

Yeshivat Har Etzion Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash
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God's People or Moshe's?

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If we were to choose the gravest sins committed by Bnei Yisrael, the episode of the golden calf would certainly feature in either first or second place on the list (the other candidate being the sin of the spies). This is the only sin where God promises Moshe that the punishment will be felt for all generations. As a result of this sin the Tablets of the Covenant are shattered, and they are lost – in that original format – forever. We shall examine here a further result of the sin of the golden calf - a result that is often overlooked, owing to the other serious ramifications.

Am Yisrael: God's nation or Moshe's nation?

Moshe becomes aware of the sin of the golden calf while still atop Mount Sinai. God tells him, "Go, descend, for your nation which you brought up from the land of Egypt has become corrupt" ([Shemot 32:7](#)). God refers here to Israel as Moshe's nation, thereby introducing the question of who, in fact, Am Yisrael (the Nation of Israel) belong to. Moshe, for his part, obviously thinks of the nation as belonging to God: "Why, O God, are You angry at Your nation, whom You brought out of the land of Egypt?" ([32:11](#)). This debate is quite surprising, to say the least. How can we understand that Am Yisrael belong to Moshe, when it is abundantly clear that God was responsible for taking the nation out of Egypt?

In fact, this debate is not concluded on Mount Sinai. Following Moshe's prayer on behalf of the nation, we are told, "God yielded concerning the evil which He had declared that He would do to His people" ([32:14](#)), but further on God again defines Am Yisrael as Moshe's nation: "Go, arise from here – you and the nation which you brought up from the land of Egypt" ([33:1](#)).^[1] This attitude on God's part also finds expression in the decision that He will not enter the land together with the nation, lest He consume them: "For I shall not ascend among you - for you are a stiff-necked nation – lest I consume you on the way" ([33:3](#)). Further on, again, God asserts that he will help Moshe specifically; only later on does it become clear that He will be helping all of Am Yisrael. All of this creates the impression that Am Yisrael is not in direct contact with God. Am Yisrael is Moshe's nation, and God assists Moshe in his leadership role as an external partner, as it were. His help to the nation is in fact the help that He extends to Moshe as the leader of the nation,^[2] rather than direct help to Am Yisrael as His flock and His chosen nation.

This rupture between Am Yisrael and God was not always present. In the confrontation between God and Pharaoh, God declares several times that Am Yisrael is His nation. On the

very first occasion where Moshe and Aharon present themselves before Pharaoh, they convey God's instruction: "Let My people go..." ([5:1](#)). Later, God addresses Am Yisrael in the first person, promising: "And I shall take you to Me as a nation" ([6:7](#)). As the story of the Exodus progresses, this form of address is used less and less. In the warning that precedes the death of the Egyptian firstborn, this title does not appear (in contrast to the warning that precedes the plague of hail). Likewise we find in the parasha commanding the marking of the new month, God says, "I shall take out your hosts" ([12:17](#)), rather than "My hosts,"^[3] as we find in the promise of redemption given to Moshe at the beginning of parashat Vaera ([7:4](#)).

We may describe a process in which, starting at the time of the Exodus, the selection of Am Yisrael is partially replaced by a selection of the firstborn. It is thus that the place of the parasha, "Sanctify to Me every firstborn" ([13:2](#)), should be understood – against the background of the fact that in the verses following the Exodus, the expression "My nation" is almost completely absent. In several places such an expression would seem appropriate, but there is no mention of it. At the splitting of the Red Sea, for instance, the Torah speaks of "Bnei Yisrael" rather than "God's nation:" "Speak to Bnei Yisrael... and Bnei Yisrael came..." ([14:15-16](#)). Following this there are many more occasions, which I shall not list here, where Am Yisrael is not mentioned as being "God's nation."

The epitome of this phenomenon is to be found on the occasion of the giving of the Torah, where – once again – no mention is made of the connection, although it would seem essential. In fact, the last time that the Torah defines Bnei Yisrael as God's nation is in parashat Mishpatim, which follows the giving of the Torah: "If you lend money to anyone of My people, to the poor among you" ([22:24](#)). The climax of this theme is the "argument" that takes place between Moshe and God, where God insistently refuses to define Am Yisrael as His nation. The sin of the calf, then, represents the climax – or, more accurately, the final blow – in the process of Am Yisrael ceasing to be God's nation.

