

Lesson

5

THE BROKEN TABLETS

Can it be that the greatest divine revelation in human history failed to communicate its most basic message? Examining the dynamics behind the story of the Golden Calf and the Broken Tablets, we gain insight into some of the foundational underpinnings of the Jewish faith. What are “miracles” and “divine revelations,” and what purpose do they serve? How was the Torah communicated to us, and why is so much of it open to human interpretation? And on a personal level: What should we do with the “broken pieces” of our past failures?



Depiction of Moses receiving the Torah on Mount Sinai, from the *Braginsky Leipnik Haggadah* (detail), copied and decorated by Joseph ben David of Leipnik, 1739. (The Braginsky Collection)

TEXT 1

EXODUS 19:1-20:15, 24:1-18, AND 31:18 (††)

ARRIVAL AT MOUNT SINAI (19:1-2)

1 In the third month of the Children of Israel's exodus
 2 from the land of Egypt;
 3 on this day, they arrived in the Sinai Desert . . .
 4 and Israel encamped there, opposite the mountain.

ISRAEL WILL BE G-D'S CHOSEN PEOPLE (19:3-6)

5 Moses ascended to G-d;
 6 and G-d called to him from the mountain, to say:
 7 "So shall you say to the House of Jacob
 8 and tell the Children of Israel:
 9 'You have seen what I did to Egypt;
 10 I carried you on the wings of eagles
 11 and brought you to Me.
 12 And now, if you will listen to My voice
 13 and keep My covenant
 14 you will be My own treasure
 15 from among all peoples. . . .
 16 You will be to Me a kingdom of priests
 17 and a holy nation.' . . ."

WE EXPRESS OUR DESIRE TO RECEIVE THE TORAH (19:7-8)

18 Moses came and called the elders of Israel
 19 and he placed before them all these words. . . .

20 And all the people replied in unison and they said:

21 “All that G-d has spoken we will do!” . . .

G-D APPEARS ON MOUNT SINAI (19:16–20)

22 It was on the third day, when it was morning

23 there were thunder and lightning

24 and a thick cloud upon the mountain

25 and the sound of the *shofar*, exceedingly strong. . . .

26 Moses brought the people out from the camp toward G-d

27 and they stood beneath the mountain. . . .

28 G-d descended upon Mount Sinai

29 to the top of the mountain. . . .

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS (20:1–14)

30 G-d spoke all these words, to say:

31 “I am G-d your G-d

32 who took you out from the land of Egypt

33 from the house of slavery.

34 Do not have any other gods before Me.

35 Do not make for yourselves a graven form

36 or an image of anything in the heaven above or on the earth below. . . .

37 Do not bow to them and do not serve them. . . .

38 Do not take the name of G-d your G-d in vain. . . .

39 Remember the Sabbath day to sanctify it. . . .

40 Honor your father and your mother. . . .

41 Do not murder.

- 42 Do not commit adultery.
 43 Do not steal.
 44 Do not bear false witness against your fellow.
 45 Do not covet . . . anything that is your fellow's."

SIGHTS AND SOUNDS (20:15)

- 46 And all the people saw the sounds and the torches
 47 and the sound of the *shofar* and the smoking mountain;
 48 and the people saw and trembled
 49 and they stood from afar. . . .

MOSES ASCENDS THE MOUNTAIN FOR FORTY DAYS (24:1-18)

- 50 And to Moses He said: "Come up to G-d. . . ."
 51 Moses entered within the cloud
 52 and he ascended the mountain;
 53 and Moses was on the mountain
 54 forty days and forty nights. . . .

THE FIRST TABLETS (31:18)


- 55 When He had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai
 56 He gave to Moses the two Tablets of the Testament:
 57 tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of G-d.



QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

If you had to name one event that changed the course of human history more than any other, what event would that be?

