

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“Lord, Lord a G-d of Compassion...” (Exodus 34:6) It is difficult to imagine the profound disappointment and even anger Moses must have felt upon witnessing the Israelites dancing and reveling around the Golden Calf. After all of his teachings and exhortations about how G-d demands fealty and morality -and after all of the miracles G-d had wrought for them in Egypt, at the Reed Sea, in the desert and at Sinai, how could the Israelites have so quickly cast away G-d and His prophet in favor of the momentary, frenzied pleasures of the Golden Calf?

"And it happened that when he drew near to the encampment and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses burned with anger and he cast the tablets from his hands, smashing them under the mountain" (Ex 32:19). Whether he broke the tablets in a fit of anger, disgusted with his nation and deeming them unworthy to be the bearers of the sacred teachings of the Decalogue (Rashi), or whether the sight of the debauchery caused Moses to feel faint, to be overcome with a debilitating weakness which caused the tablets to feel heavy in his hands and fall of themselves, leading him to cast them away from his legs so that he not become crippled by their weight as they smattered on the ground (Rashbam, ad loc), Moses himself appears to be as broken in spirit as were the tablets in stone. After all, ultimately a leader must feel and take responsibility for his nations' transgression! All of these emotions must have been swirling around Moses' mind and heart while the tablets were crashing on the ground.

But what follows in the Biblical text, after capital punishment for the 3,000 ringleaders of the idolatry, is a lengthy philosophical - theological dialogue between Moses and G-d. This culminates in the revelation of the thirteen Divine attributes and the "normative" definition of G-d at least in terms of our partial human understanding. What does this mean in terms of Moses' relationship with his nation Israel after their great transgression, and what does this mean for us today, in our own lives?

This was not the first time that Moses was disappointed by the Israelites. Early on in his career, when he was a Prince in Egypt, Moses saw an Egyptian taskmaster beating a Hebrew slave. "He looked here and there, and he saw there was not a man" - no

Egyptian was willing to cry out against the "anti-Semitic" injustice and no Hebrew was ready to launch a rebellion - "and he slew the Egyptian task-master and buried him in the sand" (Exodus 2:11). Moses was no fool; he would not have sacrificed his exalted position in Egypt for a rash act against a single Egyptian scoundrel. He hoped that with this assassination he would spark a Hebrew revolution against their despotic captors.

Moses goes out the next day, expecting to see the beginnings of rebellious foment amongst the Hebrews. He finds two Hebrew men fighting - perhaps specifically about whether or not to follow Moses' lead. But when he chastises the assailant for raising a hand against his brother, he is unceremoniously criticized: "Who made you a master and judge over us? Are you about to kill me just as you killed the Egyptian?" (Ex 2:14).

Moses realized that he had risked his life for nought, that the Hebrews were too embroiled in their own petty arguments to launch a rebellion. Upset with his Hebrew relatives, Moses decides to give up on social action and devote himself to G-d and to religious meditation rather than political rebellion (see Lichtenstein, Moshe, Tzir V'tzon). To this end, he apparently chose to escape to Midian, a desert community whose Sheikh, Yitro, was a seeker after the Divine (see Ex 2:21, Rashi ad loc and Ex 18:11).

Moses spends 60 years in this Midianite, ashram-like environment of solitary contemplation with the Divine, culminating in his vision of the burning bush when Moses sees an "angel of the Lord in flame of fire in the midst of a prickly thorn-bush... and behold, the thorn-bush is burning with fire, but the thorn-bush is not consumed" (Exodus 3: 1-3). The prickly and lowly thorn-bush seems to be symbolizing the Hebrew people, containing within itself the fire of the Divine but not being consumed by it. And G-d sends Moses back to this developing, albeit prickly Hebrew nation, urging him to lead the Israelite slaves out of their Egyptian servitude.

G-d is teaching His greatest prophet that his religious goal must not only be Divine meditation, but also human communication; and specifically taking the Israelites out of Egypt and bringing them to the Promised Land, no matter how hard it may be to work with them.

