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Broken Tablets: A Study Guide for Shavuot

Rabbi Mishael Zion | [Text and the City](#) | Shavuot / Behaalotcha 2014

Symbols, metaphors and old texts lay strewn around the warehouses of culture, waiting to be picked up again, turned useful, regain value. For one night in the Jewish calendar, the warehouse becomes the focus: Tikkun Leil Shavuot. We stay up all night in the flea market treasure hunt which is Jewish text study. As for me, each year I find myself returning to the stall which houses texts about one metaphor: the Broken Tablets. A fitting image for our time, on many levels. For this Shavuot, I collected my favorite findings on this metaphor in the format of a study guide. I humbly offer it here, to adorn your Shavuot learning. Since I couldn't help myself, I added my own play-by-play commentary on these texts, and a few brief words about learning on Shavuot, which appear below. Download the study guide in [printable pdf format](#) or [read them online](#).

Broken Tablets, Play-by-play



Whatever happened to the Broken Tablets, those shards which Moshe resoundingly left strewn at the bottom of Mount Sinai? Reminders of the sweaty idolatrous sin which broke up God's honeymoon with the Jewish people, perhaps they are best left to be covered by the sands of Sinai. Those First Tablets, which were "written by the finger of God" left unmentioned for two thousand years. Until one Talmudic Rabbi, Rav Yosef, picks them up and resets their place in Jewish tradition.

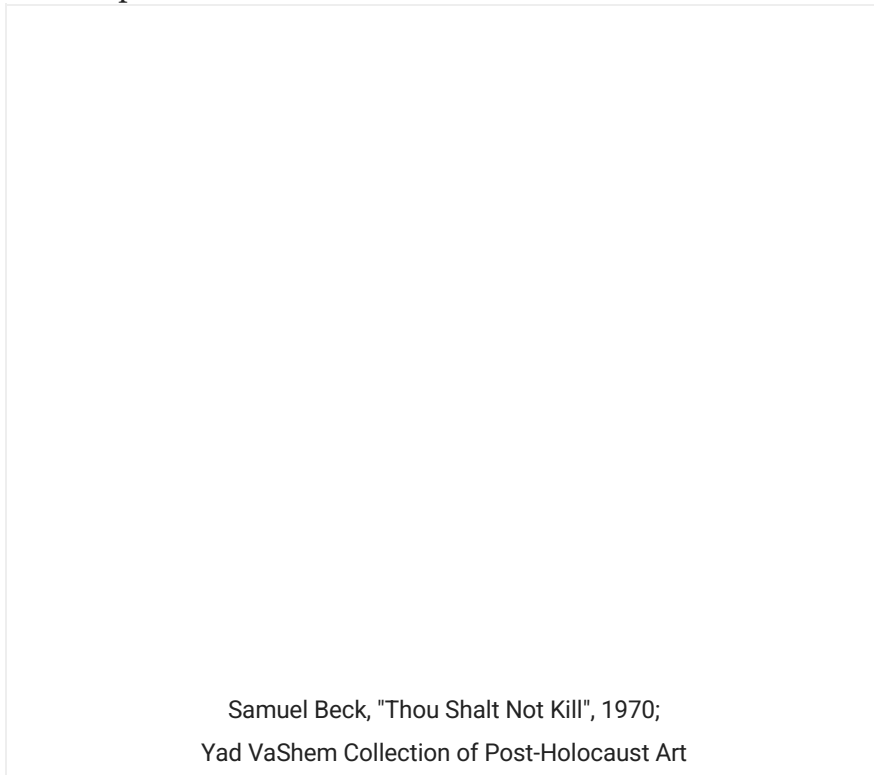
"The Tablets AND the Broken Tablets are placed in the ark" innovates **Rav Yosef** (in Bava Batra 14b). Does he intend for us to carry the First Tablets as eternal signs of our guilt and adultery at the Golden Calf, as Augustine would have it? Or perhaps the shards of Holiness regain similar status to Whole Holiness. Or perhaps, that which was created by Human Hand (the second tablets), carries the same centrality as that created by Divine Hands. Or perhaps, that which was broken so long ago, we cannot let go of it. We must continue to carry it around with us, for better or for worse.

The Talmud in **Menahot** turns this teaching in a statement about human dignity, and the dignity of scholarship: *"Rav Yosef taught that ... The Tablets and the broken tablets are placed in the ark. From here we learn that a scholar who has forgotten his learning with time, we do not treat disrespectfully."* (Menahot 99a) The sign of sin becomes the lesson of dignity. We must treat the broken person, the Alzheimered scholar, the aging, broken or lost among us – with the same dignity and honor with which we treat those who are considered whole. Both have equal value in Holy Ark.

