

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter XXXI: Emor (Lev. 21:1–24:23)

Essay 3. The Golden Calf was meant to be a bull

מדרש רבה "שור או־כֶּשֶׁב או־עֵז" וכו', הָדָא הוּא דְּכָתִיב "וְלֹא יִהְיֶה־עוֹד לְבֵית יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמִבְטָח" וכו', וְכִי שׁוֹר נוֹלָד וְהָלֹא עֶגְלָה נוֹלָד, אֵלָּא מִשּׁוּם עָשׂוּ לָהֶם "עֶגְלָה מִסֵּכָה" קָרְאוּ הַכֹּתוּב שׁוֹר וְלֹא עֶגְלָה עַכ"ל.

Midrash Lev. Rabbah:

“When a **bull or a lamb or a goat** is born, it shall stay seven days with its mother, and from the eighth day on it shall be acceptable as an offering by fire to the L-rd.”¹ **This is** [the meaning of] **what is written** [of the Egyptians], “**Never again shall they be the trust of the House of Israel**, recalling its guilt in having turned to them.”²

Now, is a bull born? Surely, a calf is born! But because they made for themselves “a molten calf,”³ Scripture [in Lev. 22:27] called [the newborn animal] a “bull” and not a “calf.”

- Lev. Rabbah 27:3

וְשֵׁם בְּמִדְרַשׁ בְּסֻמוֹת וְכִי מָה רָאָה לַעֲשׂוֹת שׁוֹר רֹאשׁ לְכָל הַקֶּרְבָּנוֹת, אָמַר ר' לוי מִשָּׁל לְמִטְרוּנָה וְכו' פֶּה לְפִי שְׁאֵמוֹת הָעוֹלָם מוֹדִין אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל לומר עֲשִׂיתָם אֶת הָעֶגְלָה לְפִיכָה נַעֲשֶׂה שׁוֹר רֹאשׁ לְכָל הַקֶּרְבָּנוֹת לומר שֶׁבִּדְקָה הִקְבִּי"ה בְּדִבְרֵים וְלֹא מִצָּא בָהֶם מִמֶּשׁ. וְלַעֲזוֹן הַמִּפְרָשִׁים הֵם תְּמוּהֵיהֶם וְסוֹתֵרִים זֶה אֶת זֶה.

There in an adjacent Midrash:

And what did He see to make the bull the head of all the offerings?
Rabbi Levi said: This is a parable of a noblewoman, regarding whom a bad rumor spread in connection with one of the prominent members of the royal court. The king investigated the matters and did not find them substantive. What did the king do? He made a banquet and seated that man at the head of those dining. Why

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¹ Lev. 22:27.

² Ezek. 29:16.

³ Ezek. 32:4.

to that extent? It was to make it known that the king had investigated the matters and did not find them substantive.

Thus, because the nations of the world taunt Israel, saying, “You made the calf,” therefore the bull was made the head of all the offerings to say that the Holy One, Blessed be He, examined the matter and found no substance in it.

- Lev. Rabbah 27:8

To the eyes of the commentators, these statements are puzzling and contradict each other. I.e., the first Midrash suggests that Israel sinned regarding the Golden Calf, and therefore Lev. 22:27 intentionally did not refer to a “calf” being born, but to a “bull” being born. In contrast, the second Midrash suggests that there was no sin attributable to Israel with regard to the Golden Calf, and as proof, a bull was chosen as the highest level of sacrifice.

ולדידן ניקח, דאיתא במדרש על פסוק "ראה ראיתי את עני עמי", אמר לו הקב"ה למשה אתה רואה ראה אחד נאני רואה שני ראיות. אתה רואה אותם באים לסיני ומקבלים תורתך. נאני רואה אותן מקבלין תורתך, והו ראה, ועוד ראיתי זו היא ראית מעשה העגל, כשאבא על הר סיני ליתן להם התורה שומטין אחד מטטרומולין שלי ומקעיסים אותי בו דכתיב "ופני שור מהשואול" וכו' עכ"ל.

But according to us, it is understood, for it is stated in a Midrash on the verse, “I have surely seen the affliction of My people in Egypt”⁴:

The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Moses, “You see one sight, but I see two sights. You see them coming to Sinai and receiving My Torah. I see them receiving My Torah, that is the first ‘seeing’; and the second ‘seeing’ is the sight of the act of the [Golden] Calf.⁵ For when I will come down on Mount Sinai to give them the Torah, they will detach one of My angelic figures and anger Me with it, as it is written, ‘Each of them had a human face [at the front]; each of the four had the face of a lion on the right; each of the four had the face of a bull on the left; and each of the four had the face of an eagle [at the back].’”⁶

- Ex. Rabbah 3:2

The Divine Chariot mentioned in Ezekiel 1:4–28 includes the form of four animals, one of them being a bull. The intent of the Midrash is that the Israelites and Mixed Multitude unhitched the bull from the Divine Chariot, and used it as a template to form the Golden Calf. See also Chapter XLVI, Ekev, essay 10.

⁴ Ex. 3:7.

⁵ Referring to Ex. 32:9, “I see that this is a stiff-necked people.”

