

TISHA B'AV

Break Two Tablets, and Fuggedaboutit!!

2017 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

Today, Tuesday, is the 17th of Tammuz. This fast day is the beginning of a three-week period of mourning that culminates with Tisha B'Av, the anniversary of the destruction of both Temples, as well as many other calamities that have befallen our People.

The Talmud tells us that there were five tragic events that took place on the Seventeenth of Tammuz:

1. Moses broke the Tablets with the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai.
2. The daily offerings in the Temple were suspended due to a lack of animals available during the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem..
3. Jerusalem's walls were breached by the Babylonians, leading to the destruction of the Temple three weeks later.
4. The Roman general Apostamos burned a Torah scroll.
5. An idol was placed in the Sanctuary of the Temple.

Due to these tragic events, we continue to mourn after all these years.

I have always wondered about the first reason stated by our Sages, that we mourn due to the breaking of the Tablets. I would think they should emphasize the CAUSE of the breakage.

Moses had led the People of Israel to Mount Sinai. There our Nation heard G-d tell us:

"I am your G-d Who took you out of Egypt...You will have no other gods before Me..." (Exodus, 20:2-3)

Forty days later, Moses was shocked to discover his People ignoring those first two of the Ten Commandments:

They removed the gold rings that were in their ears...and ... made ... a molten calf and they said, "This is your god, Israel, who brought you out of Egypt." (Ibid, 32:3-4)

How could they have forgotten so quickly??

Moses was coming down from Mount Sinai, carrying two stone Tablets, miraculously engraved by the Almighty with the words of the Ten Commandments. Obviously, thought Moses, the people weren't ready to possess such a sacred gift:

When He approached the camp, and saw the Calf and the celebrations, Moses burned with anger, and he cast the Tablets out of his hands, and smashed them at the base of the mountain.” (Verse 19)

This sin of idol worship is probably the greatest communal sin ever committed by the Nation of Israel. G-d was prepared to wipe out the entire nation and start again from Moses. Moses prayed to G-d to forgive His Nation.

Much of the Yom Kippur liturgy, as well as that of the other fast days, is based upon Moses’ prayers to G-d that He forgive up for this devastating sin.

In view of this major stain on our historical record, why is it not listed as the **real** reason that we mourn on the Seventeenth of Tammuz? Why do our Sages not state that on the Seventeenth of Tammuz, a mere 40 days after hearing the Ten Commandments, the People of Israel sunk to the depraved level of singing and dancing around and golden trinket and calling it a god???! The broken Tablets were merely the result of this sin; but it’s the sin itself that should be considered the reason to mourn and to fast.

The answer, perhaps, is that in one way, the breaking of the Tablets was worse than the sin that caused it!

G-d is merciful and compassionate. His children have often sinned, and He, in His love for His People, has forgiven them. Even this communal sin of idolatry was, to a degree, forgiven.

But the damage was done. Moses’ act of breaking the Tablets made a permanent change in the understanding of Torah.

*“And the tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved upon the tablets” (Ibid, verse 16**)*** Rabbi Eliezer (quoted in Eiruvim, 54a) tells us that G-d’s engraved word on the Tablets made them unforgettable to the Nation of Israel.

When Moses came down from the mountain, the Torah was literally etched in stone. It was everlasting and unforgettable. It was indisputable.

But now the Tablets of the Law lay in crumbles at the foot of the Mountain. The Torah itself is enduring and unchanging. But now, the human perception of Torah was shattered.

Rabbi Eliezer explains that had the Tablets not been broken, the Torah would never have been forgotten from the Jewish people,

Somehow, the breaking of the Tablets caused irreparable damage to our ability to remember the Torah. It must be studied and reviewed, studied and reviewed, and studied some more and reviewed some more. And then, if we’re not careful, it will still be forgotten.

Can you imagine what it would be like to learn something once and never forget it? That is, or, rather, WAS the miracle of Torah study. Just as a word etched in stone cannot be erased, so to the words of Torah, inscribed on those Tablets, HAD the power to be permanently etched onto the hearts and minds of our People.

But alas, that gift was crushed along with those remnants of stone that lay at Moses' feet. And with the loss of that gift, it became so much harder for us to learn and appreciate the holiness of our Torah. And that loss of our collective memory of G-d's Word has been part of the cause of so much alienation of G-d's children from His Torah.

And that, I believe, is the reason the breaking of the Tablets is considered an even greater tragedy than Golden Calf that caused it.

If we would constantly focus on all that G-d has done for us, it would be impossible for us to deviate from His Word. That's why we need to keep on studying and learning. We have to re-engrave into our hearts that which we find all-too-easy to forget.

If we remember to remember, maybe we'll forget to forget!

Have an easy and meaningful fast.

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