



**Publication of
HEVRAT PINTO**
**Under the Direction of
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The Path to Follow

THE SIN OF THE GOLDEN CALF AND ITS ATONEMENT

Rabbi David Pinto Chlita

This Shabbat we read Parsha Ki Tisa, which deals primarily with the sin of the golden calf, as well as Parsha Parah, which discusses the red heifer. Is it by accident that these parshiot are read together, or could there be a profound connection between them? Rashi already explained this on the verse, “They shall take to you a completely red heifer” (Bamidbar 19:2), an explanation that originates with Rabbi Moshe HaDarshan: “They shall take to you – from their own. Just as they removed the golden rings for the calf from their own, so shall they bring this from their own as atonement; a red heifer – this is compared to the child of a maid servant who sullied the king’s palace. They said, ‘Let the child’s mother come and wipe away the filth.’ Similarly, let the cow come and atone for the calf” (see Rashi on Bamidbar 19:22). Rectifying the sin of the golden calf therefore occurs through the mitzvah of the red heifer. Even this requires an explanation, for what connection is there between a heifer and a calf, other than the fact that one is the mother and the other is the offspring?

To begin with, let us briefly examine the sin of the golden calf. When the Torah describes this sin, it states: “The people saw that Moshe had delayed in descending the mountain, and the people gathered around Aaron and said to him: ‘Rise up, make for us gods that will go before us, for this man Moshe – who brought us up from the land of Egypt – we do not know what became of him’” (Shemot 32:1).

All the commentators, each in their own way, have examined the incongruity of the incident of the golden calf. It is difficult to understand how the Jewish people, who had just received the Torah and seen “darkness, cloud, and thick darkness” (Devarim 4:11) – the darkness of sins and their punishment, as well as the light – were capable of falling so far from the highest height, Mount Sinai, all the way to the depths of the abyss, idolatry. We need to understand the root cause of this terrible fall. We also need to understand why G-d did not prevent the Jewish people from reaching such a point, meaning why He did not send Moshe before it happened.

It seems that there was no reason to reprimand the Jewish people for the sin of the golden calf, since it was the Satan that misled them. The Targum recounts that ki boresh Moshe (“Moshe had delayed”) is connected to the term shesh (“six”): At the shisha assar (“sixth hour”), the Satan came and confounded the people, showing them darkness, cloud, and confusion, until they said, “Moshe is certainly dead.”

Therefore it was the Satan that misled them, which showed them “a vision of Moshe’s bier,” proving to them by signs and wonders that their leader Moshe was dead. What could they do in such a desperate situation? Moshe their leader, the one who until that point had shown them the way, G-d’s emissary, was dead. What could they now do?

The answer was simple, and it was an answer which they had already given when they received the Torah: “We shall do and we shall hear.” This principle represents complete self-annulment, for how can a person commit himself to doing something before knowing what he must do? He can only do so when he commits himself to doing all that he is told – absolutely everything, regardless of the commandment – which represents complete self-annulment. That is what the Children of Israel committed themselves to doing at Mount Sinai. Yet here they failed in this regard. Although the Satan showed them through signs and wonders that Moshe was dead, they should have understood on their own that everything comes from the Creator of the universe. They should have first reflected upon things, for they could have been mistaken about the time. Next, even if Moshe had actually been summoned to the Celestial yeshiva, the Holy One, blessed be He, is the Creator of the universe and directs it. Thus just as He sent them Moshe up to now, He would have sent them another leader. Instead of this, instead of annulling themselves before Heaven, they followed their own reasoning and concluded that Moshe was dead, and they went to find Aaron so he could make them a calf.

We may say that the root cause of this sin was a lack of self-annulment before the Creator of the universe. This is also why the Holy One, blessed be He, did not send Moshe to the Children of Israel before they sinned: It constituted a test to see if they were worthy of receiving the Torah, to see if they would keep their promise to do and hear.

