YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***MIKDASH***

**Rav Yitzchak Levy**

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**IN LOVING MEMORY OF**

**Jeffrey Paul Friedman**

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**לע"נ**

**יהודה פנחס בן הרב שרגא פייוועל**

**כ"ב אב תשכ"ח – י' אב תשע"ב**

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**Lecture #279: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (LXXXIX) – The Prohibition of Bamot (LXV)**

Having discussed in the previous *shiur* the connection between the calves of Yerovam and the golden calf in the wilderness, we wish in this *shiur* to examine the worship of the calf in the wilderness: Was it idolatry or can it be defined differently?

### The Golden calf was idolatry

When the Torah first relates to the golden calf, it would appear that the verses explicitly relate to it as idolatry. Thus, for example, when God informs Moshe about the calf:

And the Lord spoke unto Moshe, Go, get you down; for your people, that you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have dealt corruptly; they have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them; they have made them a molten calf, and have worshipped it, and have sacrificed unto it, and said, This is your god, O Israel, which brought you up out of the land of Egypt. (*Shemot* 32:7-8)

And later in Moshe's prayer:

And Moshe returned to the Lord, and said, Oh, this people have sinned a great sin, and have made them a god of gold. (*Shemot* 32:31)

*Tehilim* 106 describes the incident involving the golden calf as follows:

They made a calf in Chorev, and worshipped a molten image. Thus they exchanged their glory for the likeness of an ox that eats. (*Tehilim* 106:19-20)

This is also true of some of the commentators. In his commentary to *Shemot*, Rashi writes:

"Who shall go before us" – They yearned for many deities. (*Shemot* 32:1)

It would appear from all this that the golden calf was a certain type of idolatry. The terms "molten calf" to which the people bowed down and offered sacrifices, and "golden god," seem to be clear expressions of idolatry.

There are *Midrashim* in *Chazal* that link the calf in the wilderness to the idolatry practiced in Egypt. In Egypt, everybody worshipped lambs, and the Israelites learned from them and fashioned the golden calf:

When Israel received the commandments after forty days, they forgot their God, and said to Aharon: The Egyptians would carry their god, and sing before it, and see it before them. Fashion a god for us like the god of Egypt, and let us see it before us, as it is stated: "Arise and make us a god" (*Shemot* 32:1).[[1]](#footnote-1) (*Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, chap. 44)

This is also the opinion of Rabbi Abraham the son of the Rambam in his commentary to *Shemot*:

"He made them a molten calf" – Presumably this is what they asked him to do. I have a tradition from my father, my master, *z"l*, that this was because they were devout regarding the opinions of the astrologers, for the exodus from Egypt took place at the time of the sign of Taurus, or some similar idea concerning the dictates of the stars that branch out from idolatry. (*Shemot* 32:8)

In contrast to these sources, many *Rishonim* understand that we are not dealing here with actual idolatry.

### The Golden calf Was not idolatry

Let us examine how these *Rishonim* relate to the verses cited above which seem to indicate that the golden calf was indeed idolatry. We shall open with the *Chizkuni*, who cites the *Bechor Shor*:

For I made you their leader and spokesman, and they appointed somebody else in your place, and they also transgressed [the prohibition of] "You shall not make unto you a carved idol" (*Shemot* 20:3), even to remember Me, to serve it and to bow to it in My name, for even though their intention was not idol worship, they transgressed My commandments. (*Shemot* 32:8)

According to them we are not dealing here with idol worship, all worship here being directed to God's name and memory. We are dealing here with a transgression of the prohibition to make a carved idol, but this is not idol worship.

The Ramban in his commentary explains as follows:

The slain and the stricken were few in number, because for most of them the sin was an evil thought… (*Shemot* 32:7)

According to the Ramban, those who actually bowed down or offered sacrifices to the calf were few in number, whereas most of Israel did not sin in their actions, but only in their thoughts.

The Ibn Ezra in his long commentary addresses the issue of Aharon:[[2]](#footnote-2)

God forbid, that Aharon should have fashioned an idol. Israel too did not ask for an idol; they merely thought that Moshe who had led them from the Sea of Suf died, as I have explained…

Now all those who worshipped the golden calf as idolatry, saying, "This is your God, O Israel" (*Shemot* 32:8), or thinking that in their minds, were only three thousand, half of a hundredth of the camp. (*Shemot* 32:1)

To summarize for now the reasons offered by the *Rishonim* as to why the golden calf was not considered idolatry:

• It is inconceivable that Aharon, God's holy man and the prophet of Israel, would practice actual idolatry, and there is also no explicit claim that he did so.

• The children of Israel did not worship idolatry but only transgressed the prohibition to make a carved idol.

• We are dealing with a total of 3,000 people out of the 600,000 in the camp.

