



KI TISA

THE BROKEN VESSEL

*Why Letting Go Opens the Door to G-d's Wisdom*

# PARSHAH OVERVIEW

## *Ki Tisa*

The people of Israel are told to each contribute exactly half a shekel of silver to the Sanctuary. Instructions are also given regarding the making of the Sanctuary's water basin, anointing oil, and incense. "Wisehearted" artisans Betzalel and Oholiab are placed in charge of the Sanctuary's construction, and the people are once again commanded to keep the Shabbat.

When Moses does not return when expected from Mount Sinai, the people make a Golden Calf and worship it. G-d proposes to destroy the errant

nation, but Moses intercedes on their behalf. Moses descends from the mountain, carrying the tablets of the Testimony engraved with the Ten Commandments; seeing the people dancing about their idol, he breaks the tablets, destroys the Golden Calf, and has the primary culprits put to death. He then returns to G-d to say: "If You do not forgive them, blot me out from the book that You have written."

G-d forgives the Jews but says that the effects of their sin will be felt for many generations. At first, G-d proposes to send

His angel along with them. But Moses insists that G-d Himself accompany His people to the Promised Land.

Moses prepares a new set of tablets and once more ascends the mountain, where G-d reinscribes the covenant on these second tablets. On the mountain, Moses is also granted a vision of the Divine Thirteen Attributes of Mercy. So radiant is Moses's face upon his return that he must cover it with a veil, which he removes only to speak with G-d and to teach His laws to the people.

## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

When you study the Torah, what is your primary focus: the wisdom you are about to learn or the privilege of reading G-d's book?



After Moses shattered the first tablets, G-d forgave the Jews and gave Moses a second set of tablets.



# TEXT 1

*Exodus 34:1*

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה פְּסֹל לְךָ שְׁנֵי לְחֹת אֲבָנִים  
כְּרֵאשֹׁנִים וְכָתַבְתִּי עַל הַלְּחֹת אֶת הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר  
הָיוּ עַל הַלְּחֹת הָרֵאשֹׁנִים אֲשֶׁר שִׁבַּרְתָּ.

And G-d said to Moses, "Carve out for yourself two stone tablets similar to the first set, and I will inscribe upon the tablets the words that were on the first tablets that you broke."

אֲשֶׁר שִׁבַּרְתָּ — “that you broke”

*asher shibarta*

G-d used these words  
to compliment Moses.

# TEXT 2A

*Talmud, Shabbat 87a*

שָׁבַר אֶת הַלֻּחוֹת, מֵאִי דָרַשׁ?

אָמַר, "וּמָה פָּסַח וְשֶׁהוּא אֶתְד  
מִתְרִי"ג מִצְוֹת, אֶמְרָה תּוֹרָה,  
'וְכָל בֶּן נֹכַר לֹא יֹאכַל בּוֹ' (שְׁמוֹת  
יב מג). הַתּוֹרָה כּוֹלָה כָּאֵן  
וְיִשְׂרָאֵל מְשׁוּמְדִים, עַל אַחַת  
כְּמָה וְכְמָה."

וּמַנְלֵן דְּהֶסְכִּים הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ  
הוּא עַל יְדוֹ?

שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר, "אֲנֹכִי שֶׁבַרְתָּ" (שְׁמוֹת  
לד א). וְאָמַר רִישׁ לְקִישׁ, "יִישַׁר  
כְּתָבְךָ וְשֶׁבַרְתָּ."

Moses broke the tablets. What was he thinking?

He said, "The paschal lamb is only one of 613 commandments, and G-d said, 'All children of foreigners may not partake' (Exodus 12:43). Here, the entire Torah is at stake and the Jews are in a state of apostasy; how much more so [are they unworthy of it]?"

Where do we see that G-d agreed with Moses?

It is written, "That you broke" (Exodus 34:1). Reish Lakish explained these words as, "Thank you for breaking them."

אֲשֶׁר — “that” → אִישׁוּר — “certification”  
*asher* *ishur*

**G-d:** “I endorse your  
breaking of the tablets.”

## TEXT 2B

*Rashi, Exodus 34:1*

אשר, אישור. שאישרו ושיבחו על  
שבירתן.

The word "that" implies endorsement.  
G-d endorsed Moses's decision and  
praised him for breaking the tablets.

