




תורת אביגדור
הגאון ר' אביגדור מיללער זצ"ל

Rav Avigdor Miller on the Parsha

Adapted from his Tapes, Seforim and Writings of Talmidim



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פרשת תצוה

With Rav Avigdor Miller ztz"l

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Part I. Living by Seichel

THE MISUNDERSTOOD INCIDENT

In this week's *parsha* we read about one of the most misunderstood incidents in the history of our people; the *cheit ha'eigel*, the sin of the golden calf. The great embarrassment it brought upon the *Am Yisroel*, and the subsequent punishments were intended by Hashem as admonitions for eternity, *lessons for how we should be living our lives*. And yet the confusion about what took place at that time - confusion even among the *lomdei Torah* - prevents us from learning the lessons that Hashem intended from that infamous incident. And therefore, the story of the Golden Calf deserves our attention.

And actually the whole thing is a big puzzle. Because we know that we are dealing here with a generation that was exceedingly great. The mere fact of living with Moshe Rabeinu, and seeing him, was enough to change a person forever; you can be sure that one look at Moshe would be enough to change us immensely and leave an impression that would endure throughout our lives. The people saw Aharon, Elazar and Isamar, Nadav and Avihu, Pinchos, Yehoshua, Caleiv, Nachshon ben Aminadav, Betzalel ben Uri and the *shiv'im zekeinim*. These great men, who lived among the people,

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certainly stamped the qualities of kindness, humility, piety, and most importantly of Awareness of Hashem upon the people of their generation.

MOST OF THE JEWS WERE NEVI'IM

And the women too were not in any way denied this greatness. Miriam was the leader among the women - one of the many women leaders - and her fire of inspiration did not fail to melt the hearts of the *nashim tzidkoniyyos* and recast them in the mold of greatness. Men and women alike strove to come close to Hashem and to attain the state of prophecy even before the giving of the Torah, and very many succeeded. That's a very big *chiddush*, but it's what the Kuzari tells us: "All of them sought the state of prophecy, and most of them attained it" (1:103).

And therefore, at *Mattan Torah*, they rose to heights heretofore unimaginable. That great event of hearing the Voice of Hashem was a culmination of the mighty events they had witnessed in Mitzrayim; the ten *Makkos* had provided them with ten big volumes of *emunah*, of *da'as Hashem*, and the spectacle at the Yam Suf had caused the nation to soar to unexpected heights of greatness. And now, as they gathered together at the foot of Har Sinai, all of these influences combined to raise them to a state of prophecy that had never before occurred and has never occurred again: "Face to face Hashem spoke with you" (Devarim 5:4), a form of the highest prophecy. "Was there ever anything like this great event? Did a nation ever hear the Voice of Hashem speaking out of the fire as you heard?!" (Ibid. 4:32-33). No generation before or after was worthy of such a stupendous prophecy on a national scale - "The least of their women was like the prophet Yechezkel" (Rambam Shemonah Perakim 4). And it was this remarkable generation that was chosen to be the witnesses of the Giving of the Torah for all generations to come.

THE MYSTERIOUS PUZZLE

And yet, that is the great enigma, the puzzle, that has to be studied. How could it be that a nation of *ovdei Hashem*, a people who had heard the thunderous Voice of Hashem telling them: לא תעשה לך פסל וכל תמונה - "Do not make for yourselves any form or picture to worship" (Shemos 20:2-3), should now be dancing around a golden cow?! ויעלו עולות וגישו שלמים... ויקומו לצחק! - "And they brought up *olos*

and *shelamim*...and they arose to make merry” (Ibid. 32:6). The same people who had seen Hashem face to face, were now making merry around a golden cow. And that needs an answer.

Now, an answer for a conundrum like that surely needs a good introduction; so we’ll take it step by step. And we’ll first ask: What does *kabolas haTorah* mean after all? You know, for us it seems to be a simple matter. Because we think, what was the big *kuntz* of accepting the Torah? Especially when we understand that they were motivated by a great wave of gratitude; Hakodosh Boruch Hu had just freed them from Mitzrayim and He saved them at the Yam Suf! So there should be nothing much involved here. What’s so remarkable about a people that accepted the Torah under those circumstances? We would have surely done the same. That’s how we think. So listen now and hear how difficult it was.

THE BNEI YISROEL HAD A SPECIAL PROBLEM

Accepting the Torah means that we subject our minds to the mind of Hashem. We humble our own thoughts, our own attitudes, and we subject them to the attitudes that are taught by Hakadosh Baruch Hu in the Torah. *Kabolas Hatorah* doesn’t mean that you sign on the dotted line, “OK, I accept,” and that’s all. Accepting the Torah *doesn't* mean that you accept something begrudgingly, without liking it. No, it’s much more than that; it means that the mind has to be in agreement with the Torah, your thoughts must be attuned to all the ideals of the Torah in its myriad of details.

So maybe you’re thinking, “That’s not too difficult. If Hashem gives us the Torah, we accept it; why not?” But we have to understand what our forefathers were before the Torah was given, and why this was not easy at all. Not only was it not easy but *it was extremely difficult*. Now, had the Torah been offered to the Egyptians, or maybe to the Slavs or to the Chinese or the Greeks, it would have been a minor matter. The fact is that when they were offered alternative religions, they accepted them. It didn’t take much to reel them into buying some of the most foolish ideas ever presented to the world. You know, when *Yushka Pandra’s* mother had a son and they said it was “Hashem’s son”, so the *Am Yisroel* laughed at that. It was a *mamzer* and that’s all. לא יבוא ממזר בקהל השם (Devarim 23:3) This was before Goren so what could you do already? It’s a *rachmanus* on the child, but a *mamzer* is a *mamzer*. Even today, there’s one community

that when they refer to this man, he's always given that title; he's always labeled with that appellation, "The *mamzer*."

