

96. Al Khazari: This is the true greatness, which descended direct from Adam. He was the noblest creature on earth. Therefore you rank above all the other inhabitants of the earth. But what of this privilege at the time when that sin was committed?

97. The Rabbi: All nations were given to idolatry at that time. Even had they been philosophers, discoursing on the unity and government of God, they would have been unable to dispense with images, and would have taught the masses that a divine influence hovered over this image, which was distinguished by some miraculous spots with reverence, going so far as to believe ourselves blessed by their particular spots with reverence, going so far as to believe ourselves blessed by their dust and stones. Others ascribed it to the spiritual influence of some star or constellation, or of a talisman, or to other things of that kind. The people did not pay so much attention to a single law as to a tangible image in which they believed. The Israelites had been promised that something visible would descend on them from God which they could follow, as they followed the pillars of cloud and fire when they departed from Egypt. This they pointed out, and turned to it, praising it, and worshipping God in its presence. Thus they also turned towards the cloud which hovered over Moses while God spoke with him; they remained standing and adoring God opposite to it. Now when the people had heard the proclamation of the Ten Commandments, and Moses had ascended the mount in order to receive the inscribed tables which he was to bring down to them, and then make an ark which was to be the point towards which they should direct their gaze during their devotions,<sup>[2]</sup> they waited for his return clad in the same apparel in which they had witnessed the drama on Sinai, without removing their jewels or changing their clothes, remaining just as he left them, had not provided himself with food, having only left them with the intention of returning the same day. An evil spirit overpowered a portion of the people, and they began to divide into parties and factions. Many views and opinions were expressed, till at last some decided to do like the other nations, and seek an object in which they could have faith, without, prejudicing the supremacy of Him who had brought them out of Egypt. On the contrary, this was to be something to which they could point when relating the wonders of God, as the Philistines did with the ark when they said that God dwelt within it. We do the same with the sky and every other object concerning which we know that it is set in motion by the divine will exclusively, and not by any accident or desire of man or nature. Their sin I consisted in the manufacture of an image of a forbidden thing, and in attributing divine power to a creation of God. Some excuse may be found for them in the dissension which had broken out among them, and in the fact that out of six hundred thousand souls the number of those who worshipped the calf was below three thousand. For those of higher station who assisted in making it an excuse might be found in the fact that they wished to clearly separate the disobedient from the pious, in order to slay those who would worship the calf. On the other hand, they sinned in causing what was only a sin of intention to become a sin in deed. This sin was not on a par with an entire lapse from all obedience to Him who had led them out of Egypt, as only one of His commands was violated by them. God had forbidden images, and in spite of this they made one. They should have waited

and not have assumed power, have arranged a place of worship, an altar, and sacrifices. This had been done by the advice of the astrologers and magicians among them, who were of opinion that their actions based on their ideas would be more correct than the true ones. They resembled the fool of whom we spoke, who entered the surgery of a physician and dealt out death instead of healing to those who came there. At the same time the people did not intend to give up their allegiance to God. On the contrary, they were, in theory, more zealous in their devotion. They therefore approached Aaron, and he, desiring to make their plan public, assisted them in their undertaking. For this reason he is to be blamed for changing their theoretical disobedience into a reality. The whole affair is repulsive to us, because in this age the majority of nations have abandoned the worship of images. It appeared less objectionable at that time, because all nations were then idolators. **Had their sin consisted in constructing a house of worship of their own, and making a place of prayer, offering and veneration, the matter would not have been so grave, because blessing through their means. We even say that God dwells in them, and that they are surrounded by angels.** If this were not essential for the gathering of our community, it would be as unknown as it was at the time of the kings, when the people were forbidden to erect places of worship, called heights. The pious kings destroyed them, lest they be venerated beside the house chosen by God in which He was to be worshipped according to His own ordinances. There was nothing strange in the form of the cherubim made by His command. In spite of these things, those who worshipped the calf were punished on the same day, and three thousand out of six hundred thousand were slain. The Manna, however, did not cease falling for their maintenance, nor the cloud to give them shade, nor the pillar of fire to guide them. Prophecy continued spreading and increasing among them, and nothing that had been granted was taken from them, except the two tables, which Moses broke. But then he pleaded for their restoration; they were restored, and the sin was forgiven.