

MESHECH CHOCHMAH

Parshas Ki Sisa

Effects of the Chet Ha'egel on the Land of Israel

הִנְנִי גֹרֵשׁ מִפְּנֵיךָ אֶת הָאֵמֹרִי וְהַכְּנַעֲנִי וְהַחִתִּי וְהַפְּרִזִּי וְהַחִוִּי וְהַיְבוּסִי.
הַשְּׁמֹר לְךָ פֶּן תִּכְרַת בְּרִית לְיוֹשְׁבֵי הָאָרֶץ...
כִּי אַתָּה מִזְבְּחֵתָם תִּתְעֶזֶב וְאֶת מִצְבְּוֹתָם תִּשְׁבֹּר וְאֶת אֲשֵׁרֵי תִּכְרֹתוֹן.

1. Behold, I drive out from before you the Emori, the Canaani, the Perizi, the Chivi and the Yevusi.
2. Guard yourself lest you seal a covenant with the inhabitant of the land...
3. For you shall break apart their altars, smash their pillars and cut down his Asheirah (worshipped) trees. (34:11-13)

BEFORE AND AFTER

Many of the mitzvos which appear in the end of our parsha were already given to the Bnei Yisrael earlier on in Parshas Mishpatim. Their reiteration at this stage is a consequence of the *Chet Ha'egel* which had happened in between, requiring them to be restated. In several cases, the way in which they are presented reflects the difference between the two times. Thus, for example, when (re)commanding the mitzvah of going up to the Beis Hamikdash three times a year, our parsha adds some words of assurance:

וְלֹא יִחְמוֹד אִישׁ אֶת אֶרְצְךָ בְּעֹלְתְךָ לְרִאֲוֹת אֶת פְּנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ שְׁלֹשׁ פְּעָמִים בַּשָּׁנָה

*No man will covet your land when you go up to appear before Hashem, your God, three times a year.*¹

The Meshech Chochmah explains that this assurance did not feature on the original command, as such assurance was not necessary. The Gemara states² that had the first set of luchos not been broken as a result of the *Chet Ha'egel*, no nation would have had any control over the Jewish people. As such, in the time when Parshas Mishpatim was stated there was no worry that leaving the land unoccupied could lead to its possession

1 34:24

2 Eiruv 54a.

by hostile elements. In our parsha, however, such a worry indeed exists and hence it was necessary for the Torah to state that nevertheless, no harm would come by the entire people going up to Yerushalayim.

“THEIRS” OR “HIS”?

The command in our pasuk to remove all traces of avodah zarah from the land of Israel likewise clearly follows on from the episode of the *Chet Ha’egel*. Having fallen in the area of avodah zarah, the people are exhorted to uproot it from the land in which they are destined to live. Here too, as the Meshech Chochmah points out, the scope of eradication of idolatrous objects was itself impacted by the *Chet Ha’egel*.

If we observe the third pasuk carefully, we will note that it contains a grammatical shift, for the owners of the first two objects mentioned are referred to in the plural – “*their* altars... *their* pillars,” while the third object refers to “*his* *Asheirah* trees.” What are we to make of this shift?

The basis of the answer can be found in the two preceding pesukim, for the first pasuk lists a group of nations – the Emori, Canaani etc. – while the second pasuk refers to “*יֹשֵׁב הָאָרֶץ* – the one who dwells in the land,” using the singular form. Looked at in this way, we can see that the objects mentioned in the third pasuk are divided between those mentioned in the first two pesukim, as follows:

- ▶ “You shall break their altars and smash their pillars” – referring to the group nations listed in the first pasuk.
- ▶ You shall cut down his *Asheirah* tree – referring to “the one who dwells in the land” mentioned in the second pasuk.

The question now is, what is behind this dual assignment?

REVERBERATIONS

Actually, the commands in our pesukim are the subject of a discussion in the Gemara.³ The background to this discussion are two halachos pertaining to conferring avodah status on an object:

- ▶ One cannot render forbidden an object belonging to someone else without their consent.
- ▶ Any object that is attached to the ground has the status of land.

Bearing these two principles in mind, the Gemara proceeds to ask why any *Asheirah* trees need to be cut down, when we are mindful of a third idea:

- ▶ The land of Israel belongs to the People of Israel from the time of Avraham Avinu.⁴

As such, whereas altars and pillars, which are detached from the ground, belong to the

3 Avodah Zarah 53b.

4 Rashi (Avodah Zarah ibid.) quotes as the source for this idea Hashem’s words to Avraham Avinu (Bereishis 13:17), “*כִּי לִךָ אֶתְנֶנָּה*” – for I will give it to you.”

gentile nations and therefore can attain avodah zarah status, trees, which are attached to the ground, belong to Bnei Yisrael and should not be susceptible to receiving avodah zarah status!

To this question the Gemara answers: Having worshipped the Golden Calf, the people thereby demonstrated that they were amenable to avodah zarah, which then allowed their trees in Eretz Yisrael to attain *Asheirah* status.⁵

THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE

In light of the above discussion, let us return to our pesukim. The Meshech Chochmah notes that the idea of the people's amenability to avodah zarah allowing trees that were worshipped to become *Asheirahs* applies only as long as that amenability itself existed. However, once the people recovered from the *Chet Ha'egel*, their original principled opposition to avodah zarah likewise returned, and once again, from that point onward, no tree that was worshipped could become an *Asheirah*. In contrast to this, the detached objects, such as altars and pillars, could continue to attain avodah zarah status. Let us see how this distinction is borne out by a careful reading of our pesukim.

The Torah first commands to destroy "*their altars and pillars,*" referring to the Nations listed in the first pasuk. Since these objects are detached from the ground, those nations can confer avodah zarah status upon them at any time. Hence, as long as those nations are there, this command is in place.

The second command is to destroy "*his Asheirah trees,*" referring to "יֹשֵׁב הָאָרֶץ – the one who dwells in the land" mentioned in the second pasuk. These words are phrased in the present tense, in order to indicate that it is only *Asheirah* trees that are presently in existence that need to be cut down. Once the people recover from the *Chet Ha'egel*, no trees worshipped in the future in their land will attain *Asheirah* status.

Here, as he so often does in his peirush, the Meshech Chochmah meets us once we have attained a deeper of understanding of the pasuk through the Gemara, and beckons us to return to the pasuk and uncover a deeper level still.

⁵ [Indeed, as Malbim and others point out, the earlier command to eradicate objects of avodah zarah from the land (Shemos 23:24) makes no mention of *Asheirah* trees. At that time, prior to the *chet ha'egel*, trees in Eretz Yisrael could not attain *Asheirah* status and hence did not need to be cut down.]