

IS NOTHING SACRED ANYMORE?

Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D. & Magidah Khulda bat Sarah

Occasionally in our Sunday morning introductory Judaism class, someone would opine that humankind is on a downward spiral. It was almost always a variation on the theme that human beings are more unkind, even cruel, and more immoral and murderous than ever. And from time to time, in the same vein, in the face of the world's horrors, we would hear the plaintive question: "Is nothing sacred anymore?"

It's a legitimate, crucial question, if we want to persist as more than just animals that care for nothing but survival of the fittest. For many of us, for much of our lives, we seem to be satisfied with a largely materialistic existence, or at least we're able to sublimate our spiritual needs with sensual satisfactions. But for some of us, some of the time, the spiritual emptiness, the enervating effect of endlessly struggling to satisfy *ourselves*, our ego-centric preoccupation, becomes boring at best, and enough to unsettle our kishkes when we occasionally look ahead on the finite line of our lives. We feel a spiritual need or drive, something within us that seeks a higher connection, not simply the endless feedback loop of our own imagination and appetites and their satiation.

So the question of whether anything is yet sacred, when unpacked, may be a cry for something beyond us. The easy answer to what's sacred for us as Jews is "the Torah." But *parasha* (weekly Torah reading) Ki Tisa raises some provocative insights into the sanctity of the Torah.

Moses is up on the mountain to get the *luchot* (לוחות), the pair of tablets, with the commandments engraved upon them. God tells him that *the people* had made for themselves a molten calf and they were worshipping it. (Exodus 32:7)

What do you imagine Moses thought at that moment?

Akedat Yitzchak (Rabbi Yitzchak ben Moshe Arama, 1420-1494), teaches us that, "Moses may have thought that this could have been the act of a single individual, and that God had [simply] referred to the collective responsibility every Jew bears for the actions of another Jew." Or we might more plausibly assume that Moses knew from his encounter with God that the *whole* people had "dealt corruptly" because, at best, the majority had acquiesced in the evil of a minority.

So as he approached the camp, Moses may have expected to find apostasy. But, according to Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak, 1040-1105) it was much worse: they had gone beyond idolatry to incest (commentary on Exodus 32:6) and murder, since they had killed Hur for rebuking them (commentary on 32:5). Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888) comments that the pagan idolatry had passed from mistaken *ideas* to "the practical poisoning of morals and . . . moral excesses. . . ." When Moses saw the calf and the dancing, the Midrash tells us, he also saw that "the words flew away" from the tablets. (Exodus Rabbah 46:1)

The people were jeopardizing the very survival of their newly acquired peoplehood by wholesale rejection of what they had been taught were the essentials of its continued existence. They were showing themselves undeserving of Adoshem's compassion, for which Moses had argued so eloquently and courageously, and entirely insensible to the gifts—blessings and commandments—that God had given them.

And the scripture reads: "And it came to pass when he [Moses] came close to the camp, that he saw the calf and dancing; and Moses became very angry, and he cast out of his hands the tablets, and he broke them beneath the mount." (Exodus 32:19)

Why did Moses destroy the tablets?

We may agree with Rabbi Natan, that Moses did not shatter the tablets until he had received a command to do so from God. (Avot de Rabbi Natan) Or we may agree with Rabbi Hirsch, that he smashed the Tablets based on his own feelings, not God's instructions. Rashi suggests that he wanted to punish the Israelites severely, which is why he shattered the tablets within their sight.

In any event, as Or Hachayim (Rabbi Chaim ben Attar, 1696-1744) teaches, "Clearly he would not have destroyed something unless he was convinced that by the destruction he would perform something infinitely more useful than that which he had destroyed."

Answering our question of why Moses broke the tablets hinges on whether the destruction of a holy object is ever justified. Rabbi Meir Simha Ha-Kohen (1843-1926), one of the brilliant Talmudists of his age, wrote: "Do not imagine that the Temple and Tabernacle are intrinsically holy. Far be it! The Almighty dwells amidst His children and if they transgress His covenant, these structures become divested of all their holiness. . . . Even the tablets—'the writing of God'—were not intrinsically holy, but only so on account of you. The moment Israel sinned and transgressed, they [the tablets] became mere bric-a-brac, devoid of sanctity."

It's also instructive that Moses smashed the tablets beneath the mount, in the sight of the holy place in which God had given them, so clear was his purpose and his knowledge that the tablets were only a symbol. Presumably, neither God nor Torah could be diminished by shattering them, only strengthened, because they had already effectively been shattered in the experience of the people through their apostasy. We might conclude that the people had shown themselves unworthy of the Torah—their rejection of its gifts had already broken its spirit among them—so Moses, by physically breaking the tablets, compelled them to confront what they had forsaken.

Nowadays we tend to live our lives as if the Torah conveys holiness, regardless of our ignorance or indifference to it. It's as if we assume that

notwithstanding what we do individually or as a community, our access to Torah and its influence in our lives is undiminished at any given moment. But certainly it ceases to be sacred when we cease to sanctify it with our day-to-day actions.

And if or when the Torah becomes a ritual object, an item of *veneration* but not *emulation*, it can escape the grasp of whole generations of Jews—and that has in fact happened, with devastating effect. It's sanctity then becomes mere *potential*, to be tapped by future generations.

Communities that lose the Torah are hardly bereft, because many of their members never truly possessed it. But those who come after them, who have to rediscover Torah in their own time, never cease to wonder at the underserved handicap they carry throughout their lives—which almost certainly is the fate of some of our own children.

Our tradition teaches that the engraving on the stone went entirely through the tablets and was readable from both sides. But, of course, we can't imagine how that's possible, short of God's authorship.

Maybe it would be more useful, in lieu of the endless debate on the authoring of the Tablets, to consider how the tradition understands the *meaning* of this miraculous engraving—to wit: Because the *luchot* were readable from both sides, the people were not dependent on any intermediary to convey the law to them. And in this respect the *luchot* signify the freedom of human beings, on their own initiative, to raise themselves above their animal instincts, reaching upwards to realize the full capacity of their spiritual inheritance.

The engraving of the *luchot* is a reminder of the vision and path of Torah that is bequeathed to every generation, which is given the opportunity to learn it, live it, and leave it to the next generation.

And the question of whether anything is yet sacred is answered when we, Am Yisrael, pass the test of every Jewish generation—to trust that God will care for us if we keep the Torah at the center of our lives.

Click [here](#) for more congregational development and organizing tools.

Help support the work of Gather the People with a tax-deductible donation by clicking [here!](#)