

Screening – Ki Tisa

[Shiurim Main Menu](#)

אַלְהֵי מִסְכָּה לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה לָךְ. (שמות לד, יז)

In this week's parsha we read about the sin of the egel. When Am Yisrael made the egel, the passuk says (שמות לב, ד) וַיַּעֲשֶׂהוּ עֵגֶל מִסְכָּה. Later HKB"H tells Moshe that Am Yisrael have sinned and again the phrase used is עָשׂוּ לָהֶם עֵגֶל (שם, ח) מִסְכָּה. Towards the end of the parsha HKB"H warns Am Yisrael, when they conquer Eretz Yisrael, not to enter into pacts with the inhabitants of Canaan and to not worship their gods. This is followed by our passuk above אַלְהֵי מִסְכָּה לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה לָךְ.

In the Ten Commandments on Har Sinai, HKB"H commands us לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה לֹא תַמּוֹנָה וְכָל תְּמוֹנָה (שמות כ, ג) לָךְ פֶּסֶל וְכָל תְּמוֹנָה (שמות כ, ג) וְכָל תְּמוֹנָה and a מִסְכָּה?

A פֶּסֶל is a sculpture (רש"י, שמות כ, ג). It begins with a rough chunk of raw material (wood, metal, clay, etc.). This rough form is then sculpted, using tools such as hammers, chisels, gouges etc. into the final, sculpted form.

A תְּמוֹנָה is a picture (רש"י, שם). The difference between a פֶּסֶל and a תְּמוֹנָה is that a פֶּסֶל is a 3-dimensional representation and a תְּמוֹנָה is a 2-dimensional representation, such as a sketch, painting, photograph, etc. Pictures may simulate depth but they are in essence 2-dimensional.

A מִסְכָּה is also a 3-dimensional object, but unlike a פֶּסֶל which is sculpted, a מִסְכָּה is cast by pouring into a mold. For example, melting metal and pouring it into a mold, or pouring liquid plaster into a mold and leaving it to set until solid.

I would like to concentrate on the מִסְכָּה form in this shiur, for two reasons. Firstly, because the egel in this week's parsha is a מִסְכָּה. Secondly, we have just celebrated Purim, the festival of masks and disguises. We will see later that there is a connection between the modern Hebrew use of the word מִסְכָּה, meaning "mask" and the Torah's use of the word, meaning "cast form". The Torah uses a different word for mask – מַסְוֵה (שמות לד, לג) – mentioned at the end of our parsha, when Moshe covers the light radiating from his face with a mask.

The Sforno (שמות לד, יז) explains that a מִסְכָּה is not simply casting a liquified version of a substance into a mold and allowing it to solidify - there is more to it than that. The Sforno refers to אַלְהֵי מִסְכָּה as "talismans" (טַלְסַמָּאוֹת) and says that the purpose of casting (as opposed to sculpting) is that the final form is achieved *instantaneously* and not in stages. Those who make אַלְהֵי מִסְכָּה do so at exact, specific times correlating to star constellations in the belief that

the form they are making acquires "powers" from the star constellation. This is why the *entire* form has to be created instantaneously at the precise moment.

When Moshe confronts Aharon and asks why he helped Am Yisrael to make the egel, Aharon replies וְאִמְרָ לָהֶם לְמִי זֶהָב הַתְּפָרְקוּ וַיִּתְּנוּ לִי וְאַשְׁלָכֶהוּ בְּאֵשׁ וַיֵּצֵא הָעֵגֶל הַזֶּה (שמות לב, כד). In a previous shiur ([Ki Tisa 2022](#)) we discussed how Aharon used this as a delaying tactic, thinking that Am Yisrael would not "part with their brass" so quickly and he could save time and Moshe would return before they actually got around to making the egel. For the purposes of this shiur, however, we will use this passuk to illustrate the *method* of preparing the עֵגֶל מִסָּכָה – throwing gold into the fire, melting it and creating the egel. According to Rashi (שמות לב, ד) the final form was created from the molten gold by *witchcraft*, either by sorcerers who were part of the erev rav or by Micha. Another possibility is that they poured this molten gold into a mold in the form of an egel.

The Sforno above continues (in reference to all types of idols – פְּסִל, מִסְכָּה, תְּמוּנָה) that they are all forbidden, *even* if the person creating them does not have the intent to serve them as idols, but simply uses them as a good luck charm. HKB"H does not want us to use any form of "intermediary" in our service of Him, as it says וַאֲנַחְנוּ לֹא גִדַע מֶה נַעֲשֶׂה כִּי עֲלִידָ עֵינֵינוּ (דברי הימים ב, כ, יב). Our thoughts have to be focused directly toward HKB"H, not through some man-made "apparatus".

