

# PIPE DREAMS

*by Shlomo Katz*

## Parshas Ki Sisa

### Pipe Dreams

In this week's parashah, we read of the making of the Golden Calf. Many commentaries agree that the Golden Calf was never meant as an idol to be worshiped. Rather, writes R' Avraham Yitzchak Kilav shlita (formerly an instructor at Yeshivat Merkaz Ha'rav and Chief Judge of the Yerushalayim rabbinical court), it was meant to be a conduit for Hashem's goodness to flow to mankind. He explains:

The Prophets write that the image of a shor / ox appears on G-d's Throne. What does this mean; indeed, what does it mean that G-d has a "Throne"? Hashem's "Throne" refers to the fact that He manages the world, just as a human king sitting on the throne governs his kingdom. However, Hashem does not generally interact directly with His world, i.e., He does not randomly distribute His goodness to the world. Instead, there must be worthy recipients to act as conduits. Even if the worthy recipients are few--even if there is only one--Hashem's goodness can enter our world through them.

Naturally, Bnei Yisrael recognized that the world was sustained to a great degree through Moshe Rabbeinu's merit. Thus, when Moshe seemingly went missing, Bnei Yisrael felt the need to replace him with a new conduit for Hashem's goodness. Having seen the image of a shor on Hashem's "Throne," they believed that that would be a fitting conduit for Hashem's goodness. As noted, Hashem's "Throne" refers to the fact that He manages the world. The image of the shor on the "Throne" reflects the goodness that comes through working the land; thus, they thought that a conduit in the form of a shor would bring Hashem's goodness to them. However, this too was a sin, because the Jewish People do not need tangible images to connect to, and receive goodness from, Hashem. (Avnei Bareket)

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"Hashem spoke to Moshe, 'Go, descend -- for your people that you brought up from Egypt has become corrupt. They have strayed quickly from the way that I have commanded them: they

have made themselves a molten calf, prostrated themselves to it and sacrificed to it, and they said, "This is your god, O Israel, which brought you up from the land of Egypt"." (32:7-8)

R' Eliyahu Guttmacher z"l (1796-1874; Polish rabbi; early advocate of resettlement of Eretz Yisrael) writes that there were five sinful aspects to making the Golden Calf.

(1) It was a sin against Hashem. Even if it had been only a small sin, not a Golden Calf, how could a person sin against a Being that had done so much good for the person?

(2) It was a sin against Moshe. Previously we read (Shmot 14:31), "They had faith in Hashem and in Moshe, His servant." Now, suddenly, Bnei Yisrael refer to him casually as "this man," as we read (32:1), "This man Moshe who brought us up from the land of Egypt -- we do not know what became of him!"

(3) The timing was sinful, coming so soon after the Giving of the Torah.

(4) The act itself was sinful, abandoning Hashem in favor of a statue.

(5) Worst of all, man's nature is that, after he sins, he feels regret. Not so here, where they woke up the morning after making the Golden Calf to offer sacrifices and revel (see 32:6).

R' Guttmacher continues: All five of these sins are alluded to in our verse: "Go, descend -- for your people (1) that \*you\* brought up from Egypt has become corrupt. (3) They have strayed \*quickly\* from the way that (2) \*I have commanded\* them: (4) they have made themselves a \*molten calf,\* (5) prostrated themselves to it and sacrificed to it." We also see in this verse, R' Guttmacher writes, that Hashem places the tzaddik's honor before His own; thus, the insult to Moshe is listed before the other sins.

How did Moshe react? We read in Tehilim (106:23), "He said He would destroy them, had not Moshe, His chosen one, stood in the breach before Him to turn away His wrath from destroying." "His wrath," referring to G-d's anger, also could be read, "his wrath," referring to Moshe's anger. Moshe said to Hashem, "I will forgive the insult to me, and You forgive the insult to You."

Hashem responded, continues R' Guttmacher, "That will account for two of the five sins. What of the other three sins?"

To this Moshe answered (32:13), "Remember for the sake of Avraham, for the sake of Yitzchak, and for the sake of Yisrael [Yaakov] . . ." Why did he say "for the sake of" three times? Because each of the Patriarchs had a merit in which one of the three remaining sins could be forgiven. Avraham had fought idolatry; now, "they have made themselves a molten calf." Yitzchak did not react negatively when he was told \*suddenly\* that he would be offered as a sacrifice; now, "they have strayed \*quickly\*." Yaakov experienced relatively little joy in his lifetime; now, "the people sat to eat and drink, and they got up to revel." (Derushei V'chiddushei R' Eliyahu Guttmacher: Bet Rachel)

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"Then Hashem struck the people with a plague, because they had made the calf that Aharon had made." (32:35)

We read (Bereishit 50:25), "Yosef caused Bnei Yisrael to swear, saying, 'When Elokim will indeed remember you, then you must bring my bones up out of here'." The Midrash Tanchuma relates that the Egyptians placed Yosef's remains in a iron coffin, which they lowered to the bottom of the Nile (knowing that Bnei Yisrael swore not to leave Egypt without those remains). In order to retrieve Yosef's remains, Moshe Rabbeinu wrote the words "AleI Shor" / "Arise, ox" on a tablet and threw it into the Nile. ("Shor" is a nickname for Yosef, a play on Bereishit 49:22.) Subsequently, continues the midrash, when Aharon threw the gold that he had collected from Bnei Yisrael into the furnace, others threw that same tablet into the fire, and the Golden Calf (an young ox) came out.

