

Parashah and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

Parashat Ki Tissa, Exodus, Chapters 30-34 | March 2, 2024

By Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

Wabi Sabi and the Second Tablets

Let us ponder the Japanese notion of *wabi sabi*, a phrase that combines two very different words, each difficult to translate. Together, they connote a joy in the uniqueness and beauty of the imperfect object, in the recognition that such an object reflects its human creator, and therefore the nature of human existence. The concept is described in a book by Nobuo Suzuki, titled *Wabi Sabi: The Wisdom in Imperfection*:

One of the distinguishing features of Japanese culture is its peculiar concept of beauty. For a Westerner, even for a Chinese, the most beautiful cup is an impeccably fashioned one, with a perfect circumference, a smooth immaculate surface, and—if it is decorated—an exact and uniform arrangement of the decorations. In Japan, however, the most highly-prized cup—and the most expensive—tends to be the one that contains flaws, because that makes it unique. It may have dents, sandstone stuck to it or even be cracked or mended . . .

For Suzuki, as for many others who write on this subject, the notion of *wabi sabi* bears with it lessons for life:

Applied to humans, being aware of our imperfection makes us humble; accepting it frees us from being unhealthily self-demanding and from the fixation on a perfection that does not exist in nature and by extension does not exist in humans either. Accepting our own imperfection and each person's unique nature does not mean resignation. On the contrary, it shows us the path to follow to evolve as human beings.

As Suzuki and others further describe, one exquisite embodiment of *wabi sabi* is the form of Japanese artistry known as *kintsugi*, in which shattered pieces of pottery are pieced together using lacquer of gold, with the gold itself reflecting where vessels had once been broken. Thus the shattering is still remembered; it is not effaced, but marked in a way that highlights the uniqueness of the object (right).

The artist Matsuo Fujimara, in his book *Art and Faith: A Theology of Making*, gives us stories of the origin of *kintsugi*, including a tale of the great expert in tea-making Yusai Hosakawa:



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When he was to prepare tea for the warlord Hideyoshi, Hideyoshi's young attendant dropped an invaluable piece of tea ware, one of Hideyoshi's favorites, breaking it into five pieces. Hideyoshi raised his hand to punish the servant, but Hosokawa intervened, singing a poem that echoed a 9th-century *waka*. The improvised version used a romance poem between two childhood friends courting each other as adults, but a turn of phrase transformed that romance into a sacrificial mercy toward the young servant. Hosokawa, by singing this poem, basically atoned for the young servant and took responsibility, saying, "I will be the one to be blamed for his mistake." Artfully done, this clever turn of phrase spared the servant. Later, Hosokawa arranged for the five pieces of pottery to be reconnected using the *Urushi* Japan lacquer technique with gold gilding and presented it to Hideyoshi. The warlord was moved by the beauty of Kintsugi tea ware, and the story became renowned. This act of compassion became the basis of Kintsugi, which added gold in the Urushi filled cracks, creating a work of beauty through brokenness.

Thus *kintsugi* became a symbol in itself of *wabi sabi*, as well as a metaphor for forgiveness and moral improvement.

It is therefore striking to consider our own *parashah* from the perspective reflected in the notion of *wabi sabi*. For our reading describes a shattering: the tablets given by God are shattered by Moses at the foot of Sinai in the wake of the sin of the golden calf. Yet, as our *parashah* also describes, another set of tablets are made; and unlike the first, which were forged entirely by the fiery finger of God, the second set is carved by Moses, with the letters of the Ten Commandments then inscribed by the Almighty. According to Jewish tradition, this second set of tablets, a symbol of God's forgiveness, was bestowed on Yom Kippur; and for the great early medieval sage Saadya Gaon, there is therefore a sense in which this set created by Moses was greater than that fashioned by God Himself. Saadya is cited by Abraham Ibn Ezra:

The Gaon said that the second [tablets] are more honored than the first, for the second were given on a sacred day, and on the Day of Atonement, unlike the first, . . . and the first were destroyed.

