

# BUILDING A SUCCESSFUL NATION

*by Rabbi Berel Wein*

Even after millennia of analysis, commentary and sagacious insights, the story of the Jewish people creating and worshiping the Golden Calf, as recorded for us in this week's Torah reading, remains an enigma and a mystery. After all of the miracles of Egypt and the splitting of Yam Suf, manna from heaven and the revelation at Sinai, how is such a thing possible?

The fact that our great sainted priest Aharon, the most beloved of all Jews and the symbol of Jewish brotherhood and service to God and man, is not only involved but is described as being the catalyst for the actual creation of the Golden Calf, simply boggles our minds. One is almost forced to say that there is no logical or even psychological explanation as to how and why this event occurred.

The Torah tells us the story in relatively dry narrative prose. Apparently it comes to teach us that there is no limit to the freedom of thought and behavior of human beings, to act righteously or in an evil fashion as they wish. No logic, no series of miracles, no Divine revelations can limit the freedom of choice that the Lord granted to humans.

The assumption of Western man and his civilization and society was and is that there is a logic and rationale for everything that occurs. This assumption is flawed and false. History is basically the story of the follies, mistakes and irrational behavior of individuals and nations. This week's Torah reading is merely a prime illustration of this human trait. Our freedom of choice is so absolute that we are able to destroy ourselves without compunction, thought or regret.

Nevertheless, I cannot resist making a point about what led up to Israel's tragic error in creating and worshiping the Golden Calf. The Torah emphasizes that perhaps the prime cause for the building of the Golden Calf by Jewish society then was the absence of Moshe.

While Moshe is up in heaven, freed of all human and bodily needs and restraints, the Jewish people are in effect leaderless. It is true that Aharon and Chur and the seventy elders are there in the midst of the encampment but they do not have the gravitons of leadership that can guide and govern an otherwise unruly, stiff-necked people.

Successful nation building is always dependent upon wise, patient, strong and demanding leadership. The leader has to be able not only to blaze the trail ahead for his people but he also must be able to stand up to his people in a manner that may be temporarily unpopular. The failures of both Aharon, as recorded for us in this week's Torah reading, and of King Saul as described for us in the Book of Samuel, are attributed to their inability to withstand the popular pressure of the

moment.

Moshe, the paragon for all Jewish leadership throughout the ages, is cognizant of the wishes and wants of the people but he does not succumb to that pressure. The Torah describes Moshe as one whose "eye never dimmed." He always sees past the present with a penetrating view and vision of the future. The absence of such a person and leader can easily lead to the creation and worshipping of a Golden Calf.

Shabbat shalom

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