

**Parshat Pekuday**  
**March 8, 2008**  
**“Do you know what a chumby is?”**  
**Rabbi Alan B. Lucas**

How many of you know what a chumby is? Do any of you have a chumby? For our purposes this morning – I will divide the world into three classes of people: those who know what chumbies are – I am obviously a member of that class. Those rare but privileged few who already have one – alas a group of which I am not a member; and those of you who don't have a clue what I am talking about – which probably comprise the majority. A chumby is the latest gadget. It really doesn't matter what exactly it is, or what it does – if you are really interested I'll tell you at the Kiddush, but for our purposes this morning – either you are a gadget person or you are not a gadget person. When it comes to gadgets, there are two types of people: those who love them and those who hate them. When it comes to gadgets I am in a mixed marriage. I love them, Edy hates them. (which is why I have not even raised the notion of wasting money on a chumby – they cost \$179)

If chumby was too hard a test for you – I'll give you something a little simpler. If you have a Tivo you are a gadget person. I'll give you partial credit for a cable company DVR) If you have more than one Tivo or a Series II one that is connected to the Internet – you are my kind of person. If you do not know what a Tivo is – you are in that other class.

I admit to being a gadget lover. I love to tinker with gadgets - toys that whirl and spin and light up, have always fascinated me. The day I got my Treo connected to my Slingbox enabling me to watch my Tivo remotely was, *(tearfully) well, it was one of the happiest days of my life.* To me this is what America is all about (don't tell me they are all made in Japan - they may make them better and cheaper than us - but the love of gadgets is as American as Ben Franklin and Thomas Edison - this is the birthplace gadgets!)

Now all these gadgets have undoubtedly added much to our lives. We are efficient in our work, organized in our homes, offering a higher standard of living to a larger number of people than ever before. All of these conveniences add real pleasure to our lives and the lives of millions of people.

But for all of my love of gadgets, I must admit that they have no value for me, other than what they can do for me – my relationship with them is completely utilitarian. As much as I love my gadgets, when they break, I throw them out. There is no permanent affection between me and my Treo. And to tell you the truth, I am actually kind of happy when it breaks. Now why on earth would I be happy when my beloved gadget breaks? Well it is obvious to any true gadget lover- when your gadget breaks.... You can go out and replace it with the newer and better model.

Yes, my love for things is a functional, conditional love. So long as they work, I love them.

Now, to tell you the truth - I really don't have much of a problem with all of this gadgetophilia-

as long as we are dealing with gadgets, with things. But when I see people applying the same strategy to other people and human relationships – well then I must draw a line.

It is one thing to junk a computer, it is quite another to junk a marriage. It is one thing to replace your cell phone quite another to replace a valued friendship.

Little is lost when one gadget is replaced in favor of a newer and better model. But when the planned obsolescence of things gets applied to relationships we are all the worse for it, as we often feel disconnected, lacking in roots or purpose.

Divorce is a recognized Jewish remedy to a marriage that has lost all hope for a future, nursing homes are a valued resource when the elderly require specialized care, and friendships sometimes do not survive the growth and challenges of a lifetime - but one has to wonder if the high rate of divorce, the explosion of nursing homes and the number of disposable friendship is not, at least in part, a symptom of gadgetophilia and the disposability of things - inappropriately applied to people.

Judaism in its wisdom seems to have anticipated this. When we drop *sifrey kodesh* – any sacred text that contains God’s name like a *siddur* or a *tanach* – what do we do when we pick it up? We kiss it. Strange custom no? Unless the rabbis had this in mind. In fact there are a number of Jewish customs that seem to be predicated on the understanding that the way we treat things, is ultimately the way we will come to treat people - and the purpose of these customs seems to be to caution us to be careful in our willingness to dispose of things that matter. A book is a book – a Bible is more than a book, it is something sacred, something to be respected; and a person – well a person is also sacred, something truly precious.

On our Shabbat table we are taught to cover the *challot* until after we make the *Kiddush* over the wine. Does anyone know the reason for this custom? Because we begin with the blessing over the wine and not with the *motzei* over the *challah* - we cover the *challah* so it will not realize that the wine is being given preference, its feelings shouldn’t be hurt. When its turn comes we uncover it and all attention is focused on the bread. Now, on one level this is more than a bit silly. Any nursery school child can tell you that bread does not have feelings. Or is it possible that our rabbis who encouraged this custom might have been concerned about something other than the bread and its feelings? A community that gives little thought to its things will soon come to give little thought to its people.

One of the earliest introductions to how we treat things in Judaism can be found in today’s torah reading – *Parshat Pekuday* that details the building of the *Mishkan* – The Tabernacle that served as the sacred sanctuary while the Children of Israel traveled in the wilderness. The reading also details some of the stuff that went into the *Mishkan*.

What was inside the *Mishkan*? Not much – turn to p. 1520 in the back of your *Humashim* and you will see a diagram of the *mishkan* described in our reading.

Explain diagram. What was inside the *aron*? Source of a little controversy. Everyone agrees it contained the *luchot habrit* – The Commandments given to Moses by God and brought down from Sinai – more on that in a moment. I Kings 8:9 explicitly declares: *ayn b’aron rak shnei luchot haavanim...* yet, there is a quote from Exodus (16:34) which states: “take a jar, put one

omer of *manna* in it, and place it before the Lord to be kept throughout the ages.” Which some interpret to mean in the Ark. And the New Testament Book of Hebrews suggests that Aaron’s rod which blossomed was also placed in the *Aron*.

But even the *Shnei Luchot Habrit* – that everyone agrees was placed there and the main, if not only, content of this most sacred place in Judaism – even it is the subject of some confusion and controversy.

