

COVENANT AND CONVERSATION

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THOUGHTS ON THE WEEKLY PARSHA FROM THE CHIEF RABBI



כי תשא
Ki Tissa

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כ אדר תשס"ז

Two Types of Religious Encounter

These were perhaps the holiest object in history, yet within hours they lay shattered.

Framing the epic events of this week's sedra are two objects - the two sets of tablets, the first given before, the second after, the sin of the Golden Calf. Of the first, we read:

“The tablets were the work of God; the writing was the writing of G-d, engraved on the tablets.”

These were perhaps the holiest object in history: from beginning to end, the work of G-d. Yet within hours they lay shattered, broken by Moses when he saw the calf and the Israelites dancing around it.

The second tablets, brought down by Moses on the tenth of Tishri, were the result of his prolonged plea to G-d to forgive the people. This is the historic event that lies behind Yom Kippur (tenth of Tishri), the day marked in perpetuity as a time of favour, forgiveness and reconciliation between G-d and the Jewish people. The second tablets were different in one respect. They were not wholly the work of G-d:

Carve out two stone tablets like the first ones, and I will write on them the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke.

Hence the paradox: the first tablets, made by G-d, did not remain intact. The second tablets, the joint work of G-d and Moses, did. Surely the opposite should have been true: the greater the holiness, the more eternal. Why was the more holy object broken while the less holy stayed whole? This is not, as it might seem, a question specific to the tablets. It is, in fact, a powerful example of a fundamental principle in Jewish spirituality.

The Jewish mystics distinguished between two types of Divine-human encounter. They called them *itaruta de-leylah* and *itaruta deletata*, respectively "an awakening from above" and "an awakening from below." The first is initiated by G-d, the second by mankind. An "awakening from above" is spectacular, supernatural, an event that bursts through the chains of causality that at other times bind the natural world. An "awakening from below" has no such grandeur. It is a gesture that is human, all too human.

Yet there is another difference between them, in the opposite direction. An "awakening from above" may change nature, but it does not, in and of itself, change human nature. In it, no human effort has been expended. Those to whom it happens are passive. While it lasts, it is overwhelming; but only while it lasts. Thereafter, people revert to what they were. An "awakening from below", by contrast, leaves a permanent mark.

An awakening from above temporarily transforms the external world;

an awakening from below permanently transforms our internal world.

The first changes the universe; the second changes us.

Because human beings have taken the initiative, something in them changes. Their horizons of possibility have been expanded. They now know they are capable of great things, and because they did so once, they are aware that they can do so again. An awakening from above temporarily transforms the external world; an awakening from below permanently transforms our internal world. The first changes the universe; the second changes us.

Two Examples. The first: Before and after the division of the Red Sea, the Israelites were confronted by enemies: before, by the Egyptians, after by the Amalekites. The difference is total. Before the Red Sea, the Israelites were commanded to do nothing: "Stand still and you will see the deliverance G-d will bring you today . . . G-d will fight for you; you need only be still." (14:13-14). Facing the Amalekites, however, the Israelites themselves had to fight: "Moses said to Joshua, 'Choose men and go out and fight the Amalekites'" (17:9). The first was an "awakening from above", the second an "awakening from below."

That is the difference between the things that are done for us and the things we have a share in doing ourselves.

The former change us for a moment, the latter for a lifetime.

The difference was palpable. Within three days after the division of the Sea, the greatest of all miracles, the Israelites began complaining again (no water, no food). But after the war against the Amalekites, the Israelites never again complained when facing conflict (the sole exception - when the spies returned and the people lost heart - was when they relied on hearsay testimony, not on the immediate prospect of battle itself). The battles fought for us do not change us; the battles we fight, do.

The second example: Mount Sinai and the Tabernacle. The Torah speaks about these two revelations of "G-d's glory" in almost identical terms:

The glory of G-d settled on Mount Sinai. For six days the cloud covered the mountain, and on the seventh day G-d called to Moses from within the cloud.

Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of G-d filled the tabernacle.