TEXT 2

DEUTERONOMY 4:32–33, 35 

כִּי שָׁאַל נָא לְיָמִים רִאשׁוֹנִים אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ לְפָנֶיךָ לְמִן הַיּוֹם אֲשֶׁר בָּרָא אֱלֹקִים
אָדָם עַל הָאָרֶץ וּלְמִקְצֵה הַשָּׁמַיִם וְעַד קְצֵה הַשָּׁמַיִם הִנְהִיָּה כְּדַבֵּר הַגְּדוֹל
הַזֶּה אוֹ הַנְּשֻׁמָּע כְּמוֹהוּ. הִשְׁמַע עִם קוֹל אֱלֹקִים מְדַבֵּר מִתּוֹךְ הָאֵשׁ כְּאֲשֶׁר
שָׁמַעְתָּ אֶתְּהָ וַיְחִי . . .

אֶתְּהָ הִרְאֵתָ לְדַעַת כִּי ה' הוּא הָאֱלֹקִים אֵין עוֹד מִלְּבָדוֹ.

Ask, now, after the early days that came before you, from the day that G-d created man upon the earth, and from one end of the heavens to the other: Has there ever been the likes of this great thing, or has anything like it been heard? Has a people heard the voice of G-d speaking from within the fire, as you heard, and lived? . . .

You were made to see to know that G-d is the G-d; there is none else besides Him.

TEXT 3

RABBI YEHUDAH HALEVI, *THE KUZARI* 4:11 

לא כן מִשֶׁה עָלְיוֹ הַשְּׁלוֹם הַמְּנַהֵיג הָרֵאשׁוֹן. הוּא הֵבִיא אֶת כָּל הָעָם אֶל
מַעֲמַד הַר סִינַי לְמַעַן יֵרְאוּ בְּעֵינֵיהֶם, אִישׁ כְּפִי יִכְלְתוּ, אֶת הָאוֹר אֲשֶׁר
רָאָה הוּא . . . כְּמוֹ שֶׁאָמַר הַפְּתוּב "וַיֵּרְאוּ אֶת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל" . . . וְכָל אֱלֹהֵי
הָעִידוֹ אִישׁ בְּפָנָיו רָעָהוּ עַל שִׂרְאוֹ וְעַל שִׁשְׁמָעוֹ. וְכִךְ הִרְחִיק מִלֵּב הָאָמָה
הַחֲשָׁד הָרַע: שֶׁמָּא אֵין זֹאת כִּי אִם טַעֲנַת יְחִידִים הַמְתַּפְּאָרִים כִּי נִגְלְתָה
אֲלֵיהֶם נְבוּאָה? כִּי לֹא תִתְכַּן כָּל קְנוּנְיָה בְּפָנָיו הַמוֹנִים.

Moses, the first [Jewish] leader, was not like them [the founders of other religions]. He brought the entire people to stand at Mount Sinai, for them to see with their own eyes, each in accordance with their ability, the revelation that he saw. . . . As the verse states (EXODUS 24:10), "They saw the G-d of Israel." . . . They all could affirm to each other what they saw and heard. This removed from the heart of the nation the terrible suspicion: Perhaps all of this is just the claim of a few individuals that prophecy came to them? For it is not possible to create a conspiracy in full sight of the masses.



