

Sh'mot 32:26-28

Mosheh stood in the gate of the camp.
 He said: "Whoever is for Hashem – to me!"
 All the Sons of Levi gathered to him.
 He said to them:
 "Thus said (*koh amar*) Hashem G-d of Israel:
 Each man – place his sword on his hip
 Pass through and back
 from gate to gate in the camp
 and kill
 each man his brother
 and each man his peer
 and each man his relative.
 The Sons of Levi acted
 according to Mosheh's word.
 There fell from the nation that day
 around three thousand men.

שמות פרק לב:כו-כח
 ויעמד משה בשער המחנה
 ויאמר: "מי לה' אלי!"
 ויאספו אליו כל בני לוי
 ויאמר להם:
 "כה אמר ה' א-להי ישראל:
 'שימו איש חרבו על ירכו
 עברו ושובו
 משער לשער במחנה
 והרגו
 איש את אחיו
 ואיש את רעהו
 ואיש את קרבו:
 ויעשו בני לוי
 כדבר משה
 ויפל מן העם ביום ההוא
 כשלושת אלפי איש:"

"The wages of sin are sin"; "sin causes sin"; "the coverup is often worse than the crime". Why do human beings so often double down on their misdeeds rather than cutting their spiritual losses?

This pattern begins with the very first sin – Adam and Eve hide from G-d, and then deflect responsibility.

I raise this question now in the context of Mosheh Rabbeinu's post-Golden Calf rallying cry in this week's parshah: "Whoever is for Hashem – to me!" What would have happened had everyone rallied to him?

Are the various short and longterm punishments meted out for the Calf actually the result not of the sin, but of the failure to recover from it? And if the Calf was, as Nachmanides plausibly argues, merely a symbolic chariot for Hashem the invisible Rider, and as seems clear, a replacement for Mosheh when he was thought dead, why didn't everyone rally to Mosheh on his return?

My suggestion is that our every action becomes part of our self-image, so that we become invested in our sins. Had Mosheh been present all the way through, no one would have thought of building a Calf as acceptable. But having already done it, they could not disown it without disowning part of themselves – and so very few rallied to Mosheh.

At the same time, it seems that only 3,000 of them failed to completely back away from the Calf and dared to confront those who rallied to Mosheh.

The policy question this raises is: what would have happened had Mosheh not initiated the confrontation? Could things have returned to the way they were before, as if nothing had happened?

In one of my tenth grade classes this past week, we've discussed the difference between "local" and "reverberating" choices. Local choices are those that we make each time that will not change the choices we make next time; reverberating choices are those that make us different people, that affect the choices we will make in the future. The question in those terms is: Could the Golden Calf have been a local choice had Mosheh not made it reverberate by forcing a confrontation?

What makes this question more important is that the question of whether Mosheh made the decision to initiate the confrontation on his own, rather than by Divine command. The verse says that he said "So said Hashem", but where did He say it? Rabbeinu Bechayay said he said it offscreen: Rashi, following Mekhilta and Targum Yonatan, suggests that it refers to Shemot 22:19, זובח לאלהים יחרם; but by far the most interesting suggestion is made by the midrash Eliyahu Rabba:

מעיד אני עלי את השמים ואת הארץ
 שלא אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה כך
 לעמוד בשער המחנה
 ולומר מי לה' אלי
 ולומר כה אמר ה' א-להי ישראל,
 – אלא שהיה משה צדיק דן קל וחומר בעצמו
 אמר:
 אם אני אומר לישראל
 'הרגו איש את אחיו ואיש את רעהו ואיש את קרובו',
 יהו ישראל אומרים:
 לא כך למדתנו, סנהדרין שהורגת נפש אחת בשבוע נקראת מחבלנית?
 מפני מה אתה הורג שלשת אלפים ביום [אחד]?
 לפיכך תלה בכבוד שלמעלה,
 שנאמר: כה אמר ה' וגו' (שם / שמות ל"ב) –
 מה ענין שלאחריו? ויעשו בני לוי כדבר וגו' (שם / שמות ל"ב / כ"ח).
 I call Heaven and Earth to testify for me
 that The Holy Blessed One never told Mosheh this,
 to stand in the gate of the camp
 and say "Whoever is for Hashem – to me!"
 and say "Thus said Hashem G-d of Israel"
 but Mosheh the righteous made an a fortiori argument on his own –
 He said:
 If I say to Israel:
 "kill each man his brother and each man his peer and each man his relative",
 then Israel will say:
 Did you not teach us thus, that a Sanhedrin that takes a life once in seven years is called destructive?!
 For what reason are you killing 3,000 in a single day?!
 Therefore he made it depend on the honor of Above.
 as Scripture writes: "Thus said **G-d**"
 What comes afterward?
 "The Sons of Levi acted according to **Mosheh's** word.

