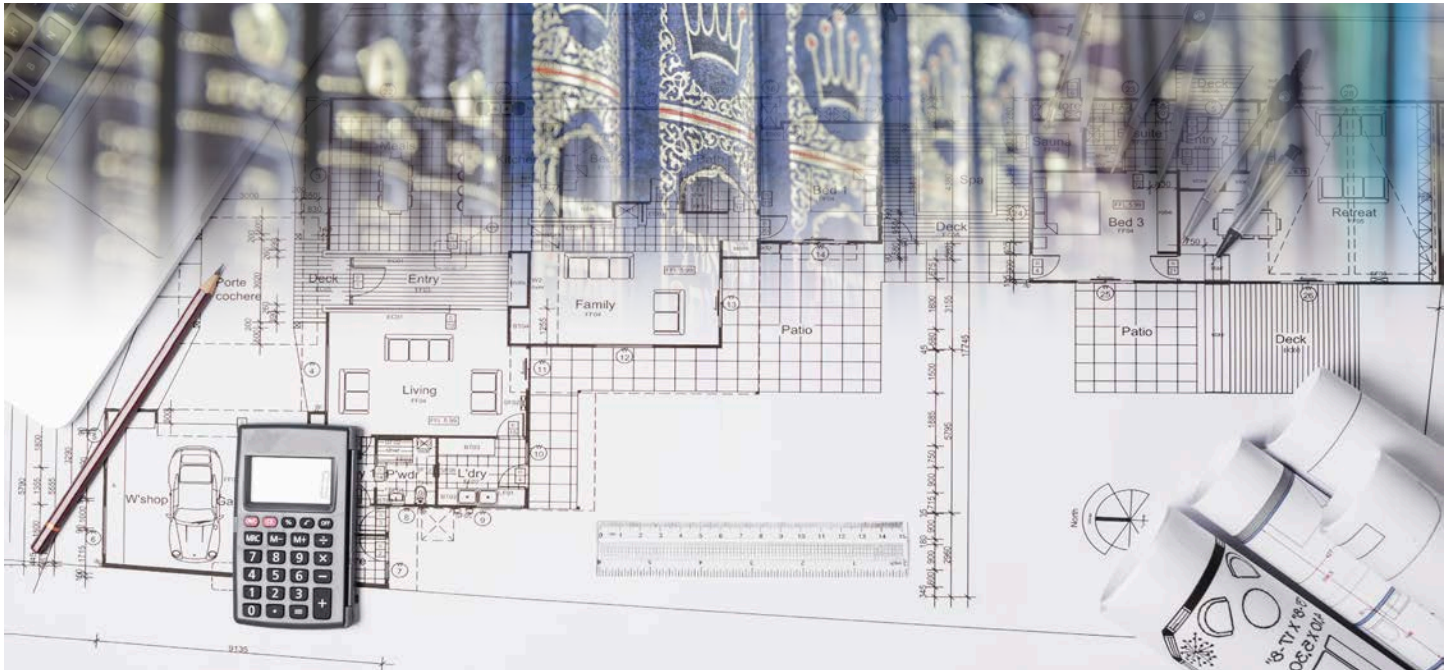


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## DEMOLITION AS THE PRECURSOR TO BUILDING: ARCHITECTURAL LESSONS FOR JUDAISM

### The Spiritual Effect of the Architectural Process

Every architectural process by which new buildings are constructed involves many phases of design. The most memorable, of course, is the construction phase. However, one of the critical phases of design, which precedes construction, is called the demolition phase. It usually occurs when a building or portion thereof is going to be renovated — the old is cleared to make way for the new. Even when constructing an entirely new building there is always a level

of demolition involved: ground clearing, earthworks removal to dig deep for foundations and piping, or the demolition of miscellaneous on-site structures to make way for the new project. In other words, there is never something newly constructed that does not involve the destroying or clearing out of something that preexists it.

In this respect, architecture can serve as a real-time model for the spiritual process of building ourselves anew that Judaism promotes in various ways — and particularly at holiday times. For instance, when we start the new year in Tishrei, first we engage in a

teshuvah process during the month of Elul that culminates forty days later at Yom Kippur. True repentance is a long process — it involves breaking old habits and repairing broken relationships. The sound of the shofar heard at Rosh Hashanah, the *teruah* — the repeated, broken short blasts — also signifies this breaking process. And when we are done with our brokenness, and have resolved to build ourselves anew, the first mitzvah we are given on *motzei Yom Kippur* is to go outside and engage in a real construction project: building a sukkah, which functions as a tangible symbol of our rebirth.