According to some opinions (כוזרי א, צו; רמב"ן שמות לב, א) Am Yisrael had no intention to worship the egel as an idol. They thought that Moshe was dead and they sought a replacement *for Moshe*, a tangible, visible "something/someone" to lead them and intercede for them with HKB"H. The Ibn Ezra (שמות לב, א) says that the vast majority of Am Yisrael had no intention to worship avodah zara. It was only a very small group who actually sacrificed to the egel – those executed by Moshe when he returned from Har Sinai and broke the luchot.

I have not seen this perush in any of the sources, but in the עֲשֶׂת הַדְּבָרוֹת mention is made only of תְּמוּנָה וְכָל פְּסִל לְךָ תַעֲשֶׂה לֹא and *not* מִסְכָּה. The latter is only first mentioned *after* the sin with the egel. Perhaps Am Yisrael might have thought that making a form by sculpting or drawing was forbidden, but by casting was not forbidden. This is an attempt לְלַמֵּד זְכוּת on Am Yisrael, although the Midrash (ויקרא רבה פרשה כד, ה) says that the commandment לֹא יִהְיֶה לְךָ אֱלֹהִים comes to *include* מִסְכָּה אֱלֹהֵי, so I am not sure this is a good argument.

Until now everything is clear. HKB"H wants our connection with Him to be direct, not via any "middleman/middle-thing".

There is only one small problem with all of the above and that is parshiyot Truma and Tetzaveh. These parshiyot deal with building the Mishkan. The Mishkan is FILLED with objects that seem to fit the exact description of all the forbidden things above.

For example, above the Aron HaBrit you have two Kruvim, two figures that resemble angels, with faces of children, one male and one female and wings covering their faces (זֶהָר קִמַח, א). The Kruvim have to be made מִקְצָה, a solid unit, not numerous pieces stuck together. There are only two ways to make such a thing - taking a solid chunk of gold and sculpting out the shapes, or making a mold in that shape and pouring molten gold into the mold. That is exactly what פָּסָל and מְסַכָּה are!

If that is not enough, in the first Beit HaMikdash, Shlomo HaMelech added an additional set of Kruvim, besides those on the כַּפֹּרֶת. The Gemara (בבא בתרא) describes these two additional Kruvim as each being 5m high!

This is the question asked by the Abarbanel בְּעֵינֵי הַכְּרוּבִים שֶׁצִּוָּה לְתַבְרָדָּה לַעֲשׂוֹת עַל הַכַּפֹּרֶת, כִּי הֵיחָה יִרְאֶה שֶׁהָיָה עוֹבֵר בְּזָה עַל לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה לָּךְ פָּסָל וְכָל תְּמוּנָה אֲשֶׁר בְּשָׂמַיִם מִמֵּעַל וְאֲשֶׁר בְּאָרֶץ מִתַּחַת. וְאִיךָ צִוָּה אוֹתָם לַעֲשׂוֹת מָה שֶׁהִזְהָרוּ עָלָיו? (שמות כה, א).

In fact, the Gemara (יומא נד, ע"ב) says that when the goyim destroyed the 2nd Beit HaMikdash and they saw the images of the Kruvim on the Parochet, they were dumbfounded – "The Jews have these graven images in their holy of holies?"

So, how do we resolve this seeming conflict?

Before getting to the bottom line, we need to examine the fundamental function of the Beit HaMikdash in this world. At least 95% of my shiurim revolve around some aspect of the Mikdash and its purpose. Each "nut and bolt" has deep symbolism and meaning and is an essential cog in the "machine".

The purpose of the physical Beit HaMikdash in this world is to connect Heaven and earth, to connect the Heavenly Mikdash with the Mikdash within each one of us (תהילים קכב, ג) כְּעִיר שֶׁחֲבֵרָה לָהּ יַחְדָּו (תהילים קכב, ג).

The Beit HaMikdash is a microcosm of the paradox that is our world. The purpose of creating our world is in order that HKB"H's Shechina can reside in our world. How do you take something that is infinite, like the Shechina, and limit it to a finite, physical world? Obviously, there is no way we humans can understand such a reality, it is beyond our understanding. Humans are experiential beings, we perceive things according to our physical experience – what we see, hear, smell, taste, touch. How is it possible to perceive something metaphysical experientially?

The answer is that we humans are *also* a paradox. We are at the same time finite and infinite. HKB"H created us so that we have a finite, physical component and also an infinite, metaphysical component (a neshama). The finite part of us perceives experientially, through our five senses. The infinite part of us, perceives metaphysically, through our neshama. Our purpose in life is connecting the two, bringing down the metaphysical into the physical so that they work in tandem and not at odds with each other. Again, כְּעִיר שְׂחִבְרָה לָהּ יַחְדָּו – within ourselves.

