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PENINIM ON THE TORAH

PARSHA BOOKLET

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PARASHAT KI SISA

When you take a census of the Children of Israel according to their numbers, every man shall give Hashem an atonement for his soul ... there will not be a plague

Rashi explains that when Jews are counted, it is important that they not be counted individually by person; rather, they should each give a coin towards the Mishkan, and the coins will be counted. We open ourselves up to the effects of ayin hora, an evil eye. We must endeavor to understand the reasoning for this. What is the difference whether we count people or coins? Are the goals not the same?

Horav Eliyahu Lopian, zl, explains that, actually, the focus of their census varies. One who counts people does so to assess his strength and ability to succeed in war or to address other issues of security. As the numbers increase, so does his self-confidence in his ability to succeed. He becomes much more sure of himself and, thus, falls prey to the misguided belief of *kochi v'otzem yadi*, "my power and the strength of my hand" has accomplished all of these great achievements. It was me, me and only me.

It is not so for one who counts the coins that have been donated to the Mishkan. The focus turns to evaluating how many are dedicated and connected to Hashem. The focus is spiritual in nature and, therefore, not subject to the effects of the evil eye.

This idea presents a powerful lesson for us. Involvement in numbers is fine as long as the goal of this number is to note how many more are connected to the Almighty. If, however, the objective is to showcase one's strength and laud one's own achievements, the census taker is treading on risky ground.

Every man shall give Hashem an atonement for his soul... This shall they give - everyone who passes through the census... as a portion to Hashem. Everyone who passes through the census... shall give a portion of Hashem. The wealthy shall not increase and the destitute shall not decrease... to give the portion of Hashem. (30:12,13,14,15)

Upon perusing the text, we note the Torah's emphasis on Hashem: "A portion to Hashem;" "a portion of Hashem;" "to give the portion of Hashem." What is the significance of this? Obviously, this is being given for/to Hashem.

In the Talmud Megillah 13b, Chazal say that Hashem knew that one day the wicked Haman would deposit shekalim to destroy the Jews. Therefore, He preceeded Haman's coins with His coins (half-shekel). This is enigmatic. If the purpose of the half-shekel was to preempt Haman's shekalim, why is there a prohibition against increasing or decreasing from the half-shekel amount? Haman gave ten thousand shekalim. We should not be restricted from superceding the half-shekel. Furthermore, what was so destructive about Haman's shekalim? Since when does Heaven concern itself with ten thousand shekalim?

Horav Sholom Schwadron, zl, addresses these questions as he teaches us the rationale behind the half-shekel contribution and the significance of performing a mitzvah totally l'shem shomayim, for the sake of Heaven. He cites the incident in Melachim (2:3:27) in which Mesha, king of Moav, offered his firstborn son as a sacrifice. This event precipitated a great wrath to take effect against the Jewish People. Why should we suffer because some pagan decided to act in an utterly foolish manner, sacrificing his son to his pagan god?

This teaches us, explains Rav Sholom, that when a gentile is determined and resolute, demonstrating total commitment to his spurious ideals, by acting on behalf of his "cause," it serves as a prosecutorial grievance against us: Thus, when the wicked Haman takes out ten thousand silver shekalim from his treasury, it serves as a critique against us: "Look what the wicked Haman is willing to do in pursuit of his evil. See how far he will go. Behold his unmitigated commitment." If the gentile will do so much for something which is not even meaningful to him, how much more so should the Jewish People do for the Torah, which is their lifeblood.

The difference between a mitzvah performed lishmah, for its own sake, and one performed by rote, without aforethought, is great. Likewise, explains Rav Sholom, there is no comparison between an aveirah, sin, committed lishmah, for its own sake, with malice and intent to destroy and defame with passion and fervor, and one that is committed half-heartedly, for no apparent reason. Haman exemplified dedication to evil. He sinned with enthusiasm, zest and passion. His hatred for the Jewish People was so intense that he was prepared to relieve his coffers of a huge sum of money - if that is what it took to destroy the Jews. This is an aveirah lishmah at its nadir!

This aveirah, which was committed with such ardor, stood as a glaring denunciation of our own commitment for positive action in service of the Almighty. Therefore, in anticipation of Haman's actions, Hashem commanded us to contribute a half shekel solely l'shem shomayim, as a way of undermining the effect of Haman's shekalim. The machatzis ha'shekel had one purpose: mitzvah lishmah. Thus, each Jew had to contribute a prescribed amount - no more, no less - because the striking aspect of a mitzvah carried out lishmah is the attention to following every detail. Often for an aveirah lishmah, one will spend everything, do whatever he can do, go all out, to commit a sin. Not so, when it comes to a mitzvah. A commandment is to be followed according to the command. The greater the adherence to every minute detail of the command, without any form of deviation, the more it elevates the "lishmah" of one's actions. Following the command to the letter is the true litmus test of commitment.

This lesson applies to us today as well. When we look at the fervor, unremitting and relentless dedication to evil, that personifies our enemies, it makes us wonder. Do we express a similar devotion to our positive ideals? Is our mitzvah observance expressed with such enthusiasm? Is there a similar passion to our Jewishness? If we circumvent the effect of "Haman's" shekalim, we must raise and qualify our own level of commitment.

You must observe My Shabbosos
You shall observe the Shabbos

The Bnei Yisrael shall observe the Shabbos. (31:13,14,16)

Shemiras Shabbos, observing Shabbos, is a term which is used constantly regarding the mitzvah of Shabbos. Chazal derive lessons from each time the word shemirah, observe, is used. From the word tishmoru, you must observe, they glean that one is enjoined in shvus, those acts of labor that are not prohibited in their own right, but rather because they enable one to transgress an actual melachah, act of labor.

The pasuk of u'shemartem, you shall observe, followed by v'shamru, and (Bnei Yisrael) shall observe, teaches us that pikuach nefesh, saving a life, docheh es ha'Shabbos, literally pushes away, overrides, the Shabbos. The Torah is telling us, "Desecrate one Shabbos, so that you will live to observe many others." All of these pesukim are written with the word shemirah, which-- according to the author of the Torah Temimah-- means safeguard: make a fence around the Shabbos; do what you must to see to it that Shabbos is observed.

Horav Eliyahu Schlessinger, Shlita, feels that Shemiras Shabbos is no different than the halachos that apply to shomrim, watchmen. According to the Torah, the responsibility of the shomer, watchman, is commensurate with the degree of shemirah he accepts upon himself. If he does not treat the animal or object properly, he is liable for damages to the animal or those incurred by the animal. For a shomer to be completely patur, free of liability, there has to have been an accident that was beyond his control. Otherwise, we consider his shemirah, watching, as being deficient.

Shemiras Shabbos must be carried out in a manner in which there is no lapse whatsoever in the attention we pay to Shabbos. When one approaches Shabbos with such an attitude, then his shemirah, observance, of the holy day is complete, and he will not be negligent in its observance. Furthermore, since Shemiras Shabbos mandates one to be meticulous in thinking about Shabbos, ensuring that nothing occurs that would undermine his sense of Shabbos, one can never say lo yodati, "I did not know the halacha." This is not an excuse. If one is truly observant, he makes it his business to know the law.

Rav Schlessinger relates the following incident that occurred concerning the Brisker Rav, zl, which gives us insight into the meaning of "observing Shabbos." It was the beginning of World War II. The Brisker Rav and a number of other distinguished Jews had an opportunity to obtain passage on a ship leaving Odessa for Eretz Yisrael. The Rav was in Moscow; the ship was leaving on Motzei Shabbos from Odessa; the train from Moscow to Odessa was a two day trip, which left on Wednesday afternoon.

They would arrive in Odessa on Erev Shabbos, in the afternoon, if the train arrived on time. The Brisker Rav was not inclined to take a chance at arriving on Shabbos in case the train was late, an almost certain possibility, given the manner in which the Russian railroad was operated. When the Rav articulated his serious misgivings, the president of the shul in Moscow, who just happened to be a communist sympathizer, spoke up and said, "Rebbe, this is a question of life and death. One does not know what tomorrow might bring. It is best that the Rav take advantage of the earliest opportunity to escape." The Rav listened and, with a heavy heart, acquiesced to leave on the train.

The train left on time. Three hours into the trip, it was already running late. The Brisker Rav was extremely agitated. The thought of arriving on Shabbos and having to disembark the train on the holy day was just too much for him to handle. If the train kept up its "timely" schedule, they would arrive one day later than planned. Things certainly did not look very promising. Suddenly, the train began picking up speed. As it traveled faster, it began to make up for lost time until it arrived in Odessa on Friday afternoon, on time.

No one could understand how this abrupt change in schedule had transpired. It was as if a miracle had occurred. Rabbi Eliezer Yehudah Finkel, zl, the Mirrer Rosh Yeshivah, who was also part of the entourage, supported this idea. It was clearly a miracle performed for the sake of the Brisker Rav, because shemiras Shabbos meant so much to him.

Hashem smote the people with a plague because they had made the calf... "Go ascend from here, you and the people whom You brought up from the land of Egypt. And I will send an angel before you...for I will not ascend in your midst, for you are a stiff-necked people..." The people heard this bad tidings and they grieved...He said, "My face shall go and I shall provide you rest." (32:35) (33:1,2,3,4,14)

After Klal Yisrael perpetrated the sin of the Golden Calf, and the offenders were punished, Hashem said that He would not ascend with them to Eretz Yisrael. The quality of the Jewish People's stiff-neckedness rendered them unworthy to have Hashem's Presence in their midst. Rashi explains that their stiff-neckedness did not directly render them unworthy, but rather it is a trait that might cause Hashem to become enraged with them in the course of their journey, which might lead to their annihilation. Therefore, it was best for their own sake for Hashem to send an angel to accompany them.

Immediately upon hearing this disheartening news, the people reacted as expected: *vayisablu*, "they grieved." Rashi adds that the people were now divested of the spiritual crowns that they had received when they declared, "We will do before we will listen." At that point, sixty myriad ministering angels descended and wove the crowns for each Jew: one for "we will do," and one for "we will listen." When they sinned, however, one hundred twenty myriad destructive angels descended and removed the crowns. This was all part of the Heavenly response to their sin.

When we note the text a few *pesukim* later, we see a startling revelation. Hashem rescinded His decree, and said that He would no longer send an angel, but rather, He would go and accompany the nation. We wonder what occurred to change Hashem's decree. There seems to be no indication of Klal Yisrael repenting. We also do not find Moshe Rabbeinu interceding on their behalf. We only find a decree for punishment which is shortly abrogated. What caused this annulment?

Horav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, zl, of Brisk, explains that the key to this puzzle can be found in *pasuk* seven which states: "Moshe would take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, far from the camp, and he called it *Ohel Moed*, Tent of Meeting; and it would be that whoever would seek Hashem, would go out to the Tent of Meeting." Herein lies the resolution to our query. Targum Onkeles defines Tent of Meeting here as *bais ulpanah*, house of study, while in other places, he defines it as *Mishkan Zimnah*, temporary sanctuary. The Tent of Meeting was, as Rashi describes it, a place where those who were *mevakeish* Hashem, who wished to receive instruction in the Torah, would go and study. There were people who thirsted for-- and demanded-- the word of Hashem. They wanted to study Hashem's Torah from Moshe.

This atoned for Klal Yisrael's insurrection with the Golden Calf. When Moshe moved his tent out of the camp, an insatiable thirst for Torah developed among the people, and they followed Moshe outside the perimeter. This thirst was an indication that intrinsically the Jews seek and thirst for Hashem. Their sin was an extrinsic deficit, catalyzed by the mixed multitude and their own apathy. In reality, Klal Yisrael were not sinners; they were not evil; they could once again be accepted favorably. When a person is a *mevakeish*, someone who seeks Hashem with all his heart, he demonstrates his true essence, and Hashem supports and enables him to achieve greater, more exalted, levels of knowledge and spirituality.

