

ESCAPE INTO SHUL

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

In this week's Parsha, the Bnai Yisroel were commanded to build the Mishkan - the Tabernacle. This temporary and portable building was the direct consequence of the sin of the Golden Calf. The Jews had sinned with the Golden Calf; therefore, G-d commanded them to build the Mishkan.

The Bais Hamikdash eventually replaced the Mishkan, and the Shuls of today temporarily replace the Bais Hamikdash. This means that the structure of our daily prayers that revolve around the need for a Shul or Minyan (quorum of 10 men), is also the consequence of the Jews having worshipped the Golden Calf.

Why was building the Mishkan the consequence for worshipping the Golden Calf? What would our religious observances have been like if the Jews had not sinned with the Golden Calf?

In two weeks time we will read the story of the Golden Calf. Forty days after the end of last week's Parsha (Mishpatim) Moshe was scheduled to return from the summit of Mt. Sinai. Due to a miscalculation in determining Moshe's return the Jews grew restless and insecure. Aharon, attempting to calm the people, constructed the Golden Calf. The Jews worshipped the Golden Calf, and when Moshe returned on the 17th of Tamuz (exactly 40 days and nights from the time of his departure) he broke the Luchos - Tablets, destroyed the Golden Calf, mobilized the Leviyim, and punished those who had sinned with the Golden Calf.

The relationship the Jews had with G-d was founded upon fear of His awesome might and seemingly arbitrary justice. As the Medresh relates by the parting of the Yam Suf: The Sea asked, "The Egyptians serve idols and the Jews serve idols, why part for the Jews and drown the Egyptians?" Basically, the sea was questioning what made the Jews better than the Egyptians? In what way were they different from each other?

You can imagine that if the sea could not tell the difference between the Egyptian and the Jew (figuratively speaking) then the Jews themselves must have wondered the same thing. Why was G-d's frightening power directed against the Egyptians and away from themselves? It could not have been because of their own "good deeds". The fact was that they had not yet received the Torah and did not have the means for developing a personal relationship with G-d. They did not yet know what G-d considered to be a "good deed."

Furthermore, attributing their "good luck" to being the grandchildren of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yakov was not much help either. Knowing that G-d had saved them because of their ancestry did

not leave them with a feeling of security. Instead, it emphasized the degree to which their personal destiny was completely out of their control and seemingly removed from their own actions.

The only factor that seemed to separate the Egyptian from the Jew was Moshe's presence. He seemed to be able to direct G-d's awesome power against the Egyptians and away from the Jews. However, when they thought that Moshe was not coming down from the mountain, the Jews panicked. They confronted Aharon and demanded an intermediary to direct G-d's apparent arbitrary power and vengeance.

From the time of Revelation until Moshe's return on the first Yom Kippur with the second set of Luchos was 120 days. During that time, it became clear that the Jews were not ready to live with the constant awareness of G-d's presence and expectations. At the time of Revelation, the Jews requested that Moshe, rather than G-d, present the Ten Commandments, "Lest we die." In the same way the Jews had not been able to experience G-d's direct communication with them at Mattan Torah (20:16); so too, the constant pressure of G-d's manifest glory and awesome fear during the time in the desert was too much for them to bear.

We are told that in the aftermath of the Golden Calf G-d was "Mitzamtzem - contained Himself," and confined Himself in the Mishkan to the space between the wingspan of the Cherubin. The concept of Tzimtzum - containment is a difficult one for us to comprehend considering the contradictory notion of an unlimited G-d restricting Himself. (As I've often explained, G-d's only limitation is that He can not be limited.) Nevertheless, containment is how the commentaries explain G-d's relationship with the world in the aftermath of the Golden Calf. Whereas before the Golden Calf G-d's majesty was manifest throughout the world, after the Golden Calf G-d restricted Himself to the Mishkan.

The Garden of Eden was another place where G-d's presence was self-evident. The basic difference between Gan Eden and the rest of the world is that in Gan Eden G-d's presence is self-evident, rather than hidden. As the Pasuk says, and they heard the voice of G-d walking in the garden... (Ber. 3:8) In the rest of the world, and after Adam and Chava had sinned, G-d's presence is more hidden. The manifest presence of G-d in the desert was therefore like Gan Eden. Surrounding clouds, pillars of fire, Manna from heaven, water from rocks, and the Voice of G-d Himself made G-d's presence impossible to ignore.

As the Jews awaited Moshe's return from Mt. Sinai they were painfully aware of G-d's all-encompassing, judicious, and seemingly vengeful, power. Without the support of a daily regiment of Torah and Mitzvos, as well as the combined lessons of history, the Jews felt like mere pawns on G-d's celestial game board. Who could know what was the key factor in directing G-d's benevolence toward the Jew, and His anger against the Egyptian or Amaleki? The obvious answer was Moshe, and in his absence the Jews panicked.

After the Golden Calf, it became clear to G-d that the Emunah - faith that the Bnai Yisroel had in Him was based more on fear than trust. It would take time before the Bnai Yisroel were ready to live with

G-d's revealed presence. It would require distance before the Bnai Yisroel could trust G-d's love. Therefore, Hashem was Mitzamtzem - contained Himself within the structure of the Mishkan.

In truth, G-d is still as evident in nature as He was before the Golden Calf. The difference is that He provided us with the option of focusing our relationship with Him to the confines of a Mishkan, Bais Hamikdash or Shul. The ultimate goal in our relationship with G-d is to attain a level of constant awareness and devotion. There shouldn't be a need for us to ever "escape" His manifest presence. However, to live with that kind of constant awareness and expectation (pressure) requires a relationship founded upon love and trust, not fear and awe. It is analogous to marriage. If we truly love our spouses, then the constancy of each other's presence and demands is welcomed. However, if we don't truly love our spouses then the constancy of each other's company becomes a burden from which we wish to escape.

If the Bnai Yisroel had not sinned with the Golden Calf, there would not have been a need to build a Mishkan. The Luchos would have been placed in the Aron. A Mizbeach would have been constructed for offerings. The various instruments of our service to Hashem would have been constructed; but they would not have been the daily focus of our devotion. Instead, each and every one of us would have been our own Bais Hamikdash. We would have recognized the presence of G-d in every stone, every blade of grass, every shadow and every breeze. We would have sensed his loving care and protection in every facet of our lives. We would have lived our lives within the embracing reality of G-d's manifest presence, just as Adam and Chava had lived while still in Gan Eden.

The building of the Mishkan heralded a restructuring of our relationship with Hashem. On the one hand, it was a tragic loss of closeness and opportunity. On the other hand, it was a tragic loss of closeness and opportunity. On the other hand, it allowed us the necessary time and distance to develop a trusting and loving relationship with G-d.

Good Shabbos.

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