

Parshat Ekev: Luchot v'Shivrei Luchot: On Whole and Broken Pieces

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Parshat Ekev both looks forward to the entrance of the Jewish people into the land of Israel and backward to the circuitous journey that brought them to this liminal moment on the brink. In so doing, it spends much time reflecting on a highlight/lowlight of early Jewish history, the revelation at Sinai and the attendant sin of the Golden Calf.

Deuteronomy chapters 9-10 are largely focused on this episode, and it is interesting to note that it is framed through the lens of Israelite defiance. Sinai is introduced initially not as a unique a site of divine disclosure, but as just another place of human provocation.

7 Remember, never forget, how you provoked the Lord your God to anger in the wilderness: from the day that you left the land of Egypt until you reached this place, you have continued defiant toward the Lord. 8 At Horeb [a.k.a Sinai] you so provoked the Lord that the Lord was angry enough with to have destroyed you. 9 I had ascended the mountain to receive the tablets of stone, the Tablets of the Covenant that the Lord had made with you, and I stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights, eating no bread and drinking no water. (Deuteronomy 9: 7-9)

ז זכר אל-תשכח את אשר-הקצפת
 את-יהוה אל-היך במדבר למן-היום אשר-יצאת
 מארץ מצרים עד-באכם עד-המקום הזה ממרים
 הייתם עם-ה': חוברב הקצפתם
 את-ה' ו'תאנף ה' בכם להשמיד אתכם: ט
 בעלתי הרהר לקחת לוחות האבנים
 לוחות הברית אשר-כרת ה' עמכם ואשב בהר
 ארבעים יום וארבעים לילה לחם לאאכלתי ומים
 לא שתיתי: (דברים ט: ז-ט)

Lest the Israelites think themselves worthy of entrance into the land of Israel, they are reminded of their profound unworthiness, as evidenced by the great sin that follows.

15 I started down the mountain, a mountain ablaze with fire, the two Tablets of the Covenant in my hands. 16 I saw how you had sinned against the Lord your God: you made yourselves a molten calf; you had been quick to stray from the path that the Lord had enjoined upon you. 17 Thereupon I gripped the two tablets and flung them away with both my hands, smashing them before your eyes. (Deut. 9:15-17)

טו ואפן וארד מן-ההרהר בער באש ושני
 לוחות הברית על שתי ידי: טז וארא והנה
 חטאתם לה' אלהיכם עשיתם לכם עגל
 מסכה סרתם מהר מן-הדרך אשר-צוה ה'
 אתכם: יז ואתפש בשני הלוחות ואשלכם
 מעל שתי ידי ואשברם לעיניכם: (דברים
 ט: טו-יז)

This climactic moment, of Moshe throwing down the tablets, shattering them into pieces, stands as one of the most shocking events in the life of Moshe and the life of the Jewish people. The motivation for this dramatic act is not listed, neither in Exodus, when it happened, nor here, when it is re-told. Commentaries abound. Perhaps it was to awaken the people to repentance. Perhaps it was to punish the sinners by withholding from them God's word. Or perhaps it was to protect those very sinners from God's word. (They could not be punished if they were not aware of their sin.) Or, perhaps, most simply and intuitively, Moshe smashed the tablets out of his own anger and frustration as the leader of a people so outrageously insubordinate.

Whatever the reason, Moshe found it within himself, on the other side of this act, to pray on behalf of his people to solicit God's forgiveness of them. And indeed God forgives and inaugurates a second process of revelation for a second set of tablets.

1 Thereupon the Lord said to me, "Carve out two tablets of stone like the first, and come up to Me on the mountain; and make an ark of wood. 2 I will inscribe on the tablets the commandments that were on the first tablets that you smashed, and you shall deposit them in the ark." (Deut. 10:1-2)

א בעת ההוא אמר ה' אלי פסל-לך שני-לוחות אבנים כראשנים ועלהאלי ההרה ועשית לך ארון עץ: בוֹאֲקֹתֵב עַל־הַלְּחֹת אֶת־הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר־הָיוּ עַל־הַלְּחֹת הָרִאשִׁימִים אֲשֶׁר־שָׁבַרְתָּ וְשָׂמְתָם בָּאֲרוֹן: (דברים:א-ב)

The reunion of God and the Jewish people appears to be underway.

