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SHAVUOS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

The Greatest Event Ever

The Three Weeks, commencing with the 17th of Tammuz, focused us on the tragedies contributing to this day's sorrowful nature. Talmud Taanis 28b records Moses' smashing of the tablets as one of these tragedies. As he descended from Sinai with those two sapphire tablets bearing God's laws, he encountered the Jews sinning with the Gold Calf. He responded by breaking the tablets. A wise Rabbi explained he did so, lest the Jews continue their sin, projecting their idolatrous expression onto these divinely inspired objects, just as they were doing regarding the Calf. Moses broke the tablets to eliminate this possibility, to which, God agreed. We might think the service of the Gold Calf as more worthy of making the list of tragedies. But as a friend suggested, sin is not a "loss," but a waste. A true "loss" is the removal of something of value or a failure to realize a gain. That loss was the tablets. The removal of the positive is loss, not the engagement in the negative, the latter being "harm." Similarly, we mourn the loss of the Temple, and not the idolatry or enmity between the Jews that precipitated those two losses, although the latter are evils for which we must repent.

But to truly comprehend the loss of the tablets, we must understand: 1) what they were and 2) why God gave them to us. The indispensable need for the tablets is derived from God's granting to Moses a second set of tablets after he smashed the first set.."

What I will eventually suggest herein astonished me, but I feel Maimonides' words point to this discovery...

The Guide for the Perplexed (Book I, chap. lxvi)
"And the tables were the work of God" (Exod. xxxii. 16), that is to say, they were the product of nature, not of art: for all natural things are called "the work of the Lord," e.g., "These see the works of the Lord" (Psalms cvii. 24); and the description of the several things in nature, as plants, animals, winds, rain, etc., is followed by the exclamation, "O Lord, how manifold are thy works!" (Psalms civ.24). Still more striking is the relation between God and His creatures, as expressed in the phrase, "The cedars of Lebanon, which he hath planted" (Ibid. 16): the cedars being the product of nature, and not of art, are described as having been planted by the Lord. Similarly we explain. "And the writing was the writing of God" (Exod. xxxii. 16): the relation in which the writing stood to God has already been defined in the words "written with the finger of God" (Ibid. xxxi. 18), and the meaning of this phrase is the same as that of "the work of thy fingers" (Psalms viii. 4) this being said of the heavens: of the latter it has been stated distinctly that they were made by a word, "By the word of the Lord were the heavens made" (Ibid. xxxiii. 6). Hence you learn that in the Bible, the creation of a thing is figuratively expressed by terms denoting "word" and "speech." The same thing, which according to one passage has been made by the "word," is represented in another passage as made by the "finger of God." The phrase "written by the finger of God" is therefore identical with "written by the word of God," and if the latter phrase had been used, it would have been equal to "written by the will and desire of God."

Onkelos adopted in this place a strange explanation, and rendered the words literally, "written by the finger of the Lord." He thought that "the finger" was a certain thing ascribed to God; so that "the finger of the Lord" is to be interpret-

ed in the same way as "the mountain of God" (Exod. iii. 1), "the rod of God" (Ibid. iv. 20), that is, as being an instrument created by Him, which by His will engraved the writing on the tables. I cannot see why Onkelos preferred this explanation. It would have been more reasonable to say, "written by the word of the Lord," in imitation of the verse "By the word of the Lord the heavens were made." Or was the creation of the writing on the tables more difficult than the creation of the stars in the spheres? As the latter were made by the direct will of God, not by means of an instrument, the writing may also have been produced by His direct will, not by means of an instrument. You know what the Mishnah says, "Ten things were created on Friday in the twilight of the evening," and "the writing" is one of the ten things. This shows how generally it was assumed by our forefathers that the writing of the tables was produced in the same manner as the rest of the creation, as we have shown in our Commentary on the Mishnah (Avos, v.6)."

