

Two Torahs or Two Tablets?

Parshat Ki Tisa

Anshe Sholom B'nai Israel Congregation

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This past week our community partnered with our friends at Skokie Valley to learn about the very troubling trend of Anti-Semitism on college campuses. The program featured a panel of professors, including our own Dr. Ellen Cannon, who was incredible and shared her research, her deep sense of alarm along with her inspiring voice of faith and positivity regarding the power of Jewish community.

In the days since, I have also been thinking about some of what Dr. David Shyovitz shared. He wears a kippah, teaches Jewish history and is among the most publicly visible Jewish faculty members at Northwestern. He described how his own relationship with the chair of the Department of Black Studies has been both vital and tested recently, and that despite very different perspectives, they had managed to keep talking. He was even invited to offer feedback on the department's statement regarding the war.

He also made a plea to the students which is worth repeating, for all of us: "you have four years right now to read, and think, and grapple. It would be even better if you read the books that support another side's perspective, but no matter what, take the time to learn and educate yourselves." Dr. Shyovitz confessed at a certain point that he still has faith in the project of a liberal arts education.

The notion of intellectual pluralism appears in the Talmud as well (Eruvin 13b), in a passage which has become both revered and repeated in certain sectors of the Jewish community.

Rabbi Abba said in the name of Shmuel, For three years, the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai argued. One said, 'The halakha is like us,' and the other said, 'The halakha is like us.' A heavenly voice spoke: "These and these are the words of the living God...and the halakha is like the House of Hillel."

If you are wondering about that last line, don't worry, you're not alone - the Gemara has the same question:

A question was raised: Since the heavenly voice declared: "Both these and those are the words of the Living God," why was the halacha established to follow the opinion of Hillel? It is because the students of Hillel were kind and gracious. They taught their own

ideas as well as the ideas from the students of Shammai. Not only for this reason, but they went so far as to teach Shammai's opinions first.

This text celebrates and acknowledges that there are different viewpoints out in the world, both held with fierce conviction and both reflecting aspects of Divine truth.

It even teaches us what to do, and why Beit Hillel's approach carried the day in this moment of ideological warfare: because they managed to be kind even amidst disagreement, and they taught the ideas of the other side even before their own.

At some point however, I encountered another piece of this story, a more troubling account from the Jerusalem Talmud (Shabbat 1:4):

[On a certain day] in the attic of Hananiah ben Chizkiyah ben Guryon when [the rabbis]... called the roll and found that [members of] Beit Shammai outnumbered those of Beit Hillel, Beit Shammai decreed eighteen regulations on that day.

Rebbi Joshua from Ono stated: The students of the House of Shammai were standing downstairs and killing the students of the House of Hillel. It was stated, six of them went up (to try to argue their case); the rest were standing around them with swords and lances.

Here Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel are again in disagreement, but this time, it turns to bloodshed. Students of Beit Hillel were killed or denied the ability to express their opinion, under the threat of death.

The Gemara, almost in passing, offers the following devastating comment:

אותו היום קשה לישראל כיום שנעשה בו העגל.

That day was difficult for Israel like the day when the Golden Calf was made....

Dr. Steven Fine of Yeshiva University notes that “A fragment from a *Gaonic* work, *Halakhot Gedolot*, found in the Cairo Geniza, has it that “they all killed each other” הרגו האלו האלו ואלו האלו,” an especially cruel wordplay on the earlier phrase that communicated such harmony to us. “One source even inflated the number of dead to 3000, the same number at the sin of the Golden Calf.”

Another rabbinic phrase (from Tosefta Sotah 14:9) remarked that “when the students of Hillel and Shammai increased who did not sufficiently follow their teachers, dispute increased in Israel and two Torahs were made.”

The episode of the *Egel*, the Golden calf was the first great failure in Jewish history. It was a moment of profound shock, loss of life, confusion, disunity, and betrayal. Facing this reality, commentators are nearly unanimous that Moshe had to shatter the first set of *luchot*. Something dramatic had to happen, and fast.

Reish Lakish, in the Gemara (Shabbat 87a) praises Moshe's strength and employs a famous wordplay, on a verse later in the parsha (34:1):

Regarding the tablets that were destroyed, "אָנֶשֶׁר נִשְׁבְּרָתָּ"

אָמַר רִישׁ לָקִישׁ: יִישָׁר כְּחֶךְ שְׁשֻׁבְרָתָּ.

Reish Lakish said: The word *asher* is an allusion to the phrase *yasher koach*! May your strength be true [*yishar kohakha*] due to the fact that you broke the tablets. Good job Moshe, you did it. Those tablets had to be broken to teach the Jewish people a lesson.

If we leave the story here, the *Egel Zahav* would only be a tale of rupture, human failure, finger-pointing, reprisals and betrayal.

