



A lesson from
Aleph Learning Institute

HIGH HOLIDAYS 5780

Lesson 8//Series 4

ELUL-TESHUVA-REPENTANCE

In the Torah Portion Ekev, Moses continues his final monologue to the Jewish nation. Moses (Moshe Rabbenu) recounts the episode of the sin of the golden calf and how he was compelled to smash the tablets as he descended from Mount Sinai. Deut. 9:7-17: "And I saw, and behold, you had sinned against the L-rd, your G-d; you had made yourselves a molten calf; you had deviated quickly from the way that G-d had commanded you. So I grasped the two tablets, cast them out of my two hands, and shattered them **before your eyes.**"

The Talmud Bava Batra, 14b, indicates that the second set of tablets were placed in the ark along with the broken shards of the first set of tablets. The very fact that the broken tablets were not discarded indicates that they convey a positive message. The Ritva (1250-1330) elaborates that shattering the tablets was a dear act before G-d otherwise they would not be placed in the ark, for a prosecutor cannot become a defender. His logic is based upon examples in this regard. The Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur would replace his golden garments with white linen lest the gold vestments bring to mind the sin of the golden calf. Similarly, we do not use the horn of a cow as a shofar for it too would recall the sin of the golden calf. In addition, the broken tablets accompanied the Jewish people whenever they waged war which could not possibly be a bad omen. In fact, the strongest indication of a positive connotation regarding the broken tablets is that they are revisited and mentioned at the climax of the entire Torah.

Why the necessity by the Torah to emphasize that the tablets were smashed, "**Before the eyes of Israel?**" The answer lies in a fascinating statement from the Talmud: Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, Talmud Tractate Avodah Zorah, 4b: "The Jewish people fashioned the golden calf only to give a claim to penitents, as it is stated, 'Would that their hearts be like this, to fear Me and to keep all My commandments all the days.'" **Rashi:** For if the sinner says, "I shall not return, for I shall not be accepted," we tell him, "Go and learn from the sinners of the golden calf, who were atoned and whose repentance was accepted."

The Talmud and Rashi are telling us that the Jewish nation had attained a lofty spiritual level and had no inclination toward sin. Yet, when G-d created an overwhelmingly strong urge to serve the golden calf, many were unable to resist the temptation. The odds were literally stacked against the people. The Talmud explains that this was out of concern for future generations. If, in the distant future, individuals will despair of achieving forgiveness for their terrible sins, we can tell them the story of the golden calf and the broken tablets, and inspire them to return. After all, if the generation of the desert could rebound from such an epic failing, it is obvious that we can overcome any of our smaller sins.

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Thank you!

The Midrash tells us that Adam composed Psalm 92 with a message of hope for future sinners, echoing a message from the sin of the Tree of Knowledge (Eitz Hadaat). “It is proper to give praise[to admit to] G-d”, to teach future generations, that all who admit their sins and forsake them are saved from the judgement of Gehinom. **Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance 7:4:** A baal teshuvah [master of return] should not consider himself/herself distant from the level of the righteous because of his sins and transgressions. He is beloved and desirable before the Creator as if he never sinned. Furthermore, he has great reward, for he has tasted sin, yet he separated himself from it, conquering his [evil] inclination. Our sages declared, **“In the place where baalei teshuvah stand, even the completely righteous are not able to stand.”**

With this elucidation we are able to better understand the episode of the golden calf. The sinning occurred before Moshe’s descent from the mountain, while the subsequent regret and teshuvah occurred after Moshe returned. The catalyst for this 180 degree change was the moment when the tablets smashed in front of the eyes of the Jewish nation. In one moment, the entire script was flipped. Moshe succeeded in shocking the Jewish people back to their senses which precisely called forth their desire to repent. Having a visual experience, witnessed by the Jewish people firsthand, has a major impact on the person. The Rebbe elaborated that the day in which the tablets were broken is a fast day (17 Taamuz). However, in the future redemption, when full repentance for the sin of the golden calf is realized-which began with, ‘I will shatter them before your eyes’- then the fast day will be turned into a day of joy and gladness.

The great sage and mystic Rabbi Natan Shapiro (1588-1633), author of Megaleh Amukot, a work on Kaballah, writes: The word **אלול** (Elul) is an acronym for the words, **לווחות, ושברי לווחות, ארון** – the ark, the tablets, and the shards of the tablets. **What is the connection between the Ark and the month of Elul? More importantly what do the broken shards of the tablet have to do with this month and what message is this trying to convey to us?**

Story: After the Holocaust, a survivor came to visit the Rebbe of the Chassidic dynasty of Gur, Rabbi Avraham Mordechai Alter. He emerged from the Holocaust a lonely man after losing his wife and children and entire community. Sadly, this man lost his faith as well. Upon hearing the story, the Rebbe broke out in tears. The man and his Rebbe sat together mourning what they had lost. Then the Rebbe presented a new insight. “What Moses was saying is, “I smashed the tablets only **before their eyes.**” **But there is another reality- a world in which the tablets have never been broken.** What Moses was communicating was that, what may seem to us as utter destruction and chaos, does not always capture the complete story. “Before your eyes” there is nothing but destruction and devastation. **Yet, what in our world bespeaks total disaster may, in a different world, be wholesome.** The day will come when that world will be exposed, G-d will transform our perceptions and paradigms and we will discover a reality in which every single Jew once exterminated before our eyes during the holocaust, is alive.

Every one of us once owned a set of sacred tablets which at some point in our lives was destroyed. Many of us create a second pair of “tablets” to substitute those which were lost. They may not be exactly like the original. We are stuck holding the broken shards of our innocence, unwilling and unable to move on. However, there is a secret world in which your first tablets were never broken.

Notwithstanding the abuse and pain you experience, each of you possesses a tiny corner in your soul which forever remains invincible, pure and sacred. In some sense, your personal tablets can never be shattered. When your perception matures, you might discover how your shattered dreams can become part of your individual path to wholesomeness. Wholesomeness does not come in one shape, for some it comes in the form of a broken heart. What is broken in one level of perception may be wholesome in another. **The month of Elul** is the final month of the Jewish year when we gear up for the High Holidays. This month allows us to build an “ark” in our personal life which will contain not only our second complete tablets but also embrace the broken shards of our first. At this time we can pick up the broken pieces with tender love, learning how each of them constitutes another aspect of wholesomeness.

This lesson is gleaned from JLI Torah Studies taught at Aleph Learning Institute

Best Wishes for a Sweet, Healthy, Happy, Peaceful New Year! Sincerely, Rochel Kaplan, Director