YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

PARASHAT KI TISA

SICHA OF HARAV AHARON LICHTENSTEIN SHLIT"A

The Shattering of the Tablets

Summarized by Binyamin Frankel

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He turned and descended from the mountain, with the two tablets of testimony in his hands… And it was, when he came close to the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, that Moshe's anger burned, and he cast the tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain. (*Shemot* 32:15, 19)

Moshe's shattering of the tablets is mentioned again in *parashat Ekev*, as part of his summary of the wanderings in the desert:

I saw and behold, you had sinned to the Lord your God; you had made for yourselves a molten calf, you had deviated quickly from the path that God had commanded you. So I grasped the two tablets and I cast them from my two hands, and shattered them in your sight. (*Devarim* 9:16-17)

The shattering of the tablets represents the tragedy of the generation of the desert – and, to a considerable degree, the tragedy of *Am Yisrael* in general, to this day. When a *sefer Torah* falls to the floor, the entire congregation is shocked and shaken; here, the tablets – inscribed with God's own writing - were shattered by Moshe in front of the entire nation. It is impossible to describe the downturn, the tragedy, embodied in this act, and where and what we could have been were it not for the sin of the golden calf.

But on a different level, beyond the tragedy of the nation as a whole, the sin of the golden calf is the tragedy of a single individual – Moshe. We imagine Moshe toiling and exerting himself mightily in an attempt to inculcate Torah values and faith in *Am Yisrael*, trying to come close to God through understanding and cleaving, and now – as he stands at the pinnacle of his endeavor, in the midst of his personal encounter with God at Mount Sinai, receiving the Torah for *Am Yisrael* – he comes down and discovers that, in a certain sense, all of his efforts have been wasted. Moshe must surely have been seized by overwhelming frustration and pain, if he went so far as to shatter the tablets "inscribed by God's finger," written in "God's script."

What really caused Moshe to shatter the tablets as he came down the mountain? Why did he decide that the proper course of action, faced with the scene of the nation "gone wild" at the foot of the mountain, was to shatter the tablets?

The Midrash addresses this question and brings a parable to explain Moshe's action:

[Moshe] said: Better that she [the nation of Israel] be judged as a single woman, and not as a married woman. (*Shemot* *Rabba*, 43 and 46)

In other words, Moshe witnessed the nation abandoning all the values to which they had been educated since the exodus from Egypt, and understood what was going to happen if the tablets were to be given to them. For this reason, he decided that it was better to shatter the tablets and cause Israel not to receive the Torah, such that their act of betrayal would not be a direct rejection of the commandments – for they would not yet have received and accepted them. In the same vein, we find another explanation in the midrash:

Moshe also said: Better that they should be considered as sinning unintentionally, rather than be considered as sinning deliberately against what is written on the tablets, "I am the Lord your God," where the punishment is, "One who sacrifices to [foreign] gods shall be utterly destroyed;" therefore, he broke the tablets. (*Shemot* *Rabba*, 43)

Thus, even when Moshe sees that Bnei Yisrael have neglected all that they learned, he never ceases trying to guard and protect them. He makes his own calculation and understands that it is better for *Am Yisrael* that the tablets be broken.

Another midrash introduces a slightly different angle:

There were three things that Moshe did of his own initiative, which were in consonance with God's will … he broke the tablets… (*Shemot Rabba*, 46)

Although the decision was Moshe's alone, God concurred with his action and granted it retroactive Divine approval.

However, we see a different - almost opposite - direction adopted in other *midrashim*:

"Hew yourself two tablets of stone" (*Devarim* 10:1) – This is why it is written, "Be not hasty in your spirit to be angry; for anger rests in the bosom of fools" (*Kohelet* 7:9). Who is it who was angry? Moshe, as it says, "Moshe's anger waxed hot, and he cast the tables out of his hands, and he shattered them at the foot of the mountain" (*Shemot* 32:19). The Holy One said to him: "You, Moshe, are taking out your anger on the Tablets of the Covenant; do you want Me to take out My anger, and you will see that the world will not be able to exist for even a moment?" Moshe said, "What shall I do?" [God] answered, "I am imposing a fine upon you; you broke them and you must replace them," and therefore it says, "Hew yourself two tablets of stone." (*Devarim Rabba*, 3)

This midrash does not describe Moshe's act as the result of logical consideration, but rather, to some degree, as an emotional outburst at the sight of *Bnei Yisrael* and their actions. When Moshe sees his entire leadership endeavor crumbling before his eyes, he is filled with a burst of terrible anger, and he shatters the tablets, without thinking about the results or the significance of this act. For this, God rebukes him.

