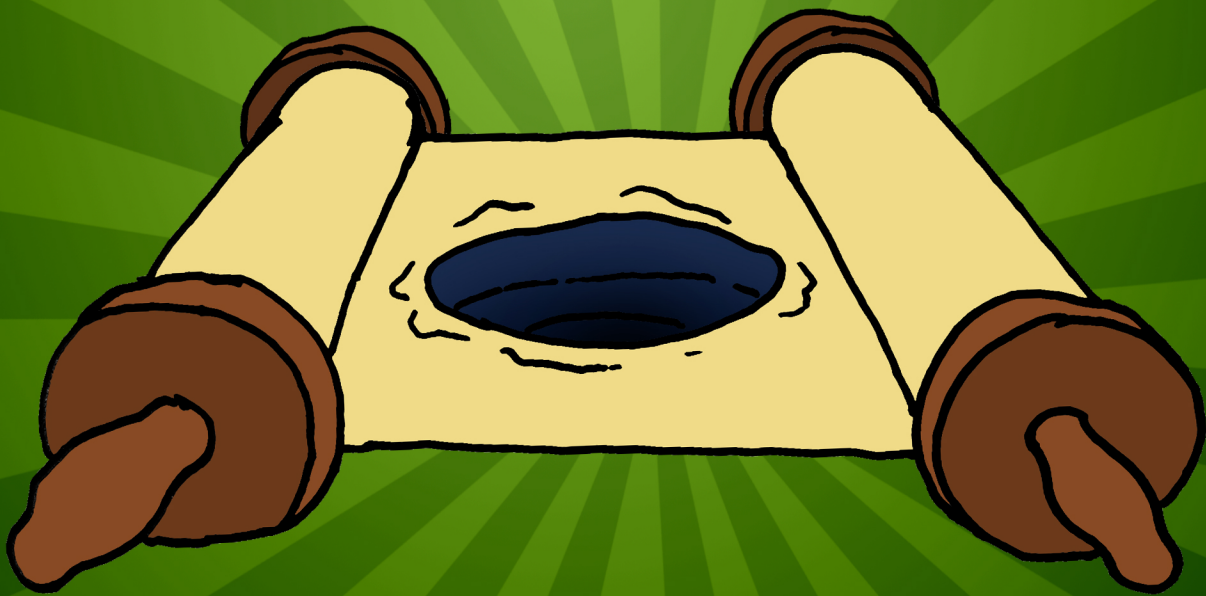


SHAVUOS RABBIT HOLE



"TABLET TYPOGRAPHY"



A SIMPLE QUESTION.
A MOUNTAIN OF SOURCES.
A SPIRAL OF POSSIBILITIES.
PREPARE TO STAY UP ALL NIGHT...
...AND NOT JUST BECAUSE IT'S SHAVUOS.

Introduction

If you're already familiar with my "Parshah Rabbit Hole" YouTube series, then you already know what you're getting yourself into.

If not, then here's the basic idea: I find something weird or interesting or obscure about the topic at hand (in this case Shavuot and the giving of the Torah) and then we start digging, starting with whatever leads we have and following the trail of sources to get even weirder.

There's no end goal or message I'm trying to teach - we're just experiencing the path of discovery together and delighting in the treasures we find along the way.

You may be familiar with some of the sources and (hopefully) some might be completely new to you, so I've included **an index at the end** that'll give you some context about each of the works/authors we'll be looking at on our way down the Rabbit Hole.

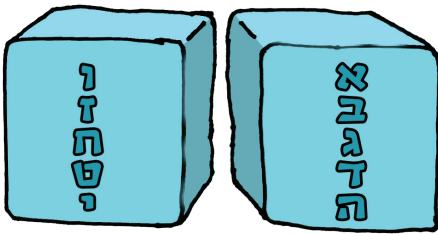
One of the key themes of Shavuot is the idea that Torah is our inheritance - a limitless playground of divine ideas that's all ours. That's amazing to me.

I hope this Rabbit Hole gives you the opportunity to explore and enjoy a tiny corner of our family estate.

—Dovid Taub

Recently my family and I were talking about the pretty well-known idea that the first five of the Aseres Hadibros (the Ten Commandments) are about a person's interactions with G-d (bein adam lamakom), and the second five are about our interactions with each other (bein adam lachavero). Another fairly ubiquitous idea that goes along with that one is that there were five commandments on each tablet. So I started wondering - how do we know that the Aseres Hadibros were designed like that, in two columns? And what else do we know about the layout of the luchos (tablets)?

So that's where this Rabbit Hole starts - with the design and layout of tablets and what else we can find out about them. If you're ready to see where this goes, then let's dive in.



I felt like if we started with tracking down the source for five for us, five for G-d idea it might lead us to other details about how the text of the tablets was configured and possibly to unexpected new ways of picturing the tablets altogether. So I did some digging and the earliest source I could find for this idea was Ramban, or Nachmanides.

Ramban on Exodus 20:13:1

Of the Ten Commandments, there are five which refer to the glory of the Creator and five are for the welfare of man, for [the fifth commandment], Honor thy father, is for the glory of G-d, since it is for the glory of the Creator that He commanded that one honor one's father who is a partner in the formation of the child. Five commandments thus remain for the needs and welfare of man.

רמב"ן על שמות כ':י"ג:א'

והנה עשרת הדברות חמשה בכבוד הבורא וחמשה לטובת האדם, כי כבוד אביו אביו כבוד האל, כי לכבוד הבורא צוה לכבוד האב המשתתף ביצירה, ונשארו חמשה לאדם בצרכו וטובתו:

So there it is. But where did Ramban get it from? He doesn't tell us. Abarbanel also mentions this idea, and he attributes it to Chazal - the sages of the Talmud. But none of my searches for any of the related phrases yielded any results from Mishnah, Gemara or Midrash. Eventually I found a footnote somewhere that pointed me to a sneaky little Midrash that managed to originate this idea without my detection because it didn't actually say it.

Mekhilta DeRabbi Yishmael, Tractate Bachodesh 8:16

How were the Ten Commandments given? Five on one tablet and five on the other. "I am the L-rd your G-d," and opposite it "You shall not kill," whereby Scripture apprises us that spilling blood is tantamount to "diminishing" the likeness of the King...

...This is why the Ten Commandments were given, five on one tablet and five on the other. These are the words of R. Chananya b. Gamliel.

מכילתא דרבי ישמעאל, מסכתא דבחדש

ח':ט"ז

כיצד נתנו עשרת הדברות? חמשה על לוח זה, וחמשה על לוח זה. כתוב בזה "אנכי ה' אלקיך", וינגדו כתוב "לא תרצח", מגיד הכתוב שכל מי שהוא שופך דמים, מעלין עליו כאלו ממעט בדמות... לך נתנו עשרת הדברות, חמשה על לוח זה, וחמשה... על לוח זה. דברי רבי חנניה בן גמליאל

You see what it did there? It established the idea without naming it. Midrashim need better SEO. BUT... it does tell us where the idea that each tablet had five commandments on it comes from. Chananya Ben Gamliel. (in some places it's Chanina. Just a heads up for variations

below). And it turns out that my hunch was correct -If we find the source of that opinion we would find other opinions. Here's the whole debate as it appears in Talmud Yerushalmi...

