

CLASS 2 - PARSHAS KI SISA

by Rabbi Heshy Grossman

Moshe Rabbeinu descends from Har Sinai and discovers that Klal Yisrael has created a Golden Calf in his absence, a basis for idolatry. He casts to the ground the tablets of Hashem, stirring the Jewish people to repentance. Forgiven, but not forgotten, the sin of the Egel HaZahav echoes still. The suffering of the Jewish people throughout history is an element of retribution for this monumental sin.

Let us consider a number of questions.

What is it that gives this sin its comprehensive nature; how is it paradigmatic of all future misdeed? And how have the B'nai Yisrael sunk so quickly, from the pinnacle of Divine revelation to the depths of idolatry? Even so, why does Moshe break the Luchos? In the absence of a Divine command, what gave him the right to do so? Not only is he never rebuked, but Hashem ultimately praises his initiative.

1

"And I will send an angel before you, and send away the Canaani, the Emori, the Hitti... for I [Hashem] will not dwell in your midst, for you are a stiff-necked people, lest I destroy you on the way."

"And the nation heard this terrible word, and they mourned, and no man placed his crown upon him."

"VaYisnatzlu B'nai Yisrael Es Edyam MeiHar Chorev" - "And the B'nai Yisrael were removed from the crowns they had received at Har Chorev" (Shemos 33, 2-6)

What were these unique crowns that had been acquired after accepting the Torah?

'Edyam' parallels 'Eden', both words having the same numerical value.

At Har Sinai, Klal Yisrael had achieved an exalted level, that of Adam HaRishon in the Garden of Eden, before the sin. They were freed from the angel of death and ready to dominate the world stage, entering the Promised Land for eternity.

The sin of the Egel HaZahav parallels the original sin, and man falls from the heights of immortality, losing the crown that is his connection to the world above.

Let us explain these two pivotal events, demonstrating why they are the foundation of all subsequent sin.

As we asked in regards to the sin of the Golden Calf, how is it that Adam HaRishon, the direct

handiwork of G-d, can violate the one Mitzva he has?

Adam's choice was not as ours, a clear-cut decision: good or evil. Rather, he was obliged to distinguish between two versions of good; that which was truly G-d's will and the duplicitous sham proffered by the snake.

Let us explain.

In the world of Adam, evil did not exist. He was aware only of truth and falsehood. To violate G-d's word was unthinkable foolishness and meant opting for a world of anti-existence. He never imagined that were evil to be actualized in life man might choose to pursue it.

He reckoned as follows: The purpose of life is the revelation of G-d's presence, the sanctification of His name. In Eden however, when man is catered to by angels, spirituality is everywhere. If I will eat from the tree and allow for an element of darkness in existence, hiding G-d's Hand, the ultimate unmasking will enlighten the world in a way that is presently unimaginable.

Partaking from the Etz HaDa'as brought a new dimension to life. Evil was now transformed into a viable option, and man was forced to overcome its enchanting allure.

The sin in the desert is strikingly similar. A world with Moshe Rabbeinu as its guide is witness to Divine revelation. When Moshe fails to appear at the expected time, Klal Yisrael is panic-stricken. How are we to achieve our spiritual goals in his absence?

Ramban explains that the Golden Calf represented one element of the Divine chariot of Yechezkel's prophecy, specifically, the ox which draws the left side. The chariot symbolizes Divine providence, G-d's direction of worldly affairs. The ox plows the earth, representing the material bounty that sustains all life.

The people were guilty of this: separating one aspect of life from the unity that is the true basis of existence.

One as exalted as Moshe Rabbeinu, they felt, can grow spiritually with the open miracles of life in an arid desert. The average person, however, needs to recognize the truth on his own, and requires natural law in order to sanctify His Name. This is the Calf that they make real.

The physical functions of life, the apparent power of cause and effect, conceal G-d's presence. They certainly understood that it is the Hand of G-d that operates behind the scenes, but they hoped to serve as vehicles for His service. By empowering the Golden Calf, man will learn of its emptiness, recognizing cause and effect as a smokescreen, and negating its apparent control, bringing the world to a deeper recognition of Divine providence.

Though well-intentioned, as was Adam HaRishon, they did not sin as much as act foolishly. It is never wise to hide from G-d, for one can never be certain that the physical blandishments of a tempting world will be repulsed. Once open, the doorway to sin is not easily closed.

