**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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# SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

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**This shiur is dedicated *le-zekher nishmot***

**Amelia Ray and Morris Ray
by their children Patti Ray and Allen Ray**

**on the occasion of their twelfth *yahrtzeits***

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**PARASHAT KI TISA**

**sicha of harav YAAKOV MEDAN**

**Aharon’s Part (and Ours) in the Episode of the Golden Calf**

1. **Aharon’s mistake**

Aharon’s conduct in our *parasha* is examined at great length by ibn Ezra. How could Aharon have erred as he did? And how is it that he not only goes unpunished, but is in fact given great honor, having the high priesthood bestowed on him?[[1]](#footnote-1) The justification that ibn Ezra offers seems rather forced, and we will propose a different way of understanding the events.

In seeking to define Aharon’s part in the episode of the Golden Calf we encounter a seeming contradiction between what the Torah narrates and the testimony of Aharon himself, in his report to Moshe. The Torah offers the following record:

And Aharon said to them: “Break off the golden earrings which are in the ears of your wives, of your sons and of your daughters, and bring them to me.” And all the people broke off the golden earrings which were in their ears, and brought them to Aharon.

And he received the gold at their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool and made it a molten calf; and they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up out of the land of Egypt.”

And when Aharon saw it, he built an altar before it, and Aharon made a proclamation and said, “Tomorrow is a feast to the Lord.” (*Shemot* 32:2-5)

From the narrative set forth in the Torah it seems that Aharon makes the Golden Calf himself out of the gold jewelry. At the same time, the text also suggests that he tries to steer the events in the direction of God’s authority, declaring, “Tomorrow is a feast to the Lord.”

When Aharon himself recounts the story, it sounds somewhat different:

“And I said to them, ‘Who has any gold?’ They broke it off and gave it to me; then I threw it into the fire, and there came out this calf.” (*Shemot* 32:24)

This suggests that Aharon never has any intention of fashioning a calf; the calf is formed by itself.

A critical view of Aharon might resolve the contradiction by suggesting that the Torah describes what really happened, while Aharon is trying to justify himself before Moshe and to minimize his role and responsibility in the creation of the Golden Calf. However, it is difficult to accept this assumption, since our conclusion would then be that Aharon tells Moshe something that is not true and effectively denies his responsibility. Would God have granted the elevated status of *Kohen Gadol* to such a person?

It seems that the opposite must be the case. Aharon tells Moshe the story exactly as it happened: he truly had no intention of having a calf emerge from the fire. Nevertheless, the Torah holds Aharon generally responsible for the episode, without getting into the details of how exactly the calf was formed. Ultimately, the calf emerges from Aharon’s actions, and so he is responsible.

How, then, are we to understand what Aharon does? Perhaps this is how it happens: Aharon holds a great lump of gold made up of the jewelry donated by the Israelites. He engraves the form of a calf on it (“he fashioned it with a graving tool”) but has not yet cut away the outline, removing the excess gold, such that the lump of gold has not yet assumed the form of a calf. At this stage, before the calf is formed, Aharon addresses the Israelites with the following challenge: “Moshe entered the burning fire here on Mount Sinai; is the calf, which you seek to serve, capable of doing the same?” The people are thus forced to agree to the test, and Aharon casts the lump of gold into the burning fire on the mountain, with the intention that it would melt and disappear. Thus the dream of the Golden Calf would dissipate and the people would continue waiting for Moshe.

However, Satan intervenes and Aharon’s plan goes awry. The gold was cast into the burning fire, but it struck a rock and rolled out of the fire. What ended up melting in the fire was just the outer framework, which had already been marked out by Aharon’s engraving. The inner part — the form of the calf — is unaffected by the fire and remains intact. The deafening roars of victory on the part of those seeking to serve the idol drown out all else: “Moshe entered the fire and was consumed, like Haran, son of Terach; the Golden Calf entered the fire and emerged unscathed, like Avraham, who emerged live from Nimrod’s furnace. The calf is holier and stronger than Moshe; it will lead us from now onwards!”

At this point Aharon’s plan to hold a feast for God the next day — a feast where there would be genuine gestures and indications of the fear of God, despite the mistake of the Golden Calf — is rejected. The idolaters appropriated the feast for the calf, and “they rose up to make sport (*le-tzachek*)” (*Shemot* 32:6), with all the licentious, depraved connotations implied in the expression *le-tzachek.* The celebration slips completely out of the control of Aharon and his loyal followers, and then, all of a sudden, Moshe appears…

And he took the calf which they had made, and burnt it in the fire, and ground it to powder, and scattered it upon the water… (*Shemot* 32:20).

Moshe repeats Aharon’s action, casting the calf into the fire on the mountain, and this time the calf is completely consumed. Now it becomes clear that Moshe enters the fire and emerges unscathed, like Avraham from Nimrod’s furnace, while the calf is burned and destroyed like Haran, Avraham’s brother. Moshe is firmly established as leader, and no one dares to protest when he gives the ashes of the calf, mixed into water, to the Israelites to drink, and when he kills three thousand worshippers of the Calf.

