YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***MIKDASH***

**Rav Yitzchak Levy**

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Dedicated by Steven Weiner and Lisa Wise with prayers for Refuah Shelemah for all who require healing, comfort and peace –

those battling illnesses visibly and invisibly, publicly and privately.

May Hashem mercifully grant us strength, courage and compassion.

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**Lecture #281: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (XCI) – The Prohibition of Bamot (LXVII)**

In the last two *shiurim* we examined the connection between the golden calf in the wilderness, the calves of Yerovam and idol worship, and we saw the main positions voiced in the Bible itself, in *Chazal*, and in the words of the *Rishonim*. In this *shiur* we wish to consider the essential difference between the *keruvim* and the golden calf.

**What is the Difference Between the Keruvim and the Golden Calf?**

The prophets use the expression, "the ark of the covenant of the Lord of hosts, who sits upon the *keruvim*" (e.g., I *Shemuel* 4:4). This expression assumes that the *keruvim* constitute sort of a throne upon which God, as it were, sits, and the ark serves as a footstool in which rests the deed recording the covenant between God and the people of Israel – the tablets, the broken tablets and a Torah scroll.

If so, why was the golden calf – which, as we explained, expressed the chariot that bears God's presence – considered a sin, while the ark and the *keruvim –* another symbol of God's presence – constituted the holiest vessel in the Holy of Holies?

**The Difference Between a Divine Command and a Human Choice**

This question was raided by *Midrash Aggada*:

"And you shall make two *keruvim*" (*Shemot* 25:18). But surely He said to you and commanded you at Mount Sinai: "You shall not make unto you a graven image, nor any manner of likeness" (*Shemot* 20:3)! This is not difficult. Unto you, you shall not make it, but to Me, you shall make it. Similarly: "Every one that profanes it shall surely be put to death" (*Shemot* 31:14), and elsewhere it states: "And on the day of Shabbat, two he-lambs" (*Bemidbar* 28:9). (*Midrash Aggada*, *Shemot*, 25)[[1]](#footnote-1)

Rabbeinu Bachya notes:

That which He said: "You shall not make unto you a graven image, nor any manner of likeness," and afterwards commanded about making the *keruvim* – the same mouth that forbade is the mouth that permits. (*Shemot* 20:4)

Rav Kasher in his notes brings other answers to this question:

I have also heard that it was only forbidden to make them in order to worship them. For if you do not say this, how did [Shelomo] make the lions. (*Torah Sheleima*, 16, Jerusalem 1983, p. 34)

Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi offers the following answer:

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…** They should have waited and not have assumed power, have arranged a place of worship, an altar, and sacrifices [to God!]… On the other hand, there was nothing strange in the form of the *keruvim* made by His command. (*Kuzari*, I, 97)

In other words, the difference is between a Divine command explicitly given by Him and something that He did not command.

**The *Keruv* – An Imaginary Creature, as Opposed to Calves and Bulls, which are Real Creatures**

Rabbi Yosef Ha-Mekane draws a clearer difference between the *keruvim* and the calves:

"You shall not make unto you a graven image." There are those who ask about the *kerumim*; surely they are images? Rav Natan answers: The Torah only forbade [images of] anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. But the model of the *keruvim* was neither in heaven nor in the earth, as they were nothing but faces and wings.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The *keruvim* were unique, with no parallel in the universe. It is therefore possible to distinguish between the prohibition to make an image which relates to images of things which exist in the real world, and the *keruvim*.

