



The Sin of the Golden Calf in Kabbalah

Parashat Ki Tisa

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Introduction

We are all familiar with the sin of the golden calf. Yet, what boggles the mind is how could such a grievous sin have occurred? After all, the people were standing at the foot of Mt. Sinai, days before they heard G-d Himself speak to them, days before that they experienced the parting of the Sea. They experienced all the plagues in Egypt and the Exodus. How, in just forty days, after seeing the power of the Divine might, could they ask that an idol be built for them? Rabbis have answered this question in various ways throughout the centuries. The holy Mekubalim have their answer, and their answer reveals the secrets underlying this horrible event.

As is his way, Rabbi Haim Vital condenses in few words that which he received from his teacher the Ari'zal. Yet, in these few words we will find mountains and valleys of meaning and depth. The sin of the golden calf is not what it appears to be, as we will now discuss. This following text is from Rabbi Haim's work, Sefer Likutei Torah.

Sefer Likutei Torah (Vilna 68b)

Text

"The secret of the Calf that was made of gold in the image of a bull.

Commentary

The Ari'zal is here telling us that the image of the infant calf is the same as the adult bull. This was the image used in the great sin. Yet, as we shall see, the image of the Bull is not an idolatrous image, it is actually carved into the Throne of Glory as one of the four Faces of the holy Merkava (Divine Chariot), prophetically described in Ezekiel 1. In order to understand this topic we must diverge for a moment in order to understand a small bit about the teachings of astrology and the zodiac.

During the period of the Exodus, the astrological sign dominating the epoch was Aries the ram. This is why a lamb, related to the ram was the Paschal sacrifice. This mazal



dominated events for 2,000 years, from about the time of Avraham until the time of the destruction of the Second Temple. This was a time of severe judgement, for Aries is ruled by the planet Mars, who rules over blood.

One point is made very clear by our holy Rabbis - it was the Erev Rav (the mixed multitude who went out of Egypt with Moshe) who instigated the sin of the golden calf. As alleged "former" idolaters, the Erev Rav knew the secret of these astrological epochs. The Erev Rav were not yet cleansed of their idolatrous past. They had not yet elevated to the level of faith that was held by the Benei Yisrael. It was the Erev Rav who thus approached Aharon and demanded from him an "image."

However, why the image of the calf/bull? The answer is that because this too was an astrological sign, not of the present epoch, but of the previous one. The epoch of Taurus the bull is what preceded the epoch of Aries. According to the astrologers, it was during the epoch of Taurus that Adam first walked the earth. The Erev Rav therefore considered this to be an auspicious sign. Thus, when they chose an image that they wished to represent G-d, they took the image that they thought was the highest and most powerful image. They could not conceive that G-d was above images and astrology. Therefore, they brought down wrath upon all Israel.

Text

Know that [this sin] blemished the Supernal Mother, as recorded in the Zohar [where it says], "they sinned against the Mother." Therefore, they made the image of the bull, which is the secret of Imma.

Commentary

An image is a mental construct where the mind attempts to grasp and give form to a non-physical reality. Therefore, images are all created in the intellect using the power of thought. The intellectual/thinking function of mind corresponds to the sefirat Binah, which corresponds to the left lobe of the brain and rational, analytical thinking.

When constructs of the mind are incorrect, this blemishes the sefirotic source of Mind, which is the sefirat Binah. The sefirotic Face of Binah is called Imma Ila'ah (the Supernal Mother). Therefore, when the Erev Rav made a mistake of the intellect, attempting to portray abstract G-d in a concrete form, this blemished the power and function of Mind/Binah/Imma above.

Text

For the lion is Abba, the bull is Imma, the man is Z.A., and the eagle is Nok, as is known.



Commentary

Here we see how the “images” of the Merkava correspond to the holy sefirot. The first astrological epoch was Taurus, which corresponds to the bull and the sefirat Binah. This teaches us that the universe was created to contain within it the element of intelligence, thus implying the presence of a Creator, one who can be perceived and experienced through thinking and contemplation. The image of the man (Adam) is obviously Z.A. because the holy Name corresponding to Z.A. is MAH, which is numerically 45, the same value as Adam (man). Rabbi Haim says these correlations are “as is known” because this is the pattern outlined in the Zohar and by most other Mekubalim. A fuller discussion of the merkava and its relationship to the camps of Israel is discussed in Parashat Bamidbar.

Text

However, their mistake was that they knew that Imma [is the one] who gives Mohin and life to Z.A. and that this was the place which Moshe grasped.

