

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

PARSHAS KI SISA

Dancing around the Golden Calf

The tragic episode of making and worshipping the Golden Calf came to a traumatic head with the breaking of the *luchos* by Moshe Rabbeinu. Having received the *luchos* from Hashem, Moshe descended the mountain in order to give them to the Jewish People. However, when he reached the camp, he saw that the people had made the Golden Calf, and judged that they were not worthy to receive the *luchos*, whereupon he threw them down and smashed them into fragments.

There is a very basic problem here. While he was still on the mountain, Moshe was told by *Hashem Himself* that the Jewish People had made the calf, yet he nevertheless took the *luchos* and began his descent. He was, apparently, of the opinion that the making of the calf was not a critical impediment to the Jewish People receiving them. In that case, why, upon seeing the Golden Calf, did Moshe break the *luchos*? If he felt that the people were not deserving of them, he should have left the *luchos* on the mountain!

The Seforno explains that when Moshe was initially informed by Hashem that the people had made the Golden Calf, the verse reads:

סָרוּ מִהֵרָא מִן הַדֶּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתָם עָשׂוּ לָהֶם עֵגֶל מִסֶּכֶה

*They have strayed quickly from the path that I have commanded them; they have made for themselves a molten calf.*¹

Moshe was thus aware that the people have sinned. However, he reasoned that, as grievous as their sin may be, they could recover from it by him bringing down the *luchos*. Perhaps their sin was born of a moment of confusion or lack of direction over Moshe not being among them. As soon as they would see the *luchos*, they would snap out of it and be reminded of the correct path for them to be taking. This is why he took the *luchos* with him.

However, when Moshe approached the camp he saw the calf – which he had been told about – but he also saw something else that he had not been aware of. The verse reads:

¹ Shemos 32:8.

וַיְהִי כַּאֲשֶׁר קָרַב אֶל הַמַּחֲנֶה וַיֵּרָא אֶת הָעֵגֶל וּמַחֲלֹת

*It happened as he drew near the camp, he saw the calf and the dances.*²

Moshe had been told that the people had made a calf. He did not know, however, that having made the calf, they then proceeded *to dance around it*.³ This represents a completely different level of identification with their sin. They did not relate to it as a mistake at all. They were happy with it!

At this point, Moshe realized that merely seeing the *luchos* would not have any effect on the people. They were too far invested in their path of sin; with all the dancing they may not even have noticed Moshe or the *luchos*! The only course of action that could bring them back was to smash the *luchos* in front of them. The people would then be confronted with a drastic expression of how far they had strayed and what they potentially stood to lose.

There is a profound message in these words for those people who make mistakes, otherwise known as human beings. Having committed those acts, a stubborn and egocentric part of us is reluctant to recognize them as wrong, choosing instead to justify them and even idealize and dance around them. The Seforno is teaching us that whatever mistakes we may have made, we should be sure to maintain a sense of honesty about them, so that the sight of the *luchos* alone should be enough to bring us back, without anything having to be smashed in order to shake us out of our delusions.

2 Ibid. verse 19.

3 Rav Yehuda Copperman, in his commentary to the Seforno, points out that this contrast is reflected by the fact that the word “הָעֵגֶל” is preceded with the letter *heh*, denoting a known entity, while the word “מַחֲלֹת” has no *heh*, as that element was not known to Moshe.

*And cleanses, though not completely.*⁴

The sages of the Talmud,⁵ cited by Rashi, expound these words as reflecting two conflicting ideas: “וְנִקָּה – He will cleanse,” and “לֹא יִנְקָה – He will not cleanse.” The resolution of this conflict is that it depends on whether the person does teshuvah: “He cleanses those who do teshuvah and does not cleanse those who don’t.”⁶ Indeed, this interpretation is reflected in our communal practice when reciting the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy out loud, where we conclude the recitation with the word “וְנִקָּה”, and do not include the words that follow, as they reflect the negative outcome for one who does not do teshuvah.

Understandably, this matter requires some investigation, since the simple meaning of the words sees them as one integral phrase, “וְנִקָּה לֹא יִנְקָה,” why, then does the midrash state that they should be separated and treated as two opposing ideas?

In truth, however, the pshat approach which sees this as one phrase is quite difficult. Grammatically, as one phrase, this represents an absolute statement, which would mean “He does not completely cleanse [the person].” How does this statement, which comes only to limit the extent of Hashem’s mercy, reflect the concluding attribute of mercy? Moreover, is this even so? Can a person never be entirely cleansed of his sins, even if he does teshuvah?⁷ For this reason, the sages adopt the drash approach and explain that the cleansing is not limited, but it is conditional, for it depends on the person doing teshuvah. If he does, however, he can be entirely cleansed, and it is to this that we refer by mentioning only the word “וְנִקָּה” in our recitation of the Divine Attributes.

There is a fascinating idea related to this found in the early sources. There are two sets of “Thirteen Middos”: The Thirteen Middos (Attributes) of Divine Mercy and R’ Yishmael’s Thirteen Middos (midrashic principles) through which the Torah is expounded.⁸ These sources state that there exists a parallel between these two sets of thirteen, so that involving oneself in one of the principles of drash helps activate the corresponding attribute of mercy – a most unusual application of the idea of “*middah kenegged middah*”! The thirteenth and final exegetical principle states:

וכן שני כתובים המכחישים זה את זה עד שיבא הכתוב השלישי ויכריע ביניהם

Similarly, two verses that contradict each other, until a third verse comes and reconciles them.

And indeed, this is the very situation described by the final attribute of Mercy, which appears to contain “two conflicting verses” – the idea of Hashem cleansing and Him not cleansing – until the third “verse” comes to reconcile the contradiction, explaining that the matter is dependent on the person doing teshuvah!⁹

4 Shemos 34:7.

5 See Yoma 86a.

6 This is also the approach of Onkelos, who translates: “סלח לדתיבין לאורייתיה, ולדלא תיבין לא מזכי” – He forgives those who return to His Torah, but does not cleanse those who do not return.”

7 Rashi himself first offers a pshat approach, whereby Hashem does not entirely cleanse the person, but rather, exacts retribution from him little by little. However, even according to this explanation, Hashem does *ultimately* cleanse the person completely, He just does not do so *immediately*. This is already a departure from the absolute connotation of the negation contained within the pshat. For this reason, Rashi proceeds to cite the midrashic approach.

8 These are enumerated in the morning prayers just before *pesukei de’zimra*.

9 Bnei Yissaschar, Elul Maamar 2.