

The Second Love-based Episode (*Ki Tissa*)

Did you know that there are two episodes of the Golden Calf recorded in *Parshat Ki Tissa*? Though this may sound surprising, our Sages (Mishna *Megillah* 4:10) distinguish between ‘*Ma’aseh Egel HaRishon*’ (literally, ‘The first episode of the [Golden] Calf’), and ‘*Ma’aseh Egel HaSheni*’ (literally, ‘The second episode of the [Golden] Calf’), noting that the first may be publicly read and translated, while the second may be publicly read but not publicly translated.

The question I’d like to address is what is meant by ‘the first’ and ‘the second’ episode of the Golden Calf? And why is the former treated differently to the latter?

Rashi addresses both these points in his commentary to Mishna *Megillah*, noting that: ‘The entire story of the Golden Calf [from *Shemot* 32:1] up until [*Shemot* 32:20] where we read that ‘they burned it with fire’ is what is called ‘*Ma’aseh Egel HaRishon*’, whereas the recounting of the story by Aharon to Moshe [from *Shemot* 32:21-24] in which we read ‘and out came this calf’ (ibid. v. 24) is what is called ‘*Ma’aseh Egel HaSheni*’. It is this section that should not be publicly translated in case the ignorant may erroneously understand that the calf came out the fire on its own...’

From here we learn that ‘the first episode of the Calf’ is the one described by the Torah, while ‘the second episode of the Calf’ is the Torah’s record of what Aharon later told to Moshe. And why should the second episode not be publicly translated? To avoid listeners reaching a conclusion which would be deemed heretical.

However, not everyone concurs with Rashi’s interpretation. Specifically, Tosfot (on *Megillah* 25b DH *Ma’aseh*) quotes the Yerushalmi which understands that ‘*Ma’aseh Egel HaSheni*’ continues up until *Shemot* 32:25. Given this, Tosfot asserts that the reason why this passage is not publicly translated is not due to heresy. Instead, this limitation was placed by our Sages in order to protect the honour of Aharon, so that the people should not think that Aharon was actively involved in the production and the worship of the Golden Calf.

So far, we have offered two reasons why ‘the second episode’ is publicly read and not publicly translated. Still, the very phraseology of ‘first episode’ (‘*Ma’aseh Egel HaRishon*’) and ‘second episode’ (‘*Ma’aseh Egel HaSheni*’) is itself perplexing, as this implies that these were two different events - as opposed to being the same event told from different perspectives.

However, I believe that this is exactly the point being made by our Sages, which is that the retelling of the story by Aharon was so different to the actual episode that

it is considered to be a distinct event from the first. But why did Aharon relate the events so differently?

Malbim, writing in his commentary to *Shemot* 32:22, explains that: 'Aharon, due to his love for the Jewish people, wished to perceive and present the actions of the Jewish people in a favourable way. Consequently, he described the events in a manner that made him sound guilty, and made them sound innocent.'

What emerges from all this is that there are, in fact, two episodes of the Golden Calf. One is a depiction of what took place. And one is a depiction of how Aharon wished to understand what took place. The first is true from a *fact-based* perspective, while the second is true from a *love-based* perspective.

Avot 1:12 records a teaching of Hillel that we should be like the students of Aharon: 'We should love peace. We should pursue peace. We should love others. And we should bring them closer to Torah.'

But how should this be done?

The answer is found in the story of *Ma'aseh Egel*: not the *fact-based Ma'aseh Egel*, but the *love-based Ma'aseh Egel*.

Shabbat Shalom