Jerusalem Talmud Shekalim 6:1

The Gemara continues with discussion of the two tablets. **How were the tablets written? Rabbi Ḥanina ben Gamliel says: Five on this tablet and five on that tablet. This is as it is written: “And He wrote them upon two tablets of stone”** (Deuteronomy 4:13), i.e., **five** of the Ten Commandments **on this tablet and five on that tablet. But the Rabbis say:** All of the **Ten** Commandments were written **on this tablet and the same ten were written on that tablet. This is as it is written: “And He declared unto you His covenant, which He commanded you to perform, even the ten words”** (Deuteronomy 4:13). This teaches that there were **ten on this tablet and ten on that tablet. Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai says: Twenty on this tablet and twenty on that tablet, as it is written: “And He wrote them upon two tablets of stone”** (Deuteronomy 4:13). This teaches that there were **twenty on this tablet and twenty on that tablet. Rabbi Simai said: Forty on this tablet and forty on that tablet, as it is written: “On the one side and on the other were they written”** (Exodus 32:15), as a cube [*tatroga*]. **Ḥananya, nephew of Rabbi Yehoshua, says: Between each and every statement** that was written on the tablets, **its precise details and the explanation of its letters** were written as well, **as it is written: “Filled with beryl [*tarshish*]”** (Song of Songs 5:14). *Tarshish* is the name of a sea, or more likely, an area of the Mediterranean. The verse is indicating that the Torah is filled with all of these details, **like the great sea** is filled with waves.

תלמוד ירושלמי שקלים ו'א'
כיצד היו הלוחות כתובים. רבי חנניה
בן גמליאל אומר. חמשה על לוח זה
וחמשה על לוח זה. הדין הוא דכתיב
ויכתבם על שני לוחות אבנים: חמשה
על לוח זה וחמשה על לוח זה. ורבנן
אמרין. עשרה על לוח זה ועשרה על
לוח זה. הדין הוא דכתיב ויגד לכם
את בריתו אשר צוה אתכם לעשות
עשרת הדברים. עשרה על לוח זה
ועשרה על לוח זה. רבי שמעון בן יוחי
אמר. עשרים על לוח זה ועשרים על
לוח זה. דכתיב ויכתבם על שני לוחות
אבנים: עשרים על לוח זה ועשרים
על לוח זה. רבי סימאי אומר. ארבעים
על לוח זה וארבעים על לוח זה. מזה
ומזה הם כתובים. טטרגונה. חנניה בן
אחי רבי יהושע אומר. בין כל דיבור
ודיבור דיקדוקיה ואותותיה של תורה.
ממולאים בתרשיש. כימא רבא.

Ok, so, according to this we've got four different opinions: Five commandments on each tablet, One full set of 10 commandments on each tablet, two full sets on each tablet and four full sets on each tablet. It's not clear from the text itself how each of those would look, and we'll break it down beat by beat and dig into all the different opinions soon. BUT... first let's veer off/back up.

Besides for giving us 3 new ways to think about the tablets, this piece also tells us the two main verses from which information about the tablet layout is derived. Here they are in their natural habitat:

Deuteronomy 4:13

He told you His covenant, which He commanded you to fulfill—the ten statements—and He wrote them on two tablets of stone.

Exodus 32:15

And Moshe turned, and went down from the mountain, and the two tablets of the Testimony were in his hand: tablets written on both their sides; on the one side and on the other were they written.

דברים ד'י"ג

ויגד לכם את בריתו אשר צוה אתכם לעשות עשרת
הדברים ויכתבם על שני לוחות אבנים:

שמות ל"ב:ט"ו

ויפן משה מרהקו ושני לוח העדת בידו לחת
כתבים משני עבריהם מזה ומזה הם כתבים:

The second verse (which is actually the earlier verse) is also the source of another pretty well-known idea about how the tablets looked...

Shabbat 104a

Rav Hisda said: The letters *mem* and *samekh* that were in the tablets were standing miraculously. Each letter was chiseled all the way through the tablets. In that case, the segment of the tablets at the center of the *samekh* and final *mem*, letters that are completely closed, should have fallen. Miraculously, they remained in place.

And furthermore, Rav Hisda said: The writing on the tablets was read from the inside, from one side of the tablets, and read from the outside, the other side of the tablets, in reverse order. The Gemara cites words that appear elsewhere in the Bible: *Nevuv* was read as *bet, vav, bet, nun; rahav* as *beit, heh, reish*; and *saru* as *vav, reish, samekh*.

שבת ק"ד

אמר רב חסדא: מ"ם וסמך
שבלוחות בנס היו עומדין.
ואמר רב חסדא: כתב
שבלוחות נקרא מבפנים
ונקרא מבחוץ, כגון: "נבוב"
— "בובן", "רהב" —
"בהר", "סרו" — "ורס".

So, this idea of the floating pieces miracle is definitely weird and cool, but as I said, it's also talked about a lot, and I usually like to focus on the lesser known weird and cool stuff. So I was going to leave it out of this Rabbit Hole. BUT... it actually comes into play in a few different ways later on.



There's another idea that I've heard but didn't know the source for, that the words were not only engraved all the way through, but were miraculously not reversed on the other side. I wondered if there's a way to read that in this gemara, but it seems to very clearly say that the text was reversed on the other side, going so far as to give examples of a bunch of random backwards words. Rashi on this gemara confirms this...

Rashi on Shabbat 104a

"And it was read from the outside" - the letters were reversed and the word was reversed. And this is only teaching us that the engraving pierced through the entire tablet, and therefore the letters 'mem' and 'samekh' stood by a miracle.

רש"י על שבת ק"ד

ונקרא מבחוץ - האותיות הפוכות
וההגייה הפוכה ולא אשמועין אלא
שהיה החקק נוקב את כל הלוח
ולפיכך היו מס וסמך בנס

It kind of seems like Rashi is specifically refuting the possibility of interpreting this as meaning that the words were miraculously facing the right way on both sides. Which made me wonder where that idea does come from, and where I got it from. It turns out, it could be that I got it from Rashi. On Chumash.

Rashi on Exodus 32:15

ON BOTH THEIR SIDES could the letters be read, and this constituted a miraculous piece of work (Shabbat 104a).

רש"י על שמות ל"ב:ט"ו

משני עבריהם. היו האותיות
נקראות, ומעשה נסים הוא (שבת
ק"ד):

That sounds like he's saying the words were miraculously legible on both sides, right? BUT.... all of the major commentaries on Rashi say it isn't.

Gur Aryeh on Shemot 32:15

"From both their sides, the letters could be read, and it was a miraculous act." In the chapter 'HaBoneh' (Shabbat, beginning of 104a), Rashi explained that they were read on the inside in their proper order and on the outside in reverse. And according to this, what is said here, 'and it was a miraculous act,' refers to the closed 'mem' (מ) and 'samekh' (ס), which stood by a miracle (Rashi there). For since they appeared engraved from both sides, it was impossible for a closed 'mem' and 'samekh' to stand and not fall out, and concerning this, it was said, 'it was a miraculous act' (this is also how Mizrahi explains it)."

גור אריה על שמות ל"ב:ט"ו
משני עבריהם האותיות נקראות ומעשה ניסים היה. בפרק הבונה (שבת ריש קד.) פירש רש"י שהיו נקראות בפנים כסדר ומבחוץ בהפך. ולפי זה הא דקאמר כאן 'ומעשה ניסים היה' על מ"ם סתומה וסמ"ך, דהיו עומדים בנס (רש"י שם), דכיון דמשני עבריה ניראת חקוק, אי אפשר להיות מ"ם סתומה וסמ"ך להיות עומדים, ולא יהיו נופלים, ועל זה אמרו 'מעשה (ניסים היה) (כ"ה ברא"ם

But, there's one lesser known commentary that suggests otherwise...

Divrei David on Rashi, Exodus 32:15

It would seem that Rashi was not referencing this miracle, for this miracle of 'mem' and 'samekh' is not mentioned here. Rather, it is written, 'and it was a miraculous act' concerning the fact that the letters could be read from both sides, and many commentators wrote that it could be read equally on the inside and the outside.

דברי דוד על רש"י, ספר שמות ל"ב:ט"ו
לפי הנראה רש"י לא נתכוין לנס זה שהרי לא נזכר כאן נס זה דמ"ם וסמ"ך אלא כתב ומעשה ניסים הוא על שהיו נקראות האותיות משני עבריהם והרבה מפרשים כתבו דהיה נקרא בפנים ובחוץ בשוה.

