

Things break. Sometimes irreparably. A Few weeks ago, my wedding ring, which I had worn for close to ten years, broke. First the wood slid off the metal part, then one of my daughters squeezed my hand extra hard, and the wood was crushed.

My children break things all the time, and we argue about whether to throw them away, fix them, keep broken things, replace them (I want my children not to think of the world as disposable).

Sometimes we break things on purpose – the glass at weddings, tearing kriyah.

This week's parasha, Ekev:

Deut 9: 16-17: "I saw how you had sinned against your God **אֱלֹהֵיכֶם**: you had made yourselves a molten calf; you had been quick to stray from the path that **אֱלֹהֵיכֶם** had enjoined upon you.

Thereupon I gripped the two tablets and flung them away with both my hands, smashing them before your eyes."

Why did Moshe break these tablets?

Shabbat 87a – Moshe's decision: **What** source **did he interpret** that led him to do so? Moses **said: With** regard to the **Paschal** lamb, **which is only one of six hundred and thirteen mitzvot, the Torah stated:** "And the Lord said unto Moses and Aaron: This is the ordinance of the Paschal offering; **no alien shall eat of it**" (Exodus 12:43), referring not only to gentiles, but to apostate Jews as well.

Regarding the tablets, which represented **the entire Torah, and Israel** at that moment were **apostates**, as they were worshipping the calf, **all the more so** are they not worthy of receiving the Torah.

Avot DeRabbi Natan 2:3 Moshe took the tablets and was overjoyed. But when he saw that they were disgracing themselves with the Golden Calf, he said to himself: How can I give them these tablets? I will be binding them in serious commandments, and causing them to deserve death from Above! For it is written on these tablets, "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exodus 20:3).

So he started to go back up. The seventy elders saw him and ran after him. He was holding on to one end of the tablets, and they grabbed on to the other end. But Moses' strength was greater than all of theirs, as it says (Deuteronomy 34:12), "And for all the awesome power that Moses displayed before all of Israel." (He looked and saw that the writing was flying off them, and he said: How can I give these tablets to Israel? For there is nothing on them! So instead, I will take ahold of them and smash them, as it says [Deuteronomy 9:17], "I grabbed the two tablets, and I cast them out of my two hands, and I broke them.")

I especially like the second, which suggested that the smashing of the tablets was required in order for there to be the hope of a covenant between Hashem and Israel.

The commentaries argue, bringing their various proof texts, about whether Moshe acted on his own initiative, or whether God herself commanded him to break the tablet. But both commentaries say that God commended Moshe for having done so:

Deut 10:1-5:

Thereupon **השם** 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 **עֲלֵה־לָחֶת הַרְאִשִׁים** **אֶשֶׁר שִׁבַּרְתָּ** – on the first tablets that you smashed, and you shall deposit them in the ark." I made an ark of acacia wood and carved out two tablets of stone like the first; I took the two tablets with me and went up the mountain. After inscribing on the tablets the same text as on the first—the Ten Commandments that **השם** addressed to you on the mountain out of the fire on the day of the Assembly—**השם** gave them to me. Then I left and went down from the mountain, and I deposited the tablets in the ark that I had made, where they still are, as **השם** had commanded me.

Both of the commentaries I originally quoted refer to a seemingly extraneous word in Hashem's instruction to Moshe here: as it says [Deuteronomy 10:2], "That [*asher*] which you broke": Well done [*yishar koach*] that you broke them!

The tablets as they were could not meet the Israelites where they were. I have heard another teaching that Moshe broke them to show that Torah itself could break in order to meet the people even in their most broken places.

Menachot: And I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, **which you broke, and you shall put them in the Ark**" (Deuteronomy 10:1–2). **Rav Yosef teaches a *baraita*: This verse teaches that both the tablets of the Covenant and the pieces of the broken tablets are placed in the Ark. One should learn from here that with regard to a Torah scholar who has forgotten his Torah knowledge due to circumstances beyond his control, e.g., illness, one may not behave toward him in a degrading manner.**

As Rabbi Dr. Erin Leib Smokler writes:

"The Israelites needed to carry with them the memory of breakdown, the price paid--in relational terms--for their errant ways, but also the lesson learned about the profound possibility of second chances. In preserving the pieces together with the complete whole, the people would be always be reminded that relationships can be repaired; that people can start over, even with God. And yet they need not overlook or ignore the scars that they bear from that very process. They take those with them too in their arks."

Things break, sometimes irreparably, sometimes on purpose. Sometimes because they need to be broken.

But that brokenness doesn't mean the relationship is finished. Breaking itself can be what creates space for renewal. The model of the mishkan suggests that we don't have to just throw away the broken pieces, or patch them up as best we can, but that we can treasure them as reminders of what we have done, what we have learned, and our intentions going forward.