

ASERET HADIBROT: THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

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I

ASERET HAD'VARIM

The 'Aseret haDibrot ("Ten Commandments", as they are [inaccurately] called [see below]), have always been a source of tension and conflict in Judaism. On the one hand, the Torah explicitly states that the 'Aseret haDibrot comprise the covenant between God and the B'nei Yisra'el (see Sh'mot 34:28, D'varim 4:13). Yet, throughout our history, we have fought those religious approaches that maintain that only these "Ten Commandments" were Divinely given and continue to maintain that the entire Torah, from the Bet of B'resheet, is from God. (This difficulty is what led to the abandonment of the daily public reading of the 'Aseret haDibrot - see BT Berakhot 12a and JT Berakhot 1:5. See also the famous Response of Rambam [#233] to the question of standing up for the public reading of the 'Aseret haDibrot).

Before moving on, a word about the faulty translation of Aseret haDibrot - "Ten Commandments". First of all, this group of Divine commands is not referred to by any numerical grouping until later in Sh'mot (34:28) - where it is called 'Aseret haD'varim - the Ten Statements. The other references in the Torah use the same wording and Rabbinic literature constantly refers to 'Aseret haDibrot (Rabbinic Dibrot being roughly equivalent to the Toraic D'varim).

The word Commandment - (Heb. Mitzvah) implies a Divine directive which either obligates or restricts us. Eating Matzah on Pesach night, avoiding stealing, studying Torah and avoiding eating impure animals (e.g. pigs) are all Mitzvot - Commandments. Each separate action which is obligated or forbidden constitutes an independent Mitzvah (although there are significant debates as to the number of Mitzvot included in some commands which have two separate actions; e.g. hand and head T'fillin, morning and evening K'riat Sh'ma); several Mitzvot may be included in one paragraph, even in one sentence or phrase in the Torah. When we read through the first section of the 'Aseret haDibrot, we find four or five distinct commands (depending on whether we reckon the opening statement as a Mitzvah - see Ramban and, alternatively, Avrabanel on Sh'mot 20:2). It is not only a poor translation to render this group of statements as Ten Commandments - it is also inaccurate. There are between 13 and 15 Mitzvot within the 'Aseret haDibrot. In order to avoid inaccuracies or clumsiness, we will just refer to these verses as 'Aseret haDibrot throughout this shiur.

II

COUNTING UP TO "TEN"

Once we have established the proper translation and understanding - we need to analyze the numeric reality here: If there are ten statements here, where does #1 end, where does #2 end etc.? Convention maintains the following breakdown I suggest that you follow with a Humash open!:

I. I am Hashem...house of slaves; II. You shall have no other gods...my Mitzvot. III. You shall not take the Name...in vain. IV. Remember...and made it holy. V. Honor...gives you. VI. Don't murder. VII. Don't commit adultery VIII. Don't steal/kidnap (see below) IX. Don't commit perjury X. Don't covet.

This breakdown, which is familiar to us (e.g. the common references to murder as "the sixth commandment [sic]") and which is thematically strong (each statement is a different idea or theme), has one difficulty. First, a bit of terminology.

The word "Parashah", which we commonly use to denote a particular week's Torah reading, actually means "paragraph". The Torah, in its Halakhically valid format (in a scroll), is not written with vowels or punctuation - but the Parashiot are separated. Some Parashiot are separated by a partial- line space (Parashah S'tumah), others by a skip to the next line (Parashah P'tuchah).

After being informed that there were Ten Statements that we heard at Sinai (34:28), if we look back at this group of statements we see ten Parashiot - as follows:

I. I am Hashem...my Mitzvot II. Do not take...in vain. III. Remember...and made it holy. IV. Honor...gives you. V. Don't murder. VI. Don't commit adultery VII. Don't steal/kidnap (see below) VIII. Don't commit perjury against your fellow IX. Don't covet your fellow's house X. Don't covet your fellow's...all that belongs to your fellow

The difference is telling - the first statement includes the command to believe in God (as most Rishonim understand the first line) and the prohibitions against idolatry. Oddly enough, coveting, which is the most difficult Mitzvah to explain here, becomes 2 of the 10 statements!