So we're left with two completely different ways of reading that Rashi. BUT... we also have confirmation that this idea does exist in other commentaries. I asked chatGPT what the source for this idea is and it made up some very convincing quotes. So I had to resort to using my own brain and eventually found a couple of instances of that idea in the major commentaries on Chumash. Here's one:

Rabbeinu Bahya, Shemot 32:15

Tablets written on both their sides; from this side and from that side they were written. This was a great wonder, that the writing could be read in its proper order from both sides, which is not the case with our writing, for in front it is in its proper order, and from behind it is reversed. And it said 'from this and from that' meaning from both sides, both front and back...

רבנו בחיי, שמות ל"ב:ט"ו
לחת כתובים משני עבריהם מזה ומזה הם כתובים. זה היה פלא גדול שהכתב היה נקרא כסדרו משני העברים מה שאין כן בכתב שלנו כי מלפנים הוא כסדרו ומאחוריו מהופך ואמר... מזה ומזה משני הצדדים והם פנים ואחור

On the flipside (sorry) we have Ibn Ezra, who gives a more grounded approach to that verse about "from this side and from that side they were written"...

Ibn Ezra on Exodus 32:15

Scripture tells us that what was written on one side was also written on the other side. Each tablet was thus thick. There is no need to assume that the mem and the samekh which were inscribed in the tablets were miraculously suspended...

...We have no way of knowing whether each one of the tablets was completely covered with writing, or whether some blank spaces were left on the four corners as we do today with our books. We similarly do not know whether the writing was thick or thin. There is no reason for us to speculate concerning things for which we do not have a tradition.

אבן עזרא על שמות ל"ב:ט"ו

כאשר כתב מזה העבר כן היה כתוב בעבר השני והנה הלוח עב. ואין צריך מ"ם וסמ"ך שבלוחות שיעמדו בנם

ולא נוכל לדעת אם הלוח נכתב כלו או... נשארו לו מארבע פאותיו שזירין. כאשר נעשה אנחנו היום בספרים או אם היה המכתב עב או דק. ודבר שלא מצאנוהו בקבלה אין טעם לסברותינו:

So, according to Ibn Ezra, the simple meaning of the verse is that the Ten Commandments were engraved on both the front and the back of the tablets, and we don't have to resort to floating mems. He also teases us with the prospect of knowing the margin sizes and font styles of the tablets, but then shuts us down completely and tells us not to even bother thinking about any of those kinds of details. But don't worry, we'll think about them anyways. Sorry, Ibn Ezra.

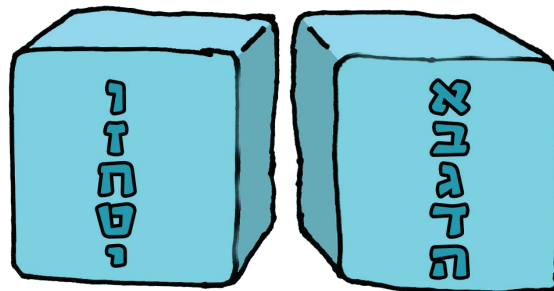
On that note, let's jump back into the Yerushalmi and look at each opinion, one at a time. First up is the 5-5 split.

Jerusalem Talmud Shekalim 6:1

How were the tablets written? Rabbi Ḥanina ben Gamliel says: **Five on this tablet and five on that tablet. This is as it is written: "And He wrote them upon two tablets of stone"** (Deuteronomy 4:13), i.e., **five of the Ten Commandments on this tablet and five on that tablet.**

תלמוד ירושלמי שקלים ו':א'

כיצד היו הלוחות כתובים. רבי חנניה בן גמליאל אומר. חמשה על לוח זה וחמשה על לוח זה. הָדָא הוּא דְּכָתִיב וַיִּכְתֹּבם עַל-שְׁנֵי לוחות אֲבָנִים: חמשה על לוח זה וחמשה על לוח זה



Now, you might be wondering how Chananya/Chanina got there (btw, i love that we can't even agree on the name of the person). My assumption when looking at it the first time was that it just makes sense with the words of the verse. Ein Yaakov agrees and explains it with a fun little example:

Ein Yaakov, Jerusalem Talmud, Ch. 6

Hanania understands the words according to their simple meaning, and he brings proof from the plain meaning of the verse 'And He wrote them on two tablets,' meaning that G-d wrote the Ten Commandments on two tablets, some on this tablet and some on that tablet. This is like one who says, 'I wrote a certain discourse on two pages of parchment,' intending to say that one page was not sufficient to complete the entire discourse, and for this reason, he needed two pages, and wrote part of the discourse on one page, and after filling the first page, he needed to complete the idea on a second page. So too, the Ten Commandments were written: five on this tablet and five on that tablet.

עין יעקב, תלמוד ירושלמי, שקלים ו'א'
חנניה סובר דברים כפשטן, והביא ראיה ממשוטן
של מקרא ויכתבם על שני לוחות, שהכוונה בזה
שכתב עשרה דברות על שני לוחות, קצתם על לוח
זה וקצתם על לוח זה, והרי זה כמו שאומר כתבתי
דרוש פלוני על שני קלפים, שכוונתו לומר שלא
הספיק קלף אחד לגמור בו כל הדרוש, ולזה בקש
שני קלפים, וכתב קצת הדרוש על הקלף האחד,
ואחר שהשלימו לקלף האחד הוצרך להשלים הענין
על קלף שני, וכן עשרה דברות היו כתובים חמשה
על לוח זה וחמשה על לוח זה

The Korban HaEdah, on the other hand, says there's a little more drushiness to it, and tells us how the rules of talmudic exegesis are applied to a seemingly extra word...

Korban HaEdah on Jerusalem Talmud Shekalim 6:1

And He wrote them on two tablets of stone. The minimum number for 'tablets' is two. What, then, do we learn from 'two' (יניש)? That both were equal: five on this tablet and five on that tablet.

קרבן העדה על תלמוד ירושלמי שקלים ו'א'
ויכתבם על שני לוחות אבנים. מיעוט לוחות שנים
מה ת"ל שני שיהיו שניהם שוים חמשה על לוח זה
וחמשה על לוח זה

Ok, so now we know a couple of different routes to get to the version of the tablets we generally picture when we think of them. Now let's get into the weirder options.

Jerusalem Talmud Shekalim 6:1

But the Rabbis say: All of the Ten Commandments were written on **this tablet** and the same **ten** were written on **that tablet**. This is as it is written: "And He declared unto you His covenant, which He commanded you to perform, even the ten words" (Deuteronomy 4:13). This teaches that there were **ten on this tablet and ten on that tablet**.

תלמוד ירושלמי שקלים ו'א'
ורבנן אמרין. עשרה על לוח זה ועשרה על לוח זה.
הדא הוא דכתיב ויגד לכם את דבריתו אשר צוה
אתכם לעשות עשרת הדברות. עשרה על לוח זה
ועשרה על לוח זה

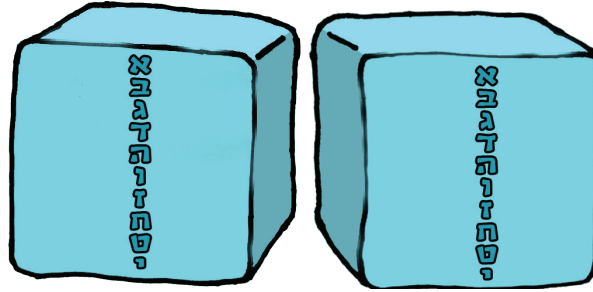
Again, this seems like it fits with the words, just focusing on a different part than the first opinion.

Korban HaEdah on Jerusalem Talmud Shekalim 6:1

The ten statements—"and He wrote them on two tablets of stone" implies that ten were written on each stone, for if not, why would it say 'the ten statements'?

