

The Parsha Discussion

TORAH TO DISCUSS WITH TEENS AND ADULTS AROUND YOUR SHABBAT TABLE

Ekev 5779. Broken Tablets; Broken People; Broken Faith

In Chapter Nine of Devarim, Moshe revisits the episode of the Golden calf and the shattering of the luchot; the tablets of the law. In Chapter Ten, he depicts the renewal of the covenant as God invites him to receive the second tablets.



One might think that the broken tablets represent sin and betrayal, and that the second, intact, tablets which are inserted into the Ark of the Covenant – the Aron Habrit – represent obedience, a covenantal bond, and therefore the antithesis of the broken tablets. Some commentators certainly view the Ark of the Covenant as holding only a single set of the Tablets of the Law; the intact ones. But there is another aggadic teaching, based on our parsha, and widely quoted in rabbinic sources:

“R. Yosef learned: ‘Which you broke, and you shall place them [in the Ark]’ (Deut. 10:2) – [This juxtaposition] teaches us that both the tablets and the fragments of the tablets were both deposited in the Ark” (Bava Batra 14b)

If the Ark contained not only the intact tablets but also the broken fragments, what could this mean?

TEACHING 1: Broken People

“Rabbi Judah says... Be careful [to honour] a sage who has forgotten his learning involuntarily: for we say that both the whole tables of stone and the pieces of the broken tables were placed in the Ark.” (Berakhot 8b)

A sage who has reached old-age and has, due to senility, lost his scholarship and erudition is akin to the broken tablets. He contained Torah, he represented the link with God, but now that is all in shatters, a faint memory, a broken one, of the past glory. We place this individual in the place of honour, in the Ark. The damage of time does not allow us to add insult to injury, to violate this man, demoting him from his place of respect. We know he is broken, but we retain his dignity.

This teaching might suggest a new, sensitive vantage point to view many people in our communities who have suffered from life’s knocks and cruelties and who are in some way “broken”, people who do not fit the pristine image of the grand, intact, tablets. How do we allow these people to find their place alongside the intact tablets, in the central arena of the covenant – in the Ark?

TEACHING 2: Broken faith; rebuilding Faith

Whereas the first tablets were Godly, the second are human. The first are described as: “The tablets were God’s work, and the writing was God’s writing” (ex.32), whereas the second tablets are a joint God-human effort: “the Lord said to me, ‘Carve out two tablets of stone like the first, and ...I will inscribe on the tablets the commandments that were on the first tablets that you smashed.’” (Deut 10:1-2)

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The first tablets were pristine, unblemished. They shattered the moment that they encountered sin. (the Golden Calf.) The second tablets are given after the sin and after God's forgiveness of the Golden Calf. They acknowledge human error and welcome human forgiveness. They are created by human effort, expressed by the fact the Moses, not God, hewed the tablets.

This understanding leads Rabbi Nachman of Breslav, as expressed by his student, Rabbi Natan, to see the broken and intact tablets as a process of renewal and repair.

By means of the idea of broken tablets, of broken faith; through that brokenness itself, faith returns and rehabilitates itself. And this is the embodiment of the concept of the second tablets.

Because thanks to the existence of a small fragment of the broken faith, he fulfills the advice of the sages that those for whom faith is broken, they should return and rebuild that faith. And that is the aspect of receiving the second tablets. (Likkutei Halakhot. Shabbat)

So, let's discuss

- Is it likely that the fragments of the law were kept in the ark
- This aggadic teaching that the "tablets and the fragments in the ark" – what might it mean to you? Which reading that we offered did you prefer?
- Do you think that faith shattered can be restored? Or is faith broken beyond repair?

Shabbat Shalom!