But the foolish nations had no minds of their own - you could feed the most foolish garbage into their minds and they accepted it hook, line and sinker. And that's what happened - we see that all around us. But the *Bnei Yisroel* had a special problem that no other people had. And the problem was that this family was a unique kind of people with an unparalleled attitude towards the world, and it's important for us to know what that mindset was. The *Bnei Yisroel* were a people who had been trained for many generations *not* to obey what was told to them. They were trained to *use their minds independently*. It's an important point I'm telling you now. They had a tradition of thinking on their own and not accepting what anybody told them.

WHERE'S THE JUSTICE?

And I'll explain that. You heard this many times but it's an important principle. Rabeinu Nissim Gaon, at the beginning of his *peirush* to *Mesichta Brachos*, asks a question: How is it that we find that Hakadosh Baruch Hu punished people in *Sefer Bereishis* even though they had no Torah to follow? Look in the *chumash* and you'll find a number of cases in *Bereishis* where Hashem punished people for their sins. *Kayin*, *Avimelech*, the people of *Sedom* - we find that many people were punished for things they were never warned against, things that were not told. And sometimes He visited the strictest of punishments on them for transgressing! "How could that be?" asks Rabeinu Nissim. It's a good question - Rabeinu Nissim doesn't need my *haskamah* but it's something that we should have asked on our own. How can you punish a man if he doesn't know that it's wrong? After all, the death penalty by Hakadosh Baruch Hu is meted out only with justice! Where's the justice of punishing someone who was never told that it's wrong? That's the *kasha* Rabeinu Nissim Gaon asks.

And he tells us the following answer, and it's a fundamental principle so pay attention. כל המצוות שהן תלויין בסברה ובאובנתא דליבא, *anything that can be deduced by logic and the wisdom inherent in a man's mind*, כבר הכל מתחייבים בהן מן היום אשר ברא אלוקים אדם על הארץ, *a person is already expected to obey from the beginning of time*. He's saying here that anything that can be understood by the human mind to be wrong is

obligatory upon a person to stay far away from - even though he was never told anything; never warned that it's forbidden. If your mind tells you that a certain thing is wrong, if your conscience tells you it's wrong, then you're obligated to keep it like a law that's written down, even though you never heard any statement that it's wrong. And not just a *middas chassidus*, extra credit. The obligation is so imperative, so important, that if a man transgresses these obligations of his mind, then he deserves to be put to death by Hashem.

AVRAHAM AVINU'S REBBE

Now this tradition of using the mind, not only *using*, but *relying completely* on the mind to know one's path in life was followed by our forefathers, and that's why we find that the *Avos* practiced laws that they were not commanded to do. About Avraham Avinu it states וישמר משמרתִי מצוותִי חוקתי ותורתִי - "Avraham kept *mishmarti*, My keeping, *mitzoosai*, My commandments, *chukosai*, My statutes, *v'sorosai*, and My Torahs. That's all plural. He kept so many things. Now where did Avraham have so many things? He only had the seven *mitzvos* of the *bnei noach* as far as we know, but here we're learning that he had a whole list - not just a list of *mitzvos*, but a list of *categories of mitzvos*, with sublists and details beneath the headings. And that means he had a host of commandments, more than we could imagine. But from where did he have them?

And the answer is Avraham learned all these *mitzvos from his mind!* Avraham was busy thinking and he was able to elicit from his mind all the great principles. The truth of a Creator was only the first step for Avraham; it was only the beginning of the ideals that Avraham Avinu drew forth from the well of his mind. Just like he cultivated from his mind the idea, the concept, that there's a Creator, he also drew forth thousands of other principles. He developed *from his mind* a complete system of how to perceive the world; how to live life, how to think, how to serve Hashem. From his own mind, he deduced *all* the great truths of reality. He understood the greatness of mankind and that man does not live just for this little life alone. He understood that the great and noble aspirations in a man's soul must be a preparation for something infinitely more important and more eternal than this life itself.

But not only did Avraham Avinu discover these principles and many like them, but he discovered from his own mind the

principles of proper behavior, of how to serve Hashem. The laws of the Torah, the attitudes that the Torah demands of us, Avraham Avinu was able to draw forth from the depths of his mind because the human mind has in it such wisdom. And that's what Avraham taught his children, he taught them to think. And it was with this attitude, this ideal of using the mind to know how to serve Hashem, with which *the Am Yisroel* came to *Har Sinai*.

THE ONLY ANCIENT SOURCE OF TRUTH

That's how it was with everything in ancient times. The criterion for them was, "Does *my mind* obligate me in this law? Does *my conscience* tell me that it's forbidden or permitted? Is that action mandatory upon me to fulfill?" And so whenever any problem ever arose, any question of behavior, so what was the criterion by which they judged? It was - "Does *my seichel* tell me that it's right or wrong?" And once they probed the depths of their minds and they came to a decision, it was to them the word of Hashem, *and they were ready to give their lives for it*. They could stake their lives on the *psak din* of their *seichel*. Their mind was their *Shulchan Aruch*. That was the final arbiter; the final authority was their *seichel*.