קרבן העדה על תלמוד ירושלמי שקלים ו'א'
עשרת הדברים. ויכתבם על שני לוחות אבנים
משמע דעשרה על כל אבן כתב דאל"כ עשרת
הדברים ל"ל

Ok, pretty simple. It's new and fun and somewhat perplexing to think of each tablet as being a carbon copy of each other (not literally - most opinions say they were sapphire), but it's pretty easy to picture. I drew an illustration anyways.



Now let's get even weirder...

Jerusalem Talmud Shekalim 6:1

Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai says: Twenty on this tablet and twenty on that tablet, as it is written: "And He wrote them upon two tablets of stone" (Deuteronomy 4:13). This teaches that there were twenty on this tablet and twenty on that tablet.

תלמוד ירושלמי שקלים ו'א'
רבי שמעון בן יוחאי אומר. עשרים על לוח זה ועשרים
על לוח זה. דכתיב ויכתבם על-שני לוחות אבנים:
עשרים על לוח זה ועשרים על לוח זה.

Before we start figuring out how this looks, first let's figure out how he got there. Korban HaEdah will help.

Korban HaEdah on Jerusalem Talmud Shekalim 6:1

As it is written 'And He wrote them' (ויכתבם) - it is implied that they were written two times on each tablet.

קרבן העדה על תלמוד ירושלמי שקלים ו'א'
דכתיב ויכתבם. משמע שיהיו כתובים שני פעמים על
כל לוח:

Oops my bad. That didn't help at all. Honestly, I can't figure out what the Korban HaEdah is trying to tell us there. If you do, let me know.

BUT... there's actually a secret missing piece here. If you look at the first three opinions (5, 10 and 20 on each tablet), they all seem to be deriving it from the same verse, which is where it starts to get confusing and the commentaries have to do a lot of work to explain how the same words are proving different things.

BUT... the secret missing piece is that there's actually another verse with the same exact phrase ("He wrote them on two tablets of stone"). Here it is:

Deuteronomy 5:19

These words did Hashem address to your entire assemblage at the mountain from within the fire, the cloud, and the thick cloud—a voice great and without cessation. He wrote them on two tablets of stone, and He gave them to me.

דברים ה'י"ט
אֶת־הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה דִּבֶּר ה' אֶל־כָּל־קְהִלְכֶּם בְּהָר
מִתּוֹךְ הָאֵשׁ הָעָנָן וְהָעַרְפֶּל קוֹל גָּדוֹל וְלֹא יָסָף וַיִּכְתְּבֵם
עַל־שְׁנֵי לְחֹת אֲבָנִים וַיִּתֵּנָם אֵלַי:

And some commentaries say that it's the duplicate wording in two different verses that gives us the extra information...

Etz Yosef on Shir HaShirim Rabbah 5:14

Since two verses are written, we must need both of them to teach us that there were twenty [commandments] on each tablet.

עץ יוסף על שיר השירים רבה ה'י"ד:א'
מכיון דתרי קראי כתיבי מצריכין להו לאשמועינן
דהוי עשרים על כל לוח

The way I understand this is that each verse gives us 10 on each tablet, giving us a total of twenty on each tablet.

Ein Yaakov, though, gets us there with just one verse...

Ein Yaakov, Jerusalem Talmud, Ch. 6

...[The verse] did not need to mention 'two,' for from the word 'tablets' we already learn this, as the minimum for 'tablets' is two. Yet, it adds 'two tablets of stone' to teach us that there were two which were four, meaning that twenty commandments were written on each of the two tablets...

עין יעקב, תלמוד ירושלמי, שקלים, ר'א'
לא הוצרך להזכיר 'שני', כי מלשון לוחות שמענו...
כן שמיעוט לוחות שנים, והוסיף בכאן לומר שני
לוחות אבנים ללמדנו שהיו שנים שהם ארבע שהיו
כתובים עשרים דברות על כל אחד משני לוחות

Btw- he uses the same method Korban HaEdah used for five on each tablet. Things are getting confusing. Let's move on to how they looked.

Sirilio on Jerusalem Talmud Shekalim 6:1

Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai says. He interpreted [Devarim 4:13] the same as the Rabbis, and he interpreted "from this and from this" to mean that on both surfaces of each [tablet], ten were written, making twenty on this one and twenty on that one. And my esteemed teacher of blessed memory explained that Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai interpreted "from this and from this" regarding the length of the tablet itself. On one surface, it was like this: "I am the Lord your God" up to the middle of the page from the east side of the page, and similarly on the west side of the page, the feet of the writing were opposite the feet of the writing.

פירוש שלמה סיריליו על תלמוד ירושלמי
שקלים ר'א'

ר' שמעון בן יוחאי אומה דריש דרשת רבנן ודריש
מזה ומזה הם כתובים דבשני שטחיהן בכל אחד היו
כתובין עשרה הרי עשרים בזה ועשרים בזה ומורי ז"ל
פירש דר' שמעון בן יוחאי דריש מזה ומזה באורך
הלוח עצמה בשטח האחד כזה אנכי ה' אלקיך עד
אמצע הדף ממזרח הדף וכן למערב הדף רגלי כתב
כנגד רגלי כתב



Ok, there's a lot to unpack here. First of all, he attributes this opinion to a completely different verse - the one that's not mentioned at all until R' Simai. So that's weird. But he also gives us two ways of visualizing this - the first is that there was a full set of the Ten Commandments on each side of each tablet. Then he offers another possibility in the name of his teacher, and... it's confusing. There's a lot of directions in it. And feet. Honestly, I wasn't confident

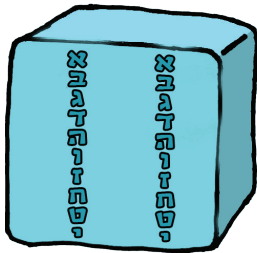
I was imagining it correctly. So I decided to try to figure out who Sirilio's teacher was and see if that teacher explains it himself somewhere.

Hebrew wikipedia mentioned a couple of people he learned under, and one of them was Yaakov ibn Habib, author of Ein Yaakov. And sure enough, he explains it in a way that is clearer to me.

Ein Yaakov, Jerusalem Talmud, Ch. 6

...And the writing of each tablet was as if there were two tablets, as I will illustrate...

עין יעקב, תלמוד ירושלמי, שקלים, ו'א'
והיה דומה כתב כל לוח אחד כאילו היו שני...
לוחות כמו שאצייר



So, two columns on each tablet, on one side. He delivered on his promise to provide an illustration, but it would have taken up a lot of room here, so you'll have to rely on my rendition.

The Maharal of Prague has a similar design, but weirder. And he gets there differently than everyone else. His explanation of the entire debate is that each opinion is holding the tablets to a greater level of perfection than the opinion before it. Here's what he says about this opinion specifically:

Tiferet Yisrael Ch. 35

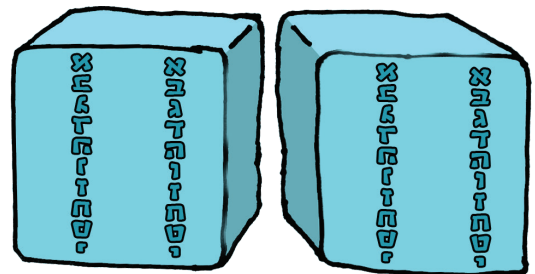
Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai says that the commandments were twenty on each tablet. For ten commandments were written on the right side of the tablet, and similarly ten commandments on the left side of the tablet, facing each other. The first was read from right to left, and the second from left to right. And this is proper, for if it were not so, there would be a flaw in the tablets, which are a divine creation, for they were the work of Heaven from Hashem. And it is so that everything that is perfect has its right and left equal. As you see in a person, who has a right and a left, and both are completely equal.