⁶ Ezek. 1:10

ומה שלא היה שור, פירש השפתי כהן כדי שיראו בזיונם שאם הוא אלוה או מנהיג לא היה צריך גידול וזה צריך לאכול עשב עד שיגדל ושיעשה שור עכ"ל. נמצא שמה שהיה עגל לפי האמת היה סבה מאת המקום כדי לבזותם ולביישם. אמנם לעין הרואים המעשה שהיה עגל סוברים שאף מחשבתן של ישראל היתה לעשות עגל ממנו. ואם היה אומר הכתוב עגל היה לבית ישראל למזכיר עון שהרי באמת עשו עגל, ולפיכך אמר "שור".

As to why [the statue that was formed] was a calf and not a bull, especially if they had planned to use the bull from the Divine Chariot as their template, the *Sifte Kohen* explained: In order that they should see their disgrace, for if it were a god or leader, it would not need to grow, and this one needs to eat grass until it grows to become a bull.

That is, commentary on Ex. 32:4 states that Aaron threw the gold into the fire, and while the people called for a bull to arise, instead a calf arose.⁷ Thus, **it's found that the fact it was a calf, in truth, was a reason from the Omnipresent to disgrace and shame them.**

However, in the eyes of the observers, since the act resulted in a calf, they think that the intention of Israel was to actually make a calf. Thus, while G-d wanted those involved to be shamed, by confounding their plans to fashion a bull, He did not want future generations of Israel to be shamed. **If the Scripture had said "calf," it would serve as a reminder of sin for the house of Israel, since they did indeed make a calf. Therefore, it says "bull."**

ולא עוד אלא שעשו ראש לכל הקרבנות לומר שפדק הקב"ה בדברים ולא מצא בהם ממש, שהואיל שלא נתקיימה מחשבתם, שהיו רוצים שור ועלה עגל ובהיותו עגל נתביישו, אם כן אין ממש במעשה זה, שהרי המעשה אינו חשוב כשהוא הפך המחשבה.

Not only that, but [the bull] was made the head of all the offerings, as if to say that the Holy One, Blessed be He, examined the matter and found no substance in it, since their thought was not fulfilled. That is, they wanted a bull, and a calf came out, and they were shamed by it. If so, there is no substance in this act, for an act is not significant when it is the opposite of the thought.

⁷ Rashi on Ex. 32:4: "As soon as he had thrown it into the fire in a melting pot, the magicians amongst the mixed multitude who had come up with them from Egypt came and made it by their magic art. There are some who say that Micah [the idolator mentioned in Judges ch. 17] was there, who had been drawn forth from the foundations of a building in Egypt where he was nearly crushed. He had in his hand a 'supernatural name' and a plate upon which Moses had written: 'Come up, ox, come up, ox!' in order to raise the coffin of Joseph who is compared to an ox [cf. Deut. 33:17] out of the Nile, and he cast [the plate] into the melting pot and the calf came out." See also Midrash Tanchuma, Ki Tisa 19.

ובזוה יובן הפסוק "ונמירו את־קבֹודם בַּתְּבִנִית שׁוֹר אֲכַל עֵשֶׂב", דמאי נפקא מינה אם אוכל עשב או אינו אוכל, ועוד דלאחר שאמר "נעשו־עגל בַּחֲרֵב" מהו שחזר לומר "בַּתְּבִנִית שׁוֹר" אם לא הנה אלא עגל. אלא לגלות לנו הבזיון שקבלו בו ישראל שלא בא שור כמו שהיו סוברים אלא תבניתו דהיינו עגל, והנה צריך לאכול עשב עד שיתגדל.

With this, we understand the verse, **"They exchanged their glory for the image of a bull that feeds on grass."**⁸ What difference does it make whether it eats grass or does not eat grass? Furthermore, since it already said in the previous verse, **"They made a calf at Horeb and bowed down to a molten image,"**⁹ why return in the next verse to say, **"the image of a bull,"** if it was only a calf?

Rather, the reason was to reveal to us the disgrace that Israel received, that a bull did not come out of the fire, as they had thought, but rather it's likeness, meaning a calf, and it had to eat grass as it grew into a bull. Rashi on Ps. 106:20 explains, "There is nothing as disgusting and repugnant as a bull. When it eats grass, it produces much dung, with which it soils itself." So the people expected a bull to emerge from the fire, but instead they got a calf. Even then, it wasn't a cute newborn calf, which only drinks milk for the first three weeks of life. Instead, it was an older calf, weaned from milk at 8–12 weeks, but younger than 12–24 months, at which point it would be considered a full-fledged bull. So the Golden Calf was a poor imitation of the bull they had expected, yet it still had the disgusting nature of an older calf and mature bull.

ואף כאן התחיל הכתוב "שור או־כֶּשֶׂב או־עִז" כדי להשמיענו הטעם שמתחל להם, לפי שהיו רוצים שור, ויצא להם עגל ונתבנישו בו. וכל העושה עבירה ומתבניש בה מוחליו לו מיד כמו שאמרו ז"ל, ומשום הכי עשה שור ראש לכל הקרבנות, לפי שמנה השם של שור נודע שנתחרטו ונתבנישו בנדאי שהוא ראוי להיות ראש לקרבנות.

Even here, Scripture begins, **"When a bull or a lamb or a goat is born,"** in order to inform us of the reason that He forgave them: because they wanted a bull, but a calf came out, and they were ashamed of it. Anyone who sins and is ashamed of it is forgiven immediately, as our sages said.¹⁰

For this reason, a bull was made the head of all the offerings, because from this name **"bull"** it is known that they regretted and were surely ashamed; therefore, it is fitting to be the head of the offerings.

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⁸ Ps. 106:20.

⁹ Ps. 106:19.

¹⁰ Berachot 12b.