

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

In the House of Lords there is a special chamber used as, among other things, the place where new Peers are robed before their introduction into the House. When my predecessor Lord Jakobovits was introduced, the official robing him commented that he was the first Rabbi to be honoured in the Upper House. Lord Jakobovits replied, "No, I am the second." "Who was the first?" asked the surprised official. The chamber is known as the Moses Room because of the large painting that dominates the room. It shows Moses bringing the Ten Commandments down from Mount Sinai. Lord Jakobovits pointed to this mural, indicating that Moses was the first Rabbi to ever be honoured in the House of Lords.

The Ten Commandments that appear in this week's parsha have long held a special place not only in Judaism but also within the broader configuration of values we call the Judeo-Christian ethic. In the United States they were often to be found adorning American law courts, though their presence has been challenged, in some states successfully, on the grounds that they breach the First Amendment and the separation of church and state. They remain the supreme expression of the higher law to which all human law is bound.

Within Judaism, too, they have always held a special place. In Second Temple times they were recited in the daily prayers as part of the Shema, which then had four paragraphs rather than three.¹ It was only when sectarians began to claim that only these and not the other 603 commands came directly from God that the recitation was brought to an end.²

The text retained its hold on the Jewish mind none the less. Even though it was removed from daily communal prayers, it was preserved in the prayer book as a private meditation to be said after the formal service has been concluded. In most congregations, people stand when they are read as part of the Torah reading, despite the fact that Maimonides explicitly

¹ See Mishnah Tamid 5:1, Brachot 12a.

² We do not know who the sectarians were: they may have included early Christians. The argument was that only these were directly heard by the Israelites from God. The other commandments were given indirectly, through Moses (see Rashi to Brachot 12a).

ruled against it.³

Yet their uniqueness is not straightforward. As moral principles, they were mostly not new. Almost all societies have had laws against murder, robbery and false testimony. There is some originality in the fact that they are apodictic, that is, simple statements of "You shall not," as opposed to the casuistic form, "If ... then." But they are only ten among a much larger body of 613 commandments. Nor are they even described by the Torah itself as "Ten Commandments." The Torah calls them the *asseret ha-devarim*, that is, "ten utterances." Hence the Greek translation, Decalogue, meaning, "ten words."

What makes them special is that they are simple and easy to memorise. That is because in Judaism, law is not intended for judges alone. The covenant at Sinai, in keeping with the profound egalitarianism at the heart of Torah, was made not as other covenants were in the ancient world, between kings. The Sinai covenant was made by God with the entire people. Hence the need for a simple statement of basic principles that everyone can remember and recite.

More than this, they establish for all time the parameters – the corporate culture, we could almost call it – of Jewish existence. To understand how, it is worth reflecting on their basic structure. There was a fundamental disagreement between Maimonides and Nahmanides on the status of the first sentence: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." Maimonides, in line with the Talmud, held that this is in itself a command: to believe in God. Nahmanides held that it was not a command at all. It was a prologue or preamble to the commands.⁴ Modern research on ancient Near Eastern covenant formulae tends to support Nahmanides.

The other fundamental question is how to divide them. Most depictions of the Ten Commandments divide them into two, because of the "two tablets of stone" (Deut 4:13) on which they were engraved. Roughly speaking, the first five are about the relationship between humans and God, the second five about the relationship between humans themselves. There is, however, another way of thinking about

³ Maimonides, *Responsa*, Blau Edition, Jerusalem: Mekitzei Nirdamim, 1960, no. 263.

⁴ Maimonides, *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*, positive command 1; Nahmanides, *Glosses ad loc.*

numerical structures in the Torah.

The seven days of creation, for example, are structures as two sets of three followed by an all-embracing seventh. During the first three days God separated domains: light and dark, upper and lower waters, and sea and dry land. During the second three days He filled each with the appropriate objects and life forms: sun and moon, birds and fish, animals and man. The seventh day was set apart from the others as holy.

Likewise the ten plagues consist of three cycles of three followed by a stand-alone tenth. In each cycle of three, the first two were forewarned while the third struck without warning. In the first of each series, Pharaoh was warned in the morning (Ex. 7:16; 8:17; 9:13), in the second Moses was told to "come in before Pharaoh" (Ex. 7:26; 9:1; 10:1) in the palace, and so on. The tenth plague, unlike the rest, was announced at the very outset (Ex. 4:23). It was less a plague than a punishment.