There is yet a third possibility - which I will sketch briefly.

In BT Makkot 23b, we read the famous passage: R' Simlai expounded: We were given 613 Mitzvot at Sinai; as is says: Torah tzivah lanu Mosheh... - and the numeric value of Torah is 611 - (meaning, Moshe commanded us 611 Mitzvot) - and Anokhi vLo Yih'hey lekha ("I am..." and "you shall have no other..." we heard from the Almighty. (= 613)

This distinction, between the first two Dibrot (or first statement - as above) and the rest seems to be based on the grammatical difference - the first two Dibrot are phrased in the first person - "I am Hashem your God...You shall have no other gods before Me..."; however, this distinction obtains throughout the entire second statement. Based on the grammar, we heard this section from God directly - but there are 4 or 5 Mitzvot (depending on your position on "I am..." as Mitzva or not -see Avrabanel, question 7 on this section) in these Dibrot:

1) belief in God 2) not to maintain idols (or beliefs in other gods) 3) not to fashion them 4) not to worship them 5) not to bow down to them.

Which means that besides the 611 taught to us by Moshe, we heard another 4 or 5 from the Almighty Himself. This difficulty might be sidestepped if we break down the statements a bit differently - but it would mean ignoring the grammar of the rest of the "you shall have no other..." statement. (see Ramban s.v. Lo Tisa (20:7) for an explanation of the grammatical switch in the middle of the Dibrot).

I. I am Hashem...before Me; II. You shall make no image...my Mitzvot. III.-X (as above)

In any case, we often refer to the "Ten Commandments" as if their meaning and structure is obvious - and, as noted, it is anything but. There are at least three different ways to break the statements down and we have various ways of interpreting the meaning and import of the various statements.

III

10 --> 613?

That these 'Aseret haDibrot hold a special place in our historic and religious consciousness goes without saying; the two stone tablets, carved by God and including a graphic version of these Ten Statements were placed in the central vessel of the Mishkan (Sanctuary) - see Sh'mot 25:16. The question must be asked - why these ten? What is so special about these ten statements (and the 13-15 Mitzvot included therein) which merit their unique and sanctified place in revelation and on the tablets?

There have been many approaches which suggest that these ten statements serve as an outline for the Torah; that each of them is a super-category under which other Mitzvot are subsumed - such that all 613 Mitzvot are included (conceptually) in these 'Aseret haDibrot. See, for instance, JT Shekalim 6:1, Rashi on Sh'mot 24:12, R' Sa'adiah Ga'on's Azharot, Ralbag on Sh'mot 20 following v. 14. Perhaps the earliest source for this idea is Philo's De Decalogo.

Although these approaches have much to recommend them, there are some obvious difficulties they generate. In order to "include" all of the commands relating to forbidden foods, the Mishkan, the Kehunah (Priesthood), agricultural laws etc. - we have to utilize a lot of exegetical imagination. Besides this difficulty, the inclusion of "coveting" here is problematic - since it is no way a "category of Mitzvot". There are no Mitzvot which command a limitation of desire - just self-restraint against acting on that desire. (The entire subject of coveting is problematic - see MT Hilkhot Gezeilah va'Avedah 1:9).

