

Modifying the Middle Man

MUCH INK HAS BEEN SPILLED, FOR MANY generations, over the events in the latter part of this week's Torah portion.

The people saw that Moshe was delayed in descending from the mountain; the people gathered upon Aharon, and they said to him, "Get up! Make us a god that will go before us—for this man, Moshe... we don't know what happened to him." (32:1)

What did they mean by asking Aharon to "make a god?" This generation, more than any other generation, knew Hashem and His limitlessness, both in His powers and in the fact that He has no beginning or end. It's slightly analogous to one of us asking a neighbor to make us a sun. One doesn't just make a sun—or a god, for that matter!

Assuming that the premise of this question is correct, there is also a more basic issue: Why did they need a new god in the first place? Granted, Moshe might not have been coming back, but the Jewish people definitely did not view Moshe as Hashem! Hashem still existed! So what did they need a new god for?

And, even more elemental:

...They said, "This is your god, O Israel, which took you up from Egypt." (32:4)

Now, that is quite a claim to make—especially of a statue that was literally created five minutes beforehand!

Circling back a bit, how did Aha-

ron even agree to such a preposterous request?

In one of the longest pieces in his commentary on the Torah—in fact, he prefaces it by saying, "I must wax prolific on the subject of the Golden Calf"—Ibn Ezra takes to task many of those who would explain Aharon's behavior by saying that he feared for his life after seeing the murder of Chur, or that he feared for the fate of the Jews if they were to be found guilty of murdering him. After all, poses Ibn Ezra, if the Jewish people were indeed requesting that Aharon make an idol, Aharon should have stood his ground, given up his life, and allowed the chips fall where they may. In such a situation, there is no wiggle room. Throughout the generations, other Jews, of much smaller stature than Aharon, withstood this very test!

Furthermore, writes Ibn Ezra, assuming that Aharon did make an idol, this would be a much worse sin than worshipping it. It would have warranted that Moshe kill Aharon before killing those who had worshipped it! However, in fact, Moshe did quite the opposite—he prayed that Hashem should be merciful toward Aharon, while he showed no mercy to those who had served the Golden Calf.

Clearly, any literal understanding of this sad series of events is sophomoric in nature (and, maybe, influenced by Charlton Heston's "The Ten Commandments"). Some deeper explanation is necessary.

Many of the answers given to our questions start out by explaining that the Jews never intended to make an idol that would replace Hashem. Ibn Ezra maintains that the people were simply looking for "Hashem's Presence to rest on a higher object." Until that point in time, Moshe had been that "higher object." Now that Moshe was gone, they needed another focal point that they could relate to. At any rate, one thing is clear: they definitely were not looking to create a new god. The terminology they used—*elohim*—in this context means "leader," not "god." And their excited cheer of, "This is your god, O Israel, which took you up from Egypt," meant that (as far as they were concerned) Hashem, Who had taken them up from Mitzrayim, and Whose Spirit had previously rested on Moshe, had now found a new place upon which to rest His Presence.

However, Rabbi Avigdor Nebentzal finds this resolution to be somewhat problematic, in that now the punishment does not fit the crime! Such a request is not, in and of itself, unjustifiable. This was precisely what had been planned for the future, when the Jews would arrive in Israel and build the Holy Temple—a specific place upon which Hashem's Presence would rest! And the people knew that this would eventually happen, for they sang in *Az Yashir*, the Song at the Sea (inspired by the Holy Spirit):

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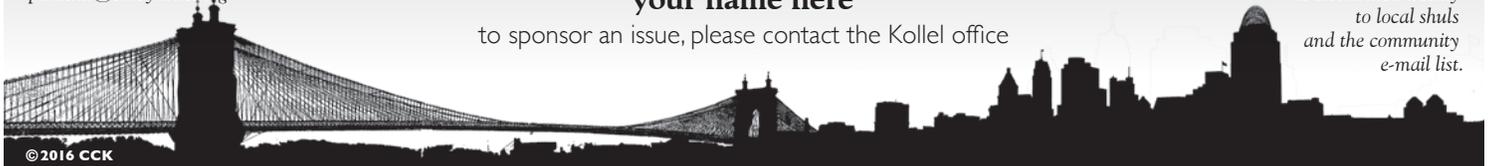
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Minyanim for Standard Time