Similarly, it seems to me that the Ten Commandments are structured in three groups of three, with a tenth that is set apart from the rest. Thus understood, we can see how they form the basic structure, the depth grammar, of Israel as a society bound by covenant to God as "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." (Ex. 19:6)

The first three – no other gods besides Me, no graven images, and no taking of God's name in vain – define the Jewish people as "one nation under God." God is our ultimate sovereign. Therefore all other earthly rule is subject to the overarching imperatives linking Israel to God. Divine sovereignty transcends all other loyalties (no other gods besides Me). God is a living force, not an abstract power (no graven images). And sovereignty presupposes reverence (Do not take My name in vain).

The first three commands, through which the people declare their obedience and loyalty to God above all else, establish the single most important principle of a free society, namely the moral limits of power. Without this, the danger even in democracy is the tyranny of the majority, against which the best defence against it is the sovereignty of God.

The second three commands – the Sabbath, honouring parents, and the prohibition of murder – are all about the principle of the createdness of life. They establish limits to the idea of autonomy, namely that we are free to do whatever we like so long as it does not harm others. Shabbat is the day dedicated to seeing God as creator and the universe as His creation. Hence, one day in seven, all human hierarchies are suspended and everyone, master, slave, employer, employee, even domestic animals, are free.

Honouring parents acknowledges our human createdness. It tells us that not everything that matters is the result of our choice, chief of which is the fact that we exist at all. Other people's choices matter, not just

our own. "Thou shall not murder" restates the central principle of the universal Noahide covenant that murder is not just a crime against man but a sin against God in whose image we are. So commands 4 to 7 form the basic jurisprudential principles of Jewish life. They tell us to remember where we came from if we are to be mindful of how to live.

The third three – against adultery, theft and bearing false witness – establish the basic institutions on which society depends. Marriage is sacred because it is the human bond closest in approximation to the covenant between us and God. Not only is marriage the human institution par excellence that depends on loyalty and fidelity. It is also the matrix of a free society. Alexis de Tocqueville put it best: "As long as family feeling is kept alive, the opponent of oppression is never alone."⁵

The prohibition against theft establishes the integrity of property. Whereas Jefferson defined as inalienable rights those of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," John Locke, closer in spirit to the Hebrew Bible, saw them as "life, liberty or possession."⁶ Tyrants abuse the property rights of the people, and the assault of slavery against human dignity is that it deprives me of the ownership of the wealth I create.

The prohibition of false testimony is the precondition of justice. A just society needs more than a structure of laws, courts and enforcement agencies. As Judge Learned Hand said, "Liberty lies in the hearts of men and women; when it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can save it; no constitution, no law, no court can even do much to help it."⁷ There is no freedom without justice, but there is no justice without each of us accepting individual and collective responsibility for "telling the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth."

Finally comes the stand-alone prohibition against envying your neighbour's house, wife, slave, maid, ox, donkey, or anything else belonging to him or her. This seems odd if we think of the "ten words" as commands, but not if we think of them as the basic principles of a free society. The greatest challenge of any society is how to contain the universal, inevitable phenomenon of envy: the desire to have what belongs to someone else. Envy lies at the heart of violence.⁸ It was envy that led Cain to murder Abel, made Abraham and Isaac fear for their life because they were married

⁵ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, abridged with an introduction by Thomas Bender (New York: Vintage Books, 1954), I:340.

⁶ *The Two Treatises of Civil Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 136.

⁷ Learned Hand, "The Spirit of Liberty," "I Am an American Day" ceremony (Central Park, New York City, May 21, 1944).

⁸ The best book on this subject is Helmut Schoeck's *Envy; A Theory of Social Behaviour*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969.

to beautiful women, led Joseph's brothers to hate him and sell him into slavery. It is envy that leads to adultery, theft and false testimony, and it was envy of their neighbours that led the Israelites time and again to abandon God in favour of the pagan practices of the time.

