

# DISTANT WISDOM

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

## FRIDAY NIGHT:

*The people (ha-umm) saw that Moshe delayed in descending the mountain, and the people gathered around Aharon and said to him, "Rise up, make for us gods that will go before us . . ." (Shemos 32:1)*

It's like buckling down before a storm. It's like boarding up the windows and taking all the necessary precautions in advance of a terrible storm that you know is coming your way while it is still calm.

We began a few weeks ago with Parashas Terumah, which was the start of the portions that deal with the Mishkan and the service within. However, in this week's parshah, as the rabbis teach, the Mishkan was only the response to the golden calf, the antidote, if you will, to a human tendency to want to worship physical objects.

Of course, the worshipping of physical objects is never permissible, because it is the essence of idol worship. Therefore, the Mishkan could only be, at best, a physical place to go and worship the non-physical God, and a vehicle to focus us and help us to remain focussed on the one, true, non-corporeal Creation of all that exists.

Thus, even though the previous parshios come before this week's parshah in the Torah, historically, they occurred after. The golden calf occurred on the 16th day of Tammuz, towards the end of the first set of 40 days that Moshe had ascended Mt. Sinai. The instructions to build the Mishkan only descended with Moshe at the end of the third and last set of 40 days that Moshe ascended the mountain.

From the 11th day of Tishrei (Seder Olam 6), over the next three months, and until the 25th day of Kislev (Seder Olam 7), the future date of Chanukah, the Mishkan was constructed with all its many implements. It wasn't permanently erected until the following first day of Nissan (Ibid.), in deference to the birth of Yitzchak Avinu, who had been the ultimate sacrifice to G-d.

Nothing new so far.

However, later, Rashi writes the following with regard to the mitzvah of the Parah Adumah - Red Heifer - used as the central part of the purification process after one has come into contact with the dead:

RED HEIFER: It can be compared to the son of a handmaid who dirtied the palace of the king. They told his mother to come and clean up the filth. Thus, the heifer comes to atone for the calf. (Rashi,

Bamidbar 19:22)

In other words, as Rashi points out, the Red Heifer atoned for the sin of the golden calf. The golden calf returned death to the world - which the Jewish People escaped when they said, "We will do and we will hear" - and the Parah Adumah atones for defilement by the dead.

Thus, if the analogy is accurate, the Parah Adumah was also a greater insight into what the golden calf truly represented. For, of all the mitzvos incumbent upon the Jewish people, the mitzvah of the Parah Adumah is the most perplexing of all, since in the process of purifying someone, it results in defilement of the one performing the process itself.

It is the quintessential paradox: Like two people washing from the same tap, except that one person's hands become clean, while the other person's hands become dirty. So elusive is its explanation that Shlomo HaMelech, the wisest man of all time (after Moshe Rabbeinu himself), wrote:

I said about wisdom that it is distant from me. (Koheles 7:23)

The Talmud says that it was in reference to understanding the basis of the mitzvah of the Parah Adumah that Shlomo HaMelech wrote this (Niddah 9a). But, what does any of this have to do with the sin of idol worship, or the replacement of a great leader?

### **SHABBOS DAY:**

*"Rise up, make for us gods that will go before us, for this man Moshe who brought us up from the land of Egypt - we do not know what became of him!"* (Shemos 32:1)

So, that was the entire rationale for committing an act of idolatry, because of a missing leader? If what they really meant was, "Oh, good, now that we see Moshe is not coming back, we can finally build idols once again and not get yelled at, and killed for doing so!"

However, that does not seem to have been their intention behind their words. On the contrary, it seems that because they missed Moshe, they were drawn to replace him with the calf. Surely they were sophisticated enough to know that a golden calf wasn't going to provide the leadership and miracles that Moshe Rabbeinu himself had provided until that point in time!

Rather, Moshe meant more to the people, especially the Erev Rav - Mixed Multitude - whom he had taken out of Egypt with the Jewish People. Moshe Rabbeinu represented answers, an address to go to when life became confusing and seemed direction-less. He represented resolution - just the opposite of what the Parah Adumah represented.

If we go back in time to when death first came into the world, we find a similar idea. Whatever rationale Chava used when deciding to violate the mitzvah of abstaining from eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, the Torah sums it up this way:

And the woman perceived that the tree was good for eating and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable as a means to wisdom, and she took of its fruit and ate. (Bereishis 3:6)

Chava did not have to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil because it was edible; she had plenty of other trees to satisfy any need she had for fruit. Nor did she have to eat from the fruit because it was appealing to her eyes, for that is rarely a reason to eat anything, especially when it is forbidden to do so.

Rather, the fact that the tree provided wisdom, something that Chava in her heightened state of awareness could appreciate - that was a different story. Especially since she had not died from touching the tree, as Adam had told her she would, and she experienced for the first time intellectual confusion.

She could have waited until Adam had come home from work that day. After all, he had only been in another part of the Garden while the snake was pushing the fruit on her. Any questions she had, any doubts she had experienced could have been resolved by her husband and teacher shortly, if she had only waited.

If only she had waited. However, she didn't wait. Eating from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil also represented an answer to her question: If I did not die from touching the tree, would I die from eating it? Adam HaRishon, at the moment, had represented "distant wisdom," whereas the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil represented an on-the-spot answer.

