

PARASHAT EIKEV

Moshe's Prayer – Before or After the Sin of the Golden Calf?

By Rav Amnon Bazak

a. The Contradiction

In our parasha Moshe seeks to emphasize the message that it is "Not by your righteousness that the Lord your God gives you this good land to possess it, for you are a stiff-necked people" (9:6). Moshe substantiates this on the basis of the nation's evil actions during the period of the desert: "Remember, do not forget, how you made the Lord your God angry in the desert, from the day you came out of Egypt until your arrival at this place, you have quarreled with God." The central proof that Moshe brings for this claim is the episode of the golden calf, which he describes at length (9:8-21, 25-29).

The sin itself is described here in a way that is almost a perfect parallel to the narrative in Sefer Shemot. In both places we find two consecutive statements by God to Moshe. Let us compare these:

Shemot 32:7-8

"God spoke to Moshe: Go, descend, for the nation that you brought up from the land of Egypt has become corrupt. They have quickly turned aside from the path that I commanded them; they have made themselves a molten calf and they have bowed to it and sacrificed to it and said, 'This is your god, Israel, that has brought you up from the land of Egypt'."

Devarim 9:12

"God said to me: Arise, descend from here quickly, for your nation that you have taken out of Egypt has become corrupt; they have quickly turned aside from the path that I commanded them; they have made a molten image."

Shemot 32:9-10

"God said to Moshe: I have seen this nation and behold, it is a stiff-necked nation. And now leave Me alone, that My anger may burn against them and that I may consume them, and I shall make you into a great nation."

Devarim 9:13-14

"God spoke to me saying: I have seen this nation and behold, it is a stiff-necked nation. Leave Me and I shall destroy them and erase their name from beneath the heavens, and I shall make you into a nation mightier and greater than they."

The two descriptions of the episode correspond almost exactly, aside from the apparently insignificant matter of form – the abbreviation of the description of Bnei Yisrael's act in our parasha, in contrast with its lengthy presentation in Sefer Shemot. But from this point onwards we find a significant difference between the two accounts. In Sefer Shemot, Moshe's reaction to God's outburst is a prayer, entreating God to show mercy to Am Yisrael (32:11-13): "Moshe begged the Lord his God and said, Why, God, should Your anger burn against Your people whom You brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a strong arm? Why should the Egyptians speak, saying, 'He brought them out at an evil [time], to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them out from upon the face of the earth'? Turn from Your burning anger and relent of the evil for Your people. Remember for Avraham, for Yitzhak and for Yisrael Your servants that which You promised them by Your self, saying to them, I will increase your seed like the stars of the heavens, and all this land concerning which I spoke - I shall give to your descendants, and they will inherit it forever." Following this plea, God relents concerning the thought of destroying Am Yisrael: "God relented of the evil that He had spoken to do to His nation" (14). Only afterwards is Moshe's descent from Mount Sinai described, with the shattering of the tablets.

In our parasha the description is different. First Moshe fulfills God's command – "Arise, descend quickly from here" – without appealing to God in prayer at all: "I turned and descended from the mountain, and the mountain was burning with fire, and the two Tablets of Testimony were in my two arms. And I saw, behold, you had sinned to the Lord your God: you had made for yourselves a molten calf, you had turned quickly aside from the path that God commanded you. So I grasped the two tablets and cast them from my arms, and I shattered them before your eyes" (Devarim 9:15-17). Only afterwards, by Moshe's account, did he once again ascend to God, and only then did he offer his prayer that God discard His thought of destroying Bnei Yisrael: "I fell down before God as before, for forty days and forty nights - I ate no bread, nor did I drink water – for all of your sin that you sinned, in doing evil in the eyes of God, to make Him angry. For I was afraid of the rage and fury that God angered against you, to destroy you." Only then, too, does God relent of His plan: "God listened to me then too." Thereafter, Moshe goes on to describe other sins that Bnei Yisrael committed in the desert (verses 22-24), but near the end of the chapter he comes back to a description of his prayer during the second period of forty days. The description of this prayer likewise corresponds generally to the narrative in Sefer Shemot, but – as mentioned – with a striking difference: the same prayer which, according to Sefer Shemot, was uttered by Moshe prior to his descent from the mountain, is presented by Moshe himself in Sefer Devarim as having been offered after his descent and the second ascent to God: [1]