RABBI YEHUDAH HALEVI
C. 1075–1141

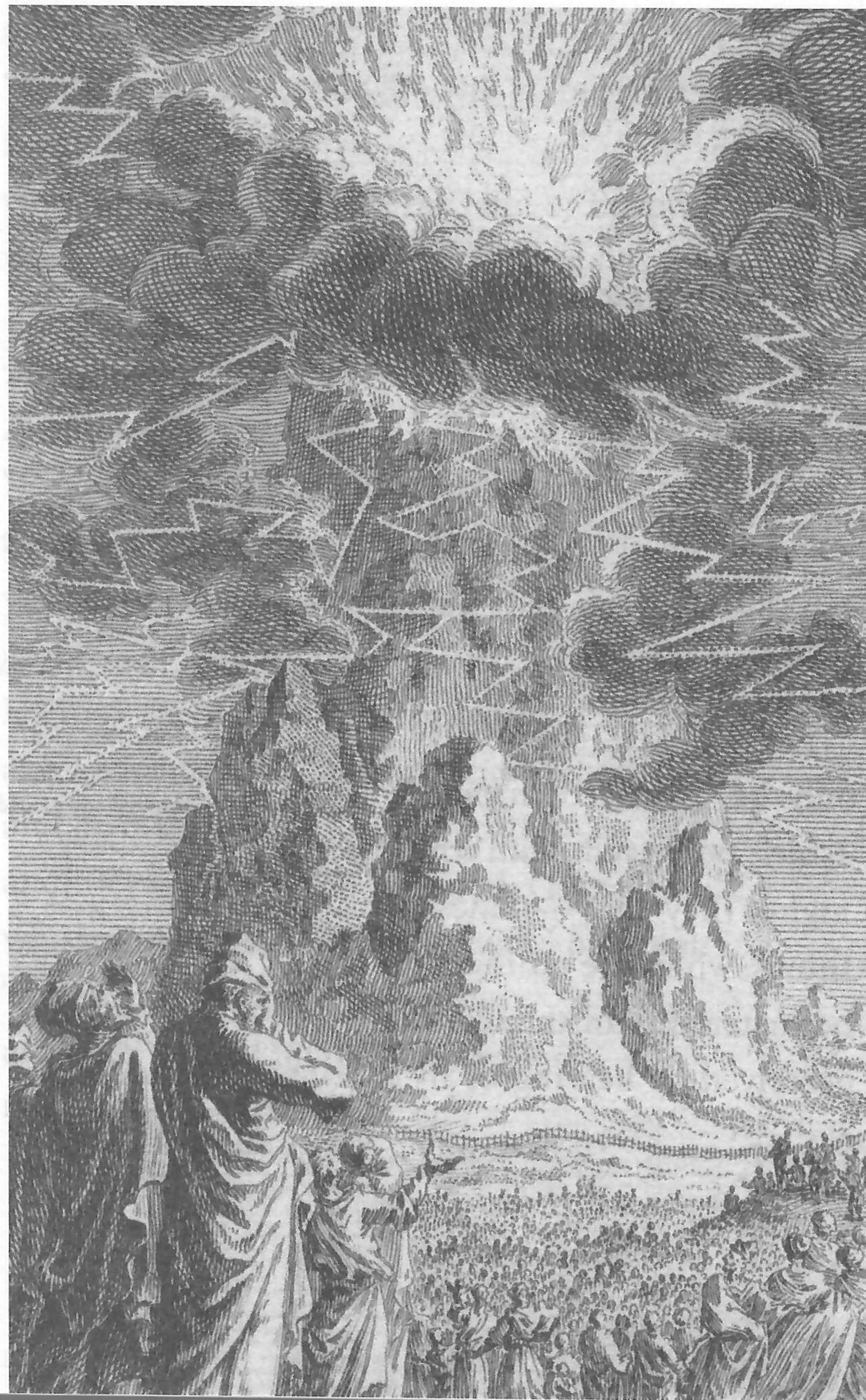
Noted author, physician, and poet. Rabbi Yehudah Halevi is best known as the author of the *Kuzari*, a philosophical work, written in the form of a discussion between a Jew, a Christian, and a Muslim before the King of the Khazars. In addition to the *Kuzari*, he wrote thousands of poems, of which only a few hundred survive today.

TEXT 4

MECHILTA, EXODUS 20:15 

רוֹאִין אֶת הַנִּשְׁמָע וְשׁוֹמְעִין אֶת הַנִּרְאָה.

They saw what is heard, and they heard what is seen.