Being a *mevakeish* stems from an individual's perception that Hashem and His Torah are all that exist. Nothing else counts; nothing else has significance. Horav Yeshaya Berdaki, zl, was the son-in-law of Horav Yisrael, zl, m'Shkloy, a primary disciple of the Gaon, zl, m'Vilna. Rav Yisrael went with a

group of the Gaon's students to Eretz Yisrael. When Rav Yeshaya followed his father-in-law to the Holy Land, he experienced a trip that was fraught with peril and tribulation.

Rav Yeshaya was traveling with his young son and daughter when the ship was battered by a storm of hurricane proportion. Their boat was battered by gale-force winds and waves that came crashing down on the fragile boat. Suddenly, a powerful wave slammed against the boat, shattering it, and catapulting its hapless passengers into the stormy sea. There were no lifeboats or life jackets. All Rav Yeshaya could do was instruct his two children to climb up on his back and hold on for dear life as he swam in the direction of land.

After two hours of grueling paddling in the water, the human life raft was about to give up. Rav Yeshaya could go on no longer. His body was spent; his arms were practically numb; and it was suicidal to continue bearing the weight of both children. He had to make a terrible decision. If he continued, they would all drown. If he left one child, he might save the other and himself. Under such circumstances, the male, who has more mitzvos, takes precedence. He was now faced with the lamentable decision of telling his young daughter that he must leave her.

With a heavy heart and weeping profusely, he told his daughter that only one of his children could go on - and that one was to be her brother. The little girl did not understand. "Abba, Abba, why are you letting me go? Why are you doing this?" she wailed. "I have no choice," cried the grief stricken father. "Please, Abba, do not let me go! I have no father other than you. Why are you doing this to me?" she begged.

When Rav Yeshaya heard the words, "I have no father other than you," his heart would not let go of his daughter. He had to try to swim with both of his children. He swam and swam with superhuman strength until he finally reached the shore. Then he passed out.

When he came to, Rav Yeshaya, obviously shaken, looked at his daughter and said, "My child, remember your entire life what has transpired today. You certainly know that my decision to leave you was the most difficult decision of my life. You wept, and I wept, but there was no other choice. When you expressed yourself with the words, 'I have no father other than you,' however, it left such a powerful impression on me that I was motivated to try beyond hope and swim for it.

"Remember this lesson throughout your life. Whenever you are in a situation that seems hopeless, remember: Do not give up hope. Turn to Hashem and cry. Entreat Him with all of your heart and tell Him the exact same words that you said to me: 'I have no father other than You.' You must help me, because there is no one else but You, Hashem." A father can not turn away from his child - if the child is sincere. Some of us turn to Hashem as our Father only after we have exhausted all of our other 'fathers.' He alone is our source of salvation. He is our only Father.

Every man shall give Hashem atonement for his soul. (30:12)

The Gaon zl, m'Vilna writes that the word, v'nasnu, "(they) shall give," retains the same spelling, both backward and forward. He suggests that the Torah is teaching us a powerful lesson: What goes around comes around. While I may be the individual who is giving today, the situation is likely to change tomorrow or in the distant future, at which time either I - or one of my descendants -- will be on the receiving end. Thus, in order to ensure a positive response in the future, one should act appropriately in the present. Our attitude towards others becomes reciprocal. A similar idea applies to our children's education. As we raise our children during their youth, we are always giving. Our

children do not take care of themselves. We protect them and provide for them. As we age and approach our twilight years, we turn to our children for assistance and care. The way we treat our children when they are young; the countenance we display in our relationship with them, will affect their reciprocity when it is our turn to be on the receiving end. In addition, the way we treat our parents serves as a learning experience for our children. They are watching us. What they do not learn from us is our fault. They will act towards us in a manner that parallels the way we have acted towards our parents. It is all part of the reciprocity.

Bnei Yisrael shall observe the Shabbos. (31:16)

Shabbos is a staple of Yiddishkeit, one that, regrettably, the Jewish people have neglected and even scorned. At first, it was supposedly difficult to earn a living unless one worked on Shabbos. Then, it just fell into place together with so many other "archaic" mitzvos that do not seem to conform to the demands of contemporary society. I recently saw an inspiring thought about Shabbos that I would like to share on these pages. While my reading audience is composed primarily of shomrei Shabbos, it is also read by many who are not that "affiliated." In addition, it would benefit all of us to work to strengthen our shemiras Shabbos, especially in the area of kedushas Shabbos, observing its sanctity and according it the proper reverence.

When one is praying for a choleh, an individual who is sick, on Shabbos, it is customary to add the phrase, Shabbos hi me'lizok, u'refuah kerovah lavo, "Even though (the institution of) Shabbos prohibits us from crying out, may a recovery come speedily." One of the great Admorim, Horav Hillel zl, m'Paritsch, once visited a town in which a number of Jews kept their stores open on Shabbos. Rav Hillel convened a meeting and was able to impress upon the residents the overriding significance of Shabbos, inspiring them to agree to close their stores. There was one condition, however, that the residents stipulated. The richest man in town would also have to agree to close his store on Shabbos, as well. Otherwise, they had no chance of competing with him. Rav Hillel immediately sent for the man, who ignored the Rebbe's request. The Rebbe sent a second request, and the man responded to this summons in a similar manner.

One does not insult a tzaddik, righteous person, and get away with it. Shabbos morning, as this wealthy man was preparing to go to work, he suddenly experienced severe stomach cramps. His abdominal pain grew worse with each hour. His wife, who was no fool, realized that her husband's ailment was the result of playing with fire by insulting the great tzaddik. She proceeded to the place where Rav Hillel was staying and begged the tzaddik to forgive her husband and intercede on his behalf. Rav Hillel listened, but he did not respond. He did not utter a word. The chassidim who were there asked, "Rebbe, can you not at least say, 'Shabbos hi mi'lizok u'refuah kerovah lavo'?" The Rebbe continued his silence.

The remainder of Shabbos was uneventful. The man, however, was becoming increasingly sicker. As soon as Shabbos was over, the woman came again to Rav Hillel and pleaded tearfully to the Rebbe, "Please pray for my husband!" Finally, Rav Hillel responded, "The phrase, 'Shabbos hi me'lizok u'refuah kerovah lavo,' can be alternatively interpreted as, 'If Shabbos will refrain from crying out, then a speedy recovery will come.' This person has been denigrating Shabbos for years, causing it to cry out in pain against him for desecrating it. If he gives his solemn promise that he will close his store on Shabbos and begin observing the holy day, then he will recover."

The chassidim ran to the man's house and relayed the Rebbe's message. The man promptly agreed to close his store on Shabbos, and he soon recovered.

Take yourself spices - stacte, onycha and galbanum. (30:34)

Chazal teach us that eleven ingredients comprised the ketores, incense. The fragrance of the incense represents the Jewish People's obligation and desire to serve Hashem in a pleasing manner. Interestingly, one of the spices, the chelbonah, galbanum, had a foul aroma. Chazal derive from here that when the community is in an eis tzarah, time of trouble, and they gather to pray, the sinners must be included in their communal prayer. Just as the chelbonah was included together with the other spices, so, too, should those, whose spiritual aroma is lacking, be included in the greater community. Everyone -- the righteous as well as those who are not yet righteous - all have a share in serving the Almighty.

We wonder why Hashem instructed us to include the galbanum if, in fact, it has a foul aroma. The purpose of the ketores is to offer up a sweet-smelling aroma to Hashem. Will not the chelbonah ruin the aroma with its foul scent? Was there no other way to teach us the overriding importance of unity? Should we ruin the aroma of the ketores just to teach a lesson?

Horav Tuvia Lisitzin, zl, gives a meaningful explanation. True, the chelbonah has a foul odor, but when it is mixed together with the other ten sweet-smelling spices, it actually has a positive effect on the final aroma. It enhances and embellishes their aroma, creating a superior sweet scent, one that would not have been as sweet had the foul-smelling chelbonah not been included.

Actually, this idea does not come as a surprise. We see it all of the time. Salt is inedible on its own, but it enhances the flavor of those foods into which it is mixed. This applies to many other spices that are not tasty or palatable on their own. They serve as condiments, enhancing and bringing out the hidden flavor of many foods. Likewise, the chelbonah has an acrid odor on its own, but when it is mixed with the other spices, it seems to bring out their best fragrance.

If Chazal have made a statement demanding the inclusion of a sinner in a public prayer service, it indicates that his presence, while deplorable on its own, is beneficial in the assembly of others. A unified Klal Yisrael, especially when it includes those who are not among its greatest supporters and performers, is a group that has tremendous power. We always talk about the power of "two." In this case, however, the power of "one," of a unified community standing together as one, has a greater effect.

You shall make it into a spice-compound, the handiwork of a perfumer, thoroughly mixed, pure and holy. (30:35)

The offering of the ketores, incense, was one of the most important avodos, services in the Mishkan. Twice daily, the Ketores -- comprised of eleven spices -- was offered on the Mizbayach HaZahav, golden altar. Preparing the Ketores was no simple task. In fact, it was one family of Kohanim, the Avtinas family, who was proficient in the proper preparation of the mixture. They refused, however, to share their expertise with anyone else. It remained in their family. For this, Chazal harshly criticized them, to the extent that following their name, they added the pasuk in Mishlei 10:7, Shem mishaim yirkav, "The name of the wicked shall rot."

How did the Avtinas family retain its monopoly? It seems that the formula for the composition of the Ketores was a secret, which the family refused to divulge. Chazal, refusing to give in to their

monopoly, hired expert craftsmen from Alexandria, Egypt, to prepare the Ketores. For the most part, they did well. They were able to pulverize the correct ingredients and mix them together perfectly. They were unable, however, to make the smoke of the Ketores rise up in a straight column like a pillar. Their smoke would waft from side to side and eventually dissipate. Apparently, one ingredient was missing, the maaleh ashan, an herb which catalyzed the Ketores to rise up perfectly.

When Chazal saw that they were in a bind, so that nothing they did could match the skill and expertise of the Avitnas family perfumers, they declared, "All that the Holy One, Blessed Be He created, He created for His honor. Therefore, the House of Avitnas should return to their position." When the Avitnas family understood how indispensable they were, they refused to return to their original position unless they were given a one hundred percent raise.

Chazal were upset and demanded an explanation for their insolent and selfish behavior. The Avitnas family replied, "We have a tradition in our family that the Bais Hamikdash will one day be destroyed. We fear that given the eventuality of that day, it is possible that an unsuitable person might use the secret ingredient of maaleh ashan for the service of idols." In his commentary to the Talmud Yuma 38A, the Maharsha writes that Chazal did not believe the Avitnas Family. They felt that their true motivation was mercenary, solely for financial gain and personal aggrandizement. Thus, Chazal criticized them.

In summing up the whole story, Chazal derive an important lesson from their inability to break the monopoly this family had created for themselves. Ben Azzai says, "By your name shall they call you, and in your place shall they seat you. From your own portion they shall provide you. A person cannot encroach upon what is set aside for his fellow man." In explaining these words, Horav Avraham Pam, zl, cited by Rabbi Shalom Smith in his latest analogy of the Rosh Yeshivah's shmuessen, ethical discourses, says that a person should not worry that others might take away his livelihood. Parnassah is not a gift whose source is human. It is from Hashem, earmarked specifically for the individual. Thus, no one can take it away from him. If he is entitled to it; if Hashem has decided that it is for him, then he will receive it - without question. It is like the proverbial "money in the bank." Hashem had decreed that the Avitnas family would retain its monopoly of the Ketores production. Nothing could stand in the way of this decree - not even the machinations of Chazal.