From this gloomy assessment we could, heaven forefend, conclude that Am Yisrael is indeed no longer God's nation. After all, God Himself refuses to accept Moshe's definition of them as His nation, and thereafter – throughout the remainder of the Torah – there are very few instances of the nation being defined as such. It seems that a person could claim that, following the catastrophic sin of the golden calf, the connection between them and God was severed. The obligation to observe the mitzvot still exists – and perhaps even the covenant between Am Yisrael and God is still valid – but the definition of Am Yisrael as God's nation is lost forever. Indeed, it is precisely this sort of claim that Christianity has historically maintained, and from the Torah text it would appear, as it were, that there is substance to this claim. It should be emphasized that two questions arise here. The first is the fundamental question of whether Am Yisrael ceased to be God's nation. The second

question is exegetical: how can God "attribute" the nation, as it were, and having taken them out of Egypt, to Moshe - when it is quite clear that it was God Who initiated the idea of the Exodus and also carried it out?

Moshe: Agent of the nation or emissary of God?

An essential point should be added here, which may lessen the problem even if it cannot solve it entirely. In the past (see my shiur on parashat Tetzaveh), I addressed the question of whether the kohanim are representatives of Am Yisrael or representatives of God. A similar question may be raised concerning Moshe: is Moshe Am Yisrael's representative before God, or is the essence of his task to serve as God's emissary to Am Yisrael? It would seem that the answer changes with different periods in the course of his leadership. While at the time of the giving of the Torah we relate to Moshe as Am Yisrael's representative to speak with God, later on his status changes and he becomes God's "partner," as it were.

Expressions of this transition may be detected in several places. For example, the first Tablets are fashioned by God, while the second are made by Moshe, and appear also to have been written (engraved) by him (see [Shemot 34:27](#)). Thus Moshe becomes God's partner in creating the Torah and handing it over – which leads, thereafter, to the light emanating from his face which makes Am Yisrael fearful to approach him, just as they feared to approach Har Sinai. This also serves to explain the fact that, when God distances Himself from Am Yisrael, Moshe also moves the tent (ohel) outside the camp; it is as if Moshe's dwelling, too, cannot reside amidst the nation.[4]

Chazal give expression to this transition in Moshe's role in their assertion that Moshe's face shone because of a drop of ink that was placed upon his forehead. This teaching symbolizes the fact that Moshe in fact turned into part of God's Torah, such that he may be perceived as God's partner in creating the Torah, rather than a partner of Am Yisrael receiving it. In light of this perception we can understand, in a somewhat gentler light, the change that takes place in the relations between Am Yisrael and God. When Moshe becomes God's agent, this change is accompanied by the fact that Am Yisrael now stands before Moshe, rather than directly before God. Admittedly, even if we accept this interpretation for the breach that has been created between Am Yisrael and God, it does not solve the difficulty that such a breach creates.

I propose here a completely different interpretation of the discussion between God and Moshe following the sin of the golden calf. This interpretation solves at least the first problem raised above – the exegetical issue of God's claim as to the "ownership" of the nation.

Tzippora as the beginning of the phenomenon of assimilation

Moshe's marriage to Tzippora is an issue that arises on several occasions in the Torah, starting with the marriage itself and concluding with the story of the complaint that Aharon and Miriam voice concerning the "kushite woman" that Moshe married. The Torah gives no indication of why this subject is of

such great significance. Another question in this regard concerns the role played by Moshe's wife in the descent to Egypt following God's revelation at the burning bush. From the verses dealing with Moshe's return it seems that Tzippora was accompanying him, but following the giving of the Torah, Yitro visits the Israelite camp together with his daughter, Tzippora, "after she had been sent away" – proving that she had not joined him when he went to Egypt. Chazal address this seeming contradiction by positing that somewhere in the course of the journey Moshe sent her back to her father's house, in order that Pharaoh would not gain extra slaves.

A further question arises with respect to the story of the encounter with the angel on the way to Egypt. Why does God want to put Moshe to death?[5] And how does Tzippora's act of circumcising their son save him?