Commentary

As it is above, so it is below. The sefirotic Face of Z.A., which radiates and gives light and life to Nok/Malkhut, receives what to give Nok from the Face above Him, which is Imma/Binah. The reception of the supernal lights into Z.A. act as His “brains” (mohin), giving Z.A. the ability to interact with Nok and to provide for Her. Without the influx from Abba (Hokhma) and Imma (Binah), Z.A. lies dormant or asleep. This happens every time that Nok does not offer up Her MahN (mayim nokbin).

If mankind sins, then no MahN ascends, thus the power of Z.A. lies dormant, thus the earth suffers from lack of abundance. This sublime level of sefirotic knowledge was widely known in those days. Even the Erev Rav knew of this teaching, although they lacked sufficient holiness to understand it correctly. It is said that this is what Moshe grasped. This means that the power in Moshe’s soul was enough to raise up MahN to cause there to be a union among the sefirot. Moshe, in essence, kept Z.A. aroused and awake.

Text

They [also] knew that when they would sin the inner Mohin would be taken away from Z.A.

Commentary

The sefirot align with one another dependent upon the behavior of mankind. When we ascend MahN then Z.A. aligns with Nok to receive it. Z.A. then raises the MahN and Imma and Abba align with Him to receive it. In return, MahD (masculine waters) returns down the same passage, all in alignment. When, however, human activity, feelings or thoughts do not manifest righteousness, and holiness, then they are cut off from their



sefirotic source. As such the sefirotic “pipe-line” is ruptured. No Divine radiance can then flow below. The Erev Rav knew all too well their own short comings and knew that they could never experience the Divine radiance unless they completely repented of their sins, which they were unwilling to do. They thus sought an alternative.

Text

Therefore, they sought to establish a more consistent presence of the Mohin in Z.A. in the lower world. [This is] the Name Elokim.

Commentary

Rather than having to struggle to intermittently receive the full Divine radiance of the Name YKVK, the Erev Rav were willing to accept a lower level of Divine manifestation, one that would be easier for them to control and that would not require of them any great changes of behavior. This level is called “katnut” (smallness) and is represented by the Name Elokim.

This level of Divine manifestation was already in the world, prior to the Exodus, and was known by all, even to Pharaoh. The problem herein is that the entire purpose of the exodus and the giving of the Torah on Sinai, indeed the entire purpose of creation was to eventually manifest the level of Divine manifestation called “gadlut” (greatness or spiritual adulthood), represented by the Name YKVK. Granted, at this higher level of Divine manifestation, human responsibility is greater, nonetheless so are the rewards. The rewards being the full and final redemption of all mankind and the restoration of our world into the greater spiritual scheme. In essence, the Erev Rav, by making the golden calf were thwarting the entire purpose of creation.

Text

[Thus did they say] “Rise up and make for us Elokim (translated as “a god”).”

Commentary

Herein lies the sin of the golden calf and answers our initial questions as to how such a sin could be performed after witnessing the Hand of G-d perform so many miracles. The people were not asking that an idol be made for them. They knew that the idols of Egypt were worthless. Yet, they also knew that the level of YKVK might be something they could not maintain. Thus, rather than elevate themselves to merit the higher attainment, they were willing to compromise and accept a lower level of Divine manifestation so that they would not have to elevate themselves.

This lack of desire for growth is the inverse and opposite of the purpose of creation. In essence, the sin of the golden calf was not one worshipping some stupid idol; it was idol worship of the worst degree. The idol being worshipped was not the calf; it was what the



calf represented. The calf represented the forces of astrology, the forces of merciless destiny. The calf represented the lowest levels of how G-d maintains His universe without the addition of Divine mercy or intervention. The calf represented a breach of the sefirotic unity; a separation of Divine mercy (YKVK) from Divine justice (Elokim).

As such the Erev Rav were telling G-d to leave them alone and let them take care of themselves, that they would live in accordance to natural law and that they would have no need for the involvement of the Creator. If this were indeed actualized, Israel would never have been redeemed from Egypt. Thus, the sin of the golden calf shared the brazen spirit of rebellion found earlier in the generation of the Tower of Babel.

The Erev Rav were no stupid fools looking towards an Egyptian idol because Moshe had disappeared. Rather, they took advantage of Moshe's time on the Mount to attempt to manipulate the Divine flow, to lessen it, so that they could continue and succeed in their sinful ways. In our many sins, nothing has changed through the centuries. The Erev Rav continues to this day to perpetuate the same crimes against G-d and the Jewish people.

Text

Being that they [thus] blemished Z.A., Moshe needed to radiate the 13 rectifications from Arikh Anpin in order for the Mohin to return within Z.A.

