

United We Stand

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Parshas Yisro

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The Parsha's Path

This week's Parsha features the *aseres hidibros*, the "Ten Commandments." While the giving of these commands was a climactic and crucial event in Jewish history, one fundamental question has plagued commentators for millennia: Why these ten? Of all the commandments in the Torah, why are these the ones G-d wished to articulate to the whole people at Sinai? There are certainly many other commandments that are equal or greater in severity than some of the ones listed. Some commentators suggest that there's nothing particularly special about these commandments; they are merely a sampling of the other *mitzvos*, to give the Jewish people a taste of what they'll have to keep. However, others suggest that there is something paradigmatic about this set of laws, that they somehow epitomize what the whole Torah is about. But if so, what?

Rabbi David Fohrman suggests that the five commandments on the first tablet, which deal with matters between man and G-d, parallel the five commandments on the second tablet, which deal with matters between man and his fellow. Understanding these parallels can help illuminate what the commandments are all about.

The first command is to acknowledge "I am H', your G-d." The sixth command, the first on the second tablet, is "You shall not kill." Rabbi Fohrman suggests that what drives a person to kill someone is the belief that the world would be a better place without them; it would be better if they didn't exist, so you wipe out their existence. Likewise, the fundamental reason a person denies G-d is because they feel it would be better if G-d didn't exist. Denial of G-d removes Him from one's life and allows one to live as they please without feeling the yoke of Heaven upon them. These two commandments adjure us to respect the right of G-d and one's fellow humans to exist.

The second command is not to fashion or worship idols, and parallels the seventh command, not to commit adultery. Here the connection is obvious: We must not betray sacred relationships. Just as we may not betray G-d by worshipping idols, we may not betray our spouses. The next step after respecting G-d's and others' existence is to afford them this most basic loyalty.

The third command is not to take G-d's Name in vain, paralleling the eighth command, not to kidnap. G-d's Name is, as it were, His body, the way He is manifested, from our perspective, in this world. A body is a physical manifestation and extension of a person, connecting his soul with reality. Likewise, our recognition of G-d actually brings Him into reality and enables Him, as it were, to act. When we take G-d's Name in vain, treating it as trivial, we violate this representation of G-d and subvert it in a way that is against His will. This is much like how when one kidnaps a person, he violates his body, his physical form, misappropriating it against the person's will.

These commands require us to respect the physical autonomy of people and G-d, and treat them accordingly.

The fourth command is to keep Shabbos, which is described as a sign and a testimony to G-d's Creation of the World and His dominion over it. By refraining from creative activity, we acknowledge G-d as the Ultimate Creator. Thus, Chazal tell us, to violate the Shabbos is equivalent to denying Creation. This parallels the ninth commandment, not to give false testimony. Giving false testimony is distorting a person's past, accusing them of doing or not doing something when it simply isn't true. Likewise, not keeping Shabbos is giving false testimony by denying G-d's Creation and His involvement in the world. We are adjured in these commandments to respect and acknowledge the past actions of G-d and our fellow man and not distort them.

The fifth commandment, the bridge between the commands between man and G-d and man and man, is to honor one's father and mother. Just as we are required to honor G-d, our heavenly father, we must honor our parents, who are also responsible for our existence. This parallels the final commandment, not to covet, because just as we must be fully appreciative of those who made us and gave us life and refrain from focusing on what they failed to provide, we must appreciate everything we have and not feel like we should have what belongs to others. Just as we respect our parents' and G-d's claim on our existence, we must respect others' claim on what they own.

What emerges is that the Ten Commandments really represent a progression from recognizing G-d and others' existence to recognizing G-d and others' ownership. The Ten Commandments are thus, fundamentally, the first Bill of Rights. Unlike the Bill of Rights, however, the Ten Commandments don't focus on what we're *entitled* to, but rather what we *owe* to others and to G-d. Rabbi Fohrman suggests that the Ten Commandments are best encapsulated by Hillel when he was asked to summarize the whole Torah while standing on one foot: What is hateful to yourself, do not do unto others. Only when we grant this basic respect, regardless of how we may be treated or what others are doing, can a foundation be laid for the ideal of *love your neighbor as yourself* and brotherly reconciliation. We must show our fellow Jews that no matter what, we respect their existence, we would never betray them, we respect their right to act with autonomy, we respect their past – their accomplishments, their hardships, and their perspectives, and we respect their right to what they have and appreciate that G-d gives every person the resources meant for them. May this foundation of respect usher in a new era of love and unity and allow us to merit to once again hear G-d's voice, heralding the Ultimate Redemption, *bimheira viyameinu*.

