YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

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**Shavuot Against the Backdrop of the Golden Calf**

**Based on a sicha by Harav Aharon Lichtenstein**

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In parashat Mishpatim we learn: "Three pilgrim festivals shall you celebrate for Me during the year. You shall observe the Festival of Matzot; for seven days you shall eat matzot as I commanded you, at the time of the month of spring, for at that time you went out of Egypt, and you shall not come before Me empty-handed. And the Festival of the Harvest, the first fruits of your labor, which you sowed in the fields; and the Festival of the Ingathering at the close of the year..." (Shemot 23:14-17).

The Ramban asks why the Torah refers to Shavuot with the definite article - "the Festival of the Harvest," since this is actually the first time we find any mention of this festival and therefore we would expect the Torah to explain at this point what the festival is, just as it does in the case of Pesach. The Ramban explains that since we have already been told, "Three pilgrim festivals shall you celebrate for Me during the year," and the "Festival of the Spring" has already been mentioned in association with Pesach, the Torah is now hinting at the yearly cycle of festivals according to the agricultural year, including both Shavuot and Sukkot. He writes: "And behold, all are named after the work of the field, so that they serve as opportunities for us to thank God who maintains the laws of the heavens and brings forth bread from the earth to satisfy the longing spirit, and the hungry spirit is filled with good."

Basically this teaches us that the pilgrim festivals are to be viewed on two different levels:

a. The first level refers to the agricultural aspect of the chagim, as mentioned in parashat Mishpatim.

b. The second level deals with the historical aspect. With reference to Sukkot we are told, "In order that all your generations may know that I made Bnei Yisrael dwell in sukkot when I took them out of the land of Egypt" (Vayikra 23:43). Concerning Pesach we find reference to this aspect in parashat Bo, where we are told that the "Festival of Matzot" is the day upon which Bnei Yisrael left Egypt. When it comes to Shavuot, however, the Torah fails to provide us with any historical context. In parashat Yitro we learn: "In the third month following Bnei Yisrael's exodus from Egypt, on this day they came to the wilderness of Sinai" (Shemot 19:1). This would indicate that Shavuot falls more or less around the time of the giving of the Torah. We are familiar with the controversy concerning the exact date of the giving of the Torah, but nevertheless it is difficult to understand why the Torah hides this festival from us. Why does the Torah not state explicitly that the festival of Shavuot is on the day of the giving of the Torah, in the same way as it describes the historical context of Pesach and Sukkot?

As we know, there are differences between the first version of the ten commandments, which appears in parashat Yitro, and the second version, as it appears in parashat Va-et'chanan. The Ramban examines these differences and discusses their significance. One difference is that in the first version, with regard to the mitzva of honoring parents, the Torah teaches us, "Honor your father and your mother in order that your days may be lengthened on the land which the Lord your God has promised you." In the second version we read, "Honor your father and your mother as the Lord your God has commanded you, in order that your days be lengthened and THAT IT BE GOOD FOR YOU on the land which the Lord your God has promised you." The Gemara (Bava Kama 54b) asks why "good" is not mentioned in the earlier version of this mitzva, but does appear in the second version. The answer which the Gemara provides is, "Because they (the tablets containing the first version of the commandments) were destined to be shattered. And so what if they were destined to be shattered? Rav Ashi said: God forbid that 'good' should disappear from Israel." In other words, Rav Ashi maintains that the words "in order that it be good for you" could not be written on the original tablets because we all know that they were going to be broken.

From this perspective we are able to understand why the Torah refrains from stating explicitly that the day of the giving of the Torah falls on Shavuot. On Shavuot the Torah was indeed given, but we all know that the episode of the giving of the Torah concluded with the debacle of the golden calf. Hence the context of matan Torah is one which we would prefer to forget. Chazal present a particularly shocking parable in explaining this event: "This is comparable to a bride who commits adultery under the chuppa (wedding canopy)." Clearly, in the case of a bride who conducts herself thus under the chuppa, we would prefer to forget not only her specific action but the entire chuppa as well.

This idea concerning the Torah's treatment of Shavuot can be traced through several sources both in the Torah and in the writings of Chazal.

