**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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**PARASHAT KI TISA**

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**This shiur is dedicated *le-zekher nishmot***

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by their children Patti Ray and Allen Ray**

**on the occasion of their twelfth *yahrtzeits***

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**The Golden Calf and the *Mishkan***

**Harav Yaakov Medan**

### I. When Was the command to build the *Mishkan* issued?

The commentators struggled with the question of whether the command to build the *Mishkan* (chapters 25-31) was given during the period of Moshe's first ascent to Mount Sinai – before the sin of the golden calf (chapter 32) – or perhaps only during the period of his third ascent in order to receive the second set of tablets – in the wake of the sin of the golden calf. In practice, the building of the *Mishkan* began only after Moshe's third descent from the mountain, but when was the command to build the *Mishkan* issued? This question is related to another question: Is the *Mishkan* a reaction to the sin of the golden calf, or did the idea of the *Mishkan* precede the golden calf, such that there is no connection between the two?

According to initial exegetical logic, the command regarding the *Mishkan* and the holiness of the priests came before the sin of the golden calf, for it is recorded in the Torah after Moshe's first ascent to the mountain; only afterwards do we find the sin of the golden calf and the atonement for it. Indeed, this is the position of the Ramban, who maintains that, with very few exceptions, the Torah is written in chronological order. The majority of the commentators concur.

Rashi, however, argues that Moshe was commanded regarding the *Mishkan* only on his third ascent to the mountain, only in the wake of the sin of the golden calf. It seems that according to Rashi, there is a connection between the golden calf and the need for the *Mishkan*:

"And He gave to Moshe" – There is no chronological order in the events related in the Torah. In truth, the incident of the golden calf happened a considerable time before the command regarding the work of the *Mishkan* was given. For on the seventeenth of Tammuz the tablets were broken, and on the Day of Atonement God became reconciled with Israel, and on the next day, the eleventh of Tishrei, they began to bring their contributions for the *Mishkan*, which was set up on the first of Nissan. (Rashi, *Shemot* 31:18)

Rashi's argument is not entirely clear, as he relates to the contributions made for the *Mishkan* and its actual construction, and not to the command to build it found in chapter 25. It is clear that the *Mishkan* was built after the incident involving the golden calf; that is true even according to the order found in the Torah, as the incident of the golden calf is recorded in chapter 32, and the actual construction of the *Mishkan* is described in chapters 35-40. But from where do we know that the command to build the *Mishkan* (chapters 25-31) was also issued only after the incident of the golden calf (chapter 32)? It behooves us to find an explanation for Rashi's position that was not explicitly written, as will be explained below.

### II. The conclusion of the assembly at Mount Sinai

After the assembly at Mount Sinai, we find verses of conclusion that contain several commandments:

And the Lord said to Moshe: Thus you shall say to the children of Israel: You yourselves have seen that I have talked with you from heaven. You shall not make with Me gods of silver, or gods of gold, you shall not make to you. An altar of earth you shall make to Me, and shall sacrifice thereon your burnt-offerings, and your peace-offerings, your sheep, and your oxen; in every place where I cause My name to be mentioned I will come to you and bless you. (*Shemot* 20:19-21)

In our view, this is the way to understand the commands in these verses:

1. God's dwelling place is found in heaven.

2. One must not create accompaniment for God in the form of deities made of silver or gold.

3. The sole command to build something relates to an earthen altar, where God will cause His name to be mentioned.

We will deal primarily with the second command. What are the gods of gold to which this command relates? And why would the people of Israel think of making gods of gold to accompany God, so that it was necessary for the Torah to prohibit them?

