

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

Parshat HaShavua
Yeshivat Har Etzion

**This parasha series is dedicated
Le-zekher Nishmat HaRabanit Chana bat HaRav Yehuda Zelig zt"l.**

PARASHAT KI-TISA

THE IDEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE SIN OF THE GOLDEN CALF

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A. "While the King was reclining at his board, my spikenard gave off its fragrance"
(*Shir ha-Shirim* 1:12)

The Gemara quotes the words of the Sage Ulla, referring - according to Rashi - to the sin of the golden calf:

"Ulla said: Disgraceful is the bride who prostitutes herself under her wedding canopy. Rav Mari the son of Shemuel's daughter said, "While the king was reclining at his board, my spikenard gave off its fragrance."" (Gittin 36b)

"Who prostitutes herself under her very wedding canopy' - while the Divine Presence and Israel were still at Sinai, they made the golden calf..." (Rashi *ibid.*)

Indeed, this episode is exceedingly difficult to understand. After all the signs and wonders in Egypt, after the splitting of the Red Sea and the level of faith in God and in Moshe that the nation attained in the wake of that miraculous event, and after the climactic experience of the Revelation at Sinai, with the entire nation "seeing the sounds and the lightning" - how could they degenerate so quickly, while still stationed at the very same spot, to such base idolatry? How can we explain the dramatic change that came over *Am Yisrael*, from hearing "I am the Lord your God Who brought you

out of the land of Egypt," to crying out, "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt?"

In this *shiur* we shall attempt to answer this question.

B. "I KNEW THAT THEY WERE KERUVIM"

First, we must examine the wondrous visions of the prophet Yechezkel.

Yechezkel was the only one among all the prophets who saw God's "chariot," "carrying" the Divine Presence from place to place. This chariot is described in great detail in chapter 1 of Yechezkel: it includes four creatures, each with four faces; they have wheels beneath them and a firmament over them, and above the firmament - a throne, and upon it "a form with the likeness of a man upon it, above... this was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of God" (*Yechezkel* 1:26-28). However, while chapter 1 gives the impression that the vision that Yechezkel saw was simply that of God's Throne, later on we discover that he sees not only the Throne, but also the chariot - symbolizing the exile of the Divine Presence. In chapter 10 we find the terrible prophecy of God going away from the place above the *keruvim* in the Temple, to the chariot that bears the Divine Presence eastward. Towards the end of the book, in chapter 43, at the center of the concluding prophecies of redemption, Yechezkel describes the return of the Divine Presence, in the same chariot, back to the Temple.

For the purposes of our discussion, attention should be paid to the creatures that stand at the base of the chariot. In chapter 1, Yechezkel calls them "creatures" (*chayot*), while in chapter 10 he refers to them as "*keruvim*." If we compare the faces of the creatures in chapter 1 with those of the *keruvim* in chapter 10, one difference stands out starkly:

(1:10) The face of a MAN, the face of a LION, the face of an OX, the face of an EAGLE

(10:14) The face of a *KERUV*, the face of a MAN, the face of a LION, the face of an EAGLE

This comparison teaches us several things:

a. "*Keruv*" = ox. This understanding has solid linguistic substantiation: the ox is the classic plowing beast, and 'plowing' in Aramaic is known as "*karba*" (sharing the same root as the Hebrew word "*keruv*").

b. As noted, in chapter 10 all four of the creatures are called "*keruvim*." Hence, God's chariot in fact rests upon four oxen, each of which has four faces.

c. The "transfer" or "moving away" of the Divine Presence, described in chapter 10, is simply a move from one set of *keruvim* to a different set of *keruvim*: from the stationary *keruvim* that adorn the Temple, to the "mobile" *keruvim* that carry the Divine Presence eastward. At first, "The glory of the God of Israel rose above the *keruv* upon which it was, to the threshold of the House" (*Yechezkel* 9:3), and then "The glory of God went out from above the threshold of the House, and stood over the *keruvim*" (*Yechezkel* 10:18). Only in the wake of this transition does Yechezkel understand that the creatures that he saw in chapter 1 are actually oxen - *keruvim* - whose symbolic function is to move the Divine Presence from place to place:

"This was the creature that I had seen beneath the God of Israel at the River Kevar, and I knew that they were *keruvim*" (10:20).

