

# ... Chet – וביום פקדי... HaEgel Revisited

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In the aftermath of Chet HaEgel, HaShem declares to Moshe, "וביום פקדי עליהם הטאתם" – Nevertheless (though I am ostensibly forgiving the Jewish people), on the day when I take account of them, I shall revisit their sin upon them (Shemot 32:34). Rashi (based on Sanhedrin 102a) explains this as follows:

*Now I shall listen to you [and refrain] from destroying them all at once, but always whenever I will punish them for their sins, I will also punish them a little for this sin along with their other sins; no suffering comes upon Israel that does not have along with it a little of the punishment for the sin of the Calf.*

עתה שמעתי אליך מלכותם יחד, ותמיד תמיד כשאפקוד עליהם עונותיהם, ופקדתי עליהם מעט מן העון הזה עם שאר העונות; ואין פורענות באה על ישראל שאין בה קצת מפרעון עון העגל

In other words, every punishment that has befallen us through the ages contains an element of retribution for Chet HaEgel. Thus, on Tisha B'Av, when we commemorate all of the national suffering we have undergone, it is appropriate to delve into this foundational sin of Chet HaEgel, which rears its shameful head each time HaShem visits tragedy upon us.

There are three classic approaches to Chet HaEgel. Rashi understands the sin as one of actual avodah zarah, idolatry.<sup>38</sup> This interpretation is heavily supported by the simple reading of the pesukim. Bnei Yisrael's request to Aharon is, "קום עשה לנו אלהים אשר ילכו לפנינו" – Arise and make for us gods that will go before us (Shemot 32:1). Similarly, Bnei Yisrael's pronouncement upon seeing the calf emerge is, "אלה אלהיך ישראל אשר העלוך מארץ מצרים" – These are your gods, Israel, which brought you up out of the land of Egypt (Shemot 32:4). They then proceed to sacrifice korbanot to the egel (32:6), and God even describes them as prostrating themselves before it (32:8). All of this strongly indicates that the people engaged in idol worship. Despite the textual strength of this approach, however, on a conceptual level it begs the question: How could Bnei Yisrael have witnessed the Ten Plagues, Kriat Yam Suf, and Matan Torah, and then a mere forty days later refer to a golden calf as the god who redeemed them?<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> See Rashi on א פסוק: "ד"ה "אשר ילכו לפנינו" and "אשר העלנו מארץ מצרים"

<sup>39</sup> Rashi seems to address this question in his commentary to 32:4. There, Rashi explains that it was the Erev Rav, the "mixed multitude" who left Egypt together with Bnei Yisrael, who instigated the fashioning and worship of the

The Ramban<sup>40</sup> suggests that most of the nation did not, in fact, commit actual avodah zarah. They did not view the Egel as a replacement for God; rather, they were trying to replace Moshe. After all, Moshe is the one who disappeared up on Mount Sinai. The Ramban supports this contention in a number of ways. For example, he points out that when Bnei Yisrael make their request to Aharon, they do not ask for a god who will grant them life in this world or the next (the most Divine of powers); rather, they say "אשר ילכו לפנינו" – that will walk before us and lead us. Bnei Yisrael further explain "כי זה משה האיש אשר העלנו מארץ מצרים לא ידענו מה היה לו" – for this man, Moshe, who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has happened to him. In other words, Bnei Yisrael explicitly state that they are looking for a leader and guide to substitute for Moshe (whom they recognize as a man, not a god), because his whereabouts are unknown. Furthermore, upon Moshe's return, the people immediately relinquish the Egel and allow Moshe to grind it up. Had they believed it possessed divine powers, they would not have abandoned it so readily.