Can we even begin to imagine how much anger, envy, bitterness and hatred we would avoid if we would integrate this reality into our psyche? It does not mean that one should lie down and allow people to step all over him, infringing on his business and property. There is a halachic code that addresses these issues. If an individual's actions are within the parameters of halachah, albeit inappropriate from a mentchlichkeit, human and ethical standpoint, then one has nothing to worry about. He will receive his, and the other individual will also receive his. This could circumvent heartache, misery and enmity. Hashem promises, and He keeps His promises. He will provide. We must be patient.

The people saw that Moshe had delayed in descending from the mountain... Go descend - for your people have become corrupt ... They have strayed quickly from the way that I have commanded them. They have made themselves a molten calf. (32:1, 7-8)

Klal Yisrael's sudden descent from the spiritual high that they had achieved at the Giving of the Torah to the nadir of depravity they exhibited during the sin of the Golden Calf is perplexing, as well as tragic. Their rapid descent into the abyss of idolatry leaves us shocked. This is especially true when we consider the fact that idolatry is not a sin which one commits spontaneously. The yetzer hora, evil

inclination, has to work long and hard to convince someone to worship idols. Yet, this pasuk describes an almost sudden and radical transformation from the peak of spirituality to the depth of idolatry almost in a flash.

Horav Chaim Shmuelevitz, zl, explains that people who make extreme changes in their spiritual standing on an abrupt basis are impacted by the adversity in their lives, which cause them to be more susceptible to impulsivity. The Midrash tells us that when Moshe Rabbeinu did not return at the precise moment that they had expected him to return, the people began to worry. After all, he had no food or water. How could he have survived so long? Acutely aware of the people's ambivalence, the Satan deluded them by conjuring up a vision of angels carrying Moshe's body on its way to its burial. Certain that they were being deprived of their quintessential rebbe's leadership, the people became bewildered, insecure and depressed. It was in their degenerative state of despair that the Jews became vulnerable to impulsive and mutinous degradation.

While the gradual digression to decadence is something that can happen to emotionally stable people as well, it becomes a screaming, speeding roller coaster on its downward spiral when an individual is in a state of confusion and despair. The rules are suspended, the criteria changes, as depression and ambiguity take hold of the person until he no longer has a rational control over himself. This does not mean that his predicament is insurmountable; it is only more challenging. A strong person, who is able to cope with adversity, will retain his sense of self and maintain his perspective, despite the ambiguities that rise up to obscure the truth.

Depression is not a sin, but as the Karliner Rebbe, zl, asserts, there is nothing as conducive to sinful behavior as depression. When an individual loses his ability to think rationally, anything can happen. A person's outlook becomes distorted, and that which is evil and wrong may suddenly seem to be good and acceptable behavior. This breakdown explains the sinful behavior associated with the Golden Calf. Confronted with the loss of their mentor and guide, Klal Yisrael became frightened and dejected, falling into a degenerative state of confusion. They began to fall spiritually at a rapid pace, and nothing could help them break their fall. As soon as the idea of idolatry presented itself, they became willing participants, with irrational desperation, no different from a drowning man who grasps at a straw.

Rav Chaim points to Shlomo HaMelech as the paradigm of strength and self-control. Once, he reigned over a vast empire, but he lost his throne, becoming so destitute that Chazal say, "He reigned only over his walking stick." Yet, he came back and returned to his original position of monarchy. How did he do it? Should his downfall not have precipitated an emotional decline within him? The answer is that although he ruled only over his cane, at least he ruled over it. He retained his regal bearing. His monarchy had diminished substantially, but he was still a monarch! He used his incredible wisdom to cushion his descent, so that he would not become completely lost. He never stopped ruling, because he never lost control.

In his latest volume of "Touched by A Story," Rabbi Yechiel Spero relates the story of a wealthy individual in Yerushalayim whose financial empire suddenly took a tailspin, and he lost everything. From being one of Yerushalayim's wealthiest philanthropists, who helped support many families, he became one of its neediest. The fancy, princely garb that was once his hallmark was quickly replaced by shoddy clothing. His wife, however, continued to dress in her usual elegance, ignoring the stares and bitter responses that pursued her. It was a paradox to observe husband and wife. The husband was now a roofer, which was a position that did not require fancy clothing. His wife continued in her usual upscale, state-of-the-art clothing, as if nothing had happened to alter their financial status.

One day, Rebbetzin Chanah Levine, wife of the venerable Horav Aryeh Levine, zl, came home and told her husband, "I am so envious of that woman." She went on to explain that upon meeting her

on the street, she had inquired whether everything was all right. The response came forth in a torrent of tears, as the woman began to describe her pain and misery. What hurt her most was the humiliation that her husband sustained on an almost daily basis. She saw the constant look of dejection and disgrace in his eyes. He had once been on top of the world, while now he was a poor laborer. She explained that despite the dirty looks she received and the disparaging remarks she heard behind her back, she continued to dress in her previous regal fashion. She wanted her husband to feel good that his wife dressed well, and that he was still very special. When the rebbetzin concluded her story, she looked at her husband and asked, "Do you now understand why I am envious of his wife?"

This shall they give - everyone who passes through the census - a half shekel. (30:13)

The nation was commanded that every male Jew was to give a half-shekel donation each year. When the Bais HaMikdash was standing, this money was used for the maintenance of Korbanos Tzibbur, Public Sacrificial service. The half-shekel was chosen, as opposed to a whole unit, to imply that every Jew is incomplete as an individual. It is only when he joins together with another Jew that he becomes a whole and fully functional member of the community.

The Mishnah in Meseches Shekalim 1:1 says: On the first day of Adar, announcements are made concerning the donation of the Shekalim and concerning Kilayim, crops that are commingled in a forbidden manner. Is there some connection between these two seemingly disparate matters? At first glance, Shekalim and Kilayim are two divergent issues. Why does the Mishnah juxtapose them upon one another?

Horav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld, zl, explains that, as mentioned above, a person must strive to cultivate relationships. As the Tanna says in Pirkei Avos 1:6, Knei lecha chaver, "Acquire for yourself a friend." One who lives as an individual lives as an incomplete person. He is missing a part of himself. Nonetheless, one must maintain criteria with regard to his relationships. He must be sure to associate only with those people who are appropriate. Just as certain admixtures of crops are forbidden, so, too, is it unwise to develop an affiliation with people of questionable or incompatible character. The positive effect of a good friend - and, conversely, the negative effect of a bad friend - cannot be emphasized enough.

And He gave Moshe (the Luchos) when He finished speaking to him on Har Sinai. (31:18)

Moshe Rabbeinu remained on Har Sinai for forty days and nights, while Hashem taught him the entire Torah. In the Talmud Nedarim 38a, Chazal tell us that, despite Moshe's outstanding acumen and memory, "he learned and forgot, learned and forgot." In other words, he could not retain the Torah lessons that he was receiving from Hashem. In truth, this is not surprising. How could a human being comprehend the wisdom of the Creator? This troubled Moshe as he became increasingly frustrated with his inability to absorb and retain his knowledge of the Torah. In the end, Hashem gave him his Torah knowledge as a gift. We wonder why it had to be this way. Hashem knew that a yelud ishah, human being, was incapable of absorbing the entire Torah, and, ultimately, the only way he would grasp it would be as a gift. Why did Hashem make Moshe spend forty days on the mountain working at a task that was impossible and would inevitably end in failure?

The Alshich HaKadosh explains that Hashem selected Moshe as the one to receive and

eventually transmit the Torah to Klal Yisrael. He would be the source from which future generations of Jews would learn Torah. To be worthy of this monumental privilege, Moshe would have to sustain the emotional pain and frustration of "learning and forgetting" the Torah that he had been taught for forty days. Horav Avraham Pam, zl, notes, as cited by Rabbi Sholom Smith, in his anthology on Chumash, that Moshe's frustration was probably exacerbated by the realization that he would only be able to transmit to Klal Yisrael that which he remembered. Whatever he forgot would be lost to eternity. Yet, Moshe persevered. His desire to absorb the eternal verities and wisdom of the Torah catalyzed him to go on, not to give up. Thus, he earned the Divine "gift" of the Torah.

Moshe earned the privilege to be the quintessential Torah leader, relaying the Torah in its entirety, even the profound insights that every perceptive student in the future would innovate, only because he overcame his own frustration, his feelings that his efforts were nothing more than an exercise in futility.

Rav Pam adds that it is human nature to forget. Even the rare genius forgets. One of the greatest challenges on the road to distinction in Torah knowledge is the feeling of despondency that one gets when he forgets much of what he has learned. The yetzer hora, evil inclination, avers, "Why waste your learning? You are going to forget most of it anyway. Why expend the energy when you could be doing something more productive?"

What really is the purpose of studying if it will be forgotten anyway? First, we acknowledge that Hashem rewards study for the purpose of study. There is a mitzvah of limud haTorah, study of Torah - not yedias haTorah, the knowledge of Torah. Whether the reward is received in This World or in Olam Habah, the World to Come, it will nonetheless be received. Second, Hashem granted the Torah to us as a gift. When one indicates his appreciation of the gift, when he demonstrates that he knows the value of the gift, he is then worthy of receiving it. One who studies shows that he cares and seeks mastery. He is deserving of that gift.

Last, Rav Pam cites the Talmud in Niddah 30b, which teaches us that an embryo developing in its mother's womb is taught the entire Torah by a Heavenly Angel. As soon as the child emerges, an angel strikes him on his mouth, and he forgets everything. Why bother teaching Torah to an embryo that will forget it anyway? The Bach explains that the Torah that is taught prior to birth is absorbed by all 248 organs of the body. Thus, even though he will forget it at birth, the Torah will, nonetheless, permeate the child's body, infusing its soul forever with the holiness of Torah. In addition, the Eitz Yosef explains that once the Torah is suffused into the child's body, his task after birth is merely to remember what he learned from the angel during his embryonic stage.

Last, the Sefer Chassidim offers encouragement to the individual who is frustrated by his inability to remember what he learns. One should not be disheartened, regardless of how hard he struggles to understand Torah to no avail. In the World to Come, when he will be a student in the Yeshivah Shel Maalah, Heavenly Academy, he will be able to understand all of the Torah that he has struggled to comprehend in This World. His efforts and his struggles will then be richly rewarded.

Our reward is commensurate with the effort that we expend. Moshe Rabbeinu epitomizes this concept. Reflecting upon Moshe Rabbeinu makes our task that much easier.

And the people gathered around Aharon and said to him, "Rise up, make for us gods." (32:1)

The sin of the Golden Calf suggests a multitude of questions. First, how did they do it? How were they able to create a molten image of a calf? Rashi tells us that Aharon collected a wealth of gold

and Jewelry. Afterwards, members of the erev rav, mixed multitude, trouble makers and rabble rousers who accompanied the Jewish People when they left Egypt, might have used the sorcery that they were taught in Egypt. Alternatively, Michah might have had with him a tablet upon which was written ali shor, "rise up ox," a phrase which Moshe Rabbeinu used to raise up Yosef's coffin from the Nile River. This caused the calf to rise from the molten gold. According to the Tikunei Zohar, the leaders of the erev rav were two of Bilaam's sons, who in Egypt had graduated to the top of their class in witchcraft and sorcery. They used all of their acquired powers of tumah, spiritual contamination, to create a living idol of molten gold.

This answer leads up to a greater, more cogent question. If the erev rav had their own ability to create this idol, why did they approach Aharon? Apparently, they did not need him to make the eagal, Golden Calf, so why did they bother with him? What makes this question more pressing is the fact that the Zohar HaKadosh declares that if Aharon had told them to place their gold on the ground, rather than to give it directly to him, the magic forces would have dissipated. In other words, they were taking a risk by giving the gold to him. Why did they take a chance of endangering their plans by seeking Aharon's assistance?

