

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Sheina Leah *bas* Alter Binyomin a”h
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

A Cow for a Calf

PARSHAS KI SISA 5777

During the time-period corresponding (basically) to the month of Adar, four special sections are appended to the weekly Torah reading. The Mishnah lays out the order (*Megillah 3:4*):

ראש חודש אדר שחל להיות בשבת, קורין בפרשת שקלים... בשנייה זכור, בשלישית פרה... ברביעית החדש...

“When Rosh Chodesh Adar falls out on Shabbos, we read the section of ‘*Shekalim*’ (featuring the giving of the half-shekel coin [in addition to the regular *parshah*])... On the second Shabbos, (we add the section of) ‘*Zachor*’ (the commandment to remember the imperative of destroying Amalek)... On the third – ‘*Parah*’ (section involving the *Parah Adumah* [Red Heifer])... On the fourth – ‘*Hachodesh*’ (section involving the New Moon)...”

Difficult to Understand Why It’s Difficult to Understand

This week, in any event, the regular *parshah* of Ki Sisa is read; in addition, as outlined above, it is on this Shabbos that we also read the section about the *Parah Adumah*, the Red Heifer whose ashes are utilized to purify those rendered ritually defiled (through contact with a corpse).

Interestingly enough, there is actually a fairly firm connection between these two readings. One of the main topics discussed in this week’s *parshah* is the tragic episode involving the *Cheit Ha’eigel* – the Sin of the Golden Calf. The Medrash Tanchuma teaches that the *Parah Adumah* actually serves to atone for this sin: “Let the mother (the cow) come and clean up that which her child (the calf) has soiled.”

Chazal’s assertion, however, seems to contradict another well-known facet of the *Parah Adumah*. Of all *mitzvos*, it is this one that the Torah singles out to be characterized as a “*chok*,” that is, a Heavenly **decree** whose underlying reason is not discernable to mortal man. According to another *medrash* (*Bamidbar Rabbah 19:3*), even Shlomoh Hamelech, wisest of all men, was incapable of fathoming this mitzvah. He went through all the *mitzvos* of the Torah, uncovering the foundations of each one, until he arrived at the section of *Parah Adumah*. Stymied by its secrets, he was forced to declare: אֶמְרָתִי אֶחְפָּמָה וְהִיא רְחוּקָה מִמֶּנִּי – “I had said, I would master wisdom; but it (i.e., *Parah Adumah*) proved too elusive for me” (*Koheles 7:23*).

The issue appears to be – in light of the Tanchuma’s teaching – that this mitzvah doesn’t seem so difficult after all. In fact, it appears quite logical: Klal Yisrael sinned with the Golden **Calf**, and the Red **Cow**, the “mother,” provides atonement on behalf of its “child.” Where is the difficulty?

In a beautiful exposition, the Beis Halevi (*parshas Ki Sisa*) elucidates the matter. In so doing, he provides much valuable insight into the weighty and profound episode of the Golden Calf itself.

Outsmarting Oneself

What is truly mysterious is the actual perpetration of this deed. How could Yisrael, on their lofty level and in proximity to Har Sinai, steep to such a low as worshipping a molten image?

The Beis Halevi thus clarifies that, in fact, their act did not involve actual idolatry, nor did they entertain any idolatrous thoughts. In fact, their intent was somewhat pristine. What the people really sought, he explains, was to prepare a medium for Hashem's Shechinah to rest among them – something that actually did take place later through the Mishkan (Tabernacle). And while the particulars may be hidden from us, the truth is that their act was not some impulsive and mindless descent into folly. Rather, it was laden with precise calculation. As stated, these were people of high caliber, and the pathways and secrets of Heaven were known to many of them. Thus, what they sought was to use this knowledge and fashion a physical entity to appropriately house the Presence of Hashem Himself.

So where exactly did they go wrong? Were their esoteric calculations inaccurate? The Beis Halevi explains that, indeed, they were inherently on target. The problem was only that they lacked one integral ingredient: the command of Hashem. The primary difference between the Mishkan, which successfully brought down Hashem's Shechinah, and the Eigel Hazahav, which failed, was that the effort to build the Mishkan was imbued with the sanction and word of Hashem Himself. In the instance of the Eigel, it was simply because they relied on their own knowledge, without Hashem's input, that such tragedy ensued.

It is for this reason that they were charged specifically with the mitzvah of *Parah Adumah* to atone for their deed. We wondered how to reconcile these seemingly opposing intimations. On the one hand, Chazal describe this mitzvah as completely enigmatic; on the other, there appears to be a logical aspect to it, as the Cow atones for the Calf. The answer is that, indeed, both are true. There are numerous details involved in the entire process of preparing the ashes and executing the purification, and the underlying reasons of these particulars are quite difficult to fathom. *But it is precisely because of this quality that it so effectively atones for the Cheit Ha'eigel.* In other words, the primary fallacy of this venture with the Golden Calf was the fact that Yisrael relied solely on their own calculations and initiative. Thus, to rectify this failing, they were granted a mitzvah of which they could not possibly gain complete comprehension. Instead, they would have to cede their own intellect to Hashem's command, relying solely on His word. And in this way the Cow would atone for the Calf.

The obvious lesson to be gleaned from the above is the necessity to yield our own thoughts and opinions to those of Hashem, as revealed in His Torah. Such a mindset, indeed, is unique to Yisrael, a point underscored elsewhere by the Ramban. In his commentary to the Torah (*Vayikra 16:8*), the Ramban decried what he termed "the followers of Aristotle." Aristotle is widely regarded as the pride of the nations and the epitome of secular wisdom. But the Ramban writes quite starkly that "he and his wicked disciples believed that whatever they could not grasp through their own reason, perforce must not be true." However, the model provided by *parshas Ki Sisa* and *parshas Parah* declares otherwise; from them, we learn just how important it is to place our faith and trust in Hashem – even when confronted by matters that may not be grasped by our own intellect.!

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