Now let us fast forward to the sin of the Golden Calf and its aftermath. Moses pleads with G-d to forgive the nation. G-d responds that He dare not dwell in the

**TORAS AISH IS A WEEKLY PARSHA
NEWSLETTER DISTRIBUTED VIA EMAIL AND THE
WORLD WIDE WEB AT HTTP://AISHDAS.ORG.
FOR MORE INFO EMAIL YITZ@AISHDAS.ORG**

The material presented in this publication was collected from publicly available electronic mail, computer archives and the UseNet. It is being presented with the permission of the respective authors. Toras Aish is an independent publication, and does not necessarily reflect the views of any given synagogue.

**TO DEDICATE THIS NEWSLETTER PLEASE CALL
973-472-0180 OR EMAIL YITZ@AISHDAS.ORG**

midst of Israel, lest He destroy them at their next transgression. Moses then asks to be shown G-d's glory, to understand G-d's ways in this world. G-d explains that a living human cannot see His face, since that would require a complete understanding of the Divine.

But His back - a partial glimpse - could and would be revealed. Moses then stands on the cleft of a rock on Mount Sinai, the very place of G-d's previous revelation of the Ten Commandments, and he receives a second revelation, a second "service to G-d on this mountain:"

"...Moses arose early in the morning and ascended to Mt. Sinai... taking the two stone tablets in his hand. The Lord descended in a cloud and stood with him there, and he called out with the Name Adonai [YHVH]. And Adonai [YHVH] passed before him and he proclaimed: Adonai, Adonai, El [G-d], Compassionate and forgiving, Slow to Anger and Abundant in Kindness and Truth..." (Ex 34: 4-7).

In this second revelation, G-d is telling Moses two things: first of all, that He is a G-d of unconditional love, a G-d who loves the individual before he/she sins and a G-d who loves the individual even after he/she sins (Rashi ad loc), a G-d who freely forgives. Hence G-d will never reject His covenantal nation, will always forgive with alacrity and work with Israel on the road to redemption. Secondly, if G-d is fundamentally a G-d of love and forgiveness, we must be people of love and forgiveness. From Moses the greatest of prophets to the lowliest hewers of wood and drawers of water, just as He (G-d) loves freely and is always ready to forgive, so in all of our human relationships we must strive to love generously and always be ready to forgive. This second Revelation is the mirror image of the first, yes, we must firmly ascribe to the morality of the Ten Commandments, but we must at the same time be constantly aware that the G-d of the cosmos loves each and every one of His children, and is always ready to forgive us, no matter what. © 2010 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI SIR JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

This week's sedra begins with a strange command: "When you take a census [literally, 'when you lift

the head'] of the Israelites to determine their number, each one is to give to the Lord an atonement offering for his life when they are counted, so that they will not be stricken by plague when they are counted." (Exodus 30:12)

Evidently, it is dangerous to count Jews. This is confirmed by an episode in II Samuel 24. On one occasion, King David decided to take a census of the people. His chief of staff Joab strongly advised against it: "But Joab replied to the king, 'May the Lord your G-d multiply the troops a hundred times over, and may the eyes of my lord the king see it. But why does my lord the king want to do such a thing?'"

However, David overruled him. Once the census was taken, David began to realize that he had done a great wrong: "David was conscience-stricken after he had counted the fighting men, and he said to the Lord, 'I have sinned greatly in what I have done. Now, O Lord, I beg you, take away the guilt of your servant. I have done a very foolish thing.'"

The result, however, was tragedy. A plague struck the people, taking many lives. There is a tantalizing mystery here. Why is it dangerous to count Jews? The commentators offered many suggestions. Rashi says that counting is fraught with the danger of "the evil eye". Rabbenu Bachya suggests that when people are being counted, they are numbered one by one rather than all together. For a moment they are individuals, separated from the community. Hence the danger that an individual's merit may not be sufficiently great to save him from adverse judgement. Sforno says that a census reminds us of change; it draws attention both to those who have died and those who are still alive. This too is dangerous, since it raises the question: by what right am I here and others not? To avert this we must give, by way of ransom, a gift to the Temple and its Divine service.

If only by way of midrash, and with no suggestion that this is the plain sense of the verse, there is another possibility. Why do nations normally take a census of their population? To establish their strength: military (the number of people who can be conscripted into an army), economic (the number from whom taxes can be raised) or simply demographic (the numerical growth or decline of the nation). The assumption beneath every census is: there is strength in numbers. The more numerous a people, the stronger it is.

