

Darkness and Light; Remembering and Forgetting: The Essence of Hanukkah

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1. Text of "Al Hanisim"

When the wicked Greek kingdom stood against your people Israel in order to make them forget your Torah and to cause them to stray from your desired laws...

נוסח "על הנסים"
כְּשֶׁעָמְדָה מַלְכוּת יוֹנָן הַרְשָׁעָה עַל עַמְּךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל לְהַשְׁכִּיחַם תּוֹרַתְךָ וּלְהַעֲבִירָם מִחֻקֶּי רְצוֹנְךָ...

2. Bereishit Rabbah 2:4

R. Shimon b. Lakish explained the [first] verses [of the Torah] in light of the various exiles: "The earth was *tobu*"—this refers to the exile of Babylonia... "and *bohu*"—this is the exile of Media... "and darkness"—this is the exile of Greece, which darkened Israel's vision with their decrees... "over the abyss"—this is the exile of the wicked kingdom [Rome], which cannot be fathomed, like an abyss... "and the spirit of God was hovering"—this is the spirit of the Messianic King...

בראשית רבה (וילנא) פרשה ב:ד
ר"ש בן לקיש פתר קריא בגליות, והארץ היתה תהו זה גלות בבל שנאמר (ירמיה ד) ראיתי את הארץ והנה תהו, ובהו זה גלות מדי (אסתר ו) ויבהילו להביא את המן, וחושך זה גלות יון **שהחשיכה** עיניהם של ישראל בגזירותיהן... על פני תהום זה גלות ממלכת הרשעה שאין להם חקר כמו התהום... ורוח אלהים מרחפת זה רוחו של מלך המשיח...

3. Mishnah Avot 1:1-4

Moshe received Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Yehoshua, and Yehoshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets transmitted it to the Men of the Great Assembly... Shimon Hatzaddik was one of the last people remaining from the Great Assembly... Antigonus of Sokho received traditions from Shimon Hatzaddik... Yose b. Yoezer of Tzradah and Yose b. Yohanan of Yerushalayim received traditions from them...

משנה אבות א:א-ד
משה קבל תורה מסיני ומסרה ליהושע ויהושע לזקנים וזקנים לנביאים ונביאים מסרוהו לאנשי כנסת הגדולה... שמעון הצדיק היה משירי כנסת הגדולה... אנטיגנוס איש סוכו קבל משמעון הצדיק... **יוסי בן יועזר** איש צרדה ו**יוסי בן יוחנן** איש ירושלים קבלו מהם...

4. Mishnah Hagigah 2:2

Yose b. Yoezer says: One should not lean [upon an animal when offering it as a sacrifice on Yom Tov]. Yose b. Yohanan says: One should. Yehoshua b. Perahiah says: One should not. Nitai Ha'arbeli says: One should. Yehudah b. Tabai says: One should not. Shimon b. Shetah says: One should. Shemayah says: One should. Avtalyon says: One should not. Hillel and Menahem did not disagree. Menahem left and Shammai entered. Shammai says: One should not. Hillel says: One should...

משנה חגיגה ב משנה ב
יוסי בן יועזר אומר שלא לסמוך **יוסי בן יוחנן** אומר לסמוך יהושע בן פרחיה אומר שלא לסמוך ניתאי הארבלני אומר לסמוך יהודה בן טבאי אומר שלא לסמוך שמעון בן שטח אומר לסמוך שמעיה אומר לסמוך אבטליון אומר שלא לסמוך הלל ומנחם לא נחלקו יצא מנחם נכנס שמאי שמאי אומר שלא לסמוך הלל אומר לסמוך...

5. Talmud Bavli Menahot 99a-99b

Said Reish Lakish: Sometimes the cancellation of Torah is its very foundation, as it is written: "Which you shattered (*asher shibarta*)"—The Holy and Blessed One said to Moshe: "More power to you (*yishar kobakha*) that you shattered them!"

