**Jewish Artist Lab Nov. 17, 2020**

**Searching in the White Spaces for Meaning**

**What happens to broken objects?**

Source #1: Exodus 32: 1-19

1 When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, “Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don’t know what has happened to him.”

2 Aaron answered them, “Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me.”

3 So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron.

4 He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, “These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.”

5 When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, “Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord.”

6 So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.

7 Then the Lord said to Moses, “Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt.

8 They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, ‘These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.’

9 “I have seen these people,” the Lord said to Moses, “and they are a stiff-necked people.

10 Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation.”

11 But Moses sought the favor of the Lord his God. “Lord,” he said, “why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? 12 Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth’? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people.

13 Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: ‘I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.’ ”

14 Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster the Lord had threatened.

15 Moses turned and went down the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands. They were inscribed on both sides, front and back.

16 The tablets were the work of God; the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets. \*\*

17 When Joshua heard the noise of the people shouting, he said to Moses, “There is the sound of war in the camp.”

18 Moses replied: “It is not the sound of victory, it is not the sound of defeat; it is the sound of singing that I hear.”

19 **When Moses approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, his anger burned and he threw the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain.**

וַֽיְהִ֗י כַּאֲשֶׁ֤ר קָרַב֙ אֶל־הַֽמַּחֲנֶ֔ה וַיַּ֥רְא אֶת־הָעֵ֖גֶל וּמְחֹלֹ֑ת וַיִּֽחַר־אַ֣ף מֹשֶׁ֗ה וַיַּשְׁלֵ֤ךְ מידו [מִיָּדָיו֙] אֶת־הַלֻּחֹ֔ת **וַיְשַׁבֵּ֥ר** אֹתָ֖ם תַּ֥חַת הָהָֽר׃

Source 2: Deuteronomy 10:1-5

Thereupon the LORD said to me, “Carve out two tablets of stone like the first, and come up to Me on the mountain; and make an ark of wood.

**I will inscribe on the tablets the commandments that were on the first tablets that you broke, and you shall deposit them in the ark.”**

I made an ark of acacia wood and carved out two tablets of stone like the first; I took the two tablets with me and went up the mountain.

The LORD inscribed on the tablets the same text as on the first\*\*, the Ten Commandments that the LORD addressed to you on the mountain out of the fire on the day of the Assembly; and the LORD gave them to me.

Then I left and went down from the mountain, and I deposited the tablets in the ark that I had made, where they still are, as the LORD had commanded me.

בָּעֵ֨ת הַהִ֜וא אָמַ֧ר יְהוָ֣ה אֵלַ֗י פְּסָל־לְךָ֞ שְׁנֵֽי־לֻוחֹ֤ת אֲבָנִים֙ כָּרִ֣אשֹׁנִ֔ים וַעֲלֵ֥ה אֵלַ֖י הָהָ֑רָה וְעָשִׂ֥יתָ לְּךָ֖ אֲר֥וֹן עֵֽץ׃

וְאֶכְתֹּב֙ עַל־הַלֻּחֹ֔ת אֶת־הַדְּבָרִ֔ים **אֲשֶׁ֥ר הָי֛וּ עַל־הַלֻּחֹ֥ת הָרִאשֹׁנִ֖ים אֲשֶׁ֣ר שִׁבַּ֑רְתָּ וְשַׂמְתָּ֖ם בָּאָרֽוֹן׃**

וָאַ֤עַשׂ אֲרוֹן֙ עֲצֵ֣י שִׁטִּ֔ים וָאֶפְסֹ֛ל שְׁנֵי־לֻחֹ֥ת אֲבָנִ֖ים כָּרִאשֹׁנִ֑ים וָאַ֣עַל הָהָ֔רָה וּשְׁנֵ֥י הַלֻּחֹ֖ת בְּיָדִֽי׃

וַיִּכְתֹּ֨ב עַֽל־הַלֻּחֹ֜ת כַּמִּכְתָּ֣ב הָרִאשׁ֗וֹן אֵ֚ת עֲשֶׂ֣רֶת הַדְּבָרִ֔ים אֲשֶׁ֣ר דִּבֶּר֩ יְהוָ֨ה אֲלֵיכֶ֥ם בָּהָ֛ר מִתּ֥וֹךְ הָאֵ֖שׁ בְּי֣וֹם הַקָּהָ֑ל וַיִּתְּנֵ֥ם יְהוָ֖ה אֵלָֽי׃

וָאֵ֗פֶן וָֽאֵרֵד֙ מִן־הָהָ֔ר וָֽאָשִׂם֙ אֶת־הַלֻּחֹ֔ת בָּאָר֖וֹן אֲשֶׁ֣ר עָשִׂ֑יתִי וַיִּ֣הְיוּ שָׁ֔ם כַּאֲשֶׁ֥ר צִוַּ֖נִי יְהוָֽה׃

**Questions**

Why did Moshe break the tablets (לוחות)?

