

A MOMENT TOO LONG

by Rabbi Dovid Green

The Sin of The Golden Calf is a story which really deserves many pages of discussion. There are some obvious questions which must be reconciled in order to have any understanding of what actually happened. We'll begin with the storyline according to the traditional sources.

In the afternoon of the day that the Torah was given, Moshe went up to Mount Sinai for a forty day period. He spent that time in a completely spiritual existence learning with G-d. On the thirty ninth day the Jewish Nation at the foot of the mountain were mistakenly expecting Moshe. Seeing that he wasn't coming, they came to the conclusion that he was dead. They approached Aaron who was left in charge, and requested a "god that will go before us." Aaron seems to agree, and tells the nation to go home and get the gold rings from their wives and children. Then it states that they removed the gold rings that were in "their" ears and they brought them to Aaron. Aaron melted down the gold, and formed it into a golden calf. Then, "they (in plural) said "this is your god, Israel." The Torah states then, "and Aaron saw, and he set out to build an altar before it. Everything being ready, he declared "a celebration for G-d tomorrow!" The people got up early the next morning, brought sacrifices, and began celebrating.

Rabbi Eliyahu Ki Tov, in his work "Sefer HaParshios", asks several questions, and dedicates approximately 20 pages in answering them. Here are some of his questions and answers.

1. Was Aaron also mistaken about when Moshe was supposed to return? If not, couldn't he have explained to the people to just wait another day?
2. Why did Aaron agree immediately to participate?
3. Why in particular did Aaron ask for the gold rings from the wives and children?
4. When the Jews left Egypt, a mixed multitude of people who were not from the Children of Israel followed along with Moshe's permission. They are often blamed for instigating sinful behavior such as the golden calf. Why are they blamed for being the ones who said "this is your god Israel"? Is it just an easy way to shift the blame from the Children of Israel?

Many of these questions are answered by understanding what the sages say about this entire event. The mixed multitude started the whole thing. Aaron's actions are a response to their demands, and were actually designed to stall for time, and prevent the Jews from falling as low as they did. Rabbi Ki Tov explains the nature of the test that the Jews were undergoing. The nation had just recently experienced prophesy on a very high level at the giving of the Torah. Subsequently they were

brought back to a relatively mundane reality, and made to wait 40 days for Moshe to return. One can imagine that every moment waiting for Moshe was like an eternity. Their desire to get close to G-d was extremely strong, and Moshe had become the go-between who broadened that connection. This explains why Aaron could not have asked them to continue waiting. Another moment was too long.

One can imagine that the encampment of the nation was quite large. There were at least three million people there. It was most likely several miles in radius. According to traditional sources, Moshe told them that he would return by midday on the fortieth day. They waited for Moshe until midday. That leaves only one half of a day to prepare the idol and all that they did. Aaron sent everyone home to get the gold rings from their wives and children. Aaron knew the wives would be more objective, and refuse. That would take quite a long time for everyone to arrive home, request the gold rings, and then return. Aaron was correct. Notice that it states that the people removed their own gold rings that were in their ears. That is because they couldn't get the ones from their wives.

How long must it have taken to actually make the idol? It all took place in one afternoon. Quite a bit happened in a very short time. After it was made people began to call the idol the G-d of Israel. At that point a brave and righteous man named Chur attempted to rebuke the people. He was killed. Aaron "saw", and began to build an altar before the idol. What did Aaron see? He saw that Chur was killed. Does that mean that Aaron did this because he feared for his life? The sages say that he "saw" that the nation was not objective, and he was the only force who could keep total anarchy from breaking loose. He tried to stall the nation in every way possible. That is why the Torah states that Aaron built the altar personally. This way it would take longer. Lastly, when the altar was completed, Aaron declared "A celebration for G-d tomorrow!" He was able to put off the nation serving the idol until the next day. Hopefully by then Moshe will have come. All that we have said so far is implied in the verses if they are read carefully. This certainly paints a very different picture of Aaron. His actions were carefully thought out, and designed to minimize the sin as much as possible. Perhaps this is why Aaron becomes the high priest later. His love and concern for his people are such, that he went out on a limb for them to prevent them from creating a wall between themselves and G-d through idol worship. He and his offspring became the representatives to G-d for our own atonement forever.

Why are the mixed multitude blamed? The reason is that they, in contrast to the Children of Israel, were not accustomed to difficulties. They lived in relative comfort in Egypt. They were great people though, and their hearts moved them to follow the Jewish Nation into the wilderness to an unknown destination and fate. G-d tested the Jewish People many times in the wilderness with hunger, thirst, and other troubles, and the Jews who were accustomed to difficulties in Egypt were better prepared to handle these new ones. The mixed multitude did not fare as well, and when they were put through trying experiences, their commitment wavered. Old habits began to set in. This is the reason why these people are continually cited by the sages as the instigators. Many of the Children of Israel fell prey to the provocations of the mixed multitude in times of pressure.

One of the great lessons learned from this entire episode is the ability for us to repent en masse. When Moshe indeed returned, he destroyed the idol, judged the worshipers, and returned to the mountain to achieve atonement for the nation. Moshe returned on Yom Kippur, The Day of Atonement, with the second tablets. The nation was given the commandment to build the tabernacle. Now they can give their gold in the service of G-d to show that they have repented. An entire nation sinned, and an entire nation was forgiven. Just as Moshe heard "Solachti", "I've forgiven you", may we all merit the same, speedily, in our days.

Good Shabbos!

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