I would like to suggest another approach to understanding the 'Aseret haDibrot which explains the inclusion of specifically these Ten Statements in the revelation and on the tablets. There are three premises which must be established regarding the 'Aseret haDibrot:

IV

PREMISE A: UNDERSTANDING THE MESSAGE MEANS UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT

We study Torah in great depth and with passion not only because we are commanded to do so, but also (and perhaps chiefly) because we believe that the Torah, although 3000+ years old addresses and directs us here and today. (I am referring to the non-Halakhic sections of Torah; it goes without saying that the behavior which we are duty-bound to fulfill by virtue of our participation in the Sinaitic covenant is relevant to us at all times. Even those commandments which are not practically implementable today have great significance.) If we are to understand the Torah properly, we have to begin by understanding the time-frame, circumstances and original target audience to whom it was addressed. Just like it is impossible to understand the import of Yeshayahu's message without understanding the background of court-sanctioned oppression in Yehudah, or Eliyahu's message without understanding the nature of Ahav's monarchy and syncretistic worship - similarly, we cannot understand the impact and "message" of the Torah without taking into account the reality of the B'nei Yisra'el at this time in history. By integrating what we know about them and their circumstances at this specific point in time, we can grasp the "ur- message" and learn to apply it to our own lives. [We might consider this a parallel to understanding Halakhic concepts in order to apply them to modern appliances]. It is therefore incumbent upon us to take into account the situation and knowledge of the B'nei Yisra'el prior to their arrival at Sinai in order to understand the 'Aseret haDibrot more fully.

V

PREMISE B: THE DIBROT WERE "INTERRUPTED"

If we look at the verses immediately following the 'Aseret haDibrot, we see that the B'nei Yisra'el could not take the intense experience of direct Divine revelation and asked Mosheh to go up to God to get the rest of the Torah and relay it to them:

When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, and said to Mosheh , "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die." Mosheh said to the people, "Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin." Then the people stood at a distance, while Mosheh drew near to the thick darkness where God was. (20:15-18) In other words, the original plan was for the people to hear more than just these 'Aseret haDibrot; whether they should have heard the entire Torah or just the rest of Sefer haB'rit (through 23:19) is unclear. What is implicit in these verses is that it was the people's fear that interrupted the revelation and "changed the rules" such that Mosheh would receive the rest of the revelation alone and transmit it to the people.

This would also explain an interesting switch in terminology in the Torah relating to the Tablets.

Whereas they are called Luchot haB'rit - "the Tablets of the Covenant" in one section of Sefer D'varim (9:9-15), they have a different name in reference to their placement in the Mishkan:

You shall put into the ark the Edut (testimony) that I shall give you. (25:16). These tablets are called Edut because they testify to the Revelation. In other words, these 'Aseret haDibrot were not committed to graphic representation on the tablets because of their inherent importance, but rather as a testimony to the Revelation which every member of the B'nei Yisra'el had experienced (see the S'forno on 24:12). Had the B'nei Yisra'el "withstood" the fear and heard more of the Torah directly from God, perhaps the whole Torah would have been given in stone by the Hand of God - or perhaps none would have been carved (there would be no need for a physical representation of the Revelation - whose purpose may be to validate the rest of the Mosheh-only Revelation - if all of the Torah had been given directly to the B'nei Yisra'el). This - we will never know.

One conclusion we can draw from this is that instead of viewing the 'Aseret haDibrot as categories or an "outline of Torah", we may view them as the FIRST ten statements to be given to the B'nei Yisra'el. In other words, instead of seeing the 'Aseret haDibrot as (the) ten chapter headings of the covenant, let's see them as the "first ten pages" of that covenant.

VI

PREMISE C: TWO VERSIONS MUST BE INTEGRATED

As we all know, there are two versions of the 'Aseret haDibrot in the Torah. Besides those appearing in our Parashah (20:2-14), they are "repeated" by Mosheh to the new generation in D'varim (5:6-18). Although the two versions are structurally alike, there are some significant differences between them - especially in the Dibber about Shabbat. Rabbinic tradition - and a simple reading of the text - mandates that both versions were given at Sinai. For example, the notion that Shamor (D'varim) and Zakhor (Sh'mot) were said in one voice is not only p'shat - it is also Halakhically meaningful (see BT Berakhot 20b). In order to fully understand the impact of the 'Aseret haDibrot, we have to integrate both versions. [A modern-day analogy to this would be taking a stereo recording and isolating each channel - first listening to the left channel with the strings and horns, then listening to the right channel with the percussion and vocals; God gave us "stereo" at Sinai (at least), and each "channel" was written separately. The harmonic "reality" can only be understood when integrated.]

