

# The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

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Understanding the sin of the Eigel HaZahav (Golden Calf) has perplexed many of our commentators. Clearly, the transgression was of such magnitude that, had Moshe not interceded, HaShem actually considered annihilating the people (32:10). And even when HaShem accedes to Moshe's entreaties (32:11-13) and reconsiders "regarding the evil He had said he would do to His people" (32:14), the Talmud (Sanhedrin 102a) ominously records that while HaShem chose not to punish the people all at once, "There is no [future] punishment that comes upon Israel which does not have in it some retribution for the sin of the golden calf." Which is to say that this sin was seen as so pervasive and entrenched within the Jewish human condition that its occurrence would not be restricted to some ancient historical event. Rather, every future disobedience against Gd and man would contain some small measure of this appalling offense along with its apportioned retribution.

How then are we to understand the enormity of this delinquency? The question becomes even more acute when we consider the view of Ramban (32:1) - along with Rabbeinu Bechaya on 32:4 and many others,

who argues that the golden calf debacle was not a sin of overt idolatry. He maintains that the people, fearful of Moshe's absence, simply wanted another symbolic figure to act as an intermediary - much like Moshe was - to ensure that Gd would protect them from the dangers of the harsh wilderness. If so, Chazal's assertion that the golden calf sin continues to hover over the Jewish people, inflicting small doses of its punishment over all future generations, is simply difficult to fathom.

A possible approach to resolve this difficulty can be sought in the rather strange way the Torah describes the golden calf transgression. In three places (32:21,30,31), the verses employ the phrase CHATA'A G'DOLA - a great sin, to label the transgression. Note, the feminine gender in each case. But elsewhere (32:24) when the Torah speaks of the "calf", it states, HA-EIGEL HAZEH, clearly employing the masculine gender. It would seem then, as Ramban demonstrates (ad loc), that the sin was not in the fashioning of the calf as such. After all, the ox/calf was one of the prominent figures prophetically witnessed by Yechezkeil in the mystical vision of the Almighty's Chariot (Yechezkeil 1:10). If "The Great Sin" is not referring to the EIGEL (calf), what then is it grammatically modifying?

The answer may lie in how the Torah speaks of the EIGEL. Whether referring to the EIGEL itself or to any idolatrous figure, the Torah writes, EIGEL MASEICHA (Sh'mot 32:4,8; D'varim 9:16) or ELOHEI MASEICHA (Sh'mot 34:17, Vayikra 19:4). Rashi (32:4) translates the Hebrew MASEICHA as molten metal. However, the word, MASEICHA may have an entirely different meaning. It also translates as "a mask".

*[See the Yalkut Shimoni, Va'etchanan #831, and K'tav V'kabala, Sh'mot 34:17 and most notably Bamidbar 33:52 where the claim that MASEICHA can also have this meaning is substantiated.]*

Interestingly, the fact that the phrase EIGEL HAZAHAV - golden calf, appears nowhere in the entire Bible may lend credence to this translation. All of which leads to a most interesting suggestion. Could the feminine CHATA' A G'DOLA - "the great sin", be referring to the feminine MASEICHA - as mask - depiction of the EIGEL?! And if so, how can we better understand the profound gravity of the sin of the golden calf?

However we understand the dispute between Rashi and Ramban as to whether the sin of the EIGEL occurred before the building of the Mishkan (Rashi) or after (Ramban), all agree that the fundamental message

of the MISHKAN was to proclaim that HaShem desired to establish a direct, unmediated, intimate personal relationship with each and every Jew. As the Alshich HaKadosh famously observes (on Sh'mot 25:8), HaShem commanded Israel to build a sanctuary, not for Him to dwell in it, but rather so that He might dwell among them - in each and every one of them. That an incorporeal, infinite Being could connect to a finite, mortal creature is a revolutionary idea, one radically alien to the idolatrous ancients and even to many modern religious sects as well.

Moshe's essential role, as HaShem's shaliach (agent), was to help a people, steeped in Egyptian paganism, to adopt and commit to this rarified belief in HaShem's immediacy and closeness which would be effected and accomplished by a religious and moral regiment of mitzvot. Only in this sense was Moshe the great intercessor between the people and HaShem. However, the people had a terribly mistaken understanding of Moshe's assignment. For them, Moshe was the emissary, the powerful negotiator to bargain with Gd on their behalf to protect them from any danger and forgive them when they misbehaved. In a word, they saw Moshe's task, not as an agent to bring them closer to Gd, but rather to the contrary, as a go-between to avoid them from

having to establish an intimate bond with Gd. Such a closeness would be too intense, too nerve-racking, too many commandments, too much scrutiny. Far better to allow for Moshe to mediate between them and thus create some distance, some space, so that they would not have to interface directly with Gd. It was as if they announced: "We'd rather deal just with Moshe and let him talk to HaShem for us." Thus, when Moshe failed to appear, they saw in their golden calf the same ability to help distance themselves and disengage directly from Gd. If, as Ramban argues, the ox was seen in the vision of Gd's Chariot as an intermediary power, then surely its young, the calf, could assume a similar role.

*[See Rav Solovitchik's masterful analysis of this theme of sh'lichus (agency) as it applied to Moshe in Derashot HaRav, "The Doctrine of Assignment," pp. 45-75.]*

If this analysis is correct, the understanding of EIGEL MASEICHA as the "calf as mask" becomes clear. The great sin - CHATA'A G'DOLA - of the people was in wanting to place a "a mask" - some partition, some veil, as it were - to block any intimate fellowship with HaShem. By keeping Gd at a distance, they could indulge in their passions with Moshe defending them when Gd's anger would threaten. And indeed, that's

exactly what occurred once the EIGEL was worshiped. "And the people sat down to eat and to drink and they got up to make merry" (32:6), which Rashi (ad loc) interprets to mean that they engaged in adultery and bloodshed. Of course, Moshe's subsequent smashing of the Luchot (32:19) shockingly disabused the people of this fallaciously misguided perception of their covenant with Gd.

We can now also understand why the sin of the EIGEL is revisited down through the generations whenever the people sin. For is not every sin rooted in man's desperate attempt to flee from Gd's Presence and thus evade any accountability for his delinquent and immoral behavior?!

What the people failed to grasp - and it would take them some 40 years to do so - was this: That to be a Jew, a member of a chosen and unique people whose existence would transcend the laws of history and defy the doctrine of the rise and fall of nations, that to enjoy such a glorified, eternal status would require them to accept and live by the religious command of SHIVITI HASHEM... To set the Lord before me always"! (T'hilim 16:8). Essentially, the religious posture of the Jew would reflect a constant LIFNEI HASHEM, a "before Gd" reality, ritualized and actualized in the mitzva lifestyle. True, there would be a measure of

discomfort in this experience of covenantal intimacy with HaShem. And man, from time to time, would attempt to escape from this tension and seek to fashion some modern equivalent of an EIGEL MASEICHA, a mask, a barrier to shield himself from the burning, commanding Presence of the Almighty.

All true, but when the Jew - when we - accept this mission - this paradoxical existence of closeness and remoteness, love and fear, comfort and tenseness - we are brought into proximity with the Infinite. We brush up against immortality, and our humanity is pushed to the limits of its finite boundaries. And in that epiphanous moment, we are afforded a glimpse into a mysterious beyond of wonderment and awe that leaves us changed forever! We discover and see a vision of our best selves and we are inspired to bring about its realization.

And all because we accepted HaShem's invitation to join with Him in close partnership to help redeem the world! 🙌