

# Zera Shimshon

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## Chapter XXVI: Shemini (Lev. 9:1–11:47)

### Essay 2. The Golden Calf and the teaching of repentance

**מדרש** פליאה הובא בספר כסף נבחר, בשעה שגשרפו בני אהרן אמרו מלאכי השרת למה קרעת את הים לפניכם, השיבו השורפים "השיבנו ה' אליה" וכו' עכ"ל. והוא פלא. ויובן במה שאמרו ז"ל שבני אהרן מתו בשביל חטא אהרן שעשה את העגל, כמו שפירש רש"י על פסוק "ובאהרן התאנף ה' מאד להשמדו". ואין השמדה אלא כילוי בנים ותפלתו של משה עשה מחצה ומתו שנים ונשארו שנים עכ"ל. ומה היה חטאו של אהרן, והלא פונתו היתה לטובה כמו שאמרו ז"ל.

*This essay continues the teachings from Chapter XXV, Tzav, essays 1 and 2.*

There is a wondrous midrash that is brought in the book, **Kessef Nivchar**<sup>1</sup>: “**In the hour that the sons of Aaron, [Nadab and Abihu,] were burned [after offering strange fire], the ministering angels said to G-d, ‘Why did you split the sea before them?’ Those who died in the fire answered, ‘Return us, O L-rd, to Yourself.’**”<sup>2</sup> **This is wondrous.**

A first question, then, is what is the connection between the splitting of the sea at time of the Exodus from Egypt and the deaths of Aaron’s sons?

A second question is what is the meaning of Nadab and Abihu’s plea, “Return us.”

**This will be understood by what [the rabbis] of blessed memory said, that the sons of Aaron died because of the sin of Aaron, that he made the Golden Calf, as Rashi explained on the verse, “Moreover, the L-rd was angry enough with Aaron to have destroyed him.”**<sup>3</sup> The expression “**destruction**” means to finish off his sons, and the prayer of Moses created a **division into two, and half of Aaron’s sons died, and half remained.** Thus, Nadab and Abihu died, while Eliezer and Itamar survived.

**What was the sin of Aaron, and wasn’t his intention for good, as [the rabbis] of blessed memory said?**

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Josiah ben Joseph Pinto (c. 1565–c. 1648), Syrian rabbi and preacher, a disciple of Rabbi Chaim Vital. His books included *Kessef Nivchar* (Venice 1621), Kabbalistic sermons on the weekly parshayot.

<sup>2</sup> Lam. 5:21.

<sup>3</sup> Deut. 9:20.

וגיש לומר דאיתא במדרש ריש פרשת "צו את־אֱהֲרֹן", "שנאה תעורר מדנים" שנאה שנמתן אֱהֲרֹן בין ישראל לאֱבִיהֶם שִׁבְשָׁמִים היא עוררה להם דיני דינים. מלמד שהיה אֱהֲרֹן נוטל קרבנם ופוחסן לפניהם ואומר להם ראו שאין בו ממש, הוא שמשוה אמר לאֱהֲרֹן "מה־עשה לך העם הזה כִּי־הבאתָ" וכו'. מוטב שיִדונו שוֹגְגִים ואל ידונו מְזִידִים, הֵדָא הוא דכתיב "וּבְאֱהֲרֹן הִתְאַנַּף ה' מֵאֵד לְהַשְׁמִידוֹ" ואין השמדה אלא כילוי בנים וכו' עכ"ל.

**It can be said that it is brought in the Midrash at the beginning of parshat Tzav:**

**“Hatred awakens judgments,”<sup>4</sup> that the hatred that Aaron presented between Israel and their Father in Heaven awakened upon them judgment upon judgment. Rabbi Asi said, this teaches that Aaron would take their sacrifice for the Golden Calf and squash it before them and say to them, “See that there is no substance to this,” i.e., the Golden Calf can’t do anything for you.**

**This is the reason why Moses told Aaron, “What did this people do to you that you have brought such great sin upon them?”<sup>5</sup> Moses meant: “It would have been better for them that they be judged as unintentional sinners [thinking there was some benefit to be derived from the Golden Calf] and not be judged as intentional sinners [knowing the truth]. . . .” This is as it is written, “Moreover, the L-rd was angry enough with Aaron to have destroyed him,”<sup>6</sup> and the expression “destruction” means to finish off his sons and daughters.**

- Lev. Rabbah 7:1

עוד אָמְרִינָן בְּפֶרֶק קמא דְעֵבֻדָּה וְנָרָה לֹא הָיוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל רְאוּיִים לְאוֹתוֹ מַעֲשֵׂה, וְלֹא עָשׂוּ אֶלָּא כְּדִי לְהוֹרוֹת תְּשׁוּבָה לְרַבִּים.