C. UNDER HIS FEET WAS A KIND OF PAVED WORK OF SAPPHIRE STONE, LIKE THE VERY HEAVEN FOR CLARITY"

Let us now return to *Benei Yisrael* encamped in the wilderness of Sinai, facing the mountain. At the end of *Parashat Mishpatim* we read another description of the Revelation at Sinai, in which *Benei Yisrael* merited to see God's Throne:

"They saw the God of Israel, and under His feet was a kind of paved work of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clarity" (24:10)

This description brings to mind the vision described in *Yechezkel* chapter 1. There we read of a firmament above the creatures which are at the center of the chariot, "and above the firmament that was over their heads - a kind of vision of sapphire stone in the form of a Throne" (*Yechezkel* 1:26). *Benei Yisrael*, then, saw God's Throne - the same Throne that rests upon the four *keruvim*. Indeed, Ibn Ezra comments:

"Here [in *Parashat Mishpatim*] it is written, 'They saw the God of Israel', while there [in *Sefer Yechezkel*] - 'This was the creature that I had seen beneath the God of Israel'. For he grasped this intuitively, for it was beneath the firmament, which was also beneath the Throne, and all of it beneath the Holy God" (Ibn Ezra on 24:10).

This interpretation sheds altogether new light on the story of the golden calf. At the end of *Parashat Mishpatim*, *Benei Yisrael* already saw God seated upon oxen. Now, after Moshe had ascended the mountain and was late - by their calculations - in

returning, the nation demanded of Aharon that he return the Divine Presence to them, so that it could go before them. Therefore Aharon built them a new "chariot," fashioned in the mold of the chariot that they had already seen:

"They made a calf at Chorev and bowed down to a molten image. They exchanged their glory [according to *Chazal*, the verse implies "MY glory"] for the form of an ox that eats grass" (*Tehillim* 106:19-20).

From Aharon's point of view, the calf was never intended to serve an idolatrous purpose; he himself declares, "There will be a festival FOR GOD tomorrow" (32:2). Aharon's sin lay in the artificial attempt to "bring down" the Divine Presence on the back of a *keruv*-ox, by means of a "do-it-yourself" calf, instead of waiting for the Divine Presence itself to choose its seat and location.

However, it seems that the nation misunderstood Aharon's intention. At first, when we read that they called out, "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt," we are still not sure whether they were pointing to the calf itself or rather to somewhere above the calf, to the place of the seat upon which the Divine Presence was supposed to descend; perhaps it was in reference to that spot that they called, "This is your God, O Israel." But later on it becomes apparent that at least the majority of the nation, remembering the *keruvim* and the Throne from the Revelation at Sinai, confused the seat with that which was supposed to be upon it:

"They have turned aside quickly from the path which I commanded them and have made for themselves a molten calf, and they have bowed down to it and have offered to it, and said: This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt."(32:8)

D. "I SHALL MEET WITH YOU THERE, FROM BETWEEN THE TWO *KERUVIM*"

As we know, there is a controversy among the commentators as to whether the command concerning the building of the *mishkan* preceded the sin of the golden calf or whether the *parshiyot* are recorded in their chronological order, such that the *mishkan* command came about only after the sin. To Rashi's view "There is no chronological order in the Torah; the episode of the calf preceded the command concerning the *mishkan* by a long time" (31:18). Ramban, in contrast, maintains that "In accordance with the literal text, Moshe was commanded concerning the construction of the *mishkan* before the sin of the golden calf" (*Vayikra* 8:1).