The Kuzari<sup>41</sup> posits that Bnei Yisrael's intention when they fashioned the Egel was merely to create a tangible object that would help focus their worship of the unfathomable God. The only reason it was sinful is that God had not commanded them to do so. The Kuzari explains that Bnei Yisrael had been anxiously awaiting Moshe's return from Mount Sinai, expecting him to carry down the luchot and to construct an ark – tangible objects that would aid their avodat HaShem. When Moshe was delayed, they panicked and sought to construct their own tangible object, the Egel, to facilitate their service of HaShem. The Kuzari suggests that the Keruvim atop the aron were not fundamentally different than the Egel in that both were physical objects meant to help direct the people toward God. The difference lay in the simple yet crucial fact that God had commanded the construction of the Keruvim, while the Egel was conceived of by the people without God's authorization or consent.<sup>42</sup>

The Ramban's and Kuzari's approaches provide plausible explanations for how Bnei Yisrael could have committed the sin of Chet HaEgel so soon after experiencing the plagues, splitting of the Yam Suf, and Matan Torah. According to both interpretations, Chet HaEgel was not idolatry; the people never questioned or doubted God Himself.<sup>43</sup> They merely wanted a new leader to guide them, or a tangible object to help them focus their worship. Nevertheless, these interpretations falter when it comes to explaining the pesukim which seem to describe the people engaging in an act of avodah zarah.

I would therefore like to suggest the following approach to help make sense of Chet HaEgel:

The essence of Chet HaEgel is that Bnei Yisrael were not ready for a covenantal relationship with God that entailed rules and self control. Matan Torah was not merely an inspirational

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Egel. Even so, it is difficult to understand how Bnei Yisrael could have been persuaded to follow along after all of the miracles they recently witnessed, including the revelation of God Himself on Mount Sinai.

<sup>40</sup> In his commentary to Shemot 32:1

<sup>41</sup> I, 97

<sup>42</sup> This is supported by the fact that the phrase "כאשר צוה אותם" is the common refrain throughout the construction of the Mishkan.

<sup>43</sup> A further proof that the Kuzari brings to support this contention is that even after the sin, the manna continued to fall, the pillar of fire continued to lead them, and the prophetic spirit continued in their midst.

sound and light show; it contained laws and obligations.<sup>44</sup> At that point in their development, the people were simply not ready for such a monumental commitment. All of Parshat BeShalach, the parshah that serves as the bridge between yetziat Mitzrayim and Matan Torah, consists of test after test<sup>45</sup> that Bnei Yisrael seem to fail! They complain about the lack of water in Marah (Shemot 15:22-26); they grumble again in Midbar Sin about the lack of food (16:1-4); they leave over manna until the morning against explicit instructions (16:19-20); they go out to collect manna on Shabbat (16:25-29); they complain about the lack of water again in Refidim (17:1-7); and they are accused of testing whether God is in their midst (17:7).

Furthermore, as Rabbi Yonatan Grossman points out,<sup>46</sup> Parshat Beshalach is a chiasmic structure:<sup>47</sup>

- 1a) external enemy (the Egyptians at Kriat Yam Suf)
- 2a) water complaint (Marah)
- 3) bread and meat complaint (mann and slav)
- 2b) water complaint (Refidim)
- 1b) external enemy (Amalek).

At the end of the parshah, Bnei Yisrael are right back where they started from at its beginning. Though the parshah has brought them to the brink of Matan Torah, they are spiritually no further along than they were immediately after Yetziat Mitzrayim.<sup>48</sup> They have not inculcated the lessons that the tests of Parshat BeShalach were supposed to have imbued. Nevertheless, God continues with His plan and bestows upon them the Torah.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>44</sup> This is especially true according to the Ramban's understanding that the detailed laws of Parshat Mishpatim constitute the sefer habrit over which Bnei Yisrael bind themselves to the covenant (see Shemot 24:3-7). Matan Torah consists of them agreeing to abide by many detailed, practical laws that will govern every aspect of their lives.

<sup>45</sup> Note that words containing the root .ה.ס.ג, test, appear a surprising number of times throughout the parshah: 15:25 – "שם שם לו חק ומשפט ושם נסהו" – There (in Marah) He placed for him a statute and a law and there He tested him.

16:4 – "למען אנסנו הילך בתורת אלהים" – so as to test him, will he follow My laws or not (regarding the manna).