MECHILTA

A halachic Midrash to Exodus. Midrash is the designation of a particular genre of rabbinic literature usually forming a running commentary on specific books of the Bible. The name “*Mechilta*” means “rule” and was given to this Midrash because its comments and explanations are based on fixed rules of exegesis. This work is often attributed to Rabbi Yishmael ben Elisha, a contemporary of Rabbi Akiva, though there are some references to later sages in this work.

Wetgeving op de Berg Sinai
(*Legislation on Mt. Sinai*), Jan Luyken, etching, Amsterdam, 1712. (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam)



QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

Which is better, the movie or the book? What are the differences between “seeing” something and “hearing/understanding” it?

TEXT 5

THE REBBE, RABBI MENACHEM MENDEL SCHNEERSON,
LIKUTEI SICHOT (HEBREW EDITION) 6, P. 128 (יג)

אֶת זֹאת חִידַשׁ מִתֵּן תּוֹרָה—“רוֹאִין אֶת הַנִּשְׁמָע וְשׁוֹמְעִין אֶת הַנִּרְאָה.”
 הַ“נִּשְׁמָע,” שְׁאֶפְשֵׁר לְקַבֵּלוֹ רַק עַל יְדֵי שְׁמִיעָה - רוֹחֲנִיּוֹת, אֶלְקוֹת - אוֹתוֹ
 קִבְּלוּ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּנֹדְאוֹת וּבְאוֹפֵן מוֹחָשִׁי שֶׁל רְאִיָּה. הֵם רָאוּ אֶלְקוֹת.
 וְהַדְּבָרִים הַגְּשָׁמִיִּים, שֶׁהָיוּ תָמִיד בְּבַחֲיִנַת “נִרְאָה,” הָיוּ אֶצְלָם אַז בְּאוֹפֵן
 שֶׁל “שׁוֹמְעִין”—כְּדַבֵּר שְׁנִקְלָט רַק עַל יְדֵי שְׁמִיעָה אוֹ הַבְּנָה שְׁכָלִית.



RABBI MENACHEM MENDEL SCHNEERSON
 1902–1994

The towering Jewish leader of the 20th century, known as “the Lubavitcher Rebbe,” or simply as “the Rebbe.” Born in southern Ukraine, the Rebbe escaped Nazi-occupied Europe, arriving in the U.S. in June 1941. The Rebbe inspired and guided the revival of traditional Judaism after the European devastation, impacting virtually every Jewish community the world over. The Rebbe often emphasized that the performance of just one additional good deed could usher in the era of Mashiach. The Rebbe’s scholarly talks and writings have been printed in more than 200 volumes.

This is what the Giving of the Torah achieved: that “they saw what is heard, and they heard what is seen.”

That which is ordinarily “heard”—i.e., spirituality and G-dliness, which can only be perceived through “hearing”—the people of Israel perceived with the certainty and tangibility of sight. They *saw* G-dliness. On the other hand, material things, which are ordinarily “seen,” they now “heard.” The materiality of the world was like something that is perceived by hearing or by logical deduction.

TEXT 6

EXODUS 32:1-19 (11)

FEARING THAT MOSES IS GONE, THE PEOPLE ASK FOR AN IDOL (32:1)

1 The people saw that Moses delayed
2 in coming down from the mountain;
3 and the people massed upon Aaron
4 and they said to him:
5 “Arise, make us a god who will go before us;
6 for this man Moses
7 who brought us up from the land of Egypt
8 we do not know what has become of him.”

*Covenant &
Conversation: Aaron's
Role in the Making
of the Golden Calf*
**Rabbi Lord
Jonathan Sacks:**

*What Did the Golden
Calf Represent?*
A Torah class
Rabbi Mendel Kaplan:



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THE MAKING OF THE GOLDEN CALF (32:2-6)

9 Aaron said to them:
10 “Remove the golden rings
11 that are on the ears of your wives
12 your sons, and your daughters
13 and bring them to me.” . . .
14 He took them from their hand
15 and he formed it with a graving-tool
16 and he made it into a molten calf;
17 and they said: “This is your god, O Israel
18 who brought you up from the land of Egypt!” . . .
19 They arose early in the morrow
20 and they offered up burnt-offerings

21 and brought peace-offerings;
 22 the people sat down to eat and to drink
 23 and they got up to make merry. . . .