In light of this midrash, writes R' Shlomo Kluger z"l (1785-1869; rabbi of Brody, Galicia), we can resolve a difficulty presented by our verse. The pasuk says that Hashem struck the people with a plague "because they had made the calf that Aharon had made." Who made the calf--Aharon or "the people"? The answer is that each played a part: Aharon threw the gold into the furnace, but "the people" caused a calf to emerge. Indeed, it was to protect Aharon's honor, so that no one would think that he personally fashioned the calf, that "the people" were harshly punished by being struck with a plague. (Chochmat Ha'Torah)

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"Hashem said to Moshe, 'Carve for yourself two stone Tablets like the first ones, and I shall inscribe on the Tablets the words that were on the first Tablets, which you shattered'." (34:1)

R' Moshe Chaim Ephraim of Sudlikov z"l (1748-1800; grandson of the Ba'al Shem Tov z"l) interprets this verse as a message to every Jew:

Every Jew is rooted to, and has a letter in, the Torah. When a Jew sins, he damages that connection. He "shatters" his letter and causes its "light" to darken, which in turn manifests itself in negative consequences in our material world. On the other hand, when he does teshuvah, he rekindles that light.

All of this is alluded to here: "'Go, descend -- for your people . . . has become corrupt." When people act corruptly, the world's level descends. But, one can carve for himself new letters; he can rekindle the light of the letters that he shattered. Indeed, this is for man's own benefit, as it says, "Carve \*for yourself\* . . .," for our Sages have taught that when a person repents because of love for Hashem, all of his sins turn to merits. (Degel Machaneh Ephraim)

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## Thirty Days Before Pesach . . .

R' Eliezer Ashkenazi z"l (1513-1585; rabbi in Egypt, Italy and Poland) asks: How could the benevolent G-d enslave an entire people (the Jewish People enslaved in Egypt) with no fault on their part? Indeed, writes R' Ashkenazi, it seems that our Sages themselves asked this question in the Gemara (Nedarim 32a): "Why was Avraham Avinu punished and his descendants were enslaved in Egypt for 210 years?"

In response to this question, three Sages in the Gemara each suggests a sin that Avraham committed. Notwithstanding, writes R' Ashkenazi, it is impossible to say that the enslavement in Egypt was decreed because of a sin committed by Avraham. After all, Rabbi Yochanan, one of the three Sages who says that Avraham sinned, also says that the Splitting of the Sea after the Exodus was built into Creation at the time that water was created. This implies that Bnei Yisrael's enslavement in Egypt and the Exodus were part of the grand plan for the world, not merely a reaction to some sin of Avraham's.

Moreover, at the Brit Bein Ha'betarim, the vision in which Hashem informed Avraham of the coming enslavement, Hashem began by speaking lovingly to Avraham (Bereishit 15:1), "Fear not, Avram, I am a shield for you; your reward is very great." These do not sound like words spoken by One who is about to inform Avraham of a forthcoming punishment for a sin!

Rather, explains R' Ashkenazi, the Gemara is not suggesting that the enslavement in Egypt was punishment for a sin. Indeed, it was good news to Avraham that his descendants would be enslaved. Avraham devoted his entire life to proclaiming the truth of Hashem's existence, and the only reason he wanted children was so that Hashem could continue to be proclaimed through them. And, just as the spiritual soul can attain perfection only by descending for a time to the physical body, so the Jewish People could not attain its perfection--which is attained when Hashem is revealed through it--except by descending into a land of impurity and black magic, i.e., Egypt. This is the purpose, as well, of our current dispersion throughout the world; now, there is virtually no nation that has not heard of the G-d of the Jews, writes R' Ashkenazi.

And what of the Gemara quoted above? That Gemara is asking a different question. Hashem told Avraham (Bereishit 15:13), "Know with certainty that your offspring shall be aliens in a land not their own, they will serve them, and they will oppress them four hundred years." This implies that Bnei Yisrael would be aliens in a land not their own \*for 200 years\* and they will serve their hosts and be oppressed by them \*for 200 years\*. Thus, asks the Gemara, "Why was Avraham Avinu punished and his descendants were \*enslaved\* in Egypt \*for 210 years\*?" To that question, the Gemara answers that Avraham sinned. (Ma'asei Hashem)

The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ('lehagdil Torah u'leha'adirah'), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at **Torah.org** start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page.

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