## QUESTIONS

Why did G-d endorse Moses's decision to break the tablets?

Why didn't Moses return the tablets to G-d and preserve them for later?

## TEXT 3

*Talmud, Menachot 99a*

תני רב יוסף מלמד שהלוחות ושברי לוחות מונחין  
בארון.

אמר ריש לקיש פעמים שביטולה של תורה זהו יסודה.

Rabbi Yosef taught, "The tablets and the broken tablet shards were placed in the ark."

Reish Lakish taught, "Sometimes, undermining the Torah is its foundation."

## QUESTIONS

Why are the broken shards preserved in the holy ark? Shouldn't they be buried?

How does breaking the tablets lay the foundation for the entire Torah?



The second tablets contained much more Torah content than the first.

# TEXT 4

Midrash, Shemot Rabah  
46:1

אָמַר מֹשֶׁה, הֲרִי הִנֵּה לְיִשְׂרָאֵל מִי שְׂיִבְקֶשׁ עֲלֵיהֶם, אֲנִי מִי יִבְקֶשׁ עָלַי, הִתְחִיל מְצַטְעֵר עַל שְׁבוֹר הַלּוּחֹת.

וְאָמַר לוֹ הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא, "אֵל תְּצַטְעֵר בְּלוּחֹת הָרִאשׁוֹנוֹת, שְׁלֹא הָיוּ אֶלָּא עֲשָׂרַת הַדְּבָרוֹת לְבָד, וּבְלוּחֹת הַשְּׁנִיִּים אֲנִי נוֹתֵן לָךְ שְׂיִהְיֶה בָּהֶם הַלְּכוֹת מְדַרְשׁ וְאַגְדוֹת." הִדָּא הוּא דְכַתִּיב, "וַיִּגְדַּל לָךְ תַּעֲלָמוֹת חֻכְמָה כִּי כִפְלִים לְתוֹשִׁיָּהּ" (איוב יא ו).

Moses worried, "The Jews had an advocate to plead on their behalf. Who will advocate for me?" He began to feel bad about breaking the tablets.

G-d said to him, "Do not worry over the first set of tablets, for they only contained Ten Commandments, whereas the second set of tablets that I am granting you will also contain the law, the Midrash, and the Agadah." This is the meaning of the passage, "And [if only G-d would] reveal to you the mysteries of wisdom, which contain double wisdom" (Job 11:6).

