Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of Chanah bas Nosson a"h

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

Heads Up

PARSHAS KI SISA 5776

It is usually with a tinge of sadness that we study this *parshah*, as it features the tragic downfall of Yisrael connected with the *Cheit Ha'eigel*, the Sin of the Golden Calf. The issue of what exactly occurred and what went wrong is dealt with at great length by a host of commentators; a complete treatment of the subject is well beyond the scope of this forum. Here, we will have to suffice with one innovative approach to explain some of the background leading to these unfortunate events.

A "Cloud" Hovering Over Their Heads...

By way of introduction, let us examine a certain aspect of the Sinai experience as related to us by Chazal. In a fairly well-known teaching, they report that the acceptance of the Torah involved a moment of great drama. This it derives from the *passuk* depicting Yisrael's positioning by the mountain: רַיִּתְיַצְּבוֹ בְּתַחְתִּית הָהָר – "And they stood by the foot of the mountain" (*Shemos 19:17*). The Gemara takes this quite literally, explaining that they stood literally *under* the mountain: מְלַמֵּד שֶׁבָּפָה הַקְדוֹש בָּרוּךְ הוֹא עַלִיהָם אֶת הָהָר בְּגִיגִית, וְאָמֵר לָהֶם, אָם אַתַּם הְנָאָר הָנָתְרֶם הַתּוֹרָה מוּטָב, וְאָם לְאוּ, שֶׁם תְּהָא קְבוּרָתְכֶּם - "This teaches that Hashem held the mountain over them as a vat and said to them: 'If you accept the Torah – well and good. But if not – there will be your grave'" (*Shabbos 88a*).

Actually, it may have been more than a mere moment. We may be accustomed to picturing a scene whereby Hashem lifts the mountain and issues the ultimatum, the people wisely agree, and the mountain is put back in place. But R' Shlomo Kluger (*Imrei Shefer*) explains much differently. He understands that, in fact, the matter was somewhat protracted. That is, as long as there existed a possibility that Yisrael would rescind their acquiescence, the threat remained. It is true that *Ma'amad Har Sinai*, the grand audience and revelation at Mount Sinai, took place on the date of Shavuos. But the actual *Luchos* (Tablets of the Law) were not given until much later; recall that the giving of the Torah was actually a forty-day process, during which time Moshe Rabbeinu was atop the mountain, learning and receiving the Torah. It was after forty days, then, that the *Luchos* were placed in his possession. R' Shlomo Kluger thus asserts something we may not have originally considered: namely, that the mountain remained suspended in the air, above their heads, *for the entire forty-day duration*. Only once the *Luchos* were transferred into Yisrael's possession (received by their agent, Moshe Rabbeinu), was it no longer possible to change their minds. And so, the mountain was not replaced until forty days had passed.

R' Shlomo Kluger uses this information to provide a most illuminating interpretation for a *passuk* in this week's *parshah*, adding some insight into the causation of the unfortunate events of the *Cheit Ha'eigel*.

The Difference between "From" and "Than"

As we know, the Satan was able to gain sway over the people as a result of confusion and miscalculation regarding Moshe's expected descent from the mountain. The passuk that headlines the chain of events states: בַּרֶבֶת מֶּן־הָהֶּר –"And the people saw that Moshe had delayed in descending from the mountain" (Shemos 32:1). This final phrase appears to be extraneous, for the Torah, of course, does not employ unnecessary words. We know where Moshe was; why was it necessary to accentuate that he had delayed his descent "min hahar – from the mountain?"

To account for this phrase, let us first clarify some of the details relating to the chronology and the mistake involved in the calculation. Rashi here elaborates on the error. Moshe Rabbeinu was to remain on the mountain for a period of forty days; the issue that arose related to when the "clock" started. The people assumed that the tally began the day that Moshe ascended, which was the 7th of Sivan. The true intent, however, was that Moshe would be on the mountain for forty *complete* days (i.e., the previous evening *plus* the following day), thus disqualifying the day of ascent. Thus, the real count began the *next day*, on the 8th.

Chazal inform us of the date on which Moshe actually did descend. This occurred, unfortunately, after the worship of the calf had already begun, prompting Moshe to destroy the *Luchos* he held. As the Mishnah states (*Ta'anis 4:6*):

בָּשָׁבָעָה עַשָּׂר בָּתַמוּז נִשְׁתַּבָּרוּ הַלּוּחוֹת.

"On the 17th of Tammuz, the Luchos were broken."

Why, indeed, did the people think that he was supposed to come down earlier? R' Shlomo Kluger understands that this is precisely what the *passuk* is alluding to. Moshe descended on the 17th of Tammuz – 40 days after the 8th of Sivan – and proceeded to destroy the *Luchos*. But he had actually received them from Heaven on the preceding day, the 16th of Tammuz. Recall that the mountain remained suspended in mid-air until the receiving of the Torah was "finalized". In other words, it was on the 16th of Tammuz that the people witnessed the mountain fall back into place – because that was when the *Luchos* were transferred into Moshe's possession.

This, then, is the meaning of the *passuk*. We wondered why it was necessary for the Torah to spell out from where Moshe descended: "And the people saw that Moshe had delayed in descending **from the mountain**." Actually, R' Shlomo Kluger explains, the phrase "*min hahar*" here does not mean "**from** the mountain." The term "*min*" can also translate to mean "than" – and this is its meaning here. The *passuk* is reporting on what caused Yisrael's error. On the 16th of Tammuz they saw the mountain return to place and so assumed that the forty-day period was over. But then Moshe did not appear; *he did not return at the same time the mountain did*. As the *passuk* states: "And the people saw that Moshe delayed *more than* the mountain did." Really – had they been paying better attention – they would have correctly calculated Moshe's return date as the 17th of Tammuz, the following day. But on the 16th of Tammuz there was a development: they saw mountain itself "descend". They became confused when Moshe's appearance did not immediately follow the descent of the mountain. And thus the tragic events unfolded as they did.