Much has been written about the spiritual significance of this controversy (see Nechama Leibowitz; "New Studies on *Sefer Shemot*, pp. 337-343), which boils

down to the question of whether *themishkan* was '*le-khatchila*' (the original Divine ideal) or '*bedi'avad*' (a post-facto concession or compromise). Either way, the connection between the sin of the golden calf and the *mishkan* is clear. In the *mishkan*, once again, we find the *keruvim* serving as the basis of God's seat:

"I will meet with you there, and I will speak with you - from above the covering, from between the two *keruvim* which are upon the Ark of Testimony - of all that I shall command you to pass on to *Benei Yisrael*" (25:22).

In other words, even though the sin of the golden calf arose, initially, from a blurring of the distinction between the tangible seat and its spiritual "occupant," in the process of '*tikkun*' (repair) for this sin God did not choose to obliterate His seat. For the future, too, *Am Yisrael* is required to remember the difference between the Throne and He Who sits upon it.

The nation still needs tangible symbols to express the manifestation of the metaphysical Divine Presence, but the limits are clear; there are, admittedly, *keruvim*, but *Am Yisrael* is not permitted to see them. The only person who sees the *keruvim*, on one day in the year, is none other than Aharon. It is specifically Aharon who, despite his sin - which we have explained above - was able to distinguish between the Throne and the "festival to God," is able to enter the Holy of Holies without fear, with the knowledge that the Ultimate Essence is to be found above the Ark covering, BETWEEN the two *keruvim*.

E. "HE MADE TWO GOLDEN CALVES..."

It seems that there are no perfect solutions. Many generations internalized the message of the sin of the golden calf, until Yeravam ben Nevat came along and caused the nation to sin.

In *Sefer Melakhim I* we read that Rechavam ruled over Jerusalem and the Temple. Yeravam worried that "If this entire nation goes up to offer sacrifices in God's House in Jerusalem, then the heart of this nation will return to their master, to Rechavam, King of Yehuda, and they will kill me and return to Rechavam, King of Yehuda" (*Melakhim I* 12:27). Therefore, Yeravam decides to place two gold calves at the country's borders - one in Dan, in the north, and the other in Beit El, in the south. Then he declares, once again:

"You have ascended enough to Jerusalem; here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt" (*Melakhim I* 12:28)

A profound ideological intention underlies Yeravam's act. The nation has already become accustomed to the fact that God rests between two *keruvim*. For this reason Yeravam does not suffice with one calf-*keruv*, but rather fashions two. The significance of placing these *keruvim* at the borders of Israel is an expansion of the area in which the Divine Presence is manifest. Instead of the Divine Presence dwelling between the two *keruvim* in the Temple, it will henceforth rest between the two calves in the north and in the south - i.e., throughout the borders of Israel. Thus Yeravamsought to attain his true objective: that the nation would cease to view Jerusalem and the Temple as the place of God's Presence; instead, they would perceive the entire land of Israel as the place where God rests His glory. It is also possible that when Yeravam declared, "This is your God [or 'these are your gods'] who brought you up from the land of Egypt," he was not pointing to the calves, but rather to the expanse between them.

But what happened to Aharon when he fashioned the calf, happened also to Yeravam when he fashioned the two calves:

"This thing became a sin, and the people went [to worship] before the one as far as Dan" (*Melakhim I 12:30*).

The nation once again failed to distinguish the calves from what they were meant to symbolize. Exactly the same sin repeats itself, and instead of serving God - even in a way that was intentionally wrong - *Am Yisrael* soon began serving the calves themselves: "To offer sacrifices to the calves which he had made" (*Melakhim I 12:32*). This was Yeravam's sin, and it led all of Israel to sin along with him.

The failure to distinguish between the means and the end, between the tangible and the abstract, between the symbolic and the essential, stands at the root of Israel's sins throughout all of *Tanakh*. This phenomenon finds expression in the distorted relationship towards the *Mikdash* and the sacrifices, towards the king and the royalty, and towards the different paths in understanding Divine service. But eventually, promises the prophet, when the Day of God arrives and God's Kingship is revealed to the entire world, then all will realize that all actions of mortal man have no tangible value or meaning:

"Man's loftiness will be bowed, and man's haughtiness shall be brought low, and God alone will be exalted on that day" (*Yishayahu 2:17*)

Translated by Kaeren Fish