


CHABAD

RESEARCH UNIT

שבת..... *for Friday nights* קדש

Friday 17 February 2017 - 21 Shevat 5777
Sedra Yitro

THE ENGRAVED TABLETS

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS WHICH APPEAR IN THIS WEEK'S SEDRA¹ are the core of Jewish teachings. Embroidered designs, silver engravings and reliefs of the two tablets of stone decorate our Torah scroll mantles and the Ark in the Synagogue. They are Jewish emblems the world over.

Everything in Judaism is significant. We might think that the actual ten laws, and the many other laws of Judaism, of which these are a kind of summary, are the most important thing. But the fact that these laws were given to the Jewish people in the form of engraved stone tablets is surely meaningful. This fact is telling us something.

As we know, the two stone tablets were engraved with the words of the Ten Commandments. In fact, the Talmud tells us, the engraved letters went all the way through the stone. This is a very specific mode of writing, contrasting with the Torah scroll, which is in the form of ink on parchment.

Chassidic teachings point out that the idea of an engraving on stone expresses a greater level of unity, of integration, than does ink on parchment. Ink can be rubbed off, erased. The words, however holy



In Loving Memory of Mrs Jeanne Gewolb-Sostrin
 (Yenta bas Devora) ע"ה - 15 Tevet 5772
 Dedicated by her son Dr Roger Gewolb שי'

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they may be, are potentially separate from the parchment on which they are written.

The message of the engraved tablets is that ultimately the Jewish relationship with Torah is that of an engraving. The writing and the medium are one and can never be separated. The Torah is simply an integral part of the Jew.

It might be that at any given moment this unity with the Torah may not be apparent. We could imagine that the engraved words have been covered with dust, and are therefore temporarily hidden. But the dust can easily be washed away. The true nature of the person within is revealed - a person for whom the Divine teachings of the Torah are part of their very being².

THE HUMILITY OF STONE

Another way of understanding the Tablets has to do with the material of which they were made: stone.

We can consider existence as divided into the realms of Animal, Vegetable, and Mineral. Above these stands Humanity. The Torah Scroll is made up of Animal (parchment) together with Vegetable (ink). Lower than these is the stone of the Tablets which Moses received at Sinai. The stone expresses the idea of the simplest level, mute humility and acceptance³.

This is the quality which we need when we come to serve G-d. The levels of Vegetable and Animal can be an expression of self and of pride, leading toward the category of the human, who all too often are focused on their own selves.

As human beings, at the top of the scale, we seek to gain from stone the quality of humility. In addition to the Ten Commandments engraved on them, this too is the teaching of the Tablets, helping us to be unified with G-d.

1. Exodus chapters 18-20. 2. Based freely on Rabbi Shneur Zalman's *Likkutei Torah* beginning of Bechukotai. 3. See R. Shneur Zalman's *Torah Or*, section Vayigash.

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SEDRA YITRO

DECIDING TO RESPECT

Jessica was furious with her mother. She had refused to let her buy that outfit and it was driving her crazy. For goodness' sake, nearly her whole class had that style top; why couldn't she?

Jessica tightened her lips. She didn't speak to her mother for the rest of the day, ignoring her hurt looks. Jessica glared up at her bedroom ceiling. *Parents*, she thought. *Always in your way and never letting you do anything*. A little freedom, that's all she wanted.

She gazed at herself in the mirror, imagining herself wearing that gorgeous top – she'd look so good in it. Suddenly there was a knock and her father came in.

"Hello, Jessie," he said, sitting on the chair by her desk. "Hello," Jessica muttered.

"How was your day?" "Terrible."

"Aw, it couldn't have been. You went shopping, I thought."
"Yes, but Mum wouldn't let me get that top everybody's wearing."

"Did she tell you why?" Her father asked, frowning slightly.

"No, she didn't.... Not really..." "Oh, she told me she did. She didn't think it was modest enough."

Jessica sighed. "Oh my *gosh*. My whole class is wearing that type of top, dad. Even Lea." Lea was known to be one of the most modest girls in the class.

Her mother suddenly popped her head round the door, and said, “Well, some people have different standards, and I don’t think it looks right. But, you know what? I would rather it was *your* decision. If you really want to get it, I won’t stop you.” She drew back her head. Jessica smiled. *At last.*

But her father was still in her room. “You know, Jess, I think you should respect Mummy’s wishes and not get it,” he said. “Did you know that in this week’s Torah portion, Yitro, it says you should honour your parents?”

“Yes, of course, in the Ten Commandments. We learned *all* about it.” Jessica wished they could get back to talking about the outfit and the top. It had looked so good. And now Mum says she could buy it.

But her father continued, doggedly, “I think there’s a lot to learn from the idea of honouring your mother. One is that even if you don’t agree with her now, I think that later you will value what she said. She was faced with similar pressures when she was your age. She understands, and she thinks this kind of top is wrong, even if other girls are wearing it. Anyway, I thought you liked being different to other people?”

Jessica swallowed. “That’s true, but – this is different...”

“Look, I understand how you feel. So, as Mummy said, we can buy it, if you really want it, and Mummy will try not to criticise. Or, you can respect her wishes and do as she says. She loves you and only wants the best for you.”

For a few moments there was silence.

“Fine.” Jessica took a deep breath. “Maybe she’s right. I’ll get the other one that was there. I think it looked okay.”

“That’s my girl.” Her father kissed her on the forehead and left the room.

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