

THE WORD OF TORAH

by Rabbi Yisrael Rutman

Shavuot is the festival of the giving of the Torah. For many people that means that Moses came down from Mount Sinai carrying the Ten Commandments inscribed in stone. But what does that mean? That the Torah consists of those ten laws and nothing else? Some people think so.

But the truth of the matter is that no one at the time, and no one who has honestly looked into the matter since then, thinks that that is all there is to the Torah. Even the most superficial survey of the Torah text will yield many more than that. The Talmud states clearly that there are 613 commandments in the Torah, and all of them were transmitted, in all of their considerable detail, at Mount Sinai.

That does not mean, however, that the Ten Commandments is just Hollywood hype. Not for nothing does virtually every synagogue have a replica of the 10 Commandments. The big ten are big in the eyes of the Torah too. After Moses broke the first set upon seeing the people dancing around the Golden Calf, he went back up the mount to receive another set. The people carried these with them, along with the original, broken ones, all through their wanderings in the wilderness, until they finally entered Israel, and then, 440 years later, placed them in the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem. There they remained, until the destruction of the First Temple, when they were hidden for safekeeping, their location unknown to this day.

But there is no contradiction here. In fact, the 10 Commandments are known to represent all of the 613. For example, "I am the Lord your G-d" includes loving and fearing G-d and treating places of worship with respect; "Thou Shalt Have No Other Gods" includes witchcraft and tattooing (which has roots in idolatry); "Thou Shalt Not Kill" includes informing against other Jews to the non-Jewish regimes and refusing to help the poor; "Thou Shalt Not Steal" includes cheating, fraud and practical jokes; "Thou Shalt Not Covet" includes loving your neighbor and returning lost articles.

Yet, the tablets of stone that Moses brought to the people was still not the briefest version. It was preceded by a single utterance of the Almighty, the purest possible revelation. Since, however, the

people could not comprehend it, it was repeated for them as ten commandments, the most concentrated form in which the Torah could be transmitted intelligibly.

It has been compared to a light which enters a spectrum and is bent into its component colors. Though the colors appear to be distinct and varying rays, in fact, there is only one ray of light. Likewise, from G-d's point of view, the Torah is a single revelation; to us, living in the physical world, where all existence is compound, the Torah too is perceived as something made of many parts. The 10 Commandments (and the 613) represent a distillation of G-d's wisdom in such a way that the human mind can comprehend and live by it.

The Maharal of Prague explains that it was necessary to transmit the Torah in such a compressed form in order to convey the indivisible unity of Torah. Not just to impress the human race with how many laws G-d could incorporate into a single syllable, but to teach us that one who denies even a single word of Torah denies the entire Torah, for in reality it is one inseparable entity.

This would explain why it is that we find sometimes in the verses of the Torah references to "the word" of G-d, in the singular. True, there are words that serve interchangeably in the singular and the plural; but in this case it does so in a unique way. For all the words of G-d in the Torah are, strictly speaking, just one word.

May we all merit to experience on this Shavuot something of the wonderful unity of the Torah. U'miTzion tetzei Torah, u'devar HaShem miYerushalayim. "And from Zion may the Torah go forth, and the word of G-d from Jerusalem."

Sources: Rashi, end of Parshas Mishpatim; Me'am Loez, Yisro; prism metaphor quoted from Artscroll Shavuos, P. 116, based on Maharsha.

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