

Lessons of the Broken Tablets

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What chutzpah! Moses comes down from Mount Sinai, bearing the tablets of the commandments, and suddenly hurls those very stones to the ground, breaking them into countless shards. The words of God! How dare he?

Moses, of course, has reason to lose his temper. The Children of Israel, dismayed by the length of time Moses has been up that mountain, have convinced his brother Aaron to build them a god they can see. All too readily, Aaron complies, molding the golden calf.

Moses cannot believe his eyes. Yes, God has already told him of the people's wicked idolatry. Still, seeing the evidence kindles his anger. My Mussar teacher, Alan Morinis, who is slated to visit us in May, teaches that our anger is like a flaming match. Our reaction is modulated by the distance we are able to keep between that flame and our internal fuse, which sets off an outburst. In this instance, Moses's match and fuse come together quickly, and he responds harshly.

Or does he?

Moses's display of anger chastens the Children of Israel, including Aaron, leading to their repentance.

Moses here is rather like a parent. Too often, we lose our tempers at our children for small insignificant reasons. Our anger serves no positive purpose. Instead, our outbursts inadvertently teach our children to respond to frustrating situations by exploding. On other occasions, though, our anger is appropriate to the situation at hand. Our children can learn our values when they see what really makes us angry, and that's behavior we hope that they will model. Moses's angry display has the intended effect in our story.

Nevertheless, a later phrase in this week's Torah portion suggests that God is not entirely pleased that Moses has broken the original tablets. God tells Moses to carve two new tablets, like the first, and to inscribe upon them the words that were on the first set of tablets. God makes a point of what Moses has done, referring to the original tablets, "which you broke." Moreover, this time, the

words won't be inscribed by God. Instead, Moses will now need to do the carving.

The Jerusalem Talmud takes a completely different approach to Moses's breaking the tablets, suggesting that the matter is out of his hands, literally. The stones, we are taught, are too heavy for any human to carry. However, the divinely-inscribed letters on them are miraculous; they reduce the weight of the tablets, so that Moses can lift them. This Talmudic interpretation anthropomorphizes the letters, imagining that they are so revolted by the golden calf that they actually fly off the tablets. The stones then regain their full weight, and Moses is physically unable to bear them, so he drops them to the ground.

We might say that the Talmud is suggesting that God, the source of any such miracle, is the One who causes the tablets to be broken. Broken tablets are better than a destroyed people. God – not Moses, in this version – hopes that the people will think that their leader has destroyed the tablets in a fit of anger, and will therefore repent.

The appearance of anger, then, perhaps better framed as “righteous indignation,” serves a useful purpose.

That positive view of the shattering of the tablets informs an important rabbinic teaching about what happens to those shards later. The rabbis wonder: What became of the broken tablets? Carved by God, and inscribed by the Divine hand, surely they are too holy to have been left on the side of a mountain. After all, we don't throw away an old Torah Scroll or prayer book that can no longer be used. We treat these items with care, ultimately burying them in our cemetery. Often, traditional Jews place old sacred books in the same grave with a person who lived the values of the holy words in the books. How much more would we treat with respect stones on which God has personally engraved commandments? Therefore, the rabbis teach that the Children of Israel placed those shards in the Holy Ark, carrying the broken tablets and the whole ones together.

Perhaps the broken tablets are intended as a continual reminder to the Children of Israel. If they repeat their sin, bowing down to an idol, they will shatter the covenant.

An entirely different view may be even more inspiring. Our rabbis have taught that the broken tablets may be a metaphor. Each and every one of us, like the tablets in the Ark, is both broken and whole.

Moses, for example, is God's primary human agent of redemption. Our tradition considers him to be the holiest person who ever lived. Still, he has a fatal flaw: anger, the incident with the tablets being far from the most egregious example. In one story told in the Book of Numbers, the people have no water. They kvetch, and with good reason: Lacking water in the desert! God tells Moses to speak to a certain rock, and that rock will produce water. Instead, Moses harshly reprimands the Children of Israel, and dramatically smashes his rod upon the rock. God gives the people water; after all, they haven't done anything wrong. Moses, though, is punished: After leading the Children of Israel for forty years in the desert, he will not be permitted to enter the Promised Land with them.

Perhaps the most remarkable part of that story is that Moses doesn't immediately resign his duties as the people's leader. He continues to serve God and the Children of Israel, even knowing that he won't achieve the ultimate reward. Moses's brokenness – his anger management problem – travels in the same vessel as Moses's great skill and loyalty as God's servant.

Like Moses, we are all broken. My colleague, Rabbi Marci Bellows, tells of a childhood when she experienced "success and very little early failure." Then, as an adolescent, "[she] didn't get the part [she] wanted in a school play, a boyfriend broke up with [her,] and [she] got some Bs." Before she knew it, young Marci "spiraled into depression." Blessedly, her parents "recognized [her depression] quickly and sent [her] to a caring therapist." Ultimately, Marci "learned that [she] didn't have to define [her]self by [her] successes or by [her] failures."

Years later, having grown up to become Rabbi Bellows, Marci connects the insight she acquired as a youth in psychotherapy to the midrash about the broken and holy tablets, borne in the same Ark. Rabbi Bellows teaches: "[O]ur brokenness is just as holy as our perfection. Our flaws and moments of weakness can be just as sacred" as our greatest talents and achievements.

Most of us are all too aware of our imperfections. Our self-esteem can take big hits from those flaws. One person's brokenness is being overweight. He feels badly about himself in the doctor's office, in the clothing store, and whenever he looks into the mirror. Another person's brokenness is being disorganized. She feels worthless when she keeps others waiting, when she looks at her messy desk, or when she can't find that password.

The lesson of the broken tablets, though, is that those imperfections are part of our holiness. Yes, we can work to improve ourselves. At the same time, the midrash of the broken tablets teaches us to accept our brokenness and to see our flaws in the context of our full selves. That overweight guy? He's enormously successful at work, making a positive impact on people's lives with a career that makes the world a better place. That disorganized woman? She's a caring, faithful partner to her spouse, a most attentive mother, and a cherished friend.

The lesson of the broken tablets is that we have every reason to love ourselves, as we carry our flaws and our positive characteristics together, in the holy vessels that are our lives. Flaws and all, each of us is God's creation, *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the Divine image.

Amen.