

And by all the strong hand and awesome power that Moshe performed before the eyes of all Yisrael. (34:12)

Rashi explains that the “strong hand” is a reference to Moshe Rabbeinu accepting the Luchos from Hashem in his hands. Although the Luchos were of extraordinary weight, Moshe was able to carry them. “Before the eyes of all Yisrael” refers to Moshe’s decision to break the Luchos in the presence of the entire nation. Hashem ratified his action, as Chazal say, Ye’yasher kochacha sheh’sheebarta’, Hashem thanked him for breaking the Luchos. We wonder if it had really been necessary for Moshe to break the Luchos. Why not simply put them away until such time that the people performed teshuvah, repented, and would be worthy of receiving them? Furthermore, how was Moshe able to break them? It is not as if they were constructed of ordinary material. The Luchos were Hashem’s handiwork and, as such, should have been unbreakable by man. Last, while we can understand why Hashem did not take issue with Moshe’s action, why did He affirm it? Moshe apparently felt that the people were not worthy of the Luchos. Thus, it would be inappropriate to give it to them until they had undergone a complete transformation. Why, then, was Hashem pleased with Moshe’s decision? It seems that Moshe sought to impart to Klal Yisrael an important lesson, one with which Hashem concurred.

An old adage, attributed to the Kotzker Rebbe, zl, asserts, “There is nothing so whole as a broken heart.” Life is filled with different situations, moments of joy and happiness; confidence; a sense of excitement; love and healing. There are also moments in life that appear to be shattered, occasions when the rose garden we thought we had seems to be more like a thorn bush. We are confronted with emotional and physical pain, trauma, financial challenges, and a gamut of issues involving our children. We live through the sunshine and the rain, the whole and the fragmented stages of life. They all meld together into the great experience called “life.”

We have no idea why we must endure the shattered moments of life. Hashem, however, considers them to be an essential part of our existence. Chazal teach us that the Shivrei Luchos, broken fragments of the Luchos, were kept in the Aron HaKodesh right next to the whole Luchos. This conveys a powerful message: The broken moments of life are just as significant for our growth as the whole moments. Hashem’s Presence abides not only in the complete Luchos, but in the shattered ones, as well. This is why Hashem thanked Moshe for his initiative in breaking the Luchos. Concealing them would not communicate the message of hope to which the broken Luchos allude. A Jew must never give up. Even in adversity, Hashem is ever present. This lesson

was Moshe's everlasting and greatest achievement. Many of us, at one time or another, go through trials and tribulations that briefly shatter our lives. The broken Luchos convey the lesson of hope – our leader's enduring legacy to his nation.

Alternatively, we may explain the anomaly of the shattered Luchos after first gaining a deeper insight into the sin of the Golden Calf, which catalyzed this searing response. When we go back to the Torah's recounting of the sin, we are confronted with a number of questions. The Torah begins with a description of the Luchos as being "inscribed by the finger of G-d" (Shemos 31:18). Hashem then told Moshe to descend from the mountain, since the nation had quickly degenerated, straying by making a golden calf. Hashem wanted to destroy the people. Moshe supplicated to Hashem and He listened. Then, as Moshe was about to descend, the Torah adds another aspect to its description of the Luchos: "Moshe turned and descended from the mountain, with the Two Tablets of the Testimony in his hand, Tablets inscribed on both their sides; they were inscribed on one side and the other" (Ibid. 32:15,16). Why does the Torah deem it necessary to amplify its description of the Luchos, and why does it do so specifically shortly before Moshe broke the Luchos? Indeed, in addition to the fact that they were inscribed by Hashem, the Torah finds it necessary to add that they were inscribed on both sides. Is there significance to the fact that, miraculously, one could look through the Luchos?

