

"Examine it Through and Through - For All is Contained Therein"

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The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

Special Holiday Shiur

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by Rav Jonathan Mishkin

The Torah reading for Shavuot contains the most well-known set of laws in Judaism. Exodus chapter 20 records the ASERET HA-DIBROT - commonly referred to as the Ten Commandments, but more accurately translated as the Ten Statements. Representing the first divine communication to the Children of Israel, the Aseret Ha-dibrot hold a position of prominence for the Jews unrivaled by any other biblical passage, with the possible exception of the Shema. The arks of synagogues around the world are adorned with representations of the shenei luchot ha-berit - the two stone tablets on which were engraved the Aseret Ha-dibrot. Most people stand when the Aseret Ha-dibrot are read from the Torah with a cantillation system unique to this section. Some Jews even conclude their daily prayers with a recitation of these ten statements.

What is so special about the Aseret Ha-dibrot? Why have they captured the imagination of generations of Jews who insist on their transcendent nature? Are the thirteen verses in question holier than other parts of the Torah? Indeed, the Rambam (Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, 12th century), writing in his eighth principle of faith, declares that it is incumbent upon the Jew to believe that

There is no distinction between a verse of Scripture like, "The sons of Cham were Kush and Mitzrayim" (Genesis 10:6), or "His wife's name was Mehetabel and his concubine was Timna" (Genesis 36:39, 12), and one like, "I am the Lord your God" (Exodus 20:2), or "Hear, O Israel" (Deuteronomy 6:4). All came from God, and all are the Torah of God, perfect, pure, holy and true.

(Maimonides' Thirteen Principles can be found in his commentary to the tenth chapter of Mishna Sanhedrin.)

To be sure, Maimonides discusses here the source of the Written Law and is arguing that every verse in the Torah is of divine origin. He does not seem to be saying that every verse in the Torah is of equal significance. Elsewhere, the Rambam states that in Temple times, the Aseret Ha-dibrot were read aloud daily because "they are the first and root commands" (commentary to Mishna Tamid 5:1).

Rabbi Yitzchak Abarbanel (15th century) reminds us that the thirteen verses comprising the Aseret Ha-dibrot bear the distinction of being the only verses spoken directly by God to the nation of Israel. In contrast to our passage, the rest of the Torah was dictated to Moshe, who relayed the information to his people. Furthermore, the Aseret Ha-dibrot were recorded in stone by the "hand of God," whereas Moshe set down the rest of the Written Law. The Abarbanel then explains that the Ten Statements were singled out for such special treatment because they include the 613 mitzvot that God commanded His nation. Because God wanted Israel to recognize that He was the author of the entire gamut of Jewish law, He Himself introduced the Ten Statements which represent the rest of the Torah.

This idea that the Aseret Ha-dibrot contain all the Torah's commandments is a fairly old one, finding expression in the midrashim of the Sages. For example, Bamidbar Rabba (13:16) states:

The 620 (Hebrew) letters from "I am the Lord" (20:2) to "anything that is your neighbor's" (20:14) are parallel to the 613 mitzvot. The seven extra letters represent the seven days of creation, teaching that the world exists only for the fulfillment of the Torah.

The term "taryag mitzvot" - 613 commandments - represents the traditional idea that the Torah contains 613 biblical commandments. This figure does not appear anywhere in the Torah itself, and the mitzvot are, of course, not numbered as they are presented. Yet, the Sages of the Talmud seem to accept that the will of God is expressed in 613 separate ordinances - 365 prohibitions and 248 positive directives (see Makkot 23b). By linking the Ten Statements to the 613 Commandments, the midrash explains why the Aseret Ha-dibrot were given special treatment by God - their importance is concealed in their depth of meaning.

We are now confronted with the following challenge: in what way do the Aseret Ha-dibrot contain the range of God's message to the Jewish people? Several commentators have attempted to squeeze the

spectrum of Halakha into these thirteen verses - some giving broad explanations for the meaning of the individual statements, others being very specific in the relationship between the commandments at revelation and their details that followed. We begin with the former.

