

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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Posted July 3, 2008, by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

THE SEVENTEENTH OF TAMMUZ AND THE BREAKING OF THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

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The next big day in the Jewish calendar is the fast of the Seventeenth of Tammuz.

According to the Mishnah (Taanit 4:5) five terrible things happened on this date:

1. the tablets of the law were broken.
2. The daily whole offering was cancelled
3. The city wall was breached
4. Apostemos burned the Torah
5. And he set up an idol in the Temple.

The Yerushalmi examines how it came to be that Moses broke the tablets:

Rabbi Yishmael taught: The Holy One, blessed be He, told him to break them and afterward said, "You did the right thing in breaking them."

Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman said in the name of Rabbi Yonatan: The tablets were six handbreadths long and three broad. Moses was holding on to two handbreadths and the Holy One, blessed be He, was holding on to two of them and there was a space of two handbreadths in the middle. When the Israelites did their deed (worshiped the golden calf), the Holy One, blessed be He, wanted to grab them out of the hand of Moses. But Moses' hand was stronger and he seized them from him.

Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Yose bar Abayye: The tablets wanted to fly, but Moses was holding on to them.

It was taught in the name of Rabbi Nehemiah: The writing itself flew off the tablets. (Y. Taanit 4:5)

Discussion Questions:

1. We see here one of the Yerushalmi's hallmark characteristics: each sage offers his opinion but they are not all forced to harmonize with each other nor is any one picked as the authoritative one, as would happen in the Bavli. What kind of intellectual life would produce this sort of document?

2. It is clear that it was not only Moses who wanted to cast the tablets to the ground. In fact, here, it appears that God, the tablets and the writing itself wants to be destroyed rather than be given to this sinning people. How does this change your idea of what happened in this Torah story? Did you ever think that God would want the tablets destroyed? Did you ever imagine that the tablets themselves had feelings on the matter?