In summary: We must understand these 'Aseret haDibrot through the eyes and ears of the B'nei Yisra'el at that time; we must understand them as the "opening" of the covenant as opposed to its "outline" and we must integrate both versions in order to comprehend the impact and import of this Revelation.

VII

THE FIRST DIBROT: INTRODUCTION TO GOD

Although there are some (relatively minor) differences between the two presentations of the first few Dibrot (I am...you shall have no other gods...you shall not take the Name...in vain), we are on fairly safe ground examining them as one consistent unit (see Ramban s.v. Zakhor). As the "first page" in the covenant, it is clear that the two parties to the contract need to be introduced. The B'nei Yisra'el have seen God as a warrior (see 15:3) and have been witness to His power in Egypt and on the sea - but could have been misled (based on their experience with Egyptian culture and religion) to believe that there is one God who fights for them, another who meets them in this cloud of glory etc. Therefore - the first statement for them to hear is "I am Hashem who took you out of Egypt" - the same God who fought your wars and fed you in the desert. (See Ibn Ezra on this verse and his explanation of why the introduction isn't "Who created heaven and earth").

As part of this introduction, a sharp divide must be made between the way the gods were worshipped in Egypt and the way Hashem is to be served. Images, physical representations of any sort - even those resembling His noblest creations - are absolutely forbidden. God's glory is represented not through an image or representation - but through His Name. You must not only avoid any syncretism (worship of other gods along with Hashem), you must also avoid trying to represent or depict God - He is beyond imagery. The only way to understand Him is through His Name (however that is to be understood - perhaps it means that just as a Name is purely for external interaction, so the only way to understand God is through His actions with us. We refer to Him as "merciful" not because that's who He is, but because that is how He manifests Himself to us).

This pattern - the obliteration and impossibility of idolatry and fetishes followed by a deep reverence for God's Name - is found in the opening verses of D'varim 12.

VIII

TWO ASPECTS OF SHABBAT

As mentioned above, the two versions of the "Shabbat Statement" vary greatly:

(Sh'mot): Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to Hashem your God; you shall not do any work; you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days Hashem made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore Hashem blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

(D'varim): Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as Hashem your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to Hashem your God; you shall not do any work; you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and Hashem your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore

Hashem your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.

- * Difference #1: Zakhor - "remember" (Sh'mot) / Shamor - "observe" (D'varim);
- * Difference #2: "...as Hashem your God commanded you." (D'varim only)
- * Difference #3: "...so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you." (D'varim only)
- * Difference #4: Commemoration of Creation (Sh'mot)/Commemoration of Exodus (D'varim)

In order to understand these differences - and the propriety of Shabbat following the "introductory" dibrot - let's begin by focusing on the second difference. In D'varim, we are told that Shabbat was already commanded by God. To what is this referring? It certainly can't be referring to the earlier version of the 'Aseret haDibrot, since that statement would be true for all Ten Statements. If this is the case - then "...as Hashem your God commanded you" should have either appeared in all ten statements or at the very beginning or end of the series.

Some of the Rishonim cite the well-known Gemara (BT Sanhedrin 56b) that we were commanded regarding Shabbat at Marah (Sh'mot 15:22-26); however, if this is the case, why doesn't the Torah make the same statement in the Sh'mot version of the 'Aseret haDibrot? I believe that what these Rishonim - and the Gemara itself (in the name of R. Yehudah) intend is as follows:

There are two aspects to Shabbat. On the one hand, Shabbat is a day of cessation of labor - set up in a special way to reflect a humane approach to those who work with and for us. The Torah commands us not only to avoid working, but to make sure that our servants "rest as well as you". This is commemorative of an overt experience of the Exodus - that even though we were enslaved to the Egyptians, we must not fall prey to the human tendency to "pass on the pain" and inflict the same bad treatment upon our (future) servants. This particular aspect was already commanded - in the desert, regarding the Mahn (Mannah). We were commanded to only take enough Mahn for one day for each member of our household - reflecting a sensitivity to others (if we took more than our share, someone else would suffer) and a faith in God that He would provide. On Friday of that week, we found a double portion and were commanded to prepare today everything we would need for these two days and not to go out and collect it on the morrow. In other words, Shabbat is a day of cessation of social and financial competition and accumulation - and this had already been commanded. (See R. Hirsch's comments in D'varim and at the end of Sh'mot 16:20).