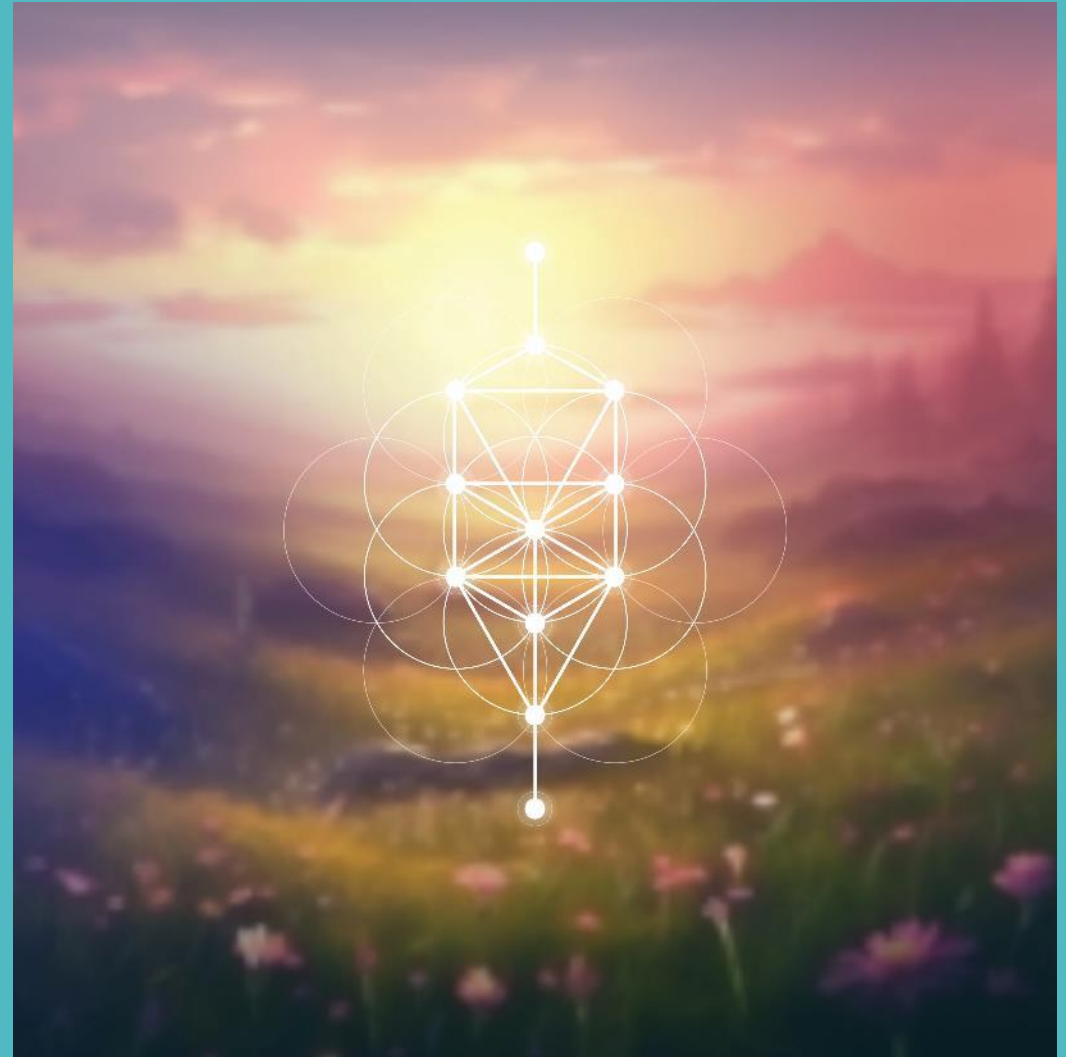
## ANSWERS

G-d endorsed Moses breaking the tablets rather than returning them because it ultimately led to the Jews receiving more Torah content. This act laid the foundation for the enhanced Torah we have today.

## ONE QUESTION REMAINS

Why are the broken shards preserved in the holy ark? They remind us of our shortcomings.

The Torah has two layers of wisdom: plain wisdom and profound wisdom.



# TEXT 5

*Rabbi Shneur Zalman  
of Liadi, Tanya, Likutei  
Amarim, chapter 4*

וְצִמְצַם הַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא רְצוֹנוֹ  
וְחִכְמָתוֹ בְּתַרְי"ג מְצוֹת הַתּוֹרָה  
וּבְהִלְכוּתֵיהֶן, וּבְצִרּוּפֵי אוֹתֵיזוֹת תְּנַ"ךְ,  
וּדְרָשׁוֹתֵיהֶן שְׁבָאֲגָדוֹת וּמְדַרְשֵׁי  
חֻכְמֵינוּ ז"ל.

בְּכַדֵּי שְׁכָל הַנְּשָׁמָה אוֹ רוּחַ וְנַפֶּשׁ  
שְׁבִגוּף הָאָדָם תּוּכַל לְהַשִּׁיגוֹ בְּדַעְתָּהּ.

. . . וְלָכֵן נִמְשָׁלָה הַתּוֹרָה לְמַיִם. מֵהַ  
מַיִם יוֹרְדִים מִמְּקוֹם גְּבוּהָ לְמְקוֹם  
נְמוּדָה, כִּי הַתּוֹרָה יֵרְדָה מִמְּקוֹם  
כְּבוֹדָהּ, שֶׁהִיא רְצוֹנוֹ וְחִכְמָתוֹ יִתְבָּרַךְ,  
וְאוֹרֵיטָא וְקַדְשָׁא בְּרִיךְ הוּא כֹּלָא חַד  
וְלִית מַחְשְׁבָה תְּפִיסָא בֵּיהּ כָּלֵל.  
וּמִשָּׁם נִסְעָה וְיֵרְדָה בְּסִטְרַת הַמְּדַרְגּוֹת  
מִמְּדַרְגָּה לְמְדַרְגָּה בְּהַשְׁתַּלְשְׁלוֹת  
הָעוֹלָמוֹת, עַד שֶׁנִּתְלַבְּשָׁה בְּדַבָּרִים  
גַּשְׁמִיִּים וְעַנְיָנֵי עוֹלָם הַזֶּה.

