

# GUIDANCE NEEDED

*by Rabbi Berel Wein*

The narrative of the incident of Israel and the Golden Calf in the desert is so riveting and fascinating that we return to it year after year with renewed and refreshed interest. How did human beings that experienced Godly revelation at Sinai revert to worshipping a Golden Calf just a few short weeks later? What happened to the "the kingdom of priests and holy nation" to cause this terrible reversal of course? The great commentators to the Bible, and in fact, the Jewish people itself, in its deepest soul, have all wrestled with the problem of understanding this unfathomable fall of Israel and its consequences. And even though a full solution to this problem is not present, at least not in this limited space, I think that there are a number of insights that are apparent from this event, and that these insights are pertinent and necessary to us, personally and nationally, today as well.

The Torah stresses that the absence of Moses from the Israelite encampment for so many weeks after the granting of the Torah on Sinai was a strong contributing factor to the debacle of the Golden Calf. Jews, like all other humans, need strong, courageous, sensitive, wise leadership. Every person must, perforce, make difficult decisions for themselves. The world and Jewish society especially, is not a dictatorship governed by infallible people. But, at the same time, people require guidance, direction and vision in their lives. There must always be someone to point the way, to identify the goals and to formulate plans and ideas. The Jewish people were still too raw, too insecure, and too new to freedom to be able to be weaned from Moses' continuing presence and leadership. Panicked, they searched for a substitute Moses and reverted back to the idolatrous ways of the society of Egypt where they had been raised. After forty years, the Jewish people would be able to bear the permanent loss of Moses. But it would take many years of Torah life and training for them to make it on their own with Joshua as their new leader.

The absence of visionary leadership in many sections of today's Jewish world is what has contributed to the plethora of Golden Calves that surround and bedevil us. The Holocaust has crippled us in many ways. Visionary leadership has been one of its worst casualties. The creation of the Golden Calf was instigated by a group of people described by the Rabbis as "the eiruv rav" (a great mixture of peoples.) This section of the Jewish people was comprised of members of many other nations in Egypt who escaped from their bondage by attaching themselves to the Jewish people at the moment of the Exodus from Egypt. These people became "fair-weather" Jews. During the decades of Jewish wandering in the desert of Sinai, the 'eiruv rav' constantly agitated against Moses and against true Jewish interests. At every opportunity, whenever problems and discomfort arose on the road to the Land of Israel, they always raised the option of returning to Egypt, of

becoming pagans once more, of discarding the great Jewish dream for "watermelons and leeks and onions and cucumbers." Unfortunately, whether out of malice or ignorance, the 'eiruv rav' still is present amongst us today.

In a wholesale manner, Jews are abandoning Judaism and are being encouraged to do so by others whose commitment to Judaism and Jewish survival is tepid at best. In the present society's permissive atmosphere that allows one to construct the rules of one's own religion as one wishes, the 'eiruv rav' agitates for the destruction of tradition and the elimination of explicitly stated Torah values and behavior. Is it any wonder that the people yet dance around the Golden Calf? Lastly, I wish to point out that saving the Jewish people from the clutches of the Golden Calf is not always pleasant and joyful work. When Moses returns to the encampment of the Jews and sees for himself the destruction - both physical and moral - that the creation of the Golden Calf has wrought, he calls for action, even for civil war in order to save the people. "Who is unto God, let him come unto me!" is his battle cry. And the men of the tribe of Levi who rallied to his cause at that fateful moment in Jewish history, slew thousands in order to save Israel from the wrath of Godly destruction. Moses remembers the loyalty of Levi to the cause of Jewish survival in his final blessings to the people of Israel. "They spared not even family in their loyalty to God's covenant," he exclaims. Moses allows no compromise with the Golden Calf, for that will only lead the people down the slippery slope of spiritual annihilation. It is an insight that we should ponder in our current society as well.

Shabat Shalom,

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