

Reflections on the Decalogue¹

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1. Innovative Concepts

The Ten Commandments comprise a unique set of laws that introduced concepts of the highest order to mankind. This compendium, more accurately referred to as the Decalogue – a term derived from the Greek-Latin rendering of *asseret hadebarim*, the ten words or pronouncements, a phrase thrice-attested in the Torah (Ex. 34:28; Deut. 4:13, 10:4) – appears twice in the Five Books. In Exodus 20 it is embedded in the Torah’s narrative description of the early stages of Israel’s development as a nation; indeed, presented as the natural unfolding of G-d’s covenant with the patriarchs and the fundamental element that defines Israel’s national identity. In Deuteronomy 5, Moshe recites it early in his valedictory address through which he leads Israel to a covenant renewal shortly before his death. (There are a number of differences between the two formulations, most of which we will address in our study *On Decalogue Variations*².)

Following are four major features of this remarkable proclamation that manifest original, even revolutionary concepts. Each is linked with several associated innovative notions.

1. The Decalogue constitutes the essence of Hashem’s Revelation to Israel. Its precepts were the foundation upon which He enacted a covenant with the nation, establishing an intimate relationship between Him and man, an association with far-reaching consequences. The tablets on which the Decalogue was inscribed are “Tablets of the Covenant” (לוחות הברית, Deut. 9:9, 15) while the ark in which they resided is the “Ark of the Covenant” (אֲרוֹן הַבְּרִית, Josh. 3:6, et al). It was through acceptance of the Decalogue and the laws understood to be attached to it that G-d had declared He would make Israel His “treasure” among the nations and it would become a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:5-6). Analogous to priests serving within a nation is Israel to serve among the nations, responsible to bring the consciousness of Hashem to the world and inspire the nations to fulfill His will. Thus will the hope that He expressed to Abraham at the initiation of the enterprise of creating a new nation from his progeny, that it will be a source of blessing to the world (Gen. 12:3), be realized.

Although suzerain-vassal covenants that required exclusive loyalty between vassal nations and their suzerains or subjects with their kings were popular in the ancient Near East, the notion of such a relationship between a nation and a deity was unprecedented. To formalize the G-d-Israel Covenant, the Decalogue contains in a compact form the most essential elements contemporary protocol prescribed for enacting suzerain-vassal treaties:

- The opening verse begins with Hashem’s majestic self-identification, stating His name as well as His relationship to Israel.
- A reminder of the great benefaction He bestowed on Israel in redeeming it from the house of bondage immediately follows.

¹ This study is from Rabbi Shamah’s commentary on parashat Yitro.

² Referenced studies of Rabbi Shamah may be found online at www.judaic.org.

- Next, the fundamental stipulations He demands from His people are enumerated. (It is understood that additional ones would be added.)
- A statement of punishment for violation and reward for compliance is included, attached to the prohibition of engaging in any form of idolatry. In addition, a reward of “length of days on the land” is mentioned with the precept of honoring father and mother.

The remaining covenant requirements – essentially technical details – consist of committing the particulars to writing, designating witnesses, providing for safekeeping, partaking of a finalizing ceremonial meal and a declaration of Blessings and Curses. They are described in succeeding chapters. Indeed, the Books of Exodus-Leviticus combined on the one hand and the Book of Deuteronomy on the other, each in a self-contained manner, are structured in accordance with covenant protocol as we intend to demonstrate in a study on covenant format in the Torah. Utilizing the conventional model for the external framework of the Covenant conferred the highest degree of significance upon it since kings had vigorously insisted on the supreme importance of covenantal commitments. It also helped make clear to the recipients, in terms they were familiar with, what was being transacted.

As the Covenant established a relationship with the eternal G-d who was also concerned for the long-term future, it transformed Israel into a permanent corporate entity and placed great concern on bringing in the children. Each individual in the nation was to be viewed as in a direct relationship with and personally charged by G-d, having to answer to Him, as opposed to being exhorted by a king, priest or tribal chieftain. This is reflected in the Decalogue’s use of the second person singular; this notion helped advance a democratization process. The latter is connected to the lofty status granted each human being by virtue of everybody being derived from common human ancestors who were created by the one G-d as well as from His having created all humankind “in His image” (Gen. 1:26-27), applications of the Torah’s revolution in thought.

