**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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**PARASHAT EKEV**

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**IN LOVING MEMORY OF**

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**August 15, 1968 – July 29, 2012**

**לע"נ**

**ז"ל יהודה פנחס בן הרב שרגא פייוועל**

**כ"ב אב תשכ"ח – י' אב תשע"ב**

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**Moshe’s Interpretation of the Sin of the Golden Calf**

**By Prof. Yonatan Grossman**[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Introduction**

In this *shiur*, we will attempt to understand Moshe's attitude toward the story of the sin of the Golden Calf. The sin of the Golden Calf is one of the most tragic episodes in the history of the Jewish People, and there is no way to ignore this foundational event. However, the timing of Moshe's decision to relate to this event is a significant manner in itself, as we shall see over the course of this *shiur.*

**The Location of the Sin of the Golden Calf in Moshe’s Oration Concerning the *Mitzvot***

As we noted in the previous *shiur*, we will be following R. Mordechai Breuer's approach, which views the structure of the entire oration concerning the *mitzvot* as based on the structure of the Ten Commandments. According to his division of the oration, the story of the sin of the Golden Calf belongs to the first commandment:[[2]](#footnote-2)

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make unto you a graven image, even any manner of likeness, of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down unto them, nor serve them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the third and upon the fourth generation of them that hate Me, and showing mercy unto the thousandth generation of them that love Me and keep My commandments. (*Devarim* 5:6-9)[[3]](#footnote-3)

The part of the oration concerning the *mitzvot* that represents the first commandment is made up of two sections that begin with the words "Hear O Israel." The first instance of that phrase is in the passage of *Shema* found in *Parashat Va'etchanan* (6:4); the second instance is in our *parasha*, at the beginning of the story of the sin of the Golden Calf (9:1).

**Lovingkindeness vs. Merits**

Moshe's call of "Hear O Israel" opens a topic different from the one that we encountered in the first section (6:4-8-20), which also began with the words, "Hear O Israel":

Hear, O Israel: you are to pass over the Jordan this day, to go in to dispossess nations greater and mightier than yourself, **cities great and fortified up to heaven,****a people great and tall, the sons of the Anakim,** whom you know, and of whom you have heard say: Who can stand before the sons of Anak? (*Devarim* 9:1-2)

Moshe's words are almost an exact quotation of the way he describes the people of Israel's response to the report of the spies, as described in chapter 1:

Where are we going up? Our brethren have made our heart to melt, saying: **The people is greater and taller than we; the cities are great and fortified up to heaven; and moreover we have seen the sons of the Anakim there.** (*Devarim* 1:28)

Moshe's use of almost exactly the same wording as the sin of the spies indicates that it is not at all by chance, but rather it serves a strategic purpose for Moshe. Mentioning the spies serves him in achieving a rhetorical goal. Throughout his recounting of story of the sin of the Golden Calf, Moshe tries to teach the people that they enjoy redemption not by virtue of their own merits, but by virtue of God. Already from the beginning, the people were "rebellious" (*Devarim* 7-9). The linguistic parallelism between the sin of the Golden Calf and the sin of the spies repeats itself several times, with the objective of joining these two terrible sins into a clear statement that the people of Israel are great sinners, but God nevertheless chooses to save them.

If the linguistic parallelism does not suffice, this is also stated explicitly:

Know therefore this day, that the Lord your God is He who goes over before you as a devouring fire; He will destroy them, and He will bring them down before you; so shall you drive them out, and make them to perish quickly, as the Lord has spoken unto you. (*Devarim* 9:3)

The *Da'at Mikra* commentary on this verse argues that the word "He" in the phrase "that the Lord your God is He who goes over before you as a devouring fire; **He** will destroy them, and He will bring them down before you" should be read in both directions: Know that the Lord your God who goes over before you – **He** is a devouring fire; **He** will destroy them, and He will bring them down before you." This type of parallelism is called Janus parallelism.[[4]](#footnote-4) Even without this parallelism, this verse greatly emphasizes the word "He" – God is the savior, and not man.

