



Parashat Yitro: Ready for a Relationship with God

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Dear Friends,

Parashat Yitro is the parasha of the Ten Commandments. It is THE Divine revelation, and a natural opportunity to discuss the commandments, God, and belief. I welcome all comments and thoughts at ewolfin@gmail.com !

In my meetings with traditional and secular families I often hear a sentence that goes like this: "Look, I'm not a religious person and I don't keep 613 commandments, but I really believe in the ethical commandments of the Torah. I am committed to the Ten Commandments. As far as I'm concerned, they are the basis..."

How is it that of all of the commandments given to Moshe in the Torah, those ten were etched in our hearts as the essence of the entire Torah and the basis of a universal code of ethics?

When I ask which commandments they mean, they automatically quote two: "Do not murder", and "Do not steal". Some mention "Honor thy father and thy mother," the fifth commandment. There are even those who add "Love thy neighbor as thyself", even though it is not actually one of the Ten Commandments. Intuitively, it seems to them to belong on the "must do" list. "What about keeping Shabbat, the fourth commandment," I may ask them. They respond with surprise: "When did that commandment make its way into the top Ten?" But then they might add as an afterthought that they actually do keep Shabbat; that it is a special day for them, a day in which the family spends time together - hikes, visits grandparents or goes to the beach. Even though this is not how I spend Shabbat, I like this answer very much, and I feel that God must be happy that families are spending quality time together, visiting their elders or their soldier son who is watching over us on Shabbat!

But the conversation always gets complicated when I ask about the first and second commandments. There are those who are very surprised to find out what they are, much less that they head the list: (Sh'mot 20:2) "**I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage,**" (this is a commandment of action, also called a positive commandment) and "**You shall have no other Gods**" (this is a commandment of abstention, a "negative" commandment).

These commandments raise a very significant question: Is it possible to command belief?

The traditional interpreters of the Torah were split on this issue. The Rambam (Maimonides - Rabbi Moshe Ben Maimon, who lived in the 12th century) made his position very clear. He begins his 14-volume treatise on Halacha, the Mishne Torah, with this statement: "**The foundation of all foundations and the pillar of wisdom, is the knowledge that there is That which existed before all else, Which created**

all that is, and that all that is in the heavens and on earth and all that is between them would not exist if not for This fact." (Hilchot Yesodei Hatorah, Chapter 1, Halacha 1)

A little later, in the 6th halacha, he expands: "Knowing this is a positive commandment (מצוות עשה), as it says "I am the Lord your God," and anyone who conceives that there is another is transgressing the commandment of abstention, "You shall have no other God" and is also negating the central principle, which is that everything is dependent on Him."

The Rambam believes that belief in the Creator of the universe is the foundation of the Torah of Israel, and he or she who does not believe in this fact is not only missing, but negating the entire point. Let us remind ourselves that the Rambam is considered the greatest philosopher and one of the wisest Jews ever to have lived. A famous saying is that "From Moshe (Rabbeinu) to Moshe (Ben Maimon – Maimonides) there has been no other Moshe." He was not only a philosopher, but a rabbi who was a halachic authority, a scientist and a brilliant rationalist.

Let me tell you a personal story. Earlier in my life, at a stage when I felt very distant from Judaism, I chose a rabbinic career because of the Rambam's genius. I was studying for my B.A. in Islam and Arabic. One day, my final year of college, in a wonderful class about the sages of Islam in the Middle Ages, the lecturer brought a text I was unfamiliar with. It was called "Moreh Nevochim", and it was written by the Rambam. Although he was not a Moslem sage, he did live in that period and was very influenced by the wisdom of Islam. I do not remember which text it was – I have since read the entire book from beginning to end – but I remember that I was very excited by it. The text was beautiful, and it was ours! Until that moment I had had no idea that our tradition contained such wealth. I went on to do an M.A. in Jewish studies, and the rest is history.

And now, back to the difficulty the Rambam places before us: Is a person who does not believe in the existence of the Creator transgressing the first commandment, and essentially missing the entire point?

Many interpreters disagreed vehemently with the Rambam's statement, and claimed that a person cannot be commanded to believe in God, and therefore it is not possible that it is one of the 248 positive commandments. Nechama Leibowitz, z"l, quotes the Malbim (a 19th century rabbi and interpreter) who clarifies our understanding of the Rambam:

"The Rambam was specific and wrote in the halachot of the foundations of the Torah, that the commandment is to **know** that there is One who existed first, and that this is a positive commandment. He did not say "to **believe**" is the commandment, but rather to **know** with one's mind and it is not necessary to accept it from Moshe through belief." (Gilyonot Nechama, Parashat Sh'mot)

How is it possible to **know** that God exists? Can His existence be proven? We have always been told that the existence of God is a matter of belief, and that belief is a personal choice.

Last week, in Parashat Beshalach, immediately following the parting of the Red Sea, we read the verse "**And they believed in God and in Moshe his servant.**" (Sh'mot 14:31) The freed slaves are stunned by the enormity of the miracle that took place in front of their eyes, and they (finally) begin to believe. But then, in that same parasha, they lose their ability to believe again. That is the nature of belief. It is elusive and temporary. Forty years later Moshe will tell them "**And you will know today, and your hearts will return (to know) that God is THE God in the heavens above and on the earth below; there is no other.**" (Deuteronomy 4:39)

Childhood is a time of angels, fairies, magic, and simple belief in God. But childish belief does not for long. Soon, the adolescent brain takes over and reduces all magic and imagination to one big question mark regarding everything we have ever been told. Naive, childish belief makes way for rationality, and sometimes also for cynicism and rebellion. But as the years go by something within us urges us to continue to search for a deeper truth. Something within us wants to **know**... to know God! Some of us stop at this point and feel that belief is sufficient, or state that they do not believe at all. Others continue to search, to question and to try to understand. They do this until they have a eureka moment, a moment of deep insight which the Rambam calls a formative moment of knowledge of God. The journey is not over at that point, because knowing is with one's mind and it then has to be brought back into one's heart, one's life, and one's soul.

Where are you on this journey? Do you believe? Have you ever believed? If you have lost your naive belief, when and how did it happen? Did a new, deeper knowledge of the existence of God take its place? If so, have you been able to bring God into your heart, to where it was before the narrow mind with its doubts banished it?

If your answer is negative, i.e. you do not believe or know, and you have not brought God back into your heart, then Parashat Yitro with the Ten Commandments and the first two commandments in particular is an invitation to try again to examine your relationship with God.

If you are not interested in a relationship with the Creator, you have no doubt stopped reading long before this point. If you are, this is an invitation to invest the effort necessary to consciously climb the ladder – from belief, to knowledge, to instating the Creator with and in an open heart.

I am not trying to convince anyone to be religious – anyone who knows me knows that. Instead, I would like to invite anyone who would like to, to be in a close, intimate relationship with the Divine, with the mysterious dimension that gives such wonderful meaning to existence.



And if you are not convinced by the words of the Rambam and find him antiquated, I will end with a quote from another Jewish genius who was also a scientist, Albert Einstein.

"But, on the other hand, everyone who is seriously involved in the pursuit of science becomes convinced that a spirit is manifest in the laws of the Universe – a spirit vastly superior to that of man, and one in the face of which we with our modest powers must feel humble."

And

"A knowledge of the existence of something we cannot penetrate, of the manifestations of the profoundest reason and the most radiant beauty, which are only accessible to our reason in their most elementary forms –it is this knowledge and this emotion that constitute the truly religious attitude; in this sense, and in this alone, I am a deeply religious man."

Shavua Tov,
Elisha