That is why it is dangerous to count Jews. We are a tiny people. The late Milton Himmelfarb once wrote that the total population of Jews throughout the world is smaller than a small statistical error in the Chinese census. We are a fifth of a per cent of the population of the world: by any normal standards too small to be significant. Nor is this true only now. It was then. In one of his concluding addresses in Deuteronomy, Moses said: "The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were

more numerous than other peoples, for you are the fewest of all peoples." (Deuteronomy 7:7).

The danger in counting Jews is that if they believed, even for a moment, that there is strength in numbers, the Jewish people would long ago have given way to despair.

How then do you estimate the strength of the Jewish people? To this the Torah gives an answer of surpassing beauty. Ask Jews to give, and then count their contributions. Numerically we are small, but in terms of our contributions to civilization and humankind, we are vast.

Think only of the makers of modern thought: in physics, Einstein; in philosophy, Wittgenstein; in sociology, Durkheim; in anthropology, Levi-Strauss; in psychiatry, Freud; in economics, a whole string of great thinkers from David Ricardo to Milton Friedman to Alan Greenspan to Joe Stiglitz (including 40 per cent of the winners of the Nobel Prize for economics). In literature, there were writers from Proust to Kafka to Agnon to Isaac Bashevis Singer; in music, classical composers like Mahler and Schoenberg, popular composers like Irving Berlin and George Gershwin, as well as some of the world's greatest soloists and conductors. Jews have won 48 Nobel prizes in medicine. They have made an outstanding contribution to law (in Britain, where they are one-half of a percent of the population, they contributed two of the last three Lord Chief Justices, the highest judicial office in the land). And all this without mentioning the Jewish contribution to industry, finance, academic life, the media, and politics (under John Major, at one time both the Home Secretary and Foreign Secretary were Jews).

But it is, of course, the Jewish contribution to the life of the spirit that is not only unique but shaped the entire course of Western civilization. Somehow this tiny people produced an unceasing flow of patriarchs, priests, poets and prophets, masters of halakhah and aggadah, codifiers and commentators, philosophers and mystics, sages and saints in a way that almost defies comprehension. It was not once that the Jewish imagination caught fire, but in century after century, sometimes under the worst persecution known to any nation on earth. Time and again, in the wake of tragedy, the Jewish people renewed itself in a burst of creativity. The destruction of the First Temple gave rise to systematic Torah study in Babylon. The destruction of the Second precipitated the great literature of the Oral tradition: Midrash, Mishnah and Gemarah. Encounters with Karaites, and later, Christians, produced the great Torah commentaries. The challenge of Islamic neo-Platonism and neo-Aristotelianism provoked one of the great ages of Jewish philosophy.

If you want to know the strength of the Jewish people, ask them to give, and then count the contributions. That is the majestic idea at the opening of this week's sedra.

Nor is this mere conjecture. There is one episode in the Book of Judges (chapters 6-7) that epitomizes this dazzling truth. The Israelites had suffered a devastating series of attacks from the Midianites. G-d called on a warrior, Gideon, and told him to wage war against them. Gideon duly assembled an army of 32,000 men. G-d responded with what must surely be one of the strangest lines in history: "You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into their hands" (Judges 7:2). G-d tells Gideon to announce that anyone who wishes to go home should go home. 22,000 men did so; now a mere 10,000 remained. G-d said: There are still too many men.

He told Gideon to take the men to a place of water and observe how they drank. 9,700 knelt down to the water to drink it directly. A mere 300 cupped the water in their hands and stayed standing. G-d told Gideon to dismiss the 9,700, leaving a mere 300 troops, an absurdly small number for any military engagement, let alone a war against a powerful enemy. Only then did G-d say to Gideon: "With the three hundred men that lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your hands." (7:7). Mounting a surprise attack at night, and using ingenious tactics to suggest the presence of a large army, Gideon struck and won.