Shemot 32:11-13

"Moshe begged the Lord his God and said, Why, God, should Your anger burn against Your people whom You brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a strong arm? Why should the Egyptians speak, saying, 'He brought them out at an evil [time], to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them out from upon the face of the earth'? Turn from Your burning anger and relent of the evil for Your people. Remember for Avraham, for Yitzhak and for Yisrael Your servants that which You promised them by Your self, saying to them, I will increase your seed like the stars of the heavens, and all this land concerning which I spoke - I shall give to your descendants, and they will inherit it forever."

Devarim 9:26-29

"I prayed to God and said: Lord God, do not destroy Your nation and Your inheritance, whom You redeemed in Your greatness, whom You brought out of Egypt with a strong arm. Remember for Your servants – for Avraham, for Yitzhak and for Yaakov; do not pay heed to the stubbornness of this nation, nor to their wickedness, nor to their sin, lest it be said in the land from which you brought us: 'It was for lack of God's ability to bring them to the land of which He spoke to them, and for His hatred for them, that He took them out to let them die in the desert.' But they are Your nation and Your inheritance, whom You brought out with Your great strength and with Your outstretched arm."

Sefer Shemot, too, describes a second ascent by Moshe, with a prayer to God to atone for the sin of Bnei Yisrael: "It happened on the next day that Moshe said to the people: "You have sinned a great sin; now I shall ascend to God, perhaps I shall be able to atone for your sin." So Moshe returned to God and said, "Please, this nation has sinned a great sin; they have made themselves a god of gold. And now, if You will forgive their sin – for if not, please erase me from Your book that You have written"" (32:30-32). But it is clear that the prayer recorded in our parasha is not this prayer – since it is formulated quite differently – but rather the first prayer described in Sefer Shemot. [2]

How, then, are we to explain the difference between the two descriptions?

b. Approaches of Ibn Ezra and Ramban

The commentators address this question, offering various explanations.

Ibn Ezra (Shemot 32:11) writes: "Some say that this is the same prayer that is mentioned in parashat Ekev. This prayer should have been written after Moshe's return to the mountain, and therefore "And God relented..." – after he prayed and fell before God for forty days. For if God relented of the evil decree in the beginning, why would Moshe say, "Perhaps I shall be able to atone for your sin" (Shemot 32:31)? For he descended, burned the calf and slaughtered its worshippers, and then returned to pray to God on behalf of Israel and on behalf of Aharon, who had played a critical role.

Others maintain that the prayer, "Do not destroy Your nation" (Devarim 9:26) is not the same prayer that is recorded here.

In my opinion, the reasons for the prayers are the same, as I shall explain. For how could Moshe beseech God before burning the calf and making Bnei Yisrael drink the waters and slaughtering the worshippers? God even hinted to him that he should pray after descending and getting rid of the calf; therefore it is written, 'Perhaps I shall be able to atone for your sin' (Shemot 32:30) – after he had removed the sin, as it is written, "Your sin that you committed – the calf" (Devarim 9:21). And behold, since God said to him, "Now leave Me alone," he was reminded of the prayer that he had offered when he fell down before God. So this parasha should have been written after, "Moshe returned to God" (Shemot 32:31), but there is no chronological order in the Torah... For it is not logical that Moshe would have prayed on behalf of Israel because of the idolatry in their midst, before removing it."

To Ibn Ezra's view, Moshe prayed only once – when he ascended the second time, as described in our parasha, for it is not logical that Moshe should pray for atonement for the sin while the calf still stood and the people were still worshipping it. Likewise, it is unclear why Moshe would express doubt – "PERHAPS I shall be able to atone for your sin," if the atonement had already been assured. In Sefer Shemot the prayer is recorded earlier in order to express the idea that Moshe indeed understood from God that he should pray on behalf of the nation, but his actual prayer came only when he ascended the second time; thus, our parasha presents the events in their chronological order.

