

## Breaking the Luchot: Let's Get Ready to Rumble

By Mordechai Plotsker | February 17, 2022

### Parshas Ki Tisa

Rebellion! "Go down from the mountain and witness your nation merrily dance before a golden calf!" said God (Shemot 32:19). Chaos and mayhem engulfed the camp as Moshe descended into a spiritual abyss! The irascible shock culminated in an act of unbridled anger as Moshe took matters into his own hands, so to speak, by smashing the Luchot, engraved by God Himself, into pieces. (Deafening silence.)

And yet, despite Moshe's public display of anger, his decision was applauded and accepted by our Sages, not just in the Babylonian but Jerusalem Talmud as well. "Yafeh sheshibarta, good that you broke them (the Luchot)." One act of anger, and everyone across the Jewish diaspora is pleased with the result! Incredible! Take Reish Lakish, who explains "which you broke" (Shemot 34:1) to infer that God was supportive of Moshe's decision (BT Shabbat, 87a), and Rav Chilkiya, who justified Moshe's anger and subsequent shattering of the Luchot at the bottom of the mountain! (YT Taanit, 4:5).

How could anger be acceptable in this instance but unacceptable, for example, at the Mei Meriva, which resulted in Moshe being denied entry to Israel? Is there room to accept that anger is sometimes necessary, and if so, how do we envision that risk framework to operate?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks suggests the answers to these two questions can be found in the Rambam's Mishnah Torah, Hilchot Dei'ot, 2:3, wherein he instructs us to keep far from anger, and to stay calm even when provoked, for "one who yields to anger is as if he worshiped idols" (BT Shabbat 105b). Our sages also said, "Whoever yields to anger, if he is wise, his wisdom deserts him, and if he is a prophet, his prophecy leaves him" (BT Pesachim 66b), and that "The life of an irascible person is not a life for it can destroy his house and lead to ill effects" (BT Nedarim 22a). But Moshe did get angry!

The issue with anger is that it is a high-risk strategy since it may provoke an angry response, making a tense situation worse, not better. To address this, Rambam presents a qualifier by stating that if one wants to instill reverence in his children and family, and his desire is to show them his anger so as to bring them back to good, he should only appear to be angry, if only to provide a shock effect and reprove them. Internally, however, one must not be angry at all. (Mishnah Torah, Hilchot Mamrim, 6:9).

Therefore, it is the contention of Rabbi Sacks that when people are dancing around an idol, Moshe was correct to visually display his anger since it was effective messaging, sending shockwaves through the nation and causing an immediate cessation of disloyal conduct. However, when there is no water and the people are crying out in thirst, it is wrong to get angry for that would be a time for prayer (Rambam's Shemoneh Perakim, Chapter 4).

Yes, Moshe shocked the Jewish people with his unilateral decision to break the Luchot. Yes, his anger was visible and he was shocked beyond the pale. However, in a moment's notice, there was the same Moshe, evidencing his profound love for the Jewish people, launching into one of the most riveting supplications ever presented before God. Moshe never stopped fighting for the benefit and positive outcome of the Jewish people. Even when there was little to no defense, Moshe found one (or two).

Before we get ready to rumble, let's first ask ourselves whether the egregious act of spilled milk, or not cleaning up the spilled milk, is a justification to verbally shattering our own Luchot within our precious homes that are filled with children and family that we profoundly love and steadfastly protect.