

KI SISA

BRINGING HOME THE HEART

Parashas Ki Sisa describes one of the most dramatic moments in the history of the Jewish people: *Cheit Ha'Eigel* (the Sin of the Golden Calf). To fully appreciate the gravity of this sin, we must understand the whole incident in context. Let us review the crescendo of events that led to this climax. After years of bitter slavery in Egypt, Hashem commanded Moshe to redeem the suffering Jews from Pharaoh. Pharaoh refused, and Hashem punished all Egypt with consecutive, supernatural national disasters, otherwise known as the *eser makkos* (the ten plagues).

Even after the Jewish slaves were finally liberated, Pharaoh chased after them with his mighty Egyptian army. In an unprecedented miracle of epic proportions, Hashem split the *Yam Suf*. The Jews walked through it on dry land, and their Egyptian enemies drowned. All of these Divinely orchestrated events were for the ultimate purpose of preparing the descendants of Yaakov to receive the Torah. By this point in time, the Jews had reached such spiritual heights that “even a

maidservant at the Red Sea saw what the prophets Yechezkel and Yeshayah never saw.”¹

Now that the Jewish people were liberated and spiritually ready, Hashem prepared to give them the Torah. Having just experienced a revelation greater than almost any other prophet in history, the people remained at the foot of the mountain. Moshe “approached the fog where G-d was,”² and ascended Mount Sinai to receive the details of the Torah and bring them back down to the Jews. Forty days later, the Jews grew apprehensive. They saw “that Moshe was late coming down from the mountain.” The audacity of their reaction radically changed the course of history. The people gathered around Aharon and they said to him, ‘Rise and make us a god that will go before us, because this man Moshe who took us up from the land of Egypt – we do not know what happened to him’.³

In light of all the events preceding the giving of the Torah, these words are shocking. Their receiving of the Torah at Mount Sinai was both a milestone in their development as a nation and the pinnacle of their national spiritual existence; it would define their essence forever. To say that the people who went through this experience “erred” later would be a gross understatement. How could *Bnei Yisrael* request that Aharon make them a god? Were they not recent eye witnesses to countless open miracles in Egypt and at *Yam Suf*? Did they not hear directly from G-d forty days earlier, “You shall have no other gods before Me”?⁴

¹ *Mekhilta, BeShalach Shirata* 3.

² *Shemos* 20:18.

³ *ibid.*, 32:1.

⁴ *ibid.*, 20:3.

One would think that their direct experiences with G-d would have girded them with the conviction to wait for Moshe *Rabbeinu's* return. How could they have lost faith in G-d and Moshe *Rabbeinu* so quickly and easily?

This classic question has been addressed by our Sages for generations. They suggest many different answers to explain this problem. We will focus on one particular approach and explore how it relates to our daily lives.

Divine Destiny

Cheit Ha'Eigel was part of our destiny; it was part of Hashem's plan all along. Rabbi Chaim Halpern explains⁵ that Hashem orchestrated the circumstances so that the sin would happen at that time. Rashi elaborates, "It was the decree of the King [for the *yetzer hara*] to control them in order to give an opening to *ba'alei teshuvah*. For if the sinner will say, 'I will not do *teshuvah* because I will not be accepted,' they say to him, 'Go out and learn from the act of the Calf, that they denied [Hashem] and they were accepted with *teshuvah*.'"⁶ According to this interpretation, had it not been for this grave sin and *Bnei Yisrael's* subsequent successful *teshuvah*, sinners in future generations would have despaired.

As they were about to receive the Torah and join a covenant with Him, Hashem wanted to teach *Bnei Yisrael* about the foundational concept of *teshuvah* and how it works. One might ask: If this predestined transgression was simply to teach

⁵ *Shaarei Chaim*, p. 263.

⁶ *ibid.*

us a lesson, why did it have to be such a radical sin with such severe consequences?