I will combine the ideas of two 12th-century commentators, Rabbi Avraham ibn Ezra and Avraham bar Chiya who both identify three types of mitzvot: those of the heart, those of speech and those of action, each category manifested in positive and negative commandments. The first type of mitzva - involving thought - is represented in the Aseret Ha-dibrot by the second statement - "Thou shalt have no other God" (a negative command), the fifth statement - "Honor thy father and thy mother" (a positive command), and the tenth statement - "Thou shalt not covet" (a negative command).

The second class of mitzva - governing speech - has two samples in our passage, both negative: the third statement - "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord in vain," and the ninth statement - "Thou shalt not bear false witness."

The third category provides rules of action, manifested hereby the sixth statement - "Thou shalt not murder," the seventh statement - "Thou shalt not commit adultery," and the eighth statement - "Thou shalt not steal." Rabbinic interpretation of the mitzva of honoring parents clearly marks it as a positive mitzva of action. According to Halakha, the Torah is here mandating obedience to parents' requests as well as the performance of deeds to take care of one's mother and father.

Our commentators might have considered "Remembering Shabbat" a mitzva of thought since respecting the day means belief in the Torah's claim that God created the world. It can also be categorized as a mitzva of speech since the phrase "Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy" is usually cited as the source for the mitzva of reciting kiddush. And of course, Shabbat observance demands avoiding a wide range of forbidden actions.

Verse 2 might represent an introductory statement reviewing God's relationship with the nation, or according to those who feel that this too is a command, it represents the ultimate mitzva of thought - belief in the existence of God. The Aseret Ha-dibrot thus represent all six possible types of mitzvot -

any of the other hundreds of Jewish duties can be labeled as belonging to one of the categories illustrated by the ten.

Taking a similar approach, Rav Yosef Albo (14th century) sees the first five statements as explaining the fundamental principles of belief necessary for a relationship with God, and the last five as the basic rules required for the functioning of a society. All the other mitzvot are details for the development of these two schemes.

On the first tablet were the statements required of man in acceptance of his God, may He be blessed. For just like a king who builds a state and then frees slaves to populate it, God came to address His subjects so that they would accept His rule. The first thing that needed to be said was that He was the master who provided for them in freeing them from slavery - and this is the first statement of "I am the Lord your God," as if to say - it is befitting for you to accept My kingship because I freed you.

Next, He warned the people not to crown any other king in His stead, which is the statement of "You shall have no other god." It then made sense to command the subjects that they demonstrate extreme respect towards the monarch, avoiding the respect of taking His name in vain, which is "You shall not swear falsely." After that, it was fitting to designate a day commemorating the creation of the state which will remind the people of master who founded their country and who freed them from slavery. For this, God commanded the [Jews] to keep Shabbat, which testifies to the creation of the world (20:11) and to the Exodus from Egypt (Deuteronomy 5:15).

After this [the King] said, "Respect your father and your mother," because it is obvious that the king who built the state is unable to reveal Himself daily to His subjects. Now even if that generation who witnessed the coming of the king and the imposing of His rule, and His freeing them from slavery, remember these things, still - those who come after them who never experience the slavery and who never witness the coming of the king, might rebel against the idea that there even exists a ruler over them. The only way to avoid such a fallacy is to humble the children to accept the lessons from their parents who will teach them all that the king did for them in earlier times. This explains the fifth statement completing the requirements necessary for man's relationship with God reflected in a slave's subservience to his master.

Following this, the king establishes the requisite rules for maintaining the existence of the state and the society within it. The first of these is guarding the body of one's fellow, which is "You shall not murder" and avoiding his property - "You shall not steal." Also included is respecting something considered partly a man's body and partly his possession - his wife, represented here by "You shall not commit adultery." These are followed by a recognition that it is insufficient not to directly harm a person's body, property or wife, one must also refrain from speaking against his fellow - "You shall not bear false witness," and thinking harmful thoughts against him - "You shall not covet." With this, [the King] has completed the necessary precautions for maintaining a civilized society. (See The Book of Principles 3:26 for Albo's full text.)

