

GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

These are the words that Moshe spoke to all Israel, across the Jordan, in the wilderness, in the plain, opposite Suf, between Paran and Tofel and Lavan, and Chatzeiros, and Di-Zahav. (Devarim 1:1)

Sefer Devarim chronicles Moshe Rabbeinu's last day on earth. The entire book, as long as it is, occurred on a single day, as he prepared the nation for life beyond his own. Most of the people standing before him were part of a new generation, not the one that left Egypt with him. Nevertheless, the lessons are eternal, and it is possible to make the same mistakes as our "fathers" even if we never knew them.

Everything the Torah says has significance, and can be understood on many levels. Even something as simple as a name, which can easily be overlooked, teaches something. This is certainly the case of "Di Zahav," mentioned in the first verse of the parshah, as Rashi explains:

And Di-Zahav: (lit., enough gold). He rebuked them for the calf they had made as a result of their abundance of gold, as it is said: "and I gave her much silver and gold, but they made it for Ba'al" (Hoshea 2:10). (Rashi)

Thus, "Di Zahav" was not the official name of a place, but a subtle allusion to the sin of the golden calf. Why did Moshe Rabbeinu not mention the event explicitly? Rashi explains that as well:

Since these are words of rebuke and [Moshe] enumerates here all the places where they angered God, it therefore makes no explicit mention of the incidents [in which they transgressed], but only alludes to them, out of respect for the Jewish people. (Rashi)

Hence, the Jewish people are not only criticized for having allowed the calf to be made, but also for using the gold given to them by God to do so. Little offends a parent more than when their child uses a privilege to perform a sin.

The Talmud, however, adds an interesting twist to this. According to the Talmud, Moshe Rabbeinu actually used the reason for incrimination as the basis for salvation, as it says:

Rebi Elazar also said: "Moshe spoke insolently towards Heaven" . . . Rebi Yannai learned it from here: "And Di-Zahav" (Devarim 1:1). What does "And Di-Zahav" mean? They said in the school of Rebi Yannai: "Moshe said before The Holy One, Blessed is He, 'Master of the Universe, the silver and gold which You gave to the Jewish people until they said, "Dai!" led to their making the calf!'

" (Brochos 32a)

It was as if Moshe put the blame for the golden calf on God. How could he do that? The Talmud adds:

Rebi Chiya bar Abba said: "It is like the case of a man who had a son whom he bathed, anointed, gave plenty to eat and drink, and around whose neck he hung a purse before placing him at the door of a brothel. Will he not sin?" (Brochos 32a).

In other words, Rebi Chiya bar Abba said, God, by giving the Jewish people so much gold, after all they had gone through until that time, basically set up the sin of the calf. On the contrary, given the conditions, it would have been stranger had they not built the calf.

We, of course, roll our eyes and say, "Come on!" We might appreciate the effort by Moshe Rabbeinu to defend his people, but we certainly have a difficult time accepting the basis of his defense. The Jewish people, after all God had done for them, should have showed restraint and controlled their nature, gold or no gold.

The strange thing is, that the Talmud concludes with the following:

Rebi Shmuel bar Nachmani said in the name of Rebi Yochanan: "How do we know that The Holy One, Blessed is He, agreed with Moshe? Because it says, 'and I gave her much silver and gold, but they made it for Ba'al' (Hoshea 2:10)." (Brochos 32a)

Really? You mean, that actually worked?

Yes and no. According to the Maharsha, Moshe's defense only worked to stop God from destroying the entire nation, which He had told Moshe Rabbeinu He was prepared to do:

"Now leave Me alone, and My anger will be kindled against them so that I will annihilate them, and I will make you into a great nation." (Shemos 32:10)

At this point God referred to everyone in the camp below, golden calf perpetrators and those who only stood on the sidelines. After all, as the GR"A says, when it comes to fighting against the Erev Rav, the Mixed Multitude, you're either against them or with them. There is no neutral ground, making those who did not prevent the golden calf perpetrators of it as well.

Moshe's plea referred to them. He himself would carry out the execution of those actually involved in the building or worshipping of the calf. Moshe in his counter-plea, only fought on behalf of those who remained outside of the circle of people responsible for the golden calf.

The only problem with the Maharsha's explanation, it would seem, is that the answer does not "fit" the question. The people Moshe Rabbeinu defended were not guilty of building the calf, just of not preventing it. His explanation of an over-abundance of gold being the direct cause of the calf did not, seemingly, apply to them.

Yes it did. What Moshe Rabbeinu was saying is not what it seems from the Talmud. The Talmud sounds as if he was trying to clear the people who built the calf. He was not. He too agreed that there was no excuse for the calf, especially at the base of Har Sinai, especially after already hearing from God directly that the Jewish people were not allowed to make or worship idols.

Sinners will be sinners, though. They live to sin and usually take the first opportunity to do so. The fact that Moshe appeared to be late in returning was not the reason for the golden calf, but the excuse for it. That's why they wasted no time in seizing the moment to do exactly that, while everyone else was prepared to wait longer for Moshe's return. At the very least, they should have turned to Aharon HaKohen to decide what to halachically do next.

Anyone who has ever stood up to a rambunctious crowd intent on sinning has usually been made to regret it. In fact, Chur, Miriam's son had done exactly that and was murdered on the spot. The Talmud says that this is what prompted Aharon to give them the impression he was appeasing them.

This is basically what Aharon answered his brother who questioned his approach to the situation:

Moshe said to Aharon: "What did this people do to you that you brought [such] a grave sin upon them?"

Aharon replied: "Let my lord's anger not grow hot! You know the people, that they are disposed towards evil." (Shemos 32:21-22)

In other words, once the sinners got going, they were like a train rolling down the track at full speed. Chur stood in their path and was run over. Trying to stop them meant death. Trying to stall them was the only option.

This is what Moshe Rabbeinu told God. "You fueled the sinners. You gave them the gold and the opportunity. You made their sin inevitable, and that made them virtually unstoppable while I was not around. So, what were the rest of the people supposed to do? Kill or be killed?"

Well, actually, yes. This is what later happened:

Moshe stood in the gate of the camp and said, "Whoever is for God, [let him come] to me!"

All the sons of Levi gathered around him. He said to them, "So said God, the God of Israel, 'Let every man place his sword upon his thigh, and pass back and forth from one gate to the other in the camp, and let every man kill his brother, every man his friend, every man his kinsman.' "

The sons of Levi did according to Moshe's word, and on that day some 3,000 men fell from among the people. (Shemos 32:26-28)

That was then. Regarding the end of history, the Arizal has taught that everyone will reincarnate in the final generation, Moshe Rabbeinu, the Jews of his time, and the Erev Rav. The Zohar has already warned that the Erev Rav will be extremely influential at this time. The GR"A said that they will be the

leaders of the Jewish people, empowered by their affluence and political connections.

In Moshe's time there was a second chance. At the End-of-Days, we may not be so fortunate. Tisha B'Av reminds us of how many times since then that we haven't been. A day is coming soon when God will put His foot down and judge the world. Standing on the sidelines will not be an option. A person will either be considered against the Erev Rav or part of them, just because they did not try, on some level, any level, to stop them.