

# SICHA SUMMARY

PROJECT LIKKUTEI SICHOS | 5783 - YEAR OF HAKHEL



## Likkutei Sichos, Vol. 24

*Devarim, Sicha 1*

### The Context:

Prior to his passing, Moshe prepared the Jewish people for their entrance into the Land of Israel by reviewing their history and the Torah they were to fulfill. The sages taught that he did so by explaining the Torah to them in seventy languages:

“On that side of the Jordan, in the land of Moab, Moses commenced and explained this Law...”

*Explained this Law* — He explained it to them in seventy languages. (*Rashi from Midrash Tanchuma 2; Bereishis Rabbah 49*)

At a much later point in history, there was another effort at translating the Torah:

“It happened once that five sages wrote the Torah in Greek for King Ptolemy. That day was as difficult for Israel as the day that the Golden Calf was made, because the Torah was unable to be translated adequately.” (*Masechta Sofrim 1:7*)

### The Questions:

1. If translating the Torah was a dangerous task that would lead to misunderstandings, as the sages in Ptolemy’s days seemed to think, why did Moshe voluntarily provide these translations?
2. Why do the sages compare this translation to one of the severest, sordid events in Jewish history, the making of the Golden Calf?
3. We find a similar expression in another context: The Talmud states that “the day Hillel was bowed and was sitting before Shammai like one of the students... was as difficult for Israel as the day the Golden Calf was made (Shabbos 17a) Once again, why is Hillel’s subordination to Shammai compared to such a catastrophic event?”

### The Explanation:

The Talmud does not say that the translation of the Torah into Greek or Hillel’s sitting before Shammai was as difficult as the **servicing** of the Golden Calf, but as the **making** of it. When the calf was made, there was still the potential that the next day Aharon would be able to guide the

people to a “celebration for G-d.” It was an event that hung in the balance — it definitely had the potential for tragedy, as it indeed turned out, but it didn’t have to end that way.

Similarly, the translation of the Torah into Greek created the possibility of certain concepts being lost in translation. Those reading the Torah in Greek could come to the wrong conclusions if the translation was too literal. Therefore, the day of the translation was “as the day the calf was made,” because it was an event that had the potential for disaster.

The same applies to the incident of Hillel and Shammai. The law follows Hillel in the majority of cases. In this one instance, the law was decided in accordance with Shammai. The danger present in Hillel sitting humbly before Shammai was that this would set a precedent that would lead to Shammai’s opinions being accepted as law in other cases as well.

In all three episodes, it was not the event itself that was negative, but its potential.

### **The Deeper Explanation:**

On a deeper level, both events contain the same spiritual threat that was present in the Golden Calf. The original aim of the builders of the calf was to have a physical entity that could embody and convey the Divine presence to the people, as Moshe was for them throughout his leadership. Their mistake was that G-d had appointed Moshe to this role; he had achieved total self-effacement so that his persona did not obstruct G-d’s presence. But G-d never designated the Golden Calf as an

intermediary, and so it only obstructed G-d’s presence. The calf represented the foundational sin of dualism, of perceiving the world as having more than one supreme power.

The translation of the Torah into Greek presented a similar danger. Through an innocent mistranslation, it would be possible to read several verses of the Torah as describing a reality of two distinct gods and powers. Thus, the translation of the Torah, like the making of the calf, allowed for the potential mistake of dualism.

In a more abstract way, Shammai’s legal philosophy presents a similar danger as well. Shammai is consistently more prohibitive, censoring acts and items from being permitted or pure, instead of finding legal methods to permit them, as does Hillel. The idea of excessive prohibitions seems to say that G-d’s presence and light cannot penetrate and “refine” these acts, items, or scenarios. This echoes the claim of dualism, that G-d is not the essence of all reality, there are some parts that are too dark, too separate, to be one with Him.

Thus, the possibility of the law turning in the favor of Shammai is also consistent with the threat of the Golden Calf.

These concerns, however, did not materialize. The Torah was translated sensitively so that mistakes could not be made, and Hillel’s sitting before Shammai did not result in the legal tradition being decided in Shammai’s favor, but rather, Shammai adopted lenient positions in some cases, even in comparison to Hillel.

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