The Rabbis of the Talmud noted that the word for tablet, *luchot*, is in the plural. If the word for “tablet” is already plural, then two of them must mean that Moses placed additional tablets beyond the two containing the Commandments! It is like our saying: “two twins” - either you are using the language inappropriately, or you mean four people. Since the Torah, that is God, would not be using language inappropriately, the Rabbis could only conclude that *shnei luchot* - two tablets must mean that there were four!

Now, what other tablets could Moses have possibly placed in the Holy Ark? What other tablets could possibly rate that kind of treatment, that level of *kedusha*, of holiness?

The rabbis respond to their own query by answering: *luchot, v’shivrei luchot* - “tablets and fragments of the tablets were both placed in the *mishkan* - in the Tabernacle. What other tablets could Moses have possibly placed in the Tabernacle of the Lord? Remember when Moses returned to the Israelites, carrying the first set of tablets? Remember how he was so outraged by the idolatry of the Golden Calf that he shattered those tables on the ground? And then after the people repented of their sins, Moses returned to the mountain top where God presented him with a second pair of tablets to replace the first pair that was broken? Now, so far this is a typical American tale - the old, outdated, broken tablets were trashed and replaced by a new, sleeker model. Cell phone breaks? Rejoice! Time to get a newer and better one. I wonder if they called the Second Set of the 10 Commandments – *Luchot* version 2.0?

No, I don’t think so, because I believe that in this beautiful rabbinic legend, the rabbis are trying to teach us that something very un-American transpired. That the love the Israelites felt for that first pair of tablets was not simply due to their function, but was related to something unconditional, bestowed not for what their usefulness, but for what they would always represent. These broken shards were all that remained of the original tablets – a gift from God – *b’ckvodo, u’v’atzmo* - and therefore, they too deserved a place in the *Aron HaKodesh* - in the Holy Ark of the Lord.

Children learn this at a very young age. Does or did your child have a *shmate*, or a blanket or something like that—a security blanket, a beloved teddy bear? I did – and I still miss my *smate*. Now in time, all blanketies, all *shmates* become dirty, torn, practically useless and bordering on disgusting. We bargain with our children: “I’ll get you a new one, a better one – a clean one!” No deal. Some things are important – not for what they can do for you but what they mean to you.

Think of your wedding ring. Chances are that in the course of your lifetime, you will be able to purchase more elaborate, more expensive jewelry. Yet, your love for that original gold band is not based on the fact of how it looks on your finger. We love our wedding bands because

they remind us of one of the happiest days in our lives; they signify the most important relationship we will ever have with another human being. Those rings are irreplaceable.

This is precisely our relationship to those first tablets. Moses saved them both, *luchot*, *v'shivrei luchot*, the shattered and the whole to remind us that not everything has a practical purpose and that utilitarianism is not the only measure of value.

To the contrary, some of the most important things in life are not especially useful or practical. Some of the things we value the most in life are those which signify essential values or remind us of important relationships .

The respected Sage was teaching in his Beit Midrash – in his classroom and in the middle of the lesson an old, smelly, decrepit, senile man entered the *Beit Midrash*, the House of Study, making a lot of noise, and totally disrupting the lesson. Nonetheless, the rabbi rose, waited until the old man was settled into his seat and in gratitude, the old man proceeded to fall asleep and immediately began snoring, right before the learned rabbi, right in the middle of his lesson. The students were insulted on behalf of their teacher and they asked why the rabbi showed such enormous respect to an old man who showed such little respect to him? “Why do you rise in deference to such a sorry wreck of a human being?” one student asked. The rabbi smiled and simply replied: “*luchot*, *v'shivrei luchot*” both were placed in the *aron hakodesh*. We are taught to rise before our elders - so I rose, human beings, created in the image of God are never to be valued only for what they can do for us – this man may be broken now – but he was and is created in the divine image and out of respect for that divine spark and the person he once was I rose.”

In America we treat our elderly like VCR's - when they are no longer of use, we put them away out of sight, not to be bothered by them again. In Judaism we honor our elderly, and treasure the divine in every human no matter how badly battered or broken.

This also explains why at the time of a family *simcha* - like a Bat Mitzvah or an *aufruf* or a baby naming - why friends and family are so special. We don't *need* - them. This ceremony from a practical point of view, would go off just as well without them, Sarah would have chanted her *Haftarah* just as beautifully without the presence and support of family and friends - in fact one could even argue that their presence places additional pressure on a 13 year old who is nervous enough to stand on this bema to recite her portion. But we value your presence not so much for what you do here today, but what you mean here today, what you represent to the families that invited you. Sarah, these are the people who will always be there for you - these are the ones who were there when your parents were married, when you were born - whose presence adds to this moment not for what they do, but simply for who they are. And Barak and April – so it is for those who share this special moment in your lives as you named your daughter here on this bema this morning – Barak many of these people were not only at your wedding but in this same sanctuary for your Bar Mitzvah – and Randy and Michelle the same is true for all who have gathered in anticipation of your wedding tomorrow. We provide a foundation of unconditional love that makes this moment all the more special.

*Luchot*, *v'shivrei luchot* -- the broken shards of the original tablets where placed in the *aron hakodesh* – in the most sacred spot of Judaism – wow!

Some things are irreplaceable. Some relationships deserve to endure. When it comes to family and friends, when it comes to things like our Jewish faith, when it comes to our relationships that really matter, the question is not what can they do for me but rather, “what do they mean to me?”

What memories, what values, deserve a place in your *aron hakodesh* – in your heart?  
*Luchot – v’shivrei luchot?*

That is the question to ask of our friends; that is the question to ask of our faith; that is the question to ask of the things that matter the most.