



What Must Be Broken

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The tragedies we remember on 17th Tammuz are really of different kinds:

משנה תענית ד:ו

חמשה דברים אירעו את אבותינו בשבעה עשר בתמוז... נשתברו הלוחות ובטל התמיד והובקעה העיר ושרף אפוסטמוס את התורה והעמיד צלם בהיכל.

Mishnah Ta'anit 4:6

Five events of calamity occurred to our ancestors on 17th Tammuz... the Tablets were shattered, the daily sacrifice was discontinued, the city walls were breached, Apostomos burned a Torah scroll, and an idol was set up in the Temple Sanctuary.

The breaching of Jerusalem's walls prior to the destruction of the Second Temple¹ often receives the greatest attention on this day. Apart from the breaking of the Tablets, the other

¹ The biblical account places the breaching of Jerusalem's walls before the destruction of the First Temple on 9th Tammuz (Jeremiah 39:2; 52:6-7). The Mishnah, however, commemorates the breaching of the city on 17th Tammuz, following the chronology of the Roman siege that preceded the destruction of the Second Temple. The Talmud reconciles the discrepancy by distinguishing between the two destructions, while noting that the later date became the focus of communal memory and observance (Ta'anit 28b).



events mentioned in the Mishnah² are likewise connected to the process of Jerusalem's destruction. In this sense, the day forms part of a continuum that begins with Asarah be-Tevet and culminates in Tisha B'Av. Shivah Asar be-Tammuz is that moment before defeat when the defenses are breached. It is a milestone preceding the fall, like the moment the body stops fighting the illness or something deep in a society breaks

This is why the days between 17th Tammuz and 9th Av are days of unalloyed grief. There is little to learn from them, the mistakes have already been made. The name Bein ha-Metzarim³ ("Between the Straits") captures them well: days with nowhere to flee, nothing to do but sit with the pain.

But something else also took place on 17th Tammuz: the shattering of the tablets by Moshe after the sin of the Golden Calf. At first glance, the two events appear parallel—two moments of painful rupture. There too, at the foot of Sinai, the fracture became the prelude to further catastrophe: the death of the sinners, a plague, and above all the withdrawal of the Divine Presence from among the people.⁴

Yet the breaking of the tablets is fundamentally different, perhaps even the opposite, of the breaching of Jerusalem's walls. For in at least some sense, it is a breaking that heals rather than a breaking that destroys. This is already noticed by Reish Lakish:

² The daily offering (*tamid*) ceased: During the Roman siege of Jerusalem, the supply of sheep required for the twice-daily communal sacrifice was exhausted, making it impossible to continue the Temple service. Rabbinic tradition viewed the cessation of the *tamid* as a profound rupture in Israel's regular covenantal worship. Apostomos burned a Torah scroll: The identity of Apostomos is uncertain, but Rabbinic sources remember him as a foreign ruler or military officer who publicly burned a Torah scroll.

An idol was erected in the Temple Sanctuary: According to Rabbinic tradition, a pagan image was placed within the Temple precincts, desecrating the holiest site of Jewish worship. Some sources associate this event with the persecutions of the Seleucid period, while others connect it to later Roman desecrations of the Temple.

³ The expression originates in Lamentations 1:3, and Eikhah Rabbah 1:29 connects it to the period of mourning.

⁴ "For I will not go up in your midst, since you are a stiff-necked people" (Exodus 33:3).



תלמוד בבלי מנחות צט א-ב

אמר ריש לקיש: פעמים שביטולה של תורה זהו יסודה, דכתיב: אשר שברת - אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה: יישר כחך ששברת.

Talmud Bavli Menahot 99a-b

Reish Lakish said: At times, the very suspension of Torah becomes the ground upon which Torah stands. As Scripture says, “which you broke.” God said to Moshe: “Well done for breaking the tablets.”

How can it be that the breaking of the tablets was a good thing? Here are three midrashic frameworks⁵ that can help us answer this question.

One approach suggests that the tablets lost their meaning following the sin of the Golden Calf, and therefore there was no point in preserving them:

מדרש הגדול, שמות לב:יט

משל למה הדבר דומה, לאדם שהיה בידו נר וכבה כיון שראה שכבה הנר אמר וזה למה בידי מיד השליכו מידו, כך כיון שעשו ישראל אותו מעשה פרח הכתב מן הלוחות אמר משה אלו למה לי.

Midrash ha-Gadol to Exodus 32:19

This may be compared to a person holding a lamp. Once the lamp went out, he said: “What use is this to me now?” and immediately cast it from his hand. So too, once Israel committed that act, the writing flew from the tablets, and Moshe said: “What use are these to me now?”