However, if we take a closer look at Reish Lakish's "*yasher koach*," it comes not during the initial incident, but later, in the moment of rebuilding.

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה פָּסֵל־לְךָ שְׁנֵי־לִחוֹת אֲבָנִים כְּרֹאשֵׁיכָם וְכָתַבְתִּי עַל־הֵלָחוֹת אֶת־הַדְּבָרִים
אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ עַל־הֵלָחוֹת הָרִאשֹׁנִים אֲשֶׁר שִׁבְרָתָּ:

God said to Moses: "Carve two tablets of stone like the first, and I will inscribe upon the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you shattered." What Reish Lakish is really saying then is: *yasher koach Moshe*, you broke the tablets, and have the strength to carve new ones.

There is much which remains shattered since October 7th, and I want to highlight a similarity between the incident of the Golden Calf: the experience of betrayal.

Israelis felt betrayed by their government, betrayed by the promise of living in security. American Jews have felt betrayed as well, by protests that explicitly or tacitly support Hamas, with chants that call for the destruction of Israel. We may have felt that our own sense of security as Jews was threatened as well.

In our community too, I worry about feelings of betrayal toward each other, as we try to absorb, process and make sense of the war in Gaza. We are blessed with a dynamic, diverse and textured community, and people have a broad range of perspectives about all kinds of issues, Israel included.

Let me share some of the voices I have heard in recent weeks:

- I have heard from people who are supportive of the war and feel that it was necessary to respond after the barbarism of October 7th.
- I have heard people express that Israel is acting in a fully correct way from both a moral and geopolitical perspective, despite exceptionally challenging times.
- I have heard others who support Israel's right to defend itself, but are unsure if the current war is fully just, or is being prosecuted as justly as possible.
- There are many who with a range of opinions about Israel and the war, who are very upset by the loss of Palestinian lives in Gaza
- There are those in our community, both Israelis and Americans, who were not big fans of Israel's government on October 6th and remain concerned about the government's ability to lead right now.
- There are others who are deeply concerned that this chapter of Jewish history will, when the dust settles, be seen as a time of moral failure on the part of Israel.
- There are others still who look around the world and worry about the erosion of Israel's good will and that Israel's relationship to its friend's and allies has been tarnished, damaged or set back fifty years.

It is a lot. Let us pause for a moment and breathe, because all of our anxiety and heart rates likely just increased as I named some of the ideas people have been grappling with in this room. Again, it's a lot.

I worry that we are slowly losing (or have lost?) our ability to hold all this complexity, in one room or within one heart. Can we encounter a perspective other than our own, examine it and hold it up? Maybe if we squint we can see holiness in it? Or are we inching closer to the standoff in the lobby of Hananiah ben Chizkiyah ben Guryon, when one group within the Jewish community decided that the other group's opinions were so untenable that they killed them, or perhaps the groups started killing each other.

Like the students of Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai, I fear that we may again be living in a time of two Torahs.

There is however another model, suggested by our parsha and our sages.

How did Moshe respond? First, he carved a new set of tablets, and that alone is worth a *yasher koach*. Just turning the page and trying to rebuild is praiseworthy. But there is more:

The Talmud (Bava Batra 14b) teaches that the broken pieces of the Luchot were placed in the Aron side-by-side with the second tablets, *luchot v'shivrey luchot munachim*

b'Aron. Not hidden. Not buried. Not forgotten. Instead, they were restored to a place of honor, in the Holy Ark alongside the new, restored Tablets.

Out of brokenness and rupture, we can rebuild and create a more whole future. We cannot change what has happened but we can decide how we will respond.

Let me offer a rhetorical leap: the broken tablets in the ark are not so different from the approach of Beit Hillel with which I began. They inhabited and taught a perspective that was not their own, indeed that they felt was faulty and broken and dead wrong. They held up this other opinion even as they held fast to their own belief. They put these perspectives next to each other, holding some brokenness and some wholeness together in the same space. In this version, there weren't two Torahs held by different camps, but two sets of two Tablets, one whole and one broken, but all held in the ark together.

Let us try to see the wisdom of our tradition in this very fraught moment. Can we inhabit another perspective, to see its wisdom and beauty and power? Can we muster the courage to truly grapple and have some hard conversations, to read things that might trouble us?

Let us endeavor to remain in dialogue and conversation with each other and with those in our community with whom we may disagree. There is a world of difference between saying "I'm concerned, or angry, or even feel betrayed", and "I'm done."

As Jews, and as a community, we face a choice. We must decide if this is a time of two Torahs, or two tablets. I pray that we have the courage and fortitude to follow in Moshe's footsteps, to engage that which we see as irreparably broken and carry it with us, in our ark and in our hearts as we carve a new, more whole future together.