

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter XLVI: Ekev (Deut. 7:12–11:25)

Essay 4. Why Moses again mentioned the Golden Calf

"זָכֹר אֶל־תִּשְׁכַּח אֶת אֲשֶׁר־הִקְצַפְתָּ וְכוּ' "לְמַן־הַיּוֹם אֲשֶׁר־יֵצְאוּ וְכוּ' "מִמָּרִים הָיִיתֶם עִם־ה', וּבַחֲרֹב הִקְצַפְתֶּם" וְכוּ'. מְקַשִּׁים דָּאֲחַר שְׁאָמַר שֶׁהָיוּ מִמָּרִים עִם־ה' מִשִּׁיֵּצְאוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם עַד־בּוֹאֵם עַד־הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה שֶׁהוּא עַרְבוֹת מוֹאָב שְׁבָאוּ לְשָׁם בְּשָׁנַת הָאָרְבָּעִים, לְמָה חִזַּר וּפָרַט "וּבַחֲרֹב הִקְצַפְתֶּם" שֶׁהוּא מַעֲשֵׂה הָעֶגְלָה נִהְיָ בְּכֻלָּל מֵאֵתִים מְנָה?

“Remember, never forget, how you provoked the L-rd your G-d to anger in the wilderness: from the day that you left the land of Egypt until you reached this place, you have continued defiant toward the L-rd. At Horeb you so provoked the L-rd that the L-rd was angry enough with you to have destroyed you” (Deut. 9:7-8). [People] question: After [Moses] says that they provoked the L-rd from the time they left Egypt until they reached this place—which was the fields of Moab, to which they arrived in the fortieth year—why did [Moses] go back to say, “At Horeb you provoked,” which was the incident of the Golden Calf, for doesn’t “two hundred subsume one hundred”¹? In other words, Moses already said that the Israelites provoked G-d the entire time in the wilderness, so why then specifically mention one incident that occurred within that time frame?

וְיֵשׁ לֵאמֹר שֶׁפְּנוּנַת מִשְׁחָה הָיְתָה לֵאמֹר שֶׁלְּגַבֵּי הַקָּב"ה שִׁיּוּדַע כָּל מַחְשְׁבוֹת הָיוּ מִמָּרִים מִן הַיּוֹם שֶׁיֵּצְאוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם, אֲבָל לְגַבֵּי הָעוֹלָם לֹא נִתְּוַדַּע דְּבַר זֶה עַד מַעֲשֵׂה הָעֶגְלָה. וְהֵינּוּ דְבָרִים יְצִיאָתָם מִמִּצְרַיִם כְּתִיב "נִיְהִי בְּשֵׁלַח" וְכוּ' "וְלֹא־נָחֶם" וְכוּ' "כִּי אָמַר" וְכוּ' "פְּנוּ־יָנַחֶם הָעָם" וְכוּ' "וְשָׁבוּ מִצְרַיִמָּה". שֶׁנֶּרְאָה מִזֶּה שֶׁלְּבָם לֹא הָיָה שְׁלֵם עִם הַקָּב"ה וְלֹא הָיוּ מוֹכִינִים לְשִׁמוּעַ בְּקוֹלוֹ אֶלָּא אֲדַרְבָּא לְחִזּוֹר לְמִצְרַיִם.

It can be said that Moses’ intent was to say that regarding the Holy One, Blessed be He—Who knows all thoughts—He knew that they had provoked Him from the day they left Egypt, but regarding the rest of the world, they didn’t learn about this matter until the incident with the Golden Calf. This is why, on the day of their leaving Egypt, it’s written, “Now when Pharaoh let the people go, G-d did not lead them by way of the land of the

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¹ This quotation appears in Bava Kamma 74a, Bava Batra 41b, and Sanhedrin 31a, and relates to testimony from one set of witnesses that someone owes 100 dinars, and testimony from a second set of witnesses that he owes 200 dinars. Even though they disagree about the amount, the court will find the person liable to pay 100 dinars, for the 100 dinars to which one set of witnesses testifies is subsumed within the 200 dinars to which the second set of witnesses testifies. That is, testimony concerning a large sum includes testimony concerning a smaller sum.

