

Golden Calves, Past & Present

Commentary to Parshat Ki Tisa

By HaRav Ariel Bar Tzadok.
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The story of the Golden Calf is really a hard one to swallow at face value. The entire nation of three million people stood at Mt. Sinai and saw with their own eyes the entire unraveling of the fabric of space/time as we know it, and witnessed a phenomenon that must have been so deeply etched into their individual and collective memories that it changed them forever. How could they hear the actual Voice of G-d speaking to them, having it change them down to the genetic level, and then only six weeks later create a Golden Calf? How could the nation, three million strong, still standing at the foot of Sinai, still daily witnessing it smoke and rumble forget all so quickly what they had all experienced?



Indeed, this is not what happened. The people did not forget anything. The subtle evil of the sin of the Golden Calf was not that the nation intended to abandon G-d and reject what they received at Sinai. No, the Golden Calf was not such an overt attack on holiness; it was very subtle, with a subtleness lost to most of us today. Because we fail to recognize the subtle nature of what really happened, we have again been seduced by many modern Golden Calves.

Our Sages have taught us some very interesting details about this episode. Apparently, it was not the entire Jewish people that instigated this event, rather it was one small but influential group called the Erev Rav (mixed multitude). They did not intend to turn the people away from their G-d, per se; rather they intended to reinvent G-d for them. This was the devious plot; by redefining G-d, they would be able to redirect the Jewish people away from their original calling, and shift the people in another direction, bringing them under an entirely different spiritual influence.

The Erev Rav did this by using deceit. They never called upon Aharon and the Jewish nation to worship a false idol made of gold. They never called on the people to re-adopt Egyptian practices. If they had tried either of these they would have been killed instantly. What the Erev Rav did was ever more so

subtle and poisonous. They attacked the minds of the people and took advantage of their lack of spiritual maturity and sophistication.

After Moshe Rabbeynu failed to return when they expected him to do so, the Erev Rav raised the doubt that possibly he would not return at all, possibly because he had somehow offended the Deity and was no more. If this were the case, how could the people therefore follow his sublime and rather strange message of worshipping a faceless G-d? Such a concept was unheard of in the ancient world. The Erev Rav spoke to Aharon and the people; they did not call for the making of an idol, rather they demanded the making of a god with a face, one with a face they had all heard of, possibly knowing well. This G-d is Elokim, the one who created the Heavens and the Earth.

Now, do we not daily proclaim that YKVK, G-d of Sinai and Torah is Elokim? If so, then what is the problem here? To create an image of Elokim would be the same as having YKVK before the people, would it not? What then would be the problem? The solution the Erev Rav offered to the issue of the missing Moses was well thought out. They wanted to replace the supernatural Deity with a natural one, and by doing so, limit the power of how G-d manifests Himself here on Earth. This lesson is not so apparently clear with a mere perusal of the text. We should learn from this that most plots of devious deception are very well thought out, subtle and meant to confuse and deceive.

At the time of Sinai, the peoples of the world were, to a point, spiritually sophisticated. The general consensus was that there was a single Deity who was in charge of all things. This entity, in charge of the pantheon of gods, was called Elokim. Pharaoh even acknowledges Him in his conflict with Moses. What was so shocking about Moshe Rabbeynu's message was that there is a G-d named YKVK who is actually above the Divine "face" of Elokim. This was a concept that the common people both Israelite and Gentile had a real hard time comprehending. They could not comprehend, like we do today, that YKVK is Elokim.

In ancient times everyone believed that there was a Higher Power that controlled the universe. While we refer to that power as Elokim, the ancients referred to it as Nature. They believed that there was a natural order to things and that the natural order was supreme, with nothing greater than it. This concept is also found in Torah in that the Hebrew name Elokim shares the same numerical value with the Hebrew word for Nature, HaTeva. Not for naught does Genesis teach that in the beginning Elokim created the Heavens and the Earth. Elokim is the G-d of creation and thus the Lord and Master of Nature. How can there possibly be any power higher than this?