Deeper Meanings

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All that G-d tells us we shall do and we shall listen (24:7).

This week's Parsha records the momentous giving of the Torah at Har Sinai. The pasuk tells us that all of our ancestors accepted the Torah willingly (*We shall do and we shall listen*). However, Tosafos famously asks that the Gemara (Shabbos 88a) learns from a different pasuk (19:17) that G-d raised the mountain over them like a barrel and said that if they accept the Torah, fine, but if not, there they would be buried. This seems to contradict the notion that they accepted the Torah willingly.

My father, in his amazing, must-buy sefer *Kanfei Yonah* (available at the YU Seforim sale, select stores, and at cwcweb.org), which discusses many fascinating contemporary issues and other important topics, discusses many of the approaches to resolve this issue, quoting from the Rav to the Besht to Rav Yehuda Amital to the Maharal, but I think all of them can basically be broken down into four categories:

1. We accepted the Torah willingly, but we were in a state of spiritual bliss. The Torah was forced upon us to make it binding even in times of difficulty when we might not be willing to accept it.
2. We were willing to accept the Torah in theory, but weren't necessarily committed to rigorous practical observance. This is what we were forced into.
3. We willingly accepted the Written Law, but not the Oral Law, which is much more difficult.
4. We were willing to accept the Torah in its entirety no matter what happened, and being forced was just to teach us the message that while it's true we accepted the Torah willingly, we have to recognize that this was not simply "our choice"- rather, we have a responsibility towards G-d to bend our will to His will.

Ultimately, I think that all these answers really reflect one common idea: by using force, G-d made our Kabbalas HaTorah a more idealistic acceptance, intensifying and increasing what we were willing to do voluntarily. But why should this be true?

To answer this question, perhaps we have to answer a second question: At the beginning of Meseches Avoda Zara, we are told that in the days of Moshiach, the non-Jews will complain to G-d that they were deprived of the reward of the Jewish people because they didn't get the Torah. G-d will reply that He offered the Torah to them (as per the midrash), but they refused it. They will complain that unlike with them, G-d forced the Torah on the Jewish people, so it wasn't a fair comparison. G-d seemingly agrees at this point and offers them one "easy" mitzvah - Sukkah. The non-Jews will sit in their sukkahs until G-d will make the weather boiling hot, making the sukkah uncomfortable. The non-Jews will leave their sukkahs, kicking it down. Even though they would be exempt from sukkah due to the weather, the fact that they would kick it down demonstrates their lack of commitment to Torah.

How does G-d giving the non-Jews the mitzvah of sukkah answer their complaint that they didn't have a mountain over their heads forcing them to accept the Torah? What does one have to do with the other?

The mitzvah of Sukkah represents man's vulnerability and submission before G-d and a desire to live in His house. In a sense, then, it is a house of humility. In this vein, my father suggests at the end of his essay that the idea of the mountain was to remind the Jewish people of the famous midrash as to why Har Sinai was chosen as the mountain for the giving of the Torah: because unlike the larger mountains, Har Sinai symbolized humility, and humility is an essential quality for receiving the Torah (the Gemara in Taanis says that Torah only stays with one who is humble). One who does not have a sense of reverence for the Rabbis, tradition, and submission to G-d is liable to either reject the Torah or distort it for their personal agenda. The idea of being forced into receiving the Torah is that following the Torah is not all about our own free choice and it's not a partial commitment - it is a complete, humble submission to G-d. By kicking the sukkah down, the non-Jews demonstrated that they were uninterested in such submission.

The message of what Matan Torah is all about is essential, even to the most devout and committed of Jews, to facing a world of instant gratification, where sometimes our desires, lifestyle, and values clash with those of the Torah. It is especially important to reflect on all the ways our tendencies conflict with what the Torah demands of us, and recognize where our true goals and mission lies. Because no matter where our inclinations lead us, being a Torah Jew means being humble enough to realize that our commitment to Torah always comes first.

Goal of the week

Reflect on one way you can show respect to others more.

This week's bulletin is dedicated for a Refuah Sheleima for Shaindel Temma bas Rachel Zlotta, Masha Sarah bas Teiviah Leah, Bracha bas Shoshanah, Reuven ben Golda, Yitzchok Moshe haKohen ben Miriam, Ephraim Melech ben Teilah, Gavriel Margoliot Ben Malka, and all those injured by the war and acts of terror, as well as for the safe return of all the hostages and soldiers. Please have them in mind in your Tefillos.

Have A Great Shabbos !!

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