In these verses, and similarly in the continuation of the chapter, Moshe expresses great concern about Israel's arrogance in the wake of the conquest of the land:

Speak not you in your heart after that the Lord your God has thrust them out from before you, saying: For my righteousness the Lord has brought me in to possess this land; whereas for the wickedness of these nations the Lord does drive them out from before you. Not for your righteousness or for the uprightness of your heart do you go in to possess their land; but for the wickedness of these nations the Lord your God does drive them out from before you, and that He may establish the word which the Lord swore unto your fathers, to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov. Know, therefore, that it is not for your righteousness that the Lord your God gives you this good land to possess it; for you are a stiff-necked people. Remember, forget you not, how you did make the Lord your God wroth in the wilderness; from the day that you did go forth out of the land of Egypt until you came unto this place, you have been rebellious against the Lord. (*Devarim* 9:4-7)

The word "possess" appears seven times in this section, and it is the guide word. It is important to Moshe to emphasize that it is not the people who take possession of the land; rather, it is God who gives it to them to possess it. The people of Israel are a rebellious people, and they do not deserve to possess the land on their own merits.

This awareness of Israel's rebellious nature is what leads Moshe to a new perspective on the sin of the Golden Calf. The verses that we have just seen, until verse 7, constitute an introduction to the broad treatment of the sin of the Golden Calf, which serves as a perfect example of Israel's rebelliousness in the wilderness.

**What was the “Sin” of the Golden Calf?**

Moshe relates to the historical issue of the sin of the Golden Calf, but he does not copy his words from the book of *Shemot*. Rather, he chooses to relate to certain sections and in certain ways that are not always "true to the source" in the account given in the book of *Shemot*.

The *Rishonim* disagree about the nature of the "sin" in the story of the sin of the Golden Calf. The great majority of *Rishonim* maintain that it was a sin of actual idolatry: "They wanted many gods."[[5]](#footnote-5) We find such an approach already in the words of the Psalmist:

They made a calf in Chorev and worshipped a molten image. Thus they exchanged their glory for the likeness of an ox that eats grass. They forgot God their savior, who had done great things in Egypt. (*Tehillim* 106:19-21).

In contrast, R. Yehuda Halevi writes that the "sin" at Mount Sinai was not really a sin of idolatry, but rather a sin of corporealizing and giving physical form to God, a sin that stemmed from an error on the part of the people of Israel.

Based on this disagreement, Eli Chadad proposes to distinguish between the two accounts of the sin of the Golden Calf.[[6]](#footnote-6) The sin of the Golden Calf as described in the book of *Shemot* involved a violation of the prohibition of idolatry, whereas in the book of *Devarim* the sin is not described as one of real idol worship, but rather as one of corporealizing God by way of the Golden Calf.

What follows from this is that in Moshe’s account of the sin of the Golden Calf in *Devarim*, he relates not to the beginning of the first commandment – "I am the Lord your God," which deals with the duty to believe in God – but rather to the second part of the commandment, the issue of corporealization – "You shall not make unto you a graven image, even any manner of likeness…" These verses do not relate to straying from God, but rather to a negative mode of worship that should not be followed, though this is less severe than the prohibition of outright idolatry.

The book of *Devarim* does not bring the full background for the sin of the Golden Calf.

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| *Shemot* 32 | *Devarim* 9 |
| 1. **And when the people saw that Moshe delayed to come down from the mount, the people gathered themselves together unto Aharon, and said unto him: Up, make us a god who shall go before us; for as for this Moshe, the man that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we know not what is become of him.**  2.And Aharon said unto them, “Break off the golden rings, which are in the ears of your wives, of your sons, and of your daughters, and bring them unto me.”  3. And all the people broke off the golden rings which were in their ears, and brought them unto Aharon.  4. And he received it at their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool, and made it a molten calf; and they said: This is your god, O Israel, which brought you up out of the land of Egypt.  5. And when Aharon saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aharon made proclamation, and said, “Tomorrow shall be a feast to the Lord.”  6. And they rose up early on the morrow, and offered burnt-offerings, and brought peace-offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to make merry.  7. 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;  8. **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.” | 8. **Also in Chorev you made the Lord wroth,** and the Lord was angered with you to have destroyed you.  9. When I was gone up into the mount to receive the tables of stone, even the tables of the covenant which the Lord made with you, then I abode in the mount forty days and forty nights; I did neither eat bread nor drink water.  10. And the Lord delivered unto me the two tables of stone written with the finger of God; and on them was written according to all the words, which the Lord spoke with you in the mount out of the midst of the fire in the day of the assembly.  11. And it came to pass at the end of forty days and forty nights, that the Lord gave me the two tables of stone, even the tables of the covenant.  12. And the Lord said unto me, “Arise, get you down quickly from hence; for your people that you have brought forth out of Egypt have dealt corruptly; **they are quickly turned aside out of the way which I commanded them; they have made them a molten image.**” |

