

# GOING FOR GOLD

*by Rabbi Yochanan Zweig*

*"And you saw their abominations and their detestable idols - of wood and stone, of silver and gold that were with them" (29:16)*

In Parshas Devarim, Moshe assembles Bnei Yisroel and rebukes them in a veiled manner in order to avoid embarrassing them. He, therefore lists the places where Bnei Yisroel acted improperly, rather than explicitly mentioning their sins. The commentaries differ as to which sins are reflected by the various places. Rashi interprets Di Zahav as the place where the sin of the Golden Calf was

committed.<sup>1</sup> The Talmud teaches that although Moshe was rebuking Bnei Yisroel for participating in the sin of the Golden Calf, he was, at the same time, attempting to mitigate their culpability. Moshe argued that it was the gold and silver that Hashem heaped upon Bnei Yisroel until they were forced to say "di" - "enough", that played a crucial factor in the entire community succumbing to the sin of idolatry, hence the name "Di Zahav" to describe the sin. The Talmud concludes that Hashem accepted Moshe's argument, as it states in the verse "I gave them an abundance of wealth and they used the gold for Baal." <sup>2</sup> Moshe assumes that if Bnei Yisroel did not have gold and silver they would not have made the idol. How can he be sure that they would not have fashioned the calf out of wood or stone?

Throughout history Bnei Yisroel have fallen prey to the clutches of idol worship. Never do we find Hashem's response as harsh as it was to the Golden Calf. Why was this event more heinous in nature than all the subsequent parlays into idolatry?

In Parshas Nitzavim, Bnei Yisroel are warned against idolatry. The verse states that Moshe told Bnei Yisroel that they saw first-hand the detestable nature of idolatry when passing through the nations who served idols of "wood and stone, of silver and gold that was with them".<sup>3</sup> Rashi explains why the Torah adds the phrase "that was with them" after "silver and gold".

Moshe was ridiculing the idol worshippers for publicly they would only serve idols of wood and stone. They kept the silver and gold idols "with them", serving them only in private, for fear that they would be stolen.<sup>4</sup> Inherent in their actions is the ludicrous nature of their service; they feared that the idols that they worshipped as deities would be stolen by man. The unique nature of the sin of the Golden Calf was that it was a public display presented before the entire nation. The punishment was therefore more severe than when isolated pockets of Jews engaged in such activities.

The entire nation of Bnei Yisroel would not tolerate a public display of idolatry were the idol made of

wood, for the material used would reflect the fallibility of the idol. Moshe argued that the only reason that Bnei Yisroel were willing to use gold of such large quantities to make the idol was because they had so much of it and were not afraid that it might be stolen; if Bnei Yisroel had had less gold, they would not have used it publicly. To use another material publicly would not have been tolerated, thereby forcing the instigators of the golden calf to serve privately, out of the public eye, saving Bnei Yisroel from communal culpability.

1.1:1 2.Berachos 32b 3.29:16 4.Ibid

## A Present Definition

*"For this matter is very near to you...to perform it"(30:14)*

The Ramban interprets the matter under discussion as the mitzva of Teshuva, repentance. The Torah is attesting to the accessibility of repentance.<sup>1</sup> The expression "karov eilecha" - "close to you" implies a certain degree of ease. How can repentance be described as easy?

The Rambam teaches that repentance occurs when the penitent has the conviction never to return to his wicked ways, and is confident that even Hashem can attest to the fact that he will never again revert to the ways of his past.<sup>2</sup> How can a person guarantee that he will never repeat a sin of the past?

Teshuva in its perfection, according to the Rambam, is when a person is faced with the opportunity to commit a sin which he has previously transgressed, but due to his repentance, he does not succumb. The Rambam gives the following scenario as an example: If a man who has had an illicit relationship finds himself secluded with the same woman, in the same location where he once transgressed, having the same passion for her, his libido just as strong as in the past, yet he is still able to extricate himself from the situation, this is the perfect penitence.<sup>3</sup> Since it is forbidden for a person to place himself in a compromising situation, the Rambam must be setting a theoretical standard for a person to achieve. Why is it necessary to replicate the situation with the same woman and location? Would it not suffice to abstain from the sin, regardless of the person or locale involved?

The Talmud teaches that a person who repeatedly transgresses a certain sin views the sin as a permissible act.<sup>4</sup> The Talmud is giving us an insight into why a person sins. Generally, we define ourselves as a composite of our past actions. If a person has repeatedly transgressed a certain sin, and is now faced with the very same sin, he may reason that the sin cannot possibly impact upon him any more than it has already. The feeling that the sin has become part of his essence prevents the person's extracting himself from it.

The person is convinced that he will commit the sin again in the future, and therefore, not

committing it at present only serves as a temporary frustration.

The Rambam is teaching us that the mindset which is required for Teshuva is one in which a person divorces himself from his actions of the past. A person must feel that his past actions do not reflect his true nature, and furthermore, that under the same exact circumstances he would not repeat them. Teshuva can only occur when a person divorces himself from the negative behaviors of his past and realizes that they are not part of his true essence. Perhaps he may sin again in the future, but that is not because the behavior is ingrained in him from the past.

We cannot guarantee that we will never sin again. However, the knowledge that the sinful acts of the past are not part of our present will ensure that they are not motivating factors for committing the same sin in the future. A person must feel that his past does not control him. The ability to come to this realization is not a difficult task. If a person is truly interested in changing his way of life, this mindset will be natural and accessible to him. It is this notion to which the Torah attests that Teshuva is "karov eilecha" - "close to you".

*1.30:14 2.Yad Hilchos Teshuva 2:2 3.Ibid 2:1 4.Yuma 86b*

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