What do you think happened to the broken tablets?

Moshe had a “redo” He went back up the mountain, God made a second set, and Moshe came back down the mountain. Was that a punishment? Why or why not?

God wrote the tablets but why do you think he asked Moshe to carve the ark himself?

What happened to the broken tablets—a Talmudic response\*

Source #3-Baba Batra 14a (bottom)-14b(top)

Baba Batra is the 22nd tractate of the Talmud.

**And** accordingly, **how do I realize** the meaning of that which is stated: **“There was nothing in the Ark except** the two tablets of stone which Moses put there,” which, according to the opinion of Rabbi Meir, teaches that something else was in the Ark besides the tablets themselves? It serves **to include** **the broken pieces of the** first set of **tablets, which were placed in the Ark.**

ומה אני מקיים אין בארון רק לרבות **שברי** לוחות שמונחים בארון

**Questions**

What’s the response in the Talmud to the question of what happened to the broken pieces?

What can we learn from this response?

If your response is different to what happened to the broken pieces of the Tablets, what can we learn from your answer?

What do you think is more important—the tablets themselves or the message on the tablets? Why?

**Consider with your Hevruta**

Have you ever saved a broken item? What was it and how did it break?

How did you feel when it broke? Did you try and repair it?

Where did you place it? Why?

Do you have a broken item that might be the inspiration for a work of art, a musical

composition or a poem? What could you create and what medium might you use?

Did you feel that during this pandemic something broke for you? Is there a way you

might express that through your art?

Is brokenness worth remembering?

**Hevruta hints:**

\*This is a midrash—a story based on what’s missing in the Torah. Their “proof” is not tangible. Their proof comes from their very close reading of the text. A midrash signals the curiosity of the writer. Our question is always—why is the writer curious and what’s

the writer trying to teach? We’re moving from the literal to the metaphorical although there are commentaries that just redefine an obscure word in the Torah.

\*\*Caught in the thicket ------ נאחז בסבך

What if your partner asks you—did God really write the Ten Commandments?

You’ll need to decide if you want to address this question that raises both a theological

question and the issue of reading a text on multiple levels.

A few responses

Refocus: That question requires a long discussion. Let’s keep it for another time and focus on the question of what happened to the broken tablets.

Define the question differently: What a good question about the literal (*p’shat*) meaning of the text. We’re also discussing a question about the literal meaning of the text—what happened to those broken tablets. The rabbis often ask a question about the literal or p’shat meaning to get to a deeper meaning (*d’rash*)

Address the question personally and honestly: Respond with “I believe it means….But, you’ll have to decide what you believe and that can change as you keep learning.” Alternatively, “I don’t know the answer to that question but I’m studying the Torah to learn and maybe I will someday have a response. How about you? What do you think?

Move to objectivity: “No one has verifiable proof for the answer to your question. It’s a question of belief. Some Jews believe literally that God wrote the Ten Commandments. Other Jews believe that a person or people wrote the text and it was inspired by God. Some Jews believe it was written later by a person or people. Many Jews ignore the question, but I’m glad you are curious. What do you think?”

Consider your own response that matches the emotional and maturity level of your partner.

Art Connections

Rembrandt’s painting of Moses breaking the tablets.

<https://richardmcbee.com/writings/jewish-art-before-1800/item/rembrandt-in-berlin-moses-breaking-the-tablets-of-the-law>

Virtual and Visual Midrash. https://talivirtualmidrash.org.il/en/

*Raiders of the Lost Ark* (could be considered a very long midrash about what happened to the Ark of the Covenant)

<https://timfrankarchaeology.files.wordpress.com/2013/01/restore1.jpg> (a visual of what it takes to put together an archeological find)

*Mend Piece* by Yoko Ono <https://www.amfedarts.org/yoko-ono-mend-piece/>

[https://www.littlethings.com/fix-broken-things creative](https://www.littlethings.com/fix-broken-things/1--creative) approaches to broken objects

Rockets into Roses: Yaron Bob. https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/innovation-alley-rockets-into-roses-israeli-artist-yaron-bob/