

FAITH BASED INITIATIVE

by Rabbi Pinchas Avruch

"The people saw that Moshe had delayed in descending the mountain, and the people gathered around Aaron and said to him, 'Rise up, make for us oracles that will go before us, for this man Moshe who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what became of him!'" (Shemos/Exodus 32:1) The Jewish Nation miscalculated when Moshe's forty-day sojourn on Sinai was scheduled to be complete; they anticipated his return a day earlier than he was actually due. Concerned that he had perished, they begged that Aaron intervene to find a new leader for the nation. How did this evolve into the great act of betrayal that was the heathenish service of the golden calf?

"The wicked one watches for the righteous and seeks to kill him; but G-d will not forsake him to his hand, nor let him be condemned when he is judged." (Tehillim/Psalms 37:32-33) Rabbi Yisrael Salanter (1) explains that the Yetzer Hara (2) is "the wicked one" who possesses great strength to rule over all people if not for G-d's intervention to restrict him. But consistent with the teaching in Pirkei Avos (Ethics of the Fathers) that one sin leads to further sin (3), when a person takes the initiative to sin, G-d removes the Yetzer Hara's restrictions, allowing him to lead the sinner further astray.

Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler (4) expounds that when the Children of Israel started to worry about Moshe's delay, despite their knowledge that G-d had told Moshe that his stay on the mountain would be forty days and that he was in G-d's care throughout, they failed spiritually. They should have realized that Moshe's delay was due to a miscalculation on their part and, scared and perplexed as they were, should have reacted with an inward focus to realize that mere humans do not possess all the answers. Since they did not second guess their own presumptions, rather they allowed worry to enter their hearts, the Yetzer Hara gained license to challenge them further. Thus, he created darkness and a sense of gloom and confusion, to which the people responded that Moshe must certainly have died. That conclusion allowed the Yetzer to go a step further: he created an image in the heavens of a deceased Moshe being carried away. The Talmud (Shabbos 89a) explains that it was because of this vision of Moshe in the firmament that the people did not simply say "We do not know what happened to Moshe," rather they said "THIS man Moshe..." pointing to the image in heaven. Panicked by the thought of being leaderless, and firmly in the grip of the Yetzer, they were at the cusp of their horrific transgression when they approached Aaron and demanded new leadership.

Although the Yetzer Hara is now a few millennia older, his strength has not waned an iota and he has

not lost an ounce of his passion. He pursues the subversion of our G-d consciousness and connectedness with great fervor. Judaism does not believe in leaps of faith. The Hebrew for "faith" is "emunah", which comes from the root "emun" meaning training; a solid belief in G-d and his Torah comes from diligently toiling to understand, not from a moment of inspiration. Our forebears at Sinai proclaimed "We will do and we will listen." (24:7) Listening means expending the effort to study and inquire and understand how the Torah fills our lives with holiness; doing means that even before we achieve an understanding, we have the emunah to know that G-d loves us, gave us His holy Torah for our benefit and gave us Sages who do understand to counsel us. Throughout our life's journey of acquiring this understanding, the Yetzer Hara unceasingly bombards us with darkness and gloom and confusion. He capitalizes on every opportunity to create false images that will fill us with panic and despair about our future, about G-d, about the Torah. We must resolve to learn, to train, to understand, to listen and to do.

Have a Good Shabbos!

- (1) 1810-1883; founder and spiritual father of the Mussar movement, a moral movement based on the study of traditional ethical literature and development of techniques for spiritual and character growth
- (2) the evil inclination: Satan's personal tampering with one's thoughts creating temptation to sin and do wrong
- (3) the spiritual chain reaction taught by Ben Azai in 4:2.
- (4) 1891-1954; in Michtav Me'Eliyahu, his collected writings and discourses; from England and, later, B'nai Brak, he was one of the outstanding personalities and thinkers of the Mussar movement

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