



March 2, 2024



Parshas Ki Sisa

22nd of Adar 1 5784

The Righteous By Association Sin

Without question, the most famous sin in Jewish history is the Chet Ha'eigel, the Sin of the Golden Calf. This was a tremendously public sin, witnessed by millions. A sin so severe it almost caused Hashem to exterminate our nation. A sin so catastrophic we still cry about it today. Ever wonder how this sin could have possibly occurred? These people literally just left Egypt amidst a barrage of miraculous plagues, only to see an entire sea split before their eyes, and then witnessed that same sea drown out the mightiest empire in the history of the planet! And to top it off, they all got VIP seats at the greatest revelation of Hashem ever: He. Spoke. To. Them. They heard His voice! There were no intermediaries. No kings or prophets or rabbis. Hashem himself. And then weeks later they are worshipping a golden calf? How could any half-rational human being turn on Him so quickly? How short was their memory that they forgot Hashem's Revelation and erected a calf as their new god? Is there even a rudimentary explanation for their reasoning?

Another point that is bizarre is that they chose a calf as their god of choice. Why didn't they find a more glorious animal? Like a lion or a Komodo dragon, perhaps. Or maybe a polar bear. Why a baby cow of all animals? It seems so weak.

Rav Shamshon Rafael Hirsch (Shemos 32, 1) offers the following much needed explanation: These people were very much aware of Hashem's existence and very much believed in Him. After witnessing what they witnessed, who wouldn't? These people were not building a golden calf to replace **Hashem**, they were building a golden calf to replace **Moshe**. They were tricked into believing that Moshe died and they were devastated. Why? For who would now do all the spiritual work for them? Who would take charge of their spiritual life? They were bereft of the person who did all the hard work while they sat back and watched. These people had on an intellectual level accepted Hashem's omnipotence. They even accepted His Torah. What they didn't do was plan to expend any serious effort into it. That would be the job of Moshe and rabbis and spiritual leaders that would follow.

You Might Actually Have To Do Something

Moshe's supposed death plunged them into an immediate crushing fear. A fear that they may actually have to do something for their spiritual welfare. They may not be able to depend on their Rabbi to do everything for them. They may actually have to take time out of their physical lives and do something holy on their own. That was scary. That was not what they had in mind. They believed in Hashem and His Torah so long as someone else was in charge of it. They were hoping to live a "pay-the-membership-dues-but-don't-bother-me" type of life. But Moshe died. It now fell on them. They would actually have to do something.

But since that wasn't the life they were looking to live, they decided to erect a new rabbi. A new intermediary. A new power that would take over where Moshe left off. It would do the work for them. It would shoulder the burden for them. They decided to build a new Moshe. They got together and decided on a calf. Why? For no animal represents a weak, subordinate worker better than a calf. Even a cow can be strong and occasionally fight back and resist. A calf was perfect: Weak, subordinate, dependable.

We, too, often become immensely dependent on our teachers, rebbeim, parents, rabbis, rebbes, or spiritual leaders to shoulder our spiritual burden. We may overly depend on them to inject holiness into Shabbos or meaning into Tisha B'Av. We may overly depend on them to daven for our welfare. We may overly depend on them to point out what is wrong in our lives. The Eigel tells us that our leaders are here to **lead** us, not to **replace** us in our service of Hashem. If we allow spiritual laziness to grow into over-dependency on spiritual leaders, we have not effectively listened to the message of the Chet Ha'eigel.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that directly outside the New York Stock Exchange, the crown jewel of American materialism, is a golden calf. Perhaps it is Hashem's little reminder to us all that we can't put all our focus on our materialistic pursuits while justifying ourselves that the rabbi will keep us holy. Perhaps we are to look at the golden calf of Wall Street to remember not to make that mistake again.

A man once walked into a doctor's office. After the examination, he asked, "Now, Doc, tell me in plain English exactly what is wrong with me."

"In plain English," replied the doctor, "you're lazy."

"Now, doctor," inquired the patient, "give me the difficult medical terminology to tell my friends."

We often use our shuls, yeshivos, and leaders as shields to hide ourselves from ourselves. We fall into the trap of deeming ourselves worthy by association. "If I tell people that I am associated with a spiritually sophisticated person or group, then I, too, must be spiritually sophisticated." That, says Rav Hirsch, is the sin of the Golden Calf.

We should have our souls aflame, ready to do the will of Hashem. We should dance our way to yeshiva and shul. Our Shabbos tables should be overflowing with holiness and harmony. We should be able to do it all by ourselves.

Of course, we need leaders and prophets and rabbis. But mostly we need ourselves. We need our self-motivation. We need our deep, dramatic interest in forging a personal connection with Hashem.

The Last Man Out Of Auschwitz

On that unforgettable day when the American troops pulled up to Auschwitz to liberate it from the Nazis, what they found shocked them. Skeletons of men hanging onto humanity by a hair. Smoke everywhere. Evil everywhere. Death everywhere. They began announcing instructions to all the inmates to form a single file line and walk through the gate. The wide-eyed inmates, shaking in disbelief, began treading their way to the gate to freedom.

The very last inmate to go through those gates, the very last soul to leave that horrid place, was a special Yid from a town deep in the middle of nowhere. The man, more dead than alive, limped to the gate. The very last prisoner of Auschwitz stopped at the gate and looked at the big American soldiers ready to whisk him off to freedom. He looked at all the other survivors already boarding buses and trucks to take them away. He stopped, paused and looked up to Heaven and cried out in a broken scream, "Hashem, never in my entire life did I have as strong of a connection with You as I did here! Every second I was here I felt You, I loved You, I spoke to You, I cried to You, I hoped for You, I davened for You, I wished for You, I dreamed of You. And You were there for me every step I took. Every morsel of food I ate, I saw You. I breathed You. I lived You.

"Hashem, I am going out of this place, never to return. Promise me that I will always have this relationship with You. Promise me I will live the rest of my life with You by my side. Promise me that wherever the rest of my life takes me I won't forget You. I won't put others first. I won't ever lose You. Hashem, this horrible place gave me You; don't let my life take You away. I love You, Hashem. I love You forever."

With that, the last survivor of Auschwitz limped through the gates and drove off to freedom.