

Go! Go down! For your people that you brought up from the land of Egypt has become corrupt ...They hand made themselves a molten calf. (32:7,8)

The idyllic relationship that had emerged between Hashem and *Bnei Yisrael* when we overwhelmingly accepted the Torah at *Har Sinai* changed with the sin of the Golden Calf. After the *chet ha'eigel* – nothing has been the same. Had Moshe *Rabbeinu* not intervened, it would have been – deservedly – all over. Indeed, the sin continues to dog us to this very day since, in variations, we have yet to comprehend the repeat performances we have in some way presented. *U'b'yom pakdi u'pokadeti aleihem chatasam*, “And on the day that I make My account, I shall bring their sin to account against them” (ibid. 32:34). The sin of the Golden Calf cannot be completely expunged, because it left an indelible taint on the People, a spiritual malfeasance affecting the entire nation. It has not left us, as the errors in faith, which precipitated the Golden Calf, continue to plague us.

In order to understand the concept of *u'b'yom pakdi u'pakaditi*, fully, and how we continue to exhibit a faithlessness akin to the manner exhibited with the creation of the Golden Calf, it is necessary that we try to understand the actual sin, so that we may clearly observe its present mutation.

It is understood that the nation that followed the lead of the *erev rav*, mixed multitude, in constructing the *eigel ha'zahav* was misled in error and incognizant of the gravity of its sin. That was the beginning. As in all sin, once the breach has been made, the follow-up becomes justifiable in the eyes of the sinner, for he has found excuses for his malevolent behavior. The people sought tangibility in their service, something or someone corporeal to which they could relate. Not everyone is capable – especially following 210 years of Egyptian slavery, culture and idolatry – to establish mental focus on a Supreme Being, a monotheistic G-d, whom they cannot see or hear. It is a process which they were circumventing. They did not realize that there are no shortcuts in achieving spiritual ascendance.

We do not require images, be they temples made of mortar and steel, to define our worship. Hashem is a personal G-d Who can be reached from wherever we may find ourselves. The use of an image in order to foster awareness is outrageous to us. The *shul* -- or any religious edifice for that matter -- exists for the pure utilitarian purpose of service as a place of assembly.

We may ask, why then did Hashem command us to construct the *Mishkan* which was to serve to atone for the *eigel*? If image is wrong, if it reeks of paganism, what is there about the *Mishkan* and the *Keruvim*, which were images, that is different? This question is asked in the *Kuzari*, and the answer defines Torah Judaism. He writes: “Their only sin was in their use of an image and making use of a choice of symbol entirely on their own, without first being told to do so by a *tzivui* Hashem, a command from G-d.”

The *Mishkan* teaches us (and this is one manner in which it atones for the sin of the *eigel*) that we may relate to Hashem only as He defines, not as we want. We do not worship Hashem according to our intellect, whim or fancy. We serve Him obediently in the manner that He commands us. We do not serve Hashem in a manner that makes us feel “good”, “close to Him”. We serve at His pleasure and dictate. Thus, the *Keruvim*, which are images, are not only permissible, they are critical to the construction of the *Mishkan* – because Hashem has so commanded. Perhaps this is why the *Keruvim* are fashioned from the same ingot of gold as the *Kapores*, Cover of the *Aron*. This teaches that such an image is part and parcel of the *Mishkan*, because it is Hashem’s command. When man acts of his own volition, in response to his own intelligence, it is an *eigel*.

Anyone reading these lines understands that we are alluding to one of the major issues plaguing our people: religious pluralism. There is only one way to serve Hashem, as dictated by Him and interpreted by our Sages. Anything less than complete obedience to the word of G-d is self-worship as defined by the *eigel ha’zahav*. Interestingly, the worshippers of the Golden Calf had no qualms concerning defiling themselves through their profligate behavior. They “served” Hashem by debauching themselves before an idol. As long as we ascribe to similar forms of the self-worship evinced by the *eigel hazahav*, we will be relegated to suffer the consequences of our actions – or inactions!