

## Broken Tablets—Embarrassment or Inspiration?

R. Yaakov Bieler  
Parashat Ki Tissa

### ***What was done with the remains of the first tablets that contained the Ten Commandments?***

The extremely dramatic events surrounding the smashing of the tablets of stone upon which the Ten Commandments had been inscribed are described in Parashat Ki Tisa, Shemot 32:19, and again as part of Moshe's valedictory review of what had transpired during the forty years of wandering, in Parashat Eikev, Devarim 9:17. What is not apparent from either biblical text is what, if anything happened to the broken fragments from that first set of tablets. The "Luchot" (tablets), at least while whole, had clearly been incredibly holy objects. Aside from the often repeated phrase "Luchot HaBrit" (the tablets of the Covenant—between HaShem and the Jewish people),<sup>1</sup> indicating how the tablets symbolized the irrevocable relationship entered into between God and Israel at Sinai, Moshe mentions the unique manner of their manufacture as an additional reason for their deserving extreme reverence: (Devarim 9:10) "And HaShem Gave to me the two tablets of stone, WRITTEN BY THE 'FINGER' OF GOD, in accordance with all of the matters that HaShem Spoke with you on the mountain from the midst of the fire, on the day of assembly."

But once the tablets lie shattered on the ground, what was to be done with them? A custom that is not explicitly mentioned in the Bible<sup>2</sup> but is already mentioned in the primary sources of the Oral Tradition,<sup>3</sup> would require the Jews to BURY the myriad ostensibly unusable pieces into which the tablets had been reduced. Assuming that the broken tablets had been buried in a manner resembling the current practice of interring Sifrei Tora that can no longer be repaired as well as worn-out Chumashim and Siddurim, would explain why we hear nothing further about the remains of the first tablets during the course of the biblical narrative.

### ***A view maintaining that the fragments were not buried.***

However, R. Yosef, in Bava Batra 14b, by means of a creative reading of a particular biblical phrase, comes up with a different solution to account for what was done with the broken pieces.

Devarim 10:1-2

At that time, HaShem Said to me: Form for yourself two tablets of stone like the first ones, and ascend to Me to the mountain and you will make for yourself a wooden Ark. And I will Write on the tablets the things that were on the first tablets that you broke 'VeSamtem BaAron' (and you will place THEM in the Ark).

While a simple rendering of the phrase in question would identify the antecedent of "them" as referring to the new, whole tablets that have just come into existence, in light of the phrase that immediately precedes it, i.e., "the first tablets that you broke", it is possible to read the pronoun "them" as representing the shattered pieces of the first "Luchot" as well. Furthermore, Devarim

---

<sup>1</sup> Devarim 9:9, 11, 15.

<sup>2</sup> Devarim 12:3-4 states that artifacts dedicated to HaShem should not be destroyed, but does not specifically apply this principle to objects like holy books or writings.

<sup>3</sup> See Shabbat 116a and RaMBaM, Mishna Tora, Hilchot Yesodei HaTora 6:8.

10:1 informs us that in addition to the Ark that Betzalel is given responsibility to construct for the Tabernacle (Shemot 25:10-22; 31:2, 7), God asks Moshe to create a second Ark when he reascends Sinai to receive the second tablets: (Devarim 10:1) "And you (Moshe) will make for yourself a wooden Ark". When Moshe originally descends from the mountain (Shemot 32:15 ff.; Devarim 9:15 ff.) to find the people worshipping the Golden Calf, the biblical text says nothing about the tablets he was carrying being in any sort of "Aron", i.e., he doesn't take the "Luchot" out of anything prior to his throwing/dropping them. Therefore, it stands to reason that the Ark Moshe is asked to build prior to receiving the second tablets is not primarily, if at all,<sup>4</sup> for the replacement "Luchot" which he would once again carry out in the open when he descends, but rather for the broken ones, which would need some sort of container in order to keep them together.

