

Rabbi Benjamin Blech

Personal Growth or Communal Responsibility?: A Question of Priorities

Some thirty years ago, I attended a yeshiva in which I learned Torah full-time, day and night. At one point, I informed the *rashei yeshiva* that I wanted to go to Yeshiva University in order to become a *rav*. Their response, in almost these exact words, was, "*Has ve-shalom!* You must sit and learn and become a *gadol ha-dor*." I told them that I wanted to become a rabbi so that I could teach and help people in ways that only a rabbi can, but they insisted that my obligation was to remain in yeshiva and become a *gadol*. I argued that by following their advice I wouldn't be accomplishing anything for anyone else, but they maintained that my religious responsibility was to become as learned as I could be. I was to become the greatest *talmid hakham* possible which could only happen if I sat and learned Torah day and night for the rest of my life.

I did not do what they wanted and, instead, entered the rabbinate. Since becoming a rabbi, I have spent time running to hospitals, teaching little children, teenagers, and adults. And, in truth, all the time I've spent teaching, I could have spent learning; all the time I've spent on communal responsibilities, I could have become more of a *talmid hakham*.

I made a decision contrary to what I was taught in that particular yeshiva. Rather, I based my choice on what I learned from my own father, ה"ע, who was a *rav* his entire life, as was his father before him, and his grandfather. I am proud to say, in fact, that I am a tenth generation rabbi and, regardless of the times, being a *rav* has always meant putting *zarkhei*

zibbur ahead of personal growth. What I hope to illustrate during this lecture is why the decision to adopt such a priority is a correct one, and how it should guide a person in countless ways. These include simple moments of choice where an individual can say, "This Sunday I will learn another blatt Gemara" or say, "This Sunday I will go to Washington to rally on behalf of Soviet Jewry." And the principle should guide more complex decisions as well, including personal development, career choices, and a host of other issues.

Let us look at the sources. I know I can impress you more if I quote a Ḥazon Ish or a Rashba or other Rishonim and Aharonim. Please forgive me if I am simplistic enough to use a source as *pasbut* as the Ḥumash itself. I will analyze a story in the Ḥumash which relates to a distinction between two major Yamim Tovim, and will explain an halakhic anomaly that exists regarding them. This story also clarifies a major halakhah and sheds light on what I think is the proper hashkafah regarding the issue of the tension between individual growth and communal responsibility.

Let us start with two Yamim Tovim which provide us with a fascinating insight into two different levels of responsibility. Once a year, when we reflect on our sins, we have Rosh Hashanah, the *'aseret yemei teshuvah* and Yom Kippur to ask forgiveness. But there is a problem. According to the *Shulḥan Arukh*,¹ on Rosh Hashanah we are to go to shul, daven, hear the shofar, and then we are to return home, *sameah ve-tov lev*, happy, and content at heart. We are then to eat and drink with the assurance that having done what Rosh Hashanah requires of us, we have been forgiven for all our sins. That's wonderful! All of our obligations have been completed on that day! But, lo and behold, a few days later we are back in shul on Yom Kippur, begging forgiveness, filled with fear, and reciting the *viduy* which, strangely enough, is not part of the Rosh Hashanah liturgy. We must surely ask, why is all this necessary? Didn't the *Shulḥan Arukh* just say that our sins were forgiven on Rosh Hashanah, that we should go home confident that we have been forgiven? Why should we still be worried? On Yom Kippur we don't eat, we don't drink, we don't rejoice because we're nervous about our judgment. What are we nervous about if everything was settled on Rosh Hashanah? Perhaps there is a second level of Teshuvah which asks forgiveness for a different body of sins.

To understand the difference between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we must recognize that there is an historic dimension to these Holy Days, just as there is to the other Yamim Tovim. Pesach is *zman berutenu* and Shavuot is *zman matan toratenu*. Similarly, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, which seemingly both deal with the identical concept of Teshuvah, actually deal with two different types of sins, because each is based on a different incident in history.

