

HOW COULD THIS HAPPEN?

by Rabbi Berel Wein

After all of the commentaries and explanations regarding the event of the Golden Calf that is the centerpiece of this weeks' parsha, one is still left, somehow, with an empty feeling of not understanding how such an event could have in fact occurred.

After all, did not the splitting of the sea, the war against Amalek, the manna and the miraculous wells of water, the revelation at Sinai, make an impression upon them? No doubt that all of the answers and explanations have validity, but how do we deal with this story? What is the relevance of this story to us, a generation that has many Golden Calves but certainly not that Golden calf of the parsha?

I think that the most direct and simple answer to this is to view the event in its simple reality. It is enough to know that such an event, though not understandable or rational, can and does occur. It should teach us about the irrationality of people, nations and political leaders. It should put us on notice that nothing in human affairs is unlikely or impossible.

The possibility of a Golden calf incident is always with us. By discounting the vagaries of human nature we expose ourselves to such sad incidents as described in this week's parsha. Moshe never imagines that such an event can occur amongst the people of Israel and so he ascends the mountain for his own spiritual development and to bring the Torah down to the Jewish people. Aharon also never thinks that a Golden calf can spring forth from his attempts to mollify the frenzied mob that now surrounds him. But, no matter, the Golden Calf arrives, alive and snorting fire. And that is life's lesson - that the unexpected and impossible is itself always present in our lives and society.

Anyone who reviews the events of the twentieth century will stand amazed at the events, wars, changes and profound diplomatic and political errors that shaped its story. Nothing that happened was rational or predictable in 1901.

Who could have thought that the great empires of Germany, Russia, France, England, Austria and the Ottomans would never survive that century? And who could have imagined the State of Israel arising and the destruction of European Jewry? That disaster of the Holocaust is a Golden Calf of unbelievably major proportions.

All rumors later circulated to the contrary notwithstanding, no one really envisioned such a catastrophe of so great a proportion. Since prophecy is no longer present amongst us, the future is always murky and undecipherable. Therefore the only thing certain in our lives, both personal and

national, is uncertainty.

And that is the basic and troubling message of the Golden Calf incident. The parsha is here to warn us of trusting only in our judgments, conclusions and prescience. That is not how life really works and not how events play themselves out.

The events of the Golden Calf constantly repeat themselves in our life story. Fortunate are those who are not seduced by that idol and are wary initially of the attempts to construct and deify it.

Shabat shalom.

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