Clearly this is not just a story about war. Tanakh is a religious text, not a military one. What G-d was saying to Gideon-what tacitly He has been saying to us and our ancestors for forty centuries-is that to win the Jewish battle, the battle of the spirit, the victory of heart, mind and soul, you do not need numbers. You need dedication, commitment, study, prayer, vision, courage, ideals, hope. You need a people who are instinctively inclined to give, to contribute. Give, then count the contributions: the finest way ever devised to measure the strength of a people. © 2010 Rabbi Sir J. Sacks and torah.org

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

One of the most extraordinary images in the Torah appears in this week's portion. Moshe (Moses) asks G-d "Show me your glory." G-d responds that He cannot be seen by any human being. But, G-d tells Moshe, "Stand in the cleft of the rock" and "you will see My back, but My face must not be seen." (Exodus 33: 17-23) What does this mean?

The Midrash maintains that Moshe was asking G-d for an understanding of why there is evil in the world. An especially relevant question coming as it does after the Jews experienced so much upheaval after leaving Egypt. G-d's response was that as events unfold, they cannot be easily understood. Only after an event, often as long as many years later can one gain a glimpse and comprehend what had occurred. When G-d tells Moshe, you can see me from behind, but not

from the front, He may be saying that events can only be understood in hindsight.

Another possibility comes to mind. Perhaps Moshe was asking G-d for proof of His existence. Moshe may have felt that such a proof was needed by Am Yisrael after they rejected G-d by building the Golden Calf. But such a proof does not exist. After all, if G-d is G-d, proof would limit Him. And so, G-d tells Moshe, "You cannot see me from the front." There is no proof of My existence. Rather, one should concentrate on understanding the characteristics of G-d, the benevolence of G-d, the kindness of G-d. It's these characteristics that are symbolized by G-d telling Moshe He can be seen from the back.

Still another approach is that Moshe was asking G-d, especially after the Jews were punished for having built the Golden Calf, how Divine judgment works. G-d's response is that decisions are not based on strict law, rather on a law that tempers justice with mercy. You cannot see me from the front, may mean that the world could not exist if G-d judged us with pure judgment alone. Only from the back, only with law mingled with kindness can the world endure. Indeed, only with this mixture did G-d allow the Jews as a people to survive after the sin of the Golden Calf. Not coincidentally, G-d's thirteen attributes of mercy soon follow in the text. (Exodus 34:6-7)

One final thought. Could it be that when Moshe tells G-d, let me see you from the front, G-d responds that built into his essence is deep humility? This may be the meaning of our text. G-d is saying "I don't want the honor of being seen from the front, but rather modestly from the back." As G-d displays the trait of humility, so too should we attempt to learn the lesson of walking humbly in the world. © 2010 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

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. © 2010 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. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

Less than two months after hearing G-d speak to them directly, the nation sins by asking for, contributing towards, celebrating in front of, and worshipping the golden calf (or tolerating those that did). Much has been discussed about the extenuating circumstances involved, such as the sin starting from -

and being committed by - the mixed multitude of nations that joined the Children of Israel when they left Egypt, the fact that Moshe was "late" (not really, but they thought he was), that Satan showed them what he claimed was Moshe's dead body, that they didn't worship the golden calf itself but tried using it as a vehicle to worship G-d, that Aharon was part of making it, etc. Nevertheless, despite everything, it comes down to one basic factor: They didn't listen to G-d. They had been commanded explicitly not to serve other deities (Shemos 20:3) and not to make any molten images (20:4), an admonition repeated shortly thereafter (20:20).

No matter what rationalization they may have had, they should have known that making a golden calf was a problem; even making it was not allowed, let alone worshipping it. Chur (Moshe and Aharon's nephew) tried to tell them so, and he was killed for it (see Rashi on 32:5). Those that didn't actually worship the golden calf not only stood by as others did, they didn't stand up and support Chur either. The mass of confusion clouded their ability to separate wrong from right, and instead of focusing on what they knew to be wrong (from G-d's explicit directives) and avoiding/preventing it, they allowed their confusion to obfuscate their requirements.

It is this sin - allowing things that are unclear affect even those things that are, or should be - that we ask G-d to forgive us for on Yom Kippur, in the very last "al chait." "And for the sin that we have committed before you while in a state of confusion" (literally "while having a confused heart").