Matan Torah in Sefer Devarim

In parashat Va-et'chanan, when Moshe recounts the story of the giving of the Torah, he commands the nation as follows:

"Only guard yourself and guard your soul carefully lest you forget the things which your eyes have seen... The day you stood before the Lord your God at Chorev... You heard the Voice speaking these words, BUT YOU SAW NO PICTURE, only a Voice... And let your souls be carefully guarded FOR YOU SAW NO PICTURE on the day when the Lord your God spoke to you at Chorev from within the fire" (Devarim 4:9-15).

Why does Moshe repeat at such length, and remind Bnei Yisrael so many times, that they never saw any form (of God) at the time of the giving of the Torah? Clearly he is haunted by the trauma of the golden calf, and therefore he is driven to emphasize this issue. A similar phenomenon occurs when the tribes of Gad and Reuven come to Moshe and request the eastern banks of the Jordan River as their inheritance. Moshe is reminded of the sin of the spies, and he criticizes them sharply - again, because of his fear of a repeat of the same sin of despising the beautiful land.

The Shattering of the Tablets

At the sight of the golden calf Moshe breaks the tablets, and the Gemara and Midrash provide us with several different interpretations of this act. In one such midrash (Avot de-Rabbi Natan 2:3), we find the following:

"Rabbi Yossi Ha-Gelili said: Let me give you a parable to explain what this may be compared to. A king of flesh and blood said to his servant, 'Go out and betroth to me a beautiful and charming and kindly girl.' The messenger went and betrothed a girl. Following the betrothal he found out that the girl had been unfaithful. Immediately he made the following calculation: 'If I now hand her the ketuba [sealing the marriage], then she will be deserving of death [because she has committed adultery], and will be lost to my master forever.' Similarly, Moshe in his righteousness judged the situation and said, 'How can I now give Israel these tablets? I will thereby commit them to the mitzvot and make them deserving of death.' Therefore he took them and immediately broke them."

This Midrash highlights the idea that in the wake of the golden calf, it was as though matan Torah had not taken place. The Midrash illustrates how the Torah had not been completely handed over, and because of the sin, the handing over was canceled. The Beit HaLevi explained the difference between Moshe's role regarding the first and second tablets as paralleling the difference between a sheliach holakha and a sheliach kabbala (an agent to deliver and an agent to receive). He compared Moshe, holding the first tablets, to a messenger on the way to deliver a 'get' (bill of divorce) - the document does not take effect until he reaches the woman for whom it is destined. Similarly, the commandments which Moshe brought down, inscribed on the first tablets, only took effect once they reached Bnei Yisrael. Because of the sin of the golden calf they never reached Bnei Yisrael, and in this sense it was as if the Torah was never given. In the case of the second tablets, however, Moshe was not comparable to a messenger on the way. Here he was comparable to a representative charged with receiving the document on the woman's behalf. The moment he receives the document the woman is legally divorced; similarly, the moment Moshe received the second set of tablets they were immediately binding upon the nation.

An Angel of God

Following the episode of the golden calf, in parashat Ki Tisa, the Torah records the following: "And I shall send before you an angel... for I shall not rise up among you - for you are a stiff-necked nation - lest I destroy you along the way" (Shemot 33:2).

It would seem, though, that this was the case even before the sin. As we read in parashat Mishpatim, "For My angel will go before you..." Would this not suggest that from the beginning it was God's intention that an angel would lead them, rather than God Himself?

Rashi explains that in mentioning the angel in parashat Mishpatim, God was in fact hinting to them about the sin of the golden calf. Thus from Rashi's point of view we see that not only with hindsight is the value of matan Torah diminished by the sin; it is diminished even before the sin takes place. The knowledge that immediately following matan Torah the calf will arise, damages matan Torah in advance.

We can explain the presence of the angel in a different way. Every convert to Judaism is required to undergo a three-part conversion process:

a. brit mila,

b. immersion in a mikva,

c. offering a sacrifice.