In this book, the story is reported from Moshe's perspective. There are several significant differences between the two stories. Through these differences we can uncover Moshe’s objective in choosing to insert the story of the sin of the Golden Calf precisely in this location and precisely in this manner.

If we examine verse 8 in the book of *Shemot* as compared to verse 12 in the book of *Devarim*,we see that Israel's sins are described in greater length in the book of *Shemot* – "and they have worshipped it, and have sacrificed unto it, and said" – as opposed to the book of *Devarim*,where there is almost no description whatsoever of the actual sin, but merely: "they are quickly turned aside out of the way… they have made them a molten image."

**The Breaking of the Tablets**

One of the greatest turns in the story of the Golden Calf in the book of *Devarim*,as opposed to the story in the book of *Shemot*, is the absence of Moshe's prayer before he descended from the mountain. Moshe does not completely erase the prayer from the event, but merely pushes it off until the end of his words (beginning in verse 18 and especially from verse 25):

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| *Shemot* 32 | *Devarim* 9 |
| 9. And the Lord said unto Moshe, “I have seen this people, and, behold, it is a stiff-necked people.  10. 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.”  11. **And Moses besought the Lord…** [Moshe's prayer]  14. And the Lord repented of the evil which He said He would do unto His people.  15. And Moshe turned, and went down from the mount, with the two tables of the testimony in his hand; tables that were written on both their sides; on the one side and on the other were they written.  16. And the tables were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, graven upon the tables…  19. And it came to pass, as soon as he came nigh unto the camp, that he saw the calf and the dancing; and Moshe's anger waxed hot, and he cast the tables out of his hands, and broke them beneath the mount. | 13. Furthermore the Lord spoke unto me, saying, “I have seen this people, and, behold, it is a stiff-necked people.  14. Let Me alone, that I may destroy them, and blot out their name from under heaven; and I will make of you a nation mightier and greater than they.”  15. So I turned and came down from the mount, and the mount burned with fire; and the two tables of the covenant were in my two hands.  16. And I looked, and, behold, you had sinned against the Lord your God; you had made you a molten calf; you had turned aside quickly out of the way which the Lord had commanded you.  17. And I took hold of the two tables, and cast them out of my two hands, and broke them **before your eyes.** |

This pushing off of Moshe's prayer can be explained by way of another difference between the two stories – namely, the story of the breaking of the tablets, which is also not identical to the account in the book of *Shemot*.

The breaking of the tablets in the book of *Shemot* seems to be an emotional reaction lacking any clear purpose: "And it came to pass, as soon as he came nigh unto the camp… and Moshe's anger waxed hot, and he cast the tables out of his hands…" Moshe is described as one who, in a moment of anger, loses control and casts the tablets out of his hands out of frustration. This is not the case in the book of *Devarim*: "And I took hold… and cast them out of my two hands and broke them before your eyes." When Moshe describes the incident to Israel, it is important for him to emphasize that it took place specifically before the eyes of Israel. This fact is totally missing from the account in the book of *Shemot*, from which it might have been understood that Moshe broke the tablets while he was still on Mount Sinai and that no one saw what he did.

The emphasis on the fact that the tablets were broken before the eyes of Israel is an educational emphasis. According to this, Moshe decided to break the tablets in order to negate any possible future corporealization of God by way of these tablets. Breaking the tablets is not a goal in itself; it is a didactic tool to pass on a clear message. Moshe sees the calf and decides to break the tablets, even though they are "the writing of God," in order to teach the people of Israel that in no way is it permitted to corporealize God and make a substitute for Him, even if the intention is for the sake of Heaven.  