Ramban disagrees with Ibn Ezra's explanation, mainly because the two prayers described in Sefer Shemot appear quite different from one another:

"I do not agree, since the prayer that Moshe offered upon his return to the mountain is as recorded, "Please, this nation has sinned a great sin" (verse 31). If it is all the same single prayer, offered during the forty days when he returned to the mountain, then why would he divide it and mention here (verses 11-13) only part of it, with the other part being mentioned after the descent (verse 31)?"

Hence, Ramban concludes, there were indeed two prayers, and he explains the need for this as follows:

"Therefore it appears that when God told him, "Leave Me alone that My anger may burn against them and that I may consume them," Moshe began to entreat Him immediately, not leaving it for afterwards, for he feared that God's anger would emerge and that the plague would begin decimating them right away. So immediately he said, "Why, God, should Your anger burn against Your nation"... So he prayed for them, and God relented of the evil of which He had spoken – to slaughter them and destroy them. He was not completely appeased, He only declared that He had relented and would not destroy them completely. Given this reprieve, Moshe descended and burned the calf and slaughtered its worshippers, and then he told the nation, "I shall ascend to God; perhaps I shall be able to atone for your sin" (verse 30) – that He will forgive you."

The first prayer, then, was meant only to avert the immediate threat of annihilation, but the nation had not yet achieved atonement for the sin, and this was the purpose of the

second prayer. But why, then, does our parasha make mention of only one prayer? Ramban explains that our parasha deliberately omits any description of the first prayer:

"But the Mishneh Torah [Sefer Devarim] the event is recounted in a different order, for after God spoke, saying, "Leave Me and I shall destroy them," Moshe says, "I turned and descended." The reason for this is that Moshe sets out for them there [in Sefer Devarim] all their sins and the efforts he had made on their behalf" – and so this occasion was not appropriate for any mention of Moshe's first prayer. [3]

The Ramban's approach, describing two different prayers, seems to sit better with the literal text. His explanation, however, is still deficient: we are still left with the issue of the prayer which in Sefer Shemot is described as being offered prior to Moshe's descent, while in our parasha he prays after his second ascent.

c. Two aspects of God's relationship with Am Yisrael

It seems, then, that this contradiction – like many others – comes to express different aspects of reality, with each description presenting a different angle. The principal difference between the two views turns on the question we presented above: did Moshe descend from the mountain with the knowledge that God had relented of His intention to destroy Am Yisrael, or without this knowledge?

According to the narrative in Sefer Shemot, Moshe could not descend from Mount Sinai without first being certain that God would not carry out the terrible threat of annihilating the nation. Moshe prayed immediately upon hearing the decree, and his prayer was accepted. However, it was specifically because Moshe knew that his prayer had been accepted that he could be so deeply shocked upon seeing the actual idolatry before his eyes, and therefore he reacted spontaneously by breaking the tablets. In the description in Sefer Shemot we read (32:19), "It happened when he neared the camp, and he saw the calf and the dancing, that MOSHE'S ANGER BURNED and he cast from his hands the tablets, and he shattered them at the bottom of the mountain." The breaking of the tablets was therefore an act of anger, parallel to God's anger described only a few verses previously: "Now leave Me alone THAT MY ANGER MAY BURN against them and that I may consume them." Just as God's anger did not realize its destructive potential, so Moshe's anger represents an emotional response, not calculated, and without ideological significance. After breaking the tablets Moshe directs his energies towards repairing the spiritual situation of the nation and asking for atonement; this is the significance of his second prayer.

Our parasha, on the other hand, describes Moshe as descending from the mountain with the feeling that God has had enough of Bnei Yisrael and intends to destroy them. Upon seeing the calf, he understands that this represents a fundamental breach of the covenant with God and, this being so, that there is no longer any significance attached to the Tablets of Testimony. Therefore, IN A CALCULATED MOVE, and without anger, Moshe breaks the tablets: "I grasped the two tablets and cast them from my hands, breaking them before your eyes" (9:17). This is not a spontaneous act, but rather a

symbolic expression of the severing of the connection between God and Am Yisrael. [4] Only afterwards does Moshe decide that the situation may still be saved; that there is still some possibility of avoiding the Divine plan to destroy Israel. While in Sefer Shemot the prevention of the annihilation of Am Yisrael is described in a brief dialogue between Moshe and God, in our parasha it is described as a long, drawn-out process: "I fell down before God as the first time, for forty days and forty nights - I ate no bread, nor did I drink water – on account of all of your sin that you sinned in doing this evil in the eyes of God, to make Him angry. For I was afraid of the wrath and the fury that God angered against you, to destroy you."

