YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

**PARASHAT KI TISA**

**Sicha of HarAV Yaakov Medan**

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In memory of Rabbi Dr. Joseph I. Singer z"l,   
Rabbi Emeritus of Manhattan Beach Jewish Center,   
and son-in-law of Dr. Chaim Heller z"l,   
whose yahrzeit falls on 12 Adar, by his daughter, Vivian Singer

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**The Golden Calf**

Translated by David Strauss

**I. "And When the People Saw that Moshe Delayed"**

The golden calf is one of three sins committed by the generation of the wilderness that raised the specter of Israel's destruction by God and their replacement by a people to be born of Moshe (and in some cases, of Aharon as well). The other two sins are the sin of the spies and the sin of Korach and his company. In all three cases, Moshe's (and Aharon's) prayer prevented Israel's destruction, and the severe punishment was mitigated to a lesser one.

What brought Israel to commit such a heinous sin of idolatry, so soon after the Mount Sinai experience, when they had risen as one to receive the Torah with the declaration "We will do and we will hear"? The Torah ascribes the people's sin to Moshe's delay in descending from the mountain:

And when the people saw that Moshe delayed (*boshesh*) to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aharon, and said to him: Rise up, make us a god who shall go before us; for as for this Moshe, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we know not what is become of him. And Aharon said to them: Break off the golden rings, which are in the ears of your wives, of your sons, and of your daughters, and bring them to me. And all the people broke off the golden rings which were in their ears, and brought them to Aharon. And he received it at their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool, and made it a molten calf; and they said: This is your god, O Israel, which brought you up out of the land of Egypt. And when Aharon saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aharon proclaimed and said: Tomorrow shall be a feast to the Lord. And they rose up early on the morrow, and offered burnt-offerings, and brought peace-offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play. (*Shemot* 32:1-6)

How are we to understand Moshe's delay in descending from the mountain, and why did it lead to this catastrophic lapse?

The meaning of Moshe's delay was a subject of dispute between Rashi and Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Levi in his *Kuzari*. Rashi’s explanation follows that of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi in the Gemara (*Shabbat* 118a):

For when Moshe ascended the mountain he said to them [the Israelites}: At the end of forty days I shall return during the first six hours of the day [before noon]. They thought that the day on which he ascended the mountain [the seventh of Sivan] was to be included in this number. In fact, however, he had meant complete days – forty days, each day together with its night that precedes it. Now, as regards the day of this ascent, its night was not part of it, for he ascended on the seventh of Sivan. It follows therefore that the fortieth day fell on the seventeenth of Tammuz. On the sixteenth of Tammuz, the Satan came and threw the world into confusion, giving it the appearance of darkness, gloom, and disorder [so that people would] say: "Surely Moshe is dead, and that is why confusion has come into the world!" He said to them: "Moshe is dead, for six hours [noon] has already come [*boshesh* = *ba shesh*], and he has not returned." (Rashi, *Shemot* 32:1)

According to Rashi, the Israelites knew that Moshe had ascended the mountain for forty days, and there was only a slight misunderstanding as to when the count should begin. The Satan took advantage of this misunderstanding to incite the Israelites to say that Moshe had died.

We shall never know the depth of the Satan's machinations and how exactly he did it. In the reality as we know it, it is difficult to understand how a short delay on Moshe's part could have led to Israel's downward spiral into the abomination of the golden calf.

Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Levi had a different understanding, one that seems more convincing:[[1]](#footnote-1)

They waited for his return clad in the same apparel in which they had witnessed the drama on Sinai, without removing their jewels or changing their clothes, remaining just as he left them, expecting every moment to see him return. He, however, remained there forty days, although he had not provided himself with food, having only left them with the intention of returning the same day. (*Kuzari* I, 97)

Let us examine Moshe's parting words to the people after the Sinai encounter:

And the Lord said to Moshe: Come up to Me to the mountain and be there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, and the law and the commandment, which I have written, that you may teach them. And Moshe rose up, and Yehoshua his minister; and Moshe went up into the mountain of God. And to the elders he said: Wait here for us, until we come back to you; and, behold, Aharon and Chur are with you; whoever has a cause, let him come to them. And Moshe went up to the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. And the glory of the Lord rested upon Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days; and the seventh day He called to Moshe out of the midst of the cloud. (*Shemot 24:*12-16)