It appears that these questions should be addressed within the context of a discussion about the Egyptian "asafsuf" ("hangers-on"), a group noted in the Torah as having left Egypt together with Am Yisrael at the time of the Exodus. The identity of this group could be either of the following:

a. A group of people who had no connection whatsoever with Am Yisrael, and who simply jumped on the bandwagon at the time of the Exodus, grabbing the opportunity to escape from the country. If this is so, it is reasonable to assume that these people did not accompany Bnei Yisrael all the way until they entered the Land. After achieving some distance from Egypt, they could go wherever they wanted to, and most of them probably did so.

b. The second possibility seems more probable: these were people who were not Jewish, but were connected to Am Yisrael through family ties.[6] If we adopt this explanation, this group would be similar to the people who returned from the Babylonian exile at the time of Ezra. Indeed, at that time, too, these "extras" caused many problems for the Jews who were returning to Eretz Yisrael, and a rigorous filtering process was necessary in order to separate them from Am Yisrael.

The phenomenon of the "hangers-on" – assuming that we accept the second possibility – is directly related to the story of Moshe's marriage to Yitro's daughter. When Moshe takes Tzippora with him to Egypt, he is thereby giving legitimacy to the phenomenon of the "asafsuf." He will no longer be able to criticize mixed marriages, for everyone will accuse him of hypocrisy. It is Moshe who chooses to bring Tzippora with him to Egypt, without being commanded to do so, and as a result the angel awaits him and seeks to kill him, for by his actions Moshe is endangering the future of Am Yisrael. It is only Tzippora's wholehearted readiness to be part of Am Yisrael – expressed in her circumcising her son – that allows God to forgive Moshe, for thus the problem – at least on his private level - has found a solution.

But even Tzippora's desire to join Am Yisrael does not solve the problem of legitimizing the phenomenon of the asafsuf. Since it is impossible to know the real intentions of each and every person seeking to become part of the nation, this will still open the door to a large influx of outsiders with a negative influence.

Therefore, Moshe decides to send Tzipora back, although she herself has already accepted the Israelite law. But despite the fact that Tzipora is sent back to Midian, the impression of Moshe's marriage to her remains etched in the consciousness of Bnei Yisrael. She therefore ends up exerting a real influence on their assimilation later on, and the creation of the asafsuf. Needless to say, the asafsuf bear considerable responsibility for leading Bnei Yisrael astray and into sin in the desert – including, inter alia, the episode of the golden calf.

This, then, is the background to the argument that is conducted in our parasha between God and Moshe. God insists that it is Moshe's nation that has come out of Egypt, and He refers here to the asafsuf, whose creation and integration was facilitated by Moshe. Moshe, on the other hand, asks God to ignore the asafsuf - although these people are the source of the problem - and to relate instead to the great majority of those who left Egypt and who are, indeed, God's people.

"Moshe and Aharon with their kohanim, and Shemuel, with those who call His name"

The above hypothesis applies only in the framework of our discussion of the exegetical question. The more fundamental problem is the other question presented above: did God indeed give up Am Yisrael, such that from now they are no longer His nation? In order to evaluate this question, we must locate the point where Am Yisrael is once again called God's nation. Obviously, in the books of the prophets we find many expressions identifying the nation of Israel with God, but – in contrast to Moshe's prophecies – these are spoken in the personal style of each individual prophet, such that they may not be used as any type of proof. In any case, it is quite possible that Am Yisrael is referred to as God's nation by the prophets without this title actually being awarded by God. Therefore, we must find the place where God Himself calls Am Yisrael His nation.

The occasion that we seek awaits us in Sefer Shemuel. When God informs Shemuel that he must anoint Shaul as king, he tells him:

"You shall anoint him as ruler of My people Israel, and he shall deliver My people from the hand of the Philistines, for I have seen My people, for their cry has come to Me."
(Shemuel I 9:16)

Here God calls Am Yisrael His nation, for the first time since the sin of the golden calf. The expression "My people" does not merely appear here, but is specially emphasized. Until now God has avoided all use of it, while here it appears no less than three times in a single verse. Likewise, we note that there is a stylistic parallel between this verse and the verses preceding the Exodus: the words "for their cry has come to Me" are reminiscent of the verse at the end of chapter 2 of Shemot, "And God heard their anguish... and God knew" (2:24-25).

Hence, we may say that Shaul's coronation by Shemuel represents, in a way, a closing of the circle that opened with the Exodus. God took His nation out of Egypt, but in the wake of

Israel's sin this endeavor failed, and God distanced Himself from Am Yisrael. Am Yisrael became God's nation once again during the period of Shemuel and Shaul. It is no coincidence, then, that Chazal assert – based on the verse in Tehillim, "Moshe and Aharon with His kohanim, and Shemuel with those who call His name" (99:6) – that Shemuel was considered equal to Moshe and Aharon together. During his time, the breach between Am Yisrael and their Father in heaven, which developed during the period of Moshe and Aharon, was healed.

