

## **SHATTERING THE TABLETS: THE CASE FOR JEWISH PEOPLEHOOD**

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Two years ago I attended a discussion for community leaders in Northern New Jersey led by Rabbi Donniel Hartman of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem on the topic of Jewish innovation.

Rabbi Hartman opened by reminding us that in Judaism, Moses was the greatest prophet for he had the most intimate knowledge of God's will. Over and over again in the Torah passages begin with: "God spoke to Moses saying, 'Speak to the Children of Israel and tell them thus.'" Moses took great care to follow God's directions precisely and to relay God's words exactly as he heard them.

Rabbi Hartman then proceeded with a teaching from the classic rabbinic commentary Avot D'Rabbi Natan describing the few exceptions to this pattern, a few occasions when Moses took matters into his own hands. The significance of the commentary pointing these out is that we are told that in those exceptional situations God approved of Moses' initiative and agreed with his judgment.

One such situation was when Moses began his descent from Mount Sinai to deliver the first set of "*luchot*"— tablets of law —to the people of Israel waiting below.

Listen to the words of the midrashic retelling of that dramatic moment:

*...Moses took the tablets of the commandments and started descending the mountain, happy and excited. When he saw*

*the offense the Israelites had committed in building the golden calf, he asked himself: how can I give them these tablets of the commandments? In doing so I would be obligating them to these laws and thus condemning them to death for it says 'You shall have no others gods before me.'* (Ex. 20:3)

*Moses started to turn back, but the Elders saw him and ran after him. Moses held on to one side of the tablets, they held on to the other, but Moses was stronger... He looked at the tablets and noticed that the writing had disappeared from them. 'How can I give the Israelites blank tablets?' he thought, and decided it would be better to break them instead, as it is said, 'And I took hold of the two tablets, and cast them out of my two hands, and broke them' (Deut 9:17)*

*(Avot D'Rabbi Natan, Ch.2)*

In that moment, Moses smashed the tablets. The Midrash bases its proof that God approved of Moses' initiative in this case on the disappearance of the writing on the tablets *after* Moses struggles with the Elders but immediately *before* he throws them down on the ground. To the Midrash this is a sign that after Moses himself took the first step of withdrawing the Torah from the Jews in order to save them from being culpable for building an idol, God agreed with his instinct and withdrew the laws from the tablets.

What Moses understood was that there could be no Torah without a community to follow its teachings, and if the community was not present – spiritually, emotionally, psychologically – to receive the Torah, better the

Torah be withdrawn than have all its potential adherents destroyed. And God agreed.

This is a powerful lesson for Judaism today, in particular for those of us committed to the renewal of Jewish life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We stretch ourselves to respond to the growing majority of Jews who no longer deem binding the traditional interpretations and practices of the Torah. We create innovative educational programs, write radically new commentaries, promote new theologies, expand accessibility to lifecycle rituals, and even redefine Jewish identity – all in the hopes of reengaging the people to whom this sacred legacy was given and on whose shoulders its destiny rests.

And yet our attempts are often met with criticisms of: “diluting”, “dumbing down”, “making convenient”, “compromising” and “sacrificing” our Torah's teachings in an effort to engage people who don't take it to heart. Only the precious few living a “traditional” form of Judaism -- usually defined by adherence to a set of practices grouped under the heading of “religious observance” which in common parlance is too often equated with Orthodoxy – only they seem to be able to claim the title of “authentic Jews”.

What is lost in these arguments is the profound message of the Midrash – that there is no value in Torah for Torah's sake. In fact, such thinking can prove terribly destructive. The Torah's value derives from those who animate its teachings by living them. And according to our striking Midrash, when God acceded to Moses' impulse to withdraw the laws and smash the tablets, God embraced the idea of the primacy of the people, however imperfect we may be, over the supposedly “perfect” Torah.

This teaching is echoed in yet another Midrash found in the Babylonian Talmud (Berachot 32a).

When God first sees what the people have done by making a golden calf, God commands Moses to descend the mountain with the words: "Go, get down!" God's reasoning, according to this other Midrash, is based on a definition of leadership that requires followers. After all, Moses, despite his personal greatness, was there acting on behalf of the entire people. And if the people were not able or willing to receive the Torah in that moment then there was no need for Moses to be there.

From this Midrash we learn that the Torah is not given to the Moses of each generation, rather the Torah is meant for an entire group of people, who at times may be unworthy of it.

