

Go, descend – for your people has become corrupt... they have strayed quickly from the way that I have commanded them. They have made themselves a molten calf. (32:7,8)

Hashem ordered Moshe *Rabbeinu* to return to his people. They were no longer worthy of his leadership. They had quickly strayed – they had made a molten idol. Upon reading the text, the first question that emerges is: Was this a digression in which they first strayed, and their turning away from Hashem ultimately led to the nadir of idol worship? Or, is it all one sin, in which the people strayed by creating and worshipping the idol?

Let us return to the text: when Hashem informs Moshe that his people have strayed quickly. Does it really make a difference if their breach came quickly, or slowly over time? A sin is a sin. It is related in the name of *Horav Yeruchem Levovitz, zl*, who explains that it was not impossible to fathom that, over some time, with exposure to the mundane issues of everyday life, the impression of the awesome fiery spectacle of Revelation would begin to wane. Indeed, unless one acutely works on reviewing and renewing the events which led up to – and including – the Revelation, it soon becomes part of “history,” and one becomes victim to the dangers of complacency. For *Klal Yisrael* to lose the emotion that accompanied Revelation in a mere forty days, however, smacked of more than mundane influence. It gave the indication that when they stood at *Har Sinai* and accepted the Torah, it was not with whole-hearted compliance. If such a seminal experience can be so quickly lost, it is an indication that they had never fully accepted the Torah. This was the underlying tragedy of *saru ma’heir*; they quickly strayed. [Indeed, when the effect of one’s religious experience quickly dissipates, it bespeaks a lack of genuineness. Contrived experiences, with all the singing and hoopla, the dancing and *kumzitz*, should last more than an hour or two. If it does not, it lacks spiritual integrity.]

With this idea in mind, we may suggest that the Golden Calf was the nadir of their “quickly strayed.” It took forty days until they blatantly showed how far they had plummeted. It began with *saru ma’heir*, and they then descended to *asu la’hem eigel maseichah*.

Horav Chaim Shmuelevitz, zl, asks the same question: How did they fall so quickly from the apex of spirituality to the nadir of depravity? Indeed, *Chazal* (*Shabbos* 105) teach that the *yetzer hora*, evil inclination, does not work like this. It has extraordinary patience. One day, it tells the individual, “Do this.” The next day, it encourages the sinner to commit another minor breach. All of these “innocuous” infractions, with time lead to full-blown idol worship. If so, how did they, almost overnight, become captives of the *yetzer hora*?

The *Rosh Yeshivah* explains that, when Moshe was “late” (according to their erroneous calculations), the people became very anxious, thinking that he was gone, and they were now leaderless, a ship without a rudder. This anxiety transformed into full-fledged depression. When one is depressed, nothing prevents him from slipping and falling into the abyss of sin. When

someone is depressed, his self-esteem takes a significant hit. He may have negative thoughts about himself, his worth, and his abilities. In such a state, individuals might engage in behaviors they would not consider when they are emotionally balanced.

Furthermore, one who is depressed may forget to whom he owes his life and success. He may lose his sense of gratitude. He simply does not care. Such a person is now vulnerable to the manipulations of the *yetzer hora*.

Perhaps this is why the people singing and dancing, that accompanied their idol worship so angered Moshe. If they were so depressed – why were they singing? If they had given up hope, thrown in the towel – why were they dancing? Unless, this, too, was a sign of depression. They simply did not care.

We may suggest a practical approach toward coming to terms with the nation's sudden about-face and its tragic repercussion.

Horav Mordechai Gifter, zl, Telshe Rosh Yeshivah, would often relate the story of his journey from America to Lithuania. Hundreds of travelers were taking their minds off the long voyage with party after party. The ship had become an entertainment center on water. Suddenly, in middle of the trip, a massive storm interrupted their frivolity at sea. The heavy ship was tossed around as the wind pushed the waves higher and higher. They all thought this was it. They feared the end was near – the ship was no match for the fierce storm. The passengers were panic-stricken; family members bid farewell to one another. Then, as suddenly as it started – it stopped, and the water became calm. The transformation was almost weird – like suddenly from night to day. The *Rosh Yeshivah* thought for sure that his fellow travelers had learned their lesson, and they would act differently now that they had confronted the sobering truth of their own mortality. However, nothing of the sort happened. No sooner had the sea calmed down, and the winds dissipated, than the parties began once again in earnest. In fact, they had become more frivolous now that they had confronted death – and survived. He could not believe what he was observing.

The experience troubled him greatly, and, when he arrived in Telshe, he posed his dilemma to the *Rav – Horav Avraham Yitzchak Bloch, zl*. How could people stare at death one moment and carry on with abandon in the next moment – as if nothing had happened?

“This is not a question at all,” the *Rav* replied. “*Dos iz a mentch*, ‘This is a human being!’” This is the true nature of a human being – one minute overcome with fear – the next minute filled with unconstrained joy. Likewise, *Klal Yisrael* stood in awe at the foot of *Har Sinai*, but as human beings, their reactions were not etched in stone. When the urge to join the frivolity surrounding the Golden Calf surfaced, they joined the party, because, after all, they were only being human.