The difference between them was that the sanctity of Mount Sinai was momentary, while that of the tabernacle was permanent (at least, until the Temple was built, centuries later). The revelation at Sinai was an "awakening from above". It was initiated by G-d. So overwhelming was it that the people said to Moses, "Let G-d not speak to us any more, for if He does, we will die" (20:16). By contrast, the tabernacle involved human labour. The Israelites made it; they prepared the structured space the Divine presence would eventually fill. Forty days after the revelation at Sinai, the Israelites made a Golden Calf. But after constructing the sanctuary they made no more idols - at least until they entered the land. That is the difference between the things that are done for us and the things we have a share in doing ourselves. The former change us for a moment, the latter for a lifetime.

There was one other difference between the first tablets and the second. According to tradition, when Moses was given the first tablets, he was given only Torah shebikhtav, the "written Torah". At the time of the second tablets, he was given Torah she-be'al peh, the Oral Torah as well:

"R. Jochanan said: G-d made a covenant with Israel only for the sake of the Oral Law, as it says [in the context of the second tablets]: "For by the mouth [al pi] of these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel"" (Ex. 34:27).

The difference between the Written and Oral Torah is profound.

The first is the word of G-d, with no human contribution.

The second is a partnership - the word of G-d as interpreted by the mind of man.

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The difference between the Written and Oral Torah is profound. The first is the word of G-d, with no human contribution. The second is a partnership - the word of G-d as interpreted by the mind of man. The following are two of several remarkable passages to this effect:

R. Judah said in the name of Shmuel: Three thousand traditional laws [halakhot, rules belonging to the Oral Law] were forgotten during the period of mourning for Moses. They [the Israelites] said to Joshua: "Ask" (through ruach hakodesh, the holy spirit). Joshua replied, "It is not in heaven." They said to Samuel, "Ask." He replied, "These are the commandments - implying that no prophet has the right to introduce anything new." (B.T. Temurah 16a)

Any attempt to reduce the Oral Torah to the Written

- by relying on prophecy or Divine communication -

mistakes its essential nature as the collaborative partnership between G-d and man, where revelation meets interpretation.

"If a thousand prophets of the stature of Elijah and Elisha were to give one interpretation of a verse, and one thousand and one sages were to offer a different interpretation, we follow the majority: the law is in accordance with the thousand-and-one sages and not in accordance with the thousand prophets."

(Maimonides, Commentary to the Mishneh, Introduction)

Any attempt to reduce the Oral Torah to the Written - by relying on prophecy or Divine communication - mistakes its essential nature as the collaborative partnership between G-d and man, where revelation meets interpretation. Thus, the difference between the two precisely mirrors that between the first and second tablets. The first were Divine, the second the result of Divine-human collaboration.

This helps us understand a glorious ambiguity. The Torah says that at Sinai the Israelites heard a "great voice velo yasaf" (Deut. 5:18). Two contradictory interpretations are given of this phrase. One reads it as "a great voice that was never heard again", the other as "a great voice that did not cease" - i.e. a voice that was always heard again. Both are true. The first refers to the Written Torah, given once and never to be repeated. The second applies to the Oral Torah, whose study has never ceased.

It also helps us understand why it was only after the second tablets, not the first, that "When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of Testimony in his hands, he was unaware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with G-d" (34:29). Receiving the first tablets, Moses was passive. Therefore, nothing in him changed. For the second, he was active. He had a share in the making. He carved the stone on which the words were to be engraved. That is why he became a different person. His face shone.

In Judaism, the natural is greater than the supernatural in the sense that an "awakening from below" is more powerful in transforming us, and longer-lasting in its effects, than is an "awakening from above." That was why the second tablets survived intact while the first did not. Divine intervention changes nature, but it is human initiative - our approach to G-d - that changes us.

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"The team phoned back to Israel and asked for volunteers . . ."

In the summer of 1999 I was in Pristina making a television programme about the aftermath of the Kosovo campaign. Outside every church was a NATO tank. At the start of the conflict it had been the Serbian Christians who had attacked Mosques. Now they feared reprisals from the returning refugees. The mood was tense. Murders were taking place every night. Revenge was in the air. The most important task was to establish order and a return to civil peace.

