

Parashah Sixty-Nine

Exodus 31:1–32:14; Ezekiel 20:1–17; Colossians 3:1–5

notes by Tim Hegg

This week’s section contains three lines of thought. It begins with the notice that Bezalel, Oholiab, and other craftsmen would be filled with the Ruach HaKodesh in order to perform their tasks of constructing the various articles of furniture and ornamentation for the *Mishkan*, the Tabernacle.

The second section centers on the Shabbat as an eternal sign between God and Israel (31:12-18), followed thirdly by the narrative of how Israel sinned with the golden calf. Are these sections related, or were they simply pasted together without much attention to literary transition by the final editor?

My own belief is that if there were a “final editor” of the Torah, he or they were as much guarded by the Ruach as was Moses in the original compilation. Thus, I would take it as a given that not only the words, sentences, and paragraphs were inspired, but also the order in which they were recorded. Thus, my initial query is to find the relationship between these three sections in our *parashah* for this week.

And, it is not difficult to see the connection. The opening strain focuses attention upon the fact that God would supernaturally empower the craftsmen to make the necessary articles of the *Mishkan* so that His commands to Moses would be carried out perfectly, and so the people would be able to worship as He intended. Thus, the first line of thought in our section focuses upon the means of worship.

The second paragraph reiterates (with some interesting additions) the former commandments regarding the Shabbat. Yet in this context the Shabbat is said to be given to Israel for a specific purpose (v. 13), “... that you may know that I am Adonai who sanctifies you.” In other words, the Shabbat is also given as a means—a sign, a reminder—to set Israel apart to the Lord. After all, this is the essence of worship, to serve Him wholly. (Remember that the Hebrew term most often translated “worship” is the word עֲבוֹדָה, *avodah*, the basic meaning of which is “to serve.”) The Shabbat keeps this thought in focus. Our redemption from Egypt had one primary purpose, that we should be forever worshippers of God. So the empowering of the craftsmen to create a place for worship, and the giving of the Shabbat as a constant reminder that our purpose in life is to be worshipers, are linked together.

The final section is striking in comparison, and in connection with the first two. In the golden calf event we see a vivid picture of an ugly reality. Israel, indeed, mankind, even given the best of all possible advantages to appreciate and worship God, inevitably chooses to worship the creation rather than the Creator, Who is blessed forever (cf. Rom 1:25). The three themes of our *parashah* remind us that even when God has prepared a place and day for worship, until He changes the heart of a person no true worship will take place.

This, in itself, has profound implications for us today. First, we should not despise careful preparation of time and space for worship. These are God ordain and honored. God does not change, nor do His precepts change. His Torah stands as an eternal revelation of His character, thoughts, and will. Thus, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the same God Who endowed the craftsmen with ability and gave very specific instructions regarding the place of corporate worship, the *Mishkan*. But secondly, we must remember that neither a place set apart for worship, nor the recognition of the ordained day for worshipful rest, guarantee true worship. Unless the Lord quickens our hearts—enlivens our souls—rebirths us by the water and the Spirit (John 3:5), our worship will be false, self-centered, and even idolatrous. The prophet Isaiah teaches us this in the first chapter of his prophecy, by commanding the Israelites of old to stop bringing their sacrifices (their acts of worship) since in truth these were nothing more than false worship—the kind of thing that stinks in God’s nostrils.

How is it that our hearts can be changed? How may we prepare to worship in spirit and truth? The inward work is done by the Ruach on the basis of the sacrifice of Yeshua, linked to the heart by faith. Without faith in the crowning sacrifice of Mashiach, without the cleansing (atoning) of His blood, without His priestly intercession—there is no true worship. For no one may approach the Father but through Him, and worship is nothing more nor less than communion with the Father and the Son of His love, by the sanctifying work of the Ruach.

Let us look briefly, now, at each of the sections. 31:1-11 describes the supernatural ability given to the craftsmen by the Ruach HaElohim (Spirit of God). This ability was not merely in the hands, but first (and perhaps foremost) in the heart and soul. V. 3—“I have filled him with the Spirit of God in wisdom, understanding, and knowledge.” These three terms (which form the basis for the acronym CaBaD, חֵכֶמָה, בִּינָי, דַּעַת) speak of spiritual vigor, of a life filled with Torah study and application to life. These craftsmen therefore constructed their items in accordance with what they knew about God. This in itself is a tremendous lesson for each of us. Let the work of our hands, empowered by the Ruach, show forth the truth about God in wisdom, understanding, and knowledge.