And therefore they became the most independent of nations. It was a nation that lived by reason and by logic. They were one little family, in a world of great and powerful nations all who served idols and lived according to magic and superstition. The entire world was steeped in the conviction that magic ceremonies and the worship of images were the cause of prosperity, health and all good things. It required an enormous stubbornness in order to remain loyal to the traditions of Avraham their ancestor and to resist the prevailing influence of the world in which they lived. The family was trained to ridicule the claims of the idolaters that boasted of "miracles" wrought by their gods; even the children were reared with the attitude that such tales were false, and they laughed at the world.

The *Bnei Yisroel* turned their backs on the world; they turned inwards to their own minds, and they relied on their clear and unadulterated thinking to make their way in this world. That's how it was for the hundreds of years down to *Mattan Torah*. Everything was judged *not* by authority but on its own merits. Does my reason tell me it's right? Or does my reason tell me it's wrong? The mind of man, the unadulterated *seichel*, that's the only source of truth.

Part II. The *Cheit Ha'eigel*

SOCIALISM COMES TO AMERICA

And then suddenly Moshe Rabeinu appears on the scene and he wants to turn everything upside down on its head. He says, "Are you ready to receive a Torah?" Now they understood what a Torah meant. A Torah meant *hachna'ah*, it meant humility. It means to subject your mind to what an authority is going to command you. Of course, it's Hashem's authority. Hakadosh Baruch Hu is the One who is giving the orders, "Do this," "You can't do this," "You must think so and so." But even so, it's not the *seichel* anymore, it's not my own clear mind directing my way in life. It's Someone else telling me what to do and think. It's Somebody with a capital S, but it's still *not my own mind*. And don't think that such a thing comes easy to the independent minds of the Bnei Yisroel, *because immediately they have their own ideas*. The mind rebels at being subjected and subjugated to the mind of another. And many of them thought, at least in the back of their minds, "If it was good up till now, if our *seichel* was sufficient, why can't we continue as is?"

It's like telling a liberal today that private property is a sacred concept. Let's say he's been reading Karl Marx. He's been considering the "problems" with capitalism; he's studying other kinds of societies to understand socialism. Or today he can even study American society to study socialism. The government today is engaged in a great socialistic activity. It's soaking the rich in order to give to the poor. That's what's happening now. It's a slow form of socialism. It's gradual, but there's been a big revolution in the last fifty years (*this was said in 1980*). They're taking from the rich and so all incentive is taken away from making big money. The incentive to build businesses and to propel the economy here in America is being whittled away by the liberals. Many people are retiring because what's the purpose of earning money if it all goes to the government! And who's going to get your hard earned money anyway? Vagrants, people who don't want to work.

Entire populations of loafers are being maintained in the big cities; shiftless people, some of them are criminals - a big percentage are criminals - and they don't want to work. It doesn't pay for them to work. Why should they bother going to work if they can sit home and government money supports them? And therefore there's a

great wave of socialism today. Everything is now based on this idea. Of course they wouldn't admit it's Karl Marx, because they know that his name reminds people of the false promises of the past, but there's no question it's a socialistic attitude.

LAW ABIDING GANGSTERS

Of course some people might smile when they hear this. But they're naive, that's all. They don't realize that they've been hoodwinked gradually over a long period of time. The prevailing idea is to soak the rich in order to distribute it to the poor, and they're so accustomed to it that if you tell them today there's such a thing as private property, and that private property and a person's hard earned money is sacred, that concept is alien to their minds today. The fact that a man has amassed fortune - he has a lot of land and he has a lot of money in the bank, and you'd like to have some of it, that doesn't mean you have a right to take it. Even if you do it by means of the rule of law, it means it's brigandage by law. If the law would give you the right to take a gun and make a holdup, that's no excuse. And that's what the law does today. It actually does that.

But if you try to tell that to a college student today, he would laugh at you. Their minds have been made so crooked by their professors that they cringe when they hear you mention private property, or capitalism. Because their minds have already been sold on foolishness. It's very difficult for him to subject his mind to the truth, once he's been sold on socialism. And therefore when they hear you explain the wickedness of their ideals, they object and it's difficult for them to accept what you're saying.

THE ICE CREAM OF THE COLLEGES

But that's only today when people are weak-minded and shallow; and stupid people can be sold stupid ideas like socialism. Today's youth are so crooked that a professor can feed them lies like socialism, evolution and atheism, and they think that they've found gold! It's like a man who is eating manure and he tells you it's ice-cream! And he believes it! What can you do with a person so crooked?!

But our forefathers didn't have crooked heads. They lived naturally; their minds were sold on the truth and they knew that their minds were to be relied upon. And because their minds were unsullied by reading the New York Times editorials, they knew that

they were able to think clearly. They were sold on true ideals, on ideas that made sense. Of course that meant that they were considering what Hakadosh Baruch Hu wanted them to do. But it came from their own minds, their unsullied attitudes. They were sold on using pure *seichel* to do good in this world.

ACCEPTING THE NEW SYSTEM

And it was this independent minded people, a people who had always lived with what was *hatov vehayashar*, good and straight in their own eyes, who were now encamped at Har Sinai. And suddenly these people were told to accept an entire system that *wasn't* founded on their own reasoning. *Chukim u'mishpatim*. The *chukim* they surely didn't understand *why* they were commanded to do. And that's a great part of the Torah. You can't eat this, you can't do this, and you can't wear this. You have to refrain from work at certain times. All kinds of prohibitions *and very many of them had no explanation at all*.

And even the *mishpatim* that seem to have an explanation are often arbitrary. The Torah doesn't give you any leeway to adjust to circumstances because of what *you* might think is good. We're told that in general this *mishpat* is good and we understand the reason for it, but in a certain situation it doesn't apply, so you want to adjust, make changes. No! It's an ironclad rule, the Torah is putting us in a straight jacket.