Philistines, although it was nearer; **for G-d said, ‘The people may have a change of heart when they see war, and return to Egypt’**” (Ex. 13:17). **It seems from this that G-d understood that they were not wholehearted with the Holy One, Blessed be He, and they were not prepared to hear His voice, but rather they were prepared to return to Egypt.**

וּכְשֶׁבָאוּ לְהַר סִינַי הִקְדִּימוּ נִעְשָׂה לְנִשְׁמָע. וְאִיתָא בְּמִדְרָשׁ עַל פְּסוּק "וַיִּתֵּן אֱלֹהֵי-מִצְרַיִם כְּכֹלְתוֹ", "לֵךְ ה' הַצְּדָקָה" וְכוּ' נֶאֱמַר לְיִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר "נִעְשָׂה וְנִשְׁמָע" שְׁמָא נֶאֱמַר לָהֶם לֵאמֹר "אֵלֶּה אֱלֹהֵיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל" עכ"ל. וְהַקּוּשְׁיָא מְבַאֲרַת דְּמִי בְּעַר לֹא יָדַע בְּזָה.

But when they came to Mount Sinai, they advanced the word “we will do” before the word “we will hear.” Did the Israelites suddenly develop a complete trust in G-d, in the short time between the Exodus and arriving at Mount Sinai? Such it may have appeared to the world at large. However, **there is a midrash brought on the verse: “And He gave unto Moses, when He had made an end of speaking with him upon Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of G-d”** (Ex. 31:18). The Midrash reads:

“With You, O L-rd, is the right, and the shame is on us to this very day, on the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, all Israel, near and far, in all the lands where You have banished them, for the trespass they committed against You” (Dan. 9:7). **It was proper for Israel to say, “All that G-d said, we will do and we will hear.” Was it also proper for them to say** [regarding the Golden Calf], **“This is your god, O Israel”** (Ex. 32:4)?

- Midrash Ex. Rabbah (41:1)

The midrash gives several examples that after we do something good, we follow it by doing something bad. **The difficulty is explained that one “who is stupid cannot know” [the greatness of the L-rd]**². Thus, the Israelites were giving mixed signals, at times professing a complete faith in G-d, and at other times showing tremendous weakness.

וּמִלְכָּד מַה שְׁכַתְּבֵנוּ בְּזָה בְּפִרְשַׁת פִּי תִשָּׂא עוֹד יֵשׁ לֵאמֹר בְּדִרְךָ אַחַר שְׁלִכְאוּרְךָ אֵין כָּל כֹּף שֶׁבַח לְיִשְׂרָאֵל בְּנִעְשָׂה וְנִשְׁמָע, שְׁהוֹאִיל שְׁפָנוּנְתָם הִיָּתָה לְמָאוֹס בְּתוֹרָה שְׁבַעַל פֶּה כְּמוֹ שְׁכַתְּבֵנָה בְּרַחֲמֵי בְּרַחֲמֵי יְהוָה בְּפִרְשַׁת יְתֵרוֹ בְּשֵׁם הַמִּדְרָשׁ שְׁכַפְיִית הָהָר כְּגִיגִית הִיָּתָה בְּשִׁבִיל הַתּוֹרָה שְׁבַעַל פֶּה. לְכֵן אָמְרוּ נִעְשָׂה כָּל מַה שְׁיִהְיֶה בְּכַתֵּב וְאַחַר כֵּן נִשְׁמָע הַתּוֹרָה שְׁבַעַל פֶּה לְקִיָּמָה כְּפִי רְצוֹנֵנוּ וְלֹא בְּתוֹרַת חַיִּיב.

Besides what we wrote on this subject in parshat Ki Tisa (note 11), we can also say in another way that apparently Israel was not so praiseworthy for saying “All that G-d said, we will do and we will hear.” This is because their intent was to despise the oral Torah, as the Zera Berach³ wrote on parshat Yitro regarding the midrash that [G-d] overturned the

² Ps. 92:7.

