

Hashem said to Moshe, “I have seen this people, and behold! It is a stiff-necked people. And desist from me...and I shall annihilate them. (32:9,10)

The severity of the *chet ha'eigel*, sin of the Golden Calf, is beyond description. It represents an egregious rebellion against Hashem, a sin for which we still are paying for to this very day. One would think that, after Hashem related to Moshe *Rabbeinu* the sequence of events leading up to the sin, He would have addressed the iniquitous sin which the people so flagrantly committed. Idol worship immediately after receiving the Torah was an unpardonable sin. Yet, all Hashem says is that *Klal Yisrael* is an *am kshei oref*, stiff-necked people. This is why Hashem is prepared to annihilate the entire nation – due to their self-asserting, pretentious nature? Being stiff-necked is certainly not a positive character trait, but is it the most important attribute in describing the sin of the Golden Calf?

Horav Sholom Schwadron, zl, explains that *kshei oref* is actually an extension of the sin of the Golden Calf. *Rashi* defines *kshei oref* as, “They turn their neck against those who rebuke them and (thus) refuse to listen.” This is quite possibly why they killed Chur when he attempted to reprove and stop them from continuing their descent to spiritual oblivion. Therefore, he explains that the actual sin was creating and worshipping the Golden Calf. It was their refusal, however, to listen to reason, to accept responsibility – by continuing to justify their nefarious sin – that caused their punishment.

We must realize that sin is an indication of error, of weakness, of a spiritual falling out. The justification which follows the sin, however, the qualifying of the sin, the lying to and degrading of those who only want to help, actually causes the punishment. This is similar to transforming the sin into a mutiny against Hashem. This does not *chas v'shalom*, Heaven forbid, in any way gloss over the sin; it is only a perspective on the punishment that follows. We all make mistakes; we all have our weak moments, but to transform them into ideologies, to rebuff and abuse those who would help us return, is the ultimate *chutzpah*. It is *kshei oref*, for which there is no countenance.

The first step following a spiritual fall is to concede that one has sinned – not to blame it on the whole world, as many do. I just read the expose of a young ex-*Chassidic* woman who left the fold. She rants and raves about everyone, her parents, teachers, *Rav*, friends, etc. At no time does she concede in any way that she might be wrong. She projects blame on others, as a means for justifying her crude behavior. Parents are the first scapegoats, followed by the system. It is never the individual who executed the sin. This is why the sin of the Golden Calf still haunts us to this very day. We are still qualifying our egregious behavior, refusing to accept the responsibility, to listen to reason, to talk it out. Why? Because that would mean conceding that we might be wrong. This is where our *kshei oref* kicks in, preventing us from accepting responsibility for our deplorable behavior.