



Rabbi David Silverberg
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Several prominent Torah commentators argued that *chet ha-egel*, the incident of the golden calf recorded in Parashat Ki-Tisa, did not actually entail idol worship. Whereas the straightforward reading of this narrative suggests that *Benei Yisrael* indeed worshipped the calf and even made explicit reference to its status as a deity ("This is your god, O Israel" – 32:4), these commentators contended that this is not the case. Most prominently, Nachmanides (32:1) claimed that *Benei Yisrael* sought a replacement for Moshe, not for God. Convinced that Moshe could not have survived for forty days atop Mount Sinai without food or water, the people concluded that they must find a new leader to chart their path through the wilderness to the Land of Israel. Aharon chose a calf for this purpose because one of the images engraved on the heavenly throne is that of an ox (Yechezkel 1:10).

Maimonides, however, did not subscribe to this view. As recorded by his son, Rabbi Avraham, in his Torah commentary, Maimonides was of the opinion that the incident of the golden calf reflected the ancient beliefs in the independent power of the constellations. Citing his father, Rabbi Avraham writes:

This was because they were attached to the theory of the astrologers that the Exodus from Egypt occurred at the time when the constellation of the ox rose [to power], or some similar, imaginary idea of the dictates of the constellations associated with idolatry. They declared, "This is your god, O Israel" because they believed in the impact of the power of the constellation of the ox upon their departure [from Egypt], for it [the calf] is the symbol or model for its spiritual force.

In Maimonides' view, Moshe's absence led the people to reconsider not only their future – who will lead them and navigate through the treacherous wilderness – but also their past. Moshe had brought them out of Egypt in order for the people to establish a covenant with God, and he had ascended Mount Sinai to receive the laws associated with that covenant. When he failed to return, they began thinking that perhaps they should never have trusted him in the first place, that in truth, the miracles of the Exodus had nothing to do with an invisible God who wished to take them as His treasured nation. They thus concluded that it was the constellations, rather than a Supreme Being, who brought havoc to Egypt and allowed them to escape, and they thus fashioned a calf as a symbol of the astrological force that brought them to freedom.

Maimonides' approach may shed some light on the festivity and celebration that accompanied the worship of the golden calf: "The nation sat to eat and drink, and they [then] arose to make merry" (32:6). As Rashi cites from the Midrash Tanchuma, this celebration included promiscuity and even violence. How did such unrestrained, wanton behavior result from the theological transition from the worship of God to the worship of the constellations?

The answer is that according to the people's distorted understanding, they were freed from Egypt with no "strings attached," without any responsibility resulting from their newfound freedom. So long as they had looked to the Almighty as the cause of the Exodus, they were bound by His conditions; they did not actually become free, but rather were transferred from the service of Pharaoh to the service of the King of kings. The conclusion that the Exodus resulted from some independent astrological force meant that they were freed by some natural occurrence, and were thus not bound to the service of any being, human or divine. They felt responsible only to express their gratitude to this perceived force, but not to abide by any rules or obligations. The sudden outburst of celebration expressed the relief the people felt upon being released from the burden of the divine yoke by their newfound belief in an astrological sign that took them from Egypt "free of charge."

It is perhaps not coincidental that specifically within this narrative we find the verse (32:16) from which the Sages famously derived the axiom, "There is no free man other than he who occupies himself in Torah" (*Ein lekha ben chorin ela mi she-oseik ba-Torah – Pirkei Avot 6:2*). Ultimate freedom is not the kind of freedom displayed at the site of the golden calf, but rather the freedom to serve the Almighty with intensity, sincerity and devotion, unencumbered by external pressures or internal tendencies. The greatest sense of joy and fulfillment comes not from indulgence and material gain, but rather from realizing one's spiritual potential and using his time and capabilities to study and observe the Torah at the highest standard possible.