

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

Fool's Gold

2010 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

“The statistics linking smoking to lung cancer, emphysema, heart disease, and burn marks on furniture are inconclusive...”

“Seat belts are too restrictive. Many people have died because they couldn’t get out of their cars quickly enough...”

“I’m only going to taste one tiny sliver of this Double-Decadent Chocolate Cream Pie...”

“Honest, Mom, It’s only a date...”

“Marijuana is NOT addictive! It’s not as if it will lead to taking something dangerous ...”

“I don’t need to hire a Mohel. I can do it myself. I’ve watched it being done dozens of times...”

Do we really believe the lies we tell ourselves?

One such lie led to the creation of the Golden Calf.

Moses climbed up Mount Sinai to receive the Torah. He told them he’d be there for 40 days. He meant 40 full days, not including the day he actually went up the mountain. The people counted the day of his ascent as well, and therefore expected him back a day earlier:

The nation saw that Moses had delayed in descending the mountain, and the Nation gathered around Aaron and said, “Rise up, and make for us gods that will go before us, for this man Moses who brought us up from the land of Egypt -- we do not know what became of him!” (Exodus, 32:1)

How could they have made such a foolish mistake? Granted, they misunderstood Moses’ timetable; they couldn’t figure out where he was. They feared he was dead. But does a delayed arrival of Moses justify idol worship? A mere 40 days before, they had stood at the base of the mountain, and heard the Second Commandment: “*You will have no other gods before Me... Don’t bow to them, and don’t serve them...*” (Ibid, 20:3, 5)

What were these people thinking? Which part of “*Don’t ...*” did they not understand?!!

How could logically thinking, intelligent people, do such a thing? These people had seen all the miracles that G-d had performed for them in Egypt, at the Red Sea, and in the desert. How could they have so blatantly ignored G-d's warning? How could people who had sung "*This is my G-d, and I will glorify Him...*" (Ibid, 15:2) at the Red Sea now dance around a golden statue, chanting "*These are your gods, Israel, who took you out of Egypt*"? (Ibid 32:8)

Nachmanides explains that the people were not interested in replacing G-d. Rather, they were looking to replace Moses, who they thought had disappeared. They viewed Moses as a "semi-god," and the purpose of the Golden Calf was to serve as a new semi-god who would be their new guide.

But did they *REALLY* believe that nonsense? If they really still believed in G-d, and simply thought they were just creating a new Moses, why were they violating G-d's Torah?!

They arose early the next day and sacrificed burnt offerings and peace offerings. The people sat down to eat and drink, and they got up TO ENJOY THEMSELVES. (Ibid verse 6)

"*TO ENJOY THEMSELVES.*" That is how Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan ("The Living Torah") translates the word "*LETZACHEK*." Literally, it means "to laugh" or "to mock." Sarah viewed Ishmael as a bad influence on his brother Isaac when he began to "*METZACHEK – to ridicule.*" (Genesis, 21:9) When Joseph was falsely accused of trying to seduce his master's wife, she claimed that he had come "*LETZACHEK – to make sport*" with her. (Ibid, 39:16)

The term "*LETZACHEK*" refers to a total breakdown of morality. The Golden Calf episode was not a religious ceremony involving the worship of a false god. It was an orgy!

And therein lies the explanation of what was really going on. The Talmud says that the only reason our ancestors worshipped idols was in order to allow themselves to engage in promiscuity. (See "Of Television, Toilets, and Idolatry") G-d said there are limits on intimate behavior. The religions of Baal and the Golden Calf permitted everything.

Rather than being viewed as immoral individuals who had no self-control, they formulated a new theology, the religion of the Golden Calf. They weren't being evil; they were being ecumenical!

Human nature is such that we don't want to admit our own weaknesses. Therefore, we fabricate justifications for our actions/inactions. "I'm not a glutton -- I WANT to weigh 300 pounds." "I'm not addicted to cigarettes; I could quit any time. It's just that my research indicates that the surgeon general is a drunk." "I'm not too lazy to reach down and put on my seatbelt; I believe I'm safer without it!"

The amazing thing is that if we repeat these lies often enough, we begin to believe them!

One of my favorite examples is abortion. To me, abortion is wrong. (There are many exceptions, but I don't want to go into that here. That's not my point.) I know that because Jewish Law says so. No, it's not murder, in the full sense of the word. But it's not "a woman's choice" either. My source for this belief is the Torah. For me, there is no question.

I find it amazing that so many people have their own opinions as to when life begins. Unless they are doctors, biologists, or, at least, theologians, most people have no educated basis for an opinion. Yet, a person who has no idea what he/she is talking about claims to believe that life begins in the second trimester. Or third trimester. Or five minutes before birth.

And what is their basis for such an opinion? They believe it so they can have the clear-conscience-convenience of guilt-free abortion. "My reason for terminating this pregnancy is not because I don't want to be encumbered by an unexpected human being who will cramp my style. Oh, no! I am terminating this pregnancy because I believe that this is not a child; it is an unviable tissue mass!"

It's what I would call "outcome based theology." Believe what's convenient so you can justify doing what you want to do. Believe what you have to so you can do what you want to. In the 60's they called it "Free Love." Today they call it liberalism. In the desert they called it the Golden Calf.

Moses turned and descended from the mountain, with the two Tablets of the Testimony in his hand ... The Tablets were G-d's handiwork, and the script was the script of G-d, ENGRAVED on the Tablets. (Exodus, 32:15)

"ENGRAVED on the Tablets." The Talmud (Avos, 6:2) observes that the Hebrew word "*CHARUS* – engraved," can also be pronounced "*CHEIRUS* – Freedom." "*FREEDOM on the Tablets.*" "*There is no freer person,*" says the Talmud*, "*than one who studies Torah.*"*

Who is more free, one whose thoughts, beliefs, and philosophies are slaves to his passions – or someone who has the peace of mind of knowing and accepting what G-d expects of him?

Have a great Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz