

The Broken Tablets and the Whole: A Shavuot Exploration

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Luchot v'shivray luchot munachot ba-aron.

Both the whole tablets and the broken tablets were placed in the ark.

— *B. Brakhot 8B*

In preparing for Shavuot, we set out to study the midrashic traditions of the broken tablets of the Law. When we read this saying in *Berakhot*, we felt that we had come upon one of the gems of the Talmud. We wanted to understand how the broken tablets, which in Exodus were very real fragments of stone, became in the Talmud a rich and poignant metaphor for human frailty and loss.

Text and Context

The Talmudic context in which the saying about the whole and the broken tablets appears is a discussion of the rules associated with learning and recitation in the study house. We are told not to get ahead of the congregation as we study the Torah portion, but week by week to review the Hebrew text twice and the Aramaic translation once. One who follows this practice, it is said, will have his days and years prolonged. This is followed by the story of Rabbi Bibi ben Abaye, a hotshot scholar who wanted to study all the Torah portions for the year on the eve of Yom Kippur. One of his colleagues reined him in by reminding him of the venerable teachings quoted in the name of Rabbi Yehudah, one of which was: “Be careful to respect an old man who has forgotten his learning through no fault of his own, for we have said: ‘Both the [whole] tablets and the broken tablets were placed in the ark.’”

In this deft combination of law and lore, the Talmudic editors teach deep ethical lessons. Following the precepts for proper Torah study ensures that no individual will separate him or herself from the community. Similarly, understanding the respect due to all ensures that no individual—however disabled by age, sickness or personal hardship—can ever be separated from a community that has Torah study at its center.

Rabbi Yehudah's proof-text bolsters the argument with a complex metaphor. All our vaunted attainments are as fragile as a human being and the process of aging. The community itself is compared to an ark that has within it whole tablets as well as broken ones. In that light, human beings can only treat one another with the greatest respect.

Text-cavation

How did the rabbis conclude that the two sets of tablets were both placed in the ark of the covenant?

Recall the story of the tablets in Exodus 32-34. Moses shattered the first set in a fury, when he came down from the mountain and saw the people's idolatry with the golden calf firsthand. After Moses wipes out the sinners and goes back up the mountain, God instructs him to make a new set of tablets (the first were made by God), which God will again inscribe. When Moses comes down again from the mountain, he has with him this new set of tablets. There is no mention of the fate of the broken tablets. What happened to them?

Rashi's comment on the passage in Berakhot points us to an answer: "The tablets were placed in the ark: As it is written: ...that you smashed, and you shall deposit them in the ark. That is, even the broken ones you should place in the ark."

The full verse that Rashi cites is from Deuteronomy (10:1-2): *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. 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."* The rabbis noticed that the word "them" is ambiguous. Reading literally but inventively, they heard God commanding Moses to place not only the new tablets, but also the broken tablets in the ark. In other words, "Both the whole tablets and the broken tablets were placed in the ark" was not a metaphoric proverb in its original

context, so much as a textual midrash—reading between the lines to explain God's commandment to Moses in Deuteronomy.

Of course, this reading is not the only plausible interpretation. The great rabbinic Bible, the Mikra'ot G'dolot, gives a snapshot of a conversation on Deuteronomy 10:1-2 that lasted several centuries. Rashi (1040-1105) claimed that there were two arks, which confirmed a second Talmudic tradition: "Rabbi Yehudah taught in the name of Rabbi Ilai: There were two arks with Israel in the desert, one in which the Torah was placed, and one in which the broken tablets were placed" (Y. Shekalim 6:1).

Ibn Ezra (1089-1164), by contrast, understood that there was only one ark. When Moses said, *I made an ark* (Deut. 10:3), he meant 'I commanded that an ark be made,' referring to the ark made by Bezalel. Nahmanides (1194-1270) wrote that Moses indeed made a wooden ark, but that it was only temporary. There was no space designated for a second ark in the Tabernacle. As soon as the new gold-plated ark was completed, the wooden ark was placed in a *genizah*, a storage facility for used and damaged sacred objects. What's more, claimed Nahmanides, the Talmudic traditions bear him out. "Both the whole tablets and the broken tablets were placed in the ark" is authoritative, because it is the opinion of the majority, while the tradition claiming that there were separate arks for each set of tablets can be dismissed as merely the opinion of an individual.

The Text in New Contexts

In the Talmudic passage about the broken tablets, Rabbi Yehudah had taken a familiar teaching, previously tied to a biblical verse, and inserted it into a new context where it was reborn as an ethical proverb. Taking our cue from Rabbi Yehudah, we invited those gathered at the *tikkun* (study session) on the night of Shavuot to appropriate the image of the whole and the broken tablets as their own.

One of us recalled hearing how our friend and teacher Art Green had used the image, arguing that after the Holocaust one could only do theology from the point of view that "both the whole and the broken tablets

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were placed in the ark.” That is, just as modernity has made it impossible for us to take a non-historical view of Torah, so the Holocaust has made it impossible for most Jews to believe in the God their ancestors believed in. On the other hand, to view only the brokenness of tradition and not the potential for renewal and wholeness in contemporary Judaism is to cut ourselves off from the life-giving energies of faith. It is up to us to make a new set of whole tablets, a mosaic composed of fragments from the past and emerging patterns of our own time.

Most memorably, someone noted that the human memory can be likened to an ark with whole and broken tablets within it. We carry within ourselves ineradicable memories of where our relationships went wrong, alongside our sense of what’s whole and vibrant in those relations. Our authenticity in our relationships with others and with ourselves depends upon our honest acknowledgment of both the whole tablets and the broken tablets within ourselves.

And what of Shavuot itself? Even as we read the Bible’s account of revelation, we know that the sin of the golden calf is coming and that God’s precious tablets will inevitably be broken. And yet, the annual celebration of Shavuot allows us a moment in time to be free from the burden of this dark foreknowledge. We are given a moment to aspire to the wholeness of receiving the commandments anew and the potential to fulfill them as never before. But if the commandments should be broken in the coming year, Shavuot promises that our broken intentions will also be safeguarded, so that we can revisit and renew them. As it has been taught, “Both the whole tablets and the broken tablets were placed in the ark.”



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