give us the material, but we decide what our lives look like. He has views on the matter – the Torah, halakhah, our Judaism, dictates the way our lives should look. But we, too, have opinions. We also have thoughts on how our lives should look. God may tell us to make ourselves into an *aron* or a *menorah*, but we would rather be a calf, the convention in our wider world. And while we may think “if you are the God we think you are, you will understand,” God says, “if you are the people I think you are, you will obey.”

The fundamental principle of our Orthodoxy emerges from seeing the *chet ha-egel* as the cautionary tale it is. Our engagement with the wider world must be on God’s terms and not our own. The temptation is to dismiss or minimize those things we don’t like – either by channeling Terry Pratchett’s phrase with the popular “God will understand,” or by willfully ignoring the fact that we are doing something prohibited. When the demands of our religion don’t fit with contemporary understandings of morality and values, we can all too easily demand a calf be made, something more in keeping with the convention than an *aron*. “It’s still gold,” we tell ourselves, “God wanted something out of gold.” But it completely misses the point.

IV.

Last week, someone suggested that I teach my shiurim in the shul the same way I teach my classes at Maimo. “I don’t think people would appreciate the homework” was my response. (Though if there are people interested in spending 45 minutes a day four days a week learning just one topic for an entire year let me know.) But nonetheless, I don’t want to give you homework, but lifework. The kind of work that cannot be completed in an evening or a weekend but, instead, is the kind of task that takes a lifetime. There’s two parts to it, though they can be done at the same time. First, we have

to know what God wants from us. And that means becoming acquainted with multiple shelves' worth of books: Torah, *gemara*, halakhah. Second, as I emphasized last week, we have to hold up a mirror to ourselves and determine what drives our interpretation of God's will.

We are raw material. We have the gold. We can choose our shape. We will cast it over our lifetime.

But there is only ever one right choice.