

Carrying and Carrying On

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This week's *parashah* is primarily about trauma. The trauma of the betrayal that was the construction of the golden calf and the trauma of the destruction of the tablets that ensued. But this week's *parashah* is also about how to respond to trauma and how to encounter and support brokenness.

In Devarim, Moshe narrates his own version of bringing down the first set of *luhot*, tablets, and breaking them. His description details exactly how he held the *luhot* in his arms:

דברים ט

¹⁵וְאֶפֶן נֶאֱרַד מִן הַהָר וְהָהָר בָּעֵר בְּאֵשׁ וְשָׁנִי לִוְחֹת הַבְּרִית עַל שְׁתֵּי יָדַי: ¹⁶וְאֶרְא וְהִנֵּה תַטְאֲתֶם לָהּ אֱלֹהֵיכֶם
עֲשִׂיתֶם לָכֶם עֵגֶל מִסֶּכָּה סֶרְתֶּם מִהָר מִן הַדֶּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' אֶתְכֶם: ¹⁷וְאֶתְפַּשׁ בְּשָׁנֵי הַלְחָת וְאִשְׁלַכְתֶּם מֵעַל שְׁתֵּי
יָדַי וְאִשְׁבַּרְתֶּם לְעֵינֵיכֶם:

Devarim 9

¹⁵So I turned and went down from the mountain, while the mountain was ablaze; the two tablets of the covenant were in my two hands. ¹⁶Then I saw that you had indeed sinned against the Lord your God, by casting for yourselves an image of a calf; you had been quick to turn from the way that the Lord had commanded you. ¹⁷So I took hold of the two tablets and flung them from my two hands, smashing them before your eyes.¹

In the scene that Moshe depicts he makes very clear that he is holding the two *luhot* in his two arms,² one tablet per arm, and carrying them carefully down the mountain. After he

¹ Trans. NRSV.

² In Hebrew, the word *yad* refers to both the English hand and the arm.

breaks them, God instructs Moshe to make new tablets which are to be exactly the same as the first,

דברים י:א-ב

¹בַּעַת הַהוּא אָמַר ה' אֵלֵי פָסֵל לִי שְׁנֵי לוחֹת אֲבָנִים כְּרֹאשֵׁינִים וְעֹלָה אֵלֵי הַהָרָה וְעָשִׂיתָ לָּהּ אֲרוֹן עֹץ: ²וְאָכַתָּב עַל הַלוחֹת אֵת הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ עַל הַלוחֹת הַרִאשֹׁנִים אֲשֶׁר שִׁבַּרְתָּ וְשָׁמַתָּם בְּאֲרוֹן:

Devarim 10:1-2

¹At that time the Lord said to me, “Carve out two tablets of stone like the first ones, and come up to Me on the mountain, and make an ark of wood. ²I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you smashed, and you shall put them in the ark.”³

God’s instructions are also very specific, and He demands that these second, replacement tablets are to be כְּרֹאשֵׁינִים, *exactly like the first ones*. Yet, when Moshe describes how he carried the second tablets that he made, he no longer places them one in each of his two arms, but instead holds them both in one arm,

דברים י:ג

וַאֲעַשׂ אֲרוֹן עֹצֵי שִׁטִּים וְאָפַסֵל שְׁנֵי לוחֹת אֲבָנִים כְּרֹאשֵׁינִים וָאֶעַל הַהָרָה וְשְׁנֵי הַלוחֹת בְּיָדִי:

Devarim 10:3

So I made an ark of acacia wood, cut two tablets of stone like the former ones, and went up the mountain with the two tablets in my hand.⁴

While this detail might appear small and inconsequential, it is deliberate.⁵ This careful description stands in contrast with the way the carrying of the *luchot* is described by the Torah initially, in Sefer Shemot. When the omniscient narrator writes about the way that Moshe carried the first and second *luchot* in *our parashah*, it does not distinguish between two-handed

³ Trans. NRSV.

⁴ Trans. NRSV.

⁵ I am indebted to my father, Cantor Sam Weiss, who first drew my attention to this detail.

and single-handed carrying.⁶ But when Moshe himself retells the story in Sefer Devarim, choosing his own emphasis, and crafting his descriptions, he chooses to highlight this component. Moshe wants to draw attention to the fact that he was carrying the *lulhot* and also wants to demonstrate exactly *how* he was carrying them. Moshe wants to teach a lesson about carrying.

