

A MATTER OF CHOICE

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

In Parshas Ki Sisa, we read about one of the most tragic events in Jewish history; the sin of the Golden Calf. It is almost inconceivable how a nation could rise to such a pinnacle - to receive the Torah, the Word of Hashem on Har Sinai - and yet just forty days later, to take their gold, form with it a calf, and say, *"This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!"* (32:8)

But did the Jews indeed sin? Certainly a cursory reading of the pesukim indicates so. A plague broke out as a result of the golden calf (32:35). Furthermore, approximately 3,000 Jews were killed by the Levi'im, at the command of Moshe (32:28). And perhaps most tragically, Hashem declared (32:34), "And on the day that I make My account, I shall bring their sin against them," namely, that whenever a Jew sins and is punished, he suffers a small portion of the punishment the Jews were to have received then (Rashi).

Yet there is an amazing Gemara which seems to indicate otherwise:

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: The only reason the Jews sinned with the Golden Calf was in order to provide an opening for ba'alei teshuva (repentants). As R' Yochanan said in the name of R' Shimon bar Yochai: David was not disposed to sin (with Bas Sheva), nor were the Jews disposed to sin (with the Golden Calf). So why did they sin? In order to teach the concept of teshuva (repentance)! [Avodah Zara 4b-5a]

Apparently, the Jews were "pushed" into sinning. On their own accord, this would not have happened; Hashem thrust this sin upon them in order to teach the important lesson of repentance; that no matter how far one has strayed - even if he has made himself a golden calf - he can still return.

Mefarshim (commentators), however, ask a perplexing question: If indeed the Jews on their own accord would not have sinned, were it not that the Master of the Universe "steered" them to do so, then in what way can their teshuva serve to teach us the concept of repentance? Their "teshuva" was accepted as a matter of course - after all they should really not have sinned in the first place! But when we sin by exercising our bechira, our free-will to do good or bad, who is to say that our repentance will be accepted?

Different answers are proposed to deal with this question (see Maharal, Michtav Me-Eliyahu, and others). Basically, they all agree that to some degree the Jews sinned as a matter of free-will - if not there could be no punishment and repercussions. What the Gemara means is that there was a

sudden shift of events which made it very difficult - but not impossible - for the Jews to avoid sinning.

Ultimately, though, one can still question: Why teach the concept of teshuva by means of such a complex and coerced situation? Perhaps we could take a slightly different tack.

It is no secret that we live today in a society that tends to avoid blaming the individual for his own shortcomings. People, society says, are the product of their environment and circumstance - they can for the most part not be blamed for their actions. Joey shot his teacher because he was abused as a child. Michael steals because he grew up in an impoverished home. Robert is taking drugs because he has been rejected by his peers - this is his way of gaining acceptance. Given different environments and different circumstances, they might have turned out different...

The Torah sees things differently. True, environment and circumstance play a crucial role in character development. Parents and teachers must certainly do everything they can to provide a climate within which Torah values can thrive. But one always has the choice to do good or bad. Bechira - free will - is the most basic tenet of the Torah. Without the choice between good and bad, man ceases to be distinct from the animals, who enjoy no such choice. We become products of our whims, ruled only by our own desires.

The importance of imparting this message to our youth can not be ignored. It is perhaps the most important concept they (we) will ever learn; that whatever the circumstances, the ultimate choice is in our hands. No one can be forced to do bad. And even when things have taken a turn for the worse, it's never too late, one can always return. No one is beyond repentance.

Perhaps this is precisely the message the Torah is trying to convey with the sin of the Golden Calf. It is true that the Golden Calf was largely a product of circumstance. The Jews had been misled into believing Moshe had died. Different factors combined to make their avoidance of sin extremely difficult. The Gemara declares unequivocally that, "The Jews were not disposed to have sinned with the Golden Calf!" Yet, notwithstanding all the excuses, justifications, and circumstances, they are still held responsible for their actions.

"So why did they sin? In order to teach the concept of teshuva." The sin of the Golden Calf teaches us the most basic rule of repentance: Accepting responsibility for our actions and misdeeds. Accepting that every person has the freedom to do as they choose. We all know of great individuals that came from the lowliest of backgrounds. Society, peers, circumstance - they all wield great, yet not insurmountable influence over our lives. Ultimately the choice is ours.

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