

BUCKING THE TREND

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

When examining the sin of the Eigel Ha-zahav (Golden Calf), one is compelled to look for its root cause. True, it is not unlikely that among a large nation, there will be more than a few rotten apples. Thus, that there were individuals who were prepared to sin so soon after receiving the Torah (the sin of the Golden Calf came a mere 40 or so days after Kabbalas Ha-Torah) should come as no surprise. What is shocking is how an entire nation could allow itself to be drawn into so foolish a sin!

The Midrash (Tanna de-Bei Eliyahu 4) cites Moshe's plea-bargain with Hashem:

Master of the Universe: You are both righteous and fair! Everything You do is with complete faith. Is it just that because of three-thousand men who served the Golden Calf, a nation of 600,000 (men over the age of 20) should be wiped out?

If there were in fact only a paltry 3,000 individuals (0.5%) out of an entire nation who "served" the Calf in the true sense, why do we collectively suffer the repercussions of this sin to this very day? - "And from now on, whenever I visit punishment upon you, there will be an element of punishment for the Golden Calf (32:34, Rashi ibid.)." - Furthermore, asks R' Yehoshua Leib Diskin zt"l, if the sin was committed (principally) by 3,000 people, that leaves approximately 597,000 people who had little interest in serving the Bovine deity! How is it possible that none of them joined forces and took a stand? Could they not have overcome the (vocal) minority with relative ease?

In fact, says R' Diskin, every individual on his own was disgusted and appalled by the actions of the Cow-bowers. "If I could," each of them thought, "I would take a stand. But how can I? I'm just a face in the crowd! Who would listen to me? Can I overcome an nation of sinners and idol worshippers?"

If each individual had given his contemporaries the benefit of the doubt (as indeed we are obligated to do [see Avos 1:6]), says R' Yehoshua Leib, the believers, who were in fact the vast majority, would have easily overcome the minority, and the Golden Calf would never have come about. It is only because each person saw himself as being the only one who had his priorities straight, and failed to judge others equitably, that the sinners were able to proceed unhindered. This is why an entire nation was implicated in the sin of a mere few.

This doesn't, however, completely explain why an entire nation was implicated in the sin of idol worship, if their failure was only one of not judging others favourably.

I believe that aside from the obvious lesson here - which is never to assume we're the only ones

around with good intentions - there is another salient point we can take out of this. Can you think of a time when you sat by and feebly let something happen that you knew was wrong, yet didn't have the "guts" to say so? When you meekly "looked the other way" and pretended everything was ok, out of fear of ruffling someone's feathers? But what if, as you bonelessly sat there pondering what to do, someone else with a mouth bigger than yours came along and had the guts to speak out? Did you suddenly find it easier to speak your mind?

It's scary to be alone.

It has happened to most of us: You're a small child with a parent in a big place; perhaps a shopping mall or an airport. Suddenly, you find yourself alone. Panic stricken, you search the sea of faces for your father or mother, yet you fail to find them. You're too scared even to cry. The tears only start to flow when, after a few anxious moments, you're reunited...

Some people call it group psychology. It's what makes it possible for a group of mainly decent individuals to behave in a callous and sometimes heinous manner. We desperately desire to belong, and if that means on occasion sacrificing our scruples, so be it. We know we are wrong, yet we feel powerless to do anything but go with the flow.

Would there have arisen just a few strong-willed individuals who had the inner strength to speak out against the Calf-worshippers, their upstart group would likely have blossomed in no time into a formidable opposition, and perhaps our history would have been different. Alas, it was not meant to be.

Perhaps this is why an entire nation was punished for the sin of idol worship, even though according to R' Diskin most of them did not sin by worshipping the Calf per se. Fearing the speculation of others more than we fear Hashem is itself a tacit form of idol worship.

While we can not turn back the clock and undo the Golden Calf, by studying and integrating its lesson, we rectify the original sin. What we should truly fear is sin, not the ridicule of others. All the more so if we remember that there are likely many others who feel just as we do - but they're just too scared to say so.

Have a good Shabbos.

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