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The Golden Calf Incident

31:1 to 34:35



Effective leadership is characterized by two things: first, the knowledge of where one is going and second, the ability to encourage others to go with him. **Moses** had already demonstrated the ability to lead the people of Isra'el. Their journey from the land of **Egypt** did not take them northeast into Canaan, but southward through the deserts of the Sinai Peninsula. The reason for this southern journey becomes more apparent as one studies the chapters of the book of **Exodus**. The Israelites obviously were not ready to encounter the challenges and temptations of the land of Canaan. They needed to be prepared, both politically and spiritually, for the difficulties they would face in possessing the Promised Land. Among the problems that they would face in the Land would be the temptation of idolatry. They had worshiped false gods while they were **in Egypt (Joshua 24:14)**, and they lacked faith. In anticipation of this, **God** had provided them with a series of miracles to demonstrate the impotence and emptiness of idolatry. These miracles also helped bring about the deliverance of Isra'el. But these lessons were quickly forgotten.

Chapter 32 records one of the darkest moments in Isra'el's history up to that point. Rather than witnessing increased dedication and spiritual renewal as a result of **the LORD's** revelation of the Torah and the Tabernacle, we find the people of Isra'el thoroughly impatient with the activities of their leader **Moses**. This impatience, along with their spiritual immaturity, led them to open idolatry and rebellion. The descent into idolatry was subtle. It is a prime example of syncretism, or the process by which ideas from one religious system are intermingled with those from another. These chapters do not record the total abandonment of the worship of **ADONAI**; however, they do illustrate that subtle process by

which idolatrous practices seeped into the worship of the **God** of Isra'el.⁶⁵⁷

In future generations, the Israelites would not take responsibility for their sin here. **The rabbis teach that converts from Egyptian paganism caused the sin of the Golden Calf incident (Exodus Rabba 42:6). But not content with that, they also insist that Satan, the Adversary, stirred up turmoil in the camp of Isra'el by casting doubt on the return of Moses from Mount Sinai (Tractate Shabbat 89a).**