Yom Kippur 5770
Rabbi Michael Balinsky

1. Bavli Avoda Zara 4b

Rabbi Joshua b. Levi further said: The Israelites made the calf only in order to place a good argument in the mouth of the penitents, as it is said, "0 that they had such a heart as this always, to fear Me and keep all My commandments. . . . (Deuteronomy 5:26)

2. Sanhedrin 102a
R. Isaac said: No retribution whatsoever comes upon the world which does not contain a slight fraction of the first calf [i.e. the molten calf in the wilderness], as it is written, nevertheless in the day when I visit, I will visit their sin upon them.

3. Sifre Hazzinu 320

You stood at Mount Sinai and said, All that the Lord hath spoken will we do, and obey (Exod. 24:7), (whereupon) I said: re are godlike beings (Ps. 82:6); but when you said to the (golden) calf, This is thy god, 0 Israel (Exod. 32:4), I said to you, Nevertheless, ye shall die like men (Ps. 82:7).

שפת אמת דברים ליום כפור
[תרס״ג]
יום הכפורים יום סליחה ומחילה בכלל ובפרט ויש בו סליחות חטא העגל כמ״ש ז״ל בפסוק וביום פקדי ופקדתי שאין פקודה שאין בו מחטא העגל והטעם לפי שעי״ז נסבבו אח״כ כל החטאים. וכמו כן מדה טובה מרובה שאין סליחה שאין בו סליחות העגל דגם כל התשובות שבנ״י עושין תמיד וכל הסליחות הכל בכח התשובה והסליחה של דור המדבר כמ״ש חז״ל שלא היו ראוין לאותו החטא רק כדי להורות תשובה. לכן כל זמן שבנ״י עושין תשובה מתעורר זכות דור המדבר. ובכל שנה נמחק קצת מן החטא עד לעתיד שיהי׳ מתוקן כל החטא ויזכו בנ״י למה שהיו ראוין להיות קודם החטא כמ״ש אמרתי אלקים אתם. ולכן ביוה״כ דומין למלאכים והוא אות שעתידין להיות קדושים. ובני ישראל מתענין בשמחה לומר שמצפים לחזור למדריגה זו הראשונה שלא נצטרך לאכילה ושתי׳ רק להיות ניזונים מזיו השכינה כמלאכים ׃ ולפי שע״י הסליחה נזכר שבחן של דור המדבר לכן מצות סוכות אחר יוהכ״פ כמ״ש זכרתי לך חסד נעוריך זכות דור המדבר. כי ע״י החטא נכבה הזכות וע״י התשובה חוזר ומתעורר הזכות. כמ״ש הר״י ז״ל בשערי תשובה בפסוק תשא עון וקח טוב ע״ש ׃

Yom Kippur is a day of *selichah* and *mehilah* for the individual and the community. There is also forgiveness for the sin of the Golden Calf as it says (Sanhedrin 102a): "nevertheless in the day when I visit, I will visit their sin upon them. No retribution whatsoever comes upon the world which does not contain a slight fraction of the first calf."

The reason is that all others sins are emergent through this sin. And since "a measure for good is greater than a measure for punishment" there is no forgiveness that does not entail forgiveness for the sin of the golden calf. All the repenting Israel does on an ongoing basis and all the *selichot*, all of this is on the power of repentance and forgiveness of the wilderness generation as the sages say Avoda Zara 4b: "R. Joshua b. Levi further said: The Israelites made the calf only in order to place a good argument in the mouth of the penitents, as it is said, "0 that they had such a heart as this always, to fear Me and keep all My commandments. . . . (Deuteronomy 5:26)".

Therefore when Israel repents, this awakens the merit of the generation of the wilderness. Each year, a portion of the sin of the golden calf is erased until in the future there will be a complete

tikkun of the sin. Israel will then merit the status they were in before the sin as it says (Psalm 82:6) I said, "You are godlike creatures, and all of you are angels of the Most High.

Therefore on Yom Kippur we are like angels and this is the sign that in the future we will all be holy. Israel fasts in a spirit of rejoicing which signifies they envision returning to this original level where they did not need to eat or drink; rather they were nourished through the radiance of the *shekhinah* like angels. Through forgiveness, the praiseworthy level of the wilderness generation is recalled. Therefore the command of *sukkot* follows immediately after *Yom Kippur* as it says (Jeremiah 2:2) "I remember to you the loving-kindness of your youth", this refers to the merit of the wilderness generation. Through the sin of the golden calf, their merit was extinguished and through repentance their merit is awakened and returns.