And yet, they didn't balk at the offer. They accepted it, and they became *nichna*. They were *anavim*; they were humbled because of the great gratitude they felt - the experience of having lived through Yetzias Mitzrayim after such a long and bitter bondage, and the triumphant march through the Yam Suf. **וְאַחֲרֵי כֵן יֵצְאוּ בְּרוֹשׁ גְּדוֹל**, they saw Hashem's revenge flood their enemies, while they were inundated with a flood of wealth. That caused a great happiness to them and they sang a song of gratitude that will never end; *Az Yashir*, we're still singing that song of gratitude today. And so when the time came, they said, "We are humbling ourselves before Hashem, and we give up our own minds. From now on we'll think only according to the guidelines of the Torah."

THERE ARE LIONS IN THE SYNAGOGUE!

And now we come back to the *eigel*; with the above introduction we can begin to unravel the puzzle of the *cheit eigel*. The

Torah says **לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה לָךְ פֶּסֶל**, that you shouldn't make graven images. That's something everyone here understands. You know I had a call recently from a fellow. He told me on the telephone that Hashem appeared to him and told him three things. One of them was he shouldn't make graven images, and he was telling me that that's why he can't go to a synagogue. He said that there are graven images in the synagogue. He saw two lions holding up the tablets of the *aseres hadibros* and therefore he won't go into a place where there are graven images. So you see that even a *meshugeneh* understands what Hashem said at Har Sinai; no graven images allowed.

That's what our forefathers were told by Hakadosh Baruch Hu. "You shouldn't make an image of Me or anything that resembles Me," which means you can't make an image of the sun, or the moon or the stars. You can't make an image of human beings or animals, and you cannot do any kind of service in connection with an image. And this was part of the Torah for which they said **נִעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָע**; they accepted it.

THE GREAT MAN IS LATE?!

And now they're standing around *Har Sinai*, they just accepted everything, and Moshe tells them he's going up on the top of the mountain into the clouds, and he's going to bring down the stone tablets that Hakadosh Baruch Hu is giving them. Moshe promised them that he'd return in forty days and then he disappeared into a cloud. Now the faithful people were waiting impatiently because he was their beloved leader, he's the one who would lead them to the Promised Land. He was their *ish elokim*, the one who stood for them as their conduit, their go-between, to Hashem. And now he disappeared alone on top of a mountain. He didn't take along any provisions with him, nothing to eat, and he walked into the midst of a fire. There was a fire burning on the top of the mountain and he disappeared into that fire.

And so they were concerned about him. Even the first day there was a big worry, would he come out alive? They were hoping, but they weren't sure. *You* read it without any worries at all because you remember the end of the story from last year. But they didn't have the Torah already like you do; they didn't know what had happened to their leader. They were in a panic, **כִּי זֶה מֹשֶׁה הָאִישׁ לֹא יָדְעָנוּ** "for this man Moshe that brought us up from Egypt, we

know not what happened to him” (Ki Sisa 32:1). And so now, at the end of forty days they were standing and counting the seconds. “Where is Moshe our teacher?! Where is Moshe our leader?! Where is Moshe the one who is the intermediary between us and Hashem?!” And the minutes were passing by and there was no Moshe. They knew he was punctual. Punctuality is one of the virtues of great men, and he had promised. The hours were passing by and **וירא העם כי בושש משה**, “They saw that Moshe was already late.” And they knew that the only reason Moshe Rabeinu would be late is if he was dead. That's what they said. “If he was alive, he wouldn't be late.”

And therefore a panic now took hold of the camp. Moshe is gone! What's going to happen to us?! He took us out of Egypt but now we're leaderless in the desert. We are embarked on the great course of history, the entrance of the *Am Hashem* into *Eretz Canaan*, the land of milk and honey, where we want to build a holy nation, and now it has all collapsed in a tragedy of unequalled proportions. It would be impossible to enter a land that's populated by big and powerful peoples living in fortified cities, without the *Ish Elokim* to lead us. What will happen to us? We'll perish in the wilderness. We must *immediately* set up a lifeline to connect us to Hakadosh Baruch Hu. There's no other solution! Moshe Rabeinu was our lifeline and he's gone! What else can we do?!

AM YISROEL STUDIES THE MA'ASEH MERKAVAH

Should we make an image of Moshe? This we wouldn't do. An image of a human being we couldn't do. But we need something, a symbol, a substitute for Moshe Rabeinu upon which the Presence of Hashem should rest. And we have to get busy now and start petitioning from Hashem; we have to start bringing offerings and praying to Hashem that He should redeem us from our plight. And so they reminded themselves that when the *Yam Suf* was split and Pharaoh's army was being drowned, they saw a vision. In that vision they saw the heavenly chariot. It's depicted in the book of *Yechezkel Hanavi*. The chariot had on it four figures, and one of the figures was the figure of an ox. There was a figure of a man, a figure of an eagle, and a figure of an ox, and there was a figure of a *kruv*, a certain kind of *malach*.

Now to make a figure of a man, that would be too bold. Even a *k'ruv* they didn't want, that would also be too much; it's playing

with fire. And therefore they decided they would make a figure of an ox, a golden ox, and it would be the place for the Presence of Hashem to rest. It was an endeavor to bring nearer to them the *Shechina*, just like we find later on, when the *Shechina* rested between the golden *k'ruvim*. And could it be so wrong? After all, that's what they saw of Hashem in that heavenly chariot, in the vision at *Kriyas Yam Suf*.

