

**Aharon's Part in the Sin of the Golden Calf – From the Torah to Chazal**  
By Dr. Brachi Elitzur

The discussion in rabbinical literature of Aharon's role in the sin of the golden calf, familiar to us from Rashi's commentary, is characterized by a defense of Aharon's motives and a focus on the sophistication of his strategy:

"[Break off the golden earrings which are] in the ears of your wives..." – Aharon said to himself, "The women and children are possessive when it comes to their jewelry; perhaps that will delay matters, and in the meantime Moshe will return." But they did not hesitate; they broke off their jewelry themselves.

"And he said, 'Tomorrow is a feast unto God'" – He did not say "today," hoping that Moshe would come before they would worship [the idol].

That is the plain meaning. But a *midrash* in *Vayikra Rabba* teaches that Aharon acted out of many different considerations: he saw Chur, his sister's son, rebuking them – and they killed him. This is the meaning of the words, "He built an altar (*mizbe'ach*) before it" – alluding to the fact that he built it in light of the one who had been sacrificed (*mi-zevot'ach*). He also understood the situation and said, "Better that this sin be attributed to me and not to them."

Furthermore he said, "If they build this altar, each contributing his part, their work will be finished very quickly. If I build it myself, and take my time over the work, Moshe will in the meantime have returned."

"A festival unto God" – in his heart, he meant this truly for the sake of heaven, since he was certain that Moshe would be back, and they would worship God. (Rashi, [Shemot 32](#))

This exegetical direction has become entrenched to the point where, in reading the verses describing the episode, the reader is actually surprised to find no mention of Chur, and no explicit record of Aharon's attempts to prevent the construction of the golden calf.

*Chazal's* teachings about the sins of the founding fathers of Am Yisrael often seek to defend the motives that led to the sin and to diminish its severity. However, at the same time there are also many teachings that oppose this approach, sometimes even attributing to the figure in question a sin more severe than the one described in the text.<sup>[1]</sup>

The forgiving approach characterizing most of *Chazal's* teachings from Eretz Yisrael (as opposed to those in Bavel) concerning Aharon's role is an exception to the ambivalent evaluation suggested by the teachings surrounding the sins of other important figures. In this *shiur* we will try to trace the attitude towards Aharon's sin in the matter of the golden calf from the Chumash through the post-biblical literature, and try to understand the reasons for the development of this across-the-board defense and justification of Aharon in the period of the Mishna and the Talmud.

### **Aharon's Role in the Sin in the Biblical Account**

The Torah describes Aharon's role in the sin of the golden calf in five different places:

1. The account at the time of the sin
2. The description that Aharon himself provides in response to Moshe's questioning
3. Moshe's response to Aharon's explanation
4. Divine justification of the punishment meted out to the people through a description of the identity of the sinners
5. A description of the sin forty years later, in Moshe's historical speech.

Let us compare these accounts and see if they divulge any biblical basis for the defense that developed over the course of the generations.

The Narrative Record	Aharon's Account
	<p><b>Moshe said to Aharon, “What has this people done to you, that you have brought such a great sin upon them?”</b></p> <p><b>And Aharon said, “Let not the anger of my lord burn. You know the people, that they are bent on evil.</b></p>
<p><b>The people gathered themselves to Aharon and they said to him: “Arise, make us gods which will go before us, for this one, the man Moshe, who brought us up out of the land of Egypt – we do not know what has become of him.”</b></p>	<p><b>For they said to me, ‘Make us gods which will go before us; for this one, the man Moshe who brought us up out of the land of Egypt – we do not know what has become of him.’</b></p>
<p><b>And Aharon said to them, “Break off the golden earrings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons and your daughters, and bring them to me.” And all the people broke off the golden earrings which were in their ears,</b></p>	<p><b>And I said to them, ‘Who has gold?’ They broke it off</b></p>
<p><b>and brought them to Aharon.</b></p>	<p><b>and gave it to me.</b></p>
<p><b>And he received it from their hand, and fashioned it with an engraving tool, and made it a molten calf. And they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up out of the land of Egypt.”</b></p>	<p><b>And I cast it into the fire, and this calf emerged” (<a href="#">Shemot 33:21-24</a>).</b></p>
<p><b>And when Aharon saw it, he built an altar before it. And Aharon made a proclamation, saying, “Tomorrow is a feast unto God.” And they rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings, and the people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to make merry (<a href="#">Shemot 32:1-6</a>).</b></p>	

