

TWO TABLETS: PRESCRIPTION FOR JEWISH OBSERVANCE

by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene

The Ten Commandments (Shemos 22:2-17, Devarim 5:6-21) as spoken by G-d to the Jewish nation at Sinai were engraved upon the Shnei Luchos Habris, Two Tablets of the Covenant. The first Five Commandments belong to the category of laws between "man and his Creator" while the remaining Five Commandments are precepts between "man and man".

The Ten Commandments engraved upon the tablets of stone and brought down by Moshe from G-d to the Jewish people are accorded a special distinction over all the other 613 precepts.

The question is: why? What is so special about the Ten Commandments over and above all the other mitzvos that were also given at Sinai? Why was there this division into "two" tablets, which, in turn, parallel two categories of mitzvos?

The foundation for Jewish observance is to firmly establish the relationship between G-d the "Source" and Israel the "product".

The first stage is for Israel's national acceptance of G-d as their Sovereign. This is the cornerstone to foster the developing of a relationship. Once the king's authority has been asserted, there is then the unfolding of the second stage: where his power is exercised by issuing decrees and edicts over his subjects.

The Jewish nation acceptance of Torah at Sinai is characterised as "the wedding day" (Shir HaShirim 3:11 and Rashi ad.loc) - in the marital union between G-d and Israel.

It was this which marked the striking of an eternal bris, "covenant".

The "two" parties forging a "covenant" so-to-speak "cut" part of themselves to fuse their very identities with the other. They gloriously become one entity. Their existence is itself defined via their relationship with the other party and the eternal bond created which is indelibly engraved upon their being. (This is, of course, a far cry from an impersonal, non-committal partnership where the parties have, at best, a "pareve" affinity that is extrinsic and unlikely to last.)

The Ten Commandments written upon the Two Tablets are comparable to the Kesubah, "marriage contract" drawn up as the essential contractual terms under which a Jewish man and woman enter into Jewish matrimony. Herein the parties pledge their allegiance and the principle obligations to each other thereafter. (The Avos deRabbi Nosson 2:3 fascinatingly explains this is why Moshe smashed the Two Tablets, tearing up the marriage contract, when the Children of Israel were

disloyal by worshipping the Golden Calf and had to provide a substitute upon their national repentance).

The Ten Commandments forge this eternal relationship.

The covenant struck between "two" parties, affirming the relationship between G-d as the "Source" and Israel as the "product", is mirrored in the Ten Commandments inscribed upon the Shnei Luchos HaBris, "Two" Tablets of the "Covenant". The emphasis is on how this relates to the eternal bris, "covenant" of Torah that unites man and his Creator.

How this bond is intrinsic to the national Jewish psyche is magnificently captured in the Ten Commandments engraved through the thickness of the Tablets - such that the letters and stone were inseparably one.

Herein is included the symmetrical record of the laws pertaining both to man's relationship to "G-d" and to "man". The first grouping, those of "man-G-d laws", relate to G-d the "Source" while the second grouping, those of "interpersonal laws", relates to man, the "product".

Side-by-side, the Ten Commandments are the microcosm to all 613 Commandments (See Bamidbar Rabbah 13:15). They embrace the acceptance of G- d's Sovereignty at Sinai as the essential platform for strict adherence to all the other 613 laws in the Torah, which serve to polish and perfect man to become more G-dly.

Through its symbolism of the "eternal covenant" between man and G-d, of two parties inextricably bound in their mutual relationship, the Two Tablets are, quite simply, the doctor's perfect prescription for Jewish observance. The course is presented by Osher Chaim Levene, author of SET IN STONE (2004: Targum) about the meaning of mitzvah observance and PEOPLE OF THE BOOK (2007: Targum) about the biblical personalities. A London-based writer and educator, he learned at the Gateshead and Mir Yeshivas, holds a Bachelor of Science (Honors) business degree from London's City University, and is a Member of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors.