SOUL OF TORAH נשמת התורה

A Chassidic Take On The Parsha

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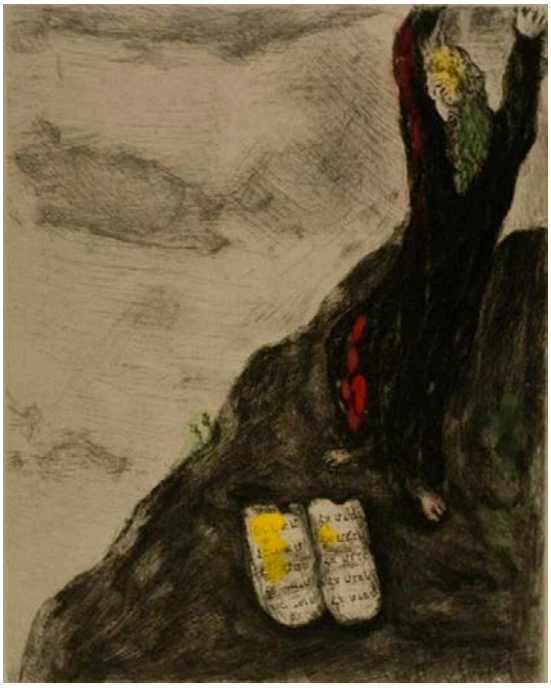
From Shattered to Sacred:

The Rabbinic Twinning of the *Luchot*



(Marc Chagall (1887-1985) "Moses Breaking the Tablets of the Law")

Even in a busy parsha like ours, *Parshat Ki Tisa*, the breaking of the tablets stands out as the most dramatic. Personally, I am struck by how the Rabbis append a crucial detail to the event, transforming a narrative of loss and shame into a paradigm of enduring sanctity.

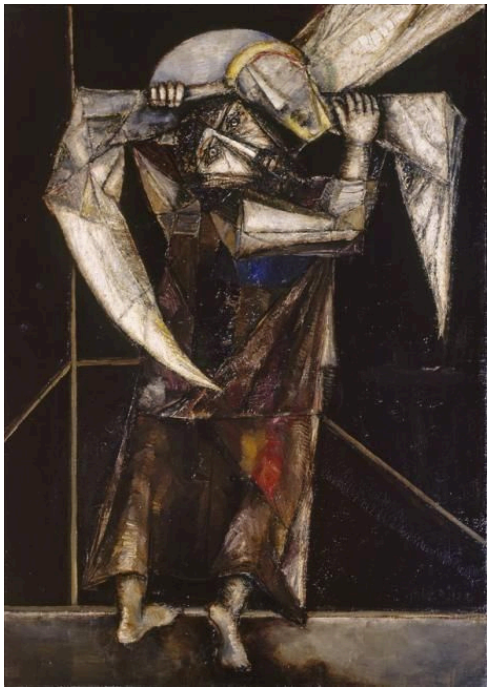
Briefly, here is the story in this week's *parsha*:

Following Matan Torah, Moses ascends to heaven for forty days. He returns bearing the Tablets, which serve as a covenantal contract (לוחות הברית). To his shock, his long absence led the Jews astray; they cast a golden calf and are reveling. Moses is incensed and hurls down the tablets in a fury. They shatter completely. After a long process, the tablets are re-inscribed, and he's given new ones. With that, the story seemingly ends: the first set of tablets have been discarded and replaced with the second set.

Yet, the story does not end there.

While it is how the story ends in the Torah, the Rabbis append a profound detail, revealing that even though the first Tablets were shattered, they were not discarded. We know the tablets eventually take a place of honor in the Mishkan and Beit Mikdash. Once the tabernacle was built, the tablets were placed in the holy ark, stationed in the Holy of Holies. Perhaps surprisingly, the rabbis teach that the new tablets weren't there by themselves. Instead, the broken shards of the first set took their place of honor in the ark, lying side by side with the new tablets (See Bava Batra 14:).

On the surface this makes no sense: why preserve the shattered fragments? I believe this twinning delivers an incredibly powerful twofold message about the nature of the religious journey.



(Shmuel Bonneh (1930-1999) "Jacob Wrestling with the Angel")

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- The religious journey isn't linear or smooth; it is, instead, a process of breaking and reconstituting. There are times when our spiritual vitality is perfectly aligned with the divine will, and commitment to the commandments is effortless and complete. But then there are times that alignment breaks, when we feel detached and out of sync —and that, we must understand, is not a spiritual failing. That is the nature of the religious life: there is an ebb and flow. In Chassidut, that is expressed as רצוא ושוב והחיות. Religious *Cheyut* is a perpetual journey of moving close, pulling back, and again moving close. It oscillates. Thus, the broken *luchot* belong alongside the new ones: they are not a pause, but an integral part of that story.

- The other, and perhaps more important, lesson this twinning teaches is that even after old paths are abandoned and outdated paradigms are shattered, they should not be discarded. While the old paradigm might not work in its pristine form and had to be crushed, its wisdom is not entirely lost. Instead we need to keep it constantly before us, with one eye observing the new *luchot* and the other looking at the broken one for guidance and inspiration. Because our religious journey is an amalgam of various religious states, even when we realize we need to change paths, we should not completely negate the previous journey.

And this is not just true for the *luchot* but also for our religious experience as a whole. A notion in Chassidut teaches that *Matan Torah* occurs in perpetuity, with every generation having its own Har Sinai experience.

Following this logic, we too must pass through our own "breaking-of-the-tablets" moment, much like the Jews' in the desert. That moment is the realization that existing religious paradigms are insufficient for our contemporary religious struggles, requiring them to be broken. The old tablets are shattered, so to speak—yet their core is not discarded; they are then refurbished and reconstituted, yielding a restored set of tablets. The immutable core of the content endures, simply re-examined—taken apart and put back together again, emerging stronger and better.

In fact, this mode of רצוא ושוב, going back and forth, breaking and reconstituting, breaking with old paradigms while not discarding it completely, is in our DNA, going back all the way to our forbear Yakov, "God's favorite (according to the Midrash)."

Jacob does battle with an agent of God. He triumphs. Yet, despite dealing a crushing blow to a manifestation of the Divine, the encounter is commemorated by a name change which puts God front and center in Jacob's reconstituted identity. His new name is Yisra-EL, conveying subservience to the very God he just defeated; El now an intimate part of his new sense of self.

This mode of רצוא ושוב, of going back and forth, of breaking with old paradigms and reconstituting them, is not an exception but a core feature encoded in our spiritual DNA. The struggle for a deeper, more authentic religious life is not a spiritual failing, but an echo of the transformational encounter that changed our forbear, Jacob, into the new man, Yisra-EL.

And this is why, even in a *Parsha* as rich as ours, the story of the broken *luchot*, especially as told by the Rabbis, stands out. It is a testament to their genius. They take a story meant to underscore the fragility of faith and turn it into the exact opposite. The rabbinic epilogue transforms it into a profound teaching on resilience and religious fortitude. Our breaks are not detours; they are part and parcel of the perpetual journey of *krivat elokim* (drawing close to God); רצוא ושוב, in and out and in—and so on and so forth.