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Is Hashem Jealous?

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1.

WHAT IS MOSHE'S QUESTION?

On the verse,¹ “Moshe pleaded before Hashem his L-rd and said: Why (למה), Hashem, should Your anger flare up against Your people...,” Rashi explains the phrase, “Why, Hashem...” {Moshe argued by way of analogy}: “Aren’t the wise envious only of the wise; and the valiant, of the valiant?”²

Simply understood, by offering this explanation, Rashi forestalls a question, as commentaries explain:³ Since the Jews had committed a severe sin — idolatry (the sin of the Golden Calf) — it makes sense that Hashem should be angry. What then prompts Moshe to ask, “Why, Hashem, should Your anger flare up against Your people?”⁴

Because of this conundrum other Torah commentators⁵ explain that the word “למה” here means (not “why,” but rather,) “do not.” Meaning, Moshe **pleaded** with Hashem, “**Do not** show anger against Your people.” However, Rashi, who explains Scripture according to *pshat*,⁶ renders the word “למה” according to its simple meaning: **why**. Therefore, Rashi explains that Moshe objected, “Why, Hashem, should Your anger flare up?” because, “the wise [are] envious only of the wise; and the valiant, of the valiant.”

This needs to be clarified, however. In *parshas Yisro*,⁷ Rashi had explained the reason that Hashem said, “I am Hashem **your** L-rd,” using the second-person *singular*, as follows:

¹ *Shemos* 32:11.

² {After receiving the Ten Commandments, the Jewish people created a Golden Calf. In anger, Hashem told Moshe that He would annihilate the Jewish people and establish a nation from Moshe.}

³ *Mizrachi*; *Gur Aryeh*; *Be'er Mayim Chaim* on this verse; et al.

⁴ {Rashi's answer is that Moshe was asking Hashem how He could be jealous of an idol which is worthless.}

⁵ See the commentary of *Rabbi Yehoshua Ibn Shuaib* (on this verse), who refers to the commentary of *Rabbi Saadia Gaon on the Torah* (1188); see *Ibn Ezra*; *Ramban*.

⁶ {The plain meaning of Scripture. Rashi says in his commentary to *Bereishis* 3:8: “I have come only to explain the plain meaning of the Scripture.” Though there are many levels and depths of interpretation on the Torah, Rashi adopts a straightforward approach.}

⁷ *Shemos* 20:2.

To provide Moshe an opening to offer a defense {of the Jews} regarding the incident of the {Golden} Calf. This is why Moshe said, “Why, Hashem, should Your anger flare up against Your people?” They were not commanded, “Do not have any other gods besides Me.” Rather, You gave this command to me alone.

So why does Rashi here look for a different explanation of Moshe’s objection, “Why, Hashem, should Your anger flame up against Your people?”

We cannot say that Rashi meant to explain this verse according to both explanations,⁸ but chose not to bring the explanation from *parshas Yisro* here because he had brought it already earlier. Because it’s not plausible that Rashi left it out altogether (not even referring to it concisely as a secondary explanation) **here** in our *parshah*, which is the place of this exchange {between Moshe and Hashem}, relying on his **incidental** explanation in *parshas Yisro*, **which is not the primary place** {that his point is discussed}. This is particularly problematic since the other explanation {in *Yisro*} is more compelling since it completely negates the possibility of any **complaint** against the Jews, unlike the reason given here, which only addresses Hashem’s anger that was sparked by His jealousy.

We must say that Rashi’s two explanations are intended to clarify two **distinct** issues, as discussed below.

2.

WHY IS HASHEM JEALOUS?

We must also clarify: From a straightforward reading of Rashi’s wording, “Aren’t the wise only envious of the wise; and the valiant, of the valiant?” it is clear that Moshe was claiming that Hashem was jealous of the

⁸ *Mizrachi* comments, “Both interpretations are appropriate.” *Riva* remarks, “So you have two interpretations of the passage given by Rashi.”

idol {i.e., the Golden Calf} itself. To make such an allegation about Hashem is disrespectful.