Envy is the failure to understand the principle of creation as set out in Genesis 1, that everything has its place in the scheme of things. Each of us has our own task and our own blessings, and we are each loved and cherished by God. Live by these truths and there is order. Abandon them and there is chaos. Nothing is more pointless and destructive than to let someone else's happiness diminish your own, which is what envy is and does. The antidote to envy is, as Ben Zoma famously said, "to rejoice in what we have" (Mishnah Avot 4:1) and not to worry about what we don't yet have. Consumer societies are built on the creation and intensification of envy, which is why they lead to people having more and enjoying it less.

Thirty-three centuries after they were first given, the Ten Commandments remain the simplest, shortest guide to creation and maintenance of a good society. Many alternatives have been tried, and most have ended in tears. The wise aphorism remains true: When all else fails, read the instructions. *Covenant and Conversation 5775 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l ©2015 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks z"l and rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"You shall not climb up My altar with steps, so that your nakedness will not be revealed on it." (Exodus 20:22) In the time when the Torah was given, all religions were intimately connected with sexuality, temple prostitutes, and orgiastic rites. One of the great moral revolutions that Judaism brought to the world is the notion that holiness requires modesty in the realm of sexual matters and, by extension, all areas of life.

The Torah forbids the use of steps in ascending the altar, instead mandating the more gradually ascending ramp, in order that the priest's nakedness not be revealed. This underscores the lesson that worship of God and sexual immorality are incompatible.

The significance of the ramp leading up to the altar can also be understood in another way. One of my mentors, Rabbi Moshe Besdin, z"l, explained to me that with a ramp you can either go up or go down, progress or regress. However, with steps, you can rest. The Torah may well be teaching us that, when ascending God's altar, you cannot stop to rest; you dare not fall into the trap of self-satisfaction and complacency. Judaism asks for constant examination, self-criticism and growth.

The Tzemach Tzedek, one of the great Chabad rabbis, once asked his students: Who stands higher on the ladder, the individual on the third rung or the individual on the tenth rung? The individual on the tenth rung, they all responded. Not necessarily, he qualified. If the individual on the tenth rung is going down or standing still, and the individual on the third rung is going up, the individual on the third rung stands higher than the individual on the tenth rung!

I would like to add an additional interpretation to this verse. The Torah uses the word ma'alot, usually translated as steps, but which can also be translated as "good character qualities." So now the verse reads, "Do not climb up to My altar with your good character qualities; so that your nakedness will not be revealed on it."

According to this reading, God warns us that if we ascend to the altar of God flashing our good qualities, proud of our achievements and self-satisfied about all that we know, then the danger is that our nakedness—our weaknesses, our vulnerabilities, our flaws—will be revealed. The altar cannot be a center for self-aggrandizement, a stage of religious worship from which we let others know how great we are; if we fall into this trap, God tells us that ultimately our nakedness—not our greatness—will be revealed.

The altar of God must be approached with a sense of humility, with full awareness of our inadequacies; it dare not become a center of self-satisfaction, religious one-upmanship, and arrogance.

The following Hassidic tale illustrates this point. In a town in pre-war Europe, there lived two Jews: One, named Reb Haim, a great scholar, and the other, also called Haim, an indigent porter who could barely read the Hebrew letters. The scholar married well: the richest man in town came looking for the most brilliant mind in the yeshiva as his son-in-law, and gladly supported him generously.

The two Haims, such very different people, crossed paths frequently. Haim the porter would pray early in the morning so that he could start working as soon as possible in order to earn his meager living. Rushing out after the service, he would invariably run into the great Reb Haim arriving early for another minyan, since he stayed up until the early hours of the morning learning Torah. In this way they "met" nearly every day.

Reb Haim the scholar would always dismissively sneer at Haim the porter, ignoring the deprivations faced by the other Haim. Haim the porter, in contrast, would look upon the scholar with yearning, feeling sad and unworthy that he couldn't spend his life studying the holy Torah.

Many years later, both Haims died on the same day, and went to face judgment in the Heavenly Court. Haim the scholar was judged first. All of his good deeds, years of long study, and righteous acts were

placed on one side of the scale, and on the other side his daily sneer of self-satisfaction. The sneer outweighed all the good deeds. Haim the porter then submitted for judgment. On one side of the scale were placed his sins, and on the other side of the scale his daily sigh of yearning. When the scales finally settled, the sigh outweighed the sins and the sneer outweighed the merits.

