

INTERNAL CONFRONTATIONS

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

He took all of it from them, and with an engraving tool formed it and made a molten calf. (Shemos 32:4)

It is extremely hard to believe that within so short a time of leaving the Garden of Eden that Kayin could murder his brother, Hevel. As evil as Kayin had been, he had still seen the Garden, and even more amazing, he spoke to God on a level that later righteous prophets would not. It wasn't as if he had doubts about the existence of God or His ability to punish, although according to Rashi, he did wonder about the omniscience of his Creator.

But what about the Erev Rav, the Mixed Multitude? They were at the foot of Mt. Sinai and had witnessed the miraculous destruction of the Egyptian nation, the incredible splitting of the sea, supernatural bread from Heaven, and the awesome defeat of Amalek. What more was there to prove about God's omniscience or omnipotence?

And yet, not only did they produce a golden calf and act licentiously, they even murdered one of the righteous people of the generation, Chur, the son of Miriam and Caleiv. "You're going to build an idol over my dead body!" he told them, and they agreed, right there, at the foot of Mt. Sinai, as Moshe Rabbeinu was up receiving the Torah from God Himself. Incredible!

Sometimes events occur that are shocking, and they make us wonder how they could have happened. Sometimes events occur that are more than shocking, and they make us wonder if they could have actually happened. But then again all of us have, at some point or another, probably done something that would have made an objective onlooker question, "Did that really just happen?"

Not only is hindsight 20-20, but it is also often devoid of the energy of the moment that caused people to act so foolishly. This is what it means to be objective: emotional detachment from a situation so that it can be analyzed in intellectual terms.

In what they call the heat of the moment, that is nearly impossible if the issue is one that concerns people, good guys and bad guys. You can be sure that Chur had also reacted emotionally during the episode of the golden calf, which is why he threw caution to the wind and allowed himself to become vulnerable to the whims of the raucous crowd forming at the base of Mt. Sinai.

However, since he became emotional for the right reasons and it drove him to take up the right side, his death was meaningful and counts as a great Kiddush Hashem, sanctification of the Divine Name.

The Erev Rav and Jewish stragglers became emotional for the wrong reason, and they became murderers and defilers of the Divine Name.

There is an important lesson about life here that most people probably overlook. This is especially so since the story of Chur is left for the Midrash and Rashi to tell, not the Torah itself, that only makes it even more important to spend some time discussing.

The golden calf is a symbol of many things, and as such it is not just an event that happened once-upon-a-time and ended. It is ongoing, and reoccurring, and often in ways that most people do not even realize. As a result countless people have fallen for it without even knowing it.

To begin with, it was gold, and not just because that was one metal that they had plenty of after leaving Egypt. Gold symbolizes something, then and today, and that is strength, power, and longevity. It is also a symbol of security, being one of the most precious of metals.

A calf, on the other hand, represents youthfulness, before reaching the age of wearing a yoke, the symbol of bearing responsibility. The licentious behavior of the Erev Rav at the base of the calf was the offshoot of what it represented and promoted.

Combined together, the golden calf became a symbol of man's desire to forever throw off the yoke of maturity and allow one's child to emerge and control life. It was the representation of man's yetzer hara that seeks comfort above all else, in whatever form it can achieve it.

Criminals live that way all the time. They have given up on the struggle to keep their yetzer haras in check and they allow it to dictate their direction in life on a daily basis. They take what they want when they want it in the way they choose to take it, regardless of what it means for others.

The thing is though that they belong to the same species of being that the rest of us do. As much as we'd like to believe that they are vastly different than we are, deep inside we know that they are not, or at least, we should know that they are not. As painful a realization as it may be for many of us, we too are capable of doing what they do, and don't only because we work so hard to keep our yetzer haras in check, or at least at a minimum.

This doesn't mean that we don't get chances to cheat. And, it doesn't always have to do with where you work or what you do, because compromising situations arise even in the privacy of your own home with no one else around, especially today with modern technology. And it doesn't help when stress is applied to stress in our daily lives.

Just watch what happens to many religious Jews after exerting themselves, like a group of young men who have just played a game basketball, for example, on a hot day. See what happens to way they make a brochah over a glass of water when extremely hot, sweaty, and thirsty.

Another example is a family that comes back from a long day of traveling and can't wait to get home and go to bed. For some, saying Krias Shema al HaMittah, the order of blessings and Tehillim said

before going to sleep, becomes a herculean task.

And then there is just making blessings altogether. How many blessings does the average person make on a daily basis during which he or she actually feels what he or she should feel when making them? For many people, it is like a race against time when making a brochah, and it is not so uncommon to wonder a few moments later if we actually made the blessing at all.

Such scenarios are not small matters since they involve the mentioning of God's Name. They also involve our attitude towards life and the Heavenly gifts we receive daily. Would you want to keep giving to someone who says thank you while clearly thinking about something else, and says it half-heartedly? It's amazing that God does, but the question is, for how much longer?

Then there are even more serious situations in which a person eases up on their self-control too much. Sometimes it is obvious even to us that we have stumbled, other times we have to be reminded by others. I remember one year going through the viduy, the confessional prayer, of Yom Kippur thinking to myself that most of the list does not apply to me. But then I read a commentary on the viduy that was intent on showing people that the entire list applies to all of us in one way or another, changing my appreciation of how I much needed the entire viduy.

Here's the really important part. In the beginning, back at the giving of the Torah, the Jewish people and the Erev Rav lived in two different and distinct camps. There was no confusing the two, just as back in the Garden of Eden when the Snake personified the yetzer hara and man only possessed a good inclination.

However, after Adam HaRishon sinned he inherited the yetzer hara as well, his evil inclination, making it far more difficult to recognize who was doing the talking, man or his yetzer hara. Likewise, in the beginning the Erev Rav was a unique section of the Jewish camp, but since then they have intermarried into the Jewish people, it has become extremely difficult to know who is our friend and who is our foe, at least until it is too late.

Just as we have an internal yetzer hara all of us also have Erev Rav in us as well. It is that for some the influence is minimal and therefore manageable for the most part at least, whereas for others it is the dominating factor in their lives, driving them in directions that baffle us and making them do things that confuse us.

Your defense against the Erev Rav without and the Erev Rav within? To be like Chur, who built himself up spiritually during the non-confrontational times, and who came to care more about upholding truth than breaking it. Clearly he was raised with a great sense of love of God, one that would allow him to make the supreme sacrifice for that love by giving up his life for it.

It has to be that during a time of spiritual crisis when everyone starts to raise their voices, the yetzer tov and the yetzer hara, that the voice of the yetzer tov can win out. Part of Chur might have told him, "Maybe we should let Moshe Rabbeinu take care of this rowdy mob? Besides, what I can do to stop

them? They'll only kill me and do what they want anyhow." But the other part of Chur answered, "Maybe so, but every second someone does not step up to protest it profanes the holy Name of God, and that is reason enough to risk everything."

Essentially, this is what the learning of Torah is all about. If learned well and learned correctly, we should evolve into a "Chur." We should be able to develop sufficient fear of God that tells us to do everything from slowing down and saying a blessing with the proper intention to not lapsing during times of weakness to, when necessary, being able to put ourselves on the line to stop that which clearly violates the will of God-even if we know that our voice won't turn the tide.

As the Vilna Gaon taught regarding the Erev Rav, if one is not fighting against them then one is fighting for them, and it would be better off if the person wasn't born in the first place. That is true of the outside Erev Rav and the inside one. If do our part then we can assume that God will do His by helping us to succeed in ways we could never have achieved on our own.

Text

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