Cassuto offers a similar answer:

Why does the Torah, on the one hand, command the manufacture of *keruvim* for the *Mishkan*, while on the other hand, it considers the fashioning of the golden calf a criminal offense? It may be answered that despite the similarity between these two things, there is a fundamental difference between them. According to the Ten Commandments, it is forbidden to make a graven image or likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. And the likeness of a bull, a living creature on earth, is included in this prohibition. The *keruvim*, on the other hand, imaginary creatures that are not found in heaven or in the earth or in the water, are not included in it. The reason for this distinction is clear: One who sees the likeness of the *keruvim* and knows that they are imaginary creatures, easily understands that they are only a symbol, and therefore it is unlikely that he will err and attribute Divine character to them; whereas one who sees the likeness of a bull, and knows that there are many bulls in the world and that they are exceedingly strong creatures, with great power of fertility (the Canaanites called their chief god by the name bull), is likely to err and attribute to that likeness, and even to living bulls, Divine character, and worship them as gods. (*Shemot*, p. 285)*.*

**The Difference Between Aharon’s Original Intention and the Thinking of the Masses.**

Cassuto argues that there is a contradiction between Aharon's intention when he made the golden calf at the people's request, and the thinking of the masses when they actually worshipped the calf. In the continuation of his words, he writes:

According to Scripture, Aharon's intention when he made the golden calf was merely to make an empty throne for God, similar to the throne of the *keruvim* which at the very same time Moshe was being commanded to make on Mount Sinai. He thought that the prohibition in the Ten Commandments was only against bowing down to idols and worshipping them… He did not understand that the prohibition to make them, which is spelled out explicitly on its own, is sort of a fence, so that the masses not come to err and bow down to and worship them… Aharon sinned in that he did not understand the need for a fence or the possibility of error on the part of the masses, an error that happened when the people saw the calf and did what they did.

In the body of his commentary to *Shemot* 31, he writes on verse 4:

Even though Aharon merely intended to provide the people with a kind of tangible symbol, sort of an empty throne, as stated, the people erred after the concrete likeness and treated it as an actual deity… They saw the calf as a symbol of God, and thought that this symbol itself was worthy of Divine honor. It was as if they made the calf a partner of God; hence the plural term ("These are your God"). (p. 288)

In his commentary on verse 8, Cassuto writes:

"They have made them a molten calf" (*Shemot* 32:8) – This in itself was not yet a grave sin, but they added to it: "And they have worshipped it, and have sacrificed to it" (ibid.) – similar to the actions of the pagan peoples (p. 289)

On the face of it, there is a vast gap between Aharon's original intention and what actually happened when the people worshipped the calf itself.

The clarification of this issue requires a greatly expanded discussion. What was Aharon's part in the sin involving the calf and what was the part of the people? What was their original intention? Were they seeking a substitute for God or for Moshe?

A distinction can be made between two components: The first is the relationship between Aharon and the rest of the people. The second is the relationship between the calf as a chariot of bulls and as a means to worship God out of a desire for a tangible expression of connection to Him; and the calf as the object of actual worship once it becomes identified with God Himself.

Without entering into a discussion here about the connection between the command to build the *Mishkan* and the sin involving the golden calf, both with respect to the timing of God's commandment to Moshe, and with respect to the essence of the *Mishkan* itself, and to what extent it served as a response to the human desire for a tangible expression of the appearance of God, there is room to examine the relationship between these two components.

**From a Means to an End**

It would seem that the golden calf was actually worshipped by only three thousand of the six hundred thousand Israelite men in the wilderness. What was the attitude of the rest of the people? The biblical text does not relate to their actual position regarding the calf. On the other hand, it is certainly possible to imagine that Aharon's intention, in his desire to diminish sin as much as possible, was to treat the calf as a throne for the *Shekhina*, as bulls serving as a chariot for the Divine presence.[[3]](#footnote-3)

It is very possible that a significant portion of the people viewed the calf in this way, and that out of the total population, three thousand men, possibly connected to the "*erev rav*," the "mixed many," a group that included Egyptians and other who joined the Israelites when they left Egypt, changed direction, and turned the means into an end in itself, turning the chariot into a deity, and in the end worshipping it.

In principle, turning the means into a goal can take place in the transition from individuals to the masses, but it can also be the result of time. Over time, worship may turn from a means to an end out of a fierce desire on the part of the worshippers to move from the spiritual-conceptual plane to a physical-tangible plane, to move from a means to relate to an invisible deity to something visible.