Ultimately, in our worship of God, humility triumphs over all. ©2022 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

A literal reading of the Parsha tells us that Yitro, who was the high priest of Midian and the father-in-law of Moshe, saw of the events of the Exodus from Egypt and, according to Rashi based on Midrash, saw the battle the Jewish people fought against Amalek.

The Torah implies, and Rashi states openly, that upon hearing of these events, Yitro was propelled to leave his home, and to come into the desert to accompany the Jewish people, at least initially, on their travels through the Sinai desert. The Torah does not tell us how he heard about these events, but, apparently, they were of such earth-shattering proportions, that the news spread rapidly throughout the Middle East.

From the verses in the song of Moshe and the Jewish people, at the splitting of the waters of Yam Suf, it is obvious that Yitro was not alone in hearing about these wondrous events. The verse says that all the nations of the area were also astounded to hear of these miracles, and to realize that a new nation had been born from the slavery of Egypt. Yet, the reaction of the people in those countries and especially that of Amalek certainly differed greatly from the response of Yitro to the very same news.

The nations of the world chose either to oppose the news by attacking the Jewish people, or, mostly, to simply ignore it as not being worthy of their concern. People are so confirmed in their inertia that even when there is an event that obviously is historic and earth-shattering, but which would, at the same time, cause a reassessment of their own lives, attitudes, and policies, they will, in the main, either deny the news, besmirch the miracle, or ignore the matter completely.

It is to the credit of Yitro that he chose to act positively upon hearing of the events that occurred to the Jewish people in their exodus from Egypt. Of course, being the father-in-law of Moshe, he also had a personal vested interest in visiting his family, but, nevertheless, it must be recorded to his credit, that he uprooted himself to join the Jewish people in their travels through the desert.

One of the great tests in life is how one responds to news that is momentous and unexpected,

that makes it necessary to change one's habits and life direction. Jews often piously – and I do not doubt their sincerity when they say it – put off momentous decisions until the Messiah arrives. But the little I know of human nature teaches me that even when the Messiah arrives, there will be many who will not be willing to change their life pattern, sell everything to join the Jewish people in the land of Israel, with all the accompanying hardships that inevitably will be involved. People hear many things, many times very important things, but this knowledge does not necessarily imply that they are willing to act upon them in a positive and productive manner. Yitro is eternally privileged to have a portion of the Torah on his name because he heard and shortly thereafter, he acted.

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RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

The Torah tells us that at the moment of revelation, all the Jews at Sinai were able to see (v'chol ha'am ro'im; Exodus 20:15). Is it possible that of the few million, there was not one single person who was blind? Here the Mechilta responds and states that, in fact, a miracle occurred. In the words of this Midrash, "there was not among them a single blind person." The Mechilta additionally points out that at Sinai, not even one Jew was mute or deaf. After all, the Torah states, "and all the people answered" and declared, "we will do and hear" (Exodus 19:8; 24:7).

The full text of the Torah actually reads "and all the people saw the voices" (ve'chol ha'am ro'im et hakolot). It is certainly possible to see images, but is it possible to see voices?

The Mechilta suggests that the power of the people to see was so profound that it went beyond the usual. In the words of Rashi, "they saw that which should be able to be heard, which is impossible to see at any other place." In other words, at revelation, the moment was so powerful that they saw what is normally heard. Their vision was so powerful that they even saw voices.

Another thought comes to mind. Perhaps at revelation, there were those among our people who were not in perfect physical shape. There may have been some who could not hear. However, our text may be suggesting that even the hearing-impaired were able to complement this limitation by a greater ability to see. This may be the meaning of seeing voices. Unable to hear, they compensated with their ability to see. Similarly, there may have been those who couldn't speak or who couldn't see, but were able to somehow, with God's help, make up for this limitation at this most amazing moment in history.

The idea that those with disabilities have a place in Judaism is fundamental to Torah. Some of our greatest leaders struggled with limitations. Isaac couldn't see, Jacob was lame for a period of time, and Moses suffered from a severe speech impediment. Despite these difficulties, they rose to unbelievable heights.

