

You break it, you bought it

Student Rabbi Gabriel Webber

~~~~~  
God said to [Moses]: “Ah! Moses, you have vented your anger [by destroying] the tablets of the covenant. Would you like Me to vent My anger [by destroying things]? You will see that the world could not endure even one hour.”

Moses replied: “What is there that I can do?”

God replied: “I will impose a penalty on you. You smashed them so you can replace them.”

This is the meaning of that which is written in Exodus 34:1: “Hew for yourself two Tablets of Stone [like the first].”

— *Deuteronomy Rabbah 3:14*  
~~~~~

“You break it, you bought it.”

That was, essentially, what God had said to Moses when he smashed the of Tablets of the Law. Now he sat outside the camp, chisel in hand, trying to process.

It was the lack of anger that had been most disconcerting. God had asked, “Would you like Me to vent my anger too?” and, if Moses was honest, the answer was yes. Anger was what he expected. There was comfort in the familiar. Anger would be a just punishment for his transgression. There was comfort in justice.

As soon as he'd felt the hard stone edges leaving his grasp, Moses had come to his senses. It was too late by then, of course, but he knew that there would be a price to pay. And ever since, he had been waiting for God's decision. The waiting was the most disconcerting. Or the lack of anger. One of those.

It was three days before God summoned him to the innermost recess of the Tent of Meeting. When he arrived, the Divine Presence waited until he was sitting cross-legged on the ground before manifesting itself to him.

“My tablets.”

“God...”

“My Tablets, Moses. You smashed them.”

“God...”

“It's not the Tablets themselves that I mind about, you understand. There's no shortage of stone and inscribing words onto them does not tax Me overmuch. I do mind a bit about the words. They're replaceable because I know them and will never forget them, but even so, what sort of way is that to treat My words? This is a Code of Law for you to live by, and if you cannot even preserve the words of the Law, how can you preserve the Law itself?”

“God...”

“But what I do mind about is that you gave yourself a luxury. As a leader, you're entitled to some luxuries above those of the Israelites. You work hard and are entitled to recompense. With that, I have no problem. But by destroying the Tablets, you allowed yourself a luxury above those of Myself. You gave in to your anger and started smashing things.”

“God...”

“Do you know how much I yearn to give in to My anger and start smashing things? But I cannot. When you smashed My Tablets of Stone, you did wrong, but it wasn't the end of the world. The

stone can be replaced and so can the words. But what would I smash? Humankind, that is what. Humankind is in My hand like stone in the hand of a stonemason, to be held aloft or crushed at will. And should I crush a human being, one of your own flock, they cannot be replaced. I cannot simply hew another one and inscribe them the same way. The Tablets were not unique, but each and every living being in My Creation is unique. For you, letting off steam may be cathartic. For Me, it would be destructive for My creatures – terminally so.”

“God...”

“You let off steam, Moses. How did it feel?”

“God...”

“And understand me, I am not asking how you *do* feel. Not how you feel now. I ask how it *did* feel, at the time.”

“God...”

“I’m jealous, Moses. You assume I’m omnipotent, and so I am, up to a point. But I have to limit My own powers or else the world could not stand. I have to practice self-denial to ensure the survival of My Creation. And you, Moses... you do not practice self-denial. You had an impulse; you acted on it. No thought, no reflection, no contemplation, no weighing up of the likely consequences and their pros and cons. I can never do that. That can never be Me.”

“God...”

“Would you *like* Me to vent my anger too?”

“God...”

“Because let Me tell you this: I would. I would like to. I can’t. But you did. So where do we go from here?”

“God...”

Moses waited for another interruption, but it never came. He lifted his tearstained face towards the Divine Presence. The assault of God’s confession had been wearying. The Eternal One might not realise it, but apparently there was a place for catharsis in the Divine psyche after all. God had unburdened Himself.

The Divine Presence looked expectantly at him. Reluctantly, Moses tore his mind from analysing the multitude of issues just raised by the admission that omnipotence was a myth, and focussed it on the question of the moment: “So where do we go from here?”

