

Why Break the Tablets?

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God informs Moshe, on the summit of Mount Sinai, of the Sin of the Golden Calf and commands him to descend the mountain and confront the nation. After beseeching God to forgive the people, Moshe complies, carrying with him the divinely created Tablets of Testimony upon which God has inscribed the Ten Declarations.¹⁷

When Moshe nears the Israelite encampment, however, and sees the nation dancing before the Golden Calf, he becomes enraged and "casts the tablets out of his hands and smashes them beneath the mountain."¹⁸

In the book of Devarim, nearly forty years later, when Moshe recalls this event before the nation, he emphatically declares: "I grasped the two Tablets and threw them from my two hands, and I smashed them before your eyes."¹⁹

In the wake of the destruction of these Tablets, God commands Moshe to carve a second set upon which: "I (God) will inscribe the words that were on the first tablets *asher shibarta* (which you shattered)."²⁰ The Talmudic sages perceive in the two words '*asher shibarta*' divine approbation of Moshe's actions- *Yiyasher kochacha sheshibarta*, "You are to be congratulated for shattering [the first set of Tablets]." The rabbis thus identify the breaking of the Tablets as one of three actions which Moshe performed of his own accord, to which God retroactively gives His stamp of approval.²¹

So powerfully does Rashi identify with this rabbinic observation, that he cites it in his final commentary on the Torah.²² The Torah ends with the statement: "Never again has arisen a prophet like Moshe, who knew God face-to-face; as evidenced by all the signs... and by the strong hand and great power that Moshe performed before the eyes of all Israel." Rashi maintains that the very last words of the Torah, "... before the eyes of all Israel," allude to the breaking of the Tablets; an event which Moshe describes as having occurred "before the eyes of the people."²³

Questions

The classic, familiar image of Moshe breaking the Tablets of Testimony at the foot of Mount Sinai demands a second look.

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¹⁷ Shmot 32:7-16

¹⁸ Ibid 32:19

¹⁹ Devarim 9:17

²⁰ Shmot 34:1

²¹ Talmud Bavli Yevamot 62a

²² Rashi Devarim 34:12

²³ Devarim 9:17

Simply put, why does Moshe shatter the Tablets? Why does he take his anger out, in seemingly misdirected fashion, upon an object of such overwhelming sanctity? The destruction of any sanctified object is a grievous sin; how much more so the shattering of the God-created Tablets of Testimony.

Compounding the problem is the apparent positive judgment of the rabbis concerning Moshe's actions. Why do the rabbis believe that God congratulates Moshe for breaking the Tablets? Why, in addition, would Rashi see this action as so commendable and significant that he would cite it as his final comment on Moshe's life and close his monumental work on the Torah specifically by recalling this event?

Approaches

So serious are the issues raised by Moshe's breaking the first set of Tablets of Testimony, that a wide range of often diametrically opposed views concerning this event are proposed by the commentaries.

A. Strangely enough, it is the Rashbam, *pashtan* par excellence, who veers sharply away from the straightforward explanation of the Torah text. Maintaining that Moshe did not shatter the Tablets at all of his own accord, the Rashbam states:

"When Moshe saw the Calf, his strength ebbed and he only had enough power to thrust the Tablets far enough away that they would not damage his feet as they *fell* from his hands."²⁴

As the Rashbam himself indicates, he builds his position on earlier statements found in the Midrash which postulate a sudden inability on Moshe's part to carry the Tablets. A source in Pirkei D'Rabi Eliezer explains, for example, that the Divine inscription on the tablets miraculously enables the stone to "carry itself and Moshe with it." When, however, the Golden Calf and the rejoicing Israelites come into view, the inscription "flies" from the Tablets. With God's words gone, Moshe can no longer carry the heavy stone and the Tablets fall from his hands.²⁵ Similar explanations are found elsewhere in Midrashic literature.²⁶

While the Rashbam does translate these Midrashic traditions into less miraculous terms, he nonetheless, seems to contradict the clear intent of the Biblical text, both here and in the book of Devarim. The Torah indicates that Moshe does not drop the Tablets but actively thrusts them from his hands, destroying them at the foot of the mountain. The Rashbam must have struggled deeply with the concept of Moshe consciously shattering the Divinely created Tablets, to have adopted a Midrashic position so clearly at odds with the straightforward meaning of the text.