General Sir Michael Jackson thanked me for what the Jewish community had done:

I asked (the head of the Jewish community) how many Jews were there currently in Pristina. His answer? Eleven.

I interviewed General Sir Michael Jackson, the head of the NATO forces. To my surprise, he thanked me for what the Jewish community had done: it had taken charge of the city's 23 primary schools. It was, he said, a valuable contribution to the city's welfare. When 800,000 people have become refugees and then return home, the most reassuring sign that life has returned to normal is that the schools open on time. Meeting the head of the Jewish community that day, I asked him how many Jews were there currently in Pristina. His answer? Eleven.

The story, as I later uncovered it, was fascinating. In the early days of the conflict, the State of Israel had, along with many other international aid agencies, sent a field medical team to work with the Kosovan Albanian refugees. Immediately they noticed something others had missed. The aid agencies were concentrating, not unnaturally, on the adults. There was no one working with the children. Traumatized by the conflict and far from home, they were running wild.

The team phoned back to Israel and asked for volunteers. Virtually every youth group in Israel, from the most secular to the most religious, sent out teams of youth leaders at two-week intervals. They worked with the children, organised summer camps, sports competitions, drama and music events and everything else they could think of to make their temporary exile feel like a summer holiday. At all levels it was an extraordinary effort. The Kosovan Albanians were Muslims, and for many of the Israeli youth workers it was their first contact and friendship with children of another faith. Their efforts won high praise from UNICEF, the United Nations Children's organization. It was in the wake of this that "the Jewish People" – Israel, the American-based "Joint" and other Jewish agencies – were asked to supervise the return to normality of the school system in Pristina.

That episode taught me many things: the force of *hesed*, acts of kindness; the healing power of kindness extended across the borders of faith; and the way young people can rise to great moral achievement if we set them a challenge. The entire relief effort in Kosovo was a wonderful convergence of many people and agencies, from many faiths and nations. It also showed, though, the practical difference collective responsibility makes to the scope of the moral deed. World Jewry is small, painfully so. But the invisible strands of mutual responsibility mean that even the smallest Jewish community can turn to the Jewish people worldwide for help and achieve things that would be exceptional for a nation many times its size. When a people joins hands, becoming even momentarily "like one body with one soul" they are a formidable force for good.

When a people join hands, becoming even momentarily "like one body with one soul" they are a formidable force for good.

(To Heal a Fractured World – Continuum 2005 – Pages 94-95)

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Sources

מקורות

<p>¹Shemot Chapter 32 Verse 16 The tablets were the work of God; the writing was the writing of G-d, engraved on the tablets.</p>	<p><u>שמות פרק לב, טז</u> והלחת מעשה אלהים המה והמכתב מכתב אלהים הוא חרות על הלחת: <u>שמות פרק לד, א</u></p>
<p>²Shemot Chapter 34 Verse 1 Carve out two stone tablets like the first ones, and I will write on them the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke.</p>	<p>ויאמר ה' אל משה פסל לך שני לחת אבנים כראשנים וכתבתי על הלחת את הדברים אשר היו על הלחת הראשנים אשר שברת. <u>תיקוני זוהר תקונא שתיין ותשע דף קי עמוד ב</u></p>
<p>³Tikunei Zohar 110b An awakening from above, an awakening from below</p>	<p>ואתערותא דלתתא גרים אתערותא דלעילא. <u>שמות פרק יד</u></p>
<p>⁴Shemot Chapter 14 Verse 13-14 'Don't be afraid,' replied Moses to the people. 'Stand firm and you will see what God will do to rescue you today. You might be seeing the Egyptians today, but you will never see them again. God will fight for you, but you must remain silent</p>	<p>(יג) ויאמר משה אל העם אל תיראו התיצבו וראו את ישועת ה' אשר יעשה לכם היום כי אשר ראיתם את מצרים היום לא תסיפו לראתם עוד עד עולם: (יד) ה' ילחם לכם ואתם תחרישון: <u>שמות פרק יז</u></p>
<p>⁵Shemot Chapter 17 Verse 9 When Pharaoh let the people leave, God did not lead them along the Philistine Highway, although it was the shorter route. God's consideration was that if the people encountered armed resistance, they would lose heart and return to Egypt.</p>	<p>(ט) ויאמר משה אל יהושע בחר לנו אנשים וצא הלחם בעמלק מחר אנכי נצב על ראש הגבעה ומטה האלהים בידי: <u>שמות פרק כד</u></p>
<p>⁶Shemot Chapter 34 Verse 16 The <i>glory of G-d</i> settled on Mount Sinai. For six days <i>the cloud covered</i> the mountain, and on the seventh day G-d called to Moses from within the cloud.</p>	<p>(טז) וישכן כבוד ה' על הר סיני ויכסהו הענן ששת ימים ויקרא אל משה ביום השביעי מתוך הענן: <u>שמות פרק מ</u></p>
<p>⁷Shemot Chapter 40 Verse 34 Then <i>the cloud covered</i> the Tent of Meeting, and the <i>glory of G-d</i> filled the tabernacle.</p>	<p>(לד) ויכס הענן את אהל מועד וכבוד ה' מלא את המשכן: <u>תלמוד בבלי מסכת גיטין דף ס עמוד ב</u></p>
<p>⁸Babylonian Talmud Masechet Gittin 60b R. Jochanan said: G-d made a covenant with Israel only for the sake of the Oral Law, as it says [in the context of the second tablets]: "For by the mouth [a/ p] of these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel"</p>	<p>א"ר יוחנן: לא כרת הקב"ה ברית עם ישראל אלא בשביל דברים שבעל פה, שנאמר: +שמות ל"ד+ כי על פי הדברים האלה כרתי אתך ברית ואת ישראל.</p>