Eliyahu de Vidash comes out of Kabbalistic Tsfat with a new understanding. *"The human heart is the Ark, thus a person's heart must be full of Torah but simultaneously be a Broken Heart, a beaten heart. Only thus can it serve as a home for the Divine Presence. For She only dwells in broken vessels."* (Reshit Hokhma).

The Ark becomes the Heart, and theology and history become psychology. More importantly, the Tablets aren't broken, Divinity is. And is we are to becoming a dwelling

place for Her, we too much be of the Broken Vessels. The post hoc becomes aspirational, and the imperfect – divine.



Samuel Beck, "Thou Shalt Not Kill", 1970;
Yad VaShem Collection of Post-Holocaust Art

And then Faith breaks. Modernity, Enlightenment, or simply life. For the **Hasidic Reb Natan of Nemirov**, the Broken Tablets are a necessary part of the process: *“Through broken tablets, i.e. broken faith, by means of that brokenness itself the faith returns and amends itself, which is the second tablets.”* The First Tablets are broken, so broken. But that is not the end of the story. They are a crucial part of the path towards the creation of Second Tablets, Second Naivete. There is no such thing as unbroken faith, just as there is no such thing as unbroken love. By grasping the brokenness the new tablets can be achieved. Tikkun requires some breakage.

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Brief words about learning on Shavuot

On this night we don't just do any learning, says the Zohar, rather the learning must be that of “beading”, חריטה, which in the Zohar is usually described with a different Hebrew word – *Tikkun* (lit. preparing, fixing). The study companions become a group of bridesmaids, lovingly and joyfully preparing the adornments for the princess on the night before she is to enter to wed the King. Lovingly they bead together texts one to the other. From words of Torah to the Prophets, from the Prophets to the Talmud, from the Talmud to the realm of the Hidden

– the skilled jeweler quickly assembles a radiant necklace. It is with such *hidushim*, innovations, and *tikunim*, prepared adornments, that the bride enters her Shavuot bridal canopy. And in this way the Torah is given anew each year, each day. As long as we reassemble these jewels and bead them together in myriad ways, as long as we do so in a way which aims to please the Bride and Groom, then we are playing our role in the mystical drama which is the Cosmos.

Broken Tablets: A Study Guide for Shavuot

Compiled and translated by Rabbi Mishael Zion, Bronfman Fellowships, Shavuot 2014

A. DEUTERONOMY 10:1-4

1 At that time the LORD said unto me: 'Hew thee two tables of stone like unto the first, and come up unto Me into the mount; and make thee an ark of wood.

א בַּעַת הַהוּא אָמַר יְהוָה אֵלַי, כְּפֹסֶל-לָךְ
שְׁנֵי-לוּחֹת אֲבָנִים כְּרֵאשֵׁינִים, וְעֹלָה אֵלַי,
הַהָרָה; וַעֲשִׂיתָ לָךְ, אֲרוֹן עֵץ.

2 And I will write on the tablets which you smashed, and place them in the ark.'

ב וְאָכַתְבָּ, עַל-הַלְחָת, אֶת-הַדְּבָרִים, אֲשֶׁר
הָיוּ עַל-הַלְחָת הַרְאשֵׁינִים אֲשֶׁר שִׁבַרְתָּ;
וְשִׁמְתָם, בְּאֲרוֹן.

3 So I made an ark of acacia-wood, and hewed two tables of stone like unto the first, and went up into the mount, having the two tables in my hand.

ג וַאֲעֲשֶׂה אֲרוֹן עֲצֵי שִׁטִּים, וְאֶפְסַל שְׁנֵי-
לְחֹת אֲבָנִים כְּרֵאשֵׁינִים; וַאֲעַל הַהָרָה, וְשִׁנִּי
הַלְחָת בְּיָדִי.

4 And He wrote on the tables according to the first writing, the ten words, which the LORD spoke unto you in the mount out of the midst of the fire in the day of the assembly; and the LORD gave them unto me.

ד וַיִּכְתֹּב עַל-הַלְחָת כַּמְּקָתֵב הַרְאשׁוֹן, אֶת
עֲשָׂרַת הַדְּבָרִים, אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יְהוָה אֵלֵיכֶם
בְּהָר מִתּוֹךְ הָאֵשׁ, בְּיוֹם הַקָּהָל; וַיִּתְּנֵם
יְהוָה, אֵלַי.

B. TALMUD BAVLI BAVA BATRA 14B

Rav Yosef taught: “*The tablets which you broke and place them in the ark*” – this teaches that the Tablets and the broken tablets are placed in the ark.

תני רב יוסף: “אשר שברת ושמתם” - מלמד שהלוחות ושברי לוחות מונחין בארון [...]

