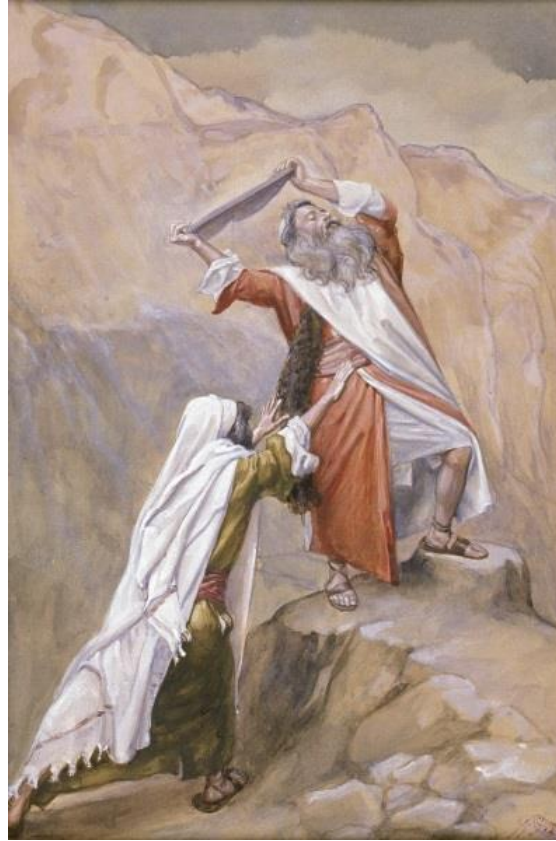


Moshe and the Luchot – Artwork



Moses with the Tables of the Law
Guido Reni



*Moses Destroys the Tables
of the Ten Commandments*
James Tissot



Moses breaks Tablets of Law
Marc Chagall

Moshe and the Luchot in Art

Introduction

The three images discussed here all display Moshe with the Tablets of the Covenant, ("לוחות הברית") but at slightly different points in the narrative. In Reni's image,^[1] Moshe simply holds the tablets, while in Tissot's painting^[2] he prepares to throw them in response to the sin of the Golden Calf. Chagall^[3] illustrates the next moment, after the tablets have already been dropped. The three artists' depictions of Moshe vary, reflecting their different understanding of his emotions at this juncture. Similarly, their portrayals of the tablets differ, highlighting how little we really know about their shape, size, and what was written on each of them.

Contrasting Images

Reni

Reni's painting is almost a portrait of Moshe. The majestic leader fills the image, his red robes contrasting with the grey clouds in the sky. He holds one of the long stone tablets against his body and lifts the other above his head. It is not clear if he is reacting to the Golden Calf, or if he is simply calling out to the nation to present them with the tablets.

Tissot

Unlike Reni, Tissot chooses to render Moshe in action, capturing his fury at the sinning nation. Moshe stands on a rock, body arching back, as he prepares to hurl the tablets below. A second figure, presumably Yehoshua, reaches for Moshe's robes, perhaps attempting to prevent the sacred tablets from being destroyed. The scene is set, not amidst lofty clouds, but against a mountainous range. The harsh lines of the stones reflect Moshe's severe response to the Golden Calf.

Chagall

Chagall, like the other artists, opts to portray just Moshe and the tablets without the accompanying nation. The image is divided on a diagonal with a hint of grey-black clouds filling the left half, and a greenish mountain covering the right. A dismayed Moshe stands on Mount Sinai, his hands held aloft in a gesture of helplessness. At his feet lie the still intact stone tablets which have apparently dropped from his hands.

Relationship to the Biblical Text

The artists' choices reflect certain ambiguities in the Biblical text and different possible interpretive stances:

One or Two?

While Tissot portrays the tablets as two connected blocks of stone, Reni depicts them as two separate tablets.^[4] Which depiction is closer to the Biblical text? The tablets are consistently referred to as "two tablets of testimony" or "two tablets of stone",^[5] suggesting that they were two distinct slabs. Why, then, do Tissot and many earlier artists depict them as attached? This may be due to the fact that writing tablets in medieval times took the form of diptychs (a two-leaved tablet).^[6] Alternatively, the popular assumption that each tablet contained only five commandments^[7] may have led artists to view each tablet alone as incomplete, and, thus, to join the two.

