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Parashat Hashavua  
Yeshivat Har Etzion

## PARASHA

### PARASHAT YITRO

#### "The Ten Commandments"

By Rav Yehuda Rock

Above the "*Aron Kodesh*" in many synagogues one finds a listing of the Ten Commandments, presented in the familiar arrangement: "I am the Lord your God..."; "You shall have no other gods..."; "You shall not take the Name of the Lord... in vain," etc. In this *shiur* we shall see that this arrangement represents only one of four possible ways of enumerating the Ten Commandments.

The fact that there are ten commandments (and not some other number) is stated explicitly in the verses. In *Shemot* 34:28, for example, we read: "He wrote upon the tablets the words of the covenant – the ten utterances." It likewise states in *Devarim* 4:13, "And He told you His covenant which He commanded you to do – the ten utterances – and He wrote them upon two tablets of stone." Once again, in *Devarim* 10:4, we read: "He wrote upon the tablets like the first writing, the ten utterances which God had spoken to you at the mountain from amidst the fire on the day of the assembly, and God gave them to me." Thus, it is clear that what God wrote upon the tablets is divided into ten "utterances" ("*devarim*"), as the Torah refers to them, or, as *Chazal* usually refer to them, the "ten commandments" ("*dibberot*" – as in *Mekhilta Yitro*, "*Masekhta De-Be-chodesh*," *parasha* 8 – "*keitzad*").

#### Division of the Ten Commandments

[The first three possibilities that we address here are based upon an article by my esteemed teacher, Rav Mordekhai Breuer, in his *Pirkei Mo'adot*, beginning from p. 379.]

The textual unit comprising the "Ten Commandments," both in *parashat Yitro* and in *parashat Vaetchanan*, has two systems of "te'amim" (cantillation) – the *ta'am elyon* ("upper system") and the *ta'am tachton* (the "lower system"). The *ta'am elyon* is of Babylonian origin, while the *ta'am tachton* was used in *Eretz Yisrael*. They differ from one another in terms of the division into verses: the *ta'am elyon* divides the unit into exactly ten verses, and this system thus defines the Ten Commandments.

It is important to note at this point that in many editions of the Chumash (including the Koren Tanakh), there are some corruptions of the *te'amim*. For the purposes of our discussion below we shall rely on the *te'amim* as printed in the "critical" editions (Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, Chorev, Keter Yerushalayim). Often one finds the two systems presented separately from one another at the back of *Sefer Shemot*, at the end of the Torah, or at the end of the entire Tanakh.

The *ta'am elyon* ends the first verse at the words "*mi-beit avadim*" ("from the house of bondage"), and the end of the next verse at the word "*mitzvotai*" ("My commandments"). Hence, "I am the Lord your God Who took you from the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage" is one commandment; "You shall not have... and to those who observe My commandments" is the second, etc. This is the generally accepted, conventional division.

Aside from this system of traditional cantillation, this division into verses also has a clear source in rabbinical text: The Mekhilta (ibid.) draws a parallel between the Commandments inscribed on the first tablet and the corresponding order of Commandments on the second tablet:

In what form were the Ten Commandments given? With five on the first tablet and five on the second.

It is written [on the first tablet], "I am the Lord your God....," corresponding to which [we find on the second tablet], "You shall not murder." The Torah is teaching us that anyone who spills blood is considered as though he detracts from the image of the King...

It is written [on the first tablet], "You shall not have....," and correspondingly [on the second tablet], "You shall not commit adultery." The Torah is teaching us...

It is written, "You shall not take the Name of the Lord your God in vain," and correspondingly, "You shall not steal." The Torah is teaching us... etc.

Let us now consider the second approach to the division of the Ten Commandments.

According to the *ta'am tachton* (the "lower" system), the textual unit containing the Ten Commandments consists of twelve verses. Thus, the lower system makes no attempt to divide the unit into ten commandments.

Nevertheless, the sages who instituted this cantillation system took into account the fact that the unit presents ten commandments. Let us now examine the relationship between the Commandments and the division into verses according to the *ta'am tachton*.

The Ten Commandments may be categorized into three groups according to their relative length: there are commandments of a regular length – a verse; some that are very brief, and some that are very long.