תלמוד בבלי בבא בתרא יד ע”א-ע”ב

C. TALMUD BAVLI MENAHOT 99A

Rav Yosef taught: “*The tablets which you broke and place them in the ark*” – this teaches that the Tablets and the broken tablets are placed in the ark.

From here we learn that a scholar who has forgotten his learning out of force, we do not treat him disrespectfully.

”אשר שברת ושמתם בארון” תני רב יוסף : מלמד שהלוחות ושברי לוחות מונחין בארון, מכאן לתלמיד חכם ששכח תלמודו מחמת אונסו שאין נוהגין בו מנהג בזיון. תלמוד בבלי מסכת מנחות דף צט/א

D. RESHIT HOKHMA, R. ELIYAHU DEVIDASH, GATE OF HOLINESS 7; 16TH C KABBALISTIC MORAL TOME

The Zohar teaches that the human heart is the Ark. And it is known that in the Ark were stored both the Tablets and the Broken Tablets. Similarly, a person’s heart must be full of Torah... and similarly, a person’s heart must be a broken heart, a beaten heart, so that it can serve as a home for the Shekhina. For the Shekhina [divine presence] only dwells in broken vessels, which are the poor, whose heart is a broken and beaten heart. And whoever has a haughty heart propels the Shekhina from him, as it says “God detests those of haughty hearts”.

ועוד נלמוד מדברי הרשב”י שאמר שכיס הלב הוא הארון, ונודע הוא שבתוך הארון היו הלוחות ושברי לוחות, כן ראוי שיהיה לבו מלא תורה... וכנגד שברי לוחות צריך שיהיה לבו לב נשבר ונדכה שיהיה מכוון לשכינה, שהשכינה מושבה הם מאנין תבירין דילה [=כלים שבורים שלה], והם העניים שלכם לב נשבר ונדכה, ומי שלבו מתגאה עליו דוחה השכינה מעליו שנאמר תועבת ה' כל גבה לב.

ספר ראשית חכמה - שער הקדושה - פרק שביעי

E. R. NATAN OF NEMIROV, LIKKUTEI HALAKHOT, 19TH CENTURY HASSID, STUDENT OF REB NACHMAN OF BRESLOV, SHABBAT 6

And this is the meaning of the verse “Which you broke and place in the Ark”, about which our Sages said: “the Tablets and the Broken Tablets are placed in the Ark”. By means of the aspect of broken tablets, broken faith, by means of that brokenness itself the faith returns and amends itself, which is the second tablets.

Because thanks to the existence of a shard of the broken faith, by keeping that shard he is fulfilling the advice of the faith itself which was broken – and he can return and repair that faith which is the aspect of receiving second tablets.

וזהו בחינת אשר שברת ושמתם בארון ואמרו חכמנו זכרונם לברכה, לוחות ושברי לוחות מנחים בארון. הינו על - ידי בחינת שברי לוחות בחינת אמונה השבורה, על - ידי - זה בעצמה חזר ונתתקן האמונה מחדש שהם בחינת הלוחות שניות, בבחינת שקל פסקא שדא להו וכו', כי על - ידי שנשאר בו איזה נקודה מהאמונה השבורה על - ידי - זה מקיים העצה של חכמים שנשברה אמונתם אצלו וחוזר ומתקן האמונה שהיא בחינת קבלת לוחות שניות. כי כל קבלת התורה עומדת על אמונה, כמו שכתוב, כל מצותיך אמונה, וכמו שכתוב, בא חבוקק והעמידן על אמונה וכו' הינו כנ"ל :

ספר ליקוטי הלכות - הלכות שבת הלכה ו

F. R. YITZHAK ARAMA, AKEIDAT YITZHAK, 15TH CENTURY SPAIN

Why didn't God sculpt the second tablets, the way He sculpted the first ones? Because that which is totally Divine is not sustainable in the hands of humans. Therefore the first tablets, which were "made by God and written by God", were not sustainable. Therefore God told Moses "sculpt [the second Tablets] for yourself" – you make them and I will shape them, thus retaining both the shape and image of the first ones, but these will be sustainable.

למה לא פסלם הקדוש ברוך הוא בעצמו – כראשונים? לפי שהדברים האלוהיים בהחלט אין להם קיום אצל בני אדם, לפיכך לא נתקיימו הלוחות הראשונים ש"הלוחות מעשה אלוהים המה והמכתב מכתב אלוהים הוא" (ל"ב ט"ז), לכן "פסל לך" ועשה אתה את גופן ואני אתן את צורתן. ועם זה יהיו מדמותן וצלמם ויתקיימו אצלם.