The verses do not indicate when Moshe was to return to the camp, and since they did not yet know that God's intention was to give Moshe the Oral Law along with the Written Law, over the course of 40 days, they could have understood from his words that he would ascend the mountain, take the tablets and other writings – "the law and the commandment" – and descend the mountain that very day. The fact that nothing is said about Moshe taking provisions (for himself and for Yehoshua) lent support to this possibility. The appointment of Aharon and Chur to stand in for him would seem to indicate a longer period, but not necessarily forty days. Even if Moshe had intended to stay on the mountain for more than a day, the expectation would have been for a short stay and a quick return.

Let us try to imagine ourselves in the camp of Israel. This is how Mount Sinai is described at the time of the revelation:

And you came near and stood under the mountain; **and the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven,** with darkness, cloud, and thick darkness. (*Devarim* 4:11)

The Lord spoke with you face to face **in the mountain out of the midst of the fire**. I stood between the Lord and you at that time, to declare to you the word of the Lord; **for you were afraid because of the fire, and went not up into the mountain**… (*Devarim* 5:4-5)

These words the Lord spoke to all your assembly **in the mountain out of the midst of the fire**, of the cloud, and of the thick darkness… And it came to pass, when you heard the voice out of the midst of the darkness, **while the mountain did burn with fire**… and we have heard His voice **out of the midst of the fire…** Now therefore why should we die? **For this great fire will consume us**. (*Devarim* 5:18-22)

The people were afraid of the burning mountain, and Moshe approached in and ascended it in a way that was not clear to them. However, though the people wondered about Moshe's fearless approach to the burning mountain, they initially believed God had commanded him to ascend the mountain and would protect him there.

The first day passed, and doubts began to gnaw at them: Did Moshe indeed survive the fire that surrounded the mountain? The doubts were but nagging thoughts, and the people's great faith in God and His prophet overcame their worry. After another three days with no sign of life from Moshe or Yehoshua, their doubts grew and the certainty of their faith was somewhat eroded. Two days later, the few skeptics among the people dared to voice their thoughts aloud. Four more days passed, and the circle of skeptics widened. The possibility that Moshe perished on the mountain, because of some trace of sin or because of natural circumstances, arose again and again. After twenty days had elapsed since Moshe's disappearance, a large segment of the people began to despair. When forty days had passed, the last of those who still believed in Moshe and in God's mercy were silenced, and the great believers took their seats on the opposition benches, their voices almost inaudible. Chur, the great believer, was killed (according to *Chazal*, as discussed below) by those who saw a need to establish new leadership, and the atmosphere that guided the people was one of despair at the existing situation and of a need for change. Indeed, it is not easy to believe that one who entered a burning mountain and has been missing for forty inexplicable days might still emerge alive and return to his people.[[2]](#footnote-2)

It may be conjectured even according to Rashi that this was the mood that developed, though in his view, the tension was kept in check throughout the forty days because Moshe had promised to return. But when, in their estimation, the forty days had elapsed and Moshe did not return, their patience snapped and they ceased to believe that Moshe would come back.

**II. "Rise, Make Us a God"**

Aharon and Chur had previously been with Moshe at the top of the hill on the mountain of Chorev, supporting his arms during the war against Amalek at Refidim (*Shemot* 17), and they were both entrusted with the leadership in Moshe’s absence. Now, the people gathered up against Aharon – alone. *Chazal* inferred from this that Chur had clashed with the people first, and was killed:

When Israel performed that act, initially they approached Chur. They said to him: "Rise, make us a god." When he did not heed them, they stood against him and killed him… Afterward, they approached Aharon. They said to him: "Rise, make us a god" (*Shemot* 32:1). When Aharon heard this, he was immediately afraid… Aharon said: “What shall I do? They killed Chur, who was a prophet. Now, if they kill me, as I am a priest, the verse that is written will be realized in their regard: ‘If a priest and a prophet will be killed in the Sanctuary of the Lord’ (*Eikha* 2:20), and they will be immediately exiled!” (*Vayikra Rabba* 10, 3)

It may be that *Chazal* also inferred Chur's intransigence against any compromise from his relation to Kalev ben Yefuneh:

And Kalev married Efrat, who bore him Chur. (I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 2:19)

The sin of the spies parallels the sin of the golden calf in many particulars. There, Kalev stood firmly against the people, even before Yehoshua joined him. Here, according to *Chazal*, it was Kalev’s son Chur[[3]](#footnote-3) who acted in the same manner and resisted the sin of the golden calf.

