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**A Parsha Weekly by the Friedman Kollel
of Metropolitan Washington**

**Parshas Ki Tisa
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The Calf and the Cow

By Rabbi Eliezer Lachman, Rosh HaKollel

This week we read the story of the eigel hazahav, the Golden Calf, in the regular Torah portion, and the laws of the parah adumah, the Red Cow, in the special reading of Parshas Parah. These two sections are intimately connected, for the Sages teach that the service of the Red Cow atoned for the sin of the Golden Calf. The Sages state that this may be compared to the child of a maidservant who dirtied the king's palace, and the mother is told to clean up her child's mess. Similarly, the Calf, so to speak, made a "mess," and it is up to his mother, the Cow, to clean up after him (Rashi, Bamidbar 19:22).

This metaphor, however, requires explanation. The maidservant actually cleans the palace; how can the Cow, which is only slaughtered and burned and does not do anything, be said to be cleaning up after the Calf? Furthermore, the Red Cow was taken and burned in order to produce ashes that can then purify those who became tamei from contact with a corpse. Why should this be connected with the sin of the Golden Calf?

To answer these questions, we need to understand the sin of the Golden Calf. The Golden Calf was not an example of simple idol worship. When the people said, "This is your god, Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt" (Shemos 32:4), they certainly did not mean that the physical object they had just made literally took them out of Egypt. Furthermore, a careful reading of the verse indicates that they did not intend the Calf to replace Hashem, but rather to replace Moshe, whom they had similarly described above as the one "who brought us up from the land of Egypt" but who was now missing (32:1). The verse also clearly implies that the sacrifices that were brought before the Calf were originally thought of as a "festival for Hashem" (32:5-6), and not a repudiation of Him.

Ramban and other commentaries explain that the Golden Calf was meant as a symbolic representation of one of Hashem's attributes or activities. The Jews felt themselves incapable of dealing with Hashem directly; after all, Hashem is infinite and beyond human comprehension. Only Moshe was able to relate to Hashem and channel His desires and teachings to mankind; in his absence, how can regular people relate with Hashem? The people felt they needed to take one attribute of Hashem and focus on that alone. The Golden Calf was a concrete physical symbol of that aspect.

But this was a tragic error. Hashem wants us to relate to Him as He is, as the One who is beyond all physicality and limitation. He does not want us to relate to a symbol or to an attribute, but to He Himself. When we do so, the Torah teaches that Hashem enables us to transcend our own limitations. The Gemara (Avodah Zarah 5a) teaches that at the time of the giving of the Torah, the Jewish people had become like angels and were no longer subject to death, but when they worshipped the Golden Calf, they lost this level and once again became mortal. For one who truly relates to Hashem, the unlimited source of life, receives eternal life from Him, but one who limits himself to concrete symbols and discrete attributes does not transcend his own inherent limitations and mortality.

The service of the Red Cow demonstrates that we no longer focus on the Golden Calf, and the attribute that it represents, in our divine service. Just as the child has a mother who cleans up after him, so too the Calf also has a mother, a Cow, who clean ups after the Calf. The way the Cow cleans up is precisely through its being burned, for this shows that even the Cow, who is superior to the Calf, is not an end in itself. Rather, it is burned as a service to Hashem, who is alone the focus of all devotion. Thus, the service of the Red Cow atones for the Golden Calf.

The ashes of the Red Cow, in turn, purify those who became tamei from contact with the dead. Death itself, and its attendant impurity, come about because of the tragic sin of the Golden Calf; the ashes of the Red Cow, which atone and make amends for this sin, therefore serve to remove the impurity of death.

About the Friedman Kollel

The Rabbi Samuel and Zehava Friedman Kollel, located in Olney, Maryland, offers learning opportunities for Jews of all backgrounds. These include one-on-one chavrusas, public lectures and classes for men and women, as well as after-school structured learning for public school teens. The Kollel operates under the leadership of Rabbi Eliezer Lachman and Rabbi Shaya Milikowsky. For more information or to sponsor an upcoming Capital Torah, please contact Rabbi Elyakim Milikowsky at FriedmanKollel@BetterFamily.org.

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