

# DON'T SECOND GUESS G-D

*by Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

The sin of the golden calf remains to be a blemish on the "score card" of the Jewish nation that won't go away. Indeed, as Rashi points out (32:34), there is no punishment inflicted on the Jewish people that does not carry with it a "payment" for the sin of the golden calf. It is an enigma to be sure, but the question is, an enigma for whom?

The Talmud (Rashi paraphrase this gemora on 32:31) reveals a curious dialogue that took place between Moshe Rabbeinu and G-d on top of Mt. Sinai, during the period that Moshe pleaded for the future of the Jewish people after they made the golden calf:

Moshe said to G-d: It was because of the gold and silver that **you** gave to them until **they** said, "Enough!" that caused them to make the golden calf! (Brochos 32a)

Imagine giving your child a gift, a brand new hammer, let's say. He says, "Thank you very much," as he runs out to find whatever he can to hammer and bang. Unfortunately, after a short while you hear a **crash!** You run outside, only to find your son standing there, looking sheepishly at his handiwork and the window through which his new hammer has flown. Sensing his father's anger, the son preempts his father's strike and cries out, "It's **your** fault! **You** bought me the hammer! If **you** hadn't bought me the hammer, then I never would have broken the window!"

What a brilliant defense ... It's enough to confuse any parent, at least the one expecting a humble apology and plea for forgiveness! Once you regain your senses, you'll probably think to yourself, "Chutzpah! It's bad enough **he** broke the window, but now he wants to turn it around and blame **me** for **his** negligence! What ingratitude!" What then was Moshe thinking when he blamed G-d for the golden calf, because He blessed them with so much gold and silver?

The answer to this question lies in understanding the nature of spiritual growth.

Growing spiritually is a step-by-step procedure-there are **no** short-cuts. The Vilna Gaon compares spiritual growth to climbing a sheer cliff, the kind you climb step-by-step, peg-by-peg, all the way up the cliff. There is no such thing as skipping a step, like you might do when climbing a set of stairs. If you lose your footing on a staircase, the worse you may sustain is a bruise and hurt pride. However, skip a peg on such a cliff, and its straight down, an awful lost faster than you climbed up! The same is true about spiritual growth, and even though the intention may be to go up, too quick an "ascension" can result in a destructive drop. History is replete with examples of this type of tragedy,

the first, perhaps, being the sin of the golden calf.

The Jewish people committed the sin of the golden calf only 89 **days** after leaving Egypt, after being enslaved to the Egyptian mentality for 210 **years**. Within **one year**, through the course of the ten plagues, they reversed what **one century** had ingrained in their consciousnesses (they had only been in actual servitude for 116 years, since the death of Levi, the last son of Ya'akov). **That** was a **fast** reversal ... like a train traveling 80 miles an hour and then making a 180 degree turn without slowing down!

**That** was Moshe's point to G-d. In a short time, G-d had carried them out of slavery on "eagle's wings." They had soared to new heights hitherto unknown to mankind, even witnessing unheard of revelations of the "hand" of G-d-overnight. But it was a high level of spiritual growth that had been given to them, not earned, just like the gold and silver that had washed ashore after the Egyptians had drowned in the sea. But what G-d did not, and would not give them was the one thing they had to create on their own: motivation to stay loyal to G-d and His Torah.

But **that**, argued Moshe, requires development. **That**, Moshe emphasized, takes time to bring out. It had been the intention of the Jewish people to grow up spiritually fast, but the result was to fall hard, very hard. Usually G-d gives us what we need AS we need it, corresponding to our current level of spiritual growth. However, this time, Moshe complained, G-d gave them far more spiritual opportunity than they were ready to use, and the result was the golden calf. In the end, G-d accepted Moshe's defense of the Jewish people, and allowed them to survive.

There are many things to learn from the incident of the golden calf. However, one very important message is that spiritual growth is an exhilarating, but arduous climb up from the abyss of materialism. To scale the "mountain" too quickly is to risk spiritual backlash. On the other hand, to not scale the mountain at all is to forsake the stars for the mud!

The balance: plant each "peg" firmly into the wall of Torah growth, for it is upon **this** that you will stand to grow to the next level. Make sure you are climbing up, but, also make sure your growth is real, and your own. And remember, when it comes to growth in Torah, there are no short cuts. If you remember this, then, whatever materialism G-d blesses you with will allow you to better yourself and your devotion to Him, and to avoid building your own version of the golden calf.

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Rashi says much later on in Parashas Chukas that, though the Red Heifer was used to purify a person from spiritual defilement resulting from contact with the dead, it also atoned for the sin of the golden calf (see BaMidbar 19:2). After all, death is the result of the golden calf, for the rabbis teach that after accepting Torah, the Jewish people returned to the level of Adam before his sin, regaining immortality. Creating and worshipping the golden calf was tantamount to a repetition of the sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil all over again, bringing with it the consequence

of death. Therefore, as Rashi says, the heifer comes to "clean up" after the mess of its young (i.e., the calf).

