

Yitro 5781
To Be Commanded
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Much can be said about the Ten Commandments, starting with our calling them “the Ten Commandments.” In the Hebrew, they are called “*Aseret HaDibrot*,” which means “The Ten Utterances.” When we try to count them, it is not so simple to get to 10 precisely. That is why the *Dibrot* are marked with two sets of cantillation marks--one that we use when studying them out of a book, and one that we use to chant them communally, skipping over punctuation to produce 10 distinct utterances.

More importantly, what do we mean by calling themax THE 10 Commandments? Are those utterances distinct from, or more important than, the other 603 Commandments? Even more importantly, what does it mean for us, really, to say that we are “commanded?”

We cannot possibly answer those questions fully in one d’var Torah, but I’d like to play together in that space this morning.

For starters, it is a basic Jewish principle that all of the *mitzvot* command us equally. As such, the 10 Commandments are *not* more important than any of the other *mitzvot*. You might ask, then, why did we stand a few minutes ago for their recitation? The short answer is “tradition,” a tradition that was hotly contested at its inception during the Middle Ages. The reason for the heat was that heretics, early Christians, and some other sidelined sects in the early rabbinic period believed that the 10 Commandments were Divine Law, and therefore commanding, and that the other commandments in the Torah either never were, or no longer represented, the will of God. The rabbis, therefore, doubled down on the belief that the entire Torah represents God’s word. Maimonides upheld that view, writing that “in any place” where Jews are accustomed to stand for the reading of the 10 Commandments, “one should prevent them from doing so because of the possible damage to belief, as some people may imagine that there are various levels of Torah and that only some parts are exalted, and that is a very bad thing...And it is strictly forbidden to treat part of the Torah as if more exalted than another part” (Responsa of Maimonides, Blau Edition, Jerusalem, 1960, saif 263).

Well--were we wrong, then, to stand? I don’t think so. According to the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, ordinary Jews have always had a passion for the Ten Commandments and felt them to be “the distilled essence of Judaism. They were heard directly by the people from the mouth of God (whatever that means, exactly). They

were the basis of the covenant they made with God at Mount Sinai...Jews kept searching for ways of recreating that scene, by standing when they listened to it from the Torah...Despite the fact that they knew their acts could be misconstrued by heretics, they were too attached to that great epiphany--the only time in history God spoke to an entire people to treat it like any other passage in the Torah. The honor given to the Ten Commandments was the custom that refused to die" (in "The Custom that Refused to Die").

So, we stand, affirming our wish to recreate the Sinai moment and feel like God is speaking directly to us.

That, then, begs the question: If, purportedly, we want to receive Revelation, what are the implications for our choices and behavior, if we do? More specifically, if receiving Revelation involves Torah, Does Torah command us?

For Jews who use *halakha* to shape their practices, yes, Torah commands us. But the nature of that command begs a guiding philosophy. For that, we have two, distinct yet compatible, classical approaches.

How does Torah command us? The first approach, whose antecedent is found in the Talmud (Shabbat 88a), posits that living a flourishing life necessarily means being bound in commitment and obligation beyond oneself. Said Rav Avdimi bar Khama Bar Khasa, "The Holy One turned the mountain upon [the Israelites] like a beer barrel, and said to them, 'If you accept the Torah, all will be well, and if not, here will be your grave!'" It sounds harsh, but perhaps not more disorienting than living in perpetual free fall, not bound and as a result not held in relationship to anyone or anything beyond one's own conception. The *Meshekh Khakhma* (on Exodus 19:14) softens the original midrash, adding that when God held the mountain over the Israelites, God revealed God's glory in such wondrous ways that rational thought and even their individual souls left them, and they became like angels, devoid of discernment but not needing it, either, because they saw with complete clarity their dependance on Torah. In that telling, the mountain over our heads was a good thing, an experience of pure awe.