This may also be why their ornaments were removed from them, the ones which they had received at the giving of the Torah, as the verse states: “And now, remove your ornaments from yourself” (Shemot 33:5). Rashi explains: “And now – this is the punishment that you will immediately receive, that you remove your ornaments from yourselves.” We also read, “Remove your ornaments – these are the ornaments that were given to them when they said, ‘We shall do and we shall hear’” (Baal Zekenim MiBa’alei HaTosafot). Angels of destruction removed these ornaments from them when they worshiped the calf. Given that in making the calf, they proved that they had not annulled themselves before the Holy One, blessed be He, it follows that they were no longer at the level of “we shall do and we shall hear,” something that can be easily understood.

Let us return to what we said at the outset. According to our explanation, and as we know, the mitzvah of the red heifer atones for the sin of the golden calf. It is not without reason that these two parshiot are read together most of the time: Ki Tisa on the one hand and Parah on the other. According to what we have said, we see that this deals with two things that have a connection to one another, namely sin and its atonement.

The mitzvah of the red heifer is a chuk, a decree that we cannot understand. As Rashi says on the expression,

"This is the chukat [decree] of the Torah" (Bamidbar 19:2): "Because Satan and the nations of the world taunt Israel, saying, 'What is this commandment? What is the reason for it?' Therefore the Torah referred to it as a chuk, a statute. I have decreed it, and you are not permitted to question it." As we know, King Solomon himself was unable to discover the reason for this mitzvah, concerning which he stated: "I thought I would be wise, but it is beyond me" (Kohelet 7:23). This teaches us that we cannot understand the mitzvah of the red heifer. According to all that we have said, we realize

why it can atone for the sin of the golden calf, a sin that involves a lack of self-annulment, a lack of unconditional adherence to G-d's will. As for the mitzvah of the red heifer, we publicly demonstrate that we are doing His will even without understanding it, only because He desires it. We therefore demonstrate the required humility and atone for that sin. This constitutes "let the child's mother come and wipe away the filth" (Rashi on Bamidbar 19:22), for this is how we atone for that terrible sin.

Real Life Stories

There Will Not be a Plague Among Them

Those who study Torah and safeguard holiness are especially important to G-d, Who protects them in all situations of suffering and distress, as it is written: "There will not be a plague among them" (Shemot 30:12).

The Midrash also explains the verse, "Hashem is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble" (Nahum 1:7) in the following way: "The ways of the Holy One, blessed be He, are not like those of mortals. A mortal king, against whom a country rebels, indiscriminately punishes and kills the good with the bad. Not so with the Holy One, blessed be He. When a generation acts provocatively against Him, He rescues the righteous and destroys the wicked" (Bamidbar Rabba 5:3). As proof, the Midrash cites a few incidents which teach us that an educated man who devotes himself to learning Torah thereby protects and saves not only himself from disaster, but also the members of his generation.

What follows is an incredible story told by the "Maggid" Rabbi Shlomo Lewinstein Shlita.

Rabbi Ran Ilan Shlita, a Rosh Kollel in Beit Shemesh, came to offer his condolences to Rav Chaynks during the seven days of mourning for his mother, at which point he told him the following story: Some time earlier, an avrech from his kollel had telephoned him at two o'clock in the morning, dejected and in tears.

What had happened?

His young son was not feeling well, and they brought him to Hadassah Medical Center for tests. To his great despair, they found a very dangerous brain tumor in the boy, and according to doctors his condition was hopeless.

"How can I help you?" asked the Rosh Kollel with compassion.

"I want you to come with me to see Rav Chaim Kanievsky."

"Alright," he said. "Come to my home one hour before Shacharit, and together we'll go to Bnei Brak. After praying, we'll speak to the Rav."

Thus they traveled to see Rav Chaim, and after praying they explained the situation to him.

"Bring the child here," he said to them.

That's what they did, and a few hours later they both returned with the boy.

As soon as the boy entered the room, Rav Chaim asked him: "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

"I want to be like the Rav," he said.

When he heard this, the Rav asked his wife to bring him the wine that he used for siyumim. He then served it to everyone, and they drank a l'chaim.