Aharon's reenactment of the event diminishes the dramatic dimension of the narrative record. It is clear that Aharon skips over the parts of the story describing the people's efforts to build the golden calf; he also censors the description of the worship that goes on around the calf, and gives no hint that he himself was the main organizer of the event. While quoting almost directly the nation's demand of him, in his description of his response he portrays what happened as something unexpected, the result of the deplorable situation of the people that is "bent on evil."

Aharon's account not only fails to serve as a basis for a defense; it actually amplifies the severity of the sin, in two ways. First, Moshe's request for clarification proceeds from the assumption that Aharon was not only a party to the sin, but that he caused the people to sin: "... that you have brought this great sin upon it." Second, Aharon fails to take responsibility for his role, placing the blame mainly on the people.

Moshe's response to this account of the events shows that he is not convinced of Aharon's innocence:

Moshe saw that the people were in disorder – for Aharon had made them disorderly, to the scandal of their enemies. ([Shemot 32:25](#))

Furthermore, God names Aharon as being responsible for the sin and for the results of the subsequent plague:

And God struck the people with a plague, for having made the calf which Aharon made. ([Shemot 32:35](#))

In Moshe's speech in *Sefer Devarim*, in his rebuke of the people – "For it is not out of your righteousness that the Lord your God gives you this good land, to possess it, for you are a stiff-necked people" ([Devarim 9:6](#)) – he recalls the people's sin concerning the golden calf. Here again, he shows no deference to his elder brother, and shares with the younger generation some information which had not been presented in the text in the record of God's anger following the sin:

And God was exceedingly angry with Aharon, seeking to destroy him, and I prayed also for Aharon at that time. ([Devarim 9:20](#))

Thus, Aharon's part in the sin is not in doubt. Aharon, like the other creators of the golden calf, is sentenced to die, but Moshe's prayer, which succeeded in halting the plague, also saves Aharon from God's anger.

Two other biblical events, with no direct connection to the sin of the golden calf, grant some credit to Aharon. They reflect the process of his internalization of the lessons of that episode, first within himself, and later on succeeding in bequeathing the message to his children.

Aharon's astonishing silence at the death of his sons, Nadav and Avihu, at the climax of an event in which Aharon's family is the focus, arises from his awareness of the severity of the sin of those who act on the basis of human drives and religious ecstasy. Such people thereby violate God's explicit command that places clear, unequivocal boundaries on the proper manner of Divine service. Aharon's silence may be interpreted as an assumption of responsibility for not having succeeded in educating his sons in light of the lessons he had learned. He had not prevented their mini-golden calf, which clouded the revelation of God's fire descending on the *Mishkan*, which should have signaled complete forgiveness for the sin of the golden calf. [\[2\]](#)

The real repair would find expression in the zealous act of Aharon's grandson – Pinchas, son of Elazar. In contrast to, "When Aharon saw it, he built an altar before it," the text describes the

respected lineage of a man who was not swept away with the sins of the people, and was not caught up in the despair that gripped the rest of the leadership, but rather arose and acted, bringing an end to the plague:

And when Pinchas, son of Elazar, son of Aharon the *Kohein*, saw it, he arose from the midst of the congregation, and took a spear in his hand. And he went after the man of Israel into the chamber, and he thrust both of them through – the man of Israel and the woman, through her belly. So the plague was halted from upon Benei Yisrael. ([Bamidbar 25:7-8](#))<sup>[3]</sup>

