

WHAT A CHOICE . . .

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

FRIDAY NIGHT:

All the people pulled off the golden earrings from their ears and brought them to Aharon. He took all of it from them, and with an engraving tool formed it and made a molten calf. (Shemos 32:3-4)

It is so bizarre! A golden calf? Who needed it? There are so many symbols of reckless fun, or of complete abandon. Why would the organizers decide to make something as strange as this?

"Even the regular partygoers rubbed their eyes in disbelief when they arrived at the wild party that took place . . ."

Took place where? When?

". . . On Shabbos in Eilat: Hundreds of youths celebrated with Ecstasy around a golden calf. 'It caused us to fell life idol worshippers.' The producers did not know what shocked us: 'This is not a calf at all, but a bull with a pierced nose.' " (Yehudit Zilberstein and Assaf Gur)

That's right. It happened in Eilat, Israel this year toward the end of January. The week before the bus blast that killed 18 people, just around the corner from the Prime Minister's house. The article from the Israeli newspaper, Ma'ariv, continued:

"Around the golden calf that was set in the wilderness were gathered hundreds of celebrators. They bowed and danced as drunkards and waved their hands in ecstasy. The strange scene being portrayed here, a duplicate of the Biblical event that brought about the breaking of the Luchot HaBrit - (Tablets of the Covenant) occurred this last weekend in the wadi by the Nasichah Hotel in Eilat. This time, however, the event concluded with only a number of shocked participants and loads of criticism. This public celebration began Friday in the stylish halls of the Hotel and continued on into the next day in the wadi, was organized jointly by Shimon Shirazi (known event organizer), Itan Salimi (another well-know organizer), and the TLV Club. In addition to the Golden Calf, this wild party also included Drug Queens riding on camels and other provocative performances."

We can learn something from everyone and everything, but I think this line from the article has far greater historical ramifications and implications than the person who said it knew as he was saying it:

" 'When I saw the calf that was set up on the central stage, I stopped dancing!' one of the party-

goers told me yesterday, 'I was simply disgusted. I am not traditional, but the organizers stepped over a red line. This statue made us appear like idol worshippers. What, I'm already no longer a Jew?' "

When I read that line, I was amazed. Still suffering from shell shock about the incident, the words of this person who had driven all the way down from Tel Aviv to have the time of his life, Ecstasy and all, and then simply got back into his car and drove right back to Tel Aviv mid-party because of the offense he took to the calf - a burst of light in a cloud of utter darkness.

"The celebrants divided into two groups. 'There were many there who had large quantities of alcohol and drugs, and they became greatly aroused by the sparkling calf, and they began to dance around it, saying that they were like the Jewish people who sinned in the desert. But there was also another large group that shook from the entire episode, and they approached the organizers and asked that the idol be removed immediately,' said one of those who were there."

And what was the organizer's response to their request?

" 'Suddenly people who break Shabbat keep tradition? That's ridiculous!' The producers then told the partygoers that had turned to them, 'Anyone who doesn't like it is not obligated to stay!' "

Unbelievable. In this day and age, and in Eretz Yisroel, in Eretz HaKadosh, in the desert and so close to the place of the original incident in this week's parshah, the incident for which we are still paying. And not only close in location, but close to the way it was first carried out:

They got up early the next day and brought burnt-offerings and peace- offerings. The people sat down to eat and to drink, and were licentious. (Shemos 32:6)

Of course, there must have been differences. For one, the golden calf of Moshe Rabbeinu's time was at the base of Har Sinai, where the Jews who had miraculously left Egypt had heard G-d Himself speak, and they had replied, "We will do and we will understand!" (Shemos 24:7). These were just wayward kids and young adults whose exposure to Torah was either nil or non-existent.

Only G-d can decide who is guilty and how much. But what I find amazing is that the conclusion to each event is the same: separation, or what the Kabbalists call birur. For, after Moshe destroyed the golden calf of his time, he then turned to Klal Yisroel and demanded:

"Whoever is for G-d, join me!" (Shemos 32:26)

A crisis. A choice. A moment of truth. Something has occurred, and it means something to me. What? In which direction does it send me? Back to party with others around the golden calf, or back home?

