

MESHECH CHOCHMAH

Parshas Ki Tisa

Breaking the Luchos

וַיְהִי כַּאֲשֶׁר קָרַב אֶל הַמַּחֲנֶה וַיֵּרָא אֶת הָעֵגֹל וּמַחֲלֹת וַיַּחַר אַף מֹשֶׁה וַיִּשְׁלֶךְ מִיָּדָיו אֶת הַלְּחֹת וַיִּשְׁבֶּר אֹתָם תַּחַת הָהָר

It happened as (Moshe) drew near the camp and saw the Egel and the dances, Moshe became angry and he threw down the luchos from his hands and smashed them at the foot of the mountain. (32:19)

The simple understanding of why Moshe smashed the *luchos* is that, upon seeing that the Jewish People had descended into idolatry and made the golden calf, he judged that they were not deserving of receiving the *luchos*.

HOLY OBJECTS, PLACES – AND PEOPLE

The Meshech Chochmah explains that there is a deeper theme here. Throughout Torah we encounter numerous entities which possess *kedushah*. They may be physical entities, such as the Mishkan and its vessels; they may be places, such as Eretz Yisrael and Yerushalayim and they may be people, such as Moshe Rabbeinu. It is critically important to realize that none of the above entities possess *independent kedushah*. Rather, the *kedushah* which exists in any entity is that which is bestowed upon it by Hashem, and remains so subject to Hashem's will that it remain. Thus, when the Torah commands¹ "וּמִקְדָּשִׁי תִירָאוּ" – And you shall fear my sanctuary." The Gemara² clarifies:

לֹא מִן הַמִּקְדָּשׁ אַתָּה יִרָא אֱלֹהִים מִמִּי שֶׁהוֹחִיר עַל הַמִּקְדָּשׁ

You are not to fear the Mikdash itself, rather, the One who commanded you concerning the Mikdash.

This fundamental idea is depicted very clearly by the Gemara elsewhere³ which relates that although ordinarily, no one could enter the Kodesh Hakodashim on pain of death, the wicked and depraved Titus was able to enter there with a harlot and emerge unscathed. At that stage, the sanctity which pertained to the Kodesh Hakodashim – the holiest of places – had been removed.

1 *Vayikra 19:30*

2 *Yevamos 6b.*

3 *Gittin 56b.*

The reason it is imperative to maintain this pure perspective on *kedushah* is that if people should ascribe essential *kedushah* to anything other than Hashem, they may come to relate to that entity as an independent source of spiritual influence and, accordingly, as something deserving of worship. An expression of this perspective may be found in the reaction of the Plishtim to the plague which erupted in response to their taking the Aron:⁴ “מִי יצִילֵנוּ מִיַּד הָאֱלֹהִים הָאֲדִירִים הָאֵלֶּה” – Who will save us from this mighty deity?” They ascribed the plague to the Aron itself, not to the God whose Presence resided there.

In the case of Moshe Rabbeinu, mistaking his exalted level of *kedushah* as integral – and not instilled by Hashem – may lead people to believe that he is an independent source of Torah and mitzvos. In reality, Moshe is incapable of *generating* mitzvos. His exalted level is related to his status as faithful *transmitter* of the mitzvos.

This entire issue is compounded by the fact that, since time immemorial, physical man found it difficult to relate to an abstract Deity. This resulted in people turning to physical objects as representations of spiritual forces. Indeed, according to numerous mefarshim, this tendency was the origin of avodah zarah. Upon coming to relate to certain objects as representing higher forces, people then degenerated to relating to those objects as deserving of worship themselves.⁵

THE CHET HA’EGEL

All of the above tendencies formed part of the *Chet Ha’Egel* as Bnei Yisrael capitulated upon seeing that Moshe had not yet returned. In Moshe’s absence, they turned to a physical object to which they could relate and which they could serve, going so far as identifying it as the force which had taken them out of Mitzrayim.⁶ Indeed, the very fact that they considered an object to be a substitute for Moshe meant that, on a certain level, they had made a similar mistake about Moshe himself, ascribing to him independent spiritual power and relating to him as the force behind their Exodus from Mitzrayim. They were unable to fully relate to Moshe, whom they could see, as acting purely in the role of emissary of an incorporeal and unknowable God.

This mistake is alluded to in the People’s words to Aharon as a prelude to making the *Egel*,⁷ “כִּי זֶה מֹשֶׁה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלָנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לֹא יָדַעְנוּ מָה הָיָה לוֹ –” For this man Moshe, who took us out of Mitzrayim, we do not know what has become of him.” Similarly,

4 *Shmuel-1, 4:8.*

5 The Meshech Chochmah adds that an additional error which led to avodah zarah was that people felt it was beneath the dignity of an Infinite God to concern Himself with the goings on of the lower realms; rather, He relates purely with higher beings, such as angels, constellations etc.. Hence, they felt that their prosperity would come from petitioning those elevated beings. As he explains, the flaw in this reasoning is that fails to take into account that, relative to an Infinite Being, *all other beings* are equally finite and lowly – be they angels, constellations, human beings or ants! Hence, if the Creator relates to even the most elevated of His creations it is entirely reasonable that He will relate to all of them and supervise them. This central idea is what we express in the Shema when we say that “ה’ אֱלֹהֵינוּ – Hashem is our God,” i.e. He supervises us and provides for us, “ה’ אֶחָד – Hashem is One,” He is the only One Who can do so.

6 See *Shemos 32:4.*

7 *Ibid.* pasuk 1.

