

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

The more I study the Torah, the more conscious I become of the immense mystery of Exodus 33. This is the chapter set in the middle of the Golden Calf narrative (between Exodus chapter 32 describing the sin and its consequences, and Exodus chapter 34 with God's revelation to Moses of the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy, the second set of Tablets, and the renewal of the covenant. It is, I believe, this mystery that frames the shape of Jewish spirituality.

What makes chapter 33 perplexing is, first, that it is not clear what it is about. What was Moses doing? In the previous chapter he had already prayed twice for the people to be forgiven. In chapter 34 he prays for forgiveness again. What then was he trying to achieve in chapter 33?

Second, Moses' requests are strange. He says, "Show me now Your ways" (Ex. 33:13) and "Show me now Your glory" (Ex. 33:18). These seem more requests for metaphysical understanding or mystical experience than for forgiveness. They have to do with Moses as an individual, not with the people on whose behalf he was praying. This was a moment of national crisis. God was angry. The people were traumatised. The whole nation was in disarray. This was not the time for Moses to ask for a seminar in theology.

Third, more than once the narrative seems to be going backward in time. In verse 4, for example, it says, "No man put on his ornaments," then in the next verse God says, "Now, then, remove your ornaments." (Ex. 33:5) In verse 14, God says, "My presence will go with you." In verse 15, Moses says, "If Your presence does not go with us, do not make us leave this place." In both cases, time seems to be reversed: the second sentence is responded to by the one before. The Torah is clearly drawing our attention to something, but what?

Add to this the mystery of the Calf itself -- was it or was it not an idol? The text states that the people said, "This, Israel, is your God who brought you out of Egypt" (Ex. 32:4). But it also says that they sought the Calf because they did not know what had happened to Moses. Were they seeking a replacement for him or for God? What was their sin?

Surrounding it all is the larger mystery of the precise sequence of events involved in the long passages about the Mishkan, before and after the

Golden Calf. What was the relationship between the Sanctuary and the Calf?

At the heart of the mystery is the odd and troubling detail of verses 7-11. This tells us that Moses took his tent and pitched it outside the camp. What has this to do with the subject at hand, namely the relationship between God and the people after the Golden Calf? In any case, it was surely the worst possible thing for Moses to do at that time under those circumstances. God had just announced that "I will not go in your midst" (Ex. 33:3). At this, the people were deeply distressed. They "went into mourning" (Ex. 33:4). For Moses, then, to leave the camp must have been doubly demoralising. At times of collective distress, a leader has to be close to the people, not distant.

There are many ways of reading this cryptic text, but it seems to me that the most powerful and simple interpretation is this. Moses was making his most audacious prayer, so audacious that the Torah does not state it directly and explicitly. We have to reconstruct it from anomalies and clues within the text itself.

The previous chapter implied that the people panicked because of the absence of Moses, their leader. God Himself implied as much when He said to Moses, "Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt" (Ex. 32:7). The suggestion is that Moses' absence or distance was the cause of the sin. He should have stayed closer to the people. Moses took the point. He did go down. He did punish the guilty. He did pray for God to forgive the people. That was the theme of chapter 32. But in chapter 33, having restored order to the people, Moses now began on an entirely new line of approach. He was, in effect, saying to God: What the people need is not for me to be close to them. I am just a human, here today, gone tomorrow. But You are eternal. You are their God. They need You to be close to them.

It was as if Moses was saying: Until now, they have experienced You as a terrifying, elemental force, delivering plague after plague to the Egyptians, bringing the world's greatest empire to its knees, dividing the sea, overturning the very order of nature itself. At Mount Sinai, merely hearing Your voice, they were so overwhelmed that they said, if we continue to hear the voice, "we will die" (Ex. 20:16). The people needed, said Moses, to experience not the greatness of God but the closeness of God, not God heard in thunder and lightning at the top of the mountain, but as a perpetual presence in the valley

below.

That is why Moses removed his tent and pitched it outside the camp, as if to say to God: It is not my presence the people need in their midst, but Yours. That is why Moses sought to understand the very nature of God Himself. Is it possible for God to be close to where people are? Can transcendence become immanence? Can the God who is vaster than the universe live within the universe in a predictable, comprehensible way, not just in the form of miraculous intervention?