Watch this question take an interesting twist. And, perhaps, unbeknownst to the following reporter, her comparison of the following two subjects is more on the mark than she thinks:

When sacred goes cinematic, passions flare

*By Carrie Rickey
Philadelphia Inquirer*

The controversy ignited by Mel Gibson's The Passion is as ancient as the story of the Golden Calf. In America, sparks can fly whenever the First Amendment strikes the Second Commandment. But such furors aren't confined to the home of freedom of speech and religion, whose major denominations have prohibitions against the graven image.

SHABBOS DAY:

"I have plenty, my brother" said Eisav. (Bereishis 33:9)

The gematrios of eigel hazahav -(golden calf) is 103 and 19, respectively: Ayin-Gimmel-Lamed equals 70+3+30, and Heh-Zayin-Heh-Bais equals 5+7+5+2. I am sure I have seen interesting drashos over the years regarding those numbers, but one that struck me hard was the fact that the World Trade Center Twin Towers were destroyed by 19 Arab terrorists (the 20th didn't make it for some reason), over the course of 103 minutes (the article said 102 minutes, but one minute, 60 seconds, is easy to err about).

Coincidence?

Part and parcel of being a Torah observant Jew is the recognition that absolutely nothing in life is coincidental. Events that we might otherwise view as meaningless or random are full of intention from Heaven. This understanding and approach to life is frequently expressed in the Talmud and is emphatically stated in the texts of Kabbalah. On that basis we can see the connection of the golden calf and the Twin Towers.

As to who died that day in the attack, how they died, and why they died is a question for G-d, not us. There are cheshbonos -(calculations) involved in every death, and especially when people die in such a cataclysmic way. But, as G-d tells us:

For My thoughts are not your thoughts and your ways are not My ways -- the word of G-d.
(Yeshayahu 55:8)

Therefore, we will not address questions that cannot be answered from the sources and knowledge available to us in our current state of existence.

In the world of architecture there are many beautiful buildings, and even awesome is a term that has been used to describe some of them. However, some buildings surpass the status of being significant architecture only, entering the unique realm of icon. The Twin Towers, which dominated the already complex and unique skyline of New York City, were examples of this to the nth degree.

New York City, for all its warmth and pizzazz, is by far one of the most materialistic cities in the entire world. It is home to the New York Stock Exchange, which to a large extent, is the thermometer of the

prowess of not just the American economy, but the world's economy. It may not be the wealthiest city in the world, almost reaching bankruptcy decades ago, but it is certainly a great symbol of wealth, financial success and greatness, and the Twin Towers was the logo of New York City, Inc.

But, not just of New York City, Inc., but of America, Inc. For, what the Twin Towers were to New York City, New York City is to America. America is about the American Dream, the possibility of being able to work (hard) and break loose of financial restraints and have a great life. A great physical life, that is, filled with the fulfillment of materialistic dreams. Though America is religion-tolerant, it remains to be one of the greatest melting pots of all history.

In short, America is Eisavland. For, there were three parts to Eisav, as we learn from the Torah and the midrashim. The Eisav with which we are perhaps the most familiar is Eisav the brute, the one who takes what he wants when he wants it, even if it means bullying or worse, murdering. That is what he had been doing, says the Midrash, the day he came home weak and burned out and sold his birthright to Ya'akov, his twin brother (Bereishis Rabbah 63:19). Sounds a lot like Russia, no?

Then there was Eisav the religious fanatic. To appear religious before his father Yitzchak, he inquired about tithing foods that were not even necessary to tithe, like salt and straw. It had been his intention to give his righteous father the impression that he was stringent in Torah law when in fact he was just the opposite (Bereishis 63:16). Europe, perhaps?

And, then there was Eisav the businessman, the witty quick talker, who even practiced law (Bereishis Rabbah 63:15). The dealmaker, the man of alliances, who took greater pleasure in compiling wealth for its own sake:

"I have plenty, my brother" said Eisav. "Let what is yours remain yours." (Bereishis 33:9)

I HAVE ALL: All that will supply my needs. But Eisav spoke proudly, saying instead, "I have plenty." (Rashi)

As in much more than he could ever need, and maybe even use. America?

