

Moshe pleaded before Hashem, his G-d. (32:11)

A distinction exists between a sin that reveals an essential moral flaw and a spiritual shortcoming and one that is the result of circumstantial pressures. A surface-level sin is an error in action or inaction resulting from impulsivity, ignorance or external pressures. This type of sin, although baneful, does not necessarily reflect the sinner's true character or values. The sins are nonetheless significant, but rectifiable via the medium of *teshuvah*, repentance.

A sin which is deeply-rooted in a spiritual flaw reveals deeper issues within a person's moral/spiritual psyche. His actions are not isolated errors, rather of profound misalignment with Torah values. Actions are defined by constancy and persistence. One can claim mistake – once, twice; if it becomes, however, a constant, it reveals a deficiency in one's character. In short, sin can be an aberration or it can be a reflection of the sinner's essential character.

Let us now turn to the grievous sins which the nascent Jewish nation committed as it journeyed to the Promised Land. While these were not the only infractions they committed, they stand in a league of their own in terms of what they represent concerning the nation's character. First was the *cheit ha'eigel*, sin of the Golden Calf, which, in fact, resembled idolatry. *Bnei Yisrael's* behavior reflected moral turpitude; their declaration, *Eileh elohecha Yisrael*, "These are your gods, *Yisrael*," was idolatrous. Yet, Moshe *Rabbeinu* prayed on their behalf, even invoking the merit of the *Avos ha'Kedoshim*, saintly Patriarchs. Apparently, as bad as the Golden Calf was, they had yet to cross the red line.

The second sin was the over-reaction to the report, issued by the *meraglim*, spies, sent by Moshe. The Jewish response of uncontrolled, unwarranted weeping, with a call to return to "lovely" Egypt where they had "so much," crossed the line and went too far. They declared, "Let us appoint a new leader and return to Egypt." Such behavior, while not on the level of idol creation as was the Golden Calf, nonetheless represented a moral/spiritual flaw that prevented Moshe from praying for them. He emphasized that, if Hashem were to immediately decimate the people, *v'shamu Mitzrayim*, the Egyptians would hear and spin their own version of what had happened, claiming that Hashem had been unable to follow through with bringing them into *Eretz Yisrael*. He did not invoke *z'chus Avos*, because he felt this generation had proven themselves unworthy of entering the Land.

How are we to understand the dichotomy between these two sins? *Horav Moshe Tzvi Nariyah, zl*, explains that the nation's reaction to the slanderous report of the spies merely indicated their weakness and fear. They had been slaves for 210 years, and all they knew was Egypt. As miserable as their lives were there, they knew what to expect and made peace with it. Going to *Eretz Yisrael*, according to the spies, was a lesson in futility. They had no chance of success. Thus, they wept like children – without any *seichel*, common sense. Their children, however, would be able to enter *Eretz Yisrael*.

When the nation created and worshipped the Golden Calf amid licentious revelry, they showed that something was seriously wrong with its spiritual character. Thus, when they declared, *Eileh elohecha Yisrael*, they crossed the line and deserved whatever punishment Hashem would mete out. Their sin was not mere surface dirt – it was a flaw in their essential character. Thus, Moshe prayed for them. Otherwise, they would have received the ultimate punishment. Indeed, Hashem has meted out a little of the punishment they deserved throughout the generations that have followed. Whenever we receive a Heavenly reprimand, it includes a partial reimbursement for the sin of the Golden Calf.