To this, God replied in a highly structured way. First, He said: you cannot understand My ways. "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and I will show mercy to whom I will show mercy" (Ex. 33:19). There is an element of Divine justice that must always elude human comprehension. We cannot fully enter into the mind of another human being, how much less so the mind of the Creator Himself.

Second, "You cannot see My face, for no one can see Me and live" (Ex. 33:20). Humans can at best "see My back." Even when God intervenes in history, we can see this only in retrospect, looking back. Stephen Hawking was wrong when famously said, at the end of *A Brief History of Time*, that if we were to reach a full scientific understanding of the cosmos, we would "know the mind of God." Even if we decode every scientific mystery, we still will not know the mind of God.

However, third, you can see My "glory." That is what Moses asked for once he realized that he could never know God's "ways" or see His "face." That is what God caused to pass by as Moses stood "in a cleft of the rock" (Ex. 33:22). We do not know at this stage, exactly what is meant by God's glory, but we discover this at the very end of the book of Exodus. Chapters 35-40 describe how the Israelites built the Mishkan. When it is finished and assembled we read this: Then the Cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the Mishkan. Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting because the Cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the Mishkan. Ex. 40:34-35

We now understand the entire drama set in motion by the making of the Golden Calf. Moses pleaded with God to come closer to the people, so that they would encounter Him, not only at unrepeatable moments in the form of miracles, but regularly, on a daily basis, and not only as a force that threatens to obliterate all it touches, but as a presence that can be sensed in the heart of the camp.

That is why God commanded Moses to instruct the people to build the Mishkan. It is what He meant when He said: "Let them make Me a sanctuary and I will dwell (veshachanti) among them" (Ex. 25:8). It is from this verb that we get the word Mishkan, "Tabernacle," and the post-biblical word Shechinah, meaning the Divine Presence. Applied to God, as discussed last week in parshat Terumah, it means "the presence that is close." If this is so -- and it is the way Judah Halevi

understood the text (The Kuzari, 1:97) -- then the entire institution of the Mishkan was a Divine response to the sin of the Golden Calf, and an acceptance by God of Moses' plea that He come close to the people. We cannot see God's face; we cannot understand God's ways; but we can encounter God's glory whenever we build a home for His presence here on earth.

That is the ongoing miracle of Jewish spirituality. No one before the birth of Judaism ever envisaged God in such abstract and awe-inspiring ways: God is more distant than the furthest star and more eternal than time itself. Yet no religion has ever felt God to be closer. In Tanach the prophets argue with God. In the book of Psalms King David speaks to Him in terms of utmost intimacy. In the Talmud God listens to the debates between the Sages and accepts their rulings even when they go against a heavenly voice. God's relationship with Israel, said the prophets, is like that between a parent and a child, or between a husband and a wife. In the Song of Songs it is like that between two infatuated lovers. The Zohar, key text of Jewish mysticism, uses the most daring language of passion, as does Yedid Nefesh, the poem attributed to the sixteenth-century Safed kabbalist, Rabbi Elazar Azikri.

That is one of the striking differences between the synagogues and the cathedrals of the Middle Ages. In a cathedral you sense the vastness of God and the smallness of humankind. But in the Altneushul in Prague or the synagogues of the Ari and Rabbi Joseph Karo in Safed, you sense the closeness of God and the potential greatness of humankind. Many nations worship God, but Jews are the only people to count themselves His close relatives ("My child, My firstborn, Israel" -- Ex. 4:22).

Between the lines of Exodus 33, if we listen attentively enough, we sense the emergence of one of the most distinctive and paradoxical features of Jewish spirituality. No religion has ever held God higher, but none has ever felt Him closer. That is what Moses sought and achieved in chapter 33, in his most daring conversation with God. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl zt"l* © 2016 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks z"l and rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

Ki Tisa is the most theological portion of the Pentateuch. It deals with one of the most profound issues facing our religion; what is the nature of God's involvement with the world in general – and with Israel in particular? This is one of the most difficult passages in the Bible, so how should we understand chapters 33 and 34 of the Book Exodus – the central chapters of this week's Biblical portion?

