

טעמו וראו

A taste of the
Rebbe's teachings

Parshat Ki Tisa

>>

Broken Tablets: An Achievement?

When the Torah eulogizes Moses, it mentions the breaking of the Tablets as one of his greatest virtues.

Doesn't that seem ludicrous?

In loving memory of
Rabbi **Gershon Mendel Garelik**,
and in honor of - תבלחט"א -
Mrs. **Bassie Garelik**,
the Rebbe's Shluchim to Italy

Dedicated by their grandchildren,
Rabbi **Shmuel & Chaya Mushka Greenberg**,
Wichita, Kansas

A. The Breaking of the Tablets

Source 1 31:18, 32:15-16, 19

When G-d finished speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai, He gave him two tablets of the Testimony. They were stone Tablets, written with G-d's finger.

Moses turned around and began going down the mountain with the two Tablets of Testimony in his hand. They were Tablets written on both sides, with the writing visible from either side. The Tablets were made by G-d and written with G-d's script engraved on the Tablets.

As he approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, he was angered, and he threw down the Tablets that were in his hand, shattering them at the foot of the mountain.

Source 2 Deuteronomy 34:10-12

No other Prophet like Moses has arisen in Israel, who knew G-d face to face. No one else could reproduce the signs and miracles that G-d let him display in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and all his land, or any of the mighty acts or great sights that Moses displayed before the eyes of all Israel.

וַיִּתֵּן אֱלֹהֵי מֹשֶׁה כְּכַלְתּוֹ לְדַבֵּר
אֹתוֹ בְּהַר סִינַי שְׁנֵי לַחַת
הָעֵדוּת לַחַת אֶבֶן כְּתָבִים
בְּאֶצְבַּע אֱלֹהִים:

וַיִּפֹּן וַיֵּרֵד מֹשֶׁה מִן־הָהָר
וּשְׁנֵי לַחַת הָעֵדוּת בְּיָדוֹ
לַחַת כְּתָבִים מִשְׁנֵי עֲבָרֵיהֶם
מִזֶּה וּמִזֶּה הֵם כְּתָבִים:
וְהַלַּחַת מַעֲשֵׂה אֱלֹהִים הִמָּה
וְהַמְּכֻתָב מִכְּתַב אֱלֹהִים הוּא
חֲרוּת עַל־הַלַּחַת:

וַיְהִי כַּאֲשֶׁר קָרַב אֶל־הַמַּחֲנֶה
וַיִּרְא אֶת־הָעֵגֹל וּמַחֲלַת
וַיַּחֲרֵאֵף מֹשֶׁה וַיִּשְׁלַךְ מִיָּדוֹ
אֶת־הַלַּחַת וַיִּשְׁבֵּר אֹתָם
תַּחַת הָהָר:

וְלֹא־קָם נָבִיא עוֹד
בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל כְּמֹשֶׁה אֲשֶׁר יָדָעוּ
יְהוָה פְּנִים אֶל־פְּנִים: לְכֹל־
הָאֲתוֹת וְהַמּוֹפְתִים אֲשֶׁר
שָׁלַח יְהוָה לַעֲשׂוֹת בְּאֶרֶץ
מִצְרָיִם לְפָרְעֹה וּלְכֹל־
עַבְדָּיו וּלְכֹל־אֶרְצוֹ: וּלְכֹל
הַיָּד הַחֲזָקָה וּלְכֹל הַמּוֹרָא
הַגָּדוֹל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה מֹשֶׁה
לְעֵינֵי כָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Rashi:

Who knew G-d face to face: Moses felt familiar with G-d, speaking with him whenever he wished.

Any of the mighty acts: This refers to receiving the Tablets in his hands.

The great sights: This refers to the miracles and wonders in the wilderness.

Before the eyes of all Israel: This refers to the incident where he was stirred to smash the Tablets before their eyes, as it is said, “I shattered them before your eyes.” G-d approved; the verse states, “The first Tablets which you shattered.” [As the Talmud explains it, G-d said to Moses:] “Well done for shattering them!”