A third approach is brought in the *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* (2:3); it is somewhat different from the two views presented above:

Rabbi Yehuda ben Beteira said: Moshe did not shatter the tablets [of his own accord,] but rather was told to do so by God, as it is written, "Mouth to mouth I speak to him" (*Bamidbar* 12:8) – mouth to mouth I told him to shatter the tablets.

The midrash goes on to quote a list of *Tannaim* (including Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria, Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Meir, and others) who agree that Moshe acted on the basis of a direct Divine command.

Why do these *Tannaim* interpret the situation in a way that appears to be a complete departure from the literal sense of the verses? Why do they want to prove that Moshe acted as he did because he was so commanded? The answer seems clear: it is, quite simply, impossible to imagine Moshe deciding on his own to break the tablets given to him by God, without an explicit instruction to do so. It is not possible that a human being – even Moshe Rabbeinu himself – could decide of his own accord to break the Torah and the commandments inscribed upon it for any reason at all – even as a response to the absolute violation of the very values that the Torah is coming to teach and inculcate. These *Tannaim* could not imagine Moshe deciding on his own initiative to shatter God's word solely on the basis of his own calculation – and certainly not as the result of a flash of anger. Although there is some logic in Moshe’s action, it is impossible that he would commit a sort of "transgression for the sake of heaven," in order to educate the nation. A "transgression for a good reason" is a concept that is foreign to Torah. Moshe could not possibly have transgressed God's word telling him to convey the Torah to *Bnei Yisrael*, without an explicit instruction from God.

What about the other opinions we reviewed? Is it possible that they entertained the possibility of a "transgression for the sake of heaven"? Would they suggest that Moshe's action could go unpunished if he acted as he did in contravention of an explicit Divine command, and without consulting God first? In order to complete the picture, we must go back to an earlier midrash we examined, and see its preamble:

The script flew off the tablets, and therefore he shattered them, as it says, "And I saw, and behold, you sinned against the Lord your God" (Devarim 9:16) – Moshe saw that they sinned, and he shattered the tablets. (*Shemot* *Rabba*, 46)

This is not talking about script in the simple sense of the word, but rather in the sense of substance and values. When *Am Yisrael* transgressed God's fundamental command, "You shall not have other gods before Me," the script left the Torah, as it were: all the values that it expressed and came to teach the nation, flew into the air and were gone. After this the tablets were largely devoid of meaning; therefore, Moshe allowed himself to break them. Tablets with Divine script upon them, which God had commanded to convey to the nation, would not have been broken by Moshe. But after the nation's sin, the script on the tablets disappeared, and their significance was gone.

To complete this approach, there is another midrash that adds one further detail as to Moshe's act:

When God gave him the tablets, they bore themselves. When Moshe began his descent, came near the camp and saw the golden calf, the script took flight, and the tablets became heavy in Moshe’s hands. Immediately, "Moshe's anger waxed hot, and he cast the tables out of his hands, and he shattered them at the foot of the mountain" (*Shemot* 32:19). (*Tanchuma*, *Ki* *Tisa*, 26)

When Moshe descends from the mountain, the tablets are carrying themselves. Moshe is entirely enveloped in the spirit of his intense spiritual experience; he is full of motivation and desire to convey to the nation what he has learned. In such a situation, no weight in the world could stop him or encumber him; he bears the weight of the tablets with ease. But when he sees what *Bnei Yisrael* are doing, his strength leaves him; his spiritual "high" comes crashing down. All the considerable power that was stored inside him, expressed also in the form of physical strength, disappears. Immediately, the tablets are too heavy for him to bear, and he drops them.

From the perspective of this midrash, Moshe wanted to bring the tablets to *Bnei Yisrael*, and never had any intention of breaking them. Yet his shock and disappointment caused his inner strength – which had kept him alive atop the mountain for forty days and forty nights without food or drink –to dissipate instantly, "and he shattered them at the foot of the mountain."

(This sicha was delivered on leil Shabbat parashat Ki Tisa 5769 [2009].)