The Israelites certainly felt God's involvement and protection during the period of the plagues and the splitting of the Reed Sea. They continued to sense

God's close connection when they stood at Mount Sinai and heard His commanding voice. But then, Moses absented himself and seemed to have absconded into splendid, supernal isolation with the Divine, leaving the nation bereft of both leadership and the divine presence. They panicked, and regressed into the hedonistic and destructive idolatry of the Egyptian Golden Calf. They lost their moorings!

Now, after they have accepted their punishment and are about to continue their journey, they have one major, but crucial request: They wish God to enter into their midst, so that they will always be sure of His protective presence. They want to live in a world in which God's supportive compassion will always be manifest, not in an agonizing uncertainty, in which God's face is often hidden.

God has already informed them, however, that they must first "make a Sanctuary for Him" – prepare the world so that it will be ready for His presence – "and then He will dwell in their midst". In the words of the Kotzker Rebbe, "Where is God? Wherever you let Him in". First make a sanctuary where God can dwell, and then He will descend into its midst.

Hence, God explains to Moses, the spokesman for his nation, "I will send an angel (messenger) before you, I will drive out the Canaanites... bring you to a land flowing with milk and honey, but I will not go in your midst" (Exodus 33:3). You will have messenger-angels who will lead you, you and they will have to make the decisions and follow through on the actions; but you will not see My face, and I will not be visibly in your midst. This is for your own good: "I will not go in your midst because you are (still) a stiff necked (stubborn and rebellious) nation, lest I destroy you on the way" (Exodus 33:2,3,5).

It is premature for you to have Me in your midst, God explains, until the nation has properly repented and is ready for redemption. God is loving and compassionate, but He has high standards. If His presence is truly in our midst, if He has no opportunity to "look away" (as it were), then He will have to punish in the same way that He rewards. We are better off with God always ready to step in and prevent disaster, but from behind a cloud – so that He will be able to back off, look away, as it were, from punishing us severely, even though we might very well deserve such punishment.

Moses continues to press, entreating, "How shall it be known that Your nation has gained Your favorable grace unless You go (on the journey) together with us (imanu), so that we may be distinguished, your nation and I, from every other nation on the face of the earth?" (ibid 16). But God doesn't acquiesce. Yes, He will reveal the "paths" on which He wishes Israel to walk and by means of His divine Torah, he will show them how He wants them to live. He will send leaders, prophets, teachers and generals to lead them in the right direction. But, they will have to follow their leaders without ever

seeing God's face or having God's presence in their midst, until they take responsibility for their actions, repent and become worthy.

During the early Biblical period, certainly when the Israelites were in Egypt and for most of the First Commonwealth Period. God was still very active "behind the scenes" – because, after all, the Jewish people was very much in its infancy. It was during the Second Commonwealth, and especially in our period, that God expected and expects us to initiate, to play center stage in our journey towards redemption. He promises, however, that when we truly wish to become pure, He will aid us and that He guarantees our eventual repentance and world redemption. ©2023 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

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. ©2023 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 AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

As Moses descends the mountain, aware that the Jews have made the golden calf, Joshua awaits him. Hearing noise coming from the camp, Joshua tells Moses that he hears the voice of war. In the words of the Torah, “When Joshua heard the sound of the people...he said to Moses, ‘There is a sound of battle in the camp’” (Exodus 32:17). Moses responds that it is not the sound of war in the camp but rather the sound of *anot* (32:18). What exactly does this term mean?

Abarbanel suggests that Joshua did not know that the golden calf had been built. Hearing sounds, he assumes the noise was that of war. Moses, aware of the reality of the situation, responds that it was not the sound of war, but rather, “It was simply the sound of people making a noise.” Abarbanel reads *anot* as “noise.”

Nachmanides suggests that *anot* details the type of noise. Moses “was reluctant to speak disparagingly of Israel. So he told [Joshua] that it was the noise of merriment.” Nachmanides understands *anot* as a joyous song. As Nehama Leibowitz explains, “Moses would never denounce his people.... He was reluctant to let Joshua [hear of]...their disgrace.”