The first tablets which Moshe broke at the foot of the mountain were not discarded. In fact, according to Talmudic tradition, the rubble of the first tablets was treasured and kept alongside the second tablets inside the *aron* (ark):

תלמוד בבלי בבא בתרא יד:

דתני רב יוסף אשר שברת ושמתם מלמד שהלוחות ושברי לוחות מונחין בארון.

Talmud Bava Batra 14b

As Rav Yosef teaches: **Which you smashed, and you shall put them [in the ark]** teaches that the *lulhot* and the shards of the *lulhot* were placed in the ark.

The first *lulhot* are not discarded, but neither are they reassembled; they are to remain forever broken. And they are recognized as valuable, as worth keeping, in their broken state. If any being could turn back time and restore the *lulhot*, it would be God—who heals the sick and revives the dead—but here God chooses not to restore. Instead of telling Moshe to fix the broken tablets, God tells Moshe to hold on to them, to carry them.

The first lesson to be learned from the way that Moshe carried is actually a lesson derived from this choice that God makes. God does not promise Moshe that He is going to fix what is broken, nor does He provide Moshe with instructions to fix the tablets. Instead God says, “These tablets are broken. That is what they are now. Your obligation to them is to carry them.”

⁶ See Shemot 32:15, 19.

Often, when we are confronted with difficult situations and the people who are suffering through them, our first inclination is to try to resolve the problem. We want to troubleshoot, provide advice, go back to the source, and address the issue. God's choice to keep the *lulhot* broken teaches us that sometimes, the right path is simply to acknowledge when things are broken, to look at the pain, and to suffer with those who are suffering. Sometimes the right approach is to leave things as they are, to listen instead of to speak, to hold rather than to fix.

This approach is particularly critical for three reasons. First, even when we're able to fix the problem, even when we know exactly what to do and how to help, we first need to acknowledge the brokenness. The shattering itself is traumatic, even if the brokenness is later made whole.

Second, when we don't rush in to fix the problem ourselves, we create the space and the opportunity for the person who is suffering to solve their own issues. When we're silent but affirming, we can say, "What are you going to do about it and how can I support you?" instead of, "This is clearly too much for you. I'll take care of it." Not only did God not restore the original *lulhot*, He told Moshe to make the replacement *lulhot* himself,

שמות לד:א

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה פָּסֵל לְךָ שְׁנֵי לַחֹת אֲבָנִים כְּרֹאשֵׁינִים וְכָתַבְתִּי עַל הַלַּחֹת אֵת הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ עַל הַלַּחֹת הָרִאשִׁימִים אֲשֶׁר שִׁבַּרְתָּ.

Shemot 34:1

God said to Moshe, craft for yourself two stone tablets like the first ones. And I will write the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke.

Indeed, Moshe does construct the second tablets, and when he comes down with the finished product, he is literally beaming.⁷

⁷ See Shemot 34:28-29.

The final reason why cultivating a more hands-off approach is essential is that more often than we might like to admit, we aren't qualified to fix the problems with which we are presented. We need to train ourselves in holding, in being present, and being attentive so that when the time inevitably comes when holding is all that we can do, we will do it well and appreciate its value.

Because the second lesson that Moshe's carrying teaches us is that carrying itself expands our capacity to carry. The heart is a muscle. Emotional muscles work like physical muscles; the more you use them, the stronger they become. When Moshe first carried the *luchot*, they were so heavy that he could barely hold one tablet in one hand. However, the second time Moshe carried the *luchot*, he was able to carry them both in just one hand. And he carried them in one hand because that freed the other arm to hold the broken *luchot*. His need to carry, his experience with carrying, expanded his capacity to carry. The weight of both sets of tablets were identical, but as Moshe bore their weight, carrying them up and down the mountain, his strength increased, and he was ultimately able to carry more with more ease.⁸ Before the catastrophe, Moshe didn't know that he would be able to carry twice the weight of the *luchot*, but once he knew that he had to, he discovered that he could.