Similarly, when we start the new year in Nissan, we break something old in order to discover our newly freed selves; before we tell our freedom story in the *Maggid* section of the Pesach seder, we must first do the *Yachatz* ceremony — breaking of the middle matzah in half. This symbolizes how we must break down our slave mentality in order to arrive at a free man’s mentality.

Shavuot is also a holiday that involves a demolition phase as a precursor to a new construction phase. Let’s look at its history in order to see how.

### Breaking Down Barriers

When *Am Yisrael* first received the Torah at Sinai, the first historical “Shavuot,” they were taken into a desert as the setting for this momentous occasion. The Gemara in *Eiruvin 54a* explains that a desert is a place of humility, because it is an open space of passage for anyone — it is a trampled upon place. The Gemara in *Nedarim 55a*, advocates for the receiving of the Torah in a desert in order to parallel this environment’s key feature — making oneself *hefker* — a prerequisite for proper Torah adherence. The desert is a leveler of ego and thus the ideal setting for receiving the Torah.<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, it also served to unbundle the chaos of the concentrated urban environment that the Jewish people resided in for over two centuries.

Egypt was an empire of myriad peoples in residence and in passing, engaged in travel and in business. It was a place where might was measured by glorious architectural wonders known the world over. By entering a vast, wild, untamed and unclaimed desert, any spirit

of conceit that may have lingered among the Jews for having resided in (and even contributed to the building up of) Egypt’s great metropolises was broken in the Jewish people. The message was clear: a desolate environment was superior to even the greatest of metropolises as a place to build up the chosen nation of Hashem.

### Breaking Through Sin and Breaking to Rebuild

Even though the Jews felt the enormity of their privilege in being designated Hashem’s *am segulah* — the people chosen to receive and live the Torah — they nevertheless experienced a tragic downfall soon thereafter. After his monthlong spiritual encounter with God post-Matan Torah, Moshe must abruptly hasten his return to the nation. There he sees the idol worshipping ceremony of the Chet HaEgel unfolding before his eyes, and his reaction is to immediately and decisively throw down the Luchot. The Luchot were thus shattered to smithereens.

The commentaries vary in explaining why Moshe did this. Some claim that his arms weakened and he could not physically support the weight of the Luchot anymore.<sup>2</sup> Others claim that Moshe did this intentionally and in anger.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps he sought to create a concrete symbol of the desecration of what the people did — their idolatrous festival destroyed any holiness they had attained at Sinai.<sup>4</sup> They were no longer deserving of the precious Luchot that functioned as the contract between them and Hashem, since that contract was now nullified by their treacherous actions.<sup>5</sup> A more unusual explanation that I

once heard is that Moshe understood immediately how unforgivable this sin would be in the eyes of Hashem, and therefore decided to literally “cast his lot” with the Jewish people by shattering the Luchot — i.e., doing something unforgiveable himself by breaking the holy handiwork of God Himself. In so doing, he created an argument on behalf of the Jewish people: if Hashem couldn’t forgive them, then He also wouldn’t forgive Moshe for this devastation.<sup>6</sup> In essence, Moshe forced Hashem’s hand in forgiveness in order to be left with a nation.

After Moshe broke the Luchot, the next thing he did was to destroy the Golden Calf — he grinds it up and forces the Jews to drink its ashes. The point is that Moshe purposely broke things in order to forge a path toward rebuilding. In his mind, these were necessary acts of destruction in order to begin the process by which *Am Yisrael* could receive the second set of Luchot. His actions were a spiritual demolition that led to the making of a renewed nation, one that is able to ascend once again to holiness.

A fascinating question lingers about the smashing of the Luchot. What happened to the stone pieces? Where did they go? The Midrash tells us that Moshe actually collected them and placed them in the Aron Hakodesh.<sup>7</sup> After the Jews received the second set of Luchot, these pieces were then placed beside the shards of the first and together they were carried with Bnei Yisrael for 40 years in their travels throughout the desert.

