

Breaking the Tablets: Parashat Ki Tissa

Buried in the middle of this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Ki Tissa*, within the greater drama of the golden calf and its bloody aftermath, is a shocking detail about our great leader, Moshe Rabbenu. For the most part, it's Moses' brother, Aaron, whose behavior in our *parasha* this morning is rightfully seen as outrageous – collecting jewelry from *b'nai Yisrael* without protest and helping them build a fake deity, to whom Aaron, the High Priest, then announces a festival, leading the people to bring sacrifices and tender burnt-offerings. Of course, there is more than enough blame to go around here with the Israelites, too, being far from innocent as primary instigators of this grand (misguided) plan and some commentators even placing responsibility with God Godself who perhaps should have known better in leaving the community waiting for such a long time without any kind of reassurance of either Moses' or God's presence. Yes, there is plenty of bad behavior in our *parasha* this morning, which makes it easy to miss the small detail about Moses' reaction that follows the climax of this gripping narrative. When we take a closer look, however, we find that our esteemed leader acts in an entirely unexpected way - one that feels particularly relevant as we consider the state of our world today.

It is Moses's first reaction to hearing the sin of the golden calf for which he is most famous. When God, incensed, tells Moses to hurry down from the mountain because the people have acted basely and then reveals the Divine intention to destroy the entire community at once, Moses immediately steps up to defend and protect the Israelites saying, "*Shuv mecharon apecha v'henachem al ha'raa l'amecha* - Turn from your blazing anger and renounce the plan to punish Your people" (Exodus 32:12). Invoking *z'chut avot* (ancestral merit) and reminding God of the Divine covenant with Israel, never to be broken, Moses is successful at convincing God to reverse the Divine decree which is one of the reasons that this particular text is traditionally read on fast days – other times on which we wish that God would be

willing and able to save our people from destruction. Yes, Moses' first reaction to a total abandonment of community values and betrayal by his people, is calm, even-handed reasoning and diplomacy. What comes next is entirely different!

When Moses only hears of the people's indiscretion, he is able to stay tempered and composed, but once he comes down the mountain to actually see the Israelites' flagrant disregard for the covenant they have made with their God – dancing with abandon around the molten calf – he becomes enraged. And it is then that he does the shocking thing – he hurls the newly received tablets of the 10 Commandments from his hands, causing them to shatter. While we can certainly understand Moses' anger here and even his inclination to break something, physically releasing the fury trapped inside, the precise item that he chooses to destroy is quite astonishing: he shatters nothing less than the holiest object known to the community, the very item he has just waited forty long days atop Mt. Sinai to receive, tablets written by none other than the very hand of the Divine. To create a graven image used to worship in place of God is an egregious thing, to be sure, but to ruin a sacred document given directly by God also smacks of blasphemy. In seeking to defend the community's avowed principles and values, Moses destroys the very stones on which they are written.

Moses' actions in our parasha are so potentially problematic that Biblical scholars throughout the ages have offered various interpretations to try and set the prophet's behavior in a more favorable light. The medieval commentator Rashbam argues that the phrase "*yashlech miyadav*" should be translated not as "hurled" but rather as "let fall from his hands," indicating that Moses was so shocked by the sight of the calf that all strength sapped from his body, causing the tablets to drop. Dr. Ismar Schorsch, former Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, suggests that Moses broke the tablets not in anger but rather in an attempt to protect the Israelites, reasoning that as long as these laws went undelivered the

community could not be held liable for transgressing them. Scholar Aviva Zornberg uses similar reasoning when she posits that after Moses saw *b'nai Yisrael* worshiping the calf he became worried that they would soon come to worship the tablets, too, and thus destroyed them in order to save the people from themselves. For all of these thinkers, smashing the commandments was not a rejection of God's law but rather a deed undertaken either unintentionally or in order to shield the Israelite community from penalty and harm.

There is another school of thought, however, that sees Moses' actions here quite differently – understanding the prophet's behavior as constituting a rejection of the whole enterprise of covenant between God and Israel. These scholars don't see Moses as spurning God, Heaven forbid, but they do imagine that what Moses learned about *b'nai Yisrael* in this episode caused him to believe the people unworthy of the privilege of receiving the commandments and living in special relationship with the Divine. The great sage Rashi imagines Moses thinking that if regarding just one law, that of the Pesach sacrifice, it is clear that non-Israelites should not eat of it, how could it be possible to give all the laws of Torah to a people who had just shown themselves to be apostates? Ibn Ezra compares the Torah to a *ketubbah* between God and Israel, explaining that Moses essentially ripped the wedding contract to shreds when he saw Israel cheat. And scholar Nahum Sarna suggests that in smashing the tablets Moses was enacting the ancient Near Eastern practice of invalidating and repudiating a legal document by destroying its very essence. Moses's first reaction to a total abandonment of community values and betrayal by his people may have been reasoning and diplomacy but at some point the very system he's trying so hard to preserve breaks, which causes him to break, which leads him to break the tablets. When one cannot work to create change from within, sometimes we must work to create change from without – even when it means taking a stand against communities or institutions that we love.

Over the last many weeks many of us have reached this kind of a breaking point as we've watched with increasing concern and distress events taking place in the State of Israel. While positioned by some as being a debate about "judicial reform," a description that's about as accurate as describing our *parasha* as being a meditation on the aesthetics of worship, what's really going on in Israel is a golden calf moment – an abandonment of values and act of betrayal perpetrated not by the people against their leadership but rather by the leadership against the very people they are supposed to govern and protect. Israel has no Constitution enumerating the rights of its citizens and has only one legislature, controlled by the governing majority, so the single check and balance to power lies with the court which, according to the governing coalition's new law set to go into effect next month, will now be subject to legislative override and see the appointment of judges fall under full governmental control. In the words of journalist Matti Friedman, "Israel, which has rightly prided itself as being the only democracy in the Middle East, will move closer to the model of Hungary or Turkey than of America" if this law is enacted.¹ No wonder that hundreds of thousands of Israelis have taken to the streets in protest!