Which is the greater miracle at the time of revelation? On the one hand, it certainly reflects God's intervention if all people, even those who couldn't see, were given sight at that moment. On the other hand, revelation, which embraces even those with limitations (and who among us does not have some limitation?), makes an extraordinary statement. It teaches us that just as everyone was welcome at Sinai, so too must we do everything in our power to ensure that everyone in our community is embraced. ©2022 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

The Ten Statements

Our Rabbis have explained that the Ten Commandments are the foundation upon which all of the six hundred and thirteen commandments are erected. Each commandment can be expanded to encompass not only those laws which are found in the written Torah, but also can influence the comprehension of the entirety of the Oral Laws which were given to Moshe on Har Sinai to clarify and expand on the Written Laws. It is also evident that the Ten Commandments were written on two tablets with five commandments on each. Our Rabbis explain the reasons for this division.

The translation and characterization of Hashem's revelation as the Ten Commandments is misleading. The Hebrew term is Aseret HaDibrot, the Ten Statements. There are many more than ten commandments which we find in Hashem's words, but these laws were expressed in ten statements, five on the first tablet and five on the second. The Kli Yakar explains that the ten statements used by Hashem to give the people His Law, find a parallel in the ten statements through which Hashem created the world. The Kli Yakar explains that the creation of the world was contingent on the giving of Hashem's Laws on Har Sinai. The world cannot exist without the standards of behavior and interaction that is demanded in the laws that were received at Har Sinai.

The Or HaChaim explains that the Torah begins this set of Laws with the words, "And Elokim spoke". Hashem began His command of the Law with the attribute of Justice represented by the name Elokim. The first words of the actual statements, however, were, "I am Hashem your Elokim." Here the

attribute of Mercy, represented by the name Hashem, precedes the attribute of Justice. But the Or HaChaim gives another reason for beginning with Justice and then emphasizing Mercy. There are both positive and negative commandments in the Torah. Many positive commandments are without punishable consequences. One is commanded to pray three times a day, but one is not punished for not praying. One simply will not receive the benefit and the reward for this positive commandment. If, however, he is commanded to not eat chametz (leaven) on Pesach, he does receive punishment for breaking a negative commandment. The Ten Statements can be divided along the lines of the two tablets, but they can also be divided into positive and negative commandments. The Or HaChaim explains that from the Gemara (Menachot 41a) we learn that when Hashem brings Justice with Mercy, punishment for not doing a positive commandment does apply. Thus, one is commanded to observe Shabbat and honor one's parents, both positive commandments, but one can be punished for not fulfilling these commands since they are part of the Ten Statements.

HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that Hashem chose these Ten Statements and the commandments they contain to deliver on Har Sinai, because they were the most difficult to perform properly, and they would receive the harshest punishments both in this life and the next. These Ten Statements also hint at all of the six hundred thirteen commandments that comprise the Written Law, the Torah. HaRav Sorotzkin also compares each tablet with the other to demonstrate that the order and the grouping of these commandments were unique and important. He starts by explaining that the mitzvot given on the first tablet, contained in the first five statements, were primarily concerned with our special relationship to our Creator. Those mitzvot that were written on the second tablet contained laws that were primarily between Man and his fellowman. He asks why Hashem did not write them all on one tablet.

The Laws written on the first tablet are the justification and the foundation of acceptance for the Laws written on the second tablet. It would be impossible for Man to accept "Thou shall not kill" or "Thou shall not commit adultery," two Laws for which Men have an appetite, unless Man has already accepted belief in a Supreme Being, One Who rewards those who guard His commandments and punishes those who do not. The first tablet contains the commandments, "I am the Lord your G-d," "There shall be no other gods besides Me," "Thou shall not raise up My Name in vain," "Remember the Sabbath Day." These four commandments help to establish Faith in our hearts for the Creator of the world. When these same commandments include the words, "For I am a jealous G-d, remembering the sins of the fathers for

their children, for the third and the fourth generation of those that hate Me," they establish the concept of reward and punishment, which is a necessary criterium for commandments that involve interaction with our fellowman.

