

Good Shabbos, everyone.

I want to take this opportunity to thank Shimmy Weichbrod for his years of service--a decade of volunteer work for our shul—diligently producing the bulletin every week. I estimate that he has dedicated over 100/ 24-hour days to this project ...and we are very grateful for his contribution.

But today is not only about honoring his service...it is a day for us to reflect on what we can do as well...how can we dedicate our time and talents to the shul and community. Like the original Mishkan, which was the product of a community effort, a shul depends on the efforts of the entire membership to step up and volunteer. Please think about how you can contribute and do your part!

Thank you to the drasha sponsors:

- Joe and Helaine Bondar, in memory of Joe's father, Dovid Bondar, 11 Adar.
- Noah and Ellen Lightman, in memory of Noah's father, Mashe Uda Labe Lightman, 27 Adar.
- Fred and Janet Sunness, in memory of Janet's mother, Sylvia Stoltz, 8 of Adar, and Janet's father, Morris Stoltz, 28 Adar.

May all the *neshamos* have an *aliya* and may the sponsors be rewarded for their support of the shul with *bracha*, *hatzlacha*, and good health.

As you may know, one of my favorite sefarim is a 12th century work of Jewish philosophy by the great Spanish philosopher and poet, Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi, called the **Sefer HaKuzari**. It describes, in conversation form and in great detail, the spiritual journey of the King of Khazars, which took place sometime between the eighth and tenth century. It outlines his search for the true faith until eventually he found Judaism and converted along with much of his kingdom.

The sefer begins with a short account of the incidents preceding the king's conversion and recounts his conversations with a Philosopher, a Christian, and a Muslim concerning their respective beliefs. Then a rabbi appears on the stage and tells the king that the foundation of the Jewish faith is different from other religions; it is based on the *yetzias Mitzrayim* experience, when the Jews encountered God, directly.

ספר הכוזרי מאמר א:יא. אמר לו החבר: אנחנו מאמינים באלהי אברהם יצחק ויעקב המוציא את בני ישראל ממצרים באותות ובמופתים ובמסות, והמכלכלם במדבר, והמנחילם את ארץ כנען, אחר אשר העבירים את הים והירדן במופתים גדולים, ושלח משה בתורתו, ואחר כך כמה אלפי נביאים אחריו מזהירים על תורתו, מיעדים בגמול הטוב לשומרה, ועונש הקשה לממרה אותה. ואנחנו מאמינים בכל מה שכתוב בתורה, והדברים ארוכים.

Upon hearing this statement, the Melech Kuzar, the Khazar king, gets quite upset and asks the rabbi: how could **the generation** that experienced all the miracles of *yetzias Mitzraim* later worship a golden calf?

ספר הכוזרי מאמר א:צב. אמר הכוזרי: הזהר החבר שלא תטה בספור שבחי עמך ותעזוב מה שנתפרסם ממרים עם אלהי המעמדות, כי שמעתי שבתוך זה עשו עגל ועבדוהו מבלתי האלהים.

Before the rabbi attempts to offer a rationale for the heinous act of the *cheit ha-egel*, he offers one simple mitigating fact—very few people actually worshipped the *egel*...

ספר הכוזרי מאמר א:צז. ולא הגיעו עובדיו אל שלשת אלפי איש מכלל שש מאות אלף שהיו.

Basing his estimate on the Pasuk that says Moshe Rabbeinu killed 3,000 people,

שמות פרק לבכח) וַיַּעֲשׂוּ בְנֵי־לֵוִי כְדִבְרֵי מֹשֶׁה וַיַּחַל מִן־הָעָם בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא בְּשַׁלְשֵׁת אֲלָפֵי אִישׁ:

the rabbi suggests that only 3,000 people actually worshipped the *egel*. Only 3,000 out of a nation of 600,000 men between 20 and 50—with estimates (based on **Targum Yonasan ben**

Uziel) of upwards of 3 million people in total. If you do the math--only 1 in 1,000 worshipped the *egel*.

Think about it. A nation that had just left 210 years of slavery and idol worship (הללו עובדי ע"ז) (והללו עובדי ע"ז) is suddenly confronted with a feeling of isolation and confusion. They were left alone in a desert after their leader, Moshe, disappeared—and 999 out of 1,000 are strong in their faith...and do not revert to idol worship.

That is pretty incredible!

The story of the *cheit ha-egel*, when seen in that light, should be something we are proud of—99.9 percent of the Jewish people were strong in their faith...and did not worship the calf.

