

UNDERSTANDING GOD'S JUDGMENTS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

One of the most persistent and troubling questions regarding the event of the Golden Calf, as recorded in this week's parsha, is: "How could Aharon have done what he did?" Did he not realize the consequences of his action to himself and his family, as well as to the people of Israel generally? After all Aharon is to be the paradigm of Jewish priestly leadership for all generations to come.

And yet the Torah records for us that Aharon rose from this debacle, albeit at a tragic and heavy price to him and his family, and became revered as the ultimate High Priest of Israel. In this, he resembles the story of Yehudah, who also inexplicably falls into strange and unacceptable behavior and yet arises from his situation to become the leader of the tribes of Israel and the founder of the royal house of Jerusalem.

The Torah seems to emphasize to us the recuperative powers of these individuals as examples for us, while dealing with their negative actions and consequent punishments in a more indirect fashion. The Torah excuses no sins and gives no one a free pass on one's negative behavior.

Yet, all of the champions of Israel have baggage associated with their stories and descriptions of character as portrayed in the Torah. Yet, even accounting for human frailty, the question begs itself as to the causes of Aharon's behavior regarding the construction of the Golden Calf. And, over the ages, the commentators to the Torah have wrestled with and attempted to solve this problem.

I suspect that it was Aharon's great and unconditional love for the Jewish people that drove him to cooperate in the construction of the Golden Calf. Moshe's love for Israel was also unbounded and unconditional but Aharon was incapable of Moshe's tough love approach. He therefore sought to mitigate the evil act that he felt was inevitably coming and tried to soften its eventual consequences.

He was willing to provide Israel with the excuse - "Look, Aharon was with us and he participated in the Golden Calf, so it was not entirely our fault, and it could not have been that bad." There is a concept in Judaism called *aveirah lishmah* - a sin committed knowingly but for a higher purpose, for the sake of Heaven itself, so to speak.

A sin committed for the sake of the eventual salvation of the Jewish people from destruction is still a sin - but it has a moral content to it that allows the sinner to rise and recover after participating in that sin. Aharon's love of Israel, in this case misplaced and exaggerated, was nevertheless the cause of his redemption and of his becoming the High Priest of Israel for all history.

Such an insight aids in understanding the complexities of personality and circumstance that this week's parsha occasions. It is beyond human abilities to make such reckonings and judgments. However the Torah does allow us a glimpse as to how Heaven deals with such issues and we should be most grateful for having that insight brought to our knowledge and attention.

Shabat shalom,

Rabbi Berel Wein

Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com