

BOSTONER TORAH INSIGHTS

BOSTONER 'CHASSIDUS' TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH

PARSHAS KI TISA (PARAH) – 22 ADAR 5781

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We read from Parsha Ki Tisa again this month, this time the entire Parsha, which includes the perplexing and disturbing account of the Chet HaEigel. After the Yetziyas Mitzrayim, Kriyas Yam Suf and the Revelation at Har Sinai, how could the people entertain the possibility of a golden idol. Moreover, why was the entire nation worthy of annihilation for this sin, that Hashem planned to destroy millions of people that He had personally invested in for so long and start a new nation from Moshe Rabbeinu, when seemingly only a small percentage had actually participated in worshipping the Golden Calf.

The Midrash (Yakut Shimoni 867), in the name of Rebbe Shimon Bar Yochai says that anyone who performs 'Shituf' with the Name of Hashem through idol worship is worthy of annihilation. This is based on the Pasuk, "One who brings offerings to the gods shall be destroyed – only to Hashem alone" (Shemos 22:19). Rashi further explains that even though it mentions the punishment of death for idol worship in other places, such as, "and he will go and serve other gods...then you shall remove that man or that woman...so that they will die" (Devarim 17:3-5) it was necessary for the Torah to state "One who brings offerings to the gods shall be destroyed – only to Hashem alone", in order to teach us that not all forms of 'worship' are punishable by death. Rather 'one who brings offerings' becomes the category for which types of worship are punishable by death. Just like bringing offerings is something that is done before Hashem, so too offering incense, libations, prostration and other similar forms of worship would be worthy of death, even if they are not normally done by the native idol worshipers in relation to that specific idol. On the other hand, other types of worship such as hugging, kissing, etc. would be punishable by lashes and not by death, because they are not done before Hashem.

However, we must understand according to the opinion that say 'Shituf' is permitted for a Ben Noach, if Klal Yisroel had a status of Ben Noach before they received the Torah, why were they sentenced to destruction?

"He took the calf that they had made and burned it in the fire. He ground it to a fine powder and sprinkled it over water and made Bnei Yisroel drink" (Shemos 32:20). Rashi explains that the drinking of this water acted as a 'litmus test' to check if the individual had sinned by the Golden Calf, in the same manner that this ritual is performed with a Sotah who is suspected of being unfaithful to her husband. Rashi further explains that the death sentences for the sin of Chet HaEigel depended upon the following jurisprudence. Those who were warned by witnesses not to worship the Golden Calf were killed by the sword by the tribe of Levi. Those who had witnesses testifying to their wrongdoings but were not warned were killed by a Heavenly plague. Those who had neither warning nor witnesses died through a disease called Hidrokan, which is a painful bowel disease.

One might ask why it would be necessary for there to have been witnesses in order for the transgressors to be punished with a Heavenly plague. Hashem does not need witnesses to mete out justice, only a human court would need witnesses. One answer may be that no one would be able to prove that one who died from a plague, did so because of his sins vis-à-vis the Chet HaEigel. Perhaps, their death was a coincidence. However, when the nation saw that those who died by the plague had witnesses testifying to their sins even though there was no formal warning, they were able to conclude that their death was attributed to their sins and not happenstance. Similarly, since the Hidrokan was a very specific type of death that was noticeable, even though everyone drank from the same water, would prove that their death was directly correlated to their sins, even though there were no witnesses.

As far as when individual people were warned not to participate in Chet HaEigel, one possibility is based on the Gemara (Sanhedrin 8b) that a Talmid Chacham does not need a warning of Hasrah, since its purpose is to verify whether a person did an action inadvertently or on purpose. However, a true Talmid Chacham, who is knowledgeable of the law, there is no question whether his actions are on purpose or not. Thus, since all of Yisroel heard the first two Commandments, they personally knew through their own experience that Hashem was the One and Only and didn't need to be warned. Therefore, when Rashi talks about death by the sword for those who had witnesses and warning, he is referring to those who worshipped the Eigel publicly and the warning was from Hashem himself via the first two commandments. Those who died by Heavenly plague, mistakenly thought that 'Shituf' was permitted because they were still Bnei Noach. Accordingly, the majority of those who received the plague were the gentile Eirev Rav that joined Bnei Yisroel when they left Egypt, as it says, "Hashem brought a plague upon the nation", with the term 'Am' or 'nation' generally referring to the Eirev Rav. And the rest who worshipped privately received the punishment of Hidrokan.

The experience of meriting to hear from Hashem himself, the first two commandments of 'Anochi' and 'Lo Yiheyeh Lecha' also turned out to be what sealed the decree of punishment for the sin of Chet HaEigel. We must remember to fulfill the concept of "placing Hashem before us always" (Tehillim 16:8) without any other considerations.

May it be His Will that we should see the Bi'yas Go'el Tzedek speedily in our days.