

PARASHAS PARAH

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

*God told Moshe, "Go down. Your people which you brought out of Egypt have corrupted themselves."
(Shemos 32:7)*

Ah, the Erev Rav, where would the world have been without them? Where would the world be without them today? In Yemos HaMoshiach, that's where. All that went wrong for the Jewish people in the desert was instigated by the Mixed Multitude, just as God had forewarned Moshe Rabbeinu back in Egypt, on the way out.

And now, in this week's parshah, their coupe de grace: the golden calf. Had it not been for the Erev Rav, the Jewish people would have waited peacefully at the foot of the mountain in their camp below for Moshe Rabbeinu to return with the Word of God. Maybe they would have asked, "What's taking him so long?" and been a bit concerned.

But, they certainly would not have responded with idol worship and licentious behavior. Only the Erev Rav, as intelligent as some of them may have been at the time, could do something so dumb at Mt. Sinai. It is always amazing how a bad trait can lay waste to intelligence, even use it to engineer one's own destruction. We're watching the very same thing happen today as well.

Interestingly enough, another name for the Erev Rav was "HaAm," or "the people," as noted above. In fact, Chazal say that every time the Torah refers only to HaAm, which, on a simple level, can apply to the Jewish people as well, it is really a direct reference to the Erev Rav themselves. Hence, when the verse says:

After Pharaoh sent the people away. God did not lead them through the land of the Philistines .
(Shemos 13:17)

the Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh says that it refers to the Erev Rav, whom Pharaoh sent along with the Jewish people to cause precisely the kind of trouble they cause in this week's parshah.

Of all the nicknames to give to a troublesome people, HaAm is not so bad. At least, that is what one might think at first, until one considers that they are not supposed to be an "um," that is, a separate nation. They were Egyptians who, because of the Bris Milah Yosef, as Viceroy, had the Egyptians perform to get grain during the famine, became converts to the way of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov. By the time they left Egypt, there should have been no trace of a different origin.

In other words, the name HaAm was a way of denoting the lack of integration into the Jewish people by these Egyptian converts, evidenced by how quickly they reverted to Egyptian ways in this week's parshah. And, having not fully integrated into the Jewish people meant, means, that the conversion process was not complete on all levels, and therefore, that they remained a divisive force within Klal Yisroel.

In other words, in this case, HaAm is not compliment, but an indication of the Erev Rav's propensity to be divisive. If k'ish echad b'leiv echad¹ describes the ultimate state of Jewish unification, HaAm, in reference to the Erev Rav, alludes to just the opposite. And, it has been by sowing disunity amongst Jews that the Erev Rav has been most successful in keeping us from fulfilling the ultimate dreams of our nation.

And, make no mistake about it: the Erev Rav comes in various different forms and types of people. In fact, the Zohar discusses in great detail five different categories of Erev Rav (Bereishis 25a), and all of them can have an application in every kind of Jewish community you can think of. And, as different as one group might be from the other, they all have one thing in common: they put themselves before the nation.

Therefore, says the Zohar, they can give charity, lots of it, even build synagogues and Torah study houses, but to act as base for their name plaque. Secondary to the good name they will receive for being so philanthropic is the good their actual contribution will do for the people for whom it is intended.

Or, they can take an activist role on behalf of some cause, or even specifically, a Jewish cause. But, if you truly analyze what they are doing, no matter how well-intentioned they make themselves appear on the surface, it is their personal mandate that they attempt to fulfill, not the national one of the Jewish people. Indeed, as they work on behalf of the Jewish people they in fact work against the Jewish people, often using their money and political clout to force their ways and means.

If they had their own flag, the golden calf would be their emblem in its middle. And, just as Amalek was the antithesis of Moshe Rabbeinu, the Erev Rav is just a derivation of that very antithesis. The trait of Moshe Rabbeinu was Netzach, which meant that everything he did was for the sake of Eternity. The Erev Rav simply lived for today, investing all of their energy in the physical pleasure of the moment.

The golden calf embodied this approach to life. A calf represents playful youthfulness, and gold represents longevity. In short, the golden calf represented man's desire to never grow up and take responsibility for himself and the world, so that he can party round the clock. And, when Moshe Rabbeinu came back down the mountain in this week's parshah caring the antidote for such a lifestyle, that's exactly what he found going on in the camp below: a wild party.

This week is also Parashas Parah, so the maftir jumps to Parashas Chukas, where we find the laws concerning the procedure of the Red Heifer, necessary for a person who has become defiled by

contact with a dead body, or implements that have. We read it now because of the closeness of Pesach, but its juxtaposition with the reading of the sin of the golden calf couldn't have been better timed, for like Moshe Rabbeinu himself, it is the antithesis of the Erev Rav and all that they stand for.

First of all, it is red, and not gold. If gold represents longevity, then red, the color of blood, represents human vulnerability and frailty. If a calf represents wistful youthfulness, then a heifer represents responsible adulthood, the ability to wear a yoke and to channel energy in a meaningful and productive manner. If the golden calf represents eternal youth, but really results in early death, the Red Heifer looked like death, but actually resulted in a return to life.

