

# LET THE COW COME AND CLEAN UP THE MESS LEFT BY THE CALF

*by Rabbi Yissocher Frand*

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These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 496, Tallis: Bringing It Home On Shabbos. Good Shabbos!

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## **Let The Cow Come And Clean Up The Mess Left By The Calf**

I would like to share the following beautiful idea about the Aveyra [sin] of the Golden Calf, taken from an essay by Rav Avigdor Nevinsal, the Rav of Jerusalem's Old City.

The story of the Golden Calf, which occurred only a few months after the Exodus from Egypt and the splitting of the Red Sea, and only a few weeks after the Revelation on Mount Sinai, is one of the most perplexing episodes in the Torah. How did Klal Yisrael [The Jewish People], who had so recently reached such spiritual heights, come to commit such an act? The answer to this question lies in the following explanation.

Chazal teach that the Parah Adumah [Red Heifer] provides atonement for the Chet haEgel [Sin of the Calf]. The Sages use the metaphor "Let the mother (cow) come and clean up the mess of her child (calf)." There is far more symbolism implicit in this statement than just the cow-calf relationship. Chazal are saying that there is something inherent in the nature of Parah Adumah that is a direct antidote and atonement to what the Chet haEgel was all about. The challenge lies in uncovering this connection. What does Parah Adumah have to do with Chet haEgel?

Tractate Parah deals extensively with the process of preparation of the ashes of the Parah Adumah. One who has even superficially learned these Mishnayos, detailing the laws of preparation of the Parah Adumah, is impressed with the measures the Rabbis took to ensure that the Parah Adumah was always made with the highest standard of purity ("al taharas hakodesh").

Walls and barriers were built between the people involved in the preparation of the Parah Adumah and any type of tumah [impurity]. The entire process was built with safe guards and fail-safe apparatus to make sure that no tumah would ever come in contact with the people involved in preparing the ashes to be used in the "sprinkling ritual" that purified those who had come in contact

with the dead. This was carried to such an extent that the children used to draw the water for the Parah Adumah mixture were born in special locations and were guarded throughout their childhood to ensure that they never accidentally came in contact with tumah.

There is however one anomaly to this entire process. The Mishneh says that the Kohen who actually burned the Parah Adumah to create the ashes was made to have the status of a Tevul Yom [Parah 3:7]. This means that he became impure, he immersed himself in a mikvah, and all he needed to do was wait for nightfall to regain the status of being tahor [ritually pure].

Regarding all other sacrifices, a Tevul Yom is not allowed to bring the offering - because he is not yet fully tahor. Our first instinct would be to assume that certainly a Tevul Yom could not have anything to do with the preparation of the Parah Adumah. However, not only was a Kohen who was a Tevul Yom ALLOWED to prepare the Parah Adumah, but ironically they INSISTED that every Kohen who ever was involved in the burning preparation of the Parah Adumah first be made into a Tevul Yom.

This insistence was based on Rabbinical exegesis that a Kohen was allowed to burn the Parah Adumah. In fact, it was for this reason that the Rabbis went to extremes in the other matters relating to the preparation of the Parah. Lest people think that one does not need to be meticulous with matters of purity and impurity in preparing the Parah (as indicated by the fact that a Tevul Yom can burn the Parah even though he cannot offer any other sacrifice), the Rabbis decided they must go 'overboard' so to speak, in the other matters of preparation, to counteract such a notion.

The issue of the validity of the Rabbinical exegesis allowing a Kohen Tevul Yom to burn the Parah Adumah was a major dispute between the Perushim [Pharisees] and the Tzedukim [Sadducees] during the time of the Mishneh and Gemara. The Tzedukim interpreted the Torah literally, denying the validity of the Oral Tradition and of Rabbinic exegesis.

The Tosefta in Tractate Parah says that in the time of the Second Temple, when many Kohanim Gedolim [High Priests] were corrupt and at times were even Tzedukim, there was an incident of a Tzedukee Kohen Gadol, who intended to prepare a Parah Adumah "the correct way" without allowing himself to be made a Tevul Yom. The Rabbis forced him to become Tameh and then ensured that he went to a Mikveh. Instead of subsequently burning the Parah Adumah as a Tevul Yom, the Tzedukee Kohen Gadol stalled until it was already nighttime. Since the Parah could not be burned at night, he said that he would do it the next day. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai personally woke this Kohen the next morning and again made him Tameh and again made him go to the Mikveh, ensuring that he in fact burned the Parah in the state of Tevul Yom, against his intention and against his original plan.

