



The Memory of Tragedy

R. Micha'el Rosenberg – rosenberg@hadar.org

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There shouldn't be much ambiguity about why 17 Tammuz is a fast day; the Mishnah relates five tragic events that took place on this date:

משנה תענית ד:ו	Mishnah Ta'anit 4:6
(1) נִשְׁתַּבְּרוּ הַלְוִיּוֹת,	1) The tablets were broken;
(2) וְכָטַל הַתָּמִיד,	2) and the daily offering [in the Temple] ceased;
(3) וְהִבְקָעָה הָעִיר,	3) and the City [of Jerusalem] was breached;
(4) וְשָׂרֵף אֶפּוֹסְטוֹמוֹס אֶת הַתּוֹרָה,	4) and Apostomos burned the Torah;
(5) וְהָעִמִּיד צֶלֶם בְּהִיכָל.	5) and he set up an idol in the Sanctuary. ¹

The Mishnah relates that 17 Tammuz is a sad day because so many awful incidents occurred on it. Yet one of these, namely, the breaking of the Tablets, is an outlier, not only because it happened generations earlier than these other events, but also because of its reception in the Rabbinic imagination.

¹ The specific circumstances of the final four events here are unclear: which are referring to events during the First Temple, and which to events during the Second? Who is Apostomos, and when did he engage in these acts? See, for example, the Yakhin commentary of R. Yisrael Lifshitz as well as the modern commentary *Torat Eretz Yisrael* by Shmuel, Hannah, and Ze'ev Safrai, for both the ambiguities and the interpretive possibilities. In any event, that we are discussing tragic events is clear.



We can easily understand why our Sages, as in the *mishnah* above, would treat this as a tragedy. Moshe has destroyed the most physically intimate gift God gave the Jewish people: a personally-written message. If there is a tradition to fast when a modern Torah scroll is God forbid dropped, should we not fast for the destruction of an autograph copy, as it were, of God's work?

This understanding, however, is complicated by a Rabbinic interpretation of Shemot 34:1: "Hashem said to Moshe: 'You yourself, carve two stone tablets like the first, and I will write on the tablets the things that were on the first tablets, which you destroyed (אשר שברת)'. The 3rd century sage Reish Lakish understands the final phrase ("which you destroyed") as code for a more startling message from God:

תלמוד בבלי מנחות צט.:	Talmud Bavli Menahot 99a-b
אמר ריש לקיש	Reish Lakish said:
פעמים שביטולה של תורה זהו יסודה	Sometimes the destruction of Torah is its foundation,
דכתיב (שמות לד, א) אשר שברת	as it is written, "Which you destroyed"—
אמר לו הקב"ה למשה יישר כחך	The Blessed Holiness said to Moshe, " <i>Shkoyakh</i> that you
ששברת	destroyed." ²

The statement is perplexing—why does Reish Lakish think that God **praised** Moshe for breaking the Tablets?—but what is clear is that, in this reading of the story, Moshe's act of breaking them was indeed a righteous action, something worthy of affirmation directly from God. But if the breaking of the Tablets was praiseworthy, why should it be included in a list of five tragedies? Was the breaking of the Tablets a tragedy for which we should fast, or the right response in the moment by a leader of impeccable insight?

² The fullest version appears here, but the core of the statement appears as well at Bavli Shabbat 87a, Bavli Yevamot 62a, and Bavli Bava Batra 14b.



I want to consider two messages for us from this seeming contradiction. The first is simply that there need not be a contradiction here. Sometimes, the right thing to do in a given moment may, despite its correctness, still be a tragedy. Moshe understood that in that moment, a violation of the Torah's sanctity was necessary precisely for its preservation. What he did was right, and God praised him for it. Still, the image of such a precious immediate communication from the Blessed Holiness shattered on the ground is a tragedy; we can, and should, both praise Moshe for his act and mourn its occurrence.

The second message is, to me, less obvious. Because while Reish Lakish's statement, divorced from its biblical context, might lend the impression that God praises Moshe immediately after the breaking of the Tablets, when we read Hashem's message in its biblical context we see that a significant gap appears between Moshe's action and God's response. Moshe breaks the tablets in Shemot 32:19. Only after a full one-and-a-half chapters—39 verses!—do we arrive at God's telling Moshe, "Good job on breaking the Tablets" in Shemot 34:1. In the meantime, we've read about multiple punishments of the Israelites, Moshe's begging forgiveness from God, Moshe's desire for more direct intervention from God and desire to see God's face (12-23). In Moshe's retelling of this time in Devarim 9, the two events are not just separated by 39 verses, but 40 days—a full 40 days in which Moshe is beseeching God, before he receives the divine *shkoyakh*.

The Imrei Emet,³ writing about this verse, explains the gap. The Talmud elsewhere teaches that one may not tear down a synagogue until one has built its replacement.⁴ So too here, says the Imrei Emet, God had to wait to praise Moshe's act until God had commanded the construction of the second Tablets. Sometimes, we can only see the good in a tragedy after we've had time to grieve and even begin to repair the loss.

³ R. Avraham Mordekhai Alter (1865-1948), the fourth Gerrer Rebbe, son of the better-known Sefat Emet.

⁴ Bavli Bava Batra 3b.



This means that for a full 40 days, Moshe and the Jewish people may have seen and felt only the tragedy of Moshe's breaking the Tablets. 40 days spent in regret, depression, despair, until God says to Moshe that his action was, contrary to all appearances, the right thing to do, and perhaps then, something that does not demand our mourning.

We nonetheless include the breaking of the Tablets in the list of tragedies that occurred on this day, because even when in retrospect we can see the good that resulted from a seemingly awful moment, that time that we spent living in the in-between, the time when we could see only the misery, leaves an imprint on our personal and collective psyche. We may know, with the gift of hindsight, that Moshe's action was in the best interest of God, Torah, and the Jewish people, but we also have the memory of living for 40 days in despair. The fact that this story has a happy ending, with God forgiving us and giving us a second chance with the giving of the second Tablets on Yom Kippur, does not abrogate either the obligation or the opportunity to mourn and recall our darkest days.

