

# PARSHAS KI SISA - ON GOLDEN CALVES AND OTHER HEROES

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

## On Golden Calves and Other Heroes<sup>1</sup>

*Make us gods which shall go before us, for this man Moshe that brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.*

It wasn't idolatry.

We could almost wish that it had been. Had the Jews lapsed into a form of replacing G-d with another deity in the form of the Golden Calf, we would be able to give a sigh of relief. At least we moved on beyond that, never to go there again.

But it wasn't idolatry, and the mistake they made has not been entirely eradicated, thousands of years later.

That it was not idolatry should be clear from the text, which shows them wanting a replacement for a missing Moshe, not a disappearing G-d. While they did not stop believing in Hashem, the nature of their request, however, shows that they fundamentally misunderstood what we are to believe about Him, and about His relationship with Man.

They came to the conclusion that Moshe was not coming back, and that precipitated a state of panic. Could there be any continuity of the community, any assurance of a future without some sort of Moshe? How else could Man rely on the assistance of G-d, if not through something that embodied the qualities that G-d most appreciated? Moshe had been that representation. As long as he was with them, they could count on Hashem smiling down upon them. They believed - erroneously - that nothing could be more important than winning that Divine smile.

If Moshe was no more, someone or something had to replace him. If no person in the community could replace him, then they would find a symbolic substitute, and it would win Divine favor. In their minds, not only was this possible, but it was necessary. How much can Man really understand about G-d? We recognize the infinite gap between Him and us; yet without understanding Him, how can we possibly serve Him? The best strategy is to hit upon the qualities and ideals that come closest to what puny Man can comprehend. Through them, we arrive at the best approximation of what He is. Through that understanding, we fully realize how dependent we are upon Him; with this dependence, we might have some chance of winning His grace.

They would agree upon a symbolic representation of the highest ideal in human accomplishment,

and serve the One G-d through it. Surely G-d would respond well to their sincere quest, and invest that symbol with godliness! The symbol of what G-d can and should mean to Man would be the basis of belief and relationship. It would become the link between the human and the Divine, and in so doing, the guarantor of their future and their success.

So they thought, and so did many who came after them. This argument did not end with the destruction of the Golden Calf, but has reappeared in many cultures and faiths. The falsity of this thinking is one of the kernel ideas of Judaism that pits it against other faiths.

Our job is not to understand Him, but to become more like Him. We are not to bring Him closer to us, but to move ourselves closer to Him! Others would preoccupy themselves endlessly with trying to influence Him, to importune Him to do our bidding. Consciously or otherwise, they would be results-oriented. They sought and continue to seek primarily the blessings that He can grant. Any aid to making Him more real and immediate to us is a benefit. In their thinking, creating these tools and crutches is admirable, not sinful.

The Torah teaches otherwise. We are not to care primarily about what our lot will be, as much as what are deeds are going to be. If anything could potentially affect our fate - which is not, in any event, our primary concern - it is whether our actions accord with His Will. At all times, however, we must bear in mind His absolute freedom of Will. Nothing limits His choices. He cannot be manipulated to do what we want, rather than what He wants! Neither He nor his close servants are to be tools we use to accomplish what we want.

When we delusionally believe that we have found some sort of device to get Him to produce the results we desire, we are engaged in nothing less than heathenism and idolatry! Our subjective notions of what the future ought to hold in store for us should never translate into a belief that we can make that future happen. We have no controlling influence on the future.

Those who surrounded Aharon and clamored for a new Moshe, however, thought that Man did possess such powers, and attributed them to Moshe. They did not see him for what he was - an instrument of Hashem's Will, and nothing more. Rather, they saw in him someone who had transcended the ordinary, who had become somewhat godlike, and who therefore was in a position to directly influence G-d's decisions. He had, so to speak, G-d's ear, and He was willing to listen to suggestions coming from Moshe. It was not Hashem Who had taken them out of Mitzrayim, using Moshe as His human mouthpiece. It was Moshe, they thought, who had guaranteed the connection between G-d and the Jewish people. Without a Moshe, G-d would not have been there for them.

They completely misunderstood the nature of the laws that Moshe had given them, and that remained in their possession even during his absence. They failed to realize that it was not Moshe who guaranteed the connection to the Divine, but those very laws! Each person's adherence to Divine expectation is the sufficient and necessary element to secure a relationship with Hashem - nothing more, and nothing less. We connect to Him by faithfully performing His mitzvos, by

ourselves becoming more like Him through the purifying influence of His commandments.

Mention the word "intermediary," and most Jews have no trouble pointing to it as something that we do not believe in. Moreover, they will quickly - and correctly - observe that denying the existence of intermediaries between Man and G-d is so important, that it is one of a small number of beliefs that spells the difference between Judaism and other religions. Ironically, some people do not understand that a corollary of this core belief is that we have complete access to HKBH without any other intercessor, and that each of us is responsible for keeping the channel of communication open through our own deeds.

Looking for any other route is, alas, a carry-over from the ancient Golden Calf.

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1. Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Shemos 32:1

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