

# MAKING IT BY BREAKING IT

*by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky*

The last verses of the Torah encapsulate a glorious career of leadership of the father of all prophets, Moshe, into a few brief sentences. "Never has there risen in Israel a prophet as Moses whom Hashem had known face to face: as apparent by all the signs and wonders that Hashem had sent him to perform in the land of Egypt against Pharaoh and all his courtiers and all his land. And by all the strong hand and awesome power that Moshe performed before the eyes of Israel" (Deuteronomy 34:10-12).

Powerful descriptive. But it is as cryptic as it is powerful. What is the strong hand and that Moshe performed before the eyes of all Israel? Does it refer to the horrific plagues brought on Egypt? Perhaps it refers to the splitting of the sea or the opening of the earth to swallow Korach and his rebellious cohorts?

Rashi tells us that the words "Moshe performed before the eyes of Israel" refers to something totally different, perhaps very mortal. Rashi explains that the posuk (verse) refers to the smashing of the tablets upon descending Mount Sinai and seeing the nation frolic before the Golden Calf. He quotes the verse "and I smashed the tablets before your eyes" (Deuteronomy 9).

Rashi's comment evokes many questions. Why is smashing the Luchos counted as an awe-inspiring feat? And more important, is this the final way to remember Moshe the man who smashed the Luchos? Is that the parting descriptive of Judaism's greatest leader?

Rabbi Yisrael Lipkin of Salant, was Rav in a city when a typhus epidemic erupted. Despite the peril of the contagious disease, Rabbi Lipkin went together with a group of his students to aid the sick, making sure they had food and clothing. The roving first-aid committee imposed strict restrictions upon the townsfolk, imploring them to eat properly every day in order to ward off immunological deficiencies.

Yom Kippur was fast approaching, and Rabbi Lipkin decreed that due to the menacing disease, absolutely no one was to fast on Yom Kippur despite it being the holiest day of the year.

The town's elders were skeptical. They felt that Rabbi Salanter had no right to impose such a ruling on those who were not afflicted. Despite their protestations, Rabbi Salanter was unfazed. In fact he made his point in a very dramatic way.

On Yom Kippur morning, immediately after the shacharis services, he went up to the bimah, made

kiddush, drank the wine, and ate a piece of cake!

Immediately, the townsfolk were relieved. They went to their homes and followed suit.

The elders in the town were outraged at this seemingly blatant violation of Jewish tradition. They approached

Rabbi Lipkin to protest his disregard for the sanctity of the day, but Rabbi Lipkin remained adamant. "I have taken a group of students for the last month, and together we have attended to scores of typhus victims. I guaranteed every mother that each of their children will return home healthy. On my guarantee not one of those students became ill!"

He turned to the elders and declared. "When you are able to make such guarantees then you can tell me the laws against eating on Yom Kippur!"

The Torah ends with the greatness of Moshe. It refers to his great accomplishments as his Yad haChazaka, his strong hand before the eyes of Israel -- the breaking of the two Tablets Of Law. Moshe's greatness was not only knowing how to accept the Ten Commandments, but when to smash them as well. And though not every one of us is equipped with the ability to overrule a practice or tradition, Klall Yisrael knows that when the time to act is called for the great ones will arise to build and cure by smashing what needs to be broken. Because whether it is breaking a fast or breaking the tablets, it takes a great man to understand the time to build and an even greater man to know when it is time to tear down.

Chag Sameach

Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

*In honor of the birth of Max Handelman on July 8 to our children Carol & Stephen Handelman of Toronto, Canada Dedicated by Mr. & Mrs. Lionel Fisch*

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