



On Endings and Beginnings

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The draw of theatre in an age of movies is that each experience is unique.

While the script's words and stage directions remain the same night after night, the unique alchemy of the actors and audience, gathered in that particular configuration at that particular moment in time, does not. When we linger in our seats after the final encore, delaying our exit into the glaring reality of the world, it is because something in us senses that this particular alchemy will never happen again. If we were to return to see the play again the next night it would not be the same, and neither would we. Every time a curtain falls on stage, the particular piece of art that was that play, that night, with that audience as it is that night, shatters.

Torah is not theatre. But like theatre, our experience of the Torah we read together throughout the year is unique each time. The verses that speak to our souls, the questions that feel vital, change year after year. Each time we read Torah is the only time we will read Torah in that particular way.

Every time we finish reading the Torah, we shatter the tablets anew.



Maybe that's why Rashi chooses to offer, in his final comment on the Torah, a reflection on what Moshe did when he shattered the *luhot* (tablets):

דברים לד:י-יב

¹⁰וְלֹא קָם נָבִיא עוֹד בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל כְּמֹשֶׁה אֲשֶׁר יָדְעוּ ה' פָּנִים אֶל פָּנִים: ¹¹לְכָל הָאֵתוֹת וְהַמּוֹפְתִים אֲשֶׁר שְׁלַח ה' לַעֲשׂוֹת בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לְפָרְעָה וּלְכָל עַבְדָּיו וּלְכָל אֶרְצוֹ: ¹²וּלְכָל הַיָּד הַחֲזָקָה וּלְכָל הַמִּוֶּרָא הַגָּדוֹל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה מֹשֶׁה לְעֵינֵי כָל יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Devarim 34:10-12

¹⁰And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moshe, whom HaShem knew face to face; ¹¹in all the signs and the wonders, which HaShem sent him to do in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh, and to all his servants, and to all his land; ¹²and in all the mighty hand, and in all the great terror, which Moshe performed in the sight of all Israel.

רש"י דברים לד:יב

עיני כל ישראל – שנשאו לבו לשבור הלוחות לעיניהם... והסכימה דעת הקב"ה לדעתו, שנאמר: "אשר שברת" (שמות לד, א), יישר כחך ששברת.

Rashi on Devarim 34:12

"In the sight of all Israel"—that he shattered the tablets before their eyes... and The Holy Blessed One agreed with his judgment, as it says "which you broke" (Shemot 34:1), "More power to you for shattering them!"

Commenting on the final verse of the Torah which talks about Moshe's accomplishments, Rashi assigns each clause a specific event from Moshe's life. "The mighty hand" becomes the moment when Moshe received the *luhot*, "the great terror" the many miracles he performed in the desert. These are among the greatest moments of Moshe's life; it makes sense that the Torah might choose to reference them in its final eulogy for Moshe.

The Torah's final words, "in the sight of all of Israel," however, describe, in Rashi's reading, a very different sort of event: the moment that Moshe smashes the *luhot* at the foot of Sinai.

Why would the Torah choose to commemorate that moment in its final words? Because according to Rashi and the talmudic tradition he draws from, that moment which we so often read as a tragedy is, in fact, a moment that God affirms as an appropriate choice.

The talmudic statement that Rashi's final comment draws from explains that God approves of Moshe's decision to smash the *luhot* because, in some way, even as it shatters Torah, it also affirms and "establishes" it:

תלמוד בבלי מנחות צט.

אמר ריש לקיש: פעמים שביטולה של תורה זהו יסודה, דכתיב: "אשר שברת" (שמות לד, א) – אמר לו הקב"ה למשה: יישר כחך ששברת.

Talmud Bavli Menahot 99a

Reish Lakish said: There are times when the negation of Torah is its foundation, as it says, "that you shattered"—God said to Moshe, "Well done that you shattered."

How does Moshe's choice to shatter the *luhot* also, in some way, establish Torah? The Sefat Emet¹ explains that by shattering the *luhot*, which were no longer appropriate for the Jewish people, Moshe allows us to receive the second:

¹ R. Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter (Poland, 1847-1905), is best known for his teaching on the holidays and weekly *parashah*, but he also wrote a commentary on sections of the Talmud as well, from which this passage comes..



שפת אמת מנחות צט.

פעמים ביטולה של תורה זהו יסודה ... ויותר נראה לפרש דכתיב: ואכתוב על הלוחות כו' הראשונים אשר שברת יישר כוחר, פירוש: ע"י ששיבר הראשונים ניתן להם השניות. ואילו לא שיברם לא היה נותן השניות ואל הראשונות לא היו ראויין ע"י החטא. נמצא שע"י ששיברן נשאר לנו השניות.

Sefat Emet on Menahot 99a

There are times when the negation of the Torah is its foundation... meaning that through the breaking of the first, the second were given to them. And if he had not broken them the second ones would not have been given, and they would not have been worthy of the originals because of the sin. Therefore, it is through the shattering of the originals that we have the second.

Every time we finish the Torah, we experience a shattering. Reading is not simply a matter of written words. It is a union of human being and text. It is breath from a particular body, at a particular moment in time, given form. The Torah itself, as a physical object, will still be there the next time we come to it, but we will never again be the people we are at this moment. Our concerns, our hopes, our loves and fears will be different. The questions we bring to Torah will be different. The Torah, then, in the way it is brought to life through the union of human voice and word, will never exist again as it does now. When we finish the final word, we shatter the Torah we created that year, knowing its pieces will never be put together again.

In his final words on the Torah, Rashi affirms the experience of that shattering, but also offers hope: God approves of what we are about to do. We must shatter the Torah we have created this year. As the Sefat Emet states about the first *luhot*, the Torah we have created over the past year is no longer appropriate for us. We have changed: we are not the people we were last Tishrei. And in order to move forward, to receive the new *luhot*, the ones that are appropriate who we are now, we must allow ourselves to shatter what came before.



But even though we shatter the Torah as it was in order to move forward to the Torah of the coming year, the Torah as it must be now, we still carry remnants of the past year's Torah with us. Like the shards of the first *luhot* which were carried side by side with the whole, second set of *luhot* in the *aron*, remnants of the Torah of the past year remain with us. We may never be able to access it as immediately, as urgently, as we did when we created it the first time, when it was still whole. But it does not vanish. Its pieces remain with us, side by side with the new Torah we create now.

Each of us is an *aron*. Within us are the shattered pieces not of one set of *luhot*, but of a lifetime's. Next to the shard of a child's halting reading of her first Rashi lies a jagged piece of the laws of childbirth read by a grown woman during her first pregnancy. In another corner, perhaps, is the memory of an uncle's introduction of Nechama Leibowitz at a Shabbat table when she was eight, and there, tiny but glinting, a remnant of her father's comments about the Zohar.

In the middle, among the shards, is a whole set of *luhot*, still small. It contains questions she still does not know how to articulate, texts still only partially parsed. Day by day, week by week, it grows. No one knows yet the Torah it might have to offer.

Let us begin.

