Moshe Breaks The Tablets Of The Law

The 17th of Tamuz happens forty days after Shabuot. Moshe ascended Mount Sinai on the 6th of Sivan, and remained there for forty days. The people of Israel made the golden calf on the evening of the 16th of Tamuz, when they thought that Moshe was no longer going to return. When Moshe descended Mount Sinai and saw the Yehudim worshiping the golden calf, he broke the tablets containing the Ten Commandments.

There are many very interesting commentaries regarding this episode. There are those who explain that Moshe destroyed the Tablets to protect the people of Israel. How so? The Second Commandment says, "You shall not have other gods before Me … you shall not make for yourself any image [of idolatry] …". The Rabbis explained that by breaking the tablets Moshe destroyed the written evidence that documented the terrible "betrayal" of the Jewish people to HaShem, by worshiping other gods. The Rabbis presented the following metaphor: "Imagine a woman who got married and after a few days there were some very negative comments about this woman's behavior (suspicion of adultery). What did one of her relatives do? He took the Ketuba, the marriage certificate, and destroyed it. He said: it is better that this woman be considered unmarried than married. Likewise Moshe, when breaking the tablets he said: If I do not destroy this [incriminating] document the people of Israel will have no hope of being forgiven. So he broke the Tablets and then he told HaShem, trying to advocate for the people of Israel: Forgive them! They never got to read what was written on the Tablets!".

Either way, the destruction of the Tablets of the Law meant a great tragedy. Firstly, because it meant not having anymore the Tables of the Testimony written "directly" by HaShem, which once broken were replaced by tables written by Moshe.

And secondly because the destruction of the Tablets reminds us of the cause of this misfortune: the worshipping of the golden calf.

Finally, the Rabbis of the Midrash also teach us a positive aspect of remembering the destruction of the Tablets of the Law on the 17th of Tammuz. Ribbí Yehoshua Ben Levi (Masekhet Aboda Zara 4b) said that from the golden calf episode we learn that HaShem is willing to forgive even the most serious offenses. So we should never give up hope and say, “I have committed too many sins. HaShem will never forgive me. I am definitely at a point beyond redemption. ” According to Ribbí Yehoshua Ben Levi no transgression can be more serious than the idolatry practiced with the golden calf. And we see that in the end, after repentance and Tefilot (prayers), HaShem forgave Am Israel.

This is a very suitable message for a day of fasting, which should be dedicated to doing Teshuba: repent of our evil actions and get closer to HaShem.