17:2 – "מה תריבון עמדי מה תנסון את ה'" – Why are you fighting with Me (Moshe)? Why are you testing God?

17:7 – "ויקרא שם המקום מסה ומריבה על ריב בני ישראל ועל נסותם את ה' לאמר היש ה' בקרבנו אם אין" – He called the name of the place Masah U'Merivah because of the fight of Bnei Yisrael and because of their testing of God saying, 'Is HaShem in our midst or not?'

17:15 – "ויבן משה מזבה ויקרא שמו ה' נסי" – Moshe constructed an altar and called his name 'HaShem nisi' – God is my banner, my miracle, my tester.

<sup>46</sup> "The Manna and the Paschal Sacrifice" found at <http://www.vbm-torah.org/parsha.59/16besha.htm>

<sup>47</sup> In a chiasmic structure, the topics in the text appear in the order ABCBA, so that the first topic also appears last, the second appears again second to last, etc. This structure can be used to emphasize the topic in the middle which serves as the focal point. It also creates the impression that there is progression at first but then regression back to the beginning.

<sup>48</sup> Rashi famously comments on the use of the singular, "ויחן שם ישראל נגד ההר" (19:2), that at Mount Sinai, Bnei Yisrael were unified כאיש אחד בלב אחד. This might have seemed to indicate that Rashi thinks the people have made tremendous progress. However, that very Rashi continues by pointing out that all the other encampments were filled with resentment and dissention.

<sup>49</sup> Why God continues with His plan despite all of Bnei Yisrael's shortcomings and failed tests is an interesting question. Perhaps because He had promised Moshe at the Burning Bush (Shemot 3:12)?

Within this context, it is clear that Bnei Yisrael did not possess the spiritual maturity necessary for Matan Torah. They were not ready for the obligations that God demanded of them on Mount Sinai. Thus, they were in a high state of panic in the aftermath of Matan Torah, overwhelmed by the magnitude of what they had just committed themselves to.<sup>50</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that they jumped at the slightest opportunity to return to their lives of no rules, no obligations, no laws. Upon Moshe's delay, they immediately constructed an idol. At first glance, this seems incomprehensible – how could the nation that experienced God on Mount Sinai have worshiped an idol that they fashioned themselves. However, with the above background in mind, it begins to make sense: the Egel's attraction lay precisely in its being a man-made god. They controlled it; it did not have power over them. It could not make demands of them, nor impose rules or laws upon them. Bnei Yisrael could not possibly have believed that the Golden Calf was the God that took them out of Egypt. But they desperately tried to convince themselves that it was<sup>51</sup> because this god would not insist upon anything in return. Thus, the answer to the question of how the people could have committed Chet HaEgel so soon after Matan Torah, is that they committed Chet HaEgel precisely *because* of Matan Torah and the overwhelming obligations it entailed.<sup>52</sup>

Consequently, the essence of Chet HaEgel lies in the people's attempt to return to a rule-free life. This underlying motivation is clearly evidenced in the pesukim that describe the people's worship of the Egel. Over and over again, the Torah emphasizes the spirit of revelry and the lack of self-restraint that characterized the worship. This wanton spirit is captured in the phrase "ויקמו לצחק" – they arose to make merry, to party, to let loose.<sup>53</sup> In fact, when Moshe is first approaching the camp, Yehoshua hears "קול העם ברעה"<sup>54</sup> Rashi translates this as בהריעו שהיו מריעים ושמחים וצוחקים – trumpeting, because they were blowing horns, rejoicing, and laughing. In response, Moshe says that it is not *kol anot gevurah* or *kol anot chalusha*, but rather "קול ענות" "אנכי שומע", which Rashi translates as קול חרופין וגדופין – a sound of defamations and blasphemies. The sounds that assault Moshe's and Yehoshua's ears are those of utter chaos.

