

Parshas Ki Sisa - Para

- Avrohom Gordimer.

Chet ha-Egel, Para Adumah and submission to G-d

Parshas Ki Sisa
Rabbi Avrohom Gordimer

The Chet Ha-Egel ("Sin of the Golden Calf") was a junction of downfall and tragedy, as well as an event which taught us how to do teshuva (repentance) and reconcile with God. At the beginning of Parshas Chukas, Rashi quotes the Medrash Tanchuma which explains that the mitzvah of Parah Adumah ("Red Heifer") served to rectify the Chet Ha-Egel. It is true that a calf and a cow are of the same breed, but is there a deeper interrelationship of the Chet and the Parah which underlies the teshuva which the Parah Adumah precipitates for the Chet Ha-Egel?

Rashi, based on a Medrash, explains that the that the people sought to make a physical image (the Egel) upon the failure of Moshe Rabbeinu to descend from Har Sinai at the time which they presumed or calculated should have been the end of Moshe's 40-day stay on the mount. They miscalculated and thereafter deviated, crafting the Egel.

This explanation reveals the fault which lay in the the inner recesses of those who served the Egel. Rather than trusting in God and in Moshe's word that their leader would descend from Mt. Sinai at the correct time, the people used their own human perceptions and judgment to determine how to conduct themselves. They acted upon their subjective understanding, thereby violating the Torah in the extreme.

The Parah Adumah teaches us that we cannot decide or define halacha based on our subjective understanding. The Parah Adumah is counterintuitive, as it purifies the t'meim (impure) and contaminates the pure (those who prepare it). Its character and theory are beyond human comprehension, as the Gemara teaches, and it is therefore the quintessential Chok, defying human logic in its workings. Thus, fulfillment of the mitzvah of the Parah Adumah is a statement of submission to Hashem's ultimate authority and autonomy over halacha, subjugating human logic and perceptions to the unfathomable Divine intent and decision. This is precisely why the Parah rectifies the Chet Ha-Egel, such that the Parah declares that humans cannot act upon their own, limited understanding in defining halacha; rather, they must submit to God's parameters and definitions.

With this in mind, perhaps we can understand the placement of a few other mitzvos which precede the Chet ha-Egel in this week's parshah. The Torah introduces the parshah with the command to donate a half-shekel ("Machatzis Ha-Shekel") for the Mishkan, and it is declared that all must give the same amount - rich or poor (ibid. 30:16). This mitzvah teaches the trait of humility in God's work, such that the creative nature of constructing the Mishkan was limited in a way that all were equal, and none could stand out as being a bigger donor. So, too, the command not to build the Mishkan on Shabbos (ibid. 31:13-17) limits Man's creative work and his personal, subjective role in mitzvos, in submission to Hashem's overall authority.

The mitzvah of the Kiyor ("laver" - *ibid.* 31:17-21) instructs us that we must purify and prepare ourselves before serving Hashem. We cannot just jump into His avodah (service), as to do so is to fail to recognize its import and imbue ourselves with a proper attitude. We must first realize before Whom we shall stand and we must elevate ourselves to the requisite level of sanctity beforehand. So, too, the command to anoint the Mishkan and its vessels with Shemen Ha-Mishchah (Oil of Anointment - *ibid.* *vv.* 22-33) conveys the requirement of preparation to service God, and the prohibitions of using the oil for personal reasons and of concocting personal doses of it and of the holy incense for oneself (*ibid.* *v.* 37) also reflect submission to God and a cognizance that we cannot tamper with and exercise control over mitzvos.

God created Man with specialized talents to serve Him uniquely; however, this service is obviously and by definition predicated on complete submission to Hashem's Will. When personal talents are used to undermine or tamper with halacha, the result is deemed idolatry, even when it appears to be Torah activity