

HE CAST THE TABLETS OUT OF HIS HANDS*

וַיְהִי כַּאֲשֶׁר קָרַב אֶל־הַמַּחֲנֶה
וַיֵּרָא אֶת־הָעֵגֶל וּמַחֲלֹת
וַיַּחַר־אַף מֹשֶׁה וַיִּשְׁלֶךְ מִיָּדוֹ אֶת־הַלְּחֹת
וַיִּשְׁבֵּר אֹתָם תַּחַת הָהָר:

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.

And it came to pass when he [Moses] came close to the camp—He knew from his encounter with God that the people had “dealt corruptly” (32:7), so he was expecting to see them in ruination of their covenant, worshipping a golden calf. *That he saw the calf and dancing*—But they had gone beyond idolatrous worship to incest (Rashi 32:6) and murder (Hur was killed for rebuking them—Rashi 32:5), far beyond “mental error” (S.R. Hirsch) to jeopardizing the very existence of their newly acquired peoplehood by wholesale rejection of Torah. *And Moses became very angry*—They were showing themselves undeserving of Adonai’s compassion, for which Moses had argued so courageously and eloquently, and entirely insensible to the gifts—the blessings and commandments—that God had given them. *And he cast the tablets out of his hands and he broke them*—They were unworthy of the Torah, and 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. *Beneath the mount*—And he did this beneath the mount, in the sight of the holy place in which they had been given by God, so clear was his purpose and his knowledge that the tablets were only a symbol; that neither God nor Torah could in any way be diminished by shattering them, only strengthened, because they had already been shattered in the experience of the people through their apostasy.

* Exodus 32:19 (in Ki Tisa)