

FROM RAGS TO RICHES

by Rabbi Naftali Reich

Parshas Ki Sisa describes the tragic downfall of the Jewish people at the very pinnacle of their spiritual achievement.

The people encamped as one around Har Sinai in their zeal to receive the Torah. Hashem's voice thundered off the mountain tops, proclaiming the Aseres Hadibros, the Ten Commandments, and designating the Jews as His chosen people for accepting His eternal covenant.

From the lofty heights of those wonderful intoxicating days, the Jewish people spiraled downwards. Moshe had ascended to Heaven to bring down the Luchos, the stone Tablets, and in his absence, the nation had strayed far. The Torah describes how, only forty days later, the people embraced the worship of the Golden Calf and were dancing around it in wild abandon.

Hashem revealed to Moshe in Heaven exactly what was taking place down below, and instructed him to go down and take control of the tragic scene. Moshe grabbed the Tablets and made his way down the mountain. He was greeted by Yehoshua and by the crescendo of noise emanating from the camp.

As he approached the camp and saw the people dancing to musical instruments around the golden calf, Moshe took the miraculous Tablets of stone and smashed them at the foot of the mountain.

The commentaries ask why Moshe waited until he descended the mountain to shatter the Luchos. Did he not believe Hashem when He told him the Jews were worshiping a golden calf?

The Tablets transcended the laws of nature; the letters penetrated the stone through and through, yet one could read the holy text on them from either side. The Tablets were a reflection of the divine connection that the Jewish people had with their creator-but which, by worshiping the golden calf, they had lost. The Jewish people, after this serious breach of faith, were no longer worthy of being the recipients of the Luchos. So why did Moshe wait? Why didn't he leave them in Heaven instead of smashing them at the foot of the mountain?

The commentaries explain that although Moshe knew beyond any doubt that the Jewish people had worshiped the golden calf. Yet he rationalized that it was surely just a temporary lapse, not done willfully or with enthusiasm. Perhaps they had succumbed to their base urges momentarily and could still be restored to their previous lofty stature.

But when he saw the people brazenly dancing around the calf, with musical accompaniment and

great gusto and excitement, he realized the truth: they could never again be worthy of those heavenly Tablets.

It is one thing to abandon G-d out of fleeting temptation while all the while experiencing pangs of guilt. It is another to abandon Him without compunction, with relish and merriment. After such debasement, the disconnect is complete and absolute.

When not acting in consonance with the inner vibrations of our conscience, we often feel stirrings of guilt and remorse. We may wonder why we need to be plagued with misgivings and confusion about our behavior. Why can't we feel whole and happy with what we are doing?

In truth, Jewish guilt is a gift from Hashem. It doesn't allow us to re-define our priorities and our character, based on our "fall from grace." That little voice inside of us that is telling us we shouldn't be here, we shouldn't be doing this, this is not me-is making sure that our substandard actions do not define our essence. It is ensuring that we regain our grip and give genuine expression to our innermost aspirations.

Wishing you an inspiring Shabbos.

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