YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA**

**Parashat Ki Tisa**

**Sicha of HarAV Baruch Gigi**

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**Dedicated in memory of**

**Elliott Horowitz z"l**

**Elimelech Shimon ben Shraga HaLevi**

**whose Yahrzeit is 20 Adar**

**by the Horowitz Family**

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**The Sin of the Golden Calf and Repentance for It**

Summarized by Nadav Schultz

Translated by David Strauss

**Introduction**

At the beginning of our *parasha*, the section about building the *Mishkan*, which developed over the two previous *parashot,* comes to an end*.* The Ramban explains the purpose of the building of the *Mishkan* as an attempt to bring the revelation at Mount Sinai down to the world, actualizing some of the ideas expressed at the revelation at Mount Sinai within the reality of life in this world.

But the greater the expectation, the greater the disappointment. No more than forty days after the Jewish people proclaimed: "We will do and listen" (*Shemot* 24:7), they stumbled. It was not a small slip, but the sin of the golden calf, a sin so serious that *Chazal* said: "No punishment ever comes upon Israel which does not include some bit of payment for the sin of the golden calf" (cited by Rashi, *Shemot* 32:34). A *midrash* in tractate *Shabbat* aptly describes this sharp crash:

Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani said in the name of Rabbi Yonatan: What is meant by that which is written: "You have ravished my heart, my sister, my bride; you have ravished my heart with one of your eyes" (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 4:9)? In the beginning, with one of your eyes; when you do [it], with both of your eyes.

Ulla said: Shameless is the bride that plays the harlot within her bridal canopy! Rav Mari the son of the daughter of Shmuel said: What verse [refers to this]? "While the king sat at his table, my spikenard gave up its fragrance" (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 1:12).

Rav said: Yet [His] love was still with us, for it is written "gave," and not "smelled badly." (*Shabbat* 88b)

The *midrash* describes three stages: In the first stage, at the revelation at Mount Sinai, the relationship between God and the people of Israel paralleled a betrothal. The people declared: "We will do and listen" (*Shemot* 24:7), and everything seemed to be working well, aimed toward a utopian ideal. Then, in the second stage, the people went through a probationary period, at the end of which they were supposed to become married to God, as it were – that is, to merit the resting of God's *Shekhina* among them.

But in the third stage, it becomes apparent that the actions of the people of Israel were nothing more than a fraud, or as the second statement formulates it: "Shameless is the bride that plays the harlot within her bridal canopy." Shortly after receiving the Ten Commandments, the people commit the sin of the golden calf, thereby justifying the criticism of "a certain heretic" in tractate *Shabbat* (88a): "You rash people, who gave precedence to your mouth over your ears."

Despite this terrible act, the third statement in the *midrash*, "Yet His love was still with us," emphasizes that what Israel did was accepted in a relatively forgiving manner, an idea that seems to emerge to some extent from the verses in *Tehillim*:

But they beguiled Him with their mouth, and lied to Him with their tongue. For their heart was not steadfast with Him, neither were they faithful in His covenant. But He, being full of compassion, forgives iniquity, and destroys not; many times does He turn His anger away, and does not stir up all His wrath. (*Tehillim* 78:36-38)

The psalmist notes the deception of the people of Israel that manifested itself in the sin they committed immediately after having received the Torah. But he continues by noting God's mercy, which also emerges clearly from our *parasha.*

However, even if "His love was still with us," as Rav states, and as it would appear already in the book of *Tehillim –* we must explain *why* the people merited to receive God's mercy.

**The Break and the Repair**

In order to answer this question, let us look at the passage in tractate *Berakhot* that describes what was happening on the heights of Mount Sinai when the people sinned with the calf:

"And the Lord spoke to Moshe: Go, get you down" (*Shemot* 32:7). What is meant by: "Go, get you down"? The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moshe: Moshe, descend from your greatness! Have I at all given you greatness other than for the sake of Israel? Now that [the people of] Israel have sinned, why should I want you? Immediately, Moshe became powerless and had no strength to speak. When, however, [God] said, "Let Me alone that I may destroy them" (*Devarim* 9:14), Moshe said to himself: This depends upon me – immediately, he stood up and prayed vigorously and begged for mercy. (*Berakhot* 32a)

With the people of Israel sinning at the foot of the mountain, God informs Moshe of their behavior and that there is no longer any reason for his greatness. This is because Moshe's greatness stems from his being the leader of Israel. Moshe’s initial reaction is to assume there is no hope for the people, and therefore he becomes powerless – but following God's additional words, Moshe changes his approach. He understands that God expects him to take charge of the situation, and then he regains his strength and stands up to pray.