G-d concealed His desire and wisdom in the 613 commandments of the Torah and in their laws, in the sequence of letters in the biblical canon, and in the teachings of our sages of blessed memory, as documented in the Agadah and Midrash.

He did this so that every soul, spirit, and vivifying force dressed in a human body would be able to grasp [G-d's transcendental will and wisdom] with their human minds.

. . . It is for this reason that the Torah is compared to water. Just as water flows from a high point to a low point, so did the Torah descend from its place of honor, which is the realm of Divine will and wisdom, where it is seen to be one with G-d, a plane on which no mind [let alone a human mind] can grasp it. Then it traveled from there, descending through the mystery of spiritual levels, from one level to the next, following the devolution of countless worlds, until it could be dressed in material concepts and the physical phenomena of this world.



Beneath the outer layers  
of Torah is the infinite  
wisdom of G-d that is  
incomprehensible to us.

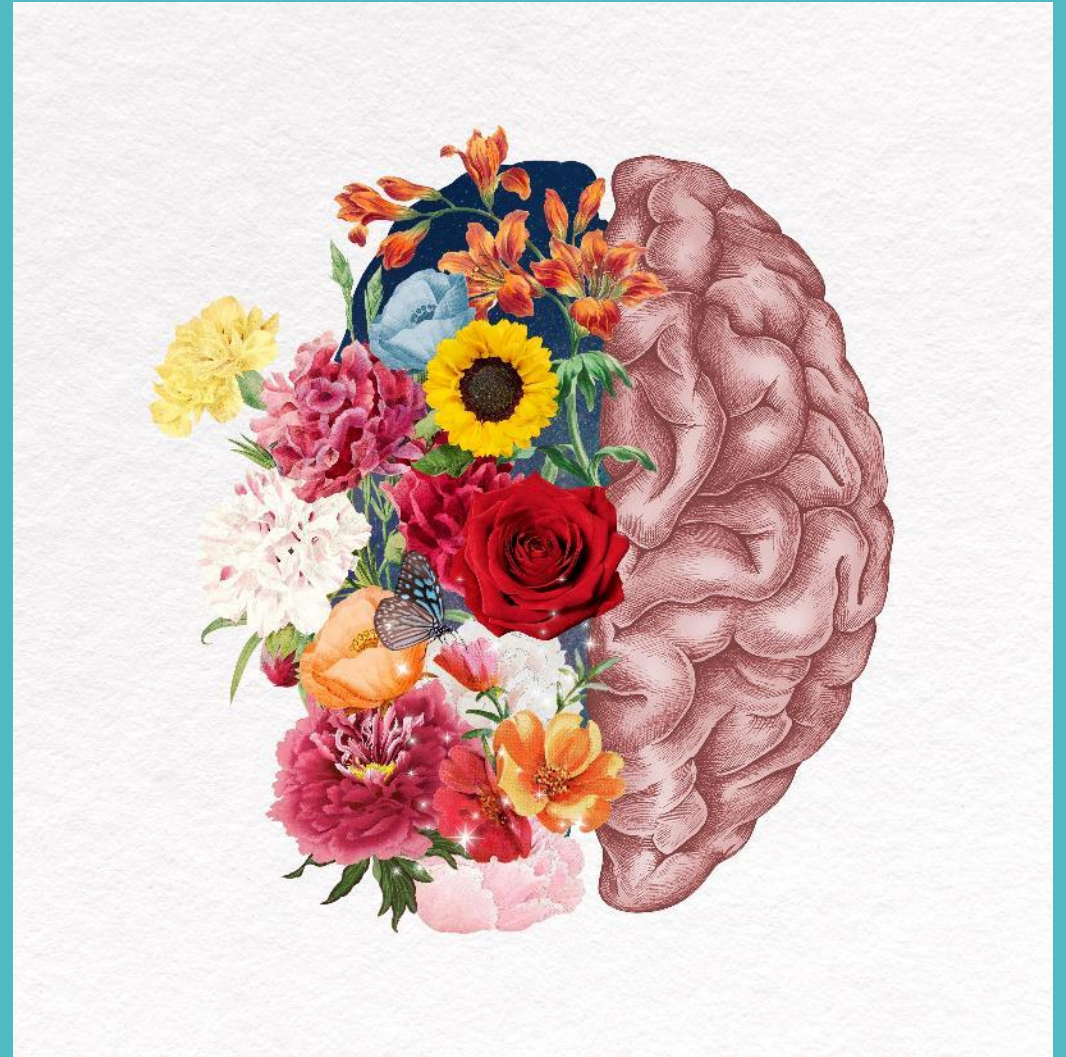
## TEXT 6

*Maimonides,  
Mishneh Torah, Laws  
of Repentance 5:5*

וְכַשֵּׁם שֶׁאֵין כֹּחַ בְּאָדָם לְהַשִּׁיג וְלִמְצֹא אֶמֶת הַבּוֹרָא, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "כִּי לֹא יִרְאֵנִי הָאָדָם וְחָי" (שְׁמוֹת לֵג כ), כִּי אֵין כֹּחַ בְּאָדָם לְהַשִּׁיג וְלִמְצֹא דַעְתּוֹ שֶׁל בּוֹרָא. הוּא שֶׁהַנְּבִיא אָמַר: "כִּי לֹא מַחְשְׁבוֹתַי מַחְשְׁבוֹתֵיכֶם וְלֹא דַרְכֵיכֶם דַּרְכֵי" (יִשְׁעִי נָה ח).

