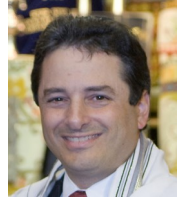


## From The Rabbi



The story of the Megillah and the costumes we wear on Purim, help us to remember:

### **Things are not always as they seem!**

As I was preparing to write this column, I received an email with an essay from Y.Y. Jacobson. This essay was a commentary on the Biblical story about Moses smashing the tablets engraved with the Ten Commandments upon descending Mt. Sinai and seeing the people worshipping the Golden Calf. His interpretation of this story is completely different than the way I have understood this story until now. Reading this essay reminded me how important it is to remember that things are not always as they seem to be and that we must look beyond the surface to truly understand most things in this world.

First, let me tell you a little about Rabbi Jacobson. He served as a member of the team that prepared the public addresses of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson for publication. He also served as a senior fellow at the Chabad Lubavitch Rabbinical Seminary, Chovevei Torah, where he taught Talmud, Kabbalah, and Hasidic philosophy. In 2005, he replaced his late father Gershon Jacobson as editor-in-chief of the Yiddish weekly *Algemeiner Journal*, which he continued for a number of years. He served as the spiritual leader of Congregation Beis Shmuel Chabad in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, New York, and is the Dean of TheYeshiva.net, where he presents weekly classes and lectures. Jacobson was the first rabbi invited by the Pentagon to present the annual keynote address to the US military Chief of Chaplains Senior Leadership Training Conference. He is the author of the audio series "A Tale of Two Souls" on the Tanya.

Rabbi Jacobson's essays are always insightful and thought provoking. This month, I would like to use my column to share his essay, "Broken". I hope that it will touch you and give you a meaningful insight into a familiar story, as a life lesson, as it has done for me.

### **Broken**

*by Y.Y. Jacobson*

The simple reading of the story (recorded twice in the Torah, first in Exodus and then again in Deuteronomy) goes like this: After the Jews created a Golden Calf, Moses smashed the stone tablets created by G-d, engraved with the Ten Commandments. Moses and G-d then "debated" the appropriate response to this transgression and it was decided that if the people would truly repent, G-d would give them a second chance. Moses hewed a second set of stone tablets; G-d engraved them also with the Ten Commandments, and Moses gave them to the Jewish people.

Yet a few major questions come to mind.

**Why did Moses have to break and shatter the heavenly tablets?** Moses could have hidden them or simply returned them to their heavenly maker.

The rabbis teach us that "The whole tablets and the broken tablets nestled inside the Ark of the Covenant." The Jews proceeded to gather the broken fragments of the first set of tablets and had them stored in the Ark, in the Tabernacle, together with the second whole tablets. Both sets of tablets were later taken into the Land of Israel and kept side by side in the Ark, situated in the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem.

**Why would they place the broken tablets in the Holy of Holies, when these fragments were a constant reminder of the great moral failure of the Jewish people. Why not just disregard them, or deposit them in a safe isolated place?**

In its eulogy for Moses, the Torah chooses this episode of smashing the tablets as the highlight and climax of Moses' achievements.

In the closing verses of Deuteronomy we read: "Moses, the servant of G-d, died there in the land of Moab...And there arose not since a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom G-d knew face to face; all the signs and wonders which G-d sent to do in the land of Egypt...that mighty hand, those great fearsome deeds, which Moses did before the eyes of all Israel."

**What did Moses do "before the eyes of all Israel?"** Rashi, in his commentary on Torah, explains "His heart emboldened him to break the tablets **before their eyes**, as it is written, 'and I broke them before your eyes.' G-d's opinion then concurred with Moses' actions, as it is written, 'which you broke—I affirm your strength for having broken them.'"

This is shocking. Following all of the grand achievements of Moses, the Torah chooses to conclude its tribute to Moses by alluding to this episode of breaking the tablets! Granted that Moses was justified in breaking the tablets, but can this be said to embody his greatest achievement? How about his taking the Israelites out of Egypt? Molding them into a people? Splitting the Sea of Reeds? Receiving the Torah from G-d and transmitting it to humanity? Shepherding them for forty years in a wilderness?

Why does the Torah choose this tragic and devastating episode to capture the zenith of Moses' life and as the theme with which to conclude the entire Torah, all five books of Moses?!

### **In the Fragments**

We need to examine this entire episode from a deeper vantage point.

Moses did not break the tablets because he was angry and lost his control. Rather, the breaking of the tablets was the beginning of the healing process. Before the golden calf was created, the Israelites could find G-d within the wholesomeness of the tablets, within the spiritual wholesomeness of life. Now, after the people have created the Golden Calf, hope was not lost. Now they would find G-d in the shattered pieces of a once beautiful dream.

Moses was teaching the Jewish people the greatest message of Judaism: Truth could be crafted not only from the spiritually perfected life, but also from the broken pieces of the human corrupt and demoralized psyche. The broken tablets, too, possess the light of G-d.

Which is why the sages tell us that not only the whole tablets, but also the broken ones, were situated in the holy of holies. This conveyed the message articulated at the very genesis of Judaism: From the broken pieces of life you can create a holy of holies.

G-d, the sages tell us, affirmed Moses' decision to break the tablets. G-d told him, "Thank you for breaking them." Because the broken tablets, representing the shattered pieces of human existence, have their own story to tell; they contain a light all their own. Truth is found not only in wholesomeness, but also—sometimes primarily—in the broken fragments of the human spirit. There are moments when G-d desires that we connect to G-d as wholesome people, with clarity and a sense of fullness; there are yet deeper moments when G-d desires that we find G-d in the shattered experiences of our lives.

We hope and pray to always enjoy the "whole tablets," but when we encounter the broken ones, we ought not to run from them or become dejected by them; with tenderness we ought to embrace them and bring them into our "holy of holies," recalling the observation of one of the Rebbe's, "there is nothing more whole than a broken heart."

We often believe that G-d can be found in our moments of spiritual wholesomeness. But how about in the conflicts which torment our psyches? How about when we are struggling with depression, addiction or confusion? How about when we face despair and pain? How about in the conflict between a godless existence and a G-d-centered existence? We associate religion with "religious" moments. But how about our "non-religious" moments?

What Moses accomplished with breaking the tablets was the demonstration of the truth that the stuff we call holiness can be carved out from the very alienation of a person from G-d. From the very turmoil of his or her psychological and spiritual brokenness, a new holiness can be discovered.

It is on this note that the Torah chooses to culminate its tribute to Moses' life. The greatest achievement of Moses was his ability to show humanity how we can take our brokenness and turn it into a holy of holies. When Moses broke those sacred tablets, he forever empowered the journey of the fragmented souls among us.

*Rabbi Gordon Yaffe*