*Why Did Moses
 Break the Tablets?
 A Torah class
 Rabbi Mendel Kaplan:*



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MOSES BREAKS THE TABLETS (32:15–19)

24 Moses turned and went down from the mountain
 25 and the two Tablets of the Testament
 26 were in his hand. . . .

27 The tablets were the handiwork of G-d
 28 and the writing was the writing of G-d
 29 engraved on the tablets. . . .

30 And it was, when he drew closer to the camp
 31 and he saw the calf and the dances;
 32 Moses's anger was kindled
 33 and he threw the tablets from his hands
 34 and he broke them beneath the mountain.



QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

What other biblical story does the story of the Broken Tablets remind you of?

TEXT 7

MIDRASH, SHEMOT RABAH 32:1

הָדָא הוּא דְכָתִיב (תְּהִלִּים פב, ו-ז), "אֲנִי אֶמְרָתִי אֱלֹקִים אַתֶּם [וּבְנֵי עֲלִיּוֹן כְּלַכֶּם. אַכֵּן כְּאָדָם תָּמוּתוֹן...]:"

אלו המְתִיננו יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמַשָּׁה וְלֹא הָיוּ עוֹשִׂים אוֹתוֹ מַעֲשֶׂה, לֹא הָיְתָה גְלוּת וְלֹא מִלְאָךְ הַמָּוֶת שׁוֹלֵט בָּהֶן. וְכֵן הוּא אוֹמֵר, (שְׁמוֹת לב, טז) "וְהַמְּכַתֵּב מְכַתֵּב אֱלֹקִים הוּא, חָרוּת עַל הַלְחוֹת". מֵהוּ "חָרוּת"? ... חִירוּת מִן גְּלוּת... חִירוּת מִמִּלְאָךְ הַמָּוֶת.

בְּשַׁעַה שֶׁאָמְרוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל, "כֹּל אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר ה' נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָע", אָמַר הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא: אָדָם הָרֵאשׁוֹן צוּיָתוֹ מְצוּהָ אַחַת כְּדִי שִׁיקִימָנָה, וְהַשְׁוִיָתוֹ לְמִלְאָכֵי הַשָּׁרֵת... אֵלּוּ שֶׁהֵן עוֹשִׂין וּמְקִימִין תְּרִי"ג מְצוּת... אֵינּוּ דִין שִׁיָּהִיו הֵן חַיִּין וְקִימִין לְעוֹלָם? ... פִּיּוֹן שֶׁאָמְרוּ, "אֵלֶּה אֵלֶּיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל", בָּא מוֹת עֲלֵיהֶן.

אָמַר הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא: בְּשִׁטְתוֹ שֶׁל אָדָם הָרֵאשׁוֹן הִלְכְתֶּם, שְׁלֹא עָמַד בְּנִסְיוֹנוֹ ג' שְׁעוֹת, וּבִיתְשַׁע שְׁעוֹת נִקְנְסָה עָלָיו מִיתָה. "אֲנִי אֶמְרָתִי אֱלֹקִים אַתֶּם", וְהִלְכְתֶּם אַחֲרַי מִיְדוּתְיִי שֶׁל אָדָם הָרֵאשׁוֹן, "אַכֵּן כְּאָדָם תָּמוּתוֹן".



SHEMOT RABAH

An early rabbinic commentary on the Book of Exodus. "Midrash" is the designation of a particular genre of rabbinic literature usually forming a running commentary on specific books of the Bible. *Shemot Rabah*, written mostly in Hebrew, provides textual exegeses, expounds upon the biblical narrative, and develops and illustrates moral principles. It was first printed in Constantinople in 1512 together with 4 other Midrashic works on the other 4 books of the Pentateuch.