Just as no human can understand the Creator in His truest sense, as it is written, "For no person can see Me and live" (Exodus 33:20), so can no person understand the Creator's wisdom. This is what the prophet alluded to when he said, "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, and My paths are not your paths" (Isaiah 55:8).

As humans, we can appreciate these lofty concepts in an abstract way.



# TEXT 7

*Rabbi Meir Leibush  
Wisser, Job 11:6*

אין אנו משיגים מן הדברים רק  
את מקריהם החיצונים כפי מה  
שהם פועלים על חושינו. ומזה לא  
נוכל לדון על מהות הדברים כפי  
מה שהם בעצמם מזולת היחוס  
שבין שטחם החיצוני ובין חושינו.

כי תנאי משיגי החושים הם הזמן  
והמקום, והם אינם תנאי הדברים  
בעצמותם. ולפי זה אי אפשר  
שנשיג משום דבר השגה ברורה,  
לדעת איך הוא הדבר בעצמו לפי  
אמתתו. רק כפי מה שנראה לנו  
מפעולתו על חושינו.

We only grasp the temporal, external aspects of all things—the elements that relate to our senses. This understanding does not enable us to know these things in their purity, sans the relationship between their outer elements and our senses.

This is because our senses can only detect things that depend on the time-space continuum. However, the essence of a thing is not conditioned on time or space. Therefore, we can't gain a clear understanding of a thing on its purest level. We can only know it through its effect on our senses.

# TEXT 7

*Rabbi Meir Leibush  
Wisser, Job 11:6*

והמשיג עצמות הדברים בידיעה  
מושכלת שלא על ידי החוש, רק  
כפי מה שישכיל השכל המופשט  
מחומר, הוא יבין תעלומות חכמה  
לדעת מהות הדברים ואמתתם.

כי כל יש הוא מכופל, ועצמותו  
ואמתתו הוא משונה מתצוניותו  
המוחש על ידי החוש.