Furthermore, the objection, “Aren’t the wise envious” is the challenge that Agrippas (a **gentile**)⁹ posed to Rabbi Gamliel¹⁰ (regarding the Torah calling Hashem “a jealous G-d”).¹¹ Rabbi Gamliel replied (with an parable)¹² explaining that Hashem is not “jealous” of idols, but rather of those who worship idols.¹³

On this basis, it is perplexing:

a) Even if Rashi has compelling evidence that Moshe demurred, “Aren’t the wise envious,” why does Rashi understand Moshe’s objection as relating to the idol itself (like the above-mentioned challenge of **Agrippas**)? Why doesn’t Rashi explain it in the way that the *Midrash*¹⁴ (on our *parshah*) explains Moshe’s objection:

“Master of the world, they made for You an assistant and You are angry **with them**?! The Calf that they made will be Your assistant....” Hashem responded: “Moshe, you are as mistaken as them, for the Calf is worthless.” Moshe replied: “If so, why are You angry **with your children**?...”

{The interpretation of the *Midrash* is preferable to Rashi’s explanation because:} (a) it is worded more respectfully; and, (b) it **emphasizes** Hashem’s anger “**with them**,” “**with your children**” {and not with the idol itself}.

b) Since according to *pshat*, we find no response to Moshe’s objection to Hashem — “Aren’t the wise only envious of the wise; and the valiant, of the

⁹ *Rashi on Avodah Zarah 55a*. {Agrippas was a pagan general appointed over the Roman armies. He lived during the reign of King Agrippas.}

¹⁰ *Avodah Zarah 55a*; and in *Mechilta*, on *Shemos 20:5*, the question is put somewhat differently.

¹¹ *Devarim 4:24*.

¹² *Avodah Zarah 55a*: “This is comparable to a man who married a second wife in addition to his first. If his second wife is more refined than his first one, his first wife will not be so provoked to hate her husband. But if his second wife is less refined than his first, then his first wife will be provoked to hate him.”}

¹³ This explanation is based on *Rashi on Avodah Zara 55a, s.v.*, “*ein miskanei*” {the word *miskanei*, which usually means “jealous,” means here, provoked} “to hate her husband.”

¹⁴ *Shemos Rabbah*, ch. 43, sec. 6 (end).

valiant” — this explanation remains problematic: If idols are such nonentities, why then does the Torah make such a big deal about the prohibition against idolatry, warning, “Do not have any other gods besides me,” “Do not make {a graven image}”?¹⁵

3.

WHY WISE AND VALIANT?

It is also unclear why Rashi mentions both examples: “(Aren’t) the wise envious only of the wise; and the valiant, of the valiant”?

We cannot answer that he does so to conform with the wording of the verse¹⁶ (“Let not the wise man glorify himself with his wisdom... the valiant with his valor”), and of the above-mentioned story,¹⁷ as well, because:

a) In the verse and the above-mentioned story, there is a **third** example: “a rich man, with his wealth,” which Rashi omits.

b) As known, Rashi rephrases a point (and elaborates, in general) only when the rephrasing (or the elaboration) is germane to understanding the simple meaning of a verse, and not because he is mirroring the phraseology used in a verse or a teaching of our Sages.

As such, we need to clarify: How are these two examples needed to understand *pshat*.

¹⁵ {*Shemos* 20:3-4.}

¹⁶ *Yirmiyahu* 9:22.

¹⁷ {Agrippas’s challenge to Rabban Gamliel in *Avodah Zara* 55a: “Agrippas, the General, asked Rabban Gamliel: In your Torah, it is written concerning idolatry: ‘For the Hashem your L-rd is a devouring fire, a jealous G-d (*Devarim* 4:24).’ Aren’t the wise only envious of the wise; the valiant, of the valiant; and the rich, of the rich?”}

4.

ANNIHILATION IS EXTREME

The explanation:

When Rashi quotes the verse, “Why, Hashem...” (or as in other printed editions, “Why, Hashem, should Your anger flare up,”) he is compelled to explain {that Moshe asked Hashem}: “Aren’t the wise...” because of a problem {with Moshe’s rejoinder}: After Hashem told Moshe,¹⁸ “And now, let Me be! Let My anger flare up against them and I shall **annihilate** them...,” Moshe should have first challenged Hashem’s declaration, “I shall annihilate them,” by responding: “Hashem, why would You **annihilate** Your people?” (or with a similar objection), and then he could have objected further, “Why, Hashem, should Your anger flare up...?” What we see is the reverse: First, he argued, “Why, Hashem, should Your anger flare up?” and only afterward did he beseech Hashem not to “annihilate them”!¹⁹

The reason for his initial response is as follows: Moshe did not protest the death penalty for the sin of the Golden Calf. Already earlier, the Torah taught that **many** transgressions incur the death penalty, and we don’t find any objection or astonishment expressed. The reason is simple: a severe sin deserves a harsh punishment — death.