The Rav then spoke to the boy's father: "Return to Jerusalem, to the hospital, and ask the doctors to conduct a new brain scan."

When they returned to Jerusalem, the boy's father asked the doctor to conduct a new brain scan on behalf of Rav Chaim Kanievsky.

"It's not necessary," said the doctor. "We did one just last night. There's no medical justification for another test, and it's very expensive."

"No problem," said the father. "I'll pay all the costs, but on one condition: If the results are the same as those of yesterday, it means that the test wasn't justified, and therefore I'll pay for it. However if it shows a different result, then it was useful to have this test and therefore the hospital should pay for it." The doctor agreed, and they conducted the test. His brain was completely normal!

However doctors did not want to let the boy leave just yet. They thought that the results were odd, and they wanted to check the boy again.

They conducted another test, and again the results were completely normal. The child could therefore leave the hospital, and from there the boy and his father went to Bnei Brak to see Rav Kanievsky.

When they arrived and the Rav saw their faces beaming with joy, he said: "You certainly think that a miracle occurred here, perhaps due to the wine of the siyumim. However there's something you should know: When I heard that the boy wanted to become a talmid chacham, I told you to get another test done, and I remained here beseeching G-d to have compassion on the child. I told myself that I have a duty to help, through prayer, a child who wants to become a Torah scholar. And thank G-d, my prayer was heard."

Shas of the Gemara!

Before concluding this article, we will cite a marvelous story from the Maggid Rav Lewinstein Shlita, one that illustrates the tremendous degree of self-annulment by the great men of Israel for the sake of Torah study.

Rav Lewinstein recounted that Rebbetzin Kanievsky, the wife of the gaon Rav Chaim Kanievsky and the daughter of our teacher Rav Elyashiv Shlita, once shared with him her admiration for her father's persistence:

"My father never slept past two o'clock in the morning. At precisely two o'clock, he was already sitting down in front of his Gemara, something that he did regularly."

"Furthermore, he did not spend his time with us as children, nor did he speak good or bad to us. Only once a week, on Shabbat afternoon, when he could no longer study because of the darkness, since he did not use electricity on Shabbat, he would go out for a walk, and we children took turns on accompanying papa."

"But don't think that he spoke to us. What did he do? He was thinking of learning at every possible moment. It was simply an honor for a child to walk with papa."

Rav Lewinstein said to her, "Does Rav Chaim know his grandchildren?"

She replied, "I don't know if he knows all their names, but I believe that he knows them all. Also, do you know how much time and effort the Rav invested in his children? He finished Shas with each of them!"

"Shas of Mishnayot?" Rav Lewinstein asked her.

Irritated, she replied: "What? Shas of the Gemara! With one child, he finished it at the age of 15, with the second at the age of 16, and with the third at his Bar Mitzvah. With each of them, he completed all of Shas!"

This is how the great men of the generation viewed life, if only we could merit walking in their ways: "Follow the footsteps of the sheep" (Shir HaShirim 1:8).

At the Source

Both Hands and Feet

It is written, “Aaron and his sons shall wash there et yadechem [their hands] ve’et raglechem [and their feet]” (Shemot 30:19).

Why the two-fold use of the term *et*? All that needs to be said is: “Aaron and his sons shall wash *et* yadechem *ve’raglechem* [their hands and their feet].”

The holy Ohr HaChaim states that in this way, the verse is teaching us that it was useless to wash the hands but not the feet, just as it was useless to wash the feet but not the hands. Thus here the term *et* means “with,” meaning that the kohanim must wash both their hands and their feet. This is what the Gemara teaches, namely that the kohanim must wash both their hands and their feet (Zevachim 19b).

Secondary Importance

It is written, “He shattered them at the foot of the mountain” (Shemot 32:19).

In Shtei Yadot, Rabbi Avraham Chazkuni explains why Moshe broke the Tablets, despite the fact that it is forbidden to break things in anger. As the Maharsha said in his commentary on Tractate Shabbat (105b), when someone breaks something of secondary importance, it is not prohibited.