Hashem apprises Moshe of this misdirected notion when he informs him of the *Egel*,⁸ “כִּי מֵאַרְץ מִצְרַיִם שָׁחַת עַמְּךָ אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלִיתָ מֵאַרְץ מִצְרַיִם – For your nation, which you took out of Mitzrayim, has acted destructively.”

The Meshech Chochmah further explains that it is concerning this tendency Chazal state⁹ that even when Bnei Yisrael stood at Har Sinai and received the Torah, their hearts and mouths were not in complete alignment. Chazal adduce in this regard the pasuk in *Tehillim*¹⁰ which says: “בלשונם יכזבו לו ולבם לא נכון עמו” – With their tongues they spoke falsehood to Him and their heart was not set with Him.” This does not mean that they harbored at that time any *intentional* plans to deviate from the Torah. Rather, it refers to the fact that they had not fully attained the purity of vision whereby they could interact with the sanctified entities of the mitzvos while, at the same time, ascribe essential *kedushah* to Hashem alone.

MOSHE’S DECISION TO BREAK THE LUCHOS

Upon witnessing the critical error of the Bnei Yisrael, Moshe made the decision to break the *luchos*. This was not “just” a result of the fact that the Jewish people did not deserve to receive them. Moshe felt that in their current state, if he were to present them with the *luchos*, they would take the very same allegiance which they had given to the *Egel* and direct it instead to the *luchos*! Hence, Moshe smashed the *luchos* in front of their eyes. This was indeed a traumatic event, but it was also sorely necessary and profoundly revealing.

In principle, there could be no holier entity than the *luchos*. They were both fashioned and engraved by Hashem Himself. And yet, Moshe was communicating that all that sanctity was invested in them in order for the Bnei Yisrael to fulfill Hashem’s will and live by His Torah. Should Bnei Yisrael fail to do that, the *luchos* would cease to serve their function and, at that stage, would have no more *kedushah* than pieces of pottery. By breaking what were once the holiest objects in existence, Moshe was reclaiming the concept of holiness.

THE TIMING OF HASHEM’S “YASHER KOACH” TO MOSHE

The breaking of the *luchos* was thus done in order to impress upon Bnei Yisrael the true nature of *kedushah* and to direct their religious devotion to Hashem alone. Indeed, although the decision to break the *luchos* was Moshe’s, Chazal inform us that Hashem expressed His full endorsement of that act. Later on in our Parsha,¹¹ when commanding Moshe to prepare a second set of *luchos*, Hashem says:

פָּסַל לָךְ שְׁנֵי לַחֹת אֲבָנִים כְּרֵאשֹׁנִים וְכַתַּבְתִּי עַל הַלְּחֹת אֵת הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ עַל הַלְּחֹת הָרֵאשֹׁנִים אֲשֶׁר שִׁבַּרְתָּ

Carve for yourself two stone tablets like the first ones, and I shall inscribe on the tablets the words which were on the first tablets which you broke.

8 Pasuk 7.

9 *Vayikra Rabbah* 18:3.

10 78:36-37.

11 34:1.

The Gemara¹² notes that the concluding words “אשר שברת – which you broke,” seem entirely redundant. Moshe Rabbeinu knows full well that the first *luchos* were “the ones which he broke!” Why is this mentioned here? The Gemara expounds the word “אשר - which” as relating to the word “אישור – endorsement.”

אמר לו הקב"ה למשה יישר כחך ששברת!

Said the Holy One ,Blessed be He ,to Moshe” ,You did well to smash them“!

It is most interesting to note that the words which Chazal identify as indicating Hashem’s endorsement of Moshe breaking the *first luchos* appear in the context of His command to Moshe to prepare the *second luchos*. What is behind the timing here?

In truth, the Meshech Chochmah explains that the full message which Hashem wished to communicate came from the first and second sets of *luchos* combined!

WHOLE LUCHOS AND BROKEN LUCHOS

The Gemara¹³ informs us that, “לוחות ושברי לוחות מונחין בארון,” the Aron contained not only the intact second set of *luchos*, but also the broken pieces of the first set.

- What is the purpose of placing the pieces of the first *luchos* in the Aron when they no longer had any words of Torah written on them?

The answer is, this is exactly the point. On the face of it, the first *luchos*, which were fashioned by Hashem, contained a much higher level of *kedushah* than the second *luchos*, which were fashioned by Moshe. And yet, the first *luchos* were broken while the second ones remained intact! It is specifically this contrast which emphasizes that the *kedushah* of an object depends solely on Hashem willing that it contain *kedushah*, as a function of Bnei Yisrael fulfilling His will. As such, the first *luchos* made by Hashem – which then saw Bnei Yisrael dancing around the *Egel* – lay broken in pieces next to the second *luchos* made by Moshe, which saw Bnei Yisrael in a state of Teshuvah and dedication to fulfilling Hashem’s will.

Accordingly, says Meshech Chochmah, we now understand why Hashem’s “yasher koach” to Moshe for breaking the first *luchos* appears together with the instruction that Moshe – not Hashem! – carve out and prepare the second *luchos*.

The breaking of the *luchos* was unquestionably a tragic episode and a major trauma for the Jewish People. However, in light of our inability to relate to them correctly at that time, those original *luchos* were of greater service to us as broken pieces than when they were whole, allowing us to attain a true appreciation of the nature of holy objects, and of holiness itself.

12 *Bava Basra 14b.*

13 *Bava Basra ibid.*