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<p>⁹Babylonian Talmud Masechet Temurah 16a R. Judah said in the name of Shmuel: Three thousand traditional laws [<i>halakhot</i>, rules belonging to the Oral Law] were forgotten during the period of mourning for Moses. They [the Israelites] said to Joshua: “Ask” (through <i>ruach hakodesh</i>, the holy spirit). Joshua replied, “It is not in heaven.” They said to Samuel, “Ask.” He replied, “These are the commandments – implying that no prophet has the right to introduce anything new.”</p>	<p><u>תלמוד בבלי מסכת תמורה דף טז עמוד א</u> אמר רב יהודה אמר שמואל: שלשת אלפים הלכות נשתכחו בימי אבלו של משה. אמרו לו ליהושע שאל! א"ל: +דברים ל' + לא בשמים היא. אמרו לו לשמואל שאל! אמר להם: אלה המצות - שאין הנביא רשאי לחדש דבר מעתה.</p>
<p>¹⁰Rambam Introduction to the Mishnah If a thousand prophets of the stature of Elijah and Elisha were to give one interpretation of a verse, and one thousand and one sages were to offer a different interpretation, we follow the majority: the law is in accordance with the thousand-and-one sages and not in accordance with the thousand prophets.</p>	<p><u>רמב"ם, הקדמה למשנה</u> . . . אלא אלף נביאים, כולם כאליהו ואלישע, אם יפרשו פרוש, ואלף חכמים וחכם יפרשו היפך זה, אחרי רבים להטות, והלכה כדברי אלף חכמים וחכם, לא כדברי אלף הנביאים הגדולים.</p>
<p>¹¹Devarim Chapter 5 Verse 18 God spoke these words in a loud voice to your entire assembly from the mountain, out of the fire, cloud and mist, but He added no more. He wrote [these words] on two stone tablets, and [later] gave them to me.</p>	<p><u>דברים פרק ה</u> (יח) את הדברים האלה דבר ה' אל כל קהלכם בהר מתוך האש הענן והערפל קול גדול ולא יסף ויכתבם על שני לוחות אבנים ויתנם אלי:</p>
<p>¹²Shemot Chapter 34 Verse 19 When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of Testimony in his hands, he was unaware that his <i>face was radiant</i> because he had spoken with G-d.</p>	<p><u>שמות פרק לד</u> (כט) ויהי ברדת משה מהר סיני ושני לוחות העדת ביד משה ברדתו מן ההר ומשה לא ידע כי קרן עור פניו בדברו אתו:</p>