KI TISA: Moses, The Golden Calf and Fifth Graders

The Disconnection

A few months ago, my son Rabbi David told me that while passing by his daughter Tamar's Zoom class, he heard the rowdy voices of the girls screaming, laughing, and playing instead of studying. He asked Tamar, "What is going on?" She replied, "The teacher got disconnected!" The teacher's absence on Zoom caused chaos as 30 girls were unsupervised.

Our Parsha (Torah portion) describes a similar situation but on a much larger and more serious scale. The teacher, Moshe, left his students to receive the tablets of the Law on Mount Sinai. It was the first time the crowd was without the presence of its leader. The children of Israel behaved well for almost 40 days under the circumstances, but chaos erupted when Moshe didn't return. The opportunists, rebels, and anarchists ("the mob" in Hebrew) took advantage of the situation, and anarchy prevailed. The absence of law, order, and personal responsibility led to celebration among those who didn't want Moshe to return.

The crowd summoned Aaron and demanded, "Make us a god to go before us because that man Moses, who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has happened to him." (Exodus 32:1). Aharon tried to buy time, "Tomorrow we will celebrate God!" The next day, the leaders of the anarchy movement worshipped the golden calf and celebrated with food, drink, and promiscuity.

How could this happen? How could the same people who had just heard the voice of God sin in this way? While commentators offer different explanations, I believe their belief system at that time depended entirely on Moshe's presence. The Jewish people were emotionally immature, like fifth graders without

their teachers; they lost their discipline and direction without Moshe's visible presence. Forty days without Moshe were too much for Bene Israel. Everyone experiences that feeling of anarchy when the teacher leaves the classroom in fifth grade, but as one matures, they understand that education is for their good. One develops a standard of moral self-discipline that does not depend on the teacher's or local authority's physical presence.

We made a big mistake when worshipping the golden calf, but our beloved leader, Moshe Rabbenu, represented us before HaShem. On the 10th of Tishri, Yom Kippur, we were forgiven for that terrible sin.

The question is, what happened since then? Did we learn our lesson? Are we now mature enough to live a life of holiness and loyalty to God without external supervision? The following story will help us find the answer.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, the Magid of Berditchev, was famous as the "advocate of the Jewish people." Like Moses, he constantly prayed to God, defending Israel and presenting our case: our people's virtues and good deeds. During the middle days of Pesach, Chol HaMoed, while walking through the streets of the Jewish neighborhood, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak noticed something that inspired him to pray to HaShem with a compelling argument in favor of the Jewish people. Confident of positive results, he called his students and asked them to find tobacco, which was prohibited and punishable by fines and imprisonment in Tsarist Russia. After searching throughout the city, they found tobacco, and the rabbi was overjoyed. He then asked them to bring him whiskey, which was forbidden during Pesach. Despite offering large amounts of money, they could not find any whiskey and returned to their master empty-handed.

Infinitely happy for the lack of results, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak looked up to heaven and said, "HaShem, Almighty God: how proud you must be of your people, Israel, who love and respect you

so much! The Tsar of Russia has guards, commissioners, and police officers dedicated to locating and punishing tobacco smugglers. However, with a little effort and money, you can find all the tobacco you want! On the other hand, look at your children's loyalty to the Jewish people. It has been over 3,000 years since you commanded us to observe Pesach, and no Jew has chametz. There is no police, no guards, no trials, no fines, and no jail enforcing this order, yet every Jew, without exception, keeps Your Law to the highest standard! My KeAmekha Israel – Who is like Your nation, Israel, a unique nation in the world?"

Despite our ancestors' mistake in making the golden calf, over time, we matured into a people stubbornly and staunchly loyal to our God and His Torah.

Note: In those days, both Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews did not practice Mekhirat Hametz and *got rid of all their chametz* completely, as indicated in the Gemara (see here).