תפארת ישראל ל"ה

רבי שמעון בן יוחאי אומר, כי היו הדברות עשרים על כל לוח. כי היו כתובים מימין הלוח עשרה דברות, וכן בשמאל הלוח עשרה דברות, פניהם איש אל אחיו. הראשון היה נקרא מן הימין לשמאל, והשני מן השמאל לימין. ודבר זה ראוי, כי אם לא היה כך, היה חסרון בלוחות, שהם בריאה אלקית, כי היו מלאכת שמים מן השם יתברך. וזה, שכל שהוא שלם, שוה הימין והשמאל. כאשר תראה באדם, שיש לו ימין ושמאל, ושניהם שוים לגמרי.

So, that's cool. He's got the two columns, similar to Ein Yaakov, but for the Maharal it's about symmetry as a level of perfection, so the column on the left is actually flipped so that it's a mirror image of the column on the right.

Ok, now let's get to the last opinion - 40 on each tablet. (The end of the discussion in the Talmud includes that cool stuff about details being written in between them. That's very cool, and I actually had a whole additional tangent of this Rabbit Hole I could have done on that, but then you wouldn't have any more printer ink and you'd be sad.)



Jerusalem Talmud Shekalim 6:1

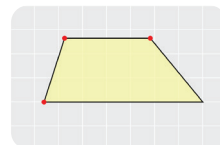
Rabbi Simai said: Forty on this tablet and forty on that tablet, as it is written: "On the one side and on the other were they written" (Exodus 32:15), as a cube [tatroga].

תלמוד ירושלמי שקלים ו'א'

רבי סימאי אומר. ארבעים על לוח זה וארבעים על לוח זה. מזה ומזה הם כתובים. טטרוגה.

So.... this is the most extreme opinion. And there are a bunch of different ways to visualize it. Also, it just tosses this greek shape word at us. I assume Rabbi Simai was trying to be helpful, but it actually gets pretty confusing. Exactly what shape is it referring to? A square?

A tetragon is another name for a quadrilateral, which is a polygon with four sides and four angles.



A cube? A quadrangle?

Before we start looking at the different commentaries on this, we need a little bit of background on the shape of the tablets themselves. I was going to try to avoid this because it's talked about a lot (especially in Chabad circles where we get very upset about the rounded tablets), but it's relevant here.

The main idea is that the tablets were either squares or rectangles, and they were not just slabs, they were blocks. They had depth. The Talmud Bavli and the Talmud Yerushalmi have slightly different measurements for the width of the tablets, but they agree on the height (the Yerushalmi doesn't mention the depth, but everyone seems to assume it's the same as the Bavli). Here they are:

Bava Batra 14a

The baraita continues: **And as for the tablets, their length was six handbreadths, their width was six handbreadths, and their thickness was three handbreadths.**

בבא בתרא י"ד

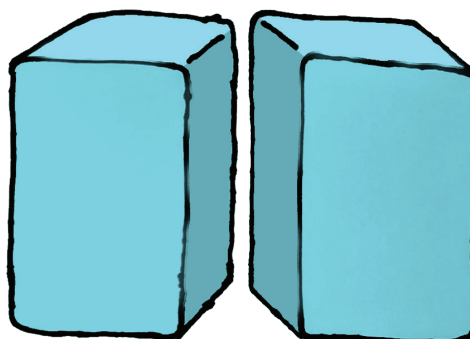
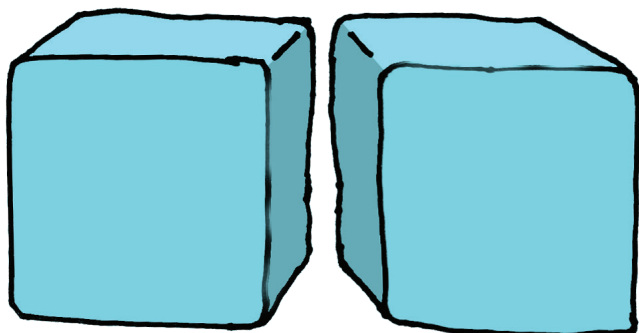
והלוחות – ארךן ששה, ורחבן ששה, ועבין שלשה; מונחות כנגד ארכן של ארון.

Jerusalem Talmud Taanit 4:5

Rebbi Samuel bar Nahman in the name of Rebbi Jonathan: The tablets were six hand-breadths long and three wide.

תלמוד ירושלמי תענית ד'ה'

רבי שמואל בר נחמן בשם רבי יונתן. הלוחות היו אורכן ששה טפחים ורחבן שלשה.



Ok, now we can continue. Let's see how the Korban HaEdah describes this layout...

Korban HaEdah on Jerusalem Talmud Shekalim 6:1

From this side and from that side they were written. This means twice along its length and twice on both sides of its width. And on the upper and lower surfaces no writing was done, for each tablet's length was six and its width three and its thickness three. If so, the upper and lower surfaces were only three by three, and they were not suitable for the Ten Commandments. And to write five from here and five from there is not a respectful way to divide them, according to the opinion that all of them were written lengthwise [in one complete column].

קרבן העדה על תלמוד ירושלמי שקלים ו'א:
מזה ומזה הם כתובים. היינו ב' בארכו וב' פעמים
על שני צידי רחבו ועל שטח שלמעלה ושלמטה
לא היו נכתבים שכל לוח אורכו ו' ורחבו ג' ועביו
ג' א"כ השטחים שלמעלה ושלמטה לא היו כ"א
שלשה על שלשה ולא היו ראויין לעשרת הדברים
ולכתוב חמשה מכאן וחמשה מכאן אין זה דרך
כבוד לחלקם למ"ד שכלן היו נכתבין באורך (ועיין
ביפה מראה):

Ok, so, according to this, tetragona seems to mean cube (or cuboid), and there was a full set on each of the four sides of each tablet, but not on the top or bottom. Which is definitely a new way of picturing the tablets for me. But it also makes sense - if the tablets were blocks, then why wouldn't their three dimensionality be used?

Another interesting detail here is that the top and bottom weren't used because they were too small to fit a full set of the Ten Commandments. This is based on the Yerushalmi's measurement which would make the top and bottom sides three handbreadths by three handbreadths, or around 9"x9". This is interesting to me because it seems to me that you could definitely carve the Ten Commandments on a 9"x 9" area. In which case, what's the Korban HaEdah's argument? I see two options: A) the font size had to stay consistent, in which case, a set of Ten Commandments big enough to fill a 9"x18" space wouldn't fit on a 9"x9" space. B) The words had to fill the entire space, but if you scale down a full column of all 10, then you get a lot of extra space on the sides.

There are probably some other options too, involving letter spacing and stuff, but I'm bored of that now, so let's move on.

Ein Yakov translates tetragona as square, but he has a very interesting take on squares:



Ein Yaakov, Jerusalem Talmud, Ch. 6

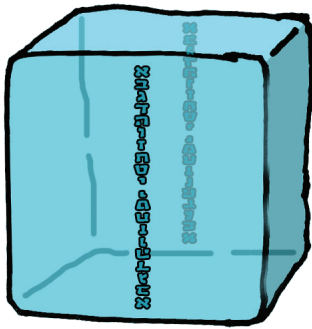
And what I have thought by way of the plain meaning (derech hapshat), is that the intention of Rabbi Simai is as follows:

Since the tablet was square — its length equal to its width — and every square-shaped object has two surfaces equal to one another, and each of those surfaces has four corners equal to one another, then on each one of those four corners, the Ten Commandments were written.

The upper surface was divided into two equal corners, and likewise the lower surface opposite it; and in each corner were written [all] ten commandments — this makes a total of forty.

But on the edges (i.e., the thickness/sides of the tablet), there was no writing. And this is the meaning of "tetruga" in the Greek language — square.

