

LIVING UP TO THE HIGHEST STANDARDS

by Rabbi Dovid Green

It would take many pages to properly do justice to the topic of the Sin of the Golden Calf which is contained in this week's parsha. Although that is impossible in such a forum as this, I would still like to touch on this topic, and provide food for thought, and perhaps a deeper understanding of this grievous sin and its repercussions.

To begin with, a brief synopsis. The Jewish Nation received the Torah on Mount Sinai on the morning of the sixth of the month of Sivan. Thirty nine days later, on the seventeenth of the month of Tamuz, after this incredible and earth-shaking experience, The Jews were worshipping the golden calf. G-d, Who had been teaching Moshe the Torah on Mount Sinai, tells him that he must go down from the mountain for "his" people have become corrupt. They are worshipping graven images. Moshe pleads with G-d not to destroy the nation, and goes down to the camp. Upon seeing the idol and the goings on, he casts down the tablets of the ten commandments, and smashes them to pieces. He then destroys the idol and punishes the perpetrators. The next morning, after admonishing the people, Moshe makes his way back up Mount Sinai to try to achieve forgiveness on behalf of the Jewish people. Approximately eighty days later, Moshe does just that, and a new agreement is made with G-d, and two new tablets are given.

The sages of the Talmud liken this sin to a bride who commits adultery while still under the wedding canopy. As they say, "Disgraced is the bride who acts immorally (even while) inside her wedding canopy." It is in these extreme terms that they criticize that generation. The paradox is that immediately after in the next breath they write "The Rabbis taught: those who bear insult, and don't insult in kind, who listen to their disgrace, and don't answer back, about them the verse states (Judges 5) and those who love Him (G-d) are like the rising of the sun in its strength."

These words are also referring to the generation who "committed adultery while still under her wedding canopy." However, in this statement the generation is praised in the highest terms, and called those who love G-d! It seems to imply that they had an answer had they chosen to speak up. Furthermore, this generation is praised for its level of fear of G-d (Deuteronomy 5). The sages state that no generation would have been able to receive the Torah besides this one.

To reconcile these apparent contradictions, the sages make an incredible statement. "This act was not befitting such a great generation, the only reason they made the golden calf was to give an opening for those who sin to repent." This means to say that they were put in that dangerous situation to

teach the subsequent generations that no matter how bad they might be, they can change for the better, even an entire generation, and be viewed by G-d with extreme favor.

Was it all worth it? A resounding YES! This is why. We live in such a world of grey areas. We are constantly forced to make decisions. We all make our share of regrettable decisions. We all experience guilt. Let me quote Rabbi Avraham J. Twersky from his book Let Us Make Man. "Guilt is an important sensation which can function or malfunction. When functioning properly guilt is constructive...Healthy guilt, like physical pain, is a warning signal that there is a threat of something dangerous happening to the person, or that something has already happened, and needs correction. Guilt is to improper behavior what pain is to physical injury...Similarly, guilt is a distressful feeling which deters people from violating their values, or serves as an indicator that one has transgressed a value and needs to do something to bring the system back to proper functioning."

What the Torah teaches us regarding transgression is that we can do something to bring the system back to proper functioning. The generation that sinned with the golden calf was able to set things straight. Even though they fell from the most elevated plain, they returned to their exalted spiritual state through soul searching, understanding what brought them to their low state of behavior, and a sincere desire to correct it. This is relevant and valuable to all of us. Anyone who wishes sincerely to do so can reach the highest of heights no matter how far he/she has fallen. We should never give up on living up to the highest standards.

Good Shabbos!

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