Understanding Maimonides

We must pay attention to Maimonides' words. He opens with "And the tables were the work of God." His intent is to first discuss the tablets—not their writing. He first explains how the tablets are made via "nature," meaning by God. They are not "works" or "art." By definition, if natural objects are used in a new construction or form, like wood-working or paintings, we call this "carpentry" and "art" respectively. But if something is formed undisturbed by external influence, as leaves are formed with veins and trees with bark, this we call "nature" and not art. Therefore, when addressing the tablets, Maimonides writes, "they were the product of nature, not of art: for all natural things are called "the work of the Lord."" This means that the tablets formed naturally independent from the rest of the sapphire that formed in that area of Sinai. That is quite amazing. We will get back to what this means. But they

were not works of carpentry or art. Remain mindful of this distinction.

Maimonides then addresses the tablets' writing: "And the writing was the writing of God." He argues that although the Torah says the writing was "written by the finger of the Lord," this writing was no less natural than the tablets themselves, or God's natural creation of the heavens. He disputes Onkelos' suggestion that a tool was used to form these letters, and insists that those letters were created without a tool, just as God created the heavens, by His will alone.

But focus your attention on Maimonides' insistence that the writing was "natural" and not an act of carpentry or art. What does he mean by this? You must know that Maimonides bases himself on the verse that references both, the tablets and the writings: "And the tables were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God" (Exod. xxxii. 16). Maimonides teaches that this verse is not redundant, but with it, God intentionally directs us to realize that not only were the tablets a natural phenomenon, but so too was the writing. This is essential to our discussion.

So, we must delve into understanding the distinction between writing that is natural, and writing that is art. How are they different?

We must ask a number of questions. God communicated 10 Commandments, shortly afterwards they would be committed to the Sefer Torah Moses would write. Therefore, for what purpose did God create the tablets with the same record of this communication? Is this not a redundancy?

Let's briefly recount the history. God orchestrated Revelation at Sinai. The nation heard great sounds. Moses ascends Mt. Sinai, he remains in commune with God for 40 days and nights and then he receives the two tablets from God. While still on Sinai, God informs Moses that the Jews sinned with the Gold Calf and that He will destroy the nation. Moses prays and God refrains from destroying the Jews. Before Moses descends the mountain we read these words, "And Moses turned and descended from the mountain, and the two tablets of Testimony were in his hands; tablets written from both sides[1], from this side and that were they written. And the tables were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, were they explained on the tablets." (Exod. 32:15,16) Why is Moses' descent interrupted with this detailed description of the tablets? Why was this description of the tablets not included earlier (31:18) where we read, "And God gave to Moses—when He concluded to speak with him on Mount Sinai—two tablets of testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God." This

division of the tablets' details into two Torah portions requires explanation, as does the term "tablets of testimony"... testimony to what exactly? And we wonder why "two" tablets are needed. Could not a larger tablet contain all the words; could not smaller letters accomplish the same message on a single tablet?

Maimonides also cited the Mishna in Avos, "Ten things were created on [the first] Friday in the twilight of the evening," and "the writing" is one of the ten things." Maimonides wishes to draw our attention to the necessity for God to have created the tablets and their writing, at the end of the six days of Creation, just before God ceased His creation. What is his message?

In Exodus 34:1, God instructs Moses to hew a second set of tablets, and He says He will write on them the matters that "were" on the first tablets. Why doesn't God say He will write on them the matters that "He wrote" on the first tablets? He uses a less descriptive term.

I also wonder if there was more to Moses' breaking of the tablets than already explained.

Revelation

Revelation on Sinai was intended to remove all doubts that a Supreme Intelligence created all, sustains all and communicates with man. However, God desired this message not end at Sinai's closure. My friend suggested that the tablets were intended to be an everlasting "testament" (tablets of Testimony). This explains why upon God's completion of His communication with Moses atop Sinai, we read, "And God gave to Moses—when He concluded to speak with him on Mount Sinai—two tablets of testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God." That is, once God concluded His Revelation to the people and to Moses, He desired an everlasting testimony of this Revelation, to serve as enduring and conclusive evidence that He alone created and sustains the universe. Thus, "testimony" appears in this verse, and not later in the second description of the tablets. In order that this testimony is everlasting, the words are embedded in a permanent object: stone. So "stone" is also in this verse. But can't anyone write words in stone? Of what proof are these tablets?