Clearly we are not the first in history to face the painful confrontation between Torah as it has been lived and taught and a people who have chafed against its demands. In fact, as Rabbi Hartman continued to make his points, he commented that since the beginning of Emancipation, the whole notion of community in Judaism has been questioned. Emancipation brought with it the possibility of being identified not as a Jew but as a Frenchman or an Englishwoman. With the social and professional opportunities afforded Jews through secularization and assimilation, affiliation with the Jewish community became a lower and lower priority. Even the relative decrease in anti-Semitism and the rise of the modern State of Israel's power has granted Jews more and more options to claim some kind of Jewish identity without having formal ties to the Jewish community.

“And let’s face it,” he confessed on our behalf. We Jews are experiencing “continuity fatigue”. We’re tired of being told that our people are in crisis. We don’t want to be bothered; we want UJA to leave us alone. We don’t want to go to events at the JCC, much less spend three hours of our Saturday mornings in a synagogue.

Of course, all this just reinforces the critique that those of us who labor to make Judaism more appealing are only causing great damage to the Torah with little reward or justification.

But we know there is still deep hunger out there – for connection, for meaning, for purpose. This crisis in Jewish community building comes at a time when dipping into multicultural and multireligious experimental spirituality is increasingly hip, from drumming circles to Kirtan chants, all predicated on a search for personal and individual self-fulfillment. In our society, Rabbi Hartman noted, religion has become only as good as it enables me personally to have a direct, intimate experience of the holy.

We know that the spiritual changes Rabbi Hartman described are taking place within the larger framework of societal changes that are transforming the ways human beings relate to one another on a global scale.

Jeremy Rifkin, in his remarkable new book, [The Empathic Civilization](#), documents how the changing social, economic and political paradigms in our world have created greater and greater empathy amongst people. Traditional hierarchies are being replaced by collaborative models in business (think Linux), energy production and distribution (think renewable

smart grids), governance (think the European Union) and socialization (think Facebook).

As Rifkin states, “A complex, globally structured civilization made up of hundreds of millions of individuals interacting in vast associational networks – social, economic and political – requires a sense of openness, a nonjudgmental point of view, an appreciation of cultural differences, and a desire to continually find common ground among people.”

It should not be shocking to us, Rifkin says, “that in the most technologically advanced countries, where self-expression is high, the older theological consciousness, with its emphasis on strict external codes, the communal bond, and a hierarchically organized command and control, is losing its hold. Religious hierarchies make less and less sense in a flat, networked world.”

So what do we make of Jewish community today?

Just like Moses found the strength to emerge from his powerlessness after being dismissed by God to rise to a courageous defense of Israel, sparing them from the fullness of God's wrath, so too do we who care deeply about the future of Jewish life need to find the courage to emerge from our own feelings of rejection or loss, heal our bruised egos, shake off the ashes of our mourning for a Judaism that once was but is no longer, and rise to the defense and embrace of our people today who are living in a different world and a different time but for whom the Torah can and must still be a source of holiness and a path to community.

Like Moses, we may even need to be prepared to fracture, if not shatter our Torah, to withdraw parts of it in order to show solidarity with our people and evolve a Jewish language and practice in which we can all share. Every generation, Rabbi Hartman challenged, needs to ask itself what part of the Torah they are willing to break in order to save the community.

Let's be clear: responding to his challenge would not be to make Judaism easier, to make it less of a burden or to carelessly or selfishly delete or excise parts of our heritage. Precisely the opposite: to respond to the challenge would be to make Judaism reflective of and relevant to the changed world in which we live; to create access and to ensure inclusion; to use distributed power and social capital to inspire collaboration amongst a flat, networked Jewish people.

The sacrifices we make of Judaism are in order to make it meaningful to those who would call it home. The sacrifices we make are to ensure Judaism's eternal presence in our world as a source of wisdom and inspiration. The sacrifices we make are to inspire loyalty, to ignite passion and to arouse commitment.

If indeed every generation is called to sacrifice part of the Torah in order to be there with and for the community, what is our generation's response? What are we prepared to sacrifice in order to bring the overwhelming majority of Jews home to Judaism? The second day of yomtov in the Diaspora? Defining Jewish practice as a binding set of laws rooted in rabbinic authority? Matrilineal descent? The prohibition on intermarriage?

Notice how in the first Midrash Moses realizes he can't come down the mountain with blank tablets. Neither can we. Blank tablets are not just tablets with nothing written on them. They are tablets written in a language, in an idiom their recipients no longer speak, understand or accept. We too cannot present such a Torah to our people.

And lest we shudder at the blasphemy of shattering the Torah, let's remember where the shards of those tablets Moses threw down ended up: in the holy ark right next to the new ones that were created – created by Moses this time, not by God.

After Moshe breaks the Luchot HaBrit, God commands him to prepare another set of stones for the second tablets to be inscribed with the commandments.

