

—וי—Parashas Parah—וי—  
**Ki Sisa**

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Perceptions • Adar 18, 5786 • March 7 2026 • Issue #2138

*T*his week's *parsha* is very complex. It starts off talking about *Machatzis HaShekel*, the obligatory half *shekel* given yearly for public sacrifices. Then it discusses the eleven spices used in the *Ketores*, the Incense Offering for the smaller golden altar inside the *Kodesh* of the *Mishkan*. This is followed by a review of *Hilchos Shabbos* before dropping the golden calf bomb and drastically changing the mood of the entire *parsha*.

The incident of the calf consumes much of the *parsha*, leading into God's threat of national destruction and Moshe's plea for national mercy. In the course of Moshe's and God's interaction, we learn about the Thirteen Traits of Mercy, and levels of Divine revelation. Finally, Moshe is commanded to return back up the mountain with a new set of tablets to be inscribed by God.

It's one *parsha*, but two worlds. Until the calf, the Jewish People had been immortal. They lived in the Messianic Era, even if the rest of the world was not yet up to speed, including the Erev Rav. As a result of the sin of the calf, they fell off a spiritual cliff and landed in the world we call "home." It wasn't like the light of day gradually giving way to the darkness of night. It

was “day” one moment and dark “night” the next. Another great opportunity to end history gracefully had been squandered and we’re still paying the price.

Ahhhhh, but then there is this *alilus* thing. We’d like to believe that nothing “bad” was ever destined to happen, just that man, empowered with free will but burdened with a *yetzer hara* sometimes gets it right, and sometimes gets it wrong, *really* wrong. And, as painful as it is to watch one’s child make mistakes, God, to preserve free will and reward and punishment, lets man sin right under His nose, so to speak.

Though billions of people have never really questioned that, if they would they would realize that it can’t be true. A human parent is separate from their child and this gives the child great independence to what it wants. But God is not separate from His creations, all of which are a part of Him. When we sin, we don’t do it in *front* of Him, we do it *within* Him.

People ask if God can make a rock that He can’t pick up. The answer of course is no, but not because of a limitation of God as the questioners want to imply. It’s because of the limitation of the physical world, making the question quite silly and a waste of time.

The real question they should seriously be asking is, can anyone ever will against God? Sure, we can make decisions that go against the Torah, but can we ever make a decision that contradicts what God wants to happen in any given moment. Certainly not. But aren’t they the same thing?

We would have thought so. But the concept of *alilus* and others like it say otherwise, revealing that God’s agenda for Creation and history is not always what we might think it should be. Even there, the greatest evil has to be for the good of the bigger picture, though how can it be so baffling to man that

even the great Moshe Rabbeinu asked for greater insight into how. According to the Gemora, he was denied.

It's rarely clear why the good guys get to be the good guys in history, and the bad guys, the bad guys. They don't get to choose their natures any more than the good guys do, and by the time they're old enough to improve their family situation they have already been scarred for life.

The only thing we know for certain in life, or at least have faith that it is so, is that God is always good, only does good, and only wants to give good. Beyond that, we have to be grateful for whatever good we have and whatever evil we get to avoid. If you're not as good as you should be and realize it, then it means you have a chance to improve yourself with God's help. If a person is too far gone to even consider getting on track, then...we'll have to see.

That's why it's so fitting that the *Maftir* for this week is about the *parah adumah*, the red heifer. It was the way we became purified from being spiritually defiled by the dead. But it is also has a built-in contradiction that puts it in the category of a *chok*, a *mitzvah* we can't understand. We just follow the instructions and trust that it works, the same approach we're supposed to have all of our life. The answers will come later.

Have a great Shabbos,

Pinchas Winston