עין יעקב, תלמוד ירושלמי, שקלים ו'א:
ומה שחשבתי בדרך הפשט שכוונת רבי
סימאי לומר שכיון שהלוח היה מרובע ארכו
כרחבו, וכל גשם מרובע יש לו שני שטחים
שווים זה לזה, ויש בשניהם ארבע קרנות שוות,
שעל כל קרן מאלו הארבע קרנות היו כתובים
עשרה דברות, השטח העליון נחלק לשתי
קרנות שוות וכן השטח התחתון שכנגדו, ובכל
קרן היו כתובים עשרה, הרי כלם ארבעים,
אבל בשטחי העובי לא היה בו שום כתב. וזה
פירוש טטרוגה בלשון יון, מרובע



It seems like he's kind of using square as a verb to describe alignment - the top line of each set has to be squared with the edge. Maybe. Whatever his understanding of squares is, his layout is clear - he even provides another illustration (again, you'll have to rely on my version). According to him, you have one set on top, and another set on the bottom, rotated 180 degrees. And the same on both sides, adding up to four full sets of the Ten Commandments on each tablet.

But why? Ein Yaakov explains in great detail how Rabbi Simai's proof from the verse demands this layout, but it's long and complicated and I didn't feel like we needed to have it here. BUT... he also explains why Rabbi Simai thought this was logically the best way to make the tablets:

Ein Yaakov, Jerusalem Talmud, Ch. 6

...All of the commandments should be written on each of the two tablets, from every side and every angle that Moses our Teacher would hold the tablet in his hand. And with a first glance, he would be able to read all ten commandments from "I am [the L-rd]" until "that which is your fellow's"... And similarly, if he would flip the tablet to the surface opposite it, the commandments would be written two times, one on the upper side and the second on the lower side, in such a way that whenever he would hold the tablet in his hand along its length, one would immediately see "I am [the L-rd]" and be able to complete all the commandments without any flipping of the tablet

עין יעקב, תלמוד ירושלמי, שקלים, ו:א'
 שיהיו כל הדברות כתובים בכל אחד משתי...
 לוחות מכל צד ומכל עבר שיקח משה רבינו
 בידו הלוח, ובהבטה ראשונה יוכל לקרות כל
 עשרה דברות מאנכי עד אשר לרעך... וכן אם
 יהפוך הלוח אל השטח שכנגדו יהיו כתובים
 הדברות שתי פעמים, האחד בצד עליון והשני
 בצד תחתון באופן שבכל עת שיקח הלוח בידו
 לאורך השטח יראה מיד אנכי ה' ויוכל לגמור
 כל הדברות בלי שום הפוך בלוח

Ok, so, I love this. It makes perfect sense to me. I've actually thought about this on a practical level before when making cards for games and stuff - which way is the user going to flip this card? Side to side or top to bottom? This solves that problem - Make it work for both ways. Divine design at its finest.

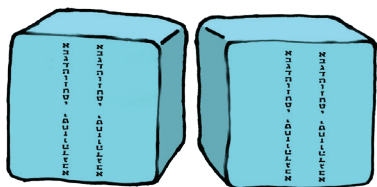
BUT... Yefeh Mareh doesn't like this approach, or the ones that say it was written on four sides. Why? Because of the floating mem. See? I told you it would come back.

The whole thing about the letters going all the way through only works if you don't have to carve another set of the Ten Commandments on the opposite side. It seems like most commentaries are okay with that only working according to the first two opinions and not the last two, but Yefeh Mareh isn't okay with that.

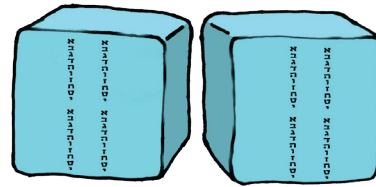
Yefeh Mareh, Jerusalem Talmud, Shekalim, 6

...But this is not correct, for it can be assumed that the statement about the 'mem' and 'samekh' on the tablets standing by a miracle is agreed upon by everyone... The better explanation is that everything was written on one surface... Without 'from this side and from that side,' we have twenty on each tablet according to the opinion of Rabbi Shimon ben Yo-chai. And since it is written 'from this side and from that side,' we learn that twenty commandments were written at the top of the tablet from top to bottom, and similarly twenty at its other end from bottom to top, in this form:

יפה מראה, תלמוד ירושלמי, שקלים, ו'א'
אבל אין זה נכון, דההיא דמ"ם וסמ"ך שבלוחות
בנם היו עומדים משמע שהיא מוסכמת אליבא
דכולי עלמא... אבל היותר נכון, שהכל נכתב בשטח
האחד... שהרי בלאו מזה ומזה אית לן עשרים בכל
לוח כדעת רבי שמעון בן יוחאי, ומכיון דכתיב מזה
ומזה שמעינן שהיו עשרים דברות כתובים בראש
הלוח מלמעלה למטה, וכן עשרים בקצהו השני
מלמטה למעלה כצורה הזו



He actually has two different versions of how that looks, but according to both of them, all four sets are on one side. The only difference is whether the bottom two sets are rotated 180 degrees.



The Maharal of Prague has a similar layout, but he continues with his mirror-image-perfection model and lands up with something a little different:

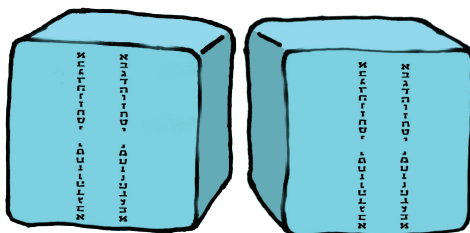
Tiferet Yisrael Ch. 35

However, Rabbi Simai held that the tablets – which are the handiwork of G-d – must be perfect. And everything that is perfect is completely equal. For if it is not completely equal, it is flawed, because it lacks completion until it is completely equal. And for this reason, there were forty on each and every tablet: There were ten commandments from right to left, and ten from left to right, and it is fitting that the top and bottom of the tablet should be equal, just as the right and left are equal, until it is completely equal.

תפארת ישראל ל"ה

אמנם רבי סמאי סבר, כי צריך שיהיו הלוחות -
שהם מעשה אלקים - שלמים. וכל דבר שהוא שלם,
הוא שווה לגמרי. שאם אינו שווה לגמרי, הוא חסר,
מפני שהוא חסר השלמה עד שיהיה שווה לגמרי.
ולכך היו ארבעים על כל לוח ולוח; והיו עשרה
דברות מימין לשמאל, ועשרה משמאל לימין. וראוי
שיהיה שווה המעלה והמטה מן הלוח, כמו ששווה
הימין והשמאל, עד שהוא שווה לגמרי.

So, according to this the Ten Commandments were flipped once horizontally, then both of those were flipped again, this time vertically, creating perfectly perfect perfection.



Phew. That was a lot of layouts. If you weren't keeping count, don't worry, I was. We went through 10 different possible configurations of the tablets.

Ok, so, remember that idea we discussed earlier about the letters going all the way through but miraculously being the right direction on both sides? Well, after all of those different ways of looking at the luchos, I wondered if there were any discussions of that debate in the Yerushalmi that connected any of those opinions to this miracle. So I dug around some more and discovered that there was indeed a connection, and it's been right under my nose in Tanya and I never paid attention to it.

Tanya, Part V; Kuntres Acharon Ch. 6

...“The sacred service is theirs; on the shoulder shall they carry.” The purpose is to combine the “shoulder,” the hinderpart, with the sacred service, the supreme wisdom, in a manner of inwardness. This state is the source of the tablets in the Ark, as we find, “Written on both their sides....” The Jerusalem Talmud, Shekalim, explains that they did not have any front and back; study that reference.

תניא, קונטרס אחרון ו'

“עבודת הקדש עליהם בפתח ישארו” לחבר וליחד... את ה“כתפיים”, שהן בחינת אחוריים, אל “עבודת הקדש”, היא חכמה עילאה, בבחינת פנים, שממש נמשכו הלוחות שבארון, כמו שכתוב: “כתובים משני עבריהם כו”, וכמו שכתוב בירושלמי דשקלים, שלא הייתה בהן בחינת פנים ואחור, עיין שם

So according to Tanya, the miracle wasn't just that the back was straight, it's that the tablet had no back. Or front. They somehow transcended back and front. Cool. But the Alter Rebbe says that this idea is from that piece of Talmud Yerushalmi we've been looking at this whole time and I couldn't see it in there.

