



# GROWTH

## At The

# SHABBAT TABLE

## PARSHAT DEVARIM

"If Simchat Torah was like Tisha b'Av this year, then may Tisha b'Av be like Simchat Torah this year with true and complete Geula."

### The Three Phases of Discontent

The book of Devarim opens: "These are the words that Moshe spoke to all of Israel, across the Jordan, in the Wilderness, in the Plain, opposite [the Sea of] Reeds, between Paran and Tophel, and Laban and Hazereth and Di-zahav." The commentators decipher each of the cryptic code-words as Moshe's attempt to subtly hint to specific sins that the Jews violated in the desert, utilizing a gentle approach to introduce a series of rebukes before the nation's entry into the Holy Land. Regarding the last aforementioned one – "Di-zahav" – Rashi explains that Moshe was rebuking them over the 'calf that they had made due to the abundance of gold which they had' [the words '*di zahav*' / דִּי זָהָב are read as '*dei zahav*' – enough gold].

The Talmud (Berachot 32a) offers a varying interpretation, one that is wildly unbelievable. The Gemara quotes an opinion that understands "di-zahav" as a reference (back to when the Jews committed the sin of the golden calf) to Moshe beseeching Hashem to avoid destroying Am Yisrael, arguing that the sin was actually "G-d's own fault," so-to-speak. "Master of the World," pleaded Moshe, "It is because of [the plentiful] silver and gold which You have bestowed upon Israel until they said 'enough' (*dai* / דַּי) that they have made a calf." With these mind-boggling words, Moshe was attempting, not to justify the heinous act, but to advocate before Hashem on behalf of the nation to understand and forgive their rebelliousness. The Gemara goes on to display Moshe's line of reasoning by way of parable, providing 3 different metaphors:

- 1) A lion doesn't roar amidst a big box full of hay/straw. Only amidst a box containing meat does the lion grow ecstatic, wild, and violent.
- 2) A man owned a weak, malnourished, scrawny cow, and decided to feed it juicy pieces of fat. Upon devouring the delicious indulgences, the cow energetically started kicking its owner, to which he responded in astonishment: "It is only due to the fats that I have fed you from which you derive energy to kick me!"
- 3) A father provided his child a shower, soothing ointment, delicacies, expensive wine, and presented him a loaded wallet. The father then left him off at a house of ill-repute. The Gemara then indicates the understandable inevitability of the kid yielding to temptation.

The point being made from all these anecdotes is rather clear – that abundant riches and blessings inherently present the great challenge of misusing them and going astray. Why, then, is the Gemara compelled to drive the point home with *three* different parables? Chazal are always meticulous to be concise; what is being added by reiterating the same theme with various parables?

This question is addressed by a number of commentaries. Among them is the Sefer "*Eretz HaChaim*," who illustrates that the Gemara is subtly transcending the cause-and-effect likelihood of profuse wealth leading to the challenge of straying, and actually addressing potential ways to protect oneself from going down that road. The first advice is to avoid excessive immersion in physical pleasures, as alluded to in the fact that it is the juicy piece of steak which causes the lion to roar uncontrollably. The second parable, about an inherently disloyal, scrawny cow who only acted up after being fed, represents the importance of fasting (as per each individual's ability – a common practice in days of old) in order to subdue one's *yetzer hara*. Finally, the third anecdote about the child inevitably succumbing to sin in the disreputable establishment evokes the priority of surrounding oneself with good people and avoiding negative influences to the best of one's ability.

The Sefer "*Or HaChama*" explains that the 3 metaphors are in fact hinting to the 3 cardinal sins that were committed when the Jews created the golden calf (which was the original context of the whole discussion). The first, about the lion growing ecstatic, wild, and violent over a piece of meat, depicts bloodshed, reminiscent of when Hur, son of Miriam, was murdered by his brethren when trying to stop them from idolizing a calf. The second parable alludes to the sin of rebelling against G-d (i.e. idolatry), as represented by the unfaithful cow who kicked its master, of all people, who graciously fed it! And the final saga, of a boy who invariably surrendered to promiscuous activity, exemplifies the sin of adultery, which Bnei Yisrael committed against Hashem when they "cheated on Him" with a foreign deity just moments after their "wedding ceremony" at Har Sinai.

After some deliberation, I thought of another insight behind the 3 parables that carries a profound message. Perhaps, the Talmud means to uncover what we can call "The 3 Phases/Forms of Discontent." The metaphor of the roaring lion alludes to a reality that many may experience: producing noise. That noise may come as complaining, venting, or some other form of passionate expression, but regardless, it is often the first type of response to discomfort or even extreme cases of stress: roaring and crying one's heart out. However, this may sometimes transition into defiance, where supposed gratitude is replaced with rebelliousness. This is displayed in the second parable, a story of a cow that revolts against the one to whom it owes the most appreciation. Sometimes, when people are in a state of profound pain, that hurtfulness is expressed as antagonism, not always because they are inherently disgusting people, but because they aren't in the right state of mind. And so, the second bracket includes people who resort to "spitting in G-d's face" with acts of rebellion due to their soul being buried with many layers of hardships and insecurities. Yet, there is a third form of opposition – one that may not appear as extreme, but is in fact much deeper. It expresses itself as complete detachment from one's own soul, stemming from trauma that is so intense and pain that is just unbearable. This leads to a person disconnecting himself from the G-dliness that he possesses and is extremely dangerous, as it can lead the individual to total despair as he tries filling the voids in himself with all forms of luring substances and addictions, as manifested in the third anecdote, where the child never imagined he would end up sinking so low.

Yet, we are still left wondering: how can it be? It would seem that, given the overflowing amounts of riches and luxuries, it should be the opposite! In these anecdotes, where is the pain coming from?

The answer is simple. While overindulgence in physical pleasures and wealth bring satisfaction to the body, it leaves the soul starving. Materialism leads to a higher likelihood of straying, as evident from the parables, not necessarily because it is inherently evil, but because its attraction is so strong that it can cause people to focus too much on it and lose sight of the important things in life, like spiritual growth and attachment to Hashem. The lack of that connection is the biggest source of discontent and pain to the soul, which then may lead to some form of rebellious disposition. Of course, we all want blessings in this world, but it is only with the proper balance between material prosperity and spiritual attachment that we can actually enjoy them and utilize them the right way. May we all be *zocheh*...