In short: the rationalization that engagement with a physical world will serve to reveal G-d's presence is an element of the original sin.

Let us now explain how they went wrong.

2

The Torah reveals a striking similarity in its introduction to both of these cardinal sins.

"And the woman saw that the tree was good to eat, and desirable to the eyes...."

"And the nation saw that Moshe was delayed in descending from the mountain...."

They followed their eyes.

Of this, we remind ourselves each day: "And do not stray after your hearts, or your eyes..."

The Torah's warning refers to material desire and temptation. Eyes present man with an attractive image, and only the intellect subjects that vision to critical analysis. While the insightful man can look beyond the surface and recognize lasting value, the man who follows his eyes is betrayed by a vision that senses nothing but physicality.

There are those who insist that the purpose of creation is achieved by the merging of man's spiritual self with the realities of the physical world. True. At times, it is necessary to lower one's self from the spiritual heights and confront the physical dimension of Olam HaZeh. But, this is a test, not a Mitzva. It is Adam's curse to work the land, one of the many obstacles facing man in his drive towards spiritual devotion. Success in the physical world is not our goal, nor should it be the focus of our attention.

This world may be a vehicle for the service of G-d. But, it is not an excuse for fun and pleasure.

Simply put, if it is the will of G-d that you hope to express, why does it taste so good?

This was their mistake.

As Queen Esther demonstrated when she entered the den of Achashverosh, sin is sometimes justified, when one's intentions are completely pure, an 'Aveirah Lishmah'. But, who is the man who can confidently state that he has no desire of his own?

When Moshe Rabbeinu destroys the Luchos, he leaves man with no option but to independently discover the truth. Is this not similar to the motive of those who produced the Golden Calf?

Unlike the people who hastily besieged Aharon, Moshe had long ago ceased to be concerned for himself, his every breath reflecting the word of G-d. On the contrary, his act of pure devotion is perfect atonement for the Original Sin - Part II, his was an 'Aveirah Lishmah'. While the people were guilty of undue attachment to a materialistic existence, Moshe Rabbeinu leads them once again, this

time to a discovery of the true value of Olam HaZeh. He eventually returns with the second Tablets, representing the Torah SheBa'al Peh. Under his tutelage, man does become partner with G-d, and his connection to this world does help to produce a different aspect of revelation.

Perhaps this is the lesson: only Moshe Rabbeinu can bring the word of G-d down from heaven. Without him, the best of intentions deteriorate into a dance before the Golden Calf. 3

"VaYashkimu MiMochoras VaYa'alu Olos, VaYagishu Shelamim, VaYeshev HaAm Le'Echol, V'Shasu, VaYakumu L'Tzachek" (Shemos 32, 6)

Hoping to serve their Creator, the nation initially offered varied sacrifices to G-d before descending towards idolatry. This slippery slope parallels the path of the ideological movements that have swept the Jewish people in recent times.

At first - 'Olos' - a burnt offering, dedicated completely to Hashem. The first stage of every revolution is marked by passion and fervor, the earnest commitment of the true believer.

As time goes on, the enthusiasm fades, the sacrifice offered is 'Shelamim'. While a portion remains dedicated to the Temple, the owner benefits as well. In other words, though enthusiasm for the cause is still present, man now attends to his own self-interest.

Ultimately, the original idea is forgotten, either in despair over unmaterialized promise, or having lived out its usefulness. Without ideals, and bereft of values, man is left to 'Echol V'Shasah' - eat and drink, with no hint of Divine sacrifice.

From here it's only a short step towards the abyss - 'VaYakumu L'Tzachek'.

We wait for G-d to repair the damage done. In the meantime, we can only pray, as Eliyahu on Har HaCarmel, in the Haftora of this week's Parsha.

"Aneni Hashem Aneni, V'Yed'u Ha'Am HaZeh Ki Attah Hashem HaElokim, V'Attah HaSibosa Es Libam Achoranis" (it is You who has turned their hearts astray)

'You have provided a place for them to turn away from You, and it is in Your Hand to repair their hearts towards You.' (Rashi)

JerusalemViews, Copyright (c) 1999 by Rabbi Heshy Grossman and Project Genesis, Inc.