

SERIOUS AFTER EFFECTS

by Rabbi Label Lam

When Yehoshua heard the voice of the people in their shouting, he said to Moshe: "There is a voice of battle in the camp!" (Shemos 32:17)

Yehoshua was alerting Moshe on the way down the Mount Sinai and he was describing the auditory signals and the alarming sounds of what would turn out to be the ugly celebration surrounding the Golden Calf. Almost no single incident in our history had such a devastating effect as the sin of the Golden Calf and it is also one of the most perplexing events ever.

It was only 40 days after everyone in the Nation of Israel heard directly from the The Almighty the first 2 of the 10 Commandments, "I am HASHEM you G-d" and "You shall not have any other G-d before Me..." How could it have happened that such a clear and open statement be countermanded within such a short period of time? The entire episode boggles the mind!

With a searing insight, the Sefas Emes, like a super sleuth or a skilled forensic scientists detects in Yehoshua's brief report the root cause of the sin of the Golden Calf. He explains that Yehushua was involved in the battle with Amalek and he sensed that Amalek was involved in this giant sin. "Even though before, the Clouds of Glory rejected from the camp anyone who was spiritually weak, now the infection was in the camp itself. It was about this that Yehushua decried that "there is a voice of battle in the camp". That brief encounter with Amalek on the way left a lingering effect that festered again in a moment of weakness and panic. This can be added into the calculation regarding the admonition to "remember what Amalek did to *you*". If Amalek cannot stop our march to Mount Sinai they can at least plant a ticking time bomb that will cause damage even after the fact.

It was many years ago that I was driving one of my Rebbeim back from an eye doctor appointment. As we were passing a well-manicured church I commented on how lovely they were keeping their property. He interrupted my praise and took the opportunity to tell me a fascinating story that gives support to the Hallacha that there are certain places we are not to use as reference points.

He told me that when Rabbi Aaron Kotler was just getting started in Lakewood he had a small but loyal and dedicated group of learning young men. One of those students was approaching him continually with questions of faith. Reb Aaron would carefully and sensitively answer his questions but he began to suspect that the source of his questions were not a sincere search for the truth. It was like the boy who puts his finger in the dyke and another leak erupts. This fellow was looking for a way out!

On one of his frequent trips to Williamsburg Reb Aaron took counsel with the previous Skverer Rebbe who asked him if this boy had any contact with any local churches. Reb Aaron was certain not but he followed up on the advice and he asked the boy. The fellow was adamant that he did not have any contact with any churches. Reb Aaron quizzed him further about how and when he goes to Yeshiva and which path he takes.

The boy then realized that on the way to Yeshiva at 7AM every day he passes by a certain church and he sets his watch to the clock in the bell tower. Reb Aaron assured him that was the source of his problem. That subtle acknowledgment gave a foothold of credibility, enough to subconsciously erode his confidence in Torah. How careful we have to be! Even a small injection of "doubt" (SAFEK - is the numerical value of Amalek) can have such **serious after effects**.