It is also possible, though, that Joshua may have known what happened. He may have been telling Moses that the Jews had rebelled and were prepared to go to war with God. Joshua's words then make sense: “There is a sound of battle in the camp.”

Moses responds that he understands the actions of the people very differently. He states that he

does not hear the voice of victory or defeat as Joshua does but rather the voice of a nation painfully crying out. From this perspective, the word *anot* comes from the word *inui*, which means “affliction”; the people were afflicted and confused. They were confused about their relationship to God and were in deep conflict about belief.

Perhaps, too, Moses may have thought he was, on some level, responsible for the golden calf as he ascended Sinai too soon, leaving his people on their own. As parents must carefully tabulate the right time to step back and allow their children to assume greater responsibility, leaders must do the same.

Ultimately, for Joshua, the cry signifies the Jews' rebellion. *Kol milchamah* (the sound of battle) not only reflected the actions of the people but was also advice to Moses that he should take up arms in response to the challenge.

Moses, however, who hears the cry as the spiritual bewilderment of the people, believes that the reaction should be to bring the Jews back with sensitivity and care. Of course, Moses is overcome when seeing the golden calf, breaks the tablets, and then commends the Levites for punishing the idolaters (32:19, 26–29). Still, soon after, according to the Midrash, he (Moses), and not God, proclaims the Thirteen Attributes of Divine Mercy (34:6, 7; Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer 46). Indeed, throughout Moses's years of leadership, he most often reacted with mercy when Am Yisrael rebelled.

A legend about the tablets' destruction highlights Moses's merciful approach to the people. God and Moses were involved in a tug of war over the tablets. Upset with Am Yisrael, God attempts to take the tablets back. Coming to their defense, Moses pulls in the opposite direction (Jerusalem Talmud, Ta'anit 23a). Is it possible that in the process the tablets fall and shatter? From this perspective, the shattering of the tablets was an expression of Moses's deep love for Am Yisrael.

Like Moses, when encountering someone struggling with faith, we should hear a cry rather than rebellion, and we should respond with love. ©2023 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

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Prosecutor and Defender

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

The principle of “*Ein kategor na'aseh sanegor*” (“A prosecutor cannot become a defender”) means that items which contributed to Jews sinning cannot be used as part of the divine service to bring the Jews atonement. Thus, the Rosh Hashanah *shofar* is not made from the horn of a cow, because it brings to mind the sin of the Golden Calf. However, according to the Talmud, this principle is limited to articles that were used

for the divine service in the Temple (such as a *shofar*, which was blown there daily). Thus, the *Parah Adumah* (Red Heifer) could be used to atone for the sin of the Golden Calf, since the ceremony involving it took place outside the Temple.

If this is correct, why can't a *Kohen* who committed murder recite the priestly blessing? *Tosafot* (*Yevamot 7a*) suggests that the reason he is excluded is "Ein kategor na'aseh sanegor." But this blessing is recited outside the Temple, so he should be permitted to do so! It would seem that outside the Temple, what is permitted for the divine service is the use of an object (such as gold or a cow's horn) even though it might bring to mind a certain sin. In contrast, the sinner himself (such as a *Kohen* who committed murder) may not perform the divine service, even outside the Temple.

If this is correct, how do we explain the command to Aharon to take a calf during the eight days of the dedication of the Tabernacle (*Vayikra* 9:2)? Rashi answers that this was done to indicate that G-d had forgiven the Jewish people for the sin of the Golden Calf. But based on what we just said, a calf itself should not have been allowed! It would seem that when asking forgiveness for a specific sin, the chance of true repentance increases when the very item which was used to commit the sin is used for atonement. This is why the gold donated to make the Tabernacle was able to atone for the gold which people had enthusiastically donated to make the Golden Calf. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

The Special Spices

There are so many important sections of our parasha that are well-known (Half Shekel, Golden Calf, the Sabbath overriding building the Mishkan, the thirteen characteristics of Hashem, the Second Tablets), it is hard to find any part of the parasha that one would not guess that it is found in Ki Tisa. Yet, apparently hidden within our reading this week are two formulas of spices, one to be added to the anointing oil, and one to be the incense for the Golden Altar from which the special incense that was burned in the Holy of Holies was taken.