Rosh Hashanah commemorates creation, not of the world, but of Adam, which took place on the sixth day of the creation of the world. The sin associated with Rosh Hashanah, therefore, is the sin of the *'ez ha-da'at* which occurred on the same day man was created. But Yom Kippur commemorates another moment in history, the moment when God forgave the Jews for the *ma'aseh ha-'egel*. There is a qualitative difference between these two sins, which explains the different approaches to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

The sin in the Garden of Eden was very clear. God had said, ומעץ הדעת טוב ורע לא תאכל ממנו כי ביום אכלך ממנו מות תמות (Gen. 2:17). You shall not eat from this tree. Adam ate and, by so doing, both he and Eve violated God's law. That sin I understand very well. But what was the sin of the *ma'ase ha-'egel*? This is not so simple. Let us look at the story. Moshe Rabbenu descended from Mount Sinai and saw that the Jewish people were worshipping the golden calf. He threw down the *lulot* and burnt the golden calf in a fire. The Torah tells us, ויטחן עד אשר דק ויזר על בני ישראל פני המים וישק את בני ישראל (Ex. 32:20). This test, similar to that administered to the *sotah*, punished some of the people who sinned and they died. Then Moshe called out, "Who is for Hashem, come with me." When the children of Levi responded, he told them, שימו איש חרבו על והרגו איש את אחיו ואיש את רעהו ואיש את קרבו (Ibid., 32:27). I know it sounds harsh, but this is what they were commanded to do. If they had allowed the idolatry to continue, there never would have been those who worshipped God. They then fulfilled Moshe's will. ויעשו בני לוי כדבר משה ויפל מן העם ביום ההוא כשלשת אלפי איש (Ibid., 32:28). Three thousand people worshipped the golden calf and, in an act of retribution, the sinners were all slain by Bnei Levi. The *Humash* continues, ויהי ממחרת ויאמר משה אל העם אתם חטאתם חטאה גדולה (Ex. 32:30). But whom its Moshe Rabbenu addressing? Obviously, the ones who were not killed, who were spared precisely because they did *not* sin. And yet Moshe turned to them and said, אתם חטאתם חטאה גדולה!

I have two questions to raise on this matter. One is conceptual; the other, grammatical. Firstly, how can Moshe tell them that they "sinned a great sin," when they were the very people not destroyed by Bnei Levi because they did nothing wrong? Secondly, the word for sin is usually *het*; a big sin is *het gadol*. Why then does Moshe say, "*hata'ab gedolah*?" Furthermore, Moshe continued and said, ועתה אעלה אל ה' (Ibid.), I will go up to Hashem and I will pray. You will recall that the breaking of the *lulot* took place on the 17th of Tammuz, and that two sets of 40 days passed from the time Moshe went up to Har Sinai the next day until Hashem forgave the Jewish people. That puts us at Yom Kippur. And when Moshe told Bnei Yisrael he would go up to the mountain to pray, he said to them, אולי אכפרה בעד חטאתכם (Ibid.), perhaps I can gain

kapparab for your sins. Note the word "*kapparab*," similar to the terminology of Yom Kippur. And, once on the mountain, Moshe said to Hashem, *אנא חטא העם הזה חטאה גדולה* (Ibid., 32:31). Once again, the terminology is similar. And this "*ana*" calls to mind the Yom Kippur liturgy when the Kohen Gadol also said, *אנא חטא העם הזה חטאה גדולה*.

The same question we posed regarding the relationship between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur we now repeat regarding the story of the *ma'aseh ha-egel*. We asked why Yom Kippur is necessary if, as the *Shulhan Arukh* tells us, our sins have already been forgiven on Rosh Hashanah. Why are we frightened and repeatedly recite *'al het* when our sins have already been forgiven? What sins are we afraid of? And, regarding the story of *ma'aseh ha-egel*, we ask the same question: What sin is Moshe accusing the survivors of committing for which they were later to be forgiven on Yom Kippur? After all, those who sinned were already killed by Bnei Levi; the ones whose fate hung in the balance seemingly did absolutely nothing.

The Torah addresses this question in a very fascinating way. To understand it, we must appreciate a principle I learned from Rav Soloveitchik many years ago. The Rav said, to phrase it as succinctly as possible, that there is a link between the halakhic and aggadic sections in the H̄umash. Specifically, whenever there is a halakhah which mentions items which seem to be symbolic of something, expressing an idea which is not clearly stated in standard halakhic terminology, the idea has already been clarified elsewhere in the H̄umash through an aggadic story. Let us apply that principle to a halakhah in the H̄umash reminiscent of the *ma'aseh ha-egel*, i.e., the halakhah of the *'eglah 'arufah*. The Torah tells us, *כי ימצא חלל באדמה אשר ה' אלקיך נתן לך לרשתה נפל בשדה לא נודע מי הכהו* (Deut. 21:1). If one finds a corpse in the field and no one knows who killed that person, the first thing the elders and judges must do is to go out with a tape and measure the distance from the corpse to the closest city. And then, the Torah continues, *ולקחו זקני העיר ההוא עגלת בקר אשר לא עבד בה אשר לא משכה בעל. והורדו זקני העיר ההוא את העגלה אל נחל* (Ibid., 21:3-4). The elders must take an *'eglat bakar* which "never did anything" (I'm purposely translating it this way), and bring it to a stream which never produced anything, and there slaughter the animal. There are two ways to slaughter an animal. One way is *shehitah*—from the front of the neck to the back; the other, more unusual manner, is *'arifah*—from the back to front. It is this second way of slaughtering which is required here.