³ Rabbi Berachia Berech ben R' Yitzchak Izaak Shapiro, Zera Berech (Krakow 1646), commentary on the Torah.

mountain above [the Israelites] like a tub because of the oral Torah.⁴ Therefore, according to the Zera Berach, they said “we will do all that will be in writing,” i.e., in the written Torah, “and afterward we will hear the Oral Torah to fulfill it in accordance with our will, and not as an obligatory law.” Thus, there is ample evidence to the Israelites weakness, and reason to condemn them for it.

אַלָּא שְׁאֵנוּ דוֹרְשִׁים אֲדַרְבָּא לְשִׁבְחָא יִשְׂרָאֵל כְּדִאֲמַרְיֵנוּ בְּשַׁבָּת, עֲמָא פְּזִיזָא, דְּקִדְמִיתוּ פּוּמִיכּוּ לְאוּדְגְּנִיכּוּ. אֲנֵן דְּסִגְיֵנוּ בְּשִׁלְמוּתָא כְּתִיב בּוֹן: “תָּמַת יִשְׂרָאֵל תִּנְחַם.” וְהִקְדִּימוּ נַעֲשֶׂה לְפִי שְׁהִיּוּ בּוֹטְחִים וּמֵאֲמִינִים בְּהַקְב"ה שְׁאִין כְּמוֹהוּ שְׁיִשְׁגִּיחַ עֲלֵיהֶם וְלֹא יִצְוֶה לְהֵם אֲלָא מַה שְׁיִכּוּלִים לְסוּבְלוֹ, וְשִׁתּוֹרְתוֹ אָמַת בְּלִי תּוֹסֶפֶת וּבְלִי מִגְרַעַת, וּלְפִיכּוּ נֶאֱחָה לְהֵם לֹאמַר "נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמַע."

However, a contrary view is to praise Israel, as is written in tractate Shabbat (page 88a), where a heretic said to Rava, “You **impulsive nation, who accorded precedence to your mouths over your ears.** You still bear your impulsiveness, [as you act without thinking]. You should listen first. Then, if you are capable [of fulfilling the commands], accept [them]. And if not, do not accept [them].” Rava answered him, “**About us, who proceed wholeheartedly** and with integrity, **it is written: ‘The integrity of the upright will guide them’** (Prov. 11:3), [whereas] about those people who walk in deceit, it is written [at the end of the same verse]: ‘And the perverseness of the faithless will destroy them.’” **They advanced “we will do” before “we will hear” because they trusted and believed in the Holy One, Blessed be He, that there is none like Him, Who will watch over them, and Who will only command them to do what they can endure. Also, His Torah is true, without addition and without defect, and therefore it was proper for them to say, “We will do and we will hear.”**

אַמְנָם כְּשִׁחְטָאוּ בְּעַגְלָא וְקִבְלוּהוּ עָלֵיוּ לְאַלֹּהִים, נִסְתַּר פִּירוּשׁ זֶה, שְׁהָרִי אֵם הָיָה מֵאֲמִינִים בְּהַקְב"ה בְּלֵב שְׁלֵם לְפִי שְׁאִין כְּמוֹהוּ, לֹא הָיָה לְהֵם לְהַמִּיר אֶת כְּבוֹדוֹ בְּלֹא יוֹעִיל. וּמִדְּהִמִּירוֹ שָׁמַע מִיָּנָה שְׁלֵמִפְרַע לֹא הָיָה לְבָם שְׁלֵם בְּהַקְב"ה, וּכְשִׁחְטָאוּ "נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמַע" לֹא הָיָה מִחֻמַּת הָאֲמָנָה בּוֹ לְפִי שֶׁהוּא יְחִיד בְּעוֹלָם, שְׁהָרִי הָאֲמִינֵנוּ אֶפִּילוּ בְּתַבְנִית שׁוֹר אוֹכֵל עֵשֶׂב וְכוּנְתָם הָיְתָה כְּפִירוּשׁ הָרַאשׁוֹן, וְזֶהוּ "מְמָרִים הָיִיתָם עִם-ה'" , שְׁמִיּוֹם אֲשֶׁר יִצְאָתָם הִפִּיר בְּכֶם אֲלָא שְׁלֹא נוֹדְעוּ מִחֻשְׁבוֹתֵיכֶם עַד מַעֲשֶׂה הָעַגְלָא וְזֶה הוּבָרַר הַדְּבָר לְמַפְרַע.

