BS”D

Parshas Ki Tisa 5776

Rabbi Chaim Zev Citron

*Do we allow our mistakes to define our lives? Or do we rise from our errors and turn back with repentance to G-d and allow Him to exercise His compassion.*

And G-d Said, “Let Me Be!”

How are we to understand what it was that the B’nei Yisroel had in mind when they made the golden calf?

Rashi says that now that the Jews thought Moshe was dead, they needed to be led through the desert by “gods.” They therefore made the golden calf as a god to lead them.

Later on, when the Jews were punished, Rashi also makes it clear that they were punished for idolatry. Whoever worshipped the calf and had been warned by witnesses was killed by the Levi’im with a sword, resembling the judicial process of the “idolatrous city” (*ir hanidachas*). If the worship had taken place before witnesses but no warning had been given, the punishment was death by plague, i.e., “death at the Hand of Heaven.” When no witnesses had been present, Moshe had the people drink the ground ash of the calf. This punished them in the manner of the water of the *sotah*, so that those who were guilty died. (See Rashi 31:20) All this indicates that Rashi viewed the golden calf as out-and-out idolatry, albeit for the purpose of guidance through the desert.

The Ibn Ezra holds that it is impossible to say that the original intent of the golden calf was idolatrous. He argues forcefully that the golden calf was never intended to be an idol. Otherwise, why did Moshe’s brother Aharon participate in making it? Otherwise, why would he have later been appointed as the Kohen Gadol, the High Priest?

The Ibn Ezra opines that the golden calf was meant as a vehicle through which G-d would reveal the path through the desert to the Jewish people. Just as the pillar of fire and cloud had done when they left Egypt. Just as Moshe had done until his disappearance on Mt. Sinai. The calf was made, to quote the Ibn Ezra, “for the glory of G-d.” Aharon was a willing participant.

But things did not work out that way. A small segment of the people did worship the calf as a god. And, as we often find in the Torah, all of the people bear responsibility. G-d was angry at Aharon, too, because despite his good intentions, he was the cause of the sin. It wasn’t his intention, nor the intention of most of the Jewish people, but nevertheless, the making of the golden calf led directly to its worship as an idol.

Although in one important detail the Ramban disagrees with the Ibn Ezra, his basic interpretation of the golden calf is similar.

The Jews did not want an idol. They wanted another Moshe to lead them through the desert. Aharon chose to make it an image of a calf. The ox on the Divine Chariot (of Yechezkel) is on the left which represents judgment and destruction. The calf would be the perfect image to guide the Jews through the desert, a place of desolation and “destruction.” As the Ramban puts it, “The destroyer will show the path through the place of destruction.”

Unlike the Ibn Ezra, however, the Ramban does not believe the calf was some kind of vessel to channel G-d’s revelation to the Jews. Rather, it would focus the minds of the Jews on the attribute represented by the calf (gevurah) and that would help them know the path through the desert.

Some Jews understood the calf in this way, which was harmless. But others actually worshipped it as a god.

After the idolatry of the golden calf takes place, G-d expresses his outrage to Moshe. At one point, He says to Moshe, “Now let Me be, that My anger may blaze against them.”

Here’s an insight based on the Be’er Mayim Chaim:

The sages say that G-d performs all of the Mitzvos Himself. So how does He pray? He prays that “May My compassion overcome My anger.” Does that mean that G-d is conflicted? Can He not decide whether to be angry or compassionate?

The Divine attributes of Gevurah from whence comes judgment and anger and the Divine attribute of Chesed from whence comes love and compassion are both true. The way we human beings act is indeed worthy of punishment. But there is within us also a nucleus of truth and goodness that elicits compassion. Which does G-d choose?

The sages say that for one instant every day G-d is angry. Bilaam wanted to tap into that Divine anger to bring ruin on the Jews. And indeed, there is in our conduct a reason for anger and judgment. But G-d *wants* to be compassionate. He tells Moshe, “Let Me be.” Let my anger flare. In other words, He needs Moshe’s “permission” to be angry. Moshe gets the hint. He steps forward and does not “let G-d be.” He argues for compassion. He allows G-d to “overcome” His anger, overriding the fact that we sin, and to be compassionate, that is, treat us at our best and not at our worst.

It is we who are conflicted, not G-d. Do we allow our mistakes to define our lives? Or do we rise from our errors and turn back with repentance to G-d and allow Him to exercise His compassion.

And just as G-d asked Moshe, he asks each one of us, “Don’t let Me be angry at you. Give Me reason, despite your errors to be able to forgive you, ‘May My compassion overcome My anger.’”