Commentary

When such a breach of sefirotic unity occurs, where Tiferet/YKVK is ripped away from Malkhut/Elokim, the only recourse of repair is by the intervention of the highest sefirah Keter, referred to as Arikh Anpin (the Long, Full Face of G-d). Keter is the initial passageway through which the Divine radiance flows into the vessels of the sefirot from the unknowable Ayn Sof (the Nothing). Keter is the raw essence of life, sustenance, and mercy. It is the purest form of G-d's light manifest in creation.

When mercy (YKVK, G-d's greater revelation) and severity (Elokim, G-d's lesser revelation) are knocked out of sync, because of the sins of mankind, there are only two way for the balance to be restored. Either balance will be restored through a great show of severity or through a great show of mercy. G-d could have destroyed all the people at that time, and possibly destroyed the entire world. Divine severity is very hard to please and a lot is required.

Divine mercy, on the other hand, is rather high and sublime and very difficult to grasp. Thus, Moshe balanced the two. He called for the immediate deaths of those involved with the golden calf to appease to forces of severity and judgement. He then went back to G-d and offered himself in order to supplicate the highest level of Divine radiance, the ultimate, altruistic mercies of Keter.



Text

Therefore, the 13 attributes were recited here.

Commentary

In the text, immediately following the sin of the golden calf we have the revelation of the 13 attributes of mercy. This is the recitation of the verses, "HaShem, HaShem, (1) G-d [who is], (2) merciful and (3) gracious, (4&5) slow to anger, and (6) abounding in kindness and (7) truth. (8) He preserves kindness (9) for thousands [of generations], (10) bearing [forgiving] iniquity, (11) transgression and (12) sin. (13) He clears [acquits the penitent]." (Ex. 34:6-7).

This expression of G-d's mercy is an expression of G-d's "full Face" Arikh Anpin. So sublime is this level that not even Moshe was able to perceive it all. Thus, G-d told him "no man can see me and live." For if a man were to perceive the fullness of G-d's Divine radiance in the world, he would evolve and ascend and no longer be a man. G-d told Moshe that He would 'cover his eyes" and that Moshe would see the "Back" but not the "Front." The "Back" side of the sefirat Keter is the level of Da'at, which is not a sefirah by itself. It is only the outer (or backside) manifestation of Keter. Moshe's soul emanated from the Da'at, so it was most auspicious and proper for him to achieve this level of Divine revelation.

Text

This is the secret [meaning] of "My Face shall go" meaning that the Face of anger, which is the Name Elokim, shall go . . .

Commentary

The context of this verse is that after the sin of the golden calf, HaShem said that His Presence (lit. His Face) would not travel within the Jewish camp. Rather His angel would guide them. In other words, this was a lowering of the level of Divine radiance that would guide the Jewish people in the wilderness. Moshe pleaded that this would not be the case. Moshe pleaded with HaShem that indeed, they would merit being guided by that level of Divine manifestation known as "G-d's Presence (i.e., the Face of mercy YKVK) and not merely by an angel (who would only represent the force of severity Elokim). The full verse being referred to reads, "He [HaShem] said, "My Presence [Face] will go and provide you rest." (Ex. 33:14). The Ari'zal reads the verse, "My Face shall go" to mean that the lower Face of Elokim will go away.

Text

. . . and shall come within Z.A. the YKVK's of spiritual adulthood.



Commentary

Once the Face of Elokim shall go, and with it Divine wrath, then Z.A. (the spiritual counterpart of Israel above) can be nourished by the power of the Name YKVK, which is the true providence that G-d wishes revealed. Thus, the level of Divine manifestation represented by the Name YKVK is called "gadlut" or spiritual adulthood.

Text

[Then] "I will provide you rest."

Commentary

It is only being under the influence of the Name YKVK that the Jewish people have any form of true rest. For there is no true rest other than when one is in one's proper place. The proper (psychological/spiritual) place for the Jewish people is to be under the influence of the holy Name YKVK, which entails G-d's personal daily interaction with the Jewish people. This entails the manifestation of Divine intervention and the revelation of Divine mercy. All this existed until the sins of the Jewish people caused the destruction of the First Temple built by Shlomo HaMelekh. When the First Temple was destroyed and the Ark of the Covenant hidden (to this day), the Jewish people again fell victim to the dominance of the Erev Rav, only this time we did not have Moshe Rabbeynu to supplicate for us. Since then the influence of YKVK has been concealed and only the "katnut" (smallness) of Elokim (Divine severity/natural law) is dominant. This will only be rectified with the coming of Mashiah.

Until then, the only way to draw down a semblance of the radiance of the Keter is by our observance of Torah and mitzvot. With every mitzvah that we perform we generate greater light that eventually will break the strangle hold of the Erev Rav. There are many different types of "golden calves" today. We must be extra cautious to guard our minds from modern day idolatries.

Shabat Shalom.