There are many forks in the road of life, and sometimes it's difficult to know which way to turn. Having a fork up ahead shouldn't adversely affect each step we need to take until we reach that fork. Often, by taking the right steps leading to the fork, which road to take becomes abundantly clear. © 2010 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI NAFTALI REICH

Legacy

Things don't just happen by themselves. And yet, when the Jewish people built a golden calf while Moses was away on the mountaintop receiving the Torah from Hashem, something very strange happened. The Midrash in this week's Torah portion tells us that the people threw their golden ornaments into the flames and a fully formed golden calf emerged. Amazing! Why would such a thing happen? Surely, this must have been an aberration. Surely, something like this could not happen again.

But wait. Let us peek into next week's Torah portion. Lo and behold, the same thing happens. The people are building the Tabernacle, Hashem's earthly Abode. The time arrives for the construction of the golden candelabrum, the mystical symbol of wisdom that will illuminate in the Inner Sanctum. The

construction of this transcendent vessel is exceedingly complicated, and to make matters even more difficult, the entire candelabrum is to be made from a single ingot of gold. Although he gives it his best effort, Moses cannot accomplish this baffling task. Finally, Hashem tells Moses to throw the gold into the fire and the candelabrum will emerge by itself. And this is exactly what happens. What is the connection between these two strange phenomena? Is it coincidence that they transpired one right after the other?

The commentators explain that these two incidents are actually two sides of the same coin. They both reflect the tremendous power inherent in the human will. When a person's heart is set on a goal, when he is consumed with a flaming desire to attain that goal, nothing can stand in his way. Where there is a will there is way, says the old adage. The implication, of course, is that human ingenuity can always discover a solution to any problem. But it is far deeper than that. The human will generates an almost mystical energy that can penetrate any barrier.

When Moses did not return from the mountaintop on schedule, the people were confused and disoriented, and they instinctively turned to their old idolatrous habits for reassurance. In their distress, they were overcome with a burning desire for the illusory comforts of the idol worship to which they were accustomed in Egypt. This desire was so strong, the Torah tells us, that all they had to do was throw their golden ornaments into the fire and the golden calf emerged.

But just as the human will penetrates all barriers to attain its sinister goals, it can also be channeled to the good. If a person is inspired to reach for the highest spiritual goals, his very desire will generate a mystical energy that will carry him there, one way or another. This is what Hashem was teaching Moses. Nothing stands in the way of the indomitable human will, not even the near impossibility of forming the intricate candelabrum from a single piece of gold. The fire of his enthusiasm would create the candelabrum even if his hands could not.

This was the true reversal of the sin of the golden calf. The flaming desire to sin had generated the abominable idol. But now Moses channeled his flaming desire in the opposite direction, and by doing so, he created the perfect vessel of wisdom and spiritual illumination.

A great emperor of ancient times ruled most of the civilized world with an iron hand. After he was assassinated, civil war broke out among his potential successors to the throne. Both pretenders to the throne were powerful charismatic figures, and each was able to rally many local kings and princes of the empire to his standard. The war raged on for several years until one of the pretenders finally emerged victorious and was acclaimed as the new emperor.

One of the kings who had fought valiantly on the side of the loser feared for his life. He traveled to the imperial city and pleaded for an audience with the new emperor. The audience was granted, and the defeated king prostrated himself before the new emperor.

"What have you to say for yourself?" declared the emperor.

"Your majesty," said the king, "do not look at whose friend I was but rather at what sort of friend I was. You saw that I was a loyal and devoted friend to your rival. If you honor me by accepting my friendship, you now know what sort of friend I will be to you."

The emperor smiled and nodded. "You have spoken well, my friend. Your life is spared, and you will retain all your lands and honors."

In our own lives, it is important to recognize the enormous power we hold in our own hands. We are capable of attaining any goals we pursue with true single-minded perseverance, but sometimes we would do well to stop and consider where we are going. Only if we channel our energies correctly and pursue goals of enduring value can we truly enrich our lives and find true happiness and fulfillment. © 2009 Rabbi N. Reich & torah.org

RABBI PINCHAS WINSTON

Perceptions

"G-d told Moshe, 'Go down. Your people which you brought out of Egypt have corrupted themselves.'" (Shemos 32:7) Ah, the erev rav, where would the world have been without them? Where would the world be without them today? In Yemos HaMoshiach, that's where. All that went wrong for the Jewish people in the desert was instigated by the Mixed Multitude, just as G-d had forewarned Moshe Rabbeinu back in Egypt, on the way out.