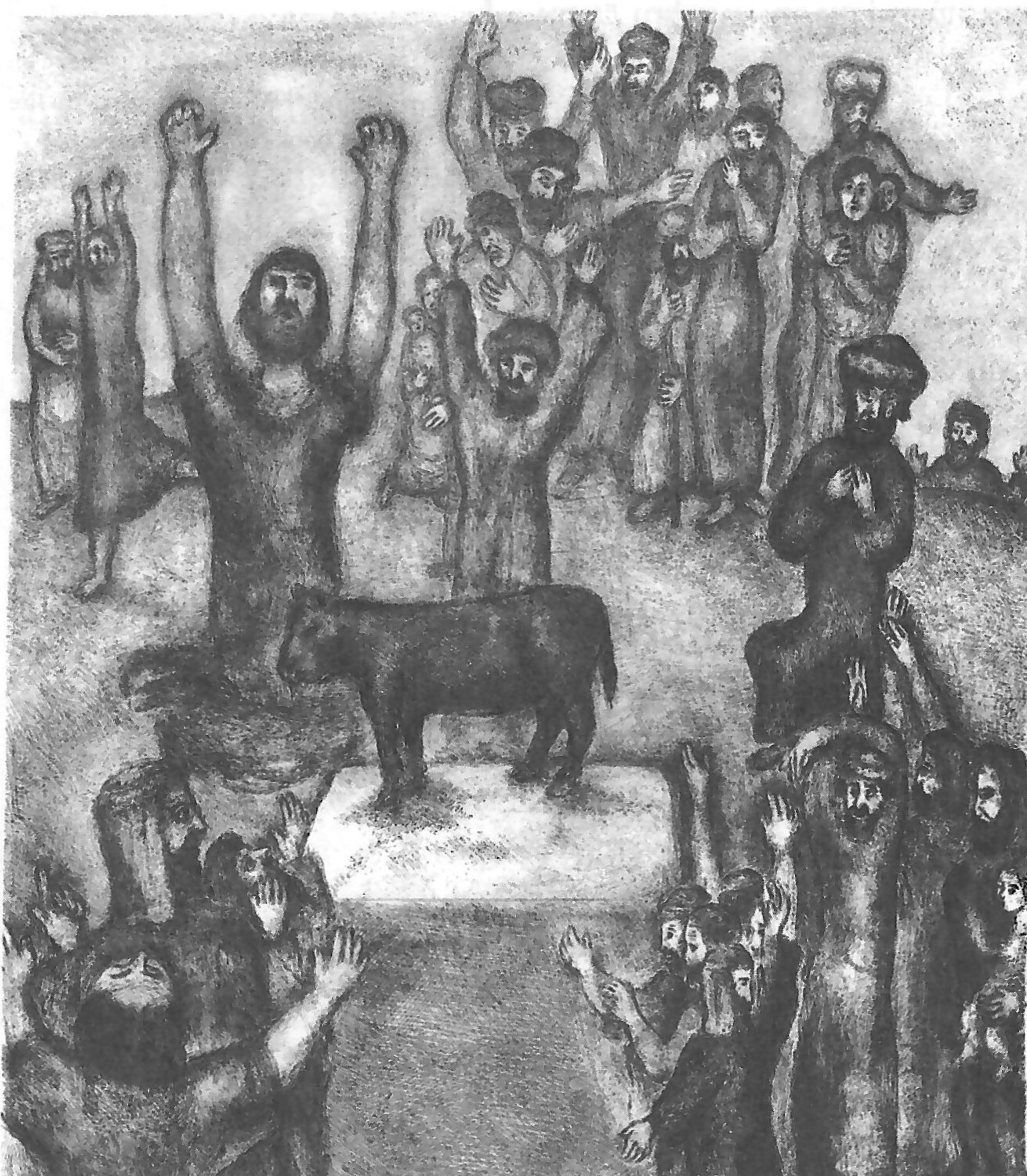
This is the meaning of what is written (PSALMS 82:6-7), "I said you are divine, and that supernal beings you are all. Indeed, like Adam you will die. . . .":

Had the people of Israel waited for Moses and not done that deed, neither *galut* [the exiles of the Jewish people] nor the angel of death would have had any power over them. Thus, it is written (EXODUS 32:16), "The writing was the writing of G-d, *charut* (engraved) on the Tablets." What is the meaning of *charut*? . . . *Cheirut* (freedom) from exile . . . [and] *cheirut* from the angel of death.