**The Criticism Levelled Against Aharon**

Before we return to the matter of Moshe's prayer, let us focus for a moment on the continuation of the passage:

And I fell down before the Lord, as at the first, forty days and forty nights; I did neither eat bread nor drink water; because of all your sin which you sinned, in doing that which was evil in the sight of the Lord, to provoke Him. For I was in dread of the anger and hot displeasure, wherewith the Lord was wroth against you to destroy you. But the Lord hearkened unto me that time also. Moreover, the Lord was very angry with Aharon to have destroyed him; and I prayed for Aharon also the same time. (*Devarim* 8:18-20)

In the book of *Shemot*, God does not level any criticism against Aharon; it is only Moshe who voices complaints against him. Only in the book of *Devarim* do we hear God's criticism of Aharon, and this requires explanation.

According to the guiding principle that we have suggested, the answer is simple. In the book of *Shemot*, where the criticism levelled against the people of Israel involves idol worship, there is truly no room to criticize Aharon, as he did not worship an idol. But when the issue is the corporealization of God, the criticism is rightly levelled against Aharon as well.

**What did Moshe do with the Golden Calf?**

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| *Shemot* 32 | *Devarim* 9 |
| 20. And he took the calf which they had made, **and burnt it with fire, and ground it to powder, and strewed it upon the water, and made the children of Israel drink of it.** | 21. And I took your sin, the calf which you had made, **and burnt it with fire, and beat it in pieces, grinding it very small, until it was as fine as dust; and I cast the dust thereof into the brook that descended out of the mount.** |

In the book of *Shemot*,Moshe makes the people of Israeldrink the remnants of the Golden Calf, whereas in the book of *Devarim* he casts the dust of the Calf into the brook. Why doesn't Moshe note his giving Israel to drink the dust and water mixture? *Chazal* view Moshe's giving Israel to drink as a repair of the sin; just as a *sota* is given the bitter waters to drink when she betrays her husband, the people of Israel, who betrayed God, drink their sin as an act of repair. This reparative act is necessary when we are dealing with a sin of idolatry; when the issue is the corporealization of God, there is no betrayal, but merely a mistake in the mode of serving God. In such a case, there is no need to make the people drink the dust of the Calf.

**Moshe’s Prayer Before He Descends from Mount Sinai**

The story of the sin of the Golden Calf concludes with Moshe's prayer. In other words, Moshe pushes off his prayer to the end of the account:

So I fell down before the Lord the forty days and forty nights that I fell down, because the Lord had said He would destroy you. And I prayed unto the Lord, and said, “O Lord God, destroy not Your people and Your inheritance, that You have redeemed through Your greatness, that You have brought forth out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Remember Your servants, Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov; look not unto the stubbornness of this people, nor to their wickedness, nor to their sin; lest the land whence You brought us out say: Because the Lord was not able to bring them into the land which He promised unto them, and because He hated them, He has brought them out to slay them in the wilderness. Yet they are Your people and Your inheritance, that you did bring out by Your great power and by Your outstretched arm.” (*Devarim* 9:25-29)

With respect to the wording of Moshe's prayer in the book of *Devarim*, it may be said that more or less we are dealing with the same wording that appears in the book of *Shemot*: 1) The people of Israel are the people of God; 2) what will the Egyptians say; 3) merits of the forefathers.

The true difficulty is not the content of the prayer, but its location in Moshe's oration. Why does Moshe mention his prayer only at the end of his account of the sin of the Golden Calf? In the book of *Shemot*,the prayer was uttered before Moshe's descent from Mount Sinai.

The answer to this question seems to be that Moshe wished to juxtapose the prayer to the renewal of the covenant. If we examine the book of *Shemot*, we find that even after the prayer, there are all kinds of deaths and arguments and interrelated issues surrounding the matter of the Golden Calf, which make it difficult to fully absorb the events and form from them a clear picture. When Moshe changes the order of the events in the book of *Devarim*, he creates a logical progression according to which the atonement of the people of Israel and the renewal of the covenant that came in its wake stemmed from Moshe's prayer.

