

The Moment

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One could argue that the Ten Commandments (or better: Ten Pronouncements or Statements), given on *Har Sinai*, were the most important piece of legislation that the world has ever known. Certainly, it has outlived the ancient law codes of the Mesopotamians, Hittites, and Hammurabi— though these predated the Torah by five to eight hundred years. Is there any law code more famous? These Ten Commandments have formed the basic legislation of the entire Western world and has impacted strongly on at least three billion people (1.2 billion Moslems, 1.8 billion Christians) – fully half of the world’s population. This code has changed the course of world civilization. That moment at *Har Sinai*, celebrated on the Holiday of *Shabuot*, should be seen and appreciated as the most important moment in human history. It is most appropriate to analyze the factors that made this law code and this moment so significant and so impactful.

First, we should point to the Torah’s two internal characterizations of the Ten Commandments. These characterizations will be helpful in understanding why the Ten Commandments were so impactful. *Shemot* 30:15 describes the Ten Commandments as *Luhot Ha-edut*– The Tablets of Testimony. What are the implications of this designation? To what do they serve as witness? One would not be far off the mark in suggesting that these *Luhot* serve as witness to *Bore Olam*’s ongoing involvement and concern with the world He created. Not only is the Almighty the Creator and Sovereign – but He serves as Master Legislator as well. God is concerned enough to provide His creations with a proper legal system with which to govern - a legal system that intends to guide mankind towards a proper Messianic end. Further, this code of law- based on the Divine word- testifies to the absolute nature of the moral system He legislated. The Israelites, and by extension all of humanity, are to strive to live by these absolute Divine, moral and legal norms. Whether one sees these norms as “Natural law” implicit in the human heart, mind and soul, or as “Revealed legislation,” these norms are rooted in Divine concern about human behavior and the absolute nature of God’s moral legislation. *Har Sinai* testifies to this concern.

As well, *Shemot* 24:7 calls these Ten Commandments *Luhot Ha-berit* – The Tablets of the Covenant. This legislative act is viewed by Torah as a contractual/covenantal agreement between the Creator and the Israelites. We are to become His chosen people and He is to be our God (see *Shemot* 6:7). As a result, we are responsible for bringing these Divine norms to the attention of all others – of sanctifying His Name. God, in turn, will guarantee our ongoing vitality as a nation. “I shall be your God and you shall be My Nation,” underscores the indissoluble bond – the contractual agreement – between the Israelite nation and the God of our forefathers. This everlasting relationship is rooted in the “berit” that was contracted at *Har Sinai*. These two terms, *Luhot Ha-edut* and *Luhot Ha-berit*, serve as the basis of this Divine-human relationship. The Ten Commandments, and this legal system, are the result of this encounter – cemented at *Sinai*. A holy moment indeed.

As such, these Ten Commandments have to be viewed as central in the relationship between *Am Yisrael* and *Haqadosh Barukh Hu*. A violation of the covenant (the golden

calf) has to result in the smashing of these tablets (Moshe Rabenu). Here, the violation is viewed not only as disloyalty to God, but also as a violation of one's contractual/covenantal obligations. No relationship is possible with this sort of violation and disloyalty.

Having established how Torah views these Commandments and their centrality in this Divine/human encounter, we now turn our attention to the geographical and environmental factors that define the moment of this experience. First, we note that the site chosen was the empty, barren desert of *Sinai*. One may raise the question: Why the desert? Why not give the Commandments in this or that country? Here, the Rabbis of the Midrash significantly point out that the desert is open and free to all. No one nation has sovereignty over the desert. So too, the law of *Bore Olam* is free and open to all. Other nations and individuals may avail themselves of the opportunity of binding themselves to the Creator by adopting this set of Divine legislation.