"Hashem spoke to Moshe saying, 'Now you, take for yourself choice spices: five hundred shekel-weights of pure myrrh, fragrant cinnamon, half of which shall be two hundred-fifty, two hundred-fifty of fragrant cane, five hundred of cassia in the sacred shekel-weight, and a hin of olive oil. Of it you shall make oil of sacred anointment, a blended compound, the handwork of a perfumer; it shall remain oil of sacred anointment. With it you shall anoint the Tent of Meeting and the Ark of Testimonial-tablets, the Table and all its utensils, the Menorah and its utensils, and the incense Altar, the Elevation-offering Altar and all its utensils, and the Laver and its base. You shall sanctify them and they shall

remain holy of holies, whatever touches them shall become holy. You shall anoint Aharon and his sons and sanctify them to minister to Me. You shall speak to the Children of Israel saying, "This shall remain for Me oil of sacred anointment for your generations. It shall not be smeared on human flesh and you shall not duplicate it in its formulation. It is holy, it shall remain holy for you. Anyone who shall compound its like or who shall put it upon an alien (non-priest) shall be cut off from his people.'" Hashem said to Moshe, saying, 'Take yourself spices – stacte, onycha, and galbanum – spices and pure frankincense: these shall be of equal weight. You shall make it unto a spice compound, the handwork of a perfumer, thoroughly mixed, pure and holy. You shall grind some of it finely and place some of it before the Testimonial-tablets in the Tent of Meeting, where I shall designate a time to meet you; it shall remain holy of holies to you. The incense that you shall make – in its proportion you shall not make for yourselves; it shall remain holy to you for Hashem. Whoever makes its like to smell it shall be cut off from his people.'"

The Anointing Oil with its spices was used to sanctify each of the objects within the Mishkan: the Ark, the Shulchan (Table), the Menorah and the Golden Altar that was used for incense. It was also used to anoint Aharon and his sons. The remainder was used for generations of the Kings of the Davidic Dynasty, each new Kohein Gadol (Head Priest) and any replacement objects up to the end of the First Temple. The Or HaChaim says that, unlike the other preparations for the Mishkan, Moshe alone was given the task of preparing the Anointing Oil with its spices. The oil was to achieve total dedication to Hashem's Will, thus Moshe was the appropriate source for this mixture. The Or HaChaim also explains that the spices used for the Anointing Oil were donated only by Moshe for its preparation. A large amount was made and was the only Anointing Oil ever used throughout Jewish history.

Several restrictions were placed on the B'nei Yisrael concerning the Anointing Oil. The spices that were prepared by an expert. These spices were prepared by a perfumer, although how his expertise was used is uncertain. Some suggest that he was an expert at grinding the roots of the spices to extract the purist flavor from them. Others suggest that his skill was infusing the spices into the liquid of the oil. The Anointing Oil was Holy, namely that it was separated for this use only and could not be used for other anointing. The B'nei Yisrael were prohibited from using Moshe's Anointing Oil for any personal use. They were prohibited from making an exact duplicate of this oil. The punishment for using Moshe's oil was being cut off from the people, but the punishment for making a replica of the oil was only lashes. It was, however, permitted to use the same ingredients but in a different proportion.

The Ketoret HaSamim, the incense of spices, was the second mixture of spices discussed in this

section. The Torah mentions here four spices: nataf (balsamic resin), shecheilet (onycha), chelb'na (galbanum), and levonah (frankincense). (It should be noted that the translation and identification of these spices differ among our Rabbis). Hirsch points out that the sentence was written in the form of a generalization, specification, generalization (klal uprat u'klal) followed by a specification. Using the Rabbinic formula for the process of understanding the Torah, this would mean that these specifications indicate additional spices that fit the same characteristics as these three examples could also be added or substituted. The three spices mentioned between the two generalizations have in common that they produce a strong fragrance when lit and the smoke from them rises straight upward. Hirsch explains that the balsamic resin was from plant material, the onycha from mineral material. The galbanum would not normally be used because its smell is unpleasant, but it is used because the Torah required it. The frankincense is separated from the other three because its smoke does not rise straight up, something which appears to be an essential aspect of the first set of spices.

