

IRREVERSIBLE CHANGES

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

One of the most dramatic moments in the Torah was when G-d informed Moshe that the Bnai Yisroel were sinning with the Golden Calf and that He was going to destroy them. Rather than questioning or arguing the merits of the case, Moshe accepted the facts as stated by G-d and immediately launched into his defense of the nation. That moment of Moshe confronting the wrath of G-d and coming to the defense of his charges was an unequaled display of loving leadership. Regardless of the circumstances or degree of their betrayal, Moshe demanded forgiveness. As the events then revealed, Moshe was concerned about the nation more so than the individual. Individuals deserving of punishment would certainly be punished; however, the nation as a whole had to be forgiven and saved from G-d's wrath. As the Torah states, "G-d relented regarding the evil..." and did not punish the nation.

Following his successful defense of the nation, Moshe descended from Mt. Sinai, broke the Luchos, and confronted the Jews. He destroyed the Golden Calf and began punishing those who had actually participated in worshiping the idol. He questioned Aharon regarding the circumstances of the sin and gathered around him the tribe of Levi. With the help of Shevet Levi, the remaining sinners were punished.

The next morning, Moshe demanded that G-d forgives the Bnai Yisroel, and G-d consented to do so. However, G-d's forgiveness did not mean that there wouldn't be consequences to the nation's relationship with G-d. In fact, the relationship was profoundly changed because of the sin of the Golden Calf.

Following the sin of Adam and Chava, G-d withdrew His overt presence from the workings of nature. Before the sin, G-d's presence could be heard "manifesting itself in the garden." (Ber. -3:8). After the sin, His presence was secreted within the laws of nature. As a way of illustrating this change, imagine the difference between seeing someone in person to only hearing a description of that person. Seeing someone does not require that we engage in any mental processing. We see the person and we know what that person looks like. Whatever processing takes place happens automatically without exerting any effort. However, when that same person is described to us without our seeing him in person, the description requires that we engage in a series of mental processes that translate the description into a picture. Imagine the processing that is demanded if afterwards we actually met that person. Taking the mental picture generated by the description and matching it to the real person would require a complex process of association and reconciliation.

G-d's manifestation before the sin was similar to seeing the actual person. G-d's manifestation after the sin was similar to hearing a description. The first didn't require that Adam and Chava engage in any mental processing. They simply knew that G-d existed. Experiencing nature meant recognizing the Creator. G-d's manifestation after they sinned was similar to the second case of hearing a description of the person but not seeing him. Both the initial description and the subsequent face-to-face meeting require processing and effort.

Contrast the reaction of the Jews toward G-d at the time of the splitting of the sea to our reaction to the record of that event. For those who were there the verse in As Yashir (Song by the Sea, Shemos - 15:2) Says, "This is my G-d..." Rashi references the Medresh that says that the Jews were able to point with their fingers and say with absolute certainty, "Look, there is my G-d!" The manifestation of G-d was so clear that the Jews did not have to engage in any mental processing. It was as if they were seeing G-d in person! On the other hand, we must process the story of the sea parting and believe that it was a manifestation of G-d. We must use our minds and imaginations to process and accept events that others witnessed.

The same Medresh that Rashi referenced is also the source of the famous quote, "A maidservant at the splitting of the sea witnessed more of G-d's actuality than the famous prophet Yichezkel." I have always questioned how that was possible. Becoming a prophet required the most rigorous and comprehensive training imaginable. A prophet had to be both an extraordinary scholar as well as truly righteous. Only then could an individual hope to attain the understanding of G-d called prophecy. How could a mere maidservant have ever understood more than Yichezkel who was considered among the greatest of our prophets? However, now I understand the meaning of the Medresh. The Medresh was not describing a sophisticated understanding of G-d or His relationship to justice, society, and the universe. The Medresh was describing the basic recognition of G-d as He manifested His actuality in the parting of the sea. Yichezkel understood G-d through the highly sophisticated and complex processing of Torah knowledge, natural law, and life experience. He functioned on the level of the person who must form a mental picture based upon someone else's description. The maidservant, on the other hand, functioned on the level of the person who had met G-d in person. She might not have understood the depths of G-d's mastery or her subsequent responsibilities, but she knew that He existed even more clearly than the greatest of prophets. Adam and Chava before their sin were minimally like the maidservant at the parting of the sea. After they sinned, G-d could only be maximally realized on the level of prophecy. Therefore, it is following their sin that G-d began to speak to humanity. Prior to their sinning, there was no need for G-d to speak. He may have spoken, but it was not His primary means for communicating His actuality. Through "working and guarding" (Ber. - 2:15) Gan Eden, humanity would understand the depths of G-d's profundity. Following their sin, G-d withdrew Himself from nature. No longer would He be clearly manifest within the laws of nature. From then on, humanity would have to struggle to recognize G-d's manifest presence. Through their observation of the laws of nature they could derive the existence of the Creator Who is ever present. After struggling to reveal the truth of G-d's existence

and living a life style that reflected His presence, G-d would then grant a chosen few the benefit of receiving His prophecy. Only then would His presence be absolutely confirmed. However, even then the recognition of His presence required the mental exertions to translate prophecy into recognition.

That is why the early generations lived so much longer than the generations after the Mabul. It required far more time to recognize G-d through the study of nature and to understand His expectations for humanity than it did once Torah was introduced.

At the giving of the Torah, G-d once again decided to manifest Himself to the Bnai Yisroel on a level that was similar to Gan Eden. Although His presence was to remain secreted within nature, He would reveal Himself to an entire nation through prophecy. However, not just any prophesy. G-d was prepared to reveal Himself on the highest level of prophecy - the level of "word."

The Rambam - Maimonides explained that all prophets, except for Moshe Rabbeinu, received prophecy while asleep or in a trance through the medium of a "vision." Moshe, on the other hand, received prophecy in a fully conscious state, "like a secretary taking dictation." G-d spoke to Moshe through words not pictures. All other prophets had to be trained to translate their visions into an understanding of G-d's wishes. Moshe did not have to undergo any processing or translation. G-d told him exactly what He wanted.

At the giving of the Torah, G-d spoke to the entire nation. They were fully conscious when they heard the word of G-d. G-d's manifest presence was no longer a matter of individual belief or intense training. The entire nation had experienced G-d together. The very nature of a shared experience validates the veracity of the experience. If only one person had experienced the word of G-d, it would have been no different than any other prophecy and subject to belief, question, and debate. However, if 3,000,000 people experience the word of G-d in a clear and unambiguous communication, then G-d must certainly exist.

Following the sin of the Golden Calf, G-d again withdrew His clear manifest presence. No longer would G-d speak to the entire nation. No longer would the nation hear as G-d communicated with Moshe. Only a chosen few would merit the level of prophecy and "hear G-d speak from between the Cherubim." Everyone else would have to learn from the prophets and believe that they were hearing the word of G-d. Had they not sinned with the Golden Calf, everyone would have merited hearing G-d speak. G-d's revelation would have been an ongoing encounter, not a one-time experience.

The aftermath of the Golden Calf irreversibly altered the manner of G-d's revelation. No longer would His presence be clearly manifested in nature and no longer would He publicly reveal Himself through word. It remains to the study of Torah (His word) and the sciences (His presence in nature) to recognize G-d's presence and understand His expectations.

The author is Rabbi of Shaarey Zedek Congregation, Valley Village, CA.