In any event, the people gathered up against Aharon, and demanded of him: "Rise, make us a god who shall go before us; for as for this Moshe… we know not what is become of him" (*Shemot* 32:1). The people's demand is difficult to understand even acknowledging their reasons for thinking Moshe has disappeared: if Moshe is gone, a leader must be appointed in his stead; presumably, Aharon. But why make a god?! This question gave rise to a dispute among the commentators. The Ramban argues that the calf was intended to replace Moshe, and not, heaven forbid, to replace God:

Rather, they wanted another Moshe, saying: "Moshe, the man who showed us the way from Egypt until now, as the journeys were at the commandment of the Lord by the hand of Moshe – he is now lost to us. Let us make ourselves another Moshe, who will show us the way at the commandment of the Lord by his hand." This is the reason for their mentioning “Moshe, the man who brought us up,” rather than [mentioning] the God who brought them up – for they needed a man of God…

But the matter is as I have stated, that they did not want the calf to be for them in place of a god who kills and makes alive, whom they would take upon themselves to serve as a deity, but they wanted to have someone in place of Moshe to show them the way. (Ramban, *Shemot* 32:1)[[4]](#footnote-4)

Based on the words of the Ramban, it should be noted that the people did not ask Aharon to take Moshe’s place. Apparently, the people understood the difference in rank between Aharon and Moshe. Notwithstanding Aharon’s high level, they saw him as a man of flesh-and-blood, whereas Moshe was to them a man of God, upon whom the spirit of God had rested. They sought a "mystical" figure, who in their eyes resembled one of the creatures of the Divine Chariot, to take Moshe’s place.[[5]](#footnote-5) And they relied upon one who could replace Moshe, the man of God. They called this figure "God."

It would seem that the essence of their request for a substitute leader in place of Moshe, after they mistakenly despaired of his returning to the camp, was not so heinous a sin as to warrant the destruction of the people. The weightiest aspect of the sin was probably the search for a mediator among the holy creatures and angels of the Divine Chariot. But it is still difficult to understand both the suggestion that God would totally annihilate the people and the killing of the calf-worshippers by the Levites.

Rabbi Saadya Gaon, the Ibn Ezra, and the Rashbam all adopted an approach, each in his unique way, not very different from that of the Ramban: that the intention was to fashion a concrete body – the calf upon which God's spirit would rest – in order to lead them to the land of Canaan.[[6]](#footnote-6)

In contrast to the Ramban, Rashi writes that those who worshipped the golden calf sought a full-fledged "substitute" for God Himself:

"Who shall go before us" – They wished to have many gods. (Rashi, *Shemot* 32:1, based on the Gemara in *Sanhedrin* 63a)

Rashi (citing *Chazal*) pours even more oil on the fire, adding the sins of fornication and of shedding blood on top of the sin of idolatry:

"To play [*letzachek*]" – This term implies sexual immorality, as it is stated "to mock [*letzachek*] me" (*Bereishit* 39:17), and bloodshed, as it is stated: "Let the young men arise and play [*veyisachaku*]" (II *Shmuel* 2:14); here, too, Chur was assassinated. (Rashi, *Shemot* 32:6)

This group of sins represents a full rejection of Torah. At the same time, Rashi also builds a defense of Israel regarding this heinous transgression, based on the assertion that it was the mixed multitude [*eirev rav*][[7]](#footnote-7) who fashioned the golden calf – not the people of Israel themselves:

"These are your gods" – It does not say: "These are our gods." Hence we learn that it was the mixed multitude which came up from Egypt that gathered themselves together against Aharon, and it was they who made [the calf] and afterwards led Israel astray after it. (Rashi, *Shemot* 32:4)

The sin of Israel, according to Rashi, was that they were drawn after the calf.