It is not only the issue of democracy, however, that makes this moment in Israel so uniquely devastating and dangerous. Over the last many years, Netanyahu's government has become increasingly ultra-nationalist and ultra-religious such that it now contains individuals vehemently opposed to many of the values that we hold dear: religious pluralism, LGBTQ inclusion, unity amongst citizens, safe and respectful treatment of Israel's Palestinian population. Israel's current Minister of National Security, Itamar Ben Gvir, was convicted fifteen years ago for inciting racism and championing an anti-Arab movement which Israel has outlawed as a terrorist organization; until recently he kept a photograph of the Jewish mass-murderer Baruch Goldstein hanging in his home. Its Minister of Finance, Bezalel Smotrich, has been quoted as saying that Israel should have "finished the job" by expelling all Arab

¹ https://www.thefp.com/p/i-took-up-arms-to-defend-israel-now?utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=web

residents in 1948 and that the entire town of Huwara, site of last week's retaliatory mob following the murder of two Israeli brothers, should be "wiped out" (although he's since retracted his words). For many of us – proud Zionists, generous donors, lovers and defenders of Israel who understand that we can never quite understand, those of us who live in the Diaspora without the burden of sending our children to war – this feels like the moment to throw down the tablets. The chasm between our values feels so great as to make us question the entire relationship.

And yet, the story of the first tablets does not end with their destruction. While God eventually provides Moses with a second copy of these sacred slabs, the Babylonian Talmud Bava Batra indicates that both sets of the commandments – the new ones and the old, broken ones – were placed in the *aron kodesh* (holy ark) together and carried by the people as they traveled through the wilderness. The broken tablets were not buried, which is what we would typically expect for holy items no longer in use; the sin and protest that they symbolize didn't ultimately create a permanent rupture between God and the people but rather represented one terrible moment that was ultimately redeemed, with the people coming back from bad behavior, recommitting to core values, and continuing to live in sacred partnership. This is my greatest hope, too, when it comes to the State of Israel.

Over the last few weeks there have been congregations who have ceased to recite the traditional Prayer for the State of Israel in their worship services; some have suggested that synagogues remove the banner supporting Israel from their entryways. To me, this is not the right path either – it's not only smashing the tablets in protest but burying them as well, giving up any hope of eventual rebuilding and repair, and it goes a step too far. "An Open Letter to Israel's Friends in North America" penned by Friedman along with prominent Israeli thought leaders Danny Gordis and Yossi Klein HaLevi indicates that "when an Israeli government strays beyond what your commitments to liberal democracy can

abide, you have both the right and responsibility to speak up,” and speak up we should.² JTS, United Synagogue, the Rabbinical Assembly and many other Conservative Movement organizations have come together in authoring a statement opposing legislation that threatens Israel’s democratic character. 120 American Jewish leaders, including joint CEO of the RA/USCJ Rabbi Jacob Blumenthal, recently signed a petition calling communities to boycott the US visit of Smotrich later this month. We should stand in vehement opposition to people and policies with which we disagree. But to abandon Israel entirely is to give up on her possibility and promise, and you never give up on those whom you love.

When I recite the Prayer for Israel these days, I say it with more fervor than ever before, hoping that Israel will find her way into becoming *reishit tzmichat geulatenu* – the beginning of the flowering of our redemption – even as that feels increasingly remote. I feel similarly to how I felt when reciting the Prayer for Our Country when living under American presidents with whom I disagreed – I pray for hope, I pray for change, I pray for strength to use my voice, my money, my time, my energy to work for the good. When I pass under our sign that reads “Wherever we stand, we stand with Israel” I think not of Israel’s government but rather of her citizens – those protesting in the streets, those whose lives have been imperiled by words and actions of incitement, those who have been discriminated against or treated as lesser or prevented from living their fullest lives, those who are frightened for the soul of the country as am I. I think of those wounded by Hamas on Thursday in Tel Aviv, and so many more who have been injured or killed by acts of terrorism, and I think of the brave soldiers risking their lives to protect and defend our country and its people. This may be a moment for breaking things – silences, chains of command, postures of unconditional welcome – but the shattered fragments still belong in our communal ark. They are a sign of the love that exists even amidst tremendous disappointment.

² <https://www.timesofisrael.com/an-open-letter-to-israels-friends-in-north-america/>

In closing I return to another piece of commentary from Aviva Zornberg, drawing upon a midrash that imagines the letters of the 10 Commandments flying away into thin air as Moses dropped the heavy tablets. Quoting the Hasidic rabbi, the Sefat Emet, Zornberg explains that God's words failed to find a real place within the hearts of the people which is what led the community to sin and the letters to fade away into nothingness. For us, however, it is just the opposite – it is because devotion for Israel is so deeply embedded in our hearts that we feel the need to act as loving critics at this difficult moment - to push her to be better and to do better and to embody better the values written on the tablets, both broken and whole, inside a sacred ark long ago.

May we live to see the day when Israel will truly become *reishit tzmichat geulatenu* – the embodiment of our highest values. And until then, may the example of a man who broke things out of love inspire us to do the same.

Shabbat Shalom!

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