The Maharil Diskin gives a compelling explanation for including Aharon in their diabolical plan. Derech erez kadmah laTorah, "Derech erez/manners, human decency, precedes Torah." In other words, in order for something to succeed, it is essential that a process be followed. That process demands that the elders - be they rabbinic authority, lay leadership, parents, mentors, or whoever is in charge - must be consulted. Otherwise, an individual's actions are indicative of a lack of control, a lack of focus, an accident about to happen. When leadership is not consulted, it is a recipe for disaster, both spiritually and physically. Indeed, upon recounting the episode of the meraglim, tragedy of the spies, Moshe Rabbeinu emphasized that everybody came to him in a tumult, with the young pushing the elders, exhibiting a lack of derech erez. This was the first sign that trouble was brewing and a disaster would occur.

The erev rav were very clever. They were not satisfied merely to create a Golden Calf. They wanted to make sure that everybody participated in its creation. They did not want a single Jew to say that his hands were clean, that he was innocent. No one would be more righteous than they. No one was going to denigrate them by saying, "I am better than you." In order to ensure "perfect attendance" at their unprecedented act of chutzpah, they included Aharon. When Chur intervened, they killed him.

It is not that they really had derech erez. They just knew that unless they exhibited derech erez, unless they put on a show, they would not get the following that they sought. They needed acceptance. Having Aharon in their camp increased the chances for their success.

"Go, descend - for your people that you brought up from Egypt has become corrupt. (32:7)

The sin of the Golden Calf has left a dark spot on the spiritual character of Klal Yisrael. Indeed, its repercussions, both from a spiritual perspective and from a punitive point of view, affect us until this very day. Particularly, occurring shortly after the highpoint of our history, the Revelation and the Giving of the Torah, this sin was one of epic proportion. Yet, there is a positive aspect, as evidenced by Chazal's statement in the Talmud Avodah Zarah 4b. They say, "Klal Yisrael made the Golden Calf only to give a pischon peh, opening (of the mouth) for baalei teshuvah, penitents or returnees to Judaism." Just as David HaMelech was not suited for "that" deed (David's misconstrued sin with Batsheva), neither was Yisrael suited for the Golden Calf. Why did they act that way? "So that if an individual sins, he is told to 'look' at the 'other' individual who has sinned, and if a community or group sins, they

are told to look at the 'other' group that has sinned."

Rashi's commentary reinforces this. He comments, "They were strong and in full control of their yetzer hora, evil inclination. In turn, they should not have fallen prey to the blandishments of the evil inclination. It was, however, a decree from the King (Hashem) in order to give an opportunity for the sinner. This way he will not say, 'I am not going to repent. It is too late. I will not be accepted.' To him, we say, 'Go derive a lesson from the Golden Calf.' They denied (Hashem), and, yet, their teshuvah, repentance, was accepted."

That generation should have been able to overcome its collective yetzer hora. Hashem, however, did not want that. He wanted to teach a lesson to future generations. People, by their very nature, fear change. Thus, one who has sinned and now must go through the process of teshuvah looks for every excuse to justify his misdeed and avoid repenting. He is afraid that his teshuvah will not be accepted. So, why bother?

In order to circumvent such a defeatist attitude, Hashem prepared the way that even such great individuals as those who received the Torah and David HaMelech should also fall into the clutches of sin. Their eventual teshuvah serves as a standard and a guide for others. If "they" can fall and raise themselves up through teshuvah, so can we. If they could erase the taint of sin, despite Hashem's extreme displeasure with them, so can we. It was worth it for Hashem to "allow" His noble servants to err, so that generations of others could learn from them.

Horav Chanoch HaKohen, zl, m'Alexander, interprets the famous pasuk of U'beyom pakdi u'pakadeti aleihem es chatasam, "And on the day that I make My account, I shall bring their sin to account against them" (Shemos 32:34), which is usually defined as a condemnation presaging everlasting punishment. In a positive note, in the future, when a Jew sins, Hashem will say, "If I forgave 'their' sin, I will certainly forgive the sins of others." Indeed, the tradition is that when his chassidim heard this from the Alexander Rebbe, they became so overjoyed that they danced throughout the night.

Moshe would take the Tent and patch it outside the camp... and call it a Tent of Meeting. (33:7)

Klal Yisrael's involvement in the sin of the Golden Calf effected a negative critical change in their spiritual persona. In his commentary to the end of the parsha (34:30), Rashi notes that the people feared coming close to Moshe Rabbeinu. "Come and see the great power of sin," Rashi says. "Prior to extending themselves to the Golden Calf, they were able to look at Moshe without fear, without trembling. Once they sinned, however, they shivered and trembled even before the Karnei Hod, Rays of Glory, of Moshe." Consequently, Moshe moved his tent out of the camp, so that those who sought the word of G-d would go there. While there is a difference of opinion between Rashi and the Ramban as to when Moshe moved, it is clear that once the people had sinned and fallen from their lofty spiritual perch, such that Hashem declared that He would not reside among them, Moshe also left. His tent remained outside the camp until Rosh Chodesh Nissan, at which time the Mishkan was inaugurated and became the new Ohel Moed.

The Talmud Berachos 63b relates Hashem's reaction to Moshe's move. "Now they will say, 'The Rav is angry, and the student is angry. What about Klal Yisrael? What will be with them? If you return your tent among them, good. If not, Yehoshua bin Nun, your disciple, will serve instead of you.'" Basically, Hashem was telling Moshe that he had no right to leave. Klal Yisrael needed him. This was especially true now after they sinned. They needed his compassion, his love, his guidance.

There is a powerful lesson to be derived herein. A leader does not have the right to stay angry. He may not sever his relationship with his flock. If Moshe would not return, then Yehoshua would have to step up and take over the reins of leadership. This idea applies equally in the family unit. Parents have a responsibility. Yes, there are disappointments, some simple setbacks, while others may be of a more serious nature. As parents, we have to be there through thick and thin, through trial and error, through disappointment and failure. We may be insulted, we may be hurt, we may become angry, but we must always be there. Unless, of course, as in the case of Avraham Avinu, who was compelled to send Yishmael away in response to the adverse influence he was having on Yitzchak. Eisav did not deter Yaakov from studying Torah. Thus, he was allowed to stay home while his father, Yitzchak Avinu, was mekarev him, reached out to him. Leadership has its perks. It also has its responsibilities. One goes in tandem with the other.

As parents and teachers, we have a responsibility to make realistic goals for our children and students, while simultaneously giving them the tools to realize these goals. All too often, we hear about demands that parents and teachers make, but little is said about how they assisted in their achievement. I recently came across a powerful educational lesson that I think is appropriate for these pages.

Everyone makes mistakes. Each of us fails at times. As adults, we accept these failures as setbacks which can serve as learning blocks upon which to build. It is all part of the process. The problem is that we often relay a different message to our children and students. Failure is shameful, and anything less than an "A" is just short of disaster. When children are subjected to this form of pressure, it can have an inverse, devastating effect. We are conveying to the child that anything less than perfect will not meet with our approval.

This story is about a young third-grade boy who was a shy and nervous perfectionist. Because everything had to be so perfect, he refused to get involved. His fear of failure deterred him from playing classroom games. He never enjoyed himself with the other children, because anything that involved competition was too much for him to handle. Constantly frustrated, he rarely completed his assignments, as he was repeatedly checking for mistakes.

This went on for most of the school year until a young teacher's aide joined the class in order to ease the teacher's load. One morning, as the students were working on an assignment, the young boy suddenly burst into tears: he had missed one of the problems. The teacher's aide looked up in despair. What could she do? Then, out of the blue, she had an inspiration. "Come here," she said to the young boy. "I have something to show you."

The child came over to her desk, and she showed him a canister filled with pencils. As she removed the pencils one at a time, she said, "See these pencils? They belong to the teacher and to me. Notice how the erasers are worn. Do you know why? Because we also make mistakes. And when we make a mistake, we erase it and start over again. This is what you must learn to do. Do not let the mistake halt your growth. Use the eraser and continue writing! I will leave one of these pencils on your desk, so you will always remember that everyone makes mistakes, even teachers."

That pencil became the boy's most cherished possession, and he kept it with him throughout life. That, together with the encouragement he received, helped him to scale the heights of learning, as he rose to the pinnacle of his profession. He made it because he had learned that to err is human, and because somebody cared enough not to give up on him.

Bnei Yisrael shall observe the Shabbos. (31:16)

The concept of shemirah, observing/guarding, is mentioned earlier in 12:17. Regarding the mitzvah of Matzoh: U'shemartem es ha'matzos, "You shall safeguard the Matzoh," Chazal say, "Do not read it as Matzoh, but as mitzvos (similar spelling)." Just as one may not allow Matzoh to become chametz, leaven, so, too, one may not permit mitzvos to become leaven. In other words, when the opportunity to perform a mitzvah arises, one should not delay, but rather should immediately take advantage of the opportunity. This is the simple p'shat, meaning. Horav Sholom Schwadron, zl, suggests that a deeper meaning lies in the concept of shemirah. It is not only an enjoinder with regard to not tarrying in mitzvah performance, it is even an admonition regarding our attitude towards the quality of our performance.

We certainly have a problem with our attitude concerning mitzvos. For example, let us consider the mitzvah of Shabbos. Shemirah means to guard it, think about it, prepare for it: something we all do. We purchase appropriate clothing l'kavod Shabbos, to honor the sanctity of the day. We look for special foods to honor Shabbos. We make all kinds of preparations for Shabbos, but what do we actually do on Shabbos? How do we spend the day? We daven quickly, taking time to socialize. We eat a festive meal and retire for the day. Is that what Shabbos is all about? Is that what we prepared for all week? Is that the definition of shemirah?

The Torah tells us to "safeguard the mitzvos." This applies not only to preparation for the mitzvah, but equally to the quality of our performance. All too often, we make a number of hachanos, preparations, for the mitzvah, but when it comes to our actual performance, our attitude is, at most, unenthusiastic.

Let us look at our daily routine to see if this holds true. We enter the shul and recite a L'shem yichud, preparatory prayer, before donning our Tallis and Tefillin. We place great emphasis on the meaning of the words of this prayer, but when it comes to the Tallis and Tefillin, we put them on quickly, and we soon forget that we are wearing them. We begin our davening with kavanah, but by the time we arrive at Shemoneh Esrai, we are half-asleep.

Rav Sholom cites a few instances from our yearly cycle that support this claim. On Rosh Hashanah, we prepare for Tekias Shofar by reciting Lamnatze'ach (Psalm 47) seven times. Our fervor escalates as we recite the pesukim of Kra Satan, which precede the Tekios. When it comes to the actual Tekios, however, how many of us are ready to be yotzei, fulfill our obligation, in accordance with all the shitos, various opinions, concerning the length and sound of the Tekios? We sing the Piyutim, hymns and prayers, associated with the High Holiday davening, but do we apply ourselves equally to the Viddui, confessional service?

This is all the work of the yetzer hora, evil inclination, who convinces us that we have fulfilled our obligation by the preparation for the mitzvah. Indeed, the yetzer hora sees to it that we expend our entire religious fervor and enthusiasm on the preparations, as long as we do not get "carried away" and fulfill the mitzvah properly. There are situations when the yetzer hora convinces us to become involved in an endeavor that is totally foreign to the mitzvah, in an effort to impede our mitzvah performance. An example is the chazzan of Yamim No'raim who stays up all night in preparation for the next day's davening - and is half asleep when he should be davening with passion and fervor. Another example is the rebbe who decides to go to the mikveh before giving a shiur, when, instead, he should review his remarks again, so that his delivery of the shiur will be more proficient. This is the work of the yetzer hora.

