

Parashat Ki Tisa, 5775, 2015:

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The Luchot: Our Link to Hashem

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shmuel David ben Moshe Halevy, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

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*)

This *pasuk* (verse) is found in our *parasha* 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, may tend to overshadow its singular significance. This was the moment when G-d actually gave the *luchot* (tablets of the testimony) into Moshe's hands, to be guarded and protected for all time. They represent the moment of Revelation, and became the foundation of ethical behavior throughout human history. What, however, is the singular import of the *luchot* for the Jewish people?

Our verse is very 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 understand 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), based upon *Talmud Bavli Shabbat* 104a, *Talmud Bavli Megillah* 2b, 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." The miraculous nature of the *luchot* reflects the momentous encounter between Hashem and the Jewish people. At that moment, we received our ultimate mission, namely, to share that which had been revealed to us with the entire world, and thereby be "a light unto nations." (*Sefer Yeshiyahu* 49:6)

Given the *luchot's* supernatural qualities and appearance, we are ready to analyze their meaning and significance. As such, we need to examine an earlier *pasuk*: "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?

My question was asked and answered by the illustrious Talmudic Sage, 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 *Asseret Hadibrot* (the Ten Commandments). In point of fact, however, they 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 She'ba'al Peh*).

Each day, toward the end of *Shacharit* (the Morning Prayer service), we recite a paragraph that proclaims our people's permanent 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 holy 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) 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,” so that we may ever be able to fulfill our role as a “a light unto nations.” *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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