Another approach imagines Moshe acting to protect the people:

⁵ All three are found in Midrash ha-Gadol, a 14th century Yemenite midrashic collection put together by R. David Adani.



משל לאחד שנתעסק עם בת מלכים והיו ביניהן תנאים, הלך השושבין וכתב לה התנאים, בא ליתנו לה מצאה שזינת, קרעו. כך תנאים ששמעו ישראל בפה ועדיין לא קיבלו אותן בכתב עלה משה לכתבן בלוחות. כיון שראה שביטלו דיבור שני שבהן שיבר הלוחות שלא לחייבן.

This may be compared to a man engaged to a king's daughter, with conditions agreed between them. The friend went to write down the conditions, but when he came to deliver them, he discovered that she had been unfaithful, and so he tore up the document. So too, Israel had heard the covenant verbally but had not yet received it in writing. Moshe ascended to inscribe it on the tablets, but when he saw that they had violated the second commandment, he shattered the tablets so as not to render them liable.

What these two interpretations share is the idea that the breaking itself does not worsen Israel's condition. The tablets had either become meaningless or had turned into incriminating evidence. A third approach: Moshe simply lost his temper.

עליו אמר שלמה אל תבהל ברוחך לכעוס (קהלת ז, ט), זה משה. אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא אתה כעסת אתה השלכת אתה שברת אתה תחליף.

About him [King] Shlomo said: "Do not be quick to anger" (Ecclesiastes 7:9)—this refers to Moshe. The Holy One said to him, "You became angry, you threw them, you shattered them—you must replace them."

And yet even here one might ask: could Moshe have continued to serve as mediator between Israel and God without first releasing that anger? Was the breaking not itself necessary in order for him later to stand before God and say: "And now, if You would forgive their sin... but if not, erase me, I pray, from the book You have written" (Exodus 32:32). The restorative dimension of the shattered tablets becomes clearer when we consider the alternative. Could life simply continue as normal after the sin of the Golden Calf? Could the tablets carved while the people danced around the calf truly be the tablets with which we move forward?



And while the breaking of the tablets stands in opposition to the breaching of Jerusalem's walls, it calls to mind another story about those walls: the story of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai.⁶ During the siege of Jerusalem, he understood that the battle was already lost. Escaping the thugs who insisted on fighting the Romans, he made his way to the Roman camp and asked only: "Give me Yavneh and its sages." In doing so, he established an alternative center of Torah that sustained Jewish existence after the destruction of Jerusalem. Rather than insisting on continuing the struggle and avoiding rupture at all costs, Rabban Yohanan understood that sometimes something must be broken in order for something new to be built. Perhaps he realized that, like the tablets, the Jerusalem of that moment had become an empty vessel.

The parallel between Moshe and Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai deepens in light of the Torah's description of Moshe after the breaking of the tablets:

שמות לג:ז

וּמֹשֶׁה יָקָח אֶת הָאֹהֶל וַיִּנָּטֵה לּוֹ מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה הַרְחֵק מִן הַמַּחֲנֶה וַיִּקְרָא לוֹ אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וַהֲיָה כָּל מִבְקֶשׁ ה' יֵצֵא אֶל אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד אֲשֶׁר מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה:

Exodus 33:7

Moshe took the tent and pitched it outside the camp, far from the camp, and called it the Tent of Meeting⁷; and whoever sought God would go out to the Tent of Meeting outside the camp.

Like Moshe, Rabban Yohanan understood that sometimes the condition of the camp is such that one has no choice but to step outside it.

⁶ Talmud Bavli Gittin 56a-b.

⁷ The designation "Tent of Meeting" here is somewhat ambiguous. While later readers often identify it with the tabernacle (*mishkan*), Exodus 33:7-11 describes a tent of meeting located outside the camp and associated with Moshe's direct encounters with God. The Sifrei Bemidbar #94 explicitly distinguishes between these two tents, suggesting that there were two separate spaces.



The convergence on 17th Tammuz of the shattered tablets and the breached walls comes to teach us that sometimes we must seek out the breaking and initiate it ourselves. It can remind us that the period beginning on the seventeenth of Tammuz is not only the season of Bein ha-Metzarim ending on 9th Av, but part of a much longer arc culminating on Yom Kippur—the day on which the second tablets were given,⁸ the day when something new emerges out of the shatters.

⁸ Mishnah Ta'anit 4:6.

