

# A GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

**This [was named] the “Waters of Merivah”, because the Children of Israel argued with God . . . (Bamidbar 20:13)**

In exactly one week the Three Weeks will begin, b”H. The fast day of the 17th of Tammuz will be postponed for a day since other than on Yom Kippur we do not fast on Shabbos. Likewise, Tisha B’Av, which falls on Shabbos this year, will be pushed off to the next day, the 10th of Av, for the same reason.

Since the 17th of Tammuz begins the Three Weeks, and Tisha B’Av ends them, it would appear as if they are related, connected to each other by the three weeks between them. In actuality, the 17th of Tammuz resulted because of the golden calf in the first year after leaving Egypt, and Tisha B’Av resulted from the sin of the Spies in the second year of the exodus. This makes them distant from each other in time and conceptually, raising the question, why are they part of one long period of mourning?

The answer, of course, is that the former led to the latter. The sin of the golden calf changed everything and made possible the sin of the Spies. Had the Jewish people not committed the first sin they would have received Torah and then left straight for *Eretz Yisroel* never once considering the possibility of rejecting the Land. The entire episode of the Spies was THE direct consequence of the calf.

So was Korach. In a world of true and false Korach would never have considered challenging Moshe Rabbeinu. In a world of good and evil, his argument with the greatest leader of the Jewish people ever became inevitable. In a world of true and false the *yetzer hara*, if it exists at all, is not part of man and can be judged objectively. In a world of good and evil the *yetzer hara* is part of man, and it can easily be incited and confused for a person's true desire.

Prior to the calf, the Jewish people, the Talmud says, freed themselves of the *yetzer hara*:

When the serpent came to Chava he put *zuhama* into her. When the Jewish people stood at Mount Sinai, their *zuhama* left them. (*Shabbos* 145b)

On a simple level, *zuhama* is a level of spiritual impurity for which there is no remedy until *Techiyas HaMeisim*, or the Resurrection of the Dead. That is when people will be created anew, like Adam was when he was first made, without the imprint of *zuhama*. Since the Jewish people underwent

resurrection at Mt. Sinai, effectively removing the *yetzer hara* from them, they achieved this at that time.

The only problem was that the *Erev Rav*—the Mixed Multitude—that left Egypt with them did not lose their *zuhama* at the giving of Torah. They remained mortal and with an internal *yetzer hara*, as did a couple thousand Jewish stragglers. They were the ones who panicked when Moshe Rabbeinu did not return on time and built a golden calf to replace him.

Once that happened, it pulled down the rest of the nation that had not participated in the sin of the calf. They ceased to be immortal and some of the *zuhama* even returned to them. This corrupted them enough to allow Korach to rebel against Moshe Rabbeinu, and the Spies against God. In each case they thought God was on their side only to find out how deadly wrong they were. This kind of incorrect perception could only occur after the sin of the golden calf.

This is what it means when it says:

*And now go, lead the people to [the place] of which I have spoken to you. Behold My angel will go before you. But on the day I make an accounting [of sins upon them], I will bring their sin to account against them. (Shemos 32:24)*

*But on the day I make an accounting, etc.:* Now I have listened to you not to destroy them all at once. When I take an accounting of their sins, I will also account a little of this sin with the other sins. [This means that] no punishment happens to the Jewish people in which there is not part of the punishment for the sin of the [golden] calf. (*Rashi*)

Did not the Jewish people atone for the sin of the calf? Apparently yes, as it says:

*And Moshe returned to God and said, "Please! This people has committed a grave sin. They have made themselves a god of gold. And now, if You forgive their sin But if not, erase me now from Your book, which You have written."*

*And God said to Moshe, "Whoever has sinned against Me, him I will erase from My book!" (Shemos 32:31-33)*

And that's what happened. The perpetrators were eliminated and those who remained were forgiven. If so, then what does Rashi mean that every punishment in history is also part punishment for the sin of the golden calf?

Exactly what we are saying. The only reason there has been need for punishment since the golden calf is because of sins committed. The only reason sins have been committed is because the incident of the golden calf restored the inner *yetzer hara* and made future sin possible. In this respect, every future punishment is also punishment for the sin of the golden calf.

This goes for the hitting of the rock in this week's *parshah* as well. What should have been a straightforward and joyous event turned out to be a catastrophic and tragic failure. Clarity was

usurped by confusion, peace by anger. The event cost Moshe Rabbeinu the opportunity to cross the Jordan river into *Eretz Yisroel* and the Jewish people their Moshiach. The golden calf struck again.

Before this, though, comes the *mitzvah* of the Red Heifer. As Rashi points out, it is the cure for the golden calf, representing its opposite. The calf was gold which represents eternal materialism. The heifer was red, like blood, symbolizing the temporal nature of the physical world. A calf is young and playful and shuns responsibility. A heifer carries an yoke and lives to channel its energy in a productive manner.