Rav Sholom cites an incident in which an individual who had Yahrtzeit for his father went to the rav and asked him to gather five Torah scholars who would fast on the day of the Yahrtzeit. He offered to pay them handsomely. The rav replied that if he wanted them to fast, it would be more acceptable for him to ask them himself. Since he was prepared to dole out a considerable sum of money in memory of

his father, it would be more appropriate for him to give the money to a Torah scholar who might not be able to purchase a decent meal.

When all is said and done, the meaning of shemirah is to apply one's heart, *simas lev*: to think; to be cognitive of the various facets of the mitzvah; not to make what is secondary into the primary aspect of the mitzvah; and not to disregard other mitzvos while carrying out a specific mitzvah. We must determine our priorities and focus on them.

And the people saw that Moshe was late to come down from the mountain. (32:1)

How quickly they lost their faith. How quickly they were able to forget everything that Hashem had done for them. Chazal tell us that the Satan showed the people a vision of Moshe Rabbeinu being carried in Heaven. Their leader was gone. He must immediately be replaced. How are we to understand Klal Yisrael's lack of patience and faith? Why would they not wait a little bit longer? Perhaps Moshe would yet return. How did they change from a nation that had received the Torah to a people who were prepared to revert to idol worship?!

I think the answer lies in understanding Klal Yisrael's mindset. At the time, they were scared.

They were desperate. Fear leads to despair. Despair leads to the nadir of sin. Indeed, as Horav Aharon Karkner, zl, says, despair is in itself a grave sin. It is the most destructive of all sins, because it represents a lack of hope. When one loses hope, he is susceptible to descending to the nadir of depravity. Hope for the Jew is his elixir of life. We have survived the vicissitudes of the millennia, precisely because we have maintained our hope in a future, our hope for redemption.

The Izbitzer Rebbe, zl, explains that we are called Yehudim, because our ancestor Yehudah demonstrated remarkable resilience and inexhaustible hope. When through Yosef's manipulation, the silver goblet was planted and found in Binyamin's sack, the brothers thought all was lost. They lost hope. They had come to an impasse which they could not surmount. Not so Yehudah. He did not fall apart when faced with adversity. Vayigash eilav Yehudah, he drew near to Yosef. He came forward and argued. Yehudah never gave up hope and neither do we, his descendants. We are a people whose roots are entrenched in hope and tempered with resilience.

Klal Yisrael was afraid. Their leader was gone, and it appeared that he would not return. They were paralyzed with fear. What should they do? Where could they go? Let me tell you what fear does to a person. In truth, much of human endeavor is motivated by the negative emotions which have been catalyzed by fear. We are afraid of failing, so we act. We are afraid of being called losers, so we undertake various projects to prove that we have something to contribute. We are now getting to the primary source of all fears: the fear that we are insignificant; the fear that what we do is inconsequential; the fear that we do not matter.

Why was Klal Yisrael so afraid that Moshe was gone? I think that in their mindset, they needed him for support. They had just completed a long tenure as slaves in Egypt. During their liberation from the Egyptian bondage, they had begun to connect with Moshe in a relationship that generated a feeling of self-worth and self-esteem. They no longer felt lost and insignificant. They were somebodies! Then Moshe disappeared. He promised to return at a specific time, but he did not. They once again reverted to their fear of being nothing. They had to act immediately to counteract that fear: They created a golden-calf.

For many, human existence is a lifelong quest to prove that they have value. People need to feel important and needed. Jews are different - or, at least, they are supposed to be. We are Yehudim. We

have hope. We are resilient. We have endured so much and still survived. We have overcome challenge after challenge, obstacle after obstacle, and have become stronger. Our lives are filled with purpose. This gives us hope. We have a mission: To serve Hashem and sanctify His Name throughout the world. We do not need a pat on the back from anyone, for we are members of Hashem's legion. We have overcome, and we will continue to do so.

The frum, observant, community can hold its head up high. Long ago, the world wrote us off as extinct. We have survived and thrived. In the sixty-odd years since the Holocaust, Orthodox Jewry throughout America and Eretz Yisrael has proven that fear is not one of our hindrances. We have demonstrated that courage, resilience and hope conquer apathy and fear. We have built Torah throughout this country, in a land where the pessimists said it would never succeed. We have continued building the world that the Holocaust destroyed. A nation that lives with hope cannot be vanquished.

Let me conclude with a short story that puts the above ideas in perspective. It is about a father and his young son, both of whom had been sent to Auschwitz. In spite of the unspeakable horrors, hardships and persecution, the Jewish inmates were able to cling to whatever scraps of religious observance they could. Shabbos, the Festivals and basic mitzvos were observed to the extent possible - under the miserable conditions to which they were subjected. One midwinter evening, the inmates remembered that it was Chanukah. How were they going to "celebrate" the Festival of Lights? The father had been a craftsman, so he fashioned a small makeshift Menorah from scrap metal. A few pieces of thread plucked from his prison garb served as a wick. For oil, he used some butter that he had been able to procure from a guard.

They were used to taking risks, and this was no different. It was the butter that the young boy could not understand. How could they waste precious food? Would it not have been more appropriate to share the butter on a crust of bread than to burn it?

The father looked at his son, and with a tone the young boy would always remember, said, "My son, you know that a person can live a long time without food. I assure you, however, that a person cannot live one moment without hope. These flames are the flames of hope. This is a fire that we cannot be without - ever! Remember this always!"

They fashioned it into a molten calf. They said, "This is your G-d, O' Yisrael, which brought you up from the land of Egypt. (32:4)

When we peruse the tragic incident of the eigel ha'zahav, Golden-Calf, we note that only three-thousand Jews actually sinned. In fact, these sinners were members of the eirav rav, mixed multitude, who came along with Klal Yisrael when they left Egypt. Yet, the entire nation carried the onus of guilt. Why? Interestingly, Shevet Levi, who was not involved in the sin at all, was included in this collective guilt. Why? This occurred again later on when the meraglim, spies, returned from reconnoitering Eretz Yisrael, and ten of them disparaged the country. Hashem wanted to destroy the nation and rebuild it through Moshe Rabbeinu. Once again, the proportion of guilt seems disproportionate. There is yet a more glaring episode in Tanach when Achan, one man, took from the spoils of Yericho, and all of Klal Yisrael was held responsible. Why? Is this not taking collective punishment a bit far?

In his commentary to Sefer Yehoshua, The Malbim writes that all of Klal Yisrael is considered as one body. Thus, just as if there is an infection in one organ it affects the entire body, so, too, if one Jew sins, it is viewed collectively and the guilt is shared by everyone. No one sins in a vacuum. His transgression leaves a lasting blemish on the nation. This is the dynamics of a community. Each individual affects the entire unit.

In truth, the idea goes deeper. When an individual sins, it indicates that the community has not condemned this particular sin. If everybody in Klal Yisrael would have accepted the prohibition against taking spoils from Yericho - seriously - then Achan could not have sinned. The feelings would have been too strong. If everybody in Klal Yisrael would have been against creating a golden-calf, then it would not have happened. If everybody in Klal Yisrael was secure in the commitment to enter Eretz Yisrael, then the spies would not have slandered the country. Veritably, in one way or another, everybody was responsible for the community not being as negative towards the sin as they should have been. Collective guilt is the result of collective sin. It is just that Hashem is able to distinguish the overt sinners from the covert sinners. Yes, when another Jew desecrates Shabbos, disdains kashrus, disparages morality and the laws of marriage, it is a taaneh, a criticism, of our behavior. We have become too accepting, too agreeable, too complacent, too secure with our own observance to really be concerned about that of others. Regrettably, the sin is collective, just as the obligation is.

Yehoshua heard the sound of the people in its shouting. (32:17)

In the Nimukei Ridvaz it is stated, "It is written b're'oh with a hay, meaning, 'In its degradation,' but it is read b're'o, 'in its shouting.' This teaches us that when Yehoshua heard all of the shouting connected with their celebration, he thought that it was actually sounds of the war, in which those who still followed Moshe Rabbeinu were waging battle with the idol-worshippers. This news was, at best, ambivalent, since it indicated that the Jewish People was being destroyed by machlok'es, internal strife. This was good news and bad. On the one hand, Jews were fighting for kavod Shomayim, the honor of Heaven. On the other hand, Jews were fighting. This is the double meaning of b're'oh, which in its written expression implies negativity, while in its oral reading intimates a positive feeling.

The lesson we derive from the Ridvaz is simple. Even during those circumstances in which one has no other recourse but to actively dispute those who seek to undermine the Torah, as occurred during the sin of the Golden-Calf, we must nonetheless face the fact that we are involved in a machlok'es - albeit l'shem Shomayim, for the sake of Heaven - but a machlok'es nonetheless. Controversy is never a good thing, even if it is undertaken for the purpose of expunging the evil that infests us. Regrettably, at times it is the only avenue that we can employ, but it hurts - or, at least, it should.

And he (Moshe) saw the calf and the dances... And he threw down the Tablets from his hands and shattered them. (32:19)

It is incredible that Moshe Rabbeinu felt obligated to shatter the Luchos. Indeed, if he felt that Klal Yisrael was not worthy of receiving them, then he should have put them away for a later date when they would be worthy. Was it really necessary to act with such finality? The Amar Naka explains that had the Luchos not been broken, no nation would ever have been able to dominate Klal Yisrael. What is so bad about that? He explains that shibud malchios, the slavery to which the gentile nations subject us, is a form of penance for us. It cleanses our sins and purifies us, thereby permitting us to enter Olam Habah, the World To Come. Moshe Rabbeinu knew that if Klal Yisrael received the Luchos then, they would have forever forfeited their chance to enter Olam Habah, which is the aspiration of every Jew. It is worth all the suffering which we endure, because true life is that which is lived in the spiritual realm.

Horav Chaim Elazary, zl, offers an alternative approach. He explains that when Moshe finally

descended from the mountain with the Luchos in his hands, the people came face to face with the reality that their beloved leader was still alive, and his mission had been accomplished. What should they have immediately done? They should have themselves shattered the Golden Calf. The fact that they did not act decisively bothered Moshe. Apparently, they thought they were not sinners. They had hoped to have their cake and eat it, too. They could have a Golden Calf and the Luchos - together! No! This could never be. Moshe decided to shatter the Luchos in order to teach Klal Yisrael a powerful lesson. The eigal and the Luchos do not coincide. One who has an eigal eschews the Luchos. By breaking the Luchos, Moshe was demonstrating to the people that they were sinners and must immediately repent. Teshuvah, repentance, can only occur after one recognizes and acknowledges his iniquity.

The wealthy man shall not increase and the poor man shall not decrease from half a shekel to give Hashem's offering. (30:15)

Everyone was to contribute the same amount, so that no Jew could say that his contribution was greater -- or more significant -- than that of someone else. Horav David Feinstein, Shlita, elaborates on this idea. One who is blessed with great wealth or has a brilliant mind, such that he has amassed great Torah scholarship, cannot claim that he serves Hashem more completely than the ordinary person who serves Hashem humbly and obediently-conducting himself scrupulously in accordance with the code of Jewish law. Likewise, the worker who assembles a computer module is no different than the one who makes the screws and bolts that hold the body together. Just because people serve in various capacities does not mean one is any greater than the other.

What really matters as far as Hashem is concerned? It is neither the position nor the function of one's endeavor; it is neither money nor brains. In addition, Hashem does not count how much time a person devotes to His service. The two things that Hashem views as important are the proportion of one's available time that he puts to good use and the sincerity with which he carries out this endeavor.