In the Siddur, one can find a list of the eleven spices that were used in the preparation of the Ketoret (after Ein Keilokeinu in the paragraph Pitom HaKetoret). These were stacte, onycha, galbanum, frankincense, myrrh, cassia, spikenard, saffron, costus, aromatic bark, and cinnamon. Included were some ingredients that were agents which acted upon those spices: Carshina lye, Cyprus wine (or old white wine), Sodom salt, and a minute amount smoke-raising herb. Rabbi Natan HaBavli says to add a small amount of Jordan amber. The amounts for each of these ingredients are listed in the paragraph which is taken from Gemara Keritot (6a). A further paragraph explains the purpose of these acting agents which were added. As with the Anointing Oil, the formula for the Ketoret could not be reproduced by an individual for personal use or to smell its aroma.

It is interesting that these two very important formulas of spices are hidden within such a dramatic parasha. Perhaps this passage, which could easily have been placed in Terumah or in the parshiot following ours, was placed here for a reason. It was a foreshadowing of the dedication of the Kohanim and the Temple at a time when it was unclear that the Temple would be built after the Golden Calf. The Ketoret also was a sign of the process by which the Kohein Gadol approached Hashem in the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur to secure Hashem's forgiveness. Thus, its inclusion here, is a sign to Man and the Temple that Hashem forgives. © 2023 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Cross-Currents

Our ancestors' devotion, so soon after the revelation at Har Sinai, to a physical object, the egel

hazahav, the golden calf, is rightly and remarkably confounding. Obviously, like so many of the Torah's narratives, behind the simple Written Law account lies information necessary for a true understanding of things.

Rav Yaakov Moshe Charlop, in his *Mei Marom*, offers a tantalizing thought with regard to the calf-worshipping. He suggests that the people, on the sublime level approaching prophecy that they had attained after Hashem's revelation, perceived something shocking but true: that Hashem will speak to them in the future from something physical, something in fact made of gold.

The truth of that perception lay in the kruvim that were part of the kapores covering the aron in the holiest part of the Mishkan. From a point between those golden representations of children, Hashem would one day speak to Moshe (Bamidbar 7:89).

Like every actual prophecy, though (see Rambam, *Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah*, 7:3), the vision required accurate interpretation. And, faced with the egel, which Chazal tell us emerged miraculously from the gold thrown into a fire, and what they felt was Moshe's tardiness in returning from the top of the mountain, the people surmised that the egel was the golden object that would host Hashem's future communication.

There is a lesson there for all of us far from the level of perception of our Sinai ancestors. We often assume that what we see is to be interpreted a certain way, and that our position or actions should be based on that interpretation. Often we are right. But often, wrong. The law of unintended consequences can wreak much havoc.

Consider *Sefer Esther*. Imagine the Shushanites' interpretation of Mordechai's stubborn refusal to honor Haman with a bow to him. It was reasonable for them to conclude from that sight that Mordechai was endangering the Jews rather than subtly paving the path toward their rescue from mortal danger.

Reasonable, but wrong.

We, too, need to respect the interpretation of events and the required response that experienced elders counsel. And sometimes that requires, if not ignoring what we see, at least understanding that its implications may not be what we think. © 2023 Rabbi A. Shafran and torah.org

RABBI PINCHAS WINSTON

Perceptions

It all comes down to mentality. I look at someone in wonderment and ask, "How can they do that?" He looks at me in wonderment and asks, "How can they not do that?" Both of us assume that because we both believe in the same God, follow the same Torah, and live by the same Shulchan Aruch, the differences between us should be minimal. And yet there are some very fundamental dissimilarities in our approach to certain halachos and matters of derech erez.