The *ta'am tachton* system groups the very brief commandments together: "You shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." Four commandments are thus merged into a single verse.

In the case of a very long commandment, the *ta'am tachton* system spreads it over a few verses, each of "regular" length. Thus, for example, in the commandment of Shabbat:

(7) "Remember the Shabbat day, to sanctify it.

(8) Six days shall you work and perform all your labor.

(9) And the seventh day is a Shabbat for the Lord your God; you shall not perform any labor – [neither] you, nor your son, your daughter, your manservant, your maidservant, your animals or the stranger who is within your gates.

(10) For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day; therefore, the Lord blessed the Shabbat day and sanctified it."

Where a commandment is of "regular" length, the length of the verse and the commandment are the same. In such instances, the *ta'am elyon* and *ta'am tachton* are identical. This is the case, for example, in the commandments, "You shall not take the Name...", "Honor your father and your mother," and "You shall not covet...."

When we examine the division of the first two commandments according to the *ta'am tachton* system, a problem arises. Let us examine these two commandments in their entirety:

"I am the Lord your God Who took you from the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage.

You shall have no other gods before Me.

You shall not make for yourself a form, or any image, that is in the heavens above or that is in the earth below, or that is in the water beneath the earth.

You shall not prostrate before them, nor shall you worship them, for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the sins of the fathers upon the sons, upon the third and the fourth generation, for those who despise Me, and performing kindness to the thousandth generation for those who love Me and observe My commandments."

The first commandment (according to the *ta'am elyon* system) – "I... from the house of bondage" – is of more or less average length. In accordance with the methodology described above, we would expect the *ta'am tachton* system to assign a complete verse to this commandment. However, the first verse actually ends with the words, "before Me." Clearly, then, the *ta'am tachton* system takes a different view in determining the division of the commandments: the words "I am the Lord... before Me" comprise one commandment, while the words "You shall not make... and to those who observe My commandments" constitute the second commandment (and a lengthy one, at that, spread over two verses).

The *ta'am elyon* system classifies the commandments by distinguishing between affirmative commands – "I am the Lord your God" – and negative commands – "You shall have no other gods... You shall not make for yourself an idol... You shall not prostrate before them, nor shall you worship them...." The *ta'am tachton* system, by contrast, prefers distinguishing between commands relating to faith (both affirmative and negative) – "I am the Lord your God... You shall have

no other gods..." – and those relating to conduct – "You shall not make for yourself an idol... You shall not prostrate before them, nor shall you worship them..."

This approach is echoed in a passage in the Sifri (Shelach, 112), which, commenting on the verse, "For he has scorned the word of God," states, "The verse speaks of idolatry, as it is written, 'As God spoke in this' – he [the violator] has scorned the First Commandment that was given to Moshe by God – 'I am the Lord your God... You shall have no other gods before Me.'"

Clearly, the Sifri viewed "I am the Lord..." and "You shall not have..." as representing a single commandment.

Aside from these two approaches, there is a third approach that is also anchored in tradition: the division reflected in the division into *parshiyot* (units of text as they appear in the *Sefer Torah*, resembling paragraphs). The textual unit containing the Ten Commandments is divided into ten *parshiyot* (some "open" – i.e., where the *parshiya* ends and the rest of the line is left open; others "closed" – i.e., the *parshiya* ends and the next one begins on the same line). Obviously, the *parshiyot* are meant to divide the text into ten commandments. According to this arrangement, the first two commandments (as defined by both of the previous systems), from "I am the Lord... You shall not have... You shall not prostrate before them... and to those who observe My commandments," comprise a single commandment, while "You shall not covet" is divided into two commandments:

1. "You shall not covet your neighbor's house" (in *parashat Yitro*) or "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife" (in *parashat Vaetchanan*);
2. "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, his maidservant, his ox, his donkey, or anything that your neighbor has" (in *parashat Yitro*), or "You shall not desire your neighbor's house, his field, his maidservant, his manservant, his ox or his donkey, or anything that your neighbor has" (in *parashat Vaetchanan*).<sup>1[1]</sup>

In evaluating the three approaches, we find that each presents some exegetical difficulty. (This is precisely the reason why there are three different approaches!) The

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<sup>1[1]</sup> In Rav Breuer's view, in the article mentioned above, it is possible that the sages who created the lower system subscribed to the same approach that we see reflected in the *parshiyot*. I humbly submit that were this the case, the lower system should have divided the commandment of "You shall not covet" into two verses.

problem with the third approach lies in the fact that the sequence of "your neighbor's wife" and "your neighbor's house" is different in *parashat Vaetchanan* and in *parashat Yitro*, which appears to prove that they belong to the same unit. It thus seems difficult to divide them in determining the Ten Commandments. This difficulty is what led the first two approaches to combine the two sections of "You shall not covet" and instead divide the first section of the Ten Commandments.

The concluding words of the first section of the Ten Commandments – "For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God... and performing kindness to the thousandth generation for those who love Me and who perform My commandments" – would appear (in contradistinction to the second approach, that of the *ta'am tachton*) to refer not only to the practical prohibitions of creating or worshipping idols, but also – and perhaps principally – to the more fundamental prohibition of "You shall not have other gods before Me." As for the words, "I am the Lord your God Who took you from the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage" – if they represent a specific command, then it would appear that this command, too, is the corollary of "You shall not have..." such that the concluding words, "for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God..." refer also to "I am the Lord your God," in which case it should be included together with "You shall not have" (as opposed to the first approach, of the *ta'am elyon*). On the other hand, if the words, "I am the Lord... the house of bondage" are meant as a general introduction, then it would seem that they should not be included as part of any commandment (once again, in contradistinction to the *ta'am elyon*).

These difficulties, it seems, underlie the approach of the *parshiyot*, which combines the entire first section into a single commandment, and then divides "You shall not covet" into two separate commandments, despite the obvious question to which this gives rise (as discussed earlier). We shall presently see that a fourth approach to the division of the commandments avoids these difficulties.

All three approaches that we have discussed thus far are anchored in one of the mechanisms of the "*mesora*" (rabbinical tradition); the first two are even given explicit expression in rabbinical texts. The fourth approach, which we shall examine below, has no explicit basis in the *mesora*, but, as we shall see, it has a solid grounding in the plain, literal text.

## **"The Words of the Covenant"**

Let us return to the verses which mention the "ten utterances":

"He wrote upon the tablets the words of the covenant; the ten utterances."  
(*Shemot* 34:28)

"He told you His covenant which He commanded you to do – the ten utterances – and He wrote them upon the two tablets of stone." (*Devarim* 4:13)

"He wrote upon the tablets like the first writing, the ten utterances that God spoke to you at the mountain from amidst the fire, on the day of the assembly, and God gave them to me." (*Devarim* 10:4)

The "ten utterances," then, are the "words of the covenant" (*Shemot* 34 and *Devarim* 4) which were initially written upon the first set of tablets (*Devarim* 4) and later upon the second set (*Shemot* 34 and *Devarim* 10).

In what sense are the Ten Commandments the "words of the covenant"? Although we indeed find in the Ten Commandments references to reward and punishment (at the end of the prohibition of idolatry and in the prohibition against taking God's Name in vain), these promises and warnings refer to specific commandments. It is thus difficult to broaden their scope to the extent that they represent the covenant in question. The Ten Commandments are characterized as fundamental laws (affirmative and negative), not as the terms of a covenant between God and *Am Yisrael*.

Although one could argue that a covenant was forged over the contents of the Ten Commandments (which would in itself require clarification), the expressions "the words of the covenant" and "His covenant which He commanded you" indicate that these utterances themselves are the words of the covenant, not matters to which covenantal conditions apply. Furthermore, from what we read at the end of *parashat Mishpatim* (24:3-7) it appears that the covenant at Sinai was forged over everything that is contained in *parashat Mishpatim*, as well. Where, then, are "the words of the covenant"?

We shall return to this question a bit later; in the meantime, let us turn our attention to the tablets upon which the "ten utterances" are written.

### **The Tablets, the Mishkan, and Shabbat**

At the end of *parashat Mishpatim* (24:12) we read:

"God said to Moshe: Ascend the mountain to Me, and I shall give you the stone tablets and the teaching ["torah"] and the commandment which I have inscribed to instruct them." The purpose of Moshe's ascent is to receive from God the tablets upon which the "teaching and the commandment" are inscribed.

Moshe's ascent is described immediately thereafter, at the end of chapter 24. Assuming the Torah's presentation follows chronological sequence (see Ramban), it emerges that what happens immediately after Moshe's ascent of the mountain is described at the beginning of *parashat Teruma*: God commands Moshe concerning the Mishkan. This command, with all of its various appendices, spans all of *parashat Teruma*, *parashat Tetzaveh*, and part of *parashat Ki Tisa* (until 31:11), and is followed by the commandment of Shabbat (31:12-17). Only after God completes His instructions to Moshe regarding the Mishkan and Shabbat does He give him the tablets (31:18):

"He gave to Moshe when He finished speaking with him at Mount Sinai the two Tablets of Testimony, tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of God."

This should surprise us. The stated purpose of Moshe's ascent to Mount Sinai is the giving of the tablets, but upon ascending the mountain he also receives the entire command of the Mishkan, and the command of Shabbat. One might explain that the command of the Mishkan is mentioned here because the tablets are meant to be placed inside the Ark that stands in the Holy of Holies (25:16, 21). This would not, however, explain why Moshe receives here the command of Shabbat. (The fact that we infer the Shabbat laws from the juxtaposition of its command to that of the Mishkan does not suffice to answer our question, since these laws are not mentioned explicitly in the verses; we certainly cannot regard them as the crux of the reason for the mention of Shabbat here!) Furthermore, if the subject of the Mishkan is indeed so vital to the giving of the Tablets, then – considering the length of the command concerning the Mishkan – would it not seem logical for God to tell Moshe that he is ascending the mountain for this purpose, as well?

Thus, we are faced with difficulties in three areas pertaining to the tablets and the commandments inscribed upon them: a.) the division into ten commandments; b.) the definition of the commandments as "the words of a covenant"; and c.) the function of the commands concerning the Mishkan and Shabbat within the context of Moshe's ascent of the mountain, which is supposedly meant only for him to receive the tablets.



## "The Ten Utterances"

It seems that the expression "the ten utterances" should be understood quite differently from its accepted meaning. The ten "utterances" appear to be ten different utterances of God, all elements of a covenant, related to the covenant of Sinai – its proposal, its content, and its observance. *Chazal* and the *mesora*, which apply the name "the Ten Commandments" to the section of laws from "I am the Lord..." to "You shall not covet," apparently sought to emphasize the centrality of these laws. But in terms of the plain meaning of the text, it seems that the "ten utterances" to which the Torah refers are ten other utterances of God concerning the covenant.

If we review the story of the covenant of Sinai, we discover that there are indeed ten significant utterances concerning the covenant.

Immediately upon Bnei Yisrael's arrival at Sinai, God proposes the covenant (*Shemot* 19:3-6):

"Moshe ascended to God, and God called to him from the mountain, saying:

So you shall say to the house of Yaakov and tell to Bnei Yisrael:

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and [how] I carried you upon eagles' wings and brought you to Me.

And now,

If you will listen well to Me and observe My covenant –

Then you shall be special for Me from among all the nations,

For all the earth is Mine, and you shall be for Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

These are the things that you shall tell to Bnei Yisrael."

This is the first of the ten "utterances" of the covenant.

Thereafter, Moshe relays to God the nation's response, and God commands him concerning the preparations for the revelation. These preparations are related to the specific event that will take place at Mount Sinai and are not directly applicable to future generations; therefore, they are not included in the ten utterances.

At the Revelation itself, God tells the nation all of what we usually refer to as the "Ten Commandments" – from "I am the Lord your God..." through "You shall not covet" (20:1-13). According to our proposed theory, this unit should not be regarded as a list of ten items (as we have seen, it is difficult to arrive at a logical division of this unit into more than nine items), but rather as a continuous passage which, while addressing a number of different subjects, need not necessarily be viewed as an organized list. The passage begins with the fundamentals of God's sovereignty over *Am Yisrael* ("your God") based upon the experience of the Exodus, with prohibitions against damaging this relationship, proceeding to the commemoration of the Shabbat of Creation, with its attendant faith in the creation of heaven and earth, and continuing with a series of fundamental laws for social functioning.

This is the second of the ten utterances.

At this stage the nation asks to hear God's commands via Moshe, and not directly from God Himself, and Moshe accedes to their request (20:14-17). God's next words are addressed to Moshe as a new utterance. This utterance is quite lengthy, incorporating the conclusions from the Revelation at Sinai with regard to the negation of fashioning images of God, and with regard to the altar as the proper place for God's service – the appropriate representation of the Divine Presence (20:18-22); laws to be presented to the judges whom Moshe had appointed at the beginning of *parashat Yitro* and who, to fulfill their task, require a fixed system of laws; as well as miscellaneous laws (21:1-23) and plans in anticipation of entering the land (23:20-33).

This is the third utterance.

Moshe tells the nation "all of God's words, and all the laws" (24:3) – in other words, the contents of the second and third utterances, as specified above, and the nation accepts these terms (*ibid.*). Moshe records this material in a book (24:4), which is called "the book of the covenant" (24:7), and a ceremony is held commemorating the forging of the covenant over this material (24:4-8). Thus, the first utterance was the proposal of the covenant, and the material of the second and third utterances – which was divided into two utterances due to the nation's request to hear the rest via Moshe – constitutes the crux of its content.

Following the ceremony of the forging of the covenant over the contents of the preceding utterances, God commands Moshe to ascend the mountain once again, "that I may give you the tablets of stone and the teaching and the commandments which I have written to instruct them," (24:12), and Moshe ascends (24:13-18). According to our present hypothesis, the "teaching and the commandment" here do not refer to the "Ten Commandments" which God had already declared, but rather to new information that God will command Moshe on the mountain; this, too, will be written upon the tablets.

As mentioned, God commands Moshe upon the mountain concerning the Mishkan (25:1 – 31:11) and Shabbat (31:12-17), and we questioned why these commands appear here. The answer is that the Mishkan and Shabbat are two mechanisms whose purpose, as expressed in these *parshiyot*, is to preserve and eternalize the covenant. This being the case, they are inscribed upon the tablets of the covenant. On what basis do we assert that the function of the Mishkan and Shabbat is to preserve and eternalize the covenant? With regard to the Mishkan, it is the fact that the tablets are placed in the center of the Mishkan, in the holy Ark. From the *parshiya* that discusses the Ark's construction, we understand that its purpose is to house the tablets. Following the details of its construction, we read (25:21), "And you shall place the covering over the Ark from above, and in the Ark you shall place the Testimony which I shall give to you." Clearly, the Ark can be covered and closed with the covering only after the tablets have been placed inside. Nevertheless, the order of the verse is reversed, reflecting importance rather than chronology. At the center of the Mishkan are the tablets upon which are inscribed the ten utterances of the covenant of Sinai.

Shabbat is described in this command to Moshe immediately following the command concerning the Mishkan, as a sign of the covenant between God and *Am Yisrael*: "... For it is a sign between Me and you for your generations, to know that I am the Lord Who sanctifies you... And *Bnei Yisrael* will observe the Shabbat, to make the Shabbat for all their generations an eternal covenant."

How many utterances are contained in the commands concerning the Mishkan and Shabbat? In other words, how many times are we told, during the course of these commands, "God said" or "God spoke to Moshe"? The *parshiyot* of *Teruma* and *Tetzaveh* together form one long utterance – the fourth of the ten utterances. In *parashat Ki Tisa* there are another five utterances that belong to the command concerning the Mishkan: the half-shekel, the basin for the *kohanim* (*kiyor*), the anointing oil, the incense, and Betzalel. These represent the fifth to ninth out of the ten utterances, and Shabbat is the tenth.

There are thus ten Divine utterances related to the covenant of Sinai. These include the proposal of the covenant (1), the content of the covenant (2-3), as well as the means of preserving and eternalizing it – the Mishkan (4-9) and Shabbat (10). Immediately after the completion of these ten utterances – the words of the covenant that are inscribed upon the tablets – "He gave Moshe, when He had finished speaking with him at Mount Sinai, the two tablets of testimony; tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of God" (31:18).

Translated by Kaeren Fish

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