MAN IS NOT TO BE TRUSTED

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"I am HaShem your G-d, who brought you out of the land of Egypt." [20:2]

This is not the first Mitzvah in the Torah. The first Commandment is "Be fruitful and multiply." [Gen. 1:28] The Sefer HaChinuch (Book of [Mitzvah] Education) enumerates the Commandments in order of appearance, and this is number twenty-five when counted in order.

It would even be inappropriate to call this the first of the Ten Commandments -- because, according to a careful reading of the text, one finds fourteen different Commandments in the Aseres HaDibros, the Ten Statements.

But, obviously, the existence of G-d is the first and most fundamental principle of traditional Jewish belief. Maimonides begins his Halachic Encyclopedia, the Mishneh Torah, with "The foundation of foundations and pillar of all wisdom is to know that there exists a First Being, and He brought into existence all that exists..." Maimonides also lists this as the first Positive Commandment in his Sefer HaMitzvos (Book of Commandments). The Sefer HaChinuch says that "the roots of this commandment need no explanation - it is known and revealed to all that this is the foundation of religious belief."

On the other hand, there are those who argue that this is not one of the Mitzvos -- see the Ba'al Hilchos Gedolos, the commentary of the Ramban on the Sefer HaMitzvos, and the commentary Kina'as Sofrim there as well. This last source offers the reason: "It was difficult to many writers -- how can it be correct to count the belief in the existence of a commander among the Commandments, for it is impossible to have commandments without first clarifying that a commander exists!"

This helps us to better understand why belief in G-d's existence is called the foundation of all the Commandments, and not simply the first, greatest, or most important. To have "Commandments," we must have a "commander." The translation of Mitzvos as "good deeds" is figurative at best; a distortion, at worst. It is true that Mitzvos are good deeds, but only because we know that G-d is good and His Commandments are good. This is neither the literal meaning nor the intent of the word.

Judaism does not trust man. Philosophers have attempted to create systems of morality that depend upon human wisdom to determine what is correct and good, and to do those things. Judaism says "the inclinations of the heart of man are evil from his youth." [Gen. 8:21] We know that

external compulsion is not always successful (have you never violated a national law?) -- but it is far more powerful than our own imaginings.

There is a story told that Aristotle was caught by one of his students doing something that was, well, not in accordance with Aristotelian philosophy. Said he, "now I'm not Aristotle!"

Whether true or merely a parable, the point is sound: when humans create their own values, they can decide not to follow them. Our well-conceived notions are frequently no match for our base desires -- just ask anyone who has attempted to diet! And similarly, a renowned, avowedly secular professor of philosophy in Israel was recently revealed to be an absolute terror in his family life.

The commandment to know of G-d's existence is thus not merely a religious value, but a moral obligation -- that which compels moral behavior even when it is difficult. "These are the things which Hashem commanded you, that you shall do them..." [35:1] -- even when it is not easy!

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