Throwing the Tablets

In Tissot's image, an angry Moshe is about to heave the tablets down below. In Chagall's painting, in contrast, Moshe looks as if he has simply dropped the stones. What really happened? Shemot 32:19 states, "וַיִּשְׁלֶךְ מִיָּדָיו אֶת הַלְּחֹת וַיִּשְׁבֶּר אֹתָם תַּחַת הַהָר", which is commonly understood to mean that Moshe intentionally smashed the tablets.^[8] [Rashbam](#), though, suggests that upon seeing the Golden Calf, Moshe's strength left him and the tablets fell from his hands.^[9] Instead of focusing on Moshe's anger, Rashbam and Chagall highlight Moshe's frustration and disappointment with the nation.

Division of the Decalogue

How were the commandments written on the tablets? Of the three artists, only Reni relates to the question. While many assume that there were five commandments on each stone,^[10] Reni divides the Decalogue unevenly, displaying "Honor your father..." as the first commandment on the second tablet. What are the origins of such a division?

The Torah actually never states how the commandments were distributed amongst the two stones, and this allows for various possibilities. According to R. Chanina ben Gamliel in the [Mekhilta](#), there were five on each tablet, with each commandment in some way relating to its partner on the second tablet. The Sages [there](#), in contrast, suggest that there were ten on each tablet.^[11] Reni, here, follows the division of Augustine,^[12] who has the three commandments between man and God on one tablet and the seven commandments between man and man on the other.^[13] For elaboration, see [Decalogue Divisions](#).

Shape and Size

All three artists paint the tablets as curved on top, but they differ in the way they envision their overall size. While Tissot and Chagall portray the tablets as a relatively small and square twosome, Reni depicts long and rectangular tablets. The Biblical text is silent on the tablets' shape and size but Rabbinic sources^[14] suggest that each was a square, six handbreadths in width and length, and three handbreadths in thickness. It is not totally clear how these measurements are obtained and, in fact, the only known limiting factor is related to the dimensions given for the ark which contained them.^[15] For more, see [Ark of the](#)

Covenant.

Moshe's Horns?

Chagall portrays Moshe with two horns on his head. These are absent from the other depictions, but are a prominent feature of many renderings of Moshe. In [Shemot 34:30](#), after Moshe descends with the second set of tablets, we are told, "כִּי קָרַן עוֹר פָּנָיו" (Moshe's skin took on a radiant glow). The conception that the verse speaks of a horned Moshe stems from the translation in Jerome's Latin Vulgate which renders "קָרַן", as *cornuta*, or horn.^[16] It is perhaps surprising, though, that Chagall, a Jewish artist, would be influenced by the Vulgate, and it is possible that his source is actually Rashi's comments on the verse.^[17] When explaining the phrase, [Rashi](#) also connects the word "קָרַן" to horns, writing: "because the light shone and protruded like horns." If so, Chagall is portraying shining beams, which simply appear like horns.^[18]

^[1] Reni (1575-1642) was an Italian Baroque painter, known for his classical style and his many religious and mythological scenes. This painting dates to 1624 and is currently housed in the Galleria Borghese, Italy.

^[2] James Tissot (1836-1902) was a French painter who spent the later part of his career painting Biblical scenes. This painting can be found in the Jewish Museum, New York.

^[3] Marc Chagall (1887-1985) was born in Russia to a Chassidic family. He is one of the most well-known and celebrated modern Jewish artists, working in a variety of media from painting to stained glass. Many of his works were inspired by his Chassidic background and relate to religious and Biblical themes. This painting can be found in the Musée National Message Biblique Marc Chagall, France.

^[4] In Chagall's painting shown here, it is not completely clear whether the tablets are connected or not. In several of his other images, though, they are more obviously attached.

