

A significant portion of *parshat Ki Tisa* is spent describing the *chet haegel* and its aftermath. It is surprising that *Bnai Yisrael* were able to fall from the spiritual heights of revelation at Sinai to the depths of spiritual degradation embodied in their construction of the *egel hazahav*. Many of our *meforshim* explain the *chet haegel* as some indication of a shortcoming in *Bnai Yisrael*. However, we can learn a valuable lesson by explaining it as an indication of a shortcoming on the part of *Moshe Rabbenu*.

What do we know about *Moshe Rabbenu's* background? *Moshe* led what we might call a "charmed life." He was raised from an early age (three months old) as a prince in *Pharaoh's* palace. Although *Moshe* suffered a minor setback when he killed an Egyptian taskmaster, was found out, and ran away to Midian, his life in Midian was relatively easy compared to *Bnai Yisrael's* situation back in Egypt. After all, although *Moshe* was a shepherd, he was a shepherd for *Yitro*, the high priest of Midian, and married into the family. Finally, *Moshe* returned to Egypt to liberate *Bnai Yisrael*. Even then, he did not truly share the experience of slavery with the rest of *Bnai Yisrael* (which explains the ire of *Bnai Yisrael* when *Moshe's* meddling in their affairs backfires and causes *Pharaoh* to make *Bnai Yisrael* work even harder.)

During the ten plagues, *yetziat Mitzrayim*, the subsequent *kriat Yam Suf* and *matan Torah*, we see *Moshe* acting as G-d's spokesperson. In acting as a G-d's spokesperson, *Moshe* continued to be a man apart and did not really emotionally identify with *Bnai Yisrael* (for example, consider *Moshe's* behavior in the beginning of *parshat Yitro* where he has not even thought of delegating some of his onerous responsibilities to others.) I suggest that this lack of emotional connection with *Bnai Yisrael* caused *Moshe* to view himself as almost super-human.

Moshe's inability to empathize with *Bnai Yisrael* and emotionally involve himself in *matan Torah* made the first set of *luchot* incomprehensible to *Bnai Yisrael* – almost as if they had been written in Chinese (unless, of course, you're Chinese, in which case say, "almost as if they had been written in English.") A Torah which was totally lacking in any human component was bound to be misinterpreted and misunderstood. This explains the midrash which states that *Aharon* and *Bnai Yisrael* threw the *shem hameforash* into a pot of molten gold, and the *egel* then emerged by itself – the lack of human involvement caused G-d's holy name to be corrupted to the maximum possible degree.

When *Moshe Rabbenu* came down from *Har Sinai* and saw that *Bnai Yisrael* had been able to misinterpret revelation at Sinai to such a degree that they were worshipping the *egel hazahav* (a one-hundred eighty degree turn,) he realized that this was indicative of some corruption of *matan Torah* as embodied by the first set of *luchot*, and he broke them.

Hashem then forced *Moshe* to personally involve himself with *Matan Torah* in two ways. The first way was *Hashem's* limitation of *Moshe's* ability to perceive him fully, in response to *Moshe's* request for *Hashem* to reveal Himself (*Shemot* 33:17-23). This was *Hashem's* reminder to *Moshe* that he is only a human, and as much as he may aspire to be super-human, he will never be able to achieve *Hashem's* level. The reminder of *Moshe's* humanity caused him to be able to begin to identify with *Bnai Yisrael*. (Compare, for example, the dispassionate wording that *Moshe* uses in discussing *Bnai Yisrael* with *Hashem* before this incident – “your nation” (32:11) and “forgive **their** sin” (32:31) – to the wording he uses afterwards – “forgive our sin” (34:9). The change in wording is indicative of *Moshe's* change in attitude.)

The second way was *Hashem's* command for *Moshe* to be responsible to carve the second set of (blank) *luchot* by himself, after which *Hashem* will inscribe them with His word (34:1). *Hashem* forced *Moshe* to be personally involved in *matan Torah* and to identify with *Bnai Yisrael* by personalizing the *luchot*. In so doing, *Moshe* was able to view himself as a recipient of the Torah along with *Bnai Yisrael*, rather than purely as *Hashem's* spokesperson.

One can adduce additional support for this viewpoint by comparing *Moshe* and his brother *Aharon*. Compared to *Moshe*, who seemed to act in an aloof manner (see, for example, the description of *Moshe's* removal of *ohel moed* from amid the camp in 33:7-11), we know from *Pirkei Avot* 1:12 that *Aharon* was known as *ohav shalom v'rodef shalom*. Since *Aharon* grew up in Egypt among *Bnai Yisrael*, he was more able to empathize with *Bnai Yisrael* from the outset. This explains the necessity for *Aharon* to accompany *Moshe* in Egypt as his “spokesperson” (to make up for this lack of empathy that *Moshe* had) and also the reason that *Bnai Yisrael* naturally approached *Aharon* to ask what to do, when *Moshe* failed to descend from *Har Sinai* at the appointed time.

There is an important lesson for us in this approach to analyzing the *chet haegel* and the first and second set of *luchot*. Torah, although divine in origin, needs humans to be actively and emotionally involved in it for it to endure. When I was a child, my grandmother stressed on an almost daily basis that “it’s not only what’s on your head that matters, it’s also what is in your heart.” Only when we are able to connect with each other as a community in observance, Torah study, and also *gemilut chasadim* will we be able to make Torah endure and to bring about the coming of *Mashiach* speedily in our days.

Shabbat Shalom

Danny Geretz

<i>Bnai Yisrael</i>	The Children of Israel
<i>chet haegel</i>	Sin of the (golden) calf
<i>egel hazahav</i>	Golden calf
<i>gemilut chasadim</i>	Acts of loving-kindness
<i>Har Sinai</i>	Mount Sinai
<i>kriat Yam Suf</i>	Splitting of the Red/Reed Sea
<i>luchot</i>	Tablets (ten commandments)
<i>matan Torah</i>	Giving of the Torah
<i>meforshim</i>	Commentators
<i>midrash</i>	Rabbinic legend
<i>Moshe Rabbenu</i>	Moses our teacher
<i>Ohel moed</i>	The tent of meeting
<i>ohav shalom</i>	
<i>v'rodef shalom</i>	A lover and pursuer of peace
<i>parsha(t)</i>	Weekly Torah portion
<i>Pirkei Avot</i>	Precepts of the Ancestors
<i>Shem hameforash</i>	Hashem's holy seventy-two letter name
<i>yetziat Mitzrayim</i>	The departure from Egypt