**Also, it is said in the first chapter of tractate Avodah Zarah:**

Rabbi Yochanan says in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai: David was not fit to [act as he did in] that incident [involving Bathsheba], and **the Jewish people were not fit to [act as they did in] that incident** [of the Golden Calf]. . . . Rather, why did they perform [these sins]?

. . . If an individual has sinned, one says to him: Go to [that famous] individual [who sinned, King David, and learn from him that one can repent]. And if the community sinned, one says to them: Go to the community [that sinned, i.e., the Jewish people at the time of the Golden Calf.]

It is necessary [to learn about repentance both in the case of an individual and in the case of a community]. For if we had learned [this idea only with regard to] an individual, [one might have thought that he has the option to repent only] because his sin is not publicized. But [in the case of] a community, whose sin is

<sup>4</sup> Prov. 10:12.

<sup>5</sup> Ex. 32:21.

<sup>6</sup> Deut. 9:20.

publicized, [one might] say [that the community] cannot [repent]. If we had learned [this idea only with regard to] a community, [one might have said that their repentance is accepted] because their prayers are more numerous [than those of an individual, and they are heard before G-d]. But [in the case of] an individual, whose merit is not as strong, [one might] say [that he is] not [able to repent]. [Therefore, it is] necessary [to teach both cases.]

- Avodah Zarah 4b–5a

Thus, we see that **this incident with the Golden Calf happened only in order to instruct the community about repentance**, i.e., that it is possible even for a publicized sin.

עוד איתא בילקוט על פסוק "והמים להם חמה", עמד סמא"ל ואמר לפני הקב"ה, רבונו של עולם לא עבדו ישראל עבודה זרה במצרים ואתה עושה להם נסים, וכששמע זה שר של ים נתמלא עליהם חימה ובקש לטובעון, מיד השיב לו הקב"ה, שוטה שבועלם וכי לדעתם עבדו והלא לא עבדו אלא מתוך שעבוד ומתוך טירוף דעת וכו', ואתה דן שוגג כמזיד אונם כרצון וכו' עכ"ל ועיי"ש.

**Further, it is brought in the Yalkut Shimoni on the verse:**

“The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, **the waters forming a wall for them** on their right and on their left” (Ex. 14:22): [The angel] **Samael stood and said before the Holy One, Blessed be He, “Master of the Universe, did Israel not worship idols in Egypt, so that You performed miracles for them?”** When the ministering angel of the sea heard this, he became filled with wrath against them and requested to drown them. Immediately, the Holy One, Blessed be He, responded to him, **“Fool, they worshipped idols only because of servitude and great anguish, and [yet] you judge an unintentional sinner as one who intentionally commits sins?”**

- Yalkut Shimoni, parshat Beshalach, remez 234

ומעתה מקשים המלאכים בשעה שגשרפו בני אהרן דמוכה מפאן שהקב"ה פעם עליו לפי שעשה ישראל מזידים. אמרו מלאכי השרת למה קרעת את הים לפני ישראל והלא כבר עבדו עבודה זרה במצרים, אלא ודאי צריך לומר שאין אתה מעניש על השוגג אלא על המזיד. ואדרבא אתה מוחל על השגגות פדכתיב "שגיאות מיניבין", והשתא ממה נפשך קשה למה פעסת על אהרן ומתו בניו. הלא אם ישראל לא היו מזידים לא היו מורים התשובה לרבים, שעקר התשובה היא לחוטא כמזיד, ואם לא היתה דיבורו של אהרן היו נידונים כשוגגים וכצד היתה הוראת התשובה לרבים. ואם פן מה שעשה אהרן כה היתה ראוי לעשות, ולא עשה אלא כפי רצונך שהנחת לעשות אותו מעשה אף על פי שלא היו ראויים.