How might these terms be simply defined? Wisdom is being able to know what God has said—being able to approach life with His viewpoint as revealed in the Torah. Understanding is the ability to apply this viewpoint to the specific situations of life (to say it another way, to be able to derive *halachah*). Knowledge is the ability to derive new applications from the wisdom and understanding gained from the Torah—to be able to make application of a given precept to a situation that is new. Spiritual knowledge makes the eternal and ancient wisdom always relevant.

The second paragraph of our section reiterates the centrality of the Shabbat. There are several things I will point out by way of overview. First, note that here the Sabbath is declared as a sign (אוֹת, *'ot*) between Adonai and Israel forever (v. 13). A sign must point to some reality. In this case, it is the unique relationship that God has with Israel on account of His having chosen her to be His covenant nation, and thus having redeemed her from Egypt to be His own people. Therefore, the Shabbat is to be a sign that God has set Israel apart, sanctifying her to Himself. The Shabbat is a sign that Israel is special to the Lord, that she has been marked out (sanctified) for Him. This does not, of course, exhaust the meaning of the Shabbat as a sign, but in this context it is the primary emphasis. This is all the more significant in light of the up coming golden calf event. God has claimed Israel for Himself, she belongs to Him. The Shabbat is proof of this, and the Shabbat is a creation reality—it cannot change as long as the heavens and earth remain. In like manner, even though Israel will sin and turn her back upon God, the unique status of her being His chosen people cannot change any more than the course of the earth around the sun can change. It is fixed (cf. Ps 89:37).

A second thing I might point out from this passage is that “being cut off from your people” is equivalent with capital punishment, v. 14. The Hebrew is emphatic: “surely be put to death” (מוֹת יוֹמָת). But this phrase is parallel to the next one, i.e., “shall be cut off from his people” (וְנִכְרְתָה הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהוּא מִקֶּרֶב עַמִּיהָ). In this case, being cut off from one’s people is done through the death penalty, whether administered by appointed judges or by God Himself.

A third matter: the term for “work” is not the common word עֲבוּדָה, *avodah*. It is rather the term מְלָאכָה, the same word used in the Gen 2 account which gives us the first notice of Shabbat. While עֲבוּדָה may include any kind of activity that is labor, מְלָאכָה has as its primary meaning “business, occupation, employment.” The two are clearly different. In the broadest of strokes, what is prohibited on the Shabbat is the continuation of business, of employment, of seeking to make wages, or to gain economically. It is not *activity* that is prohibited. Rather, the activity which is enjoined upon us for the Shabbat is precisely those kinds of things which direct our attention as fully as possible to the fact which we always affirm, i.e., that God is

the One who supplies all of our needs, and that even that which we gain through our weekly business is, in fact, from Him.

This fact is emphasized again in v. 16. Here the language is that the sons of Israel are to “do” (לַעֲשׂוֹת) the Shabbat (translated “celebrate” in some English bibles). So Shabbat is not a lack of doing—it is doing those things that set the day of Shabbat apart from the other days of work, and which draw us together as a community to the worship of God and an appreciation of who we are in Messiah as His chosen people.

Our *parashah* ends with the well-known story of the golden calf. But from the time of the earliest commentaries on this text, the story has raised a number of obvious questions. First, it seems beyond belief that Aaron, who had such partnership with Moses as the spokesman for God, could have been so easily persuaded to make an idol for the people. What is more, had he been guilty of leading the people in idolatry, it would seem that he would be the most culpable, yet when the punishment comes upon the people for their sin, Aaron is entirely spared, and then goes on in the subsequent story to be the primary figure in the service of the Tabernacle before HaShem as the *cohen gadol* (High Priest). Later, God charged Aaron with the sin of joining Moses in striking the stone (Num 20:12). Yet here, it appears as though Aaron entirely escapes any punishment for the sin of idolatry!

The Sages felt this difficulty, and attempted to give various explanations why Aaron, in fact, was not guilty of idolatry. They suggest that he simply tried to stall to give time for Moses to reappear. They note that before Moses ascended the mountain, he had appointed Hur as a co-leader with Aaron in his absence (Ex 24:14). Since there is no mention of Hur in the current pericope, the Sages conclude that the people had already killed him because he had refused their request to fashion an idol. Thus, they suggest, Aaron’s actions should be seen in light of the fact that he feared they would kill him as well. His actions in reference to the golden calf, therefore, are interpreted as attempts to delay the people’s request in order to give time for Moses to come back from the mountain.

The Sages also posit that there was a contingency of Egyptians who had joined Israel in her exodus, but had done so not out of a fear of God, or a willingness to turn from their idolatry to trust the God of Israel, but because they considered the events of the Passover as magic (putting the blood on the door, leaving in haste, considering Moses to be a sorcerer, etc.). According to the Sages, this group of Egyptians, who had never truly confessed HaShem to be the One, true God, constituted the “mixed multitude” (עַרְבֵי רַב, cf. Ex 12:38) who came out of Egypt. They were the ones who incited the people to idolatry, and they were the 3000 who were eventually put to death.

