

Thoughts on (תש"ע) פרשת כי תשא:

- With most of our attention is (correctly) focused on the questions relating to how the עגל could have ever been made and what it really symbolized, there are several other “smaller” questions with far reaching ramifications that are often not addressed. רש"י explains that in fact משה had told בני ישראל that he would be gone for exactly forty days, accordingly רש"י is “forced” to explain how they could make an error if it was all just a matter of waiting the right amount of time. At the same time, there is nothing that forces us to understand the text this way, as nowhere do we find משה actually telling them in advance that he will be gone for a forty day period.

It is quite reasonable to suggest (as some of the מפרשים do) that he never told them how long he would be gone for, and it is even possible that he himself did not know how long he would be gone for. Accordingly, as the days and weeks dragged on, their patience wore thin and eventually אהרן simply could no longer say “no,” with his best efforts only pushing them off for one more day. What is often not realized is that even according to רש"י such an idea must be employed, as if they had always assumed that משה would be gone for a full forty days, why would another day or two make such a difference.

Perforce we need to assume that throughout this time they were more than impatient, with אהרן vaguely keeping them under control only because he could keep pointing to the day when משה was set to return. With this idea the approach of רש"י seems even stronger, as we now see that אהרן was able to maintain some level of control, but on day forty when they erred, even אהרן if he did not, they were far too impatient. At this point it would seem that any attempt to explain that they were a day off would only be seen as stalling or a feeble excuse.

However, it would seem that the ramifications of this question are far larger than understanding the impatience or anxiety of בני ישראל. If initial plan was for משה to be on סיני for forty days, this would then mean that whatever activities/teaching/law giving were supposed to take place, in fact did take place. However, if there never was a (stated) plan of forty days, and the only reason that he came down at that point was to deal with the העגל, that would then indicate that far more was planned. This idea is expressed by the ספורנו who writes on the words סרו מהר saying קודם שאגמור לתת לך מה שיעדתי לתת, והם התורה והמצוות אשר כתבתי, indicating that far more was planned but had to be postponed for a later date, or perhaps something new might be done.

While this idea ultimately leads us into an area that can never fully be known, since we are talking about what could have or should have been, still it does seem that חז"ל did give us some direction in understanding possible changes that were or were not made. The fact that the story of the עגל is sandwiched in between פ' ויקהל and פ' תרומה ותצוה, is explained by many to show that even after this terrible חטא there is still a place for a משכן, and even more so, we are entitled to have it (and may even need it more than ever!). At the same time we also are told by חז"ל that the first לוחות symbolize תורה, while the second set, physically carved out by משה, symbolize פה שבכתב. It is

possible (and will remain speculative by definition) that this change was made to deal with the new reality of the העגל, that a more intense and personal involvement was needed. As the מהרש"א writes in גיטין describing the איסור to write down תורה שבעל פה, if we would write it all down it would be placed in the bookshelf and not be learned and studied (like the student with the notebook full of information that never gets learned). So instead we are instructed not to write it down, forcing us to engage it personally and regularly. It may be that this was the primary weakness that allowed the עגל to be made; we needed to be participants and not just observers. It would seem safe to say that this is not just a good solution for the עגל, but for many of the other faults and weaknesses seen in כלל ישראל, both past and present.

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