Then along comes Moshe Rabbeynu and proclaims that there is this invisible, faceless G-d who not only controls Nature but can bend it to His Will arbitrarily, without any concern for the limitations set by natural law. This radical concept flew in the faces of the Egyptians and sounded to them to be pure madness. As we know, the Egyptians and the rest of the world were rudely awakened. In spite of what happened then most of us today do not realize the significance that this revelation had in the ancient world. In order for us to grasp the profundity of the revelation of the existence of this "face" of G-d known as YKVK we must delve into ancient religious beliefs.

In ancient times, the science of astrology ruled the day. The ancients, since the days before the flood were experts in knowing the courses of the stars and their influences upon Earth. The ancients knew that every two thousand years the Earth passes through the influence of one of the astrological signs. Recently, we have entered into the astrological epoch of the sign Aquarius, the water bearer. This is the famous “dawning of the age of Aquarius” made famous by a song of that name back in the 1960’s. It is also a sign of the coming of Mashiah, who bares the “waters of Torah.”

Prior to this, for the previous two thousand years, the sign of Pisces the fish was in ascendant. During this time the Christian Church was the most dominant force on Earth. The original sign of Christendom before they adopted the cross was the sign of the fish. The Greek word for fish, Ichthus, had special meaning to the early Christians. Prior to the age of Pisces, the astrological sign of Aries the Ram was in ascent. The period of the Patriarchs, the generations of slavery in Egypt, Moses, the ten plagues and the Exodus all occurred under this sign. What is unknown to many is that while the sign of Aries is today a ram, in those days, the sign was that of a calf, sheep or ram.

The exodus from Egypt took place under the dominant astrological influence of Aries, represented by the sign of a ram, calf or sheep. Pharaoh and the ancient wise men all knew the forces of astrology. They were convinced that these powers were set in place by the Creator and that their influence was unmovable and unshakable. Then along came Moses and revealed that there is a power above the astrological influences and that this power, YKVK, could actually override the astrological influences that control the natural world. Pharaoh could not grasp this concept, but as we know, he was eventually forced to, due to the events that YKVK performed to introduce Himself to human history.

When Moses told Pharaoh that the children of Israel were going out to the wilderness to sacrifice sheep and goats, this angered Pharaoh and Egypt immensely. It was, as if Moses was saying that Israel was sacrificing the gods of Egypt. This was a pretty gutsy thing for Moses to do. Later when Israel sacrificed the Paschal lamb the Egyptians were driven out of their minds with rage, but of course, there was not much they could do against the power of YKVK. Now, we again visit the image of the calf, here at Mt. Sinai with the Golden Calf.

When Moses failed to reappear from on top of the mountain, the Erev Rav (mixed multitude) not being people of pure faith demanded that the people return to the safe and secure knowledge of having a visible god with which they could relate. They therefore chose the logical symbol of the natural power of that present epoch, the astrological symbol of Aries, which in those days was a calf. In their eyes this was not a denial of YKVK but rather a token of respect for YKVK’s handiwork. At least, this is what they proclaimed. They never intended to replace YKVK with a foreign god, but rather they sought to change what YKVK meant and to re-invent Him as being subject to the universe that He created instead of being above it and outside it. This, in essence was the exact same mistake made by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden by choosing knowledge over life. Adam, Eve and the Erev Rav chose the tangible over the intangible, the visible over the invisible. By doing this they all brought death to the world.

When we lock G-d up in a box and say that He only does this and His Torah only means that, we have in essence exchanged the Tree of Life for the Tree of Knowledge. We proclaim our knowledge superior to the mysterious and unfathomable workings of the Invisible Creator. This is spiritual arrogance at its heights. This was the sin of Pharaoh and Egypt; this was the sin of the Erev Rav. The sin of the Erev Rav was ever so subtle, to disconnect the Israelite people from YKVK and thus return them into a state of psychological mental slavery.

When the Erev Rav succeeded in their plan, all of Israel became mental and psychically contaminated. Since the days of Eden, G-d has been directing human history to bring mankind to the point that Israel could serve as His agents to teach the world the truth about YKVK and our true power of liberation from the crushing forces of natural law. YKVK means that we can rise above fate, that we can rise above destiny, that we can set a path before us that is only charted by our faith and the measure of our minds. When the Golden Calf was built, all of this was lost. The people chose to remain in mental slavery rather than maintain liberation. This is why YKVK initially desired to wipe out the entire nation and rebuild it from scratch starting with Moses. If not for the intervention of Moshe Rabbeynu Israel would not have survived as a people.