We are still paying the price for Chava's impatience for wisdom. And, as Rashi says, we are still paying a price for the sin of the golden calf as well:

There is no punishment that comes to the Jewish people that is not partially because of the sin of the golden calf. (Rashi, Shemos 32:34)

Really, they were one and the same sin: Impatience for resolution, the opposite of, by definition, what the paradox of the Parah Adumah represented. As Shlomo HaMelech, the very man who represented human ability par excellence to bring about resolution, had to admit that, when it came to the Red Heifer, he could not find resolution.

Not that it did not exist, but rather, that it existed on another plane altogether, one that he had not been permitted to reach in his life. The Parah Adumah was "distant wisdom," and he would have to wait to attain it, or meet with disaster trying to find a short cut, as Chava did before him, and as Shlomo did when he decided to marry 1,000 wives against the Torah's command.

### **SEUDOS SHILSHIS:**

*It happened as he drew near the camp and saw the calf and the dances, that Moshe's anger flared up.* (Shemos 32:19)

Perhaps one of the most difficult questions to resolve in human history is, where is all of this leading? Is this world all there is, or is this world just a corridor to another one, as many traditions teach? And, if there is another world after this one, what is it like - better or worse than this one?

The Torah doesn't speak about the World-to-Come. It barely even alludes to a future world, which is quite bizarre considering that so much is riding on one's belief in such a reality. I can't remember the last time I told a secular Jew, "Look, the only reason why the Torah does not speak about the World-to-Come, is to make sure that you serve G-d for altruistic reasons," and he answered, "Oh, now I get it. Where do I sign up?"

The question is not a pressing one when mitzvos are enjoyable to do. The question doesn't even get off the ground for the rare individual who simply loves G-d so much that he performs every mitzvah that comes his way, no questions asked. And, it may not arise for the Jew who knows no other way of life than the one he was raised into, in this case, Torah Judaism.

However, for countless others, Judaism without a clear-cut belief in reward for mitzvos in the World-to-Come is like playing basketball without the ball, and the multi-million dollar salaries to go along with it, as well. Who is going to run back and forth across the court without a ball to put it through the hoop, even for tons of money?

According to the Talmud, G-d appreciated our impatience, and imbued Shabbos with a little aspect of the World-to-Come, so that we could at least "taste" it enough to know it will come at some point in the future. However, it is not so easy to get that taste, and for many others, it is not enough of a taste to convince them that it is worth sacrificing the forbidden pleasures of this world for one that may or may not exist, or may or may not be better.

Thus, the golden calf also represented this impatience as well. By all accounts, the golden calf represented an abandonment to the present, to the pleasures of this world without thought or care of what the future World-to-Come may offer. It was the symbol of the philosophy of, "eat, drink, and be merry, for who knows what tomorrow will bring."

Well, when "tomorrow" came around for Adam and Chava, it brought death. And, literally, on the morrow after the golden calf was fashioned, death reigned in the Jewish camp as Moshe punished those guilty of their part in the sin. The message for all time: Those who sacrifice the World-to-Come for this world usually end up losing both worlds:

He took the calf that they had made and burned it in fire. He ground it to fine power and sprinkled it over the water. He made the Children of Israel drink. (Ibid. 20)

So much for the golden calf.

Then G-d struck the people with a plague, because they had made the calf that Aharon has made. (Ibid. 35)

So much for the pleasures of this world.

### **MELAVE MALKAH:**

*I shall not ascend among you, for you are a stiff-necked people. (Shemos 33:3)*

Personally, I do suffer from stiff necks on an ongoing basis, but I don't think that this is what the Torah is talking about. The Torah, of course, is referring to our stubbornness to get the message - THE message.

We Jews are big gamblers, and likewise, big losers as well. Time and time again, we have gambled away the future in the name of the present. Historically, diversions away from Torah have rarely been ideological, usually being a matter of convenience, of comfort.

When the force of a Torah lifestyle has come head-one with the persistent reality of Western living, for many the resolution has been immediate and in favor of physical gratification. The Western world does not wait for anyone, and it rarely offers second chances, and mockingly taunts, "You're going to pass me up for something you've never seen or experienced? "Yes, I am." "Are you that gullible?" "No, I'm not, but I'm going to do it anyway."

In the beginning of our history, the answer was mostly, "yes, we will do, and then we will understand." There were some stragglers who jumped the Torah ship even before they had planted their feet firmly upon it. However, now, towards the end of our history, it is only the small minority who answer in the positive, the large majority having little, if any, interest at all in Torah and its promise of eternal reward.

It was no different before the Holocaust either, but probably vastly different during it. The Holocaust divested Jews of just about every last earthly possession they had, and had to have made many wonder if they should have pursued a more spiritual lifestyle in the end.

As the World Trade Center, the symbol of the goals of Western society and the icon of financial prowess, burned to the ground, the people inside the building probably wondered, if they had time, what had it all been for? Once again, the immediate pleasure of the "golden calf" brought on the morrow only death.

Did we learn a lesson?

The Torah has told us: Sacrifice in this physical world of ours, as difficult as it may seem to be at times, is worth it in the long run. When we build our golden calves and sacrifice our "tomorrows" on the altar of the present, we can, and have only met with death in the end - in this world and in the next world. Resolution of all the contradictions and difficulties is forthcoming.

However, patience - and it may take a while, but the wait will surely have been worth it.

Have a great Shabbos,

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