And now, in this week's parshah, their coupe de grace: the golden calf. Had it not been for the Erev Rav, the Jewish people would have waited peacefully at the foot of the mountain in their camp below for Moshe Rabbeinu to return with the Word of G-d. Maybe they would have asked, "What's taking him so long?" and been a bit concerned.

But, they certainly would not have responded with idol worship and licentious behavior. Only the Erev Rav, as intelligent as some of them may have been at the time, could do something so dumb at Mt. Sinai. It is always amazing how a bad trait can lay waste to intelligence, even use it to engineer one's own destruction. We're watching the very same thing happen today as well.

Interestingly enough, another name for the Erev Rav was "HaAm," or "the people," as noted above. In fact, Chazal say that every time the Torah refers only to HaAm, which, on a simple level, can apply to the Jewish people as well, it is really a direct reference to the Erev Rav themselves. Hence, when the verse says: "After

Pharaoh sent the people away. G-d did not lead them through the land of the Philistines." (Shemos 13:17) The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh says that it refers to the Erev Rav, whom Pharaoh sent along with the Jewish people to cause precisely the kind of trouble they cause in this week's parshah.

Of all the nicknames to give to a troublesome people, HaAm is not so bad. At least, that is what one might think at first, until one considers that they are not supposed to be an "um," that is, a separate nation. They were Egyptians who, because of the Bris Milah Yosef, as Viceroy, had the Egyptians perform to get grain during the famine, became converts to the way of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov. By the time they left Egypt, there should have been no trace of a different origin.

In other words, the name HaAm was a way of denoting the lack of integration into the Jewish people by these Egyptian converts, evidenced by how quickly they reverted to Egyptian ways in this week's parshah. And, having not fully integrated into the Jewish people meant, means, that the conversion process was not complete on all levels, and therefore, that they remained a divisive force within Klal Yisroel.

In other words, in this case, HaAm is not compliment, but an indication of the Erev Rav's propensity to be divisive. If k'ish echad b'leiv echad¹ describes the ultimate state of Jewish unification, HaAm, in reference to the Erev Rav, alludes to just the opposite. And, it has been by sowing disunity amongst Jews that the Erev Rav has been most successful in keeping us from fulfilling the ultimate dreams of our nation.

And, make no mistake about it: the Erev Rav comes in various different forms and types of people. In fact, the Zohar discusses in great detail five different categories of Erev Rav (Bereishis 25a), and all of them can have an application in every kind of Jewish community you can think of. And, as different as one group might be from the other, they all have one thing in common: they put themselves before the nation.

Therefore, says the Zohar, they can give charity, lots of it, even build synagogues and Torah study houses, but to act as base for their name plaque. Secondary to the good name they will receive for being so philanthropic is the good their actual contribution will do for the people for whom it is intended.

Or, they can take an activist role on behalf of some cause, or even specifically, a Jewish cause. But, if you truly analyze what they are doing, no matter how well-intentioned they make themselves appear on the surface, it is their personal mandate that they attempt to fulfill, not the national one of the Jewish people. Indeed, as they work on behalf of the Jewish people they in fact work against the Jewish people, often using their money and political clout to force their ways and means.

If they had their own flag, the golden calf would be their emblem in its middle. And, just as Amalek was

the antithesis of Moshe Rabbeinu, the Erev Rav is just a derivation of that very antithesis. The trait of Moshe Rabbeinu was Netzach, which meant that everything he did was for the sake of Eternity. The Erev Rav simply lived for today, investing all of their energy in the physical pleasure of the moment.

The golden calf embodied this approach to life. A calf represents playful youthfulness, and gold represents longevity. In short, the golden calf represented man's desire to never grow up and take responsibility for himself and the world, so that he can party round the clock. And, when Moshe Rabbeinu came back down the mountain in this week's parshah caring the antidote for such a lifestyle, that's exactly what he found going on in the camp below: a wild party.