HaRav Sorotzkin also explains the reason why "Honor thy Father and thy Mother" is included in the first tablet even though it appears to be between Man and his fellowman which is on the second tablet. The connection in the Gemara between honoring one's parents and Shabbat is emphasized by the example of a situation that would not be required to observe that honor. If a parent would ask his child to break the observance of Shabbat, that child should not obey even though he is required by the Torah to honor his parents' wishes. His Parent in the Heavens, Hashem, must be honored before his parent on Earth. Shabbat also encompasses the comprehension of Hashem as the One to Whom all allegiance must be given as the Creator of the world in six days. It is for that reason that it is incumbent on the parent to teach his child to observe Shabbat.

HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that honoring one's parents is essential for the continuity of the Jewish People: "... the continuance of G-d's whole great institution of Judaism rests entirely on the theoretical and practical obedience of children to parents, and 'Honor thy Father and thy Mother' is the basic condition for the eternal existence of the Jewish Nation." Hirsch suggests that it is for this reason that this mitzvah is on the first tablet, namely, that belief in Hashem as the Creator, the Master, and the King to Whom all allegiance must be given, is the responsibility of each parent to teach to his children. The same way in which a child will honor the will of his parent sets the example for how that same child will then honor Hashem.

The gift of the mitzvot, both in the form of the Ten Statements as well as the entirety of the six hundred thirteen mitzvot which are learned from these Statements, guide us through our time in this world and prepare us for the afterlife. We are blessed that Hashem has presented us with this guide to enable us to live meaningful and productive lives which will benefit all Mankind. May we study the Torah and all the laws so that we can take advantage of this gift. ©2022 Rabbi D. Levin

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Deriving Laws from Pre-Sinaitic Sources

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

"Anything we prohibit or practice today is only because of the commandments which G-d gave to Moshe Rabbeinu...." We do not undergo circumcision just because Avraham Avinu

circumcised himself and the members of his household, but rather because G-d commanded us through Moshe to circumcise our sons just as Avraham circumcised his sons (Rambam, *Peirush Ha-Mishnayot, Chullin*). The Torah was given at Sinai, and Jewish law was established then. Whatever our forefathers did, they did of their own volition and not because they were given a Torah mitzva.

As a result, even though G-d said to Avraham, "Your name shall be Avraham" (*Bereishit* 17:5) and our Sages derive from this that anyone who calls Avraham by his former name Avram is transgressing a positive commandment, such a mitzva is not included in the list of the 248 positive commandments. This is because Avraham's story took place before the Torah was given at Sinai.

This principle, however, presents us with numerous difficulties. How is it that our Sages derive that one must be quick to perform a mitzva from the episode of Avraham arising early in the morning to fulfill the directive of G-d to sacrifice his son Yitzchak? How did our Sages learn from Lavan that we do not mingle *semachot*? (See the first essay in Parshat Vayetze.) How could our Sages derive the requirement of using a knife to slaughter an animal from the story of the sacrifice of Yitzchak, where the Torah says, "And he took the knife to sacrifice his son" (*Bereishit* 22:10)? There are many more examples.

A number of solutions have been proposed:

1. We do not actually derive *mitzvot* from stories about our forefathers. We do, however, derive details of how to fulfill them.
2. The only types of laws we derive from pre-Sinaitic times are those that are logical and have clear reasons behind them. We do not derive laws which are simply divine decrees (*gezeirat ha-katuv*) from this material.
3. If we have no other way to derive a law, and it does not appear among the laws given at or after Sinai, we may derive the law from material that appears before the giving of the Torah.
4. We derive the law from pre-Sinaitic sources only in cases where we can explain why this specific mitzva went into effect even before the giving of the Torah.
5. We can use pre-Sinaitic material to clarify words and other details of laws given at Sinai. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"And her two sons; which the name of the one was Gershom, for he said, "I was a stranger in a foreign land." (Shmos 18:3) The careful observer will note that this is the second time we are hearing the explanation for the name of Moshe's son Gershom. In Shmos 2:22 we are told he was named

Gershom because "I was a stranger in a foreign land" and here it repeats the same reason. The Ohr HaChaim notes this and says it bore repeating so we knew it was the same son, and not another one named for him.