Now, the good ones said, "How could you do such a thing? Didn't we just accept the Torah where Hashem told us that we shouldn't make any images?" But there were other people there too who had other ideas, especially the *eirev rav*, who had recently converted. You know, a great number of noble Egyptians had gone out of Mitzrayim with them. And the *eirev rav* was not the riffraff of Egypt. It was the elite, the nobility. The best people of Egypt went out with them, and these people said "Look, what do you do in the case of emergency? You must make some leeway. You must make some allowances. And therefore, although Hashem said that we shouldn't make images but this is an emergency now. The people are panicking and they'll start dispersing too. Some will return to Egypt if you don't do something in a hurry. So let's make an image of a golden ox, otherwise all is lost. We're leaderless and we have to connect to Hashem."

THANKSGIVING: ECHOES OF THE CHEIT HA'EIGEL

In Egypt they had seen such a thing. In Egypt they worshipped Apis, a sacred bull as an intermediary between themselves and the more powerful gods. They had other gods too; the baboon, the crocodile, the snake - but one of the gods was the bull. And so the *eirev rav* resorted to methods which they had known before joining our people. Like new converts frequently think, they were confident that they could improve the Am Yisroel by applying ideas and methods which they brought from their former environment. They thought they could restore the people's courage by making an image dedicated to Hashem, and by dancing and celebrating in its honor as did all the nations.

So they said, "We had such a thing in Egypt, so we'll do it here too. Only that we'll do it in a kosher way." Like some Jews say, "Let's celebrate Thanksgiving, only we'll do it in a *kosher* way, with a *kosher* caterer, and we'll do it with *birkas hamazon* with *yarmulkes* on our heads. And we can be the best Jews possible and still do like the

gentiles do.” Kosher gentiles! And so that’s what they said there too. “Let’s celebrate the worship of Hashem with a golden ox like they do in Egypt, only that *they* worship the ox; but *we* worship only Hashem. The ox is only a symbol for us.”

THE SIN OF NOT PROTESTING

Now the good ones said no, but the converts of Egypt insisted - desperate times call for desperate measures - and they went ahead and did it. And the people didn’t prevent them. The people could have prevented them. There were only three thousand that were dancing around the *eigel* - those are the three thousand who were subsequently executed when Moshe returned. The rest of the people didn’t dance around the *eigel*, only that *they allowed it to take place*. That was their sin, that they allowed it to take place.

The question is *why* did they allow it to take place? It was because their minds were still functioning! They still followed logic! And they saw there was some logic to what these people were saying. It’s true that they had accepted the Torah but they still left a little space to manipulate with their own minds. “True, Hashem said לא תעשה לך פסל, we shouldn’t make any figures, but in a case like this, it’s for Hashem and we mean it *lesheim shamayim*. And we’re not doing it ourselves; we’re letting *them* do it because they’re accustomed to such things from Egypt. And it’s needed anyhow.” And therefore they permitted it.

WE ACCEPTED MORE THAN LAWS AT SINAI

“Oh no!” Hakadosh Baruch Hu said, “Then you didn’t receive the Torah fully.” You neglected the most integral point of *Mattan Torah*! Because what was the defining aspect of *na’aseh v’nishma* that didn’t exist before *Har Sinai*? After all, the *Am Yisroel*, long before Sinai, were *ma’aminim bnei ma’aminim*. Avraham Avinu was the *rosh hama’aminim* and he taught it to his children. כי ידעתיו - “I know him,” said Hashem, למען אשר יצוה את בניו ואת ביתו אחריו ושמרו דרך השם - And I know that he will teach his children to keep the way of Hashem” (Bereishis 18:19). And the *Bnei Yisroel* did that - they guarded the way of Hashem always.

So what *new* service did they accept when they came to *Har Sinai*? It wasn’t just more laws, more details. What changed was that they accepted to be *nichna* to Hashem in all these details; they accepted the principle that they would stop using their minds, their

minds that had until now guided their way in life, and that from now on they would think only what Hashem wants them to think. That was the crux of *kabolas hatorah*, the defining aspect of *Kabolas Hatorah* that didn't exist before Har Sinai.

WHAT DOES ANOCHI MEAN?

And that commitment of the *Am Yisroel* to be *nichna* was encapsulated as a way of life *for us*, in the first of the *Aseres Hadibros*. Because when we heard the first three words of the *Aseres Hadibros* we were being taught are an entirely new attitude. *Anochi Hashem Elokecha*. What do those words demand of us? It's a commandment after all, but we don't see any command here. Pass by any synagogue, or even here, and ask them, "What is the command of *Anochi Hashem Elokecha*?" and you might very well get a blank stare. Or maybe he'll hem and haw, and tell you something vague.

So we'll say here that it's a commandment to know that He is Hashem. Now, to know that He is Hashem seems to be a very inclusive command; if we wished we could include the entire Torah in it. So we won't go so far; we'll limit ourselves now to one of the most important meanings of *Anochi Hashem Elokecha*. And that is "I am Hashem *your model*."

Anochi Hashem Elokecha, "I am Hashem your model," is the command of the Torah; not only that you should *know* that I am Hashem your G-d, but *you should know what I think, and think along with Me*. That was what *Kabolas Hatorah* really meant. We give up our own thoughts, our baby thoughts, and we rise to the thoughts of the Supreme Intelligence and think His thoughts. And those are the attitudes and ideals that we adopt as our own.

"CERTAINLY YOU'RE A BLIND SHEEP!"

Now, right away, modern people, the self-proclaimed intelligentsia, bridle when I say this; they become impatient with me, and they come out with a protest, "You want us to accept everything blindly, to stop using our minds?!" Like once a modern Orthodox rabbi said to me; when I said that we have to follow the *gedolei Yisroel* so he said, "Are we blind sheep?" So I said, "Yes. You're a blind sheep; certainly you're a blind sheep." No question about it; we're all blind sheep.

