

# MYSTERY OF THE GOLDEN CALF

*by Rabbi Berel Wein*

The story of the building of the golden calf in the desert remains one of the greater mysteries in the Torah and in the history of the Jewish people. How could a people that just experienced Divine revelation at Mount Sinai immediately revert to pagan worship and form? And just because their leader Moshe was late in returning to them, how were they so easily swayed to worship a golden calf? And was it not possible for Aharon, the great and beloved leader of Israel in the darkness of Egyptian slavery, to dissuade Israel from the folly of the golden calf? And, finally, why did Aharon himself agree to be a partner to the crime and actually became a participant in the creation of that deadly idol?

There have been many ideas advanced by the Torah commentators over the ages regarding these issues. One approach has been to emphasize how powerful the human expression of free will and personal autonomy is. We are all aware that all human beings pass through moments of rebellion against authority - parental, governmental, societal - during their lifetimes. We would all like to do "it" by our selves, without instruction, direction or command. And it makes no difference what the "it" is - we always want to do "it" our own way. Observe the way a two-year-old refuses to allow to be fed or insists on walking on his own. That is an expression of this basic human nature of independence and unwillingness to obey the orders of others.

In the nineteenth century, this human nature of avoidance of instruction from others was raised to a philosophical level by the words and writings of Immanuel Kant and others. The full "autonomy" of man, even from Divine instructions and commandments, was proclaimed as being the moral standard of modernity. Even God had no right, so to speak, to tell man what was just and moral and right and good. Mankind, through its own "autonomy" would set the moral tone for human life. And man would always be able innately to choose wisely and beneficially. Well, Auschwitz and the Gulag have pretty much laid that theory to rest, though the myth of man's "autonomy" remains alive and functioning in the Western world even today.

Thus, the story of the golden calf is an expression of human rebellion and the wish for complete freedom of choice and action. The Jewish people did not deny the revelation at Sinai. They did object to being commanded to forsake idolatry by God. They denied that God had the right, so to speak, to command them to do anything. Aharon attempted to bring them to the observance of the Divine commandments through their own autonomous behavior - he allowed the calf in order that they should come to reject its folly and falsehood. In that experiment, he failed. Mankind always

worships its own creations, no matter how destructive they may be. The lesson of the golden calf is that man cannot be left alone in free autonomy, without instruction and guidance, and be expected to construct the moral world that man aspires to create.

The key word in Judaism is vtzivanu - and He commanded us. Without God's commandments and the imposition of His discipline upon man, the world is a very dangerous and bad place. There are many golden calves that prance before our eyes in this society of ours. It is God's commandment that we do not ourselves worship them that guarantees the future of Israel and of all of mankind.

Shabat Shalom.

Rabbi Berel Wein

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