Now that we have presented questions concerning the Luchos, let us understand exactly what was the sin concerning the Golden Calf. Moshe was "late" in returning from the mountain, or so Klal Yisrael thought. They felt that they could not function without Moshe. They needed something or someone tangible, a corporeal intermediary to whom they could relate. They were not yet ready to accept the fact that Hashem is a personal G-d, such that an intermediary is not only unnecessary but is categorically wrong. The Jewish People were not prepared to process the spiritual dimension of their lives. Accepting another dimension that was not tangible was unreal for them, a foreign concept. Whatever they saw, they viewed through a one-dimensional perspective. Thus, when Moshe did not appear, they demanded a replacement, and the Golden Calf was something they could touch and feel. It seemed real to them.

The Luchos were engraved through and through to convey the message that something deeper exists beyond the confines of our one-dimensional perception. Through our relationship with the Torah, we developed a sense of trust in Hashem, granting us the ability to see through the ambiguities that, at times, cloud our lives. One must be worthy of receiving such Luchos. Klal Yisrael's choice of a golden calf dispelled this fact. They were not ready for such clarity of vision.

While this approach explains why they should not have received the Luchos, why did Moshe have to break them? They could have been concealed until a time when the people would realize their significance. Apparently, Moshe sought to teach the people the meaning of reality. We are used to thinking that if we can see it and touch it, it is real. Matters of the spirit are not real – they are supernatural. This was the basis of Klal Yisrael's error. It was necessary for them to realize that, without spirituality, nothing is real. It is merely broken shards. The people were taught that Luchos which one can see through from front to back – and vice versa – are spiritual in nature, but how? Just because they were inscribed miraculously, did not necessarily mean that they were spiritual.

Have we ever wondered how Moshe was able to break Hashem's handiwork? First of all, how does one possibly break something which was made by Hashem? Second, the Luchos were holy and, as such, it would take someone with "big shoulders" to undertake breaking them. How did Moshe do such a thing? The Ramban alludes to this question when he writes that as soon as Moshe brought the Luchos within the perimeter surrounding the Golden Calf, the letters on the Luchos flew off and ascended Heavenward. The Luchos were of such a holy nature that they could not exist together with the spiritual pollution of sinful behavior. We now understand how Moshe took it upon himself to break the Luchos. They were no longer on the same spiritual plane as before he had accepted them. The people were not ready to receive this holy gift. Thus, they lost it. When Moshe saw the letters fly off the Luchos, he understood that this nation was no longer worthy. He was now left with two tablets of stone, because the essence of the Luchos was no longer present. Moshe broke the stone, because its reality was gone. This was his lesson to the people. The reality of an object is its connection to spirituality. Without its spiritual essence, it is not real. The Torah emphasizes the supernatural nature of the Luchos, for this was the area in which the nation went wrong. They thought reality was defined by tangibility. Moshe showed them otherwise. This enduring "lesson" remained side by side with the replacement Luchos, so that the people would never forget the meaning of reality.

Perhaps this is the relationship between the Golden Calf and the Red Heifer. Chazal teach us that the mitzvah of Parah Adumah, Red Heifer, was given to us to serve as atonement for the Golden Calf: "Let the Mother (Red Heifer) come and clean up the mess made by its child (Golden Calf)." How are the two related? Certainly, it goes beyond the fact that they are both members of the bovine family.

When we think about it, the laws concerning the Parah Adumah are paradoxical. The mere fact that the Kohen who prepares the ashes of the Parah Adumah with water to be sprinkled on the one who is tamei meis, spiritually defiled from coming in contact with a dead body, becomes himself tamei,

while the one who was tamei, is cleansed, is in itself the greatest mystery. The fact that a mixture of ashes and water can cleanse one who is spiritually unclean is not much less of a mystery. The lesson I believe is that mystery is defined by that which we, in our limited minds, cannot grasp. Is it any different than the Jews' definition of reality? They thought that touching and feeling define reality. They were wrong. Parah Adumah teaches us that we must believe in a higher concept of cognition, an understanding that extends beyond that to which our minds can relate. This is where emunah, faith, enters into the equation. A Jew understands what his limited mind can fathom. After that, he relies on faith. Judaism is all about the leap of faith that we must take when our minds no longer understand. This is the "mother's" lesson: A Jew must have faith in the Almighty. Otherwise, life just does not make sense.