



The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

Ki-Tisa: Why Did Moses Smash the Tablets?

As soon as Moses came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, he became enraged; and he hurled the tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain. (32:19)

Why did Moses smash the tablets? If he was “enraged” as the verse above suggests, then could this have been a mistake, a moment of lost control?

Approach 1: Shock and Indignation

Moses did not hesitate to break them because his anger was roused at the sight of their evil conduct. He could not control himself... (Ramban Ex. 32:16); When I saw you dancing in front of the calf I could not control myself and I broke the tablets... (Ramban, Deut 9:17)

Ramban (Nachmanides) takes what seems to be the straightforward meaning of the text. Moses saw the revelry around the calf and could not contain his fury. After all, this was a nation that he had led and trusted. He was incensed at the breach of the covenant. Rashbam goes so far as to suggest that his physical strength suddenly failed him:

When he beheld the calf, all his vitality ebbed away from him and he just managed to push the tablets far enough away so as not to fall on his feet, like a person for who the burden becomes too much.

The Ramban seems closer to the text which talks about Moses’ deliberate smashing of the tablets: “I GRASPED HOLD of the two Tablets, I FLUNG THEM FROM my hands And I BROKE them” (Deut ibid) and yet both Ramban and Rashbam reflect the dismay, shock and indignation that would have seized Moses at the sight of the dancing, feasting and worship around a molten image. This was an instinctive emotional response.

Approach 2: An Educational Act

Other commentators, however, suggest that Moses was more controlled, and that he smashed the Tablets in a manner planned to shock the Children of Israel, and make them understand the severity of their actions. Netziv explains:

The text describes how Moses took the calf and burned it and no man resisted him, whereas they had previously pressed Aaron to make it. This was because Moses, with deep psychological insight resolved not to break the Tablets on the mount when God initially informed him of the nation's sin..., but decided to do it when it would make the greatest impact upon them, breaking the nation's heart, and grieving them when they witnessed Moses smashing this unique treasure before their eyes. (32:15)

This educational approach, shared also by Abarbanel and other commentators, places the breaking of the Tablets as the first in a series of actions taken by Moses upon his descent from the mountain: “[Moses] broke the [Tablets] at the foot of the mountain. Then he took the calf which they had made, burned it in the fire, and ground it to powder; and he scattered it on the water and made the children of Israel drink it.” If we recall that Moses had been informed of the Golden Calf while he was at the summit of Mount Sinai, he had time to calculate his actions. He choreographed these moments to shock the nation.

In this regard, we should understand that the shattering of the Tablets must be seen as a tearing of the very symbol of covenant, expressing the notion that the entire Israel-God relationship was in peril, as Ibn Ezra says:

In a spirit of zeal for God, he smashed the tablets which constituted a legal certificate; he ripped up the betrothal document in the sight of all Israel.

Smashing the tablets was the most vivid way to communicate this realization.

Approach 3: Midrash – An Act of Defense

He [God] said He would destroy them, had not Moses His chosen stood before Him in the breach (Psalms 106, 23). R. Samuuel b. R. Nahman said; When Israel were engaged in that deed [the Golden Calf], the Holy One Blessed be He sat in judgment upon them to condemn them, as it is said “Now let Me alone that I may destroy them.”

...What did Moses do? **He took the tablets from the Almighty's hand in order to assuage His wrath.**

To what may this be compared? To a prince who sent a marriage-broker to betroth a woman on his behalf. He went, but she had compromised herself in the

meantime with another. What did he do? **He took the marriage deed which the prince had given him wherewith to betroth her and tore it up. He said: Better she should be judged as an unmarried woman than a married one.** Moses did likewise. As soon as Israel perpetrated that deed, he too took the tablets and broke them. Moses further said: Far better they be judged as inadvertent sinners than as deliberate ones, as if to say, had they seen their punishment they would not have sinned. (Shemot Rabbah 43, 1)

In a third understanding, Moses smashes the Tablets **to defend Israel**. If the Tablets testify to the covenant – like a marriage document – then Moses smashes them to erase the evidence of the covenantal bond between God and Israel, as if to hide the documentation that might incriminate them. Moreover, with the tablets broken, there is now no written record of the prohibition of idolatry. The central thrust of this Midrash is that the breaking of the Tablets serve to defend Israel from God's anger. It rests primarily upon the verse in Psalms (quoted at the start of the passage) and the verses in Deuteronomy which depict Moses as allaying God's great fury.

So - Let's Discuss

- What are the three approaches offered here?
- Is it reasonable that Moses was so enraged at the sight of the Calf and the revelry to smash the precious Tablets?
- If God had already informed Moses of the sin, and he had pleaded on their behalf – see 32:11-14 – is it feasible to attribute this action to a furious rage?
- If Moses was acting educationally, did his actions succeed in eliciting a sense of remorse? (– In this context, see 33:3-10)
- Can the third Midrashic approach be supported textually or contextually? (Maybe we should rephrase: Should Moses be perceived primarily as the defender or accuser of Israel?)

Shabbat Shalom