Albo has thus argued that the Aseret Ha-dibrot contain the most important principles for building the Jewish nation. Presumably, the rest of the Torah falls into place as applications of these ideas.

Other scholars are more specific in attributing the 613 mitzvot to the Ten Statements. The Ramban (Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, 13th century) wrote an essay called "Taryag Mitzvot Ha-yotzim Mi-aseret Ha-dibrot" - "The 613 Mitzvot which are Derived from the Ten Statements." The Ramban moves dibra by dibra showing how the philosophy of each statement finds expression in numerous individual precepts. For example, Shabbat (dibra #4) represents concepts of holiness and rest expressed in the holidays prescribed by the Torah which are also deemed holy. Also included within the general command of Shabbat are resting in the seventh year - shemitta - and the laws associated with it such as the release of the Jewish slave, as well as observance of the Jubilee year and its restructuring of land ownership. The reminder that "In six days the Lord made heaven and earth" serves as a warning not to tamper with God's creations through the hybridization of plants or animals. "You shall not do any work ... your ox or your ass or any of your cattle" (Deuteronomy 5:14) hints at the prohibition of plowing with an ox and an ass together (ibid. 22:10).

Admittedly, this sort of approach can lead to some rather fantastic connections. In his two essays on Shavuot in Kad Ha-kemach, Rabbeinu Bachye ben Asher (14th century) links the 248 positive commandments to the three positive statements in the Ten (numbers 1, 4 and 5) and the 365 negative commandments to the other seven. One of his techniques is to identify associations based on the Torah's terminology. Thus, from the verse, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage," Rabbeinu Bachye seizes on the words "me-eretz" - land, "mi-beit" - from the house, and "avadim" - bondage.

"Eretz" includes all the agricultural laws that must be observed in Israel like orla (not eating fruit from a tree until its fourth year), hybridization of plants and vines (which however seem to be negative laws), resting the land in the seventh year, and all laws of sacrifices which are commandments incumbent only on residents of the Land of Israel. "Beit" only represents two laws related to one's house: mezuzah and ma'akeh (building a protective railing on a flat roof). "Avadim," of course, relates to the laws of Jewish slaves such as freeing him when his term is up, providing for him before he goes and treating a female servant properly. It also hints at the slightly different rules governing a non-Jewish slave. This treatment of the Torah's language seems less unusual in light of the Talmud's derivations of halakhot from extraneous articles or its transference of law details to multiple cases based on word repetition.

We have seen some commentators' attempts to link the Ten Dibrot to the 613 mitzvot, exercises which I believe were intended to defend God's decision to speak only these statements directly to the nation. But perhaps the idea that the ten are representative of many more messages has another purpose as well. The Mishna (*Tamid 5:1*) reports that as part of the Temple service, the kohanim would recite the Aseret Ha-dibrot along with the three paragraphs of Shema and accompanying blessings. The Amora Shemuel relates that it was customary for these verses to be read even outside the Temple proper, but that the practice was discontinued because heretics circulated their belief that only the Aseret Ha-dibrot were being read because they were the only commandments created by God, whereas the other 603 were of questionable origin (*Berakhot 12a* with Rashi).

This need to suppress any overemphasis of the Aseret Ha-dibrot has a parallel in current practice as well. The question has been raised whether it is proper for people who usually sit during Torah reading to stand during the recitation of this passage. Does this preferential treatment exhibit a belief in the divine authorship of these verses in contrast to the rest of the Torah? Some argue that there is no such element involved, and that standing merely represents an imitation of the original scene at Sinai when all of Israel stood to hear the voice of God. By standing, we recognize that indeed only these verses were uttered by God. And if we accept the premise of the midrash as elaborated upon by Ibn Ezra, Ramban, Rav Albo and Rabbeinu Bachye, we recognize that the Aseret Ha-dibrot are really only an introduction of things to come.

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