

Zera Shimshon

by Rabbi Shimshon Chaim Nachmani zt"l

Published Mantua 1778*

Chapter XLVI: Ekev (Deut. 7:12–11:25)

Essay 10. Sinai, the Golden Calf, and the Throne of Glory

בְּרִכּוֹת פָּרַק ה' אָמְרָה לְפָנָיו: רְבוּנוּ שֶׁל עוֹלָם, הוֹאִיל וְאִין שְׂכָחָה לְפָנֵי כְּבוֹדָךְ, שְׂמָא לֹא תִשְׁכַּח לִי מַעֲשֵׂה הָעֵגֶל? אָמַר לָהּ: "גַּם אֱלֹהֵי תִשְׁכַּחנָּה". אָמְרָה לְפָנָיו: הוֹאִיל וְיִישׁ שְׂכָחָה לְפָנֵי כְּבוֹדָךְ, שְׂמָא תִשְׁכַּח לִי מַעֲשֵׂה סִינַי? אָמַר לָהּ: "וְאַנְכִי לֹא אֲשַׁכַּח". צָרִיד עֵיוֹן מָה עָנָן זֶה לְזֶה, וְלָמָּה נִקַּט לְפָנֵי כְּבוֹדָךְ וְלֹא אָמַר הוֹאִיל וְיִישׁ שְׂכָחָה לְפָנֶיךָ.

In tractate **Berachot**, the fifth chapter (page 32b): “[The community of Israel] **said to Him: ‘Master of the Universe, since there is no forgetfulness before the Throne of Your Glory, perhaps you will not forget my sin of the Golden Calf?’** He responded to [Israel]: **‘This [*eleh*] too shall be forgotten’** [with ‘*eleh*’ referencing Israel’s identification of the Golden Calf as, ‘This [*eleh*] is your god.’ (Ex. 32:4)]. [The community of Israel] **said before Him: ‘Since there is forgetfulness before the Throne of Your Glory, perhaps You will also forget the events [revolving around the revelation] at Sinai?’** He said to Israel: **‘I [*Anochi*] will not forget you’** [with “*Anochi*” referencing the First Commandment given at Sinai, “I [*Anochi*] am the L-rd your G-d’ (Ex. 20:2).]”

This requires investigation how one matter is related to the other. That is, the Torah, and likewise our midrash here speaks in the language of man, and thus speaks of “forgetfulness.” Obviously, G-d doesn’t suffer from human frailties such as forgetfulness, so how would a conscious decision by G-d to overlook our sin of the Golden Calf suggest that he would also consciously overlook our positive action of receiving the Torah? We also need to investigate **why the [midrash] used the language of “the Throne of Your Glory,” and didn’t simply say, “Since there is forgetfulness before You.”** I.e., what is the significance of the midrash mentioning the Throne of Glory?

וַיִּבְרַח שְׂפִיר בְּמַאי דְאִיתָא בְּשִׁמּוֹת רַבָּה פְּרִשְׁתָּ שְׁמוֹת וּפְרִשְׁתָּ כִּי תִשָּׂא שְׂכָחְנָגְלָהּ הַקַּב"ה עַל הַר סִינַי עִם כְּבוֹדוֹ וְהַסִּיּוֹת הַנוֹשָׂאִים אוֹתוֹ הֵם הַתְּבוּנָנוּ בּוֹ וְשִׁמְטוֹ אֶחָד מֵהֶם, כְּדָכְתִּיב "וּפְנִי-שׁוֹר מֵהַשָּׁמַיִם", וְהַכְּעִיסוֹ אוֹתוֹ בּוֹ, וְזֶהוּ שְׂאֵמַר לוֹ לְמִנְשָׁה "רְאֵה רְאִיתִי", אִתָּה רוֹאֵה רְאִיָּה אֶחָד, וְאַנְי רוֹאֵה שְׁתֵּי רְאִיּוֹת עַכ"ל.

This will be understood nicely by what is brought in Shemot Rabbah, parshat Shemot (3:2) and parshat Ki Tisa (42:5) that when the Holy One, Blessed be He, was revealed on

* English translation: Copyright © 2021 by Charles S. Stein. More essays are at <https://www.zstorah.com>

Mount Sinai with the Throne of His glory and the *chayyot* angels¹ carrying it, [the Israelites and mixed multitude] looked at Him but unhitched one of [the *chayyot*], as it is written, “and the face of an ox on the left” (Ezek. 1:10),² and they provoked Him to anger by this [action, and by their reason for it, which was to take the ox to use as a template in making the Golden Calf]. This is why He said to Moses, “I have surely seen” [ראה ראיתי] [*ra’o ra’iti*] (Ex. 3:7), as if to say: “You see one vision, but I see two visions.³ You see them coming to Sinai and receiving My law and so do I. This, however, is only one vision. But I can also see the vision of the Golden Calf.”

ומעשה הדבר מבואר שאם ישפח מעשה העגל צריך שישפח נמי מה ששפטו צורת שור מהמרפכה באותו מעמד. ואם כן הייתי אומר שישפח נמי מעשה סיני דהיינו קבלת התורה שהיתה באותו מעמד, וקל להבין.

From here, the matter is clarified, for if He had forgotten the incident with the Golden Calf, it would also be necessary for Him to forget that they unhitched the [angel] with the form of the ox from the Chariot, the traveling form of the Throne of Glory, at the same place. For the Golden Calf that had been made by the mixed multitude had been fashioned from that ox that the people had removed from the Chariot. We also understand that the Chariot was only at Sinai to bring G-d to give the Torah to Moses. **If so, that He chose to “forget” the tampering with his Throne of Glory, I would have said that He also forgot the other events at Mount Sinai related to the Throne of Glory, which was the reception of the Torah, at the same place, and that’s easy to understand.** That is why the midrash suggests that a conscious decision by G-d to overlook our sin of the Golden Calf suggests that he would also consciously overlook our positive action of receiving the Torah. It also explains the significance of the midrash mentioning the Throne of Glory, which in the form of the Chariot carried G-d between Heaven and Sinai.

* * *

¹ Rambam’s Mishneh Torah, Foundations of the Torah, 2:7, considers the *chayyot* to be the highest of the ten ranks of angels.

² That is, Ezekiel has two visions of the chariot of G-d (i.e., the traveling form of Heaven’s Throne of Glory). At the river Chebar, Ezekiel had a vision of the chariot being carried by the *chayyot*, each of which had four faces (Ezek. 1:10): the face of a human toward the front, the face of an ox on the left, the face of a lion on the right, and the face of an eagle on the rear. At Jerusalem, Ezekiel had another vision of the Throne of Glory being carried by angels, again with four faces (Ezek. 10:14), but this time he states there was a human face, a cherub’s face, a lion’s face, and an eagle’s face. [In the second vision, the angels were not *chayyot*, but *cherubim*, but that is beyond the scope of this essay.]

The midrashic view is apparently that the first vision related to a time before the ox had been stolen by the people, whereas the second vision related to a time after that theft, when G-d had replaced the ox with a cherub.

A different view is presented in Chagigah 13b, where Reish Lakish said that after the first vision, Ezekiel was troubled by the appearance of the ox, considering the history of the Golden Calf, and that he prayed that if he had a similar vision, the ox would be replaced.

³ The verb is doubled for emphasis, i.e., “I have *surely* seen,” while the midrashic interpretation is that the doubling indicates that G-d has seen two visions.