

**Ki Tissah - The First Tablets: Perfection. The Second Tablets: Second Chances**  
**Rabbi Eliot Malomet**

March 15, 2025 15 Adar 5785

The first reference to the Tablets is way before the Golden Calf episode in our parasha. Back in Parashat Mishpatim, God says to Moses:

עֲלֵה אֵלַי הַהָרָה וְהִנֵּה שָׁם וְאֶתְּנָה לְךָ אֶת לְחַת הַבְּרִית וְהַתּוֹרָה וְהַמִּצְוָה  
 אֲשֶׁר כָּתַבְתִּי לְהוֹרֹתָם. (שְׁמוֹת כד:יב).

*Go up to me on the mountain and remain there, that I may give you **the tablets of stone**: the Instruction and the Command that I have written down, to instruct them.* (Exod. 24:12)

When the text says, **the tablets of stone** it suggests that these tablets already existed well prior to Sinai. (**Not just any ordinary tablets. THE Tablets of Stone.**) We should read this is as if God pulled them out of "cold storage" to give them to Moses precisely at this moment. This comports with the teaching in Pirkei Avot which states that the Tablets were among the ten special things that were created on the eve of the Sabbath at twilight.<sup>1</sup> **Already at Creation, God had the idea of communicating the ten essential laws to humanity. When God gives Moses the Tablets then, he is literally giving him a piece of Creation.** To take the metaphor further, the moment that God gives the Tablets to Moses would be as if he was presenting him with a precious heirloom that had been stored from the beginning of time<sup>2</sup>.

We next encounter the Tablets in our parasha:

וַיָּמָן אֶל מֹשֶׁה כְּכַלְתּוֹ לְדַבֵּר אִתּוֹ בְּהַר סִינַי שְׁנֵי לְחַת הָעֵדֻת לְחַת אֶבֶן  
 כְּתָבִים בְּאֶצְבַּע אֱלֹהִים. (לא:יח)

*He gave to Moses when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai the two tablets of the Testimony, tablets of stone, written by the finger of God.* (31:18)

We notice a couple of things. First, **the giving** of the Tablets is actually quite unceremonious. Compare this to the signing ceremonies for treaties. We recall the signing of the Camp David Accords or the Oslo Agreement or the Abraham Accords, which all took place at a ceremonial location, the White House Lawn, amid the presence of the dignitaries, with a presidium, speeches, and trumpet fanfare. Or compare this to something closer to home: the taking out of the Torah from the Ark. We approach the Ark in with distinct choreography, there is a kind of dramatic unveiling in curtain opening, special melodies akin to a fanfare, bowing and a procession. In contrast, when God

gives Moses the Tablets it is very discreet. No **BIG BOOMING VOICE** from on high. No big fanfare. There is here, however, a palpable intimacy between God and Moses. It is as if they were having a private conversation, and now that the meeting was over, God gave Moses a record of that meeting, the basic points, engraved on a medium that originated from the time of Creation. Note also that now the Tablets are referred to not just as **tablets of stone** but **the two tablets of the Testimony**. To what do the attest? A meeting between God and a human being took place. Unlike all previous and subsequent encounters between God and humans in the Torah, this is the most consequential. It will forever alter human civilization. The **Tablets of the Testimony** testify to that.

And we learn here that they are **written by the finger of God**. The only other time we have that expression in the Torah referring to something other than the Tablets is at the plague of lice when the Egyptian magicians exclaim, **אֲצַבֵּעַ אֱלֹהִים הִוא**—**this is the finger of God!** (Exod. 8:15) when they cannot replicate the plague through their own magic. **At the very least, this image 'points' to the miraculous nature not only of the Tablets but the text that they contain.**

The next mention of the Tablets is here:

וַיֵּקֶם וַיֵּרֶד מֹשֶׁה מִן הָהָר וּשְׁנֵי לְחַת הָעֵדֻת בְּיָדוֹ לְחַת כְּתָבִים מִשְׁנֵי  
 עֲבָרֵיהֶם מִזֶּה וּמִזֶּה הֵם כְּתָבִים. וְהַלְחַת מַעֲשֵׂה אֱלֹהִים הֵמָּה וְהַמִּכְתָּב  
 מִכְתָּב אֱלֹהִים הוּא חֲרוֹת עַל הַלְחַת. (לב:טו-טז)

*Moses faced about to come down from the mountain, the two tablets of the Testimony in his hand, tablets written on both their sides: on this one and on this one they were written; and the tablets were God's making, and the writing was God's writing, engraved upon the tablets.* (32:15-16)

Moses holds the Tablets in one hand. That means, unlike all the depictions in art, the Tablets were not that large at all. Perhaps we could imagine them about the size of the clay tablets discovered in the ancient city of Mari, (Syria), (as shown here) dating from the 18th century BCE. These measured as much as 8"x4", were



<sup>1</sup> Avot 5:6. **Ten things were created on the eve of the Sabbath at twilight, and these are they: [1] the mouth of the earth, [2] the mouth of the well, [3] the mouth of the donkey, [4] the rainbow, [5] the manna, [6] the staff [of Moses], [7] the shamir, [8] the letters, [9] the writing, [10] and the tablets. And some say: also the demons, the grave of Moses, and the ram of Abraham, our father. And some say: and also tongs, made with tongs.**