So I started searching for this phrase - “they did not have any back or front” - and it led me to a trail that starts with Pirkei Avos.

Pirkei Avot 5:6

Ten things were created on the eve of the Sabbath at twilight, and these are they: [1] the mouth of the earth, [2] the mouth of the well, [3] the mouth of the donkey, [4] the rainbow, [5] the manna, [6] the staff [of Moses], [7] the shamir, [8] the letters, [9] the writing, [10] and the tablets. And some say: also the demons, the grave of Moses, and the ram of Abraham, our father. And some say: and also tongs, made with tongs.

משנה אבות ה':ו'

עשרה דברים נבראו בערב שבת בין השמשות, ואילו הו, פי הארץ, ופי הבאר, ופי האתון, והקשת, והמן, והמטה, והשמים, והקרבן, והמקטב, והלוחות. ויש אומרים, אף המזיקין, וקבורתו של משה, ואילו של אברהם אבינו. ויש אומרים, אף צבת בצבת עשויה

I've always loved this Mishnah because it's spooky and weird and has a cool list of things that exist in some sort of liminal space. The letters and the writing part was always the least exciting to me, though. I always assumed it meant the floating mem. I never really thought about what the difference between them is. In Hebrew the words are Ksav and Michtav, and I think a better translation of that would be “the writing” and “the written.” I think that highlights the ambiguity of it, which is something all the commentaries deal with differently. Bartenura seems to interpret Michtav as referring to our two-way-tablet miracle:

Bartenura on Pirkei Avot 5:6

the writing: that they could be read from all four sides.

ברטנורא על משנה אבות ה':ו'
והמכתב. שהיו נקראים מכל הארבעה צדדים

So now it's not just the front and back that are equal, it's all four sides. Which makes it even weirder and cooler and also connects it to our square/cube/tetragon in the Talmud Yerushalmi.

I dug around for some of the phrases in that short commentary and it seems like the earliest mention of this idea is in Sefer HaAruch - which is a very cool, very old encyclopedia of Talmudic terminology. It gives two explanations of what Ksav and Michtav mean:

Sefer HeArukh, Letter Kaf 409

..."The writing" (ksav) refers to the form of the letters. "The written" (michtav) refers to the combination of letters to form a word that can be read.

Another explanation: ksav refers to the 22 letters of the holy script that we use for writing. Michtav is what is called "Tetragona," which can be seen and read from all four sides. This is what was written on the Tablets, and this is what the verse "And the writing and the script, the script of G-d, is engraved" means.

ספר הערוך, אות הכ"ף ת"ט
כתב [שריפט] (אבות פ"ב פסחים נד) עשרה דברים
נבראו וכו' עד והכתב והמכתב פירוש כתב צורת
אותיות מכתב צירוף האותיות להיות תיבה להיקרות
במלה. ד"א כתב אלו כ"ב אותיות כתב הקודש שאנו
כותבין בו ומשתמשין בו מכתב הוא הנקרא טטרגונו
שנראה ונקרא מכל צד מד' צדדים והוא הכתוב על
הלוחות והוא שפי' הכתוב והמכתב מכתב אלקים
הוא חרות וגו'

According to that second explanation it seems like Ksav is the regular two-dimensional letters we write with and Michtav is some sort of divine, three-dimensional letters.

So, the question is, exactly how miraculous and mind-mending are we talking? Tosfos Yom Tov answers that question:

Tosafot Yom Tov on Pirkei Avot 5:6

THE INSCRIPTION. Bartenura says "the inscription could be read from all four directions." What seems most likely to me is that this was a miraculous thing, "the work of G-d" (Exodus 32:16). Many of the commentators on the relevant passage in the Jerusalem Talmud struggled with this. See Ein Yaakov and Yefeh Mar'eh. I prefer the words of the most recent of the commentators, R. Menachem Azariah of Fano in his work Asarah Ma'amarot, in the treatise Chakor Din, 2:20, commenting on the passage in the Jerusalem Talmud. There he says that they were the "work of G-d" that our minds cannot imagine, "not like the work of some commoner that others have drawn for us in the study hall, which a boy could come up with".

תוספות יום טוב על משנה אבות ה':ו'
והמכתב. ל' הר"ב שהיו נקראים מכל הד' צדדים.
והקרב אלי שהיה דבר נסיי ומעשה אלקים המה
והרבה נתלבטו בזה מפרשי מאמר ירושלמי
דשקלים פ"ו. עיין בעין יעקב ויפה מראה. ואחר
אחרון אני בא בעל עשרה מאמרות שכתב במאמר
חקור דין חלק ב' פרק עשרים על אותו מאמר
דירושלמי שהיה זה מעשה אלקים בלתי משוער
בשכלנו. לא כמעשה הדיוט שציירו זולתינו לפנינו
בבית המדרש ונער יכתבם. ע"כ

Wow. So... the answer to my question before about how mind mending of a miracle this was is that it was so mind-bending you can't even imagine it. Cool.

Tosfos Yom Tov mentions our Gemara, but he doesn't really give any details. There's obviously a connection, but we still don't really understand what it is.

BUT... while I was digging around for possible clues about this idea, I stumbled upon one more source that uses this miracle in the context of a complete, point-by-point analysis of the four opinions in the Talmud yerushalmi. In Teshuvos HaRadbaz, the titular Radbaz answers someone who is confused about this piece, and isn't satisfied with Ein Yaakov's explanation. Radbaz declines to comment on Ein Yaakov, but gives his own, very unique breakdown:

Teshuvot HaRadbaz Volume 3 980

...And now I will explain to you the dispute of the Tannaim: Hanania holds five on this tablet and five on that tablet. And even though one has more verses than the other, it is not a problem for him, for Hanania has that which Hanania, nephew of Rabbi Yehoshua said, that between every utterance was its precise details and the letters of the Torah, filled like Tarshish in the great sea, and this is found in this very Baraisa, and thus the entire tablet is filled... And the Rabbis came to dispute, and they said that the writing was equal on every tablet, for if not, G-d forbid, there would be separation between them, and one tablet would be left with all five of its commandments being prohibitions, and thus the left side (severity) would gain dominance and destroy the world... Now, according to both Hanania and the Rabbis, the writing went through from one side to the other, and from one side it was read straight and from the other side reversed, as it says in tractate Shabbos... And Rabbi Shimon came to say: twenty on this tablet and twenty on that tablet: indeed the letters were on both sides, but they were not read from the outside in reverse, but rather straight. And this is [the meaning of twenty] on this tablet - ten from the inside and ten from the outside, meaning they were written on both sides in the way they are read, and it was a miracle. And so Rashi, of blessed memory, wrote in Parshas Ki Sisa... And Rabbi Simai came to say: you fulfilled 'on both their sides' and you fulfilled the the intention of the repetition in the verses, but you did not fulfill 'from this side and from that side they were written.' Rather, there were forty on this tablet and forty on that tablet. And the meaning of the verse is thus: 'written on both their sides' means front and back; 'from this side and from that side they were written' means right and left. And this is what 'Tetragona' means, that is, 'square,' that one reads it from all four of its directions, and it is a Greek word, and so it is in the Arukh. And its illustration is like this: four people are sitting around the tablet, and the tablet stands upright, and each of the four reads 'I am the L-rd your G-d, etc.' in a straight manner, and it is miraculous...

