

# Parashat Ki Tisa כִּי תִּשָּׂא

Torah: Exodus 30:11–34:35

Haftarah: 1 Kings 18:1–39

## Did Israel Sin?

### General Overview

The parasha this week is a busy one. It begins with establishing Israel's first taxation system, then continues with teaching about Bezalel, Shabbat, the golden calf, and finishes with Moshe's face shining after the Lord gives him a second copy of the Torah.

The major feature of this parasha is the account of the new family's first serious difficulty — the golden calf incident. As we explore *Ki Tisa* we shall see how the Lord, the Husband, handles His unfaithful spouse. At the end, we shall get a glimpse not only of Moshe's shining face, but also of the remarkable grace of a Husband who loves His wife unconditionally.

### Exposition

Our method of approach will be to look at this family in terms of

- I. Their Special Times
- II. Their Special Need
- III. Their Special People

In this excerpt from Parasha Ki Tisa, we will focus on section II, Their Special Need.

### II. Their Special Need

We now leave the subject of Shabbat to see how the Lord gives the Torah to Moshe. Our text says, "When the LORD finished speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the Testimony, the tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of God." (31:18) Thus, we have written revelation directly from God! If only we can rest here and just bask in the thought that we have an all knowing, all-powerful, all-present eternal God who created everything and who took the time to write out for sinful people some of His thoughts and desires. Surely this is a demonstration of grace!

However, how gracious is The Eternal One, really? How would God act when those to whom He gave this revelation, sin? This is the crux of the matter in Exodus 32 and until the end of the parasha. Thus, we move now to the story of the incident of the golden calf.

#### A. The Problems

##### 1. Did Israel Sin?

There seem to be differences of opinion among various commentators as to what exactly constituted Israel and Aaron's sin. It seems, however, that there should not be any confusion because Psalm 106:20 clearly states, "They

exchanged their Glory for the image of a bull, which eats grass.” According to Nechama Leibowitz, “The Psalmist described the golden calf as an instance of idolatry, plain and simple.”<sup>1</sup> According to Leibowitz, Israel broke the commandment against idolatry.

However, not all see it that way. Yehudah HaLevi, for example, says that the people of Israel

were prompted to ask for a tangible object of worship in the manner of the other nations without repudiating God who had brought them out of Egypt, merely requesting it should be placed before them to gaze upon when they related the wonders of their God...<sup>2</sup>

Thus, HaLevi seems to be saying that Israel did not break the first commandment, but the second one. In addition, there are others who suggest that the sin of the golden calf was not really committed by Israel *per se*, but was done by those among Israel who were part of the mixed multitude that came out of Egypt. The *ArtScroll Chumash*, for example, states it like this,

Even the Jews who truly worshipped it as an idol were a tiny minority of only three thousand people... and even they were the Egyptian rabble... that flocked to join the Jews when they left Egypt.<sup>3</sup>

This interpretation is based on the words in 32:4 where, after the gold was fashioned into the calf, an element of the crowd said, “This is your god, O Israel,”<sup>4</sup> as if to say, “*We* are the Egyptians who made this for *you* Israel.”

There seem to be elements of truth in the understanding of both Leibowitz and HaLevi, but we do not accept the interpretation put forth by the *ArtScroll Chumash*. For one, it seems that even if the majority of Israel was not involved, nonetheless, those who disagreed could have attempted to put a stop to it. Secondly, the text indicates that the Lord held *Israel* accountable when it says in 32:7–8, “Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Go down, because *your* people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt’” (italics ours). Moshe’s people were not the Egyptians, but the Israelites.

## 2. Did Aaron Sin?

Then there was Aaron’s involvement. How guilty was he? The text seems to place at least some responsibility on him. For it says in 32:25, “Moses saw that the people were running wild and that Aaron had let them get out of control and so become a laughing stock of their enemies.” In addition, if Aaron was not guilty, the Lord would not have said to Moses that He would make of him (Moshe) a great nation (32:10). He would have included Aaron as well.

However, the sages seem to stray away from recognizing Aaron’s guilt in this sin. Their reasoning says that

It is inconceivable that Aaron could have created an idol, even if he had been threatened with death. The Torah requires a Jew to give up his life rather than worship idols, can one believe that God’s chosen anointed Kohen Gadol would fail to withstand a test that countless thousands of Jews have withstood over the centuries?<sup>5</sup>

There are others who also share this opinion, but this assumes too much. It assumes, first, that Aaron, unlike any other man, was not capable of idolatry. It assumes that God’s choice of Aaron was because he deserved it by being so

righteous. It also assumes that Aaron was the anointed High Priest, when Aaron as yet may not even have known what a High Priest was! Most of all it assumes that Aaron knew the Torah, when Moshe had not yet revealed it to Israel.

### ***B. A Proposal from a Professor***

As you can probably tell, this commentator is compelled from the plain meaning of the text to believe that Israel wilfully chose to create an idol, for whatever reasons, and Aaron wilfully chose to accept their request and participated in this gross idolatry.

