*Asher Shibarta* – Which You Broke!

Rabbi Lester Bronstein, Shabbat Ki Tissa, March 13, 2020

Moses descends the mountain with the precious tablets that record the covenant between God and Israel. He sees the golden calf, and he smashes the tablets.

Later, God will invite him to carve two new tablets like the first. God says,

“Carve two tablets like the first set of tablets *asher shibarta*. “Which you broke!

This is like saying to your spouse, “Honey, I took care of the ConEd bill – which you forgot to pay.”

It doesn’t help the relationship to say that last phrase. It may reflect true resentment, but it does more to break the relationship than to repair what may already be less than whole.

So is God being vindictive here? The Rabbis certainly don’t think so. In the words “asher shibarta,” “which you broke,” they hear a word play. They hear God saying “sh’koiach,” meaning “Good for you – may your strength increase.” “Good for you, Moses, that you broke those tablets!” “Yasher koach asher shibarta.”

First of all, the Rabbis are telling us that the tablets are merely a written record of the true promise. The true promise has already been broken. The tablets in their “whole” form are now useless.

By breaking the tablets, Moses is providing something truly useful in the project of repairing the broken trust between themselves and God, and between themselves and themselves.

The Talmud tells us, “luchot v’shivrey luchot munachim ba’aron.” “Both the tablets and the broken tablets rested in the Ark.”

Here is one of the most radical statements in the entirety of Rabbinic literature. Yes, they are saying, the new (whole) set of tablets is precious to this people as they slowly re-learn the terms of the covenant and press onward. But the fragments of the first set are equally valuable, in that they serve as a constant reminder of how fragile this world can be. The shards, shaking around in the box, remind the Israelites to do everything in their power NOT to break what is whole, and to repair what is broken.

Broken promises; broken aspirations; broken health; broken healthcare systems; broken societies; broken faith; broken relationships. Brokenness is more or less the norm in this world. But the attempt to heal the brokenness – that, too, is normal. It’s human. It’s Godly. It’s what the kabbalists call “tikkun olam.” Repairing the broken world. Or “teshuvah.” “Returning” to a state of wholeness.

On this night when everything feels broken beyond repair, it is good to hear those shards rattling around in the holy ark we carry with us through life. It’s good to remember that we can carry that burden together, and that together we can carve out a new set of tablets.

The job of decent human beings is to keep the world together; and when it breaks, as it inevitably does, our job is to try to put it back together. That is a daunting task, but it is the only task worth pursuing.