The only way we humans can possibly perceive metaphysical reality is by experiencing some physical "manifestation" of it that hints to its essence, while at the same time accepting that the physical manifestation is only an infinitesimally small part of the true metaphysical reality.

How can we perceive metaphysical concepts like angels, the כְּסֵא הַכְּבוֹד, the Shechina, etc. with our limited human understanding? HKB"H provides certain "blueprints" that echo and reflect the metaphysical concepts, infinitesimally, in a way our human minds can comprehend. In תּוֹרַת הַקְּבָלָה this concept is called תּוֹרַת הַצְּמִצּוּם.

This is the structure of the earthly Beit HaMikdash. It is a set of blueprints of metaphysical concepts, downsized to infinitesimal proportions to accommodate our human limitations of understanding. They are Heavenly blueprints designed by HKB"H Himself for that specific purpose. The purpose of each component and each blueprint in the Beit HaMikdash is for us to perceive metaphysical realities of HKB"H, within our human limitations.

Case in point, the Aron HaBrit with the Kruvim above it on the Kaporet. When the Kohen Gadol enters the Kodesh HaKodashim to offer the Ketoret on Yom Kippur, he prostrates himself in front of the Aron HaBrit. He is not bowing down to the Aron chas veshalom, he is not *worshipping* the Aron chas veshalom – he is *using the Aron experientially* to try to comprehend the infinity that is HKB"H within the limits of his human understanding. The Kohen Gadol is prostrating *before HKB"H directly*, he is *worshipping HKB"H directly*, with the understanding that he can never possibly comprehend the true reality of HKB"H. This is how the Abarbanel answers his own question above (י, שמות כה).

This is the purpose of the Beit HaMikdash. These physical manifestations of the metaphysical blueprints are *limited to the Beit HaMikdash alone*. Our experiential perception is limited to *only* these blueprints that HKB"H specifically commanded us to use – to them alone! and only *in that place* alone.

We are forbidden to use any other experiential manifestation, other than those *created by HKB"H Himself* or those that *HKB"H commanded us to make*, according to His blueprints. We are forbidden to associate with them any special

powers and worship them chas veshalom. We are also forbidden to use them as intermediaries between us and HKB"H chas veshalom.

The danger is that if we decide, on our own, to create *our own* experiential manifestations, or even to duplicate those same manifestations from the Beit HaMikdash, but outside the confines of the Mikdash – that we will end up using them in the wrong way. The only reason that they are harmless in the Beit HaMikdash itself is because the Shechina resides there, it is a protective environment that prevents us from going astray.

This is how the Malbim explains it (שמות לד, יז). A person should not say "It is too far to travel to the Beit HaMikdash. Instead, I will make for myself my own private set of Kruvim like they are in the Mikdash and bow down before them as if I were performing the same action in the Mikdash". For this reason, HKB"H tells us – "Do not do this. You must travel to the Beit HaMikdash three times a year (on the Shloshet Regalim) to see the 'face' of HKB"H". Therefore, the Gemara (פסחים קיח, ע"א) says כָּל הַמְבִיָּה אֶת הַמוֹעֲדוֹת כְּאִלּוּ עוֹבְדֵי עֲבוּדָה זָרָה שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר - אֵלֶּהִי מִסְכָּה לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה לָךְ. If you disrespect the festivals, you will end up worshipping avodah zara. The one leads to the other.

The sin of the egel, according to those who say that it was simply an attempt to replace Moshe, not HKB"H Himself – is that they made *their own manifestation* – they were not commanded by HKB"H to do so. That is forbidden. Moshe was an intermediary, but he was sent by HKB"H. When HKB"H Himself sends an intermediary then it is legitimate, otherwise it is not.

According to the other opinion, Am Yisrael mamash served the egel, as if it were a replacement for HKB"H Rachmana litzlan, which is obviously forbidden.

This is the ikar of the prohibition to make our own מִסְכָּה, תְּמוּנָה, פְּסֻל.

According to the above, the root of the word מִסְכָּה is נָסַךְ, meaning pouring/casting.

The word מִסְכָּה can also be attributed to a different root סָכָה, meaning covering/obscuring (like in the word סָכָה). This hints to the fact that the מִסְכָּה obscures direct contact with HKB"H, which is why it is forbidden.