The centrality of *'egel* connects this halakhah and the story of the *ma'aseh ha-egel*. There is also another connection. Regarding the *'eglah 'arufah*, the Torah tells us, *ונגשו הכהנים בני לוי* (Ibid., 21:5), the Kohanim, Bnei Levi, shall draw near. For this act Kohanim are required, *כי הם בחר*,

‘ה (Ibid.), because they are the ones whom God chose. Where did God choose the Kohanim instead of the *bekhorim*? At the *ma’aseh ha-’egel*.

The Torah continues, וכל זקני העיר ההוא . . . ירחצו את ידיהם על העגלה, (Ibid., 21:6). The elders must wash their hands over the *’eglah*, and then must testify and say; ידינו לא שפכה את הדם הזה (Ibid., 21:7). What a fantastic statement! The elders, the leaders of the Sanhedrin must say, “We didn’t kill him.” Additionally odd in this narrative is the fact that the word “שפכה” is spelled with a “ה” instead of the expected “ו.” What is the “ה” doing there? You may remember that a few moments ago I mentioned another unnecessary “ה.” In the story of the *ma’aseh ha-’egel* the Torah uses the phrase, חטאה גדולה. What is the significance of these unusual extra “ה”s?

In case anyone has still not made the connection, the next *pasuk* continues by stating that these leaders must ask for forgiveness by saying, כפר לעמך ישראל אשר פדיית ה’ (Ibid., 21:8). This word “*kapper*” has all the associations of “*ulay ’akhaprah*” of the *ma’aseh ha-’egel* and the *kapparah* of Yom Kippur. “Please forgive,” they say. Forgive what? Does anyone actually imagine, in their wildest dreams, that any member of the Sanhedrin was actually responsible for this death? What are they to be blamed for? Surely they are not responsible for every death in the field. The Gemara asks this question and it is quoted by Rashi in his commentary to this *pasuk*.²

Implicit in the response to this question lies the essence of my talk. Of course we don’t think that a member of the Sanhedrin actually stretched out his hand and killed someone. But we learn a new concept from here. Perhaps someone came to the city and needed help. Perhaps, if this person had found lodging, food or some other kind of communal assistance he would not have gone out into the field. But no one showed any concern for his needs. While it is clearly not possible that a member of the Sanhedrin killed this man through an act of *commission*, it is very conceivable that they were responsible for his death through an act of *omission*, by not responding adequately to his request for help. The people responded, as the saying goes, *by turning their backs on him*. They showed him the backs of their necks and didn’t answer. How was the *’eglah* which served as their atonement killed? It was killed from the back of its neck!

There are two kinds of sins. There is the sin of active commission, which is a Rosh Hashanah type of sin. It is comparable to the *’ez ha-da’at* when God said don’t do something and we did it. We don’t have to worry as much about this type of sin, because when we review our sins on Rosh Hashanah we realize that there aren’t that many infractions that we committed. Did you ever kill anyone? No. Are you responsible for

idolatry? *Has ve-shalom!* Are you even responsible for most of the sins mentioned in the *'al het*? No. And so we do not read this litany on Rosh Hashanah. But we do read it on Yom Kippur. Why?

The answer lies in the second level of sin. Just as there is one level which is concerned with what you did do, so is there a second level which is concerned with what you did *not* do. Let us look again at those remarkable "ה's." What does the "ה" signify in Hebrew? For example, if the *pasuk* regarding the *tefillin shel yad* (Ex. 13:16) were to say "על ירך," without the "ה," it would mean that Tefillin should be placed on your stronger hand, the hand of action, of doing. But it is written "ידכה," with a "ה" at the end which the commentaries interpret as the feminine hand, the passive hand, so to speak.³ I am not a male chauvinist, but grammatically, the masculine form is active and doing, while the feminine form is passive. There are two kinds of sin—a *het* and a *hata'ah*. When the elders recite as part of the ritual of *'eglah 'arufah*, ידינו לא שפכה את הדם הזה, no one thinks they actually shed blood. Of course not. But שפכה is spelled with a "ה" in the passive form. The leaders of the community must face up to a higher level of responsibility—not that of commission, but that of omission.