Next, the starkness of the desert is highlighted by the mountain chosen for this event. Unlike the Canaanites who chose the high and mighty *Har Hermon* as their "holy mountain," and unlike the Greeks who chose Mount Olympus as their "temple of the gods," *Haqadosh Barukh Hu* chose a small, nondescript mountain – barely noticeable – and immediately forgotten after the event. (Note: There is no intrinsic holiness to this *har* – it's only God's presence that sanctifies, and with the withdrawal of that Presence, no sanctity remains.) Even more to the point is the root of the name *Sinai*. The Biblical commentators see this name as rooted in the Hebrew word *sanui* – that which is hated and abandoned by one and all (despite the change in spelling). And the alternate name, *Har Horeb*, derives from the Hebrew word *Hurban* – devastation and destruction. This mountain – not a very pleasant place – did not welcome visitors, nor did it fascinate or attract because of its majestic bearing. God specifically chose this abandoned, avoided, stark, desolate mountain upon which to reveal these Ten Commandments. The focus had to be on the majestic presence of *Bore Olam*, revealing His Divine glory, and not on the mountain itself.

The natural elements also play a role in this revelatory moment. Torah goes out of her way to describe these factors. Thunder and lightning, fire and brimstone, all serve to heighten the tension (*Shemot* 19:16) and establish the moment as unforgettable. The mountain itself is described as trembling with the presence of the Almighty descending upon the mountain – surrounded by clouds and smoke – all aflame. This moment was intended to last for an eternity and to shape a people into God's chosen. It had to be awe-inspiring – a spiritually uplifting, overwhelming moment. And it was. Torah records the fear felt by the people and their words begging Moshe to speak, rather than the Creator – *pen-namut* (Per chance we may die). Moshe attempts to allay their feelings of trepidation by noting that this moment was intended to strike a note of fear and trembling into their beings, so that they never conceive of violating the norms of the encounter.

The geography and natural elements all conspire to establish this moment as "The Moment" – a one time event in human history. But it wasn't enough – more was necessary to establish The Moment. Prominent at the *Har Sinai* experience was the sound of the *shofar* (*Shemot* 19:16, 19; 20:16). One wonders why? What did this primitive sound symbolize to the Israelites at that moment? What images did it evoke? What feelings did it inspire? Prior to this moment, we don't have any record at all of the *shofar* as ritually or spiritually important.

Yet, Torah goes out of her way to note again and again how prominent was this sound, along with the thunder that filled the heavens. Did the *shofar* strike fear into their hearts? *Amos* 3:6 asks rhetorically: “Is the *shofar* ever sounded in the city and the people not tremble?” Evidently, at a later time, the *shofar*’s blasting signaled fear. Though this verse is spoken five hundred years after the Sinaitic moment, perhaps the *shofar* played the same role earlier? Or did the blasts of this instrument signal freedom to the ancient Israelites, as it does on Yom Kippur of the Jubilee year? (*Vayiqra* 25:9) Our Torah text does not enlighten us as to any of these options, leaving us guessing as to the true symbolic meaning of the *shofar* – though we are quite sure of its significance.

But this is not all. Along with the geographical, environmental and humanly initiated *shofar* blasts comes Moshe’s demand that the people must prepare themselves for the great moment about to be experienced. Proper *hakhana* (preparation) only serves to intensify the feelings of anticipation. First, the people must self-sanctify by washing their clothes (*Shemot* 19:10). Though we are not told why sanctification comes about in this fashion, and why this was significant, perhaps it may be explained as symbolic of a new beginning. Next, they were prohibited from coming close to a woman (*Shemot* 19:15). Here, Moshe had lead them away from any physical sensations. The Moment must be viewed as purely spiritual. The focus is not to be on anything human, but exclusively on the Divine. And then, finally, on the third day, the Moment was to be experienced (*Shemot* 19:11). For the first time in human history, a throng of people – a nation transformed - shall stand witness to what no other nation ever witnessed.

Three thousand three hundred years later, the nation of Israel still commemorates and celebrates The Moment. How could it not? Passed on from that Moment - from father to son and mother to daughter - were the sights seen, the sounds heard, the emotions felt. This Moment was preserved in the collective unconscious heart, mind and soul of this nation.

Our legal system, the ethics and ritual that define us as a people, were all rooted in that Moment at *Har Sinai*. The Ten Commandments established the covenantal relationship between the Almighty and His Chosen Nation. Our task now stands to pass on the power of this Moment to the next generation, as it is to pass it on to the other member nations of the world – to the Creator’s other children.

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