This raises another question: why did Moshe save the shards? After all, we have a tradition to bury *sheimos* — once-holy objects that lose their ability to function for their intended



use. Why didn't Moshe just bury the shards of the first Luchot instead of saving them?

I posit that the answer is that Moshe sought to create a concrete symbol of what it takes to rebuild. It may involve building upon the ashes of sin but that sin — no matter how enormous — does not preclude us from succeeding in rebuilding. In other words, Moshe did not advocate for a total erasure of the memory of sin by burying the shards. He preferred to compel the nation to remember their sins as a precursor to the rebuilding process. Carrying the shards of the first set of Luchot along on their 40-year sojourn in the desert was emblematic of the need to be vigilant in all matters of holiness. The central location of these shards of our sins within the very core of the Jewish encampment while traveling, and in the holiest of places when encamped and the Mishkan was erected, made this message remain ever fresh and relevant; on the one hand, sin is close to wrecking what we've built, but on the other hand we must remember our fall in order to rise again. The brokenness was a prerequisite to attaining and maintaining wholeness.<sup>8</sup>

Interestingly, this accords with a Jewish "architectural *minhag*": the Gemara tells us that when we build a new building, we should always leave something unfinished in the entryway "*zecher l'churban*" — as a remembrance of the destruction of the *Beis Hamikdash*.<sup>9</sup> Nothing built anew comes without invoking our once grand structure of service to Hashem, the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. Not only must we never forget this great loss, we still actively mourn it in every attempt at rebuilding by leaving a visual cue at the entrance. Brokenness

informs our aspiration for ultimate redemption and permanence of place.

## Building a Way Forward

We know that after the Chet HaEgel, the Jewish people are given the command to build the Mishkan as a way of filling their need for a physical mode of relating to God.<sup>10</sup> And now, after our spiritual demolition phase, we can enter into a construction phase.

**The process of building anew is never completely achieved. We must strive to attain holiness as an ever-unfolding process.**

But the Mishkan was never meant to be permanent. It was designed to be erected and dismantled with frequency, based on the peregrinations of the Jews in the desert. In fact, Rashi tells us that in the *shivat y'mei hamiluim*, the seven-day preparation period that served as the inauguration of the Tabernacle, Moshe erected and dismantled the Mishkan every day!<sup>11</sup>

Can we understand this as a message that spiritually we must be nimble — ready to rebuild and start again at a moment's notice? Put another way, perhaps the lesson for eternity is that the process of building anew is never completely achieved. We must strive to attain holiness as an ever-unfolding process. This can help assuage the psyche of the wandering Jewish nation, sentenced to seemingly endless migrations in our current *galut*. The need for rebuilding our lives

over and over again in different times and in different places is behavior modeled for us by our ancient ancestors with their Holy Tabernacle.

Another interpretation of Moshe's actions during the *miluim* period is offered by Rabbi Baruch Simon. The repeated dismantling and re-erection of the Mishkan for seven days was illustrative of the teshuva that the people needed to undergo after the Chet HaEgel. Only once they fully finished this process — breaking their habit for idol worship, breaking themselves down in teshuva — could the Shechinah rest upon the Mishkan on the eighth day.<sup>12</sup>

In fact, David Hamelech yearned to build the Jewish nation's ultimate edifice, the Beit HaMikdash, of which the Mishkan was simply its precursor. But, tragically, he was not granted permission to do so. It makes sense then that he wrote in Tehillim 51 that the thing that Hashem desires even more than sacrifices, (which can only be given in the Temple), is a broken heart. Two verses later, he refers to the building up of the "*chomot Yerushalayim*." The implication is that in order to build our greatest structure, we should embrace our broken hearts.<sup>13</sup>

The need for destroying and rebuilding is expressed rather shockingly as an attribute even of Hashem! A Midrash teaches us that Hashem built many worlds which He then destroyed before deciding to keep this one.<sup>14</sup>

## Breaking as a Mode of Preparation

A conscious breaking down as a precursor to building up is also present in the entry into the Land of

Israel. Yehoshua, Moshe's beloved student and the designated leader to bring the Jewish people into the Promised Land, echoes Moshe's preparations for Matan Torah by requiring a three-day separation period for the people prior to entering Jericho, the first city they would conquer. Additionally, at the command of Hashem, an elaborate seven-day ceremony, echoing the *shivat y'imei hamiluim* inauguration of the Mishkan, follows. During this time, the kohanim encircled the city's walls in a processional with a regiment of choice soldiers, while carrying the Aron Hakodesh and blowing the shofar.<sup>15</sup> This highly orchestrated ceremony occurred once a day for six days and seven times on the seventh day, but culminated with the entire nation's participation — when they cried out in unison, they succeeded in bringing down the heavily fortified walls of Jericho. In other words, in order to launch the beginning of the military conquest and ultimately the building up of the Jewish presence in the Holy Land, a demolition phase occurred first. Breaking down literal barriers built their self-confidence to rally forward and carry out their mission.

