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## Broken Tablets, Broken Souls

Moses shattered the tablets, then he redefined the meaning of brokenness

By Rabbi Y.Y. Jacobson

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In honor of the birth of **Hadassah**  
to **Esther** and **Zalman Lebovic**  
Dedicated by **David** and **Eda Schottenstein**

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In the loving memory of **Yosef** ben Reb **Shabtai** and **Dinah**  
Who passed away on the third of AV  
Dedicated by his brother Reb **Yaakov Elberg** & family

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### 1. Class Description:

The simple reading of the story goes like this: After the Jews created a Golden Calf, Moses smashed the stone tablets created by G-d, engraved with the Ten Commandments. Moses and G-d then "debated" the appropriate response to this transgression and it was decided that if the people would truly repent, G-d would give them a second chance. Moses hewed a second set of stone tablets; G-d engraved them also with the Ten Commandments, and Moses gave them to the Jewish people.

Yet a few major questions come to mind.

1. Moses, outraged by the sight of a golden calf erected by the Hebrews as a deity, smashed the stone tablets. He apparently felt that the Jews were undeserving of them, and that it would be inappropriate to give them this Divine gift. But why did Moses have to break and shatter the heavenly tablets? Moses could have hidden them or returned them to their heavenly maker?

2. The rabbis teach us that "The whole tablets and the broken tablets nestled inside the Ark of the Covenant." The Jews proceeded to gather the broken fragments of the first set of tablets and had them stored in the Ark, in the Tabernacle, together with the second whole tablets. Both sets of tablets were later taken into the Land of Israel and kept side by side in the Ark, situated in the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem.

This seems strange. Why would they place the broken tablets in the Holy of Holies? After all, these fragments were a constant reminder of the great moral failure of the Jewish people. Why not just disregard them, or deposit them in a safe isolated place?

3. In its eulogy for Moses, the Torah chooses this episode of smashing the tablets as the highlight and climax of Moses' achievements. Why does the Torah choose this tragic and devastating episode to capture the zenith of Moses' life and as the theme with which to conclude the entire Torah, all five books of Moses?!

This class, using as a springboard two seemingly superfluous words in Eikev, will examine this entire episode from a deeper vantage point. It tells the story of all forms of brokenness in the human journey.

**2. Sources:**

**מקורות**

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| <p><b>1. Deuteronomy</b><br/>Chapter 10, Verses 1 &amp; 2</p> <p>1. At that time Hashem said to me, "Carve for yourself two stone Tablets like the first ones, and ascend to Me to the mountain, and make a wooden Ark for yourself.</p> <p>2. And I shall inscribe on the Tablets the words that were on the first Tablets that you shattered, and you shall place them in the Ark."</p> | <p><b>א. דברים</b><br/>פרק י, פסוקים א-ב</p> <p>א. בַּעַת הַהוּא אָמַר יְהוָה אֵלַי פָּסַל לְךָ שְׁנֵי לוחֹת אֲבָנִים כְּרֵאשֹׁנִים וְעָלָה אֵלַי הַהָרָה וְעָשִׂיתָ לְךָ אָרוֹן עֹץ.</p> <p>ב. וְאָכַתָּב עַל הַלְּחֹת אֵת הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ עַל הַלְּחֹת הַרְאשֹׁנִים אֲשֶׁר שִׁבַרְתָּ וְשִׁמַּתָּם בְּאָרוֹן.</p> |
| <p><b>2. Exodus</b><br/>Chapter 34, Verse 1</p> <p>1. Hashem said to Moshe, "Carve for yourself two Tablets of stone like the first ones, and I shall inscribe on the Tablets the words that were on the first Tablets, which you shattered.</p> <p><b>Rashi</b><br/>You broke the first ones; you carve yourself other ones.</p>                                                         | <p><b>ב. שמות</b><br/>פרק לד, פסוק א</p> <p>א. וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל מֹשֶׁה פָּסַל לְךָ שְׁנֵי לוחֹת אֲבָנִים כְּרֵאשֹׁנִים וְכָתַבְתִּי עַל הַלְּחֹת אֵת הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ עַל הַלְּחֹת הַרְאשֹׁנִים אֲשֶׁר שִׁבַרְתָּ.</p> <p><b>רש"י ד"ה פסל לך</b><br/>אתה שברת הראשונות, אתה פסל לך אחרות.</p>                    |

