

STIFF NECK

by Rabbi Raymond Beyda

"I have seen this people and behold it is a stiff-necked people" Shemot 32:9

The incident of the Golden Calf has raised many questions throughout the centuries. How could the people fall so far spiritually so soon after the Revelation at Sinai? How could a generation called the "dor deah" -the Generation of Wisdom" -state "These are your gods O Israel" referring to their own golden earrings and bracelets? Could a people who heard en masse G-d's declaration "I am the Lord your God" kill the son of Miriam - Hur - in a mob like frenzy because he tried to talk them to their senses? These and other questions prompted the various explanations of motives and transgressions as well as justification and explanation of the events of one of the darkest days in the history of our people.

One question that requires interpretation is that in referring to His anger and His plans to destroy His people Hashem does not really express anger or resolve to punish because of the sin of idol worship. Instead, He refers to the nature of the sinners. "They are a stiff-necked people" is repeated to Moshe several times as he desperately attempted to appease the Lord and gain absolution and forgiveness for his people. Why is this the cause of so much Heavenly wrath? Isn't it the idol worship that really violates the Torah's commandment 'Thou shall not have any other god'? The message is that stubbornness in the face of rebuke increases the wrath of God. He calculates as follows. Since they are stiff-necked they will not admit their sin. It follows that they will not repent nor make amends. The only option then is to destroy them. The prophet Yirmiyahu says: "Here I shall pass judgment upon you for saying I have not sinned". In other words if a person does not acknowledge that he or she has done wrong one will not be prompted to fix the wrong in the future. Should one take care of the weakness on one's own it does not require Heavenly rebuke from above.

The Samak says that one must love those who criticize and correct. This is a misvah. If one was going to an important meeting and another points out a stain on his suit or an important file that he forgot - he would probably thanks the person and appreciate the help provided. When one is criticized for behavior not in keeping with Torah commands then one should feel grateful to the one who has benevolently pointed out the spiritual flaw.

Stiff-necked people don't change. They resist improvement and repel criticism. A flexible person seeks growth and is able to accept comments, which can yield spiritual advance and eliminate weak adherence to the Torah and its statutes.

The lesson of the Samak is clear. Listen to your critics. They are the best friends you have. Love their advice and take it to heart. If Hashem sees you working on yourself He will leave you as He patiently watches you attempt to grow. It is only those who stubbornly resist growth and deny weakness that arouse anger.

It can really hurt if one has a stiff neck.

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