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What Mean These Stones?

By Rabbi Joshua (meaningfully known as The Hoffer) Hoffman

In this week's parsha, we are told that when Moshe descended from Mt. Sinai and saw the people worshipping the golden calf, he cast the tablets of the Torah he had received from God to the ground and shattered them to pieces. Eventually he went back to Mt. Sinai and received a second set of tablets that he placed in the ark and that lasted permanently. What happened to the first set of tablets after they were broken? The rabbis tell us that they were also placed in an ark. Although there is a dispute about this among the rabbis, according to one opinion, they were placed in the same ark together with the second set. On its face, this opinion appears a bit strange. What purpose did these shattered pieces of stone serve? Why preserve the memory of that sad event? Apparently, there was some message to the people that the preservation of the broken tablets carried. What, then, was that message? .

The Talmud in tractate Berachos tells us that we must honor an elderly Torah scholar, even if he has forgotten his learning. Just as the pieces of the shattered tablets were honored by being kept in the ark, so too must we honor this man who contains within him the remnants of the Torah he has studied. Torah study is more than a mere intellectual exercise, although the intellect does play a very important role in the process. A true Torah scholar is purified through his learning. His entire life is changed, and this change remains with him even when the specific details of what he has learned have become vague in his mind. In a similar way, perhaps, the shattered pieces of the tablets served to remind the nation of the original revelation at Mt. Sinai and the spiritual height they attained at that time. Although they experienced a fall from this height with the incident of the golden calf, remnants of that height remained within them, waiting to be developed.

It is interesting to note that there is a difference of opinion between Rav Saadia Gaon and Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra concerning the relative value of the two sets of tablets. Ibn Ezra, in his longer commentary to our parsha (Shemos, 34, 1), cites Rav Saadia as enumerating seven reasons why the second set was on a higher level than the first. He says, for example, that through the second tablets, a light emerged from Moshe's brow. This would seem to indicate that Moshe reached a higher spiritual level through the second tablets. The nation, it would seem, also rose to a higher level as a result, because they were able to perceive this light as Moshe taught Torah to them. Ibn Ezra himself, however, disagrees with Rav Saadia Gaon. He argues that the first tablets were written by God, while the second were written by Moshe, so how could the second set possibly be on a higher level than the first? Following Ibn Ezra's opinion, it is possible that the shattered pieces of the first set were kept in the ark to indicate to the people that they still had some connection to the first tablets, as we have argued based on the gemara in Berachos. This approach is elaborated upon at great length by Rabbi Gedaliah Schorr in his work Ohr Gedaliahu on our parsha.

Although Rav Saadia Gaon's opinion is rejected by Ibn Ezra, it is advocated by Rabbi Naphtali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, the Netziv, in his commentary Ha'amek Davar to parshas Eikev. He notes that according to the Palestinian Talmud, the second set of tablets set the groundwork for the study of the oral law. Whereas through the first set of tablets the oral was, somehow, readily discernible from within the words etched in stone, the second set of tablets necessitated an intense intellectual input in order to derive the oral law from within it. Although Rabbi Schorr also notes this difference, he takes it as an indication that the second set was on a lower level than the first. The Netziv, however, marshals proof that for this very reason the second set of tablets was on a higher level. The Midrash Rabbah, he notes, cites the verse "It is good for me that I have suffered" as referring to the second tablets, which Moshe had to suffer for before he received them, but which yielded the reward of many aspects of Torah learning gained through the effort. The fact that Moshe himself wrote the tablets, says the Netziv, is emblematic of the effort involved in learning the oral law. Thus, the very argument used by Ibn Ezra to indicate that the first tablets were on a higher level is used by the Netziv to show that the second tablets were on a higher level, as Rav Saadia maintained, albeit for different reasons.

Following the approach of Rav Saadia Gaon and the Netziv, the shattered pieces of stone kept in the ark carry a very profound message for all of us. It was only through the shattering of the first set of tablets that Moshe, and the nation with him, attained a higher spiritual and intellectual level. Keeping the broken tablets in the ark together with the second, complete ones teaches us that a broken relationship can lead to a deeper one, if the proper effort is applied. This holds true in regard to our relationship with God as well as our relationship with our fellow man. A development that may appear, at first, tragic and irreparable can, in the end, be the touchstone for vistas previously unseen. Perhaps it was with this in mind that, when Moshe shattered the first set of tablets, God told him, as the rabbis say, 'yeyasher kochacha sheshibarta,' meaning, literally, 'your strength shall be straightened by having broken them,' or, loosely, 'more power to you.' Thus, the seemingly tragic event of the shattering of the first tablets carried within it the seeds of a future blessing.