When the people of Israel proclaimed, "All that G-d has spoken we will do and we will hear" (EXODUS


24:7), G-d said: "I commanded one mitzvah to Adam for him to fulfill, and I likened him to the ministering angels. . . . This people, who will fulfill 613 *mitzvot* . . . is it not fitting that they should live and exist forever? . . ." But when they proclaimed, "This is your god, O Israel," they became mortal.

Said G-d: "You followed in the ways of Adam, the first man, who did not hold out for three hours, and on the ninth hour of that day, death was decreed on him. 'I said you are divine,' but because you followed in Adam's path, 'Indeed, like Adam you will die.'"



Le Veau d'Or (The Golden Calf), from the *Bible Series*,
 Marc Chagall, etching, 1956.
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 (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris

TEXT 8

EXODUS 34:1-28 

THE SECOND TABLETS

- 1 G-d said to Moses:
- 2 “Carve yourself two stone tablets like the first;
- 3 and I will write upon the tablets
- 4 the words that were on the first tablets
- 5 which you broke. . . .”
- 6 He carved two stone tablets like the first
- 7 and Moses rose early in the morning
- 8 and he ascended Mount Sinai
- 9 as G-d had commanded him;
- 10 and he took in his hand two stone tablets. . . .
- 11 And he was there with G-d
- 12 for forty days and forty nights . . .
- 13 and He wrote on the tablets
- 14 the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments.



QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

Based on the verses we just read, what differences can you find between the First Tablets and the Second Tablets?

Figure 5.1

First and Second Tablets

	FIRST TABLETS	SECOND TABLETS
State of the World	Restored state of Creation before Adam's sin	Reverted to world tainted by sin, death, and hardship
Source of the Tablets	<i>Content:</i> Divine <i>Medium:</i> Divine	<i>Content:</i> Divine <i>Medium:</i> human
Composition of Torah	Written Torah only	Written plus Oral Torah

TEXT 9

MIDRASH, SHEMOT RABAH 46:1 (11)

וְאָמַר לוֹ הַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא: אֵל תִּצְטַעַר בְּלוּחֹת הָרִאשׁוֹנוֹת, שְׁלֹא הָיוּ
אֶלָּא עֲשֶׂרֶת הַדְּבָרוֹת לְבַד, וּבְלוּחֹת הַשְּׁנָיִים אֲנִי נוֹתֵן לְךָ שְׂיֵהָא בְּהֵם
הַלְכוֹת מְדַרְשׁ וְאַגְדוֹת.

Said G-d to [Moses]: “Do not be distressed over the First Tablets, which contained only the Ten Commandments. In the Second Tablets, I am giving you also Halachah, Midrash, and Agadah.”

How Reliable Is the Oral Tradition?
Mr. Howard P. Danzig and Rabbi Shlomo Yaffe:



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TEXT 10

TALMUD, NEDARIM 22B (11)

אֲלֵמָּלָא חָטְאוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל, לֹא נִיתַן לָהֶם אֶלָּא חֲמִשָּׁה חוּמְשֵׁי תוֹרָה וְסִפְרֵי
הַיּוֹשֻׁעַ בְּלִבָּד... מַאי טַעְמָא? “כִּי בְרוּב חֲכָמָה רַב כְּעֵס.”

Had Israel not sinned [with the Golden Calf], they would have received only the five books of Moses and the book of Joshua. . . . Why? Because, as the verse says (ECCLESIASTES 1:18), “Much wisdom comes through much grief.”



