

BIG BULL OR LITTLE CALF

by Nechama Stampler

Big Bull Or Little Calf¹

This is the matter that you shall do for them to sanctify them to minister to me. Take one young bull and two unblemished rams.

Rashi: The significance of the young bull was that it would atone for the incident of the Golden Calf, a calf being a younger form of a bull.

Gur Aryeh: Why would we use a bull rather than a calf itself to atone for a sin committed with a calf?

Know that the calf was not a figure chosen at random, but had profound significance. Those responsible for the debacle of the eigel looked specifically to the bull for the image they wished to use for their avodah. They chose the bull because it was one of the four animals of the merkavah/chariot in the prophecy of Yechezkel.² (Since, as Chazal tell us, even the common folk were treated to fuller prophetic visions at the splitting of the Yam Suf than Yechezkel, they presumably had access to the imagery to which he was later treated.) In that prophecy, one of the four animals that bore Hashem's Throne was the bull. The people understood the single Throne to be a representation of the inscrutable Oneness of Hashem. This idea was so lofty, that it could not serve their need to connect with Him. But the Throne stood on a vehicle drawn by four animals. This implied that a vehicle was necessary to bring a humanly-graspable conception of Hashem to places remote from His majesty. The four animals represented the four directions of a world of physical dimension, not the ethereal non-dimensionality of a spiritual world. They would pull the vehicle, carrying the Throne to the corners of our world.

Moreover, the bull stood to the left, which always implies something of secondary importance. To those who trekked through the Wilderness, this meant that if any image could be teased out of the merkavah to serve alone, it would be the bull. They chose an eigel, a calf, rather than a bull, because they understood that any spiritual force does not have a full representation in the world of time and space, but only a weak shadow of the original. The bull of the prophetic vision was therefore reduced to a calf when it stood ready to serve as a stand-in for the original. The eigel performed as a junior version of the original, but in their minds, it stood for the bull.

While this explanation is more than satisfactory, there are a few gaping holes in the theory. If it were true, every korban connected with atonement for the sin of the Golden Calf would be a bull rather

than a calf. This is far from the truth. In fact, the parallel offerings of Aharon and the Jewish nation - at the time of their presentations during the inauguration of the mishkan - were both calves³ and not bulls.

Moshe's rank and role dictated the difference. Moshe was on a higher level; he also represented din, judgment, rather than the chesed of Aharon. For Moshe it was appropriate to use the more powerful image of the bull. The others would use the altered and weakened image of the calf.

Why all the duplication of atonement effort? If Moshe's earlier offering brought atonement, why would Aharon and the Bnei Yisrael bring korbanos to make the same statement? The answer is that atonement comes in steps. For seven days of the inauguration, Moshe was in charge, and performed the avodah. He served as a kohen, and his daily korban mentioned in our pasuk told his generation that Hashem had forgiven them. That, however, did not mean that Hashem was ready, as it were, to readmit them to the closeness of close interaction. Aharon would take their kaparah request to the next level through his avodah on the eighth day of the mishkan's inauguration.

Furthermore, it is a truism that moments of great spiritual accomplishment are fraught with danger, because the yetzer kora mounts the greatest resistance at those moments, never conceding ground without a good fight. It was no coincidence that Klal Yisrael plunged so deeply and suddenly at the precise moment that Hashem, as it were, handed the luchos to Moshe as the representation of having received the Torah. Klal Yisrael was particularly imperiled at that moment, and unfortunately lost the battle to the pushback of the yetzer kora. We can take away a principle from this. Moments of great spiritual triumph precipitate counter-activity by the Accuser. Past flaws and indiscretions become increasingly problematic. The appropriate antidote is atonement granted in advance by Hashem Himself.

This was the position that Klal Yisrael found itself in during the mishkan's inauguration - not once, but twice. The seven days positioned the kohanim to become appropriate masters of the avodah. The eighth day began the regular, continued operation of the mishkan. Each of these accomplishments would be resisted by the Soton. Each required kaparah for the gaping hole in the spiritual record of the people. Moshe's korban brought that kaparah during the seven days, while those of Aharon and the people brought kaparah independently needed because of the great milestone achieved on the eighth day.

We are still puzzled by the use of a bull - whether a young calf, or an older adult - to atone for the sin of the Golden Calf. The gemara⁴ tells us that golden vestments were banned from the inner avodah because "an accuser cannot become a defender." Gold stands in perpetual reminder of the sin of the Golden Calf. As an accuser, it cannot serve to help defend the Jewish people in their quest for forgiveness. The gemara says that an overlay of gold similarly invalidates a shofar. Yet in the days of the milu'im, bulls and calves play a role in securing atonement for the sin of the eigel!

We observe an obvious distinction between cases. An "accuser" like gold or a calf cannot generally be a suitable vehicle for forgiveness for unrelated transgressions. But where atonement is requested specifically for the sin of the golden calf, i.e. where they are used to achieve atonement for their own improper use in the past, they have a definite, desired role. When their purpose is not related to forgiveness at all but to some other function of the avodah, then the location makes a difference. They become invalid only in the holiest places in the interior of the mikdosh.

1. *Based on Gur Aryeh, Shemos 29:1; Tifferes Yisrael chap. 38; Netzach Yisrael chap. 2*
 2. *Yechezkel 1:10*
 3. *Vayikra 9:2-4*
 4. *Rosh Hashanah 26A*
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