According to the Torah of the Kabbalah, the results of the sin of the Golden Calf were and still are devastating. Originally Moses was meant to immediately become the Mashiah. The Torah brought down from Sinai originally emanated from the Tree of Life. As such the mitzvot it contained were designed for purified souls. There were no laws of forbidden and permitted and the like, because the souls of the people were being prepared to literally raise above all physical limitations. If not for the sin of the Golden Calf, we would have all been transformed and entered immediately into the Messianic era. The entire course of world history would have been radically different from what it has been. Alas, all this was taken away from us because of a single error. The sin of the Golden Calf enslaved us again, this time in a spiritual Egypt. We have yet to be redeemed from this one.

The sin of the Golden Calf was a subtle mental shift from the unknown to the known, from the unfamiliar to the familiar and from the insecurity of the abstract to the surety of the concrete. In other words because the people sought security in physical things and were not willing to put their absolute faith in Heaven, therefore, they lost everything and certainly did not obtain the security they sought so much. As it was then, so is it today.

Today we still have many Golden Calves. Each time we put our faith into something that we believe will provide for us security and reassurances that life will proceed normally, steadily and without too much turmoil, that is our personal Golden Calf. Understand why the people did what they did and you will see that we today are no different. We today still think the same way they did. We are still making the same mistake that they did. We share the same fears and lack of faith. And we continue to ask why Mashiah has not yet come.

The Erev Rav (mixed multitude) of old is also spiritually still among us. In ancient times, they were a separate people, clearly identifiable. Today, however, the Erev Rav is not so physically discernable.

Today the Erev Rav is a spiritual element. It is identified as a type or group of souls whose lack of true faith only breeds sorrow and trouble for the Jewish people. The Zohar (1, 25a) goes so far to tell us that the Erev Rav souls have incarnated into the Jewish people and rise to serve as leaders in both the religious and secular communities.

Whenever a religious leader speaks out against the study of the secrets of Torah, the Zohar identifies such a Rabbi as being the Erev Rav. Whenever a religious leader places emphasis on the physical appearances of religious observance and not its inner core, the Zohar identifies such a Rabbi as being the Erev Rav. Whenever a religious leader aggrandizes himself and his followers, giving off an air of superiority and aloofness, the Zohar identifies such a Rabbi as being the Erev Rav. When a religious leader runs after money and power instead of after humility, the Zohar identifies such a Rabbi as being the Erev Rav. When we look around at the problems facing the Jewish religious communities worldwide, we can clearly see that many of our problems are due to many of our so-called leaders being secret and subtle members of the Erev Rav. And we wonder why Mashiah has not yet come.

In the days of Moses, the problem of the Golden Calf was settled in dramatic manner. The Levites went throughout the camp and simply removed everyone who was overtly and flagrantly guilty of such a disgusting compromise. Unfortunately, this cannot be a solution for today. Even if we had a group of righteous and zealous Levites willing to purge the nation of all modern day worshippers of our many Golden Calves, after they finished their job of cleansing, who would be left to serve Heaven and to rebuild the nation?

Our situation today is as serious as it was back then. The story of the Golden Calf is not a lesson in history; it is a revelation about today and a warning for our personal future.

We have to very much seek a solution to the Golden Calves among us today. We have to work diligently to recognize and then identify the Erev Rav amongst us and work as hard as we can to neutralize their ever so subtle influences that are destroying the Jewish religious communities worldwide. I do not need to elaborate further how to indentify guilty members. We each have our own Erev Rav in our individual communities. It is up to us, each one of us must rise up like the Levites of old and root out the spirit of the Erev Rav from within ourselves and then from our spheres of influence.

Only a return to the pure and simple faith of Sinai can restore us now. Anyone who keeps building their security and sense of self worth based on things of this world are clearly under the spell of the Erev Rav. You cannot continue to worship your modern Golden Calves and still think you are worshipping HaShem. It did not work in the days of Sinai and it will not work today. Change your attitudes and cleanse yourselves from the Erev Rav within you. Accomplish this and you will then find within yourself the zeal of the Levite to eradicate the Erev Rav and the Golden Calves they embrace, wherever they are to be found. In this way, indeed, we can help bring Mashiah.