Yet that is not how we are meant to remember this painful episode. We are commanded that we all must remember the embarrassing story of the *cheit ha-egel* **for all time**.

דברים פרק ט(ז) זָכֹר אֱלֹהֵינוּ שֶׁכָּפַחְנוּ אֶת אֱשֶׁר־הִקְצַפְתָּ אֵת־ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ בְּמִדְבָּר לְמַן־הַיּוֹם אֲשֶׁר־יִצְאָתָהּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם עַד־בְּאֵכֶם עַד־הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה מִמֶּרְיֵם הַיִּיתֶם עִם־ה'.

*Remember how **you** challenged God and rebelled against Him in the Midbar...*

And the first example Moshe cites of their rebelliousness is the *cheit ha-egel*.

Rav Shneur Zalman of Lyadi writes in his *Shulchan Aruch Harav* that there is a positive commandment to remember the *cheit ha-egel*.

שולחן ערוך הרב אורח חיים סימן ס סעיף ד

זכירת מעמד הר סיני ומעשה עמלק ומעשה מרים ומעשה העגל הן מצות עשה של תורה וגם זכירת שבת יש אומרים שמצותה בכל יום

In the **Siddur**, remembering the *cheit ha-egel* is included in the *sheish zechiros*, the six things we have a Mitzva to remember every day—along with *yetzias mitzrayim*, *mattan Torah*, Shabbos, Amalek, and Miriam's episode of *lashon hara*.

And furthermore, we may wonder why the actions of those few had an everlasting effect on the entire nation. The entire nation suffered the loss of the *luchos* when Moshe came down from Har Sinai and saw the *egel* and shattered them.

Moreover, according to the **Vilna Gaon**, after the *cheit ha-egel*, the *ananei ha-kavod*, the clouds of glory, disappeared,, and would return only when construction of the Mishkan began on Sukkos.

It is striking that there were terrible incidents in the Midbar, involving many more people, that hardly get noticed, certainly not remembered every day like the *egel*.

For example, when the Jews sinned with Midianite women, 24,000 Jews died in a plague until Pinchas committed his act of zealotry.

במדבר פרק כה: (ט) וַיְהִי הַמָּתִים בַּמִּגְדָּה אַרְבָּעָה וָעֶשְׂרִים אָלֶף: פ

Why is the *cheit ha-egel* deemed so serious? Why is it treated as something the entire nation did, with lasting fallout and permanent negative effects on the entire nation, when 99.9 percent were not involved?

I believe that there is more to the story than meets the eye—and in that subtlety lies the great significance of the story and its relevance for all time...

Let us begin to analyze the events which followed the *cheit ha-egel*: Moshe descends from Har Sinai and proclaims—מי לה' אלי—

We would expect that 2.97 million people would align themselves with Moshe. **But only one shevet appeared loyal to God and his servant Moshe; that was *Shevet Levi*.**

שמות פרק לב פסוק כו

וַיַּעֲמֵד מֹשֶׁה בְּשַׁעַר הַמִּחֲנֶה וַיֹּאמֶר מִי לַה' אֵלָיו וַיֹּאסְפוּ אֵלָיו כָּל־בְּנֵי לֵוִי:

The **Daas Zekeinim MiBaalei Tosafos** writes that there were **three groups** that formed during the *cheit ha-egel*. One group was the 3,000 people who actually worshipped the *egel*. A second group was *shevet Levi*, who vehemently opposed it. And the third group-- **the majority of the nation--was somewhere in between. They they did not reject or replace God outright; but they also wanted an *egel*...**

דעת זקנים מבעלי התוספות שמות פרק לב פסוק כו: ונראה ששלש כתות היו במעשה העגל כת אחת אומרת אשר ילכו לפנינו ולא נתכוונו אלא למנהיג לבד. וכת אחרת קבלוהו לע"ז והם שלשת אלפי איש שנדונו בסייף. ושבט לוי שכלם דבקו בה:

This may explain the phrase you rebelled, while still with God. You thought you could have it both ways....

Similarly, the **Netziv** explains that when Moshe asked מי לה' אלי he was not only asking who was not involved in worshipping this *egel*. **He was also asking who is firmly committed to *avodas Hashem*...enough to take a stand...**

And the majority of Jews were were not firmly committed. They were neutral, indifferent and apathetic. They accepted God but, at the same time, did not denounce the *egel*. They “played it safe.”