For Eliyahu Rabba, Moshe felt that the confrontation was necessary to forestall the anger of G-d. However, it seems that the principles he had taught his people – in the name of that same God – would be seen as incompatible with the actions he thought were necessary. So he shockingly pretends to be quoting G-d when actually he was seeking to forestall Him. In halakhic terms, he claimed that he had a *hora'at sha'ah*, an explicit suspension of ordinary Torah law. But this was not true. Perhaps this provides a different explanation of why only the Levites rallied to him.

Moreover – Sifrei Matot 153 states that Moshe's was unique among prophets in that he used the language *זה הדבר*, this is the word of Hashem, as well as *כה אמר*, Thus spoke Hashem. Careful study shows that Mosheh uses *זה הדבר* when speaking to the Jews, and *כה אמר* when speaking to Pharaoh. This is the exception, and perhaps that set off alarm bells and even suspicions among the Jews, who recognized that somehow Mosheh was not prophesying in the manner to which they were accustomed.

Now Eliyahu Rabba endorses Mosheh's decision via a fascinating parable:

משלו משל - למה הדבר דומה?
 למלך בשר ודם שסרח לפניו בנו בכורו.
 תפסו בידו, ונתנו לעבדו לשר הבית, ואמר לו:
 צא והרג את זה ותנהו לחיה ולכלבים.
 מה עשה אותו העבד?
 הוציאו מלפניו והניחו (בבית ארץ) [בביתו, ורץ] ובא ועמד לפניו.
 לסוף ל" יום, כטוב לב המלך עליו, והיו עבדיו ובני ביתו מסובין לפניו –
 כשהוא נושא את עיניו אינו רואה את בנו בכורו –
 היה מכניס יגון ואנחה בלבבו – ואין כל ברייה מכיר בו אלא עבדו שר הבית.
 מיד רץ והביאו והעמידו במקומו.
 כתר יפה שהיה מונח לפניו
 תפסו בידו ונתנו בראש עבדו שר הבית,
 A parable – to what is this similar?

To a flesh and blood king whose eldest son behaved rottenly before him.
 He took him in his hand, gave him to the palace chamberlain, and ordered:
 "Go out and kill this one and give him to the beasts and dogs!"

What did that servant do?

He took him out from before him and hid him in his house, then ran back and stood before the king.
 After 30 days, when the king grew cheerful, and all his servants and household were dining before him -
 There was pain and agony in his heart – and no one recognized it but the palace chamberlain.
 Immediately he ran and brought (the condemned son) and stood him in his (accustomed) place.
 (The king) had a crown stored before him –
 he took it in his hand and placed it on the head of his servant the palace chamberlain.

The fundamental analogy seems to be that Mosheh, like the chamberlain, is ultimately rewarded for disobeying orders. But while it is true that G-d initially threatens to kill all the Jews, He as-if changes his mind – *וינחם* - before Mosheh actually descends from Sinai (unless one takes verse 14 as out-of-order, as describing in advance how the narrative will end.)

Note also that the chamberlain's reward is likely the crown that had previously belonged to the rescued prince. But reading the Torah, we generally assume that Hashem takes back both of His threats in verse 10 – that He neither destroys the people nor replaces them with Mosheh. In this midrash, I suspect that Mosheh's face is eventually illuminated by light that originally would have been shared by all the people.

Mosheh earns the condemned prince's crown even as he saves him; his disobedience covers that of the people. Sometimes one sin *makes another necessary*.

This is plainly a dangerous message, and one that – even believing that it is the clear meaning of this midrash – I am hesitant to embrace.

But within the framework of that midrash – I suggest that the servant is heroic because he has so internalized the values of the king that he can act in direct response to values rather than rules, and because he is willing to risk his own life solely for his master's happiness.

The problem here, as in Iyov and the Akeidah, is that once we know the story, we can never be the selfless servant – in the back of our minds will always be the hope that, if we get it right, G-d will give us a crown. And I wonder how the king reacts - however happy he is to see his son - if he suspects that the servant is gaming the system, and chooses when to obey and when not with self-interest as part of the equation.

Shabbat shalom