

This Week's Parshah - Parshas Ki Sisa

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Yehudis *bas* Yosef *a''h*

a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

The Thin Line

An exposition of the mystifying event known as the “Cheit Ha’eigel” – Sin of the Golden Calf

We have previously discussed the unique property of the *Aron Hakodesh* (Holy Ark), which was “beyond the realm of measurement”; that is, it did not take up any physical space within the *Kodesh Hakadashim* – the Holy of Holies, the chamber wherein it resided. While it quite difficult for us to conceptualize, additional insight into this phenomenon may actually be gleaned by examining a central theme of this week’s *parshah* – the episode of the *Cheit Ha’eigel*.

An Image Problem

The great Torah teachers throughout the generations have been perplexed by this seemingly inexplicable event. How could a nation – who had witnessed the miracles of the Exodus, and were standing by the very mountain where they beheld Hashem’s Presence and heard Him prohibit the practice of idolatry – turn around, fashion a golden calf, and proclaim “This took us out of Egypt”?!

Indeed, a significant body of commentators relate that, despite appearances, the deed was actually bereft of idolatrous intent. To provide a thorough and complete explanation of exactly what the act *did* entail is way beyond the scope of this article. For our immediate purposes, we make brief mention here of one approach, advanced by the Kuzari (*I:27*) and R’ Yehonasan Eibenschutz (*Tiferes Yehonasan*). They contend that, while a grievous error, the idea of the Golden Calf *seemed* to have had precedent, and from an authorized source. At first glance, the notion is not so far off from the *Keruvim* on the *Aron Kodesh* – the angelic, golden figurines which adorned the cover of this sacred vessel.

It is worth noting further where these *Keruvim* were housed. Consider the following Mishnah, which discusses the proper directional alignment for prayer. The Mishnah states (*Berachos 4:5*):

הַיָּהוָה רוֹכֵב עַל הַתְּמוּרָה, גֵּרָד. וְאִם אֵינוֹ יָכוֹל לִירֵד, יִתְּזֵיר אֶת פְּנָיו, וְאִם אֵינוֹ יָכוֹל לְהִתְזַיֵּר אֶת פְּנָיו, יִכְּוֶן אֶת לְבוֹ קִנְיָד בֵּית קִדְשׁ הַקְּדוֹשִׁים.

“If someone was riding a donkey (when the time for prayer arrives), he should (stop and) descend (to pray). If he is unable to descend, he should (at least) turn his face (towards the direction soon to be mentioned). If he is unable (even) to turn his face, he should (at least) direct his heart towards the *Kodesh Hakadashim*.”

The *Kodesh Hakadashim* effectively serves as the Gates to Heaven, as all Yisrael directs their prayers towards this hallowed location. It is appropriately considered the most sacred area in the world – the “Holy of Holies”. And what is placed right in the midst of this holiest of places, to which only the High Priest may access, on the holiest day of the year? What is contained directly behind the partition, sitting directly in the line of the prayers of all Yisrael? Two molten, golden images.

And so, the question practically begs itself: How, exactly, is this arrangement sanctioned? Doesn't the Torah repeatedly condemn any suggestion of or resemblance to idolatry? Doesn't it explicitly forbid the crafting and keeping of such images, even where no express idolatry is involved; as the verse states (*Shemos 20:20*): "Do not make... images of silver, or images of gold..."!

To the Letter

Some commentators contend, in fact, that the fashioning of the *Keruvim* should, inherently, fall within the purview of the aforementioned prohibition. They explain this is one other example of those unique *halachic* instances wherein the Torah itself inserts an exception to an otherwise binding restriction (known in Talmudic terminology as "*hutar michlalo*"). A sister-in-law is included in the Torah's list of illicit marriages (i.e., one may not wed a woman who was formerly married to his brother). The exception arises in the case of levirate marriage ("*yibum*"); where the brother died childless, the surviving brother is then *supposed* to marry the widow, to produce offspring to uphold the name of the deceased. Similarly, crafting molten images is normally proscribed, yet it is a *mitzvah* to fashion the *Keruvim* for the *Aron* and place them in the *Kodesh Hakadashim* (*D'rashos Mahari Mintz, referenced in K'motzei Shalal Rav, parshas Terumah*).

What emerges from this idea is the imperative to simply follow instructions. Someone fashioning the *Keruvim* may be moved to make them out of silver instead of gold, or to make four instead of two. But if he does so, explains Rashi (*Shemos, ibid.*), he immediately incurs a violation of the prohibition against images. If he follows the Torah's guidelines, he performs a great *mitzvah*; if he deviates based on his own predilections, he is rendered a transgressor. (*Cf. Meshech Chochmah, Shemos 37:1*).

The above discussion may provide us with at least some minimal insight regarding the *Cheit Ha'eigel*. As noted, their act was not some wanton, random frenzy to suddenly embrace idolatry. Rather, the deed was intended as Divine Service, resembling, in spirit, the idea of the *Keruvim*. However, they were missing a key element; as the Beis Halevi explains, they acted from their own initiative, without a command from Hashem. Their intentions may have been pristine, but in an area such as this, one walks a very thin line. A slight deviation from Divine Guidance may mean the difference between a meritorious deed and a grievous misstep.

R' Ya'akov Kamenetsky explains (*Emes L'Ya'akov, Shemos 20:20*) that this could be the lesson of the *Aron's* wondrous feature. This vessel, containing the *Keruvim*, was not detectable, as far as normative measurement is concerned. This is a phenomenon which finite, human comprehension can not fully grasp. But this was specifically the Torah's intent: to highlight the imperative of dedicating our minds and hearts solely to Hashem's Word. Reliance on one's own (limited) intellect to fully unravel the secret of the *Keruvim* is a futile and even dangerous exercise; as we have seen, those who thought along these lines were led astray. In this and all areas, the guiding principle should not be our personal conceptions, but what Hashem Himself has prescribed.