The testimony God intended is to the truth that He alone is the source of the universe. We read that these tablets were "written with the finger of God." Maimonides said this was a "natural" phenomenon. Here now is the amazing idea and how these tablets "testified"...

Astonishing Tablets

These miraculous tablets contained something not found elsewhere in nature: naturally formed letters, sentences and commandments! Imagine a tree cut down, where its inner rings viewed closely were actually lines of text forming intelligent sentences, or lightning bolts that formed words as they streaked across the sky. That is how astonishing these tablets were. The Torah says the text could be seen from both sides of the tablets (Exod. 32:15). Some wish to explain this to mean that the letters were hollowed through, but that would not appear miraculous as a human being can carve letters into a stone. My opinion is that the letters were formed internally through the sapphire's grain. And as sapphire is translucent, one can see the letters "from both sides." The only explanation for words existing in the inside a stone is if the words formed naturally. That means the creator of the stone intentionally embedded His messages within the stone.

As God formed these tablets over time at the end of Creation, so too, He formed the "writing" simultaneously, and naturally. The commands were not subsequently carved into the tablets, but they literally grew inside the stones grain as the stones naturally formed over time: "And the writing was the writing of God," as Maimonides said above, this means a natural phenomenon. This explains why God tells Moses that He will write on the second tablets the matters that "were" on the first set, and not matters that He "wrote" the first set. For God did not do an act of "writing" on the first tablets. Yes, the words appeared "written" as the verse states[2], but not through an act of one thing acting on another resulting in writing. Again, the verse does not say, "I wrote" on the first tablets, but rather, "were" on the first tablets. The letters in the first tablets formed within the tablets. This is an amazing idea, and a phenomenon not seen elsewhere in nature. Perhaps for this reason, Maimonides includes in this chapter his critique of Onkelos' suggestion that the stone tablets were carved through an instrument.

The Need

What consideration demanded that God create such a phenomenon? Although the exact words appearing on the tablets were duplicated in the Torah scroll, it was not the words per se that demanded the tablets' existence, but the "manner" of existence of these words. This natural formation of words and commands is God's clear message that He is behind the natural world, and Torah.

Both form one unit. This is needed, for many people view nature as devoid of God's creation and rule. Man becomes accustomed to matters by his very nature. The sun rises and sets, plants and animals grow, and species beget their own kind. We take all for granted, thinking all occurs due the nature itself...and not God. But with the existence of naturally formed words and commandments in natural objects, we can no longer maintain a view of an unguided world. Nature is finally understood to be the expression of an intelligent being: God. How can one ignore a natural object that has words naturally imprinted and not the work of art? This was the lesson of Sinai, and the sustained lesson of the tablets.

Therefore, the Torah scroll's account of God's communicated commands sufficed for the 'content' of His words, but not for an everlasting "testament" which was revealed through natural stones containing intelligent words! And perhaps to remove all doubt that this occurred without God's intent, there were two stones, not one. A freakish natural incident can possibly be dismissed if it occurs once...but not twice.

We can no longer separate nature from God. His very words are embedded in these stones in truly natural manner.

Why didn't God give the tablets to Adam the First? Perhaps Adam had no need for them. God's original plan was that man use intellect to discover God. The beauty and precision of natural law is sufficient for a person following a life of wisdom.

However, at this era in mankind's development, these tablets were intended to offer mankind a new leap in our wisdom of God. The ability for nature to produce such a phenomenon would offer us tremendous appreciation for the Creator of this nature. They were to be viewed and not placed in an ark.

But as these tablets were being delivered, the Jews sinned with the Gold Calf. The extraordinary lesson of the tablets would not be realized with those Jews. These first tablets required destruction. However, a lesson was required: the nation must now have a reminder of what they lost. God instructed Moses to hew a new set of stones; their tablet form would not come about naturally, but by human craft. God also "wrote" the matters on this second set; again, no longer a natural phenomenon of words that were part of their natural design. A gap now existed between the Jews, and God. The intended, intimate relationship that could have been, was now lost. To emphasize this break from God, these tablets must be stored out of sight; in an ark. Perhaps this explains why King Solomon hid the ark and

no other vessel. He reiterated this message of "distance" between God and the nation through digging caverns to eventually hide the tablets and the ark.