B. The Ramban believes, like the Rashbam, that the breaking of the Tablets simply could not have been a conscious, premeditated action on Moshe's part. Attempting to remain more clearly within the boundaries of the text, however, the Ramban maintains that Moshe is overcome not by physical but by spiritual and emotional weakness when he comes into sight of the celebrating Israelites:

²⁴ Rashbam Shmot 32:19

²⁵ Pirkei D'Rebbe Eliezer 45

²⁶ Midrash Tanchuma Devarim Eikev 11

Moshe did not hesitate to shatter the Tablets, for he was so angered when he saw this evil deed, he could not control himself.

Ramban Shmot 32:16

לא נמנע משה בכל זה מלשבר אותם, כי חרה לו בראותו המעשה הרע ההוא, ולא יכול להתאפק.

רמב"ן שמות לב:טז

C. Numerous other authorities, however, are unwilling to accept the breaking of the Tablets as an involuntary action on Moshe's part. Strange as it might seem, they claim, Moshe consciously destroys the Tablets of Testimony in response to the sin of the Golden Calf. For this deliberate act, they continue, Moshe receives the Divine approbation recorded in the Talmud (see above).

While the sources agree, however, on the deliberate nature of Moshe's act, his motivations remain the subject of ongoing debate.

Some Midrashic authorities maintain that Moshe is motivated by a desire to protect the nation from the full effect of their sin. He reasons:

If I give the law to the people, they will be held fully culpable for their actions under that law. Far better that they should be judged as inadvertent rather than as deliberate sinners.

Moshe, therefore, smashes the Tablets to avoid presenting them to the Israelites.²⁷

Another Midrash suggests that Moshe goes even further in a self-sacrificing attempt to save the nation. He deliberately sins by breaking the Tablets so that his fate will be bound up with the fate of the Israelites.

True, Moshe says to God, The people have sinned- but so have I. If you will forgive them, then forgive me as well. If you will not forgive them, then do not forgive me. Instead, "erase me from the book that you have written."²⁸

At the opposite end of the interpretive spectrum, Rashi sees Moshe's motivation as condemnatory of the Israelites actions. Moshe deliberates:

If the Torah states with regard to the Pesach sacrifice, which is only one mitzva, 'no apostate may eat of it,' (Shemot 12:43) - Now, when the entire Torah is involved and all of Israel are apostates, shall I give the Torah to them?

Rashi Shemot 32:19

אמר מה פסח שהיא אחת מן המצוות, אמרה תורה (שמות יב מג) כל בן נכר לא יאכל בו, התורה כלה כאן, וכל ישראל משומדים ואתננה להם: רש"י שמות לב:יט

Yet other commentaries interpret Moshe's actions as consciously educative in intent. Moshe wants, through the smashing of the Tablets, to 'shock' the Israelites back to their senses. The Netziv goes so far as to claim that Moshe deliberately refrains from breaking the Tablets at the summit of Mount Sinai, when God first informs him of the *chet ha'egel*. He, instead, bides his time and waits until his actions will have the greatest impact upon the people at the foot of the mountain. When the nation witnesses his destruction of these overwhelmingly sanctified

²⁷ Midrash Rabba Shmot 43:1

²⁸ Shmot 32:32;Midrash Rabba Shmot 46:1

objects, Moshe reasons, they will be so shocked and aggrieved that they will, without objection, accept the punitive measures necessary in response to their sin.²⁹

D. The broadest and boldest classical suggestion concerning Moshe's motivation in breaking the Tablets of Testimony is offered by the 19th-20th century scholar, Rabbi Meir Simcha HaCohen of Dvinsk, in his insightful work, the *Meshech Chochma*. Rabbi Meir Simcha maintains that Moshe wants to convey to the people one simple truth: *There is only one source of holiness in existence: God, Himself.*

Moshe recognizes that at the core of the sin of the Golden Calf lies the nation's erroneous belief in sources of sanctity outside of God. The Israelites perceive Moshe as inherently holy and essential to their relationship with the Divine. When Moshe apparently disappears they feel compelled to create another source of supposed holiness in an attempt to reach God-hence, the creation of the Golden Calf.