2. The first two pronouncements* enunciate details of the immense advance in religion related to belief in one G-d. Israel must recognize Hashem as its sole G-d, whose sovereignty extends over all realms of the world, and be completely faithful to Him. All manner and aspects of idolatry are strictly prohibited. When fully developed and applications spelled out by the prophets, the belief that there is only one G-d, continually concerned for kindness, righteousness and justice, led to the uncompromising responsibility for consistent moral and ethical action. Superstitions were ruled out as were all sorts of rationalizations for inappropriate and divisive behavior that the belief in multiple deities fostered. Idolatry became recognized as man’s dangerous distraction from morality, stemming from his undisciplined raw drives and his unbridled ego, serving his own creations. Belief in one G-d heightened recognition of the universal brotherhood concept latent in the Creation account and promoted abiding concern for all human beings, leading to the vision of an eventual end to wars with peace on earth.

3. Commandment 4, Shabbat, is a multi-faceted innovation of enormous significance with applications in various realms. As a day “for Hashem” that is commemorated on the seventh day of each week without exception on which work must cease, it provides a recurring national reminder of Hashem having created the world and all in it in six days and resting on the seventh. It is a day to be perceived as His having already sanctified and

blessed from Creation. And since the prohibition to work is not limited to Israelites but includes the Israelite's male and female slaves, animals, and "your stranger within your gates" (an individual in your circle, dependent on you), the implication is that G-d's will is that we be compassionate on all His creations. Releasing the slave from labor for twenty-four hours cannot but prompt thoughts of his welfare and foster advances in social justice.

In the Deuteronomy version of the Decalogue, Shabbat's primary purposes are defined as, "in order that your male and female slave may rest as you do" and that "you remember you were a slave in Egypt" and Hashem redeemed you from there (Deut. 5:14-15). The Shabbat passage in *Parashat Ki Tissa* highlights the day as a celebration of the Covenant (Ex. 31:12-17).

A day of rest rejuvenates and transforms life in both the physical and domestic spheres. Sanctifying the day and distinguishing it as dedicated to Hashem, in whichever manner such responsibilities were to be put into practical effect, promote spiritual welfare as well as family and communal cohesiveness. We read that in the days of the prophets these purposes were fulfilled by establishing Shabbat as a joyous festival that celebrated the values the day stands for (Isa. 58:13), and making it an occasion to visit a prophet (2 Kings 4:23) or the sanctuary (Isa. 66:23).

Although seven-day units were employed for various purposes in the ancient Near East – reflecting the symbolic prominence of the number seven – it is only Israel that had established the week as an ongoing, regularly occurring subdivision of time. In addition, all Near Eastern major celebrations were then associated with one astral phenomenon or another involving sun, moon or stars. Thus, it surely is meaningful that the unit of a week does not correspond to any celestial movement and the Shabbat celebration is free of any such linkage.

4. The mode of articulation of most of the Decalogue commandments is unique and in a legally advanced form. Except for those commandments demanding exclusive service of Hashem and Shabbat, the other precepts were "on the books" of the world's great civilizations prior to *Mattan Torah*. Indeed, regulations prescribing respect for the names of the gods, the honoring of parents and the prohibitions of murder, adultery, stealing and false testimony had long been legislated in Near Eastern society. However, there are major differences between the manner the pre-Torah world understood and codified these laws and their formulation in the Decalogue. In no pre-Torah society were they recognized as categorical imperatives that derived from a Divine source, incumbent upon each member of society to fulfill at all times regardless of social status or any personal considerations, as they are presented in the Decalogue's terse and apodictic style.

That the Covenant was contracted before Israel entered the Promised Land, an occurrence that was to be relatively imminent, also possesses an innovative character. It is important for a nation to possess its own land, a matter generally conceived as critical to its identity. G-d had promised a land to Abraham from the very beginning, one of the reasons undoubtedly being for it to become an arena in which the laws of the Torah may fully flourish and an example may be set for other nations. Nevertheless, He did not consider it necessary to establish the Covenant upon the nation's land. Israel's self-identity as a nation was established through the Covenant contracted in the wilderness!

