

FREEDOM

by Rabbi Yisroel Ciner

This week's parsha, Ki Tisa, contains the Chait Ha'Egel [the Sin of the Golden Calf] and the subsequent breaking of the Luchos [tablets upon which the Ten Commandments were inscribed].

"And he (Moshe) turned and descended from the mountain with the two tablets of testimony in his hand... And the tablets were the work of Elokim {G-d} and the writing was the writing of Elokim, charus [engraved] upon the tablets... And it was when he came close to the camp and he saw the calf... and he threw the tablets from his hand and he broke them. [32:15-19]"

This description that the luchos [tablets] were charus [engraved] seems to be out of place. That should have been mentioned earlier when the luchos were first introduced: "And He (Hashem) gave to Moshe... the two tablets of testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of Elokim. [31:18]" Why was this description delayed until the Torah spoke of the breaking of these luchos?

The Kli Yakar writes that this description of the luchos actually explains why Moshe deemed it necessary to break them. The Medrash teaches that the term should not be read charus [engraved] but rather chairus, meaning, freedom. The luchos, the Torah, grant a freedom that allows a person to soar above this mundane world. It was the words of Hashem that created the world. When studying and connecting to Hashem's words that were given to us in the luchos/Torah, one's own spiritual world is created. By connecting to the Golden Calf, Bnei Yisroel [the Children of Israel] showed that they were not yet worthy of this freedom. Moshe therefore broke the luchos.

A fantastic story, told in the book entitled Vintage Wein, offers a poignant glimpse of this freedom.

During the Vietnam War, a marine suffered physical injuries and psychological damage. He was sent to the Veterans Hospital in the middle of New Jersey. While there, he expressed an interest in studying about his Jewish heritage and he was granted a visit to the Lakewood Yeshiva. He grew interested in learning Torah and the Navy acceded to his request that during his recuperation he be granted leave to study full-time at the Yeshiva.

While there, he became committed to Torah study and observance, all the while receiving full disability pay from the Navy. A board would periodically monitor his eligibility and after three years they recommended that payments be suspended as he had recovered. The ex-marine appealed this decision and a special tribunal of three naval officers was chosen to review this case.

The navy argued that he had made a full recovery and was functioning on a high intellectual and

emotional level. He countered that his vocational goal was to become a Torah scholar and eventually he would leave Lakewood and become a teacher.

The panel challenged the ex-marine asking why they should support a religious vocation. They explained that they were not authorized to support Rabbinical preparation.

The student explained that he was not training to be a Rabbi rather a talmid chacham. When asked for a definition of that term, he explained that a talmid chacham is a person who knows right from wrong and can help others to make ethical decisions. I know enough to become a Rabbi but I still must learn more to become a talmid chacham.

Things didn't look too promising until one of the panelists, a former commander, spoke up. "I have seen talmid kokums in action!" he said, unable to pronounce the guttural 'ch' sound. "They read from those long books."

He told his co-panelists that when he was the commander of a destroyer in the China Sea during the Korean War, a Jewish Chaplain asked permission to study Talmud with two Jewish sailors. "This chaplain was a talmid kokum and studied Talmud regularly."

"We were off the coast of China for three straight months. When we finally hit port in Japan it was a wild scene--even before we docked, fights were breaking out to see who would be first off the ship. As discipline was breaking down in front of my eyes, this chaplain and the two Jewish sailors were learning their Talmud on the port main deck, oblivious to all the commotion. Well, their quiet scholarliness affected the others. My men couldn't help noticing that the talmid kokums were studying and not behaving like madmen. Their example served as a calming affect on the rest of the crew.

"I recommend that we grant this man another year of full compensation. Being a talmid kokum is serious business. We can call it occupational therapy if you want."

Not charus [engraved] but chairus--freedom, rising above the mundane. Moshe broke the first luchos but after repentance and prayer the second luchos and the Torah were given.

True freedom is within our grasp.

Good Shabbos,
Yisroel Ciner

L'iluy nishmas Avi Mori Asher Chaim ben Tzvi, hk"m. TNZB"H

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