

YISRO (EXODUS 18:1-20:23)

## Hey, What About the Other 603?

2001 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

I recall a discussion I once had with the grandfather of a baby whose Bris I had just performed. He maintained that the requirement that a Bris take place on the eighth day was a rule that had been introduced by Joshua. He asserted that only the Ten Commandments had been given by G-d, and that the rest of Jewish practice was based upon rabbinic additions.

He was, of course, totally mistaken.

Indeed, in this week's Torah Reading we are presented with the awe-inspiring, breathtaking image of the Revelation at Mount Sinai. The entire Nation of Israel stood at the base of the mountain as the Master of the World thundered forth, "*I am your G-d Who took you out of the Land of Egypt . . .*" (Exodus, 20:2)

It has been pointed out that Judaism is the only religion that makes the claim that G-d appeared to the masses. Others claim there was a private revelation to an individual prophet, who, in turn, passes G-d's Word on to the nation. The Nation of Israel stood at the base of the mountain and heard G-d's pronouncements directly. The Ten Commandments were given at that time. The rest of the Mitzvahs, however, were transmitted to us via Moses.

This has given rise to the mistaken assumption that the Ten Commandments have a unique status, more deserving of observance than the rest of the Torah. Many Jews feel that it is very important to observe the Ten Commandments, while the rest of the 613 commandments remain on the back burner. (Ironically, I have yet to meet such a person who actually observes the Sabbath, one of the Big Ten!!)

This is not a new misconception. There was a time when the Ten Commandments were recited as part of the morning service. As a result, there were people who saw this as a proof that ONLY those commandments were legitimate, negating the value of the rest of the Torah. In order to prevent this distortion from continuing, the rabbis of the Talmud removed it from the liturgy and banned public readings of the Ten Commandments, other than in the context of the regularly scheduled weekly Torah Reading.

Does this mean that there is nothing special about the Ten Commandments? What then, is their significance? What are we supposed to learn from them?

Let us examine the first of these Commandments, which, at first glance, doesn't seem to be a Commandment at all: "*I am your G-d Who took you out of the Land of Egypt, from the house of slavery.*" This, according to Maimonides, is a Mitzvah requiring us to know that there is a G-d. Rashi explains this verse as telling us that if for no other reason than the fact that G-d took us out of Egypt, we are obligated to subjugate ourselves to His will.

The second Commandment, "*You will have no other gods before Me,*" (Ibid, v.3) requires no explanation as a foundation of our faith. G-d is telling us, "worship just Me; obey only My Commandments."

The Talmud tells us that only these first two Commandments were said to the entire nation. Unable to withstand the intense holiness to which they were being exposed, the people asked Moses to receive the rest of the Commandments from G-d and to transmit them to the people. He did so, not only with the remaining eight of the ten, but with the remaining 611 of the 613 Mitzvahs.

These ten are not an extraordinary ten, of greater priority. These Commandments, given at Sinai, lay the groundwork for the rest of the Torah. These Commandments tell us WHY we must obey ALL of the 613 Commandments. Just as these were given to us at Mt. Sinai, so too were all the others. Next week's Torah Portion, which deals primarily with civil law, torts and damages, is adjacent to this section to tell us that these seemingly "secular" laws were also given at Sinai, and must be observed.

In other words, it's not good enough to observe the "Mt. Sinai" laws like not having false gods. You also have to observe the "mundane" laws like not having false business practices. The 613 Commandments are a "package deal."

What if we don't fulfill the entire package? What if we can't observe all of the Mitzvahs? We are not perfect, and we are sure to falter, so why should we bother?

This is actually a Christian concept. Christian theology teaches that since we can't fulfill the entire Torah, we are hopeless sinners, and that we must, therefore, find other means to salvation. (See the Second Commandment, cited above.)

Judaism teaches that we have to strive to do whatever we can. Torah observance is a journey; we get as close to G-d as we can. We should not allow our nonobservance of one mitzvah to be an excuse to ignore the rest.

If a person observes some Mitzvahs and doesn't feel ready to do others, does that make him a hypocrite? No, it means he is inconsistent. (As we all are.) It means he is human. It means he has room to grow.

The Ten Commandments stand as a "summary" of G-d's will. Appreciate your creators. (G-d and your parents.) Demonstrate your belief that G-d created the world by resting on His Sabbath. Don't lie and don't cheat and don't lust for what's not yours because G-d gives you what you're supposed to have.

If we can focus on the First Commandment, the reminder of all that G-d has done for us, we will find it easier to accept the privilege of fulfilling ALL of His Mitzvahs.

Have a great Shabbos.

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