This week is also Parashas Parah, so the maftir jumps to Parashas Chukas, where we find the laws concerning the procedure of the Red Heifer, necessary for a person who has become defiled by contact with a dead body, or implements that have. We read it now because of the closeness of Pesach, but its juxtaposition with the reading of the sin of the golden calf couldn't have been better timed, for like Moshe Rabbeinu himself, it is the antithesis of the Erev Rav and all that they stand for.

First of all, it is red, and not gold. If gold represents longevity, then red, the color of blood, represents human vulnerability and frailty. If a calf represents wistful youthfulness, then a heifer represents responsible adulthood, the ability to wear a yoke and to channel energy in a meaningful and productive manner. If the golden calf represents eternal youth, but really results in early death, the Red Heifer looked like death, but actually resulted in a return to life.

Hence, the Red Heifer and the golden calf represent two extremes on a single continuum, and therefore, the ongoing challenge of the Jew, indeed of all mankind. We are caught in an ongoing internal battle between the drive for immediate pleasure and satisfaction, and long term gain. It is a battle that not only defines us as individuals, but as a nation as a whole. To quote "Why Israel is the world's happiest country", by Spengler: "Envy surrounds no country on Earth like the state of Israel, and with good reason: by objective measures, Israel is the happiest nation on Earth at the 60th anniversary of its founding. It is one of the wealthiest, freest and best-educated; and it enjoys a higher life expectancy than Germany or the Netherlands. But most remarkable is that Israelis appear to love life and hate death more than any other nation. Can it be a coincidence that this most ancient of nations, and the only nation persuaded that it was summoned into history for G-d's service, consists of individuals who appear to love life more than any other people? As a simple index of life-preference, I plot the fertility rate versus the suicide rate of 35 industrial countries, that is, the proportion of people who choose to create new life against the proportion who choose to

destroy their own. Israel stands alone, positioned in the upper-left-hand-quadrant, or life-loving, portion of the chart. Those who believe in Israel's divine election might see a special grace reflected in its love of life. In another location I argued, 'It's easy for the Jews to talk about delighting in life. They are quite sure that they are eternal, while other peoples tremble at the prospect impending extinction. It is not their individual lives that the Jews find so pleasant, but rather the notion of a covenantal life that proceeds uninterrupted through the generations.'"

In other words, Israelis, at least the traditional ones, feel a sense of eternity, and its has to affect their way of thinking, and therefore, their way of acting. The ones who have lost this sense of eternity, and many already have, have done two things: they have given up on the future and turned to extremely temporal pleasures. In short, they have adopted the life of the Erev Rav and have become, hopefully only temporarily, like them.

Not just in Eretz Yisroel, obviously. One can travel to just about any country Jews are found in the world today, which, amazingly, is almost every place people can be found today, and find Jews pursuing the golden calf way of life. To the extent that they ignore the eternal reality of the Jewish people is the extent to which they follow the ways of the Erev Rav. And, today, you can be religious as well and fall into the same trap.

Indeed, there ought to be an Erev Rav-golden calf thermometer. I'm not quite sure how it would work, but somehow it would look at a Jew's life, and determine how much the person leans in one direction or the other, either in the direction of the golden calf, or that of the Red Heifer. It would measure how real a person is with eternal life, as projected by his or her approach to the material world.

This message comes right in advance of Pesach because this is really what Pesach is all about. As we move away from chometz, the symbol of which is bread, in the direction of matzah, plain flour and water, we shed more than pounds. We leave behind an attachment to the golden (calf) way of life, a branch of Egyptian life.

That's why they built it in the first place. For, you can take the Erev Rav out of Egypt, but apparently, it is far harder to take the Egypt out of the Erev Rav, and the golden calf was their way of making the Jewish camp their home away from home, that is, their Egypt away from Egypt. Unfortunately, less than 100 days out of Mitzrayim, those Jews still suffering from the Mitzrayim Syndrome got pulled into the spiritual abyss, like errant dust into an industrial strength vacuum cleaner.

Interesting how some knowing Jews today refer to America, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, as the "Golden Medinah," or, "The Golden Country." For, it has been, for decades, the place of great opportunity, especially for the Jewish people, a place where almost everything we have touched has turned to gold. The last time this

many Jews were this wealthy was when the gold and silver of the Egyptian army washed ashore after they drowned in the Red Sea.

