

STEADFAST GRATITUDE

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

As part of the ongoing recounting of the desert experience this week in Parshas Ekev, Moshe discusses the Eigel HaZahav, the sin of the Golden Calf. First he tells the Jewish nation about his journey to the top of Sinai, where he remained for forty days and forty nights. *"Then I ascended the mountain to receive the Tablets of stone, the Tablets of the covenant that Hashem sealed with you, and I remained on the mountain for forty days and forty nights; bread I did not eat, and water I did not drink* (Deuteronomy 9:9).

He then discusses the sin of the Golden Calf, where the nation chose to erect a new deity to serve, causing Moshe to descend the mountain enraged and smash the luchos. He then tells how Hashem wanted actually to destroy the nation and begin anew. It was only Moshe's interference, praying once again for forty days and nights, that led to their absolution.

What seems somewhat difficult to understand is the interjection of Moshe's miraculous sustenance not eating or drinking for forty days. Why is it inserted in the story. In Shemos (Chapter 34) it has a place as Hashem describes the miracles He performed as part of the Torah-transfer process. But here, in Moshe's narrative, it seems self-appreciating. After all, was Moshe's ability to survive forty days sans physical nourishment his act?

Or was it rather another miracle in what was clearly one of the most miraculous events in world history? And if so, why mention it here?

From the annals of talking with some yeshiva principals, I would like to share the following story, as it may shine a light on Moshe's words:

A number of years ago, one particular yeshiva student entered 9th grade. In his elementary school, this youngster earned a reputation for being very bright, but also being one of the wildest and most innovative troublemakers that a school can afford! The high school was afraid to accept him, but his potential for success and his parent's good standing in the community helped them decide to take a chance.

The dean of the school wanted to place him in a class with a no-nonsense, make-'em-work type of rabbi, but the high school's principal strongly disagreed.

He wanted to put him into a class that had a new teacher, a quiet young man who hardly spoke

above a whisper. In addition to his low-key demeanor, the rabbi looked as frail and emaciated as a war-refugee. That rabbi's most outstanding trait, which was inversely proportional to his physical stature, was his love and devotion toward even the most difficult student.

The principal assured the dean that despite this young student's reputation, he would thrive with this rebbe. Against his better judgment, the dean consented.

What took place was truly remarkable. This young boy not only excelled in his Hebrew studies, but during class he never called out, sat quietly in his chair taking notes, and participated in all the discussions.

The dean asked the rabbi how he was able to calm him down, and the rabbi just shrugged. Then the dean decided to ask the boy himself. "What changed your classroom attitude this year?" asked the austere dean.

"What formula do we have that made you so successful? I'd love to know so I can share it with all our students."

"Sorry" smiled the boy. "It was not you or even the school. It's rebbe! You see, I thought to myself, how can I even think of making trouble. Rebbe is such a tzadik; he cares so much for me. I know that he even davens (prays) for my success, and I am almost sure that he even fasts for me! I may be a troublemaker, but I am surely no ingrate!"

Moshe, I am sure, did not take fasting forty days lightly. True, he survived it miraculously, but I am sure that it entailed giving his whole soul and most of his physical being to achieve that level. Hashem gave him the strength to finish what he wanted to actually do if it were humanly possible. He understood that Torah must be transmitted with mesiras nefesh, giving one's soul.

And that is why he mentions it here. You see, the sin of the Golden Calf was not only one against Hashem, so the nation should have realized how much strength, effort, and lifeblood Moshe gave to this mission. Their sin was not only a slap in G-d's face, it was also a rebuff of Moshe's efforts as well.

So next time we are about to rebel against G-d, we must realize and remember, we are not only negating G-d's word, but the efforts, the fasting, the tears, and the prayers of our parents, our grandparents, and our teachers. If fear of G-d does not stop us, maybe gratitude for his mortal messengers will.

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Drasha is the e-mail edition of FaxHomily, a weekly torah facsimile on the weekly portion which is sponsored by ***The Henry and Myrtle Hirsch Foundation***

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