But he didn’t know. He was spent.

“What *is there* that I can do?” he asked resignedly. The Tablets were already broken. Moses could not turn back from what he had done. Only God could create a second set of Tablets of the Law. Was that to be the Divine plan?

“Let the punishment fit the crime,” declared the Divine Presence. “You took a liberty that is not available to Me. You can spend a while in My shoes. I have to create; so you can create too. I have tried to create exact replicas of the destroyed, to restore the world to an ideal state; so you can try too. You smashed the first set of Tablets; now you can replace them. Hew for yourself two Tablets of Stone like the first. I’ll wait.”

Moses was no mason. Hewing Tablets was no easy task.

But there was a bigger problem.

Moses could not remember what the first Tablets had looked like. He painstakingly fashioned two huge, square tablets. It took him three weeks of work from dawn to dusk. They were not quite right. He couldn't put his finger on it, but they were not quite the same as they had been.

Two more tablets. Still not quite right.

Two more. Still not quite right.

After each failure, he glanced towards the Tent of Meeting, sighed, and picked up his chisel.

Reflections on the story

The story of Moses creating the second set of Tablets of Stone is read on Yom Kippur (Exodus 33:12-34:9) because it ends with Moses begging God, "Pardon our iniquity and our sin."

But in fact, what could be a better metaphor for teshuvah, for repentance, than the biblical story of Moses having to repair the consequences of his wrongdoing and replace the Law that he smashed? The Law that he smashed, indeed, both physically and figuratively.

This short midrash contains just one tiny line from Moses: "What is there that I can do?" The 'is there' could be seen as adding a petulant note – 'You know full well that there's nothing I can do, but go on, surprise me!' – but I prefer to see it as genuine and helpless. With those few words, Moses realises that what he's done is irreversible.

The rest of the midrash is about God, and ultimately about helplessness. Moses was expecting anger, but was surprised by Divine Patience – much as we are every Day of Atonement after a year of wrongdoing and transgressions. God certainly reprimands Moses, but cannot possibly be reprimanding him for failing to live up to God's own standards: that would be an impossible high standard, and no sensible deity would apply it. So then God's question, "Would you like Me to vent My anger?" has to be tinged with resentment. When Moses vents his anger, there is a higher Power to put things right. God has no higher power to correct mistakes and misjudgements; God has to get things right first time, and, like an author who writes characters with lives far more interesting than her own, God is envious.

The famous High Holy Day piyyut *Like clay in the hand of the potter...* (which includes a verse about stone, surely no coincidence) seems to be telling us about God's omnipotence. But there is another side to it as well: it is possible to do irreversible things with clay, and it is possible for God to do irreversible things with humankind.

The 'penalty' eventually imposed on Moses does not seem especially penal. Pragmatic and almost parental, it is the most basic of punishments: you break it, you bought it. You damage it, you replace it. You smash the window, you won't be getting your deposit back. Just as on Yom Kippur we fast to give ourselves a glimpse of our eternal home, with this penalty God gave Moses a glimpse into the life of an anguished deity. When God vents anger, the consequences can be impossible to repair. So God can't vent anger. When humans vent anger, though, God will work with us to put things right.

We know that Moses eventually succeeded in creating a second set of Tablets. But I like the idea that it took him many attempts, and I like the idea that he never *quite* got them perfect. We can do teshuvah, we can make repentance, but it takes time and effort and it is, perforce, imperfect. It is, by far, better not to vent our anger, not to give in to our evil instinct, in the first place; but when we do – and we will, because we can never live up to God's miraculous standard of self-control – we have to make a second set of Tablets of Stone... as closely as possible like the first.


GW 29.09.19

Inspired by Ruth Calderon's A Bride for One Night: Talmud tales (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2014) and given as an Erev Rosh Hashanah sermon, [5780] GW Sermon 1, to the Southport and District Reform Synagogue – check against delivery.