The Second Set of the Tablets of the Law: Thoughts on Parashat Ki Tissa, March 6, 2010

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The Me'am Lo'ez, the classic Ladino biblical commentary (Turkey, 18th century), draws on midrashic sources in describing the two sets of the Ten Commandments. The original Revelation on Mount Sinai was a highly dramatic episode. Moses ascended the mountain, as the people of Israel gathered below with great anticipation. The scene was marked by thunder and lightning and the sound of the shofar.The voice of God was heard by all.

Yet, shortly afterward, the Israelites were dancing around a golden calf! When Moses came down the mountain and witnessed this idolatrous behavior, he threw down and shattered the tablets of the law.

Later, Moses ascended the mountain again. This time, there was no public fanfare, no miraculous sounds and lights. God told Moses that he himself would have to carve out the stone on which the Ten Commandments would be inscribed. The second set of the tablets of the law--received by Moses alone and through his own hard labor--was preserved.

The first tablets of the Ten Commandments, given with so much drama, were destroyed. The second tablets, given privately and quietly, survived and became the spiritual foundation of the people of Israel.

The Me'am Lo'ez points to the moral of this story: the really important and lasting things in life are often done by individuals in privacy, through their own exertions. Things done with much publicity may not be as permanent. We ought not judge the value of a person or an event based on external glitter and fame. Rather, we ought to realize that greatness and permanent value are often found in obscurity, in seemingly small and unnoticed acts of kindness or spiritual insight.

External fame, power, and popularity do not necessarily correlate to internal worth. What is truly important is what we do through the sweat of our own brow, quietly, without seeking publicity or glory. What is valuable and lasting in us are those things which are authentic, honest and good in the eyes of God, and which bring goodness and kindness to our fellow human beings.

***Pessah is fast approaching. If you would like to order copies of Rabbi M. Angel's Sephardic Haggada or Gilda Angel's "Sephardic Holiday Cooking" cookbook, please order through the Institute's online store at www.jewishideas.org. Please order right away so you can have these books in time for Passover.

Angel for Shabbat