However, Rashi also points out that the mitzvah of the Red Heifer is a statute (a mitzvah whose logic defies us), one for which the yetzer hara and nations of the world laugh at us, asking, "What purpose does **that** serve?"

Our answer to the question, "Exactly. You answered the question with your question."

Rashi adds that a statute is a law of which G-d says, "It is a decree from Me, and you have no permission to think into it." Implicit in this statement is that, though we may be brilliant, and capable of so much, our brilliance has an upper limit. We can be **like** G-d, but we can't **be** Him, and therefore, we certainly can't second guess Him. Many mitzvos may make sense to us, and Western society has adopted many as its own, such as "Don't steal," and "Don't murder," etc. But that is only because Western society sees the value in such ordinances, and how they make life more secure for the average individual. But what value does the Red Heifer have for the average working man? How does abstaining from eating meat cooked in milk make mankind more civilized? What damages does wearing clothing woven from a mixture of wool and linen cause?

The answer: it prevents golden calves.

Aside from the actual, non-visible spiritual impact on creation mitzvos have, statutes remind us that Divine logic is divine, and mankind's is not. They remind us that our decisions can barely take into account the past and the present, let alone the future. They remind us that there is a master plan for creation, one that you have to be G-d to see from beginning to end in a single eyeshot. Statutes inform us that G-d is privy to knowledge that we are not, knowledge that provides invaluable perspective on the events within our lives, and our long history.

They tell us: Don't second guess G-d.

The Talmud states that the people allowed the golden calf to be built initially as a replacement for Moshe, whom they had thought had died on the mountain (see Rashi on 32:1). Darkness had descended on the whole world, and they felt left out in the cold, in the middle of desert within which survival was only possible through miracles. They didn't know WHY this had happened, or what G-d had wanted from them, but they didn't wait to find out either. They panicked. They second guessed G-d, and did they ever pay a price for it ...

Thus the Red Heifer, the quintessential statute, truly does "clean up" for the calf. And according to the Brisker Rav, it is the mitzvah of the Red Heifer that will play a major role in the final redemption from the "red" nation called Edom. Maybe it is time to stop second guessing God, to increase our faith in His master plan, and to hang in there to see how the whole thing will unfold. We have it on faith from very reliable sources, that we will be quite pleasantly surprised.

One final word on this week's parsha.

When Aharon, responding to the demand of the people for an idol, ordered them to bring gold and silver, he thought he had devised a clever stall tactic. After all, how many women and children would be prepared to part with their jewelry for a "sacred cow"?

However, what he hadn't take into account was the chutzpah of the male portion of the population, who literally yanked the jewelry of their wives and children! Thus, the rabbis teach that the golden calf was the product of the male population, and not the female portion of the nation. And, as a reward for this, women received the day of Rosh Chodesh, the first day (or, when Rosh Chodesh is two days, the first two day) of each month as an extra holiday, during which they are supposed to abstain for normal household chores and the like.

Why Rosh Chodesh?

If you recall from Parashas Bo, the first mitzvah the Jewish people received while still in Egypt was the mitzvah to proclaim the new month. We pointed out that this mitzvah embodied the mission statement of the Jewish people: just as the moon has no light of its own, but rather, it reflects the light of the sun, so too must the Jewish people, who are compared to the moon, reflect the light of G-d and His Torah.

When Moshe came down from the mountain, and saw the golden calf in the camp below, he broke the two stone tablets upon which G-d had written the Ten Commandments. Why? Why didn't he just put them away, or better yet, give them back to G-d? We won't let even a Sefer Torah wobble in the hands of someone without scrambling to protect it from falling to the ground, G-d forbid. How could Moshe deliberately throw down the Tablets, the handiwork of G-d Himself, to the ground? And as if that wasn't disturbing enough, G-d later congratulated Moshe for doing so (see Rashi on Devarim 34:12)!

The answer to this question is based upon an explanation given by Rabbi Avraham Pam, shlita, the Rosh HaYeshivah of Torah VaDa'as, and one of the biggest Gedolei Hador today. Rav Pam points out: Not only did they build a golden calf, but they added the words, " ... This is your god, Israel, which took you out of Egypt!" (34:4)?

This is what angered G-d, and Moshe the most, says Rav Pam. To have built a golden calf so soon after leaving Egypt was not the surprise, as we have said earlier. However, to build an idol and then claim that **that** was Judaism, that **that** was the god of Israel, **that** defied the very reason why the Jewish people had left Egypt in the first place. It's one thing to make a non-believer a believer, but it is next to impossible to make a believer out of someone who already thinks he's doing the will of G-d. When it comes to such people, Moshe said, you have to start all over again, for they abandon the mission of the Jewish people, and have the audacity to call it the true Judaism.

But the women didn't participate in the construction of the golden calf, and they never accepted it as a symbol of G-d's plan for the Jewish people. Therefore, they were rewarded with a holiday that alludes to this very plan, the day of Rosh Chodesh, the day that embodies the essence of the Jewish soul. And this is the halacha to this very day.

Have a wonderful, uplifting Shabbos, as the parsha says, "When you lift up the head of the Jewish people ..."

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