

Parashat Ki Tisa, 5784, 2024:

Breaking the Luchot

Rabbi David Etengoff

ה' יעזור וירחם על אחינו כל בני ישראל, בארץ ישראל ובכל חלקי הארץ

Our *parasha* contains a famous verse that depicts Moshe's act of destroying the first set of *luchot* as a response to the *Egel HaZahav* (Golden Calf) and the abandoned celebration it engendered: "Now it came to pass when he drew closer to the camp and saw the calf and the dances, that Moshe's anger was kindled, and he flung the tablets from his hands, shattering them at the foot of the mountain." (*Sefer Shemot* 32:19, this and all Tanach translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*). In his *Commentary on the Torah*, the Malbim (Rabbi Meir Loeb ben Yechiel Michel, 1809-1879) intimates that Moshe certainly had every reason to destroy the *luchot* prior to this juncture. After all, Hashem had explicitly informed him:

And Hashem said to Moshe: "Go, descend, for your people that you have brought up from the land of Egypt have acted corruptly. They have quickly turned away from the path that I have commanded them; they have made themselves a molten calf! And they have prostrated themselves before it, slaughtered sacrifices to it, and said: 'These are your gods, O Israel, who have brought you up from the land of Egypt.'" (32:8-9)

Why, then, did Moshe wait to break the *luchot* until "he drew closer to the camp and saw the calf and the dances?" In my estimation, the Malbim's response is an analytic tour de force:

...for he [Moshe] thought they did this [the *Egel HaZahav*] because they believed Moshe tarried on his way down from [*Har Sinai*] and sought a leader in his place. [Moreover, Moshe was convinced] when the people would see him coming down the mountain, they would cease their [forbidden] actions and repent. When he approached the camp, however, and saw they recognized him and nonetheless continued to rejoice over the *Egel* through their dances, he realized they were fully intent on rebelling against Hashem and Moshe His servant. Moreover, they were not merely looking for a substitute leader and guide, instead, they were engaging in literal idol worship. At that moment, Moshe became furious, and threw the *luchot* from his hands. (Translation and brackets my own)

Even though Hashem told Moshe the people had acted corruptly, rejected the path He had commanded them, created a molten calf, bowed down before it and offered sacrifices to it, the Malbim maintains that Moshe did not initially share Hashem's perception of the people's actions. Instead, he believed the people were desperate for a substitute leader and guide who would lead them forward. In addition, he was positive that when the people would see him standing before them, they would cease their abhorrent ways and do *teshuvah*. Unfortunately, both of these assumptions proved false, for even when they saw Moshe standing in front of them, with the *luchot* in his hands, they continued their licentious celebrations before the *Egel*. This idolatrous behavior was a flat-out rebellion against Hashem and Moshe, and too great a burden for Moshe to bear. As such, "at that moment, Moshe became furious, and threw the *luchot* from his hands."

In his *Commentary on the Torah*, Rav Moshe Alshich (1508-1593) suggests an interpretation of Moshe's hesitation to shatter the *luchot* that supports the Malbim's analysis. The *Alshich HaKadosh* opines that our narrative is the proof text for the notion that, "a man will not act, even if he knows of the evil, until he sees it with his own eyes." This is the case, since "the Holy One blessed be He had told Moshe [of the people's backsliding,] and he had heard of the matter from Yehoshua, yet it did not make a crystal-clear impression upon him until he saw the *Egel*, for then and only then did, 'Moshe became furious' [and break the *luchot*]."

The *Alshich HaKadosh* offers a second insightful interpretation as to why *Moshe Rabbeinu* did not destroy the *luchot* until he witnessed the decadence of the people. He notes that the essence of serving Hashem is to act, "*b'simcha u'btuv lavov*—in joy and with the goodness of one's heart." So, too, if an individual violates the will of the Holy One may He be blessed, and feels remorse for his or her actions, then there is hope that they will repent and fix the error of their ways. Sadly,

however, “the person who celebrates their purposeful sin loses all hope, *chas v’shalom*.” The Alshich utilizes this principle to explain why and when Moshe smashed the *luchot*:

As such, when [the sin of the *Egel HaZahav*] was relayed to him [Moshe] by the Almighty, Himself, He did not tell him that they [the people] were joyous and devoid of feelings of remorse regarding their sin, and, therefore, Moshe was not very angry [as he thought there was still hope for them]. When, however, he saw the *Egel*, the wild dancing and their overwhelming joy on their day of idol worship, then “Moshe became furious,” [as he feared the Jewish people would be no more].

With Hashem’s help, may we ever be counted among those who serve Hashem “*b’simcha u’btuv lavov*.” As *Dovid HaMelech* said so long ago: “Serve Hashem with joy (*b’simcha*), come before Him with praise.” (*Sefer Tehillim* 100:2) *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>.

Please contact me at rdbe718@gmail.com to be added to my weekly email list.

*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

*** I have posted 164 of Rabbi Soloveitchik’s English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link: [The Rav](#)