***Extrapolating an interpersonal lesson from R. Yosef's approach to what was done with the tablet fragments.***

The Talmud in Berachot 8b and Menachot 99b draws a poignant and haunting conclusion from the need for preserving and venerating, rather than discarding or burying, the broken remains of the first tablets:

R. Yehoshua ben Levi said to his children:...Be careful regarding how you treat an elderly individual who has forgotten his learning due to an extenuating circumstance (e.g., old age, sickness, accident, struggle to make a livelihood, etc. as opposed to where his learning may have deserted him due to lack of interest, belief, regular review), as we say, "The tablets as well as the broken pieces of the tablets were placed in the Ark."<sup>5</sup>

The analogy between the remnants of the first tablets and an individual who no longer possesses the academic acumen with which he was once endowed and therefore commanded respect, is particularly apt when the image of the letters that had originally been engraved by God on the tablets, flying up from the stone is imagined.<sup>6</sup> In the same manner that stones can be stripped of their uniqueness and importance once special markings or historical detail are obliterated, so too a unique and talented human being can in short order be reduced to ordinariness should his/her special skills desert him/her. Rav Kook, in his Aggadic commentary Ein Ayah on Berachot 8b,<sup>7</sup> offers a metaphysical and perhaps even psychological reason for the need to treat the former Talmid Chacham with respect, regardless of his present reduced cognitive abilities.

---

<sup>4</sup>Some commentators note that even if eventually, once Betzalel constructs the Mishkan, including the "Aron", the second tablets will be placed in the central Ark, while the broken pieces, at least according to one view, would remain in the less elaborate Ark constructed by Moshe.

<sup>5</sup>The quote appears in Bava Batra 14b.

<sup>6</sup>See Shemot Rabba 46:1 and the discussion in fn. 4 in the essay for Parashat Teruma cited in fn. 1. Among the explanations for why Moshe dropped the tablets is that as long as the writing remained on the stones, the holiness of the objects essentially made them weightless, and they carried themselves. However, upon being confronted with the people worshipping the calf, the letters detached themselves from the stones, resulting in Moshe's having to bear their entire weight, which he found impossible to do, and consequently dropped and shattered them.

<sup>7</sup>Vol. 1, HaMachon Al Shem HaRav Tzvi Yehuda Kook, ZaTzaL, Yerushalayim, 5755, p. 42.

Since the purpose of (Tora) wisdom is the performance of good deeds (see Yoma 86b),<sup>8</sup> the elderly individual whose engagement with Tora study may have taken place in the distant past, also acquired knowledge resulting from good deeds throughout his life, and for this reason a residue of righteousness and correctness will always remain in his soul. Even if he has forgotten his learning, this only means that he has lost the details, but the pure all-encompassing concepts that are collected within the soul as a result of the great quantity of his former study, can never be forgotten. Similarly, even while one is in full possession of his learning, he can never verbalize the entirety of what he knows; it is only a person's inner spirit that recognizes the truth of the pleasantness of the principles corresponding to his accomplishments in Tora and knowledge of the fear of HaShem.

The residue, the aura of holiness and goodness, continue to be associated with people as well as inanimate objects, regardless of the ravages of time and circumstance, and therefore ongoing reverence for such people and things is appropriate.

***If the shards from the first tablets were left in the Aron, in addition to thereby extending to them respect, did they also serve some specific purpose?***

The preservation of the broken tablets along with their newly created replacements, cause some sources and commentators to suggest that the broken tablets' continued presence was helpful to the Jewish people during the course of their wanderings in the desert. The Midrash Halacha proposes one such function:

BaMidbar 10:33

"And they journeyed from the mountain of HaShem for three days, and the ARK of the Covenant of the Lord traveled before them three days journey to spy out for them a resting place."

Sifre

"Ark"—this refers to what went out in the lead, ahead of the nation, when they (the Jewish people) were going to war, and within it were the broken tablets.

---

<sup>8</sup>Abaye explained: As it was taught: (Devarim 6:5) "And thou shalt love the Lord thy God," i.e., that the Name of Heaven be beloved because of you. if someone studies Scripture and Mishnah, and attends on the disciples of the wise, is honest in business, and speaks pleasantly to persons, what do people then say concerning him? 'Happy the father who taught him Torah, happy the teacher who taught him Torah; woe unto people who have not studied the Torah; for this man has studied the Torah look how fine his ways are, how righteous his deeds! . Of him does Scripture say: (Yeshayahu 49:3) "And He said unto me: Thou art My servant, Israel, in, whom I will be glorified". But if someone studies Scripture and Mishnah, attends on the disciples of the wise, but is dishonest in business, and discourteous in his relations with people, what do people say about him? ' Woe unto him who studied the Torah, woe unto his father who taught him Torah; woe unto his teacher who taught him Torah!' This man studied the Torah: Look, how corrupt are his deeds, how ugly his ways; of him Scripture says: In that men said of them,: (Yechezkel 36:20) "These are the people of the Lord, and are gone forth out of His land".

