



Parashat Ki-Tisa

Parashat Ki-Tisa tells the famous but troubling story of *chet ha-egel*, the sin of the golden calf. Less than six weeks after beholding the divine revelation at Sinai, *Benei Yisrael* quickly and tragically succumb to the ancient lure of idolatry, fashioning and worshipping a graven image, a flagrant breach of the covenant into which they had just entered with the Almighty. Writers throughout the ages have struggled with the questions of what *Benei Yisrael* were seeking by resorting to this idolatrous worship, and how they could transgress such a basic tenet of their faith so soon after beholding God's revelation.

While Maimonides does not address this incident in his writings, his son, Rabbi Avraham Ben Ha-Rambam, in his Torah commentary, cites some comments from his father relevant to this very difficult topic:

[I have] a tradition from my father and master z"l that this was because they adhered to the doctrine of the astrologers that the departure [from Egypt] occurred at [the time of] the rise of the [constellation of] the ox, or something similar among the imaginary decrees of the stars that grew out of idolatry.

According to Maimonides, *Benei Yisrael* here did not devise a new occult, but rather embraced the belief that their miraculous escape from bondage resulted not from divine power, but rather to perceived astrological forces. They worshipped not a golden calf, but rather the constellation represented by the form of the calf, figuring that it was this constellation that had brought them to freedom and that would now, if sufficiently appeased, lead them on the next leg of their journey.

On several occasions in his writings, Maimonides describes the prevalent belief in astrological forces and how many of the Torah's laws are geared towards the purpose of eliminating such beliefs. In his *Commentary to the Mishna* (Avoda Zara 4:7), he writes that the ancient pagans fooled the ignorant masses into accepting their faith by concocting theories concerning the powers of astrological forces. And in his *Guide to the Perplexed* (3:46), Maimonides advances the claim that the ancient Egyptians worshipped the constellation Aries. Presumably, he perceived the sin of the golden calf as *Benei Yisrael's* return to this system of faith to which they had exposed during their years in Egypt.

Still, the question remains how and why *Benei Yisrael* could so suddenly transform from a God-fearing nation to adherents of the ancient astrological cults.

Rabbi Avraham proceeds to cite an explanation to this question; though it is unclear from whom he brings these comments, it seems from context that they are quoted from his father:

They sought perfection in Torah and equal minds in religion, and Moshe was their guide in this matter and instructed them the path from Him, may He be exalted. And when he was delayed in arriving, they thought that he had passed and they did not have the independent capability or perfection in Torah. Therefore, in their sinful minds, they saw it fit to return to the path of idolatry with which they were familiar and had left...

Benei Yisrael mistakenly concluded that Moshe had passed on, and felt incapable of continuing along the path he had begun leading them. Suddenly finding themselves directionless in the

wilderness of Sinai, they naturally returned to the only other belief system they had known – the astrological beliefs of ancient Egypt.

Benei Yisrael's mistake, then, was their presumption that their covenant with God and the possibility of Torah observance depend on specific circumstances. Once the situation no longer presented the ideal conditions for obeying this covenant, they figured, they may just as well turn their backs on the entire endeavor. The lesson of *chet ha-egel*, perhaps, is that we as a nation remain bound by the precepts and dictates of our covenant with God even when "Moshe" appears to have left us, even when the current circumstances present less-than-ideal conditions for Torah observance.