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| <p><b><u>3. Gemora Bava Basra</u></b><br/>Page 14, Side 2</p> <p>Rav Yosef taught, "it says in the verse, 'That you broke, and you shall place.' This teaches us that the second set of Tablets as well as the broken ones, were placed in the Ark". And the other one, he uses this verse for the teaching of Reish Lakish, as Raish Lakish said, "'That you broke': Hashem said to Moshe, 'May your strength be well directed for having shattered the Tablets'".</p> <p><b><u>Chidushei HaRamban</u></b><br/>The broken Tablets are precious to G-d, for if He would have been upset that they were broken, He would not have said to place them in the Ark. For a prosecutor does not become the defender.</p> | <p><b><u>ג. מסכת בבא בתרא</u></b><br/>דף יד, ב</p> <p>דתני רב יוסף אשר שברת ושמתם, מלמד שהלוחות ושברי לוחות מונחין בארון. ואידך, ההוא מיבעי ליה לכדריש לקיש דאמר ריש לקיש, אשר שברת, אמר לו הקב"ה למשה יישר כחך ששברת.</p> <p><b><u>חידושי הרמב"ן</u></b><br/>שברי לוחות חביבין לפני המקום, דאילו היתה שבירתן קשה לפניו, לא היה אומר לשומם בארון שאין קטיגור נעשה סניגור.</p> |
| <p><b><u>4. Shemos Rabba</u></b><br/>Section 61, 1</p> <p>After Moshe attained atonement for the Jews for the sin of the golden calf, he said, "The Jewish people have someone who seeks mercy for them, but who will seek for me?" Moshe was distressed for having broken the Tablets. Thereupon Hashem said to him, "Do not be pained that you broke the first set of Tablets. For the first one contained only the Ten Commandments, while within the second set of Tablets I am giving you Halachot, Midrash and Aggadot." This is the meaning of the verse, He told you the secrets of wisdom, which is double.</p>                                                                                           | <p><b><u>ד. שמות רבה</u></b><br/>פרשה מו, א</p> <p>כיון שפנה חטייה שלהם אמר משה הרי היי לישראל מי שיבקש עליהם אני מי יבקש עלי, התחיל מצטער על שבור הלוחות, ואמר לו הקב"ה אל תצטער בלוחות הראשונות, שלא היו אלא עשרת הדברות לבד, ובלוחות השניים אני נותן לך שיהא בהם הלכות מדרש ואגדות, הדא הוא דכתיב (איוב יא) ויגד לך תעלומות חכמה כי כפלים לתושיה.</p>                      |

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| <p><b>5. Deuteronomy</b><br/>Chapter 34, Verses 10 - 12</p> <p><b>10.</b> Never again has their arisen in Israel a prophet like Moshe, whom Hashem had known face to face,<br/> <b>11.</b> for all the signs and wonders that Hashem sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharoh and all his slaves and all his land,<br/> <b>12.</b> and for all the great awesomeness that Moshe performed before the eyes of all Israel.</p> <p><b>Rashi:</b> That his heart inspired him to break the Tablets before their eyes, as it says, “and I smashed them before your eyes.” And G-d agreed with Moshe, as it says, “‘That you shattered,’ May your strength be well directed for having shattered.”</p> | <p><b>ה. דברים</b><br/>פרק לד, פסוקים י-יב</p> <p>י. ולא קם נביא עוד בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל כְּמֹשֶׁה אֲשֶׁר יָדְעוּ יְהוָה פָּנִים אֶל פָּנִים.</p> <p>יא. לְכֹל הָאֵתוֹת וְהַמוֹפְתִים אֲשֶׁר שְׁלַח יְהוָה לַעֲשׂוֹת בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לְפָרְעֹה וּלְכָל עַבְדָּיו וּלְכָל אֶרְצוֹ.</p> <p>יב. וּלְכָל הַיָּד הַחֲזָקָה וּלְכָל הַמוֹרָא הַגָּדוֹל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה מֹשֶׁה לְעֵינֵי כָל יִשְׂרָאֵל.</p> <p><b>רש"י לעיני כל ישראל:</b> שנשאו לבו לשבור הלוחות לעיניהם, שנאמר (לעיל ט, יז) ואשברם לעיניכם, והסכימה דעת הקב"ה לדעתו, שנאמר (שמות לד, א) אשר שברת, יישר כחך ששברת.</p> |
| <p><b>6. Shemos Rabba</b><br/>Section 61, 1</p> <p>This is compared to a king who wished to betroth a woman. He wrote her a Ketuba and gave it to his messenger to deliver it to her. After a few days, it was rumored that the woman had sinned. Thereupon, the messenger, who was still on his way, tore up the Ketuba saying, “better that she be judged as a single and not as a married woman.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | <p><b>ו. שמות רבה</b><br/>פרשה מו, א</p> <p>משל למלך שנטל אשה וכתב לה כתובה ונתנה ביד השובבין לאחר ימים יצא עליה שם רע מה עשה השובבין קרע את הכתובה אמר מוטב שתהא נדונית כפנויה ולא כאשת איש.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <p><b>7. Gemora Yuma</b><br/>Page 86, Side 2</p> <p>Raish Lakish said, “Great is Teshuva, for it causes ones sins to become for him like merits.”</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | <p><b>ז. מסכת יומא</b><br/>דף פו, ב</p> <p>והאמר ריש לקיש גדולה תשובה שזדונות נעשות לו כזכיות.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |

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| <p><b>8. Shemos Rabba</b><br/>Section 61, 1</p> <p>Another explanation: When nearing the camp, the Holy Letters, which had carried the heavy weight of the stones, flew off the Tablets, making the stones exceedingly heavy in Moshe's hands, therefore he broke them.</p> | <p><b>ח. שמות רבה</b><br/>פרשה מו, א</p> <p>דבר אחר, שפרחו הכתובים מן הלוחות לכך שברן.</p> |
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**מקורות להשעור:**

שיחת יום ד' פרשת עקב, כ"ף מנחם אב תשכ"ה

### 3. Questions and Exercises

1. What was the biggest mistake of your life? Can you fix it?
2. What has broken you most in your life? Is there a way you can "pick up" your broken pieces?
3. Why do the sins of the baal-teshuvah become mitzvos? Is that fair?
4. Why were the broken tablets placed in the Holy of Holies? What would that mean in your life to place your fragments into your holy of holies?
5. Why does the Torah conclude its eulogy for Moshe with the story of his breaking the tablets?
6. Describe the elements in your life which are wholesome and the components of your life which are broken?