For it to be a powerful educational moment, all of the details needed to be taken to the extreme. According to Rashi, the Jewish people committed more than idol worship during *Cheit Ha'Eigel*; other serious prohibitions were involved, including murder and immoral relations.⁷ The sinners weren't just a few nonconformist outsiders; huge masses of people participated! Yet they were still able to return. The lesson can impact future generations through a *kal vachomer* (a fortiori argument). In Jewish Law, *kal vachomer* means that if a rule applies to an extreme case, it applies with equal or greater certainty to a moderate case. Future sinners will be encouraged when they look to the precedent that *teshuvah* can redeem even from the worst of sins and even an entire nation.

Hope is never lost. The *teshuvah* message from *Cheit Ha'eigel* is alive in every generation. The Lubvitcher Rebbe stated⁸ that it is improper to refer to Jewish outreach as “*kiruv rechokim* (lit. bringing close those that are distant).” The expression reminds an unaffiliated Jew of his past actions and implies that he is far from G-d. We are never out of reach. Hashem will always receive our *teshuvah* and bring us back to Him.

This lesson is a critical aspect of *Matan Torah*. Rabbi Halpern relates the Klausenberger Rebbe's view to this effect: part of accepting the Torah was sinning and then doing *teshuvah*. A true Torah life is not filled exclusively with times of inspiration. Our individual journeys have both ups and downs, smooth spots and bumps in the road. A realistic Torah life

⁷ Commentary on *Shemos* 32:6.

⁸ *Likutei Sichos, Behar-Bechukosai* 5740.

includes making mistakes, falling, and then getting up and improving ourselves. As the verse in Mishlei says,⁹ “seven times a *tzaddik* falls and rises.” Even a *tzaddik* will stumble, but he will then arise. Without understanding *teshuvah* and its role in our lives, we could never have accepted the Torah.

A high school dean once told a student a lesson that the student never forgot. He said to her, “One of the most important things to learn in life is how to ski.” When the student responded, “I have no interest in skiing. Why is it so important to learn how to ski?” His memorable answer was, “Because one of the first lessons is how to fall and how to get up.” Living as an *eved Hashem* (servant of G-d) means learning how to fall and finding the inner strength to climb right back up and keep going.

As outlined above, the message of *teshuvah* is an inherent part of accepting the Torah for every generation. Rabbi Halpern discusses *Bnai Yisrael's teshuvah* in the story of *Purim*. The Jewish people sinned of their own free will, participating in the feast of Achashveirosh and worshipping idols. Hashem's Hand was hidden in the natural course of events, and they suffered a severe consequence: Haman's plot to wipe out the entire Jewish nation.

At the time, they could have despaired and given up hope. Instead they followed Mordechai's example of appealing for Hashem's mercy by fasting and weeping.¹⁰ They remembered the *Cheit Ha'eigel* and *Bnei Yisrael's teshuvah* at the time and realized that they could do the same.

⁹ *Mishlei* 24:16.

¹⁰ *Esther* 4:1-3.

There is an even deeper connection between the *teshuvah* on the Sin of the Golden Calf and that of the Purim story. *Cheit Ha'eigel* occurred at the time of *Matan Torah*, when we were accepting *Torah shebichtav* (the Written Law). In the Purim story, we accepted the *Torah shebe'alpeh* (the Oral Law), as it says in the *Megillah*, “*k'iyemu vekiblu haYehudim aleihem ve'al zaram* (the Jews resolved – accepted as binding, for themselves and their progeny.)”¹¹ Our Sages say that the Jews actually had an excuse for not upholding the Torah – they had agreed to uphold it under duress; the *Midrash* details how Hashem held Mount Sinai over their heads to coerce them into accepting the Torah.¹² The *teshuvah* of the Jews at the time of the *Cheit Ha'eigel* was repentance out of awe and fear of Hashem. In the Purim story, their *teshuvah* climbed to a higher level and was motivated by a great love for Hashem and gratitude for His salvation.¹³ They understood that no Jew is ever detached from Hashem, even if he bows to Haman or eats at the feast of Achashveirosh.

