

Weekly Teaching

February 22, 2019

This week's Guest Teaching is provided by my colleague, Rabbi Shoshana Cohen, a member of the [Conservative Yeshiva Faculty](#) in Jerusalem.

Shabbat Shalom,
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Following completion of the Mishkan, this week's parshah focuses on the sin of the Golden Calf and its aftermath. In 32:15, Moshe is descending from Mt. Sinai holding the original God-given *Luchot HaBrit*—the Tablets of the Covenant—when he hears what has happened. These original tablets “were the work of God; the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets.” But upon hearing the news he throws down the tablets, smashing them at the foot of the mountain.

What follows is a long back-and-forth between God and Moshe as to whether and how each side of the triangular God-Moshe-Israel relationship can be repaired. In the end, of course, there is a reconciliation and a new set of tablets. But as we see in chapter 34, the new tablets are different—it is Moshe who does the carving and inscribing.

According to an account of this event in Deuteronomy 10, both sets of tablets—the original broken tablets and the second set—are placed in the Ark of the Covenant. (Interestingly, according to Deuteronomy's retelling, the second tablets were constructed by Moshe but the writing was God's.) In a midrash found in the Babylonian Talmud Bava Batra 17b (and various other texts), we see that the sages understood the inclusion of the first tablets as divine endorsement of Moshe's having smashed them. Reish Lakish goes so far as to say that God congratulated Moshe saying, “*yashar koach* that you broke them!”

What does it mean that God congratulated Moshe for breaking the tablets? R. Yitzchak Hutner, a 20th-century rabbi who spanned the Hasidic and Lithuanian traditions and served as the rosh yeshiva of the Rav Hayim Berlin yeshiva for many years, connects this midrash on the broken tablets to another found in the Babylonian Talmud Eruvin 54a. There Rabbi Eliezer says that because they had been inscribed directly by God, “had the first tablets not been broken, the Torah would never have been forgotten from the Jewish people.”

At first glance, it seems like Rabbi Eliezer is saying a bad thing, that is, if it hadn't been for the sin of the Golden Calf and the breaking of the tablets, Israel would have a clear and direct picture of God's will in the world. However, if we read these two midrashim together—“*yashar koach* for breaking” and “Torah would never have been forgotten” we are forced to reconsider.

There are times, explains Rav Hutner, that the forgetting of Torah is actually the way that it survives. He connects this idea to Chanukkah, when, according to the Al haNisim prayer, the Greeks came to make the Jews “forget the Torah.” He points out that it was at the point in Jewish history that the Oral Torah came into being. This happened because people began to forget the Torah and they needed to debate and reconstruct its content.

While this is an interesting and important historical point, it also can give us more insight on Torah learning and on brokenness. Real creativity and learning most often happen from a sense of deep need. When something is missing, we are most inspired to delve deep and apply our God-given intellect to create new and innovative ideas. Moreover, in places of darkness and confusion, when we recognize that something is missing, we are most likely to turn to others to help us make sense of the world and fill the void with wisdom.

The broken tablets in the ark remind us of the power of brokenness, and of forgetting, to spark innovation and the building of intellectual and spiritual community. In the words of Leonard Cohen, “There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets through.”