The Tosefta concludes that this Tzedukee Kohen Gadol threatened Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai that he would get back at him "when I get the opportunity". Three days later, however, he died. All this illustrates the pitched battle that existed in Talmudic times between the Perushim and the Tzedukim

regarding the Parah Adumah procedures.

Parah Adumah does not only represent the quintessential chok [incomprehensible command] of the Torah. It also represents the quintessential example of a law where one's common sense reasoning needs to be nullified in the face of Rabbinic exegesis and Rabbinic enactments. Parah Adumah is the prime example of a law directing us to "blindly" follow the Torah and the Rabbis, despite our lack of understanding.

Now let us return to Parshas Ki Tisa and the Aveyra of the Golden Calf.

A case could be made that the action of the Jews when they worshipped the Golden Calf was really not their fault. Picture the following. Let us say a father takes his ten-year-old son by airplane to Minneapolis, Minnesota to Mall America - the largest shopping mall in the world. It is possible to spend a week in that mall and not see every store. Imagine if the son is overwhelmed by the shopping mall, and imagine that the father then disappears from sight.

The boy is in a strange place in an overwhelming situation. He does not know anyone there. Would it be any wonder if the petrified child panicked? Would it be any wonder if the child went over to a perfect stranger and said: "be my father"?

This is how Klal Yisrael must have felt in the Wilderness. They were taken out into the dessert. They must have felt that they were literally in the middle of nowhere. They were totally dependent on one man - Moshe Rabbeinu - who now disappeared. Moshe had made sure there was water. He made sure there was mann. He made sure they had protection from the elements. He was the entire conduit between them and the Almighty. Without Moshe, they panicked.

Is it any wonder they sought a new intermediary between themselves and G-d? This is the way it had always been. We can understand perfectly how they must have felt. Making a Golden Calf in lieu of a father figure is almost a logical and rational reaction on their part, given the circumstances.

What then was the 'complaint' against Klal Yisrael? Where did they go wrong?

The complaint against them is based on the fact that before Moshe ascended Mount Sinai he told them explicitly: "If you have a problem, go to Aharon and Chur" [Shemos 24:14]. The analogy to Mall America is not 100% accurate. A more parallel case would be if the father brought along to Mall America the ten-year-old son's older 17 year-old brother and told his younger son, "if you can't find me, go to your older brother - he'll know what to do."

What happened? The people in fact went to Chur. They told them "We have this brilliant idea. It's called the Golden Calf. We'll create one to be our new leader." Chur told them it was a horrible idea and forbade them to act upon it. The result was that the people killed Chur. Why? Because they believed it was a good idea. They then went to Aharon and repeated their idea to him. Aharon saw what they had done to Chur, and for whatever calculation he had in responding positively, out of fear for his life, agreed to help them with their plan.

The mistake of Klal Yisrael was that they ruled in this matter on their own without consulting the proper authorities. Such a revolutionary step as replacing Moshe Rabbeinu with a Golden Calf should under no circumstances be contemplated without first asking a "shaylah" [Rabbinic query] and without being prepared to abide by an authoritative "teshuva" [response] to such a "shaylah".

They felt that there was no need to ask a serious "shaylah". "It makes sense to us," they argued. It is true that the Golden Calf involved the Aveyra of idolatry, but it also involved another very fundamental flaw. A person must have the awareness that there are certain things he cannot do on his own. There are things about which he must ask a "shaylah" and many times there are situations where he must nullify his own opinion and understanding in the face of another person's superior opinion.

Now it makes eminent sense why the Parah Adumah should atone for the Aveyra of the Golden Calf. The Chet HaEgel was an instance where the people did not ask and were not willing to nullify their own opinion. Rather, they went off on their own, using their own power of reasoning. This is what the Tzedukim were always doing. "I can read the Torah. I can figure out what it says to do in the Torah. I do not need any Rabbi to explain to me what I am supposed to do." This is exactly the Aveyra of those who built the Golden Calf.

We now understand what our Sages mean when they say let the Cow come and clean up the mess the Calf made. Let history not repeat itself. Let the Parah Adumah, which not only represents nullifying one's understanding to that of the Almighty, but also represents nullifying one's understanding to that of the Rabbis, come as the antidote for the spiritually self-reliant attitude that led to the creation of the Golden Calf.

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This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Ki Sisa are provided below:

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