“pesol lecha shnei luchot avanim karishonim/ carve for yourself two tablets of stone like the first”

Why is the word “lecha/for yourself” in the command? Why isn't it just “pesol/carve” two tablets of stone?

The commentator Ibn Ezra notes how the formulation “pesol lecha/carve for yourself” is similar to the earlier command to Avraham “lech lecha meartzcha, umimoladtcha, umibeit avicha/ go forth to yourself from your land, from your place of birth, from your father's house”. What does lech lecha/go to yourself” mean?

The Hasidic commentator Mei Hashiloach interprets that command to mean “go forth to find your authentic self, to learn who you are meant to be.”

“Lech lecha”: This is an imperative not just for us as individuals, but as the interaction with Moses, representative of the people, on Sinai teaches us, is an imperative for us as a community as well.

“Pesol Lecha”: We the Jewish people must carve a Torah that helps us find our authentic self, we must craft the traditions from which we can learn who it is we are meant to be.

“Pesol lecha” “carve for yourself” is not a one-time commandment. It is a commandment that is fulfilled over and over again. Every generation must see itself not only as the passive recipient of our sacred texts, but also as the sculptors of our sacred traditions which bind us to our sense of mission and purpose, which as Rabbi Art Green puts it, is to “be a wandering sanctuary for the divine presence.”

The second set of tablets is the one that endured precisely because Moshe had to be actively involved in making them. Our Torah will endure when we play our part as well.

But these second tablets and both the responsibility and the opportunity they bestow on us could not have been revealed without the fracturing of the first, which is why the broken shards are kept in the holy ark along with the second tablets. The disassembling and reassembling of Torah in every generation becomes part of the sacred narrative and sacred destiny of the Jewish people. It is the source of our continuity, not our dissolution. As we learned from the Kotzker Rebbe: There is nothing so whole as a

broken heart. Whether as individuals or as a tradition, we can't achieve wholeness until we've been broken.

In one of the more dramatic moments of our session with Rabbi Hartman that day, he reminded us that our ancient rabbis believed it was God who followed Moses' lead when God withdrew the writing on the tablets, teaching us that to be a Jew, to be a Jewish leader, means having the courage to do something that sometimes even God hasn't figured out yet.

I am not unaware of the boldness, or of what some might call the recklessness of what I am saying. In fact, there are times when I wonder myself whether I can truly walk the path I am preaching.

My journey to the rabbinate has been a boundary-breaking one from the start. I was raised in Montreal's Modern Orthodox community wherein leadership roles for women are limited and female rabbis do not exist. In 1993 I became the first Canadian woman to be ordained a Conservative rabbi at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, and two years later served as its first female Assistant Dean of the rabbinical school.

In the midst of that, I founded my own synagogue, Kol HaNeshamah in Englewood, NJ, bringing innovation to suburban congregational life in the forms of collective community leadership and shared ritual and administrative responsibility.

In the years since, I have lead Sha'ar Communities, an organization that takes an innovative and courageous approach to Jewish identity and community by validating and creating multiple portals into Jewish life

without privileging any, and instead promoting the sufficiency of each for the creation of meaningful Jewish living. We are increasingly being recognized, both in Bergen County, NJ, and around North America, for being responsive to changing patterns of Jewish affiliation, to changing priorities of Jewish people and to the opportunities that such shifts create for evolving a vigorous, dynamic and accessible Judaism for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The invitations we have received to bring our model to other communities, both in the U.S. and in Canada, attest to the rewards our risking of traditional models is reaping not only for us as an organization, but most importantly, for the people whose lives we touch.

Over the past 25 years I have blazed my way through communal resistance, challenged religious precedent and even charted new family territory all the while steadfast in my commitment to Judaism and passionate about leading and serving my people and my tradition.

But the questions I raised with you today, the challenge I placed before you, give me considerable pause.

Am I ready to abandon the concept of Jewish Law in favor of conscious Jewish practice, intentional Jewish observance?

Am I ready to throw open the gates of the Jewish people and redefine the foundations of Jewish identity? Am I ready to say “Hineini/Here I am”, and on our community’s behalf, proclaim, “Here we are”, to answer the call of any who would turn to me for rabbinic leadership and to us for Jewish fellowship, regardless of which parent of theirs is Jewish?

I am reminded of the young woman who came running up to me after an especially meaningful Bar Mitzvah service, begging me to tell her whether she was Jewish or not. "I was raised by my Jewish father and non-Jewish mother, and have always identified as a Jew. But just the other day my friend told me I wasn't Jewish, and now I don't know who I am. Rabbi, am I Jewish?" I will never forget the urgency in her voice and the pleading in her eyes.