^[5] See, for instance, [Shemot 32:15](#), [34:1](#), [34:29](#)

^[6] Thus, medieval artists naturally depicted the tablets based on their contemporary models. Modern artists, in turn, were likely influenced by the earlier renderings.

^[7] See below that not all agree on this point.

^[8] This is supported by the *piel* (intensive) form of the word "וַיִּשְׁבֵּר".

^[9] The word "וַיִּשְׁלֶךְ" is difficult as it connotes a throwing rather than dropping. This prompts Rashbam to suggest that Moshe managed to throw them slightly away from him so as not to drop them on his feet. Rashbam's position might be motivated by a discomfort with the idea that Moshe would intentionally destroy the handiwork of Hashem.

^[10] See, for example, this [image](#) of the tablets by Chagall, or Rembrandt's famous [painting](#). Depictions of the tablets in many synagogues atop the ark similarly tend to portray five on each slab.

[11] This position can be understood in light of what is known about covenants in the Ancient Near East, where a copy of the terms was given to each party. If the tablets represented the written contract of the covenant between Hashem and His nation, here too, two copies are necessary. Other opinions in the Yerushalmi go as far as to suggest that there were 20 or 40 on each tablet, presumably assuming that the commandments were written on the front and back of the stones, or that the stones were a cube with writing on four of its sides.

[12] Quaestionum in Heptateuchum libri VII:II:71.

[13] According to Augustine, the first commandment combines, "I am the Lord..." with "You shall have no other gods...", while the verse of "Do not covet..." actually constitutes two separate commands, one for the house of a fellow man and one for his wife.

[14] See the discussion in [Bavli Bava Batra](#).

[15] The ark was two and a half cubits in length, a cubit and a half in width, and a cubit and a half in height. This gives a maximum, but not minimum, size for the tablets. As it is not clear if the two tablets were placed side by side (as assumed by the Talmud Bavli) or laid one atop of the other, many varying dimensions are possible. There is also controversy regarding what else was placed in the ark and regarding the amount of handbreadths in a cubit, all of which affect the calculations.

[16] This is a valid possible translation of the noun form, קֶרַח, which can be understood as either a beam of light or a horn. In context, though, the verse seems to be speaking of a shining countenance, not a horned Moshe. It is also possible that Jerome himself did not think that Moshe literally sprouted horns, but understood the word "horned" as a metaphor to mean glorified or strong. See [Yirmeyahu 48:25](#), [Yechezkel 29:21](#), and [Tehillim 148:14](#) where such metaphoric usages can be found.

[17] It is also possible that Chagall was influenced not directly by the Vulgate itself, but rather indirectly from all of the artistic renderings which were influenced by the Vulgate.

[18] In some of his [other depictions](#), this is even more explicit.

Sources

Biblical Texts

שמות ל"א:י"ח

וַיִּתֵּן אֶל מֹשֶׁה כְּכֹלֹתוֹ לְדַבֵּר אֵתוֹ בְּהַר סִינַי שְׁנֵי לַחַת הָעֵדוּת לַחַת אֶבֶן כְּתָבִים בְּאֶצְבַּע אֱלֹהִים.

שמות ל"ב:ט"ו-י"ט

(טו) וַיִּפֹּן וַיֵּרָד מֹשֶׁה מִן הַהָר וּשְׁנֵי לַחַת הָעֵדוּת בְּיָדוֹ לַחַת כְּתָבִים מִשְׁנֵי עֲבָרֵיהֶם מִזֶּה וּמִזֶּה הֵם כְּתָבִים. (טז) וְהַלַּחַת מַעֲשֵׂה אֱלֹהִים הִמָּה וְהַמְּכָתֵב מְכָתֵב אֱלֹהִים הוּא חֲרוּת עַל הַלַּחַת. (יז) וַיִּשְׁמַע יְהוָה אֶת קוֹל הָעָם בְּרָעָה וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל מֹשֶׁה קוֹל מְלַחֲמָה בַּמַּחֲנֶה. (יח) וַיֹּאמֶר אֵין קוֹל עֲנוּת גְּבוּרָה וְאֵין קוֹל עֲנוּת חַלּוּשָׁה קוֹל עֲנוּת אֲנָכִי שָׁמַע. (יט) וַיְהִי כַּאֲשֶׁר קָרַב אֶל הַמַּחֲנֶה וַיֵּרָא אֶת הָעֵגֶל וּמַחֲלַת וַיַּחַר אֶף מֹשֶׁה וַיִּשְׁלַח מִיָּדוֹ מִיָּדָיו אֶת הַלַּחַת וַיִּשְׂבֵּר אֶתֶם תַּחַת הָהָר.