The atmosphere of anarchy is further highlighted by 32:25, which states, "וירא משה את העם כי פרע הוא כי פרעה אהרון לשמצה בקמיהם" - Moshe saw the nation, that it was in disorder, for Aharon had made them disorderly to be a disgrace among their enemies. This pasuk too focuses on the wild unruliness of the people. In addition, it is significant that the word chosen to describe their lack of control is "פרע." This is an obvious allusion to Paroah, who represents the life they claim to still want, in which there are no Divine demands made upon them.

<sup>50</sup> This approach fits nicely with the "כפה עליהם הר כגיגית" midrashim (Rashi to Shemot 19:17; Shabbat 88a). God had to coerce them to accept the Torah because they were not ready to do so themselves.

<sup>51</sup> "אלה אלהיך ישראל אשר העלון מארץ מצרים" (Shemot 32:4)

<sup>52</sup> See Rabbi Chanoch Waxman's article, "The Jewelry and the Tent" (<http://www.vbm-torah.org/parsha.59/21kitis.htm>), in which he suggests that Chet HaEgel is the "anti-covenant." In worshipping it, Bnei Yisrael do everything from Shemot Perek 24 (the perek in which they forge their covenant with God as part of Matan Torah), but instead of performing these actions as part of a brit with HaShem, they are doing them to celebrate around the Egel.

<sup>53</sup> Shemot 32:6

<sup>54</sup> Shemot 32:17

Furthermore, immediately before Moshe shatters the luchot, it says in 32:19, "וַיִּרְא אֶת הָעֵגֶל, וַיִּחַלְצֵם מִיָּד הָעֵגֶל" – it is the dancing that pushes him over the edge. Some commentators<sup>55</sup> explain that what upsets Moshe is the pleasure Bnei Yisrael are taking in worshipping the Egel. But I would argue that the significance of this phrase is that Moshe totally understands what is going on – that the people want to dance wantonly; they crave no rules.

I would even suggest that subconsciously, Bnei Yisrael are trying to sabotage their relationship with God. They are terrified of what they have committed themselves to, but even more terrified of backing out of it themselves. Deep down, they actually want God to get angry with them so that He will be the one to renege on their covenant.

Ultimately, Moshe gives the people exactly what they want. He smashes the luchot, thereby nullifying their covenant with God and the obligations it entailed. The people are now free from the mitzvot and responsibilities that a committed relationship with God demands. But instead of feeling relieved, Bnei Yisrael are shocked into realizing that it isn't what they really want at all. They are filled with remorse and desperately beg God to forgive them. They remove their ornaments from Har Chorev (33:4,6) and enter into a mourning period (33:4) during which God dwells outside their camp rather than in it (33:7). They look longingly after Moshe every time he goes out to communicate with God (33:8), something to which they are no longer privy. After much pleading and negotiation on Moshe's part, HaShem agrees to completely forgive Bnei Yisrael and forge yet another covenantal relationship with them. The shock and pain of their first failed relationship has matured them, and when God calls Moshe up to receive the second luchot, the people are finally ready to enter a committed relationship with God - laws, luchot, and all.

To return to Tisha B'Av, I had always assumed that the reason God visits punishment upon us for Chet HaEgel over and over, within every other punishment, is that it was a sin of such staggering magnitude it can never be fully atoned for.<sup>56</sup> However, perhaps the reason we are continuously punished for Chet HaEgel is that there is an element of that sin in every other sin we commit. If the root of Chet HaEgel was Bnei Yisrael's fear of committing themselves fully to God, then perhaps it is that same apprehension, that same holding back of complete faith and commitment that lies at the heart of every other sin as well. On Tisha B'Av, when we mourn all of the tragedies that have befallen us, perhaps we should also look within ourselves and examine whether we may be guilty of our own Chet HaEgel. Perhaps when we can overcome this and commit ourselves fully and confidently to God, God will in turn commit Himself fully to us by once again dwelling among us in the Beit HaMikdash.

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<sup>55</sup> See the Alshich, Seforno, and Rav Hirsch (all are cited in Nehama Leibowitz, p.603-4)

<sup>56</sup> This would fit best with Rashi, who says it was actual avodah zarah.