

PARSHAS KI SISA

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Tamari

'So I said to them, who has gold? They removed it and gave it to me. I threw it into the fire and this calf emerged?'

Aaron wanted to understand the essence of the act of Israel that led them into error and caused them to do something that was contrary to their nature. He knew that Israel was not yet a unified entity; something that would be possible only when they entered the Promised Land. Meanwhile, Moses who was counted as the whole of Israel was the unifying factor. At the time as Israel made their error, the Luchot were partially in G-d's hands and partially in the hands of Moshe. They had the din of 'shnaim ochazim' that according to the Maharal, is the essence of a unifying connection. In his absence they were left without being united. Casting the gold into the fire and turning it a unified mass would give them the unity they needed, so actually it was in principle, a good idea. However, Aaron did not consider the 'eirev rav' and their effect on Israel. The Gemara (Sanhedrin, 88b) teaches us that one becomes a 'zaken mamrei' by adding a 5th species to the lulav. The Avnei Nezer explains that it destroys the unity needed for the lulav. So too, the addition of the 'eirev rav' was such an addition that invalidated the unity of the whole Israel. When Aaron took gold from the 'eirev rav' as well, their gold destroyed the unity he wanted to achieve.

There is however another perspective to the 'maaseh haeigel', that can be seen in Aaron's casting the gold into the fire.

We do not talk of chet haeigel, because it was not a sin but rather an error. Their idea was to serve G-d and to worship only Him. The Kuzari says that it was as though they saw the roof of a temple to idolatry and thought it was a Bet Knesset, so they bowed down in worship. Even though it was wrong, their purpose was 'leshem shamayim'. So the purpose of passing the gold through fire was to purify it, thereby allowing only the holy motive of their worship and their holy service to remain. Whenever we have actions that are for the sake of heaven, then although they are done in sin, there is a purification process where the sin is removed and the holy purpose is achieved. This is like the effect of purifying vessels, where the impurity is removed and the vessel becomes kosher.

We see this in the case of the pans of the 250 leaders of Israel, who offered incense during the revolt of Korach. The same fire that consumed them, naturally scoured the vessels as well. While they were wrong in what they did, their actions were motivated by a deep desire only to serve G-d. So the fire, while destroying the impurity in the vessels, left the holiness of their intentions, so that the pans could be used for the sacred purpose of coating the altar.

Moshe by smelting and grinding the eigel and then adding it to the water and making Israel drink it, did something akin to the water given to the Sotah (Rashi). The Avnei Nezer commentated that the water in the case of the Sotah elevated her to great heights of spirituality, seeing as how it was given by the Cohen who was an 'ish chesed'. The water contained dust from the floor of the Mishkan and the ashes of the holy words. If she was guilty, it revealed her sin. However, the text tells us that even when she did not commit adultery, she was still a tamei due to some other thing. In this case the water cleansed her of that impurity. The water that Moshe made Israel drink revealed the sin of the small minority who meant to worship an idol. Most of Israel, however, was only guilty of not protesting their actions, so the water cleansed them of their minor sin.

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