But what of the relationship between God and Moshe? How did God appraise Moshe's audacious gesture, smashing to pieces God's own handiwork, inscribed with God's own words? The Talmud saw in the words of our verses a subtle hint to an answer:

How do we know that the Holy Blessed One gave His approval [to Moshe's actions]? For the verse says "that you smashed" ("*asher shibarta*"). Reish Lakish interpreted this: All strength to you ("*iyasher kochecha*") that you smashed it. (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 87a)

ומנלן דהסכים הקדוש ברוך הוא על ידו [משה]? שנאמר "אשר שברת" ואמר ריש לקיש: יישר כחך ששיברת. (שבת פז.)

In an astounding read of an otherwise innocuous phrase, Reish Lakish offers a radical wordplay, hearing in the word "*asher*" echoes of the phrase "*yasher koach*," well done. Thus, when God referred to the tablets, both in Exodus and in Deuteronomy, as those which were broken--"*asher shibarta*"--God was offering tacit approval, even praise, for that bold move. Sometimes things, even the holiest of things, need to be shattered. Sometimes rupture is called for precisely to reconstitute a relationship. Moshe got that and God did too.

The importance of the broken tablets is established still further by the final words of verse 2. To return to the verse:

I will inscribe on the tablets the commandments that were on the first tablets that you smashed, **and you shall deposit them in the ark.**" (Deut. 10:2)

וְאֶכְתֹּב עַל־הַלְּחֹת אֶת־הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר־הָיוּ עַל־הַלְּחֹת הָרִאשִׁימִים אֲשֶׁר־שָׁבַרְתָּ וְשָׂמְתָם בָּאֲרוֹן: (דברים י:ב)

The verse is ambiguous. What shall be placed in the ark? The second tablets? The first tablets that were smashed? The Talmud weighs in:

From where do we know that the fragments of the first tablets were deposited in the ark? He [R. Meir] learns it from the exposition reported by R. Yosef. For R. Yosef learned: "...that you smashed and you shall deposit them in them ark" [Deut. 10:2] teaches us that both the tablets and the fragments of the tablets were deposited in the ark. (Babylonian Talmud, Baba Batra 14b)

אלא שברי לוחות דמונחין בארון מנא ליה? נפקא ליה מדתני רב יוסף, דתני רב יוסף: (דברים י') אשר שברת ושמתם מלמד, שהלוח ותושברי לוחות מונחין בארון. (בבא בתרא יד:)

The Talmudic consensus, indeed its very starting point, is that the remains of the first tablets had to be preserved. The broken pieces, remnants of a broken relationship, had to live side-by-side with the whole, reconstituted one. The Jewish people had to contend, in perpetuity, with the reality of rupture that lay at the heart of their very existence.

And yet we must note that it was not just shards that stood in that ark, but the second tablets themselves, emblems of what is possible on the other side of brokenness. The Israelites needed to carry with them the memory of breakdown, the price paid--in relational terms--for their errant ways, but also the lesson learned about the profound possibility of second chances. In preserving the pieces together with the complete whole, the people would be always be reminded that relationships can be repaired; that people can start over, even with God. And yet they need not overlook or ignore the scars that they bear from that very process. They take those with them too in their arks.

Reish Lakish, the rabbi cited above who gave language to God's approval of Moshe, adds this insight:

There are times when the nullification of Torah may be its foundation. (Babylonian Talmud, Menachot 99b) פעמים שביטולה של תורה זהו יסודה (מנחות צט:)

Sometimes shattering is the key to building--a new self, a new relationship, a new strong grounding upon which to stand. To those who elect to break apart in order to meaningfully start over, to etch a new narrative ("*psol lecha...*" "carve out" [Deut. 10:1]), Moshe, Reish Lakish, and even God seem to say:

"Well done that you smashed."

"יישר כחך ששיברת"

Just remember to pick up the pieces and to take them with you.



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