BABYLONIAN TALMUD

A literary work of monumental proportions that draws upon the legal, spiritual, intellectual, ethical, and historical traditions of Judaism. The 37 tractates of the Babylonian Talmud contain the teachings of the Jewish sages from the period after the destruction of the 2nd Temple through the 5th century CE. It has served as the primary vehicle for the transmission of the Oral Law and the education of Jews over the centuries; it is the entry point for all subsequent legal, ethical, and theological Jewish scholarship.

TEXT 11

TALMUD, SHABBAT 88A (11)

מְלִמֵד שְׂכָפָה הַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא עֲלֵיהֶם אֶת הָהָר כְּגִיגִית, וְאָמַר לָהֶם:
 "אִם אַתֶּם מְקַבְּלִים הַתּוֹרָה, מוֹטֵב; וְאִם לֹא, שָׁם תִּהְיֶה קְבוּרַתְכֶם."

This teaches us that G-d overturned the mountain over them like a cask and said to them: "If you accept the Torah, fine; if not, there shall be your burial."



G-d's Judgment, Asher Brown Durand, oil on canvas, United States, c. 1851–1852. (Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk)

TEXT 12

THE REBBE, RABBI MENACHEM MENDEL SCHNEERSON,
LIKUTEI SICHOT 26, P. 424 (12)

איך מתאים מאמר רבתינו זכרונם לברכה "כפה עליהם כו" . . . עם
הענין "נעשה ונשמע" . . . ?

וביאור פנימיות הפשט בזה הוא . . . במעמד הר סיני עברו רק נ' יום
מיציאת מצרים, שהייתה ערות הארץ במידות מושחתות וכו' כידוע.
ועדיין לא הי' שהות שיבואו בני ישראל להפירה כזו שהיא מן הקצה
אל הקצה לגבי מצבם הקודם. אלא שמלמעלה "כפו עליהם" הפירה
זו, על ידי שהופיע עליהם אור הפרת האמת עד כדי כה, שראו במוחש
שהתורה והמצוות הם תכלית הטוב (גם בגשמיות), ובאם לאו אין
חיהם חיים (גם בגשמיות). ולכן אמרו בכל לב ונפש "נעשה ונשמע".
אבל כיון שלא באו להפירה זו מעצמם ובהדרגה, כי אם בדרך מתנה
והברקה מלמעלה, הרי אחרי מעמד הר סיני לא נשאר מכל זה אלא
רושם בהעלם.

*When Faith and
Trust Break Down
A lesson from the story
of the Golden Calf
Mrs. Sharon Freundel:*



MYJLI.COM/BIBLE

How do we reconcile the saying of the sages that "G-d overturned the mountain over them like a cask" with the fact that the people willingly responded, "We will do and we will hear"? . . .

The deeper meaning is as follows. . . When the people of Israel stood at Mount Sinai, only fifty days had elapsed from their Exodus from Egypt, which was the most debased place in the world in terms of decadent character, as is well known. This was not sufficient time for them to make the transition, from one extreme to the other, and achieve a genuine recognition [of the value of the Torah]. Rather, this recognition was "forced" on

them from Above, when the light of truth was revealed to them so powerfully that they could tangibly see that the Torah and the *mitzvot* were the ultimate good, and that without them, their lives were not worth living, in the most literal sense. They therefore proclaimed with all their heart and soul, “We will do and we will hear.”

However, because they did not achieve this recognition in a progressive, methodical way by their own efforts, but rather as a gift and as a flash of illumination from above, once the moment of the revelation had passed, nothing but a faint impression of it remained.

TEXT 13

TALMUD, MENACHOT 99A 

לוחות ושברי לוחות מונחים בַּאָרוֹן.

Both the [Second] Tablets and the Broken Tablets were kept in the Ark.



QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

What “broken tablets” do you carry with you in your own life?