



MIDEI CHODESH B'CHADSHO

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Why *Break* the Tablets?

Let's begin by challenging a reality that we have accepted for years...

At the end of a forty-day encounter on the summit of Mount Sinai, God informs Moshe that the Israelites have sinned at the mountain's base, through the creation of a Golden Calf. He commands Moshe to descend and confront the nation. After beseeching God to forgive the people, Moshe complies, carrying with him the divinely created *Luchot Ha'eidut*, Tablets of Testimony, upon which God has inscribed the *Asseret Ha'Dibrot*, the Ten Declarations.

As Moshe nears the Israelite encampment and witnesses the nation dancing before the Golden Calf, however, he suddenly "casts the tablets out of his hands and smashes them beneath the mountain." Almost forty years later, this

great leader will testify to the children of the perpetrators: "I grasped the two Tablets and threw them from my two hands, and I smashed them before your eyes."

Understandable? Perhaps... But troubling, nonetheless.

What was Moshe thinking? Why smash the *Luchot*? Could any object be more sanctified or precious than these two stone tablets- hewn by God and inscribed by God with the word of God? How could Moshe apparently allow these sacred stones to become the objects of his frustration? Destroy the calf; punish the people- but, shatter the *Luchot*? Why?

Compounding the problem are the reported divine and human reactions to Moshe's actions.

In the wake of the sin of the Golden Calf, God commands Moshe to carve a second set of tablets upon which: "I (God) will inscribe the words that were on the first tablets *asher shibarta* (which you shattered)." The Talmudic sages perceive



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in the two words ‘asher shibarta’ divine approbation of Moshe’s actions- *Yiyasher kochacha sheshibarta*, “You are to be congratulated for shattering [the first set of Tablets].”

Moshe is deeply afraid that, if delivered to the nation in its present state, the Tablets of Testimony will be horribly misused

Even more striking is Rashi’s contention that the last six words of the entire Torah text, “before the eyes of all Israel,” specifically reference the breaking of the Tablets; an event that Moshe claims occurred “before the eyes of the people.”

Even if we can somehow understand Moshe’s destructive response to the sin of the Golden Calf, how can we explain the laudatory reactions to that response? So laudatory, it seems, that Rashi would cite this episode as the final event that God wants us to remember about the greatest leader we have ever known.

Unafraid of questioning the deeds of even the greatest of our leaders, the rabbis confronted these issues head-on. In the course of their explorations, they arrive at a wide variety of explanations for Moshe’s actions.

At one end of the spectrum lie those authorities who, unwilling to accept that Moshe could have possibly

deliberately destroyed the *Luchot*, insist on explaining Moshe’s actions as involuntary. The *Rashbam*, departing from his usual insistence on *pshat*, the straightforward interpretation of the text, builds on earlier midrashim that claim sudden physical weakness on Moshe’s part. Tormented by the scene before him, says the *Rashbam*, Moshe only has enough strength to thrust the tablets away, as they fall from his hands.

Like the *Rashbam*, the *Ramban* maintains that the breaking of the Tablets simply could not have been a conscious, premeditated action on Moshe’s part. Attempting to remain more clearly within the boundaries of the text, however, this scholar cites overwhelming emotion as the catalyst



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for Moshe's actions:

"Moshe did not hesitate to shatter the Tablets, for he was so angered when he saw this evil deed, *he could not control himself.*"

Most scholars reject this approach. Accepting the apparent evidence of the text and the later approbation of Moshe's actions, they maintain that Moshe deliberately destroys the Tablets of Testimony. While these authorities agree on the purposeful nature of Moshe's act, however, they debate his possible motivations.