**A Summary of the General Course of Events**

To summarize what we have seen up to this point with regard to the changes in the story: The presentation of the sin of the Golden Calf in the book of *Devarim* in a manner that is different from the way that it is presented in the book of *Shemot* shifts the sin of the people of Israel from the sin of actual idolatry to the sin of corporealizing God, "You shall not make unto you a graven image." The problem lies with the making of a graven image, not with the object of the service. In other words, we are not dealing here with a theological problem of idol worship, but rather with an inadvertent error regarding the correct way to serve God – a straying from the path, but not a straying from God. In the book of *Devarim*, there is no mention of "Whoever is on the Lord's side, come to me," as it is presented in the book of *Shemot*; everyone is a servant of God.

It seems that both types of people were actually present at the time of the revelation at Mount Sinai. The true idol worshippers were the three thousand people who were killed, as is described in the book of *Shemot*, but these were a small minority.[[7]](#footnote-7) Most of the people sinned with corporealization.

On the assumption that both types of sin were present at this event and that we are dealing at the moment with *mitzvot* connected to the first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before Me," why does Moshe emphasize specifically the matter of making a graven image? The simple answer is that Moshe is relating to the sin involving the Golden Calf at the second stage, at which he no longer relates to matters of idol worship, but rather to the issue of corporealization and incorrect or inappropriate modes of serving God.

Moreover, it should be noted that the insertion of the story of the Golden Calf precisely at this point is an expression of Moshe's love for the people of Israel. Moshe could have described the people of Israel as idolaters, but he chose not to do so; he decided to mention the sin of the Golden Calf as a problem of corporealization. According to Moshe's account, it turns out that the people of Israel never violated the prohibition of idol worship, but only the prohibition of corporealization. Moshe could have severely rebuked Israel, but he chose a more gentle approach out of his love for his people.

**The Appeasement in the Aftermath of the Sin of the Golden Calf**

After the atonement for the sin of the Golden Calf, Moshe once again ascends Mount Sinai and receives the second set of tablets. This is the appeasement and renewal of the covenant. At first glance, the story appears to be a simple one, but the verses in fact pose a serious exegetical challenge.

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| *Shemot* 34 | *Devarim* 10 |
| 1. And the Lord said unto Moshe, “Hew yourself two tables of stone like unto the first; and I will write upon the tables the words that were on the first tables, which you did break.  2. And be ready by the morning, and come up in the morning unto mount Sinai, and present yourself there to Me on the top of the mount.  3. And no man shall come up with you, neither let any man be seen throughout all the mount; neither let the flocks or herds feed before that mount.”  4. And he hewed two tables of stone like unto the first; and Moshe rose up early in the morning, and went up unto mount Sinai, as the Lord had commanded him, and took in his hand two tables of stone. | 1. At that time the Lord said unto me, “Hew yourself two tables of stone like unto the first, and come up unto Me into the mount; **and make yourself an ark of wood.**  2. And I will write on the tables the words that were on the first tables which you did break, **and you shall put them in the ark.**”  3. **So I made an ark of acacia-wood,** and hewed two tables of stone like unto the first, and went up into the mount, having the two tables in my hand.  4. And He wrote on the tables according to the first writing, the ten words, which the Lord spoke unto you in the mount out of the midst of the fire in the day of the assembly; and the Lord gave them unto me. |

The continuation of the verses in the book of *Devarim* describe Moshe's second descent from the mountain:

And I turned and came down from the mount and put the tablets in the ark which I had made; and there they are, as the Lord commanded me. (*Devarim* 10:5)

This is very surprising, as the account in the book of *Devarim* skips the entire story of Moshe in the cleft of the rock and the Thirteen Attributes of God's mercy that is found in the book of *Shemot*. One of the greatest episodes of Divine revelation to man is completely omitted from the account!

**The Ark of Wood or an Ark of Gold?**

Before we deal with the absence of the story of Moshe in the cleft of the rock, let us first focus on a serious exegetical question arising from these verses concerning the wooden ark. In the book of *Devarim*,it is mentioned for the first time that Moshe put the tablets into an ark of acacia-wood. According to Rashi, the ark described here is **not the Ark of the Testimony** that was made of gold and upon which stood the *keruvim* in the *Mishkan*. According to this view, it is illogical to say that we are dealing here with the Ark of the Testimony, because the people were commanded to build that only after Yom Kippur! Rashi proposes that there were two arks, the ark of the Testimony and the ark mentioned here. Later, when the tablets were transferred to the Ark of the Testimony, the purpose of the wooden ark would be to go out with Israel to war.

