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TURNING LEMONS INTO LEMONADE

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Emil W. Herman ז"ל ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
who loved and supported Torah learning.

KI SISA

TURNING LEMONS INTO LEMONADE

You ever had a conversation with an investor?

Any time you have a conversation with an investor, it only takes a few sentences before they start talking about the stock market. You can usually find these people in their offices, chained to their computers, with their faces in their hands, muttering, “Oy, vey.”

In the course of a 20-minute conversation, they’ll check the status of their investments at least three times, all the while complaining that they can’t get a pension because they lost all their savings—and if they thought that they would be able to retire at age 55, now they’re preparing to work until 70.

So let’s take a look at how Judaism deals with such crises.

In this week’s Torah portion, we read about one of the greatest crises to ever hit the Jewish People: the Sin of the Golden Calf.

At the time of the Shavuot holiday, the entire nation stood at the foot of Mt. Sinai and heard from G-d Himself, “I am the Lord your G-d” and “You shall have no other gods”—and 40 days later, the very same nation was worshipping an idol! To put it in stock-market terms, it’s like your stocks falling from 14,000 points to 6,000 points—and not in six months but in 40 days. It’s like falling from the highest balcony into the deepest pit.

When it happened, Moshe Rabbeinu was high up on Mt. Sinai with G-d. It was there that he heard the news: “Go down, because your nation has acted destructively.” G-d wanted to immediately destroy the Jewish People. But Moshe quickly interrupted G-d, so to speak—he essentially said to G-d, “Before You do anything, let me get down there. I’ll deal with it.”

So Moshe gets down the mountain and sees the destruction before his very eyes. He then shatters the Luchos, the famous Two Tablets (for those of you who saw the movie The Ten Commandments), takes the Golden Calf and incinerates it, grinds it up, deals with the sinners, and immediately goes back to G-d to beg for mercy. He gives G-d an ultimatum: If you don't forgive them, then wipe me out together with them too. And indeed, G-d is appeased.

However, G-d tells Moshe that from now on, only "My angel" will guide the Jews— the Divine Presence itself, will no longer rest among the Jewish people. G-d explains this by saying, "I shall not rise up in your midst because you are a stiff-necked people—I might consume you on the way." In short, the Jewish People are no longer prepared for the spiritual heights of the revealed Shechina.

But Moshe did not give up. Further in the Parsha we read that Moshe tried to arouse G-d's mercy on the Jewish People—He implied to G-d, "if You really love me, then I'm asking You now to not send an angel to escort us through the desert but rather, dwell among us Yourself." So G-d replies: "My Face shall proceed," which Rashi explains to mean: "I will no longer send an angel—I will go Myself."

When Moshe saw that it was an *ais ratzon*, a window of opportunity, he quickly got in another request: *V'niflinu ani v'am'cha*—"Distinguish myself and Your people from every nation on the face of the earth." This means, give the Jewish Nation a special relationship with You that is more than every nation of the world has with You. Thus, ever since then, prophets have only existed among the Jewish Nation, not the world's nations. G-d had agreed to this request—"because," as the verse states, "you have found favor in My eyes."

But Moshe wasn't satisfied with even this. He immediately asked for another "little" thing: "Please let me have a vision of Your Glory." But to this request, G-d responded, "You shall see My back, and My face shall not be seen."

Now, what's going on here? What was Moshe asking? And what was G-d answering? G-d doesn't have a body! What does it mean in the first place that Moshe wanted to "see" G-d? What exactly did he want to see? And what did G-d answer him? What does "seeing G-d's back" and not "G-d's face" mean?

Some explain that when Moshe asked to "see" G-d, it means that he wanted an answer to the greatest question of all time: "Why?"

Moshe wanted G-d to take him into His confidence, to reveal His secrets, to let him know why bad things happen in the universe: Why does the stock market crash? Why do things happen they way they do? Like people who go around with these big

questions in their gut, lamenting to themselves, “If only I knew why this happened to me—if only I knew what I did wrong to deserve this...”

This was what Moshe Rabbeinu wanted to know. He wanted to know G-d’s secrets.

So G-d responds to him: “You shall see My back, and My face shall not be seen.” In other words, I’ll let you understand why things happen – after they happen. But you will not see my “face” – i.e. the future.

Even ordinary people like you and I can sometimes understand why things happened the way they did after they happened. We can understand the good that was hidden in what happened. Sometimes it takes years until we see the good that comes from it, but sometimes we do come to understand it.

Now, Moshe Rabbeinu obviously understood things a lot more than any of us. But still, G-d told him, “And My face shall not be seen.” The future remains unknown.

What we see from this whole saga is that Moshe transformed the worst trauma to ever hit the Jewish People into a bond between G-d and the Jewish Nation that was stronger than ever—until then, only G-d’s angel went with the Jews, as we read in the Torah portion of Mishpatim (23:20), “I will send an angel before you to safeguard you on the way.” Thus, Moshe accomplished getting G-d Himself to go with the Jews—after the Sin of the Golden Calf!

Ultimately, as a result of the Golden Calf, the Jews built the Mishkan—Moshe Rabbeinu transformed a giant fall into a spiritual growth.

As the Rebbe would always say, additional light must come from the darkness itself.

Years ago, there lived a Lubavitcher Chasid in Kfar Chabad, Israel named Itch’keh Ginsberg. He owned a house in Kfar Chabad, and when the Rebbe told him to become the director of the Chabad school in Brosh, a different town, he moved to Brosh and rented his house in Kfar Chabad to another family.

In the winter in those days, homes would be heated with oil furnaces. So in the Ginsbergs’ rented home, the curtains caught fire somehow because of the oil furnace. The fire spread quickly throughout the house. The housewife tried to escape but the fire was already blocking the door—so she jumped out a window and broke her spinal cord and several other things.

She barely escaped with her life—but the entire house was burnt to a crisp.

The poor woman ended up in the hospital crying, “What’s going to happen? Will I ever recover? And how will I ever repay the Ginsbergs for their lost house?” To make matters worse, people in Israel did not have insurance in those days, and certainly not fire insurance or renters’ insurance. So the poor woman lay there worrying how she would ever manage to return an entire house to them.

Meanwhile, off in the town of Brosh, Rabbi Ginsberg heard that his house in Kfar Chabad had totally burned down. So he went with his wife to see what had happened. Sure enough, when they got to Kfar Chabad, they discovered that indeed, the entire thing had completely gone up in smoke. But while they were still standing there looking at the smoldering ruins, their old neighbors came over and informed them that the woman who had rented the home was lying in the hospital seriously injured—and, on top of that, crying over how to give the Ginsbergs back their house.

When Rabbi Ginsberg heard this, he turned to his wife and said, “Let’s go visit her in the hospital.”

When they got there, they went to her room—where Rabbi Ginsberg declared, “I came here to thank you!” The woman looked at him, thinking he’d gone mad. “What did you come to thank me for?” she asked. So he told her, “You know that I’m busy all the time with running the school. I don’t have much time to study Torah, and I always feel guilty that I don’t dedicate more time to study Torah. So I’m always worried about Judgment Day: When I get to the Court of Heaven and they ask me, ‘Why didn’t you study Torah?’, what am I going to tell them?’ But now I have an answer—I’ll tell them that you burned all my books and I didn’t have any books from which to study Torah!”

The woman laughed and cried at the same time.

Now this, my friends, is a mighty lesson on how to view everything that happens to us in life. We must heed this lesson of finding the good in everything that seems bad in our lives!

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