What exactly the meaning of this name conveys is a matter of debate. Some explain simply that Moshe was in Midian, a stranger from the land of Egypt where he was born, and Hashem gave him a wife and child there, so he was expressing gratitude.

Others explain his gratitude to be even greater. He was happy in his situation in Midian that not only had he been saved from Pharaoh's sword, but that he rose to prominence (the Midrash relates that he became a king.) Now, his birthplace was the land that was "foreign" to him and he was praising Hashem for his success here.

The Ramban, however, explains that it was repeated here because earlier there was no opportune place to discuss the naming of Eliezer. Now, however, the names are mentioned for Moshe is thanking Hashem for protecting him as a stranger in a foreign land, AND saving him from the sword of Pharaoh, AND now making him the king of the Jews, AND drowning Pharaoh and his armies in the sea.

It is almost reminiscent of the song Dayenu, where we recount each of the different steps of increasing kindness that Hashem did for us when we left Egypt. Here Moshe expresses again the appreciation for the first kindness of his being a stranger and yet having blessings, and then goes on to recall the others.

If we reread the words of the Ramban with a different perspective, we can come to a new realization of appreciation on Moshe's part. The first time the name is explained, the Ohr HaChaim suggests that beyond the simple understanding is the fact that the righteous live in this world as strangers, temporary dwellers. Moshe alluded to that fact, and added "in a foreign land" to indicate that he was also far from his parents and brethren.

In this light, we see a new pattern. Moshe thanks Hashem for enabling him to remain aloof in a foreign land. Instead of blending in with the people in the palace, he remained separate and distinct. That led to Pharaoh wanting to kill him, but Hashem saved him. Not only that, he was rewarded for his fidelity by becoming the leader of the greatest nation in the world, the Jewish People.

The Jews in Egypt were "metzuyanim," distinctive and identifiable. When you looked at them, you could see that they were different and not like everyone else. The reward for maintaining our rarified identities is that ultimately, we will be uplifted and the difference will be clear for all to see and marvel at the greatness and holiness of Klal Yisrael. And that is something to be thankful for.

Upon his visit to New York in the 1920's, R' Boruch Ber Leibowitz z"l was presented with the Key to the City by New York Mayor, Jimmy Walker.

At the public ceremony, Mayor Walker said: "Rabbi Leibowitz, you and I both wear crowns of leadership. I wear the crown of the greatest city in the world, New York City, while you wear the crown of the greatest people in the world, the Jewish People."

"The difference between us," he concluded, "is that I wear my crown upon my head, while you wear your crown in your head." ©2022 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

Virtual Beit Medrash

STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA HARAV AHARON LICHTENSTEIN SHLIT"A

Adapted by Binyamin Frankel

Translated by Kaeren Fish

A verse in our parasha reads: "You shall not make with Me gods of silver, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold." (20:19) The Mekhilta elaborates: "You shall not make with Me" -- "Rabbi Yishmael said: You shall not make the form of My servants which serve Me on high: not the form of the angels, nor the form of the ofanim, nor the form of the keruvim.

"Rabbi Natan said, You shall not say, 'I shall make a sort of image of Him and then prostrate myself to it' -- therefore it says, 'You shall not make with Me.' And it is written (Devarim 4:15), 'You shall guard yourselves exceedingly well, for you did not see any image....'"

Similarly, concerning the prohibition of idolatry, we find the following verses: "Guard yourself lest you be ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed from before you, and lest you inquire after their gods, saying: 'How did these nations serve their gods? I shall do likewise.'" (Devarim 12:30)

The statement, "I shall do likewise" may be understood in two different ways. The simple understanding is that this person seeks to serve idols in the same way that the nations do. However, Ibn Ezra offers an interesting understanding: "'I shall do likewise' -- [meaning] 'in my service of G-d,' and you will think that you are acting well. You shall not do so, for G-d abhors all of their actions." In other words, Ibn Ezra warns us against adopting defective norms that belong to idolatry, and trying to use them in our service of G-d.