The question that remains is the following: why does Moshe’s act succeed, and why does Aharon’s fail?

The answer we might offer is that Moshe casts the Golden Calf into the fire with the sole intention of burning it. His outward declaration and inner intention are one and the same; he makes no attempt to enter into negotiations with the idolaters. Aharon lacks Moshe’s decisive leadership; his strategy is to act with cunning and come to an agreement with the worshippers of the calf. His act was perceived as putting the Golden Calf to the test, to see whether it does or does not possess any real power — and this approach is not proper in God’s eyes.

1. **Aharon’s merit**

None of the above offers the sort of justification for Aharon that would explain his appointment as *Kohen Gadol* following the episode of the Golden Calf. We must therefore look further afield to find the positive and appropriate aspects of his deliberation, even if our conclusion will ultimately be that he erred.

It seems that in the moment of crisis Aharon prefers the wholeness of the Jewish people over any other consideration — even when the situation involves a form of idolatry, or at least its accoutrements. Aharon is characterized in the holy *Zohar* as the attendant of the matron[[2]](#footnote-2) — in other words, of the assembly of Israel. Many generations later, his great disciple, Hillel, would champion a similar ideal:

Hillel said: “Be among the disciples of Aharon, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving people and bringing them close to Torah.” (*Avot* 1:12)

Of course, we do not mean to suggest that the approach of the School of Hillel is equivalent to making a Golden Calf! However, the way of the School of Hillel was to take a lenient approach to many laws, even in relation to the tradition that had passed from generation to generation and was preserved mainly by the School of Shammai. The School of Hillel adopted this approach to a great extent in order to set the *halakha* at a level that most of the population could observe,[[3]](#footnote-3) and in most cases the *halakha* was indeed decided in accordance with their interpretation.

Aharon is chosen as *Kohen Gadol* not **despite** but rather, to a considerable degree, **because** *of* his sin. A *Kohen Gadol* who is a complete *tzaddik*, who has never sinned, could never stand with a broken heart and make atonement for the people’s sins before God, since he would have no understanding of what sin is, or of the power of the *yetzer ha-ra* (evil inclination). The *Kohen Gadol* atones, first and foremost, for himself and his household; only afterwards does he atone for the rest of the nation.

However, Aharon is also chosen because of his ability to unify the Jewish people around him, even in sin; his ability to uphold and proclaim the importance of the wholeness of the assembly of Israel, and on this basis — only on this basis — to stand before God in supplication for forgiveness. Aharon pays for his mistake of maintaining the unity of the nation even when their sin degenerates to the level of some sort of idolatry, with the death of his two sons on the day of the inauguration of the *Mishkan*. Nevertheless, his mistake does not change his ability to function as the attendant of the matron and make atonement for the people before God.

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Let us consider another story involving Hillel and Shammai. The two schools were divided over a question of principle. The students of the School of Shammai were carefully selected from among the most venerated families in Jerusalem, and they viewed themselves as guardians of the ancient tradition. The School of Hillel, on the other hand, would accept anyone — even from among the simplest folk — and sought every possible leniency, within the framework of the rules for halakhic rulings, with the intention of connecting the people to the Torah. The School of Hillel sat, for the most part, in the attic of Beit Gadya in Jericho, while the School of Shammai sat in Jerusalem. The emergency measures enacted by the various rulers at their time made it difficult for the two academies to meet, to discuss their disagreements, and to reach compromises. Once they did manage to gather together, in the attic of Chananya ben Chizkiya ben Gurion in Jerusalem, and there by majority vote (in accordance with *Shemot* 23:2) they ruled on the laws that were subject to dispute between them. The Mishna records:

And the following are some of the laws which were enacted in the attic of Chananya ben Chizkiya ben Gurion, when they went up to visit him. They counted them, and the School of Shammai outnumbered the School of Hillel, and they decreed eighteen laws on that day. (*Shabbat* 1:4)

The School of Hillel normally outnumbered the School of Shammai — inter alia, owing to the fact that theirs was a less elitist, more popular academy. However, the School of Shammai insisted, with great vehemence — and even violence — that the vote on the *halakha* would be open only to those students of the School of Hillel who were acceptable to them:

The students of the School of Shammai stood waiting for them below, [threatening] to kill the students of the School of Hillel. It was taught: Six of them went up, and the rest confronted them with swords and spears. It was taught: Eighteen matters were decreed; concerning eighteen they were the majority; and concerning eighteen they were divided. (*Yerushalmi*, ad loc.)