Indeed, when they sinned with the Golden Calf and accepted it as a god, this explanation of Rava’s was temporarily hidden, for if they had believed in G-d wholeheartedly, that there is none like Him, they would not have substituted His glory to no avail. From their substitution, we hear from this that, retrospectively, they were not wholehearted with the Holy One, Blessed be He, and when they said, “we will do and we will hear,” it was not because of the faith in Him that He was unique in the universe. For they believed even in the image of an ox eating grass and their intention was as the first interpretation, which is that, “you have

⁴ Shabbat 88a: “ ‘[And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet G-d] and they stood at the lowermost part of the mount’ (Ex. 19:17). Rabbi Avdimi bar Chama bar Chasa said: this teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, overturned the mountain above them like a tub, and said to them: ‘If you accept the Torah, excellent, and if not, there will be your burial.’ ”

continued defiant toward the L-rd,” that from the day you left [Egypt], He knew you, but your thoughts did not become clear to others until the incident of the Golden Calf, and then the matter became clear retrospectively.

ומה שחזר לומר בסוף התוכחה "ממרים הייתם עם-ה'" מיזם דעתי אתכם. כוונתו הייתה לומר אף על פי שחשב לי הקב"ה לעון פשעמיתי "והן לא-ינאמינו לי" ואמר לי הם מאמינים בני מאמינים, אתה אין סופך להאמין וכו' כדאי תא בפרק הזורק. זה לא היה אלא לפי שעברתי על הוי דן את כל האדם לכף זכות, ומשום הכי נענשתי. אבל האמת היא שאתם הייתם ממרים את ה' כמו שעשיתם בחורב ובתבערה ובמסה אף מיום הראשון שידעתי אתכם, שאף על פי שאמר לי הם מאמינים, גלוי היה לפניו שעתידים לתטוא, כמו שהיה יודע שאני אין סופי להאמין.

Regarding what [Moses] returned to say at the end of the rebuke, “you have continued defiant toward the L-rd,” [he meant], “from the day I knew you.” His intent was to say, “The Holy One, Blessed be He, thought me guilty when I said, ‘What if they do not believe me’ (Ex. 4:1), and He said to me, ‘They are believers, the children of believers; and ultimately, you will not believe,’ as it is brought in the chapter entitled “One who throws,” which is the 11th chapter of tractate Shabbat.⁵ As the Gemara explains: “They are believers, as it is written: ‘And the people believed [once they heard that G-d had remembered the children of Israel, and that He saw their affliction, and they bowed and they prostrated]’ (Ex. 4:31). The children of believers [as it says with regard to Abraham our Patriarch]: ‘And he believed in G-d [and He counted it for him as righteousness]’ (Gen. 15:6). Ultimately, you will not believe, as it is stated: ‘[And G-d said to Moses and to Aaron]: Because you did not believe in Me [to sanctify Me in the eyes of the children of Israel]’ (Num. 20:12, referring to Moses striking the rock at Meribah, instead of simply ordering it to produce water as G-d had instructed him).’ ”

Moses meant, “Even though G-d rebuked me for saying, ‘What if they do not believe me,’” the rebuke **was only because I violated** the rule, ‘**judge every man as meritorious.**’ **Because of that violation, I was punished. But the truth is that you provoked G-d as you did at Horeb, and ‘again you provoked the L-rd at Taberah, and at Massah, and at Kibroth-hattaavah’ (Deut. 9:22), even from the first day I knew you, that even though He told me, ‘they are believers,’ it was obvious to Him that they would sin, as He knew that ultimately I would not believe [in Him to sanctify Him in the eyes of the children of Israel],”** i.e., at Meribah.

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⁵ Chapter 11 of Shabbat begins on 96a. The quotation presented is from page 97a.