

כ"א אדר תשפ"א
THE MOTHER OF ALL SIN

וישכימו ממחרת ויעלו עלת ויגשו שלמים וישב העם לאכל ושתו ויקמו
לצחקי

By far the worst moment in Jewish history was the חטא העגל. Not long after we had received the תורה, we were already betraying the first 2 of the עשרת הדברות, which we heard from Himself, and were worshipping foreign items. The גמרא famously tells us² that we are still suffering to this very day because of the חטא העגל. While the גמרא seems to imply that the punishment was forgiven after 24 generations, the original statement of the גמרא that says that every עבירה has 1/24 a part of the עגל, מעשה עגל, the way רש"י interprets the גמרא is that it really means any small amount.³ What was the כפרה that seemingly wiped away the punishment of the חטא העגל? As רש"י later tells us, it was the גלות of the first המקדש.⁴ Even if that may have technically been the end of the punishment brought about by the חטא העגל, we are definitely still feeling the effects of the גלות today. In fact, the משנה⁵ tells us that one of the reasons we commemorate the fast of תמוז today is because of the חטא העגל, which took place on that very day. One can ask a fairly simple question: We know that Himself said He never punishes past the third or fourth generation for the sins of the ancestors.⁶ Why, then, did it take 24 generations to atone for the מעשה עגל? There is a seemingly simple answer here as well. That promise of the חטא העגל was said in the exact context of the איסור עבודה זרה in the עשרת הדברות. From the fact that we didn't keep our end, it makes sense to say that the חטא העגל didn't "feel the need" to keep His end.

Perhaps, there is more to this terrible tragedy than it may seem. While עבודה זרה is no doubt one of the more severe sins, it could very well be that the חטא העגל at its core has more to it. The גמרא⁷ brings down that עריות and גזילה are unique in that they are the עבירות with the greatest temptations. In fact, the משנה⁸ tells us that one who avoids an עבירה such as eating blood, which is disgusting, gets rewarded, קל וחומר one gets rewarded for a sin which has great temptations and is much harder to avoid. What is the paradigm the משנה chooses for a sin which has great temptations? Again, we see עריות and גזילה. However, that's not all. The גמרא⁹ adds that while many people are suspect of גזילה, and not so many are suspect of עריות, the overwhelming majority of people are suspect regarding הרע לשון הרע, or at the very least, אבק לשון הרע. In fact, this is brought down as well by the ראשי¹⁰ as well, warning us to be extra diligent in this regard. If you take the עבירות of these 3, ג, ע, and ל, which spell out עגל. The עבירות that are hardest to avoid, and the ones that most people are נכשול in, come from the root of the עגל. In fact, some interpret the גמרא that the עגל is the basis of all sin as referring to this; that all sin stems from a desire of גזילה or עריות,, or לשון הרע.¹² What is the common thread between these 3 עבירות? The core of גזילה and

¹ שמות לבו.

² סהנדרין קב.

³ רש"י שם ד"ה "אחד מעשרים וארבעה"

⁴ רש"י שם ד"ה "פסוק זה"

⁵ תענית כו-כו:

⁶ עיין שמות כבה.

⁷ חגיגה יא:

⁸ מכות כג:

⁹ בבא בתרא קסה.

¹⁰ רמב"ם הל' איסורי ביאה כב.יט-כ

¹¹ שר"ע אהע"ז כה.א.

¹² דרישה אהע"ז כה.א.

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עריית is taking that which belongs to others for yourself. Because you covet that which someone else has, and maybe it's not so practical to actually take it, or you're able to resist taking it, the result is speaking הרע לשון about them. This diminishes the victim in the eyes of the עבריין, and maybe that helps to suppress his desire for the other guy's things. Even if the עריות involved are not איש איש, the concept of עריות is that not everything you want can be yours, even if it's not anyone else's. Yet, by speaking הרע לשון, one also raises himself to think that he is better than everyone, and convinces himself that is too good for whatever or whomever he previously desired.

The תורה tells us that we eventually did have a כפרה for the חטא העגל, even before the חורבן קריאת התורה.¹³ We know that the כפרה is used to purify a טמא מת, someone who came in contact with a dead body. Interestingly enough, the גמרא¹⁴ learns that although the טומאה of a טמא מת is more חמור in certain aspects, the מצורע, someone who spoke הרע לשון, is more חמור in that he is sent out of all 3 of the camps, while the טמא מת is only banned from מחנה שכינה. The reason for this is that the מצורע caused rifts between people through his speech, so he is punished מדה כנגד מדה by being forced into isolation.¹⁵ To circle back to what we said before, the מצורע also tried to elevate himself above others through his malicious speech. The punishment of being alone also fits, as now he is not even below everyone else in society, but he is completely out of society.

While the real עגל or the עבירות of עריות, גזילה, and לשון הרע may be at the core of every עבירה, the גמרא¹⁶ says that ultimately, what causes one to sin is a "רוח שטות". If we knew הקב"ה was always in front of us, and we lived לנגדי תמיד, שויתי ה' לנגדי תמיד, we would be too afraid to do even the slightest thing wrong. This lack of awareness is what causes us to falter every now and then. This problem was also what was at the core of the חטא העגל. When the Jews messed up in their count, and thought משה had died, they wanted an intermediary to be able to reach הקב"ה, and who can communicate His will. The first time הקב"ה communicated to us directly, we couldn't handle it. Yet, if we realize that He was always there, we wouldn't feel the need for an intermediary. The whole concept of עבודה זרה started when mankind thought we needed to communicate through an intermediary.¹⁷ אם ירצה השם, we should be זוכה to feel the presence of הקב"ה in our lives, and not think that any foreign entities or concepts, or even ourselves and other people, are the cause of everything in our lives. With this awareness, we should at least come to not do עבירות out of a sense of יראה, and ultimately out of a sense of true אהבה and ידיעה of הקב"ה.

¹³ רש"י במדבר יט. כב ד"ה "פרה אדמה"

¹⁴ פסחים סח.

¹⁵ ערכין טז:

¹⁶ סוטה ג.

¹⁷ רמב"ם הל' עבודה זרה א.א.ב