The power of *teshuvah* out of love is so transformative that our Sages state that through this kind of repentance “premeditated sins are transformed into merits.”¹⁴ The Slonimer Rebbe explains¹⁵ that transgressions cause personal internal damage as well as wreaking external havoc on the world. *Teshuvah* out of love repairs both. The *chilul Hashem* (disgrace to G-d's Name) caused by sins becomes a *kiddush Hashem* (sanctification of G-d's Name). Loving repentance doesn't wipe out the past, but rather redeems it and sins are converted into

¹¹ *ibid.*, 9:27.

¹² *Gemara, Shabbos* 88a.

¹³ *Nesivos Shalom, Purim*, p. 15.

¹⁴ *Gemara, Yoma* 86b.

¹⁵ *Nesivos Shalom, Devarim*, p. 194.

merits. Thus, the *Cheit Ha'eigel* was a comforting example to the Jews of Persia; they not only learned from it, but even elevated their *teshuvah* higher, so they could turn their past errors into a *kiddush Hashem*. In this way, Hashem bestowed on us the eternal gift of *teshuvah*.

Special Protection

Despite the ultimate compensation of *teshuvah*, it is still troubling that the Jews didn't seem to have much choice in *Cheit Ha'eigel*. A premeditated plan implies that they were forced to participate. Yet they suffered consequences, and the Jewish people are still suffering to this day. How could they, and we, be held accountable for an action that does not seem to have been done with free will?

Let us explore how and why Hashem creates a situation of inevitable sin. We need to first understand the reverse: how Hashem regularly helps us **avoid** sin. Our Sages make a strong statement about this: "A man's [evil] inclination rises up against him every day and tries to kill him... and if it were not for Hashem Who helps him, he [the man] would not be able to overcome it."¹⁶ The *yetzer hara* is so powerful, explains the Slonimer Rebbe,¹⁷ that human beings left to their own natural devices would not be able to withstand its tests.

In His great kindness, Hashem gives us what the Slonimer Rebbe calls "*shemirah elyonah* (supreme protection)." This *shemirah* takes two forms. One kind of *shemirah* is described by our Sages in their statement, "Every day a heavenly voice goes out from

¹⁶ *Succah* 52b.

¹⁷ *Nesivos Shalom, Shemos*, p. 245.

Mount Sinai and proclaims, ‘Return, wayward sons!’¹⁸”¹⁹ On this statement, the Baal Shem Tov asks two questions: If this voice goes out, why does no one hear it? And what is the purpose of an inaudible heavenly voice?

The answer is that this form of *shemirah* is when Hashem provides us a lifeline, even after we have already jumped overboard. Hashem loves us so dearly that He doesn’t give up on us, even after we have succumbed to the *yetzer bara*. Have you ever tuned into that little voice in your head? The one that says, *Do I really want to act this way? Maybe that was the wrong thing to do. Maybe I’m going in the wrong direction.* That is the “heavenly voice”; it encourages you to stop and reflect on your actions. In the natural course of events, jumping overboard inevitably results in drowning; inertia prevents us from keeping afloat and we naturally continue in our misguided direction. But Hashem casts out a lifeline and sends out this heavenly voice in the form of *hirburei teshuvah* (thoughts of repentance). The voice is inaudible because it is internal. Thoughts of repentance are not our own, but rather messages from our loving Father in Heaven, trying to inspire us to come home.

The other form of *shemirah* is provided before we take action. Our Sages describe it as “*ba litaber mesayin oso* (one who comes to be purified is helped).”²⁰

Often we are motivated to do Hashem’s will and are prevented from doing so by the overwhelming power of the *yetzer bara*. In this case, Hashem gives us *shemirah elyonah* to even out the playing field, so to speak. We often don’t have a fighting

¹⁸ *Yirmiyahu* 3:22.

¹⁹ *Zohar*, 3, *Naso*, 126 or 196:1.

²⁰ *Yuma* 38b.

chance against temptation, so He provides Heavenly assistance to strengthen us. When we are stripped of this pre-sin *shemirah*, in a sense, we are “forced” to sin. G-d doesn’t take away our free choice, but rather He removes the extra support we need to overcome the *yetzer hara*. Without this *shemirah*, sin is practically inevitable.

