

ERRANT DEIFICATION

by Rabbi Pinchas Avruch

"It happened as [Moshe] drew near the camp - he saw the calf and the dances - that Moshe's anger flared up. He threw down the tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain." (Shemos/Exodus 12:19-20) Meshech Chochma (1) explains the core of Judaism is belief in G-d and His Torah. With Torah as a Divine expression of the Creator's will, observance of the Torah is the observance of His will. All other holinesses, including the sanctity of the land of Israel, are all extensions of the sanctity of the Torah. Devotion to and observance of Torah do not depend on any place and time, nor is it relative to the person. Moshe, the greatest of all prophets, who merited speaking to G-d as one human speaks to another, observed the same Torah and lived by the same guidelines as the least learned, most simple Jew.

However, the human mind is challenged to integrate this knowledge in a practical sense. Finite man cannot comprehend the Infinite Creator he serves. Throughout human history many have utilized physical beings as vehicles through which they channel their service to the Eternal G-d. But eventually these tangible objects and heavenly bodies are mistakenly identified as the object of the service - indeed, that G-d wants them to be served in His stead.

When Moshe did not return by the time he had been expected, the masses created a replacement and attributed it with having taken them out of Egypt. Moshe saw the Jewish people worshipping the Golden Calf, and understood that in their panicked effort to find a replacement for "the one who took them out of Egypt," they had fallen into this trap of deifying the messenger. Most distressing to Moshe: by extension, the nation had deified him. He needed to communicate that the Torah was not dependent upon a fellow human being, that had he never come into this world the essence of Torah would remain unchanged.

Moshe understood that had he entered the camp with the two tablets intact, the Jews would have maintained their corrupt concept in divine service, simply substituting them for the Golden Calf. By throwing them down and destroying them he taught the nation that the tablets had no inherent holiness. They were holy only as a vehicle to connect the Children of Israel to G-d and His Torah. But with their act of idolatry at Mount Sinai tantamount to an adulterous act under the marriage canopy, the Jews bled the tablets of all the holiness with which they had been imbued.

Although our generation has no appreciation of genuine idolatry, the trap of errant deification ensnares us equally. Are chessed (kindness) and tzedaka (charity) the definitions of our Judaism, or are they vehicles, subject to the definition and parameters specified by Torah, to connect to G-d by

emulating His perfect selflessness? Does the Land of Israel define our Jewish consciousness, or is it one of many tools available to elevate it? While we strive to invest ourselves in the fulfillment of a mitzvah (Divine command), we must not imbue it with its own inherent holiness, or else we risk draining it of all holiness. Rather, we must maintain our awareness it is only a means to a greater end - the greatest of all pleasures - a relationship with the Divine.

Have a Good Shabbos!

(1) biblical commentary of Rabbi Meir Simcha haKohen of Dvinsk; 1843-1926; in this unique blend of halacha (law), thought and commentary, Rabbi Meir Simcha demonstrates the unity between the written Torah and oral Torah and presents striking interpretations of Biblical verses and Talmudic passages.

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