The Ibn Ezra, however, maintains that we are dealing here with **the same ark.** In his view, the command to build the Ark of the Testimony was given before the place in which it is described in the Torah. But there is a difficulty with the Ibn Ezra's position: How can the Ark of the Testimony with the *keruvim* be described as an ark of wood?

The Ramban, and in his wake the Abravanel, present an intermediate position. In their view, we are dealing with **a temporary ark,** to be used until the time that Israel is commanded to fashion an ark of gold. One of the Abravanel's proofs is that it is illogical that the Torah would refer to the Ark of the Testimony throughout the Torah as "**the** ark," if indeed there were two arks.[[8]](#footnote-8)

**The Tablets of the Covenant Inside the Ark of Wood**

It may be argued that greater than this exegetical dispute is the literary question of why is it important for us to know that the tablets were placed in the ark. Even beyond that, why is it important for us to know that the tablets were placed in an ark of wood?

If there were two arks, as argued by Rashi, the question arises why the book of *Shemot* describes an ark of gold, whereas in the book of *Devarim* there is an ark of wood. According to the Ibn Ezra, why is the ark described once as being made of gold and a second time as being made of wood?

We can suggest an answer to the literary question based on the general tendency that we proposed earlier, following the approach of Eli Chadad. Moshe wishes to prevent the tablets from becoming a source for the corporealization of God, and it is therefore necessary to hide the second set of tablets in an ark. Moreover, Moshe is concerned that the ark itself will become a symbol of corporealization, and it is therefore presented as an ark of wood. In fact, the *Kuzari* raises a question about the *Mishkan* as something that encourages corporealization, and the *Chaver* answers that the difference lies in what stemmed from a Divine command.[[9]](#footnote-9)

This may also explain why Moshe skips the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy. The book of *Shemot* describes the breaking of the covenant, and it was therefore necessary to renew the covenant. In the book of *Devarim*,there is no breaking of the covenant, and therefore there is also no need for the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy.

**From Be’erot Benei Ya’akan to Mosera and from there to Gudgod**

From an exegetical perspective, everything that was said above may be merely an "introduction" to the truly serious difficulty:

And the children of Israel journeyed from Be'erot Benei Ya'akan to Mosera; there Aharon died, and there he was buried, and Elazar his son ministered in the priest's office in his stead. From thence they journeyed unto Gudgod; and from Gudgod to Yutva, a land of brooks of water. At that time, the Lord separated the tribe of Levi to bear the ark of the covenant of the Lord, to stand before the Lord to minister unto Him, and to bless in His name, unto this day. Therefore, Levi has no portion nor inheritance with his brethren; the Lord is his inheritance, according as the Lord your God spoke unto him. Now I stayed in the mount, as at the first time, forty days and forty nights; and the Lord hearkened unto me that time also; the Lord would not destroy you. And the Lord said unto me, “Arise, go before the people, causing them to set forward, that they may go in and possess the land, which I swore unto their fathers to give unto them.” (*Devarim* 10:6-11)

Starting in verse 6, it would appear that the Torah begins a new story, but verse 10 brings us back to the story of the sin of the Golden Calf, thus joining the intervening verses to our story. What is the function of verses 6-7? In truth, this is only a secondary difficulty. The real difficulty is that what is stated in these verses is incorrect; in the book of *Bamidbar*,the journey is not from Be'erot Ya'akan to Mosera, but from Mosera to B*e*'erot Ya'akan – the opposite of what is reported in the book of *Devarim*!

And they journeyed from Chashmona and pitched in Moserot. And they journeyed from Moserot and pitched in Benei-Ya'akan. (*Bamidbar* 33:30-31)

The Ibn Ezra had so much difficulty with this that he suggested that we are dealing here with entirely different places. All of the *Rishonim* reject his interpretation.

Another difficulty that must be addressed is the account of Aharon's death in Mosera. As we know from the book of *Bamidbar*, Aharon died in Hor Ha-Har, which is eight stations later!