The *Bavli* recounts the events as follows:

They wedged a sword in the *beit midrash*, and said: “Whoever enters, enters; but no one will leave.” That day Hillel was bowed and sat before Shammai like one of the students, and it was as painful for Israel as the day when the Golden Calf was made. (*Shabbat* 17a)

Hillel followed the path of Aharon. He was ready to be exceptionally lenient — so long as the simple folk, too, would be able to connect with the world of Torah. Shammai and his students are depicted here as resembling Moshe and the tribe of Levi, ready to attack the people with their swords, while Hillel — bowed over and sitting before Shammai — resembles Aharon, receiving rebuke from Moshe.

The similarity between the two instances does not necessarily tell us who is right, since in the case of the Golden Calf, the Torah is quite clear in presenting Moshe as being in the right, and not Aharon. However, for future generations, the *halakha* was generally ruled in accordance with Hillel and his students. The similarity is nevertheless useful insofar as it illuminates the fact that in both instances, both parties are fighting for the sake of Heaven.

**Appendix: The relevance to our reality**

When reading the story of the Golden Calf, we are apt to be misled into thinking that the Torah is telling us about an ancient event reflecting primitive beliefs about idolatry that have no direct bearing on our lives. In other words, the reader might conclude that we cannot imagine a situation today in which people would eat, drink and conduct themselves with wanton abandon before a Golden Calf.

It is constructive in this regard to consider events and phenomena occurring in our own times — and specifically the less respectable examples. After reading the passage below, we may have a better understanding of how close God’s word is to us, and how relevant the warnings are for us, describing what we might descend to if we do not pay heed.

The following article appeared (in Hebrew) on the NRG news website a few years ago.[[4]](#footnote-4) I have removed the names of the organizers.

**The Golden Calf**

*Even veteran partygoers rubbed their eyes in disbelief as they arrived at the trance party held on Shabbat in Eilat: hundreds of youth were ecstatically circling a Golden Calf*

*\* “They made us feel like pagans.” \**

*Meantime, the organizers had trouble understanding what the fuss was about: “It’s not a calf — it’s a bull with piercing*.”

By Yehudit Zilberstein and Assaf Gur

Hundreds of revelers gathered around the Golden Calf, which had been set up in the desert. They knelt, danced in rapture, and waved their arms in ecstasy. This strange scene — an almost exact replica of the biblical event that led to the shattering of the Tablets of the Covenant — transpired last weekend, in the wadi near the Princess Hotel in Eilat. This time, the episode ended with nothing more than some shocked celebrants and a torrent of criticism. The rave, which started on Friday in the stylized hall of the Princess Hotel, continued the next day in the nearby wadi, and included drag queens riding on camels and other provocative displays.

In anticipation of the party, the organizers reserved all 420 rooms of the Princess Hotel, and dozens more rooms at the Club Hotel. They spent more than four days preparing the star of the event — a giant statue of a calf, painted a shining gold. “When I saw the calf, displayed on the main stage, I stopped dancing,” recounted one of the party-goers yesterday. “I was dumbfounded. I’m not a religious person, but the organizers crossed a red line here. This statue cast us as idolaters. Have we stopped considering ourselves as Jews?”

The revelers split into two groups. “There were lots of people who had consumed quite large quantities of drugs and alcohol. They were very enthusiastic about the glittering calf; they started dancing around it and saying that they were like the Israelites who sinned in the desert. But there was also a big group that was shocked by the whole scene. They approached the organizers and asked them to have the calf removed immediately,” reported one participant.

“This whole scene, with dancing around a Golden Calf in the desert, just turned me off,” said Elad, 35, who had travelled all the way from Tel Aviv to participate in the event. “Right away I was reminded of the story at Mount Sinai, and I told myself that this sort of thing is not for me, not even if there’s a trance party. We came here to dance and enjoy ourselves, but they made us feel like idolaters in Sodom and Gomorrah. It’s worse than making a party on Yom Kippur. I stood there and watched from the sidelines until I’d had enough, and then I went home, back to Tel Aviv.”

The event’s organizers rejected the many requests to remove the statue. “All of a sudden, people who desecrate the Sabbath become traditional and observant. It’s ridiculous,” the producers told a group of party-goers who approached them. “Anyone who feels it’s not appropriate for them doesn’t have to stay.”

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. If the *parashiyot* follow the chronological order of events, then Aharon’s appointment in principle (*Shemot* 28) precedes the episode of the Golden Calf (*Shemot* 32). Nevertheless, he is actually appointed only in *Vayikra* 8, at which point we would have expected the appointment to be cancelled owing to his sin. Moreover, according to Rashi and some opinions among *Chazal*, the events are not recorded in chronological order, and even the initial appointment in principle came only after the Sin of the Golden Calf. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Zohar, *Parashat Metzora*, Vol. III, 53b. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The *prozbol* instituted by Hillel for *shemitta* years is just one of many examples. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The original article is available at: <http://rotter.net/forum/gil/5592.shtml>. The event happened in January 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)