In hindsight, there are two possible ways to understand these golden gods:

1. The golden calf, as Moshe defines it in his confession regarding the sin:

And Moshe returned to the Lord, and said, “Behold, this people have sinned a great sin, and have made them **a** **god of gold.**” (*Shemot* 32:31)

2. The *keruvim* on the *kaporet*, asthey are fashioned from gold, and they are made in the likeness of the heavenly chariot of God's servants:

And gold for the pattern of the chariot, even the *keruvim*, that spread out their wings and covered the ark of the covenant of the Lord. (I *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 28:18)

The connection between the golden calf and the *keruvim*, on the one hand, and the prohibition to make gods of gold, on the other, creates an independent connection between the golden calf and the *keruvim* themselves. This connection supports our understanding, outlined elsewhere, that the golden calf was not outright idol worship, but rather an attempt to portray characters found on the heavenly chariot, which were revealed to the people at the assembly at Mount Sinai. Let us consider the verses that describe the concern that this would happen:

And the Lord spoke to you out of the midst of the fire; you heard the voice of words, but you saw no form; only a voice…Take you therefore good heed to yourselves, for you saw no manner of form on the day that the Lord spoke to you in Chorev, out of the midst of the fire. Lest you deal corruptly, and make you a graven image, even the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any beast that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged fowl that flies in the heaven, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth. (*Devarim* 4:12-18)

Even though Israel saw the figures of the beasts on the chariot, the Torah clarifies that the voice of God was heard from a place where there is no manner of form.

This situation continued later also in the *Mishkan* itself:

And when Moshe went into the tent of meeting that He might speak with him, then he heard the Voice speaking to him from above the ark-cover that was upon the ark of the testimony, from between the two *keruvim*; and He spoke unto him. (*Bamidbar* 7:89)

The voice of God came from the empty space between the two *keruvim*, above the *kaporet –* a place where there is no manner of form, but only the *keruvim*.

It is possible that the *keruvim* were somewhat similar to calves, for this is the way that Yechezkel describes the *keruvim* in the chariot:[[1]](#footnote-1)

And every one had four faces, and every one of them had four wings. And their feet were straight feet; and the sole of their feet was like the sole of a calf's foot; and they sparkled like the color of burnished brass. (*Yechezkel* 1:6-7)

Let us return to our matter. The plain sense of the verses indicates that it is prohibited to make the *kaporet* and the *keruvim –* "gods of gold." Hence, there is no room to talk about a command to build the *Mishkan*, for the ark, the *kaporet*, and the *keruvim* are the heart of the *Mishkan.* For this reason, these verses speak only of an earthen altar for the purpose of the peace-offerings and burnt-offerings, where the name of God will be mentioned. The *Shekhina* will remain in heaven, from which God spoke to Israel.

This mode of interpretation leads us to Rashi's conclusion[[2]](#footnote-2) that the command regarding the *Mishkan* reflects a change in God's governance of Israel in the wake of the sin of the golden calf. It is possible that in response to the golden calf, God wanted to clarify for Israel that in the place of the *Shekhina* there is no manner of form. The *keruvim* or other images from the heavenly chariot are merely an external framework for the word of God, which is heard from the space between the *keruvim* – expressing the site of the *Shekhina* without a body – and not from the *keruvim* themselves.[[3]](#footnote-3)

It may be possible to support this understanding from a comparison between the *mitzva* of making a pilgrimage on a festival as it was formulated before the incident of the golden calf and the very same *mitzva* when it was repeated after the incident of the golden calf. This comparison reveals the addition of two words:

Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the Lord God. (*Shemot* 23:17; before the incident of the golden calf)

Three times in the year shall all your males appear before the Lord God, **the God of Israel.** (*Shemot* 34:23, after the incident of the golden calf)

The wording of this change brings to mind the vision that perhaps led to the mistake regarding the golden calf:

And they saw **the God of Israel;** and there was under His feet the like of a paved work of sapphire stone. (*Shemot* 24:10)

And so too that which is stated regarding the golden calf:

And they said: “This is **your god, O Israel,** which brought you up out of the land of Egypt.” (*Shemot* 32:4)

This implies that the Torah changed its instructions in the wake of the incident involving the golden calf in order to clarify who is truly the God of Israel. Perhaps it is for this reason that *Chazal* said that it was precisely on the three pilgrimage festivals that they opened the curtain in order to allow the people to see the *keruvim*, to clarify for them that the *Shekhina* rests in a place where there is no manner of form and that the *keruvim* are merely a frame:

R. Katina said: Whenever Israel came up for the festivals, the curtain would be removed for them and the *keruvim* were shown to them, whose bodies were intertwisted with one another, and they would be thus addressed: Look! You are beloved before God as the love between man and woman. (*Yoma* 54a)

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According to the Ramban and his company – who maintain that the command to build the *Mishkan* was given during Moshe's first forty days on Mount Sinai, unconnected to the incident of the golden calf that took place afterwards and in the chronological order in which the story appears in the Torah – the verses appearing at the end of the assembly at Mount Sinai must be understood in a different manner, as they were explained in most of the *midrashim* and commentaries. According to them, the "gods of gold" are golden images of the sun or moon, or images of *keruvim* in addition to the *keruvim* that the Torah permits. This position is stated explicitly in the following *midrash*:

"You shall not make with Me" (*Shemot* 20:19) – R. Yishmael says: You shall not make an image of My ministers that minister before Me in the heights, not the image of angels or *keruvim* or *seraphim* or *ofanim*… "Gods of silver and gods of gold" – Why was this stated? Since it says: "And you shall make two *keruvim* of gold" (*Shemot* 25:18). You might think to make four. Therefore, the verse states: "gods of gold." For if you add to the two, they will be regarded as gods of gold. (*Pesikta Zutrata* [*Lekach Tov*], *Shemot* 20:20, and Rashi, ad loc.)

Their words are certainly faithful to Halakha. I wish to propose another explanation, one that in my opinion is closer to the plain meaning of the text –that "gods of gold" are the *keruvim* themselves.

According to our approach, it was forbidden before the incident of the golden calf to put *keruvim* in the *Mishkan*, as this appears to be the plain meaning of the concluding section of the account of the assembly at Mount Sinai. Nevertheless, the command to build the *Mishkan* was given prior to the sin of the golden calf. At this stage, there was room for a *Mishkan* that would house the tablets of the covenant in an ark, as well as a *menora* and *shulchan* and the rest of the vessels of the *Mishkan*. It was only the *kaporet* with its two *keruvim* of gold that were added at the time of Moshe's third ascent to Mount Sinai, for the reasons mentioned above. The recording of this command was appended to the rest of the commands regarding the *Mishkan.*[[4]](#footnote-4)

### III. The selection of the Levites and the priests

The command to build the *Mishkan* includes the appointment of Aharon and his sons as priests who would minister in the *Mishkan*:

And bring you near to you Aharon your brother, and his sons with him, from among the children of Israel, that they may minister to Me in the priest's office, even Aharon, Nadav and Avihu, Elazar and Itamar, Aharon's sons. (*Shemot* 28:1)

In several places, the Torah connects the holiness of the priests to the selection of the tribe of Levi as God's ministers:

At that time the Lord separated the tribe of Levi, to bear the ark of the covenant of the Lord, to stand before the Lord to minister unto Him, and to bless in His name, to this day. (*Devarim* 10:8)

The verse mentions the Levites, who bear the ark of the covenant of God, and the priests, who bless the people in the name of God. The implication is that we are dealing with a single selection. The separation of the tribe of Levi came in the wake of the Levites' actions at the time of the sin of the golden calf, as is stated in the verse several lines earlier, as well as at the incident of the golden calf itself:

And the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moshe… And Moshe said: “Consecrate yourselves today to the Lord, for every man has been against his son and against his brother; that He may also bestow upon you a blessing this day.” (*Shemot* 32:28-29)

If the Levites – and the priests with them – were chosen in the wake of the sin of the golden calf, it turns out that the verses dealing with the consecration of Aharon and his sons relate to what happened after the sin of the golden calf.[[5]](#footnote-5) Since the verses dealing with the consecration of the priests are an inseparable part of the command to build the *Mishkan*, it is possible that all of the commands regarding the building of the *Mishkan* were issued only after the sin of the golden calf, as argued by Rashi.