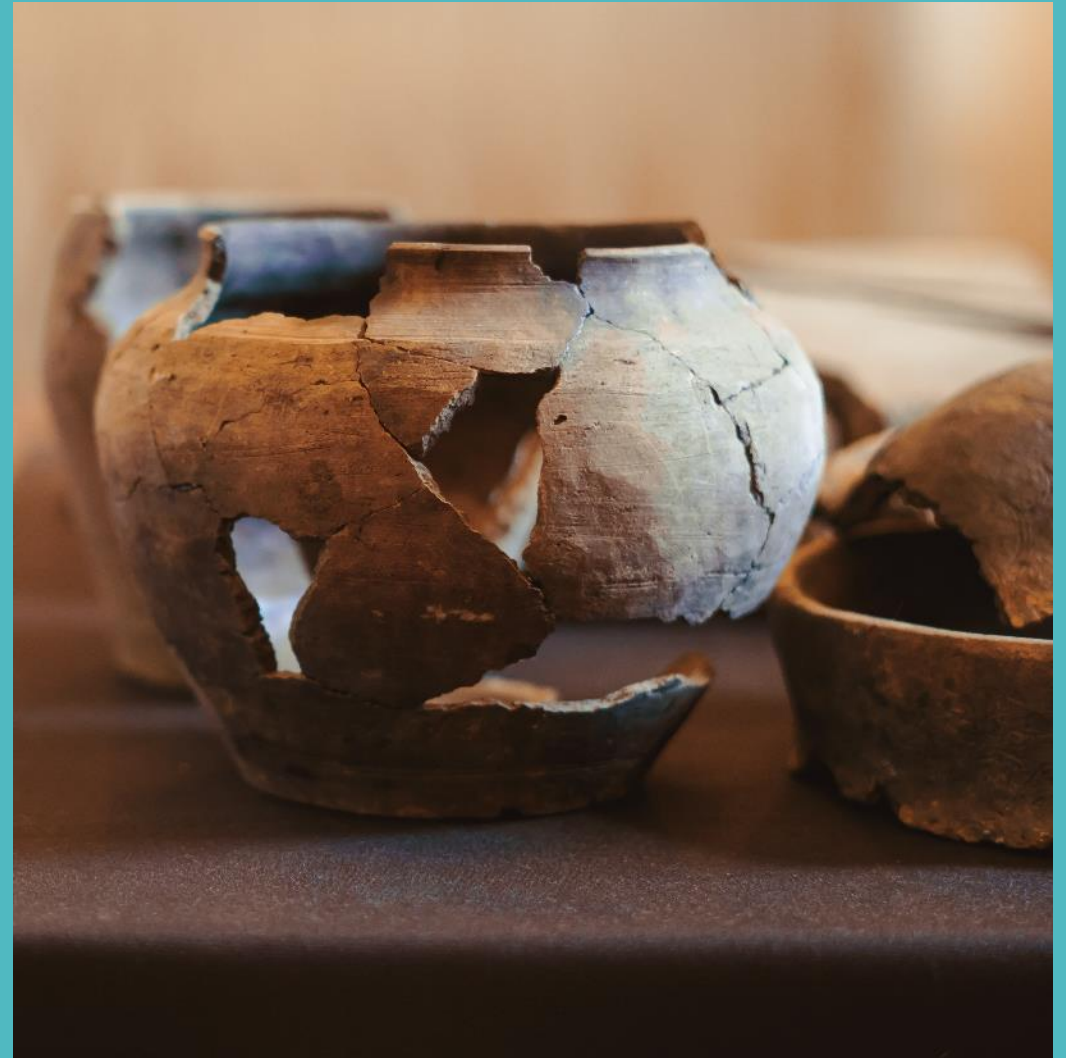
One who can grasp the essence of a thing without relying on data gained through the senses but rather on the abstract mind stripped of corporeality will understand the hidden wisdom and know the true nature of a thing.

For everything that exists, exists on two levels. Its essential truth is different from its external element that can be sensed.



The second set of tablets included a higher tier of Divine wisdom and gave us the ability to grasp that wisdom.

A physical vessel works only when it's whole, yet paradoxically only a broken vessel is effective for G-dliness.



## TEXT 8A

*Midrash, Vayikra*  
Rabah 7:2

אָמַר רַבִּי אֶלְכָסְנַדְרִי הֵדְיוֹט הֵזָה אִם מְשִׁימֵשׁ הוּא בְּכֵלִים  
נְשֻׁבָרִים גְּנָאֵי הוּא לוֹ, אֲבָל הַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא כְּלֵי תַשְׁמִינְשׁוּ  
נְשֻׁבָרִים, שְׁנֵאמַר, "קְרוֹב ה' לְנִשְׁבְּרֵי לֵב" (תהלים לד, יט).

Rabbi Alexandri said, "If an ordinary person must make use of a broken vessel, it is embarrassing. However, G-d's vessels are always broken, as it is written, 'G-d is close to those whose hearts are broken'" (Psalms 34:19).



Becoming a vessel for G-d and His wisdom requires letting go of ego and creating inner emptiness. That inner emptiness makes us a "broken vessel."