Even as I continue to teach young couples about the importance – and at this point in my rabbinate, the requirement -- of sharing Jewish spiritual heritage and practice, can I see myself sanctifying the love of a Jew for another human being who is not a Jew, sending the message that not only does our faith celebrate love, but that we understand Jewish identity to be larger than who it is you choose to share your life with? Can I see myself sending the message to both partners that Judaism will not abandon you, but will strive to enrich your life and deepen your connection to Torah regardless of the other choices you make? It should come as no surprise that I, for one, struggle deeply with telling someone who they're allowed, and who they're forbidden, to love.

Just recently, Rabbi Jim Ponet who presided over the marriage of Mark and Chelsea, wrote: "My problem with intermarriage, I now realize, is based on legitimate fears about the survival of our people, period. But what if our people is in fact evolving into new forms of identity and observance? What if we are indeed generating new models of Jewish commitment and engagement with the world? What if Rabbi Donniel Hartman is right when he observes in his book *The Boundaries of Judaism* that 'when the intermarriage act is in fact only ... an expression of one's choice as to partner and not of one's personal religious and collective

identity, the classification of intolerability is not warranted', and that 'modernity and the choices it has engendered have created complex realities which we must take into account in our boundary policies'?"?

Simply asking these questions makes me tremble with the weight of Jewish history and Jewish destiny upon my shoulders, and by extension, upon yours. Could it be that my role will simply be to ask them, and to wait for the next generation of leaders to answer them?

I often think about the contrast between Moses' powerful presence on Har Sinai, his courage to confront God on behalf of the sinning people and change the course of their future and of ours, and the heartbreaking scene of his final stand on a mountain, this time Har Nevo, gazing over into the land he has spent his whole life leading his people to, that he himself will never set foot in.

The tragedy of Moses not being able to enter the land has nothing to do with whether he hit a rock when he was supposed to speak to it, the way most commentators explain it when way back when we were complaining in the desert about needing water.

The tragedy stems from his no longer being able to speak a language and articulate a vision that the generation before him needed as they opened the next chapter in Jewish history. Moses began his leadership with a people forged in slavery. But at the end of his life he stood before a generation that had been born into the freedom of the desert. Their frame of reference, their values and vision came from a different place and were leading them down a related, but different path. Moses could

no longer lead them. He had taken them as far as he could, and now the greatest show of his leadership was to stand down.

Standing down is also a show of courage. Saying, “dayeinu/enough”, can also be a show of strength. I have travelled this path as far as I can possibly travel. I have tried as hard as I can possibly try. The only response, the only resolution is to make peace with where, and who, I am. This too, is courage.

But I am not ready to stand down from the great Jewish questions of our time. To me it would feel less like leadership and more like cowardice.

In Moses' place came Joshua. A man who was also a veteran of Egypt, but unlike Moses, was able to unshackle himself of the requirements distilled from that experience and able to embrace a new generation with a new set of needs and demands.

What did Joshua possess that Moses didn't, I wonder. What will distinguish Jewish leaders today from one another, I wonder too. Am I Moses, able to see the new frontiers that Judaism is heading towards but unable to reach them myself? Or am I Joshua, learning to speak a new language of Jewish intention and responsibility, sculpting a new framework for Jewish identity and practice, leading people into new settings for Jewish experience and commitment?

Will the tablets I hold in my hands survive the collision with our culture today and emerge recast into a Torah of authentic Judaism for the future that is unfolding before us? Will the record of the sacrifices we make

today take their place in the holy ark, alongside the ongoing sacred narrative of the Jewish people?

What is at stake in the answers to these questions is more than just Judaism. The fate of Judaism is an urgent, particular piece of a universal crossroads at which humanity stands. Our ability to deepen spiritual and moral consciousness in a world of increasing connectivity and collaboration opens up the possibility of extending our empathic embrace beyond the human race to all forms of life and to the planet itself. The consequences of Judaism's unwillingness to renew itself will be devastating to itself, and by many accounts they already are. But the consequences of humanity's unwillingness to do the same could have far more catastrophic effects.

Creating a sustainable Judaism, one that is open-sourced, non-hierarchical and collaborative is part of the global urgency today to create a similarly sustainable planet.

This is the powerful new narrative of our time as articulated by such critical thinkers as Jeremy Rifkin and Rabbi Art Green. For us as Jews it is the narrative waiting to be inscribed on our generation's tablets. It will come with considerable risk and loss as well as the promise of great reward.

What will we need to put down before we can pick up our pens, open our laptops or unlock our doors to begin?

Like the tug of war our opening Midrash describes between the Elders and Moses over the tablets of the Law, our Torah today is wrenched between

the weight of the past and the call of the future. Which will lead to its salvation: a tighter embrace, or a looser grip?

Am I, are we, willing to find out?