Now everything fits together beautifully. Let's look again at the halakhah of *'eglah 'arufah*. They must take a calf which "never did anything" (אשר לא עבד בה) bring it to a stream which "never did anything" (אשר לא יעבד בו) and break the *back* of its neck, all of which indicates a level of culpability *not* of *doing*, but of *not doing*.

And why do they use an *'egel*? Because of the resonance it had due to the story of the golden calf. When Moshe Rabbenu saw that the Jews had sinned, he had Bnei Levi kill the 3,000 violators. Out of a camp of 600,000 men from the ages of twenty to sixty and close to two million people all together, only 3,000 people sinned. What did the others do? They were very happily sitting and learning. They were from Jews who were busy developing themselves—"shteiging," as they say in Yiddish. What was their crime? Their crime was that they did nothing—אנא חטא העם הזה—חטאה גדולה. This is the real sin for which Moshe prayed until they were forgiven on Yom Kippur. We say, "silence is golden," but my new proverbial expression is, "silence is the golden calf." Silence is not golden. Sitting back, doing nothing, not getting involved—that is not golden. The real sin of the *ma'aseh ha-'egel* is that the vast majority of Klal Yisrael sat back and did nothing in the face of those who were turning astray. They sinned because they were able to say, "It's not my problem." And so Moshe Rabbenu turned to them—to the good ones, the frum ones, the ones who *didn't* worship the *'egel*—and he said, אתם חטאתם חטאה גדולה. You committed a great sin and so I will go up to the mountain one more time, אולי אכפרה בער חטאתכם. We see from here that the words

akhaprah, *kapparah* and *kippur*, wherever they appear throughout the Humash, deal not with sins of commission, but with sins of omission.

Now we can understand the tefillah of *'al het* which we recite on Yom Kippur, and in which we ask forgiveness for all the terrible sins we did not commit. Why are we asking forgiveness? I may never have killed anyone. Yet, if I was alive during the Holocaust but never got involved because I was living in America and didn't consider it my problem, then I share in the crime of murder, God forbid. How can you be guilty of idolatry? If there are people who cannot worship Hashem and cannot perform *mizvot*, such as the Jews of the Soviet Union, and you say, "This is not my concern," then it is your sin, a sin not of *het* but of *hata'ab*. And, to answer the original question, how could Moshe Rabbenu scold these people and say, "I'll pray for you" when they did nothing? That's exactly the point! The question is the answer. They sinned precisely because they did nothing. It is their silence, indeed, which condemns them.

Rosh Hashanah allows us to feel fairly confident because, in terms of sins of commission, we don't have that much to worry about. Our real fear is the higher level on which we are judged, the level on which the members of the Sanhedrin had to come and say: *ידינו לא שפכה* with a "ה," the level which is the focus of the sin of the *ma'aseh ha-'egel* and of Yom Kippur.

How beautiful is the relationship between the halakhic portion of Devarim 21 and the aggadic portion of Shemot 32! It is not simply halakhah defining a story, or a story becoming halakhah, but it also reflects on the essence of the Yom Tov of Yom Kippur which is the end of the teshuvah process. The *'aseret yemei teshuvah* lead us from the simple level of teshuvah to the higher degree of *kapparah* demonstrating our awareness that we have a responsibility to other people, to the totality of Klal Yisrael. If not, we still remain guilty of the *het ha-'egel*.

At the end of Parshat Ki Tisah, Rashi cites the Gemara which states that from the day of the *ma'aseh ha-'egel* and on there will never be a time that punishment will befall the Jewish people without it partly being due to that terrible sin.⁴ The Gemara is not saying that every generation will be punished for the sin committed thousands of years ago by the generation of the *ma'aseh ha-'egel*. That smacks of a concept alien to us, one that the Christians call "Original Sin." Rather, the Gemara is saying that in every generation, whenever Bnei Yisrael are deserving of punishment, there will be punishment also for the re-enactment at that particular time of the same crime as the *ma'aseh ha-'egel*. If part of Klal Yisrael is guilty of something, then the rest must answer to the crime of doing nothing, of being too concerned with their own personal development, just as the remaining two million Jews were at the time of the golden calf. I can just picture them sitting and "shukelling" over their

Gemarat, if there would have been Gemarat in those days. The story of the *'egel ha-zahav* and the halakhah of *'eglah 'arufah* make clear the distinct level of responsibility with regard to acts of omission, as opposed only to acts of commission.