## TEXT 8B

*Rabbi Shneur Zalman  
of Liadi, Maamarei  
Admur Hazaken Al  
Inyanim, p. 402*

כמשל החיטה שבארץ, אינה מצמחת  
עד שתרקב תחילה, בחינת אין.

והענין, כי בארץ יש כח המצמיח,  
ובחיטה יש כח הצומח, אף בלבושים  
קמח וסובין. והן מסך מבדיל בניהם,  
עד שנרקבים ומתחברים כח הצומח  
עם המצמיח כו'.

כן אצל האדם, הלב הוא מוקף  
בקליפות, שהוא גסות הרוח להחזיק  
עצמו והשגתו ליש. והוא מסך מבדיל,  
לבל יראה האמת.

מה שאין כן כשמתבונן בשכלו, זה  
שהשגתו בעודו בגוף הוא שקר,  
וישברנה, על ידי השבירה יעשה כלי.

By way of analogy, consider a seedling that doesn't sprout until it rots and cavities appear in its shell.

It works like this: The soil contains an energy that drives growth. The grain seedling contains a specific energy that can grow [wheat that is converted into] flour. [The walls of the seed form] a curtain that separates the two growth energies. Then the seedling rots, and the energy of growth in the seedling joins with the energy in the soil that drives growth.

The same is true of a person. A wall of resistance surrounds the heart, preventing it from surrendering. This wall is the ego, which drives us to worship ourselves and our understanding. This is a curtain that prevents us from seeing the truth.

However, when we meditate on the simple fact that the physical body influences our paradigm and is therefore flawed, our paradigm breaks, and this turns us into a vessel.

True fulfillment comes from letting go, trusting in G-d, and recognizing that we are part of something greater than ourselves.