It is not coincidental, therefore, that "masks" are associated with Purim, because by pouring and drinking יין נֶסְךְ at Achashveirosh's party, Am Yisrael ended up erecting masks between them and HKB"H. This resulted in a reciprocal response of HKB"H hiding his face from Am Yisrael, הִסְתִּיר פָּנָיו. The true symbolism, therefore, of masks on Purim is not continually obscuring your face and remaining incognito, but rather initially covering your face to arouse curiosity and then *revealing* your face for all to see. The revealing is the ikar, not the covering.

There is an entire topic of discussion related to the above and that is the place of "culture" and "art" in Judaism. Are we allowed to paint, sculpt, take photographs, etc. or are these a prohibition of the above commandments? This topic is enough to fill more than one shiur on its own, but here I will just bring the bottom line.

The prohibition is against creating these things for the purposes of worshipping them or using them as intermediaries to HKB"H. In the time of Ezra HaSofer, they practically abolished the yetzer hara for avodah zara and today there are very few instances where people bow down to talismans, statues and pictures. They are mostly limited to the Christian and Hindu faiths where people actually worship and bow down to them.

For the most part today, art is not part of a religious ceremony, it is to create or to reflect beauty in the world. Rav Kook ז"ל (אגרות הראיה, קני"ח) says כָּל הַמְרַחֵב הַגְּדוֹל שֶׁל הַנוֹי וְהַהַדוּר, הַיִּפְי וְהַצִּיּוֹר, מִתֵּר לְיִשְׂרָאֵל. According to this view, not only is such activity permitted, it increases the glory of HKB"H in the world כָּל מֵה שֶׁבָּרָא הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא בְּעוֹלָמוֹ, לֹא בָּרָאוּ אֶלָּא לְכַבּוֹדוֹ (אבות ו, יא). There are some who are makpid when it comes to reproducing the human form, animals, plants and celestial bodies, especially in the sculpted form.

As stated above, it is also forbidden to make your own personal duplicates/models of components of the Mikdash. However, this prohibition applies to *exact* duplicates and those which are used specifically for the *purposes* they served in the Mikdash (like a Menorah identical to that in the Mikdash in every dimension and detail, which is used for actual lighting). If, however, you make alterations to the original structure and/or you use them for purposes of teaching and researching, there is no prohibition. We use models of the keilim to teach people in our workshops and this is permissible.

Regarding wearing jewelry, such as a Magen David, Beit HaMikdash pendant, etc. which are symbols of identification, not objects of worship, there is no prohibition. The only consideration relates to societal gender norms. If the societal norm is that *only one gender* wears such jewelry, then the opposite gender is not permitted to wear them. If, however, the societal norm is that both genders wear it, then it is permissible for either gender.

To end off the shiur, I would like to talk about a different type of מִסְכָּה. I am referring to screens – TV screens, computer screens and cellphone screens. Another possible root of the word מִסְכָּה is מִסְדָּה referring to the aforementioned types of screens.

Obviously, the prohibition in the Torah did not directly address these types of מִסְכּוֹת (מִסְכִּים actually), but the underlying principles may be applied to them equally. If a person turns their use of the TV or computer screen into some kind of "religious ritual" that competes with or encroaches on a person's time that may

be better used for more lofty things, like doing mitzvot or studying Torah, then that is not a positive thing. If "screen time" is part of a person's parnasa, or part of their essential relaxation time needed to be able to function – then obviously there is no problem with that.

Which brings me to the final type of screen – the smartphone. If HKB"H had any kind of screen in mind when He formulated **לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה לְךָ**, it would probably have been the smartphone. The recent generation has been reared with the premise that HKB"H created humans with a missing appendage and to compensate for that we have invented smartphones. Smartphones have almost become a "body part" that we cannot live without. Try to separate a person from their smartphone for a few hours and you will see what I mean.

There is no inherent problem with smartphones per se, the problem lies in our abuse of them. Smartphones are increasingly becoming tools of obscuration. It is almost impossible for a family to sit together at a gathering, such as a meal, visit, etc. without one or more members "bowing" their heads, fixated on their smartphone. It has become almost impossible to walk in the street without someone crashing into you because they are fixated with their smartphone and do not see what is going on around them. I will not even get into the subject of driving with smartphones and how dangerous they are. They invade every space, the home, the shul, the school and not in a good way.

I pity anyone who is not a religious Jew, because at least we get one day of the week where they are not a factor. I especially pity the younger generation who were born into a reality of smartphones and do not realize that there is life beyond them.

To be sure smartphones do have their place and function, but we have not yet learned how to regulate that sufficiently. Humanity and specifically Jewish society have yet to set acceptable societal and halachic norms for smartphone use and a pivotal point will be our passuk above.

Shabbat Shalom

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