Some differences are understandable and perfectly acceptable. Sephardim are very different from Ashkenazim. Chassidim are very different from both. But as long as each group is doing its best to fulfill the 613 mitzvos and spirit of Torah, there is nothing to complain about. As long as a Jew is doing their best to love and fear God, which should show up in the way they act, especially towards others, there is nothing to complain about, only to praise.

Where it gets tricky is when someone thinks they are doing all of this, but really they are not. They are taking liberties they should not, and perhaps think too highly of themselves to self-criticize. In their eyes they are doing just fine by God, but not in your eyes. That's when someone asks, "How can they do that?" That's when mentality can play too major a role in the way a person approaches Torah, and life in general.

True, Torah is called Aitz Chaim -- Tree of Life. But it is also called "water," and though water helps things to grow it does not necessarily guarantee that what grows will be all good. If you water a good seed, you get a good tree. If you water a bad seed, you get a bad tree.

With one major difference, though. Actual water is really quite neutral, teaching us nothing (obvious) about morality. Torah may be compared to water, but it is only about morality. When you learn it, you "drink" laws about life and social behavior, which ought to guarantee that a good "tree," to which man is compared, grows. How can a person learn Torah and still be corrupt, even just a little? The answer once again: mentality.

What is mentality, and where do we get it from?

There are a few contributors to a person's mentality, some they cannot control, some they can partially control, and some they can completely control, if they choose to. A person's soul, which they do not choose, sets a person on a certain path in life before they are even born. Once born, they are impacted by family and peers that they can choose, somewhat, to reject. And then, once out in the larger world, they are bombarded by extraneous sources like social media that they can accept or reject outright.

The truth is, by the time a person is usually much older and better prepared intellectually and emotionally to deal with the third category of influence, they have already been so affected by the first two categories that they are unaware of their biases because of them. One they were born with and one they were too young to understand its potential future effects. It had already shaped their mentality before their first day in Cheder.

This is why even children who once promised themselves to not be like their parents later end up being more like them than they wanted to be. This is also why some friends remain a part of our way of thinking even long after they stopped being a part of our lives. This is the reason why so many years later we can still recall our best and worst teachers. All of them didn't just get

under our skins. They got into our heads and way of thinking.

And this is also why, as Rashi points out in Bereishis, that God sacrificed some important clarity about His unity to teach us derech erez:

"And God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness...' (Bereishis 1:26)

Let us make...Even though they [the angels] did not assist Him in His creation, and there is an opportunity for heretics to rebel, the Torah did not hesitate to teach proper conduct and the trait of humility... (Rashi)

Hence the motto: Derech erez kadmah l'Torah -- proper conduct before Torah. In this brief and seemingly side point of Rashi is one of the most instructive lessons in all of Torah. Technically-speaking, not being able to teach new "tricks" to old "dogs" refers to at least middle-aged people. Psychologically, it is actually true from 12 years old and up, and in some respects, even earlier.

Thus, while many parents in the world gloss over those very early and formative years, less so but somewhat also in the Torah world, it turns out that they are the ones that may seal the fate of their children for the rest of the lives! Everything a person will ever learn and understand will always be through the eyes of the mentality that they began to develop even before they ever opened a Chumash.

There are always exceptions to just about any rule, but who knows how to be one? And miracles do happen, especially for people looking to do teshuvah, but who wants to rely upon them? You can be sure that the 3,000 Jews who joined the Erev Rav in their celebration of the golden calf were somewhat destined to ever since their childhood. You could draw a straight line from what they were doing at the base of Har Sinai to their early upbringing.

Similarly, there is a clash of mentalities happening here in Israel today. The truth is, they have been at odds ever since the Zionist Conferences at the end of the 1800s, the secular and the religious. Make no mistake about it. There is no threat to democracy because of the proposed reforms, and certainly no human rights abuse here. This is why so many Israeli academics publicly support the reforms.

What there is instead is a fear within the very secular community to allow democracy to work when the people who block their initiative to lose the Jewish soul of the country are in power. They didn't complain before because the Supreme Court is mostly left-thinking, which is why they are so against surrendering their current power status.