And it was at Har Sinai that we agreed that we were blind, and we made a covenant that we're going to subject our minds to Hashem. Moshe Rabeinu came and said to the people, "I have an offer for you; from now on you have to put on this straight jacket and accept the Torah *in all its details*. You'll have to be *machni'a* and sacrifice your own minds to Hashem's from here on in." That's what Moshe's proposed to the *Am Yisroel*. Because what is the Torah after all, if not the thoughts of Hashem? And that's what accepting the Torah meant. You have to be humble towards Hashem and say that your mind is nothing; from now on I'm going to think with the thought processes of the Torah, and nothing else.

And that was extremely difficult. It was a very great sacrifice for them. You know, people can sacrifice their physical liberty sometimes. A person can sign himself away for six years, "I'll be a bonded servant to you for this and this amount of time." They can do that. It's only a physical body after all. But to sacrifice your mind, to sign your thinking away to someone else, that's already beyond the ability of a thinking people. And even if they *do* sign on the dotted line, they continue to rebel in the recesses of their mind. They rebel against that bondage of having to think a certain way.

THE WORST FORM OF BONDAGE

Mental bondage is the worst kind of bondage, and that's what Moshe Rabeinu was presenting to them at *Har Sinai*. He was offering the most independent minded people to ever walk this earth, the opportunity to give up their most precious possession, their freedom to think. Now if it had been the Egyptians, or maybe the Edomites or Greek nation - any one of the the nations of the world - they could have much more readily accepted that, because they didn't live by *seichel* anyhow. They didn't live by the strict ideas, the strict precepts of the mind. They lived with a hodgepodge of emotions and arbitrary ideas, different gods for different situations; there wasn't much *seichel* there, and I'm being gracious when I say that. But the *Am Yisroel* obeyed the *Shulchan Aruch of the mind*, the Torah of their conscience, and here suddenly they were told to give it up, to drop it all, and to accept a criterion that was not understandable and not based on their own judgment.

And so when the *Am Yisroel* said "We will do and we will listen," included in that - actually the most important component of

that -was the commitment to think along with Hashem. And that's why this commitment was set in stone, the stone of the *Aseres Hadibros*, with the words *Anochi Hashem Elokecha*: "Think along with Me. Forever and ever, I am to be your model."

Part III. Living by Hashem

THINK WHAT HASHEM THINKS

Now how can anybody know what Hashem is thinking? Isn't that ridiculous for a *basar v'dam* to aspire to know? And the truth is that it's none of our business. But what He *wants us to think that He's thinking*, that's what He wrote in the Torah. He wants us to think according to what He wrote in the Torah. Our career in this world is to adopt the attitudes of Hakodosh Boruch Hu as our own. And Hashem was now going to provide us a model. *Anochi!* "I am the only model; follow me!" And once we understand that we have a model like Hakodosh Boruch Hu, and that we're expected to think like Him, that already opens for us a career in life. Hashem's perfect thoughts are infinite, and therefore we have to get busy thinking along with the Torah. To mold our minds into Torah minds, minds that work according to the guidelines of Hashem's thoughts is a lifetime of work, and the sooner you get started, the better you can mold your thoughts.

Now, the examples of how Hashem thinks are endless, but we'll mention just a few of them so that we can understand more clearly what's expected of us. You'll forgive me if I step on somebody's toes, but it's a commandment, *Anochi Hashem Elokecha*, and we have to know what Hashem is thinking.

DO YOU LOVE BIRDS?

When it comes to eating, anybody who is a vegetarian on principle, on principle if he thinks it's wrong to take the life of an animal just to eat meat, that person is in opposition to the principles of the Torah. The Torah teaches us that animals are given to man to use. Anybody who is a vegetarian on principle is using his own mind, and he's proud and arrogant against the Torah. The Jewish nation is humble to the Torah, and we understand that that's good for us. That's what the Torah wants and therefore it's right. Because the Torah says openly that it is permitted to eat meat. And so, if he thinks

that it's wrong to eat meat, so his thinking is not in coincidence with the principles of the Torah.

Now, if a person feels that it's better for his health to be a vegetarian, that's something else. We have no quarrel with him. It doesn't mean that he's right, but still, we're not interested in quarreling with him about that. But if he does it on principle, if he says it's wrong to eat meat; he says that he loves birds and it's morally wrong to eat poultry – then he's an *apikores*, he's not a Jew. He cannot be a Jew and have a principled stance against the Torah. The Torah teaches that the earth has been given by Hashem to human beings in general, and then to the Jewish people. Now, we also love birds! We love birds when they're served, let's say, as roasted chicken. We love those kind of birds. We want chickens to increase and multiply; why not? We want pigeons to increase. Pigeons are also delectable to eat. Did you ever eat a roasted pigeon? It tastes good too. It's a kosher bird; why not? Anybody who goes overboard for animals shows that he doesn't have Torah in his mind. He's lacking a Torah mind. And therefore, anyone who questions the right of mankind to use the flesh of animals, is questioning the authority of the Torah; that person hasn't yet fulfilled the mitzvah of *Anochi Hashem Elokecha*.

GO TO WORK!

You know, today the work ethic has been forgotten in many places. It's considered not necessary to work. To get by without work. The Torah teaches us work is a virtue. Everybody must work. Unless you're studying Torah, but otherwise you must work. Torah is also work. But to be idle is a crime. Idleness is considered by the Torah the same as wickedness. For a child to be home and be supported by a parent, not to go to school, is a wickedness. The parent doesn't report him to the truant officer either?!

