

Parshat Ki Tisa 5778

(ברכות לג, ב) – *everything is in the hands of Heaven except the fear of Heaven*

(עבודה זרה ד, ב) – *Israel only committed the sin of the Golden Calf to give a pretext to penitents*

The drama of the Golden Calf is all about the timing – how did Bnei Yisrael fall to the lows of what, according to many opinions, was literal idol worship so soon after experiencing the wonders of the Exodus and the revelation at Mt Sinai?

Is sin impossible after experiencing הר סיני?

Is the assumption underlying our incomprehension of חטא העגל that Bnei Yisrael could not sin at this time, or merely ought not to? The Meshech Chochmah explains how Moshe's ongoing role as intermediary between Hashem and Bnei Yisrael was dependent on Moshe reaching a level of prophecy akin to angels such that Hashem suspended his free will and inclination for sin. Since Bnei Yisrael heard the first two statements of the Ten Commandments directly from Hashem, they were on this same level as Moshe at Mt Sinai, and indeed at that moment, their free will was also suspended. The moment of literal revelation at Har Sinai was a unique super-natural experience (and therefore subsequently not literally comprehensible within normal human history – see Guide for the Perplexed 2:33). Indeed the three days of separation of men from their wives prior to the Revelation symbolised the separation from physicality that was required for this suspension of free will. The instruction *שובו לכם לאהליכם* – *return to your dwellings* (Devarim 5:27) after the Revelation is understood by the Meshech Chochmah homiletically as the command to return to normal physical life and free will after the out-of-body experience of Har Sinai. We therefore learn that it is vital to demonstrate that the experience of supernatural events does not supplant the role of free will in maintaining *יראת שמים* and it was important for Bnei Yisrael to return to having the free choice to do good or evil.

Vital lessons from the Golden Calf and breaking the Tablets

The Meshech Chochmah famously explains how that faith/trust (אמונה) in Hashem and the Torah are the exclusive sources of inherent holiness, and all physical objects – Eretz Yisrael, Yerushalayim etc including the *לוהות* – only have secondary holiness as assigned by the Torah. Bnei Yisrael made the mistake of believing Moshe to be a supernatural leader rather than a mere intermediary. Mistakenly believing that they had lost a leader who was an actual physical embodiment of holiness, they needed to supplant what

they were lacking with the Golden Calf as a necessary object of worship, and so the Meshech Chochmah has Moshe declaim “did you imagine I embodied a holiness distinct from Hashem's mitzvot, such that in my absence you made yourselves a Calf! *חלילה* for I am also a human person like you, the Torah is not dependent on me, and the Torah would be unchanged even if I did not exist!”. Hence Moshe broke the Luchot to demonstrate that there is no holiness and physical godliness except in the extra-corporeal existence of Hashem. If he had brought Bnei Israel the Tablets as planned upon his descent from the mountain-top, then Bnei Yisrael would have gladly given up the Golden Calf for the Tablets, and then they would have continued to erroneously believe in physical manifestations of holiness rather than in the primacy of pure Emunah in Hashem and the Torah. Thus the act of breaking the tablets was a lesson of immense value to Bnei Yisrael that holiness never primarily resides in any physical object, and the source of all holiness is Hashem and his Torah. Indeed, the broken tablets that Hashem ‘wrote’ were forever preserved in their shattered form in the Ark, alongside the replacement tablets that Moshe wrote.

Bnei Yisrael did Teshuvah!

The Gemara (Avodah Zarah 4b) naturally assumes that Bnei Yisrael should have been on such a high spiritual level after Har Sinai that they should have resisted the temptations to make the Golden Calf. Nonetheless, Hashem encouraged temptation to get the better of them so that future generations would see ample precedent that even when the sins are committed by the Tzibbur, it is possible for the Tzibbur to repent *en masse*. After the Golden Calf incident, Moshe sent the Levites into the camp to kill all who were guilty by participation.

The Meshech Chochmah points out that the Levites were outnumbered by 100 to 1, and could have been easily opposed. However, every individual amongst Bnei Yisrael shared the overwhelming experience of the Revelation of Mt Sinai and all knew that opposing the Leviim would have lead future generations to doubt the truth of the the Revelation itself. Similarly, all submitted willingly to drinking the water containing the destroyed Golden Calf even though those who were guilty would have died (Shemot 32:20). In conclusion, the sin of the Golden Calf must be understood in parallel with this greatest paradigm of communal repentance. Indeed it is in the aftermath of the Golden Calf that Hashem revealed to Moshe the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy which are central to our prayers for atonement to this day.