בבלי מנחות צט. צט.:
אמר ריש לקיש: פעמים שביטולה של תורה זהו יסודה, דכתיב: +שמות ל"ד+ אשר **שבירת** - אמר לו הקב"ה למשה: יישר כחך **ששברת**.

6. Talmud Bavli Eruvin 54a

And said R. Elazar: What is meant by "engraved on the tablets"? Were the first tablets not shattered, the Jewish people never would have forgotten Torah.

בבלי עירובין נד.
ואמר רבי אלעזר: מאי דכתיב +שמות ל"ב+ חרות על הלחת - אלמלי לא **נשתברו** לוחות הראשונות לא **נשתכחה** תורה מישראל.

7. Talmud Bavli Temurah 16a

Said Rav Yehudah said Shmuel: 3000 halakhot were forgotten during the mourning period for Moshe... Said R. Abahu: Nonetheless, Otniel b. Kenaz restored them through his dialectic...

בבלי תמורה טז.
אמר רב יהודה אמר שמואל: שלש אלפים הלכות **נשתכחו** בימי אבלו של משה... אמר רבי אבהו: אעפ"כ **החזירן** עתניאל בן קנז **מתוך פלפולו**...

8. Talmud Bavli Eruvin 13b

Said R. Abba said Shmuel: For three years, Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel argued; each said the *halakhah* followed their view. A heavenly voice descended and said: Both are the words of the living God, but the *halakhah* follows Beit Hillel.

בבלי עירובין יג:
אמר רבי אבא אמר שמואל: שלש שנים נחלקו בית שמאי ובית הלל, הללו אומרים הלכה כמותנו והללו אומרים הלכה כמותנו. יצאה בת קול ואמרה: אלו ואלו דברי אלהים חיים הן, והלכה כבית הלל.

מכון הדר
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...Have we not received from the mouths of the Sages that Yose ben Yo'ezer and Yose ben Yohanan, who were during the days of the conflict with Greece, were the first ones to stand in a dispute in Torah law (the first dispute in the law of laying the hands on festivals). That is, that on account of Greece's darkening of Israel's eyes with the decrees it decreed "to make them forget Your Torah", this darkening-forgetting led to the first dispute in the Sanhedrin...In this sense, the ongoing proliferation of opinions and dissenting positions...continues in a straight line from the darkening of Israel's eyes via the forgetting of Torah caused by the decrees of Greece. In this way, a superficial glance leads one to perceive the proliferation of opinions and dissenting positions as a remaining holdout from the redemption from Greece, for even with the whole redemption and salvation of the Hasmonean victory, the very same sorrow which was born in the polemic with Greece still remains with us. However, from the words of the Sages, we learn a deeper perception in the heart of the matter, as will be explained as follows.

"Sometimes, the canceling of Torah is its fulfillment, as is said, '...which you broke' – 'More power to you for breaking them'" (TB Menahot 99b). The act of breaking the tablets is an act of fulfilling the Torah by way of canceling it. But the Sages also said that "had the tablets not been broken, Torah would not have been forgotten from Israel" (TB Eiruvim 54a). We find, then, that the breaking of the tablets also had an aspect of making the Torah forgotten. We learn an amazing innovation from here – that it is possible for Torah to be proliferated via the forgetting of Torah, such that in this manner it is possible to receive a "Yishar Koah" on account of forgetting Torah. Go out and see what the Sages said, that "300 Halakhot were forgotten in the days of mourning for Moshe Rabbenu...and Othniel ben Qenaz restored them with his dialectics" (TB Temurah 16a). Those words of Torah in the dialectics of restoring halakhot – those are themselves words of Torah that were proliferated only via the forgetting of Torah. Moreover, every matter of dispute in Halakhah exists only via the forgetting of Torah. Nevertheless, so taught the Sages, "Even though these say pure and those say impure, these invalidate and those validate, these exempt and those obligate...these and these are the words of the living God" (TB Hagiga 3b, Eiruvim 13b). We find that all differences opinion and disputes of position are an expansion and embellishment of Torah born specifically by strength of the forgetting of Torah.