This is also explained in the Mekhilta (following on from the above): "'Nor shall you make for yourselves' -- You shall not say, 'Since the Torah permits [the keruvim] to be made in the Temple, I shall do the same in the synagogue, or the beit midrash.' The verse therefore teaches, 'You shall not make for yourselves.'

"Another explanation for the words, 'You shall not make for yourselves' -- you shall not say, 'We shall make [idols] for decoration, just as others do in other places.' The verse therefore teaches, 'You shall not make for yourselves' [i.e., for your own esthetic purposes]."

To clarify this, we must examine the prohibition of idolatry. This prohibition can be transgressed in one of two ways -- "in its usual manner," and "not in its usual manner." The Gemara (Sanhedrin 60b) teaches that the actions forbidden under the category of "in its usual manner," including the particular actions that represented the service of Ba'al Pe'or, or casting a stone at Mercury, etc., apply only to that specific form of idolatry. The prohibitions that fall under the category of "not in its usual manner," such as offering sacrifices or incense, libations, prostration, etc., apply to all forms of idolatry.

These two models of idolatry in fact represent two negative elements which may attract a person's interest and lead to sin. A person may be attracted in a trivial manner. During the period of the settlement of Eretz Yisrael and the period of the kings, Bnei Yisrael repeatedly sinned and repented. However, there is one sin which recurs over and over again throughout that period, as we read: "Only the people sacrificed in the high places, because no House for G-d's Name had been built until those times. And Shlomo loved G-d, walking in the ways of David, his father; only he sacrificed and offered incense in the high places." (I Melakhim 3:2)

This theme reappears several times over the course of Sefer Melakhim. The Mishna (Zevachim chapter 14) mentions various situations in which the 'bamot' (high places) were permitted and forbidden. We find that these bamot, which were actually used lawfully during a certain period in history, were a very strong temptation for Am Yisrael. Apparently, the bamot gave people the ability to communicate with G-d in every situation and in every place. Man needs some connection with G-d that goes beyond place, and the bamot represented a distorted fulfillment of that need. This is idolatry that is "not in its usual manner." It is a type of behavior which does not belong directly to idolatry, but may be considered part of its accessories.

There is yet another type of idolatry. This is where a person wants to perform actions that are not normative by any standard, believing that this will help his connection with G-d.

What we learn from our parasha is that the path to G-d is not given over to man. One's own subjective good intentions are not the proper criterion. Rather, performing actions which G-d Himself defines as good must be the basis for one's orientation. The attempt to seek G-d in a unilateral manner, based only on one's own personal initiative, is not only missing the mark, but

a form of idolatry. (*This sicha was delivered on Shabbat Parashat Yitro 5769 [2009].*)

SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

Our Parashah opens, "Yitro, the priest of Midian, the father-in-law of Moshe, heard everything that Elokim did for Moshe and Yisrael, His people--that Hashem had taken Yisrael out of Egypt." From this it seems that Yitro had heard all about the Exodus before joining Bnei Yisrael in the desert. But, the Parashah continues, "Moshe told his father-in-law everything that Hashem had done to Pharaoh and Egypt for Yisrael's sake--all the travail that had befallen them on the way--and that Hashem had rescued them." This implies that there was much that Yitro did not know. Indeed, after listening to Moshe, Yitro says, "Now I know that Hashem is the greatest of all the powers, for in the very manner in which the Egyptians had conspired against them [Hashem took revenge on them]."

R' Shlomo Yazya Duran z"l (Algiers; late 16th century) explains: When Yitro first heard about the Exodus, he did not grasp the significance of the details. Rather, he was moved by the general idea "that Hashem had taken Yisrael out of Egypt." In Yitro's mind, that alone justified his trek into the desert to make sacrificial offerings with Bnei Yisrael.

After Yitro came to Moshe, R' Duran continues, Moshe saw an opportunity to teach his father-in-law some of the fundamentals of our faith. Specifically, Moshe told Yitro that the story of the Exodus contains three lessons within it: first, that Bnei Yisrael were saved from their enemies; second, that Hashem exacted vengeance on those enemies; and, third, the amazing wonder that each and every detail of the Egyptians' punishment was Middah Ke'negged Middah / a precise response to the wrong they had done. (Megillat Sefer p.426) © 2022 S. Katz and torah.org

