

Notes on the Shattering of the Tablets
Rabbi Eliot Malomet February 19, 2022 18 Adar I 5782

שמות ל"ב:י"ט וַיְהִי כַּאֲשֶׁר קָרַב אֶל־הַמִּטְהָה בִּנְרָא אֶת־הַעֲגֹל וּמַחֲלַת נִיטְרָאָף מִשֶּׁה וַיִּשְׁלַף מִיָּדוֹ אֶת־הַלְחָת וַיִּשְׁבֵּר אֶתָּם תַּחַת הַקָּהַר:
Exodus 32:19 *As soon as Moses came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, he became enraged; and he hurled the tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain.*



From Left: Rembrandt, 1659. Charlton Heston in *The Ten Commandments* 1956. Gustav Dore, 1866.

This catastrophic moment invites exploration. The text says Moses was enraged. But there is also, possibly, a measure of calculation in his act. There had to be. Otherwise, it would have very little meaning beyond the expression of a tantrum. These artists try to capture some of that, with Rembrandt depicting more of the pain and disappointment than anger. The midrashic tradition has no shortage of interpretations.

מדרש תנחומא, כי תשא כ"ו:ב' כְּשֶׁעָשׂוּ אוֹתוֹ מַעֲשֵׂה וַיֵּרֵד מִשֶּׁה מִן הַקָּהַר וְקָרַב אֶל הַמִּטְהָה וַרְאָה אֶת הַעֲגֹל שֶׁעָשׂוּ, בְּשֶׁעָה שֶׁנָּתַן לוֹ הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא אֶת הַלְוִיִּים, הָיוּ סוֹבְלִין אֶת עֲצָמָן. כִּי־נִיֵּן שֶׁיֵּרֵד וְקָרַב אֶל הַמִּטְהָה וַרְאָה אֶת הַעֲגֹל, פָּרַח אוֹת הַפְּתָב מֵעֲלֵיהֶם וְנִמְצְאוּ כְּבָדִים עַל יָדָיו שֶׁל מִשֶּׁה. מִיָּד וַיִּחַר אָף מִשֶּׁה וַיִּשְׁלַף מִיָּדָיו (שמות לב, יט).

Midrash Tanchuma, Ki Tisa 26:2 After they had performed the wicked deed, Moses descended from the mountain and, as he approached the camp, observed the golden calf they had made. Until that moment, the tablets that the Holy One, blessed be He, had given him carried themselves, but as he descended the mountain, approached the camp, and saw the calf, **the letters flew from the tablets** and they became heavy in the hands of Moses. Forthwith, *Moses became angry, and he cast the tables out of his hand.*

The Letters Flew Off. What is behind this startling image? The tablets are miraculous creations. *They carry themselves*, meaning, that the stones are so heavy they would have required some kind of "lift". Metaphorically, the midrash is saying that the words inscribed on the stone, down to each letter, "lift" are what keeps the stones light, in other words, without what is written on them, the stones are just stones. According to this midrash, Moses is not angry at the people. He's angry that God's message is beyond their capacity to understand, and that they will never be able to appreciate its importance. The anger emanates from frustration and the knowledge that in this moment, the stones are just stones. Exasperated, defeated, dejected, rejected, he recognizes that the divine element of the tablets will not enter the hearts of the people. They have returned, as it were, to God. Without anything sustaining them, they are too heavy, and he has no choice but to let them slip from his hands.

As a Pre-Emptive Measure to Protect Israel
 לְמַעַן הַדְּבַר דּוֹמָה לְשֵׁר שֶׁשָּׁלַח לְקַדֵּשׁ אִשָּׁה עִם הַפְּרָסוּר, הִלָּךְ וְקִלְקְלָה עִם אַחֵר, הַפְּרָסוּר שֶׁהִיָּה נָקִי מֵה עֲשֵׂה נָטַל אֶת כְּתוּבָתָהּ מֵה שֶׁנָּתַן לוֹ הַשֵּׁר לְקַדֵּשׁ וְקָרְעָהּ, אָמַר מוֹטָב שֶׁתִּדּוֹן כְּפָנוּיָה וְלֹא כְּאִשְׁתֵּי אִישׁ. כִּף עֲשֵׂה מִשֶּׁה כִּי־נִיֵּן שֶׁעָשׂוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל אוֹתוֹ מַעֲשֵׂה נָטַל אֶת הַלְוִיִּים וַיִּשְׁבְּרֵן. שְׁמוֹת רַבָּה מ:גא