But according to the Ramban, who maintains that the command to build the *Mishkan* preceded the incident of the golden calf, the consecration of Aharon and his sons also preceded the selection of the tribe of Levi in the wake of the sin of the golden calf. Clear support for this may be brought from the words of the man of God to Eli on the eve of the destruction of the *Mishkan* in Shilo:

And there came a man of God to Eli and said to him: “Thus says the Lord: Did I reveal Myself to the house of your father, **when** **they were in Egypt in bondage to Pharaoh's house?****And did I choose him out of all the tribes of Israel** to be My priest, to go up to My altar, to burn incense, to wear an *efod* before Me? And did I give to the house of your father all the offerings of the children of Israel made by fire?” (I *Shemuel* 2:27-28)

The words of the prophet suggest that Aharon was chosen for the priesthood already during the period of Israel's bondage in Egypt, and not only in the wake of the incident of the golden calf. Moreover, it would appear that the entire tribe of Levi had already been chosen during the period of Israel's bondage, as is evident from God's answer to Moshe at the burning bush:

And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moshe, and He said: Is there not **Aharon your brother, the Levite?** I know that he can speak well. And also, behold, he comes forth to meet you; and when he sees you, he will be glad in his heart. (*Shemot* 4:14) 

The very designation of Aharon with the title "the Levite" points to the fact that the tribe of Levi was different from all the other tribes. This is also indicated by the special treatment given to the tribe of Levi in the genealogical table in *Shemot*, chapter 6.

The tribe of Levi was apparently selected because it had never left the land of Goshen, in which Yaakov had dwelled, and it did not move to the land of the Nile, the cultural center of Egypt. The tribe of Levi preserved their ancestral tradition more so than did their brothers, and already then it was chosen for the spiritual leadership of the people of Israel. This also follows from the *gemara* that sees Amram, the father of Moshe and Aharon, as a spiritual leader:

It was taught: Amram was the greatest man of his generation. (*Sota* 12a)

Amram continued the tradition of Kehat the son of Levi, and passed it down to his son, Aharon.

The Levites' behavior during the incident of the golden calf and their response to the call, "Who is on the Lord's side, let him come to me," established in practice their being set apart for all generations to serve as God's ministers. But already before the sin of the golden calf, God had chosen Aharon and his sons, in continuation of His selection of them "when they were in Egypt in bondage to Pharaoh's house," to be His ministers who ministered to Him in the *Mishkan*.

The dispute between Rashi and the Ramban on the question whether the command concerning the building of the *Mishkan* came before the sin of the golden calf or only in its wake remains unresolved. Each side can adduce proof for its position from the Biblical text, and each side can reconcile those verses that at first glance appear to contradict it.

(Translated by David Strauss)

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1. The images on the chariot had the appearance of an ox, a lion, an eagle, and a man. It is possible that the lower half of the *keruvim* was like that of a calf-ox, the upper half was like that of a lion, including its mane, their wings were like those of an angel, and their faces were like that of man. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rashi himself does not explain exactly as we have explained, as will be clarified below. Our discussion relates to his fundamental position, and it is possible to connect our second explanation to Rashi's position in its entirety. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Among the commentators, the one who comes closest to our explanation of "gods of gold" – that they are the *keruvim* – is the Rashbam (*Shemot* 20:20): "Even though God commanded that *keruvim* be made for the ark, they were made for Him to rest upon, similar to the *keruvim* of His heavenly throne, and not to bow down to them." The Ibn Ezra mentions the incident of the golden calf in this context (ibid.): "And the reason that you should make images is to receive heavenly power, and you should think that you are making them in My honor, as if they were intermediaries between you and Me, like the calf that Israel had made." [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. A difficulty remains with the position of the Ramban: Why does the Torah mention the earthen altar in our *parasha*, and not the rest of the *Mishkan*? This difficulty can be reconciled, but we shall not do so in this framework. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. According to this understanding, even though Aharon, Nadav, and Avihu went up to Mount Sinai with Moshe (*Shemot* 24:1), Aharon and his four sons and their descendants were not yet set apart for all generations until after the sin of the golden calf. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)