Some Midrashic scholars maintain that Moshe is motivated by a desire to protect the nation from the full effect of their sin. According to one such approach, Moshe reasons: *If the law is transmitted, the people will be judged fully culpable under that law. With the tablets destroyed, perhaps they will instead be judged as inadvertent sinners.* Yet another Midrash suggests that Moshe actually shatters the Tablets so that his personal fate will be bound up with the fate of the Israelites: *Now God will have to consider my sin of breaking the tablets along with the people's sin of the Golden Calf. My forgiveness and theirs will be intertwined.*

In contrast, Rashi sees Moshe's motivation as condemnatory of the Israelites' actions. Moshe deliberates: *If the Torah states with regard to the Pesach sacrifice 'no apostate may eat of it,' -Now, when the entire Torah is involved and all of Israel are apostates,*

how can I give the Torah to them?

Yet others see Moshe's act as educative in intent. This great leader desperately wants to teach the people of the error of their ways. One of the broadest and boldest classical suggestion in this direction is offered by the 19th-20th century scholar, Rabbi Meir Simcha HaCohen of Dvinsk, the *Meshech Chochma*. Rabbi Meir Simcha maintains that Moshe wants to convey one simple truth to the people: *There is only one source of holiness in existence: God, Himself.* The Israelites perceive Moshe as independently holy and essential to their relationship with the Divine. When Moshe apparently disappears, they feel compelled to create the Golden Calf, another source of supposed holiness. Moshe is deeply afraid that, if delivered to the nation in its present state, the Tablets of Testimony will be horribly misused. *He is concerned that the people will deify the Tablets themselves.* By shattering the *Luchot*, therefore, Moshe directly demonstrates that they are not inherently sanctified objects, in and of themselves. Any holiness they might possess will emanate only from HaShem, and only when the nation obeys His will.

One final approach to Moshe's actions might be added to all the above and to the numerous other suggestions of *Chazal*.

Two significant distinctions separate the second set of Tablets received at Sinai from the first set, destroyed by Moshe. First and foremost, while the

first Tablets were both carved and inscribed by God, the second set were carved by Moshe at God's command and then Divinely inscribed on the summit of Mount Sinai.

The Tablets themselves will thus represent the word of God, finding a home in the actions of man

The second distinction emerges from a subtle, yet fascinating, observation made by Moshe when he recalls the flow of events. Moshe indicates that accompanying the commandment to carve the second set of Tablets was an added Divine directive: "And make for yourself a wooden ark [in which to place these tablets]." So important is this ark (which, strangely, is not mentioned at all when the events occur in the book of Shmot) in Moshe's mind, that he mentions it no less than four times within the span of five sentences.

Perhaps the message of the second Tablets and the ark into which they are placed is the message of context. *The Torah is valueless in a vacuum. Its words are only significant when they find a ready home in the heart of man; only when those words are allowed to shape and form the actions of those who receive them.*

Moshe, upon descending the mountain with the first *Luchot* and witnessing the celebrating Israelites, recognizes

that the Tablets and the law that they represent have no context within which to exist. The nation is simply unready to accept God's Word. Were that word to be given to them in their present state, the Torah itself would become an aberration, misunderstood and even misused. Moshe, therefore, publicly destroys the Tablets of Testimony and, then, at God's command, begins the process of re-educating the people.

Central to that process of re-education will be the symbolism of the second set of Tablets of Testimony, themselves. God will inscribe upon them His word but, this time, only on stone carved by Moshe. The Tablets themselves will thus represent the word of God, finding a home in the actions of man. These new Tablets must also immediately be placed into a symbolic home—a simple ark of wood. *Only if the words of those Tablets find their home, as well, in humble hearts of man—only if the Torah finds its context—will that Torah be worthy of existence.*

The partnership with which God challenges us is full, and our relationship with Him is, on some level, symbiotic. We are the vehicles divinely chosen to bring God's presence into this world. Through our lives and actions, the Torah finds the context within which it can exist. *Just as the law gives meaning to our lives—our lives give meaning to the law.* ■

Rabbi Shmuel Goldin's Dvar Torah is featured each month marking the new Hebrew Month on Shabbat Mevarchim HaChodesh.