

The incident of the golden calf is one of the Torah's most perplexing narratives. If we take the story at face value, we wonder why the people, who have witnessed a plethora of miracles beginning with the 10 plagues and their escape from Egyptian slavery, sustaining them in the desert, and culminating in the revelation of the Torah, could be so lacking in confidence that they resort to such an egregious act. Aaron's reaction and seeming complicity is equally puzzling. He and his family have just received the perpetual responsibility and honor of the priesthood, and now he actively helps the people create an idol. Midrash Tanchuma justifies his behavior in a variety of ways: Instrumental in making the calf were two Egyptian magicians who had served Pharaoh and were known to Aaron. They, not Aaron, were responsible for forming the gold into a calf. In telling the people to "remove the golden earrings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters ..." (32:2), Aaron hopes to delay them until Moses arrives. "... he was aware that the women ... had seen the miracles and the deeds that the Holy One had wrought for them ... But the men refused to listen to them. ..." That ploy having failed, he tries to delay by proclaiming a feast for the following day. (Tanchuma Ki Tisa 19) Other commentators deduce that because Aaron realizes that there is a faction of stubborn idolators among this "mixed multitude" that he has helped lead out of Egypt, he supports their request for an idol in order to expose their duplicity. Witnessing the excesses of this group, the majority would be horrified and unite against them, thus eliminating their unhealthy influence once and for all. Others see the golden calf simply as a focusing tool. "Some individuals were prompted to request for a tangible object of worship in the manner of the other nations without rejecting God who had taken them out of Egypt, merely asking that it should be placed before them to gaze upon when relating to God." (Kuzari 1, chapter 97) All of these things are plausible, and considering the time and place of the incident itself, thoroughly understandable. And this is precisely the key to what is perhaps its most important message. The episode of the golden calf is a watershed moment in our spiritual development. Worshiping an invisible deity is a bold and revolutionary concept. How can we relate to an invisible entity we can only perceive in the results it produces? And how are we supposed to understand how to connect the results to their source? Even the words we use, like God, HaShem, The Holy One of Blessing, etc. are simply euphemisms for the unvoiced consonants יהוה that attempt to evoke that for which we have no adequate words. If we are still wrestling with this today, how much more did our ancestors, outliers in the midst of a pagan world, struggle with the absence of something tangible to worship? They had witnessed miracles, and they knew through the teachings of their traditions that their unseen God is the source of everything, but how can they grasp the concept that a stone, a tree, an animal, or an object fashioned by human hands to represent them is not their God and must never be worshiped, even as a means of directing their thoughts toward their God? And how can they begin to comprehend that there is a strict and unbreachable boundary between God and God's creation? The people need a powerful lesson to catapult them out of their old way of thinking and help them fully realize these difficult concepts. Descending from the sublimity of the mountain into the chaos below, Moses performs two acts that have the necessary shock value to shatter old patterns and set the people back on course. He "flung the tablets from his hands, shattering them at the foot of the mountain. Then he took the calf they had made, burned it in fire, ground it to fine powder, scattered it upon the surface of the water, and gave it to the children of Israel to drink." (32:19-20) These "Tablets of Testimony" had been fashioned by HaShem (32:16), but neither they nor the golden calf, which was created by human beings, are to be treated as objects of worship. To drive this point home, both the tablets and the calf are pulverized, reduced to the base matter from which they came. Forcing the people to drink the water containing the fragments of the golden calf is a further, unmistakable lesson in the futility of worshiping objects. The calf is as powerless as the gold from which it comes and what survives of the gold after it passes through the digestive systems of the people will return to the earth, too small to ever be used again. The people have obviously not yet grasped the message of the *mishkan* and its furnishings, so before it can be finished and present any further temptation to worship objects – those enigmatic cherubim, for example – the people need to understand once and for all what and how they are supposed to worship. They receive another lesson when Moses returns from pleading with HaShem on their behalf. He pitches a tent outside the camp, where he converses with HaShem. This simple "Tent of Meeting" is a far cry from the elaborate symbolism of the future *mishkan*, but its message is clear: HaShem cannot be contained in objects because HaShem is everywhere, independent of time and space. The second set of tablets, made and inscribed by Moses, will reside in the *mishkan*, but they will not be worshiped, and the people will slowly learn that these tablets, like all sacred objects, are just symbols of something far greater than human hands can make and the human mind can conceive.

Shabbat shalom!