The Whole Truth: Thoughts for Parashat Ekev

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By

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In reviewing the history of the Israelites since the Exodus, Moses reminded them of the two sets of Tablets of the Law. The first set was given with much fanfare at Mount Sinai. Yet, when Moses found the Israelites worshipping the golden calf, he threw down the stone Tablet and shattered it into pieces. He then ascended the mountain a second time, after which he brought down the second set of Tablets of the Law.

The Talmud (Berakhot 8b) reports the tradition that both sets of Tablets--the shattered and the whole-- were kept in the ark. A moral lesson is drawn that we should show honor to elderly sages who have forgotten their Torah due to their mental decline in old age. Just as we honored them when they were "whole", so we are to honor them when they are "shattered". The shattered Tablets and the whole Tablets are revered.

Perhaps we can draw another lesson from the placement of both sets of Tablets in the ark. Each individual has strengths, virtues, accomplishments. These reflect us at our best, when we are "whole". But each individual also has weaknesses, moral blemishes, failures. These reflect the "shatterings" within us. What are we to do with our failures?

One approach is to ignore our shortcomings, and concentrate only on our strengths. This is the way of ego-centrism and arrogance. Another approach is to focus on our shortcomings to such an extent that we become guilt-ridden and self-hating. This is the way of negativity, making us feel powerless and unworthy.

The holy ark teaches us how to be "whole" human beings: we store both sets of Tablets within our holy arks--our inner selves. We recognize our good qualities, but we do not disdain our failures. We bring our "shattered" selves along with our "intact" selves. We learn from our errors. If we are contrite about foolish decisions, missed opportunities, for failing others when they needed us--we cannot let these failings destroy us; but neither can we go on with our lives as though they never happened. We live as "whole" human beings when we can integrate our virtues and vices, our strengths and weaknesses, our successes and

failures. The "whole" Tablets remind us of how good we can be. The "shattered"Tablets remind us how we have sometimes fallen short--but how we can regain our footing and do better next time.

The ark in the Mishkan held both sets of Tablets of the Law, just as our inner selves hold both sets of our own personal Tablets of our lives. Ultimately, this strategy teaches us humility as well as confidence; it teaches us to look to our strengths but not to forget our weaknesses; it helps us strive to become whole human beings.

Angel for Shabbat