Let us take this a step further. The Gemara also explains that when confronted by an unsolved death in the fields, the elders must be prepared to say, "There never came to us a person begging for food or asking for assistance." They are referring to physical needs, to the simplest of needs. Our society today cannot make such a claim. On every other block there are people lying in the street, homeless people, bag ladies. What a terrible indictment of our society. If, God forbid, this was a Jewish society, what would that say about us? But this addresses only the matter of physical needs.

The other matter is that of silence in the face of spiritual sins. The story of the golden calf represents this kind of a silence. The halakhah (of *'eglah arufah*) and the story (of the *'egel ha-zahav*) complement each other in terms of the basic human needs of each individual: the physical and the spiritual. In each case, one could ask: "Who cares? I am good. I, personally, am a ben-Torah. I am in a one-to-one relationship with Hashem." But this is not a one-on-one basketball play-off. Rather, this is an illustration of *kol Yisrael 'arevim zeh ba-zeh*. No Jew is complete if he does not involve himself with others.

How does this relate to Torah u-Madda? We began with my wanting to attend Yeshiva University so that I could become a practicing rabbi. Well, I did come to this institution where I studied more than just Torah, and therefore am able to speak to people—"*da mah she-tashiv*." I can relate to individuals. You may ask, as others have, "Who cares? Why do you need to talk to them? They are what they are. Better, 'shteig away' and become a gadol." My answer is, that if that were the case, then I would be comparable, God forbid, to those at the time of *ma'aseh ha-'egel* who just sat back and watched others sin. And then you would have to say about me as well: *אנא חטא העם הזה חטאה גדולה*.

Torah u-Madda demands two things of you: to learn Torah and then to be what you can be as a practicing Jew. Yes, *lilmod u-lelamed*, but also *lishmor ve-la'asot*. This is the *mahloket* in the Gemara—which is greater, *limud* or *ma'aseh*?²⁵ And the Gemara concludes that *limud* is greater only because it brings to *ma'aseh*. As beautiful as it may be, the simple intellectual experience—sitting in an ivory tower without any interaction with the rest of the world—is a stale and stagnant experience.

I must add that, at your stage of life, you have an obligation to learn a great deal in order to have the ability to respond and teach correctly. You

must first fill yourself with sufficient knowledge. But that act itself cannot be your end goal. I think you are making a mistake if you only want to develop yourself, forever and ever.

The Torah is compared to water. Water that is found at the top of a mountain, such as at the summit of Har Sinai, has the tendency to flow down the mountainside and from there to seep into the earth. All the earth benefits from it and is able to flower. We too receive the Torah on Shavuot, the *ḥag ha-bikkurim* or holiday of the first flowers. But this is not the end. We do not celebrate Simḥat Torah which represents our complete rejoicing with God's law until Sukkot. It is this holiday, the *ḥag ha-'asif*, which is the time of the final harvest. It is on this Yom Tov when the Haftorah reflects on the Messianic era. Symbolically, it bespeaks that time when we have shared our values, ideals and commitment, our very special relationship to the Almighty, with the world at large. The *ḥag ha-'asif* represents the ultimate ideal, when all of mankind matures and "ripens" to the stage of highest fulfillment. We are bidden to play our role in this historic mission of the *mamlekheth kohanim*, acknowledging that our service of the Divine requires responsibility to others. Indeed, our faith places greater priority on helping society than on personal solitude or silence.

NOTES

1. Orat Hayyim 597:1. See the *Tur, ad. loc.*, for a striking quote from the Talmud Yerushalmi.
 2. See Sotah 45b; Rashi, Deut. 21:7, s.v. *yadenu*.
 3. *Shulḥan 'Arukh, Orat Hayyim 27:1; Magen 'Avraham, ad. loc.*
 4. See Rashi, Ex. 32:34, s.v. *u-veyom*; Sanhedrin 102a.
 5. Kiddushin 40b.
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