The sin of the golden calf is mentioned in two more historical reviews in later biblical literature, but neither of them mentions Aharon's role. The psalmist in *Tehillim* and Nechemia both recall the ingratitude of Am Yisrael as a way of praising the trait of mercy that characterizes God's treatment of the nation:

They made a calf in Chorev, and worshipped a molten image. They thereby exchanged their glory for the likeness of an ox that eats grass. They forgot God Who had saved them, Who had done great works in Egypt; wondrous works in the land of Cham, and terrible works at the Red Sea. And He said that He would destroy them, had not Moshe, His chosen one, stood before Him, in the breach, to turn away His anger, lest He destroy them." ([Tehillim 106:19-23](#))

They refused to obey, nor did they take heed of Your wonders which You did with them; they stiffened their necks and appointed a leader to return, in their rebellion; but You are a God of pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and great in love – and You did not abandon them. Even when they made themselves a molten calf, and said, "This is your God who brought you up out of Egypt," and committed great blasphemy. (*Nechemia* 9:17-18)

The omission of any mention of Aharon's role may be explained in light of the purpose of these historical reviews. Both the psalmist and Nechemia precede their description with a rebuke over the nation's lack of gratitude for God's kindness towards them in Egypt and in the wilderness. They mention the sin of the golden calf as a further example of the nation's moral betrayal of God. While Aharon's part in the sin is beyond question, he certainly cannot serve as an example of ingratitude and betrayal. His sin was a religious one, lying outside of the purview of the rebuke, and it is therefore disregarded.

### **The Sin of the Golden Calf and Aharon's Role in it in Post-Biblical Literature**

The post-biblical literature largely ignores the sin of the golden calf. The Aramaic translations omit this episode, and the prohibition on translating it is set down in the Mishna:

The first description of the sin of the golden calf is read and translated, while the second is read but not translated. ([Megilla 4:10](#))

Rabbi Ovadia of Bartenura explains:

The second account of the sin of the golden calf – from "Moshe said to Aharon..." until "When Moshe saw that the people..." and the verse "And God plagued the people" – all of these are read but not translated, out of concern for Aharon's honor.

Josephus, in his *Antiquities of the Jews*, does address the episode, but his account offers no hint of the construction of the golden calf, nor of any failure of leadership on Aharon's part:

When matters were brought to this state, Moses went up again to Mount Sinai, of which he had told them beforehand. He made his ascent in their sight; and while he stayed there so

long a time, [for he was absent from them forty days,] fear seized upon the Hebrews, lest Moses should have come to any harm... yet were they exceeding sorry upon the supposal that they were deprived of a governor and a protector, such a one indeed as they could never recover again; nor would this suspicion give them leave to expect any comfortable event about this man, nor could they prevent their trouble and melancholy upon this occasion. However, the camp dared not move on all this while, because Moses had bidden them afore to stay there.

But when the forty days, and as many nights, were over, Moses came down, having tasted nothing of food usually appointed for the nourishment of men. His appearance filled the army with gladness... (*The Antiquities of the Jews*, Book III, translated by William Whiston)<sup>[4]</sup>

Josephus's deliberate choice to ignore the fashioning of the golden calf, sits well with the apologetic approach that characterizes the rest of his work. Both in his *Against Apion* and in the *Antiquities*, his aim is to counter the anti-Semitic claims of the enemies of the Jews of his period, who made all sorts of false accusations, describing the Jews as having engaged in a wretched form of worship in their Temple.<sup>[5]</sup> The sin of the golden calf, representing an improper form of worship, could have been used as evidence against the Jews, seemingly demonstrating that they did not abandon their ancient customs – which even received official approval and assistance from the *kohein* appointed over the Divine service. The retelling of the events at the foot of Mount Sinai not only offers no criticism of the people and of Aharon, but goes so far as to depict them as meticulously obeying Moshe's word, even when they are crazy with worry over the fate of their admired leader.