While it is clear that there are some interesting points in our text which are usually overlooked by many commentators, and which may seem at first to give some credence to the interpretation of the Sages on this passage, in the final analysis, the Sages simply could not bring themselves to admit that the Israelites could be guilty of such blatant idolatry, especially since they had so recently witnessed the wonderful power of God on their behalf in bringing them from Egypt, and in giving them the very words of God in the Torah. Yet it seems inescapable, if we allow the text its plain meaning, that the people were, in fact, moved to idolatry in the moment of their despair. To try to come up with alternate explanations actually obscures the hard but important lessons we are to learn from this text.

The opening verse of this story (32:1) relates that the motivation of the people was to replace Moses, since they feared he may have died, having lingered on the mountain longer than they thought he should have. Their words are insightful: “Come, make us a god who will go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.” Obviously, Moses was not the one who brought them up from the land of Egypt! God was their Deliverer! Here we see an all important perspective: whenever we assign to a leader, regardless of how important or powerful that leader

may be, those things that are the work of God, we open the door to idolatry. Surely God had appointed Moses, and surely he was a prophet unlike any other. Yet he was God’s servant. It was not his leadership, or even the strength of his character, that had effected Israel’s deliverance from Egypt. Somehow, the people had put their trust and allegiance in man rather than in God.

Next, it appears that Aaron acted out of fear. The Hebrew of 32:1 has וַיִּקְהַל הָעָם עַל-אַהֲרֹן, which the English versions translate, “the people assembled about Aaron,” but the preposition על used with קהל, “to gather,” always carries hostile connotations. We should understand this to mean that the people gathered “against” Aaron. In other words, the people had formed into a mob who were hostile to Aaron. If, as the Sages suggest, Hur was already somehow taken out of the picture, one could well understand Aaron’s fear. How could he single-handedly expect to withstand the force of a mob? In his fear, he gave into a plan that he hoped would buy him some time until Moses reappeared.

At first, given this scenario, we might empathize with Aaron. What else could he have done? Yet it is at the point of crisis that a leader must stand upon the clear principles of truth, and leave the outcome to God. Aaron’s actions, while understandable from a human point of view, were not worthy of his position and responsibility as God’s appointed leader. It is precisely at the point of crisis where mature faith in God’s way of doing things is manifest. Standing on true principles and leaving the outcome to God should have characterized Aaron’s actions. Instead, he came up with his own plan, which apparently he thought would work. In the end, however, it caused great harm to the people he was commissioned to lead. Moses’ assessment of Aaron’s leadership is given in 32:25, “Now when Moses saw that the people were out of control—for Aaron had let them get out of control to be a derision among their enemies....”

Aaron, giving into the pressure of the people, instructed them to gather the gold they possessed in ear rings. Perhaps he thought this would have taken them a few days. But instead, they return almost immediately with gold in hand. The use of the verb פָּרַק, *paraq*, “to tear,” in 32:2 may highlight the fact that Aaron hoped the process would be difficult for the people, yet the next verse uses the same verb, indicating that the people were willing to do anything necessary to create the idol.

When the people brought the gold, 32:4 relates that Aaron took an engraving tool (חֶרֶט, *cheret*), and fashioned the gold into a golden calf (עֵגֶל מִסִּכָּה, *‘egel masēchah*), literally, a “calf of a molten image.” The way that this text relates the event is much different than what Aaron tells Moses later on (34:24), “I said to them, ‘Whoever has any gold, let them tear it off.’ So they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf.” The Sages suggest that the demonic power of the Egyptians was actually responsible for making the idol—that Aaron threw the gold into the fire in hopes that a malformed glob of gold would be left, and the people would be discouraged about ever having an idol made of it. Yet the previous text tells us that Aaron took an engraving tool and fashioned (צוּר, *tzur*) the idol. Moreover, in the initially telling (v. 4) the text says that Aaron “took” the gold from the hands of the people (וַיִּקַּח מֵיָדָם, *vayiqqach miyadam*) while in Aaron’s retelling he says “they gave it to me” (וַיִּתְּנוּ-לִי, *vayit’nu li*). From a strictly *halachic* perspective, Aaron took legal possession of the gold when he “took it” or drew it to himself. When he later relates the events to Moses, he tries to distance himself from having owned the gold that eventually became the idol. Such disparity between the two accounts gives every indication that Aaron was attempting to rationalize what he knew had been an egregious sin on his part.