“Ten things were created on [the first] Friday in the twilight of the evening”

As natural law needed to tolerate these unique tablets, they had to be planned with the creation of the substance of sapphire. This could not be created later, for the very blueprint of how sapphire forms must contain natural laws that would generate stones with embedded communication. As this would be a "property" of sapphire's substance, it must be set at the time that God endowed sapphire with its formative properties: during Creation.

“And Moses turned and descended from the mountain, and the two tablets of Testimony were in his hands; tablets written from both sides, from this side and that were they written. And the tables were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, were they, explained on the tablets.”

Why is Moses descent interrupted with this detailed description of the tablets? Why was this description of the tablets not included earlier (31:18) where we read, "And God gave to Moses"... "two tablets of testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God." It appears to me that the first account expresses the "purpose" of the tablets: testimony. Thus, we learn that the testament is in durable stone, and that the testament is a unique phenomenon. But when Moses is about to descend to the sinful Jews, we are told of the tablet's nature that conflicts with their idolatry: the tablets were "God's work," intended precisely to fend off idolatry. This aspect is relevant in connection with the idolatrous Jews, and therefore not mentioned until its relevance surfaces.

Now we understand the loss of the tablets: our knowledge of God has been impaired. This is the ultimate tragedy. What an amazing sight they must have been. Perhaps in the future, this will be the means by which God will make His name fill the Earth. For we do not know if the tablets were the only natural elements in which God embedded natural communication. And as this was God's will at Sinai, perhaps in the messianic era He will unveil this again to a more fitting generation. ■

FOOTNOTES

[1] Ibn Ezra rejects the notion that the letters Mem Sofit and Samech (shapes like "O") had miraculous center pieces floating. The letters were not hollowed from one side completely through to the other. They were simply written on the two faces of the stones, as the stones were thick. Alternatively, I suggest the letters were internal facets in the translucent sapphire, that could be seen on "both sides," like a crack can be seen from any side of a diamond. Furthermore, God does not perform impossibilities, so to have legible writing passing through a stone, with the exact wording seen on the opposite side, is not possible. God can do miracles, but not impossibilities. Similarly, God cannot create a circle that is a square.

[2] Exod. 32:15

**2 Million Jews
Witnessing God's Bible
Communication at Mt.
Sinai. A One-Time Event
of Mass Revelation.**

**All Other Religions
Have No Witnesses for
Their Claims. Therefore
they Demand
Blind Faith as they
Contain No Proof
of Divine Authorship.**

**Had Revelation Never
Occured, a History of a
Mass Event would have
Never Been Accepted or
Transmitted**

**Judaism
The Only True Religion**

Gentiles & Shavuot

RABBI REUVEN MANN

Should Gentiles Keep Shavuot? The Holiday of Shavuot is unique in that, unlike the other holy days, no specific date is assigned to it in the Torah. Rather, we begin the “Count of the Omer” on the second night of Passover and continue this activity until we have counted forty-nine days. The day which follows the culmination of the count assumes the status and holiness of Shavuot.

In that sense, this is not a stand-alone phenomenon. Rather, we must view Shavuot as the completion of the holiday of Passover. The objective of removing us from the enslavement of Pharaoh was to transform us into the nation of Hashem by receiving His Torah and establishing a holy society in the Land of Israel.

But are we to believe that the Torah is intended only for the Jews and for no others? If, indeed, the Torah contains the religious truths revealed by the Creator to His human subjects, why would it be limited to a small group who call themselves Jews?

We should note that the two major world religions, Christianity and Islam, have an interesting attitude to Torah. Both of these religions affirm that it is divine and therefore revere not only Moses but all of the Jewish prophets. Both religions however are not consistent in their attitudes. For if you believe that the Torah is from G-d then it must be true, and if so why don't you observe it? And why are you so mean to the Jews when they are the ones to whom it was given, and who safeguard it and make it available to you? A little appreciation might be in order?

Let us be clear: if the Torah is true and was given to us by Hashem, then the other religions must be man-made. To the extent that other religions retain principles of the Torah (such as, “love thy neighbor as thyself”) they do no harm, but when they depart from Torah and expound their own theological imaginations they deviate from the Word of the A-Mighty.