Philo of Alexandria treats the sin of the golden calf at length, but with no mention of Aharon being party to the debacle:

When Moses had gone up into the neighboring mountain and had remained several days alone with God, the fickle-minded among the people, thinking that his absence was a favorable opportunity, as if they had no longer any ruler at all, rushed unrestrainedly to impiety, and, forgetting the holiness of the living God, became eager imitators of the Egyptian inventions. Then, having made a golden calf in imitation of that which appeared to be the most sacred animal in that district, they offered up unholy sacrifices, and instituted blasphemous dances, and sang hymns which differed in no respect from dirges, and, being filled with strong wine, gave themselves up to a twofold intoxication, the intoxication of wine and that of folly, reveling and devoting the night to feasting, and, having no foresight as to the future, they spent their time in pleasant sins, though justice had her eye upon them, who saw them while they would not see, and decided what punishments they deserved." (Philo, *On the Life of Moses*, translation by Yonge<sup>[6]</sup>, with slight amendments)

Unlike Josephus, Philo is not concerned for the image of the Jews in the eyes of the environment, and does not hesitate to dwell on the severity of their sin, even ascribing to them some despicable acts that are not mentioned in the text. Against this background, the omission of Aharon's role is even more surprising.

Suzanne R. Daniel-Nataf, who researched Philo's writings, proposes a general theory for the mystery of the disappearance of Aharon's role in the later writings:

That perfect, unblemished "philosopher" [Moshe] is depicted as a king in the sense that this concept was meant in the ancient world, and especially during the Hellenistic period. Moshe has no partners in his rule, nor any advisors... Most typical [of Philo's approach] is the change that takes place in Aharon. In addressing the revelation at the burning bush, Philo explains Aharon's appointment to accompany Moshe not as a position of partnership, but

rather as an underling... Even when he speaks of the first battle against Amalek, and even explains its symbolism, he makes no mention of the fact that Aharon and Chur stand upon the hill with Moshe, supporting his arms on each side. However, since he omits other episodes ... we find that Aharon's sins, too, are erased, as it were..." (Introduction to *The Life of Moses I*)

Thus, Aharon "benefits" from Philo's immense admiration for Moshe. In order to avoid depicting Aharon as possessing any degree of leadership over the nation, Philo prefers to skip over the description of his involvement in the golden calf.

### Aharon and the Sin of the Golden Calf in Rabbinical Literature

The *midrashim* of Chazal do not ignore the story of the golden calf. On the contrary, there are many teachings that expand upon the biblical account, developing the description of Aharon's leadership in this episode. The *midrash* in [Vayikra Rabba \(10:3\)](#) gathers all the single teachings about Aharon's handling of the event into a single account, and the bias towards defense and justification is not difficult to discern:

"Take Aharon..." ([Vayikra 8:2](#)) – "You love righteousness and hate wickedness" ([Tehillim 45:8](#)). Rabbi Berakhia, in the name of Rabbi Abba bar Kahana, interpreted this verse in reference to Aharon:

1. When Benei Yisrael committed that act [the golden calf], they first went to Chur. They said to him, "Arise, make us gods" ([Shemot 32:1](#)). Since he would not listen to them, they arose against him and killed him [...] Thereafter they went to Aharon, and said to him, "Arise, make us gods." When Aharon heard this he was afraid, as it is written, "When Aharon saw it, he built an altar before it" (32:5); he built it before [the idol] in light of the one who had been sacrificed. Aharon said, "What can I do? They have killed Chur, who was a prophet; if they now kill me, a *kohein*, they themselves will have fulfilled the verse, 'Shall both *kohein* and prophet be killed in God's Sanctuary?' ([Eikha 2:20](#)). They will then immediately be cast away."
2. Another explanation: "When Aharon saw" – what did he see? He said, "If they build it, each will contribute and their work will quickly be finished. If I build it myself, I will tarry in the work, and Moshe, our teacher, will descend from the mountain. Thus, the work, originally meant for pagan worship, will be done by me, and I will direct it for the sake of God." "And Aharon made a proclamation, saying, 'Tomorrow is a feast unto God'" ([Shemot 32:5](#)). The text does not say, "a feast unto the calf tomorrow," but rather "to God tomorrow."
3. Another explanation: "When Aharon saw it" – what did he see? He said, "If they build it, the shame will be attributed to them. Better that the shame be attributed to me, and not to Am Yisrael."