What does Moshe pray for? First, he tries to fight the existential danger hanging over the people:

Now therefore let Me alone, that My wrath may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them; and I will make of you a great nation. And Moshe prayed to the Lord his God, and said: Lord, why does Your wrath wax hot against Your people, that You have brought forth out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians speak, saying: For evil did He bring them forth, to slay them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth? Turn from Your fierce wrath, and repent of this evil against Your people. (*Shemot* 32:10-12)

At this point, Moshe does not know exactly how the people sinned, and therefore he puts forward only a general argument: if, God forbid, the people are destroyed, it will cause a desecration of God's name of enormous magnitude. This argument is accepted by God, and the threat of annihilation is removed.

However, that is not the end of the story. Moshe now heads down to the people to separate them from their sin. When he reaches the foot of the mountain, he sees the calf and the dancing, and casts the *luchot ha-brit*, the tablets of the covenant, from his hands:

And it came to pass, as soon as he came near to the camp, that he saw the calf and the dancing; and Moshe's anger waxed hot, and he cast the tablets out of his hands, and broke them beneath the mount. (*Shemot* 32:19)

Seeing the state of the people, Moshe understands that they are not ready for the ideal of the covenant represented by the tablets, and chooses deliberately to smash the tablets. On the one hand, this will prevent the people from living at the ideal level of the revelation at Mount Sinai. At the same time, however, this breaking of the tablets enables the people’s repair. In this respect, the breaking of the tablets is an act similar to the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Man was removed from the garden, a place that symbolized an elevated spiritual level, in order to allow man to make amends that would return him to the garden in due time.

What these two events have in common is that they are both dramatic events that constitute a "breaking of vessels" with the aim of bringing about their repair. Moshe was not commanded by God to break the tablets, but according to the following *midrash*, God supported his action after the fact:

"Which you did break [*asher shibarta*]” (*Devarim* 10:2) – The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moshe: You have done well to break them [*yishar kochakha she-shibarta*]. (*Bava Batra* 14b)

We should not see this Divine approval as a trivial matter. It was a radical decision to break the tablets. In this case, however, Moshe read the map correctly, and was answered: "You have done well to break them."

After that, Moshe understands that he cannot be satisfied with the breaking of the tablets; he must overhaul the entire system. He burns the calf and gives its ashes to the people to drink – an action with a very strong associative connection to the way a woman suspected of adultery would be given to drink of the bitter waters. He then gathers together the descendants of Levi, and – in an act that is nothing less than starting a civil war – goes through the entire camp and smites all those who worshipped the calf.

**The Request for Atonement and the Leadership of Moshe**

Even after all these actions, Moshe's part is still not over, and he turns to God with the following request:

And Moshe returned to the Lord, and said: Oh, this people have sinned a great sin, and have made them a god of gold. Yet now, if You will forgive their sin – and if not, blot me, I pray You, out of Your book which You have written. (*Shemot* 32:31-32)

Moshe asks for a pardon for those who remained after many were killed by the sword and many others were killed after drinking the dust of the calf. It is possible that God would not have forgiven them, except that Moshe threw all his weight against that possibility. If God does not forgive the people for their sin, better that the name of Moshe – God's greatest servant – be blotted out of the book that He had written.

Moshe's complete commitment to the people is what turned God's attitude toward them around. This reversal is expressed in a most extreme manner in the following *midrash*:

“God would speak to Moshe face-to-face” (*Shemot* 33:11). Rabbi Yitzchak said: The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moshe: Just as I have turned upon you a cheerful face, … so shall you turn upon Israel a cheerful face, and restore the tent to its place [in the camp, rather than outside it].

"And he would return to the camp" (ibid.). Rabbi Abahu said: The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moshe: Now they will say, The Master is angry [about the calf] and the disciple [Moshe] is angry; what will happen to Israel? If you will restore the tent to its place, well and good; but if not, Yehoshua son of Nun, your disciple, will minister in your place. Therefore it is written: "And he would return to the camp." (*Berakhot* 63b)

According to the *midrash*, things reached such a point that Moshe wanted to rebuke the people, and God forbade it. This is a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree reversal of God's attitude to the people.

In the end, the people of Israel, who were on the brink of extermination were given a second chance. This happened only because of Moshe's dedication, in that he was prepared, for the sake of his people, to waive his opportunity to be remembered. Ultimately, this is what is expected from a leader: that he be able to make himself smaller for the whole people. When such a leader stands at the head of his people, then even a grave sin like that of the golden calf can be repaired.

[This *sicha* was delivered by Harav Gigi on Shabbat *Parashat Ki-Tisa* 5779.]