The Revelation at Mt. Sinai was not intended for Jews alone. Judaism maintains the ideal of the “Righteous Gentile”. He is someone who renounces idol worship and accepts upon himself the seven Noachide laws, which he conscientiously observes. He is considered to be on a very high religious level and merits a share in the world to come.

Judaism does not require or even expect

that he should convert and become a member of the Jewish people. If he should desire to do that, then a protocol is prepared for him. If the individual is sincere and wants to reach a higher level of personal holiness by adherence to the six hundred and thirteen commandments and be a full-fledged member of the Jewish community, he may enter a conversion program and at its successful completion become a new member of that special group.

However, the Covenant of Hashem whereby His Nation was established was executed with the Jews, the children of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov whose mode of divine worship found favor with the Creator. And He chose their descendants after them to be entrusted with His Torah, to preserve it and teach it to all mankind.

Those of us who are Jews by birth have been commanded to faithfully fulfill the Torah and its commandments and behave in a manner which inspires those who come in contact with us to admire and seek to emulate our behaviors. This is the meaning of living a life on the principle of Kiddush Hashem (Sanctification of the Divine Name).

It is legitimate to affirm that the Jews are the Chosen People, but that in no way implies any devaluation of gentiles. We are not permitted to act in a manner which would cause non-Jews to scoff at our inferior ethical qualities. One who does so desecrates Hashem's Name. And what if someone says, “why should I care what goyim think?”

The answer is, because Hashem, who created all humans in His Image desires that they have the opportunity to fulfill their spiritual potential and perfect their souls via adoption of the Torah philosophy. By acting in a foolish and corrupt manner, we turn them away from Hashem.

Hashem gave mankind the Torah which contains two tracks, the seven Noachide Laws which is the level of morality that all mankind must achieve; and the higher level of Kedusha (sanctity) reflected in the six hundred and thirteen commandments which only the Jews are obligated to fulfill. The Torah thus constitutes the Divine Revelation not just for the Jews but for all mankind.

There will never be another Torah given to mankind. All the prophets who came after Moshe did not make any alterations, neither through addition nor subtraction or modification, to the Mitzvot. Their entire objective was to strengthen and reinforce observance of the religious system contained in Torah.

The purpose of Shavuot is to affirm and celebrate Torah from Sinai. This is of extreme importance for Jews, for this is the basis and foundation of our religious existence and national identity. But I maintain that Gentiles

should celebrate Shavuot as well, for they also have a share in Torah. G-d wants them to keep the commandments intended for them, and thereby elevate their souls to an exalted level; which gives them the status of “righteous among the nations” and enables them to inherit a share in the world to come. May all of us merit it to achieve this.

Chag Shavuot Sameach. Shabbat Shalom. ■

Holiday Kedusha

RABBI ELIEZER BARANY

On six days work may be done, but on the seventh day there shall be a Shabbos of complete rest, a sacred occasion. You shall do no work; it shall be a Shabbos of the Lord throughout your settlements. (Sefer Vayikra 23:3)

1. Desecrating the holidays

Parshat Emor discuss the different holidays, the moadot, throughout the year. In the beginning of this discussion, however, the Torah starts speaking about Shabbos. The obvious question is, why should Shabbos be included? Shabbos is not a holiday! There are many answers given to this question, and many halachot that are learned out from here. However, I would merely like to understand the idea expressed by our sages, as quoted by Rashi:

What relation is there between Shabbos and the festive seasons? By putting both into juxtaposition it teaches you that he who desecrates the festivals is regarded as though he had desecrated the Shabbos, and that he who keeps the festivals is regarded as though he had kept the Shabbos (Sifra, Emor, Section 9:7). (Commentary of Rashi on Sefer Vayikra 23:2)

The Sifra explains that Shabbos was included in the list of holidays to teach us that if someone has violated a holiday, it is as if they have violated Shabbos, and someone who has observed the holiday, it is as if they have kept Shabbos. But why should that be the case? And is the inverse true? If one keeps Shabbos, is it as if they kept the holidays, and vice versa? It doesn't seem

that there is a two-way relationship that exists between the two. So what idea is being taught and why should it be that way? Additionally, the midrash explains that it is as if you violated or kept Shabbos. Of what value is that?

