

# ACCEPTING TORAH AS A COMMAND, NOT AS A CHOICE

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

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## Accepting Torah As A Command Rather Than As A Choice

The Torah teaches that Moshe's son was called Gershom "because he said, 'I was a stranger (Ger) in a foreign land'" [Shemos 18:3]. The other [son] was called Eliezer "for the G-d of my father has come to my aid (Ezer) and he has saved me from the sword of Pharoh" [Shemos 18:4]. The Baal HaTurim is bothered by the change of wording between these two verses. Why does the reason for naming the first son Gershom contain the extra expression "because he said" (ki amar)?

The Baal HaTurim relates a fascinating comment, based on a Medrash in Parshas Shemos. The Medrash says there that when Moshe asked Yisro for permission to marry his daughter Tzipporah, Yisro agreed, on condition that their first-born son would be a priest to Avodah Zarah [Idolatry]. The Medrash says that Moshe Rabbeinu accepted this condition.

The Baal HaTurim here in Yisro, and in Shemos, explains that when Gershom was born, Moshe Rabbeinu purposely did not circumcise him. An Angel came to kill Moshe for this negligence. At that point Tzipporah released him from his condition and circumcised Gershom.

The extra words "because he said" are Moshe's explanation. "Do you know why I had to wait before circumcising my son Gershom?" "Because he said, 'I was a stranger in a foreign land.'" In other words, the reason was why I had to delay circumcising Gershom was because I was a stranger in a foreign land, and therefore I was forced into Yisro's terrible condition before I could marry my wife.

Perhaps we have heard of fathers-in-law demanding strange things from their prospective son-in-laws, but to make such a demand -- that his grandchild should be an idol worshipper -- and for Moshe to accept such a condition is hard to fathom. The Ba'al HaTurim explains Moshe's calculation. Moshe believed that this was the way to bring Yisro to Teshuva. He felt that as a result of marrying Tzipporah, even though doing so meant agreeing to this terrible condition, ultimately Yisro would

"come around". Nonetheless, Moshe Rabbeinu was punished for agreeing to such a condition and his own grandson became an idolater [Shoftim 18:30; see commentaries there].

There is another aspect of this Medrash that is hard to understand. The Medrash says that Yisro demanded that condition -- that his grandson be dedicated to Avodah Zara -- after Yisro himself had already given up on Avodah Zara. It is taught that Yisro was a great man of truth. He traveled throughout the world searching for the truth by experimenting with all types of Avodah Zara. Yisro finally determined that it was all nothing. He relinquished his priesthood and renounced Avodah Zara. Yet, according to this Medrash, even after this point in Yisro's life, he still demanded that his grandson should become an idolater. This is wondrous! If someone is a man of truth, who "tried it all out," and determined that it was false, then how can he come back and ask that his grandson should be an idolater? It does not make any sense!

The Mir Rosh Yeshiva, Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz zt"l, says that Yisro was indeed a truth seeker, but he made a big mistake. Yisro believed that the proper method for arriving at the truth was through the process that he had used to arrive at the truth. Yisro reasoned "I did not discover the truth as a result of someone forcing it down my throat. I chose the truth. I traveled around and tasted everything and came to the conclusion through my own free will and my own convictions that Judaism is the true religion. Certainly I know that G-d is True, but I want my grandson to have that same beautiful experience of tasting things and seeing other possibilities. If in the end he too will choose Judaism, that will be wonderful. But I do not want him brought up in a house of Judaism, which would preclude him from CHOOSING Judaism -- since it would be forced upon him. G-d forbid we do not want him to be forced. We want him to pick it of his own free will."

This means that Yisro was (l'havdil elef havdolos) a "sixties person". In the sixties we had these kind of people that refused to take anything for granted. Everyone had to experiment and do his or her own thing. So even though Yisro had personally found the truth, he wanted his grandson to find the truth by himself, just as he (Yisro) had done.

This, says the Mir Rosh Yeshiva, goes against what Judaism is all about. A basic fact of Judaism is that we are servants of G-d. The highest level that a Jew can reach is not that he does Mitzvos out of his own free will, but that he does Mitzvos because he realizes that this is what G-d wills. He realizes that G-d is the Master and he is the servant. "I do Mitzvos, not necessarily because I WANT to do them, but because I HAVE to do them." Judaism is about being a metzuveh v'oseh (one who is commanded and therefore observes). We do not do Mitzvos because they SEEM right, they SEEM ethical, or they SEEM moral. We do Mitzvos because we KNOW and accept that they are G-d's commandments.

This concept can be further emphasized as follows: The verse states concerning the Ten Commandments "And G-d commanded ALL these things saying [Shemos 20:1]." Rash"i cites a Medrash on the meaning of the expression "ALL these things": At first G-d said all Ten

Commandments simultaneously (something which is impossible for a human being to hear or to comprehend). After saying them all at once, G-d repeated each one individually.

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, Z"TL, asked about this sequence of events. What was the purpose of saying all Ten Commandments at once if no one could understand them in that fashion?

Rav Soloveitchik answered that almost everyone realizes that "I am the L-rd Your G-d" and "Thou shall not take the Name of the L-rd in vain" must be Divine commandments. We accept them as Divine decrees. However, some people do not consider commandments such as "Thou shall not murder" to be Divine in origin. We think we understand the rational behind "Thou shall not commit adultery". Commandments such as "Thou shall not steal" seem self-explanatory and self-evident. Are they not obvious? What kind of society can we have if murder and adultery are allowed? Do we need a G-d to tell me that? Clearly, any society cannot survive without "Lo Signov".

Ravi Soloveitchik explained that it was necessary for G-d to say all Ten Commandments simultaneously, so that we would know that the G-d who tells us "Don't take My Name in vain" -- which might not seem logical to us -- is the same G-d who tells us "Do not murder" -- which might seem obvious. G-d is telling us that the reason why we must observe "Do not murder" is not because we do not think it is right and not because we do not think it is moral, but because I (G-d) say that it is wrong.

The differences between a Divine "Thou shall not murder" and a societal "Thou shall not murder" are the issues that we confront today. In a societal "Thou shall not murder" abortions can become permissible, euthanasia can become permissible, and children that are not born normally can be murdered. All of those things are permitted by our society's "Thou shall not murder". Therefore, G-d says, not only are the 5 commandments (relating to matters between man and G-d) from Me, but all 10 commandments are from Me. We must know we must listen to the Torah, not because we think so, not because we have tried other things and Torah seems to make the most sense and not because it is morally compelling. We must listen to the commandments of the Torah for one and only one reason: Because G-d instructed us to do so and we are his servants.

This was Yisro's mistake. Although this was the way that Yisro discovered Judaism, this was not the proper path to proscribe for his grandson. In the final analysis, we do not have to keep the Torah because we like; we have to keep because we are told to. To paraphrase Alfred Lord Tennyson, "Ours is not to question why, ours is just to do and die" [The Charge of the Light Brigade; 1854].

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## Glossary

**Avodah Zarah** -- Idolatry

**Teshuvah** -- Repentance

**l'havdil elef havdolos** -- to distinguish a thousand times

**Lo Tignov** -- Do Not Steal

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### Sources and Personalities

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