We can combine the various interpretations, to a degree, and say that the inner circle of sinners was indeed comprised of members of the mixed multitude. They were idolaters by nature, and they were the ones who sought a "substitute" for God. Perhaps it was about them that Aharon said to Moshe, when he came down from the mountain:

And Aharon said: Let not the anger of my lord wax hot; you know the people, that they are set on evil [*be-****ra***]. (*Shemot* 32:22)

Perhaps Aharon had in mind the Egyptian sun god Ra, to whom the mixed multitude had been accustomed and who they now saw as a possible alternative, as it were, to God, who had brought them to Mount Sinai.

These, as stated, were in the inner circle of the calf-worshipers; it is possible that they were the ones who shed the blood of Chur, and that they accompanied their idolatry with acts of fornication, as is the way of idolaters. They were liable to death and were slain by the Levites.

The people of Israel themselves were in the outer circles around them. The outer circles as well were not monolithic, but included different circles with varying degrees of error in their perception of the calf's ability to represent the Divine Presence on earth. The "mainstream" hoped that God would indeed rest His *Shekhina* on the calf, which represented one of the figures of the Divine Chariot. Those who erred on a lower level perhaps did so in accordance with the explanation of Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Levi in the *Kuzari*:

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 Him who had brought them out of Egypt. On the contrary, this was to be something to which they could point when relating the wonders of God. (*Kuzari* I, 97)

In his view, the worshippers of the calf did not expect the *Shekhina* to rest upon the calf, as suggested by the Ramban and those in his camp. All they wanted was a demonstration to satisfy their imagination and their feelings, so that they could use it to tell of the wonders of God and to pray to Him; for it was difficult for them to direct their worship without any form, image, or likeness.

**III. More on Israel's Error**

We shall first deal with what I have termed the "mainstream." These were not the wicked idolaters, who were probably all from among the mixed multitude. They were also not the innocent sinners who sought a tangible manifestation for the sake of their service of God, as understood by Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Levi. Rather, this group thought that after Moshe had departed, there had to be a body to receive the emanation of God's glory, in order to lead them to their land, and for that purpose they made the calf in place of Moshe, as argued by the Ramban and most of his cohorts.

It may be possible to explain their error even from the verses themselves. In our [study of *Parashat Shemot*](https://etzion.org.il/en/tanakh/torah/sefer-shemot/parashat-shemot/shemot-moshes-appointment-gods-messenger), we dealt at length with an idea alluded to in the verses of the burning bush and elaborated upon in the words of *Chazal* – that Moshe had been appointed as God's emissary to bring Israel to Mount Sinai but not to bring them to the Land of Israel, and that it was hinted to him already at the burning bush that he would not bring them into the Land. Moshe was told similar things at the giving of the Torah:

Behold, I send an angel before you, to guard you on the way, and to bring you into the place which I have prepared. Take heed of him, and hearken to his voice; be not rebellious against him; for he will not pardon your transgression; for My name is within him. But if you shall indeed hearken to his voice, and do all that I will speak, then I will be an enemy to your enemies, and an adversary to your adversaries. For My angel shall go before you, and bring you to the Amorite, and the Chittite, and the Perizzite, and the Canaanite, the Chivite, and the Yevusite; and I will cut them off. (*Shemot* 23:20-23)

These verses can be understood to mean that the angel, a messenger of God, would replace Moshe in leading the people from Mount Sinai to the Land of Israel, thus terminating Moshe's role. It is possible that Moshe, ascending the burning mountain, appeared to the people as Eliyahu would later appear when a chariot of fire and horses of fire took him up to heaven (II *Melakhim* 2:11). In this way, the calf that emerged from the fire was to replace Moshe, as Elisha would replace Eliyahu.

Still, we must not allow any mitigation of Israel's guilt to dull our hearts from understanding the enormity of the sin and their error in requesting a "mystical" figure made of inanimate metal, in which God's glory would be immanent, and which would guide the people on their way. Heaven forbid that God should agree to this!