What is perplexing here is the **method** of punishment — “**I shall annihilate them**” — the grounds for which must have been exceptional:

The Torah stipulates that for a person to be found guilty and receive the death penalty, witnesses must testify (after the perpetrator had been warned), and then the *beis din*²⁰ must examine and investigate the testimony. Even when the Torah says,²¹ “You shall not allow a sorceress to live,” which literally means that we cannot allow a “sorceress” to live, Rashi

¹⁸ {*Shemos* 32:10.}

¹⁹ {*Shemos* 32:12.}

²⁰ {The Jewish court.}

²¹ *Shemos* 22:17.

clarifies that we don't kill every "sorceress" that we see, "but she should be executed {after judgment and sentencing} **by the *beis din*.**"

Furthermore, regarding mankind's first sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge, Hashem had warned Adam explicitly:²² "Do not eat from it, because on the day you eat from it, you shall surely die." Nevertheless, after transgressing, Adam was not punished with immediate death; rather, he died only after living for 930 years.

Here, however, regarding the sin of the Golden Calf, Hashem said, "**And now, let Me be... and I shall annihilate them**" — they were to be put to death immediately after the sin.²³ Furthermore, "I shall annihilate *them*," means *all* Jews, including those who did not worship the Calf. This is also implied by the continuation of Hashem's words, "I will make **you** {Moshe} into a great nation."²⁴ (Rashi says,²⁵ "If a chair with three legs cannot stand before You when You are angry, how much less will a chair with one leg.")²⁶

Such a {grave} punishment cannot be the result of this sin alone, but rather, because "**My anger will flare up** against them."²⁷ (For this reason, the punishment was more severe than what the sin itself deserved.)

This was Moshe's objection: "Why, Hashem, should Your anger flare up — Aren't the wise only envious of the wise..." It makes sense why the severe sin of idolatry deserves a harsh punishment, especially since it is irrational to think that there is any substance to "other gods." (It's even beyond the pale to have an emotional attraction to them.) Rashi pointed this out earlier:²⁸ "They are not Divine, but others have made them gods

²² *Bereishis* 2:17.

²³ See *Rashi*, *Shemos* 32:20.

²⁴ *Shemos* 32:10.

²⁵ *Shemos* 32:13.

²⁶ {*Rashi* quotes the *Midrash* which compares *Avraham*, *Yitzchak* and *Yaakov* to a chair with three legs, while *Moshe* is compared to a chair with one leg. This implies that *Moshe* was protesting a reality where he would be the lone leg — the sole survivor of the Jewish people.}

²⁷ {*Shemos* 32:10.}

²⁸ *Shemos* 20:3.

over themselves.” Thus, it makes sense why this sin deserves a harsh punishment.

However, since Hashem said “I shall annihilate them” — (a) without a trial by a *beis din*; (b) immediately; and (c) all Jews — it is clear that the punishment was due not only as a consequence for (and deservedly to) those who worshiped the Calf, but rather, it was also a consequence of the **flaring anger** over idolatry itself.

Therefore, Moshe objected: “Why, Hashem, should Your anger flare up” against the Golden Calf? “Aren’t the wise only envious of the wise...?” The Calf is too pathetic for it to engender the “jealousy” (Hashem’s anger) associated with idolatrous behavior, and to the extent that its worship should entail the swift, sweeping death of all the Jews as punishment.

5.

IT’S ALL ABOUT THE IDOL

On this basis, we can understand why Rashi doesn’t bring here the explanation that he had brought in *parshas Yisro*: “to provide Moshe an opening.... This is why Moshe said, ‘Why, Hashem, should Your anger flare up against **Your people**?’ They were not commanded....”

Rashi explains that Moshe’s objection emphasizes (according to the explanation appropriate **there**, where the commandment forbidding idolatry was given) that there was an excuse for even those **who had served** the Calf-idol, exonerating them completely from any punishment for transgressing the commandment not to have “any other gods....” However, when learning *pshat* of the verse **here**, as the story unfolds, the wording, “Why, Hashem, **should Your anger flare up**,” demonstrates that {Moshe’s} objection was not about the punishment itself to be exacted from those who had worshiped the Calf, but rather, to the “flaring anger” against idolatry, as elucidated above.

