



The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

Ki Tissa. The Golden Calf. Why?

When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, the people gathered against Aaron and said to him, “Come, make us gods who shall go before us, for that man Moses, who brought us from the land of Egypt—we do not know what has happened to him.(Ex 32:1-2)

How did a people who loyally accepted the Torah at Mount Sinai end up worshipping a Golden Calf?

Rashi suggests that the people were just waiting for an opportunity to worship idols.

Make us gods: They wished to have many deities.

In his reading, the nation remained disciplined for forty days, but the moment they thought that Moses was dead, baser instincts took over. A chaotic spirit erupted in the camp, which sought out pagan ecstasy, even threatening the life of anyone who obstructed their worship.

Rabbi Yehuda Halevy in the Kuzari sees things differently. For him, it was a slow, controlled process:

The Israelites had been promised that something tangible would descend on them from God which they could follow...Moses, however, took forty days, although he had not taken any food, having only left them with the intention of returning the same day...they began to divide into parties and factions. Many views and opinions were expressed, till at last some decided to do like the other nations, and seek an object in which they could have faith, without, however, prejudicing the supremacy of God who had brought them out of Egypt. On the contrary, this [calf] was to be something to which they could point when relating the wonders of God...

The Kuzari suggests that the people were confused and disoriented. Moses seemed to have left the camp for a short time (see 24:12-18), but was now missing for forty days. They felt that they needed a focus, a means of connecting to God. After all, Moses had facilitated that connection. They did not reject God, nor was the calf an object of worship. Their sin lay in making a forbidden molten image. But in contradistinction to Rashi, this was far from an impulsive rush to idolatry; it was a gradual, even reluctant, attempt to find a way forward.

So please discuss:

When you read the story of the Golden Calf (you might wish to read verses 32:1-7 at the table):

- Which of these two options seems more correct?
- Why did the people go to Moses's brother if they wished to commit idolatry?
- Why did they bow to the calf?
- What do they mean when they say: "These are your gods Israel who brought you out from the land of Egypt"?

I recently came across an intriguing song by one of Israel's premiere rock artists, Ehud Banai. It comes from his iconic inaugural album, 30 years ago. Here is the text, translated:

Lyrics to Ehud Banai's עגל הזהב (Golden Calf)

We are here, in the heart of the desert,

Thirsty for living water
You're on top of the mountain
Above the clouds
There is no sign
No signal
So many days
In a closed circuit we circle
Around the Golden Calf.

There's no one to hit the rock
Who will give direction?
In the darkness fighting over every crumb
Around the Golden Calf

He isn't coming down from the mountain top
He isn't coming down to the people
They break into a crazy dance
Forgetting themselves
Dancing around the Golden Calf
Around the Golden Calf

Begging it: "Please don't leave us now;
Be for us as a father!"
An abandoned flock, dancing around it
Calling to it in vain
Golden Calf
Golden Calf

Please read this poem.

- Analyze its four stanzas and ask yourself what Banai is depicting when he retells this famous story.

Here is my attempt at a short analysis.

Stanza 1: The people want “living water”; in other words, they seek God. But Moses is gone. In the first instance, they retain their composure, a closed circuit – aimless but disciplined.

Stanza 2: Moses’s absence begins to take its toll. People turn against one another. They feel as if they are in the dark. They are feeling the stress of a leaderless, Godless reality. They cannot tread water endlessly.

Stanza 3: People suggest that Moses isn’t returning. The people panic. They feel abandoned. They turn to a “crazy dance” to forget themselves in a frenzy of movement, a primal beat, allowing the sensual to divert their attention from the disorientation.

Stanza 4: The people, who seek “living water,” allow themselves to proclaim the golden calf as a god. They know they call in vain, but they call anyhow. Any faith is better than no faith, a palliative preferable to pain. How can a person go through the frightening desert without a source of faith?

This is a poem which wonders what people do when they are abandoned by leadership, or when true religious answers fail them. At first they wait, experience confusion, but soon: 1. They turn to in-fighting 2. They resort to indulgent distraction 3. They find false gods that provide an alternative, even if it is a bogus alternative.

Like the Kuzari, it is a slow process. Like the Kuzari, they seek God in a true way. But like Rashi, they do end up fully engaged in false god-worship. We might recall the accusation of Jeremiah (2:13): “My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the source of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.”

In Banai’s song, the alternatives are there from the start. The Golden Calf is present in the opening stanza. But they avail themselves of that alternative only as a last resort.

We sometimes find people who do this. They have a human need for true answers, for spiritual depth, but instead they seek alternatives: material indulgence, shallow ideologies, and even fractious political in-fighting.

May we continue to seek the “living waters” even if it means we must at times live with doubt rather than certainty. Let the Golden Calf be a warning to us of the dire alternatives.

Shabbat Shalom!