Shacharis

Sunday8:15 AM
Monday–Friday7:20 AM

Mincha

Sunday *thru January*1:15 PM
Mon.–Thurs. *thru January*2:35 PM
Sunday–Thurs., *Feb.–Mar.*5:45 PM
Shabbos2:45 PM

Ma'ariv

In the Beis Midrash:

Sunday–Wednesday9:45 PM
Thursday10 PM

Modifying... CONTINUED

You will bring [Your people] and plant them on the mountain of Your inheritance, the foundation of Your abode, which You, Hashem, have made—the Sanctuary, Hashem, which Your hands have founded. (15:17)

Granted, they were not yet near “The Mountain of Your Inheritance,” but such an idea existed! Furthermore, they themselves later built the Mishkan (the Tabernacle), so we see that such an idea was not foreign to them. So why did Hashem look so askance upon the Golden Calf?

Rabbi Nebenzahl answers that the issue was subtle: They were slightly lacking, in a certain respect, in their belief in, and deference to, Hashem. The proper thing for them to do, when they thought they might need to replace Moshe, was to wait for Hashem to command them to build a Mishkan. Instead, they took control of the wheel. They fashioned a Golden Calf, and then they brazenly said, “Now we have built something on which You can rest Your Presence, and You may now do so!” They were so confident that Hashem would follow their lead—even though they hadn’t consulted with Aharon first (as Ibn Ezra discerns from the Torah’s expression, “The people gathered upon Aharon,” and not just “to Aharon”—meaning that the people

came up with the idea and demanded that Aharon follow, instead of waiting to hear his advice)—that they had a big feast and celebration, even though they hadn’t yet received any sign from Hashem that He would rest His presence on their handiwork! Such was their tremendous sin, according to Rav Nebentzal. They had a lack of respect for Hashem’s Oneness.

It is interesting to note that the remedy for this sin was that Hashem commanded the Jews to build the Mishkan, and His instructions were extremely specific—two and a half Torah portions’ worth! The reason for this may be that the cure for their sin, that of preemptively taking the driver’s seat, was to put Hashem back in complete control and to subjugate their will and ideas to His will and ideas.

In fact, in Parashas Pekudei, when the Torah discusses the actual construction of the Mishkan, almost every section ends with the expression, “They did X, just as Hashem had commanded Moshe.”

Every Day

👉 “Dirshu” Gemara Shiur

(Maseches Y’vamos)
Rabbi Yitzchok Preis.....
Sunday 7:15–8:15 AM
Monday–Friday 5:50–6:45 AM

👉👉 Kollel Yisgaber K’ari

(amud-a-day of Mishnah B’rurah)
Rabbi Chaim Heinemann
Monday–Friday 6:55–7:20 AM

👉👉 Kitzur Shuchan Aruch

Live video conference!
Rabbi Dani Schon.....
Monday–Friday 12:05–12:20 PM

👉 Daf Yomi

Rabbi Meir Minster.....
Sunday–Thursday 8–8:45 PM
Shabbos (at CZE) 1:00 pre-mincha

👉👉 Nightly Halacha Chabura

Rabbi Dani Schon
& Binyamin Teitelbaum
Monday–Thursday 9–9:45 PM

Sunday *Free brunch!*

👉👉 America Runs on Torah

(Jewish Law & Parasha)
Rabbi Dani Schon
and Yisroel Kaufman..... 10 AM
Grand Deluxe breakfast served

👉 Shivti

(Self-contained learning, geared
toward practical halacha) 10–noon A

Tuesday

👉👉 Partners in Torah at the Mayerson JCC

Rabbi Binyamin Teitelbaum.....8 PM

Wednesday

👉👉 Torah Treasures for Seniors at the Mayerson JCC

Rabbi Yitzchok Preis..... 10:30–11:15 AM

👉👉 Downtown Lunch-n- Learn at Strauss & Troy

Rabbi Yitzchok Preis..... 12–1 PM

Thursday

👉👉 Halacha based on the parasha

Rabbi Chaim Heinemann.....9:10–10 PM
Homemade refreshments served.

KEY: 👉 Beginners
👉👉 Intermediate
👉👉👉 Advanced
👉👉👉👉 for men and women