

They have strayed quickly from the way that I have commanded them; they have made themselves a molten calf. (32:8)

Six weeks after the seminal event in Jewish history – the Giving of the Torah – the nation demonstrated that all was not “good.” Thirty three hundred years later, we still experience the ramifications of *chet ha'eigel*, sin of the Golden Calf. Indeed, Hashem told Moshe *Rabbeinu*, *U'byom pakdi u'pakedeti aleihem chatasam*, “And on the day that I make an accounting, I shall bring their sin to account against them” (*Shemos* 32:34). *Rashi* quotes the *Talmud Sanhedrin* 102a, where *Chazal* explain this *pasuk*: “There is no punishment that comes upon *Yisrael* which does not have in it some retribution for the sin of the Golden Calf.” It is truly difficult for us, more than three millennia removed from that dreadful day, to come to terms with some understanding of how such an exalted nation could descend to such a nadir of depravity [after experiencing the greatest event in Jewish history].

Reasons are beyond our grasp, but lessons are not only within our level of comprehension – they are a requirement, a necessary tool to guide how a Jew should live and how he should serve Hashem. Every experience – both good and bad – imparts a lesson about which we must ruminate and with which we should imbue our lives. The most glaring lesson to be derived from the sin of the Golden Calf is that evil is not prejudiced. The *yetzer hora*, evil-inclination, can destroy anyone, regardless of his greatness and in spite of everything that he has experienced. Man is no match for the *yetzer hora*, and he must be acutely aware of that. *Horav Moshe Rosenstein, zl*, asked **Horav Yeruchem Levovitz, zl**, this question: How could a nation that was so spiritually refined, that had been exposed to so much holiness and revelation of Godliness, plummet almost overnight to such a low point? The answer was simple, but incredibly profound: “This is the power of the *yetzer hora* .”

Horav Eliyahu Lopian, zl, would often relate how a young student, an exceptionally brilliant and holy student, lost an opportunity for spiritual distinction beyond anyone's dreams, in one night. At the funeral of *Horav Moshe Kordovero, zl*, author of the *Tomar Devorah*, the *Arizal* observed this young man who was in attendance. Speaking to him later on, the young man revealed that he had seen *amudah d'nehora*, an invisible pillar of Heavenly Fire, following behind the body of the deceased as it was carried to its final resting place. *Rav* Moshe Kordovero was, indisputably, a holy man. The fact that the young man saw what only the *Arizal* had been able to discern, was indicative of his own exalted spiritual plateau. The *Arizal* asked to speak with him again the next morning. It was the intention of this great mystic to propose his daughter to the young man. The next day, the young man showed up, but, for some reason, the *Arizal* gave him the cold shoulder. Afterwards, the *Arizal* explained that he had noticed on the young man's forehead an indication that he had sinned that night. Overnight, he fell from his lofty, spiritual perch.

Horav Yerachmiel Kromm, Shlita, supports the notion of the invincibility of the *yetzer hora* with

proof from Yaravam *ben* Nevat, whose erudite knowledge towered above that of all the scholars of his generation. It was no wonder that he was selected to succeed as Shlomo *Hamelech's* heir to the throne. Yet, due to a smidgen of envy for Rechavam's lineage from *Shevet Yehudah*, which allowed him to sit in the *Azarah* of the *Bais Hamikdash*, while Yaravam, who descended from *Shevet Ephraim*, could not, he diverted *Klal Yisrael* from going up to Yerushalayim. He was a *choteh u'machati es ha'rabim*, a sinner who also induced others to sin. Such a great man fell due to a twinge of unfounded jealousy. One cannot change his lineage. Obviously, Hashem wanted Yaravam to descend from the tribe of Ephraim. Live with it! He could not, and, as a result, he destroyed his life and the lives of countless others. Rather than go down in history as an exalted Jew worthy of emulation, he was recorded in infamy as a *choteh u'machati*.

Rav Kromm derives another important lesson from the *chet ha'eigal: metinus*, patience. The *Satan* succeeded in taking down the nation because they were befuddled, literally not knowing if they were coming or going. Everything was done *b'mehirus*, impetuously. They were impatient. Moshe had not returned on time. So what? Perhaps they were mistaken about his time of arrival. Why not give him the benefit of the doubt? When one lacks patience, is impulsive, acts without thinking the subject through, he will make critical mistakes, disastrous mistakes, like the Golden Calf. We are still paying for the impetuosity that they exhibited. "Seize the moment" applies to something good – not something bad. *Saru maheir min ha'derech*, "They have strayed quickly from the way": When one is flustered, not thinking cogently, he will make foolish, unforgivable mistakes.

Last, we learn from Moshe *Rabbeinu* exactly what should be the reaction when sinful behavior reaches a point of such depravity that there really is no return. He broke the *Luchos*. The Tablets had been fashioned by G-d. As such, they were no ordinary creation. Why did Moshe have to shatter them? Was there no other way for him to prove a point? Apparently, Moshe understood that if the nation had fallen to such a low point that they were dancing around a molten calf of their own creation, mere words would have no effect. He had to awaken them, to shatter their reverie, to bring them back to reality. Nothing less than breaking Hashem's handiwork would send the necessary message: It is all over. You have just acted in a manner so egregious that there is no other recourse but shattering the *Luchos*. You may do *teshuvah* and even receive a second set of *Luchos*, but, you have lost the first ones forever.

Indeed, Moshe's message worked, for, from that day on, until after Moshe's death, the nation never again lapsed in their relationship to Hashem. They complained; they bickered; they doubted, but they never turned to an idol. Moshe got his point across to them.

It becomes a serious problem when one begins to accept the behavior of others, which under normal circumstances would be offensive. Our comfort zone sadly seems to change when we become complacent. What used to be a *shonda*, shameful, now becomes tolerable. Fashionableness that once bespoke a level of sophistication today engenders an ambience of wanton shamelessness. What once troubled us, today has become trendy. Our comfort zone has been altered and, once this occurs, nothing short of an epic and shocking incident will rouse us

from our slumber. Shattering the *Luchos* was Moshe's version of a wake-up call.