The child is a loafer and now what's going to become of him? He'll become a criminal eventually. So the parents who don't know what Hashem says about work, so they make excuses. They're persuaded by their children, persuaded by their neighbors that it's possible for children not to work, and they become failures.

But those who live by the Torah, by Hashem's thoughts, they're not going to change that principle. It doesn't matter what *sheker* the New York Times floods the world with. The New York

Times wants you to think that a loafer who says he's a writer, he sits in his apartment all day thinking about how he'll become a famous author one day, that's a real hero. Or the man who wants to play music. He walks the streets with pride wearing his guitar on his back. He expects everyone to look at him with esteem; he's a musician after all so he must be filled with noble thoughts.

But we look at him with disdain because forever and ever we stand by the Torah principle that גדולה מלאכה, that everybody must be busy with something. גדולה מלאכה - "How great is work, שמכבדת את בעליה - it uplifts the person, it makes something out of him" (Nedarim 49b). There's no such thing as not working. It's good for your *neshama* to work, it molds your character when you're forced to do things against your will. Of course, you'd like to do nothing and pick the dollars off the trees. "Ahh, if only money grew on bushes," you think. But we don't care what *you* think; we care only about what Hashem thinks. And we know that He told our first father, Adam Harishon, בזיעת אפיך תאכל לחם - "You'll have to drip with the sweat of your face in order to eat bread" (Bereishis 3:19). And we look at the world through the eyes of Hakodosh Boruch Hu.

SCHOOL SHOOTINGS

We'll take another concept. Spanking children. In Sweden they passed a law recently outlawing the spanking of children. A child can bring suit against his parent for spanking him. That's "wonderful" progress in the history of mankind, and there are a lot of lunatics in America who agree to that. Of course spanking has long been outlawed in the public schools, and that's why you have murderers. Teachers are murdered in school. Teachers are attacked and murdered in schools in America. A boy goes into a school today with a gun and he's shooting people in the hallways. Shooting people in school. The Torah blames the parents for not spanking the children. When I was in school - I went to school once - it was permitted to spank. There was only a regulation how thick the ruler has to be, and spanking was administered only by the principal. Those were the rules. And so they took you out to the principal's office and he delivered. He gave a spanking, and it was effective. They didn't murder any teachers in those days.

Now if you'll listen to the principles of the Torah, the Torah tells us to spank. It's in the Torah. It's not in the *chumash*; actually if

you look in the *chumash*, you'll find it too, but it's written *openly* only in the *peirush* on the *chumash*. That's where Shlomo Hamelech says איזולת קשורה בלב נער - "Wickedness is innately tied into the mind of a child" (Mishlei 22:15). Wickedness, foolishness, is in a child's mind.

A child is full of foolishness. How can you separate the foolishness from the child? So he says how do you separate the chaff from the wheat? You thrash the wheat, don't you? You thresh the wheat. שבט מוסר ירחיקה ממנו - "The rod of instruction will separate the foolishness from the child" (ibid.) You must have spanking. Of course, if you don't know how to use discretion, that's not a *sheivet mussar*; it's just wildness, *hefkeirus*. But the *sheivet mussar* of Shlomo Hamelech, the spanking of the Torah, remains the truth forever and ever no matter what the blue ribbon committees tell you.

This movement against corporal punishment is a terrible crime against the experience of mankind, and that's why you have such a wicked generation today. They never felt a father's strap on their backside, and so the results are the street today. Those children who were privileged to be spanked by their father are lucky because they learned great lessons by means of the piece of leather.

WHAT HASHEM ADMIRES

Somebody who thinks like Hashem understands the greatness of having children, of large families. Somebody who fulfills *Anochi Hashem Elokecha*, his mind functions differently than the outside world, it functions properly, and he considers having children not only a duty, but a privilege. It's a great happiness to have offspring, and we know that by doing this, we are living virtuously, not selfishly. With a houseful of children your life is devoted to others. You're giving the gift and the opportunity of life to others, and your entire life is spent giving to others.

And it's not only the mother and the father who are obligated to think like Hashem. Anybody walking the street is obligated to think along with Hashem. So you see a woman pushing a baby carriage, and inside are two babies, and six more holding onto the sides, so you admire that - *because Hashem admires that!* Raising a future family of *ovdei Hashem*, of *bnei Torah*, of mothers, of fathers, of *ohavei Hashem!* We admire that; we see this mother and we consider her a princess. Now she's dressed very plainly. There's nothing to admire in the way the gentiles would look at her. She's busy and

she's worried. Her mind is occupied - raising a family means many responsibilities. Nevertheless we don't look at the world through the eyes of the goyim. The false exterior means nothing to you if you think along with the thoughts of Hashem. You see what's being done here, what's being accomplished. Hakodosh Boruch Hu desires a nation that is multiplying itself. And therefore anyone who is succeeding in this tremendous endeavor should arouse admiration within you.

WE ARE NOT THE JUDGES

Now this is an entirely new field - I say "new" because it's new to most people. But it's a field of endeavor that we must learn to undertake because that is what Hakodosh Boruch Hu meant when He gave us the Torah. Many people have lost sight of the original concepts of thinking like Hashem thinks, but with Torah we don't yield to what people write, to what the radio plays and to what the television displays. We don't yield to suggestions from the street. We humble our mind before the Torah and therefore we maintain as much as we possibly can all the great concepts, the thoughts of Hashem, to this day.