Translation Rabbi Michael Balinsky

Underlying this teaching of the *Sefat Emet* is the idea, expressed in many sources and reflected in the *mahzor*, is that *Yom Kippur* is the day Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the second set of tablets, signifying the restoration of the covenant which was broken through the sin of the golden calf. He also cites two different amoraic traditions. One asserts that the sin of the golden calf was forgiven, but not fully erased. In this, he distinguishes between two terms, *selichah* and *mehilah*. There was *selichah* after the golden calf, the people were restored to God, but there was not *mehilah*, complete erasure of the sin. As a result, the sin of the golden calf lingers to this very day. He then takes this idea one step further; our sins may be emergent because of golden calf, but similarly our repentance also acts as part of the forgiveness of the golden calf. Our repentance will result in the erasure of that sin.

It should also be pointed out that the Talmud passage in Sanhedrin 102a speaks of retribution for the sin of the golden calf. The Sefat Emet moves away from retribution and only applies it to the area of sin, not punishment.

The second amoraic passage quoted, Avoda Zara 4b, is quite striking. David Flatto, in an article from Tradition (Winter 2001) says the following:

> Rabbi Joshua b. Levi further said: The Israelites made the calf only in order to place a good argument in the mouth of the penitents, as it is said, "0 that they had such a heart as this always, to fear Me and keep all My commandments. . . . (Deuteronomy 5:26)" The subtext of the passage is one of the great mysteries that looms behind the sin of the golden calf -how could a nation sin with idolatry at the footsteps of Mount Sinai? In response to this question the midrashim again divide into two broad groups. Some state that indeed Israel did commit this grave sin, and they underscore the extent of the offense. Others mitigate the sin, either by arguing that the calf was not really idolatry, or by defending the people, depicting them as innocently confused or tempted by a shrewd antagonist. The above passage belongs to the latter group, but employs an entirely different strategy.
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> The people of Israel did sin, even deliberately, the passage boldly asserts. However, their sin was for the sake of heaven! The proof of the midrash is a verse in Deuteronomy that emphasizes the unparalleled spiritual height that Israel attained at Sinai. If sin emerges in this context, the passage argues, it must be of a different nature. The nation sinned as a form of spiritual self-sacrifice for all future sinners

> who would see this generation as a model for the possibility of repentance! The passage thus appropriates the midrashic trope of self-sacrifice, including the more radical relinquishing of one's spiritual attainments, by extending it even to the nation as a whole. According to various midrashim, Moses, Aaron and even Israel sinned by their own volition, as a form of sacrifice for the greater good of others. In one great midrashic stroke, the passage totally revises the nature of Israel's sin with the golden calf. The heroic role of self-sacrifice in the sin of the golden calf constitutes a leitmotif in the collective midrashim surveyed above. The primary source for the theme can be traced to a single verse (Exodus (32:32)), wherein Moses makes a striking offer to forfeit his life alongside the people of Israel. The midrash, however, senses the singular significance of the verse, and refuses to allow it to be lost upon the reader. In the wake of mortal sin, and with divine fury lurking in the background, Moses bravely challenges destiny, despite the uncertain outcome-"perhaps God will forgive Israel's sin" (Exodus 32:30). At this most critical of hours, the posture that Moses assumes is one of complete surrender, and ultimate sacrifice. When Moses and his people narrowly escape destruction, and emerge triumphant, the midrash desires to immortalize and replicate this spiritually precious moment. Thus, the midrash poignantly reproduces this posture and exposes it as the subtext of various loci within this narrative and beyond. As a result, the midrash stretches this theme both vertically (in the career of Moses) and horizontally (to Aaron, the Levites and even Israel). Undeterred by its problematic dimensions, the midrash boldly displays self-sacrifice as a remarkable spiritual achievement.

For the *Sefat Emet*, he sees these two Talmudic passages as not mutually exclusive, but as complementary. The same generation that caused the golden calf also introduced repentance. Our acts of repentance can ultimately undo and restore ourselves to the level of the wilderness generation before they sinned. We can perform the tikkun for the sin of this earlier generation.

In making these assertions, the *Sefat Emet* follows in the thought of others, that our repentance and forgiveness on *Yom Kippur* has much greater significance than only applying to ourselves. We are part of something much larger and past, present and future can come together through our actions. The fasting on *Yom Kippur* is really rooted in joy. We become like angels, requiring neither food nor drink. In a way, it is an anticipation of the joy of *Sukkot*, a return to the wilderness generation who journeyed under the protective cloud of God's presence.