2. Direct Perception and Moshe's Mediation

An ancient tradition recorded in the Talmud (BT *Mak.* 23b-24a) relates that the people heard the first two commandments מפי הקב"ה ("from the mouth of the Might"), meaning directly from Hashem, whereas the remaining eight they heard through the mediation of Moshe. This is likely based on a straightforward interpretation of the Decalogue format as indicated by the syntax. In the first two commandments G-d speaks of Himself in first person, addressing the people in second person: I, Hashem, am your G-d; you shall have no other gods besides Me...for I, Hashem your G-d, am a jealous G-d, etc. In the third, fourth and fifth commandments, He is referred to in the third person: Do not take the name of Hashem your G-d in vain; a Sabbath for Hashem your G-d; that you may have long days on the land that Hashem your G-d is giving you. The last five commandments are case-neutral but from the overall context it was perhaps assumed that they continue along the same line as the previous three.

The reason for this change appears to be described in the brief account that immediately follows G-d's proclamation of the Decalogue in Exodus (20:15-18) and Moshe's review of it in Deuteronomy (5:20-24). The people were awe-struck and terrified by the overpowering experience of encountering the Divine and felt they could not maintain the high level of discipline required. They were committed to G-d's program but feared that they would die and so they asked Moshe to relate the Divine words to them. Although the text records this request subsequent to the completion of the proclamation, it may very well be describing the people's reaction and dialogue with Moshe that occurred at some point in the midst of the experience. In order not to interrupt the narration of the proclamation, the request was described afterwards.

In Moshe's Deuteronomy retrospective, just before he recounted the Decalogue and after he reminded the people that Hashem spoke to them "face to face from the midst of the fire," he reminded them that he "stood between Hashem and you at that time to relate to you Hashem's word because you feared the fire..." (Deut. 5:4-5). In the post-Decalogue passage there, the people are described as having expressed the fear that they would die if they "continued" hearing Hashem's voice (5:22), affirming that they did hear some of His words. This probably means that they heard the first part, at which point they communicated their fears to Moshe and a change in format was instituted.

In Exodus, when the people requested Moshe's mediation, we are informed that he reassured them. He explained that G-d's purpose for them to have had a direct national prophetic experience was to test them (to challenge and prove them) and to instill in them reverence for Him in order to prevent their sinning. Having such an encounter with G-d etched in its national historic consciousness would be a powerful motivational factor for the nation to maintain its future reverence for Him. In introducing His purpose for Revelation, G-d told Moshe: "Behold, I am coming to you in a thick cloud in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and also so that they shall trust in you evermore" (Ex. 19:9). A purpose of Revelation was for the people to believe that G-d does communicate His will to human beings and that they should be able to trust His legitimate prophet and the laws received through him.

In Deuteronomy, after reciting the Decalogue and reminding the nation of its request for his mediation, Moshe elaborates with a somewhat different emphasis. He quotes G-d to the general effect of being satisfied with the people's positive disposition in requesting

Moshe's mediation and that He has hope that they would maintain their reverence for Him in the future.

At a later point in Moshe's Deuteronomic discourse, when he exhorts Israel not to heed soothsayers and sorcerers, etc., as do the nations G-d is dispossessing from before them, he returns to our subject. Once again he quotes Israel's statement and G-d's response, with further details:

...not such has Hashem your G-d designated for you. A prophet from your midst, from your brethren, like me, Hashem your G-d will raise for you, him shall you heed. In accordance with what you asked from Hashem your G-d at Horeb on the day of the assembly, saying: "Let me not continue hearing the voice of Hashem my G-d and this great fire let me not see, that I not die." And Hashem said to me, "They did well in what they spoke. A prophet will I raise for them from their brethren, like you, and I will place My words in his mouth and he will speak to them all that I command him" (Deut. 18:14-18).

The prophetic experience was to continue into the future in one form or another. It is the alternative to the various forms of divination that the pagan nations engaged in. The latter practices, steeped in idolatrous magic and wonder-working, are intertwined with abominations (as the previous verses in that Deuteronomy 18 passage make clear), whereas the prophet who receives his inspiration from G-d will lead the nation in the moral path.

The people's decision at the Lawgiving not to continue to see the fire accords with the system of G-d inspiring outstanding individuals with the gift of prophecy for the benefit of the masses. In this regard, one cannot help but think of Moshe's response to his disciple Joshua. Upon hearing the report that Eldad and Medad were prophesying in the camp, Joshua asked Moshe to restrain them. Moshe's response: "Are you jealous for me? Would that all Hashem's people be prophets that Hashem place His spirit upon them" (Num. 11:29).

