



by Rabbi Dr Raymond Apple z"l

KI TISA

The Mouse is not a Thief

The foolishness of the people of Israel was unbelievable.

After being redeemed from slavery and experiencing the Revelation on Mount Sinai, their sin in making a golden calf was the height of irresponsibility.

But Moshe was a patient man. Even at that moment he could find it possible to ask God to forgive them.

"Why, O Lord", he prayed, "does Your anger burn against Your people whom You brought forth out of the land of Egypt?"

The commentators wonder why he mentioned the going out from Egypt. What was its relevance to his prayer?

The Midrash suggests that what Moshe was implying, was this: "Master of the world, from whence did You take your people out? From Egypt, where everybody worships animals.

"Of all places in the world You found no other country to enslave Your

children but Egypt, whose people exerted so much pressure on Your people that, against their will and better judgment, they too learned to worship a calf.

"Remember from whence You took them out!"

There is something almost impertinent in this Midrash. Blaming God Himself for putting the people into the situation of such irresistible pressure that it was no wonder they sinned, shifts the guilt away from those who actually committed the sin.

But the Midrash, sensing our surprise at its approach, offers a simile.

A boy got involved in bad company and committed a transgression and his father screamed at him, "I'll kill you!"

The scene was witnessed by a friend who objected, "How dare you scream at your son? You yourself corrupted this boy, and now you yell at him? Of all trades, you apprenticed him to a frivolous occupation; of all locations, you selected for him a disreputable district... and now you're blaming him because he could not resist temptation?"

The theology of the Midrash is a major problem. It suggests that whatever we do can in the end be sheeted home to God because wherever we

are, in some sense God bears responsibility for putting us there.

But if we can limit our response to the Midrash and concentrate only on the human situation, there is an extremely pertinent lesson we can learn. For there is a Talmudic principle, "The mouse is not the thief - the hole is the thief!" (Gittin 45a).

If a mouse steals cheese, why only blame the mouse? Why not also blame the hole in which the mouse is hiding?

Likewise, if a person commits a wrong, why only blame the person concerned and not also the circumstances that made it possible for them to sin?

This reminds me of how aptly the Talmudic phrase was applied in 1972 by a leading preacher, who said that those who assassinated the Israeli athletes at Munich were not the only ones to blame; part of the guilt had to be ascribed to those nations that trained, harboured or condoned terrorists and made their crimes almost inevitable.

The world has changed since 1972, but there are still nations and peoples that have not learned the lesson. -OZ

Y'HI ZICHRO BARUCH