

## Parshat Ki Tisa – Imbibing the Egel

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The sin of the Golden Calf is a seminal event in the Torah not only because it became the paradigm for the process of repentance<sup>1</sup>, but because it is also replete with narratives of Moshe acting of his own volition and taking the initiative. The most obvious and prominent example of Moshe's exercising this independence is his breaking of the Luchot upon returning to the camp and seeing the celebration surrounding the Egel.<sup>2</sup> The Gemara<sup>3</sup> cites this as one of three times in the Torah that Moshe acts of his own accord at a pivotal moment and God acquiesces by indicating His approval after the fact. In this vein, Reish Lakish interprets the phrase "Asher Shibarta,"<sup>4</sup> the Luchot that you Moshe broke, not as a condemnation of Moshe, but rather as God's acknowledging and congratulating Moshe for having broken the Luchot (יישר כחך ששברת). Immediately after Moshe breaks the Luchot, the Torah tells us of another initiative of Moshe, where he sets out to destroy the Golden Calf; "And then Moshe took the Egel they had made, burnt it in the fire and milled it to a powder; and then scattered it on the water and made Bnei Yisrael drink it."<sup>5</sup> In this week's shiur, we will take a deeper look into why did Moshe eliminate the Egel in this manner and more importantly why did he make Bnei Yisrael drink the remnants of the Golden Calf?

The Chizkinui suggests that Moshe's intent was to completely obliterate the Egel from existence. He therefore goes to great lengths, as described in the Pasuk, to physically destroy the Golden Calf and then spreads the dust over the water of the nearby flowing river to leave no trace of the Egel's existence. It conjures up similarities to the Rabbis prescription for the destruction of Chametz for Pesach.<sup>6</sup> As a coincidence, the river available to Moshe for the destruction of the Egel also happened to be Bnei Yisrael's water source. The principal purpose of the process was to eliminate the Golden Calf and it was just incidental that Bnei Yisrael drank the dust residue of the Egel. He evidences this from Moshe's retelling of the story of destroying the Egel in Sefer Devarim<sup>7</sup> where Bnei Yisrael's drinking of the waters is absent from the description.

On the other hand, the Ramban suggests that Moshe's actions in dealing with the Golden Calf were driven by his intent to deride the Egel. He demeans Bnei Yisrael's actions by first pulverizing their creation and then having them ingest it only to be expelled when they defecated in the future. Moshe's impetus was to demonstrate unequivocally that there was no justification for their egregious behavior and that the Egel possessed no semblance of holiness or godliness. Consuming the Egel then was an act of profound and patent profanity that Moshe hoped would leave an indelible impact and lesson on Bnei Yisrael. To reinforce this, Rav Hirsch adds that Moshe pressed Bnei Yisrael into physically aiding him in the destruction of the Egel. The Golden Calf which they had pinned their hopes and beliefs on was with their help liquidated in a moment and then perceptibly brought to its final end by having them drink it.

Interestingly, the two more literal interpreters of the text, the Rashbam and the Ibn Ezra, cite neither of these approaches. Instead, they both explain the Pasuk in light of the Gemara<sup>8</sup> that indicates that Moshe's intent in having Bnei Yisrael drink the waters of the Egel was to check them like a Sotah (unfaithful wife). They are likely swayed by the two situations being analogous in that in both instances the sinner is given waters mixed with dust to drink. Extending this parallel, Rashi indicates that this was one of three methods employed to punish those that participated in the Egel. If there were warnings and witnesses to their violation, they were punished by the sword. If there were witnesses alone, they died in the plague. Absent witnesses, similar to a Sotah where there is only circumstantial evidence of adultery, only God knows the truth. Lacking procedural evidence, the drinking of the waters then acts as a divine determinant as to the innocence or culpability of the suspected party by killing those that have sinned and sparing those that are innocent. The Malbim extends the comparison of the Egel to a Sotah by suggesting that there is thematic overlap between them. The Torah and Neviim abound with suggestions that idol worship is akin to adultery.<sup>9</sup> Given Chazal's description of Maamad Har Sinai as a wedding ceremony,<sup>10</sup> it is as if the covenant of Sinai was akin to wedding vows between Bnei Yisrael and God. In that light, Bnei Yisrael's sin with the Egel was an act of adultery against God. The drinking of the waters of the Egel then is an appropriate punishment or test for those who are suspected of being unfaithful to God.

<sup>1</sup> It is the Torah portion read on public fast days (מסכת סופרים יז,ה). Also see גמרא עבודה זרה ד:

<sup>2</sup> שמות לב,יט

<sup>3</sup> שבת פז.

<sup>4</sup> ויאמר יקוק אל משה פסל לך שגילחת אבנים כראשנים וכתבת עליהם את הדברים אשר היו עליהם הרשנים אשר שברת: (שמות לד,א)

<sup>5</sup> ויקח את העגל אשר עשו ישראל וישרף באש ויטחן עד אשר ידק ויזר על פני המים וישק את בני ישראל: (שמות לב,כ)

<sup>6</sup> משנה פסחים כא. וגמרא שם כח.