After fashioning the molten image, we read in v. 4, וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלֶּהָ אֱלֹהֵיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הֵעֲלִינֶךָ מִמִּצְרָיִם, “and they said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.’” There a couple of important things to note in this phrase: 1) the demonstrative pronoun (אֵלֶּהָ, *‘ele*) is plural, thus “these are”; 2) אֱלֹהֵיךָ, *elohim*, may be translated as a plural, “gods” (though cf. Neh 9:18); 3) the people, not Aaron, are the ones making this pronouncement, “they said.” (Note variants in the Lxx, which has the singular except

in a few Mss.). It appears, therefore, that there was a group of people who had put themselves forward as leaders in some fashion. They were the ones who made an “official” proclamation regarding the molten image. And it appears that the rest of the people were willing to follow their lead, since no one comes forward to challenge them. It may be that the construction of the calf or bull was considered as a way to bring God close to them—a way to “get God’s attention” by constructing a throne for His feet or a kind of pedestal for His enthronement. That the image of bulls in pagan religions of the Ancient Near East were apparently used in this manner may give credence to this interpretation. Regardless of exactly how the molten image was viewed, it was considered a means of controlling God—to bring Him near when it appeared that He remained aloof and distant, or to assembly Him along with the local gods believed to be in control of that region. Here we see the heart of all idolatry: an attempt to control God because He is viewed as less than good. The spirit of idolatry goes back to Satan’s lie: “has God said?” Once the people came to believe that God was selfish (like the pagan gods), they resorted to means they thought could manipulate Him to do their bidding.

Aaron’s next action is interesting. It appears that in order to persuade the people away from their idolatry, he constructed an altar in front of the idol (לְפָנָיו, *l’phanav*), and declared that “Tomorrow shall be a feast (חַג, *chag*) to יהוה.” If in fact Aaron’s intentions were to draw the people back to the worship of HaShem, we can only say that his motivations were honorable. But here again, we learn an important lesson: using the wrong methods in an attempt to achieve an honorable goal never works. God is the One Who decreed the *mo’edim*, the appointed times of the festivals. In Aaron’s desperation to bring the people back to their senses, he quickly adds a festival. From a human point-of-view, this seems logical. After all, if the festivals are a means of focusing attention upon what God has done, and especially His role as our Deliverer and King, then engaging in a festival would seem the right thing to do. But the error of Aaron’s rationale was in trusting that the *emotional* aspects of a festival would turn the people back to a *right way of thinking*, when in fact just the opposite is true. Truth is the fountainhead of Godly emotions, not visa versa. Instead of proclaiming a festival, Aaron should have called the people to repentance and to a return to the truth.

The fruit of this backwards rationale is highlighted in the 32:6. The people did, indeed, show up for the festival. They engaged in the emotional festivities, but it did not turn them to confess the error of their ways. Instead, the text states: “So the next day they rose early and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play.” They “rose early”—they were eager to engage in the festivities. They offered false offerings, and then sat down to eat, drink, and engaged in “play.” The Hebrew word translated “play” is צחק, “to laugh,” which can sometimes denote “dancing” (Ex 32:19; Judg 16:25) but also at times carries the idea of sexual activity (Gen 26:8; 39:14, 17). Instead of the festival returning the people to a true recognition of God, it carried them away into further sin, perhaps even engaging in Canaanite fertility rites.

God is the first to alert Moses to the situation (32:7ff). His assessment is clear: 1) they have corrupted themselves, 2) they have turned aside from the commandments of God, 3) they have committed idolatry, 4) they are an obstinate people. When God’s anger burned against the people, He suggests that He would destroy them, and begin a fresh with Moses, from whom He would make a “great nation.” This is neither a test for Moses, nor an indication that God could actually lie in regard to His covenant promises. Rather, this section is given to us so that we might understand the manner of an intercessor. Moses, in the face of God’s anger, stands firm on what God has said, and reminds Him of His promises. As Moses is a foreshadow of Messiah as our Intercessor, we are given insight into His intercession for us. He constantly pleads the merits of His own sacrifice, and the eternal promises that rest upon it. Like Moses, the intercession of our Messiah is based upon the eternal faithfulness of God.

When Moses returns to the mountain to intercede a second time for the people, he says: “But now, if You will, forgive their sin—and if not, please blot me out from Your book which You have written!” Once again, we are taught the method of an intercessor. Yeshua pleads in the same way: the merits of His own righteousness form the basis of His requests on our behalf. When we are said to be clothed in His righteousness (Is 61:10; 1Cor 1:30; Phil 3:9; 2Pet 1:1), it means that before we could ever be declared unrighteous, the Father would need to find some flaw in our Intercessor, for His righteousness has been reckoned to us. To the extent that Yeshua is righteous, to that extent all who are “in Him” are likewise righteous.