These two points of view are contrasted in this week's *parshah* as if to give us a choice of paths in life. One leads to "golden calves," which ultimately results in sin and punishment. One goes in the same direction as the Red Heifer, allowing a person to avoid the kind of lifestyle that can result in a golden calf related punishment.

The decision seems to be a no-brainer. Given a choice between a pleasant and productive life or a meaningless and deadly one, who in their right mind would choose the latter? Given the history of the Jewish people, and the world in general, billions of people! Crazy, isn't it?

The Talmud confirms the insanity of such a choice:

A person doesn't sin unless a spirit of insanity enters him. (*Sotah* 3a)

In a specific sense, this means that a person loses perspective, and this allows him to sin. After he has, and the reality of what he has done catches up to him, he may ask, "What was I thinking?" Others certainly ask this about him. It's as if a person becomes insane, albeit temporarily, when committing the sin.

In a more general sense, the Talmud is referring to the net effect of the sin of the calf. Just as eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil dramatically changed mankind for all of history until *Yemos HaMoshiach*, likewise did the sin of the calf do the same thing. For all intents and purposes, the world has been "insane" ever since, not completely, but enough to have more than one world war and to carry out a Holocaust.

This is what God acknowledged after the Flood, if not for His benefit than for ours:

... *the inclination of man's heart is evil from his youth.* (*Bereishis* 8:21)

Evil is crazy, insane. Never mind the fact that the most "normal" individual can perpetrate it, the evil he does is not normal, at least in the ultimate sense. The verse is telling us that as a result of descending from the level of true and false to that of good and evil, it became possible to be crazy on some level even if the rest of a person is perfectly sane.

Recently I was sent an article from a fellow Canadian about Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper. We both live in Israel now, but remain proud Canadians. Israel is my home and my first love when it comes to countries, but I have a tremendous appreciation for the life I was able to enjoy as a

Jew while growing up in Toronto.

That pride increased somewhat over the last few years because of the Canadian Prime Minister. His unwavering support for Israel from within an international community that is quite hostile to the Jewish state is more than just admirable, it is righteous. This only made me more curious as to why the Canadian leader was willing to risk international popularity (especially now that President Obama does not share his sentiments about Israel and its leadership) to support a country to which his country owes very little.

The article, printed in the magazine "*Mishpachah*," was informative. It revealed the man to me and removed the mystery. Though politics and popularity tend to go hand-in-hand, giving rise to the compromising of values, Stephen Harper marches to the beat of a different political drum. For him, it is not an issue of popularity but one of right and wrong.

The interests of his country, the Canadian PM insists in contradistinction to his opponent in the upcoming election, Justin Trudeau, is best served by supporting a true democracy such as Israel, and in protecting it from the evils of mankind. Canada needs to be, he says, a country that is more interested in doing the right thing than the politically expedient thing.

All I can say is, "Wow." I say this for three reasons. The first is that I am amazed that there are still some people like this in the world who believe this and stand behind it. The second source of my wowness is the fact that he was elected with such an opinion to public office of a major international country. The third reason for my awe is that he is still in office at this time of history, which can't be anything short of a miracle.

From a big picture point of view, which always interests me, I wonder what he is doing here at this stage of history. Nothing happens by chance and everything is meant to teach us something. The more something catches our attention and makes us wonder about its existence, the more this is so. What does Stephen Harper teach us at this critical stage of history?

The answer to this question might be, it depends upon who you are. Different people might learn different things from this political anomaly. Therefore, I can only tell you what I learn from it today, which may be somewhat different from what I learn from it tomorrow.

The truth is, what I learn is nothing new, as far as the principles are concerned. The first is, make truth your priority and guide in life. The second is, do not abandon your commitment to truth when falsehood becomes powerful and the majority opinion. These are ideas that every decent person already knows.

What I learn from Stephen Harper is how to walk the walk, and not just talk the talk. I see in him a man for whom pursuing truth is not just a theory, but daily practice. I see a level of sincerity that I do not see so often in others, even many who are supposed to be practicing such levels of sincerity as a unction of living by Torah. Yes, I include myself as well.

Ultimately, what I see in the Canadian Prime Minister is a source of inspiration, one that should come from me and my own community, but does not always. It is a little incriminating, even if I do fulfill more Torah obligations on a daily basis. As Rashi points out in the first *parshah* of the Torah, being a *mentsch* does not automatically follow from a Torah lifestyle, anymore than reading the instructions automatically results in a built model plane.

That's the part that God left for us to do, and it doesn't hurt to have an example of it from time to time, even if that example comes from outside the community. Learning such an approach to life can save us from making our own versions of the golden calf, and the punishment that it invites. With the Three Weeks about to begin, this is what we have to consider.

Text

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