רשי על הפסוקים:

אשר ידעו ה' פנים אל פנים. שְׁהִיָּה לְבוֹ גֹס בּוֹ וּמְדַבֵּר אֵלָיו בְּכָל עֵת שְׂרוּצָה:

ולכל היד החזקה. שְׁקִיבֵל אֶת הַתּוֹרָה בְּלוּחֹת בְּיָדָיו:

ולכל המורא הגדול. נְסִים וּגְבוּרוֹת שֶׁבְּמִדְבָּר הַגָּדוֹל וְהַנּוֹרָא:

לעיני כל ישראל. שֶׁנֶּשְׂאוּ לְבוֹ לְשֹׁבֵר הַלוּחֹת לְעֵינֵיהֶם שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר "וְאֲשַׁבְּרֵם לְעֵינֵיכֶם" הַסְּכִימָה דַעַת הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא לְדַעְתּוֹ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר "אֲשֶׁר שִׁבַּרְתָּ" - יִישַׁר כַּחַךְ שֶׁשִׁבַּרְתָּ:

>> The Rebbe

Can breaking the Tablets be greater than receiving them?

The Torah concludes with the words, “before the eyes of all Israel.” Rashi explains: “This refers to the incident where he was stirred to smash the Tablets before their eyes, as it is said, ‘I shattered them before your eyes.’ G-d approved; the verse states, “the first Tablets which you which you shattered.’ [As the Talmud explains it, G-d said to Moses:] ‘Well done for shattering them!’”

This is very bizarre.

In this section, the Torah sings Moses’ praises: “No other Prophet like Moses has arisen in Israel, who knew G-d face to face. No one else could reproduce the signs and miracles that G-d let him display in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and all his

land, or any of the mighty acts or great sights that Moses displayed before the eyes of all Israel.”

The notion that the words “before the eyes of all Israel” is a reference to the breaking of the Tablets (“he was stirred to smash the tablets before their eyes”) seems to be the very opposite of the literal understanding of the text, which speaks of Moses’ virtues.

It is true that G-d approved of his decision to break the tablets, and he does deserve credit for sensing G-d's will. But we still do not view the actual breaking of the Tablets as a positive occurrence!

Why does Rashi understand the verse as a reference to the breaking of the Tablets? From the perspective of Torah’s literal meaning, other commentators seem more on track. As they explain it, “before the eyes of all Israel” has no independent meaning. It is merely a continuation of the preceding description of the “mighty acts or great sights that Moses did—before the eyes of all Israel”!

These final words come after a long litany of Moses’ feats:

“He knew G-d face to face,” he was able to converse with G-d whenever he desired. He performed amazing miracles in Egypt. He did “mighty acts,” a reference to receiving the Tablets. He showed “great sights,” a reference to the miracles he did in the desert.

His greatest feat, the one listed at the very end, cannot possibly be his choice to break the Tablets. That would indicate that not only was it a positive thing, but moreover, it was far greater than any of the miracles he did during their forty years in the desert.

It would be even greater than the fact that he received those very Tablets. Could breaking the Tablets be greater than receiving them? That is unthinkable!

B. Defending the People

Source 3 Exodus 34:1

G-d said to Moses: Carve out two tablets for yourself, just like the first ones. I will write on those tablets the same words that were on the first tablets that you broke.

Rashi:

Carve for Yourself: You broke the first Tablets, you carve out others for yourself.

This is comparable to a king who went off to a faraway land and left his bride with the maidservants. The immoral behavior of the maidservants tarnished the betrothed's reputation. Her bridesman arose and tore up her marriage contract, saying, "If the king decides to kill her, I will tell him, 'she is not yet your wife.'"

The king's investigation found that only the maidservants had behaved immorally. He was reconciled with his bride. The bridesman said to the king, "Write her another marriage contract for the first one was torn up." The king replied to him, "You are the one who tore it up. You buy another paper for yourself and I will write it for her in my handwriting."

The king is G-d, the maidservants are the mixed multitudes, the bridesman is Moses, and G-d's betrothed is Israel. Therefore, it says, "Carve for yourself."

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה פְּסַל־לְךָ
שְׁנַי־לַחַת אֲבָנִים כְּרֵאשֵׁינִים
וְכַתַּבְתִּי עַל־הַלַּחַת אֶת־
הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ עַל־הַלַּחַת
הַרְאשֵׁינִים אֲשֶׁר שִׁבַּרְתָּ:

רש"י על הפסוק

פסל לך. אתה שִׁבַּרְתָּ
הַרְאשֵׁינִים, אתה פְּסַל לְךָ
אֲחֵרוֹת.

