

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Parshat Ki Tisa

The Torah, in this week's Parsha, describes the sin of the Golden Calf. Right after the Jews received the Torah, in an awesome revelation from G-d, they immediately veered from its path and chose to serve idols instead. In fact, the Midrash compares this act to a bride who is unfaithful to her husband on the day they got married. This seems very puzzling. How could it be that the very same Jews who saw G-d perform countless miracles in Egypt, could so quickly deny His authority in the world? How could it be that the very same Jews who sensed G-d's presence so clearly at the splitting of the Red Sea, so much so that the Midrash tells us it was if they were able to point at G-d with their fingers, could turn around and say it was a golden calf who save them from the Pharaoh's armies? How could it be that the very same Jews who had miracle bread rain onto their front doors every morning, could decide that they now wanted to serve a molten form?

Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch (1808 –1888) gives an insightful explanation to understand this strange story. He explains that the Jews never intended to make an idol. After seeing all G-d had done for them in the previous months, there was no way they could rebel against him or deny his presence. However, there was one crucial mistake they made about the relationship between Moses and G-d. The people understood that G-d was all powerful and capable of anything. However, they believed that man had the ability to affect G-d's will and could bend it to match his own. This is how they viewed the role of Moses. Moses was a person who had learned how to use the great power of G-d for what he wanted. They believed that Moses was not merely an agent of G-d, through whom G-d performed miracles, rather it was Moses who forced the hand of G-d to make miracles. They believed it was not G-d who had brought them out of Egypt, rather it was Moses who had caused G-d to bring them out of Egypt.

The Midrash tells us that the reason the Jews wanted to make the calf now was because they believed that Moses had died in heaven and was not going to return. With this in mind, Rabbi Hirsch explains that the Jews did not request a new god. Rather they were requesting a replacement for Moses. Since Moses was the person who had used G-d's power to carry the Jews thus far, and he was no longer around, they needed a being that that would be able to fill this role. The Elohim that that the Jews wanted Aaron to make



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is not referring to a god as the word is usually translated. Rather, it is referring to a being of power. For example, the word is used in other places as a reference to judges of a Jewish court. They were essentially asking for a replacement for Moses who would be able to influence G-d, just as they believed Moses had. However, this approach was a terrible mistake. G-d is not merely a source of power that can be tapped. A power that can be used for one's own will, as long as one has the knowledge how to use it. G-d has a will of His own. This will cannot be bent or changed. It was G-d's decision to free the Jews from their bondage in Egypt and sent Moses as his agent. It was not Moses's decision. The only way to take advantage of G-d's power is to fulfill His will. When one does so, G-d will want to reward him/her for this service of G-d. As our Rabbis teach us, if one makes G-d's will his/her will, G-d will make his/her will, His will. (Ethics of the Fathers 2:4)

Although this seems like a philosophical mistake the the Jews made in ancient history, Rav Hirsch explains that this mistake is still very prevalent today. When a person looks at his or her own religious obligations as a burden and thinks of how she or he can fit it into one's life without inconvenience, he/she is essentially stating that G-d's will is not one's main priority. It is merely an obligation that must be fulfilled to ensure one good graces with G-d. One who really believes that his/her purpose in life is to fulfill G-d's will, will fit in his/her needs around G-d's, not vice-versa. If one can truly accomplish this feat and make G-d's will one's own will, that person is demonstrating that one understands his or her goal in life, allowing G-d to make his/her will His will.

Shabbat Shalom

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