



SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

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SERMON TITLE:

Two Tablets, One Heart:

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In loving memory of

ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
Emil W. Heman who loved and supported Torah learning.

FIRST DAY OF SHAVUOS

Two Tablets, One Heart:

Good Yom Tov!

In September of 1977, an Orthodox Jewish couple in New Jersey became the proud parents of Siamese twins. Because of the twins' critical condition, they were transferred immediately to the world-famous Children Hospital of Philadelphia, where the chief of pediatric surgery at the time was the future U.S. Surgeon General, Dr. C. Everett Koop.

Dr. Koop came to the conclusion that since the twins were two bodies using one heart and one liver, the heart would not have the strength to keep both bodies alive. He concluded that both would not survive.

However, since the heart belonged to the body of Baby A, with the body of Baby B having no heart of its own but depending on the heart of Baby A, what they could do was separate Baby B from Baby A, thus at least giving Baby A a chance to live.

Now these were two complete bodies with their own brains and nervous systems, and the nurses had noticed that they even had their own personalities, with one calmer and the other more prone to crying.

The dilemma was that if they surgically separated them, Baby B would certainly die—and only then would Baby A have the chance to survive.

So first, the surgeon declared that he would not perform the surgery until he got an explicit ruling from a court that he was allowed to proceed—he was not interested in later getting charged for infanticide. And indeed, a court allowed him to go forward.

Now Dr. Koop, who was a man of faith, understood that in addition to the legal issue at hand, there was also a very deep moral issue at hand: was it okay to kill one baby so as to possibly save another baby? Or would it be better to not do anything, even though that would result in the death of both babies?

At the same time, the parents consulted the late great Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, the father of modern-day halachah, with this serious question.

Rabbi Feinstein immediately asked Dr. Koop if there were the possibility for Baby B to survive if it were given the heart. And the answer the doctor gave was straightforward: Baby B had no chance of being saved, regardless of the situation. The only option was to try to save Baby A, who had the heart.

At the same time, the hospital prepared for the surgery. They recruited a team of over 20 of the best doctors with specialties in all the areas in which problems might arise as a result of the surgery. They were on call to start the surgery as soon as Rabbi Feinstein issued a response.

After a few days, Dr. Koop noticed that his team was starting to show signs of impatience, so he said: "The ethics and morals involved in this decision are too complex for me. I believe they are too complex for you as well. Therefore I referred it to an old rabbi on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. He is a great scholar, a saintly individual. He knows how to answer such questions. When he tells me, I too will know."

Finally, after ten days of halachic deliberations, Rabbi Feinstein ruled that the surgery must be done to at least try to save the life of Baby A.

So the surgeons carried out the surgery successfully, and Baby A lived. But a short time later, sadly, Baby A couldn't hold out either.

And now we come to the subject of Shavuot—on which we, the Jewish Nation, gave birth to Siamese twins of our own: the Luchos, the Two Tablets.

The Luchos were two blue sapphire stones which looked like twins—they were both the exact same size. They looked the same. And five Commandments were written on each of them.

Physically speaking, the two Luchos were not connected. They were two totally separate stones. But content-wise, they were as connected as were those Siamese twins—they had one heart.

On one stone was engraved five Commandments between Man and G-d—the ritual mitzvos: Faith in G-d, the prohibition of worshiping idols, keeping Shabbos, and so on. On the second stone was engraved the Commandments between Man and his fellow man—the ethical mitzvos: Not to steal, not to kidnap, not to murder, and so on.

Now, there are those who want to separate the Luchos. They argue that it's too much for the Jewish heart to bear both. It's too hard to keep both the ritual and the ethical. And so they want to conduct separation surgery—they want to keep only the ethical mitzvos and let others concentrate on the ritual mitzvos.

So if there's something we can learn from this story, it's that when we separate conjoined twins for purposes other than saving the life of one, ultimately both will die. Jewish history proves again and again that those who tried to embrace just one of the Tablets—meaning, only those mitzvos they liked—didn't succeed, and they ultimately lost everything.

Why is this so? Because the "Siamese twins"—the two Luchos—share one heart. Both the mitzvos between Man and G-d, the ritual mitzvos, and the mitzvos between Man and his fellow man, the ethical mitzvos, are observed not because we like them but because they are G-d's Will.

Someone who keeps the ethical mitzvos just because they are "the right thing to do" is ultimately likely to find excuses for the lowest acts. As the Rebbe said many times, World War II taught us what "moral" people are capable of when their morals are not based on belief in G-d. Because whatever can weigh on a person's conscience can itself constantly change, which is not the case when it's founded upon G-d's Commands—then, it can never change.

And so the only way to guarantee keeping G-d's mitzvos between man and his fellow, the ethical mitzvos, is only when they're built on faith in G-d.

In the story of the Siamese twins, everyone involved acted according to halachah, Jewish law—but when it comes to the Luchos Habris, the Tablets of the Covenant, the twins were born together so as to remain forever connected together.

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