Hence, the Red Heifer and the golden calf represent two extremes on a single continuum, and therefore, the ongoing challenge of the Jew, indeed of all mankind. We are caught in an ongoing internal battle between the drive for immediate pleasure and satisfaction, and long term gain. It is a battle that not only defines us as individuals, but as a nation as a whole:

Why Israel is the world's happiest country

By Spengler

Envy surrounds no country on Earth like the state of Israel, and with good reason: by objective measures, Israel is the happiest nation on Earth at the 60th anniversary of its founding. It is one of the wealthiest, freest and best-educated; and it enjoys a higher life expectancy than Germany or the Netherlands. But most remarkable is that Israelis appear to love life and hate death more than any other nation. Can it be a coincidence that this most ancient of nations, and the only nation persuaded that it was summoned into history for God's service, consists of individuals who appear to love life more than any other people? As a simple index of life-preference, I plot the fertility rate versus the suicide rate of 35 industrial countries, that is, the proportion of people who choose to create new life against the proportion who choose to destroy their own. Israel stands alone, positioned in the upper-left-hand-quadrant, or life-loving, portion of the chart. Those who believe in Israel's divine election might see a special grace reflected in its love of life. In another location I argued, "It's easy for the Jews to talk about delighting in life. They are quite sure that they are eternal, while other peoples tremble at the prospect impending extinction. It is not their individual lives that the Jews find so pleasant, but rather the notion of a covenantal life that proceeds uninterrupted through the generations."

In other words, Israelis, at least the traditional ones, feel a sense of eternity, and it has to affect their way of thinking, and therefore, their way of acting. The ones who have lost this sense of eternity, and many already have, have done two things: they have given up on the future and turned to extremely temporal pleasures. In short, they have adopted the life of the Erev Rav and have become, hopefully

only temporarily, like them.

Not just in Eretz Yisroel, obviously. One can travel to just about any country Jews are found in the world today, which, amazingly, is almost every place people can be found today, and find Jews pursuing the golden calf way of life. To the extent that they ignore the eternal reality of the Jewish people is the extent to which they follow the ways of the Erev Rav. And, today, you can be religious as well and fall into the same trap.

Indeed, there ought to be an Erev Rav-golden calf thermometer. I'm not quite sure how it would work, but somehow it would look at a Jew's life, and determine how much the person leans in one direction or the other, either in the direction of the golden calf, or that of the Red Heifer. It would measure how real a person is with eternal life, as projected by his or her approach to the material world.

This message comes right in advance of Pesach because this is really what Pesach is all about. As we move away from chometz, the symbol of which is bread, in the direction of matzah, plain flour and water, we shed more than pounds. We leave behind an attachment to the golden (calf) way of life, a branch of Egyptian life.

That's why they built it in the first place. For, you can take the Erev Rav out of Egypt, but apparently, it is far harder to take the Egypt out of the Erev Rav, and the golden calf was their way of making the Jewish camp their home away from home, that is, their Egypt away from Egypt. Unfortunately, less than 100 days out of Mitzrayim, those Jews still suffering from the Mitzrayim Syndrome got pulled into the spiritual abyss, like errant dust into an industrial strength vacuum cleaner.

Interesting how some knowing Jews today refer to America, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, as the "Golden Medinah," or, "The Golden Country." For, it has been, for decades, the place of great opportunity, especially for the Jewish people, a place where almost everything we have touched has turned to gold. The last time this many Jews were this wealthy was when the gold and silver of the Egyptian army washed ashore after they drowned in the Red Sea.

In some respects, it has served us well. It allowed us to rebuild the Jewish nation on American soil after the Jewish nation was wiped away from European soil. And, quite clearly, it helped pave the way for the Final Redemption, as countless Jews invested untold sums of wealth into the development of Eretz Yisroel, including the construction of many wonderful Torah institutions.

However, the same cannot be said about everyone who struck it rich in America. Some use their wealth, not to strengthen the Jewish people against the pitfalls of the golden calf lifestyle, but to encourage it. Some, as mentioned before, even use their financial clout, in the name of helping the Jewish people, to actually undermine the future of the State of Israel. They call themselves friends of the Jewish people, but then again, so did the Erev Rav.

And, before we say to ourselves with confidence, "Well, that's not me!" we should read the Zohar on

the Erev Rav today. Once I did, I became very uneasy, and felt compelled to examine my lifestyle for any Erev Rav tendencies. Everyone ought to do the same thing, especially as scandals come to light from all sectors of the Jewish people.

At the very least, get back to Torah basics, and make sure that whatever you do, you do it for the right reasons, and with humility. Above all, let God be above all, meaning that you should fear no one but God Himself, and serve Him loyally. This will serve you the best of all, especially as we head into uncharted waters of history, and the world becomes less favorable to anything the Jewish people seem to do today.

1. Literally, "a single person with a single heart," the high level of unity the Jewish people achieved at Mt. Sinai.

Text

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