There are two reasons why Hashem might retract that *shemirah elyonah*, explains the Slonimer Rebbe.²¹ Both reasons relate to the status of the individual in question. Individuals of great spiritual stature already have enough vigor to battle the *yetzer hara*. Hashem removes His assistance to give unique individuals the opportunity to triumph on their own. The second reason is more relevant to the average person, who has either consciously or unknowingly committed many minor transgressions throughout his life. None of them justify dire consequences; however, he is gradually drifting away from Hashem. He is vulnerable to the dangerous cumulative effect of his little sins. The effect of this destructive pattern is so subtle that he hardly notices it happening over time.

In such a case, Hashem wants to wake the person from his spiritual slumber. He may remove the *shemirah elyonah* to cause the person commit a big sin; the transgression will be drastic enough to suddenly make him aware of his unhealthy habits. Only then will he have an opportunity to make amends.

²¹ *Nesivos Shalom, Shemos*, p. 246.

Nothing More Whole than a Broken Heart

The Slonimer Rebbe points out²² that *Bnei Yisrael* did indeed have an aspect of greatness. *Matan Torah* girded them with the ability to control their *yetzer hara* on their own. However, let us focus on the second reason, of Hashem giving a wakeup call.

At the beginning of this discussion, we exhibited our surprise at *Bnei Yisrael's* lack of faith that motivated the *Cheit Ha'eigel*. Upon further examination, we see evidence of this weakness earlier on. Since coming out of Egypt, *Bnei Yisrael* complained numerous times. They showed doubts in Hashem's abilities, despite their first-hand experiences with Hashem's open miracles. Apparently, as the Jews stood by *Har Sinai* to receive the Torah, the deficiency in *emunah* remained. How were they supposed to realize that they weren't on the level they assumed they were? How were they to have a chance at correcting their flaws in perspective when they did not realize they had them? To wake them up, Hashem removed His *shemirah elyonah* and let them sin in *Cheit Ha'eigel*.

Hashem's purpose was not to punish them. The purpose was to arouse them, to cause them to realize how far gone they were, how much they needed to fix. The goal was *teshuvah*.

Consider the analogy of a parent educating his child. A child does not realize the importance of responsibility in preparing for tests and papers in advance. He returns home every day and runs out to play, saying that he does not have much schoolwork and he will get to it "later." It is only when the parent reminds him over supper that he might have schoolwork does he suddenly realize and spend the time until

²² *ibid.*, p. 249.

bed cramming for his test or writing an entire paper. He is a bright student, and he manages to get by with this approach in elementary school, but his parent knows that when he gets to high school, he will not succeed unless he re-evaluates how he relates to schoolwork. He must learn how to take responsibility for his work and his time management.

One time, before a major test, the parent doesn't remind his child at dinner. He watches as the child forgets to study for the test, and returns home heartbroken with a failing grade. Now the child realizes how his outlook was leading him down a dangerous path. Now he is open to seeing where he should re-evaluate and change. The parent didn't want to punish the child. He only wanted the child to learn from the experience.

Nothing compares to the power of a broken heart. A broken heart is the symbol of immense disappointment; the most devastating moments of our lives are permanently ingrained in our emotional memory. Sins should break our hearts. The aftermath of transgressions should be disappointment in ourselves and a realization of our unrealized spiritual potential. In this way, the Slonimer Rebbe interprets the phrase from *Yirmiyahu*, “*Teyasreich ra’aseich* (your evil shall afflict you).”²³ “Your evil” means “your sins.” Your transgressions will afflict you with the emotional pain of a burdened conscience that will motivate you to do *teshuvah*.