Realizing that he must try to cure the nation of its misconceptions, Moshe turns to them and effectively says:

I am not holy. I am a man just as you. The Torah is not dependent upon me. Even had I not returned the Torah would have continued in my absence.

The Sanctuary and its utensils are not intrinsically holy. Their sanctity derives from God's presence in our midst. If you sin, these objects lose their holiness.

Even these Tablets of Testimony-the word of God-are not holy, in and of themselves. Their sanctity derives from your relationship with God and your willingness to observe his law. Now that you have sinned, these tablets are mere stone, devoid of any sanctity. As proof of my point, I shatter them before you!

Moshe, Rabbi Meir Simcha continues, is deeply afraid that the Tablets of Testimony will be misused by the nation in its present state. He is concerned that the people will deify the Tablets themselves. By shattering the Tablets, therefore, Moshe directly addresses a root cause of the *Chet Ha'egel* as he teaches the Israelites that God, alone, is the source of holiness.³⁰

E. One final approach to Moshe's actions can be suggested if we consider the fundamental differences between the two sets of tablets received by Moshe on Sinai: The first set, destroyed as a result of the *Chet Ha'egel* and the second set, mandated by God to take their place.

The most obvious distinction is that the first set of Tablets were both carved and inscribed by God while the second set were carved by Moshe at God's command and then Divinely inscribed on the summit of Mount Sinai.

A second, more subtle yet fascinating, distinction between the two sets emerges as part of Moshe's recollections in the book of Devarim. Recalling the flow of events at Sinai for the people, Moshe states that, accompanying the commandments to carve the second set of Tablets and to ascend the mountain with them, was an added Divine directive: "And make for yourself a

²⁹ Ha'amek Davar Shmot 32: 15-20

³⁰ Meshech Chochma Shmot 32:19

wooden ark [in which to place these tablets]."³¹ So important is this ark (which, strangely, is not mentioned at all when events occur in the book of Shmot) in Moshe's mind, that he mentions it no less than four times within the span of five sentences.³²

Perhaps the message of the second Tablets and the ark into which they are placed is the *message of context*. The Torah is valueless in a vacuum. Its words are only significant when they find a ready home in the heart of man; only when those words are allowed to shape and form the actions of those who receive them.

Moshe, descending the mountain and witnessing the celebrating Israelites, recognizes that the Tablets and the law which they represent have no context within which to exist. The nation is simply unready to accept God's Word. Were that Word to be given to them in their present state, the Torah itself would become an aberration, misunderstood and even misused. Moshe, therefore, publicly destroys the Tablets of Testimony and, then, at God's command, begins the process of re-educating the people.

Central to that process of re-education will be the symbolism of the second set of Tablets of Testimony, themselves. God will inscribe upon them his word but, this time, only on stone carved by Moshe. The Tablets themselves will thus represent the word of God, finding a home in the actions of man.

These new Tablets must also immediately be placed into a symbolic home—a simple ark of wood. Only if the words of those Tablets find their home, as well, in humble hearts of man—only if the Torah finds its context—will that Torah be worthy of existence.

Points to Ponder

One of the first personal mottos I developed for myself in the early years of my rabbinate was: *You can't judge Judaism by the Jews.*

This motto has, unfortunately, come in handy more times than I can count during the years since.

We cringe when we are confronted with individuals who claim to be observant Jews but whose actions belie their faith. "How," we are asked, or ask ourselves, "can a religious person act this way? If this is what Judaism produces"

The appropriate responses to these challenges are, of course, clear. *If an individual acts in a way which contradicts the values that Judaism represents, then that individual is not an observant Jew and, even more importantly, what he practices is not Judaism.* The problem is not with the law but with the context. Judaism cannot exist in a vacuum. For Jewish law to take concrete root in this world it must rest in the hearts and shape the actions of those whose very lives reflect its goals.

The partnership with which God challenges us is full and our relationship is, on some level, symbiotic. We are the vehicles divinely chosen to bring God's presence into this world. *Just as the law must give meaning to our lives—our lives must give meaning to the law.*

³¹ Devarim 10:1

³² Ibid 10:1-5