

# APPRECIATING WHAT WE HAVE - WHILE WE HAVE IT!

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

The sin of the Eigel HaZahav/Golden Calf is one of the most intriguing stories of the Torah. Having mistakenly thought that Moshe would no longer return from his forty-day stay atop Mount Sinai, the Jews came to Aaron, requesting a replacement. *"The people saw that Moshe had delayed in descending from the mountain, and the people gathered around Aaron and said to him, 'Come, make for us a god that will go before us, for this man Moshe, who brought us out of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.'"* (32:1)

What a strange request! Clearly, they are seeking a replacement for Moshe. Yet instead of asking for a new leader, they ask for a "god"!

Rabbi Elazar of Kozhnitz zt"l, son of the Kozhnutzer Maggid, R' Yisrael, finds in their request a \*penetrating insight\* into human nature. Why is it, he asks, that when (G-d forbid) a Rebbe or great leader dies, his followers have such a hard time accepting the guidance of a new spiritual mentor? Indeed, countless arguments and controversies have arisen over this very problem - how does one go about "replacing the irreplaceable"?

Why does this occur? Because, he explains, human nature is for one to give great distinction and consequence - almost to deify - that which he no longer has. A great leader in his lifetime is just that - a great leader. Once he dies, he becomes in our eyes a sort of demi- god - a person so thoroughly irreplaceable that it would be senseless even to try.

In part, we do this out of anguish for our loss. It also, he explains, serves as a viable excuse not to seek the guidance of the great leaders who remain. If one's loss is indeed "irreplaceable," then nothing can be done but grieve, conveniently allowing one to continue living without actively seeking the advice and guidance of those greater and more knowledgeable than he.

When Moshe was around, he was respected by the nation. But he was human. When (mistakenly) they thought he had died, he became a god in their eyes. The people gathered around Aaron and said to him, "Come make for us a god..." Our leader Moshe can not be replaced by a mere mortal, for he was a "god," and only a "god" could replace him. [Likutei Mahara]

Incidentally, this insight highlights our extreme short-sightedness in appreciating what we have - while we still have it. When the people thought Moshe Rabbeinu (our teacher) had left them, they were overcome with grief. Only when forced to contemplate what life would be like without their revered leader, did they truly comprehend and appreciate just how much Moshe really meant to

them.

It is sad, is it not, to think that we rarely stop to appreciate all the goodness we have in our lives. But take something essential away, even just for a short while, and see how quickly it's worth grows in our eyes. Every day, we make berachos (blessings) on our food, before and after eating, with varied levels of concentration. Yet think how much we miss our breakfast, snack, lunch, or coffee - on a fast day. Imagine if every morning you thanked Hashem for your breakfast after having contemplated what it would be like to have to go through the day without food.

We read in this week's Sidrah that after the sin of the Eigel, Hashem told Moshe that He would no longer accompany them - for they are a stiff-necked nation - but would rather send His angel with them. Understandably, the people were grief-stricken. They became full of regret. Our Sages teach that when the Jews said (Shemos 24:7), "Na'aseh ve-nishmah/We will do and we will listen," proclaiming their willingness to accept unquestioningly Hashem's commandments and teachings, angels came and affixed two crowns to their heads, one in honour of "we will do," and one in honour of "we will listen." (Shabbos 88b) Upon hearing the bad news - that Hashem would no longer dwell among them - the people refused to don their crowns.

We read, "The people heard this bad tidings, and they became grief-stricken, and no one donned his crown." (33:4) The pasuk then continues (ibid:5-6), Hashem said to Moshe, "Say to Bnei Yisrael, 'You are a stiff-necked nation! And now, remove your crowns from yourselves...' And thus Bnei Yisrael were stripped of their crowns from Mount Chorev."

Why does Hashem command the Jews to remove their crowns? Did we not just read in the previous verse that they had already refused to don their crowns? This is a very difficult question with which many mefarshim (commentators) grapple, each taking his own way.

Rabbi Yaakov Yitzchak of Lublin, the "Choizeh" (seer) zt"l, explains that when the pasuk says, "And no one donned his crown," it is not to be taken in the literal sense. Surely they must have donned their crowns, as is indicated by that which Hashem later commands them to remove them. Rather, it means that in their state of dejection, they neglected to appreciate them! Although they had sinned, and thereby been deprived of Hashem's presence in their midst, all was not lost - they still had their crowns. Because they failed to appreciate them, their crowns too were stripped from them, as punishment for their lack of appreciation! [This is truly a deep and penetrating insight which can not be justly explained (appreciated?) in such limited space. It is left for the reader to further contemplate the far-reaching implications of this vort.]

Chazal say (Bereishis Rabbah 14:9), "With every breath [you take] you should praise Hashem [for that breath]." I will not go as far as to suggest that one hold one's breath in order to appreciate what it means to be able to breathe. Yet even something so basic and so easily taken for granted as the air we breathe, and the ability of our lungs to function, can be the objects of our praise and appreciation. No matter how difficult life can sometimes become, if we try to appreciate what we

have - while we have it - we will surely find that there is so much to be thankful for!

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