Thus, Moshe Rabbeinu, the greatest Torah scholar and quintessential leader of the Jewish People, does not view himself as being any more distinguished than the most simple of his followers. Moshe saw only one distinction in regard to himself: he had a greater load to carry. His responsibility paralleled that of the most common Jew: maximize your time and potential to be all that you can be.

It is for this reason that at the beginning of Parashas Netzavim, Moshe emphasizes, "You are standing this day, all of you, before Hashem." (29:9) In Moshe's eyes, all Jews were the same, standing before him that day as equals -- from the greatest leaders to the youngest child, from the most profound professional to the simple laborer. One who is not that gifted cannot say, "I am not smart, and, therefore, Hashem expects less of me." It is not true. Hashem expects that each individual give up as much of the twenty-four hour day that he has available - qualitatively and quantitatively.

If one looks at a classroom, he will notice different students with differing strengths and backgrounds. Some may function better than others. Success should be measured with the yardstick of how much of what they could have accomplished in the time allotted to them did they accomplish and the level of sincerity that accompanied this endeavor. If we make use of this scale, we might end up viewing our students and our children in a different light - a more accurate one.

The entire people removed the gold rings that were in their ears and brought them to Aharon.

Is this not the way it usually is - the nouveau riche take their money and throw it around? In a public display of their insecurity, those who have suddenly come into wealth - or even those who have been raised in opulence - will sometimes use their wealth to make a statement, to impress their opinion upon others, or simply to extract honor and respect. Wealth can and should be used to attain positive goals. There are so many who do so. For some reason, those who lack the astuteness and self-esteem to use their money wisely seem to overshadow the rest. Klal Yisrael had recently been liberated from Egypt after suffering two hundred years of backbreaking, degrading labor. They left wealthy, and they added to their newly found wealth at the Yam Suf, when the Egyptians drowned. They should have exhibited gratitude to the Almighty who gave them everything; to Moshe Rabbeinu, their quintessential leader who did so much for them; to Aharon HaKohen, who was not only a leader, but also their friend. The money went to their collective heads, however, and they lost it.

It seems like history repeats itself - which it does. Klal Yisrael gets a little bit of money and lo and behold, "Vayishman Yeshurun va'yivat," "Yeshurun / Yisrael waxed fat and rebelled." (Devarim 32:15) Is this the way it has to be? In Parashas Bo (11:2), Hashem instructed Moshe Rabbeinu, "Please speak into the ears of the people, and a man shall ask from his neighbor and a woman shall ask from her neighbor utensils of silver and gold." Rashi cites Chazal in the Talmud Berachos 9a who say that Hashem asked Moshe using the word na, which means please, as if it were a special request: "Please ask the people to request these silver and gold vessels." We can understand that when we ask a person to undertake a mission of some difficulty we say, "please." In this case, Hashem was requesting that they appropriate the Egyptian silver and gold. Is that so difficult? Do people have to be convinced to take money? Why, then, did Hashem emphasize, "please"?

The Gerrer Rebbe, z.l., the Bais Yisrael, explains that Klal Yisrael were acutely aware that taking money is not a simple endeavor. This would be the newly liberated Jewish slaves' first encounter with the challenges that arise from money. They understood that the temptations that presented themselves with money could, at times, be overwhelming. This is why Hashem had to say, "Please take the money."

The Rebbe adds that for this reason they were told to "borrow" the money. Hashem felt that Jews should view material wealth as being on loan to them temporarily. When a person has something on loan, his excitement about the possession is limited due to its temporal nature. The pasuk teaches us how to view materialism: as something that has been borrowed - something which, at anytime, can be taken away from him.

Returning to the pasuk in Sefer Devarim 37:15 which describes Klal Yisrael's inability to cope with the challenge of material wealth, Sforno explains that the pesukim are telling us that when Klal Yisrael falls prey to materialism and affluence, when they turn towards physical gratification as a way of life, ignoring the spiritual dimension, there is only one antidote: exile. Only exile with its consequent poverty and depravation relieve the symptoms of physical indulgence. Addressing the words of Sforno, Horav Elya Svei, Shlita, notes that we have endured numerous "exiles" during the last 2,000 years of galus, exile. There has been one common denominator throughout these various stages of exile: poverty. We have always been poor. While there have been individual Jews, specific periods and certain areas throughout history for whom this has not been case, for the most part, the Jews, have been poor throughout their bitter exile. We have only to peruse history, to view pictures, to research the museums, and we will see one thing: poverty. This was Hashem's therapy, His method of rectifying our past.

This would all be fine if Europe had been the last stop in our exile. It was not destined to be. It is well known that Rav Chaim Volozhiner, zl, predicted that America would be our last exile before the

advent of Moshiach. Hopefully, this is our last exile as we prepare for Moshiach Tzidkeinu to herald the Final Redemption. What about the poverty? We may not all be wealthy, but does one really see here in America the abject poverty that defined the European exile? True, there are many Jews who barely scrape out a living, but it is a far cry from Europe. Who ever heard of a chassan not having a new suit for his wedding? We are not talking Armani, but in Europe it was not unheard of for a chosson not to have new clothes for his wedding. Why is America different? Is not poverty an essential requisite of galus?

Horav Svei suggests that the European Holocaust, the cataclysmic tragedy that destroyed such a large portion of our People, must have been the final atonement for the sin of "Vayishman Yeshurun." We have paid our dues. We have been poor long enough. We can now have affluence once again. Luxury is no longer a dream. It can be a reality. We have a new opportunity to live as we did thousands of years ago.

The American exile is our chance to experience material wealth and pleasure and to see if we can now rise to the challenge without succumbing to its blandishments. The American exile affords the opportunity for nice homes, cars, food on the table and money in the bank - and not to rebel. We have paid the terrible price of rebellion for 2,500 years. We have lived in exile under the most primitive and poverty-stricken conditions, all because we did not know how to deal with the temptations that arise from wealth. Can we learn to use this opportunity of material blessing for a positive purpose, to spread Torah, perform acts of loving-kindness, and raise the banner of Hashem throughout the world? Time will tell. We must remember, however, it is a test that we must pass.

Hashem relented regarding the evil that He declared He would do to His people. Moshe turned and descended from the mountain, with the two Tablets of Testimony in his hand, Tablets inscribed on both their sides; they were inscribed on one side and the other. (32:14,15)

Prior to the chet ha'egel, sin of the Golden Calf, when the Torah mentions that Hashem gave Moshe the Luchos, the Torah describes that they were made of stone written with the Etzba Elokim, finger of G-d. Now, after the sin, and after mentioning that Hashem relented from the punishment He was prepared to mete out, the Torah records an added detail about the Luchos - "inscribed on both their sides; inscribed on one side and the other." Why not mention the complete description right away? Is there some reason that the Torah waited until after the tragic rebellion with the Golden Calf before adding this detail about the Luchos' inscription?

In his sefer Areshes Sefaseinu, Horav Schlesinger, Shlita, cites the Kedushas Yom Tov who gives the following explanation: In the Talmud Kiddushin 30b, Chazal teach us that the Torah which was given to us through Moshe has a unique characteristic. If a person studies it correctly, he merits its therapeutic qualities. If he does not, it will be for him a poison, destroying him. How can it be that the Torah which is referred to as Toras Chaim, the Living Torah, the Torah of life, should have a deadly effect upon he who does not merit? How could it suddenly transform life to death? Chazal explain that Hashem says to Klal Yisrael, "My son, I created the yetzer hora, evil inclination, and I also created the Torah as its antidote. If you study the Torah, you will be protected from its wiles. You will not fall into its hands." The Torah is truly a medicine, an antidote against evil. It does not destroy. If one does not study, if he does not avail himself of its therapeutic powers, however, he will fall prey to the evil that is out there.

Basically, the answer is simple. It all depends upon one's attitude and approach to Torah study. If one studies lishmah, for "its" sake, to fulfill Hashem's command, to give Hashem nachas ruach, satisfaction, then Torah protects him. He will merit Siyata Dishmaya, Divine Assistance, and the Torah is for him a sam hachayim, life-sustaining elixir. If he studies Torah, however, for the wrong reasons, if he continues along his merry way, disregarding the mitzvos that are inscribed in the Torah, at times

even intentionally - then the Torah will turn into a sam ha'ma'ves, poison, that will destroy him. This is the meaning of the Luchos that were inscribed on both sides. A person should not think that there is only one side to the Torah and that one who studies it will surely overcome the blandishments of the yetzer hora. This is not true. The Torah/Luchos were "inscribed on one side and on the other." Only if one studies Torah lishmah, for the right reasons, will he succeed in benefiting from its therapeutic effect.

With this in mind, Horav P. Friedman, Shlita, explains why the Torah detailed the Luchos' inscription following its placement of the incident of the Golden Calf. The Torah is responding to a compelling question. Why did Moshe break the Luchos? Why did he not descend with them and give them to the Jewish revelers? If its healing powers are so extraordinary, why could it not bring back the sinners? Give them the Torah, and they would change! This is a powerful question. We reach out to everyone, but what about the sinners of the Golden Calf?

The answer is written in the Torah. The Luchos are inscribed on both sides -- two sides to the coin of Torah. Not everyone is prepared to receive the Torah. For one who is not appropriately prepared, it can be poison. The sinners of the Golden Calf were at that moment idol worshippers. They were not spiritually fit to receive the Torah. It would have an adverse effect on them. This is why Moshe decided to shatter the Luchos and not give them to Klal Yisrael.

Bnei Yisrael shall observe the Shabbos. (31:16)

We are enjoined to observe and guard the Shabbos, to make certain with utmost care that neither we nor anyone else desecrates the holy Shabbos. One who truly cares about the sanctity of Shabbos will do everything possible to make certain that he does not violate this holy day. The following story demonstrates the length to which a person will go to preserve the sanctity of Shabbos. In one of the apartment buildings in Yerushalayim lived a very old man, whose neighbors noticed that he would never open the hall light. He would climb the stairs to his third floor apartment in pitch darkness. This went on for years, to the astonishment of his neighbors. Why would he not put on the light? He was risking his life by climbing the stairs in the dark.

At first, the neighbors thought that he was simply frugal, attempting to save every penny. This trait, however, was not consistent with his everyday behavior in which he demonstrated that money was not much of an issue to him. Finally, one of them decided to approach the elderly Jew and ask him why he was refraining from putting on the light. He refused to answer them, giving all kinds of excuses for his strange behavior. Finally, after some convincing, he explained that he once accidentally opened the light on Shabbos. As penance, and as a way to prevent this from ever occurring again, he decided never to use the lights in the hallway. He predicted that if he would get used to climbing the steps in the dark, he would never make the mistake of opening the light on Shabbos.

The postscript to this story is that when the non-observant neighbors saw how committed a Jew can be to Shabbos, they, too, became observant. We derive two lessons from this story: First, we have an idea to what lengths a person can go to observe Shabbos. Second - and probably of greater significance to our generation and specifically the observant milieu - when the non-observant sense the true conviction and commitment of the observant Jew, they respect him and, in some instances, follow suit. This is not meant to condemn, but rather to suggest and encourage spiritual integrity in our mitzvah observance. After all, we never know who is watching us.

There are various ways to influence or to inspire those who are not yet observant. Acting in an aggressively negative manner, such as belittling them, will only reinforce their negative attitude. Regrettably, we live in a time when a few hooligans and misfits can, through their negative actions, malign and denigrate Torah Judaism. The following story demonstrates the manner in which an

observant Jew can inspire others to keep Shabbos - and all mitzvos. Horav Arye Levene, z.l., was once walking down a street in Yerushalayim on Shabbos, accompanied by his grandson. Suddenly, he stopped and stepped into one of the more prominent coffee shops remained open on Shabbos. Obviously, such a shop became a center for chillul Shabbos, public desecration of the Shabbos. Rav Arye walked in, took a seat at a table and simply sat there. He was dressed in his Shabbos garb, and he just sat there. Certainly, this was not good for business. Apparently, in those days some people had bushah, were embarrassed to flaunt their desecration of Shabbos in front of such a venerable saint as Rav Arye Levene.