In addition, why did they justify their request with the argument that they did not know what happened to Moshe? Did Moshe ever claim to be God? At most it was necessary to find a replacement for Moshe, but not for God.

If so, why did they ask Aharon to fashion such a substitute for them? They should have asked that he himself stand in place of Moshe, or that he choose someone else to substitute for him.[[3]](#footnote-3)

One of the most prominent commentators who relates both to the golden calf in the wilderness and to the calves of Yerovam as worship of the God of Israel, and not idol worship, is Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi in his book, *The Kuzari*:

All nations were given to idolatry at that time. Even had they been philosophers, discoursing on the unity and government of God, they would have been unable to dispense with images, and would have taught the masses that a divine influence hovered over this image, which was distinguished by some miraculous feature. Some of them ascribed this to God, even as we today treat some particular spots with reverence, going so far as to believe ourselves blessed by their dust and stones… The people did not pay so much attention to a single law as to a tangible image in which they believed.

Their sin consisted in the manufacture of an image of a forbidden thing, and in attributing Divine power to a creation of their own, something chosen by themselves without the guidance of God…

On the other hand, they sinned in causing what was only a sin of intention to become a sin in deed. This sin was not on a par with an entire lapse from all obedience to Him who had led them out of Egypt, as only one of His commands was violated by them. God had forbidden images, and in spite of this they made one. They should have waited and not have assumed power, have arranged a place of worship, an altar, and sacrifices. This had been done by the advice of the astrologers and magicians among them, who were of the opinion that their actions based on their ideas would be more correct than the true ones…

At the same time the people did not intend to give up their allegiance to God. On the contrary, they were, in theory, more zealous in their devotion. They therefore approached Aharon, and he, desiring to make their plan public, assisted them in their undertaking. For this reason he is to be blamed for changing their theoretical disobedience into a reality. (*Kuzari,* I, 97)

Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi views the worship of the golden calf as a distorted version of the worship of God. The statue of the calf symbolizes God, in total opposition to what Israel was commanded in the Ten Commandments. Those who worshipped the calf did not deny the God of Israel who took them out of the land of Egypt, as is evident from their declaration: "This is your god, O Israel, which brought you up out of the land of Egypt" (*Shemot* 32:8). The sin of the people was that they fashioned for themselves an image, and thereby attributed Divine power to that which they had made with their own hands and of their own will without God's command. In other words, the sin was not idol worship, but rather a transgression of one of the Torah's commandments.

Another view is expressed by the Ramban, who also understands that we are not dealing here with idolatry, for all that the Israelites wanted was to replace Moshe:

This verse is the key to the correct understanding of the golden calf and the thinking of those who made it. For it is known that the Israelites did not think that Moshe was God, or that he of his own power performed the signs and wonders for them; why then would they say: Since Moshe has left us, let us make a god.

And furthermore, they explicitly stated: "A god who shall go before us" (*Shemot* 32:1). Not a god who shall give them lie in this world or in the World-to-Come. Rather, they were asking for another Moshe…

Surely Aharon apologizes to Moshe, saying: "Let not the anger of my lord wax hot" (*Shemot* 32:22). He would be adding iniquity to his sin, saying that the people asked him for an idol and he made it for them with his own hands. Why should [Moshe's] anger not wax hot; what greater sin is there than this?

But the matter is as I have explained, that they did not ask for a calf to be for them a god that brings death and gives life, nor did they accept upon themselves to worship it. Rather they wanted it to substitute for Moshe as their guide. This is Aharon's apology, as he argued: They only told me to make them a god that will go before them in your place, my lord, as they did not know what happened to you, whether you would return or not, and therefore they needed something to guide them for as long as you would not be with them, and if perhaps you would return they would abandon it and follow you as at first.

And so it was, when the people saw Moshe they immediately left the calf and kicked it, allowing it to be burned and its ashes to be scattered upon the water, and none of them objected at all. And so you see that he did not rebuke them, nor did he say anything to them. But when he came to the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, they immediately fled from it, and he took the calf and burned it and made them drink it and they did not refuse at all. (*Shemot* 32:1)

The Ramban adduces as proof the fact that when Moshe returned to the people, and broke the tablets and burned the calf, none of those present protested against what he was doing. Were the golden calf a real idol the Israelites would have risen up against him and objected to the burning. From here we see that after Moshe returned to the camp, the calf was no longer needed.

In the next *shiur* we will consider Yerovam's calves and discuss whether or not they were idolatrous.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Many different Midrashim, each in its own way, describe this reality. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. And similarly the *Chizkuni* in his commentary to the beginning of the chapter (*Shemot* 32:1). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The word *elohim* does not prove that they sought a deity, as the term can refer to any powerful being, humans included. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)