

Shabbat Ki Tissa: Failure's Permanent Possibility

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Shemot 32:19	
וַיְהִי כַּאֲשֶׁר קָרַב אֶל-הַמַּחֲנֶה וַיֵּרָא אֶת-הָעֵגֶל וּמַחֲלֵת וַיַּחֲרֹאֲף מֹשֶׁה וַיִּשְׁלֶךְ מִיָּדוֹ אֶת-הַלְּחֹת וַיִּשְׁבֹּר אֹתָם תַּחַת הָהָר:	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.
1. The Broken and Whole Tablets	
Devarim 10:2	
וְאֶכְתֹּב עַל-הַלְּחֹת אֶת-הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ עַל-הַלְּחֹת הָרִאשֹׁנִים אֲשֶׁר שִׁבַּרְתָּ וְשַׁמַּתָּם בְּאֵרוֹן:	I will inscribe on the tablets the commandments that were on the first tablets that you smashed, and you shall deposit them in the ark."
Mishnah Avot 3:8	
רבי דוסתאי ברבי ינאי משום רבי מאיר אומר, כל השוכח דבר אחד ממשנתו, מעלה עליו הכתוב כאלו מתחייב בנפשו, שנאמר (דברים ד) רק השמר לך ושמר נפשך מאד פן תשכח את הדברים אשר ראו עיניך. יכול אפלו תקפה עליו משנתו, תלמוד לומר (שם) ופן יסורו מלבבך כל ימי חייך, הא אינו מתחייב בנפשו עד שישב ויסירם מלבו:	Rabbi Dostai ben Rabbi Yannai said in the name of Rabbi Meir: whoever forgets one word of his study, scripture accounts it to him as if he were mortally guilty, as it is said, "But take utmost care and watch yourselves scrupulously, so that you do not forget the things that you saw with your own eyes" (Deuteronomy 4:9). One could [have inferred that this is the case] even when his study proved [too] hard for him, therefore scripture says, "that they do not fade from your mind as long as you live" (ibid.). Thus, he is not mortally guilty unless he deliberately removes them from his heart.
Bavli Menahot 99a-b	
"אשר שבירת ושמתם בארון" – תני רב יוסף: מלמד שהלוחות ושברי לוחות מונחין בארון. מכאן לתלמיד חכם ששכח תלמודו מחמת אונסו, שאין נוהגין בו מנהג בדיון...	"[The tablets] which you broke, and you shall put them in the Ark" (Deuteronomy 10:1–2). Rav Yosef teaches a <i>baraita</i> : This verse teaches that both the tablets of the Covenant and the pieces of the broken tablets are placed in the Ark. One should learn from here that with regard to a Torah scholar who has forgotten his Torah knowledge due to circumstances beyond his control, e.g., illness, one may not behave toward him in a degrading manner.

¹ All translations are from Sefaria, unless otherwise noted.,,

<p>אמר ריש לקיש: פעמים שביטולה של תורה זהו יסודה, דכתיב: "אֲשֶׁר שִׁבַּרְתָּ", אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה: יִישַׁר כֹּהֵךְ שִׁשְׁבַּרְתָּ.</p>	<p>Reish Lakish says: Sometimes the apparent dereliction of the study of Torah is its foundation. This is derived from a verse, as it is written: which [asher] you broke" (Exodus 34:1). The word "<i>asher</i>" is an allusion to the fact that that the Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Moses: Your strength is true [yishar kohakha] in that you broke the tablets, as the breaking of the first tablets led to the foundation of the Torah through the giving of the second tablets.</p>
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2. No Take Backs (No Backsies)

Sefat Emet, Parashat Bemidbar, Balak 24 ²	
<p>בי"ז בתמוז ירד מרע"ה עם הלוחות ראשונות והגם שנשברו איתא שבירי לוחות מונחין בארון כי כל המתנות שנתן הקב"ה לבנ"י הם לעולם. וגמירי משמא מיהב ייב"י משקל לא שקלי.</p>	<p>On the seventeenth of Tammuz, Moshe our teacher descended with the first tablets. Even though they were shattered, it is stated that the broken tablets were placed in the Ark — for all the gifts that the Holy One, blessed be He, gives to Israel are eternal. And we have a tradition: in Heaven they give, but they do not take back.</p>
<p>ולכן הארת לוחות הראשונות נשאר לעולם לבנ"י. אבל אותיות פורחות למעלה לפקדון לבנ"י. וכפי מה שזוכין מאירין האותיות.</p>	<p>Therefore, the illumination of the first tablets remains forever with the People of Israel. However, the letters flew upward as a deposit for Israel. And according to the measure that they merit, the letters shine forth.</p>

3. Failure's Permanent Possibility

Rodger Kamenetz, "The Broken Tablets"	
<p>The broken tablets were also carried in an ark. In so far as they represented everything shattered, everything lost, they were the law of broken things, the leaf torn from the stem in a storm, a cheek touched in fondness once but now the name forgotten. How they must have rumbled, clattered on the way even carried so carefully through the wasteland, how they must have rattled around until the pieces broke into pieces, the edges softened crumbling, dust collected at the bottom of the ark ghosts of old letters, old laws.</p>	<p>In so far as a law broken is still remembered these laws were obeyed. And in so far as memory preserves the pattern of broken things, these bits of stone were preserved through many journeys and ruined days even, they say, into the promised land.</p>

Rabbi David Hartman, <i>The Living Covenant</i> , 261-262
<p>It is significant that the Bible's account of the covenantal election of Israel in the desert is followed directly by a story of the community's rebellion. The presentation of the story of the golden calf right after the moment of election may be understood as a reminder that the covenantal community is always liable to fail in its task, for idolatry has a great and persistent seductive power. A midrash states (Berakhot 8b) that the broken first tablets of the Lord were placed in the ark of the covenant alongside the second set of tablets brought down from the mountain by Moses- as if to say that God's reconfirmation of the covenant after the incident of the golden calf created a memory and awareness that human failure and rebellion are permanent possibilities of the covenantal relationship between God and the community.</p>

² This translation produced with the aid of ChatGPT.