Rav Arye continued sitting. He did not talk to anyone; he just sat there quietly, looking straight ahead. After about fifteen minutes, the owner of the shop, who was no fool and recognized Rav Arye, came over and said, "Rebbe, I take the hint. I promise that as of today, I will be closed on Shabbos."

This was the result of an action taken by an individual such as Rav Arye Levene who did not only love the Shabbos - he also loved all Jews. When one admonishes from the heart, when one rebukes with love, it reaches the innermost recesses of the heart of his "target audience."

A component of Shabbos observance is to make certain that the "institution" of Shabbos is not desecrated. This means that it is simply not sufficient that one is observant, he must likewise see to it others are also observing Shabbos. Horav Shimon Schwab's father-in-law was meticulous in his observance, and he also went out of his way to make sure others would follow suit. The following story demonstrates his strength of conviction and to what length he would go to ensure that no one would desecrate the holy Shabbos.

Whoever passes over a certain bridge in England must pay a tariff. This created a serious problem for the Jewish community, since it was necessary to use the bridge on Shabbos. How would they pay for it? Regrettably, many people were compelled to carry money with them on Shabbos, so that they could pay to use the bridge. Rav Schwab's saintly father-in-law could not permit Shabbos to be desecrated because of a few dollars. Consequently, he purchased a number of tickets for the bridge and deposited them by the toll-booth with special instructions, stating that whenever a Jew wished to pass, they should use one of the purchased tickets.

Once a Jew came up to the toll-booth, smoking a cigarette on Shabbos. When the ticket collector saw this, he became indignant and rebuked the Jew: "How dare you smoke on the Sabbath, when you have a fellow Jew who is willing to spend his hard-earned money to guarantee that his fellow Jews do not desecrate the Sabbath? I do not think I should give you one of the free cards, because you do not deserve it! Why should someone pay for a hypocrite?" Once again, we see the far-reaching influence of the individual who demonstrates spiritual integrity.

Moshe saw the people, that it was exposed, for Aharon had exposed them to disgrace. (32:25)

The ignominy of the nation - their lack of fidelity to Hashem and Moshe Rabbeinu - had been revealed by Aharon's actions. He put the sin into perspective. Long years of exposure to Egyptian immorality and idol worship had taken their toll on Klal Yisrael. Moshe observed everything. He saw the work of the actual sinners, and the indifference of those who let the iniquity take place. Moshe Rabbeinu understood that Aharon's intentions were noble and for the sake of Heaven. He disagreed with him, however, in his approach. He was adamant that one does not have any relationship whatsoever with those who would create a Golden-Calf. Indeed, Aharon's collaboration with them lent them support and increased their audacity. To paraphrase Horav Elyakim Schlessinger, Shlita, "Without the support of the righteous, there would be no foundation for the success achieved by the wicked."

This is the meaning of the pasuk, "For Aharon had exposed them to disgrace." Without Aharon, it would not have been revealed. They would not have succeeded in making the eigel, Golden-Calf. The correct and only approach to dealing with such an iniquitous group is to act as Moshe did, declaring, "Mi l'Hashem eilai," "Whoever is for Hashem, join me!" When the righteous separate themselves from the wicked, the wicked simply dissipate, because they have no support. Sforno supports this idea when he explains that Aharon revealed that there were no tzaddikim on his side, for had there been righteous people, Aharon would have had their support. Thus, he would not have given in to the mixed multitude who were responsible for the creation of the eigel. Aharon and Chur were the individuals who stood up against a crowd that was obsessed with creating a godhead. Chur was killed, and Aharon was left alone. He had no alternative but to remain silent.

While there were certainly many members of Klal Yisrael that did not support the mixed-multitude, as so many have done through the generations, they buried their heads in the sand and preferred apathy to spiritual patriotism. Yes, Aharon revealed that he stood alone, which is often the stand taken by many of our Torah leaders - alone.

We see from here, writes Rav Schlessinger, the overriding importance of supporting our gedolei Yisrael against any incursion into the Torah. He adds a profound thought. The spiritual leadership has the responsibility to take a stand, to rally support, to rise to the challenge and to shy away from confrontation. Aharon had no support, because he did not demand any. Moshe declared, "Mi l'Hashem eilai!" and they came forward. We understand from here that if you do not ask, people will not come forward. Leadership must take the necessary initiative, so that the people will have an appropriate path to follow.

In his commentary Haamek Davar, the Netziv, z.l., makes an incredible inference from Moshe's statement. One might hesitate to take a stand in opposition to those who would tear down the very foundations of Torah, for fear of reprisal. Moshe Rabbeinu teaches us not to be afraid. The members of Shevet Levi came forward when they were called, and no one stood in their way. When the gadol issues a decree, when he calls for support, we should go forward courageously, with nothing to fear. When one is on the side of the truth, he should fear no one. Indeed, he is the one who is to be feared.

Rav Schlessinger makes one last observation in regard to Moshe Rabbeinu's clarion declaration. Moshe said, "Whoever is for Hashem, join me!" This implies that he who did not join Moshe was indicating that he was not for Hashem. Even though they had the right intentions and deep in their hearts they wholeheartedly supported Moshe, unless they come forward to actively engage the idol-worshippers in battle for the truth, they were not considered as being from those who are "l'Hashem!" Well-meaning Jews, good-hearted Jews - and all those whose conviction and dedication does not extend beyond the heart and mind - are not worthy of membership in Hashem's legion.

And you will see My back; but My face may not be seen. (33:23)

The Chasam Sofer explains that we can not understand everything. Indeed, certain circumstances seem nonsensical and even ludicrous to our limited minds. After awhile, however, they begin to make sense when we view them through the perspective of hindsight. Looking back allows us a panoramic view not accessible to us beforehand. When a Jew is confronted with a situation which he does not understand, which might even cause him to question his convictions, he should resort to that old Jewish virtue which has preserved our resolve throughout the vicissitudes of history: emunah, trust, in Hashem. When we do not understand, we should trust Hashem that everything has a purpose and a reason. One day, we will be afforded the opportunity to "look back" and see how it all makes sense in

context. This, says the Chasam Sofer, is the meaning of the pasuk: "You will be able to understand My actions when you look back." "My face," is an allusion to looking at occurrences or situations before and during the time they take place. This word cannot be understood at "face" value.

In other words, things happen to us which at the time we cannot explain. One day, it will all fit into place. It is, however, a common error to think that these unexplained occurrences take place for our sake. This is not always true. Sometimes, they happen to - or for - us, but other times we are participants in someone else's script. We might be major players in someone else's real-life drama. Afterwards, we should ask ourselves: Why? Why me? How does this situation impact my life? What message is there for me? The following story illustrates this idea.

It was summer bein hazmanim , intersession, and two yeshivah bochurim, students, Shloime and David, planned to meet some friends at a large park in the Catskill Mountains at noon that day. They left Boro Park very early to allow themselves sufficient time to reach their destination in a timely fashion. As often happens, however, the best-laid plans are meaningless when they do not concur with Hashem's master-plan. Traffic was unusually heavy, and they were plagued by a number of minor mishaps and mini-crises, to the point that they thought they would not arrive at all.

First, they had a flat tire which took fifteen minutes for these two resourceful young men to change. Not bad, they would still make it by 12:00. They made a quick stop at a rest area along the New York State Thruway and, when they returned to their car, it would not start. While this is not a tragedy, when one is on a tight schedule, it can be nervewracking to find cables and jump start the car. Still, they were on time. They figured a fast pace would help compensate for the time they had lost. It did not take long before the local sheriff pulled them over for excessive speed. He took his time writing the ticket, creating an even bigger delay. They were now over an hour late for their meeting with their friends.

Things went fine for about another fifteen minutes when their car just sputtered and made an unscheduled stop. They could not believe what was happening to them. A single trip to the mountains was turning into an epic journey. An hour later, a tow truck arrived, only to tell them that the fan belt was torn, a problem that would take two hours to repair. They were only twenty minutes away from the park. Should they still go, or should they return home? They decided that since they had travelled this far and it was still light outside, they might as well go to look for their friends - even if they were four hours late. Alas, when they arrived, the park was deserted. Apparently, their friends had come and gone. They were disgusted. To have come all this way for nothing! Suddenly, they heard a young voice shout, "Help! Help!". "Help us, please," a second voice screamed.

For a moment they froze and stood motionless, as their gaze riveted on the sight of two little boys flailing in the lake. The two immediately dove into the water and rescued the children. Afterwards, Shloime turned to David and said, "Do you realize what occurred today? Do you have any idea what happened here? If we had not arrived at the park precisely when we did, those two children would not have survived. Everything that happened today, all the mishaps and delays were orchestrated from Above, so that we could save the lives of the two boys." Once again, we see that there is no such thing as a coincidence.

*He remained there for forty days and forty nights; he did not eat bread, and he did not drink water.
(34:28)*

It is interesting to note that the preparation for the second set of Luchos was the same as for the first set. Once again, Moshe was required to abstain from physical satisfaction in order to study the

Torah for forty days and nights. Why? Ramban explains that the second set of Luchos required a second preparation period. What Moshe had learned previously did not apply to the second set of Luchos. We wonder if Moshe had known the Torah well enough to present it to Klal Yisrael the first time, why would he need another forty days of study to qualify for the second set of Luchos?

Horav Mordechai Gifter, z.l., explains that Torah's true essence is above human understanding. Thus, when Hashem gave us the Torah, it was given on a level commensurate with our degree of comprehension. When Klal Yisrael was originally about to receive the Torah, they were on a high level of kedushah, holiness. Accordingly, they would have received the Torah on this level. This all changed when they sinned with the Golden-Calf, and their spiritual status-quo plummeted. They now would have to receive the Torah on a much lower level of understanding. Likewise, Moshe was now charged with teaching the Torah to them on a reduced level, because they could not relate to anything higher. To guarantee that Moshe would teach them the Torah on their new, diminished level, it was necessary that he relearn the Torah on a level of understanding conforming with Klal Yisrael's newly adjusted level of comprehension. This was not due to any shortcoming on Moshe's part; rather, it was to ensure that Klal Yisrael received the Torah on their level of understanding.

We may add a compelling lesson to be derived from Rav Gifter's exposition. The rebbe/teacher must prepare and teach according to the student's level of understanding and expertise. A teacher should not teach just to hear himself speak. His goal is to teach his students, and his preparation should be oriented toward this goal.

The wealthy shall not increase and the destitute shall not decrease from half a shekel. (30:15)

As part of an annual compulsory tax, the Torah instructs each member of Klal Yisroel to give a half-shekel towards the korbanos tzibur, communal offerings. The Toldos Yaakov Yosef explains that the requirement for half a shekel underscores the importance of unity among Jews. No Jew is complete unless he joins with others. Indeed, even the simple person has the potential to complete the most noble Jew. In the beginning of Meseches Shekalim, the Mishnah says: On Rosh Chodesh Adar, they (Bais Din) would proclaim regarding the obligation to contribute the Shekalim and Kilayim, reminding people to rid themselves of any diverse species of grain, vegetable or fruit. It is interesting to note that the Mishnah places Shekalim and Kilayim together. The Mishnah is conveying a subtle message to us.

