

Breaking Holy Objects (Edited Transcript)

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One of the most dramatic moments in the Chumash takes place in this week's parsha, Ki Tisa. When Moshe comes down from Mt Sinai carrying the Ten Commandments, which are engraved on the tablets, and he sees the people worshipping the golden calf, he throws down the tablets and smashes them. It is real drama because he destroys the tablets that contain the Ten Commandments!

Why did he do that? He saw the people were worshipping the golden calf! But how did that happen? Well, the people began to get worried that Moshe was not coming back down the mountain. Let's go through the sequence of events. They heard G-d say the Ten Commandments, and then Moshe goes up the mountain to learn more about the Torah and to bring down the Torah to the people. Time passes and they start to worry about where he is and why he's not coming down. They're waiting for him, and in their minds, according to their calculations, he's been delayed, so they think he's not coming back. They panic, they make the golden calf to replace Moshe and they start to worship this golden calf. When he comes down the mountain and he sees them worshipping the golden calf, he smashes the tablets.

We need to understand how he could do this, because G-d didn't give him permission to do so, and these tablets were engraved by G-d Himself, as this parsha teaches us. So this is a holy object and Moshe destroys it. What gives him the right to do that? The Rashbam, in his commentary, says Moshe didn't intend to break them, but that he actually 'lost strength' when he saw the people worshipping the golden calf. He was so overcome with despair, despondency and outrage at what was taking place that he lost the physical strength to hold the tablets, so they began to fall, and then he pushed them away from him so they wouldn't shatter on his feet. That's why the pasuk says: 'vayashlech', that he 'threw' the tablets. He didn't intend to break them, he just lost strength and the tablets broke when they dropped to the ground after he pushed them away from his body.

However, most of the commentators learn that Moshe wilfully and intentionally smashed the tablets containing the Ten Commandments, and how could he do this? This is actually debated in the Gemara (Shabbos 87a) where the Gemara discusses how Moshe Rabbeinu could do this without the instruction of Hashem, and it says this is one of three things he did that G-d did not instruct him to do, where he took the initiative, and then afterwards G-d agreed with what he had done. The Gemara says G-d declared to him afterwards: 'Yishar kochecha' well done for breaking the tablets, and that's actually the origin of the words: 'Yeshar koach,' when you say well done to someone for doing something, especially if they've done a mitzvah or they've received an aliyah - it comes from this Gemara, where it says: 'Yishar kochecha.' That became 'yeshar koach,' which then eventually became 'shekeach', but the original Hebrew bears no resemblance to the way we use the word today - and this Gemara is the source for that expression, to say: 'May your strength be with you for what you have done, which is such a good thing.'

Moshe's rationale

What was his logic? What gave him the right? What made him make that decision? The Gemara explains and Rashi quotes it in our parsha: when Moshe saw them worshipping the golden calf, he made the following rational argument to himself. He said, a person who worships idols cannot be part of the group of people who brings the Korban Pesach. So, if for the transgression of worshipping idols, a person cannot participate even in one mitzvah, they lose the right to one mitzvah. Then, if the entire Jewish people is involved in the worshipping of this golden calf, then surely they are no longer worthy to receive the Torah. If the transgression of worshipping idols disqualifies you from even one mitzvah, how much more so does it disqualify you from the entire Torah? So he reasoned that the people were no longer worthy to receive the Torah, hence he smashed the tablets to say they had lost the right to receive the Torah.

What is so fascinating is that this is recorded as one of his great achievements, which is an interesting thing because he's breaking the tablets. Why is this one of his greatest achievements? In the very last pasuk, the final verse of the entire Torah, at the end of the

five books, it says: *Lo kam navi k'od b'Yisrael k'Moshe* ? no prophet arose and will arise in Israel like Moshe. ? And then it goes on to list all of his attributes, and it says all the great things he did, and the final verse, verse 12, chapter 34 of the Book of Devarim, says: *Ulechol hayad hachazakar* ? and for the strong hand ? and *Ulechol hamora hagedol* ? and the great signs and wonders which Moshe did in the eyes of all of Israel. ? And there Rashi, in his commentary on the pasuk, says this is referring to all of the great things Moshe did in his life. He was the instrument through which G-d brought the great miracles that led to the liberation of the Jewish people from the slavery of Egypt. He was the instrument through which G-d gave the Torah to the Jewish people. And then, finally, what does it mean in the eyes of all Israel ? Rashi says, that he broke the tablets.

So, the final few words of the entire Torah, which is listing the accolades of Moshe Rabbeinu, says one of his greatest moments was when he broke the tablets. We understand the greatness of his achievement being the instrument through which the Jewish people were liberated from Egypt, where he performed all the signs and wonders that G-d enabled him to perform, and the fact that he was the instrument through which the Torah was given to the Jewish people. But, why was one of his greatest moments the breaking of the tablets ?

Rav Eliyahu Meir Bloch, the Telzer Rosh Yeshiva, explained the following fascinating insight. He said human nature is when you become personally invested in a project or in something you're doing; you have a personal interest in it. You may start off with altruistic motives, but eventually you become emotionally attached to what you're doing. He said, think of this from the perspective of Moshe Rabbeinu. When G-d came to him to give him his mission, originally it was to lead the people out of Egypt, but the ultimate purpose for this was to give the Torah to the people at Mt Sinai. So the whole purpose of his mission was in order to lead the people to the foot of Mt Sinai, where they would receive the Torah from G-d. And Moshe knew this was his ultimate purpose, and this was going to be the key moment in Jewish history ? and indeed for world history ? and it was all resting on his shoulders. So when he came down the mountain and he saw the people worshipping the golden calf, he came to the conclusion that they were not worthy to receive the Torah, and therefore, the entire enterprise of the giving of the Torah to the Jewish people was a failure, and it was his failure, so he smashed the tablets as a way of saying the Jewish people are no longer worthy to receive the Torah.