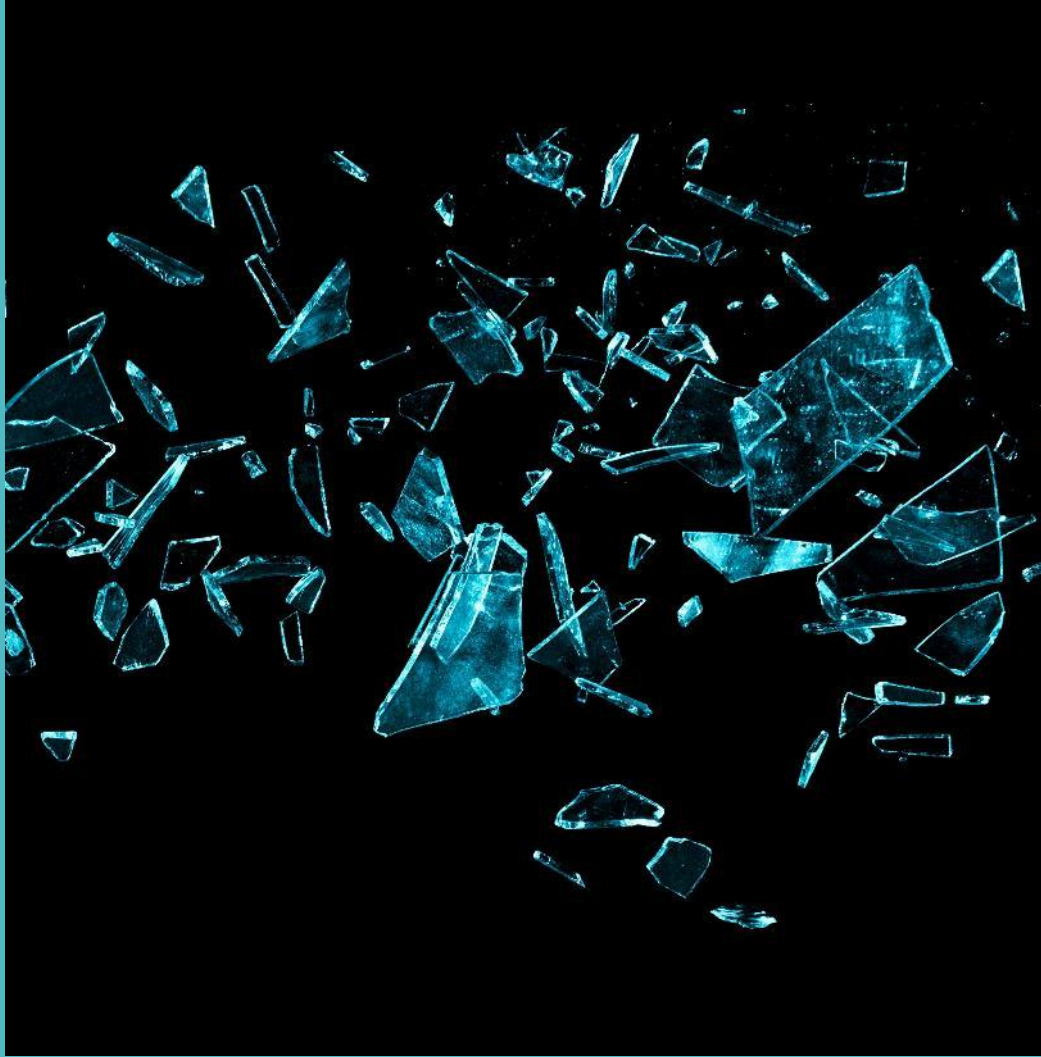




To access the higher level of Torah insight, we must break down our ego and surrender to G-d.

Torah study requires us to use both brain and soul.





After G-d elevated the Jews above all other nations at Mount Sinai, Moses understood that their ego needed to be shattered for them to experience G-dliness.

## TEXT 9

*The Rebbe, Rabbi  
Menachem Mendel  
Schneerson, Likutei  
Sichot 26, p. 252*

און דאס איז דער יישר כחך ששברת. ווייל די שבירת הלוחות אין  
אן אופן פון ואשברם לעיניכם האט אויפגעטאו ביי אידן דעם געפיל  
פון שפלות ושבירת לב וואס דאס האט זיי געמאכט א כלי ראוי צו  
קענען אויפנעמען די כפלים לתושי' פון לוחות שניות. דעם ריבוי עד  
אין סוף פון תורה שבעל פה.

G-d thanked Moses for breaking the tablets because he broke them before the eyes of the people. This gave them a sense of humble brokenness, which turned them into proper vessels for the higher level of wisdom delivered in the second set of tablets and the endless additions found in the Oral Torah.

G-d only enriched the second set of tablets with the higher level of wisdom because before the breaking of the tablets, the Jews had not yet become vessels for it.



## TEXT 10A

*Job 11:9*

אַרְכָּה מֵאֶרֶץ מִדָּה וּרְחֹבָה מִן־יָם.

Its measure is longer than the planet  
and broader than the sea.

## TEXT 10B

*Rabbi Shneur Zalman  
of Liadi, Igeret  
Hakodesh, Epistle 23*

פְּנִימִיּוֹת הַתּוֹרָה, וְשֶׁהִיא אֲגָדָה . . .  
וְשֶׁרֹב סוּדוֹת הַתּוֹרָה גְּנוּזִין בָּהּ.

The innermost [mystical] aspect of the Torah is Agadah . . . for the secrets of the Torah are concealed in it.

## ANSWER

The shards of the broken tablets were preserved to remind us of how the Jews merited higher levels of Divine wisdom—through humble surrender.

## TORAH STUDY

**Higher level:** We surrender to G-d and open ourselves to His higher, infinite wisdom.

**Lower level:** We engage our minds to grasp the Torah's revealed teachings.

When we learn Torah in both ways, we connect to the Author of the Torah, G-d Himself.

## KEY POINTS

1. The Torah contains two tiers of wisdom: Divine insight clothed in conventional wisdom and raw Divine wisdom. The human mind can grasp conventional wisdom. Transcendental Divine wisdom transcends our intellectual capacity.
2. The only way to access our connection to G-d is by surrendering our ego and sense of separateness and recognizing that we are a part of G-d, not apart from G-d.
3. Letting go of our independent self, and all the dreams and goals therein, can be frightening. It is why we refer to this as the experience of breaking—becoming a broken vessel.
4. However, embracing our authentic selves as part of G-d is thrilling and blissful. In retrospect, it is hard to imagine why we were so afraid.
5. When studying Torah, we must access both levels of wisdom. We use our minds to grasp the conventional wisdom. Then we surrender to G-d and access Divine wisdom. This way, we connect with the Torah and its Author.