**Now, the angels had a question**, which we identified as the first question on our wondrous midrash, viz, the connection between the splitting of the sea and the death of Aaron's sons: **At the**

time that the elder sons of Aaron were burned, this proved that the Holy One, Blessed be He, was angry at him because he made Israel into intentional sinners. The ministering angels said, “Why did you split the sea before Israel, for didn’t they already worship idols in Egypt? Rather, certainly it’s necessary to say that You don’t punish the unintentional sinner, but rather the intentional sinner. To the contrary, you forgive the unintentional sins, as it is written, “Who can be aware of mistakes? Clear me of unperceived guilt.”<sup>7</sup>

Now, whichever way you look at it, there’s a question why You became angry at Aaron such that his sons died. If Israel had not been intentional sinners, [the incident with the Golden Calf] would not have taught repentance to the community, for the essence of repentance is for one who sins intentionally. [Of course, repentance is also required for unintentional sins,<sup>8</sup> as one should have learned the halachot so that he wouldn’t sin, even unintentionally.<sup>9</sup>] If it were not for Aaron's speech, they would have been judged as unintentional sinners, and then how would there have been a teaching to the community of repentance, that it was possible even for publicized sins? If so, what Aaron did so was proper to do, and he acted only according to Your will, as You arranged the incident of the calf to occur, even though Israel were not fit to have acted in such a way, to be involved with such an idol.

הַשִּׁיבֵנו הַשְּׂרֹפִים "הַשִּׁיבֵנו" וְכוּ', כְּלוּמַר בְּלֹא זֶה יֵשׁ קוֹשֵׁיָא לְאַלְהֵינוּ, שְׁתַּרְי הַקַּב"ה הַנִּיחֵם וְשִׁיִּשְׂרָאֵל יַעֲשׂוּ הַעֲגֹל כְּדֵי לְהוֹרוֹת תְּשׁוּבָה לְרַבִּים וְלְדוֹרוֹת הַבָּאִים. וְאִם לֹא הָיָה מַעֲשֵׂה הַעֲגֹל הָיָה אֲפָשָׁר שְׁלֹא יַעֲשׂוּ תְּשׁוּבָה, שִׁיְהִיו טוֹעִים וְשׁוֹגְגִים בְּסִבְרָתָם לומר שֶׁאֵין תְּשׁוּבָה מוֹעֵלֶת לְרַבִּים. אֲבָל לְאַחַר מַעֲשֵׂה הַעֲגֹל אֵי אֲפָשָׁר לָהֶם לְטַעוֹת עוֹד, וּמַעֲתָה נִקְרָא שְׂגָם אֶתְּהָ עֲשִׂית אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל מִזִּידִים, שְׂאֵם דּוֹרוֹת הַבָּאִים לֹא יַעֲשׂוּ תְּשׁוּבָה אֵין לָהֶם מְנוּס. שְׁבִנְדַאי יְהִיו נִקְרָאִים מִזִּידִים וּפּוֹשְׁעִים, וְאִם כֵּן לְמָה חָרָה אַפָּד עַל אֲבֵינוּ עַל שֶׁעֲשֵׂה יִשְׂרָאֵל מִזִּידִים, הֲלֹא אִף אֶתְּהָ הַנְּחַת לַעֲשׂוֹת הַעֲגֹל כְּדֵי שְׁדוֹרוֹת הַבָּאִים יְהִיו נִידוּנִים כְּמִזִּידִים, דְּאֵם לֹא הָיָה זֶה הַמַּעֲשֵׂה יְהִיו נִידוּנִים כְּשׁוֹגְגִים וְאֲנוּסִים בְּסִבְרָתָם.

Regarding our second question on the midrash, **those who died in the fire answered, “Return us, O L-rd, to Yourself,” as if to say that without this, there is a question for our G-d. For the Holy One, Blessed be He, arranged that Israel would make the Golden Calf in order to teach the possibility of repentance for a publicized sin to the community and to the future generations. If not for the incident of the Golden Calf, it’s possible that they wouldn’t have repented for other publicized sins, that they would have been wrong and mistaken in their reasoning, saying that repentance is not effective for the community that has committed a publicized sin.**

**But after the incident of the Golden Calf, it’s impossible for them to be mistaken again, to think that repentance is not effective for a community that has committed a publicized sin. Now, it’s considered as though You also made Israel intentional sinners, for they know that**

<sup>7</sup> Ps. 19:13.