To what can this be compared? To a ruler who dispatched his agent to betroth a woman. He saw the woman cohorting with someone else. What did the agent do? He took the Ketubah that the ruler had given him and tore it up. He said to himself, Better that she be judged as a single woman, and not as a married woman. This is what Moses did. When he saw Israel committing that deed, he took the tablets and broke them. Shmot Rabba 43:1

The parable is stunning in its re-reading of the text. By understanding the giving of the tablets as an act of betrothal, the worship of the golden calf would have been tantamount to adultery. But the specifics are important. The charge of adultery can only be made **after** betrothal. Breaking the tablets **nullifies** the betrothal. Without having been formally "betrothed," the most severe punishment is not justified since **technically**, they are not in a marital relationship. Moses' act, far from being an act of anger or exasperation **is a pre-emptive act to help Israel avoid a more severe punishment.**

Rashbam: To Avoid Self-Injury

וישלך מידי - כשראה את העגל תשש כחו ולא היה בו כח להשליכם רחוק ממנו קצת שלא יזיק את רגליו בנפלים, כדרך כל משליכי משאוי כשאין בהם כח לשאת.
when Moses saw the golden calf, he became physically too weak to continue to carry the weight of the Tablets and he threw them as far as possible away from himself so that they would not drop on his feet. This is the way all persons who throw away something which has become too heavy for them, do this. We have to appreciate Rashbam's perspective. This interpretation, like the earlier midrash of the tablets being held aloft by the letters, is based on the premise that the tablets were heavy. That idea is probably based on the earliest visual depictions of the tablets as being somewhat large. But smaller tablets, say the size of a floor tile, would not be as heavy. Regardless, to Rashbam the sight of the golden calf repulses him and makes him physically weak. At that instant, he has to make a very quick decision: *if I let them fall from my hands, they would likely break my feet. But if I muster some strength to throw them even in this instant, I will at least save myself from injury.* In this interpretation, the casting of the tablets is not so much a reaction to the people's behavior as it is an act to avoid self-injury.

Shmuel David Luzzatto: To Scare The People

וישלך מידי את הלוחות וישבר וגו': לא מתמהון לבב, ונראה שעשה כן להפחיד העם ולהראות להם כי נשברה הברית אשר בינם ובין ה'.

He cast the tablets from his hands and he broke them. Not out of vexation, it appears he did this to scare the people and to demonstrate to them that the covenant between them and God was broken. To Luzzatto the breaking of the tablets was not an impulsive act. It was, rather, a pedagogical act,

what we would now call, "a teachable moment." There are things that cannot be expressed with words, and that have to be expressed demonstratively, through act or symbolic gesture. There is nothing more dramatic than smashing the tablets in order to demonstrate that the covenant is null and void. But it is a pre-meditated act nonetheless. Moses is not out of control. He is deliberately instilling fear, because the consequences of breaking the covenant are so high.

Yoram Hazony: Tablets as Metaphor for Mind

Why does Moses break the tablets inscribed by God? What are we being taught here? Moses is obviously outraged by Israel's betrayal of the God that took them out of Egypt, which is also a betrayal of him. But it is hardly plausible that he destroys the tablets created by God himself—the first item that has been described as having been created by God since the founding of the world in Genesis—because he is so angry that he cannot control himself...

When God's teaching is "inscribed" or "written" upon human minds, this means that mankind's understanding is reshaped or reformed, and as a consequence, our behavior is reformed...the inscription of the stone tablets at Sinai likewise refers to the human minds that are to be reshaped and reformed through the inscription of God's precepts upon them. If this is right, the stone of the mountain can be seen as representing the minds of the people that are to be reshaped and reformed ... Thus the tablets of stone, carved and inscribed by the finger of God, would then be a representation of the people of Israel with God's precepts inscribed upon their minds...

The Torah Shatters Upon Entry The *torah* may be inscribed on the stone of the human mind in one of two ways. God can form a people and impart to them his teaching at his initiative. But if this people are not prepared to accept God's teaching, then God's precepts **will shatter upon entry into the world.** Crumbling against the stone of the mountain, these precepts will appear in our world as nothing better than illegible fragments. Alternatively, the *torah* can appear in the world through the excruciating human effort of forming a people and bringing them up the mountain so that their minds may be inscribed by God in this way...
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