שמות ל"ד:א'

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה פָּסֹל לְךָ שְׁנֵי לַחַת אֲבָנִים כַּרְאשֵׁינִים וְכַתְּבֵתִי עַל הַלַּחַת אֶת הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ עַל הַלַּחַת הַרְאשֵׁינִים אֲשֶׁר שִׁבַּרְתָּ.

שמות ל"ד:כ"ט-ל"ה

(כט) וַיְהִי בְּרִדַת מֹשֶׁה מִהָר סִינַי וּשְׁנֵי לַחַת הָעֵדוּת בְּיַד מֹשֶׁה בְּרִדְתוֹ מִן הָהָר וּמֹשֶׁה לֹא יָדַע כִּי קָרַן עוֹר פָּנָיו בְּדַבְּרוֹ אֵתוֹ. (ל) וַיֵּרָא אַהֲרֹן וְכָל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת מֹשֶׁה וְהִנֵּה קָרַן עוֹר פָּנָיו וַיִּירָאוּ מִגִּשְׁתֵּת אֱלֹהֵי. (לא) וַיִּקְרָא אֲלֵהֶם מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּשְׁבוּ אֵלָיו אַהֲרֹן וְכָל הַנְּשָׂאִים בְּעֵדָה וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה אֲלֵהֶם. (לב) וְאַחֲרַי כֹּן נִגְשׂוּ כָל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּצְוּם אֶת כָּל אֲשֶׁר דָּבַר ה' אֵתוֹ בְּהַר סִינַי. (לג) וַיְכַל מֹשֶׁה מִדַּבֵּר אֶתֶם וַיִּתֵּן עַל פָּנָיו מַסְוָה. (לד) וּבָבֹא מֹשֶׁה לְפָנָיו ה' לְדַבֵּר אֵתוֹ יָסִיר אֶת הַמַּסְוָה עַד צֵאתוֹ וַיִּצָּא וַדַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת אֲשֶׁר יִצְוָה. (לה) וַרְאוּ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת פָּנָיו מֹשֶׁה כִּי קָרַן עוֹר פָּנָיו מֹשֶׁה וְהִשִּׁיב מֹשֶׁה אֶת הַמַּסְוָה עַל פָּנָיו עַד בֹּאוֹ לְדַבֵּר אֵתוֹ.

ירמיהו מ"ח:כ"ה

נִגְדָעָה קָרַן מוֹאֵב וַיִּרְעוּ נִשְׁבְּרָה נָאִם ה'.

יחזקאל כ"ט:כ"א

בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא אֶצְמִיחַ קָרַן לְבַיִת יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹךְ אֶתֶן פֶּתַחֹן פֶּה בְּתוֹכְכֶם וַיִּדְעוּ כִּי אֲנִי ה'.

תהלים קמ"ח:י"ד

וַיָּרֶם קָרְן לְעֵמּוֹ תְּהִלָּה לְכָל חֲסִידָיו לְבָנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל עִם קָרְבוֹ הַלְלוּ יְהוָה.