6.

WISDOM AND VALOR

Now we can also understand why Rashi brings the two illustrations of “the wise envious of the wise; and the valiant, of the valiant.” After telling Moshe,²⁹ “Go descend, for Your people have acted corruptly...,” Hashem continued,³⁰ “They have strayed quickly from the way that I have commanded them; they have made themselves a molten Calf, prostrated strongthemselves to it, and sacrificed to it, and they have said, **“These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.”**” Although the Jews did say this, why is it necessary to mention this in this verse? How does the fact that they said “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt” add to the magnitude of the sin of “they have made themselves a molten Calf, prostrated themselves to it, and sacrificed to it”? Similarly, when Moshe pleads with Hashem “Why, Hashem, should Your anger flare up against Your people?,” Moshe specified, “whom You have brought up from the land of Egypt with great power and a strong hand.”

This itself proves that Hashem’s burning anger (expressing “jealousy”) was (also) due to the Jews declaring, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.” It was concerning this that Moshe questioned Hashem’s “jealousy” using the **two** analogies of “the wise” and “the valiant.”

To explain: Two qualities were needed to free the Jews from Egypt and lead them through the desert — “wisdom” and “valor”³¹ — but not (necessarily) wealth; this is quite clear. The complexities of the exodus from Egypt, etc., which entailed miracles and wonders, required great wisdom (to know how to put them in motion) and valor (to actually carry them out).

²⁹ {*Shemos* 32:7.}

³⁰ {*Shemos* 32:8.}

³¹ {In the original Hebrew, “*gevurah*.”}

Furthermore, those who turned to the Calf seeking its intervention³² were not after riches. As Rashi pointed out earlier, the Jews had acquired **enormous** wealth from the spoils of Egypt, and even more from the spoils at Sea.³³

When Moshe said, “Why, Hashem, should Your anger flare up,” he meant to say that it would be preposterous to be “jealous” of the Calf, because, “Aren’t the wise only envious of the wise; and the valiant, of the valiant ?” The truth is that Hashem was the One Who took them out of “Egypt with great power and a strong hand,” and not the Calf. An idol has neither wisdom nor valor, so how could it be possible to be “jealous” of this idol?

7.

A JEW IS ALWAYS LOYAL

From the “wine of Torah”³⁴ in Rashi’s commentary:

We still need additional explanation: True, there is no reason at all to be “jealous” of an idol, because “the wise {are} envious only of the wise; and the valiant, of the valiant.” Nevertheless, some Jews had worshiped the Calf and proclaimed, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.” Seemingly, then, there is room, after all, for “jealousy” — “A jealous G-d” — jealous of those who had worshiped the Calf since they had imagined the Calf to be “wise” and “valiant.”

The explanation: A Jew by nature is not fooled by idolatry.³⁵ He knows that an idol is made of only wood or stone, and so attributes no importance to it. This is true even for someone who actually transgresses and sins because, “even while sinning, his loyalty was intact.”³⁶ As the Alter

³² {To make the Calf.}

³³ *Shemos* 15:22.

³⁴ {I.e., the inner teachings of Torah.}

³⁵ *Tanya*, ch. 19.

³⁶ *Tanya*, ch. 24.

Rebbe put it,³⁷ “A Jew doesn’t want to and is unable to divorce himself from G-dliness.” The only reason why those who served the Calf said, “These are your gods, O Israel” is that “a spirit of folly entered”³⁸ them (and therefore, they spoke in such a way). The spirit of folly, however, is a separate entity, foreign to the person (it **entered him**).

This was Moshe’s objection: “Why, Hashem, should Your anger flare up against Your people.” Even from the perspective of “Your people,” the Jews, there is no place for “jealousy.” Because to consider the idol as being “wise” or “valiant” was completely out of character for them. Therefore, Moshe’s argument, “Aren’t the wise only envious of the wise; and the valiant, of the valiant” was the reason that “Hashem reconsidered....”³⁹

— Based on a talk delivered on Shabbos *parshas Ki Sisa*, 5732 (1972)

³⁷ See *Maamar Basi Legani 5710*, ch. 3; *HaYom Yom*, p. 73.

³⁸ Since this applies to other sins, certainly it applies to this one; *Sotah* 3a.; see *Tanya*, “*Likkutei Amarim*,” ch. 24-5.

³⁹ {*Shemos* 32:14.}