The Jerusalem Talmud on Tractate Shekalim recounts that when the Children of Israel made the golden calf, the letters of the Tablets flew into the air.

Hence at that point, the Tablets were only an object of “secondary importance,” not something essential, meaning that it was not prohibited to break them in anger.

After the Fact

It is written, “You will see My back, but My face may not be seen” (Shemot 33:23).

The Chatam Sofer writes amazing things in his commentary on this verse:

We witness painful events and incidents occurring before our very eyes, things that arouse astonishment in our hearts: Why does Hashem allow all this? Why so much [Divine] anger? Yet after a certain time, when these events have passed, we see and understand after the fact that the goal of it all was to do good to the Jewish people, and to save them from other evil decrees.

This is what happened during the miracle of Purim – Vashti’s execution, the fact that Esther was taken to Acharverosh, and everything that resulted from it – all was in preparation for the deliverance of the Jewish people. Yet before the king’s order is carried out, we see and understand nothing. All we can do is believe without a doubt that nothing is in vain, and that the reasons for things are hidden from us. For us this faith is good, since we will only be rewarded for faith.

This is the meaning of the expression, “You will see My back,” meaning that once the goal has been achieved, we will be able to look back and retroactively understand everything that has happened. However the verse explicitly tells us, “My face may not be seen” – we cannot see or understand beforehand.

Atonement

It is written, “They have strayed quickly from the way that I have commanded them. They have made themselves a molten calf” (Shemot 32:8).

The Gemara states, “The first account of the making of the calf is both read and translated. You might think that [we should refrain from doing so] out of respect for Israel. Hence on the contrary, we are told that it is good for them, for it acquires atonement” (Megillah 25b).

In the book Ben Yehoyada, Rabbi Yosef Haim of Baghdad writes that this is difficult to understand, for how does this acquire atonement for them?

We may explain that atonement does not come from shame. Rather, it comes from the fact that when all the people hear that Hashem accepts their repentance, even for such a grave sin, it allows them to consider repenting.

Hence all the people who hear this reading consider repenting, which acquires atonement.

In the Light of the Parsha

The Root Cause Was Pride

It is written, “When the people saw that Moshe had delayed in descending the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron and said to him, ‘Arise, make us gods that will go before us’” (Shemot 32:1).

The Sages in Midrash Tanhuma have said: “The sixth hour had already passed, and 40,000 men [of the *erev rav*] who ascended with the Jewish people – including two Egyptian magicians by the name of Yunus and Yombrus, who had performed magical signs before Pharaoh – all of them gathered around Aaron...and said to him, ‘Arise, make us gods.’” At several points in this parsha, Rashi writes that the *erev rav* (“mixed multitude”) were the ones who gathered around Aaron, and that they fashioned the golden calf and made the Children of Israel sin.

On the expression, “and *Di-Zahav*” (Devarim 1:1), the Gemara states: “Moshe said before the Holy One, blessed be He: ‘Sovereign of the universe, the silver and gold [zahav] that You showered upon Israel until they said, ‘Enough [dai]’ – that is what led them into making the calf.’ They said in the school of Rabbi Yanai: A lion does not roar over a basket of straw, but over a basket of flesh. Rabbi Oshaia said: It is like the case of a man who had a lean but large-limbed cow. He gave it vetch to eat, but it began to kick him. He said to it, ‘What led you to kick me, other than the vetch that I fed you?’” (Berachot 32a). In another Gemara, Rav Pappa says: “When the proud cease to exist [in Israel], the magi shall cease. When the [corrupt] judges cease to exist [in Israel], oppressors shall cease” (Shabbat 139a). We may therefore say that since there was a great abundance of silver and gold among the Children of Israel, they grew proud. That is why they were punished, and it is why the Egyptian magicians, through their magic, made them sin and fashioned the calf. As the Sages have said, the sin of pride is punished by acts of magic.

