

I have seen this nation and behold they are a stiff-necked nation. (32:9)

The chet ha'eigel, sin of the Golden Calf, is the first collective rebellion against Hashem by the nation that had just earlier accepted the Torah. Understandably, with our limited ability, we are unable to fathom the sin. What provoked it, its egregiousness, its roots in the mindset of the people? We can, however, piece together various correlative events which shed light on this defining sin. When we take note of the haftorah, reading from the Prophets, which describes Eliyahu HaNavi's showdown with the prophets of the Baal idol, we are enlightened with regard to a new concept of sin and also to the error committed by the Jewish People.

Let us first develop perspective on the sin committed by the Jewish People during the time of Eliyahu HaNavi: In his rebuke to the nation, Eliyahu asks them, Ad masai atem poschim al shtei ha'seifim, "Until when will you dance between two opinions?" The people were acting ambiguously – do they follow the Prophets of Hashem, or the false prophets of the Baal? Eliyahu put it to them simply – but firmly. "If Hashem is the G-d – follow Him. And if it is the Baal – follow him!" (Melachim I 18:21). Eliyahu intimated that there can be no ambiguity in religion. When one worships two deities, when his allegiances are conflicted, he has nothing. From Eliyahu's declaration, we can deduce that it is preferable to worship an idol than to amend idol worship to one's service of Hashem!

Were the Jewish People who made the Golden Calf any different? They claimed that they needed an intermediary to replace Moshe Rabbeinu who had "gone missing." Moshe descended the mountain and gave them his response by breaking the Luchos, Tablets. Torah and idol worship do not mix. It is either – or.

In his commentary to Pirkei Avos 1:5, Rabbeinu Yonah (cited by Horav Shlomo Wolbe, zl,) writes: "Thoughts of Torah and thoughts of promiscuity are two opposing thoughts, which the heart cannot tolerate together." Likewise, explains Rav Wolbe, Torah observance and idolatry do not mix. They are incompatible with one another. Torah observance requires temimus, absolute purity, and Torah which is influenced, buffered, motivated, appended by idolatry is not true Torah. One is better off solely worshipping an idol than incorporating idol worship in his avodas HaKodesh, thereby corrupting Torah.

Rav Wolbe explains that Chazal specifically selected Eliyahu's showdown with the nevieei ha'baal as the haftorah for the parsha of the eigel ha'zahav due to the corollary between the two. When Klal Yisrael committed the chet ha'eigal, Hashem told Moshe that He has seen this nation, and they are a stiff-necked nation. The reason for their punishment was not idolatry, but the negative character of stiff-neckedness which lay at the root of their sin How does stubbornness affect one to the point that he falls prey to the urge to make a Golden Calf? This came shortly after receiving the Torah and the beginning of a new life, a new relationship with Hashem. Rav Wolbe explains that inculcated stubbornness renders one unable to give up old routines and habits with which he was raised and with which he is comfortable. This is despite the fact that he is acutely aware that he has turned the page and that, in his present state, they are no longer appropriate. Moshe Rabbeinu was their leader, and now he was gone. They felt that they needed a replacement. While in Egypt,

idolatry was a way of life, so why not now? Now, without Moshe, they would create a molten image to take his place. What about the fact that it smacked of idolatry? They would simply revert to the “Egypt mode.” Their stubborn tendency kicked in and told them that, if idolatry was good enough in Egypt, why not now?

Stubbornness and idol worship are dangerous when fused. Idolatry was in their past; stubbornness allowed them to return to their past iniquity and even feel good about it. Although on the surface the two aspects of their sin seem unrelated to one another, the Mashgiach explains that, indeed, a common thread courses between them: both reflect a lack of temimus, earnest and sincere commitment to Hashem. Temimus is the ability to live wholeheartedly with Hashem. When one refuses to relinquish his old harmful predispositions, he worries about the past, the future and everything in between. Torah observance demands purity of mind in which one maintains complete focus only on Hashem – no other entity, no other ideas that run counter to our belief in Hashem. This problem continues to haunt us to this very day. While today it is not about idolatry, we still are guilty of “dancing between the two opinions.” We continue to straddle the fence with regard to our full commitment to Hashem. I am not talking about those who maintain dual interfaith allegiances. They have nothing, because they have reduced their religion to a superfluous addenda. They ignore the profundity, tradition and sacrifice involved in Judaism. To them, it is nothing more than lox and bagels on Sunday, masquerades on Purim, latkes and dreidel on Chanukah, matzah balls, gefilte fish and wine on Pesach. They did away with Shabbos long ago, with no real need for Rosh Hashanah and Succos. Yom Kippur still has value, otherwise they could not have their break the fast meal at the local restaurant. Kashrus went out the door about the same time as Shabbos. I address, however, those of “our own” who attempt to secularize, liberalize and minimize the Torah, halachah and the long-standing traditions that have kept us apart from the rest of the world. The new catchwords are “acceptance” “change” “modernity” and “openness.” The lines of demarcation between men and women with regard to serving Hashem have been breached by those who seek change and demand acceptance. They forget that halachah is not man-made and tradition is an ideal for which our forebears sacrificed. Morality, tznius, family life and respect for Torah leaders have been undermined, impugned, and, in some instances, trashed. While this was something that might have been expected from the secular streams, it is shameful when those who were raised to respect halachah, represent tznius – both in moral modesty and a mindset that bespeaks humility – are the ones to eschew both. Those who straddle both sides of the fence have been afflicted with the same insecurity that led to the stubbornness that created the eigel. There is a forum for halachic discussion; it certainly is not social media. When Rebbetzin Sara Schenirer a.h. wanted to initiate change, she spoke to – and received the support of – the gedolei Yisrael. Someone who is not willing to take this approach apparently knows what the response will be.