

ANI YHVH: THE BASIS FOR THE MORAL SOCIETY

by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

I

"ANI YHVH" - THE REFRAIN OF OUR PARASHAH

It seems clear that the theme of the first half of our Sedra (Chapter 19) is **Ani YHVH** - "I am YHVH." This phrase repeats, with slight variations, 16 times - within 37 verses! This anomaly demands explanation.

In addition to the general question of the constant use of this phrase, there are four usages of it which are worthy of our attention: v. 12, v. 14, v. 16 and v. 18. The entire section of verses 11-18 includes most of the interpersonal obligations and warnings in our Sedra. (The rest are at vv. 32-37) There are a total of 17 admonitions (**Mitzvot Lo Ta'aseh**) and 3 obligations (**Mitzvot 'Aseh**) within these 8 verses - and all of them deal with relationships between people - specifically, between Jews:

- 11) You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another.*
- 12) And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am YHVH.*
- 13) You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning.*
- 14) You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am YHVH.*
- 15) You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor.*
- 16) You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am YHVH.*
- 17) You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself.*
- 18) You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am YHVH.*

Why is this phrase repeated here four times?

II

IMITATIO DEI

It seems clear that the theme of the first half of our Sedra (Chapter 19) is **Ani YHVH** - In order to understand, we need to look back at the opening of this Sedra:

Speak to the entire congregation of Israel and say to them: Be holy! for I, YHVH your God, am holy.

Our striving for holiness is an attempt at **imitatio dei** - imitating God. This is, of course, a limited enterprise, as no human could ever come close to truly being God-like. However, the Torah does motivate and encourage us to "follow God's ways" however much possible and to realize the "Image of God" in which we were created. To do this, there are three types of models available to us:

1) Imitations of God - e.g. Shabbat. The Torah describes God as having ceased from creative labor - so we, too, cease from creative labor and become, in the words of our Rabbis, "partners with God in creation" (BT Shabbat 10a). Shabbat is mentioned in v. 3.

2) "Models" of God - there are numerous references in Talmudic and Midrashic literature to the child-parent and student-teacher relationship being models of how we should relate to God. For example: "May the fear of your teacher be like the fear of heaven" (Avot) and "You shall fear YHVH your God - this includes [having reverence for] scholars" (BT Bava Kamma 43). Honor for parents is mentioned in v. 3 - and honor for the elderly and the scholar is mentioned in v. 32.

3) Foci of holiness - where we can direct our reverence and love for God. The best example is, of course, the Tabernacle/Temple. In v. 30, we are admonished to "revere My Sanctuary".

In summary - we are given various ways in which to strengthen that which is Godly about us - by "copying" God's behavior as we observe it in the world and through Torah; by behaving appropriately towards those who are human models for that relationship and by showing the proper fear and love for those objects of sanctity which bear His Name.

The theme of **Ani YHVH** becomes necessary on this account - Be reminded that the goal of all of these Mitzvot is not to turn them into ends - but rather, they are ways to come closer to God (see, for instance, Rashi's comments on the juxtaposition of fearing parents with keeping Shabbat - that even though we are admonished to fear parents, if they request or even demand of us that we violate Shabbat - we defer to the Highest authority - "You and your parents are obligated to honor Me").

III

BUILDING THE HOLY SOCIETY

Now, to our section (vv. 11-18). The Torah is showing us how to build the holy society. The **Ani YHVH** phrases, which are the theme of this chapter, serve as "markers" to demarcate steps in the process.

We start with the society which is rife with stealing - such that a person's word, even in court, is not to be trusted, where even God's Name is desecrated in the name of material gain. This is the society of "What's yours is mine and what's mine is mine" (Avot 5:10) - and verses 11 & 12 address this level of corruption and command us to move up from here.

Then - the society in which more subtle types of corruption exist - holding back pay, hurting people who won't find out that it's you - or won't even know about it. This is the society of "What's yours is mine and what's mine is yours" - without respect for boundaries. To this society, the Torah addresses verses 13 & 14.

We then look at a society which has moved up from these levels - but where there is still discrimination and favoritism in the system - and where idle gossip and "turning a blind eye" are the norm. "What's yours is yours and what's mine is mine" - i.e. mind your own business. To this society, the Torah addresses verses 15 & 16.

And then we move to build the ideal society: Once we have justice, revenge seems reasonable. And there seems to be no need for my letting you know that your behavior upsets me - or to be as concerned with your needs as I am with mine. We move from the just society to the holy society. All of the Mitzvot in these last two verses take us beyond justice - they move us towards compassion. Towards "What's mine is yours and what's yours is yours".

At each step of this process, we are reminded of the great goal of this entire process:

Ani YHVH

Be holy, for I, YHVH your God, am holy.

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