Ibn Ezra, in turn, finds Saadya's position preposterous. How can an object created by man be greater than the creation of God? As Ibn Ezra biting remarks:

These are like the words of a dream, they are neither helpful nor a hindrance, for the writing of God was on both [sets], and moreover the first were an act of God, and the second merely of Moses.

How, Ibn Ezra is asking, can the imperfect result of human effort be greater than the act of God?

Perhaps Japanese art allows us to answer this question.

As our reading begins, the stage is being set for the glorious conclusion to the Sinai revelation. Moses, on Sinai, has already received the blueprints for the Tabernacle, through which the Divine will dwell in Israel, as well as the designs of the clothing for the priests who will minister therein. In our reading, he is instructed as to how every Israelite shall be counted, and on how to fund the Tabernacle through the giving of the "half shekel," a symbol of the joining of every single member of Israelite society to national endeavors. Moses is further told of Bezalel, the ingenious artists who is to oversee the Tabernacle's construction. All is set for God's home to be



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created in Israel, and Moses, before descending Sinai, is given the gift that will be placed in the Tabernacle's Holy of Holies: the tablets created by God.

But then, all goes awry. As Moses remains in the mists of the mountain, Israel grows nervous, then desperate. A golden calf is created and served. The Almighty, enraged at this sin, informs Moses that He will now destroy Israel and create a new nation out of the descendants of Moses alone. But Moses refuses the Almighty's offer and beseeches the Almighty to forgive. It was familial love of Israel that drew Moses to his mission in Egypt; and giving up on that love to found a new people all his own was unthinkable. On Sinai, at the burning bush, God had introduced Himself as the God of Moses' fathers; now, again on Sinai, Moses speaks to the God of the forefathers:

Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel your servants, to whom you swore by your name. (Exodus 32:13)

God relents and agrees that Israel will live. As Moses descends the mountain and witnesses Israel in the midst of sin, he too appears overcome by anger and shatters the tablets, the symbol of the covenant, at the foot of the mountain. This is, of course, also a metaphor; the relationship between God and Israel has been shattered—at this point, seemingly, irreparably so. God announces that He will not dwell among His people; an angel of the Almighty will instead guide Israel in its journey, a sign that Israel will not be truly forgiven. At this point, it seems that all of the instruction regarding the Tabernacle has been in vain. Yet Moses refuses to relent, insisting that his own role in history is bound up in God's granting of forgiveness:

“Now, if you will forgive their sin [well and good]; but if not, erase me from the record which you have written!” (Exodus 32:32)

In arguing with God, Moses reveals why God chose him. The same man who risked himself for his brothers when threatened by the Egyptians is also willing to sacrifice for them when they are threatened by God Himself. God relents and forgives, making known for the first time that He is not only, as He declaimed at Sinai, “a jealous God,” who reacts angrily to idolatry; He is also a *El rahum v' hanun*, a God of mercy and grace. A second set of tablets are to be created as a symbol of the forgiveness bestowed.

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Here we must take note of the way in which, as our series' title puts it, “Torah changed the world.” For in the giving of the second set of tablets we discover what is perhaps as important a message as that which Judaism gave to humanity in the Decalogue: we discover here the invention of repentance and forgiveness. Rabbi Sacks has explained how this is so:



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The sociologist Philip Rieff pointed out that the movement from paganism to monotheism was a transition from fate to faith. By this he meant that in the world of myth, people were pitted against powerful, capricious forces personified as gods who were at best indifferent, at worst hostile, to humankind. All you could do was try to propitiate, battle, or outwit them. This was a culture of character and fate, and its noblest expression was the literature of Greek tragedy.