Royalty and constitution, prophecy and priesthood

Why is it specifically during Shemuel's lifetime that God's relationship with Am Yisrael is renewed? What is it about that period that facilitated the return of the Divine Presence? The answer seems to lie in the lineup of all the key positions of national leadership, for the first time since the time of Moshe and Aharon.

Moshe and Aharon in fact fulfilled four different roles, which together represent the entire leadership body of Am Yisrael: royalty, priesthood, prophets, and legislators. Moshe, as Chazal emphasize, serves as king, in addition to his role as legislator (insofar as it is he who is responsible for conveying the Torah to Am Yisrael). Prophecy, of course, is also Moshe's role. Aharon fulfills the fourth aspect of the leadership spectrum with his role as Kohen.

This situation, where all leadership functions in Am Yisrael are being fulfilled, did not exist again until the time of Shemuel. During the period of the judges, obviously, there was no king or centralized leadership for all of the nation: "Each person did what was right in his eyes" (*Shoftim 17:6*). Only in Shemuel's lifetime were these roles fully revived. Shemuel himself served as prophet and legislator. The crown of priesthood was also given to him, as we may deduce from the fact that he slept in the Sanctuary of the Mishkan – which would have been unthinkable had he not been a kohen. He also temporarily fulfilled the role of national leader, but the institution of kingship returned to Israel with the coronation of Shaul. It was this restoration of kingship that made it possible for the Divine Presence to reside once again amongst the nation, as we may learn from the obligation to appoint a king before the Temple is to be built.

In general, the leadership roles in Israel flow directly from God, and from there they pass down throughout the generations. Thus, the crown of priesthood is given to Aharon at the time of the Revelation at Sinai, and from then on it is passed on dynastically. Similarly, the authority to legislate was given to Moshe at Sinai and was then passed down through semikha (ordination). Prophecy was also given to Moshe, while all the other prophets who followed, appointed by God, actually continued his prophecy – as Moshe himself taught: "A prophet from among you, from your brethren, LIKE ME, shall the Lord your God raise up; you shall listen to him" (18:15).

The Israelite royalty was also meant to be passed on successively from Moshe. But in the wake of the sin of Mei Meriva, it was decided that Moshe would not enter the land – which led to a severing of the chain of leadership. God Himself

had to choose a new king for Israel – and this development was fully realized only in Shemuel's time. The rupture that prevailed between God and His people continued until that time. It was healed with the appointment of Shaul as king of Israel:

"And you shall anoint him as a ruler over My people Israel, and he shall deliver My people from the hand of the Philistines, for I have seen My people, for their cry has come to Me."

Notes:

[1] See also further on, where Moshe says: "For I have found favor in Your eyes – I and Your nation" (33:16), but in His answer God again insists, "Before all YOUR nation I shall perform wonders..." (34:10).

[2] God says at first, "All the nation in the midst of which you are will see... which I will do with you" (34:10), and here it is clear that He is referring to Moshe. Later on we read, "Behold, I will drive out from before you..." (ibid. 11), and we cannot know whether this is directed at Moshe alone or at the nation as a whole. Thereafter we read, "Guard yourself lest you forge a covenant," and these words are clearly directed at the nation. Hence the Torah presents a flow of verses referring first to Moshe and thereafter to Am Yisrael.

[3] Although we read, further on, "On this very day all of God's hosts left the land of Egypt," we must differentiate between an instance of God addressing Israel directly, and a description in the Torah of events as they happened. In the story of the golden calf, too, the Torah describes God as relenting of the evil that He had spoken about bringing upon His nation, but God does not relate to Am Yisrael in this way when He speaks to them or to Moshe. In any event, even expressions such as these are no longer found after the golden calf.

[4] A discussion of this Ohel and its significance lie beyond the scope of this shiur.

[5] From the verses there, it appears that the threat to kill him is related to Moshe's refusal to accept the task of going down to Egypt, but this interpretation is not the only viable one, and I shall attempt to raise another possibility.

[6] Unfortunately, we are witness to a similar phenomenon today in the modern aliya from the former U.S.S.R.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

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