Angel for Shabbat/Pessah

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By

Rabbi Marc Angel

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The Torah portion for Shabbat Hol haMo'ed Pessah includes the description of Moses ascending Mt. Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments a second time. The first tablets were cast down and shattered when Moses found the Israelites worshipping a golden calf.

The Talmud suggests that the shattered pieces of the first set were placed in the ark together with the whole second set of tablets. "*Luhot veshivrei luhot munahot ba'aron*" (Berakhot 8b). I have previously interpreted this to be symbolic of the nature of each human being. We have "whole" unblemished aspects of our lives, things of which we are proud. But we also have "broken pieces"—mistakes, disappointments, unfulfilled aspirations. We are a composite of both "sets of tablets." If we focus only on our successes and achievements, we become self-satisfied and arrogant. If we focus only on our failures, we lose confidence and self-respect. We keep balance by maintaining both "sets of tablets" in a healthy way.

The tablets of the commandments represent a covenant between God and us. They are symbols of what we can be at our best. But the fact that one of the sets was shattered indicates that we can fall very short of our best.

During the current covid 19 pandemic, we can see the two sets of tablets reflected in humanity.

The whole tablets—humanity at its best. Health care workers devoting themselves to healing the sick; scientists working to come up with cures and vaccines; police, fire departments, delivery people, grocery staffs, postal workers, building staffs etc. We see so many people striving to maintain our spirits via online prayers, shiurim, articles of encouragement. Many government officials are working long hours to guide us through this crisis as best as possible. We hear of employers who keep paying their employees even when their businesses aren't operating. We know of generous souls who contribute to support worthy institutions and to help people in need. We see tremendous idealism and self-sacrifice on the part of so many.

The broken tablets—humanity at its worst. Scammers who seek to exploit fears and anxieties, and who cheat people out of their money; haters/racists who blame Jews or other groups for spreading the virus; "religious" leaders and communities that ignore the social isolation rules and bring on disease and death to their followers; gougers who raise prices inordinately on products that people must have; hoarders who show no concern for the needs of others. We see greed, hatred, selfishness etc.

The "ark" of humanity contains whole tablets and shattered tablets. Humanity can be extraordinarily great or disappointingly bad. Our current crisis reflects us at our best…and at our worst.

Let's look further into the Torah reading for Hol haMo'ed Pessah.

Shortly after describing Moses' receiving the second set of Ten Commandments, the Torah portion segues to commandments relating to the Israelites' future entry into the Promised Land. Then it lists laws about the observance of Pessah and other holy days. The juxtaposition of these themes invites interpretation.

The first set of tablets were shattered under dire circumstances. But the story did not come to an end at that point. Moses ascended to receive a second set that remained intact. In spite of the original failure and frustration, there was now a second chance, an opportunity to reclaim the covenant with God with new and whole tablets. After this second set was given, God then exhorted the people to think ahead to better times. The Israelites would eventually enter the Promised Land. They would observe festival days with joy and thanksgiving.

During this covid 19 crisis, we see the whole and the broken tablets of humanity. Both are part of the human reality. But the Torah reminds us to think ahead, to look to better times. It calls on us to pick up the broken pieces and regain our sense of balance and commitment to the future.

It also challenges us to rise to be the best that we can be. Each of us can—and must—contribute to the integrity of humanity's whole tablets, humanity at its best. We need to enlarge the space given to humanity's fixed tablets, and confine the broken pieces to a tiny corner.

May the Almighty bless all of us with good health…physical, spiritual, emotional, mental, financial etc. May the current plague come to a speedy conclusion. As the Almighty redeemed our ancestors from servitude in Egypt, may He redeem us from the pandemic and bless us with good health and happiness.

THE SYMBOLS OF PESSAH: Here's a link to a short article on the symbols of Pessah. Although this year, Pessah will be experienced very differently from past years, the ongoing symbols have much to teach us: https://www.jewishideas.org/passover-symbols-symbols-our-lives-0

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