In other words, the pagan world believed in shame and sin without the true possibility of repentance, forgiveness, redemption. The Bible, however, approaches human development differently:

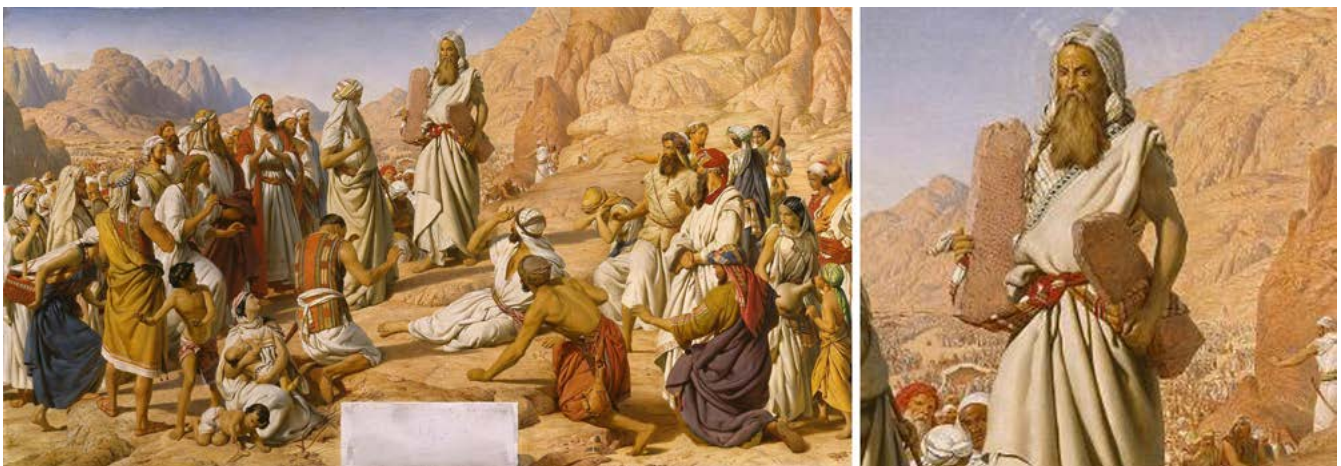
Repentance presupposes that we are free and morally responsible agents who are capable of change, specifically the change that comes about when we recognize that something we have done is wrong and we are responsible for it and we must never do it again. The possibility of that kind of moral transformation simply did not exist in ancient Greece or any other pagan culture. This transformed the human situation. For the first time it established the possibility that we are not condemned endlessly to repeat the past.

Biblical Israel did not only change the world in creating its covenant, but also in the *recreation* of the covenant when the second set of tablets appeared on the earth: the recreation after a shattering embodies the grandeur of humanity in the midst of humanity's own fallibility and imperfection.

It is with this in mind that we can understand why God insisted that this time, the tablets would be created not only by God, but also by man:

And the Lord said to Moses, **carve for yourself** two tablets of stone, akin to the first; and I will on write the tablets the statements that were on the first tablets that you shattered. (Exodus 34:1)

The tablets would be made by man, and would therefore be imperfect; and they would therefore embody human life itself. Strikingly, in the depiction of this moment given us by the Victorian artist John Rogers Herbert, with Moses granting another set of tablets to a grateful Israel, we can notice how roughly-hewn, and imperfect, the tablets actually are, a sign of the human being that brought them into existence:



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In their very imperfection, these tablets embody *us*; as symbols of the possibility of improvement, the very flaws of the humanly created tablets embody hope itself. The tablets, in other words, *are who we can be*. They teach humanity how to see our own moral capacity. Their imperfection is therefore the source of their grandeur.

If there is a portrait of a human being that captures the spirit of the second tablets, it is Rembrandt's strange and striking *Self-Portrait with Two Circles*.



Two aspects of the painting stand out that seem somewhat strange. The first is that Rembrandt has left his own hand—the hand of an artist—missing from the canvas. The second is the geometric addition to the canvas of two circles that seem to have nothing to do with the image itself. In truth, these two oddities are connected—and here, in offering an explanation of the painting, I am very much drawing on an interpretation by Simon Schama. Rembrandt deliberately highlights his own imperfections as an artist by leaving his hand unfinished.



