

כִּי תִשָּׂא

THE GOLDEN CALF

The incident involving the Golden Calf was the bleakest moment of *Klal Yisrael's* early history. It was an act of infidelity of such magnitude that *Chazal* were moved to proclaim:

עלובה כלה מזונה בתוך חופתה

A shameless bride who plays the harlot within her bridal canopy (*Shabbos* 88:).

Due to this transgression, Hashem decreed that *Klal Yisrael* would not be permitted to enter *Eretz Yisrael* immediately; they were destined to wander in the wilderness for forty years (Rashi, *Bamidbar* 14:33). Three different punishments were effected against the transgressors: whoever sacrificed and burned incense died by the sword; whoever embraced and kissed the calf died by the plague; and whoever rejoiced in his heart died of dropsy (*Yoma* 66:). The two crowns which had been placed on the head of each Jew at *Kabalas Hatorah* were removed at the time of the *eigel* (*Shabbos* 88•). Even the *Shechinah* deserted *Klal Yisrael* (*Sotah* 3:), and only returned with the building of the *Mishkan* (Ramban, *Shemos* 25:2). As a result of the *eigel*, “there is not one misfortune suffered by *Klal Yisrael* that is not partly in retribution for the sin of the calf” (*Sanhedrin* 102•).

The actual sin of the *eigel* must be understood within the context of the world scene of that period and within the context of the temperament of the newly created nation. The Jews had hoped for the fulfillment of Moshe's promise to provide something tangible or visible from Hashem, something which they could follow as they followed the “pillars of cloud and fire” when they departed from Mitzraim. Similarly, they faced toward the cloud of glory which hovered over Moshe while Hashem spoke to him; they stood and then bowed to Hashem (*Shemos* 33:9,10).

There was a miscalculation of when Moshe was to return from Mt. Sinai. A small segment of this great multitude, only three thousand out of a population of at least 1.2 million, was overcome by false notions and was instrumental in dividing the people into sinful factions. They never intended to challenge or deny the Divinity of Hashem who had brought them out of Egypt. They only sought something visible to act as an intermediary between themselves and Hashem (*Kuzari*, *Sha'ar* 5). For regarding the *eigel*, they openly exclaimed:

אלה אלקיך ישראל אשר העלוך מארץ מצרים

“This is your G-d, O Israel, which has brought you up out of the land of Egypt”
(*Shemos* 32:8).

They had seen the face of a calf at the *Kerias Yam Suf*; the calf was one of four images which had adorned the *merkavah*. They did not have the audacity to duplicate the face of man, so they settled for the next image — the calf. Also, the *keruvim* — cherubim — (which had human faces)

were images established on top of the *Aron Hakodesh* (*Shemos* 25:18-20). The sinners felt that ample precedent had been set for the utilization of images in holy situations.

In effect, this was a violation of Hashem's command. Hashem had forbidden them to make images. The *Cheruvim* and the *merkavah* were made with the permission of Hashem, but this *eigel* did not have Divine consent. They felt that self-inspired actions would be more pleasing to Hashem than those commanded by Him, but this was a grave error. They considered themselves to be zealous in their devotion and even enlisted the righteous Aharon to aid them in their religious fervor. Their sin lay in the fact that this act contravened the will of Hashem (*Kuzari* 5).

The ramifications of this sin were catastrophic. Moreover, this action provided ample ammunition for "the Falsifiers." They claimed that the *eigel* was the fountainhead of Jewish crimes against Hashem, throughout our history, which culminated in the crucifixion of their leader. The sin of the *eigel* served as proof that the Divine covenant with *Klal Yisrael* had never been consummated, leaving the Jewish claim to a special relationship with Hashem to be mere fantasy. Later, one of their theologians associated the calf cult with the worship of the devil. The Jews who drank the water into which the ground powder of the Golden Calf had been cast (*Shemos* 32:20) were identified by our enemies as devil worshippers. Moshe's intention in polluting the water supply with the ground-up *eigel* was to examine them using the procedure for a *sotah* — suspected woman (*Avodah Zarah* 44•); this act was also misconstrued. The Medieval identification of the Jew with the devil was no doubt influenced by this misdirected patristic interpretation.

The Torah, as always, never attempts to hide or suppress the ignomies of *Klal Yisrael*, but honestly and squarely places blame where it is deserved. It must be understood, however, that the sin of the *eigel* was instigated by the astrologers and the magicians of the *eirev rav* who had joined with *Klal Yisrael* (*Zohar Shemos* 32:1; Rashi *ibid.*7). The *eigel* was not the initiative of the children of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, but was the handiwork of the newcomers to *Klal Yisrael*. The newcomers were enthusiastic idealists in their devotion to Hashem. After all, eighty percent of *Klal Yisrael* were not permitted by Hashem to leave Mitzraim and to participate in *Kerias Yam Suf* and in *Kabalas Hatorah* (Rashi, *Shemos* 13:18), while an enormous number of the *Eirev rav* were permitted to participate with *Klal Yisrael*. Various numbers for the *eirev rav* are suggested, from 240,000 (*Targum Yonasan, Shemos* 12:38) to 900,000,000 (*Rabbeinu Bechaya, Shemos* 13:18). If eighty percent of *Klal Yisrael* were deemed unworthy of redemption, how is it plausible that such huge amounts of *geirim* were deemed worthy of redemption? How were they found worthy to participate in *Kerias Yam Suf* and in *Kabalas Hatorah*? The only logical answer is that they were lofty individuals who embraced the teachings of Hashem with their fullest energies. Their problem, however, was that when they encountered an extremely stressful situation, they fell back on solutions from their past with which they were comfortable. When they saw that Moshe did not return from *Shamayim*, and they feared that he was dead (*Shabbos* 89•), they felt abandoned and leaderless. They were enthusiastic individuals who required an immediate resolution to their problems. They did not lose faith in Hashem who took them out of Mitzraim (*Shemos* 32:4), but in an attempt to resolve their dilemma, they resorted to tactics with which they were familiar from their past. They made a bonfire, threw gold into it, ate and drank, made merry (*Shemos* 32:3-6; 32:18), and introduced idolatry (*Yerushalmi Taa'nis*

22:). They knew no other way; their only relief in a time of strain, was to recourse to familiar territory.

Chazal say

קשים גרים לישראל כספחת

Geirim are as difficult for *Klal Yisrael* as leprosy (*Yevamos* 47:).

This is due to the fact that the *geir* brings with him the baggage of his previous history. The *Gemara* (*Bava Metzia* 59:) teaches that a *geir* “has a strong inclination to evil.” Since his original character is bad (*ibid.*), a stressful situation might cause him to relapse. Rashi (*Horayos* 13•) compares the latent evil character of the *geir* to the destructive nature of a mouse, who delights in making mischief just for the fun of it. Hence, it is not surprising that when Moshe Rabbeinu failed to reappear on time, the stress of the situation caused the *eirev rav* to revert back to their original character. The strain and tension of the moment so completely overwhelmed them that they relapsed into the behavior with which they were most familiar — idolatry.

The obvious lesson from this is that newcomers to religious observance should take a back seat in the congregation and not attempt to take over in leadership positions. The newcomer, by the very fact that he elected to abandon his old ways and voluntarily embrace a new way of life, demonstrates that he possesses a great deal of enthusiasm, vigor and zeal. These great qualities must be curbed, and he must learn from the establishment. These good qualities alone do not qualify that individual for a leadership position because his essential background is deficient. Enthusiasm without knowledge is a dangerous quality. Had the *eirev rav* remained in the background, and not sought to lead *Klal Yisrael* in the search for a “new Moshe,” the course of history would have been significantly different.

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