

# A Conversation on the Plane

Category: Devarim, Ekev

*What do Israeli kids know about Judaism? Why did Moses break the tablets?  
And what is the secret to Jewish continuity?*

## A Conversation

This week, I visited Israel. On the plane ride back, sitting across the aisle, was an elderly woman who had immigrated from the former Soviet Union in the nineties, and next to her was her granddaughter, an 11-year-old girl who was born and raised in Israel. They both live in Netanya.

Over the course of the flight, I had a long conversation with the pair, where I quizzed the young girl about her Jewish knowledge.

At first, I asked her if there was any form of prayer at her school. She said, “no,” but she immediately added that she believed in G-d. When I asked her if she knew the passage of “Shema Yisrael,” she had no idea what I was talking about. I asked her if she had ever visited a synagogue; “no,” she answered, “but I’ve seen pictures of a synagogue!”

I decided to try my luck in a different way, so I asked her if they had Bible classes in school. She responded that they did, but she added that Biblical Hebrew was too difficult for her to understand.

“How is that possible?” The grandmother suddenly intervened. “I thought you are a straight A student!”

The girl answered honestly: “Yes, I am a perfect student in all subjects except Tanach...”

“Her teacher is probably not that good,” the grandmother tried to defend her.

“I actually like the teacher,” the girl interjected.

The girl turned to me and asked me to tell her something “in Tanachit (bible language).”

“Let’s see if I’ll understand.”

I recited the first verse of the Torah, and she actually understood it well. Then I moved onto “Shema Yisrael,” and she didn’t understand it at all. Who is the “Israel” that needs to hear? I moved on to “Ve’ahavta,” and she didn’t do that well either. My “bible lesson” wasn’t that much of a success.

Later, I asked them if they light Shabbat candles. The grandmother said that she does occasionally, whenever she meets the women at street corners who hand out candles. The granddaughter said that at her house they don’t light candles, but they do make a blessing on grape juice and a blessing on challah every Friday.

Throughout our conversation, the child demonstrated her “Jewish knowledge” several times. The grandmother mentioned the word “goyim,” and the granddaughter looked at her and asked, “What is goyim?!” At some point, I mentioned the word “mitzvah,” and she has no idea what that word meant either; the only thing she knew was that in about a year, she would have a bat mitzvah party, and her mother told her that she would then become responsible for her actions. But what is a “mitzvah”? It was actually the grandmother who knew to say that it meant “good deeds.”

“What about Yom Kippur?” I asked.

“I love Yom Kippur” she answered, “because everyone rides bicycles.” She knew that it was a day to ask for forgiveness, but she “only does it sometimes.”

“Pesach?” She learned about it in school, but “at home we don’t have a seder.”

“Yes, we do,” her grandmother argued...

I encouraged her to start lighting Shabbos candles; I explained to her that girls light one candle, and married women light two, and that if she began lighting candles, her entire family would begin to follow in her footsteps. Her grandmother said that she would be happy to give her a candlestick, but before I got off the plane, when I asked her if she would indeed light candles, she was not ready to commit...

However, this little girl does believe in peace – Shalom! She thinks that everyone should live in peace.

# Why Break?

In this week's parshah, Moses returns to the story of the sin of the golden calf. He says that when he went up to Mount Sinai to receive the Torah, he stayed there for forty days, without eating or drinking. Then, G-d gave him the two tablets, and told him to go down from the mountain, because the people had committed a sin: they had built a golden calf of idol worship. "I descended the mountain," Moses relates, "and I saw that you had made for yourself an idol. I grabbed the two tablets and threw them down, breaking them in front of you" (Ekev 9).

This brings us to the big question: "Why did Moses break the tablets?"

In the book of Exodus, in Parshat Ki Tisa, it says that Moses was angry, but when Moses himself tells the story, he doesn't mention anger at all. On the contrary, he mentions that he was afraid of G-d's anger...

In one of his talks, the Rebbe cited a midrash that gives a unique explanation:

"When G-d gave him the tablets, they carried their own weight, but when he came down and approached the camp, and saw the golden calf, the letters flew away and they became too heavy for Moses, and they broke" (Midrash Tanchuma, Tisa 26).

The Rebbe asks: What is the meaning of the statement that the letters flew away? The Ten Commandments were engraved on the tablets, so how exactly did they fly away? Had they been two separate entities, like ink on parchment, it would be possible for the ink to erase or disappear, but how exactly do engraved letters leave the stone?

The Rebbe gave an amazing explanation (Toras Menachem vol. 69 pg. 183):

The tablets themselves had to be naturally heavy; after all, they were six handbreadths by six handbreadths (18 inches by 18 inches) of stone. But the letters were like a living soul, which made the tablets lighter than their actual weight. With the letters, the tablets became like a living being that 'carries itself'; after all, it is easier to carry a living thing than to carry an inanimate object. Therefore, when the letters flew away, the 'body' of the tablets suddenly became very heavy.

In other words, the concept that the words flew away doesn't mean that they physically emerged from the stone, but rather that the life-force of the words flew away and the stones "died." Moses recognized that the tablets no longer served their purpose, and G-d no longer had interest in them. Therefore, he broke them.

## **The Lesson**

This teaches us a very important lesson.

Tablets that are not alive will eventually break. Jewish observance without passion and excitement will not survive. The secret of the Jewish people's survival is that Jewish life is exciting and vibrant.

Three hundred years ago, when the Chassidic movement was founded, millions of observant Jews lived in Eastern Europe. The problem was that it was a Judaism without vibrancy; the people lived under pressure; the preachers would speak about G-d's wrath, and everyone observed Torah and its commandments out of a sense of obligation.

But then, the Baal Shem Tov came and told these Jews that G-d loved them and loved their mitzvos. He told them that the angels kiss every mitzvah they fulfill, and that every simple Jew is beloved in the eyes of the Creator. He breathed new life into their Judaism; it's no wonder that Chasidism in Eastern Europe spread like wildfire...

The way to bring Judaism to every Jew, and especially to children, is with 'life.' It's not enough to observe mitzvos; you have to do them joyfully. As the Talmud says: "Every mitzvah they received upon themselves with joy, they still do with joy, and every mitzvah they received upon themselves grudgingly, they still do grudgingly." (Tractate Shabbat 130a).

A vibrant Judaism is the secret to a surviving Judaism.

(Based on this week's Jewish Insights class. <https://jewishinsights.org/>)