Rashi notes the difficulties and suggests the following explanation:

This is also part of the reproof: This also you did: When Aharon died on Hor Ha-Har at the end of forty years and the clouds of Divine glory departed, you feared war with the king of Arad and you appointed a leader that you might return to Egypt, and you turned backwards eight stages unto Benei Ya'akan and hence to Mosera. There the sons of Levi fought with you, and they slew some of you, and you some of them, until they forced you back on the road along which you had retreated. From there you returned to Gudgod, which is identical with Har Ha-Gidgod. (Rashi, *Devarim* 10:6)

Rashi proposes a difficult and complicated explanation, and no other commentator follows his approach.

First we must pay attention to the question of the context that we raised in the beginning. Why are these matters mentioned in the middle of the story of the sin of the Golden Calf? Many *Rishonim*, as well as modern scholars, maintain that this was stated here in order to teach us that Aharon died **not** because of his role in the sin of the Golden Calf, but for some other reason. This is further supported by the fact that the text describes how Aharon did not forfeit the priesthood.

**The Criticism Levelled Against Aharon**

I wish to propose an interpretation that is entirely different from the one suggested by the aforementioned *Rishonim* and modern scholars. My proposal is rather daring and pioneering and does not appear to have been suggested by anyone before me.

We seem to be dealing here with something similar to what happened to Moshe with the sin of the spies. In his introductory oration to the book of the *Devarim*,Moshe presents himself as one who was punished in the wake of the sin of the spies, despite the fact that in the book of *Bamidbar*, we find that he was punished because of what happened in Mei Meriva. Here it seems that precisely the same thing was done, but this time with Aharon.

If this is true, we can say that the insertion of the matter of the Levites in the next verse also bears significance:

At that time the Lord separated the tribe of Levi to bear the ark of the covenant of the Lord, to stand before the Lord to minister unto Him, and to bless in His name, unto this day. (*Devarim* 10:8)

Since when do the Levites bless in the name of God? It is difficult to say that the Levites mentioned here are in fact the priests, because this would harm their standing. The plain understanding is that an office that had been assigned to the priests alone was expanded into a general Levitical office in the wake of the sin of the Golden Calf.

Based on this, I wish to propose an explanation for the confusion with respect to the place names. We suggest that what appears to be a geographical description is not a geographical description but rather a play on words:

And the children of Israel journeyed from Be'erot Benei Ya'akan to **Mosera**; there Aharon died, and there he was buried, and Elazar his son ministered in the priest's office in his stead. (*Devarim* 10:6)

Mosera is meant in the sense of *musar*, rebuke or punishment. When God punishes Egypt, mention is made of the *musar* of God. An allusion is made here to a punishment meted out to Aharon for the sin of the Golden Calf.

From thence they journeyed unto Gudgod; and from Gudgod to Yutva, **a land of brooks of water.** At that time, the Lord separated the tribe of Levi to bear the ark of the covenant of the Lord, to stand before the Lord to minister unto Him, and to bless in His name, unto this day. (*Devarim* 10:7-8)

Scripture uses a positive description of the place to describe its positive attitude toward the appointment of the Levites. Moshe first describes a *musar*, a punishment for the people of Israel, separation from the source of abundance. But from there it moves on to describe the abundance that will follow the death of Aharon by way of a positive expansion, choosing the entire tribe of Levi to serve in the Holy.

(Translated by David Strauss)

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1. Based upon an oral presentation by Prof. Grossman, transcribed and edited by VBM staff. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In the previous *shiur*, we noted that we will be following the view of the Ibn Ezra, who joined the commandment to believe in God, "I am the Lord your God," to the prohibition of idolatry, "You shall have no other gods before Me" – so that together they constitute the first of the Ten Commandments. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Unless marked otherwise, all references are to the book of *Devarim.* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Named after the Greek god Janus, who had two faces – one in front and the other behind. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Rashi, *Shemot* 32:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See his article in *Megadim* 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Three thousand men is a paltry sum compared to all of Israel in the wilderness, on the assumption that most of the people of Israel (with the exception of the tribe of Levi) sinned with the Golden Calf. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The Abravanel discusses this issue at great length. See his commentary to the book of *Shemuel* to the story of the ark's falling into captivity when it was taken out to battle together with the sons of Eli. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Kuzari* 1:85-87. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)