The aim of the *midrash* is to show that the words of the psalmist, describing the figure worthy of heading a dynasty of leaders – "You love righteousness and hate wickedness, therefore God – your God – has anointed you with the oil of gladness, above your fellows" ([Tehillim 45:8](#)) – refers to Aharon.

Aharon's special qualities, justifying his selection as *Kohein Gadol*, might have been highlighted on the basis of other verses in the Torah. For instance, the *midrash* might have cited his humility when called upon to join Moshe in leading the people in Egypt, or his silence at the sight of the death of his sons, or his restrained reaction to the rebellion of Korach. However, it is specifically

the verses describing the episode of the golden calf that are chosen to show Aharon's stature. Why is this so?

In fact, the question goes deeper than this. Aharon represents the leadership of priesthood. During the Second Temple period, the Temple and the position of *Kohein Gadol* were no longer at the height of their glory (as we may deduce from Nechemia's proclamation and from other sources). One might have explained an inclination in the *midrashim* towards defense of the *kohanim* in the Torah as part of a general effort to restore the honor and raise the status of the *kohanim* and the Temple. However, the teachings in *Vayikra Rabba* are attributed to the Sages of the Talmud, who lived in Eretz Yisrael some 200 years after the destruction, when the supremacy of the *kohanim* had been replaced by the supremacy of the Sages. What, then, might explain the strong trend towards defense of Aharon in these *midrashim*?

The basis for the answer should be sought in the circumstances of Jewish life in Eretz Yisrael during the period of the Mishna and the Talmud, which created a need to defend AmYisrael in the face of their sin, and to defend Aharon's motives.

Early Christian theology, from the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E. and especially at the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century (paralleling the beginning of the Talmudic period) invested its energies mainly in assaults on Judaism and the commandments. The *Didascalia*, a 3<sup>rd</sup>-century Christian work, warns Christian believers against observing the commandments of Judaism, which are nothing but chains placed on the Jewish people owing to its waywardness in the sin of the golden calf. The commandments, in the view of the Christian authors, do not apply to those who believe in Jesus and thereby annul and cancel their part in that ancient sin. The apologetic trend concerning Aharon and the sin of the golden calf is therefore part of the Judeo-Christian polemic.

The teachings of the *midrash* diminish the scope of the sin:

Rather, it was the converts who left Egypt together with them, who made the golden calf. It was they who said to Benei Yisrael, "These are your gods, O Israel." (*Pesikta de-RavKahana*, 9)

The *midrash* also describes the causes of the sin:

What is the meaning of "And Di-Zahav"? Rabbi Yannai taught, "So said Moshe before the Holy One, blessed be He: 'Master of the Universe, the silver and gold (*zahav*) which You poured upon Israel until they said, "Enough" (*da*) – that is what caused them to make the golden calf..." Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani and Rabbi Yonatan said: "From where do we know that the Holy One, blessed be He, acknowledged what Moshe said? As it is written, 'I multiplied silver and gold for them, but they used it for Ba'a'l' ([Hoshea 2](#))." ([Berakhot 32a](#))

Furthermore, the *midrashim* shift the direct responsibility for the sin from Benei Yisrael:

"And when the people saw that Moshe was late (*boshesh*)" – do not read it as "*boshesh*" but rather as "*ba'u shesh*" (they came at the sixth). When Moshe ascended on high, he told Am Yisrael: "After forty days, at the beginning of the sixth hour, I will return." After forty days, Satan came and mixed up the world. He said to them, "Moshe, your teacher – where is he?" They said to him, "He has ascended on high." Satan said to them, "The sixth hour has come." But they paid no attention to him. He said, "He is dead." But they paid no attention. He then showed them a vision of his deathbed. And this is the meaning of what they said to Aharon – "For this one, the man Moshe [we do not know what has become of him]." ([Shabbat 89a](#))

Most importantly, the *midrashim* emphasize Aharon's eternal atonement:

[Am Yisrael] said to God: "Master of the Universe, since there is no forgetfulness before Your throne, perhaps You will never clear us of the sin of the golden calf." He said to them, "Even these may be forgotten" ([Yishayahu 49](#)). They said, "Master of the Universe, if there is then forgetfulness before Your Throne, perhaps You will forget how we stood at Sinai." He said to them, "Yet I will not forget you" ([Yishayahu 49](#)). This is as Rabbi Elazar taught, as Rav Ushaya had taught: "What is the meaning of the words, 'Even these may be forgotten'? This refers to the sin of the golden calf; 'Yet I will not forget you' – this refers to the gathering at Sinai." ([Berakhot 32b](#))

The defense of Aharon is part of the generally apologetic approach to the sin of the golden calf. Aharon, who served as Moshe's replacement while he was atop the mountain and demonstrated leadership ability in a situation of emotional frenzy that led to the sin, merited to found the dynasty of priestly leadership whose role and destiny was to atone for the sin of the people, for generations to come.

[God] said to Aharon: "You love righteousness" – you sought to defend My children; "And hate wickedness" – hating to find them guilty. "Therefore God – your God – has anointed you with the oil of gladness, above your fellows." [...] He said to him, "By your life, out of the entire tribe of Levi, none was chosen as *Kohein Gadol* but you." ([Vayikra Rabba 10:3](#))

Translated by Kaeren Fish

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<sup>[1]</sup> For example: "'And Avraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock by themselves' – Rabbi Yehoshua of Sakhnin taught in the name of Rabbi Levi: God said to him, 'You gave them seven ewe lambs – by your life, the Ark of the Covenant will spend seven months in their possession.' This is the meaning of the verse, 'He delivered His strength into captivity and His glory into the enemy's hand' ([Tehillim 78:61](#)). Rabbi Yehoshua of Sakhnin taught in the name of Rabbi Levi: God said to him, 'You gave them seven ewe lambs – by your life, in the future they will kill seven righteous men of your descendants, and these are they: Sha'ul and his three sons, Eli, Chofni, and Pinchas.' (Some say Shimshon was one of these seven, instead of Eli.) Rabbi Yehoshua of Sakhnin taught in the name of Rabbi Levi: God said to him, 'You gave them seven ewe lambs – by your life, they are destined to destroy seven worlds for your children, and these are they: the Tent of Meeting, and Gilgal, and Shilo, and Nov, and Giv'on, and the two Temples.'" (*Pesikta De-Rav Kahana* 11, 9, p. 186).

Another example: "Our sages taught: The left hand should always push away while the right hand draws near. Not like Elisha, who thrust away Geichazi with both hands" ([Sanhedrin 107b](#)).

<sup>[2]</sup> See last week's *shiur*.

<sup>[3]</sup> On the linguistic and thematic links between the three episodes, see: Yonatan Grossman, "Kana'ut Moshe, Kana'ut Nadav Va-Avihu, Ve-Kana'ut Pinchas," VBM, *parashat Balak* 5764.

<sup>[4]</sup> Project Gutenberg website: <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/2848/pg2848.txt>. The translation is slightly amended here.

<sup>[5]</sup> Concerning the accusations and their refutation in Josephus's works, see: Josephus, *Against Apion*, second article, 7.

<sup>[6]</sup> <http://www.earlyjewishwritings.com/text/philos/book25.html>