For Heaven's sake

Do you know what personal greatness that took ? It meant admitting that he had failed in his mission. It meant admitting the whole purpose and all the time and effort he had invested in bringing the people to this point was now to no avail, because they had disqualified themselves by worshipping the golden calf. Do you know what he showed at that moment ? He showed he was not in it for himself ? he was in it for the cause ! He was doing it for the ultimate motivation in life, *L'sheim Shamayim*, for the sake of Heaven. He wasn't doing it for himself.

So often, as human beings, we get caught up in things, we do things for our own personal interest, even if it gets in the way of the cause, of something that we're trying to achieve for others and to make the world a better place: in family, in marriage, in the community, in whatever it may be, our own personal involvements distract us from doing the right thing. Moshe Rabbeinu was so great that he was able to make a decision to break the tablets and to disqualify the people from receiving the Torah, even though it meant he was admitting failure. That was his greatness, and that's why it is mentioned as one of his greatest achievements, because it shows us what kind of a person he was. Of course, in the end, G-d forgave the people and they were able to receive the Torah eventually, so he was able to complete his mission, but at the time that he broke the tablets, he didn't know what the outcome would be, and he was prepared to take that brave, bold move to say the mission had failed.

There's another, completely different, perspective on understanding why Moshe broke the tablets. The Meshech Chochma, one of our great commentators, Rav Meir Simcha HaKohen of Dvinsk, says as follows: It wasn't about disqualifying the people from receiving the Torah; rather, it was an educational moment. Moshe wanted to educate and reach the people and change their perspective, because he realised they had made a terrible mistake. What led to the mistake of them making the golden calf ? At the end of the day, these were people who had seen the 10 plagues, the splitting of the sea, they'd heard G-d's voice at Mt Sinai ? how could they make a golden calf ? The answer he gives is that they invested too much importance in Moshe. They started to see Moshe as a holy man who was the source of all of their greatness, and they needed this holy man in their midst in order to achieve great things. When they *lost* him, they needed some other tangible representation of some aspect of holiness they could hold onto, so

they created a golden calf that could be the tangible dimension of holiness that they could grasp and touch and feel and see.

However, they forgot the important fact that our interaction is directly with G-d. We don't go through people, we don't go through objects ? we interact directly with G-d. G-d is involved in every aspect of our life; he doesn't delegate, he's involved in the minutia of our lives and He wants a direct relationship with us. All holiness in this world comes from Him and from His Torah. There is nothing physical that is intrinsically holy. We don't believe in holy objects or holy lands or holy anything ? it all comes directly from G-d. Of course, the land of Israel is holy, but why? Because the Torah says so. The city of Jerusalem is holy. Why? Because it is invested with holiness by the Torah and by G-d. All of the holiness stems from Hashem Himself.

The Mishkan, the Tabernacle, is holy, the Beit Hamikdash is holy, but only because it is invested with holiness by G-d. But it's not intrinsic to it, so when, later on in Jewish history, the people sinned and they lost the right to a temple, and it was destroyed, it lost its holiness because the root of its holiness comes from our connection to G-d, and the root of its holiness comes from the Torah itself, which invests all of these objects with holiness. Moshe was trying to get this message through to the people, this message that they needed to interact directly with G-d and that all human beings are equal, and we all have equal access to Hashem. The root of all holiness is in loyalty and dedication to G-d and to His Torah, and we have that direct access. The people didn't need Moshe and they didn't need a golden calf and they didn't need the so-called holy objects in order to have that connection with G-d ? in order to live a life of Torah and of holiness.

Do you know how Moshe taught them that lesson? He took what would be, in their eyes, the most holy object of all ? the tablets that were engraved by G-d Himself, with the words of the Ten Commandments, and he smashed them. He did this as a way of saying to the people: "Do you think this object has intrinsic holiness?" By breaking the tablets, he showed the Jewish people that no object has intrinsic holiness. It is only holy because G-d has invested it with holiness. It is only holy because the Torah has invested it with holiness, and he smashed it to show the people not to worship the object, only to worship Hashem. Don't become fixated on objects and on people, be connected to Hashem and to His Torah. That is the root of all holiness. And that is what he was trying to teach the people. So he didn't just break the tablets in a fit of rage, he didn't break the tablets, according to the Meshech Chochma, in order to symbolise the disqualification of the people. He broke the tablets in order to educate the people, to change them, to help them to see the real method of connection with G-d, and for them to realise they have immediate and direct access to G-d. The real connection is with G-d Himself and with His Torah.

That's why in the Holy Ark, later on, they carried the second set of tablets that were engraved by Moshe, not by G-d, side by side with the broken tablets. Moshe was sending a message to the Jewish people, reminding them that they don't need him and they don't need a golden calf and they don't need any of these things ? they just need that direct and personal connection with Hashem and with His Torah, then their lives would be filled with holiness.

Don't fixate on objects, fixate on and connect with Hashem. He invests everything with holiness, and when you are loyal and dedicated to Hashem, then your life will be filled with many holy objects and many holy things. But never lose sight of the root of it all, which is your direct connection with G-d.