The emphasis in our parasha is - as the Ramban explains – a description of the seriousness of Bnei Yisrael's actions in the desert. This being so, Moshe wants to emphasize how close they came to complete annihilation, heaven forefend. The breaking of the tablets signified the end of the road. Only at the very last minute did Moshe reach the conclusion of Elazar ben Dordaya, that "It depends on me alone" (Avoda Zara 17a), and he succeeded – with tremendous effort – in preventing this punishment.

The two descriptions are therefore distinguished by the fundamental question: did Moshe descend from the mountain accepting – at least temporarily – the decree, or had he already succeeded in preventing it immediately? It appears that "both these and those are the word of the living God" – there is an aspect of truth to both. The dual description is reminiscent of another famous contradiction, between our haftara and another prophecy. In the haftara that we read this Shabbat, God tells Am Yisrael: "So says God: WHERE IS YOUR MOTHER'S BILL OF DIVORCE, with which I sent her away? Or to which of My creditors have I sold you? Behold, you have sold yourselves by your sins, and it is by your wrongdoings that your mother has been sent away" (Yishayahu 50:1). According to these words, there is no possibility of God giving Am Yisrael a "bill of divorce." But this appears to contradict the prophecy of Yirmiyahu, who declares in God's name (3:8): "I saw that although faithless Israel committed adultery I sent her away AND GAVE HER A BILL OF DIVORCE..." (see Radak and Metzudat David). It would seem that these represent two aspects of God's relationship with Am Yisrael, with the truth being a complex combination of both – a sort of "divorced but not divorced" (see Gittin 73b, and elsewhere).

Likewise in our parasha: the possibility that there was a stage in history in which there existed a Divine decision to destroy Am Yisrael, is not unequivocal. Our parasha expresses such a possibility, but the combination with the description in Sefer Shemot gives rise to the conclusion that such an extreme possibility was prevented from ever reaching fruition.

Notes:

[1] The introduction to this prayer (verse 25) teaches, "I fell down before God for the forty days and the forty nights, as I had fallen down [previously], for God had said He would destroy you": clearly, the meaning is that Moshe prayed during the second period of forty days of "falling down" before God, as previously described (verses 18-19) – "I

fell down before God as previously, for forty days and forty nights... for I feared the rage and fury that God angered against you, to destroy you."

[2] Further on, too, we are told explicitly that the prayer in which Moshe asks God not to destroy Bnei Yisrael was uttered during the second period of forty days: "I stood upon the mountain, as the first time, for forty days and forty nights, and God listened to me this time, too, and did not destroy you" (Devarim 10:10).

[3] Ramban offers the same explanation in our parasha (9:15): "But he makes no mention of it here, for he wants now to list for them all the efforts he has made on their behalf – that they brought him to shatter the tablets and to pray for them for forty days and forty nights."

[4] I first encountered the possibility of regarding the two descriptions of the breaking of the tablets as two different aspects in the words of Hizkuni. In his commentary on the account in Sefer Shemot, he explains the breaking of the tablets as arising from a weakening of Moshe's hands: "'He cast from his hands' – his strength failed as he saw the calf, and he had no strength to bear them." In our parasha, in contrast, Hizkuni explains that Moshe acted in a calculated manner: "'I broke them before your eyes' – so as not to render you guilty, for it is written, 'You shall have no other gods before Me' – and you made the calf!" Although we have explained the significance of the two descriptions in a different manner, the possibility of a dual reality has already been raised by Hizkuni.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

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Yeshivat Har Etzion
Alon Shvut, Israel, 90433
office@etzion.org.il
