

Shards in the Ark:
Of Passover and Promises
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What would you do if you had a mountain dangling over your head? An actual, gargantuan mound of dirt and stone? Would you agree to anything to save yourself? That's the theory of the modern French-Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. He proposes, based on nuances in ancient Biblical Hebrew, that the Israelites were Yahweh's third choice as the chosen people and he gave them an ultimatum – agree to be my tribe or I will drop Mt Sinai on your heads. These newly liberated slaves stood not at the base of Sinai, but under it.

I first heard this theory in Divinity School and found it both troubling and fascinating. Did Yahweh actually want the Israelites as his chosen ones or had he run out of options? Did the Israelites sin in the desert, building a golden calf, because they were coerced into their covenant with God?

And, ultimately, might we understand the Passover story of freedom from bondage and wandering in the wilderness for 40 years as one of learning to make and keep promises and the consequences for breaking them? Their destination was called the Promised Land, after all.

Did Yahweh grasp that the humans he had created in Genesis needed to learn to honor their vows and keep their promises in Exodus? Dangling mountain or not, evidently so. And we continue to learn that lesson in our post-modern, swipe left, maybe-I-do world.

Yahweh made four promises to Moses when he called to the prophet from the burning bush to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. During the Passover Seder Hagaddah service, participants drink four cups of wine to honor those promises.

Lise read them for us in our opening words this morning. In Exodus 6, Yahweh tells Moses, "Therefore, say to the Israelites: 'I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. ⁷ I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians.

That surely sounds like a great offer, eh? It has dawned on me, though, especially over this past week of pondering the topic so intently, that the Israelites could not have fully grasp what they were agreeing to. They had no experience with choices, promises or vows, making them or keeping them; they had been slaves, and in the exodus, they were mere babes in the tempting wilderness of freedom. I believe that the 40 years they

were required to wander were not just a form of punishment, but also (perhaps even more significantly) a learning experience in freedom and responsibility.

Victoria Safford alludes to this likelihood in her poem *Desert Spring*, which we heard earlier. She writes:

“They had no idea what they were getting into, following this Moses, this wild-eyed one who claimed visions and made promises, and who after all could guarantee them nothing, except death if they were caught. Of freedom they knew nothing, except what they could taste by living its opposite, and that taste became a hunger. They went into the wilderness and they knew nothing but the journey.”

These foundational events surrounding the chosen-ness of the Jewish people, the four promises, and the deliverance of commandments comprise what is known collectively as the Mosaic covenant. Yahweh’s pact with Moses and his chosen people. It is a binding together, a sacred commitment between a tribe and its God.

Covenant is a word familiar to us as Unitarian Universalists. We are brought together by covenant rather than a unified creed. We recite a covenant each week. It is an agreement, a sacred contract, we’ve entered into with one another as a beloved community. We have agreed to it freely and we must keep it responsibly. And we renew that covenant through the offering of our time, talent and treasury. We abide with one another in both wilderness and paradise.

The Israelites’ covenant with God needed to be renewed after the episode with the Golden calf and the smashing of the first tablets. So, Moses went back up the Mountain to receive a second set of tablets. Yahweh could have moved on and chosen another people, but he was going to keep his side of the bargain and offer an opportunity for redemption. Or, perhaps, he was dangling the Mountain over their heads again. How could we know?

There is a famous Jewish joke that suggests that the first set of commandments numbered 200. And that when Moses came down with the second set, he told the expectant Israelites that he had good news and bad news. The good news was that he had bargained Yahweh down to 10 commandments. The bad news was that the whole killing and coveting no-no was still a thing.

All joking aside, the differences between these two sets of tablets is significant. On a website entitled [The 70 Faces of Torah](#), a Talmudic scholar tells us that, “Whereas the first tablets were Godly, the second are human. The first are described as: “The tablets were God’s work, and the writing was God’s writing” (ex.32), whereas the second tablets are a joint God-human effort: “the Lord said to me, ‘Carve out two tablets of stone like the first, and ...I will inscribe on the tablets the commandments that were on the first tablets that you smashed.” (Deut 10:1-2)

The first tablets were pristine, unblemished. They shattered the moment that they encountered sin. (the Golden Calf.) The second tablets are given after the sin and after

God's forgiveness of the Golden Calf. They acknowledge human error and welcome human forgiveness. They are created by human effort, expressed by the fact the Moses, not God, hewed the tablets. This understanding leads Rabbi Nachman of Breslav, as expressed by his student, Rabbi Natan, to see the broken and intact tablets as a process of renewal and repair.

By means of the idea of broken tablets, of broken faith; through that brokenness itself, faith returns and rehabilitates itself. And this is the embodiment of the concept of the second tablets. Because thanks to the existence of small fragments of the broken faith, he fulfils the advice of the sages that those for whom faith is broken, they should return and rebuild that faith. Promises made, promises broken, trust and a covenant renewed through atonement and forgiveness.

This wisdom pertains to us, too, here in this Sanctuary in a vastly different time and context. The right of private judgement and the use of conscience are foundational principles in the development of Unitarian Universalism. We might also ponder: What does it mean to be free? To have free will, to be endowed with freedom to choose and to promise?

As humans in a free society, we give and receive promises. We avow, we pledge, and we covenant. Sometimes we succeed at keeping our promises and honoring our vows and then, at times, there are promises broken.

Why do we make promises? I'd argue that it is an essential aspect of human bonding from childhood pinky swears to romantic wedding vows to stone-cold contractual agreements. Promises made and kept strengthen our personal character and the integrity of our relationships.

In an article for Psychology Today magazine, the therapist Michelle Gielan highlights some of reminders about promises and why keeping them is beneficial. She notes that

- Promises are hard work. If following through on a promise was easy, then broken promises wouldn't hurt so much. Promises are challenging because they require us to step outside our wants and fulfill something for someone else or to break old habits.
- Promises are commitments. People with strong trusting relationships rank higher in emotional intelligence and are more likely to remain loyal to their commitments.
- Promises can make or break your reputation. When a promise is broken, your personal integrity suffers and others will not trust you again so willingly.
- Promises should not go beyond your own boundaries. Ever heard the expression, "Don't make promises you can't keep?" Be thoughtful about what you promise in the first place. Breaking a promise is the same as disrespecting yourself.

So, why do we break them? There are so many possibilities: a weak will, feeling coerced into that promise (like the Israelites, perhaps), and a world of too many options. Some add these reasons to the list: decreased affiliation with religious communities, the flimsy commitments within social media, and the self-absorbed belief in endless reinvention...out with the old and in with the new?

We are human. We make promises and despite our best intentions, we break them. The shards of the Israelite's broken promise (those first tablets) were placed in the ark of the covenant alongside the intact ones. That most holy ark represents the heart of God. A covenant is something you give your heart to and after 40 years, the wanderers forged that heart-bond in blood, sweat and tears. Regardless of its origins, the chosen people grew into their covenant with Yahweh, with each other, and with themselves.

Do you feel a need to renew a commitment to yourself or others to be a promise keeper? As modern people, as Unitarian Universalists, we are endowed with the opportunity to choose and the freedom to make promises.

May we remember that these blessings come with a clause to own our choices and honor our promises. And that when we don't, we can atone and potentially, be forgiven, place the shards of our broken vows in the ark of our hearts, strap on our sandals, hold hands with our best selves and with the spirit of Moses and Miriam, and journey on, together, towards the Promised Land.

Blessed be. Blessed we. And Amen.

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