

GOLD STANDARD

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

The are the words that Moshe spoke to all Israel, across the Jordan, in the wilderness, in the plain, opposite Suf, between Paran and Tofel and Lavan, and Chatzeiros, and Di-Zahav. (1:1)

It is with this complicated list of places that we begin sefer Devarim, the Book of Deuteronomy. The places, Rashi explains, are not meant to pinpoint Moshe's location when he spoke his words, nor that of the Jews. Rather, they are a veiled rebuke from shepherd to flock. Instead of openly lambasting his nation for their errors and misdeeds, Moshe reminds them of the places in which they went astray, and allows them to fill-in the missing details in their own thoughts.

One of the places mentioned is the cryptic Di-Zahav. Nowhere else in Tanach do we even find mention of such a site. Rashi, citing the Gemara (Berachos 32a), explains this to mean, "Too much gold!" zahav, of course, meaning gold, and di a derivation of dei, meaning 'more than enough.' This, he explains, was a hidden rebuke about the incident of the Golden Calf—which, he writes, came about as a result of them having too much gold!

Rashi implies that the fateful incident of the Golden Calf came about principally due to them having too much wealth (the Jews of the Desert were indeed wealthy, both through the spoils they received from their Egyptian taskmasters upon leaving, as well as the great wealth spit out by the Sea after the remaining Egyptians drowned). While this fits beautifully with the words Di Zahav, it is a highly unusual understanding of the underlying cause of the sin of the Golden Calf!

We can't argue the fact that, without the gold, they could not have made a Golden Calf. But was the Gold really the root cause? If they were to have made a cast-iron calf, or a wooden wolf for that matter, would it really have been any different? The nation was disheartened by Moshe's having failed to return to them at the appointed time. They happened to have gold, so they fashioned a golden idol. But when we speak about the sin of the Calf, it is their worship of a molten image that makes the matter so grave, not the material from which it was formed.

It is told that the holy Rema, Rav Moshe Isserles zt"l, Rav of Cracow and author of the famous Ashkenazi commentary on the Shulchan Aruch, in his elder, decided to retire from Rabbinical leadership. Leading the Rabbinat of such a large city, one can imagine, would be a daunting task even for a young man. One might also surmise that the elderly sage would have enjoyed spending his 'golden years' studying the Torah with the undisturbed peace and serenity that is not the lot of the Rabbinat, who must constantly deal with arguments and monetary disagreements between

one Jew and another. Despite the community's uproar, he was firm about his decision, and would not allow himself to be swayed. It seemed nothing could change his mind, not even the promise of money—a rare commodity for a community Rabbi. It was thus with great surprise that, just weeks before the scheduled date of retirement, the Rabbinical lay-committee, who's job it had been to find a replacement for the irreplaceable R' Moshe, now found themselves sitting across the table from him, listening to him say that he had changed his mind, and wished to remain Rabbi of Cracow—assuming they would still have him.

"You may be wondering," he told them, "what brought about my sudden, complete, and inexplicable change-of-heart (they were!). It was due to a case that came before me this morning, the details of which I will now tell you.

"There is a talmid chacham (Torah scholar) in our community, R' Efraim Mendel, who for many years earned an honest yet meagre living selling bagels in the marketplace. Unbeknownst to me, R' Efraim Mendel entered into a Yisasschar-Zevulun agreement with another gentleman, R' Yitzchok, whereby R' Yitzchok would support R' Efraim Mendel in full, and R' Efraim Mendel in turn would dedicate himself completely to Torah study, without having to worry about selling his bagels. R' Efraim Mendel, it seems, has now decided the agreement is no longer to his liking, and wants to be released from the deal. R' Yitzchok refuses to release him. He produced a signed document that entitles him to continue supporting R' Efraim Mendel, in exchange for which he would be entitled to his portion of the reward for R' Efraim Mendel's Torah study. 'We have an agreement,' he said adamantly, 'and I have no intention of terminating it!'

"I needed some background. Turning to R' Efraim Mendel, I asked him how this agreement came about, especially since I knew R' Efraim Mendel was exceptionally humble, and very few people knew of his vast knowledge of Torah and amazing diligence, let alone an outsider."

"The Rav knows that every morning my wife and I would get up at four o'clock to begin making our bagels. After davening ke-vasikin (with sunrise), I would take a sefer Tehillim (Book of Psalms) in my hand, and pray as my rebbitzen began measuring the flour to mix with the water. As she kneaded the dough, I prayed to Hashem that the dough be a consistent one. When she put the bagels in the oven, I would continue to pray that they would bake evenly, and would be tasty. Finally, after the bagels were ready, I would pray to Hashem as I walked to the market that I would quickly and easily find buyers for my wares, so that I could be finished with my work for the day, and be off to the beis ha-midrash to begin my day of Torah study. It was hard work, true, but every step of the way I would pray with all my heart, and baruch Hashem, people liked our bagels, and we made a fine living.

"One morning I was standing in the market peddling my wares as always when this guest, R' Yitzchok, happened to stop buy. He wanted to buy some bagels. He started talking to himself about whether the correct beracha (blessing) on the bagels would be Ha-motzie or mezonos. I offered him my opinion, and when he disagreed, I proceeded to prove to him from Shas (the Talmud) and

poskim (halachic authorities) that I was indeed correct.'

"Frankly, I was flabbergasted,' R' Yitzchok continued. 'Who ever heard of a bagel salesman who knew shas and poskim with such clarity?! On the spot, I made him an impulsive yet serious offer. He had no business selling bagels like a commoner. I would support him comfortably from now on, in exchange for the honour of backing such an erudite scholar, and having some small share in his learning. We drew up a contract with the terms,' he once again showed me the shtar, 'and I immediately began sending him a monthly stipend. And now, I can not fathom why, he wants out. Have I not given him generously enough?'

"Of course not!,' said R' Efraim Moshe. 'And that is exactly my problem. I feel like I no longer need Hashem. I don't worry about the dough, or the flour, or the customers. No more heart-felt Tehillim for an easy day. It's all so cozy and comfortable—but where's my relationship with Hashem!? That's why I want out. I'm not willing to give up those heart-felt prayers— and our need to ask Hashem to give us sustenance every day—for any money in the world!'

"And I say," concluded the Rema, "that in a city in which such a din-Torah (case) can take place... why, I'd be a fool to leave such a holy city!"

In Moshe, the Jews found not only a faithful leader, but also a direct connection to Hashem. When Moshe Rabbeinu was your teacher, there were no doubts. Every day, they experienced Hashem in a tangible way, through Moshe's prophecy, and through the Holy Presence which dwelled above his tent.

Perhaps with Moshe gone (they thought for good), they felt a need to replace him with something tangible. A golden calf that came to life before their eyes, and danced among them. "This is your G-d, Israel!" Did they believe that this calf, who moments before had been pieces of golden jewellery, was suddenly their G-d? Not likely. But for a nation that wasn't ready to deal with the reality of having to trust in a G-d they couldn't see, it was a compromise. A walking miracle, so that they would never have to trust 'blindly,' but could rather experience G-d's miracles daily, in a tangible way.

They had too much gold. Unlike R' Efraim Moshe, they weren't used to having to worry and pray for what they needed. They had all the wealth they could ever use, and then some. And unlike R' Efraim Moshe, they didn't like the idea of suddenly having to pray to Hashem, and place their trust in Him unequivocally.

Ve-di zahav—and too much gold. Man was not meant to live a life so comfortable that he never has to pour out his heart to Hashem. Sometimes, when life's curveballs have us running to the nearest Tehillim, it's good to remember that's why we're here.

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