

HOW COULD THEY?

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

Any student who has studied the sequence of events leading up to this week's Parsha has asked, "How could they do it? How could the Jews, so soon after the miracles of the Exodus, so soon after the parting of the sea, so soon after the giving of the Manna, so soon after the giving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai, how could they worship the Golden Calf?!" The question presumes that had we been present during those same magnificent displays of Hashem's presence, we would not have sinned. Had we been exposed to the undeniable existence of the Creator who willingly altered the constancy of nature to accommodate His Chosen People, we could never have bowed to a golden image or figure! The question becomes far more disturbing when we realize that the entire incident began only six hours after the people had calculated that Moshe should have returned! A mere six hours, that's all! (see the Aliya review in Parsha-Summary [parsha-summary-subscribe@torah.org]) What happened? What happened to the nation who heard G-d speak to them at the foot of Har Sinai, and who had sung the song of Angels on the shores of the Reed Sea?

The commentaries all explain that the sin of the Golden Calf was not simple idol worship. The Jews did not just go crazy and forget what they had witnessed and experienced. In fact, the entire sin was intended as a means of relating to G-d, not denying Him. The Rambam explains the early origins of idol worship as an attempt by pre-diluvian generations to personalize an otherwise overwhelmingly awesome and non-corporal Creator. By directing prayer and thanksgiving to the physical manifestations of G-d's presence, such as the laws of nature, G-d became more real and understandable. Unfortunately, history has proven that innovations and compromises in our relationship with Hashem always backfire. The second and third generations do not take the time to study the reasons or rationales supporting rituals and customs; most people are content to follow and imitate. Therefore, the children saw that their parents showed devotion and fear to nature, or objects representing nature, and concluded that those very same objects were themselves divine, without understanding that they merely represented G-d.

It is the belief or fear that we are incapable of having a direct and intimate relationship with the Creator of Heaven and Earth that results in idol worship. The generation of the Exodus did not deny G-d's existence, they simply wished to replace Him with something more tangible and understandable. They desired a medium that could buffer them from the awesome fearfulness of a G-d who manipulates the laws of nature as punishment and reward. The question that must be asked is: Why did the Bnai Yisroel feel that they needed the medium? Why didn't the Jews feel that

they could have a direct and intimate relationship with Hashem Himself, rather than turn to images and representative figures? Hadn't Hashem proven to them, time and time again, that His love for them as the children of the Avos and Imahos was unqualified and undeniably trustworthy?

The underlying motive for humans to worship idols is the desire to exert control over their own lives and destinies. Our relationship with Hashem is founded on the belief that He, and not us, is in control of all things. We make decisions that effect the immediate and the future; however, G-d is entirely in charge of the consequences and final outcome. This sense of complete dependency is the most difficult challenge for us to overcome. To ease us into accepting our inherent dependency upon Hashem, we start out as dependent upon parents, family, friends and community, and eventually graduate into an acceptance of the natural dependency that Hashem has ordered in nature. Nevertheless, we fight the inherent vulnerability, and more significantly, the inherent responsibility that comes with being dependent. This is expressed in our attempts to exert control over our own lives by creating an illusion of independence from the responsibilities of family, society, and religion. In truth, it never works except to the degree of our own self-delusion.

The Bnai Yisroel after Revelation were no different than us in this conflict with dependency; except in one area. They had it much worse than we do! Their total existence defied the norms of human controls and demanded a total acceptance of Hashem's ever-present manifestation of absolute mastery. From the freedom they had been miraculously granted to the very food they ate, theirs and their loved one's existence depended totally on G-d. Add to this one other important factor that was unique to the generation of the Exodus, and we begin to understand how the Jews were able to worship the Golden Calf.

Our dependent relationship with Hashem is framed by two basic principles.

1. Hashem has provided us with a set of rules and expectations that carry consequences, both positive and negative.
2. Our 3,000 + years of survival proves the constancy of G-d's love and protection, and justifies our trust in Him. At times we understand G-d's justice and rational and have the ability to associate consequence with deed. At other times we must accept Hashem's ruling on the basis of faith, regardless of the suffered consequences. Yet, no one can deny the miraculous nature of Jewish survival.

The Jews at the time of Exodus had neither of these basic principles to help them frame their sense of dependency. The Torah had not been given yet, and their history was just beginning. At best, they had family traditions and beliefs dating back 500 years or less to the time of Avraham and Sarah. These were family legends that carried few demands and unknown rewards. All they knew was that a force of indescribable power had elected to look favorably upon their pitiful plight and moved heaven and earth to free them of oppression and punish their former masters. The gift of freedom had no relationship to their immediate deeds, and the

expected and assumed payoff was yet to be revealed. Those who had the courage of conviction or sense of desperation to believe, trusted Moshe and followed him into the wilderness. The remaining majority of untrusting Jews stayed behind in Mitzrayim.

In attempting to understand the rationale behind events, we desperately look for cause and effect that gives us a degree of control for the future. The Jews in the aftermath of the Yam Suf knew that there was a master over the universe, but had no idea why He cared about them any more so than He did for the Egyptians. As the Medresh says, The Reed Sea asks Hashem, "Why should I split for the Jews and drown the Egyptians? Both of them are idol worshippers! By what merit do they deserve to live and the others to die?" To which G-d replied, "It's none of your business, it is your obligation to listen to My commands and not ask questions!" In fact, Moshe himself had the same question when G-d first approached him by the Burning Bush. He too wondered by what merit the Jews deserved to be freed from slavery? To which Hashem answered, "It's none of your business; however, I promised their fore-fathers that I would free them from slavery and give them the Torah!" In each instance it is clear that the Jews themselves had no framework for understanding G-d's system of justice. They certainly had no cause to associate their miraculous change of fortune with their own deeds or actions. Therefore, the generation of the Exodus felt totally out of control of their own lives with little understanding of what they were to do in the future to maintain this streak of good fortune. However, there was one constant in their lives that had positioned himself as the only obvious control in relating to, and seemingly controlling, the awesome power of G-d - that being Moshe! So long as Moshe was around the awesome and often vengeful power of Hashem was directed away from them and against their enemies. As soon as Moshe was "missing" for just 6 hours, the basic insecurity that comes when there is total dependency without trust overwhelmed the people. They demanded an immediate replacement for The man Moshe, upon whom they had come to rely for a modicum of control.

Of course, this very experience was what Hashem intended all along. His goal was to catapult the Jews into an acceptance of His ever-present protection so that they would realize and accept the totality of their dependency without qualification or reservation. However, they were unprepared to do so. They demanded a buffer that would give them the illusion of control that Moshe's presence had provided.

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