After all, why a calf, and why gold?

A calf, says the Midrash, because Michah had thrown a plate with the words, "Arise, ox, arise ox," into the pot of melted gold. After Moshe had used it to raise Yosef's - (who is referred to in our sources as an ox) coffin from the Nile river on the way out of Egypt, Michah took the plate with him. The calf emerged on its own from the pot.

And, as the Torah and the Talmud explain, one of Yosef's chief accomplishments was to collect all the money of the world of his time together, and cause it to come down to Egypt (Pesachim 119a). He had amassed, on behalf of Pharaoh and the Egyptian nation untold wealth, over which he was viceroy.

And, is there any better symbol of wealth, or eternal wealth than gold itself, something that the Twin

Towers projected with American pride?

SEUDOS SHLISHIS:

G-d told Moshe and Aharon, "Since you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me before the Children of Israel, you will therefore not bring this people into the land which I have given to them." (Bamidbar 20:12)

Those familiar with the Torah Codes may also be familiar with the controversy they have created. While some are clearly enthralled by them and see Divine messages in them, others dislike them, to say the least, for a variety of reasons, few of which have anything to do with a Torah outlook.

What is new is not Torah Codes, per se, but the usage of the computer to find them. For example, Rabbeinu Bachayay (1263-1340 CE) refers to the concept of dilug -(skip) in his commentary on Parashas Bereishis. Kabbalah itself uses all kinds of similar systems to bring to the surface hidden messages in the Torah, many of which are far more outlandish to the uninitiated than the Torah Codes.

Torah Codes, that is, words and phrases embedded in the verses of the Torah, but which are not easily seen by the eye, belong to the realm of Torah learning called Remez -(hint). Pshat refers to the simple reading of the verse, Remez to that which is learned through the anomalies in the verses and such, Drush to that which is part of the Oral Tradition but not necessarily evident from the verses themselves, and Sod to the Kabbalistic explanation of the words and phrases.

After the Twin Towers were destroyed, Torah code researchers began a computer search for allusions to this horrifying event that might be encoded in the Torah. Over the last two years their findings have been frighteningly accurate. They are a part of a specific presentation by the researchers that is available in papers and seminars, and hence, I am not going to describe their contents in this essay.

However, I do want to address an idea that is evoked from the principal location in Torah that the Twin Towers codes were found - i.e. just after the episode of the Parah Adumah, the Red Heifer, this week's special Maftir. For, as Rashi explains, the Red Heifer and all of the details, are none other than a rectification for the golden calf (Rashi, Bamidar 19:2).

The key word for this table of codes is the Hebrew word Ta-omim -(Twins), as in Ya'akov and Eisav. The number of letters that separate each of the letters is THIRTY-SIX - the number that represents the light with which G- d made Creation, gave Torah, and will bring the Final Redemption. It stands vertically like a tower, with its foundation (the final letter, Mem) in the posuk:

G-d told Moshe and Aharon, "Since you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me before the Children of Israel, you will therefore not bring this people into the land which I have given to them." (Bamidbar 20:12)

What was the big deal, and how did the punishment fit the crime? So Moshe brought water from the

rock by hitting it as opposed to speaking to it, it was still a great miracle, wasn't it? And what did it have to do with living in Eretz Yisroel, that Moshe lost the right to go there as a result?

The answer has to do with the essential difference between certain TWIN brothers, and an essential difference that a Jew has to recognize and acknowledge if he is to find himself on the right side of the RED (Esaiv's favorite color) line, and for that matter, on the right side of the ocean.

For, as the Bais Levi teaches, it is the RED Heifer that is the key to ending Golus Edom, the exile of the one who was born RED and ruddy. It's no small wonder that the first nation we confront after the episode of the rock is Edom.