2. Equal kedusha

The Midrash Lekach Tov incorporates this midrash as well, but then it continues to say that all the moadot are called Shabbaton – a cessation of rest. Apparently the midrash explains that these two different categories have some sort of relationship as expressed by the language of Shabbaton as found in the Torah. The Malbim explains this issue with the following:

Shabbos should not have been included in the category of the festivals since Shabbos is sanctified and fixed and not sanctified through the court. Rather it just comes to teach you that a person shouldn't be lenient in the sanctity of the holidays even though they are announced through the court, because their sanctity is equal to the sanctity of Shabbos and their matter is one according to their secret and reasoning. And one who desecrates the holidays it is as if they desecrated Shabbos. (Commentary of Malbim on Sefer Vayikra 23:3)

The Malbim provides a few points. He explains that the Torah connected Shabbos and the holidays to embolden the esteem of the sanctity of the holiday in the eyes of the people and they are really equal in holiness. He points out that they are different in sanctity, but equal. Then he tells us that one who violates the holiday has so to speak violated Shabbos. However, he doesn't point out the other way, that violating Shabbos would be like violating the holidays. If their holiness is equal, why shouldn't that be the case?

3. Creation of the world

What do we know about Shabbos? We know that one who desecrates Shabbos is like an idol worshipper. Why should that be the case? The Rabbis explain that one who desecrates Shabbos denies God being the Creator of the world, and one who upholds Shabbos attests to God creating the world. Does this same principle apply to one who violates the holidays? The Gemara explains that one who disparages the holidays is like an idol worshipper. Is there any difference between these two things, violating or disparaging?

4. God's involvement in the world

The Rambam explains that "Everyone who treats the holidays with disrespect is considered as if he became associated with idol worship." Shabbos, as we said, expresses the creation of the world by Hashem. But what do the holidays do? Observing the holidays attests to the fact that God is involved in the world. Pesach testifies to God being involved in the affairs of mankind and creating a nation for the purpose of receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai, on Shavuot. So God gives man a class of knowledge to learn how to approach Him. Sukkos attests to God protecting the nation of Israel in the desert for forty years. Rosh Hashanah attests to the fact that God judges mankind and Yom Kippur demonstrates that God forgives the sin of man. So these are two different dimensions: Creator and God.

When a person keeps the holidays, they are attesting to God's involvement in the world. Now, who can be the One to manipulate the laws of nature to provide miracles for the people of Israel? Only the Power Who created those very laws. By keeping the holidays, one attests to the reality that God is involved in the world. As such, if one keeps the holidays, it is like they kept Shabbos because the God of the world must of necessity be the Creator of the world. However, by keeping Shabbos, one is really only attesting to the Creator of the world. One does not speak about anything beyond that. Now, I believe we can understand the Malbim.

5. The Malbim

The Malbim is saying that holidays share the same sanctity of Shabbos. By not acknowledging God, Who is involved in the affairs of man, one automatically denies the Creator of the world because the only Being Who could manipulate the laws of nature would be the One Who created them. Additionally, one who disparages the holidays is like an idolator. The Malbim explained that since holidays are established by the court, not God, people look down on it. Since it is established by man, people might disparage them. But something established by God? That, no one who is involved with Torah would have an inkling to disparage.

6. Egypt and Mount Sinai

And I believe this adds an element to an understanding found in the Aseret Hadibros, which we of course read on Shavuot.

I am the Lord your God Who brought you

out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage. Sefer Shemot 20:2)

It has been asked by many why God identifies Himself as the One Who took out the Jews from Egypt. Why didn't He identify Himself as the Creator of the World? So the Kuzari famously explains that no one was there at the time of the creation, so it could not be incumbent upon us to follow the Creator. Rather, His realness is proven through the Jews receiving the signs and wonders of God, and being present as an entire nation to receive the Torah from God. Hopefully this Shavuot we can recognize the event that proves that God relates to man and realize how fortunate we are to part of that relationship. ■