And that's only the beginning. There are 10,000 other subjects that I could talk about because the thoughts of Hashem encompass everything in the world. And we're not going to be arrogant enough to think on our own once Hashem has already revealed what He thinks. We're not arbiters and judges of what's right and wrong. Forever and ever our minds follow the dictates of the Torah in every detail. We study the Torah, the seforim, we listen to the Torah leaders, and we see what is the right way to think, and we mold our minds according to those guidelines. And that's called humility. Humility means that your mind is nothing now.

And that gives us a key to unlock the enigma of the *cheit ha'eigel*. Because what happened then was that they hadn't fully incorporated into their own attitudes the first of the *Aseres Hadibros* that they had heard from the mouth of Hashem only days earlier. *Anochi Hashem Elokecha!* Those words were a direction to the Am Yisroel to adopt an entirely new attitude. To receive the Torah meant to be humble. You have to be *nichna* which means you declare your mind to be in service of Hashem. That's the true humility, that the mind should accept the Torah without any exceptions, without any

explanations and excuses. לא תעשה לך פסל - "You shouldn't make any images" means you shouldn't make any images *period*.

THE EIREV RAV: THE FIRST "LAMDANIM"

And so Hashem said, "Now you're reverting to your old ways of using your mind and saying במה דברים אמורים - "It was only talking about a different type of situation." Or חסורי מחסרה והכי קתני - "You have to read the words like this; it means something else." All kinds of explanations and excuses to say it doesn't apply here and this case is different. "Had Hakadosh Baruch Hu known that this is going to happen, He would have allowed us to do it," they said. Oh no! No, there's none of that business. No excuses! The Torah is given over to you without your prerogative to manipulate it. You can't finagle on Torah. This is it. Once and for all you're going to accept a new way of thinking, and that's it; no ifs ands or buts. And that was their sin, that they hadn't surrendered their minds to Hashem's word, to Hashem's thoughts *completely*.

You can't make any deviation this way or that way. Maybe you think something else would be better? Nothing doing! You must say, "Who cares what I think?!" That's humility. Humility means our minds don't function. Of course they *do* function, but they function only according to thoughts of Hashem. Torah is the best kind of thinking and it helps our minds to develop, but the foundation is subjugating our thoughts to His. Our minds must be humbled before the thoughts of the Torah and not operate on our own conscience; we think and act only within the guidelines of Hashem. And that's called service of Hashem, to be humbled before Hakadosh Baruch Hu so greatly, so intensely, that your mind is willing to accept everything.

TIMES HAVE NOT CHANGED

Once you accept the Torah, your mind is going to think only according to the teachings of the Torah. And even though it might seem to you that times have changed, maybe ideas should be changed now, but we are humbled before Hashem, and we made the commitment, *na'aseh v'nishma*, to be humble before Him forever and ever. That's the nation of *anavim*. That's the hallmark of the *Am Yisroel*. We are bent over before the Torah, before the majesty of the Torah ideals, and we're always listening to the Torah and trying to think according to the directives that the Torah gives us.

And it was the *cheit ha'eigel*, and its punishment that reverberates through all the generations, that impresses upon us forever the importance of remaining loyal to the thoughts of Hashem in all of their details. And when Moshe Rabeinu finally came down from the mountain, he took the most extreme reaction possible: "And I broke the *luchos* before your eyes" (Devarim 9:17). "You're not ready for *Anochi Hashem Elokecha* yet. If you want to alter even a small detail of the Torah, if you want to rely in any way on your own way of thinking, then that's already a destruction of the whole Torah, and there's no need for the *luchos* at all."

CREATING A TORAH MIND

And it was this most extreme reaction of Moshe Rabeinu that impressed upon the nation forever the urgency of complying precisely with the law. When the people witnessed the miraculous *luchos*, engraved by the finger of Hashem Himself, dashed on the rocks to pieces, they were taught forever the urgency of fearing every detail of the law, because every detail is the thought of Hashem, and even the slightest of deviations is a deviation from the only truth in this world.

And when we read in the Torah about this incident of so many years ago, we impress upon our minds the same lesson that they learned when they saw the words *Anochi Hashem Elokecha* shatter before their eyes; that we must forever consult the Mind of Hashem, the infinite Intelligence, and only by means of Hashem's thoughts are our minds perfected. And by means of a lifetime of perfecting our minds, by constantly thinking the thoughts of Hashem and guarding our minds against any adulteration of His perfect thoughts, we prepare ourselves for the great day when we will stand before Hashem and present to Him the culmination of our life work, the creation of a Torah mind.

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Q&A With Rav Avigdor Miller Ztz"l

Q:

If I had a fire in my house, does that mean I have to think about doing *teshuvah*?

A:

If a fire took place, *chalilah*, in somebody's house, does he have to think about *teshuvah*? Absolutely. Not only if a fire took place. Even if a person touched a hot pot by accident and burned a finger. Of course, you should run to the sink and keep your finger under cold water, that too. That's the first thing. But you have to think, "Why did this happen to me?"

We learned אם רואה אדם שיסורין באין עליו יפשפש במעשיו – If one sees that any sort of trouble is coming upon him, he should search out his deeds and do *teshuvah* (Brachos 5a). Certainly he should think that. Maybe I was pointing at somebody and talking *lashon harah* with my finger. Or something else. Of course you have to think. That's why Hashem sent it.

We forget about Hashem, so He reminds us. Now, if you had been thinking about Him in the right way, could very well be that He wouldn't have burned your finger. And therefore, anything that happens in this world is for the purpose of making us think about Him. And ignoring these things is ignoring the reason that you're in this world – to become more and more aware of Hashem.

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