

THE GOLDEN CALF: ALILLUS AND KAVSHEI D'RACHMANAH

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

He took all of it from them, and with an engraving tool formed it and made a molten calf. (Shemos 32:4)

On a Pshat level, the golden calf was formed just as any other gold ornament might have been formed. After collecting and then melting down all of the gold they fashioned it into an image of a calf.

On the level of Sod, the process was far more mystical and complicated. The Midrash says that though Aharon had thrown the gold into the furnace and taken an engraving tool to form it after, two Egyptian sorcerers, the sons of Bilaam who had left Egypt with the Erev Rav, had used black magic to transform the gold into a calf.

Michah, who had smuggled an idol out of Egypt, provided the mystical finishing touches.

The story of the calf actually began long before the Jewish people even reached Har Sinai, with the death of Yosef. Yosef, on his deathbed, had made his brothers swear that they would not leave Egypt without his bones for reburial in Eretz Yisroel. Knowing this, and wanting to prevent his descendants from leaving Egypt, the Egyptians placed Yosef's body in a metal coffin and submerged it at the bottom of the Nile River.

When it came time to finally leave Egypt 139 years later it was Moshe Rabbeinu's responsibility to locate and retrieve Yosef's remains. The first part of this mission required knowledge of where the Egyptians had submerged his coffin, but that had occurred six decades before Moshe had even been born.

Fortunately for the Jewish people Serach bas Asher was still alive, and she remembered the location of Yosef's coffin.

Taking Moshe there, all that remained to fulfill the vow and continue with the redemption was to surface the metal coffin, something that without modern technology, was not so easy to do. This was especially so for a single person.

Moshe Rabbeinu though was not just any single person. He knew Kabbalah and he used it to complete his mission. Inscribing the words, "Arise Ox! Arise Ox!" on a metal plate, he then threw it into the river. It caused Yosef's metal coffin to float to the surface, and Moshe took what he came for and rejoined the Jewish nation in its final preparations for leaving Egypt.

However, as Divine Providence would have it the spectacle had not gone unnoticed. Rather, Michah,

the child Moshe saved years ago saw him perform the miracle and recovered the plate for himself. He took it with him out of Egypt and when the gold was thrown into the furnace he tossed the plate in as well. Consequently, a miracle happened there as well, except that this time a live, bleating, and animate golden ox "arose."

The rest is history, an often long and torturous history. What gave the plate its power? The Arizal explains this, based upon a story in the Talmud:

Rebi Chiya bar Abba became ill and Rebi Yochanan went in to visit him. He said to him, "Do you accept your suffering?" He replied, "Neither the [suffering] nor the reward for it." He said to him, "Give me your hand." He gave him his hand and he rose. (Brochos 5b)

On the surface it seems as if Rebi Yochanan was simply a healer, with the ability to miraculously cure Rebi Chiya. He might have taken his hand merely as a courtesy to a patient who is in the process of recovering from a debilitating illness. The Arizal explains otherwise:

The Name Yud-Lamed-Yud is the second Name of the Names of Ayin-Bais, and with it Moshe raised the coffin of Yosef, as explained on the verse, "The ox knows its Master" (Yeshayahu 1:3). This Name is also used to raise the sick from illness. Hence, it is alluded to in the first letters of each of the words, "yehiv lei yadei—he gave him his hand," whose initials are, Yud-Lamed-Yud, and therefore he arose. Thus, one must say to a sick person, "Yehiv lei yadei," after which the sick person should give him his hand. The one making him rise should say to him, "And he gave him his hand and he arose" while contemplating the initial letters of the Name. (Sha'ar Ma'amrei Chazal, Brochos, Ch. 1, 5b)

It is understandable that something as holy as a Name of God can be used to miraculously heal, especially someone as righteous as Rebi Chiya. The question is, how could it have been used for something so impure and destructive as the golden calf? Furthermore, why should Moshe and Aharon be held responsible for its creation if it was the result of black magic?

The answer has to do with a concept called, "Alillus," mentioned in the Midrash:

Go and see the deeds of God, awesome in His deeds toward mankind. (Tehillim 66:5)

Go and see how, when The Holy One, Blessed is He, created the world, He created the Angel of Death on the first day as well . . . Man was made on the sixth day and yet death was blamed on him. To what is this similar? To a man who decides that he wants to divorce his wife and writes her a bill of divorce. He then goes home holding it, and looks for a pretext—alillah—to give it to her. He tells her,

"Prepare me something to drink."

She does and taking it he says, "Here is your divorce." She asks him, "Why?" He tells her, "Leave my

house; you made me a warm drink."

She says, "Were you able to know that I would prepare you a warm drink in the future that you wrote a bill of divorce in advance and came home with it?"

So too did Adam say to The Holy One, Blessed is He, "Master of the Universe, before You created the world Torah was with You for 2,000 years . . . What is written in it, 'This is the law when a man will die in a tent' (Bamidbar 19:14). If You had not established death for Your creations would You have written this? Rather, You want to blame me for death!"

It also says the same thing with respect to Yosef . . . Rav Yudan said, "The Holy One, Blessed is He, wanted to carry out the decree of, 'Know that you shall surely be [strangers], etc.' (Bereishis 15:13), and arranged for Ya'akov to love Yosef [more than his brothers]. This way the brothers would hate Yosef and sell him to the Arabs, and they would all go down to Egypt . . ." This is what is meant by "awesome in His deeds." (Tanchuma, Vayaishev 4)

As Adam HaRishon pointed out, from the beginning history has never been straightforward. In fact very often it even seems convoluted, causing many to question Divine Providence and others to give up on it. This has resulted in all kinds of "golden calves throughout history.

If anything, though, it should remind us that as much as we understand about God and the way He runs His world, there is a lot more that we do not understand. As the prophet Yeshayahu told Chizkiah HaMelech, this makes it impossible to second-guess God:

[God] brought suffering to Chizkiah and told Yeshayahu, "Go and visit the sick," as it says, *"In those days Chizkiah became ill to the point of death; and Yeshayahu the son of Amotz, the prophet, came and said to him, 'So says God, Lord of Hosts: Command your house for you shall die and not live.'"* (Yeshayahu 38:1).

"Why do I deserve such a severe punishment?" Chizkiah asked.

"Because, you have not had children," Yeshayahu answered him.

"But I saw through prophecy that I will have evil children," [Chizkiah explained].

"What business have you with kavshei d'Rachmanah—mysteries of God?" Yeshayahu questioned. (Brochos 10a)

Alillus. Kavshei d'Rachmanah. These are two integral parts of Jewish history that defy human understanding. Appreciating, and more importantly, accepting this and remaining loyal to God and Torah in spite of them, is the only way to avoid making "golden calves" of our own.

Text

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