Israel's error according to the approach of Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Levi in the *Kuzari* is the same; there is no license, God forbid, for an individual or for the people as a whole to employ imagination or anthropomorphism in the service of God. Here the prohibition seems to derive primarily from a safeguard against idolatry. The distance in a person's consciousness between an image that serves only as a means to enhance his ability to serve God, and an image that may come to be seen as the very embodiment of God's glory, is liable to be short and prone to error. Hence the Torah forbids the use of any image, even as an external means to worship God.

I will add a further comment on the approach of Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Levi, the great apologist for the sin of the golden calf. One of the strongest proofs for his position – which he himself brings – is the difference between the prophetic attitude toward the worship of Baal, which was outright idolatry that did not recognize the exodus from Egypt and its significance, and its attitude toward the calves of Yarovam, which were similar to the calf in the wilderness and about which it was said: "Behold your gods, O Israel, which brought you up out of the land of Egypt" (I *Melakhim* 12:28).

The ideology of idolatry assumed that a conquering nation would be assimilated by the land they conquered and by its indigenous culture, which peered at the conquerors in countless mythological legends from every stone, hilltop, and leafy tree. According to the Baal cult, the Israelites were therefore enjoined to regard all that preceded the conquest of the land as prehistory, and to see themselves as born anew when they took possession of the land under the auspices of the Canaanite "god of the land" – Baal. In contrast, the calf-worship recognized the God of Israel who had delivered them from Egypt, and created a likeness and image to illustrate the worship of God in the absence of a Temple (for the Temple was in Jerusalem, in the territory of the kingdom of Yehuda, which was in a state of war with the kingdom of Israel of Yarovam ben Nevat).

The prophets, and especially Eliyahu and Yirmiyahu in the book of *Melakhim*, drew a clear distinction between the two sins. They saw the worship of Baal as serious, unparalleled idolatry, whereas their references to the calves were relatively moderate and more tolerant. Indeed, Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Levi expands at length on the difference between the "company of Yarovam" (the worshippers of the calf) and the "company of Achav" (the worshippers of Baal).

Let us illustrate this: Yehoachaz son of Yehu, his son Yehoash, and his grandson Yarovam II, kings of Israel, are mentioned as having done “evil in the sight of the Lord” and not having “turned from the sins of Yarovam son of Nevat, who sinned and caused Israel to sin [with the golden calves he set up].” And yet – Yehoachaz, Yehoash, and Yarovam II were of the house of Yehu, who exterminated Baal from Israel. They were infected with calf-worship, but not with the worship of Baal. And thus it was said in their day:

And Chazael king of Aram oppressed Israel all the days of Yehoachaz. But the Lord was gracious to them, and had compassion on them, and turned toward them, because of His covenant with Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, and would not destroy them; neither did He cast them from His presence until now. (II *Melakhim* 13:22-23)

He [= Yarovam II] restored the border of Israel from the entrance of Chamat to the sea of the Arava, according to the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, which He spoke by the hand of His servant Yona the son of Amitai, the prophet, who was of Gat-Chefer. For the Lord saw the affliction of Israel, that it was very bitter, with neither bond nor left at large, and neither was there any helper for Israel. And the Lord did not say that He would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven; but He saved them by the hand of Yarovam the son of Yoash. (II *Melakhim* 14:25-27)

Such miracles were not recorded in the days of the Baal-worshipping kings.

We shall conclude with a comment on Rashi's view that the worshippers of the calf were full-fledged idolaters. What is the connection between the despair of Moshe returning and the eruption of the idolatrous impulse? From the verses, it seems that there were people in the mixed multitude who did not clearly understand the difference between the form and its Creator, between Moshe and God Himself. God's appearance through the leadership of Moshe left room for these people to err. In the plagues of Egypt, all saw Moshe raising his hand, and thereby bringing about the plagues. Before the parting of the Sea of Suf, Moshe stretched forth his hand and the water split, and when he stretched forth his hand a second time, the water returned to its place and drowned the Egyptian army. At Refidim, too, Moshe hit the rock and brought forth abundant water to quench the people's thirst. Sinai brought a climax: the *Shekhina* spoke through the mouth of Moshe. Not everyone could discern the difference between the *Shekhina* and Moshe himself.

