

TERUMAH (EXODUS 25:1-27:19)

Broken Promises, Broken Tablets, and Broken Hearts

2003 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplovitz

Aron – Translation: Ark, coffin)

Every Synagogue has an *Aron*, a Holy Ark, where the Torah scrolls are stored. This *Aron* is based on the original *Aron*, a wood-and-gold box that housed the Tablets of the Ten Commandments. (See "Heavy Metal".)

When G-d told Moses to build the Tabernacle, an itinerant Temple that traveled with the Israelites in the desert, the *Aron* was one of the principle furnishings of that Temple. This gilded container was covered with a slab of pure gold that was molded to include two statues on top. These two golden statues, the Cherubim, are the only exception to the Law prohibiting graven images. According to the Talmud, these winged statues bore the faces of children. More about the Cherubim later.

You will place into the Aron the Testimony that I will give you. (Exodus, 25:15) As we know, Moses came down from Mt. Sinai with two stone Tablets with the Ten Commandments engraved on them. To his shock and dismay, he saw that the Israelites had quickly broken their promise to follow G-d's Torah. He discovered his People worshiping the Golden Calf. Moses immediately threw the Tablets to the ground, smashing them. After a later ascent of Mt. Sinai, he returned with a second set of Tablets. Moses placed both sets of Tablets into the *Aron*.

The Talmud (Menachos 99a) deduces from the inclusion of the broken Tablets into the *Aron* that a Torah scholar who forgets his learning should still be respected. Stones that once contained G-d's Commandments retain their sanctity even after their destruction. A person who dedicated his life to acquiring wisdom of G-d's Law retains his dignity even after that wisdom has left him.

The same can be said of any human being. A human is, when all is said and done, a mammal comprising several dollars worth of minerals. However, a human is, of course, so much more. *And He blew into his nostrils a living soul...* (Genesis, 2:7) A human body is the receptacle into which G-d places a *Neshama*, an Immortal Soul that lives on even after the body fails. A human body that no longer houses that *Neshama* is placed, like the Broken Tablets, into an *Aron*.

There are many thoughts that go through my mind when trying to absorb the tragedy that occurred last Shabbos morning. I will share with you but one of those thoughts.

In one respect, Ilan Ramon was more fortunate than too many of his fellow Israelis. He, like many others, went to work and never came home. According to reports I heard today, his remains have been identified, and he will be brought to burial. Not everyone is so “lucky.” He is mourned by millions across the world. Millions, if not billions of dollars will be spent in the attempt to insure that such a disaster never happens again. If an explosion kills several dozen Israelis, the world shrugs its collective shoulders. Another day, another dead Jew. Some things never change.

Let us pray that Israel and the world be spared future anguish.

There is a contradiction in descriptions of the Cherubim. Exodus 25:20 tells us that they stood ...*with their faces toward one another*... Chronicles 2, 3:14 says that*... they stood on their feet facing the House.*

Which way did the Cherubs face, toward each other or toward the back of the Temple? The Talmud (Bava Basra 99a) answers that it was both. Most commentaries understand the Talmud as stating that the Cherubim functioned miraculously. When Israel did G-d’s will, the Cherubim faced each other, while when we violated G-d’s will, they faced away from each other.

During the Pilgrim Festivals, when Jews from all over came to Jerusalem, the curtain that usually obscured the view of the *Aron* was opened so that the People could see the Cherubim embracing each other, symbolizing G-d’s love for His People.

There is, however, a problem with this interpretation. When the Babylonians destroyed the Temple, they ridiculed the fact that the Cherubim were embracing each other. (Yoma 54b) In view of the fact that the Temple was destroyed due to the sins of our People, wouldn’t we expect the Babylonians to find the Cherubim facing away from each other, signifying G-d’s anger?

There are a number of solutions offered to this question. I would like to offer my own humble suggestion.

G-d promised Jacob that He would follow him to Egypt. (Genesis, 46:4) When we are in exile, G-d “joins” us in exile. Even as the Babylonians ransacked our Holy Temple, G-d allowed the Cherubim to continue their embrace. Even as He punished Israel, He demonstrated His love for Israel. We are never alone.

I listened to the Secretary of State speaking the other day. I also listened to the “United Ostriches” with their collective heads in the sand. It doesn’t look promising...

May G-d grant wisdom to our President. Let us all pray that someday soon the world will become a safe, genuinely peaceful place. May G-d bless us all, and may G-d bless America. Amen.

Have a great Shabbos.

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