## Building the Ideal Structure

The Midrash has compared the Mishkan to a *chuppah* — the marriage canopy where Hashem, as the groom, meets *Am Yisrael*, the bride.<sup>16</sup> The common understanding is that the Mishkan is the “Tent of Meeting” where God's presence descends on the structure and meets Israel there. While encamped, the Jewish people, like a bride, encircled the Mishkan with God as “groom,” further amplifying the *chuppah* comparison.

The holiday of Shavuot is also seen as a remembrance of the *chuppah* of the Jewish People and Hashem at Sinai.<sup>17</sup> Hashem is said to have “held the mountain [Sinai] above their heads” as they surrounded Him at Matan Torah, much like a *chuppah* is temporarily suspended above the heads of a bride and groom. Additionally, under the *chuppah*, the custom is to break a glass as the final act before a couple can celebrate their marriage. This is commonly understood as another custom *zecher l'churban* — to remember the Temple that lies in ruins. However, Rav Josef B. Soloveitchik has an interesting alternative explanation for this minhag. He states that it is done in memory of the broken Luchot.<sup>18</sup> At the seminal moment of cementing a new relationship with another, and the imminent building of the “*bayit neeman b'yisrael*,” there is an evocation of brokenness. It is the demolition phase that must precede the successful building phase.

On Shavuot this year we can now understand that when we celebrate the giving of the Torah once again, we should carry with us the memory of how we nearly lost it. Let's remember the history of things shattered in order to successfully build our new selves, in relationship with each other and with Hashem.

## Endnotes

1. I am grateful to Rabbi Moshe Taragin for these insights into the desert setting for Matan Torah and these two Gemara citations as read in an article entitled, “A Desert Gift,” by Rav Moshe Taragin, <https://www.etzion.org.il/en>.
2. Rashbam, Shmot 32:19.
3. Rashi, Shmot 32:19 See next sources for more commentaries who believe that Moshe purposely broke the Luchot. This debate is only relevant on the accounting of the

breaking of Luchot in Shmot Ki Tisa, but in the accounting by Moshe himself in Devarim, Ekev 9:17, he states outright that he threw down the Luchot.

4. This point seems to agree with Seforno's interpretation in Shmot 32:19.
5. Ibn Ezra, Shmot 32:19.
6. Similarly, Ramban to Devarim, Ekev 9:17 comments that Moshe put his own life on the line by breaking the Luchot as a favor to the people
7. *Bava Batra* 14b; *Menachot* 99a.
8. For a fuller exploration of this topic, see my shiur entitled: “Rebuilding in the Face of the Ruins: Lessons from Tanach and Gemara,” audio recording and source sheet on [www.yutorah.org](http://www.yutorah.org); search under Elisheva Levi.
9. *Bava Batra* 60b.
10. This is the opinion of Rashi and Seforno, et al in Exodus.
11. Rashi on Bamidbar 7:1, quoting *Sifri* 44.
12. *Sefer Imrei Baruch al HaTorah*, VaYikra, p.83, quoting Rabbi Yosef Greenwald. I am grateful to Rabbi Yaakov Glasser for bringing this source to my attention.
13. I am grateful to Dr. Rivkah Blau for bringing this source to my attention.
14. *Breishis Rabbah* 3:7.
15. The *Baal haTurim* to Exodus 19:13 says that this was the same shofar used at Har Sinai for Matan Torah.
16. Rashi on Bamidbar 7:1, quoting *Tanchuma* 20a.
17. *Mechilta D'Rabi Yishmael* – Yitro.
18. “The Breaking of the Glass” by Rav Herschel Shachter, [https://torahweb.org/torah/2005/parsha/rsch\\_yisro.html](https://torahweb.org/torah/2005/parsha/rsch_yisro.html).