Menachem Tzion suggests an important lesson, regarding the concept of unity, to be derived from here. While achdus, Jewish unity, is crucial to the survival of our people, it is important to remember that diverse "seeds", whose goal it is to undermine Torah Judaism, are not acceptable. They do not contribute to achdus. They are kilayim. The Mishnah teaches us that while it is important to proclaim about the Shekalim, encouraging unity among Klal Yisrael, this unity does not include those who perverse philosophy and alien perspective disparage Torah life.

The Torah enjoins Klal Yisrael that their contributions must be equal. The wealthy man should not increase his gift, and the poor man should not diminish his share. What is the true definition of wealth? Who is really a rich man, and who is a poor man? Horav Eliyahu Schlessinger, Shlita, cites the Mishnah in Pirkei Avos, 4:1 which defines a rich man as someone who is sameach b'chelko, satisfied and happy with his G-d-given portion in life. He does not complain or drive himself to the brink of disaster if he is not blessed with an overabundance of wealth. This Mishnah teaches us a lesson in character refinement, but it does not really define wealth. Perhaps one who is satisfied with what he has should be called a tzaddik, righteous or virtuous person. Furthermore, should we really refer to one who accepts his poverty and is satisfied with his lack of material excess as being "blessed in this

world"?

Horav Schlessinger infers from here that wealth is not determined by the quantity of one's assets, but rather by how much he feels he is lacking. Chazal teach us that "one who possesses one hundred (dollars) must have two." By his very nature, man is driven to desire, he must possess more and more. The more one has - the more he wants and thinks he needs. One who has one hundred dollars wants two hundred; one who has two hundred seeks four hundred. On the other hand, one who has very little, but is satisfied with his portion, is truly wealthy, because he has what he needs. The proverbial wealthy man has it all, while contemporary man never has enough. The true ashir is happy with life; he has everything that he needs.

We may now render a homiletic exposition of this pasuk. "The wealthy shall not increase." Who is truly wealthy? He who does not find it necessary to increase his assets. He has sufficient assets to suit his purposes. The man is poor, however, who always views his portion as insufficient, as less than others'; he always wants more, never is gratified with that with which he has been blessed. He is a poor man and probably also a psychologically unstable man.

For six days work may be done and the seventh day is a day of complete rest. (31:15)

Rabbeinu Bachya says that Shabbos is the principle of faith. It is equivalent to all the mitzvos because it confirms our belief in the creation of the world. As we believe that Hashem created the world in six days, we affirm that He rested on the seventh. Throughout Rabbinic literature, Chazal underscore the mitzvah of Shabbos and emphasize its significance. Throughout the ages, Jews have sacrificed material comfort - and even their lives - in observance of this mitzvah. The following story reinforces this idea: Horav Simcha Kaplan, Shlita, Rav of Tzfas, relates that when he studied at the Mirrer Yeshivah in Europe, he boarded at the home of a family that had one child - a son. One erev Shabbos, he noticed the husband preparing to go to the market. His wife reminded him, "Today is Erev Shabbos, be sure to come home early." When he returned from the Yeshivah after Minchah, he noticed the lady standing by the window murmuring, "It is almost Shabbos." Horav Kaplan was surprised to hear her concern since there was plenty of time left until Shabbos. The woman turned to him and said, "Let me tell you about our past so you can better understand my anxiety regarding Shabbos. For many years of our marriage, we had no children. Finally, after many prayers and tears, Hashem granted us a child. Our son, however, seemed to be sickly, not developing like other children, always listless. We were distressed. We traveled to the greatest specialists, who told us that we had no hope. Our son was stricken with a disease for which there was no cure.

We had nowhere to turn. On our way back from the doctor, we stopped at a hotel in Vilna for the night. As you can imagine, I could not contain myself. I broke out in bitter weeping, which was heard by many of the guests. They came to us and suggested that since we were going back to Mir, it would not be out of our way to stop in Radin and ask the sainted Chofetz Chaim to intercede on our behalf. We left for Radin, despite the fact that it was well known that the Chofetz Chaim was old and frail. He was no longer accepting visitors.

When we arrived in Radin with the help of the Almighty, we met the husband of the Chofetz Chaim's granddaughter, who used to board at our home in Mir. We told him our plight, and he immediately accompanied us to his grandfather. We were overwhelmed by the great tzaddik and gaon. I began to relate to him the occurrences of our life and the tragic situation confronting us at the moment. He responded by asking, "Do you begin Shabbos early?" I asked him to explain. He responded, "On

Erev Shabbos, at chatzos, midday, your table should be set and the candelabra should be prepared for Shabbos. From the moment you light the candles, do not do any labor." Obviously, we followed the Chofetz Chaim's instructions, and immediately our son gradually began to recover. Slowly, our son was cured. When we related our story to the doctor who had given up hope on our son, he exclaimed, "I have the ability to mend what is broken, cure what is ill; I cannot create something from nothing. The Chofetz Chaim can!" Now you understand my concern that my husband has not yet returned. You see, Shabbos begins a little earlier in our house."

It would serve all of us well to view this as not just another story, but rather a lesson in avodas Hashem, service to the Almighty.

And the people gathered around Aharon and said to him, "Rise up, make for us gods...The entire people removed the gold rings... He (Aharon) took it from their hands and bound it up in a cloth, and fashioned it into a molten calf. (32:1, 3,4)

One of the most grievous sins and tragic episodes in the history of our People is the chet ha'eigel, sin of the Golden Calf. What makes things worse is Aharon HaKohen's involvement in its construction. Indeed, when Moshe questioned Aharon about his role in its creation, he responded that he was overwhelmed by the people. Hoping to create some delay, he had them bring their gold and jewelry to him. Regrettably, their response to his request was incredible. It always seems to be like this when people have the passion of sin in their hearts: nothing stands in their way. Aharon then threw their gold and jewelry into the fire and a golden calf emerged. He was not prepared for this surprising result of his innocuous action. After all is said and done, we still must understand the rationale for Aharon's action. Why did he throw the gold into the fire? What was he trying to prove? Moreover, why did he defer to the people's demands? A man who stood before Pharaoh, unwavering in his demand, should not have feared a group of wild rabble rousers.

In addressing Aharon's enigmatic role in the chet ha'eigel the Shem MiShmuel first focuses upon Klal Yisrael's original demand for a replacement for Moshe. What was Moshe's greatest achievement in regard to this fledgling nation? He provided leadership. He was the focal point around which they all rallied. He was their unifying agent. He transformed a multitude of people, who had previously been subject to slavery and deprivation, into a cohesive unit, ready to serve the Almighty. His stature and prodigious spirituality guided them through their collective experiences, helping them to handle their petty differences. He was their paradigm of selflessness, their beacon of inspiration to overcome their selfish interests. The loss of Moshe, albeit brief, threw the developing nation into a turmoil. They were like a ship without a rudder. They had no direction and no stabilizing force to navigate them. They were no longer unified, no longer cohesive.

They came to Aharon seeking alternative leadership. They stood before him scared, confused, bereft of their leader. They made all kinds of demands, most of them nonsensical and some even rebellious in nature. Aharon understood the source of the problem; he was acutely aware of the stimulus for their spurious demands. They needed unity, a galvanizing force to unify them during their wait for Moshe's imminent return. Aharon realized that a community-wide project would unify the people. The physical act of contributing towards one common goal would meld the individual personalities, represented by their jewelry, into one community, symbolized by the single gold ingot that Aharon would make. Who would be better than Aharon to effect such a goal? He was the Kohen Gadol, the personification of peace and harmony. He understood the source of their problem, and he addressed it.

How could this be considered wrong? How was this noble goal transferred into a calamitous sin whose punitive effect is still felt today? Aharon wanted to create a gold ingot, the symbol of Klal Yisrael's unity. Suddenly, to his horror and dismay, there emerged a golden calf, an idol. Aharon did not realize that along with those who were sincerely confused, there joined the eirev rav, mixed multitude of non-Jewish "add-ons", who had left Egypt out of fear for their lives. They infused a non-Torah oriented seed into Klal Yisrael. They undermined their unity. When an alien item is added to a group, the result is complete ruin. Unity can only be effected when all members sincerely seek it. When there are those who have their own agenda, who use the concept and goals of unity as a vehicle to exploit and deter others - it is disastrous. That is precisely what they had intended. Aharon's ingot was poisoned by the infusion of evil forces, whose self-oriented goals destroyed the common good he sought to achieve. In the end, Aharon was rewarded for his virtuous aims. He aspired for the common good, to effect unity until Moshe returned. His intentions were rewarded when he was selected to serve in the Mishkan/Bais Hamikdash. The Sanctuary is the focal point for all of Klal Yisrael to seek out Hashem, to serve Him through prayer and sacrifice. The Kohen Gadol's task is to unify the hearts and minds of Klal Yisrael in their service of Hashem. Aharon was eminently suited for this role.

And now if You would but forgive their sin! But if not, erase me now from this book that You have written. (32:32)

Rashi explains that the word, "misifrecha", "from Your book," applies to the entire Torah. Rashi suggests a reason for Moshe's well-known reaction to Hashem's desire to punish Klal Yisrael with annihilation: "That they should not say about me that I was not worthy to implore mercy for them." This is mind-boggling! We are referring here to Moshe Rabbeinu, the "anav mikol adam," the most humble of all men. He is prepared to have his name erased from the nitzchiyus, eternity, of Torah, simply because of what they may say, asserting that he was not capable/worthy of achieving clemency for Klal Yisrael. Does this seem rational for the quintessential leader of our people, a man who set the standard for personal humility and devotion to his flock?

In his approach towards explaining Moshe Rabbeinu's demand, Horav Simcha Zissel Broide, Shlita, cites a similar anomaly. In the Midrash Shemos Rabbah 6, Chazal say that Shlomo Hamelech would rather have been subjected to the most humiliating and lowly labor than to have it written about him, "His wives turned him away." Although Chazal tell us that "whoever says that Shlomo sinned is mistaken," the wisest of all men was extremely concerned about what was written about him - even if it was wrong.

Each passage in the Torah has a remarkable value. It is a chapter in eternity! This makes Moshe's sacrifice to have his name removed even more incredible. Indeed, without Moshe, the entire Torah would be changed. Yet, Moshe was willing to relinquish it all for Klal Yisrael. That is not what Chazal tell us. They seem to feel that Moshe was concerned that they would say about him that he could not effect Klal Yisrael's pardon. How are we to understand this?

Horav Broide explains that if there was a possibility that Klal Yisrael might have expected more from Moshe and he "failed" them, it would have indicated a deficiency in Moshe Rabbeinu's gadlus, pre-eminence. He is no longer the great "rav" who was the lawgiver. Even though it was a misconception on the part of Klal Yisrael, it would still be a blemish on the whole idea of Kabollas HaTorah. It would no longer be perfect. As far as Klal Yisrael were concerned, Moshe was the quintessential leader in every aspect. Therefore, Hashem selected him to be His agent through whom the Torah would be taught to Klal Yisrael. Any critique of Moshe would, regrettably, be perceived as a critique of the Torah. Moshe could not let this happen. Thus, he asked that his name be deleted from the

Torah in order to circumvent any later problems.

At the end of the parsha, the Torah relates how Moshe would don a Masveh, mask, to cover the Karnei Hod, Rays of Glory, that emanated from him as a result of his close relationship with the Almighty. Ibn Ezra states that actually, when Moshe left the Ohel Moed, the unique light that shone from him remained inside. It did not follow him out. He wore the Masveh because the people expected to see rays of glory -- or something covering them -- emanating from Moshe. In order not to disappoint them, Moshe wore the Masveh.

Once again, we see that Moshe would not permit the people's perception of him to be denigrated. If they expected him to wear a mask covering the Rays of Glory, so be it, he would wear a mask - even though it was not necessary. If the lack of a mask would have created a blemish in their perception of Kabollas HaTorah, it was necessary to wear the mask.

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