3. Symbolism of the Fire

In Deuteronomy, the people's fear that they would die if they continued to hear G-d's voice was expressed with reference to being consumed by the great fire (Deut. 5:22-23). Regarding that fire – extensively cited by Moshe in Deuteronomy but referred to in a subdued manner in Exodus – and what it represents, it is worthwhile to read Rabbi S. D. Sassoon's statement on the Symbolism of the Fire. (Excerpted and translated from *Natan Hokhmah Lishlomo*, Heb. section, p. 191.)

...It may be that most of the Ten Commandments were previously acknowledged, such as You shall not murder, commit adultery, steal, etc., but what was new to their consciousness at Sinai was that these laws possess absoluteness...drawn from the absolute unity of the Creator, which spreads over the whole creation and is reflected within it and brings about an absoluteness to the values of compassion and justice, which are expressions of Hashem's unity.

At Sinai, as Hashem's absolute unity became known to them, they recognized His will is absolute in its demands and that it is the sole dispenser of life and true sustenance to each creature. This reality brings about the situation that whomever distances himself from the path of life that Hashem, blessed be He, revealed is

destined for total destruction, whether speaking of an individual or a complete nation.

Hashem's words emanate from the fire: "His words you heard from the midst of the fire" (Deut. 4:36), that means to say, that the command did not reach your ears and understanding as an arbitrary command, that is, as a proper and worthwhile precept, but as an absolutely required command that does not tolerate annulment, and whose abandonment is complete destruction. It is this destruction that the fire symbolizes: "For lo, they who distance themselves from You shall perish, You destroy all those who stray from You (Ps. 73:27).

It is this absoluteness of the law that is the essential revelation of Sinai, that accompanies the revelation of "that Hashem, He is the G-d in heavens above and on earth below, there is none else" (Deut. 4:39). That is why the term מִתּוֹךְ הָאֵשׁ ("from the midst of the fire") in conjunction with Hashem's words at Sinai appears ten times in Deuteronomy (4:12,15,33,36; 5:4,19,21, 23; 9:10; 10:4) to emphasize this absoluteness.

This is also the reason the Torah represents Hashem as fire (Deut. 4:24; 9:3).

Although this fire consumes and destroys all that is in opposition to Hashem's will, it also has the power to illuminate the path in which we should travel. For it is easier for the one who perceives this fire to separate from the evil and unseemly. That is the meaning of what is written that the fire that preceded the nation showed or illuminated the path (Deut. 1:33).

Being that the appearance of fire pointed to Hashem's presence and governance...the prophets prophesied that the time will once again come when Hashem will illuminate before the nation... (Isaiah 60:19-20; Micha 7:9).

Endnote

* There are several millennia-old disputes as to how to divide the Decalogue into ten pronouncements. Most of the controversy centers on how to interpret the first verse, that of "I, Hashem, am your G-d..." Though it is essentially a declarative statement and does not contain an imperative verb, *Targum Yonatan* rendered it as the first commandment, as did several Talmudic and Midrashic Sages, followed by Ibn Ezra, Rambam, Ramban and the general tradition. They understand it as requiring the acknowledgment of the existence of Hashem, or the recognition that He alone (with a focus on the meaning of His name) is our G-d. Other Sages and a number of commentators considered the first verse as introductory. Hasdai Crescas, Abarbanel and others presented strong philosophic arguments against the first view. It should be noted that the prohibition against idolatry – with its "You shall not have," "You shall not make," and "You shall not bow to them," does appear to naturally divide into more than one law.

The Masoretic Text, judging from its nine space breaks (all *setumot*, spaces within the line) appears to consider the first verse together with all the idolatry-related verses as one pronouncement, given that they comprise one block of text. It appears to divide the *lo tahmod* verses into two commandments with a *setumah* between them in Exodus, while Deuteronomy has one *lo tahmod* clause and one *lo titaveh*, with a *setumah* between them.

To the extent that it does not significantly affect our comments, we will use the more prevalent division that views the Decalogue's first verse as the first precept, the idolatry prohibitions as the second, and both *lo taḥmod* verses (as well as the *lo taḥmod* and *lo tit'aveh* in Deuteronomy) as the tenth commandment.

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