The Left saw in the last election how, even in this day and age of Woke culture, the religious parties can still take control of the country away from them. The Interim Prime Minister and his followers were humiliated in defeat, and they worry going forward that the power they lost will only make it more difficult to go the way of

Europe and America.

While the Right tends to think independently of world opinion and is concerned about the Jewish integrity of the state, the Left wants to finally just leave all that behind and become another Western nation. One trip to Tel Aviv and Haifa makes that clear. Reading left wing newspapers makes that clear. It's their mentality, born and bred on leftist kibbutzim, and carried over into the secular educational system.

While a two-state solution is not the way to resolve the Arab conflict, it might be the way to solve the religious-secular one. Give them Tel Aviv (less Bnei Brak). Let them run it autonomously. Let them turn it into the Sdom they want it to be, and America has already become. Then God will have to take care of it as He sees fit. We have a history of golden calves, and this one is alive and well and bleating.

Liberalism has its place in society and history, but a bleating-heart liberal is not only not a Jewish thing, but a dangerous thing. What to do?

The Torah is a template for life. Some would like to believe that the past was the past, and therefore you can read Torah and perhaps even enjoy it, but there isn't much to learn from it in terms of life today. Orthodox Jews obviously disagree, but is that because they're just hanging on to the familiar, or because they truly think differently.

By the way some Torah Jews live, it is not always so clear. But certainly, in principle we believe that Torah is eternal, meaning that it is always relevant regardless of how irrelevant people try to make it. If God wrote it, and He also made the world, then it can be assumed He took all of history into account.

Besides, has man really changed that much since thousands of years ago? His yetzer hara is the same yetzer hara it has always been. Just the ways to be trapped by it have changed over time, and thanks to technology. For all of modern man's material sophistication, he is actually less sophisticated today spiritually. But does he care so long as God keeps to Himself in the meantime?

They tell the story of Rav Shimon Schwab (1908-1995) who, as a young man, spent a Shabbos with the Chofetz Chaim (1838-1933). The Chofetz Chaim at some point asked his young guest if he was a kohen or a levi. He answered that he was neither.

The Chofetz Chaim, who was a kohen, told his guest that it was a pity. He said that Moshiach would come soon, and that only the kohanim and levi'im would serve in the Temple, not the rest of the Jewish people.

Then he asked the future Rabbi Schwab:

"Why aren't you a kohen?"

The young man answered the obvious: "Because my father was not a kohen."

But the Chofetz Chaim pressed him, "Why wasn't your father a kohen?"

By that time, Rabbi Schwab realized that the

Chofetz Chaim was teaching him something that had nothing to do with his lineage, so he waited for the real answer, and it came.

"Do you know why your father was not a kohen and my father was?" the Chofetz Chaim asked. "Because when our teacher Moshe called out, 'Who is for God -- let him come to me,' my great-great grandfather came, and your great-great grandfather did not. That is why my father was a kohen and your father was not a kohen.

The message was clear: Next time the call goes out to fight on behalf of God, in whatever form it may take, answer it. Don't hesitate, even for a moment, because moments come and go quickly, and with them, eternal opportunities. A person has to have already developed the right mentality to make truth more important than anything else. That way, when a crisis comes that tests our resolve, we can make the correct choice decisively. ©2022 Rabbi P. Winston & torah.org

SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

"Moshe pleaded before Hashem..." (32:11) The gemara (Berachot 32a) teaches that following the sin of the golden calf, Moshe prayed for the Jewish people "until his bones were burning." R' Meir Simcha Hakohen of Dvinsk z"l (died 1926) explains: Chazal say that Moshe's grandson, Yonatan, was a priest to an idol. Thus, as Moshe prayed that the Jewish people be forgiven for their idolatry, his bones, his body from which his grandson would come, were burning with shame.

On the other hand, this very fact gave Moshe's prayers added credibility, for Hashem had said (in verse 10), "Let Me destroy them and make you a great nation." As Hashem offered to make Moshe into a great nation despite the failings in Moshe's own family, He can similarly overlook Bnei Yisrael's faults. (Meshech Chochmah) ©2001 S. Katz & torah.org