In the sin of the golden calf, these same people seek God because Moshe has disappeared. These same people dance before the calf with the words: "These are your gods, O Israel, which **brought you up** out of the land of Egypt." God uses similar language when he rebukes Moshe: "Go, get you down; for your people, that **you brought up** out of the land of Egypt, have dealt corruptly." Their words imply that Moshe is the God of Israel who brought them up out of the land of Egypt. Countering this formulation, Moshe turns to God with the words: "Lord, why is Your wrath inflamed against Your people, that **You have brought forth** out of the land of Egypt?" – as a continuation of the revelation at Mount Sinai, where it was said: "I am the Lord your God who **brought you forth** out of the land of Egypt." The request for another god, then, was a request for a substitute for both God and Moshe as one.

**IV. Why specifically a calf?**

The Ramban answers this question with a response that is bound up with the desert landscape:

Now Aharon's intention was as follows: Because Israel was in a wilderness, a desolate wasteland, and destruction and everlasting desolation come from the north, as it is written: "Out of the north the evil shall break forth upon all the inhabitants of the land" (*Yirmiyahu* 1:14)… But rather [the intent of the verse is to state] that the attribute of justice comes to the world from the left, to requite upon all the inhabitants of the land according to their evil. And since in the account of the Divine Chariot it is stated: "And the four of them had the face of an ox on the left side" – therefore Aharon thought that the destroyer [the ox, which was to the left, i.e. the north] points to the place of destruction where its great power is centered, and when worshipping God through there, the spirit will be poured from on high, just as it was put upon Moshe. (Ramban, *Shemot* 32:1)

The Ramban links the position of the ox-calf in the Divine Chariot – left, which is equivalent to the north for one facing east, as is customary in Scripture – with the attribute of judgment. The form of the ox-calf is appropriate to lead in areas of desolation and wilderness, and therefore, according to the people who were in error about Moshe, there was room to think that God would impart of His spirit to lead them there, as He had imparted of His spirit to Moshe.

Let us try a different path, and return to the description of Moshe's ascent of the mountain with the seventy elders:

Then went up Moshe, and Aharon, Nadav, and Avihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel; and they saw the God of Israel; and there was under His feet the like of a paved work of sapphire stone, and the like of the very heaven for clearness. And upon the nobles of the children of Israel He laid not His hand; and they beheld God, and did eat and drink. (*Shemot* 24:9-11)

And the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the eyes of the children of Israel. (Ibid. v. 17)

The expression "God of Israel" recalls the words uttered about the calf: "These are your gods, O Israel," and it may be assumed that this was said about the calf in the wake of the seventy elders of Israel seeing "the God of Israel." We can relate what they saw to what Yechezkel the prophet saw in his vision of the Divine Chariot regarding the holy creatures:

And out of the midst thereof came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance: they had the likeness of a man. And each had four faces, and each 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* 1:5-7)

Yechezkel saw the creatures in their entirety, with their faces and wings. It is possible that the elders of Israel saw only the undersides of the creatures' feet, and from that angle they appeared to be calves.

Moreover, Yechezkel goes on to describe the sound of the Chariot:

And when they went, I heard the sound of their wings like the sound of many waters, like the sound of the Almighty, a sound of tumult like the sound of a camp; when they stood, they let down their wings. (Ibid. v. 24)

It is possible that the sound of the Chariot is connected to the way the "sea of Shlomo" was created in the Temple together with the basins – which were made in the likeness of the Divine Chariot:

And every base had four brazen wheels… And the work of the wheels was like the work of a chariot wheel. (I *Melakhim* 7:30-33)

And he made the molten sea of ten cubits from brim to brim, round in compass… It stood upon twelve oxen, three looking toward the north, and three looking toward the west, and three looking toward the south, and three looking toward the east; and the sea was set upon them above, and all their hinder parts were inward. (Ibid. vv. 23-25)

Again, a prominent feature of the Chariot in the Temple is the twelve oxen. The sea of Shlomo standing on twelve oxen is the source of the water in the basins, the water of purification and consecration in the Temple of God. If the figures of the Chariot are found in the basin-stands that hold the water, the oxen express the Divine Chariot, which we do not understand even with the prophecy of Yechezkel. The place of the oxen was central in God's Chariot, and from here arose the possibility of error for the calf-worshippers.