<sup>7</sup> ואת חטאתכם אשר עשיתם את העגל לקחתי ואשרף אתו באש ואתו בחון היטב עד אשר ידק לעפר ואשלף את עפרו אל הנהל היד מן ההר: (דברים ט,כא)

<sup>8</sup> עבודה זרה מד.

<sup>9</sup> שמות לד, טז ויקרא כה, שופטים ב, יז ירמיהו ג, ו-י יחזקאל כג, ל

<sup>10</sup> מכילתא דרבי ישמעאל פרשה ג

The Orach Chayim notes the importance of Bnei Yisrael drinking the waters of the Egel based on what the Neviim tell us that the sin itself takes retribution from the sinner. Therefore it would only be appropriate that the evil they created would be the means of their demise. The deficit in this explanation is that it does not sufficiently address the retribution meted out to all those who were killed in the plague or by the sword. Why were they not required to die by the sin of their creation? The fact that only those that survived were made to drink the waters of the Egel would appear to suggest that they were the ones in need of this prescription. In order to understand this, we need to gain a deeper understanding of the interplay between the sin and the impetus of the perpetrator to rid themselves of that iniquity which can sometimes lead to repentance.

Before the sin is committed, the desire of the person is so strong and the object of their pining so appealing that it obfuscates from them the reality that the accomplishment of the sin will not bring them fulfillment, but rather everlasting guilt and regret. Unfortunately, in most cases the drive to reach the imagined panacea is so intoxicating that only after the sin has been violated are they able to come to their senses. Then, the sudden realization after the sin of the void, emptiness and disgust that is left in its wake is too overwhelming for the sinner to face. They are so revulsed by the sin they committed that they are unable to contemplate how they ever fell victim to such a heinous and debased act of treachery (תמהים אנחנו על נפשותינו איך נעשתה התועבה – הזאת – תפלת זכה)<sup>11</sup> In order to cope with this, they project their sin onto the object of their sin. Their solution is to convert their self-loathing into feelings of revulsion and contempt towards the object of their sin. While this approach might help to keep them more sober when faced with similar challenges in the future, it abdicates personal responsibility for the sin committed by externalizing the culpability and assigning the failure to the object of their sin. An outstanding illustrative example of this is the story of Amnon's<sup>12</sup> rape of his half-sister Tamar.<sup>13</sup> Amnon is infatuated and physically love-sick over the beautiful Tamar. In his eyes, she is the ultimate desire of his heart and she is so precious that it was beyond him to do anything untoward towards her. In the end, he is counseled by his friend to create a scheme that would allow him to ensnare Tamar. When the resultant planned seclusion takes place, Tamar begs him to seek the King's approval and not to sink to the level of a debased lowlife by raping her. Amnon is deafened to her pleas by his overwhelming desire for her and despite her objections rapes her. Immediately after the act, the first thing the Navi tells us is that Amnon "hated her deeply and the hatred he felt towards her was greater than any love he had ever felt towards her." His disdain for her is so palpable that he then, ignoring Tamar's protestations to not embarrass her further by sending her away, commands one of his servants to "throw this thing away from me, send her out and lock the door after her." The once beautiful and desirous Tamar is now a hated "thing" to be thrown out on the street. He heaps upon her all of his contempt for the once unimaginable act that he stooped to committing. The innocent Tamar becomes a representation of the reprehensible sin that he can't fathom having perpetrated. All of Amnon's disappointment and self-hatred for his failure is directed towards her. She now becomes the object of his scorn, the reason for his sin. Sadly, all this projecting of his guilt on Tamar also leaves him unrepentant.

When Moshe returns to the camp, he breaks the Luchot and destroys the Egel. As we saw earlier, the process of destroying the Golden Calf was meant to demonstrate the inherent worthlessness of the Egel and the senselessness of worshipping it. The methods that Moshe used would instill within Bnei Yisrael the futility of their behavior. On the other hand, Moshe knew that his success would come at a price. The debasing of the Egel and Bnei Yisrael's realization that they had acted unconscionably would lead to pangs of guilt and self-denial that they had resorted to such degeneracy. Moshe's demeaning of the Golden Calf and shaming of their behavior would result in their projecting the blame for their sin on the Egel itself. The repercussions of that disassociation would be a reluctance to take responsibility for their grievous act and an inability to confront their own fallibilities. In order to avoid this consequence, Moshe ingeniously has Bnei Yisrael drink the dust of the Golden Calf. The physical imbibing of the Egel reverses the innate externalization of the sin. They can no longer run away from their guilt because that which they blamed for their misdeeds is now inside of them. The drinking of the waters forces Bnei Yisrael to take responsibility for their actions and internalize the gravity of their sin.

Shabbat Shalom

<sup>11</sup> על התשבה, הגר"ד סולובייצ'יק, לעברך בברית ה', דפים קיד-קטו

<sup>12</sup> King David's eldest son and the crown-prince

<sup>13</sup> שמואל ב פרק יג