There is another side to Shabbat, which also relates to the Exodus - although more covertly than the first aspect. Shabbat is not only a commemoration of the Exodus and a behavioral reminder and guide to proper and dignified treatment of others - it is also a commemoration of creation. The entire debate/polemic between Mosheh and Pharaoh that led to our Exodus was about God's ultimate power and control over His world. The commemoration and remembrance of Shabbat (Zakhor) is a weekly testimony to God as creator, as evidenced by the plagues in Egypt. (Note that this version open up with virtually the same wording as the Mitzvah to commemorate the Exodus (13:3); from

here our Rabbis learn that the Exodus must be mentioned in the Kiddush of Shabbat - BT Pesachim 117b)

In other words, as we move to the next stage of the B'rit, we are not receiving a "new" command; on the one hand, an older Mitzvah (dating back two to three weeks to the first week of the Mahn) is being reinforced while another aspect, one which is also part of our most recent experience of the Exodus, is being integrated into that same day of cessation/commemoration.

IX

TWO ASPECTS OF KIBBUD AV VA'EM

Regarding the next Statement (honoring parents), we have two problems: Why is this statement here at all, and why is it given the same "...as Hashem your God commanded you" as Shabbat - again, only in D'varim?

I'd like to suggest that not only are there two underlying motivations for Kibbud Av va'Em - as we defined regarding Shabbat - but that both of them have direct associations with the Exodus. As such, this Mitzvah quite properly belongs at the beginning of the B'rit.

When we were first commanded to celebrate the Pesach and thereby save the B'chorot (firstborn), God commanded us to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. This celebration was commanded to be done by families. This may not seem very noteworthy to us, but keep in mind the Halakhah that Eved ein lo hayyis (a slave has no Halakhically meaningful family relationships - BT Kiddushin 69a), and that slave life does not admit to family as a priority. The notion that we were commanded to celebrate with our families indicates an obligation to recognize the fact of family as a unique and special circle around us - which was not necessarily the norm in Egypt. In this sense, we were very much commanded to honor parents - for the most basic level of honor is the recognition that our relationship with them goes beyond the biological and genetic. (See the Gemara in Sanhedrin ibid. where the same Marah-association is made with Kibbud Av va'Em - I believe that our explanation fits nicely with that and is not a challenge to it. Perhaps at Marah, but most certainly at the Mahn, we gathered water and food by families and households!)

There is another underlying motivation for parental honor which is most certainly part of the Exodus - but which is more covert in the experience. Almost anyone standing at Sinai was the product of several generations of slaves - generations which could easily have given up in despair and ceased reproducing. Much as the brave stories from the ghettos of W/WII, the faith and tenacity with which the B'nei Yisra'el continued to raise families was heroic - and was the direct cause for the Exodus. God could never have taken a non-existent people out of Egypt! For them to be "redeemable", they had to exist and that debt of gratitude had to be paid to parents.

So far, we have seen two areas of Mitzvah (Shabbat includes at least three Mitzvot between the two versions) which directly build upon commandments or experiences of the recent past. We will now

see that the rest of the Statements came to deflect the B'nei Yisra'el from behavior which was most likely for them to be drawn to - again, as a result of their most recent experiences.