Even if it could be maintained that until Betzalel's Ark was constructed, the "Aron" that Moshe fabricated served as the temporary storage facility for the whole as well as the broken "Luchot", once all of the components of the "Mishkan" (Tabernacle) were completed, the second tablets were clearly intended to be placed within Betzalel's "Aron", in accordance with Shemot 25:16. Furthermore, this Ark was never intended to leave its central place within the arrangement of the Jewish people, both while they were encamped, as well as during the time they were traveling, as indicated in BaMidbar 2:17. Consequently, if BaMidbar 10:33 speaks of an Ark preceding the people by several days, it stands to reason that what is being referred to is the "Aron" constructed by Moshe, and rather than imagining that it was empty, for what sort of spiritual significance would there be were an empty wooden box to occupy the "point" of the Jewish procession, it is logical that the remains of the original "Luchot" should be contained therein.

But what would an "Aron" containing the broken first "Luchot" traveling at the head of the march of the Jews through the desert represent? One approach is advanced by HaEmek Davar in his commentary on BaMidbar 10:33 and Devarim 31:26. He suggests that the phrase "Aron Brit HaShem" (the Ark of the Covenant of God) which appears in BaMidbar 10:33; 14:44; Devarim 10:8; 31:9, 26, cannot refer to an Ark containing the second tablets, since the covenant was made in connection with the original "Luchot".<sup>9 10</sup> Paradoxically, at least from one perspective, the Ark containing the remains of the original "Luchot" was holier than the one in the center of the encampment, since the broken pieces are associated with a more intense, unsullied stage of the relationship between God and His People, a relationship that we have continually been striving to regain ever since the debacle of the Golden Calf. In addition to whatever metaphysical assistance may have been provided by means of the "Shivrei Luchot" (the broken first tablets)—was it only the "Clouds of Glory" that leveled the road ahead and killed snakes and scorpions that lay in the Jews' path? (see RaShI on BaMidbar 10:34)—the positioning of such an "Aron" containing this specific content at the forefront of the Jews when they are on the march, subtly may have suggested to them to look optimistically forward to a time of reconciliation and complete atonement rather than constantly revisiting a difficult and sinful past.

Yismach Moshe (R.Moshe Teitelbaum b.1759, d.1841) on Parashat Eikev (105a) presents an additional insight regarding the preservation of the broken tablets by reflecting upon the Talmudic analogy between the shards and the scholar who no longer can study, cited above. The commentator contends that while forgetfulness is definitely a scourge for the individual who wishes to know and to come to conclusions based upon comparing and contrasting the various bits of information and concepts that s/he has accumulated over the years, nevertheless it has a silver lining as well. Were one not to forget, this would paradoxically impair his/her ability to come up with new ideas and avenues of thought! "Im Kein, HaShichecha Tova Gedola

---

<sup>9</sup> Shemot 24:3-8 describes the covenant ritual, and at least some commentators, according to the principle that the Tora's stories are not in chronological order, understand this event to have taken place prior to Moshe's ascending Mt. Sinai and presenting the Ten Commandments that were inscribed on the first tablets, described in Shemot 20.

<sup>10</sup> HaEmek Davar concedes that rather than being exclusively a reference to an "Aron" containing tablets, it could refer to one in which the entire Sefer Tora, which also is a manifestation of the covenant between HaShem and the Jews, is placed; however such an explanation is relevant only for the two latter verses in Devarim, in light of the Sefer Tora not coming into existence until that point.

SheGoreim Chidushim BeYisrael, SheChaviv Lifnai HaShem Yitbarach Yoteir MeiHaKol” (If so, forgetfulness is a great goodness that causes innovative thought amongst the Jewish people, something that is beloved before HaShem, May He Be Blessed, more than anything else). The broken “Luchot” then represent a breaking down of what is already known, in order to allow for a reconstruction that may even improve upon what had been originally thought and understood. Such a mindset holds the key to not only moving on through the desert, but also to achieving repentance and reconciliation. As long as people think that they remember or know all that there is to be known, that there is nothing more to think, say or do, then the possibility for change for the better and rapprochement will be virtually non-existent. Sometimes it is important to wipe the slate clean, in effect to break and forget in order to begin again, to revisit what is known and what has been done, in order to determine whether there may be additional paths as yet uncharted, and new directions that can lead to greater harmony and spiritual wholeness. It is certainly a tragedy that tablets had to be smashed, just as it is sad to consider someone who was once at the cutting edge of knowledge but who now no longer can contribute on such a level. However, a benefit that inevitably results is that there is now room to reconsider, a new generation will have its opportunity to make its contribution, and hopefully just as the Jewish people ultimately reached its Promised Land after so many years of wandering, , so too each generation in its time, and each individual in his/her place will eventually grow and succeed.