**Corruption Over Time**

According to Albright, this phenomenon is evident also in the calves of Yerovam in Dan and in Bet-El:

Needless to say this resurrection [= Yerovam's resurrection of the ancient symbol of the calf] was fraught with danger, since the associations between Baal, the lord of heaven, and the bull, were exceedingly strong… The *keruvim…* could magnify the glory of God… In contrast, the calves of Bet-El and Dan could only humiliate His service… A danger loomed over the pure faith in God through the introduction of Canaanite elements into the Temple service both in the south and in the north. (*From Stone Age to Christianity*, p. 179)

Albright sees the sin of the masses in the identification of the cult of the calves with Canaanite rituals. Rav Elchanan Samet, on the other hand, argues that in the case of Yerovam's calves, it is difficult to see a clear distinction between the intention of Yerovam and the intention of the masses. Most of the verses that describe the worship of the calves as idol worship attribute this to Yerovam himself. Should one argue that in contrast to Aharon, Yerovam's intention was idol worship, this is not possible: Some of these verses that purportedly accuse Yerovam of idol worship (I *Melakhim* 12:32; II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 11:14-15), combine this accusation with the accusation that he deposed the priests of the tribe of Levi, and there is a logical contradiction between these two accusations.

It may further be argued against seeing Yerovam's calves as idol worship that were they indeed seen as idols, Eliyahu the prophet and Yehu the king of Israel, two figures who fought jealously on behalf of God, would have acted against the worship of the calves and against the calves themselves, rather than passing over them in total silence.

But beyond these arguments, one must consider how things worked over time. It is possible that among the people, over the centuries during which Yerovam's calves became a permanent part of the cult, and from the time of Achav, when idolatry spread throughout the kingdom of Israel, the calves' connection to pagan worship became stronger in every respect.

There is, however, no explicit prophetic testimony towards the end of the days of the kingdom of Israel that the calves in practice became a direct object of idolatry, but in our humble opinion this is certainly possible and even reasonable. It is interesting that the *Netziv* (*Divrei ha-Emek*, I *Melakhim* 12:28) understands that at first Yerovam lured the people to worship the calves with the understanding that this was not idolatry, but afterwards even Yerovam himself grew more wicked and related to the calves as idolatry.

**The Difference Between a Visible Calf and a Hidden Keruv**

We cited above Rav Kasher's comments about the passage from *Midrash Aggada.* He also brings another explanation of our issue:

And I (and Rabbi Yosef) say that the *keruvim* are permitted, as it is written "You shall not make unto yourself" (*Shemot* 20:3), in a place where you can see. But the *keruvim* were hidden from the eye, as they rested in a place where nobody enters except for the High Priest once a year. (*Torah Sheleima*, 16, Jerusalem 1983, p. 34)

If so, according to Rav Kasher, another reason that the *keruvim* are permitted is that they could only be seen once a year on Yom Kippur by the High Priest. This is different than the general prohibition against making graven images which relates to a reality that can be seen.

Joshua Meir Grintz[[4]](#footnote-4) makes a similar argument in the distinction that he draws between the *keruvim* that were hidden from the eye and the calves which were openly exposed:

Unlike the *keruvim*, Yerovam's calves were apparently placed in a public place, and anybody could approach them and kiss them – see *Hoshea* 13:2: "They that sacrifice men kiss calves." (p. 128)

This seems to be an important difference: the *keruvim* stood in a place where nobody could see them (even when the *Mishkan* was being transported from place to place). In contrast, both the golden calf in the wilderness and the calves of Yerovam were visible to all, and the service was conducted in direct relationship with them.

As mentioned above, in the pagan temples of the nations of the world there was a throne or a chariot with bulls on which was erected a statue of the king in clear and visible form, in particular dimensions, materials and colors. In contrast, in the Holy of Holies the *keruvim* are the likeness of a throne, but not an actual throne. Their wings constitute only something that is like a seat. And of course, nothing actually rests upon them.