מִשָּׁל לְמֶלֶךְ שֶׁהֵלֵךְ לְמַדִּינַת
הַיָּם וְהִנִּיחַ אַרוֹסָתוֹ עִם
הַשְּׂפָחוֹת, מִתּוֹךְ קִלְקוּל
הַשְּׂפָחוֹת יָצָא עָלֶיהָ שֵׁם רָע,
עָמַד שׁוֹשְׁבֵינָה וְקָרַע כְּתַבְתָּהּ,
אָמַר אִם יֹאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ לְהַרְגָהּ,
אָמַר לוֹ עַדִּינוֹ אֵינָה אֲשַׁתְּךָ;

בְּדַק הַמֶּלֶךְ וּמִצָּא שְׂלֵא הָיָה
הַקִּלְקוּל אֲלָא מִן הַשְּׂפָחוֹת,
נִתְרַצָּה לָהּ. אָמַר לוֹ שׁוֹשְׁבֵינָה
כָּתַב לָהּ כְּתָבָה אַחֲרָת,
שֶׁנִּקְרָעָה הַרְאשֵׁינָה, אָמַר
לוֹ הַמֶּלֶךְ אַתָּה קָרַעְתָּ אוֹתָהּ
אַתָּה קָנָה לָהּ נָיִר אַחֵר וְאָנִי
אֲכַתֵּב לָהּ בְּכַתֵּב יָדִי.

כִּן הַמֶּלֶךְ זֶה הַקֶּב"ה, הַשְּׂפָחוֹת
אֵלוֹ עַרְב רַב, וְהַשׁוֹשְׁבֵינֵי זֶה
מֹשֶׁה, אַרוֹסָתוֹ שֶׁל הַקֶּב"ה
יִשְׂרָאֵל, לְכֵן נֶאֱמַר פְּסַל לְךָ:

>> The Rebbe

Moses recognized the true purpose of Torah

The answer lies in Rashi's earlier comments, where he explains the reason for the breaking of the Tablets.

When G-d commands Moses to fashion two new Tablets, Rashi states: "This is comparable to a king who went off to a faraway land and left his bride with the maidservants. The immoral behavior of the maidservants tarnished the betrothed's reputation. Her bridesman arose and tore up her marriage contract, saying, "If the king decides to kill her, I will tell him, 'she is not yet your wife'"...the king is G-d, the maidservants are the mixed multitudes, the bridesman is Moses, and G-d's betrothed is Israel."

This explanation could help us understand how Moses could be praised for taking the initiative to break the Tablets.

To preface: Rashi's parable doesn't seem to explain why Moses took the liberty to break the Tablets.

These tablets are a microcosm of the entire Torah. They were G-d's personal handiwork (as opposed to the second tablets which were fashioned by Moses before being engraved by G-d). These tablets were fashioned by G-d Himself.

Now, Moses' entire identity was the Torah. He, no doubt, had a perfect understanding of Torah. So he was surely able to appreciate the sublime nature of the Torah—especially those first Tablets fashioned by G-d Himself.

So the question must be asked: true, it is important to defend the Jewish people. But nonetheless, how could Moses destroy the Tablets that were fashioned and given to him by G-d Himself?!

The answer is that the People of Israel always come first.

The entire purpose of the Torah, beginning with that first set of Tablets, was for the sake of the People of Israel. As we read throughout the Torah, "Command the people of Israel," "Speak to the people of Israel." It is all about the Jewish people. Therefore, the moment their reputation was tarnished

and they were harm's way, G-d forbid, Moses didn't hesitate; he didn't consult with anyone, not even G-d, and he shattered the Tablets—Tablets that had been fashioned by G-d Himself.

The ultimate purpose of Torah is to uncover the essence of the Jewish people. So, in the event that the result might be the opposite, G-d forbid, and you are forced to choose between Torah and the Jewish people—there is no place for hesitation. Moses immediately proceeded to break the Tablets, the Torah, for the sake of the Jewish people.

Moreover: the breaking of the Tablets was worthwhile even to save just a small portion of the People of Israel, the most immoral among them, those who transgressed with the Golden Calf:

The idea that someone's good name could be tarnished is only relevant among human beings who make mistakes. G-d knew all along that the real “debauchery” was only among the “maidservants,” the mixed multitude, as He told Moses clearly when He instructed him to go down the mountain and deal with the issue. Moses, too, the true shepherd of Israel, knew that the People of Israel were incapable of fashioning a Golden Calf. The minority who did reach that state did so only under the influence of the “maidservants,” the mixed multitudes.

