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**Parshas Ki Sisa
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The Timing of the Golden Calf

By Rabbi Eliezer Lachman, Rosh HaKollel

This week's Torah reading tells the story of the sin of the Golden Calf. Many people are bothered by how the Jews could have committed such a serious sin so soon, a mere forty days, after hearing the Ten Commandments from God. This is a very serious issue that should be dealt with, and actually phrasing the question as we just have only understates the true difficulty involved. Let us explain why.

We generally think that the section of the Golden Calf starts with, "The people saw that Moshe delayed in descending the mountain...", which is, indeed, the first verse in Chapter 32. However, the division of the Torah into chapters is of non-Jewish origin, and the actual text of the Torah is divided into sections based upon a totally different system. In the text of the Torah, the section of the Golden Calf starts with the previous verse: "He gave to Moshe, when He finished speaking to him on Mount Sinai, the Two Tablets of Testimony, stone tablets inscribed by the finger of God." (31:18)

Evidently, the sin of the Golden Calf can only be understood fully when appreciated in the context of what was simultaneously taking place on Mount Sinai. The sin of the Golden Calf took place at the end of the forty days, and at that very moment, "when [God] finished speaking to [Moshe]," He gave to Moshe the Two Tablets, upon which were written the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments, thus, were not only announced to the people forty days previously, they were actually being given in their official written form, in God's own "handwriting," to the people simultaneously with their most egregious sin!

This transfer of the Tablets to Moshe comprises the culmination of the giving of the Torah. There were three distinct stages to its giving. First, God proclaimed the Ten Commandments orally to the people. Then, God taught Moshe on Mount Sinai the 613 mitzvos of the Torah. Finally, God gave him the Two Tablets, upon which was the written version of the Ten Commandments. Since all 613 mitzvos are sub-categories of the Ten Commandments

(Bamidbar Rabbah 13:16, cited in Rashi, Shemos 24:12), one can readily see that this three-part process follows the pattern of "general, particular, general," which is a common methodology used in communicating and impacting upon others. Following this analysis, the transfer of the Two Tablets to Moshe is the acme of the giving of the Torah. It represents the principles of the Torah being internalized by people, based upon their appreciation of its myriad details.

How could it be that at that very moment the sin that epitomizes rejection of Torah was committed?

Maharal (Netzach Yisrael ch. 2) explains that to the contrary, that time was predisposed for sin exactly because it was at the acme of the giving of the Torah. He explains that the world has a certain level of physicality and imperfection that is the norm for it. When a person breaks through that level and reaches a higher level of spirituality and perfection, he necessarily experiences instability in his spiritual life. Since this person is of the physical world, yet his spiritual attainment is not in keeping with the essential nature of the world, he cannot fully actualize his attainment. His attainment remains only imperfectly achieved, and this has the potential of destabilizing other spiritual achievements. This person must be especially vigilant in guarding himself against the blandishments of the yetzer hara (evil inclination), which he now experiences to a greater extent than before. Similarly, when the Tablets were being given to Moshe, the Jews felt a greater sense of spirituality than they were accustomed to, and that is the norm of the world. They did not know exactly why they were feeling this way, but this heightened level of spirituality, which was only partially attained, destabilized their spiritual lives and was the direct cause of the temptation they felt at this time to commit the sin of the Golden Calf.

Oftentimes, a person experiences religious growth and is bewildered to discover that his spiritual life has only become more complicated as a result. This can be true for many reasons, but one of them is because of what we were explaining - a greater level not fully achieved causes instability. This is certainly not a reason to stagnate religiously, for growth and challenge are necessary to give meaning to life. It is, rather, a concept that, properly understood, helps us appreciate the complexities of life and aids us in navigating the road we must travel on to become closer to God.

About the Friedman Kollel

The Rabbi Samuel and Zehava Friedman Kollel, located in Olney, Maryland, offers learning opportunities for Jews of all backgrounds. These include one-on-one chavrusas, public lectures and classes for men and women, as well as after-school structured learning for public school teens. The Kollel operates under the leadership of Rabbi Eliezer Lachman and Rabbi Shaya Milikowsky. For more information or to sponsor an upcoming Capital Torah, please contact Rabbi Elyakim Milikowsky at FriedmanKollel@BetterFamily.org.

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