

Exodus 32:26-9

Mosheh stood at the camp gate and said: "Whoever is for G-d, come to me!"

All the Levites gathered around him.

He said to them: "Thus said G-d Lord of Israel: 'Each man place your sword on your thigh. Pass back and forth in the camp between the gates, and let each man kill his brother, his friend, and those close to him'".

The Levites did as Mosheh had ordered. On that day, around three thousand men fell from among the nation.

Mosheh said: "Fill your hands (mil'ue y'deikhem) today for G-d, for each man with his son and brother, and to bring upon you today a blessing.

In the aftermath of destroying the Golden Calf, Mosheh issues a call for volunteers. The Levites respond, and Moshe orders them, in the name of G-d, to pass through the camp and kill people. The text seems to indicate that they in fact kill some 3,000 people. Thereafter, an extremely confusing poetic statement by Mosheh probably declares that they will fill sacred offices as their reward.

Our first issue is: Whom did Moshe order the Levites to kill?

a) If they were supposed to kill all the Calf-worshippers, why did they kill only 3,000? On the other hand, if there were only 3,000 Calf-worshippers, why did only Levi gather around Mosheh? (Note the general problem in biblical interpretation, especially of the Prophets, that wholesale denunciation of the population for idolatry are frequently juxtaposed with fairly small concrete numbers of idolaters. See for example II Kings 10:18-29)

b) Why the focus on "brothers, friends, and those close"? (Also: why the shift to "sons and brothers" in 29?) Furthermore, if all the Levites gathered to Mosheh, how could they kill brothers? (Note: Rashi suggests that this problem can be solved by positing half-brothers et al.)

Our second issue is: Why did Mosheh order this massacre?

The easiest response to a) is to somehow argue that these three represented the most intense or most severe sinners.

- 1) Chizkuni adopts the entirely plausible position that most Jews worshipped the Calf as a representation of G-d, and that these three thousand were the only ones with actual idolatrous intentions.
- 2) Ramban suggests that they were the ones who for one reason or another could not be convicted in the regular court system.
- 3) Bekhor Shor seems to suggest that they were the only Calf-worshippers, or at least the only ones who did not repent immediately when Moshe returned. This requires him to say that while Levi was the only complete tribe to respond to Mosheh's call, most members of the other tribes did so too.

This reading solves b) by saying that only the non-Levites killed relatives. It also explains the shift in 29 to sons and brothers by reading that not as a description of the people whom they had killed but rather of the people with whom they would be assuming sacred office.

- 4) Ibn Kaspi as, as per his wont, an original and pragmatic explanation of the low death toll. He suggests that the order was to kill anyone on the camp street – as everyone heard Mosheh's call, only very foolish people would have been out while the Levites swept though. Furthermore, he suggests, the Levites were likely less than zealous in carrying out the actual killing "mashkhu y'deikhem k'tzat meshikhah", an astonishing suggestion in a context that seems saturated with zealotry (as the Midrash points out in comparing Mosheh to Eliyahu because of this action.) He, however, assumes that only the Levites were willing to undertake this, and thus solves b) by assuming that even the Levites did not respond completely and so some levites were likely among the victims as well.

Ibn Kaspi's suggestion is rooted in the text's failure to distinguish the three thousand victims from the rest of the community in any way. He thus feels compelled to interpret the entire episode as a symbolic gesture of atonement – some people had to die lest G-d kill them all. As there was no specific population that uniquely deserved death, nor a specific quota of deaths, he thinks a certain ambivalence in carrying out the massacre quite likely.

Seforno adopts the position that most Jews did not in fact worship the Calf, but that they were nonetheless guilty for failing to protest the actions of the minority. The Levites thus modelled, extremely, communal assumption of responsibility for each other's actions, and what can perhaps be called "poetic atonement" was created when the majority stood idly by while their idolatrous friends, neighbors, and relatives were killed.

In either case, Mosheh's action seems extraordinary – is it really possible to kill people randomly, or at least extra-judicially, so as to create atonement for others? Surely such an action can

only have been ordered at the explicit behest of G-d, "Thus said G-d the Lord of Israel". In that light it is worth citing the midrash Tann D'vei Eliyahu Rabbah (Chapter 4):

"Mosheh stood at the gate . . . He said to them: "Thus said G-d the Lord of Israel . . .""

I call heaven and earth to testify that the Holy One Blessed be He never told Mosheh to stand at the camp gate and say "Whoever is for G-d, come to me!" Rather, Moshe thought: If I tell Israel 'kill your brother, your neighbor, and those close to you', they'll say "Didn't you teach us that a Sanhedrin that executes someone more than once in seven years is called destructive? Why are you killing three thousand in one day?!" Therefore Mosheh attributed this statement to G-d, as it says 'The Levites did as Mosheh ordered'".

I would for now rather hear your comments about this midrash than offer my own. Please do send them.

Shabbat Shalom