On the verse, “When He finished speaking to him on Mount Sinai, He gave Moshe the two Tablets of Testimony” (Shemot 31:18), Rashi states: “There is no ‘earlier’ or ‘later’ [i.e., strict chronological order] in the Torah. The incident of the calf preceded the order regarding the work of the Sanctuary by many days.” That said, we still need to understand why the passage on the golden calf was written in Parsha Ki Tisa. It could have been written in Parsha Mishpatim, before Parsha Terumah, for that is where the parshiot related to the Sanctuary begin, and the golden calf was made before that point.

We have said that pride was the root cause of the sin of the golden calf. We must add that it was for this very reason that the passage on the golden calf appears in Parsha Ki Tisa, for our holy books state that the mitzvah of the half-shekel teaches us the attribute of humility. In fact everyone only gave a half-shekel in order to teach us that each person is but a half, and that if the Children of Israel had possessed humility, they would not have committed the sin of the golden calf. Hence that incident is written before this parsha, in order to teach us that every individual must be humble. Otherwise he is liable to commit grave sins, as the Children of Israel did with the golden calf.

All this may explain the verse, “Now leave Me alone. Let My anger flare up against them and I shall annihilate them, and I will make of you a great nation” (Shemot 32:10). Since pride was the root cause of the sin of the golden calf, Hashem said that a new Jewish people would emerge from Moshe, the humblest of all men, in order for them not to sin through pride.

The Census

At this time last year, hundreds of civil servants from the Israeli government were busy with the final stages of the 5769 census. Participating in the census were hundreds of thousands of families, which were selected to give personal information to government officials. According to published results, a number of people refused to participate because they feared that the “evil eye” and other harm might befall them if they were counted by others.

We must point out that this question has been presented to the great men of Torah and to poskim, and that we find it discussed in depth among books of responsa, as we shall mention below. However let's not get ahead of ourselves.

First of all, a few dry facts about a census: A census provides the most complete and accurate representation of a nation's population and its characteristics. In a census, all the data on a large number of people is gathered at a specific point in time, and conclusions about the entire population can be drawn from this data. In most countries in the world, a census is performed every ten years. In other countries, such as Japan, Austria, and Canada, a census is performed more frequently, namely every five years.

The first tally of Israel's population was conducted in Heshvan of 5709, not long after the founding of modern Israel, during the War of Independence. It was conducted by the Central Bureau of Statistics, in association with the Interior Ministry. Its main goal was to establish a list of citizens in preparation for distributing identity cards for electing members of the first Knesset. The census touched upon fundamental demographics, professions, literacy rates, and languages used by Israelis.

On the day of the census, a general curfew was imposed for seven hours, the goal being to ensure that everyone would be home when census workers arrived to find them, and also to diminish the likelihood that they would be counted more than once in two different places. The census workers received a picture of each resident and issued that individual a stub containing an ID number, with which he or she could later receive an official identity card.

A Tragic Result

At the beginning of this week's parsha, Moshe received G-d's order to count the Children of Israel indirectly, not to count actual people: “When you take a census of the Children of Israel according to their numbers, each shall give Hashem an atonement for his soul when counting them, so that there will not be a plague among them when counting them” (Shemot 30:12).

From here we learn that there is a real danger involved in counting Jews, and that to be protected from this danger, everyone was to give a half-shekel as “an atonement for his soul.” Thus King Saul avoided counting his soldiers directly, and used lambs instead (I Samuel 15:4). On the other hand, King David did not abstain from counting the people, and the result was tragic:

“Satan arose against Israel and enticed David to take a count of Israel. ... This matter was bad in G-d's eyes, and He struck Israel. ... Hashem sent a pestilence in Israel, and 70,000 men of Israel fell” (I Chronicles 21:1-14). The Midrash says, “Whenever Israel was counted for a good purpose, they sustained no loss in numbers. Yet whenever they were counted for no good purpose, they sustained a loss. On what occasion were they counted for a good purpose? In the days of Moshe, in connection with the standards and the division of the land. When for no good purpose? In the days of David” (Bamidbar Rabba 2:17).