In fact, the main purpose of the *aron*, the reason why God instructed that it had to be built right before Moshe came up the mountain to have the second tablets inscribed, was for the purpose of carrying the first tablets, not the second.⁹ It is the first tablets, the ones which have crumbled, that Moshe needs to provide for. The *aron* is not only for the tablets which are still intact, it is also for the ones which are no longer legible. The *aron* is for both sets of tablets, the whole and the broken. These broken pieces, which serve as a painful reminder of a catastrophe that almost severed the covenant between the Jewish people and God, are placed in the center of the Ark of the Covenant.

⁸ To be clear, we have no indication from the biblical text that Moshe literally carried the first set of tablets, once they were broken, up Mt. Sinai.

⁹ See Rabbi Ya'akov Bieler, "Broken Tablets—Embarrassment or Inspiration?" February 2005, <https://rayanotyakov.files.wordpress.com/2013/10/5765-kitisa.pdf>.

The image of the two sets of tablets, residing next to one another in close proximity, is what it looks like to be in community. Every person who is near you is broken in some ways and whole in others. We all need to be carried sometimes, and sometimes we need to carry others. Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer develops the idea that, in fact, not only was Moshe carrying the *lulhot*, the *lulhot* were carrying him.¹⁰

פרקי דרבי אליעזר מה

לקח משה את הלוחות והיה יורד, והיו הכתובין סובלין את עצמן ואת משה עמן, וכשראו את התופים ואת המחולות ואת העגל ברחו הכתובים ופרחו מן הלוחות, ונמצאו כבדין על ידי משה, ולא יכול משה לסבול את עצמו ולא את הלוחות, והשליכן מידי ונשתברו.

Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer 45

Moshe took the tablets and descended. The words would carry [the tablets] themselves and Moshe with them. And when they saw the drums, the dancing, and the [golden] calf, the words ran away and flew off of the tablets, which were then heavy in Moshe's arms. And Moshe could not bear them, so he cast them out of his hands, and they were broken.

Before they were broken, the *lulhot* carried themselves. After they were broken, they needed to be carried. Before the tablets were broken, Moshe was lifted up by the tablets themselves, but after they were shattered by the betrayal of the golden calf, Moshe carried the stones that once carried him. This is the last lesson of carrying—it is a task that is designed to be shared. No person can always expect to be borne by others, and equally critically, no person should think that it is their responsibility to always be the one who carries and carries alone. When you are whole, you must carry others, and when you are broken, you must let others carry you.

¹⁰ Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer is a work of *midrash*, probably from the 9th century. A version of this idea can be found in Midrash Shemot Rabbah and Midrash Tanhuma as well. There is also an extension of this idea in the midrashic literature which suggests that when the Levi'im carried the *aron*, the *aron* actually carried them. See Sotah 35a.

Moshe himself, the leader of the people and the teacher of the law, had times in his life when he was carried, times in his life when he said, “I’m not sure I can carry anymore.”¹¹ This is expressed in the structure of the *aron* itself. The *aron* was carried by the Levi’im directly¹² and therefore was built with beams in its side for this purpose. And of all of the *mishkan*’s furnishings, the *aron* alone could not have its beams removed. This is because the object that does the most carrying needs to be reminded that it too can and will be carried.

Our *parashah*, Ki Tissa, opens with the instruction for Moshe to count the people by means of the *mahatzit hasbekel*, half of a *shekel* coin. The term, כִּי תִשָּׂא, can be translated literally as “when you lift,” or “when you carry.” Perhaps it is in acknowledgment of what it means to shoulder the burden of the broken that our *parashah* is so named. Perhaps it is the reason why everyone, no matter how rich or poor, how full or empty, how broken or recovered, pays the same half *shekel*. Because everyone is always just half a *shekel*. Everyone has the need to be carried, and everyone will have a time when they are called upon to lift up someone else. And after all of these half *shekalim* were collected, the coins were melted to form the *adanim*, the sockets, which together held and supported the structure of the *mishkan*.¹³

Wishing you a Shabbat of holding and being held.

¹¹ See BeMidbar 11.

¹² See BeMidbar 7:1-9.

¹³ See Shemot 38:25-27. It is also sweet to note that the *adanim* always supported in pairs, שְׁנֵי אֲדָנִים תַּחַת הַקָּרֶשׁ; see Shemot 36:20-30.