The commentators are divided as to how this process took place at the time of Bnei Yisrael's exodus from Egypt. According to Rashi, first came the conversion process and only afterwards was there matan Torah. The Ramban, on the other hand, maintains that first they were circumcised and immersed, then came matan Torah, and at the end was the sacrifice. The Ramban's view does in fact follow more closely the order of the parshiot as they appear in the Torah, but what is the logic behind this process? The answer is that mila and tevila (immersion) elevated Bnei Yisrael to the de-facto state which allowed them to receive the Torah, and after matan Torah they were able to enter the covenant of the sacrifice.

This perspective allows us to explain the problem we posed earlier. The angel mentioned in parashat Mishpatim, and not God Himself, escorts the nation, because Bnei Yisrael at this stage have not yet completed their conversion process and are therefore not able to withstand the presence of the Shekhina among them. Only after matan Torah and offering a sacrifice will Bnei Yisrael be able to accept the Shekhina into their midst. At this stage the presence of the angel is not a punishment, but rather the result of a given situation - a natural result of the nation's lack of readiness to stand the full and direct power of the Divine Presence. On the other hand, when God states "I shall send an angel before you" in parashat Ki Tisa, this is clearly and explicitly meant as a punishment, indicating that the Shekhina has departed in the wake of the sin. Hence, although the two pesukim both describe similar situations, their contexts are vastly different. The first instance describes an interim situation on the way to a goal they aspire to, and the second describes a descent and the eradication of the spiritual achievements which characterized the process of attaining the Divine Presence.

We Shall Do, and We Shall Hear

In parashat Ki Tisa, after the sin of the calf, God says: "'And now, take off your adornments (edim) from upon yourself that I may know what I shall do to you.' And Bnei Yisrael took down the edim from Mount Chorev" (Shemot 33:5-6).

Rashi adopts the Gemara's explanation (Shabbat 88a) that the word 'edim' refers to the crowns granted to them on Har Sinai when they said, "Na'aseh ve-nishma" (We will do and we will hear). The Gemara explains as follows:

"R. Simai explained: When Bnei Yisrael eagerly declared 'Na'aseh ve-nishma,' six hundred thousand ministering angels came down, one to each member of Israel, and gave him two crowns - one in reward for saying 'na'aseh' and the other for 'nishma.' When Bnei Yisrael sinned, double that number of angels of destruction came down and took them away, as it is written, 'And Bnei Yisrael took down the edim from Har Chorev.'"

What this teaches us is that after the sin, the significance of matan Torah was greatly and seriously diminished. The nation had taken a step backwards, in a negative direction. We may compare the situation to that of a bride who was unfaithful under the very chuppa - it would have been better had she never entered the chuppa at all.

We originally posed the question of why the Torah hides the festival of matan Torah from us. Now the significance of the textual 'gap' is clear. Even Chazal refer to Shavuot as "zeman matan torateinu" (the time of the giving of the Torah) rather than as "zeman kabalat torateinu" (the time of the receiving of the Torah), because there was a giving of the Torah at the time, but not a proper receiving.

The Nature of the Festival of Shavuot

Since Chazal ultimately do refer to Shavuot as 'zeman matan torateinu,' we are obliged to regard it as such - and perhaps with more conscientiousness than we invest in the other pilgrim festivals. In the case of Pesach and Sukkot, we are able to experience the spirit of the day in relative simplicity. Pesach, for example, is the festival commemorating our freedom, without any associated problems. But on Shavuot we are required to experience the essence of the day as the festival of the giving of the Torah, without relating to what we know took place immediately thereafter - the sin of the golden calf. This may be compared to the situation of someone who is required to take part in a production and to experience the celebration despite the fact that, having previously read the script, he knows that the celebration is immediately followed by a terrible tragedy.

In fact, Shavuot is in a certain sense also a day of teshuva; a day of correcting the sin of the golden calf. Indeed, the Gemara in Shabbat teaches:

"Reish Lakish said: God is destined to return them (the crowns) to us, as it is written (Yishayahu 35:10), 'And the redeemed of God will return and will come to Zion in celebration, with eternal joy (simchat olam) upon their heads' - joy of the past (simcha she-me'olam) upon their heads."