Upon his descent from *Har Sinai*, Moshe initially had no intentions of breaking the *Luchos* (Tablets). After hearing that *Bnei Yisrael* had sinned, he assumed committing such a dire sin would prompt their immediate remorse. He presumed they would already be doing *teshuvah*, working on the deficiencies in

²³ *Yirmiyahu* 2:19.

emunah they displayed since they left Egypt. Moshe was shocked and angered when he saw just the opposite: They were dancing and singing around the Calf, serving the Golden Calf with joy! He cast the *Luchos* from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain.²⁴

Joy is a very powerful emotion. Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe says²⁵ that true *simchah shel mitzvah* (joy of the commandment) is the joy that comes from deeply connecting to Hashem through the *mitzvah*. The Arizal once told one of his pupils that he merited all of his spiritual achievements due to the great joy with which he did every *mitzvah*. He understood the divine connection he was making through his *mitzvos* and he rejoiced.

Simchah shel mitzvah is felt when connecting deeply to the *mitzvah* and the One Who commanded it. What then can we deduce about the opposite: *simchah shel aveirah* (joy of the sin)? When one rejoices while doing an *aveirah*, it shows how deeply he is connected to evil and its source. According to Rabbi Avraham Schorr,²⁶ *simchah shel aveirah* strongly attaches the person to evil and makes him even more comfortable with committing transgressions regularly.

When the Torah describes all the consequences of neglecting the Torah, it justifies these curses, “since you did not serve Hashem your G-d with joy and gladness of heart when everything was plentiful.”²⁷ This criticism specifies the lack of *simchah shel mitzvah*.

²⁴ *Shemos* 32:19.

²⁵ *Alei Shur*, vol. 2, p. 325-326.

²⁶ *HaLekach VeHaLiban*, 5762, p. 149.

²⁷ *Devarim* 28:47.

Interestingly, Rabbi Schorr interprets the above verse differently by applying alternate punctuation: “since you did not serve Hashem your G-d – with joy and gladness of heart.” The punishment is not just a result of your intentional anti-service of Hashem and your pursuit of sins. The curses were given because it was done “with joy and gladness of heart.” Your joyful emotional state while sinning expresses a deep attachment to evil; therefore, your actions deserve severe consequences

In light of this idea, we can better understand Moshe *Rabbeinu's* actions. When he saw *Am Yisrael* serving the Golden Calf with joy, he was horrified and smashed the *Luchos*. We can assume that breaking the *Luchos* was not Moshe acting in an impulsive fit of fury. When he didn't see the expected remorse, he despaired of the *Am Yisrael's* spiritual state. *Are the Jewish people too far gone? Can their hearts not be broken?* He wanted to do something drastic in a desperate effort to save them. If *Bnei Yisrael* would see the *Luchos* – Hashem's direct gift, the words of Hashem and the writing of Hashem – shattered, what they had done might penetrate. *That? What have we done to deserve that? OHHH...* That would start the long road back. Moshe *Rabbeinu's* purpose was not to release his anger, but rather to make a powerful emotional impact on *Bnei Yisrael* in order to neutralize their joy in sinning. He hoped that the breaking of the *luchos* would present powerful imagery of the breaking of their hearts, and would inspire them to do *teshuvah*.

Moshe broke the *Luchos* for the same reason that Hashem removed his *shemirah elyonah*; he wanted to wake the Jews from their spiritual slumber and penetrate their hearts. When those mistaken perspectives had been broken, they were then able to rebuild. As they were forming an eternal bond with Hashem through the Torah, they needed to understand the fundamental lesson of *teshuvah*.

This lesson is for all generations and applies to us as well. We need to ask ourselves, do our hearts break in times of introspection? When we examine our behavior, are we disappointed in ourselves or are we doing *aveiros* with joy and satisfaction? Let us be inspired and remember the power of *teshuvah me'abavah*: we can redeem our past actions and transform our sins into merits. Remember that Jews are never far from Hashem.

We also need to appreciate all the ways Hashem helps us succeed. Do we hear Hashem's messages? Let us heed the little voices encouraging us to be strong against the *yetzer hara* and do *teshuvah*. In this way, *Cheit Ha'eigel* will forever be an opening for us to return to Hashem. May our hearts be broken by regretting mistakes of the past, and may they become whole again in our loving return to Hashem.