

Parashat Ki Tisa, 5770, 2010:

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The Luchot (Tablets of the Testimony) and the Torah

Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel, Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

When He [Hashem] had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, He gave Moses the two tablets of the testimony, stone tablets, written with the finger of G-d. (*Sefer Shemot* 31:18, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The above-quoted *pasuk* (verse) is found in our *parasha* (Torah portion) between the passage discussing Shabbat and the episode of the Golden Calf (*Egel Hazahav*). It is an unenviable placement since the power and glory of Shabbat, and the dramatic disaster of the Golden Calf overshadow its singular significance. Nonetheless, it is the moment when G-d actually gave the *luchot* (tablets of the testimony) into Moshe's hands – ostensibly to be guarded and protected for all time. It therefore provides us with the opportunity to study and learn about the *luchot* so that their true importance can be revealed and understood.

Our verse is rather terse in its description of the *luchot*. We know that they were composed of stone and were “written with the finger of G-d” as a testimony to our people and, by extension, to all mankind. The next chapter in the Torah, however, provides us with a clearer image of the “two tablets of the testimony”:

Now Moses turned and went down from the mountain [bearing] the two tablets of the testimony in his hand, tablets inscribed from both their sides; on one side and on the other side they were inscribed. Now the tablets were G-d's work, and

the inscription was G-d's inscription, engraved on the tablets. (*Sefer Shemot* 32:15-16)

We now know that G-d's inscription on the *luchot* was different in kind and degree from that of which man is capable, since they were “inscribed from both their sides; on one side and on the other side they were inscribed.” As Rashi (1040-1105) notes: “from both their sides” teaches us that: “the letters could be read. [i.e. from both front and back] This was a miraculous phenomenon. -[from Shabbat 104a, Megillah 2b].”

Now that we have a better understanding of the *luchot's* supernatural qualities and appearance, we are ready to analyze their meaning and significance. In order to properly undertake this task, we need to turn to an earlier *pasuk* found in Parashat Mishpatim, wherein Hashem tells Moshe to ascend *Har Sinai* (Mt. Sinai) so that He can give him the *luchot*: “And the L-rd said to Moses, ‘Come up to Me to the mountain and remain there, and I will give you the stone tablets, the Law and the commandments, which I have written to instruct them.’” (24:12) We are immediately struck by the seemingly superfluous words “the Law and the commandments, which I have written to instruct them.” In other words, if G-d's purpose was to be served by giving Moshe the two tablets of the testimony, why was the latter half of the verse in any way necessary?

Happily, my question was asked and answered by one of the most illustrious of all the Talmudic Sages, Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish:

R. Levi b. Hama says further in the name of R. Simeon b. Lakish: What is the meaning of the verse: “And I will give you the tablets of stone, and the law and the commandment, which I have written that you may teach them”? “Tablets of stone”: these are the Ten Commandments; “the law”: this is the Pentateuch; “the

commandment”: this is the Mishnah; “which I have written”: these are the Prophets and the Writings; “that you may teach them”: this is the Gemara (Talmud). It [this verse, therefore,] teaches [us] that all these things were given to Moses on Sinai. (*Talmud Bavli, Berachot 5a*, translation, *Soncino Talmud* with my emendations for readability)

Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish's explication of our *pasuk* provides us with an entirely new way of understanding the significance of the *luchot*. Beyond question, it would have been sufficient if they referred solely to the *Aseret Hadibrot* (the Ten Commandments). In point of fact, however, these were the leading edge of Hashem's ultimate gift to our people, since, according to Rabbi Shimon's interpretation, G-d simultaneously gave us the entire Pentateuch, Mishnah, Prophets, Writings, and Talmud! This, in turn, provides us with a compelling understanding of the famous first phrase of *Pirkei Avot* (*Ethics of the Fathers*): “Moshe received the Torah at Mt. Sinai...” i.e., the entire Written Torah (*Torah shebichtav*) and the complete Oral Law (*Torah shebe'al peh*).

Each day, toward the end of *Shacharit* (the Morning Prayer service), we recite a pithy paragraph that proclaims our people's inextricable link to the Torah and our unique relationship to the Almighty. It is a paean of praise to G-d's ultimate kindness in having given us His Torah:

Blessed is He, our G-d, Who created us for His glory, separated us from those who stray, gave us the Torah of truth and implanted eternal life within us. May He open our heart through His Torah and imbue our heart with love and awe of Him that we may do His will and serve Him wholeheartedly, so that we do not struggle in vain nor produce futility. (*The Complete ArtScroll Siddur*, page 156)

May we be *zocheh* (merit), as a nation and as individuals, to recognize the power and meaning of this short but content-rich prayer. Perhaps most of all, “May He open our heart through His Torah and imbue our heart with love and awe of Him that we may do

His will and serve Him wholeheartedly.” May we always recognize, as well, that all of this began on a lonely mountain in the midst of a barren wasteland, when Moshe received the *luchot* from our Creator so many years ago. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

Past drashot may be found at my website:

http://home.mindspring.com/~rdbe/parashat_hashavuah/index.html.

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The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added please do not hesitate to contact me via email: rdbe718@gmail.com.