

**“Nothing is Written in Stone, but You Have to Write Something”**

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Here is the short version of one of my childhood stories. One evening when I was about nine years old, I didn't feel very well so I went to my parent's bedroom to lie down in their bed. As my mother, just like thousands of mothers before her have done, felt my head, she said that I seemed a little warm. I remember the kindness of her touch, and what the security of that kiss on my forehead felt like. Then my father, as he would always do, would run his hand down the back of my shirt to feel if my back was warm and then they would consult with each other. Yes, I seemed warm and for the next few minutes there were no other siblings vying for attention, I was the only one. For this brief moment, I was just their poor little boy who didn't feel well. Then they would pull out the thermometer, thank God I could take it orally, and for the next few moments we would sit together in their bed watching the mercury rise. Sure enough I had a temperature. Then the tender care would continue. Innocent care, loving cuddling – it was perfect – even though I didn't feel well. Then I asked if I could shake the thermometer down. They didn't think it was a good idea, but I insisted. After a bit of a struggle they conceded. I got myself into the middle of the bed so I wouldn't hit anything, but somehow I did hit something. I don't even know what it was, but the mercury went flying. Now they were angry. All of the gentleness was gone and they were now screaming, but I was sick. I scrambled to pick up the little silver balls and little pieces of glass but there was no way. I had ruined the whole thing. We eventually got the mess cleaned up, they gave me some Tylenol and sent me off to my room. No more cuddling, no more coddling just off to bed.

I have never been one who second guesses himself. I have always felt that no matter what my mistake was, I could fix it. However, this was one time I wish I could have gone back and changed my behavior. The infamous thermometer story is one I wish I could redo. It was not like a baseball that hit a car and we could call, “Do over.” Some things you just can't do over.

Many weeks ago we read the story of *Moses and the Golden Calf*. In this story, Moses is on top of Mt Sinai working with God on the Ten Commandments. Our Torah teaches that this was the work of God's hand. With *etzvah elohim n'vrah*, they were inscribed by the finger of God. Amidst the important work of revelation, God looks over Moses' shoulder and sees the Jewish people building the golden calf. In a moment of rage, God says to Moses that he is going to wipe out this people and start over. Moses calms God down and says he will take care of it. As Moses turns to come down the mountain, he too sees this horrible sight and also becomes enraged. In a fit, he smashes the two tablets he is carrying. Furious and in the moment he smashes something that wasn't even his. In fact, he was so angry about the golden calf, I'm not even sure he knew what he had done. He immediately seeks to remedy that situation. Then, I imagine after that mess was cleaned up, he turned around to pick up the tablets, only to realize what he had done. I imagine the look of fear in his eyes. I imagine the dread, the remorse, the sense of disappointment at having destroyed God's gift to humanity. We all feel it. We have all felt it. We all know the feeling of giving back a gift.

There are times in our lives when those we love offer us a gift, not a material gift, a gift that comes from within, a kind word, a loving gesture and a gentle touch and we don't accept it, or worse, we turn away leaving them broken. We don't do it purposefully, sometimes it's just instinctual, but we do it and then we feel badly. The second we realize the hurt we have caused, there is remorse and sadness. There is anxiety, and then the famous "What was I thinking." We all do things we wish we had not done. We wish we could take it back and undo it, we wish we could go back in time and start over. We say things we wish we had not said. That's why at the end of each wedding just before the groom breaks the glass, I say that we must be careful with the words we use with each other, because once offered they can never be taken back. Just as this glass will be broken, never to be put back together, so too, the words we use can break us apart, and then the marriage cannot be put back together. The glass once broken can never hold the precious wine again. Once the marriage is broken, it cannot hold the precious love again. So I warn, be careful. Be careful with your words.

Moses was not careful with his words. He took God's words and smashed them on the ground. It had nothing to do with God, yet it was God's tablets that were smashed. I can imagine Moses scrambling to pick up the pieces and looking to God and crying, "I can put them back together. I can fix this. I can make it up to You." The deep pain is palatable; we feel for him, I feel for him, I know exactly how he must have felt.

Then the texts becomes unclear. In the first telling, we are not sure if Moses returns to the mountain to write a new text himself, or if he is just to prepare the stones for a new inscription, but either way, he must return to fix what he had broken. As he ascends the mountain again, he is asked to carve the words once more, to write them over, as if God is suggesting you broke it, you fix it. If you have to put forth the effort then maybe you will be more careful. Or maybe God was trying to give Moses something to do so that he would feel as though he was participating in the remedy of the mess he had created. The Lord said to Moses "Carve two tablets of stone like the first, and I will inscribe on them the words that were on the first two shattered tablets. *V'chatavti al ha'luchot et ha'd'varim*" (Exodus 34:2)

No matter, first God takes Moses back and then God tells him that he now has to share in reconstructing the text. He has to participate in the writing of the story. God essentially says to Moses that you can no longer be just an observer of revelation, you can't simply be a stenographer, you have to contribute to it yourself. At some point God teaches Moses that you have to do something, you can no longer wallow in self pity. You can't keep on blaming yourself, you have to move on, you have to decide to get back to work.

It's easy to be the victim. It's easy to get comfortable in that role and to enjoy it. All of the self-loathing, all of the disappointment and misfortune is who we become. At some point, we have to break free of that. We all have challenges, we've all made mistakes that we truly regret, but we have to move on. We can, if we want to, carry all of those mistakes with us, using them to teach us what not to do in the future. I might even suggest we carry some of it, but we must move on.

Then, in this week's reading, we have Moses passing along that advice to the Jewish people. "As soon as you have crossed the Jordan into the land that God has given you, you shall set up large stones, coat them with plaster and inscribe upon them all of the words of this teaching.

When you cross over into the land that God is giving you, a land flowing with milk and honey ... you shall set up these stones. *V'chatavti aleihem et col divrei ha'torah hazot.*" (Deuteronomy 27 2-4) With almost the exact same language, Moses passes on this incredibly important lesson to the people. As Moses is about to take leave, he tells them God wants to be in a relationship with them and then he tells his beloved people to now write their own version of the story. By referring to his great mistake of destroying the tablets, he tells them we all make mistakes. Go make your mistakes. Though I wish I could steer you away from the mistake I have made, you need to make your own. However, don't become the mistake, write a new story. I did it, so can you. *Shiru L'adonai shir hadash*, as the Psalmist teaches, today is a new day now write a new song.

We can't sit around waiting for life to happen to us, you have to make something happen. This is not about taking responsibility, this is about taking control. We can't continue to be the victim. Moses knows all about being the victim. We all know what it means to be the victim and we can grow to enjoy that role. Regret is normal and it can be the security which prevents us from repeating the same bad behaviors.

I remember that day in my parents' bed and the broken thermometer. I remember the lonely walk back to my room and the peace I had broken and I feel badly about it. I also know I have shaken down a thousand thermometers since then never breaking another. I also know it was just a thermometer. Material objects can be replaced but relationships don't work as easily. However, as God taught Moses and then Moses taught the Jewish people, they too can be repaired, but you have to be willing to get in there and write a new story, or at least the next chapter.