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And yet, lest anyone assume that this unfinished aspect was due to his losing his ability to draw and paint in his old age, Rembrandt goes out of his way to highlight how he can still draw brilliantly.

To create a circle, Schama noted, is incredibly hard, and therefore Rembrandt shows that he is still absolutely capable. When we combine these two themes, we realize that Rembrandt is seeking to highlight both his gifts and his flaws, seeing in this dialectic not a discouragement but a drive for further invention, and even greatness.

The imperfect tablets remind us of the shattering that came before, but also of the potential for repair; in this way, they are not unlike the Japanese embodiment of *wabi sabi* reflected in pieces of pottery rejoined after a shattering, with the breaks remembered, marked by gold. The remembrance of the shattering is a reminder of the overcoming of the shattering, an overcoming which has a beauty all its own. As one writer, Tiffany Ayuda, put it, in *kintsugi*,

Every break is unique and instead of repairing an item like new, the 400-year-old technique actually highlights the “scars” as a part of the design. Using this as a metaphor for healing ourselves teaches us an important lesson: sometimes in the process of repairing things that have broken, we actually create something more unique, beautiful, and resilient.

We are therefore able to understand Saadya’s suggestion that the second tablets have a beauty and grandeur all their own that the first, perfect tablets did not have. For they pointed to the resilience of the human being that is made manifest in the very imperfections of life, to hope after a shattering.

Understood this way, the story of the tablets carved by Moses teaches us not only about repentance, but also about the ability of a people to overcome many different forms of shattering that have occurred throughout its history. Is not *kintsugi* the story of the Jews? Has our people not overcome so many shatterings, pieced itself together, and endured? And is that overcoming not part of the grandeur of the Jewish story?

The Japanese celebration of imperfect art is profoundly related to Jewish history. In a wonderful essay, Sarah Rindner reflects on artistic creations that are “unfinished,” such as the Rembrandt portrait; and though she does not mention *wabi sabi*, she does describe how shatterings, and imperfect art, relate to the resilience of the Jewish people:

An echo of the “unfinished” aesthetic may be identified in the Jewish practices surrounding mourning. Upon hearing of a loss, a Jewish mourner traditionally rips his or her garment, and Jewish tradition is replete with rituals that reminds us of the incomplete nature of our happiness in the wake of the destruction of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, which occurred in 70 CE. For example, if a Jewish family builds a new home, it is required to leave a visible patch of it unplastered—in a sense the home remains unfinished as a reminder that God’s “home” has yet to be rebuilt. Reflecting upon a patch of unpainted canvas in the otherwise complete “Street in Auvers-sur-Oise” by Vincent van Gogh at the Met Breuer, I was reminded of this uniquely Jewish practice, known as a *zecher l’churban* (a reminder of the destruction).



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There are a variety of customs that are associated with *zecher l'churban*, some of them more widely observed than others. For example, a glass is shattered under a Jewish wedding canopy, women are instructed not to wear all of their fine jewelry at any one time, and in some circles even listening to music is curtailed. The pervasiveness of these customs does not reflect a sense of nihilism or a cult of mourning. Rather, the sages say that “whoever mourns over Jerusalem will merit to see in its joy” (*Bava Batra* 60b). Counter-intuitively, reminding ourselves of our incompleteness specifically points to the promise of an eventual restoration.

We reflect on the shattering of the tablets at a time when, not long ago, a shattering occurred to the Jewish people; but we have also seen, in the weeks that followed, a covenantal *kintsugi*, a coming together, and a reflection of resilience, in which the very scars are the source and sign of the bonds Jews share. As we read this week of the tablets recreated, we hope and pray for many more restorations yet to come.

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Additional Resources

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks on Repentance, “The Challenge of Jewish Repentance,” Originally Published in the *Wall Street Journal*, September 16, 2017. [Click here to read.](#)

Sarah Rindner on Unfinished Work, “‘Unfinished-ness’ in Art, Judaism and the Poetry of Eve Grubin,” *The Book of Books*, July 19, 2016. [Click here to read.](#)

