



ALSHICH

INSIGHTS FOR THE SHABBOS TABLE

ספר שמות

פרשת כי תשא

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HOW THE ALSHICH UNDERSTANDS *CHEIT HA'EGEL*

How could the Jewish people, who had just reached such a tremendous level of holiness and closeness to Hashem at *Har Sinai*, have fallen so low as to worship a golden calf?

It is undoubtedly true that being surrounded by wicked people is likely to bring a person to sin. Thus *Shemos Rabbah* 43:7 tells us that when the Jewish people committed this sin, Moshe told Hashem He shouldn't be surprised, comparing them to a young man whose father gave him a perfume shop in a street full of harlots. When he adopted an immoral lifestyle his father became enraged but his adviser told him it was his fault, since he had given him a profession that drew him to this immorality. Similarly, when the Jewish people were still in their 'youth,' Moshe said, "You brought them to Egypt, a place of immorality and idol worship, and they learned from their wicked neighbors." This is even more true when we consider that even after they left Egypt they continued to be in the company of evildoers, namely, the multitudes of the *eirev rav* who departed with them and acted as their adversaries.

Our Sages (*Avodah Zarah* 4b-5a) had a different explanation for how the Jewish people could have committed such a terrible sin. They said that they did not deserve that such a thing should happen to them, but it happened so that if a whole community sins, "We can tell them, 'Look at the Jewish people after the Golden Calf.'"

By this they meant that a community should never despair of doing *teshuvah*, thinking that Hashem will never forgive them. They should be consoled and encouraged by those who were greater than they and still did not manage to avoid sinning yet Hashem forgave them after they did *teshuvah*, so they, too, can repent and be forgiven.

However, it seems strange that Hashem should have made a whole community sin just to help those who would transgress in the future. Furthermore, if they indeed sinned just to be example to later generations but through no fault of their own, they should not be blamed for what they did. Yet we see that if it were not for Moshe's intervention before Hashem, the entire Jewish people would have been wiped out instead of just those who sinned.

What was bothering the Sages was that normally Hashem saves *tzaddikim* from committing a sin, so why did He not stop the Jewish people from sinning with the Golden Calf? Furthermore, how could it be possible that the Jewish people, who had become a holy purified nation, lacked sufficient merit to be saved from sinning?

A possible answer might be a different principle found in *Chullin* 7a: that "one transgression generates another transgression." This means that even a relatively mild sin can lead a person to commit a much more serious sin. Based on this principle, one might say that the Jewish people must have sinned in some

way before the episode with the Golden Calf and that this was why Hashem did not save them. The previous sin must have led to this more serious sin, and their Divine protection had been removed. In this sense, one might have said that they in fact deserved what happened to them, because of what they had done wrong previously. It was in order to refute this false explanation that our Sages said that Bnei Yisrael did not deserve what happened to them. Rather, Hashem did not take affirmative action to stop them from sinning as He normally would have – leaving them open to the vagaries of their own free choice – in order to teach later generations that *teshuvah* was always possible.

Bearing all these factors in mind, the Jewish people's responsibility for what they did with the Golden Calf is diminished. And this is even if we assume that they actually made the Golden Calf, which the Zohar (*Ki Sisa* 191a) rejects, considering the holy level Bnei Yisrael were on after Matan Torah. Rather, it says that on behalf of the *Satan*, the *eirev rav* used their impure powers of sorcery to transform the melted golden jewelry into the Golden Calf.

There were two occasions on which the *Satan* used every possible means to get man to sin. The first time was with Adam. Before Adam sinned, he was on an extremely high level, learning Torah directly from Hashem – just as all Jews will after the Resurrection of the Dead – and thus could have attained the ultimate eternal reward without having to die first. If things had continued that way, the *Satan* would have had no power over man. So he looked desperately for a helper and representative to cause Adam to sin, and found the snake. He attached himself to the snake, which injected the spiritual poison of the *Satan* into Chavah. Chavah then caused Adam to sin, they both fell to our present level of physicality, and it became necessary for man to die so that his body could be purified and eventually be reunited with the soul at the time of *Techiyas HaMeisim*. Meanwhile, in this world, the *Satan* would hold sway.

The second occasion was at *Har Sinai*, where Bnei Yisrael had experienced the revelation of Hashem's Presence and the spiritual pollution injected by the snake was cleansed from them. If they had managed to maintain this level until Moshe had returned with the *Luchos*, they would have permanently attained the level of Adam before the sin and been freed from the Angel of Death/*Satan*, for they would no longer have needed to die in order to attain their ultimate reward. This again endangered his whole existence, so he found a fitting representative through which to act – the *eirev rav*. He had to make sure that the Jewish people would not wait one or two more days to see if Moshe would return and that they would stumble before then. He therefore used the *eirev rav* to go on the attack by using the Golden Calf.

THE ALSHICH AND HIS COMMENTARY

The Alshich (1508 - 1600), was one of only five famous rabbis in Jewish history universally known by the title "HaKodosh" (the Holy one). He served on the same Beis Din as Rabbi Yosef Caro, author of the Shulchan Aruch. He simultaneously focuses on both the text as well as the context of a series of verses by listing a range of questions and then answering them all using one or two concepts.

These sheets are drawn from the Alshich on the Torah published by Feldheim and are in memory of Yental Bas Yitzchok, Mrs Jean Silkin. They seek to expand the spectrum of readers who can appreciate the Alshich's true greatness.

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