

A Daily Bread

Date: 4 Tammuz 5785 (June 30, 2025)

Torah Portion: Chukat

Topic: Golden Calf, Red Cow: A Sin and Its Antidote, Part 1

It is written (Num. 19:2), “That they bring you a red heifer.” The Midrash questions the laws of the Red Cow. Why are all communal offerings male, whereas this one is a female? We learned that there is no instance where the community brings a female animal as an offering. By contrast, the waters of purification require a cow specifically; a bull cannot be used. This is analogous to the son of a maidservant who soiled the palace of the king. The king said, “Let his mother come and wipe up the excrement.” So too, the Kadosh Barchu said, “Let the Red Cow come and atone for the incident involving her “son,” the Golden Calf.

By what merit does the Red Cow atone for the sin of the Golden Calf? Beis HaLevi begins by defining the sin of the Golden Calf. What were the people of Yisrael thinking when they proposed creating “a god that will go before us?” (Exo. 32:1). How could a people of such spiritual sophistication commit so grievous and misbegotten a sin?

To get to the heart of the matter, we must realize that every mitzvah is a cosmic force, invested with the power to make far-reaching improvements to the world. The terms specified for a mitzvah’s fulfillment are rooted in the mysteries of the celestial realm, and performing the mitzvah, beside for spreading goodness in the sphere of earthly life, also serves to expand, unite, and perfect the upper worlds in a manner that benefits us in the present and lays the foundation for our eternal future.

For example, let’s take the mitzvah to build the Tabernacle. A highly detailed plan laid out by Elohim fixed the design of the structure, furnishings, and priestly vestments. Clearly, the exacting measurements and choices of material reflect, in some mystical way, the deep secrets of Creation and, more particularly, the “Chariot” that bears Elohim’s heavenly “throne.” Every detail, having some mystical parallel, contributes to the building’s overall function as an earthly abode for the Divine Presence.

Accordingly, it is possible to think that someone who is sufficiently expert in the mysteries of Kabbalah would be able to fashion a resting place for the Shechinah of his own design, and by his own initiative. This is precisely what the Yisraelites thought, and what they wanted to do, when they feared that Moshe, who had hitherto managed their relationship with Elohim, was not coming back from his forty-day sojourn on Mount Sinai. They hoped to make some kind of structure or object that could receive His Presence and draw down a continued flow of Divine blessing to them. Recognizing the limits of their own understanding, they even sought the help of Aharon who was certainly better acquainted with the pathways in Heaven than anyone among them. We will thus understand that the request, “Arise, make us a god that will go before us,” was not a proposal to create a man-made deity. It was actually a plea to “make us a dwelling place for Elohim, so that He may persist in resting His Presence among us and guide us through this Wilderness to our Promised Land.”

In short, the Yisraelites’ involvement in this affair began innocuously, without any sinful intention. However, they made one fundamental mistake. For while human deeds and man-made objects can indeed wield great power and effect positive changes on many levels, that is true only when the action or project is carried out in observance of a Elohim-given mitzvah. In that case, the merit of obeying Elohim’s word and implementing His will infuses the deed or the object it produces with spiritual power of cosmic reach. Without the mitzvah element, even the most sublime meditations cannot make a human act anything more than what it naturally is: an earthly undertaking with earthly results. Not only does it fail to activate the cosmic forces of good or open the storehouses of heavenly blessing, but it actually constitutes a sin, because what mortal being may be so presumptuous as to meddle with the dynamics of a world beyond his mandate, to “rule the earth and conquer it,” or to induce Elohim to do things that He has not offered to do? And because the Yisraelite plan was a sin, they set themselves up to stumble further into sin when the gold they had melted in the fire merged in the form of the Golden Calf.

Shalom.