Thus, the incident posed no danger to the entire People of Israel, G-d forbid, but only to the small minority who sinned with the Golden Calf.

Nonetheless, to defend the small minority who sinned and to ensure that they will be welcomed back into the fold, Moses didn't hesitate to break the Tablets!

Source 4 Sefer Hamaamarim 5700 pg. 61

Two things preceded the creation of the world: Torah and the People of Israel. Who came first? The Torah contains references to the People of Israel: “Command the People of Israel, speak to the People of Israel.” Clearly, the People of Israel came first.

שני דברים קדמו לעולם,
תורה וישראל, ואיני יודע
איזה מהם קודם, כשהוא
אומר צו את בני ישראל
דבר אל בני ישראל, אומר
אני ישראל קדמו.

C. The Ultimate Virtue

>> The Rebbe

Breaking the Tablets was Moses' Greatest Act

So, the breaking of the Tablets demonstrates a great virtue in Moses, and in fact, his greatest virtue of all:

After Torah lists the amazing feats of Moses [speaking to G-d face to face, performing the miracles in Egypt, receiving the Torah, and more miracles throughout their sojourn in the desert] the Torah concludes with the greatest virtue of all: For the sake of the Jewish people, he didn't hesitate to break the Tablets—a greater virtue than all the amazing feats he accomplished, including the fact that he received the very same Torah.

The greatest achievement of Moses, the faithful shepherd of Israel, was that he jeopardized his entire identity—the Torah—to defend a small portion of his flock, the People of Israel, who had fallen into sin. The Torah is Moses' essence. Yet he didn't hesitate to break the precious Tablets which were fashioned by G-d Himself, to defend those who had transgressed with the Golden Calf.

This is the true virtue of a Jewish leader. He recognizes the essential value in his people, which supersedes the Torah, and is therefore ready to break the Tablets for their sake.

This virtue is greater than all the others. All the other feats were accomplished with talents that were given to him by G-d. As the Alter Rebbe explained, Moses humbly felt that if G-d would have given those talents to someone else, he would have executed the task more ably. But the decision to break the Tablets didn't come from a G-d-given power. It was his own idea, “and G-d approved of it.”

Breaking the Tablets to defend the People of Israel is the greatest expression of Moses' love for his fellow Jew. "Moses was a lover of Israel," the Talmud says. He didn't hesitate, and immediately shattered the Tablets to protect his people.

Moses did this act "before the eyes of all Israel"—they all witnessed how he broke it—to teach us the importance of loving our fellow. He endeavored to implant within us a true sense of *Ahavat Yisrael*.

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Source 5 Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak of Lubavitch, Sefer Hamaamarim 5710 pg. 236.

The Torah says, "Moses was more humble than any other person on the face of the earth." Despite the fact that he was aware of his lofty stature, he was still more humble than anyone else, because he knew that all of his talents and powers were given to him by G-d.

The Torah tells us that when Moses was born, his mother saw "that he was good." The Midrash explains that the entire home was filled with light upon his birth. That is a blessing from G-d, not a natural achievement.

Moses assumed that had someone else been granted those same powers, he would have achieved the same status, and he may have even developed those powers further, reaching even greater heights. Therefore, he was still humble.

וזהו דכתיב "והאיש משה ענו מאד
מכל האדם אשר על פני האדמה".
ועם היות שידע את הטוב שלו
ואשר הוא גבוה במעלה מכל
אדם, ומכל מקום היה עניו מכל
אדם. והוא מפני שידע, אשר כל
עניני מעלותיו אשר בהם הוא
גבוה במעלה ומדריגה מכל אדם,
הוא מה שניתן לו מלמעלה,
וכמו שכתוב "ותרא אותו כי
טוב הוא". ואיתא במדרש רבה,
טוב שמו, טוביה שמו, בשעה
שנולד משה נתמלאה כל הבית
אורה. דכל זה הוא מה שניתן לו
מלמעלה.

וחשב דאילו היו אלו הכוחות אצל
אחר הי' גם כן במדריגה ומעלה
זו, ואפשר דאחר אם הי' לו כחות
אלו הי' מגלה את הכוחות יותר,
ומשום זה הי' עניו מכל.