One may interpret the Revelation at Sinai as Revelation in a distinct place and time, as depicted in our Biblical narrative, or as a foundational myth undergirding a unique set of intentional practices and communal norms honed across time and place. In either case, Sinai is the place where our People forged a *Brit*--a covenant--with the Divine, consecrating ourselves in service of a sacred project to make this world habitable by God and God's creations. Of course, we may bind ourselves to other systems or constructs, but from the perspective of the Jewish People's communal narrative, our norms begin formally at Sinai. Our tradition takes that acceptance, however coerced,

extremely seriously and for all time.

In the *Mekhilta*, written some 1,800 years ago in the land of Israel, Rabbi Khanina ben Gamliel imagines what the two tablets of the Commandments looked like. He suggests that each tablet bore five of the Commandments. That's how most of us picture them, right? But the other sages disagree. They say that each tablet contained all Ten utterances.

The problem with Rabbi Khanina's opinion, the one we picture, is that the first five commandments contain 146 words and the second five commandments contain 26 words. That would alter the familiar, symmetrical, iconographic rendering. But more fundamentally, why would there be two, identical tablets?

In the ancient Near East, like today, when two parties made a treaty, each retained a complete copy. In the case of the 10 Commandments, Moshe brought down two, identical tablets, one belonging to God, and the other belonging to the People. Each needed to be stored in its owner's tabernacle, which for both parties was the Aron Habrit--the Ark of the Covenant. Fact or fiction? You decide. The point is that the 10 Commandments cemented the Brit between God and the People of Israel.

And, according to our tradition, every Jewish soul, past, present, and future, was present and counted in that sacred covenant.

To summarize the first view of Torah's authority, we agreed to a covenant that is so essential to our thriving that we had no choice but to accept it.

In the second view, Revelation is ongoing. Ongoing Revelation means that every generation, and every person, has the potential to discover truth and right--"the will of God" in religious terms--and to shape practices and norms around what is revealed. One finds evidence of ongoing Revelation in the Torah itself, as Deuteronomy repeatedly responds to and revises earlier statements and laws.

Godself tells us that Torah does not live in Heaven, but rather, it is in the mouths and in hearts of each generation, to hear its message and carry out its intentions. That view is most famously sourced in a Talmudic legend (Bava Metzia 59b) you have heard before from this *bimah*, most recently from Dan Pekarsky, in which Rabbi Eliezer gets God to prove that Rabbi Eliezer is correct in a ruling regarding a particular oven, only to be bested by a younger colleague who quotes God's own words back at the Divine: "The Torah is not in Heaven," the younger rabbi says to God, "and You have already told us to make decisions here on Earth about how to live it out." And God smiles, because that is exactly what God had intended.

In order for Torah to transform us as individuals, in order for it to become part of us and us part of it, we need to take hold of it on our terms. The one-sided, Sinai spectacle does not get the job done for the people. So too with us. We are designed to thrive on our own agency, divinely inspired.

I would suggest that the authority of Torah comes from our need to better ourselves, to learn and to grow. We must not accept each verse of Torah as the best answer to the human condition, but we probe the underlying questions and tensions that help us shape the narrative of our own lives within the communal story. A thinking, commanded Jew lives and thrives in the working out of concrete practice from a tangle of sacred truths, which we do our best to grasp.

If we are to be moved to really make Torah live in us and breathe its goodness out into the world, we must open a channel in our own hearts and souls. Then we can transform ourselves, our world, and even Godself. Our part in the commandedness chain is to open that channel.

Much has now been said, and much more can be said about the Commandments, all of them, including the famous Ten. I want to leave us with a memory of standing in the Mishkan we built this morning, from coast to coast, when we tried, for just a moment, to stand at Sinai--or under Sinai--together, when we stood as one to receive Divine command.

Let's hold onto this: To be commanded is to discern our place in the vast wholeness of creation, to aspire to create from our lives something better than ourselves, and to discover the freedom to bring our deepest goodness, in utter humility, to a world that depends on the Divine spark planted in each of us, hoping to take its place in shaping our story. May we know, honor, and treasure that hope.