X

MURDER-ADULTERY - KIDNAPPING/STEALING

The B'nei Yisra'el had not only been the victims of genocide, seeing their own babies thrown into the Nile, but they had also been witness to the destruction and murder of much of Egyptian society. The Torah is sensitive to the notion that our environment affects us and that our (even necessary) involvement in war can lead to a significant lowering of our moral compass. Witness the specific commands regarding the sanctity of the Mahaneh - war camp (See Ramban's commentary on D'varim 23:10). We had just arrived at Sinai fresh from our first war (against Amalek) - and had to be warned that in spite of what was done to us and in spite of what we had just been commanded to do (defend ourselves), human life is still sacred and we must never lose that awareness: Lo Tirtzach - Do Not Murder.

It is often the fate of slaves (or any "lower class") that they dream of overturning the oppressive class and allowing themselves the freedoms enjoyed by their overlords (Orwell's Animal Farm is a good example). As we are told in Vayyikra (Leviticus) 18, Egyptian society was promiscuous in the extreme and practiced every kind of sexual abomination. Coming from this type of society, it is reasonable to assume that at least some of the B'nei Yisra'el would have thought about "enjoying" such activities. After commanding us regarding proper respect for parents, the Torah commands us about the sanctity of the marital bond. Therefore, the next step in the B'rit is: Lo Tin'af - Do Not Commit Adultery.

[Parenthetic note: The "Halakhic p'shat" of the next Statement is "Do Not Kidnap". This is learned from context (see Rashi ad loc.); since the other statements all carry the possibility of capital punishment, this one must also include a capital crime. The only type of "stealing" which involves the potential for capital punishment is kidnapping.]

People who have been treated badly usually have one of two reactions (and often both at the same time) - they either wish to continue to be subjugated (note the difficulty that many long-term prisoners have with managing their own lives) or they wish to subjugate others. This would be especially true of slaves, who have been used for material gain with no regard for their humanity. We might have reacted in one of these ways, subjugating others or looking for others to subjugate us. Whereas God prohibits the latter - after a fashion - in its earlier prohibition of idolatry, He prohibits the former here. Therefore, the Torah commands us to restrain ourselves from using others for our own material gain: Lo Tignov - Do Not Kidnap.

XI

THE NEW SOCIAL CIRCLE: RE'AKHA'

In the final Dibrot, we are introduced to a new term: Re'akha - your fellow. This word obviously plays a significant role here as it shows up four times within these last couple of lines. I believe that both the significance of this word and of the mention of these Mitzvot at the beginning of the B'rit may be understood in light of an event that took place several months earlier in Egypt:

[God tells Mosheh:] ..."Tell the people that every man is to ask Re'ehu (his neighbor) and every woman is to ask R'utah (her neighbor) for objects of silver and gold." (Sh'mot 11:2)

We were commanded to "borrow" the gold and silver of the Egyptians, who are called, ironically, our Re'im. This act constituted both deception and coveting. [A note about coveting: To covet something does not mean that you see your neighbor with a new car and you want one just like it - that may just be good taste. Coveting is when you want THAT car - his car. It relates more to your appreciation - or lack thereof - of his ownership and property than about what you want.] We weren't told to get gold - but to get it from the Egyptians. It wasn't as much an issue of having great possessions (see B'resheet 15:14) as much as "emptying Egypt out" (Sh'mot 3:22, 12:36).

Now we are commanded that our new Re'im - every other member of the Covenant - must be treated differently. Besides being a Kingdom of Kohanim, we are also slated to be a "Holy Nation" (see 19:6). In order for this to take place, we have to reshape our attitudes towards neighbors and fellows and create a just society based on law: Lo Ta'aneh v'Re'akha Ed Shaker - Do Not Bear False Witness Against Your Fellow.

We must also respect the rights and property of our fellows: Lo Tahmod...v'Khol Asher l'Re'ekha: "Do Not Covet...nor Anything Which Belongs To Your Fellow."

It is most poignant that these 'Aseret haDibrot conclude with that key word - Re'akha, reminding us of how differently we need to behave towards our covenantal fellows than we did to our neighbors in Egypt.

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