An even greater innovation emerges from this, for the power of Oral Torah is much greater in the context of difference of opinion than in the context of agreement. For included in that statement that "these and those are the words of the living God" is the principle that even the opinion rejected from *halakbah* is a Torah opinion, provided that it is said according to the boundaries of the give-and-take of Oral Torah...should [the proponents of this view] arise as the majority later on and decide according to the rejected opinion, henceforth, the *halakbah* would change in its essence...the disputes that arise in Torah are a positive creation of new Torah values, the likes of which cannot be found in regular words of Torah...

And so we return to the beginning. The reality of debate in Torah, which continues until our own day, was indeed born in the darkness of Greece. Nonetheless, this reality is not a holdout from our redemption from Greece. On the contrary! The redemption of Hanukkah by the Hasmoneans constituted a victory over the darkness of Greece by producing light out of the darkness itself. May the Torah be magnified and exalted—by way of the forgetting of Torah. Its cancellation is its fulfillment. While the fall of Babylonia and Media helped heal the subjugation of the Jewish people, the fall of Greece contained within it a remedy prepared from the wounds itself. "When the wicked Greek kingdom stood against your people Israel to make them forget the Torah"—from the forgetting itself new wellsprings of Torah opened up by way of dialectical reconstruction, pursued in order to clarify the Torah that was being forgotten...

Texts

1. Greece's goal in the Hanukkah story was to make Israel **forget** (שכח/להשכיחם) 'Torah
2. In the midrash, Greece is associated with **darkness** (חשך/החשיכה)
3. **Yose b. Yoezer** and **Yose b. Yohanan** are pre-rabbinic figures who live at the time of the Hasmonean revolt
4. **Yose b. Yoezer** and **Yose b. Yohanan** are the earliest pair of (pre-)rabbinic figures who have a debate over law. After their time, debates continue unabated, culminating in the culture of Shammai and Hillel and their disciples, who exemplify a culture of **dispute** and disagreement.
5. According to Reish Lakish, Moshe is **congratulated for breaking the first set of tablets**, having given the Torah a firmer foundation by abrogating it.
6. According to R. Elazar, the **breaking of the first tablets** is associated with massive loss of Torah via **forgetting**.
7. Laws **forgotten** can be **restored** through intellectual creativity.
8. Both sides of a **dispute** are valued as capturing some essential truth.

R. Hutner's Synthesis

- A surface glance at Jewish history shows that we began arguing over matters of law in the time of the Greek's persecution of us and we still do so today. Didn't the Greeks succeed in causing us to forget the Torah? Isn't our redemption from this historical persecution still incomplete?
- The breaking of the first tablets is both congratulated and associated with forgetting. This means that forgetting Torah can contribute to Torah's proliferation and rejuvenation. In fact, some original contributions to Torah only happen because other Torah was forgotten.
- Disputes are fundamentally about lacking the truth and the right information. And yet, in rabbinic discourse, both sides of a dispute are valued. This demonstrates the value of forgetting Torah even further; those new values would never have otherwise been uncovered.
- This entire process of dispute, and the forgetting that enables it, originated for the Jewish people during the Hanukkah story. And yet, even after our triumph over the Greeks, we retained the mode of argument and engagement that their persecution bequeathed to us. What we truly celebrate on Hanukkah is our ability to create opportunities for creativity and survival out of the very forces that threaten us. We adapt, so does Torah, and we and Torah emerge much richer.

Reflections on Leadership:

What elements of our institutional memory help stabilize and preserve us? What elements freeze us in place and would better be forgotten?

Which policies and procedures would we reconstruct if we were starting over now, without the benefit of received tradition?

Have you ever had a moment where you "broke the tablets?" If yes, what was it? If not, why not?

Have you ever exercised leadership by generating new policies and approaches? If yes, when? If not, why not?

How might you use R. Hutner's words at the end to inspire seizing moments of crisis as an opportunity for reconstructing your leadership and those you lead?

What leaders are mentioned in these texts? What are their distinctive qualities and actions?