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 ASBI Congregation
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Shattered Tablets

Those of you who sat through the Torah reading this morning may have been wondering, “is this the longest Torah portion or the longest double-portion that occurs each year?” The answer is that *Vayakbel Pekudei* is not actually the longest Torah portion of the year but it is the most boring. The boredom comes, not necessarily because the subject matter is irrelevant or uninteresting, but because the subject matter is so very repetitive. Those of us who get really excited about the mishkan, get to hear lots and lots about the mishkan the first time the furnishings and materials for the mishkan are described. Just a few weeks ago, we heard the instructions for building the mishkan, in meticulous and painstaking detail in *Parshiot Trumah* and *Tetzaveh*. The Torah could have then said, “and Moshe and the Children of Israel built the mishkan just as God had commanded them” and we could have all been at kiddush by now. In fact, the phrase, “just as God had commanded Moshe” appears fourteen times in *Parashat Pekudei*. But each time is connected to one or another detail of the construction and setting up of the mishkan and so here we are. Not yet at kiddush.

But, of course, not everything is the same in these later *parshiot*. And, as the French say, “*viva la' difference*” it is precisely the places where the implementation of the mishkan’s construction in the *parshiot* of *Vayakbel Pekudei* diverge from the instructions in the *parshiot* of *Trumah* and *Tetzaveh* that should capture our attention

Similarly, a divergence between a piece of rabbinic tradition or a classic interpretation of an element of scripture and what is contained in the Torah directly is also worth our attention. We find an example of that in *Massechet Berachot* (8b) where the Talmud teaches that the intact tablets of the law, with the *Asseret HaDibrot*, the second set to *luchot* that Moshe brought down from Sinai, and also the shattered remains of the original *luchot*, the first set of the *Asseret HaDibrot*, were both placed within the *aron*, the ark.

לוחות ושברי לוחות מונחות בארון

This is a very poetic image. The Talmud says this is a metaphor for the honor and deference we must give to Torah scholars who have forgotten their knowledge. They are the shattered fragments of the tablets and they too deserve a place in the *aron* along with the intact tablets.

But that is not what the Torah itself says. There is no indication from the Torah itself to suggest that the shattered tablets along with the intact tablets were placed together in the *aron*. Or is there?

Rav David Bigman, an Israeli rosh yeshiva who was born in America and studied in Chicago as a young man, thinks a literary perspective on this entire section of the Torah can provide a source for this rabbinic tradition. The construction of the mishkan, its furnishings and accoutrement are described in four Torah portions. *Terumah* and *Tetzaveh* list God’s commands, and *Vayekhel* and *Pekudei* describe the implementation. In the middle is *Parashat Ki Tissa* which describes the sin of the Golden Calf, the shattering of the first tablets, and the creation of a second set of tablets.

The Torah itself places the story of the shattered and the intact tablets right inside the mishkan by enveloping that narrative of sin and repentance with the details of the mishkan’s construction.

The shattered tablets alongside the intact tablets are both placed in the ark. The Torah does this through a literary envelope, and the Talmud is sensitive to this and derives an ethical message about respecting elderly scholars who have forgotten their knowledge, but once we notice this literary device it becomes grist for the sermon mill and there are additional meanings that can be gleaned from this observation. I will focus on two of them.

Sin, and the recovery from sin are not meant to be suppressed. The Torah includes the sin of the Golden Calf in its account of standing at Sinai and it is that story right at the heart of the midrash, the sacred center of Jewish religious life. So too in our lives, we should not suppress the memory of failure and mistaken choices but should retain the memory of those choices so that they can guide us in a better direction in the future. This is counter-intuitive to many. Years ago, I heard Rav Bigman himself share this message with a group of our Princeton students and I vividly remember how outrageous one student in particular found his message. "Sins should arouse our shame," she said. Maybe. But the Torah thinks that recovering from sin and repairing a relationship with God deserve to be at the very center of a sacred and holy life.

There is a second and final allusion to this Talmudic teaching that I wish to discuss this morning. Shattered Vessels, *Keilim Shevurim*, is the title of a brief but important book by an Israeli rabbi and thinker named Shimon Gershon Rosenberg but universally known as "Rav Shagar." You know he's impressive because he got his own acronym. Rav Shagar, at the time of his untimely death in 2007 was rosh yeshiva at Yeshivat Siach Yitzchak in Efrat, a tiny institution with very few students. Numerous posthumous books by Rav Shagar have been published in the decade since his death and a small but growing number of those books and essays are being translated into English. *Keilim Shevurim*, Shattered Vessels is an allusion to Kabbalistic cosmology, and the book, published in 2003, is an attempt to create a Jewish response to the insights of postmodernity.

We can also use the image of shattered and intact tablets being placed side by side in the aron to indicate that same response to postmodernity.

Naive faith is a religious sensibility that has never been challenged and exists unaware that there are competing ideologies, alternative religions, and compelling challenges to a life of faith with no easy answers. Faith of that kind is inevitably challenged by a serious confrontation with the contemporary post-modern world. We can't "un-see" certain things or "un-know" certain truths once we confront them. In an integrated and diverse world we cannot ignore how contingent our faith commitments are. The accident of being born to a certain set of parents or being raised with certain influences which we did not choose looms so large in creating our religious identity and our faith commitments. It isn't tenable to pretend that we are observant Jews because of a rational decision to embrace the "Truth Faith."

Naive faith shatters when it confronts the challenges of postmodernity and the faith that replaces it is one that is aware of its own contingency. We know that there are other ways of life. We know that our religious and ethical choices are shaped and influenced by our family of origin and by our community. But we nonetheless choose to live a life guided by values and traditions that WE find meaningful. It doesn't have to be universal. It doesn't have to be fully rational. Torah is OUR way of life and we can be dedicated and committed to Torah with a post-naive faith.

The shattered fragments of the tablets also need to be housed in the *aron* alongside the second set of *luchot* that we have carved to replace them. Crises of faith are an inevitable part of a life of faith and working

through them and rebuilding our faith in their aftermath, is a sacred process that should be treasured at the heart of the *mikdash*.

There is a Yiddish expression that roughly translates as “a question never killed anyone.” Indeed, we celebrate questions in Jewish life and no topic is out of bounds. But we can do more than overcome fear of questions. We can recognize that in our post-modern world, we must not primarily honor perfect and unchallenged faith, but honor the commitments of those who have struggled, honor the struggle itself, and hold onto the questions to retain the shards of our destroyed faith alongside the second *luchot* that serve as a replacement.