העמק דבר שמות פרשת כי תשא פרק לב פסוק כו: (כו) מי לה' אלי. אין הכוונה מי הוא שלא עבד עבודת כוכבים, שהרי רוב ישראל לא עבדו עבודת כוכבים, אלא מי יודע בעצמו שהוא אך לה', למסור נפשו וכל אשר לו לאהבת ה' וכבודו...

Seen in this light, the *cheit ha-egel* was an egregious error by the overwhelming majority of the nation—who refused to take sides, who were indifferent to what was happening—and who refused to align themselves with God.

The majority of the nation indeed did not worship the *egel*, they did not overtly reject God, but their fidelity to God was not strong enough to find the moral courage to stand up and be counted with faith and conviction when Moshe came down and presented them with the challenge מי לה' אלי

And when the majority of the nation is neutral, hedging their bets and indifferent or apathetic to the attack on God, they are really not neutral. Instead, they are actually complicit in the evil of the few and are blamed accordingly.

Plato said: “*The price good men pay for indifference to public affairs is to be ruled by evil men.*” And the majority indeed paid the price for the 3,000 who worshipped the *egel*. Look at how their actions changed their reality forever...with the shattered *luchos* and all it brought with it...

The **haftarah** that we read with this Parsha is from Melachim I: 18. There, **Eliyahu haNavi** challenges the false prophets of *Baal* on Har HaCarmel in front of the Jewish nation.

Eliyahu chastises the nation: How long can you straddle the fence?

וַיִּגַּשׁ אֵלֵיהֶם אֵל-כָּל-הָעָם וַיֹּאמֶר עַד-מָתַי אַתֶּם פֹּסְחִים עַל-שְׁתֵּי הַסַּעֲפִיּוֹת אִם-ה' הָאֱלֹקִים לָכֵן אַחֲרָיו וְאִם-הַבַּעַל לָכֵן אַחֲרָיו וְלֹא-עֲנֹה הָעָם אֹתוֹ דְּבָר:

*Elijah approached all the people and said, "How long will you keep hopping between two opinions? **If the LORD is God, follow Him; and if Baal, follow him!**" But the people answered him not a word.*

But is Eliyahu sincere when he says that if you believe in Baal, go all in? Wouldn't it be better for them also to worship Hashem?

The **Malbim** says there is no such thing...straddling the fence in *avodas Hashem* is a rejection of Hashem.

מַלְבִּים: עַד מָתַי ר"ל אתם עובדים את הבעל, ובזמן רעתכם תצטקו אל ה', כמ"ש ובעת רעתם יאמרו קומה והושיענו, כי אתם פוסחים בין שני הרעיונות ואינכם יודעים את מי תעבודו, וזה לא יתכן, כי אין בין שני ההפכים אמצעי, ואם ה' הוא האלהים, אין ממש בבעל אשר צוה להכריתו ולשקצו, ואם יש ממש בבעל אין לכם חלק
You cannot have it both ways—either you are with God, or you are with the princes of *Baal*...

The **Lubavitcher Rebbe** takes this a step further and writes in his *Likutei Sichos* that the neutral approach—hedging your bets, worshipping both God and *avoda zara*, not standing up for good against evil—is actually **worse** than regular idol worship. This is because staying neutral is itself a rejection of God and His unity **and one who plays both sides has a harder time recognizing his deficiencies and has a greater ability to adversely influence people.**

This is why the *cheit ha-egel* shook the entire Jewish nation, why it changed their reality forever—because, with the exception of *Shevet Levi*, they all shared the blame—for their neutrality and indifference and complicity in this heinous episode.

The message of the *cheit ha-egel* is timeless. In our lives, we must establish our allegiance and commitment to Hashem as all-encompassing and all binding and all guiding. The Torah must be our only source of values and worldview. We cannot try to play both sides. And on the human level, we cannot be passive when a choice between good and evil, or right and wrong, is presented to us. We must always have the moral strength to stand up for truth, to stand up for the forces of good, proudly and courageously taking the moral high ground. Whether it is standing up for Israel, for Yiddishkeit, for someone who is being mistreated—we must answer the call מי לה' אלי with a resounding הנהני. We must always be firmly committed to Hashem in every aspect of our lives...

May we be *zoche* to answer the call of Hashem, the call of truth, as *Shevet Levi* did, and may we soon see the rebuilding of the *Beis Hamikdash*...*bimhera viyamenu...amen.*