<sup>8</sup> Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance 1:1.

<sup>9</sup> Mishneh Torah, Laws of Sin Offerings 5:6.

repentance is available to them. **If the future generations do not repent, they have no escape from punishment, for certainly they will be called intentional sinners and wicked.** If so, asked Nadab and Abihu, that You arranged the incident of the Golden Calf, to teach the people that the community can repent from a publicized sin, then You too made them into intentional sinners, **why did You become angry at our father because he made Israel into intentional sinners?**

**Didn't You also arrange for them to make the Golden Calf, in order that the future generations would be judged as willful sinners? For if not for this incident, they would have been judged as unintentional sinners and compelled by their reasoning.**

וְהִנֵּה לְתַרְצֵי קוֹשֵׁיָא זֹו צְרִיף לֹוּמֵר וְשִׁגְלוּי וְיָדוּעַ לְפָנָיו שְׁלֵעוּלָם לֹא יבֹא זֶה הָעֲנָן וְשִׁשְׂרָאֵל לֹא יַעֲשֶׂוּ תְּשׁוּבָה, לְפִי שְׂאֵף אִם לֹא יִרְצוּ לַעֲשׂוֹתָהּ הוּא יִכְרִיחֵם לַעֲשׂוֹתָהּ וְלֹא יבֹאוּ לַעוֹלָם לְכָלֵל מִזִּידִים, מֵה שְׂאִין פֶּן אֶהְרֹן שְׁהִבִיָּאֵם לְכָלֵל מִזִּידִים. אֲבָל אִם נִתְרַץ כֶּה צְרִיף לֹוּמֵר וְנִקָּא "הַשִּׁיבֵנו ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ", כְּלוּמֵר וְלֹא תֵאמֵר עוֹד "שׁוּבָה יִשְׂרָאֵל" דְּמִשְׁמַע שְׁיִשׁוּבוּ מֵעֲצָמָם, אֲלֵא "הַשִּׁיבֵנו ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ", שְׁתִּתְּנֵה אֶתְּהָ הָרְאשׁוֹן לְסִייעֵנוּ וְלַעוֹרֵר לְבָנוּ לְשׁוּבָה בְּתְּשׁוּבָה. וְאִז אִף אֲנוּ נִצְדִיק עֲלֵינוּ אֶת הַדִּין, שְׁלֹא הִיָּה צוֹרֵף שְׂאֶהְרֹן יַעֲשֶׂם מִזִּידִים, שְׁהִרִי עַל כָּל פָּנִים לְדוֹרוֹת הַבָּאִים הַקָּב"ה יִכְרִיחֵם לְשׁוּבָה בְּתְּשׁוּבָה.

**Here, to solve this difficulty, it is necessary to say that it is revealed and known before Him that such a thing would never happen, that Israel would not repent. That's because even if they didn't want to [repent], thinking it would be ineffective for a publicized communal sin, He would have forced them to do so.** Thus, as far as G-d was concerned, telling the people that the Calf had no substance could have been delayed until after they had ceased bringing sacrifices to it, so that their sin would have remained unintentional. If so, **they would never have come to the category of intentional sinners.** That's **something that's not the case with Aaron**, who squashed their offerings and pointed out that the Calf had no substance, and **who brought them to the category of intentional sinner** by doing so, for they then continued to serve the Calf after knowing the truth.

**But if we solve thus, it's necessary to specifically say, "Return us, O L-rd, to Yourself." That is, one can no longer say, "Return, O Israel, to the L-rd your G-d, for you have fallen because of your sin,"<sup>10</sup> which has the meaning that they would repent of their own accord.<sup>11</sup> Rather, "Return us, O L-rd, to Yourself," using the imperative form, that You will be the first to assist us and to awaken our hearts to return in repentance. Then we too will justify the judgment on ourselves, that it was not necessary for Aaron to make them intentional sinners, for in any case, for the future generations, the Holy One, Blessed be He will force them to repent.**

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<sup>10</sup> Hosea 14:2.

<sup>11</sup> Lam. Rabbah 5:21.