In some respects, it has served us well. It allowed us to rebuild the Jewish nation on American soil after the Jewish nation was wiped away from European soil. And, quite clearly, it helped pave the way for the Final Redemption, as countless Jews invested untold sums of wealth into the development of Eretz Yisroel, including the construction of many wonderful Torah institutions.

However, the same cannot be said about everyone who struck it rich in America. Some use their wealth, not to strengthen the Jewish people against the pitfalls of the golden calf lifestyle, but to encourage it. Some, as mentioned before, even use their financial clout, in the name of helping the Jewish people, to actually undermine the future of the State of Israel. They call themselves friends of the Jewish people, but then again, so did the Erev Rav.

And, before we say to ourselves with confidence, "Well, that's not me!" we should read the Zohar on the Erev Rav today. Once I did, I became very uneasy, and felt compelled to examine my lifestyle for any Erev Rav tendencies. Everyone ought to do the same thing, especially as scandals come to light from all sectors of the Jewish people.

At the very least, get back to Torah basics, and make sure that whatever you do, you do it for the right reasons, and with humility. Above all, let G-d be above all, meaning that you should fear no one but G-d Himself, and serve Him loyally. This will serve you the best of all, especially as we head into uncharted waters of history, and the world becomes less favorable to anything the Jewish people seem to do today. © 2010 Rabbi P. Winston & torah.org

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Masked Emotions

In what is probably the most anti-climactic event in Jewish history, the nation that was about to receive the Torah from Moshe turns away from the will of Hashem. After 40 days they begin to worry that Moshe will never return and they panic. They create a new leader for themselves—The Golden Calf..

The Torah describes the scene in Exodus 32:6: "The people offered (the calf) peace offerings and they sat down to eat and drink and they got up to revel."

Hashem immediately commands Moshe to descend Mount Sinai in order to admonish his corrupt nation. As Moshe comes down the mountain he hears tumultuous shouts emanating from the people who were celebrating their new found deity. His student, Yehoshua, also hears the sounds and declares (Exodus 32:17) "the sound of battle is in the camp." Moshe listens and amends the theory. He tells Yehoshua, "It is not the sound of victory, nor the sound of defeat: I hear

the sound of distress." When Moshe sees the Golden Calf he breaks the Tablets and restores order, sanity, and the belief in Hashem.

What is strange about the episode is the contrast of the sounds made and the sounds heard. If the Jewish People reveled and celebrated then why did Yehoshua hear sounds of war and how did Moshe hear sounds of distress? They should both have heard the sound of celebration and festivity.

Rav Chaim of Sanz had a custom: he would test the local children on a monthly basis. The children would recite orally from the Mishnah or Talmud and Rav Chaim would reward them generously with sweets and money. Once a group of secular Jews decided to dupe Rav Chaim. They taught a Talmudic selection to a gentile child and reviewed it with him until he knew it perfectly. They dressed him like a Chasidic child and had him stand in line with all the other children to be tested.

The rabbi listened to the young boy intently. The other children were puzzled: they did not remember this boy from their cheder, yet they were amazed at the remarkable fluency he displayed in reciting his piece. Rav Chaim was not impressed at all. He turned to the young man and said, "please tell your father that there are better ways to earn a few coins!"

With that he dismissed the child.

The secularists were shocked. "How did the Rabbi know?" Their curiosity forced them to approach Rav Chaim. Rav Chaim smiled as he answered them. "There are two ways to say the Gemorah. One is filled with spirituality. The child's body is swaying and filled with the emotion of Torah. The other is just repetitive rote. This young man lacked the fire and the true joy that the Jewish children have when learning Torah. I knew he was not one of ours."

The Jews got up to revel around the golden calf. Moshe and Yehoshua however knew the difference between true joy—simcha—and confusion. The Jews revel were in essence distressed but it was masked with drinks and noise makers. True joy is coupled with a certainty and a sense of direction; something lacking for those Jews celebrating the idol. The Jews may have gotten up to celebrate, but it was no celebration. It may have looked like a party to the untrained eye, but Moshe knew the true sound of joy. It did not exist with the Golden Calf. True joy is the harmony of spirituality and contentment. Superficial sounds of euphoria and celebration are heard by those with true insight as sounds of battle and distress. © 2003 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky and torah.org