Along these same lines, Nechama Leibowitz provides a brilliant commentary on the golden calf incident. She begins by asking,

How was it conceivable that the generation which had witnessed the miracles of Egypt and had scaled the loftiest heights of communion with God... could descend to the depths of pagan idolatry and make a calf?"<sup>6</sup>

She, then, proceeds to cite the sages and their opinions about who was guilty and what was their sin. In the end, however, she contends that the sages had not given the answer to her question. She provides us with her own provocative answer. We quote her at length,

Evidently the Torah wished to impress on us for all time that such a thing was conceivable. The assumption that people who have scaled the loftiest heights of Divine communion are not capable of descending into the depths of depravity is without foundation. . . .One single religious experience, however profound, was not capable of changing the people from idol worshipers into monotheists. Only a prolonged disciplining in the precepts of the Torah directing every moment of their existence could accomplish that. The all-embracing character of the Torah's observances regulating the individual's relations with himself, family, and society constitute the surest guarantee against moral relapses.<sup>7</sup>

Well said, Professor Leibowitz! At this juncture, we may well remember the teaching of James in his letter in the Brit Hadasha also confirms this when he says, in essence, that real faith always issues forth into a godly walk. (See James' argument in chapter 2.)

Seeing that Israel was thus engaged in pagan idolatry, how did God respond to the grave situation? Israel was in a critical situation with a great need of Divine mercy. Would it be given?

### ***C. Consequences***

If there is any one element that can destroy a marriage, it is adultery. No matter how strong the marriage, any slip into adultery has dire consequences. It is the same with God and His bride Israel. In the Tanakh, whenever Israel went after other gods, it was often referred to as adultery, such as in the first three chapters of Hosea.

Because of the golden calf incident, God had no choice but to show Israel that there were consequences to their spiritual adultery. After all, it says in 34:14 that God is a jealous God. (But here the husband/wife analogy breaks down a little.) For God's just action was to take the lives of all who either participated in the sin or did not want to be "for the Lord" (32:26). A human spouse obviously cannot, nor should do that!) As a result, about 3000 people were killed (32:28). Not only

was there a huge loss of life for the nation at this point, but we are also told in 32:35 that the Lord struck the people with a plague for making the golden calf. Any marriage that suffers from adultery has various “plagues” to deal with!

#### ***D. What Grace!***

One would expect that there would be at least some negative consequences when adultery occurs. We all agree that God was justified in taking the lives of those that sinned against Him. However, why did He not just do away with the whole nation because of their quick and decisive rebelliousness toward Him. There is no other way to explain His actions without using the words *grace* and *mercy*! In this section, His grace and mercy are demonstrated in several ways.

First, God listened to the pleas of a fervent intercessor, Moshe. Next, He relented of His expressed intent to destroy Israel. Then, He even gave Israel a second copy of the Tablets after Moshe destroyed the first set. Along the way, He taught and strengthened Israel’s leader, Moshe. The most significant act of grace however, was that He did not reject His wife, Israel.

In this marriage, there would be more troubles, sometimes periods of estrangement, and even separation. Divorce however, was never an option for this “couple.” In this particular relationship, all the problems stemmed from Israel, not God. Yet as far as the Husband was concerned, He never considered divorce or permanent separation an option for solving their problems. It simply was out of the question. Perhaps the clearest place in the Tanakh which would affirm this is in Jeremiah 31:35–37:

Thus says the Lord who gives the sun for light by day and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night; who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar, the Lord of Hosts is His name. If this fixed order departs from before Me, says the Lord, then the offspring of Israel shall also cease from being a nation before Me forever. If the heavens above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth searched out below, then I will also cut off all the offspring of Israel for all that they have done, declares the Lord (NASB).

Through the golden calf story, Israel demonstrated that she had great needs. She needed teaching from the Torah to help guard herself against idolatry and unfaithfulness. She also needed discipline when she did become unfaithful to the Holy One. She also needed an abundance of grace and mercy from her Father in Heaven. She needed Him to forgive her and to bring her into a personal relationship with Him on an individual level. God was ready and willing to meet all of those needs.

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<sup>1</sup> Nechama Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot*, 552.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 550.

<sup>3</sup> The ArtScroll Chumash, *op. cit.*, 493.

<sup>4</sup> The NIV reads "...your gods...." The word in question is *eloim*. This word in Hebrew is plural. Usually it refers to God. However, sometimes, such as in this passage, it can refer to beings other than the one true God. When it speaks of foreign deities we might expect *elohim* to be translated in the plural as the NIV does. However, in this case the Israelites were worshipping only one false god, the golden calf. Hence, *elohim* should be translated in the singular, *god*, as do most other translations.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 493.

<sup>6</sup> Leibowitz, *op. cit.*, 547.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 555–556.