The Urgency of the Now

by

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“The entire assembly of the Children of Israel left Moshe’s presence. Every man whose heart inspired him came; and everyone whose spirit motivated him brought the portion of Hashem for the work of the Tent of Meeting, for all its labor and for the sacred vestments.” (Shemot 35:20-21)

Wait. What exactly is happening here? Had the Torah not just taught us that Moshe was appealing for free will offerings for the *Mishkan* from the entire community, from everyone, not just from the wealthy or the comfortable? Had not the people, roused and enthused by the call, seemingly spoken with one voice only to fall away as soon as the appeal was over? The Torah tells us that, “the entire assembly left Moshe’s presence.” The Or HaChayim explains that they had been as one, enthusiastic to respond to Moshe’s appeal.

So, what went wrong?

What happened between the time they left “as one” and when “only a few” returned?

This was certainly not the response of the people to the call for the Golden Calf! This seems to me to be another example of the confused priorities that drive our communal and individual acts of *chesed* and *tzedakah*. So often, it is the “new and shiny” object that draws our attention and our interest.

Such confused priorities infect people for whom the siren song of the world in stronger than the call of God. That was certainly true at the time of Sinai; it is true now, when individuals seek to “redefine” what it means to be Orthodox, observant; when they create a “bright, shiny object” that has less to do with God’s will than with the lure of the world.

It is not a new phenomenon. After all, the people stood at Sinai and yet felt the draw of the Golden Calf more than the power of the mountain. Today, there are those who seek to “water down” observance and make it more palatable to people.

Their priorities *start out* well – after all, they embrace their Judaism ecstatically. But over time, there is an erosion of intent. Their priorities become confused. We see that in the case of Open Orthodoxy. They began only wanting to “be more open to surrounding culture.” They end up … well, you can see where they end up.

Introduced in 1997, Open Orthodoxy teaches that while *halacha* must be observed and the cardinal principles of faith must be upheld, Orthodox life can and should be enriched by the surrounding world. What began as a move to affirm rabbinic autonomy, quickly morphed into ordaining female rabbis, support legalization of same-sex marriage, support liberalizing conversion standards, question the Sinaitic origin of Torah and even include rabbis open to intermarriage.

A great speech. A seductive appeal. An emotional hook. Suddenly, everyone is eager to give. And yet, at the end of Moshe’s speech, many left and only the ish remained; only the truly committed nediv lev, those with understanding, only they stayed to follow through on what they heard.

The Chida observes in this something that fund raisers know only too well – there is a gap, sometimes a large one, between the heart and the hand, between thought and action. Many, perhaps most, good intentions evaporate before that are ever actualized.

It is true that many heard Moshe’s great appeal with open hearts and minds. It is true they were eager to respond but… oye, by the time they got home, they were tired; some other matter became pressing on their minds; they had second thoughts.

It is telling that Chazal teach that the contributions for building the Mishkan were meant to serve as an atonement for the making of the Golden Calf.  Yet an amazing question is raised by the Jerusalem Talmud in Shekalim, For the Mishkan, the Torah reports, only the nediv lev, the wise hearted, those whose “heart lifted them” contributed, whereas for the Golden Calf, vayitparku kol ha’am – everyone contributed.

What are we to make of that? The sin calls us louder than the atonement. Why?

The answer is no less important now than it was then. Perhaps even more so. Rav Meir Shapiro, founder of Daf Yomi and head of the Yeshiva Chachmei Lublin, was a prolific fund raiser.  He observed that often when appeals are made, the community at large is seduced into believing that the funds they contribute are needed to sustain the Jewish people’s future. But when the campaign is over, and the funds collected, counted and allocated, people begin to take stock and inquire as to what became of all these funds?

What did our fundraising really accomplish? More learning? More hungry people fed? More poor people clothed?  These are such “pedestrian” accomplishments, no? They seem awfully far removed from the lofty oratory of the fundraising appeal.

The knowledge inures them, makes them less likely to give the next time.

So, it was when the appeal went out for the Golden Calf. The people believed their funds would sustain the future of the Jewish people. How could they have known that their funds would end up as a meaningless idol?  They were promised Eleh eloecha yisrael. They were given a false god.

The realization must have been unsettling to say the least. Like the beggar on the street who asks for money for food only to squander the gift on alcohol, giving this way changes our feelings and behavior. It makes us reluctant. Wary. So, when it came to contribute for the worthiest cause, the Mishkan, only the wise hearted, the nediv lev, gave.

If we are to enjoin people to give, we must give an accounting, we must show the people that their contributions are for good and not wasted. Untold sums were collected for the Calf, without an accounting. Yet, when the cause is so purposeful and so vital for the Mishkan, Moshe is prompted to give an exact and clear financial report!

When the cause is noble, accounting for the money is never difficult. Too often, well-meaning and generous donors are duped by clever appeals – cute animals, and powerful graphics. But what are the results of these multi-million-dollar campaigns? Where does the money go? Does it go to CEO’s and COO’s and beautiful office buildings? Or is it used for its intended purpose?

To give to the Golden Calf required only a loosening of self-discipline. But to give to the Mishkan? This called for greater self-discipline, the acceptance of the yoke of Heaven.  Apparently, this is not a call “all of the people” were willing to hear. To give without the slick appeal; to perceive the need to lift the poor, feed the hungry, and clothe the naked demands a discerning heart, a soul, and spirit.

To give to the Mishkan demands a knowledge of the difference between a Mishkan and a Golden Calf, to know the difference between heaven and earth.

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