Classical Texts

מכילתא יתרו דבחדש ח'

כיצד נתנו עשרת הדברות: ה' על לוח זה וה' על לוח זה. - כתיב אנכי יי' אלהיך וכנגדו לא תרצח, מגיד הכתוב שכל מי ששופך דם, מעלה עליו הכתוב כאלו ממעט בדמות המלך; משל למלך בשר ודם שנכנס למדינה והעמיד לו איקונות ועשה לו צלמים וטבעו לו מטבעות; לאחר זמן כפו לו איקונותיו שברו לו צלמיו ובטלו לו מטבעותיו ומיעטו בדמותו של מלך; כך כל מי שהוא שופך דמים, מעלה עליו הכתוב כאלו ממעט בדמות המלך, שני (בראשית ט"ו) שופך דם האדם וגו' כי בצלם אלהים עשה את האדם. - כתיב לא יהיה לך וכתוב כנגדו לא תנאף, מגיד הכתוב שכל מי שעובד עבודה זרה מעלה עליו הכתוב כאלו מנאף אחר המקום שני (יחזקאל ט"ז: ל"ב) האשה המנאפת תחת אשה תקח את זרים וכתוב (הושע ג': א') ויאמר ה' אלי עוד לך אהב אשת אהובת רע ומנאפת וגו'. - כתיב לא תשא את שם ה' אלהיך לשוא וכנגדו כתיב לא תגנוב, מגיד הכתוב שכל מי שהוא גונב, לסוף בא לידי שבועת שוא, שני (ירמיה ז': ט') הגנוב רצוח ונאוף והשבע לשקר וכתוב (הושע ד': ב') אלה וכחש ורצוח וגנוב ונאוף. - כתיב זכור את יום השבת לקדשו וכנגדו כתיב לא תענה. מגיד הכתוב שכל מי שמחלל את השבת מעיד לפני מי שאמר והיה העולם, שלא ברא עולמו לששה ימים ולא נח בשביעי, וכל מי שמשמר את השבת מעיד לפני מי שאמר והיה העולם, שברא עולמו לששה ימים ונח בשביעי, שני (ישעיה מ"ג: י"ב) ואתם עדי נאום ה' ואני אל. - כתיב כבוד את אביך ואת אמך וכנגדו כתיב לא תחמוד, מגיד הכתוב שכל מי שהוא חומד, סוף מוליד בן שהוא מקלל את אביו ואת אמו ומכבד למי שאינו אביו. לכך נתנו עשרת הדברות חמשה על לוח זה וחמשה על לוח זה, דברי ר' חנינא בן גמליאל, וחכמים אומרים עשרה על לוח זה ועשרה על לוח זה, שני (דברים ה': י"ט) את הדברים האלה דבר ה' - ויכתבם על שני לוחות אבנים, ואומר (שיר השירים ד': ה') שני שדיך כשני עפרים תאומי צביה ואו' ידיו גלילי זהב ממולאים בתרשיש.

ספרי שלח קי"ב

ד"א כי דבר ה' בזה ישמעאל אומר בע"ז הכתוב מדבר שנאמר כי את דבר ה' בזה שביזה על דבור הראשון שנאמר למשה מפי הגבורה אנכי ה' א-לוי [וגו'] לא יהיה לך א-לוי אחרים על פני.

בבלי בבא בתרא י"ד.

מיתבי: ארון שעשה משה, אמתים וחצי ארכו ואמה וחצי רחבו ואמה וחצי קומתו, באמה בת ששה טפחים; והלוחות, ארכן ששה ורחבן ששה ועביין שלשה, מונחות כנגד ארכו של ארון; כמה לוחות אוכלות בארון? שנים עשר טפחים, נשתיירו שם שלשה טפחים, צא מהן טפח, חציו לכותל זה וחציו לכותל זה - נשתיירו שם שני טפחים שבהן ספר תורה מונח, שנאמר: +מלכים א' ח'+ אין בארון רק שני לוחות האבנים אשר הניח שם משה [וגו']; מאי אין בארון רק? מיעוט אחר מיעוט, ואין מיעוט אחר מיעוט אלא לרבות ס"ת שמונח בארון; פירנסת ארון לארכו, צא ופרנס ארון לרחבו: כמה לוחות אוכלות בארון? ששה טפחים, נשתיירו שם שלשה טפחים, צא מהן טפח, חציו לכותל זה וחציו לכותל זה - נשתיירו שם שני טפחים, שלא יהא ספר תורה נכנס ויוצא כשהוא