MELAVE MALKAH:

"Whoever is for G-d, join me!" (Shemos 32:26)

On this posuk regarding Bilaam, the evil sorcerer contracted to curse the Jewish people as they approached Eretz Yisroel, Rashi provides a crucial insight into who the Jewish people are:

He said, "This wicked man has abandoned the tools of his own craft, for the offensive weapons of the gentiles is the sword, and he is attacking them with his mouth, which is their skill . . ." (Rashi)

Interesting that of all the skills the Jewish people should be noted for, it is speech (and we don't mean the gift of the gab). Rashi is alluding to how the Jewish people can affect the direction of history through speech alone, whether it is through speaking Torah, praying to G-d or a better result, without having to become overly involved in the physical reality. Pesach - Peh, the mouth that sach (spoke) is not called this for nothing, and THAT is an understatement.

And the Jewish mouth is what Eretz Yisroel is all about:

For, the land you are about to possess is not like Egypt from where you came, and in which, if you sowed seeds, you had to bring water to them as you would for a garden of green herbs. The land you are about to possess has mountains and deep valleys, and is watered by rain from the sky -- a land which Hashem, your G-d, cares for, Hashem, your G-d pays attention to continuously the entire year. (Devarim 11:11-12)

This is a parshah sheet, not a book (in case you were wondering by now). Therefore, in short, survival in Eretz Yisroel is dependent upon closeness to G-d, which is expressed and often determined by the use of one's mouth. Unlike the rest of this planet, success and failure is determined by one's relationship with the Creator, and this was the message that was supposed to be taught, and was lost when Moshe hit the rock - the way of Eisav - instead of speaking to it, a miracle of another dimension altogether and the way of B'nei Ya'akov.

When Ya'akov took the blessings from Yitzchak, forced to dress up as his brother Eisav and act in his very physical ways, his father commented:

"The voice is that of Ya'akov's, but the hands are the hands of Eisav." (Bereishis 27:22)

Talking to the rock to bring forth water as opposed to hitting the rock was supposed to have separated the voice of Ya'akov from the hands of Eisav once again, forever. Not doing so at the crucial moment of entering Eretz Yisroel left the Jewish people overly dependent on Eisav's ways and his world for physical survival, often, and even usually at the cost of spiritual survival.

The year before the TWIN Towers were obliterated, Y2K threatened the world with international chaos. It has been pointed out that the letters Y2K in Hebrew would be Yud-Bais-Kuf, which spells "Yabok," the name of the river Ya'akov crossed before fighting with the Angel of Eisav, and earning the name change to Yisroel.

As technicians neutralized the effects of Y2K, insecurity gave way to safety once again, only to return in greater and more dramatic force when out of the clear blue sky, literally, Arab terrorists on American home turf destroyed its symbol of financial prowess and damaged its symbol of military might.

Ironically, the towers were TWINS.

Ironically, the code showed up in the parshah that comes to resolve the golden calf, the very symbol of Eisav's culture into which Ya'akov, as a twin, has no problem entering and integrating into - Parashas Parah.

Ironically, it is rooted in the parshah dealing with the essential spiritual preparation for life in Eretz Yisroel, and earning a living there.

And it represented a new page in American history, a new era of insecurity, and perhaps most of all, for the Jews living in Chutz L'Aretz.

And now, all of sudden, as anti-Semitism grows around the world, an age- old religious question has been brought back from the dead, to haunt a world of Jewry that, just years ago, would have assumed that the issue was dead for good: Who killed you-know-who?

Is it not bizarre? One man, a movie star, whose father is a Holocaust denier of the worst kind, and who has no problem letting his father tell it to the world. And, in spite of the questioning of the account's veracity, people eat it up like it is the absolute truth.

The crises for the Jewish people seem to be coming faster and with increased intensity. Security has given rise to insecurity, which gives rise to even more insecurity. What's happening? What's the message? How are we, as Jews supposed to respond?

Believe it or not, after all this, the answer is really quite simple. It's what Moshe told the Jewish people as he prepared to purge the Jewish camp of all the golden calf participants:

"Mi l'Hashem Elai!" - "Whoever is for G-d, join me!"

How each and every one of us interprets those words is the difficult part, and what we are being asked to do at this critical time in history.

Have a great Shabbos (anyhow). PW

Text

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