The twelve oxen bear the water upon which the voice of the God of Israel is borne as “the sound of many waters” – along the lines of the exposition of Rabbi Akiva:

And it is stated: "God is the *mikveh* (ritual bath) of Israel" – Just as a *mikveh* purifies the impure, so does the Holy One, blessed be He, purify Israel. (Mishna *Yoma* 8:9)

Moreover, in the wake of the revelation at Sinai, the Torah warns Israel against making the likeness of living creatures as a means of serving God. It would seem that the Israelites saw the supernal holy creatures at the time of the Divine manifestation on the mountain, and it was precisely the revelation at Sinai that gave rise to error:

And you came near and stood under the mountain; and the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven, with darkness, cloud, and thick darkness. And the Lord spoke to you out of the midst of the fire; you heard the sound of words, but you saw no form; only a sound… Be very careful of yourselves – for you saw no image on the day that the Lord spoke to you in Chorev out of the midst of the fire – lest you cause devastation and make for yourselves 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* 4:11-18)

It seems like it should have been unnecessary to warn Israel, following the Sinai revelation, against making animal images – unless they had just seen them with their own eyes. Indeed, in the parallel account of the Sinai revelation in *Tehillim* (chapter 68), it is mentioned that God descended to the "mountain of God" with all His chariots and angels. The verses in *Devarim* warn that *from the place* where the pure voice of God was heard at the time of the revelation, the people of Israel saw no image; caution must be exercised so as not to identify the holy creatures they saw with the place from which the voice was heard, for there was no image there. There was room for this warning because Israel had erred about it with the golden calf, when they identified the visions of the creatures with the *Shekhina* and fashioned an idol in the likeness of one of the creatures.

The second of the Ten Commandments also refers to images of creatures which should not be identified with the place of the *Shekhina*, a warning that was given to Israel *before* the sin of the golden calf:

You shall not make for yourself a graven image, any manner of likeness [of anything that is] in heaven above, or that is in the earth below, or that is in the water under the earth. (*Devarim* 5:8)

The warning was required, as stated, precisely because of the ox that was in the Divine Chariot, which was revealed to Israel at the giving of the Torah.

(Edited by Sarah Rudolph)

1. A similar understanding was offered by the Ibn Ezra, the Chizkuni, and others. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See also the Jerusalem Targum, known as Targum Yonatan, according to which the people thought Moshe was consumed by fire when he ascended the mountain. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It is difficult to see Chur as the son of Kalev ben Yefuneh, since Kalev was thirty-nine years old at that time (see *Yehoshua* 14:7) and Chur was the grandfather of Betzalel, the builder of the *Mishkan*. Nevertheless, *Chazal* understood that Chur was the son of Kalev ben Yefuneh. Even if we propose another possibility – according to which Chur was the grandson of Kalev ben Chetzron – we are still dealing with the same family. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Similar explanations (with variations) were offered by the Chizkuni, *Da'at Zekeinim mi-Ba'alei ha-Tosafot*, and others. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Here is the verse that describes the Divine Chariot envisioned by Yechezkel, in which the figure of the ox-calf appears: "As for the likeness of their faces, they had the face of a man; and the four of them had the face of a lion on the right side; and the four of them had the face of an ox on the left side; the four of them [also] had the face of an eagle" (*Yechezkel* 1:10). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. According to the Ibn Ezra, the three thousand calf-worshippers who were slain related to the calf as a full-fledged idol (and they were indeed the mixed multitude that left Egypt with Israel), while the rest of Israel related to the calf as a type of intermediary, as noted above. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Rashi, Onkelos, and most commentators refer to this group as the *eirev rav*, "mixed multitude," based on the verse: "And a mixed multitude [*eirev rav*] also went up with them" (*Shemot* 12:38). But the plain meaning of the verse is that many an *eirev* went up with them. Indeed, we find elsewhere: "And it came to pass, when they had heard the law, that they separated from Israel every alien mixture [*eirev*]" (*Nechemya* 13:3).

   The straightforward meaning of "*eirev*" is offspring of mixed couples – of an Israelite man and an Egyptian woman, or an Egyptian man and an Israelite woman – like the blasphemer (*Vayikra* 24), or people of indeterminate lineage, akin to those described in *Sefer Ezra* (2:59). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)