<sup>2</sup> An irresistible digression: How long after the Big Bang would a tile or tablet sized object have emerged? ChatGPT:

**The formation of a tile-sized solid within a protoplanetary disk likely began around 2–3 billion years after the Big Bang, as dust particles coalesced into progressively larger objects — the precursors to asteroids and planets.** If you we put midrash and cosmology together, God would have fashioned the tablets from the first solid matter in existence. These would not be "rocks" per se, but "clumpy aggregates". **Could they have been fashioned into tablets and carved? Well of course! God can do anything!**

approximately 1 inch thick, about size of half of this sheet. At less than 5 pounds, they would not have been that difficult to carry with one hand. How the Tablets were written is a great puzzle. Like a double-side page? Perhaps. Or, more elaborately, perhaps they were not shaped like tiles but rather shaped like cylinders with the text wrapped around it. The example pictured here is the Cyrus Cylinder from the 6th century BCE<sup>3</sup> upon which the text wraps



around the cylinder! **But the most important aspect of these tablets is that God made them, and God wrote them.** This takes us into the realm of the miraculous. Thus, we find fantastical rabbinic speculations about them:

רב כהנא אומר: הלוחות לא נבראו מן הארץ אלא מן השמים, מעשה ידיו של הקדוש ברוך הוא. (פרקי דרבי אליעזר מ:ג)

**Rabbi Kahana said: The tables (of the Law) were not created out of the earth but out of the heavens, the handicraft of the Holy One, blessed be He. (Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer 46:3).**

Here are other speculations: Shir Hashirim Rabbah (5:14)

אמר רבי יהושע בר נחמיה, מעשה נסים היו נגללין היו של סנפירינן היו והיו נגללין.

**Rabbi Yehoshua bar Nehemya said: They were a miraculous creation; they were rolled up [niglalim]. They were crafted of sapphires, and they were scrolled.**

רבי מנחמא בשם רבי אבון אמר ונחצובין מגלגל חמה היו

**And yet another says that they were made from Rabbi Menahama said in the name of Rabbi Avun: They were hewn from the orb [migalgal] of the sun.**

Heaven. Sapphire. Sun. We are in the realm of fantasy. **The rabbis are trying to convey through their speculations the sheer unimaginability and perfection of the Tablets.**

While Moses was up on the mountain receiving the Tablets, the people down below were getting restless and anxious and began worshipping the Golden Calf. When Moses sees this, he smashes the Tablets:

ויהי כאשר קרב אל המחנה וירא את העגל ומחללת ויחר אף משה וישלך מידו את הלוחות וישבר אתם תחת ההר. (לב:יט)

**And it was, when he neared the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, that Moses's anger flared up; he threw the tablets from his hands and smashed them beneath the mountain. (32:19)**

<sup>3</sup> The Cyrus Cylinder is a barrel-shaped cylinder of baked clay measuring ~9"x~4" at its maximum diameter and weighs approximately 4.5 pounds. It was created in several

This is of course, the most dramatic moment in the story. But considering that the Tablets were made by God himself, it is even more dramatic! This is the epitome of human audacity! And if we approach this text as the rabbis do, it would be akin to saying that Moses has taken the most precious item that was stored for human beings from the very beginning of creation and destroyed it! We could understand how even God would be shocked at what Moses did! **God has waited for this moment since Creation, only to have it ruined by idolatry - the inability to contain the need for the tangible - and human anger - the inability to control one's emotions. And God only made one set of Tablets.**

Fast forward. Moses beseeches God to disclose his ways to him. Effectively it is a request to begin again which will require a new set of tablets. God instructs Moses to:

פסל לך שני לוחות אבנים כראשונים וכתבתי על הלוחות את הדברים אשר היו על הלוחות הראשונים אשר שברת. (לד:א)

**Carve yourself two tablets of stone like the first ones, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets which you smashed. (34:1)**

This is stern language. **I was the one who fashioned the original Tablets. I kept them intact for eons of time. I saved them for you until the right moment. Then you smashed them. So, now Moses, you carve yourself a new set of tablets. I cannot go back to Creation. These tablets will be of your own hand, your own fabrication, not mine. I will write on them, but know that these are replicas, not the originals.**

There is a tragic dimension to the story. It wasn't supposed to end this way. **The people were not supposed to commit idolatry, and Moses was not supposed to smash the tablets, and everything was supposed to be perfect.** Instead, what we have is betrayal, sin, failure, anger, and resentment.

But we also have a great gift here: a second chance. As difficult as this moment was, the second set of tablets, the replica of the original Tablets, is the ultimate symbol of compassion and second chances. **The rabbis are fond of telling us that the Ark of the Covenant contained the fragments of the first Tablets and the intact second tablets.** The meaning: We contain within ourselves the recognition that we are not perfect creatures, and that with God's compassion, we will always be afforded a second chance.

**Shabbat Shalom!**

**Today is Day 526 of the war. We pray for the speedy release of the remaining live hostages, and the return for proper burial, of those who were cruelly murdered. May God comfort the bereaved, heal the wounded and shield Israel from terror.**

**This Parasha Sheet is sponsored by Hazzan Mike and Lisa Weis to commemorate the Yahrzeit of Lisa's grandmother, Etta Kessler, z'l.**

stages around a cone-shaped core of clay within which there are large grey stone inclusions. (Wikipedia).