In order to be spared from the dangers associated with counting Jews, the Radak lists two conditions for undertaking a census: 1) The goal of the census should be justified; and 2) the census should be carried out indirectly, by means of an object. When the initiative for a census comes from G-d, it is an expression of love. As Rashi says in citing the Midrash, “Because they are so precious to Him, He counts them continuously,” this containing no danger. The same cannot be said when the initiative comes from human beings. In that case, we must count people indirectly, even if counting serves a practical purpose.

In the Talmud, things take on a concrete halachic dimension. Rabbi Yitzchak said, “It is forbidden to count Israel even for a mitzvah.” Rabbi Eleazar said, “Whoever counts Israel transgresses a prohibition, as it is said: ‘The number of the Children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured’ [Hosea 2:1].” Rabbi Nachman bar Yitzchak said, “He transgresses two prohibitions, for it is written: ‘Which cannot be measured or numbered’” (Yoma 22b).

Rabbi Yitzchak also said, “Blessing is only possible in things hidden from sight.” The house of Rabbi Ishmael teaches that we only find blessing in something that the eye has not grasped, as it is written: “Hashem will command the blessing for you in your storehouses” (Devarim 28:8). The Sages have taught, “On entering the storehouse to measure the new grain, one recites the benediction, ‘May it be Your will, Hashem our G-d, that You send blessing upon the work of our hands.’ Once he has started to measure, he says: ‘Blessed be He Who sends blessing into this heap.’ However if he first measured the grain and then recited the benediction, then his prayer is in vain, for blessing is not to be found on anything that has been already weighed or measured or numbered, but only in a thing hidden from sight” (Taanith 8b). The Sages also taught, “King Agrippa once wished to cast his eyes on the hosts of Israel. He said to the Kohen Gadol, ‘Cast your eyes upon the Passover sacrifices.’ He took a kidney from each, and 600,000 pairs of kidneys were found there” (Pesachim 64b).

In the halachot regarding prayer, it is said that we must not count people who gather for a minyan to see if ten men are present. In the Kitzur Shulchan Aruch we read, “We must be careful not to count people to know if there is a minyan, for it is forbidden to count the Children of Israel individually, even for a mitzvah” (Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 15:3). In this regard, we should point out that among other peoples, there is a widespread belief that counting people causes harm. Thus among black Africans, men do not like to be counted due to a fear that being counted will draw evil spirits to them, and that many people die as a result of being counted. Among the Batwa of the Congo, there is a superstition that prevents them from counting their children, for they believe that if they count their children, or if they mention the exact number of children they have, evil spirits will hear and some of their children may die. Hence when asked how many children they have, they answer: “I don't know.”

I Share Their View

In his book Kuntrass Mifkad Toshavim, the gaon Rabbi Eliezer Yehuda Waldenberg examines the various procedures used for counting in Tanach, and among them he discusses the census that David conducted and its consequences. He also distinguishes between various methods of counting: Complete and partial; mitzvah-necessary and mitzvah-unnecessary; and direct and indirect.

Responsa Shevet Halevi deals with this issue and provides some practical conclusions: “In the Israeli census, since no number of family members appears, either individual or collectively, and since several other procedures are used so that it is not considered as counting Jews, I share the view of other great poskim in telling the public that everything is as it should be.”

Guard Your Tongue

“Masters” of Lashon Harah

If a person has unfortunately grown accustomed to the sin of Lashon Harah by constantly engaging in it, like those who often say, “So-and-so did this,” “So-and-so's ancestors did that,” “this is what I heard about him” – and these are derogatory statements – then the Sages call such people Ba'alei Lashon Harah [literally, “Masters of Lashon Harah”]. Their sin is that much worse because they deliberately transgress Hashem's Torah, and to them it has become trivial. Concerning such people, it is said: “May Hashem excise all lips of smooth talk, the tongue that speaks boastfully” (Tehillim 12:4).