תשובות הרדב"ז חלק ג תתק"פ

ומעתה אבאר לך מחלוקת התנאים חנניה ס"ל...
ה' על לוח זה וה' על לוח זה ואע"ג דאחד מקרא
מרובה ואחד מקרא מועט לא קשיא ליה דהא אית
ליה לחנניה האי דחנניה בן אחי ר' יהושע דאמר
בין דבור ודבור דקדוקיה ואותיותיה של תורה
ממולאים כתרשיש כימא רבא והאי איתא בהאי
בריייתא גופא ונמצא כל הלוח מתמלא...ואתו
רבנן לאפלוגי ואמרי כתיבה שוה היתה לכל לוח
ולוח שאם לא כן ח"ו יהיה פירוד ביניהם וישארו
ה' כולם לאוין בלוח א' ונמצא השמאל מתגברת
ויחריב העולם...והנה [לדעת ר'] חנניה ורבנן היתה
הכתיבה מעבר לעבר ומצד אחד נקרא ישר ומצד
אחד בהפוך כדאמרין בשבת פ' הבונה... ואתא
ר' שמעון למימר עשרים על לוח זה וכ' על לוח
זה לעולם משני עבריהם היו האותיות אבל לא היו
נקראות מבחוץ בהפוך אלא ביושר והיינו עשרים
על לוח זה עשרה מבפנים ועשרה מבחוץ והיינו
כתובים משני עבריהם כדרך קריאתן ומעשה נסים
היה. וכן כתב רש"י ז"ל בפרשת כי תשא... ואתא
ר' סימאי למימר קיימת משני עבריהם וקיימת
כפל הכתוב אבל לא קיימת מזה ומזה הם כתובים
אלא מ' על לוח זה ומ' על לוח זה וענין הכתוב כך
הוא כתובים משני עבריהם היינו פנים ואחור מזה
ומזה הם כתובים היינו ימין ושמאל והיינו דקאמר
טטרוגה כלומר מרובע שקורא בו בכל ד' רוחותיו
והיא מלה יונית והכי איתא בערוך. וציורו כך
ארבעה בני אדם יושבים סביבות הלוח והלוח עומד
על חודו וכל א' מארבעתן קורא אנכי ה' אלקיך
...וכו' בדרך ישר ומעשה נסים הוא

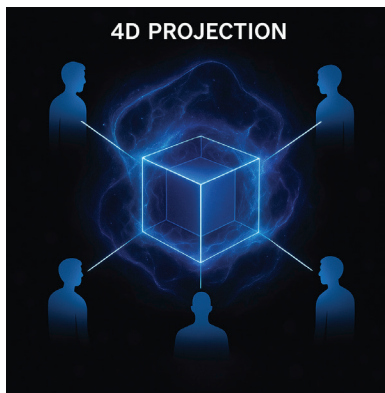
First of all, I told you the thing about extra stuff between the lines of the tablets would come back. And I love the way that it did - that even if a particular chunk of Torah seems sparse, don't worry, we have plenty of Torah to fill all the gaps.

I also really like this idea that having too much negativity on one of the tablets would break reality. That's super cool.

It's also very cool to me that he clearly says here that Rashi in Chumash is talking about the two-way-tablets. Which means there's a conflict between Rashi on the Talmud and Rashi on Chumash, which is always cool to me because it highlights the different modes of Torah and that the same verse can mean different things when learned through different methods - even by the same person.

And of course, one of the most exciting parts of this for me was the extremely clear - yet still somehow incomprehensible - description of what it would be like to look at the tablets according to Rabbi Simai. How did it work? Did the tablets project a pocket of four dimensional space allowing viewers to perceive all sides at once?

I couldn't draw a picture of this one so I tried to get an AI to do it, but this is the best it could do:



BUT... the thing I loved most about this is how, according to this, each opinion highlights the multi-faceted nature of Torah in a different way, even the simplest one.

Alright, that's it! That's the Rabbit Hole!

Thank you for following me down the Rabbit hole. You can try to get out the way you came in, but the entrance faces the same direction on both sides.

Index of Sources

Bartenura

Rabbi Ovadiah of Bartenura (c. 1445–c. 1515), Italy and Jerusalem. Renowned for his commentary on the Mishnah, which became the standard in printed editions. He later revitalized Jewish life in Jerusalem.

Divrei David

Commentary on Rashi by Rabbi David HaLevi Segal (c. 1586–1667), Poland. Known as the Taz, he was a leading halachic authority and sharp Talmudist, especially active in Kraków and Lwów.

Ein Yaakov

Compilation of and commentary on the aggadic (non-legal) portions of the Talmud by Rabbi Yaakov ibn Chaviv (c. 1460–1516), Spain and Salonika. Intended to make the ethical and narrative teachings of Chazal more accessible and inspirational.

Etz Yosef

Commentary on Midrash Rabbah by Rabbi Chanokh Zundel ben Yosef (19th century), Bialystok, Lithuania (now Poland). Blends classic interpretations with his own insights in a clear and structured style.

Gur Aryeh

See Maharal.

Ibn Ezra

Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra (1089–c. 1167), Spain and later Italy and France. Celebrated for his rationalist biblical commentary and grammatical precision, especially in explaining the plain meaning of the text.

Korban HaEdah

Commentary on the Talmud Yerushalmi by Rabbi David Frankel (c. 1704–1762), Germany (Berlin). A major figure in reviving Yerushalmi study in Europe and a respected halachic voice.

Maharal (Rabbi Loew of Prague)

Rabbi Yehudah Loew ben Betzalel (c. 1520–1609), Prague, Bohemia (Czech Republic). Philosopher, mystic, and communal leader, known for his deep interpretations of Torah, mitzvos, and Jewish destiny. Often referred to as Rabbi Loew or the Maharal of Prague.

Mechilta

Halachic Midrash on Sefer Shemos, attributed to Tannaim in Eretz Yisrael, especially Rabbi Yishmael. Part of the corpus of Midrashei Halacha.

Radbaz

Rabbi David ben Zimra (1479–1573), Spain, Egypt, and later Tzfas. A prolific halachic authority and kabbalist, widely quoted in later responsa literature.

Rabbeinu Bahya

Rabbi Bahya ben Asher (c. 1255–1340), Saragossa, Spain. His Torah commentary weaves pshat, derash, philosophy, and Kabbalah into an integrated approach.

Ramban (Nachmanides)

in halacha, Kabbalah, and biblical commentary. His Torah commentary is central to traditional study and revered for its spiritual depth. Often referred to by his Latinized name, Nachmanides.

Rashi

Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (1040–1105), Troyes, France. The foremost commentator on both Torah and Talmud. His clarity and conciseness became the foundation of Jewish learning.

Sefer HaAruch

Lexicon of Talmudic and Midrashic terms by Rabbi Nathan ben Yechiel (c. 1035–1110), Rome. One of the earliest and most respected dictionaries of rabbinic Hebrew and Aramaic.

Sirilio

Rabbi Solomon Sirilio (c. 1485–c. 1554), originally from Spain, later active in Salonika and Tzfat. A pioneering commentator on the Talmud Yerushalmi, especially its agricultural tractates, known for adapting Bavli-based analysis to the Yerushalmi's unique style.

Talmud Bavli

The Babylonian Talmud, compiled in Babylonia (modern Iraq) in the 5th–6th centuries CE. Central text of rabbinic Judaism, spanning law, lore, ethics, and theology.

Talmud Yerushalmi

The Jerusalem Talmud, compiled in the Land of Israel (mainly Tiberias and Caesarea) in the 4th–5th centuries CE. Preserves early traditions with a unique style and rhythm.

Tanya

Foundational book of Chabad Chassidus by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi (1745–1812), White Russia (Liozna, Liadi). Explores the inner life of the soul and divine service.

Tiferes Yisrael

See Maharal.

Tosfos Yom Tov

Rabbi Yom Tov Lipmann Heller (1579–1654), Moravia and Poland (Prague, Kraków). His commentary on the Mishnah is detailed, clear, and often printed alongside the Bartenura.

Yefeh Mareh

Commentary on the Talmud Yerushalmi by Rabbi Shmuel Yafeh Ashkenazi (1525–1595), a scholar of the Ottoman Empire. His work complements other Yerushalmi commentaries with clear explanations and extensive sourcing.