

THE COSTS OF NOT CONSULTING

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

On the eighth day, Moshe called to Aharon and his sons and to the elders of Israel. He said to Aharon, "Take a young bull for a chatas...And speak to the Bnei Yisrael, saying, "Take a he-goat as a chatas, and a calf and sheep in their first year - unblemished - as an olah."

Be'er Yosef: We face multiple questions in encountering these pesukim. 1) What are the zekeinim, the elders doing here? They don't participate in any of the instructions or their implementation that would make it worthwhile to mention them. (Rashi writes that it was important to include them, so that they could testify that Aharon did not act on his own, but had been instructed to serve as the kohein gadol by Divine instruction. This seems difficult. This point had been made once before.² Why should the Bnei Yisrael need to be taught this a second time? A midrash on our pesukim likens the Bnei Yisrael to a bird, which cannot possibly fly without wings. Similarly, taught R. Akiva, Bnei Yisrael cannot do anything without the guidance of its zekeinim. Here again we must question how this thought is germane to our pesukim. The instructions here come directly from HKBH; there is simply no room for the guidance of the zekeinim.) 2) Typically, Moshe commands the people himself. Why does the Torah order that Aharon be the one to convey this mitzvah to the people? 3) The Sifra takes note of the different requirements demanded of Aharon and the people. The people are commanded to bring more offerings than Aharon. The Sifra explains that while Aharon needed to expiate the sin of the Golden Calf, others additionally required kaparah for the sin of selling Yosef into slavery, at which time they slaughtered a goat, whose blood was used to encourage Yaakov to conclude that Yosef had been attacked by a wild animal. But why would Aharon not require a piece of that kaparah? He was descended, after all, from Levi, who was one of the chief architects of the plot against Yosef! 4) The calf matches the sin to which it was linked. But why choose a goat to point to the sale of Yosef? The goat was peripheral to the sale of Yosef. It only figured in the cover-up after the fact, when its blood was used to suggest to Yaakov that Yosef had been mortally wounded by some wild beast. It doesn't speak to the sale itself.

Let's examine the sin of the Golden Calf. Our rishonim caution that it was not an instance of mass defection of the people to idolatry. Rather, the people sought to invite an indwelling of the Shechinah in some object that would serve as a tangible and palpable reminder of a Divine presence in their midst. Alternatively, this object would replace Moshe as the unifying figure that held the people together as a group.⁴

What began as poor thinking ended in the avodah zarah of a small part of the population who turned a bad idea into something much worse. Probing further, we soon realize that the Golden Calf never would have become a reality, had the people consulted with the proper authorities, rather than acting on their own. (In fact, they scorned the advice of their elders. When Chur admonished them, they killed him. Aharon, now fearing that they would kill him as well, desperately wished to save the people from the terrible implications of the pasuk, "If you will slay in Hashem's mikdash both kohein and prophet,"⁵ as explained by the gemara.⁶

The sale of Yosef occurred similarly. It was not the consequence of the jealous rage of the shevatim, but entirely justified in their minds on strong legal principle. The pattern of Yosef's behavior in his reporting their supposed misdeeds to their father convinced them all that Yosef intended to continue the pattern that had begun two generations earlier. Avraham had effectively disinherited Yishmael, appointing Yitzchok as his sole successor; Yitzchok in turn had moved his brother Esav out of the running for even a share of the spiritual legacy of their father. The shevatim believed that Yosef was attempting the same, reaching for exclusive rights to spiritual succession - and prepared to stop at nothing to gain it. (Alternatively, they believed that Yosef rejected a pillar of both succession and faith - the kingship of Dovid, following from Yehudah.⁷

Here as well, disaster would have been precluded had they not acted on their own, but consulted with their father. (If they thought that they could not discuss their findings with him, they could have gone to the beis din of Shem and Eiver.) Rather than seeking the oversight of their father, they hid their actions from him by slaughtering a goat, and using its blood to conceal the deed from Yaakov. Hiding their decision from their father was not at all peripheral to their sin; it was at its very core.

With the Bnei Yisrael poised to inaugurate the mishkan with an offering that would atone for the chet ha-egel, the earlier sin of mechiras Yosef jumped into focus. It was at that point that the sin of failing to consult with proper authorities first figured in our nation's history. The Golden Calf was but a replay of that first, fatal error. As the Sifra says, they had in hand a failing "both at the beginning and at the end."

Aharon, however, was an exception. His part in the chet had nothing to do with failing to consult. He acted to save the nation from a double murder. While he shared some of the guilt - he was, in the final analysis, party to a terrible stain of the record of the people - that guilt had nothing to do with the sale of Yosef. Hence, his kaparah involved only a calf. The goat - relating to Yosef's sale - was irrelevant to him.

Including the zekeinim in our pesukim therefore makes perfect sense, even if they played no discernible role in the implementation of the parshah. The Torah wishes to underscore that it was the sidestepping of the authority of the elders of the generation that was common to both the chet ha-egel and the sale of Yosef.

We understand as well why Aharon was to convey our parshah to the people. The chet came about because the people did not seek out the guidance of Aharon, but rather forced his hand. The antidote to their sin required that they now submit to Aharon's instruction.

R. Akiva's teaching now comes into even sharper focus. Klal Yisrael is likened to a bird that attempts to soar higher and higher. When we try to elevate ourselves further and conjure up new ideas to achieve this aliyah, precisely then do we need to realize that the zekeinim are our wings. Without them, our plans will make us plummet, not soar.

We recall that when the moment to act on our parshah arrived, it was marred by the deaths of Nadav and Avihu. Moshe consoled his brother on his loss, by telling him that Hashem had earlier indicated that He would be sanctified by those close to Him.⁸ This does not tell us everything we would like to know. Why, in fact, did Hashem choose this moment to demonstrate the exactitude of His judgment, even with those close to him?

Nadav and Avihu saw a fire descend from Heaven. Their souls were set aflame with love of Hashem. They sought to draw closer to Him by bringing their own flame. They consulted no one - not their father, not Moshe. Ironically, at the very moment Hashem chose for the tikkun of the chet of the egel, Nadav and Avihu committed a similar aveirah. Their immediate punishment brought home to the Bnei Yisrael the importance of seeking out the guidance of the zekeinim of every generation. This was demanded even of great people like Nadav and Avihu. Without their guidance and approval, nothing positive can come from even the good intentions of the rest of the nation.

Sources:

1. Based on Be'er Yosef, Vayikra 9:1-3
 2. Rashi, Vayikra 8:1
 3. Kuzari 1:97
 4. Ramban, Shemos 32:1
 5. Eichah 2:20
 6. Sanhedrin 6A
 7. Shalah
 8. Rashi, Vayikra 10:3
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