

KI SISA (EXODUS 30:11-34:35)

Abs of Steel/Calves of Gold

2001 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

This week, it seems, is the "Week of the Cows." First, in our regular weekly Torah Portion, we will read about Israel's sin of worshipping the Golden Calf. When Moses didn't come down from Mt. Sinai as expected, the Israelites panicked and promptly replaced him with this idol. Next, we will read, from a second Torah scroll, the section of "*Parah Adumah*," the Red Heifer.

The Red Heifer is a Mitzvah that is, in all due respect, totally illogical. (At least it's illogical to humans. The great King Solomon himself couldn't figure out the deep meaning that G-d had invested into this apparently contradictory Mitzvah.)

The ashes of the Red Heifer were used for purification. If a person had come in contact with a corpse, either by direct contact (e.g., a doctor) or having entered a cemetery, he would be considered "*Tamei*," ritually defiled. Such a person would not be permitted to enter the Temple or eat "sacred foods," such as the *Korban Pesach*, the Passover Offering of roasted lamb at the Seder. Part of the purification process involved being sprinkled with a solution that included, among other things, the ashes of a totally red heifer.

(The reason for this additional Torah Reading is that with Passover right around the corner, we are busy preparing our homes for the coming Yom Tov. We need to remember the Mitzvah of the Red Heifer because it is supposed to be part and parcel of our Passover preparations. Every year at the Seder, we conclude our meal with a "dessert" of Matzah called *Afikoman*. The *Afikoman* serves as an interim replacement for the Passover Offering that may only be offered when the Temple is standing. When the Temple is rebuilt, hopefully soon, we will have to participate in the Red Heifer purification ceremony. That way, we will be able to replace our Matzah *Afikoman* with a savory desert of roasted lamb, as required by the Torah.)

Is there a link between the two colored cows in this week's Torah Readings? Can we find a connection between the calf of gold and his crimson "mother?"

The Talmud says that the Mitzvah of the Red Heifer is to atone for the sin of the Golden Calf. The Midrash Tanchumah says, "If a maid's son messes up the king's palace, let the mother come and clean up after her son." Since a calf was involved in this sin of idol worship, his "mother" should clean up the

mess by bringing forgiveness for this sin.

Very nice symbolism. But does it fit? Is there any logical connection between the sin of bowing down to a calf-shaped molten image, and being sprinkled with a mix containing the ashes of a cow?

Yes and no.

The Red Heifer is the quintessential "*Chok*," or divine edict, with no understandable explanation. The Talmud tells us that the Red Heifer "purifies the defiled, and defiles the pure." The person who burns the heifer, the person who collects the ashes, the person who adds the other ingredients, all of them become "contaminated" through the ceremony that purifies the "client." The same mystical blend that allows one who has come in contact with the dead to enter the Temple causes those involved in preparing the concoction to be temporarily barred from entering the Temple!

There are many Mitzvahs that make a lot of sense, such as the prohibitions against murder and adultery. There are other commandments that G-d gave as a royal decree. We do what the King tells us to do simply because He is our King. An atheist can understand the immorality of stealing and the importance of paying to repair things that you damage. A secular humanist will also give to charity and might even circumcise his son if he believes that it's a healthy thing to do. The real test of one's faith comes when one is presented with a requirement that goes beyond our level of understanding. When we observe the Sabbath and make sure our suits don't contain mixtures of linen and wool, we are showing that we follow the Torah because of our faith in G-d, not because we decided that we happen to agree with the logic.

Let's examine the sin of the Golden Calf. Now THERE'S something that REALLY makes no sense!

Here you have the Nation of Israel, a group of people who have seen the greatest miracles in the history of the world. They saw the Ten Plagues in Egypt. They walked on dry land through the Red Sea and witnessed it closing on the Egyptians. They stood at the base of Mt. Sinai and observed lightning and saw (yes, SAW!) thunder. They heard the voice of G-d commanding them, "*You will have no other gods before Me!*" And the next thing you know, 40 days later, they're dancing around in front of a bovine statue, a gilded trinket, and singing, "*These are your gods, Israel, who took you out of Egypt!*" DOES THIS MAKE ANY SENSE AT ALL?!

This, perhaps, is the connection between the calf and his mom. Maybe the cow is there to teach us a bit of horse sense! Sometimes we're too smart for our own good. We think we have all the answers: This Mitzvah makes sense so we do it. This custom is antiquated and old-fashioned, so we don't.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchick stated that the way we serve G-d is by fully surrendering ourselves, in thought, word, and deed to the will of the Almighty. By performing commandments without first subjecting our acceptance to the criteria of being approved as logical by our mortal minds, we show our recognition of the vast genius of the Divine Will.

Worshipping the Golden Calf was a totally irrational thing to do. Perhaps the best way to atone for not thinking reasonably is by showing G-d that we have learned to trust HIS logic instead of our own. G-d is telling us: "Don't be so smart! If you were as wise as you think you are, you never would have prayed to a nugget of fool's gold! Get your act together! Purify yourself with the ashes of a cow. I know you don't understand it, but you've already proved your own "wisdom" at her golden son's party! Trust me. I know what I am doing. I am, after all, your Creator."

Another thought about the Golden Calf:

The people weren't thinking straight. They actually THOUGHT that they were doing the right thing by praying to the calf. It made sense because they didn't think it through. Their priorities got mixed up and they didn't think about the full ramifications of their actions.

How many of us have our own Golden Calves that we dance around? Some of us throw away precious hours in front of that high priest of idol worship -- the almighty T.V! Others of us throw ourselves into our work at the expense of everything else. (Did you ever hear of someone on his deathbed regretting that he hadn't spent more time in the office instead of with his children?!)

How about exercise? A very important endeavor, without a doubt. Even a Mitzvah. But have you ever met runners who LIVE to surpass last week's top speed, weight lifters who MUST build rock-solid "abs" and bulging biceps?

Are we really dedicating ourselves to life's priorities? Are we thinking through to the consequences of our actions? If, not, we may be suffering from symptoms of spiritual "mad cow disease" and intellectual "foot and mouth."

Have a great Shabbos.

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