From Grintz's perspective, there is an enormous difference between a symbolic throne, which lacks the form of a seat and has nobody sitting in it, and which stands in a place that only one person is permitted to enter (and even he is forbidden to see it), and a graven image of a calf or calves, that is visible to all, that one can gaze upon, touch and kiss, even if it merely symbolizes the Divine presence and is not identified with it.

As described in the Torah, God Himself is completely hidden, and has no likeness or form. When the Torah speaks throughout the book of *Devarim* of the Divine selection of a place, it is careful to use the expression: "the place that God shall choose to place **His name** there.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Rav Elchanan Samet as well views this distinction as the main difference between the calf-calves and the *keruvim*. We shall present here his summary of the issue:[[6]](#footnote-6)

Sometimes the biblical judgment of particular actions is not in accordance with the "objective" nature of these actions, but rather in accordance with the impression left in the eyes of those that see them, unaware of the precise context in which they were performed and of the intentions of those who performed them, but only of what they see.

Now let us go back to the differences that we noted between the *keruvim*, which stood unseen in the Temple, and the calves that stood in public, and before which was erected an altar upon which sacrifices were offered. The service of the calves appeared outwardly like a pagan cult: the graven image of an animal, which in several cultures served the image of a deity; before it stood an altar, upon which sacrifices were offered; and people directed their faces toward it with expressions of admiration (such as prostration and statements like: "These are your God…").

The vulgarity of this ritual and its outward resemblance to idolatrous worship lead to its description by prophets (and in *Shemot* 32, in the words of God Himself to Moshe) as an act of idolatry, even though the worshippers' intentions were directed solely to the God of Israel, and the image served merely as a chariot for the invisible God who dwelt among them.

There is but a thread-like difference between the supremely sanctified and concealed symbol of God's presence – the ark and the *keruvim* – and the symbol of the calf, erected in the open, not at the command of God, and therefore it is condemned as idolatry.

These are the words of the *Mekhilta* on the verse: "You shall not make with Me gods of silver, or gods of gold, you shall not make to you" (*Shemot* 20:19) – even the *keruvim*, from between which issues the voice that speaks to Moshe and gives Israel the commandments, are liable to turn into "gods of silver and gods of gold," if the context in which they are made is not in precise accordance with God's instructions in His Torah, even if they are made "in synagogues and in study halls." Man's intention to do this forbidden act for the sake of God will not save the *keruvim* from becoming "gods of silver and gods of gold," even if the person doing this is not truly involved in idol worship.

If the *keruvim* can be called "gods of gold" when they are not in their place in the Holy of Holies, all the more so can the golden calf be called by this term (*Shemot* 32:31).

In this *shiur* we tried to examine both with regard to the calf in the wilderness and with regard to Yerovam's calves, what is the essential difference between the calf and the *keruvim*. We proposed several differences, thus far dealing with the calves of Yerovam according to the plain meaning of the verses. In the next *shiur* we will examine the entirety of Yerovam's actions according to *Chazal*.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Cited by Rav Kasher in his *Torah Sheleima* on *Parashat Yitro*, no. 135. *Midrash Lekach Tov*, *Shemot* 25, cited there in the notes, brings several additional examples of this principle in the passage concerning levirate marrage and on the verse: "You shall not wear mingled stuff… You shall make twisted cords upon the four corners of your covering" (*Devarim* 22:11-12). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Published in the Jubilee volume, *Birkat Avraham*, in honor of R. Avraham Berliner, p. 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Here too we must examine to what extent Aharon actually fashioned the calf or did he merely cooperate and then the calf emerged on its own. This depends on how we understand the story as a whole. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In his article, "*Ha-Reforma ha-Rishona be-Yisrael*," *Mechkarim be-Mikra,* Jerusalem 5739, pp. 127-147. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For this reason Jerusalem is not mentioned in the Torah, and even when allusions are made to it, it is impossible to infer from the discription where it is located (Emek Shaveh, Shalem, Mount Moriya). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. VBM, *Pirkei Nevi'im Shonim be-Sefer Melakhim*, *shiur* 18 – "*Chata'ot Yerovam* IV." [↑](#footnote-ref-6)